ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The "song of sorcery" quoted by Colin (and added to (tm) him) is a compilation <t?r.??Si "The Gypsie Laddie," "Whistling Gypsy O or Gypsy Davey "a popular folk ballad believed to date from e 1600's I am deeply grateful to Dover Books for String The English nd Scottish Popular Ballads faction, edited by Francis James Chfrom whom the lyrics I've used in Song of Sorcery have been gleaned, and also to the many wonderful performers of folk mu sic whose artistic stewardship of these old songs to teen a continuing source of mspu-ation I owe particular thanks in this respect to my good friend Alien Damron and to Laurie, Rusty and Autumn of BANISH MISFORTUNE.

V

SONG OF SORCERY
CHAPTE I

If it hadn't been for Maggie's magic, the eggs would have tumbled from the basket and shattered when the panting barmaid careened into her. The automatic gathering spell barely had time, as it was, to snatch the eggs into the container before they were spilled back out again as the distraught young woman began tugging at Maggie's sleeve.

"Come! Be quick now! Your old Granny's at it again!"

"Be careful!" Maggie scrambled to keep her eggs from breaking, trying at the same time to snatch her sleeve from the girl's grasp. "What do you mean?"

"Some poor young minstrel was singing a song, and just like that she starts ravin' and rantin' and changes him into a wee birdie, and commenced chasin' him and callin' on her great cat to come eat him up! Oooooh, I hears the cat now-do be quick!" This time she had no occasion to do further snatching at the sleeve, but slipped instead on the forgotten trail of egg mess left in Maggie's wake as she galloped across the barnyard and through the tavern's back door.

Wood clattered on stone and fist on flesh as the patrons of the tavern rudely competed for the front exit, tripping on overturned chairs and trampling table linens underfoot in their haste to be gone. Only three of the most dedicated customers remained at their table, placidly sipping their brew, watching the commotion with far less interest than they watched the level in their flagons.

Granny's braid was switching faster than the tail of a cow swatting blowflies as she ran back and forth. She showed surprising agility for one of her age, and for all her leaping about was not too out of breath to utter a constant stream of hearty and imaginative curses. With the grace of a girl she bounded over an upturned bench and then to the top of a table, whacking the rafter above it with furious blows of her broom.

"Come down from there this instant, you squawking horror, and take what's coming to you!" Granny demanded, black eyes snapping, and body rocking with the fury of her attack. "Ching!" she hollered back over her shoulder. "Ching! Here, kitty. Come to breakfast!"

It was fortunate for the mockingbird that Maggie saw him dive under the table to escape the broom before the cat spotted him. Just as the cat gathered himself for a pounce on the low-flying bird, Maggie launched herself in a soaring leap and managed to catch the cat in mid-pounce, retaining her grip on him as they landed with a "whoof" just short of the table.

Struggling for the breath their abrupt landing knocked from her, Maggie clasped the cat tighter as he squirmed to escape. "Grandma, you stop that right now!" she panted with all the authority she could muster from her red-faced, spraddle-legged position on the floor.

"I will not!" the old lady snapped, taking another swing at the bird as it landed safely back in the rafter above the table. "No two-bit traveling tinhorn is going to gargle such filth in MY tavern about MY in-laws and get away with it." She jumped down from the table, looking for another vantage point from which to launch her attack.

"Whoever he is, Gran, change him back," Maggie insisted, setting the cat free now that the bird was out of reach on the rafter, quivering in its feathers at the slit-eyed looks it was receiving from both broom-wielding elderly matron and black-and-white-spotted cat.

The old lady glared at her granddaughter and primly adjusted her attire, tucking her braid back into its pin. "I most certainly will not."

"You most certainly will," Maggie insisted, noting with some consternation the set of her grandmother's chin and the anthracite glitter of her eyes. "Grandma, whatever he's done, it's for Dad to dispense justice--it just isn't the thing these days to go converting people into supper for one's cat just because they displease one. What will the neighbors think of us? It isn't respectable."

The old lady made a rude noise. "As if I cared about that. But alright, dear. Only wait until you hear what he did-wait till your father hears! That birdbrain will wish Ching had made a meal of him before Sir William's done with him!"
"But I didn't write the tune," protested the man who materialized in place of the mockingbird as Gran snapped the release ritual from her fingers. His arms and legs clung to the rafter for dear life. "Please, somebody get me a ladder."

"It isn't that high," snorted Grandma contemptuously. "Ching can jump it from this table."

"One of you men come help me with this thing." Maggie said, taking hold of one end of a long bench. A member of the stalwart society who'd remained at their station during the melee, being between pints, sauntered over and lifted the opposite end of the bench, and together they stood it on the table so that the former mockingbird could use it to descend.

"Now then, sir." Maggie stood with hands on hips as the stranger dusted himself off. "You have upset my grandmother terribly, and I want to know how and why. What did you say to her?"

"I upset her?" he stammered, red deepening his already ruddy cheeks. "What did he say to you?" Maggie whirled on the grandmother, who sat cross-legged on the floor, trying to calm her cat. The cat was attempting to maintain a seriously threatening hissing crouch while being dragged flat-eared and whip-tailed into the old lady's lap.

"Nothing much, dearie," replied the grandmother, pouring over her descendant a gaze of the purest molasses. "He can explain to your father. Chingachgook is a trifle upset. I'll be at my cottage if you need me."

When Maggie looked back for the stranger, she found him by the hearth, inspecting a fiddle for damage, setting it to his shoulder and lightly drawing a bow across the strings. He had slung a guitar across his back.

"You're a minstrel, then?"

He had to try out several notes before answering. "I'd hardly be making myself so popular with my music and all if I were a stonemason, now would I?" He spoke flippantly and Maggie thought it was to conceal the tremble in his hands as, apparently satisfied that his instruments were undamaged, he slipped fiddle and bow into a soft skin bag. "Who are you?" he asked, "besides the relative of that witch?"

"You might do better with a sweeter lyric, minstrel. The one you've used so far today hardly seems to please, now does it? I am also Sir William's relative, as a matter of fact. He's my father."

The minstrel blinked twice, rapidly, as if expecting the medium-sized dusky-colored girl to be transformed into his idea of a fair and lithesome noblewoman. She continued to stare at him frankly and without noticeable approval, giving at best, in her bare feet, coarse brown tunic and skirt, and dirty white apron an impression of pleasant ordinariness dealing with momentary unpleasantness. Remembering his manners, the minstrel bowed, briefly.

"Colin Songsmit, Journeyman Minstrel, at your service, lady."

She had followed his inspection with one of her own as far as her own dirty feet, and now looked up from, them to meet his gaze with shrewd brown eyes. "You're looking no great treat yourself. Wait a bit."

Watching her disappear through the back door, Colin sank down onto a bench that had miraculously remained upright and passed long, tired fingers over his eyes. Being changed from one thing to another, chased by witches and cats, and being changed back again was not the sort of thing his apprenticeship had prepared him for. He could make fair to middling instruments, write stirring epic sagas and set them to equally stirring and complimentary music, play lute, zither, harp, dulcimer, pipes, and drums competently, and fiddle and guitar splendidly, if he did say so. He was quite prepared to entertain at feasts and be feted, to immortalize adventures and be considered an adventurer by association, to record history, and to have all the ladies wooing him ever so prettily for songs immortalizing their own particular charms.

But no, he had decidedly not been prepared to be one moment singing the latest southern ballad to an appreciative audience, and the next to be regarding his Fiddle from a bird's-eye view while the matronly sort who had served his cakes and ale batted at him with a broom, shrieking to her cat to come and eat him.

He had hardly been instructed in maintaining his aplomb while hanging onto rafters, getting splinters in his fingers and knees, while some brown-haired young woman argued with her grey-and-brown-haired grandmother about the respectability of feeding him to the cat, the animal in question evidencing no doubt whatsoever as it lashed its wicked tail at him and licked its wicked chops. His ruminations were interrupted by the return of the unlikely noblewoman, armed with a broom. Colin knocked over the bench he had been sitting on in his haste to escape.

"Don't be a goose," she said. "I'm only going to dust you off a bit. You're all over feathers and dust, and if you're going to see my dad you'll have to be somewhat more hygienic. He's been sick, and you reek of contamination." He managed to stand still while she broomed him with brutal briskness.

After five months in bed, no amount of twisting and turning and repositioning could make Sir William quite comfortable. It wasn't just his legs, injured when an arrow inexplicably found its way into his horse while he was
hunting, causing the poor beast to rear and roll on him. Granny Brown claimed sickbed fever had prolonged his recovery far past the usual convalescent period, and lack of active use had caused his legs to weaken and his wounds to mortify, conditions she continued still to fight with her entire herbal arsenal.

What he wished was that Amberwine could come home— even for a short visit. Although she had no healing magic whatsoever, and cheerfully admitted incompetence at managing even the simplest aspects of household or estate affairs, her light-hearted faery gaiety and placid, accepting intelligence brought the dimples out from under Granny Brown's traditional witch scowls, and even slowed the brusque and practical Maggie down to something close to gentleness.

Ah well, he sighed to himself, arranging his bedclothes in a position suitable for the company whose footsteps he heard climbing the long spiral staircase to his tower chamber. He'd made her the best possible marriage to that southern lord-the fellow might even get to be king, they said, and she seemed to like him in the bargain. Where he'd find such a match for thorny Maggie was more than a sick man should contemplate. It was complicated arranging marriages for not-quite-born-in-wedlock children one acknowledged belatedly. The village witch's daughter who at the age of two years is declared to be the daughter of the Lord-High-Mayor-Knight-Protector-of-His-Majesty's-Northern-Territories (And Incorporated Villages) tends to remain the village witch's daughter. No amount of equal education or advantage seemed to be able to make of a witchchild as refined a lady as her faery sister. For all of Amberwine's extra encouragement and coaching, Maggie remained neither fish nor fowl, her mother's line too base for nobles, her father's too noble for the base-born lads. Too bad she wasn't a son, so all he'd have to do would be to leave her the estate, which she managed most capably, and find her a wife. Worthy wives were bound to be more common commodities than wormy husbands, he felt sure.

To the pounding on his chamber door he called permission to enter, and a disheveled Maggie did so, followed by an only slightly less disheveled young man.

"Hallo, Dad." She dropped a kiss on his forehead.

"Lo, Magpie. Who's this?" He made an attempt at hearty cheerfulness in the direction of the young man.

"I caught Granny trying to feed him to Ching," she replied. "She was in a dreadful huff."

Sir William narrowed his eyes at the young man. "What did you do to cause my mother-in-law to wish to make cat food of you, sir?"

"Your pardon, noble sir." The young man made him a low bow. "Colin Songsmith, Journeyman Minstrel, at your service. Noble sir, I don't know why the lady was so vexed with me. I only sang the latest southern ditty for her, practicing it, y'know, before presenting it to you."

"Present it to me then, dammit, and let's get to the bottom of this. Maggie, dear, do scratch my shoulder—ah, right there—good girl."

Since his fiddle rendition of the tune had met with such avion results, Colin unslung his guitar from his back and tuned it. The tuning gave him time to compose himself. Finally he tapped his fingers on the soundboard of the guitar and told them, "Not being from this district, or the one where the song originates, I can't understand the fuss over it. I learned it from Minstrel Giles. He said he always comes north this time of year to avoid the first blossom of some of the southern plants. Gives him ill humors of the nose and throat, he says, and, as you well may imagine that's an unhandy affliction for a troubadour." He paused to allow this professional confidence to sink in. Maggie nodded briskly that she was perfectly capable of understanding occupational hazards and the old man impatiently waved him to continue. "Ahem—yes, as I was saying, folk down south at least, find this an entertaining tune. Giles says it's all the rage."

The minstrel's features coarsened and his voice dropped to a lower register. The guitar was a stone fence he leaned upon as he confided ribald gossip to another peasant. The music galloped along in time to his voice.

"The gypsy Davey came riding along, Singing so loud and gaily. He sang so sweet and so complete, Down come our faery lady... down come the faery maid."

"She come trippin' down the stairs Her maids were all before her As soon's he saw her pretty face He cast some glamourie o'er her."

Sir William opened his eyes. A gypsy man had wreaked a great deal of havoc in the village two festival seasons ago by absconding simultaneously with two of the estate's dairy maids, sisters whose soiled state Sir William had had to launder with generous donations to their dowries so they could be safely wed before they whelped. If the fella'd charmed a faery he must be quite the charmer indeed—the faeries were so enchanting themselves, they generally saw through the "glamourie" of others.

The minstrel dropped the peasant role and became the gypsy, insinuating himself into the lady's romantic
imagination. Casting Maggie as the lady, his passionate glances totally confused the expression of polite attention she had maintained. Trying to stare down the minstrel's false gypsy as she would her grandmother's cat, she found herself annoyed that she was unable to look away when she wished.

"Will you forsake your husband dear,
And all the wealth he gave ye?
Will you leave your house and lands
To follow Gypsy Davey—to ride with the Gypsy Dave?

Maggie flushed, her dark skin burgundy with befuddlement as the minstrel released her eyes to become narrator again.

"She dressed herself in her gay green cloak And her boots of finest leather, Then mounted on her pony fine, And they rode off together.

"Late from huntin' came Lord Rowan,
Asking for his lady.
The one did cry and the other reply
'She's gone with the Gypsy Davey—rode away with the
Gypsy Dave."

Intricate minor patterns wove through the main theme, invoking hoofbeats fading away from the lady's fine home across the moors. The minstrel didn't look up from the guitar again until the last keening notes quivered off his strings to die in the stillness around him. Sir William's face was a most alarmingly unhealthy eggplant color, and the resemblance between Maggie and her grandmother was suddenly uncomfortably apparent.

"Well, Dad," she smiled around sharp white teeth, "What d'you think? Boil him in oil, or flay him alive?"

What had Colin's masters taught him at the academy? In dealings with aristocrats, when in doubt, grovel. He knelt so fast he banged his knee on the floor. "Your pardon, m'lady, Sir William. I only did as you asked. I meant no offense, and can't think why the tune has given it. I'll never play it again-ever." In your vicinity, at least, he added to himself, searching for an exit as Sir William's skin regained its former pallor.

"Perhaps you should choose less exotic material in the future, lad," the old knight advised drily, "or not mention names in your ditties. The Lord Rowan cuckolded in your song, unless of course there's another one, is my son-in-law, married to my younger daughter, the Lady Amberwine."

Colin gulped, his eyes darting furtively to the leaded glass window and back to the long flight of stone steps they'd mounted coming to the tower room.

"Who was this fellow with the stuffy nose who taught you that song?" Maggie asked.

"Minstrel Giles, m'lady?"

"I was wondering if he'd like that nose removed?"

"Maggie!" snapped Sir William, "You're scaring the lad to death, you little heathen. He said it wasn't his song."

He turned more kindly to the minstrel, who by now was perspiring profusely. "Sorry, son." He jerked a thumb at his glowering daughter. "She's a terrific girl, really, just awfully fond of her sister, as we all are around here." He shook his head. "I don't understand this at all. Winnie—Lady Amberwine—is not at all your average running-off sort of girl. She's too considerate for that type of thing. To just leave without explanation! No letter to us! Even if she didn't like her husband, which I could have sworn she did, she'd hardly have placed her family in such an awkward spot without giving us fair warning—"

"Fine lady, indeed, noble sir," the minstrel agreed emphatically, "I'm sure she's a fine, fine lady."

"Too right, she is that." Sir William's hands tortured the bedclothes for a few moments before he turned his baffled and miserable face to Maggie. She leaned down and hugged him. "Aw, Dad, of course she is. She wouldn't just go gallivanting off with the first passing gypsy—you know very well she can hardly decide which gown to wear to breakfast in the morning without consulting every servant in the house, and me and Gran besides. She certainly wouldn't be able to bolt altogether on the spur of the moment like that! It'd take her a week to pack!" She glared again at the cowering Colin. "Must have been one of His Lordship's enemies paid that Giles fellow to make up that awful song."

Colin gulped and waggled a tentative index finger for attention. "Begging your ladyship's pardon," he began, not really wishing to call notice to himself again but equally reluctant for Giles to suffer the consequences of his own silence. "Giles confessed that he only gave the tune a bit of a polish—it was actually a popular creation."

"Common gossip music, then, eh?" Sir William looked even older and sicker than he had looked when Colin came into the room, and he had appeared twenty hard years older than Maggie's grandmother then. "Maggie, what can be going on with the girl?"

Maggie looked down, shoving her fists deep into her apron pockets. "I don't know, Dad."

"You remember that nasty gypsy fella running off with Mullaly's daughters and nearly emptying my wallet
trying to save their foolish reputations?"

"Yes, Dad, I remember. Betsy and Beatrice Mullaly are as bovine as their charges, though. Everybody knows that. Winnie's got more sense."

"I think so. I don't know. I wish I had my legs under me, so I could go see Rowan and talk to him myself." He made an impatient attempt to rise. Maggie gently pushed him back onto the bed.

"That's no good, and you know it. I'll go talk to Rowan."

The old man looked at her for a long time, then closed his eyes and sank back against his pillow. "Of course you will, lass. You're the only one who can, I suppose." Then opening one eye he looked at her again, more sharply. "You're not thinking of going alone, of course?"

She shrugged. "Why not? We can't have it all over the territories what I'm up to if there's nothing in it. I'll be alright. I've got my magic to protect me, after all."

He snorted. "Hearthcraft, hmph. AH very well for running the castle or tavern, but what are you going to do if you meet a bear, girl."

"Very well, then," she conceded, trying not to allow their disagreement to tire her father any further. "Til take the mockingbird, here, with me."

The pronouncement came as a complete surprise to Colin.

Sir William peered closely at him. "Oh, then if a bear comes along HE sings the creature sweetly to sleep with a bloody lullabye, and you turn it into a great bloody hearthrug?" He ran a hand through his thinning hair, grayer since the accident. "Ah, well, he's responsible to his guild for his conduct, and if he's with you I can at least be quite sure he won't be spreading that song about. I suppose it wouldn't be wise to have any of the local guard go. I doubt any of them would purposely slander your sister, but people don't seem to be able to forego telling everything they know, nonetheless." He sighed once more, deeply, and capitulated. "He'll have to do, I guess."

"Good." She kissed her father's cheek again and rose to her feet. "I'll just go put binding spells on the cleaning I've already done, and enlarge the larder a bit, before I talk to Gran about handling anything that comes up while I'm gone."

"That should be exciting," Sir William mumbled to her back as she swept through the door ahead of Colin.

CHAPTER 2

Maggie was unalarmed to hear the Territorial troops marching in close order drill, accompanied by professional mourners keening for the dead and wounded, as she entered her grandmother's cottage. She recognized the tromping of the marchers as her gran's heavy-handed double beat on the loom batten, which always sounded like an advancing army, complete with fife and drum corps, and the keening sound as the old lady chanted a song in the ancient tongue to make the work less tedious.

"Maggie, darlin!" Her grandmother exclaimed, raising her legs past the edge of the loom bench and twirling around on her behind to face her granddaughter. "I'm so glad you're here! Now you can do this nettlesome chore and I can stir up that batch for Betsy Baker."

"Funny, I was just talking about her." She picked up a shuttle, changed the shed with a tromp on the foot treadle, then clucked her tongue at her grandmother. "Really, Gran, look at all these broken warps you've left hanging. I'll never hold up this way!"

Gran regarded her through the measuring glass she held at eye-level, slowly pouring a smoking yellow fluid into it. "You, my dear, are the home economist. I am the alchemist. I'll stick to my own field any day. All those itty-bitty threads--bah!"

"Well, I've yet to see you turn tin into gold," Maggie replied, her thumb and forefinger lightly spinning the broken ends together again. With the mending spell she was projecting from beneath her conversation, the warps should be stronger when she had respun them than they were originally.

Gran added an iridescent blue powder to the yellow fluid, and curls of green smoke interlaced with the yellow wafting toward the string-tied bundles of herbs that hung so thickly from the ceiling that Maggie sometimes felt she was walking upside down in a meadow. "I have always considered that a very silly practice, Magdalene. Tin is much more useful." Gran always put on her most dignified air when practicing her craft. Maggie had received instructive lectures at these times, surrounded by noxious fumes and falling bits of materia medica from the ceiling, and was always addressed during these sermons as "Magdalene," her full name, which she particularly disliked.

Turning on the bench to face her grandmother's back, Maggie leaned against the front beam of the loom, her right foot swinging, rumpling the striped rug she'd woven for Gran's floor. She'd have to reweave another bald spot, she noted. Gran was always spilling something caustic and burning it, or the cat was kneading it bare. "I'm going down south, Gran."

"So Ching told me." She set the beaker of liquid down and faced her granddaughter. "Don't you think it's Amberwine's business who she chooses to go with?"
"I suppose so." Maggie frowned at her nails and tried to explain the uneasiness she had felt since hearing the minstrel's song. "But she's not like us, Gran. I mean, she was always having to remind me to stop and think how what I was doing was going to make other people feel-she never just DOES things."

"You think she was coerced?"

Maggie nodded. "Or something like that. Or Rowan's mistreated her-though I rather think she'd have been back home by now if that were the case. Anyhow, whatever she's doing, she won't mind a visit, will she? And I shall finally see somewhere besides this stupid village. Do you know, one of the guards who accompanied Rowan to the wedding told me the flowers are already out down there this time of year?"

"That's not all that's out, dearie." Gran regarded her severely. "Our climate may be inhospitable a great deal of the year, but it does serve to discourage a lot of the nonsense they put up with down south. I had a message from your Aunt Sybil only a month or so ago, that she had seen bandits from across the Brazorian border destroy a mountain village right near Rowan's territory. And there's dragons and werewolves and ogres and pirates out there as well," she sat down, wearied by the length and import of her list, "and lions and tigers . . ."

"Don't forget the bears," Maggie said dryly.

"And bears. And don't you laugh at me, my girl. Even a unicorn can be very dangerous, if startled. Worst of all, though, are the people. Witches and wizards can be very territorial, so you'd best be a bit more polite to strange magicians than you are to your old granny. And men, of course. Speaking of which, Magdalene, I do not think your father very wise to send you off with that scandalmongering Songsmith character."

"Don't be silly, Gran. He's just a musician-he doesn't have any magic at all."

"Don't be silly yourself. You don't know if he has any magic or not, and he's a man, isn't he? How do you suppose there got to be more of them than there are of us, and why do you suppose our powers are getting weaker every generation?"

"Surely this is not MY Grandmother Brown getting all moralistic with me?" Maggie grinned.

Granny looked embarrassed. "Of course not, you impudent wench. But pairing off, if done at all, should be done only after your powers are fully developed and tested. Your poor mother never did amount to anything, witchwise, getting involved so young and all . . ."

"I'm not. I'm hardly the bigot some folks are, but . . ."

A playful rapping at the door interrupted her, and there was no waiting for her to grant entry before the door opened and a round face topped by a thatch of white hair peeped around the door at them. The face leered, and a matching set of rosy fingers waggled at them. "Good day to you, Goodwitch Brown, Mistress Maggie. May I come in?"

"Appears to me you're already in, Hugo," Granny said. "What can I do for you?"

The man seated himself in Granny's only other chair, a rocker. He grinned, showing a collection of teeth in every known metal. "Well, I'm only just up to the north, Goodwitch, and I thought I'd pop in and get a bit of my usual." His watery blue eyes strayed to Maggie and overstayed a welcome they'd never had to begin with.

"To be sure," said Granny, climbing onto her narrow bed to reach a row of handmade jugs on the shelf above it. She had to sniff several before selecting one.

Hugo followed her movements for a moment before licking his lips and addressing Maggie.

"Well, Mistress Maggie, I understand you're taking a nice trip."

"News certainly travels fast"'

"I suppose you're going south to visit your lovely sister?"

"Toads! Does the whole village know already?" Maggie was annoyed. Not only had she hoped to keep her mission a secret, but she particularly did not want a gossipy old goat like Hugo the Peddler to know her business.

"No, no, no. Never fear, dear lady. I won't tell a soul. You know I'm quiet as Medusa's boyfriend when it comes to a lady's private secrets, eh? But I was taking a new hammer over to the smith, and he told me you were journeying tomorrow, so naturally I just assumed . . ."

"Here you are, Hugo." Granny poured a little of the powder from the earthenware jug into a paper, folded the paper with great ceremony, and presented it to the peddler. "Six coppers, please."

"Six!" Hugo protested while unclasping a neat brocade coin purse he carried at his belt. "It's gone up, has it? I remember when it was two."

"Inflation," Granny said cheerfully, tucking the money in the pocket of her skirt. "The cost of practicing witchcraft these days! I couldn't begin to tell you how that drought last summer cut into my profit margin. Some of my most valuable plants were scorched, and probably won't even come up this year at all . . ."

Hugo was backing out the door, tipping an imaginary cap as he left. "Yes, well, goodbye, ladies."

Maggie let out a whoop of laughter. "Oh, Gran, how COULD you? Six coppers for that rubbish!"

"It's all part of the charm, dear. Good magic always is better if it costs something more than the client can
comfortably afford."

"What's it for?"

"Impotence. You can come in now, darling." She cooed the last in a tender voice never heard by anyone in the village, including Maggie. Chingachgook, her black and white cat, leaped into the room from the windowsill, and onto her lap.

"Well, I may have need for some of those powders myself."

"I thought you might, so in my antique wisdom I have prepared a couple of things for you."

"Such as?" Maggie sat down abruptly on the weaving bench as Ching launched himself from Gran's lap to her shoulder. Gran pulled her own braid forward and carefully extracted seven long hairs from it. "Here, you're the weaver, plait these into a chain, and wear it round your neck."

In order to do what?" Maggie's fingers flew through the loops of hair, and she plaited the chain closed in an intricate invisible knot behind the curtain of her otter-brown hair.

"Make yourself more clearly understood, of course," purred Ching, bumping her cheek with his head.

Maggie stared, but, seeing her grandmother's smirk of satisfaction, resigned herself. "I suppose having Ching along will help me talk with the larger non-human types. But I hope I won't have to hear the horse complain about his sore feet and the bad grass?"

"Not unless you ask Ching, dear. I should think that with no one but that maudlin minstrel along, you'd be happy for intelligent company."

"Yes, Gran."

"Speaking of intelligent company, you'd better stop and see Sybil on your way, or there'll be another rupture in the family tree."

Maggie wriggled with impatience that caused Ching to abandon her shoulder. "Gran, it may be urgent that I reach Winnie!"

"All the more reason that you see Sybil." She thrust a thonged leather bag at her. "Here's your medicine pouch. Now run along. I'm sure the estate will take care of itself."

"I'll have to," Ching muttered, settling his chin on his front paws and wrapping his tail around his nose.

CHAPTER 3

Maggie was so anxious to get away from the village that she left Colin and the pack horse far behind in the first half hour on the road. After a long frozen winter at Fort Iceworm, it was a joy to splatter over the muddy tracks and splash through the pools left by melted snow from the last storm a month earlier. She scarcely noticed the nip at her ears as her mare created a wind for them, and the flopping tug of her woolen cape as it billowed out behind her made her want to sing from exhilaration. The smell of the new, tender grasses, the smell of anything at all after a sub-zero winter of buried vegetation and frozen noses, was sweeter by far than any of the perfume worn by the ladies at Winnie's wedding. Even under a dull gray sky, the colors of spring were dazzling after the stark blacks and endless expanses of everlasting white. Mostly there was green, of course, but there were also redbirds and bluebirds and an occasional brave blossom of yellow or purple.

Her neighbors, whom she did spare a glance as they leaped into drainage ditches to escape being galloped ddwn as she sped past, were also colorful. After nine months of black and deep indigo and brown that they wore against the cold, it was good to see the dark coats finally exchanged for the women's costumes of red and gold skirts, blue or yellow blouses, and white embroidered aprons and kerchiefs. Most of the men dressed more soberly even now, a plow being less kind to white aprons than a butter churn, but Maggie knew that soon on market days they would be slipping over their smocked homespun shirts felted vests embroidered in the most outlandish scenes and hues their womenfolk could devise. The more fantastic the embroidery, the more fantastic the man, folk said, for what woman would ruin her eyes doing such work for a nincompoop?

It wasn't until she had to wait for a flock of sheep to dawdle across the road that the minstrel, panting and red-faced, galloped up on his mud-flecked buckskin horse. Ching, being jounced unmercifully in the basket he occupied atop the pack horse, yowled filthy feline curses.

Colin struggled to contain his ire as he reached the witch and her sweating chestnut mare. "Your pardon, milady, but if you try to maintain this pace, you'll kill your beast before we reach the next village."

As the thorough tonguelashing she was receiving from her grandmother's cat began to sink in, Maggie bit back the angry retort she'd meant for the minstrel, and instead nodded meekly and gently urged her horse forward as the last sheep passed.

Encouraged by this apparent acceptance of his authority, Colin added generously, in the grand language he'd been schooled to use with the aristocracy, "We troubadours are well versed in the ways of the road. Pray let me be your guide, milady."

"Oh, pray go soak your head," Maggie replied, unable to control her temper this time. "There's only this one
bloody road south from here to the Troutroute River, according to Dad's map. What's there to know, anyway? Look," she pointed to a red bag tied in the fork of a tree. "The path is even protected with medicine bundles. Probably as exciting as a walk around the barnyard."

Colin didn't know what to say. How could he tell this pushy female, who even though she wasn't anywhere near being what he would call sweet and innocent, nonetheless seemed pretty naive, what the perils of the road were? Fresh from the Academy this spring, he truthfully hadn't experienced a great many of them himself. He was sure there were some, however, as his fellow students from parts of Argonia more exotic and sophisticated than East Headpenney, where he'd been raised, had told absolutely harrowing tales. And the history the masters gave in Lyric Appreciation classes, he felt sure, was not born of conflict, magical or unmagical, to be dispersed merely by hanging a medicine bundle in a tree fork. But go tell that to Mistress Know-it-all.

So they jogged along in silence for a long while; the dull clomp of the horses' hooves and the occasional jangle of the strings on Colin's instruments as he shifted weight in the saddle were the only sounds. They had quite passed all the farms that surrounded Fort Iceworm, and were negotiating the more rugged, untraveled track that was the South Highway when Maggie, who had been sneaking an occasional guilty side-long glance at Colin's tight-lipped face, cleared her throat.

"Lovely day, isn't it?"

Colin's expression thawed just a bit. "Can't say as it is, really."

"No, beastly I suppose, actually, from your point of view." Having made herself an opening, she had very little idea how to proceed. Diplomacy, as had been frequently pointed out to her by loved ones who had occasion to know, was not Maggie's long suit. "See here, minstrel, you really mustn't be so bloody touchy about every little remark I make. A person makes a simple topographical observation and you get all huffy." She noted with increasing exasperation that her humble apology wasn't exactly producing instant rapport, but nevertheless plunged ahead. "I only meant that any fool should be able to find their way down a road that's the only one there IS ... don't you think?" she ended in a voice rather smaller than the one she'd begun in.

Colin blew an angry breath out over clenched teeth. "And I only meant, milady, that I have perhaps had occasion to learn things about traveling that might prove instructive to a girl who's never been off her father's estate, that is, if she chose to listen instead of biting people's heads off all the time."

"Biting people's heads off? Did I bite anyone's head off? What do you think I am, an ogress, that I bite people's heads off?"

"Please stop chewing so loudly, witch," yawned Ching as he shifted to a more comfortable napping position in the basket. "Your dulcet tones are giving me a pain in the whiskers."

Maggie's shoulders drooped and finally she nodded. "Alright, maybe a little bite. But you met my Gran, and Dad, though he's a nice sort of fellow for one of the ruling class, cares more about hunting than managing things, and has a head to match those boar trophies on the walls at the tavern sometimes. Winnie, when she was home sort of kept things smoothed over and everyone peaceful. I'll be the first to admit those tactics can be very effective but, Toads, minstrel," she looked directly into his eyes now, a plea for understanding, "sweetness and light just don't get the hearth laid or the sheep sheared. Someone has to see to it that things get done. And one can't forever be saying, Please, sir, I beg yer pardon, sir, would you kindly toss the slops out if it isn't too much trouble and you've nothing better to do?"

"I wouldn't be so fine, though, if something should happen to you while I'm supposed to be with you, and your father found me elsewhere. I'll accompany you, as arranged, milady."

"At least stop calling me 'milady', then. My sister is the lady in the family, whatever your songs say to the contrary. I was born into what you might call the unauthorized distaff branch of the family. Dad didn't marry my mother until I was two. Maggie Brown, apprentice witch, is my entire noble title. A simple 'Maggie' will suffice."

Colin grinned suddenly. Perhaps it wouldn't be such a long journey after all. He began to whistle softly and had gotten through four choruses before he caught Maggie's baleful eye and realized he was humming the very song that had caused him to sprout feathers. He offered a sheepish smile. "I know you don't like the words but it is a rather catchy tune, don't you think?"

"Definitely not." It was, though.

"Well, madam, I DO take requests."

Maggie stopped herself just in time from requesting silence, Instead she asked. "Do you know of a place up ahead, oh guide, where we could stop to eat?"

"No, but hum a few bars and I'll improvise." He almost fell off his horse laughing at his own cleverness.

"Forget it," Maggie groaned. "I just lost my appetite."
Though Colin's laughter could hardly have disturbed Ching, who was able to sleep through the numerous explosions resulting from Gran's arcane experiments, the cat nevertheless chose to open an eye and extend a black paw up the side of his basket. "I have not lost my appetite," he informed Maggie, aborting the stretch as he recalled his precarious position. "One hardly expects, when traveling with a hearthcrafter, to grow lean in the process."

"Too right, cat," Maggie apologized, feeling irritably at the same time that all the apologizing she was doing was getting to be a nasty habit. "Sorry if I was inconsiderate."

"Oh, that's alright," Colin replied, thinking she was addressing him, "Just having a bit of fun. There's a little knoll ahead that ought to be fairly dry and not too muddy."

They found the knoll and tied their horses to a tree at its base. Extracting a light lunch of cheese and dried apples, which Maggie reconstituted to fresh, and fresh bread from the horses' saddlebags, Maggie divided them between Colin and herself. She took out a packet of dried fish, expecting to find Ching at her heels, eager to devour it. Instead, she had to look all around the hill before she saw him, crouched at its base farthest from the road, switching his tail with concentration. "Chingachgook, here's your lunch."

"Not now, dammit," he hissed. "I'm trying to hear what he's saying."

"Who's saying?"

"Whoever's in there, of course."

Maggie started down the hill. "It's not polite to eavesdrop."

"Well, he sounds very upset about something and I only wanted to know what," Ching said, sitting up and giving her his best innocent-wide-eyed-kitten look, which was somewhat spoiled by his coloring, white chin and nose with eyes and ears a black, furry bandit's mask.

"What is it, Maggie?" Colin called through a bite of apple as he trotted down the hill to join them. "Ching hears something in there. Look, there's a little doorway!" A semi-circular piece of sod quaked and cracked away from the rest of the knoll.

"Yes, and it's opening," Ching hissed, crouched and whisker twitching once more. The wet-faced, red-eyed gnome who emerged was indignant. "Can't a fellow even mourn the fate of his best friend without you nosy mortals hollering on his rooftop?"

"I wonder what those taste like," Ching mused.

"I wonder what those taste like," Ching mused.

Maggie shoved him back. "Behave yourself, cat."

"We're sorry to intrude on your grief, sir," Colin said, removing his cap and leaning over a bit so the diminutive person would not have to look up so far to him. "It's obvious you're in some sort of trouble. We extend our condolences, and would do what we may, to alleviate your pain and atone for our rudeness." It was always extremely unwise to be anything but courtly to Little Folk, leprechauns, gnomes, brownies, and the like. Every reference Colin had ever heard made to them advised caution and courtesy even beyond that ordinarily extended to human nobles, for the Little Folk were strange and touchy and alien. Being so very small, they had never, like merfolk, witches, faeries, or even ogres, intermarried with people of larger dimensions, and they remained shy and reclusive. Although this gnome was the first Colin had ever seen first-hand, close up, he had known a boy in East Headpenney, an unfortunate orphan whose parents had unwittingly destroyed the underground home of a gnome family.

"Ah, waly, waly, waly," cried the little man as he sat down on a toadstool, wringing his red pointed cap in his hands, "Alas, poor rabbit!"

Judging by his behavior, it seemed as though he had decided to take them into his confidence. Colin ventured a question. "Rabbit is the name of your friend, then?"

"Rabbit's name is of your friend, then?"

"Rabbit he's named, as rabbit he is!" nodded the gnome, sniffing and digging in the pockets of his green knickers. "He comes to my house to bowl with me every quarter moon and every half, without fail. When he didn't come as usual, I went looking for him."

"And you couldn't find him?"- Maggie asked sympathetically.

The gnome took out a coin-sized handkerchief, blew his nose hard, and glared at her. "I f-found him alright. Caught in one of your horrid iron traps, his back leg nearly sundered, a-perishing of pain and fright."

Even Ching looked shocked and as compassionate as it was possible for him to look.

"I've tried all I know to free him," the gnome said. "But the power over iron is beyond my skill, and I've not the brute strength to spring it."

"You'd better show us where it is then," Colin said, "before whoever set that trap comes to check it."

If it hadn't been for Ching's hunting ability, they might have lost the gnome's track as he ran through the freshly green meadow and into the woods beyond. Not far from a deer path faintly etched through the undergrowth, the rabbit lay panting out his life, his soft white fur speckled red on both sides of a cruel trap that bit his leg like the disembodied dentures of an ogre.
When Colin had released the trap, he started to pick the rabbit up, but Maggie stopped him. "His life is too fragile within him now for movement, minstrel. I've helped my Gran with a couple of cases like this, not on rabbits, of course, but I know that glassy-eyed look. Best thing to do would be to splint the leg and give him something for the pain first, then let him rest a bit." She took off her kerchief and offered it to the gnome. "Spread this on him, sir, to keep him warm. I'll see if I can find an ice poppy to ease his pain, though it will be hard to locate them without the flowers."

"Failing that," said Colin, pleased to have an alternative to doing exactly as the witch directed, "perhaps I ought to go fetch MY medicine."

"YOUR medicine?" she asked. He was gratified to see how surprised she looked. "You witches aren't the only ones prepared for this sort of thing, you know. All minstrels are supposed to keep with them while traveling no less than two ounces of strong apple brandy in case of emergency."

"I didn't see him whipping any of that out while he was flying around in the rafters," remarked Ching, licking a paw.

"Waly, waly, waly, waly," sobbed the gnome, who had wrapped the kerchief close around the rabbit's torso and had taken his friend's head on his lap and was rocking back and forth, stroking the long, soft ears.

"Waly, waly, to be sure," said Colin, sprinting back down the deer path, "Be back in a flash."

Maggie turned back to the gnome, hunkering down, as Colin had, to face him on a civil level where she would not be talking down to him. "Is there a nearby creek, Master Gnome? Ice poppies like the banks of creeks, and we ought to have water to cleanse the wound anyway."

"Through yon trees, maid. But hasten, do. His life force dwindles ..."

Maggie picked up a wad of the hems of her cape and skirt in one hand and used the other to push away the wet willow wands that slapped at her face and clothing. Willows in such profusion made her uneasy with their sharp-tongued leaves and the way they had of making the path ahead or anything behind them hard to see. She was glad it was not later in the day, for Gran had told her that there were willows which actually uprooted themselves to follow travelers who stayed on the road past twilight. Of course, Gran had never said the trees did anything but follow, still - She shivered. "Travel must not agree with me, cat. I'm jumpy as grease on a griddle. I have the oddest feeling we're being watched." When no teasing reply came from the cat, she looked around for him. He was crouched at her heels, fur glistening with dew from the grass and bristling, head turned to the left, ears ever so slightly rotating backwards and forwards, whiskers working. "Very reassuring, cat," said Maggie.

"You're the one with the big brown eyes, Witchy," growled the cat. "Find the damn pool and the damn posies, and cure the damn bunny, and let's get out of here." His fur had continued to rise while he talked, and he now appeared twice his normal size. "I've been in dog kennels I liked better."

"I know what you mean. I keep feeling there's something besides the gnome and the rabbit at our backs."

"Alright, alright, only everything's so gray I can't really see very much either." She parted the branches of two willows which had originally grown on either side of the path, but whose drooping branches now completely obscured it. Slogging through the wet grass and soggy branches, they were both damp and cold by the time they came to the banks of the stream.

There was a different feeling there by the stream than there had been in the willows. Something about the place, some unidentifiable quality, poured over Maggie, so that, emerging from the trees to the grassy banks that held the blue waters, she took one soft step at a time until she stood absolutely still beside the gentle flow. It was the chilling, active blue of the killing crevasses of the great glacier that was its mother, but beautiful too. Around it, all about them, the air was mist-muffled and quiet, though there was the tinkle of the water, and once the song of a bird reached them, distinct and perfect. But here the sky did not seem dismal gray as before, but shone with the pearly transluscent silver-pink of the inside of a sea shell. The leaves, rustling without sound, glimmered in green pale, dark, and pale again like a jeweled gown winking in the light as its owner curtsied.

"There's enchantment here," said Ching quietly. Though he himself was more or less impervious to most spells, he had defluffed and come out of his crouch to stand, ears up and tail waving a gentle j behind him, at Maggie's side. "Yes," she said.

"It's across the stream, watching, in those trees."

Maggie let her eyes drift to the area he indicated. The cat's vision was not as precise as her own, but his sixth sense was far better developed.

Had it been a brighter day, she would, of course, have seen the unicorn immediately. As it was, his fog gray coat and opalescent horn blended so perfectly with the atmosphere in the woods that at first she mistook him for a bit of afternoon sky glowing through the boughs and branches. Only the amethyst eyes betrayed his presence, regarding her curiously across the icy blue water.
"He wants to know," Ching told her, "if you are a virgin maiden."

"That's certainly a personal question when we haven't even been properly introduced," she mumbled, a little taken aback. Then she stared back into the jeweled eyes and nodded, "Not tall, blonde, lily-like, or in any particular distress, but I believe I meet all the essential requirements."

Those requirements were apparently the unicorn's only criteria for making the acquaintance of female persons, for he waded gracefully across the stream to stand before her, carefully dipping his beautiful head, horn averted, naturally for his forelock to be petted.

"Really, chum," Maggie said fondly while administering the solicited attentions, "You ought to be a little more discriminating than THAT. I know any number of maidens whose virginity is the only thing they're at all scrupulous about. They wouldn't hesitate to sell you out to the constabulary for the price your horn would bring."

"Will you stop lecturing that homy creature and find out if there are any ice poppies around here, before the rabbit croaks and his pal puts a curse on us that won't quit?" asked Ching, impatient now that the unicorn's spell was no longer binding him, the unicorn having little or no interest in cats.

"Oh, of course," she replied dreamily, a large besotted smile warming her face as she stroked the unicorn's mane and fed him the core of her apple, which she had jammed in her pocket when Ching found the gnome's home. "Only with Moonshine here we don't need ice poppies. As soon as we take the bunny some of this water, after you've dipped your horn in it," she said, speaking to the unicorn, not the cat, "the little rabbit will be good as new."

She lay her face against the pale, sleek neck of the enchanted beast, her arms a copper garland encircling him. "I never met a unicorn before. He really likes me,"

"Will you get him to use his power so we can get back to that rabbit?" the cat demanded, switching his tail. "I thought we were out for sisters on this jaunt, not horseflesh."

Reluctantly, Maggie released Moonshine, who nuzzled her hand again before performing the necessary magical service. There was no need to ask him aloud. Once her credentials were established, unspoken rapport linked them instantly, with no need for the cat to interpret. Her early admonitions had been absolutely useless, Moonshine told her. Regardless of her character, race, creed, color, or place of national origin, the first virgin maiden a unicorn met was it, the love of his life. He was only fortunate that HIS maiden, Maggie, was so kind, so understanding, so intelligent, so beautiful, so lovely in every possible way, far beyond his coltish dreams.

"Til be back right away," she promised, stumbling over a dead log as she pushed back through the willows, trying to look over her shoulder at the same time.

"Watch it," Ching hissed, "you almost stepped on my tail!"

Maggie didn't even apologize, and stumbled twice more, almost spilling the precious fluid out of the cup of birch bark she had fashioned to hold it.

Colin was there when they got back to the gnome and rabbit. He stopped his sentry's march when he saw them, and knelt beside Maggie as she bathed the rabbit's leg with the heating water. "We have a problem," he told her, as she sluiced more water on the back of the injured leg; the front was already showing signs of improvement. The gnome wrung his hands, but had stopped saying "waly, waly" altogether. "Our horses and provisions are gone."

"What?" she stopped bathing the wound, and the gnome took the bark container from her hand into both his arms, setting it awkwardly beside him, and continued to dribble water on the rapidly healing leg.

"The horses, food, my musical instruments, everything, is gone."

"How can that be? The reins were tied well to that tree."

"Eureka!" cried the gnome. "He stirs! Rabbit, Rabbit, old friend, can you hear me?"

"I don't know, but they're gone."

With the aid of the gnome, the rabbit was soon sitting upright. At first he eyed Ching with distinct reservations, and regarded the humans warily as well, but when the gnome who introduced himself, now that he had the time, as Pop, explained their role in his recovery, Rabbit declared himself boundlessly grateful and much in their debt.

"And to your kind friend, the unicorn, as well, missus," he added to Maggie. Having communicated for so long with Pop, who spoke Argonian, even if some of his expressions were a little dated, the rabbit was perfectly able to converse with Maggie and Colin without an interpreter. It was Ching, in fact, who needed a translator if he wished to address Rabbit, for he was unable to converse with any animals who might normally provide him a meal. Although he could converse with any non-human animal of his own or greater stature, mostly by understanding their thoughts and making his own wishes known without benefit of vocalization or gestures, his particular familiar's magic was mindful enough of his sensitivities to free him from the necessity of making dinner conversation with any who might normally be his prey.

Reassured about the rabbit's recovery, they fell to brooding on their horseless state, Colin resuming his pacing off the deer path, Maggie nibbling her knuckles, Ching attacking and retreating from various leaves and twigs. "It's too bad unicorns don't care for anyone but maidens," Maggie said, "or Moonshine could take us to Rowan's estates,
I'm sure, or at least as far as Aunt Sybil's cottage."

"Even if he would," Colin reminded her, "we could hardly embark on such a long journey with no provisions
and only one mount. Besides, I'd like to get my hands on whoever's made off with my fiddle and guitar!" He slapped
one fist angrily into the palm of the other hand and looked very fierce for one of a normally cherubic appearance.

"Perhaps," suggested Rabbit, "it was the trap-setter."

"You know who set the trap, Rabbit?" Pop asked.

Rabbit twiddled his front paws somewhat diffidently before answering. "Well, I suspect it was the same
bowman who shot the horse of the great knight after the first snowfall. He has been lurking about since; my cousins
who dwell close to the castle have been made nervous by his lurkings and comings hither and yon."

"The Great Knight?" Colin asked, "Do you mean Maggie's father, Sir William? He was crippled up for some
reason or other..."

"Thanks, Colin," Maggie said, wincing at what a rabbit's opinion would be of her father, to whom hunting was
an occupation done with more regularity than breathing, "I hadn't really thought I'd mention the relationship at this
point--"

"Do not fret yourself, maiden," said Pop, "'tis well known the sins of the father are visited on the son, not the
daughter,"

"With a little work, that could be a rhyme," Colin said.

Rabbit mumped gently the paw which had been injured and was now soft and glossy as new. "The Great
Knight is not the killer of our kind that this bowman is. My cousins warned me of snares, but I thought not to look
for such an engine of destruction as this." His eyes showed a little more white as he sniffed the trap, involuntarily
taking a half a hop back.

"We don't see iron used like this often," Maggie agreed. "It's too difficult to get, and expensive. Even wolves
are usually killed with deadfall or arrow or lance. Except for horse's shoes, and kettles and pokers the peddler brings,
I hardly see an iron implement this far north from one season to the next."

Colin snorted and said with some bitterness, for he was sorely injured by the loss of his instruments, the best of
his efforts as a luthier, "I suppose there's some satisfaction in knowing that we were probably all harmed by the
same party."

Pop interrupted him by leaping to his feet and pointing skyward with a thick index finger.

"What's that?" asked Colin.

"Sounds like trumpeter swans," Maggie replied, rising to her feet and scanning the skies. "But so much louder-
oh, look up there! They're enormous!"

"And black," said Pop. The cacophonous calling died away long after the seven ebony giants had flown beyond
the horizon limited by the tree tops. Maggie watched the sky, however, till the last note faded, then looked back to
her companions. Ching was again swelled to double his normal size.

Maggie chuckled and kneeled to stroke the spikey fur of the familiar's spine. "Don't expect you'll be hunting
those birds, eh, old boy?"

For an answer he sat down and began to wash the area beneath his tail.

"I suppose we had better start back for your father's place, Maggie," Colin said. "Too bad we'll lose a whole
day, not to mention my favorite instruments."

"Wait a bit," she said, rising slowly and walking towards the trees. It was not until she reached out and stroked
the unicorn's nose that Colin actually saw him. Knowing through legend and song of the magical creature's exclusive
preference for virgin maidens, the minstrel prudently refrained from making any sound or gesture which might cause
Maggie's new acquaintance to take flight.

After a brief exchange and one or two mutual nuzzlings, the unicorn melted back into the willows and Maggie
returned to her companions. "Moonshine says he'll check a favorite watering-hole of his. If the horses aren't actually
stolen, but have only wandered off, or been driven away, he says there's a good chance they'll be there. Of course, I
could always go on alone on Moonshine." From her tone, Colin knew that the last was not an afterthought, but a
fond wish which the theft of their horses had given her an excuse to voice. Colin had only to bow out of the quest, to
return to his own concerns, and fashion new instruments, and she would be free to go with her new friend through
the magic trails in the forest as far as they extended, however far that was.

Pop the Gnome was apparently dubious about the last, for he looked disapproving.

"What's the matter?" asked Maggie, for even her charmed distraction was not impervious to a gnome's
disapproval.

"How many mortals do you suppose would see you when you had been forced to take Moonshine onto the open
road before they decided to slay you, unicorn, cat, maiden, and all, for the sake of the magic horn?" He was
struggling, it was evident, to ask the question civilly but his voice emerged harsh and stern. Maggie opened her
mouth to protest, looked at him, at Colin, and Rabbit, and cat, then closed her mouth and nodded. Her eyes, when she lowered them, were oddly bright.

"Come now, witch," said Ching, rubbing at her ankles, "Don't go clouding up. You've lived here near this wood nineteen years, and never knew till today there was a unicorn in two hundred miles of the place. Or a gnome, for that matter."

Maggie made a face, but said nothing, for the horses trotted up to them then, supplies and instruments still strapped to their saddles.

Moonshine made no secret that he was as reluctant to part with Maggie as she was with him, and even allowed himself to come in full view of Colin as he followed them at the edge of the wood where it bordered the highway. He exerted no other spell to keep her near, however, and as the wood and road parted to make way for a stream, parted from them with a last flourish of his tail, releasing her after an orchid-eyed good-bye to vanish into the forest.

That night, as they camped far from that section of the North-em Woods, Colin had to occupy himself with his music and Ching with his toilet, and they all had a cold supper, for there were no comments, nor questions, nor answers from the witch who had belatedly found reason for homesickness.

As she finally rolled herself in her goosedown blanket, Ching came and lay in the crook of the arm that cradled her cheek, purring, "Poor Maggie. Why can't you content yourself with a broom, like your foremothers?"

CHAPTER 4

Colin woke to another muffled, mist-shrouded day, and to the smell of fresh-brewed herb tea and berry cakes. Maggie was sitting on a rock by the fire, a clay mug of tea warming one chapped hand while the other turned over the iron trap that had nearly ended the rabbit's life. She looked up as he rolled over, and poured him a mug of tea.

"What do you intend to do with that, anyway?" he asked, accepting the tea and indicating the trap.

"My aunt, the one we're supposed to see on the way, does a little metalwork. I thought I'd see what she makes of this. Berry cake?"

"Please." He got up and stretched, then hunkered down again to enlighten his inner workings with the hot tea and fragrant cake. He was surprised, when he woke up enough to think about it, to find the warm breakfast fire. It had been such a wet spring he wondered that she was able to locate any dry wood. "Ummmm-these are delicious. A little early for berries, isn't it?"

"Not for me. I just dry them when they're available and freshen them up when I need them. Same with the cream. Would you care for some?"

"Yes, thanks."

She poured a little white powder into his tea and it turned a soft toffee brown. He tasted it. "That's amazing."

"Glad you like it."

They passed that day and the next pleasantly enough, once more reaching a village and scattered outlying houses by the middle of the third day. Colin remembered as much as he could of unicorn lore, and entertained Maggie with all the stories and songs he could think of concerning the mystical beasts. He even made up a unicorn song, on the spot, which delighted her so much that she managed from somewhere to produce an excellent meat pie for lunch and fresh peaches for dessert. Colin hadn't eaten so well since he left East Headpenney, and fitted the long discourse he was delivering, on the difficulties of keeping the proper dramatic tension present in one's lyric while doing an appropriate number of aesthetically correct doo-dahs in the music, in between appreciative slurps and gobbles of peach flesh and juice. He quite forgot to wonder where she found peaches six months before they would blossom and nine months after they should have rotted, or how she had dried them to include pits and all.

"About that song you don't like, for instance, Maggie," he said as an example. "There is something about it that bothers me."

Maggie, who could only stand so much jargon about someone else's specialty, shot her peach pit into a puddle of water. "There's a great deal about that song that bothers ME, minstrel," she said.

Ching was giving his full attention to his lunch of reconstituted trout heads and had not so much as a glance to spare them. Cat music tended to consist of one pleasant long hum of lyric and he saw no need at all for any other kind.

"Well, I know, that, of course, but what I mean is, there's no proper ending at all. It's anticlimactic, don't you think?"

"I certainly hope so," she replied. She would hate to think it would all end like that-with Winnie riding off for no good reason with some grubby gypsy while her bewildered husband rode home scratching his head. She began to see what Colin was talking about.

"Just so. Well, I'm actually very glad, indeed, you had me come along to protect you on this journey. Perhaps our investigations will suggest a more poetic conclusion."

"Oh, please," Maggie groaned. "Not one of those where he cuts out her true love's heart and hands it to her in a
cup of gold, following which she either dies of despair or he cuts her in half and then throws himself upon his own sword in remorse. I'm ever so tired of that one. It's Gran's favorite."

"Hardly surprising," Colin mumbled, dousing the fire with a cup of water from the puddle and commencing to pack things back onto the horse. "Your grandmother is a-er-temperamental lady, isn't she?"

Maggie grinned evilly. "You think she's bad, you should hear her and Aunt Sybil go on about the REST of the family! I believe Aunt Sybil's cottage is supposed to be an inheritance from a great-great-granddam who was fond of luring children up to the house to snack on a bit of roofing. Then there was Great Grandma Oonaugh. Now there was an old horror!" But she said it, Colin thought, with the same pride others might display in royal ancestors.

"You hardly ever hear of any really wicked witches anymore." Colin said. "Since under King Finbar's rule, criminal offenses are prosecuted equally, whether of magical or nonmagical nature, and are tried by a group of the offender's peers, I suppose there's not much percentage in doing anything really awful. Your ancestors may have been a bad lot, but you're really very nice, now that we're better acquainted." She gave him a sharp look, as though she were about to take offense and he hastened to explain. "I mean, even UNICORNS like you, and I guess one has to be pretty pure of heart for that ..."

"Hearts apparently have little to do with it," she said with more objectivity regarding unicorns than she'd shown since just before Moonshine had declared himself smitten.

"And then you did catch your cat and stop him from-you know--"

"Oh, that. Well, I suppose Gran must be right. She says our bloodline has become increasingly impure in the last few generations. She likes Dad well enough, you understand, thinks he's wonderful and all that." She swung up into the saddle after settling Ching in his basket on the pack horse. "Probably because he was such a raffish sort in what the two of them refer to as his misspent youth." She smiled. "I suppose it just wasn't misspent enough, and I got tainted by his decent side."

"What sort of witch are you then, exactly, if you don't consider it impertinent to ask?"

"You hadn't noticed?" She gave him a queer sidelong look, and clucked to her horse, kicking its sides with her soft-soled boots as they clomped back out into the muddy road again.

"No." Colin followed behind her, leading the pack horse.

"I'm a hearthcrafter. Where do you suppose the warm fires and fresh fruit have been coming from?"

"I wondered," he admitted, digesting this new information as they rode off downhill again, the muddy road little more than a track through spreading marshy meadows and newly lush hillocks that gradually gave way to a few sparse slim trees flush with new green leaves. "It seems very useful then, if you can do all of that."

"Oh, aye, it's that," Maggie said, making a face. "That's what Gran says too—but I'm afraid useful doesn't really do me all that much credit in our line of work. It takes passion and power, Gran says, to be a really first-class witch, though I think at times she only says that to justify her beastly temper. No one has ever accused me of lacking that sort of passion either—but Aunt Sybil's got a lot stronger magic than I do, and she's a far more placid person than Gran or I either—one-I suppose it comes of knowing what to expect. You'll probably really like her." She looked at the tortuous track ahead of them. "It's still quite a ways though, I reckon. I don't suppose you'd know that song about the silly nobleman who died of indigestion from eating eels, would you?"

Colin did know the song about the nobleman, a fellow named Lord Randall, and the song about the fiddle and the wind, which was one of his own personal favorites, and the one about the laddie-cut-down-in-his-prime. Maggie sang along in a voice low and rough for a woman, but with a lot of power and vitality, and she was even very often on key. She expressed a strong preference for murder ballads and the popular songs women sang over the loom or field hands sang while doing whatever there was to do in the field. When Colin tried to introduce an occasional romantic air, she interrupted him with a request for a work song sung by bandits as they plundered helpless villages. If he tried to ignore her long enough to finish a chorus of one of the charming love ballads he preferred, the black and white cat made it a point to rouse himself long enough to produce a terrible yowling. It seemed that any tender emotions the lady had were addressed exclusively to unicorns, and other expressions thereof were not to be tolerated.

By the time they camped that night, the minstrel had exhausted his repertoire of murder ballads and was considering applying for a teaching position at the Minstrel Academy, where he would present a course on the musical proclivities of the Northern Sorceress Personality, a subject he now felt he possessed more expertise in than he really cared to.

A technically impossible evening meal of Queenston Quiche, artichokes in almond sauce, and chocolate fudge layer cake, served with a blue wine equally correct with meat or fish, and equally delicious with either, helped to alleviate some of Colin's artistic aggravation, not to mention his empty stomach and dry throat. As he was hoarse
from singing, he limited his musical endeavors that night to a soft lament played on his fiddle while Maggie, arms elapsed about her knees, stared into the fire, rocking a little in time with his playing. Ching sprawled at her feet as comfortably as though on his favorite rug beneath his mistress's loom at Fort Iceworm.

The morning again just missed being rainy, the sky the color and texture of raw wool, with the sun invisible except as a light patch stifled by bales of clouds. Damp and subdued and tired of being threatened by the weather, neither Colin nor Maggie felt like singing or talking or doing anything but sitting half-slumped in their saddles, absorbing bumps and uneven jarrings as their horses plodded down the mushy trail. It took Colin a few minutes to notice when his horse stopped.

"Oh, no," Maggie said, drooping wearily forward on her mount's neck. Stretching out before them was a vast sea of swirling, frothing water. Debris, natural and manmade, swept along in the churning muddy flood, and trees caught up in it genuflected at its perimeters. How they could have dozed without hearing the roar and rumble of those waters was amazing.

"It wasn't like this when I came north," Colin said. "It doesn't look the same at all."
"This IS the Troutroute River, then?" Maggie asked.
Colin nodded. "According to the maps—and I remember the path this far too, but the bridge that was here is gone."

"How are we going to get across, then?"

Ching growled low in his throat and hopped down from his perch, stalking forward to crouch low on the path ahead of them. Except for his growl, his total green-eyed concentration was fixed on the flood. With a whip of his tail he stood up and turned to Maggie. "Well. If that doesn't beat all. This is the first time I EVER saw a dragon climb a tree."

"What?" she asked, a little snappish at being interrupted while she was trying to plot how they were going to cross. She personally was not overly fond of large bodies of water, and Ching was even less enamored of it than she. There were far too many trees on and just beneath the surface, and the water was far too fast to make swimming even a fleeting consideration.

"Maggie, look out there!" Colin pointed. "There's a dragon in that tree."
"Silly creature," sniffed Ching, cocking his ears again for a moment. "She's crying for help. Of course she's stuck. Any dragon dumb enough to go out in THAT stuff." He shuddered with revulsion. "And then climb a TREE it-well, she deserves to be stuck."

"Can't she fly out?" Maggie shielded her eyes with her hand to try to block out the sparkles of light bouncing off the water to obscure her vision.

Ching was still for a moment, listening, for he seemed to need to cock his black ears even to hear with his mind. "She's moaning something about her wings being tangled."

"Still don't see why she doesn't fly out, great beast like that..." Maggie said, riding a few paces up, then back, to get a better view of the dragon.

"At least we won't have to worry about a dragon as well as a flood." Colin shivered and dismounted. "Perhaps your sister would appreciate your visit more later, when she's—you know—had more chance to adapt to the nomadic life."

"I don't know. I've never seen this sort of thing before. This is the first journey I've taken more than a day's ride from home, after all, and I can hardly be prepared for everything." She gnawed a grubby and already abused thumbnail. "Wish I had some of Gran's good strong transformation magic, instead of just hearthcraft. I could change these horses into whales or something. As it is, we're as stuck as that dragon."

"I suggest we give up."

"No, really, Ching, what can a hearthcrafter do in this kind of situation? I could spin a rope, but we'd never make it all the way across the river."

"Don't be silly," the cat scoffed. "What would I do with a rope anyway? Walk tippy-toe across it, or hang by my tail?"

"I don't know," Maggie snapped, nettled by the cat's sarcasm, her inability to produce a solution, and the party's
generally negative attitude. "But I'm sure not going to carry you." She curled her lip at the water. "I'm not all that fond of that stuff myself, you know. If my magic didn't require extensive contact with scrubwater, I'd probably be as likely to melt of it as Great-Grandma Oonaugh." She twined a second weed around the first and forced them into a rough coil in her hand.

The cat swatted at the end of the reed that protruded from her hand. "Going to make a bathing dress of these, witch?"

"Take a swim, Ching. Maybe I will," she stared at the reeds, replying to the concept of constructing reed bathing dresses, not to the swim. "Minstrel?" she said.

Colin hoped she had decided after all that they would turn back, now that he had patiently given her time to reflect on the impossibility of their situation. He expected she, as would any reasonable person, would reach the obvious conclusion. "Yes?"

"Help me pick some more of these rushes, please."

"Uh-why?" A qualm made him pause before he picked the first of the reeds.

"Umm-just a little idea of mine," she replied, as she energetically began to snatch up every reed in sight.
His qualm became an uneasy twinge as he dropped an armload of reeds on top of those she'd already gathered. She stopped gathering finally, but signalled him to continue, and sat down and began to weave the rushes into a large, flat coil.

"Funny time to make a rug," Colin remarked, smiling at his own humor as he dumped more rushes on the pile.

"One does the best one can with the talents allotted one," she replied with a suspicious expression of self-satisfied false humility.

His suspicion was confirmed. His twinge became absolute fear as the rush rug became a basket large enough to hold, technically speaking, either a man or a woman. Colin had the distinctly uncomfortable feeling it was intended to hold a man.

"It's a boat!" Maggie exclaimed proudly, as pleased as if she were announcing the sex of her first-born babe, as she floated the flimsy-looking thing on the edge of the flood.

"Uh-uh," the minstrel said firmly.

"Oh, really. It's quite strong. I'm sure it will hold you." She looked up at him with an expression of purest concern for his safety and comfort.

"Hold me while I do what?" He stood very still as he waited for her answer.

"While you rescue that poor stranded beastie, of course."

"That DRAGON!?" The stillness exploded into an orgy of pacing and wild gesticulation and he changed octaves several times as he spoke. "Look here, Maggie. I'm every bit as much an animal lover as you are, but why in the name of all that's sane would I want to rescue that dragon? I like it exactly where it is!"

"We have to rescue her because she flies, of course, is why " She used the sort of voice she might use to explain to a small child why the sky is blue. She didn't stay within earshot of his indignant sputterings, either, but went to the pack horse and began unstrapping their belongings.

"Well, see here, Maggie. Now just stop. Just because I don't agree with you doesn't mean I'm about to leave you here alone! Put those things back, won't you?" By the fury with which she was unwinding the bindings of their packs, throwing the bundles indiscriminately on the ground to fall where they may, he reckoned she was ready to remain behind if he insisted on sensibly returning to civilization. He perceived her bizarre unpacking methods to be a demonstration both of the sorcerous passion, if not power, she'd discussed earlier, and also any possible determination to remain at the river as a means to make him guilty enough that he'd stay and do as she demanded.

She ignored him, however, as he flapped around putting things back on the horse which fell right back off, of course, without the benefit of the length of braided leather rope that had bound them on. This rope Maggie was busying herself winding around her hand and elbow. After trying to replace the cat basket one more time to have it fall to his feet, spilling out the snug old piece of blanket intended to insure Ching's comfort, Colin decided against trying to strap his fiddle back on and instead replaced it gently on the ground, out of reach of the chestnut's hooves should it decide to take a stomp or two.

Maggie was looking pleased as she wound the rope. Fortunately, they'd brought far more gear than they really needed and the rope was quite long. Rummaging in the pile of belongings, she removed the extra clothing she had brought from its sack, and stuffed it in with the foods. The sack she began to fill with mud from the banks of the swollen Troutroute, digging the stuff up in great gooey gobs, and depositing it in the sack with a sucking "plop."

Colin had continued to pursue her progress with alarm and not a little personal interest. Perhaps she had not been entirely frank about the scope of her magical powers, and was capable of a great deal more than she'd admitted. Perhaps she was now concocting a gigantic, magical, enormously powerful, arcane-
poultice—though whether its purpose might be for rescuing tangled dragons or chastising recalcitrant troubadours he was uncertain.

She lashed the muddy sack securely to the end of the rope and hefted it. Turning to him, she inquired sweetly, "I don't suppose you're a fantastic shot with a sling or anything like that?"

"Not particularly."

"Alright then, stand back." She began to sail the muddy sack in circles above her head, bits of mud decorating her hair and spattering her face, arms, clothing and companions as well as the inanimate environment in the immediate vicinity. Colin ducked and Ching took shelter behind a tree. When it seemed to her the proper impetus was reached, she let fly with the bag. It landed, splashing an upwardly exploding fountain of water a short distance from the dragon-inhabited tree.

Hauling the sopping bag back again, she inspected the rope and then the bag itself. The rope was braided for utility in a fashion that minimized its tendency to shrink. The bag was not in a condition ever to hold clothing again.

By the time she finished her inspection, Maggie's hands were so slippery with mud she had to wash them off in the river before resuming her sack-whirling stance. She let fly, and this time the bag snaked its way into the appropriate tree, and its weight wrapped it twice around a branch. Maggie leaned back on the rope, testing it with her entire weight. Satisfied, she took the end and tied it securely around the trunk of another tree.

She wiped her still far-from-immaculate hands on her skirt, and glared triumphantly at the minstrel, who had arranged himself in a nonchalant position against a tree that lent itself to lounging. Applauding slowly, he complimented her feat with mock graciousness. "Very ingenious, Mistress Brown. And nobly done. Nobly done, indeed. Now the only problem that remains, I suppose, is for person or persons unknown (unless, of course, and I can't discount the possibility, you mean for that very remarkable cat of yours to do it) to surrender his or herself to the doubtfully enormous strength of your oversized poultry basket, haul themselves across that charming laundry line you've so cleverly employed, and reach the tree, where the dragon trapped therein will meekly cooperate in having its appendages broken and its wings mangled while its benefactor frees it, after which it will follow us all over Argonia in unending and everlasting gratitude. Providing, of course, one doesn't overbalance that silly-looking boat, providing, too, that the clothesline doesn't work its way loose from its moorings, and providing the dragon doesn't immediately roast one well done before it learns of one's beneficent intentions, just in case it's interested in them."

It was Maggie's turn to applaud. "From your pretty words, minstrel, I gather you appreciate the possible difficulties of my scheme. However, I would like to point out that those things may just as well NOT go wrong, and, as they say, nothing ventured, nothing gained."

"Whereas if I should venture in this case, I might stand to gain a charring?"

"As I was saying before you gave me the benefit of your immense wisdom, I do intend to get across this river and to the other shore, and I don't intend to go the whole width by means

1. of rope and basket. So if dragons frighten you, my faint-hearted friend, I suggest you stand back."

"I still don't see how you propose that that dragon will be of any benefit to us once you acquire it."

"Once you have helped me rescue her, she will fly us across the river, naturally."

"Oh, she's agreed to that, has she?" He raised a questioning brow to the cat, who had sauntered over from behind his tree and was sniffing without interest at the spilled contents of the packs. Looking up, he met the minstrel's eye, flipped his tail, and stalked off. He had better things to do than talk to tree-climbing aquatic dragons or, for that matter, to so-called musicians who talked to cats.

"Maggie, I know you want to see your sister, but this is rather extreme, isn't it? I mean, the river is dangerously flooded, and die dragon and all. He could hardly believe she meant to go on with it, and kept waiting for her to say that of course he was right and she would naturally go back to her father's hall and wait like a good witch for conditions to improve. "Have you another suggestion?" she asked with iciness that warned him he was likely to wait a long time for her to say what he wished. He coached her a little.

"'e ought to wait a few days, perhaps, for the flood to subside, and then cross it the usual way."

"No!"

"Why not? Oh, Maggie, what difference could a few days possibly make?"

; "I don't know-it all depends-it could make all sorts of . difference. Abandoned lords have been known to do all sorts of lawful things to wives who run off from them, and that gypsy is . ao gallant protector, believe me. He ran off with two of the dairy

.. maids and then just left them to their-er-fate. What if he leaves Winnie stranded in the woods, or something?
Even if Rowan doesn't murder her, there's robbers and wild animals and--"

"Dragons?" Colin suggested helpfully.

He received a glare for his trouble but she continued. "Of course, dragons. She's quite alone, actually. Maybe
hungry and cold, and most certainly confused and lonely. If the gypsy should run true to type and abandon her, she
would simply not understand it. People are just never unkind to her-she wouldn't know what to think. She'd be
brooding about what she might have said that vexed him, and not be on the lookout for murderers or dragons at all . .
."

"If all of that's true, she'll probably be far beyond your help by the time we get there, anyway."

Maggie's eyes ate caustic holes in him. "She certainly will be, if we sit tamely by and wait for the river to go
down—or I waste all my time debating the matter with craven minstrels."

He shook his head stubbornly. "Stop debating then. I'm done trying to keep you from risking your life. But I'm
certainly not going to risk mine." He leaned with greater determination against the tree, looking if possible fiercely
dedicated to languishing there for the duration. "I'm sorry, old girl. A lot of people have control over my life. My
craftmaster has power over my music, your father and other aristocrats have power over my comings and goings,
and your grandmother has power over my shape. You, however, don't have any power over me at all, and I refuse to
allow you to push me into something stupid and dangerous."

"Coward."

"At your service."

With one last glare, she arranged herself in the boat, holding on to the rope for balance. Then she had to stand
again, one foot on the basket and one on shore, to push the basket boat out into the water.

Her arms were almost yanked from their sockets as the tide jerked her and the boat downstream of the rope she
clung to. She regained her seat and began hauling herself hand over hand down the rope, thinking stubbornly that
she was certainly showing the minstrel that she was not a girl to stand around and wait for the men to do everything,
as he obviously thought. Her ruminations were extremely brief, however, for me rope was slick and wet and her
shoulders ached horribly with the strain of clinging to it against the current. In no way did the pain lessen as she
strove to get enough purchase to pull herself and the boat against the tide, closer to the rope. Her body stretched so
far between her lifeline and the boat that it arched, her belly almost grazing the water, her knees barely in the basket,
head buried between wrenching shoulders and straining arms as she struggled for a better grip on the rope. A
passing log swept the little rush boat out from under the precarious purchase her knees had maintained, and she
dropped with a shocking icy splash into the river, the water soaking her to the waist. Inexperienced as she was at
rivercraft, she did realize that her most desperate and immediate priority was to retain her grip on the rope at all
costs.

She was actually only a few feet out from the shore, but even her work-hardened hands were not used to
supporting her entire weight from slick, cold leather thongs against the force exerted by the river. The icy water
chilled her to the top of her head, and she couldn't feel her fingers after a short time.

Abruptly she sank to her armpits in the biting cold river. A weight jerked on the rope and it slipped agonizingly
in her hands. She could not be sure when one hand slipped from the rope, but suddenly her body was floating on the
surface, tossing and turning with the torrent, the arm that kept her from drowning an arrow of pain that felt as though
it were breaking her back.

She was hauled partially out of the water as Colin's arm caught her clothing, then her waist. "Got you!" he
yelled above the river, nearly breaking his own hold on the rope with the shock of her added weight to his own.
"Grab on, now!" He had did along the rope far enough to catch hold of her. Flinging her free arm wildly in his
direction as she tried to obey his order, she nearly throttled him, hooking her elbow around his neck. - He gargled at
her.

They did so much thrashing around themselves that they scarcely Noticed when the waves began to break over
their shoulders, lOblmerging the rope for a moment. Maggie clung to Colin's ;>felt, twisting her head to keep the
water from her mouth and jjjose. Colin was finally able to get them back to the shore, and !Stey lay there, half out
of the water, just as the tension that had ;jeen fighting them for the rope went slack. " As Maggie clambered out of
the water and up Colin's legs and ;*"to the bank, to lie panting and choking beside him, she heard Ching translate for
the big green and turquoise dragon who was frying herself in what little sunlight there was. "Ah hah," said iihe cat in
his pseudo-dragon voice. "Dinner is served."

CHAPTER 5

Fortunately, the dragon was so surprised that they did not incinerate immediately when she breathed on them,
that she completely forgot she outweighed them by a few hundred stone, and had sharp claws and teeth as well as
fire-breathing potential.

For a witch, Maggie was very adept at being self-righteously indignant, and when she had spit out the river
water, she took advantage of the dragon's confusion to display her talent for invective. "Ching," she ordered, "will you tell this foul-mouthed, fetid-breathed, carrion-eating crud that she is the most ungrateful, rude and-and not a very nice creature at all!" I'll not. The cat sat upright, tail curled sedately around his front paws. "So far, she looks on me as not quite bite-sized. I have no desire to jeopardize our relationship by conveying such irresponsible messages."

"Some familiar you are. You're supposed to protect me."

"Only from—ahem—a fate worse than death. Other peril, up to and including death, were not in my job description, particularly at the cost of my own tail."

Maggie threw up her hands. "I'm surrounded by cowards!"

"I beg your pardon!" bubbled Colin, still dripping from saving her life. "Now who's the ungrateful crud! My hands will probably take weeks to heal well enough that I can play bar chords again."

She shot him a look of simultaneous apology and annoyance. She wished he would not pick such awkward times to be sensitive. If she couldn't enlist the cat's help he wouldn't have to worry about playing his bar chords. "Now just how was it you were planning to negotiate with this eternally grateful creature?" Colin pestered. Not having heard the remark about dinner, he remained more unalarmed than he should have been.

"Ching can talk to her, you see ..."

Colin looked at the cat, who was yawning, and at the dragon beside him, who was concentrating on puffing up and down the scale of dragon puffs, forte to pianissimo, trying to rekindle the fizzled flame. "I'm not sure communication is the key—I can talk to a Brazorian bandit, too, but that hardly means he'll refrain from skewering me—"

"Precisely," she said, hastily returning her attention to the cat. "You ought to be ashamed, Ching. I've helped take care of you since you were a kitten."

"Yes, wasn't I cunning?" He licked a paw clean of an imaginary speck.

"You were. You were the most promising of the litter—your mother, Sacajawea, was the loveliest, loyalest, most magical of all familiars—many's the time I held you both purring in my lap and fed you dainties from the banquet table and told you ..."

"Oh, very well. You've made your point. But I will not insult this discriminating creature. Perhaps if you prepare some food for her which will provide a nutritious alternative to yourselves as a main course, she'll accept it in your stead. She's missed her last feeding, she said. She'd have gobbled me up, bite size or no, but says she finds a cat who speaks impeccable dragonese a diverting novelty."

Maggie didn't wait for the cat to finish his long-winded speech before she rummaged into the foodbag and came out with a piece of dried venison that, with a bit of stretching, became a whole deer, considerately roasted for the flameless dragon. After four more such delicacies, the dragon daintily mopped her long, royal-blue snout with a ruby-colored forked tongue, and settled back with a gale-force sigh against a convenient grove of trees.

Colin released the breath he had been holding during the exchanges that passed from Maggie to cat to dragon. He had watched his companion address the cat, who had of course said nothing in reply, but had licked his whiskers and twitched his tail tip occasionally. The cat had then turned to rub against the dragon in a most affectionate manner, after which performance Maggie had produced the miraculous venison, the dragon had devoured it, and the dragon had retired to leave the cat gnawing at the meat left clinging to the shards of bone overlooked in the dragon's gluttoning. The cat could obviously converse with Maggie, and through the cat, Maggie could converse with dragons. That was all very well and good, but it did make him feel slightly left out, but since he was also evidently to be left out of the dragon's diet, he found it fairly easy to reconcile himself.

While he and Maggie changed into dry clothing, the cat chatted casually with the dragon.

"It's quite a touching little story, really," Ching informed them as they emerged from the woods, fully prepared to run back to the cover of the trees at any sign of hostility or renewed appetite from the great beast. The cat assured them that they were safe, as the dragon had pronounced herself quite well fed for the time being. "Poor Grizel," Ching mewed his most plaintive, "has had a simply dreadful time."

Dragons are notoriously long-winded, being so full, generally, of hot air, and Ching had begun to fancy himself a raconteur, so what with the cat's speech having to be translated for Colin after it had already gone from dragon to cat to Maggie, the narrative became somewhat garbled at certain points. Nevertheless, what Grizel actually said was interpreted as the following, in as near to the dragon's own mode of expression as is possible to relate:

THE DRAGON'S STORY

"I never thought of myself as the suicidal type, not even when I found myself tumbling down the river, but I suppose I must have been, a little bit, to have sought a cave so near the river's bed, when for eons and eons that particular cave has been flooded at the same time every year."

"The heart, alas, knows no season when it's breaking, and I heeded not spring nor flood—I almost wish your
violent agitation of mat branch out there had not freed my wings and claws. For though I was able, having recovered my senses, to swim here, where I encountered this charming little furry friend and was given the benefit of your hospitality," (she licked her snout in remembered appreciation) "you have freed my body but not loosed the chains that bind my heart.

"Of course, I might at any time prior to my entanglement in that tree have swum to shore. But I was asleep when the flood waters filled my cave, and before I had quite gathered my faculties, I was struck behind the ears with a portion of a nearby mountain, which must have become dislodged in the flood. At least, I suppose it had to be something as substantial as that, for I am quite well-armoured, you know.

"Oh, yes, we dragons are almost completely protected externally, but ah, the searing pain that can burn within! I see you appear puzzled, but it is true, my friends, it is indeed true that we, too, have feelings that cannot be shielded by our scales, and bear passions hotter than our own fires. Though the flood has extinguished one flame, that other within me burns like a torch I carry-for him. And I had always considered myself to be such a cool-headed sort!

"Ah, but that was all before I met-him. If only you could see him! A dragon is surely just a dragon, you may say. How quickly your preconceptions would melt away if only you could see my Grimley! Brilliant red-orange scales glittering in the sun! the liquid reptilian grace of him as he sails through the Southern Aurora! The sensuousness of his slither when he turned to sear me with that earthquaking smile from those hypnotic garnet eyes of his! Ah, Grimley, Grimley, my heart, my flame, my own!"

(For a moment she seemed quite overcome but was finally able to proceed in a calmer fashion.)

"We were very happy for a while—he scarcely left my side nor would he allow me to hunt for myself, but fed me from his own snout the choicest morsels. We were so blissful! How could we have quarreled and parted over such a small thing? I tell you, I am quite, quite bereft! Absolutely bereft. I simply felt, you know, that it was demeaning to my darling to let that MAN choose what he ate from our range, instead of raiding the herds and villages at the dictate of his dragonly will. He took my concern amiss, and called me a little hothead who had no concern for the security of our future offspring. And I—oh, the terrible things I said—still ... I feel, you know, that I must resolve in my own heart this matter of dragonian dignity. On the river, as it all flashed before me in the extremity of my need, I decided that if I should be freed, I would fly to the east to consult our great queen. Perhaps her wise counsel could heal those harsh words. If our queen agrees with me, then I shall return with her to my love in a blaze of glory, and how can he deny me then? If not, I shall crawl all the way back home and beg his forgiveness."

(Another flood impended, as the great dragon tears rolled off her snout and down her stomach, further saturating the sodden ground surrounding her. She sniffed a giant sniff and continued.)

"At any rate, I drifted unconscious downstream after the mountain hit me, until I became entangled in that tree, as first you beheld me. Although I possessed the strength to free myself, I was afraid of injuring my wings, which are ever so fragile. Then, when you people were playing about on that rope, you jarred the tree loose that had pinioned my wings, and set me free, and—and here I am-flameless, loveless wretch as you see me!"

Colin, his poet's sensitivity aroused, had quietly drawn his fiddle from his bag and was playing a little lament for the creature as she finished her tale.

Uncomfortable with the surfeit of sentimentality, Maggie squirmed a bit, but did feel sorry for the beast. She was actually, objectively speaking, an attractive thing. From royal blue snout to spiked and slender tail tip, her color altered many times to blend from blue to turquoise, aquamarine, and other blue-green distinctions, to sea green, and mist green, and forest green, and emerald green, to finally tip her membranous wings and frost her spikes with a chartreuse of the same beautiful shade as her big, limpid eyes, pools of misery that were, as has been mentioned, quite overflowing.

Maggie let out a long breath and rolled up her sleeves. "I can do something about the flameless part of her problem, at least, if she wit! promise to help us," she told Ching. "Tell her that if she will fly us across the river, I can help her by restoring her fire."

The cat relayed the message, and Grizel pronounced herself quite amenable to flying them across, all except the horses.

She would not have been able to provide such ferry service, she told them, if it were not for Maggie's generous offer. She asked Ching to explain that dragons fly not only by means of their wings, which were insubstantial compared to the rest of a dragon's bulk. The fire-breathing mechanism created a cavity of hot air within, that served as a buoying agent. Maggie looked down the dragon's open mouth and concentrated on her hearth-building spell. Soon Grizel was smoking cozily away.

Colin, meanwhile, unsaddled their horses and gave them a smack on the rump to send them home, so that they
might reach safety before Grizel's next feeding time. Maggie joined him in making packs of their belongings which they strapped to their backs. Ching settled himself on top of the pack Maggie wore, and Grizel knelt, allowing them to mount above her wings upon her neck and shoulders.

They felt the air rush up at them as they rose faster and faster and higher and higher. Maggie had to catch at her skirts to avoid having them singed by the backlash of the dragon's flame. Below, the river rushed heedlessly on. They sailed a dizzying height above the trees, and could make out, just beyond them, fields plowed in patchwork patterns.

Extending her feet, then gradually folding her wings as she damped her flame, the dragon brought them to a safe landing at the edge of a forest clearing.

"Farewell!" she saluted them. "I cannot go near the town in daylight for fear of my life. You have fed me when I hungered and enflamed me when I languished, and I shall ever be your friend, but I ask you grant me one final request."

The people asked the cat to tell the dragon they would be glad to grant the request, and of what did it consist? "That if you meet my Grimley before I do, should you survive the experience, you would tell him that his Grizel burns for him still and repents her inflammatory words and-and that I shall return to him anon!"

Aunt Sybil was slogging about in a puddle of syrup, trying to resningle her house with fresh gingerbread cookies. Maggie and Colin had smelled the cookie fragrance as soon as they'd left the highway just past the village and turned off onto the path, which a child had eagerly volunteered to show them. The child also volunteered to guide them to the aunt's house, but, as it appeared a fairly uncomplicated journey, they declined.

"Little chap seemed disappointed," said Colin.

"His folks wouldn't like him coming along, I think," Maggie said. "They surely must remember the previous tenant of Auntie's house. Great-great-great-Grandma Elspat liked children-but not in the conventional sense. It's a wonder the rest of the Brown line continued-I believe, you know, that it was no little woodcutter's daughter that did her in. Gran said it was her own daughter, to save herself. It will be interesting to see the place."

"But you-uh-your current aunt-she doesn't-indulge?"

"In gobbling children? Oh, no-but she keeps up the original architecture, I understand, so that they'll come out to see her, and she can treat them. With her specialty, she gets rather lonely."

"Oh?"

"Yes, she sees the present in her crystal ball."

Colin scratched his head and for a moment seemed to accept this, then said, "Huh?"

"She sees the present in her crystal ball," Maggie repeated. "Why does she need a crystal ball for that? Most of us see the present without one."

"Well, yes, but Aunt Sybil, you see, doesn't have to be present to see the present. I mean, she can see what's happening to OTHER folk now . . . not just herself-you understand?" "I guess so."

"That's why she has no neighbors. In the old days, I guess, she might have been actually persecuted. People like a witch who can look into their private lives far less than one who eats their children. Though of course, if she accepted all the consultations for that sort of thing that are available to her, from what Gran says I suppose she could have a house of gold, instead of gingerbread."

It was then that they rounded a turn in the path and saw the clearing containing a house, which was not charming at all, but appeared to be the victim of some natural disaster, the roof half off, the walls slanting in, and the door ajar on its jamb. An elderly woman, who at first glance looked to Colin alarmingly like Maggie's grandmother, was occupied with a bowl and spatula, and had a pile of cookies the size of dinner plates on the ground beside her. The entire woods smelled like a bakery.

Ching jumped down from Maggie's back and raced to where Sybil was working, where he began mewing raucously and rubbing himself against her, before sitting down to clean the syrup from his paws. Sybil turned a beaming face to them, so pretty and friendly and benevolent that the resemblance to Maggie's grandmother was all but obliterated for Colin.

"Maggie, darling, and Colin! I am so pleased you've made it with no further trouble! I nearly burnt the gingerbread when you fell in the river and the dragon got loose!" She had set down the bowl, which Colin could now see contained fudge icing, and, after wiping her hands on her ample apron, embraced them both. "Auntie, what's happening to your house?" "I tell you, dear, I was about to send to your Gran and see if she would like a guest till high summer. Have you ever seen such a sticky mess?" They both agreed that they had not. "You should know, Maggie dear, since I have no daughter of my own, I had intended to pass this place to you, but the practical problems of a house made of sweets far outweigh the security of owning one's own home."

Surveying the ick and goo, Maggie certainly understood what she meant. She bit her lip for a moment, then picked up a shingle and bit that instead slowly, chewing carefully as she circled the house, noting that even the
foundation of peppermint stick logs was sagging and melting into the ground around the house. "May I use your oven?" she asked finally. "Oh, of course, darling. You must be famished." "We are, a bit. But if you'll find something for Colin and Ching, I'll undertake the repair of the cottage for you." "Could you do that, dear?"

Maggie shrugged. "Well, it's a bit trickier than preparing a banquet for 1500 after a lean hunting season and a drought, but if you have the raw ingredients, I can tackle it."

It took even Maggie's magic the remainder of the light part of the afternoon to make the required candies and shore up the foundation, shingle the walls, and patch the roof with fresh sugar wafers. Fortunately for her, the power that defined her hearthcraft talent as that of hearth and housework took the term housework literally, so that it included a bit of light carpentry.

Colin and Aunt Sybil sat on stumps in front of the house, drinking tea and munching the fresh roofing material, watching Maggie apply the fudge at strategic points so that it could spread itself before she applied the shingles.

"I only tuned in when you children were in the river, young man," said Sybil conversationally, "Have you known my niece long?"

Though Colin's experience was limited, it was not so limited that he had never before heard that tone of voice from fond female relatives of unmarried girls. "Er-not that long. We're traveling together on official business actually-Sir William's orders."

"I see. Maudie's message hinted that there had been some unpleasantness?" "Message, ma'am?"

"My familiar, my budgie bird, flies messages between us sometimes-to keep in touch, you know."

"Isn't that a little awkward, considering?" He nodded to Ching, asleep in Sybil's lap, face nestled in his front paws as completely at home as though Sybil were her sister.

"Oh, Ching knows he mustn't be naughty and bother Budgie. Maudie has made that quite clear." She stroked the cat's spotted fur. "Our mother wouldn't have needed a budgie for her messages, of course."

"She wouldn't?"

"Oh, no. She could talk to you plainly as day through HER visions. She talked Maudie all through birthing Bronwyn, even though she had to be in Queenston just then."

"Bronwyn?" Colin asked, sipping his tea. Maggie certainly had an extensive family. More of them just seemed to pop up in conversation all the time.

"Maggie's ma. Lovely girl she was, Bronwyn."

"It seems like Maggie has an awful lot of relatives, and they're all ladies. Tell me about Bronwyn, will you? Maggie talks about distant ancestors, but hasn't said much about her immediate family, other than that she's rightfully worried about this one sister who doesn't seem to be entirely a sister." He felt a bit guilty for taking advantage of Maggie's doing a favor for her aunt to pry, but his horse and his musical instruments, as well as her things, had been stolen in this venture. He felt, under the circumstances, he really ought to have the whole story. Besides, it could add immeasurably to the background he needed to improve that song . . .

Aunt Sybil was a kind person and a lonely one, however, she was not stupid. She gave him a hard look from under her brow that considerably heightened her resemblance to her sister. Maggie, having finished the foundation and the walls, and having patched the hard-candy windows with an extra shingle or two, had climbed the ladder her aunt used to climb to her bed-loft. With this she mounted the roof. She was again applying the fudge as binding material in strategic places so that it would spread itself properly to be ready for the application of the sugar-wafer roof tiles. "Well, young man, I can understand your curiosity. I suppose I can tell you something now, but the rest I'll save till Maggie's done there and we can all have a bit of supper. There's a lot she doesn't know, either, that I think she ought . . ."

"Any enlightenment you can provide would be appreciated, ma'am," Colin said. He had finished his tea and roof tile and had taken his guitar from its bag. He strummed lightly the strings as he fingered the keyboard. It kept his hands limber.

"I suppose Maggie has told you that she is a love child?" "A-? Oh, yes, she did. I thought that was a little strange, because she and Sir William and everyone else acted as though she is a legitimate heir."

"She is, she is. But only because Sir William chose to acknowledge her, when he married her mother." "I think you had better explain about that part."

"Well, let's see, now. How it was was that Willie Hood, Sir William that is, and my niece, Bronwyn Brown, were fond of each other from-oh, from when they were little bitty tykes. Childhood sweethearts, you might say. But Old Tom Hood, Willie's father, he had grand ideas, you know. He never did take to Willie being so sweet on the village witch's daughter. I lived mere then, with Maudie, my powers not being so well developed at that time as they are now. Folk could jist stand to be around me then. Our mother lived here with our little brother, Fearchar, and they were both querulous, discontented folk mostly, not easy to be with. So I lived with Maudie and her little girl, and often this little lad, Willie Hood, was there to play. Stop that, kitty!" she cried, as Ching jumped off her lap and ran
after a bird. He did desist, but not without an unkind glare before he sat down to wash his paw. Sybil tried to pick up
the thread of her story. "Oh, my dear, now, let me see, where was I?"

She found a bit of metal wire in her pocket and began to twist it as she continued. "Oh, yes, Willie Hood. He
did come to visit, but Himself, Sir Thomas, didn't like it. So he arranged a marriage with some foreign faery folk
who had a daughter with a dowry so large as to buy title to all the Northern Territories for Willie." She crocheted the
wire with her fingers into a double-linked ring. "If he'd been a braver boy, I suppose Willie might have taken Bran
and run off—but they were only sixteen years old or so then, and he was fond of his father, for all that he was an old
rogue. And Bron wasn't so sure that she wanted to run off and marry anyone, even Willie. Not that she didn't care
for him, but she still hoped then to see her own talent blossom into some sort of respectable witchery, and there was
only Maudie and me could teach her. She didn't mind not marrying, like some craftless village lass might, of course.
Few of us have married, in the Brown line. I believe Elspat was wed to an ogre for a short time, if you could call
such a union a marriage, and later there was Bron herself, but that's all I recall."

"Surely that's a little unusual?" Colin asked. He put a hand across the strings to stop their vibration. "Most
ladies need a husband to protect them and provide for them."

Was there a hint of mockery in that gentle, dimpled smile? "And that's what you'll do, I'm sure, young man,
when you marry. Protect and provide for your wife."

"Well, minstrels don't marry, as a rule. At least not until they've retired from the road and obtained positions as
professors," he explained. "It's too difficult being on the road all the
time, giving all your attention to music, to really be seriously involved with somebody—and girls take a great
deal of involvement."

She laughed outright this time. "Dear, dear lad, you have just made my point for me! Boys take a lot of
involvement too, that a witch may not have time for. Bronwyn was a sweet, dear girl, but she never really developed
her powers before she died, because she was always spending so much of herself on Willie. Do you think Maggie's
craft," she nodded at her niece, still busily shingling the roof, "takes less of her than your music does of you?"

"Er—I suppose not, but Maggie's—"

"Maggie's very like we all have been, even Bron. Which was why, as I was saying, she told Willie to never
mind, she didn't care if he married Ellender. She even went to the wedding, pregnant and all. Her uncle was furious."

"I can see his point."

"Yes, I guess you could. Maudie was a bit put out too, but she'd raised Willie as much as Tom Hood had, and
was delighted she was going to have a grandchild. The only time it looked as though there might be trouble was
right after the wedding—Willie became genuinely attached to Ellender, the faery bride, and stayed away for a time
from Bron. But faeries—and Ellender was a good quarter-blood faery, it was easy to see that—they smile and nod a lot,
and are ever so lovely to look at while you're speaking to them, but you go away feeling that you've been talking to
yourself. Have you ever noticed that?"

"No'm, I can't say as I've met many, at least not that close to the old blood." There had been a girl in East
Headpenney, though, that, try as he might, he could never compose a really decent song about her, for all that she
had long blond hair, big blue eyes, and all the really admirable feminine attributes.

"I see that you have."

"What?"

"I don't need my crystal ball to see what's so close to me, laddie. Why do you think I must bide alone?"

She went on. "At any rate, for whatever reason, Willie soon was coming back to the cottage, and asking after
Bron, and bringing Maudie a bit of this or that from the castle gardens for her Grafting. Pretty soon it was as though
the wedding had never taken place."

"Didn't people talk?" Colin asked, again remembering East Headpenney.

"I suppose they might have, but they were careful not to let Sir William Hood hear, if they did. For he was now
Sir William, as Sir Thomas, having wickedly succeeded at separating the children, as he thought, had taken to his
bed. Folk were careful not to let Maud or Sybil Brown hear either, and I hear many things that are not meant for me
to."

"Well, they certainly must be a high-minded lot of villagers to not be right in the middle of it, nevertheless. In
East Headpenney there'd have been an awful scandal."

"It's amazing how fair and generous folk can be when faced with their own mortality. It's the uncertainty, I'm
thinking, that adds a spice to life, keeping a body more immediately concerned with his own problems than other
folks'. Even a loose-tongued person who knows that he might wake up as a crow can find his own fate a good deal
more absorbing than his neighbors'."

"I never thought of it that way."

She nodded wisely. "Brewing beer and mixing healing herbs is the least of the good that Maudie does for that
village.” She stuck the wire back in her pocket. Maggie was now circling the house, hands waving designs in the air in front of her. She appeared to be mumbling something, but her voice was too low for Colin to hear. “What surprised everyone most, though, was when Bronwyn was birthin’ Maggie—what do you suppose?”

Colin looked at Maggie. Obviously the birth had taken place. What else, then, could be the punch line? He had to admit he didn't know.

"Why, Her Ladyship, Ellender, came trippin' down from the castle to the cottage, is what! Maudie nearly threw her out at first, but I could tell she meant no harm and made Maudie let her in. Do you know, young man, I think that right there is where Maggie and Winnie got to be such great friends?"

Colin, having no idea what she meant, nodded and kept quiet, and hoped she'd elucidate so that he wouldn't have to seem ignorant.

"Ellender was pregnant at the time, poor thing, and her people, the foreign faery folk I was telling you about? They'd sent her some special elixir for labor pain. Faeries intermarrying with mortals had caused some difficulties with the bIRTHings, but this elixir was to make it all seem like a walk in the garden. Bron'd been having a hard time of it, you could hear her hollering all about, I would imagine. Clear to the castle, probably, which must have been what brought Eliender down." Tears began to gather in her eyes. "Do you know—um—in spite of what Maudie could do, none of her medicines were of any help to Bron, and she could give her nothing more without harming the babe and—do you—" she stopped for a moment to compose herself. "Do you know that that silly faery lass gave Bronwyn her elixir? Just a bit at first, but as it only helped some, she gave her more and more, till it all was gone."

"That was certainly a very kind thing to do."

"It was kinder than that. Her own folk never got more elixir to her before little Amberwine was born, and she died herself giving birth. That was when Bron moved into the castle to care for little Winnie along with Maggie, and when a decent time of mourning passed, Willie married my niece and acknowledged Maggie as well." The old lady was quiet for a time. Maggie had disappeared into the house, which caught the last pink rays of sundown on its soundly wafered roof, as tight and neat and pretty a cottage as any made of more conventional building materials.

"In East Headpenney, people would have said Bronwyn personally saw to it that the lady would die in childbirth so she could take over and be a wicked stepmother and ..."

"If anybody had said such a thing, they'd have had the whole clan down on them, particularly young Winnie, for Bronwyn was the only mother she knew. Funny, you know. I myself wouldn't think being a crow would be such an awful thing, but--"

"I take your point."

"Oh, Auntie, that was so good," Maggie sighed, leaning back in her chair.

"Your voice is a bit crackly, dear," said her aunt. "Care for some honey in your tea?"

"Don't mind if I do, at that." She cleared her throat and rubbed her arms with the opposing hands. "I'm so hoarse and weary from all that spell-casting, I couldn't boil water for tea right now."

"Well, it certainly looks lovely, darling. I appreciate it so much. Under normal circumstances it's an enormous chore to keep this old place up, but with all this rain I was quite sure I'd finally be forced to move."

"Just don't let the children eat at it any more, Auntie. You'll have to keep a conventional cookie jar for that I'm afraid. I put such a strong preservative spell on it, it will be quite inedible."

"Don't worry about it, dear. It was a wicked idea to begin with, that has deteriorated into being merely frivolous. I'll be glad to have a roof over my head that won't turn to goo. When mother and Fearchar lived here the two of them could keep it up—he was rather handy as a boy."

"Tell me about Uncle Fearchar, Auntie," Maggie said. "None of the villagers seem to know much about him, and Gran never speaks of him at all."

The old lady didn't say anything for a moment as she cleared the table and poured the tea. Ching was stretched full length in front of the emberous hearth fire, dying now that it was not needed for cooking. The evening sky had been clearing as the three people and Ching had come into the cottage for dinner, and the night was warmer than it had been at any time on their journey.

"I was going to mention Fearchar anyway, Maggie. Colin and I were having a talk while you were working and, as I told him, I wanted to tell you one or two family things that might be—painful—for Maudie. You may think that I'm an interfering old woman—" she held up her hand to ward off Maggie's protestations. "Yes, you well may. Quite a few do. But someone with my talent—to see so much denied the rest of you—it may be arrogant of me, but I feel that I have an obligation to give you some advice, to make things easier. And I'll do a sighting, as well, of course, but we can do that later."

She stared for a moment into her earthenware cup. "You see, dear, there was a quarrel, years ago, before you girls were born, and Fearchar left, and we haven't heard from or seen him since."
"Not even you?"
"Well, I did for a while, actually, but it wasn't a very good contact-a lot of static, you know, interference—till finally I could scarce see him at all."
"He was—somehow, do you think he was blocking you?"
Her aunt nodded sadly. "I think so. He was most upset when he left—it can't have been easy for him, the first boy in our long line of females. And then, mother died just before."
"Before what, Mistress Brown?" asked Colin, as the old lady was looking increasingly embarrassed. She looked, in fact, as though she wished she had not opened the subject and was reluctant to continue.
"Before Willie and Ellender." They nodded at her encouragingly and she went on. "I told you, Colin, that folk in the village thought little and said less of Maggie's mother being with child
and her love wedding another. That was very true. Our brother was not so prudent."
"Being family, of course ..." Colin began.
"We realized that, and that it was hard on him, particularly since he had always rather looked up to Willie—tagged along, making a regular nuisance of himself when he visited us at Fort Iceworm, he did. But he took on so long and so loud in such a temper, that it was all Bron and I could do to calm Maudie. See, Fearchar challenged Willie to a duel, of all the silly things, for the 'ruin' of his niece—and he no more than thirteen years old—when anybody could see she was not ruined, being a bit more than she was, rather than a bit less." She turned to Maggie and smiled. "Your father made some mistakes when he was young, but he's a good man, for all that. He just told Fearchar in front of the whole tavern that he wouldn't fight him and that was that. Fearchar called him a coward and slapped him publicly, and Willie just nodded and went back to his brew. The men at the tavern said Fearchar would have jumped onto him anyway and give him a thrashing, but they held him off. Finally he had to go away. Then he starts in pestering Maud to change Willie to a hare, saying he was like a hare because he was scared, y'know, to fight Fearchar. Maudie wasn't happy about the wedding, nor about Bron being so sad with missin' Willie, but she weren't daft."
"Gran would never do anything to hurt my Dad!" Maggie said stoutly. "And she told me herself Mama wouldn't elope with him so he wouldn't have to marry Ellender. What was all the fuss?"
"Just as I said, darlin'. Your uncle didn't see things that way. He kept pestering your Gran for that spell till she finally told him if he didn't be still she'd turn him into a magpie. That was when he left."
"Sounds like everybody should have been relieved, to me," said Colin.
"It was quieter," Sybil admitted. "But it was a shame too. He was a disappointed young man, not yet come to his powers, and mother only barely in the ground. He felt we'd all disgraced him and turned against him. I trust the years have shown him better." She poured a little more tea and said, "So I was thinking, dearie, that if your travels looking for Winnie take you to Queenston or thereabouts, you might ask after him. That was where my last sighting of him was."
"Of course," Maggie stretched and yawned, and in her stretch her eyes fell on her pack, hanging from a nail on the wall. "Oh, Auntie, I brought you a present." She got up and fetched the trap, setting it on the table before her aunt, who pounced on it.
"An iron trap!" her breath sucked in and she clicked her tongue, "Oh, child, where did you get such a wicked thing?"
"Colin took it off the foot of a rabbit. He said he thought it might have been set by the same man who shot at my dad last winter; the rabbit said so, I mean."
Gingerly, Sybil carried it to a little cabinet next to the fireplace. Inside this were metal-working tools, a small anvil, hammer, and tongs among them, along with some others Colin didn't recognize.
"I'd pity the bandit that thought to rob your life savings!" Colin said. "Who'd ever think you were a blacksmith, ma'am?"
Aunt Sybil dimpled with pleasure as she returned to the table. She carried a crystal globe with her, about the size of a small pumpkin. "Metalwork is a hobby, really. I don't get to use my craft professionally as much as I would like—a body has to be scrupulous with a gift like mine or cause a lot of damage."
Maggie laughed, a bit rudely, Colin thought. "Auntie, you must be the first one in our entire family to seriously worry about her magic causing damage!"
"Aunt Sybil looked at her for a moment. "Not quite the first, child, nor the last, either." She sat down and placed the crystal before them. "I suppose it comes of being able to live other people's lives, second-hand though it is. It's a hard thing to hurt someone you understand. Troubles the sleep. So I do my metal-work when I can get metal, and peek a bit for the fun of it between serious craftwork commissions, and with that and keeping this old cottage together, I do keep busy."
"Can you show me what's happening to Winnie now?" Maggie asked, leaning forward and looking into the
"To be sure, to be sure," replied her aunt, turning the ball over in her hands and looking deeply into it. What at first appeared to be a stray flicker from the candle stirred in the center of the ball, to gradually grow into a bright glow that began suddenly to fragment, sending motes of colored light dancing about the room.

"Ah, yes," said Aunt Sybil with satisfaction. "I believe that must be it."

AH they could see was the image of a dagger, glittering nastily through the rainbow lights. Slowly, that moved away, and a throat came into view, slender and pale, and above that and around it a swath of comsilk hair. Long, tapering fingers with broken nails dragged the hair back, and a pair of sleep-dazed, startled green eyes peered out through the parted curtain of hair.

"Out, you hussy!" hissed a voice behind the dagger. "Leave this camp at once if you want to stay alive and pretty!"

Amberwine gulped. She was not used to threats. "I beg your pardon?" she said.

"Oh, I'm sure you do that, my fine fancy lady. But begging is for honest gypsies, not faithless false trollops such as yourself! Out with you!" The voice turned into a black-haired woman, who leaned into the range of the glass, the better to menace the shrinking Amberwine. Except for the color of her hair and the green of the dress she wore, the second woman's image was indistinct.

Aunt Sybil frowned and put fingertips to her forehead. "Let me just see now if I can fine-tune this."

"Ooooh, Auntie!" Maggie's nose nearly touched the glass in her anxiety to see more. "You've got her! Poor Winnie, what an ugly customer that old bat is!"

Colin and Sybil each touched Maggie's shoulder and she scooted back so they could see.

Sybil's breath hissed out in surprise. "Well, I'll be burned. If it isn't that charlatan, Xenobia. I might have known she'd be behind mis sort of thing."

"Xenobia?" Maggie asked. "Who's she?"

"She's beautiful." sighed Colin, evidently not referring to Xenobia, who was flashing her knife in glittering arcs at Amberwine, who finally had wakened to her danger and was reaching to pull on her boots before making an exit.

"Not so fast, my lady," said Xenobia. "You can just leave those behind to pay for your keep."

Amberwine complied, but said, "Quite a costly straw pile you have here, your highness. Four gold rings, a silk dress, a fine woolen cloak my sister wove for me, my moonstone necklace, and a good gray mare. Now my fine leather boots." She stood up barefoot in her shift and Sybil gasped.

"Consider it your dowry for coming away with my son, girlie!" laughed the other woman. "Pity you couldn't hold him, weren't it?"

"Pity my husband didn't kill him when he found us together on the moor," Amberwine replied over her shoulder as she hurried out into the dimness beyond the glass. "And me along with him."

The dagger flashed as Xenobia threw it and the glass went dark.

"Get it back. Aunt Sybil!" cried Maggie.

"I'm trying, child, but violence disrupts my concentration-ah, here," the rainbow colors danced briefly to show Amberwine hurrying down a path. Still vibrating in a tree she had just passed was the gypsy dagger.

"Perhaps we should start tonight," Maggie said. "She seems to be in terrible danger."

"Yes," Colin said. "Perhaps we should. For that lovely lady to be so mistreated by that AWFUL witch-oh, excuse me, I do beg your pardon!"

Aunt Sybil grinned at him. "The false part of your statement, lad, is that Xenobia is not a witch at all. Doesn't even have the second sight a lot of her people have. She's just a charlatan who calls herself Queen of the Gypsies."

"How long has your sister been missing, now?"

Maggie shook her head and looked at Colin, who replied, "From the last full moon to this, from what Giles said, but I can't be sure. Perhaps half again that time since I met him and Maggie and I started this journey."

"Good. Then it could hardly be the gypsy's child."

"Child?" Maggie asked.

"I haven't helped your granny midwife, girl? Your sister is at least five months into her pregnancy."

"I thought they'd been feeding her well--she did look a bit stout."

"I didn't think so," said Colin.

"As for leaving tonight, that would be foolishness. You're weary to the bone on my behalf now, dear, and both of you on fool. Rest well this night and you'll make up your lost time the quicker for it."

"I don't think I can sleep," Maggie said. "Poor Winnie!"

"Chingachgook is having no problem on that score," said Sybil, nudging the cat, still stretched out in oblivious repose, as she returned the glass to its place above the hearth.

"Odd name for a cat," Colin remarked, fingering his guitar as he always did when distracted or confused.
"It's a family name," Sybil replied. "Handed down from one of our distant ancestors, a foreign sailor. Legend has it that he was a savage warrior from far across the seas who wooed and won, or was it the other way around? one of our early ancestresses.

Some of our elder kin once bore his peculiar names but as we've tried to become more-Argonian-we've passed these names on to our familiars instead. Except it's difficult to keep calling a budgie bird Osawatomie all the time, so I just call him Budgie."

Maggie had jumped up and began pacing. "How can you talk of such things at a time like this! We've simply got to find Winnie. Pregnant! Poor dear, I've got to get to her now and take her home. If she's so far gone as you say, Auntie, it can't possibly be that cursed gypsy's. Perhaps-no, oh, I hope we can find her before something terrible happens."

"Settle down, dear. Really, you children must be off to bed."

"Sit down, Maggie," Colin encouraged. "Here, I'll play us a lullaby."

He did so, and halfway through the lullaby, which was a long, monotonous musical recitation of King Finbar's coronation address, Maggie was climbing the ladder to the loft. Colin himself was yawning, as was Aunt Sybil, who rubbed her eyes and beamed at him. "You are a very talented young man. Are you by any chance of siren descent?"

"I don't know. I'm an orphan actually. I was raised by my Uncle Jack and Aunt Fiona in East Headpenney. Of course. Uncle Jack wasn't really my true Uncle-he was cousin to my father or somesuch thing. At any rate, he didn't like to talk about my folks much."

She got up and went to her metalworking cabinet. "East Headpenney is a charming place. I was looking at the harvest there last autumn. Very well they did." She smiled. "Play one more, dear. I'll cast a little spell of enhancement, just the standard one, and with your ability you should be able to put yourself to sleep with it. I must stay awake tonight and make a little going-away present for Maggie, but I'm sure if you sing The Minutes of The Seventh Tribunal that would do the trick for you." After casting her spell she stuck bits of cloth in her own ears.

He did as she suggested, and it worked so well that neither he nor Maggie were wakened by the firing, hammering, and polishing of metal that went on throughout the night.

CHAPTER 6

"Remember, dear," Aunt Sybil told her as Maggie tucked the magic metal mirror into her apron pocket. "I could only give you three visions, so use them wisely to find your sister."

Maggie hugged and kissed her aunt one more time, then Sybil embraced Colin as well before the young people and the cat set off back down the path to the highway.

It was a long way yet to Lord Rowan's hall, and longer yet on foot. Determined as Maggie's heel-and-toe stomp approach to getting to their destination was, Colin had to hold back his long-legged stride to avoid leaving her behind. By suppertime the first night both of them were exhausted, and sat glumly nursing their blisters by the side of the road. They were unwilling to make even a small detour now to find a private place to camp for the night.

"Your aunt is a lovely old woman, Maggie," Colin said, painfully easing off one of his boots. "But I can't help wishing she could have loaned us something more immediately useful than a magic mirror-say, seven-league boots, for instance."

Maggie clenched her teeth and fought back the tears that lurked just under her eyelids as she removed her own boots. "I wish we at least had some of Moonshine's healing water, so our feet would be fit for travel tomorrow. We should have gone back to that village we passed just before Auntie's house and bought horses."

"That's what I wanted to do, if you'll recall, Mistress Brown," griped Colin. "But, no, you didn't want to spend the time."

"If we come to another place tomorrow, maybe we can buy a horse."

"A horse?"

"Dad didn't give me enough money to buy a lot of horses on this trip, since he supplied us with some. Do you have enough for another?"

His eyes fell under her challenging stare. "No."

"Oh, don't look so put-upon. We can ride double or take turns. I didn't intend to hog it all for myself."

Colin poured a little water from his waterskin over his sore feet, then passed the water to her. "I hope your sister appreciates all this worry and pain on her behalf!"

"She-oooh, that hurts!-she will. She'd do the same for me, or have some knight or other do it for her, at any rate." She had finished bandaging one foot, and bathed the other from the waterskin before bandaging it as well. "If you knew her, you wouldn't mind this so much, really."

Remembering the green-eyed, pale haired, lithesome-though-pregnant vision, Colin nodded. "I suppose not."

"Here," Maggie said, finishing her own feet. "Put your foot up here and I'll bandage it."

"My boot won't fit tomorrow with all that under there."
"So tomorrow we'll take it off. Tonight it'll keep from rubbing your blankets." As she wrapped she continued. "The thing about Winnie isn't so much just that she's lovely, or charming, or any of that stuff."

"It helps," Colin groaned.

"I guess it might, for you. But-you remember the unicorn?" Colin said that, naturally, he did. "Well, Winnie's a bit like him. She makes you feel good-as if you're very important to her. Of course, I know I am-we've always been friends since we were babies. But she makes everybody feel that way." Colin appeared skeptical of such boundless grace. Maggie continued, determined that he should understand. "Many's the time when I was small I was teased by the other kids because I'm different, being a witch, and dark, and all. Gran couldn't turn every child in the village into something animalistic and similar-the little brats would have loved it! And Gran couldn't understand why I wanted to be like them anyway. She thinks we're a lot better, and, though I agree now that it would be boring to be the same as everyone else, I felt differently then.

"They all wanted to play with Winnie, of course, but she'd turn her back on them in a minute if they didn't include me. She always listened to me, even if she didn't understand all of the witching stuff. She cared about it because I do. When Dad gave us a tutor and classes in how to be ladies and have manners and social style and such, Winnie didn't even need to be taught but I could never get the way of it. She'd coach me extra so I wouldn't look the fool in front of Dad, then make jokes about how silly the whole thing was, anyway."

Colin withdrew his freshly-bandaged feet and Maggie looked down for a moment at her rough, dirty hands. "I've missed her a lot, Colin. I could only stand for her going away because she really seemed to swoon over Rowan, once she saw him, and would have a lovely big house and meet all those court people. I was planning to go visit her this summer, if it hadn't been for Dad's accident and Gran needing me at home."

The minstrel was not wholly convinced. "I find it hard to imagine such a virtuous person as you are saying she is doing what she did."

"I didn't say she isn't an ass sometimes," Maggie admitted. "If she had to run her own household and do all the chores without the benefit of servants, it would have been impossible for her. She's good with servants though. They all like her, and she knows how to get what she wants from them. She's just not very good at handling any sort of unpleasantness. People are never unkind to her, so I suppose unkindness isn't very real to her." She winced, remembering the vision in the crystal, and continued in a smaller voice. "She'd rather just go to sleep and forget about it than have to face doing something to make someone unhappy. That always has made ME unhappy. I could never see why she's not better at making decisions. She said she didn't have to be because I did it so well." She frowned. "That's why it's difficult for me to credit your song. If she were to go off with someone, it might be for a little while, on the spur of the moment, while she could still see the turrets of her own home across the moors and know it was all very safe and romantic and fun. But to leave altogether? Without asking anyone or packing anything?"

"People do change," Colin said gently.

Ching came bounding out of the woods with a rabbit in his mouth.

"The gnome would throttle you, but thanks," Maggie said, accepting it.

"Excellent," Colin said. "I was getting sick of gingerbread."

They did pass through a small village the next day, and were able to purchase an aging plow horse who had not yet been killed for his meat. They rode double till Ching conveyed the message that the horse was going to lay down and not get up again if one of them didn't dismount. Maggie was restless anyway, and took the first turn walking, and in this fashion they progressed surely, if not swiftly.

The conversation had been far from lively, Maggie brooding over her sister's condition, desperate enough now to be considered a "plight," Colin humming and nodding to himself in the throes of a fit of creativity.

Finally, after many miles had passed, he asked, "Here, now. Maggie, what do you think of this?"

He sang:

"When they came to the gypsy's camp The lady met his mother. She said 'This is no gypsy girl You'll have to find another.'"

Maggie shook her head. "I don't think so, Colin."

He looked offended. "Why not?"

"It sort of spoils the drama, don't you see, for him to have a mother. Evil seducers never have mothers, do they?"

"Artistically speaking, it's a toss-up who seduced whom, isn't it? Now, don't be angry. I'm thinking of this in terms of posterity."

Promenading along in front of them, Ching smirked a great cat smirk and said from over his shoulder, "Another crack like that and he can forget about having his own posterity, eh. witch?"

"Okay then, how about this verse, Maggie?" Colin persisted, attempting to save himself from another tirade. "It
ought to work up some popular sympathy for our side:

"A beggar lassie, dressed in rags, Still in her heart a lady, She mourns the day she heard his song, The song of Gypsy Davey, the song of Gypsy Dave."

"It has possibilities," Maggie admitted. "Still, I hope you won't be stuck with such a gloomy ending, even though that's the sort people like Gran prefer."

"Maybe I can come up with something better when we've talked to Lord Rowan," he said.

"You'll have to do most of the talking, you know."

"I will?" He was unsure whether to feel pleased at being assigned an important role or wary of assuming any responsibility in the matter beyond being General-Protector-Against-Bears and Chief Observer.

"Well, I hardly think my brother-in-law is going to lay out a feast and spread the red carpet, as it were, for the bastard sister of his defected wife, do you?"

"I guess not."

Since leaving Sybil's cottage the days had been uniformly as sunny and clear as before they had been dreary and damp. Hills and forests and forested hills rolled gently back from the road. Wildflowers began to show themselves overnight, embellishing the carpeting of tangy new grass with clumps of blue and purple and yellow and pink and white, mixed and scattered by the roadside and upon the waving meadows. People and houses and roads branching off theirs appeared with increasing frequency, and soon they left the main highway and began having to ask the way to Lord Rowan's private estate.

The road that was pointed out to them led down the thickly populated valley, pleasant with fresh-plowed earth and neat stone houses. Maggie was continually delighting in some new aspect of the southern springtime. At Fort Iceworm it would still be as dim and dank as when they had set out on their journey.

The valley road began a gradual climb that nevertheless nearly finished off the old horse. Their feet had hardened slowly enough, spelling riding with walking, that both Maggie and Colin were now able to walk all the time, and lead the horse, who carried only their packs and the cat, when he chose to ride.

The next valley beyond those hills held the majority of Lord Rowan's vassals, those wealthy ones with good, arable land. The "remainder of his holdings were the rocky hills and mountains of the Argonia-Brazoria border. Only a few scattered villages could be found in all those tortuous peaks and plunging canyons, but it had been the task of the Lords Rowan since the birth of Argonia to patrol those high hinterlands, and to this the greatest part of his time and effort was devoted.

Through the rocky foothills, then. Maggie and Colin and the tired old horse trudged, the road getting ever more steep and ever more winding as they traveled.

"I hope he doesn't live in the middle of those mountains," said Colin.

"The top of a hill, I think the people at the wedding mentioned."

"Which one? We've topped several." The minstrel kept having to wipe the sweat from his forehead to keep it from trickling into his eyes. He had already removed his vest and rolled up his shirtsleeves. His fair skin was burning a hot pink, in spite of the sun they'd gotten before. It had been several years since he'd worked in the fields of East Headpenney. He was no longer accustomed to hard work under a hot sun and was extremely uncomfortable, more so since he did not feel at liberty to give in and be miserable beside Maggie, who plodded along as steadily as the horse, her coarse wool clothing heavy but not confining, hair braided, kerchief tied around her forehead as a sweatband.

"We may as well stop here for rest and a drink," she said finally, when the path began to widen, and trees grew along the steep cliffs going abruptly up on one side and abruptly down on the other.

They sat for several minutes catching their breath, drinking from their waterskins and refilling them at the little stream of water that cascaded down the side of the cliff which formed a wall on one side of the road. Ching returned from a trot around the next bend, his fur lightly ruffled and his tail switching.

"The castle is on the next hill over," he told her. "But there are people on horses coming this way. A lot of people."

Maggie passed the information on to Colin, who sighed gratefully at the first part, although he hardly saw, really, how he could brave another hill, even one more, and agreed with her about the second that the best course would be to climb to the top of the hill and wait until the party passed them. "Who knows?" Colin remarked. "Maybe they'll be going back right away and won't mind giving us a lift."

Maggie said nothing, but was clearly dubious.

Ching scampered ahead and back several times. At the next bend the path reached its zenith. The descent was not by means of a rocky path such as the one up which they had come. The path sloped gently down, dividing a broad field from a wood that covered the land as far as they could see, including the rounded dome rising from the
floor of the valley beyond them. The wood only covered the dome to a certain point, however, for the rest was taken up in the structure of a castle, smallish as castles went, Colin thought, a circular wall enclosing a circular moat dug into the top of the mound. The circular moat surrounded a circular structure flanked by six semi-circular towers. That was it, a simple but effective, and incidentally rather beautiful, design.

"Achoo!" Maggie sneezed and scratched her nose, rubbed her eyes, then pointed. "Here comes that party Ching referred to. Best get over to the side." It took them a few moments to convince the horse, by which time the procession was upon them.

Although Maggie's actual rank as her father's acknowledged heiress and acting steward was rather ambiguous, Colin's presence and their by-now shabby mode of dress dictated that they follow the custom of standorf as the obviously noble caravan paraded before them.

Accordingly, Colin took his cap in his hand and wore his best humble look as the first horse, which contained a man in a military uniform, passed.

Maggie sneezed again and watched the upcoming equestrians with bold and open curiosity. Colin's elbow jabbed her ribs. "Come on, Maggie, you'll get us whipped. Do TRY to look the modest maiden, won't you?"

"Sony," she said, and trained her eyes on her great toe which was now protruding from her boot. Only occasionally did she sneak a peep at the procession. She could hardly help the sneezes, however, which occurred with increasing frequency.

"Imagine, receiving us with no chamber prepared, nor lamp tit, nor tea laid!" a well-fed figure who looked as though missing her tea would do her no harm at all complained to a thin and delicately handsome man. Both were well mounted and well (hessed, the woman perspiring through the limp lace collar of her lavender brocade riding costume, which threatened to collapse at the seams at any moment, with the stress placed upon it by her numerous bulges and protuberances. She was red-faced, either with indignation or the effort of riding, it was difficult to tell which.

"I was talking with the serving maid . . ." the man began.

"You would talk to the serving maid," snapped the lady. . "And she said that the lord had not informed the servants of our impending arrival, nor had he given orders of any sort regarding Ws'household since he ordered his horse and rode off after Lady Rowan."

The lady sniffed. "What would you expect of a northern woman but that? They're all half-wild up there, so I understand."

"Nevertheless, it's a great pity. Poor wretch. I understand Lady Rowan is very beautiful." Maggie sneezed again. "Bless you," the man said absently, taking no note of the origin of the sneeze. The fat woman leaned across him from her saddle to glare at Maggie, who, fortunately, was too occupied readying herself for another sneeze to glare back. "I don't care what she says." snipped a plain-faced girl three horses back from the apparently noble couple. She was addressing a somewhat prettier maid who rode beside her. Both were clothed too grandly for the road, in silks and satins and lace repaired with other materials and much taken in, evidently cast off gifts from their lady. "What's that old bag know of true love, anyhow?"

"Not a thing from him, I'll wager." the other girl agreed chuckling behind her hand. "He's too busy trying to catch us a the bedmaking."

"No wonder, either, poor man." said the first girl, "Bu Ludy, one of Lady Rowan's personal maids, come from ou village, you know, and she was actually there when the gyps actually came into the actual castle!"

"No!"
"Yes! Handsome as anything, she says, though swarthy, o course, but I find dark foreign types attractive, don't you?"

"Oh, my, yes. That brooding, unknown quality!"

"Prouder than any noble, he was, she says, though not too proud to give a girl a pinch." She giggled. "Ludy showed me her bruise to prove it."

"Well, they are all alike."

"Indeed."

"What happened then?"

"Oh, it was SO romantic! Ludy says first he come and asket for a meal, you know, and the lady, she was just passin' by. He offered to sing to pay for his lunch."

"Ooooh, he sang too?"

"My, yes, that's part of it. you know. There's a lovely sons about it all." The girl went on to tell with great relish and considerable colorful embroidery how the Lady Amberwine had been so thrilled with the singing she'd invited him into the hall and then at his slightest suggestion had ordered her horse sad died, pausing only long enough to pull on her fine leather riding boots and warm woolen cloak over her green silk morning drcv before following her new love off across the moors.

"I didn't see any moors hereabouts, meself," said the othci girl suspiciously.

"They're on the west side of the castle, silly, where you can' see them for the trees around the hill."

"Well, moors or no moors, she didn't let any grass grow under her, did she?"

"Oh, no. she was gone by that evening."

Maggie's sneezes interrupted their conversation and the plainer girl looked back over her shoulder at them.

"Ugh! Scraggy-Jooking pair."

"He's rather dear, though, don't you think?"

By the time they had climbed down the hill, crossed the valley, climbed up the dome, crossed the drawbridge, and gained entrance to the inner courtyard, Maggie was not only crying openly, she was gasping for breath.

The closer to the castle they came, the more blurred her vision became from the itching and tearing of her eyes. Her constant sneezing kept her from drawing a decent breath. She stayed bent over with convulsions of katchooing, and Ching no longer rode on her shoulder but regarded her with wide-eyed alarm.

Colin gently guided her across the courtyard to the hall and pounded on the door. A servant on his way in by a side door noticed them at first with disapproval, then saw the state Maggie was in and sympathetically motioned to Colin to come round to that entrance which led to the kitchen.

"Your woman looks sick," observed the sturdy female who, by the ladle she brandished, Colin took to be the cook.

"Yes, ma'am, it came upon her suddenly. Though we may not appear so, my traveling companion is of noble blood, and I accompany her with a message for the Lord Rowan. Do you suppose she could be made comfortable till this illness passes?"

Ching lingered in the doorway for a moment, then, confident that the two-legged members of his party were looking out for

One another, went to see if there was a barn available with the possibilities of a good brawl with some of his own kind, and

:Other feline diversion. Perhaps he would get friendly enough

With the locals to acquire some gossip useful to their mission, fastening the acquisition of his mistress's step-granddaughter and

Ipis own return to his favorite rug under the loom.

"Poor dear can scarcely draw a breath!" the cook said, supporting Maggie in her meaty arms. "To bed with her, and hot Jierbal towels for her face and chest!" She gently lowered Maggie Into a chair and left the kitchen, to return an instant later with a pretty if somewhat vapid-looking girl. "Ludy, put this lady in the North Chamber. She's too sick to be drug all over the Castle."

Ludy looked askance at Maggie's disheveled state, and the Cook, clearly a person of some authority, said with exaggerated patience, "The lad here claims she's noble enough for our guest chambers, and if she is or if she's not, in the state His Lordship's in he'll never know the difference anyhow."

The girl nodded and guided a streaming, sneezing, gasping Maggie from the kitchen.

Turning back to Colin, the cook said with mild severity, "Your message for His Lordship will have to wait, young man. His Lordship is-er-patrolling the borders at the present time.' The minstrel's personal fragrance and grimy clothing, skin, and hair, drew a sniff from her. "Might be best you tidy up a little first anyway."

She showed him the serving men's common quarters and the well. He hauled four buckets of water to the
trough for himself, and three more to wash his clothing. He wore the blue twill britches and ochre skirt, smocked for
warmth, that he had worn the first day at the inn at Fort Iceworm. He hung the road-worn clothing to dry in the sun.
His hands were quite shriveled and soft from all the washing, and it was some time before they dried sufficiently
that he could pick up his guitar. Sitting on a servant's straw mattress, the guitar on his lap, he strummed and thought.

What on earth would he say to His Lordship? How could he breach such a tricky subject as a wife's
abandonment without causing an offense which might not get him turned into cat food, but could certainly get him
hung or something equally uncomfortable and debilitating? He wondered, too, what was wrong with Maggie, and
wished she were there to consult. It was ven inconsiderate of her to leave him in an awkward social situation that
concerned, after all, her relatives, not his.

Maggie awoke from a nightmare in which she was being pressed to death. Although her breathing had been
none too easy when she went to sleep, it was practically nonexistent now, and only panic forced her return to
consciousness.

In her dream, a lion's roar subsided into a menacing growl as the heavy paws pressed down on her shoulders
and the mane bristled against her face.

Struggling to open her stone-weighted eyelids, she found they stubbornly remained closed. Body and will were
made of syrup.

A growl so real that she knew she dreamt no longer rewarded her attempt at movement, and curdled in her ear
as the lion's acrid breath came to her nostrils.

Odd, she thought. One would suppose a lion's breath smelled rather like old blood and such, but this one had
obviously been drinking wine.

Curiosity accomplished what fear would not. Although her eyes would not open entirely, they did open enough
to disclose that what pressed her to the bed was indeed a maned beast, but not one of the feline persuasion.

With hair and beard of bright red, her oppressor looked bleary-ily into her face as she heaved herself upright
enough to partially dislodge him. She noted that his eyes matched his hair. Sprawled across her in a drunken stupor,
he had snored loudly enough to sound very much indeed like a snarling jungle cat.

Speaking of cats, where was that cat who was supposed to preserve her maidenly honor in such situations, she
wondered. From what her granny had told her, drunken red-headed men who sprawled across a girl while she was
sleeping constituted a definite threat thereto.

Ever one of the direct approach, she snarled a bit herself, her husky alto voice made even rougher by the trauma
caused by all her sneezing, which, happily, seemed to have momentarily abated.

"Augh, get up, you!" she said. "You're drunk as a lord!"

He'd fallen back to sleep but now roused a bit, grumbling sleepily, and waved vaguely the bottle still clutched
in one floppy fist. "S'alright, me darlin'. I am a lord!"

Finding she was quite decently clad in her own skirt and tunic, the cook's herbal towels crumpled under her
elbow, she decided to extricate herself the rest of the way out from under him. Wriggling upwards, she sent him
rolling to the foot of the bed as she drew her legs out from under him and hugged them to her chest, huddling there
for a moment, still not feeling quite herself after her indisposition.

He flopped over on one side and attempted to arrange his slack features into a creditable leer. "Aha!" he

"If you'll pardon my saying so, your lordship, I think you've already had an overabundance of spirit."

"Oh, no, m'dear,，“ he said, playfully swining one shovel-’ sized hand in the general direction of her ankles
and swigging from the bottle with the other.

She fetched him a kick that caused him to withdraw the hand for a moment. She wished she could drop one of
her grandmother's powders into his bottle to convert it to something less intoxicating.

He nursed his hand tenderly. "You've hurt me," he blubbered, his bloodshot blue eyes filling with tears.

"Well, I'm very sorry, I'm sure, but you shouldn't go around lying all over people and grabbing at them like
that," she said.

He looked slightly more alert, and also more dangerous, as he said belligerently, "You could have fooled me,
woman. I thought that's what you were here for, because you wanted me to grab you.‘ ‘ Seeing indignant denial
oozing from her every pore, he flopped face down in the bed again. "Then do me the courtesy to get out of me
bedchamber."

"This is your bedchamber?" Maggie looked around at the sumptuous room, with draperies masking its curved
wall, rich rugs on the floor, and tapestries, and the enormous bed on which they argued. "Sorry," she got up and
looked at him curiously, having recognized her brother-in-law and being at a total loss for a decent way to save the
interview.

"It's one of them," he said. "Kept THIS here," he swigged from his bottle. "Dammitall, it's empty." Before she
quite realized what was going on, he had hooked a brawny arm about her waist and pulled her back down beside him. He breathed a winey whisper into her face. "Cook hides it from me, if I don't hide it first. Bloody servants have the gall to say I've been drinking too much. Don't know their place. Ought to thrash the lot of 'em." He grinned conspiratorially. "I fool 'em though. Hide it in these chambers. Don't want any guests anyway, and the lazy buggers never touch these rooms otherwise."

"How clever of you," she said, drawing back from him as far as she was able. She was just about to open her mouth to scream when he gave her a hard look and shoved her away from him. She tumbled to the floor.

"Go on then, you heartless cold wench!" he sobbed with maudlin abandon into his big hands. "Bloody awful women. Always wantin' this and that from a fellow for nothin' but a how-d'ye do, then along come some other fellow and you don't even want that! Use a poor devil and throw him away!"

Maggie stopped at the door. To leave him in this state of mind would probably alienate him for good and defeat her entire purpose in coming to the castle. She looked at him for a moment, trying to see the stately nobleman at Winnie's wedding, the man they said might succeed Finbar as king, and whom her beloved sister had pronounced handsome beyond her wildest dreams. Picking up his empty jug in one hand and concealing it, just in case, in the fold of her skirt, she walked back to him and put a conciliatory hand on his massive shoulder. He did not even look up.

"Don't cry, your lordship. It's not at all how you think," she said. "You're really much too good for the likes of me. and I'm honored by your attention, really, but I've got these-urn-pressing family obligations. I have this grandmother who'd turn us both into frogs, you see."

He passed a hand over his face. "Did you say-? I'm drunker than I thought."

Maggie extracted the jug from her skirts, and poured a drop of Ijre remaining dregs onto her finger. She mumbled a brief spell over it, sprinkled a powder from her pocket over it, and wiped it on the lip of the bottle. Then she cast a general expanding spell and held the bottle out to him. "Have a bit of this, Lord. It'll clear your head."

He swigged a few draughts, gagging on it at first, but eventually both his posture and vision appeared to improve, and he regarded Maggie more soberly, "Can't think how I ever went after such a red-nosed, puffy-eyed, tangle-haired mess of a wench at that." But he grinned, if a little sadly. "Looks like you've been doing some bawling yourself."

"Sneezing, m'Lord."
"Sneezing?"
"Yes, I've had a strange reaction to something hereabouts. I was put to bed here to rest when I became ill."

He said nothing for a moment but looked sheepish. "I- urn-didn't exactly advance your recovery, I suppose?"
"Well, I did wake up in a hurry."
"Sorry," he said. "Sneezing seems to be done."
"It does."

"Let's have a truce then, little lass. Come sit by me and I promise not to bite you. I'll finish this brew. Have some? No? I suppose you know, like everyone else knows why it is I'm actin' unbefittin' m'station, as cook says."

"I do-I mean-you're not . . ."

"Oh, I am. I am indeed. But how is it that you know? Not one of our girls, are you?" Able to see color again, he was curiously aware now of her darkness in a country of mostly fair-haired women.

She felt her cheeks go hot under his scrutiny where they had not with his more direct advances. "No, m'lord, I'm not from here."

"But you have heard."
"I've heard."
"How? Has it gone so far abroad then?"
"Oh, no, you might say a little bird told me."

"And did he tell you why she did it?" he asked softly. "Because if he did, I wish you'd tell me. No one has. Amberwine-well, she just said she was going with him, she didn't say why." She looked away. She didn't know what to say. "What's your name?" he asked.

"Maggie."

"Pleasure to meet you, Maggie. I'm Roari Rowan and this is my place, but since we seem to be so close on such short acquaintance, you can call me Red."

Maggie nodded and he continued as though he hadn't interrupted himself. "She just sat there, Maggie, on that horse I gave her, looking bonny as ever with the wind kinda liftin' her yellow hair, and she says to me, 'I'll leave you now, Roari, and the house as well, and go with Gypsy Davey.' I was so mad I could have cut them both in half, and the horses too! How could she prefer that low-born greasy wretch to me and all I gave her--all I was going to give her? Oh, I know I was gone a lot, searchin' for the border raiders, but for the sake of all that's sacred. Maggie, how
could a sane woman leave her man like that with no word at all and just GO?"

In his agitation his voice had risen to a shout, and his fists were clenched menacingly. A shudder ran through him, and for a moment his shoulders shook. Maggie awkwardly patted his back. His fists relaxed and he shrugged. "Ah, well, what good could it have done to kill them? To dirty my honorable sword with that gypsy's filthy gore? To kill the woman I hoped would be the mother of my children? No. I suppose they deserve each other." The tears were flowing freely again, and Maggie could think of nothing to say, but just kept patting him on the back. Red had a passing ignoble moment when he wondered if she might not be ready to offer more substantial comfort, when footsteps came pelting down the hall and the door crashed open.

Colin and the cook tumbled in with Ching at their heels. Rowan leaped to his feet. "Unhand that woman, sir!" demanded Colin, boldly brandishing the fire iron. "Or you may find yourself scampering to a mousehole to escape yon cat!"

"Keep a civil tongue in your head, young man!" scolded the cook. "Oh, my poor, poor boy. At it again, are you, Red?" she asked, snatching the bottle from him. "Never you mind nasty young men and lewd women, dearie, go to your chamber, and cook will make you a nice pot of tea and fix a bag for your head."

Maggie was going to say something rude about being called a lewd woman, but Rowan was ahead of her. "Has a man no privacy!" roared Roari Rowan to cover his embarrassment. He had found a roar a very effective measure to hide one thing and another, such as the tears that still glistened on his cheeks and in his beard. "I need no tea nor bag for my head. What I need is a drink!"

Re-entering a state of inebriation with a minstrel, Red found, was a most economical way to drink. The fellows sang more than they drank.

First drinking songs, then ballads of love lost, love spurned, love unrequited, love unconsummated, love unconsecrated. both men singing with tears streaming down their faces in poetic abandon, until Colin was afraid his fiddle strings would go limp from the soaking.

Ching sat on Maggie's lap and purred. At first she sang along with them, but she didn't really care for their selection. The sleep which would have rested her from her illness had been interrupted by Rowan's admittedly collapsed lust. She yawned in her chair as Colin and Rowan wailed on. Eventually she leaned over Ching to fold her arms on the table and rest her head on them.

When she woke in the morning, she was in the same lavish bedchamber as the day before, quite alone this time, she noted with relief. She poured cold water from a painted pitcher into a matching bowl, washed and dressed herself, and set out to find the others. Ching hopped down from the bed and followed on her heels.

The stone floors rang hollowly beneath her feet and the place seemed deserted till she once more found the kitchen. Colin was not in sight, but Lord Rowan greeted her as she entered. "Ah, Maggie. The servants obviously must prefer you to our last guests. Squire Bumple and Lady Limely's quarters were not so grand as yours." His eyes were a bright, clear blue this morning and Maggie wondered if perhaps Cook had not after all got to him with her healing poultices and herb teas, though when she might have done it was beyond Maggie. The sky had already been lightening when she herself had succumbed to sleep. "You rested well, I hope?" His Lordship inquired.

"Very well, m'Lord." she replied primly before reverting to type and asking boldly, "were Squire Whatsis and his lady the people we met as we came down to your castle, Lord?"

"Aye, they were." He gestured to a chair at the table, the same where she'd fallen asleep earlier. He sat with his legs straddling his chair, elbows resting on its back. "Of course, Cook didn't fancy them as she did you, lewd woman or not; they were only neighbors and not kinfolk."

"Well I must say I'm glad not to have to formally introduce myself again," she said.

"A more informal re-introduction would have scarcely been possible, eh, little sister-in-law?" He got quite a hearty laugh from the black look she gave him for his impropriety. "Family obligations, indeed, m'dear!" His laughter wheezed to a stop. "Ah, damn, that felt good. I haven't laughed in a long time. You and the minstrel are better than all of Cook's tonics."

"Where is Colin?" She touched the mirror in her pocket and remembered with a spurt of impatience her sister's image in the crystal.

"He's about. Choosing a horse for the rest of your journey, I suppose. Gypsies have good mounts. You can't hope to overtake them on foot." She stared at him.

"Oh, aye, Colin told me of your daft plan." He shrugged, "I did my best already. If you can talk sense to your sister, I hope you'll find her then."

"When we saw her in my aunt's crystal ball, she was leaving the gypsies," Maggie said. "And she was pregnant, my aunt said. Very pregnant."

"Very-?" He looked irresolute for the first time that mom-ing. "Too-?"
Maggie nodded in answer to his garbled question. "Five months at least by Aunt Sybil, who knows quite a lot about such things. Way before the gypsy came. I don't suppose you'd want to come along? Pregnant women have been known to do odd things before, and it surely must be your child."

Rowan was quiet for a long time. "What do you want me to do, Maggie? How can I take her back, if she'd come? She's shamed me before my own folk. They'd expect me to do something vengeful, and it's not in me to harm Amberwine. I need the respect of my people to lead them, Maggie."

She nodded. She wanted to tell him of her suspicion that Winnie had somehow been tricked, that, in spite of all the evidence to the contrary, including his own painful confrontation with her, his lady had been forced to leave her home. Remembering his confusion of the night before, she decided regretfully that it would be unfair to add to it, to raise his hopes when she had no real proof that her feelings were based on fact. "But you won't stand in our way? If we find her and she'll come home with us to Iceworm, you'd bear her no malice? You won't mind if she comes home to me and Dad?"

"No, little darlin'." He patted her hand and held the pat a moment too long. "I won't mind that. But I think I mind your going." They each looked in an opposite corner of the room after he said that, searching for a change of subject.

Uncomfortable, Maggie rose to her feet and went to the kitchen door, thinking she'd check on Colin's progress with the horses. As she stepped a foot into the tree-lined courtyard, she sneezed a mighty sneeze and retreated, still sneezing, into the kitchen.

The door slammed as she backed into the table and gropingly found her chair, sinking into it as she gasped for breath between sneezes. As she held her head in her hands in the enclosure of the kitchen, the sneezing slowly subsided.

Red looked alarmed. "Poor lass. Perhaps you've simply caught your death of coid. Minstrel Coiin made up a song, you know, about your tryin' to save that daft drownin' dragon."

"He-gasp-he did?"

"Aye." He rose and touched her shoulder as he crossed the room in one stride. "You just let me show you how to build a roarin' fire in the hearth here. Cook wasn't expectin' us up and stirrin' so early today, y'know, after our little commiseration last night." He pulled a door in the wall beside the fireplace open and began throwing logs into the hearth's open maw. "She doesn't reckon with me constitution. M' family's descended from the owd frost giants, did you know that? Hell, I can drink like that all night and march forty leagues the next day."

Maggie was paying no attention to Roari's bragging, for as he lit the tinder to the kindling her sneezing once more erupted. "It's ahhhhh--it's--ahhh--it's CHOO! It's the logs!" Although what she said was fairly unintelligible, her frantic gestures and the commencement of her sneezing just as he lit the fire finally made sense to Lord Rowan, who was not a stupid man. He doused the fire with the pot of water in which Cook had been soaking wine cups. The fine pottery tinkled in the hiss of the dying flames. He swore as he both cut and burned his fingers pulling the embers apart, and found the rinse pail, dousing the embers again till they were completely dead. When the fire was out, he threw the sticks of kindling and logs back into the bin from which they'd come, and slammed the door.

Again Maggie's wheezing and sneezing began to abate, and she breathed normally again.

"I never saw t' like of that." His Lordship sat down again and stared at her curiously. "The good rowan logs, is't? From my own trees?" He was still shaking his head when comprehension came crashing down on top of it. "Wait a bit-that trick you did with the wine jug-and your owd granny turning folk into frogs and t' like. I heard Amberwine say she was a witch-you're witchfolk yourself, aren't you, girl?"

Maggie nodded, speech still being difficult. "It's a wonder then, dearie, that you're sitting there to nod at me."

She looked quizzical.

"Didn't your granny or that aunt of yours tell you anything? Rowan trees are dead prison to your kind."

Maggie shrugged and said in a voice half her usual volume, "I suppose they never thought of it. That kind of tree doesn't grow at home, and I've never left there before."

"For one of your kind, it should have been a standard warning," he said, his booming voice still harsh enough to make her shrink from its noise. "Should have told you that along with telling you to wrap your cloak tight and stay indoors on rainy nights. I don't know why the reaction didn't kill you, but if it had my enemies would have said I murdered you from spite over Amberwine."

"That's ridiculous," Maggie replied with some of her old assurance.

"Wouldn't have been unheard of," said Cook, coming in from the courtyard. "Course YOU wouldn't, m'Lord, but there's them ...""

His glower persuaded her to continue at a more subdued level.
"Anyhow, just fancy poor Miss Maggie being a witch and your rowan trees making her ill!" She heaved a deep, put-upon sigh. "I suppose that means a cold breakfast and no herb tea for you, with no fire."

The positive aspects of witchcraft were displayed by Maggie who, having recovered her strength, produced ham and ginger omelettes, and two loaves of bread, one for Rowan and the other for herself and Colin, who came in while preparations were in progress. Rowan's omelette consisted of a ham and two thirds of the morning's eggs. The other, third was more than enough for Maggie and Colin and the servants. Thus they breakfasted comfortably enough to please even Cook, although the older woman did voice the opinion that somehow such fare lacked the taste of food made the conventional way, with elbow grease and a fire of the usual kind. Both minstrel and host assured her that such views constituted nothing but traditionalist propaganda.

With a napkin-ruffling sigh, Lord Rowan pushed himself away from the table, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. "Now then, minstrel, m'lad, you have the horses?"

"Yes, m'Lord." A sober Rowan, Colin felt, was entitled to formal address, although "Red" was good enough for a drunken one.

"And the provisions?"
"As much as we'll need. We can travel light on that account, m'Lord, due to Mistress Brown's-er-skills."
"Very good. Weapons?"
"Weapons, m'Lord?"
"Weapons." Rowan nodded encouragingly. Colin cast a quizzical glance at Maggie, who shrugged.

"No weapons, m'Lord. Our mission being-uh-in the nature of a family disturbance, you might say--"

"Laddy, there is NOTHING," Lord Rowan jabbed a sausagelike finger emphatically into the table top, "Nothing more dangerous than a family disturbance! Were I not so sweet-tempered in my cups, had you not known so many good drinking songs, and had my in-law here not been sae bonny, you might well have found out from me how dangerous. You won't be so lucky as to charm the gypsy gamp in similar fashion, I'm thinkin'."

He leaped up and stalked into the dining hall and back before Maggie and Colin had time to do more than exchange bewildered shrugs. When he returned there was clasped in his great paw a broadsword whose enormity was minimized only by his own. He whacked and whooshed experimentally at the air around him, then ceremoniously presented the sword to Colin, who found it awkward to keep aloft.

"I don't see how he can carry that," Maggie said.

"Right!" barked Rowan, springing off again to return with the scabbard, which he plopped on the table. He sat again, drawing his chair up to the table once more, beaming like an excited child. "It's my second best family sword, y'know. Figure if you're off to find my wife you may as well have my sword to help you wade your way through her admirers. We Rowans are a warrior clan, really, descended from a rowdy bunch of fellows called frost giants from someplace past the Sea of Glass. Since we've been in Argonia there've been so bloody many heroes on both sides it's difficult to say who's bravest, but it's generally agreed that my sword, Owd Gut-Buster, belongin' formerly to that famous berserker. Rowan the Rampager, is the best. This one," he glowed with pride as he reached across the table to finger the sword as it lay in front of Colin, "is the legendary Obtruncator. Owner was not only a fella of great bravery, but possessed the most marvekms restraint and foresight of all the Rowans before him."

"What was his name?" Colin asked.

"Rowan the Reckless." He placed the sword in the scabbard. "I'm considered somethin' of a sissy by the chroniclers of my family, I would suppose, but most of the heroes, you must understand, served as one-man fronts in some king's war. I'm the first to be considered for nomination for the throne itself. Bumple came here to pledge himself to me before the fact. When you've gone I'm going to have to ride over there and make amends. I guess. Can't just go discarding peoples' allegiances if you're going to be in politics."

"You'll make a splendid king, I'm sure." Maggie said it politely, but was surprised to find she felt considerable conviction behind her statement.

"Damn right. I would," agreed Rowan. "Doesn't look too well, actually, though, Bumple says, what with her potential royal highness not exactly givin' me what you might call her vote of confidence." A few minutes passed in silence, then His Lordship banged the table as he got to his feet. "Well, lad, I'd best show you how to use this second-best family sword, eh?"

"Thank you, m'Lord, I'm sure, but really--"

"Oh, yes, and Maggie darlin', you'd best have this along." He tossed her a sheathed dagger. "All the gypsies carry at least one, and you oughtn't to be unprotected." The hilt was notably unencrusted with gems, but was made of a beautiful purple-colored wood, and appeared quite sharp enough to slice anything requiring slicing. Maggie devoutly hoped she could confine its use to game meat and fresh fruit.
CHAPTER 7

Colin groaned with pain as he half slid and half fell off his horse and onto the ground, where he lay like a freshly landed trout. A long night filled with too much wine and not enough sleep, followed by the unsoothing clang and banging of Gut-Buster and Obtruncator as Rowan attempted to teach him the rudiments and a few of the finer points of swordplay (as far as he could tell it was all rudimentary, and though he felt the point often, he didn't find it particularly fine) had gotten his day off to an inauspicious start. Maggie's insistence that they leave immediately after she had been unable to use her aunt's gift to locate Ambcrwine from within the castle had not been a welcome development. It had become even less agreeable when the decision was made by Maggie and Rowan that in order to keep to a minimum the effect of the rowan trees upon her, Maggie was to ride Rowan's swiftest steed at maximum speed out the west gate of the castle and across the moors. Colin was to trot behind with a packhorse and a fresh mount to replace the lathered one that would carry the heavily-veiled Maggie away from her nemesis. That was all very well for Maggie, but Colin hardly felt up to walking on tiptoe very quietly, much less trotting.

Neither had his sacrifice of his own best interests in order to preserve hers met with deep appreciation and profound gratitude. Maggie was turning the mirror over in her hands, staring at it moodily when he rode up, and she continued to be quiet and uncommunicative, nodding or shaking her head or answering in the shortest possible fashion when he addressed her, if she answered at all.

Now that he was finally allowed to rest his throbbing head and aching limbs, he was prodded out of his misery by Maggie saying "If you don't want any of this, I'll give therestoChing." He looked up. Maggie was seated on her bedroll, toasting her toes before one of her fueliess campfires, eating a wing of the roast pheasant that turned on the spit above the fire, dripping juices into the flames with a sizzling pop that even sounded delicious.

After feasting on the rest of the bird, two potatoes with fresh herbed butter, and half a loaf of hot bread, Colin thought he might survive after all.

With surprise, he saw that Maggie had spread his cloak across her knees and was reweaving one of the collection of rips and tears and holes that were its only adornments.

"Thank you," he said. "But you don't have to do that."

"I like sewing," she replied without lifting her eyes. "It calms me."

"Well, if it's calming you want, listen to this!" In spite of his afflictions, new verses for the song about Amberwine and the gypsy had been worming their way in and out of his aching brain all day long. He fetched his guitar down from the horse and sang:

"Go saddle me my good gray steed The brown is not so speedy And I'll go racin' 'crost the moor To overtake my lady.

"When he saw the man who wronged him so His anger it did kindle, But thinkin' on his lady's love His wrath did slowly dwindle.

"How could you leave your house and land And all the wealth I gave ye? How could you leave your own true love To ride with Gypsy Davey?"

"Oh, what care I for house and land Or all the wealth you gave me. I'm goin' now, my own true love, To ride with Gypsy Davey."

"Then I'll put those other two verses I sang earlier towards the end. What d'ya think?" Colin asked, looking up expectantly. Maggie was staring off into space again, ignoring her needlework. When she saw him watching her, she quickly brushed her face with the back of her hand and leaned down to bite in two the thread with which she had been sewing.

"Well?" Colin asked again.

"I beg your pardon?"

"What do you think?"

"Oh-the song. Very good, Colin. You really do have a talent." It was the longest sentence she'd said all day. He was about to ask her if she'd like to discuss what was troubling her or if perhaps he was mistaken and she was merely practicing to enter a religious order under a vow of silence, when she added another comment. He grinned with relief and with the realization that for a change he was actually glad to hear her say something. "But how do you know Winnie's side of the conversation?"

"A combination of research and poetic license. Ludy, the serving maid, was listening at the door when Rowan told Cook what happened on his ride."

"I think he showed remarkable restraint for someone with his background, don't you?" She reweove one of the few places on the cloak that had remained intact.
"Well, he came off alright in the song, I suppose ..."
"He'd make a handsome king, don't you think?"

By returning his guitar to its sack Colin was able to conceal his frown. Rowan had been decent enough to him, but Maggie was acting, now that he thought about it, a lot the way she had after meeting the unicorn. While Rowan's horns were of another variety, they apparently troubled him enough to cause him to pay a lot of unsettling attention to ordinary brown-haired girls -like his susceptible sister-in-law. It would have pleased Colin a lot better if the bereaved, deserted husband had just gone on bereaving and left his own traveling companion out of it.

"Why don't we try the magic mirror again, Maggie? We ought to find out if we're headed in the right general direction before we go much further."
"I suppose you're right. I wonder why it wouldn't work this morning. Toads! I thought if Rowan could just SEE Winnie he might--oh, I don't know what I thought."
"He did try that once to gel her back," Colin reminded her, disliking Rowan even more because fairness forced him to defend the fellow.
"I know. Where shall we start?"
"Where your aunt left off."

Maggie had pulled the mirror out of her pocket and polished it. She held in her mind the image of Amberwine and of gypsies, the latter image provided by the village fairs and her imagination freshly fueled by Colin's song. As the rainbow lights flashed away in the darkness, two indistinct pictures, one superimposed on the other, appeared in the mirror.

"Hmnnm, let me try to clarify that," she said, and thought hardest about her sister as she had last seen her, tousled and troubled and burdened by pregnancy. The gypsy wagons that had hung ghostlike over the mirror faded and Maggie and Colin almost wished them back to hide the ugliness of the remaining image.

Amberwine huddled by a stone wall, her hair tangled in a mat that covered her face, so that it took Maggie a while to be certain that it was indeed her elegant sister who swatted the flies away from the sores that covered her arms and thin, bare legs. Her ribs showed sharply above her swollen stomach. As the sounds of a marketplace rattled through the mirror, Winnie suddenly sat up straighter and shoved a handful of hair back from her red, swollen eyes with one sharp combing motion. A peddler's cry sang out over the other noises and Winnie got to her feet, pulling the remnants of her shift over as much of herself as they would cover. The cry was repeated, and Maggie almost lost the picture in her surprise. "That's Hugo's cart!" she said, as it came into view, immediately in front of Amberwine.

At first it appeared as though Winnie might try to round the corner of the building and escape the peddler's notice, but then she seemed to change her mind and drew herself to her full height, managing to look regal and somehow, Colin thought, ethereal and heart-breakingly beautiful, for all her dirt and mats and sores.

"Why, my Lady Amberwine," exclaimed Hugo, as though he were greeting her in her father's kitchen garden.
"Whatever are you doing here in Queenston?"

Though Maggie had difficulty with them, the social graces and their attendant poise had been Amberwine's by birthright, not education alone, and had never deserted her. Now, as ever, she was cool. "Oh, hullo, Hugo. How nice to see you here. I don't suppose you'd have a frock and a bit of bread or something today I might charge to Daddy's account, do you?"

The peddler's tone was sweeter than Aunt Sybil's house. He waved a cutely admonishing finger at her. "Now your ladyship knows I have nothing fine enough for the likes of you on MY humble cart." He gave Amberwine a chance to interpret this as a rejection of her thinly-disguised petition for help, then said. "Actually, ma'am, I've been sent to look for you. Your father is staying here with a distant relative of your stepmother's. If you wouldn't mind riding in my modest wagon, I could take you to him."

Amberwine was cool, but not that cool. Tears of relief and gratitude washed her lovely face. "At last. Oh, Hugo, I don't know how to thank you," she started babbling, "if father wilt only forgive me, perhaps--"

She stopped herself from talking by fairly dancing onto the cart. "Is Maggie along? Will I see her?"

"Old Hugo has all kinds of surprises for you, my Lady, if only you'll just settle yourself so we can get on now," he said it as though coaxing a child.

"Oh, certainly, to be sure, oh, my, yes," she wriggled around and signalled to him that she was ready for departure.

"That slimy bastard!" Maggie yelled, as the mirror went dark. She thrust it rudely back into her pocket. "How fast can we get to Queenston from here?"
"It's about a week's hard ride, at least. Maggie, what did he mean about your father being there?"
"I don't know. It's a lie, of course. What can that vile worm be up to, anyway?"
"Can he have passed us while we were at the castle?"
"Perhaps—or else—"

"Or else what?" he asked, hoping she wouldn't insist they ride all that night to get to Queenston the earlier.

"Or else that explains the iron trap, and why our horses were stolen. But why would Hugo be the villain Rabbit
saw shoot Dad's horse? And how could he move so quickly? You yourself said a week. The* man must not sleep." She sighed and bit her thumb nail before spreading her blankets. "We have to though. And the horses need a rest."

His own questions about the vision were drowned out by relief as Colin spread his own bedroll.

CHAPTER 8

They never reached Queenston.

Colin, whose ear could pick a birdsong out of a thunderstorm during an earthquake (if a bird should be so
unwise as to be present and singing under such circumstances), heard the music hours before they reached the gypsy camp.

By the time Maggie heard it as well, they had spotted the gaudily painted wagons competing with the wildflowers for sheer colorfulness in the wood-bordered meadow.

At the top of the meadow they stopped their horses and watched the late afternoon activity of the gypsies. Townspeople from the village which lay nearby were scattered among the gypsies, having their fortunes told, Maggie supposed, or perhaps naively imagining they could get the best end of a trade for the gypsy horses which were tethered close by one of the wagons. Babies squallled and children ran naked among people, livestock, and wagons. The flash of bright, cheap cloth and the glitter of a golden earring or a gold com necklace occasionally danced across their field of vision before being blotted out as the wearer disappeared behind a wagon or hunkered down to barter.

The predatory gleam in Maggie's eye, and the determined compression of her lips as she surveyed the scene boded no good to Colin. Gypsies were scarcely known for their tractable dispositions either, and he and Maggie could not count on strange townspeople to extricate them from any difficulty Maggie's temper brought upon them.

Ching sat up on his pallet and viewed the camp with precisely the same attitude he displayed towards birds. Maggie smiled suddenly, a lazy, preoccupied smile, and nodded, leaning over to scratch the cat's ears.

Hoping that the smile meant her mood was improving, Colin said, "Maggie," in his best tone of gentle but firm reasonableness. "That is not place for you. You are far too emotional about
this situation, and will undoubtedly cause those people to do us some injury if you let your temper get the better of you. You can't do your sister any good then, can you?" He ended on a note slightly more confident than the one he'd started on, and stole a glance from his alert, eyes-forward posture, to see how she was receiving his speech.

To his utter astonishment, the predatory stance and the probably even more troublemaking smile had both disappeared, and it was a mild Maggie who sat on the horse beside him, her head lowered, eyes downcast, hands meekly folded atop the pommel of her saddle. Ching had rolled over on his back and was watching them, upside down, purring sincerely.

"I-uh-I feel," he finished lamely, somewhat deflated by the lack of anticipated opposition, "that an objective party such as myself is the proper one to do the reconnaissance. Besides, gypsies are pretty musical. They're not so apt to mind a minstrel."

"Of course not, Colin," she readily agreed. "A minstrel's pocket's as easy to pick as anyone's." The momentary sharp look that accompanied that statement was quickly veiled by lowered lashes. Colin wasn't really fooled by her pose of maidenly acquiescence, but was grateful she wasn't making a scene. "I really think you're probably quite right. As you say, I do get upset. So perhaps Ching and I will stay here in this part of the meadow."

"What will you do?" he asked suspiciously.

"Oh, pick a few wildflowers, gather a few herbs Gran was wanting at home. So you just run along and find that awful gypsy-but watch out for his nasty mother."

"Right," he said, still puzzled, but getting ready to take advantage of her uncharacteristic fit of good nature to click to his horse and be off.

"Good-bye!" she waved gaily to him, though he still sat beside her. In order not to feel ridiculous, he rode into the camp.

A small, grubby boy ran up to him as he stopped beside one of the wagons on the fringe of the camp. "Honorable Lord!" the youngster yelled loudly as he bowed low and grinned, "I will keep your splendid animal and treasured possessions from all harm while you enjoy the hospitality of my home and converse with my elders, you know what I mean?"

Colin knew. "How could I possibly repay you for such thoughtful service, young squire?" he replied with insincerity to match the urchin's own. He knew exactly how.

"By crossing my palm with a small coin or two, or a large one if you prefer, oh, not for me, but for my aged mother and fourteen younger brothers and sisters! ’ he replied. It must have been a remarkable family for him to
have fourteen younger brothers and sisters, Colin thought, as the boy himself was scarcely more than seven or eight years old.

"Of course," he said, flipping the coins to the child. Two wagons away, a woman with the raven gypsy hair and skin darker than Maggie's switched her scarlet flounced skirt back and forth the same way Ching would switch his tail as she watched the transaction with an interest not wholly economic. Her lava-black eyes infected Colin's pores with a humid pre-perspiration warmth.

Very conscious of those eyes, Colin cradled his fiddle under one arm as he sought the source of the music, a task made more difficult, as there was a lull in the performance, whether or not occasioned by his arrival he had no way of knowing.

Children clung to his britches and shirt tail as he walked from wagon to wagon, seeking the musicians, who were not occupying the bare meadow grass within the ring of wagons, as Colin had half expected. There were women poking in a cooking pot over a central campfire, and some others tending a spitted animal roasting over a pit, but they were old and unattractive, and in no way musical-looking, though he admitted he could have been fooled. Actually, the children weren't the only ones enjoying the novelty of being with peculiar-looking strangers. Colin had sung a lot of songs about and by gypsies, but like many of the other things he had sung of at the academy, gypsies were not something of which he had any first-hand knowledge. He'd sung of rowan trees too, but how good had he been at recognizing them? They'd practically had to kill a friend of his before he even knew what they were. The same ignorance held true of court life (except for a brief field trip to the minstrel hall at the capitol), the seas beyond the Gulf of Gremlins, war, bandits. True Love, ogres, flying carpets, and princesses. And of course, any number of other things, though he had been able, in the course of this journey, to withdraw dragons, unicorns, gnomes, and knights from the list. Even in East Headpenney they had had a witch, though she was of little real use that Colin could see, her main talent being the ability to communicate with dead people. Because of that talent of hers, he had met a lot of ghosts, but on the whole, he thought with satisfaction, gypsies were far more colorful and exciting. He sort of hoped this might be the wrong gypsy camp, or that if Gypsy Davey were here, Amberwine would, in spite of the evidence of the magic mirror, be with him. While Amberwine and Maggie were being reunited, Colin could see, her main talent being the ability to communicate with dead people. Because of that talent of hers, he had met a lot of ghosts, but on the whole, he thought with satisfaction, gypsies were far more colorful and exciting. Hence sort of hoped this might be the wrong gypsy camp, or that if Gypsy Davey were here, Amberwine would, in spite of the evidence of the magic mirror, be with him. While Amberwine and Maggie were being reunited, Colin could befriend the people of the caravan, who would recognize him as a good and honest man and a great artist, and trot out all their best folk stories and songs to tell him, which he would take back to the academy and for which he would be given all sorts of praise and respect and a professorship with tenure (which he would humbly decline, of course, preferring the true troubadour's life on the open road).

Just as he was accepting the Minstrel's Medal of Merit from Master Minstrel Peter, he tripped and fell sprawling, face first, catching himself hard on his left side to avoid damage to his fiddle.

"Sorry," mumbled the person over whom he had tripped, languidly drawing her feet closer to her and covering them with a full blue skirt. Her mood appeared to match her attire. Ignoring him as completely as though he were a ghost, she sat with her head resting against the splinterly rough wood of the wagon, the pretty head drooping as though her neck were inadequate to support it. Though the neck was long and graceful, it appeared to Colin to be in no way insubstantial, however. It was draped with beads and coins that jangled distractingly as the girl heaved a desolate sigh. Her chin pointed up but her mouth pointed most emphatically down, and he watched a tear balance, glistening, on the end of her nose before skipping over her lips to slide down her chin and trail off behind her ear.

"It was my fault. I ought to look where I'm going," he said, feeling embarrassed to be relatively tragedy-free in the face of such evident misery. "Beg your pardon, but could you tell me where the musicians are? I play the fiddle." he held it up, his credentials, "I thought, you know, they might let another fiddler sit in."

She jerked her head to the left. The children who had been following him had joined a group of people, liberally sprinkled with dogs, who leaned, sat, or lay in a loose cluster around five men, and around one man in particular.

Having more than what he felt was his just portion of moody women lately, Colin stifled his sympathy, and in three strides joined an ale keg of a man who was seated on the ground. The man in the middle was telling a story, and telling it very well. His tone was ringing and true, and carried so well Colin wondered that he had not heard him earlier. The fellow's whole

1. attitude was a parody of the love, grief, hate, sorrow, and anger that motivated his audience. His was the voice of life taken lightly, and it was a soft voice, sibilant, caressing the ears of his listeners. He had a gift for timing, drama, and imitation that made him the best natural storyteller Colin had ever heard, aside from Master Minstrel Peter.

Though certainly dark, the gypsy was neither tall nor particularly handsome, having a beakish nose not uncommon on other faces in the crowd. But his black eyes sparkled with wit, his mouth was always ready to laugh,
and his hands were in constant motion, making a play of his words.

They were large, thin-fingered hands and they drew, as Colin watched diagrams of battles, became firing cannon, or horses so fast as to elude all pursuit. They described with gestures to match his voice his conquests of the most beautiful women in more countries than he cared to count. Colin believed every word.

Watching the gypsy, Colin wished that he had as large a nose so that he could flare it dramatically, as though at the scent of blood or perfume—it was, on the gypsy, an excellent tool of expression. Colin also thought that his nature slighted him when it came to flashing a dashing smile. Even with brown edges, white teeth flashed so much more effectively in a dark face. The gypsy drew answering grins from the men and sighs from the prepubescent girls and the few crones.

The only physical resemblance between himself and the gypsy was that they both had dirt under their fingernails—but Colin wondered if he could move his hands so flexibly describing the curve of a lover’s breast, waist, and hip that his audience would fail to notice his poor grooming habits. Probably not.

For all his talent and training, he began to despair of ever having such a manipulative narrative skill as the gypsy. Perhaps if he questioned the gypsy, who seemed to have accomplished the thing the older fellows had hinted was part of the trade of the minstrel, that of having the audience in the palm of his hand and, not incidentally, of having female persons unplatonically impressed with him, Colin would find out how it was done. It could be, of course, that practice made perfect, as it did with getting a consistently perfect high drone from his fiddle or clear barred chords on the guitar. Probably not, but he could hope so.

When the gypsies began to play once more, this tune a non-gypsy song, a bawdy ballad, in fact, that Colin knew, he put his fiddle to his shoulder and unlimbered his bow. The other fiddler in the group, a one-eyed man whose big nose had such large pores in its skin it looked like a bit of aged cheese, stopped playing. Colin played for a moment or two longer before he realized he was carrying the tune alone.

The man who spat in his general direction was as skinny as one of the camp dogs, but lacked their teeth or any of his own. "We do business with you people, but who asked you to play, eh?"

"I am the violinist in this camp," said cheese-nose.

The air had a lot the same mouth-drying heaviness it had had in Sir William's tavern just before Colin had flown off into it. He hoped the witchy gypsy woman, Xenobia, was not within earshot, as he remembered his training in dissembling class. Dissembling class had been excellent training for him. Basically much too forthcoming for his own good, Colin realized that every competent entertainer must be at least in part a liar. "What do you mean 'you people'?" he asked in the best imitation of their speech pattern he could muster.

"Outsiders get entertained tonight, when they pay," said the skinny man. "Isn't that right, Davey? Only gypsies now."

Colin huffed himself up indignantly. "Not a gypsy? I? Not a gypsy? What sort of people are you not to have heard of the fair gypsies of Kallanderry?" He warmed to his part. "You wound me. My violin weeps with pain—to be so ignominiously cast out by my own people—" seeing a glint of amusement in Davey's eye and fearing he was laying it on a bit too thick, he left off talking and began playing again, which suited him much better. The fiddle did indeed cry a violin's lament, a morbid throbbing tune, if to say tune was not to make it sound too lively. Before long the majority of the observers and participants looked a lot like the gypsy girl he had tripped over. It was too mournful for Colin to sustain without becoming seriously depressed, so he blended it into a sprightlier tune, one full of enough spirit and fire to convince them he had to be a gypsy.

Nonetheless, up till the moment when Davey began to first clap time and then to improvise on his own guitar, Colin had expected to have his fiddle shoved down his throat at any second. Taking Davey's lead, the others also chimed in and the hostility was forgotten. Behind his concentration on his music, Colin was finally able to exhale.

As one good drink begat another, so did one lively tune lead to the whole group joining in on a second song. Soon everyone was laughing, crying, singing, shouting, and generally carousing in an altogether friendly fashion. All except Davey, Colin was surprised to notice. Among the unabashed tears and laughter, the storyteller had stopped participating now that he was no longer the center of attention. He looked bored. A jug had been making the rounds of the group, and when Colin next passed it to Davey, the gypsy rose to his feet. "Come on, Cousin. I'll show you around." He picked up his bolero, on which he'd been seated, and flung it casually over one shoulder. His guitar dangled from the other hand. As they left the group, he said, "My people are preparing to entertain the townsfolk with a little show tonight, while the children go into the town for supplies. Now, of course, that we know you're one of us," and a twitch of his eyebrow gave Colin to understand that he knew no such thing, "we hope to enlist you in our performance. We'd be honored, you understand."

"I understand, and I'll be happy to do that, Cousin," Colin replied. "Nothing I like better than a good show. Nothing like it for gathering provisions either. Are you sure the town will be empty enough to make the shopping profitable?"
"Oh, yes." His smile was wolfish. "A group of our little black-eyed beauties, chaperoned by my mother, have
gone to the town to do what you might call the advance publicity. A few of them," he indicated the nongypsies still
engaged in trying to trade horses, "came out this afternoon when a friend of ours who's a peddler passed the word we
were here. They hope to trade horses and buy and sell orphans." He grinned broadly, apparently considering this last
very humorous. Colin, orphaned since babyhood, was less amused, but nevertheless smiled his best shrewd ersatz-
gypsy smile.

"I saw one pretty girl who apparently didn't go. I tripped over her when I joined your group—very nice-looking,
but she seemed unhappy."

"You can only mean Zoran," Davey snorted. "She thinks she owns me. She's always hanging around me,
crying. I think she believes if she cries hard enough I'll drown in her tears. If you like her, take her with you, please.
She's nothing but trouble. One time when I was young and stupid I gave her a little thrill, and ever since she dogs my
footsteps. Her father used to be a powerful man here, could train anything, trained our first bear, in fact, but then he
was killed. If Zorah weren't such a good trick rider my mother would get rid of her."

Colin felt ill at ease. This was not what he wanted to know about female admiration, its care and feeding.

Infatuated girls

undoubtedly must cause trouble to someone like Davey, he imagined. He knew he'd have to go right on
imagining too, since few were infatuated with him, and it hardly seemed fair. Still, the gypsy seemed to have a
history of such disappointed infatuations; he must be used to it by now. He seemed to make a habit of them. Hadn't
he ever been smitten himself? Even with the reportedly irresistible Amberwine?

"I can't take any girls with me," Colin said aloud. "Maggie wouldn't like that at all, I'm afraid."

"Who is this Maggie?" asked the gypsy, his irritation gone and his voice regaining its former silkiness.

"Uh—one of our girls."

"Pretty?" Interest flickered in Davey's dark eyes, replacing the sullenness he'd displayed discussing the
unfortunate Zorah. Colin was reminded of the hunting hound with a scent, or songs about hunting hounds getting
scents, anyway. No one hunted with dogs in East Headpenney.

"Umm—so—so." He remembered belatedly that his imaginary Kallanderry gypsy tribe were supposed to fair, and
Maggie was nearly as dark as any of these people. "Actually, she's the regular kind of gypsy—we—uh—adopted her."

"Oh, and you say she's traveling with you?"

Colin waggled his head deprecatingly. "She's a really shy girl. She wanted to camp up farther in the meadow—
doesn't like crowds."

"What? And miss our legendary hospitality?" Davey clapped him on the back and speared a chunk of meat
from the roasting lamb as they passed. "No, my friend, cousin, we must insist you bring her down to our camp.
Never must it be said that some of our own camped alone while we had a fire and music and plenty of food to share!
It would be a deadly insult!"

"It would?" Colin certainly didn't want to offend local custom. He suspected Davey knew that and was
counting on it. "That's very gypsy of you, I must say." Colin replied finally, feeling trapped.

Davey waved expansively. "Of course it is."

Colin was shoved suddenly forward as a small black-haired missile slammed into his back. "Davey! Queen
Xenobia wants to see you now." A buxom gypsy lass disentangled herself from Colin and tugged at the hand of
Davey, who was already following her back toward the campfire.

"Your pardon, Cousin. My mother has returned."

"Perfectly alright, old man. I'll just go along and—uh—command Maggie to pull up stakes and come back here with me to your camp and—er—no nonsense."

"Good!" hollered the gypsy, flashing one more dazzling grin as he was dragged off. Colin sighed to notice that
the gypsy didn't allow himself to be dragged for long, but neatly turned the situation by catching up with the girl in
two strides and encircling her waist with his arm. Colin shook his head slowly, and walked back toward where he
had left his horse,

"Psst! You, Blondie!" He thought at first from the language that Ching had followed, finally deciding to talk to
him.

"What?" he asked, looking around.

"Over here! Yes, you!" From behind a wagon wheel the girl who had been crying, the one Davey had called
Zorah and had said such uncomplimentary things about, beckoned him. He wondered what she could possibly be
doing under the wagon. Feeling a little foolish, he looked over his shoulder to make sure no one was looking before
he hunkered down to talk to her. No one watched, and he imagined if they did they'd assume he was relieving
himself.

Her expression was perhaps a little nervous, but no longer so soggy. "Yes, ma'am?" he asked.
"You make friends fast, eh, Blondie?"
"If you mean Davey, we just met of course but ..."
"But you like him. Fine fellow, yes?"
"Well--"
"Sure, you do. Everybody likes him. Me, especially," a rueful shrug punctuated that remark, "but it's you who's got to help him."
"Me? Help him? He looks as though he's doing just fine without my help, actually."
"You don't understand."
"Can't say as I do, in fact. Say, tell me. what's a nice girl like you doing lurking about behind wagon wheels anyway?"
"Come down here and sit by me, and I'll explain it all to you, little fiddler."
"Thank you, but you see, I'd actually promised Davey that I'd come."
He went.

CHAPTER 9

As he had never seen Maggie do much more than produce something tasty for mealtimes, Colin would have been a trifle shocked if he had beheld the goings-on in the meadow above the gypsy camp since he had been absent.

The longest chore was the gathering of lichens for dyes, but even that took only a few minutes with the aid of Rowan's knife and Maggie's magic, for the gathering of plants was a legitimate household pastime at Fort Iceworm. Tree lichens next had to be separated from rock lichens. These were then divided into their respective varieties, which would produce divers colors according to their properties. Rock lichens were the best, but the most tedious to gather.

Then there was the dyepot to be fashioned. This was made of clay from the banks of the little stream that kept the meadow green and provided the gypsy camp with a water supply.

Setting the magically fired pot on another magic fire to boil with some of the dye plants and a bit of salt, Maggie repaired to the woods. There she removed her white shift from under her brown woolen skirt and tunic. One of these days she would have to conjure an anti-scratchy spell for wool, she promised herself, as she returned to her horse and dyepot, and took her extra shift from her pack. She wove a spell and the shifts unwove themselves and rolled themselves into neat balls of cotton. It was simple then, with the use of a rapid production spell and an extra-fine enchantment placed on the hand spindle she also carried in her pack, to spin out the thread from her underwear to something finer and softer and much, much longer than it had been before.

Back to the woods she went with this thread, and from the boughs of two trees that grew close together she made a loom. Powered by her magic, the crude loom warped itself and wove the ex-lingerie into a gossamer white cloth.

Maggie draped the cloth over her arms and carried it back to the dyepot. Cutting some of it off, she dipped the shorter piece in. It came out a saffron and she held it up to herself. "What do you think, cat?" she asked Ching, who had had time for a short nap during all this activity. "Do I look nice in yellow or maybe a little sallow?"

Ching growled at the herby smell of boiled lichen on the cloth, but it was a token growl only. He had smelled far more obnoxious smells than stewed vegetation in his life as Granny Brown's familiar. "What in the name of the Mother are you doing with THAT?" he asked.

Snipping at his tail with her fingers, Maggie laughed mysteriously and cut off another piece of cloth, added something from her medicine pouch to the dyepot, and withdrew a bright emerald piece of cloth. "Making a party dress, kitty dear. The gypsies are obviously planning a do of some sort, and I won't want to look shabby, will I?"

"Kitty dear?" Ching flipped his tail with a gesture of profound disgust and trotted off towards the woods. "On that note I think I'll go have a bit of a scratch in the dirt."

When the cat returned, Maggie had put the last stitch into the dress and had emptied the dyepots. With only a little water and a bit of soap root her grandmother had smuggled into the country at considerable cost to Sir William's purse, she managed to bathe her skin and hair.

"Ugh. Putting THAT stuff on your pelt can lead to a fever, witch. Don't you know anything? Why didn't you use your dry-cleaning charm?" Ching sounded casual, but if he hadn't been fairly used to the vagaries of his own mistress he would have been seriously concerned for her granddaughter's mental health.

"Believe it or not, cat, once in a while it actually feels nice to be wet all over. Particularly on a warm day." She shrugged. "And I haven't melted yet. I'm going to the woods again. Stay here and watch the horse, will you, and be prepared for a surprise!"

"Nothing you do any more surprises me," grumbled the cat, settling down to clean his immaculate white belly.

Without the thin hair necklace mostly concealed by the billows of her hair, the cat would never have recognized
Maggie. Even at Amberwine's wedding she had been too busy flitting hither and yon supervising preparations and yelling at people to bother much with her own appearance. Freed of the dirt and set off by the soft, colorful cloth of her new dress, her skin gleamed in the waning sunlight like freshly-minted copper coins.

The emerald bodice of the gown was trimmed with saffron embroidery, and was cut so low Maggie nearly lost her courage and stuck in a couple more stitches, just to be safe. It was a flattering style, though, as much of it as she could see in the magic mirror, and it made her neck look longer, her bosom fuller, and her cheekbones higher. Her brown hair showed glints of garnet as it flowed across her back and her eyes looked large, melting and mysterious. She fastened wildflowers above her ear for a finishing touch, but was not quite finished at that. At the nape of her neck she tied a special braided knot, and into this put two small phials from her medicine pouch.

The pouch itself, her kerchief, woolen clothes, and boots, as well as her money, she wrapped in her cloak and hid in a hole beside the stream bed. If she concealed her pack as well, it would be too obvious to possible thieves she was hiding something, and would invite search, so, reluctantly, she left it beside the horse.

"I must admit," said the cat, who had been watching these preparations in silence. "This time you surprised me. What are you going to do in that get-up?" Ching hated to appear not to know everything, but his feline curiosity was definitely activated, as he could never remember having seen Maggie in anything but the brown skirt and tunic or some variation on the same theme. He had always taken it for granted that it was part of her, as his own fur coat was part of him.

"I have a plan. We are going, old cat. to fight fire with fire because, as people are always telling me, you can catch more flies with honey than with vinegar."

"You look like you've got more use for that stitch in time that saves nine, if you ask me," yawned the cat, licking a paw and applying it to his whiskers to acquire his own party polish. "Are you sure your gran wouldn't want you to put a couple more stitches in the top of that dress?"

"Look, cat. who feeds you on this trip, anyway? Gran or me?"

"Have I mentioned how nice you look?" Ching asked. "You smell good, too . . ." "Thank you," said Maggie, as pleased as if she had not coerced the compliment from him. "It's a little of the perfume Gran made for some of those ladies at Winnie's wedding-just enough behind the ears to do the trick."

"That stuff really works," the cat conceded. "I'm surprised it didn't sell any better than it did. Maybe if she'd called it something besides Gramma Brown's Balm for the Blues-I suggested "Heat," myself, but she said I was being a feline chauvinist."

"Well, in case anyone gets wind of it that shouldn't, I have the antidote tucked in my hair, and a little more of the love philtre for when the perfume wears off."

"But what are you going to dooo?" mewed Ching in his sweetest wheedling tone. Something told him that his position as moral guardian was about to be challenged.

"You'll see," she said, starting down the meadow, her feet brushed by the soft, cool grasses, and her bright skirts swaying.

Ching jumped to his feet and stretched, then padded after her. "And I thought I was the enigmatic one in this outfit."

"THAT is why you must help him," Zorah concluded urgently, brushing the last of the tears with which she had been freely dampening Colin's best handkerchief for the last half hour. "Why me?" he asked. "I hardly know the man." Or have good reason to like what I do know, he added to himself.

"Because you are a kind man, I can tell, and you do not come under the influence of Xenobia."

"But I explained that I am a gypsy really, you see--" "Kallanderry? Phooey!"

"I see. Well, I shall discuss this with my friend--" He lost his train of thought momentarily as a flock of birds flew overhead. Where had he heard that peculiar cry before? Oh, yes, the swans . . . When the birds had passed over, he could hear the first chords of a guitar melody drifting across the circle from the campfire. Zorah hastily gathered her skirts in her hand and crawled out from under the wagon. "I must go now. The show starts soon, and I got to prepare my horse. Help us, mister, please. You're my last hope."

"I'll give it some thought," he said cautiously, crawling out from under the wagon less cautiously, bumping his head, and then having to dust off his britches, which retained some horsey artifact that had been under the wagon. A sound less pleasant than the guitars attracted his attention. Many more non-gypsies, distinguishable by both their coloring and their clothing, were milling around the encampment now, and a good number of them were clustered on the far side of the campfire.

From within this cluster came a roaring, growling, and derisive shouts and jeers. Investigating, Colin found a
bear-baiting in progress. He could have been wrong, of course, and had it backwards, but it seemed to him that the
growls and roars came from the bear, and the shouts and jeers from the mixture of gypsies and non-gypsies that
taunted the beast. The bear was supposed to be one of the entertainments and was trained to "dance." Now he was
merely being irritated. Colin wondered that the bear's trainer allowed it to be so mistreated. An irritated bear was the
last dancing partner he himself would prefer, and gypsies, according to the stories he had always heard, were
supposed to be good with animals.

Under the circumstances, he felt he could hardly blame the animal if it chose to take a bite out of someone at
time during the evening. Just so it wasn't him.

He wandered around, looking for Davey. He had to make some excuse for not bringing Maggie after all. After
Zorah's disclosures, it seemed more dangerous than helpful to be there himself.

The best thing for them to do that he could think of would be to extricate themselves as gracefully as possible
from the vicinity of the camp, and get to Queenston. There, perhaps, they could find where Amberwine had been
taken by the peddler, collect her from him, and return to Fort Iceworm.

"Tell your fortune, mister?" The scarlet-dressed woman who had watched the child take his horse stepped out
from the shadow of a wagon, causing the preoccupied Colin to jump in his tracks. Without waiting for an answer the
woman sidled forward and grasped the wrist of the hand not employed in carrying the fiddle. "You got no common
hand there, mister--" she began.

"Uh--I just visited another practitioner of your art a short time ago--" Colin said, withdrawing his hand.

"Oh?" the woman asked, left staring at the hennaed palm of her own hand. He could see now she also sported a
little tattoo beneath her right eye. "Did that fortune teller warn you your horse is about to become the main course
for tonight's feast?" Colin looked around frantically, trying to see his horse, or the horse he'd borrowed from Rowan.
It was not tied the others belonging to the gypsies' guests. "No, ma'am--where is he?"

"Really, mister, I can't just GIVE my professional services away, no matter how handsome you are." She
switched the red skirt a little more and smoldered at him.

He fumbled in his purse and crossed her palm with too many coins, which disappeared down her dress. "And
that boy looked so reliable too," he mourned.

The woman flashed such a show of great white teeth he almost thought she meant to bite him. "He is reliable--
but I'm not. See, by having me tell your fortune, you have changed it! Now your horse is alright--he's tied up right
behind my wagon, where Mateo put him."

"Oh."

"You are angry?" she asked with no abatement of the toothy grin.

"Not especially, if the horse really is alright. Relieved actually. He doesn't belong to me, you see, and I'd hate to
have to answer for him."

"Xenobia thought you would be angry."

"I beg your pardon? This is really an extraordinary conversation, don't you think?"

The woman ignored his last remark and went back to switching her skirt, which seemed to be a favorite gesture
of hers. "Xenobia says the outsiders are always angry when we outsmart them."

Colin chuckled. "Yes, I can see where that would probably be true." He backed away, this time occasionally
glancing behind him to make sure he didn't back into anything or anybody to upset his balance. He darted down for
one quick glance under the wagon before leaving the area entirely. Sure enough, there were his horse's white-
stockinged feet and grazing nose placidly chomping the meadow grass.

"Hmph," said the woman, purposely shoving rudely into him as she passed to the campfire to solicit more
business. Colin found it difficult to understand her attitude. She seemed to feel that his money was poor
compensation for the absence of the properly stimulating row she had been expecting.

He followed her stiff back and flouncing red skirt through the now flickering shadows cast by the fire. Night
had come quickly, and with it a full moon. Taking the place Davey indicated with a wave that he should occupy,
Colin hoped the full moon wouldn't be up to its usual tricks to making people behave bizarrely and complicating
things. Even good luck charms frequently failed when the moon was in this bloated phase.

The entertainers were shabby by minstrel standards, or even by good-sized city standards, but the presence of
the townspeople, who had turned out in large numbers, testified that entertainment in their own town was even
shabbier. Probably almost nonexistent. As a preliminary to the flashier numbers, the woman who had accosted
Colin, introduced by Davey as "Runya the All-Seeing," made the rounds of the farmers, servants, tradesmen, and
craftpeople, mumbling such stock phrases as "Ah, there's luck in that handsome face of yours, mister," and "You're
gonna remember for a long time what the gypsy woman tells you today, my friend." For her finale, she publicly read
the palms of the mayor and the local castle's head butler. What she claimed to read in their pudgy palms was so
preposterously flattering and so filled with riches, love, power, and fame as to make the recipients of her attentions
fairly blush with pleasure, and the rest of the audience collapse with mirth.

The bear-baiting continued, but this time it was called dancing. Colin concentrated, during this phase of the performance, on a chord progression he thought would go well with gypsy music.

Zorah's trick riding brought the level of entertainment up somewhat. Gasps flew through the audience. "Where had a girl learned to do that, whose was that magnificent horse, and from whom do you suppose she stole it. and wasn't that a crummy trick she should be wearing britches so that when her skirt flew over her head when she somersaulted across the horse's back--"

Nevertheless, this exhibition of equestrienne derring-do brought nthe most applause of any act yet presented.

The musicians played a couple of numbers, one gypsy, one a ynon-gypsy reel, and the tempo changed to a startling upbeat one,

. . the scurrying of fiddles and the syncopated toc-a-tocing of the
 - band drums heralding flashing limbs and heaving bosoms as the
  glancing girls swirled around the campfire. Not all the gypsy
  fi:rls, or even most, were really beauties, but whatever shortcom-
  i'Jngs they possessed went unacknowledged by the men, who
  . Showered them with coins. Actually, Colin thought, they were inot really even very good dancers.

From what he remembered of his instruction in gypsy culture, designed to give him background for the music he was learning, the constant traveling kept them hard at work maintaining a semblance of order to their home life, and left little time for the eternal dancing popularly believed to be their main occupation in life, besides stealing. Consequently, the only time they really danced much was at their entertainments, at festivals and fairs, and whenever they were allowed near enough to a village to interact with its people.

Whatever these dancers lacked in beauty or skill they made up for in sultry appeal and enthusiasm, and in spite of himself Colin found his hands getting quite sore from clapping time to the complex rhythms of their music. He started to dig out his purse to throw a few coins himself, but found someone had been there before him. He hoped Maggie's resources would be adequate for the rest of the journey. It was, after all, her sister.

As the final dance tune began, the girls grabbed some of the townsment and pulled them up to dance with them in crude imitation of the folk steps the gypsies had displayed. As the last notes died away, the girls sat down next to their erstwhile partners, in order to relieve them, Colin felt sure, of whatever coins they had not extracted by their performance.

Again the musicians began playing popular songs, and once or twice Colin found himself playing a solo part. It was Davey, apparently flattered, who introduced the song about himself and Lady Rowan.

They were into the second verse when a drunk hollered, "Hey, Gypsy. How about that? What happened to her highfa-lutin' ladyship, anyway?"

Davey stilled his strings with one hand and the other musicians stopped playing, as well. He paused, caressing his chin with his fingers, appearing to weigh the question carefully. "Now, you know. I really couldn't say, boys. That was a nice girl, a beautiful girl, but hardly up to one of our little gypsy temptresses, eh?" He hugged the girl beside him, the same one who had earlier brought him the message from his mother. "No. Really, friends, she was as charming as could be, but we couldn't keep her here forever. Mum had to run her off, finally. Stole things, if you know what I mean." He led the crowd in an uproarious laugh. Colin felt nauseated. A tap on his shoulder and a hiss in his ear prevented him from an indelicacy.

"Can you get them to play for me?" It was Maggie who hunched down, unnoticed, in the darkness behind him.

"Sure," he said, too glad to create a diversion from the present line of discussion to question her more closely. "Something fast, slow, then fast again, in their type of music," she said.

Colin raised his bow, tucked his fiddle under his chin, and hesitated only a moment before sweeping into the lead-in of one of the more classical pieces of gypsy dance music. The other musicians seemed as happy to play, and stop discussing Davey's love life, as he was, and joined in quickly. The hand drum beat rhythmic counterpoint to the whining, interwoven harmonies of the two fiddles and Davey's guitar.

The opening chords were fast, as Maggie had requested, and she used them to come whirling out before the fire, an emerald and golden dervish casting her own dancing shadows under a pale yellow moon.

Colin was suitably impressed. For the first time since he'd met her, he realized she certainly was very much a witch indeed. As surely as Granny Brown had transformed him into a bird, Maggie had transformed her prosaic assistant scullery-maid self into a seductress to be reckoned with.

For only a moment she paced the measured beat with saucy thrusts of her hip, her fingers snapping in time. The lack of the silver finger cymbals worn by the gypsies didn't trouble her, it seemed, and she made an instrument of her own hands and body. Colin decided she was manifesting musical talent after all. Flowers appeared and disappeared in the tossing dark waves of her hair as she whirled. Her skin was less like the satin which was the
popular conception of ladies' skin, and more like burnished metal, as it sheened with her perspiration. Her bosom
rose and dropped sharply in time with the drum, while her mid-section did something serpentine and her shapely
legs, apparently unhampered by the bright skirts molding against them, pranced and twirled and wove their own
patterns in the circle beyond the campfire.

As the music slowed, becoming almost sinister in its insinuation, her arms joined her torso in the undulations
and Colin was reminded of the cat having a nice stretch, or so he told himself. He was trying to believe her dancing
was a musical interpretation of the cat or a snake or a variation of the folk steps the women had done earlier.
Following the sequence she had requested, using his instrument to guide the others, he found it difficult to keep his
mind on anything but his friend's disturbing behaviour.

What bothered him most was not the antics she was performing with her body, but the way her eyes first locked
on Davey's to hold his as she executed a turn. Her head and upper body strained backward to maintain the contact as
she danced, then, emerging from her turn, she let her eyes slip slyly away. A phantom smile played on her lips,
which seemed somehow fuller

and redder than Colin remembered, but that might have been a trick of the full moon.

Davey was apparently as enchanted by all of this as anyone, and watched her with a sort of predatory possess si
veness while he continued to fondle the girl at his side.

The tempo picked up, and her steps again became more prancing, hips keeping time, fingers clicking, ribcage
bobbing to the music. The eye contact changed too, and she gave the gypsy only an occasional smile, then slipped
away to bestow a full-blown silent laugh on another member of the audience. It was difficult to tell who was
mesmerizing whom, but a glimmer of understanding began to dawn when Colin noticed Davey's hawklike
attentiveness become irritation on the occasions when her attention was elsewhere.

With a drum roll, the music ended, and Maggie sank from a graceful turn to her knees, arms extended, palms
up. She was pelted with the coins not already gleaned by the pickpockets, as the townsmen and gypsies both
applauded.

Colin was working at fighting off a sense of betrayal. While this was certainly an interesting side to her
personality, he trusted better the one he thought he already knew. If his suspicions were correct, this scheme of hers
was more harebrained than the one that nearly got them drowned in the Troutroute. He had better catch up to her
quickly, and let her know why what he suspected she planned was futile.

His opportunity dissolved as Davey, dumping the girl who had leaned heavily against him during the dance,
rose to his feet with a feline flourish and offered his hands to Maggie.

She smiled and accepted the courtesy, rising to her feet with his help.

Colin fumbled into action and dashed over to the pair, who seemed in immediate danger of disappearing into
the shrubbery. "Ah. Magdalene, my dear, you did join us." he said. He considered clapping her on the back but
decided against it. "Davey, this is my friend Maggie. I was telling you about her earlier."

Davey didn't break eye contact with her as he replied. "Ah, yes. The shy one."

Colin's laugh was shaky as he sought to keep the conversation from degenerating into nonverbal
communication.

"Oh, she is. aren't you Mag! But-er-a real trouper."

"She certainly appears to be," said a woman, emerging from the bustle of the departing crowd. It was Xenobia,
the woman in

the crystal. Now her hair was smoothly tied into a crimson kerchief, which was trimmed with the same coins
that adorned her ears and neck. The coins represented so many different countries and denominations that Colin felt
sure she could have easily been some kingdom's national treasury.

He saw Maggie's face as she recognized her sister's green silk gown bulging to encase the gypsy woman's
pudgy body. The green silk didn't quite manage to be a decent covering, so the woman had piled a purple and orange
flounced skirt on top of it.

Although it was well-known that a person's wickedness was reflected in the face as age advanced. Xenobia had
few wrinkles, and her nose, while straight and proud, was not prominent. In fact, she still bore the vestiges of
beauty, an effect spoiled only by her garish clothing and harsh expression.

"Mother." Davey said jovially. "This is my good friend, Colin. I told you of him earlier and this--"

"Yes," Xenobia said succinctly. "My son, I would talk to you. Come to my wagon. I have this problem I want
you to help me with."

"Of course," Davey replied, piqued at the interruption. "In a moment."

"Now," said Xenobia.

Davey shrugged and smiled at Maggie. "Now." He repeated it with an air of resignation, and ran a finger down
Maggie's arm. "You don't leave, eh?" He strode away after his mother.
"Whew," said Colin. "That was close."

"Yes, I almost had him," she snapped. "Colin, why did you have to interrupt?"

"You should have seen yourself!" he said more vehemently than he had planned to. It occurred to him that he sounded priggish. "I mean, alright, so you were beautiful, but where did you learn to dance like that? not from your grandmother, I'll wager."

"As a matter of fact, I did," she replied hotly. "It is part of the ceremony of welcoming young witches to adulthood, and we do it every year at our Sorcerous Ceremonials, so there!"

"I guess that would get them into adulthood fast, alright, if they do it the way you did."

"It is a beautiful and meaningful ceremony, I'll have you know--" the witch began her retort but was interrupted by Ching sliding between her ankles.

"It seems to me that that silly minstrel is more concerned with your virtue than I am, and I'm the chaperone! You'd better come out with it, witchy, and tell us what you're up to."

"Alright, then," she said to the cat and turned to Colin with exaggerated patience. "I thought I would make him fall in love with me, then I could reject him and give a little of the anti-love potion to his other conquests and leave him to their mercy. That's little enough revenge for what he's done to Winnie."

"That ought to do it, for sure," he admitted.

"So you think he is?"

"Is what?"

"Is in love with me, of course."

"No. Heat, maybe."

She looked mortally offended. "Well, how would you know anyway? Is it so impossible?"

"Oh, don't pout, Maggie. Ordinarily, of course, if wouldn't be impossible. If we had that whole silly village following you like puppy dogs I wouldn't be the least surprised. But in his case it is impossible. That fellow can't give you his heart, because he hasn't any."

"Excuse me? Would you repeat that?"

"I said he hasn't any heart. One of his childhood sweethearts has become disenchanted enough with the present Davey to try to persuade me to help her do something about it so she can return him to what she insists was his former perfect self. She told me the whole story."

"Which is?"

"His mother had the heart removed when he reached puberty." He was about to explain further when Xenobia and Davey reappeared.

Xenobia smiled. "Here we are again. It didn't take long at all. now did it? I trust you will stay with us tonight?"

Maggie noted that the hissing element in Xenobia's voice that had so impressed her through the crystal was actually a lisp. It was somehow more unpleasant than the hiss.

"As a matter of fact," Colin said, not caring at all for the gypsy woman's manner, "as a matter of fact, we must be getting on. There's a fair at Queenston market in a day or two where we're supposed to perform."

"Odd." said Xenobia, still smiling. "I heard of no fair. We naturally couldn't allow you to travel so far at night, could we, son?"

"No, indeed." He circled Maggie's waist with an embrace that appeared affectionate, but which she found painful. "I choreograph the dance numbers for our entertainments, you know? I intend to persuade you to share a few of those beautiful dance movements with me. my dear, you know what I mean?"

There was no need for all of this horrible cat-and-mousing, Colin thought indignantly. A ring of shadowed faces and the occasional glint of moonlight off metal, barely visible behind Xenobia and Davey, undoubtedly accounted for the prickles running up his spine.


He laughed what to Colin was a very nasty laugh, and led her off to the woods.

"Here," his mother cried after him, apparently unable to bear the pretense that theirs was just a friendly little seduction. She tossed him a length of leather rope, which she had concealed in the folds of the garish skirt. "Tie her up when you're done with her, or you won't get your rest."

"Who said I plan to rest?" grinned the gypsy with a moonlit flash of white teeth, his jewelry jingling against his bare chest as he leaped to catch the rope with one hand while retaining a firm grip on Maggie with the other. The rope apparently dispelled any illusions Maggie might have had about making matters go according to her plan, for she yelped indignantly as the gypsy began once more to propel her toward the woods. Colin urgently wished for
Lord Rowan's second best family sword. He might have at least looked sufficiently frightening to wipe the smile off that ogre's face, even if he couldn't wield the thing properly.

"As for you, my merry minstrel," Xenobia said sweetly, "You could prove less easy to handle than the girl."

"A lot you know," he mumbled under his breath, but replied more clearly. "Why are you treating us this way? Your son was bragging about your famous hospitality. Is this how you treat your distant kin?"

"MY kin?" She really did hiss now. "You're MY kin? Say something to me, then, in our own secret tongue, relative." She chuckled him under the chin with her fingers so hard it made his eyes water. "Sing me a sweet gypsy lament in the old tongue. No? I thought not." She turned to the shadows behind her. "Mateo, my boy, show this false gypsy what you found on your horse."

Triumphantly, the boy dragged forth the second best family sword. House of Rowan crest and all.

"This sword, I am told, is the property of the enemy of a great sorcerer who is friend to my people. If you're such a fine gypsy, how come you have it, eh?"

"I stole it."

She shook her head. "No. And there are no gypsies in the world who look like you, as my son well knows. He only liked your singing and playing and thought, 'ah well, he's harmless enough.' Then we found this. Too many of your kind mixing with my people is what I say."

"Mateo, if you are fond of your present form of government, it would behoove you to replace that sword in its scabbard and put it back where you found it. Then you will bring my horse right here."

"Maggie from the gypsy's lustful clutches and ride away through the thick wood beyond danger of capture was quite beyond him. It was better than listening to Xenobia's melodramatic threats, though.

The boy hastened to do his bidding, the sword thumping on the ground behind him as he scurried away. Although he didn't actually see them move, the other gypsies seemed to melt back into the shadows. He heard his heart in his ears and felt as though he had a chill. He couldn't have held onto Xenobia much longer when the boy led the horse into the clearing.

He was just breathing a sigh of relief when a blow from behind knocked him down. The witch fell on top of him, wriggled away from his grip, and emerged to stand above him like a knight who had just vanquished a dragon. His focus swam as he concentrated on trying to stop the ringing in his ears.

"No, you fools. Not with daggers." She halted the threatening jabs at him with a gesture, then scratched her chin. "For this offense to my person, something messier, I think. Let's see if our friend the bear can improve this one's singing voice, eh? Throw him in the cage!"

Colin's only good fortune at this turn of events was that he was a minstrel, not a hero, and so felt free to kick and scream with no appreciable loss of self-respect as they dragged him to the bear's wagon-cage, and shoved him at the opening. The smell alone nearly killed him before he was rudely kicked inside.

"'Too bad it's all closed up, like. I'd enjoy watching," he heard someone say as he landed. "'We'll hear, right enough,,'" said someone else.

A deafening roar was the first indication of their veracity.

CHAPTER 10

The gypsy had his love nest all arranged. Since he shared his mother's wagon, he found it convenient to prepare such trysting places wherever their band went. It made an interesting game, to find a suitable spot to woo, and, naturally, to win, his loves. The locations were varied enough to titillate his sense of adventure: a hay mow, an outbuilding, an open field, a deserted woodcutter's hut, or, as it was tonight, a comfortable bed of fragrant spruce boughs and soft moss, all ready for him to lay the lady down beneath the rustling willows.

Leaves and laying down, however, appeared to be far from the lady's mind. He was finally forced to give her a shove. Awkward, true, but effective.

"You louse-ridden, horse-dewed son-of-**--" she began before he caught her in his arms and hushed her with a hard kiss. The harshness of it became satisfyingly soft and melting and mutually nibbly and she surrendered sufficiently to allow him to go on to the next phase and locate a limb to caress. The nearest was a velvety thigh.

He murmured softly, as usual, "Your skin-oh, darling, it is so very soft."

She broke his hold and looked at him with astonishment, then burst into a fit of laughter totally inappropriate for the mood of the moment and offensive to his sense of fitness.
"What is so funny?"
"Me-me and my soft skin. What did you expect, anyway?" she was so amused by her own joke she collapsed once more before she could continue. "I mean to say, did you imagine I would have scales, or what?"

For such a ravishing girl she clearly didn't understand the first thing about being ravished. She was drearily unaware of the protocol of such matters. That was a classic compliment! Offended, Davey decided that perhaps she preferred a more basic approach, which also happened to suit him at the moment.

He grabbed the front of her bodice and pulled. It ripped apart long enough for him to catch a moonglow swell of copper skin, then it wove itself primly back together again.

"Ching was right," the girl muttered to herself, "a stitch in time would have indeed saved nine this time."

Though her perfume was driving him mad, he thought it prudent to employ more circumspect tactics with young women who caused their clothing to automatically mend. "However you did that," he grumbled, "you're certainly a lot more modest than you were a while ago." He had relinquished his embrace, but retained her wrists.

She glared at him.

"Of course," he added quickly. "On you, my lovely, modesty or immodesty are equally becoming."

Seeing that he was making no headway, he reverted to persuasion. "Come, now, my sweetheart. I won't force you to do anything you don't want to do. Not until you're ready. I'm sorry I tore your dress-I am too impatient to taste your charms. I can't help myself, you know. Passionate gypsy blood, and all that." He pulled her back into his arms, where she lay for a moment against him while he kissed her neck and munched her earlobes. He had found ninety-nine percent of the subjects tested responded favorably to such embraces.

She sighed deeply and almost snuggled against him for a moment. "You don't intend to harm us, then?"

He looked down at her with annoyance. The little wench was trying to take advantage of the situation! "Well, I didn't say THAT. You are spies, after all. But I wouldn't want to have to force you, dear girl. Think how bad that would sound!" He considered that for a moment, while defining the contours of her bosom and experimenting with a couple of squeezes.

A lupine grin replaced his unaccustomed meditative air. "On the other hand, who would you tell? Not many more get-togethers with the girls for you, sweet."

The breath was knocked out of him as he was flung backwards by the unexpected force of an enchanted shove. By the expedient of informing her magic that she wished to push the cow aside for milking, Maggie had employed it in her personal defense. "I cannot believe Amberwine's incredible lack of taste." She enunciated each word with finicky precision, and shook herself as though infested with spiders.

Davey, after inspecting himself for damage, was preparing to leap upon her and crush her into submission, in the course of which he was certain she would come around to her senses and enjoy it all tremendously. Her words, however, had given him pause.

"Amberwine? You mean Lady Rowan?" "Yes, I mean Lady Rowan, you cad." Her formerly voluptuous mouth was now set in a thin line, and her fiery eye reminded him uncomfortably of his mother.

"Must you bring up ancient history?" Sighing dramatically, he let his fingers crawl toward the leather rope at his left while he raised himself casually to his right elbow, as near to her as he dared.

"I certainly must," she said.

"You haven't got much sensitivity, have you, wench?" he asked critically.

"More than you have. I say, is it true you haven't a heart?" "You really are an insensitive little witch."

"Precisely."

"As a matter of fact, I don't. Part of my puberty rite as a gypsy prince required its removal."

"What a quaint folk custom! Oh, Mother!" she swore, catching sight of the rope in his hand. "You aren't going to use that thing, are you?" She tried to scramble away, but he caught her by the foot and slammed her against the trunk of a tree before she was able to contemplate cows.

"I don't see why not." He yanked the knot tight. "You are a spy.

"I am not a spy, and you are awful." "Not entirely. If you'd only have given me a chance I can be quite amusing, really." His protestations were limp, however, and he had lost a good deal of his inspiration for the moment. "Oh, to be sure. I think you're funnier than a hanging myself," she said acidly. "Really, how do you keep walking around without a heart?"

"It was magically removed, silly girl. Not surgically."

"You might put it that way. Scientific turn of mind you've got, for a spy."

"I told you I'm not a spy. I only wanted to find out how you managed to make off with my sister, and why you allowed your mother to drive her away later. As a matter of fact, now that we're better acquainted. I'm amazed Winnie didn't leave without being asked."

"You don't like me, do you?"
"No. You do have a certain superficial charm--" He cocked an eyebrow. "Alright then, a deep superficial charm. But though Winnie might occasionally do something batty, she's very discerning about people generally, and men in particular."

"Perhaps you're not being discerning enough, my dear," he suggested. "She, perhaps, saw some of my excellent qualities you insist on overlooking."

She snorted in a most unladylike manner. "I'm very sure one of them is that you're unbeatable in a horse trade."

"True. But other things, as well." He looked at her aslongingly as though she were a jam tart and he suffering from both appetite and indigestion.

"Be a good fellow, prince. You really don't fancy my berry-brown body any more, do you?"

"The night is young. A gag, perhaps . . ."

"Don't be a toad. Let me go. I'm not really a spy. My sister didn't do anything to you, and you know it."

"She did."

"She didn't. She couldn't wouldn't."

"She did."

"How? You can't be hurt without a heart, can you?"

I have my pride," he said stiffly, then snarled so nastily at her that in her helpless condition she was quite alarmed. "There is something very wrong with the women of your family. I should have known you two were related by the way you act."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean your father will have no grandchildren, the way you and that lily-white sister of yours behave."

"Nonsense. Winnie is pregnant already."

"So I noticed, once mother confiscated her gown. It has to be a changeling."

"Be reasonable. The baby has to be born for faeries to substitute a changeling, and Winnie's part faerie herself. Nothing like that could possibly happen. It occurred to her then to stop arguing long enough to understand what he had been telling her. "You don't mean you—um—she—you mean there's no disgrace to Rowan then?" That was as delicately as she could put it.

"Well, she did tell him to go mind his towers and battlements when he came riding after us, right enough!" He laughed. "You should have seen his face. Red as his hair!"

"I don't think it's funny," she said severely. "But why would she go away with you and then not—" he didn't finish.

"Good question. Unless like you she's nothing but a tease. The sorcerer personally told me she fancied me when she saw me perform at Fort Iceworm two years ago, before she married. He even taught me a special song he swore was her particular favorite. It had the same tune, in fact, as that ballad they sing about me now."

He shrugged. "It worked very well at first. She fairly fell into my arms and couldn't get her boots and cloak on fast enough. A damn sight faster than I was able to get her out of them. When she told her husband off I thought to myself, I thought 'Davey, lad, you have by your side a lady good for hours of fine entertainment!' Then-nothing. No sooner had we reached my camp than she turned cold. Wouldn't let me touch her." He glared at Maggie accusingly. "Never in my life has such a humiliating thing happened to me. What a lot of trouble for nothing! Oh, the sorcerer was pleased, I suppose, but what of me? She wouldn't return to her husband—of course, we wouldn't have allowed her to before the story was circulated enough to make it awkward for him, but she didn't want to go when I gave her the chance. She wouldn't eat, wouldn't work, wouldn't make love. She just slept."

Maggie nodded sadly. Winnie had napped through a great deal of unpleasantness in their childhood. When Maggie's mother had died, the only mother Winnie had known, her sister had slept steadily for almost two weeks.

"Finally, mother drove her out. Who needs another obstacle to walk over?"

"But why did you want her in the first place? Aside from your low-born lust, I mean. I'd think that all that would be a great deal of trouble for just that."

"I beg your pardon. As a matter of fact, it was a practical arrangement. A friend of our people—the sorcerer I mentioned—has political ambitions. He wished to discredit Lord Rowan in some subtle way, as he cannot do him direct damage. The rowan trees that surround Rowan's castle protect him from sorcerers. They are murderous to witches."

"Yes, I know."

"I was naturally happy to be of help in my modest way," he shrugged his most charming humble shrug. "We are loyal friends, we gypsies."

"Provided there's enough gold and silver to sweeten the deal," Maggie amended.

"You insult!" He made a jack-knife leap to his feet. "I try to act nicely to you, to make love to you, and you insult me. I shall leave you here, tied to this tree, to die." He started to stalk off.

"Oh, Davey, don't go being offended!" Maggie talked so fast she almost stumbled over her words. It would cost
her a lot of valuable time to figure out which household spell to apply to loosen a leather rope. She could have simply unspun a hemp one, but the leather was difficult. "I didn't mean to insult you, truly. I didn't think I could, you being heartless and all."

"I may not have a heart, but I'm a very sensitive man." He fairly spat at her.

"I can see that now, and I was wrong, and I'm very sorry. You're absolutely right, of course. You really are irresistible. It's just that odd things are expected of us younger witches by our elders and there's this unicorn at home and-well, you see, I can't afford to get involved with any man right now."

"That is your affair entirely, madam." He turned once more to go.

"I can help you, you know."

He stopped. "What did you say?"

"I said I can help you with your problem."

"What problem is that? The one you caused or your concern for my lack of useless sentiment?"

"No, no, no-not that. Those are just small difficulties. Come on, prince. I can't shout your worst problem all over the woods, can I? Do be patient with me a bit longer, and come back here and sit down."

"Well." he said, looking back through the trees to the camp where the embers of the evening's fire still glowed in the darkness. "It is early yet. I think it would not look g-I think, so, I would not like to go back so early." He sank to the ground near her. "Now, woman, tell me what it is that you have to help me.

"That girl you were with tonight--"

"Lahara? What about her?"

"You're-urn-lovers?"

"Yes, of course."

"Well, what if you get tired of her?"

"Then I find another one."

"What about her? Doesn't she make trouble?"

"That one? No!" He laughed. "She wouldn't dare. What trouble could she make?"

"How about the others?"

"How about them? Zorah, she just cries all the time. Dalia's husband is afraid of me. And Runya ..." he broke off thoughtfully.

"Runya the all-seeing?"

"Runya, yes. All-seeing, fortunately no. I admit, at times she has worried me. She is very capable with her knife, and she is my cousin, on my mother's side." He winced.

"You see, you do have a problem."

"Mostly they do as I tell them, though."

"Mostly. But as you say, you folks have all this passionate gypsy blood, and once in a while a little of it is bound to be spilled. What if some night you're all snuggled down in the shrubbery with a new friend, and Runya decides to take up whittling?"

He shuddered.

"It can't be much fun for you, either," she pointed out. "It must be depressing having all those women crying over you all the time."

"No. One can only do so much for them. It's the price of manhood, I suppose."

"Runya could take care of that too."

"He gulped. "What did you have to say, witch?"

"Just this. What if I were to give you a potion that just sort of de-ignites the passion of the ladies no longer in favor? A kind of anti-love serum?"

"You could give me such a thing?" He sounded tempted, then a troubled look crossed his handsome face. "But they would forget me then. What if I wanted to try again with one I had given this potion to?"

"Oh, Davey," she smiled from beneath coyly lowered lashes. "Do you really think you'd have any trouble if you chose to overpower a little potion?"

"No, that is true."

"And it could be so useful. Just a drop in food or drink."

"You want only that I release you?"

"That, and get my friend loose, and tell me how to get to this sorcerer who's plotting against my sister."

"You ask a lot, witch. What's to keep me from taking your potion and whatever else I wish?"

"I can change the potion into extract of skunk gland without batting an eyelash."

He began to untie her.

CHAPTER 11
Colin's horrible screams and the bear's ferocious growls made it difficult for even the most hard-hearted of the gypsies to get to sleep. Xenobia had thought the minstrel's execution would be noisy, but was beginning to wish the bear would eat more daintily. Zorah cowered beneath her blanket and whimpered herself to sleep, all of her own hopes dying in agony with Colin. And in the woods, Maggie cut short Davey's explanation of how to reach the sorcerer's castle. Her heart sank as she shoved the potion at him and began to run through the edge of the wood to the point of the encampment closest to the commotion.

In the bear cage, Colin shook with genuine fright, and followed his first, authentic scream with a repertoire both bloodcurdling and heart-rending. Ching, the cat, sat switching his tail. Clearly promising to give him another taste of his claws if his performance was substandard. The bear, likewise under the influence of the cat, snuffed and whuffled, bellowed and bawled, growled and grumbled his most challenging, while finishing the remains of the meal his keeper had left in the cage before the bear-baiting began.

With a particularly satisfying chilling gurgle, Colin reached his finale. The bear ate more quietly as the cat sank down onto the floor of the cage to lick his front paws and wash his ears.

Colin wiped the perspiration from his brow with the side of his arm. "That was close," he whispered to the cat, "I don't know how you talked him out of eating me, but thanks a lot, cat. I swear to you that none of your kind shall be mistreated or hungry as long as I'm about."

Ching's eyes gazed greenly up at him in the darkness, his purr almost as loud as the bear's growls. Colin scratched the cat's ears and considered. "Still, I don't imagine you're magical enough to open this cage, are you? No, of course not. At least you've given me time to think." Ching presented the side of his face for a whisker scratch. Colin regarded him thoughtfully.

"Yet you can understand me, can't you? I mean, I know I can't tell if you're saying 'meow' or reciting poetry when you and Maggie chat, but you're a clever fellow. You can understand everybody, right?" Ching said "mrrp" in a pleased sort of way, and continued to encourage caresses by rolling onto his back for his black-and-white belly to be rubbed.

"There's one girl here who might help me. I don't know if she's actually a friend or not but she does dislike Xenobia. Maybe if you could get Zorah to come and get me out?" He was starting to think and talk faster, hoping there might be some way to escape in time to save Maggie.

Ching sat up, flicked his whiskers, looked about, and switched his tail so emphatically he fairly thumped it on the floor.

"No, I don't suppose you'd know her, would you? She's got on a blue dress, and she's rather smallish-a bit shorter than Maggie. She looks sad. Actually, I don't suppose she looks that sad while she's sleeping but that's the general idea." The cat regarded him quizzically. "Urn-I think perhaps she lives in that red wagon with the hideous purple stripes on-" He found himself talking to the end of a tail and cat back feet as Ching leaped down. "I want you to know," Colin said to the tailtip before the cat was completely lost in the darkness. "This quite makes up for you trying to eat me."

The cat tried two other wagons before he found the right one. Even for humans, colors looked different in the moonlight (as in Ching's favorite words of wisdom from Granny Brown regarding feline camouflage--"all cats look gray in the dark."). Ching's magic operated efficiently enough, but his visual apparatus was such that Colin's red and purple had no meaning for him.

So he tried a green wagon with orange stripes, and a blue wagon with gilt stripes, where he narrowly missed being skewered by the dagger of a fat gypsy man attempting to make love.

The man apparently felt that Ching's questioning mew added little to his efforts; only the cat's agility kept him from becoming fish bait.

Finally, though, he found a striped wagon containing a woman who looked worn out even while she was sleeping, a girl of about Maggie's age and size, and a boy child and a girl child of tail-pulling years. Colin was wrong, though, about the girl. She did look sad, even in her sleep.

Being careful not to wake the others, who might not be so sympathetic to Colin's and Maggie's respective plights as the young woman he was sent to fetch, he hopped softly onto the girl's chest and sang into her ear. She stirred. He sang a bit louder, but she mumbled, and her arms made brushing motions to rid herself of him.

He patted her half-open lips with a paw, his nose almost brushing her teeth. Her breath smelled pleasantly of home-brewed ale and spice-root. He patted again, then leaped sideways as she sat up, her elbow nearly striking him as she raised her hand to rub her eyes.

"What?" she asked.

Ching purred reassuringly, fixing her with a calm composed gaze. He hoped she wasn't one of those silly hysterical people who couldn't abide the presence of a cat.

Zorah liked cats, however, and found stroking Ching a soothing balm for her sadness, even though she was
barely awake and afraid of waking her family. She had no idea how he’d come to her wagon, but welcomed his company anyway. When Ching was sure he had her attention, he backed off, chirruping for her to follow, advanced again to rub against her, then once more retreated when she tried to pet him. Soon she got the idea that she was being instructed to follow him when he hopped down from her wagon.

He led her to the bear's cage, but when she saw the direction he was taking she turned again to go, protesting tearfully, "Oh, puss, I can't go there. That poor man!" Ching sat thumping his tail on the ground, staring up at her until she began to realize he was not behaving in a naturally feline fashion. Most cats, if there was a great deal of blood around, would have been savagely excited. Such a description in no way fit Ching. Zorah's curiosity led her on.

More to bolster her own courage than because she actually thought she would be understood, she said, taking a deep breath and pulling her frayed and muddied cloak close about her,

"Very well. I will look, then. I am a gypsy woman, and not squeamish."

A disembodied voice followed this outspoken proclamation of bravery, almost making lie of i( by sending her screaming back to her wagon.

"Please, Zorah, do be quiet and get us out of this cage. The bear is sleeping now, and might wake up hungry."

Making the sign against the evil eye, which also included ghosts and witches, she finally managed to peer into the wagon and through the bars. There sat the minstrel, appearing more bored and anxious than mauled. He was in one corner of the cage and the bear was piled like a used fur rug in the other corner. "Will you please get me out of here?"

"If you promise to do what I asked you earlier." Not for nothing did she come from a long line of horse traders. Colin reluctantly promised he would help her locate Gypsy Davey's heart as she had asked, and she took the key ring from under the wagon seat and fit the great wooden key into the lock.

"Now hurry," she said nervously as he jumped down beside her. "Some of my people will still be awake. We got to break camp soon and be out of here before dawn. Those town people are apt to get a little mad when they learn what our little shows really cost."

"I have to find my horse and get Maggie. If only we could delay pursuit somehow ..."

"I'll drive away our horses. That should give you plenty of time. It may be a close thing with the townspeople while we gather them up, but it won't take that long."

"Good girl!"

The horse had to be saddled, but the saddle and bridle had fortunately been left on the ground near the animal. In the confusion, no one had taken the sword and scabbard from the ground where they'd tossed it while subduing Colin. But he missed his instruments immediately.

He followed the soft nickerings of the other horses to find Zorah again. She was busy loosening hobbles and smacking rumps to encourage them to wander off into the richer grasses of the upper meadow.

"Do you know what's become of my fiddle and guitar?" he asked.

She looked up from beneath a horse's belly, trying to avoid getting stepped on. "I don't know. Xenobia probably saved them for Davey. She's always taking other people's things and giving them to him, as though that would make him stay with his mama more!"

Ignoring the last part of her answer, Colin stormed, "Well, he can't have them!" He dismounted, tying the reins to a wagon wheel. He was so angry that he started to stride straight towards Xenobia's wagon, mindless of the few gypsies who still lingered by the dying campfire.

Zorah's skirts rustled like wings in the darkness as she overtook him, restraining him with a hand on his arm.

"Hey, blondie."

He turned impatiently to her. "What is it?"

"Don't go charging in there like the bear." She hauled Obtruncator from its scabbard and handed it to him.

"Listen, take some advice from a gypsy girl, and use a little stealth. If you use that and this," she tapped the sword, "Maybe you'll get to leave this camp alive."

"Oh. Right," he replied, dropping back behind the wagons in a suitably stealthy crouch, Obtruncator protruding menacingly in front of him. "Thanks."

But even sneaking wasn't as helpful as he might have hoped, for Xenobia had taken his instruments inside her wagon, and she was still awake. He could hear her humming tunelessly to herself. Obviously, Davey had not inherited his musical ability from her side of the family. Peeking around the corner of the door in the back of the painted wagon, he could see that she was sitting facing his instruments, counting the booty collected earlier in the evening.

He grimaced. Chance was evidently not going to help him much tonight. Resuming his sneaking tactics, he crept up into the doorway and hoped her own croaking would cover some of the noise he made as he mounted the
step leading inside. In case it had not, once inside he leapt immediately for her neck again, very nearly seriously
injuring himself on the second best family sword as he did so.

The gold and silver tumbled from a tower to a heap. "Xenobia," Colin said, "this is getting monotonous. Really,
I don't like bullying women." He cast about for something with which to gag her. Her eyes rolled back and her
mouth worked furiously as the movement he made in his search increased the pressure on her windpipe. He lay the
sword down long enough to grab first his guitar, then his fiddle, and pull them back to him. He seemed to lack
sufficient appendages to do everything. Finally, he snatched her own blanket up from under her, almost upsetting
them both,

and wrapped this encumbrance around her, all the while maintaining his stranglehold with the other arm.

In desperation, he finally picked up the sword and braced it, point against her back, and released her neck,
saying, "One word and you're spitted. Now then, take off your stockings and hand them back here."

"Stupid! I'm a gypsy. I don't wear stockings. I go barefoot."

"Well, um, I'll wager the Lady Amberwine had stockings. Give me hers, then." He felt absolutely brilliant for
thinking of that. He was complimenting himself on his quick wit as she handed the stockings to him after pulling
them from a remote corner of the wagon.

Unfortunately, the sword had plopped down against her blankets when she moved forward to get the stockings.
Colin rebraced it.

"Before I gag you, ma'am, you can also tell me where you've got your son's heart hidden. You can just hand it
to me if it's close by."

"Now, how did you hear about that?" she asked, sounding, discouragingly uncowed by his fierceness.

"Never mind that," he growled.

"Have pity on a poor woman, young man. My baby's heart was stolen from me."

"A likely story. Who has it then, if not you?"

"The sorcerer took it. He holds it to insure my cooperation in helping him with his plans."

"Now that's smart," Colin said. "Where does he live?"

"At Dragon Bay. But you'll never get that far!" she shrieked the last as she jumped forward, ridding herself of
the sword. Colin had carelessly shown that both of his hands were occupied with stocking as he leaned forward to
gag her. Taking advantage of her freedom, she yelled for help in a voice piercing enough to be heard in Queenston.

Colin, fiddle, guitar, and sword were out the back of the wagon and clattering toward the horse before help
reached Xenobia at the front of the wagon. He ran headlong into Zorah. who was bent over, unhobbling the last of
the horses.

As she picked herself up from the ground, Colin thrust his instruments into her arms. She clutched them to her
and ran toward his horse just before her kinsmen came howling around the wagon yelling and screaming what Colin
assumed to be uncomplimentary and disparaging remarks in their gypsy language. They were brandishing knives,
clubs, and a mace left over surely from the Second Rebellion, as well as several other miscellaneous implements
designed for incising and slicing, and quite a few blunt objects. Backing slowly away, Obtruncator hoisted before
him, Colin faced the invading horde at first with a tentative thrust here and there. As they collectively perceived that
he was no master with the weapon, they jostled each other to strike the first telling blow, crowding him back against
a wagon. Colin did the only thing he was capable of doing at that point, and started whacking and banging the sword
around himself as furiously as he was able to wield the cumbersome object. He hoped to create a wall of such
unpredictable destruction between himself and his attackers that perhaps sheer indecision as to where they should
attack would delay his opponents in dispensing with him.

The gypsies did back off in the face of his assault. The first brave soul who attempted to storm his bastions got
a fearful clout on the head, which would have surely scalped him had it been from the blade rather than the flat of
the sword. As it was, he fell to the ground, insensible. Another belligerent fellow, the possessor of a staff, brought
the staff up to block the Obtruncator, which obtruncated it on the spot.

Whirling a sword which was taller than he was and at least a tenth part as heavy did begin to tell on Colin's
strength after a time. His arms, tireless at playing fiddle or guitar, quickly wearied with the labor of bashing the
sword about. He wondered, as he wearied, who exactly had originated the term "sword-play." Undoubtedly one of
Rowan's frost giant ancestors. Someone sidled in then to take advantage of his waning strength, and Colin was
saddened to see his fellow-fiddler, Cheese-nose, flashing his dagger in confusing convolutions.

He was also extremely worried, as Cheese-nose evidently knew his way around daggers as well as he did
around fiddles. While trying to determine what the other man would do next, he saw a glint of metal from his other
side. One of the worst things about this night fighting was that, in spite of the full moon, it was difficult to see in all
the confusion and darkness who was doing what.

Colin switched his attention from Cheese-nose to the sneak-attacker, whipping Obtruncator to where he had
seen the metallic flash, nearly beheading three people in the sword's path.

He didn't hear the barking and yapping until Ching dashed between his legs and a blur of dog knocked Cheese-nose aside. Colin regained his balance, and thrust to drive off the attacker on his right side, while he avoided the recovering Cheese-nose on his left. The right-hand attacker tripped over the dog and stepped heavily backward, grinding his heel into Ching's tail. Swords were forgotten as the dog growled and snarled at all and sundry, trying to get at Ching, who now made of himself a hairpiece and muffler for the right-hand attacker, who was no longer attacking but screaming in agony. The new hairpiece was anchored firmly to his head by four sets of claws.

Although the animals created a diversion which provided Colin with a moment's respite, he would have been cut down as soon as the first gypsy returned his attention to the battle. But it was then that the bear came lumbering into the fray.

Colin didn't stick around to see his enemies scatter, as he was too busy scattering himself. He bolted for his horse, leaping into the saddle as though he'd sprouted wings. Ching made a corresponding leap from the head of the gypsy he'd been riding, and transferred to Colin's shoulder instead. Then somehow they were on the horse and off through the open meadow. Colin was shaking so hard he nearly dropped the sword before he could return it to its scabbard.

As he galloped across the space between the circle of wagons and the wood, he saw Davey, muscles rippling magnificently in the moonlight as he sprinted at full speed toward the camp. Colin resisted an impulse to run him down, but held him at bay with the horse's nervous pawing hooves. "Where's Maggie?" he demanded.

The gypsy looked genuinely confused. "She's not with you?"

"No."

"Then she must have thought you were killed in all that noise, and run away. I let her go a long time ago." He appeared unconcerned by Colin's threatening air and shrugged impatiently, starting to walk in a wide circle around the frenzied horse. "Look after your own women. I've enough problem keeping up with mine."

Watching the gypsy walk blithely away from him and back to the camp, Colin saw one more thing before he fled into the woods. Zorah, visible to him but not from the camp, popped out from under one of the wagons and waved wildly for a moment before disappearing again.

CHAPTER 12

Colin's terrible screams had come to a shuddering climax long before Maggie reached the portion of the woods that would enable her to reach the bear's wagon undetected. For a long time after that she stood staring dry-eyed at the circle of wagons, unable to believe the evidence of her own ears. She wandered further into the wood, to the upstream end of the camp, her stomach heaving and body trembling with shock and fury.

She had to control an almost unbearable urge to fly "into the gypsy camp and dismantle it and everybody in it with her bare hands. She didn't have even her dagger now. though, and if she met the same end as Colin, who would there be to help Amberwine? She was comforting herself with visions of plagues both magical and mundane which she would cause to infest the gypsies if it took the rest of her life, when her attention was redirected to the camp by the clanging of swords, the screams of combatants, and the neighings of horses.

By the time she found a vantage point from which to observe the melee, the other sounds were joined by Ching's yowl of pain and indignation, a dog's frantic yapping, the coarse shouts of the gypsies, more fearful roaring from the bear, and the thunderous thudding of unshod hooves galloping over the grass.

All she was really able to see were confusing shapes flitting about in the diffuse light of the moon, but she did finally see a streak of pale hair as Colin, on the opposite side of the camp from where she now stood, rode away across the meadow, stopping only long enough to threaten Gypsy Davey. The gypsy appeared to talk his way out of the situation, and, before Maggie could cross the meadow to join Colin, he had ridden off into the woods. Her own cry for him to wait was drowned out by the bellowings of the gypsies pursuing their horses, who were for some reason scattered all across the meadow.

She fled back into the woods and ran until she reached the part of the meadow where she had left her horse and package of belongings. Now it seemed almost a game to elude the gypsies. She was giddy with relief that Colin had escaped, and fairly skipped through the damp, clinging meadow grass as she ran to the stream. As she had anticipated, her horse and pack were gone, undoubtedly the current property of some enterprising used horse dealer. There was, of course, a good possibility that her horse was one of those trotting over the meadow just ahead of a cajoling gypsy, but she was not about to take the time to look for him, or to try to catch any of the horses and persuade one to allow her to mount.

Snatching her hidden cache of clothing from beside the stream, she heard the callings and neighings come rapidly closer to where she knelt, until the noise and thundering shadows were all around her. She had to dodge several rocketing horses to reach the safety of the willows at the edge of the wood.

When she felt she was safely concealed, she changed out of the bright clothing she'd made from her underwear
and into her brown skirt and tunic. She pocketed her medicine pouch and took the remaining phial of love potion from her hair, dropping that into her pocket as well. She wadded the bright gypsy dress so that only the green showed and wouldn't betray her by its color.

Of the wildflowers which had graced her hair that night, only one remained after her tussle with Davey, and that had wilted. She could detect no vestiges of the love-philtre perfume on her skin. Taking the flower from her hair, she tied her kerchief around her head instead. It was then that she heard a horse breaking through the underbrush nearby, the voice of its pursuer close behind. With her dark skin and clothing she melted into the forest as though she were an animated tree trunk.

By the time she could no longer hear voices, neither could she find a path underfoot. The sun had risen, and as she searched it came from oblivion to reach mid-point in the warm spring sky. The leaves overhead glimmered feverishly, their tops glazed with a citrusy hue, and all around her were mosses, tall grass, fallen leaves, and the trunks of dead trees underfoot. The path had completely disappeared. She had blended into the forest a little too successfully, and realized that she was lost.

Wandering, she came at last to the bank of another stream. Although willows and other taller bushes grew close by the bank in many places, at one point they did recede into a clearing, and in this spot the stream was lined with a field of berries.

She picked great handfuls, and ate them that way, having nothing to make a more fanciful concoction, and not possessing the strength or inclination for cooking, magical or otherwise, just then, anyway. They were very good just as they were, if a bit tart at times. She continued gathering after she'd eaten her fill, and tied them into her kerchief, leaving her hair to string down, hot and sticky, against her neck.

Her exhilaration over Colin's escape and her own began to fade, and she sat down on a log to think. She was tired, having been up the whole night, and now that she knew he was safe she was annoyed that Colin was not there to keep her company and help her continue their journey. Presumably Ching was with him now, and she missed the cat too.

She would have liked to discuss with Colin what Davey had told her, and plan how to get her sister away from Hugo, who she now felt sure was taking her sister to the sorcerer, if he hadn't already killed her. Although she badly wished to see Colin again, she just as fervently hoped he would continue on his way when he found she was not in the section of the wood for which he had been headed.

Still, Ching might have cheered her with his sarcasm, and not incidentally with the game he could catch and share with her. It would be nice to stroke his fur while she thought, too, instead of watching her hands turn blue from the berries. A tear of self-pity slid down one of her brown cheeks.

She was about to brush it aside when she heard the rustling in the bushes and heard a peculiar snuffling, whuffing sound and saw the leaves of the willows shake. A brown, furry nose poked out of the shrubbery.

She froze. A bear, perhaps the one from the gypsy camp. Now she really did miss Ching, and even the minstrel, who might have at least tried to do as her father had suggested and sing the bear a lullaby. She could always TRY to turn the creature into a rug. It was better than being eaten.

The bear emerged fully from the bushes and stood on his hind legs, blinking his small eyes and looking around. Maggie sat back so abruptly when he stood up that she almost fell into the stream. Before it had occurred to her that that would have been a safer course of action than to attract the bear's attention, she had caused considerable commotion flailing around trying to save herself a soaking.

The bear growled.

Maggie righted herself abruptly, sitting up so quickly that the kerchief-tied bundle of berries rolled out of her lap and onto the ground beside her foot. She nudged the berries toward the bear with her toes.

"Thanks, m'dear. These are excellent."
She shook her head sharply and pounded above her ear with the heel of her hand. "Excuse me. Did you say something?"

"Yes-the berries-very good indeed. I say, you wouldn't have a little honey about, would you? Since I've been in this form I've had such a great craving for it, but of course, Xenobia would never let anyone give me any."

"No, I'm sorry. Perhaps I can go find some--" Seeing a chance to escape, she tensed herself for flight, then hesitated. He seemed completely uninterested in eating her, at least so long as berries were available. "Excuse me, bear. How is it you-or rather, I-I mean, how can we understand each other?"

"You young folks broke part of the spell. Didn't you know?"
"Spell?"
"Yes, indeed. Xenobia's spell specifically stated that if I were released by—say—a magic cat and my son's own true love, that I should once more be able to talk and act as a man. Of course, I can't look like myself again unless I'm able to recover young David's sticker." His little bear eyes looked at her shrewdly.

"I trust I'm not incorrect in assuming you're part of that group— with the charming animal and the clumsy young chap who screams so beautifully? I know Xenobia's folk, of course, and you have a different look than the townspeople."

"Oh, yes, those are my friends, Colin the minstrel and Chingachgook, my grandmother's familiar. But if you're not really a bear, then who are you?"

"I am Prince H. David Worthyman, formerly known at home, and abroad as Prince Worthyman the Worthy, heir to the throne of Ablemarle. I suppose now my brother, known in my day as Prince Worthyman the Worthless, has been kind enough to fill the vacancy left in the crown princedom since my bearship."

Maggie nodded. "We don't get much political news up where I live, but Dad did say that since the death of your late father, King Worthyman the Worthy, things have really deteriorated over there." She was silent for a moment while His Highness, having finished the berries in her kerchief, shoveled them off the bushes into his muzzle with both front paws.

"Excuse me, though. Prince Worthyman. How did you come to be enchanted, if that's not too personal a question? My aunt says Xenobia's a charlatan, not a proper witch at all . . ."
"Your aunt is absolutely correct, m'dear. She's not a witch, of course. She custom-ordered the spell from her patron sorcerer."

Maggie snorted. "That fellow has caused a great deal of trouble!"

"Aye, he has indeed." He turned a berry-stained snout to her, then dropped down onto all four paws and settled himself beside the stream for a drink. "I'll tell you, gurrrl," he said, shaking the water from his snout when he had finished, "If you'll be kind enough to scratch behind my ears and along the top of my nose-ahhh, yes, that's good-I'll tell you all about it."

THE ACCOUNT OF HIS ROYAL HIGHNESS
PRINCE H DAVID WORTHYMAN. ALSO CALLED THE ENCHANTED BEAR

"I suppose you can't really be too hard on Xenobia for a lot of the things she's done. I didn't realize at the time what a sensitive girl she was or I shouldn't have-er-loved her and left her, as they say.

"But I was just a young sprout then, and if the girls didn't like me quite as well as they like young Davey, well, they liked me well enough so that soon I grew bored with them and their fickle fan-fluttering flatteries and I preferred to go huntin' instead.

'We were sheltered up to the castle, you know, and I'd never seen a gypsy wench before. But I saw a great deal of Xenobia that first time, for she was bathin' in the river. She was so pretty then, with thai golden skin and those snappin' black eyes-oh, yes, I was considerably smitten. To give m'self credit, she didn't take much persuading. I visited her several times while her caravan was in the area and then, being gypsies, they left.

'I nearly forgot about her as time went by. Being crown prince is fairly heavy work, y'know. One thing father insisted on was that I choose and marry one of the local princesses. Princesses in general seemed a sorry, simpering lot compared to Xenobia, I thought then, but finally I chose Jane of Brazoria as the least objectionable of them, and we were married, and I resumed learning my duties as king-to-be while Janie and I tried to produce an heir.

"Probably because we weren't so lucky on that account,

I was ready, when I got Xenobia's message, to believe her when she said little Davey was my son. By the time I heard, you see, the lad was well along to being eight years old. I didn't question that he was mine for a moment, either, once I saw him. He looks like me, don't you think? No? Oh, yes, not so shaggy-hen, heh-keep forgetting. Not used to being both man and bear. S'awkward.

"Anyway, little Davey was my son, and a charming, laughing child he was too. I wish Xenobia hadn't hidden herself so well when your friends released me. I'd have shown her a bear! 'Twas a terrible thing she did to our boy."

"Hmph," said Maggie. "He seemed to be doing alright for himself, if you ask me."

"Well, of course you've no idea, not having been around long. But I can tell you, gurrrl, that my son is not the warm, gay child he was. He is not even a nice person now. Many fear him, and many envy him, but no one except his mother and that girl who opened my cage truly love him-and even Xenobia and the girl only love what he used to be."

"I see."

"Back to my story-I say, I hope I'm not boring you?"

"Oh, no."

"Well, then. Davey was a beautiful child, and we loved each other at once. For a week I bided with the gypsies and taught him the things I knew-a bit about hunting, a bit about affairs of state, a few songs I'd learned off the circuit minstrels. But when time came for me to go. Xenobia cornered me, wantin' to know couldn't I stay with her and the lad. I explained about learning to run kingdoms, and Jane, and all, and I s'pect she must have figured I'd gone snooty on her. With Jane and all that. I couldn't take her back to court even if they could have adjusted to the life. It wouldn't have done at all.

'I thought she understood that in spite of the fearsome frown on her face as I left them. Five years later I received another message, this one askin' me to come to young Davey's manhood ceremony. I see now that that frown, when I first told her there was no room in my life for her and our son, was when she decided to change, and all three of us became monsters.

"She met me on the road before I reached their camp, and was all smiles and giggles. Even eight years ago, Xenobia was still quite a good-looking woman, and I flattered myself that my charm certainly wore well. I'd no idea it was a different charm altogether that she had in mind then, for we never went through the main camp at all, but straight to her wagon. She gave me meat and drink.

"I asked to see my son, but she told me he was 'being prepared.' After I drained my wine glass, I felt a little drowsy, y'know, so I thought I'd just have a bit of a nap.

"When I woke up I was in the bear's cage, couldn't move a muscle or say a thing. My body was changin' into a bear's then, you see, and it seems to affect you like that. It was dark, and Xenobia came up carrying a torch, hard yella light on her hard, wicked face. I wondered then what I saw in her. Behind her was this fella all muffled in
cloakery, like some sort of pilgrim.

"This here's the sorcerer, Davey,' she says to me. 'Come all the way from Dragon Bay to be at our boy's ceremony.' Then she went on, mocking me. 'As your highness may have noticed, I don't write to you overmuch, not bein' an educated woman like your wife and the noble kind. But our tribe has lately suffered the loss of our beloved bear—got a bit rough in the bear-baiting, and the poor thing got killed.' Well, I thought she was daft, you know, goin' on about some bear and me not bein' able to talk.

"Then she says, all sweet and reasonable, 'So I thought we could help each other out. You want to be near the boy, and I need a new bear. The sorcerer here is obligin' us by arranging for you to be the bear. If it should by any chance happen, I have to tell you, that you ever get help getting loose from the cage by another magic animal—and where will you find one of them among us?—or what the sorcerer is about to make really impossible, and you'll see for yourself what I mean, my love, soon enough—if this magical animal that helps you is aided by our boy's true love, you'll get to think and talk like a man again. Of course, anybody else tries to help you, you'll probably eat them, because in a lot of ways, mighty prince of mine, you're getting to be all bear.' She laughed then and it was spine-tinglin' to hear.

"After this ceremony, our sweet little boy will never have to worry about findin' a true love to desert the way his Papa did. His heart will belong to his mother and only to her!"

"I didn't know, of course, what she meant by that, but I was soon to find out, for she left the cage facing the gypsy's campfire.

"This ceremony they were having was all lit by torches carried by the friends of all the boys getting passed to manhood, and I could see well enough. Young Davey, he was all eager and excited, and they smeared paint on him and on the others and waved symbols in the air supposed to be magical, had some dances, give him a speech about how he's a prince now. Ha! If only he knew, he could be a real prince with none of that hokum about it.

"But on with what I was saying. Anyway, pretty soon it's all over for the other boys and they go back to their parents. But Xenobia tells the boy that since he's a prince and so on, he has one more bit of special rigamarole to go through.

"She takes this crystal thing from the sorcerer—what d'ya call them, gurrl? A prism. And she holds it in front of the child and tells him to watch it, to watch the fire inside it, to watch the colors of it, and pretty soon he gets real stupid looking. A trance, I s'pose it was.

"The sorcerer comes forward then and takes this prism from Xenobia, places it against the boy's breast. He chants and singsongs and makes more magical patterns in the air. Wasn't much of that went on before the prism gets brighter and brighter, and then very bright, indeed. Xenobia held out her hand for it then, but the sorcerer didn't give it to her. She put up no fuss, either, afraid of undoing the magic, I suppose.

"Davey woke up then, and a great feastin' party was held. I felt hungry myself, you see, for I was this way by then, and the meal I'd had as a man was hardly enough for a bear. I was also beginning to feel stupid and dull and ornery, and I tried to lift my arms to rattle the side of the cage, i saw my paws and forelegs then, and I knew she was telling the truth, that I was turning into a bear. I tried hard to understand what they were saying as they came to the cage, hoping they'd give me a clue as to how to free myself.

"Xenobia had figured by then that the sorcerer had tricked her and was hollering at him. 'You promised me I'd have the heart.' I heard her say.

"The sorcerer was sweet as honey. 'I only promised to relieve him of it, dear lady, Come now.' he says, 'why should a traveler like yourself be needing extra possessions to cart around? I'll just keep it safe for you as a memento of this lovely party and this charmin' native ritual of yours. Someday, maybe, when I'm sure of your friendship and all, I may let you have it back.'

"Xenobia didn't say anything to that, and he raps on my cage, and I knew I was more bear than man already, for he smelled delicious. 'By the way, Highness, the lady was not exactly playing fair with you. She neglected to tell you the rest of the antidote, as I'm bound by the spell to do. If, having been freed by those other conditions she mentioned, you manage to recover this little trinket,' he flashed the prism again, dazzling my eyes and taunting Xenobia, 'so your son can be as dreary as most young men. you will regain your human shape. If you don't die of old age in that bear body first!' -

"'Then I'll be if he didn't mount on a great black swan and fly away before Xenobia could be at him again.'

"I must say," Maggie admitted through her yawn, "that was an amazing story." Her eyelids had been getting ever heavier as the bear's deep voice growled on. The bear prince raised his great shaggy head from her lap. and if a bear's tiny eyes could look solicitous, his did.

"Ah. gurrl. and you listening to all that after being up all night andnone of the sleep you natural folk need. You're in sore need of hibernation." He rose to his hind paws again and looked around, then dropped once more to
all fours. "You nap a bit and I'll keep watch. I doubt any of Xenobia's tribe have lingered in the area, but we'll wait for nightfall to move along all the same."

"You're the prince," Maggie agreed, snuggling down into a nice grassy place and immediately sleeping.

CHAPTER 14
DUE TO THE MAGICAL NATURE OF THIS TALE CHAPTER 13 HAS BEEN OMITTED

Awakening in his comfortable room at the Queenston Inn, the homey weight of Ching's purring body stretched across his legs. Colin felt like crying. His body ached all over from wielding the great sword, and from riding in one day the day-and-a-half distance from the gypsy camp to Queenston. He had actually allowed himself to be so panicked by pursuit as to take Davcy's word for it that Maggie was safe and likely on the road ahead of him. He had half-killed his horse galloping down that forest path in hopes of collecting her.

For the first league or two that flew beneath his horse's hooves, he had expected to rein in at any moment to hoist a brightly clad figure up behind him. Instead, the path had been empty, the town at the hour of his passage had been empty, and the highway beyond the town leading to Queenston, while not empty, had not led to Maggie either.

He hadn't really supposed she'd get so far ahead as to reach the highway on foot before him, but nonetheless her absence upon it caused him to feel empty. It was by then too late to turn back, or to slow down, for the gypsies would have recaptured their mounts and been after him if that was their intention. He could not take the chance that it wasn't.

So today he was less weary, but sore of mind and body, and a day behind from sleeping through it if he could judge from the ruddy sunset pinking the lace curtains that hung at the window.

He was hungry too, and had no assets except a sword that didn't fit him, his musical instruments, the clothes on his back, and a borrowed cat. He also had a lack of bright notions how to proceed with keeping his promises to Maggie and to Zorah.

Ching raised his black-masked face from his kneading front paws, green eyes slitted with good cheer.

Colin idly scratched behind the cat's whiskers. "At least you're in a good mood. We'd best get to work, however, before they throw us in prison." The cat didn't look particularly worried. Having no purse, he could hardly be held responsible for bills. Colin walked to the window to get his bearings. The capitol swept down to the brilliant water of Queenston Harbor, whose garden of masts and spars was outlined in sharp detail against the mountains. The sunset frosted the upper peaks, hovering protectively around the harbor, with strawberry ice. "Ah, well," sighed Colin as he pulled his boots on. "at least if we don't come up with something here they'll only jail us-if they catch us. This is a nice place. Some inns, I understand, they'd simply slit our throats and be done with it."

Fortunately, temporary impoverishment was one contingency the academy had trained him to contend with. Guitar strung across his back, and fiddle under his arm, he held open the door of the room for Ching to stroll through. "Now, cat, I promised you you'd never go hungry, didn't I? How does some nice fish sound?" Ching gazed raptly up at him for a reply.

Hoping not to meet the landlord. Colin slipped softly down the stairs, and for a change luck was with him. He breathed more deeply when they had put several streets between themselves and the inn. The salty, fishy smell of the harbor tanged at their noses, and Ching padded along in a positively frisky fashion.

Colin soon thought it prudent to lift the cat to his shoulders so he could ride between the guitar and Colin's neck. The capitol of Argonia was much busier than it had been when the third-class apprentices from the Minstrel Academy had visited their hall there years before.

Even now, in early evening, merchants and sailors and servants and nobles streamed around him, bartering and buying right in the middle of the street. Heavily-laden wagons pulled by horses or oxen parted the stream of passers-by as a boulder parts a stream of water. Carriages, gilded and probably belonging to noble court officials and administrative personnel, clattered by, heedless of the traffic, and Colin shied, nervous of so much activity after the relative peace of the highway.

He ought to have expected it would be busier, though, with the tribunal convening in only three months. Servants would be renovating their masters' and mistresses' townhouses, merchants would be heavily stocking their inventories, and, naturally, more ships would be required to bring the goods.

Country folk would be coming to town looking for work more lucrative than farming to see them through the coming winter. And curiosity-seekers would be trying to find a good place to stay before everyone else got moved in. For everybody wanted to know what would happen when the elder statesmen of Argonia met to nominate Finbar the Fireproof's successor to the crown of Argonia.

Finbar had been one of the best kings ever to rule, and one of the most colorful. The Minstrel Academy was one of the King's many educational advances, and had been founded some fifty years ago, shortly after Finbar had accepted the crown. Tax reforms, improved farming methods instituted by wise men sent abroad specifically to
study advanced foreign techniques, the abolition of differences in the criminal code between magical and non-magical folk, and a general attitude of reason and tolerance had been the result of his rule.

But Finbar, once the most stoic and courageous of princes, was finally growing old. Some said old before his time, as an unfortunate consequence of his family history. He came from a family of performing magicians, whose talents included not only Finbar’s own penchant for swallowing flaming swords (which made him virtually dragon-proof) but also being sawn in half, lying on beds of nails, sticking swords into boxes containing themselves, and other uncomfortable occupations. Even those who did not agree that the king’s premature infirmity at the age of eighty-six resulted from his magic had to admit that his perilous ancestral talent had cost him his heir to the throne.

For his descendants, in the same way lamented by Granny and Aunt Sybil Brown, were less powerful than he, as he was less powerful than his ancestor who could climb invisible ropes into the stratosphere. The two young princes, in trying to live up to their father’s prowess, perished rather messily while attempting to master one of the more advanced skills practiced by him. The princess did happen to have a little talent for eating fire, but after the demise of her brothers she decided to retire from public life and become an illuminator of manuscripts.

Some folk were uncharitable enough to intimate that a monarch with somewhat less magic and somewhat more mortal strength and horse sense might be a wise choice at this time.

At any rate, the economy of Queenston was flourishing if the reigning monarch was not, and it was not easy for a man with a cat on his shoulders and a fiddle under his arm to elbow his way through the throngs that crowded the streets and waterfront, where if there were fewer nobles and rich merchants, there were more longshoremen, sailors, and the ladies who profited by their company.

He was about to ask one of these people where he could locate his dinner when his nose located it for him. Rancid grease, frying fish, sailors whose bodies touched water only when a wave washed across the deck of their ships, and the mingled stench of first- and second-hand ale and foreign tobacco told him he had found a place to earn his meal and rent money even before he heard the clamor of voices and the rattle of cutlery from within.

He could see very little as he entered the inn, for two reasons. The first was that a friendly pre-dinner brawl was in progress and people were flying in and out the door on their knees and by the seats of their pants in confusing profusion. The second reason was that the smoke from both pipes and unattended oil lamps clouded the entire establishment with a haze of blue-gray fumes. Colin thought perhaps the patrons were so glad to see the place after months at sea, they probably considered the fumes atmospheric.

Ducking the airborne diners, he made his way to a chair in the corner of the room where he could have his back against the wall and avoid being jostled from behind. Ching jumped down from his shoulder and went to investigate the fish smells emerging from behind the bar, and Colin unlimbered his bow.

For a time he played to himself, building his courage, and no one could hear him over the brawl. But the first of the brawlers to decide to sit and nurse his wounds over another flagon sat near him, listened to what he played, applauded loud enough even to be heard over the din, and bellowed a request. This innovative pastime quickly became fashionable among his fellows, likewise seeking less painful diversion which would allow them more drinking time.

Requests were loud and competitive, and almost led to another brawl, until someone decided to influence Colin’s choice with a copper coin. Someone else decided that what one copper coin could do, two copper coins would do better, and so on. By the time he had enough to buy his dinner, Colin was thoroughly enjoying himself.

All of the sailors had voices, a few of them good, all of them lusty, and they brought the same enthusiasm to the singing that they had to the brawling. Their favorite songs were bawdy and very long, since on shipboard it was a common pastime to sing and to add new verses, appropriate to the current situation, to old songs. Colin was on the sixteenth verse or the eighteenth, he wasn’t sure which, of the one about the selkie who outwitted the sea serpent and seduced the siren, when the first of his listeners called the innkeeper for a pint for the fiddler.

As the evening wore on and the smoky room changed from an overall illuminated black, frequent calls of “Innkeeper, t’lad’s dry! Ale!” reverberated through the room along with the clanking of flagons and the singing. Then Colin was good for another forty verses, and after the first few times was amazed at how harmonious the chorusing of the sailors had become.

When the second gallon had poured down his throat, a man with a striped cap and an eyepatch produced a concertina and another man produced a hornpipe, and then it didn’t matter if Colin sang or not, as everyone else was making music, even if they weren’t all singing or playing the same song.

As the night wore on and day approached, Colin was still singing and yarning at the table occupied by his most fervent and most intoxicated supporters. The minstrel listened to their stories and thought he’d never heard anything so wonderful, or met such fine, brave, intelligent, altogether splendid
fellows in his life.

There was a lull in the conversation then as all of them took a pull at their flagons and he told them about his own adventures. When he’d finished, several pints later, his face was wet with tears. "...and so I lost dear, dear H'l Maggie..." and a couple of the tears slid over the lip of his flask.

"There there, lad, you'll dilute the ale," said the concertina player, thoughtfully mopping Colin's face with his striped hat, and then blowing his nose on it before replacing it on his own head.

"Ah, you loved the lassie, didn't you, lad?" asked a tenderhearted old soul, the bosun of the ship they all crewed on, and a former pirate.

"Well, she made excellent stew..." Colin said wistfully, the tears still flowing freely. "But I left her in the wood. Couldn't find her. Nothin' left of her a'tall but her pussy cat." The originator of the ribald remark that followed that statement was awarded a scathing look by Ching, who was filled with fish given him by the friendly cook in the kitchen and perched once more on Colin's neck.

When the laughter died away, someone else said, "Sign on with us, then, lad."

"Can't. I've all this unfinished business. Got to find 'er ladyship for Maggie, and gel the gypsy's heart from t' sor-sorcerer for Zorah, like I told you." He started bawling again at the impossibility of it all, then brightened. "I say, you lads wouldn't know where I could find any bad sor-sor-men witches, would you?"

The old pirate with the romantic streak spoke up again. "Now there's a good reason for you to join on with us, laddie. The wiliest rogue of the sorcerous lot lives on an island in Dragon Bay, so I hear tell. If it's evil sorcerers you want, he's your man."

Colin, who didn't see how he could be running into two evil sorcerers on the same journey, felt sure that the sorcerer the pirate mentioned must be the one he sought. He agreed to sign on as far as Dragon Bay, and asked when they were leaving.

"First light 'o morning, which is to say as soon as I can boot these rogues out of here," said the second officer. "We wants to get into the Bay and docked before Dragon Days starts if we can, which we can't if you lads sits here all day."

"What's Dragon Days?" asked Colin.

"Aw, it's nothing. Just every month for a week or so Dragon Bay is plagued by this great beastie what it feeds before it eats everything in sight."

"How can people live there, then?"

"It's this sorcerer fella, you see," said the concertina player, warming especially to the narration now that work was in sight. "He sets up this Dragon Days arrangement with the Dragon. Persuasive sort of chap, they say he is, the sorcerer—not the dragon—thought dragons do their own persuadin' anyhow, the way oft is everybody has to give up so many of their beasts every month to feed the dragon. There's some say an occasional rival of Himself the Sorcerer gets unlucky enough to wander in among the poor beasts and be eaten, but none will swear to it. The folk drive their beasts down to the bay, and the animals are driven onto a barge and hauled out to one of them rocky patches that surrounds Evil Island."

"Evil Island?"

The man leaned forward, whispering, "That's where the sorcerer dwells, of course. Some say it's beautiful and others say it's terrible, but all say it's a bloody good thing t' sorcerer has made this arrangement so they can tithe a cow t' the dragon instead of being eaten out o' house and home in a more personal kinda way. Ah, laddie, a dragon is a terrible plague!"

"I don't know 'bout that," Colin said, trying to be fair, "I met a dragon once, and she wasn't such a bad sort once you got t' know 'er."

This remark was met with laughter that all but gusted away the atmosphere, the guffaws being so lusty as to blow the smoke clouds out the door. "Not so bad once you gets to know 'er! Now there's a good "un!"

The old pirate clapped him on the back. "You surely must come with us now, laddie. It's a fine sailor we can make of you."

"But I've never been to sea."

"No matter. We can teach you the sailin' part, but the serious requirements is drinkin', singin', and lyin', and you surely do excel at that."

CHAPTER 15

His Highness the bear, Maggie found, made the perfect traveling companion. While strong enough and bearlike enough to barge through the woods with no fear of interference from griffins or lions or much of anything else, he was nevertheless cultured, erudite, witty, and considerate. Ever courteous, he was mindful of her comfort and courtly in his manners, yet not too dignified to use his claws to dig for edible roots she could cook for supper.

The first night they had spent getting out of the wood, and had in the morning camped on the banks of a river
which neither of them could name, Maggie never having been so far from home before and the bear being a
foreigner. Of course, he told her, he had been all over a great many countries with the gypsy band, he was sure, but
his own mind then was dominated by the bear's, and he had only a bear's perceptions of where he had been.
The worst part of the spell Xenobia had caused to be cast upon him was that he was not only a bear in
appearance, but a bear in thought and deed as well. His own mind was imprisoned by the bear's, and he had only
the control a bear normally had over his actions and treatment. There had been other times, he admitted
remorsefully, when enemies of Xenobia not so well-connected with magical cats had been put in the cage with him.
Maggie shuddered, but so did the enchanted prince.
It had been a terrible thing to watch the body he occupied murder helpless people. It was somehow not at all the
same as leading troops in a border skirmish, bashing heads and laying into one another in good clean soldierly fun.
That was after all a prince's duty.
Well into the afternoon they had a dinner of berries and bird's eggs. The bear had them raw as he found them,
but Maggie made an omelette of her share, after she had first prudently expanded both foods to satisfy their appetites
and have a few
days' supply in reserve. There were enough eggs left over to return to the bird's nest, if the bird would have
them after they'd been jiggled about by bears and magical spells.
As His Highness regally licked in the last of the blue stain from his muzzle, Maggie reached into her pocket
and produced the silver mirror. "I suppose," she said, "we ought to find out where we're going."
"Good idea, gurrrl. How?"
Maggie showed him Aunt Sybil's mirror and explained its powers and restrictions. "Only trouble is, this type of
gift magic limits itself to three visions only. Then it's useless unless it's recharged."
"What's the problem?"
"I think we've used two already, if the one that misfired at the castle counts. Colin and I saw Winnie in
Queenston the second time we tried it. And I was thinking. If we're up against such a powerful sorcerer, maybe we
should try to enlist the help of my uncle."
The bear waited courteously for her to continue. "My aunt said her brother lives in these parts somewhere, and
by now he may be very powerful himself. Aunt Sybil and Gran are. Unfortunately, I'm not. Making a superb souffle
hardly qualifies me for rescuing people from the clutches of mighty sorcerers. There's also that little matter of your
son's heart he might advise us on. No," she concluded, having convinced herself, "we need first-class help."
"So you're thinkin' to find your uncle in the glass instead of
Lady Rowan?"
"It's an idea. Probably Uncle Fearchar knows this sorcerer, what with both of them living on the coast and aill.
Possibly they even play chess together once in a while-though neither of us have any reason to be fond of him, to
another sorcerer like Uncle Fearchar he might not be such a bad fellow."
His Highness grumbled deep in his throat, but only said, "If your sister is with the peddler and you think he's
dangerous, shouldn't we fetch her with all speed? If we delay, she and her babe may come to harm that no powerful
help can remedy."
Maggie automatically started to open her mouth to argue her point of view further, then considered. Without
knowing Hugo's plans, she had no way of knowing how much danger Winnie could be in. Had she hit on the idea of
locating her uncle to be of the most possible help to her sister, or merely to bolster her own
confidence, which had taken a sharp drop once they were dealing with sorcerers rather than a few gypsies and a
gossipy peddler?
"You're right, of course," she finally agreed. She tried to concentrate on Amberwine'then, as they peered
expectantly into the rainbow lights that began gathering in the silver, and she hoped the vision would be of
Amberwine in better straits than before.
Again she got a double image, "I'm sorry," she told the bear. "I'm not nearly so good at this as Aunt Sybil. I
keep bunching them together." The bear stared over her shoulder as the blurry vision of Amberwine's face gradually
faded. "At least her hair seemed to be combed this time," Maggie remarked hopefully.
"Maybe this is where she is," said the bear, indicating the second picture, which was sharpening now that
Amberwine's face had disappeared. In the mirror was the interior of an inn, as seen in front of, around, and behind a
man whom both Maggie and the bear both thought they recognized but were equally sure they had never met. His
appearance was strikingly unusual, not that of a person one would easily forget, Maggie thought.
He had coppery skin, lined deeply around his intensely dark brown eyes, and grooved on either side of his
hawkish nose down to a thin-lipped mouth which held a faint suggestion of a smile. His cheekbones were high, and
his brown hair, distinctively striped with gray at the temples, waved handsomely back from his forehead. In his hand
was a wine glass and at his elbow the innkeeper's wife, pouring him a refill.
"It's such an honor to have you stay with us here at Bayshore Inn, Master Brown," the woman simpered, setting down the wine crock. "Will you be staying with us long?"

"Only till the second loading is done, Goodwife," the man replied.

"It's Uncle Fearchar!" said Maggie, now that the reason for his familiar appearance was clear.

"Of course, that's why I thought I'd seen him," the bear said, "the fellow's the spittin' image of you, gurrr!." Maggie blushed guiltily. "I'm afraid the magic mirror must show what I want to see, not what I think I ought to see. But I wish we could get Winnie back-maybe--" she returned her eyes to the mirror but the image was already gone. She shook her head. "Too bad. That was the last one, too."

The bear sat back down by the Fire, and Maggie put the mirror away. "I propose that we use the nonmagical clues we have. All roads seem to lead to Dragon Bay. Let's get over there so I can get the boy's heart and tear out of that smiling sorcerer what he's done with your sister."

It was easier to talk of getting to Dragon Bay than to do it, for the way led into the foothills and over a high passage that crossed the Mountains of Mourn. The mountains had been named, said the bear, who had studied wars foreign and domestic as Crown Prince of Ablemarle, after a battle involving giant soldiers who landed on the shores of Argonia, wreaking destruction in the coastal villages. They were repulsed finally, at the cost of many lives, from crossing into interior Argonia when the loyal home guard defended their home from the towering slopes. It was reported to have been a terrible battle, with even the Argonian dragons aiding in the defense. Maggie said she'd heard of it too, except she had heard that the dragons only helped the Argonians because the enemy tasted better and were larger. The dragons had been concerning themselves more with their plates than their patriotism.

Although there was a footpath, perhaps left from the days of old before the Argonian Navy became strong enough that the mountains did not need to be foot-patrolled, the going was by no means easy. Road-hardened as Maggie's feet had become, her lungs were entirely unconvinced they were able to breathe the rarified mountain air, and the bear often had to wait while she caught her breath.

It was cold up there, too, and the snow was deeper than her riding boots, which were growing thinner and thinner with each magical patching. She shivered even in her woolen cloak, which was not, unfortunately, her winter-weight cloak. If she had only brought her hand spindle from the pack she might have woven some of the bear's fur into a coat, but it was too late for that now.

When they finally came down out of the mountains it had been a full seven days since they'd left the river. By noon of that day they stood on a hill overlooking Dragon Bay and the little town that lay along its shore. From where they stood, the Bay was silver and white, smooth as glass in long flat curves offset by choppy glittering expanses of water. Beyond the Bay was the open sea, but behind it was another mountain range, craggier and even more forbidding than the one they had just crossed.

Studding the waters were a number of small islands, some no more than rocks for the waves to break against, and others fairly large and green and covered with vegetation. The largest of the islands was crowned by a castle. Even from their vantage point it appeared crude and ancient, two enormous stone houses, one taller than the other, with towers stuck at each corner and surrounded by a high wall.

The town was situated on what was the only possible site for it, having been built on a beach that was backed by the hill on which they stood. Fierce rocky cliffs brooded over the water on either side of the town, their grimness somewhat softened by the sparkling falls of spring water cascading down their faces and by the wildflowers growing in the deep cracks that scored them.

"I'll wager," said the bear, "that that's where the dragons of Dragon Bay lurk." Maggie shaded her eyes, straining to see. "In those caves in yon cliffs, gurrr. Just the thing for dragons. Bears too, matter of fact."

"I was getting ready to speak to you about that, Your Highness," she said, turning back to him. "I'm really afraid that the sight of you will cause undue panic in the town. Perhaps I'd better go find out if I can where the sorcerer dwells."

"No, gurrl," he replied. "You're a good gurrrl to offer to take my chances for me. But sorcerers are tricky, and you might be trapped with no way to send for me. I think if you enlarge that cloak of yours to fit me, and put a hood on it, I can pass for a foreign pilgrim, and none'll be the wiser."

Maggie had been almost afraid he wouldn't object to her suggestion, for she felt safe in his company, if not from dangers sorcerous and arcane, at least from those physical ones like ogres and goblins which were well within the competence of a bear's strength.

When the cloak had been altered as he requested and he stood before her on his hind legs, paws concealed in
the folds of the garment, she smiled with satisfaction at her handiwork and pulled the hood a little lower over his snout. "There. If you just keep your voice down and your claws hidden, your Highness, this might do the trick."

"You'd better make out that I'm fasting, as well, then," replied His Highness, "I'm not much for knives or forks these days."

It was odd coming into a town again after being in the woods and mountains for so long. There seemed to be too many buildings and too many people moving too quickly. The self-preoccupied looks on the faces of the townspeople as they brushed past the V travelers forced Maggie to keep reminding herself that their own business was just as important and they needn't keep giving way before people. Though Dragon Bay was small, it was still much larger than a gypsy camp, where the bear had spent his last few years, or Maggie's home at Fort Iceworm. Many of the hurrying people were driving geese, ducks, cows, and pigs through the streets, so that the noises of those animals were mixed with the cries of their drivers and the general conversation of day-to-day commerce.

Careful to keep the bear as far as possible from the larger animals, Maggie looked around for a point of reference. "I'm not sure how to do this, now that we're here," she told the bear. "I feel so silly just walking up to someone and saying 'Excuse me, sir or madam, would you be so kind as to point the way to the nearest evil sorcerer?' I mean, how could they admit knowing someone like that? It would show they kept bad company." The bear nodded, but had no suggestions to offer.

Most of the structures along the shore street were fishermen's huts with boats docked at the front doors and nets set out to dry and mend. Several landings down from Maggie and the bear, some of the animals were being loaded onto a barge. While they stood staring at the activity, a cow being driven down the street behind them came too close to His Highness's wild-smelling person and bolted, causing several other animals to engage in a miniature stampede.

The Prince pulled Maggie away before she could be run down by a flock of frantically bleating sheep, and the two of them fled up a narrow side street to avoid being trampled. When they had put another street between themselves and the bustling dock, Maggie collapsed against a building to catch her breath.

Regaining her composure, she slowly opened her eyes again and found herself staring into the open door of the establishment on the opposite side of the street. Her hand went to the bear's shoulder. "You Highness, isn't that the inn from the vision?"

"Hmph?" asked His Highness, allowing his snout to protrude slightly as he stood more erect. "I can't tell for sure. Haven't seen many inns lately, and, to tell the truth, we bears are a trifle near-sighted, but I'd say it is."

Maggie took a deep breath and held up crossed fingers to the bear before they entered the common room of the inn.

"Good day, good folk," said the same woman who had been so polite to Uncle Fearchar, sounding as though neither they nor the day actually met her specifications. She cast a critical eye over the scruffy girl and the great, hairy pilgrim, sniffed, and continued in a businesslike manner to set the table for her lodgers' evening meal. When she had finished and they still stood there, she said, "If you're looking for a place to stay, I'd think the Lorelei would be more to your liking. It's cheaper, and anyway, we're full up."

That was a fine way to talk to an enchanted prince and a semi-powerful witch, Maggie thought. She certainly hoped the woman would display more courtesy to other peculiar-looking travelers, or in this country she might find out how difficult it was for a toad to polish cutlery. At least she had been polite to Uncle Fearchar, which reminded Maggie of why they were there. "Thank you for your counsel, ma'am." she said with all the mildness she could muster, "but actually we were looking for a relative of mine."

"Oh?" said the woman. "We have few strangers here. Who is this relative?" She set down the rag and pitcher she had been using to clean the table and placed a fist on each ample hip, devoting her full steely-eyed attention to the bothersome intruders. "My uncle, Fearchar Brown. I-er-was told he had been stopping here."

"Master Brown is a relative of yours?" The woman's lower jaw dropped as recognition of the common familial characteristics between niece and uncle began to redden her face. "Oh, do pardon me, Miss. As I say, we get so few strangers!" She hurried around the table to pull out a bench. "Pray, seat yourself and rest. I'll bring you a mug of tea and a bit of bread I baked this morning and send my boy around for Master Brown."

She called to the boy, who came running with much show of adolescent knees and elbows, and sent him on the errand, then turned anxiously back to Maggie and the bear, saying, "I'm sorry there's no butter today. Like all else in this town it goes bad very quickly. It's a pity the food we have to waste! There was a good catch this year, too, but how we'll get through the winter I don't know, I'm sure . . ."

"Doesn't salting and drying keep it well enough?" Maggie asked, more to stop the woman's babbling than because she was really interested.
"Salt!" snorted the wife, whose stare regained its former piercing severity. "I wouldn't poison my family and customers with that! It wrecks one's health, didn't you know that? And it has that horrid aftertaste, besides."

"It does?" Maggie's opinion that the woman was extremely peculiar and changeable and generally not much worth bothering about was confirmed. Even the bread she baked was absolutely tasteless, no doubt due to the woman's prejudice against salt,

and with no butter to put on it Maggie thought she might have as well eaten a piece of the table instead: "You wouldn't happen to have a place where my companion and I could wash, would you?"

The woman's grimace of distaste said that no number of celebrated kinfolk could make up for the mess they would leave her washing all the grime from themselves. Of herself Maggie thought that that was probably correct, but it was unfair in the bear's case, since none of him was visible outside his cloak. "I'd have to charge you. Mistress," the woman said finally, "as that would require the use of one of my rooms."

"I'll trade you a preservative spell for it then," Maggie offered with exaggerated patience, "to keep your dismal fish fresh."

Making sure that Maggie kept her end of the bargain first, the woman supplied her with a bowl, pitcher, towel, and a scrap of homemade soap. She did not offer to heat a kettle of water, so Maggie had a wash no warmer than those she'd had since Castle Rowan.

She realized she had given the innkeeper's wife far more than fair value for her facilities, but she felt better when she came down the steps and saw the boy escorting a man into the room. The bear joined her silently at the foot of the steps and together they stepped forward to meet Fearchar Brown. Like Granny Brown and Sybil and Maggie herself, Fearchar was clothed in brown, but with a difference.

His britches and jacket were of the finest cocoa-colore'd velvet, lavishly trimmed with gold embroideries of intertwined and elongated animals and intricately interwoven knots and lacings. His shirt was a shining cinnamon silk. Maggie and the innkeeper's wife curtsied. The bear pulled at the hood of his garment as though he were tipping a cap.

"The boy said a lady was inquiring for me, claiming to be some relation of mine," began Uncle Fearchar. sneaking to the innkeeper's wife. She nodded at Maggie. Fearchar crossed to meet her, a smile lighting his face as he took her hands in his well-kept and lavishly jeweled ones. "She is most certainly kin of mine! You must be the baby Bronwyn was about to have before I left!" he cried. Maggie thought she saw pleasure in his preliminary survey of her.

"Yes, Uncle. Maggie, sir."

"I gave them my best bread and tea," chirped the proprietress, "and they're all washed and rested and comfy."

Fearchar turned to her coldly. "You may leave us now, madam. But a bottle of wine to celebrate our reunion would not be amiss."

They sat sipping the wine while they talked. His Highness drank nothing, but did join them at the table, slumping somewhat, as his bear's anatomy was not well-suited to formal dining. As Fearchar began to talk, Maggie had been surprised to hear the beginnings of a growl rumble within the cloaked figure.

"Now then, dear girl, what brings you so far from Fort Iceworm? Your-ah-your mother and father are well, I trust."

"My mother is dead. Uncle."

"I'm so sorry to hear it. Your Grandmother? How is dear Maudie?"

"She's fine. Uncle. Actually, what we came for I mean-I--" she was distracted and forgot what she was going to say as the growl from the bear built to the point that Uncle Fearchar tried to peer into the cowl.

"Excuse me, good pilgrim. I didn't quite catch that?" he said.

The prince threw back his hood and jumped up on the bench, grabbing Fearchar by the jacket with his great front paws, "Pre-pare to die, varlet, or hand over my boy's heart! For eight long years your hateful voice has been ringing in my ears."

Maggie tried to drag the bear off her uncle by pulling on the cloak the bear wore, but it came off as she pulled, and she fell backwards.

Uncle Fearchar seemed to have regained control of the situation, though the bear still had him in hand, or paw. "I beg your pardon, my dear bear," he said into his Highness's snarling maw. "Would you perhaps be the Prince of Ablemarle come after the remedy for your enchantment?"

Maggie thought that even His Highness felt the strong, compassionate sincerity in her uncle's voice, for he was lowering him to his seat even as he growled, "Come to you for one last drink of the marrow of men's bones if you're not quick enough about doing as I say, sorcerous scum."

Unruffled, other than his clothing. Uncle Fearchar smoothed his lapels and clucked over a winestain where his coattails had dragged in his cup when he was hoisted aloft. He returned his attention to the bear. His expression was
one of mingled martyrdom and pity.

"My dear bear, it is true that I cast a spell upon you and procured for Xenobia the spell to remove young David's heart, but let's be gentlemen about this, shall we? You must realize that even a sorcerer of my stature has a living to earn." The bear's growl had died down to a grumble again but he didn't appear particularly impressed. The sorcerer continued. "It was for your own character development that you had to be transformed; surely you can see that now? In abusing the faith of poor Xenobia, you transgressed, betraying not only a woman who loved you, but your own principles. In your feckless fickle state you would hardly have made a good ruler for your country or a decent father to your son. I simply aided the lady in providing you with an object lesson. The removal of Davey's heart was part of the plan. Through the whole procedure we were only thinking of the ultimate personal growth you would achieve by the time you got to this point. We felt that in observing Davey relating to others with no regard for their emotional safety, you would come to understand how irresponsible and unworthy such behavior is. Obviously we were correct, or you would not be here now, waiting for me to institute the last of my remedial conditions to the spell."

To Maggie's surprise, the bear had by now ceased growling, and after listening quietly for a moment or two had begun nodding happily. "Yes, yes, I see it all now. How stupid of me to think that there was anything wicked in such a valuable lesson. Are you sure I'm quite worthy now to regain my human form?"

Fearchar nodded gravely. "You can be helped, yes. If you-and my lovely niece will be so kind as to accompany me . . ."

The bear brushed his snout with a front paw. Maggie recognized the gesture as one of embarrassment. "Of course. Whatever you say. Hope I didn't hurt you there, sir," he added sheepishly, for a bear.

"Wait a moment," Maggie said, bewildered at all the revelations and sudden attitude changes taking place. "Maybe both of you understand all of this, but . . ." Her uncle turned a look of deep concern and interest on her, mingled with avuncular pride, and she stumbled through the rest of her phrase. "If you're the sorcerer who has caused all of his problems, then you must be the one who's caused mine too, and you must know where Winnie is, and ..."

He patted her hand and looked deeply into her eyes, smiling reassuringly. "Of course I know where she is, dear child. She is at my home, an honored guest. She will be so thrilled to know you're coming to see her. When my trusted servant, known to you as Hugo the Peddler, found the poor girl in her sad state, he naturally brought her to me.

"Although Lord Rowan and I are, as you may or may not know, both contenders for the throne. Lady Amberwine is, after all, related to my family. I wished to spare her further pain and humiliation, and let her have her baby far from those who would chastise her for her girlish folly. Hugo feared if she knew he represented me, she would not come with him, so he instead allowed her to believe he came from your father. I hope we were in time. Hers is a delicate nature, and I fear her bitter recent experiences may have caused her lasting harm." He tapped his head with a forefinger.

Maggie found herself nodding agreement and promising to do whatever she could to help. She could see now that Fearchar had only been trying to save her sister, and a lucky thing it was, too. "That was so kind of you. Uncle. When is she to return to Lord Rowan?"

"To Rowan? Oh, Maggie, surely you must realize by now that while I bear him no malice, I do feel that Rowan is a dangerous and unpredictable man. I had hoped you would help me persuade your sister to accept the hospitality of my castle until her babe is born and they are in condition to travel with you to your father's home again. Perhaps you, too, would grace my castle for awhile? To keep His Highness company?" His Highness bowed, and Maggie nodded her head.

Uncle Fearchar had told them the trip from Dragon Bay to his castle on Evil Island would be novel, as it was. His boat was not propelled by means of the wind, but was elegantly pulled by three giant swans, black as the pupil of an eye, the same that Maggie had seen flying over the Northern Woods.

Hugo had met them at the dock and helped them aboard and made them comfortable, but in spite of what she now knew, that the peddler was her Uncle's major-domo and confidante, she still disliked him. There was the mysterious matter of the rabbit and the arrow he saw being fired at her father that hadn't yet been explained to her satisfaction . . . perhaps she'd have an opportunity to talk to Uncle Fearchar about it privately. Twice the peddler touched her, once in helping her to climb into the boat and another time in settling a soft velvet robe over her shoulders to keep off the chill from the bay. Both times she failed to suppress an involuntary shudder.

As the swans pulled them noiselessly through the water. Uncle Fearchar pointed out the bargeload of animals making its way across the Bay in a course that was at an oblique angle to their own. "Ah," said Fearchar. "There's a colorful local sight for you. Our beast barge on its way to the feeding grounds."
"Why's that?" the bear asked. "Do you take it upon yourself to feed the beasts the stockmen have no food for?"

"Hardly that," he laughed. "The animals are part of my Dragon Days program." He waited modestly for them to ask about it, but when they didn't, continued. "Dragon Days is a little project of mine, you see, to rid the area of the maraudings of the monster. All it took was having a heart-to-heart chat with him."

"It seems to me, heart-to-heart chats with dragons could be a little risky," commented His Highness.

"I am fortunate enough to be exceedingly brave," admitted Fearchar, "and just happened to have along at the time a powerful sleeping powder, in case he proved nasty."

"So how does this Dragon Days business work?" Maggie asked.

"It's a simple arrangement. I persuaded the dragon that it would be less trouble all around if we, the citizens of Dragon Bay, supplied him with a diet fitting and nutritious enough to meet a dragon's requirements, to be delivered to a certain place every month in time for his feedings. That way, he ceases snatching children and prize livestock, and we are no longer subject to his depredations. He also doesn't have to risk getting skewered by some knight errant abnormally strong and abysmally stupid enough to try to beard him in his den, as it were."

"Brilliant," agreed Maggie and the bear in unison, watching both Fearchar and the disappearing barge with such avid new interest that they failed to notice when the boat landed.

"You must get a tot of exercise climbing up and down this path just to get to your own front door," observed Maggie. Although she was used to the rigors of travel, or so she told herself before undertaking new ones, she found the almost perpendicular trail from landing to castle gate severely taxing.

"As I recall," said the bear, who had shed the pilgrim's robe and dropped to all fours for more comfortable climbing, "that's the way of castles. You must keep in mind, gurrl, one usually wants to keep one's own folk in, while discouraging the rowdy element without. Wouldn't do to make it easy, would it?"

"I seldom use this route, actually," said Fearchar. "Generally one of my familiars," he indicated the swans, now unharnessed from the boat and gracing the Bay, "flies me wherever I wish to go. Since Dragon Days takes place so close to home, however, I feel that when I go to the village to act on its behalf as the event's sponsor, it is incumbent on me to travel more or less in the mode of the local people."

The bear nodded gravely. "The common touch. Very wise of you. My father used to tell me that was a very important asset to a king."

Maggie murmured between labored breaths that it must be lovely to fly through the air like that, though she recalled the similar flight she and Colin had taken on Grizel's back with something less than relish.

The path went up even more steeply at that point and their breath was required for climbing.

The front gate was surrounded by carved stone, and its wood was embellished with carvings as well. Fearsome creatures scowled down at them, goblin guardians frozen in stone, permanently, Maggie hoped. She was considerably taken aback by its ugliness, but the bear sniffed appreciatively the work on the door, a pictorial panel dramatizing the exploits of several of the horrific creatures.

"Hmm, interesting. I say, Brown, this is quite old, isn't it?"

"I'm afraid so," said Uncle Fearchar with a put-upon sigh. Hugo opened the door and they started up a flight of stone steps which lead through myriad carved archways. The shadows in these arched passages seemed to harbor chill and gloom. "It was built before Argonia was properly settled, I believe, as an outpost for the ancient Drumclog civilization. That's all I can get out of it."

"All you can get out of it?" Maggie asked, continually astounded by the sheer breadth and miscellany of what proved to be her uncle's magic. "You mean you can talk to the walls?"

He led them through a dank gray hallway and to another carved door. "No," he said, "but there are these runes, as you see here." He indicated the characters on the carving. "Shortly after I took up residence here I noticed them and, as soon as I was able, secured wax impressions. The princess was able to enlighten me regarding their meaning." Their steps made hardly a patter on the bare stone floor of the great, high-ceilinged entrance hall.

Maggie looked up, turning on her heel to catch the last rays of sunlight shining on the walls high above them. The windows were set high and narrow, a wonderful source of light for the dust motes and any possible bats, not much use for people. At least she couldn't see any bats in the plasterwork.

"You know the princess?" she asked, belatedly tagging after them.

"My goodness, yes, child." He ushered them ceremoniously through a hall, a sharp left turn, and at last they found themselves in a room the size of Maggie's village.

"My study," said Fearchar. "Drafty at times, but it has enough space for my projects." His projects, the ones they could see displayed, included a complete dragon's skeleton, maps of every imaginable place made into tapestries and hung from the walls, a model of the capitol city and the palace, complete with pullaway walls to display the rooms' interiors ("I've been planning how to decorate-just in case"), and another entire wall of..."
pigeonholes containing scrolls and parchments, presents from the princess, “all beautifully illuminated, of course.”

High above the scholarly materials, metal cases shaped like men caught the bear's attention and Fearchar explained.

"Those were given to me by the wizard who originated the spell for turning you into a bear, Highness. Met him at the World-Wide Wizard’s conference right after I moved south. We've corresponded since, and I've visited him swanback once or twice. Those cases are used to protect the bodies of the soldiers in his country from their enemies."

"Ingenious," exclaimed the bear. "What won't they think of next?"

Maggie was running from one table to another, picking up things and putting them down again, turning them over and examining them. It was the most exciting room she'd ever been in.

"We'll spend lots of time here together, you and I, my dear," said Fearchar indulgently. "Right now, come along and see the rest of my diggings, and greet your sister."

A second door led them to a dining hall, which was cozier than the study, but still enormous. "This was formerly a foyer leading from the great hall to the kitchen and the tower," Fearchar explained, "but I needed the space in the great hall for my study, and the food arrives here much warmer without having to travel the extra distance." For a foyer, it was an elegant dining room, Maggie thought. The table was made of a massive slab of mirror-like wood, red as wine, and the legs were great beams of the same wood intricately carved and polished. Tapestries covered the walls and upholstered the matching chairs,

which looked more like thrones with their high backs and arm rests. A heating stove, lavishly decorated with black and gold tiles, wrapped around one corner of the room and provided extra seating space beside itself, comfortably tiled to bring the warmth of the stove to the lounger on chilly days.

"The stove is my own addition. A suggestion of the wizard I was telling you of. Now then, Your Highness, Hugo will have a nice den prepared for you in the room next to my own, upstairs, where it's warmer." He indicated a flight of steps which led to a long, narrow landing forming a balcony high above them. "Maggie, dear, I presumed you would wish to share Lady Amberwine's tower chamber. We live simply," his sweeping arm look in the lavish room carpeted not with reeds but with the pelts of many different varieties of fur-bearing animals, "but I trust you'll be comfortable here."

"Thank you, Uncle," she said, turning toward the staircase.

A clatter from the room beyond and Hugo came bustling out, carrying a tray full of candles. "I hadn't time to put these in the rooms, master. Perhaps the prince and Miss Maggie would be so kind as to carry them up with them?"

Climbing the staircase, Maggie looked back down once to see her uncle waving her to go on up and Hugo lighting the first of the serpent-oil lamps in the huge fixture that hung from the lofty arched ceiling above the dining table. She set the bear's candle in his chamber for him, as it was awkward for him to carry it in his front paws, and walked back down the landing to the doorway set into the rounded stonework, the tower entrance at the top of the staircase. There was another stairwell within the tower, and as Maggie climbed she lit the lamps that studded the wall to light the way.

She looked forward eagerly to seeing Winnie, and found her lying fully-dressed on top of the uncurtained bed, her hands clasped above the hillock of her abdomen.

Calling to her as she crossed the room, and eliciting no response, Maggie sat on the edge of the bed and shook her. "Winnie, do wake up. It's Maggie. I'm here. I've come all this way to find you, the least you can do is postpone your nap."

Lady Amberwine opened the startling long-lashed green eyes that matched the deep emerald of her gown. Her confusion changed to fright and she shrank from her sister's touch. "Oh, Maggie, please don't slay me! I know I've disgraced you all, and you've no reason to spare me or this gypsy child I bear, but for the sake of . . ."

"For the sake of sanity, what are you talking about?" asked Maggie, sitting sharply back. "Slay you? Box your ears, maybe, for talking such nonsense but-oh, no, now, stop that. Please stop being a goose and come back here. Of course I won't box your ears, or slay you either. Why should I do that?"

"I-I don't know, but I know that's why you're here." Winnie's hands twisted and pulled at the bedcovering as she clawed her way as far from Maggie as possible. "Winnie, it's me, your sister. I've ridden and walked a very long way, and risked great danger and more inconvenience to bring you home to Fort Iceworm, if you'll come. If I wanted to be rid of you I'd hardly have gone to all that trouble, would I?"

Winnie looked at her skeptically, but edged a bit closer. "I suppose not. Still . . ."

Maggie reached forward to touch her again and Amberwine sprang back, whimpering "no" as though she'd slapped her.

Maggie sat back up, folding her hands deliberately in her lap as she searched her sister's face for some clue to
explain the meaning of her strange behavior. Had her difficulties, as Uncle Fearchar suggested, succeeded in unhinging her reason? Could faery people even go insane? Maggie looked at herself in the mirror opposite the foot of the bed. No, she had not changed into some ogress or ravening beast. What, then, could make the sister for whom she had forsaken unicorns and braved dragons, floods, ravishment, and starvation treat her like the proverbial wicked stepsister? A tear trickled down each cheek. Maggie continued to stare at the cowering Amberwine, brushing the tears away impatiently until they soon were too many to a casual wipe and she had to give in to clutching her face in her hands to try to stem the flow.

For all that she feared her sister for what she believed was good reason, Winnie loved her, too, and seeing her cry wrenched loose tears of Amberwine's own. Now-long after she believed she had cried her life's supply of them, the salty-liquid flooded her eyes, nose, and mouth, and she gathered Maggie to her, both of them rocking and weeping copiously until at last Winnie dragged forth her handkerchief. She always had been the one who had the clean handkerchief and she applied one corner to Maggie's face and one corner to her own, saying, "Do stop crying now. Come on, everything is alright and we're together. Stop now. I really can't bear it. If you don't cease this minute I shall go right back to sleep."

"It-it's just," Maggie began, her own teary purge slowly subsiding, "it's just that I can't stand it if you hate me. You've always been my best friend. How can you have changed so?"

"Hate you? Changed? Rubbish! Whatever are you going on about?" She recalled being startled on waking to see Maggie for some reason, the nerves of pregnancy probably. But she could hardly recall saying anything like that. "Of course I don't hate you, Maggie. You're my very own dear brave big sister and I love you, of course. I'm ever so glad you've come to fetch me away from here."

"You are?"

Winnie nodded and jumped from the bed to a beautifully embroidered screen close to the door, thrust the screen aside and pulled out a dress. "We really must be changing for dinner now." Maggie could see what Winnie, who never liked tears, was up to, but refused to be distracted.

"Winnie, if you're so glad to see me, then whatever was all that stuff about slaying you?"

"Slay me? What stuff? I must have had a nightmare or something, I haven't slept at all well since I left the castle, you know. I've been feeling so awful about what I said to Roari. I don't know why I said that. Roari must be very put out with me for being so pert when he asked me not to ride off with that gypsy. He was right, of course, as usual. Davey was a dreadful person, and that mother of his! I can't think why I went with him-something about that song-oh, well, I'm sure Roari won't stay upset with me after the baby's born, do you think?" She dragged from behind the screen a flame-colored dress. "Now this would look lovely on you. Try it on. We have to do our own toilette here. Hugo's the only servant, and I'd hardly want him to help, would you?" she giggled.

Maggie was staring at her with a mixture of annoyance and perplexity, trying to make some sense of her babbling. Her manner now was more the one Maggie had expected, but her contradictory behavior was weird in the extreme, "Just a moment, Win. You distinctly said that the reason I was going to slay you was because you had disgraced us all and that your baby was going to be a gypsy."

Amberwine had hung the flame-colored gown back behind the screen and extracted a pale gold one. "Not your color, I think. It would look better on me." She patted her abdomen. "Fortunately, these gowns were tailored by a brownie seamstress, and alter themselves to fit even me."

"Still-now then, I said-what did you say? Oh, yes? Now that's astounding. I should hardly think I'd say that, Maggie. Really, dear, how could my baby be a gypsy? Unless something happened as I slept, and as I distinctly recall I was already becoming extremely plump around the middle and doing unladylike things in the morning before I left Castle Rowan. I just was on my way to consult Cook about it when I heard him singing. Lovely voice for such a slimy sort of boy. Don't know what put me up to it, I'm sure."

"You are being inconsistent, you know." Maggie was beginning to feel disoriented.

"Part of my charm, so I've been told. Oh, Maggie, I'm so very glad to see you. Do please stop being dreary about my silly nightmares and try on this topaz gown. I'll fix your hair, and you fix mine, and there are even jewels to match—darling, I tell you, this is the first time I've felt cheerful in MONTHS, and I'm absolutely giddy!"

"I can tell."

"Master Brown is quite the gay blade, you know, really. There's a siren who comes to visit—I've seen him talking to her from the battlements when I take my walks. Also, I have been informed by Hugo that we are privileged to be sharing the wardrobe your uncle provides Princess Pegeen when she comes to call. She brings her own entourage, of course, but she has them carrying so many scrolls and ink pots they don't have room for dresses. Awfully careless of her appearance, I've been told, but frightfully clever."

"I suspect she wouldn't find it very grand here after the palace," Maggie said, reluctantly allowing herself to be
diverted.

"As long as she has her runes, she's fine, so they say. She doesn't live at the palace any more. She has the best-attended hermitage in Argonia, from what I hear. Do you like your hair up like this, or with a little hanging down? Softer that way, do you think?

"I don't care . . ." Certain that she was losing her mind. Maggie allowed her sister to help her prepare for dinner.

CHAPTER 16

Colin and Bosun Neddy Pinchpurse, the former pirate, were spending their off-duty time on deck, where they would not disturb the other crew members who slept. Backs propped against the fo'c's'le, they were engaged in swapping ditties. Neddy was teaching Colin variations on the chanties he had learned in school, and Colin was teaching Neddy some new jigs to play on his hornpipe.

The evening was soft and pleasant, and the deck swayed beneath them only a little, in rhythm with the gentle swell of the silvery gulf waters. The cheerful twiddling of their music drifting across the fresh salt air made the men on duty step lightly at their work, disliking to move too quickly or too loudly for fear of missing the tune.

Colin was enjoying himself immensely on this voyage. The only way it could have possibly been better was if he were not bound to leave behind at Dragon Bay the new friends he had made, and the occupation he was learning to love. For the first time since he'd sung a song in his little-boy soprano, or used his aunt's clay pots as a drum, he had discovered something that he was good at, something that came naturally to him. He had fully expected to disappoint the sailors he'd met at the waterfront tavern. He thought that when they were all sober, they'd see that he was no good at sailing, had had no experience. He had been sure he'd be unable to do anything properly. Although he had told them he knew nothing of sailing, he was sure they at least expected him to be able to do unskilled manual work on shipboard without falling over into the sea or becoming ill-and to his surprise, he discovered that he was. And not only that, he did what was required quickly and well, and didn't need to be told twice, (f not for his promises to help Zorah and Maggie, nothing would have made him happier than to stay there, learn to be a sailor, and specialize in songs of the sea.

Instead, he was sitting with Neddy now, sharing songs instead of adventures on foreign shores. He was due to leave them on the morrow, when the Snake's Bane docked at Dragon Bay, delivering the last kegs of molasses and ale, the last bolts of linen, and the last of the metal fanning implements imported from abroad. For over a week now the Bane had been making similar stops at the little towns and settlements that punctuated the arms, legs, nooks, and crannies of the Gulf of Gremlins like suckers on an octopus's legs.

"Land ho!" the lookout cried.

"Ah, let's see now. Must be the first of the Dragon Isles," said Neddy, rising to his feet and unfolding the spyglass that hung around his neck. Colin had never seen such a wonderful thing, unless it was Sybil Brown's crystal. Neddy could see almost as far as the lookout, who carried a similar object. These were made, he had been told, by foreign wizards, and cost nearly as much as the ship's entire cargo. Neddy had implied he had not had to pay the full exorbitant amount for his.

"May I see?" Colin asked. Pinchpurse held it up to him and, awkwardly, he hunched down to peer into it over the bosun's shoulder. At length he was able to spy the rough rock silhouetted against the sea and twilight.

"What d'ye see, lad?" joked one of the men who had been at the tavern in Queenston. "Was the lookout right or no?" "Right enough, Liam," Colin grinned back. "Then we're almost done paddling about in the bath, and it's time to go for the open sea. One more stop and we're seamen again! Calls for a celebration, if you ask me."

"Journeyman Minstrel Apprentice Seaman Songsmith here and I might just be able to oblige you, boys!" cried Neddy, blowing a note on his hornpipe.

What they lacked in wine and women they made up in song. Some of those who had been sleeping belowdecks came up to join them, and the captain emerged from his chartroom to demonstrate his dance style to Neddy's hornpipe. The lookout's relief stood his watch a bit early, as it was the man sighted the first island who was also the concertina player. Ching came up from the galley, where he had been serving as ship's cat, switching his tail at first as though annoyed to be wakened from his catnap. He soon settled, purring, at Colin's feet, though, as the minstrel and his fiddle led the crewmen in one song after another. Looking out across the water, Colin watched the waves roll as he sang, and noticed a few fine fingers of mist were beginning to drift across the surface, and also that the island they had sighted with the glass was now quite visible to the naked eye.

As he sang the second chorus, he thought they must be either drifting slowly into a cloud hanging low on the water or else the mist was advancing, a great deal more of it than he'd first thought.

By the twelfth verse of the song, the mist had become a fog, sending soft smoky tendrils dancing up the hull onto the deck, caressing men and mast alike until, by the end of the song, Colin could scarcely see Neddy, seated right beside him. Also, Neddy wasn't playing or singing any more. Neither was anyone else. Colin had
finished the chorus solo. No one now suggested another, or said anything, or moved, for that matter.

After a few minutes of listening to himself breathe and watching the mist, Colin asked, "Unusual weather we're having, isn't it, mates?"

"Quiet, boy," said Ned. "We're listening." "Listening to what?" He strained his own excellent ear, and perhaps it was from wanting to hear what they did, but he thought he just might be catching something . . . "To her, of course." "Her who? Where?"

Neddy turned to him viciously. "Are you going to shut your craw, or must I shut it for you?" Colin suddenly remembered that the older man had once been a pirate and gulped, flushing hotly. Whatever they were hearing, he certainly couldn't make it ... He heard her then, at first softly, and then as her voice grew louder and he recognized it, his pulse began to race with hope. Maggie! The same husky alto, singing so low he had to exert his full attention to make out the words.

And everyone was listening. He really had never thought her voice all that fine, himself, but as the mist swirled and parted and joined and parted again in flying diaphanous banners, he could see the other men, still where they should be working, spellbound gray-blurred ghosts listening so intently that even the steersman had abandoned the steering, leaning over the wheel, ears straining.

"How sweet she sings!" whispered Neddy. "Ah, there never was one to sing sweeter," sighed the second officer. "I'd no idea you all knew her," Colin said with amazement.

"You certainly didn't mention it when I was telling you about her."

"Quiet! Can't you hear Mother singing me favorite nursery rhyme?" The conversation was violently shushed by the rest of the crew.

Colin's curiosity was at last able to overpower his desire to hear the song with which Maggie called to him. 'Your MOTHER? She's young enough to be your grandchild!' They were about to pitch him overboard when he finally made out the words Maggie sang. It was a tender love song, personally addressed to him.

"There's something funny going on here, lads," he said, and for the first time realized how dangerous their posture was to them all. Snatching up his fiddle, he ducked around them and made for the rigging, climbing high enough that they would be unable to interfere with him right away. Maggie's voice continued to cajole in a tone more alluring than even her dance for the gypsy had been.

He felt another weight drag at the rigging, and looked down to see Chingachgook, all four paws entangled in the ropes, trying to reach his pant leg.

He had not time to spare for cats, though, or even tuning, as he began to saw at his fiddle and yell out the loudest, rowdiest, bawdiest, funniest songs he could think of, not quite drowning out that insidious voice Maggie was using, even at that. If not for his training at singing rounds and part-harmonies, he could never have sustained the concentration it took to sing what he was singing and ignore that voice. As it was, he was able to keep it up long enough to provide a suitably maddening distraction for his fellow crew members, who began to try to shake him down, anger contorting their faces, covering up the song themselves now with their own hostile threats.

It was Pinchpurse who first came to his senses and shook off the enchantment, and he wasted no time at wresting the wheel from the spellbound steersman. "Siren, you lubbers! To your stations!" he hollered, every sinew straining as he pulled the wheel hard to the right, away from the rock that suddenly loomed up at them from the sea.

As the Bane heaved away from its own bane, it lurched violently. Pinchpurse hung fast to the wheel to keep it from turning back again, and the other two sailors clung to the rails, almost washed overboard. The others held onto whatever seemed stationary. Colin, cat, and fiddle made a somersaulting dive across the decks, over the railing, and into the sea.

CHAPTER 17

By now Maggie was unsure of everything, including why she was creeping down the stone staircase in the middle of the night. Earlier, when she'd left her uncle that afternoon, it had all been very clear.

He was a wonderful fellow, cared about her welfare more than Winnie, the bear, her grandmother, Colin, or Aunt Sybil, and possibly more than she cared about herself. She wanted very much to do something nice for him-something grand and special to show how much she appreciated the interest he took in her.

It wasn't until she began casting around for an idea of what to do that it occurred to her she hadn't used her own power since they'd left the inn at Dragon Bay. And that was peculiar. Now that she thought about it, he had never even inquired as to what manner of witch she was. All he'd done, really, was to tell her how very beautiful he thought her, far prettier than Winnie really, and tell her how she deserved better than a post as a village witch. And show her all of those wonderful magic gifts all of those powerful friends of his were constantly showering upon him, like the spells for turning people into bears (which was done chemically, not just from raw power, as Gran did it) and the giant black swans and this castle.
She straightened her shoulders to squeeze the chill from between them, and boldly tiptoed down three more steps. He didn’t really need her talent, she knew, for Hugo did all the cooking. Hugo doubtlessly had also long ago informed his master of the magical peculiarities of his niece at Fort Iceworm. She wondered that he hadn’t mentioned the death of her mother, as well. But even if he knew about her talent, she was still miffed that her uncle hadn’t asked her to do anything, so she thought she would surprise all of them with a lovely feast from whatever raw materials she could find in the kitchen. Which brought her to this point, hovering at the foot of the stairs, trying to remember which direction to take to find the kitchen door. She knew where it had been in the clear light of day, but in the darkness her, sense of direction had deserted her.

She thought her eyes must be adjusting to the dark, finally, when she saw a faint lightening of the gloom to her right. A moment more and she should be able to continue.

It was odd, too, how once she’d decided she wanted to make Uncle Fearchar a feast, and had excused herself to take a walk along the parapets to ponder her menu, that the mirror in her pocket began to feel uncomfortably warm, even through her skirt. She pulled it out and stared at herself in it, which was all it seemed to be good for since the visions were used up. “If you still worked,” she’d mumbled at it, “I’d try to see Aunt Sybil and find out what dishes he likes especially. I do wish it would be something tastier than what we’ve had so far.” To her surprise, the rainbow glow had appeared in the mirror and her aunt’s face followed it.

"Maggie, dear! How exciting! I’ve done it!” she said. "Aunt Sybil, I thought your visions couldn’t talk to you—or rather you couldn’t talk to them—how is it that you’re talking to me when you’re in the mirror?"

"Because you’re in the glass as well. Simultaneous sightings! My dear, we may have made a major breakthrough."

"But how did we happen to use glasses at the same time? And why is this one working? Weren’t three visions all I got?"

"But you didn’t use three, darling, or I’d never have been able to reach you this way. It was because you hadn’t used your last one I wanted to try to contact you and see how you were doing. There’s some barrier at Castle Rowan, and when I tried to find you there, I met with failure. Have you found Amberwine yet?"

“Oh, yes, I have. And Auntie—I’ve met Uncle Fearchar.
He’s a wonderful man and—"

"He is? You mean to say you’ve met your UNCLE Fearchar, my brother?"

“Yes, I have and he’s, as I’ve said, a wonderful man and—” "Well, well. Will wonders never cease?” Her aunt said softly.

Maggie was as puzzled as her aunt appeared to be. "What wonders?"

"Never mind, dear. I’m so glad you’ve found your sister. How’s young Colin? Will you be starting for home again soon?"

"I haven’t seen Colin lately. But he was quite well when I saw him last—though in a bit of a hurry. I believe we’ll probably stay here with Uncle Fearchar until Winnie’s baby is born. Aunt Sybil?"

"Yes, child?"

"I wanted to ask you about something. What does Uncle Fearchar like to eat? He hasn’t but one servant, and the man can’t cook at all. Everything is flat and bland. I thought I’d fix something nice . . ."

Her aunt’s pleasant, candid features took on a stiff mask of reserve. "I really don’t recall, Maggie, what your uncle likes. It used to be that he didn’t like any of us well enough to mention the matter."

"Sorry I asked. He’s changed, though, since then. I’m sure. Did you know he’s to be one of the nominees for the crown?"

Sybil looked startled. "No! Who told you that?"

"He did."

Her aunt laughed so hard she began to fade from the glass till at last there were only her bright brown eyes twinkling in among the rainbow lights, saying, "Maggie, dear, you really must take Fearchar with a grain of salt."

Salt. That was what made the food so bad, of course. The lack of salt. It must be that Hugo, like the woman at the inn, upheld some local prejudice against salt, and would not use it. Every-

- thing had been so exciting since she’d gotten here that she hadn’t really been that aware of what she was putting in her mouth, except that it might have been sand for all the impression it made. Poor Uncle Fearchar, who was not raised in these parts, doubtless had accustomed himself to the saltlessness of the region.

Shuffling slowly towards the light patch she’d noticed before, Maggie barked her shin on one of the low
decorative tables her uncle kept beside the ornate stove. This was like playing pin the tail on the cart horse! She wished she'd brought Winnie along for company, if not security, but Winnie acted oddly about Uncle Fearchar. Though she always said he had been good and kind to her, she certainly persisted in looking quaking and weepy in his company, though she reverted to almost her normal sunny self again with Maggie, and never again mentioned their first conversation. Maggie thought her sister probably secretly disliked Uncle Fearchar, but hated to say so after all he had done for her. She ought to have asked her to come, after all. Even if Winnie didn't like him, she wouldn't have minded helping-then the darkness would have been less intimidating-and Winnie would have insisted they bring a candle.

As she was considering how much noise it would raise if she should cause the fire in the tile stove to kindle, thus getting both warmth and light, the patch of light to her right began to glow brighter, and to grow. First the legs, then the body, and finally the arms-shimmering pale and eerie they were-but certainly legs, body and arms of a once-human entity. Maggie waited for the head to form as well, but it failed to appear.

A headless ghost then. All too common in a land where bounty on an enemy had been awarded the dispatcher of that enemy on receipt by interested parties of the head of said enemy. Or something like that. Bounties had been outlawed since Maggie was a child, but she'd come across one of the scrolls government officials used to read aloud. At the time she'd been disappointed there were no famous outlaws mentioned, but her father explained it was the custom to save expensive scribed parchment by having the name added orally at the time the scroll was publicly read.

She was very curious to know if this headless ghost was that of some notorious bandit or other, but could hardly expect it to speak without a head. Raising an armload of ghostly clanking chains, the spectre floated towards her. For chains that appeared as insubstantial as the wraith itself, they made an awful racket.

"Do be quiet," she whispered. "I appreciate the light, but I'd rather not wake everybody. It's a--" she broke off, shivering, as the ghost brushed her gown. It was hovering before her now, in the opposite direction from where it had been. Slowly, it beckoned.

Maggie followed hopefully. Perhaps, since it was easier for ghosts to find their way in the dark, it would lead her to the kitchen. Although she couldn't imagine what a ghost would want with a kitchen, particularly a decapitated ghost.

As the ghost passed through the room's furnishings, the cold light it shed illuminated them, so that if Maggie kept very close behind the spectre she was able to miss most of the obstacles in her path. Unfortunately, she did not see the outline of the door when the ghost passed through it, and got quite a nasty jolt when she did not pass through it as easily. It was as she was recovering from this that she heard the voices on the other side of the door, slightly raised to make themselves heard above the clanking of the chains.

"Damn, Hugo!" her uncle's voice said. "There it is again. I do wish you had heeded me when I told you that murdering a man in his own home invariably leads to an impossible tenacious haunting-shoo, you! Get away!" The last, Maggie imagined, was not spoken to Hugo.

"I know you told me, but you talk so much I have to give my ears a break once in a while. Besides, I thought if the dragon disposed of the body he'd have no reason to come back and haunt this hall."

"No reason, indeed! What about that head you hung on a stake at the threshold to greet me when I took possession? You have a grisly sense of humor, my friend."

"Don't go getting all lordly on me, Fearchar Brown. If your magic hadn't given out on you, you'd have talked that spook into moving to a summer climate and there'd have been no work for me to do."

"Give out on me indeed! Watch what you say or I'll convince you to go for a stroll on the Feeding Grounds yourself."

"Your wizardly wiles don't work on me, as well you know. Master Brown."

Maggie thought she heard a chuckle. Fearchar's?

"No. Hugo, you're too salty for me-just like poor Seagram here-oh, get out of here. I tell you! I haven't got your bloody head."

More clankings and an agitated rattling drowned out any conversation for a time. Maggie didn't think this ghost was one of the nasty sort who could actually do physical harm, but she worried for a moment. Even if he was a murderer, she didn't want her uncle slain by a ghost just when they were getting acquainted. The thought surprised her-she didn't quite understand why she felt it was alright for Uncle Fearchar to kill someone named Seagram but not alright for Seagram's ghost to kill Fearchar.

"Lucky for us at least some of the townsfolk follow your restriction on salt. Little Miss Maggie can be a regular terror, I hate to think what would have happened if your magic hadn't worked on her and the bear."

"It did, though. My lovely niece, far from being a regular terror, has been gentle as a dove. Though it gave me
pause, I'll admit, to see her and that so-called sister of hers reunited barely an hour after she was in the castle. And after all that wonderful

speech I made the stupid faery cow about how little Maggie was out to kill her. If it wasn't for their red eyes and sniffles at the dinner table, I'd never have known how they found me out. I had Amberwine so terrified of Maggie I'd have sworn she'd jump out the window when she first saw her."

"Window's not big enough."

"Unfortunately. But as I was saying, I am pleased with my little niece. She'll make a beautiful queen, don't you think?"

Maggie pulled her earlobe. Surely she hadn't heard that bit correctly. Queen? Could her great-uncle be thinking to marry her if he won the throne of Argonia?

"Don't count your chickens till they're in the nest, Brown. That bear can't sign nothin' proper till the gypsy gets here so you can turn him back into a man again. Then could be you'll have a problem with both of 'em. You can't make no sweet little bride out of Miss Maggie Brown neither. She'll be more queen than you or Davey, either one, can handle once she's away from you and on the throne of Ablemarle."

"Nonsense. She trusts me. Once you've finished your job—I say, you DID tell Lorelei what to do with that ship the swans saw Songsmith on, didn't you?"

"Lorelei does as she pleases, but she'll do it. And she wanted to know when you were going to keep that promise you made her when she gave you the song to charm her ladyship with. One of these days, Brown, you'll have to dry her out from all that salt water long enough to convince her she'd rather have some nice merman for a mate or else you'll be needin' a salt pool at the palace, Princess Pegeen wouldn't like that now, would she?"

"Never mind Lorelei and Princess Pegeen. They are my business. Yours is to redeem yourself for bungling that job you started on William Hood. Once you've done that, and removed my sister's subversive influence . . ."

"And I'll want half your bloody kingdom for that, I can tell you ..."

"And when, once enthroned, my niece learns of the tragic loss of her lady sister, and the baby, of course, she'll naturally turn to her only relative for advice and assistance."

"And good old King Fearchar will be there with bells on to help the little witch out, eh?"

"Yes, L will. How I envy young Davey such a beautiful bride!"

"You only think she's good-looking because she's brown as a bear, just like you," Hugo said spitefully.

A long silence, then Fearchar saying, "Ahhh, yes, that's what I like about you, Hugo. You're so perceptive. Shall we retire?"

"Aye, I'm tired with all that fetching and carrying for you and the women and that bloody bear. And I expect you must be too, Master Brown. Becoming king of two countries on such short notice is bound to be tiring."

Maggie backed away from the door, hoping to hide in the darkness of the far corners of the room where their candlelight would not penetrate. She kept on backing, long after she ought to have reached a wall. The door creaked open and candlelight spilled into the room, lighting the men who bore the lamps with sinister shadows redundantly in keeping with their conversation.

They didn't see her, but ascended the stairs with no further conversation. When their lights had completely disappeared, Maggie whistled with relief, lowered herself to the floor, and sat there shaking with a delayed reaction to being nearly caught, to hearing so much derogatory information about her uncle while she was still technically spellbound, and to the alarming contents of the conversation. From all that they said, she had at least gathered the reason for lack of salt in their diet. It appeared to be some sort of antidote for Fearchar's magic, whose nature was still not entirely clear. She could stop her reaction to the aborted enchantment by finishing it off in the prescribed manner, now that she knew what it was. She ordered a fire to light in the nearest lamp. For a moment she saw the glow of the light, but didn't see the lamp, then realized it was behind and above her. Turning to fetch it down where she could use it to explore her medicine pouch, she found herself staring into two shining feral eyes.

"Hullo, gurrrl."

Maggie caught her breath again and took the candle from the table to sit beside her on the floor. "Your Highness, you frightened me out of a year's growth."

"Sorry," He lumbered over and sat opposite her in the candlelight. "I don't like to look gluttonous at the dinner table, but I'm afraid that though I now think and talk as a man, I'm still hungry as a bear."

"Here, have some." She held out a palm full of salt she had taken from her medicine pouch. He licked her palm clean in one large slurp and she was very glad that he, at least, was her friend. Taking some salt herself, she began to feel better, and replied to his last remark. "Well, I hope you're feeling ferocious as a bear, too, then. We are in deep trouble."

When Maggie told him what she had learned. His Highness was all for charging upstairs and tearing Fearchar and Hugo to pieces. After hearing her uncle's plans for the demise of everyone near and dear to her, Maggie was by
no means, unconvinced of the merit of the plan. She did suggest that perhaps he could just restrain them while she either flayed them or set fire to their underclothes, she hadn't made up her mind which, perhaps a combination of both.

"The only problem is Colin."
"Why's Colin a problem, gurrl? We'll save him a piece!"
"They said someone named Lorelei was supposed to know what to do about Colin and a ship he's on, but that was really all they said."
"Likely unpleasant," said His Highness.
"Likely," Maggie agreed, sitting back down and unashamedly chewing a fingernail.
"We could force them to tell, then tear 'em to pieces."
"We could."
"How long does the salt help after your uncle starts his razzin' and dazzlin'?"
"I don't know. Maybe it only helps afterwards. And there's the matter of Davey's heart too. Prince. Uncle Fearchar said that after Davey gets here he was going to change you back into a man so you could sign something."
"Writ of abdication."
"What?"
"It's a document, gurrl, says I give up all title and claim to the throne. Of course, by being absent more than seven years. I've done that. But if, as you say. Brother Worthless is having a hard time at the kinging, Fearchar probably has a few of my old supporters lined up to accept me back as king-with his quick tongue, your uncle will have no problem substituting my son. Especially with a writ of abdication signed by me. naming Davey as my successor."
"And Xenobia and Davey are in his power."
"Too right. And he plans that you'll be as well. I still say we tear 'em to pieces. I can get out of them what's happened to young Colin, and we'll search the castle for the heart at our leisure ..."
"But after we find it, what if it doesn't work, and my uncle is dead. Then what will we do?"
The bear narrowed his little eyes at her. "Doesn't sound to me, gurrrl, as though you want to tear 'em to pieces any more."
"I suppose not. I just think we could find out more if he thinks we can't use anything he tells us. I'll expand my salt for the three of us till we can find out where the heart is. and what's happened to Colin, and how to get off this island with no boat. I doubt Uncle Fearchar's familiar swans would pull us."
"You understand more about these witching things than I do, but I still think we should tear 'em to pieces."
"Afterwards," Maggie said.
"Afterwards, then," the bear agreed.

CHAPTER 18

When Colin surfaced, realizing with equal degrees of pleasure and surprise that he was not dead, the first thing he saw was his fiddle floating on the water beside him. He grabbed it and held it aloft as he swam for the rock that had nearly wrecked the Snake's Bane.

The second thing he saw was the Snake's Bane sailing safely away. In all the confusion they probably hadn't even noticed when he went overboard.

The third thing he saw, as he hoisted himself up onto the rock, was a green-haired girl frantically scooting backwards on her scaly tail, being stalked farther and farther back onto land by a cat. Ching, furious at his recent dunking, was bent on having that tail for his supper.

The mermaid implored Colin with her sea-green eyes. Feeling damp and slippery and fresh out of gallantry, he took advantage of her status as a captive audience to lecture her sternly. "Madam," he said, "do you realize that you very nearly caused the wreck of a fine sailing vessel complete with a stout and hearty crew?" She was unimpressed. Wrecking ships was, after all, what mermaids did. "Not only that, but you have given my cat a bath, to which he has an aversion, and very nearly ruined one of the finest fiddles ever made, if I do say so myself. If you have anything to say in your own defense, I advise you to do so before I allow my cat to eat you up."

She started to cry. Colin realized, as he was supposed to, that he was being a beast, but he was really very upset about his fiddle. The tone would never be the same. Seeing she showed no sign of relenting, he stood and glared, hoping he would be in time to catch Ching should the cat decide to take a bite out of the mermaid.

"How can you be so cruel to me? You could be my own great-great-grandson all grown up and gone to land, and come back with nasty cats to torment me."
"I didn't come back here to torment you at all. I was sailing along with my friends, minding my own business, when you start singing to us in all your different voices, and before I know it I'm floating around in the sea, my best
fiddle ruined. So I ask you, who's tormenting whom?"

"You are being impertinent, young man," she said severely, under the circumstances. It sounded odd for her to call him young man, too, but Colin did realize that these creatures lived to great age. She might be anywhere from the eighteen years she looked to seven hundred and sixty, for all he could tell. It was typical of a creature who survived on the strength of her youthful beauty to try to pull the rank of age when confronted with difficulties.

She must have read his face, for she tossed back her long green hair from her shoulders and said, with a fetching pout. "You don't like me."

Colin could hardly avoid looking at what her new coiffure revealed about her stunning upper half. He blushed deeply and stammered, "Oh, no, really, I like you. I'm just annoyed with you."

"I thought so. You can call your monster off, you know. I couldn't drown you, whatever Fearchar says. You wouldn't drown anyway, being one of us."

He hardly knew what to ask first, but the moon was nice, the stars were bright, and the night was young. He gathered Ching onto his lap, got slapped smartly on the hand for his trouble, and settled down for conversation.

The mermaid appeared poised to dive for a moment, but after a warning look from Colin she, too, made herself comfortable on the rock, flipping her tail in the water now and then as they talked.

"Now then." said the minstrel, staring determinedly into her eyes. "I am Colin Songsmith, Journeyman Minstrel."

"Of course you are. Fearchar told me that."

"And who are you? And who is Fearchar? Is he by any chance related to a family named Brown? And why do you keep saying I'm one of you?"

"I'm Lorelei, silly. Fearchar is my friend at Evil Island, and some day he will find a spell to grow a tail and come join me, he says. I think I have heard that terrible man who works for him call him by the name of Brown, but I'm not certain. And I keep saying you're one of us because you are. Oh, not recently, and not directly-but you had an ancestress among us, you may be as sure of it as you are of your voice and the way you swim."

Colin refused to let himself wonder how he with legs, fair hair, and no scales, had been descended of a woman with scales, tail, and green hair. It was beside the point, and stranger things happened in Argonia. It would explain his musical talent, considered by his masters to be exceptional, though he naturally wasn't supposed to know that. It would explain how he, raised in East Headpenney with nothing but streams all around and no knowledge of water, had been able to swim just now, and perhaps it also explained why he was so frightfully clumsy on land, but perfectly at home at sea in spite of previous inexperience. Slowly he nodded, and she dimpled at him prettily.

"You could stay here and play with me, and I'll teach you the loveliest songs! I get so lonely here. I think I'm the only mermaid in the Gulf right now-Fearchar wanted me to come, and he's so handsome and clever I couldn't wait to get here. But he doesn't come to talk to me as much as I'd like, and he can't swim properly, and there's not much sport in wrecking ships with all this calm water and help so close by. A girl can't have any fun. He's promised me a sea serpent to liven things up, but it hasn't been delivered yet. Oh, Colin, do stay, please. We could have the most wonderful times--" she gazed at Ching with a distinctly jaundiced eye. "We'd have to drown that, of course."

The water did look very inviting, and she was very attractive in a green-haired sort of way, but Colin realized that though she was unable to drown him she was not above trying her other lures, and he refused to be tempted. Reluctantly, he shook his head. "It's very kind of you to ask me, Lorelei, but I have other obligations. I think they may even include your friend. Would you show me where he lives?"

Her tail splashed the water in agitation, showering them both. "Oh, no, Colin Songsmith! Oh, no, you mustn't. Fearchar doesn't like men. He will rob you of your will, and surely have that awful Hugo kill you, and then you could never come back to play with me either."

Colin couldn't help smiling. "I can't see why that would bother you. After all, you were about to drown not only me, but all my friends as well."

Lorelei gave him another pretty pout. "That's different. It was nothing personal, you know. It's what I do. Think how dull it would be for sailors if there were no perils like me to make things interesting for them-and so entertainingly too! The poor things would just always be sailing aimlessly around with nothing more dangerous or intriguing than a little weather to amuse them.""

As a poet, Colin could understand this from her point of view, and nodded.

"But you're one of us. I can't let you swim into certain doom now that we're getting to know each other better—though I'd be glad to see the end of that!" She flipped her tail in Ching's direction and got spat at.

"I have to go see him. If you know him so well, maybe you'd tell me how to protect myself from his power. Isn't there some plant or religious medal or something he particularly dislikes?"

"Like wolfbane, or garlic, or something like that?" she asked, cocking her head and touching her sweetly
webbed middle finger to the dimple in her chin. "We-ell, yes. Come to think of it, you probably are at least partially
immune. I am. I don't really believe that story about the fishtail, you know, except that I do love him and I hope it's
true."

"What is his power, exactly, other than changing people into bears and stealing hearts and that sort of thing?"
"Ooooh, did he do that?" the sea green eyes widened and she shook her hair again, distractingly, "I didn't hear
about that! He's just so powerful it gives me frogbumps all over sometimes."

Colin surmised that frogbumps were undoubtedly the aquatic equivalent of goosebumps and asked again, "But
what is his main power. Like, I have this friend who--she uh--" he searched for a way to explain Maggie's hearthcraft
to a mermaid with no fire to keep or doorstep to sweep, found none, and gave up, continuing, "Her grandmother, for
instance, can change people

 into animals, and she has an aunt who can see into the present and--"

The mermaid was regarding him with a critical expression. "Strange company you keep, dearie. Don't you think
you'd be better off staying with me? Oh, well, then, if you insist. Fearchar's source of power is that he is very
convincing."

"What kind of a magical power, is being convincing?" Colin digested the information, scratching his head.
"A very great one. He could convince a tuna to take up tree climbing, if a tuna wasn't a sea creature."
"It doesn't work on sea creatures then?"
"Only me," she said ruefully. "But really no. It's something to do with us swimming in the salt sea all the time.
It's salt that confounds him, I think."

"Thank you very much, Lorelei," Colin said slowly. "You've been a great help. Now could you show me how to
find him."

"We'll have to swim, of course," she said.

Colin found the prospect oddly inviting, but glanced at Ching. "What of my cat?"

"What of him?" With a movement so swift his eyes couldn't follow she leapt high in the air and dived below the
surface, rising again to float on her back, tail flapping leisurely at the moonlit water. "Come on, if you want to find
Fearchar."

Colin shrugged, stripped off his shirt, and apologized to Ching before he jumped into the water. He felt the cat
would be safe enough on the rock until he could fetch him.

Ching, however, had other ideas. Colin was only a stone's throw from the rock, swimming easily in tandem
with Lorelei, when a killer whale, crowned with color-coordinated cat, flashed merrily past them.

CHAPTER 19

Maggie's jaws and neck felt tight and stiff from all the unnatural nodding and smiling she was doing, listening
to her uncle's voice drone on. Without the benefit of his magical credulity he was something of an overblown,
pompous bore, she decided.

Amberwine had pleaded the weariness of pregnancy to retire to the relative seclusion of the tower room for a
midday nap. She had been more than a little shocked and upset to discover that instead of the sanctuary it had
promised to be while she was under Fearchar's spell the ancient castle was her prison, and intended to be her tomb.
Maggie regretted the necessity of having to upset Amberwine with the frightening truth of their situation so far in
advantage of their escape, but then could scarcely risk not telling her. She might insist on an explanation of their
behavior at some crucial moment, and spoil the whole plan. At least she had looked legitimately pale and wan when
she retired.

His Highness was also conserving his strength for their escape by giving in to the demands of his bear's body
and getting lots of sleep. He, at least, was available if she needed him. Claiming the chamber upstairs was too warm
in daylight hours for his fur-bearing form, he was curled up on the cool flagstone floor of the study, beneath
Fearchar's alchemist's bench. The wizard had not carpeted that area of his study, for safety's sake. Molten metal
accidentally spilled on the furs could set the entire interior of the castle on fire.

Her uncle lay the scroll he had been showing her on the table and was casting a critical glance over her. Her
mouth went dry and she wet her lips with her tongue and smiled harder than ever, trying to look innocent and
trusting. Was he able to detect when someone had eaten salt?

"Maggie, dear, you are not your usual radiant self. I had hoped you would abandon those old rags and attire
yourself in the pretly things I provided as more befitting a lady of your station."

"I'm sorry, Uncle," she replied demurely. She had worn her woolen costume today in preparation for their
escape. It was sturdier and more comfortable than any of the gowns, and had pockets to conceal her medicine
bundle, the remaining bottle of love potion, and the dagger Rowan lent her. "Winnie and I were going to try to plant
you a little garden in the courtyard later this afternoon, and I didn't want to get your nice things dirty. With my craft
I can grow you lovely giant melons and cabbages iong before anyone else has them-then you'll have fresh food, and
some to dry for winter."

"Your craft? Oh, yes, I believe Hugo mentioned. Hearth-crafting, is that right? That's very considerate of you, I'm sure, to try to plant me a garden. But I would like for you to stop doing vulgar things like digging in the dirt and those other menial jobs hearthcrafting implies. I hardly think hearthcrafting, other than a little needlework, perhaps, is a fitting occupation for a queen."

Here it comes, Maggie groaned inwardly. She tried to make her shrewd brown eyes go all wide and dewy as she asked, "Queen, Uncle Fearchar?"

"Yes, dear girl. I had planned to surprise you when your bridegroom arrives, but now seems as good a time as any."

"Whatever are you talking about, Uncle? How can a simple village witch like me become a queen?"

"How indeed, my dear! How did a simple village wizard such as myself become the man of power and influence you see before you today? With the help of the princess, when she makes the nomination in the tribunal in a few months, I shall become king of our fair Argonia. How? Because I've had the foresight to anticipate my opportunities, and the courage and determination to seize them. Coupled, naturally, with a deep and abiding compassion for my fellow man."

"As king I shall change the face of this country. No longer will we bow down to foreign oppressors, accepting their emissaries or making concessions to our inferiors! And that ridiculous law claiming magical personages should be prosecuted for the same dreary offenses as the non-magical rabble will be abolished. No longer, when I am king, will the vulgar hordes be able to associate with us on equal footing-and they most certainly will not be able to intermarry with us and taint our sacred blood, sullying it so that the resulting descendants of fine old families are as relatively powerless as you are. No offense, dear girl, but it's true."

"No longer will any of their kind be allowed to call themselves noble, or be in positions of authority which they can dare to abuse by using our womenfolk as William Hood did when he betrayed your mother's love to marry that foreign faery hussy." He took a deep breath, for he was becoming overwrought and flushed beneath his dark complexion. His eyes had a look about them wilder than the bear's had ever been. Gradually he calmed, and said, "You won't have to go to all the trouble of being the resourceful crusader I am, of course, my dear, since you're related to me. In order to be queen, all that's required of you is to marry Davey."

"But, Uncle," she protested just enough for effect. "I think I should dislike being queen of the gypsies. And Xenobia is rather fierce."

"I'll worry about Xenobia. You are obviously not going to be Queen of the Gypsies. That is not my idea of wealth and nobility. You are to be Queen of Ablemarle." "Ablemarle has a queen."

"Ablemarle has for a queen only the wife of Worthyman the Worthless. Believe me, they'll be delighted to have the niece of Fearchar the First instead,"

"I'm afraid I don't understand."

"You don't have to understand, dear girl. Just leave everything to Uncle Fearchar and don't worry your pretty little head about it. His Highness Prince Worthyman the Bear," he jerked a thumb at the sleeping noble, "has privately expressed to me a desire to retire permanently from court life. He fears it would disagree with him after all the fresh air he has recently enjoyed. Pegeen and I just happened to research the laws of Ablemarle quite recently, and I've come across a convenient writ he may sign, once he is in human form, to allow him to abdicate his rightfull place as crown prince to young Davey."

"But doesn't he have to give the heart back to Davey first?" Maggie asked.

"That's what the spell says."

"How can His Highness change back, then, to sign your paper, with the gypsies miles away?"

Her uncle smiled fondly at her. "Dear, dear, so many questions. Didn't I tell you to trust your uncle, child? The swans were dispatched early this morning to fetch Davey and Xenobia." So soon, then. Maggie had to get Davey's heart so that she and the bear would have a bargaining point, in case they were overwhelmed by the sheer number of their foes after the gypsies arrived. "It seems to me," she said, "that if I am to marry the gypsy, I ought to have his heart. He's far too fickle for my taste as he is, and we didn't part on exactly cordial terms. In fact, I think he quite dislikes me."

"Impossible!" said her uncle indulgently, "What young man in his right mind could despise such a ravishing creature? He'll be overcome with joy."

She followed him as he went to the ladder he kept in the study for fetching scrolls from the topmost compartments. "All the same," she said, "I would still feel better..." He looked at her sharply. "You are unusually argumentative today, Maggie. Didn't I tell you to trust me?" He moved the ladder to one of the high, deepset windows above the tapestry that told of a sea serpent hunt in the middle of a map of the Sea of Smokings.
"Oh, of course I do. Uncle! Forgive me. I guess any girl is apt to be a little silly when she is first engaged."
"Ugh," she thought, "if he believes that one . . ."

He cupped her chin between his thumb and forefinger and looked deeply into her eyes. Again she wondered if he could smell salt on her breath—or perhaps the fishiness of her excuse—but he said, "Naturally you would be, my child. And I can deny you nothing." He climbed the ladder and Maggie nearly swooned with the effort it cost her to keep from pushing it out from under him.

Light danced around the stone walls, sparking bright new colors onto the worn tapestries, encrusting Maggie's worn woolen garments with gems of luminescence, and skipping around on the bear's closed eyes till he turned over on his other side to sleep.

From the wizard's hand dangled a crystal prism. "If you look deeply into it, you will see his heart," he told her. Maggie examined the prism, which seemed to be made of solid light itself. There, framed by a thousand glittering facets, was a tiny rose, the color of heart's blood.

"That came out of him?" she asked, in spite of herself. Her uncle jerked it back abruptly and Maggie struggled to resume her docile niece pose. It was no easy task to deceive such a professional sneak as her uncle. "I mean to say," she said, "now that I know his heart, how can I help but love him?"

Mollified, her uncle set it into one of the pigeon holes of his desk. "How indeed?" He turned to the door the ghost had passed through the night before. "Ah, Lady Amberwine, refreshed from your nap, I trust?"

Winnie, pale as the proverbial lily, inclined her head, which was about all the communication she was capable of now that she knew the wizard's villainous nature.

"You may as well know, too. Your gypsy friend, Davey, and his charming mother, are on their way here in order Davey to marry your sister. We have just been discussing wedding plans. Perhaps you'll persuade him to sing that song you're so fond of." He hummed a few bars of the tune for which Colin had so often fashioned lyrics, though somehow on his lips it sounded strange, and Winnie went rigid. If she was pale before, Maggie thought her ashen now.

This time Maggie was unable to control the anger that pounded in her ears and she had her hand on her dagger when there was a ringing of footsteps in the corridor without. "Brown!" Hugo shouted, "Come here and see what I've brought you!"

They turned to the doorway. The peddler was a burly fellow when he wasn't all bent over pretending to be humble and holding his hat in his hand. Now it was Colin he held, a shirtless and disheveled Colin with his face contorted from the pain of the grip Hugo held on his arms, which were forced up behind his back.

Uncle Fearchar crossed to them. "Hugo, old friend, you're so uncouth! Where are your manners? Is this how you treat a friend of my niece?" He made as if to dust Colin off, after Hugo released him, but it was difficult to straighten the collar of a shirtless man. So he settled for giving him his best sincerely convincing smile. "Minstrel Songsmith, I presume? But what has become of your raiment?"

"I never wear my shirt when I go swimming," Colin said.

It was all Maggie could do to keep from rushing over to hug him. She had been terribly afraid that whatever end they were plotting for him had already come about, and an imaginative revenge would be all she would be able to do about it.

"I think my sister and I would probably prefer to hear Colin sing at my wedding," Maggie said. "Colin, it's too wonderful," she winked from behind her uncle's back. Hugo had gone to poke up the fire that was kept burning in the drafty hall to keep out the chill. "Uncle has arranged for me to marry Gypsy Davey and be a queen and everything."

"Oh-er-how nice," he said, not quite sure what the wink was meant to convey.
"Mrrow?" asked Ching, sauntering through the door left open when Hugo had forced Colin into the study.
"Animals in the house. Disgusting," said Uncle Fearchar, moving to shoo the cat.
"I beg your pardon?" said His Highness the bear, rising from his nap.
"Er-present company excepted of course, Your Highness," amended the wizard, crossing to his desk, where he began rummaging in the papers.

Ching triumphantly leaped to Maggie's shoulder and began to purr.

"Now that we're all together again," said Fearchar jovially, "I thought you might like to see the writ of abdication I found for Your Highness that you may sign to leave your throne to young Davey and Maggie."

"There was another item involved, wasn't there, Wizard?" asked the bear, lumbering over to the desk.

"Ah, yes, of course. Davey's heart." He picked up the crystal, waved it around a bit, and laid it on the desk, out of the bear's reach. "Have it right here, so when the boy comes all you'll have to do is hand it over to him and-poof-there you are, good as new, in all your regal splendor!"
"Let's see," said the bear, putting his forepaws on the desk and extending himself to where he could sniff at the crystal. "Yes, I guess that about does it. There's the heart, the boy's on the way, here we all are. and there's young Colin. I think the time has come." He rose to his full height and roared deeply. "Run along, now, children, unless you want to see me tear him to pieces," he told Maggie and Colin. "I'll meet you at the boat."

"Watch out, prince!" cried Maggie as her uncle snatched a phial from the desk and flung it at the bear's face. But it was too late, for no sooner had the white powder been released from the phial to float into the bear's nostrils than the huge, menacing prince subsided into a sleeping roly-poly heap of fur at the sorcerer's feet.

"Maggie, I am seriously shocked at you," said her uncle, as he tried to fix her with his expression of sincerely, seriously, shocked injury.

"Oh, dry up, you conceited ass!" she cried, unable to control herself and maintain the charade any longer.

"What a way to talk to your only uncle! You'd watch your nasty mouth when you're queen, my girl."

"I'll do nothing of the sort, and I'm not your girl!" Maggie informed him, anxiously watching at the same time as Winnie and Colin bent over the fallen bear.

"Is he dead, then?" snapped Fearchar. "I just happened to have laid that dragon-strength sleeping powder there. You'll be meeting the dragon soon."

Colin had straightened, having wit enough to retain his bewitched expression. "Oh, Master Fearchar, sir, do you think that's safe? I understand dragons can be hazardous to one's health."

Maggie knew she would explode if she heard one more syrupy answer from the lying wizard. Facing him squarely, she threatened, "Tell him the truth now. Go on, tell us all the truth if it's in you. I'm sick to death of your hokery pokery."

Her uncle seized her wrists and glared at her. Hugo had twisted Winnie's arms behind her now, and had a dagger at Colin's throat, in case he wasn't so enchanted as he seemed to be. "You will not refer to my magical powers as hokery pokery, niece. Hereafter you will be respectful and will do precisely as you are told." He smiled unpleasantly, "Too bad you didn't array yourself as I asked so you would be pretty for your bridegroom. As it is, there will just be enough time for you to accompany us to the feeding grounds to give the dragon his evening meal. You will shortly see, while my scaly friend feasts on Lady Amberwine's tender flesh and that of the minstrel, that I am to be reckoned with. Your little deceits have cost you their lives. You understand that you are responsible for this unfortunate turn of events, not I. You force me into violent action. By the time the gypsies arrive, the effects of your salt will have worn off, and you'll once more be docile, if somewhat subdued by the loss of your friends. You and the bear will do my bidding, and when he has signed the writ, you will be married and he will be removed to the dungeon till the next feeding."

"And you really think I'm going to go along with all this?" she asked, fingering the dagger in her pocket.

"Oh, my dear child, I'm afraid you have no choice. It is not actually you who will be queen at all once you marry Davey. Your charming appearance will remind the Ablemarlonians who really rules them, but you will work no more tricks, make no more unwise decisions. You will be quite subdued-permanently. I think I have just the spell to do it."

Ching's ears had been flattening as Fearchar's voice rose higher and higher while he leaned into Maggie's face to emphasize his point. He had been so intent on making his effect, he failed to notice the laid-back ears of the cat on his niece's shoulders, and the lashing tail. He could not, however, fail to notice the lightning slash of claws that ripped across his face, catching the corner of his eye.

Screaming with pain and clutching his eye with one hand, the enchanter slapped Maggie to the floor with the other hand as he grabbed the cat by the head and flung him into the fireplace.

Maggie recovered quickly enough to shriek at the fire to stifle itself. With a terrible yowl, Ching leaped out of the coals and streaked out the door.

"Catch that beast, Hugo!" ordered Fearchar. But Amberwine took advantage of her proximity to the peddler to stretch out a dainty foot and neatly trip him. By the time he recovered his composure, the cat had disappeared.

Fearchar, still clutching at his injured eye, was walking towards Maggie, who lay sprawled by the fireplace watching his advance. His uninjured eye tried to skewer her where she lay.

The pulses in her throat were throbbing so that she kept swallowing, and her hands trembled as she drew the dagger from her skirt pocket. Colin leapt forward to help her but was checked by Hugo's knife. Maggie lost her balance once and had to support herself on the mantle as she stood to meet the wizard. Her eyes felt dry as paper and fastened on him with awe and an odd loathing respect. His was the first real malevolence she had ever encountered, and she found it shamefully attractive. It crossed her mind that all she would have to do to be back to their relationship of yesterday would be to smile, apologize, offer repentance, marry someone she hated, and sit idly by and watch her friends murdered. Not so attractive after all. When she took a backward step, he didn't rush her, but
followed her with a corresponding step. The silence made her nervous.

"You have a lot of nerve abusing Ching," she said. "I don't know what Gran will turn you into for that-a weasel perhaps. I don't think there is an animal suitably vile enough to hold your form. You've injured my father, disgraced my sister, and threatened your own sisters and my friends. I don't think we want you in our family. Uncle."

"I resigned from your family a long time ago, niece," he snarled. "But I was willing to adopt you into mine."

"Only when you thought I could be useful. You didn't even want to use me for my own power-just because I look like you. But my magic is all my own, not stolen, like your castle, or gotten by lies, like the spell for Davey's heart and probably, if you could tell the truth, the one for changing His Highness to a bear. I can do an honest month's work in a half an hour if I'm pressed. That's not very grand by your standards, but all you seem to be able to do is convince people of things that make fools of them and cause their food to spoil, and play a few parlor tricks you've begged or stolen from your betters. You're not even a decently magicked village wizard and you think you should be king on a magical supremacy platform!"

He kept coming after her, but she was drawing courage from her own speech. She stood, dagger poised to meet him, in the middle study. Her voice quavered, and to her annoyance hot tears began to flood her eyes.

"You ought to have listened to me, Maggie. It will be very hard on you now. You don't know the extent of my power," the smile he wore as he stalked her was not pleasant. "I can control you completely-so completely you will have to have my permission to bathe or dress yourself in the morning."

"Not if I keep salt on my tongue at all times, and I will if it dries and cracks it in my head, rather than submit to you." She shook her head slowly from side to side, raising the dagger slightly. "I won't be your creature. You cannot injure my cat, murder my friends, and expect to take over my body before I'm done with it. I may be a dilute witch, as you think, but I am powerful enough to prevent your doing that. You can have no power over me that I don't cede to you. You're a wretched wizard, and a villain, and I think you may be a coward as well." He let drop the hand that held the swollen, bloody eye and stepped as close to her as possible to still be out of striking range of the dagger.

"Perhaps. Shall we see..."

"Maggie!" Winnie cried, "The gypsy's behind you!" She swiveled to see Xenobia flying towards her, skirts like bat wings flapping as she ran. Maggie threw the dagger and missed. She plunged a hand into her pocket and flung the next heavy object she found, the vial of love potion. Her aim was better this time, and the vial struck the gypsy woman squarely on the forehead, where it broke, its contents mingling with her blood as she fell to the ground.

For a moment Maggie and the others were frozen as Davey, handsome and cool-seeming with only his bolero covering his chest and a dark curl falling over his forehead, turned to his mother. "Are you alright, mum?" he asked. The woman's head lolled backwards, but even from where she stood, Maggie could see the battered bulging bodice of the green silk gown that had been Winnie's rise and fall.

She was spun around and her teeth knocked together, bright spots exploding behind her eyelids as her uncle slapped her hard twice across the face. She kicked him as hard as she could with her old boots, but had not gotten her head clear from the slapping when his fist slammed into her jaw and she fell crashing into darkness.

CHAPTER 20

Lady Amberwine cradled Maggie's head in her lap as the swan-propelled boat sped them near to their doom. "When will you ever learn to be still?" she murmured tenderly to her sister. "If only you had kept your tongue, he would have spared you." Maggie said nothing, nor had she done more than breathe since. being knocked senseless.

Colin scowled and struggled with the ropes that bound him. "The bear, too, starting to recover from the effects of the sleeping potion, was bound. In the far end of the boat sat the sorcerer, looking appropriately sinister now that he had covered his eye with a black patch. Xenobia's usually sour expression was fragmented with what Amberwine, had she not known the gypsy queen better, might have called emotion. The gypsy was wearing her kerchief as a bandage for the wound made by Maggie's missile. Davey looked sleek, attractive, and bored, swinging his feet restlessly against the equipment storage box he sat upon.

The little boat stopped, and Hugo lumbered over the side to tie her up. "Ladies first, Hugo. Show Lady Amberwine to the stake of i' honor. The others will have to make do with lying on the rock till the dragon notices them."

"Right." Hugo took Maggie from Winnie's lap and dumped her unceremoniously onto the beach. From the corner of her eye, Winnie saw Colin's mouth tighten and the bear gave a feeble, sleepy growl. Hugo handed Winnie out of the boat, and the smell of the animals and remnants of animals who had been left there all week for the dragon to feed upon nearly knocked her over.

"Come along, milady," mocked the peddler. "We have an excellent viewpoint reserved just for you." He pushed her off the beach into the throng of milling animals. The island rose to a central mound and in the center of this was a metal stake driven into the sheer rock. To this pole Hugo lashed Amberwine's wrists, ankles, neck, and middle. "This is reserved for Master Brown's special guests, milady. You might say it's the dragon's rotisserie." He went on
to describe in great detail, as he finished tightening the knots, in what condition they had found the remains, if any, of former occupants of the stake. Winnie was not listening, having conveniently fainted after the initial explanation of the pole's purpose.

Colin raged at his inability to do anything to help Maggie and Amberwine, but was unable to do more than shuffle off the boat and onto the island. His Highness was rolled off a miniature gangplank by Davey and the sorcerer, flopping to the beach in an excellent imitation of a stuffed nursery bear.

Hugo returned and the wizard gestured at the bear. "Skin him out here. He's too dangerous to have running amok. I can control Ablemarle without him through that spineless brother of his, if need be. The dragon may have his meat, but I want that handsome hide for my floor." Before Colin could decide whether to butt him with his head or bite him on the leg, Hugo had grasped His Highness by the furry throat. Before the bear could wake enough to do anything, the peddler was knocked off his victim by a rampaging Xenobia, who practically flayed Hugo with her fingernails before her son and the sorcerer could pull her away from him. "No! You can't! I will not allow it!" she cried as they strove to subdue her strong, squirming body. The sorcerer, who was beginning to like that sort of thing, slapped her hard across the face.

"Whatever is the matter with you now?" he demanded, shaking her roughly. "The dragon will come to feed at any time now, and when he's ready to eat he isn't going to stop for a chat.

even with me. Nor will he be selective about who he eats. I suggest we finish our business and depart."

The bear groaned and rolled over.

"You can't skin him alive and use him for a rug. Great Sorcerer," begged Xenobia, "He's the father of my son--"

"What?" Davey actually looked up from the inspection he was making of his fingernails.

"--and his hide has enormous sentimental value to me."

"Perhaps I shall just concentrate on my conquest of Argonia right now, and forget about Ablemarle altogether until some arrangement can be worked out with the present ruler. I can surely find more reliable allies later." His back was rigid with contempt as he reboarded his swan powered vessel. "Come, Hugo, if we hurry I can reach the princess's palace by morning, in time to compose my acceptance speech. You may all stay here and be eaten if you so desire." Hugo didn't desire, and leapt aboard. Before the others could express further preference, the boat was gliding wakelessly through the tossing sea. Xenobia began to shriek curses after it, and Davey ceased to look bored. If he hadn't pulled her back, she would have drowned as she tried to wade off into the sea after the boat.

Colin thought he detected streaming green hair and a flashing tail now and then showing above the surface as it followed the wizard's boat. He screamed to Lorelei, but received no answer.

His Highness yawned cavernously and attempted to sit up. "I say, what's all this?" he asked. Xenobia hovered possessively above him, casting accusing glances out to the uncaring gray sea.

"We are about to become dragon fodder," Davey answered.

"Why is young Maggie napping, then?" the bear asked. The situation was explained to him, and since they were all in the same situation and all would be needed if they were to successfully fend off the dragon for any length of time, Davey and Xenobia were prevailed upon to loosen the bonds of the bear and Colin, Wasting no time, Colin threaded his way through the animal bodies. He tried not to slip and fall on the rock as he climbed the hillock that held Lady Amberwine. She was beautiful fragile, and not a great deal of help as he tried to untie the knots that held her with her full unconscious weight dragging against them. "I do wish," he grumbled to himself, "that people would try to remain alert around here. After all, there IS supposed to be a dragon in the vicinity." He caught Amberwine just above her abdomen as she slipped down the pole when he untied the last knot.

Failing to wake her by chafing her wrist, shaking her, or shouting in her ear, he first tried to carry her in his arms, but she failed to bend sufficiently through the middle and he slipped, while attempting to climb down the hill, when one of his well-manured boots slid out from under him. He sat down abruptly, barely keeping the lady aloft. Finally he managed to haul her onto his back and began to wend his way through the animals to where the others waited. He hardly struck the romantic pose he had seen in tapestries, but his novel method of carrying pregnant ladies served quite well to allow him to guide them safely through the meandering livestock.

He had almost reached their companions when he heard it. The beat of the wings sounded like a giant playing a drum, and the sky was overcast from the shadow of the great airborne beast, flame-colored, soaring directly overhead. The wind created by the movement of his wings tore at Colin's hair and he slid on through the animals, who were now running in as much room as they had to run in, some of them plunging into the sea. One or two of these the dragon boiled with his flame before he swooped down to pick first a cow and then a, pig up into his mighty jaws. Colin forgot about swimming as a means of escape. His hair had stood on end as the dragon flew within inches of him, returning to the hillock to eat his prey.

"Get down!" screamed His Highness, rearing on his hind legs. Colin bent over and down as far as he was able
without spilling her ladyship over his head. He then plunged, goatlike, across the remaining area until he managed
with one final thrust to clear the beasts, nearly tumbling, Amberwine and all, into Xenobia's lap. His Highness was
clawing the air, roaring his challenge to divert the dragon and to give Colin time to rejoin them.

The dragon, having finished the boiled pig, noted the bear with a casual burst of flame. He was apparently
surprised at any form of opposition from his meals here, and circled around to pick up a bleating sheep to devour
while considering the bear's novel behavior.

"Sit down. Prince darling," hissed Xenobia. "Perhaps he's in the mood for mutton today."

The bear sat, but it was difficult to sit still with the poor sheep bleating so piteously. Colin almost fainted
himself, thinking

what might have become of Amberwine had he not gone straight to the rock to release her.

"Maggie does all those little tricks with fire," suggested His Highness, whose brain was functioning at its best
now, in time of peril. "Perhaps if we could wake her, she could put out the dragon's flame, then we'd only have
claws and teeth to deal with."

They both tried to rouse her, but to no avail, though they shook her and tickled her and called her name.
Amberwine started to cry again, holding her sister's head and shoulders in her arms as she began to rock and keen
and mourn like a banshee. "Here, here," said Colin severely, "she's not dead-not yet, anyway. If you're going to sing,
sing waking-up songs, like this." He began to whistle the spritely Argonian Army Reveille. Maggie sat up and
rubbed her jaw. "I think Uncle's side of the family must be part mule," she said.

"Leave off the genealogy for the moment, Maggie, please, and see if you can do something about the flame on
yon beastie," said Colin.

"I can't do anything till he's closer," she said, after considering the matter for a moment. "I'll have to be able to
look at the fire to order it around." "Splendid," said Colin grimly.

The bear got to his feet in order to resume his fighting stance once more. Colin tapped Davey on the shoulder.
"Hey, you. If you're going to let your father do all the fighting, give me your dagger." He held out his hand but the
gypsy man stood up, shaking his head. The sheep had stopped bleating.

Xenobia and Maggie stood as well. Colin was discouraged, but he stood beside them. He didn't really know
what they could do against a dragon except make themselves a little tenderer eating by battering themselves fighting
him. The creature in the center of their island prison spread his sundown-colored wings and sprang from the rock to
circle the little island again.

The bear roared another challenge to the soaring beast. Davey and Xenobia stood with daggers poised, beneath
the bear's mighty arms. Maggie crouched before them, as if she planned to physically spring upon the dragon. Oh
well, thought Colin, as he picked up a rock. When the dragon flew low enough to singe His Highness's fur, Colin
hurled the rock as hard as he could, straight into the beast's flaming mouth.

The dragon back-flapped out of Maggie's range and sat down amid the hysterical animals. Baffled anew by this
curious spice

his food was tossing into his mouth, he thoughtfully munched a few chickens, which he caught in midair with
his long tongue as they flapped frenziedly around him.

"Sorry!" Maggie said, "that blow to my jaw must have slowed my reaction time. Let's try again, shall we?"

"We haven't much choice," Colin said.

Amberwine shuddered, and said in a small, sick voice, "He's even more horrid than I'd imagined."

That was the last comment there was time for as the dragon now flew in, preparing to dine on whole roast bear
with a side order of gypsies on the rocks. This time Maggie was ready, almost scorching herself as she leapt up
crying to the dragon's fire to stifle itself.

Miraculously, it worked, the torch from the creature's claw sputtering and dwindling into a sulfurous belch,
Colin embraced her, competing for the privilege with Amberwine and a genuine bear hug from the prince.

It was not over yet, however, for the dragon disliked being deprived of his cooking apparatus, and streaked
back toward them, the great translucent orange wings fanning, if not fire, then at least a very foul fetid breath, into
all their lungs. The bear slashed out with his claws, the gypsies with their daggers, and Colin and Maggie both
hurled rocks.

This time, however, the dragon was undeterred by the rocks, which bounced harmlessly off his scales. His
claw stretched to graze the bear, who missed a swipe with his claws and fell to the rock, carrying his two gypsy
guardians with him.

Suddenly a whirlwind spun the beast snout to tail to wingtip and Colin, following the funnel, found Maggie's
finger at the source of the vortex. His friend was every inch the powerful, commanding enchantress as she
compelled the very elements about her, intoning in her throaty alto, "I wish to make a very large souffle-whip me
twelve dozen eggwhites-at once-there!" The whirlwind, he could see now, was flecked with the broken and
separated eggs of the chickens still squawking on the island as well as those of the ones just devoured by the dizzy dragon.

"We're saved!" cried Amberwine. She'd been looking out to sea, since her gentle nature made it too painful for her to watch her sister get gobbled alive.

"Not yet," said Colin, "she's hardly used to this, you know. I don't know how long she can hold out." He did not yet see, as Winnie did, the longboat full of warriors rowing swiftly to their aid.

"Will-you-all-just-be-still," said Maggie from between gritted teeth. After his initial confusion, the dragon had begun to find the whirlwind amusing, and forgot feeding long enough to make repeated dives in and out of it.

"But we are saved, lad," cried Prince Worthyman, who by now was waving vigorously at the boat. "Unless I miss my guess, that redheaded chap is set for dragon-slaying, and the young lady is bound to save my neck again. I don't know who the other chaps are, but they appear to mean business."

"Look out!" cried Winnie, turning back to her companions just in time to see the dragon swoop again, but she was too late, for the dragon's tail had caught the bear on the side of the head and knocked him down. "Oh, Rowan, my love!" she cried to the boat. "Do hurry, else we're all slain!"

Not waiting for the longboat to land, with one mighty bound from deck to shore, Rowan leaped among them brandishing sword and shield, which he instantly employed in skilled anti-dragon maneuvers. He protected Amberwine and Maggie and as many of the others as he could with the shield, while wielding the sword in their defense.

By then the boat had landed and beside him stepped Neddy Pinchpurse. Colin recognized the boat they came in as the longboat from the Snake's Bane. "You get down in the bottom of the boat, lass," Neddy instructed a flashing-eyed Zorah before he set to work covering Rowan's back with his cutlass. The second officer from the Bane relieved the redheaded noble of his shield and, keeping Amberwine and the gypsies covered with it, herded them back down to join Zorah on the deck of the longboat.

Maggie had refused to leave the island, and while the beast was circling again, Rowan cast an eye upon her, saying, "Go on now, be a good lass. You've done your share and I can finish it. We Rowans have made short work of many a dragon."

She continued to watch the creature do loop-the-loops on the far side of the island. Turning to Colin, she said suddenly, "I have it now, Colin. Where have you heard of a dragon of that particular description before?"

"I-er--" he said, a bit tired for guessing names or repartee.

"That's right, Grizel. That must be Grimley up there." Urgently, she turned back to Rowan, who shook her from his sword arm. Still she persisted. "Lord Rowan, you musn't slay this dragon."

"What? Not slay him? After he's nearly done in the lot of you? What a lot of rubbish you're talking to me now, lassie. Terror must have taken your wits."

He had no other chance to speak for several minutes, as he and Ned Pinchpurse and Colin, with the second officer's saber, slashed away in the general direction of the dragon. The bear recovered from his fall and defended them with his claws.

"See, he's tiring," Maggie insisted of the dragon, as the creature abandoned them for a measly pair of geese. "I think he must be getting full, too. Can't you just cover our escape?"

"Gurr," said the bear, "it's a menace he is to the community. Would you have him devour us and the townfolk too? For too long he's done the wizard's bidding."

"If we kill him, we'll have to kill Grizel eventually, too," she pleaded. "She's our friend now, but if we kill Grimley she'll be a more remorseless enemy than ever he was. She never wanted him to accept this arrangement in the first place."

"Look out!" yelled Pinchpurse, but it was too late, for this time it was he who was knocked down by the sweep of the dragon's tail. The beast was apparently enjoying himself now, playing with them, and they slashed till their arms were weary. With one last mocking swoop, the dragon picked up Maggie from behind. Rowan lunged to pierce him, but Maggie, in spite of the pain in her shoulders from the claws of the dragon, screamed "Don't!"

Colin caught one of her ankles and His Lordship grabbed a knee, then abruptly the beast retracted his claws, and Maggie would have dropped to the rock if her friends hadn't cushioned her fall.

Amberwine screamed suddenly, piercingly, and Xenobia wailed, "We're lost!"

"Not quite yet, we're not," said Rowan, steeling himself for another onslaught. "Alas, it's true!" wailed Davey. "There's another one!"

"The red and gold dragon had been charging them again, but abruptly did another backflip, using his tail as a rudder, and flew off at top speed to meet the blue and green dragon whose wingbeats were now as distinct as their own. Colin cried out, "It's Grizel!"
Maggie raised her face from the rock and broke out in an ear-to-ear grin. "Thank goodness Grimley's safe. I hope my shoulders didn't dull his claws or anything, or we're in trouble."

"I just hope she'll remember us."

The female dragon paid them no attention, however, and they all watched with varying degrees of trepidation and wonder as both dragons alighted on a central hillock of the island. A black and white streak flew from the neck of the aquamarine dragon just as she and the red and gold dragon twined necks, he shyly offering her a cow.

"Ching!" Maggie greeted the cat as he lept over the backs of the farm animals, who were now completely prostrate with terror. He sprang onto her chest and she cradled him against her shoulder, stroking his fur, immaculately black and white even after his flight. "How in the world . . .?"

Even Colin could hear the smugness in the purr, but what the cat told Maggie was, "I really do broadcast very well when I'm sufficiently outraged. When that person tried to murder me and you helped me escape, I ran straight out the side door and over to the most isolated spot I could find and yowled my head off for revenge. Grizel's quite fond of revenge herself, and just happened to be on her way back to Grimley, so she was only a few leagues off and ..."

"A few leagues?" said Maggie, impressed.

The others were regarding the girl and cat's apparently onesided conversation strangely. Colin grinned apologetically. "They go on like that all the time," he said.

"And here we are," finished Ching.

As they all piled into the longboat, Davey asked, "Will someone please explain to me why with one dragon we are in mortal danger, but with two we're supposed to be safe?"

CHAPTER 21

When the innkeeper's wife, thrilled almost beyond words to have a great lord like Rowan stopping at her inn, had finished bandaging Maggie's shoulders and various other amazingly minor wounds, she served them all a fine supper. Maggie pulled out her medicine pouch and with a wicked grin at the woman, sprinkled a generous amount of salt into everything.

It wasn't until they had finished eating that the crew of the Snake's Bane, led by Bosun Pinchpurse, arrived. Ned touched Colin on the shoulder as he took a place on the bench beside him. "Sorry, lad. We tried to give chase in the Bane but he were long gone. Some fisherman said he saw the blackguard trying to dock at his island, but a mermaid was screaming at him and wouldn't give him a chance to unhitch his swans so he could fly away on them. That's what the fisherman said, leastways. Too much ale, I'm thinkin'."

"Believe it or not, Ned, he was probably cold sober," said Colin, who was not, and was very weary besides.

"Anyway," said Ned, "this fisherman says the last he seen of the wizard 'e was headin' out to sea."

"He did say he was going to see the princess," Maggie said.

"Yes, ma'am, and he'll have a bit of a trip in that little boat of his. But them giant swans the lad here told us of will be makin' their own wind, and it's too calm for the Bane to make much headway, so we lost him, as I said."

"No matter," said Lord Rowan. "Now that we know how to break his spells we can supply everyone, including Princess Pegeen, with liberal amounts of salt. I doubt he'll stand much chance of being nominated on his personal integrity alone. Especially not after I lodge my complaint with the council."

"You know," said Maggie, "I'm not so sure this country and our magic folk are deteriorating at all. Your ancestors Rowan the Rampaging and Rowan the Reckless would never have thought to lodge a complaint with the council over a wizard-induced misunderstanding."

Rowan laughed. "No, more likely they'd have slaughtered every available wizard and gypsy in the land." He hugged Amberwine, who sat at his side sipping tea from a pottery cup. "Not to mention the lady."

"We're lucky you came when you did," Colin said.

"Well-yes. It would have been better if I'd come with you at once, but I'm still Rowan enough that I listened to my pride for awhile before I set out to follow you. I'd decided by the time I met Zorah that I was no fit king, or even much of a hero, if I let my sister-in-law do all the rescuing in the family. And when Zorah told me the mess you'd got into . . ." He glanced across the table at Xenobia and Davey.

"How did you know where we were, though?" Maggie asked.

"Zorah said you were off to find the Sorcerer of Dragon Bay. since she'd extracted Colin's promise to get that scamp's heart."

He indicated Davey, who studied the food he was carefully - masticating twenty chews to the mouthful, "And the last day, your Aunt Sybil's budgie bird come bringing us a message that you're up t' the sorcerer's place and something was amiss."

"We was about to leave port when 'is lor'ship come askin' for you, lad," said Neddy. "We didn't like leavin' you,
after you'd saved the ship and all, but when we went back to the rock, you was gone. So as I say, we was just lucky
he come when 'e did."

"Whew," said Maggie. "You were lucky!"

"I have some unfinished business," said Rowan, rising to his feet. "It pains me, sir," he said to Davey. "for His
Highness of Ablemarle is a fine man, or bear, depending on how you look at him. and he tells me you're his son and
acquitted yourself nobly in the dragon affair. But you've offended the honor of m' lady and for that you'll have to
answer."

"No!" Zorah lept to her feet as well. "Do you think I brought you here so you could kill him?"

Rowan looked bewildered. He was honor-bound to Zorah as much as he was to avenging the insult. While he
was trying to decide if it was more important to avenge a reputation lost than to reward a life saved, Amberwine
tugged on his sleeve till he sat down.

"I only regret we let the villain get away before we got that heart for Davey," said His Highness. "He was such
a good boy once."

"Is this it?" asked Amberwine, pulling it from her pocket. Its jeweled light danced across their eyes.

"Winnie," said Maggie, "How ever did you . . .?"

"When your uncle put the bear to sleep, Maggie. I saw it sitting about, and dropped it in my pocket while they
were all watching you. I wasn't sure what it was, but it seemed important to you," she said the last to the bear as she
gently set it in his paws.

His Highness rose and made Amberwine a bow. "Madam, if I wouldn't wet you to the elbow in so doing I'd kiss
your hand."

He climbed heavily over the bench and waddled on his hind legs to where Davey sat beside his mother. The
cynical smile on

Davey's lips as the bear pressed the crystal against his empty beast underwent a subtle change. "Be a man, my
son," said the

bear as the light gradually was absorbed into Davey. While everybody was busy feeling touched, the bear
changed back into

human form and embraced his son.

The innkeeper's wife screamed at the naked prince as she had

not screamed to see a bear at her table. Rowan hastily handed the prince a cloak. Enchantments were
sometimes careless about details.

"Ah, yes," sighed Xenobia. "I believe I do like you better in that form.

"Can you forgive me my callousness, dear lady?" asked the prince, who, if not young and handsome, was. as
they alt knew, brave and kind and intelligent, which was the same thing, only better. Actually, Maggie thought he
still looked like a bear. His hair and beard were dark and curly, and before Rowan had produced the cloak his body
hair had seemed equally copious- and he was a short, stocky, sturdy-built man. But the little dim eyes were
chocolate-drop brown and looked at the gypsy woman kindly. "Had it not been for you I'd now be a hearthrug for
that murderous magician."

"Had it not been for me, you wouldn't have been in such a condition. Of course I forgive you. Worthy . . ." and
they went on in that vein for some time, until they too finally stopped to watch the long, passionate clench that
Davey and Zorah were indulging in, much to the general edification of the crew of the Bane, who had filled up the
rest of the inn and were cheering and laughing and taking bets on how long the couple could hold out without
coming up for air.

Finally they did, however, and Davey, handing Zorah the empty prism that had once imprisoned the best part of
him. sighed. "Ah. Zorah, darling. And to think I didn't know I cared!" It was altogether an extremely long night. If
matters had been left strictly up to the initial participants in the situation, everyone would have retired early. But the
crew of the Bane had seized the occasion as one suitable for celebration and a great deal of drinking, singing, and
lying ensued on the part of all and sundry.

At one point in the festivities, Colin returned to the Bane to pick up his kit, guitar, and Obtruncator, plus the
soggy remnants of his beloved fiddle, rescued by Neddy from the rock. He returned the sword to Rowan. "I thank
you for its use, sir, but it didn't suit me like my fiddle did. That's ruined now, but I can make merry enough with my
guitar, if Neddy and his hornpipe and Tom on the concertina give a hand."

"Suit yourself, lad," said Rowan. "But I have a wish that you'd hold on to Obtruncator a spell longer. I'd the
feeling there was something following us in the wood almost until we approached the Bay."

Colin groaned, as he had had more adventure than he expected ever to want to see again. "Of course you
needn't go back with us," Rowan said quickly. "The captain tells me he'll be delighted to have you on the Snake's
Bane. Say the word, and I'll ask him to 'prentice you as an officer trainee so that you can accept an admiralty I'd like
to offer you in the King's Navy—if I'm the king, that is."

Colin nodded, but said. "That's kind of you, my Lord, but I'm afraid my new friends might be put off a little at such grand promotions not obtained-e rin the line of duty. I'll see you safely to the castle, and perhaps you could use my services till you're ready to return to Queenston for the election? I've never been to court before, other than as a student. Perhaps then I might wait there till the Bane returns, to sail with her next time around."

No sooner had the Bane put to sea than the gypsy band came tumbling into the town. Rowan was saddling his horse when he Prince Worthyman and Davey came to tell him that they wouldn't going along back to Castle Rowan after all. "I've decided not to return to Albemarle for now," the prince explained. "I want to spend some time with Xenobia and my son here, and now that I'm not in a cage I rather enjoy the gypsy life."

"Will you let your brother know you're alive then, Highness?" asked Rowan.

"Only if he gives you any trouble when you take over rule of Argonia. Perhaps then I could be a bargaining point . . ."

"Spoken like a born statesman, Prince." Rowan's huge hands engulfed Worthyman's as he said goodbye. "I hope I may count on you for advice, in case I'm elected."

The coming of the gypsies to Dragon Bay was not to be the last event that morning to ruffle the town's composure. People were screaming in an orgy of frenzied terror as Grizel and Grimley flew low over the streets, as though they were looking for someone.

"Eeeeeek!" shrieked the innkeeper's wife. "Tis the sorcerer's revenge! They've returned to murder us all in our beds!"

"You're not in your bed," pointed out his lordship, "but Mistress Maggie and her cat are. I suggest you fetch them here." A tangle-haired Maggie was rubbing the sleep from her eyes she came downstairs, and Ching had to pause to wash a paw, having yet to complete his toilet. After good-morning-did-you-sleep-wells all around. Rowan told her what he had in mind. "You talk to the cat, lass, do you not?"

She yawned and nodded.

"Do you think he'd serve as me recruitment officer for a moment or two?"

When Maggie had secured Ching's agreement, he walked out a short way from them, and in one or two flips of his tail he was joined by both dragons, right there in the middle of the corner at Bayshore and Second Avenue.

In a moment he came sauntering back to Maggie and Rowan. "You can tell him," Ching said, "that the dragons will be happy to move out to his place in exchange for their own sheep and cattle herds and all the enemy bandits they can eat. I think they'd go for anything that involves eating and flying about, but Grizel says they were thinking of moving to a better neighborhood anyway, with more room, as there may be little dragonets along in another year or two."

Maggie told Rowan, who gave the dragons the universal sign for victory.

Ching continued. "And if you don't mind very much, witch. Grimley would like to know if the Mighty Enchantress—I suppose that's you, as you're the only one answering a description anything like that—would very much mind restoring his fire. Grizel is delighted to cook for him, naturally, but he says he misses the warm feeling in the pit of his stomach."

CHAPTER 22

It was still chilly early morning when Winnie hugged Maggie one more time, carefully, with one arm only, for the other cradled little Bronwyn. They had breakfasted in the kitchen, to save time, and Rowan and his lady had risen early to say goodbye.

"I wish you could stay longer," Winnie said. "It's been so much brighter here with you about."

"It certainly has," said Cook, handing Rowan a lidded basket. "After you shined the brass, polished all the silver, cleaned the chimneys, swept the entire keep from top to bottom, waxed all the floors, and washed the walls and windows, not to mention laundering the carpets and draperies, it's very bright around here indeed. Tell me, is your sort of witchcraft common? I hope not, or you'll put the entire servant class on the streets to beg . . ."

"At least she's earned her ride out of the rowan groves by polishing all the diamonds in Grizel's new nest," Rowan laughed.

"Ching did say Grizel greatly appreciated my little house-warming present," Maggie admitted.
"I wish you'd let her take you all the way. or at least let me provide you an escort, if you won't wait until after the coronation when we all come north for the christening," said Rowan, who was now officially king-elect. Maggie had stayed to help and keep Winnie company while Rowan was in the capitol for the tribunal and for the many other government conclaves that eventually led to his selection as king. She had spent the last six weeks helping Winnie pack what she wished to take to Queenston and make arrangements for the management of the estates in their absence. In a day or two, the soon-to-be royal family would be leaving for the capitol, and Maggie really did need to return now to Fort Iceworm. Aunt Sybil's budgie, flying high above the rowan trees, had brought word that while Sir William's health had vastly improved, his temper had not. Granny Brown had not Maggie's management abilities, and had already turned Sir William's solicitor into a weasel and one of the local merchants into a raccoon. So it was time for her to return home, but she was in no great hurry to get back to what awaited her. "I'll have escort soon enough," she reminded Rowan. "I'll be traveling in your lands almost the entire two days' journey till I'm to meet Xenobia's Caravan, and that whole way I'll be in plain view of Grizel and Grimley's patrol flights."

"Very well, lass. I know you've your own mind, and that's been to my benefit. Are you sure there's no royal boon I can grant you in parting?" Maggie shook her head and occupied herself with undoing her pack to check it one more time. "Never," said Cook, standing at the window with her hands fistled at the waist of her apron, "will I get used to seeing dragons land in my courtyard."

Maggie's eyes raked the kitchen. "Where's Ching?"

"There he is. coming across the courtyard. I suspect he went to say farewell to the barn cats." said Winnie. "It's good-bye then, I suppose, till after the coronation," Maggie said, shouldering the pack that contained the magic mirror her Aunt Sybil had given her, a new hand spindle carved for her by Colin, a dress, formerly underwear, which she planned to wear while in the company of the gypsies, her medicine pouch, a few staples for her magic to transform into meals, plus a small bag of gold from Rowan-she had had to insist on small. The amount he had tried to lavish on her would have been far too heavy for her to carry. There was also, carefully wrapped in velvet, a miniature portrait of the infant Princess Bronwyn, a gift for her maternal grandfather from the new king and queen, plus a few dried herbs and flowers peculiar to the area around Castle Rowan. Winnie, in the last stages of her pregnancy, had picked these for Granny Brown while Maggie was occupied with repairing the Rowan family tapestry showing Rowan the Rampaging single-handedly defeating the entire Brazorian army.

Rowan and Amberwine saw Maggie out to where Grizel sat waiting. They knew good-byes had to be quick, for even though the rowan trees in the courtyard had been transplanted to save Maggie the discomfort of her witch's allergy to them, still their essence wafted up from the groves that surrounded the castle.

She hugged Winnie again, and kissed baby Bronwyn. Then Rowan, too, stepped forward to embrace her. "Take care of our loved ones, my liege." she mumbled into his massive chest, "and your reign be blest."

He backed away from her with a sweeping bow and, before she could mount, snatched up her hand and kissed it soundly. "I can hardly fail with a mighty sorceress in the family, now can I?" he teased.

"Shall we get ON with it?" Ching said, "I'd rather not hear the minstrel's bitter complaints ringing in my ears the first five miles of our journey about how we made him stand a night and a day holding your horses."

Maggie mounted quickly and Ching sprang to her shoulders. Grizel spread her wings and puffed up a take-off. For a long time Maggie made a point of not looking down. Ching butted his head against her cheek. "I know how you feel, witch. I will certainly be glad to be home riding nothing more spirited than my hearthrug. Dragons, whales, and horses are all very well in themselves, but hardly suitable cat accommodations."

"Hush, you'll hurt Grizel's feelings," scolded Maggie, looking down and quickly back up again. The trees were passing below them in a dizzying dazzle of green, and the road whipped along like a dusty brown serpent. Perhaps she ought to have risked the trees after all.

"She doesn't understand our conversations unless I choose for her to," said Ching. "Since I am your temporary familiar, we need privileged communication."

"That's nice," said Maggie. "Will you still talk to me sometimes back at Fort Iceworm?" The cat said nothing. "Well, will you?" she repeated.

"There will be no need, will there?" he asked, not at all in his usual bantering tone. "And Granny must he very lonely-she's causing all that trouble again too. She needs my help again-I suspect I shall be very busy with one witch. Sorry. I shall say cat remarks to you occasionally, and rub against you to be petted, and listen to you when I have nothing better to do, but our relationship will have to be pretty much as it was before."

Maggie said nothing else, as Grizel was circling in for a landing, and the witch was busy keeping her stomach in order.

Colin rode a dapple gray mare and held a pretty chestnut for Maggie. He had ridden out from the castle the afternoon before, to be on the path beyond the rowans when Grizel arrived.

Seeing that all was in order, Grizel made her good-byes and flew off to meet Grimley to discuss her new rear
firewall for their lair.

"That's quite a dragon," said Colin. He looked rather undressed without his guitar slung over his shoulder, Maggie thought.

"Yes, she is."

"I trust her reconciliation went well with Grimley? in all the excitement of the coronation preparations and the tribunals and all you never told me what the cat said about that. I've meant all these months to get around to asking. He wasn't angry or anything, because she went off like that?"

Maggie knew they were making conversation to keep from facing the moment when they'd part, and she strove for a light touch. "Oh, no, Ching said Grimley admired her spirit. Called her his 'little spitfire'.'"

"Oh no. He didn't?"

"That's what she told Ching. I--I suppose as soon as you get to Queenston you'll be sailing off on the Bane?" Maggie put her back upon her saddle horn with deliberate precision, put her foot in the stirrup, then took it out again to stand waiting for his reply.

Colin had squatted down and was mauling some clover. "No- not right away, at least. Actually, the king asked me to delay that for a while. As soon as he's taken office and the coronation's over, he's planning a little voyage to Ablemarle."

"Round the horn?"

"Yes. and he wants me there to record the whole event and make a song of it so the taxpayers will know what he's doing with their funds."

"You'll be coming up for the christening, then?"

"I suppose so, if you promise me I can keep my own shape."

Maggie grinned. "I can promise that, I think."

"Good. I say, your basket is making noises." It was too, squeaking, odd noises. Maggie lifted the lid. A tiny kitten replica of Ching put a white paw on the edge of the basket and tried to scramble out.

"I can't talk to you, Maggie, but you'll have your hands full with Sonnyboy, when he learns to talk," said Ching, the fur on his snow-white chest puffing with fatherly pride. "Rowan thought a powerful witch like you ought to have your own familiar. He told me to tell you that, and you can't know what it cost him. You ought to have seen him, down there in the hayloft, not knowing if I understood or not while he talked to that charming calico mother of Sonny's and me, and us mewing back ever so innocently."

"Well, he won't have as interesting a job, being my familiar, as you did," she said, chucking Ching under the chin while stroking the kitten with one finger between his ears. "No more dragons or wizards for us now, kitty, just scrubbing that year's worth of pots Gran won't have done, and finding another one hundred and one ways to prepare ground venison."

"I wish you wouldn't talk that way about your magic," said Colin. "It's demeaning. It's absolutely wonderful the way you can control fire and food supply and all, I think."

She looked at him curiously. "You really think so?"

"I do-it may not seem like much when you're safe and sound in your own castle, but Rowan says it's an enormous tactical asset,"

"Rowan-the king-said that?"

Colin nodded. "He called you our secret weapon. Of course, from him, being called a weapon is a compliment. He said a siege would never take a castle with you in it. And look how you provided for us on the road and kept us comfortable in all that bad weather, not to mention holding off Grimley till Rowan could arrive with Neddy."

"I had a little help," she reminded him.

"It doesn't matter."

"It's just that it's so everlastingly dull up there. Colin, with the winters so long and everyone at me to do this and that."

"Well," Colin said slyly. "You'll have help with all that at least."

"He's a bit small. We can't even talk together yet."

"But we can, dear Maggie," said a familiar voice in the back of her mind.

"Moonshine?" she asked.

Colin smiled. "He's been waiting here outside the rowan trees for six months, ever since he followed us back from Dragon Bay. He's followed everywhere you've gone, always within the woods. But he can't stand the rowans either, bewitching creature that he is. The shepherdesses saw him and . . ."

He broke off. for she was no longer there. She was running to the edge of the woods, which seemed to break to show a bit of pearly morning sky.
Colin thought that nothing would be quite ordinary, ever again, for any of them.

THE UNICORN CREED

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PROLOGUE

When Colin Songsmith arrived with the royal party at Fort Iceworm, he scarcely recognized the place. Indeed, he scarcely could see the place, once he and the rest of Their Majesties' entourage had passed within the huge log gates, for it was crammed ten deep with people everywhere. Even now, in midsummer, when crops needed tending, animals needed herding, and peasants needed supervising, and in spite of Fort Iceworm's remoteness from Queenston, Argonia's capital city and center of both population and enterprise, no one wanted to miss the royal christening.

From all corners of the realm and the known world, the guests had already gathered—kings and statesmen, queens of faery, wazirs and wise men, gypsies, an unusually large number of assorted unattached noblemen, plus other noble people, ignoble people, were-people, half-people and even a few non-people. All had assembled to christen the baby Princess Bronwyn in the hall of her grandfather, Sir William Hood.

What portions of the castle's structure were visible were layered with silken banners of every color, bearing every crest in the realm, fluttering less with wind than with the comings and goings of the throng. The meadows separating castle and village from the vast forest were strewn with guest pavilions, like huge overblown summer flowers, crimson, azure, golden and green of every shade and tint. From the topmost turret of Sir William's keep flew the King's own crest, a rowan leaf on a field of scarlet. Directly below it, as was proper, flew Sir William's own banner, an iceworm, blue, on a field of white. Pennants bearing both emblems were hawked through the streets by enterprising peasants. Every cottager and holder for leagues around lodged at least twenty people in his small home, and at all hours elaborately clad servants came and went from the humblest of village dwellings. Never did the smell of cooking food, nor the sound of laughter and song, abate, for the entire week of festivities preceding the christening.

It was a good thing that His Majesty was so tall. Otherwise Colin, whose duty it was as chief minstrel to always be at the King's right hand, chronicling his regally witty remarks on the marvelous occasion, could never have found either the King or his right hand. Fortunately, His Highness was descended from frost giants, and was thus of conveniently outstanding stature.

Colin had less luck locating the other person he most wished to find at the christening, his old questing companion, Maggie Brown, Sir William's bastard daughter and Queen Amberwine's half sister. He knew where she was well enough—or where she had been, at any rate. It was Maggie's special talent, her hearthcraft witchery, which kept the entire christening from being a greater domestic disaster than it was. Hers was the power to perform all household tasks in the twinkling of an eye, and wherever she went she cut a swath of fragrant cooking fires, clean rushes, whitewashed walls, clean dishes, hot food, cold drink, emptied chamber pots, fresh linen, kindled torches and tidied beds. It was not an unpleasant trail to follow. Nevertheless, Colin had hoped for a more personal confrontation—a bit of a reunion, as it were—a chance to sing her his new songs, to tell her of his life at the castle, and perhaps to strut for her a bit in the rich apparel the King had given him. But somehow he never seemed to be free of his duties at the same time she was free of hers in the same room. Once he almost collided with her as he was coming in from a party at Sir Oswald's pavilion, but without looking up she'd brushed past him in a brown blur, automatically mending a small tear and cleaning a wine stain on his sleeve in passing. He was, for once, speechless, and after that had no more opportunities to seek her out, preoccupied as he was with his own duties of observing, chronicling, dancing, singing, entertaining and being entertained by his fellow guests.

So it happened that, although she was the first person he'd looked for, he never really saw her properly until the actual christening had begun and he took his favored place, slightly behind and to the left of Their Majesties' makeshift thrones inside the cow yard, which was the only area large enough to hold even the noble part of the assemblage.

King Roari and his queen, the exquisite Lady Amberwine, were flanked on one side by the most important of the royal guests, and on the other side by a smug and beaming Sir William, an equally proud Granny Brown,
Maggie's irascible witch grandmother, and by Maggie herself. She was still dressed in her brown woolen skirt and tunic and manure-spattered wooden clogs, her apron splotched with a fresh grease stain, neglected in the excitement, her brown eyes darting restlessly around the courtyard, as if looking for tasks that still needed doing. Only her shining otter's pelt of brown hair was clean and neatly braided, and bespoke personal preparation for the historic moment about to take place.

As the Mother's Priestess lifted Princess Bronwyn from Queen Amberwine's arms, and carried her gently and ceremoniously to the mound of christening mud heaped high upon the white-silk-covered table in front of the throne, Maggie caught Colin's eye and grinned at him. It was her old grin, and full of relief, though somewhat nervous. He grinned back at her, trying to think how to signal her to wait for him after the ceremony, but then there was no time. The baby had stopped howling in the priestess's unfamiliar arms, and now gurgled happily as the woman tenderly smeared the small body with the Mother's life-giving mud.

The congregation cheered as the last of Bronwyn's shining pink flesh was blessed with another gooey glob, and the small Princess was borne away into the castle to be bathed before the gifting began.

Colin thought then he might step over to one side and snag Maggie before she disappeared again. But before he'd taken a pace. King Roari lifted his hand slightly, and the royal herald, standing just to Colin's right, blew a loud, whinnying blast on his trumpet. Colin winced.

The King rose majestically—he was very good at being majestic, being so large—and the trumpet-silenced assemblage knelt; not an easy task, since a kneeling person took up more room than a standing one, and the cow yard was already packed.

Colin hoped His Majesty would have the good sense to make it short, whatever he had to say. The noonday feast awaited them and he, for one, was hungry.

"Noble friends and loyal subjects." King Roari began in his most dignified version of his booming hillman's brogue. "I shouldn't like it noised about that I'm a man forgets 'is debts. The queen and me and, aye, our wee baby too. all of us owes where we are today, that is together and able to be servin' you from the throne of our great realm, to the courage and loyalty of them as saved m'lady and child from certain unscrupulous sorcerers with whose names I will nae sully this grand occasion."

Ah, now wasn't that thoughtful? His Majesty was publicly going to thank Maggie and himself for rescuing the then-pregnant Queen Amberwine from the clutches of deluded gypsies and Maggie's deranged uncle, the wizard Fearchar Brown. It wasn't necessary, naturally. That was the sort of thing one had to expect on quests, but since the King evidently had made up his mind to make a fuss, Colin dusted off his own tunic and prepared to look humble and grateful when he was thanked. Maggie'd started the whole thing, of course, but he'd gone with her as friend and protector during the rescue (well, usually he'd protected her; sometimes it was the other way around). He tried to catch her eye again, but she was staring at the King with a mixture of pleasure, apprehension, and what appeared to be impatience to be out of the cow yard and elsewhere.

"As ye all may know from the fine song m'minstrel Colin here has written about the quest, 'twas m'wife's sister, Maggie, took it on herself t'go tae m'lady's rescue. I've thanked her personal before, and Colin too, for ('great boon they've done us, but it's been pointed out tae me that though Maggie is, so far as I'm concerned, the noblest lassie in a' t'kingdom except for m'lady Amberwine, she has nae lands nor title o' her own. It also happens, y'know that I've nae blood relations, we Rowans bein' a notoriously careless lot with our hides, as ye may've heard."

The throng laughed politely. Maggie, kneeling, looked like she was preparing to sprint off down the hill and out the gate. Beside her, her grandmother and Sir William turned to see the King more clearly and Colin beheld the big, self-satisfied smile on Sir William's face. The reason for it was evident when the King spoke again.

"So it come to me that the thing for me to do-the thing for me to do is to adopt this woman, Maggie-Magdalene?" Sir William nodded his head. "Magdalene Brown, m'wife's half sister, tae be sister tae me as if she was born that way, and so a princess of the realm."

And without waiting for her to come to him, the King strode down off the throne's platform and in one giant step stood over her and clapped a silver circlet on her head. She looked up, startled, and the circlet slid down over one ear. She caught it and shoved it back up again.

"That's all I've got to say," King Roari said. "Let's eat, before the gifting' starts."

Whatever reward Colin had expected the King to bestow upon Maggie, a princess's coronet was the last thing he would have imagined. Her baffled expression was almost as funny as the sight of her; plain, earthy Maggie with grease on her dress, chimney grime on her elbows, and a crown on her head, princess of the realm! Ludicrous! Ah well, she'd give the court a few lessons in plain speaking, no doubt. Perhaps she'd even bring usefulness back in fashion. Choking back heartfelt but unseemly laughter, he wiped his eyes and tried to look decently, soberly pleased as he
hastened forward to congratulate her.

But though she hadn't taken a step, she'd disappeared again. Where before had been a clear space in front of her for the priestess to move about, now was a solid wall of the backs of eligible princes, dukes, counts and earls, each vying with the other to introduce himself in the loudest and most flowery tones, managing overall to sound very like the villagers hawking their souvenir pennants.

Sir William's grin spread across his face like jam on bread. "Look at the bloody fools!" Granny Brown hissed. "You'd think they'd never seen a pretty girl before!"

"Now, Mother Brown," Sir William replied slyly, "It's only fitting a girl her age should have a few friends."

Colin thought the suitors seemed less like friends than like a pack of hounds tearing apart a doe. and he waited as long as he could to make his way through them to speak to her. But though he missed the feast entirely, and was almost late for the gifting, he never got near enough for her to hear him. Just before he turned to go, however, the composition of the cluster around her suddenly shifted, and she surfaced, like a drowning woman, and shot him one wild, despairing look before being swallowed up again, to be swept past him to the gifting tables.

He found a place near the Queen, behind a lady in an astonishing broad-winged purple cap with several yards of veiling attached. The first gift was just being presented. He didn't see Maggie there, nor her suitors—but he did spot one lone fellow who seemed to have missed out on the courting, an insolent looking gray haired chap clad in silver, down at the end of the reception line. Colin thought at the time that the fellow's sneer was inappropriate to a christening, but put it down to indigestion. As was customary at christenings, the intangible gifts were presented first. These were bestowed by the magically endowed guests, each in accordance with his or her specialty. From Maggie's aunt, the seeress Sybil Brown, the baby received the gift of insight. From Queen Amberwine's faery kin, beauty and kindness to all natural things. From Granny Brown, whose witchcraft allowed her to transform things, the baby received the power to make the best of a bad situation. It went on and on like that-beauty, loyalty, courage, understanding, generosity, wisdom and other qualities a princess would need to live an exemplary life, along with certain wishes, spells, and enchantments for her protection from such baby's banes as diaper rash and colic. The King himself concluded that portion of the gifting by bestowing on her his own name day present, a bright red miniature shield with the Rowan crest carved into its wooden surface and painted by his own hand. Though Queen Amberwine looked up at her husband rather oddly, no one had the heart to tell the King that it was a peculiar sort of gift to give a daughter.

After that, everyone turned to the table where the more material gifts were piled. Some of them were mere toys, though others were amulets, talismans, medicine bundles or charms. These gifts were already unwrapped, and each in its turn was publicly admired and exclaimed over, after which the particular benefits of each and the donor would be noted by the Court Rememberer and ceremoniously explained to the by-now cranky baby, who clearly, from the smell of her, wanted changing.

Normally a model of poise and serenity, the queen rapidly lost her regal composure under the squirming weight of her child. Like many rituals, christenings were hardly designed for the comfort of the persons being honored. Desperate to find a gift gaudy enough to please her undignified daughter's unsubtle eye, Amberwine skipped over rattles, blocks, dolls, and magic stones.

The gilt box emblazoned with crimson jewels fairly leapt into her hand. She seized it and held it in front of Bronwyn's face, bathing the child playfully in the dazzle from the gems. The baby chortled and stretched out her chubby arms to snatch it. The queen allowed her to gum it for a moment or two before turning it over to see who had sent it. She shook her pretty head, shrugging, and handed it to the Court Rememberer to examine.

"Look, ma'am, where it was," her young lady-in-waiting suggested helpfully. "There's a bit of parchment there, with pictures and writing and all. Perhaps that says." But the parchment's drawings and runes were all indecipherable even to those of the court who could read. Finally, the King, always a man of action, tucked the parchment into his jerkin and took the box from the Court Rememberer.

"We'll just have a look, then," he said, lifting the catch, "There'll be a crest inside t' thing, of course."

But there wasn't.

The lid sprang open, and the crowd near the royal family gasped as a hideous gremlin popped from the box and bounced into the baby's face. "You're a dirty liar!" it shrieked at the little princess. "You're a dirty liar!"

Unlike the crowd, baby Bronwyn did not merely gasp. Taking the matter deeply to heart, she emitted a bellow that drowned out gremlin, crowd and all, for some time to come.

It was the baby's howl that first alerted Colin that something was very wrong and that the gift, which was concealed from him by the remarkable headgear of the lady in front of him, was in any way unusual. Up until then, he had been rather bored with the whole affair, preoccupied as he was with the amusing if rather alarming idea of Maggie Brown as a-princess, and thinking to himself that a royal christening was not so very different from the more prosaic country ceremonies he was used to in his home village of East Headpenney-only the magic available to the
royal child was of a higher, more powerful quality than usual. The bad as well as the good, so it now appeared.

Since he'd missed so much of what had gone on at first, he stepped forward to inquire of the lady in front of
him. But before he could tap her on the shoulder, she jumped backward past him with a little squeal, evidently to
make way for the Queen, who was fainting into her lord's arms. As the King caught the Queen, Colin caught the
Princess, rolling from her mother's slackened arms.

No one challenged his right to lay hands upon the royal child, except perhaps the royal child herself, who was
still lustily screaming. In the midst of the chaos, with the ladies screeching and noblemen cursing, the King roaring
his concern over his wife like a mother bear with an unaccountably limp cub, and everyone pushing at the table,
chattering like a lot of forest animals who have suddenly sensed the presence among them of a large predator,
Colin's only coherent thought was to quiet the baby.

He began to sing for her his christening gift, a most soothing lullaby, though he feared, practically having to
shout the song into her ear as he did, that his voice would sound anything but soothing. Fortunately the tune was
undemanding, musically, being essentially a chanting of the higher reaches of the multiplication tables. The baby
apparently found mathematics as enervating as Colin found less complicated christenings, for her mouth stopped
quicking, and formed a tidy little "O," drooling small moist bubbles, and for a time she regarded him from round
blue eyes, before they closed and she snuggled against his chest.

Perhaps the lullaby had had a calming effect on the adults present as well, or perhaps it was only that he had
been singing longer than he realized, but when he looked up from the sleeping child, the Queen had revived enough
to reclaim her, and the King had disappeared—though only visibly; Colin could hear the royal roar in the background,
ordering his soldiers to prepare for an immediate return to Queenston. Closer to hand, those gathered around the
Queen were arguing.

"Well, of course, it's some sort of a curse," said the lady who had jumped aside when Amberwine fainted. "You
don't suppose for a moment that sort of thing is a BLESSING, do you?"

"It has that look about it," the Grand Wazir of Babacoola commented. "Only a villain would play such a
dastardly joke, and villains are unlikely to bestow anything except curses."

"What do you think it means?" Lady Althea, the Queen's nubile young handmaiden, asked. She was busily
fanning Amberwine and the baby with a silken kerchief.

Granny Brown, across the gifting table from the rest of them, grunted. "Means she'll grow up a liar, no doubt.
Pity no one thought to give her the gift of honesty. Now the damned thing's sure to stick."

Amberwine looked peaked and distraught, her eyes flitting from one speaker to the next, apparently in hopes
that one of them would say something encouraging. The lady in the ridiculous hat was as fast with wit and tongue as
she had been on her feet when the Queen was fainting. "Now, now, milady, don't you fret," she said, laying a kind
hand on Amberwine's emerald satin sleeve. "I've been at court for many years now, and believe you me, if only the
truth were known, any family of any real consequence has at least one little curse attached to it somewhere."

"That's so," nodded the Court Rememberer.

"Why, my dear," added the Dowager Queen of Wasimarkan, "From what I've seen of court life, I'd say that this
curse could easily be the most useful gift your daughter's been granted yet."

"To be a liar?" Amberwine cried, and began to yawn. Colin noted the yawn with dismay. Having had the honor
previously of rescuing Her Majesty from dire peril, and a dragon to boot, he was aware that the Queen, gentle and
sensitive lady that she was, had the unfortunate habit of handling crises by napping for the duration while someone
else dealt with the problem. Though she made a valiant effort at maternal protectiveness, rocking her
persecuted child tenderly in her arms, the Queen was more affected by the rocking than the already sleeping
baby. The more Amberwine rocked, the wider her yawns became, until finally they would not cease and she couldn't
help nodding. At the last moment, she relinquished Bronwyn to the lady nearest her, and knelt peacefully at the table
with her head cradled on her arms among the christening gifts until servants carried her to her bed.

But five days later, when the royal party was already a good third of the way back to Queenston, Colin found
that what preyed on his mind wasn't the baby's curse, nor the Queen's continued somnolence, nor even the King's
threats of war against whoever had cursed Princess Bronwyn. He was plagued instead by a niggling foreboding
centering on Maggie, and on the trapped look on her face when last he'd seen her. Funny as it had seemed at the
time, it gnawed at him now, and so, when he'd sung Bronwyn to sleep for the hundredth time since the christening,
he sought the King, and begged his leave to return to Fort Iceworm.

CHAPTER 1
"Sorry, sir," the tower guard said. "No one allowed in Princess Magdalene's cell but family members." He
jerked a dirt-creased thumb, toward the tower door. "Her old man's in there chewin' 'er out right now."

"Oh, it's quite all right, I assure you," Colin replied, fumbling through pockets filled with penny whistles, bells,
drumsticks and guitar picks until he found the crumpled piece of parchment with most of the Rowan Royal Seal still
I am, as you say, the only hearthcrafter in these parts, I'm afraid you'll simply have to take my word for it.”

"I wouldn't go in there just yet, sir, if I was you, seal or no seal," he confided from behind his hand. "But if you was to put yer ear to the door, careful like, you might hear when 'is Lor'ship's leavin', an' manage to be out of 'is way, if you take my meanin'. "Course," he shrugged. "You bein' a King's man and that, you mayn't wish to avoid 'is Lor'ship, but I should, sir, if I was you. Proper ogre he is these days, Sir William is, sir, if you take my meanin'?

Colin took it. In a land where so much of the lore passed from tongue to tongue that even the archives were sung into seashells, any minstrel worth his salt knew full well the value of the oral tradition. He knelt and pressed his ear to the door, as suggested.

"Don't you think I don't know what you're up to, you ungrateful girl!" the Lord-High-Mayor-Knight-Protector-of-the-Northern-Territories (-And-Surrounding-Villages) thundered. Colin could just imagine the old knight's face flushing the glorious eggplant color it always did when he was vexed. He sounded very vexed.

"You can't fool me with your witch's tricks, me as has brought you up by the sweat of my brow all these years and done my best by you, knowing full well I'd probably never marry you off decent, thorny thing that you are."

"I never asked you to marry me off," Maggie pointed out. "But since you insist, I must insist on doing it correctly." The thump and rattle of her loom continued rhythmically as she spoke, answering her father in a calm, reasonable tone calculated, Colin was sure, to drive Sir William into a fit of apoplexy. "As I've already explained to you. Father dear, before a hearthcrafter marries, she must spin, weave, and sew her own wedding gown, and it must be perfect and done without the benefit of magic. Surely you want me to look more presentable for my wedding than I did for my coronation? Now that I'm a princess, I'll have certain standards to maintain, you know. Oh, dear!" she gasped a maidenly little gasp and the loom treadles clattered. "I do wish you wouldn't distract me so. Daddy dearest. Just look at what you've made me do now. I've an error two rows back I didn't even notice, you're upsetting me so! I...

"I'm sorry about that, I'm sure." Maggie's voice was as condescendingly patient as if she spoke to a particularly

"How can the bloody thing be traditional?" her father demanded. "You're the only hearthcrafter in these parts, and the first one to marry that I've ever heard of."

"Probably there'd be more marriages among us if this weren't such a difficult tradition," she said with a suspiciously heavy sigh. "The Mother only knows how I hate to weave without magic. But that is the rule, and since I am, as you say, the only hearthcrafter in these parts, I'm afraid you'll simply have to take my word for it."
"But the suitors--"

"Why don't you tell them to go away and you'll let them know when I'm ready? At this rate, with you shouting at me every hour on the hour, I should only need another twenty years."

"I'll tell you what I bloody well will do, you snooty wench! I'll send them all out to do the most dangerous deeds they can do—that should take care of some of the wretches—and bind you to the first man among them who returns victorious and in one piece. You'll marry him whether you will or no!"

"That," Maggie said, "strikes me as a really dumb idea. If these fellows are such important Lords of the realm, don't you think asking them to risk life and limb on my behalf is going to be a bit hard on the national leadership?"

The thwack of a fist striking wood was followed by a howl of pain and a string of knightly obscenities from Sir William. After the hasty clatter of a loom bench being swiftly evacuated. Maggie asked, "Hurt yourself?" Her tone was a model of daughterly concern.

"You impudent wench! By the worm's rancid steaming bloody breath, you'll marry the first fellow who comes back with a dragon's head or—or an army of bandits in tow, see if you don't!"

"Naturally, m'lord Father, I'll have to do your bidding. You've spoken, haven't you? And the King?" Her voice was frankly angry now. "Who am I, your bastard and a simple village witch, to question your mighty will? Never mind that witches needn't marry and I'd be happier single, when you've taken it into your head that marry I will. But I WILL make my preparations according to the prescribed customs of my mother's people, and I won't budge before! And why, goodness me, just look there!" She lapsed back into sugary sweetness. "A threading error. Excuse me, please, father, but this is very serious indeed. It may take me DAYS to fix this, but my dress really must be perfect so I'll be lovely as the May for the lordly dolt my beloved father picks for my groom. I shall have to take it all apart and do it over."

The door swung open so quickly Colin had to jump backwards and down a step, hugging the wall to avoid being knocked over as the purple-faced and fuming Sir William stormed out the door and down the stone steps without even seeing him.

The tower room was bare of furnishings except for a straw cot and the loom and spinning wheel sitting on the stark stone floor. Behind the loom and in a pile near the wheel lumped bag after bag of silk, both spun and unspun. Beside the loom bench an unglazed dish held congealed porridge.

Maggie stalked the room, her cheeks blazing burgundy and her dark eyes smoldering like molten iron. She looked to Colin very much like a hungry brown lioness, her braids lashing tail-like in her wake as she prowled her cage.

Colin cleared his throat and she whirled, looking at once glad to see him and annoyed at being interrupted in the midst of a rage.

"They'd better never let me out of here or so help me I'll commit treason," she announced fiercely. "I'll kill that bloody Rowan for putting me in this spot after all we did for him! What's the matter with your nosy King, anyway?"

She demanded. "Why couldn't he just mind his own business?"

Colin shrugged and sat down on her loom bench. "I suppose he thought you'd want to actually. You've never been backwards about speaking your mind before. If you didn't want to be a princess, why didn't you just say so?"

"What did you expect me to do in front of all those people?" she asked. "Shove the circlet back at him and say, 'sorry, Sire, I never wear jewelry.' Oh, I suppose you're right. He meant well. It's just--just--"

"Just what?" he asked. To his surprise, he saw that her chin was trembling and a large teardrop was winking from it. "Oh, really, Maggie. You mustn't take on so. The King wouldn't have made you unhappy for the world. He honestly thinks he's done you a great turn. It was the only thing about this whole mess that pleased him, paying you back that way. All this business of tower prisons and mandatory marriage is your father's rather heavy-handed way of handling his domestic problems, not Rowan's. I'm sure if he and the Queen could have stuck around instead of having to rush right off to clear up this curse thing, none of this would have happened to you."

"I wish the rest of those ninnies who're hanging about acting so important would have rushed right off as well," she replied with a return to her former heated intensity. "They've been after me every minute since the christening, one bunch or the other. I've not had a moment's privacy. It was bad enough during the festival, not getting a chance to speak to you or walk out to the woods, but since then it's been impossible. And when they're not dogging me, they're rooting through the forest, killing Dad's animals, which I think is half of why he's so eager to be rid of me."

She had been staring out the tower's narrow window as she spoke, and when she turned to him her face was both wet and anxious. "Oh, Colin, I just hope Moonshine has enough sense to keep clear of the castle. I haven't gotten to go see him since that evening you caught me slipping through the gate. If he comes looking for me, one of my gallant admirers is apt to think it clever to kill him and present me with a unicorn horn for a wedding present. Wouldn't Dad
think that a heroic deed!" Turning back to the window, she buried her head in her hands and began sobbing with the same ferocious singlemindedness she brought to everything else.

"Of course!" Colin clapped his hand to his head. "I forgot all about the--" He bit off his sentence, remembering that Bernard liked to be a noncontributing party to his prisoner's conversations. Rising, he tiptoed to the door. As he opened it, the guard stumbled backwards, smiling at him foolishly.

Returning the smile with every evidence of man-to-man good fellowship, Colin joined him on the landing, closing the door softly. "She's taking all of this pretty hard," he told Bernard in an exaggerated whisper.

"Well, sir, I expect for an honest, hard-working wench like our Goodwitch Brown this princess business takes a might of getting used to," the guard allowed sympathetically. "My old auntie always did say that politics was no profession for a decent woman but I say that Sir William's the Lord and the King's the King and a man has to have a job and ..."

"Exactly," Colin agreed hurriedly. "I knew you were a compassionate sort of chap the moment I laid eyes on you."

"I does my best, sir." Bernard replied, flushing with pleasure at being complimented with such a large word, whatever it meant. "And say, if there's aught I can do to help . . ."

This was the opening Colin had been angling for. "As a matter of fact, old man. what with all this boohooing and so on, my handkerchiefs gotten soaked, and my throat's quite dry from all the 'there-there'-ing, if you take my meaning, net to mention that it was a long, dry trip riding back here."

He looked around as if there could possibly be anyone else in the corridor. Finding the absolutely isolated stairway predictably empty of all but himself and the puzzled but enthusiastic Bernard, he dug in his pockets again and drew forth a silver coin, which he surreptitiously slipped into the other man's palm. Bernard, being no fool, had naturally had his palm already outstretched and waiting.

"Now, sergeant," Colin continued in his stage whisper, "If you could see your way clear to fetching the lady a towel to blow her nose on and a bit of refreshment for the two of us, I'll be happy to make sure she doesn't go anywhere in the meantime."

"Needn't ask me twice, sir," Bernard winked, pocketing the coin, "I reckon what with you being a King's man and all, it'll be well enough. And I'm obliged to be able to do somethin' to show the goodwitch I bear her no ill will. She's a hard worker and takes care of 'er own, she does, and my auntie says there's no nattier housekeeper in all the kingdom. A good woman and a good witch she is, even if she ain't exactly princess material, I say. Between you and me, I think it's a cryin' shame to keep 'er locked up like this, but no one asked me, you understand, and I need the job, and it's an easy one, even if it is a might dry, if you take my meanin', sir."

"How thoughtless of me!" Colin apologized, companionably setting his hands on the man's shoulders and giving him a friendly push toward the foot of the stairs. "Naturally, you'll need to refresh yourself before you climb back up these wretched stairs. And do try to make it a nice, clean, soft sheet you find for Maggie. Her nose is pretty raw from all that crying."

Bernard waved his version of a salute and bounded down the steps.

Seven giant black swans bore the wizard Fearchar Brown aloft in his magic chariot, up from the valley and across the glaciers, to cross the mountains dividing Argonia from Brazoria. Watching the ascent of the swans from her cliff castle's icy outer ledge was Princess Pegeen Ashburn, known commonly as Pegeen the Illuminator, only daughter and sole surviving heir of the last King, Finbar the Fireproof, and up until recently holding the satisfying rank of Royal Princess, Retired. Pegeen couldn't honestly say she wasn't glad to see Fearchar go—even if only for a short time. She hadn't had a moment's peace since he first sought refuge with her, and immediately set about making her sanctuary his stronghold.

As soon as he was gone, she fetched her drawing things and sat on her favorite spot on the ledge, intending to push from her mind, for the morning, at least, her trepidations about her lover. Today, when the glacier-rimmed valley was flooded with sunshine for a change instead of mist and rain, she would simply relax and enjoy the rare good weather and a chance to practice her own special illuminating magic. On warm days like this, drawing inside was out of the question anyway, since her cliff castle was carved in one piece from the ice at the edge of the great glacier which reared up behind it, and warm days meant drippy walls, which in turn meant running inks and spoilt parchments.

She would do as she used to on days like this, basking in the sunlight and enjoying the dizzying view from the ledge, watching the ice glitter and the prisms dance from the curiously slitted glacier across the valley to the iceworm-riddled glacial maze behind her castle. She would listen to the nonsensical gabbling of the Blabbermouth River's jade waters as they gossiped their way across the valley, and wish to her heart's content for an ink to match
the deep cobalt of the glacial clefts or a green to match the lime of the valley's tender new grass, while admiring the picturesque decay of the ruined village sprawling beneath her perch.

She'd so hoped, when Fearchar first sought refuge with her, that he would enjoy sharing these quiet pleasures of hers. But he had no eye for the view at all, and no mind to share anything but his own plans for overthrowing Roari Rowan. She tried to tell him that sitting on a throne was no great joy--she had had more than enough of it, just watching her father's rule, and when her brothers were killed attempting feats of magic beyond their skills (she had always been the talented one, actually) she had made her decision and declined her place in the line of succession. Fearchar threw that up to her often enough, but, gracious, she'd had no idea she'd meet such a brilliant, ambitious man just before her father's demise--it had rather begun to look, in fact, as if King Finbar would outlive her, and the question of kingship would not arise in her lifetime. But it had, and Roari Rowan had been chosen her father's successor, a position Fearchar had been counting on rather more heavily than Pegeen had realized at the time. She'd humored him, naturally, thinking he'd get over it, but instead of calming him down, her acquiescence had had the unfortunate effect of encouraging his rather outrageous plans.

She should never have let him sell her jewels and the tapesries and furniture she'd brought with her to her hermitage, but he had been so excited about outfitting his new army (who turned out to be nothing but a lot of Brazorian brigands recruited with the help of a very questionable-looking young woman he'd met out in the woods somewhere), and had promised that when he won back the throne and she shared it with him. she'd get everything back anyway. Never one to place much value on objects other than scrolls and books. Pegeen had let him have her things. He had thanked her so sweetly, holding her hand and gazing into her eyes and speaking to her in that lovely plummy voice of his until she was quite unsure what she had promised him he _might_ have -- and what she wished to retain.

Now, surrounded by his so-called soldiers at every turn, and even forbidden to smoke by an uncharacteristically solicitous Fearchar, who claimed her habit was dangerous and unhealthful, she was beginning to realize he would never come around and that it was she, in fact, who was being humored.

She did hope Roari Rowan would be able to read the message she had encoded at the bottom of her christening gift, the horoscope she'd sent little Bronwyn. Perhaps he'd come then and put a stop to all of this nonsense. She'd been most alarmed at Fearchar's gift-though he claimed the jack-in-the-box was a harmless joke, she was magician enough herself to know it for what it was. however convincingly he told her otherwise. She tried not to feel like a traitor to Fearchar because of the note to his enemy, but really, enough was quite enough.

And this latest scheme of his to boost the manpower of his ragtag army-unnerving. So unnerving that she reached without thinking into her pocket in search of her smoking materials. But an unmelodious blast from the tower to her left stopped her. The lookout was lowering his horn and pointing into the valley for the benefit of his foreshortened compatriots infesting the village at her feet. Pegeen shaded her eyes and scanned the valley.

A thin trickle of movement stirred the trees along the river near the foot of the slitted glacier. As she watched, figures began to emerge from those trees, several men, and then the white that unmistakably marked, even at this distance, Fearchar's female "lieutenant," the silly little nymph who had affected that awful jest for a name. And behind her, another, nonhuman, figure, moving awkwardly, as if bound.

An involuntary groan of dismay escaped Pegeen's lips. He meant it then, and more to the point, he could really do it. Fearchar, with the help of that wretched young woman, actually meant to--actually HAD, unless her eyes and the distance deceived her, actually had captured a unicorn, would capture others, and use the mystical beasts' healing magic to make that miserable little army virtually unwoundable. Pegeen gave an unladylike curse on finding her smoking materials missing from her gown pocket. Guards or no guards, forbidden or not, she simply HAD to have a smoke.

CHAPTER 2

As Colin re-entered the tower chamber, Maggie jumped up from the loom bench where she'd sat sniffing, and dried her eyes with a furious swipe of her tunic sleeve. Giving him a quivery grin and a swollen-eyed wink, she began popping small objects from beneath the piles of silk into her medicine pouch.

"Nobly done, gallant minstrel, nobly done," she congratulated him, producing a brilliant silk gown from beneath the piles. "I take it all back. Never has a princess been rescued from a tower with a more commendable display of craft and guile. I do believe your time in court hasn't been a total waste after all."

"But I didn't--" he began. "I mean, I was only trying to get that nosy guard to go away so you could talk about Moonsshine. Say, you DID have your wedding dress made all along, didn't you?"

"Why talk about Moonsshine when I can see him?" she asked, pulling the silken robes on over her brown homespun. "And no, I didn't waste my time making this flimsy thing. Winnie gave it to me to change into for the christening, only I never got the time, so I stuck it in my pocket. It'll make a good disguise, don't you think?"
She finished adjusting the dress and admired as much of her somewhat lumpily overdressed self as she was able by looking down, then said firmly. "It will be very simple. All you have to do is pretend I'm one of those serving women who are helping my suitors eat us out of keep and castle."

She turned to the window. Colin hadn't noticed before the black and white cat dozing in the sunlight slanting through the deep, narrow aperture. The cat, sensing itself the center of attention, stretched and yawned.

Maggie tickled the animal under its chin. "Well, dearie, now's your chance to be a hero like your sire." she said. In reply the cat rolled onto his back as if to invite her attentions to his underside. When the solicited pattings were not forthcoming, he purred for awhile in a friendly sort of way, flopped back on his side, curled his tail around his nose, and slept again.

"He takes after his mother." Maggie shrugged, apologetically, though she needn't have worried on Colin's account. Though he had forgiven Granny Brown's familiar cat, Chingach-gook, for trying to eat him when Granny, in a fit of pique, had turned him into a mockingbird, and had been glad of Ching's ability to converse with large animals, particularly dragons and bears, on more than one occasion, he had found Maggie's seemingly one-sided conversations with the cat disquieting. He was just as glad not to have the kitten of Ching and the Rowan barn cat to contend with.

"If you're bent on seeing your unicorn and becoming a fugitive from matrimony, we'd better flee," he advised. "Your guard could be a fast drinker, for all I know."

Afternoon sunlight filled the center of the grimy, debris-filled courtyard outside the tower. Colin and Maggie slunk furtively around it, keeping close to the shadows near the walls. Maggie stepped in a pile of horse manure and snorted disgustedly, remembering how less than a fortnight before she had magically shoveled the paving stones free of cowflops and chicken doo in preparation for the christening.

Now the stones were filthy again, and the grass and flowers trampled. The splinterly outbuildings, only recently feathered with their gay banners, were no more than splinterly outbuildings again, decorated solely with new arrow punctures inflicted during her suitors' archery practice.

Maggie led the way inside the long, manure-fragrant stable, since she was familiar with it and didn't need to wait for her eyes to adjust to the dimness inside. She ducked behind an empty stall while Colin fetched his horse, but she needn't have bothered; the groom, like the other servants, seemed to be taking advantage of her incarceration to let her father's property fall into rack and ruin.

"Your man didn't even unload Roundelay, much less feed and water her," Colin complained.

"About time the lout did something right," Maggie replied. "We'll take care of her when we've found Moonshine. Here, give me a leg up and hand me some of your gear to carry, so there'll be room for you behind."

Colin complied and mounted behind her. Though Maggie's presence made necessary some alterations in the delicate balance of his loading procedure, at least people were so used to seeing him with a horse full of instruments that the addition of one measly girl in the middle of it all would hardly be noteworthy.

Maggie kept an eye out for Ching as they passed her grandmother's cottage. He liked sunning himself on the roof, but today, fortunately, he seemed to have taken himself off, perhaps to supervise Granny while she brewed another emergency batch of ale at the tavern. They must be going through ale rather quickly now that she, Maggie, was no longer around to expand existing supplies. Well, let them stew. Granny, upon whom of all people Maggie had counted for support, had been no help at all when Maggie had tried the first few times to explain to her father that she didn't wish to marry.

No one challenged them as they rode down Fort Iceworm's one street and through the gate in the outer wall, which could be closed at night to protect the town from marauding enemies, had any enemies been foolish enough to want Fort Iceworm. The wall was mostly used to keep the moose out of vegetable patches and the bears out of the garbage, and was of no use whatsoever keeping out the salamanders, who crawled over it and into the thatched rooves, starting nasty fires.

The gate opened to the southwest, and the road led from it into a field of brilliant crimson fireweed and pink wild heather awash in a ground of green. The wildflowers were taking a beating this year from all the retainers' tents pitched in the field and from the jousting contests the guests insisted on indulging in, but Maggie relished the dazzling hues and tangy fragrance. It was good not to be cooped up in the tower any longer.

Beyond the meadow, forest stretched back as far as the eye could see, open only where fields along the road had been cultivated. Above the forest the horizon was serrated by mountains almost exactly sky-colored and sharp as the tips of fat icicles.

Maggie strained forward in the saddle, searching the nearest trees for a glimmer of white. She was both relieved and disappointed to see none.

Colin felt edgier every minute, and hungrier and more tired and put upon. He was beginning to wish he'd told his sense of foreboding to go forebode elsewhere, or had at least gotten a taste of the ale he'd sent Bernard to fetch.
Maggie hardly seemed to realize he was there, and after all the trouble he was going to on her behalf, endangering the favor he enjoyed from the King by helping her elude her high-class suitors.

"I say, Maggie, after you've warned the unicorn, you DO intend to make some decision about all those chaps who want to marry you, don't you? I can certainly see your father's point, after all. It puts him in an awkward position, having his daughter refusing the greatest lords in the land. Makes him look as if he's gotten a bit grand for his station."

"I wouldn't know about that, but I've gotten entirely too grand for mine, and no one seems to mind but me," she replied wryly. "I've felt a proper dunce, I can tell you, having all those high mucky-muck men who've never laid eyes on me before declaring their undying love and worshipful devotion and so on. It's nice to hear people say flattering things about oneself, but what I've been hearing lately has nothing to do with Maggie Brown. Limpid eyes and lily white skin indeed!"

"It's amazing what political connections can do for a girl's complexion," Colin agreed. "But if you don't want to marry any of them, I don't see why you didn't just use your magic and walk out of there."

"Didn't you notice that big iron padlock on the door? Magic doesn't work on iron, you know, not mine or anyone else's. I even have to scrub iron pots by hand; hearthcraft won't touch them. And during the day there was good old Bernard. Gran gave him an amulet to protect him against me,"

"Your grandmother helped keep you locked up? I'd have thought she'd be on your side. She-er-does know about you-know-who, doesn't she?"

Maggie sighed and searched the woods again. "She knows, but she doesn't like it. She says unicorns and witches have no business together, that unicorns are only for women who have all their power in their-well, I won't repeat that; it was rude. And quite untrue. Magic gives Moonshine and me something in common." Colin thought she added the last rather defensively.

In a cautious, pacifying tone he said, "Perhaps your granny's afraid he'll steal your affection from her." He could see how that might happen, how the unicorn's unqualified admiration and undivided attention would appeal to Maggie. Her hearthcrafting enabled her to be the best-qualified to handle anybody's problems, take charge of all situations, and manage any possible difficulties for everybody around her, but it did not make her tactful or popular. It no doubt never occurred to her that people around her might prefer to make their own decisions and solve their own problems.

She considered his remark. "No," she said finally. "It isn't that. I think it's because, although witches don't have to marry, Gran says we need to mate after a certain age to reach our-um- full magical potential. She's quite inconsistent on that point-all these years she's watched me like a hawk to make sure I didn't mess about with any of the local lads, but now that she's been so successful that Moonshine's chosen me to be his maiden, she's put out about it. NOW she's going on about how my powers are going to need supplementing or some such nonsense. Perhaps she is just jealous, and making that bit up because she knows unicorns are only supposed to associate with maidens. But what's really bothering her, if you ask me, is that I'm the last of the Brown witches. If I stay a virgin to please Moonshine, there'll never be any other little Brown witches scurrying about, carrying on the line. Gran truly doesn't feel a witch should care about anything beyond her clan and her craft."

"You do a good job of that," Colin said ruefully. "I hope you realize how much trouble you're getting ME into."

Maggie swiveled in the saddle and flashed him a sudden, fond grin over the harp in her lap. "That's what happens when you go getting sentimental over old friendships with witches. If you didn't want trouble, why did you come back?"

"Well, I, er, that is-His Majesty wanted me to write a song about your courtship, immortalizing your incredible beauty and goodness," he improvised finally. "And a bloody lot he knows about it, I might add."

Maggie was enchanted. "Oh?" she asked, looking back at him again when they'd turned onto a narrow trail leading up a hill and through a starchy stand of birch. "Go on, pray. Tell me more. What kind of song?"

"Oh, you know. The usual sort; your sparkling eye, your ruby lips, etc., etc."

"And have you thought of one?"

"Well, I was just going to use the old standard," he replied, giving his beard a thoughtful tug. "The one I sing to all my court ladies. I just change the hair and eye color a bit, you know, to fit. But what with you being a princess and a unicorn maiden and all that, it didn't seem-er-suitable."

She laughed. "You mean it was so bawdy you were afraid Gran would turn you into a mockingbird again!"

He winced. "Quite. Do you know, to this day I avoid all those ditties that begin with 'if I had the wings of a bird'?"

"I can well imagine," she said. "And it wouldn't do you any good to write one about me glorifying me to my suitors, either. I've no intention of sticking around so they can compare your song with the subject matter."

"I was afraid of that. Very well. What DO you intend to do?"
"Do as you said I should have in the first place. I'm going to ride to Queenston and ask Rowan if I can remain his sister but give him back the coronet. I'll tell him it's too much bother to keep it polished, and can't I please have a nice big bag of gold or a magic carpet or something useful instead."

Colin laughed. "Now THAT is worthy of a song," he said. "I don't think there's a single one about a quest to return a crown. It's my clear duly as a royal minstrel to accompany you and chronicle the event. Besides, until further notice, you ARE still the princess and I," he gave as good a bow as he could on horseback, "your humble servant, madam."

Fearchar's swancar glided back across the glaciers from the northwest and into the valley. The wizard enjoyed riding in the sky chariot as much for the prestige as for the mobility it afforded him. Though soaring above the haughty peaks might have been a thrill for ordinary men, to Fearchar the ride was by now merely one of the commonplace annoyances of building an empire.

True, he experienced a warm feeling when he skimmed the breast of the sprawling forest blanketing most of Argonia and knew he could say without fear of contradiction that any portion of woodland not currently under his control soon would be. But satisfying as it was to sit like a fur-wrapped god while his swans glided high above the ice-coated crests, the pleasure he obtained from mere riding was a trifling and solitary one.

He'd much preferred the other end of this journey, when his swans had spiralled downward toward the streets of the opulent Brazorian capital, only to shift slightly at the last moment, lighting gently upon the second broad tier of the temple dominating the city with its triangular massiveness.

The passersby in that city had been awed, yes they had, at the sight of this obviously mighty enchanter, cleverly disguised as a modest pilgrim, descending to honor their city with his presence. But Fearchar had not wasted his time and magical resources to honor passersby, of course. He'd come to the temple for one reason only, and that was to confer with a priestess of great wisdom. Or at any rate, a priestess whose wisdom he had need of.

The priestess Helsinora was the greatest living authority on unicorns and their various usages. Fortunately for Fearchar the lady was, like his own Pegeen, a cloistered scholar, susceptible to his magnificence. In exchange for certain promises, she'd lent him her life's work, a series of scrolls containing every known and conjectured use for the enchanted beast, its feeding, mating and migratory patterns (conclusions from field observations collected and compiled by the priestess decades ago-unicorns were now even scarcer in Brazoria than they were in Argonia). The only problem was that the document was written in ancient Brazorian runes, and would need to be translated. But with Pegeen's help, he had no doubt he would soon be privy to all its secrets.

With the scrolls, under his arm, he climbed from his chariot onto the cliff castle's outer ledge and strolled jauntily into the throne room. Pegeen jumped up quickly at his entrance and hid something in her dress. Ignoring the hint of smoke in the air and the guilty expression on her face, he laid the scrolls before her, carefully, on the seat of the throne, which was the driest spot in the castle.

Scorning false modesty, he told her how he had gained the confidence of Helsinora, who obviously recognized a superior mind and will when she saw one.

"Fine," Pegeen said, giving the document only a perfunctory glance before probing his face with suspicious blue eyes. "What does she look like?"

"Who?" Fearchar asked, carefully rerolling the scrolls before a threatening cluster of droplets forming on the canopy overhead could spoil them. Really, Pegeen had certainly allowed her once sumptuous and cozy hideaway to run downhill since he'd arrived. Even princesses, he supposed, were apt to get careless once they thought themselves sure of you.

"This Helsinora woman is who. Come now, Fearchar, you know perfectly well what I mean. Is she beautiful? Slimmer than I? Has she any disgusting vices?"

"My dear Pegeen," the sorcerer replied loftily, "I scarcely noticed. Such considerations are entirely subordinate, as I see it, to making certain our land is delivered from the usurper of your throne." He looked wronged and wounded, primarily because she had failed to recognize the importance of his latest acquisition.

She mistook his expression for unappreciated devotion, however, and laid her hand contritely on his sleeve. "I'm sorry, dearest. But as I see it, such considerations are most pertinent."

She turned away abruptly and sourness edged her voice again. "That so-called recruiting officer of yours has brought an entire army of panting bandits with her. They await you below."

"Tsk, tsk, my lady, your manners are slipping. It's considered ill-bred, is it not, to keep guests waiting without?"

"Hired brigands can scarcely be considered guests," she countered. "And this castle woefully lacks a service entrance. Besides, I had no idea where to put the unicorn. The stables belonging to this castle melted years ago."

Though Maggie had convinced Colin to cooperate with her plans, she had yet to convince Moonshine. Shortly after Colin's horse topped a hill beyond which the castle's turrets were no longer visible, they reached a
Maggie swung her leg over the chestnut's neck and hopped to the ground. Throwing back her head, she uttered a long ululating cry that seemed to come at once from her abdomen and from the roof of her mouth. It sounded like nothing human Colin had ever heard.

"That's the cry of the silver-spotted sea serpent," she told him proudly as the sound died away. "I learned it from one of the crew of the Snake's Bane last fall, before we left for Rowan's castle."

"But there are no sea serpents, silver-spotted or otherwise, around here," Colin reminded her. "It's too far inland."

"I know," she said. "That's how Moonshine knows it's me and not a real one."

Hooves thundered through the forest and Moonshine burst into the glade, his mane flying behind him like seawater curling in a ship's wake. His horn was a glittering lance, and his coat dappled mist and smoke—very possibly, Colin thought, like that of a silver-spotted sea serpent.

With leaf-scattering abandon, the unicorn galloped to Maggie's side, more in the manner of a young puppy than one befitting the mystical enchanted beast Colin had barely glimpsed a year before, when Maggie and the unicorn first met.

When he saw Colin, the unicorn's slender legs stiffened and he tossed his mane aggressively. The distinguished little white goatee under his chin quivered with indignation. Edging closer to Maggie, Moonshine rested his head on her shoulder and nickered in her ear, while his mind questioned hers. "Maiden, a man comes with you. Does this mean you have betrayed me? What have I done to offend you? I who am your servant in all things, I who would give my life if you but asked, I who—"

"Dry up, darling, won't you please?" Maggie begged. "I have heard entirely too much of that sort of thing lately. From beings less sincere than yourself, true, but it wears one down anyway. So please stop." She sank to the ground and spread her skirts on the grass so he could rest his head on her knee. It seemed safe enough here, where they'd met so often before, and she was tired of riding. "Of course you aren't betrayed. You remember Colin from before. He was with me when we met."

The unicorn rolled one amythest eye in the minstrel's direction and Colin smiled ingratiatingly and wiggled a few fingers at him.

Moonshine rolled the eye back toward Maggie. "He is a man. And NOT a maiden," the unicorn informed her. "I heard that," Colin replied. "And I should hope I'm not a maiden. I went to a very great deal of trouble managing not to be, just recently."

Maggie was regarding Moonshine with surprised puzzlement not unmingled with hurt. "I thought only you and I could converse. I didn't think you could understand anybody else."

"Nay, maiden. I have the gift of human understanding and can discern all that is said by your kind—it is only that there are few among them who have the gift of unicorn understanding. No men that I've ever heard of." He rose to his hooves again and walked closer to Colin, who stood by his horse as she grazed and drank from the pool. Moonshine approached cautiously, curling his lips back from his teeth and flaring his nostrils, sniffing elaborately. "No. No odor of chastity," the unicorn pronounced, circling the now nervous minstrel and causing the chestnut mare to shy and dance sideways. The unicorn took no notice, but continued to sniff in a manner at once menacing, suspicious, and disdainful. Colin was remembering all the stories he'd heard, not of the unicorn's wonderful healing magic, but of the beast's ferocity in battle and predilection for skewering any unwanted objects or persons bold enough to invade its territory.

"Are you sure you're not a maiden?" the unicorn asked finally, nudging the minstrel's leg in a rude gesture that brought the rapier-tipped horn alarmingly close to a treasured portion of Colin's anatomy.


"Moonshine, don't be so personal," Maggie reprimanded. "Colin has been a great help to me today. Maybe he understands you because he's my um..." she searched for a term that would fit into the unicorn's conservative and somewhat archaic view of human relations "... because he's my champion, I suppose you might say. Dad locked me up in the tower and was going to force me to marry, but Colin got me out of it. That qualifies him, doesn't it?"

But Moonshine was paying no attention. Completely reversing his arrogant stance, the unicorn now knelt supplicatingly at Colin's feet, left front hoof, horn and right front leg all touching the ground in front of the dumbfounded minstrel.

"Gallant sir, forgive this unworthy beast, I pray you. I tested you, knowing not that you championed my fairest Maid Maggie and freed her from frightful peril. As I am bound by the Creed to offer my friendship only to those
most worthy, I naturally never thought to be befriended by a human man. Indeed, I have no instructions whatsoever regarding men who would befriend rather than slay me. I suppose I shall just have to consider that any friend of Maggie's must be a corollary to the portion of my Creed covering the unicorn's relationship to his maiden.” And he recited, limerick fashion:

“For this is the Unicorn Creed She must be a maiden indeed Completely straight-laced And thoroughly chaste Who'd ride with the unicorn breed.”

Colin reassured the contrite unicorn that anyone would be confused about correct unicorn behavior given the same Creed and the same circumstances, and that he quite understood, but hadn't they better flee?

As soon as Maggie was upon his back, Moonshine asked in a business-like manner. "And we are fleeing-whither?"

"To Queenston," Colin replied.

"Whither lies Queenston?" Moonshine asked. "By the great river or with the freezing winds? To the rising sun or to the setting sun?"

"Er-um-uh," Colin said, stumbling as he tried to calculate which natural phenomena would set them on a southeasterly course.

CHAPTER 3

It came as something of a disappointment to Fearchar to find that unicorns weren’t so dreadfully ferocious as he’d been led to believe. Only twenty men, instead of the reputed one hundred, I were required to restrain the beast. Of the twenty, only one was killed. No more than four sustained even mildly debilitating injuries.

"Are you sure this beast is in good health?” he demanded of his lovely lieutenant. She knelt before him. radiant as always in her diaphanous white wrapper and leafy tunic, which shed leaves in the most fascinating places every time the girl turned into a whirlwind. "Oh, yes. Dark Pilgrim," she answered with a grave meekness which always gave Fearchar patriotic flutters on behalf of his own cause. His persuasive magic had worked wonders with this formerly disgruntled and disillusioned nymph. She was now a woman with a commitment-to him, and to the cause, naturally. Thank the Powers. He wouldn't like to see the fire in those green eyes turned against him.

"The beast walked of his own accord all the way here and insisted on bearing me on his back," she said with just the slightest hint of complaint. "I shall be sore for weeks, and will be very happy, I assure you. to make the return journey in my Whirlwind."

"Your sacrifices in the name of the cause do you great honor, my child," Fearchar said. "Later, perhaps, I shall inspect and iat your wounds personally. It's the least I can do. But for now, while our loyal followers hoist the animal into our stronghold, I will hear your report."

Rising gracefully, the girl ticked off completed tasks on her fingers. He found to his great joy that her intelligence was such that she required few detailed instructions if those he gave were liberally infused with attitudes harmonious to the best interests of the cause, if he could convince her, she could convince the bandits. Her magic, the natural, irresistible glamourie of all nymphs, was very like his own special powers of enchantment, which enabled him to imbue even the most absurd falsehoods with the credibility of irrefutable fact.

"As you have bidden. Dark Pilgrim, I have begun establishing a relay system of informants prepared to aid our cause. My brother's wife in the hamlet of Little Darlingham should prove particularly useful, as she has already in the past. She, like all of the faithful, is thrilled to hear of the rewards in store for our people when we triumph. I have spread the news of your great discoveries to every follower of the cause so each may rejoice that your wisdom has found eternal youth, health and beauty, benefits we may all glean by assisting in your work."

She smiled a dazzling smile, full of joy that she was able to share such news with her brothers-at-arms. Her slightly tilted eyes brimmed, burning with enthusiasm. "You are so wise, Dark Pilgrim, to share the fruits of your studies with the faithful. I now have more reports of unicorns available for capture than I shall ever be able to pursue."

"I'm sure you'll manage, my dear. Go on. What of these new men who came with you today? And this unicorn?"

"These are the men who followed Wulfric the Were, Dark Pilgrim. Though Wulfric prefers a solitary life on the whole, for love of me he has guided these men to the cause, and sends them freely to you, to help with your great work. It was he who found the unicorn as well, since he is wiser even than myself in the ways of the woods.”

"Where is this fellow?" Fearchar asked. "I would thank and bless him and bespeak our cause to him personally." If he were was as good as Sally claimed. Fearchar wanted to make absolutely sure he fell under the wizard's own personal spell.

The nymph, sensing reprimand in her leader's tone, trembled prettily and dropped her gaze. "I--I took the liberty of bespeaking the cause to him myself, Dark Pilgrim, as I did his followers. You did say I was to do so, to be
your right hand and the extension of your own tongue?"

"Still, dear child, one mustn't exceed--" Fearchar began, but the nymph rushed on, hastening to regain his approval.

"You see, I had this little idea of my own, for the good of the cause. It was a spur-of-the-moment inspiration, and I had so hoped you'd be pleased."

"I'm sure I shall be pleased, my child," the wizard replied as smoothly as was possible through clenched jaws. "Just tell me what it is you did with this man."

"When I went to trap the unicorn, Dark Pilgrim, I found Wulfric and his men had just slain a party of wealthy travelers. The lord of these travelers somewhat resembled Wulfric in his man form, and this lord protested, before his throat was slit like his fat purse, that his party was under the King's protection. He wore a brooch with his own seal and the usurper's wrought upon its surface, and he said it was his invitation to the christening of the Princess Bronwyn, the same christening to which you wished one of our followers to convey certain gifts, Dark Pilgrim."

"Ah!"

"When I learned of the dead man's errand, and noted his resemblance to Wulfric, I took it upon myself--"

"I would I had been there!" Fearchar cried, clasping his hands together prayerfully. "I would have commanded Wulfric to disguise himself as the dead lord so he might deliver my gifts and stay to spy on the christening and on my faithless relations at Fort Iceworm."

The nymph nearly swooned with ecstasy. "Oh, master! That's exactly what I did! Did I well, then?"

"You did exceedingly well, my child," he replied beneficently. Then they both looked up as, with a final heave on the great thick-ropes forming a man-powered pulley, his soldiers hauled the still-struggling, bundled unicorn even with the cliff's edge. From there they easily pulled the beast over onto the castle's outer ledge, and the feebly kicking cloven hooves vanished from view.

Fearchar smiled to himself and took his disciple's arm, steering her through the shrubbery at the cliff's base and into the secret entrance to the slippery irregular staircase leading into the castle's heart. The passage was his private discovery, an exit unknown even to Pegeen. "Come now, my valiant child, and allow me to tend your injuries while you tell me more of this remarkable friend of yours. We won't be disturbed in my study."

Prince Leofwin (Patebreaker) Longstaff, aspirant to the throne of the Duchy of Greater Frostingdung, was prepared this time. As he predicted, the warlockish Count chap had done it again. Completely disappeared in the midst of the hunt, so that now, as before, the falcons flew in crazy, confused circles while the hounds whimpered and slunk about with tails between their legs, refusing to leave their masters' sides.

Leofwin had had enough of that kind of pig pox. He meant to do something about it this time. As commander of his father's troops in countless campaigns against the real or imagined foes of Greater Frostingdung, Leofwin knew how to deal with slippery foreigners.

Spurring his horse to a brutal gallop, the prince crashed through the woods, heedless of the branches slapping his face and arms, determined to overtake that sneaking fellow and have it out with him exactly what was going on.

For there was something bloody awful queer about the lizardy wizard. Leofwin had thought so from the beginning, even before the first time the man joined his hunt. The good Count was too tall and too quick and too keen of nose and sharp of eye to be the sedentary administrator of Brazorian lake island estates Leofwin's spies had reported him to be. Leofwin always made it his business to know who he was rubbing elbows with. And none of the reports he'd received told him the wealthy Count's elbows would belong to a man with such a lean, unfed expression, such a crafty glint about the eyes, and such a canny way of not speaking until everyone else had committed themselves. Nor had the reports mentioned the man's mysterious hunting habits.

Today was the third day in a row that the Count had started out with them, then simply disappeared. On the previous two days, the man had reappeared within an hour, and immediately set the hounds on the scent of game; a buck the first day, a boar the second, which he'd helped to slay with a bloodthirsty glee that Leofwin's soldier's heart could not help warming to.

But, good hunter or no, the Count would need the aid of all his gods if he intended to use the same trickery to steal the dowdy brown princess away before Leofwin could make his own move.

Leofwin needed the wench to wrest the title of Crown Prince of Greater Frostingdung away from his brothers. Not that he needed that particular wench for the job. Any wench would do. As long as she was a princess. Marrying a princess before his brothers did was the only way Leofwin could establish a superior claim to the throne.

In most countries, being eldest would have sufficed. But the Grand Dukes and Duchesses of Middle Frostingdung had for centuries been in the habit of begetting litters of babies rather than producing their children singly, which naturally made for political complications since many of the little princes and princesses looked so much alike no one could ever keep track of who was born before whom. Leofwin was one of a set of identical
triplets.

Of course, he could always assassinate his brothers—or he could try and marry whoever he chose. But his brothers were his equal in ruthlessness and ambition, if not temperament: Whereas he would be apt to bash them with his sword and have it over and done with (and very likely get himself bashed in turn by the Grand Duke, who frowned on that sort of thing), Leofrig and Leofric were far more likely to poison him or lock him in a remote storeroom to starve. Fascinating fellows, in their way. Leofwin would hate to have to kill them even if he thought he could pull it off; he was fond of them. And a fellow had to marry somebody, so why not a princess?

Leofrig and Leofric were too busy keeping their eyes on each other to venture far enough from home to find a bride. Leofwin thought he might solve two problems at once by looking for a likely girl while he led campaigns against his father's enemies and the enemies of anyone else who cared to engage his services. The difficulty with that plan was that everyone at one time or another wanted him to fight everyone else, and by the time he'd conquered each in turn for a neighbor, none of their daughters were of appropriate rank anymore, since they automatically became slaves when their fathers' houses were brought down. His skill in battle had thus greatly enriched and enlarged his father's domain, but hadn't done him a bit of good at finding a bride.

Also, he'd temporarily run out of foes, having conquered everybody from the wastelands to the sea. To get out of having to stay at court and wait for his brothers to slip something in his soup, he'd agreed to attend this silly baby's party. He'd thought it very hospitable of Roari Rowan to create a new princess, as if the Argonian King had known that was just the kind of party favor Leofwin needed to take home with him. Now all Leofwin had to do was win the wench.

And he wasn't about to let some sneaking count circle around him while he was out hunting and make off with her. Leofwin had seen the peculiar gleam in Jivemgood's eye when he watched Princess Maggie. He strongly suspected the thoughts prompting the gleam corresponded to his own ideas about just how much wooing should be necessary before one threw the wench over one's shoulder and rode off with her to one's own castle. No one was going to beat him to it.

Suddenly an odd, furred figure sprang onto the trail ahead of him. Leofwin reined in so hard he nearly flew over his steed's head. The horse reared and screamed, fighting the bit so that for a time Leofwin was preoccupied with keeping his seat and calming the animal.

By the time he had the leisure to look again, the furry creature was gone, and in its place stood Count Jivemgood, a slight mocking smile on his face.

Leofwin was angry. "What the griffin shit are you up to, scaring my horse like that? Where'd that animal go?"

The man continued to smile at him, more broadly now, which was a mistake. Leofwin drew his sword and advanced with every intention of whacking the wretch in two.

"You think you're too bloody good to hunt with us, eh? Always sneaking off, aren't you? Well, let me tell you, you skulking slackard, if you don't give a good account of yourself at once, I'll see to it you never sneak again."

Leofwin was snorting like a bull by the time he'd finished, and had the vague feeling he'd made a fool of himself, had shown his hand too soon. He'd let the Count's silly sneering grin back him into a position he'd have trouble getting out of without a bloody sword and the need to make a hasty exit.

But slowly, with what seemed considerable effort, Jivemgood banished his grin and yielded, kneeling in the trail, soiling his fine silver breeches in the dirt and old leaves.

"Good and noble prince," he said in a voice which always reminded Leofwin of priests on tithing day, "Have I not said I would lead you to bounteous hunting, the like of which you've never seen? Now. behold, after searching these three days I keep my word."

"Speak plainly, man. before I find the sight of your blood more tempting than your conversation."

But Jivemgood's smile had returned, bland and pleased. "Unicorn tracks, great prince. Not less than a quarter-day old, by the spoor."

"Unicorn? You mean the animal whose horn can protect a man from poison?" Just the trick to protect him from his brothers, Leofwin thought, and maybe to impress that dowdy brown piece into swooning for him as well.

"That magic they can do, and much more besides, great prince."

"What are we waiting for, then? After him. But if I lose sight of you, you'd best not let me see you ever again, or I'll make you rue it."

Moonshine managed to evade the first two hunting parties. He heard the hounds from the first group well before the hunters were anywhere near. Stepping across a stream and into the shadows, he took his friends far back into the woods until the baying of the dogs faded and the rumbling hooves of the hunters' steeds no longer made the earth tremble.
With the second party they had even less contact. The only sign they saw of it was a goshawk circling a hapless duck. They were well away when they heard the faint sound of the falconer's call signalling his bird to return.

When the danger seemed passed, Maggie twisted around on Moonshine's back and muttered what sounded like a rhyme under her breath. Dust and leaves began swishing from side to side, all the way through the woods, along every path Moonshine had taken.

"What are you doing, exactly?" Colin asked. "Covering our tracks with a sweeping spell, in case some hound has his nose set on unicorn instead of boars or rabbits."

Late in the evening, they had reason to be thankful for Maggie's sweeping spell when they met the third party. Considering the length of time the fugitives had been traveling, they hadn't made much progress. They were only a few leagues from where they'd started at midday. Not that Moonshine wasn't swift, nor Roundelay able to keep pace.

But every time they came to any body of water, Moonshine stopped to dip his horn into it. Then, to make up for lost time, he'd gallop at top speed until he reached the next waterhole.

The second time Roundelay's front end collided with the unicorn's back end, flipping Colin forward on his horse's neck, his instruments twanging and crunching alarmingly as they jumbled forward with him, the minstrel complained. "Is it really necessary to do this every time?"

Maggie, who had barely avoided a swim in the creek when Moonshine skidded to his lightning stop, was at first too busy catching her breath to answer.

Moonshine looked back over his shoulder with a martyred air and dipped his horn in the stream a second time. Just so the minstrel wouldn't miss the point that unicorns did with streams exactly as they saw fit. With that, he casually switched his tail and trotted across the stream.

Maggie had regained her composure by that time and smiled apologetically at Colin. "You'll get used to it. I have. He does have to do it. It's part of that-whadayacallit. Moonshine, that little verse?"

"'Twould verily be a boon to me, Maiden dearest, if you would refrain from referring to The Creed as 'that little verse.' It is the doctrine of my race, handed down from dam to foal. The passage under attack by our esteemed companion, however--"

"But I didn't attack--" Colin protested. From Moonshine's tone he suspected that no amount of championing or any other kind of good deed on the part of a non-maiden truly compensated for his lack of virginity or excused him for unprecedented and no doubt illegal possession of the gift of unicorn understanding. Never mind what Moonshine had sworn to the contrary.

"The passage goes," Moonshine continued, ignoring the protest. "This too is the Unicorn Creed: 'Tis ever the unicorn deed With the horn we possess All water to bless So its purity be guaranteed."

"A noble thought," Colin said, "Though rather mediocre verse, if you ask me. I still wish we could have taken the highway." He glanced uneasily about him. The woods was deeper and the shadows thicker than earlier in the day. Only occasionally did a trilling birdsong interrupt the plopping of hooves, the flitter of leaves, the more or less rhythmic muffled noises of his instruments in their hide bags, slapping gently against Roundelay's sides.

Colin didn't like the deep woods. His boyhood home in East Headpenney was full of meadows, with the forest trimmed well away from the village. As a minstrel, he traveled mostly to settled communities, entertaining people, seldom venturing where people were not. He didn't feel, on the whole, that he'd been missing much. He wasn't partial to shadows and silence and chilling gusts of wind.

"Stop worrying," Maggie said lightly. "Moonshine knows these woods well, particularly the waterways."

"I noticed," Colin answered, unmollified.

"Colin, we can't travel on the highway, and that's that," she said firmly. "It's hardly going to do me a lot of good to flee if I have to stop and say hello to every one of my father's freeholders between here and the Troutroute River, will it? And I won't exactly be inconspicuous, riding a unicorn."

They followed a path winding along the side of a steep hill that was a sheer climb above, a sheer drop below. The path was broad and it grew gradually broader, leading gently down toward what seemed to be a slight thinning in the alder thicket dominating this section of forest.

Since no streams had crossed their path for the last half hour, they'd made good time. Then all at once Moonshine's ears cocked forward and he thudded to another jarring halt.

"What are you doing, darling?" Maggie asked.

"Yes, I can't imagine," Colin said. "There's not even a mud puddle near."

"Harken, maiden," the unicorn replied. "Do you not hear the hounds and hooves?"

Colin took the liberty of harkening too, and immediately heard what Moonshine referred to. He heard voices, though he couldn't tell from which direction. But the hounds and hooves were distinct now, and close behind them
on this nice, wide trail. "They're after us! Run!" Colin cried, and sensibly made haste to follow his own counsel.

Maggie swiveled on Moonshine's back and chattered her sweeping spell so fast that only years of long practice kept her tongue from twisting. As the unicorn sped after Roundelay, the whole trail seemed to shake itself like a wet dog, sending a thick vibrating veil of dust, leaves and twigs flying from the ground to the treetops.

Besides covering their tracks, the chaos created by the sweeping spell provided cover while they plunged into the woods ahead. They could hear sneezes and coughing above the hounds and hooves, sign that the spell was distracting the hunters in an even more personal way than Maggie had anticipated.

But she had no time to congratulate herself. Suddenly Colin turned Roundelay around, almost impaling her flank on Moonshine's horn, and rode her into the willow thicket beside the trail.

Maggie caught only a brief glance of the hunting camp which had altered his course; crimson pavilions, men piling branches onto a conical arrangement of sticks for a campfire to roast the hind other men were dressing out on the far side of the camp, hounds gobbling-the hind's entrails. No more than that was she able to see before she heard someone sneeze close behind her and Moonshine dived after Roundelay into the thicket.

The dust and leaves had barely settled to the ground when the hounds burst past her heels and into the open camp. Close behind them rode the sneezer, the red-faced, bandy-legged prince who had tried to amuse her with his impersonation of a recently captured enemy begging for his life.

One of the men building the fire looked up. Maggie recognized him as Lord Boarsbane. He looked more like a boar himself than like someone who was the bane of boars, in her opinion. "What tidings, Pate breaker?" he hailed the prince. "Did you find any of those unicorns you were seeking?"

Maggie stiffened, and felt Moonshine shrink beneath her. Neither of them had any inkling that anyone knew of Moonshine's presence in the woods-and they both knew for a fact that there were no other unicorns in the vicinity.

"I did not," answered the prince, and sneezed again before dismounting. Drawing a wineskin from his saddlebag, he swigged a long, thirsty draught, then passed the flask to Boarsbane, who did likewise. The servant who had been assisting Boarsbane"with the fire lit it, and the spitted hind was fixed above it.

Leofwin allowed a boy to tend his horse, while he settled himself on a log drawn near the blossoming campfire. "Jivemgood was so sure he saw sign of one, and once or twice, before I lost track of the slippery devil, it looked likely to me too, I'll be flogged if it didn't. Where is Jivemgood anyway? Did he come in ahead of me?"

"Where do you think this hind came from?", a thin, ascetic-looking young nobleman asked. Maggie recalled him as the author of perfectly awful sonnets in her honor. He'd kep wanting to rhyme her despised full name, Magdalene, with words like "tambourine," "jelly bean," and "wolverine," with a predictably unflattering result. Though she had rather liked the one line which rhymed her with "poison green."

The would-be poet now turned to Lord Boarsbane. "I win my wager, by the way, old darlin'. The mysterious Jivemgood triumphs again-leading our Leofwin on a wild unicorn chase and still managing to bring home the bacon, if I may mix my metaphors, in time for tea."

"You may win your wager and lose your head if you can't keep a civil tongue in it, Lordling," Leofwin growled. The hard futile ride had done nothing to improve his disposition.

Maggie's eye was caught by a rustling of leaves among the trees farthest from them, beyond the camp. A man stepped out of the leaves and into the clearing. She could not remember having spoken to him, or place who he was, but she had seen him among the suitors. He was clad in a silver-gray silk suit that beautifully blended with his shock of fashionably shaggy silver-gray hair and his full gray beard. She couldn't see the color of his eyes, but in the deep shadow still surrounding him they seemed to glitter like an animal's.

"There's our crafty Count now," the skinny young lord said. "Come, Jivemgood.'join us. Prince Leofwin has been pining for you."

Leofwin's tone was calm at first, but the tension in his back told Maggie he was holding himself under tight control. It almost seemed as if the prince feared the man who faced him. "Where the deuce did you slink off to this time, Jivemgood?"

But Jivemgood paid him no attention.

The Count's eyes really did glitter, Maggie could see that quite clearly now. He was staring straight into their hiding place. His nostrils, broader and flatter than she had ever seen on any man, flared even wider, as his head snapped up and he sniffed the air. He had caught their scent.

Had Wulfric still been in wolf form, he would have wagged his tail. He fought to restrain himself from licking his lips. What a delicious smell the beast had! The other scents were there too, though partly masked by the reeking hunters. A woman and a strange man and a horse. The woman smelled familiar, and he could not be sure, but he thought she was the Dark Pilgrim's female kin. He'd caught her scent only once or twice before.

Such scents, once identified, could be traced any time. He turned to the blustering young warlord, and curled his lips in a smile of submission. But only mock-submission. If the young warlord wanted his share of the beast's
magic, he would have to pay Wulfric's price.

The bow-legged prince grabbed him and shook him and threatened him with his fist. "Answer me, you smirking he-witch!" the prince demanded.

Wulfric kept smiling, thinking how pleasant it would be to drop into wolf form and scatter His Highness all over the forest, but he restrained himself and put on his tail-wagging voice instead.

"Cast no blame on my shoulders, great prince," he whined, "for did I not track the beast yea, even unto this glade where now we stand? Hear me, oh great Lord. The beast is wily and surpassing swift! Many times have I pursued him, and many times has he escaped me also. But he is near, great prince, and you shall have his horn for your cup if you help me capture him."

Not that he had need of Leofwin to capture this unicorn or any other. He had only to drive the beast to Her; and She would accomplish the capture. But She valued Fighting men as much as unicorns, and he would make Her a present of this one, whom the other men feared and named The One Who Made Greater Frostingdung Yet Greater. He was a fierce warlord, and though Wulfric did not like him, the man had the same hungry feel to him as others Wulfric had won to the cause. He would be good. She would pet Wulfric and make much of him when he delivered this wicked-tempered warrior to Her.

"Why should I help YOU capture him?" Leofwin growled, taking another swig from his flask. "What would you want with him after I take the horn?"

"Maybe he wants to give it to the Princess for a saddle horse!" Boarsbane laughed.

"Or give her the flayed skin for dress material," the poet said. "Lord knows the poor girl could use a new outfit. I once won what was supposed to be a belt of unicorn hide in a dice game. Scroungy-looking thing. I'd never have wagered for it, but I was carried away by the spirit of my wine cup. Lucky for me I won, too. In my sorry state, I bet my seven-league boots against it. The thing was undoubtedly the hide of some sorry white nag, but the chap who lost it to me claimed it had the power to protect him in battle. He'd have done better to carry something that had the power to protect him at dice."

"That's why you need to win the Princess, isn't it? Because you lose at dice so often?" Boarsbane asked. "I saw you gambling on your expectations of her dowry with that dwarf the other day."

"You wrong me, sir. I was winning. But as I was saying, I can well understand how the excitement of chasing such a shall we say novel beast, could have its appeal. Such sport will be a happy consolation prize in what must be a demoralizing situation for you who lack my well-bred finesse and have no hope of winning the royal witch."

"Well-bred finesse my eye!" Boarsbane scoffed. "All you have is a well-bred mama and papa who want you well-connected with the King in case he takes it into his head to annex your piddlin' lands and turn them into a parade ground."

"While you, on the other hand, have something more practical to offer her? Your thirteen half-troll children by three dead mothers and a great moldly castle sitting in the midst of a marsh full of serpents and will o' wisps?"

"It's not a marsh, it's undrained agricultural property. And Til thank you not to slight my home, youngster. It's simple, true, but at least the mortgage is paid. And the children do need a mama."

"What for? Lunch?"

"Ah, great lords," Wulfric sighed, tearing a half-raw chunk from the blistering hind and devouring it whole. "Can you not see that the possession of a unicorn is preferable to the possession of any woman? Can you not see that the possession of such a beast is preferable to any treasure, or to any reward you might gain by capturing him? Have you not heard the legends of his life-giving properties? Of his marvelous horn? Of the wondrous elixir of which he is the single ingredient?"

"Hah!" Boarsbane laughed. "A princess in the keep is worth two unicorns in the woods, I say. Leofwin, old boy, don't you know when you're being had? The Count is making merry with you again! Unicorns! Bah! I tell you there are no such things! No one in MY family has ever seen one, and my estates include leagues and leagues of wild country."

"I understand the beasts are not supposed to be partial to marshes and wasteland," the young poet said superciliously. "They are, rather, beings who prefer to inhabit dreams and enchantments, and are said to be visible only to beautiful young girls. But for all that, they're no more solid than the ones my Lord's family has never seen. I fear."

"Is that true?" Leofwin demanded, and grabbed Wulfric by the throat.

"Gurgle glook," Wulfric replied. Leofwin loosened his grip and, disguised, resisted the impulse to snap the Prince's jugular with his teeth. Instead he replied meekly. "No, great prince. The beasts exist as surely as you and I. Have none of you ever seen the magic cups that protect the drinker from poison?"

"Ah, everybody knows those are fancy carved cow's horns,"
Boarsbanc scoffed. "Probably enchanted by some witch to keep the poisons from working. I tell you, there are no such animals. I've never seen one, and neither has my father, and neither did HIS father."

"Perhaps you should have asked your mothers and grandmothers, great Lord?" Wulfric suggested. He would have enjoyed seeing their faces if he had suddenly uncovered the unicorn's hiding place, but he knew that they would never capture the beast in that fashion. They needed Her, or the cooperation of the maiden with the beast now, and that they did not have. Besides, these simpletons were unworthy to see the unicorn. They probably didn't believe in weres either. Such men would undoubtedly refuse to believe their own eyes. They were rich and comfortable, and preferred to make dens of their own choosing, to deny the laws of the forest which suited them not. They were the oppressors and royal lackeys of whom She spoke. They were not fit for the cause, as they went on to prove.

"My dear Jivemgood," the young one yawned, "You're a superlative hunter but I fear you have been deluded by poetic metaphor. The unicorn is nothing more than a symbol for unattainable purity, an idea obviously conjured up by the fairer sex to heighten their allure and enhance the illusion of their spiritual superiority. I, for one, intend to retire to dreams of some sweet young thing with none of those burdensome accoutrements."

"Now that's the first sensible thing you've said all day, young Greystraw," Boarsbane agreed. "I, too, intend to take to me bedroll here and now. Prince Leofwin. If you like, I'll be happy to help you chase wild geese in the morning. At least know they exist." And he drew out his knife, gouged out a huge hunk of meat to gnaw on in bed, and lumbered off to his pavilion.

Leofwin's cold blue eyes locked with Wulfric's, and held, as if trying to see through him. His gaze never faltered as he made his meal of the meat, before sharing it out among the servants and sending them away.

When he'd chewed his last mouthful, the prince said slowly, "But they do exist, these unicorns, don't they, Jivemgood? I've seen the horn, you know, and it was no carved cow's horn. It was in a treasure chest I captured in some siege or other, though I was more interested in gold at the time. I regretted my oversight when I learned what it was, but by then it was too late." "Of a surety they exist, great prince," Wulfric replied. "And there's one around here, you say? You've seen it?" "Close by, great prince. I've not seen it. Sensed it, rather."

"What are you waiting for man? Lead me to it!"

"Such haste, great prince, is of no help capturing unicorns. As the meatless young one has said, the unicorns must be captured by a woman's hand. I know a woman who will help us, but we must travel many days to find her."

"By that time he'll be gone!"

"I think not, great prince. But even if he is, there are many others nearer the woman."

"Humph, seems like a lot of trouble to avoid getting poisoned! I'm better off to keep avoiding the company of poisoners instead!"

"There are other benefits, my lord. The secret elixir made from the beast's other parts grants immunity from ills and wounds of all sorts. And boundless male potency," he added the last to sound like an afterthought, but as he'd expected, the warlord leaned forward eagerly.

"How do we get this elixir, then?"

"Through the woman of whom I spoke, great Prince."

"Eh? Is that so?" Leofwin scratched his chin, considering. Wulfric wondered if he should not now reveal the hidden unicorn, to convince the Prince. No, instead of being convinced, Leofwin would try to capture the beast himself. If he failed, he would rouse the countryside in his search for it, and Wulfric would have the whole of Fort Iceworm to compete with for the beast, and lose the man to the cause. And if Leofwin succeeded, Wulfric would lose both man and beast. For what man save Her Dark Pilgrim had need of more than one unicorn?

So Wulfric merely nodded, and waited.

While Leofwin thought, and weighed, and finally yawned. "Sounds lovely to me, old man. But d'you think it can wait a bit? There's something back at the castle I need to attend to first."

Wulfric smiled as if he understood, though he didn't. He would not tax himself by trying to comprehend what caused men to act as they did.

"Are they asleep?" Colin asked. The campfire stilt glowed, but when the Prince and Count had drifted over to the tents, the whole camp had sunken into quiet.

"They can't be," Maggie said. "He saw us. I know the Count saw us."

Moonshine quivered. He'd felt the Count's eyes on him too.

"Could you hear what those two were saying at the last?"

Maggie asked Colin. "I'm sure they were talking about Moonshine." Colin's excellent ears were part of his inheritance from his mer ancestors, who had also bequeathed to him his musical ability.

"I only heard part," Colin replied, sending this thought, like the others, to Moonshine to relay to her. "They
didn't talk about Moonshine in particular, but that Count said a lot of wild things about unicorns."

"Horrible things," Moonshine shuddered. "I heard it all. The man must be mad. He speaks of one who bottles unicorns to cure men's ills."

"Yuck," Maggie said. "That's disgusting."

"It takes all kinds," Colin said. "But let's get out of this place before he popularizes his ideas."

"I would I knew where he obtained them," Moonshine fretted.

"I thought you said you could understand anybody's thoughts," Maggie said, eyeing the quiet camp for any sign of movement.

"Not his," Moonshine said. "He has a strange mind-I would not say a human mind, though that is strange enough. But the other-the Prince-maiden, we must leave this place quickly. His thoughts about you were VERY unchaste."

"I can well imagine," she replied.

They slipped past the camp without incident, though once one of the hounds, an odd one who more closely resembled a wolf, seemed to stir and lazily watch them. Colin, in a voice quieter than his thumping heart, murmured the lyric to the most potent lullabye he knew, the Keynote Address of the Hostess at Her Majesty's Royal Baby Shower. The wolf-dog stretched its front paws, laid its muzzle along them, and seemed to sleep once more.

Three streams and a small pond later, Moonshine stopped and sniffed the air. "Surely now our enemies are behind us, Maiden. But I fear me greatly that I have become lost. I know not whither Queenston lies. In my haste, I've become disoriented and have forgotten the exact pointing of your fair finger."

"Never mind," Maggie said. "I've changed my mind."

"What?" Colin almost fell out of his saddle. "You mean you're NOT going to see the King? Where do you intend to go? Surely you haven't changed your mind about wanting to many one of those gallants? If you're escaping, you'll have to escape TO somewhere, you know. That's the way it's done. And you haven't got any friends abroad-except maybe the gypsies, and who knows where they are?"

"There is one other person," Maggie reminded him. "And with that loud-mouth Jivemgood blabbing it all over Fort Iceworm that there's a unicorn loose in the woods, before long someone's going to believe him and we won't be able to turn around without running into hunters. And that's not even counting the ones Dad will have after me! We need special help if we're going to make it as far as Queenston. So what do you say we head south for a bit until we cross the Troutroute?"

"To your Aunt Sybil's?" Relief poured over him. "Of course! She's just the person to help us. Why didn't I think of her?"

So they broke into a trot and headed south. And across the pond by which they'd paused, a lean gray figure rose and stretched, and wagged its taiti smugly, and padded back through the shadow-haunted woods to a camp full of sleeping huntsmen.

CHAPTER 4

Passing by the royal armory on his way to the royal pantry for a midnight snack, the Chief Archivist and Central Headquarters Dragon Liaison Officer, Sir Cyril Perchingbird, stopped suddenly. Footsteps, slow and measured, clanking with a weary hollow-ness, treaded close to the closed, iron-bound door, then paced away from it.

Now which of the royal palace's assorted apparitions was wandering tonight, Sir Cyril wondered.

Perhaps it was the Lady Drucilla, executed during the second reign of the House of Strongheart for messing about with the King in plain sight of Queen Ethel, a wild fierce woman if ever there was one. Sir Cyril fervently hoped the shade was not that of Queen Ethel herself, who later died of a mysterious stomach ailment. He took comfort from the fact that he had never heard any report indicating Ethel was in the habit of bestiring herself posthumously.

And anyway, the steps sounded as if they belonged to a masculine spirit. They practically marched; as well they might,

coming from the armory. They could scarcely belong to one of the poor young Ashbum princes, in that case. Neither lad had ever taken the slightest interest in warfare. If they'd spent more time in the armory, in fact, and less attempting to practice the sophisticated parlor magic even their royal father was capable of performing only in his heyday, the mightn't have died before their times. Perhaps one of them would be reigning now.

But he was being nostalgic. They was always the possibility that if the princes had lived, Argonia would now be embroiled in civil war. No doubt things had happened for the best. Roari Rowan filled the throne well enough. And he, Cyril, had the good fortune to correspond with the remaining Ashburn heir, the Princess Pegeen, a brilliant historical mind and undoubtedly the most learned woman in the kingdom.

Wouldn't this ghost business be a fascinating tidbit to add to his next packet to Her Highness? He hoped the ghost was one of her more interesting ancestors, so she'd be sure to reply quickly. He hadn't had a message from her
in six months.

Now if he could just manage to peek through the door without frightening the shade away. Torchlight spilled forth; not much, just enough to see from the two torches burning high on the stone walls that the intriguing footsteps belonged to no ghost.

King Roari, clasping what seemed to be a small animal to his massive chest, stalked his own armory.

Sir Cyril opened the door wider. The King stared at him as if the Chief Archivist himself were a ghost. Hastily, Cyril bowed. "Your pardon, Majesty. I heard your footfall and thought to investigate."

The King nodded tiredly. Even in the wavering torchlight, Sir Cyril saw the worry lines creasing the King's broad freckled face above his beard, and the red webs around his blue eyes.

"May I be of some service to Your Majesty?" he asked impulsively, though in the King's acceptance of his explanation there had also been dismissal.

His Majesty started to shake his head, then looked down at the animal, which Perchingbird now saw was no animal at all but a baby wrapped in a fur blanket. "I don't need you," the King replied. "But maybe ye c'n help her. Do ye ken what babies like? Winnie's still a-sleepin' and Bron sets up a terrible howl when any of t'ladies touch her. I've been nursemaidin' her ever since we left Fort Iceworm. T'only other person she'll have aught t'do with was young Songsmit, and he's deserted me, th' scamp."

It just so happened Perchingbird knew a great deal about babies. His parents had whelped so many there were never enough servants around to tend them all. Sons and daughters in great profusion had trailed through their castle, most of them finding their way out into the fields of his father's rich agricultural estates, where they worked right along with the peasants. His father believed in starting from the ground up, literally.

Sir Cyril was the odd one, gifted with a peculiar magic talent which his parents, though they didn't understand it, encouraged from the start. ("Though you understand it doesn't come from my side of the family," his sunburned father had protested when his mother approached him about little Cyril's gift. "Never mind, dear," Mother had replied, "He has your eyes.") Cyril was allowed to make the queer letters from spoken words, to codify the stories his grandparents told him, and the servants, grandparents. He was allowed to pump mercilessly any wandering minstrel hapless enough to wander into their home, baby, and the servants, grandparents. He was allowed to pump mercilessly any wandering minstrel hapless enough to wander into their home, begging the bard for more tales of Finbar the Fireproof, Argonia's colorful King at that time. Later Cyril entered King Finbar's service, but that was after the King was an old man, his sons dead, his daughter in self-imposed seclusion. While he was still growing up, Cyril earned his right to practice his craft by making himself useful with the little ones, which he could do indoors, instead of helping out in the field. He'd become quite a hand with children, as adept at feeding and changing them and making them laugh as his mother and sisters.

"The young princess is what now, sire? About nine months old?" he asked.

"Urn-Aye, that's right," the King said, pulling the wraps back from the baby's wet pink face as if to check his facts with her.

"Porridge," Perchingbird pronounced, and confidently led the way to the kitchen.

The King, though mystified, followed.

"Porridge?" His Majesty asked, just to make sure he'd heard correctly, while his Chief Archivist pulled ingredients from bins and cupboards in the royal pantry.

"Yes, sire. Porridge. Just the thing to stick to her little ribs. See now, she's awake already, but she knows we're looking to her needs. There, there now, little Sis." He paused between counter and table to chuck her under the chin. "We'll have you a nice mess of porridge in no time." The baby tracked him across the kitchen, and for the first time in many days, her eyes were dry.

An untidy hour later, the princess slept again on her father's lap. Porridge was smeared across her cherubic face and stained her pink velvet gown, but she cooed in her sleep, hiccups contentedly now and then.

Rowan leaned back in his chair, combing the porridge from his flaming beard, a thoughtful expression on his face. Talking to a bright lad like Perchingbird would be a better way to spend the evening than pacing the armory. The stone floor there was hard even on feet used to marching long distances over hilly terrain, but it had been the only room in the palace where Rowan felt at home. Kinging was tougher than soldiering, and the former border lord sometimes yearned for his sword in his hand and his shield before him. He didn't quite have a grasp yet on the subtler weapons needed to defend himself, his family, and his kingdom against the forces aligned against it.

Perchingbird was a good man. He'd figured out how to talk to the dragons, Grizel and Grimley, while everyone else stood around shaking their heads. Rowan had originally recruited the dragons through the magic cat who accompanied Maggie Brown when she and young Songsmit saved Winnie. Problems arose when the cat had to return home to Fort Iceworm to serve his mistress, and Rowan's regime found itself in possession of a Royal Air Force consisting of two dragons no one could address. "Try Sir Cyril, the archivist," someone had finally suggested. "He speaks all manner of heathenish tongues. Writes 'em, too." And sure enough, after a brief, heated discussion
with Grizel and Grimley, Perchingbird had managed to master the rudiments of dragonese, and so became the Liaison Officer between the crown and its dragons.

Generally Sir Cyril stayed put down below with his conch shells and scrolls, however, and only occasionally emerged from his quarters in the records hall when he was needed to interpret for his exclusive fiery acquaintances.

Ah well, Rowan thought, there was no sense to having sound men like Perchingbird serve under one if one never asked their advice. He'd talked this curse thing over with practically every other so-called adviser in the kingdom.

"So, Cyril," he said casually. "What do you make of the box and that piddlin' bit of paper that's cursed my little lass here?"

Perchingbird turned from wiping the dishes. Rowan's cook from Castle Rowan had taken over the palace kitchen, and she was a most particular woman. Sir Cyril had no wish to offend her and risk losing his kitchen privileges. He smiled politely and encouragingly, but blankly for all that, and asked, "What box is that, Sire?"

"You don't KNOW?" Rowan's voice started to rise to its usual roar, and the baby whimpered and wriggled.

"You mean to say you really don't know?" the King repeated, whispering this time. "Some blackguard gave Bron a wicked toy at her christening. We think it's cursed her. I know for a fact it's cursed her mother. I never thought t'be sae anxious t'get m'lady OUT of bed in m'life. She's been asleep these three weeks past and won't rise."

Perchingbird was no whiz at protocol, but he knew enough to skirt that particular royal complaint. "You said something about a parchment, Sire?"

"Aye, a parchment. Come under the cursed box. No one knows what it means. D'you mean t'say none of that pack of advisers of mine even asked you about it?"

Perchingbird shrugged. "There are others in the palace who read, sire. Usually documents don't come to my attention unless they're at least a decade old."

"Worthless lot o'lamebrains," the King growled, and dug inside his clothes, carefully, so as not to wake his daughter. He pulled out a soiled, much-creased, besmeared and flattened scroll, which he tossed across the table to Perchingbird.

Sir Cyril's eyes glanced swiftly over the document, then stared back at his King with an expression of incredulity. "This accompanied a curse. Sire?"

The King nodded. " 'Twas underneath the wretched box." His eyes narrowed as he waited to see what the one man in his court who obviously knew how to help him but hadn't been asked had to say.

Sir Cyril shook his head and scanned the scroll again. "That's impossible, Sire. I know this hand, these illustrations. This is nothing more than a christening gift from Her Highness, the Princess Pegeen the Illuminator."

Reaching an arm the length and breadth of a medium tree across the table. Rowan snatched back the document, stared at it with no more comprehension than he'd had before, and tossed it back to Perchingbird. "Hmph," he said.

Sir Cyril reexamined the scroll. "Yes, sire, this all seems perfectly innocent. All the Princess Pegeen is doing here, really, translating the standard horoscope for an upperclass lady born under your daughter's moon into ancient Drumclog runes, an rchaic written language in which the noble lady is most proficient."

Rowan sighed and nodded. His only hope of finding the sender of the curse was lost.

"Wait," Sir Cyril said suddenly. "What can she mean by lis?" His intelligent round face sharpened with concentration. 'Oh, dear. I must be mistaken. No, surely not. That rune has NO meanings and they both—Your Majesty?"

Rowan's weary red-rimmed eyes snapped to attention.

"I'm afraid I was slightly mistaken. This document is not a simple horoscope, as I thought at first, though it's meant to look like one. The Princess Pegeen has carefully encoded a message, sire, in the last portion. I don't know exactly how to translate it >ack into the Argonian tongue, but what it essentially says is that unless you make haste to the Princess's home at Worm's Roost 'astle, not only is your child cursed but your entire reign, and wssibly the kingdom, is in jeopardy."

Perchingbird glanced once more at the document. "And though it doesn't say so, sire, very much fear from the manner in which the Princess chose to warn us that she is also in grave danger."

Even the Queen stirred from her sleep as Rowan's roars echoed through the castle all the rest of that night, waking his generals, his admirals, his administrators, and his advisers.

Leaving his daughter with her yawning mother, the King larangued his cabinet about the need for speed. The arrangements, he was told, would take several weeks, while the army was called back from its various outposts. Armies could not be fathered up just like that, didn't he know.

Once more it was Cyril Perchingbird who had the practical suggestion. "My Lady Pegeen writes only of the need for speed, Sire, not striking power. The fastest route to Worm's Roost is by tea, a fortnight's journey in good weather, compared with a month overland."

The Chief Archivist was also keeper of Argonia's somewhat sketchy maps,
which contained details of natters like time and distance.

Another adviser, eager to make up for not thinking of Perchingbird's idea himself, added, "That little ship Your Majesty is so fond of, the Snake's Bane, is in port now. A serpent hunter like that is far faster than our naval vessels."

The man had a good point. Serpent hunters were built in Ablemarle, where the shipbuilders understood the necessity for outslipping serpents. The naval shipbuilders native to Argonia had never quite got the hang of building their ships, which were largely used on missions of state anyway, as light, fast or maneuverable as vessels like the Bane.

"Right you are, man. Bring me the Bane's Captain Seagarden and ask him before he meets me here to have Bosun Pinchpurse ready the ship to sail on the next tide. You seem bright enough to serve me, so get ready to come along yourself." He turned to another lord, who hadn't said much but had at least kept quiet. "You too, and you," he said to another.

From behind him, Perchingbird intruded diffidently. "Sire, I would like to serve you also on this journey, if I may. And perhaps the Royal Air Force would be a boon?"

"So be it," said Rowan. "Tell me, Sir Cyril. Is there anything in the archives tells what kind of armor a man's supposed to wear on shipboard?"

CHAPTER 5

They crossed the Troutroute river by the middle of the day following their encounter with Leofwin's hunting party.

Colin looked forward to seeing Maggie's Aunt Sybil for several reasons, not the least among them the excellent taste and generous size of her gingerbread shingles.

Sybil Brown was in her garden when they broke through the woods, into the little clearing containing her gingerbread cottage. The cottage was Sybil's inheritance from a late unlamented ancestress who was fond of children-in the culinary sense-and used the cottage to entice them into her clutches. Sybil was as different from that long-gone semi-ogress as a sword was from a spindle. Far from gobbling the focal children, she was inclined to let any of them who were adventurous enough to visit her literally eat her out of house and home. Or had been, before Maggie had helped her repair her home, and had placed a heavy preservative spell on it, making it less than palatable. Now visiting children had to eat their gingerbread the dull way, from a cookie jar.

Sybil straightened as her visitors approached, and braced her hands on the small of her back, beaming, surrounded by vanquished weeds and pampered pansies. "My, that didn't take you long at all," she said, pushing back the broad brim of her garden hat. A sprig of lilac dipped jauntily over the edge of the brim, bouncing close to her left eyebrow.

"You've been keeping track of me again," Maggie accused affectionately, sliding from Moonshine's back to embrace her.

"Sure I have, child. You're the only grand-niece I have, you know. And Colin, my boy, how sweet you are to visit an old lady again!" Colin kissed the proffered cheek and returned the sprightly sorceress's smile. "You can rest your beasties now," she told them. "It's quite all right. Those hunters left the forest early this morning. I checked after breakfast. They've all returned to the castle."

That was one of the other reasons Colin was glad to see Aunt Sybil. Her magic, the art of seeing the present even when she didn't happen to be present where it was occurring, was extremely useful at times. This particular time it was also reassuring.

He removed Roundelay's saddle and bridle and unloaded all of his instruments, then began to rub her foam-flecked back with a brush and rag from his saddlebag.

Moonshine was still fresh and frisky, but Maggie rubbed him down too. Although he didn't need it, he liked it. Sybil lifted a hand and stroked the unicorn's nose. He nuzzled her palm enthusiastically. "What a lovely creature you are," she said. From her pocket she drew a crumb of gingerbread and offered it to him in a courtly manner. He accepted it in a greedy manner.

Sybil laughed. "Eat all you want here, Noble Unicorn. If the cookie jar isn't entirely to your liking, there's always the flower bed. I'll mourn my delphiniums sorely, but someone as lovely and special as you are surely can't graze on mere grass."

"You are most gracious, Goodwitch," Moonshine replied, dipping his horn low in a courteous genuflection. "And I am properly grateful for your offer. But delphiniums would not agree with my digestion, I think. However, if you happen to have any of those long orange things--" He eyed the vegetable garden covetously, and Sybil obligingly pulled up her carrot patch for him. "Ah, excellent," he said when he'd sampled one.

"And your grass looks delicious as well. I beg your leave to dine, Maiden?"

Maggie ruffled his forelock and kissed him at the base of the horn. "Certainly, darling. But don't be a pig. I'm
sure Roundelay likes carrots too."

"I suppose you'll have to scold me too," Maggie said, wiping her mouth with her napkin and leaning her knife against the edge of her empty plate. Colin continued tucking away trout in honey sauce and cauliflower casserole.

"Now why would I do that, dearie? Even if you do wait too long to come and see me, I love you, Maggie, and I'm very proud of you. You should know that." She patted Maggie's hand soothingly, but her sharp brown eyes were bright and inquisitive as a bird. Sybil closely resembled her sister, Maggie's peppery Granny Brown, except that she was rounder and kinder and of a sweeter disposition than either Maggie or her grandmother. Maggie used to think, when she was small, that Sybil was so sweet because she lived in a house made of cookies and candies. But that theory hadn't borne up under adult scrutiny, since the house's building materials had apparently had no noticeable influence whatsoever on the personality of Grandma Elspat, the child-munching ogress.

"I ought to have known I could count on you. Auntie," Maggie said. "Everybody else is ready to have me drawn and quartered because I don't want to go along with their plans for my life."

"I know, dearie, I know," Sybil kept patting her hand. "I've been watching. And I know you wouldn't ever do anything you didn't feel was right, whatever Maudie and your father and the King think. I only wonder if it's really wise to put off your future for the sake of your unicorn? Don't get me wrong." She held up a hand to stave off the retort Maggie's mouth was open to make. "Moonshine is a marvelous creature, and you'd be a fool not to enjoy his company. And, of course, you're quite right about our witches' tradition being rather against marriage to unmagicked men. But times are changing, child. Magic is wearing thinner with each generation, and if strong witches like yourself don't breed it'll soon be out at the heel altogether."

"YOU never married," Maggie said. "And Moonshine likes you, which means you probably never even--"

"Don't be pert with me, Maggie Brown," Sybil snaped. "No, I never have, if it's any of your business. Miss, but if you must know it's because of my powers. Gentlemen callers don't care for a woman who can check up on them as I can. And I-perhaps I know just a little too much about the goings-on of other folks to let me work up the kind of notions about a man I'd need to have to mate with him."

She turned thoughtful. "Though there was once, mind you. But it's not my future we're talking about here. Weren't there any of those young men you could've married, just to please your father? Someone who'd let you keep Moonshine?"

Maggie shook her head. "Only one old widower. Lord Feeblydon, who came to the christening on a litter. He's in his nineties, I believe, and blind. I offered to marry him. I thought he might enjoy a little looking after, and wouldn't interfere with Moonshine and me, but Dad said he wasn't about to call any ninety-year-old relic 'son'."

"Unreasonable man, your father," Sybil sympathized, shaking her head.

Maggie nodded glumly. "And the thing is, Aunt Sybil, even if it weren't for Moonshine I wouldn't care to marry any of those men. They all know I'm base-born on Mama's side, and most of them have a wretched attitude towards witchcraft. That whiny warlock you may have seen with Prince Leofwin was the only one among them with any magic, and he makes my skin crawl. But I wouldn't even mind that except they all make fun of me behind my back. I know they do. For all their flattery, I didn't feel like one of them even liked me."

"I was going to talk to you about that, Maggie," Colin put in. "The thing is, see, you don't know how to gussy yourself up and talk like a real lady. That's what those fellows are used to. Why, you're a very attractive girl, if one likes the type, and all you have to do is--"

He choked on his last sentence, ending it with a cough as he caught the force of her glare.

"Just where do you suggest I start to make myself pretty for your kind, Master Songsmith? Shall I start by bleaching my hair and skin, or will it do if I just make myself a couple of inches taller?"

Colin blushed. He hadn't realized his own preference for willowy fair ladies was so obyious to her.

"You can start, niece," Sybil said severely, "By apologizing to your friend. If he hadn't liked you well enough to come back and help you, we'd have nothing to argue about here. You'd still be locked up in the tower."

Maggie flushed bright magenta, and said in the smallest voice Colin had ever heard from her, "Sorry."

Colin shrugged. "Perfectly all right, old girl. I only meant you should really try to wear a nice dress sometimes, maybe fix your hair up like the ladies in court, put a bit of scent behind your ears. I know you can do it," he said encouragingly. "You washed up rather well that time you danced for the gypsies. How's anybody supposed to know you well enough to get to like you if you bark at them all the time and perfume yourself with last week's goose bastings?"

She lowered her eyes and clenched her hands till they were white-knuckled in her lap, but her chin was still set stubbornly. "Why should I want to know them anyway, people like Leofwin and that silly Earl Greystraw with his awful sonnets?"

Sybil shook her head. "You young folks are so quick to trounce each other. Poor Robbie Greystraw. It's not his
fault about the sonnets, you know."

"PLEASE don't tell me it's mine for inspiring them," Maggie groaned. "No, but I will tell you you were wrong about none of those boys having any magic. Poor Robbie's just one of those unfortunates whose magic is so watered down it's almost invisible. He comes from a long line of transformers, powerful as your Granny Maud in their day, I hear. And one of Robbie's sisters is a reasonably adept spinner who can change straw into fine linen. But the family has married in with regular folks so many times for wealth and rank that now there's not much magic left to Robbie. The closest he can come to transforming anything is saying, 'your lips are like a rose.' Though I can't think at all why he'd want them to be, since that would make kissing very prickly."

"Very well, then, I'm sorry for him," Maggie said. "But his sonnets still stink, and I still won't marry him." She shot Colin another defiant look. "And I won't marry anybody who only wants me because I dress up fine or because I'm all of a sudden a princess."

Colin lifted an eyebrow. "Do as you like then, witch. You do anyway. But I personally don't see what's so much worse about a man wanting to marry a pretty woman because she's a princess than a unicorn making friends with her because she's a virgin. If you hadn't been, you know, he'd have gored and trampled you to death. So the legends say."

Maggie jumped to her feet, tipping the table so that it rocked dangerously. "That's not true."

Colin repeated, "It's what the legends say."

"I'll just see what Moonshine has to say about that," she challenged, and flounced angrily out of her aunt's cottage.

Colin felt vaguely ashamed of himself, but also felt she had it coming for being so superior about the whole thing. Just because she was a powerful witch and the Queen's sister and a princess into the bargain, she thought she was better than everybody else. Let her prefer unicorns to men if she liked, but one had to hold up the side. Even if the side contained such unsavory specimens as Prince Leofwin and Count Jivemgood.

Still, it hadn't been a very nice thing to do. He stole a shamefaced glance at Sybil. She winked at him, broadly. "Play us a bit of a tune, won't you, dearie? To cheer a lonely old lady?"

The lynx, Myrrill and Pyrrill, were enjoying their evening drink for the first time since the two-legged had come to their territory and taken away the mighty one-horn, Eagledown. After that, their water started tasting odd, smelling bad.

They left that place before the rot came and soon they found another place, with good water, where a one-horn was and other lynx were not.

This evening they decided to wait beside the stream, to thank the one-horn and to warn her of the two-legged, no more than a day's easy loping towards the mountains.

But no sooner had Myrrill finished drinking and sat down to groom herself than Pyrrill gave a warning growl. Two-legged. Many large hairy ones and one small smooth one-the female with the scent of magic about her, she who had lured Eagledown to her lap while the others bound the helpless one-horn with a long vine.

Did the two-legged female come for lynx this time? To wrap their dead fur around her, perhaps, so she would not have to be smooth any longer? The young cats, ears back and hindquarters twitching, spotted fur bristling along their spines, backed into the cover of the trees.

The two-legged female paid no attention to them. She sat beside their new stream and waited. The lynx waited, too. They wanted to see what would happen. They were cats, and therefore curious.

Soon the one-horn female came to bless the stream. She was old, but her horn was good, and she dipped it, banishing impurities only she could detect in the stream's crystal waters. Then she sniffed, and raised her head, and sniffed again, scenting the two-legged female who waited, downstream.

Myrrill growled. She had no wish to move again so soon. She liked this place and this water. Pyrrill yowled his warning cry to the she one-horn, but the beast was trotting toward the two-legged female, enchanted by her scent, and already singing her praise. Pyrrill's cry dissolved into an angry growl. He did not wish to move again either.

Myrrill gathered herself into a ball, and sprang. Her spots blurred to blotches as she soared across the forest floor, covering the distance between herself and the one-horn with a single leap. Another leap, and she was atop the one-horn, riding her, sharp claws bared. This was not the thanks the cats had meant to offer, but perhaps this thanks would save the one-horn. Pyrrill sprang too, landing in front of the one-horn's chopping hooves.

The angry one-horn pawed and stamped the ground, wielding her horn with great fierceness, but Myrrill's claws were very strong and Pyrrill was very swift and flexible. Pyrrill shuttled between the one-horn's legs, tangling her feet so that she could not rear and could not move forward.

The two-legged female sat, waiting still, not seeing the one-horn, not seeing the lynx. The trees were many
between the two-legged and the lynx's tangling tawny bodies.

Long did they worry the one-horn, driving her back, away from the two-legged. The one-horn was very fierce, but she was old, and tired quickly. The lynx herded her to their new lair, a warm hole against a hillside, with shielding trees and bushes.

Three nights passed, and each evening Pyrrill went to the stream and saw the two-legged waiting, and left again, thirsty. On the fourth evening the two-legged was not there, and Pyrrill raced back to his sister and to the one-horn to get them to join her in refreshment. But the one-horn would not speak to them and would not rise. All they heard from her that night and long after was praise and song for the two-legged female who had gone.

Maggie stood in front of the unicorn, her fists balled against her hips. "Well, is it true or isn't it?" she demanded. "Surely you can tell me that. Would you really have gored me, or is that just a story?"

Moonshine continued chewing with his head down, his horn tip tracing thoughtful little patterns in the grass. "Why ask such a question, Maiden? You are pure and have never had anything to fear from me."

Maggie's bravado collapsed and she sat down, suddenly too tired and discouraged to stand. "Then it must be true."

Moonshine stopped grazing to nuzzle her cheek comfortably. "Don't tret, Maiden. That part of the Creed applies only to false virgins. It has naught to do with you and I."

"You mean to say that if I hadn't been a maiden when we first met--" She was unable to leave the subject alone.

"Twould have been my duty to slay you," Moonshine affirmed.

"Whew," she said ruefully, "Lucky thing for me I could outrun the baker's boy when I was fifteen."

"Oh, maiden," Moonshine pleaded, "I probably would not have done so. I can't remember all that part-the details of the verse escape me. But I'm certain I would have been lenient with you. My dam did not say. in her teachings, that a unicorn could not be merciful to the good and beautiful."

"Where's your dam now?" Maggie asked. "I'd like to get this thing cleared up."

"She was taken from me before she was able to complete my education."

"Pity," Maggie'said.

"Indeed," Moonshine agreed.

"Well, did she tell you what if say, now that we're already friends, what if I was to marry somebody-for instance, somebody very nice, very pure in lots of ways, I mean, somebody you really liked a lot. What I mean to say is, what would become of you and me if I married this very nice person and sort of, you know, lost my maidenhood? If I married or met somebody, a man, for instance ..."

"An excellent choice for someone of your species, Maiden," Moonshine nickered, showing his large white teeth as he plopped down beside her to rest his head in her lap.

"Is that a joke?" she asked. "Because if it is, it's rather to the point. Not that I want to do anything like that now, you understand, but if I ever did want to mate--"

Moonshine rolled a soft violet eye at her. "Maiden, would you forsake me then?"

Maggie ran her fingers up under his mane and let it trickle through them like streams of milk. "No, of course not, darling, not willingly. But don't you see? Unless I could acquire enough of your lovely habits to remind Gran of a unicorn so she could change me into one, providing she would, of course, and believe me, there's little chance of that--"

"Good," Moonshine said. "I fear you are not unicorn material, Maid Maggie."

"Well, I don't know about that, but even if I was. Granny's changes are only temporary, so that wouldn't work anyway. Sooo-unless maybe you're really an enchanted prince?"

Moonshine rose in a huff. "Certainly NOT! I am a bona fide, genuine, authentic unicorn and have never been anything else! I had a unicorn dam and a unicorn sire to prove it, before they were taken from me. And now--" he folded back down again, resting his head again on her knee. "And now I have only you. Pray forgive me, gentle Maiden, for waxing wrathful, but I should be sorely loath to lose you."

She sighed, running her finger along the spiral of his horn. "I'd hate to lose you too, darling. But I don't see why we'd have to part over something like mating with our own kind. Surely that Unicorn Creed you're always going on about has some provision in it somewhere for old friends who are no longer maidens? What if you were to meet some nice unicorn filly and wish to mate with her yourself? Would I have to trample and gore you?

Moonshine blew a long, forlorn breath through his velvety nostrils.

"It just seems to me that it'd be a singularly silly way to do things," Maggie continued. "Your Creed tells you what you may and may not do about almost everything, but leaves out the important parts. When you consider what it DOES tell you to do, from what you've explained to me, I wonder that there are any of you left! You're supposed to put yourselves in the hands of any girl at ail-now correct me if I'm wrong-any girl at all, no matter what she's like
otherwise, if she's a virgin, you're supposed to go with her. Is that right?"

"I-I think so. That's not how the verse says it but--" the sing-song of the Creed whirled in Moonshine's head, confusing itself with Maggie's argument. The verses he could remember seemed similar in content, if not spirit, to her disgruntled interpretation, but somehow he didn't feel the Creed was supposed to mean what she suggested.

Now she had another question. "Doesn't the Creed even tell you to ask for references from your maidens?"

"Oh, NO, Maid Maggie. We can tell, you see, by the sweet odor of chastity that surrounds the true maiden, and a special, wonderful feeling that comes just from being near--"

"Can't say I think much of it then," she said and unceremoniously but gently dumped his head from her lap and stood. "As soon as I talk to the King about not being a princess any more, we'd better see if we can't scare up another unicorn-one with some experience in these matters-and continue your education, and mine, about this Creed of yours. It's quite bad enough to be bound to such an impractical system to begin with, but really, it's just plain unthinkable to be ignorant of ALL the ins and outs of what you do have to work with." Brushing her skirt free of grass and a few of his loose chin hairs, she strode purposefully back to the cottage, relieved to have made up her mind on the matter of Moonshine's bothersome Creed. As soon as they'd dispensed with this princess business, they would settle Moonshine's problem once and for all.

Moonshine wasn't so sure of that.

Strains of fiddle music danced through the cottage. At Sybil's table, Colin sat with his fair head bent over his fiddle, the fingers of his left hand jumping like grasshoppers while his right hand sped the bow over the strings. Across from him Sybil sat, hands folded demurely around a teacup, ankles primly crossed beneath her chair. But her cheeks were pink with pleasure and her toes tapped sneaky time to Colin's tune.

The song ended as Maggie took the empty chair beside her aunt.

"Have a little bearberry wine, Maggie dear," Sybil offered, already pouring a cup of clear garnet liquid from the uncorked jug on the table. "You look like you could use it."

Maggie drained the cup in three swallows. To forestall having to discuss Moonshine's revelations, and also to keep from having to admit that Colin had correctly recalled his unicorn lore, she asked, "What was that tune you were playing when I came in?"

Questions about music could always put the minstrel off any other subject.

But it was Sybil who answered. "Your friend was just playing me the ditty he's composing about you for the King's Grace, dearie. It's very clever. Sing it for her, laddie."

"It's an instrumental, actually," he said. "A reel. But I thought up a verse or two for it." He picked up the fiddle, hesitated, set it down again and refilled his cup, then Maggie's- Sybil's was at her lips, only partially concealing the twitch at the corners of her mouth. "You still look thirsty, Maggie," Colin prompted. "Drink up." And he emptied his own cup in one swallow.

He pretended to tune until her cup was almost empty again. Then, when the focus of her eye was no longer as piercing and the set of her jaw had softened, he began. He knew very well the value of preparing one's audience ahead of time. After a lively introduction on the instrument, he lifted his chin from it long enough to sing:

"Is your life too peaceful, Lord? Too drearily serene? Then harken, sir, and take to wife The Princess Magdalene.

As gentle as the hunting hawk As docile as the dragon, She'll fix your supper, fix your bed And then she'll fix your wagon."

He stole a glance at the object of his dubious flattery while he tucked the fiddle back under his chin and played another rollicking chorus. She stared into the bottom of her wine cup, seeming to find within its depths something of absorbing interest.

"Sweet Maggie is the bride to wed To have men deem one bold For she's as shy as conquering hordes A-swooping down on gold."

A final flourish and he ended the tune, and met Maggie's lugubrious face.

"Why, Minstrel Songsmith," she fluttered. "I didn't know you cared. That's the nicest thing you've ever said about me!" And she flicked the dregs of her wine into his face and broke into a laugh that was half maidenly giggle and half witchy cackle. "I only wish you'd thought to sing that ditty before my worthy admirers began to press their suits. You'd have no doubt saved me a lot of trouble!"

He bowed gallantly and saluted by touching his fiddle bow to his forehead. "What can I say, milady? Riding with you these past few days has provided me with new inspiration."

"Pickle it, minstrel," she grinned. "I don't suppose anybody around here would be interested to know what I've decided to do about this whole situation?"
Sybil had started clearing the table, but now she interrupted seriously. "Maybe you'd best wait till I've taken a few sightings before you jump one way or the other, dearie."

Maggie sobered and apologized quickly. "Of course. Aunt Sybil. I was going to ask. Please, could we see what the hunters are doing now? And also-do you suppose you could find out if there are any other unicorns in the forest Moonshine could talk to? And maybe, if it's not too much trouble, perhaps we could see about Winnie and the King and the baby?"

"Yes, Colin agreed, "I'd like to find out how all that curse business is going."

Sybil nodded and smoothed her skirts beneath her, situating herself comfortably before her ball. "Let me see now," she said, placing one hand carefully on each side of the crystal and gazing into it. "I think we'll do the palace first. I'm dreadfully concerned about the baby too, now that you bring it up. Ball," she addressed the globe in tones that brooked no nonsense. "Show us the King, please, and what's going on in the royal family quarters."

"If it's not too embarrassing," Colin added, earning himself harsh looks from both women. He continued to stare with wide innocent eyes into the crystal.

Shattering rainbows splintered themselves around the room, green, sapphire, pink, orange and red, harlequining the people with polychrome spangles of light and gilding the floor and walls before clearing.

The royal nursery, a room as cold and stony as any other castle chamber, was softened by screens of gilt and rose pink, tapestries depicting insipid-looking big-eyed animals, including a particularly unrealistic dragon. Beside a gilt cradle carved with all manner of hearts and flowers there stood a sturdy table, currently occupied by a large pink baby with hair like copper wire and a voice like a choir of banshees. A platoon of ladies-in-waiting fluttered ineffectually, offering suggestions and comments, but no help.

"Why, she isn't wet at all, the little minx!" the Lady EHse announced after visually checking the appropriate portion of the child's body. "And she doesn't want anything to eat. I think she's just crying for attention, milady. Tis best not to spoil children."

"Dearest Eiise," Winnie said, "I shall be only too glad to hear your views on child-rearing AFTER you have helped me convince my daughter she is not a hair ornament. Please remove her. This hurts."

Aunt Sybil shook her crystal experimentally. "That's very good, ball. We're happy to know the little darling is dry and well-fed, and that Amberwine is awake again. But what about the curse? And where's the King?" To Colin and Maggie she commented, "One has to be firm, don't you know. Even the finest crystals can be erratic at times, and think you'll settle for just any old vision."

Colin stared thoughtfully into the ball as it rearranged itself, its picture dissolving into colored clouds which dissolved into the rainbows again before dissolving for a brief moment into clear crystal. "Do you suppose the curse can have started already? Lady EHse sounded angry at the baby."

"Some people are always angry," Sybil answered, carefully not looking at her niece. Another shower of rainbows jigged around the room. From the center of the crystal, waves broke outward, threatening to crash onto Sybil's best linen cloth.

Then, as suddenly as the waves had rolled to the fore, they receded, leaving behind an image of the sea serpent hunter, Snake's Bane, wallowing in calm seas backed by the purple tinged peaks of a distant mountain range.

"I think my crystal is showing off," Sybil said, tapping it with her fingernail. "I get company so seldom; it likes to put on a good show for a sighting. But we've no time for that today, dearie," she said into the ball. "Now, be a good thing and show me King Rowan, if you will."

At that, the ball blurred a sulky gray, then focused slowly on board the ship. Roari Rowan's orange-maned head towered above everything on deck except the mainmast.

"I say, I wonder what Sir Cyril Perchingbird's doing at sea?" Colin said. "He's the chief archivist at the palace. You wouldn't believe what he knows about lullabies."

"And I wonder what the King's doing at sea," Maggie said. "How am I supposed to give him back this crown if he won't stay put? I certainly don't intend to swim after him."

The King was having difficulties of his own. "I should have known better than to get aboard this thing," he roared. "Infantrymen don't belong on ships! Anybody knows that!"

"Ah well, yer 'ighness," said a wizened little man Maggie recognized as Colin's friend, Bosun Ned Pinchpurse, a former pirate, "Tis unusual weather we're 'avin."

"Unreliable if you ask me. At this rate it will take us two MONTHS by sea instead of two weeks. We could travel crosscountry in half the time."

Sir Cyril's oiled serpent-gut slicker, worn to protect him from nonexistent spray and wind, crackled as he paced the deck. High above the Bane's decks, the dragons Grizel and Grimley indulged themselves in loop-the-loops and
aerial acrobatics as they circled the ship, occasionally dipping low enough to cause the slack sail to flap fitfully. Perchingbird examined a battered scroll, sighing and shaking his head as he did so. "It clearly shows right here that if we come up on the sea side of the glacier-" he pondered aloud.

"It doesn't take a learned man to see that the journey's shorter by sea in good weather, m'lord Archivist," one of the other lords answered loftily. "But the fact is, sailing ships happen to need wind for their sails or--"

He fell to the deck as a red-and-gold scaled missile the size of the King's stables zoomed past him. Grimley still enjoyed watching humans cower once in awhile. The force of the dragon's passing caused the ship's timbers to quiver in the best nautical tradition.

"Blow me down!" swore the sailor who was helping Bosun Pinchpurse uncoil a line.

"Nearly did at that, didn't 'e?" Pinchpurse winked in the direction of the fallen lord, then looked up, shielding his eyes with the flat of his hand while he watched the crimson dragon fly belly-up against the sun while his blue-green mate flew figure eights around him. Then, looking away, the bosun squinted at Sir Cyril, who was trying to maintain his balance on the uncooperative deck.

"Hey, there, m'Lord. You talk to yon critters, doan't you? Like young Songsmith's pussycat used to?"

"Not exactly," Sir Cyril answered. "I use their own sound. The cat apparently communicated on a more supernatural level."

"Whatever. Why doan't you ask 'em if they'd be so kind as to stop messin' about up there and put their lazy tails to work makin' wind for this vessel?"

The image faded in another splatter of color.

"Well," Sybil said. "It looks like you're going to have a bit of a wait for the King, dearie, if he's to be gone all those weeks."

"No matter," Maggie said. "We can use the time to find another unicorn and get this maidenhood business cleared up-it would be nice to have that out of the way, anyway, just in case Rowan proves difficult."

She outlined for them her conversation with Moonshine, ending with the solution that had occurred to her.

"Very sensible," Sybil said. "But had you considered that by binding him to you and taking him all over the countryside you're putting Moonshine in grave danger? No matter where you go, there'll be people-and from what you've told me, I should think there'll be unicorn hunters all over the woods. You can disguise yourself if you like, though once you're away from here I doubt you'd be recognized anyway. But a unicorn is always very obviously a unicorn."

Maggie's face fell. As her aunt had pointed out, the major problem still faced them. Whatever she did about finding other unicorns or giving back crowns, the woods would still be full of huntsmen. Moonshine was as elusive as the wind on his own, but hampered by her he wouldn't be easily able to slip from the hunters' clutches. He would need her help, and she wasn't sure even that would be enough. Though her magic could be turned to self-defense if she used a lot of ingenuity and concentration, she could scarcely count on it to defend both herself and Moonshine-and Cojin Songsmith wasn't any more a warrior than she was.

Sybil patted her shoulder and gazed into the crystal again. "Don't you fret about it, child. I have a little idea. But first, we can just have a look, now can't we, and see where those young men are? Then you and Moonshine and young Colin can simply avoid that part of the forest."

Humming Colin's tune about Maggie under her breath, Sybil called for a vision of the hunters.

The requisite rainbows again wheeled around the room, the glass cleared, and a walk-in fireplace at the tavern at Fort Iceworm formed in the crystal's center.

"Bother," Sybil said, using her strongest invective. "This isn't what I wanted at all. Must have been some interference from my humming your song, Colin."

The glass showed Sir William and Granny Brown standing beside Granny's ale-brewing cauldron. Granny stirred the mixture in the kettle with slashing swipes of her wooden paddle.

"Don't you raise your voice to ME, Willie Hood," the old lady snapped. "Or you'll likely spoil the brew."

Maggie grinned and drew her chair closer to the table. "Let's keep this vision anyway," she said. "I want to hear how they're getting along, now that they've driven me away. I'll wager the whole castle is a complete shambles by now."

Sybil smiled to herself and held the vision.

The foreshortened figure of Sir William said, "Your pardon, Mother Brown. But she's had her chance. I told those lads that the one who came back with proof of the most valiant deed would win her hand and I mean to bide by my word."

"He didn't say anything about unicorns," Maggie remarked, puzzled.

"He probably doesn't know. We ought to have realized Leofwin and Jivemgood wouldn't mention it. If you were a unicorn hunter bent on taking a rare beast like Moonshine from the lands of a lord with your father's temper,
would YOU tell him about it?" Colin asked.

"I only helped you. Willie," Granny Brown's words snapped off like icicles, "to teach the girl that it isn't good for a right-minded witch to stay in the company of a-to avoid her responsibilities. I wasn't trying to help you marry her off to any of those noble numbskulls. They're as worthless a lot as I've ever seen in all my bom days, and I advise you to send out our village lads to round them up and bring them back so you can send them packing."

Sir William's face turned eggplant-colored, and he drew himself up to his full insignificant height. "I am lord of this castle, Goodwitch, and my word is law. I have said that the most valiant deed done by one of those numbsk-noble gentlemen- shall win my daughter and indeed it shall. And for your information, I let them know that for MY money, I held the most valiant deed ANY of them could accomplish would be to bring Maggie back."

"My Lord Son-in-Law," Granny said with sugar-coated nasti-ness. "how would you like to spend some time being even more bull-headed than you already are?"

Sir William's mouth dropped open and the glass clouded.

"Drat," Maggie said. "I wanted to see that."

"Where are Maggie's admirers?" Colin asked.

Sybil concentrated on her ball again but this time it refused to focus. A blur of green and brown that seemed to be forest bounced within the globe for a moment, before the ball caught in quick succession several wraith-like, bewitdered-looking figures on horseback, wandering around in another blotch of green and brown.

"Gracious," Sybil said. "It simply won't work properly at all some days unless one can give it specific places or people."

"Try Prince Leofwin," Maggie suggested. "He's the worst of them."

But no matter how Sybil concentrated, she received only the image of bouncing greenery.

"Then how about Count Jivemgood?" Colin asked. But the crystal wandered aimlessly through hazy forest scenes before it finally settled in seeming desperation on the running form of a lean gray wolf, from which it stubbornly refused to budge.
Maggie tried again. "If it can't show us unicorn hunters, maybe it will show us the nearest unicorn we can talk
to about Moonshine's Creed?"

Sybil brightened. "Oh, yes, I'm sure it can manage that. Ball, show us the nearest unicorn."

After its usual prismatic display, the ball revealed Moonshine searching Sybil's lawn for bits of uneaten carrot.
"Not THAT unicorn, you foolish bauble!" Sybil cried, exasperated. "Do you suppose I need you to be present
in his present when it's my garden he's dining on? We want to see the NEXT nearest unicorn."

But none of her further instructions or entreaties were sufficient to produce another clear image within the
crystal, which resorted to flipping from Moonshine to the wolf to the bouncing greenery and back again in such
rapid succession that soon everything was a uniform green and gray striped pattern.

"Bother," Sybil said.

"I suppose we'll just have to find another unicorn ourselves," Maggie sighed. "I don't guess you could lend me
that little silver mirror again? The one you had shown me three visions so I could find Winnie and the gypsies?"

Without Sybil's mirror. Maggie and Colin would have had a difficult time locating Winnie, much less rescuing her.

But Sybil was shaking her head. "No, child, I'm afraid not. As you can see, my powers are a bit erratic today.
They don't get a workout like this very often, you know, and the ball is temperamental sometimes. Even under the
best of circumstances, it's hard to lend the same magic out twice. Three wishes are three wishes, even for family."

Maggie's face fell, and Sybil hugged her, adding more cheer-
fully, "Chin up, dearie. With all that forest around you and the hunters AND the unicorns, how would you
know where any of you were, anyway?"

Colin reluctantly agreed. "I can see where in a magic mirror one tree might look much like another. Landmarks
probably wouldn't be all that easy to find."

"Well," Maggie said after the long silence that followed Colin's unfortunately perceptive remarks. "If you can't
help, I suppose we'll just have to get on the best we can."

She turned toward the door but Sybil pulled her back down into her chair. "Don't be so hasty, girl. I didn't say I
couldn't help at all."

Taking the ball from the table, she placed it carefully back on the mantle before opening a cupboard from
which she drew a roll of ribbon-tied vellum. "I only said I couldn't give you MY magic. But I do happen to know
someone else who can help you if anyone can."

Colin moved his fiddle and bow from the table, and leaned across the map Sybil unrolled onto the linen cloth.
Maggie touched the vellum's surface with wondering fingers. Real maps were not common outside the archives. In a
land with one main road, few journeys were undertaken requiring a chart. This map was exceptional even at that,
however, for its surface was embellished with drawings of animals, trees, and something else mat could not have
been handier; streams, rivers, lakes and waterways of all kinds.

"Beautiful work, isn't it?" Sybil said proudly. "He made it himself. He's very clever at that sort of thing, quite
aside from his prowess as a master of disguise."

"Who?" Colin asked.

"The man you must go see-an old beau of mine." Her cheeks glowed burgundy. "The mighty and mysterious,
but really very nice, Wizard Raspberry. If anyone can help you, he can."

"I must not fail again, O Wulfric," the nymph said, clenching her dainty fist and shaking it for emphasis. "I
must not disappoint the Dark Pilgrim. He needs the beasts for his great work, to ensure the triumph of our cause."

Wulfric whined agreement and insinuated his snout into her fist. He had finished feeding and had come to make
his report, to find Her sorely distracted, pacing the hive-like base camp like a caged thing while Her comrades
swarmed through the caves,

lashing together fresh-stripped poles to gate the entrances of two of the caves. She planned that these should
serve as corrals where more than a single unicorn could be held; she could thus avoid the arduous trip to Worm's
Roost after each capture.

But She had not succeeded in capturing the beast She most recently sought to win for the cause, and blamed
Herself.

Wulfric had retained his wolf form so that She might take comfort in caressing his fur and talking to him as She
never did when he was in human guise. He hated changing into man form anyway. He did not enjoy having to walk
on two legs, and losing so much of his sense of smell. He was a fine wolf, but a poor specimen of a man; the way
other men treated him when he was one of them told him so. Even She liked him better as a wolf, as he knew from
her behavior. So he waited to transform himself awhile longer, and licked her hand instead.

"I have a confession to make, loyal friend," she confided. "I know the reason I failed. The last unicorn was
denied me-for she was there, I promise you-because I have spared, from foolish sentiment, another beast, she who
purifies the stream I used to guard near the hamlet of Everclear. I have harbored a weak sympathy for the townspeople
who know of the animal and depend on her, but now I see that neither my attachment for them nor theirs for the beast must interfere with our great task. If the townsfolk seek to prevent us from taking the beast, they will have to be dealt with." And she smiled bravely down at him and tossed her golden curls back over her shoulders in a determined gesture.

With an excited whimper full of love for his mettlesome little leader, Wulfric began the process that altered his form, and in a few moments stood up beside her as the counterfeit Count Jivemgood.

"Ah, Sally," he said. "Am I not your faithful servant in all you would accomplish? I bring you great news that will end your self-reproach and help you achieve all you desire." He had to tame his voice back down from an elation-escalated howl before he could continue. "For at that castle did I not meet a great and bloody warrior to help you win your cause? Even now does he not travel in seven-league boots to meet you and to help us capture beasts and to school our comrades in warrior ways? And did I not also see another unicorn coming this way, and on his back the female who is the reviled kin of the Dark Pilgrim? Will not the vanquishment of those two be pleasing to the Dark Pilgrim?"

Sally leapt to her feet and threw her arms around him, kissing his hairy cheek. "Oh, it will. Wulfric, surely it will indeed! You're a staunch companion if ever any girl had one! I'm certain the Dark Pilgrim will reward you by finding a way to release you from your affliction so you'll never have to turn back into a man again, even in broadest daylight.

"And, oh, I know you're very tired, but perhaps we could go together, I in my whirlwind and you in wolf form, to greet our new ally? I can show him the way back here, while you lure that other beast and the traitor-girl within reach of our band."

"It is good, your plan," Wulfric agreed, and dropped to all fours.

After a restless night and a good breakfast, Colin and Maggie stuffed their saddlebags full of fresh raspberry tarts; some for themselves and some a present from Aunt Sybil to the wizard. Adding to these two rounds of cheese, a loaf of bread apiece, and a cloth bag of salted seeds and nuts, they mounted.

"I'll keep a close watch in my crystal," Sybil promised, as Maggie leaned down from Moonshine's back to give her a final peck on the cheek. "If I see anything that could be useful to you, I'll send a message by Budgie." Budgie, Aunt Sybil's familiar, usually flew freely in the forest near the cottage, but was always available to carry whatever messages his mistress had to send. He trilled now from his perch at the windowsill, as if in affirmation that they needn't worry; he was on the job.

Thus reassured, the travelers set out. They journeyed for two days, following the wizard's map, and though they grew damp around the edges from fording so many streams, they experienced no serious catastrophes. Even the weather was fair. Overhead, lapis skies were frilled with only the most ornamental lacy white clouds. The forest smelled fresh, and its floor was carpeted with spongy emerald moss that made traveling pleasant and easy.

After Moonshine purified the streams they crossed, the water acquired a flavor that was so sweet and pure as to be almost intoxicating. Bright fish flashed across polished stones in the shallows, while deeper places drowsed in cool green shadow. Rabbits and squirrels, moose and fox crossed their path. Colin sang all the new songs he'd learned at court, leaving out only the lullabyes. Maggie sang too, in her husky, slightly off-key voice, and laughed until her sides ached.

Toward dusk of the second evening, they camped beside a wide, bubbling stream. Maggie conjured a smokeless campfire and settled down next to it.

"Court must be the most fascinating place," she remarked, her head still full of the songs he'd sung that day. "All those songs, all the music and dancing and feasting, all those people from different places with so many stories to tell. I expect you must be very anxious to get back."

"One almost envies the generals. At least they get to wear armor to protect them from some of the backstabbing." He chewed the sweetgrass thoughtfully for awhile and continued. "Do you know, the song Rowan
wanted me to compose for you wasn't the first one that's given me difficulty since I joined the staff."

"You? Having trouble thinking up songs? I don't believe it!" she scoffed. Ever since she'd known him, he'd practically exhaled a freshly composed verse with each breath.

"I just haven't had the time, what with following the King around and playing all of his favorites, altering the standard forms to fit his daring deeds-which so far have been confined to levying one unpopular tax and naming you princess. He hasn't many friends of his own in court yet, so he likes me to be there to listen to him when he wants to talk and drink with him when he wants to get drunk. And I can tell you," Colin rolled his eyes
to convey suffering martyrdom, "when that whittled-down frost giant gets drunk, it takes me weeks to recover!"

"I seem to recall something about that," Maggie said, her smile deepening as she remembered Colin's first attempt to keep up with the King's remarkable capacity for strong drink. Colin had not fared very well that time, either. "And I suppose you're right about court. I probably wouldn't like it at all. I keep forgetting the only people who have time for all those balls and feasts are the ones who have someone else to do the work for them. With my luck, I'd be working while everyone else was dancing."

Colin grinned at her forlorn tone, then said solemnly, "I know just what you mean, i'm always much too busy to enjoy myself, what with playing and all of the other social duties that are expected of me. Wenching, for example."

He sighed a deep, put-upon sigh, wriggling his toes luxuriously and shifting position, watching her reaction from beneath lashes lazily lowered to half mast. "Now that takes a tremendous hunk out of my average day at court. An honest musician like me can scarcely get any work done at all for all the time and trouble it takes to keep the court ladies happy."

Moonshine, grazing nearby, lifted his head and snorted, eying Colin severely. "Beg your pardon," Colin half rose from his lounging position and bowed as elegantly as possible. "I quite forgot there were unicorns present."

Maggie gnawed reflectively on her cheese sandwich, then gestured with it, asking. "And this lady you were telling Moonshine about earlier-whatemame-Adelaide? Adeline? Agatha? Al-wha-what??" she cried, leaping up, suddenly empty-handed. The bandit of a raven who had swooped down to pluck her sandwich from her fingers flitted out of reach onto a poplar limb. He cocked his head sideways, after each peck he took at Maggie's sandwich, and regarded them with a look that said he found the food acceptable but was naturally used to more elegant fare.

He was still there the following morning when they arose. According to the wizard's map, they were not to cross the stream on whose banks they were camped, but were rather to follow it. It flowed in a peculiar fashion, counter to the southwesterly course of the Troutroute River.

"Well," Colin said cheerfully, when Maggie had replaced the map. "At least we won't get lost. We even have a guide."

The raven flapped in circles above them as they mounted and rode along the stream's bank.

Before long, however, they found the footing near the water's edge swampy and uncertain. Tall grasses hid pockets of water. Seemingly solid ground turned to mud that sucked the horse's hooves deep, making every step an incredible effort.

The twelfth time Roundelay mired a hoof in an innocent-looking patch of grass and sank to her belly in an all-engulfing pit, Colin dismounted and led her forward, for approximately two steps. Then he too stepped into gentle green grass that on involuntary closer investigation turned out to be a minor channel of the stream. He swore, deeply and heartily.

Moonshine tsk-tsked, in spite of the fact that even he had been provoked into using one of the stronger unicorn oaths, when trying to tear the mud from his hooves with his hom.

Above them, the raven circled and cawed.

"You might pull that little trick you did last year out of your hat NOW, when it would really be useful," Colin complained, floundering for dry ground. "While I didn't care much for climbing into that oversized basket you made when I was expected to use it to rescue a dragon, I wouldn't mind having it to float downstream in now, instead of having to battle this muck."

Maggie glanced at the water dubiously. "You mean you want to ride on the water when we don't HAVE to?" Maggie disliked water. She remembered all too clearly the nightmarish story her Granny told her as a girl of a Brown ancestress who'd been melted in her own dishwater by a cagey enemy. Not that Maggie herself had ever personally shown the slightest tendency to dissolve, but one couldn't be too careful. Other than the scrub water necessary to work her magic and an occasional wash behind her ears, she generally avoided the stuff altogether. And in this case, even if she didn't melt, she could very well drown, couldn't she? It wasn't as if she was like Colin, who was descended from mer people and swam like a fish.

"If we keep on this way," he pointed out, "We're either going to be wet to our ears or we'll have to go so far from the banks to find solid footing we may lose the stream entirely. Then we'd never find your aunt's friend."
Against her better judgment, Maggie had to admit he was probably right. She found a slightly drier patch of swampy ground than the one Colin was sunk in, and dismounted. While he gathered a huge mound of reeds and grasses, she plaited them together, faster than his eyes could follow. Before it should have been possible, the hillock of grasses had become a bowl-shaped basket large enough to accommodate two people. Moonshine watched the proceedings with great interest.

"I could probably make this large enough to hold you." Maggie offered, catching his eye. "But I have to draw the line at Colin's mare. She'd sink us all."

Moonshine quickly demurred. "Nay, maiden. It is given to unicorn kind to purify the waters, not to ride upon them. I will journey with the horse and help her keep close by the bank, so that we do not become sundered, one from the other." "That's very decent of you," Colin said. Then, in an unprecedented exhibition of bravery (for him, at least), he climbed into the basket-boat and held onto the bank by gripping a projecting tree root until Maggie persuaded herself to climb aboard.

Since they were going downstream, they saw no particular need for oars or paddles—or at any rate, they didn't see the need until the boat began to spin like a saucer.

Maggie shrieked and covered her head with both arms, and hugged the bottom of the boat as it sped down the sliver of silvery water, bumping the banks and flirting with low-hanging branches that threatened to sweep the passengers into the swift, shallow current.

The raven saw them ducking and grabbing at branches and seemed to find their activity amusing. He dived at them again and again, uttering gravelly cries and fanning them with his wings.

"Do you suppose he wants more sandwich?" Colin asked.

"I don't know what the cheeky thing wants," Maggie growled back up at him, "But he makes ME want a slingshot."

In spite of her brave words, she stayed determinedly huddled in the bottom of the boat. She didn't see the water rush so quickly past an upended log that the log seemed to be swimming toward them. Neither did she watch the long olive shadows stripe across the crystal waters, light, dark, light, dark, as the basket whirled between ranks of spiraling spruce. And she missed the otter who stared at them curiously for only a moment before apparently deciding they had a good idea and sliding into the water himself.

But Colin saw and felt everything, and lay with his feet on one side of the boat, his back braced against the other, arms outflung around the edges, reveling in it all. He breathed deeply of greenery-spiced air sweetened with the fragrance of the wild-flowers which nodded in a neighborly fashion as the boat passed. As naturally as he breathed, and smelled, and saw, he started to sing. He sang just to sing, for the joy of it, imitating the birds and pipes and harps and fiddles, making nonsense sounds, singing lyrics only half-remembered, and slapping his legs in time with the companionable rhythm of Moonshine's and Roundelay's hoofbeats in the woods nearby.

From her vantage point at the bottom of the basket, Maggie stared dizzily up at him. "You're daft. You know that, don't you? We shall be dashed to pieces or drowned any moment now in this ill-begotten creation of mine and you're warbling away like an overblown relative of Aunt Sybil's Budgie."

He bawled out his chorus before answering, and gave her sodden braids a playful tug. "Don't be stuffy. This is fun if you'll just relax. Look, why don't you join me in a chorus or two, and maybe you'll forget to be frightened."

"I'm NOT frightened. I merely have no wish to face death sounding as if I'm on some holiday outing."

"Just pretend a little. Come on now. I'm really quite a wonderful song leader, everyone says so, particularly on chanteys. Try this. Repeat after me: 'And it's hey-hi-ho and away to the rolling sea.'"

That chorus cheered Maggie considerably. At least they were NOT on the rolling sea, merely a little stream. She sat up and flung her braids back so they streamed over the side of the basket, and favored Colin with a cautious, somewhat resentful stare. It was all very well for him. He liked water. The same mer blood that made him like water made him like to sing like a common siren, if without the usual disastrous results to seagoing vessels.

The boat tipped gracefully round again as his voice soared on a high note and sailed right up there for awhile. The harmony between the song and the boat's swirling, tilting onward rush caught Maggie too, and she scarcely knew when it was she started singing. Her voice blended with the raven's as much as with Colin's, but somehow everything around them made music; their voices, the water's swish and splatter, the copping hooves running beside the stream, the dip and twirl of the basket, the raven, who not only contributed his voice but danced a crazy counterpoint overhead. Whether their voices drove him to keep his distance or he had simply tired of diving at them was impossible to tell, but he stayed in the sky and stopped annoying them.

They passed from stands of mostly small trees into vast overhanging canopies of large ones, from mostly purple flowers to mostly yellow and white ones, from muddy banks to sandy beaches, and from seeing nothing
beyond them but dense trees to suddenly spotting through a break in those trees a glistening range of snow-capped mountains.

Colin, without missing a beat, pointed out an owl swooping across the stream far beyond them. Maggie whooped and nearly upset the boat when she spotted a tufty-eared lynx and her kittens drinking within touching distance of their basket.

Moonshine halted then, and before the mother lynx could be frightened away by Maggie's racket, diplomatically dipped his horn into the stream to reassure the lynx that they were interested in her welfare, not in harming her or her kittens.

Some time later they passed a beaver dam which spanned another inlet to the creek. The beaver popped from his lodge and slapped the water indignantly for silence. He was ignored.

They rode like that all day long, singing and laughing and talking and coming close to a soaking more than once. As darkness approached, they glided out of a broad meadow with a spectacular view of the Majestic Mountains. The range was so named, Colin explained, because the explorer who discovered them wished to honor the King, but Argonia happened to be between kings at the time and who knew but what the new ruler might not be a queen? So the explorer played it safe and simply labeled his find Majestic.

A short time later the boat swept out of the meadow and into a woods, and then a peculiar incident occurred which was to color the rest of their journey.

They heard a thump, as if some creature had fallen from the sky. Moonshine and Roundelay stopped, their ears pricked forward. The deep, webbed shadows cast by the tamarack and tall cedars appeared to gather themselves quickly together and leap-to splash suddenly downwards a short distance from their boat. For just a moment, Maggie had the impression of a booted foot and leg, but she had no time to see if the rest of the body would follow, since their boat chose that time to turn once more in the current. When they swung back again, the boot and leg had disappeared, the shadows were gathering on the other side of the stream, and then, abruptly, lifted. Once more the sunlight played among the trees as it had before.

All of them were shaken. Only Moonshine's presence kept the mare Roundelay from fleeing. Colin and Maggie stopped singing, and watched the mossy ground for other strange presences. The woods began to seem sinister-instead of a friendly carpet, the moss now smothered the ground, crept along tree roots and cloaked branches. Yet another variety of moss dripped down from the same branches, trailing from them like the long green hair of strangled sirens.

But quite apart from the unwholesome atmosphere, the waning light and the density of the trees made maneuvering more difficult, particularly since the banks were high and the stream was unusually broad at this point. Seemingly bound for imminent collision, they snarled instead in a tangle of exposed tree roots. Grasping spectral fingers could not have been more unsettling or inconvenient. Maggie hastily began searching for a place to pull the basket out of the stream for the night.

She was still searching when they rounded the next bend. There, directly ahead of them in the very middle of the stream, sat the smallest castle either of them had ever seen. More cottage-sized than castle-sized, it nevertheless boasted the standard turrets, and sported a tower at each comer, and a drawbridge and a moat, into which the stream fed, circling the castle and making an island of it.

The raven, absent since the boat first entered the woods, suddenly reappeared, croaking and cawing in a triumphant, raucous voice.

And slowly, with a creaking as painful as bones breaking on an inquisitor's rack, the drawbridge lowered. Moonshine stopped in his tracks, and Roundelay nickered nervously. Colin and Maggie ceased breathing, while their eyes darted from bank to bank, seeking some handhold they might use to pull their craft from the water before it delivered them up to whatever dwelled within those mossy walls.

But the castle's occupant didn't wait for the boat. As Colin and Maggie watched with horrified fascination, a great, long snout appeared on the bridge, followed by revolting, shaggy forefeet with talons as long as knitting needles. Soon the rest of the monster lumbered onto the bridge.

They had no hope that it failed to see them, For it ogled them with enormous, popping red eyes, larger than dinner plates and alight with malicious glee. The snout hung below its disgusting pendulous abdomen, and the entire fearsome apparition was coated with green slime and poisonous-looking growths, covering what looked like razor-sharp scales.

A slack, purplish tongue lolled from between fangs that would have done honor to the largest of bears. Its back was thronged with lethal spikes, and a thick ruff of stiff green hair wound itself around the monster's neck.

The boat skimmed ever closer to the bridge, and the monster reared, roaring with a voice like a forest fire, and clawed the air, as if limbering its talons to flay them as soon as they came in reach.
Moonshine trumpeted and pawed the ground, then, lowering his head, he made ready to charge. He sent a last cry to Maggie. "Fear not, gentle maiden! I shall protect you from harm if I die in the attempt!" And launched himself at the monster.

CHAPTER 6

Wulfric had ample opportunity to change from wolf form back into the guise of Count Jivemgood, for he heard Prince Leofwin swearing half a league before he smelled him.

"You certainly took your time," the prince complained when Wulfric detached himself from the night to stand before the nobleman's campfire. "I thought to meet you long before this— but, say, you must have passed me. How did you get here ahead of me? Even in this fancy footwear it's still taken me three days and a seven-league charley horse to make it this far."

The seven-league boots were propped against the log on which the prince sat vigorously massaging his shins. And from the black woods behind the gray-haired were-man, a sigh brushed the trees. Nearer and louder, the sigh became the rattle of dry leaves, and the writhing of new leaves against each other. Stalwart trees quaked to their roots.

Then, with a final rush, the fire blossomed more brightly than ever before it was smothered with earth and wet leaves. Showering sparks as high as Wulfric's head, it flickered and all but died. Beyond its embers Leofwin saw a cyclone spin into his camp.

The whirlwind spun itself down slowly, until the debris that had formed its substance fell to the ground and Leofwin saw a beautiful woman pirouette gracefully on one toe until she faced him.

"No, Moonshine!" Maggie cried, staring in horror as the unicorn charged the hideous moat monster. "Wait!"

But already Moonshine was plunging headlong at the slimy apparition. Maggie hollered and gestured, rising first to her knees and then to her feet trying to attract Moonshine's attention.

"Don't!" Colin yelled, but by then it was too late. The basket boat tipped as Maggie stood, and flopped itself over, dumping both witch and minstrel into the frigid waters.

"Help! Save me, dammit! Can't you see I'm drowning?"

Colin offered her his hand. "Try standing up," he suggested. "It's only knee deep."

Together they sloshed to shore. "Pah!" she spat the word out along with the water. "I knew I shouldn't have trusted a man who likes boats."

"And I never should have trusted a witch with no more sense than to stand up in one," he spat back, then nodded to where the unicorn and the monster stood, quietly, barely a cart length between them as they studied each other. "Look there," Colin whispered, pointing. "Isn't that curious, though?"

The monster made no threatening movements toward Moonshine, but the unicorn rolled his eyes and shook his mane nervously. "This thing smells odd, Maiden," he told Maggie. "Almost it smells--"

"Come on," Maggie pulled at Colin's arm. "Before that thing charges him."

But Colin pulled back, and when she turned around to give him a piece of her mind, he pointed to the monster's feet, shambling once more in an odd, blind, cumbersome gait towards the unicorn. "Look at that, will you?" Colin insisted, "At his feet, there, below all that shaggy stuff. I don't believe I can truthfully say I've ever seen a moat monster in its socking feet before, have you?"

Maggie stopped sputtering and squinted through her dripping lashes.

Even in the waning light she could see that the monster was indeed wearing, under his monster feet, a pair of socks that seemed to be knit from the remnants of someone's ragbag. Indeed, they looked ready to return to the ragbag again, for the heel on one foot and the great toe on the other were worn through the pattern of variegated stripes. A moat monster wearing socks meant only one thing to Maggie.

"Well," she sighed with no small relief, "I hope Aunt Sybil's tarts haven't gotten mashed."

"Yes," Colin agreed. "Looks hungry, doesn't he? We'll just have to take your aunt's word for it that he's as benevolent as she said. She might have gone into more detail about that master-of-disguise business, though. I wasn't prepared for anyone so flamboyant."

Approaching the monstrous wizard and the still-skittish unicorn, they heard a soft, pleasant voice speaking
from between the enormous monster teeth. "Verily, you are a handsome creature," it said.

An ordinary-looking human hand draped up the monster's pendulous stomach and stretched towards the unicorn's flaring nose. "I thank you very much for purifying my moat. Yonder ducks and fish would thank you as well, had your companions not affrighted them."

Moonshine nickered. "My companions affrighted them? What do you suppose you did? Think not to trick ME with honeyed words and a kindly scent, varlet! Maiden!" The unicorn appealed to Maggie. "This thing would parlay with me. What am I to do? I would bespeak this creature to save you, but already I have sullied myself and gone against my Creed by associating with your minstrel-champion. Now you see what has become of it? Having once lowered myself, I'm expected to chitchat with any sort of vile hobgoblin who cares to pass the time of day! Whatever shall I say to such a creature?"

"Try 'you're welcome, mighty wizard' for openers," Maggie said. "And don't be such a snob, darling. This particular vile hobgoblin is a friend of the family. Wizard Raspberry, I presume?" she asked, extending her hand somewhere towards the end of the monster's snout.

The thing attempted to bend over her hand as if to kiss it or bite it with his gigantic teeth-shreds of birch bark, she could see now. But as he leaned forward, his head began to slide off. Maggie caught most of it in her arms as it peeled away from the top half of a bony individual of her father's generation.

The man sported a bushy beard and shaggy gray hair which stood out in all directions from having the monster's head pulled off over it. His ears also stuck out at acute angles from either side of his head, and were distinctly pointed. A tattered gown embroidered with crude chainstitched astrological designs clothed the half not covered by the monster's bottom portion. Seemingly oblivious to his strange appearance, the wizard examined his guests with eyes as shrewd and curious as those of the raven, which now perched on his shoulder. He seemed to think THEY were the funny-looking ones.

Maggie wrung her skirt out between her hands before wiping her fingers on it, then re-extended her hand to the unprepossessing wizard. "Pleased to meet you, I'm sure. Wizard Raspberry, isn't it? This is Colin Songsmith, the King's minstrel and my traveling companion, and this is Moonshine, who's a unicorn, as any fool can see. I'm Maggie Brown, daughter of Bronwyn, daughter of Maude, daughter of Oonaugh, but most important, I suppose, from your point of view, niece to Sybil." She ended her introduction with a sniffle and a sneeze.

The wizard pulled a handkerchief out of her ear and handed it to her. "Of course you are," he agreed kindly. "I'd have known who you were straight away if Jack here hadn't insisted you were marauding bandits. That's why I greeted you in costume. But please, come, you're wet, and you must be tired and hungry."

When they were sitting wrapped in blankets while their clothing dried by the wizard's fire, Maggie asked. "You call the raven Jack. Is he your familiar, then?"

Raspberry smiled. "Oh, no. We're just good friends. Like all the others." A sweeping gesture indicated the squirrels, rabbits, chipmunks, martins, ermine and mice who nested in nooks and crannies throughout the room. Nesting materials were abundant, for the room was littered with piles and piles of bark and old cloth. The animals made full use of it all. The ones who weren't napping stared at the newcomers from eyes shining like sparks in the candlelit room.

"They seem to like you," Colin said conversationally.

"We have a working relationship. They shelter here and share my garden whenever they wish, and I, in turn, use them for models for my disguises and drawings." He smiled indulgently at the mother squirrel nursing three babies, all of them cuddled into an old robe stacked atop a mound of bark. "Also, they make excellent paperweights."

One of the squirrels scrambled to get a better position at his mother's breast, and his tiny legs churned out a piece of bark. Maggie picked it up and started to restore it to the pile, when she saw the drawing, a charming sketch of the spotted buck rabbit who was currently sniffing and hopping among the crumbs on the wizard's table. "He almost looks as if he's moving," she said, comparing the sketch to the rabbit.

The wizard nodded and looked amused. She began to examine other sketches. Most of them were of forest creatures, drawn with the same lifelike quality, in realistic poses and attitudes. Many were clearly the models for the heads adorning the wizard's walls. The heads were hung as hunters might hang trophies, or warriors their shields, but the wizard explained they were only the top portions of his various disguises. The majority of them were realistic replicas of deer, moose, bear or dragon, but a few were as wildly imaginative and outlandish as the moat monster. Among the sketches and masks were some drawings of elves and faeries, and even one of a troll. A fetching charcoal depicting a pointy-eared child with the wizard's wide enigmatic grin was tacked above the mantle, and caught Maggie's eye.

"Self portrait of the artist at an early age?" she asked.

"My daughter," he replied with what she thought was a trace of sadness. "But, come now, you didn't travel all
this way to talk about me, nor just to swim in my moat, either, I'll wager. Tell me, what service may I render?"

Maggie outlined their problems for him, with an occasional assist from Colin and from Moonshine, who knelt contentedly in a pile of straw in one corner of the room and noisily crunched carrots from the wizard's vegetable patch.

"I see," was all Raspberry said when she'd finished.
"Can you help?" she asked.
He smiled. "Partially. I can't give you any pointers on indefinitely maintaining your chastity, though I'm sure I could think of something if a pretty lass like you was looking for someone to relieve her of the burden--"

Moonshine stopped crunching carrots and glared, and Maggie flushed a shade deeper and shook her head.
"But as for Moonshine, I can provide some assistance."

Selecting a long strip of bark from beneath a dozing red fox, Raspberry wet the bark, then rolled it into a tight cone. From an earthenware crock he drew a glob of amber goo, which he liberally smeared with a fingertip along the edges of the cone. "Extra-sticky tree sap," he explained. "Wonderful for sticking things together."

They nodded and watched while he finished the cone, holding it up parallel to Moonshine's horn and studying it critically. Then, with a satisfied grunt, he set the cone in his lap and began passing his hands across it in strange designs.

"Stand back," he warned, as both Colin and Maggie crowded close in their curiosity over the mysterious cone.
"This part is simple, but the spell I'm about to invoke is dangerous. It's a spell of invisibility, which I'll apply directly to this cone rather than to Moonshine's horn. That way you can just take the cone on and off without making the horn permanently disappear. But the spell can waste you away to nothing if you get in the way. I have to shield against it myself."

His inquisitive guests hastily removed themselves to their former positions on the opposite side of the table.
"Here we go!" he said, and intoned in a ceremonially deliberate voice.
"Celery and grapefruit. Lettuce, melon, eye of newt. Broccoli and cauliflower! Grow much thinner in this hour. Water only thirst to slake; Shrink as slim as garter snake. Thinner thin than onion skin Till the light can pass within. Stir well in a glass receptacle! Now the thing is imperceptible!"

It was, too. As they watched and Raspberry chanted, the solid bark cone in his hands thinned and thinned and grew first translucent, then transparent, until, with the final word of the enchantment, it disappeared utterly.

Gingerly, Raspberry bore what seemed to be air to Moonshine, who watched him nervously. "What have you there, mighty wizard? Hold! Hold, I say! Let me look--"

"You can't look, silly," Maggie said. "That's the point of it all. It's invisible."

"Just a bit of millinery work, noble unicorn," Raspberry answered soothingly, "to make your identity less obvious."

Steadying Moonshine's twitching neck with one hand, the wizard fitted the "o" made by his fingers and thumb over the tip of the unicorn's horn with the other hand and slid the nothingness in his palm down until his hand rested on the unicorn's forehead. While the hand was sliding downward, the horn above the fingers disappeared. Moonshine crossed his eyes trying to see his own forehead.

"Is it really GONE?" he asked.

For an answer, Raspberry found a silver-backed, only slightly cracked, lady's hand mirror, and showed Moonshine his reflection with the cone of invisibility in place. Then he raised the cone, before the unicorn became unduly alarmed, to reveal the familiar opalescent horn.

He had to repeat the sequence several times before Moonshine was mollified. Then, laying the mirror aside, the wizard jiggled the cone against the base of Moonshine's horn.

"It's a bit loose. Perhaps we might tie a handkerchief around it when you gallop, though you shouldn't have any problems otherwise. It's not as effective as making your actual horn invisible, you understand, but I thought perhaps you'd like to be able to show it, in case you should meet those other unicorns you're seeking."

"Assuredly!" Moonshine said. "I wouldn't want them to mistake me for a HORSE!"

"No," Maggie said, "But it will be very handy to have any other humans we encounter think you're a horse. You can cover your hooves just by standing in something that conceals them."

"Are you going to clip his beard?" Colin asked.

Moonshine rolled his eyes again and Maggie answered quickly. "No, of course not. If anyone asks, I'll just say he's a very OLD horse, and we grow them bearded at Fort Iceworm for warmth."

But Colin's question had upset Moonshine. Glancing again at his hornless reflection in the wizard's mirror, he began to tremble. Maggie quickly removed the cone and tied it up with her own handkerchief, so she could keep track of it.
"That was VERY impressive," Colin said. "I'd drink to that at any time."

"Ah, yes, drink!" the wizard said. "What will you have? Ale, wine, mead, moose milk?"

"You have all that?" Maggie asked, for she could see no signs in the small keep of brewing facilities or wine stores.

"No. Actually, all I have is water. But you may have anything you like." He filled earthenware tumblers with water from a pitcher and set them before his guests. "Go on. Just say what you'd prefer."

Colin sighed. How sad it was that the very magically gifted were so often a little deranged. Even Maggie was watching the wizard warily. But the poor man had provided a very effective disguise for Moonshine, which was what they'd asked him to do. To humor him and to be courteous, Colin sipped his water, saying, "Actually, I'd prefer ale but there's nothing like a cup of wa-ale?" He nearly gagged on what tasted like Granny Brown's finest dark ale. Lowering his cup, he peered into the clear cold moat water it still contained, then cautiously raised the cup to his lips again and took another sip. "Ale. But--"

"A simple disguise," the wizard shrugged and grinned a mischievous grin that made his pointed elvish ears look more appropriate than ever. "I could disguise the look of it, too, if you wish. I don't usually take the trouble here at home, though. Al! I eat is fish and vegetables and an occasional egg now and then. Most of the animals hereabouts are friends of mine, and it doesn't seem neighborly to hunt them. But I can make fish or vegetable hash taste like venison or pate de fois gras if I feel like it."

"Lovely!" Maggie exclaimed enthusiastically. "May I please have some cider? Hot and spiced would be wonderful."

"You and Maggie should open an inn together," Colin suggested, joking. "You could make a fortune between you with your magic making eggs taste like venison and hers expanding it into an entire roast deer in savory sauce, all with none of the trouble or expense of hunting a real deer."

"To the best of my knowledge," the wizard replied with mock arrogance, "Royal princesses, even reluctant ones, have never become innkeepers, no matter how profitable the venture might be."

Maggie laughed and raised her pseudo-cider in a toast, clinking tumblers with the wizard's container full of ersatz Ablemar-lonian wine-Old Executioner '47, a very good year, he gave them to understand. "I've had enough of innkeeping AND processing," she declared. "And I daresay the wizard keeps himself to himself out here because he likes being alone."

Raspberry chuckled and winked merrily at her. "Not all the company one has in normal society is so enchanting."

"Still," Colin argued, "I should think it would be boring out here in these woods all by yourself all the time with nothing to do but draw pictures and dress in funny costumes."

"If I remember correctly," the wizard said, "they do much the same thing at court, except they don't draw pictures. Besides, that's not all I do; I have my little projects as well, you know, and my garden. And people do seek me out now and then to ask for a spot of magic. What they pay helps provide me with what I can't make for myself, which isn't much. Usually I charge some commodity that will help with my projects, though that depends on the client."

"What projects, master wizard?" Maggie asked. She hadn't thought about a fee, though she should have. Even among friendly magicians who extended a certain amount of professional courtesy to each other, some fee had to be charged in order for the magic to be worth anything. Granny Brown had told her that often enough. But Maggie realized Raspberry was too polite to bring the subject up directly, so she asked, "Do you mean you practice learning extra skills your magic doesn't aid you with? Like my Granny does healing and ale brewing, which have nothing to do with transforming, and like Aunt Sybil practices metalsmithing to relax her from gazing into the present?"

"Yes," the wizard nodded, "Precisely like that. And like you go on quests to provide diversion from hearthcrafting."

"It's not really like that," she protested.

"And like Colin here performs real heroics to give himself a break from simply singing about them," the wizard finished.

Colin looked up, startled and pleased. He'd never thought of it that way before but now that the wise and mighty wizard mentioned it, he supposed one could look at the quests he'd undertaken in that light.

"I don't do anything so practical myself," Raspberry confessed. "Mostly I just tinker with trying to make the things I draw work. Like balloons, for instance."

"Balloons?" Maggie asked. "That's a funny word. What does it mean?"

"Nothing-yet," the wizard answered. "Though it's supposed to be a sort of flying ball that keeps floating through the air after you've let go of it. I drew the first one before I left court many years ago. Even built my house
here with towers so I'd have a good place to launch the things from, once I got them invented." He shook his head sadly. "So far, I haven't been able to make the idea work."

"I'd have to see a flying ball to believe one," Maggie said, settling back in her chair with her arms crossed under her blanket and a skeptical expression on her face. "Unless it's magic, of course, I can't imagine such a thing working."

"You're right, I'm afraid. Mostly it doesn't," the wizard admitted, rising and combing through the upended boxes which served him as cabinets until he extracted a triumphant fist full of small tan objects. These he rolled onto the table in front of Maggie. "So far, fish bladders work best. You can blow them up and sail them. They'll go as far as the edge of the moat with a good headwind."

He sounded so discouraged, Maggie tried to appear interested as she watched him puff one of the bladders to twice its normal size. It hung on the air for a moment, then dropped sputtering to the floor.

"They'd be wonderful toys," Colin said helpfully. "Children would love them at fairs and festivals."

But Raspberry shook his head. "They're too heavy, you see. That's the problem. I'm sure one could get them to fly properly, if only one had enough air. And then too, what if they did catch on with children? What would happen to all the fish then? I hate making a toy out of part of a living thing."

Maggie picked one up. "I don't think you need to worry. They aren't very pretty or colorful. I doubt children would take to them anyway."

"But you want them to really FLY?" Colin asked. He was becoming intrigued with the idea. "Like dragons?"

"That was the idea. I'd hoped eventually to think of some-tiling one could do with them that would make them rather larger. I'd even thought, you know, that perhaps I might find a way to blow one up large enough to carry a man."

Maggie was still handling the bladder. "Colored silks would be prettier than this," she said critically. "Lighter, too."

"But one couldn't just knot a handkerchief, don't you see?" Raspberry protested. "All the air would get out."

"One could, however, sew it in the proper shape," Maggie said gently. It was clear from the ragged condition of his gown and the roughness of its embroidery that Wizard Raspberry knew very little about tailoring, however much he might know about the other aspects of disguise. "Then you could seal it, if it was to stay up a long time, by waterproofing it the way we do the seams of our snowboots."

"Wouldn't that make it too heavy?" Raspberry was as avid now as a hound with a scent.

"Not if you only did the seams," she replied. "Even that tree sap you used to glue Moonshine's cone should do."

Before she'd finished speaking Raspberry was sending squirrels and rabbits scurrying as he knocked over stacks of drawings and pawed his way under his bed. "I have a very large stock of colored handkerchiefs somewhere," he said. "A friend of mine left them here, a performing magician, you know, one of those chaps who keeps pulling things out of the air. Taught me a few tricks in payment for some little thing I did for him, but then he persuaded some of my rabbit friends to join his show and didn't have room for all the-ah! Here they are!"

By the time Maggie curled up in the straw next to Moonshine and pillowed her head against his neck, she felt more at peace with the world than she had in some time. With her magic guiding the sewing and fine stitching, and the wizard providing the pattern for the balloon and the air to blow it up, they'd had several lovely toys bobbling around the room that very evening.

She smiled to herself, recalling how pleased Raspberry had been. "I can scarcely wait to float them off the tower in the morning!" he said. "I'll wager they'll sail clear to Queenston!"

"At the very least," Colin had agreed. "We'll have a regular launching ceremony. I'm sure I'll be able to think of an appropriate song."

But the morning was to bring other, more pressing business. And guests.

Making inquiries of the other animals in the district, Wulfric soon learned that Maggie Brown and the unicorn were quartered in the castle of a well-liked wizard whose premises were considered locally to be inviolable without invitation. The woodland creatures carried on about the wizard in a perfectly disgusting fashion.

The foxes said how clever he was, the rabbits how kind, the bears how brave and the elk how fleet, while one particularly doting lynx went into raptures about the man's inquisitiveness and patience. When a porcupine started telling him how good-natured the wizard was, Wulfric growled that he had half a mind to find out if he could add to their testimony his own about how good the wizard tasted. He would have tried, too, except that the slavish devotion of the other creatures made him feel slightly off his feed. He settled for eating the rabbit, instead.

But that didn't solve the problem of how he was to pry the unicorn out of the castle. The solution didn't occur to him until after he'd eaten the rabbit. He thought how delicious the hare was after all the scrawny, sickly animals he'd been eating along the way, where Sally had already captured the unicorns. A deer had complained bitterly, before he'd gutted her, that he'd never have been able to catch her if humans hadn't stolen her friend the unicorn, leaving the
water in the district to putrefy and her and the other deer too weak to run. That gave him his brilliant idea.

He howled victoriously at the sheer craft of his plan, then changed his howl to one of illness, pain and self-pity. By the time a few of the larger animals had gathered to see who would have the privilege of finishing him off, he had his story ready.

"Oh, my furry brothers and sisters, I want to thank you for coming," he gasped, crawling piteously on his belly toward the lynx, and allowing his tongue to loll. "I fear I'm a goner, for the blight is upon me! But I say unto you, it is not too late to save yourselves! Act now, before your stream is destroyed too, and your forest ruined, and all of you sicken by the evil acts of that EEEVIL man in yonder castle and the wicked wanton witch he shelters, yea. even in the midst of her foulest deed! Free yon unicorn from their wretched hands before you, too, fall prey to my terrible-cough, hack, gag-affliction." Here he rolled over on his back and waggled his paws feebly in the air.

"What's with him?" a raven asked from an overhanging branch.

"Too much wolfsbane is my guess," the lynx said. "Or maybe it's that full moon we've had lately. You know how wolves are about full moons."

"Just keep him away from my litter," the boar's mat grunted.

"Oh, bristly sister," Wulfric cried, allowing his voice to shriek to its most piercing. "Why, I would not harm a hair of your chinny-chin-chin. Oh. no. Far from it! I seek only to warn you. That evil woman lodging with your crafty wizard means to destroy us all! In all parts of the greenwood, our furry brothers are dying, I tell you, dying in agonies from water tainted for want of unicorn magic! It's purely dreadful, is what it is, brothers and sisters. I urge you, as a dying brother to you all, with my last breath, I beg you, storm that castle and free that unicorn! Let every beast here today among us apply his or her fangs, teeth, horns, claws, talons and thaws to the task before us and free our forest once and for all of the human menace! Gasp-choke, I'm done for, brothers and sisters, but I will not have died in vain if you heed my words and save yourselves from the horror awaiting you." And with that, he performed a very credible death rattle and slunk convulsively into the shrubbery, just in case anyone had ideas about taking advantage of his nobly done demise to add variety to the menu.

From his hiding place, he heard them conferring, shuffling, snuffling, arguing, until at last the bear stood on his hind legs and looked around, saying, "I think Rrraspberry has something to answer for here. That she is up to no good, I knew it all along."

"But the unicorn came WITH her," the lynx protested.

"Unicorns got no more sense than wizards when it comes to shes. Everybody knows that," the bear growled. "I say we makes jam outta old Rraspberry and her with 'im."

Colin awoke to the sound of roaring. Unable at first to remember where he was, he tried to unstick his weary eyes as his mind wandered out of a dream of glittering ice caverns and beautiful women with expressions of frozen horror. Since it wasn't a particularly pleasant dream, he managed to convince his eyes to compromise and open half-way.

The Ley walls of his dream thereupon turned to log ones, the icy floor to bark-strewn boards, and one of the frozen ladies turned into a bearded man who was hastily pulling on his socks. Ah, yes, the wizard. That explained that. But what was that damnaable roaring? Colin rose on his elbow and considered the noise.

He initially decided it was the stream that fed the moat indulging itself in a midsummer flood, except the roaring wasn't a gurgly sort of roaring. It was rather a growling, hissing, squawking, mrowling, stomping, pawing kind of roaring. It sounded more like-he sat up abruptly as the wizard stepped quickly over Maggie and Moonshine and reached for the door.

"Wait, Raspberry!" Colin called, drawing on his own boots and breeches and reaching for the sword the King had given him all at once. "What's amiss here? It sounds as if every beast of the forest is converging on us. Have you invited them all to breakfast and kept them waiting?" He pulled on his shirt while he waited for his answer, stuffing flutes and whistles and picks back into his pockets.

"You're close," the wizard said, but didn't return his smile.

Maggie rose in a brown tangle from" the crescent of Moonshine's neck. She turned her back as she drew on her tunic and skirt under the blanket. Her movement alerted the unicorn, who bolted awake.

"What ho. Maiden?" he asked, jumping to his feet. His ears pricked, then flattened as he sniffed the air. "I hear a most unseemly racket."

Maggie shook her head and quickly slipped the invisible cone over his horn, in case the disturbance was of human origin. Then, heeding the impatient gestures Colin and the wizard were making, she and Moonshine followed them across the open courtyard leading to the drawbridge. Jack the raven circled them protectively as overhead flocks of birds, geese, gulls, and ducks as well as ravens, hawks and owls, wheeled screaming and honking in a sulky gray sky.
Colin swore and wiped a tangible blob of evidence of the birds' displeasure from his hair. At the gatehouse, he and Maggie crouched nervously behind Raspberry as the wizard grasped the handle of the drawbridge ratchet and lowered the bridge with a squealing clank onto the opposite shore.

With seeming nonchalance. Raspberry started to cross the moat.

At once the clamor dulled to an anxious grumble. The whole forest tossed fitfully, as in a bad dream, agitated by the wind. The same wind whipped Raspberry's beard and Moonshine's mane and tail, and lashed Maggie's snarled hair about her face.

But it was difficult to say whether the wind or anger ruffled the pelts and feathers of the throng around the bridge. Foxes, otters, bears, lynx, deer, wolves and wild pigs faced them with a collective feralness focused so fiercely that hairs rose on the back of Colin's own neck. On the perimeter of the crowd, a small phoenix looked dangerously close to bursting into flame as it huddled close to its companion, a diminutive salamander. The wildfowl ceased their troubled aerial gyrations and settled on the end of the drawbridge, forcing the wizard back a step.

Hundreds of bright wild eyes glowered accusingly at the wizard.

Now Raspberry's pointed ears tilted forward and Colin saw him force himself to maintain his casual stance. "What is it, friends?" the wizard asked in a tongue that, while it seemed to be Argonian, contained also something of the speech of each beast. "I smell no smoke, no great fire that would drive you forth in such numbers to seek refuge within my walls. To what do I owe the honor of this visit?"

A brown bear rumbled forward, growling low in his throat.

"What about?" Maggie asked. But as she sought to lay a restraining hand on his back, another angry roar rose from the mob, and it began pouring toward them, sweeping Wizard Raspberry in front of it.

In one rabbity bound, the wizard leapt back behind the gatehouse and began raising the bridge again. Wildfowl exploded upward, shrieking, as the bridge clanged shut.

Mopping his brow, Raspberry sank back against the gatehouse. "This is serious," he said. "They seem to think I've betrayed them."

Moonshine snorted. "If you're in charge of this woods, good wizard, I suggest you make that bear take back his slanderous remark about my maiden immediately! Bears! Bah! They're such liars!"

"Would that I could follow your suggestion, wise unicorn," Raspberry replied with a faint suggestion of a smile, "but it isn't that easy, you see. to make a bear do anything he doesn't wish to do. Besides, Bonebelcher isn't the only one who thinks we're all unicorn-nappers."

"Unicorn-nappers?" Colin echoed, "But that's utter nonsense! We already have a very serviceable unicorn at our disposal. Or rather, he has us, and I must say for my part he's more than enough. The only reason I, personally, am wandering about out here in the woods like this is to do him a great personal favor at tremendous inconvenience to myself and considerable peril to my career."

Raspberry held up a restraining hand. "Hold, minstrel. I believe you. But they seem to think otherwise."

"I thought you were friendly with them," Maggie said, ducking gracefully aside as a load of goose guano plopped past her nose and onto the stepping stone at her feet. Raspberry opened the door to the gatehouse tower and they resumed their conference on the dark inner stairway leading to the tower's crenelated roof.

"Ordinarily, I am on good terms with most of them, even Bonebelcher," Raspberry replied in answer to her question. "Though he's always been a surly sort-comes from closer to the village and has had some close calls at being hunted, you know. But, though he has no use for men in general, I was beginning to hope he rather liked me and-eh?" he broke off as Jack, seated on his shoulder, began making low gargling sounds which Colin surmised from the way the wizard kept saying "uh huh-and then what-is that so?" constituted speech for the raven.

"Well, now. That is interesting," Raspberry said when the raven had finished. "Jack here tells me there's a strange wolf in the neighborhood. A sick wolf who's been stirring up the woodland creatures, telling them that the part of the forest where he comes from is dying, and all of its denizens with it, because human beings are kidnapping unicorns and leaving the water to go bad."

"That's awful!" Maggie cried. "Anyone who'd do a thing like that should be torn to shreds!"

"That's the general consensus," Raspberry said glumly. "And the wolf has convinced most of the animals that you and Colin are the kidnappers, with Moonshine as your latest victim. I'm supposed to be your accomplice, harboring you in my castle."

Moonshine butted the door open with his horn. "I'll tell them," he said, and pranced out into the courtyard with his head held high. "Kindly open your gate, wizard."
The raven squawked loudly and circled Moonshine's head. 
"Your disguise!" the wizard said, chuckling to himself as he reached up to remove Moonshine's cone of invisibility. "No wonder the animals became so upset when you showed yourself. They must have thought we'd dehorned you."

Once more the bridge was lowered, but this time the others kept well back while Moonshine trotted across it, tossing his head a little contemptuously.

"See here, you ridiculous beasts," he scolded. "I am a free unicorn, here on a perfectly normal quest with my maiden and our good friend the minstrel, and I'll thank you to--"

"You're the one who's ridiculous, 'corny,'" the boar grunted. "Letting those scoundrels lead you to the slaughter without so much as a fight while you forget your proper duty and let our water spoil."

"I must say," a long-snooted moose sniffed, "I never thought I'd see the day when a unicorn lowered himself to become domesticated. I think it's just vile the way you're behaving!"

But the bear called Bonebelcher lumbered forward again and swiped at Moonshine's horn. "Come along, buddy, whilst we got 'em cornered in there, and you can get away. Take a little nap back there in the greenwood. We'll make sure she and her pals don't never hurt none of your kind again." With a great lunge, he grasped Moonshine's horn and tugged. The unicorn danced back, shaking his head angrily.

"How dare you! Let go, I say!" Moonshine cried as the bear dragged him forward.

"He can't do that!" Maggie exclaimed. "I'll throw a ring of fire around the castle this very minute and--" Colin grabbed her hair as she rushed forward.

"And start a forest fire that will burn the whole place down?" he asked. "That'd get rid of the wizard's friends alright. AND Moonshine. AND us. But I'll admit it would save them the trouble of tearing everything to pieces if you bum it all down first."

Moonshine, feinting forward and with a quick lunge to the rear, caught the bear off guard and escaped, galloping at top speed back into the courtyard. Maggie stopped talking of burning things and snuggled protectively against the unicorn's neck, but the look she threw Colin was clearly calculated to singe.

Wizard Raspberry raised the bridge again. Catching the angry looks passing between the two friends, he intervened on Colin's behalf. "He's right, you know. They think they're just protecting Moonshine and themselves against the trouble the wolf told them of. If only they'd listen to us for a change."

"Let down that bridge again and I'll make them listen to reason," Maggie snapped. "Those narrow-minded brute-brained beasts ought to know better than to think any of us would be party to a scheme like that."

"A few of them do understand human speech," the wizard said mildly, "But I doubt if they'll respond well to being called narrow-minded brute-brained beasts."

"Oh, I won't say that," she said, reaching past him to lower the drawbridge herself. "I'll be sweet as pie, you'll see. But I won't be intimidated by a bear or two and a lot of walking fur cloaks."

"Maggie--" Colin began, but was drowned out by a deafening roar as Maggie strode out onto the bridge.

Moonshine leapt forward. "I'll defend you, Maiden!"

"Don't be silly. You saw how vicious that bear was," she called back over her shoulder. "If you're killed defending me all of this will be worthless, won't it?"

The roar grew until it shook the ground, and the animals surged forward, onto the bridge. Maggie didn't falter, and kept her expression calm, gentle and kind. Whether or not her voice matched it, or whether indeed she said anything at all, Colin couldn't have said, for he couldn't hear a thing over the roaring.

Bonebelcher growled and snuffled a challenge, and charged. Hot on his heels ran the boar and his family of wild pigs, while the birds pecked and plucked at Maggie's hair.

Above the roar, Colin heard her yell, "Just a cross-cursed minute, you beasts!" and the bridge was suddenly laden with throngs of scampering, scurrying, charging, crawling beasts all trying to attack the witch.

Moonshine screamed a high, piercing scream and shot forward, his horn working like a scythe, cutting feathers and fur from his path to his maiden. Wizard Raspberry jumped into the fray too, and tried to pull Maggie away from her attackers, but was himself, attacked.

Colin raised his sword, Banshee Bringer, and started forward, yodeling a particularly effective battle song he'd heard His Majesty singing while in his cups. To Colin's total amazement, his voice carried high over all the racket, and the animals began melting from the bridge in droves.

"Wha-?" he stopped and saw Maggie, scratched and bruised but basically whole, being helped to her feet from beneath Moonshine's shielding belly by the wizard.

As soon as Colin ceased his song, the animals renewed their attack.

"Keep singing!" Raspberry called. And Colin did, continuing the battle song and looking as menacing as he
possibly could until they were all safely back within the courtyard with the bridge up again.

"This is getting monotonous," Maggie panted. "No matter what we try to say or who tries to talk to them they just don't listen."

"Aye. I'm glad you've proved that to your own satisfaction, witch, after almost costing us all our lives," Colin said. "I'm afraid my singing battle songs isn't going to improve their impression of us on any son of permanent basis. They don't need any more ranting and yelling, that mob. They need to calm down a bit, before they tear this castle apart stick by stick."

"Perhaps another, more soothing song?" the wizard suggested.

"You must be jesting!" Maggie said. "Anything more soothing than a tribe of dragons in full flame would be lost on that bunch!"

"It's worth a try," Colin told her coldly. "My voice DOES carry rather well, so I've always been told. It's the siren blood, I suppose."

Maggie sniffed, and dabbed at a scratch on her arm with a spit-wet fingertip. "Well, unless you want to see your siren blood all over the ground, and ours with it, may I suggest from recent bitter experience that you conduct your serenade from the tower instead of the bridge?"

He knew a good suggestion when he heard one. "Right," he nodded, and headed for the door.

"Colin," she called after him. "Watch out for the birds, won't you?"

At first nothing seemed to happen.

Colin had decided to use a tin whistle to play a gentle air, rather than spend his voice on singing and risk having it fail him. He raised it, trembling, to his lips, and feared for a moment his breath would refuse to come. But after a vain puff or two, the music which was his magic took over from the frightened, mortal part of him, and he began to play-sweetly, liltingly, first the air, then a medley that became an improvised woodland rhapsody.

To his immense relief, his efforts weren't wasted on the beasts. An otter stopped throwing rocks at the castle after the first few notes, and the bear, after circling restlessly for a chorus or two, settled down grumbling and promptly fell asleep. The birds stopped circling Colin's tower almost immediately, and soon folded their wings, roosting on the tower's crenelations and joining in with their own thread of melody.

Colin played until the sun rose reluctantly into the sky and the wild mother pig had to stop listening to give suck to her piglets. By then it was so quiet that, except for the tune, all that could be heard was a woodpecker pecking time, his red head darting in the dazzling greenery as he added counterpoint to the rhythm dictated by the whistle.

At last, Colin stopped. "Thank you, thank you very much. You've been a wonderful audience but now it's time for a few words--" He was cut off by disgruntled growls from the bear and the boar, who rose as soon as he stopped playing. "All right, all right. I love encores--"

Wizard Raspberry and Maggie had climbed the tower stairs and now stood beside him.

"Softly, minstrel," Raspberry suggested. "Perhaps I can reason with them as you play."

Wulfric had watched from within the foliage as the animals descended on the witch and tore her to shreds. He couldn't linger any longer than that, for now it was day, and he had to spend a few hateful hours in man form, which meant he must flee this part of the forest before the animals turned on him, too.

But he felt well pleased with the report he could carry to Sally. With the humans out of the way and the Dark Pilgrim's treacherous she-kin destroyed, the unicorn was theirs for the taking.

He loped in wolf form as long as he possibly could, to the edge of the forest, thrilling to the bestial roaring and the witch's screaming.

He felt so good as he ran that he covered a great deal of ground long before he had to surrender to man shape overtaking him, as it always did at least once before the sun reached the middle of the sky. He covered so much ground, in fact, that not even his sharp ears could hear the minstrel's battle song or the whistle. Nor could he hear the voice of the wizard as he made peace with the neighbors Wulfric had schemed so hard to set against him.

CHAPTER 7

Leofwin decided he had almost missed his calling. The warrior prince business was dull and unstimulating compared with a career as one of Sally Form's hooligans—or revolutionaries, as she called them.

Though so far there'd been little opportunity to collect spoils, all he had had to do to accomplish Sally's first mission was stand around the tavern and look fierce while she bamboozled the town's mayor into surrendering the local unicorn.

Between Sally's winsome way with an argument and the not-too-subtle hint of violence from the loitering bandits, the mayor's reluctance melted into a mealy-mouthed prayer that she wouldn't sack the town. To Leofwin's amusement. Sally said nothing one way or the other. She just smiled prettily.
Something buzzed past Leofwin's ear and he swatted at it, thinking it one of the pesky mosquitoes so prevalent in these swamplike lowland areas. A faery the size of a bottle cork, dressed in a motley collection of what seemed to be well-used kerchiefs, escaped his swat and shimmered near the mayor's nose, fists balled on her fly-speck hips.

"I'm telling you, Fuller," she threatened, "You can't let them do it. I'm not going to let you let them do it."

The mayor swiped a cupped hand at the end of his nose, but the faery bobbed out of reach. Wearily, the man said, "More to the point, Little Woman, these good folk are not going to let us NOT let them do it. And excuse me, but they're a lot bigger than you are."

"Don't you give me that," the faery scolded, hovering in front of his nose again and shaking her small finger vigorously at him. "There's more grown folk in this town than this turncoat trollop brought with her. " She jerked a tiny thumb at Sally Forth. "And you have three pretty good magicians and a damn good village witch besides. How much advantage do you have to have to defend Snowshadow, anyway? I suppose you've conveniently forgotten that it was the very unicorn you're dying to sell out who kept you slobs from fouling your own nests and dying of water poisoned by your own slops when her windiness there decided she was tired of guarding your stream and set off to be queen of the bandits."

"We have only your word for it that the unicorn Snowshadow does anything at all, faery," the mayor replied. "Does she ever come into town to get shod at our local establishment? No. Has she ever offered a lift to even one citizen of this fair village? No, again. All WE'VE known of her is that she warns the game away from the stream if any of us are so foolish as to try to hunt when she's around. As you do, you imp. Nastur-Sally, here, always made herself more than agreeable when SHE was our stream guardian. Prettied up the scenery, pointed out good places to hunt, rode at the head of the founder's day parade for the last ten years."

The faery shook her head slowly and flew to the door. "You're a dunderhead. Fuller. Snowshadow's been good to this town. She only does what unicorns are supposed to do, and whether you know it or not, idiot, that's exactly what this rotten burg of yours needs. I'm warning this town here and now. Send this pixilated strumpet and her outfit packing, or you'll be sorry!"

The mayor was no fool. He had the innkeeper chase the little insect out with a broom, and got down to negotiating how much valuable consideration the township could expect as recompense for the cultural, aesthetic and environmental deprivation they hoped to experience with the loss of their unicorn.

The actual capture was slick and easy, due again to the brains and beauty of their cute little leader. She sat herself down in the grass, looking so demure and delicious Leofwin could hardly wait until they'd bagged the beastie who very sensibly wandered out of the woods to lay its horny head in her lap.

But now that the capture was accomplished, and the beast docile as a saddle-horse in its specially prepared hobbles, Leofwin dawdled behind. The others poured back into the tavern for refreshment, and Sally lingered back in the woods, whispering sweet lies into the unicorn's ear to keep it calm. If only she'd stay put and not turn into a whirlwind before his comrades were out of earshot, Leofwin fancied he'd manage to find the life of a brigand very rewarding indeed.

With dragon-manufactured wind, the Snake's Bane made even better time than her crew had originally anticipated.

They rounded the Southern Arm and sliced through the Ablemarlonian Straits in four days flat, a record unheard of for any sailing vessel in the known world.

Now they hugged close to Argonia's easternmost shores. For the last two days and nights they'd seen nothing but the blue-white shelf of the Suicide Glacier, which was so called because it kept hurling bits of itself into the sea. It was believed by superstitious early explorers to be the last of the frost giants, slowly dismembering himself in remorse over some lost battle.

Sir Cyril was fascinated by the glacier, and by the sea otters lounging on the discarded pieces of its body. The slick-skinned creatures sported and called to each other, seemingly unconcerned by the huge chunks of ice plunging randomly into their playground. Perchingbird's only regret was that the weather didn't always permit him to observe the shoreline as closely as he would have liked.

By the middle of the first day his note-taking was interrupted by a fog settling heavy as a mourning veil around the ship, and allowing about the same visibility. Neither torch nor candle could penetrate the gloom to any helpful degree at all.

"Can't go on in this muck, Sire," the captain informed the King.

But when Perchingbird informed theliegons they'd have to stop for the night Grizel had demanded, "Whatever for? The light of MY life can surely throw a bit of flame forth to serve as a beacon for YOUR measly machine." She'd shot a tongue of flame from port to starboard to make her point.

"Not at the sail, if you please, ma'am," Perchingbird pleaded.
"Don't work yourself into a sweat about it, little man," Grizel's mate soothed. "You mustn't mind my little spitfire getting hot under the collar like that. Her time is near, and you know how odd females get when they're about to bear their young."

With that Grimley had flown forward of the mast and had sent a blast of flame across the gloom, piercing fog and darkness enough to help the navigator locate a landmark or two to steer by.

A short time later the King, on his way to get sick over the railing (His Majesty was an infantryman, and not a very good sailor) passed Sir Cyril and stared pop-eyed at the chief archivist. After relieving himself, Rowan turned back to Perchingbird and offered him the fur-lined cloak that spanned the royal shoulders. "If yer cauld, man, put on m' cloak, but for the love of us a' take that candle out of yer jacket."

Puzzled but ever obedient to royal command, Sir Cyril accepted the King's cloak and wondered if His Majesty's sea sickness was so far advanced that delirium had set in. Then, looking down to fasten the royal brooch at his shoulder, he saw what had made the King stare.

A soft but brilliant illumination glowed through cloak and jacket, just above Sir Cyril's heart.

"Ah, this. Tis no candle, Majesty," he reported.

"By m'shield and armor, m'lord." the King said, dropping with wobbly and unaccustomed piety to one knee, "But if that's no candle then I vow yer bein' sainted before m' very eyes!"

Teddy hastily knelt on the rolling deck and helped the King back to his feet. "Get up, please, Sire, and don't let anybody see you doing that! I'm no saint, or if I am, someone has very bad aim at bestowing halos. Look." He pulled the princess's parchment from beneath his wraps. Freed of his clothing, the elaborately drawn pictures and embellished script glowed with enough light to brighten a ballroom.

The King whistled. "They don't call Pegeen Ashburn the Illuminator for naught, do they?" he asked softly, staring at the scroll. "This'll provide light enough tae take us tae landing nearest the Worm's Roost."

"Odd I never noticed this quality to her writing before," Perchingbird puzzled. "But then, I never examined it in the dark before, either."

"Must be a handy talent, that. Saves her a royal ransom on candles, I'd think," Rowan agreed.

After that discovery the fog had been little problem, except that it impeded Sir Cyril from studying the glaciers as carefully as he would have liked. This was the third day of foul weather, and soon the Bane would reach the eastern harbor with Perchingbird knowing little more about the conformation of the icy cliffs than he'd known to begin with.

Otherwise things could hardly be better, he thought as he hummed a little tune to himself. The ship was making excellent progress. He was seeing new sights, singing new-songs? Now why should he be singing an unfamiliar tune just now? And come to think of it, how could any tune possibly be all that unfamiliar to the keeper of the archives? Certainly he'd never shown any musical improvisational ability before, and he was quite sure he was well acquainted with most of the predominating modes in the musics of the world of which Argonia was part.

Then he realized he was singing the song because milady Pegeen was singing it. urging him to come to her quickly.

Close off the starboard bow a sheet of ice plummeted into the sea, rocking the Bane even more severely than the rolling seas were already rocking her. Sir Cyril forgot the song and glanced around him, thinking to remark on the incident to whoever was closest at hand.

But all around him crew members and King's men alike stood stock still, staring out to sea, eyes straining toward the sound of Princess Pegeen's voice, which seemed to come from everywhere at once.

"I wonder what she's doing out there?" Perchingbird said to the gunner's mate, a red-haired fellow named Liam. He noticed that tears rolled down Liam's checks and, in a voice that sounded dreamy and far-off to his own ears when compared to the reality of the song, asked, "Why do you weep?"

"That's the lullabye she used to sing to me as she nursed me at her breast," the man said, not answering the question so much as murmuring in amazement to himself. "Lovely to hear it again. Faith! I haven't heard her sing it like that since she died, thirty years or so ago when I was a lad."

Swimming feverishly in the back of Perchingbird's mind was the notion that it was not possible for him to hear Princess Pegcen singing so many leagues from shore. It was not possible for Liam to hear his mother who had been dead for thirty years. It was not possible for Liam to hear his mother at all when Perchingbird heard only Princess Pegeen. It was not possible for the entire crew to stop work to listen to songs compelling each man differently but equally. Only by magic could such occurrences be possible, and only one sort of creature possessed such magic. But which creature that was he couldn't seem to remember, and really, he didn't care at the moment. He couldn't be bothered to catalogue magicks when he needed so badly to hear what it was that Pegeen was singing.

Neither he nor any of the others took note for some time of the other creature, the one who did not sing but who
undulated through the waves towards them, circling their ship not once but more than a half dozen times. The same creature who, having embraced the Bane, began constricting rhythmically around it, squeezing the ship in a pulsing vise not entirely out of time with the sirens' songs which had taken control of the men's minds.

Colin managed throughout the first few days of the journey through the shadowy eastern woods to keep their spirits aloft by playing various dance tunes and the few marching songs he knew, but by the fourth day his repertoire had degenerated into murder ballads. One after another, he sang of the most gruesome crimes committed in history, until finally he ran out of even those.

"Are you sure that's all you know?" Maggie asked. "Perhaps you've overlooked some lesser offenses. Don't you know any fraud ballads, maybe, or perhaps a breaking-and-entering air? Or maybe a ghost song. This is just the place for ghost songs!"

"No, and it's just as well." He shivered under his cloak for though it was still late summer at Wizard Raspberry's castle, here in the mist-riddled midst of the giant cedars the air was dank and chill. "I'm making myself nervous enough as it is. And I seem to have frightened off Lyrrill and the kittens."

Maggie craned forward on Moonshine's neck, then settled back with a shrug. "She's just scouting ahead, looking for her grown cubs again, but I wish she'd hurry back." Maggie preferred that the party stay together, besides which she found the sight of Lyrrill reassuring. The lynx had come to the castle after the other beasts had accepted the explanations offered by Wizard Raspberry, Maggie and Moonshine and had dispersed. Lyrrill had found the wolf's news disquieting, she had told the wizard, not because she'd ever believed Wizard Raspberry guilty of betrayal but because her young ones from the previous year had established their territory in the lands where the wolf said animals were dying. She was going to find them, she told Raspberry, and if she found them well, there would be a unicorn nearby who might answer Moonshine's questions. If the cubs were ill when she found them, and there was no unicorn, then Moonshine's magic might serve to save them.

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Colin's most hair-raising songs were more cheerful than that strangled silence. At night, Maggie always made her fuelless magic fire, and it was lucky for them all she had that power, for the wood underfoot was soaked by a constant drip from lush green leaves. Underbrush was scantier, and trees larger, than near Sybil Brown's cottage, and the mossy groundcover, which had been cheerfully sprinkled with dogwood and saxifrage near the wizard's castle, began more and more to sprout mugwort, Jousewort, fly-specked orchia, skunk cabbage, wax flowers and the deceptively demure pink bell-like blossoms of poisonous bog:

- rosemary.

But what made them the most uneasy was the abrupt change in the character of the streams and rivers. Unlike the crystalline waters of the North, these flowed sluggish, clouded and murky.

Moonshine was appalled. "How long can it have been since a unicorn has serviced this area?" he asked Lyrrill.

"The lynx waved her paw unconcernedly. "This is not the plight of which the strange wolf spoke, O Singlehorn," she told *im. "The water has always been thus, for it is the tears which wash the face of the great frozen giant who weeps among yonder mountains."

"She means the glaciers." Colin explained when Moonshine questioned the information. "Apparently the lynx only knows the old legend about them. As we now know in this enlightened age, the glaciers aren't really suicidal frost giants at all. The best scholars agree that the real frost giants simply shrank in might and stature like the rest of our ancestors. Now the only remnants of them are more or less man-sized, like the King. What the glaciers are, actually, are the shields left behind by the frost giants. As the sun melts the ice on their surfaces, they shift positions and gouge great chunks out of the earth beneath them. I suppose that's what really makes the water dirty."

"Heartened as I am to hear a reasonable explanation," Moonshine said, "I must purify this water at once, or it will spoil my maiden's tea. Excuse me." With that he dipped his hom, sending ripples of clarity across the murk.

No simple natural or legendary phenomena could explain the stench pervading the forest by the end of the fifth day, however. All that afternoon they found dead animals; a bear carcass first, then hares, squirrels, foxes. All had
lolling tongues, and lips rolled back over their teeth, paws outstretched and stiff and fur damp from the steady drizzle. Some were bloated already but none were even partially eaten. Those who hadn't had the strength to drag themselves away from their own excrement lay in it.

Lyrrill returned from her patrol. She seemed to droop from the tufts of her ears to the black tip of her bobbed tail. "Death everywhere," she reported to Moonshine, her voice audible to Maggie's and Colin's ears as a low, eerie moan. "I found one like myself, but not mine. She is ceased."

"Did you see no living thing?" Maggie asked, looking up from the tea she was boiling in a new-formed earthen kettle over her magic fire.

"None," the lynx replied.

Colin regarded the tea-kettle dubiously. "I hate to drink that stuff, even after Moonshine has magicked it."

"You do me a disservice, minstrel," Moonshine replied huffily. "How can you doubt me when my powers alone have preserved our company from the fate of these other creatures?" But the unicorn broke off soon, unable to concentrate even on defending his besmirched honor. He surrendered instead to the tremors that twitched the skin all the way down his back. He felt unusually skittish.

Colin noticed his uneasiness. "It must be these woods, I suppose, since if Lyrrill says we're the only living things about then we must be. But I can't help feeling we're being watched."

"Perhaps it's the mosquitoes," Maggie suggested, swatting one. "They seem to have survived." She made a face and started to swat again when Colin snatched her arm down.

Tiny wings backflapped furiously and a small, greenish faery quivered before her eyes.

"I beg your pardon!" Maggie cried with real embarrassment, made particularly acute since the finger-high faery didn't look as if she'd survive the first swat. "You're the first living creature we've seen all day and I--"

"You call this living?" the faery demanded, then moaned, "Mouse-blood! I wish I were dead if it is! Mind you, my mother warned me not to drink the water."

She sank into a heap of vari-colored rags, which on closer inspection proved to be cast-off butterfly wings, settling herself on the edge of Maggie's kettle. Long strings of purplish hair were plastered against her small narrow skull, and she ran her tiny fingers through it repeatedly, lamenting, "It wasn't like I wasn't brought up well, or anything like that. 'Stick with dew and nectar, Trickle,' my mother always told me. 'Dew and nectar's the thing for faeries.' But let me tell you, it's not often a regular Little Person-type faery like me gets a chance at being a stream guardian. These positions generally go to the big girls. Nymphs and dryads, you know. I just happened to be here when that renegade Nasturtium took off to go revolutionize the kingdom."

Maggie, deciding the faery was delirious, held a flower-full of unicorn-blessed water under the tiny woman's chin. "Try a bit of this."

The faery spat—but feebly. "THAT'S the stuff that made me sick, and so quickly too." She wailed, "I didn't think it would work so quickly! Blasted mortals. Never believe a thing you tell "em."

Maggie continued to urge her to drink. "It's all right. Moonshine fixed it. It'll cure you."

"Lady, I don't care what your horse did in that water, it won't--" the faery said, then sputtered as Maggie poured the water into her open mouth, almost drowning her in the process.

"He's not a horse," Maggie explained before the faery could dry off enough to come up with a whopping curse, which was the kind of thing Little People of all varieties were quite adept at.

"Moonshine is a unicorn, incognito." Already Trickle's complexion waxed somewhat healthier, and her eyes gained luster, along with a certain malicious vengeful look that caused Maggie quickly to lift Moonshine's cone of invisibility. "See?"

"Now I've seen everything," the faery groaned. "First I'm half-killed through the plotting of a water nymph who'd rather be a bandit, and now I'm saved by a unicorn who'd rather be a horse. Don't tell me; let me guess. You're really a beautiful princess who'd rather be a witch."

"Something like that," Maggie replied, startled.

"I would NOT rather be a horse," Moonshine protested.

"Whatever you are, you've certainly done the trick," the faery told him, standing now on the kettle's edge and stretching luxuriously. "Why, I feel better already, and another knuckle high to boot! Sorry if I was a bit short with you, but you wouldn't believe what I've had to put up with these last few days. That this should happen to me on my very first stream! First, that good-for-nothing hussy who was here before me has the unmitigated GALL to show her face in MY territory again, then that idiot of a mayor was stupid enough to listen to her. I'm just about fed up. I tell you. If I hadn't been so sick, you mortals would have been in a bad way. I was just about to let you have it after I told you what I think of your kind and your stinking garbage. I suppose you're taking this poor unicorn off to market or wherever as well?"

The others were too astonished to answer, but lack of response didn't trouble the faery.
She continued. "I don't see what riches you can possibly gain that are going to make up for this mess. None of this would have happened if you stupid, greedy fatheads had stood your ground.

"She's still feverish," Maggie said, dipping for some more water.

Colin wasn't so sure. "We have no idea what you're talking about, faery. But it seems to be that if you're this stream's guardian it was your responsibility to protect it from whatever-er-polluted it."

"Whoever, you mean. A whole village, a crazy nymph and a swarm of bandits besides. Come on, big boy, give me a break! A guardian spirit can only do so much, I don't care what your stupid legends say. And let me tell you something, pal. I did my best to convince that idiot bureaucrat he should stand up like a dwarf and fight those poachers to his last breath. But he just shook in his shoes and fingered his gold and gave me to understand that he didn't take orders from any faeries smaller than a wine jug-and threatened to use me as a swizzle stick if I didn't beat it. What could I do?"

"You have magic powers," Colin informed her almost primly.

Her narrow-eyed look was scornful. "Like I said, I do the best I can. In this country faeries have no corner on magic. That little town had three second-rate magicians and a first-class witch, and the mayor was a dwarf blacksmith who could twist iron horseshoes all around my magic. Besides, the poor sods seem to have done themselves in already without my help."

"You mean they're dead?" Maggie asked. "The whole village?" She'd heard rumors of villages wiped out by border raids or disease of one sort or the other, of course, but Fort Iceworm was remote from all that. A few older folk or sickly youngsters died each winter, a family was sometimes killed in a night fire, or a hunter who stayed too long in the tavern might freeze to death trying to find his way home in the snow. But death to a whole village was still the stuff of fireside stories to her.

Trickle shrugged sullenly. "How should I know? I couldn't stand to see them take Snowshadow away, so I went out flying around. I guess I lost track of the days. I took that drink without even thinking about it as soon as I got back, and since then I've been too sick to care about anything. But if they are dead, they had it coming, is all I have to say about it."

"If you were in sooth troubled for the safety of this Snow-shadow," Moonshine asked, "Why did you fly away and not instead stay and seek to warn her? It seems to me you were as guilty of her abduction as those you accuse."

"If that isn't just like a pointy-headed unicorn!" the faery said, facing him. "Look, fellow, I'm about one hundred and three years old by human reckoning, and I haven't spent my WHOLE life guarding this stream. I've been around a little, too, you know. I've seen you guys when you meet your first girlfriends, and whatever you use to think with then, it isn't your brains. Snowshadow has a nose to smell with, or at least she did the last time I saw her. We'd been hearing of this gang of unicorn-nappers for a couple of weeks, and Snowshadow knew about Nasturtium, even though she'd never met her. I'd even told Snowshadow what the wicked trollop looked like. So that unicorn didn't need me to warn her, and I didn't need to get skewered for interfering in her social life, all right?"

Moonshine considered and finally conceded, "Tis true I would have allowed no one to gainsay me the privilege of meeting my

Maid Maggie. But that was a worthy and noble attraction of a unicorn to a chaste maiden of the highest order."

The faery looked at him with her one-hundred-and-three-year-old eyes. "Sure. Aren't they all?"

Maggie studied Trickle silently for a moment. Something about the cynical little being reminded her very much of Granny Brown when she'd been up to really wicked mischief-like the time she changed a tinker who'd tried to cheat her into an earthworm and presented him to small boys bound for a fishing trip. Of course, one could be seeing similarities where in all likelihood none existed. Still . . . "Can you show us the way to this village?" Maggie asked. "Perhaps there are survivors yet. Moonshine's magic could cure them."

"Why would he want to use his magic to help them, knowing the way they treat unicorns around here?" Trickle asked.

"Yes, maiden, why should I?" Moonshine asked. "If my magic can do all that, should I not apply it instead to the innocent beasts of the forest, who suffer through no fault of their own?"

"Mainly because they're not suffering any more, being dead," Maggie replied pragmatically. "And if you apply your talents to the innocent beasts of the town instead, we may discover where the bandits have taken that other unicorn, and somehow be able to free her so we can get straight answers to our questions."

"Did I not tell you?" Moonshine trumpeted, bucking around in little circles like a frisky colt. "Did I not tell you. Small One, that my maiden is the cleverest as well as the most beautiful and kindly of all? What a marvelous plan! Let us hasten at once to implement it."

"Yes, let's," Trickle agreed. "At once. I feel another wave of nausea coming on."

"You really must take better care of yourself, my dear." Fearchar said.

Pegeen turned guiltily from her mirror of ice. She'd been trying to determine whether she was actually
becoming fat or was merely pleasingly plump. To her dismay, she had discovered dark bags under her eyes, and a certain drawn quality about her mouth. Even her hands were no longer ladylike: their nails were chewed well into the quicks. "It's that unicorn, Fearchar. His screaming keeps me awake nights. He must be utterly terrified. Can't you release him and find some other way to solve your personnel shortage?"

Fearchar's arms slid around her waist, and his saturnine face appeared in the frozen mirror beside hers. "Take heart, my princess. The unicorn should be in much better spirits tonight. Sally has brought him a companion."

"Oh, dear. How many are you going to take? I'd hoped one would be quite enough."

"Gracious, no, darling. I hope to have over two hundred followers before I overthrow Rowan. Each of them must be equipped with the powdered horn, a belt of the hide, and a hoof or two for luck. The elixir must be saved for the casualties that cannot be avoided by such magical prophylaxis. For it has to be bled fresh from the beast before each use. You know."

"Surely you don't mean to kill them!" Pegeen said, aghast. "Those beasts do nothing but good all over the kingdom. Fearchar, their loss would be a terrible blow to Argonia under ANY reign."

"Calm yourself, pet. Nothing has to be done until I've gathered sufficient forces. And you'll be happy to hear that our valiant Sally has recruited another whole band of patriots to our cause. I'm keeping them here at the castle until they're fully indoctrinated. They can join the others who serve us and help guard the beasts."

"Fearchar. I'm frightened of those robbers you call patriots. They may accept your pay for now, but they're ruthless, dangerous men. And-and you're so often gone." She looked down at her ravaged hands for a moment then turned back to him resolutely. "Not one of them is worth a hair off a unicorn's hide. You mustn't sacrifice--"

"My dear girl," her lover said, drawing away and looking down his long, hawklike nose at her. "While I have always found your merciful disposition to be one of your more charming characteristics, I must insist that you allow me to handle this without interference. You have no need to be alarmed by our own revolutionaries. They are each and every one, like their brothers in the woods, under my personal spell. The very essence of that spell is that you are, like myself, completely sacred. They are instructed to die for either of us. Not one of them will ever touch the hem of your skirt except for your own protection and I, naturally, determine how and from what you are to be protected. So you see, you have nothing to fear."

A coldness not caused by the room's icy drafts penetrated Pegeen's gown and heavy woollen shawl, raising goosebumps on her arms.

"As for slaughtering the beasts, do you know, my wise darling, you've given me food for thought. It may be, if we are very careful, we shall be able to remove the horns, necessary hide, and hooves, and, by virtue of the beasts' healing powers, have them regenerate in one another the missing parts, so that our supply of medicinal charms will be virtually limitless!" He patted her arm and seemed not to notice that she flinched from him, "Why don't you forget all of this and draw some nice pictures, darling? Perhaps prepare our coronation address."

But as he strode for the tapestry-covered door, Pegeen called to him once more. "Fearchar?"

"Yes?"

"You aren't going to harm those beasts now, are you?"

He stroked his chin, considering. "Helsinora's research specifies that the ingredients of the elixir must all be fresh to be most effective, as I've mentioned. But I'd still like to experiment with that idea of yours a little in advance of when we'll actually be needing the potions and charms. But, no, I'll tell you what, darling. Since you're concerned that I might wipe them all out, I'll wait until I have a couple of extra beasts in reserve, in case something untoward happens to the one I want to use to heal the first-er-subject. You see? I am moved by your gentle sympathies."

Two tears rolled down Pegeen's cheeks, and she mopped them away with the fringe of her shawl. What a fool she was! She ought to have known from her training as a princess that someone as ambitious as Fearchar would stop at no crime, no matter how heinous, to gain his ends. And she was powerless, at the mercy of his "protective" spell. She'd heard her ladies speak of being a prisoner of love before, but she'd never fancied she'd personally experience the phenomenon implied by the term in such an appallingly literal fashion.

She had to think, to plan. To that end, she gathered her inks and parchment and stuck them into her dress pockets. Then, taking an unlit torch from her chamber wall, she stepped behind one of three old, worn tapestries she'd been allowed to keep when Fearchar sold her finer furnishings. She was outlined against the threadbare fabric for only a moment by a faint, warm glow. Then the hanging flattened back against the wall, and the glow faded, leaving the ice-walled room once more in darkness.

Sir Cyril was brought to his senses by three occurrences, the first of which was the frigid sea water pouring over the splintering deck and into his boot tops. The second occurrence, which allowed him to become aware of the first, was the cessation of the enthralling song. And the third occurrence was that he suddenly heard the rippling of girlish laughter, and realized the cause of song and laughter and that the Bane was most certainly doomed, even as the
laughter rose above the crunching and cracking of the ship's timbers, and above the pulsing sound emanating from the awesome beast that slowly strangled the vessel.

The dragons were nowhere to be seen. Nevertheless, Sir Cyril called out. His voice was frail against the sundering decks, throbbing beast, and malicious giggles. He hollered until his throat was raw, while waves washed over him from a hole in the center of the ship—a hole that yawned where once the mainmast had stood. It must have made a fearsome crash when it broke off and fell into the sea, yet he hadn't heard it. And only gradually did the other men onboard regain awareness of their surroundings.

"Holysainted sacred Mother, lads, we're goners!" Liam cried as he was swept to his knees by another wash of water. "The beast is takin' 'is revenge on us all for every snake we ever made into oil!"

"Aw, gar!" Neddy Pinchpurse slipped and slithered across the crazily sloping decks, avoiding boards that shot straight up into the air from the force of the serpent's caress. In his right hand he held a harpoon. "Where's 'is bloody 'ead?" he asked. "Ain't no slimey gonna take my ship out from under my very feet!"

Perchingbird stumbled up beside him and restrained his arm. "I shouldn't do that if I were you. bosun."

Pinchpurse turned on him. "Oh, you wouldn't, would you, Lor'ship? Well, just what would yer Lor'ship do?"

"I'd SCREAM!" Perchingbird screamed.

But Pinchpurse glowered scornfully at him only a fraction of a second before drawing back the harpoon and thrusting deep into the writhing, pulsing mass holding their ship together.

An arrow-shaped head rose, three tiers of twisted serpent distant from where they stood. As it reared from the sea, water sluiced back from its slitted eyes, flat and clear as glass. Almost in a yawn, the thing opened its cavernous jaws. Its fangs flittered in the steady light still emanating from Princess Pegeen's parchment. The head darted forward, straight for Pinchpurse. With the boom of an avalanche the jaws clamped together.

Ned screamed.

He was joined by every man still clinging to what was left of the deck.

The head snapped back suddenly, and tossed the harpoon it had plucked from its body far out to sea. Then, seemingly miffed by the hostile gesture the harpoon signified, the serpent began uncoiling itself.

"Oh, no!" the King's first admiral cried, "When it releases us we'll be thrown into the sea!"

"Aye," Pinchpurse said grimly, between screams. "They likes their feed moist and juicy-like. snakes do."

"Where's my flaming air force?" Rowan roared, and pitched overboard, still encumbered by his chain mail shirt, shield, and heavy leather armor. Fortunately, several coils of sea serpent still writhed between king and sea. Hacking out with his great broadsword. Old Gut-buster. Rowan sank the sword into the serpent's hide and pulled himself onto the monster's back. Then using the sword as a crutch, he attempted to stand and reach the ship again, bellowing battle cries and curses all the while he danced on the snake's slippery back.

Perchingbird clung for his life to a hatchcover. and wished just this once that he could cry for help without the use of his tongue, no matter how many languages it had mastered.

The serpent snaked yet another coil loose, rattling the ship like a pebble in a gourd.

"Whoops! Whoops! Whoops!" Rowan yelled as the beast slipped beneath him, "Whoa, beastie! Ye great slithering slime of a thing, hold still and feel my blade!" But the serpent continued to unwind, and the king's feet continued to juggle him about on the beast's twisting coils.

But his bellowing was not in vain. Now another noise joined the general melee, and the dragon Grimley flew into view, diving across the sea from over the glacier. A ball of flame burst from his golden lips, scorching the serpent with a hiss more hideous than that of a thousand snakes.

"Hold! You can't do that!" a high-pitched feminine voice squealed. "Make your dragon stop that!" Two mermaids popped out from behind the ice chunk which had concealed them, and began swimming frantic circles around the ship, monster and all. The gorgeous green-haired siren broke off a piece of ice and flung it at Grimley. He was having a lovely time barbecuing the serpent, while the sea snake recoiled into a tight defensive cone around the ship, squashing in its coils all who couldn't manage to scramble toward the remaining mast. Only the King's sword remained in direct contact with the great snake now. and from its pommel His Majesty dangled, heavy not only in flesh but in several stonesweight of armor as well.

The siren's iceball flew wide of Grimley, who carried another length of snake. The serpent hissed and moaned horribly.

"Let him go, you awful things!" shrieked the green-haired mermaid's accomplice, a shapely semi-lady with lavender tresses and very healthy gills.

But Grimley struck again, and the serpent convulsed, washing them all in icy seawater as great waves broke over the shattered decks.

Sir Cyril saw the serpent's head rear high above his disintegrating sanctuary, and saw the King dangling from
the monster's neck. Then, with a final mighty curse. Roari Rowan, sword and all, plunged straight for the bottom of the sea.

"Grimley. stop!" Perchingbird shouted. The dragon hovered, considering the best portion of the serpent to fry next.

"What's the matter, hot shot? Don't you like to have a little fun?"

"His Majesty is overboard. Force the mermaids to fetch him." It didn't occur to Perchingbird at the time that dragons and mermaids probably had no common tongue, but as it turned out they didn't need to have. The mermaids had taken an active interest in the dragon's conversation, and understood readily enough what Sir Cyril's instructions to Grimley had been. "I'm going, Lorelei!" the lavender-haired lass sang out. diving. "No fair! You got the last cute mortal! I'm going too!" cried the green-haired Lorelei, who also dived.

It took both of them to haul the King to the surface and lay his body out on the first ice chunk they could find large enough to accommodate him. Then Lorelei swam back over to the serpent and ship and addressed Perchingbird. "We saved him, like you said. Now will you make that dragon let our Olic alone so he can grow another skin?"

"Only if you'll help transport the rest of us to safety." Sir Cyril replied. "When your serpent uncoils again, we'll all drown."

"Well, I don't see what's so awful about that." the mermaid pouted prettily. "You mortals are such sillies about getting a little damp."

"Madam." Perchingbird rejoined, mustering all of the dignity he could in his precarious position. "This vessel is on a mission of national importance. The man you just rescued is Lord King of All Argonia. We are joined with him to do battle with the evil sorcerer, Fearchar Brown, who has laid a deadly curse on the Princess Bronwyn, and whose evil machinations imperil our good country. As a patriotic citizen in Royal Argonian waters, you can easily understand, I'm sure, that it would be contrary to national interests for us to drown at this time, however much pleasure the sight might afford you and your companion."

"Well, gee, don't get huffy, sweetmeat," the mermaid said. "You should have said you were after that eel, Fearchar, to begin with. I have a few things to settle with him myself!" Diving back into the water, she swam to the serpent's head and instructed him in nautical rescue procedure.

The moon was high and white, providing light for the reluctant Trickle as she led them to the village. As Colin later remarked, they could have found the town anyway, without the moon, without a guide; indeed, with their eyes closed. For it smelled worse than the pit of a giant's privy tower.

So thoroughly befouled was the place that even the stream, though it had already been blessed with Moonshine's magic upstream, near their camp, was in this place slick with rot and excrement. Wind whipped leaves across its surface, and shook the naked limbs of trees, as gnarled and blasted as if they had finally succumbed to a hundred harsh winters. Dead moldy leaves scurried like rats down the muddy track that seemed to be the village's main thoroughfare. The road started at the stream and appeared to continue past the town, through the forest to the south and east.

By the sickly moonlight, Maggie saw flowers hanging dead over the side of their windowbox at the first cottage on the right. And on the left, the door of the third dwelling down hung drunkenly from one leather hinge, creaking back and forth in the soughing wind.

No lights burned, nor did smoke rise from any chimney, either for warmth or for cooking.

"Here it is," Trickle said. "The prosperous hamlet of Everclear; population, zero. Have fun, ducklings. Ta."

With that, she flew away.

Colin gulped. Maggie took a deep breath to stifle the gagging in her throat and said to Moonshine, "The first thing, I suppose, is to cleanse this water."

"Stick my horn in THAT?" he asked, prancing from one hoof to another. "It's very nasty, maiden. I'll soil my horn."

"Is there an exemption in your creed that says you don't have to purify water so foul it will soil your horn?" she asked innocently.

"Not that I know of," he sighed, and quickly submerged the extreme tip of his horn in the swill-filled stream. Clarity instantly spiralled from the point of Moonshine's horn, devouring the filth that had choked the stream. Before long they could even hear the difference as the freshly cleansed water bubbled around and over the stones in its bed.

Moonshine's face wore a vaguely gloating expression as he raised it, but he sniffed disdainfully saying, "Phew. Well, now that I have provided the potion for your ministrations. Maiden, good minstrel, I shall leave you for a time and undertake to remedy the ills of those beasts not yet beyond the power of my horn."
"Very well," Maggie said, giving him a farewell pat on the flank. "But do be careful. There are unicorn-nappers about."

With a toss of his foamy tail to show exactly what he thought of such dangers, the unicorn galloped off down the street, then turned into the darkness at the rear of the hovels on the right.

A wolfs howl rose on the night wind. Colin stared around him, his eyes probing shadows, his hand on Banshee Bringer. Maggie took another deep breath and knelt beside the stream, filling their two water skins until they were swollen full of the bright, healing liquid. She handed one of the skins to Colin. "It'll be faster if we split up. I'll take the cottages to the left, you take the ones on the right. If you find anyone who seems to have the least spark of life, just pour this between his lips."

Colin licked his own lips nervously. "But what if-I mean to say, I'm not much good at telling." He didn't care to be separated from the others to go mucking about among dead people, either. The very thought of it depressed him, made him feel helpless and, if not actually frightened, at least sensibly worried.

But Maggie was impatient to start, and answered rather sharply, "Then give it to all of them. It can't hurt." So saying, she marched boldly into the first cottage on the left. There was nothing for Colin to do but start his own rounds.

The first two cottages Maggie checked were empty, and she discovered the probable reason at the third, where six adults and two young boys lay slumped across the table. They seemed to have been dining together. When her eyes had adapted to the faint moonlight slanting in through the unshuttered window and her nose had adjusted to the smell of death sufficiently that she could breathe again, she took her own advice, and doggedly pried one head after another up from its resting place, searching staring eyes for any signs of life. Even though she saw none, pity moved her to dispense a few drops from her flask across each set of grimacing lips.

Emerging from that house, she stood for a moment wiping her eyes. Betrayers of a unicorn the people within might be, but they looked very much like her own neighbors at home. She felt embarrassed seeing in such undignified extremity people she'd never gotten to know as human beings, as if she'd caught them bathing, bereft of the trappings with which they disguised their imperfections. She forced herself toward the next cottage.

Across the road, Colin timidly knocked on the door that already stood ajar. "Is anybody alive in there?" she heard him whisper hoarsely before he entered.

Smiling slightly to herself, she stopped at the doorway of the middle cottage on her side of the road, gathering her own nerve. She heard the cries just as she put her foot on the threshold.

At first, they seemed to come from within, but her rapid search of the premises revealed no one at all in the cottage. Puzzled, she stepped back outside. Colin had disappeared by now, and in the distance, above the gusting wind, she heard the pounding of Moonshine's hooves as he conducted his own errands of mercy. But she also-yes, very distinctly now-heard a pain-filled moaning.

1. Walking toward it, she followed the mud-mired road a bit past the last cottage, down what seemed to be a well-traveled cart path. The road crooked abruptly, and meandered into the forest. Looking back, she could see that she was still well within sight of the town, but the moaning was louder than ever now, and she hurried on until she came to a long, low building. This was most certainly the inn from its size and its position, easily accessible yet well-removed enough that revelers would not keep townsfolk awake nights. It was from this building that the miserable survivor still keened what sounded like his death agonies.

But at least someone yet lived who might tell what had actually happened to the unicorn and her captors. Maggie breathed a prayer of gratitude to the Mother, along with one of hope for the preservation of at least this one inhabitant. Perhaps this man would be one of the wizards of whom the faery had spoken. For now, listening closer, Maggie could make out strange words amidst the moaning—possibly some magical spell. As she opened the door to the inn, she realized that the moaning was not, after all, just moaning, nor was it any magical spell, but a song of some son, and very badly sung at that. Chiding herself for being as over-critical as Winnie always accused her of being, she reminded herself that a very sick person such as this one obviously was could not help slurring song words.

She rushed through the door and toward the voice, bruising her skins on an overtured bench. Swearing through her teeth and rubbing her shins, she listened more intently, using the sound to help her locate a path to the singer. To her disappointment there was nothing remotely wizardly or even particularly helpful about the words of the mysterious song:

"Where is me bed? Me jolly, jolly bed? Awwwwwllllgonnne for beer and tobacco! For I lent it to a whore And now it is all wore ..."
When her magic had lit one of the torches on the wall nearest her, Maggie saw that the voice belonged to a
disheveled heap of soiled and stained, though formerly elegant, garments. The heap was sprawled at the end of a
long table in a dark corner near the hearth, which was set into the wall farthest from the door. Maggie pulled the
torch from its socket and made her way to the singing bundle. From the sound of him, the man had to be in terrible
pain.

"Are you quite all right, sir?" she asked, bending over him. His head was collapsed on his wrists, and all she
could see was the bald spot on the top of his head shining in the torchlight amid a mad scattering of tankards and
jugs. The bald spot, she thought at first, was in roughly the same place a pilgrim's tonsure should be.

But it was no pilgrim who raised leering, reddened eyes in answer to her question. Nor was it with brotherly
love that he grabbed her wrist and pulled her, torch, flask, and all, into his lap. Prince Leofwin's breath was so strong
it not only knocked her own breath from her, but totally overpowered the charnelhouse smell of the village as well.

"Ah, little wench, there you are! You took long enough at fetching that drink!" He snatched at her flask. She
snatched it back. He peered at her closely. "Eh? What's t'matter with you? What've you done to yerself—you've gone
and gotten all sooty.

I thought you were golden-haired. Been cleanin' the chimney, have you?"

"Don't be an ass!" Maggie snapped, attempting to reclaim her arm and finding to her dismay that he was much
stronger than she, even in his current condition. "Let go of me at once!"

Instead, with one hand he pulled her face down into his own, nearly smothering her, while he tumbled up her
skirts with his free hand. Her magic jerked the threads of her skirt so that they pulled it modestly down again.

His porcine eyes grew sly. "Oho. not only sooty but snooty, are we? Like that little unicorn-loving nymphie
thing? SAVING yourself for your cause, are you, dearie?" He poked her chest painfully with a squat finger. "Well,
you mind me, little honey, and forget about unicorns and causes, if you know what's good for you. Causes arc for
men fool enough to believe in them and unicorns don't care for YOUR kind of girl." He chucked her under the chin
and she bit viciously at his finger. "Now, now. enough of that." He pulled the torch from her hand and, without
releasing her, stuck it in the wall socket above him.

Then he pinioned the arm that had held the torch to her side, along with the one still holding the flask. "You
don't need to play hard-to-get for old Twin to like you, little one. I've something to comfort you. How would you
like to receive the favors of a real live handsome prince?"

He puckered up for her kiss, and at the same time relaxed his grip on her as he waited to receive her gratitude.
Maggie broke his grasp and jumped to her feet.

"Bugger off, your highness. I've had a long, hard day. If you can't do anything to help us save these people or
rescue that poor unicorn--" she looked at him suspiciously. "Say, how come you're alive when all the village is dead
from the poisonous water?"

"Water?" he scoffed, rising from the bench into a semi-crouch and stumbling towards her. "Never touch the
stuff. Ale and wine alone are fit for the innards of warrior princes like me. Now come here, little honey, and stop
being so blasted coy. And so sassy. Where do you think an ugly, bad-tempered, ill-favored, swarthy little number
like you'll ever get another chance at any man, much less a prince?"

"You'd be surprised," she said, backing into another bench and knocking it over. Awkwardly, she hopped
backwards across it. Her foot caught, and she fell sprawling on her back. Leofwin landed, whoofing, on top of her.

"You're uncom-
monly lacking in a seemly show of gratitude, my girl. Let me tutor you in some manners."

Maggie gave her best magical cow-moving shove but the prince was very heavy and lay grinning down at her,
highly amused and no little pleased with himself.

"Look here, you idiot-your Highness," she said. "I'll have you know you're not the only royalty around here.
I've lately been made princess myself by King Roari Rowan, as I trust you'll be mortified with shame to remember if
you look at me closely. I'm sure His Highness won't like it at all that a foreigner such as yourself, illustrious lineage
or no. is running around OUR country molesting OUR maidens when there are loyal subjects who badly need his
help."

That made the prince sit up. Maggie smugly congratulated herself on appealing to his instincts of regal
responsibility and international diplomacy.

Planting a hammy hand on each side of her face, he studied her closely. "You're the Princess Magdalene, for
whom I've been facing deadly peril and braving unspeakable dangers from which. I can tell you, I've barely escaped
with my life—if not my property, since those blackguards took my seven league boots that I won fair and square
cheating at dice!"

"That's me," Maggie acknowledged cheerfully.

"What a remarkable piece of luck!" he cried, and shoved her back down again while trying once more to ruck
up her skirts. "Here I've been going through all this silly questing when all I needed was this opportunity—and well-
earned it is, too, I might add! Now I'll simply despoil you, and your king will be certain to give me your hand to go
with the rest just so I'll take you home and make an honest queen of you. As THE Prince of Greater Frostingdung
with THE bona fide princess in his possession, I can spare a unicorn or two. For, with you in tow, my dear, I'll not
only win my own kingdom but your undoubtedly substantial dowry as well."

"Uh oh," Maggie said, and began wriggling more furiously than ever, wrestling with the prince, who was fairly
agleam with drunken glee.

"This is MOST opportune," he chortled.

"This is most IGNOBLE, is what it is," Maggie complained, batting angrily at his busy hands. 'This is no kind
of behavior for a gallant prince at all, if you ask me.'

Leofwin chucked her forcibly under the chin with one hand and recaptured both of her wrists with the other.

Though Maggie

was no weakling, neither was she a match for Leofwin. He was an unusually hefty sort of prince.

"You've been listening to too many romances, little honey. You seem to think that witches like yourself could
turn into REAL princesses, who, as everybody knows, are so fragile they'd break if one were to jounce them around
like this--"

"I do NOT listen to romances and whether I shatter or not, my ribs are certainly not going to hold out much
longer if you don't get your knees out of them!"

But now the prince was bent on giving her a speech.

"Gullible people like you, you see, believe that old myth that nobility is an asset in noblemen. Let me tell you,
sweeting, it's no great help in the prince game at all. Rape and pillage of foreign villages is my specialty. It's what
I'm good at." he concluded without false modesty.

Maggie groaned. "I was afraid of that. There are people out there who need our help, and you're-stop that, now!
Unhand me this instant, or you'll regret it!" She clawed and bit and began screaming words he couldn't quite make
out as he was disarranging their garments for his convenience.

"You can't fool me, lovey. That hot temper of yours is all flaming passion, isn't it? Don't worry about those sods
out there. They're done for, and OUCH!" as she bit him, "I'll put you out as well if you don't cease that caterwauling
and be goo--" He lifted his arm to strike her as she let out another bellow. But before he could strike, he felt a
distinct, uncomfortable warmth growing at his backside.

"Sic 'im!" Maggie shouted so loudly that dust and cinders jarred loose from the rafters.

Mercifully for Colin, most of the cottages he entered were empty of people, living or otherwise. At the fifth, a
smithy, he found the mayor, the dwarf blacksmith of whom Trickle had spoken, lying across his anvil as if broken,
moonlight glinting grotesquely off his empty eyeballs.

The sight was too much for Colin. who succumbed to a prolonged period of intense vomiting before forcing the
body onto its back. He mechanically poured the unicorn water through the dwarf's teeth, though of course the
halfling just continued to lay there, still staring.

Dumping the body none too tenderly back onto the floor, Colin trudged on to the next cabin, and the next, now
finding

more people, matrons, men and children, mostly little boys, though one or two lifeless infants were female.

When he'd finished his row of cottages and Maggie had still failed to appear, he began to search her row,
adding an extra drop of unicorn water to the bodies in the cottages for good measure, in case she hadn't gotten as far
as he had. It might have been his imagination, but he fancied that some of the bodies in her row looked somewhat
less dead than those in his own row, if such a thing were possible. Telling himself he was an idiot to think one
corpse could possibly feel warmer than another, he hurried on to look for Maggie. She might have found a survivor.
Of course! That had to be what was keeping her,

But he began to be perplexed when he had searched all but the last cottage without locating her. Ducking back
out into the wind-ruffled night, he suddenly stopped cold, his anxiety turning to alarm as he heard screams from
back down at the end of the road.

He ran, pelting down the muddy track, slipping on leaves and falling in the sucking mud, but righting himself
and running all UK faster.

The screams rang louder and louder, deafening him to the slow, slurping footsteps shambling in his wake.

Moonshine was disappointed when the dogs and cats and horses he touched with his horn failed to respond
immediately. He'd hoped a spark of life remained in at least one of them. For surely the animals of the village would
be more inclined than the people to answer his questions about the other unicorn.

Animals would be clever enough to be grateful and candid to one who saved them.

Though if those silly beasts who'd turned against the wizard and had dared to attack his maiden had been any
indication of the quality of the beasts hereabouts, perhaps he was wrong. Still, for some reason, perhaps because his wonderful maiden seemed to think it was the right thing to do, he was willing to try to save them. He was therefore not surprised when he suddenly remembered a portion of the Creed he could have sworn he'd never known to begin with. It just popped itself into his head and sang itself to him. He was sure he'd never learned it at his mother's withers, but nevertheless it sounded right and clearly pointed out his duty:

"For it is the Unicorn Creed To offer the horn to the need Of beings infected With water-connected Afflictions. We rise to the deed."

It ended oddly, compared to the other passages, but that was undoubtedly because of its essentially activist character.

He was relieved that the Creed substantiated Maid Maggie's idea, which was, as were so many of her ideas, unconventional. Like insisting that he associate himself not only with her but with minstrels and ersatz moat monsters.

But she was a very good maiden, nevertheless, he was sure of that, and very pure. Somehow her ideas always seemed to turn out right; the minstrel had saved them at the wizard's castle, and the wizard himself, contrary to first impressions, was a well-bred elf with exceedingly good taste, who appreciated the beauty and wisdom of unicorns.

Above him, the wind raced through the trees, and a cloud whisked across the moon. Once he thought he heard LyrrhT's hunting cry, and another time a wolf howled, seemingly nearby, and Moonshine quaked, just a little, wondering why that particular wolf should be alive when all else throughout the woods was dead.

The entire situation was eerie, was what it was. Normally, Moonshine didn't mind eerie. There were those, in fact, who considered HIM slightly eerie. But tonight, with the reek of all those dead things still haunting his nostrils, he minded the eerieness a great deal. It simply wasn't wholesome.

He wished Maid Maggie and the minstrel would hurry. He'd run out of cats and dogs and horses, and was reluctant to start on pigs and goats and chickens.

Back by the stream. Roundelay nickered uneasily, and Moonshine cocked his head to hear what she was saying.

That was when he heard the first scream.

Colin raced into the tavern and skidded to a halt. The screams were multiple and mingled, both male and female. By the bright light of a fire that streaked like lightning around the tavern floor, he saw that some of the screams, the wrathful, offended ones, came from Maggie, who was on the pointing end of the fire. The other screams, the pained and frightened ones, came from Prince Leofwin, who was on the receiving end.

Brandishing Banshee Bringer, Colin leapt from table to bench to table until he reached the corner where Maggie's fire had corralled the prince.

Noting the sword in Colin's hand, Maggie dowsed her fire before it could climb the Prince's pant leg. "It's about time you got here," she said. "My finger and my voice were getting very tired."

"That was CRUEL, witch!" Leofwin complained, rubbing his hindquarters as if inspecting for damage.

Maggie shrugged. "I thought I heard you say something about wanting flaming passion, but in my line of work, the best I could come up with was passionate flaming."

"Keep that in mind, varlet," Colin said sternly, looking down the length of his blade at the seated and sweating nobleman. "Trifle with the Princess Magdalene and you're playing with fire."

"Oh, Mother," Maggie moaned. "You sound like the dragons now."

"It's a good thing you didn't maim me," the Prince said pettishly. "Half the ladies in this part of the world would never forgive you."

Colin danced about, thoroughly enjoying himself, threatening the Prince, who had sat down next to his own heavy battle sword. This was'what gallantry was all about, defending one's lady from black-hearted princes, just as Sir Osgood the Good did in the ballad of the same name when he defended the Lady Corisande from the vile and lecherous Sir Cuthbert.

But evidently Sir Cuthbert had not been the swordsman Prince Leofwin was, for before Colin knew it, the Prince raised the great iron weapon and with a leisurely whack shattered Colin's blade to irretrievably small pieces.

"Get lost, hero, and let the lady and me continue our conversation. She's beginning to fancy me. I can tell." And with that Leofwin swipe a brutal slash where Colin's head was formerly.

By then, however, Colin had crawled beneath the table, and on hands and knees was trying to reassemble the shards of Banshee Bringer.

"You broke my sword," he accused Leofwin, who loomed menacingly above him. "The King gave me that sword, and you broke it."

"Never mind, warbler. You won't have need of it again when I'm done with you." He started to duck down under the table low enough to reach Colin with his blade, but stopped in mid-stoop.
Moonshine exploded into the tavern, spraying bits of clattering crockery and fragmenting furniture behind him as he flew to the rescue. Flying behind him was Trickle, hanging on for dear life to the end of his tail.

"You screamed. Maiden?" he asked.

Prince Leofwin had joined Colin under the table when Moonshine first appeared, but now the Prince crawled far enough out to shake his sword threateningly at the unicorn.

Maggie concentrated very hard, telling her magic she needed to chop onions with the largest knife available in the immediate vicinity. Leofwin's blade wrenched itself from its owner's hand and began making short, harmless whacks at the earthen floor. The whacks were harmless enough, at least, until the Prince tried to regain his blade and it mistook his fingers for onions. He drew his hand back speedily.

But by then Moonshine had spotted him, and was making rapid thrusts and lunges with his horn under the edge of the table. "Come forth, villain, and prepare to be skewered like the wild pig you are!" the unicorn shrilled to the Prince, who understood only the angry whinny and the rapier hem. "Despoil MY maiden, will you? Take that!"

"Let him be. Moonshine." Maggie grabbed a handful of mane. "For now." She found the outline of his disguise in her pocket and slipped it over his horn. "This is the kind of filth it truly would be a shame to soil your horn with."

"Ah, but one false move," Colin cautioned as he scuttled out to join his friends, "And she'll sic your own sword on you. If I were you I'd come away from it." Leofwin followed his advice, looking chastened and pensive and suddenly sober.

"Whew! Am I glad that's over!" Trickle said, extricating herself from Moonshine's tail and collapsing across the rim of an empty flagon, her skinned knees and dirty legs draped over one edge-head, shoulders, and small, sinewy arms over the other. "Because we've got a real problem approaching--" she looked over her shoulder, toward the door. "Correction, here."


From the gloomy night, blown in on the rainy wind and heralded by their unlovely fragrance, shuffled three of the men Colin recognized as among those whose dead lips he had wet with unicorn water. They didn't look a bit better walking than they had looked splayed in various morbid poses around their cottages. The dwarf blacksmith was still sooty and starey-eyed. Against the color of last year's fall leaves, the cobbler's pock-marks blazed like live coals. Mud caked the potter's hair, and smeared across his face and down his tunic. He'd apparently succumbed to the poison while working with his clay, since Colin had found him collapsed over a squashed pot. The dark smudges only made his dead skin look more waxen, his eyes more like stones under shallow water.

Oblivious to everything but their goal, the three grisly figures lurched their way to a table and sat, elbows bent, eyes staring at nothing. t

Soon these apparitions were joined by a fourth, one of the men at the table of six first treated with unicorn water. The fourth paid no attention to his fellows, but walked straight past their table to the shelves behind the long table that served as a bar. He pulled down three clean flagons. These he held under the open spigot of the nearest keg until he had filled all three. He might have seemed to be going about his daily business except that he failed to shut the spigot as he shuffled to the table of his fellow townsmen. Brew gushed onto the earthen floor, turning it muddy and wending a shining trail between table legs and under bench seats. Mechanically, the innkeeper smacked the pints down in front of his customers and shuffled off again.

"They must have good credit," Colin mumbled under his breath, exchanging wary looks with Maggie. "He didn't even take their money." Maggie's face was closed, her eyes narrow and suspicious. She still felt some trickery unconnected with Prince Leofwin was taking place under her nose. She smelt the sorcery, but she wasn't sure where the spell was coming from.

Moonshine's eyes rolled so far back in his head that only the least glimpse of violet was possible. Leofwin fainted dead away.

"The water seems to have worked," Colin finally remarked with an optimistic smile as pallid as the newcomers. "They-er-do seem to be ambulatory, even if they're not very sociable to outsiders. But that's not so strange. I've been in many a town where the folk are like that. Usually they just need warming up. A little song, perhaps and--"

"Shhh," Maggie said. "Something is wrong. They're not just unfriendly; they don't even know we're here. And they were dead before, I tell you."

With considerable difficulty, Trickle struggled up from her lounging position inside the flagon, dried her wings on the hem of a bar towel, and flew to the table full of moribund drinkers.

She fluttered at their eyes, ears and noses, but no matter how annoying she tried to be, none of them paid her any attention whatsoever. After a short general tour of inspection, she flew back, lighting on Moonshine's nose. "What a bunch of deadheads," she said. "I could have flown in one of their ears and out the other and they'd never have known the difference. But you can relax, 'Corny. Nothing went wrong with your magic. It's just that not quite enough went right.

"The way it looks to me is, your horn managed to put the bodies of these rascals back in business-enough so they can go through all their old habits like eating and drinking and fouling up my poor stream." She paused to scratch her head and glanced again at the townspeople. In the flickering light of Maggie's torch, the faery's tiny lips almost appeared to wear a brittle little smile. "But as for what's inside of them, if indeed anything ever was, all of THAT'S still out to lunch. Nobody's home inside their eyes at all. I'm afraid, gallant heroes and heroines, you guys with your mighty magical meddling have created a whole village of zombies."

"How sordid!" Moonshine said.

"Surely you're mistaken," Colin laughed nervously. "Only evil magicians can do that son of thing."

"See for yourself," Trickle said, beckoning him with a mocking waggle of her pin-sized forefinger to follow her to the door.

Maggie followed too, and together the three of them peeked through the splintered doorway out into the road, where silent villagers wandered in aimless pantomime of their daily lives. They were heedless of the fine rain which now veiled the woods, heedless likewise of the mud churning under their stumbling feet, and heedless as well that they walked abroad not in daylight, but in the water-riddled moonlight. They seemed scarcely more alive than their own shadows.

CHAPTER 8

"Very good, Ollie. That's it," the mermaid Lorelei prompted. "In, out, in, out, squeeze, release, squeeze, release. Eureka! He's coming around!" She did a backflip in the water, and surfaced facing the group of cold, wet sailors and soldiers who huddled together on the narrow strip of rocky beach between the great forest and the cold gray sea.

Sir Cyril was fascinated by the mermaids and their lengthy pet, and his fascination must have showed, for Lorelei dimpled prettily at him. He smiled back-guardedly. However fascinating and helpful the mermaids were now, on their best behavior, Perchingbird knew from his conch-shell-preserved lore that most members of their species were essentially nothing more than appealing, sea-going chowder-heads with alarming necrophiliac tendencies. That is, most of the female members of their species fell into that relatively (if one didn't count the odd shipwreck or drowning) harmless category. The males were very much worse. So bad, in fact, that the females preferred human males (preferably drowned) or selkies, the were-beast sea faeries who were seals in the sea and men on the land. The archives held several recorded cases of lineages born of alliances between the merwomen and the selkies. Young Songsmith, the King's minstrel, was said to be descended from such a mating.

What was so interesting about these particular mermaids, besides the fact that they were the first of their kind Sir Cyril had ever seen, was that they were altering their usual habit of drowning mortals and with great professional skill were directing their sea serpent in his exertions to revive the King. True, both mermaids and serpent were performing under some duress, but now that they'd gotten used to the idea, they did the job relatively cheerfully.

Lorelei had persuaded the sea beast to beach the last few cubits of his tail, a length sufficient to coil several times around the King's massive chest. Under her direction, the monster expanded and contracted his tail in a gentler version of the pulsating rhythm with which he had wrecked the Snake's Bane. Each bellows-like squeeze forced geysers of water from Rowan's mouth.

Perchingbird answered Lorelei's smile with an inquiring expression. He was beginning to understand the gurgly musical language passing between her and the serpent, and they seemed to have abandoned the idea of drowning the Bane's survivors, at least for the time being. Lorelei actually seemed pleased at his interest, and nodded encouragingly to him.

He left the clutch of half-drowned men, and waddled forward to observe the rescue proceedings more closely. His legs ached, and his knees still wobbled from the terrifying ride he and his shipmates had endured astride the slippery unsinged portions of the uncomfortably round serpent. Though he knew the monster had not taken nearly as long as it felt like to ferry them from their ship's wreckage to the beach, the journey through the blinding fog and ice-clogged sea had seemed endless. Sir Cyril still feared that the delay would cost the King his life.

But even as he approached the monster-wrapped King, he saw Rowan's arms begin flailing weakly.

Lorelei's dimpled smile deepened, and Perchingbird complimented her. "Wonderful work you're doing there, Miss. And a very good idea you had using your-er-pet-to revive His Majesty. I doubt any of us could have applied
sufficient pressure to get the sea water out of His Royal Highness by ourselves."

The mermaid flirted her iridescent tail in a pleased way, and said, "If you silly clams had just let us know you were after Fearchar and weren't just any passing ship, Cordelia and I wouldn't have allowed Ollie to play with your boat to begin with."

"Of course not," Cordelia agreed. She sat on a rock a little off shore, and flipped her long tresses back over her bare shoulders with a little shimmy of her human torso that sent a gasp of admiration through the ranks of the castaways, momentarily stilling the collective chattering of their teeth. With a fond smile of acknowledgement to her admirers, Cordelia continued. "You can't imagine how distressed I was to find Lorelei here in my waters in the state she was in after dealing with that horrid wizard! She and I schooled together, you know, simply ages ago, and although she was much older than I, I have always considered her a dear, dear sister. Ollie found her, actually, on an ice chunk not far from this very beach. By the time I answered his summons she was a perfect wreck, all dried out and wrinkled from being out of the water too long, and her voice nothing but a hoarse croak."

"I daresay I can't have been THAT bad," Lorelei replied edgily. "But I was upset, as any self-respecting siren would be. That Fearchar sailed out of our gulf like a greased eel. After the conversation I had with a descendant of our people, a certain minstrel, I began to doubt Fearchar ever intended to keep his promise to join me. I only wanted him to give up that split-tailed princess he'd been seeing, and come play with me as he always said he would." Her full lower lip quivered, whether with indignation or hurt Perchingbird couldn't tell. "But he had those big ugly swans of his attached to his boat, and used magic to get away from me so quickly I had to use all my energy to swim! Before I could sing the tiniest little note, he landed his boat and disappeared into the woods without even saying goodbye."

"She might have died on that rock if I hadn't saved her," Cordelia said. "But we've been having such a lovely time since then, playing with Ollie and all of the little fishing boats from the windside shore."

Perchingbird thought she must mean Brazoria. Argonia was, to his knowledge, relatively uninhabited on this coast. Most Argonians had settled in the southwestern regions, near the capital of Queenston and the Gulf of Gremlins. Better that Ollie and his friends posed a threat to Brazorian maritime activity than to Argonians.

The silver-spotted sea serpent relaxed its tail, and the King spat out the last of the seawater. Rubbing a wet, whiskery cheek against the monster's scales, His Majesty snuggled deeper into the coils. "Your skin's a mite rough, darlin'." the monarch murmured to the monster, "But, ah, don't I love a lass with a firm grip!"

Lorelei leapt from the shallows like a porpoise, and twisted in mid-air, slapping Ollie's tail smartly with her own. Then- with a graceful flip, she arched herself so that she dived into the deep waters further off shore, where she resurfaced and calmly swam back to the beach. Shaking the water from her long green locks, she pouted. "You mustn't give Ollie all the credit, sweeting. I'm the one who saved you."

Cordelia slapped her shimmering tail and flung down her comb. "Remember, sister dear, whose waters you're swimming in. Ollie is MY pet, and though I'm glad to share my territory with you when you're not yourself, all mortals in these waters are mine and--oooh, lookie there! Doesn't he have LOVELY hair, though? Just like coral!"

She stared admiringly at the King's suddenly fully revealed form, including the coral-colored hair, as Ollie's last coil resurfaced and calmly swam back to the beach. Shaking the water from her long green locks, she pouted. "You mustn't give Ollie all the credit, sweeting. I'm the one who saved you."

With a great smack of her tail, which not entirely by accident splashed water over Cordelia's freshly dried and groomed coiffure. Lorelei flung her upper half onto shore and clapsed the felled King's boot with a possessive hand. "You're NOT going to take him back, and never you mind his hair. He's MY ally, and it was MY information about Fearchar that helped put him on the throne, wasn't it, angelfish? I'm not about to let you drown him after all the trouble I've been to!"

"What a lot of bilge you're talking, sister Lorelei!" Cordelia sniffed, tossing her newly soaked lavender hair, her alabaster assets aquiver with indignation. "Some guest YOU turned out to be. See if I ever share my salvage work with you again. To think you would turn on me for the sake of a coral-haired mortal! Haven't you learned anything from your experience with your precious Fearchar? These men have no honor at all-that's why I prefer the company of a real snake like Ollie!"

Lorelei was firm. "I'm sorry, sister. It's just that this is more important than mere salvage work. Can't you see how damaging it will be to our mer mystique if mortals think just anyone can go around enticing mermaids to beach themselves simply by ignoring us? I know I've been an awful silly, and that's why I can't let you drown these men right now. They're going to catch Fearchar for me at last, aren't you, little blowfish?" The last remark, Perchingbird realized, was directed at him.

He answered quickly, in his most conciliatory tone. "Yes, Miss. Er-at least, that's part of our mission. If you or Mistress Cordelia would just be so kind now as to tell us where we are so we could be on our--"

"You're on the beach, silly," Cordelia snapped. "Where you were put by my dear Ollie, whom you almost
murred, as you very well know. Now you'll all just have to excuse me, for I really can't be bothered any further with your ridiculous problems. I have a dear friend who has been badly injured by certain cruel humans, and I must attend him." Her long gilt eyes accused them all, lingering longest on King Rowan, before returning to Lorelei, whom she addressed in a tone that showed she still stung from what she considered Lorelei's defection.

"Lest you make the same mistake again, sister dear, I advise you not to trust these men so completely. If I were you, I'd insist they bring that shark of a magician to this very spot, and throw him to you with an anchor 'round his ankle, in payment for their lives." Cordelia paused for a moment to allow her suggestion to sink in, then smiled sweetly at the crew. "I don't suppose any of you boys would care to join a lady in a little swim?" In spite of the wistful expressions lingering on the faces of a few of the men, there were no takers, and the disgruntled mermaid dived into the sea and swam rapidly towards the last few loops of still slightly smoldering seasnake.

Lorelei watched thoughtfully until both Cordelia and the snake were well out of sight, then turned back to Perchingbird, her eyes slitted and glittering with a strong emotion Sir Cyril couldn't name. "Never mind her. She's only trying to spoil my fun because she's jealous of me. But she does have a point, doesn't she? I mean, you boys DO owe me a great debt for saving you, don't you? Now, I don't know if I really want you to drown Fearchar exactly, when you find him, but as for that split-tailed princess-"

Ah, yes! Now he knew. The emotion so prominent in her expression was greed. Though she had played the benefactress well enough until now, Perchingbird knew that, considering the avaricious and amoral natures of mermaids, she oughtn't to be surprised that she was attempting to use their plight to her own advantage. Not only did she plan to seek vengeance on Fearchar, she was apparently even more interested in disposing of Princess Pegeen, her rival, as well.

The King was still regaining his senses, and when he did, the honor of the throne of Argonia would compel him to obey any demands imposed on him by the lethal, beautiful being who had saved his life, and whom he would be obliged to serve. The best thing for all concerned would be if Lorelei never formally voiced her ideas as demands at all, if she were subtly but gently reminded that although the castaways were shipless and largely without weapons or provisions, they still had considerable power at their disposal. Perchingbird could think of only one way to present an argument sufficiently timely and convincing to dissuade the determined siren.

"Oh. Dragon Grimley, sir!" he called to the heavens in general. "Might I have a word with you?"

Several sailors instinctively jumped into the sea as a spurt of flame shot out of the woods. Perchingbird took an involuntary and very hasty step backwards himself as Grimley poked his head through the trees.

"Didn't mean to scare you, hotshot," the dragon said affably. "But I couldn't see a flamin' thing in this fog. Thought I might come down to earth, so to speak, and pick up a nice morsel of moose or wolverine for the missus as long as I'm in the neighborhood. Couldn't find a single cow back at the castle. Guess it's just too flamin' foggy to do much huntin'. By the time I see my dinner, I've burnt it, if you see what I mean. What can I do for you this time?"

At the sight of the dragon. Lorelei had let out a girlish shriek and had dived into the cold gray waves.

"You're done it already, sir, thank you," Perchingbird replied. "Unless, of course, you could tell us where we are?"

Grimley scratched one of the red scales along his spine with a sharp-taloned foot. "Let me see. I'd say you were about-the castle is-uh-well, there are two mountain ranges and another big ice between the sea and--"

Perchingbird listened patiently, but soon realized that although the dragon might know perfectly well where they were, and could undoubtedly fly himself away in the direction of the castle at any time, he didn't know how to communicate his perception of the time and space involved to the earthbound and much slower people.

Frustrated, Grimley began to belch smoke from his nostrils and his eyes glowed red with vexation.

"Never mind, sir," Perchingbird said quickly, not wishing to add dealing with an overwrought dragon to his other problems. "I'm sure it will come to you. Perhaps Lady Grizel could-er- shed some light on the situation."

"That's what's got me so steamed up, hotshot," the dragon replied. "Grizel can't come, and I've got to get back to her. I only came back to tell you you folks are going to have to continue without us. While you and the others were getting all wrapped up in that long wiggly fella and listening to those fish-girls sing, the missus started cookin'. I think she's going to pop our little bun out of the oven any time now within the next moon, and I have to get back to hunt for her while she's hatchin'."

"What's all this, Cyril?" the King, who had revived, demanded in a booming voice that quelled any concern anyone may have harbored about the recovery of his lungs from their dousing. His Majesty was surrounded by the rest of the crew now, and must have been sitting, since the top of his head wasn't visible above the others. "Is that Grimley? Ask him to be a good fellow, will you, and fetch us up a fire? The men are going to perish of 'chilblains if we don't warm 'em soon."
"Your pardon, sir," Perchingbird said to the dragon, and joined the cluster around the King. Rowan looked somewhat paler than usual, but was busily burnishing the metal on his armor, drying it with a torn piece of someone's cloak. Perchingbird conveyed the dragon's message.

"Well then, that's all right," the King said. "Their new dragon cave is near m'family home. Castle Rowan. I've a wee garrison there. Just gi' this tae t'captain o' t'guard." He slipped off his signet ring. "Have 'im meet us wi' horses an' arms. Surely t'dragon can show them how tae get t'where we are?"

"Well, hope so. Sire," Sir Cyril said. And though he carefully explained the King's wishes to Grimley, and attached a note to the ring, depositing both in his own purse and tying the purse around one of the dragon's claws, he had little faith the captain of the guard would understand either the dragon or the note. He could not draw pictures, as Princess Pegeen could, to enlighten others of their situation and the King's commands.

Watching the dragon's bright form vanish into the fog, Sir Cyril very much feared the mission, if not their collective existence, was doomed. Even if they managed to find their way back to Rowan's castle, could they possibly do so before their adversary had gained the strength he needed? If they met the wizard in the fullness of his power, while they were in their current depleted condition, could they even hope to prevent him from usurping the throne, never mind forcing him to lift the curse from Princess Bronwyn? And meanwhile, as they shivered on the beach and wondered where they were, in a condition unfit to save themselves, much less anyone else, the Princess Pegeen, one of Argonia's greatest ladies to Perchingbird's way of thinking, languished in the clutches of a ruthless, unscrupulous villain.

"I'd better never catch you doing that in the sight of my innocent lambs," the woman snapped, watching Wulfric change to man form. "If you had any decency, you wouldn't perform such a disgusting spectacle in front of a respectable widow woman either."

But her slightly bulging black eyes watched avidly as she saw gray fur change to smooth human muscle and the tall, gray-haired man rise from his hands and knees to stand before her. "Really." she said, "I don't know what dear Nastur-excuse me. Sally, must be thinking of to send such a depraved creature as yourself to see her only sister-in-law when she knows very well I have three lovely chaste daughters who must be protected until a suitable match can be found." Her flat, nasal voice stopped as she ran the red tip of her tongue over her pointed teeth, smiling slightly in spite of herself. Her perfume was of such a cloying sweetness that for once Wulfric was almost glad to be in man form; the scent was enough to send his wolf nose into spasms of revulsion.

But he was on a mission for the cause, so he said politely, "I implore you to forgive this ugly carcass, noble relative of my gallant leader, but I bear an urgent message from Her. She would have you know that your opportunity to serve is nigh. Your beautiful daughters may well attract the beasts we need to accomplish our great purpose. There is at least one of these creatures loose in yon woods, though even now our Sally lays a clever snare for her. I shall watch for your signal, as you have arranged with Her. Be alert for strange beasts or men, and notify us of any who come nigh."

"Naturally," the lady replied curtly. "And don't you forget [i'm to be rewarded. I've already done you one service, and I've yet to see my pay for that. I should be made at LEAST a duchess and suitable marriages arranged for all my daughters-it isn't easy for an attractive young widow like myself to manage alone with three tender blossoms to maintain in a fitting style. By the way," she curled a lock of brazen hair around a long sharp fingernail and gave him a sly look from beneath pale lashes, "I don't suppose you go through that distressing transformation because you're an enchanted prince, do you? Because if you are, I have several important connections among the sorcerous set who might help you if you were willing to pay ..."

By that time, however, Wulfric had changed back into wolf form and leaped back across the stream which bordered the woman's garden. He bounded into the woods. But he was not going so fast that he failed to see one of the lady's "innocent lambs," a truly delicious looking sunny-haired young girl, seated by the stream bank among a varied flock of admiring beasts. Angrily recalling the woman's brutal remarks about his degrading transformation into man form, Wulfric slavered as he regarded the girl and thought it had been some time since he'd enjoyed lambchops.

He was gauging the distance between them and preparing to leap when he heard Sally's hunting horn.

Leofwin awoke while Colin, Maggie and Moonshine were discussing with Trickle what was to be done about the zombie-fied villagers. After a few generally ignored preliminary groans, the Prince crawled to Maggie's feet and began kissing fervently the tattered hem of her skirt.

Maggie slapped his hands away, "Will you please stop pawing my clothing," she asked. "Here we are in the middle of nowhere with unicorn-nappers and zombies all around us, bandits on the prowl, the royal house cursed, the King Mother-only-knows-where on some quest or other, while a lot of addle-pated noblemen like you who are certainly no better than they ought to be chase us about trying to do brave deeds, and all you can do is attempt to
launder my skirt by slobbering on it." She snatched the cloth out of his hand and started to turn back to her friends, but he threw himself prostrate and clasped her ankle, crying, "Forgive me, noble enchantress! I had no idea you were anything but another ravishingly gorgeous maiden. How was I supposed to know you control fire, can turn my own blade against me, command a unicorn and raise the dead? Most of the girls I've ravished don't even have hobbies. Spare my miserable life, I implore you. For surely you are as good as you are beautiful." "Right," she said. "And you told me not long ago exactly what you thought of my looks. Never mind. Just get up, why don't you, and tell us how it is you happen to be waiting for us here when we left you behind days ago?"

"That's easy," the Prince said, relieved. He plopped heavily down on the bench in front of his collection of empty flagons. Maggie noticed that he now seemed completely sober. His speech was no longer slurred, and his tone was relatively civil. "I won at dice with that simp, Greystraw, and took his seven league boots, family heirloom for the Greystraws. You know, seven league boots. They may be transformers through the male line, but his mother's people were elf cobblers, every one of them, for all their pretensions of nobility."

"That explains how you got here so fast," Colin acknowledged, "But not how you got here so fast. One might think, Highness, you were in league with those unicorn-snatching rogues."

Leofwin wiped his hand across his eyes. "Not so fierce, bard, not so fierce. Have pity on a sick man. Will you? You people have a rude way of ending a lovely binge. I'd planned to hunt unicorns, not abduct them. I only followed that crazy Jivemgood here with a mind to winning a prize worthy of the little lady." He nodded toward Maggie. "I don't know why the fellow had to take MY seven-league boots. He's lots faster than me-must either have his own pair or a magic carpet or something stashed somewhere. Normally I don't hold with that kind of hocus-pocus, you know. A man should rely on his own thews and good iron sword, to my way of thinking. But in this case, since what I was promised was at quite a distance and seemed just the trick to acquire a special trinket for my family and the little lady's hand in the bargain, I used the bloody boots. And let me tell you, my legs will never be the same again!"

"What exactly did Count Jivemgood have to do with the unicorn-napping anyway?" Maggie demanded. "We know that's what you were up to so you can stop all that hogwash about presents for me."

"He didn't have much at all to do with it that I could see, Your Bewitchingness. It was mostly that nymphy little bitch that was behind the whole thing, though they kept talking about a dark monk or a black pilgrim or something other and about how they were going to start a new world right here in old Rowan's kingdom. My feeling was they wanted the 'corns for the general usefulness of the beasts-keep strategic cisterns pure, mend the sick, that sort of thing. There was some raving about an elixir from Jivemgood and, of course," he glanced sidelong at the zombies who continued bending their elbows and slopping brew down their fronts with chillingly automatic regularity, "if that horn water can do THAT sort of thing to people, I can see--" "That wasn't intentional," Maggie said. "Tell us more about the woman you mentioned. You said she was a nymph--"

"She IS a nymph." Trickle said bitterly. "A renegade. Used to have my bit of turf, down at the stream. Her name was Nasturtium then. I only met her once before-well, before now, but the animals didn't seem overly fond of her. She always seemed to feel nymphing was beneath her, though she didn't mind flaunting herself in front of the townsmen when their wives weren't looking, according to what I heard. Thought she was above guarding streams and protecting animals. Looks like she's found someone else who thinks so, too, and got them to help her steal poor Snowshadow."

Suddenly the faery flew over to Leofwin's ear, and with all her strength grabbed its lobe and gave it a vicious tweak. "He knows where she's taken Snowshadow. Make him tell! I saw him cuddling up to that hussy!"

"Ow!" the Prince cried. Colin grabbed his arm as he swung at the faery. Leofwin regarded the tiny woman ruefully and rubbed his ear. "You didn't see enough to know what you're talking about, maggot. I had no chance to cuddle your friend before her pet wolf sprang from the bushes and tried to slay me. If it wasn't for my faithful sword, I'd be a dead man. I fought my way into a comer of this inn, and held them at bay until the girl gave the order to leave. I swear I don't know where they took the 'corn. Probably wherever they keep the others-back with this priest or pilgrim or whatever he is, I'd think. They took my boots and gear, and I was doing a fine job of getting drunk until everyone around here began dropping like slops flung out the window. It's been a heavy task, I can tell you that, trying to swallow down enough funeral libations to send each of the poor sods off to the next world."

Trickle opened a bulging sack that had been tossed into a shadowy comer. "Looks like you've been having a harder task yet looting the houses, haven't you, noble prince?"
"A man has to have some compensation for his trouble." Leofwin answered. "I've lost my magic boots and gear." He looked sadly at the sword still chopping away at the ground. "Even Old Spleen Splitter there, that you've got choppin' mudpies out of the floor, has been turned against me, and after all we've been through together, too. I wish you'd stop it doing that, ma'am. That is a real genuine personally tailored sword of invincibility wrought for me by my own goblin granddaddy, and I hate to see it doing women's work."

"In good time," Maggie said. "I wouldn't be overly interested in that sword right now if I were you. It makes Moonshine nervous. He hasn't split a spleen yet this week himself, and he's wanting practice."

Moonshine assumed an appropriately ferocious expression.

"Make him stop that, ma'am, won't you? I can't tell you anything else. I was into my second jug before Sally and her boys were out of town."

"How long have they been gone, then?" Maggie asked.

Leofwin scratched his chin. "I couldn't say exactly. Can't even really tell you how long I've been here-I rather lost track of time after the fifth keg."

"I suppose we'll just have to try to find out about them at the next town then," Maggie said hopelessly.

"Yes, well, at any rate, we can't just leave these villagers wandering around like this," Colin said. "We'll have to report their problem to the nearest proper authorities."

"Perhaps kinsmen can care for them until my magic can finish its task, Maiden," Moonshine said. "I'm sure it will work--in time. I do so hate leaving a job half done."

"What's to be done with them in the meantime?" Maggie asked no one in particular. She personally didn't feel much encouraged that any amount of attention could help such pathetic-looking specimens, but one could hardly leave such a group lying about for the next unwary traveler to stumble over. Besides, she couldn't help feeling guilty that her interference had robbed these people of what little dignity death had left them.

"I 'I I look after them. Princess," Leofwin offered with a gloating gleam in his piggish eye. "It should be fun. I hear zombies will do anything they're told."

"Good idea," Trickle agreed. "We'll get them to move their privies and their garbage dumps to the other side of town, away from my stream, for starters and--"

"Hold there, half-pint," the Prince objected. "You'd not have a direct descendant of the goblin king, Gawdaufool, digging privies?" He reached for his sword, but it turned on him again, whacking remorselessly toward him, still under the influence of Maggie's magic.

The faery grinned. "I sure would, big boy. And you won't be needing your oversized frog-sticker, either, unless you plan to dig with it."

"It'd be a shame to ruin a blade like that with digging," Colin said. "I'll take it, if you can get it to cooperate. Maggie. He broke MY sword, after all, and I shall probably need one if we run into any of those bandits."

Maggie nodded and the sword sprang into his hand as if of its own accord.

Leofwin jumped to his feet. "See here, you can't just take my sword and leave me here digging privies with a lot of zombies! I won't stand for it!"

But before he could move, Trickle hopped onto his ear. Cupping her hands, she shouted directly into it. "NOW HEAR THIS, Big Shot. Behave yourself, or I will personally arrange for the biggest mosquito you've ever met to drive you totally out of your mind." She jabbed him hard with the needle-like tip of her fingernail. He clapped his hand to his ear, howling, but by that time she'd zipped to the other side of his neck and gouged him several more times. He swatted there as well but she evaded him, flying above his head and jerking a lock of his hair in a hard tug that caused him to yelp. For several minutes she continued to attack while the Prince pinwheeled like an infuriated windmill.

"STOP!" he bawled at last, sinking exhausted back against the table. Tears coursed down his ruddy cheeks and droplets of blood gleamed like small rubies where the faery had left her marks. "I-I can't take any m--more."

Trickle turned to Maggie and Colin. Her tiny face was full of grim satisfaction. "Very well. Now that His Highness and I understand each other, I think you people can go about your business. I'll see to it these louts eat and exercise and take whatever rest people in their condition will take. Don't worry about them. Just send some more mortals back for them, and try to find Snowshadow as quickly as you can."

Dawn marbled the sky with carnelian as Colin, Maggie, and Moonshine returned to their original campsite. Colin nodded sleepily against Roundelay's neck and Maggie yawned with every other breath.

Moonshine, however, pranced happily, head swinging from side to side. "Heard you, Maiden, how the dogs of the village barked again, and how the horses neighed? My magic made no half-creatures of those honest beasts."

Maggie leaned forward wearily and patted his neck. "No, darling, you healed them completely, true enough. Only the people aren't as good as new because of you. Which confirms what I've been thinking. There's some bad magic brewing behind this matter somewhere."
"And my hom dipping has improved the stream too." Moonshine continued, too enraptured of his own magic to heed her misgivings of bad. "See how even the little flowers lift their heads along the banks?"

"Aye," she agreed, yawning again. "I do seem to see a daisy or two sprouting amongst the mugwort this morning."

They breakfasted over one of her magic fires. Neither Colin nor Maggie were very hungry. Both still carried the death stench of the village in their nostrils and the cold stare of the zombies in their minds' eyes.

"I'm going to look like the locals if we don't sleep soon," Colin complained, stretching hugely. "But somehow I feel disinclined to do it here."

Maggie shivered in the predawn chill, and pulling her woolen tunic tighter against her arms, moved closer to the fire. A thin mist danced above the stream. The moss underfoot was clammy with dew, which soaked through her soft skin boots.

A flutter of movement in the trees alerted Moonshine, who lifted his head and searched the forest. Soon, Lyrrill padded purring towards them.

"Looks as if she's found her cubs," Colin said.

Moonshine repeated the remark to the big cat, who licked her paw and groomed herself in a satisfied fashion.

"Yesss," she replied. "And Lyrrill hass raised no ignorant kittens. Not dead of poissonss werrre my children! NOIT craven in theirrr dens while ssinglehorms were enslaved. Myrrill and Pyrrill live, ass doess the sshe singahlornm they preserserved firrrrrwrrretched hunterrss and fallssse sshe."

Moonshine's trot was a frisky little jig as he followed the lynx's furred paws across the dense forest floor. Deeper in the woods, the travelers began to notice more small animals still thriving among the trees. They could hear larger animals too. Colin thought this forest must be awfully full of wolves. He heard the same one, he was certain, as he had heard howling near Everclear. And hadn't Leofwin said something about the nymph unicorn-napper having a pet wolf?

Moonshine heard very little, for he was fairly chattering at Maggie. "Just think, at last, Maiden, I will meet one of my own kind who will know ALL of our precious Creed. How wonderful to be learned in the ways of my dam and sire! And I shall owe it all to the steadfastness and wisdom of you, my kind, beautiful, intelligent, gentle, witty, noble maiden, more caring and more loyal and--"

"Oh, leave off, won't you?" Maggie asked, blushing as she caught Colin's amused smile. She ruffled the unicorn's mane lightly. "I'll be as glad to clear this thing up as you will. We really must see if the King can't put a stop to these unicorn-nappings as soon as possible. Perhaps he'll grant me their heads as a boon instead of making me keep the coronet, eh? That would solve all our problems."

"Except the villagers," Colin reminded her.

"Yes, of course," she agreed. "I hadn't forgotten them. But surely there's somebody in this spell-riddled realm with the power to put them right again. It isn't as if they'd have to start from scratch, after all. Moonshine's already brought the Ever-clearians back to life—at least, almost."

Colin pulled a wry face. "I'm afraid in cases like that almost really isn't good enough."

Lyrrill picked her way into a thicket of young cedar, and Moonshine followed closely. With great bounding bounds, the lynx's youngest kittens tumbled playfully out of the underbrush, hissing, and brandishing small splayed paws. Beyond them, Lyrrill turned suddenly, flanked with what seemed to be two mirror images of herself.

Before Colin and Maggie could congratulate the cat on reuniting her family, a peevish voice from behind the three adult lynx said, "WILL you wretched furry beasts remove yourselves and stop lashing your nasty little tails in my face so I can look upon this kinsman you claim to have found!"

The lynx family scooted themselves farther back into the brush on either side of the path they had opened for Moonshine.

The other unicorn lay on a bed of flower-studded moss. Her coat was whiter than snow, and her mane and tail a tawny golden. Her horn was set rather lower on her face than Moonshine's, so that she always seemed to be looking down it, and it was also more opaque than his, shining with a soft ivory patina. Only the few nicks and scratches still gleaming through her coat lingered to remind her of her disagreement with Myrrill and Pyrrill and marred her perfection. Her eyes were the silver of winter water, and a few silvery hairs gleamed in her otherwise creamy muzzle.

But she was staring in horror at Moonshine. "Your horn!" she cried.

"My-oh, yes, this little device," he said, crossing his eyes to try to see the horn between them. "Maiden, if you'd be so kind?"

Maggie plucked off the cone of invisibility.

"Clever, isn't it?" Moonshine chuckled to the older unicorn. "A little something dreamed up by my clever maiden and her friends to protect me."
"Humiliate you is more likely!" the other unicorn sniffed. "Just as these nasty cats have humiliated me and kept
me from my finest hour. I am Primrose. My dam was Dewdrop and my sire the magnificent Rosebriar, and I demand
to be released from this ignominious captivity."

"Haven't you got it wrong?" Maggie asked. "The lynx twins rescued you. It's that other unicorn who was
captured."

Primrose favored her, if favored was not too kind a term, with a glacial stare and a haughty sniff, after which
she studiously ignored the witch, and asked Moonshine in carefully measured tones, "Whoever the person whom
you so shamefully bear upon your back may be, kindly inform her that I speak with no human save only my own
pure maiden, from whose side I was so rudely torn by these two overgrown bird-breathed mouse-catching fools. I
decline to be addressed by other persons of the human persuasion, and must once again insist that I be released and
reunited with my maiden immediately."

Moonshine backed up two steps, his rump pressing against Roundelay's nose. He had not the slightest
inclination to argue with the severe older unicorn, but neither had he the slightest idea what she was talking about.

Primrose was not backwards about enlightening him. "All my born days I've tried to do the unicornly thing,
waiting for just the proper sort of maiden to come along. Mind you, never did it cross my mind to accept just any
mongrel-bred scullery maid." She cast a significant glance at Maggie. "Nor the kind of girl who might desecrate my
innocent presence with the taint of a male," and her watery stare stabbed at Colin. "Nor would I consort with one,
ever, who would dare to unhorn me with shameful magicks that would make of me a mere nag."

"I BEG your pardon," Maggie began to huff. But then, taking note of Moonshine's intense attentiveness to his
kinswoman, she stopped herself, flushed with fury, and allowed Primrose to continue.

"No, more to my liking was the charming creature who came to me in my very own glade. A beauteous vision
she was, hair as golden as my mane and skin as white as my coat, of rosey Up and cheek and eyes both bright and
decorous at the same time. Ah, me, but her manner and mien showed me at once that a more unicornly girl I never
before had beheld."

"Tell me this," Colin demanded. He hadn't liked the remark about him tainting innocent presences. "If you
unicorns are supposed to love the first girls you meet, just how many girls had you beheld before that one, anyway,
to know that she was so bloody superior?"

Primrose loftily ignored him as she kicked out to her left in an attempt to injure Myrrill, who sprang back. "I
would have joined her blissfully but for these foul cats. They sprang upon me and virtually tore me from the side of
my dearest maiden before I could make myself known to her."

"Only to protect you!" Maggie said. "Why, we've been hearing horrible things about--"

But Primrose raised her voice above Maggie's and wouldn't hear anything she said. One after the other the
unicorn recited the alleged virtues of her lost maiden, and the treacheries of the lynx and her demands for release.
Graphically and categorically, she told Moonshine what she thought of lynx and of cats in general and of people and
of Maggie and Colin in particular. She waxed eloquent on the subject of persons, lynx, and even fellow unicorns
who would keep a devoted creature like herself from being with her chosen maiden.

Finally even Moonshine tired of listening to her and silenced her with a desperate whinny. "Enough! Enough!
You're free, for pity's sake! You're free to go wherever you like. Only please, first, tell me the rest of the Creed."

"You don't know the Creed?" Primrose asked, blowing derisively through her flaring nostrils. "You don't even
know the Unicorn Creed?"

"Nay, lady, I do not. My dam was captured by hunters in my early youth and--"

"Hah! Did I not tell you? You should never trust these humans! Even your own dam was captured, and still you
consort with them, you foolish foal!" She trumpeted triumphantly as she rose to her feet, though she looked rather
nervously at the family of lynx lying purring behind her, thoroughly absorbed in washing each other with patient
swipes of great pink tongues. Reassured by her former captors' lack of interest in her, Primrose told Moonshine, "I
haven't time to tell you the entire Creed, of course. But, since you've persuaded these feline felons to free me, I shall
grant you the answers to a very few brief, specific, well-considered questions."

Moonshine glanced back at Maggie. The witch sat with her arms tightly folded and her lips tightly clenched
into a thin line. She nodded curtly in response to his inquiring look. "Go ahead. It's what you came for, after all."

Turning back to Primrose, Moonshine blew and stamped for a moment or two before saying, "We only wanted
to know, Lady Primrose, what becomes of the love between unicorn and maiden when the maiden-when the maiden
is a maiden no longer?"

"You sully my ears with such filth?" Primrose screamed, and
tried to bolt past him. But, though none of the lynx had appeared to be paying her any attention whatsoever,
Myrrill casually laid a claw-studded paw against her flank. Primrose abruptly thought better of leaving. "Well, since you ask." she answered. "Of course, I'm not one to horn in where I'm not wanted, but since you did ask for my counsel. I think I must tell you that it's as plain to me as the horn on my face that that girl of yours is NOT up to standard. Any maiden who would even allow you to consider such an obscene question has something to hide. Obviously, she's harboring lewd thoughts about a man-and we needn't look much farther than the end of your own tail to see who that is, do we, since your little friend has even had the gall to force her paramour on you."

Overriding Moonshine's objections that Colin had actually proven very useful from time to time. Primrose continued. "Purity and goodness are the unicorn's manifest concerns, dear boy. One must never forget that. You have chosen unwisely. This girl is grimy, not immaculate. She is dark, not fair. Her tongue is quick and sharp, not sweet and gentle, and I can't say that I think that insolent look in her eye is at all in keeping with the properly ladylike spirit a unicorn maiden is supposed to exhibit at all times." Sniffing fastidiously, she added, "Furthermore, she very much resembles people I have observed from a sedate distance who are known to be witches. And I suspect she is an extremely ill-tempered one at that. You would be well rid of her."

"She's very pleasant to me, thank you, and she only works the most comforting and genteel sort of spells, I can assure you. And-and besides, she IS my maiden, and the first I ever met. It isn't her fault her people have made her a princess and wish her to wed." Moonshine finished what had started out as a heated defense quietly, staring down over his horn at the ground in front of his hooves.

"Her? A princess?" Primrose let forth a horse laugh that wasn't at all prim. "Really? You can't expect me to believe that!"

"It is so," Moonshine insisted stubbornly. "What says the Creed?"

"Before I tell you that, I must stress that the Creed could in no way possibly apply to this witch-wench of yours, whatever her political or personal status. She is simply not the least bit maidenly, never shall be and, I suspect, never was. She offends the very spirit of the Creed, dear Moonshine, and we unicorns must observe the spirit of the Creed even more stringently than the letter of the Creed, don't you see? But come. Have that hussy remove her disreputable rump from your back and come forth with me a short distance. I won't desecrate the Creed by reciting it in her hearing."

Maggie dismounted angrily. As Moonshine and Primrose brushed past her and knocked Roundelay aside, Colin remarked, "Something tells me Moonshine's new friend doesn't care for you."

Maggie glared at him.

For a long time Primrose and Moonshine stood nose-to-nose in conference in the narrow glade beyond the lynx's hiding place. Then, abruptly, Primrose wheeled and galloped away.

Moonshine trotted back to Colin and Maggie, his head drooping sadly, his great amethyst eyes so troubled that Maggie forgot her vexation and reached out to stroke his neck tenderly. "What did that old biddy tell you, anyway?" she asked. "I don't suppose I can even hope the Creed is in our favor?"

"Maid-or rather, Maggie, the Creed says only that unicorns may befriend none but true maidens. Primrose says I'm defiled beyond redemption already because Minstrel Colin has seen and conversed with me. And she also said she-I beg your pardon but she--" If unicorns were capable of blushing, Moonshine would have done so. "She doubts the sanctity of your honor."

"My honor's as sanctified as anybody's, thank you," Maggie replied, preparing to remount. "And I think we'd better forget all this nonsense for now until we see what can be done to prevent Primrose's sweet pure maiden from luring others of your kind into her nasty little snares."

But Moonshine could not take Primrose so lightly. Even if she had been fooled by the nymph, she was an older unicorn of considerable experience, and apparently of considerable knowledge. And nymphs, after all, were very like mortal girls, enough so to mate with men and fool other mortals. A nymph's charm could easily mask her with a semblance of mortal purity, quite conceivably convincingly enough to deceive even a unicorn. Her infatuation with the nymph notwithstanding. Primrose was the only authority Moonshine knew on correct unicorn behavior, and he needed to consider her words carefully. "Maid-Maggie, if you wouldn't mind very much, could you ride with Minstrel Colin for a time? I would seek solitude to ponder these matters."

Maggie's back stiffened, and she opened her mouth to speak, but instead clamped her lower lip to her upper like a snapping turtle and silently allowed Colin to help her up before him.

"I suppose," Colin said, "Now that we have found out what you needed to know about the Creed, we ought to go straigtaway to the capital, and await the King to see what's to be done about the brigands-and your crown of course."

Maggie shrugged and didn't answer until a few minutes later when, straightening slightly, she replied in a careful, impartial tone. "I think by then it will be too late to do anything about the raiders. If we're to help the unicorns, we are going to have to do it by ourselves, even if it means we must deal with the brigands ourselves. And
also we must, of course, let someone in authority know the plight of the village at once."

"'DEAL with the brigands'? What do you mean, 'deal with the brigands'? Really, old girl, I wish you would listen to yourself sometimes. It's always the same with you, you know. Rescue this! Rescue that! No wonder the King wanted to make you a Princess. You think like a bloody knight!" He realized that she was upset, and this was not a particularly good time to lodge a complaint, but he thought he ought to take advantage of her unusually subdued mood to get a word in edgewise. The sullen silence from both Maggie and Moonshine as they backed out of the lynx lair and trotted back down the trail through the woods gave him a perfect opportunity to express himself fully on several matters which had been irking him.

"First," he reminded her, "I helped you rescue a dragon so we could rescue your sister from that uncle of yours and ANOTHER dragon. Then nothing would do but what you had to go and get yourself locked up in a tower and the only decent thing for me to do was to rescue you from that. Now here you go again, wanting to stand against hordes of bandits and rescue unicorns who, for all we know, don't want rescuing any more than that prissy Primrose did. I'm fond of you, Maggie, and I like to think that I'm a patient man, and the Mother only knows I admire unicorns as much as the next person, but you never mentioned anything about another rescue when we set out on this journey. AH you said was 'help me turn in my crown, Colin, so I won't have to part with Moonshine,' then it was 'Let's find us another unicorn and see what she says about Moonshine's bloody Creed, Colin.' Very well, now. I've helped you find another unicorn. And now, just because you don't care for what she said, you want to go traipsing about after a lot of very dangerous people who will more than likely damage us beyond all possible hope of repair, simply so you can rescue ANOTHER unicorn."

Encouraged by her lack of argument, he continued, "This time I'm not having it, I tell you. You seem to think I've nothing better to do than be your accomplice in all these silly schemes of yours. You forget, I'm responsible to the King for making songs, making people happy, for singing of history, not making it. His Majesty and your father will hold me to blame if anything happens to you. So this time we are going to do the clever, cowardly thing instead of the noble, numbskulled thing. This time we are reporting the entire problem, village, brigands, unicorns and all, to the proper authorities at the nearest village of-er- suitably healthy persons, and then we're riding straight for Queenston."

Moonshine's fog-gray form flickered in and out of the trees ahead as he led the way down the trail. Maggie sighed and slumped against Colin's chest. "Whatever you think is best." she said.

CHAPTER 9

Only Pegeen knew of the secret passage leading from her private chambers to the top of the maze. She and her brothers were children when she'd discovered the passage during a holiday with her family. Her father, King Finbar, had used the cliff castle for a summer retreat, a sanctuary from the demands of his court. Pegeen had found the passage while hiding from her brothers, lively little boys who thought teasing their sister was the best sport available when their father and tutors were too busy to take them gaming or help them play at jousting. The Princess was delighted with her find, and liked to imagine that her passage had been carved by the great worm for the express purpose of delivering her from her tormentors.

Not that she still believed that could be true. The worm's last great emergence had been decades before Pegeen first came to

Worm's Roost. The passage was the trail left by the worm's great body and hot breath, and the thick substantial walls forming the maze were the residue of the glacier's original pre-worm surface. Legend had it that the worm still slept deep within the maze of turnings and looping paths it had carved into the heart of the ice mass sweeping up the mountain behind the castle. The servants had always tried to scare their small royal charges into submission with tales of the worm, threatening in low, whispery voices (they said it that way partly to sound like the worm and partly to keep Her Royal Highness, Mama, from hearing) that the worm would slither hissing and steaming out of his maze and into their very bedchambers if they weren't well-behaved. Secretly, she had rather wished it would. It would have been exciting to see that, and being the youngest and only Princess in the royal family was seldom very exciting.

When she was little, she had fearlessly walked upright along the edges of the wall closest to the castle. Snow drifting close to the castle's back wall had shored the maze's walls in places, making them quite thick, in places easily an arm's length wide. Of course, they were still slick and precarious, but although she was older now, and larger and less agile, she felt sure that with the aid of the light that was part of her illuminating magic, she could easily find the chamber where the unicorns were being confined.

Close by the rear wall, the half-snowfilled impressions left from the worm's undulations formed several good-sized culs-de-sac. icy rooms with only a single, easily blocked opening accessible from the door at the back of the castle. Three such chambers lay between her secret exit and the back door to the great hall Fearchar had turned into a barracks for his garrison. Beyond the barracks door on the other side were several similar rooms. Those particular
rooms had once made convenient freezers for perishable foods. Pegeen had not been adverse to purloining a snack now and then from those stores in the course of her youthful adventures.

No one would see her, not even the guard on the tallest turret, since his post was in front of the castle and her route would be shadowed by the castle itself and the foot of the glacier where it met the back wall. Though that front guard post was a good vantage point for seeing the terrain clear to the sea on clear days, one could hear very little there of what went on inside and to the rear of the castle, because that topmost sentinel tower was situated directly above the noisy rushing waters of the Blabber-mouth River, which kept up an endless, senseless stream of chatter day and night. On the other hand, from the back of the castle one could hear almost everything said from the guard towers in the front, because the sound carried well from that height, and also because anyone speaking in that tower usually had to shout to make himself understood over the river. Pegeen had learned to differentiate between the river's noise and human sounds but Fearchar's new guards were still leery of the river. Many who had stood watch in that tower had had to be reprimanded for turning in false alarms and sending arrows into the noisy waters below. Now they were inclined to attribute all - distant noises to the river, and trust their eyes alone.

Pegeen donned an old pair of woolen britches once belonging to her father. They were tight through the hips, but would keep her knees and shins warm above her kidskin boots. Girding her cloak above her knees, she crawled through the tunnel, whose entrance was concealed by the tapestry in her chambers, rolled the packed snow door with which she blocked the outlet away from the back wall of the castle, and crawled out onto the portion of the maze wall butting against her secret exit.

She'd come out here to smoke often lately, but had never tried to negotiate the walls since her girlhood. She searched for a moment the vast expanse of shadow and glittering ice before her. 

Oh, well. No time like the present.

With what she hoped was pluck and tenacity which would have made her father proud, she applied herself to the wall, left knee and hand followed by right.

She had a lovely night for a crawl. The moon was cooperatively bright and half-full, and for a change neither rain nor snow assailed the glacier. Even the wind was agreeably absent. In all, she needed only an hour to reach the former cold storage chamber.

The unicorns were exactly where she had expected they would be. What she had not expected was the wretched state in which they were kept. Dirty straw filled the bottom of the chamber, to keep them from freezing to the ice, and the little female lay quivering on a pile of old blankets, near the wooden trough set next to the man-made door barricading them from the main tunnel. Otherwise, the poor beasts had no protection from the biting winds and icy rains which plagued the glacier almost daily.

The male unicorn trotted in restless circles around the chamber until Pegeen feared he would fall over his own stumbling feet. His golden-spotted sides were flecked with foam and with ice crystals where the foam had frozen on his skin, and his mane and tail were matted with filth. Occasionally, he would back up to a rear portion of the wall where it curved sharply back, so that it was invisible from the entrance, and give it a disheartened kick with his back hooves. A powder of ice and snow showered from the wall, but otherwise the kicks seemed to make little impression.

The little female no longer watched his efforts. Her eyes rolled back in her head, and each breath heaved from her like a sob. Frost rimmed the beards of both unicorns, and their noses and mouths! But what most appalled Pegeen about the pair's pitiful appearance was that both of their horns were broken. The male's splintered a handspan from where the spiral tip should have ended, and the female's was no more than a jagged shard protruding from her forehead.

"Oh, my dears, I had no idea," the princess said, half to herself. But the female seemed to have heard, and lifted her head, managing with seeming difficulty to focus on Pegeen. An indigestible lump rose in Pegeen's throat. "Fearchar said you were well taken care of! Well, never you mind, my friends. I shan't allow this disgraceful state of affairs to continue any longer. I--"

"Leave us, lady," the female sighed, and though she didn't really speak Pegeen could have sworn she did, which didn't exactly surprise the Princess, who had, after all, been brought up to rule a land where a good third of the populace possessed at least some magical talents.

"In the state you're in?" Pegeen replied. "Certainly not. I'll see to it somehow that you're released, as soon as I can speak to Fearchar alone. Meanwhile, isn't there something I can do to help you?"

"Leave us." the female repeated. "You can do nothing."

"Oh, yes she can," snorted the male, whose eyes kindled red in the moonlight as he, too, looked up at the princess perched above his prison. "She can come down here and let me give her a taste of hoof and what's left of my horn. If she's a maiden, I'm a donkey! Not that I'd pass up a chance to make mash of that yellow-haired tease who led us into this prison--"
"Peace. Eagledown. I feel her heart is good, but she must leave us, for she can do nothing."

"Her heart is good, her heart is good," Eagledown mocked. "Is that what you told yourself as they hauled you up here? That those townfolk who let you be taken had good hearts, or that demon's doxy who betrayed us both?"

"That doxy is my enemy too," Pegeen said. "She has completely subverted the character of the man I love. I can't understand how he could allow you to languish in such squalor, but i..."

She broke off. From the front of the castle, the guard's conch shell sounded the alert. She'd been discovered after all!

Footsteps clattered in the castle, and men cursed as they slipped on icy floors and fell. Pegeen twisted around on the wall, trying to crawl away again before she could be discovered. Instead, she lost her balance and slid down the wall, into the unicorn's pen. She was unhurt, her fall broken by the slight outward curve of the wall, but as she rose to her feet, Eagledown advanced on her, red eyes blazing.

"I beg your pardon. Clumsy of me," she apologized, and slid across the chamber, insinuating herself quickly between the female unicorn and the wall. "I trust you'll overlook my familiarity on such short acquaintance but under the circumstances..." But now both unicorns ignored her, and were still, with ears cocked sharply forward. From the front of the castle, voices shouted, and the unicorns' keen ears missed none of what was said. Pegeen found that by being still herself and paying attention to the unicorns, she, too, could hear every word spoken as if the sounds were amplified through the unicorns.

"WHERE did you see it, churl?" Fearchar was demanding. "How could you see anything at night?"

"It was the flaming. Dark Pilgrim. A great flaming dragon, it was, coming from the coast, I'd judge it, heading west-sou'west."

"A dragon? From the coast. Aha! What color?"

"Ruddy, Dark Pilgrim. Like the ruddy one that went by pearlier today with that big-bellied blue."

"A big-bellied blue, you say? Had she any green on her? And ::the other, was its red tinged with gold?"

"Aye, yer Reverence. They lit in the mountains, as I was bringing midday meal up to Jack on his shift. This red 'un went iby just now looked to me as if he was headin' for the castle you told us to keep an eye on over past the mountains there. So I blowed me conch."

"Good lad! Though you should have reported the earlier sighting as well. Sergeant!"

"Yes, Reverence!"

"Send a scout to Sally Forth at once. She's to return here in force immediately."

"Yes, Reverence."

"And the ruins, are they fortified as I ordered? And does our reception committee know its task?"

"Yes, Reverence."

"Good, good. Post additional guards and drill the men four times daily. Sentry?"

"Yer Reverence?"

"Report all future movements of either dragon. They are treacherous beasts, who have betrayed me before. They aid the tyrant Rowan. Should the monster approach our stronghold, inform me at once and I shall preserve us with my magic."

"That's the bravest thing I ever heard, Yer Reverence, to face a dragon singlehanded to preserve us! May I say, sir, it's an honor to serve a leader like yourself. But, sir, what if the beast brings the garrison down on us, along with the King's men?" "Which garrison is that, Sentry?" "The garrison Rowan keeps at the castle, Reverence." "There is no garrison there anymore, Sentry. They all were discharged, by special orders, weeks ago, when our gallant followers visited the castle to relocate its supplies."

Comradely laughter from the troops was followed by rattling weapons and clattering footsteps. Then once more all was quiet, except for the background noise of the river.

The unicorns relaxed and their ears stopped straining forward. Pegeen hugged against Snowshadow's back and avoided the baleful glare Eagledown turned on her.

"Distressing, isn't it?" she said conversationally. "I'm afraid it's looking rather more dismal all the time, wouldn't you say? I do hope neither of you will mind terribly, but I'm in the most dreadful need of a smoke."

Sybil yawned and rubbed her eyes, and finished the last of her tea before turning her attention to her crystal ball. It looked as hazy as she felt. Budgie chirped and dug his little talons into her hair.

"Yes, dearie, I'm tired, too. We'll just have our evening sighting and then it's off to bed with us both. No, I quite agree. I'm not up to watching Maggie's suitors blunder about in Wil-lie's wood any longer either. Such a timid lot! Not one of them save that nasty Prince boy and that horrid Count has had the gumption to wander out of reach of Willie's dining hall-and what a trial that's been for the help at Fort Iceworm, I should think, without niece to help! What shall we do? Watch the children, then? Ah, to be young again. I did so enjoy that evening young Colin took her for the lovely boat ride out to Raspberry's castle. But I don't suppose it would be
very nice,

- would it, to spy on them like that. Let the Mother take Her course, I always say, don't I, lovie? But he's such a charming boy, and very good with Maggie's moods. Let's just do a bit of a scan now and see if we can't come up with a unicorn so the children can get all of this nonsense over and done with. There--something's coming--"

She peered closely into the glass, her face reflecting the rainbow sparks that preceded the picture. Then, as the crystal cleared, she stared hard, and gripped the ball between her hands.

The picture changed of its own accord, as it had done only twice before in her career. The other two times had been during periods of great peril. Once, it had spontaneously showed the death of Maggie's mother, Bronwyn. The other time, the ball had zeroed in on brother Fearchar's secret island, when he had kept Maggie and Winnie prisoner there.

This time three visions followed, each close behind the other. Sybil's eyes burned with strain.

Budgie fluttered and chirped uncertainly. Gently, Sybil lifted him from the top of her head and stroked his feathers as she carried him on her index finger to the door.

"I know you're small and can't possibly make it all the way to; the coast in time to warn the King, dearie. But perhaps you could find Maggie?" The bird whistled an agitated sort of whistle. "No, I realize you're not a crystal ball. No, no, forget it. It was too much to ask. But-ah now you could make it as far as Wizard Raspberry's castle, could you not? Such a GOOD bird!" She flipped her finger into the air and Budgie winged away into the woods.

"Do watch out for owls, dearie!" Sybil called after him, and closed the door only when he was out of sight.

Hours after they'd left the lynx lair behind, Maggie continued to seethe. It was all so unfair! Of course, she couldn't blame Moonshine for wanting to think over what the old nag had said—that was perfectly understandable,—what with Primrose being the first unicorn the poor dear had met in ages. Naturally, Moonshine would be inclined to give the older unicorn's spiteful words undue importance.

But the nerve of that horn-headed, dry-dugged old plowhorse! Imagine her judging someone on appearances like that! All Maggie had asked of her was a perfectly civil question, just to try to help. How perfectly filthy of Primrose to deem her unmaidenly simply because of her companions and her coloring. It was evil-minded, was what it was. Evil-minded.

She craned forward on Roundelay's neck to look for a glimpse of Moonshine's tail among the trees. Surely by now he would see that Primrose had absolutely no authority to tell him whether or not Maggie was suitable. Primrose was only one unicorn. There were bound to be other, wiser ones. Unicorns were commonly known to be exceptionally wise creatures, on the whole. Just her luck to venture into a stupid, narrow-minded one. It was hardly possible that all unicorns shared Granny's and Primrose's opinion that unicorns and witches didn't belong together.

Ahead, Moonshine halted to purify a stream. Maggie swung her leg over Roundelay's neck and slid down. Colin watched, looking surprised and vaguely troubled.

Moonshine raised his head and shook his dripping horn. Maggie offered her handkerchief to dry it. "Here, let me. How are you doing? Aren't you lonesome up here all by yourself? Colin thinks we should stop at the next village and ask for help to rescue the other unicorns. It seems like a good idea to me. What do you think? I mean, of course we'll lose time, but on the other hand we'll gain help, and I--"

She met his beseeching gaze, and realized with self-disgust that she was prattling wildly but seemed unable to stop herself, though she despised prattlers. She couldn't bear for him to turn his head away and trot on without her. Her hand trembled as she ran it down his silky neck. His skin leapt under her touch and she pulled back her hand as if he'd burned it.

"Of course," she continued, "I'll need to ride with Colin again when we get to the town. I don't think the disguise is good enough to protect you from a whole town, but meanwhile--"

"Maggie, my friend," he said, "I would not willfully say you nay, for whatever you may be to others you are beloved to me. But I cannot deny that Primrose's words trouble me sorely. I must ponder them further, and seek what truths may dwell therein."

"Oh, I know," Maggie cried, "Oh, of course, I know that. Certainly you have to think about it. In fact, I'd be very disappointed in you if you didn't think about it, and I'm sure when you do you'll see that--"

He looked away, shame-faced, and the words came tumbling out of her before he could go away from her altogether.

"Maybe I'm not pure in all the usual ways. I mean, I still am physically and all that, but in those other ways, well, I have my faults. But what I mean to say is, you already knew I was a witch!"

His sides heaved, and the eye nearest her flicked forward, and away again, watching her covertly. She slid her arms around his neck and hugged him, burying her face in his mane. "Oh, Moonshine, I thought you didn't mind that
I wasn't perfect. I thought you knew me too well. I had no idea I'd shame you just by being me. If I'd known--but never mind."

She straightened, and pawed at her eyes with the back of her hand, ignoring the handkerchief she'd offered him a short while before. "I suppose if I'm not suitable, I'm simply not suitable. If you'd like to meet the maidens in the next village, to find someone else, I'll help you. Colin will too. I'll ask him."

"There's no need--" Moonshine began.

"It's all right," she said, stopping him. "Granny's probably right. I did very nicely without a unicorn before I met you, and I'm sure I'll manage splendidly after you--get resettled. I ... I'm very fond of you. I want to see you happy. Only this time, be sure."

He dipped his horn and walked slowly across the stream.

She took Colin's hand and remounted.

For a while they were all so silent that the birds' songs sounded raucous and ill-timed. They began gradually to travel through a healthier-looking terrain, ribboned with a twisting jade channel of the same stream that had flowed so sluggishly by Everclear, and other streams and ponds as well, and brightened with flowers and the scamperings of squirrels, rabbits, fox and deer.

Maggie sat stone still on Roundelay's shoulders. It could have been pitch dark for all that she saw. Colin was uncomfortably conscious of the tension in her back, and the set of her head made his own neck ache in sympathy. Still, it was a pretty day. In spite of himself, he began to hum a jig under his breath, and then to whistle.

Without further warning, Maggie collapsed in sobs. "Here now." He took both reins in one hand and gathered her awkwardly against his chest with his free arm. "This won't do. You're shaking so hard you're frightening the horse."

"I don't care," she wept, but dried one eye enough to see if Roundelay was indeed affected.

He patted her tangled hair with his free hand and tried to see over her head to the path beyond. "Of course you care. You care about everything. That's just the problem with you. It seems to me, witch, that this unicorn business has had the most unfortunate effect on your disposition. I don't recall that you wept so much while we were battling dragons and wizards, and here in the space of two months you're twice weeping like a baby."

He'd hoped to provoke her customarily tart reply, but instead she cried all the harder, and the horse did begin to shy. Alarmed, he slowed Roundelay to a walk, and looped the reins around his wrist. Using both arms now, he held her close and kissed the top of her head and her forehead, which felt feverish, as he would kiss a child's.

"Please, Maggie, don't cry. Shall I sing you something? A nice murder ballad, perhaps, or a battle song to cheer you up?" She didn't answer which was all right because he didn't much feel like singing then anyway. "Perhaps you'd like to snap out of it long enough to do a bit of magic, then? That might make you feel better. Shall I dirty a pot or two, or rip something you could mend?"

At that she threw her arms around his neck and wailed like a banshee. Roundelay was naturally used to peculiar noises, being in the employ of a minstrel, but Colin was sure she would not peacefully endure such a racket as Maggie was producing. There was no help for it. Dipping his head, he kissed her on the mouth, which stopped the wailing effectively, as he hoped it would.

But in other ways, the kiss surprised him. For one thing, she didn't bite him, but seemed to get right into the spirit of the thing, even forgetting momentarily to cry. In spite of the acid remarks it often produced, her mouth was as warm and sweet and moist as any girl's he'd ever kissed, though considerably saltier. And for a person with so many sharp edges and prickles about her, she was extremely soft and pliant-feeling. Quite a pleasant surprise, on the whole, but one which began provoking confusing and disturbing reactions within himself. He was both relieved and disappointed when she finally pulled away from him, mopped her face, and said, with a rather sheepish smile, "Maybe I do harbor impure thoughts, after all. But I wish that old nag would stick her wretched horn--"

"That's a good witch," he laughed. "Why not throw a really foul curse on her? Let's see, what could a hearthcrafter do to curse a unicorn? Turn all her grass sour so it would give her the bloat? No. I don't suppose that would be fair to other animals." He snapped his fingers. "I have it! We're working on the wrong unicorn. Why don't you just give a love potion to Moonshine?"

There was a subtle change in the quality of the smile she gave him. "Wrong kind of spell. I don't want that kind of love from a unicorn. Besides, Moonshine's magic would cancel out anything I did that involved a liquid, and I'd hoped-I mean, I'd rather not need-I never thought I'd need--"

She turned her head away, and he picked up a long tangled strand of her hair and joggled it playfully. "Bad idea. Forget it, witch."

She sniffed. In spite of how she felt to his touch and tasted when he kissed her. She was really alarmingly unattractive when she cried. Her eyes swelled and reddened, and so did her nose, and it ran as well. When the ladies
at court wept they always managed to do so prettily, with a lace handkerchief and a minimum of unpleasant noise and secretion-save a nicely placed tear here and there on a flawlessly pink cheek. And they always insisted, of course, that their tears were for love of him. The girls he'd known in East Headpenney never cried at all unless they stuck themselves with a pitchfork or a cow stepped on one of their feet, at least none of them had cried in his presence since they were children. Maggie's crying was like a child's-heartbroken and angry at once, and terribly honest. He had to remind himself this child he was beginning very much to enjoy comforting was a powerful witch, a nobleman's daughter, and, for the time being at least, a princess.

So he unlooped the reins from his wrist and took them in each hand on either side of her in the friendliest possible manner, and hummed something soothing under his breath-he forgot what a dirge, perhaps.

As the sun set and the cloud-swathed moon rose. Moonshine stopped. Beyond the wall of trees, a cart track ran parallel to the woods, then down through a meadow. In the midst of the meadow stood another, almost ornamental, grove of trees, joining the forest on the side farthest from where Colin, Maggie and Moonshine stood. Within the grove a stone tower was outlined against the last frail pink of the dying sun. A brook flowed out of the grove, around the tower and past it, and into the village at the edge of the grove.

Moonshine turned to Maggie. "I would don my disguise now, if you please, and accompany you to yonder town."

Maggie nodded, and silently slipped the disguise over his hom and started to knot her handkerchief at its base to hold it in place.

But Moonshine said, "Nay, Maggie, I would have it loose, so that I may remove it of my own accord when I deem it timely."

So he did intend to find another maiden in this town, one who would be more acceptable to Primrose and the Creed. Maggie gulped to swallow the lump in her throat, and said, "I could help you with it. Not that it's any of my affair, but invisible things are a bother to find once they're lost and your-first attempt-might not be-satisfactory."

Halfway to the tower a traveler overtook them and passed them from behind, which was remarkable, since the man was afoot while they were mounted. He walked very quickly, though he was so bent over that even when he turned towards them, tugging at the oversized cap he wore, they couldn't quite see his face. They could smell him, though. The ill-cured sheepskin cloak he wore over bare legs and feet reeked so badly that they had to avert their noses.

Colin asked as courteously as possible, for one with his nose in the air, "Can you tell us the name of yonder town, good man, and where we might find lodging for ourselves and stable for our mounts?"

The man lifted his head for a fraction of a second, giving him a startlingly wide yellow-toothed grin. "Why, traveler, you must have strayed far not to know of Little Darlingham and its famous tower."

"What's so famous about it?" Maggie asked. "Who lives there?"

She had the impression that beneath the cap, the stranger's sharp eyes were darting from her and back to Colin, but lingered most often on Moonshine, who pranced nervously behind her as she pretended to lead him.

But the man answered quickly in a whining voice that seemed oddly familiar. "Ah, lady, have you not then heard of the poor widow woman who lives there with her three daughters whose beauty is known all over the land? And as for your question of lodging, do not even righteous widows and beautiful daughters have to eat? And in such a large tower, is it not likely such a woman would accept lodgers for a few pennies a night or the chopping of wood or the drawing of water or perhaps," his head turned slightly towards Moonshine, "the trade of an extra steed?"

"Er-thank you, good man," Colin said. "We'll give it some thought." But the fellow was already lurching down the road ahead of them, his hips switching as he walked in a manner that reminded Maggie of a dog wagging its tail.

"Oh, no," Colin said between mouthfuls of the widow Belburga's bread. "They were really quite dead, weren't they, Maggie? It wasn't a trance or anything like that, or anyhow I didn't think so, did you?"

"I don't see how it could have been," Maggie replied, wrinkling her nose in remembrance and pushing away the plate of food. She'd only been picking at it, anyway. "Trances don't usually smell that bad."

The remembered smell of the village wasn't the only thing quelling her appetite. She didn't care much for the widow's lodging, either. The stable to which she'd led Moonshine and Roundelay was such a neglected disgrace that she could only bring herself to allow them to remain after she had vigorously applied her magic to cleaning and repairing the stalls. The tower was dark and cold, the bread hard, the stew tasteless, and the dishes greasy. A line of white clothing was strung down the middle of the circular room, from the spiral staircase disappearing into the ceiling to the diamond-paned window next to the heavy door by which they had entered. The fire in the hearth was dead.

Neither was the widow Belburga particularly warm in her welcome. The woman had been very prompt about taking Colin's coins, and very 'slow to feed them or tell them where the stable was. She had stared to Moonshine rather too sharply from under her preposterously long, pale lashes. Colin had begun speaking loudly of their
adventures, stressing the desperate plight of the people of Everclear and hinting broadly at his own royal connections as a means of intimidating the good widow into treating himself and Maggie properly. His ploy worked almost too well.

Belburga was hanging on to every word, even adding coals to the brazier by the (able and igniting a torch to supplement the stub of a candle inadequately lighting the table. Maggie could almost hear the woman’s mind working behind the elaborate superstructure of impossibly brazen curls, which she kept patting, as if to reassure herself her head was still within them. “And a prince, you say, was involved? What a coincidence!” the widow was saying now in her flat, nasal whine. Beneath the frivolous lashes her eyes were black and keen as a weasel’s. She leaned forward, fanning her hand over her deep bosom, which she heaved at Colin in what Maggie thought was a rather disgusting fashion. Colin gave her his undivided attention. “My first husband, Harry, was a prince, you know,” she confided.

was the father of my precious Lily Pearl. Oh, I can see it shocks you, to see a gentlewoman like me living like this, but I haven’t always been in such reduced circumstances, goodness no!” She smiled a bright, close-lipped smile. “And I do know a thing or two about noblesse oblige, too, being royally inclined as I naturally am from my days in court. That’s why I think you really must, Master Songsmith, take it upon yourself to lead a few of our stalwart village lads—a little stupid, our boys, true, but steady—and bring those poor persons from Everclear back here where they can at least receive direction in leading useful lives, if they never recover themselves fully.”

That undoubtedly meant, Maggie thought, that the widow felt some of the Everclear folk might make handy, unpaid servants.

“And, of course,” Belburga continued, “You simply must bring that poor young prince back here to my tower where he can mix with folk of his own station.”

“He’s not really a very nice person,” Maggie said.

Dame Belburga raised a thinly-plucked brow and favored her with a cool look, the first attention of any kind the widow had spared her that evening. “Princes, my dear young lady, are ALWAYS nice people. Those of the lower classes simply fail to comprehend at times the awesome burdens of royalty that set them apart from your average riffraff.”

“Is that so?” Maggie asked, then thought better of saying any more, since she was very tired and had no wish to spend the night looking for somewhere else to stay, however unpleasant these present quarters seemed.

“Yes, indeed,” Belburga assured her. “Of course, my Lily Pearl now, being of royal blood herself—did I mention Lily Pearl’s father was a prince? Yes, well, Lily Pearl’s nature is one infinitely suited to understanding such things—she is the epitome of sensitivity, delicacy and the utmost refinement. That’s all quite aside, of course, from her astonishing beauty, which is, I hardly need to mention, already a legend throughout Little Darlingham and, indeed, through most of Argonia by now, I should think. You’ll have to meet her, Master Songsmith. I’m sure you would love to write a song about her yourself, for singing back in court.”

Colin gave her a half-bow from his seat. “I pine for the pleasure of doing so, Dame Belburga.”

“Oh of course you do. But first, you really must bring that prince back. Then perhaps you might wish to commemorate their meeting. Right now all of my girls are far too busy developing their particular gifts in the privacy of their chambers to entertain paying guests.” She sighed and dabbed at her lips with her handkerchief. “One really must be so cautious rearing one’s children, mustn’t one? It’s so important they meet the right sort of people. One certainly wouldn’t want such lovely girls as mine taking up with someone common, and acquiring unsavory habits.” She looked directly at Maggie as she said the last and rose. “If you’ll excuse me for a moment. Master Songsmith, I think I may have one nice bit of cake left for you from our own meager, but nourishing repast. I shan’t be long.”

“I don’t seem to be popular today, do I?” Maggie remarked wryly, while the widow was out of sight behind the line of clothing.

“Perhaps a bath?” Colin suggested, and added quickly. “We probably both still stink of zombies, and are so used to it we don’t smell it on each other.”

She nodded, but dully, and stared into her plate.

Belburga bustled back to the table in a swirl of mended lace and rather odious pink velvet. “I was just thinking to myself. Master Colin—I MAY call you, Colin, mayn’t I? You do remind me, a bit. of my third husband—but back to my point. I was just thinking that on your return you would undoubtedly enjoy meeting my second daughter. Ruby Rose. Now SHE is a girl of most remarkable accomplishments, and, it goes without saying, of course, incredible personal loveliness. Her father—my second husband—IS, or was... a most marvelous wizard, capable of absolutely astounding feats of magic, and a very learned man as well. Ruby Rose is blessed not only with my looks but with her father’s brains and talent. Purely a genius, the girl is. I’m sure you would adore her. You DID mention that you hold a high position in court?”
With what Maggie felt was shockingly poor taste, Colin proceeded to go into great detail regarding his position in court and his relationship with the King, leaving out any hint of Maggie's own royal associations, except to say that she was a witch from a powerful family.

Belburga was unimpressed, and regarded Maggie more coldly than ever.

"I had a great-uncle once who married into a family of witches—we always felt, in our family, it was his greatest misfortune. I personally feel one should always to stick to one's own class of people, don't you agree. Minstrel Colin?" Not that it really mattered whether or not either of them agreed. Belburga continued without pause to regale them with the travails of her uncle, who sounded pretty awful in spite of his niece's obviously biased account. When at last she seemed to be running down, she turned another peculiar close-mouthed smile on Colin. Maggie thought that for someone who talked as much as Belburga, she didn't open her mouth much. It gave her an odd expression—as if her teeth hurt her.

"But I suppose," the widow continued after such a short pause that Colin had no chance to recover enough to proffer a remark of his own, "that being a country-bred boy, and one with magical merman blood in your heritage, didn't I understand you to say? you might have much in common too with my charming, nature-loving youngest daughter, Daisy Esmeralda (Esmeralda's foreign for Emerald, you know, and sounds so much more genteel than our word, don't you think?). Not that she's at all affected—her sisters and I call her Daisy, because she spends so much time amid the flowers in her little garden by the stream, playing with all of her little animal friends, who naturally idolize her. She's quite made pets out of even the wildest among them. Simply everyone who's anyone will tell you that our Daisy is the kindest-hearted, gentlest, most generous and best-natured of maidens. Besides, of course, being the fairest in the land with the possible exception of her two equally beautiful sisters—though I must say Lily Pearl has always been popularly considered to be the best looking. But I'm sure you two would have a great deal to talk about, though Daisy is most shy and modest except with her animal friends. But then, you could undoubtedly win her over by singing her an animal ditty or two."

"Or maybe you could just act beastly," Maggie whispered to him behind her hand.

The widow, if she heard, ignored her, and reiterated the charms of her daughters for another hour or so, while re-emphasizing at strategic intervals that Colin must make all haste to gather a delegation to rescue Prince Leofwin from Trickle and bring the Everclear zombies under the dominion of certain responsible citizens of Little Darlingham.

Maggie was glad Colin had carefully omitted any mention of the unicorns in his account. The widow would probably want to know only if the unicorns involved were pedigreed or had any relations captured by kings. With that thought, Maggie left the table without excusing herself and, brushing aside the laundry, climbed the circular stairs, at last settling down for the night on a straw pallet that even her magic could not quite make comfortable.

"I'm afraid this situation is much worse than I'd feared," Pegeen said to the unicorns as the last puff from her smoke had flown away into the night. Eagledown, though still flattening his ears at her and swinging his horn her way once in a while to try to frighten her, had backed off, at Snowshadow's urging, and no longer seemed quite so actively menacing.

Snowshadow had grown calmer and, with the warmth of her body, exuded a protective serenity which Pegeen found greatly improved her own thinking processes. "I don't know what you both must think of Fearchar—and of me, for that matter," the princess said. "But I can assure you this whole thing isn't at all like him. He's usually such a charming man. Still, I'm afraid that the nymph person has cast an evil spell on him, and he can't be trusted to see reason. I don't think there's the least point at all in appealing to his sense of decency to let you go. He doesn't seem to have any left."

Eagledown brayed an ununicornly horse laugh. "You can say that again, sister."

"So I shall simply have to extricate you from this situation myself. It will take great courage and cunning on my part, but of course, I was brought up to do that sort of thing, as a princess of the realm and all."

"I don't see how any amount of rank will help us now, Lady," Snowshadow said doubtfully. "We are among knaves with no respect for your royal standing."

"Very true, my dear. I'm virtually a prisoner myself. However, there's always the usual way of escaping from a prison to be considered—which is not to let one's captors know what one intends. All I have to do, as I see it, is to sketch us a map of the maze, and simply open the door to this chamber and lead you safely through the maze and out the other side to freedom. It's as uncomplicated as that. I could have it done in a day or two and no one would be the wiser."

"Aren't you forgetting something?" Eagledown asked. "Don't you have to get out of here first? And what makes you think I'm going to let you? You may have Snowshadow fooled, but I'd just as soon skewer you as look at you."

"No, you wouldn't," Pegeen replied evenly, secretly pleased at how well she was keeping the terror out of her voice. "You'd be doing yourself a disservice if you did. Because I'm your only hope, actually. That hole you've been
gouging with your horns doesn't lead anywhere in the least bit useful. As for escaping our present predicament, that's simply a matter of group cooperation and organizational management. You must allow me to stand on your back, so I may reach the edge of the wall and climb out the way I came in."

Wulfric concealed his grin beneath his outsized cap when he saw the minstrel stumble in through the rectangle of sunlight framed by the door of the dimly lit tavern, and grope among the tables and benches inside until his eyes adjusted to the darkness. The woman Belburga had done her work well, had she not, to drive Songsmith to him? For though early morning was a poor time for the minstrel to attempt to raise interest among the tavern's patrons in any activity more strenuous than staring into the bottom of a cup, had not Belburga, following Wulfric's hastily-concocted but clever plan, persuaded him to do so? And, oh, best of all, she had separated the minstrel and the witch and the unicorn one from the other, the better for him to dispose of them individually.

They could not plot to humiliate him again, as they had done before, appearing alive when he had reported them dead. How shamed he had been when Sally had learned from her latest one-homed conquest that those he had deemed devoured by the forest beasts were alive and united against them! He made haste to pick up their trail, though they were too far ahead for Sally's men to overtake. He could at least follow their movements and lay a plan, could he not? Surely he must try, or wear his tail between his legs forever after!

And had he not succeeded? For he had learned, from their speech, of the strange events at Everclear and had reported to Sally speedily to tell Her of the matter before returning to his tracking. And now, was not She, clever, crafty Sally, preparing Her snares not only for the unicorn but for their other enemies as well? Only this one man was left to Wulfric alone, and he knew how to deal with this man.

Songsmithe cleared his throat. "I say, could anyone tell me who's the constable around here? One of your neighboring villages is having a bit of a problem and--"

"Constable, eh?" said a portly fellow with a bulbous nose. "Why, lad, constable was et by wild trolls must've been six months ago or so, ain't that right, Shearer?"

"Aye. Terrible thing it was too," answered the elder. "If they could stomach the rest ov 'im they could take anything."

The minstrel waxed perplexed at this rough teasing, reacting exactly as Wulfric desired. Soon Songsmithe would find that none in this place save loyal, brave Wulfric would accompany him into the woods to lead forth the afflicted villagers.

"Oh, I am sorry to hear that," Songsmithe was saying, and seated himself at the table opposite the bulbous-nosed man, the elder and two others. "He would have found my tale noteworthy, I'm sure, even if he didn't choose to take a look in the tavern himself."

"What tavern is that, lad?" the elder asked. "If this tale is so interestin', why don't you tell us? It be dull here, mostly."

Songsmithe shook his head, sighed and ordered a round for the table. "It's not really worthy of your time, gentlemen, to tell. I only thought the constable would want to keep that poor addled innkeeper from giving away good ale while he didn't know what he was doing."

"Here, now!" said the tavern keeper who was setting the drinks before them. "What idiot is giving away good ale?"

"Not you, Brewer, that's for sure!" the elder wheezed.

"I'll thank the lot of you not to interrupt such a fascinatin' tale," said a third man, whose red face matched what was left of his hair. "Let the boy talk."

"There's not much to tell," Songsmithe said. "But all the people of Everclear seem to have this peculiar illness--"

"Plague?" a fourth man asked.

"No, no. Nothing like that. They can walk around and eat and drink, they just don't know what they're doing. They've left all their possessions unguarded, and the innkeeper just keeps giving away pint after pint of ale. It's very sad. I thought-that is. Dame Belburga, at the tower where my companion and I are staying, thought the humane thing to do would be to take the townfolk of Everclear under the wing of Little Darlington, so to speak, until they're mended. He swallowed a draught of ale, then studied it consideringly. "And I suppose it really would be a good idea to leave someone there in charge of that inn until the owner is well."

"Belburga said that?" asked the fourth man, a stocky young farmer whose face was like a baby's and whose muscles were like a blacksmith's. "Lily Pearl's ma? I suppose we'd have to take these folk over to Lily Pearl's place first off when we got back, so Dame Belburga could tell us what to do with 'em like, wouldn't we?"

"Oh, yes," Songsmithe replied. "We'd certainly have to do that."
Wulfric had to intervene. This conversation was not going as he wished. "But have you not heard, good friends, that bandits prowl the forest near Everclear? And wild beasts, and yea, even the trolls of which you spoke? Is it not dangerous?"

But he had waited too long. The men were on their second round at Songsmith's expense. "Oh, aye, it's a bit risky all right," the man with the bulbous nose said. "But giving away ale, after all. That's a shame, all that waste."

"Aye, and I'd never have Lily Pearl thinkin' I was too afraid to help me neighbors," the young farmer added. "I'll go if you'll lead, stranger."

"And I," said bulbous nose.

"My aunt's first cousin's boy's daughter's nephew by marriage lives over to Everclear, or used to," the oldster mused. "Or was it her nephew's daughter's boy's first cousin by marriage? Anyway, I'd best go along too."

The innkeeper threw down his apron. "Well, if I'm going to lose half my trade, I may as well go along and see that a brother innkeeper doesn't go broke from giving away ale while he's ill. I could make sure he took in good coin for it."

"I have a bit of experience at inns m'self," the redhead said. "And bandits, too, if it comes to that. Until just lately I was in the border patrol, up at Castle Rowan."

"And could I do less than to offer to accompany you myself?" Wulfric asked quickly, snatching his last opportunity to stay near his prey. "I know the woods well, and can guide you."

"I thought it was too dangerous for you," Songsmith said.

"I sought only to warn you, noble sir," Wulfric answered. "But in the company of such brave fellows, who am I to falter when my services could mean the difference between the success and failure of your mission?"

Maggie didn't care how noble his mission was or how much trouble he'd wished to spare her, it was bloody unfair of Colin Songsmith to run off back to Everclear without a word to her. Now she was stuck with the obnoxious widow and her three peerless progeny.

Belburga had been feeding her chickens when Maggie dragged herself down the stairs and out into the yard, snatching a hunk of bread left from the night before on the way. Though she'd said nothing, Belburga's smirk was eloquent. Evidently she'd suspected Maggie would be displeased to find Roundelay missing from the stable, and the minstrel gone.

Muttering to herself, Maggie ordered the night's accumulation of manure thrown out of the straw and onto the widow's compost heap, wishing she dared divert a few clods into the widow's face.

Moonshine watched her. He looked more confused and miserable and guilty than a unicorn should have been able to look, but by now Maggie's own feelings were bandaged with a gauze of dullness which made it a little easier to disregard the impulse to stroke his neck and scratch his beard. Not that he'd want her to, anyway.

"I know it isn't pleasant here," she said. "But at least you don't have to listen to that widow. AH she talked about all night were her gorgeous daughters. 'My Lily Pearl this, my Ruby-something that.' It was sickening."

"Daughters?" Moonshine's ears pricked up, Maggie's heart sank within her as she nodded. He really was going to pursue this idea of finding another maiden. In spite of everything, she still found it hard to believe. Hah. Where were all those brave sensible notions she'd lectured him with back at Aunt Sybil's now? That time seemed incredibly distant.

"I'm-not sure where they are," she said. "Let me have a bit of a look around. If I find one I'll come back for you."

But Moonshine rolled his eyes frantically. "Nay. nay. Lead me from this horse cage, I implore you. I would seek the maidens myself."

She laid her hand of his neck and let him follow her out into the morning. Although the sun was high and bright, a belt of cloud striped the foothills beneath the sharp, blue-veined whiteness of the peaks towering just beyond the forest, and from the stream and fresh-plowed meadows the dew steamed up in sharp contrast to the clarity of the day.

They first mistook the girl among the flowers of the mist-latticed garden for a wraith, for she seemed at a glance to be made of mist. Her skin was so pale as to make milk seem dingy, and her hair was fine and white as silk thread. She was small and slender, but seemed stately in a flowing white gown of shimmering fabric Maggie recognized from the clothesline the night before. Poor wench must do a lot of laundry, Maggie thought, living here and wearing that sort of get-up for everyday.

The girl took no notice of them, but busied herself plucking white roses with a pair of long silver shears. Her face reinforced the impression of wraithlike insubstantiality and overall pallor. Though it had the dark blue eyes and rosy cheeks and lips and flawless complexion requisite to the Argonian ideal of beauty, it bore absolutely no trace of ever having been flawed by the distortion of expression or emotion.
Moonshine didn't seem to notice. He was pacing and pawing like a warhorse before a battle. "NOW, please, friend, remove my disguise before she flees."

"Yes, I doubt she spends much time outdoors," Maggie said. "She'd be too afraid of getting dirty."

Before the disguise was back in her pocket. Moonshine was approaching the girl, who sat upon a stone bench and was arranging her flowers in a basket. When they were arranged to her liking, she began plucking off the petals.

Moonshine inhaled rapturously. The odor of chastity perfumed her presence more than the bruised rose petals in her basket.

"Oh, maiden, look up," he sent his message to her, and presented his best profile while thinking high, pure thoughts until, lifting her lovely head from the basket over which she so daintily toiled, she would see him and love him.

She did look up, finally, and flicked at him a long, beautifully manicured hand with nails as opalescent as his own horn. The barest frown marred her perfect features as she said in a high, clear voice, "Excuse me, horse. Please stand aside. I'm keeping a vigil for a prince who's coming along any day now to fall in love with me. Mama will be furious if I miss him."

That was not the kind of reception Moonshine had hoped for, but then, he supposed he had taken her by surprise. Perhaps instant rapport was too much to expect with one so exquisite. Ah well, there was always the classic gesture. Kneeling on the ground beside her, he started to lay his head in her lap, as duly prescribed in the Creed. "Not a horse, fairest maiden," he corrected her gently. "But a unicorn-behold!"

"Do you mind terribly taking your nap elsewhere?" she asked with the tiniest pretty hint of crossness. "You'll tear my gown with that sharp thing on your head and, oh dear, now look what you've done! You're getting me all wet. There's dew all over your skin. Besides, you're lying on the rose bushes."

He hastily stood. She brushed off her gown and extracted a silver looking glass from its pocket and inspected her hairdo. Part of her flaxen tresses was curled into an elaborate crown atop her head, while the rest frothed down her slender back.

"You are surpassing fair, maiden," Moonshine offered, somewhat shyly now.

"Naturally. I ought to be, with all the trouble I go to. One hundred strokes of the brush each and every day, morning and night, and three hours, mind you, to do my coiffure. Not to mention having to pluck all those rose petals for my rose petal and milk bath every day. For the complexion, mother says, although I daresay the scratches the thorns give my hands more than override the benefits. Still, it smells nice. The ideal thing, I suppose, is for one to have slaves to do these menial chores. But for now, one has to make the best of it until one's prince comes. But it isn't easy. Oh, no. I can dine only on robins' eggs and artichoke hearts except for once a week, when I'm allowed a little wild clover honey and a few white grapes-for the digestion. Mama says."

"But that's terrible! You poor dear maiden! They starve you!" Moonshine was genuinely upset. "Let me take you away from all this."

"Don't be an ass," she said, sounding very like Maggie. "If you take me away from all this now I shan't be here when my prince comes, and all my efforts would be wasted. I'd lose the chance to claim the heritage of my royal blood, and have to continue forever crushing my own rose petals for my baths. I'm certainly not going to risk a cruel fate like that just for a unicorn." He hung his head and she added, consolingly, "Perhaps you might just walk along beside me though, while I wait. Just so long as you don't block my view of the road. You do look striking with my ensemble." She pressed the pleats in the front of her bodice between two slender fingers and tucked a lily bloom against her bosom as she rose. "We might stroll a bit, but slowly, now. If one walks quickly one disarranges one's draperies."

Maggie sighed, and retreated a pace toward the stream when Moonshine approached the pristine Lily Pearl. She couldn't compete with that, she supposed. Dame Belburga's whey-faced daughter fairly reeked of maidenly purity. Well, then, let her have it. And Moonshine, too, if that was the way he wanted it. Maggie would just have to wait here by the stream until the two of them were well-acquainted enough that she could intrude to entrust the disguise to Moonshine's new companion-and warn her about the unicorn-nappers. Meanwhile, it wouldn't hurt to wash herself and keep an eye out for Dame Belburga, whom Maggie wasn't inclined to trust where unicorns were concerned any more than she was inclined to trust her where certain minstrels were concerned.

Keeping the garden within sight, Maggie found a spot near the water, blocked by trees from view of the road. As long as Moonshine and Lily Pearl didn't wander too far, she could keep an eye on them while she bathed.

She formed a washbowl of clay with some difficulty. Though her magic had worked well enough at shoveling manure, it was sluggish about obeying her commands now. At last she got the bowl shaped and baked, and dipped it into the stream to use for her bath. Since the townspeople of Little Darlington no doubt used the water downstream, she wanted to be careful not to dirty the creek, lest Little Darlington meet the same end as Everclear. Besides, using the basin meant she didn't have to actually get IN the stream and could keep her contact with the water minimal,
considering the nature of her chore. Though she hadn't melted yet, one never knew.

And she didn't exactly relish being dirty, but on the other hand, to be perfectly fair about it, she, unlike other people she knew, was in the habit of using soaproot when she washed, which got her cleaner than mere water alone. The more-frequent-than-average application of soap ought to make up for the less frequent application of water. Too bad her preservative spells couldn't be used on her own washings-up, or that her magic didn't include a spell for cleaning oneself without getting wet.

Lathering herself a limb at a time with the piece of soaproot she carried in her medicine pouch, she thoroughly filthied four bowls of water, even before she washed her hair. But the end results were satisfying—she felt at least a stone's-weight lighter, and the crescents under her fingernails were white again instead of black. Stripping to her coarse linen shift, she washed her woolen outer garments while her hair dried. Again, she needed more elbow grease than usual to do the job, as her magic seemed to respond only slowly. But the sun was warm, and between hearthcraft and sunlight her outer clothing dried swiftly enough that she could put it back on and wash her underclothing. She was relieved when that was dry; woolen shirt and shift were scratchy against bare skin.

Later, perhaps, she might dye the silk gown in which she'd escaped some pretty color, just to pass the time. And perhaps, in such competitive company as Lily Pearl and her mama, a drop or two of Gran's love potion behind the ears wouldn't do any harm. For now she occupied herself fingerplaiting her hair into a thick snood that reached halfway down her back.

On the whole she thought she washed up very well. Feeling much more self-respecting, she wandered farther up the grove to see if Moonshine and Lily Pearl might be ready for the disguise. She'd luckily remembered to tie it up in her still-grimy handkerchief before she'd washed out her skirt—one never knew how a good washing would affect delicate spells, and it would have been a bother to lose the cone in the grass.

Moonshine was kneebbling before his new acquaintance. "Fairest maiden," he offered. "Perhaps you'd care to mount my back and ride like the wind?"

"I was afraid when I first saw you you would make indecent proposals like that!" Lily Pearl exclaimed, stamping her little foot in exasperation. "After I've spent simply HOURS washing and ironing my gown so that it drapes properly, you want me to spoil it with unseemly athletic adventures! You don't care a bit that we royally bred ladies have delicate skins. I should get nasty callouses on my legs if I followed your advice. Mama warned me about unicorns only last week. She said you were all alike—always wanting a girl to forget she's a lady and take her galloping off into the forest. I'm only letting you talk to me because we look so fine together ..."

"Then--" Moonshine said incredulously, "then you feel no bond of love for me?"

"Well, of course not. I'd be a perfect ninny to feel a thing like that, wouldn't I? I mean, this is all so sudden—I hardly know you." As he backed away, she added more kindly. "But you are almost as beautiful as I am only do stand over here to my left, won't you, and shield me from the sun? I burn rather easily."

But he leaped back through the garden and across the stream, to plow through the grove of trees and into the forest to the west of the tower.

By the time Maggie found him, she was hot, panting, and annoyed. Her knees were skinned and dirty, and her nails once more begrimed, her carefully dressed hair snatched to a rat's nest by branches. Unreasonably, she blamed Lily Pearl for the ruin of her carefully-wrought toilette. The girl must have a monopoly on cleanliness around here. Thanks to her, Maggie couldn't seem to manage it.

Moonshine was standing on top of a hill within a grove of cedar. Like her dress and legs, he was coated with mud and scratches and wet leaves. His head was down and he didn't look up, though she knew he sensed her presence.

"There you are. What do you mean running around out here without your disguise? This is a very settled area, you know. And in case you haven't been paying attention, there are unicorn-nappers just waiting for an opportunity like this." Fumbling in her pocket, she felt the roll of invisible bark outlined in her hand. Moonshine made no protest as she lifted his head and slipped the cone over his horn, tying it at the base with her handkerchief. At least he didn't flinch from her touch. Perhaps, just to comfort him, she might stroke his nose. Something wet touched her hand and she saw that his amethyst eyes glistened with—yes, those were tears.

She knelt on the ground before him and looked him in the face, "Moonshine, what's the matter? You can tell me. I'm still your friend, after all."

Like one of Wizard Raspberry's balloons with its air let out, the unicorn sank to the ground and laid his head in her lap, as he used to. She stroked his mane and neck and face until after a long time he answered.

"I am lost. That maiden must know I am a tainted unicorn unworthy of her purity—that I have dealt with men—she must sense that she is not my first maiden—I can tell, she loves me not. And oh, it wounds me more sorely than I can express, and I know not how to stanch the wound."

"I know the feeling," Maggie said. "Forget it. Don't try. I guess nobody can protect themselves against
somebody they love—not even unicorns. And it isn't true, is it, that the first maiden always has to love you back?" She shook her head and answered her own question. "No, of course, it's not. It couldn't be, or unicorns wouldn't be betrayed so often."

Moonshine raised his head. "That's very true. Oh, Maggie, I don't know how I am to ever find another maiden as clever as you."

She pulled a face. "I still don't see why I won't do. Then you wouldn't have to find another one." But that broke the ease between them and though he rested his chin on her knee again, the gesture was tentative and nervous.

"Lady Primrose says I am not a true unicorn if I consort with one who is not a true maiden," Moonshine insisted stubbornly. "Please, dear friend, you must try to understand. It is not my choice. Indeed, I know not what I am to do. The truest possible maiden loves me not and I do not know how to win her." He told Maggie then what had passed between himself and Lily Pearl.

"I wouldn't worry about it if I were you." Maggie answered. "From the sound of all that waiting for her prince business she doesn't seem to intend to remain a maiden long. Unless I miss my guess, if any male above the rank of page rides past her gate, Lily Pearl will be away and gone, and then where would you be? Back where you started from. If she follows her mother's advice and sets her cap for Leofwin you can bet your horn she'll be ineligible for unicorn companionship moments after His Highness claps eyes "on her. Maybe you'd be better off trying one of her sisters instead." She made another face. "Their mother claims each is as wonderful as the other, but then, I suppose she would."

Moonshine considered this suggestion, at first enthusiastically, but finally rejected it. "Surely another maiden won't do. If Lady Primrose is correct and you aren't my first maiden as bespoken in the Creed, Lady Lily Pearl is. And truly-her face IS as fair as the full moon, and her voice is as sweet as honey, and her form is as graceful as the willow and all that--"

"Well, yes," Maggie agreed. "But she didn't like you very much, did she? Now, now, don't take on again. If you like I can have a word with her—perhaps if I arrange to do some of her grooming chores by magic for the next day or so she'll have more time to get acquainted with you. I'm sure once she's gotten to know you--"

"Nay, my friend. For her rejection of me, though it deeply troubles me, is made less irksome since you reminded me a first maiden may not always return the love of her unicorn. Nay, what troubles me is more that—I'm afraid that in spite of all of her beauty and grace and obvious fittingness as a unicorn maiden, I—I really don't like her very much."

"I—don't think I understand," Maggie said, carefully swallowing the note of hopefulness that tried to creep into her voice.

"Then we are well met, my good dear Maggie. For I am certain I do not."

The shadows were lengthening, and Maggie looked back down the hill towards the tower. Perhaps Colin would be back this evening, having sent his deputation on its way to Everclear. Knowing his aversion to danger, she was sure he would try to get someone else to brave the trip back through the woods if he could manage it, in spite of the widow's odd insistence that he personally should lead the rescue party.

She stood, and brushed the leaves from her skirt. "I'd best be getting back. It's rather a long walk, and I suppose I'll have to wash up again before the merry widow will feed me. Not that I couldn't show the old battleaxe a thing or two about cooking if I took the notion."

"Mount upon my back," he said. "You followed me in friendship, and I would ill reward your loyalty by causing you to miss your meal."

"Are you sure you won't feel less unicornish by associating with the likes of me?" she couldn't help asking sourly.

But he answered sadly, "Nay, my friend. My back is lonely for your weight. And besides, what's done is done." He seemed so resigned and weary that she was doubly ashamed of her sharpness.

The rescue party was seven in number; the elder. Shearer, bulbous-nosed Archie, Giles Thatcher, who was no farmer in spite of his appearance. Brewer the innkeeper, and the former guard, Griffin Hillman. Besides these and Colin, there was the stranger, who didn't give his name and seemed to have expended his full supply of words in the tavern, for he spoke to none of them once they entered the woods.

Not that anyone minded. The fellow was less than a brilliant conversationalist. The other fellows had a very good time among themselves without him, and Colin enjoyed their bawdy humor and attempts to bewilder him with stories like the one about the wild trolls (the cannibalistic ones hadn't existed in Argonia, to his knowledge, for at least one hundred fifty years).

These were the kind of men he grew up among, simple men, who took their names from their work, or from the work of their fathers. Colin's uncle, who raised him, had been a Fanner. Indeed, Colin had continued to think of himself as a farmer-turned-songsmithe long after he had taken his new name at the minstrel academy, for the rustic
life at East Headpenney was the only one he had ever known until then, and his aunt and uncle his only kinfolk. Because neither of them had ever confided to him any detail about his mother and father, he had always assumed shameful circumstances surrounded his birth, and that had always made him feel shy. Until he'd met the mermaid during his journey with Maggie to save Amberwine, he had always assumed his musical talent was born solely of his or

phaned apartness from the other East Headpenney children. Even before his ability to find his way around an octave won him a territorial appointment to the minstrel academy, he used it to make himself popular at dances and gatherings until, by the time he was granted journeyman status, he felt himself as good a man as any of his rank, and better than most, at his trade.

But of his lineage he had no idea until the meeting with the mermaid, who claimed to recognize him as a kinsman, and proved it to him by showing him how he could swim without harm or discomfort through the icy sea and suggested to him something of the power his songs held beyond that to entertain and inform. Knowing what he was explained so much else, too-his natural ability with sailing ships, and why he was always falling all over his own two feet-now that he knew not all of his ancestors even HAD feet, he felt much less ashamed of his awkwardness on land and had consequently become less awkward. Coupled with the knowledge that his musical talent held power beyond the ordinary, his position as companion to the King had lent him further confidence. Some of Rowan's gigantic self-assurance was communicable, no doubt because the King was fond of bragging that his musician was worth ten of any other lord's warriors. Rowan had a way of overstating things like that, but his loudly voiced pride in Colin did cause others in the King's retinue to treat the minstrel with respect, to his face at least.

He had all the rank and position he wanted, and the admiration of as many of the willowy blond ladies of high degree as he had ever dreamed of. But his position at court would mean nothing after his part in Maggie's private rebellion was known. Not that he cared, particularly. Rowan would surely forgive them both, once he understood the situation, and as for the others at court, their opinions meant far less to Colin than those of the plain workingmen who rode beside him now. As for the ladies, no one of them had magic as useful as Maggie's, and just lately he had found the prettiest of them faded into a colorless sameness. He could remember no detail of the appearance of a single one with the clarity he had been able to recall Maggie's bewildered brown eyes or the angry burgundy blush of her cheeks when she was made Princess. Now he found that his memories of his most ardent intimacies with his gently bred lady loves stirred him less than those of a red-nosed, tangle-haired witch weeping in his arms and returning his kiss with a warmth that was intensely personal. He'd have to watch himself from

now on. It was all very well to ride off into the woods with the unclaimed bastard elder daughter of a minor nobleman when he'd thought her face plain and her magic minor. It was a different matter to stay with the same girl when he knew her for a princess destined for a royal marriage, a sorceress whose nurturing magic had subtly powerful applications, and a strong-willed, off-beat beauty whose divertingly original appeal for him caused him to ride into all manner of alarmingly chancy situations.

As soon as he got back to Little Darlington, he would take her straight to Queenston, as he'd originally agreed, and she could marry some ally of the King's or bully Rowan into sending his army to fetch her every unicorn in the kingdom, for all Colin cared. He'd content himself with forgetting their almost accidental moment of dalliance and find himself some nice, frivolous nymph-someone with whom everything wouldn't be so complicated, though by comparison, it might be a little dull.

The others steered their horses single-file along a thickly overgrown rut. keeping under the trees as much as possible to avoid the worst of a soaking rain. The stranger, though on foot, seemed to have no trouble in this rough terrain keeping pace with them, and had disappeared again. No one complained. The smell of the fellow's badly tanned garment was not improved by wetting. .

They stopped near a creek at noontime and sat on the banks to eat their lunches. The rain continued, though the sun came out and a rainbow arched above the treetops, and the Little Darlington men delighted in the fineness of the day. With considerable gusto, they took turns telling Colin how miserable and dangerous their weather in these parts usually was.

They reached Everclear by nightfall. The town was much as it had been when Colin had first seen it: barren, deserted, and lifeless. Only the mud in the streets was well-tracked, and the smell had improved; otherwise no sign of the disturbing effects of Moonshine's rejuvenating magic were visible. The stream, though muddy, had remained clean enough, but rather than take a chance on being poisoned themselves, the men unanimously agreed to forego the water and fill their flasks with ale-purely for medicinal purposes, of course.

"It's not we don't believe you. Lad, when you say the water's been put right," Griffin Hillman said. "But I ain't clear yet in my mind how twas these folk come to be damaged like-and the lads and me, we're not that curious that we'd want to find out."

Colin was uneasy that the faery and Leofwin didn't appear at
once with their work party, but decided that probably everyone was at the inn, eating and preparing to settle down for the night. Still, it seemed like someone should have heard the horsemen arrive and at least have come out to investigate.

But no sounds emerged from the inn, either, when the rescue party tied their horses up in front of it. The men of Little Darlingham were unimpressed by the silence and laughed and talked among themselves as they entered the inn, stomping the mud from their boots first, as they would at home.

Except for the torches they lit and their own conversations, however, the inn was dark and silent. With less boisterousness than before, the men filled flagons with what was left of the ale and sal watching one another's expressions by torchlight as they drank their draughts with long, determined swallows. Colin drank nothing. It made no sense to him that this place was empty. If the zombies were in their own beds and the faery by her stream, Leofwin, at least, should be here. But the only things he could see that had been busy were spiders, whose webs now curtained broader expanses of the ceiling and the spaces between table legs than before. Though the zombie stench was fainter, the smell of stale ale was much stronger and much staler than it had been.

The men of Little Darlingham were as ready to leave the tavern as they had been to reach it. They drank quickly, filled their skin flasks, and filed quietly out the door. They liked taverns very well, but not this one. Colin sat there after they'd left, staring into the heart of the flame burning atop the last torch. He was exhausted, and felt stupid and befuddled.

Maggie had said some fell magic was at work in this place and he thought now she was right. Something was amiss. He'd felt as if he were being covertly watched all day long. And what could have gotten into Leofwin and the faery and a town full of zombies to make them disappear like that, in only a day's time?

Suddenly, from the next table, there came a knocking, as of crockery on wood. He rose and approached the table cautiously. Mother, but he'd be glad to leave this spook-ridden hole! Not that he was afraid of ghosts—but neither was he particularly fond of them. The village witch at East Headpenney had specialized in raising spirits of the dead, and he could never understand why—certainly no one ever paid her to do so, though he supposed some probably paid her to put the spirits back wherever they belonged. Anyw-ay, he had never seen her magic to do any good for anyone. Mostly it was a nuisance, intruding on what little privacy country people had. You could never be sure when

you were alone. There you'd be, bathing, or using the privy, or just making a little headway with the miller's daughter in the storeroom, and suddenly you would feel this, eerie, chilling presence. In the privy, in mid-winter, nothing was less welcome than a chilling presence. Colin had always suspected the witch used the spirits to spy for her, but he never knew for sure.

But if he wasn't frightened of ghosts, neither was he entirely sure such entities here, where everyone was already half-dead, were as similar apparitions had been in East Headpenney. Possibly one of the locals hereabouts could have gone on to ghosthood and neglected to leave behind his mortal shell, in which case he might well pack quite a wallop.

Holding the torch higher, Colin saw that the noise emanated from an upside-down flagon, rocking back and forth on a far table as if to right itself. Well, that was the kind of sense this place seemed likely to make. The people had no personalities, so naturally the inanimate objects would have.

But Colin wasn't ready for dancing beer mugs yet. He slapped his palm over the upturned bottom and held the thing firmly to the table.

A thin, muffled voice screamed from within. "Hey! You! I felt that! Let go right now! If you don't get your big paw off this mug by the time I count to seven, so help me I'll--"

She needed to say no more. Colin recognized Trickle's voice and quickly upended the flagon.

"How did you get in there?" he asked the faery, who was preoccupied with kicking her former prison across the table with blows of her tiny bare foot. She turned to him. the rage dying only slowly in her face.

"So it's you, is it, big boy? Hi. Thanks. I was getting stinking drunk from the fumes in there. Of all the filthy tricks--" she kicked the flagon another one.

"But how-?" Colin repeated.

"Can't you guess? Prince Charming stuck me in there. He pretended to cooperate, then, when I wasn't looking, he picked me up and almost broke my wings cramming me under that thing. Sneaky son-of-an-orc," she spat.

"But what about the zom-the townspeople?" Colin asked.

"What about them? Aye-wait-what ABOUT them? I hope that overblown blackguard didn't leave without telling those poor sods they could stop digging privy holes. Otherwise they'll be halfway to the other side of the world by now."

"We didn't see any of them—or any privies," he told her.

She looked oddly guilt-stricken. "I haven't had a lot of experience with the living dead myself. I have no idea
where they might be. You don’t suppose they’d wander off in the forest to die alone, like dogs or something, do you, if left to their own devices?”

Colin half-shrugged, half-shuddered. “I left to their own devices—” he repeated significantly.

He was saved from having to explain his remark to her and to himself by Archie, who burst through the door.

“Hey, minstrel! This Prince chap. Is he a stocky fellow? Balding? Straight blondish hair?”

Colin nodded.

“We’ve found ‘im then. But you’d best ‘ave a look at ‘im before you try to take ‘im anywhere, ‘e ain’t in what you might call the best of shape.”

After walking barefoot through the forest for two days, Sir Cyril was never so glad to see anything in his life as he was the gaudy, broken-down wagons, nor was he ever so glad to hear anything as he was the gypsy woman’s cry of recognition when she saw His Royal Highness.

“Hey, King! What you doing here? Why you not running kingdom?”

“Xenobia, me proud old black-hearted darlin’,” Rowan roared back. “What brings you here? There are no purses to slit in this part of my realm, are there?”

“Hey, King, how’s the wife?” A handsome swarthy young man with flashing brown eyes, a blinding white smile, and a great quantity of cheap jewelry dangling from his neck, joined the woman. Close behind him, a doe-eyed pregnant gypsy girl peered around his back at them.

His Majesty ignored the man but pulled the girl to him by taking both her hands in one great paw. “Zorah, my little dearie, has your great brute of a husband been beating you? Shall I thrash him for you, my darlin’?”

“No, King,” the girl replied, returning his smile. “My man’s too busy beating his chest to beat me. See? I make him papa!”

“What’s this?” A very nongypsyish man in gypsy dress poked his head out of a wagon and when he saw the King leapt down and engulfed him in a bear hug. “Rowan, old chap!”

A bear hug? Of course, a bear hug. From their names, and the fact that the tribe was known to the King, Sir Cyril realized that these must be the Xenobian gypsies Colin Songsmith sang of in his epic ballad, “The Quest to Free Queen Amberwine.” The nongypsy was none other than Prince H. David Worthyman, formerly an enchanted bear and presently consort to Xenobia, Queen of the Gypsies, the frumpy matron who had first greeted them.

Prince Worthyman, living with his paramour in voluntary exile from his own country, Ablemarie, was a sworn ally of King Rowan’s and had been of great help to the national heroine, Maggie Brown (now the Princess Magdalene, though Cyril kept forgetting that; the girl in Songsmith’s ballad scarcely sounded like a princess) in her daring rescue of the queen. The nice-looking young man was surely the Queen’s original abductor, now pardoned, Xenobia’s son by Prince Worthyman, popularly known as Gypsy Davey. The pretty pregnant girl, then, would be Zorah, who had led the King to the final rescue of Queen Amberwine, Maggie Brown, Songsmith, Prince Worthyman (then in bear form), and the by-then repentent Xenobia and son from the clutches of the at-that-time-unallied Royal Airforce, the Dragon Grimley. Perchingbird recalled these details with relief, for they explained to him the King’s joy at seeing Zorah and Prince Worthyman and his coldness to Davey.

His Majesty the King was returning His Royal Highness the Prince’s bear hug with a frost giant squeeze of his own, “Worthyman, what brings you here?” the king demanded, his thick tollman’s brogue rolling broader with excitement and relief.

“Now, Rrrowan, you don’t want to know that. You already know it’s something highly irregular,” Prince Worthyman laughed. He still growled some of his R’s, a speech impediment no doubt remaining from his years in captivity as a bear. “And you? Out for a stroll with yer boys, are you?”

“As a matter of fact, old friend,” the King said with an eye to the knives at the gypsy’s belts and the horses that pulled their wagons. “I’d like to talk wi’ ye about that.”

No further questions were asked. Rowan didn’t demand to know how the gypsies, complete with caravan, came to be in the middle of the eastern coastal forests, whether for poaching or for smuggling, it did not matter. The King was wise enough to recognize that among his subjects, these gypsies were a law unto themselves. And the gypsies, having once been deceived into surrendering their autonomy to the sorcerer Fearchar and having been subsequently released by Maggie Brown and Colin Song-smith and pardoned by King Rowan, were glad enough to aid their overlord now.

“There’s little enough we can do, lad,” Prince Worthyman told him regretfully. “We stopped at Castle Rrowan on the way to-do our business here, y’know. None was about there. Place had an abandoned look.”

“M’lads must be patrolling,” the King said, looking anxious even while dismissing Worthyman’s observation. “But I’ve > changed m’mind about goin’ there anyway. You folk have mounts, and arms of a sort. And this is no proper military mission, just a bit of policiiT up I’ve got to do. How about showin’ me along to Finbar’s old retreat?”

He held out his hand, and Sir Cyril placed in it the manuscript, which the navigator had saved from the wreck and
returned to him for safe-keeping. "We was wrecked off t'coast by a snake two days ago, and we're a wee bit behind schedule. Can you muster the beasties, men and arms to take us along to this place?"

Xenobia peeked over Prince Worthyman's shoulder as he examined the map, and sprang back away again with a cat-like leap and a hiss to match. Perchingbird had heard it said that gypsy ladies had a tendency toward the dramatic in their deportment.

"Hear me, King! That place is no good!" she cried. "Ill luck will follow you there! If you don't heed my word, you'll rue the day you failed to listen to the gypsy woman!"

"Now, now, lovie," Prince Worthyman said, wrapping a burly arm around his mate's waist. "You're exaggeratin' a bit, now, aren't you? Be a real queen and have the men saddle mounts for these lads, eh?"

Xenobia stared at him for a moment with nostrils flaring and sparks flashing from her dark eyes, then said thickly, "Ah, love. I can deny you nothing. I am fool for you! But this time, I tell you. Be careful. I gotta feeling about that place. Death waits at Worm's Roost. Heed me."

The woman kissed him passionately, then broke away, flouncing off in a swirl of flamboyant dirty skirts. Worthyman smiled. "Remmarrkable lady, the queen, but has never made an honest prediction in her life. Shall we plan the logistics, old man?"

By the time Maggie finished giving Moonshine his rubdown and started back to the tower, the sun had set and the evening was growing chilly. If she was going to wash again before she faced Belburga, she figured she might as well do it before the night got any colder.

She didn't bother with the basin this time, but washed off the worst of the dirt and undid the plaits of her ruined hairdo, combing her hair to hang simply to her waist.

When she was presentable, she gathered her fortitude and started for the tower, but stopped. No light shone from the lower, kitchen level. Belburga evidently did not wait dinner, even on paying guests.

Maggie cursed fluently to herself, but was not too disappointed, though she was hungry. There was something rather repulsive about the widow, quite apart from her rudeness, which made Maggie's skin crawl and rendered her quite content to avoid the woman.

She thought she would sit on the banks of the stream for awhile and see if Colin might be returning late. Though he had seemed oblivious to Belburga's general odiousness, he had managed to leave at the first opportunity. And curse him for sneaking off alone like that, leaving her to deal with the widow.

She waited a long time, until it was quite dark, but he didn't appear. She hadn't really thought he would, but she wasn't exactly swamped with people begging for her company and she was lonely. She thought about going to talk to Moonshine, but she knew he needed more time to ponder, if he wasn't asleep already. She pulled a stick of jerked venison out of her pocket, looked at it, and stuck it back where it came from. It didn't seem worth it to eat alone.

After traveling for most of a month with two close companions, she felt the need to talk to someone in the evening, but not someone like Dame Belburga. The idea of merely eating then going to bed in a dark, dismal tower was unappealing.

What would appeal to her, she thought, hugging herself for warmth, was to have this whole situation neatly dispatched, and herself biedly divested of the crown with its attendant responsibilities and matrimonial obligations. But this time, when the questing was done, she would prefer that, instead of each of them going their separate ways, they would continue to travel together, resting at night by a series of magic campfires, with stars winking down at them while Colin made up silly songs about everything that had happened.

A salty tear trickled into the upturned corner of her mouth where a smile had begun to play in response to her pleasant thoughts. She brushed the tear aside. She was being a goose. Whatever else happened, in the end, they would not all be together. Moonshine would have to go do whatever it was unicorns had to do with some other girl—he'd made that abundantly clear. Colin was a busy man; she kept forgetting that. From his point of view, she supposed, he was biding his time, putting up with her until matters resolved themselves so he could go about his business with a clear conscience. Yet, he did like her. He really did. Hadn't he helped her overcome her fear of running water by singing her through it? Hadn't he saved her from all the nasty beasts at Wizard Raspberry's (though if they hadn't ganged up on her, she could have handled them herself) and hadn't he, after all, come back to free her from the tower to begin with? And in spite of all his scolding about her penchant for quests, he had been rather dear back there on the trail. She smiled to herself and brushed her lips with the tips of her fingers. Nobody was quite THAT dear out of mere kindness, was he?

The mist rose from the stream and obscured her view of the road leading from the woods, but she thought she would look just one more time before she gave up waiting and returned to the tower. She walked out to the middle of the little ornamental bridge spanning the stream, and scanned the treeline beyond the meadows.

Nothing was there, of course. If Colin had, indeed, gone to Everclear, and it seemed sure now that he had, it
was no less than a day's journey from here and would require a day's journey back as well-and possibly more time
than that, with the stricken villagers in tow. She wished again that he'd awakened her, so she might have gone with
him. She worried that he hadn't found enough help, but reminded herself that nothing would have persuaded him
back into those woods unless he had. He was not one for taking unnecessary chances. Not unless he was prodded,
anyway. She grinned slyly to herself. Then he was capable of the most remarkable feats. She'd have to see about
that, one last time, she thought with a trace of bitterness, after Moonshine had found his other maiden and just before
she got carted off to marry some dismal duke or the other.

Maggie Brown, you are a truly wicked witch, she congratulated herself, and dropped her eyes from the treeline.
Just as she did, a light blinked from within the forest. She searched the trees, looking for a trace of it. It rewarded her
by blinking once more, and again, from the same place. Will-o'-the-wisp? But a will-o'-the-wisp should move and
should keep reappearing. Providing will-o'-the-wisps did what they should, of course, and she wasn't exactly sure
they did, since she'd never encountered one before, though she'd heard enough about them. Mostly they were sup-
pposed to confine themselves to swamps and lonely mountain roads, enticing travelers to become lost forever.

Which didn't fit. She was too far away to be its target, if it wanted to lure a traveler, and unless she was its
target, she doubted it would have allowed her to see it. No accounting for some of the magic that happened in this
country, as her father was fond of saying. She shook her head and started back for the tower-and barely caught the
last glimmer of what seemed to be a companion light to the one in the forest shining from the tower's battlements.
Abruptly, the light flicked out and the entire tower was dark, except for one arrowslit on the level above the one
where her own room was. The narrow opening glowed faintly, casting a pale ray of light down the tower wall to
melt impotently into the darkened yard.

Shivering, Maggie ran back into the old keep, relieved that the widow hadn't gone so far as to bar the door
against her. The door thumped shut behind her, and she lit a wall torch after several tries-her magic was definitely
not up to snuff-and climbed the spiral staircase.

She found the lighted room without difficulty, but hesitated, undecided whether to knock or catch the
conspirator who was sending nocturnal signals in the act of carrying out some nefarious scheme, so she
compromised. Rapping one loud, quick rap on the door, she shoved it open and barged in.

The foxiest-looking girl she had ever seen sprawled across a chair whose straight back and rigid arms had never
been made for sprawling. The girl looked up, brushing back a bush of fiery red hair from eyes which were long and
tilted and green as olives, and salted with fool's gold. Everything about her seemed pointed. She had a long, thin
face, barely saved from horsiness by a dainty pointed chin. Her sharp nose pointed down and her ears pointed up
every bit as much as Moonshine's. Seeing Maggie, the girl nearly choked on the apple she'd been munching, but
caught herself and chewed the piece in her mouth deliberately and swallowed. In her lap, illuminated by a candle,
was a heavy wood-bound tome.

Returning Maggie's stare levelly, she closed her book. Maggie barely caught a glimpse of what looked like gold
leaf.

"Sight-seeing?" the redhead asked. From her coloring, she had to be the much-vaunted Ruby Rose. "Or maybe
you'd like to claim you've got the wrong room? I know Mother told you you're not supposed to see us."

"I--" Maggie began, faltering, while she tried to think of a
likely tale. Then it occurred to her that she was not the one who was up to no good and she might as well ask
what she had to ask outright. "I saw a light in the forest and another one just above this room, in the battlements.
And--"

"And you think I'm sending secret signals to my highwayman lover, is that it?" Ruby Rose asked. Maggie could
see now that her eyes had adjusted to the light that the girl was barely old enough to qualify her for a lover of any
sort-she couldn't be more than fourteen.

"You see these visions often, do you?" the girl inquired, goading.

"No, my aunt's the one who sees visions in our family," Maggie replied evenly. "But I DID see a light. And you
know something about it, don't you?"

"Maybe I do," Ruby Rose admitted. "What day is this?"

"Saturday, I think. Why?"

"Not that, you ninny. I mean, what DATE?"

"I haven't the faintest idea. Sometime in late summer is all I know."

"Is it indeed?" the girl's voice sparked with interest, and she looked outside as if to verify the information-
which she of course failed to do, since night had already fallen. "I really must make it a point to go out of doors from
time to time. We scholars have little time for outings, and I find I quite lose track of whole seasons sometimes, and
miss collecting valuable elements for my work. You're quite sure it's summer?"

"Well, yes. We held the christening at the solstice, as usual and--" she counted, as well as she could, the days
and weeks since the christening, her incarceration in the tower, the time spent hiding in the forest, the day and night at Aunt Sybil's, the journey to Raspberry's and the trip to Everclear-then the night spent among the zombies, and the subsequent journey to Little DarHingham. She ran out of fingers to count on once, and had to start over, but since she did her counting aloud, Ruby Rose's sharp mind was way ahead of hers.

"About late August, then, isn't it?" the foxy girl asked.

"Yes, I should say so, from the nip in the air. Do you really never go out at all?"

"No more than I can help," the other answered. "It only makes my freckles worse." She pointed to her nose, on which the freckles swarmed, overflowing onto her cheeks and chin. "Mother says freckles are a blight. Besides, it's too rainy out most of the time. Rain would ruin my book."

"I see," Maggie answered, fidgeting. This young girl was every bit as weird as her mother.

"Oh, sit down, won't you? I have to think and you're making me nervous."

Maggie gingerly obeyed, pulling a footstool near Ruby Rose's uncomfortable looking chair and sitting down on the edge of it.

"You make me nervous too," she told the girl. "You're Ruby Rose, aren't you? Dame Belburga's middle daughter?"

The redhead grimaced. "Please! Ruby Rose is my mother's affected nomenclature, inflicted on me when I was yet too young to object. When I become a master alchemist, I shall change my name to Rusty. That's what my father calls me. How far away would you say he is, anyway?"

"Who?" Maggie looked around the room, but they were still alone.

"My father, of course. It must have been his signal you saw. He visits me about this time every year, and usually tries to send me some signal-a bird to my window, or something, so I'll come out and meet him and he doesn't have to face mother. I wonder how that old scold could have known he was coming in time to intercept his signal?"

Maggie shook her head. "Hold on. You're going too fast for me. I thought your father was dead."

"Then you shouldn't try to think at all," Ruby Rose Rusty said curtly. "Because he's not; he's alive. He just wears so many disguises when he travels-he always travels incognito- that nobody recognizes him when they see him, so everyone who doesn't know otherwise assumes he's dead, and mother lets them think it, so people will think her a widow instead of knowing the truth, which is that he just can't stand to live with her, so he doesn't. I don't blame him. I wouldn't either, if I had any choice."

Maggie tried to think of something sympathetic to say to comfort the fatherless waif, but the fatherless waif flashed a sudden voracious grin full of pearly pointed teeth.

"One day I'll get away from that ogress," the girl declared, making her voice theatrically deep and ominous and holding the candle that had served her as a study-light under her chin to cast sinister shadows across her face. "When I am an alchemist, I shall know the unknowable, and one day, while she is trying to scrub my freckles off with lye soap and is least suspecting it. I shall utter the unutterable and a simulacrum or a golem or something will come out of nowhere and haul her off to the netherworld. I plan that as only the first feat in my long and brilliant career, of course," she confided, setting the candle aside. "But won't it be a grand starting point?"

"It's pretty dreadful, actually," Maggie said, trying to suppress a smile. "Even for YOUR mother. But I know what you mean. My granny is a witch, and sometimes when she's in top form I'd like to call in a demon or two for help, but I don't."

"Hmph," said Ruby Rose. "You probably couldn't call a demon if you wished, then, or else you're a complete fool, or if you can and you're not a fool, all I can say is that your granny must be a more agreeable witch than my mother is an ogress." She thought for a moment. "Perhaps I could have my minions just transport father here whenever I wished to see him, or, better yet, have a castle built for us where mother couldn't find us." Her face fell. "Though I suppose he could have done that himself, if he liked. I think he's afraid, with my ogress heritage, that I'll turn out like mother-though anyone can see I take more after his line," and she tugged at the lobe of one of her pointed ears. "I can't wait to tell him about the new variation I've invented on this ancient formula." She switched the topic deftly, tapping the book in front of her, obviously wanting to divert the conversation from the subject of her father.

"What does it do?" Maggie asked.

"Changes blueberries into toadstools, at least theoretically. I haven't tested it yet."

"I can't see why you'd want to do a thing like that."

"That's because it's beyond your powers of understanding. You're not a genius who's destined to become an alchemist, like I am."

"Perhaps not, but I am a first-class witch," Maggie replied. She was annoyed and trying very hard not to show
it. She felt she should be in control, and didn't like being made to feel small by a girl surely no more than two thirds her years. Ruby Rose's learning gave her the advantage, and her youth made Maggie feel long in the tooth, for if their reckoning of the days was correct, Maggie's twenty-first birthday, the three-times-seven so significant to witches, was either nigh or had already passed. She wished fervently for the first time that she had paid more attention to the tutor she and Winnie had shared as children, so that she might know other numbers than the magic ones, and other words than those in her own tongue. If only she hadn't spent those dreary hours shifting around the patterned woven borders on the hem of Winnie's gown instead of listening to her tutor,

she might at least be able to show this superior little twit that Maggie Brown knew a thing or two, too. Since all she could recall were the colors of Winnie's gown and the whacking her knuckles had received from the tutor in payment for her inattention, she kept silent.

"If you're such a first-class witch," Ruby Rose challenged, "do something magical. Don't try to trick me either. My father is a really first-class wizard, and I promise you. I'll know the difference."

Maggie sniffed haughtily. "I never accept childish dares."

"Hah! You can't! You're just a scullery maid who's run off with that minstrel, like my mother said, You can't stay here either, by the way, when he abandons you." She leaned back with a smug smile on her foxish face and propped her feet up next to Maggie on the stool.

"I'm not either a scullery maid, and it's not like that between Colin and me at all!" Maggie declared hotly. But was it? Never mind whether it was or not. It was no business of this wretched child's one way or the other. With considerable satisfaction, Maggie ordered the rafters to dump soot and splinters down around Ruby Rose's pointy little ears.

"You horrid witch!" the girl screamed, and jumped up, clawing the soot from her eyes so that she looked more like a racoon than a fox for a change. But it wasn't her face she was worried about. As soon as she could see, she began wiping at the blackened cover of her precious book. "You ruined it on purpose, just because you're too stupid to understand it!" the girl accused.

"You asked me to show you," Maggie reminded her mildly, and hoped her hearthcraft would be as prompt about cleaning the book as it had been about showering it with soot. That had been the liveliest her powers had been all day! They probably liked dealing with base matter like dirt and manure better than they liked dealing with soap and water, derived as they were from blood-kinship to her less-than-spotless wicked witch ancestresses. No wonder it was easier for her to perform spiteful magicks than useful ones. Suddenly, she wasn't very proud of herself, and realized she had indeed taken a childish dare to do the opposite of what her powers were supposed to do—to mess and soil and ruin instead of clean and mend and tidy. She concentrated very hard, much harder than she'd ever had to before, and executed a cleaning spell that left the book, if not the girl, as pristine and unmarred as before.

Mid-way through the spell, Ruby Rose stopped glowering at her, and by the time the book was clean, the girl was grinning again. "Very good, witch. I liked that one." She regarded her own grimy hands with interest. "Oh, that mother could see me now. Do you suppose I ought to go see if my big sister, Lily Pearl, would like me to do her hair for her?"

Maggie giggled and then they were both laughing. Finally, Ruby Rose chortled to a stop and asked, "What else can you do?"

"Nothing that would impress you more than that, I'm afraid. My magic is useful in its way, but not very spectacular." It occurred to her then, however, that she had the perfect opportunity to advance Moonshine's cause. "The only other thing I can do that's very wonderful is talk to unicorns."

"To unicorns? Really?" Ruby Rose leaned forward, the gold in her eyes aglitter with—enthusiasm? At least she hardly seemed to share her mother's and sister's disparaging attitude towards Moonshine's kind. "Could I get one, do you suppose?"

Though Maggie didn't like the aquisitive gleam in the girl's eye, she admitted to herself that jealousy was probably making her over-suspicious. "I'll introduce you tomorrow," she promised.

"Can you make it early?" the girl asked, reassuming some of her former air of detached superiority, "After my father arrives I may not have the time." And she set her book carefully aside and strolled over to her little porcelain washbasin, and began delicately removing her coating of filth.

Knowing a dismissal when she saw one, Maggie left—and was careful to bang the door behind her.

When she awoke next morning she felt somewhat better. Colin should be back by evening, and then, with or without Moonshine, they would try to discover where the brigands had taken the unicorns and persuade King Roari to do something about it, as soon as he returned to Queenston. Or, if the brigands were really going to do anything despicable to the unicorns, perhaps she and Colin would find a way to take appropriate action themselves. Whatever he said about returning to Queenston, Colin certainly wouldn't want to return there without doing everything in his power to aid the King in the apprehension of the blackguards who were threatening the beasts. And hadn't Leofwin
said something about a revolution as well? If they went to the King with that sort of information, he was much likelier to listen to her petition than if they went empty-handed. Surely Colin would see that.

And the signals—it hardly seemed reasonable that with the woods full of bandits and zombies, those stealthy beacons could only be from Ruby Rose's doting papa. Brilliant Belburga's middle daughter might be, but lacking in sense if she admitted no solution possible to that puzzle other than her own.

But who was right and who was wrong about that remained to be seen. Right now, Maggie needed her breakfast badly.

Belburga was still at the table, and ignored her, but she didn't protest when Maggie ladled gruel onto a plate from the kettle on the hearth. She might as well have. Just having to look at the woman was enough to spoil Maggie's appetite all over again. Maybe the widow really was an ogress, as her daughter claimed. Ogresses no more all had to be huge and hairy than witches all had to be wicked, or faeries small. Maggie decided to see for herself. Ruby Rose's pointed teeth didn't mean anything; though pointed teeth were commonly ascribed to ogresses, and would be a dead giveaway in the case of the otherwise normal looking widow, other beings also had them sometimes. Everything else about Ruby Rose was pointed, so why not her teeth? Her mama, however, was a different story.

So Maggie checked.

The rat wasn't strictly necessary, but she threw it in anyway. She felt she could do no less for a woman who had called her a wayward scullery maid behind her back, and who had given her the worst possible food and lodging in return for a very hefty fee.

She baited the rat out with a piece of bread while Belburga was mumbling to herself. It wasn't difficult. Belburga, for all her insistence on white dresses and clean hands among her daughters, was a slovenly housekeeper, and no self-respecting cat was likely to stay with such an odious woman.

The fat gray rodent was almost immediately forthcoming, scuttling out of its hole the minute she lowered the bread, bold as if it were a dog come for its rightful supper and, indeed, it was almost as big as a small dog. Maggie threw the bread across the widow's shoetops and the rat leaped after it.

The widow loosed an earsplitting shriek and flew after the rat. frightening the poor beast into a state of nervous prostration. The shriek revealed Belburga's throat, tonsils, and tongue in graphic detail, and also a set of teeth longer and far more sharply pointed than Ruby Rose's.

Having completed the ladylike amenities, Belburga picked up her broom and began chasing the hapless rat around the room. Maggie left abruptly, without touching the food on her plate. The impoverished gentlewoman was actually slavering as she chased the poor rat.

So Belburga was an ogress. No wonder she was so revolting. Ogresses, and even descendents of ogresses, were commonly known to eat PEOPLE. Oh, maybe not neighbors or relatives or friends, providing they had any. But visitors were certainly fair game. No wonder the good widow took in lodgers. Maggie wondered how many she ever sent on their way again. That thought sent her racing to the stable.

"You're panting, my friend," Moonshine said. "What ails you?" He was munching peacefully from a bucket of oats.

"Moonshine, this is very important," she said when she'd gotten her breath back. "WHO led Roundelay out of this stable? Was it Colin or someone else?"

"'Twas Colin himself, and none other. He gave me to understand that he was away to find help for the afflicted accomplices of the wicked captors of my kindred."

"Whew." Maggie sank with a sigh into the dirty straw inside the stall. She told Moonshine what she had learned about the widow and her daughters.

Moonshine was skeptical. "The fair Lily Pearl may be unpleasantly self-absorbed, but I cannot think she is an ogress. Mayhap Dame Belburga is but her stepmother, and perhaps her teeth are in somewise disfigured through hardship—"

"Like having to crunch through human bone to get the marrow out?" Maggie suggested.

"She has harmed neither Master Colin nor yourself, and lives at peace with the folk roundabout her," Moonshine pointed out. "Surely that is evidence contrary to your suspicions?"

"Ha!" Maggie said derisively. "Lives at peace with the folk roundabout her, indeed! Except for one very weird stranger, who have we met who even knows this woman, aside from her daughters, eh? As to why she hasn't devoured us yet, I don't know—maybe she's saving us for dessert. Or maybe she just likes princes best, and is waiting to sink her teeth into Leofwin." She smiled. "She'd bust a few fangs on him, wouldn't she though?"

"Goodwitch." Moonshine said kindly, "Methinks you are overtired from our wanderings."

"Is that so? Well, come along then, and I'm fetch Ruby or
Rosie or Rusty or whatever she calls herself. She's a very odd girl, but she's smart enough to know who's an ogress and who's not. Not that it matters if the whole lot of them, Belburga, Lily, Ruby, and that other flowery brat, whatsemane, are boiling up a kettle to cook me in right now. I'm not leaving this place until Colin returns. If you like this girl, though, I suggest, for safety's sake, you win her quickly. She's not crazy about living here, either. The instant Colin rides up, we should all flee together."

"Well spoken, my friend. Lead on. I am surpassing eager to meet this new maiden." He trotted cheerfully after her, into the concealment of the cedar grove which bordered the brook.

"Don't get too surpassing eager," Maggie cautioned. "I'll have to fetch her. She likes the indoors because she freckles and likes to study alchemy all the time. She's very set on being an alchemist, Moonshine. Won't that conflict with her being a unicorn maiden? If I remember correctly, my witchery was one of Primrose's objections to me."

"Ah, but if the maiden is not yet a sorceress, perhaps she may alter her ambition once we have met," the unicorn replied.

She gave him an exasperated look. "Are all unicorns so pigheadedly optimistic? Don't answer that. It has to be your own little idiosyncrasy. Primrose is a unicorn, and I don't think she has an optimistic bone in her head."

Moonshine rolled his eyes scoldingly, but Maggie noticed he didn't contradict her.

The ever-present mist swirled up from the stream to enclose them, isolating them from all but the dewy patch of ground directly before them. Maggie took advantage of the cover to remove Moonshine's disguise while he secreted himself among the hedges. When she was sure he was safe and Belburga was nowhere about, she ducked back into the tower and up the stairs to Ruby Rose's room.

"You're a noisy sort of witch, aren't you?"

"I beg your pardon," Maggie said as civilly as possible. "But you said you wanted to meet my friend early. If you'll be so kind as to leave your musty old book, I think you'll find Moonshine worthy of even your exalted attention."

Swathing herself in a woolen shawl of the same olive as her eyes, Ruby Rose followed Maggie back down to the garden.

"Oh, I say," the girl cried in admiration when she beheld Moonshine. "What a splendid specimen he is!" She swathed herself in a woolen shawl of the same olive as her eyes, Ruby Rose followed Maggie back down to the garden.

"I guess I know when I'm not wanted," she replied, and Moonshine nuzzled them, saying to Maggie, "I think you may leave us now."

"I guess I know when I'm not wanted," she replied, and retired to the cover of the streamside hedges, to keep an eye open for the ogress, who was conspicuously absent. Maybe ogresses liked to sleep during the day. Like vampires, as soon as they'd breakfasted and fed the chickens. She'd never heard it said that they did, but one never knew. Whatever she was doing, Maggie thought grimly, Belburga'd be wise to continue doing it and not interfere with Moonshine. If she did, Maggie'd bash her one, and joyously, at that. Meanwhile, the best plan was to stay put. If she went looking for Colin, to try to meet him in the woods on his way back, she'd undoubtedly wind up missing him, and he would fall into the clutches of the ogress. Besides, she couldn't very well pursue him on foot, and the only available mount was courting.

"TONIGHT?" they both cried together. Snowshadow spoke in a tone just short of a despairing wail. "But you said a week ago it would take you but two days to complete."

"Fine. Good. Keep them intimidated. With this beastly weather we've been having, you see, I'm only just getting started on our map tonight."

"I'm sorry. It really couldn't be helped. I can't work in the rain, in spite of my illuminating magic."

"What's the matter? Afraid to get your well-bred hide wet?" Eagledown asked.

"My well-bred hide dries. My inks do not. They run. While pen and ink wash is an excellent technique for achieving some effects, it is of no great use in cartography."

"He didn't mean it. Princess," Snowshadow said. "Only- time draws short. I feel it."

Pegeen felt it too. She had spent nights pacing her chambers, looking out at the low, roiling sky through sheets of driving rain and sleet, feeling useless as she listened to the drops pelt the castle walls. Everyone had worn boots of fish-gut all week, for the floors were awash with cold water, which seeped in under the doors. In spite of her
heaviest shawl, Pegeen had felt the cold in her very marrow, as she wandered the corridors, too restless to draw or
write or even to read, and listened to Fearchar consulting with his officers, making further plans for the ruin of King
Roan's reign. The maze had been horribly slick this evening, for the rain had continued until sunset, when the sky
miraculously lifted revealing the stars and moon. The unicorns stood in ankle-deep water that was rapidly crusting to
ice, and their feed was soaked. She was glad she had thought to bring them the apples, but sorry she was unable to
bring better tidings about the escape plans.

"Very well, then. I have seen for myself that you are still safe, so I shall proceed as planned. But I must tell
you, the map may take somewhat longer to do than I'd expected."

Both unicorns neighed with dismay.

"I simply can't see far enough to map the most distant reaches by night, and it's quite impossible to do it during
the day. Fearchar wants me to do maps for his battle campaigns, and calligraphy for the proclamations he plans to
issue once he has taken the throne. His suspicions will be less if I pretend to cooperate enthusiastically. To finish
mapping the maze, I shall have to crawl farther out on the wall each night the weather is fine to draw more of the
area."

"Oh, Princess, do be careful. Don't risk your life!" Snow-shadow said.

"My life won't be much longer than yours, I fear, if I cannot free you one way or the other. For on my word as
the daughter of Ftnbar the Fireproof, and the last Ashburn heir, I shall not allow Fearchar and his lackeys to do you
more harm than they have done already. But in the meantime, while you're waiting for me?"

"Y'es?"

"Keep kicking at that hole of yours, why don't you."

When they reached the high, windswept plateaus where the snow and rain blew together in a continual swirling
dance, Sir

Cyril thought they must surely leave the gypsy wagons behind, or mire them in the man-high drifts. So he was
surprised to see the women bend over the wheels of their wagons, three and four ladies to the wheel, and deftly
remove them.

"My word, sir, whatever are your ladies doing?" he asked the man Davey, who lounged against one of the
wagons waiting for the women's ministrations. The man had buttoned his shirt all the way to his chin for a change,
covering his jewels, and wore a silken muffler around his neck, under a fleece-lined sheepskin coat covered with
beautiful embroideries. He seemed to view the wretched weather as a fine excuse to display this new sartorial
splendor, but of no particular interest otherwise. "Look around, King's man." he instructed Sir Cyril, flinging his
fleece-mittened hands far out to the sides in an expansive gesture. "What you see ahead?"

"Snow? Or besides the snow?" Sir Cyril asked.

"Snow. That's right. Say, you pretty smart, King's man. Not like some of them, too stupid to let my wife read
their hands. It's snow all around us. You know what happens to wagon wheels in snow?"

"They founder. I naturally assumed we would abandon the wagons."

"No-no such thing, King's man. These wagons our homes. Besides, who wants to walk to other side of
mountains? Very tiring. Not the gypsy way."

Perchingbird agreed wholeheartedly that he didn't wish to walk to the other side of the mountains, and tried to
go to the assistance of the group of women hoisting the wagon to his left. They peremptorily shoved him aside,
paying no attention to the snow-laden wind whipping their skirts and hair around their lean brown bodies. Davey
tugged at his elbow, pulling him back to the relative shelter of the wagon. The women seemed to take as much pride
in holding up their wagons while hugging their heavy, fringed shawls around their shoulders as they did in their
cooking or dancing.

"You can't mean to let them carry the wagons across the pass on their shoulders, though, can you?" Perchingbird
demanded incredulously. Davey shook his head, grinning, and pointed. A couple of young girls ran around to the back of one of the wagons and began drawing out long wooden slats. As the other women held up the
wagon bed, the girls slid the slats under it, in fine with the hubs, which the other women then lashed to the slats.

"Skis?" Perchingbird asked.

Davey, greatly diverted by his amazement, grinned. "Of course, skis! It's old gypsy trick. This pass is easy pass.
We take nice sleigh ride to where is level or goes up, nice sled ride where goes down. Smart, no? Horses ride in
wagons where is too deep to walk-men ski. Come, pick skis."

The King was already selecting his, a pair of long pieces broken off from wagon slides. The King's face was
grim. Perchingbird knew his Majesty fretted because his men from Castle Rowan had not yet replied to the message
sent with Grimley. Gypsy sleighs and belt knives were all very well, but what was required before one met with evil
sorcerers was reinforcements.

Leofwin's inert body bloodied up a thicket near the smithy. Fortunately for the Prince, the spear in his chest,
which had originally drained such a considerable quantity of his vital fluids, served as a plug to keep the rest from
draining. He still breathed.

Also fortunately for the Prince, Colin had been so lost in thought at the tavern he had failed to empty the
unicorn-blessed water he still carried in his own water skin, and had therefore not replaced the healing liquid with
brew from the Everclear tavern.

Before he could wet the prince down with the flask's contents, however, Colin felt a hand on his arm. The gray-
bearded stranger placed himself between the flask and Leofwin, saying, "Did you not tell us, o minstrel, that this is
an evil man? A man who would have raped your female companion save for your brave intervention? A man
connected with the captors of the very beasts whose water you would use to heal him? A rake, in short, and a
loathsome bully. I say unto you, o minstrel, this man is not fit to live. Let him die. Will such a one be missed by
any?"

Colin blinked at him, then shook loose the hand. "You make a persuasive argument—er—um, stranger. But Dame
Belburga, for one, wants his royal carcass delivered to her lodgings. And I doubt there's a man here intrepid enough
to say that lady nay." Collectively and individually, each of the companions affirmed his own lack of the required
intrepidity. At Cohn's signal, Giles jerked the sword from Leofwin's wound, and Colin sluiced unicorn water over it,
diluting the dark red which welled up from the puncture to pale pink,

"Do as you will," the stranger said, and since no one was paying him any attention, left. Colin had the feeling
he hadn't exactly won the man over, but he was too preoccupied to care,

between pouring the unicorn water over Leofwin and physically divesting himself of his own distaste for the
task. He wished Maggie had come. She was much better at this sort of thing than he was. Healing, of course, not
throwing up. It would have been nice to have had her there if for no other reason than to hold HIS head, though she
would have made some scathing comment while she was at it.

Leofwin sputtered to consciousness. "Drat it all. Sally," he grumbled deliriously. "You've spitted me already.
Must you drown me as well?"

Colin stopped pouring and smacked the wounded man's cheeks instead. "Upsy-daisy, old man. You've a lot of
explaining to do, and I insist you survive long enough to do it."

"Gently, lad," cautioned old Shearer. "Would you save him and slay him all in the same hour? There's time
enough for his tale on the morrow."

General sentiment and the prince's pallor were with the oldster, and the rescue party bedded down in the
abandoned smithy for the night. All save the stranger, who was evidently still offended enough by Colin's rejection
of his suggestion to prefer solitude.

The next morning dawned as gray and feeble as their patient.

Weakly, Leofwin peeled back an eyelid, and peered at them through an orb russet and vein-lined as an oak leaf
in the fall. "Eh? So it's you, is it?" he groaned on seeing Colin.

"It's me. The question is, what happened to you. and even more important, what happened to the zom-er-good
folk of this town?"

The Prince struggled to gain his elbows, but sank back. Colin supposed that though the wound had closed
within moments after being touched by the water from his flask, even unicorn magic would take some time to
regenerate all the ale-saturated royal gore decorating the landscape.

"It's all your fault!" the prince gasped accusingly. "If you hadn't stolen my sword like the sneaky little thief you
are, you and your great horny horse and your dark-haired demoness, they'd never have gotten the best of me!"

"Who's that, yer 'ighness?" Giles asked.

"Sally Forth and Wulfric and their gang of cutthroats, that's who. They came back for your precious zombies,
and put paid to me while they were in the neighborhood. I reckon they think the good folk of Everclear will make
excellent slaves-bandits are good enough at fighting, but not much at work. I overheard one

of them to say their master would be happy to have women servants for 'the lady' again. Whoever that is. They
can't have meant the nymph." And he preceded with increasing vigor to describe in colorful, imaginative, and often
sadistic, but erotic, detail why the term 'lady' could not have been used in reference to Sally Forth. His rescuers were
impressed. It was quite a performance for a mortally wounded man.

"Master?" Colin echoed. "Come now, you mustn't have heard properly. Bandits don't have masters. That's why
they become outlaws—to stay outside the law and not have to put up with masters. Or that's the way I've always heard
it."

But the prince lapsed back into unconsciousness and snored loudly, unmoved by Colin's arguments.

"Now what?" Archie asked, rubbing the side of his nose with the side of his calloused hand. "I'm in no hurry to
make the acquaintance-ship of no bandits. And we'll 'ave to be gettin' 'is Lor'ship 'ere back to Belburga—if he don't
croak first."
"He wouldn't dare," Colin said. "Belburga's expecting him."

Though he couldn't have said when the stranger rejoined them, Colin was suddenly facing the man, who seized his arm and hissed to him in a low voice. "I found tracks, o minstrel, of many persons. You would not be so neglectful of your duty as to fail to pursue them?"

Colin gulped. "Well, naturally I wouldn't, but you see there's the wounded man to consider, and--"

Griffin Hillman spoke up quickly. "Don't worry about the prince, lad. Me and the boys can rig a litter and carry him to Belburga, safe as a babe in arms. You, now, you're the hero. YOU go after the bandits."

"Not to smite them ourselves, o minstrel," the stranger soothingly reassured him. "That would be folly. But may we not spy to see where the bad ones lurk, holding the poor townspeople and the unicorns? Then would not great honor fall upon your shoulders as one who could lead King's men back to the lair of the evildoers, and so cleanse our fair land of their foulness?"

Colin thought the man was overstating his case somewhat, but Archie said, "Good idea," and lashed the prince to the upturned work table from the smithy, tying the other end to his horse and to Hillman's.

"Aye, sounds fine," Giles agreed. "Much as I'd love to help you and see a real bandit hideout, I'm sure too many folk at the trackin' would spoil the secretness of it all. And Lily Pearl's ma is countin' on us bringin' this prince fella back."

"Oh, I really don't think having an extra man would hurt," Colin began, but by then Giles and Brewer had mounted and were waving goodbye, while Shearer claimed that he couldn't hardly stand not to help with the tracking, but his rheumatism was bothering him so fiercely he wasn't sure but what he wouldn't have to climb aboard the stretcher with the prince before the ride was over.

"But you tell us all about it, son, when you get back tomorrow--" the old man finished.

"But I'm a terrible tracker!" Colin cried after them. "I can hardly find my way to the privy and back without a map!" He turned to the stranger, who was the only one left in earshot. "I'm sure you have a splendid plan, but it's bound to be a waste of time. We can't possibly follow such an old trail through all these woods--"

The stranger shook his head, and the sneer Colin had just noticed playing about his mouth deepened. "Not an old trail. Fresh tracks, o hero. Fragrant with sweat smell and droppings."

"They would be," Colin sighed, resigned. "Very well. I suppose we'd better see where they lead. The King will want to know. But mind you, we don't want to attract their attention."

He didn't like the peculiar fellow, and didn't trust him either. What he WOULD have liked was to get on his horse and follow the others down the road. But every time he turned his back on it, this business with the bandits became increasingly more complicated. First unicorns, then a rebellious plot, then an injured prince and two dozen or so captured townspeople. Could he really afford to pass up the opportunity to have at least some idea of where the rascals were going to strike next? Besides, if he went back without the townfolk. Maggie was likely to insist on coming back and slaying the bandits all by themselves. If he could already assure her he'd taken charge of the situation and had helpful information which had to be passed on immediately to the King, he was much more likely to persuade her to follow him out of danger, rather than having to follow her back into it. Besides, the stranger had no weapon, and Colin had Leofwin's sword. And the Little Darlingham men were rapidly disappearing down the road and into the woods. So there seemed no hope for it. Summoning his iron-reinforced courage, Colin waded into the woods after the stranger.

And promptly found himself alone and disoriented. Had the man actually been trying to lose him, he certainly couldn't have done a better job, Colin thought. In the thicket just around a small hill in his path he heard a loud rustling and snapping, and took that to be the stranger. He called out, and a voice seemed to answer, though it sounded a good way off.

Following the sound and looking around for other signs to follow, he thought he had badly estimated the man in one area of endeavor; the man must be a superb tracker. Though Colin was far from being an adept woodsman, any boy growing up in East Headpenney at least learned how to track rabbits and deer through the meadows. So he wasn't altogether ignorant of tracking techniques. Yet he could see no track, no broken twig or bent bush, no bruised leaves nor peeled bark, nor nary so much as a drooping blade of grass to mark the trail they were supposed to be following. For all he could tell, not only had the bandits not passed this way, but neither had the stranger.

As a matter of fact, this wasn't a path he was on, merely a clear border of grass and moss winding among the trees. In order to stay out of thick clumps of bushes, he had to take countless turns and uphill and downhill circumnavigations until he began to empathize with mountain goats. The footing was no great joy, either—it was humpy and spongy with moss, rugged with fallen limbs and extremely rocky about the hillsides, a soggy quagmire in the hollows.

Now and then, the stranger's dirty sheepskin would be visible in an ephemeral sort of way, but the man always seemed to melt back immediately into the forest. The difficult terrain apparently gave him no problem.
Soon Colin, who could hold the high notes longer than any man in his academy class, began to feel winded. His chest heaved, his eyes watered, his throat rasped with each breath, his mouth felt parched, his calves and sides were leaden and throbbed painfully. The iron sword weighed more than he did. He had to rest, if only for a moment.

But as he plumped himself down, he looked up through blurring eyes to see how far he had yet to go. The gray-haired stranger backtracked for a moment, seemingly just to make sure Colin didn't become permanently lost. When he saw Colin sitting, the stranger laughed one short, barking laugh, and loped on.

A minstrel with no measure of bravado is a poor minstrel, unworthy of the title. Cursing under what breath he had remaining, Colin struggled to his aching feet and set them one in front of the other a few more times. Now his throat felt as if it intended to close for repair, and his legs were numb and stumbling, but he could see the stranger, just ahead, trotting merrily along.

At last the man bounded up one hill too many—the worst of it was that ALL the hills had begun to look alike by now; rocky, slippery, muddy, moldering-leaf-encrusted pinnacles of torture— and Colin gave into his good sense as his legs gave out.

"H-h-halt," he gasped. He had to face it. Some people were just naturally more agile than others. Though there ought to be a law against anything mortal being THAT agile.

He'd almost begun to think the stranger COULDN'T stop, that the hills were pulling him into them on some sort of cord or by some enchantment. But to his surprised relief, the man stopped almost immediately, smirking at him."Winded, are we, eh?"

Colin nodded, ignoring the smirk, and sank to the ground, elbows drooping across each knee with his lead lolling between them.

"I thought you could not endure much longer," the man said, his voice changing and growing huskier. "The four-legged, even when running on two legs, can outrun those who are always deficient by two."

"Wha--whatever you say," Colin panted agreeably.

"Grr," the stranger said, whatever that meant. The voice was changing before Colin could place it—and he knew now he'd heard it before, in surroundings similar to these, with Maggie and Moonshine and--

"S-say there, good man. I don't suppose you have any relatives in high places? There's a Count Jivemgood who sounds-no." He looked up as he finished his question. The creature who had been his guide grew a long bristly snout, changed his sheepskin into a wolfskin, and suddenly sprouted a bushy tail. Then, without further ado, he dropped to all fours. "No, no, I beg your pardon," Colin apologized quickly. "Couldn't have been you after all. I must have mistaken you for some other chap."

The wolf growled low in his throat and crouched, slobbering through yellow fangs like a cavern full of dripping stalactites and stalagmites. The growl and the glittering green eyes promised a messy death, but Colin, too weary even to be frightened, much less do anything about it, was mainly baffled.

"It seems to me you're not going about this fairly," he pointed out in an injured tone that was quite detached from himself. "I have it from very good sources that werewolves have to have a full moon to turn into their--er--baser selves."

"Just like a lackey for the royal tyrant to bandy about ignorant superstition!"

Colin felt a delightful cool breeze as the whirlwind containing the voice addressing him spun itself-herself, as he could see now-between both the ravening wolf. With a final dainty pirouette the wind swept away and an extremely lovely golden-haired woman in skimpy huntress garb stood in front of him, a cross look causing her soft pink mouth to pout provocatively.

"Mortals do have such anachronistic notions about we magical folk," she complained. "Any dumb dryad knows that it's only werewolves who have to have a full moon to turn, whereas werepeople, poor dears, can naturally assume their true animal forms at any time, but must become human for at least a few hours of each day, when their magic takes its dire form and they are vicious and dangerous to all around them. Once they've given vent to their profane human nature, they're free to resume their normal bestial form, poor thing. He was resigned to a destiny of meaningless brutality, and had cast his lot with cruel ruffians until I delivered unto him the saving message of the cause and our Dark Pilgrim. He and all his men are now my brothers-in-arms, dedicated to the salvation of Argonia and the overthrow of tyranny. Though he still must change to man form, he now utilizes his ferocious human wiles to further our cause, don't you, Wulfi?"

Wulfric wagged his brushy tail and whined, happily groveling.

And no wonder. Colin thought he had never seen a more beautiful woman. Her movements reminded him of rippling water flowing to an inner source, her voice of music, her hair of honey into which new-minted gold coins had been melted, her eyes of spring grass. The peachy pink of her lips and cheeks made him feel the traditional rose color maiden's cheeks were always supposed to be was garish. Under—just barely under-her diaphanous one—
shouldered dress, her body was slim and white as a birch, and warm and vibrant-looking as a bird's breast. Colin's head began to spin. He was growing more bewildered by the moment. Though he thought he'd done well with Wulfric, and had pretty much managed to take it in stride when the sinister stranger had metamorphosed into a wolf, perhaps the shock was starting to catch up with him. The whirlwind turning into a beautiful woman kept him from absorbing the significance of the were's quick-change artistry. She was a distracting event, merely standing still. And she looked so pure and innocent and childlike—well, an older sort of childlike—and sweet. Yet her speech indicated otherwise. Could this possibly be the infamous nymph he'd been hearing entirely too much about lately? He had to know, particularly since her appearance inclined him to fall madly in love with her, which, if his guess was correct, he'd rather not do.

"I beg your pardon, Miss. Are you by any chance the legendary lady revolutionary leader, Sally Forth?"

Minstrels were always supposed to be courtly, even when addressing the criminal element, particularly when the criminal element was armed, protected by a wolf, and looked like the beautiful bandit whirlwind.

A smile blossomed on her face. "Why,"yes, I am. Why do you ask?"

"I simply—hadn't expected anyone so comely. I'd always thought of revolutionary leaders as older, and more dour, somehow."

"How sweet. But I hope you won't take me any less seriously because of my appearance. That," she said with a meaningful frown, "would be a great mistake on your part."

"I couldn't agree with you more," he said. "Why, I have this friend, for instance, a witch, and to look at her, anyone would take her for a kitchen drudge or a gooseherd, but she does the most amazing—" he broke off as Sally's fair brow darkened. "Yes, well, she's nowhere near as pretty and interesting as you are, of course." He watched her closely as he babbled, trying to think of something else diverting to say to her. He had the distinct feeling that when he stopped talking this time he was going to stop for good.

Wulfric growled impatiently, and Colin scrunched backwards. As he did so, his flute fell from his pocket. He retrieved it. "Yes, ma'am, Mistress Forth, I have followed your career with great interest—long before I knew you were so fair of face. You see, I've always had a secret hankering to be a revolutionary myself, but I could never seem to get the hang of it—heh, heh. But I composed this little tune in your honor. Had I some instrument on which I could accompany myself, I'd sing you the words, but as it is, I can play the melody on my flute for you—"

"A song? In my honor?" Sally clearly was intrigued and batted Wulfric behind her with an impatient gesture. "What kind of song?"

"Oh—a nice one. A very nice one indeed," said Colin, who had no idea what he could play on his flute that would placate her, and only hoped his siren gift of song would lead him to play for her what she would most want to hear. Ideas began coming to him. "A—'tis a stirring martial ballad, of course, in a subtly stealthy minor key with a delicate overlay of ornamentation—rather like yourself, ma'am, if I may make so bold as to say so?"

Wulfric had changed back to man form behind Sally's back, and now demanded her attention. "O Sally, this sly one dallies to save his miserable life. Shall I not spare you his noises by biting his gullet in twain here and now?"

Sally was otherwise inclined. "Wulfric, this man has written a hymn to our cause, inspired by my example. The least I can do is listen. If it's good, the Dark Pilgrim will want to hear it. You are an excellent spy. but you know little of maintaining the morale of our men. Go now in wolf form, and tell my steed I require her. We have yet unfinished business at the tower. You," she said, returning her attention to Colin, "Play."

He did, with all his heart.

To his surprise, he managed to tootle out a number very like the one he had described. If he could have held his breath and played the flute at the same time, he would have done so in anticipation of the tune soaring from his instrument. But his apprehension was unnecessary. Almost without any help from him, his flute produced a tune with the required marching lilt, minor insinuations and fluid ornamentations. He knew it was going well, but he didn't realize how well until he opened his eyes. He'd closed them both to concentrate and because he didn't really want to see what would happen to him if his song failed. He needn't have worried. Sally Forth was swaying her lovely body to the music, almost dancing, with Prince Leofwin's great iron sword held aloft between her slender hands for a partner.

"Ah," she said, when she saw him watching. "That was very moving. I have little doubt that the Dark Pilgrim will proclaim it our national anthem when he hears it. You must have been greatly impressed by my example to write such a song."

"Oh, yes. Yes, indeed, I was. Greatly impressed," he averred.

"Well, then, perhaps I can arrange for you to live a bit longer. If you're very good and very cooperative and don't make me slit your throat, which would be a shame, since then the Dark Pilgrim would never hear your song. MY song. Could you manage that, do you think?"

Colin agreed that he could, which was all he had time to do
before a great many men began popping out of bushes like flowers in the spring, tra la. But that was not the greatest surprise. That was the sight of Primrose, walking daintily through the bushes of her own accord to nuzzle Sally Form's ear.

CHAPTER 10

Maggie sat crosslegged beside the stream, watching the sun sparkle on the water and feeling thoroughly sorry for herself. She'd tried to listen to the conversation between Moonshine and Ruby Rose, but without success. They were too far away. Or deliberately shutting her out, more likely. It wasn't fair. Witches weren't a bit less pure than quasi-ogress alchemists, and it was cruel of Moonshine not to see that. Even if Ruby Rose was more learned and brilliant than she was, what did Moonshine care about that? Unicorns didn't read and he had never shown the slightest interest in alchemy.

Fine way to treat her on what might very well, from her calculations of the time of year the night before, be her birthday. There weren't even any rocks to skip across the water. The bank was smooth and grassy, with nothing harder to throw than flowers, which would not make a satisfactory thunk. She almost wished Belburga would appear and try to eat them up here and now. Battling an ogress would at least give her something to do. She hated waiting.

She looked up as a duck squawked a panic-stricken squawk. A large mallard, wings flapping furiously, dove toward the stream in front of her. He wasn't making a very good job of it, and Maggie thought his eyes almost seemed to roll in terror. His squawk sounded like, "Watchit! Watchit!" Whatever it meant, she did as it seemed to suggest, and wriggled backwards a few feet as the duck landed, belly first, then beak, then tail pointed to the sky as, to her amazement, the so-called waterfowl sank in a sputtering splashing mass of confusion to the bottom of the brook.

Before she had time to remember how much she disliked direct personal contact with bodies of water, or perhaps because her own horror of the stuff triggered her sympathy for the drowning duck, she waded in after him. The water was surprisingly deep, covering her to mid-thigh, and very cold. Marking where the duck fell, she plunged her arm and shoulder into the cold, rippling water, turning her head sideways to keep the water out of her mouth and nose, soaking one of her braids in the process. Stretching her arm as low as it would go, she groped for feathers, but found none.

Instead, a hand reached up and grasped her elbow.

She squealed an unwitchly squeal. A nix! She'd been grabbed by a nix! She should have considered the possibility before wading around in strange streams. River men, or nixen, like their female counterparts, the nixies, were very fond of seducing mortal members of the opposite sex into the water, where they could be drowned. And Maggie hadn't even had the fun of being seduced first! Well, what could you expect from a river man who operated out of a creek? She fought wildly, slapping and slithering in the muddy stream bed. She couldn't see the creature who had hold of her, but she struggled with all her might to free herself. Then, all at once, her foot slipped out from under her.

Gurgling, she fell to her knees, the water closing frigidly around the top of her scalp. Strong hands grabbed her hair and-pulled her to the surface again!

"My dear girl." said the dripping countenance of Wizard Raspberry. "I thought you were trying to help me. You very nearly finished me off. Are you all right?"

Maggie spat water from her mouth and clouted water from her ears by striking the heel of her hand against either temple. Then, together, she and the wizard sloshed back to shore.

"How did you get in there?" she asked.

"I flew in. Didn't you see me? I tried to warn you. I'm afraid I'm not very good at three-point landings yet. One gets to concentrating on flying and forgets the finer points of being a duck-like gliding on top of the water. I seem to have washed away my costume," he said regretfully, leaning over the water and scanning it for some sign of mallard feathers. He was clad in his own dripping, badly embroidered tunic and bare legs again. "I only used a duck disguise because it's the fastest. It's a difficult one, because I have to contain my mass in such a small form-which is why I tend to sink instead of swim, though I'd have gotten the hang of it sooner or later. Luckily, I happen to have brought along my second-fastest disguise." He hauled from his tunic a very wet rabbit skin.

"Fascinating," Maggie said as dryly as possible under the circumstances. "But don't try to tell me you were in the neighborhood and thought you'd just drop in. What brings you here, and why were you in such a hurry? And if you don't mind my asking, why a duck?"

"I'm very sorry," he said, pulling the rabbit skin over his left foot. "But I keep getting the feeling I'm very late and I don't really think I have the time to explain right now." As he spoke, his nose, which was neither small nor cute, began to wrinkle in the middle and, like his pointed ears, to twitch from side to side. "I have to get into costume and be off again!"

"Wait just a moment," Maggie said, watching his twitching ears with enlightened eyes. "Pointed ears! Of
"Guilty," he admitted, pulling off the rabbit skin again and casting furtive glances in all directions. "I really must apologize. That costume always makes me feel as though I'm in the most dreadful hurry-and there's someone here I don't wish to meet. But I can hardly leave without telling you why I came, since I mostly came to see you, and naturally, I have to say hello to Rusty as long as I'm here. One of the difficulties of disguising oneself well is that one begins to FEEL the part." Most of his timidity vanished as he laid the rabbit skin aside but his ears continued to twitch for several moments before they calmed down. "Belburga's not about, is she?" he asked at last, with what seemed only a very sensible human wish to avoid the ogress.

"I don't know where she is, but your daughter's talking to Moonshine." Maggie found she didn't especially care to talk about that so she changed the subject. "That is an amazing disguise. How do you do it? How did you make the costume?"

"I didn't make it, not the rabbit one. It's special. The skin belonged to a rabbit friend of mine who died. He specifically willed it to me for the purpose. I suppose he felt that becoming a disguise was much more interesting than becoming a coat or a rug or some sort of stuffed trophy."

Maggie had never heard of anyone stuffing a trophy rabbit, but the wizard had obviously been touched by his friend's gesture and she didn't wish to denigrate it, so she agreed with him.

"The spell is very simple, if you're born to this type of magic," he elaborated. Now that he'd started talking, he seemed happy to continue. Probably needed a rest from all that flying. "I just put as much of me as possible into the skin, and then I say a temporary spell of invisibility over the rest of me-oh, nothing so dire as the one on Moonshine's cone. This is a spell that only works on me. because I'm the wizard, you see-or rather, you don't see once I've started it, or at least I can't see myself-at any rate, I sort of-well, enough, I seem to BECOME the animal. Of course, I have to work out the proper behavior ahead of time to do it well," he indicated his occasionally twitching ears. "But the time I spend with my friends in the woods is spent almost entirely in observation, so I'm able to imitate most of them satisfactorily. Except ducks."

"That sounds much more interesting than hearthcrafting," Maggie said. "Could you teach me to be something?"

"I'm afraid not," he said regretfully. "I can teach you the things I've had to learn from the start myself-like balloon-making-but disguise is something that comes so naturally to me I'm afraid I wouldn't even know where to start reaching it. I have no idea of what you don't know, if you know what I mean. I can't even seem to teach Rusty. I wish I could. I don't like this alchemy study she's taken up, though I gave her an old crucible I had laying around for her last birthday. I really don't feel it's a suitable occupation for a young lady. Too artificial. And the Mother only knows she gets enough artificiality from Belburga."

"Perhaps you needn't worry. Moonshine is going to try to persuade her to give all that up and become his maiden. Which reminds me, you'd better let her know you're here. I told her about your signal last night."

"My signal? What signal? I sent no signal. It was your aunt who sent the signal, by her budgie bird. I was just on my way to Castle Rowan to try to speak to the Dragon Grimley about it. But then I saw you sitting here and thought you ought to know, though I don't normally like to come here without letting Rusty know to meet me somewhere first."

"Let me know about WHAT?" If the rabbit disguise made him chatter so anxiously all the time, the wizard was far easier to take in his moat monster manifestation, Maggie thought.

"The King. He's in dire peril. He's been shipwrecked with only a handful of men, and has sent Dragon Grimley for reinforcements from Castle Rowan. But Sybil was scanning the country the other night, and saw smoke coming from the old summer castle at Worm's Roost Glacier, and turned her power there. There was a shield over most of the place, but she did see the troops all around the glacier, armed ruffians, the Princess Pegeen and two unicorns being held in some sort of an ice enclosure. She saw a spontaneous vision of the King and his shipwrecked party then, and of Dragon Grimley. She's afraid, and I quite agree, that the situation at Worm's Roost looks very much like a trap. I thought I might go along to Grimley and help him gather the reinforcements-I speak dragonese, at least the central and coastal dialects. With the dragon's help, we could all hop or fly or march or ride to the King's aid." He looked sadly into the water which had claimed his duck skin. "Now I shall have to hop the rest of the way, and trust Grimley to fly ahead and warn the King's party. It will be much slower. But I must try, or it's Rowan and his men will be dead ducks." He stopped and looked momentarily chagrined, running his hand over mouth and beard. "I'm sorry to have put it to you that way. lass. I know you're fond of the King."

"It's not as if it were our only problem," she told him. "Bandits who kidnap kings and unicorns both don't strike me as having the welfare of Argonia at heart."

"My connections among the woodland creatures say the bandit chieftain is a woman."
"Prince Leofwin mentioned as much." she said. "It doesn't make any sense. I suppose some women might want to be bandits for the novelty of the thing, but most bandits are in banditry for fat purses instead of kings and unicorns, from what I know of them." She thought awhile longer, and hoisted her shoulders to disavow ability to figure the situation out. "Perhaps they mean to hold the King for ransom and sell the unicorns to the highest bidders. At any rate, while you're gathering reinforcements, Colin and I shall go spy out the bandit stronghold and make sure they don't harm the unicorns or the Princess Pegeen. Colin and the rescue party will be returning soon now." She searched the woods with her eyes again, though it was still too early in the day.

"You can't goby yourselves," Raspberry said indignantly. "A first maiden is a first maiden if you ask me, and that's the end of it. I'm surprised you bother to continue to interest yourself in the unicorn problem at all, with what Moonshine galivanting about after other girls and Primrose's general mean-mindedness."

But Maggie shrugged. "There's the King, too. And Princess Pegeen, from what you say. And while I'm sure you and the King's troops will manage to protect THEM from the bandits. I'm afraid the unicorns may be injured or sacrificed in the process. And they're VERY valuable creatures-something happened at a town Colin and I came through that makes me think they're more valuable than anyone has ever realized. They must be protected." She paused, choosing her words carefully, stumbling along as she spoke, hoping she didn't sound insipid or arrogant. "Besides, there's this matter of me being a princess. Prince Leofwin, the one I told you about meeting in Everclear, had some strange attitudes about how royalty is supposed to act. But I don't think Rowan feels that way-and I don't think he put a crown on my head just because he thought it looked well on my bonny brown hair. I think-I think even if he wanted me to be a princess so I could marry someone suitable, he wanted me to be princess because he felt he could trust me to-oh, I don't know, look after the peasants and make sure whoever I married did the right thing for the realm. I don't know much about politics, but I know what's right and wrong and one of the things that's right is that royalty are supposed to protect their subjects- all of their subjects, and here that means witches, giants, elves, unicorns, wee folk, mortals and everyone. In Everclear, thanks to Moonshine's magic, we were able to more or less save a whole village from disease that would never have struck the place except that their unicorn had been stolen. Unicorns are vital to the well-being of this country, mighty wizard. They keep the water clean and the animals and people from poisoning themselves. So if Moonshine chooses to stay with Rusty or Lily Pearl, or Belburga for that matter, it's up to him. As for me, I've come too far already. I'm not going to turn my back on Rowan or the most valuable creatures in this realm simply because I no longer happen to have a personal stake in one particular unicorn. Besides," she said with a small wry smile, "You will be bringing the soldiers, won't you?"

"As soon as I can. But what if I'm too late? Then what will you do?"
She shrugged again. "I don't know. I'll have to think about that when I get to it."
Suddenly they heard a hard thudding and looked up to see Moonshine galloping straight at them. Flecks of froth flew from his mouth and his eyes were rolled so far back that only the whites showed. His razor-sharp hooves bore down on them until the very last minute when, gathering all four feet beneath him, he leaped the stream.

"Not again!" Maggie cried. "Moonshine, wait! I do NOT have the time to beat the bushes for you again! We have bigger problems now. Stop and tell me what's wrong."
To her surprise, at the sound of her voice he did stop. His sides heaved deeply, and his legs trembled, but when she had crossed the bridge to stroke and pet him for awhile he was able to form a coherent thought. "Don't let that awful girl come any closer, please, Maggie dearest. She's a disgusting person."
Behind them, Wizard Raspberry, who had waded the stream to join them, sighed. "I suppose that's my fault for marrying an ogress."
Ruby Rose peeked around a tree on the far shore and Moonshine tried to hide behind Maggie.
Wizard Raspberry said severely, "Rusty, what have you been up to now?"
"Father!" she cried, and splashed across the water, launching herself at him, wrapping his soggy form in her long, thin arms. "Oh, father, you DID come!"
"I came. I always come to see you this time of year, don't I? But right now, I want to know how you've managed to frighten this creature, who is an old friend of mine, by the way."
"It was nothing very much," she said with a light scornful-ness directed towards Moonshine. "He said I could ask anything of him and all I asked for was the tiniest little portion of his horn." She pouted. "He did. He said he'd
do anything for me. He SAID so. And then he took it back, and ran and told on me, the horrid beast. I only wanted to use the horn for my alchemy."

Raspberry sighed again and lifted his eyes to the heavens. "I know it's because she's a neglected middle child with a mostly absent father and an ogress for a mother," he pleaded to some nameless deity. "But she's a very smart girl. A good girl, basically. She really is. WHY in the name of seven sacred rituals and the thirteen sacred names of the Mother can't she see that it is a deplorable, despicable thing to maim a kindly magical creature in order to turn her mother into a toad?"

"Oh, Daddy," the girl groaned. "You're always exaggerating. I wasn't going to turn mother into a toad-not exactly:" Then she wheedled, "But could you show me how, without unicorn horn, I mean, just in case?"

Maggie didn't wait to hear the wizard's answer, but led Moonshine to his stall, and brushed him and talked to him until he fell into an exhausted sleep. Gently, she slipped his disguise back over his horn. When she rejoined the wizard and his daughter, they were sitting by the stream again, but had moved to a point which was better concealed from the tower by a thick stand of trees.

"How COULD you?" she demanded of the girl, who looked up at her in surprise. "You've shaken him so badly I don't know if he'll ever recover. Unicorns are sensitive and high-strung and they don't offer their friendship to many. He wanted to love you, to be your protector and companion and all you could think of was vivisecting him for your so-called studies! If that's what learning does to a person, I want none of it! I think staying indoors poring over your stupid old book has caused your brain to mold!"

Ruby Rose was unimpressed. "I don't see what all the fuss is about. I didn't mean to hurt the stupid animal's feelings. I only thought I could take a little of that horn and enhance my power." She turned angrily on her father. "If being an ogress is so awful, and I'm not supposed to behave like one, why did you marry mother in the first place? And why do I have to live with her? All I did was try to satisfy my normal magical curiosity, which you know very well I get from you. You can't blame that on her. The only thing she's ever curious about is how much money and power Lily Pearl's beaux have."

"Please," Raspberry said with a pained expression. "Don't call your mother an ogress."

"Well, you do. And she is," replied the girl, her thin little mouth drawing into a bitter line.
Raspberry fell silent for a moment, staring out across the stream, into the horizon beyond the trees. The sky was fuzzy and gray, with distant detail so blurred that the nearby glacier-riddled mountains appeared insubstantial as a tall bank of clouds. "I wish I had a disguise that would make me turn into a father," he said to Maggie, who had seated herself beside him.

"She does have a point," Maggie agreed.
"Eh?" He looked at her blankly, then slowly the twinkle poured back into his troubled elfin eyes. "Oh, she does, indeed. Several of them. Not counting the extra one she almost chopped off your friend."

"No, truly," Maggie insisted. "She's right. If you marry an ogress, how can you expect her to beget anything but little ogresses?"

"Belburga isn't that much of an ogress," Raspberry replied. "Not until you get to know her, that is. There's a good deal of nymph in her family line, and a bit of witch, and some faery, too, I believe—though they must have been old nymphs, witches, and faeries to intermarry with ogres. But like a lot of folk these days, her powers are only vestigial-diluted and weakened by the intermarriages."

"I don't still see how if ogresses are so awful, you got involved with mother to begin with." Ruby Rose's face was the picture of childish innocence, but her voice mocked him. "After all, you're not a stupid man."

"Little girl," he said, "You have a lot to learn. When a man meets a woman as attractive as your mother was, brains have no part in it. And then, too, one gets wiser as one grows older—something you'd do well to remember, my little genius. I met Belburga, as a matter of fact, when I was on the rebound from a certain pretty young witch-your Aunt Sybil, Maggie." He smiled at the amazement on Maggie's face. "Oh, yes, we were—very close—but she finally broke it off, though we've remained friends. She never said why, but I suppose it was because I was an awkward, untried stripeling at the time, and so lacking in judgment that I immediately fell in love with the next lady who smiled in my direction. I was still doing false mustaches, and wigs, and noses made of river clay in those days, and didn't have much to offer a girl. But I took Sybil's refusal hard, and fancied myself broken-hearted, having no notion at the time how flexible that organ really is. I went about singing dreary love songs, composing bad poetry, and wearing woebegone clown faces until at last my father could stand me no longer and sent me off to study with an elfin second cousin of high degree. My cousin Maisie held a position of trust in King Finbar's court.

"She was very worldly, Maisie. A city elf born and bred. She knew a love-sick calf when she saw one, and took care that I met all of her prettiest friends, and I suspect gave them to understand that they were to make themselves agreeable to me. As I said, she had considerable influence. But somehow most of them made me feel more of a bumpkin than I already knew I was.

"Then one day I overheard Maisie complaining to a friend of the roughness of her hairdresser. Elfin damsels have very sensitive scalps, as you probably know." He ruffled the sullen Rusty's brilliant tight-curled mop. "Also, the pure elves have fine, thin hair that doesn't curl fashionably. That's one of MY less desirable traits you escaped, my girl. In the woods, they wear leaf caps to keep the branches from snagging their hair, but in the city, when the fashion isn't running to hats, a good hairdresser is invaluable to someone like my cousin. Her friend told her of a new lady-in-waiting, the widow of a prince from some obscure little island kingdom. The woman was supposed to do marvels with hair.

"A week or so later one of Maisie's admirers begged me, backing his pleas with a new silver coin, to take my cousin a bouquet of moonflowers he'd picked for her just before dawn. You know how delicate those are. They would have been wilted had I waited until Maisie had finished her toilette, so I interrupted.

"The new hairdresser answered my knock. Oh, my cynical little love, you should have seen your mother then. She was graceful as a lynx, pretty as a vixen, and as dainty. Her eyes were black as sloes and, had I but known it, were better at disguise than I. For under a cloak of sweetness as demure as a baby hare's, she had the disposition of a hungry wolverine. But I didn't know that then.

"I thought I saw in her smile an echo of Sybil's, so I wooed her. A stripeling clown was not your mother's idea of a new husband, so she kept me at a distance with her coquetry for a time. But the more elusive she was, the more ardent I became. I dreamed up new, fantastic costumes to amuse her, always striving for the novel, the surprising. I would steal up on her in the garden, disguised as one of the peacocks, and present her with a feather. Once I pretended to be a little dog who yearned to sit on her knee, but she wasn't fooled for a moment; animals have never cared for your mother, you know. But whether she was impressed or not, my skills grew to an astonishing degree. Thereby I gained King Finbar's attention and was in time made Chief Concealment Officer for the palace guard. I concocted costumes, and made suggestions for camouflage, that son of thing. Then, as we saw each other more often, the King took a liking to me and promoted me to Intracourt Espionage Officer. I could, in those days, look like any person I chose, as well as imitating dogs and peacocks.

"I grew full of self-importance as I tittled on this one and tattled on someone else. I no longer had time to moon
over Sybil or Belburga. That, naturally, proved your mother's undoing, and subsequently my own, for if there's anything your mother cannot stand, it's to be ignored. As my prominence rose, so did her ardor, and she began to follow me about. Probably I would have stayed free of her connivings then if I hadn't, at that time, uncovered a plot to do away with the young princes and substitute changelings. Belburga knew of the plot, and pretended to reveal it to me, though I think she knew I was already aware of it. But she stunned me when she told me who the perpetrator was. I knew at once I had to conceal what she'd told me forever, for she laid the blame at the 'feet' of my sponsor. Cousin Maisie. "I had only two options—one was to destroy my cousin, and the other to silence Belburga. I told Maisie what I knew, and though she denied it, at my insistence she retired from court life. I thought marrying your mother, since I was already half in love with her, an attractive alternative to silencing her in a more permanent way, so I asked the King's permission and we were wed. I took her far from the capital, but as you may well guess, by giving up my position in court, I also gave up any claim I had to Belburga's affection."

"She did not take kindly to my bringing her home to my father's house with twenty elfin brothers and sisters. And though I built for us a dwelling apart shortly after you were born, she left me. By then I had seen-and felt-her pointed teeth often enough that I had no desire to pursue her."

He smiled at Maggie. "Make no mistake. My former wife is a man-eater well enough, but only in the figurative sense. Her grandmother, I understand, was a great deal more literal."

Ruby Rose, no longer distressed or indignant, was instead as enchanted as any child by a story, and snuggled close in the shelter of her father's arm. Raspberry gave her the same dreamy smile he had given Maggie. "No, little one, your mother is no more apt to rend a man's flesh with her teeth than any other woman. It is only by her wiles, which can make him eat out his own heart, that she has the power of her ancestors. She demands much, and gives nothing." His eyes held his daughter's for a long moment, and the girl hunched her shoulders and shrank a little, but closer to him. "The trait is at the base of ogre-nature, Rusty: I am pleased with your elfin side, your curiosity, your accomplishments. But a certain-balance-is necessary to truly achieve mastery of any art. You have to learn from all things, nature and other people as well as books, and in giving yourself to what can teach you, you give yourself to your magic. Otherwise, you'll become its victim, devoured by your lust for it even as your mother's people devoured themselves and others in years past."

Ruby Rose smiled with adolescent cynicism, which she tried to conceal, but her father saw it.

"Neither a fair face nor a good brain is protection from the ill your mother's heritage can cause you to do to yourself, child, and to others. Your mother was once as fair as you, if not so clever. She is fair still, for her age, so I'm told, though you may not think her so. I cannot look upon her again, having once been in her power, for fear I'll fall prey to her all over again. That's one reason my visits to you are so infrequent."

"All right, all right. I'm not stupid. I take your meaning all too well." She sighed a put-upon sigh and turned to Maggie. "You may tell your unicorn he may pay me court if he wishes, and I won't trouble him further about his silly horn." Looking back at her father's face, which was strangely atwitch at the comers of his eyes and mouth, she said, "Better. Right?"

"Er—it's a start," he replied, adding quickly, "It isn't easy to think of others. It takes patience and practice. But an adept with your brilliance should be able to handle it."

"I'll take your word for it," his daughter replied. "But I want to know something. Daddy. If you came with so much secrecy—her eyes dropped to his slowly drying tunic, "What did you come as, anyway, a fish? But if you did come secretly," she continued, not waiting for a reply, "why didn't you signal me in a way I could respond to?" She nodded toward Maggie. "SHE thinks mother got the signal, and returned it."

"Not to me," he said. "I didn't signal. This was a surprise visit."

"You couldn't have been mistaken?"

"I'd stake Granny Brown's secret ale recipe on it."

"Belburga's unlikely to align herself with bandits—she'd be bound to consider them too uncouth." The wizard lifted his pinky in parody of his former wife and Rusty giggled.

"It's not a man who leads these bandits, sweet," her father said. "It's a woman. A nymph, the beasts say."

"Like Daisy's father? The one who turned himself into a tree to get away from mother? He was a man nymph, but he had a sister who was in charge of her own stream. I remember seeing her when I was little, when she came to
see Daisy after she was born. She was beautiful—she made Lily Pearl look washed out. But sort of serious and unhappy looking. I remember because I couldn't imagine how anyone so pretty could possibly have anything to be unhappy about.

"What do you think?" Maggie asked. "Sounds like our bandit leader to me."

"If it's as serious as that, I think you should put on your bunny suit, father, and go tell somebody."

"I fully intend to put on my bunny suit, dear," the wizard replied, and gallantly tugged the rabbit skin over one bare foot again, and rose to his feet, towering with a certain eccentric authority above Maggie, who remained seated.

"But first I want Princess Magdalene's oath that she will do nothing at all until Master Songsmith returns, and then will only follow at a distance and keep watch on the bandits' movements. We can't risk losing two members of the royal house at once."

"I must say, I consider this very stuffy of you, mighty wizard," Maggie said indignantly.

"Nevertheless, I insist. Your pledge?"

"Oh, very well. I so pledge," she promised, but crossed her fingers inside her skirt pocket.

Raspberry was satisfied. With a last kiss for his daughter and increasingly feverish twitches of his ears and nose, he muttered a spell under his breath. As he grew thinner and paler and more transparent, the rabbit skin on his foot grew plumper and more lifelike. At last, the wraith-like wizard winked out completely, an invisible hand ruffled Ruby Rose's hair, and with a final warning thump of its hind foot for Maggie's benefit, the rabbit hopped off into the forest.

Leofwin bounced and rattled against the table-cum-stretcher on which he was being borne, until he thought every bone in his body would break. There was no question whatsoever of resting and recuperating aboard such a contraption, and the men spon-

soring his torture disregarded his yelps and moans, laughing and talking loudly among themselves, jesting about the cocky young minstrel's face when they left him behind with the smelly stranger.

Leofwin knew what minstrel, but he didn't know what stranger and he didn't care. He was too busy wishing he'd been left for dead.

The heartless peasants splashed his makeshift litter through a stream, soaking him to the skin, drat and damn the lot of them! Had they no idea how to treat an injured man? He'd sooner be drawn and quartered than endure this much longer!

The string of curses he was inventing solely for the benefit of his bearers was interrupted by a titter near his left ear.

"Eh?" he tried to look in that direction, but couldn't move his head sufficiently.

The titter escalated to a giggle and finally became a deep chuckle.

"Who the dwarf drool is laughing at me?" the Prince demanded. "Tell me what's so funny or so help me, I'll pulverize you the instant I'm loose from this oversized infant swaddling."

"You heroes are so ferocious," his tormenter laughed, and landed none too gently on the tip of his nose. Trickle, the little wasp. He should have known. "The mighty minstrel is singing love songs to that good-for-nothing nymph while your hearty comrades pollute my stream by dragging your stinking behind through it. And you all wrapped up like a baby for its nappie-poo!" She laughed again, a bitter laugh, and her tiny face was bitter.

"I don't see what you're angry with me about," complained Leofwin, worried about having the insect-sized faery so close to his eyes. "I'm hardly in a position to hurt you. Oh, well, the ale flagon—I suppose you might still be a little miffed about that. But it was a jest; can't you take a jest?"

"I can take a jest all right, big boy," she replied, baring her tiny glistening teeth. "I'm going to die laughing, as a matter of fact, when your fellow unicorn thieves pop out of the bushes up ahead and slice all of you to noodles."

"Fellow unicor-WHA-AT?! Hey, you! Bumpkins! Stop! Turn this thing around immediately! Let me out! Give me a sword!" His volume was sufficient to blow the faery off his nose. She was still laughing as she somersaulted through the air and out of sight.

It never occurred to Leofwin to wonder why she had mentioned the ambush to him if she was so eager, as she claimed, to see him and the men from Little Darlingham minced. He inwardly cursed her the whole time it took Giles and Archie to unstrap him and the lot of them to dismount and lead their horses in a great arc swinging wide of the path where the bandits were . said to be waiting.

Wulfric's startled thought flew to his adored leader as she alighted from Primrose's back and began to twirl, her preparation for becoming a whirlwind. "O Sally, will you leave your steed and me alone in this forest while you blow away? Were we not all to travel together?"

"Surely my most able lieutenant can take independent initiative and carry out a simple little execution by himself. Can't you, Wulfie? Well, can't you?" she asked sternly. He whined and covered his nose with his paws.
"Belburga has answered my signal. She will let you into the witch's chamber, so you may slay her in her sleep. The lecher Leofwin and the townsmen you so stupidly involved should be dead by now. Primrose knows what to do about the unicorn. I must go thither and see to the preparations to make welcome our new recruit."

"Then you will not enchant this other creature, this new unicorn, with your beauty as you have the others, O Sally?"

"Why, Wulfie," she said, with a meaningful glance toward Primrose, whose back was towards them, "What others can you mean? Primrose is my faithful steed. I could not possibly take another. Anyway, no unicorn who has already befriended an ordinary girl would be susceptible to my word alone. He will need the example of his own kind to dispel the woman's common influence and lead him down the true path."

"If I were not a stupid beast, wise and gracious leader, I would have thought of that myself. Forgive me for impeding your progress. I shall do all that you have commanded."

The unicorn stamped and gave him a scornful look as Sally cycloned away from them, but Wulfric laughed to himself a crafty laugh. Oh, no. He would not betray his beloved leader, but there was a certain Iamb at Little Darlingham belonging to a certain odoriferous ogress, and that lamb would make him a charming hors d'oeuvre before he devoured the undoubtedly tough and stringy witch.

He practically tripped over his dripping tongue, thinking of the feast ahead, until the unicorn, who could tolerate him only in wolf form, reminded him that SHE knew not the way to Little Darlingham, and he must hurry and lead them forth.

"You haven't touched your food," Maggie remarked when she ducked into Moonshine's stall to tell him Wizard Raspberry's bad tidings about the King, and also to convey Rusty's grudging apologies.

The unicorn huddled in a corner of his stall, and though he no longer trembled, his head hung as if the weight of his horn was too great for him to bear. His horn seemed dimmer, too, and had lost some of its opalescent beauty.

"Where's your disguise?" she asked, kneeling in the straw and patting her palms against it, searching for the outline of the missing cone.

He didn't answer, and merely lifted his head briefly and lowered it again, failing to meet her eyes.

"Look, Moonshine," she said firmly, crawling on hands and knees across the stall, still patting, "This maiden business is depressing both of us, but we really have more urgent matters to attend to. An ogress's tower doesn't strike me as a fruitful place to look for virgins, anyway. Why don't you postpone this venture for awhile? As soon as Colin returns, we've got to see about rescuing those other unicorns. We'll need your help seeking them out, and I do think you owe it to your fellows to help us. Won't you forget all this nonsense and join us? Surely associating with me a day or so longer isn't going to taint you any worse than you've been tainted already."

"I would go with you willingly, my friend," he told her after a long pause. "But how could I face my fellows? You must free them alone, for the sight of me would offend them. Obviously I am unfit to be a unicorn-the second as well as the first maiden has rejected me, and the second would have maimed me as well."

Maggie rose to her knees and patted her way through the food in his trough. "I meant to tell you. She's sorry about that. She's a bright child, but not the sensitive type. She was so busy thinking about her private projects she didn't stop to consider your feelings. But I don't think she's all bad. She IS Wizard Raspberry's daughter, as well as Belburga's. You could give her another chance. She must have some redeeming qualities."

"SHE is perfect," Moonshine's sigh was bleak as winter wind. "It is I who have failed."

"Oh, toad feathers!" Maggie said impatiently, then looked at the food trough again, and sniffed suspiciously at its contents.

He was disproportionately maudlin about this situation-perhaps his barley had fermented and he was drunk.

No, the barley smelled good enough. Nevertheless, she said briskly, "You are simply not getting enough fresh air and exercise since we've come here, and it's muddling your thinking. Why don't we go for a jog, and maybe we'll find Belburga's last daughter. If you want to bother. She, at least, is supposed to be kind to animals, and spends all her time outdoors, which should suit you. Of them all, she sounds like the nicest to me." She shifted her left knee, and something crackled beneath it. "Ah, here we are," she said, picking up the bent but still invisible disguise. "Slip this on now and let's go. I'm sick of seeing you pine away over these fickle girls. The sooner we're out of here, the better."

She patted his nose when she had disguised him, and he nuzzled her hand as he had used to. "I would we had never started this quest, friend Maggie, and that I had never met Lady Primrose. For though I know it is not meet that I should love you, still-is it possible there might be an error, do you think? Might not Primrose have been misled by a false hearing of our Creed?"

"I'd like to think so but I don't suppose you'd ever get her to admit it," Maggie said.

When they were beyond view of the tower, she mounted him and they rode up into the little glade that joined the forest to the west. Moonshine ran for all he was worth, driving his hooves into the ground, his tail furled behind
him, his mane bannering in the wind.

Maggie rode with an exhilaration that was bittersweet. At this moment she was as close to her friend as she had ever been, yet knew he'd be gone from her in an instant if he found someone more suitable. Not a better friend, or one who loved him more, simply someone more suitable. She had almost stopped resenting it, and had stopped blaming Moonshine altogether. She was getting used to being rejected after all this time, she thought. All through her life, someone or other had decided she wasn't suitable for one reason or the other, and all of the reasons beyond her control. In the village she was not one of them because her father was noble, though among the nobles her common origins were suspect. Her father would have preferred she was a boy, and her grandmother would have liked for her magic to have been more witch-worthy than simple hearthcrafting. Colin liked tall, sweet elegant blonds instead of brown girls like her, and even Winnie had always told her she should try to be less overwhelming, less opinionated, less vocal, and more tactful, and she couldn't seem to manage any of that any better than she could changing her magic or her hair color. MoonsWne was pushing her away, she saw now, not because she was homelier than Lily Pearl or stupider than Rusty or less ladylike than Primrose, but because he was seeking something he didn't know how to look for. She was a little disappointed to realize that their perfect understanding had not been perfect after all, and inside herself drew apart from him a hair's breadth. Though she would help him however she could, she no longer felt responsible for failing to be his ideal. She would have liked to make him see that, by the same token, not even a unicorn could possibly be the entire dream of a young girl like Lily Pearl or Ruby Rose— or even of herself. He had no more chance of winning any of them totally to him than she had of winning him back to the boundless love of their first days together. But somehow, though their thoughts still ran freely between them, her caution and reassurance did not reach him, and he continued to blame himself.

The ride helped. She could feel his relief at escaping the dark, smelly stall. When he danced up to a cliff, where the stream cascaded from ten times his height into a jade waterfall frothing into liquid lace at its bottom, she knew when he thought of diving, of ending his guilt and of freeing her. But she clung to his mane, and refused to be freed, and let him know in no uncertain terms that she would kill him if he ever thought anything like that again, and the moment passed.

The sky was bruised with dusk, throwing purple shadows onto the not-so-distant mountains by the time they trotted back down the hill leading to the glade surrounding the tower. There it was that Moonshine saw the animals assembled by the stream, and the flower-like girl in their midst, and it was also there that Maggie saw a very small group of horsemen descending the upper road from the forest, crossing the meadows to the tower. Among them, the horsemen dragged an overturned table with a man's body strapped to it.

"Colin!" Maggie cried. "That's the rescue party, but where's Colin?"

But Moonshine was wandering dreamily toward the crowd of animals and the girl among them. Maggie slid from his back and ran along the stream, through the ogress's glade and across the bridge, into the meadow to meet the approaching riders.

The creatures gathered around the charming child were more numerous and varied than any collection Moonshine had beheld since the throng at Wizard Raspberry's. One of them, a wolf, even looked familiar, much like the one who had skulked on the edge of that other gathering. But that a wolf would travel so far from his own territory was improbable.

More improbable, however, was the sweet beauty of the gentle girl who sat serenely among her admirers, stroking first one and then another of the great herd of bears, rabbits, deer, moose, fox, the wolf, a wild boar, lynx, and a family of weasels—not to mention various domestic dogs and cats, probably from the town, and horses, lambs, cattle, goats, geese, chicken and ducks.

Though she yet bore about her the roundness of a human child, the young maid was full of womanly loveliness as well. Beneath daisy-yellow curls, merry moss-green eyes twinkled from within a perfect little heart-shaped face. Her lips smiled encouragement to each of the animals clustered around her, and her cheeks glowed pink with the pleasure of their company. A striped, tawny cat sat on one of her knees, while a gray bird fluttered at her finger and she made playful pecking moves at it. Her other hand stroked the nape of a bear cub whose mother, amazingly, appeared not to mind. Beneath daisy-yellow curls, merry moss-green eyes twinkled from within a perfect little heart-shaped face.

Moonshine watched from the edge of the crowd, enchanted, feeling with growing certainty that here at last was the perfect maiden companion for a unicorn; beautiful, gentle, wise, and sweet-natured, loving to the beasts of the field and woodland, whose languages she seemed to know. Surely this girl met the highest requirements of even the most discriminating unicorns?

Her voice was as dulcet as dew dripping from pansy petals as she addressed the animals closest to her, each in his turn. "Dear little birdie, sweet little pussycat, how I love you both! And my brave boy bear—aren't you just looking more and more like your darling fuzzy wuzzy mummy every day?"

The other animals immediately crowded closer and began chattering and chirping comments which Moonshine...
made little effort to understand. Most of them followed a similar theme, crying, "Me! Me! I was first! Remember me? You called me your favorite little pet, Daisy Esmeralda! Oh me, please!" As they called out to her they would drop little presents at her dainty feet-flowers, pretty pebbles, bits of old ribbon and nesting materials—even a dead mouse, for which the cat received a fond scolding. "See what I've brought you!" they cried. "See my gift? Isn't it fine? It's all for you. Aren't I your very nicest friend, Daisy Esmeralda?"

And she, for her part, would say to each of them that he was, indeed, her nicest friend.

All of this business took considerable time. A great many of the girl's admirers had contrived to have thorns in their paws, arthritis in their tails, or burrs in their fur—plus one absolutely legitimate broken wing—and all of these required strokings and pickings and bindings and cooings from their gentle darling.

Moonshine shifted from one hoof to the other—he was not really very good at standing still—and waited to draw a bead on her lap so he could rest his head in it and tell her about how unicorns and first maidens—well, maidens anyway—were supposed to be inseparable companions, etc. He knew what he was going to say by now, having had considerable recent practice. But he advanced only very slowly towards the fore, afraid of stepping on somebody if he tried to use his size to edge forward even slightly.

The wolf he had spotted from the edge of the wood had no such scruples. Slyly, the wolf insinuated himself between a cow with a front-running position and the mother bear, which might have been a dangerous move except that the bear was temporarily preoccupied in disciplining her overstimulated cub. The bristly gray lupine then used an almost inaudible snarl to intimidate a baby bunny, bowled over a beaver with one swipe of a powerful front paw, and nipped the striped cat's tail so that she flew from the girl's lap. Slinking forward, the wolf calmly nuzzled his head into the lap in which Moonshine had begun to take a proprietary interest. The nasty bully then wriggled forward, heedless that his claws scratched the girl's tender flesh as he pawed his way up her chest to cover her face with slobbering kisses.

"What an adorable—yecch-wolf!" she exclaimed, but her heart clearly wasn't in it. He was ruining her pretty green and yellow sprigged dress, ripping and rending it with his feet, and leaving muddy spots. Moonshine could tell from the way she averted her face that the carnivore's breath was not sweet.

Mother bear waddled forward, bawling a complaint, but the wolf turned and snarled at her so fiercely that she backed off and with her cubs rolled away into the trees.

"You—uck—are such an enth-us-ak-tic creature!" said the girl, trying both to pet the wolf and push him off her lap at the same time. "What big eyes you have!"

"Are they not the better to see you with, my dear little sister to the forest denizens?" asked the wolf in wolvish in a tone Moonshine clearly understood. "And is it not my tail's duty to wag in your presence and my nose's duty to savor your essence and my tongue's duty to lick your taste?" He looked, wagged, sniffed, and licked in demonstration, clearly warming to the subject as he opened even more tears in the girl's gown. "And are these teeth not to—"

"Hold, lupine lecher! That's quite enough of that," Moonshine commanded. He knew exactly what wolf teeth were for. Before the wicked creature had a chance to demonstrate them, the unicorn stepped past a cow and over a squirrel and planted the tip of his horn beneath the wagging wolf tail, giving a sharp upward jab. The wolf jerked up, cartwheeled three times in mid-air, and careened, howling, back into the woods.

Moonshine turned shyly to the girl, ready to assume his place as her staunch defender and savior and true friend. But though she reached out and stroked his nose in a manner he liked very much, her words were not all he had wished for.

"Aren't you a pretty creature?" she asked. "And you must be new here, too—or you'd know that all of my friends behave courteously to one another. That wasn't a very nice thing to do, what you did to Mr. Wolf. And the dear little squirrel was ahead of you, too. I think, to show you're sorry, you ought to wait behind the others until we can have a serious talk about this problem of rash behavior you seem to have."

"But MAIDEN!" he protested. "I sought only to—" he was going to say "defend you" but she fixed him with a sweet, sad, but very stern stare, and pointed to a position behind three foxes, a duck, a horse and a weasel with a limp. Humiliation heated Moonshine's hide as he slowly moved to obey her. The others returned their attention to Daisy Esmeralda, and she resumed chatting with them.

Moonshine moped. He hated standing in line, and he disliked crowds. Unicorns were not. After all, herd animals. As the only one of his species in his part of the woods, he had always been alone until he met Maggie. And she had always been considerate of his privacy. Or was it only that he'd never felt the need for privacy when she was near?

For a long time he studied the same veins in the same leaves, admired the waving colors of the sunset, watched the wildflowers behind Daisy Esmeralda fade to gray shadows. He memorized her dress, the rents in her dress, the curve of her arm and throat and each curl of her hair, until the dying light robbed her
appearance of detail. But still the crowd grew no smaller, the din no less clamorous. At last, to see something other than what he had been watching for what seemed hours, he turned to the woods—just as another unicorn stepped forth.

"Lady Primrose!" he cried, and trotted several steps towards her, before looking back over his shoulder. No one noticed he'd gone, except the animals who'd come in behind him, and who now crowded forward, filling the gap created by his absence.

Giving his mane a decisive shake, he followed the beckoning Primrose into the forest. "How did you come here?" he asked eagerly. "And why? You did recall a section of the Creed that changed what you said about Maid Maggie, didn't you? You came to tell me that she—"

"Don't speak to me of that hussy!" Primrose huffed, switching her tail. "Do you never learn, foolish youngster? Coming here so close to a TOWN! Have you let her make a horse of you in spite of my warnings? Now, hear me, unicorn lad. I've come to take you back to the woods to meet a truly PERFECT maiden.''

"The one you spoke of, Lady Primrose?" Moonshine felt uneasy, remembering Maggie's speculation that Primrose's long-lost maiden was the bandit nymph, but even clever Maggie could be wrong. Certainly Primrose seemed to have suffered no harm.

"Yes. She's even more pure and more highly principled than I had dreamed. She has a wondrous exalted mission for which— but I'll let her tell you of that. Quickly now, across the meadow with us before we're seen!"

"But—" he started to protest that Maggie would worry, but thought he would be returning soon anyway, as soon as he'd satisfied his curiosity, and would have interesting news to tell her then, when she came to tell him of Master Colin's mission. He was so weary of the stable and of the gloomy shadow of the tower and of the widow's lovely but peculiar daughters. Now Primrose, instead of merely explaining, would show him an example of a proper unicorn maiden. Then, at least, he would know what manner of girl he sought. With their horns held high and proud as standards, and their manes and tails silver and golden against the night-darkened glade, the two of them thudded past a startled Daisy Esmeralda and company, leapt the stream, and galloped across the open meadow into the woods beyond.

Maggie was not relieved by the Little Darlington men's explanation that Colin had "Gone a-trappin' with the smelly one, mum," nor was she particularly moved by the injured Leofwin's plight. She wasn't very happy about it, either, though. Neither was she pleased when they mentioned to her the warning Leofwin had received from Trickle, and she was further unsettled when they told her that the zombified townsmen of Everclear had been abducted by bandits.

"What a queer lot of bandits!" she said, half to herself. "I never in my life heard of bandits who went around abducting unicorns, kings, and zombies."

"Well, mum," said the ancient who bore up the right-hand forepart of Leofwin's stretcher, "When you gets to be my age, you finds it takes all kinds."

With that bit of venerable wisdom duly noted, Maggie decided to return to Moonshine, for running toward them she saw Belburga, Lily Pearl, and Rusty, and she had no desire to be as disgusted as she was alarmed.

But she couldn't make her getaway immediately. Belburga lashed out and clasped her arm in an iron grasp as Maggie attempted to brush past her. In a tone that would have done credit to a dragoon, the ogress informed her that she was to begin tearing her petticoats into bandages for the wounded prince.

"He don't need no bandages, mum," said the cherubic-faced young man the others called Giles, addressing Belburga without removing his eyes from Lily Pearl. "His wound's 'most healed."

"We ALL must tear bandages," Belburga insisted. "It's the womanly thing to do."

"Oh, very well," Maggie said. "I'll tear bandages til! we get him back to the tower. You may want them to restrain his wandering hands once he's himself again. But you'll have to give up your own petticoats—I've only the one, and I'll be blasted if I'll give it up for Leofwin."

So there was no help for it but that she had to help the ogress and her daughters make the prince comfortable while she heard a full account from the so-called rescue party of what had befallen them on their journey. The more she heard, the more worried she became, and at last, while Belburga was preparing what she termed a nourishing brew, while Rusty was asking excited questions of the rescuers about how much blood there'd been lying about, while Lily Pearl was holding Leofwin's hand, stroking his fevered brow and gazing soulfully into his eyes, and while Leofwin's hand crept beneath Lily Pearl's skirt, Maggie prepared to slip away.

To her amazement, as she started to slide out the door, the ogress turned to her and said in the syrupy voice Maggie'd presumed she reserved only for princes, "My dear girl, you needn't wash at the stream before you go to bed, you know. We have lots and lots of hot water here in the kettle for you. Why don't you just tidy up and go to your room and get some sleep? You must be exhausted after this
long harrowing day, and you'll want to be your freshest, won't you, when your handsome minstrel returns?"

Of all of the alarming events of the afternoon, none alarmed and shocked Maggie more than this: Belburga actually being civil to her and considerate of her comfort! Inconceivable! She raced out the door like a loosed arrow.

Moonshine was not where she had left him, nor where she expected him to be, and her agitation grew by leaps and bounds. "But he was here only a moment ago," protested Daisy Esmeralda, when Maggie had scattered her admirers and confronted her with Moonshine's disappearance.

"He's not here now," she said grimly, and shooed a few more cows, geese, and foxes. "Git! Go tend your own business, you!" She addressed the last to a particularly stubborn crane who'd been waiting all afternoon. "Don't you have eggs to hatch or something?" she demanded impatiently of the creature, then turned back to Daisy Esmeralda. 
"The question is, where did he go, and how long ago did he leave? Come on, girl, out with it. I've no more time to waste with you. Moonshine and my friend Colin may be in grave danger."

"I don't know. I honestly don't! I was just discussing with Mr. Squirrel here the winter nut market, and Mr. Unicorn was standing right over there when—" the girl stopped, flustered. She was shy with people, and had no idea how to deal with this wild-eyed witch. Tears and confusion made pools of her green eyes. "Right wI iere?" Maggie insisted.

"Why--right about there, where Goody Cow is standing--" Maggie shoved Goody Cow aside, and found one of Moonshine's footprints intact—enough of it visible, at least, that she could tell its direction and from it find the next one. Then she paused, puzzled. Other similar but smaller prints appeared from the opposite direction, blended with Moonshine's for a few paces, and then both sets stopped at the stream.

Daisy Esmeralda gathered her sprigged skirts in one hand and came to join her mother's gypsyish lodger where she hunkered close to the earth, tracing something with a blunt brown finger.

The animals had all fled, anyway. They didn't like strangers, especially rude ones like this woman.

"When did the other unicorn come?" Maggie asked her. "Was she white, by any chance, with gold mane and tail?"

"Why, now that you mention it, there was another unicorn and she and your friend DID gallop off together! I remember now! I was just telling Goody Duck that her eggs were showing a marked improvement, and I happened to look up as the unicorns ran past. But really, you frightened me so, you completely drove it out of my mind. You're wilder than ANY of my woodland friends, Goody Witch."

But Maggie was paying her no attention. Instead, the witch hitched up her skirts and started across the stream, leaping from stone to stone, missing once and splashing to her knees within arm's reach of the opposite bank.

Daisy Esmeralda shook her bright curls as the wet witch swore and sloshed ashore and continued across the meadow, moving slowly but with urgent intensity as she bent close to the earth so that she could see in the moonlight where the tall grass was furrowed by the recent press of unicorn feet.

CHAPTER 11

Once Moonshine and Primrose reached the forest's protective cover, Primrose sped ahead of him, her hooves spewing water, mud and leaves back at him as he galloped behind her. She set a slalom course, in and out of trees, around corners, over belly-up deadwood, dodging dense thickets. For what seemed half the night, until the moon studded the sky's very center, she raced and he followed. They stopped only for streams and ponds, and then for no longer than it took to skim their horn tips across the surface. Finally, he paused long enough to drink. When he looked up, he could no longer sec Primrose.

Leaping the stream, he charged through the trees in the direction still holding her scent and the echo of her thudding hooves.

Something jumped, like an out-thrust branch of the spreading cedar beside him snapping into his face, but it wasn't a branch. He found himself suddenly straining against a barrier. Before he could rear or thrust or slash out with his hooves, a roughness jerked down over his ears, abraded his nose, and cut off his wind.

He reared and plunged, trumpeting, sure that Primrose would hear him and come to his aid. But he saw the men then, and before he could stab at one, they tangled his hooves with another rope, and threw many more over his head, tightening around his neck so that he could no longer breathe.

Evil-smelling men swarmed all around him now, and more ropes, binding and choking him in a net. He tried to rear again, to grind his attackers beneath his hooves, but the ropes would not let him move. He tried to gouge at them, but could pull his head no more than a horn-tip's length one way or the other without the rope jerking him back.

His nostrils flared and the suddenly inhabited moonlight forest around him blurred as his eyes rolled in terror. He tried to rear again, to grind his attackers beneath his hooves, but the ropes would not let him move. He tried to gouge at them, but could pull his head no more than a horn-tip's length one way or the other without the rope jerking him back.

Evil-smelling men swarmed all around him now, and more ropes, binding and choking him in a net. He reared one last desperate time, cringing from their cruel hands, but the ropes were too many and too tight, and he fell heavily. A sharp pain sprang into his side as he fell and his insides jarred upward and tried to come out his strangling throat.
When his eyes finally stopped rolling and he could focus again, though he could do nothing else, he saw her. Primrose's perfect maiden stood over him, a sweet smug smile curving her perfect lips.

Maggie realized before she was halfway across the meadow that tracking unicorns at night was not going to be easy. She'd need a light. She pulled a green branch from a nearby tree and used her sewing shears to strip it of its leaves, then wrapped around its top the hem of her shift, the garment she'd refused to sacrifice for Leofwin's bandages. She thought of using the pretty silk dress balled up in her pocket, but, remembering the hours needed to spin the silk even magically, she decided to save it. She could make her shift last most of the night by expanding the threads and spinning them out further, if she needed to. She hoped she wouldn't need to. Such tricks took time.

As it happened, the one strip she had was going to last all night. Her magic would not produce its basic, customary flame, no matter how she mumbled, pointed, cursed or invoked the name of the Mother.

It was as much of a shock as if she'd suddenly looked down to find her hands missing, and a damned nuisance, but that it could be more than a nuisance she refused to consider. The loss was temporary, she was sure, though due to what she couldn't say. Time enough to think about that when she'd found Moonshine and, with his help, located Colin. Inconvenient and ill-timed as her inexplicable loss was, for she could have used the light, she was still a strong, healthy, competent witch, magic or no. That a witch without magic was no better off than an ordinary girl alone and unarmed in a hostile woods was not a view she chose to consider.

To keep from considering it, in fact, she concentrated on the hoofprints, finding that since the unicorns had been traveling very fast over ground that was apparently permanently damp from this country's daily rains, the tracks were deep enough that she could feel them through the soles of her soft-bottomed leather boots. Indeed, very often she could see the whole trail where the trees parted overhead, allowing the moonlight to illuminate her surroundings.

Except for the slight chill and dampness, and an occasional shower when she happened into a rain-webbed branch, she was not too uncomfortable. Despite the way the wheezing wind sent the shadows lumbering about in the moonlight, there was certainly nothing to be frightened of in the night that hadn't been there during the day. Poor Colin was the one who had reason to be frightened, tracking bandits all alone except for "the smelly one," whom she judged from Griffin Hillman's description to be the same unsavory character she and Colin and Moonshine had met on the road from Everclear to Little Darlingham. And Moonshine—what could have made him run off like that without a word to her when he had promised to help her find the other unicorns? And why had Primrose come to fetch him? Had she learned something about the bandits?

The shadowy trail in front of her suddenly smeared, and overlaying it a picture rose in her mind every bit as clear as the ones in Aunt Sybil's crystal of Moonshine earnestly dipping his horn into a stream. That picture was snatched away, and replaced by one of her unicorn lying injured and bloodied, silently crying out to her to come and help him. Once having fallen victim to this morbid train of thought, she continued—though she remembered Colin at first not so much with her mind's eye as with her inner ear—hearing again all of the silly songs he'd sung to amuse her. Then she did see him, singing, acting out stories with

his face and hands, and abruptly, before she could block the mage, staring at her with blank eyes, his expressive body cold and still and immobile, no longer able to argue with her or tease or scold her or simply hold her on the bloody lorse when she no longer had the will to continue. She shut her ;yes hard, and when she opened them again, the woods was here where it ought to be. She stalked forward, feeling the mud quish up around her soles. If anyone had harmed Moonshine, or "olin, who for all his perverse balkiness was the only fellow she'd ever met she could genuinely profess herself to be fond of, he would categorically dismember the culprit with her own hands. IF she ever found her way out of this horrid wood, and he probability looked more remote all the time. Her tears kept ilinding her to what little the moon permitted her to see.

She didn't need the moon at all, though, the next time she ooked up after kneeling to inspect a hoofprint. She could see perfectly clearly the feral yellow eyes gleaming down at her, and icard with equal clarity the low threatening growl. Before she ;ould stand, the beast sprang.

Colin tried to learn the bandits' intentions and destination, but won found that was no easy task to accomplish from within their .amp. The main problem was that all of his fellow prisoners were zombies, and were no more communicative now than when he'd first met them, though they smelled better. The guards were not overly friendly, and their vocabularies seemed limited to physical threats with occasional verbal punctuation which sounded like "arragh now."

They camped at the mouth of a cave east of Everclear, within the foothills of the ice-encrusted mountains looming above the forest.

Colin and the others were linked together with ropes loosely tied around their necks. Colin's hands were also bound, and his ankles as well, though none of the zombies were similarly shackled. Since they were totally compliant to everything they were told to do, there was no need to restrain them. The ropes around their necks
served mainly, he guessed, to keep them from straying and getting lost.

The bandits left to guard them, a group of about five men, lounged inside the entrance to a cave, around a fire they'd built at the cave's mouth. Colin and his companions were left outside, near enough to feel the fire's warmth, but with no protection from the rain which had been pelting them for the last hour.

Most of the zombies appeared to be sleeping, and the guards looked none too alert. With a little encouragement from a nice lullabye, Colin thought his captors might succumb to slumber too. He searched his repertoire, and decided the lullabye containing the Revised Judicial Code of the Kingdom of Argonia would be just the thing to woo them off to dreamland. He cleared his throat and opened his mouth.

And promptly shut it again. An arrow whizzed past his nose and embedded itself in a half-dead tree leaning against the cave's entrance.

The most alert of the guards opened one eye and stretched out one hand to pluck the arrow from the tree. "Arragh now," he growled, scratching his head and yawning. "Whassis?" He held the feather end of the shaft over the fire, which cast a reddish glow upon it.

"Reddisit?" asked another guard, sleepily, squinting down at the missile.

"Aye," the first one replied, and planted two filthy fingers in either side of his pit-like mouth, emitting a piercing whistle. "Coomin and ootwizit," he grumbled as his whistle died out to be replaced by scrabbling sounds from the shadows beyond their hideout. "A body can't rest nowise here 'boots wizzoot sommun wantin' ter jabber at 'im."

The arrow's apparent author crashed out of the woods and into the circle of firelight. He led a sweating horse and was himself wet and exhausted looking. "Where's 'erself?" he asked. "Gotta message frum 'is worship."

"She's oot baggin' nuthern," replied the first guard. "Whassee want?"

"Wants ya backita castle is whut. Gotta bite or a drap for a poor soul?"

"Got nawt. 'ave to feed THEM, 'erself says." and he jerked a thumb at the Everclear folk and Colin.

The messenger peered at them across the fire. "Who're they?"

"Slavics. They do what they're told. Best kinda civilians to 'ave aboot. Though they eats o're much."

"Dead-lookin', kinda, ain't they? Cept that one." He nodded at Colin, who courteously nodded back.

"He'll be deader'n they are. soon's she tires of Mm, I reckon," said the first guard, then stiffened as if listening for something. Colin heard it at once. A great agitation in the forest, borne forward on a rising wind.

"She's coomin'," the guard said.

Immediately all the others began poking the fire, packing supplies, sharpening bows, bullying prisoners, and performing other brigandfy activities, as if trying to appear busy and purposeful.

It was a good thing for them they did, for Sally Forth had whipped herself into a veritable tornado, and was driving several hapless highwaymen before her, hurtling tree limbs and gusty abuses upon them as they staggered into camp and cringed beside their fellows.

Her stormy wind whipped the fire into an inferno that threatened to engulf them all, then it and Sally's fury seemed to spend themselves and the wind died away, leaving the nymph spinning in its center.

"If you'd but let me explain, mum," the bravest of the new arrivals begged.

"Explain failure? That you lei down the side? Betrayed the Cause with your carelessness?" Sally's blossom-like mouth was square with anger, but she paused, foot tapping, long enough to give the guard a chance to offer his explanation.

"The swine never showed, mum. We waited for 'em right where you said, at the second fork where the hill and trees 'id us good, but nawt did we see t'whole time but a little nightbird and an old hooty owl."

With suspicious rapidity, the storm in Sally's lovely eyes blew itself out and her voice was as smooth as oiled water as she said, "Why didn't you tell me that in the first place? Obviousely, someone must have warned them. I'd never have blown up at you lads if you'd told me that before. Who could have known you were there? The witch?"

Her gaze slid to Colin. "You didn't lie to me, did you. my dear, about the witch? Did she come with you?"

Colin's throat tightened as her eyes burned into him, and he shrank back against the uncomfoting bulk of the nearest zombie. But she smiled at him with the same mercurial shift of expression she'd displayed to her men. "No. It couldn't have been her," she said. "Wulfie would have known. He was with you. Who was it then, who betrayed us? I think you know." Almost tenderly, she lifted a burning stick from the fire and, skirting the flames, advanced on him.

The soft light of the flaming brand was as flattering as candleglow to her skin tones, giving them a warm, honeyed gloss. Her movements were supple, her body graceful as she swayed toward him, extending the end of the brand like a gift.

He feit the heat against his cheek as she smiled kindly, saying, "You must tell the truth, you know. If you protect this spy, our work could be seriously hampered. We'll have to take time away from important tasks now to
arrange for the demise of Prince Leofwin and your friends. You understand how inconvenient that is going to be, for us all, don't you?"

The brand dipped closer to his eye, barely leaving him room to lift and lower his head. The flame danced, filling his vision. His muscles strained, bulging against the ropes at his ankles and wrists, and he pressed far back against the unyielding mass of the other captives, but the fire still jigged within singeing distance of his nose. She meant to torture him, and he had no doubt it would hurt a great deal. Erratic pounding filled his ears, and he thought it was the wild pumping of his own heart. Then the pounding was drowned out by a roaring sensation in his ears, the flame blurred into a sheet of light, and a blessed coolness bathed his face as darkness overtook him.

The rain on his face and the tension of the rope half-strangling him revived him more quickly than he would have liked. Voices surged around him, some of them not in his ears, but within the interior of his mind, with his own chaotic thoughts.

"Where d'ye want these 'ere 'corns, Sal?" a gruff voice asked. "Yer old nag is 'most as mean as t'new "un."

"Maiden, you said you meant only to recruit my kinsman," one of the mind-voices protested.

"Oh, foolish, foolish me!" another mind-voice. Moonshine, sobbed, "To think I left my dear Maid Maggie to mourn me while I followed Primrose's wicked path!"

Colin tried to peek without seeming to, but he could see little in the darkness beyond the fire, so he lay still against the lap of one of the Everclear ladies and listened.

Sally Forth's voice throbbed with compassion as she said, "Now, now. Primrose, my love, don't take on so. The ropes are only to hold him until we have a chance to persuade him to join us. He's been under the dreadful influence of that witch, and we can't hope he'll be amenable to our persuasions until Wulfric's dealt with the woman once and for all."

Primrose's next thought was less outraged, more subdued, "I suppose you know best, Maiden. Once your wolf-pet has devoured that awful person, perhaps Moonshine will see the merit in your plan."

"Devoured?" Moonshine whinnied hoarsely and Colin heard heavy cudgels thunk as the bandits clouted the straining unicorn back to his knees. The wave of despair that swept over Colin only partially emanated from Moonshine. The rest was his own fear that these ridiculous and vastly mad people could somehow slaughter his bright, brave Maggie as she risked herself in her own bullheaded way to save them, as he had no doubt she was already doing unless, perish the thought, she was instead providing nourishment for the loathsome wolf-man.

"Steady on. Moonshine," he tried to convey encouragement and a positiveness he didn't possess, "Maggie wouldn't care for hysterics, you know."

"Master Colin?" He could almost feel the unicorn's ears prick up.

"I'm afraid so. Try not to provoke them into hurting you, will you, and keep your wits about you. We won't be able to fight our way out of this, just the two of us. But--" he started to add something about tricking their way out, but Primrose's obnoxious bray entered his mind just at that time.

"Very sound advice, for such a lowlife as yourself. Man. If you have any influence over my kinsman at all, you'll convince him to follow my maiden's lead. She's wise beyond your piddling understanding. Moonshine will soon be free of that wicked witch's spell, and eager to join us. I myself saw the wolf stalking your paramour, and he is a very hungry animal, that wolf."

"Truly?" Colin mentally snapped back. "I shouldn't count my dog bones before they were chewed if I were Sally. Maggie has a way with animals, present company excepted, as Moonshine and certain dragons will be glad to tell you." But it was all bravado. He knew Wulfric was no ordinary animal but a ferocious, magical monster against whom even a witch would have a difficult time alone. And what could a hearthcrafter do to a wolf? There was always that fire trick of hers, of course. He reminded Moonshine of that, quietly, hoping Primrose would occupy herself in adoring Sally Forth and forget about eavesdropping for a moment.

Unfortunately, the misanthropic mare was not only adoring Salty, she was also confiding in her her knowledge of Colin's recovery and his communication with Moonshine.

Colin groaned as the nymph turned back to him with what could have passed on any other nymph's face for an engaging curiosity, a sweet sort of "tell me all about yourself" look. But she didn't fool him this time.

"No matter what they do to me. Moonshine," he cautioned silently, "Don't do anything that will get you hurt-unless, that is, you think it might work."

Sally knelt beside him, but didn't pick up the firebrand again. "I'm afraid I was hasty toward you before, dear minstrel," she apologized. "And I regret that, for you are a very useful person. Not only do you write stirring songs, but you also seem to have a calming influence on my new recruit. I realize now that I can hardly hold you responsible for every bit of magic adverse to our cause that occurs in these woods. The enemies of our Cause are legion, but we shall, you understand, smite them all down in time. It's a great pity your witch friend, being of such
fine stock, has chosen to oppose us, but I'm sure you understand that, like any royal lackey, she must either be convened or disposed of. As for you, why, until you meet the Dark Pilgrim yourself, and pledge yourself personally to his service, you must practice your song and help transport this new beast peacefully to the stronghold. Then I won't have to slay you. All right?"

Colin was flabbergasted by the reprieve, and almost as much by the fickle shifting of the lady's moods, but he hastened to agree. He couldn't have proposed a better device for gaining time until Maggie could rescue them himself. He cheerfully sent Moonshine an image of Maggie stopping long enough for a toasted wolf sandwich to bolster her strength before she led a small army to save them.

"It ain't easy bein' a messenger on the best of days," the arrow-bearing emissary complained in a whining voice. "But with women in command, a man can't get a word in to save 'is soul." He muttered his complaint to the burly bandit to whom he had first spoken, out of earshot of the nymph.

The other man shoved the arrow back into his hand and growled, "'erself don't read minds, ya knows. Tell 'er."

The messenger rose and went to Sally, presenting her with the arrow as a gentleman would present a calling card. "'is Worship needs you 'n' t'lads back ter t'stronghold, mum. Now. 'E says t' tell you that t' king's forces've landed, an' 'e needs you ter wipe 'em out, like."

Sally's face brightened and softened at once as if she'd received a pretty compliment. "Why, certainly. At once," she agreed, and put her silver hunting horn to her lips and blew a blast worthy of a woman whose alter ego was a wind storm.

Maggie rolled to one side of the charging wolf, leaping to her feet as he flew past her and landed on the ground. "Shoo, you stupid animal!" she said. "I haven't the patience to put up with your nastiness right now. Get on with you, and I'll forget it happened."

Unimpressed by her magnanimity, the wolf sprang again, but she ducked around a tree and began to try to shinny up it. Fangs snapped shut on her skirt tail, and she felt a tug and heard a rip. She tried to conjure up a fire, just a little hotfoot for the beast, but no flame appeared, and the animal's feet remained busily engaged in propelling him past her skirt, toward her fleshier outcroppings.

Of all the times for her magic to fail! If she lived to think about it, she decided, she'd have to try to discover why it had chosen this particular time, but right now she was preoccupied with losing her grip. She clutched desperately at a fungus growth near her fingertips, trying to use it to pull herself up. It broke, and she fell.

She landed squarely in the middle of a furry, squirming, snarling mass of wolf, her knee in his midsection, his claws raking her arm. She rolled to the side, but this time he rolled with her, and then they both rolled over and over down a slight incline at the base of which was a stream.

Just before they rolled into the water, they stopped. She was on top, and grabbed his muzzle in one hand to keep him from biting her nose off. With her other hand she sought his throat, determined to throttle him if she could. His hind legs pedaled at her middle, trying to disembowel her, and almost succeeded when she leaned in to try to make her stranglehold more secure. She leapt aside and scrambled to her feet and ran, heedless of what the sensible thing to do when faced with wild animals was supposed to be.

He was on her again before she knew it, slamming against her back and knocking her to the ground again. One arm was pinned under her. The other she braced against his neck, keeping his teeth at bay and also getting a much closer look than she really wanted at the inside of a wolf's mouth.

Then the mouth started to change, and the entire face with it, dissolving into something neither wolf nor man, and horrible in its indecision. In a moment, the paws on her shoulders became long-nailed, bristle-covered hands and the face before her melted into a man's. Someone she'd met, as a matter of fact.

"Jivemgood!" she exclaimed. "Aren't you Count Jivemgood?"

"Yeeees," he said, slobbering, mocking her, "And aren't you delicious?"

But he shifted his weight slightly when he said it, and she shifted hers enough to free her hand. She grabbed for her medicine pouch, dangling out of her skirt pocket, and pulled forth its contents, whatever it was. "Not without seasoning," she replied, and flung assorted herbs and powders straight into his face.

They parted, sneezing, but he got the worst of it, and hacked and choked, and in the process changed back into a wolf, who hacked and choked even more violently.

Now that she knew what he was and that he had no intention of running off into the woods like a decent, sane wild animal, and also realized that no retreat of hers would be fast enough to save her, she had no scruples about slaying him. Closing her hand over the sewing shears she had dropped into her pocket after using them to make her useless torch, she opened them, clutching them like a dagger in her fist, and attacked while the monster was incapacitated.

He was not, however, as incapacitated as she'd thought, and he rounded on her again just as she leaped, snapping at the first piece of fur her hand met and trying to stab at it with the open shears. With his body rolling
beneath her, her grip loosened and shifted on the shears and she didn't quite make a stab—she made a thumb-straining snip instead.

The wolf emitted an unearthly howl and leapt up, spouting gore, and sprinted into the shadows.

Maggie sat on the ground and tried to catch her breath. She couldn't believe the monster was gone and she was still alive. She couldn't believe her magic had failed her so completely and—she couldn't believe she was holding a sickeningly severed wolf tail in her scratched and bloodied hand.

Mechanically, she rose and went to the stream to wash herself off. Her knees kept buckling, refusing to support her, and finally she had to sit and splash water up on herself. It was chilly, but revived her.

She didn't hear the flutter of wings until the faery was hovering right in front of her, looking at her curiously.

"Hey, you look terrible. What happened? Why're you bloodying up my stream?"

"This beast attacked me," Maggie explained, indicating the tail.

Trickle Hew to it and landed in the middle of the strip of fur. wriggling her toes in it and petting it. "This is good stuff.

Reminds me of someone, too. Say, what would you take for this?"

"Take for it?" Maggie failed for a moment to grasp the question. "But it's—the beast, I mean, was human, sometimes anyway. Maybe that thing'll change into something—else?"

"Like what? People don't have tails. Hey, wait, you mean a WEREWOLF attacked you?"

"I suppose it must have been."

"Well, well, well. How interesting. Look, what if I give you something for this? I know the beast in question, and believe me, he may change into something that looks human, but he's all wolf underneath. It would make a great carpet for my place, lots better than the bird's nest I'm using now."

But Maggie wasn't listening. "He was going to eat me," she muttered as much to herself as to the faery. "He was actually going to eat me. I was polite enough. I never harmed him. I've never in my whole life made a slighting remark about werewolves. The forest is full of edible game, and that son of a wolf bitch was going to eat ME." An indignant scowl crawled across the shock overlaying her face. "But he didn't. I got this instead."

She picked up the tail and slowly the shock and the scowl turned into a grin—the same kind of wicked witch grin that must have petrified victims of her distant ancestresses. Even Trickle backflapped away from her a little. "You want it?" Maggie asked. "What'll you give me for it? Haven't you got some kind of faery magic you can spare me? My own seems to have run out of power.

"We—ell, I could probably manage to let go of a spell of bewilderment for you to cover your path," Trickle offered.

"No, that wouldn't work. Except for werewolves, no one is looking for me. I'm the one who's trying to find everyone else."

"Everyone wouldn't refer to a certain minstrel and a certain unicorn, would it?" the faery asked slyly. "Because if so, I'm afraid you're a little late. They've sort of fallen in with evil companions, so to speak."

"Well, I must say you're a lot of help." Maggie said. "Why didn't you try to save them?"

Trickle shrugged. "They seemed to know what they were doing till they got there and then, well, I don't care for werewolves or nasty nymphs or brigands any more than the next faery. Besides, I have my stream to look after, you know."

"I thought you LIKED unicorns. Moonshine purified your stream for you, didn't he?"

"Well, yes, but then his friends are always mucking it up again. But shame was beginning to invade the belligerency of her voice, and she said defensively, "I did warn that lummox of a prince about the ambush, but I was too late to save your boyfriend or Moonshine."

"Couldn't your magic help them?" "Not used by somebody my size."

"How about by somebody my size? I won't give this to you if you don't help me. In fact, if you don't help me somehow . . . " She snipped the bloody shears menacingly.

"Very scary," Trickle replied scornfully, deflecting them with one tiny hand. "Come on, witch. I'm wise to you. You're like me. You talk mean, but it takes somebody really getting to you for you to let them have it. Why, if I'd had any idea the spell I cast on those poor slobs at Everclear was going to keep them from noticing when the water spoiled I—"

"I THOUGHT there was some strange magic afoot there," Maggie said. "Go on. I'm finding this confession very interesting."

Suddenly the forest was filled with a single, silvery blast.

Both Trickle and Maggie listened, and when the note died away, they exchanged a long, penetrating stare.

"Time's a-wasting, witch," Trickle said. "Whatever I've done or haven't done is none of your business. If you want to help your friends, you'd better get moving. I'll tell you what. I can't go along with you, and my magic doesn't work."

"Don't you have any kind of magic you can spare me?"

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"Time's a-wasting, witch," Trickle said. "Whatever I've done or haven't done is none of your business. If you want to help your friends, you'd better get moving. I'll tell you what. I can't go along with you, and my magic doesn't
amount to much at long range, mostly, but if you give me that thing, I'll give you something that will put you in contact with certain people I know who might be able to help you later on." "Oh, very well." Maggie said. "Take it." Trickle did. and flew away with it, returning a few minutes later with a stalk of small blue flowers in her hand. "Faery bells," she explained. "Just ring them if you get in a bind, and I have friends who'll help you out."

Maggie looked skeptical, but accepted the flowers. "Is that all?" she asked.

Trickle sighed. "No. Look, witch, I have my job to do here at the stream, or I'd come with you, I really would. But you know how it is. Look, I'll tell you what. I'm putting your feet on the right path now, and I promise you they'll keep you on it as long as you're in these woods. Just follow your toes, and if you hustle and Sally doesn't, you'll catch up with her. But-uh--" "But what?" "But you'd better hurry. That was her hunting horn we heard just now, and she uses it to call her flunkies. Sounds to me like they're getting ready to move."

Maggie was more than ready to leave the faery's company. She was afraid she had more in common with the waspish little being than she cared to admit. If she seemed as hard and vengeful and jealous of her own powers as all that, no wonder Winnie and her father had been after her for years about her bad temper. Trickle was very much like what Maggie imagined her Grandma Oonaugh must have been-ready to throw evil spells indiscriminately about and never mind where they landed.

Of course. Trickle was a Little Person, and everybody knew they were touchy and tricky and as ready to do a human in as to help one. Unlike the larger varieties of faery folk, the general category of whom Trickle's smaller sort were a sub-tribe. Little People could not mingle or intermarry with larger folk, and apparently the size difference made them more likely to be antagonistic than conciliatory-most of them Maggie had met were at least grouchy, if not downright malicious, and they all seemed to have chips on their shoulders.

Still, she had to admit, she was a fine one to talk about malice. Hadn't she just maimed another creature? She was glad Trickle had wanted the tail-just thinking about it made Maggie feel vaguely unclean. Not dirty. She didn't particularly mind dirty, but, as Winnie used to say, felt as if she'd "lowered herself" by doing to the wolf what he obiously intended to do to her, though not quite the same, of course, since she didn't have a tail.

Perhaps that kind of thing, that uncleanness, was what made Primrose think a witch was unfit to befriend a unicorn. And maybe she was right. But just now. Moonshine seemed to be in need of friends who weren't worried about dirtying themselves, so she didn't intend to worry about it. At least she, unlike some small faeries she could name, wasn't so blindly devoted to her own magical pursuits that she refused to leave them even for a short time to help someone else.

As a matter of fact, it had happened quite the other way around with her, she thought ruefully. She hadn't had to leave her magical pursuits-her magic had left her, instead. But it was a temporary loss, surely. No Brown witch Maggie'd ever heard of had ever permanently lost her powers, unless you counted Maggie's mother, who Granny Brown claimed had never developed her sorcerous potential because she'd been wooed and won.

if not wed, at such an early age that all of her magic poured itself into dealing with her lover and her daughter. Which wasn't at all Maggie's case. She had never mated, which was part of her dilemma, but even by witchly standards, she was definitely old enough to take a mate if she wished. Granny Brown had stressed it in fact, and had frequently reminded her of her impending twenty-first birthday, a day of some significance in ancient lore, associated with the ebb and flow of forces vital to all life and power. Well, whatever that meant, here she was now, her feet on an invisible trail by alien magic while her own failed to keep the rain from soaking through her torn dress, and would no longer provide her with light, food or fire. At least in this rainy climate she was unlikely to get thirsty, she thought, as she tongued water droplets out of the air. And dawn was coming, and with it, with any luck at all. the sun and warmth, though in this miserable country one could never be sure. She wondered if she shouldn't ring the flowery bells and ask one of Trickle's colleagues if she mightn't borrow a cloak, but a faery cloak would be too small for her, anyway. Possibly she was just passing through an area ruled by another witch or wizard powerful enough to negate her own magic, and when she'd gone far enough her powers would return. She'd heard of things like that happening. But if that were true, why hadn't it happened when she and Colin passed through this same territory before?

Maybe Granny had been right. Maybe taking up with a unicorn at this stage in her life, when most witches mated, was depleting her power. She had expended quite a lot of it trying to help Moonshine, but no more than she would during a similar length of time in her father's castle, and it had always replenished itself before. Of course, back at the castle, she used her powers in the way they were intended to be used, and didn't have to distort them to meet demands for her own protection and that of her companions. And why should mating have so much to do with it, anyway? Aunt Sybil hadn't mated, or at least she'd as much as said she hadn't, but then Sybil was a seer, not a hearthcrafter. People didn't have to live with her to benefit from her powers-in fact, she lived alone because most people were uncomfortable living with someone who could see their intimate lives with so little effort, though, actually. Sybil was never one to pry.
What could Granny have meant by that, then? The implication had been that Maggie's own power could not sustain itself and
her indefinitely unless she reinforced it by-what? Forsaking one sort of love-the unicorn's-for another-a man's? But why? Unless it was because Moonshine didn't really need her magic. He had plenty of magic of his own. Were men any different? Colin had his magic, after all, though it wasn't nearly as powerful or useful as hers or Moonshine's, and he didn't use it usually, except for show. Perhaps it all came down to what Wizard Raspberry had tried to tell Rusty about strengthening one's power through sharing it. Well, for the time being hers would have to sulk wherever it was hiding. She hadn't time to go satisfying its caprices.

But she wished the faery's spell setting her feet on the proper path had included an anti-blister clause. Trying to sit and rest did no good; her feet kept marching even while her bottom was sitting, and the soles of her boots were quite worn through. Her calves ached and her back was beginning to pain her as well, but her bleeding feet marched relentlessly on their appointed course, all that night, and into the next day and following evening.

She ought to have known better than to have accepted a spell from a faery without learning all the complications first! Her aching muscles and feet, the cold, hunger and weariness began to bother her less than a new fear. Unless Trickle had thought this stupid spell out better than it appeared she had, the silly thing was quite likely to march Maggie right into the bandit camp too footsore and exhausted even to put up a good fight.

That fear took complete possession of her for a time, as she strode past a cabin late in the afternoon. Coals lay inside a ring of stones at the cave's entrance, and human and unicorn droppings marred the trampled moss in front of the cave. Still, the fire was dead and she had heard the hunting how long before dawn. The quarry must yet be far ahead of her, but she was really too tired to think about it. All she could think of was rest.

Sometime in the middle of the night she heard the wind rise to a howl, and realized that she heard more the wind itself now than the leaves rustling or the brushing of the branches against each other. The moon stayed hidden, and often she tripped or blundered into things she couldn't see, but before long she missed the impediments. The foliage in her path had dwindled, and so had her protection from the wind.

It turned her clothing and hair into flails against her cold-chaffed skin. The only positive benefit from it all was that her feet were more or less numb, though for some time they kept moving. But finally, when the wind was fiercest and the shad-

ows of the night were reduced to two outlines, a serrated blackness rearing like the single blackened tooth of some monstrous giant against the paler black of the sky, her feet stopped moving. Without further ado, her legs folded under her. She never knew where she landed; she was fast asleep before she hit the ground.

Colin couldn't laugh openly when the tailless Wulfric limped out of the woods to join the ranks of marching bandits and zombies. So he contented himself with a smothered snicker, containing not so much mirth as relief.

Primrose sniffed and said to Sally Forth, "I think your minions are made of inferior matter, O Maiden, to turn tail on such a lowborn one as that witch, and run."

"That's very unfair." Colin told her with a straight face. "He couldn't very well turn tail when he'd been relieved of it, could he?" The nymph examined her second-in-command's wound. Her lips were pressed tightly together, and she seemed both awed and incredulous that anyone could have inflicted such damage on the up-till-now invincible Wulfric. Colin decided to press the point. "O Sally, in the interest of a successful revolution, I beg to give you some advice, (f I were you, I'd release all of the captives and beasts, and not become involved with the witch. I've known her for some time now, and her powers are the mightiest I've ever encountered-judging from the condition of our poor comrade, I'd say if anything she just seems to be getting stronger all the time. I hardly think it will do the cause any good to have a force such as hers aligned against you."

Sally chose to ignore him. Wulfric whimpered, and looked up at her with large, sad wolf eyes. She petted him absently and asked with what Colin felt this time was real gentleness, "Wouldn't it hurt less if you changed back into man form?"

"There, isn't that better?" she asked. Wulfric rose to his feet, rubbing his lower back as he did so. His human face wore a pained grimace.

"Oh, Sally, though my man-form wears no tail, my back remembers it from wolf form, and mourns its loss. I fear I can do no more than limp, and will sorely slow you. Leave me, if you must."

"I can't, Wulfie. You know you'll never be able to cross the glacier alone. I'm the only one who can guide us safely across.

And besides, the Dark Pilgrim has ordered us to return to the stronghold."

"Ah, Sally, then I must perish, a martyr to the Cause." The last ended on a note that sounded suspiciously like a howl.
"I've always known you were a true believer," Sally cried, throwing her arms around his neck in a gesture that temporarily brightened his woebegone expression. "Any worthwhile cause can always use a martyr, but I shall be so sorry to lose you. Tell me, is there any last request you have of us before we leave you here to die?"

Wulfric's eyes lit with greed. He obviously didn't want to waste the opportunity for one last outstanding favor. Colin shifted uneasily as the wolf's eyes lit first on himself, then Moonshine, then returned to Colin. Though his face bore only a shadow of its former wolfish grin, that shadow was enough to make Colin quake. The wolf-man answered Sally's question. "Yon beast would have taken my tail long before the wily witch, and though I know you treasure the man for now, he was for a time the evil female's companion. Let me slay them both, O Sally, and I shall endure my martyrdom "with great joy."

"Now, Wulfie, let's be reasonable. You know you can't slay the unicorn. The Dark Pilgrim needs all the unicorns we can bring him, and we have so far caught only four. Besides," she jerked her head with a meaningful look in Primrose's direction. "However," she continued, "The Dark Pilgrim would undoubtedly see that a tail for a tail was a fair trade, and allow you to take the unicorn's tail as vengeance for your own loss. You could leave it with the minstrel's body, so the witch could find it and see to her sorrow what happens to those who thwart our Cause."

Wulfric seemed satisfied by this compromise. He withdrew his knife from the smelly sheepskin cloak which clothed his man-form, and walked up behind Moonshine, grabbing his tail.

Moonshine screamed, aloud to the bandits and silently to Colin, but he was so tightly bound that he could not without help withdraw his tail from the were-man's grasp.

"Hold on a moment, ma'am," Colin said, "You can't let him do that to a helpless prisoner. How would it look for the Cause?" He had no idea what he could do or say to save Moonshine and himself and spoke only to gain time.

Help came from an unexpected source.

"Maiden, you promised me no harm would come to him!" Primrose protested, trotting up to stare Sally Forth in the face.

"You said he would find glory with our cause. How can you let that filthy pet of yours TOUCH one of us? Why, that nasty wolf can do nothing but turn into an even nastier man! Moonshine and I can purify water, prevent poisoning, cure illness--"

"Heal wounds!" Colin added with sudden inspiration. "Why, ma'am, you'd be wasting three of your most valuable supporters, and maybe losing the loyalty of the lady unicorn there, if you let your friend have his way."

Sally was unimpressed. "You don't seem to understand, minstrel. I've given my word. Your unicorn injured a brave captain of the Cause, and your witch mutilated him. It is only just that you suffer in your turn, and your beast forfeit his tail. If I'm not just, my men will cease to have any respect for me. Besides, you've cost me my most devoted assistant."

Colin mustered all of his balladry play-acting skills to seem casual. "I don't see how you can call him devoted when he'd rather slink off into the bushes after murdering us than continue to serve the Cause. Moonshine didn't know who your wolf was when he attacked him, did you, Moonshine?"

"Naaayyy, Minstrel!" Moonshine cried. "Had I known, I would have run him through!"

"See there," Colin said, translating the audible neigh and tactfully neglecting to mention the latter part of the unicorn's reply. "He didn't know he was tickling a comrade-in-arms. As for Maggie, that was a fair fight, and after all, she's just a girl, and he's a big bad werewolf."

"I am a girl," Sally reminded him, drawing herself up.

"Yes, ma'am, you certainly are, which proves my point exactly. You NEED your assistant to help you. So why don't you make him take the cure and come along to the stronghold with the rest of us instead of letting him butcher us and slink around licking his wounds while your people honor him as a martyr?"

"Take the cure?" Wulfric asked. "What nonsense is this? Cure?"

"Come off it now, Wulfie, old boy. You can't tell me you didn't know all along that Moonshine's magic could cure you. You SAW it heal Leofwin's stab wound. Why, I'll wager Moonshine can grow you back another tail just like--" But Colin's fingers refused to snap. "Or at least heal over the wound so you can walk again. You can do that, can't you, Moonshine?"

"Never!" Moonshine said.

"See there, of course he can," Colin said aloud, and to Moonshine added privately, "If you ever want us to get out of this alive, you'd better show a little unicornly charity, and heal this beastie with all your heart."

"But I've never grown a tail back," Moonshine said. "I wouldn't know where to begin."

"Just let your magic do its work."

"Very well. If you can make Wulfie well enough to accompany us, you both may live," Sally said.

"I want my tail," Wulfric insisted, growling.
"Oh, all right. If he can't grow yours back you may still take his," she agreed. "But this is all taking an enormous amount of time and we should be making all speed to the stronghold. Have the beast do his magic at once, minstrel."

Trying to make it look as mysterious and complicated as possible, Colin obtained another flask of water from one of the guards, and with extreme ceremony held the flask in place while Moonshine threaded the tip of his horn through the narrow opening at the top.

Mumbling the nonsense syllables which served in some songs as euphemisms for indelicate bodily pans and functions, the minstrel then sprinkled the water over Wulfric's re-ewolved rump. And held his breath.

He needn't have worried. The wound began to heal nicely at once, and within a few minutes a growth sprouted from the end of Wulfric's spine. It was thin and hairless and pale, and rather resembled an anemic carrot, but it wagged properly, when Wulfric saw it and realized what it was. In fact, the were was so relieved to have his tail back that he chased it like a puppy before Sally could calm him.

"It doesn't look like a proper tail," she said critically.

"I don't do fur," Moonshine, still miffed at having been forced to perform his magic for an enemy, told Colin haughtily.

"He says fur takes time to grow back, ma'am, but grow back it will. Why, I understand some magical cures for baldness even include shaving off all the hair ahead of time to make it grow back thicker and more luxurious."

"Is that so?"

"Yes, indeed." He nodded vigorously. "But, excuse me, ma'am, now that we've solved this minor difficulty, don't you think we should get on to your stronghold right away? I mean, your Dark Pilgrim might need us."

Sally's blue eyes regarded him with almost coquettish interest.

"I wish I could be sure of your loyalty, minstrel. But yes, you're right. We must proceed at once."

They wrapped a bandage of cloth around Wulfric's new tail to keep it from the cold. Colin was still bound, but loosely, and Moonshine's bonds were also loosened. Colin was permitted to lead the unicorn on the restated condition that he keep him quiet and cooperative.

He sang as they traveled through the woods, and out and up into the sparsely covered country that was the skirt of the great jagged mountain in whose shadow they shivered. He made up a song about Wulfric's tail called, fittingly enough, The Ballad of Wulfric's Tail, in which he made Moonshine out to be a great and misunderstood hero for Sally's cause, making up wildly flattering words as he went along to describe both Sally and Moonshine, and emphasizing the marching beat, which made it easier for him to walk and also put the guards in a good humor, so they didn't clout him and the other prisoners so often, but stomped and growled along in a kind of brutish contentment.

Sally allowed Wulfric to range ahead, and, with Primrose, she dropped back to walk beside Colin. They were climbing up a wide, treeless meadow now, and though there was plenty of room all around. Sally walked very close to him, cocking her head attentively as if she only wished to hear his songs more closely. But he knew the signs. The ravishing rebel leader made it as plain as had any of the court ladies that she fancied Colin himself as well as his music. One had to put up with that sort of thing when one was possessed of such an abundance of talent and charm as he, but in this particular case the attention made him more than a little uneasy. His charm for this lady, if mishandled, could very well prove fatal, and not in the figurative sense.

Not that it was particularly difficult to be charming to someone as fetching as Sally Forth. However spurious his interest in her political philosophy, and however dubious the logic behind that philosophy, her physical attractions were absolutely, irrefutably genuine and beyond question. Still, entertaining her reminded him a bit of a tale the chief archivist, Sir Cyril Perchingbird, had once told him about Finbar the Fireproof's great-grandfather's performing magic. The Ashbum ancestor, Selwyn the Serpent Slayer, was possessed, like all Ashburns, of a love and talent for the flashy, entertaining sort of magic which was shown to best advantage when done before an audience. In his later years, Selwyn, who had ignored his gifts for the dour business of serpent slaying, a necessity during his day, when Argonia's coast was plagued with the snakes, decided that slaying the sea serpents was a boring and unchallenging occupation. He had taken to whistling tunes calling them up to the shores near Queenston, giving them such a good show that the monsters came happily to the harpoons of Selwyn's more belligerent friends, who took advantage of the situation to slay as many snakes as possible. Still, Selwyn's wondrous feat impressed as many of the populace as it did sea serpents, and from that day forward Argonians ceased to call their king Selwyn the Serpent Slayer and began to call him instead Selwyn the Snake Charmer. Colin thought that singing for Sally Forth was a little like that.

He had to stop singing by midday, for they had climbed high enough that footing was steep and difficult, and even the unicorns were less sure-footed than before. They were able to travel only an hour or two longer after that, and made camp, high up on the side of the mountain, in the shadow of the glacier's edge, which cupped around them
on three sides. Colin was grateful for the rest, for he was unused to heights, and even more unused to long marches, particularly during performances.

Besides, he was beginning to fear for the health of the Everclear folk, among whom he was once again shackled. They looked, if possible, even deader than usual, most of them having turned an unattractive dusky blue which matched the haze veiling the pinnacle rising at their backs. Their noses ran, and of course they didn’t wipe them, so that froze, adding to the general unsavoriness of their collective overall appearance.

Most of the bandits had equipped themselves with winter clothing, which they drew from packsacks and donned, but, oddly enough, their leader still shivered in her thin, translucent garment, and huddled herself near the fire. Either she believed in traveling light, Colin thought, or else she felt her attire was good for morale. In either case, her patronage was too important to his own survival for him to allow her to risk catching even a slight cold.

"See here, guard," he said to no one in particular. "If I weren’t trussed up like this, I’d offer my jacket to our beautiful leader, if I had a jacket, that is. What kind of fellows are you, anyway?"

His gallantry paid unexpected dividends. Sally was swamped with so many warm wraps she even shared one with him. "You know how to treat your leader with respect, don’t you, minstrel? I like that in a man."

Colin did the safe thing, and pretended to fall asleep.

Maggie eyed the impossible heights of the glacier, and felt like crying. The wretched thing looked straight up and down, with deep crevasses tinged a cold and forbidding blue, and gusts of snow skimming its lower slopes. The upper slopes she couldn’t even see. They were blanketed with the pearl gray clouds muffling most of the landscape around her.

She’d awakened that morning stiff and cold, her hair and back covered with a powdering of new snow, the impression of the faery bells engraved on her cheek were she’d crushed them under her when she fell.

At least her feet had stopped marching, but for a long time she had no idea why, nor did she know why they’d deposited her in this unpromising place. But then the wind had blown away a patch of cloud and had revealed for a moment a line of dark dots on the upper portion of the glacier.

Maggie tried to convince herself that the dots were black mountain sheep, or rock-climbing gnomes, but she knew they weren’t. Her feet had brought her, as the faery’s spell specified, on the correct path through the forest. Only now, here on this barren mountainside, she was no longer IN the forest. Nor were Moonshine and Colin. That was them, up there, in all that fog and snow and wind. And the wind, cold and snow right here where she was were no laughing matters either. Even if her feet could be persuaded to move, she had no idea how she would survive the cold without her magic.

Her magic still wasn’t working. She tried it, and wasted precious moments weeping when she failed. Toads, but she was turning into a crybaby. Lots of people couldn’t build a magic fire whenever they wanted, and they didn’t cry about it. What did they do to keep warm while climbing glaciers, then? She studied the low-lying moss hugging the chilly earth under her feet, the tiny, cold-looking flowers, the springy hummocks of damp earth covered with a carpet of plants, none of which offered a stem or twig larger than Trickle’s little finger. People without magic for fires would never come to places like this to look for fuel, that was for certain. And, undoubtedly, they would have had the sense to wear coats and mittens and boots with the soles still in them if they were to do any ice climbing. But what was she to do?

Listen to yourself, she thought angrily, moaning and wringing your hands like a milkmaid with a dry cow. You’ll do the best you can, of course, and if that’s not good enough you’ll simply have to deal with it when you find that out.

So she slipped the silk dress from her pocket on over her woolen one, which kept some of the wind out, and sewed shut the holes in her boot soles with thread pulled from her skirt and a bone needle from her medicine pouch. She padded the insoles of each boot with moss before she slipped them back on. which would make them considerably warmer when her body heat warmed the damp, chilly moss enough that it could act as insulation, the way trappers she knew always claimed it did. Now she wished she hadn’t given Trickle the tail. It might have served as a hat, or a muff, or even to warm her neck. She used the material she had torn from her shift for a head wrap, and stuffed her hands into her pockets, along with everything else that wasn’t immediately useful, including Trickle’s flower. If faery help was no more practical than Trickle’s had been so far, she’d manage on her own. thank you just the same.

None of her precautions was very affective, though she was a little warmer than she had been. She labored up the side of the mountain all that day, hearing nothing but the rasp of her own breath and feeling the pounding of her heart in her throat. Alt she could think of, apart from her own misery, was Granny Brown saying, when she found out as she undoubtedly would, that Maggie had frozen to death, “If I told that girl once I told her a thousand times always to wear her cloak when she goes outdoors.”

Still, though her legs were so sore they could hardly carry her and her tongue was soon too dry to wet her lips,
she could no more stop now than she could the night before. Though she had no hope of being able to scale the entire glacier dressed as she was, she thought she might at least be able to see from higher on the mountain where her friends were being taken, so that later on she might return with help, if she were still able. Which she doubted, actually. But Colin and Moonshine were up there somewhere, and needed her, and she couldn't stand not doing something, anything, to try to help them.

Every time she almost succeeded in convincing herself that she was being foolish and that the correct course of action would be to return to Little Darlingham and wait for Wizard Raspberry, the wind would die down for a moment, or she'd think she spotted the specks high atop the glacier's tip again, and she'd go on a little farther. The morning snow, which had never melted, but merely sank into a kind of icy crust over the mossy growth

on the mountainside, was reinforced in midafternoon by another flurry.

Maggie trudged on a few more paces, but soon the snow was flying faster, and the wind began to swirl it in front of her eyes so that she could no longer see where she was. She sank to her heels, thinking she would wait it out. The edge of the glacier had looked so close, just a moment ago, and she couldn't go much further, anyway, but perhaps when the storm had blown over she'd be able to see something.

It rapidly became evident, however, that the storm had no intention of clearing. Instead, it became steadily worse, until the wind penetrated everything she wore, and the snow piled in drifts all around her.

However clearly she had imagined freezing to death, she hadn't really thought she would. And she couldn't say she fancied it. But before long, she could no longer feel her toes or nose or eyes or fingers and her lips and cheeks stung with each flake that hit them.

Since it didn't seem that the situation could possibly deteriorate any further, she decided to see if any of Trickle's little friends cared for high altitudes. Her left hand had to be persuaded to drift across the front of her body to join her right hand in her skirt pocket on that side, and she had to hold up the silk dress with her teeth while her hands juggled the withered flower stalk between them. The wind threatened to blow the flowers away as soon as she pulled them from her pocket, so she pressed her face against her lap, and thus shielded her hands until she could take the flowers in her teeth. Then she shook the flowers, as a dog would shake an old slipper. If she expected to hear bells, she was disappointed, for she heard nothing but the wind, though she tasted the bitter plant taste of the faery bell stalk where she'd bitten it.

So that was a wasted effort. No faery appeared to stop the snowstorm, or to drop a magic necklace around her neck that would transport her with a wish where ever she wished to go. The faery bells seemed to have been Trickle's demented idea of a joke. It seemed a bad way to die, spending one's last thoughts heaping curses on the head of a wretched little sawed-off water sprite. But, bad way to die or not, Maggie's anger heated her up enough that she remained alive until help came.

Though she didn't see it at first, and when she did, she almost fled from it, failing to recognize it as such.

It could have been a tall drift of snow blowing towards her,

except that it was blowing the wrong way. It should have been blowing to the side and down off the mountain with the rest of the snow, but instead it circled her from above, and blew up at her. That was when she saw that it wasn't made of flakes but of shaggy white fur which separated into arms and legs extending from a vast trunk, and topped with a face so broad and brushy with beard and hair it appeared to be an animal. Its gait as it closed in on her was strange and tottering, and its face rose far, far above her. It was taller than any man she'd ever seen, except perhaps the King, though it was smaller than the average giant. She crouched down into herself, and decided her best bet might be to roll up into a ball and snowball down the hill. Even if she broke her neck, it might be better than what the thing had in store for her.

But the thing stood squarely in front of her now, blocking any chance she would have to roll. It opened its yawning maw, and through the raging wind she could make out Us words quite plainly.

"You the young party what rang for assistance?" She nodded dazedly, and the bells wobbled in her teeth again. She spat the flowers out, and jammed them back into her pocket with her frozen fingers. That was all she had time to do before the thing scooped her up from the center of the drift that had been building around her. Being held like that by the creature wasn't at all unpleasant—it was rather like being wrapped in a warm, pulsing fur coat.

"We'll just thaw you out a bit, Miss," it said. "And you can tell me just who you are, how you come to be on my mountain, and how you happen to have the bells on yer person."

She could detect nothing really sinister about his tone, and nothing even disrespectful about the grip in which he held and warmed her, enveloping at once her frozen face and hands and feet, which were already beginning to tingle again with life. Still, there was something very stiff and guarded about his tone which made her uncomfortable.

"At least you know WHAT I am," she said. "Which is more than I can say for you."

He sauntered up the mountain with her in his big fuzzy arms, his tone conversational, now, as if he were out for
his constitutional on a warm, sunny day instead of in the middle of a blizzard which made Maggie feel as if they were being stirred into the middle of a rice pudding. "Now, Miss, we mustn't ask personal questions, must we, now? Goodness knows I've already put myself out for you quite enough. I'd just about run down a grizzly for me supper when I heard you tinklin' them little bells, and I ask you, did I hesitate to answer vow?"

"But why DID you answer me?" she asked, mumbling into his fur and having to spit some out before she could clarify her questions. "I mean, why did YOU answer me? You're not a faery-are you?"

Instead of answering immediately, he paused. By twisting slightly, Maggie could peek out over the crook of one of his furry elbows. She immediately wished she hadn't. All around, the snow still swirled as madly as ever, so that she could see nothing in front of her or on either side.

But directly in front of them, where her captorI rescuer's toes should have been, the snow fell, and fell, and kept on falling, straight past them, feathering its way eternally down into a deep, gaping, blue-walled crevasse slicing halfway into the mountain's core-

She was trying to judge how far that might be, and to think why the creature had paused just here, above all this incredibly sharp blue ice, when he shifted his weight, tightened his grip on her, and jumped.

And landed, lightly as a bird. When she was quite sure she was alive, Maggie risked another peek, and saw that they had landed on the crevasse floor. Surrounding them, tiers of ice rose in sheer walls, fissured now and then with long deep cracks. In front of them, one such crack split the wall, broad enough for a man to walk through at the base, narrowing to an infinitesimal crack as far above their heads as she could see. In two strides, the creature bundled her into this fissure and deposited her on a pile of furs.

The cave was oddly cozy; with its sapphire walls protecting them from the blanketing snow and surging winds whining outside, it practically invited her to give in to her weariness and nap among the thickly strewn multicolored furs. But the creature bustled around at the back of the cave, and interrupted her just as she was enjoying a nice drowsy reverie, trying to count the waves of snow as they rippled down in front of the den's entrance.

"Here, Miss. Have a spot of herb tea," the monster said, holding a goblet of faceted ice to her mouth, and bracing her head with one paw as if he meant to force the stuff down her throat.

"Wait. What is this?" she asked, rousing.

"Just as I said. Herb tea. Gathered down below by me friends. Be a nice lass, now, and drink it down quickly, won't you, before it melts me goblet?"

Though she was still suspicious, she noted that the goblet was indeed melting, diluting and cooling the tangy-smelling drink it contained. Oh well, if he was going to do away with her, she supposed the creature could have done it in other ways besides poisoning her long before now. She'd have frozen without his help. She drank-and gagged, sure that she had after all been poisoned, The stuff tasted sulfurous.

"Wh-what kind of herbs did you say those were?" she asked. "Just the usual kind." he said. "The secret ingredient is the water. There's a hot spring seeping up in back of this fissure. Gives it that special taste-supposed to be very healthful, I'm told. Seems to have had a good effect on you, anyway. You're much redder now. That's a good sign on you furless ones, ain't it? Even faeries gets redder when they drink me tea. I keeps it special for 'em. They supply the herbs, and I supplies the water."

"Aha," she said, eager to change the subject so she wouldn't be tempted to tell him what she really thought of his tea. "So you don't claim to be a faery then, even though you answered the bells?"

"Maybe I do and maybe I don't," he said, sinking down onto the furs across from her and rubbing his palms against his knees. She could see now that he did have hands-very furry ones, but hands, nevertheless, not paws. "I'm who you get if you go ringing for supernatural assistance in these parts, at any rate. Actually, I suppose you might say I am a sort of faery. You smooth folk seem to have the idea that ALL faeries are simple sorts with nothing to do but dance about in dear little circles all the time. Or else be like the big 'uns who mix with YOUR people. But some of us are a bit different, and we have our responsibilities too, which we take very seriously, I can tell you. Like little Trickle, for instance, fine little thing, does a first-class job of guardin' a MOST strategic bit of moisture. From the tone of your bell, I'd say it was she who sent you t'me. Am I right?"

Maggie nodded, continuing to stare in fascination at him. His fur masked most of his outline, but she kept feeling as if there were something vaguely out of kilter with the way he looked.

He stared at her in almost the same way, but continued to talk. His voice was deep and soothing and drowned out the wind. "Trickle's just one example of a faery doin' a fine job looking after her bit of country. There's them as guards the trees too--yer nymphs and dryads and such, but they're not overly dependable. There's a couple of them down yonder on the lower slopes, watchin' over the foothills. Then there's dwarves. Generally it's dwarves for the high country, where there's likely to be mines, and gnomes in the fields and woods and such. I'm what you gets in the glaciers."
Maggie shook her head, wonderingly. "I've never seen the like of you before, or heard of anyone like you."

"Pardon me for being blunt, Miss," he replied. "But unless you're a young lady of rather broad experience, you can see how, unlikely it might be that you would have. It's my job to keep your sort of person from frequenting glaciers, you might say."

"Are you some kind of talking bear?" she asked. Talking bears were within her experience. One of her close friends was a former enchanted bear.

"I should say not." He held out his hands for inspection. Each contained ten fingers, the undersides soft and padded like feet, though smoother. Each digit was six-jointed, except the thumb, which had only four joints. Sharp claws curved from each fingertip. He next raised a meat-plattcr-sized foot, and she saw what had bothered her about him. It was on backwards. His toes pointed behind, and his heel pointed forward. It looked painful.

He grinned through a mouthful of what looked like icicles. "Clever way to throw you people off one's track, eh? Inherited me drift-hoppers from me great-great-grreat-gran, who was a snow faery, come to these lands as an immigrant durin' the great Purges in Chai-yong. Aristocrat, she was. my gran. Guarded the royal sacred mountain. But that didn't stop them smoothies from tryin' t' purge 'er."

"Chai-yong?" Maggie was puzzled. She'd heard the name only in connection with certain luxury items, and hadn't heard it at all recently. "I didn't know they even HAD faeries in Chai-yong."

"Don't suppose they did after them purges," he said. "Say, do you want to hear this or don't you?" She nodded, chastened.

"It was me grandam's job to keep the snows free of you pesky smoothies by luring any man foolish enough to intrude on 'er mountain to 'is death. She'd appear to him all pale and pretty, and smile at him friendly-like, you know, then throw him off the track with her backward feet trick. Poor devil would freeze to death chasin' around in circles. Work every time, these drift-hoppers do." He slapped his knee with a fur-muted plop, and laughed a volcanic laugh. "You should see 'em tryin' to figure out if I'm watching 'em or not. Drives 'em mad, it does."

"Who? Drives who mad?"

"The blokes comes up with the nymph. Mind you, I don't dally with 'em while she's about--she's a bit queer in the head, takin' up with mortals and the like, but the big 'uns are like that, and she is one of us, after all. But they knows I watch, and just let one of 'em get out of hand, and try to find the treasure they thinks I'm hiding."

"Are you?"

He grinned another icicle grin and asked, "Is that why you called me, Miss? To find me treasure?"

"No, sir," she said emphatically. "The last thing I want or need is a treasure. But if you have a horse-or better yet, some wings, perhaps?"

He laughed again and a shower of snow shook loose from an overhead ledge and slid to the floor, making a shining pile on the gray fur covering her feet.

"If I had me a horse, I'd eat it, and you can see I haven't got wings. But that little posey you tinkled entitles you to any reasonable help I can give you, compliments of Trickle. Unless I want to be in her bad graces, which I can tell you, I'm no coward, but I do not!" And he laughed again, this time crashing half the roof of his cave down around their ears. He remained unperturbed, however, and simply tented his furry form over Maggie until all the ice which had been shaken loose shattered onto the floor. He was a good host that way, at least.

"Has to watch me sense of humor around here," he confided. "Don't get company too often, and I gets carried away. Get it from me dad's folk, I suppose."

Maggie could tell by the pride in his voice that she wasn't going to get any help out of him, Trickle or no Trickle, until he'd told her all about it. "Who," she asked obliquingly, "were your dad's folk?"

"Frost giants, Miss, frost giants, of course! Can't you tell?" He shook his furry arms and twinkled at her with blue eyes which were, now that she looked at them, very like the King's. "One of the blokes got lost up here one time, chasin' after little grandam, just like they always did. Only she'd never seen the like of 'im before, and took a shine to 'im. He wasn't as furry as me, of course. That all come later. But he was used to the snow and cold, and didn't freeze, just got baffled-like. Once she unbaffled 'im, they sort of got together and started my kind."

"And what, if it's not too rude to ask, is your kind?"

"The faeries as knew grandam calls me Yeti, though of course, that was 'er name, not mine. Some calls me the snowman."

"Ah, then I HAVE heard of you," she said, her interest genuinely piqued now. "Trappers tell tales in my father's tavern sometimes, of abominable snowmen."

"Poo," said the Yeti. "They don't know nothing. There's only me and my two brothers in this whole country, and we does our job and keeps ourselves to ourselves. We think your trappers are pretty abominable too, scarin'
away what little game comes up to this high country. The smoothies we have dealings with mostly know us by our tracks, and the ones of 'em that gets away've got no need to call us abominable. Mostly, I hear, they calls us Bigfoot.” He looked down again proudly at his upturned heels, then, as if remembering his manners, added, "Me personal name is Sebastian.”

"Er-I'm Maggie. Maggie Brown, daughter of Bronwyn, daughter of Maud, daughter of Oonaugh, daughter of Elspat," she added, since Sebastian liked talking about relatives.

"Oh, you're a witch then," he said, impressed by her long matrilineage. "Well, now, why didn't you say so? No wonder little Trickle thinks you're all right. What can I do for you?"

"I thought you'd never ask," she said, and told him about Sally's unicorn-napping activities.

"That's her game, is it? Unicorns, is it? I should have known 'corns wouldn't be around roughnecks like the ones Nasturtium's been keeping company with." He glowered at Maggie and his glower was so fierce that if she were the trembling sort she would have trembled to see it. "You should have told me this sooner, Miss. We're a good day and a half behind 'em now. The only way we can possibly make it up is by taking you through the Needle's Eye."

"Needle's Eye?" It sounded painful to her.

"Aye," he nodded vigorously. "The Eye. It's what we Wee Folk call our secret way through the mountains. She'll have used it- too, and will've taken 'er filthy unicorn baiters with her. she should only turn mortal for it! But she's no descendant of Grandam Yeti for all that, and she doesn't know this old glacier like I does. Come along, girl." And without further discussion, he swept her once more into his high-pile embrace and carried her out of the cave, back out into the whistling wind and blowing snow. With a leap that cost him no more effort than the jump down had, he sprang upwards, landing as softly as a falling leaf on the lip of the crevasse. "Not bad for a bloke with backward feet, eh, Missy?" he asked.

Now that Maggie knew she was literally in good hands, she wasn't afraid to twist her head so that she could see where they were going, though she kept her nose buried in the fur of his forearm, ticklish as it was.

He used a sliding step where the new snow covered the ground, thrusting his heel forward like a skate. Once beyond the level snowfield; he used the small blue cracks in the glacier as stair steps, climbing easily with his feet practically at right angles to each other. He never needed to resort to handholds. On one side, Maggie found herself pressed against hard blue ice, while on the other side she cuddled against Sebastian. The Bigfoot romped up the mountainside more easily than Granny Brown's cat climbed trees. Maggie's weight didn't seem to encumber him. Listening to the deep bass beat of his great heart, she began to feel like a baby being rocked to sleep. In fact, she had to jerk herself awake when he spoke to her again.

"Here we are. Missy. You'll want to remember this to tell your grandchildren, I expect. It's not many smoothies come this way."

Maggie looked. The Needle's Eye was a vertical slit in the glacier, a fissure much like the one in which Sebastian camped. Only this one was perhaps a furlong thick from their side of the peak to the other. Looking around and down, she saw that where they had scaled the steepest, most direct access to the opening, a narrow trail wound up the mountain, a longer, tortuous path which Sally Forth and her men must have used.

The snowstorm raged on below them, and the wind moaned through the Eye, though no snow fell near them. The sun looked like a snowball frozen fast to the sky, and cast a deep plum shadow where the pinnacle shaded them. Sebastian set her down and gave her a gentle shove. "You're on your own here. Missy. I can barely make it through with my skin intact as it is, much less carrying you."

She slid carefully ahead of him, bracing herself against the walls to keep her feet from sliding out from under her. She skated through as quickly as she could, for it was very cold inside the tunnel. Once they were outside again, Sebastian hugged her back up into his dense fur.

The glacier was largest on this side of the mountain, and it took him hours to carry her down it. By the time he was halfway down, and her nose and fingers had again thawed, the sun was dying in the sky. All around them, a vast panorama of mountains and valleys layered itself dark purple in the chasms, then indigo, violet, and pale pink on the mountain's snowy peaks, finally turning pale yellow where the range met the last of the sunlit sky, then deepening again as the light died above into another range of pinks and purples, in bands as straight and striped as the threads on Maggie's loom.

All of this changed and darkened as Sebastian loped easily down the icy slopes. When he had reached the edge of the ice, where it was dirty and dark and butted against the mountain's soul, he let her down. At the foot of the peak a broad silver ribbon of river ran, and two ranges distant from them she saw the sea. Glinting randomly among the distant ridges, other glaciers shone like pink jewels, flirting back the dying light from their surfaces.

A babbling rose to meet them, and Maggie started, straining her eyes to see where it came from. A fairly large band of people moved around the single bright point of a campfire, like insects around a candle. "They don't seem to mind who hears them, do they?" she remarked to Sebastian.
"Oh, that ain't them, Missy. You're new to Blabbermouth country, I see. That's the river you're hearing. Enchanted, you know. Used to be a mighty witch lived here in the old days. She was born in a little village you can't see from here, but it sits over underneath the ledge of Worm's Roost Maze—that scarred-looking bit of ice just opposite us. You see it?"

Maggie followed his fuzzy finger to the glacier scored with a maze of curlicues and zigzags on the peak directly opposite them. Aha! Now they were getting someplace. That had to be the cliff castle the wizard had mentioned, there, carved into the ice just beneath the maze formation. She could barely make out the towers.

"The witch was a wretched sort of woman," Sebastian continued his story. "Drove all the people away from their village. They left just to be rid of 'er. I can tell you, she didn't care for that at all. One of the worst things about her was that she liked to talk all the time, but she didn't like to talk to herself. So she spelled the river so it would babble all the time, and never say anything, just like the village women she was lonesome for. Her spell worked so good not even she could stand it, and pretty soon she threw herself into the river and drowned, which ought to have shut the Blabbermouth up, if it had been a normal river and a normal spell, but it wasn't, you see, so it didn't. Some faeries claim the old girl's in there yet, and will tell you anything in the world if you want to wait that long, but I sometimes think them little 'uns gets muddled from all that thick mucky air they breathe down yonder. Anyway, Missy, this is as far as I can take you. I don't care for that dirty sort of ground, you know. Burns my feet."

Maggie nodded and mumbled and started striding down the mountain, for she had already spotted the unicorns and was impatient to be off.

"Softly, Missy," the snowman cautioned. "Softly."

She turned, flushed. "I beg your pardon. I haven't even thanked you, and you've been very kind." Her hands scabbled restlessly in her pockets as she sought the words to show her appreciation, and her right hand found the faery bells, which it drew forth. She looked at it as she would look at a broken pot, though for all the abuse the flowers had taken, the blooms were still bright and their petals intact, no doubt due to the influence of the magic. "I don't suppose these would signal one of your brothers over on that other glacier, should I happen to get into a tight spot over there?"

Sebastian shook his head until the fur flew. "Oh no. Missy. No indeed, no. Don't you go getting stuck over there on any account. None of my kind needs to guard that place. There's a worm, you know. Big fellow, steamy breath that'll melt you in a puff, and all that. And definitely not a faery. No, Missy, don't you go tanglin' with no worm. None of our sort hereabouts—the neighborhood's much too noisy, what with the river and all. I'm afraid your flowers won't do you much good from now on. Trickle probably only meant you to get as far as me with them anyway—it's our signal, like, when she comes to call, she always brings a spray along to tinkle and to brighten up me lair. They're the only thing I like about down below I can't get up on me glacier."

Knowing a hint when she heard one. Maggie held the flower stalk out to him. "In that case, I'd be pleased if you'd accept these. They're a bit bedraggled, but still colorful. Take them, please, and thank you."

Sebastian accepted them tenderly, twining them in the fur above his ear, lending himself a rakish and rather tropical air.

"You're very welcome, Missy, I'm sure," he said, and in three giant upward steps blended with the ice so well that she could no longer see him.

CHAPTER 12

Rusty crouched under the bridge, where they'd never look for her, and leafed through the heavy alchemy tome balanced on her knees. The spell she needed to combat her mother had to be in there somewhere. None of my kind needs to guard that place. There's a worm, you know. Big fellow, steamy breath that'll melt you in a puff, and all that. And definitely not a faery. No, Missy, don't you go tanglin' with no worm. None of our sort hereabouts—the neighborhood's much too noisy, what with the river and all. I'm afraid your flowers won't do you much good from now on. Trickle probably only meant you to get as far as me with them anyway—it's our signal, like, when she comes to call, she always brings a spray along to tinkle and to brighten up me lair. They're the only thing I like about down below I can't get up on me glacier."

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Any spell would do, really, as long as it incapacitated the old harpy. The ogress had gone too far this time. Entirely too far. Bad enough that Rusty had had to fetch and carry all night long two nights in a row for that ignoble Prince, who was only faking, anyway, while Lily Pearl and he drooled over each other and Mother and Leofwin discussed family lines. Daisy Esmeralda had shown unusually good sense, for her, and had fled back into the woods the moment she saw their tower filled with strange men.

The rescue party had left soon after they arrived, which was a pity, since their stories were much more interesting than the Prince's. Rusty was absolutely sure Leofwin had made up all the tales he told about slaying several bandits before they got him and defeating two or three evil wizards in the bargain.

The water slipped through the bridge's shadow, swaying the cattails near the bank. Rusty concentrated on the soothing gurgle to block out the sound of her mother and sister calling her. They wanted her to leave with them. It had taken Mother and Lily Pearl only a single day and night to break down the Prince, who didn't seem to mind being broken down at all. He'd readily believed Mother's usual bragadocio about Lily Pearl being a princess, especially after the old ogress had had Lily dig out her father's signet ring. Her Imperial Pale and Waness always wore that silly thing on a ribbon around her neck. Leofwin had appeared almost as interested in the ring as he was in the show she gave him digging the ring out of her bodice.
"Ruby Roooooo-oo-se!" Belburga's flat, nasal voice, immediately overhead, startled Rusty out of her reverie. Footsteps growled across the bridge, then back again; each thump echoed in the pulse pounding in Rusty's ears. Her palms sweated so that she had to wipe them off to keep from smearing the ink in her book. She would NOT go live in some other country with them, where her father would never find her. She would NOT leave without telling him. It wasn't fair of them to expect her to, and she wasn't about to do it. Besides, Leofwin had bragged that magic wasn't allowed in his country, and how could she ever get to be an alchemist if she went somewhere as backward as that?

"Come along. Ruby Rose, dear," her mother chirped over-lead again, in her falsest sweet voice. "You must hurry now. Four sisters and I are all packed. We wouldn't like to leave you behind."

Hah! There was nothing the old bag would like better. She cowed very well how her second daughter felt about her and irrevocably, Rusty was sure, felt the same, though she always kept in the illusion of being the doting mother for anyone who came within shouting distance. Rusty thought she probably kept up the act because she couldn't be sure which of the girls would bag the ichest husband. Mother was too clever not to have learned from the examples of certain legendary mothers who had thrown out heir least-liked offspring, only to have the girls immediately matched up by eagerly waiting kings and princes.

They called her for a few hours longer, never thinking to look under the bridge. This was the first time she had stirred from her room for any longer than necessary in months, and they had no idea where to look. Besides, neither of them was likely to soil herself crawling about on hands and knees and peering under ridges. Only Daisy Esmeralda might think of doing that, and she was probably saying farewell to the chickens or something.

So Rusty stayed there all afternoon while they called, tuning them out, searching her book for a spell to convince them to change their minds, and not finding one. Perhaps by the time she had come out for dinner, the Prince would decide he didn't like Lily after all, or Mother would decide she didn't like the Prince.

But then she heard her mother's voice again, and her footsteps in the bridge, as if she were calling out into the woods. "Come along now. Dear. We're leaving! It'll be dusk soon and you know Mother always travels best after dark! Ruby Rose? You see me now? Come at once. We'll leave you, you wretched imp! I swear we will! I won't let you spoil my ch-sister's chance for a good marriage!"

Even for a good marriage. Mama was in an uncommon hurry to leave. Why so sudden, and in the middle of the night? Even if Mother was nocturnal, neither Lily nor Daisy were, and the prince didn't seem to be either. Could all of this haste have to do with that strange-looking visitor Mother had entertained, the one Father and the witch said had something to do with unicorns and bandits? Rusty suspected strongly that her mother had gotten involved in something really dirty this time and was trying to climb out of it on Lily Pearl's snow white back, and Rusty had no intention of helping her do it.

Still, she was surprised to hear the horses; evidently ordered from the village, clatter across the bridge overhead just before dusk, spattering dirt and rock into the pages of her book and sprinkling little piles of dirt onto her hair and dress. But she was totally unprepared for the shock she felt when the horses clattered, now heavily laden, back across the bridge. Her mother's voice shrilly called out directions and admonitions, but did not call for her again, and all of Lily Pearl's remarks were addressed to the Prince.

Rusty tried to scramble out from under the bridge without tearing her dress or losing her book, but she couldn't move quickly enough to pop out of her hiding place before her family and the prince had crossed the meadow at an angle and were headed into the woods to the southwest. She ran onto the bridge and stood, staring into the woods as if she were calling out into the woods. "Come along now, dear. We're leaving! It'll be dusk soon and you know Mother always travels best after dark! Ruby Rose? You see me now? Come at once. We'll leave you, you wretched imp! I swear we will! I won't let you spoil my ch-sister's chance for a good marriage!"

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After a three-day hop. Wizard Raspberry changed back into a wizard, folded his bunny costume into his trick pocket, and knocked on Castle Rowan's great outer gate. And waited. And waited.

He hooted and halloed, but no guards challenged him and no servants greeted him. And even in his rabbit guise he couldn't hop high enough to leap the walls. Weary and worried, he sat down in front of the gate and watched the moor grass wave and the birds sail over the denuded plains surrounding the castle while he tried to think what to do and waited for his ears and nose to stop twitching. The only problem with the rabbit guise was that it tended to make the plains around the castle were surrounded by the famed forest of rowan trees, which grew in profusion only in this spot, the ancestral home of King Roari Rowan, hereditary Border Lord. Beyond the trees, to the north and east, the ice-studded, cave-riddled mountains thrust into the sky, walling off Argonia from invasion from the north and east. These were the mountains Rowan had patroled, and which the men who should have been in this castle should have been patroling.
But they weren't here, and he doubted they were patrolling either. His knocks on the great gate rang hollow, echoing deep and lonely around the circular keep before returning emptily to him. He supposed he'd have to go looking for someone when he was rested, but right now he was too tired for even another tiny hop.

So he watched the birds dipping over the moors awhile longer, enjoying, as he always did, their carefree diving as they glided, soaring above the treetops to return to the distant crags. Riding the wind, catching the currents, swooping, sailing, calling, breathing bright vermilion flames. Breathing what!

Raspberry got clumsily to his feet, which had fallen asleep, and scanned the mountains and the woods again. The day was gray and dreary, pregnant with unshed rain, and he had been watching only general movements of the fauna in the surrounding countryside. But that was definitely a flash he'd seen, definitely coming from a flying form.

And . . . yes. The form was red. Grimley the dragon, out hunting, no doubt, flaming up to have a better look at the topography on this hazy day. Raspberry waved both hands. Though the dragon didn't seem to see him, the creature nevertheless swooped out of the forest and made a great circle around the castle.

Raspberry hollered, in the elfin pan-tongue, the one all beasts could understand, and Grimley stopped, almost falling out of the sky, backflapped hurriedly, and flew over to investigate, landing on tippy-claw atop the crenelations of the round stone gate tower.

"Dragon Grimley," the wizard panted, exhausted from his leaping and shouting, not to mention all the hopping he'd done earlier, "Am I glad to see you!"

"What's cookin', hot shot?" the dragon asked, amiably enough. "Say, you haven't seen any game down here, have you? There's s'posed to be a herd of cattle for me and the missus, but I haven't found 'em. The missus is due to hatch any time now, and she can't keep her mind on it proper-like when she's hungry, now can she?"

Raspberry said he supposed not, and tried to tell Grimley of the King's plight, but to his chagrin the dragon was unsympathetic.

"He'll keep till my son's hatched, hot shot. The agreement was he kept us a herd, and we provide him with a dragon's-eye view of the country. I don't see a herd, do you?"

Raspberry had to admit he didn't.

"Well then, just cool your heels here for awhile, while I hunt up some meat before Grizel takes a bite out of me."

Raspberry did the only sensible thing to do when such a large, determined dragon suggested that he cool his heels. He waited.

"We're almost there!" Sally shouted to the men when they had eaten. She shouted not because the men were making any more noise than usual, and certainly not because of the zombies or the unicorns, but because of the river.

True to its name, the sluggish, mud-brown Blabbermouth babbled loudly and unceasingly, allowing no one to be heard above it without effort. "Now that can't be true, says I, oh no, that will never do at all and then he says to me, he goes, lookit here, if you didn't take on so about every little thing but I can tell you I was having none of that, and I goes ..." The raucous river sounded rather like the chatter of the King's courtiers, Colin thought, allowing for certain lapses in diction.

Sally valiantly raised her voice several decibels higher than the river, and most of her men strained with unbanditlike courtesy to hear her. "Always at times like this," she screamed, "I feel it lightens our loads--"

"WHAT?!" demanded a few on the outer fringes, reluctant to miss the message.

"LIGHTENS. OUR. LOADS." Sally obligingly screamed louder. "LIGHTENS OUR LOADS AND QUICKENS OUR STEP TO RECALL THE HISTORY OF OUR GALLANT--"

"COME AGAIN?"

"OUR GALLANT MOVEMENT. THEREFORE I WOULD HAVE YOU DRAW ASIDE WITH ME, AT THIS TIME, SO I MAY SPEAK WITH YOU, MY BROTHERS-IN-ARMS, OF OUR GOALS IN OUR GLORIOUS REVOLUTION."

"WHAT WAS THAT?"

"OUR GLORIOUS REV-COME ON." And with a graceful sweeping arc of her shapely arm, the nymph led them as far back up the mountain and away from the river's babbling as she could go. Primrose and Wulfric, still in wolf form, bounded after her, each claiming one of the nymph's knees for a chin rest when she had seated herself.

Colin saw her point imperiously, and one of the bandits loosened the noose binding him to the zombies and shoved him forward. "She wants you to come too, songbird," the bandit snarled, and grabbing the ropes binding Colin's wrists dragged him up the hill.

Sally smiled a polite, social smile to the assembled ruffians. "I know you are all impatient to be at our
stronghold, as am I, and I regret the necessity of pitching our camp beside this noisy river. But unlike myself, our
brother. Wulinc, and the unicorns, you men, and certainly our Master's new servants, would endanger yourselves if
you tried to cross the river at night--"

"We know that. Sal." said Colin's escort.

Sally's voice was filled with emotion as she began speaking. In the deep shadows from the distant campfire
beyond and the soft wash of moonlight from above, the planes and hollows of her face took on mysterious
significance. Her voice was all the more effective because they had to listen carefully to hear her when it dropped
into its lowest registers, though when she spoke excitedly it fairly sang across the night, cutting through the riverine
rattling as if the Blabbermouth were an ordinary stream.

Pent-up tears glittered in her eyes, all the more starlike because there were no stars in this cloud-shrouded night
to compete. Her hands flew like nightbirds illustrating her points, which were, as far as Colin could tell, excellently
dramatized illogical poppycock. The men around him didn't share his views, however. Watching their faces as they
lapped up her oratory was enough to make his skin crawl in three different directions.

"Is she like this often?" he whispered to the bandit beside him.

"Oh, no. Better most times. We generally does this every night, when we're all together and Sal ain't out on
patrol or chasing 'round after 'corns. Gives a man a wonderful lift, don't it?"

They were shushed angrily by the men closest to them, but Sally seemed not to notice. Her bosom was heaving
with pride as she told how the Dark Pilgrim had come to her stream, recognizing her at once as no mere nymph but
as a being of intelligence and resource as well as charm and beauty.

The bandits nodded, listening open-mouthed and rapt, though Colin thought at times one or more of them
looked rather puzzled, as if he was trying to remember something. Wulfric whimpered now and then to punctuate
the narrative. He looked very much as if he'd like to howl.

"Our great leader explained to me," Sally continued, "that it was my duty, and even my holy destiny, to gather
you together and lead you in gathering together the tools with which we will purge this land of our oppressors. I was
chosen, I, who had been favored above you poor mortals with an inborn knowledge of our land, important friends
among faery and mortal, were and even ogre-kind, since my brother husbanded the quasi-ogress, our sister-in-the-
cause, Belburga."

"Tell us again how that ogress was so hot your brother had to turn into a tree to get some rest, Sal," the ruffian
next to Colin shouted.

Sally continued with a sweet smile, "My brother will recover in time to take his rightful place in our new
regime, I'm sure, for it will be a wonder and a glory, with health, youth and beauty for the righteous, and punishment
for the wicked. Our magnificent hand-picked army, of which you, my beloved comrades, are the vanguard, shall be
the backbone of a reign whose like has never been seen in the world."

"I beg your pardon, ma'am," Colin said, trying to sound like an eager acolyte. "But what exactly is our mission
and-please excuse my ignorance, but why do we need a new order?"

Sally regarded him as kindly as if he was a child who had just asked why larks sing and she was his mother.
"To replace the OLD order, of course. Because this land is now ruled by a magically endowed few who control the
hard working, deserving masses-folk who gain what little they have by personal merit alone." She said it word for
word, he was sure, just as she had learned it from her so-called "Dark Pilgrim."

Naturally it didn't take into account that she herself, and the pilgrim too, no doubt, were magic, as were the
unicorns, but Colin thought he had best not go into that. It would sound too much as if he were arguing with her, and
he was really not in any position to debate anything. Clearly she and all her men were thoroughly convinced by
something beyond good sense of the truth of the twaddle she was feeding them.

He looked away, disgusted. For someone who claimed to disdain magic, the Dark Pilgrim was certainly using a
lot of it to his advantage. No wonder Sally and the helpless villagers could travel with this bunch of cutthroats
unmolested, and no wonder the ruffians cooperated with a scheme that had no visible profit in store for them except
the distant promises of "health, youth, and beauty." They were as ensorcelled as the poor villagers. He hated to think
what lay in store for the Everclear folk at the bandit stronghold. And for himself, as far as that went. But at least he
knew what he was doing, unlike those poor unseeing clods. Look at them. They didn't even close their eyes to sleep,
and their breath smelled terrible from their lower jaws hanging slack all the time. Why, only the tricks of the
firelight gave them any expression at all-like that one just at the edge, toward the back, the woman in the kerchief
who seemed to wink at him.

Sally droned on, "Do you, my comrades, remember all that I have told you?"

"Aye," the bandits chorused in a voice as solemn as one of the classes at the minstrel academy being asked to
recite all seventy-eight verses of some obscure dirge. "And the Dark Pilgrim met her at the stream and ..."

Colin, for his part, nodded and smiled as if he understood, and shuddered, and looked back at the zombies. He
preferred the honestly idiotic faces of those who were at least visibly bewitched to those of the bandits, who were under the illusion they were thinking for themselves.

He rubbed his eyes, tired, and looked back at the zombies again. Then repeated the process. It actually looked as if one of those will-less beings, the woman he had noticed before, had moved forward, to the edge of the group, just beyond the burly smith. She now occupied the place he was sure had formerly contained the cobbler's wife. Then, very slowly, she raised her head and looked straight at him, and winked.

Moonshine's voice touched his mind, whispering. "Softly, minstrel, if you would not betray her to our enemy's nag. I felt her near even as you sat entrall'd by that nymph person."

That nymph person was giving the bandits a good-night speech after hearing their lesson, presumably before she tucked each of them in.

"Sing them a lullabye," Maggie's thought came to him through Moonshine. "They'll never doze off by themselves with this stupid river carrying on all night."

"I know just the one!" Colin answered, relieved both that she was still in one piece and that she had arrived to rescue them. "I'll sing it as soon as Sally's done talking. Then you can have your troops spring out of where ever it is that you've concealed them and capture this whole verminous lot. right?"

"Not exactly," she said. "Something like that."

"You mean you're going to try to get us out of here using your magic alone?"

Maggie hedged for a moment. "Well, YOUR magic, actually. Mine seems to be-er-malfunctioning. If you'll just do as I say and sing them to sleep, instead of asking so many questions, I'll get you loose and we can escape."

"What do you mean, 'malfunctioning'?!" he asked, so upset by the implications that he failed to notice Wulfric rising from Sally's lap and shaking himself, wandering off to sniff out some rock or tree upon which he could leave his lupine calling card. "Are you mad? Without magic you're nothing but a regular girl, and this is no place, I can tell you, for regular girls. Don't you consider it troublesome enough that Sally and her little band have Moonshine and me? Did you get so awfully lonesome, or feel so terribly left out that you had to fling yourself into the fray just for company? It's that rescuing business of yours again, isn't it, Maggie? Well, lei me tell you, darling Maggie, you bloody well can't rescue anybody if you haven't got anything to do it with and nowhere to go once you've done it. They could catch us easily. How did you intend that we outrun a whirlwind and a werewolf?"

"They'd be asleep," she said. "And there's Moonshine---""

"Maybe one of them is hard of hearing and wouldn't FALL asleep. Did that ever occur to you? I suppose not. And for your information, they have a unicorn too. And she knows perfectly well you're no zombie."

"If you'll just kindly shut up and sing your friends to sleep, she'll never even know I'm here." Maggie retorted. "For though she is clever and wise, you alone can help us. I can outrun Primrose, for she is old and more sullied than she ever claimed I was, and I know right is on our side."

"Is it really?" Colin replied. "How comforting."

"Well, really, Colin," Maggie's thoughts interrupted before his own was completed. "I know you think we haven't got a chance, but even if you're angry about it, that's no reason to growl at Moonshine."

"I only said 'how comforting,'" Colin protested. "I didn't growl."

He'd been facing back towards Sally Forth in order to avoid any suspicion in the direction of the zombies, but now he looked back down the hill, puzzled.

On the far side of the dwarf, between Maggie and the mountain, a long, dark, bristling form crouched, the fire reflecting light from the bandages at one end and the fangs at the other. Maggie's memory was indelibly engraved on both ends, the wolf's nose as well as his backside, as Colin very well knew.

Launching himself to his hobbled feet, Colin fumbled in his pocket for his flute and feverishly tried to think of a wolvish lullabye.

It didn't work. He tripped on his hobbles and fell, bowling down the hill and into the wolf, zombies, Maggie and all.

"That's certainly one way to stop a werewolf," Maggie's grim thought came to him as he attempted to disentangle himself. His legs were scissored across the dwarf's chest, his arms outflung, pushing Maggie into the oblivious baker's ample lap. Beneath him, panting heavily, lay the wolf, knocked breathless when Colin's head had driven into his belly.

"How very rude!" exclaimed Sally Forth, who had dumped Primrose to the ground and whirlwinded herself down the slope to investigate the disturbance. "I gave this whole talk this evening, uriSer these adverse conditions, particularly for your benefit, minstrel, and this is how--"

"Uppity, are we," babbled the river, "I'll have that out of you soon enough says I, and she says ..."

"Ooowwwwoooo!" Wulfric howled.
"Why, lookit, Sal," said the ruffian who'd been punctuating Sally's speech with his own enthusiastic remarks all evening. He grabbed Maggie's chin in his hand and jerked her face toward the firelight. "Our Wulfric's caught 'imself a live one."

Maggie slapped the man's hands smartly, but, entangled as she was in the baker, she couldn't get enough balance to do him any real harm. He dragged her to her feet, pinioning her arms behind her.

Sally stepped in front of him and studied Maggie's face for a moment, then snatched the kerchief from the tangled brown hair and examined her even more closely. "This is your witch?" the bandit leader asked Colin.

Primrose, who had trotted down the hill behind her, said, "That's the witch, O Maiden. Ugly hussy, isn't she?"

But Sally's face was filled with a kind of pleased surprise. "Why, no. Primrose. How can you say such a thing? She's beautiful. The very image of the Dark Pilgrim."

Wizard Raspberry was glad to see the dragon. Grimley, return. What he was not so pleased to see was the predatory gleam in the eye of the large, dangerous, and very hungry-looking beast. "Any luck?" the wizard asked solicitously.

Grimley settled down on the path in front of the wizard this time, instead of on the castle's ramparts, a position which would block Raspberry's escape, should escape become necessary. "Not so's you could notice it. hot-shot. You seen any likely looking game?"

"Nothing at all," the wizard replied with authentic regret, made even more sincere by the manner in which the dragon eyed him, as if visibly dividing him into steaks, ribs, chops, and loins. "But you have my complete sympathy. I'm hungry myself-so hungry I can quite feel my bones poking through my skin," he emphasized, rubbing his bony knees to illustrate the point. "Say," he added, changing the subject. "Do you know what I think happened to your cattle?"

"No," the dragon said. "But looks like you're going to tell me. Fire away."

"I've been thinking about it, and Til wager those brigands the King is going after dispersed his men and took all of your cattle for themselves. Doesn't that make you want to help the King?"

"Makes me hungry, is what it does," Grimley said, being a single-minded creature who never allowed himself to be distracted by emotionally laden side issues. "Never fear, if you're right, I'll remember them blokes for stealing from me. But meanwhile, my missus needs her nourishment, and I can't go too far afield to fetch it, neither."

"If only I knew where there was a pleasant stream, I'd be glad to catch us some fish for supper, but I don't suppose--"

"Fish!" The dragon puffed a small sooty cloud of gray smoke to show what he thought of the idea. "Fish is no kind of food for a dragon. Do you suppose I'd be flying my wings off looking for real game if the missus would eat fish? The south fork of the Blabbermouth runs just north of here, and it's packed with the puny-scaled things, but a hatching dragon deserves nothing but the best--"

"Oh, I quite agree!" said Raspberry quickly. Grimley was putting on a head of steam now, his scales glowing deeper red than usual with an inner light and the smoke he was involuntarily belching into the wizard's face caused Raspberry to cough. Haste was definitely in order. "What if the fish don't look or taste like fish? It's very nourishing food, you know, makes the e-scales shiny, I'm told. Do you suppose if Madame Grimley didn't know, since there's no other food about. I mean--"

"Didn't know? Fish not taste like fish? What kinda smokescreen you tryin' to throw up on me, hotshot?"

"It's no smokescreen, noble dragon. It's a little something I just happen to be able to do as a little fringe benefit to being a master of disguise. If you'll show me to this river, I'll be happy to give you a free demonstration."

Grimley bared his flagon-sized conical teeth in a draconian grin. "Sure thing, hot shot. Climb aboard. I'm game if you are, heh heh."

"It's Uncle Fearchar," Maggie said. "The Dark Pilgrim she keeps talking about is Uncle Fearchar."

Morning had come, and the bandits were breaking camp. Between the river's incessant yammering and the torrential rains which had started around midnight, everyone had had the worst possible night. Colin and Maggie were tied close together, in front of the zombies, but Sally, greatly impressed by Maggie's resemblance to the leader of the Cause, had ordered that neither witch nor minstrel were to be molested. The Dark Pilgrim would decide their fate.

Maggie shivered in her sodden clothing. Her wet hair was plastered to her skull. She leaned against Colin, and they squished together from shoulder to hip. "I don't suppose we can hope Uncle remembers me with affection, can we?" she asked wearily.

"n-n-naCHOO! No," he replied, fighting down another sneeze. "I don't suppose we can." The wretched weather and lack of sleep were finally catching up with him. He'd been coughing and sneezing most of the night.

"I shall save us, never fear," Moonshine said. "Primrose tells me this uncle of Maggie's wishes me to perform a unicornly task for him. Well, then, I shall simply refuse to do it. no matter what, until he frees you both."
"Somehow, darling, I don't think you get to choose," Maggie said. "But thanks for the thought."

"If we get far enough from the river today, I'll sing them to sleep if I have to ya-ya-yaCH--" Colin's nose twitched and he said "yodel" quickly, and finished the sneeze.

But even if Sally had not decided to follow the banks of the Blabbermouth without deviation, Colin couldn't have carried out his plan. The night of coughing left his throat dry and sore and his chest aching from the constant racking. His boots got wet when they forded the river, adding to his discomfort. None of them got any chance to dry out. Streaks of cold gray rain flogged them all the way across the valley.

Maggie looked anxiously for the ice-bound castle she had seen from the top of the glacier, but with the sky so low and the foothills swelling up in the distance, she could see no trace of it. No one spoke all that day, and as the dim daylight faded into a deeper gray, many of the zombies and one or two of the bandits were coughing and sneezing too.

At the next bend in the river they forded again, and she saw the town. At first she thought that it, and not the castle, must be their destination, but then she saw that rain poured inside several of the buildings, which were without roofs, washing gutted interiors. This must be the town Sebastian had mentioned, the one everybody left because of the witch. As they passed through, brigands swarmed out of the walls like roaches, falling in beside and around them.

"Puny-lookin' lot you 'ave there, mum," said one of these newcomers to Sally Forth. "And women? What's this revolution comin' to?"

"You forget yourself, Sergeant." she said, and puffed out her chest in what Maggie thought was a very obvious way to remind him she was a woman.

They passed through the town, and climbed a path leading up and over a tall, brush-covered slope. Rounding this hill, Maggie looked up. She was not too surprised to see the icy underpinnings of the cliff castle.

"All right then, men," Sally said briskly. "Attend to the unicorns." She turned to Primrose, who had been following her like a lap dog, and suddenly flung the strap of her hunting horn around the unicorn's neck. The new arrivals quickly added their ropes to the strap.

Primrose, firmly bound in no time, was too amazed to buck. "Maiden, what is this?"

"It's for your own good, my love. You've got to be hauled up-there," she pointed. "And the ropes are necessary."

"But I don't WANT to go up there," the unicorn whinnied. "I loathe high places! Can't I wait for you here? Surely if your leader requires a boon from me, he can have the common decency to come down here to get it!"

"She's going to be a problem," Sally told the men coldly. "Take her first, then the other, and pen them in the usual place. As for these," she indicated the villagers, "I saw a house with part of a roof on it, just this side of the river. Keep them there until I've spoken with the Dark Pilgrim about his plans for them. Just now," she said, turning in a quick circle, "I think I shall blow up and apprise the Dark Pilgrim of the arrival of his visiting relative. He may wish to prepare a special reception for her."

Business was just picking up for the evening at the Inn of the Scalded Cat. The lamps were lit, sending a cozy glow through the smokey haze emanating from the customers' pipes. Giles Thatcher and old Shearer nodded and commented from time to time, as Hillman regaled their friends with tales of their recent adventures. The innkeeper, Brewer, smiled and slid full flagons back across the bar to his wife, who delivered them to his customers. Even though his little jaunt to Everclear had cost him a day's business, he was making up for it now. Every herder, farmer, and hunter with a spare moment's time came to the inn for a drop, and to hear the story of the deserted village and the injured Prince first hand.

The inn was so bustling and noisy, in fact, that it was some time before anyone noticed the forlorn figure standing in the doorway, clutching what looked like a bowl and a book. It was Good wife Brewer who spotted her. "Shoo, child. Go 'way. This is no place for little girls," she admonished, flapping her hands at the girl as she would at one of her own children.

"I beg your pardon, my good woman," the girl said. "You cannot talk to me' in that fashion. I am the daughter of the ogress Belburga and the mighty Wizard Raspberry, and am a powerful alchemist in my own right. I wish to purchase a meal from you, and a horse, so that I may seek my father at Castle Rowan."

"Well, my word," Goody Brewer said, squinting at her. "I believe-why, yes, you ARE the Dame's-middle child, isn't it? The red one? What was the name?"

"Rusty," the girl said promptly.

"Ah, yes. Rusty it was. Though that doesn't sound quite right, but never mind. Now then. Rusty, you just run along home to your own mama before she gets peeved at the likes of me. and have her feed you your supper and put you to bed like a good girl. This isn't a nice place for a young lady like you, a tavern."
"My mother and sisters have left to marry my eldest sister to a prince, and have left no food in MY tower," Rusty informed her coldly, but with a slight trembling of her chin. "I need to purchase food and a horse so that I may join my father. I can pay you handsomely—I'll be happy to barter my magic favors in exchange—"

"Belburga's gone? Are you sure?" But before the girl could answer, the woman called back over her shoulder. "Hey there, j lads, what do you think? The child here says Belburga and her girls run off with that Prince fella. Thought you boys said 'e was laid up?" "Only tired-like, Molly," her husband corrected, calling back to her. "Unicorn water had 'im mostly healed before we ever got ' back here."

"YOU-nee-com water?" Goody Brewer asked scornfully, as if she'd never heard of such a thing.

"Aye. Of course, unicorn water, woman! Are you so ignorant i you don't know about THAT?" "Of course, I know, but—"

"Bring the lass indoors, Molly," Hillman hollered. He was anxious for his host and hostess to stop bellowing back and forth at each other so he could continue his story.

"I'd best, at that," Molly Brewer agreed, and looped her arm around Rusty's shoulders. Not particularly to Molly's surprise, the girl was shaking. "We'd best get some bread and cheese into you, dearie, and a wee bit of ale, what?"

"Yes, ma'am," Rusty agreed, eagerness replacing her hauteur. "And then I'll pay you."

"Pooh? A child like you? If the constable hadn't died of gout, he'd close us down for selling to children! I wouldn't hear of it. You sit over there next to Giles and—"

"Why, it's Ruby Rose, Lily Pearl's little sister!" Giles Thatcher exclaimed. "How's your lovely sister, Miss? And the prince?"

"Gone is how," Rusty informed him bitterly, and to her dismay, began to cry, contradicting the image she had been trying to present as an independent but brilliant young alchemist setting out on her own. Sniffling, she told them of her suspicions of her mother's part in a plot against the King, and of her father's journey in rabbit form to Castle Rowan to find help for his Highness, and her mother's subsequent departure at Leofwin's side, with both her sisters. "I didn't want to go," she explained. "So I hid. But she took everything. The only things I have left are this," she held up her book, "and my crucible," she indicated the bronze bowl. "If it hadn't fallen half through a mousehole in the bottom of my cupboard, she would have taken that, too. I'm glad she didn't. I do all my best magic in it, and besides, Daddy gave it to me for my birthday. He said he got it in payment for some magic he did for an important Eastern potentate."

Hillman leaned forward, chest pressing against his big beefy arms.

"You say your dad's at Rowan Castle? You'll get no 'elp there, little girl. I served there till six months ago, but me and the other blokes was all discharged. Messenger said 's 'ighness wanted us to go back to our 'ome towns and keep watch from there."

"Nevertheless, that's where my father's gone. He says the King is in dire peril over at some glacier, and he's going to try to get the King's dragon friend to help him. That's why I need a horse, so I can go to my father's aid," she sniffed, and said very seriously, "If what you say is true, all the more reason why he'll need all the arcane forces at my disposal to help the King."

"I'll go on up there and talk to your father about this meself," Hillman told her. "But arcane forces or none, you're not going along. War's no place for children."

"I'm not a child," Rusty said with great dignity, the effect of which was spoiled by the aggressive thrust of her pointed chin. "I'll help whether you like it or not, churl."

"Is that so?" Hillman asked easily. "Then you'd better do some magic, ducks, because that's the only way you're going along."

Rusty set her book down and turned decisively to a random page. Though she had yet to make one single formula come out the way she wanted it to, she wasn't about to let these louts know it. She'd let on that this time was a special case, that usually her magic worked smoothly. As it would, some day—only why not now? She had studied very hard, though the writing and pictures in the book were cramped and faded and sometimes ran off the pages, she knew roughly half of the formulae. They should work for her-only they never did. Nevertheless, she moved the crucible from her lap to the table, keeping her eyes tight to the book's page and not watching what she was doing.

The crucible clanged against a flagon, which tipped over into it, spilling brew inside the bronze bowl. Rusty snatched up her precious book before the ale could smear the pages. "Clumsy!" she accused everyone in general.

"I'll say, 'clumsy.' " complained Shearer. "That was good ale."

"Lookit there!" Giles exclaimed. "If that ain't slick! Her bowl's smokin'-like. And her not even touchin' a fire!"

"Humph," said Shearer, still mourning the ale, "Cheap trick. No proper magic in a small thing like that."

Rusty watched gleefully as the smoke dribbled down from the crucible and across the floor. It was not dense smoke, nor particularly impressive, no more interesting in itself than the mist that had covered the stream outside her
window every morning of her life. Gradually, it solidified and took on color, and from within it came a deep chuckle.

" 'Ere now, what're you laughin' at, Bub?" asked Shearer, addressing the smoke. Everyone else had fallen silent by now, and the chuckling was very obviously not coming from the sort of place one was accustomed to hear emitting chuckling.

"That was SO good!" the voice replied. "And I was dry as a grass fire. Haven't had a proper drink in two hundred years or better! Now then, to settle the tab. To whom do I owe this edifyin' lubrication?"

"Me," Rusty exclaimed, jumping off her bench. "I conjured you forth. You are a simulacrum, aren't you?"

The thing in the smoke was still not visibly anything other than a vaguely manlike blob of pastel protoplasm. Abruptly, it rose and leaned towards her. "A simu-what?" it asked, and suddenly gelled into a pirate.

Anyone could see he was a pirate. Though he remained a little misty at the bottom, the red bandana on his head was clear enough, and the peg leg which started at his right knee, and the black patch on his right eye, and the knowing leer on his weather-beaten face.

"A simulacrum," Rusty repeated firmly. One had to be firm with riffraff. Her mother had at least taught her that. "I ordered a simulacrum, not a pirate. If you're not a simulacrum, you'll simply have to leave and send one out."

"Why, blow me down, little lassie, yer tongue's as sharp as me last skipper's and makes as little sense!" He hovered at knee height in the air and beamed down at her as if he'd just given her an enormous vote of approval.

"Only thing twas in there," he nodded to the crucible, "was me, and I was dried 'most to dust. Nothin' but yer timely infusion of spirits-tee hee, ain't that somethin'? Spirits for the spirit-nothin' but them spirits coulda revived me. I say, you wouldn't have another wee drop, would you?"

"No!" said Molly Brewer. "She would not. I said the girl's food was free, but I'll not extend free service to ever' guzzlin' golem she dirties up me floor with!"

"Ah, a fine-spirited buxom wench if ever I saw one-twould be revivin' enough to see the likes o' you, me beauty, after all these long lonesome years, if it hadn't been that that wily wazir dried me out in the desert before passin' me pot along. And me a sea-goin' man! Didn't agree with me, all that hot air and sand, I can tell you that, darlin'. Dry as powder I got, dry as bone. But I can see yer a woman of principle and-"

"Oh, well, maybe just one more," Molly relented.

"If you aren't a simulacrum, who are you?" Rusty interrupted impatiently.

"Aye, and what's yer business 'ere, I might ask?" Hillman added. "We has a national 'mergency goin' on at t' present time, and if you're of no use, I'll thank ye to be on yer way. Don't like vagrants and vagabonds in Little Darlington, we don't."

"Well now," the pirate said after due consideration enhanced by swallowing in one long gulp the free drink from Molly Brewer. "What I USED to be was a simple sea-farin' man, workin' for an independent import-export merchant whose offices, you might say, were on the high seas."

"Ha!" Rusty said. "You look like a pirate to me." She'd heard pirates described often and in great detail by the bards and minstrels among Lily's suitors.

"Now, now, lassie. I do declare I never saw such a youngster for name callin' as you be. But very well, pirate, if you prefer. I was known as Jehan the Fleet till I lost one of me pins in a-er-dispute me employer 'ad with a business rival over a merger. Same kinda thing as got me inta me pot. THAT happened when me employer went out of business-permanent-like, at the end of a Kaboolian warship. Me mates was killed to a man, but I was tossed into the briney, and fished out by them as put me there in the first place. Ship's master was a mean bastard, a wily wicked wizard--"

"My father is a wizard," Rusty informed him coldly.

"Ah, but is he a Kaboolian wizard? I think not, and oh, they're a different breed offish altogether, lassie, I can tell you. It was him put me in this 'ere pot and run me all over this country, bringin' me out long enough'to tell 'is mates how 'e sunk us, then clappin' me back in again. Got tired of it eventually, 'e did, and sold the pot, which is how I come to end up in yer good company."

"Worthless," Hillman said. "I thought as much. This girl's no more magic than I am. I'm leavin' now, boys, to serve the King. Anyone comin'?"

"Hold on there, soldier," Jehan the formerly Fleet snarled, 'Just 'oo is callin' 'oo worthless? So happens as this lass'ere is me present employer, and under the terms of me contract she gets the standard three wishes. What'll it be, darlin'?"

"Take me-us-to my father at Castle Rowan," she commanded, sweeping her hand to include all of the tavern's patrons. She was sure her father would know what to do with a crowd of people who could help the King, even if she wasn't sure how. And he would think very well of her indeed for being thoughtful enough to bring them along.

"Here now, lass, don't be so 'asty!" Shearer cried. "Some of us mayn't be up to the journey." He hated the idea
Rusty turned her determined little pointy face back to Jehan the Genie. "MAKE them want tol' she commanded, "THEN take us."

"That's two wishes," Jehan told her. "But no sooner said than done."

"There's your glacier. King," Gypsy Davey said, pointing out to King Rowan and his party what may or may not have been a solid bit of white among all of the gray and white mist, rain, cloud, snow and ice blanketing both the horizon and the more immediate atmosphere that day.

"Amazing," Sir Cyril Perchingbird said, shaking his head, still unsure of what he saw. "You must have very good eyes. I'd never have spotted it myself."

"Naw, King's man," Davey replied modestly. "Not so good eyes. My mother, she knows this place. When she was little girl, our people come here summers to dance for King Finbar. She knows this valley."

"Ah, I see. That explains it." Perchingbird nodded and looked back through the rain toward where the castle allegedly lurked. He was taking careful mental notes, to enter in the archives when he returned. No minstrel had traveled here that he knew, and the gypsies shared little of their lore with the archives. Princess Pegeen, naturally, knew this place well, but she did not often see fit to mention her physical surroundings in her letters. She had mentioned, however, a magic river. He believed she had said that it talked. And last night, when the gypsies had at last ceased chattering and all were settled out of the rain, inside the wagons, hadn't he heard a sort of low murmuring in the distance, to the north and slightly west?

King Rowan strode back and forth in the rain as if it wasn't there. "Verry well, lads. It looks as if we're to do this thing alone. Our gypsy comrades here will accompany us, with their weapons and horses. The ladies will remain with the wagons at a safe distance."

"We're going in without the dragons, sire?" a general asked.

Sir Cyril thought King Roari cared as little for the decision as his men did. judging from the surliness of his Highness's answer. Sarcasm was not one of Rowan's usual modes of expression. He didn't do it particularly well.

But, of course, the King had good reason to worry. To risk himself with a small party of hand-picked fighting men (and one scholarly observer) armed to the teeth, with war horses and two dragons in attendance, was one thing. To risk himself with what was left of those men after a shipwreck, with twenty-odd footsore, half-drowned sailors and a handful of gypsies who understood fighting over women or gold but did not understand fighting over matters of policy, was quite another. Particularly when there was only one horse for every five men. and a few gypsy daggers among them for weapons.

Their only other assets were the King's sword, Old Gutbuster, and the swords retained through the shipwreck by two other generals. Sir Cyril had placed in his own belt a handy little pen knife, a gift from a smolderingly pretty gypsy girl who had been pleased to tell him all she knew of palm reading, and of his future, which she saw as including a dark, beautiful and mysterious woman-herself.

Xenobia emerged from one of the wagons and stalked across the sodden valley floor to join the group of men. Flinging the fringed edge of her black shawl across her chest so that it covered her as completely as a cloak, she glared at them all defiantly, finally turning to Prince Worthyman.

"You are responsible for my men who die with your King," she said. "They will die. You, you will die also."

"Now, now, Zenobia, old gurl," the Prince said, giving her a brief sideways bear hug with one strong arm. "I appreciate you worrying about me, but you mustn't carry on so. Bad for morale." The gypsy whipped herself from his grasp and threw her arms around his neck, kissing him passionately. "Xenobia will not worry, love. They will kill you, then we will kill them. Right?" Worthyman beamed fondly down at her. "Rright." "Now that we've established our rear guard," the King said, nodding to Xenobia's retreating back, "Shall we move out smartly?"

THINGS ARE ALREADY BAD ENOUGH FOR COLIN, MAGGIE, AND MOONSHINE WITHOUT MAKING THIS CHAPTER 13.

CHAPTER 14

Sally Forth threw a rope ladder down from a hole in the narrow ledge running along the castle's eastern side. A guard clanked down it and at the foot of the cliff turned to salute the sergeant, ignoring Wulfric, who was still in wolf form.

"Pilgrim says to send four men up with t' witch and the minstrel, and the rest of you quarter down here for tonight."

Despite the castle's sinister appearance, Maggie was glad she and Colin were going there instead of staying with the bandits in the mostly roofless hovels in the village. Colin's cough was so bad by now that he had difficulty
hanging onto the rope ladder. She tried to help him, but the guard ahead of her on the ladder reached down to yank her hair. From below she heard Moonshine's terrified screams as Sally's henchmen, having passed a sling under his belly, prepared to draw him up. Then the feet of the guard above her disappeared through the hole, to be replaced by his hands snatching her off the ladder and dragging her onto the icy ledge.

He waited until Cotin and the other guards had joined them, then thrust her before him into a long, dank corridor lit only by smoking, sizzling torches.

"Mother!" she complained, dodging drips from the ceiling and struggling for her balance on the slick surface underfoot. "I think the weather was better outside." Colin coughed and managed a ghost of his wry grin before a guard shoved her forward, growling, "Arragh, now!"

She slid to the end of the corridor, skidding against a wall which opened onto a large chamber. At first she could see little, the darkness made only more profoundly confusing by cobwebs of smoky light emanating from the torches lining the walls. Gradually, she made out the pike-armed guards flanking the doorway in which she stood, and others like them on either side of four other arched doomways opposite her and to her left and right. The room sloped downward from the center, a slope subtle enough to permit walking but steep enough to allow drips from the ceiling to run out of the room and into the outer corridors. A fine layer of ashes spread on the floor allowed the guards in the chamber to walk without falling. From the ceiling hung several water-ruined and tattered banners whose crests and colors were familiar to Maggie as those of the great houses of Argonia. Above the room's center, a canopy was suspended to keep the constant overhead drip from wetting the heads of those on or near the throne dominating the entire chamber.

The throne was of grandiose size and design, carved in some dark substance and draped with fur. On it sat her uncle, Fearnear Brown, looking very pleased with himself indeed, and as though he thought he looked so grand sitting there he couldn't bring himself to rise. On a soggy rug at his feet knelt Sally Forth.

Maggie stumbled forward again as Colin was shoved into her back. Their guards drove them to the center of the room, and threw them to their knees in the ashes.

"Fine catch we have today, m'lord." Sally said, smiling up at Maggie's uncle.

Fearnear regarded them with elaborately casual interest. He had changed little from when Maggie last saw him, still tall, dark, and dangerous-looking, the lively complexion and strong features of her Brown forebears gone cruel and treacherous in his face. The rich clothing he had worn at his castle on Evil Island had been replaced by a dark, cowled robe whose hood protected his head, but did not shadow his face. It wouldn't. He was much too vain for that, she thought. His eyes glittered like poisoned spear points.

"Dear niece. How kind of you to seek me out," he said finally.

"Do you wear that thing on your head, Uncle, because these barbarians of yours have plucked you bald-headed, as this one tried to do me?" she asked, for want of anything better to say. Her uncle raised his hand and then dropped it as if it were too heavy. The guard who seemed so fond of tugging Maggie around by the hair released his grip on it.

"Ah, sweet child, you're as quick and lovely as ever. And you brought your fishy friend along too, I see. Good. Our Sally tells me he's made us up a little air to lighten our revolutionary load." He turned his venomous stare on Colin, "Play."

But Colin couldn't play. He was coughing again.

Fearnear laughed. "These royal lackeys lack stamina!" To the guard at Colin's right he said lazily, "He's quite useless. Kill him."

"No!" Maggie cried, throwing herself over Colin, who was still coughing too hard to ward off the guard's spear. Maggie thrust out a leg and tripped, more than kicked, the man as he lunged, and he slid sprawling across both of them. The other three guards jumped forward, but Fearnear held up his hand.

"Wait," he said. "Now then, Maggie, my dear, am I correct in assuming your undignified display is intended to persuade me to spare a useless royal parasite who can't even do his job properly?"

Rising to her knees, but still hovering protectively above her friend, Maggie said, "I want you to spare Colin, if that's what you mean. Yes."

"You know I would do almost anything for you, dear niece, but you young girls are ignorant of military matters, and are far too apt to place emotional concerns over sound judgment. This man is a spy-as are you, my dear, though I'm sorry to have to say it of one of my own dear kinswomen."

"If that's not the pot calling the kettle black, I don't know what is!" she snapped, losing her temper. "We're not spies, and we're certainly not traitors, like some people I could mention. If you want to be angry at someone, be angry at me. Colin only came along because I--"

Fearnear, who had looked as if he might explode for a moment, settled back into his chair and with some effort resumed his indolent, cat-and-mouse tone. "That's all immaterial. I'm
afraid he'll have to die. You see, you're too dangerous, even alone, to allow me to grant you any allies or concessions. You call me names and spite me, even when I tried to make you a queen. You used that scrub-drudge magic of yours to defy me and-

"But I won't now! You don't have to worry about that!" she said. "I can't use it against you any more. My magic is gone. I can't do you any harm, and neither can Colin. and we're leagues away from anyone who can. So why don't you just let us go?"

Not that she had expected him to, but the suggestion popped out before she had time to think how silly it sounded. At least it seemed to put him in a better mood. He was laughing himself sick.

"Oh, you cunning little witch, you. Let you go? No magic? Do you really expect me to believe that?" He flashed his teeth at her, looking very like Wulfric, though meaner and hungrier. "And at any rate, what good is a witch without her powers? Unless, perhaps as a serving wench, and to warm and decorate the barracks of my loyal guards."

Colin bolted upright, knocking down the guard who had just gotten to his feet again, and grabbing his spear away from him in the process. The long end of the weapon swung behind him, making a clean sweep of the stomachs of the other three guards, as Colin pressed the point into Sally's neck. Maggie, who had also been flung aside when her friend made his move, watched Sally drop her weapon and the guards, at a gesture from Fearchar, take another step backwards. Colin, panting heavily, rasped to Fearchar, "She's your own niece, you filthy bast--" and abruptly broke into another spell of coughing that left him so weak Sally had only to pluck the spear from his grasp and turn it against him.

Maggie got to her knees in time to haul him back from the nymph's forward thrust, and the guards closed in again around them. With an amused smile which tried to give lie to the earlier panic on his face, her uncle flicked his fingers at the guards, saying, "Halt. Let him live, for now. I'm terribly moved by his sense of gallantry. What say you now, niece? If I don't kill your little lap dog. will you do my bidding? ALL of my bidding?"

"You have a sick idea of how to make a girl popular. Uncle, but yes. Spare Colin, and I'll do as you say."

"Good, good. Let's adjourn, then, to the guest chambers, and you can help us make him comfortable."

It took a lot of effort for Maggie to stand again. Her knees were a lot weaker than she would allow her tongue to reveal. She tried to help Colin, but the guards had closed around him and were pushing him forward. He was still coughing as if he would turn wrong side out. Fearchar descended from his throne and grasped her elbow in iron fingers.

He led them to the farthest arch, which entered into the barracks, a long double row of dismal pallets at which Maggie carefully avoided looking. At the end of the room was another arch, and a pair of heavy cedar doors which two of the guards swung ponderously open. Cold wind and hail swept into the room, blasting them all back for a moment.

Then another guard trudged out against the storm and opened another door, this one leading to an open, empty, ice-walled chamber. The others dragged Colin forward and threw him into it.

Maggie pulled away from her uncle's bruising fingers, and went for his eyes. The guards skated out of Colin's cell and jumped for her, pulling her away. "You said you wouldn't kill him!" she shrieked against the pelting hail. "He's ill! He'll be dead before morning!"

Fearchar withdrew from the path of the storm, clucking. "You're such an excitable girl. Did I not say I had a task for you? You see, I don't quite trust you, niece. I want to see for myself if you spoke the truth about your wretched domestic magic tricks. If you can still perform them, you may provide whatever amenities your friend needs to keep him comfortable in the accommodations I have so graciously provided for him. Go on, my dear, make his clothing warmer and dry. Build him one of your delightful little fires, provide him with a light, and perhaps a bit of a tent to keep him from the elements. It's all up to you, you see. As you say, you got him into this. I certainly can't afford to have my revolution bogged down by supporting a lot of camp followers, just to please my relatives. If you want him to stay alive, you'll have to provide for him yourself. Otherwise . . ." he shrugged.

Maggie glared at him, pushed the guards aside, gritted her teeth and tried, but it was as if she had never had the power. Nothing happened. Nothing entered Colin's cell or changed there except that the hail accumulated and the wind whisked the pellets around the floor. Colin was leaning in a corner, doubled over, coughing, when they closed the door and bolted it.

She didn't have to see her uncle's gloating smile, blinded as
she was by her own scalding, angry, frustrated tears. Her nails shredded her palms as the guards took her in tow again.

"You're a truthful girl," Fearchar said. "But with a little training, we shall break you of that."

He had the guards haul her back into the throne room, and himself resumed the throne. "Now then, what to do with you. You're as bad as your friend, really. What a burden leadership is! All these useless people on my doorstep! A minstrel who can't play, and a witch who can't do the simplest magic! And you are a Brown, of course, so I truly would rather not have you consorting with my guards if there's any other useful function you can perform---"

He paused and looked past her as a lady wandered into the chamber, looking to her right and left and back again as if lost. Her plump body fairly quivered with agitation, but an aura of pinkish light surrounded her, particularly bright at her head, which was covered with a nest of wildly disorganized gray curls with a goose quill stuck in their midst, just above her ear. "Fearchar-oh, excuse me, dear, I mean, Dark Pilgrim, dear. I didn't realize you were holding court. Do pardon me for interrupting, but I was just finishing that chart you asked me to do and I seem to have mislaid my favorite stylus. I do hope it hasn't fallen on the floor in here somewhere and washed overboard or gotten its feathers ail nasty in the ashes." She had Fearchar shift from one hip to the other as she poked under the fur drape and cushions of the throne, then stood up, scratching her head, and turned to the rug, pulling one dripping end of it and sending Sally Forth sprawling backwards. "Pardon," the former Princess of Argonia said not at all contritely. Then, mumbling to herself, she made first Maggie's guards, then Maggie, lift their feet as she looked underneath for the missing implement. Looking up again, she seemed for the first time to notice Maggie. "Why, how do you do, my dear. Have we met?" she asked, extending her hand. One of Maggie's guards shoved her back to her knees and pushed her face toward the outstretched, ink-stained fingers, indicating that she should kiss them. Before she could do so, Pegeen snatched the hand back to her mouth. "Oh! I know. You must be the new serving girl Fearchar's been promising me!"

Fearchar's smile faded for the first time since his guards had brought Maggie and Colin to him at spearpoint. "She is no serving wench, my dear. Do you not note the family resemblance? This is my niece Magdalene who has lately been raised by the usurper of your father's throne to a rank equal to, if not greater than your own. Princess Magdalene of Argonia, may I present Princess Pegeen Ashburn, legitimate heiress to the throne of Argonia, who shall rule beside me when our revolution bears its glorious fruit."

Sally Forth's mouth flew open. "But, Dark Pilgrim, you promised me--"

"Ah, yes. I've promised Captain Forth that her men shall be given food and drink, and that I will now go and review the other prisoners. Pegeen, dear, if you'll be so good as to take Maggie with you to your chambers, and see to it that she's kept away from sharp implements and salt. Guards, will you be so good as to see that neither Princess leaves her Highness's quarters without my express invitation?" He smiled apologetically to Pegeen. "Our agents have spotted Rowan's party a day's march from the Blabbermouth, my dear. I want to insure your safety, and must from now on keep you under the protection of my guard."

Pegeen raised on tiptoe and planted a kiss in the hollow of Fearchar's sharp-boned cheek. "Of course, darling. You're so thoughtful. Come along, dear Magdalene." She seemed not to feel there was anything irregular about the guard escorting Maggie poising his spear at her leader's niece's neck.

Moonshine quietly allowed his captors to remove their sling and ropes, thinking to bite them as soon as he was free, but Primrose shrieked and bucked and gouged and whinnied. "Where is this VILE place?" she demanded, though naturally none of the guards possessed the gift of unicorn understanding. "There has been an error here! My maiden surely did not intend for you to abuse me in this hideous fashion!"

"I WAS," Primrose said, kicking at the door with her back hooves. "But I most certainly don't intend to now. Not until I've had a full explanation and a complete apology for this despicable treatment!"

The stallion emitted the longest horselaugh Moonshine had ever heard. "Oh, say, you're a corker, aren't you?" he chortled when he'd finally regained control of himself. "That's the best one yet. Apology! Explanation!"

"Those men will sorely regret the way they've mishandled me when my maiden finds out how they've bungled her commands," Primrose said primly.

"Your maiden?" the strange stallion asked with mock innocence. "Blond woman, sports a silver hunting horn
and wears practically nothing?"

"That is an accurate if unseemly description of her," Primrose admitted.

"Hold onto your horn, honey, but that trollop is fixing to watch them cut off your horn and grind it into powder and flay you alive to make a beit for herself from your hide."

"LIAR!" screamed Primrose, and charged him.

The stallion was on his feet, neatly parrying her thrust with a deft movement of his own broken horn before she knew what was happening. "Oh, no. I couldn't He," he said. "I'm a unicorn like you, remember?"

"And it is the Unicorn Creed That a unicorn may not mislead But always say sooth Without mercy or ruth Though sooth may in truth make you bleed."

Moonshine was more confused by that than by any of the more catastrophic events that had taken place that day. "You just made that up, didn't you?" he asked the stallion. "I never heard that part of the Creed before."

The stallion studied him warily for a moment, then trotted over, circling him. "You calling me a liar too, sonny?"

"No-I just--"

"Eagledown, have you no shame!" scolded the other unicorn, getting to her feet. She was a pretty snow-white filly with eyes the soft green of moss. "These are captives, like ourselves, hurt and confused. And instead of offering solace, you mock them!"

"Whatever has become of your horn, young lady!" Primrose demanded of the filly, whose horn was in as sad a state of repair as the stallion's.

"It broke," she said. "While we were digging."

"Digging? Are you a unicorn or a gopher?"

"Leave her alone, Primrose," Moonshine warned. "After the way you betrayed me, you can hardly hold yourself up, still, as a model of unicorn behavior and knowledge."

The filly walked over to him and sniffed, seeming to like what she smelled. "Don't be too hard on her," she said softly, gazing at him with those lovely green eyes.

"For it is the Unicorn Creed To follow wherever love leads ..." "And the primary lesson," Primrose finished for her, "Is when your love beckons Tis a priv'lege to die at her knee."

The older unicorn seemed momentarily buoyed by the nobility of the verse's sentiment, then added, plaintively, "Except that my love has taken her knee away. How can I die at her knee if she's not here?"

"If she were here," Eagledown promised, "I'd see to it that she died with you. And you both have that verse wrong. Once the maiden betrays you, it's every 'com for himself, as the Creed clearly states in THIS verse:

"For it is the Unicorn Creed To fight till you've no blood to bleed To run like the wind From the whole race of men And kill them if they force the need."

He sighed. "Too bad I had to meet up with someone like that outlaw filly. I'd always looked forward to the kind of love a unicorn is supposed to have with his girl, you know, like in the verse about unicorns and maidens, the one you botched up:

"For it is the Unicorn Creed To follow wherever love leads. If she's light-haired or ruddy She's your bosomy buddy Your friend both in need and indeed."

"Wait," Moonshine said, more puzzled than ever. "That's NOT the way it goes. I know that's not the Creed my dam taught me. It doesn't go like that at all. It's the first maiden and it's, let's see, 'wherever love leads-' "

"You gainsaying me, greenhorn?" the stallion challenged. "'Cause if you are, don't let the fact that my horn's damaged stop you. I don't need a horn to kick your tail all around this stall."

"For shame, Eagledown!" Snowshadow interjected, putting herself between the feisty stallion and Moonshine. "Forgive him," she said to Moonshine. "He feels keenly the pain of betrayal, as do we all, and only wants to fight in order to lash out at something. But we must not fight among ourselves."

"You are so wise," Moonshine agreed, looking into her eyes and smelling her sweet though soiled scent, feeling oddly happy and benevolent, despite his captive state. "Your pardon, noble Eagledown," he said to the stallion, without looking away from Snowshadow. "I'm sure you speak the Creed as you know it. It is only that I, an ignorant youngster, do not know as much of the Creed as I would, and was on a quest to learn it all. Never had it occurred to me that the Creed as given me by my dam might have other variations."

Snowshadow laughed and replied in rhyme:

"How else could the Unicorn Creed Begin to meet unicorn need? We aren't beasts of the herd To use others' words To govern our thoughts and our deeds."

"Of course not," Moonshine agreed. "But-but there IS a Creed-isn't there?"
"Certainly there's a Creed," Eagledown snorted. "We all follow one—it just seems to vary slightly from 'corn to 'corn, from what the filly here and I have found."

"Are you-?" Moonshine began, but didn't know quite how to finish his thought. He needn't have bothered. Snowshadow read him very well.

"No, I do not belong to Eagledown. He was captured before me, and both of us by the same maiden, if maiden she is indeed. Therefore, neither of us, none of us here, have anyone. She has betrayed us all."

"I have someone," Moonshine said.

"Do you misunderstand me?" Snowshadow asked sadly. "The bandit girl is false, I tell you."

"But she is not MY maiden," Moonshine insisted. "My maiden is a beautiful witch, and very fierce. She's temporarily without her power, but I'm sure once she gets it back she'll force her uncle to free us all."

"Her UNCLE?" Snowshadow asked.

"The evil sorcerer who commands the bandit girl is a distant relative of my maiden," Moonshine explained as casually as possible. "But she's not a bit like him, and she hates him and loves me, so I know she'll set us free--"

"She won't free me," Primrose said in a voice suddenly changed and quiet. "Not after what I've done to you, and said about her. She won't free me."

The older mare's head hung desolately between her forelegs. She seemed finally to have accepted the truth of her situation and what the others told her, and in the absence of Sally Form's spellbinding charm perceived the dismal truth of her plight.

Snowshadow nudged her neck gently. "Don't despair, elder sister. We shall all be freed together. If Moonshine's maiden is as good and wonderful as he says, she will save you for his sake if for no other. And if not, why, I shall insist on it."

Eagledown snorted again. "Haven't you all got it through your pointy heads yet that no mortal maiden is going to bother saving a bunch of corralled 'corns? I almost believed that pudgy princess, but I think we'd stand a better chance getting Moonshine and Primrose to help enlarge our bolt hole than we would waiting on human help."

"Well, perhaps it wouldn't hurt to do what we can," Snowshadow agreed.

"What hole?" Moonshine asked.

"Our escape route," Snowshadow said. "Come see. It's almost big enough."

Pegeen waited until the door had slammed behind them to take Maggie's hands in her own and pull her over to the wall farthest from the door. "Oh, my dear girl, I saw it all and I'm so terribly sorry. You must believe that your uncle hasn't always been like this. He's very fond of you in his way, you know."

"He has an odd way of showing it," Maggie said. "His overwhelming affection is going to be the death of me probably, and of my friend absolutely." She laughed with a bitterness just short of hysteria. "Oh, no, milady. You're dead wrong. My uncle hates me all right. He's threatened to-well, never mind."

"Never mind indeed," sniffed Pegeen, patting Maggie's knee with brisk sympathy. "You needn't worry about that. Fearchar does not hate you, I tell you. He could never dislike anyone who reminds him so of himself. Nevertheless, he has quite taken leave of his senses in regard to this so-called revolution, and it is up to us to do something about it."

Maggie started, so taken aback by the Princess's unexpected sympathy that she momentarily stopped looking around the room for something with which to hit the other woman over the head. "You mean you came in when you did on purpose?"

"Yes. I must apologize for not being able to save your young man from the maze, but I'm not really very brave, you see, and I could tell Fearchar meant to do something awful to him, no matter what you or I could do. Though he is fond of you, Fearchar's quite vexed at you still over his first attempt to gain the throne. I'm afraid he's punishing you through your friend. He might have done something nasty to you, too, but he's much too proud to degrade a member of his own family in front of me. He's almost come to believe his blood is as noble as mine. Not that it makes any difference, you understand, but he could hardly shame you publicly and keep his own face, could he?"

"Then you mean to help me?" Maggie asked. "You're not on his side?"

"Well, naturally I'm on his side," the princess replied. "But it's all rather complicated, you see, because though I am, he's not any longer. What I mean is, I love Fearchar. But that horrid woman has completely corrupted him, and I must protect him from doing perfectly dreadful things he couldn't really mean to do. He'll be glad of it and thank me when he comes to his senses—I hope."

Maggie looked at the princess suspiciously. "Excuse me, milady, but has your food been tasting rather flat and bland the past few months?"

"You mean because of salt being the antidote to Fearchar's magic charm? No, my dear, my diet is quite sufficient, thank you. I'm afraid neither salt nor magic have anything to do with Fearchar's charm for me. Even if one is a Princess, and quite used to the idea of being no great beauty, approaching middle age without so much as a
once-upon-a-time, not to mention a happily-ever-after, is not a pleasant prospect. Fearchar suffers from a certain ruthless ambition which he's allowed to get out of hand, but I can't help but hope that with the proper guidance, he'll . . ." She stopped, seeing Maggie's skeptical look, and finished lamely. "He's provided me with a great many rather beautiful dreams, you see."

"Nightmares would be easier to believe," Maggie said. "Co-lin is freezing in his wretched prison, and Mother only knows what's happened to the unicorns."

"They're safe," Pegeen told her in a tone whose self-satisfaction was not unmixed with anxiety. "For now, at least."

"He'll murder King Rowan, too, unless--"

"Murder him? But surely m'lord Rowan is bringing sufficient men and arms to deal with this ragtag bunch of ruffians Fearchar has gathered?"

"They had an accident," Maggie informed her glumly. "Now they're to be slaughtered, and so, I suspect, are we."

"Umm," Pegeen said noncommittally. "Fearchar has grown distant lately-and he's promised that wretched nymph something besides quarters for her men, unless I miss my guess." She smiled sadly, "I don't like to think what that promise might be, you see." She was quiet for a moment, and when she looked up her eyes were unnaturally bright. Stretching out ink-stained fingers that trembled slightly, she traced Maggie's cheek and jawline. "You're so very like him, you know. So very much like him. You could be his daughter, instead of his niece, you're so alike. And yet, from all I've heard said of you, you're a kind, honest, forthright girl, as good as-as he as--"

"Yes," Maggie said gently. "I am, and he is. Quite. But the point is, what are we going to do about it? Colin is ill. That fever will kill him before the night's out, if he doesn't freeze to death first. And somehow we must keep the King from being slaughtered, and I still don't know what Fearchar intends doing with the unicorns--"

"I do," Pegeen said grimly, worrying her lower lip with her teeth. "Then do you intend to lure the guard in and let me knock him senseless or shall I lure him in and let you do the honors?"

"Neither," Pegeen said. "There's another way. But we must wait until it's quite dark."

Colin's main consolation, as he lay on the floor of his icy prison being scourged by wind and hailstones, was thinking of how grand he must have looked, defying Sally Forth and her bandits and the wicked sorcerer for Maggie's sake. Just like in the ballads, he thought. In fact, certainly an act worthy of a ballad in itself. And it wasn't just play-acting this time, either, as it had been in the tavern at Everclear when he'd known very well that Leofwin was covered not only by himself but by Maggie's magic and Moonshine's horn. This time he had really braved actual danger for the love of his lady, though, in all likelihood, it not only would do neither of them a bit of good but would also go unsung, due to the untimely demise of all parties sympathetic enough to record his deed.

Ah, well, if he'd wanted everything to go smoothly, he ought to have stuck with minstrel halls and never have taken up with witches. But he knew Maggie appreciated his gesture, as he loved her for trying to save him. Perhaps, at least, he had delayed her end until Fearchar could torment her with the sight of his frozen, lifeless body. What a cheering thought. Shouldn't take too long, at this rate. Already he had no feeling in his arms or legs, nor could he feel his nose, mouth or chin, which was a blessing, considering the hail. But within, he felt as he'd always imagined dragons must, plagued as they were with a continual case of heartburn; unbearably, overwhelmingly hot. The coughing and sneezing forced his stiffened body to double over painfully, whether he felt otherwise able to do so or not.

Perhaps, if he took long enough about this dismal business of dying, he might buy Maggie enough time so that King Rowan could arrive and rescue her. If anyone had ever deserved rescuing, it was Maggie. She certainly went out of her way to rescue everyone else, and now she'd got him doing it, too. Very well, then. He felt so hot inside he was pretty sure he could stretch the freezing process out over quite a long time. But the coughing hurt, sending searing pains through his chest, waggling numbed and useless limbs helplessly about with each spasmodic, throat-rasping explosion. His head, too, felt as if it were on fire—a blacksmith's fire, with blacksmith and hammer and anvil in attendance.

Between coughs, he tried to distract himself by concentrating on the castanet clickings of his teeth, and finally gave that up. At last, though he fought it, he slept. He dreamed of softly tangled brown hair, brown eyes melting with love and admiration for him, the voluptuous embrace of a warm, cinnamon-colored body enfolding his own, and best of all, a sweet, generous mouth too busy returning his kisses to say a single word.

After a long hour of pacing and nail-biting, Pegeen cracked open the door of her room and spoke to the guard. "The Princess Magdalene and I are retiring now. Please see to it that we aren't disturbed."

The guard smirked insolently. Pegeen took that for acquiescence, and closed the door again, throwing the bolt
vengefully from the inside. Gathering up the woolen cloaks and mittens she'd dug from her traveling trunk, she beckoned Maggie to the wall screen and slid it aside, revealing the entrance to her secret tunnel.

"Fancy that!" Maggie whispered. "You'd think there'd be a draft.

"Quickly," Pegeen said. "We'll have just enough time before the castle's quiet and it's safe to venture out onto the maze."

"Enough time for what?" Maggie asked, hunkering down slightly to keep from bumping her head on the tunnel's ceiling and slipping in her haste to stay within the wake of Pegeen's pink aura.

Pegeen knelt and shoved aside the oversized snowball she used to barricade her tunnel, and sat down, scooting on her bottom along the top of the high maze wall until there was room for Maggie beside her.

The hailstorm had cleared now, and the wind had died down. The maze wall was littered with small white pellets, tinted rose by Pegeen's aura.

"Put the snowball back, will you, Maggie? There's a dear. It makes a lovely plug, but I do have to replace it every time there's a warm spell." She spoke quickly, rummaging in her dress pocket as she chattered. "Ah, there it is.

Pulling forth a torch the length of her forearm and a tinderbox, she lit the torch, and smiled at it as if it were her dearest friend. "It's been days since I've had a smoke," she told Maggie. "The weather has been beastly."

"Yes," Maggie agreed. "But it seems to be clearing up now." A faint gray light was visible along the upper edge of the horizon, above the glacier behind the castle, but all else extending beyond the Princess's aura was black as pitch. That aura was a handy sort of power to have. Thoughtful as it was of the Princess to bring along a torch, Maggie thought she really wouldn't need it as long as she stayed close to Pegeen.

She was about to say so when Pegeen leaned luxuriously back, arching her neck pleasurably, and lowered the lighted end of the upended torch into her eagerly waiting mouth, plunging it halfway down to her stomach, it seemed to Maggie, who was too stunned to comment. After a long moment during which the princess actually seemed to be sucking on the torch, she pulled it forth, extinguished, and emitted a blissful sigh. She sat for a time, serenely blowing iridescent curls of smoke from her nostrils, which glowed a faint shell pink. She reminded Maggie of the dragon Grizel in a happy frame of mind.

With a small cough and a clearer eye and steadier voice than she'd had before, Pegeen said, "Pity you can't have a nice smoke, too, before we set out. It's wonderfully warming, besides having such a calming effect on the nerves."

"Oh, yes, I can see where it would be warming," Maggie agreed. "Speaking of that, do you suppose we could see to Colin now?"

The hail had left their precarious pathway even slicker than usual, and at times they had to abandon crawling for sliding along astride the wall's top. Pegeen grew worried that she might become confused or lose her way. Never before had it been so dark when she visited the unicorn enclosure. Each time one of the worm's convolutions led them back to the rear castle wall, she breathed a sigh of relief.

Maggie's legs were bare beneath her skin, and numb from direct contact with the ice. She tried to arrange the folds of material to protect her skin, but only succeeded in hampering her movements and slowing her progress. Even with the cloak and mittens borrowed from Pegeen, she was frozen by the wind and wet ice. Soon she began slipping more often, because her hands and knees were numb from crawling, and her muscles tired and jellied from supporting her weight. They had been crawling for an impossibly long time when Pegeen stopped and leaned forward, casting her aura into the depths on the left side of their wall.

Before the princess had time to explain, Maggie felt Moonshine touch her mind.

"Maiden? Oh, Maiden, I told them you'd come!"

Forgetting her weariness and the cold, Maggie scuttled forward and peered over the edge, to see her beloved Moonshine and three other unicorns staring up at them.

"Have they hurt you?" she asked.

"Nay, Maiden. They have not. And you?"

"No. I'm fine."

"Hey, Highness," another unicorn challenged. "Have you come to get us out of here?"

"Oh, dear, how thoughtless of me!" Pegeen cried, her thumbnail flying to her teeth. "I should have brought the map, shouldn't I, so we could all escape together? I was so upset about Maggie's young man that I quite forgot."

"Just like a human," the stallion snorted. "Your own kind first, eh?"

"Master Colin is imperiled?" Moonshine asked, and Maggie showed him the image of Colin as she had seen him last, coughing and freezing in a cell like the one containing the unicorns. "Free him at once!" Moonshine said. "I, for one, shall not flee at his expense!"

"Nor I!" trumpeted the filly at his side. Her snowy coat so blended with the ice that only her eyes were clearly defined. She began to recite:
"For it is the Unicorn Creed To abandon unseemly stampede If a friend of a friend Has an end round the bend
The unicorn must intercede!"
"I wish you wouldn't do that, Snowshadow," Moonshine complained. "It confuses me when you keep reciting
stanzas of the Creed I've never heard before."
"Your pardon," the filly said to him, then to the princess and Maggie, "Onward, valiant maidens, and deliver
your friend from his fell fate!"
"But-Moonshine's maiden?" Primrose's voice was subdued.
"Yes?" Maggie asked, the chill in her voice not entirely due to the weather.
"You-you will come back, won't you?"
Pegeen answered. "I'm just going to take her to her friend, and lead them back here, then I'll go fetch the map,
and we'll all crawl out through your hole and escape through the maze at first light. You have my word as a royal
Ashburn and the daughter of my father, Finbar."
"That's more like it!" the stallion Eagledown trumpeted. "Rally round me, friends, and let's apply our hind
hooves to that hole again!"
Maggie and Pegeen crawled around the unicorns' prison, and up and over the long loop at the castle's rear
entrance, before finally reaching the chamber into which Fearchar had cast Colin.
Maggie swore under her breath when she saw him, lying on his side with his knees wrapped close to his chest,
frost winking
back into the princess's aura from his beard, hair and lashes. At first she thought he was dead already, and they
had arrived too late, but a weak cough which stirred his rigid body soon told her differently.
"Gracious!" Pegeen said. "He doesn't look as if he'll be able to stand. I had hoped the two of us could grab hold
of him and pull him up, but--"
"Of course, he can't stand!" Maggie snapped. "He's sick and nearly frozen to death. We should never have
waited so long to come! Give me a hand down."
"But-what are you going to DO?" Pegeen asked. "You can't get out of there by yourself, and I can't help you
both. I'm simply not strong enough. The barracks is only a wall away. Oh, my dear, if they should catch you."
"I'll make them wish they hadn't," Maggie said grimly. Even a hollow threat bolstered her courage a little.
Pegeen lay down on her stomach across the ice wall and Maggie eased herself down the Princess's outstretched legs
to an easy drop into the chamber below.
Colin was as cold to her touch as the ice itself, but when she felt the points Granny had once showed her,
through which a person's spirit passes closest to the skin, she could feel his, slow and weak, but present, and could
hear his breath trying to force its way through his frozen nostrils.
"Throw me down your tinderbox and the torch!" Maggie called up to Pegeen. "I'll try to warm him while you
fetch your map. Perhaps by the time you return, he'll be thawed enough so we can move him between us to the
unicorn pen. Moonshine can cure his ailments and injuries, and carry him through the maze, if need be."
Pegeen nodded with nervous eagerness. "Perhaps I can bring something to help bring him up—and some ashes
from my fire to make the footing less risky."
The tinderbox and torch clattered as they hit the ice and rolled against Maggie's feet. She lit the torch, and
scraped together fresh snow and hailstones into a mound, where she planted the light.
"I'll hurry," Pegeen promised, and then, with depressing speed, her voice and light were absorbed by the bitter
night.
Maggie mourned her magic sorely when she saw how puny the warmth and faint flickering light of the torch
were, and thought of the cozy blaze she had once been able to command at will. But there was no use crying over
doused fires, she sup-
posed. Anyone at Fort Iceworm knew other techniques for thawing frostbite victims, and she'd use those to
warm Colin until he could walk or crawl to the unicorn pen, where they could melt ice with the torch and have
Moonshine dip his horn in the water and cure their friend.
Whatever happened after that would just have to be faced when the time came.
Her hands and knees were almost as cold as Colin's, so it was with great difficulty that she passed Pegeen's
cloak beneath his stiff body, at an angle that left the rest of the cloth free to pass around them both when she lay
down beside him. Prying his hands away from his own flesh, she awkwardly wrestled them beneath her tunic, to
nestle chillingly in each of her armpits, two of the warmest areas on a person's body, according to Granny. Then she
had to prise his boots from his feet, no mean task in such a clumsy position, and one made possible only by the fact
that his boots, like her own, were falling apart at the seams already and could be disassembled rather than pulled off
whole. Once his feet were bare, she stuck them inside her skirt and clasped them between her thighs. Having begun
warming his limbs, the parts most endangered by the cold, she wriggled upward slightly again, and drew his face
down so that his nose and eyes could be warmed by her breath, thrusting her own numbed hands into his shirt at the
top of his trousers, to warm between his belly and legs.

For what seemed eons, she felt and heard only the slow thump of his pulses and the pounding of her own. Gradually, the chill in his body blended with her warmth until he was no longer so cold as he had been, nor she so warm. Maybe she'd freeze to death with him, if Pegeen failed to return. Wouldn't that entertain the guards though, trying to pry apart the braided bodies? If only the torch weren't so small and inadequate! She cuddled Colin closer, and he seemed much warmer.

So did she suddenly, and with her head shrouded by the cloak, she imagined she felt a warmth at her back as well as that coming from Colin, but soon she forgot about it, distracted by a trickle of cold wetness trailing down the hollow of her throat to seep between her breasts. Raising her head, she brushed her face against Colin's beard. It had thawed, and was dripping wet.

Encouraged, she snuggled closer. His face moved against her neck, burrowing into her shoulder and she felt his eyelashes flutter, tickling her collarbone. She shifted to make it easier for him, and with her free hand stroked the back of his neck to warm it, knowing that area for one particularly sensitive to cold.

"Mmm, Maggie?" He moved quite freely then, sliding his feet down until they rested between her knees, at the hem of the cloak.

She held him closer. "About time you woke," she murmured, and his hands shifted a bit, warm now, and obviously no longer unfeeling, as they cupped the sides of her breasts.

"Mmm," he replied, burrowing his face lower, until his still-chilly nose rested in the cleavage created by her tunic's gaping neckline. The movement caused the hand she still armed against his skin to move too, until it found a very strong pulse indeed, which it gently investigated.

"Bloody uncomfortable position," he said hoarsely, and they rearranged themselves into one that was not only more comfortable but seemed to apply a great deal more warming pressure in a far more satisfying fashion to areas previously left vacant and drafty.

"Your ear," she complained softly, "feels like an icecube."

"Your breast," he replied, sighing, "feels wonderful. May I warm my nose just a bit more? It hurts now that the feeling's returning." His voice was weak yet, and trembling, and she still felt him shake with a slight cough now and then. In reply, she pressed his head more firmly against her bosom and kissed his dripping hair. She was no longer aware of the cold, and stroked the bristling hairs at his nape with her free hand until they lay down in submission to her touch.

"Ah," he said. "Your hands feel so good. But here, you're in the cold," and he shifted again so that now he lay on top of her, sheltering her from the night sky.

She thought it the wrong time to mention that not only was she not cold, she felt deliciously steamy.

"We aren't doing this properly, you know," he breathed into her ear.

"We're not?"

"No, I have it on the best authority that for maximum effectiveness, there should be no clothing between skin surfaces."

"Well then, if that's what the best authority says," she concurred, and together they managed to remedy the error.

"What are we waiting for?" he asked.

"Princess Pegeen. She's coming back with a--ahh, a map or something."

"I know the most wonderful way to pass the time."

Pegeen heard the pounding on her chamber door while she was still in the tunnel. Shedding her cloak and mittens behind the screen, she ducked around it and pushed it back in place before strolling to the door, and throwing the bolt. Fearchar poked his head in.

"Shhh," she said, putting a fingertip to her lips. "Your niece is sleeping."

Excellent. Then you're quite free to lend me your assistance in my study. We must finish deciphering the exact formulas for concocting the unicorn medicines and charms before daybreak. My men will gain great confidence when they see, in this first battle, how my foresight in capturing the unicorns will protect them. Once they realize they cannot be permanently injured, my army will be invincible."

"You aren't going to sacrifice the beasts tonight?" Pegeen asked, trying to display less alarm than she felt.

"Not sacrifice, my dear. They are far too valuable to sacrifice. But we shall excise the parts we need from two of them, at least, as soon as we have the formulas transcribed. I trust you will not dawdle?"

"I'll be right along. Only let me fetch my cloak first. The halls are so drafty, particularly at night. I'll only be a moment."
"One of the guards will escort you. I'll await you in my study," and he stepped back from the door.

Pegeen bolted the door behind him, and rummaged in the oiled leather case that held her drawing things until she found the map. It was woefully incomplete, but that couldn't be helped. It was all they had now.

Slipping back into the tunnel, she retrieved her cloak and slid out onto the maze again, crawling forward until she was upwind of the chamber adjacent to the unicorn pen. Shaping her map into the form of a bird, she called upon a minor spell her father had taught her, one known to all performing magicians, of making birds, temporarily, of inanimate objects such as paper and handkerchiefs. With a flip of her wrist and a mumbled incantation she had learned as other children learned nursery songs, she sent the precious map sailing towards the cell containing Maggie and the minstrel. As soon as it left her hand, the map became a glowing pink dove, which flew straight to its target, and dropped, a map once more. Perhaps later in the night, when Fearchar was concentrating on his battle preparations, she'd be able to break away again and warn them, but for now the map was the best help she had to offer.

"We shouldn't have done that," Maggie said, when they had finished.

"I know," Colin replied. "Now you can't be Moonshine's maiden anymore, can y-y-ya-CHOO!"

"I don't mean that, silly. I mean we shouldn't have done that because it's made your cough worse. And you must have a fever. Feel how wet it is beneath us." Indeed, the cloak under her was soaked and Colin's face was crimson.

"Nonsense. I feel much better thanks to you and this great fire you've built. That's what's making everything so wet. It's melted a hole in the wall."

Maggie peeked out from the folds of the cloak. Flames roared to the top of the wall, an enormous fuelless bonfire blazing where the feeble torch had formerly burned. She got to her knees and began pulling her clothing on. Colin pulled his clothes on, too, except for his dismantled boots, which he regarded sadly until Maggie, with an almost automatic wink of her eye, stitched them instantly back together again. Her magic, like a freshly healed minor physical injury to a hand or foot, suddenly functioned again, as naturally if it had never been impaired.

Colin smiled fondly at his boots as he tugged them on, then at Maggie, who doused the fire and already had one leg through the hole melted in the ice wall. "I see you've got it back again," he said, indicating the hole heralding the return of her powers. "I-thank you for taking care of me, I mean."

She pulled her leg back out of the hole and returned to stand beside him, touching his shoulder. "I'm not sure who cured whom. It didn't come back until we-at any rate, stay close. Who knows what magic is apt to do? It may decide to desert us again and we'd need to take-similar measures." She grinned at him and he rose, clasped her in his arms, and kissed her soundly, but briefly, before another fit of coughing disrupted their embrace.

"We'd better melt our way through to Moonshine right away," she said. "That cough is sounding worse all the time."

He was going to tell her that it didn't feel any better than it looked when his eye was caught by a strange, faintly glowing, shape against the ice wall. Stooping, he picked up a bit of parchment, folded into a triangular shape. The tip of it was wet. "Here now, what's this?" he asked, smoothing it against his thigh.

Maggie peered down at it. Three quarters of one side was covered in glowing wiggling lines, through which a heavier, black line snaked from an arrow at the lower edge of the drawing, dribbling off into the unfinished and slightly soggy nothingness at the top.

"It's a map-this must be the map Pegeen went for," she said.

"Why would she send it this way? Do you think she may have come back while we were-you know-and was too courteous to interrupt?"

Maggie shook her head and headed back through the hole. "No. Something's happened, and she can't meet us after all. This must mean we're to take the map and go without her-Hurry."

On the other side of the hole was the chamber adjoining the castle's back doors. Maggie started her fire well back from the doors, sending flames shooting up the wall the chamber shared with the unicorn pen.

"We could have used the door," Colin said.

"This is quieter," she assured him. "Besides, I didn't think of it. And it won't take but a moment, anyway. Look at that fire!" He heard an artisan's pride in her voice as she watched her robust orange and blue flames eat ice.

"Your magic certainly returned with a vengeance," he agreed. "You'll have to watch building campfires in the woods with me around, or you might start forest fires!"

The unicorns were waiting for them with ready horns and rolling, terrified eyes when they broke through the second wall.

"Whoa!" Colin said, holding up his hands to fend off an attack. "It's only us!"

"We took you for an iceworm," Snowshadow explained.

"N-n-no," Colin answered, and sneezed, which started another round of coughing.

Maggie pointed to the pool of melted ice at their feet, and pleaded, "Moonshine, quickly, please, purify this
water so he can drink it and get well. He's still very ill."

"Wait up, now," Eagledown said, edging forward, his nostrils flaring high, sniffing in Maggie's direction. "I thought you said she was a maiden, sonny. There's no odor of chastity here. If she's a maiden, then I'm a phalarope."

Moonshine paused with his horn in the puddle. "Of course, she's a ma-Maid Maggie?! What have you done?"

Maggie looked guiltily to Colin, who looked sheepishly back at her before both turned to Moonshine with a tandem shrug.

"Minstrel Colin, I TRUSTED you!" Moonshine wailed. "And look what you've done!"

"They seem to know very well what they've done," Primrose remarked, with a return to her old vinegar.

"Of course, they do," Snowshadow said. "And I, for one, think it's rather sweet. And exciting. I've never met lovers before. And just think, they actually seem to have retained the gift of unicorn understanding! How peculiar. And how grand!" She sidled up to Maggie, keeping herself between Maggie and Colin and the other unicorns. "Tell me, between you and me, was it very wonderful?"

"Er-Colin, if you'll drink some of that now, perhaps we'd best be on our way," Maggie suggested.

He knelt and cupped some of the water in his hands, lapped it up, and wiped his mouth. "In the dark?" he asked.

Before she could answer, they heard the sound of something heavy dragging across ice and a loud creaking, accompanied by voices and footsteps. Princess Pegeen's voice shrilled above the rest, protesting loudly, "But, Fearchar, I told you already that that translation is faulty! We mustn't rush this thing!"

"Rush is exactly what we must do, my dear," the wizard answered in a lower voice, which grew louder as the footsteps approached. "You needn't maintain your pretense any longer, Pegeen. I know very well how squeamish you are. You would delay me from using the beasts indefinately, if possible. I have no more time to humor you."

Maggie climbed through the unicorn's bolt hole in the back of the cell and began melting another hole in the wall to the chamber adjoining theirs.

"You could at least wait until morning!" Pegeen was almost screaming now. Eagledown bolted through the hole after Maggie.

"Now why should you want to wait until morning, my lady?" T'S Sally Forth's voice asked with barely concealed contempt. Primrose, hearing her, paused halfway through the hole. With a none-too-gentle jab of his horn, Moonshine sent her sailing through the rest of the way.

"I only meant that the beasts might be difficult to control, that one of our men could be hurt or slain trying to subdue them in the darkness," Pegeen said.

First Snowshadow, then Moonshine, disappeared through the hole, and Colin followed them.

Maggie's fire had melted a hole half large enough for the unicorns in the next wall by now.

Fearchar sounded menacing as he said, "It strikes me, Pegeen, that yours is a very peculiar concern for a woman who has just spent half the night translating texts which readily testify that by use of one part or another of these beasts, any man slain by one of them could be revived."

"My prisoners are ample evidence of that," Sally Forth said. "If you truly have the welfare of the Cause at heart. Or have you other concerns, Princess?"

Maggie turned from a hole now melted to the proper size, and brushed past the unicorns to climb back into the pen from which they'd just escaped.

Colin snatched at her arm. "What are you doing?"

"We can't leave Pegeen behind," she said, just as the door to the cell opened and Pegeen was pushed forward, followed by Sally Forth, Fearchar, and several armed soldiers.

Maggie grabbed the Princess and thrust her through the opening to Colin, then leaped back through the hole herself and started a roaring blaze, spanning the width of the cell in front of the bolt hole.

"That should hold them," she said, rejoining the others, and smiling slightly at the screams and curses that followed her.

The segment of maze into which Maggie had melted an entrance was one of the main channels rather than another cul-de-sac like those nearer the rear of the castle. Eagledown reluctantly allowed Pegeen to mount him, and with Maggie on Moonshine and Colin on Snowshadow, they galloped into the heart of the maze.

CHAPTER 15

Wizard Raspberry paced the rocky prominence jutting from the mouth of the dragon's cave. He had to hop once in a while to avoid the anxious lashing of Grimley's tail. The rest of the dragon blocked the cave's entrance, where Grimley watched over his mate and their hatching egg.

For the last two days the dragon had moved from his current position only long enough to pick up the wizard, fly him to the river to catch more fish, which he disguised as deer meat, and return with him and the meat to the ledge. Grimley had been considerate enough to spare a fish or two for Raspberry from each trip, it was true, but the
wizard chafed under even such hospitable captivity when he thought of the King's plight.

He grew tired of pacing and sat down against the rocky wall into which Grimley's cave bored. The sun was pleasant and warm for a change, the rain having stopped an hour or so before. A double rainbow streaked overhead, close enough to touch. Rock lichens softened the seat beneath him, a seat well out of the way of the iashing spiked tail of his host.

In the face of so much pleasantness, he found it increasingly difficult to concern himself with the King. After all, the man was a warrior, the veteran of many battles; surely he'd think of something to do to help himself. And one could hardly blame the dragon Grimley for retiring from the Royal Air Force so abruptly. He had his family to look after, and for whatever reason, the cattle Rowan had promised the scaly pair as payment for their services had disappeared. Dragons weren't exactly known for their selfless sense of patriotism.

Finally, the wizard fell asleep reflecting that if one had to be the involuntary guest of dragons, it was fortunate to be captured by beasts whose cave had such a nice southern exposure.

He was shaken awake by the earth rumbling beneath him, and by thunderous roars. A singed smell invaded his nostrils, and he sat up, rubbing his eyes. In mid-air, just beyond the ledge, above a scenic ragged purple plunge into oblivion hundreds of leagues below, Dragon Grimley flew cartwheels, wing-springs, and aerial acrobatics of amazing agility and variety. Both the roaring and the singed smell emanated from the excited dragon, who bellowed at the top of his lungs while belching forth a furnace full of flame, charring anything in the direction in which the dragon's snout happened to be pointing at the time.

"AAAAROOOGAH! AAAAROOGAH!" the dragon cheered.

Raspberry tiptoed to the cave's entrance, keeping close to the wall to avoid being broiled by Grimley.

Grizel sat in the midst of a lot of broken eggshell, her blue and green tail curled around a small gold and green miniature of herself. She was brushing the little dragon's scales with her tongue, and looking exceptionally pleased with herself.

A breath of foul hot air at his back and a sudden thud, and Raspberry looked up to see Grimley, who had landed on the ledge behind him.

"It's a girl," the dragon told him, and reached into the cave, extracting something glittering, which he pressed into the wizard's hands with his great clawed foot. "Here, have a diamond. Have two. I'm a father! Isn't she beautiful? Going to be as pretty as 'er mother, I'll wager. Hot dog!"

But before Raspberry could compliment the dragons on their new offspring, the ledge was suddenly invaded by a large party of people who abruptly materialized out of thin air. They carried with them the fragrance of spirits, but not the kind that walked through walls. Several of them still held flagons clenched in their fists. Among them, amazingly, was his own pointy-eared child.

"Hello, father," she said. "We've come to help."

"Oh, Grimley! How thoughtful!" Grizel cried from within the cave. "Your meat-bringer's brought us a baby present! How did he know it would be just the thing? Our poor little Grippeldice is famished!"

All through the night the unicorns galloped, bearing their riders and themselves higher and deeper into the maze. Though they stumbled and slid and sometimes fell on the steep, glassy surface of the maze floor, they pressed on, driven by fear of pursuit, struggling against the keening wind. Pegeen's aura was their beacon, but the black cracks in the glittering crystal had a way of not appearing until Eagledown was almost upon them.

By first light they were still deep inside the maze, in front of the mouth of a tunnel. Colin twisted on Snowshadow's back and listened carefully. Several times during the night he'd heard the shouts of men, and once had seen torchlight far back down the maze. But now, except for the banshee wind, he heard nothing.

"Seems we've lost them," he yawned, stretching. Though the unicorn water had cleansed even the stiffness of being frozen in one position from his body along with his illness, and he felt better than he could ever remember having felt, physically, he was nevertheless weary from lack of sleep, and sore again from riding bareback all night long. Maggie arched her back and pointed her toes and stretched, too. Pegeen dismounted and walked over to inspect the tunnel.

"Very little wonder I could never get a clear picture of the maze from the castle," she said, returning to them after satisfying her curiosity. "If I had a brain in my head, I would have realized that an iceworm boring through a glacier isn't going to make the same sort of maze a rich lord has his gardener plot to amuse the houseguests. We must be now in a part of the glacier where the ice is so thick the worm couldn't melt all of that on top. See? He's simply drilled through it."

"I hope he didn't go underground instead of backup," Maggie said. "I could probably melt our way out, but it would take time."

"No. There's light at the other end," Pegeen assured her. "That's what I wanted to check. But I think we should
walk through. Carefully. The worm's breath and the pressure of his passing seem to have fused most of the glacier's natural fissures, but perhaps we won't find it so inside the tunnel. I'll take it slowly."

They passed through three more of the tunnels without mishap. Fortunately, the darker it got inside, the brighter the princess's aura grew. By the time they had negotiated the last tunnel, morning had broken.

A short, steep climb led them above the tunnels, to a high plateau whose rock was so thinly coated with ice that the maze walls were less than thigh-high in places, allowing the fugitives to gaze out over acres of channeled ice.

On all sides of the plateau, deeper ice contained high walls and tunnels similar to those through which they had just passed. Far down to the right, the castle fused with the glacier. The unusual angle of their vantage point to the valley allowed them also to see the ruined village, teeming with the active black spots which were Fearchar's troops. The Blabbermouth River still wore its morning cloak of mist so heavily upon its surface that it masked the water completely.

"Under other circumstances, I'd enjoy a day like this," Pegeen told them. "It's not often so clear in the valley. It's amazing the detail one can see." She shaded her eyes with her hand as she looked across the ice and into the valley. "Why, most days you can't even see where the river is, much less-oh, dear." She pointed. "Look, there to the south. Do you see them?"

Colin and Maggie shaded their eyes and squinted in the direction of her finger. A double handful of specks probably twenty furlongs from the river moved slowly toward its banks. At the head of the specks was a speck twice as large as the others, and from the top of it the sun glistened molten copper.

"Your royal brother-in-law has arrived," Colin told Maggie.

She nodded slowly. Pegeen's face bore a stricken, guilty look.

"This is all my fault," she said. "I meant to help. I never intended to lure him into a trap. But you see, when I coded that message telling him where we were, I simply meant to let him know what he might do to lift Fearchar's wretched curse from that poor little baby. Now all of those good men will be slain!"

"And we won't be able to do anything but watch," Colin said bitterly.

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Primrose looked down her long muzzle at the scene in the valley. "Yes, your friends will surely perish. For my mai-Sally is very brave. She cannot but triumph."

Eagledown snorted. "I thought you'd caught on, but I guess you're a little slow, aren't you, nag? Your precious Sally isn't down there. She's up here prowling this worm-eaten glacier, looking for us with a big flaying knife."

Primrose stared at him for a moment, her watery gray eyes watering even more, then wheeled and galloped down the far side of the plateau and out of sight into a tunnel.

"Wait!" Snowshadow called after her. "Wait! We must all stay together!"

"Let the bird-brain go," Eagledown said. "She'll just be in our way anyhow, the silly, flighty creature."

"I wouldn't mind being flighty right now," Colin said. "Remember, Maggie, when your Granny changed me into a mockingbird and sicced Ching on me? I thought I'd never want to see another bird."

Maggie's eyes were still glued to Rowan's party, moving slowly but surely towards death. "I remember," she said absently.

"What I wouldn't give if she could make me fly again right now!" he mused. "I could warn Rowan, and when the deed was sung of later, he would say 'and then a little bird told me...'."

Maggie whirled to face him, light dawning in her eyes. "Say that again."

"I merely said that he would say 'and then a little bird told me' when--"

"No. I mean the part about flying. Never mind. You brilliant man! You've given me an idea and-yes, I think we have all we need to do it."

"I did? We do? Well, always happy to be of service." Then he stopped beaming and scratched his head, puzzled. "What?"

"We can fly to warn the King," she told them. "Remember Wizard Raspberry's little toys?"

"The 'belows' you mean?" Colin asked. "Or were they called 'bellows'? Perhaps it was 'ballasts'."

"Surely you don't mean he's still working on those balloon things," Pegeen laughed. "Why, he was trying to make those work while he was still an agent in my father's court. I don't see how those can help us, Maggie. Even if you could build one in time, you'd never be able to get it to land in the right place with a message, unless, of course, you control wind as well as fire."

"I don't. Not from such a great distance, anyway, but I can sometimes do a thing or two with air currents if I can stretch my magic by making it simulate doing certain household chores. I had in mind something different. She pulled the silk gown out of her pocket, where she'd stuck it when she disguised herself as an Everclear peasant before joining Sally Perth's band at the foot of the glacier. From her medicine pouch, she took her bone needle, sewing shears, and pocket spindle. "Now then." She closed her eyes and concentrated, seeing in her mind enlarged versions of the shapes she had cut for the wizard from silk handkerchiefs.
Pegeen nodded with the appreciation of a fellow craftswoman as Maggie's shears cut balloon pieces from the dress skirt, raveled the bodice for silk thread, and turned the operation over to the spindle, which spun the thread out long and fine. The thread snaked through the slim eye of the bone needle, which whipped together the pieces of balloon in less time than it would have taken Pegeen to sew ten stitches. The unicorns shied away from the snapping shears and flying needle, and jumped over the low wall to the next path over, where they watched with rolling eyes.

Colin simply sat atop the ice wall and tootled softly on his flute. He was getting used to this sort of thing.

"Now then," Maggie said, when the completed sack lay at her feet. "There's not a moment to lose. Colin, Primrose, please help me find any straw still sticking to the unicorns' coats."

"Not another basket, surely?" Colin asked, looking up and tucking his flute back into his pocket at the same time.

"Absolutely another basket. I'll need something to ride in if I'm to fly down and warn Rowan, won't I?"

"You're going to fly down? In this? Don't be ridiculous. It won't even work. It has to be-you know," he cupped his hands in semi-circles, "rounder, or something, doesn't it?" But he nevertheless jumped the wall and began brushing Snowshadow's coat free of straw from the pen.

The Princess did likewise to Eagledown and Moonshine. "Naturally, it will need inflation," she told Colin, "But there is quite a lot of wind up here."

"Don't look at me when you say that," he laughed. "I may be able to sing an eighty-verse chantey without stopping, but I'm not windy enough to blow up that thing!"

"No, but if we stretch it across the mouth of a tunnel, you see?"

"Good idea, Princess," Maggie said. "I hadn't thought of using the tunnels."

They gathered the pieces of straw into a pile, and Maggie sat down beside it and began pulling the short pieces until they lengthened, stretching into long fibers that, with minimal assistance from her, began twining themselves around each other, writhing like a nest of snakes. "There, that should do it," she said, when the basket had grown as high as her head. Abruptly, the straws tucked themselves into their last completed row and were quiet. Maggie stood, dusting her hands off on her skirt. "To the tunnel!" she said.

It took all three of them to control the bag when the wind gusted through the tunnel and filled it with cold air. They had less problem holding onto the bag than they did keeping the air inside while they closed the sack and Maggie tied it shut.

Finally, they had managed to haul the half-filled balloon back up to the plateau when Primrose galloped, wild-eyed and dripping foam, up from the path she had taken into the maze a short time before.

"Flee!" she cried. "Flee at once or be steamed alive as I nearly was! The worm has turned!" She would have slid back down the other path except that Colin and the princess caught her, and calmed her until she'd stopped her terrified rearing.

"You mean the worm is awake?" Pegeen asked. "But he's never been awake."

"Maybe all the recent activity has disturbed him," Colin suggested. "And us coming into the glacier. Worms aren't supposed to be overly bright, but they are guardians, of a sort."

"Stop talking and FLEE!" the lathered unicorn advised shrilly.

"Where?" Pegeen demanded. "We could get trapped into one of the deep channels, or a tunnel, and have the thing on top of us. Here, it's shallow and we can side-step the monster if need be. It seems to me we're in the safest possible place for dealing with ice worms right where we are."

Maggie looked down at the half-inflated balloon and down across the glacier again, to where the specks were stopped now, close to the banks of the river. "We'll never be able to warn Rowan now."

"We certainly won't be able to if we're steamed alive," Pegeen told her.

"Steamed?" Maggie asked. "Don't you mean burned?"

"You're thinking of dragons, dear. Icworms steam. That's how these passages were created."

"It was dreadful!" cried Primrose. "Billows and billows of hot putrid stuff boiling out at me through that tunnel! I ran as I have never ran before, and when I looked back down, I saw it! It was larger than ten of the tallest cedars lashed together, and it was covered all over with nasty blue fur."

"Not scales?" Pegeen asked.

"No. No, fur! And-and it RIPPELED, and slid behind all that steam and oh, it was disgusting!"

"Steam, huh?" Maggie said.

"And ripples," shivered Primrose. "Great, nasty, undulating ones."

"How much steam?"

"Quite enough for me, thank you. It must have gone on twice the length of the worm, at least. Horrible! And it hissed!"

"Hissed, you say?" Colin asked. "Like that, maybe?"
A low, leaking sound filled the air, accompanied by a sibilant slithering and thumping noise.
"Over the wall!" Pegeen cried.

"No. Help me." Maggie wrestled the silk sack to the farthest edge of the plateau, across the path Primrose had used to escape the worm. "We can use the worm's steam to inflate the balloon, don't you see? Then all we have to do is pull it out of the worm's way, step over the wall, and while the worm slides merrily on his way, we attach the basket and I fly down to warn Rowan!"

Colin didn't think much of the idea. He didn't like the thought of the worm being awake with them on its glacier, and felt that if only he could sing an appropriate lullabye loud enough, he'd be able to lull the thing back to sleep. But since he was less loathe to brave a little advance steam to fill Maggie's balloon than he was to getting himself steamed while trying to serenade the worm back into slumber, he kept quiet.

Unfortunately, others on the glacier did not. As the First breath of steam shot up from the tunnel to the left of their plateau, they heard, along with the slumping, slithering sound of the worm's approach, clanging swords and cursing and Sally Forth's voice, ringing high and girlish, crying, "Onward, men!"

But by then the balloon was filling with rushing steam, blossoming like some mushroom-shaped flower, and it took all of their strength to hold it while Maggie tied the precious steam inside. They had a hot, uncomfortable time of it, dragging the balloon out of the way before the steam could totally engulf them.

No sooner had they boosted the balloon over the wall than the beast was upon them. Maggie looked up from tying the basket to the balloon just in time to see the monster pour into view behind its steamy veil. The sight of it unnerved her that she forgot balloon, King, bandits, and all, hypnotized by the slither and slump of a column of blue fur long enough to fill the great hall at Fort Iceworm twice over.

Pegeen couldn't stand to look at the beast. It was too fearsome. She averted her eyes just in time to see their last hope "rise, bobbling in the air just above the unicorns' backs.

She leaped, and landed on the basket's rim, head, chest, arms and shoulders inside the basket, legs and feet flailing the sky as the balloon rose, drifting gently above the worm, above the maze, and beyond, to glide above the soon-to-be-embattled valley.

Difficult as it was to think rationally with one's head in a basket and one's bottom keeping company with the clouds, Pegeen endeavored to do so. It wouldn't do to panic, or even to scream. The others couldn't help her even if they could hear her, which she doubted. But if she wasn't screaming, someone certainly was. Awful cries of agony screeched up to her from somewhere near the point of her unanticipated launching. She hoped it wasn't her friends screaming, but she really had quite enough problems of her own to worry about just then, without troubling herself with theirs.

Like how to have her rear half join the front inside the basket. By the time she accomplished that, calling on gymnastic skill she would have sworn she did not possess, she was unfit for any activity more strenuous than panting in the bottom of the basket.

As she began to recover, her eye was caught by the fluttering of the little thread holding the balloon together at its bottom. It seemed perilously slender for something so vital to keeping her aloft. And though staying aloft was definitely preferable to crashing into the valley, it would have been nice if Maggie had been thoughtful enough to explain how one was supposed to get this cursed thing DOWN, slowly, and in an orderly fashion that would permit one to place oneself somewhere in close proximity to Roari Rowan so that one might warn him. That was supposed to be the purpose of all of this strenuous exercise, after all.

A gruesome thought occured to her. Perhaps, since Maggie had meant to fly the balloon herself, the control of the thing was intricately bound up with the hearth witch's magic powers. She brushed the thought resolutely from her mind. After all, Maggie was not the only one with talent. Hadn't Pegeen's people always said of her, during her father's reign, that Pegeen the Illuminator could put a silver lining in any cloud? She ought to have a go at these clouds, if that were true, she thought. As she was in a very good position to see, all of them had distinctly dismal GRAY linings. She was practically close enough now to count the raindrops in them.

But surely she wasn't THAT high. Clouds tended to hang low over the valley, as a rule. Oh, don't be such a coward, she told herself. You can at least have a peek to get your bearings.

Raising herself to her knees, she gazed down across the vast expanses of empty gray air to a rapidly flattening field with a tiny town on one side of it and a thin gray yarn, the fog-shrouded Blabbermouth, running through it.

She sank quickly to the bottom of the basket, shaking. Curiosity was no great virtue either, she decided.

She regretted looking down, regretted catching the balloon, regretted sending the message to Rowan, and bitterly regretted ever setting eyes on Fearchar Brown. But she most regretted neglecting to bring along another torch and tinderbox. She would give absolutely anything for a smoke.
"Oh, no!"

Colin tore himself away from the sight of the worm's retreating tail to see what had prompted Maggie's cry. She pointed. Far beyond the glacier, out over the edge of the valley, their balloon wafted through the clouds. "The princess took it," Maggie said. "I would never have thought her to betray us."

Colin patted her shoulder and watched helplessly - as their last hope floated nonchalantly away. All of their time and effort was wasted. The bandits would be upon Rowan before he knew it, while Colin and Maggie were stuck up here on the glacier with the unicorns. It wasn't even much good thinking about escaping. What would Argonia be like under Fearchar's rule? Colin was too discouraged to think about that, so instead he helped Maggie to her feet. "Come along, now. We'd best get moving. I heard Sally's men just before the worm--"

Screams began filling the air, masculine screams, high-pitched, terrified, gargling, dying screams. Sizzling screams.

Eagledown chuckled. "Sounds like all the worms just got together."

"Oh, those poor men!" Snowshadow said quietly.

"Maiden!" Primrose sobbed.

"Don't waste any sympathy on her," Maggie snapped. "She's probably turned into another whirlwind and blown clean away before the thing touched her. I only wish we could do the same."

"Why can't we?" Colin asked, with sudden inspiration. "The worm doesn't steam from its back end, does it? And it's blind, you know. I noticed that as it passed. It won't be able to see us, and it's too ungainly to double back on itself. It seems to me all we have to do is follow it back down to the castle, and let it take care of Fearchar's henchmen for us."

"Not bad thinking for a mortal!" Eagledown applauded.

"Yes," Primrose said, leaping onto the ice. "I'll see for myself if Sally got awaaaaaayyy--" and slid spraddle-legged down the worm's path, newly slicked with fresh-melted ice. Her frightened neighing echoed back to them as she shot through the first tunnel, and out of sight.

Colin had lunged for the terrified unicorn as she slid past him, and tried to grab her. But no sooner had he set foot over the wall man he, too, slipped and slid swooshing down the tunnel.

"Now what?" Maggie asked, blinking rapidly, baffled by the speed with which Colin had followed his own suggestion.

Moonshine touched a hoof to the path, and retracted it again. "Tis too slick for the likes of us, friend Maggie. We cannot follow."

"Nonsense!" said Eagledown. "Looks like fun to me!" He stepped out onto the path too, but was perhaps unwittingly more cautious than Colin or the mare had been, having seen their fate. He neither slipped nor fell. "Huh," he said, and looked down the long slope where the others had traveled before him. "Maybe- maybe if I laid on my side, and you gave me a little push, I wouldn't be so likely to break a leg," he suggested to Maggie.

"What about the cracks in the ice?" Moonshine asked. "We could fall in."

"True," Maggie said. "But we'll just have to hope the iceworm melted them all back together again. Besides, by the time we get past the first tunnel, we should be traveling so fast we'll fly right over the cracks. It's either that or stay up here."

"Aw, quit dallying around and push, will you?" Eagledown said, lying down on his side and tucking his legs under him. Maggie pushed and he shot down into the tunnel.

The other two unicorns followed him, with varying degrees of reluctance, and by the time she had shoved them, she was grateful she wouldn't have to walk down. She was far too tired.

She took three skating-running steps and dove onto the ice, head first. But just before she did, she looked up again. She could no longer see the balloon.

Roari Rowan was an old infantryman of long standing, and he never tired of marching, or of skiing through snowfields beside gypsy sleighs, for that matter. That was the sort of thing a good soldier took in his stride, and Rowan was King by virtue of being the best soldier in Argonia.

So when he saw the vision, he put it down not to weariness, but rather to some residue of ill effect that perhaps lingered from his near-drowning.

Otherwise, he thought it damned unfair that a man should be seeing a thing like that when he hadn't had a good stout drink in weeks.

Whatever its origin, the vision did not go away, but continued hovering before him, just within the mist covering the river.

His men were finishing their morning meal. He'd finished his quickly, having little stomach for it. His usual voracious appetite was spoiled by an uneasy feeling gnawing at his vitals. Part of it was simply due to the mist. He
liked to see where he was going. He'd wait for it to clear before he took his men anywhere. They were getting too near their goal to go blundering about blindly. He'd been pacing the bank, listening to the river prattle to itself, hoping it might drop a clue as to what lay beyond it, when the vision descended.

Cyril Perchingbird approached the river, and Rowan stretched out a hamlike hand and collared the man, pointing before him at what he thought he saw through the drifting mist. The river was no match for Rowan's booming voice, even discreetly lowered as it was, in case enemy ears were listening.

"There now, Perchingbird, what's that look to you to be, just there, beyond yon fog?"

Sir Cyril looked, and stood on tiptoe to shout up to his lord's ear. "'Tis a lady, Sire. Wouldn't you say so?"

"I would that, Perchingbird. I would indeed, if you could just tell me which lady, and why a lady who so resembles Her Highness the Princess Pegeen the Illuminator at that, and what she is doing floating about up there, making me think I've had one too many."

"Well, Sire," Perchingbird said, shouting his reply through cupped hands, "I've never met the lady face to face. But since we're near the castle in her chart, and since the lady resembles her so closely, as you say, I wonder if we might consider the possibility that the lady might BE the Princess Pegeen?"

"Nonsense!" the King bellowed, casting discretion momentarily to the wind. "What would Milady Pegeen be doing riding round in a flower basket blowing that great silly bubble from her mouth?"

The basket chose that moment to set itself and its cargo softly down on the riverbank. The lady turned toward them startled eyes and cheeks puffed out like a chipmunk's. Then, slowly, her cheeks deflated and steam curled exuberantly from her nostrils. Her expression was normal and even serene by the time the steam cleared, and slowly, the bubble to which she'd been orally connected collapsed into a mantle which settled on her shoulders like a garment of state.

Holding forth her hand for their assistance, she smiled a smile that was both regal and proud. Now Rowan was quite certain she was indeed the Princess Pegeen, and he strode forward to assist her, lifting her from the basket as easily as if she was a child.

Smoothing her tattered skirts with great aplomb, she looked from one of them to the other. "I never again wish to hear anyone say that smoking is a nasty, useless habit," she told them.

"Yes, m'lady," Sir Cyril replied, kneeling.

By then, Pegeen was kneeling before Rowan. "My Liege. I am Pegeen Ashburn of the royal house of Finbar, called the Fireproof, and I have come to warn you that you are in immediate and deadly peril."

Before she had finished speaking, a fresh wind blew the mist from the river.

Colin shot down the glacial slide, ricocheting off the high maze walls like a confused arrow. Sunlight flashed in his eyes, blinding him one moment and vanishing the next as he rocketed into a tunnel. His teeth rattled loose in his head, the seat of his pants burned, and everything else was numb with cold. Once he closed his eyes and slammed head-first into a wall; after that he kept his eyes open and his hands out to shove away from such obstacles.

The sight of the steamrollered bandits would have no doubt made him ill had he been able to stick around long enough to indulge his sensitivities. Fortunately the bandits' bodies, like all other landmarks save the brilliant spots flashing before his eyes as the sun hit the ice, blurred past him too quickly for him to see them clearly.

But suddenly he was looking straight down the chute and ahead to the humping blue behind of the great worm, and over the worm into the cliff castle, directly in the monster's path. Surely the worm wouldn't risk invading the castle, would it? It was a dumb, blind thing, true, but it had avoided the place when it made the maze, after all. Or had it? Had the castle been built before or after the maze? No matter. The question was rhetorical now. Steam geysered into the air high enough to obscure the sun as the worm slump-slithered through the castle's back wall.

The worm's tail jumped out to meet Colin. He threw his arm up over his face as he plumped into it. Then he uncovered his eyes again. He hadn't dared hope for such a soft landing.

Primrose was there, coasting along in the worm's wake. The two of them and the tail were yet well outside the castle, but they slid quickly forward with each giant hump of the worm's body. Within moments the worm would have penetrated the castle, and would then plunge out the front and down the cliff and they would plummet behind him. Primrose seemed unaware of their predicament. Her pupils had disappeared into quivering whites, her mouth foamed and her body shook with more than the great worm's movement. While Colin thought he might manage to stop himself by grasping some stationary object in the castle and clinging to it, Primrose hadn't the same option, even if she had had her senses about her.

From behind him came a high, frightened whinny, and looking up, he saw the other three unicorns, tail over horn, spinning down the maze. Collision seemed imminent.

He climbed the worm's tail as if it were a staircase and clung, clutching handfuls of fur. He had barely cleared the ice before Moonshine, Eagledown, and Snowshadow thumped into the worm. Wonderful! Now he had four unicorns to worry about, besides his own hide.
When the worm humped again Colin did too, and dragged himself along the creature's back hand-over-hand, twining his fingers in the pale blue fur. He crawled very fast and prayed the worm wasn't deaf as well as blind. Since it had seemingly responded to the disturbance on its glacier, it at least must be sensitive to vibrations, if not sounds.

Ah well. No time like the present to find out, he supposed. He crawled up the worm's middle, most of which occupied the throne room and barracks, shifting his weight with the humping and straightening until he reached the head. Steam rose hot and acrid in front of him, and dissipated into the empty air. Less than a cartlength away from the monster's head, the castle's outer ledge puddled and ran down the cliff, cascading into the valley below.

Colin pressed the magic flute to his lips and prayed for a worm lullabye.

A long, thin ululation warbled from the flute. The worm reared its head and Colin felt a rise at his feet as the beast began to hump its middle up for the last forward push, the one that would plunge them all into the valley. Then the blind befurred snout began to weave back and forth, swaying to the eerie melody. The steam dribbled to nothing and the long body relaxed, and stayed that way.

"Some people will go to any lengths to get an audience," Maggie said in a shaking voice. She waded toward him from behind, sinking knee-deep in worm fur with each step. The beast dozed heedlessly on, apparently good for another half century or so of napping.

Colin grabbed her up and held her until he'd stopped shaking.

By then it was time for them both to start all over again. Maggie gripped his arm and turned him to face the valley. "Look," she whispered.

Though the streets of the village appeared as empty as the mained buildings suggested they would be, their gutted interiors swarmed with armed men. The nymph was there too, concealed within the old inn, the were Wulfric braced and bristling beside her. From where they stood, she looked none the worse for wear. She poised her silver hunting horn near her mouth, and her body leaned toward the river. It glittered and gossiped along, no longer bearing any taint of mist, oblivious to the ragged party fording it, led by a red-haired giant and a woman whose hair was of a faintly dimmer hue. The woman's arm swung to gesture to each of the buildings, and the King's men clustered cautiously about him, stopping near the first building to form a defensive ring around him.

"Pegeen's warned him!" Maggie said, almost cheering. "But why don't they stop?"

As if in answer, Rowan's voice rang out across the valley, drowning out the river and all other sounds, so commanding and thunderous that Colin was concerned lest the worm waken again. " 'Tis no use hidin' like wee little weasles!" the King bellowed. "I know yer back there, and I know what manner of churls ye be, and I tell you straight out, I can slay the lot of you. But I've no quarrel with you men, whoever you are, if you'll come forth and pledge me fealty here and now. My quarrel is with the black-hearted villain who's laid a curse on my wee daughter. Send him out now and 't will go the gentler with you."

His answer was a blast from Sally's horn and a volley of arrows from the rooftops. Pegeen fell at once. So did three of Rowan's men, "Bastards!" Colin said, his voice thickened. He cast about for a way off the cliff and found it almost immediately. The revolutionaries had left their rope ladder looped over its iron moorings on the ledge; fortunately, on the part of the ledge unmelted by the worm. He reached for the ladder, but Maggie pulled him back.

"Wait. What about the unicorns? They'll never get down alone and they could help us--"

"Afterwards, Maggie. Only afterwards. They're no match for that army of Sally's, and she'd love to recapture them. Stay here with them. If we fail, don't let them fall into Fearchar's hands again."

Before she could protest, he swung out and down onto the ladder. By the time she'd collected her wits and stared to follow, he was at the foot of the cliff where, with a guilty, defiant look up at her, he jerked the ladder up and out, snatching it from its hooks. It fell beside him, and he turned and sprinted into the village.

"Blast him!" she swore, furious at his underhanded, over-protective gesture. "Show a man a little affection and he gets uppity every time!"

She walked tiredly back down to the worm's tail, where the unicorns were waiting, and slid down the furry back to join them. Primrose seemed somewhat quieter than she had been and the others looked at her expectantly.

"Don't blame me!" she snapped. "Everything's falling apart down there and that blundering bard has stranded us here. Any ideas?" Eagledown blew and stamped for a moment before saying, "The truth is, witch, we unicorns could use a break from all the hubbub you people are causing around here."

"You WHAT?" she asked.

Moonshine stepped forward, but kept his eyes lowered as he said, "We have decided we have the need for a brief council among ourselves, and would request that you grant us a moment of privacy."

"A brief moment only," Snowshadow pleaded gently. "There are matters we must decide among us."

Maggie stared at them with injured incredulity, then shrugged as if their rejection of her didn't hurt, and walked off, saying, "I can use the time to look for a weapon, I suppose. Or another way out of here. Never let it be said that
Maggie Brown stays where she's not wanted.

Sally Forth, and she alone, had kept her men to the task at hand. Not even the great worm had kept her from this battle, though it had slain the valiant comrades who accompanied her into the maze. In her whirlwind, she had escaped. And now, by sheer force of will, she had bent her men's minds from the worm's attack on their stronghold, directing them with all her skillful charms to watch the mist, and wait, and never mind the slither and slump and steam above.

She was unsurprised when the monster stopped and did not venture into the valley. Ice monsters stayed on ice and if they strayed from ice, they died. Surely even the dumb brute who had slain her men knew as much. And then too, right was on her side, and justice, and the good will of the Dark Pilgrim, who looked to her to win this, the definitive battle in support of their great Cause. She would not let him down, even if she had to fight this battle single-handedly.

At her side, Wulfric growled and whined, anxious for blood. She wished almost that he was in man form, to consult with her, but she had not seen him in that guise since they arrived at the castle and, indeed, his fighting skill and ferocity were greater in his present form.

But he was no more ferocious than she. She was patient as a spinning spider when the usurping giant strode arrogantly into her web, but the moment he stopped, she had blown her signal, and had loosed her first arrow into the breast of the Pilgrim's traitorous woman, the elitist "Princess," Pegeen.

With the woman many others had fallen, and the usurper could not spare many. As her men nocked more arrows and retrieved spears fallen short of their mark, the enemy collected their dead and wounded and retreated to the cover of the house containing the half-dead servants from the village near the stream she'd once guarded.

Her men were ready now, and the enemy would not withstand them again. Stepping into the street, she showed herself, and putting her horn to lip, blew the charge. Then, with a wave of her arm, she led her men to battle.

Maggie seethed and stormed through the castle's rooms, wishing she could lay hands on her uncle, or Sally Forth, or even Colin, to let them know the danger of crossing a witch. She felt like destroying everything she passed, but the castle was sparsely furnished, and if she was truly trapped up here she might have need of the bedding and clothing and food remaining within the castle. No weapons were left behind, nor armor of any kind.

She slammed the door of the storage room. Empty. The slamming reverberated through the wall, and it must have been the strange acoustics in the cavernous corridor which made the sound seem to repeat itself with equal force at the end of the passage.

Or did that other door really still vibrate with the force of its closing, as it seemed to her when she approached it?

She paused for a moment, listening again, but heard only the splatter of water dropping from the ceiling. Cautiously, she opened the door, and smiled. Here at last was something useless she could tear apart without a twinge of conscience. Lining the walls and long tables were the paraphernalia of her uncle's largely bogus magic practice: animal skeletons, scrolls, tomes, flasks and beakers, lamps and crucibles and jars of this and that. All the makings of a good bonfire.

But as she looked around the room, she noticed that the water dripping from above didn't pool on the floor, but ran off somewhere in the middle. Investigating, she saw the rucked-back rug, and the outline of the trap door beneath it.

She pushed the rug aside and pulled the door up by the iron ring set into it. Under it was a stone staircase, broad enough for two people abreast and surprisingly dry for being in such a drippy location.

She whooped with joy and hurried back to the unicorns. Here was a way to get them all off the cliff.

"But the point is, we don't think we ought to get involved in men's battles," Snowshadow told her. "It's bad enough when you people hurt each other, much less involving unicorns. Our power is a healing one."

"Hold on there, filly, and let this witch tell us agn where the staircase is," Eagledown interrupted. "I don't know about this healing business, though I'm as quick to dip my horn in a puddle to protect the local wildlife as any 'com. But what I'm anxious to dip it in NOW is the scum who've caused me to break it off. If people think we 'corns are a lot of silly foals, they aren't going to let us live long enough to heal anything. I say, spit the lot of 'em!"

"But the Creed!" Snowshadow protested. "That IS the Creed, you ignorant filly," Eagledown said, and repeated his stanza about making men bleed.

"And I say why horn in where we aren't concerned?" Primrose said. "At least when the horrid two-legged monsters are bashing each other, they aren't deceiving, imprisoning and mutilating us."

"I didn't deceive any of you, and it just may interest you to know that Princess Pegeen has intercepted an arrow in your behalf," Maggie said hotly. "That's right. She died trying to help you. And I'm trying to help you too if you'll only stop bickering long enough to pay attention. As long as you remain up here you'd damn well better care who wins down below- you could end up stewing in the same broth we just got you out of."
"For my fodder, we'd be best off letting you destroy each other," Primrose snorted back. "But very well, I'll come. The forest beasts can only make do so long without a noble unicorn to minister to their wounds and purify their water."

"But we must NOT slay, save in defense of our lives," Snowshadow insisted. "Is that not true, Moonshine?"
He shook his mane impatiently. "I must see for myself what betides my friends, and whether by hornning or healing I will do what I'm able to aid them, for if it be ununicornly or no, I love them well."

"I'm glad to see someone has kept his senses around here," Maggie said, lighting a torch with a snap of her fingers. "This is a fine time, if you ask me, for the lot of you to turn balky. Come along."
She led them down the staircase slowly, for the steps were worn and in places heavily coated with ice.

"I'd sooner have walked down the glacier!" Primrose complained.

"I only wish you'd walk on your own feet instead of mine," Maggie retorted.

"Watch that torch, witch, or you'll blind me!" Eagledown commanded.

The battle centered on one small building, farthest of all the village dwellings from the castle and closest to the river. From the doorway, Rowan and his men defended themselves. The building was ringed ten deep in bandits. Arrows and spears rained against it, for the most part futilely. Ankle-deep mud mired the attackers, and the pungent smell of carnage and sweat seethed through the sunlit morning.

Rowan chopped his way through his attackers with the everyday ease of a woodcutter plying his trade. He was the only one of his band visible above the heads of Fearchar's pack, and for a moment she feared he stood alone. But now and then, when his attention and the solid wooden cartwheel he used for a shield were turned to the left or to the right, he would suddenly grow another set of arms on his blind side.

Still, he essentially defended the place by himself.

Maggie made her way toward the battle, keeping close to the houses and out of the way of the rooftop archers, looking in all directions before she dared to dart from one sanctuary to another.

Not that she had the faintest idea what she was going to do once she got there. Get herself killed by the King's enemies, or entrapped as his allies were? Neither situation held much promise.

Then she saw the wolf.

He crouched on the rooftop, a little behind Rowan's head. The King was taller than the doorway he defended, and while he had friends at his back, none guarded his head.

Maggie ran forward, shouting her spell so that as soon as she was within range, it would take effect. She was still well back from the enemy's rear, when the roof disintegrated into a shower of toothpicks. The wolf leaped at the same moment. He yelped once and pawed air and splintering ceiling before falling into the house, where she hoped the rest of Rowan's supporters would dispose of him.

A horn sounded, and the attackers surged forward more urgently than before. Rowan hefted his cartwheel, and pressed the front lines back, whacking and gouging at them. He grinned ferociously all the while, teeth bared and eyes deceptively merry.

The horn sounded again, and a flight of arrows sprang by overhead, peppering the newly roofless building. Some of the grunting and screaming now seemed to be coming from inside Maggie took cover behind the corner of the house opposite the one defended by the King just before the horn blasted once more.

She squinted, tracking the sound. Sally Forth stood in the front line of her troops, but was standing on something near a corner of the house, well away from the King's sword, protectively walled off by her followers. The last flight of arrows had been scantier than the one before, and the nymph raised her horn again.

At least Maggie knew how to put a stop to that. "Make that noisy instrument into a drinking horn," she commanded. The horn met the nymph's mouth, but no sound tempted the hangings, clangings, moanings and cryings of battle, and no flight of arrows followed.

Even a giant like the King couldn't help but weary under such an onslaught. Bards might sing of him killing hundreds single-handed, but Maggie for one was ill-prepared to wager her life and the lives of her friends that the bards weren't exaggerating, 'as usual, on that score.

The more Rowan hacked down to be trampled under their comrades' feet, the more comrades clamored forward to be hacked down in their turn. How could mere hearthcraft aid an impossible situation like that? She couldn't risk fire. To do so would be to burn friends and foes alike.

Arrows came singly and in small bunches now, but there were far fewer than before. Tracing their pattern, she saw that only the three houses closest to the King's stronghold were now involved in the attack. A boon, truly, but not one she could spare time to consider.

But she did consider the laced leggings worn by most of the bandits, binding their britches into their boots. Such laces would weave well, and once woven, would make effective hobbles.

She had to show herself enough to come in range again of her subjects, and to be close enough to the materials
she meant to use. At least her brown dress and dark coloring blended well with mud so she was fairly inconspicuous. Extending her arms low and toward her enemies' feet, she pantomimed with her fingers the unlacing, the twining and interweaving of the laces, repeating and interlocking the movements for as many times as she could count heads, until sweat rolled into her eyes and her fingers and forearms cramped. Each time her fingers signed, leggings unlaced and laces tangled in a mating dance.

The enemy stopped fighting Rowan and began fighting each other, tugging, cursing, falling, hopping and sometimes stabbing and sawing as they tried to free themselves.

Maggie ducked for cover again, as more arrows rained down. This time only two houses were involved.

Eagledown and Moonshine galloped forward and began harrying the jumbled brigands from the perimeters, darting forward to slash with their hooves and gouge with their horns, inflicting injury and adding to the general pandemonium. Eagledown's broken horn had shorter striking range but inflicted worse damage than Moonshine's.

Their efforts, combined with Maggie's, provided the King with-the respite he needed to clear the doorway, mowing a path in front of and around him. From inside the house behind him poured Neddy Pinchpurse, Maggie's old friend, Prince H. David Worthyman, his son, Davey, and other gypsies, nobles, and sailors, armed with daggers and an occasional sword, and shielded by pot lids, planks, and plates, and any other portable solid item which might afford them some small measure of protection. As they advanced, they captured better weapons from their fallen foes.

Now the doorway was guarded by only two men, and from her hiding place Maggie could see something of the inside, which was still heavily peopled with the refugees from Everclear and a few prone bodies, Rowan's dead and wounded.

A very pale pink glow lit one shadowy corner, where a portly gentleman cradled the body of a woman to him. He looked down at her with a look that was both grieving and beseeching, his face bathed in the glow that came from her body. As Maggie watched, the glow faded and died, and both figures were lost in shadow.

One last house sent up a feeble volley of arrows, and close by a familiar voice sang the text of Argonia's Royal Penal Code. Maggie smiled and looked around, but couldn't see him.

Then she heard more hooves, and Snowshadow pounded forward. "My people!" she trumpeted, "My people are in there! My villagers! They'll be slain!"

But now the brigands were hacking their bootlaces apart, and striking back at Rowan's band with more vigor. And from the formerly quiet houses in the rear of the village, more bandits swarmed, drowsy and yawning but well-armed with short swords and shields.

Then they were pouring from te house next to hers, and the one behind which she hid, and Jbse by she heard a strangled cry, in the direction opposite from the battle.

Close to the western wall of the house to the right of hers, Colin lay face down in the mud, a dagger in his back, his eyes already starting to glaze. Blood trickled in a thin string from the corner of his mouth. Maggie fell to her knees beside him, but knew even before she touched him that he was dead. His cheek was still warm, and the breeze rippled his hair and billowed the bloodied back of his tunic. She gathered him in her arms and stroked his face and hair, rocking back and forth. "Colin, you ass," she lectured his limp form, "If you hadn't tried to leave me behind, I could have watched your silly back for you."

CHAPTER 16

"Your pardon, gentle mother," Raspberry shouted into Grizel's cave, "But my daughter's not for eating."

"You think not? Well, I can tell you, master meat-maker, MY daughter is hungry and I will feed her NOW."

Rusty smiled expectantly at her father, waiting for his approval. She didn't speak dragonese, nor pan-elfin for that matter. The men from the tavern shrank against the cliff wall, their improvised weapons and flagons clattering to their feet. They didn't speak dragonese either, but they had a sound theoretical grasp of dragon nature.

"Aw, com'on, hot shot, don't be that way," Grimley said. "She's just a baby. She won't eat much. Just one or two of them."

"What's the problem, father?" Rusty asked. "Do the dragons require magical help? Perhaps I can be of assistance."

"No!" Raspberry said. "Didn't your mother ever teach you anything? A hungry dragon's den is no place for little girls!"

"I'm NOT a little girl," Rusty replied. "I have magic, too."

Grizel poke her head out of the cave and surveyed the people crowding her ledge as a housewife would study produce at the market. "The red-topped female is the proper size for a nice appetizer," she told her mate, "but spikey looking. How about that nice fat one over there, and the young one? You can let the old one go. He'll be far too tough."
"Dragon Grimley, you can't do this!" the wizard cried, blocking Grimley's claws as he reached for his mate's selections.

The dragon was fortunately still in a mellow mood. "No need to get hot under the collar there, fella. Look, I pre-cook everything for the baby. Just a little blast and it's over. They never feel a thing."

"That's NOT the point, noble dragon," the wizard told him. "These are loyal subjects like yourself, and this is my only daughter. How would you like it if I were to try to cook your daughter?"

"Let's go easy on the inflammatory remarks, eh, hot stuff?" the dragon suggested in a menace-edged tone.

Rusty laid her hand on her father's shoulder. "Really, father, if these beasts are hungry and you're unable to aid them, I'm sure I can with my magic. Just tell me what you need and I'll have my genie, Jehan, fetch it."

A peg-legged pirate whom Raspberry had taken to be just another of the men from the tavern spirited to the ledge by the incorrigible Rusty drifted forward, neither foot nor peg quite meeting the lichen-covered rock. "You're wishin' you had a feast fit for dragons, lassie?" he asked.

"I do," she replied grandly, as she imagined all powerful mages answered their minions.

"Done," the pirate said. "But it's your last wish, and I'm free."

"My last wish?" Rusty wailed. "But it wasn't for me, it was for Daddy."

Jehan was not listening. Instead, he dissolved. When he reappeared, he had in tow ten cattle, six deer, and a grunting boar. "Tell your dragons to fire away," he said to the wizard. "I've brought 'em a spot of supper."

Grimley roasted the boar on the spot, and soon from the interior of the cave they heard satisfied smackings and slurpings, followed by a soft burp.

Grizel poked her head out again. "Little Grippeidice may have my eyes, m'love, but she has your appetite. Roast her just one more teensy little cow, won't you, my flame, and then I think she should nap. I'm rather burned out myself. Perhaps while we're resting, you would be a love and clear this ledge? It's getting so dreadfully cluttered!"

When she'd popped her snout back inside the cave, Grimley, the scales of his head puffed to right angles with pride, turned to Raspberry. "Don't that just warm up your insides, hot shot? Ah, fatherhood! Why, I feel hot enough to slay a dozen knights in shining armor."

"In that case, noble dragon, perhaps now that you're a family beast and will want to consider providing your mate and child with comfort and security, you'd consider re-entering the King's service? My daughter, as his Majesty's agent, has just provided you with your back pay, and his Majesty does need help badly. I daresay that if we tarry much longer, it may well be that our liege will no longer be alive to require your services,"

"Aw, blazes, hot shot, I'd like to help you out, but you heard my little spitfire. I have to clean this flamin' ledge off."

"May I suggest, noble dragon, that if you carry us instead of push us from the ledge, and transport us to the Worm's Maze Glacier, we might all accomplish our goals. Namely, we would stay alive, you would clean your ledge and provide yourself with exercise and recreation while re-establishing your service to the King, and we could all help preserve our sovereign land of Argonia."

"You mean to say, you want these creatures to ride on my back and then we'll ALL go slay knights together?" the dragon asked, regarding Rusty's band skeptically.

"Yes, noble dragon."

"Well, then," Grimley snaked a claw inside the mouth of his cave and snared a talon-full of sparkling gems, tossing them amid the townsmen. "As long as we're stokin' the same fire, so to speak, have some diamonds, boys, in honor of my new little spark."

A unicorn shrilled a long high scream. Maggie straightened, wincing as she pulled the knife from Colin's back, though she knew he felt nothing. She wanted a more direct weapon than her magic now. Unicorn healing had reclaimed the bodies of the Everclear villagers and mended the wounds of Leofwin and Wulfric. Perhaps it would also save Colin and Pegeen, if it were used quickly. But she'd never know, if Fearchar's men won this battle.

Scattered groups of fighters clashed all over the road now.

Moonshine and Eagledown fought back to back, surrounded by packs of brigands. Cloven hooves and horns took a goodly toll, but new enemies quickly replaced the fallen ones.

Rowan stood alone in the middle of the road, spinning like a dervish while his sword scythed its grisly harvest.

Gypsies fought dagger-to-shortsword, but neither Prince Worthyman nor Davey still stood.

Neddy Pinchpurse and a few of his mates skirmished near the riverbank, neither they nor their attackers seeming ever to get the upper hand.

And always, for each of Fearchar's men who fell, ten more waited to engage the slayer.

The unicorn screamed again, from the building the King had defended.

Maggie zigzagged across the muddy road, avoiding engagement, running for the house.
Snowshadow reared, screaming, in the doorway. Her coat was blood-striped. Sally Forth brandished a sword, smaller and lighter than the men's, but just as effectively carving the unicorn.

"Go away!" Snowshadow safilled. "I won't let you kill my people! I won't! They can't defend themselves! Go! They can't hurt you! Go! Go!"

The nymph struck and struck again, but Snowshadow would neither move from the doorway nor strike back. A blow fell across the unicorn's neck, deep and hard, and Snowshadow fell to her knees. Sally raised the sword again.

Maggie rushed the house, but tripped and fell sprawling across a bandit's body.

She heard one hoofbeat before a shadow leaped over her, and Primrose dived, horn first, into Sally Foruy's back.

Then it was as if a high wind blew, and smoke and fire and screaming men were everywhere. A bandit grappled with a sailor, but a farmer, one she had never seen before, brained him from behind with a timber.

Other new bodies scrambled into the melee, while overhead the sun was blotted out by wild, looping shadows and belching flame.

She raised her head. From the doorway of the building, the Everclear villagers stepped carefully over their fallen unicorn, and wandered into the field of battle. At first she feared they'd be slain, but then she saw that the faces were no longer blank and the eyes held purpose. Some retrieved the weapons of the fallen and others simply launched themselves onto the b the nearest enemy.

Crawling to Snowshadow, she stroked the blood-soaked mane, and the unicorn whickered softly, blowing pink bubbles. "They were frightened people, with no understanding of my magic." Her thought was thin and weak. "But they have good hearts. I could not let the false maiden slay them."

"Shh," Maggie kissed her forelock. "You've released them from their spell. They're helping us now. Rest."

She spent what was left of the battle fighting brigands away from the wounded unicorn. She had unexpected help from a one-legged pirate who was an excellent hand with a cutlass.

The dragon was the decisive factor, of course. No one cared to be charred alive. But the brigands also grew disheartened by having their weapons snatched from their hands by no corporeal force they could see.

Those who were able began to flee, keeping close to the rocks to save themselves from the dragon.

All three unicorns gathered at the doorway, over their fallen kinswoman. "She lives?" Moonshine asked Maggie.

"Aye, but not for long, without help. And Moonshine, Colin- you must try to help Colin. He's been slain but--"

Primrose interrupted, and her voice was not so harsh with censure this time as with grief. "Have your friends bear our sister to the river, and we will do for her what we can. Then we'll discuss your casualties."

"But Colin--"

Moonshine nuzzled her with a bloody muzzle. "Many are wounded and slain, friend Maggie. We'll save your love if we have the power, but we must put order to our tasks, and also there must be words passing between us and your King. Will you see to it?"

She wiped her tears on her bloody arm and nodded.

Rowan still stood in the middle of the road, directing the separation of dead from wounded, friend from foe. One of the men who had flown in on the dragon knelt before him. "Hill-man, here, my Liege, of the Castle Rowan garrison. Request permission to return to active duty."

"Permission granted, as is bloody well obvious, I should think," the King replied. "Arm four men, Hillman, and scour this village. I want none of these rascals escaping."

"Yes, my Liege."

"Well, Maggie? And what are you doin' here, may I ask?"

the King said, turning to her. "You're supposed to be back at your father's hall bein' courted and cosseted." But he gave her a grim smile and held out his hand. She knelt and kissed it. It was covered with blood, like the rest of him. Only his eyes still shone blue and white through the gore, some of it his own, some of it that of his enemies.

"I need men to carry the injured unicorn to the water," she said. "The unicorns can heal our casualties and bring the dead back to life only--"

"Bring the dead back to life? My poor little sister, you're too gentle for battle after all, I think. The sight of it's addled yer brain. But very well." Striding to Snowshadow, he pushed the other unicorns aside and lifted the injured one in his corded, bloodied arms as if she was a lamb. He bore her to the river, setting her down among the reeds poking up from the shallows.

"Well, I never in all my days!" the Blabbermouth blabbered, "A pure disgrace is what I call it, and that's the truth and no lie ..."

Moonshine, Primrose, and Eagledown joined Snowshadow in the river, each dipping his horn or what remained of it into the chattering water.
The water instantly cleared, and its raucous voice lowered to a pleasant, well-modulated conversational tone. "Oooh, that feels very good indeed," it said gratefully. "It's been soooooo loooooong since I've felt anything as purely edifying as this. Why, look at how I sparkle now, and how deep into me you can see. I'm rather like an emerald, aren't I?"

Maggie had no patience for admiring the water, for now another wonder was taking place. Eagledown lifted his head, and his horn came out long, glittering, diamond-bright, boldly scrolled, and best of all, entirely whole. The wounds on his body, as on the bodies of the others, washed away in the sparkling river as easily as the blood and grime. Snowshadow's coat gleamed white again, and her horn grew and mended, spiraling into whole opalescent beauty even as they watched.

"Oh, I feel so much better," she sighed, splashing to her feet. "Then we must set to work," Moonshine said, also rising. "Maggie, have your King convey all the dead and wounded here, into these waters, and they shall be healed." "All?" she asked.

"Of course, all," Primrose said. "You don't suppose we discriminate between good injured bears and bad injured bears when we're practicing our art in the greenwood, do you? Though there's been some discussion about it, we ultimately decided to put your kind in the injured bear category. We will heal all. What you decide to do with them later is up to you."

The scene that followed reminded Maggie of a summer washday with her father's servants founding laundry against the rocks—a practice she limited as much as possible by use of her magic, since the process tended to be rough on fabric. Only instead of sheets and towels and skins and veils and waistcoats, people were being doused, dunked and half-drowned in the enchanted waters.

Moonshine went with her to Colin, and carried the minstrel to the river across his back. Maggie knelt in the river and held Colin's head aloft while the water lapped his body. Next to her, the portly, kind-faced gentleman she had seen in the ruined house was performing the same service for Pegeen.

"You mustn't worry, my dear," he told her, comfortably. "Why, her Highness has been here barely a moment, and already I vow her cheeks are pinking and her lashes flutter." Maggie looked. It was true. Pegeen did indeed live again, and her aura, though imperceptible in the sunlight, cast its rosy glow into the emerald waters beneath her.

Colin's color seemed improved too, though perhaps it was just the absence of mud and blood which made him look better. She stroked away the last vestiges of that with her fingers. Wet though her fingers were, when she bathed his face, she thought it felt warm again.

"I must say, though," the gentleman remarked, waving his arms at the soldiers who regrew limbs, the sailors revitalized after suffering mortal wounds, the gypsies whose skin deepened from pallor to its natural swarthiness, the bandits whose burns and gouges disappeared, all of the welter of wet humanity boiling around them. "I find this sort of thing disturbing. What do you suppose the consequences will be?"

"What consequences?" Maggie asked, not really paying attention for now Colin's eyelids were moving and his chest rose and fell with a motion quite separate from the lapping wavelets. "Oh, I suppose the bandits will be imprisoned or hanged, eventually, but everyone else..."

"I wasn't referring to them, actually," the man said. "It's the consequences for the unicorns which concern me. Once these people leave here and the news is heralded throughout the land that unicorns possess this sort of power, they'll never be free beasts again. Anyone of any means at all will try to round them up and breed them like cattle or pigs, for the profit to be gained from selling their healing magic."

"That would never work," Maggie said. "I don't think unicorns could live in captivity that long. Snowshadow and Eagledown would surely have died if it hadn't been for the princess."

"Yes? Was someone addressing me?" Pegeen tried to sit erect and succeeded instead in dunking both herself and the gentleman. He surfaced, dog-paddling, and guided the sputtering Princess to the surface.

"Your pardon, madam," he said. "Sir Cyril Perchingbird, Royal Archivist, at your service. Allow me to escort your Highness back to shore."

Colin wandered the former battlefield, Filled with a disturbing sense of unreality. He knew very little about battles. Only what he'd learned in songs and stories, and that didn't go into the emotional side of things much, aside from swellings of patriotism and bloodlust and so forth. But he was almost certain it couldn't be usual that everyone would look so refreshed afterwards as the people around him did.

The newly cleaned and revitalized bandits had cooperatively, almost cheerfully, allowed themselves to be bound with strips of their own clothing. The King roared happily about, barking orders, while Princess Pegeen and Cyril Perchingbird tried futilely to catch up with him. Wizard Raspberry and the dragon were fishing upstream, catching the evening meal which would feed this horde. He was aided by his daughter Rusty, whose piratical companion hunkered down with Neddy Pinchpurse and his mates, reminiscing, apparently, about the high seas.
Maggie presided over a large fire and a boiling crock from which she ladled cups of herb tea for all and sundry. The tea was more than mere refreshment-into it she had poured a quantity of salt from her medicine pouch sufficient to counter her uncle's magic. Sally Forth sat against the house which had been the major scene of battle, and the wolf lay at her feet. She appeared to be chatting with the river, which continued to speak quietly and rationally. Only the unicorns seemed ill at ease, and clustered together, stamping and shaking their manes.

Weird was what it was. Surely there had never been a less bloody aftermath? No one even appeared to harbor any hostile feelings toward his co-belligerants of the previous hours.

Colin was almost relieved to see Griffin Hillman and his friends herding a group of sweating, bloodied escaped brigands and carrying a thrashing, moany, brown-garbed figure among them. Pegeen's cheeks lost their new bloom. "Fearchar!" she said.

"My goodness, sir," said a bandit who was standing near the newcomers to Hillman, "Whatever 'as become of our Dark Pilgrim? 'E looks the worse for wear, sommat, 'e does."

The rowdy brigand who had seemed, when Maggie was first captured, so much less subdued by Sally's magic than the others was among Hillman's prisoners and it was he who snarled back. "'E'd be worse off yet if King's man 'ere hadn't saved 'em. There we was sweatin' like swine, bleedin' and dyin' and we sees 'im sneakin' off into that fancy swan car of 'is. All of a sudden I swallowed me own sweat and blood once too often, and I says to the boys, 'Get 'im.' All that fancy talk about savin' our skins with the beasts' magic was a lot of rot! 'E was gonter fly off V leave us to 'ang alone. So we was givin' 'im a personal demonstration of what it felt like to be real broken up."

"Both arms and legs are broke, Majesty," Hillman said. "And several ribs as well, I think." The farmer-soldiers unceremoniously dumped their cargo into a howling heap at the King's feet.

Wizard Raspberry and his daughter heard the noise and came running. The dragon flew off, dangling a writhing silvery bundle from one claw.

The King drew his sword. "Now, knave, my inclination is t'cut ye into wee little pieces t' feed tae the birdies. But free my child from your wicked spell and I'll make it quick, and easier than you deserve."

Fearchar whimpered, and Rowan raised the blade. Suddenly, Pegeen leaped between them, shielding her former lover. "Majesty, I claim a boon for warning you twice of threats against your house," she said boldly.

Rowan lowered the sword, and the cold fire in his blue eyes banked somewhat. "Gracious lady, there's much I will grant ye, but niver the life of this crawlin' crafty craven coward. He has nae the decency tae fight wi' me like a man, but wages wizardy wars against m' wife and bairn. But speak yer piece."

"I would converse with you privily, m'lord," Pegeen said, and when the King seemed about to refuse, Sir Cyril Perchingbird whispered something to him and the three of them stepped into the nearest hovel.

Maggie glared at her hated relative's quivering form for a moment, then strode over and knelt beside him, pushing aside the cowl which had flopped over his face and giving him a sip of tea. "Uncle," she said, "For the Mother's sake, spare yourself pain and undo the spell against the baby. It can do you no good now, and the King may decide to spare you If you do as he bids."

Fearchar spat feebly and said in an even feebler voice, "Bah! He'll squash me like an ant, and you, too, if you ever cross him. Know, niece, that the nobles are our enemies. They'll use us up entirely and-and discard us-if-if--"

"Save your breath, Uncle. I had my dose of salt today."

Raspberry came and knelt at the wizard's other elbow. Hillman looked as if he'd like to restrain him, but hesitated to challenge anyone on such friendly terms with the royal dragon as the kindly wizard was. "You're one of the strongest magicians in the realm, Brown," Raspberry told him. "Your magic is, in its own way, the equal of either of your sisters'. Listen, I've been high up in court circles, and I can tell you, running a country is no enviable task. Release the spell on the baby, and I'll add my plea for your life to the Princess's."

"Bah," Fearchar said again. "He'll never-ach!-spare me. You pretend to sympathize with me only to glory in my agony!"

But then Maggie and the Wizard were joined by Snowshadow and Moonshine.

"Friend Maggie," Colin felt the touch of the unicorn's mind stronger than ever. "Remind your King he agreed we would heal all of the injured."

"Moonshine, you realize this is my uncle, the wizard who would have destroyed you and the others?"

"We know, but the creed must be heeded, and:

"It is the Unicorn Creed On which we are all now agreed To make no exception, Heal all to perfection To exceptions we will not accede."

"I see," she said, "Though you certainly switch that around a lot these days. But I'll tell him."

The King returned and Colin noticed his sword was sheathed. "What is this?" he asked. "A new plot against m' crown?" Maggie told him quickly what the unicorns had said. "Humph," Rowan replied. "Might as well, I suppose. He'll
be less trouble on the journey back tae Queenston if he's of a piece. If m' homed subjects insist on curin' every ache and pain, it'll do me no good tae behead t'bastard here and now. They'll only dump 'im in t'river and grow 'im another one. And I'll not waste m'good steel that way. Only first, he's got t'lift the curse."

Fearchar seemed finally to be encouraged enough by the intervention on his behalf to cough out a civil reply: "I cannot." Rowan's sword was half out of its sheath before Sally Forth cried, "It's true! He didn't curse your child, King!" "If he didn't, who did? Did you, ye faithless trollop?" "Nay, King. Not I. But I confess I arranged it for him through a relative of mine."

"Mother's done it again," Rusty Raspberry sighed. "What d'ye mean, child?" the King demanded. "My mother's always boasting about her international circle of sorceress friends, Sire," the girl replied. "They used to meet at our tower once in awhile, flying in with magic rings and carpets and such. Stupid old crones. A curse on a baby would be just their idea of high-class magic. It WAS Mother you got that curse from, wasn't it?" she asked Sally.

"She obtained the box for us, yes, and the basic spell that accompanied it," the nymph admitted. "And the release?" Rowan roared. "What of the release, woman?"

Sally prostrated herself. "Sire, we didn't expect to need a release. None was obtained that I know of. But you could question the ogress, Belburga."

"No, you can't," Rusty said, shaking her head. When the King glared at her, she shrugged. "Sorry, your Majesty, but my dear mama's taken my sisters and moved to Greater Frostingdung. Prince Leofwin's going to make Lily Pearl his queen."

Instead of roaring again, Rowan sighed and all the iron seemed to leave his spine. "I cannot save my Bronwyn from it then, this curse? She's only a wee little baby."

Cyril Petchingbird laid his hand on his sovereign's shoulder, and said encouragingly. "Exactly, your Majesty. She's only a baby. She can't even talk yet. What harm can the curse do her now? By the time it can have any possible effect on her, you can send emissaries to Greater Frostingdung and demand the name of the sorceress who devised the curse from Dame Belburga. Are not the other issues of which we spoke of greater urgency to the security of your realm?"

"Aye, you're right as usual, Cyril. Dunk this smelling heap of offal in t' river first, and we'll speak our royal mind t' our subjects here."

Fearchar went screaming into the river, and came smiling out of it, straight for the King's feet, where his smile faded as he knelt. "Majesty, whatever you do to me is no more than I deserve. I would I could obtain for you the lifting of the curse I have so heinously placed upon your child, and will do so personally if you command it. I only beg you and my beloved niece and my gracious lady and these wondrous beasts whose magic I would have defiled, to blame none but this greedy and vicious man before you for the harm he has done. And if you cannot forgive me, it will be no more than my just punishment to go to my death tormented by your hatred."

"Oh, Fearchar," Pegeen said in a sad, soft voice. "But I implore you, Majesty, to blame me solely, and to pardon and take back as your devoted subjects these, my dupes in this plot; the nymph Sally, the were Wulfric, and all of these men who fled their own countries to find a living in your own as brothers of the greenwood. For I did pervert them by my magicks to my treasonous cause."

"Aw, don't be so hard on yourself, Dark Pilgrim," a bandit cried. "They'll 'ang us no 'igher for bein' traitors than for bein' brigands, though I do confess I don't know 'ow I could 'ave wronged such a goodly King as ours."

"Aye," several others echoed, and, "I'm with ye there, brother."

Rowan regarded the entire group with slit-eyed suspicion. "Ye'd hae all saved yerselves much grief if ye'd coom tae that conclusion before this mornin'," he told them. Sally Forth, who had remained kneeling, now raised her head. Her right hand rested between Wulfric's pointed ears and she said, "Highness, do with me what you will, but I would beg you to spare the were Wulfric, who was my accomplice, but now seems to be no more than another dumb beast, and a were no longer."

Eagledown trotted over to the nymph and the wolf, and stood for several moments, then trotted back to Maggie. Colin heard him tell her, "Say, you know what? Ever since you cut that animal's tail off and Moonshine grew it back, the wolf says he hasn't had to change into a man. Seems our magic cured his ancestral were disease along with growing him a new wagger.

"And something else, too. He says we can skin him alive if we want to, but spare the nymph."

Maggie shook her head wonderingly, and conveyed the information to the King. "If ye ask me, everyone is gettin' most awful noble all of a sudden!" Rowan complained.

"Twas that lovely baff you give us, sire," a bandit offered. "Why, I ain't felt so good since before I stole t'first copper from me old mother's purse."
"Aye," another added. "I feel like kissin' babies and helpin' crones up stairs all of a sudden."

"Aw, let 'em go. Sire. They be'n't such bad lads." This was from one of the King's own sergeants-at-arms, a man noted for his severity with miscreants of any kind.

"And beggin' yer pardon, Rowan, m'lad," Prince Worthyman added. "But it seems to me all this coulda been avoided with a bit of statecraft."

Rowan scratched his head in bewilderment. "Speak," he said.

"Before you were King, I promised to help you if you ran into political problems," the former bear reminded him. "Seems to me yer whole problem with Fearchar here is, contemptible as the man is, he's an able, ambitious witch who's had no opportunity to use his power for the good of the country."

Rowan looked to the princess, to Perchingbird, and back to Worthyman. "The Princess suggested t'very same thing," he said. "What I'd like to know is why everyone is suddenly so willing to spare one another now? And why I keep listenin' tae this drivel in a most unkingly fashion when I ought to be loppin' off heads?"

Colin surprised himself by kneeling in the mud in front of the King himself and saying, "When you start lopping, sire, I prithee take my head too, for I'm as much a traitor as these others."

The King jerked him roughly to his feet. "Dammit, lad, I've no time for your nonsense. I know very well who stopped those arrows from pricklin' me royal hide, and who took a knife in the back for his trouble."

By then Maggie was kneeling in front of him, too. "Majesty, he's not talking about that, but he's not a traitor, and it's not his fault. It's me who disobeyed you. I was willful and stubborn, and wanted to shirk my responsibility to your trust. I didn't want to be a Princess and marry a Prince. I wanted to run with Moonshine and now-and now, I want something else too. But none of that was Colin's fault."

"I'm going mad!" the King swore. "Silence, dammit! Any more of this and I'll have the lot of ye thrown back into t' river t' soak some sense into ye. Yer bandits and traitors, men, act like it! And you," he pointed an accusing finger at Colin. "Yer one of my ablest men and ye'll be Earl of this place and watch it for me, like it or not, for I need ye."

"Majesty?" Cyril Perchingbird asked.

"WHAT?" he roared.

"Majesty, perhaps the change in attitudes among your subjects is a byproduct of the unicorn magicks. Perhaps their power cures ill humors of an-er-spiritual nature, as well as of the physical variety?"

"I'll test it. Hillman, you're a good stout dirty laddy. What say you we do with this man?" He prodded Fearchar with his muddy boot.

"Slay him, sire. Slowly, my liege. Let these lads finish the work they started." He jerked an unwashed thumb at the bandits his men had rounded up and added, "And then finish them off as well."

The King scratched his beard as furiously as if it were infested and said, "Hmm. That's a reasonable answer, Hillman, but somehow it pleases me not. Ye stink, man, and all of yer men and prisoners stink with ye. Go bathe, the lot of ye! Now!"

"And the other matter, Majesty?" Perchingbird prodded prayerfully.

"Give me time, man, I'm comin' to it," he snarled back, then straightened his still-dripping tunic and set his hand on the pommel of his sword, and said, "Ahem. It has been brought to our attention that within our midst are some very extraordinary beasties, even for this, our realm, which has never exactly been shy o'magic and t'marvelous. Today we have all, in one way or another, had our lives and limbs saved by t' magic o' these unicorns. At this time, we have been moved to mercy by our own experience with the darlin' creatures, and the lot of you have benefited. We have no way of knowin' how long all this unexpected good will is goin' t'last, but we mean to take advantage of it by seein' to it that you don't take advantage of our unicorns. I want a solemn blood oath from every man and woman, friend or foe, among you that this battle never took place, that you never were healed, that you got religion or fell under an enchantment or any other fool thing you want to tell folk t' explain t' changes in yer own natures. But you're never to tell a soul or mention again to each other what our unicorns did on this day. I command this not to lessen the credit due to them, to which I'm comin' directly, but to protect them from the greed and wickedness of men such as the scalawag at my feet. Do you so vow?"

Everyone did, including Fearchar.

"There'll be no clemency for any one among ye who breaks his vow," the King said grimly.

"There is a surer way to insure silence, your Majesty," Fearchar suggested, so humbly that Colin knew for sure that the stuff of legend was taking place before his eyes, a legend which must never be told at the cost of destroying its source.

"Aside from killin' you all, you mean?" the King asked. Fearchar nodded. "Speak then," Rowan said, weKy, and sat down crosslegged in the mud. Everyone else sat oown, too. "Try t'make it simple, will ye?" the King asked.

"Highness," Fearchar said, "I can by my own magic convince everyone here that this day was something else,
the forming of an alliance for your Majesty, or any other event you wish it to be. Only withhold salt from those you
would have me bespeak, and they will never speak of this event as a battle but will speak of it as they believe it to
be, as a meeting, an oath-swear of fealty, or whatever your wish is."

"My wish is that you didn't take me for such a simpleton I couldn't see you're tryin' tae gain t'upper hand
again," the King replied. "As if I don't already have enough problems thinkin' how I'm tae make honest subjects out
of two hundred foreign brigands and keep my other nobles from huntin' these wondrous beasties."

"My Lord, I will speak my spell publicly, in front of yourself and my niece and whomever else you trust to
insure my honesty and loyalty to your Highness."

"Hmm. Fair enough. And you've gi'en me an idea too. You'll tell these men here, and this woman," he indicated
the brigands and Sally Forth, "That they're to form a new order of Royal Guard. From now on, their job will be to
protect the unicorns and to apprehend anyone who tries to poach them. Because here and now I'm makin' all
the Royal Argonian Forest a royal preserve for unicorns. These fellas will be called the Order of the Unicorn. And
they're not to seek or molest the beasts any more than anyone else, I want that understood, too. What d'ye think of
that, Perchingbird? Pretty good, eh? Just to make it look good, see to it that a new crest is designed for our Royal
House-put the 'corns on me rowan leaf. We'll let it be known that the beasts are our special talisman, and under our
protection. How's that?"

"I will do as you command, sire," Fearchar said. "If these folk are kept saltless today, I will bespeak them this
evening. Keep them saltless a day longer, and the spell will be permanent, though if they take salt after that time,
they will be immune from my powers of suggestion."

"Excellent. We'll bind and gag you meanwhile, to make sure you don't turn on us again. Perform this task
faithfully and I've got a little job for you, one suited to your powers as to no other man's. You recall that edict of
mine about the dragon tax? Thing's deuced hard to collect, and with your magic . . ."

**EPILOGUE**

Maggie slipped through the door, *shutting the maelstrom in behind her. Colin's combination investiture
celebration and hearth-warming was exhaustingly successful. All the best people were there, including the King,
Winnie, and the baby, Sir Cyril and Princess Pegeen, and the crew from the wrecked Snake's Bane, who had stayed
on to help Colin build a new hall while waiting for their own new ship to be built.

Wizard Raspberry was in the kitchen with Granny, who poured the ale, assisted by the Brewers from Little
Darlingham. The Wizard disguised twenty of the blueberry pies guests had brought to taste like strawberry, apple
and peach instead. He had helped Maggie with the decorations, too, several hundred silk balloons bobbling
colorfully among the fresh-hewn cedar ceiling beams. Princess Pegeen's splendid cartoon for an ornamental tapestry,
featuring unicorns, adorned the wall opposite the main hearth. The faery Trickle had filled a sled with fragrant
 crimson and fuschia flowers which she and Sebastian Bigfoot had brought across the glacier, along with a load of
ice.

Rusty entertained with the new magic tricks her father was helping her learn, most of which involved rabbits
instead of simulacra.

The dragons sent warm regards, along with a particularly nice diamond to announce the birth of their new get,
Grippeldice.

Xenobia's people camped close by, and tonight the hall bloomed with the hues of their brilliant clothing and
jingled with the noise of their jewelry as they danced and sang with the rest of the revelers.

The King had thoughtfully sent for Granny and Father and Aunt Sybil, along with Colin's aunt and uncle. They
had all arrived, complete with Maggie's cat. Pern, and Ching, just this morning after spending nearly three weeks on
horseback. The knowing looks which had started passing between Granny and Aunt Sybil almost as soon as they
saw Maggie, and the guarded way in which they spoke to her, bothered her more than anything else about this
evening and sent the confusion in her brain straight to her stomach. She needed fresh air.

The freezing-snowing-thawing-raining-freezing cycle of the last week sheathed the world in a fine gleam of
ice, reflecting back the full moon in millions of tiny bright replicas. The snow covering the ground was scuffed and
dirtied near the hall, but lay serenely unbroken closer to the banks of the ice-muffled Blabbermouth.

Or at least, relatively unbroken. For on closer inspection, she could see the prints of cloven hooves coming
from the woods beyond the village.

Moonshine stood beside the river, his horn half-hidden in the hole in the ice through which the newly-settled
inhabitants had been drawing water.

"Fancy meeting you here," she said. "You've been gone so long, I thought I'd never see you again."

"Dearest Maggie, it has been long, but many were the streams which needed our attention."

"I daresay," the river chimed in. "But the young lady is absolutely correct. You've been gone far too long. I was
quite going round the bend again before you came along this evening."
"Ah, but now I'm back," Moonshine reminded them. "And my two friends are here to bear me company. How goes it with our good Master Colin these days?"

She shrugged her cloak closer about her and pretended to watch the river running black past the hole. "Don't ask me," she said. "He's been so busy with his new duties as Earl that he's barely spoken to me all this month."

"Do they sit so heavily on his shoulders, then, that he has no time for his beloved?" Moonshine asked sympathetically.

"No more heavily than yours do," she snapped back, "I have work of my own, you know, but I wouldn't neglect YOU because of it. I've been so bloody helpful to everyone I seem to have helped the two beings I love best right out of needing anything at all from the likes of me."

"Nay, Maggie, it is not so," Moonshine said. "Other matters entirely keep me from your side, and other matters also occupy our Colin, I'll vow, for he loves you well."

"He doesn't. And I'll bet those other matters of yours are because I'm not a maiden any longer. Isn't that right? I'm not pure enough for you any more."

"Maggie, your heart is as pure as any unicorn's in your love of justice and goodness, as Master Colin's is pure for love of you. How that may relate to the stricture of virginity laid on unicorn companions is still a matter of mystery to me but-"

"Mystery? Of course, it's a mystery!" the river interrupted. "Though, of course, it was never supposed to be mysterious to unicorns. But with magic like you creatures have, Moonshine, you have to understand that there has to be some mystery surrounding you, and you have to be careful who you associate with."

"Halt!" Moonshine said. "Do you mean to tell me you understand the Creed? ALL of the Creed?"

"Who better? I've washed the horn tips of generations of unicorns, though just lately I was beginning to think I'd been forsaken. Listen, I've been running through this valley for a long time, and I'm a pretty important drink of water. I knew the first unicorns IN Argonia-though that was long before the witch taught me to talk, of course, which is just as well. I listened better in those days. Your ancestors held their very first council here on my banks, and I can tell you, that entire maidenhood clause wasn't designed so you could meet only PURE people, because there's no such thing. A young inexperienced girl will muddy your waters as quickly as anybody, quicker than most, I'd say. But at least most of 'em are young, and impressionable, so that the powerful goodness of your Creed and your magic will stick with her the rest of her life. She's apt to be a better-than-average human because of you, if she's got any potential at all. With any luck at all, she'll pass on a little of what she learns to her family. It's too dangerous for you to consort with the human race as a whole, you see, but with one small, usually harmless segment of it-well, your ancestors felt that a girl like that could be like the first ripple to touch your hom, spreading out to clean up the rest of the river. You see? They'd had experience where they came from, it seemed to me, and they hit on befriending virgins because virgins are young and relatively helpless and the condition is fleeting and swiftly cured. They might have chosen pregnancy, as well," the river paused significantly, "But that happens more than once. A girl's virginity flows away from her the way your magic flows from me ... it's a singular, rare, ethereal time that is clearly the proper period for confronting unicorns."

"Yes," Moonshine said, his eyes opening wide with inner revelation and his nostrils flaring excitedly. "Oh, yes. That's true! That's why! I feel it-I know that is the true message of that part of the Creed! Wait until I tell the others! And oh, does that mean that any maiden who has once been a unicorn maiden may remain always a unicorn friend?"

"I don't see why not."

"Hurray!" Maggie caught his excitement, and hugged him. "But why didn't your silly Creed say that if that's what it meant? None of you knew it that way."

"Elementary, my dear witch," the river replied. "It was too difficult a concept to put into a rhyme. Thus it was forgotten by the youngsters."

"There's a lot to be said for noisy waters running deep," Maggie said. "You are a very intelligent river."

"Thank you. I've always thought so."

"Oh, good river, oh, my dear friend, Maggie, I beg you to excuse me, for I must fly now to Snowshadow and the others to tell them of this wonderful new knowledge. Now then, river, if you could but repeat it over to me, why the unicorn may befriend only the virgin but how it is that he may remain her friend after the girl is a virgin no longer. I don't want this to be lost on our foal as it was to us," he added to Maggie.

"Your foal? Moonshine! You?"

"That is the other matter of which I spoke. My Snowshadow is to bear a new unicorn. But how can I pass on this knowledge- if I cannot remember it?"

"A song is always a good way," Colin said, approaching them.

"Master Colin! How fine you look in your new raiment! Would you compose such a verse, containing the river's knowledge, so that I may pass it truly to my new foal?"
"I'd be delighted," he answered, slipping his arm around Maggie's shoulders. "I know you're not much of a hand with a verse. I've a boon to ask of you, as well, while you're here."

"Ask it."

"Will you use your influence with this lady to persuade her that though she's a Princess and a nobly born sorceress, she should ask the King for MY hand in marriage in preference to those other blokes who are going to be lining up soon? I know I'm just a lowly Earl, and a new-made one at that, but I think that as father of the child her Granny and Aunt have been telling me she's expecting, I ought to have some preference over the others."

But there was no need for Moonshine to answer. Before Colin had quite finished speaking, Maggie threw her arms around his neck and kissed him fiercely. From the chimneys of the new hall, the fire leapt so high that its flame was seen as far away as the capitol of Brazoria, where the priestess Helsinora noted the marvelous ascension of a fiery new star into the heavens.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Elizabeth Scarborough was born in Kansas City, KS. She served as a nurse in the U.S. Army for five years including a year in Viet Nam. Her interests include weaving and spinning, and playing the guitar and dulcimer. She has previously published light verse as well as four other Bantam novels, Bronwyn's Bane, The Harem of Aman Akbar, The Christening Quest and The Drastic Dragon of Draco, Texas. Her newest novel, The Goldcamp Vampire, will be published by Bantam Spectra in the fall of 1987. She makes her home in Fairbanks, Alaska.
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