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Opening extract from

The Secrets of the Wild Wood

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"The sun goes down in the sea, in the water," said the Fool. "I shall tell my brothers, because they don't know. Or is it a secret?"

"There are no more secrets now," said Tiuri, as he walked to the cabin with the Fool.

The Fool stopped and wrinkled his brow. "No more secrets?" he said. "They call me the Fool, but I don't believe that there are no more secrets left."

Tiuri looked at him with new respect.

"Yes," he said. "You're right. I am free to tell my secret now, but of course there are still lots of other secrets. The secrets of the Wild Wood, for instance, and all kinds of other mysteries. Some of them we have never even heard about. And others we shall never understand."

"I'm not sure I know what you mean," said the Fool.

The Letter for the King, Part Eight

Prologue

Winter in the Wood

The cawing of a crow broke the silence. The bird flew up to perch on a branch, a patch of black against all the white and grey. Snow came swirling down from the tree in a fine powder.

Sir Ristridin stopped, wrapped his cloak more closely around him and wondered if the crow had any significance for him. Was it a sign? A portent of danger? He wryly thought how much he had changed, that a bird could make him pause, nothing but a hungry creature in this bitterly cold winter.

It seemed like an age since King Dagonaut had summoned him and said, "I have heard strange rumours about the Wild Wood, about robbers and dangerous bands of men, about woodland spirits and Men in Green. I want you to investigate and find out which of those rumours are true – you, the trustiest of my knights-errant. And I need you to go there immediately, as many dangers in those parts could threaten our kingdom."

Ristridin had ridden out, accompanied by Sir Arwaut and twenty men. Now he was walking through the forest on his own, but he knew he was not truly alone. He kept thinking about what his friend, Edwinem of Forèstèrra, had once said to him, "You *must* go to the Wild Wood, for a knight should know his own land, and that

means all of King Dagonaut's territory. I remember from the old stories that there was once a wide road leading through the forest to the west, to the Kingdom of Unauwen. Why did your people allow it to become overgrown? If you clear that road once again, if you cut it open, the creatures that shun the daylight will flee. It will also be another route between our two lands: the kingdoms of Unauwen and Dagonaut."

Edwinem had been a knight in the service of Unauwen, the noble king who ruled the lands to the west of the Great Mountains. He had been murdered by the Red Riders – not here, but in another forest. Red Riders from Eviellan, the dark land to the south... Unauwen and Eviellan were at war, even though the ruler of Eviellan was actually a son of King Unauwen – his youngest son, yet his greatest enemy. Edwinem had fought in that war, but in the end he had been treacherously slain, within the sovereign territory of King Dagonaut.

The flapping of wings stirred Ristridin from his thoughts. The crow flew away, and Ristridin walked slowly onwards. The snow crunched beneath his feet, and small branches and twigs cracked and snapped as he passed. There were no other sounds to be heard. He felt like a traveller in the Land of the Dead. This was the Wild Wood, where Dagonaut ruled, though the king himself had never set foot inside the forest and did not know what secrets it concealed. *And what will become of me*? thought Ristridin. *Now that I have discovered those secrets, will I ever get out of here alive and tell others what I know*?

Somewhere out there were villages and cities, houses and castles, where people lived in peace and quiet, ignorant of such wildernesses as this. Ristridin wondered if he would ever reach those places. *I must!* he thought, but he felt tired and old.

Again he stopped. He saw footprints in the snow. Lots of footprints! Others had passed straight across the track in front of him...

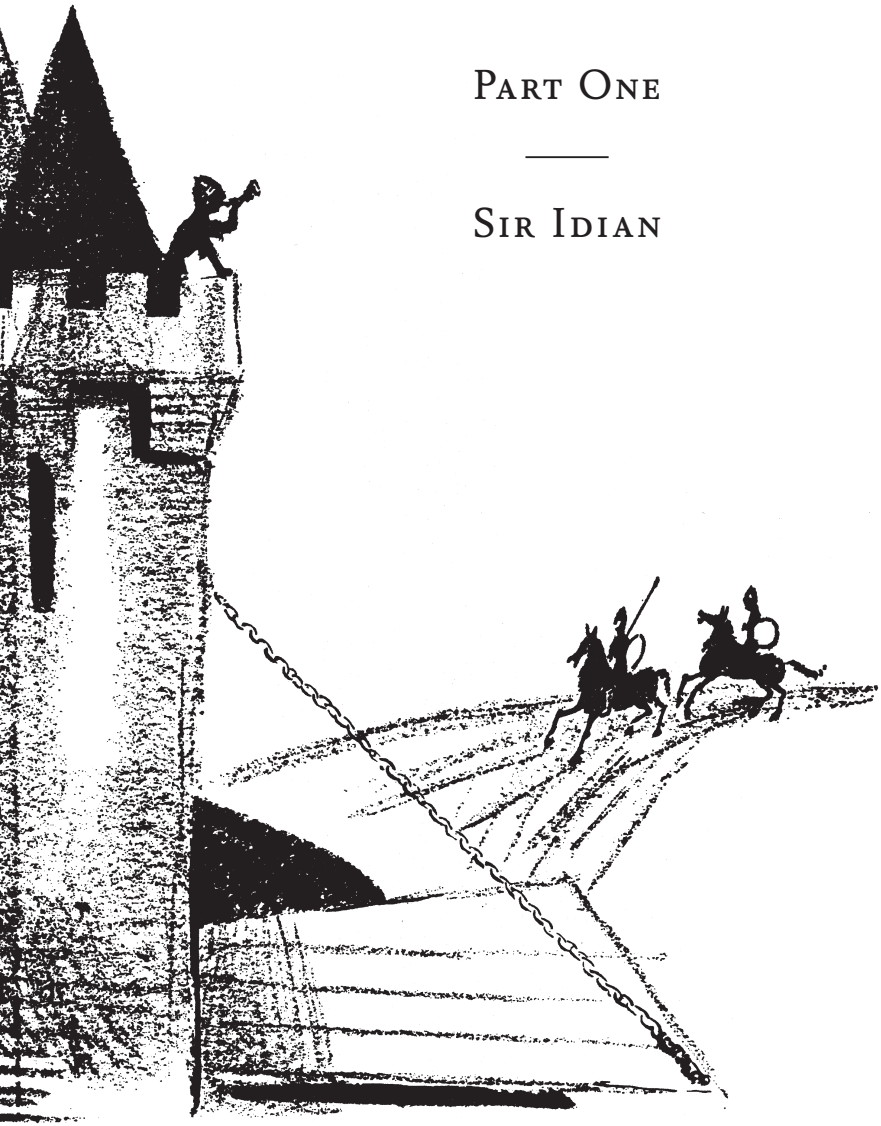
But he was alone. Where was he now? It had been many days since Ristridin had crossed the Black River, and he had been wandering for a long time. He had beaten a path through thorny bushes and tangled branches, in snow, in mist and ice. Islan should lie somewhere to the east of him now, not too far away – Islan, the lonely castle on the open plain, surrounded by forests. That was where he planned to go.

Who had left those fresh footprints in the snow? Was he already that close to Islan? Or had he taken a wrong turn? Was he lost? He looked up and saw a web of bare branches and twigs, with the silvery sky between them.

As Ristridin walked on, he felt as if he were being followed and watched. His lean face was grim and alert, and his hand rested on the hilt of his sword. He sought the way to Castle Islan.

Castle Islan... where the civilized world began. If Ristridin reached the castle, he would be able to travel onwards from there. Then he would once more ride a horse; then he would see his friends again.

He had made a promise, an agreement with his friends. In the spring they would meet at Castle Ristridin by the Grey River, the home of his forefathers. His friends were all knights – no, one of them had not yet been knighted, but perhaps by now the ceremony had taken place. Tiuri, son of Tiuri, had proven himself worthy of becoming a knight by successfully completing his mysterious mission: taking a most important letter to King Unauwen.



Part One

Sir Idian

1 Travel Plans

Sir Tiuri rode Ardanwen, his black horse, down the muddy path beside the Blue River. Not so long ago, its surface had been covered with ice floes, but now the water could flow freely once again. The river was high and tumbled along. Far away, in the mountains, the snow must be melting. Tiuri raised his head and took a deep breath. Although the air was still cold, it felt different today. The fields and trees to his right were still bare, but the birds swooped happily through the sky above, because they knew it too: winter was over! Soon travellers would be setting out along roads and tracks. Tiuri himself was keen to be off on a journey and to leave Tehuri, his father's estate, where he had spent the past few months.

He gazed into the distance, towards the south. There, some days' journey away, was Deltaland, a marshy country situated around the mouth of a river. To the west of that land lay Eviellan, a realm that was ruled by a wicked man. Tiuri had no desire to travel to that particular place. But on the Grey River, which formed the border with Eviellan, was a castle he had often thought about, even though he had never been there: Castle Ristridin, the ancestral home of the knight-errant who shared its name, Ristridin of the South. Sir Ristridin had headed into the Wild Wood in the autumn of the previous year, but in spring he would return to his castle, to meet up with his friends once again, and he had invited Tiuri to join them.

Tiuri reined in his horse and spoke out loud, "And I mean to go there. As soon as possible. Tomorrow!"

Ardanwen twitched his fine ears as if he understood what his young master was saying. Tiuri patted the horse's neck. "Are you

longing to roam the land again too, like you used to?" he whispered. "Like Sir Edwinem?" And Tiuri thought to himself: *I want to be a knight-errant, too. Later, when Father's old, I shall live at Tehuri. I'll always return here. It's my home, after all. But I want to see more of the world before then. And who knows? Perhaps King Dagonaut will have need of me, and I will be able to prove myself worthy of being his knight.*

Tiuri turned his horse and rode back to Castle Tehuri, which he could already see ahead of him in the distance.

Before long, Tiuri was riding over the drawbridge, which was kept lowered in this time of peace. The gatekeepers welcomed him back to the castle. The two Tiuris, father and son, were dearly loved. The elder Tiuri was known as "Sir Tiuri the Valiant", a name he had earned long ago, in days of war. His son was the youngest of Dagonaut's knights, and the only one who was allowed to carry a white shield; that was because of the great service he had performed for Unauwen, the ruler of the kingdom in the west.

As Tiuri jumped down from his horse in the courtyard, a boy of around fifteen came running over to him. It was Piak, his best friend, who was also his squire.

"Hey, Tiuri!" Piak called. "Where have you been? I was playing chess with your father and when I looked up, you'd disappeared!"

"I had to get out for a while," Tiuri replied, "and so did Ardanwen. The weather's changed."

He led the horse into the stable. That was a job he always did himself. No one else was allowed to touch Ardanwen, except for Piak.

"Yes. I could smell a change in the air too," said Piak, walking alongside him. "I went up to the top of the tallest turret, and everything smelt so different and new."

Tiuri smiled. Piak was still fond of high places, even though it was just castle towers now instead of the mountains that were his home.

"So now we can set off on our journey," Tiuri said.

"Journey? Journey? Now? Nonsense!" said Waldo, the old stable master. "What utter nonsense!" he repeated. "March is far too cold to travel. And April's too unpredictable. You really should wait until May."

"But May might be too mild," said Tiuri with a smile.

"And June could be too sunny," Piak added.

Waldo shook his grey head. "You young people are always in such a hurry," he said. "Hasty, reckless, never content to be where you are." He looked sternly at the two young men, his master's son and the boy's best friend. It was not a fitting way to address a knight and his squire, but they would always be children to the stable master, who had known Tiuri's father since he was just a little boy. "At least wait until the first day of spring," he continued. "You've only just returned home. Why would you want to run the risk of getting lost, breaking your neck, being murdered by brigands, or catching a cold and getting rheumatism from sleeping by the roadside?"

"But Waldo," said Tiuri with a smile, "you'd grumble even more if we stayed at home and never rode out at all."

Waldo grunted, but his eyes were friendly. "That's as may be," he said. "But you should know, Tiuri, son of Tiuri, that there's no need to go out searching for adventure. If it's your destiny, adventure will find you. Before you know it, you'll be in all sorts of trouble that you never asked for!"

"You're probably right," said Tiuri. "But we're not just riding out on a whim. Sir Ristridin of the South invited me to come to his castle in the spring."

"Sir Ristridin doesn't have a castle, does he?" said Waldo. "I thought he was a knight-errant, without lands and possessions."

"That's true," replied Tiuri. "The lord of the castle is actually Sir Arturin, Ristridin's brother, but it's also Ristridin's home, whenever he stops to rest from his travels."

"Some men are fools, handing over their castles to others, just so they can go wandering about," said the old man in his usual grumpy

tone. "Fine then, so it's Sir Arturin's castle. And that's where you're going? You and your friend?"

"My first journey as a squire," said Piak. His brown eyes sparkled at the thought of the adventures he might have. "And it's not far from the Great Mountains," he added longingly.

"It's even closer to the Wild Wood," said Waldo. "Well, I suppose it's your decision. We have a wood here, too, and it's far more beautiful and agreeable than that dangerous forest. Let's just hope Sir Ristridin has made it back in one piece."

When Tiuri had been knighted, after his journey to the Kingdom of Unauwen, King Dagonaut had told him he would not call upon his services for a while. First he should return home with his parents, to Castle Tehuri, and take some time to recover. Tiuri didn't think he needed any, but he was keen to go home, as he hadn't been there for so long. Piak went with him, of course. At Tehuri, Tiuri and his father taught Piak a great deal about everything a squire needs to know. Tiuri's parents had become very fond of him and treated him like their own son.

Tiuri had also learnt a lot. His father took him riding around his estate, preparing him for the day when Tiuri would take charge of the castle and surrounding countryside.

Autumn had flown by. In the winter, the cold, with its snow and frost, had often kept the residents of Tehuri inside the keep. It had been a quiet few months. Hardly any travellers had ridden over the drawbridge to request hospitality, and there had been very little news from the outside world. The young men had not been bored, though. In spite of the icy weather, they still went outside, and there was always something to do indoors. Tiuri and his father played chess together, for instance, and Piak had also learnt how to play, but he never managed to beat his friend. Tiuri was a skilful opponent and a match for his father.