

*Jay Williams*

# The Hero From Otherwhere



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The hero from otherwhere.

SUMMARY: Two boys who are enemies at school find they must rely on each other when they are transported to a strange world parallel to the one on earth.

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*This book is for Robert Newman*

## Author's Note

Mr. Crump's incantation for cakes and wine, on page 13, is by William Makepeace Thackeray; the Eye-ball spell, on page 24, is from *The Habit of Perfection* by Gerard Manley Hopkins; the poem chanted by Mr. Magnus, on pages 35 and 36, is taken from *To a Skylark* by Percy Bysshe Shelley; Eryd's quotation, on page 150, is by Robert Louis Stevenson; the war chant of the nine daughters, on page 160, is my own translation of parts of the Lay of the Last Survivor from *Beowulf*. And I am deeply grateful to my friend Louis Untermeyer who provided the inspiration for Jesse's poem, on pages 166 and 167.

*J.W.*

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*The Hero From Otherwhere*

## 1 The Enemies

It was a case of hate at first sight.

The Rosens had moved to Brixton when Mr. Rosen was transferred to a new job there. Jesse had been unhappy at leaving his friends, and doubly unhappy at leaving the village on the shore and moving to a town inland, even though Brixton was small enough so that a ten-minute walk took you into farmland and woods. However, he started school as cheerfully as he could, and in general got along well. But on his second day, trying to find the gym with his arms full of books, he came face to face with Rich Dennison. Literally face to face: Rich came running around a corner and they smacked into each other, almost bumping foreheads. Jesse's books went flying.

He glared at the other boy. Rich was as thick and solid as Jesse was wiry. He had shaggy black hair and what looked like one eyebrow running across both eyes. He had a sullen, heavy expression and the word that came into Jesse's mind was "gorilla."

Before he could say anything, Rich growled, "Why don't you look where you're going, skinny?"

"I was just walking—" Jesse began, angrily.

Rich gave him a shove that sent him back against the wall. "Don't walk in front of people, then," he snapped.

Before Jesse could reply, he had gone off.

From then on, it was war. It was undeclared and the sides were one each, but it was war nevertheless. It took a variety of forms, in class and out of it, but always in school since once away from it they never saw each other. They shot paper clips at each other, stepped on each other's feet while walking up the aisles, or jostled each other while carrying trays in the lunchroom. They never actually fought, mainly because Rich was obviously the stronger and so Jesse avoided coming to blows. But in every other way they never stopped competing. In social studies and English Jesse had the best of things. He loved reading, was a good talker and wrote poetry and stories endlessly. But math and science gave him headaches, while Rich shone in both those subjects. Their duels were fought when Rich correctly worked out an algebra problem on the blackboard while Jesse was still trying to make sense of all those x's and y's, or when Jesse's English essays were read aloud as models to the class while Rich looked gloomily at his own paper scribbled over with red penciled corrections. And in sports, too, they kept the battle going. Rich was a powerful batter, a rough tackier, an expert shooter of baskets. But Jesse was faster and more agile. He could climb a rope like a monkey, skim over the high jump like a feather, or shoot ahead of the pack in a hundred-yard dash, his red hair streaming back from his pale face and his thin legs pumping.

Nobody, not even their teachers, seemed to know about the feud, which went on endlessly but always under the surface. Jesse had not yet made any really close friends in this new school. And Rich, although many people admired his athletic prowess, was too grim and short-tempered to be liked. So they went their own ways, more or less alone, and although neither boy would have admitted it for an instant, they almost looked forward to each day's competition, and were both a bit lost and bored on weekends.

So things went on for a couple of months, and then, like a witch's cauldron, everything boiled over on Halloween.

It began in science class. The teacher was discussing heat and energy and called on Jesse to explain the First Law of Thermodynamics. Jesse, who had been sidetracked away from his homework the night before by an exciting new book called *Merlin's Mistake*, began a stumbling definition.

"Um . . . the First Law . . . well, that heat is the same as energy. Or, no, I don't mean that. That if you do a certain amount of work you use up energy—uh—heat—and you—"

From Rich came a snort. "You sweat," he said, out loud. The class snickered.

The science teacher said, "Perhaps you can help him out, Rich."

"Sure. Easy. When you perform a certain amount of work, the energy used is converted into a certain amount of heat."

"All right," said the teacher. "You'd better jot that down, Jesse."

Jesse sat down with his face burning. Smart guy, he thought. Always has to know the answers.

Later in the day, a group of them were in the gym making decorations for the PTA Halloween party. A boy named Frank Howse was cutting out orange paper jack o'lanterns for the windows. He wiped his nose on his sleeve and said, "All this kid stuff—too bad we can't have some real big pumpkins."

Jesse was on a ladder, pinning up crepe-paper streamers. "We don't need pumpkins," he said. "We can use Rich. He's got a natural jack o'lantern head."

There was some laughter, and Jesse went on, "Hey, Rich, how about it? All you have to do is hold a flashlight in your mouth. Gug! All that hollow space inside would light up—the eyes would shine—man! Halloween fun!"

"Oh, shut up," said Rich. "You didn't shine so much in science, did you?"

Jesse climbed down, twisting the paper streamer. "Very sharp," he said. "Oh, that was fun-ny. No, listen, I've got a better idea. We could use you for trick or treat. People would give us almost anything to keep from having to look at you."

Rich's mouth tightened. He couldn't think of insults as fast as Jesse could.

Jesse glanced at him. He could see that Rich was getting angry, but he couldn't stop. There was a kind of dangerous pleasure in teasing him this way, like taking a dare to stand on railroad tracks when the train was coming.

As he pinned the end of his paper streamer to the wall, rhymes came popping into his head. When that kind of thing happened Jesse could no more keep quiet than he could help bleeding when cut. He struck a pose and began reciting:

There was a goblin name of Rich,  
Got married to a big fat witch.  
His father was a ghastly ghost,  
Who said, I'll tie you to a p—

At that point, Rich slammed into him and they both went down. They rolled around once or twice and Rich got in a punch before the gym teacher, Mr. Moreau, jumped down from the stage and came running over to pull them apart.

"All right, what's going on?" he demanded.

Nobody said anything. Mr. Moreau tried again. "Who started it?"

Jesse rubbed his shoulder, where the punch had landed. He decided he wouldn't say anything if Rich didn't. Rich was silent. The other boys looked at each other out of the corners of their eyes but nobody wanted to be a snitcher.

Mr. Moreau said in annoyance, "Okay. You can both march up to Mr. Haggarty's office, and do your fighting in there. Get going."

They went. They walked side by side along the corridor, their footsteps thumping glumly in the silence for everyone else was busy somewhere. Jesse sighed, tapping his knuckles against the tiled wall as he went, feeling sorry for himself. After all, he'd had the worst of it. All he'd done was spout a silly poem and then he'd been knocked down and had hurt his back and been punched on the shoulder. And Rich had really started the whole thing. He needn't have been so nasty in the science class.

Then, as if to double the injury, Rich said out of the corner of his mouth, "You wait'll we're through with old Haggarty. I'll get you later."

A shiver of worry went through Jesse, but he said as boldly as he could, "Yeah? I'd like to see you."

It was too late for more talk. They were at the principal's door. They hung there for a long moment, hesitating.

At last, Jesse said, "Well, go ahead. What's the matter, you scared?"

With a scowl, Rich opened the door. Jesse, determined not to be outdone, crowded in on his heels.

They stood open-mouthed in astonishment. The room was large and flooded with light from four tall windows. It was lined with shelves on which were crowded glass flasks, dark blue bottles, and instruments of curious shapes nestling beside huge leather-bound books. Bundles of herbs and what looked like dead birds and mummified animals were hung along one wall. Neither of the boys had ever been in the principal's private office, but this certainly didn't look like what they had imagined.

They did, however, know Mr. Haggarty when they saw him. And if they were sure of anything it was that neither of the two men who stood at the far end of the room was the principal of Brixton Junior High School.

One of them had a gray leathery skin, seamed and wrinkled as an old snapping turtle. He had a short messy beard that looked like the sweepings of a Shredded Wheat factory, and on his long thin nose he wore two pairs of glasses.

The other man was fat. Not just stocky, or pudgy, or plump, but balloon-shaped, with short round arms and no neck. His little mouth was pursed into an O, and his hands looked almost too fat for the fingers to bend.

He said, in a clear, high voice, "Splendid. It worked."

Behind the boys the door shut with an ominous click.

## 2 The Tale of the Wolf

The notion began to form in Jesse's mind that something was wrong. But he said, "Sorry. We were supposed to see Mr. Haggarty."

"Come in, gentlemen, come in," said the fat man. "Don't be alarmed. It may seem confusing at first, but you'll grow used to it."

The bearded man, pushing one of his pairs of glasses up on his forehead and peering through the other pair, grumbled, "Perhaps it was a mistake after all, Crump. Two of them! And they seem very young."

The fat man waved his short arms like a penguin. "No, no. Don't worry. Come in, young sirs, do. Take a seat—two seats. We will explain everything. Open the circle, Magnus."

Jesse now saw that on the polished floor there was a circle drawn in white chalk. He and Rich, when they had entered the room, had stepped into it. Other strange marks, triangles, six-pointed stars and words that made no sense, were drawn in and around it. The bearded man held a white staff in one hand, and with it he rubbed away part of the circle.

Rich muttered, "I don't like this. Let's get out of here."

Until that moment, Jesse had been thinking the same thing. But now sheer perversity made him say, "Go on if you want to. I'd like to find out what it's all about."

He knew already that there was something very peculiar indeed about all this. Inside him, there was a fluttering of fear but, stronger than that, of anticipation and excitement.

The fat man had seated himself, with a long sigh, in a wide armchair near one of the windows. He motioned to two other chairs. Jesse took one and Rich, after a moment's hesitation, sat in the other.

Jesse stared out of the window. He should have seen the strip of lawn in front of the school, the traffic on Sycamore Street, and the familiar buildings across the way. Instead, there were pointed red roofs, twisted chimneys, and beyond them the walls and turrets of what looked like, although he couldn't believe his eyes, a castle.

"Where—" he began, and had to clear his throat. "Where are we?"

With a smile, the fat man replied, "In the kingdom of Gwylith."

"What do you mean, kingdom?" Rich demanded. "We're in Brixton, Connecticut."

"No longer," said the man with the beard. He had propped his staff in a corner and taken another chair, and he was now busy lighting a carved wooden pipe. The boys gazed numbly at him, for the way he did it was by pointing his finger at the pipe; there was a flash, and smoke at once began to rise from the bowl. The smoke was green.

The fat man put in, "The place you mention is where you have come from, but you are no longer there. Try to understand. You are no longer in your own world. You are in the kingdom of Gwylith and in the city of Gundersholm."

"But how?" said Jesse, hoarsely. "How did we get here?"

"We summoned you," said the fat man, with satisfaction.

"You're crazy," Rich said, in a flat voice. "Or else I am. I don't believe it."

"Look out of the window, dope," said Jesse.

"What of it? It's what I'd see if I was dreaming. And that's what I'm doing."

The fat man shook his head, not much of a shake for he had no neck to speak of. "Not at all. I assure you, you are not dreaming. We brought you here by our science. And if I may say so, there aren't many scientists in the kingdom who could have done the job. Allow me to introduce us to you—I am Eugenius Crump, and this is my partner, Albertus Magnus."

The bearded man nodded, and Jesse automatically said, "Hello."

"And your names?" asked Mr. Crump. When they had told him, he went on, "Excellent. Now, before I explain further, I think we might have a little refreshment, eh?"

With a stubby forefinger he drew a complicated sign in the air, and muttered, "Welcome the wine,/ whate'er the seal is;/ And sit you down and say your grace/ With thankful heart, whate'er the meal is."

At once, a small table appeared. On it were a tall silver pitcher, a platter of little cakes and four silver goblets. Mr. Crump poured wine from the pitcher into the goblets.

"Magic!" said Rich. "How'd you do that?"

Mr. Crump chuckled fatly. "Not magic, Richard. Magic is the work of poets in our land. This kind of thing is merely simple science, using a mild and ancient spell composed by Makepeace."

"Science?"

"Of course. In this case, adjusting the arrangement of matter so that a thing is or is not. As the poet, Phaskers, puts it. 'To be or not to be: that is the question.' "

"That's Shakespeare," said Jesse.

Mr. Magnus, wiping wine from his crunkly beard, said, "Nonsense. It is part of the major evocation called *The Flourishment of Revenge*, by our greatest poet, Gorius Phaskers." Jesse rubbed his forehead in bewilderment. For want of anything else to say, he sipped at his goblet. The wine was lively, prickling his tongue with bubbles and tasting like grape skins and bitter honey. He wasn't sure whether he liked it or not, but like everything that was happening here it was interesting.

Mr. Crump said, "Now for our explanation. I must begin by going back many centuries into the past. Long ago, our world was torn by a war between two brothers, Heming and Woding. Heming had made himself lord of the north, Woding of the south, and for years their armies fought bloodily for the mastery. Towns and villages were destroyed, fields were burned, and there was famine, sickness and despair."

He stopped to wheeze, while Mr. Magnus impatiently took off both pairs of glasses and began polishing them on his coattails.

"Woding was a poet," Mr. Crump went on. "Perhaps the most powerful of our poets. Now you know, poets have powers greater than those of scientists. We merely put to use what they invent. Most poets rarely use their Words of Power for any practical purpose, but when they do—well, Phaskers says, 'As imagination bodies forth/ the form of things unknown, the poet's pen/turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing/a local habitation and a name.' The humblest poet can by his art summon springtime in the midst of winter, or bring to life improbable things. Woding was no common poet and his art was as far beyond that of others as the science of Hermes Trismagistus was beyond mine.

"He brought into existence a beast, a wolf named Fenris, which in the Old Tongue means Fear. With the Wolf at his side he attacked Heming. The men of the north fled before the Wolf, and Woding met Heming and slew him with one cast of his spear.

"The whole land was thus brought under Woding's rule and peace came at last. Woding then took the Wolf into Hyperborea and there bound it to a rock known as Beldrapa, or Holdfast. The cord with which he did so he made by his art also, for no chain or rope of this world would have been strong enough. There Fenris remained from that day to this."

Jesse was fascinated by the story. He had a teasing feeling that he had somehow heard some of it before, or even that some of the names sounded familiar.

He said, "Why did he bind it? Wasn't it dangerous to keep a thing like that around when he didn't need it any longer?"

"He did it so that we should never forget that war," Mr. Crump said, gravely. "And indeed, we have not. In a thousand years we have had no such conflict in this world, not while the Wolf remained as a reminder to us. But now, unfortunately, the Wolf is free."

"Unfortunately?" put in Mr. Magnus. "Calamity! Ruin! I can think of a good many better words than 'unfortunately.' "

"Calm yourself, my dear Magnus," said Mr. Crump. "You are quite right. It is a disaster, and it will grow worse. All the land of Upper Wencia is being laid waste, the ground blasted, the villages deserted. If the Wolf is not checked, our world is doomed."

He paused and sighed. "There has been concern in every land. And at last, here in Gwyliath, the Prime Minister called us in, Magnus and I, to advise him. We consulted the Whether Forecaster—"

"What did weather have to do with it?" Jesse asked.

"Not weather, *whether*. It is a device which forecasts whether there is a solution to a problem.

We found that no hero in our world could deal with the Wolf. And so we determined to summon a hero from Otherwhere."

"I see," said Jesse. "Where's Otherwhere? And did you get a hero?"

Mr. Crump puffed once or twice. "I cannot tell you where Otherwhere *is*, exactly," he said.

"We know that our world and Otherwhere exist side by side, together but never touching. Imagine smoke from a fire and steam from a kettle rising together, mingling, but still separate. Something like that. ... By uttering certain spells, by performing certain conjurations on the right day—a day of power—we can make things pass from Otherwhere into this world."

"You mean," said Jesse, deeply interested, "like calling up spirits?"

"You could put it that way. That is what we did. And what we got—was you."

Jesse nodded. Then, suddenly, it hit him.

"What? You mean, Otherwhere is *our* world? And the hero is me?"

"Both of you. I do not know why, but when we called you both appeared."

Jesse leaped up. "Hey!" he said, fright closing his throat so that the cry came out as a squeak.

"Nothing doing. I don't want to be a hero."

All this time, Rich had been sitting slumped in his chair, hands in pockets, a scowl on his face. Now, straightening, he said, "I thought at first I was dreaming. But I've been pinching myself. Okay, it's no dream. I don't understand how you got us here, but you haven't got any right to keep us here or make us chase around after wolves. We're American citizens. You'd better just send us back or you'll be in trouble."

Jesse looked at him. With a shock, he realized that Rich —tough, strong, independent Rich—was just as scared as he was. It calmed him as nothing else could have done.

Mr. Magnus was saying, "Perhaps we'd better return them, Crump. They must take up the task freely or not at all. And they are only children. How can they decide—?"

Jesse interrupted. "Wait a minute. In the first place, we're not just *children*. But if nobody in your whole world could handle that Wolf, do you really think we can? Do we look like heroes?"

"No, you don't," Mr. Crump answered. "However, our science rarely fails. We performed all the incantations properly. You arrived. Therefore one or both of you must somehow have the ability to do the task. I don't know how. I know that it is possible."

He folded his pudgy hands together over his round stomach. "As Magnus says, you must undertake it of your own free will. If you agree, we can give you some help but in the end it is up to you. If you do not accept, we will, of course, return you to your own world to that very place and instant where you were when we called you."

Rich said, "And what's in it for me if I say yes?"

"What's *in* it?"

"That's right. What's the reward?"

Mr. Crump gave a tiny nod. "I understand. I am not authorized to offer a reward. We'll have to go see the Prime Minister. In any case, that is something we should do. Let us go now."

He got to his feet. It was a fearsome thing to watch. First he heaved so that his chair slid back a little way. Then he began grunting and pushing, and slowly his vast bulk rose out of the chair, which creaked horribly under him. Jesse watched with his mouth open and, when he was up, felt like applauding.

"You might like to see a little of our lovely city," Mr. Crump panted. "Magnus, why don't you and our guests walk. It isn't far. As for me, I'm not built for walking, so if you wouldn't mind sending me—"

Mr. Magnus went to a closet and took out a shiny new broom made of twigs bound together



around a wooden rod. He lifted it, mumbled a few words and gave a clean sweep across the floor. Mr. Crump vanished.

"How—what—?" stammered Jesse.

"It is a Whisk-broom," Mr. Magnus explained. "It has whisked him to the palace. He will be waiting for us with Dr. Cornelius. Come, follow me."

He went to the door. Jesse followed, bursting with curiosity. After a pause, Rich got up and came too.

As they were going down a long flight of steps, Jesse laughed.

"I just thought of something," he said. "Mr. Crump told us that they had to do their summoning on a day of power. Halloween! That's today. We're nothing but a couple of Halloween ghosts. Only we're in the wrong place."

He grinned at Rich. Rich grunted and then, surprisingly, as if he couldn't help himself, grinned back.

### 3 They Accept the Quest

Two things particularly struck Jesse as they walked along the cobbled street. Firstly, there were lots of chimneys but no television aerials. And secondly, there were a few horses but no cars.

The air was fresh and sweet, with a tingling quality that reminded him of the wine he had tasted. The houses were crowded together with narrow lanes running between them, their upper stories overhanging. Their fronts were latticed with dark beams between which was white or brown plaster, their pointed roofs were of red tile or thick straw thatch. Through the ground-floor windows Jesse caught glimpses of cozy interiors, of beamed ceilings and paneled walls, shining copper and polished wood, and sometimes of inner doors open to bright gardens. The people they passed nodded and smiled greetings, and, most curious of all, no one seemed to be in a hurry.

Mr. Magnus, striding ahead, stopped at a corner to wait for the boys. A tall thin man was coming toward them. He was dressed in black and wore a high black hat with a black bow tied around it. His mournful face was all nose and chin. He paced slowly along and then, right before their eyes, his appearance changed. He seemed to shimmer and dissolve, and suddenly he had become a tall stout man wearing a bright red uniform trimmed with gold braid. In one hand he held a large scroll which he unrolled with a flourish. It said,

*From Gloom to Jollity in a Flash*

*that's*

*Old Dr. Runklefeather's Universal Tonic*

*for all melancholic maladies*

Jesse had no sooner finished reading this than the man changed to his former thin sad self and walked on.

"How did he do that?" Rich asked.

Mr. Magnus pursed up his lips inside his beard. "It is the way he is made. He's a phantom."

"Not real?"

"No more real than any other apparition. That one was made by Pouncepot & Son. Shoddy stuff," he added, with a sniff.

Jesse turned to look back. He was in time to see the phantom change into its jolly shape for

the benefit of a couple of housewives with baskets on their arms. They walked right through it and went on, deep in gossip.

"How's it done?" he asked.

"It is a branch of science called Similitudes," Mr. Magnus explained. "A shape is built of mud or clay or wax, and then by using the right Words of Power it can be made to move and speak. It takes on a kind of almost-life. We use them for the jobs no one else wants to do. But some are for amusement, as well. For instance, they can be made to act out plays so that if you don't wish to go to the theatre to see live actors you can sit at home and watch the phantoms. It is good for the very young, the very old or the very ill."

He continued walking, and the boys followed. Rich said, "It seems to me it would get confusing. How can you tell real people from these fake ones?"

"Quite simple," said Mr. Magnus. "Solid bodies cast dark shadows, don't they? But illusions cast light shadows."

Jesse tried to imagine what a light shadow would look like. He couldn't give it his full attention because there was so much else to look at. And within a few minutes, they had come out into an open square and rising up before them was the castle he had glimpsed from the window.

It towered, white and shining in the sunlight, to battlements, turrets and banners. Mr. Magnus led the way through an arched gateway into a courtyard and then to a wide ivory door which opened before him. They walked into a great hall with a floor of red and white marble squares. It was hung with tapestries and lighted by tall windows.

A bald man carrying a silver staff and wearing a coat of crimson and gold came to meet them, bowing at every step.

"His Excellency is expecting you," he said. "Please follow me."

He ushered them across the hall. A sweeping staircase ascended to the upper floors, but in a corner beside it was a small door with a gold plate on it that said, *Dr. Cornelius*. The majordomo knocked at the plate with his staff. The door swung open, and with a final bow he showed them in.

A man was standing before an immense marble fireplace with his hands behind his back. He turned and eyed them. From the dignity of his manner it was obvious that he was the Prime Minister.

He was black, so black that he seemed not to reflect any light at all. Next to him, even leathery Mr. Magnus seemed to fade into a sickly paleness. He wore a dark red frock coat and a high-necked shirt with a snowy ruffle which set off his blackness. He had a proud look, although his eyes were sad. He inspected the boys for a time, and then in a voice that rang like an organ said, "All things are possible."

"Just so," wheezed Mr. Crump, whom Jesse now saw for the first time. He was wedged into an armchair to one side of the fireplace, and looked uncomfortable. "My thought exactly, Your Excellency. Allow us to present to you Jesse Rosen and Richard Dennison, from Other-where."

The Prime Minister bent his head, and Jesse, feeling very insignificant and not knowing what else to do, bowed awkwardly. Beside him, Rich mumbled, "Hi," and shoved his hands in his pockets from pure embarrassment.

"Mr. Crump has been telling me about you," said Dr. Cornelius. "And so you will not venture to save our world except for a reward?"

His voice was calm, yet when he said this Jesse felt his cheeks go hot. Shame welled up in him.

"I didn't say that," he protested.

Dr. Cornelius's large, dark eyes turned upon him and he suddenly wished he had kept his mouth shut.

"Then it was only your friend who said it?"

"I'm not his friend," said Rich. "Sure, I said it. What of it? You want us to catch a dangerous animal for you. There ought to be a reward."

"It is only fair," said the Prime Minister. "But I think you do not quite understand the danger. Please sit down."

He gestured. Chairs slid away from the wall and stopped behind the boys and Mr. Magnus. Dr. Cornelius went on, "It is not simply a question of catching an animal. Let us show you Fenris."

He said to Mr. Magnus, "Have you the Eye-ball?" The bearded man took from his pocket a small globe of what looked like murky glass. Holding it on his palm, he said,

Be shelled, eyes, with double dark  
And find the uncreated light:  
This ruck and reel which you remark  
Coils, keeps, and teases simple sight.

The room darkened. A mist seemed to fill the air and Jesse could barely make out the others. The globe began to glow. A soft light, like that of a snowy field before dawn, rose from it and the boys saw a landscape grow before their eyes.

Gray rocks and black earth that looked as if it had been burned lay beneath the gray sky. A few leafless trees stood here and there, dead and scorched. A great raven flapped heavily from the limb of one of them. He seemed to fly over Jesse's head to vanish in the gloom behind him.

Something moved in the distance, a small dark speck. It became larger and Jesse could see that it was a trotting form. As it drew nearer he felt a chill spread through his body. And this cold came not from outside, but from within him.

There stood before them a grim, starved-looking beast. Its fur was tufted and shaggy and had fallen away in patches so that its rough skin showed, stretched tightly over its ribs. Its head was held lower than its shoulders. It was flat-skulled, long-snouted, with a bloody tongue that lolled out over stained fangs. Its eyes moved as if they were twin yellow flames as it shifted its gaze, seeming to look from one to another of the people who watched it.

A spasm of fright swept over Jesse, so that he sucked in his breath between his teeth. The globe went dark. The image vanished and the room was once more full of sunlight, shining through the tall windows.

Dr. Cornelius's voice cut into the stillness. "Whatever fear you felt was no more than a shadow of Fenris, as the image you saw was nothing but his shadow."

Rich burst out, "How do you expect us to handle that thing?"

"I do not know," said the Prime Minister. "I do know, however, that the power to do so lies in you—in both of you. And it does not lie in anyone else in this world."

Rich subsided, shaking his head.

"Now let me tell you the rest," continued Dr. Cornelius. "Although our two worlds do not touch, they affect each other. Your world and ours mingle, and the great, shaking events of one move the other. Has it not seemed to you since you have been here that some of the things you have heard were slightly familiar?"

"Yes," said Jesse. "For instance, Mr. Crump quoted Shakespeare, but he said it was somebody else. And the name Fenris—I think I've read about him in some Norse tales."

"It is so," said Dr. Cornelius. "I cannot prove it to you, but you must believe me when I tell

you that if the Wolf conquers our world it will make yours tremble as well. Whatever is bad there will become worse than you can imagine. Whatever is cruel or horrible will become more so. The fear that comes from Fenris will seep into your world like a poison in the blood. So, if you chain up the Wolf you will have saved your own world as well as ours."

They gazed at him in awe. Then Rich mumbled, "If that's true—"

"It is true," said the Prime Minister, and there was no doubting his words.

There was a long silence. Jesse heard himself break it. His voice sounded to him as though it were coming from someone else.

"I don't know about *him*, but I'll go," he said.

"I never said I wouldn't go," Rich said, hotly. "You're trying to make me out to be a coward, aren't you? Trying to put the blame on me, like you did just a minute ago—"

"I didn't mean that," Jesse said, trying to be honest. "I'm just as scared as you are."

"Who said I was scared?" said Rich. "Listen, anything this weasely creep can do, I can do."

Dr. Cornelius's eyes were sadder than ever. "What you do, you must do together," he said.

"The knots that bind Fenris cannot be tied with one hand alone."

He stood in thought for a time, and then said, "As for your reward—"

He went to a bay in the rear wall, crooking a finger for the boys to join him. A triple window from floor to ceiling looked out into a sunken garden, bright with flowers. On the lawn a small boy with a golden crown on his head was playing croquet with several other children.

"Our king, Fridiof IX," said Dr. Cornelius.

"That little kid?" Rich said. "How can he be a king?"

"We always have three princes," the Prime Minister replied, "and of course the youngest always becomes king."

"That sounds like a fairy tale," said Jesse.

"Dear me, no," the Prime Minister said. "It's politics. Fairy tales are stories about merchants and bankers."

He opened one of the windows and leaned out, calling, "Your Majesty!"

The child gazed up with a smile. For a long moment, he and Dr. Cornelius looked at each other without a word, and then the Prime Minister said, "Very well." The king went back to his game, and Dr. Cornelius faced Jesse and Rich.

"The reward," he said, in a deep grave voice that sent a thrill through them, "is a treasure worth more than a king's ransom yet no king can buy it. Those who have it often do not value it, and yet it is priceless. It is stronger than life itself, but can be easily broken. You yourselves do not know you want it, and yet when you have it you will know how precious it is."

"I don't understand," Rich said.

"Neither do I," said Jesse. "But if it's a treasure—well, can't you explain any more about it?"

"No," said the Prime Minister. "To speak of it is nothing, but to have it is to have all."

Rich shrugged. "Whatever it is, it sounds valuable."

Dr. Cornelius laughed, a deep laugh so merry that the boys smiled with him. "Valuable?" he said. "When you have won it, come and tell me whether you think it is valuable. Then you accept?"

"Yes," said Rich.

"I do, too," said Jesse. "When do we start?"

"At once," said the Prime Minister. "Crump—Magnus—fit them for the journey. There is no time to lose."

## 4 Off by Aircane

They were back in the large room which was the office of the firm of Magnus & Crump, Scientific Consultants, as the metal plaque on the front of the house read. They had been sent by Dr. Cornelius in his own coach, drawn by two chestnut horses and driven by a coachman in livery of red and gold.

Jesse said, "But all the time we're away, won't everybody at home start wondering where we are?"

Mr. Magnus said, "If you succeed we will return you to the moment you left. It will be as if no time had passed in your world."

"What happens if we don't succeed?" Rich said, sourly.

"If you fail to bind the Wolf," answered Mr. Magnus, running his fingers through his beard with a crisp rustle, "we will return you but it will matter little, since we will all be doomed."

"That's great," Rich growled.

"And if you are slain," Mr. Magnus went on, "we will send your bodies home."

Jesse tried to swallow and found that there was a lump in his throat. It had not occurred to him that they might never return from their quest. Then he pushed the thought out of his head, for Mr. Crump was speaking.

"Before we equip you and send you off I must give you some instructions, some help, and a warning."

"Another warning?" Jesse said, uneasily. "About the Wolf?"

"In a way. You have not asked us how the Wolf came to be free," Mr. Crump said. He lowered himself, puffing, into his chair. "I will now explain that to you. It was the doing of Skrymir the Shape-Changer. He is the descendant of Heming, the lord of the north who fought against Woding and was defeated."

"Why'd he want to let the Wolf loose?" said Jesse. "Didn't he know it would bring trouble?"

"That is precisely why he loosed it. Skrymir claims the lands of the north, saying that they were taken from his ancestor wrongly and that they belong to him. His claim was heard by the Great Council last year and rejected. In revenge, by some wicked art, he set Fenris free. He said to the Council, 'If I cannot have my lands, no one will have any land. All will perish.'"

"He sounds like some kind of a nut," said Rich.

"I don't know what you mean," Mr. Crump said, "but he is certainly unbalanced in his mind."

"Great Equinoxes!" cried Mr. Magnus. "Unbalanced? He is mad, insane, demented!"

"Patience, my dear Magnus. Whatever the word one wishes to use, Skrymir is dangerous," said Mr. Crump. "We do not know where he is, now. We haven't been able to locate him with any of our devices. Since he can change his shape he can hide himself most successfully. And he will certainly try to hinder anyone who goes to bind the Wolf."

"How can we fight him?" asked Jesse.

Mr. Crump pursed his lips. "*Fight* is not exactly what you can do. Skrymir has little real strength or science. His power over people rests only on their own consent. He is cunning and full of lies. Those who give in to his persuasion fall into his hands. You can do nothing but be on your guard. The only way to protect yourself against him is never to agree to what he asks."

"That sounds easy enough," Rich said, with a shrug. "But you said you were going to give us some help."

"Correct. Magnus, fetch the jewels."

Mr. Magnus went into the next room. He returned in a moment or two, bearing a plain wooden box. With an air of reverence, he lifted the lid, holding out the box to Mr. Crump. The fat man took from it a piece of faded old brocade in which gold and silver threads gleamed dully. Carefully, he unfolded it on the palm of one hand. Inside were two small pieces of stone.

One was very dark, almost black, satiny and smooth, with tiny gold specks that seemed to dance deep inside it.

The other was pure white, waxy and clear. One was like the night sky, the other like a piece of cloud. Each was shaped like a comma, round at one end and tapering to a curved tail so that if they had been fitted together they would have formed a circle.

Mr. Crump said to the boys, "Take one."

Rich took the dark one, Jesse the other.

"These jewels," Mr. Crump said, in a voice much more solemn than he had used before, "are among the treasures of our kingdom. They are called the *magatama*. Never let them out of your possession, *never*. They are very old and are said to contain a force greater than any other, but what it may be we no longer know. It is said that if they are brought together with the proper Words of Power they can work wonders, but if so the words have been lost. Guard them well."

Mr. Magnus brought out two soft leather bags with cords fastened to them. He gave one to each boy, saying, "You can hang these around your neck with the stones inside."

Jesse rubbed his stone between his fingers. It felt like warm ice.

"If nobody knows how to use them, what good are they to us?" he said.

"In the first place," said Mr. Crump, "they seek each other out. So if you are ever separated, you will be able to find each other again by following the pull of the stones. And in the second place, they will help you find the cord you must have to bind up the Wolf.

"I told you that no ordinary chain or rope would have been enough to hold the Wolf, and so Woding made a cord for the purpose. It was made of three strands. Courage, knowledge and pity went into the making of it. When Skrymir set the Wolf free, he separated the cord and hid the three strands. We have been able to learn their hiding places. You will first have to find them and braid them together again."

"Where are they?"

"The first is woven into the nest of the Zhar-Ptitza, on the top of Mount Teshombara. The second is somewhere in the house of Professor Ilbird in Redwater. And the third is in the keeping of Countess Arkad of Ardour."

"Whew! That's a lot to remember," Rich said.

Jesse said primly, "I can remember them. The nest of the Zhar-Ptitza, Professor Ilbird in Redwater, and Countess Ardour of Arkad."

"Arkad of Ardour," Mr. Crump corrected, gently. "Very good. However, you needn't worry about remembering them for we will give you a map. How you get the strands is up to you. But when you find what you think is one of them, touch it with one of the stones. If it is a true strand, the stone will shine."

Jesse nodded, and put his stone in the leather bag. He slipped the thong over his head and tucked the bag inside his shirt. Rich did the same.

Mr. Magnus opened a chest in a corner of the room and got from it a pair of spears. They had slender shafts of black wood, and leaf-shaped heads of dull gray steel.

"These can never be broken," he said.

Next came two small knapsacks. Mr. Magnus unpacked one. It contained a square of cloth, a flat leather bottle, a shallow wooden bowl and a small wooden case. He shook out the cloth.

It unfolded itself, grew larger, and became a blanket. Jesse touched it. It was light and soft, and he guessed it would be very warm.

"It is also waterproof," Mr. Magnus said. He folded it up again and it became a square the size of a handkerchief.

He tapped the bowl. "Ask for something to eat."

Rich said, "A hot dog with all the trimmings."

At once, in the bowl there appeared a hot dog on a roll, with mustard, sauerkraut and sweet pickle relish. Rich looked wide-eyed at Mr. Magnus.

"Is it any good?"

"Try it and see."

Rich seized the frankfurter and bit into it. "Not bad," he said, with his mouth full.

"I get it," said Jesse. "Whatever we ask for we'll get. And I suppose the bottle will always be full of water."

"Or any drink," said Mr. Magnus. "You have only to ask."

Rich opened the wooden case. In it were a bone-handled knife, a fork, a spoon and a match. Rich struck the match. It flamed up and continued to burn without changing until he blew it out. When he had done so it looked as good as new.

"Keen," he said. "These things would be worth a fortune at home."

Mr. Crump produced a map drawn on thick heavy paper. He folded it carefully and held it out. Jesse happened to be closest, so he took it and shoved it into his pocket.

"That is all we can do for you," said Mr. Crump. He struggled out of his chair. "We can but wish you success. On you rests the future of our world—and of your own." He sighed. "A heavy weight! May neither of you break beneath it."

Jesse felt his heart sink. Even now, perhaps it wasn't too late to back out. He glanced at Rich. The other boy's face wore its usual closed, sullen expression. And Jesse thought, No, I won't be the first to say anything. He looks determined to go. If he can go, so can I.

Mr. Magnus, meanwhile, had taken from the chest a long staff. Its head was carved in the shape of a hawk with outspread wings.

"I will take you as far as I can on the first leg of your journey," he said. "We must go by aircane, since the Whisk-broom is good only for short distances." He straddled the staff. "Get on and hold tight."

The boys slung their knapsacks over their shoulders. They thrust their spears through their belts so that their hands would be free. They straddled the aircane, Jesse behind Mr. Magnus with his arms around the bearded man's waist, then Rich clasping Jesse's waist.

Mr. Crump raised a hand. One of the walls thinned, wavered like smoke, and disappeared.

Mr. Magnus chanted,

Hail to thee, blithe spirit!  
Bird thou never wert . . .

The aircane quivered and rose slowly from the floor.

Higher still and higher  
From the earth thou springest,  
Like a cloud of fire;  
The blue deep thou wingest . . .

Out through the opening they shot like an arrow. The red roofs wheeled below. Wind rushed into Jesse's face, making his eyes water. He had no thought for anything but the slender stick

on which he was perched and the huge empty space under his soles. He squinted downward and saw the towers of the castle fall away like a fort for toy soldiers. Then they were over open country.

Jesse turned his head and rested it against Mr. Magnus's back to keep the wind out of his face. Rich's arms were so tight around him that he could scarcely breathe. He blinked away the wind-made tears and caught glimpses beneath him of a great patchwork of light green fields, dark green woods, the shining gray-blue of lakes and the paler threads of roads.

They flew for a long time, and Jesse grew tired of the rushing wind, the cold and the uncomfortable position that made him yearn to move and stretch his limbs. But at last, the staff dipped and settled and he felt the ground press against his feet.

He tumbled off, stiffly, and Rich was not slow to follow, groaning and rubbing his legs.

"This is as far as I dare go," said Mr. Magnus. "We are near the land where Skrymir may lurk and I cannot take the chance that he may appear as a giant eagle and claw us from the cane."

"Do you think he knows about us?" Jesse said.

"I do not know, but it is wise to be cautious." He stared at them for a time out of unblinking eyes, his head thrust forward, looking more like an old turtle than ever. "Follow your map," he said, at last. "The road runs behind you, through the forest. Good luck."

The aircane was already lifting. Soon it was no more than a speck high above. The boys were alone.

## 5 The Map Is Torn

"This is a great mess you got us into," Rich said, bitterly. "I hope you're satisfied."

Jesse stared at him. "/ got us into? How do you figure that?"

"Please mister, I'll go," Rich said, trying to mimic Jesse's voice.

"What about you? You could have said no."

"That's what you'd have liked, isn't it? Then you could have boasted to everybody that you were one up."

"Who?" Jesse demanded. "Who could I have boasted to?"

"You should have kept your mouth shut anyway."

They glowered at each other.

Then Jesse said, "Well, we're in it. So we'd better make the best of it."

Rich turned his back, ignoring him. Jesse felt his nose prickle and tears of anger stung his eyes, but he said nothing more.

They were standing among short, broad-leaved grasses dotted with small blue flowers.

Almost like a lawn, the green stretched away in rolling waves on either side of the road Mr. Magnus had spoken of. It was really no more than a track, bare and dusty, running up out of a valley and going toward an immense wood that hung across the horizon like a dark green cloud. Beyond the wood, the jagged shapes of mountains lifted, pale blue and mist-hung, with one great peak rising above the others to a sharp point.

The boys took to the road, spears in hand, packs on their backs. An hour's walk brought them under the branches of the first trees. By then, they were sweating and dusty, and grateful for the shade. They pulled out their bottles and wished for cold water. After drinking, Jesse poured some over his wrists. "It cools you off," he explained. "My grandfather, who used to



do a lot of hiking and hunting, told me about it."

"Waste of water," said Rich.

"You can wish for all you want," Jesse pointed out.

Stubbornly, Rich put his bottle away.

They rested a little longer and set out again. The wood closed about them, shadowy and beautiful. Tall, twisted stems with smooth pale bark like the legs of elephants supported a leafy ceiling through which the sun twinkled, spattering the underbrush with gold. Here and there strange blossoms appeared, some pink as shells, some like bloody stars. Unfamiliar birds called, although none could be seen.

"It's grand, isn't it?" Jesse said.

"Mm," grunted Rich.

"It's like—I don't know, it reminds me of the wood where Alice met the White Knight, all dark and mysterious."

"Who are they?" said Rich.

Jesse's eyes opened wide. "*Alice in Wonderland*, of course."

"A book for little kids. I never read it."

"You never—?" Jesse shook his head. He knew that a lot of the books he had read weren't widely popular—the Norse sagas, for instance, or *The Mabinogion*—but *Alice*? Surely, everyone *knew Alice*?

He said, "It's not for little kids at all. Why, it's one of the funniest, best, most magical—"

Rich stopped. "Never mind that stuff," he said. "What do we do now?"

Before them, the road forked. At the fork a triangular stone, scaly with lichen, was set upright. On each of its faces marks were cut, perhaps the distances to various places, but the boys couldn't read them.

"Let's see that map," said Rich.

Jesse fished it out of his pocket and began to unfold it.

"Give it here," Rich said, impatiently.

"Why? Mr. Crump gave it to me. Anyway, we can both look—"

Rich grabbed it and tried to pull it out of Jesse's hands. Jesse clung to it. And all at once, with a sharp sound like a sneeze, it ripped. They stood gaping at the pieces. "Now look what you've done!" they cried, almost in the same breath.

They dropped to their knees, spread out the two pieces of paper and fitted them together. The map was drawn in fine detail. Little clumps of trees marked forests, here and there mountain ranges rose, tiny cities were shown with their walls, and villages and castles dotted the countryside. Three places were marked in red: a tall pointed peak beyond the forest they were now in, a town at the edge of a river and a solitary house beside a waterfall. The first was labeled *Mount Teshombara, at the top of which is the nest of the Zhar-Ptitza*; the second, *Redwater, wherein is the house of Professor Ilbird*; and the third, *The Emerald Waterfall, where lies the house of Countess Arkad of Ardour*. The road they were on could be seen as a dotted line running into the forest, near the bottom of the map. But when the paper had torn, a piece of its surface had lifted off so that nothing that had been there could be made out. All that part which showed the track through the forest, and the spot where it emerged near the mountains, was destroyed.

"That's just great!" said Rich. "Now what are we going to do? If you had just given it to me when I asked you

"Is that so?" Jesse said, jumping to his feet. "What makes you so important? Why couldn't I have held it just as well while we looked at it?"

Rich got up too, and drew back his fist. "Ah-h," he said, "I ought to smash you one, you little

weasel."

"Go ahead, Fathead," Jesse retorted. "Or better still, you take half the map and I'll take the other. You can go one way and I'll go the other. Then we'll both be lost. The Wolf will eat up this world and then our world, too—Connecticut, Brixton, everything. Okay? Is that what you want?"

"You talk too much," said Rich. But he lowered his arm, and went on, "We've got to decide. Let's look at the map—if you don't mind—and see if we can figure out where the road goes." They knelt down again. They could see that several paths ran toward Mount Teshombara, but it was impossible to tell where they came out of the forest.

At last, Rich said, "Look, it's getting late. What we'd better do is camp here. Maybe somebody will come along in the morning, and we can ask which is the right way."

"Well. . . ."

"Got a better idea, Weasel-face?"

"Not right now—Fathead."

Jesse folded the map, putting the smaller piece inside the larger. Then he said, sulkily, "Here. You want to hang onto it?"

Rich shrugged. "I don't care," he said. "You keep it, if you want to so badly."

They opened their packs and took out the blankets, spreading them on the moss that covered the ground near the stone. Then they squatted down cross-legged and got out their bowls and bottles. It was snug there, under the trees, with the red sunlight slanting across the trunks and sweet birdcalls coming from the leaves overhead. Cozy and companionable, like the end of any day after a long hike, but without any of the difficulties of cooking or preparing dinner. And if only it had been with someone friendly and pleasant, Jesse said to himself. Trying to give it a little of that feeling, he said, "What are you going to wish for, for supper?"

Rich tapped his bowl thoughtfully. "Chili con carne," he said, at last. "My mother makes it sometimes. I like it good and hot."

His bowl filled as he spoke, with the rich mixture of beans and peppery meat.

"How about that?" he said, in wonder.

"I'll have—" Jesse said. "I'll have—" He wanted something interesting and peculiar to match the adventure, but he couldn't think of anything that seemed just right. In the end he said, "Roast chicken and stuffing," and there it was.

He shook his leather bottle. The water they had last wished for had vanished, and it seemed to be empty.

"Um . . . a chocolate frosted," he said.

He removed the cork stopper and held the bottle to his lips.

"Well?" Rich said.

"Uh-huh. Yum."

"Well," said Rich, "I guess I'll have one, too."

They ate in silence, and by the time they were finished it had grown dusky.

"Look," Jesse said, holding out his bowl. "These things clean themselves. Wouldn't it be neat to take them back with us?"

"I'll bet they wouldn't work at home."

"Why not?"

"Stands to reason. Things here work by different rules from at home. Rules—that's science, the laws of matter. Like the Second Law of Thermodynamics." He laughed. "I guess you wouldn't know about that, huh? Anyway, the laws here are different because what we call magic they call science. If we brought a TV set here, it probably wouldn't work."

"Oh," said Jesse. All at once, he found himself envying Rich for knowing the things he had

never paid much attention to. But on the other hand, Rich hadn't known about *Alice in Wonderland*. I suppose, he told himself, putting his bowl away in the knapsack, everybody has his own angle.

They rolled up in their blankets. The moss was as soft as any mattress. It grew darker and darker, but the air was mild, and sweet scents came along the breeze.

He was almost dropping off, and then he woke himself up enough to say, "Well . . . good night."

"Yeah. Good night," Rich mumbled.

Jesse began wondering about home. Were things going on as usual there? Had a day passed, like this day? Mr. Crump had said they'd be returned to the same moment when he'd summoned them—when they'd gone through the door of Mr. Haggarty's office and had landed in Gwyliath. That meant that time was different somehow in both Places. Could it stand still? Or could things go on happening at home—then his mother would wonder where he was, and maybe the police would be looking for him and then everything would have to *unhappen* when he got back. He thought, I'll ask Rich about it science stuff . . . his department. . . . He awoke at dawn. And then he had too much else to think about, for with the first light the Things came.

## 6 The Attack of the Dhones

Jesse had just thrown aside his blanket when he saw the face peering at him from around a tree. It disappeared before he could see it clearly.

He sat bolt upright, his heart pounding. "Rich!" he whispered.

The other didn't stir. Somehow, Jesse didn't want to make too much noise. He scrambled up and shook Rich by the shoulder.

"Mf?" said Rich.

"Get up. There's something—"

Rich rolled over, wide awake. "What is it?"

"Something behind that tree."

"A person?"

"I don't think—Look!"

There were two faces, now. They were round and flat, like a pug-dog's face, but there was nothing doggy or friendly about them. Their yellow eyes regarded the boys coldly. Their lower jaws were thrust out and a line of sharp teeth stuck up over their upper lips. They had large pointed ears which moved alertly. They looked, and then they were gone.

"Grab your spear, quick!" Rich said, urgently.

His own was already in his hand, and as the first of the creatures came at him with a flying leap he struck at it, swinging the spear like a baseball bat. His blow sent the Thing sprawling. Jesse was scrabbling on the moss for his spear. The other creature jumped at him and Rich jabbed at it. It sprang back, away from the spear-point. As Jesse stood up with his weapon, more of the Things appeared among the trees.

They were hairless, and their pale skins shone as if covered with a thin coating of snail-slime. They had long muscular arms and short legs, and they scuttled on all fours, or jumped like hunting spiders when they moved. They snapped their jaws at the boys, but aside from the clash of teeth they were dreadfully silent.

The boys got their backs against the stone marker. Each time the Things made a rush, they

thrust at them, but it was obvious this could not go on for long. They were growing weary and dripping with sweat, and there seemed to be dozens of their attackers. The Things were swift and stayed away from the points of the spears, so that only rarely did a blow get home. Jesse's shoulders burned and his arms felt like lead. The creatures were massing now, and he could barely lift his spear. He panted desperately, trying to get more air into his lungs. One last rush and it would be over. He saw yellow eyes and white teeth as the foremost Things prepared to spring again.

Then the crowd of beasts seemed to burst apart. He and Rich, with an effort, raised their spears but it was no longer necessary for the creatures were bounding away in every direction. A man in scaly armor was slashing at them with a long curved sword and already half a dozen of the things lay dead, bleeding purple blood among the bushes. Shaking with exhaustion, Jesse dropped his spear and sat down on the ground. The man sheathed his sword and strode over to the boys.

They had an impression of grace and strength. He did not simply walk but seemed to press the ground with his feet at every step. His face was stern but kindly. His armor, they now saw, was actually the skin of some immense lizard or serpent, each scale the size of a man's hand. "Are you hurt?" he asked. "No. Just worn out," said Jesse.

"It's a lucky thing you came along," Rich said. He leaned on his spear, gasping.

"It wasn't luck," the man replied, with a smile. "I knew the Dhones were hunting someone. The air was full of their signals. Could you not feel them?"

The boys shook their heads. Jesse said, "We're strangers, maybe that's why. Do you live near here?"

"I am Bazan the Swordsman," the man said. "I live nowhere. I come and go as I choose." There was a proud note in his voice.

"It's a good thing you chose to come this way," said Jesse.

"I go where I am needed," Bazan said. "If you have no further need of me—"

"Wait," Jesse blurted. "There is something. We want to know which is the right road to Mount Teshombara."

Bazan shook his head. "Mount Teshombara? Two lads, alone, will find it more dangerous by far than here in the wood, among the Dhones."

Rich said, "Well, we've got to go. We have to find—"

Jesse caught him by the wrist.

"What's the matter?" Rich shook him off.

"I don't think we should tell anybody what we're after," Jesse said, in a low voice.

"Oh pooh!" Nevertheless, Rich said no more.

Bazan said, "You are wise to be cautious. I do not ask why you want to go to the mountain. But I will go with you at least to its foot, to show you the way and to protect you—if you wish me to."

Jesse sighed with relief. "That would be great," he said.

"You bet," said Rich.

"Then let us go as soon as may be, for we have a long journey before us," said Bazan.

They ate a quick breakfast. Bazan looked with interest at their bowls, but brought bread and cheese out of a pouch for himself, and water from a wooden canteen slung over his shoulder. Then they packed up and set off along the right-hand fork in the road.

They traveled all that day through the forest. At nightfall, they camped in a clearing under some feathery trees with silver trunks. Bazan built a fire, and this time he did not refuse when they offered him something from their bowls. He chose roast venison, which he cut up with his dagger and ate with his fingers. When they lay down in their blankets he remained sitting

at the fire, brooding. When they awoke, he was still sitting there, his sword beside him, looking as though he had not moved all night.

"I am used to sleeping lightly," he explained.

Bazan was an agreeable traveling companion. He told them stories of battles and adventures, sang marching songs or pointed out strange plants or birds. The miles went by swiftly. That night, when they made camp, they were at the very edge of the forest, and the ground rose in rocky cliffs beyond.

"Tomorrow," Bazan said, as they ate their dinner, "we shall be near our goal."

In the morning, they began to climb. Still following the road, which had shrunk to a tiny path, they ascended between high walls of stone. After a time, the path vanished and they had to scramble up ledge after ledge. The mountain range rose on either side of them, and high on their left soared the tallest peak of all. It had smooth faces, like a great pointed crystal. Its lower slopes were deep pink, but up above the color faded until the summit was a pale cool clear blue, almost as if the sky could be seen through it.

They toiled on, up and up through the tumbled rocks. They were working their way toward a kind of saddle between the pointed peak on their left, which Bazan told them was Mount Teshombara, and another range of mountains on their right. The way grew steeper. They stumbled among the sharp-edged stones. Nothing grew here; all was bleak and barren and the only touch of relief was streaks of shiny pink in the rock, like reflections of Teshombara. As the shadows lengthened, they entered a canyon. They followed it, their footsteps echoing between its walls. At its end, the ground fell away steeply. A path zigzagged down to a wide ledge which jutted out over the valley far below. On the ledge a few stunted trees clung, and a thread of water came from the rocks and flowed first into a pool and then over the edge. A hut was perched among the trees.

"Why don't we see if there's anybody home?" said Jesse. "Maybe we could sleep there tonight. It looks comfortable, and these rocks aren't going to be very soft."

Bazan hesitated, but Jesse was already hurrying down the path. Rich followed, and Bazan brought up the rear. The smell of woodsmoke was welcoming. Jesse knocked at the door.

"Come in," someone said.

He pushed the door open and went in, with the others close behind. There was only one room. A pile of dried ferns in a corner with a blanket neatly folded on it did duty for a bed. There was a wooden table with two rude benches near one wall, and a heavy chest near another, and that was all the furniture. Over the fire on a projecting iron arm hung a bubbling pot and a kettle.

A wizened old man was stirring the pot with a long iron spoon, holding the lid in his other hand. A wispy white beard grew from his chin, and his face was a mass of folds and wrinkles out of which two bright blue eyes peered.

"Travelers in the mountains?" he quavered. "What brings you at this hour?"

Bazan shouldered his way forward. "The need for food and shelter," he said.

The old man gazed at him. Then he said, "That's as may be. First tell me your name, as a good guest should."

"Names?" said Bazan. "Since when does hospitality demand names? But if you must know, I am Bazan the Swordsman."

The old man gave a chuckle, like the croak of a small lonely frog.

"A swordsman? You?" he jeered. "I see you wear a big butcher knife, so you may be a meat-slicer or a fish-boner, but you are no swordsman."

Bazan bristled. "The one thing no man calls me is a liar," he said, in a flat and deadly tone.

"Not even a wretched old toad like you. Unsay those words."

The old man wagged his head. "You are a liar," he said, with relish. "A cheat, a fraud, a vagabond, and for all I know a thief as well."

Bazan's face was white. He drew his sword, so swiftly that it was no more than a dazzling streak, and in the same motion slashed down at the old man's head. Jesse gave a squeak which he couldn't control. He expected to see the old man sliced into two halves and his hands were already on their way to cover his eyes.

But swiftly as Bazan had moved, the old man was swifter. He raised the iron potlid like a shield. The blade clanged against it and glanced off harmlessly.

Twice more Bazan struck at him. Twice more the old man warded the blows. Bazan's teeth shone fiercely, and his sword became a glittering cage of steel around the old man. Cut upon cut he made with all his power, so that it was as if lightning were flickering in the room. But the old man stood calmly, seeming barely to move his arm, and every cut was turned aside with the potlid. Then came one final chop that fell on empty air. The old man had slipped aside. He brought the edge of the potlid down on the back of Bazan's blade. There was a snap, and the sword broke.

Like a panther, the old man fell upon Bazan and began beating him with the iron spoon. Bazan tried to protect himself with the stump of his sword, but it was useless. He threw up his arms to cover his head but the spoon rapped against his ribs. He turned before the merciless beating and fled out the door with the old man after him.

The boys stood petrified, mouths and eyes wide. In a few minutes the old man returned. He covered the pot with its lid, now somewhat dented, and tossed the spoon into a bucket full of water that stood beside the fireplace.

"But—but—" Jesse stammered at last. "Who—?"

"Who was he?" said the old man, with another of his froggish chuckles. "I cannot tell you that. But I can tell you who he wasn't. I am Bazan the Swordsman."

## 7 Up Mount Teshombara

The old man's keen eyes studied the boys. "And you?" he said. "Two boys wandering the wilderness. A curious thing. Or are you—like him—not what you seem to be?"

"No, no," Jesse protested. "We *are* what we seem to be. Honest. I'm Jesse Rosen. He's Rich Dennison. And we are on a quest. Only I don't think we ought to tell you what it is. But it isn't anything wrong."

The old man nodded, as if satisfied. "I like your faces," he said, "although there is much about you that I don't understand. How did you come to fall in with that impostor?"

Jesse explained how they had been benighted in the forest, and how the false Bazan had appeared and offered to show them the right road.

"To the top of Mount Teshombara?" The true Bazan shook his head. "He was a fool as well as a fraud. You should have taken the left-hand fork. That would have led you by easy stages almost to the summit. This way leads down into the valley."

Rich groaned. "Then we'll have to go all the way back."

Bazan twisted his white beard between finger and thumb. "Perhaps not. There is another way, but it is hard and dangerous."

"We'll have to try it," Jesse said, trying to feel determined in spite of the sinking in his stomach. "But how could he have done that to us? He seemed so brave and he knew so much."

Unless—" An idea flashed into his mind. "Skrymir!" he cried.

"What?" said Rich.

"He must have been Skrymir the Shape-Changer. Disguised. And we did just what he asked."

Rich frowned. "Maybe," he said. "But we haven't got any proof of that. And the first thing you learn in science is not to jump to conclusions without proof."

"Well—" Jesse began, and then couldn't think of anything to say that would sound like proof. But the old man, who had listened to all this, interrupted. "What do you know of Skrymir?" he said, in a stern voice.

"We were warned against him," Jesse faltered.

Bazan clapped his hands together lightly. "I should have guessed. I have seen those gray-bladed spears before. Was the man who warned you as fat as a suet pudding? Or gray-skinned as that steel, and bearded?"

"Both," said Jesse.

The old man lowered his voice. "Then your quest has something to do with the Wolf." He shook his head. "But you are so young! You must have more in you than appears on the surface."

He motioned to the table. "Sit down and share my dinner. Be welcome in my house. You shall stay here tonight, and tomorrow I will show you the road you must take to climb

Teshombara. If Crump and Magnus have trusted you, then perhaps you will be able to do it."

Jesse didn't like that "perhaps" but he joined Rich on a bench, while Bazan ladled stew from the pot into three dishes. He set out rough, dark bread and a pitcher of water and sat down opposite the boys.

"Do you think that man was Skrymir?" Jesse asked. And something made him add, "Sir?"

"I cannot tell," said Bazan.

"He must have been. Why would he use your name?"

"Many others have used my name before this, to make themselves feared."

Rich swallowed a mouthful and said, "You must be pretty famous."

Bazan's lips twisted. "Famous? Yes, I was famous. In my youth, I studied all the arts of the sword. In duels, I defeated two hundred swordsmen and made myself the greatest in the land. And the more I gave to my skill, the less there was in my heart for anything else. My sword was always ready to leap from the scabbard to prove my worth.

"Ten years ago, I returned to my native village to see the place where I was born. Everyone fled from me. All the

doors were shut and barred. I had wanted to be admired— and I found instead that I was feared and hated.

"I broke my sword. I took a staff, put a pack on my back, and came here into the hills. And here I have lived alone ever since. I have found that the peace of the mountains is better than the way of the sword."

Jesse felt that dimly he understood but it was still a puzzle to him. If I was the best swordsman in the world, he thought, I'll bet I wouldn't live all alone like this. And he drifted off in imagination into an adventure in which he fought a duel with Rich, and disarmed him and then gallantly gave him back his sword . . . and by the time he came up out of it his stew was cold.

They slept that night on dried ferns which Bazan cut from the hillslope below his hut. In the morning they offered the old man breakfast from their bowls, but he only laughed and said that he preferred bread and water. When they had eaten and shouldered their packs, he took them outside.

Mount Teshombara lifted above them, its great smooth sides like dark pink glass. From

where they stood, so close under it, they could not see the summit. Bazan pointed.

"Do you see that dark line which goes up at an angle?" he said. "It is a crack in the crystal of the mountain. That is the only way by which you may climb on this side."

They stared up at it in awe.

"You will find that you can stand upright in it," he went on, "but the way is steep. And what will happen when you reach the end of the crack I cannot say, for I have never been there. If you will not go this way then you must return by the way you came to the fork in the forest road."

"Well, we're not going to do that," Rich said, firmly. "So let's get started. Unless you'd rather stay here and wait for me, Weasel," he added.

"Oh, shut up, Fathead," said Jesse. "The longer we stand, the longer it takes." And then, the words swarming into his head, he went on,

The longer we stand,  
The longer it takes;  
The longer it takes  
The more I quakes.  
The more I quakes  
The more I scares,  
So let's get going  
Up those stairs.

Rich gave a snort, which might have been laughter. But Bazan darted a sharp sudden look at Jesse, and said, "Is that yours? Did you make it this moment?"

"Sure."

Bazan nodded. "Be careful," he said. "Do not throw away your words."

"Why? What do you mean?"

The old man did not answer but motioned to them to follow him. He led them up the path behind his hut, and when they were standing once more at the canyon that led between the mountains, he showed them a narrow shelf running off to one side.

"This will lead you to the crack," he said. "I can help you no further, but I give you my blessing, for what it is worth."

He turned and went slowly down without another word.

The boys walked single file along the shelf. It sloped upward, more and more steeply, and the color of the ' rock deepened until it was the rosy pink they had seen from below. It became glassy, too, but fortunately the boys were wearing sneakers and the rock was so dry that they had no trouble getting a purchase. They went higher, until they reached a place where the rock was split and shattered. An opening appeared. There was a level space in front of it and they stopped to catch their breath.

They were facing north. To the right of them ran a chain of lower peaks, dropping away into the distance. To the left, the vast bulk of Teshombara cut off the view. Northward, the ground stretched away, green and misty, forest lands and rolling hills and the glint of water, all shadowed in the early morning. Far off, it rose again in a faint, jagged line.

They turned away from the view. They were now at the base of the crack Bazan had shown them. It was more like a deep gully, first going inward for a dozen yards and then turning sideways and upward. Where it turned, it grew narrow and as they began to climb into it they found that they were actually walking on one side of the crack with the other side above their heads. There was just enough room for them to walk upright. On the left, or inner, side the roof and floor came together; on the right, where the floor ended, the rock dropped away sheer so that if they lost their footing and fell from the cleft they would roll and bounce, with



nothing to stop them, down the smooth face of the mountain a mile or more to the lands below.

They climbed for an hour or so and came, at length, into a kind of cave strewn with broken fragments of stone. Here the crack rose on a long slope in the opposite direction. But the stone had splintered, and the floor began again high over their heads. The only way to get to it was up a flat wall more than ten feet high.

Rich rubbed his chin, thoughtfully. Jesse said, "How about boosting me up? Maybe I can reach the top of the ledge."

"I'll bet not."

"Why not try, Fathead?"

Rich's mouth tightened. "It's too high, but I'll prove it to you. I'll brace myself against the wall and you stand on my back."

He did so, and Jesse got on his back and then stood up carefully. But his outstretched hands came nowhere near the edge. He got down again.

"Okay," he said. "You get a medal for being right."

Rich was studying the wall, frowning. Then he said, "Look, the way this stone is made, when it breaks it develops tiny cracks. It's as if the whole mountain was one big crystal, like quartz."

"What of it?"

"If you look at this wall, Weasel-face, you'll see that there are lots of those fine cracks running across it. They're too small to put your fingers in for climbing, but they're not too small to shove something sharp into. A blade, for instance."

"The spears!" Jesse looked at Rich with respect. "I get it. We can force their heads into the cracks and climb up the shafts. But will they hold us?"

"Mr. Magnus said they were unbreakable. Let's try it."

"Okay."

At about the level of their shoulders they found a horizontal fissure. Rich drove the point of his spear into it so that the shaft stuck out away from the wall. He climbed onto the spear and balanced there, touching the wall with one hand to hold himself steady. The wooden shaft bent under his weight but held him.

"Now give me yours."

Jesse handed up his spear. Rich drove it into another split higher up and clambered on it. From here he could easily reach the floor of the cleft and soon he was crouching there.

"Listen," he said, "we don't want to lose the spears. So do this. You're lighter than I am, and maybe it'll work. Pull out the bottom spear and pass it to me."

Jesse worked the head back and forth until it came free. Holding the very butt of the shaft, he stood on tiptoe and reached it up. Rich was just able to catch it by the point.

"Okay, that's one," Rich said. "Now see if you can jump high enough to grab the other shaft. Use it like the horizontal bar in gym. Get your knees over it and then sit on it. Then I can give you a hand and pull you up here."

In moments, Jesse was beside him on the floor of the cleft.

"You hold me by the legs," Jesse said, "and I'll hang over the edge. I think I can pull the other spear loose."

"I'll do it."

"You're stronger than I am, but I'm lighter. You can hold me, but I don't know whether I could hold you."

Rich nodded. "That's true."

Jesse lay flat. Rich gripped him by the ankles. He slid forward until the whole upper half of

his body was over the edge. He seized the shaft and waggled it. It was wedged tighter than the other. His belt buckle was digging into his stomach and the edge of the rock cut into him. He thought, This would be a good time for Rich to let go of me. Down I'd go, plonk, on my head!

But Rich held him fast. He jerked at the spear with all his might and felt himself slide forward an inch or two. Then the spear was free and Rich was dragging him back to safety. He rolled over, gasping, and got to his feet.

"You okay?" Rich said.

Jesse rubbed his middle. "I think I've got a permanent crease. But we got the spears, didn't we?"

Rich gave a short satisfied nod. "We sure did."

They set themselves once more to the climb.

## 8 The Crystal Cave

The land below was dusky when they came to another change in the direction of the cleft, a zig after the last zag. They were so high that the air around them was still golden with sun although it was evening in the valley. It was cold, too, and their breath steamed thinly out of their mouths.

Here again, there was a cave where the cleft made an angle. This was wider and deeper than the other but not as high, and the stone had split into slices over which they saw they could climb to continue on their way.

"Let's stay here for the night," Jesse said. "No point in going on until it's light enough to see by."

They ate their dinner and by the time they were done it was almost dark in the cave.

"I wish they'd given us some kind of never-ending firewood," said Jesse. "My gosh, it's cold in here."

He got out his match, struck it and wedged it upright between two stones where it burned like a birthday candle.

Rich did the same. They wrapped themselves in their blankets and tried to find softish spots on the rocky floor.

Rich said, "Hey, listen. Just tell me something. Why did you say you'd go on this search in the first place?"

Jesse squinted at him. Rich's face was no more than a flickering eye and a nose in the tiny light. But his voice had

sounded serious, not angry or bullying.

"Do you really want to know? Or are you just needling?"

"I'm not needling."

"Well. Partly, I guess, just because Dr. Cornelius seemed to be daring me. But no, it was more than that. There was something proud and noble about him, and when he said that about saving our world and this one I felt that if I didn't speak up, I'd never be able to look myself in the face again."

"Mm. Funny. I felt that too. And it wasn't that I thought he'd say anything about it. It wasn't like the way some grown-ups are—you know, they make you feel guilty if you don't do what they want you to. With him, I felt he was really giving me a free choice."

"That's right." Jesse sat up, pulling the blanket around his face like a hood. "But I felt I was

making the choice he'd have made if he had been in my place. It made me feel good."

"Yeah. That's right."

Jesse mused for a moment, and then said, "It was more than just that, though. To tell the truth . . . it was the adventure, too."

"The adventure?"

"Of going on a quest, like somebody in a book. Strange people, strange things, and excitement—going on a trip without grown-ups. I just thought, Great! because nothing seemed really real. It was like a dream—or no, as if I was making it up in my head, and I acted the way I would if I was imagining it." He bit his lip, and added, "But it *is* real. If we'd fallen off the mountain today, we'd have been killed. Dead. And that means the Wolf is real, too."

With the words, a chill went up his spine. "Rich," he said, almost in a whisper. "Do you think we're going to be able to do it?"

"I don't know," Rich said, slowly. "It's just an animal, isn't it? It may be big and vicious, but it's just a kind of wild dog and I've never met a dog that I couldn't make friends with.

Anyway, we're in it now. We couldn't back out if we wanted to. We don't even know how to get back to—what's it called?—the city where Mr. Crump and Mr. Magnus are."

"Gundersholm."

Rich blew out his match. "I'm going to sleep."

"Okay. Goodnight."

"Mm."

Jesse blew out his own match and carefully put it away. He lay down, snuggling into the blanket, and was soon cozy. Then, without warning, a terrible wave of homesickness flooded over him.

He thought about his father, that quiet man with skillful hands, equally able to tie the most exquisite flies or repair a tractor; about his mother, a shrill lively woman who loved surprises and whose speciality was chocolate pie with graham-cracker crust. He could smell the kitchen, hear the whirr of the lawn mower, see the porch of the new house with its swing. He had hated that house at first when they had had to move to Brixton, but it had turned out to be even pleasanter and more comfortable than their old place near the shore. He saw himself coming home from school and settling down with a fresh cold apple and an interesting new book in the porch swing. It had to be a nice hot day which made the coolness of the porch more delicious. "Hi, Mom!" he called. "I'm home." She said, "You'll never guess what happened today. A man named Crump arrived—"

He didn't know it, but he was already asleep and sunk in dreaming.

He opened his eyes to brightness. The cave mouth was touched with sunlight. Rich was up, folding his blanket smaller and smaller to handkerchief-size.

"Come on, Weasel," he said. "You going to sleep all day?"

"All you had to do was wake me up, Fathead," Jesse grumbled.

They ate sitting at the edge of the crack and looking out over the dark blue, hazy world where it was not yet morning. Rich had bacon and eggs and Jesse a stack of pancakes with maple syrup. Then they packed their knapsacks and began to climb once more.

The last upward stretch was so steep that they had to go almost on all fours. The cleft opened at the top and when they had scrambled up the last few yards they found themselves on a narrow ledge which seemed to circle the pointed peak. They inched cautiously along the ledge. It widened, and they could move more easily. They went halfway around the pinnacle until they were on its southern face. Then they could see a long, long flight of steps cut into the rock and running from the ledge down the slope away from them.

"If we'd taken the right road in the forest, I suppose we'd have come up this way," Jesse remarked.

At this spot, a round hole just barely big enough for them to stand up in was bored into the summit. The rock here had exchanged its rosy tint for a pale blue. It was translucent, and the sun's rays filtering through lighted the tunnel brilliantly so that when they entered, it was like being inside a lump of cloudy ice.

They began walking. The tunnel was tubular as if some gigantic worm had drilled its way into the solid stone. It spiraled slowly inward and upward but they had no feeling of gloom because of the light that came through the walls. They plodded along for a while and had grown so used to the monotony of the walk that when they came out suddenly into an open space, they almost fell.

They were in an immense cave. It was shaped like a cone, its pointed roof high overhead, and Jesse guessed they were inside the very top of the peak itself. The air was warm from the sun which streamed through the walls, but it had a bracing quality as well. He stared around the great chamber and then touched Rich's arm and pointed. In the center, a pedestal rose from the floor, formed out of the stone. It was some six feet high and flat-topped. On it rested a large round nest woven of golden twigs, and in the nest they could just make out the round back and crested head of a bird.

They had no time for more than a glimpse. From behind the pedestal came a strange being, so fearsome that both boys shrank back.

It was a loathsome pallid green, like the green of seasickness. Its skin was hard and glossy, throwing off oily lights as it moved. It strutted on thin muscular limbs, slithering and rustling. There was something insectlike about it and something snaky. For a mouth it had a pair of cruel hooked pincers. Its cold green eyes bulged, and as it stepped toward them it reached out powerful arms which ended in sharp hooks instead of hands or paws. The boys retreated, holding out their spears to keep it off. Jesse's skin crawled and cold sweat trickled down his ribs. It was small consolation to see that Rich's spear was shaking in his hands like a twig in a wind.

They backed away still farther. To fight a thing like this was hopeless. And then, just as Jesse was on the point of turning to run, he saw something that made his heart give a sudden bump. His shadow and Rich's fell long and black across the floor, but at the creature's feet there was only a bright white glow. He remembered what Mr. Magnus had said: "Solid bodies cast dark shadows, don't they? But illusions cast light shadows."

He blinked and looked again. And now he could make out through the body of the thing the outline, faint but clear, of the stone pedestal with the nest on top of it.

He acted, as he usually did, on impulse. He began to walk toward the creature.

"Hey!" Rich gasped. "What are you doing? Stop!"

Jesse walked on. He felt a heady certainty that he was right. For one instant, as he came face to face with the creature and saw the glint of saliva on its pincer-jaws, he almost lost his nerve. Then he remembered the housewives walking through the fat-and-thin phantom that advertised Dr. Runklefeather's Universal Tonic. He strode forward. It was like walking into a movie screen made of mist.

Rich was still standing in the same place, his mouth wide open. He looked stunned. Between him and Jesse was the creature, appearing as solid as ever.

"It's a fake," Jesse called, unable to hold back his nervous laughter. "An apparition. It's like the one we saw with Mr. Magnus, in the city."

Over Rich's face flitted a series of expressions: surprise, relief, annoyance and finally a sheepish grin. Hefting his spear, he stepped forward and walked through the monster as Jesse

had done. As he did so, it vanished.

He looked at Jesse with something new in his blue eyes.

"How'd you guess?" he said.

"From the shadow. It was light instead of dark. Mr. Magnus described it to us. Remember?"

Rich nodded. "I remember, now. But I didn't remember then. You did."

Jesse shrugged, feeling slightly embarrassed.

Rich started to turn away, and then abruptly he faced Jesse again. "And walking through it, even when you knew what it was," he said. "That took guts."

"Oh well, it's because I eat vitamins," Jesse said, with a grimace. "Let's see what's in that nest, huh?"

It was above their heads but Rich made a stirrup of his hands and boosted Jesse up so that he could catch hold of the top, which was shaped like a bowl. As he did so, the bird that was within sprang up with a flap of its wings and began to circle overhead. Each feather was shimmering gold with a scarlet vein and as it soared it was like a living flame. It began to sing, piercingly beautiful notes that rang in the chamber.

Jesse climbed into the nest which was big enough to hold him easily. There were two golden eggs, and he was careful not to disturb them. The nest was made of golden twigs woven together with green vines and slender reeds. Among them was one long silken thread which was pure white.

He pulled the leather bag out of his shirt and took out his stone. He touched it to the thread.

There was a flash of light. To be certain, he touched some of the twigs and reeds but nothing happened. Once again, he touched the thread and once more the stone flashed.

Delicately, so as not to injure the nest, he pulled the thread free. He coiled it around one hand and dropped it into his pocket. He put away his stone, got on the edge of the pedestal and lowered himself to the floor. "Got it," he said. "Sure?"

"Must be. I touched it with my jewel and it lit up. Didn't you see the flashes?"

Rich gazed at the bird. He raised his hand to it, as if in greeting. The bird seemed to understand. It glided down and settled once more on its eggs. The song stopped.

"Let's see what it looks like," said Rich.

Jesse pulled out the thread and they inspected it together.

"I don't understand how something like this is going to hold the Wolf," Jesse said.

"I don't understand a lot of things that happen here," said Rich. "So there's no point in trying to figure. Not until we know more than we do."

"I guess so." On impulse, again, Jesse held out the strand. "Here. You want to hang onto it?"

Rich frowned.

"You keep it," he said. "You earned it."

## 9 In the Forest

It was quicker going down and by sunset they had come back to Bazan's hut. They told him their climb had been successful, and he said, gravely, "Well done. I knew there might be more in you than appeared on the surface."

Once more they sat at his table and shared his simple meal. While they ate, they told him about their adventure.

"And I've been thinking," said Jesse. "I wonder if that phantom we saw was put there by Skrymir? Or if it could have been Skrymir himself?"

"It was certainly not Skrymir," said Bazan, "for he is a real person and would have cast a real shadow. But he may have made the phantom. Or it may have been set there by some art of the Zhar-Ptitzza, to protect itself."

"We're going to have an awful time recognizing the enemy," Jesse sighed. "How can we tell who he is? He might be anybody. I still think he could have been the fake Bazan."

"Oh, come on," said Rich. "Why would he have saved us from those Things in the woods? If he'd wanted to get rid of us, he could have just let them eat us, or whatever they were going to do."

"If they were real," Jesse countered. "We never thought about looking at their shadows."

"I hit one and it fell, didn't it?"

"If Skrymir had made them, the way Mr. Magnus said apparitions could be made, he could have made it fall when you hit it. Remember, the others just stayed away from our spears. We never did seem to touch them." He appealed to Bazan. "Wouldn't it have been possible?"

Bazan stroked his beard. "Yes, quite possible."

Rich was silent.

"On the other hand," Bazan went on, "who can tell? It is equally possible that the Dhones were real and that he saved your lives. And I have already told you that many swordsmen have pretended to be me to give themselves a reputation. The thing that disturbs me is that he led you so far astray after saying he knew the right path. It is that which makes me feel he might have been an agent of Skrymir's, if not the Shape-Changer himself."

"Well, good gosh!" Rich cried. "How are we ever going to tell if somebody's a real person or just Skrymir in disguise?"

"You will have to be watchful," said Bazan.

"It's going to be awfully hard," Rich growled.

"Did you think it would be easy to overcome Skrymir and bind the Wolf?" Bazan said, gently. The boys looked glumly at him.

"We didn't think it would be easy—I guess," Jesse said, at last. "But it's beginning to sound impossible."

"If it were impossible," said Bazan, "you would not have been given the task in the first place. Trust yourselves. You have courage, and you are not fools." He got up. "Tonight you shall rest safely here. Tomorrow I will point you on your way."

At the first light, he set them on the path. They thanked him for all his help and set out. From the ledge where his house stood a narrow track led down, first through tumbled rocks, then among dwarfish trees, then through grassy slopes to the valley. The weather, which had been clear and chilly on the mountain, took a bad turn. It grew sticky and hot, and after a time the sky clouded over and a fine drizzle began which soaked them to the skin, so that it was like walking in a steam bath.

Late in the afternoon, the path entered another forest. It was almost like a park with enormous trees standing far apart, their branches opening high above the ground. The drizzle had stopped, but the leaves dripped ceaselessly and the air was muggy. The boys halted beneath one of the trees, whose trunk was as big around as a house. Two of its giant roots formed a sheltered alcove.

"I suppose we may as well camp here for the night," Rich said. "It's as good a place as any." The ground was covered with low pale ferns, like bunches of whitish feathers. Here and there, tall flowers rose on slender stalks taller than tall men. They were waxy and white, like the ghosts of sunflowers.

"We could pile up some of the ferns for mattresses," Rich said.

"If we can ever get them dry. I feel as soggy as an old washrag," said Jesse.

He looked anxiously around. "I wonder if there are any of those Dhones here. Or wild animals."

"Who knows? We'll find out." Rich wiped his face with his arm. He was feeling grumpy, hot and tired. "Don't be so scared all the time," he said, contemptuously.

"I'm *not* scared. I'm just *scared*. We can't all be big brave Boy Scouts like you, Fathead."

"Oh, shut up."

Jesse sat down with his back against the tree. The bark, although thick and heavy, was as soft as cork. He opened his pack.

"Tonight's so warm, I'll have lobster salad and ice cream," he said.

Then he went, "Oog!"

His bowl was full of a mixture of both.

Rich chuckled. "You've got to wish for one thing at a time," he said. "You just have to know how to handle this magic stuff. It's all logical." He himself wished for a hamburger, and began to eat it smugly.

Jesse went off and dumped the mess among the ferns. He came back and got an order of lobster salad.

"What do you mean, logical?" he asked. "What's logic got to do with magic?"

"Anybody'd know that but you, Weasel-face. Look, here they call magic science, right? Well, science has laws—remember when we were talking about that, back in the other forest? That means that things happen in certain ways, and they always work that way. If you boil water you get steam, you don't get ice. So these bowls produce a bowl full of food. They don't give you anything to drink, for instance. And they give you just exactly what food you ask for. You ask for two foods and you get them both at the same time. That's logic."

Jesse munched a piece of lobster. Then he said, "If that's so, maybe if we could figure out the laws of science here we could do some magic ourselves. Couldn't we?"

"Hm. I guess maybe so. But how could we figure out the laws?"

"Find a school and get a textbook. 'Beginning Lessons in Black Magic for Little Ones.'

Something like that."

"It would be all right if we could find a school, but we don't even know what they look like in this world," said Rich. "We don't know *anything*. For all we know, maybe kids don't even go to school here."

"Oh, well. It was a good idea while it lasted."

After his salad, Jesse had some chocolate ice cream with hot fudge sauce and then, feeling a little too full, sank back against the tree trunk and gazed up at the canopy of round yellow leaves high above his head. Dreamily, he thought back over all that had happened since they opened the door into what wasn't Mr. Haggarty's office. Who'd ever have imagined then that he and Rich would be sitting side by side, not even sniping at each other?

In fact, they'd gotten along pretty well. You couldn't say that Rich was likable, exactly, but you had to hand it to him: he had certainly been fast in action against the Dhones, and he had thought up the trick with the spears for getting up that rock face. There was something calm about the way he thought about things, even when he was at his sulkiest. Maybe it came with being good at math and science. It was funny how you could get along with somebody even when you didn't like him. You could be sort of separate, Jesse thought, and still be together. A line drifted into his head: "One and one is always two."

Was it the beginning of a poem? How could it go after that? Two, brew, few, do, who . . .

"This one's me, and that one's you." No, it needed to be smoother. Then he had it.

One and one is always two,  
Each alone—here's me—there's you.

That "one and one" reminded him of math. Could you use a word like *mathematics* in a poem? I'll bet it's never been done, he told himself. It was a nice rhythmical word, though. The mathematics of adding up two people. Of something. The way you feel. Your heart? He tried it. "The mathematics of the heart ..."

It was interesting. He wasn't sure he knew what it meant, but he liked the sound of it. He came out of his reverie with the realization that he was cold. An evening breeze had sprung up and driven off the mugginess. The air was lighter and fresher, and since he was still damp it chilled him to the bone.

Rich, a short distance off, was gathering twigs. Jesse, shivering, went to help him. "There's nothing really big enough for firewood," Rich complained. "Only this little kindling stuff."

Jesse examined one of the tall waxy flowers. Its stem was as thick as his wrist, softish but woody. "I wonder if these would burn?" he said.

"Don't be stupid. Flowers don't burn."

"Not in our world, dope. But everything's different here, isn't it?"

With the sharp blade of his spear, he chopped down a couple and cut them into two-foot lengths. Rich, grumbling at his foolishness, piled up the kindling and Jesse built a wigwam of flower stems over it. He struck his magical match and thrust it into the soft ground next to the kindling.

The twigs blazed up. The boys bent over, holding their hands toward the tiny warmth.

"It's not going to work," Rich said. "Look, the kindling's almost all gone and the flower stems haven't caught."

Jesse, hugging himself and jigging to keep warm, said, "Give them time. Just wait. It's got to burn. Come on, fire."

Rich turned away. "Weird," he said. "I'd rather trust my blanket."

The kindling had fallen into a pile of ash from which blue smoke rose. The flower stalks had blackened. The match still burned brightly at the base. Jesse kept trying to encourage it by crooning, "Come on, let's go. Burn."

It became a kind of song, which he kept time to by dancing from one cold foot to the other.

"Burn, burn, you flower fern. Burn and blazey, crazy daisy. Let's have heat to warm our feet."

He sighed and straightened up. At that instant, with a puff and a crackle, the flowers stalks caught and burst into flame.

"How about that?" he cried. "There you are. All they had to do was dry out a little."

He piled a few more pieces on the blaze and went to cut some more. Rich squinted thoughtfully at him, and then stared at the fire.

"Yeah, how about that?" he muttered.

Picking up his spear, he went to help Jesse.

## 10 The Adventure of the Dog

Nothing disturbed them that night, and they awoke to a more cheerful morning. The sunlight slanted in among the trees, and birds darted and twittered high in the branches.

After breakfast, they took out the torn map, laid it carefully on the ground and studied it.

Northward, they could see that they would reach flatter country but then a range of very steep hills rose again like a fence. A river flowed down from them and ran eastward. On the shore



of this river, where it made a turn and widened, was drawn the town marked *Redwater*, wherein is the house of Professor Ilbird.

"It's a long way," Rich said, measuring the distance with his fingers against the scale of miles at the bottom of the map.

"In that case, what are we hanging around for?" said Jesse. "Let's get started."

This was the beginning of a stretch of steady hiking, so long that they lost track of the days. Their routine was always the same: up with the sun, a quick breakfast, three hours of travel broken by short rests, lunch and a longer rest, and then on again until a couple of hours before sunset when they would begin to look for a good camping spot for the night. They grew tougher day by day and found that they could cover more ground. As time went on, they almost began to forget why they were there, so engrossed were they in the monotonous labor of the march. It seemed to them that they had always been walking. They didn't talk much; they needed all their breath for the journey, and by evening they were both too tired. All that had happened before, in their own world, seemed like a dream by now. There was only the present moment, finding a trail, descending into gullies or climbing hills, threading their way over broken ground, walking through woods or striding over open land, moving steadily northward by the landmarks so precisely drawn on their map.

They came into rolling meadowland and began to pass farms where they were greeted hospitably. Men were working in the fields, plowing with horses or oxen, and usually stopped to wave at them. At the farmhouses, with their whitewashed walls and thatched roofs, they were given milk fresh from the cow and home-baked bread spread with sweet butter, and they sometimes spent the night on goosefeather beds or rolled up in their blankets on mounds of fragrant hay.

The day came when they looked down from a hilltop and saw the river shining between high green banks no more than half a mile away. A stone bridge leaped it in a single arch, and on the other side rose the roofs and towers of Redwater.

"We'd better decide what we're going to do," Jesse said.

"What can we do? First, we have to find this professor."

"I know that, Fathead. But we can't just walk up to him when we find him and ask for the strand. He may not even know he has it. Mr. Crump just said it was somewhere in his house."

"Okay, what do you plan to do, Weasel? Break in and burgle the place?"

"Maybe we'll have to."

"Well, you're skinny. You can go in through a keyhole."

"Good thinking. Or you could knock down the door with that thick head of yours."

A whine interrupted them. They looked down. A small brown and white dog was watching them. Its head, which seemed too big for its long body and short bowlegs, was cocked appealingly on one side and its eyes were wistful brown buttons.

Rich squatted down, holding out a hand. The dog came cautiously and sniffed at it.

"Hello, pup," Rich said, softly. "Who do you belong to?"

He scratched its head and stroked its ears. One stood up, the other flopped over, giving it a questioning air. The dog uttered a short bark and trotted away a few steps, looking back at him.

"He looks like he's trying to tell us something," said Jesse.

"Are you lost?" Rich asked the dog.

He moved after it, and the dog ran off again and stopped.

"He's scared of you," Jesse said.

"Don't be so dumb. He wouldn't have let me pat him. He wants us to follow him."

"Do you think we should?"

Rich frowned. "Somebody may be in trouble."

He started after the dog, which barked excitedly and then scampered ahead. It led them to the right, away from the road and down the hill. It bounded through tall grass where they could see its tail waving like a flag, and then up a longer steeper slope. From time to time, it circled back toward them and then away as if to make sure they were coming.

They toiled upward and came at length to the edge of a grassy bank above the river. The opposite bank was almost as high and down below, through the gorge thus formed, the water raced curling and foaming among boulders. The little dog was scurrying along close to the edge. It stopped and looked over, yapping furiously.

They ran to join it. The ground jugged out at this point like a ship's prow overhanging the river. Jesse peered timidly down and the height made his stomach flip.

"There's nothing down there," he said, turning to Rich. "I don't see—"

He stopped, for the earth trembled beneath his feet in the most peculiar and unsettling way.

In the same instant, Rich yelled, "Back! Jump!"

The ground was tipping, sliding toward the river. Jesse made a wild dive away from the edge. He fell sprawling and grabbed at the grass. He felt his feet waving in thin air and there came a roaring crash that stunned him.

Frantically, gasping for breath, he dragged himself forward until all was solid under him and he could get to his feet. Rich was already up, panting, his face red with effort and with rage.

"That dog!" he snarled. "Where's that dog?"

It stood some distance off, its eyes on them. As they watched, its face changed, became a human face with hair like flames streaming upward from it. It laughed, a mirthless laugh that set Jesse's flesh creeping.

Rich was still holding his spear, and he threw it with all his might. The dog slipped aside and the spear shot past him and stuck quivering in the grass. He caught hold of its shaft with his human teeth. As he did so, his form changed again to that of a huge raven. With the spear in his beak, he flapped heavily away and was soon lost to sight.

"Skrymir!" Jesse said.

He could feel his scalp crawl with horror.

"I guess so," said Rich. He sat down suddenly on the grass, looking shaken.

For the first time, Jesse looked back at the edge where they had been standing. A great chunk of earth had broken away and collapsed into the river. The water was boiling around and over it, yellow with mud.

He shuddered. He said, "How'd you ever think fast enough? I didn't even know what was going on."

"I don't know why but I happened to be looking at the ground and I saw a crack start and go running across right behind us."

"Oh, man! You saved our lives, you know that? We'd have gone smashing down with all that dirt and stone and been carried away by the river."

Rich's face had gone all streaky between red and white. He rubbed his nose with the back of a hand. "Just thinking about it—" he said. "I guess the river must have undercut the cliff right here and all it took was our weight. So that fake dog lured us here. It *must* have been Skrymir."

"And now he's got your spear."

"Where's yours?"

"I dropped it when I jumped. It's in the river."

Rich stood up. "Well, we've still got our knapsacks. And he didn't get us, not that time."

Jesse gritted his teeth. "Right!" he said. His courage was coming back, reinforced by anger.

"Let's go back to the city."

Rich looked around him once more and flexed his arms. "That's the last time I pat a dog in *this* world," he said.

## 11 A Job With Professor Ilbird

When they had crossed the bridge, the boys found themselves in a busy street. Redwater seemed more crowded than the other city they had been in; the people walked more rapidly, the voices were louder, and there was an air of bustling liveliness about the place.

They stood on a corner under the overhanging second story of a large inn. They had to keep dodging out of the way of people going in and out of its courtyard.

"Well, what'll we do?" Rich said. "Got any ideas?"

Jesse nodded. "I've been thinking. If he's a professor, maybe he works for a college. Let's walk around a bit and see if we can find one."

They strolled along a tree-lined avenue looking curiously at the shops and booths. Some of the shops were open to the street, and in them shoemakers tapped, metal-smiths hammered, or potters worked at their humming wheels. They turned into another street where there was a market under a long roof set on stone pillars. Booths were crowded close together, full of fruits and vegetables, shining fish, or sides of meat hanging from hooks, and the place was noisy and good-natured.

Jesse said, "Wait, I'll ask that kid."

A boy of about their own age, wearing a leather apron and carrying a rolled-up piece of leather on his shoulder, was sauntering past.

Jesse said, "Hi. Is there anything like a college around here?"

The other raised his eyebrows. "Is it a riddle?"

"What do you mean?" Jesse said, in puzzlement.

"What's like a college but isn't a college? If so, I give up."

"Well, no, all I meant was is there a college around here?"

"No. But there's a high school and a low school. Will they do?"

Jesse looked at Rich. "What do you think? Would a professor teach in a high school? And I don't know what a low school is."

"A low school is the school in the basement of a high school," the leather-aproned boy said.

"And of course a professor would teach in a high school. Why not? The higher the school, the more important the professor."

He shifted his roll of leather so that one end rested on the cobblestones. "You're strangers, all right. Where are you from?"

"Um . . . hard to explain," said Jesse. "A long way off."

"You must be." The boy looked them up and down. "What do you work at?"

"Well, nothing yet. We're still in school. Don't you have to go to school?"

The other boy shook his head. "You must live in an upside-down sort of country. Go to school? I'm not anywhere near old enough, yet. I'm only thirteen."

Rich had been leaving it to Jesse to do the talking, but now he broke in, "Thirteen? We start school when we're six. When do you start, for gosh sakes?"

"We start when we're ready for it. How could you begin studying Taste when you're six years old?"

"Taste? What kind of taste?" said Jesse, feeling completely bewildered.

"Tasting food, for instance. Being able to tell marjoram from rosemary in a salad dressing. Or tasting the difference between the way Sippaco and Snuber paint pictures. Or how could you study Political Untruths at six, or the works of the major poets?"

"I'm confused. What about reading and writing and spelling?"

"Well, sure, if we went to work for a scientist, we'd learn rites and spells from him," the other said. "Those things are important but nobody but a scientist or a poet would need to know them. As for reading—why, we learn that from our parents to start with and then we teach ourselves. Just the way we teach ourselves to talk. You didn't have to go to school to learn to talk, did you?"

"I suppose not," Jesse said.

"There you are. We start by finding something we're interested in, and then we get a job doing it. Maybe you change jobs a dozen times before you're fifteen or sixteen, but sooner or later you find what you want to do. Then, when you're grown up, you go to school to learn all kinds of other interesting things when you think you're ready for them. Take me, for instance. I'm working for a leathersmith, now. But I've been studying dyeing with him and I may go into chemistry next year. It sounds as if it could be fun."

"But suppose," Jesse objected, "suppose you don't want to work at anything? Suppose you just want to fool around and play games?"

The other's eyes grew round. "I never heard of anybody who didn't want to work at *something*. When we want to play games, we take some time off and play. But if you *only* wanted to play games and nothing else that would be your work, wouldn't it?"

Jesse scratched his head. "I guess it would. I never thought of it that way."

"It sounds weird," Rich said. "Listen, we haven't much time. Where's this high school you were talking about?"

The boy pointed. "Go down that lane. It will take you to Fimble Square and you'll see the school."

They thanked him and set off. They left him shaking his head and murmuring, "Begin school at six! What next?"

The lane led them by twists and turns into a large pleasant square shaded by graceful slender trees. One whole side of it was taken up by a tall narrow marble tower standing on a squat brown stone base. The other three sides were lined with comfortable-looking brick houses. Jesse noticed that each door held a brass plate. He went up to peer at one. It said, *Professor Nelgert Bodkin*.

Rich was looking at the next one. "Professor Wilgrim Taproot," he read.

"They're all professors. Keep looking," said Jesse. "I'll bet our man lives here somewhere."

He was right. At the end of that row, on a red door, they found a plate that read *Professor Armand llbird*. They stood hesitating, and at last Jesse stepped boldly forward and rapped at the door.

"Wait a minute," Rich said, worriedly. "Do you think we—?"

Before he could continue, the door was flung open. A smell of burning and a drift of blue smoke came out, and after them appeared a large red-faced man with a bulbous nose. He wore a patched bathrobe and carried a frying pan in which were two shriveled sausages.

"I hope it's important," he cried. He had a hoarse, braying voice.

Jesse took in the pan, sausages, smoke, and smell. Then he said, "Are you Professor llbird?"

"Certainly. What of it?"

"We're looking for work," Jesse said, "and we're both expert cooks."

"Work? There's no work here. I can't—" began Professor llbird, and then he stopped. He

inspected them out of narrowed eyes. "Cooks?" he said. "Not just water-boilers? Not just toast-burners? Real honest-to-goodness cooks?"

"We—I'm not—" Rich stammered.

But Jesse cut in smoothly, "We're masters, sir. We can make anything you like. Beef stew, snails in garlic butter, roast chicken—" Out of the corner of his eye he glanced at Rich. "Chili con carne—"

Then Rich understood.

"Come in, come in," Professor Ilbird rasped, waving his frying pan. The sausages flew out and landed in the street but he ignored them.

He led them along a dark passage into a brick-floored kitchen. It was a cheerful room, its walls paneled in light wood, its big windows looking into a garden. But there were scraps of moldy food on the floor along with bits of broken crockery; dirty dishes and pans were piled in the sink, and the stove was streaked with drippings which combined their old smell with that of the newly-burned sausages.

"How long have you been cooks?" Professor Ilbird demanded. "Never mind, don't tell me. I know how it is with young persons who are enthusiastic about something. I was young myself, once. I'll give you a trial. Lunch, that's what I want. I'm due in the classroom in an hour."

"What would you like?" Jesse asked.

The professor looked ruefully at his empty frying pan.

"Sausages? Right! Sausages and scrambled eggs and plenty of buttered toast and grilled tomatoes and fried potatoes and a rasher of bacon on the side."

"All right," Jesse said. "But you mustn't watch us while we work. It makes us nervous. Just show me where you want to have your lunch and we'll bring it to you."

Fifteen minutes and half a dozen wishes in their dinner bowls later, they brought the professor his lunch on a large silver tray which they found in a corner and managed to clean of some of its grease stains. Professor Ilbird rubbed his hands, looking at the smoking dishes. He lifted the lid of the coffee pot and sniffed. Jesse's bottle had produced coffee and Rich's had poured out cream. He tucked his napkin under his chin and dug in.

"You're hired," he croaked, with his mouth full.

The boys exchanged triumphant smiles.

"Step one," Rich muttered.

"What's that?" said Professor Ilbird.

"He said, thank you, sir," said Jesse, demurely.

## 12 Something About Rich

"That," said Rich, "was pretty smart of you."

The boys were alone in the kitchen. Professor Ilbird had changed out of his bathrobe into a blue gown with a crimson hood and had gone off to his class.

"I don't know that I'd have thought of it in a million years," Rich went on, with admiration in his voice. "Did you have the idea right from the beginning?"

Jesse shook his head, trying not to look too pleased with himself. "When I knocked at his door I didn't have any idea at all. I just hoped something would happen. But when I saw those burned sausages, it came to me." And then, some sense of wanting to be fair made him add, "We're even, aren't we? You saved us when the cliff broke away."

"Oh, well . . . What about that thing in the cave at the top of the mountain?"

Jesse looked at him. There was something very like friendship in Rich's eyes under the heavy dark eyebrows. A small thrill ran up Jesse's spine, of pure joy. He said, "You know what? We're a pretty good team, aren't we?"

Rich nodded.

"Maybe we'll do it after all," said Jesse. "I mean, find the strands and bind the Wolf. What do you think?"

"I don't know. Maybe." Rich squared his shoulders. "Anyway, let's get started searching. The prof will be back in about an hour."

They took out their jade stones. Rich looked around the messy kitchen. "It's going to be a job searching this room alone," he said. "And what are we looking for? Another white thread?"

"Not necessarily," said Jesse. "Mr. Crump told us the stones would help us recognize the strands, so I guess that means each one will be different."

They tried touching everything that looked stringlike but the stones never gleamed. From the kitchen, they worked their way through the house as quickly as they could, fearful every minute of hearing the professor return. They prowled through the study with its walls lined with books, the dining room with its two great silver candlesticks on a scratched and dusty table where they had served the professor his lunch, then upstairs to the master bedroom with its enormous four-poster bed hung with cobwebby curtains, and finally to the attic where there was a small room with two cots and a chest and where, the professor had said, they could sleep.

At last, hot and disappointed, they stared at each other and Rich said, "No good, it's not here." Jesse mopped his wet face. "It's got to be here. Mr. Crump wouldn't have said it was, if it wasn't. We haven't really had a chance to search carefully."

"Where is it, then?" Failure had turned Rich sullen again.

Jesse gazed around helplessly. "Maybe the professor is on Skrymir's side and he's got the strand hidden somewhere. We'll have to look more thoroughly."

"But old Lumpy-nose will be home any minute."

"We're working for him, aren't we? We'll stay on and be his cooks and dishwashers, and we're bound to have time to take the house to pieces if we want to."

The front door slammed.

"Let's get busy, then," Rich said, between his teeth.

When Professor Ilbird came into the kitchen the boys were hard at work, Jesse scrubbing plates in the sink and Rich sweeping the floor.

"Warm milk!" the professor said. "With an egg beaten into it. Oh, my voice! My vocal cords need coddling. Bring it to me in the study."

"Maybe one of his vocal cords is the strand we're looking for," Jesse remarked, getting a glass off a shelf and trying to wipe it clean.

Rich poured hot milk and egg out of his leather bottle.

"You take it," he growled. "Maybe you can get him to let you look down his throat."

Jesse carried the glass into the study. As he stood waiting for the professor to return the glass, he said, "What do you teach, sir? Singing?"

"Singing?" Professor Ilbird turned purple and began to pant with fury. "What's the matter with you, wretched boy? Are you daft? Have you no eyes? Can't you tell a Doctor of Screaming when you see one? Didn't you notice my crimson hood and my chain of golden S's?"

"I'm sorry," Jesse stammered. "We don't have Doctors of Screaming where I come from."

"Then you must come from some imbecile cluster of barbarians," Professor Ilbird said in a

calmer voice, and finished the milk.

Jesse asked timidly, "Why do you teach screaming? Excuse my sounding stupid, but what good is it?"

"Naturally you wouldn't know. It is an advanced course for mature persons. Screaming, my young dullard, is beneficial to the health. It keeps the body in tone and releases all harmful residues in the blood through proper expansion and exhalation."

"I see," said Jesse politely, although he didn't.

"Furthermore," the professor continued, "screaming may be used for signaling at long distances, for the expression of emotion, and for defense."

"Defense?"

"Certainly. Observe."

Professor Ilbird put the empty glass on a table. He made his mouth into an O, stretched his neck, pointed his lips at the glass, and uttered a short piercing screech. The glass dissolved into glittering powder. "Wow!" Jesse gasped.

"A mere nothing," yawned the professor. "For my doctorate, I split a two-ton rock at a distance of five hundred yards. Have you settled in comfortably? Everything all right?"

"Oh, yes," said Jesse. "Everything's fine, except we're having some trouble getting your kitchen cleaned up."

"I'm a slob," said the professor frankly. "Do your best. For dinner, I'll have a simple light meal. Let me see. Braised pork chops with prune sauce, red cabbage, fried potatoes, salad, and lemon meringue pie."

He tossed Jesse a small leather bag full of gold and silver coins. "That's for your shopping," he said. "Tell me when you need more."

Jesse went back to the kitchen. "We'll have to pretend to shop," he told Rich. "We don't want him to get suspicious. Maybe we can even cook something once in a while. I can fry eggs."

"I know how to make biscuits and corned-beef hash and meat pie," Rich said. "And a few other things, too, if we can ever get any of these pots clean enough to cook in."

"That's pretty good," Jesse said. "How'd you learn to make all those things?"

"I sometimes have to do the cooking for my kid brother and myself when my mother works late."

"Your mother works?" Jesse said, in surprise. "What does she do?"

"Shorthand and typing in a real estate office."

"What about your father? Doesn't he work?"

Rich bit his lip. A grim, lowering expression came over his face like a veil, and Jesse realized that that was how he had always looked in those days which seemed so long ago, back in their own world.

"No," Rich said curtly. He turned away and began stacking clean plates. He carried them to the cupboard without another word, and after a moment Jesse sighed and began trying to find a shopping basket.

"I'm going," he said, when he had unearthed one. "Are you coming to the market?"

"No."

"I'll get some potatoes and fruit and butter and stuff. All right?"

"Get whatever you want."

"Okay. What are you so sore about?"

"Who says I'm sore?"

"Nobody has to say it, Fathead. You're just it."

"You'd better go if you're going."

Jesse went out frowning. Rich hadn't even called him "Weasel." So something was wrong,

but what could it be? Just asking whether his father had a job? Maybe that was it—maybe he was ashamed because his father wasn't working.

He shrugged. There was nothing he could do about that. Rich would get over it.

He found his way back to the market square. He strolled about and made his purchases from the stalls under the tiled roof. He looked around for the boy they had talked to earlier, but there was no sign of him. A man was selling sweet thick whipped cream over mild dry cake, and Jesse bought a portion in a little cup. He sat on the edge of a stone fountain and watched the busy crowd while he ate. He thought to himself that this was a pretty good country, and wondered idly whether, if he lived here, he could go to work for a poet. Maybe, he thought, the reward they had promised him might be that he could stay here as long as he liked. Not so bad, no school, no rushing around, no pollution or riots or problems—except the Wolf, he told himself, wryly. Just that little problem, nothing to it. And then he thought, No, you couldn't live here forever, not without your parents and your friends and everything that was familiar and real and your own. Anyway the whole thing was silly because the way Dr. Cornelius had described the reward it was nothing like that—stronger than life itself but easily broken . . . you don't know you want it and yet when you have it you will know how precious it is. Some kind of jewel, maybe, like a diamond which you could mistake for glass, or a chain of gold. And he began imagining how he'd use the treasure, or spend it, when he had it.

As usual, when he began daydreaming, he lost track of the time. It was nearly dinnertime when he got home and Rich was moody and snappish. They gave Professor Ilbird his dinner and then had their own at the kitchen table. They washed the dishes, swept the floor—the kitchen was already looking much neater—and went up to their attic room.

Their window faced north. Jesse leaned his elbows on the sill and looked out. To his left, the sky was faintly flushed with the last of the sunset. The roofs were outlined in black against the pink and above, where the color deepened, a pair of twin stars twinkled.

Suddenly, far to the north, the sky blazed for a moment with a light that sprang up and died away.

"Hey, look at this," he called to Rich, who was washing his face in a basin, with water from an earthenware pitcher.

Rich came and stood beside him, toweling himself. Once again, the distant darkness was brightened. They could see a dazzling streak like lightning, but upside-down lightning, which sprang from the ground, shot toward the sky, and vanished. An arc of violet fringed with pure white rose up. It pulsed, once, twice, growing larger, expanding, then fading. Then all was dark again and although they watched for a time there was nothing more to see.

"Northern lights?" Jesse said, at last. "Or maybe a storm?"

Rich shook his head slowly. His eyes glinted in the twilight.

"It had something to do with the Wolf," he said.

"How do you know?"

"I just know. I could feel it. Couldn't you?"

"No."

They stood in silence a little longer. Then Rich said, "Hey, listen."

"What?"

"About my father. You know, you asked me if he had a job."

"I don't care about that," Jesse said hastily, not wanting to reopen the matter.

But Rich went on, "I haven't got a father. He ran off and left us. Two years ago."

"Oh. Gosh, I'm sorry," Jesse said. He stared at Rich, who looked stonily out into the gathering darkness. Then, stupidly, he said, "Isn't he— isn't he coming back?"



"I hope he doesn't," Rich said, in a tired voice. "He didn't like me much. He used to beat me up. He said I had to learn that life wasn't all fun and candy bars. He hit my mother, too. I used to listen to them when I was in bed at night. I could hear him sock her, and her crying. I tried to stop him once and he put me in a closet and locked me—"

His voice broke. Jesse stood trembling between horror and embarrassment, not knowing what to say. He had never imagined such a thing could be. He had never felt as sorry for anyone as he did for Rich but he hadn't any idea what to do about it.

Rich gave himself a shake, and then in a firm voice said, "Well, that's it. That's why, way back when we were in school, in the gym, and you made up that poem—"

"What poem?" Jesse honestly couldn't remember.

"About me having a father who was a ghastly ghost."

Jesse groaned. "Oh, yeah. But how did I know—?"

"It doesn't matter now. Anyway, when you asked me about him this afternoon, I got to thinking. I never told anybody about him before. Nobody in school knows, because we moved here—I mean *there*, to Brixton—after he left us. And just now, looking at those lights, I knew they had something to do with the Wolf and I thought, well, I can tell Jesse. Because if we meet the Wolf we may both be killed, and heck, I'd rather tell somebody first. You know?"

Jesse nodded. "Sure, I understand."

Rich turned away from the window and hung up his towel. Jesse stared out toward the north. In a muddled sort of way, he wished he had something important to tell Rich, in exchange.

At last, with a sigh, he said, "Thanks for telling me."

Rich was already in bed, and he grunted, almost as if he was a little sorry he had spoken.

Jesse undressed and got into his own bed. He pulled the blankets up to his chin and lay staring at the pale square of window, now full of stars. Into his head drifted the poem he had once begun, and which he had only thought of occasionally since.

One and one is always two,  
Each alone—here's me—there's you.

People were so terribly alone inside their own heads. If only you could get from one to another. If you could add them together...

And what was the next line he had tried? "The mathematics of the heart." Adding people together made them stronger, the way Rich felt stronger when he wanted to tell somebody else about his trouble. The danger they faced had something to do with that.

He was drowsing off and the lines formed themselves behind his closed eyelids.

The mathematics of the heart  
Adds together what's apart.

He smiled at it, and smiling fell asleep.

## 13 The Second Strand

It had been a long day and they both overslept. They were awakened by a thin sharp penetrating scream which jolted them out of their beds and onto the floor.

"What—?" Rich stammered.

"It's Professor Ilbird," said Jesse, rubbing his eyes. "We'd better go down."

The professor was fuming when they came running down the stairs. They hadn't even paused to wash their faces.

"You'll have to do better than that, young sluggards," he cried. "I have an important meeting in half an hour. Porridge, eggs, bacon, grilled mushrooms, coffee! At once!"

They didn't bother to pretend to cook. Two minutes later, Rich brought the porridge out and set it on the dining table.

The professor eyed it in surprise. "I must say, you boys can be quick when you want to," he said.

Well-fed and in a more cheerful mood, he went off to his meeting and the two began another search of the house. They tried every corner and cranny, and went through desks, cupboards and bureau drawers. They turned up forgotten ends of twine, a coil of rope, a spool of thread and another of wire, and even a length of thin, rusty chain, but their stones refused to gleam.

"I give up," Rich said, throwing himself into a chair and resting his elbows on the kitchen table. "I'm beat. If that strand is in this house it's hidden for good."

"We can't give up," Jesse said. He poured some lemonade out of his bottle, realized that he had forgotten to wish for it to be ice-cold, threw it away and tried again. He drank thirstily.

"It's got to be here. There must be something—we haven't tried."

"You name it."

"If it's disguised, maybe it doesn't look like string at all. Maybe that's the mistake we're making."

"You mean it could be a candlestick, or even a ladder. Something long and thin—"

"Sure. Or anything. Maybe a chair or a book."

Rich groaned. "We'll have to touch everything in the house."

"It may take us a month."

Rich got up, gritting his teeth. "Let's go. Compared to this the climb up to that bird's nest was a picnic."

He went into the dining room and Jesse started on the professor's study. Half an hour later, he had touched nearly a thousand books with his stone when the professor came bursting in.

"What in the name of the Four Sublime Elements do you think you're doing?" he demanded.

"I found the other one crawling around on the dining room floor. What does it mean?"

"I'm—I'm counting the books because I'm planning to clean them," Jesse gulped.

It sounded flimsy to him but Professor Ilbird only flapped a large hand.

"Well, stop counting," he said. "I have a more important task for you. Come into the kitchen."

Rich was already there, touseled and sweating, with cobwebs in his hair. Professor Ilbird laid a piece of parchment on the table.

"It is indeed fortunate that I have two such noble cooks," he said, solemnly. "You are going to make me something special."

They regarded him uneasily.

"For years," he went on, "I have wished to learn the Grand Shriek of Almendrakas. I have searched through many ancient records without success. Now, however, a visiting scientist for whom I once did a great favor has given me the recipe for a Reveal Stew, and when you have made it for me and I have eaten it, I will know what I have to know. The Grand Shriek will be mine!" He slapped his chest and beamed. "Isn't that exciting? You may applaud if you like."

Jesse did, and received a bow in return. Rich picked up the parchment and glanced over it.

"I never heard of some of these things," he said. "Two gills of that water called Acqua

Transmontane.' And this one, 'Shavings of the stone that lieth in the head of of a toad.' How are we going to get anything like that? We can't just walk out and buy it."

"Why not?" retorted the professor. "You've got legs, haven't you? And I presume there's some money left. You may have to get some of the ingredients at the chemist's shop around the corner, but the rest can be bought at the market stalls." He raised a finger. "As you will see, the stew must be stirred for four hours. Do not let it burn. And above all—" He paused and scowled fearsomely at them. "Above all, do not taste it."

"Why not?" asked Jesse.

"It would be far too strong for you," said the professor. "A mouthful would destroy you. In any case, it's mine. All of it! I need every bit in order to learn the Grand Shriek."

"All right," Jesse said, soothingly. "We'll get started right away."

"I'll be in my study. Call me when the stew is ready."

When he had left them, Rich said, "Four hours of stirring! Can't we get this stuff made in our bowls?"

"We can try."

They had been keeping their bowls and bottles in one of the kitchen cupboards. Jesse got his bowl out and put it on the table. "Reveal Stew," he said.

Nothing appeared.

"Well, now we know," said Rich. "I guess there are some things you can't get that easily. Okay, take the basket and we'll go shopping."

Half an hour later, they had begun the stew. They had a good fire going in the stove and an iron pot ready. They mixed together the various substances—these included sage and acumen, chopped erudition, roots of several kinds, some of them square, cerebrum seed and a pinch of salt—and following the recipe brought them all to a simmer and began to stir. Jesse took the first turn and after fifteen minutes by the kitchen clock, when he had begun to feel that his arm was ready to fall off, gave the long wooden spoon to Rich. On and on they stirred in shifts of a quarter of an hour each, while the stew bubbled and glooped and the kitchen began to fill with an unusual, spicy fragrance.

The four hours were almost ended. Rich was stirring, and Jesse studied the recipe. "It says that after four hours the stew will be thick."

"It's thick all right," Rich panted. "I can hardly get the spoon around in it."

He bent forward to peer into the smoking mixture. As the steam curled around his head, a spider dropped from one of the cobwebs that still clung to his hair. It fell into the pot.

Jesse snatched up another spoon and dipped it into the stew. He tried to fish out the spider. He got it on the edge of the spoon, lost it, and got it again, trying not to interfere with Rich's stirring. He lifted out the spoon and with one finger flicked away the spider. The thick boiling-hot liquid burned his finger.

"Ouch!" he exclaimed. Without thinking, he stuck his finger into his mouth to soothe it.

He stood petrified, his finger in his mouth. For with the touch of the tiny drop of liquid on his tongue it was as if a brilliant flare had been kindled in his brain. Everything that had ever been known, all the knowledge in the world, streamed through his mind. He saw whole civilizations rise and unfold themselves like stone flowers, and crumble away again. He heard millions upon millions of words. For one instant he knew everything: he understood the electrical charges that make up all matter, the radiation of the suns, the nature of life, and the beginning and end of the universe. It was too much. He clutched his hair with both hands as if he were trying to pull the top of his head off. He opened his mouth to yell, but only a squeak like a bat's came out.

Rich grabbed him by the arm. "What's the matter?"

Everything had gone out of Jesse's head again. Everything but the one thing he wanted to know.

"The strand!" he gasped. "I know where it is. It's the cord of Professor Ilbird's bathrobe."

"How—?" Rich began.

"I don't know how I know. I just do."

Their attention was caught by a pungent whiff of burning. They had forgotten about the stew.

Jesse ran to the kitchen door. "Come on, before he smells it! We've got to get that strand."

They sped on tiptoe into the hall and up the stairs. They ran into the professor's bedroom. His patched old bathrobe hung behind the door. From two loops on the robe hung the cord that belted it, made of blue and white wool with moth-eaten tassels. They had never thought of it as anything but part of the bathrobe. Jesse grabbed one of the tassels and dragged the cord free. He touched it with his stone. There was a flash of light.

At the same moment, they heard a bellow from downstairs.

"Idiots! *Nincompoops!* VILLAINS!"

Cramming the cord into his pocket, Jesse made for the door with Rich at his heels. They were too late. Professor Ilbird came thundering up the stairs.

They ran back into the bedroom. All they could think of was getting as far away from him as possible. The wall stopped them. They swung round desperately to face him.

"Vandals! Stew-burners!" howled the professor.

He opened his mouth wider than they had ever dreamed a mouth could go. He uttered a frightful scream.

The wall behind them gave way and shattered outward. Jesse felt himself lifted into the air. He caught a glimpse of Rich rising beside him in a cloud of splintered wood, wallpaper, and bits of brick. Then he was whirled head over heels and carried away like a leaf in a tornado.

## 14 Lizard-Riding

In that screaming wind all Jesse's senses failed. Then, with a shock, he plunged into cold water. He came to the surface sputtering and heard another splash. Automatically, he began treading water to stay afloat. He could see a reed-fringed shore not far away. Shaking his wet hair out of his eyes, he called to Rich, "Can you swim?"

"I'm okay."

They struck out together. Soon they felt bottom under their feet and could stand up. They crunched through a skim of ice at the shore and stood gasping on dry land.

The sky was covered with clouds. The lake into which they had fallen was the color of lead. All around it were dark green trees, almost black, with slender leaves that hung limply from the thin branches. The air was oppressive. It had a biting edge, and the heaviness just before a storm when everything is hushed and you can feel the weight of thunder overhead. A thin wind moaned through the trees, bringing with it a piercing chill.

Jesse hugged himself, shivering. Between chattering teeth he said, "We'd better start walking. We've got to find some shelter."

"Sure, but which way?" Rich's lips were blue. "We don't know where we are. Have you got the map?"

"It's in my pack. And the pack's in the professor's house. So are our bowls and bottles."

"And the strands?" Rich said fiercely. "Don't tell me that—"

"Don't worry. I've got them." He had the bathrobe cord in his pocket, and the white thread coiled up in the leather bag with his jade stone, hanging around his neck. "I've got some money too, left over from the shopping. If we can find a village we'll be able to buy some food."

Rich patted his wet shirt. "I've still got my stone, too. I suppose we're lucky we didn't land on rock instead of water."

"If only we knew where we were."

"Maybe we can figure it out." Rich closed his eyes, frowning. "We were against the wall in his bedroom, between the two windows that looked out at the square. Right? Our own window in the attic looked the same way. That was north. If he screamed us straight ahead, we're further north, which is where we want to be anyway if I remember the map."

"It's nice to be logical," Jesse said. "Now tell me logically which way we go to keep from freezing to death."

Rich spat in his hand and hit it with a forefinger. A drop flicked out.

"That way's as good as any other," he said. "How's that for logic?"

They set off through the trees. Except for the sound of the wind there were no other noises, no bird calls, no rustles in the underbrush, and even their feet made little noise on the thick moss. Their wet clothes clung to them without drying and their very bones were cold. But there was something else, something Jesse couldn't put his finger on. It was a kind of tension in the air. It was like waking up late at night with the feeling of having just heard a footstep in the silent house.

Rich said, "How did you suddenly know where the strand was?"

"It was that one drop of the stew that did it." Jesse shuddered. "I'm glad it was only a drop. For a minute, I felt as if I was going crazy. I knew everything there was to know. It's too much."

"Too bad you couldn't have known where the third strand is."

"We do know that. In the house of Countess Arkad of Ardour, next to the Emerald Waterfall."

"Sure, but *where* in her house? We may have the same trouble we had at Professor Ilbird's. Maybe worse, because it's probably a bigger house, or even a castle. And suppose she's unfriendly?"

"There's no point in worrying about it. We may die of cold before we find her."

An hour or so of walking warmed them a bit. The trees thinned away and they saw that they were in another valley, wide and forested, surrounded by the peaks of small but rocky hills that stuck up like pointed teeth. A narrow dirt road with a hard bare surface ran along the skirts of the wood. After some hesitation, they turned left and began to follow it.

Before long, they saw a house. Its thatched roof came almost to the ground so that its small windows seemed to peer out from under the brim of a hat. In front of the door hung a wooden sign with an owl painted on it.

They went in by the low front door. There was a fire burning in a room set with wooden tables and benches. Along one wall was a counter on which, among mugs and bottles, stood several brass candlesticks. A thin red-nosed man was polishing one of them and he looked up with a start as they entered.

"Can we get something to eat?" Jesse said.

"O' course you can, my friend," said the man. "This here's an inn, ain't it? The Owl of Ardour, as ever was. You been swimming by the look of it. Some folks don't care what the weather or what the Wolf."

The boys dragged up stools and sat in front of the fire. Slowly, they began to thaw and dry. Never had heat felt so good. The innkeeper brought them mugs of cider into which he thrust

the red-hot end of a poker which lay in the fire. The cider hissed comfortingly, and when they drank it warmed their stomachs. Then he brought them a loaf of bread and some thick slices of dark sausage.

"Nothing else to be had," he said. "And few to give it to. You're the first in days. Nor I can't say I blame 'em. Who'd want to stay in Ardour with that thing growing in the north?"

"Thing? You mean the Wolf?" said Jesse.

"What else?" He eyed them suspiciously. "Not that everybody minds it. There's some can't even feel it coming."

"I can," Rich said. "It's like being in a box with somebody pressing down the lid."

Jesse nodded. "I've felt it in the air since we landed— I mean, got here. How far away is the Wolf?"

"Not as far's I'd like," said the innkeeper, going back to his polishing. "The Daughters of Eryd are keeping him back, but not for much longer, I'll be bound. One of these days he'll burst through them and what'll happen then I can't say except 'twon't be desirable."

"Then why do you stay here if it's so dangerous?" Jesse asked.

"It's my house, ain't it?" said the innkeeper. "All I've got, and that's what. I'll stick as long's might be. And now you've asked so many questions," he added, hefting the candlestick as if it were a club, "perhaps you'll tell I why you been swimming on such a day and why two boys goes walking alone in the shadow of the Wolf. And going north, besides."

"We weren't exactly swimming," Jesse said. "We fell in a lake. It was an accident. And we're here because we have to find a place called the Emerald Waterfall. We've got an errand to do there."

"Hmp." The innkeeper shrugged. "None o' my affair, is it? That's telling I straight out, that is. Well, have your own funeral and welcome, so long as it's nothing to do with Wolves and such."

"That's right, it hasn't," said Rich. "Are we anywhere near the Emerald Waterfall?"

"Not so far. You must go along this road northward until you see two peaks, as like as two pins. The Doublets, us calls 'em. On your right they'd be. There, you must leave the road and climb, and between the Doublets is the Emerald Waterfall. And sooner you go there than me."

"Why?" asked Rich. "What's up there?"

"I don't know and don't want to know. But every nine nights, so long as I can remember, there's flames up on those peaks, fire and flames blazing on the mountainside, that's gone by morning and never comes again until nine nights later."

"Maybe that's what we saw in the sky," Jesse said. "Something to do with the Wolf?"

The innkeeper shook his head. "Not the Wolf, not this fire. It's been there long before anybody heard about the Wolf. But what it is I don't know and don't want to know, and that's what."

The boys looked at each other, wondering and dismayed.

Then Rich said, "How far is it from here to the place where we have to start climbing?"

"Forty mile, it may be, or maybe fifty, like."

Jesse whistled gloomily. "That's a good long stroll."

Rich said, "I don't suppose you've got a horse and wagon or anything that you could let us use? We could pay for it."

"Horses? Us don't keep horses in Ardour," said the innkeeper. "Lizards, that's what us rides. I've got a nice lizard I could let you have, but he's frackish along of the Wolf being so near."

"Do you mean nervous?"

"I mean hard to handle, is what."

"A lizard big enough for somebody to ride on? Could we see it?"

"Now, wait a minute," Jesse said. "I never heard of anybody riding on a lizard and I don't know whether I want to find out if it's possible."

"Calm down, Weasel," said Rich. "If they all ride on them around here, why can't we? Let's at least look at it."

"What I like about you is your scientific curiosity," groaned Jesse.

The innkeeper, chuckling, led them to a pen behind the house. They looked over the stone fence to see an immense scaly creature more than seven feet long from nose to tail-tip and standing as high off the ground as a St. Bernard dog. Its scales were peacock-colored, like patches of oil in water, and its large round eyes were yellow with slitted pupils like those of a cat. As the boys appeared it curled around and hissed at them, opening its mouth to show several rows of disagreeably sharp teeth.

"Are you kidding?" Jesse said. "That thing'll eat us if we try to ride on it."

"That he will, if you give him half a chance," said the innkeeper, cheerfully. "Generally, he's as good-tempered as any lamb, but the Wolf has made him jinky and skittish."

Rich was already climbing the fence. He jumped down into the pen. The lizard recoiled, its head drawn back, its body curved in an S. It looked like a snake ready to strike.

Slowly, step by step, Rich moved toward it talking to it in a low soothing voice. The lizard's mouth was open again, but it had stopped hissing. It kept its eyes fixed on Rich. He came right up to it and stood for a minute or two, and then with great care put his hand on its head. He began to rub the tiny scales along its nose. The lizard's eyes closed and its head sank. It looked as if it were about to purr.

Jesse let out his breath.

"Well done!" the innkeeper exclaimed. "If so be you don't find what you seek at the Emerald Waterfall, come you back here and us'll put you to work as a groom."

"Thanks," said Rich. "Is there a saddle or anything?"

The innkeeper explained that no saddle or bridle was used. From each side of the reptile's jaw grew a long, whiplike whisker which slanted backward. These were used as reins to guide the beast.

The boys paid for their meal, bought a loaf and a couple of chunks of sausage, and gave the innkeeper another coin for the hire of the lizard.

"When you're done with him, leave him," the man said. "He'll find his way back. Good luck to you, but I don't expect us'll meet again unless it's in the Wolf's belly."

"And happy digestion to you, too," muttered Jesse, as he nervously climbed onto the lizard's back behind Rich. He gripped Rich's belt tightly. Rich kicked the lizard and it started off at about twenty miles an hour.

It ran with a smooth even gait. It neither bumped nor jolted, and it became clear why no saddle was needed. It was as easy to sit on as a sofa. Its only drawback was that from time to time the creature stopped short for no reason they could discover, and then they had to kick its ribs again to make it move.

Comfortable as the ride was, they had had enough of it by the time the twin peaks loomed up on their right. Rich pulled on the whiskers and the lizard stopped. They slid off and Rich patted the reptile. It blinked at him affectionately and then turned and sped away.

Jesse shook his head in wonderment. "How do you do it?"

"There's nothing much to do," Rich answered. "Animals can tell when somebody's afraid of them and they can tell when somebody likes them. It's a kind of language they have, without words. You know, you can just look at a dog the right way and he'll wag his tail, or if you're angry he knows it and sags before you even say anything. So when I meet a strange animal I just *think* friendly."

"It would be fine if you could think that way at the Wolf."

"I don't know if I can with that big a wild animal," Rich said, doubtfully. "But I'll sure try."

## 15 The Mountain Witch

The sky had grown darker, and the twin peaks vanished in cloud. In the north, the clouds had solidified into a sheet of purplish-gray that seemed to press upon the earth like stone.

Lightning flickered from it. As the boys began climbing the lower slopes among twisted pines, the wind knifed suddenly at them.

They looked around for shelter. A couple of great stones thrust out of the ground above them and they clambered up and found a little space between. They had no sooner crammed themselves into this shallow cave than an even stronger blast of wind came and with it hailstones half the size of their fists.

They huddled together, knees drawn up to their chins and arms wrapped around their legs. Spears of lightning sizzled on all sides and above the crash of thunder they could hear the crack of trees splitting. Hailstones drove into their shelter and bruised them. The very rocks above them seemed to groan and stir in the violent wind.

After what seemed like hours, the storm passed over and went grumbling down the valley.

The gray lifted and paled. Through paler clouds a faint yellow glow shone, just above the hills, the merest hint that the sun was still there.

The boys got up stiffly and began to climb once more. Fortunately, the slope was not too steep and they went fairly quickly. When they were more than halfway up they came upon a path which twisted among the rocks. It led toward the saddle between the twin peaks.

Rich was leading, and all at once he stopped.

"What's wrong?" asked Jesse, coming alongside him.

Perched on the slope—indeed, with its back wall built into the very hillside—was a house. Its walls were of stone and its roof of slates. Rope was bound across the roof and anchored to stone pegs as if the whole place had been tied down so it wouldn't blow away. A few trees grew around it bearing tiny apples and pears. One of these trees had been broken by the storm and under its branches lay what seemed to be a bundle of old clothes.

"It's a person," said Rich, in a low voice.

They went forward together, and when they were close they could see that it was a woman, no taller than Jesse. She was dressed in a ragged woolen gown and an apron. She lay on her back, her gray hair straggling about her face, and blood had clotted over a wound on her forehead where one of the branches had struck her.

"See if you can lift the tree," Jesse said. "I'll try to drag her out. She's not very big."

Rich got a good hold on the biggest branch and heaved. His face turned red with exertion, but he managed to raise the broken tree enough so that Jesse could pull the old woman free.

"What'll we do with her now?" Rich panted. "Do you know anything about first aid?"

"Not much," said Jesse, worriedly. "Let's take her into the cottage."

They carried her inside between them without much effort for she seemed to weigh almost nothing. The house was plainly furnished, but very clean. A wooden bed was built into one wall and they laid her on it.

"She's breathing quietly," Jesse said. "And what I do remember from first aid is that the best thing you can do when you don't know anything is—nothing. I'll just pull one of the blankets



over her to keep her warm."

Rich said, "She sure is ugly, isn't she?"

It was, if anything, an understatement for she was perhaps the ugliest person they had ever seen. Her beaky nose almost met her pointed chin, from which a few long bristly hairs twisted like wires. Her skin was leathery and lumpy, and hairy brown moles grew on her cheeks. She seemed to have few, if any, teeth.

"She looks like a witch," Rich went on. "Do you think she could have anything to do with Skrymir?"

Jesse scratched his chin. "I don't know. Somehow I don't think so. I don't know why, but I don't."

"Well, whatever she is, let's leave her and get going. We've done all we can do," Rich said. Jesse squinted at him. "You mean, leave her here alone?"

"Why not? It's getting late and we ought to try to get to the Countess's castle before it gets dark."

Jesse stared down at the old woman. "I don't know. It doesn't seem right to just walk away." "What else do you think you can do?" Rich argued. "We aren't doctors. Suppose she's got a fractured skull? We can't help her."

"I suppose not."

"And we've got a job to do. We've got to find the third strand. We haven't got time to hang around here. Come on. Or do you want to get lost on the mountain top and never find the castle? Use some logic, for once."

Jesse shifted uneasily from foot to foot. Then he made up his mind. "Look," he said. "You go if you want to. I'll stay with her."

"Oh, for Pete's sake!" snapped Rich. "How stupid can you be? What's the good of that?"

"No good, maybe. I just know inside that it wouldn't be right to leave her alone. If she wakes up and is too weak to do anything for herself somebody ought to be here to—to give her some water or something."

Rich tightened his lips. "Of all the dopes!"

"I can't help it."

"For all you know she's a witch and when she wakes up she'll turn you into a piece of garbage. Or maybe the whole thing's a trick of Skrymir's to keep us here and stop us from getting the third strand."

Jesse twisted his hands together. Everything Rich said was possible. But looking at the ugly old woman, small and helpless under the blanket, he couldn't bring himself to believe it.

"You're the one always talking about proof," he said, at last. "There's no proof of any of that."

"All right," Rich said, with a scowl. "You stay if you want to. I'm leaving."

Jesse stared at him in torment. "If you find the castle, maybe they can send some help," he said.

Without another word, Rich stormed out of the room, slamming the door behind him.

Jesse drew up a stool and sat down beside the bed. Things had been going so well between him and Rich that maybe, he thought glumly, it had been too good to last. Only the night before they had been so close, when Rich had told him about his father. But now they had come into this land where the cold shadow of the Wolf could be felt, and perhaps everything would change.

The latch clicked, and the door opened slowly. He spun around in alarm, the hair rising on his neck.

It was Rich.

"What—?" Jesse said, weakly.

"Stupidity is catching," growled Rich.

He pulled up another stool and sat down. Jesse said nothing, but his mouth widened in a happy smile.

The old woman's eyelids twitched. Jesse bent forward.

Rich nudged him, and said in a whisper, "Maybe you think she's all right, but don't say anything about where we're going or what we're looking for. We don't know whose side—"

He stopped. The old woman's eyes were open. They were sharp and bright, and as red as garnets.

"Who are you?" she said, faintly.

"We found you under the tree," Jesse explained. "I'm Jesse and this is Rich."

She managed to get up on one elbow, wincing at the pain of her bruise.

"I remember now," she said. "My cat ran out into the storm. I went after it and there came a lightning bolt. It must have brought down the tree. And the cat—"

She broke off and gave a weak cackle of laughter. The boys saw a fat black cat come in through the half-open door. It rubbed itself against the door and marched over to the fireplace where it curled up snugly although no fire was burning.

"Well, you monster, so you are safe and I suffer," said the woman, her red eyes glittering.

"Do you think you're badly hurt?" Jesse asked.

"My old skull is too hard," the woman replied. "I will mend. Fetch me a little broth, boy, and give yourselves some as well."

"Where is it?"

"In the pot hanging in the fireplace."

An iron pot hung from a hook over the ashes of the dead fire. There was soup in it, cold and with a skin of fat over the top. Rich put some wood in the fireplace and was wondering where to find a match when the old woman spoke.

"Stand aside, boy."

He did so. She pointed a skinny finger. The air snapped, and suddenly the logs were blazing. Rich, with a suspicious look in his eyes, found bowls and spoons while Jesse began to stir the soup. There was some bread, too, in a wooden box, and a blue pitcher of milk. Rich poured out a saucer of milk for the cat. It jumped up and came to him, rubbed its head against his hand and began lapping.

When the soup was hot—and it filled the cottage with a delicious smell that made the boys' mouths water—Jesse ladled out a bowlful and gave it to the old woman. However, she was too weak to hold it or to feed herself and he had to feed her, a spoonful at a time. When she had had enough, he gave himself a portion.

Rich had eaten, and now, looking out the window at the darkening sky, he said, "We ought to be going."

The old woman said, "Night is coming. I must get up."

She tried to rise, but with a groan sank back again.

"I'm too weak to face the Horseman," she gasped. "We are lost!"

"What do you mean?" asked Jesse. "Who's the Horseman and why are we lost?"

She turned her eyes on him, two piercing sparks. "Every ninth night," she said, in a voice that chilled him, "the Horseman comes. He casts the brand that will burn up the mountain and all the land of Ardour. Every ninth night I must face him and quench his fire. And this is the ninth night. If he is not met, the mountain will burn and the flames will consume Ardour."

The boys stared at each other in alarm.

Rich said, "Let's get out of here. We can carry her with us."

"You will not carry me away," the woman said, harshly.

"If the land burns I will stay and perish with it. Nor will it do you any good to flee. For the flames will spread through the whole land, faster than you could run."

Jesse said, "Is the Emerald Waterfall in Ardour?"

"It is," said she. "All the land hereabouts is Ardour."

Jesse said to Rich, "Then the—what we want to get to, you know—will burn up, too. We've got to do something!"

He swung around on the woman. "Could we meet the Horseman for you? Could we put out the fire?"

"Wait a minute," Rich cut in. "What are you—?"

"Have you got any other suggestions?" Jesse demanded.

"I guess not," Rich said, grimly. "But I didn't figure on being a volunteer fireman."

The old woman grinned so that her nose and chin almost met. "Bare is back without brother behind it," she said. "Listen, then. In the middle part of the night the Horseman will come. Do not fear him, he cannot harm you. He will set fire to the earth. Pluck a straw, each of you, from the broom that stands behind the door and with those straws beat out the fire."

"Beat out a fire with straws?" Rich cried. "You've got to be crazy."

"Believe what I tell you," she replied, in a stern voice. "Do as I say. Be steadfast. Now, lie down upon the floor and rest, and I will wake you when the time comes."

## 16 The Emerald Waterfall

There were no stars. The darkness wrapped them around so that they could not even see each other although they stood side by side. Some distance behind them, the window of the old woman's cottage glimmered faintly from the light of a single candle inside, but that tiny glow only made the night darker.

Jesse shifted from foot to foot. His hands were damp with nervousness. He rolled the broom-straw between his fingers and said, over and over, to himself, Oh, boy, I hope this works. If it doesn't—But he didn't like to finish the sentence. The beating of his pulse sounded loudly in his ears. There was no other sound, not even from Rich, and he began to imagine wildly that he was all alone.

Then, in the darkness, appeared a small but brilliant point of light. There was no way of judging how far away it was.

"Look," he said.

Rich said, "I see it."

It grew larger and brighter by the second. And now they could see that it was a flaming torch. It was held by a man on a great steed. Fire sprang from its hoofs. Water dropped flashing from its mane. It galloped in thin air and the clouds were lighted by the torch. But no matter how bright the light, they could not see the face of the rider which remained in shadow. He stood in the stirrups and in a terrible voice cried out,

So fares it with Ardour's fate  
as this flaming brand flies,  
And so fares it with Ardour's fate  
as this flaming brand flies.

With that, he flung the torch. At once, red flames leaped up in a circle on the mountainside, all around the hut. Rider and horse vanished as the smoke billowed high.

Rich was already running toward one side of the circle of fire. Jesse dashed in the opposite direction. The heat seared his eyes and the smoke set him coughing, but he raised the broom-straw and beat at the flames with it although he felt helpless and even foolish doing so.

But at once, blue flames arose. Far from being hot, they seemed to throw out coldness. They lifted above the red flames which died and disappeared.

With new heart, Jesse moved around the circle of fire, striking with his straw. His face felt scorched and his eyes watered. Sweat dripped from him in big drops. But everywhere he went, the cold blue flames danced up and the red fire faded.

It seemed to him that he had been doing nothing all his life but fight the fire. But he looked around at last, and saw that it was ended. Both blue and red flames were gone. They had left no trace, not a mark on the ground. Then he realized with surprise that he could see all this because the air was gray with morning.

Rich staggered toward him. There were smudges of soot on his cheeks and his eyes were red.

"Are you all right?" Jesse said, hoarsely.

"Yes. Just worn out. What about you?"

"Like a baked potato. All I need is buttering."

They returned to the cottage. The old woman met them at the door.

"You have done well," she said. "And better than well. Come in, sit down and refresh yourselves as you deserve."

They washed their faces and hands in a bucket of cold water, and sat down at the scrubbed wooden table.

Jesse said, "Are you feeling better?"

"Yes, thanks to you both."

She put hot fresh rolls before them, salted butter, thick honey, boiled eggs, jam made of tiny wild strawberries, and mugs of sweet pear-cider. The boys fell to, and for a long time were too busy to say a word.

At last, they pushed themselves away. "Come on," Rich said. "We've wasted too much time already."

They rose, and went to the door, and the old woman hobbled outside with them. Hunched and short as she was, she had to look up into their faces.

"Last night," she said, "you saved the land. If there is anything I can do for you, you have only to ask."

Rich only shrugged, frowning. But Jesse said, "If you could tell us where the Emerald Waterfall is ..."

"It is not far." She pointed to the path which ascended past the cottage. "Follow that to the pass between the peaks, and you will see the waterfall."

"Thanks."

"It is you who merit thanks," she said. "And since you ask for nothing, take this. It is little enough for me to give you and it may help you on your way."

She thrust a small parcel into Jesse's hands.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Something for your journey. For I see that you have far to go, and you will need all the strength you have before you come to the end. Farewell."

She went inside, closing the door behind her.

Jesse untied the parcel. In it were a small loaf of bread and a piece of soft white cheese.

"That's a big help," Rich scoffed. "There's about enough for a quick lunch."

Jesse tied up the parcel again and stuffed it into his pocket. "It's better than nothing," he said. "I guess it's all she could spare."

They set out along the path. When they were out of sight of the cottage, Rich said, "I hope you believe now that she was a witch."

"No. Why are you so sure?"

"Didn't you see her eyes?"

"Well, yes. But things are different in this world. Maybe red eyes are natural."

"Ha! And she lit the fire by just pointing at it. And she had a black cat, didn't she? And a broomstick—the one we got the straws out of."

Jesse said, stoutly, "Any old woman could have a cat and a broom. And you forget, when we first saw Mr. Magnus he lit his pipe by pointing at it. So maybe that proves she's on his side."

"Gah!" Rich exclaimed, in disgust.

Jesse couldn't have said why he felt compelled to defend the old woman, but he did. "Maybe she looks witchy because she spends her whole life on the mountain facing that Horseman every nine nights. And if she is a witch, well, maybe she's a good one and not a bad one."

Rich plodded on in silence.

Half an hour's walking brought them to a flat, open space carpeted with short springy turf. On either side the peaks soared another two or three hundred feet to rocky points which stood out sharply against the sky. From the side of one of them water gushed out of a crack. It streamed down a channel in the rock until it struck a broad ledge and from this it burst out in a wide splash and fell straight down in a torrent as green as the grass. At its foot was a gap into which the water vanished, thundering.

They gazed at this sight in wonder.

"This has to be it," Rich said, over the roar of the water.

He walked a few paces off to where the ground dropped away again on the other side of the pass. He waved his arm.

Jesse joined him. Together, they looked down upon the spires, roofs and battlements of a small white castle perched on a craggy outcrop on the other side of the mountain.

"That must be where the Countess lives," said Rich. "Now what'll we do?"

"Same as before, I guess. Go knock on the door and see what happens."

"Have you ever talked to a Countess before?"

"Are you kidding?"

"I hope she doesn't just have her guards throw us out."

"The only way to find out is to try," said Jesse. "If we have to, we'll climb through a window. The last strand is down there, and we've got to have it."

Rich nodded. He took a deep breath, as if he were about to do a high dive. Then, with a jerk of his head to Jesse, he started down the path.

## 17 The Quarrel

The path led them to the walls of the castle, and soon they stood before its gates. They were open. The boys walked through and into a courtyard. There was nobody in sight.

No one stopped them or challenged them. But suddenly, the notes of a trumpet rang out sweetly. A high double door swung open on the far side of the courtyard.

"I guess that means *Come in*," Jesse said.

"Let's go, then," said Rich.

He led the way. They entered a great hall. High above their heads were gilded rafters. On the walls hung tapestries in faded colors showing the hunt of a unicorn. The pale daylight came through tall pointed windows and gave the room a misty look.

They walked forward. At the far end there was a raised platform, and on it a high-backed seat carved out of yellow stone. A woman sat there with her elbow on the arm of the seat and her chin on her fist. Her golden hair flowed over her shoulders almost to her lap, half covering her gown of white embroidered with silver flowers. On her head was a lacy circlet of frosted silver.

Slowly, she sat erect and smiled at them.

"Welcome," she said, in a low, musical voice. "I am Arkad, Countess of Ardour."

Rich glanced at Jesse, and, clearing his throat to get the words out, said, "I'm Rich Dennison. He's Jesse Rosen."

The Countess rose to her feet and came down a step to look more closely at them.

"I know of you," she said. "Word has come to me of your errand." She studied Rich, and went on, "So you are the hero who was promised? And this other boy, is he your squire?"

"Well, no, not exactly," said Rich. "We're in it together."

"Ah, I see. But in every venture there must be one who leads and one who follows. For when I send my knights forth I must have a captain to command them. Is that not true?"

"I guess so," Rich mumbled.

"Let us go to dinner," said the Countess. "And after you have eaten, I will tell you how to find what you seek."

"The third strand?"

"Just so."

"But I thought you had it," Jesse put in. He was feeling shut out, and it made him speak just a shade too loudly.

The Countess glanced at him. "You must not be rude, child," she said, gently. "Follow us."

She put her hand on Rich's shoulder and steered him to a wide door which opened as they approached. Jesse followed, his face burning with resentment.

They entered a dining room as high-ceilinged as the hall. A long table stood before a fireplace in which a fire of sweet-smelling logs was burning. Three places were set at one end of the table, with plates and goblets of pure gold. As they sat down, a faint fine music began although no musicians could be seen.

The Countess clapped her hands. Servants in green and silver entered with platters of food and crystal pitchers of white wine. They moved noiselessly and said nothing, but served and poured and then departed. The boys began to eat while the Countess, sipping wine, watched them with a smile.

She said, speaking to Rich, "When I was told you were coming, I could not credit that a mere boy would dare to face the Wolf. But I have watched you in my scrying-glass and I see now that you have a hidden strength in you. Also, you have a power over animals, for it was you who tamed Andrim's lizard."

"There wasn't much to it," Rich said. "I've always liked animals. I've had a lot of pets."

He tried to sound careless, but his face was shining with pleasure. His sullen look was gone and he kept his eyes on the Countess and almost forgot to eat.

"Modesty befits a champion," said the Countess. "I saw, too, how you saved your young friend when Skrymir led you to the cliff above the Redwater River. And long before that, how bravely you fought the Dhones. Truly there is much power in you, young as you are."

"Do you think so?" Rich looked earnestly at her. "Will I be able to bind the Wolf?"

"If you are not hindered—yes, I think it possible."

"Hindered? What do you mean?"

"She means me, I guess," Jesse said. His voice sounded thin and spiteful in his ears, and he was surprised for he hadn't exactly intended it that way. But between jealousy at all the attention that was being paid to Rich, and irritation at being treated like a child, he couldn't help himself. "She's been talking about everything you did that was so great, as if I was just dragging along with you."

"Not at all," the Countess said, before Rich could speak. "You are not important enough to provide a hindrance, my child. I spoke of Skrymir and his devices. He may yet have some trap in store for you. But, Master Rich, I will give you something to help you see through his tricks."

"What is it?"

"I will show you when you have rested."

"And the third strand?"

"That, too." The Countess drank from her goblet and leaned forward. "But now, while you eat, tell me of your life in that strange world from which you come."

"What do you want to know?"

"How you live, what work you do, what your cities look like ..."

Rich had never been good with words. But with the beautiful Countess so clearly interested in him, he became eloquent. He told her about Brixton, about school, about his family—talking in a rush, his face more lively than Jesse had ever seen it. He even told her about his father, showing no embarrassment or hesitation. And all the while, Jesse sat feeling stupid, useless and envious.

At last, Rich's flow of words came to a halt. The Countess said, "All this is very interesting to me, and most strange. They chose well who chose you for this task."

She stood up. "Now," she said, "you will rest and recover your strength. And when you have done so, we will hold a council of war."

They realized that the high windows had darkened and stars could be seen twinkling faintly outside. Jesse was puzzled, for he seemed to remember that it was no more than midday when they reached the castle. Yet he found that he was feeling sleepy and indeed could hardly keep from yawning. Time had passed strangely at the dinner table.

The Countess led them through a long corridor to a pair of rooms connected by an arched door. Windows looked out at the craggy mountainside, purple with evening. Each room had a snug bed with silk sheets and soft woolen blankets, and in each room a silver stand held tall candles which burned with a clear soft light.

"Until tomorrow," said the Countess, and left them.

Rich said, "I'll take this room and you take the other."

Jesse said, bitterly. "Sure, go ahead, order me around."

"What's eating you?"

"Oh, nothing. What difference does it make what's eating me? You go ahead and be the big hero. Sure, big shot, you take the room you want and I'll sleep out in the hall."

"I know what it is. You're just sore because she liked me."

"I am not. Only you go shooting your mouth off—"

"Me? That's great. If I hadn't warned you, you'd have told that old witch in the hut everything. Oh, man! I see what it is. Anybody you like is okay, but if I like somebody they're no good."

"I never said that. Only this Countess kept talking about how much you did and how strong you are. I suppose I didn't do anything? What about that monster in the top of the mountain?"

And how about my idea of getting us into Professor Ilbird's house?"

"Blah, blah. Big talk."

"And you're just an easy sucker for anybody who tells you how important you are."

They had come almost face to face. Their eyes were blazing, and all the hatred they had had for each other, long ago, had come to the surface. They no longer knew what they were arguing about. And Rich, unable to say any more, put his hand against Jesse's chest and shoved. Jesse staggered, stumbled against the end of the bed, and fell with a thump that knocked the wind out of him.

He sat up, gasping, and when he had his breath back, snarled, "If you can't win an argument you hit somebody. Where'd you learn that from—your father?"

Rich went white.

"You dirty little—" he began.

Then he swung away, for tears were beginning to run down his cheeks. He stalked into the other room, slamming the door behind him.

Jesse's eyes stung, and he began to cry as well, as much from pain as horror at having said such a thing. "It wasn't my fault," he sniveled, getting to his feet. "You stupid dope. You bum." He wasn't sure who he was talking to.

He fell across the bed. A great weariness overwhelmed him. Wet-faced, sobbing, miserable, he fell fast asleep.

He awoke feeling strangely cold and stiff. The bed under him seemed very hard and he turned over and opened his eyes with a groan.

There were gray clouds above him.

He sat up, wide awake, his heart thumping with terror. There was no sign of the room, of the castle, of Rich, of any human being. He was lying alone on the bare rocky mountainside.

## 18 The Garden of Eryd

Jesse struggled to his feet and stared about wildly, his scalp crawling. His first thought was that he must have been taken out of the castle and left somewhere in the open. But even with the thought he knew he was wrong. He recognized the spot. There were the twin peaks, there was the track down which they had come, here was the place on which the castle had stood. "How could it happen?" he muttered. "How could a whole castle disappear? Where is everybody?"

His legs felt weak and he had to sit down again on the grass. He rubbed his face with both hands, hard, as if he could rub understanding into himself.

He remembered, with shame, the quarrel he and Rich had had. It seemed so pointless. There had been no reason for it except his own hurt pride. But it had led him to say that even more hurtful thing to Rich. And he realized, with a shock, that he was sorry deep down inside because—yes, because he *liked* Rich.

Their adventures together had made him respect the other boy. But it was more than that; he suddenly understood that although they looked at things in different ways they weren't so unlike. They had felt the same about tackling this quest. They had faced each new challenge boldly and had relied on each other to overcome problems. Maybe, he said to himself in surprise, we're more alike than we thought we were and that's why we got along so well even though we thought we hated each other.

And last night when we really acted as if we hated each other—? That was because I felt



jealous that the Countess was paying so much attention to Rich, but maybe Rich felt guilty about going along with her and that was what made him angry. Maybe he was angrier at himself than at me.

He shook his head. It all seemed very complicated. And there was no use thinking about it because they had parted with a fight and now Rich was gone. The third strand was in the Countess's castle and that, too, was gone. Something too strange to explain had happened. He could not begin to guess at it. Without Rich, without the third strand, the quest was over. The grass whispered in the breeze. Overhead, the clouds pressed down, gray and heavy. The day matched the despair that was in him. How was he ever to find Rich again? Where could he begin?

Then, as if a clear little voice had spoken in his head, he heard Mr. Crump say, "If you are ever separated you will be able to find each other again by following the pull of the stones." His heart gave a jump. He drew out his leather bag with shaking fingers and took hold of the jade stone. The instant he had it in his hand he could feel it tug as if a string were tied to it. So strong was the pull that his hand moved.

He rose and began to walk in that direction, down the hillside. He was, he saw, following the path again. Ever since Professor Ilbird had screamed them away they had been going north, and now he was leaving the double peaks behind and on his left, so he was probably still going north. North was where the Wolf lay. He shivered. But that was also where Rich was, and perhaps the Countess as well, and with her the third strand. He set his teeth and went on. The path led him into a long sloping valley through which a trickle of a stream flowed. He sat down, very warm from walking and conscious of his hunger. Then he remembered the parcel the old woman had given him.

He got it out of his pocket. It was a trifle squashed. He untied it and took out the loaf and cheese. He tore off a piece of bread. It was warm and soft and as fragrant as if it had just come from the oven. The cheese had a refreshing, sourish taste.

He ate about half of each, and drank some water from the stream. He was about to wrap the remainder of the food, and stopped. Both loaf and cheese were whole again as if he had eaten nothing.

"That's what I call a present," he said to himself. "If the old woman was a witch, she was a friendly one."

He tied up the parcel and shoved it into his pocket. Then, with the jade stone in hand, he went on.

For the next three days he walked through a desolate land without seeing a soul. From morning to night, the sky was a sheet of gray cloud. There were dark rocks everywhere and the only green was an occasional patch of weedy grass. No trees grew there, and no wild flowers. No birds sang, and the only sound was the croaking of crows. Jesse ate when he felt hungry, and at night he curled up wherever he happened to be and lay shivering, sleeping restlessly. And every night he saw the lights in the sky which he had seen from the window of the professor's house: at first, flashes like lightning, and then a great glow of violet and white which throbbed upward, sank, and vanished. Each night the lights were larger and brighter as if he were drawing closer to them.

He kept himself from thinking about that or anything else. He fixed his mind on finding Rich. He no longer felt any fear or loneliness. He walked numbly, aware of nothing but weariness and the stubborn determination to reach his goal. The jade stone in his hand pulled him onward.

On the morning of the fourth day, he plodded over the top of a ridge and found himself in a garden.

Trees bearing lily-shaped scarlet and orange blossoms stood guard around the edges. Within were beds of flowers, fragrant herbs, and flagstone walks bordered with moss. The most striking thing was that over the garden the clouds had broken and the sun streamed down, here and nowhere else.

Jesse stood for a moment enjoying the warmth, the sweet smells, and the bright colors, so delightful after the endless cold gray. Then he stepped forward. He followed one of the walks and it led him to a bed of tall-stemmed yellow roses where a man was standing, leaning thoughtfully on an ivory walking stick.

Jesse hesitated, uncertain whether to run or stay. Without looking at him, the man said, "Good morning. There's nothing to be afraid of here."

He had a deep comfortable voice which reminded Jesse of the Prime Minister, Dr. Cornelius. "I'm sorry to say there are slugs on my roses," he went on, chattily. "I hate to do it, but I really think I'm going to have to get rid of them. Even a slug has some rights, but I'm selfish enough to think my roses come first."

He turned to look at Jesse with a grin. He was big and bearish, with long rough gray hair almost to his shoulders. His nose had once been broken which made him look something like a prizefighter, but in spite of this his face was kindly and his bearing dignified.

"I don't understand," Jesse said.

"Never mind. You can't expect to understand everything," said the man. "One moment." He put a hand to his forehead, frowned, and then said,

Foul is the guest  
At the fair feast;  
Shall what is best  
Fall to what's least?  
Slime-born and slow,  
I bid you go.

Jesse heard a pattering on the ground. Slugs were curling up and dropping from the roses by dozens.

"Just doggerel," the man said, "but good enough for this kind of thing. Now, then. Let us meet formally. My name is Eryd."

"I'm Jesse Rosen."

"A strange name. And even your clothes are strange to me." Eryd looked sharply at him. "I see there is a story here. Let us go and sit down in peace together, and I will give you something to revive you for I see you have traveled far and are weary."

Jesse gazed at the pleasant garden and gave a long sigh.

"I have and I am," he said.

## 19 "Prove You're Jesse!"

He fell into step beside Eryd and they walked along the path to a low-roofed, rambling house on the edge of a large pond. A porch on pilings thrust out from it like a pier above the water. On it sat a girl with clear yellow skin. She was playing a lute, and she laid it aside when Eryd appeared.

"My dear," said Eryd, "go and fetch some refreshment for our guest."

The girl jumped up and ran into the house. Jesse and his host seated themselves in deep,

comfortable chairs. Very soon, the girl appeared, and with her two others, one fair and freckled, the other brown-skinned and black-haired. They set down a small table and on it put a basket of flat cakes, a honeycomb and a pitcher of foaming fresh milk.

The brown-skinned girl said, "Mayn't we stay, father?"

"Not now, my dear. Our guest is weary. You will meet him later."

The three girls smiled at Jesse and returned to the house.

"My daughters," said Eryd. "I have nine of them."

"The Daughters of Eryd," Jesse said. "Of course; I should have guessed. I was told that they are holding back the Wolf."

Eryd nodded. "But for how much longer?" he said. "Every evening they go to meet him with the weapons I make for them. And every night, in spite of all they can do, he gains a little ground while they grow weaker. Not all my skill can protect them or make new weapons forever. Some day—"

He gave himself a shake. "Well, we needn't talk of that. Tell me what you are doing wandering alone in these dangerous lands. If you are lost—"

"I'm not, but my friend is," said Jesse. He looked into Eryd's candid eyes and all at once felt that here at last was someone he could trust. After all, it was here alone that the Wolf was being held back. He went on, "We were staying with the Countess of Ardour and we had a—a kind of argument. The next morning he was gone."

"Run away, you mean?"

"No, just vanished into thin air. Not only him, the Countess too—the whole place. I found myself all alone out on the side of the mountain."

Eryd sat bolt upright. "Arkad gone?" he said, dismayed. "That is indeed ill news for Ardour and for all of us. It's the Enemy's work, no doubt of it. I see. So you have been wandering about in the hope of finding your friend?"

Jesse drew out his jade stone. "This tells me where to go," he said. "It's like a magnet pulling me to wherever he is."

Eryd's expression changed, and his face hardened. "Where did you get that?" he demanded, sternly.

"Mr. Crump gave it to me. He gave one to Rich, too."

"Crump? Of Crump and Magnus? He gave you the *magatamal*!" He sank back in his chair. "I don't understand. Perhaps you'd better explain."

Quickly, Jesse told how he and Rich had been summoned, and how they had agreed to find the three strands and bind the Wolf.

Eryd listened, frowning. "Strange," he said. "Two boys—? Yet Dr. Cornelius of all people must know what's best."

He rubbed his chin, thoughtfully. "I am only a poet, my boy. Until the Wolf was loosed, I lived here quietly with my daughters and my work. I know very little about these matters. But I will do what I can to help you. Guard that stone well. It and the other were once One Stone. But when the two brothers, Heming and Woding, ruled all the known world they divided the stone into two and each took half. After Heming was slain, his stone was lost for many hundreds of years, until a great scientist, Hermes Trismagistus, found it again. Since then, both stones have rested in the king's treasury. No one in this world knows how to put them together again.

"If Skrymir were to get hold of the one your friend has," he finished, "I cannot tell what use he would put it to, but it would certainly be evil."

Jesse shivered.

"Which way does it point, now?" Eryd asked.

Jesse held up the stone. His hand moved slowly.

"Northward," said Eryd. "That way lies the Wolf. The vanishing of your friend and the Countess must have been Skrymir's doing. They are there with him, held captive, although I cannot say how."

Jesse gave a heavy sigh. "Then I'd better go," he said.

"What will you do when you find your friend?"

"I don't know. All I know is that before I can do anything else, I have to find him. We were supposed to be in this together. . . And the third strand must be where the Countess is."

"Well," said Eryd, "you cannot go alone. I will send my daughters to guard you."

He clapped his hands. A girl, taller than the others Jesse had seen, whose skin was copper-red, came out of the house.

"Call your sisters, my dear," said Eryd, "and tell them to arm themselves."

"It is early, father," she said, with a curious side-glance at Jesse.

"I have another errand for you. Be quick."

"Can I ask you something?" Jesse said, when the girl had gone. "Are you really a poet?"

Eryd smiled. "I'm not sure I know what you mean by *really*. I have been writing poetry since the world was young."

Jesse said, admiringly, "Gosh, I've always wanted to meet a real poet. I've read a lot of poems, and you know, I've even tried to write some myself, but it's hard to think of poets—you know, like Shakespeare, or Blake, or Tennyson—being real people, alive and writing ..."

His voice trailed off as he floundered, trying to say what he meant.

Eryd said, "Have you written some poems? Will you say one for me?"

"Oh, no, I couldn't." Jesse blushed, and began to stammer. "I don't even remember any. And they're no good anyway."

"I don't know how it is in your world," said Eryd, "but here we don't speak of good or bad poems, but only true poems and false ones."

"How can you tell which is which?"

Eryd chuckled. "That's a question I have sometimes argued bitterly with friends. Even the best of us may sometimes write a false poem when his thought fails or the words will not come right, and instead of destroying it he lets it stand. But a true poem is hammered into its shape out of the poet's desire. And if all goes well, that desire finds its way along the words and comes to life. As Rils says,

Bright is the ring of words  
When the right man rings them;  
Fair the fall of songs  
When the singer sings them.  
Still they are carolled and said—  
On wings they are carried—  
After the singer is dead  
And the maker buried.

"I could never be like that," said Jesse.

Eryd rested a hand on his shoulder and looked down at him gravely. "Yes," he said. "Even you. If the wish burns strongly enough in you, you may give it its true shape."

"I don't understand."

"Some day, I think you will."

What Jesse wanted most of all was to ask Eryd to say one of his own poems. But shyness made him hesitate, and before he could make up his mind out of the house came the nine sisters.

They wore silver helmets and coats of black mail that came to their knees. They carried leaf-bladed spears and round shields of red leather edged with gold. Jesse recognized the four he had already seen but now their faces were set and grim.

The tall red girl said, "What of the Wolf, father?"

"It is a risk we must run," said Eryd. "This task comes first. Use the song I gave you yesterday, for today's is not yet ready."

He embraced each of them in turn, and took Jesse by the hand. "We may not meet again," he said. "Farewell, and may you find what you seek."

The red girl led the way. They went by a path through a green hedge and the gray wasteland was all around them once more.

Jesse had his stone in his hand and now its pull seemed stronger than ever. The tall girl strode beside him, the others behind, and they marched in silence for several hours. The land grew bleaker still. What bits of grass there were were blackened and burned, and even the rocks looked cindery.

All at once, the tall girl touched Jesse's arm. "Look there," she said, pointing.

The broken ground was more level, and some distance away a ring of worn stones stuck up from it. Trails of mist arose and the stones were hard to make out against the slate sky.

Nevertheless, Jesse thought he could see a form standing in the center of the circle.

He walked faster. Then he broke into a run.

"Rich!" he called.

Rich turned slowly to look at him. He had his hands in his pockets and his thick brows were drawn into a scowl. He made no other move.

Jesse reached the edge of the circle and stood between two of the stones, trying to catch his breath.

"What happened?" he panted. "How did you get here?"

"You ought to know," Rich growled. "You brought me here."

"Me?" Jesse's voice was almost a squeak of surprise. "What are you talking about?"

"Oh, knock it off. Haven't you tried enough shapes?" said Rich. "Now you're Jesse. I'm still not giving you anything."

"What do you mean, *now* I'm Jesse? I've always been me."

"Yeah?" said Rich. "Prove it."

"What?"

"You heard me. Prove that you're Jesse."

"But how? Why? Why do I have to prove I'm me?"

Rich's lips twisted. "That's right. Just what you always say."

He turned his back. Jesse sprang forward and caught him by the sleeve.

"I don't know what you're talking about, but—look!" he said.

He held up his hand with the jade stone in it. Rich clapped his own hand to his chest. Jesse knew why. The stone which hung around Rich's neck in its leather bag had leaped toward its fellow.

"There," he said. "Nobody can fake that."

Rich said, "You *are* Jesse."

There was enormous relief in his voice.

"Well, sure, Fathead. Now maybe you'll tell me how you got here. And where's the Countess?"

"Countess?" Rich almost spat the word. "That wasn't any more a Countess than I am. It was Skrymir!"

## 20 The Coming of Fenris

"The Shape-Changer!" Jesse exclaimed.

Rich nodded. "We should have looked to see if the castle threw a shadow," he said. "The whole thing was a fake. And Skrymir changed himself to look like a beautiful woman so that he could separate us. He did it, too, didn't he?"

Jesse said, "You mean, by making us fight? That was my fault more than yours, Rich. I'm—" He paused, and swallowed. "I'm sorry I said what I did. I didn't mean it."

"What about what I said? I was a bigger idiot than you were," Rich said, bitterly. "I fell for all that flattery. And I ended up going along with him of my own free will."

"What happened? How did everything vanish?"

"After I left you, I went into the other room, you know. Well, only, all of a sudden it wasn't the other room, it was the big throne-room. The Countess was sitting on the throne and she said, 'I sent for you because I was listening to the quarrel and I can see that the other kid— she didn't say it that way, of course, but you know what I mean— 'he's in the way. You're the real hero.' She went on talking like that, and I kept feeling more important, as if here was somebody who understood how good I was, and I began to think I could do anything. Then she said, 'Come with me, and I will take you to the Wolf. You can tame him. You don't need the other boy. Leave him and come along.' When she talked, I could see myself walking down the street with the Wolf on a lead like a pet, and they'd give me a medal . . . Sounds stupid, doesn't it?"

"No," said Jesse. "If she'd tried it on me I'd have felt the same."

"I guess so," Rich said, gloomily. "So I said, 'Sure. Let's go.' She took my hand and the next thing I knew we were here. She wasn't a woman any more, but a man. And his face—"

He shuddered. "I can't tell you about it. Do you remember that dog who almost killed us? This was worse. I just hope he doesn't come back. He laughed at me. It was like being sliced up with a knife. We stood here in this stone circle and he said, 'Give me the stone that hangs around your neck or you'll never leave here.' I was so scared I almost did it."

"Why didn't you?"

"I just had sense enough left to put things together. I knew who he was. I guessed what had happened. I knew he was Skrymir and I figured that even though I'd goofed once, maybe he couldn't do anything more to me unless I agreed. Once he had the stone that was the finish. Any chance of finding the third strand or anything else was gone, and maybe if he had the stone he'd just kill me without another thought. And he couldn't take the stone unless I gave it to him. So I hung onto it.

"Anyway," he finished, "you know I don't like being pushed around."

"Good for you," said Jesse. "What then?"

"He said, 'All right, then you'll stay here until you agree even if it takes forever.' And he left me. I tried to get out of this circle but I couldn't. Every once in a while bread and water would appear. Then my father came."

Jesse's mouth dropped open. "Your father! How could he get here?"

"I didn't think of that at first. He started saying that he was sorry for the way he'd acted, and that things were going to be different from now on. All I had to do was give him the stone and he'd take me home. Man, that was bad. I almost fell for it. I started to hold out the stone and he smiled. I knew that smile."

"Skrymir?"

"That's right. So I told him to get away. Then, a long time later, Mr. Crump came."

"The real Mr. Crump?"

"I thought so. He told me the whole thing was a test. He said I had been tested and I'd shown I could be trusted, but now everything was all right and I could give the stone to him. I wasn't sure—but then I saw Skrymir looking out of his eyes."

"No wonder you didn't believe I was me," Jesse said. "I wouldn't believe anybody—"

He stopped dead. An idea had come to him, an idea so dazzling that he stood in a kind of stupor for a long moment.

"Rich!" he said, at last. "The Countess!"

"Where?"

"I don't mean that, Fathead." Jesse grabbed him by the arms and shook him in his excitement.

"Skrymir's castle was an illusion. But who else lived near the Emerald Waterfall?"

Rich knit his brows. "The old witch? You don't mean her? You don't mean she was—?"

"That's what I do mean. *She* was the Countess."

"But—"

"But nothing. It fits. She was the only one who lived there. There was no other house. The whole land depended on her being there. And our map never said she lived in a castle. It said, 'The house of Countess Arkad.' We thought it had to be a castle because she was a Countess."

Rich hit himself on the forehead. "We were right there and didn't know it. And the third strand is somewhere in that cottage of hers."

"I'll bet it isn't. She knew what she was doing when she gave us something for the journey," said Jesse.

He dragged the parcel of bread and cheese out of his pocket. It was tied up with a string.

He touched the string with his stone. There was a bright quick gleam.

"That's it," Rich breathed.

Jesse untied the string from the parcel.

"What about the other two?" asked Rich.

Jesse took out the white thread they had found in the nest of the Zhar-Ptitz. From his other pocket, he took the cord of Professor Ilbird's bathrobe.

"What do we do with them?"

"Braid them together. See what happens."

Jesse began to do so with shaking hands.

The daughters of Eryd had been waiting outside the stone circle. The tall girl now stepped forward and called to Jesse.

"Boy! Will you stay or go?"

He looked up from his work. "Why?"

She pointed with her spear to the north. "The Wolf," she said. "Fenris is coming."

The sky was boiling with clouds. A ghastly light shone beneath them, a greenish glare like a sick sun.

"What'll we do?" Jesse said to Rich.

"Finish braiding them," Rich answered, determinedly.

Jesse did so. When he had finished, he straightened. The strands had changed in his hands.

He now held a thin cord, smooth as silk, eggshell white.

"Now what?"

"Give it to me," Rich said. "When he comes, I'll try to get close and lasso him. I can't think of anything else."

"We'd better get into the open."

Jesse started out of the circle. Rich hung back.

"I can't get out," he said.

Jesse seized his hand. "You can!" he said. "There's nothing holding you in. Come on. Try."

"I tried before."

"Try again."

He dragged Rich by main strength to a space between two of the stones. Rich hesitated. Then he took a breath and a step,

He was out.

"Be quick!" cried the tall girl.

The air was moving around them. A dark mass had appeared on the horizon. Jesse felt the hairs on the back of his neck stir. Thrill after thrill of fright went through him.

Rich was making a running noose in the cord.

The dark form came closer. With it came a chill that seemed to freeze the air itself so that everything was suddenly motionless. Now they could see it plain, the same shape they had once seen in the Prime Minister's room. Gray and dusty, with patchy fur, flat-skulled, long-snouted, yellow-eyed, it loped toward them. But this was no image seen in a crystal ball, it was the creature itself and it grew larger and larger, and still larger. It was bigger than an elephant, bigger than a house. Its eyes were like moons in the sky above them and its shoulders blocked off the plain.

With it came fear, such fear as Jesse had never felt in all his life. It was deeper than the fear of the dark, worse than the fear that comes crawling in nightmares. His legs gave way under him. He sank down on the blasted ground.

He tore his eyes away from the Wolf to to cast one desperate glance at Rich. The other boy's face was like chalk. His teeth were chattering—Jesse could see his jaw quiver. And as the Wolf loomed over them, vast as a mountainside, Rich covered his eyes with his arms and dropped beside Jesse.

Behind them, the nine daughters of Eryd stood shoulder to shoulder with their shields before them and their spears leveled. They began to chant. Their voices rose louder, and the sweet wildness of them sent shudders along Jesse's spine.

Hold thou now earth      the hand-gifts of heroes,  
What from foemen was wrested      death wrung from their grasp.  
Must the bright mail      which in battle withstood  
Over splintering of shields      the bite of the sword,  
Decay now in dust      at the death of its wearer?

As they chanted, light grew about their spears and danced from the spear-points. It collected above them, rising in an arc of violet tinged with white. It was the light the boys had seen from the professor's window. It throbbed, rising and falling to the rhythm of Eryd's chant.

Harp's joy, swift hawks      and hound at my heel,  
But dark are delights      if deprived of companions.

The Wolf snapped at the girls and Jesse could hear his teeth grate against their shields. They fell back. They stabbed at him with their spears and the light blazed out so that lightning seemed to fly upward from the ground to the heavens.

A terrible howl burst from the Wolf. Jesse saw spears flying, streaks of brightness against the dark. There came a crash of thunder that made the ground ripple and leap like a shaken blanket. Jesse was thrown down on his face. He clutched at the stones, his brain numb.

There was silence.



He lifted himself, wiping dirt from his mouth. There was no sign of the Wolf. Rich lay in a huddle with his arms wrapped around his head. The nine daughters of Eryd were scattered like sticks carelessly flung away.

Jesse got painfully to his feet and tottered toward them. Their gold-rimmed shields were split and blackened, their armor scorched. Only one moved as Jesse approached, the tall girl who had led them.

She propped herself on her hands. Her helmet was gone and blood matted her hair and stained her cheeks.

"Flee while you can," she said, hoarsely. "Our strength is ended."

"But the Wolf is gone," said Jesse.

"Only for now. This time he was almost too much for us. He will return," she whispered.

"And when he returns, there will be none to hold him back. It is the world's end."

## 21 The Jewels

The girl sank down and lay still. Jesse stared dully at her. He was overcome by a leaden sense of hopelessness. Their attempt had failed. Everything was lost.

A groan drew his attention. Rich was just struggling to his feet.

"How come we're still here?" he said.

"The girls drove off the Wolf. I think they're all dead."

Rich rubbed his face. "I must have passed out. I don't remember anything after it came except noise."

"It's coming back," Jesse said.

"When? How do you know?"

"The girl told me it would. I don't know when."

Rich still held the shining cord. He said, "This wasn't much good, was it? Neither was I."

"Nobody would have been much good," Jesse said. "Who could have known that thing was going to be so big? And so frightening?"

The memory made him shiver violently.

"Maybe if I hadn't been a dope about the Countess—" Rich muttered.

"What difference would that have made?"

"None, I guess." Rich looked at him almost shyly. "Anyway, thanks for saying so." He knelt beside the girl and touched her wrist. "I can't feel any pulse. What do you think will happen when it—when the Wolf comes back?"

"There's nothing to stop it now. It'll go on, over the whole country, I guess, and then the world. And that's the end. Unless we can figure out some way of getting that cord over its neck."

"Even if we could, how could we hold it? It would just drag us around and—" He shrugged. Jesse took the cord from him and examined it. "Maybe this is magical," he mused. "Maybe we're not using it right."

"Who knows?" said Rich. He picked up one of the blackened spears and took the shield which lay beside the tall girl. "I don't suppose these will do much good, but I feel better holding them."

Jesse nodded. "They were more than just spears. They were magic of some kind, too. It was the lights that came from them that drove the Wolf back."

"Lights?"

"You didn't see any of that?"

"I told you, I don't remember anything."

"They chanted something—it was a poem Eryd wrote."

"Who's Eryd?"

Jesse told him about his wanderings, about meeting the poet and then how the nine sisters had faced the Wolf.

"I see," Rich said. "Then it wasn't just the spears. It was—"

He paused. He stood for a long time, his face set in a frown, his eyes blank, deep in thought.

"What's wrong?" Jesse said, after a bit.

"Shut up a minute." He pressed his hand to his forehead. Then he said, "Science in this world is what we call magic. That's what we figured out. And magic—?"

"I know. It's what poets do. We figured that out, too. In fact, when we first got here Mr. Crump told us that."

"Right. And if we could figure out how they do their magic, maybe we could make some of our own."

"You mean, make these spears work again? But that's impossible. How could we figure it out?"

"Not the spears. We've got something else, maybe something better."

He tossed away the spear and pulled out his dark jade stone.

"These," he said. "Mr. Magnus told us that there were Words of Power that would make them work wonders. That's what he said."

"I remember," Jesse said. "Sure. All we need to do is figure out how to do a little magic. That ought to be easy. Ha!"

Rich's eyes were blazing with suppressed excitement. He hit Jesse on the arm, a short light jab.

"*You* can do magic," he said.

"Me?" Jesse guffawed. "Are you feeling all right? You must have hit your head when you fell."

"Listen, you fool. You never figure things out by logic. Just listen."

"Okay. I'm listening."

"Do you remember the time we were in the forest, and we were so cold and wet? You said we ought to try burning some of those flowers. They didn't burn until you said a poem over them, and then they blazed up."

"But that was just because they'd dried out."

"Was it? You didn't look very closely. I was watching. There wasn't a trace of a fire until after you made up that little poem. Now just think a minute. Every time somebody's done something magical here, they've used a poem. Mr. Crump told us that scientists here just put to use what poets invent. Words of Power in this world are poems. The humblest poet, he said, can make it springtime in the middle of winter—"

"Or kill slugs," said Jesse. "Like Eryd."

"Or make a poem to drive back the Wolf, the way he did."

"But I'm not a poet."

"I'll bet you are. You're not a grown-up, and maybe you aren't a good poet yet, but you're always making up poems and what else makes a poet? And I remember Bazan the Swordsman—the real Bazan—saying to you, 'Be careful. Do not throw away your words.' He said it when you'd just made up some verses. He wouldn't have said that to me."

Jesse's mind whirled in confusion. "But—" he said. He had a dozen objections. He knew the jingles and verses that came into his head weren't real poetry. But on the other hand, he

couldn't answer what Rich said for he knew that his deepest satisfaction came not only from reading poems but from letting them grow, as they sometimes did, inside his imagination. Tucked away in a secret corner of his bureau drawer at home, along with the fossil fish and the five-dollar gold piece and his other treasures, were eight or ten such poems he had made and written down.

"But," he said, "I don't know how to begin."

Rich touched his stone. "When Mr. Crump was talking about these, he said that if they could be brought together they'd work wonders. Make up a poem about bringing them together."

"But you can't just make up a poem about anything," Jesse said. "Not a real poem. It has to come into your head."

"You told me 'try' before. Now you try," said Rich.

He held out the stone, and after a moment Jesse took it. The two stones, the light and the dark, lay on his palm. He gazed at them, wishing for something to enter his mind.

This one and that one. He remembered the lines he had made. Would they do? He mumbled them aloud, feeling self-conscious about saying them in front of Rich.

One and one is always two,  
Each alone—here's me—there's you.  
The mathematics of the heart  
Adds together what's apart.

Nothing happened. But he knew at least one reason why. The poem wasn't finished. He had known that

before, which was why he had let it rest, waiting for the other lines, whatever they were going to be.

Rich said, in a flat voice, "You'd better work fast. The Wolfs coming back,"

The terrible chill was in the air again. The sky to the north glared below black cloud and the rushing wind of the Wolfs approach blew against their faces.

Jesse noted that as something interesting, but he was too deep in his poem to be frightened any longer. What could come next? He had made some lines about a peculiar kind of arithmetic, an arithmetic he understood even though he couldn't make sense of the figures that came so easily to Rich. One and one meant what the Prime Minister had said long ago when he had told them that the knots to bind Fenris could not be tied by one hand alone.

Looking at the stones, he had it, the last two lines that worked with the rest of the poem, and he laughed triumphantly even as the darkness grew about him.

The sum of being friends is done  
To prove that one and one makes one.

He said it again, the whole poem, shouting it defiantly aloud this time to hear it above the roar of the wind, not caring who else heard it.

As he ended, the stones moved. They joined together and locked, becoming a single disk.

## 22 The Defeat of Skrymir

Jesse was looking into Rich's face. But it was a stranger's face, pale, thin, bony, framed by red hair. He realized with a shock that it was not the face of a stranger but a familiar one—the

face he saw when he looked into a mirror.

But at the same instant, he was looking into Rich's broad face with its heavy eyebrows, solemn expression and shock of thick black hair.

Dizziness washed over him. His vision was blurred, doubled, so that he seemed to be seeing the world out of two pairs of eyes at once. There was darkness, and in the dark he shouted, "What's happening? Who am I?" Then he opened his eyes.

He knew who he was. He had been Rich and Jesse. They had melted into each other like drops of water running together to form a mighty river. He was Another.

He had in him Jesse's poetry and Rich's logic. Rich's strength and Jesse's liveliness, Rich's determination and Jesse's imagination were blended in him as the two stones, the light and the dark, had been blended into one stone which he now held in his hand. All that each boy, alone, was capable of was part of him, but magnified, grown immense by the power of that stone.

He towered above the Wolf, which came to heel like a puppy. It fawned at his feet and rolled its eyes back to look at him. It no longer brought fear, for fear was unknown to the man who had been Jesse and Rich.

He picked up the shining cord and put the noose around the beast's neck. He held the end of it like a leash and the Wolf whined. He patted it.

He dropped the jade disk into his pocket. Then he saw the nine girls lying where they had fallen. They seemed no larger than children. He stooped and touched each in turn, and at his touch they sighed, breathed easily, began to wake.

He turned away and set out northward. Where he walked, the burned ground misted over with green. Points of grass pushed through the clods, and with them tiny daisies so that the green appeared to be drifted over with snow.

He came to a point of barren stone that looked out over a sea as white as milk. Coils of vapor rose from the tossing water. At the end of the point a spike of rock thrust up. This, he knew, was the rock which Woding had named Beldrapa, or Holdfast.

He was about to tie the Wolf's leash to the rock, when he paused and looked more closely. His eyes had a new power and he could see that the rock was as flimsy as fog. Inside it was a shadowy figure holding the illusion of the rock together. Although he could not see its face he knew that it was Skrymir.

The man who had been Jesse and Rich laughed. "Ah, Skrymir," he said, "of all your strokes this was the craftiest. But so be it. If you will be rock, *be* rock forever."

He reached out even as Skrymir began to move in panic, and at his touch what had been flesh grew flinty. He took his hand away. Before him stood a man of stone. Skrymir would never change his shape again.

The man who had been Jesse and Rich cast a loop of the silvery cord around the stone man and tied it fast. The Wolf lay down. The grass which had sprung up everywhere covered the rocky point, grew around and over and through the Wolf, and instead of a beast there was nothing but a little mound on which daisies nodded.

He who had been Jesse and Rich stood for a time looking out at the milky sea. The sky was clearing and behind him the land flowered. He was rilled with the sense of his strength. He drew out the jade disk and tossed it on his palm. With it, he could be lord of this world.

He smiled. He closed his fist around the disk and fixed his mind on another place. At once, he was standing in the Prime Minister's room in the castle in Gundersholm.

Dr. Cornelius stood with his hands behind his back, in front of the fireplace. On either side of him were Mr. Magnus and Mr. Crump. Mr. Magnus was holding the globe they called the Eye-ball.

"We were watching," said Mr. Crump.

"I guessed you would be," said the man who had been Jesse and Rich.

He looked into their faces and saw in them the same anxiety. They were wondering whether he had decided to remain as he was, with all the power of the magical stone. They were thinking that they might have been freed from the Wolf only to become his slaves.

With his strong fingers he broke the jade disk in half. Each half was comma-shaped, just as it had been before. He held them out to the Prime Minister. And as Dr. Cornelius took them, Jesse and Rich stood before him again.

The Prime Minister handed the stones to Mr. Crump. The fat man carefully returned them to the wooden box from which they had first come. Dr. Cornelius put his hands on the boys' shoulders.

"I cannot tell you our gratitude," he said. "No one in your world will ever know what you have done, but here you will never be forgotten."

He went to a corner and raised a heavy red curtain. He bowed low, as did Mr. Crump and Mr. Magnus. Behind the curtain stood the little boy Jesse had once seen playing croquet in the garden.

He held a small sword in one hand. His golden crown sat jauntily on his head, marring his grave look. Jesse wanted to smile. But looking into the large dark eyes of the child, he felt all the laughter go out of him. A king looked out of the boy's eyes.

"Kneel down," he said.

Jesse and Rich dropped to their knees.

The king touched each of them lightly on the shoulder with his sword.

"We, Fridiof, ninth of the name, make you knights and barons of the realm of Gwyliath," he said. "Be worthy and full of honor."

He sheathed his sword and broke into a wide, delightful smile.

"Thank you very much," he said. "You can get up now. I'm going."

Dr. Cornelius held up the curtain for him once more and he passed through a low door behind it. When he had gone, the Prime Minister gave each of the boys a gold ring carved with winged lion-like figures.

"These are the badges of your knighthood," he said. "Keep them secure, for with them you are free to come and go as you like in our land."

Jesse slipped his on his finger and said wistfully, "I'll have to keep mine hidden when I get home. I'll never be able to explain to my parents where I got it."

"Now," Dr. Cornelius went on, "I beg you to remain with us as our guests for as long as you choose. Remember, when you wish to go we can return you to that place and moment in your own world from which you were called."

"Then let's stay," said Jesse. "What about it, Rich?"

Rich nodded.

"Come, then," said Dr. Cornelius. "The news has already spread and the people of the city are waiting to greet you."

They followed him into the great hall, out across the courtyard and through the gate. As they came into the sunlight they were received with roar after roar of cheers.

The days that followed were full of interest and pleasure. Everywhere the boys went they were welcomed by grateful people, hailed as champions, feasted as conquerors of the Wolf and of Skrymir. Mr. Crump and Mr. Magnus performed incantations that brought Eryd and his daughters to Gundersholm. The wizened old woman whom they now knew to be the Countess of Ardour came as well, and even Bazan was persuaded to leave his hut and attend

a great banquet in the boys' honor. They were taken to visit some of the sights of the kingdom, sea caves, forests of giant lilies, and the Palace of Cerdrix which was carved from a single tooth of some ancient beast. But at last, the day came when they found themselves longing for home.

Once again, they stood in the long room which Crump and Magnus used for an office. Mr. Magnus had drawn a double circle in chalk on the floor and surrounded it with six-pointed stars and other curious symbols. Dr. Cornelius and Mr. Crump looked on as the boys took their places within the circle and Mr. Magnus raised his white wand.

Then Rich said, "Wait! We forgot something."

"What?" asked Jesse. "We didn't bring anything with us."

"Nothing like that, you dope. The reward!"

"That's right. Dr. Cornelius, what about the reward?" The Prime Minister gave a chuckle that sounded like a deep note being plucked on a cello. "But you already have the reward," he said.

"You mean our being made barons and knights? Oh," Jesse said. "That's great. But it doesn't really fit all those things you told us about how the reward would be something that even a king couldn't buy, and how it would be so precious . . . Don't think I'm not grateful," he added, hastily. "That's not what I mean."

"I understand," said Dr. Cornelius. "But the honors we have given you are by no means as precious as the reward you already have."

Rich shook his head. "I don't get it."

The Prime Minister exchanged glances with Mr. Crump and Mr. Magnus. Then he said, "I will give you a choice. I will have Mr. Magnus send you back to your own world with your pockets filled with gold and precious stones, or empty as they are now. But if you choose the riches, you must go back as you first came—enemies."

The boys stared at him. Rich said, slowly, "And if we go back with nothing, we can stay friends?"

"Just so."

Rich faced Jesse. "You say what you want," he said.

Jesse shoved his hands in his pockets and hunched his shoulders. "Why me? If you want the gold and jewels, say so. I won't stop you."

"Why don't you come right out and say it? Do you want them?"

"Well . . . no."

Rich grinned. "Neither do I."

"We must be crazy," Jesse said, with a laugh of pure relief.

The earth seemed to tilt beneath him. Faintly, the sound of Mr. Magnus's voice chanting came to him. Then he and Rich were standing in a familiar corridor, in front of a door on which in gold letters were the ominous words:

*James R. Haggarty*  
*Principal*

They hung there for a long moment, hesitating.

At last, Jesse said, "Well, let's go. Are you scared?"

Rich snickered. "After all we've been through, it'll take more than a principal to scare me."

"Right!" said Jesse. "We'll tackle him together." And, side by side, they pushed open the door and marched in.