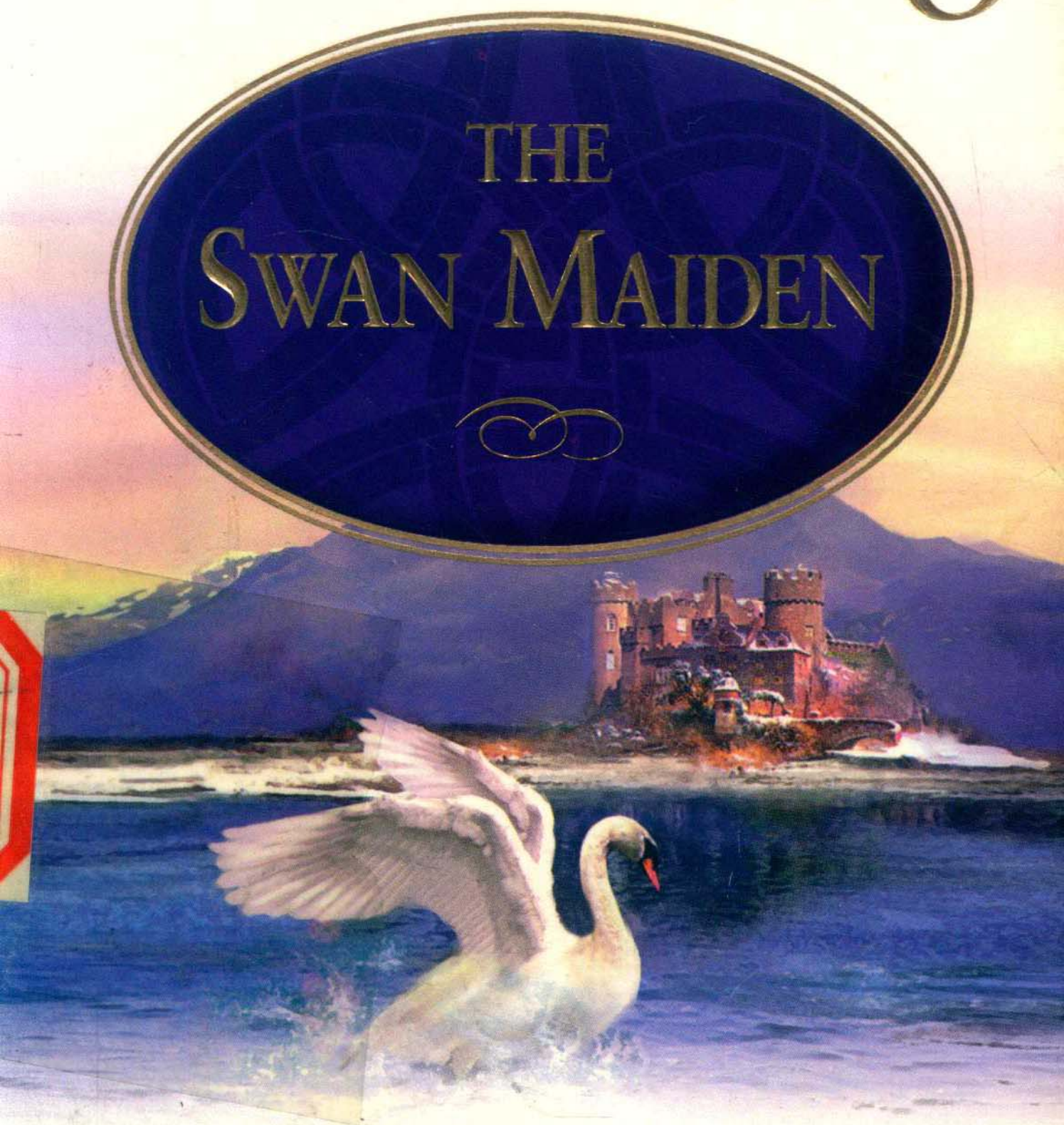


NATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR  
OF *THE STONE MAIDEN*

# Susan King

## THE SWAN MAIDEN



"SUSAN KING CASTS SPELLS LIKE A SORCERER — HER BOOKS  
NEVER FAIL TO ENCHANT!" —PATRICIA GAFFNEY  
AUTHOR OF *THE SAVING GRACES*





*The  
Swan Maiden*



*Susan King*



A SIGNET BOOK

## SIGNET

Published by New American Library, a division of  
Penguin Putnam Inc., 375 Hudson Street,  
New York, New York 10014, U.S.A.

Penguin Books Ltd, 27 Wrights Lane,  
London W8 5TZ, England  
Penguin Books Australia Ltd, Ringwood,  
Victoria, Australia

Penguin Books Canada Ltd, 10 Alcorn Avenue,  
Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4V 3B2

Penguin Books (N.Z.) Ltd, 182-190 Wairau Road,  
Auckland 10, New Zealand

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices:  
Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England

First published by Signet, an imprint of New American Library,  
a division of Penguin Putnam Inc.

First Printing, January 2001  
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Copyright © Susan King, 2001

All rights reserved



REGISTERED TRADEMARK—MARCA REGISTRADA

Printed in the United States of America

Without limiting the rights under copyright reserved above, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise), without the prior written permission of both the copyright owner and the above publisher of this book.

## PUBLISHER'S NOTE

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

BOOKS ARE AVAILABLE AT QUANTITY DISCOUNTS WHEN USED TO PROMOTE PRODUCTS OR SERVICES. FOR INFORMATION PLEASE WRITE TO PREMIUM MARKETING DIVISION, PENGUIN PUTNAM INC., 375 HUDSON STREET, NEW YORK, NEW YORK 10014.

If you purchased this book without a cover you should be aware that this book is stolen property. It was reported as "unsold and destroyed" to the publisher and neither the author nor the publisher has received any payment for this "stripped book."

*To Julie and Jacci, with love and thanks*



## *Acknowledgments*

To all the readers who loved Sir Gawain (the knight, not the goshawk!) in *Laird of the Wind* and asked for his story, heartfelt thanks for the inspiration.

David King, Andy Hernandez, and Mike Braid kindly gave expert archery advice, friendship, and so much more; and thanks again to Andy for finding a longbow for a short person.

I am especially grateful to Shihan Tim Gilbert, Rokudan Renshi (sixth Dan black belt in Shorin Ryu), for sharing the secret of catching arrows, and for patiently, if a little exuberantly, shooting arrows at me until I caught some myself.

Hope springs exulting on triumphant wing.

—*Robert Burns*

## Prologue

I heard the sweet voice of the swan  
At the parting of night and day,  
And who should be guiding in front  
The queen of fortune, the white swan  
—*Carmina Gadelica*

*Scotland, the Highlands*  
*Winter, 1286*

“In the time of the mists,” the *seanachaidh* said, “when faeries danced upon the Highland hillsides, a maiden lived in a fortress of bronze and silver on an island in a loch. She granted her heart to no one, until a certain warrior wooed her and won her love.”

Gabhan MacDuff, grandson of the *seanachaidh* and son of a warrior, yawned as he lay on his stomach beside the hearth fire. His parents sat nearby with kinfolk and a few servants, all quiet as they listened. He rested his head on his folded arms and watched the flames dance.

“Their love was bright as a rainbow,” his grandfather went on. “And all who knew them admired them for the love they bore each other. They were to be wed—he who was dark as a raven, and she who was fair as a swan.”

At the mention of their love, Gabhan wrinkled his nose. His father chuckled softly, sitting nearby, his long booted legs stretched out to the fire. He touched Gabhan’s head with his big, gentle hand, reminding him to show better respect.

“But one man, a Druid, secretly wished them ill. He coveted the maiden for himself, and his heart had grown hard and dark with longing. He vowed that if he could not have her, then no one would.

“On the eve of the wedding, the Druid went out into the moonlight and spoke a spell. He took a faery bolt and shot it into the skies. Clouds gathered and a great storm arose. The waters of the loch swallowed the island, and lightning struck the fortress. The walls crumbled into the loch.”



Gabhan liked the part about the destruction of the fortress. He propped his head on his hand and looked at his grandfather. The older man was handsome like Gabhan's father, with blue eyes and black hair gone gray. Gabhan's own eyes were brown, like his English mother's, though he favored his Highland kin otherwise.

"All who lived in the fortress were drowned on the eve of the wedding," Adhamnain MacDuff continued. "And the dark-haired warrior and the pale maiden were lost, too, in the deep loch."

Gabhan frowned. He did not like to imagine the warrior and the maiden sucked into the murky waters. He waited, hoping to hear that they would be saved.

Seated beside his father, his mother smiled at him, and then gazed lovingly at her husband. Gabhan knew that his mother had left her English family to come to Glenshie Castle to be with her Highland husband, also called Adhamnain, although her family thought him a savage and unsuited to her. Now she rested her hand upon his arm, her face glowing and happy, her dark eyes warm and sparkling.

Gabhan looked up at his grandfather, feeling anxious. He did not want the story to end in disaster.

"But the hearts of the lovers were pure, and the power of shared love is strong and good, and cannot be destroyed. Such love makes its own magic, and that is what saved them all . . . in a way. Every soul who drowned that night became a swan," his grandfather said, leaning forward. "The maiden and the warrior transformed into the most beautiful and most graceful of all the enchanted swans on the loch.

"The Druid saw the birds, and saw the loving pair at the center of the flock, and knew that his evil plan had failed, for he had not separated them. He fled the land. The descendants of those swans live upon that loch still, and the magic and mystery of that place will always endure. And it is said that at certain times, in certain lights, the walls of the sunken fortress may be seen—but only by those whose hearts have been opened by great love." He sat back, smiling.

"What happened to the Druid, Grandfather?" Gabhan asked.

"Some say he still lives, having found the secret of eternal



life, and that someday he will return to claim the swan maiden."

Gabhan shivered at the thought. "I know that place," he said. "It is called Loch nan Eala, the loch of the swans. It is not far from here. My father took me to see the swans there. A castle is on the shore, called Dùn nan Eala, and a family lives there. And my mother told me that she and my father saw the fortress once, shining at the bottom of the loch."

His grandfather smiled. "Surely if any have seen it, those two have," he said, eyes twinkling as he glanced at his son and daughter-in-law. "It is believed that sometimes the warrior and his lady come ashore, shedding their swan skins and regaining their human forms for a few hours. They search for a way to break the spell. If they ever find it, they will be free."

"Can it be broken, Grandfather?"

"They say that a warrior who knows true love must catch a faery bolt and fling it into the heart of the loch, the opposite way that the evil man threw it," his grandfather said. "Then the spell that surrounds the loch will end at last."

"Ach," Gabhan said. "I could catch a faery bolt."

"Could you?" Old Adhamnain smiled. "That is hard to do."

"I could do it," Gabhan insisted confidently.

His grandfather smiled. "Faery bolts are very hard to find. And the swans on that loch are happy, after so long."

Gabhan nodded, and rested his head upon his arms once again when his grandfather turned to murmur with his parents.

Though Gabhan listened, he understood little of their discussion. They spoke of the recent death of the King of Scots, and the struggle with the English king who was sending his armies north. The English had no rights here, his father insisted. Righteous rebellion already brewed in Scotland, and he would fight in the forefront of battle if he must, to protect Scotland and his home and kinfolk.

The hour was late, and Gabhan was tired, and the warmth of the hearth and the low drone of voices put him to sleep quickly. He dreamed of a sun-sparkled loch where white swans glided. He was a swan himself, gliding beside a beautiful female. Their matched bodies were mirrored in the smooth glass of the water. A golden chain circled his neck, and hers, and bound them to-

gether. He felt the gentle tug of the links as he floated in the cool lap of the water beside her.

Storm clouds sailed over the loch, and Gabhan lifted his wings. Beside him, the beautiful swan did the same. They rose from the water as one, with the chain draped between them like a banner of sunlight. They fled from the storm, but it caught them with a fierce, dark wind. Lightning flashed, clouds rolled like boulders, and the wind spun them down into the water's embrace.

Gabhan awoke with a cry, and felt his father's hand upon his head, soothing and strong.

Not long after that night, Gabhan rode over the heathered slopes away from Glenshie alongside his weeping mother, his grim nurse, and an old male servant. They were leaving the purple hills and the swift streams, leaving the stone tower that was home. His mother said they were going to England.

His father was dead. Killed. Gabhan could not think of it, for the pain was too deep. The castle had been attacked, and his grandfather had died as well. His mother had urged him along on a desperate escape in the dark of the night, while he heard shouts behind him and smelled smoke. He understood little, if any, of what had happened.

Still, he squeezed back tears and held his head high as he traveled. Determined to defend his mother, knowing his father would expect that of him, he kept his wooden sword pointed outward. His nurse told him to put it down before he hurt someone. But his mother smiled wanly, and thanked him for his chivalry, and let him keep the sword.

At the English border, his mother traded his red plaid, which his father had given him, to a farmwife for a brown tunic that fit Gabhan like sackcloth. His mother told him he must speak only English now. He must never speak Gaelic again, she said, and he must answer to Gawain, never to Gabhan MacDuff.

He had nodded obediently, his wooden sword ready, his back straight. He did not understand all that she asked of him, and he missed his father so much that he ached as if he were ill. But he loved his mother and would do whatever she asked. The



sadness in her eyes matched the hurt in his heart. He only wanted to see her smile again.

Her English kin were strangers, but kind, and the hills near his grandparents' castle were low, green, and lovely, though not as beautiful as the hills near Glenshie. He liked the long-legged horses and the dogs and cats his uncles and grandfather kept, and he often walked along a nearby river to watch the swans there. They, more than anything, reminded him of home.

Later, his mother wed Sir Henry Avenel, a handsome widowed knight who made her laugh, and who had three small sons. With his young stepbrothers, Gawain ran errands for the knights who rode in and out of Avenel Castle. Fascinated by their armor, their horses and weapons, and the endless stories of their noble deeds, Gawain yearned to become a knight.

No one ever mentioned Glenshie or the MacDuffs to him again. Gawain sometimes saw his mother gaze at him with sadness in her eyes, but she only shook her head if he asked, and turned away.

Secretly, Gawain thought of Scotland often, cherishing vivid memories. He intended to return to Scotland one day and find Glenshie Castle, to claim his rightful land and title. That must wait, he knew, until he was grown and a knight, the master of his life, the benevolent defender of others that he so wanted to be.

He grew tall, and manhood strengthened him, body and heart and soul, and he felt his boyhood dreams fade. At last he knelt before the king of England to be knighted. Promising fealty, he swore to dedicate himself to the principles of chivalry.

When he finally returned to Scotland, he rode behind his king, and beneath the dragon banner, the sign of destruction.





# Chapter 1

*Scotland, Perthshire  
Spring 1300*

Flames poured upward, fierce and beautiful, licking delicately at the door frame. Blinking in the light, Juliana stumbled back as a web of fire spread over the floor rushes. She ran to the window of her bedchamber, whirling uncertainly.

Somewhere below, she heard a crash as the blaze engulfed more of her father's castle. Struggling against panic, she reminded herself why she had come back here against her mother's wishes, just as they had been ready to escape by the postern gate. She was sixteen and a woman grown, she had told her mother; she would be safe, and would return quickly.

Now she feared that her own escape might be impossible. She fought the urge to scream. *Be calm*, she told herself. She had come back to rescue her birds, and must do so.

Fervently she prayed that her mother and the rest were already safe in the forest. Their enemies were at the gates of Elladoune like hungry wolves: English wolves with fire arrows and an appetite for rebel Scots, ready to pounce upon the castle.

Somehow she must find her own way out, but first she had to free the doves and the little kestrel she kept; she had raised the doves from hatchlings, and had nursed the wounded kestrel until its wing had healed, and she would not leave them. She ran toward their cages as dark smoke swirled throughout the room.

Carrying first one cumbersome wooden cage and then the other, she set them on the wooden chest beneath the window ledge. Unlatching the doors, she urged the birds out. One by one they hopped to the opening and glided through the window to freedom.

One dove clung to the back of its cage. Calmly, despite her rising panic, Juliana coaxed the bird toward the window and merciful release. It fluttered away, a pale blur in the night.

Heat and smoke seared her lungs, and she turned, coughing, aware that the wooden floor grew warm under her bare feet. Clad only in the linen chemise that she had pulled on when her mother woke her, she had taken no time to dress further.

Glancing at the flame-wreathed doorway, she realized that her only choice was to go through the window. Her birds had flown free, but her escape would have to be a steep, dangerous dive into the loch. Leaning her head through the window, gulping in fresh air, she looked out.

The midnight sky, never fully dark in summer, glowed eerily, and the loch was dark and deep below. The castle's back wall sheered downward to a rocky promontory at the edge of the loch. Protected by its rear location, the large window was a luxury; its tall lancet shape, divided and glassed in its upper curves, would allow her room to jump.

The glass cracked as she looked up, the pieces cascading like stars. Shielding her head, Juliana stumbled back and ran blindly into an alcove that led to a small garderobe.

The small space was cool, and fresh air swept through the tiny window that overlooked the side of the bailey yard. Juliana knelt on the oak bench seat and craned her neck to peer out. Men, horses, and glittering armor filled the courtyard.

"Come down, Lady Marjorie!" one of the men bellowed. She glimpsed him as he paced the yard on a huge black warhorse. In jet-black armor and red surcoat, he seemed wholly malevolent.

"Come down to me!" he shouted again. The English commander, leading the raid on Elladoune Castle, believed that Juliana's mother was still inside. By now, Juliana hoped, her mother had fled to safety with her little sons and the servants.

Not long ago, her mother had roused the household, and Juliana had gathered her younger brothers, one a swaddled babe, one a whimpering toddler. The English knights had come to Elladoune to arrest Juliana's father, who had left weeks earlier with his two eldest sons to join the rebels. Discovering Alexan-



der Lindsay's absence, the English had fired his castle without a care for his family.

Always fragile in nature, Juliana's mother had been close to panic, praying fervently while she attempted to soothe her children. Juliana had suggested that they all go to the abbey, where the abbot, her mother's kinsman, would shelter them.

"Come down!" the commander shouted again. "Give up your tower to King Edward's knights, or give up your lives!"

Arrows tipped in fire sailed upward, smacking into the walls close to the window. Startled, Juliana jerked back. Fury stirred within her. If her bow had been to hand, she would have aimed an arrow straight into his black heart. She had skill enough for it. But she lacked the ability to harm any creature, for which her elder brothers had sometimes chided her. Now she felt as if she could do it.

Coughing, she stumbled out of the alcove and ran to the window, careful to avoid the broken glass. Climbing on the wooden chest, she stood on the window ledge. She straightened inside the lancet like a saint in a niche.

The wind was cool, and the loch gleamed below, but she did not look down. She looked up, where swans winged past, feathered golden in the firelight.

Perched there, she remembered an old tale about a flock of swans that had cradled a girl safely in a net, carrying her home. Another legend said that long ago, a hundred people had drowned in this very loch, and each had transformed into a swan.

The wind batted her chemise against her body and whipped her long hair out in a spray of gold. Closing her eyes, she prayed for protection, and prayed that the first legend, not the second, would hold true for her.

She bent her knees and bounded outward. As the wind took her, she arrowed her arms toward the water.

An angel flew out of the inferno and sank into the water. Surely it was the most beautiful and terrifying sight he had ever witnessed. Gawain ran forward, water lapping at his boots.

He searched, but did not see the pale slip of a girl who had leaped from the tower window. A hundred and more swans

glided on the flame-bright surface of the loch, but he saw no human form among them. Several birds launched upward to circle overhead.

Behind him, the bellow and crackle of the fire grew louder. He heard the commander, Sir Walter de Soulis, continue his demand that the lady of the castle come out and give up her home to him.

*Bastard*, Gawain thought succinctly. He hoped the woman and her servants, whom he had glanced earlier at some of the windows, had found an escape. But he knew they could be dead inside the blazing castle. He was not certain that the girl who had leaped free had survived, either.

"You—Avenel! Did the girl come out of the water?" a knight called as he ran toward him.

Gawain turned. "Nay. She may be gone—drowned."

Another knight came forward and peered at the loch. "Drowned or fallen on the rocks—or even killed by those birds. Swans can fight like demons."

"Sir Walter wants her captured," the first man said. "The mother and the rest have fled into the forest, they say."

"And we may find the girl's body tomorrow," the other said.

Gawain looked up at a soaring swan. "Scots claim that when someone drowns, their soul enters the body of a swan," he mused.

"How do you know that?" one of the men asked.

"I heard it as a boy. My . . . nurse was Scottish. There is a legend about enchanted swans on this very loch, if I recall. Supposedly the first swans of Elladoune, long ago, were drowned souls. Each new swan is the soul of someone deceased, they say."

One knight looked at the other. "Sir Walter will want to hear about this."

"Tell him the girl went into the water and has not come up," Gawain said. "She's gone, no doubt. A swan flew up from the spot where she fell. I have been watching."

"I saw that too," the first knight said. "Enchanted swans or none, Edward of England owns this loch now, and he wants rebels, not children or swans. Come ahead. We'll have to tell



Sir Walter the girl has drowned." He looked up at the white birds circling overhead. "How could she change into a swan?"

"The longer I serve in Scotland, the more I believe anything can happen here," his comrade drawled as they walked away.

Gawain remained to scan the water. He had deliberately told the knights that tale of enchantment so that they would hesitate to search for her. If the girl had survived, he wanted to give her a chance to escape. He dimly remembered, as a boy, having to flee in the night from unseen enemies; the girl's situation had triggered his sympathy and his interest.

The burning silhouette of the castle was reflected in the loch. As a lad, he had believed in the eternal magic of El-ladoune, yet the English had destroyed a legend in mere hours.

Memories stirred through him here and everywhere he went in Scotland as part of King Edward's Scottish campaign. None of these knights knew of his Scottish origins—or the fact that his birthplace, Glenshie Castle, was somewhere close to El-ladoune.

Yet he did not even know where Glenshie was located.

Glancing toward the hills, he knew one of them hid his boyhood home in its lee. Years ago, he had vowed to find Glenshie and claim his inheritance for his own. Now that he was a king's knight, that secret dream seemed remote and impossible.

He walked along the rocky base that edged the tower. The water lapped at the promontory and sparks from the blaze sizzled in the loch like fallen stars. Searching the loch's surface, he was not yet ready to give up on finding the girl.

Moments later, he saw the lift of a pale arm and glimpsed a face amid the swans. She was there, he was sure now—although he did not know if she was a drowned or a living thing.

He yanked off his red surcoat and pulled at the leather ties of his chain-mail hood and hauberk. He laid his sword and belt aside, and struggled out of the steel mesh, his quilted coat, and his boots. He piled his gear, all but his trews, in the fiery shadow of the tower.

No one watched as he slipped into the water. He did not ask for help, expecting none. His fellow knights were here to claim and conquer, not to defend and rescue.

Once he had been fiercely proud to be among them. But he