

Straken

Terry Brooks

Published by Pocket Books

Extract

All text is copyright of the author

[Click here to buy this book and read more](#)

This opening extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.



O N E

“Pen Ohmsford!” The black-cloaked figure called out to him from across the chasm that separated the island of the tanequil from the rest of the world. “We have been waiting for you!”

A male Druid. He came forward a few steps, pulling back his hood to reveal the strong, dark features of his face. Pen had never seen him before.

“Come across the bridge so that we can talk,” the Druid said.

The firelight threw his shadow across the stone archway in a dark stain that spilled into the chasm, and the portent it foreshadowed was unmistakable. Pen wished he hadn’t rushed into the light so quickly, that he had been more careful. But he had thought himself past the worst of it. He had survived his encounter with the tanequil and received the gift of the darkwand, the talisman that would give him access into the Forbidding. He had lost two fingers in doing so, but he had come to believe that they were a small price to pay. Losing Cinnaminson was a much larger price, but he had accepted that there was nothing he could do about it until after his aunt was safely returned, promising himself he would try to come back for her then. Finally, he had escaped the monster that had pursued them all the way from Anatcheræ and knew it to be dead at last, pulled down into the chasm and crushed.

But now this.

His fingers tightened possessively around the darkwand, and he scanned the faces of the captive Trolls. All there, he saw. No one missing. No one even appeared hurt. They must have been caught completely by surprise not to have put up any fight. He wondered vaguely how that could have happened, how the Druids had found them at all, for that matter, but he guessed it was a pointless exercise.

A few of the Trolls were looking up now, Kermadec among them. The anger and disappointment on his face were unmistakable. He had failed Pen. They all had. The boy saw Tagwen there as well, almost hidden behind the massive bodies of his companions.

There was no sign of Khyber.

"Cross the bridge, Pen," the Druid repeated, not unkindly. "Don't make this any harder on yourself."

"I think I should stay where I am," Pen answered.

The Druid nodded, as if understanding him perfectly. "Well, you can do that, if you choose. I've read the warning on the stone, and I know better than to try to come across after you." He paused. "Tell me. If the danger is real, how did you manage to get over there without being harmed?"

Pen said nothing.

"What are you doing here, anyway? Trying to help your aunt? Did you think you might find her here?"

Pen stared back at him silently.

"We have your friends. All of them. You can see for yourself. We have your parents, as well, locked away at Paranor." His voice was patient, calm. "It doesn't do you any good to stay over there when those you care about are all over here. You can't help them by refusing to face up to your responsibilities."

My responsibilities, Pen repeated silently. What would this man know of his responsibilities? Why would he even care, save that he thought he could stop Pen from carrying them out?

A second Druid appeared beside the first, coming out of the darkness and into the light. This one was slender and small, a ferret-faced Gnome of particularly cunning looks, his eyes shifting swiftly from the first Druid to Pen and then back again. He muttered something, and the first Druid gave him a quick, angry look.

"How do I know you aren't lying about my parents?" Pen asked

suddenly; it wasn't the first time he had heard the claim. He still didn't want to believe it.

The first Druid turned back to him. "Well, you don't. I can tell you that they were flying in a ship called *Swift Sure* when we brought them into the Keep. They helped us find you. Your father was worried about the disappearance of his sister, but more worried about you. That is how we found you, Pen."

Gone cold to the bone, the boy stared at him. The explanation made perfect sense. His father would have aided them without realizing what he was doing, thinking it was the right thing, that they were as concerned about his aunt as he was. The King of the Silver River was supposed to have warned his parents of the Druids, but perhaps he had failed. If so, his father wouldn't have known of their treachery. How could he?

Pen brushed back his tangled red hair while trying to think what to do.

"Let me put this to you another way," the taller Druid went on, moving slightly in front of the other. "My companion is less patient than I am, although he isn't volunteering to cross the bridge, either. But when morning comes, we will bring one of the airships across, and then we will have you, one way or the other. There are only so many places you can hide. This is all a big waste of time, given the way things eventually have to turn out."

Pen suspected that was true. But his freedom, however temporary, was the only bargaining chip he possessed. "Will you set my friends free, if I agree to come over?"

The Druid nodded. "My word on it. All of them. We have no use for them beyond persuading you to come with us. Once you cross over, they are free to go."

"What about my parents?"

The Druid nodded. "Once you are back at Paranor, they can go, too. In fact, once you've told us what we want to know, what your purpose is in coming here, you can go, too."

He was lying. He made it sound believable, exuding just the right amount of sincerity and reasonableness through his choice of words and tone of voice, but Pen knew the truth of things at once. The Druid would have done better to tell him something less soothing, but he supposed the man saw him as a boy and thought he would respond better to a lie than to the truth.

He paused to consider what he should do next. He had asked the questions that needed asking and gotten the answers he expected. It reconfirmed his suspicions about what would happen if he crossed the bridge to surrender to them. On the other hand, if he stayed where he was, they would capture him sooner or later, even if he went back down into the chasm, something he did not think he could do. Worse, he would be doing nothing to help his family and friends. If he was as concerned about responsibility as he liked to think, he would have to do more than go off and hide.

The decision was easier to make than he would have thought. He had to go to Paranor anyway if he was to use the darkwand to reach his aunt. Rescuing the Ard Rhys was what he had set out to do, and he couldn't do that if he didn't get inside the Druid's Keep. The Druids who had come for him were offering him a chance to do just that. He would have preferred going about it in a different way, but it all ended the same. The trick would be finding a way to keep the darkwand in his possession until he could get inside the chamber of the Ard Rhys.

He had no idea how he was going to do that.

"I want to speak with Tagwen," he called out. "Send him to the head of the bridge and move back so I can come across safely."

The Druids exchanged an uncertain glance. "When you surrender yourself, then we will let you talk with Tagwen," the taller one said.

Pen shook his head. "If you want me to surrender, you have to let me talk with Tagwen first. I want to hear from him what he thinks about your promises. I want to hear from him how good he thinks your word is. If you don't let me talk to him, I'm staying right here."

He watched their dark faces bend close and heard them confer in inaudible whispers. He could tell they didn't like the request and were trying to come up with a way to refuse it.

"If you think I will be so easy to find over here come morning, perhaps you should wait to try it and find out for yourselves," he said suddenly. "It might not be as easy as you think. That spider creature you sent to hunt me down? Or was it supposed to kill me? You did send it, didn't you?"

He asked the questions on impulse, not knowing how they

would answer, but suspecting. He was not disappointed. Both Druids stared at him in surprise. The one who did all the talking folded his arms into his cloak. "We didn't send him. But we know who did. We thought he was dead, killed in the Slags."

Pen shook his head, his eyes shifting to Tagwen, who was watching him alertly now, knowing he was up to something, anxious to find out what it was. "*He? Not it?*"

"Aphasia Wye. A man, but I grant you he looks more an insect than a human. Are you saying he isn't dead? Where is he?"

"No, he's dead. But he didn't die in the Slags. He tracked us all the way here. Last night, he crossed the bridge. Just as you want to do. Except that he found a way. Then he found me, but something else, too, and it killed him. If you want to see what that something is, fly your airship on over. I'll wait for you."

It was a bluff, but it was a bluff worth trying. Aphasia Wye was a predator of the first order—they might be hesitant to go up against something that had dispatched him. It cast Pen in a different light, giving him a more dangerous aspect, since he was alive and his hunter wasn't. He had to make them stop and think about whether it was worthwhile to refuse his request.

The taller Druid finished conferring with his companion and looked over. "All right, Pen. We'll let you speak with Tagwen. But no tricks, please. Anything that suggests you are acting in bad faith will put your Troll friends and your parents at risk. Don't test our limits. Have your talk, and then do what you know you have to do and surrender yourself to us."

Pen didn't know if he would do that or not, but it would help if he could talk with Tagwen about it first. He watched the Dwarf rise on the taller Druid's command and walk to the head of the bridge. He watched the Druids move back, signaling the Gnome Hunters to do the same. Pen waited until the area in front of the bridge was clear of everyone but the Dwarf, then stepped out onto the stone arch and walked across. He used the darkwand like a walking staff, leaning on it as if he were injured, pretending that was its purpose. Maybe they would let him keep it if they thought he had need of it to walk. Maybe pigs would learn to fly. He kept his eyes open for any unexpected movement, for shadows that didn't belong or sounds that were out of place. He used his small magic to test for warnings that

might alert him to dangers he couldn't see. But nothing revealed itself. He crossed unimpeded, captives and captors staying back, behind the fire, deeper into the gardens, away from the ravine's edge.

When he was at the far side, he dropped down into a crouch, using the bridge abutments as shelter. He didn't think they intended to kill him, but he couldn't be certain.

Tagwen moved close. "They caught us with our pants down, young Pen. We thought we were watching out for you, but we were looking too hard in the wrong direction." His bluff face wrinkled with distaste. "They had us under spear and arrow before we could mount a defense. Anything we might have done would have gotten us all killed. I'm sorry."

Pen put his hand on the Dwarf's stout shoulder. "You did the best you could, Tagwen. We've all done the best we could."

"Perhaps." He didn't sound convinced. His eyes searched the boy's face. "Are you all right? Were you telling the truth about that thing that was tracking us? Was it really over there with you? I thought we'd lost it once and for all when we entered the mountains. Is it finally dead?"

Pen nodded. "The tanequil killed it. It's a long story. But anything that crosses this bridge is in real danger. I'm alive because of this."

He nodded down at the darkwand, which was resting next to him on the bridge, flat against the stone, tucked into the shadows.

The Dwarf peered at it, then caught sight of Pen's damaged hand and looked up again quickly. "What happened to your fingers?"

"The tree took them in exchange for the staff. Blood for sap, flesh for bark, bones for wood. It was necessary. Don't think on it."

"Don't think on it?" Tagwen was appalled. He glanced quickly over Pen's shoulder into the darkness of the tanequil's island. "Where is Cinnaminson?"

Pen hesitated. "Staying behind. Safe, for now. Tagwen, listen to me. I have to do what they want. I have to go with them to Paranor."

Tagwen stared. "No, Penderrin. You won't come out of there alive. They don't intend to let you go. Nor your parents, either. You're being taken to Shadea a'Ru. She's behind what's happened to the Ard Rhys, and once she's questioned you about what you are doing and you tell her—which you will, make no mistake—you and your parents are finished. Don't doubt me on this."

Pen nodded. "I don't, Tagwen. But look at how things stand.

We're trapped here, all of us. Even without the Druids to deal with, we're stranded in these ruins, surrounded by Urdas. I have to get out if I'm to help my aunt, and the quicker the better. It's already been too long. If I don't get to Paranor and use the darkwand soon, it will be too late. And now I have a way. The Druids will take me faster than I could get there on my own. I know it's dangerous. I know what they intend for me. And for my parents. But I have to risk it."

"You're risking too much!" the Dwarf snapped. "You'll get there quick enough, all right. And then what? They won't let you into the chamber of the Ard Rhys. They won't let you make use of that talisman. Shadea will see you for the threat you are and do away with you before you have a chance to do anything!"

"Maybe. Maybe not." He looked off into the gardens, into the pale, shifting patterns of color and the dappled shadows cast by the Druids and Gnome Hunters in the firelight's glow. "In any case, it's the only choice that makes sense." He turned back to Tagwen. "If I agree to go with them, will that tall Druid keep his word and let you go? Is his word any good? Is he any better than the rest of them?"

Tagwen thought about it a moment. "Traunt Rowan. He's not as bad as the other one, Pyson Wence, and certainly not as bad as Shadea. But he joined them in the plot against your aunt." He shook his head. "She always thought he was principled, if misguided in his antipathy toward her. He might keep his word."

Pen nodded. "I'll have to chance it."

The Dwarf reached for him with both strong hands and gripped his shoulders. "Don't do this, Penderrin," he whispered.

Pen held his gaze. "If you were in my shoes, Tagwen, wouldn't you? To save her from the Forbidding, to give her a chance, wouldn't you do just what I'm doing?" Tagwen stared at him in silence. He gave the Dwarf a quick smile. "Of course you would. Don't say anything more. I've already said it to myself. We knew from the beginning that we would do whatever was necessary to reach her, no matter the risk. We knew it, even if we didn't talk about it. Nothing has changed. I have to go to Paranor. Then into the Forbidding."

He closed his eyes against the sudden panic that the words roused in him. The enormity of what he was going to attempt was overwhelming. He was just a boy. He wasn't gifted or skilled or anything useful. He was mostly just there when no one else was.

He took a deep breath. "Will you come after me? In case I don't

find a way to get through? In case I get locked away in the dungeons and don't get my parents out? Will you try to do something about it?" He exhaled sharply. "Even if I do get through and find her, the Druids will be waiting for us when we get back. We'll need help, Tagwen."

The Dwarf tightened his grip. "We'll come for you. No matter how long it takes us, no matter where you are. We'll find a way to reach you. We'll be there for you when you need us."

Pen put his hands over those of the Dwarf's, pressing them down into his shoulders. "Get out of here any way you can, Tagwen. Don't stop for anything." He hesitated. "Don't try to reach Cinnaminson. She has to wait for me. She can't leave until I come back for her." He shook his head quickly, fighting back tears. "Don't ask me to explain. Just tell me you'll do what I've asked. All right?"

The Dwarf nodded. "All right."

"I can do this," Pen whispered, swallowing hard. "I know I can."

Tagwen's fingers tightened. "I know it, too. You've done everything else. Everything anyone could have asked of you."

"I'll find a way. Once I'm there, I'll find a way."

"There are some still loyal to your aunt," Tagwen said. "Keep an eye out. One of them might come to your aid."

Pen glanced down again at the darkwand. "What can I do about the staff? It's too big to hide, but I have to take it with me. I know they won't let me keep it, if they see it. But I can't afford to give it over to them, either."

From back in the shadows, the taller of the two Druids called out, "You should have said everything you intended to say by now, Pen. You should be finished and ready to honor your promise. Tell Tagwen to step back, and then you come forward to us!"

Pen stared toward the firelight, to the cluster of Troll prisoners huddled together, to the shadowy forms of the Gnome Hunters surrounding them, to the cloaked forms of the Druids. It had the look of another world, of a place and time he could barely imagine. He was still enmeshed in the world of the tanequil, of orange-tipped leaves and mottled bark, of massive limbs and roots, of a sentient being older than Man. His memories of the past two days were still so painfully fresh that they dominated his present and threatened to overwhelm his fragile determination.

He despaired.

"That's a pretty piece of work," Tagwen said suddenly, nodding down at the darkwand. "It might help if it wasn't so shiny."

He eased back on his heels and reached behind him for a handful of damp earth, then rubbed it along the length of the staff, clotting the runes, dulling the surface. He worked in the shadows, shielding his movements.

"If they take it away from you," he said, finishing up, "tell them you found it in the ruins. Tell them you don't know what it is. If they think it was given to you to help the Ard Rhys, you'll never see it again. You might keep it long enough to use it if they don't suspect what it's for."

Pen nodded. He stood up, one hand gripping the staff. He leaned on it once more, as if he needed its support. "Go back to them. Tell Kermadec to be ready. Khyber is still out there, somewhere. I saw her while coming back to you. She should have been here by now. She might be watching all this, and I don't know what she will do."

The Dwarf took a quick look around, as if thinking he might see her in the darkness, then nodded and rose, as well. Saying nothing, he returned to the Gnome Hunters and the encircled Rock Trolls, his head lowered. The Trolls watched him come, but did not rise to greet him. Pen waited until he was seated among them again, then looked over at the Druids, who were standing to one side.

"Do you promise my friends will not be harmed?" he asked again.

"Not by us or those who travel with us," the taller Druid replied, coming forward a step. "We'll leave them here when we depart. What happens to them after that is up to them."

It was the best Pen could hope for. He would have liked to have found a way to get them back to Taupo Rough, but he couldn't chance trying to make that happen. Kermadec was resourceful. He would find a way.

Pen glanced down at the darkwand. The dirt and mud that coated its length mostly hid its runes. Its smooth surface was dull. If he was lucky, they would not pay close attention to it. If they took it, he would have to find a way to get it back later.

His gaze shifted to the island of the tanequil, to the dark silent wall of the forest that concealed the sentient tree. He was leaving things unfinished here, he knew, and he might never have a chance to come back and set them right. The urge to act immediately threat-

ened to overpower him, to turn him from his path to the Ard Rhys. He knew her so little, and Cinnaminson so well.

He took another deep, steadying breath and looked back at the waiting Druids. "I'm ready," he called out in what he hoped was a brave voice.

Then, using the staff as a crutch, he began to walk toward them.

