

CHAPTER 6

THE WITCH'S PRISONER

WHEN THE ogres pushed over the tree, Stephen had been standing just behind the girls, so he had been forced to jump backwards rather than forwards. The tree had crashed down in front of him, and he had been cut off from the others. He saw Pamela fall over, and Varril swirling his cloak as he shouted, and then an ogre stepped out right beside him on the path, reaching out hungrily.

He turned and ran.

He could not go down the path, because the ogre blocked the way, and nor could he go up the path, because of the fallen tree. So he rushed sideways into the Deep Forest, just as a blaze of light came from Varril's direction and made everything as bright as day.

It was the light which saved him. Three or four ogres were lurking in the trees, waiting for anyone who made a dash for it, but they had to shield their eyes from the brightness just long enough for him to dodge past their massive legs. He plunged on into the Forest. At least one of the ogres turned and chased after him, so he ran on as hard as he could, though it was difficult in the darkness under the tangled trees.

The sounds of the fight back at the path faded away. Gasping, Stephen turned right and crept as quietly as he could for a short distance, then crawled underneath some bushes. Sure enough, the chasing ogre blundered straight on in the darkness, just as the others had done the day before. Stephen wriggled right underneath the bushes and lay silently, expecting the ogre to catch on to his ruse and start looking for him. Minutes passed. Once he heard some crashing from a long way away (although somehow it sounded different from the noises that the ogres made), and once he heard a shrill cry off in another direction, but that was all. Even the birdcalls from high overhead seemed to have stopped.

He waited for quite a long while, afraid that the ogre might have crept back and was hiding somewhere close, but eventually he decided it was safe. He scrambled out from under the bushes, then crouched down and looked around to see if anything had spotted him.

Finally he gave a sigh of relief and stood upright, sure that he had given the ogre the slip.

As he looked about, he saw that there was a new problem. While he had run through the Forest and hidden under the bushes, the afternoon had drifted into evening, so that now it was difficult to see even the nearest trees. He set off in what he thought was the right direction, only to find an enormous fallen tree-trunk barring his way. He had certainly not gone past that before! Confused, he turned another way, and immediately put his foot into something soft and yielding. He yanked backwards in horror, and the ground made a sucking noise, sounding as if it was reluctant to let him get back to the hard earth.

Thoroughly frightened, he ran back to where he had hidden from the ogre, and discovered that even that patch of bushes had vanished in the darkness of the Deep Forest. He ran round and round, trying to recognise something that would put him on to the right track, but only succeeded in getting more and more lost. Panic rose up inside him and finally, throwing caution to the winds, he shouted:

"Pamela! Mary! Where are you? Varril!"

His voice only seemed to travel a few yards through the Forest before it was smothered by the weight of leaves and branches. He shouted again and again, heedless of what might be listening, but to no avail. Eventually he collapsed onto an old tree-stump, so exhausted that he could not move another step. A few tears trickled down his face, but he wiped them away angrily, partly because he thought that crying was not the thing to do, and partly because he did not want to draw attention to himself. Of course, that was not really very logical, since he had been shouting at the top of his voice only minutes before, but by now he was too tired to think properly.

As he sat there, it became pitch dark, and slowly he realised that there was nothing he could do until the morning. Wearily, he scratched a hole in the leaves under a nearby bush, and in spite of being frightened and alone in the middle of the Forest, fell asleep almost at once.

Hours later, in the deepest part of the night, a pair of shining, orange eyes crept close to Stephen and regarded his sleeping form.

"Hsssst!" said a voice, thoughtfully, "a boy-thing!"



He collapsed onto an old tree stump

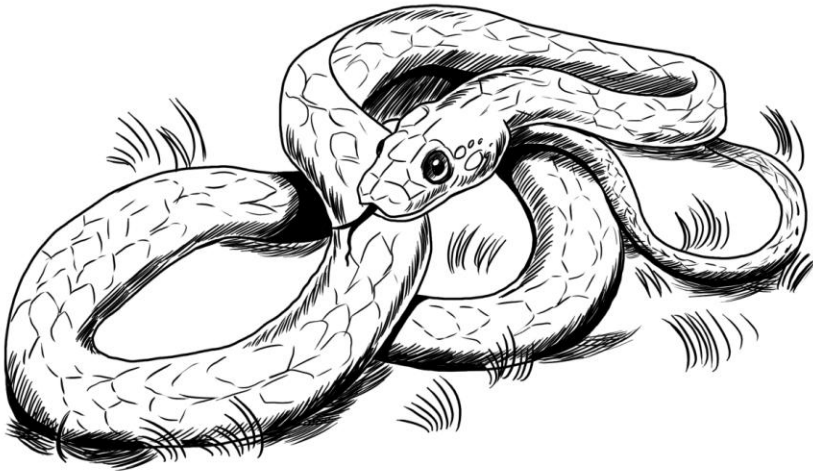
The eyes blinked once, and the leaves quite close to Stephen rustled. He stirred in his sleep, and mumbled something, and the eyes vanished. Stephen pulled an imaginary blanket over his head and settled down again. The eyes reappeared a few feet away.

"What can thissss mean?" mused the voice after a pause. The leaves rustled again as something else besides Stephen decided to wait until the coming of dawn.

The morning finally arrived, and the darkness of the Deep Forest lessened. Stephen stretched and propped himself up on one elbow. He saw that he had slept between the roots of an enormous tree, and not far away he could see the stump which he had used as a seat the previous night.

"Hsst!" came a voice from just behind him. "The boy-thing awakes!"

He jumped around, and saw a huge snake curled up by the side of the tree. There seemed to be coil upon coil of it, and on the top rested a large triangular head. Orange eyes stared at Stephen unwinkingly, and from time to time a forked tongue came out from between bony jaws to taste the air.



A huge snake curled up by the side of a tree.

"Did you ssleep well?" hissed the snake, "here, in the Deep Forest?"

Stephen nodded, unable to speak.

"There iss no need to be afraid," said the snake. "I am not hungry thiss week."

Stephen was relieved to hear that, but as it happened he had not really been afraid, only surprised. After being chased by ogres and becoming lost in pitch darkness, a talking snake did not really worry him, especially as he was still half asleep!

"But why iss it you are here?" hissed the snake, its tongue flicking in and out.

"I'm lost," said Stephen.

"Aaaahh...." breathed the snake. It raised its head into the air to look more closely at Stephen, then rested it back down again.

"You are alone?" it asked.

"I am now," replied Stephen. "I left my sisters on the path when an ogre chased me. Do you happen to know where the path is?" he added hopefully.

"Which path?" whispered the snake. "There are many pathss leading through the Deep Forest."

It began to unwind itself and glide towards Stephen, and he sat up cautiously. Perhaps it would be wise to be wary of this snake after all, because it was truly enormous. In some places it was so thick that he doubted if he could reach right round it, and even when its head had moved yards closer, several coils still lay, unmoving, back at the tree. Stephen was about to jump up in alarm when the snake stopped moving forwards and started instead to coil itself up again.

"Where iss it you are going?" it hissed when it was comfortable again.

"To..... to....." Stephen found he could not remember the name of the town Varril had been aiming for. "Towards the Sunlit Sea," he said finally.

"Aaahh," said the snake. "Then you must head daywardss... you must go that way!" As it spoke, it shot its head forward with blinding speed, making Stephen jump. He looked nervously where the snake was pointing, and then quickly back again.

"It iss a difficult journey," said the snake, and fixed Stephen with its strange orange eyes. Stephen looked into them and started to feel giddy, so he scrambled to his feet and pressed back against another large tree to steady himself. He immediately felt better.

"I... well... I suppose I had better be going, then," he said.

"Yesss," hissed the snake. "You must make use of the light."

"Well, thank you for your help," said Stephen politely, and set off in the direction which the snake had indicated. Secretly he was glad to move further away from it.

"Oh yesss," whispered the snake, but quietly so that Stephen could not hear. "Walk quickly! *She* will be sso happy to ssee you, little boy-thing!"

By this time, Stephen had pushed his way into the trees and was clambering up a leafy bank. He wanted to go as straight as possible, so he tried to avoid going round things, and climbed over them or went through them instead. Only twice did he stray from his straight line. Once he heard something snoring from directly in front and he definitely did not want to disturb anything else in the Deep Forest: and once the earth started to get very sticky, so he walked around the dangerous patch, keeping to the solid ground.

As he walked, he wondered what had happened to Pamela and Mary. Varril had confidently expected to be able to deal with any dangers on the path, but there had been an awful lot of ogres. Not only that, but there was that other crashing noise as well, which might have been something even worse (Stephen, of course, had no way of knowing that it had been a Forest troll). He desperately hoped that Varril had been able to protect the girls, and that he could meet up with them again at the end of the Forest.

He racked his brains trying to remember the name of the place where Varril had been taking them. What was it? Something to do with a town? Yes, but what was it exactly? He simply could not remember, and eventually gave up trying. Instead, he concentrated on walking in the direction the snake had showed him.

Usually this just meant pushing through tangled branches, or jumping over a muddy ditch, but occasionally he would have to go through a whole group of prickly bushes which seemed to be deliberately standing in his way. By the end of the morning most of his clothes were torn and he had tiny scratches all over his face and arms.

He was also very hungry, but since he had nothing to eat he did his best to ignore his rumbling stomach. In fact, if it hadn't been for his worry about the girls and lack of food, he might almost have enjoyed his walk through the Deep Forest. It was not so very different from walking through thick woods at home, although it was true that the trees were taller, and the light was poorer, and certainly you did not have to be on the lookout for ogres and large snakes back home. Stephen was just listening to the calls of the birds high above him, and thinking that he must have walked quite a long way, when he heard a different sound altogether.

"Hee! Hee! Hee!"

It was a high, cackling voice, and Stephen immediately fell to his knees and crawled forward so that he could investigate without being seen. By now his clothes were in such a state that crawling on the Forest floor made no difference at all to them.

"Hee! Hee! Call me a bodger, would they?"

Stephen poked his head over the top of a mound, looked towards the source of the voice, and what he saw made him very glad that he had stayed out of sight.

Quite a large space had been cleared out of the Forest, and a dingy cottage sat in the middle of it. In front of the cottage a figure was dancing around with glee, and Stephen had no trouble in recognising it as a witch. It wore a pointed cap, was dressed all in black, and its face and hands were all thin and knobbly.

"Oh, you toothsome little thing!" screeched the witch happily. "How plump and juicy! How firm and meaty!" She leaned forward and stared at something which up until then Stephen had overlooked.

"If only you were taller!" wailed the witch.

Stephen saw that there was a wooden stake hammered into the ground, and tied to it was someone - or something - that only stood about three feet high.

"Indeed," said the captive, "I am so short that really I am not worth your trouble."

"Oh no!" sang the witch. "No, no, no! You don't fool me that easily, you succulent little morsel!" As she spoke, she started capering round and round again, but this time she threw a funny-looking powder into the air. It twinkled mysteriously in the sun (which was quite strong in the middle of the clearing) and drifted very slowly to the ground.

"Mine! Mine!" trilled the witch. "Let no-one eat my meal! Let no-one from Within come near my gnome!"

The shining powder finally touched the ground, and the witch thrust her bony face towards her captive.

"Wait here, my little one," she crooned. "I will go and fetch them, and then they will see who they called a bodger! Hee! Hee!" She jumped into the air with happiness and, just like the magic powder, hung there for a moment before drifting slowly to the ground. Then she scuttled off to the edge of the clearing, looked back once at the little figure tied to the stake, and plunged into the Forest.

Stephen waited for a few minutes, then crawled cautiously over the mound towards the unmoving figure of the gnome. He paused at the edge of the clearing and when there was still no sign of the witch, called out in a low voice.

"Pssst! Can I help?"

The gnome, surprised, looked round until he saw Stephen crouched not very far away.

"Probably not," he said sadly. "Mistress Moray said a Spell to keep me here. When she comes back with the others, they'll roast me for dinner." A large tear ran down the gnome's face and dripped off the end of his nose.

"Oh," said Stephen uncomfortably. "Are you sure I can't untie you?"

"You can try," said the gnome, even more sadly, "but unless the witch has botched another Spell, you won't be able to get close enough."

Stephen stood up and walked slowly towards the gnome. When he was about four feet away, he felt a bit dizzy, but the feeling passed almost as soon as it had come. Seconds later, he knelt down by the side of the gnome and started to struggle with the knots which tied him to the stake.

"I don't understand!" cried the gnome. "How did you do that?" Stephen did not reply.

"Are you a Magician?" asked the gnome.

"No, I'm not," said Stephen. "How long is the witch going to be?"



The witch hung in the air for a moment

"Not long," said the gnome. Both of them looked nervously at the place where she had disappeared into the Forest, then Stephen went back to struggling with the ropes.

"These knots are too tight," he gasped. "I can't undo them."

"Oh, hurry!" said the gnome. "I don't want to be roasted, and escape is so close!" He tried to help Stephen by wriggling his hands as much as he could.

"It's no good, they're too tight," said Stephen helplessly. "If anything, they're tighter than when I started."

"Witch-knots," muttered the gnome.

"If only we had a knife," said Stephen, and the gnome immediately squeaked with excitement.

"A knife! Of course! Look in the witch's cottage and you'll be sure to find one!"

Stephen looked doubtfully at the grimy cottage, and then at the pleading look on the face of the gnome. The thought of that little figure being roasted for a lot of horrible witches decided him, and he trotted across to the door of the cottage. It was not closed properly (witches, after all, do not have much to fear from intruders), so he pushed it right open and went in.

The inside of the cottage was even dirtier than the outside. There was hardly any furniture, only a table and a wooden bed. Dust and dried mud lay everywhere. Little piles of what Stephen assumed were unfinished meals (although who knows what the witch might have been up to) were scattered all over the place, and so were other oddments, the purposes of which Stephen could not even guess.

"Oh, hurry, hurry!" came a shrill voice from outside. "I think I can hear them coming!"

Stephen could not find a knife, but as he looked round in something of a panic he caught sight of a shelf tucked away behind the door. A whole row of glass objects were laid out there, and each of them looked clean and shiny, not at all like the rest of the things in the cottage. Some of the objects were round, some had straight edges. Some were made of clear glass and others were frosty. At least one seemed to be full of colours which moved and swirled as Stephen went closer. The colours expanded and moved more quickly the nearer he got, and Stephen thought he had never seen anything quite so beautiful before. Reds and oranges merged with a deep blue which was slowly climbing up the cottage wall, and all the time a

strange purple colour pulsed in the middle of the glass, like some sort of beating heart.

By this time Stephen was only a few feet away, and the whole cottage was a mass of blazing colour. Daylight seemed drab and ordinary, and in any case it was quite impossible to tell whether it was day or night inside the cottage because the colours filled it up completely. Stephen did not much care whether it was day or night anyway. All he wanted to do was watch the colours, get close to them, and never have to do anything else ever again. He was, in fact, on the very verge of being bewitched, when two things happened.

The first was that another call came from outside.

"Quickly! I can feel them coming closer!"

The shrill voice of the gnome cut into the Spell which had almost captured Stephen. He shook his head, confused, and that was when the second thing happened. His foot slipped on something that the witch had left lying around on the floor, and he stumbled painfully.

"Ouch!" he cried, falling down and nearly twisting an ankle. As soon as his eyes left the glass ball, the magic colours disappeared from his sight and warm daylight streamed through the door instead. He shook his head in a daze. What was going on?

At that moment the gnome called out yet again. Of course! He was looking for a knife! His glance fell upon a sharp-looking glass object near the door (fortunately he did not catch sight of the coloured ball again) and he snatched it up hurriedly. Then he rushed back out of the door.

"Over here!" shouted the gnome. Astonished, Stephen saw that the cottage was no longer exactly in the centre of the clearing, and he also noticed that a strong wind had blown up.

"What's happening?" he shouted back as he dashed across and started to run as fast as he could at the witch's rope.

One of the gnome's hands came free and he pointed behind them. Stephen glanced back and gasped in horror because the dingy cottage had actually edged around and was moving slowly towards them. Instead of windows it seemed to have glaring black eyes, and instead of a door (which of course Stephen had left open) it appeared to have a huge, gaping mouth.

Stephen hacked at the rope even more frantically, and at last it fell to the ground. The gnome jumped forward.

"Into the trees!" he yelled.

He had to shout at the top of his voice, because by now the wind was whistling through the clearing, stirring up piles of leaves into the air.

"What's happening?" called Stephen again as they struggled towards the trees.

The tiny gnome did not answer, but redoubled his efforts to get away from the witch's cottage. Stephen risked a quick look behind, and saw a scene that he would never forget. The evil cottage looked just like a huge, monstrous creature squatting on the ground, glaring balefully at them. Even more frightening, the trees where the wind was strongest were bending right over, and a swarm of witches was plummeting down above them. The whole area grew darker, and the gusting wind seemed to become colder.

"They've arrived!" gasped the gnome, and as he spoke, the wind died away as if it had never been. A furious cry echoed through the trees.

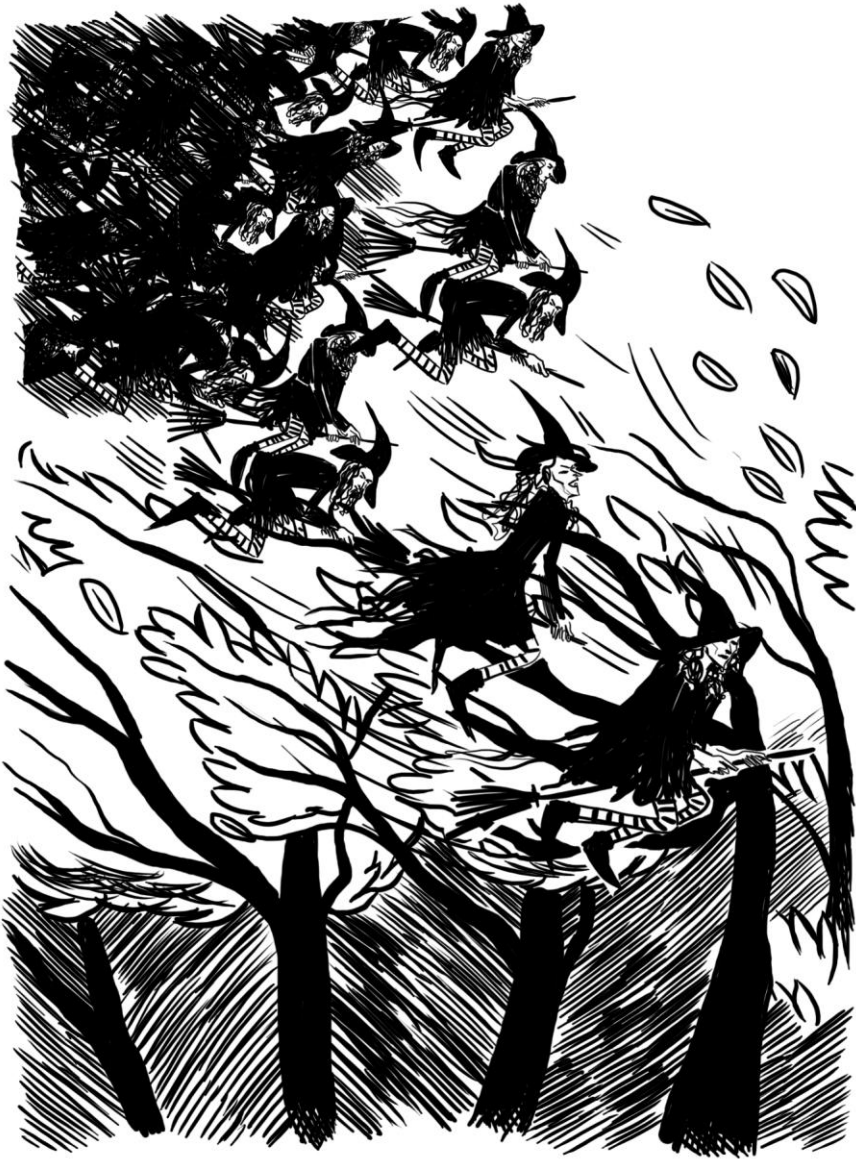
"My dinner! Where is my dinner? Who has taken my tasty little gnome? Oh no, no, no!"

Stephen could imagine how the witch would be dancing up and down in a rage.

"Slow down," whispered the gnome. "They won't be able to find us if we're quiet and get away deep into the Forest." His legs were much shorter than Stephen's, but on the other hand he was able to dodge through much smaller gaps between the bushes and trees. The two of them slowed down and concentrated on moving as quietly as possible.

"Nasty, nasty gnome!" sang out the witch, sounding fainter. "Where have you gone? Oh, where is my supper?"

By now they were nearly a hundred yards away from the witch's cottage, and every step took them further into the tangled Forest. Without talking, they kept going for another half an hour, until finally the gnome stopped by a handy log and sat down. Exhausted, Stephen collapsed beside him.



A swarm of witches was plummeting down.

"Well," said the gnome in his high-pitched voice, "I am in your debt."

"Are we safe now?" asked Stephen.

"Well," said the gnome again, "you are never exactly *safe* in the Deep Forest, but I think we have seen the last of Mistress Moray."

"Would she really have eaten you?"

"Witches eat anything, just like ogres," answered the gnome. "In fact, witches even eat ogres, given half a chance! I was lucky that you came along when you did."

He fell silent, then smiled and held out his hand.

"My name is Guelph," he said, "and I repeat that I am most certainly in your debt."

"I'm Stephen," said Stephen, and shook hands with the tiny gnome.



Guelph held out his hand.

"Where are you going?" asked Guelph. "Or at least, why are you wandering around in the Deep Forest?"

Stephen explained how he had been on a path the day before and how he had come to be lost. He described his encounter with the snake, and then looked round in dismay as a thought struck him.

"The snake pointed me in the direction of the Sunlit Sea, but now I'm lost again!"

Guelph was shaking his head.

"The snake pointed you in the direction of Mistress Moray," he corrected. "Snakes are like that. You should never believe anything a snake says unless you have just woken it up. Surely you knew that?"

"No," said Stephen miserably. "I don't know anything about Within." The thought that he had spent most of the day walking in the wrong direction almost made him burst into tears. "I wish I'd never come here!" he moaned.

"You're a stranger!" exclaimed Guelph in sudden understanding. Stephen nodded glumly.

"Then that explains it! The witch did botch her Spell after all!"

Stephen looked at the gnome, interested in spite of himself.

"She said a Spell against anyone from Within. Don't you see? You don't come from Within, so the Spell had no effect!"

Guelph laughed, but stopped when he saw Stephen's unhappy expression.

"Cheer up," he said. "I can take you to the Sunlit Sea, and even into Beachtown, which is probably where the elf was taking you."

Stephen felt his spirits lift. Of course - Beachtown - that was the name!

"We're only a few hours from the edge of the Forest," continued Guelph. "The snake must have pointed you in nearly the right direction after all. But look, it's nearly dark now, so I suggest we have something to eat and wait until morning before we set off. What do you say?"

Stephen suddenly remembered that he had eaten nothing all day, and the look on his face was answer enough for Guelph. He showed Stephen how to tell which berries could be eaten and which should be left strictly alone, and dug up a few roots which looked and tasted rather like carrots. As they ate, Stephen told Guelph how he and the girls came to be in Within, and explained how they needed to find the Sage so that they could get back home again. It was a long story to tell and by the time he had finished, it was already too dark for them to see each other properly. After a quick search, they found a large bush which was broad enough to shelter both of them, and they lay down thankfully and made themselves comfortable.

Stephen was completely worn out, but he felt happier than he had done for quite some time. He had found a friend, and at last it looked as though he was going to be able to get out of the Forest. He just hoped that Mary and Pamela had escaped as well: if they had, then with a bit of luck he would be able to meet up with them the next day.

It sounded as though Guelph was already fast asleep, and Stephen felt his own eyelids beginning to close. His last thought before drifting off to sleep himself was that he had forgotten to ask the gnome any questions. He had no idea who he was, or where he was going, or why he had been travelling alone in the Deep Forest.