

TWELVE FAIR KINGDOMS

Suzette Haden Elgin

book one of the ozark fantasy trilogy

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Twelve Fair Kingdoms

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CHAPTER ONE



I should have known that something was very wrong when the Mules started flying erratically. I was misled a bit, I suppose, because there were no actual *crashes*, just upset stomachs. The ordinary person on the street blamed it on turbulence; and considering what they understood of the way the system worked, that was as reasonable a conclusion as any other. However, I had full access to classified material, and I knew perfectly well that it was magic, not aerodynamics, that kept the Mules flying. And magic at the level of skill necessary to fly a bulky creature like a Mule was not likely to suffer any because of a little disturbance in the air. You take a look at a Mule sometime; it surely isn't built for *flight*.

Even someone who's gone no farther in magic than Common Sense Level knows that the harmony of the universe is a mighty frail and delicately balanced equilibrium, and that you can't go tampering with any part of it without affecting everything else. A *child* knows that. So that when whatever-it-was started, with its first symptoms being Mules that made their riders throw up, I should of known that something sturdy was tugging hard at the Universal Web.

I was busy, let's grant me that. I was occupied with the upcoming Grand Jubilee of the Confederation of Continents. Any meeting that it doesn't happen but once every five hundred years—you tend to pay it considerable attention. One of our freighters had had engine trouble off the coast of Oklahomah, and that was interfering with our supply deliveries. I was trying to run a sizable Castle with a staff that bordered, that spring, on the mediocre, and trying to find fit replacements before the big to-do. And there were three Grannys taken to their beds in my kingdom, afflicted with what they claimed was epizootics and what I knew was congenital cantankerousness, and that was disrupting the regular conduct of everyday affairs more than was convenient.

So... faced with a lot of little crises and one on the way to being a big one, what did I do?

Well, I went to some meetings. I went to half a dozen. I fussed at the Castle staff, and I managed to get me in an Economist who showed some promise of being able to make the rest of them shape up. I hired a new Fiddler, and I bought a whole team of speckledy Mules that I'd had my eye on for a while. I visited the "ailing" Grannys, with a box of hard candy for each, and paid them elaborate compliments that they saw right through but enjoyed just the same. And I went to church.

I was in church the morning that Terrence Merryweather McDaniels the 6th,

firstborn son of Vine of Motley and Halliday Joseph McDaniels the 14th, was kidnapped, right in broad daylight... when the man came through the churchdoor on a scruffy rented Mule, right in the middle of a Solemn Service—right in the middle, mind you, of a *prayer!*—and rode that Mule straight down the aisle. He snatched Terrence Merryweather in his sleeping basket from between his parents, and he flew right up over the Reverend's head and out through the only stained glass window he could count on to iris—Mule, basket, blankets, baby, and all, before any of us could do more than gape. February the 21st, that was; I was there, and it was that humiliating, I'm not likely to forget it. The McDaniels were guests of Castle Brightwater, and under our protection, and for sure should of been safe in our *church*. And now here was their baby kidnapped!

Although it is possible that kidnapping may not be precisely the word in this particular instance. You have a kidnapping, generally there's somebody missing, and a ransom note, and whatnot. In this case, the Reverend shouted an AAAAmen! and we all rushed out the churchdoor; and there, hanging from the highest of the three cedar trees in the churchyard in a life-support bubble, was Terrence Merryweather McDaniels the 6th, sucking on his toe to show how undisturbed *he* was by it all. And the Rent-a-Mule chewing on the crossclover against the church wall, under the overhang. There was no sign of its rider, who could make a claim to speed if to nothing else.

We could see the baby just fine, though we couldn't hear him. And we knew he was safe in the bubble, and all his needs attended to indefinitely. But he might as well of been in the Wilderness Lands of Tinaseeh for all the good that did us—we didn't dare touch him.

Oh, we had Magicians there skilled enough to put an end to that bubble and float the baby down to his daddy's arms without ruffling one bright red hair on his little head. If we hadn't had them, we could of gotten them in a hurry. It wasn't that; it was a matter of diagnosis.

We had no way, you see, of knowing just what kind of magic was on the forcefield holding that bubble up in the tree and keeping it active. Might of been no problem at all, just a bit of Granny Magic. *Ought* to of been, if the man doing it couldn't afford but a Rent-a-Mule. And then it might of been that the mangy thing was meant to make us think that, and it might of been that if we so much as *jiggled* that baby we'd blow the whole churchyard—AND the baby—across the county line. We're not much for taking chances with babies, I'm proud to say, and we weren't about to be hasty. The way to do it was to find the Magician that'd set the Spell, or whatever it was, and make it clear that we intended to *know*, come hell or high water, and keep on making it clear till we got told. Until then, that baby would just have to stay in the cedar tree with the squirrels and the chitterbirds and the yellowjays.

Vine of Motley carried on a good deal, doing her family no credit at all, but she was only thirteen and it her first baby, and allowances were made. Besides, I wasn't all that proud of my own self and my own family at that moment.

Five suspicious continental delegations I had coming to Castle Brightwater in less than three months, to celebrate the Grand Jubilee of a confederation they didn't trust much more now than they had two hundred years ago. Every one of them suspecting a plot behind every door and under every bedstead and seeing Spells in the coffee cups and underneath their saddles and, for all I knew, in their armpits. And I was proposing that they'd all be safe here— when I couldn't keep one little innocent pointy-headed baby safe in my own church on a Solemn Day?

It strained the limits of the imagination somewhat more than somewhat, and there was no way of keeping it quiet. They'd be having picnics under the tree where that baby hung in his pretty bubble and beaming the festivities out on the comsets before supertime, or my name wasn't Responsible of Brightwater.

In the excitement we left the Solemn Service unfinished, and it took three Spells and a Charm to clear that up later on, not to mention the poor Reverend going through the service again to an empty church reeking mightily of garlic and asafetida. But the clear imperative right then was a family meeting; and we moved in as orderly a fashion as was possible (given the behavior of Vine of Motley) back to the Castle, where I turned all the out-family over to the staff to feed and cosset and called everyone else at once to the Meetingroom.

The table in the Meetingroom was dusty, and I distinctly saw a spiderweb in a far window, giving me yet another clue to the competency of my staff and strongly tempting me to waste a Housekeeping Spell or two—which would of been *most* unbecoming, but I never could abide dirt, even loose dirt—and I waved everybody to their chairs. *Which* they took after brushing more dust with great ostentation off the chair seats, drat them all for their eagerness to dot every “i” and cross every “t” when it was my competence in question, and I called the roll.

My mother was there, Thorn of Guthrie, forty-four years old and not looking more than thirty of those, which wasn't even decent; I do not approve of my mother. I said “Thorn of Guthrie” and she said “Here” and we left it at that. My uncles, Donald Patrick Brightwater the 133rd—time we dropped that name awhile, we'd wear it out—and Jubal Brooks Brightwater the 31st. Jubal's wife, Emmalyn of Clark, poor puny thing, she was there; and Donald's wife, Patience of Clark, Emmalyn's sister. And my grandmother, Ruth of Motley, not yet a Granny, since Jonathan Cardwell Bright-water the 12th showed no signs of leaving this world for all he was 109 years old... and it was said that he still troubled Ruth of Motley in the nights and scandalized the servingmaids in the chamber next to theirs. And I could believe it. We could of used him that day, since his head was as clear as his body was said to be hearty, but he was off somewhere trying to trade a set of Charms he'd worked out for a single Spell he'd been wanting to get hold of at least the last five years... and the lady that Spell belonged to not *about* to pass it on to him, if he spent five more.

As it was, that meant only seven of us in Meeting, not nearly enough for proper discussion or voting, and you would of thought that on a Solemn Day, and with guests in the Castle, there'd of been more of us in our proper places. I was put out

about the whole thing, and my mother did not scruple to point that out.

“Mighty nervy of you, Responsible,” she said, in that voice of hers, “being cross with everybody else for what is plainly your own fault.” I could of said Yes-Mother, since she despises that, but I had more pressing matters to think of than annoying my mother. She’d never make a Granny; she was too quick with that tongue and not able to put it under rein when the circumstances called for it, and at her age she had no excuse. She’d be a flippant wench at eighty-five, still stuck in her magic at Common Sense Level, like a child. Lucky she was that she was beautiful, since men have no more sense than to be distracted by such things, and Thorn *was* that. She had the Guthrie hair, masses of it, exactly the color of bittersweet chocolate and so alive it clung to your fingers (and to everything else, so that you spent half your life picking Guthrie hair off of any surface you cared to examine, but we’ll let that pass). And she had the Guthrie bones... a face shaped like a heart, and great green eyes in it over cheekbones high arched like the curve of a bird’s wing flying, and the long throat that melted into perfect shoulders... And oh, those breasts of hers! Three children she’d suckled till they walked, and those breasts looked as maiden as mine. She was well named, was Thorn of Guthrie, and many of us had felt the sharp point of her since she stepped under the door-beam of Castle Brightwater thirty-one years ago. I have always suspected that those Guthrie bones made her womb an uncomfortable place to lie, giving her a way to poke at you even before you first breathed the air of the world, but that’s a speculation I’ve kept to myself. I hope.

“Well, now that we’re thoroughly disgraced in front of the whole world,” sighed my grandmother, “what do we propose to do about it?”

“This is *not* the first manifestation of something cockeyed,” said Jubal Brooks. “You *know* that, Responsible.”

“There was the milk,” my grandmother agreed. “Four Mundy’s in a row now it’s been sour straight from the goat. I assume you don’t find *that* normal, granddaughter.”

“And there was the thing with the mirrors,” said Emmalyn. “It *frightened* me, my mirror shattering in my hand like that.”

I expect it did frighten her, too; everything else did. I was hoping she wouldn’t notice the spiderweb. She was a sorry excuse for a woman; on the other hand, we couldn’t of gotten Patience of Clark without taking the sister, too, and all in all it had been a bargain worth making.

Patience was sitting with her left little finger tapping her bottom lip, a gesture she made when she was waiting for a hole to come by in the conversation, and I turned to her and made the hole.

“Patience, you wanted to say something?”

“I was thinking of the streetsigns,” she said.

“The streetsigns?”

“Echo in here,” said my mother, always useful.

“I’m sorry, Patience,” I said. “I hadn’t heard that there was anything happening with streetsigns.”

“All over the city,” said my uncle Donald Patrick. “Don’t you pay any attention to anything?”

“Well? What’s been happening to them? Floating in the air? Whirling around? Exploding? What?”

Patience laughed softly, and the sun shone in through the windows and made the spattering of freckles over the bridge of her nose look like sprinkled brown sugar. I was very fond of Patience of Clark.

“They read backwards,” she said. “The sign that should say ‘River Street’ ... it says ‘Teerts Revir.’” She spelled it out for me to make that clear, though the tongue does not bend too badly to ‘Teerts Revir.’

“Well, *that*,” I said, “is downright silly.”

“It’s all silly,” said Patience, “and that is why I was laughing. It’s all ridiculous.”

Emmalyn, whose freckles just ran together and looked like she hadn’t bothered to wash, allowed as how she might very well have been cut when her mirror shattered, and that was not silly.

I looked at them all, and I waited. My uncles, pulling at their short black beards the way men always do in meetings. My mother, trying to keep her mind—such as it was—on the discussion. My grandmother, just biding her time till she could get back to her embroidery. And the sisters—Emmalyn watching Patience, and Patience watching some inner source of we-know-not-what that had served us very well in many a crisis.

Not a one of them mentioned the Mules, though I gave them two full minutes. And that meant one of three things: they had not noticed the phenomenon, or they did not realize that it was of any importance, or they had some reason for behaving as if one of the first two were the case. I wondered, but I didn’t have time for finding out in any roundabout fashion.

“I agree,” I said at once the two minutes were up, “it’s all silly. Even the mirrors. Not a soul was harmed by any one of the mirrors that broke—including you, Emmalyn. Anybody can smell soured milk quick enough not to drink it, and the other six days of the week it’s been fine. And as for the streetsigns, which I’m embarrassed I didn’t know about them but there it is—I didn’t—that’s silliest of all.”

“Just mischief,” said Jubal, putting on the period. “Until today.”

My mother flared her perfect nostrils, like a high-bred Mule but a lot more attractive. “What makes you think, Jubal Brooks,” she demanded, “that today’s kidnapping—which is a matter of major importance—is connected in any way with all these baby tricks of milk and mirrors?”

“*And* streetsigns,” said Emmalyn of Clark. Naturally.

“Jubal’s quite right,” I said, before Thorn of Guthrie could turn on Emmalyn.

“And I call for Council.”

There was a silence that told me I’d reached them, and Emmalyn looked thoroughly put out. Council meant there’d be no jokes, and no family bickering, and no pause in deliberation for coffee or cakes or ale or anything else till a conclusion was come to and a course agreed upon.

“Do you think that’s really called for, Responsible?” asked my grandmother. She was doing a large panel at that time, mourning-doves in a field of violets, as I recall. Not that she’d ever seen a mourningdove. “As Jubal said, it’s been mischief only so far, and pretty piddling mischief at that. And there’s no evidence *I* see of a connection between what happened in church today and all that other foolishness.”

“Responsible sees a connection,” said Patience, “or she would not have called Council. And the calling is her privilege by rule; I suggest we get on with it.”

I told them about the Mules then, and both the uncles left off their beard-pulling and gave me their attention. Tampering with goats was one thing, tampering with Mules was quite another. Not that they knew what it meant in terms of magic, of course—that would not of been suitable, since neither had ever shown the slightest talent for the profession, and I suppose they took flying Mules for granted as they did flying birds. But they had the male fondness for Mules, and they had anyone’s dislike for the idea of suddenly falling out of the air like a stone, which is where they could see it might well lead.

“It has to do, I believe,” said Patience slowly, “with the Jubilee. That’s coming up fast now, and anybody with the idea of putting it in bad odor would have to get at it fairly soon and move with some dispatch. I do believe that’s what this is all about.”

She was right, but they’d listen better if she was doing the talking, so I left it to her.

“Go on ” I said. “Please.”

“I’m telling you nothing you don’t know already,” she said. “The Confederation of Continents is not popular, nor likely to be, especially with the Kingdoms of Purdy, Guthrie, and Farson. And Tinaseeh is in worse state. The Travellers hate *any* kind of government; they are still so busy just hacking back the Wilderness that they don’t feel they can spare time for anything else, and they for sure don’t want the Jubilee. A Jubilee would give a kind of *endorsement* to the Confederation, and they are dead set against that. And then there’re all the wishy-washy ones waiting around to see which way the wind blows.”

““A thing celebrated is a thing vindicated,”” quoted Ruth of Motley. “They all know that as well as anybody.”

“The idea,” Patience went on, “would be to make it appear that there’s so much trouble on the continent of Marktwain... so much trouble in the Kingdom of Brightwater specifically... that it would not really be safe for the other Families to send their delegations to the Jubilee.”

My conscience jabbed me, for she was right; and it had been niggling at the back

of my mind for some time, though I'd managed to ignore it up to now by worrying about dust on the banisters and coffee deliveries for Mizzurah.

Donald Patrick scooted his chair back and stared at me, and then scooted it up again, and said damnation to boot, and my grandmother went "Ttch," with the tip of her tongue.

"Five years of work it's cost us," he said, glaring around the table. "Five years to convince them even to let us *schedule* the Jubilee! Surely all that work can't be set aside by some spoiled milk and a few smashed mirrors!"

"Precisely," I said, flat as pondwater. "And that is just the point. You see, youall, how it will look? First, parlor tricks. Then, a kind of tinkering—nothing serious, just tinkering—with the Mules. And then, to show that what goes four steps can go twelve, the baby-snatching. Again, you notice, without any *harm* done."

"Aw," said Jubal, "it's just showing off. A display of power. Like throwing a dead goat into your well."

"That it is," I said. "'See what we can do?' it says... 'And think what we *might* do, if we cared to.' *That's* the message being spread here. Think the Wommacks will fly here from the coast knowing their Mules may drop out from under them any moment, to come to the support of our so-called Confederation?"

"Disfederated," murmured Patience of Clark. "A more accurate term at this point."

"Patience," I said, "you hurt me."

"Howsomever and nevertheless," she said, "it's true. And anything but a sure hand now will wreck it all."

We sat there silent, though Emmalyn fidgeted some, because it wasn't anything to be serene about. Marktwain, Oklahomah, and probably Mizzurah, agreed on the need for the Confederation of Continents; and their Kingdoms were willing to back it as best they could. But the whole bulk of Arkansaw lay between Marktwain and Mizzurah, and the Ocean of Storms between all of us and either Kintucky or Tinaseeh; and the three loyal continents all put together were not the size of Tinaseeh. Since the day the Twelve Families first landed on this planet in 2021, since the moment foot was set on this land and it was named Ozark in the hope it would prove a homeworld to our people, those of us who preferred not to remain trapped forever in the twenty-first century had been in the minority.

The Twelve Families had seen, on Old Earth, what the centralization of a government could mean. They had seen war and waste and wickedness beyond description, though the descriptions handed down to us were enough to this day to keep children in Granny Schools awake in the long nights of winter, shivering more with nightmare than with the cold. Twelve Kingdoms, we had. And at least four of them ready to leap up every time a dirty puddle appeared on a street corner and shout that this was but the first sign, the first step, toward the wallowing in degradation that came when the individual allowed themselves to be *swallowed up* (they always said "swallowed up," playing on the hatred every Ozarker had for being

closed in on *any* side, much less *all* of them) by a central government... And several more were in honesty uncommitted, ready to move either way.

I ran them by in my mind, one by one. Castle Purdy, Castle Guthrie, Castle Parson, Castle Traveller—dead set against the Confederation and anxious to grab any opportunity to tear the poor frail thing apart and go to isolation for everything but trade and marriage. Castles Smith, Airy, Clark, and McDaniels, and Castles Lewis and Motley of Mizzurah, all with us—but perhaps only Castle Airy really ready, or able, to put any *strength* behind us. It was hard to know. When the Confederation met at Castle Brightwater, one month now in every four—to the bitter complaints of Purdy, Guthrie, Farson, and Traveller about the expense and the waste and the frivolousness of it all—those six voted very carefully indeed. That is, when we could manage to bring anything to a vote. Only Castles Airy and Lewis had ever made a move that went three points past neutrality, and that rarely. As for Castle Wommack, who knew where they stood? One delegate they sent to the meetings, grudgingly, against the other Castles' delegations of four each and full staff; and the Wommack delegate came without so much as a secretary or Attendant, and spent most of his time abstaining. We were seven to five for the Confederation—maybe. Maybe we were but two against ten, with six of the ten playing lip service but ready to bolt at the first sign of anything that smelled like real conflict.

My mother made a rare concession: she addressed me by term of kinship.

“Daughter,” she said, making me raise my eyebrows at the unexpected mode of address, “what do you think we ought to do?”

“Ask Jubal,” said foolish Emmalyn, and I suppose Patience kicked her, under the table. Patience always sat next to Emmalyn for that specific purpose. Ask Jubal, indeed.

“*Think* now before you speak,” said Ruth of Motley. “It won’t do to answer this carelessly and get caught out, Responsible. You give it careful thought.” She had finally forgotten about her embroidery and joined us, and I was glad of it

“I think,” I said slowly, “that things are not so far out of hand that they cannot be stopped. Vine of Motley is crying herself into hiccups up in the guestchambers at this very moment, and no doubt feels herself mighty abused, but that baby is safer where he is than in her arms. Signs and mirrors and milk make no national catastrophe, and Mules that behave like they’d been drinking bad whiskey are not yet a disaster. The point is to stop it *now*, before it goes one step further. The next step might not be mischief.”

“What is called for,” said my grandmother, nodding her head, “is a show of competence; that would serve the purpose. Something that would demonstrate that the Brightwaters are capable of keeping the delegations, and all their kin, and all their staffs, safe here for the Jubilee.”

“I sometimes wonder if it’s worth it,” sighed Donald Patrick. “I sometimes think it might be best to let them go on and dissolve the Confederation and all *be* boones if that’s their determined mind! The energy we put into all this, the *time*, the *money*...

Do you know what Brightwater spent in food and drink alone at the last quarterly meeting?"

"Donald Patrick Brightwater," said Ruth of Motley in a voice like the back of a hand, "you sound like a Purdy."

"I beg your pardon, Mother," said my uncle. "I hadn't any intention of doing so."

Strictly speaking, it was not fair for him to be rebuked. As the ordinary citizen was ignorant of what kept the Mules flying in the absence even of *wings*, so was Donald Patrick ignorant of the peril every Ozarker faced if we could not establish once and for all a central government that could respond, and respond with speed, in an emergency. The decision to maintain that ignorance had been made deliberately, and for excellent reasons, hundreds of years ago, when first the menace of the Out-Cabal had been discovered by our Magicians, And that decision would stand, for so long as it was possible, and for so long as disputations in political science, and intercontinental philosophy, and planetary ecology, and the formidable theory of magic, could be substituted for a truth it had been sworn our people would never have to learn.

"First," I said quickly, "there's finding out where this attack is coming from. That's the easy part"

My mother crossed her long white hands over her breasts to indicate her shock and informed us that *first* we had to get that baby down out of that tree.

"Mother, dear Mother," I said, "you know that's not so—that baby is all right. Unlike the rest of us, that baby is protected from every known danger this planet can muster up. Not so much as a bacterium can get through that bubble to harm Terrence Merryweather McDaniels, and he will be tended more carefully there than a king's son."

It was only a figure of speech; there were no kings in our kingdoms and never had been, and therefore no king's sons. When First Granny had stood on Ozark for the first time, her feet to solid ground after all those weary years on The Ship, she had looked around her, drawn a long breath, and said, "Well, the Kingdom's come at last, praise be!" and we'd had "kingdoms" ever since for that reason alone. But it had the necessary effect. Thorn of Guthrie made a pretense of thinking it over, but she knew I was right, and she nodded her lovely head and agreed with me that the baby probably represented the least of our problems. Except insofar as it stood for an insult to our Family and our faith, of course (and it was at that point that I realized the Solemn Service had been left unfinished).

"I say call in the Magicians of Rank, then," said Jubal Brooks, "and have them to find out which one of our eleven loving groups of kindred has set itself to bring the Confederation down about our heads. *Literally* about our heads."

"No," I told him, hoping he was right that it was only one. "No, Jubal Brooks, that's all wrong. It would maybe be *fastest*, depending on the strength and number of the Magicians ranged against ours, but it's all wrong as to *form*."

"I don't see it," he said.

“A symbol,” said Ruth of Motley, spelling it all out for him, “is best answered by a symbol. Not by a... meat cleaver.”

“And what symbol do we propose to offer up for this motley collection—no offense meant, Mother—of shenanigans? Cross our hearts and spit in the ocean under a full moon?”

“A Quest, I expect, Jubal,” I said, straight out. I had been thinking while they were talking, and level for level, that seemed right to me. And the women nodded all around the table.

“In this day and age?” sputtered Donald Patrick, and threw up his hands. “Do you realize the antiquated set of hidebound conditions that go with mounting up a *Quest*? Responsible, you can’t be serious about this!”

“Well, it is fitting,” said his mother, saving me the trouble. “As Responsible and Patience have pointed out, the entire campaign against us to this time has been a single symbol, what would be referred to in classical terms as a Challenge. OUR MAGIC IS BETTER THAN YOUR MAGIC, you see. No harm has been done, where obviously it *could* have been, had they been so minded. Very well, then—for an old-fashioned Challenge we shall offer an old-fashioned Quest. It is appropriate; it has the right ring to it.”

“Foof,” said Donald Patrick. “It’s absurd.”

“Indeed it is,” I agreed, “and that’s the whole point.”

“We might should ignore the whole thing,” he said. “For all we know.”

“We do, and there will be no Grand Jubilee of the Confederation of Continents of Ozark, Donald Patrick Brightwater—and yes, I *do* know, down to the penny, what all this has been costing us. Nor will we have another *meeting* of the Confederation, I daresay, for a very long time. Whoever is doing this, they would be *delighted* to have us ignore it all, and everybody snickering behind their hands at us for cowards and weaklings... and it is in the hope that we will be fools enough to do that that they’ve kept every move to pestering only and not gone forward to injury. If they can bring us down for two cents, why spend two dollars?” I was completely out of breath.

“They have overplayed their hand,” said Patience, “with this matter of the McDaniels baby.”

“I believe so,” I said. “It was a mistake of judgment. They should of kidnapped one of Jubal’s Mules instead.”

“And hung it in a cedar tree? In a life-support bubble?” Her brown eyes dancing, Patience of Clark was clearly trying not to imagine Jubal’s favorite Mule being cleaned and fed and curried up in the cedar tree; and losing the battle.

“It would of been safer,” I said. “*I* might of been busy enough not to take it for anything more than a prank; and *they* would of had still more time to make nuisances of themselves—and undercut the confidence in our security staff—before the Jubilee.”

“Responsible, that’s but eleven weeks away!” Patience broke in, the laughter in her eyes fading. “That’s mighty little time.”

“All the more reason to talk less and do more,” I said. “Here’s what I propose.”

I would take our best Mule, from Brightwater’s champion line, called Sterling and deserving of her name. I would make a brief and obvious fuss around the city in the way of putting together suitable outfitting for a journey of a special kind. I would let the word of the Quest be “leaked” to the comset networks. And then, I would do each Castle in turn, staying only just long enough at each to make the point that had to be made. Responsible of Brightwater, touring the Castles on a Quest after the source of magic put to mischief and to wickedness—just the thing. *Just* the thing!

“Even Tinaseeh?” asked Jubal dubiously.

“Even Tinaseeh. Certainly.”

“It’s a nine-day flight by Mule from here to Tinaseeh,” he said. “At least. And you do a Quest, you do it by foot or by Mule, Responsible, no getting out of *that*. Nine days, just that one leg of the trip.”

“As the crow flies,” I acknowledged. Not that it would of taken *me* nine days, but there was no reason to let Jubal Brooks know more than he needed to know. “I will not head straight for Tinaseeh across the Oceans of Remembrances and of Storms, dear Uncle. I am touring the Twelve Kingdoms on solemn Quest, please remember. First I will go to Castle McDaniels. Then a short flight to Arkansaw, a mere hop across the channel to Mizzurah, on over to Kintucky, and then—and *only* then—to Tinaseeh. Then Oklahomah, quick around *it*, and back home.”

“But, my dear *niece*,” he said—Jubal Brooks was stubborn, grant him that—“though it’s but one day from Kintucky’s southernmost *coast* to the coast of Tinaseeh, that one day will set you down not at Castle Traveller but on the edge of the largest Wilderness Lands on Ozark. Larger than the entire land area of this continent, for example; I strongly doubt you’ll do the trip over *that* in less than three days, and you’d *still* have two days ahead of you before you reached the Castle gates!”

My grandmother stepped in then; the man was getting above himself, but tact, of course, was necessary. Men are a great deal of trouble, I must say.

“Jubal Brooks,” she said, firmly but courteously, “Responsible was properly named. I suggest we do her the courtesy of trusting her in this.”

“Distances,” he began—the man was ranting!—“are distances. Name or no name—”

We might of wasted a lot more time on that kind of thing, if there hadn’t of been a knock on the door just as he was hitting his stride. For all that we were in Council, we could spare time to answer the door, and we did. Nobody was there, of course, leading Emmalyn to look puzzled and Patience to look innocent, but it served its purpose.

I dismissed Council with thanks, letting Jubal run down naturally as we all filed

out, paid a visit to the guestchambers only to be told that the baby's parents had gone with full ceremonial tent to camp in the bed of needles beneath their son and heir, taking along the infant daughter of a servingmaid to see to the problem of Vine of Motley's milk—a practical solution, if a bit hard on the servingmaid—and then I ran for the stables.

So far as I was concerned, we were late already.

CHAPTER TWO



So close to home I didn't dare take chances, and so I let my Mule fool about and waste hours in the air on the first stage of my journey, to Castle McDaniels. I wore an elaborate gown of emerald green; under it I had on flared trousers of a deeper green, tucked into trim high boots of scarlet leather, with silver bells about the bootcuffs and silver spurs all cunningly worked. And I had over *that* a tight-laced corselet of black velvet embroidered in gold and silver, and it was all topped with a hooded traveling cloak of six layers black velvet quilted together with silver thread in a pattern of wild roses and star-in-the-sky-vine and friendly ivy. My scarlet gloves matched my boots and my riding crop matched my spurs, and around my throat on a golden chain was a talisman almost not fit for the sight of decent people, except that decent people could be counted on not to know what it meant and anybody that knew what it meant would sure not mention it. All in all it was a purely disgusting sight. When I flew I preferred honest denims, and over them a cloak of brown wool. And spurs and riding crop to fly a Mule were about as sensible as four wheels and a clutch to sail a ship—but none of that was relevant.

I was a *symbol*, and a symbol carrying out a symbol. I was, by the Twelve Corners, a Meta-Symbol, and I intended to look the part if it choked me. They, whoever they might turn out to be, would have leisure to compare the style in which Castle Bright-water did these things with their scroungy brigand on a mangy rented Mule. I would see to that, and I intended to rub it in and then add salt, if I got the chance.

I brought Sterling down smartly at the entrance to Castle McDaniels without raising so much as a puff of dust, and I called out to the guardmaid at the broad door to let us in.

“Well met, Responsible of Brightwater!” she hollered at me; and I mused, as I had mused many and many a time before, on the burden it gave the tongue to greet either myself or my sister, Troublesome (not that many greeted *her!*). A regular welter of syllables, and I hoped the Granny that did it got a pain in her jaw joints. When I was a child, the others made me pay for the inconvenience, ringing changes on it all the day long. Obstreperous of Laketumor, they liked to call me. Preposterous of Bogwater. Philharmonic of Underwear. And numerous variations in the same vein. On the rare occasions when my sister and I shared the same space, they liked to call us “Nettlesome and Cuddlesome.”

We have a saying, an ancient one: “Don’t get mad; get even.” It stayed my hand when I was young enough to mind such nonsense, and now I would not stoop the distance necessary to get even. But it still rankles at times. As when a skinny guardmaid bellows out at me before all the world, “Well met, Responsible of Brightwater!”

“Well met yourself,” I said, “and why not good morrow while we’re at it?”

“Beg your pardon?” She had a slack jaw, too, and it dropped, doing nothing to improve the general effect.

“As should you,” I said crossly. “The year is 3012, and ‘well met’ went out with the chastity belt and the spindle.”

“I have a spindle,” she said to me, all sauce, but she must not of cared for the expression on my face; she left it at that.

“What’s your name, guardmaid?” I asked her, while I waited for the idea to reach her brain that someone should be notified of my arrival.

“Demarest, I’m called. Demarest of Wommack.”

Demarest... it was a name that had no associations for me, and she was far from home.

“Would you tell the McDaniels I’m here, Demarest of Wommack?” I asked her, giving up. No doubt the McDaniels, like myself, were having trouble finding Castle staff that could even begin to meet the minimum needs of their jobs. It made me sorry, at times, that robots were forbidden to us. True, they were the first step toward a population that just lay around and got fat and then died of bone laziness; I understood and approved the prohibition. But they would of been so useful for some things. Pacing off the boundaries of a kingdom, for instance, which had to be done on foot, every *inch* of it... and letting people into Castles.

She looked at me out of the corner of blue eyes under straight-cut coppery bangs, and she tugged at the bellpull hanging at her right hand, and in due course the Castle Housekeeper appeared and opened the front doors to me. She did not, I’m happy to say, tell me I was well met; but she called stablemaids to take away the Mule and unload my saddlebags, and she showed me into a small waiting room where a fire burned bright against the February chill. And she saw to it that someone brought me a glass of wine and a mug of hearty soup.

I settled my complicated skirts and maddening trousers, and drank my soup and wine, and soon enough the arched door opened and in came Anne of Brightwater, my kinswoman and a McDaniels by marriage, to greet me.

“Law!” she said from the doorway, looking me up and down. She was blessed with a plain name and plain speech both, and I envied her the first at least.

“Look like a spectacle, don’t I?” I acknowledged.

“My, yes,” said Anne.

“I’m supposed to,” I said. “You should see my underwear.”

She agreed to forego that experience, and came and sat down and stared at me, shaking her head and biting her lower lip so as not to laugh.

“Well, Anne?”

“Oh, I’m sure you’ve good reasons,” she said, “and I have sense enough not to want to know what they are. But I’ll wager not a single Granny saw you leave in that getup, or more than your boots and your gloves would be rosy red.”

I chuckled; I expected she was right.

“Welcome, Responsible of Brightwater,” said Anne then, “and how long are we to have the misery of your company?”

Plainer and plainer speech.

“Can you put me up for twenty-four hours, sweet cousin?”

“In the style you’re decked out for?”

“If you mean must there be dancing in the streets, Anne, no, I’ll spare you that.”

“What, then? You didn’t just ‘drop in’ on your way to buy a spool of thread somewhere.”

Anne pulled her chair near the fire, folded her arms across her chest, fixed her attention on me, and waited.

“I, Responsible of Brightwater,” I recited, “am touring the Twelve Castles of Ozark, Castle by Castle, in preparation for the Grand Jubilee of the Confederation. Which is—as you’ll remember—to be convened at Castle Brightwater on the eighth day of this May. And I begin here, dear cousin, to do you honor.”

“And because Castle McDaniels is closest.”

“And,” I capped it, “because a person has to begin somewhere. There is one advantage; if I start with you, then it follows that you’re first done with me.”

“Ah, yes,” she sighed, “there is that.”

She leaned back in her chair and sighed again, and I tried to keep my spurs from making holes in her upholstery.

“What’s required?” she asked me.

“One party,” I said. “A very small one. In honor of my tour, you know. In honor of my Quest.”

“In honor of the Pickles.”

“The Pickles? Anne!”

On Earth, we are told in the Teaching Stories, there was a food called pickles, made out of some other food called cucumbers. On *this* world, Pickles are small flat squishy round green things, and they bite. They certainly are not good to eat, even in brine, and we grant them a capital letter to keep the kids mindful not to step on them barefoot.

“Well,” said Anne of Brightwater, “it’s just as sensible.”

“It would be just as well,” I said, “not to mention the Pickles in your invitations.”

“Responsible, dear Cousin Responsible, I *despise* parties! I *always* have despised them, and you know it. Why don’t you be too tired, instead?”

The fire crackled in the fireplace, and a nasty wind howled round the Castle walls, and I knit my brows and glared at her until she sighed one more time and went away to give the necessary orders. My mention as she stepped into the hall that she’d best expect a comset film crew did nothing for her expression, but she went on; and I got myself out of my spurs and hung them over a corner of her mantel.

There could be no treason here—and that *was* what all this foolishness in fact amounted to, of course, plain treason—not in Castle McDaniels. The Brightwaters and the McDaniels had been closer than the sea and its shore ever since First Landing, and if there was anyone in this Castle who was not kin to me by birth or by marriage, or tied to me by favors given and received, it was some ninny such as stood guardmaid. Nevertheless, a Quest was a Quest, and it had to be done according to the rules. I had had a boring flight, tooling along through the air and waving to passing birds; and I would have a boring supper with Anne’s boring husband, and then we would all have a boring party and be boringly exhausted in the morning. And then before lunch I would be able to take my leave for Castle Purdy.

At which point a thought struck me, and I pulled my map from my pocket and unfolded it. Upper right-hand corner of the pliofilm, the small continent Marktwain, with the Outward Deeps off its coasts to the east. To the south of Marktwain, Oklahomah, a tad bigger. To the west, and dwarfing both, the continent of Arkansaw, with little Mizzurah almost up against its western coast and sheltered some from the Ocean of Storms by its overhang to the north. Then across the Ocean of Storms, in the northwest corner of my map, was Kintucky, big as Oklahomah but with only the Wommacks to manage the whole of it. And last of all, filling the southwest corner, the huge bulk of Tinaseeh, the only one of our continents to have an inland sea, and its Wilderness Lands alone as big as either Kintucky or Oklahomah. And the empty Ocean of Remembrances, filling all the southeast corner.

True, the most obvious route, and the one I had described to the arguesome Jubal, was straight over to Arkansaw. But Arkansaw was shared by Castles Purdy and Guthrie and Farson. And those were three of the most likely to have something to hide from me and require an investment of my time.

An alternative that might save me time in the *long* run would be to fly straight on south to Castle Clark on Oklahomah, and make a quick circuit of Castles Smith and Airy, both of which—along with Clark—were loyal to the Confederation. I could maybe do the entire continent in eight, nine days, counting one to a Castle for the required ceremonial stopover, before I moved on to Arkansaw and more reasonable sources of trouble.

The McDaniels children found me poring over my map and gathered round to

look over my shoulder, all nine of them. The room shrank around me; not a one of them that was not a typical McDaniels, big and stocky and broad-shouldered (and if female, broad-hipped as well). It got very crowded in that room.

“This is a nice map you’ve got,” said one of the younger of the herd, a boy called Nicholas Fairtower McDaniels the somethingth—I could not remember the what-th there for a minute. The 55th? No; the 56th. I was embarrassed; if there is one thing expected of us it is knowing people’s *names*, and this boy was a second cousin of mine.

“What are you looking for, Responsible? It’s a nice map, like Nicholas says, but there’s a lot on it.”

“She’s looking for the kidnapper—” said the very littlest, and instantly clapped both hands over his mouth. “I forgot,” he said around his fingers.

Either Anne or their father then had threatened them with dire events if they mentioned that baby; still, it *was* a McDaniels baby, and it was not surprising that they’d be interested. Manners were hard to get the hang of.

“I am trying to decide,” I said, ruffling the boy’s hair to show I didn’t intend to take notice of his lapse, “which is the best way to go when I leave in the morning. Like you say, there’s a lot of choices.”

The children hadn’t any hesitation at all—zip due west to Arkansaw, as any fool could see. Except for one of them. Her name was Silverweb, and she was fifteen years old and not yet married; perhaps it was her intention to become a Granny without the bother of waiting around to become a widow. She was a handsome strapping young woman, with a pleasant face; she bound her hair back in an intricate figure-eight of yellow braids that I could never of managed, and she carried herself with dignity. I made a mental note to compliment Anne on this daughter—her only daughter—who seemed to me to show promise.

She laid a well-tanned finger that showed she wasn’t afraid of a little sun to my map, and traced a different route. Castle Clark, on Oklahomah’s northeast corner. Castle Airy, at the southern tip... Oklahomah came very near being a triangle. Then to Castle Smith, in the northwest corner. My choice exactly.

“Do it that way,” she said. “Then over to Arkansaw, only an easy morning’s ride. And you’re at Castle Guthrie.”

“Faugh, Silverweb,” said one of her brothers, “she can’t do that at all. You heard Mother—Cousin Responsible is touring all twelve Castles on solemn Quest The way to do it is go straight on to Arkansaw, then Mizzurah, then Kintucky, then Tinaseeh, then *end up* in Oklahomah, and back to Marktwain.”

“If she ever gets out of Tinaseeh,” said another. “Horrible old place, Tinaseeh is, and full of things that would as soon eat you alive as look at you.”

“Not as horrible as your room!”

I moved out of the way so as not to get my costume spoiled, grateful that the map was indestructible, and let them shove and carry on for a bit to get it out of their

systems. Silverweb, calm among the turmoil, held fast that it would be just as sensible, and twice as pleasant, and break no rules that *she'd* ever heard of, if I went the other way round.

“But then she’s got all that open ocean between Tinaseeh and Oklahomah to fly! Look at it, would you? A person could fly over that and never be heard of again—it must be... three days across? Five? Six?”

“It’s got to be done at one end or the other,” scoffed his sister. “Better to do it when the worst is over and she can take her time. She’ll be plain worn out, by then.”

“What makes you think so, Silverweb?” the boy taunted, for all he had to stand on his tiptoes to look her in the eye. “She’s Responsible of Brightwater, Silverweb, she’s not a *tourist!*”

Silverweb’s chin went up and the blue eyes almost closed. She took one step forward and the boy fell back two. Second of nine she was; it couldn’t be easy. And the other eight all male... it was enough to constitute a substantial burden.

Silverweb. I added it up in my head—she was a *seven*. Withdrawal from the world... that went with not marrying... secrets and mystery... that fit the hooded eyes and the intricate figure of her braids. From what I could see, this one was properly named, and living up to it.

As of course she would be. There were no incompetent Grannys on Marktwain to cause trouble with an Improper Naming, as had been known to happen elsewhere from time to time.

I let them squabble, Silverweb winning easily, and relaxed as best I could given the way I was dressed, enjoying the sight of them all if not the sound. I had my route chosen now—as Silverweb had had the wit to lay it out, and it was not designed solely in terms of distances and points of the compass. I would do quickly the friendly territory of Oklahomah; and in that way I’d have a bit extra where it was less than friendly.

The party was pleasant, more a dance than a party, and a credit to Anne. She’d invited people enough to fill the Castle’s smaller ballroom, and had managed to muster a respectable crowd, considering the short notice and a thunderstorm that had already been scheduled and could not of been postponed without distorting the weather for the next three weeks. Anne and I stood in a corner back of the bandstand where the Caller was hollering out the dances, both of us in slight danger from a flying fiddle bow but willing to risk it for the sake of the semi-privacy. I despised parties as much as Anne did, probably more, and I couldn’t dance even the simplest dances, much less the complex things they were weaving on the tiles that night in honor of my visit.

“Star in the shallows, flash and swim,
Lady to her gentleman and parry to him!”

“Wherever do they *learn* to do all that?” I marveled.

“Circle has a border to it, touch it and run,
Muffins in the oven till their middles are done!”

“You should of been taught,” said Anne. “They had no right to leave you ignorant just because you might of enjoyed yourself.”

“There wasn’t time,” I said, which was the plain truth. Plus, I was awkward, always had been.

“Braid a double rosebud, smother it in snow,
Swing your partner, and dosey-do!”

“Step on a Pickle in the dark of night,
Grab your cross lady, and allemande right!”

“It’s not fair,” she insisted. “I hear your brother’s the best dancer in three counties, and turning all the girls to cream and butter. And I’ll wager they saw to it that your sister learned every dance that was worth knowing.”

I snorted. “Nobody ever ‘saw to it’ that Troublesome did anything, Anne of Brightwater. What she wanted to do, she did. What she cared to know about, she learned. Anything else was just so much kiss-your-elbow.”

“Sashay down the center, rim around the wall,
Single-bind, double-bind, and promenade all!”

I couldn’t even understand these calls... dosey-do and promenade-the-hall went by often enough to let me know it was dancing, but the intricacies of it were beyond me. I couldn’t decide whether I minded that, either, though on general principles I was not supposed to fall behind on anything that mattered to any sizable proportion of Ozarkers, “sizable” being defined as more than three. It looked to be hot work, and I fanned my face with my blank program in sympathy.

“Young people!” I said, ducking the bow. “They do amaze me.”

Anne gave me a sharp look, and I looked her right back and waited. Whatever she had to say, she’d say it; she’d said enough about my blue-and-silver party dress, which was even more preposterous in the way of gewgaws and lollydaddles than the one I’d arrived in. And my high-heeled silver slippers with the pointed toes.

“My daughter, Silverweb,” she said to me, and I noticed that she was talking with her teeth clenched, and spitting out the syllables like she couldn’t spare them, “Silverweb, my dear cousin, is a ‘young people.’”

“And a fine one,” I agreed. “That’s a likely young woman, and I plan to keep my eye on her in future. I wager she’ll go a considerable distance in this world.”

“Silverweb,” Anne said again, “is *fifteen years old*. And you, Responsible of Brightwater, *you* remarking on the habits of these ‘young people’ like a blasted Granny, have had precisely fourteen birthdays, and the fourteenth not more than six weeks ago!”

It wasn’t often I stood rebuked lately, not since we’d finally managed to pack my sister off where she couldn’t do any harm to speak of or leave me holding the bag if she was bound and *determined* to live up to *her* name. But this was one of the times, and I had it coming. Not that we are given to considering only the calendar years on Ozark, we know many other things more worth considering. But my speech had not been genteel. It was the sort of thing my mother would of said, and I

wished, not for the first time, that I had the skill of blushing. That, like the ability not to fall over my own big feet, had been left out of my equipment. And the more ashamed of myself I was, the more I looked like I didn't care at all—I knew that. I only wished I knew what to *do* about it

Anne of Brightwater was not as tall as I was, and she had a usual habit of gathering herself in that made her seem even smaller, but she was making me feel mighty puny now, there mid the music and the boom of thunder, A trick like a cat does, puffing herself up to be more impressive.

“It is *hard* for Silverweb,” said my kinswoman, spitting sparks now along with the syllables, “seeing you come here, dressed like a young queen and treated like one, off on a Quest before all the world and it taken *seriously*— oh, they are, don't you worry, they are taking it very seriously! While she stands aside and must hear herself called ‘one of the McDaniels children.’ Had you thought of that?”

I had not thought of it, obvious though it surely should have been. I looked at the tall grave girl who was a year my senior, moving easily through the squares in a simple dress of gray silk sprigged with pale green rosebuds, and her only ornament a shawl of dark gray wool in a Love-in-the-Mist knotting, with a pearl fringe... and perhaps the single wild rose in her yellow hair. I remembered the way I had sat that afternoon, “watching the children,” with a pretty fair estimate of the expression that must of been on my face at the time, and I felt a fool. Had I called her “one of the children” in her hearing? Surely not... but supper had been boring, as expected, and I'd not paid a great deal of mind to curbing my tongue.

“The mother lion defends her young,” I said lamely, and the nearest Fiddler got me back of the ear, making me jump.

“And a stitch in time saves nine!”

I winced and stared at the floor, and Anne drew her skirts around her with a swish like ribbon tearing and went off and left me standing there all alone as she headed for the ballroom door, managing to tangle herself up with two couples in a reel before she sailed out into the corridor and slammed the door behind her.

She would be back later to apologize. After all, I had not *chosen* to be Responsible of Brightwater. It was none of my doing. A Granny had chosen that role for me and I filled it as best I could, and no doubt there were good reasons. Some of them I knew, and some I could guess, though there seemed a kind of fuzz between them and my clear awareness; others I would learn in time, and some I would be told. When I was buried they would be written on a sheet of paper narrow as my thumb, in the symbols of Formalisms & Transformations, and tucked between my breasts and buried with me. Somewhere, if she still lived, there was someone who knew every one of those reasons at this very moment, and no doubt the knowledge lay heavy on *her* shoulders; I hoped they were broad.

I was *behaving* like a fourteen-year-old, I realized, and I smoothed my ruffled feathers and set my quarrel with Anne aside, along with the futile lamenting about my lack of elegances. Spilt milk, all of it, and I'd spill gallons more before I saw my own

Castle gates again. The only important question I needed to concern myself with was: could there be mischief here, if not treason, despite the fact that the McDaniels were close to the Brightwaters as our skins?

I listened, then, with more than my ears—my ears were too full of fiddle and guitar and dulcimer to be useful in any case—and only silence came back to me. Here I might be annoying, and I might be read up and down, but here I was loved, and here the Confederation was seen as a worthy goal to be worked toward. I found no small thing that I could worry about, and I worried easy; nor would I be spending this night casting Spells to troll for echoes that I might of missed hearing through the music.

Thunder boomed again, less intimidating than Anne, and I poured myself another glass of punch and retreated further into the protection of the tall white baskets of flowers and ferns that surrounded the bandstand. And seeing as how the McDaniels set as fine a party table as was to be found anywhere, I had another plate of food. I would be off in the morning early, I decided, and skip the breakfast. That way I wouldn't have to face Silverweb of McDaniels again and risk putting my foot deeper yet in the muck than I had already, from being self-conscious over slighting her so today.

My pockets were deep and my skirts full enough to hide plenty of lumps. I made sure I had both a midnight snack and a breakfast squirreled away before Anne came back to tuck her arm through mine and tell me what a crosspatch she'd been over nothing.

“It wasn't ‘nothing,’” I said resolutely, “and I had every word you said coming to me, Anne. But I want you to know it wasn't *meant* to be the way it looked, and I wish you'd tell Silverweb that once I'm gone. And I thank you for bringing my manner to my attention here and now, close to home; it would not be so easy if you were the lady of Castle Traveller.”

“Just use your head,” she said, and tears in her eyes because she saw I was truly sorry. Anne of Brightwater had a quick temper, but a heart that melted at blood heat, nearly. “And watch your tongue.”

“I'm trying,” I said. “Ill get the hang of it.”

I had for sure *better* get the hang of it, and that with some speed.

“You'll tell Silverweb?” I asked her. “Promise?”

“I'll tell her. And she will understand. Silverweb is a deep one.”

CHAPTER THREE



The next day I was able to be a little more sensible. Leaving, I still wore my spectacular traveling outfit, but the minute I was well over the water and out of sight of the fishing boats I brought Sterling to a full stop in midair and changed into

something that didn't make what was already misery doubly so. Balancing on Muleback for that kind of thing takes practice, and properly fastened straps and backups, but I was more than up to it—I'd had lots of practice. Mostly it requires pretending you are flat on the ground, while at the same time not exactly forgetting that it's a good ways down.

I took the Ocean of Remembrances at a leisurely pace; it was a three-day flight from Castle McDaniels to the first landfall on Oklahomah, and since I'd done Castle to coast in about fourteen minutes flat I had time to make up over the ocean.

I cut the Mule back to half her regulation speed, and I balanced a very small dulcimer—all I'd been able to fit in my saddlebags, but not all that bad—over her broad neck, and I sang my way dry through a steady wind and plenty of rain by way of a Weather Transformation that it was fully illegal for me to know. Sterling disliked the dulcimer, and she probably disliked my voice even more; it was a good deal like her own. Just as I was never called upon to dance at parties, I was never called upon to sing (anywhere), and I reveled in my opportunity, here at a height where there was nobody to clap hands over their ears and beg me to leave off tormenting them. I do *know* a lot of ballads, not to mention every hymn in the hymnal, and I enjoyed myself tremendously.

There is some inconvenience, of course, to making any lengthy ocean voyage by Mule, our oceans being almost completely empty of islands or reefs. A person could get through one day without too much hassle, provided you neither ate nor drank the day before nor during the flight itself. But once you went beyond that single day the inevitable happened, and considerable gymnastics were required of both rider and Mule. (This was not the least of the reasons why Ozarkers for the most part went by boat from continent to continent, and it made it unlikely that I would meet any other citizen on Muleback as I went along, which was all to the good in the interests of modesty.) Only for the sake of a symbol would anything so unhandy be undertaken by a reasonable person, and few had that sort of symbol to deal with.

I had ample time to think about the distances and times of flight that would be expected of me, when my throat and my fingers got tired. Brightwater to McDaniels, one very long day, and then three more to Oklahomah. Three days roughly for each leg of the triangle from Castle Clark to Castle Smith, Castle Smith to Castle Airy, and back again almost to Clark for the best take-off across the channel to Arkansaw—that a day's flight only, and a short day. Three days' travel for Castles Farson and Guthrie, a day's flight to Mizzurah; two days there and two to Castle Purdy. Four days across the Ocean of Storms to Kintucky, provided the ocean didn't do too much living up to its name and force me to put in an extra day for the benefit of the population. Ten days from Kintucky to Tinaseeh. Then the longest leg over water... the McDaniels children had not been too far off in their estimate of the flight time from Tinaseeh's southeast tip back to Oklahomah; it was a good five days, even with fair weather and a tailwind. And then four days home. Fifteen days, even cutting it very close, I'd be expected to spend flying over water. And far more than that for the land distances, with stops at the same intervals expected of anyone else.

Since I was all alone I indulged myself, and turned the air blue to match the stripe between Sterling's ears, which were still laid back in protest against my concert. I could of done the whole *trip*, the actual flying time, in about an hour total, just the amount of realtime involved in take-offs and landings, and there was no time to spare with the Jubilee coming in May, and February almost over. But whereas a Magician of Rank could have done it that way and nobody would of done more than maybe fuss mildly about people that felt obliged to show off, having a *woman* do such a thing would cause about the same amount of commotion as a good-sized groundquake. And the damage would not be repairable by stone and timber. I could shave an hour here and half an hour there and get away with it, but not much more, not without causing more trouble than I could conveniently put an end to. The word would be well out by now, and people in the towns and farms—and on the water along the coasts, too—would be expecting to look up and see me fly by all in emerald and black and gold and silver and scarlet, at *reasonable* points of time. Aeronautically reasonable.

I could think of no cover story that would get me out of any of that time, except that (the Twelve Corners be praised) I would be able to do most of my make-up time in the Wildernesses instead of over the oceans. The likelihood of anybody observing me in mid-ocean once I got away from the coasts was too small to be worth considering; I would do a decorous few miles in sight of land, SNAP to a suitably remote spot in the nearest Wilderness, and camp there to wait out the time it “should” of taken me to fly that far. Enough was enough. Muleflight was fine for formal occasions, for short-time travel, and for racing and hunting, but it was one of the most boring ways ever devised for going long distances. Sterling, like any other Mule with a sense of self-respect, refused to go through the completely superfluous leg movements in the air that travel over ground or in the water would of required... it was a lot like sitting on a log (a small log) floating through the air, and if it hadn't been for the wind blowing past you it would of been easy to believe that you weren't moving at all. Over the water even the wind wasn't all that much diversion. It wasn't tiring, and twelve full hours of it was no great strain on either Mule or rider, but, *law*, it was boring. I intended to keep it to a minimum.

The coast of Oklahomah is peaceful land. Pale golden sand sloping gently down to the water on one side and gently up into low green hills on the other, and the weather always easy there. There were boats out, farther from the land than I had really expected them to be, and I made my arm tired waving at their passengers before I began my descent. *And* managed to drop my poor dulcimer into the Ocean of Remembrances in the process. New motto: never try to balance a dulcimer across a Mule's neck, keep from falling off the Mule, and wave to a boat captain below you at the same time.

Sterling and I settled down toward the land, and I saw that my expectations were correct; the word had gone out. Although Castle Clark was no more than three miles up from the shore, where it had a view that melted both heart and mind as it faced out toward the sea, there was a delegation of some sort waiting to meet me. I wouldn't have to hammer on the gates of Castle Clark as I had had to do at Castle

McDaniels; we were going in in a small, and I hoped a tasteful, procession.

The Clarks' Castle staff wore dark brown livery, trimmed at cuff and hem with yellow and white. Four of the staff were there on Muleback (all, by their insignia, Senior Attendants), the Clark crest embroidered on their right shoulders. I had always liked that crest; two stalks of wheat, crossed, yellow on a field of brown, and a single white star above the wheat—nothing more. It pleased the eye and was a credit to the Granny that'd devised it when the Castle was built.

“Good morning, miss,” they said, which was a great relief, and I good-morninged them back again. And then they told me that dinner was waiting for us at the Castle, which pleased me even more. I hope to outgrow my appetite one of these years, but I was hungry again.

“And a message from Castle Smith waiting, miss,” said one.

“What sort of message, Attendant?”

“Don't know, miss. I was told to greet you, ask you to dinner, and say the message was waiting. That's all.”

We turned the Mules, and they followed me, four abreast and a mannerly four Mule-lengths behind, across the sand and up the hill ahead of us. The Mules had no objection to the hard-packed beach, but floundered once we were above the tideline; I was pleased to see that none of the animals following me took the all too common Mulish tactic of stopping dead and refusing to move, sinking deeper all the while into the sand. They were well trained, and they struggled through the powdery stuff without hesitation, though I'd no doubt they'd of said a good deal if they'd had the chance. Not one brayed, a sure sign of good management in the stables, and once we reached the road their hoofs tapped smartly along the white pavement. Very orderly, and I liked order. I was in a good mood, and prepared to be in a better one, as we went through the gates and dismounted in the courtyard, and I was led straight on to a long balcony on the second floor that looked out over the hills to the sea.

There sat the Clarks. Nathan Terfelix Clark the 17th, with a beard like a white bush trimming up his burly chest, and not a hair on his head, in compensation. His wife, Amanda of Parson, the one with the chins. Their three daughters, Una, Zoë, and Sharon, and the husbands of the two eldest at their sides. Let me see...it was Una that had scandalized her parents by marrying a Traveller, and gone on to scandalize the Families nearby by loving him far beyond what was either decent or expected, and that would be him, Gabriel Laddercane Traveller the 34th, in the suit of black. The Travellers were unwilling to give up *any* of their ancient trappings, and they dressed still as they had the day they stepped off The Ship in 2021. Zoë's husband was a kinsman, Joseph Frederick Brightwater the 11th, and looked pleased to see me. And an assortment of babies, all of them beautiful. I've never seen an ugly baby—but then I've never seen a genuinely *new* one, either—I'm told that might dent my convictions.

And there sat Granny Golightly.

She gave me the shivers, and it pleased me not to have her where I had to see her

oftener. She stood not quite five feet tall, she weighed about as much as a Mule colt, and she was an Airy by birth, which had been an astonishing long time ago. If my reckoning was right, Granny Golightly had passed her one hundred and twenty-ninth birthday recently; next to her I was a flyspeck on the windowpane of time. I intended to go lightly near her, for sweet prudence' sake, and as befit her name.

“Hello there, Responsible of Brightwater,” they said to me, and waved me to an empty chair in the sunshine. Dinner was chowder —I counted eleven kinds of fish!—and dark ale, and cornbread properly prepared and so hot the butter disappeared when it touched it, and a fine pair of salads, one fruit and one vegetables. And a berry cobbler that I knew nobody at Castle Brightwater could of brought off, including my own self.

Finishing that cobbler, and thinking back on the rest of the meal, I understood fully how the Clarks acquired their bulk, and I forgave Amanda her chins. What I did not understand was the trim waists of the daughters, especially Una, who accounted for five of the children. Perhaps since they had grown up eating this way they had developed a natural immunity. Or perhaps this was a company meal and they usually ate like the rest of us at noon; I had, after all, been expected here.

“Responsible of Brightwater,” said Nathan Terfelix, “there’s a message here for you from Castle Smith. Man arrived with it this morning almost before we had the gates unlocked, and what he was in such a hurry for I have no idea. *Or* interest. Knew you couldn’t get here before noontime.”

“Took off as fast as he arrived, too,” Amanda added. “He wouldn’t even stop for a cup of coffee.”

She raised her head and nodded at a young Attendant standing near the door, and he brought me an envelope and laid it in my hand without a word. He looked to be about eleven, and if I was any judge his livery collar itched him; this must be his first year in service.

“Amanda,” I said as he backed away, “the young man’s collar is badly fit. Someone should see to it.”

Granny Golightly cackled, which was trite.

“Not going to miss a trick, are you, Responsible of Brightwater?” she demanded. “Going to see that our *livery* fits the servants right, are you? You plan to inspect the stables while you’re here, and run your little white fingers up and down the banisters?”

“I beg your pardon, Granny Golightly,” I said. “I did not mean to criticize.”

“Lie to me, young missy, and you’ll rue it,” she snapped. “Criticism you gave, and criticism we got, and I’ll see to the tadling’s collar myself, this afternoon. *And* to the careless seamstress that made it too tight in the first place, whoever *she* may be! All we need is sloppy staff giving Responsible of Brightwater bits to add to her long list!”

This was ordinary behavior for a Granny, and I paid it no mind; it had been years

since I'd made the mistake of getting into a wrangle with a Granny bent on public performance. She went on like that for quite some time, under her breath, while I turned the envelope from Castle Smith over in my hands, and the young husbands disappeared one at a time on mumbled errands.

Creamy white paper, thick as linen, and an envelope that ought to of held something of importance—which it had to hold, if it could not of been sent by comset in the ordinary way but had to be carried here by human hand. Seven inches square if it was one, and the Smith crest stamped on it both front and back, *and* an official seal! And inside it, all alone in the middle of a sheet of matched paper like lonely raisins in a pudding, the following words:

We regret that Castle Smith will be unable to entertain you at this time, due to a family crisis. Any questions you might have can be asked there at Castle Clark, and well answered.

In cordial haste,
Dorothy of Smith

The eldest daughter of the Castle, Dorothy of Smith... carrying out a minor social duty? Or what? Dorothy was a pincher; I remembered her as a child at playparties and picnics, always quick with her wicked little fingers, and running before you could get a fair chance to pinch her back. She would be fourteen now, just about three months older than I was. And since she'd bid me ask questions, I asked one.

"Begging your pardon, Granny Golightly," I said, and the Granny stopped her nattering and looked up from her cobbler. "Amanda, do you or Nathan either of you know of any 'crisis' at Castle Smith?"

Amanda looked blank, and Nathan frowned, and Granny Golightly forgot her pose long enough to give me a sharp look between bites.

"Crisis," said Nathan.

"What kind of crisis?" asked Amanda.

I waved the note. "Doesn't say," I said. "Just disinvites me."

"Now that won't do, young lady," Granny Golightly jumped in, "for you invited your *own* self on this particular traipse-about! There was *no call* sent out from the Twelve Castles, demanding the drop-in of Responsible of Brightwater at her earliest convenience, not as I know of—and I would know."

"Gently, Granny," said Zoë of Clark, and leaned over to pick up a baby. For ballast perhaps. "Gently!"

"Flumdiddle," said the Granny.

"I withdraw the accusation," I said, "and you are quite right—I had no invitation. Not here, either, but you've seen fit to be hospitable and I thank you for it. I will remember it."

"On your list!" said Granny. "See there?"

"And," I added, "I will remember the way the Smiths set their hands to the same plow—what to do with Responsible of Bright-water, all inconvenient and uninvited.

Unless—unless there truly is trouble at Castle Smith to back this up.”

Silence, all around the table. Mules braying in the stables, and seabirds crying out as they whirled above us, but no words, nor did I really expect many. Ozarkers do not talk behind one another’s backs, excepting always the Grannys, who do it only as part of their ritual and are careful that it leans to harmless nonsense.

“Anybody sick there?” I asked finally.

“Might could be,” said Zoë. “It’s that time of the year. We have a few people here down with fevers... nothing serious, but fevers all the same.”

“I was thinking more on the order of a plague,” I said flatly.

More silence.

“All right,” I said, “is there marrying trouble there? Or birthing trouble? Or naming trouble?”

“If there is,” said Granny Golightly, “Granny Gableframe is there and she’ll see to it.”

“Responsible,” said Amanda of Farson, “you’re touring the Castles, as I understand it, because you intend to find out who hung the McDaniels baby in your cedar tree—”

“Flumdiddle!” said Granny Golightly again. Emphatically.

“Trite, Granny Golightly,” I said between my teeth, and she wrinkled her nose at me.

“I say flumdiddle because no other word that’s accurate sits well in my mouth,” she had back at me. “If all you wanted to know was who did that foolish baby trick, you have Magicians of Rank as could find that out for you without you setting out on a Quest! Amanda, you can’t see any farther than the end of your nose.”

“Gently, Granny,” said Zoë again, and her sisters each reached for a baby, too. They appeared to use the little ones like a kind of armor in this Castle; any sign of tension and everybody grabbed a baby. I wasn’t sure what it signified, but it was distinctive.

“What were you going to say, Amanda?” I asked, keeping my voice as courteous as I could and hoping for a chance at this Granny another day.

“I meant to say that the Smiths are easily offended. That’s well known.”

“If they think you suspect *them* of doing that sorry piece of business—and with you coming uninvited they’ll for sure think you *do* suspect them, since you’ve never done such a thing before— you’ll put their backs up,” said Nathan Terfelix. “They’re stiff-necked and over proud. They won’t bear being spied upon.”

“Do *you* see my visit as being spied upon?” I asked, taken aback, and then regretted it; Golightly was on me quick as a tick.

“Most certainly!” she said, little wrinkled cheeks red as wild daisies. “*Most* certainly! And why not, seeing as that is what it is?”

“Oh, my,” I sighed, “this won’t do.”

“Now, my dear, that’s just Granny’s way of talking,” said Amanda. “You mustn’t mind it.”

Telling me, was she, about the Grannys and their way of talking? Even Sharon looked embarrassed, and the silent Una made a little noise in the back of her throat and stared down into her coffee cup.

“Your Granny,” I said quietly, “is doing what she’s good at. Stirring up trouble. Sowing dissent.”

The old lady’s brows went up, and I thought she was going to rub her hands together with glee at finally getting to me. But she waited, to see if I’d go on.

“I see no reason why youall can’t know why I’m here,” I told them. “Nor why the tour of the Castles. For sure, I could of found out without leaving my own bedroom—with the help of a Magician of Rank, of course—”

“What are you up to with a Magician of Rank in your bedroom?” Granny interrupted, scoring one point.

“—who kidnapped the McDaniels baby,” I went right on. “That’s not in question. The point is that somebody, or some one of the Families, is doing one piece of fool mischief after another to try to make people back out of the Jubilee. Especially people that’ve been against it all along and are just looking for an excuse to stay away. Finding out *who’s* doing the mischief is not really the point —though it serves as Quest Goal, naturally, and I’ll do it as I go along. The point is to show that Castle Brightwater is not to be put down by mischief, magical or otherwise.”

“A symbol,” said Amanda.

“A Quest for a Challenge,” said Golightly, who knew her business. “Quite right.”

“But nobody *here* is against the Jubilee!” said Zoë, looking both outraged and puzzled.

“Of course not” I agreed, “but do *think*, Zoë of Clark!”

She joggled the baby a bit, and then she nodded.

“You couldn’t go only to the Castles you suspect,” she said. “That would tip your hand.”

“Green *roosters*, the girl’s stupid!” shrilled Granny Golightly, and Zoë winced. I thought I might have to take this Granny in hand; and then I reminded myself sternly that the internal affairs of Castle Clark were none of my business, as long as they remained allies of Brightwater.

“And why am I stupid, Granny?” demanded Zoë, and good for *her*!

“She means,” I said gently, “that the problem is not tipping my hand—the Families that I suspect know who they are already. Traveller, Purdy, Guthrie, and—I’m sorry, Amanda—Parson. The reason for all this folderol is that a Quest must be done in a certain fashion, or it is *not* a symbol. A Quest is *one* thing, *done*

under rigid constraints, one step at a time—”

“And plenty of adventures as you go along!” said Granny. “That’s *required!*”

“One step at a time,” I went on, working uphill, “flying our finest Mule, wearing my finest gown... and so on. Done any other way, it’s not a Quest at all, it’s just the daughter of Brightwater gallivanting around the planet uninvited and unexplained. That would be something quite different, Zoë. Brightwater doing this as a Quest, and doing it to the letter of the rule—that says we mean business, and no mistake about it.”

The early shadows were beginning to stripe the balcony, and the wind was coming up cold. The older children began shooing the younger ones inside, and the Clark daughters passed along the babies in their laps to the staff to be carried in. High time, too, to *my* mind.

“I see,” Zoë said, rubbing her arms and drawing a shawl around her shoulders from the back of her chair. “Yes, that’s clear.”

Nathan Terfelix pulled at his beard—which I would have enjoyed pulling myself—and poured one half-cup of coffee all around to finish off the pot.

“What do *you* think, Responsible of Brightwater?” he asked; and there was no banter in his voice. “I take no insult on the part of my wife—the Farsons have never shown sign of love for the Confederation, and your logic can’t be faulted. Nor is she responsible for her family’s doings on the other side of Arkansaw, if doings there be. But what do you think of the chances for this Jubilee?”

“Fair to middling,” I said. “Provided I do this right.”

“I don’t see it,” said Sharon of Clark. “The Jubilee is a celebration, a giant party. It’s a lot of trouble for Castle Brightwater, but if they’re willing, why should anybody else care?”

I looked at Granny Golightly and waited for a remark about the girl’s stupidity, but apparently she didn’t think twelve was old enough yet to demand the attentions of her tongue. She glared at me, but she held her peace.

“The Travellers,” I told the child, “the Purdys, the Guthries, the Farsons... all of them want the Confederation set back to meeting one day a year like it once did, pure play-acting with no muscle to it. And each Castle absolutely to its own self the rest of the time. Every meeting, Sharon of Clark, the Travellers move to go back to that one day a year, the Farsons second that, it goes to a vote, and it goes down seven to five or eight to four, depending. *Every* meeting... that’s the first thing happens after the Opening Prayer. The Jubilee, now, may look like a giant party, but it means a kind of *formalizing* of the Confederation that’s never been done yet. Those Families would like to see it fail, like to see the other Families do as Castle Smith has done here—send letters around politely regretting that due to some ‘crisis’ they could not after all attend the Jubilee. You see that?”

Sharon of Clark drew her brows together and sighed. “Well, it makes no sense at all,” she said crossly. “Don’t they know anything? Don’t they know that if it

wasn't for the Confederation we'd have *anarchism*?"

"Anarchy, child," said her father. "The word's *anarchy*."

"Well, *that*, then! Don't they even care?"

She was positively a bristle with outrage, and I gave the Granny credit for that; Sharon of Clark had been properly taught. I doubt she knew anarchy from a fishkettle, but she'd learned it for a word to shudder at, and that was all that was likely to be required of her.

"Perhaps they don't care, Sharon," I said carefully. "And then perhaps they only don't understand. If we knew the truth of it, might could be we'd be able to change their minds on the subject."

Amanda of Farson said nothing, there being little she *could* say, and I paid her the courtesy of not questioning her on her own sympathies, while her child nodded solemnly. Amanda had been a Clark by marriage now over forty years; it was not likely that she still held to her Family's prejudices. Even if she did, certainly she would not be involved in sabotage coming from that quarter. A woman *actively* disloyal to her husband's house would go back to her own, as a matter of honor; she would not live as his wife and work against him.

"Speak openly, Responsible of Brightwater," said Granny Go-lightly then, "and look in my eyes when you speak. Do you suspect treason here?"

I looked her eye to beady eye, and I spoke flat out. "For sure and for certain, Granny Golightly, I do *not*. Nor, till I had this scrap of paper from Castle Smith, did I suspect it on all of Oklahomah. It was my idea that I'd stop quickly at each of the three Castles here, where I knew the loyalty to the Confederation wasn't in question, and so doing gain maybe a little extra time to spend in other places."

"She speaks the truth," said the Granny, showing an amount of overconfidence that didn't specially surprise me. "And I will speak the truth, returning her the favor, and then we can all get inside out of this blasted wind and get *comfortable*."

She leaned forward and tapped her skinny fingers together as she steepled them, peering at me over the steeple. "There's no trouble at Castle Smith," she said, "but not your treason, either. No one at Smith's doing *magic* as shouldn't be doing it, or for evil ends."

"I wonder," I said.

"I'm *telling* you," she snapped, "and I know of what I speak. You can cease wondering. I am the Granny of this Castle, and the senior Granny of the five that share the housekeeping of Oklahomah among us, and I *tell* you, Uppity—fourteen, aren't you! what an age for wisdom!—I tell you there's no need to set your stubborn foot in Castle Smith. It's as Nathan Terfelix says; they're stiff-necked and you've insulted them, and they haven't the sense to see what you're doing, any more than Sharon there did, or the babies."

"Not going would save me time," I hazarded.

“Don’t go, then,” she said, and stood up with more creakings and poppings than an old attic floor in cold weather. “Who’s there to suspect? Granny Gableframe, her that was a Brightwater by birth, and a McDaniels by marriage forty-seven years? Can you see her allowing such goings-on? And there’s whatisname... Delldon Mallard Smith the 2nd, and twice is enough if you ask me, no more gumption to him than a nursing baby for all he thinks himself a power in the land. And his three brothers, each of them as much a bully as he is, but scared of him, more fools them... and all their poor burdened wives, doing their best to clean up after their worthless menfolk...”

“Granny Golightly,” I said quickly, “I think I follow you.”

“*That* one,” she said, shaking her finger under my nose and not a bit slowed down, “that Delldon Mallard, now, he is just *stupid* enough to set himself up proud and claim he should have been made an exception of, though he knows very well you skip a station on a Quest and you risk the whole thing. He was a stupid little boy, he was a stupid young man, and he’s growing stupider with every passing year. I can just *see* him thinking himself fit to be an *exception* and sitting around his supper table bragging that he’s shown Brightwater a thing or two! But he’s a poor, pitiful, pathetic, puny fool. He couldn’t sour milk any way but spitting in it.”

Whew! She was outspoken. Too outspoken. There were still staff near us, and what their family allegiance might be was unknown to me. And children, who are not always good at guarding their tongues.

“Want *me* to hush,” she said, her mouth twitching, “you pass the Smiths by. Or I’ll say the rest, to convince you—and I know a passel more, young woman.”

I was sure she did, and it was clear that she was prepared to lay it all before us, and the devil take the consequences.

“Granny Golightly,” I said, “I’ll make a bargain with you, if you’ll hush now.”

“State it!”

“You spread the word for me,” I said, “with a suitable story... some *good* reason why I did not go to Castle Smith. You know the conditions on a Quest—mere refusal of admittance to a location is no excuse. I need a plague, or a dragon, or a bomb, or whatever you like, I leave it to you. But something that will be sufficient to make by-passing that Castle *not* a spoiling of my Quest! Something clearly and wholly beyond my control, you understand me?”

“I do,” she said. “And I’ll see to it.”

“Your word on it? And nobody else harmed, mind!”

“My word, given already,” she said impatiently, “and done as it should be. I’ll spread the story and it will be ample, and no edges lopping over. My promise on it, Responsible of Brightwater!”

I stood up then, too, and it was like a congregation following the choir; they all followed the Granny and me and stood along with us, and the servingmaids moved in to clear away the tablestuff.

“Then I’ll stay the night here, if you’ll have me for supper, too,” I said, “and then go on sometime tomorrow to Castle Airy. The matter of Castle Smith I’ll leave to Granny Golightly, with my thanks.”

“Make it good, Granny,” said Una—the first time she’d spoken all that time except to chide or cosset a child.

“Never you mind,” said the old woman. “I’ve been a Granny a very long time now, I know my doings.”

Maybe.

Since she would cover my tracks for me, it made no difference if the guilty one *was* at Castle Smith; as had been plainly stated, I had not even needed to leave home to find out who that was. But the Smiths now... I’d seen Delldon Mallard Smith at meetings, and for sure had always found him a pompous bore, with an “uh... uh... uh...” for every other word out of his mouth. But I didn’t know there was dry rot in his brain, which was how the Granny made it sound, and it was of course a credit to the Smith women that I didn’t. If the men at the Castle were as foolish as Granny Golightly had said them to be, plain out and aloud in front of one and all, then there might be one or more of them fool enough to be mixed up in this somewhere, or to prove a weak link at an inconvenient moment.

It didn’t matter, I decided. I felt quite confident about Granny Golightly’s powers of invention. By the time I landed Sterling at Castle Airy some truly wondrous tale would have spread from one end of Ozark to the other to explain why I had not favored Castle Smith with a visit, and that was all that was of any present importance. The rest of it could wait till a later time.

I followed them into the Castle, looking forward to my room and a rest and a proper bathroom, and as a show of solidarity I scooped up a random baby from a low bench in the hall under a round window.

When in Clark...

CHAPTER FOUR



Castle Clark did very well by me; a small formal supper for twenty-four interesting couples, and the young man provided for me able to discuss several other subjects besides Mules and the weather, and then a truly impressive breakfast on the Castle balcony with what appeared to be half the county invited, and both a Taleteller and a Ballad Singer laid on. I left happy; dulcimerless, but mighty well fed, and my traveling costume fresh from the attentions of Granny Golightly herself—who I’d wager had not bothered to wash or press it but confined her “work” to a Housekeeping Spell—and I went over the next step in my head as Sterling and I headed out.

Castle Airy sat at the southernmost tip of Oklahomah; like Castle Clark it

overlooked the sea, but there was a great difference between the tender hills of Kingdom Clark's seacoast and the hulking sheer cliffs that Castle Airy sat on. Their lands *had* no beaches; you pulled a boat up into the sucking caves that pitted the lower borders of the looming seacliffs at your own peril. Between the borders of Clark and the lands paced off by Daniel Cantrell Airy the 9th and his five sons in 2127 lay a broad expanse of Wilderness. Technically speaking, it was at least a three-day flight from Castle to Castle, and considering the time involved it was going to be a piece of luck for me that I could by-pass the visit to Castle Smith after all.

I had no intention *whatsoever* of spending three full days—much less four—in the air. According to the maps there was an isolated stretch of thick forest roughly mid-Wilderness; once I got beyond the area where people were likely to be around, I intended to SNAP straight to that spot and spend two of my days in a pleasant contemplation of the Wilderness, some long naps that I was badly in need of, and catching up an account book I had dutifully brought with me having to do with trade in supplies for magic and a good two months out of date. I could then fly in on the third day and join the Airys for supper, with all as it ought to of been,

Nor need I stay at Castle Airy long; they were loyal there. They were as romantic... quaint, to put it frankly... in their loyalty to the Confederation as the Travellers were in their resistance to it. Held a Confederation Day every blessed year on December 12, with speeches and bands and bunting and whatnot, the only one of the Kingdoms to have such an innovation. Stamped the Confederation Seal all over everything, and flew its flag beside the flags of Airy and Ozark at the Castle gate. Any day now I expected them to begin opening souvenir stands or publishing a Confederation *Gazette*.

Why they were like that, it was hard to say; if we knew why any Family developed as it did rather than in some other fashion, *that* would be knowledge. I'd put that a sight higher than any of the scientific discoveries that had earned their originators a Bestowing of land in the past ten years. Or past one hundred, for that matter.

I jumped suddenly as a squawker flew by me, drawing a bray of disgust from Sterling and scaring the squawker into a plunge that I thought for a minute might prove fatal to the ugly thing. It was a male, its blue-and-white-speckled comb rigid with terror and its raucous call twice the volume a female could muster. And I supposed it had lost its eggs, along with its way, or forgotten the difference between up and down, assuming it ever had known it. It surely had no business being two hundred feet up in the air interfering with me and my Mule.

"Never mind the fool thing, Sterling," I said, and soothed her with a sturdy smack to the shoulder. "It's gone now, and if it doesn't kill itself it's headed back to the farm where it belongs."

The Mule snorted, reminding me of Granny Golightly, who I was well pleased to have behind me this fine morning, and I smacked her once more for good measure. What makes a Mule think a whack on the shoulder is a caress is a mystery, but it appears to be the way of it. Or perhaps they are sickened by lovepats, and look on the thumping as some kind of comradely, Muleworthy activity. Mules are the only

creatures on Ozark that are capable of telepathic communication with a Magician but refuse to have anything to do with the process; their position appears to be that we should mind our own business and leave them to mind theirs, and they maintain that *most* effectively. You try mindspeech on a Mule—say to let it know there's a storm ahead and you'd appreciate it taking cover in a hurry—you'll get yourself a headache that'll last you three days. There are, among the Teaching Stories, two or three that have to do with young Magicians looking on this situation as a challenge and trying to *force* a Mule to mindspeech; they're gory, as Teaching Stories go. Myself, I leave the mind of the Mule strictly alone.

I stopped thinking about Mules and thought about landing, which was going to be possible fairly soon. I hadn't seen any sign of habitation now for a considerable time, and on Oklahomah there was mighty little to block your view once you got ten feet above the trees. I took one more look at the map to be sure I had my coordinates straight, waited twenty more minutes for good measure, and SNAPPED, to Sterling's great relief. The less of this formal travel the better, so far as she was concerned, and she didn't need to use her psibilities to make that plain. Her braying didn't become exactly *musical*—that would be overstating the case a tad—but it took on a definite tone of musical *intention*.

The land below us as the air rippled and cleared was so tangled that I pulled back up to give it another good look; I had no desire to land in a bramble thicket or some such. There was nothing down there but forest, big old trees with their branches all twined and knotted in one among the other and their roots humping out of the ground, and I was hard put to it to see a break where we could set down. It would be dark down there, for sure, and not a likely place to run into anybody, give it that. Then I saw the glint of water to my right, a middle-sized creek by the look of it from where I was, and I turned that way. We could head down above the water and make a landing slow to the bank, unless it was thickets all the way to the edge.

I had to try twice before we found a break in the undergrowth—no wonder nor Clarks, nor Smiths, nor Airys had cared to claim any of this stretch. It'd have to have diamonds under it to make it worth fooling with. I finally located a little bend in the creek where it eased back into a kind of tumble of boulders, several of them big enough for a Mule to stand on with a foot or two of space to spare, and I brought Sterling down. Seeing as how I didn't want to slide into the water and ruin my clothes totally, I brought her to a full stop in the air first and then we stepped sedately onto the nearest flat place. She was good, but she couldn't land naturally with *no* room for a run-in.

And then I looked around me, and I was satisfied. There could of been forty people in those woods within ten feet and not one of us would of known the others existed, it was that tangled. Dark! My, but it was dark. We'd come down out of clear skies and a brisk wind and scudding little puffs of cloud, all bright and sparkling; down here it was pure gloom. *Very* satisfactory.

I had a microviewer with me, and six trashy novels on fiche that I couldn't of gotten away with taking time to read at home. I could feel my resolve to work on the

account book fading away at the very look of this place; it was designed by its Creator for a good read if ever I saw a place that was, and the serious stuff could wait. I would settle in here in this back-of-nowhere and indulge myself while the chance lay there begging to be taken.

I pulled the smaller saddlebag off the Mule's back and set it down, careful *it* wouldn't slide, and set myself down beside it. The first step, even before I led Sterling down to drink (provided she waited for me to do that, which was not anything to lay bets on), was to change my clothes. I was just pulling off one of the last of my complicated garments when I got into trouble I hadn't anticipated.

Whatever it was that had slapped me into that cold water had been big, and because I'd had my head covered up in swathes of lace and velvet I hadn't seen or heard or smelled it coming. I hoped I'd given the dratted clothes a hard enough pitch to keep them dry, but not hard enough to throw them into a bramblebush... or I'd be spending my planned period of self-indulgence manifesting a new set just like them, out here in the middle of nowhere, by magic, with nothing but my emergency kit and whatever happened to grow handy for makings.

On the rough principle that what had knocked me into the water was not a water creature itself, since it had been on the bank at the time, I dove for the bottom of the creek. It was murk down there, naturally, no nice clear ocean all pretty with water like a gemstone, but it seemed to be clean water, and flowing, and there were no deepwater weeds in my way to get caught in. And about the time I was congratulating myself on that, I discovered that I'd made a major mistake.

I'd never seen one before, but I recognized the shape of it well enough when I got my eyes open, even through the dark of the water and the stuff I'd stirred up going in. Only one thing on this planet goes with six legs and is the size of the shadow that twisted just ahead of me (I hope), and I was in sizable trouble. The cavecat can climb anything, and it can swim, and it lives to kill; four of the legs are for running, and the other two for slashing and clawing, and the clawing involves eight three-inch razors to every paw. Not to mention its *teeth*, of which it has more than it needs by a goodly number.

There are not supposed to *be* giant cavecats on Oklahomah. Kintucky, maybe, just maybe, though I'd never heard of one showing up there the past thirty years. But the way of things was supposed to be that cavecats had been wiped out everywhere except in the Tinaseeh Wilderness—where I was convinced the Travellers not only didn't try to get rid of them but *encouraged* them, just to keep everybody off. Nevertheless, this was *not* Tinaseeh, nor yet Kintucky, this was placid, long-settled Oklahomah, with its Wilderness not much more than a pocket hanky as Wildernesses go, and that *was* a giant cavecat in the water ahead of me. Right smack dab ahead of me. And I could see how, in this backwood tangle, the Family hunts might of missed a specimen or two.

I didn't know how well they swam, but I knew if it got to me it would drown me, even if it had to surface and just hold me under with its middle legs while it had all the air it wanted or needed. And I needed air badly, myself. The bottom was right

there, and praise the Twelve Corners, it was rocky—I gave myself a hard shove off the cobbly rocks and shot toward the light, with the cat right behind me, and I scrambled out onto the bank and hollered for Sterling.

Mules. If she'd been there, where I'd left her not two minutes before, I might have been able to SNAP out of that particular hard place before the cat made it out of the water. She wasn't there, though, nor anywhere in sight. Gone looking for something edible, probably.

“Sterling, you damn Mule, you, damn your ears and your tail and your bony rump besides!” I shouted, and then I made the very close acquaintance of hundreds of pounds of soaking wet cavecat

It pulled me in with one front paw and held me to its chest, which stank the way you'd expect wet cat to stink and then some, and started off across the rocks on the bank. Almost dainty, the way it picked its footing, and in no hurry at all. Like any cat, it intended to play with me awhile before it made its kill, and no doubt I was an unusual play-pretty for the nasty thing. If there'd been any people around here in a long, long time we would have *known* there were still cavecats on Oklahomah... and I made a note, as it carried me, that when I got back—if I got back—word had to be sent to the three Castles to clear them out.

It's amazing how much time a person has to think in a situation like that. Time stretches itself out in front of you, and everything goes to the slowest of all motions, and we went positively stately over those boulders and under arches of trees and through an assortment of bramble thickets. I was bleeding badly, and I was pretty cross, but I didn't intend to let either interfere with me staying alive. I relaxed, and let just enough blood fall to keep the cavecat's nostrils contented, and sort of cuddled back into its smelly wet embrace. And waited.

The problem was the selection of a suitable countermeasure. Common Sense magic would only get me killed—would of had me dead before this, considering the blood I ought to of been losing. The cavecat obviously did not know how frail the hides of humans were, nor that they could die from the loss of their body fluids before it had a chance to have its fun. Common Sense magic was not enough, nor Granny Magic. The question was, would Hifalutin Magic do it, or did I have to move clear on up to Formalisms & Transformations? (*And* make up your mind quick, Responsible, things may *seem* slow, but this animal is covering the ground at a smart pace and its cave cannot be much farther away!) I needed to be ready the instant it set me down and stretched out to bat me around between its front paws and watch my interesting attempts to get out of its reach—that *instant*.

I decided I was not expendable, and whatever firepower I had I'd best use it at its most potent. There was nobody around to see and wonder at a woman using that level of magic, and if there had been I would not have been in any mood to care. Formalisms & Transformations it would be, and all out—now which one? I was a mite short on equipment.

The cave smelled worse than the cavecat, which I wouldn't of thought possible in advance. Not that it was fouled—no cat does that, whatever its size—but it had lived

there a long time, and it was a tom, and it had marked out all the limits of its territory with great care. It slouched in under a hole in the ground that I doubted I would of spotted as the entrance to anything, and it was suddenly darker than the inside of your head. Not a ray, not a *mote*, of light was there in that cave... I had the feeling it was small; no echoes, no water dripping. Just a hole in the ground, perhaps, and not a *real* cave such as we had flushed these creatures out of long ago on Marktwain. Real enough to die in, however, had I intended to die. Which I didn't.

It stretched out, long and lazy and reeking, and laid me down between its paws. And it stretched *them* out, hairy bladed bars on either side of me like a small cage of swords, and it gave me a gentle preliminary swipe with the right one, and batted me back the other way with the left one, to see me roll and hear me whimper.

The Thirty-third Formalism was suitable, and I used it fast, doing it rather well if I do say so myself. Lacking gailherb, I used a strip of flesh from the inside of my upper arm to guarantee Coreference; lacking any elixir, I used my own blood to mark out the Structural Description and the desired Structural Change. Make do, my Granny Hazelbide always said; and I made do. It smarted. On the other hand, I would of been embarrassed, dying in a place like this at the whim of a creature with five hundred pounds of brawn and maybe four, five ounces of brain. It would not have been fitting.

When the cavecat lay purring quietly, content with the fat white pig it now thought was what it had caught originally (assuming it thought at all), and which I had Substituted for my own skinny white form, I gathered my battered self together and crawled on my stomach back out into what passed in these parts for daylight. I found myself regretting very much that there was no way to do a single Formalism—let alone a Transformation—while being clutched to a cavecat's bosom. Like a Mule landing, I had needed a *little* space, and I'd gotten mighty beat up before it became available. I was going to have a good night's work ahead of me cleaning up all this mess, and maybe longer. I looked like something blown through a door with rusty nails in it, and most assuredly my appearance was not anything that would impress the Airys if they could see me now. Or before tomorrow morning, I rather expected.

"Botheration," I said, and hollered for Sterling one more time. She turned up at once, naturally, now that I didn't need her to save my life, and looked at me with the most Mulish distaste.

"Don't like my smell, do you?" I muttered. I didn't blame her; I didn't like it either. "Let's get back to the water," I said, "and I'll do something about it."

I didn't know the coordinates, or even the general direction, and I was too tired and too weak to SNAP even if I had known them. So I just followed her tail. I could count on her to take me back to where we'd landed, since she wouldn't be enjoying all these brambles and brush any more than I was. I wanted water, and the medicines in my emergency kit, and the denims I'd been about to put on when this adventure—

I stopped short, right there. I stopped, battered as I was, and the elaborateness with which I blistered the air all around me impressed even Sterling; her ears went flat

back against her head.

“And plenty of adventures as you go along! That’s *required!*” she’d said, had dear old Granny Golightly, and I’d ignored her and gone right on talking without so much as an acknowledgment that I’d heard her mention the matter. Nor had I thought of it since. If I hadn’t been so young I’d of thought I was getting old.

This *changed* things.

Sterling brayed at me, and I hushed her.

“Wait a minute now,” I said. “Let me think.”

There were but two possible readings. One, this had been an accident, no more, and my simplest course was to heal my wounds and settle and furbish myself to appear at Castle Airy as if I’d had no hair disturbed on my head since I flew out from Castle Clark. *Two*—this was Granny Golightly’s doing—and she had an amazing confidence in my abilities if it was, or an outright dislike for me— and I should somehow or other contrive to have myself rescued by somebody else... or whatever. Clear things up just enough to stand it, maybe, throw myself over the Mule’s back at the proper time, and straggle into Castle Airy a victim just short of death.

Foof. I didn’t know what to do. From Granny Golightly’s perspective I’d been getting off easy; two Castles stopped at already, and not one adventure to show for my trouble yet—hardly the way that things were supposed to be laid out. Under the terms of the Constraints set on a Quest, its success was directly proportional to the number and the severity of the adventures encountered along the way, and Golightly might well have felt she had a duty to support me more than I might of cared to be supported. And if Granny’s story explaining my by-passing Castle Smith was a cave-cat mauling, and I showed up unmarked and spoiled it—there’d be trouble. But how was I to know?

Until Sterling and I made it out onto the bank of the creek again, me fretting all the way and her whuffing, and there, in the absolute middle of nowhere, naked and alone out on a bare gray boulder, sat a pale blue squawker egg. No nest, no squawker, no coop. No farmer. Just the egg. Granny Golightly was mean, but she wasn’t careless; the question was neatly settled, and a few more points to her. I wondered just how far that one’s range extended?

Well, it was dramatic, I’ll say that for it. There I was at the gates of Airy before the eyes of their greeting party, clinging to Sterling’s mane with one poor little gloved hand, my gorgeous velvets sodden with blood and my hair hanging loose below my waist in a tangle of brambles and weeds and dirt. I chose a spot that looked reasonably soft, pulled up the Mule weakly, moaned about a twenty-two-caliber moan, and slid off gracefully onto the ground at their feet in a bedraggled heap. If I’d been watching, I’m sure my heart would of ached for me.

They carried me into the Castle at full speed, shouting for the Grannys (the Twelve Corners help this poor Family, they had *three* of the five Grannys of Oklahomah under their roof!), and I allowed a faint “a cavecat... a huge one... back

there...” to escape my lips before I surrendered consciousness completely. (Under no circumstances did I intend to undergo the ministrations of three Grannys in any other condition *but* unconsciousness.)

I woke in a high bed in a high room, surrounded by burgundy curtains and hangings and draperies and quilts. The Travellers were addicted to black; with the Airys it was burgundy. And crimson for relief of the eye. There was a plaster on my chest, and another on my right thigh; a bowl of bitter herbs smoked on the wooden chest at the foot of my bed, and the taste in my mouth told me I’d been potioned as well.

I ran my tongue around my teeth, and sighed. Bitter-root and wild adderweed and sawgrass. And wine, of course. Dark red burgundy wine. And something I couldn’t identify and didn’t know that I wanted to. Either none of the Grannys here held with modern notions, or the dominant one didn’t. Phew.

“She’s awake, Mother,” a voice said softly, and I let my eyelids flutter wide and said the obligatory opening lines.

“Where am I? What—what happened to me?”

“You’re in Castle Airy, child,” said a voice—not the same one— “and you’re lucky you’re alive. We would of taken our oaths there were no cavecats left on this continent, but you managed to find one, coming through the Wilderness. Whatever possessed you to *land* in the Wilderness, Responsible of Brightwater? Oklahomah’s got open land in every direction if you needed to stop for a while... why the Wilderness?”

I had expected that one, and I was ready for it. “My Mule got taken sick all of a sudden,” I said. “I hadn’t any choice.”

Time then for some more obligatories.

I struggled to a sitting position, against the hands of the three Grannys who rushed forward in their burgundy shawls to hold me back, and demanded news on the condition of my beloved steed.

“The creature is just fine, child,” said the strongest one, pushing me back into the pillows with no quarter given. “Not a mark on her, the cat was only interested in you. And I’ll thank you not to flop around like a fish on a hook and undo all the work we’ve done repairing the *effects* of its interest!”

I sighed, but I knew my manners. I said a lengthy piece about my gratitude and my appreciation, and swallowed another potion which differed from the earlier one only in being even nastier, and at last I found myself alone with only the three Grannys and the lady of the Castle and my obligations settled for the time being.

The lady was a widow, her husband killed in a boating accident years ago, which was the only reason the Castle had three Grannys. It was in fact a Castle almost entirely of women; every stray aunt or girlcousin on Oklahomah with poor prospects and not enough gumption to go out as a servant came here to shelter under the broad wings of Grannys Forthright, Flyswift, and Heatherknit. And over them all, the

beautiful woman who sat at my side now, smiling down at me, Charity of Guthrie. A three she was, and she lived up to the number; in everything that Charity of Guthrie did, she succeeded, with a kind of careless ease, as if there was nothing to it at all. Her hair fell in two dark brown braids, shot with white, over her shoulders, and her sixty-odd years sat lightly on her as the braids. The Guthrie women wore remarkably well.

“Sweet Responsible,” she said to me, “we are so happy you’re here... and so sorry that your visit has to be like this! We had a dance planned in your honor tonight, and a hunt breakfast tomorrow morning, and a thing or two more besides; but obviously you must stay right here in this bed, and no commotions. I’ve already sent the word out that you’ll be seeing nobody but us, and that only from where you lie. Poor child!”

The poor child was all worn out, and could see that even with an excessive pride in the skill of her Grannys this woman was not likely to believe her recovered from the attack of that cavecat overnight. Loss of blood. Loss of skin. Shock. Blow on the head. Being dragged along. Whatnot.

Since there was no help for it, I gave up and closed my eyes. I was going to see to it, one of these days, that Granny Golightly paid dearly for this delay, not to mention all the arithmetic she’d put me through working this out so that all parts of it came out right *aerodynamically*. Aerodynamicadamnably. Not to mention in addition the potions, which were beyond anything in my personal experience to date.

I slid down into sleep like a snake down a well, surrendering. Tomorrow would be soon enough to try to convince them that someone as young and strong as I was could not be kept down by a cavecat, or even by three Grannys...

CHAPTER FIVE



The women at Castle Airy were anything but docile, and I was no match for them. Under ordinary circumstances I might of had at least a fighting chance, but I was not operating under ordinary circumstances; I was being the badly mauled victim of a cavecat attack, and I lost almost two precious days to that role. I would dearly of loved to make up the lost time on the crossing from Oklahomah to Arkansaw, but it would not do. The sea below me was not an open expanse with a rare bird and a rare rocktip to break it; it was the narrow shipping channel between the two continents, and about as deserted as your average small-town street. All up the Oklahomah coast and all the way across the channel I flew, at the regulation sixty-mile-an-hour airspeed for a Mule of Sterling’s quality. It was proper, it was sedate, and it was maddening; it was a number well chosen, being five times a multiple of twelve, and the members of the Twelve Families found it reassuring and appropriate, but it was *not* convenient.

Below me there were at all times not only the ponderous supply freighters, but a

crowd of fishing boats, tourboats, private recreation vehicles, and government vessels from a dozen different agencies. Near Arkansaw's southernmost coast I even saw a small golden ship with three sails of silver, a craft permitted only to a Magician of Rank.

It didn't surprise me, it warmed my heart, for all it made me have to dawdle through the air. We Ozarkers, from the beginning of our history, even before we left Earth, had always had a kind of lust for getting places by water. If an Ozark child could not afford a boat, that child would set anything afloat that it was strong enough to launch—an old log was a particular favorite, and half a dozen planks nailed together into an unreliable raft marked the traditional first step up from log-piloting.

What *was* in some way surprising was that we had bothered with the Mules; it hadn't been a simple process. When the Twelve Families landed they found the Mules living wild on Marktwain in abundance, but much complicated breeding and fine-tuning had been required before they were brought to a size where a grown man would be willing to straddle one on solid ground, much less *fly* one. And the twelve-passenger tinlizzies we built in the central factory on the edge of Marktwain's desert were more than adequate for getting people over land distances as needed, as well as solving the problem of what to do with the most plentiful natural substance produced by our goats and pigs.

But the memories of Earth, Old Earth, were still strong, and we were a loyal, home-loving people. We hadn't been such fools as to take with us on The Ship the mules of Earth, seeing as how using that limited space for a sterile animal would of been stupid; but every Ozarker had always fancied the elegance of a team of well-trained mules... and the Mules *were* a good deal like them. Especially in the ears, which mattered, and in the brains, which mattered even more.

We had brought with us cattle and goats and pigs and chickens and a few high-class hounds, but of all that carefully chosen lot only the pigs and goats had survived. Most of the other animals had died during the trip, and the few that made it to landing or were born on Ozark soon sickened, for no reason that anyone could understand, since we humans breathed the air of Ozark and ate its food and drank its water with no ill effects. And then to find the Mules! For all that they stood only four feet tall and had tails that dragged the ground, they looked like something of home, and we had set to breeding them for size, and we braided and looped their tails. And "discovered" that they could fly sixty miles an hour. In the one most essential way of all they differed from their Earth counterparts—they were not sterile.

The people on the boats below me waved, and I waved back, as I wound my way carefully above them, doing my best not to fly directly over any vessel. Sterling was well trained, but there were limits to her tolerance for the niceties, and I wanted no unsavory accidents to spoil the image I was trying so hard to establish.

It was well into afternoon when I began to head down toward the docks that crowded Arkansaw's southeastern coastline, and there was a chill in the air that made me appreciate my layers of clothing. The docks were crowded, almost

jammed with people, some carrying on their ordinary daily business, and some no doubt there to gawk at me, and I decided that a landing would only mean another delay that I could not afford. I chose the largest group of people I could see that appeared to have no obvious reason for being on the docks, and dipped low over them, gripping Sterling hard to impress her with the importance of good behavior. My intention was to fly low enough—but not too low—exchange cheerful greetings in passing as I flew by, and then get on with it. It was a simple enough maneuver, something that could be brought off by a middling quality Rent-a-Mule with a seven-year-old child on its back. I didn't want the people down there to think me uppity and standoffish, nor did I want to waste time, so I chose my moment and sailed gracefully down the air toward the waiting Arkansawyers—

And crashed.

Three Castles I'd visited now, without the slightest hint of that disturbance of flight that had made me suspicious in the first place. And now—not over a Wilderness where nothing could suffer but my stomach, not over a stretch of open ocean with the occasional freighter, but twenty feet up from a dockful of sight-seeing women and children—my Mule suddenly wobbled in the air like a squawker chick and smashed into the side of a storage shed on the edge of the dock. The last thought I had as I flew, quite independently, off her back, was that at least we hadn't hurt anybody, though from the screams you'd of thought them all seriously damaged. And then my head and a roof beam made sudden contact, and I stopped thinking about anything at all.

When I woke up, I knew where I was. No mistake about it. The Guthrie crest was carved into the foot of the bed I lay on, it hung on the wall of the room beyond the bed, little ones dangled from the curving brackets that held the lamps, and it was set in every one of the tiles that bordered the three big windows. Furthermore, the woman sitting bolt upright in a hard wooden chair at my right hand, where turning my head to look at her would put me nose-to-shoulder with an embroidered Guthrie crest, not to mention more clouds of Guthrie hair, was no Granny. It was my maternal grandmother, Myrrh of Guthrie, and I was assuredly under her roof and in her Castle.

They had taken off my boots and spurs, but my clothing showed no sign whatsoever of a trip through the air into the side of a dock shed, nor did my body. I wasn't likely to forget the thwack I'd hit that shed with, but I hadn't so much as a headache, nor a scratch on my lily white hand. Being as this was somewhat unlikely, I looked around for the Magician of Rank that had to be at the bottom of it

“Greetings, Responsible of Brightwater,” he said, and I was filled with a sudden new respect for those who found my mother's physical configurations distracting. He had chocolate curls, and the flawless Guthrie skin and green eyes, and the curve of his lips made me think improper thoughts I hadn't known lurked in me. He was tall, and broad of shoulder, slim of waist and hip... and then there was the usual garb of his profession to be put in some kind of perspective. A Magician of Rank wears a pair of tight-fitting trousers over bare feet and sandals, and a square-cut tunic with

full sleeves caught tight at the wrists, and a high-collared cape that flows in a sweep from his throat to one inch of the floor, thrown back in elegant folds over one shoulder to leave an arm free for ritual gestures. There'd never been a man that getup wasn't becoming to, and the fact that it was all in the Guthrie tricolor—deep blue, gold, and forest green—was certainly no disadvantage.

I shut my eyes hastily, as a measure of simple prudence; and he immediately checked my pulse, combining this medicinal gesture with a thoroughly nonmedical tracking of one strong finger along the most sensitive nerves of my wrist and inner arm. It was my intention not to shiver, but I lacked the necessary experience; and I was glad I could not see the satisfied curl of those lips as he got precisely the response that he was after.

“Responsible of Brightwater, open your eyes,” he said, in a voice all silk and deep water, “and swoon me no fabricated swoons. You had a nasty knock on your head, you broke a collarbone and three ribs, and you were bruised, scratched, abraded, and generally grubby from head to foot—but you, *and* I might add, your fancy Mule, are in certified perfect condition at this moment. Every smallest part of you, I give you my word. That was the point of calling me, my girl, instead of a Granny.”

“Confident, aren't you?” I said as coldly as possible, repossessing myself of my arm, and Myrrh of Guthrie remarked as how I reminded her very much of my sister, Troublesome.

“Neither one of you ever had any manners *whatsoever*,” she said, “and my daughter deserves every bit of trouble the two of you have given her... bringing you up half wild and about one-third baked.”

I took the bait, it being a good deal safer to look at her than at him, and I opened my eyes as ordered.

“Hello, Grandmother,” I said. “How nice to see you.”

“*On the contrary!*” she said. “Nothing nice about it. It's a disaster, and I'm pretty sure you know that. The young man on your left, the one you're avoiding because you can't resist him—and don't concern yourself about it, *nobody* can, and very useful he is, too—is your own kin, Michael Stepforth Guthrie the 11th. You be decent enough to greet him, instead of wasting it on me, and I'll guarantee you safe conduct past his wicked eyes and sorrier ways.”

There was only one way to handle this kind of scene; some others might of been more enjoyable, but they wouldn't have been suitable. I sat up in the Guthrie bed, propped on my pillows, put a hand on each of my hips right through the bedclothes, gritted my teeth against the inevitable effect, and I looked Michael Stepforth Guthrie up and down... slowly... and then down and up, and then I looked him over once more in both directions.

“Twelve roses,” I said, “twelve sugarpies, and twelve turtles! You are for *sure* the comeliest man ever my eyes have had the pleasure to behold, Mr. Guthrie. Your buttocks, just for starters, are superb... and the line of your thigh! Law, cousin, you

make my mouth water, on my word... turn around once, would you, and let me see the swing of your cape!”

Not a sound behind me from Myrrh of Guthrie; and I didn't glance at her, though I would of loved to see her face. Michael Stepforth's eyes lost their mocking laughter and became the iced green I was more accustomed to see in Guthrie eyes. I faced the ice, smiling, and there was a sudden soft snapping sound in the nervous silence. One rib, low on my right side.

“Petty,” I said, and found the pain a useful distraction, since not breathing was out of the question. “Cousin, that was *petty*.”

The next two ribs sounded just like an elderly uncle I'd once visited that had a habit of cracking his knuckles, and breathing became even more unhandy.

“See where bad manners will get you?” observed Myrrh of Guthrie. “And as for *buttocks*—at fourteen a woman does not mention them, though I must agree with your estimate of Michael's. Who will now leave us alone, thank you kindly.”

I didn't watch him sweep out of the room. His mischief had immunized me temporarily against his charm; you don't feel the pangs of desire through the pangs of broken ribs.

“Uncomfortable, are you?” said my grandmother, but she had the decency to move to the end of the bed where I wouldn't have to move around much to look at her while we talked.

“I wouldn't have him on my staff,” I said crossly, hugging my ribs.

“He's an *excellent* Magician of Rank,” she said. “Such quality doesn't grow on every bush, and I've need of him.”

“And if he takes to breaking *your* ribs, Grandmother?”

She chuckled. “The man has principles,” she said. “Infants and old ladies... and anyone he considers *genuinely* stupid, I believe... are safe from his tantrums. And do *not* ask me which of the three categories I have my immunity under, or I'll call him back.”

I sniffed, and gasped at the result; the breaks would be neat, and simple, but they were a three-pronged fire in my side. And what can't be cured for the moment must be endured for the moment.

“Grandmother,” I said, “while we're on the subject of manners, would you care to explain why my visit has to be called a ‘disaster’? That strikes me as mighty sorry hospitality. Castle Guthrie wealthy as sin from the shipping revenues, *and* the peachapple orchards, *and* your share of the mines in the Wilderness. You telling me you can't afford to put up one girlchild for twenty-four hours?”

“It's the twenty-four hours that we can't afford,” she said, and she sounded like she meant it. “This is not one of your la-di-da city Castles, we're *busy* here. Right now we're so busy—I want you gone within the hour, young lady. With your ribs set right, of course.”

“Not possible,” I said firmly.

“Responsible,” she said, “you exasperate me!”

“Myrrh of Guthrie,” I said back, “you bewilder *me*. Here I lie, your own daughter’s daughter, three ribs broken by your own Magician of Rank, not to mention whoever or whatever was responsible for that encounter my Mule and I had with the architecture that graces your docks—”

“That was not the work of Michael Stepforth Guthrie!”

“And how do you know *that*?”

Her lips narrowed, and she turned a single golden ring round and round on her left hand. Her wedding ring, plain except for the ever-present crest.

“I am not entirely ignorant,” she said, which I knew to be true, “and though he’s skilled he’s like any other young man, a regular pane of glass. I know what he was doing at the time of your undignified arrival.”

“If he’s as skilled as you say, he’s equally skilled at pretending to a transparency that’s convenient for his purposes. Who trained him?”

“His father. And a Magician whose name you’ll know... Crimson of Airy.”

Crimson of Airy... now there was a name. It was a concoction absolutely typical of Castle Airy, and in dreadful taste, but she had lived up to it. She was a *one*, and she had everything that went with being a one, and of the five women to become Magicians on Ozark in the thousand years since First Landing, only Crimson of Airy had made any mark. If it hadn’t been forbidden, she’d have been a Magician of Rank herself, no question; and I knew her reputation. That of the father of Michael Stepforth Guthrie I didn’t know, but my never hearing of him—plus the fact that he’d allowed a woman to meddle in his son’s education for the profession—told me all I needed to know.

Myrrh of Guthrie leaned toward me and I burrowed into my pillows hastily, for it looked to me as if she was going to grab my shoulders and shake me, broken ribs and all. But she caught herself.

“I know what you’re thinking,” she said. “You’re thinking that it’s our Michael Stepforth that’s been souring your milk and kidnapping babies and making your Mules giddy, purely because he’d be able. I’ll grant you he’s that good, I won’t deny it—but he’s been far too busy here to be involved.”

“Too busy for such piddly stuff as souring milk? And sending some trash into a church after one little baby, with the Spell already set?” It’s not that easy to scoff with three broken ribs, but I scoffed. “Dear Grandmother,” I said, “with every word you speak you undo three others. Either the man’s a bumbler and an egotistical fraud—which I’ll not accept, not if Crimson of Airy taught him his tricks, and very lucky we are that *she’s* dead at last!—or he is more than clever enough to tend to whatever brews here at Castle Guthrie and carry on all that other mischief with one of his long clever fingers, just on the side! And the *latter*, Myrrh of Guthrie, the *latter* is the truth of it!”

“You say that only because you don’t *know* what’s brewing here!” she hissed at me. “It’s been weeks, if not months, since he’s had more than snatches of sleep... the Parsons are at our backs and at our throats, the Purdys are determined to ruin us all and have ignorance and black luck enough to do it, and you come here, *now*, at a time like this!”

“Grandmother!” I lay back, easy, and realized that I was a rattled young woman and that the pain was fast getting to me. “Grandmother, *what* are you talking about? I agree that the Purdys make bad neighbors; very well. Granted. They seem forever determined to win whatever foolishness awards are going round. But the only ruin the Purdys will bring is ruin to themselves, and the Farsons have their own Kingdom to run.”

“You’re ignorant,” she said flatly. “Plain ignorant!”

It was possible, I was beginning to realize, that I was. I had more than a strong suspicion that I had been *deliberately* ignorant... and I would of given a large sum for the intelligence reports that lay in my desk back at Brightwater. I had read them, I would never have *not* read them, but had I perhaps been reading them with a selecting eye for what I preferred to find there, and ignoring patterns that would have required some effort?

My grandmother stood up suddenly, hurting me as she jarred the bed and well aware that she hurt me.

“I want you up,” she said, “since you won’t leave. Up and able-bodied. If you insist on meddling in our affairs because Brightwater can’t manage its own, then I intend you to hear just what it is you’re meddling *in*! You lie there, and I’ll send Michael Stepforth —oh, hush your mouth, he’ll do what needs doing on orders from me, and no nonsense out of him!—and an Attendant will be here in one hour to bring you down to the Hall. Where we’ll tell you what you’ve gone and blundered into!”

“I know my way, Grandmother,” I reminded her mildly. “I’ve been here before.”

“An Attendant will come for you,” she said again. “I’ll hear no more of our lack of hospitality out of you, or from anyone else. And a Reception and Dance in your honor this evening, missy, as befits a Castle rolling in its wealth!”

My grandmother was furious, that was quite clear without her slamming the door behind her and making all the crests hanging about rattle on their hooks. I hadn’t expected warmth here, but this exceeded my expectations; I was amazed. And where was her husband, her own sixth cousin with the utterly prosaic name and the utterly prosaic manner? The most boring of all the Guthries? Ordinarily he would at least have been mentioned, if not present for our little altercation... where was James John Guthrie the 17th in the midst of my welcome?

“A man’s name is chosen for euphony,” I said aloud, “and James John Guthrie is not euphonious. It sounds like three rocks landing on a pavement, and the third one bouncing.”

Whereupon something replied, after a fashion. Considering what I had said,

“Shame, shame, shame, you wicked chiiiiiiild!” did not really follow.

I topped it.

“Three times six is eighteen,” I told the thing, and then there were eighteen of them, and I was glad I hadn’t decided to say nine times nine.

“Really!”

“Shame, shame, shame, you wicked chiiiiiiiiiild!” they all said in chorus. Eighteen giant seagulls, four feet tall and a wingspread to match, standing round my bed flopping those wings and ordering me in perfect harmony to be ashamed of my wickedness.

If they’d been real I’d have turned all eighteen into fleas and deposited them neatly in the high collar of Michael Stepforth’s cape, perhaps, but I was far too miserable to waste my time working Transformations on fakes. I closed my eyes instead and let the pseudobirds do their chant while I tried hard not to breathe, and after ten, eleven repetitions their creator finally appeared in my doorway—not bothering to knock—and came striding in, walking through one of his birds to reach my side.

“Look up, please,” he said crisply.

“Why? To view your little flock? No, thank you. I don’t care for squawkers.”

“Seagulls.”

“They look like squawkers to me,” I said. “Might could be your Spells are faulty.”

(I *wished!* I tried to imagine a faulty Spell worked up by Crimson of Airy, and found the thought ridiculous.)

“You look up here or I’ll put all the gulls in bed with you,” he said placidly. “And you wouldn’t like that; they’re awfully dirty.”

It was a pain as bad as the pain in my ribs to have to put up with his sass; on the other hand, I wasn’t about to give in to the temptation to do magic beyond my permitted level under this one’s nose. Much as some old-fashioned staple along the lines of turning him into a reptile would have done me good, much as I longed for the tiny satisfaction of maybe just snapping one of his perfect fingerbones, I was not that foolish. Even if I could have managed something like that with all my supplies packed away in a wardrobe and three of my ribs broken, there was no sense to giving him any further smallest advantage. I lay still, and I looked up.

Hmmmm. Structural Description... Structural Change... Coreferential Indexes. All properly formal and not a fingertip out of place. The double-barred arrow appeared in the air, glowing gold, quivering slightly, and the pain faded away as the arrow did. Perhaps ninety seconds total time. I was impressed. It always takes longer to undo things than to do them, and more formal operations are required. He was as good as my grandmother said he was. I grinned at him.

“Ask me no fool questions,” he said grimly, “and don’t offer me any more of

your uncalled-for and unappreciated assessments of my person. Just thank me, please, and show you have *some* breeding.”

“Thank you kindly, Magician of Rank Michael Stepforth Guthrie the 11th,” I said promptly. “You are certainly handy at your work, and I intend to mention it everywhere I go.” And I batted my lashes at him, and crossed my hands over my breasts.

“Your Attendant will be along soon,” he said, looking clear over my head and out the window, “and you are now in perfect condition. And leave off your spurs, you’ll mark up the stairs. We’re waiting for you—patiently—down in the small Hall.”

“And your bill? For services rendered, Michael Stepforth?”

“Courtesy of the house,” he said. “No charge.” He raised both his hands in the mock-magic gesture of the stage magician, fanning his fingers open and shut and open again. And then he turned on his heel and swept out of the room, the cape swirling about him. And the gulls made a soft little noise and disappeared.

I thanked the Attendant and walked into the Hall, where I had spent a number of reasonably pleasant Hallow Evens and Midsummer Days over the years. There had been children then, and costumes and candy, and cakes and beer and an atmosphere of frolic. There was none of that today.

They sat in high-backed chairs about a table at the far end of the room, filling a windowed corner through which I could see the sun going down. Myrrh of Guthrie. The previously absent James John, looking ruffled. Michael Stepforth Guthrie. Two unmarried sons in their late teens, whose names I did not remember. And one Granny, whose name I *did* know. Whatever else I might neglect, I did not neglect the Grannys; I had a file on every one of them, and I knew it by heart, and they didn’t gather an Ozark weed that I didn’t know it. This one was a harmless old soul, name of Granny Stillmeadow, that specialized in liniments and party Charms, and I chose the chair next to hers and let her pat my knee.

Supper appeared the minute I took my place, and by the time I’d been introduced to the two boys it had been served and we were well into it. And if Myrrh of Guthrie was serious about the Reception and Dance scheduled for that same evening there was surely no time to fool about. I didn’t recognize the beast that I was eating, but I recognized it for a beast, and I knew both the vegetables. And I was sure they wouldn’t poison me in front of the servants, so I fell to. And I listened.

Castle Farson, it appeared, had been sending bands of traders across the Wilderness to the Guthrie docks, and offering higher bids for supplies than those authorized to the Guthrie personnel. The Guthries were willing to allow that that might have been due to an unfortunate incident in which a charge set by a Guthrie mining crew had caved in a gem mine on the very edge of Kingdom Farson. However, it seemed that although the mine was in Wilderness Lands and therefore technically common property, the Farsons felt that the Guthries were demanding more than their share of the profits from the mine, which meant their miners might just conceivably have been harassing the Guthrie miners who *set* the charge. (What

the Purdys had been doing through all this, and whether they'd been getting any of *their* legitimate share of the profits, was not mentioned.) But it did come up that a Purdy had managed to get himself killed—according to both the Guthries and the Parsons, it was deliberate, which I found it hard to believe, even for the Purdys—in a spectacularly disgusting way. (Granny Stillmeadow was of the opinion that only a Magician of Rank could of arranged it, considering the curious shape the body had assumed before it was found.) And this getting killed had happened in the Farson Castle Hall, while the Guthries were there protesting the latest iniquity perpetrated by the Farsons, and a Farson Granny had cried “Privilege!” and they'd had to call a three-Kingdom hearing, which by law had to be held on common ground in the Wilderness, and was still going on, and that was costing an arm and a leg and another arm. And a Purdy spy had hacked her ridiculous way through the Wilderness to tell the Guthries that the Farsons were stealing them all blind by working another gem mine on the Purdy's southern border, tunneling from its Wilderness entrance clear under the Guthrie lands—which was something the Guthries already knew—but, since the poor thing had ruined herself for life scabbling around on foot through the underbrush and whatnot and getting lost over and over to bring information that she had *thought* would prove the Purdy loyalty to the Guthries, and since she claimed to have been assaulted by a farmer in a ditch along the way (which the farmer denied, but the Granny was of the opinion he was at least bending the truth, if not breaking it), it made it a debt of honor for Castle Guthrie to avenge when the fool woman fell into a well and drowned herself—

That did it. That *did* it! To think that *these* were three of the Kingdoms staunchly claiming that they should be left to manage their own affairs! It beat all, and some left over!

“Wait!” I shouted. “Just *stop!*”

They all put down their silverware and stared at me, and the Granny clucked her tongue.

“You interrupted, child,” she said. “Ill-bred of you. *Ill*-bred!”

I whistled long and low, and pushed my plate away from me.

“What *was* that?” I asked. “The roast, I mean.”

“Stibble,” said James John Guthrie, whose absence was now well explained. He would be very busy indeed with all *this* going on.

“Stibble?”

“Something like a pig and something like an Old Earth rabbit.”

“I don't believe it.”

“Nevertheless. Granny there named it for us.”

“How big?”

He made a measure in the air. Two feet, roughly, and about so high.

“Did you like it?” he asked.

“Yes, I did,” I said. “I just wanted a name for it.”

“It’s new,” said James John. “Our Ecologist developed it... oh, about a year and a half ago. A little bit of this, a little bit of that.”

“And made no mention of it?”

He raised his eyebrows and speared another bite of stibble roast

“You folks going hungry on Brightwater?” he asked me innocently. “Famine on Marktwain, is there? Starving populations on Oklahomah?”

He knew very well that the law said we all shared. If the Guthrie Ecologist had found a reliable new foodsource, the announcement—and all details—was supposed to go out to all the Twelve Castles, share and share alike. But I let it pass.

“There is no way,” I said, “that I can remember all of this hooah about you Guthries and Parsons and Purdys.”

“Poor things,” said Granny Stillmeadow. “The Purdys, I mean.”

“And no reason why you should remember,” said Myrrh of Guthrie like a scythe falling. “I don’t recall asking you for help. I don’t recall sending any dispatches demanding rescue, and we can handle it ourselves, thank you very much. If *you’ll* just stay home.”

“The *wickedness* of those Parsons,” bellowed James John Guthrie, “and the *ineptitude*, I might say the stupidity, of those Purdys, defies belief, and brings a decent man to—”

“Talk too much,” pronounced Granny Stillmeadow. “Shut your face, James John Guthrie, the young woman’s been told it’s not her concern.”

Well! So she could granny when it was needful after all! I patted her knee.

“Granny Stillmeadow,” he said doggedly, “you have not heard what those people did today. I am here to tell you—”

Granny Stillmeadow, and Myrrh of Guthrie, and I myself fixed him with chilly stares, and Michael Stepforth cleared his throat ominously, and both the sons looked down at their plates, and the man gave it up, his voice trailing off while the servingmaids came forward and took away all evidence of the stibble roast, and the two vegetables, and the bread and butter and gravy and salt and coffee.

“No dessert,” said Myrrh of Guthrie, “because of the Reception and the Dance.”

One of the young women looked up at that and offered that there was a bread pudding ready in the Castle kitchen if her lady wanted it, and no trouble at all, but Myrrh waved her away.

“You do *see*,” she said to me, “why I told you we hadn’t time right now to play games with you?”

No, as a matter of actual fact, I did not see. I’d never heard such a tangle of nonsensical tales in all my life, and I couldn’t imagine how any group of supposedly competent grown-up people had allowed things to reach such a pass. However, I

now had a certain feeling of conviction about one thing—whatever was going on here on Arkansaw, it was keeping the Guthries so busy they had little time to even think about the Jubilee, much less plot against it. That didn't mean I didn't have my guard up, not with that canny Magician of Rank sitting there to remind me. The Guthries could of put all this together as one gigantic distraction, in the hope that I'd feel obliged to stay on and try to settle it, for instance; that would of been perfectly plausible. I didn't *think* so. It all had the ring of truth, however ridiculous; but I wasn't putting it entirely out of my mind. But I was reassured a good deal by the number of lies I'd been told in the space of one brief hour... well, call them distortions, lies may be too strong a word... and the lack of craft behind them. The Farsons were feuding with the Guthries; and the Guthries were feuding with the Farsons; and the Purdys were caught in the middle trying to play both sides. That much was obvious. The rest of it I wouldn't give two cents for.

It might be I'd have to do some serious digging before I left Arkansaw, and for sure I'd have to keep a wary eye and ear from here on out on Michael Stepforth Guthrie, but I needn't waste time at Castle Guthrie. Reception. Dance. A little breakfast. And on to Farson.

It wasn't going to be a pleasant night, of course; the Magician of Rank would see to that, hoping to provoke me to some indiscretion he could use later on, and wanting his own back for my shaming him before the Missus of the Castle that afternoon. I could count on lizards in my bed, and sheets that *felt* like bread pudding, and bangs and thumps and clanks, and mysterious flames dancing in the corners, and probably—no, for sure—the whole room rocking and swaying all night like a small boat in a high wind. I might sleep through some of it, and then I might not. Depending on how ingenious he was. And how spiteful.

I looked at him, and he looked back at me slow and steady, that beautiful mouth curling and the lashes half-lowered over the sea-green eyes. I felt my own traitor lips part, and I firmed them tight, and I saw the devil dance behind those lashes.

I was learning; my sympathy for my mother's victims increased.

CHAPTER SIX



Responsible of Brightwater,” said the Attendant, in that dead voice that seemed to have been droning on for hours and hours. I gripped my glass, leaned on the table, and shook this latest hand; it belonged, said the Attendant, to one Marycharlotte of Wommack, wife of Jordan Sanderleigh Parson the 23rd. I didn't even bother to add up the letters and see what number “marycharlotte” came to, which was some index of my exhaustion; she could be any number she chose, including the horrible four, she could be a one like Crimson of Airy and a threat to my life and the Kingdom of Brightwater... I no longer cared.

I stood in the line with the Attendant at my side, and the people filed past and

were introduced by couples, or one at a time, and I had begun to suspect that they were recirculating that line; it trailed out the Hall door and dissolved into a milling crowd of faces and names I'd long since lost all track of. If a single face had come around twice, or three times for that matter, I doubt I'd have been able to spot it—by now they all looked just alike to me.

I was very nearly out on my feet, and the wine the Castle staff kept pouring into my glass was no great help. White wine I might have replaced with water and gotten away with, but not red; nothing else liquid on Ozark is that color, except blood, and a glass of blood in my hand would of made a mighty poor impression.

Michael Stepforth Guthrie had had some innovations to offer on magical harassment in the guestchamber that had outdistanced even my broadest expectations, and before long I'd settled down to taking notes on his effects, since it was clear I wasn't going to get any sleep. I'd been grateful for my virginity before it was all over, since that had limited his legal span of effects some, but nonetheless—when I'd given up all hope at dawn and staggered out of my bed I'd been in sorry shape. And then there'd been the requisite eighteen hours of flight to Castle Parson, which I'd had to do every one of its minutes in plainstyle—no SNAPPING. So far as I'd been able to tell, the whole continent of Arkansaw was innocent of empty areas, even in the Wilderness Lands; Sterling and I had looked down on a constant scurry of activity beneath us the whole time, and had been promptly greeted by Arkansawyers of one kind or another each time we landed for a brief rest stop.

And the Parsons themselves were terrifyingly efficient. Met me at the door, fed me and wined me, saw me to a room to change my bib and my tucker, saw me back down to the Hall for this party, which was clearly intended to fill all the remainder of this evening, and *no* discussion. Not a word. “Welcome, Responsible of Brightwater, pleasant to see you.”

“Beg your pardon, Responsible, but you've caught us at a right busy time, we'll just have to make do.”

“Step this way, please, miss.”

“Notice the view from that window, child, it's much admired.”

“Fine evening, isn't it?” And on and on.

I could tell from the clustered packs of guests around the Hall and the scraps of their talk that floated my way that it was much the same stuff the Guthries had been talking. Perfidy, wickedness, and ineptitude; the ghastly Guthries and the pitiful Purdys. But no one brought any of it to *my* ears—we remarked on my costume, and how pretty it was; and on my Mule, and how handsome *she* was; and on the weather, and how fine *it* was; and the party, and how pleasant *that* was. No more.

I'd made a few early stabs at talking of the Jubilee, and had learned immediately that the Parsons were either far more subtle than the Guthries, or else under some sort of orders regarding the topics of their converse. “You'll be at the Jubilee in May, no doubt?” (That was me, all charm.) “May is a *fine* month, we always enjoy

May!” (That was whoever, moving on down the line toward the punchbowl, smiling.) I got flustered, and then I got mad, and then I got grim; and as the evening went on I reached a cold plateau of determination that floated on my second wind and a very good head for wine. I stopped asking, which got me no information, but at least deprived them of the satisfaction of ignoring my questions.

More hands. Something something of Smith, wife of something something the 46th. Accompanied by himself, the something some-thingth. My teeth ached from smiling, my behind ached from riding, and my spirit ached from boredom, and it went on and on.

“There,” said the Attendant. A variation.

“There?”

“That’s the last of them, Miss Responsible.”

“You’re sure?”

“I am,” he said. “That’s all, and I can’t say I’m sorry.”

I looked, and it did appear that there were no more people lined up to my right with their hands all ready to be shaken by the guest of honor, Responsible of Brightwater. And a good thing, too; the Farson Ballroom was huge, but it was straining at the seams. I’d have said there were four hundred people there; surely I had not shaken *four hundred hands*?

I set down my glass on the table, careful not to snap its stem for spite, and gathered up my elaborate blue-and-silver skirts.

“Give my compliments to your Missus and my host,” I told him, “and tell them I’ll be down to breakfast in the morning. Early.”

He raised his eyebrows, but it was not his place to question my behavior, and I surely didn’t give a thirteen what he thought of it. If he thought I was going to fight my way through this roomful of sweating phony smilers to find the Farsons, if he thought I was going to *thank* them for their bold as brass campaign to wear me right down to a nub, he could think twice more. Manners be damned, I was going to my bed.

I showed him my back and went out the closest door, into the corridor that led to the stairs toward my room. But I was being watched; another Attendant appeared at my side the instant I reached the door, carrying a bowl of fruit, a tray of bread and butter, and a tall decanter of that accursed Farson wine.

“This way, miss,” he said, and he led on politely, looking back now and then as we wound up stairs and down corridors, down stairs and through tunnels, round turrets with more stairs and across echoing rooms lined with the family portraits of generations of Farsons, until we came at last to a door I had seen before and knew full well could have been reached by a direct route taking maybe six minutes flat.

“Your room, miss,” he said, opening the door to let me pass.

“Thank you for the grand tour, Attendant,” I said through my teeth, and he

bobbed his head a fraction.

“No trouble at all, miss. No trouble at all; I had to come this way anyhow.”

And then he set the food and drink down on a table and left me, blessedly, alone.

I was so angry that I was shaking, and so tired that I was long past being sleepy. The second was a point in my favor, as I had work to do, but the first wouldn't serve. You can't do magic, at whatever level, when you're in a state of blind rage. (Well, you can, but you risk some effects you aren't counting on and that may not exactly fit into your plans.)

I threw myself out flat on the narrow elegant guest bed, kicking off only my shoes, and whistled twenty-four verses of “Again, Amazing Grace.” No way to tell which was which, since I was only whistling; but I kept count by picking one berry from the fruit bowl for every verse I finished, and setting them out on my lap in sixes till I had four sets. By that time I was a tad hyperventilated, but I was no longer furious; I had in fact reached a stage of grudging admiration.

After all, the Farsons had given me nothing tangible to complain of. I'd been properly met, a full complement of Attendants in red and gold and silver livery at my beck and call, I'd been dined and wined to a fare-thee-well. I'd had a servant at my elbow every instant, and often half a dozen. I'd been guest of honor at the biggest party I ever remembered seeing, and formally introduced to who knew how many scores of distinguished citizens of Kingdom Farson, and all their kith and kin. And now here I lay in state in one of their best guestchambers, and it had been *my* choice that I'd not stayed below in the Ballroom to receive whatever honor had been next on their list for me.

Thinking about it, staring up at the vaulted ceiling high above my head, I chuckled; it had been done slick as satin, and I had not one piece of information to show for all those hours—nor one legitimate complaint. Well done, well done for sure.

I got up then and went into the bathroom, where I was pleased to see that the facilities were not marred by any nostalgic antiquation, and made myself ready for the night

Three baths, first. One with hot water, and one with cold, and one with the proper crushed herbs from my pack. Then my fine white gown of softest lawn, sewn by my own hands; I pulled it nine times through a golden finger ring, and examined it carefully—not a wrinkle, it was ready to put on. My feet bare, and a black velvet ribbon round my neck; my hair in a single braid, and I thought that would do. I had nothing really fancy planned for this night, just a kind of easy casting about for wickedness, if wickedness was to be found here. I didn't expect any; for all their sophistication in handling one lone inquisitive female, this Family was just as taken up with the continental feud as the Guthries had been. I was just checking.

I set wards, Ozark garlic and well-preserved Old Earth lilac, at every door and window, laying the wreaths so anyone passing would be certain I slept no matter what went on. I didn't bother warding against Magicians, just ordinary folk and a

possible inquisitive Granny; if the Parsons cared to send a Magician, or better yet a Magician of Rank, to check on me, I wanted *that* person to come right on in. I'd be saved hours of Spells and Charms that way, and I had nothing in mind for the night that was forbidden to a woman.

I set two Spells, Granny Magic both of them, and the leaves in the bottom of my little teacup formed unexciting figures both times. I didn't need the bird to tell *me* there was travel in my future, not with all of Kintucky and Tinaseeh still ahead of me; and I didn't need the fine hat that formed high on the right side near the rim to let me know diplomacy was indicated.

And then I moved up a tiny notch, with the idea of making assurance doubly sure, and ran a few Syllables.

I said:

ALE.

BALSAM.

CHERRYSTONE.

DEVIL IN DUNG.

EMBLEM IN AN EGG.

FOGFALL IN THE FOREST.

EGGSHELL IN AN EEL.

DUNG ON DEWDROPS.

COBBLESTONE.

BOWER.

ALE.

Now that's a simple bit, you'll agree. Your average Granny might not be quite so free with dung, but I saw no flaw in it all; and I cast my gold chain on the bed where I was kneeling at my work, fully expecting to see it fall in yet one more reassuring shape, after which I would call it a night and get some well-deserved sleep.

Then I took a look at what I'd got, and backed off to give it room, and backed off some more, and remembered Granny Golightly. What *was* that old woman's range, anyway? Her and her plenty of adventures required...

It loved me, that was clear. It licked my face, and it licked the velvet ribbon round my neck, and it slobbered down both the front and the back of my gown with pure affectionate delight, and rolled over on the Parsons' good counterpane to have its stomach scratched, and even flat on its back it kept on licking every part of me it could reach.

This the wards would never hold for, especially if it began to hum to me, which was likely if it got any happier. I scrambled off the bed, with it after me anxiously, licking and snuffling and falling over things at my heels, and I doubled the garlic and hung a ring of it on the doorknob. For good measure I took my shammybag of white

sand and laid out a pentacle at the door, with the door itself serving as one of the five sides. Only then did I pause, doing it in the middle of the pentacle just to be extra safe, whereupon it knocked me over and devoted its tiny mind and heart and its enormous tongue to licking me *absolutely clean*.

It was called a Yallerhound, though it was nearer brown than yellow, and only by the most strained courtesy a hound. Like the giant cavecats, it had six legs; like the Mules, its tail dragged the ground; unlike the Mules, so did its ears and its body hair. It was seven feet long, not counting the tail, and about five feet high, and its aim in life was to love people and keep them *clean*. It had a purple tongue the size of a hand towel, from the eager attentions of which I was already soaking wet from head to foot. And it now had decided that my hair wasn't clean enough, and would probably drown me before it was satisfied about *that*.

I couldn't help myself, this was too much, and made twice as awful because it would of won me no sympathy from anybody—some part of me, somewhere inside, could still see that it was funny. But most of me was at the end of all its ropes. I lay down in the middle of the pentacle, making sure no part of me lopped over any borders, curled up in a ball to protect as much of me as possible from the damned Yallerhound, and I bawled and cried and carried on till I was limp. The poor stupid creature cried with me, keening high and thin.

When I woke up it was a quarter after two, and I was ashamed of myself. Women, after all, are expected to *cope*. There I lay, decked out all ladylike and delicate for magic, as was proper; and there *it* lay, curled round me and humming a tune in that thin little voice that went so badly with its size and made it obvious that the creature was mostly hair. And both of us soggy in a puddle of Yallerhound lick—and the sticky tears of two species. It was enough to rouse the last word I remembered being spanked for using—it was enough to make a person say “puke.” Ugh.

I felt better for the sleep, however, and whatever I felt was all the Yallerhound cared about, especially if what I felt was something positive. Now that I'd had my connoption fit, I had to *think*.

To begin with, there was the source of this animal. No Granny on Ozark (and so far as I know we have all the Grannys there are) could teleport anything as big as either a giant cavecat *or* a Yallerhound. I knew Granny Golightly had had her signature on that cavecat back on Oklahomah, but it might of been she'd only had to encourage one that was already there. But I'd bet my velvet neckband it was on this Yallerhound as well, and that was a different matter altogether. Yallerhounds don't just happen to turn up in bedrooms, popping out of empty air, and that had to mean she'd had some help. From a Magician of Rank, who, other than me, would be the only individual with enough skill and strength to bring this off. And I had a pretty good idea I knew *which* Magician of Rank.

Not Michael Stepforth Guthrie; I thought he'd had fun enough for a while. The one I had in mind was called Lincoln Parradyne Smith the 39th, resident of that same Castle Smith that had so coolly disinvited me to visit, Magician of Rank to the

continent of Oklahomah, and surely handy to good Granny Golightly.

He'd have been delighted to help her; I rather expected that almost any one of the Magicians of Rank on this planet would of been. I'd been twelve years old the first time a sign from the Out-Cabal had obliged me to convene a Colloquium of the Magicians of Rank (and what a difference two years makes... I hadn't even noticed the attractions of Michael Stepforth Guthrie). And I'd been warned to be prepared for their hostility, but it hadn't been warning enough. It was like sitting too close to a wall of fire to be shut in a room with them; I flamed inside with the waves of hatred beating against me from that crew of arcane males, and I'd been sick for days afterward.

A strange sickness. I lay in my bed, so weak I could not lift my head from my pillow even to drink, and perpetually thirsty, and the skin of my body cold as mountain river water while I burned and burned within. I had not known that so much pain could be.

"They consumed your energies, child," our Granny Hazelbide had said, sitting beside me and holding my icy hands in her warm ones, and every now and then letting a spoonful of water trickle one drop at a time down my throat. "Sucked 'em right up like a pack of babies at the teat; and they'll do it every time."

I'd asked her with my eyes, because I couldn't talk—how long? And she'd shaken her head.

"This first time, sweet Responsible, sweet child? No way of telling, just no way atall. What you're doing, lying there on a cross of ice and fire mingled... oh yes, child, I know! I've never been through what you're bearing, praise the Twelve Corners, but I do *know*! ... what you're doing there is renewing yourself. It may take days and it may take weeks and there's not a blessed thing anyone can do to help you. But there's one good thing—each time it will be shorter. As you get older, and stronger, and more experienced at this yourself... why, you'll get to where you don't *mind* them any more than a pack of babes!"

A spasm had racked me, all my muscles flickering under my skin, and she'd sat there calm as a boulder, it not being one of the times when she felt expected to cluck and fuss and dither. She'd sat there eleven days, and when it was over she told me I'd done well.

"A short time, for your first time," Granny had said. "That speaks well for the future, child."

They hated me, one and all, did the Magicians of Rank—though they no more understood why than the Yallerhound would have. Nor why they should have felt compelled to come at my call, me no more than a little pigtailed girl; nor why they couldn't get up and go home, but had to sit and listen to my pronouncements, as if I had a rank and they had none; nor why their voices left them if they tried to speak upon the subject, ever. It was a mystery, and one that they weren't privy to, and there weren't supposed to be any mysteries they weren't privy to. They were, after all, the Magicians of *Rank*.

So, if one of them could do me a little hurt... just a small hurt, you understand, just a plaster for their aching egos... I was in fact surprised that they'd chanced the cavecat, it might have *really* hurt me; and I could be sure I'd been watched every minute in the crystal that Lincoln Parradyne Smith kept in his magic-chest. He must of been very confident he could reach me in time if I couldn't manage by myself, or he never would of risked it. The Yallerhound, on the other hand, was just funny. It couldn't hurt me even if it wanted to, which it didn't, short of falling on me by accident off a Castle roof, or something of the kind.

"The Yallerhound," I said aloud, which delighted it and set it humming up and down a nineteen-tone scale that was awful beyond all imagining, "is a harmless creature. However, it weighs almost one hundred pounds and a bit, and it eats more than a half-grown Mule, and it will never, never stop licking you."

We would of made a pretty sight, Sterling and me and my saddlebags, and the Yallerhound riding behind me licking my neck and my hair as we flew by. Not to mention the fact that, given the magic I was supposed to be able to perform, we would of had to drop like a stone. A Mule couldn't carry that much weight, even if it was precious cargo instead of stupid beast. I had to make up my mind what to do with the thing.

I could simply leave it here, a "gift" to the Castle, and claim I had no idea where it had come from—which was, in a sense, true. They'd never forgive me, and they'd probably shut it up in the stables to die of heartbreak and the conviction that it had done something wrong—but I could do that.

I could claim that *their* Magicians had sicced the silly thing on me, and gain a few points that way, since they wouldn't be able to prove that they hadn't. But the results for the innocent Yallerhound would be the same, if I left it behind.

I could buy another Mule to carry *it* and take it with me—thus guaranteeing that I'd look like a fool and be greeted like one at every Castle left on my itinerary.

Or I could try to do something with more flair to it, and maybe some justice. Like send it back to its Granny, O! True, I shouldn't be able to do that. True, she'd know that I had. But she couldn't tell on me without telling what *she'd* done, and what she'd done was a pure disgrace. *Therefore!*

"My pretty Yallerhound," I said, frantically ducking the purple tongue and encountering it all the same, "do you know what I think? I think you should go right back to where you came from! Poor Granny Golightly has got no Yallerhound to love her, and I'll bet she's dirty as seven little boys dividing up syrup in August. She undoubtedly, indubitably needs a Yallerhound to look after her, don't you think?"

Its eyes got wide and its tongue paused long enough for me to wipe my face off once. It had just enough brain to know I was talking about it, as well as to it. I tapped it on its nose, gently, and I scratched it on its hairy stomach, gently, and I set to work.

Crystals were not my style, but I didn't need one. I had no trouble finding my lady Golightly in my mirror. She slept curled like a scrawny baby in a high bed on

the third floor of Castle Clark, under a thick red comforter stuffed with squawker feathers, and a smile of innocent bliss upon her face.

I dumped the Yallerhound right on top of the smile.

CHAPTER SEVEN



I sat in the library at Castle Motley, drinking coffee so strong you could of stood a spoon up in it easy, still weak-kneed from the recent shenanigans but pleased that I'd arrived here without any unbecoming incidents. Sterling had flown across the narrow channel to Mizzurah with nary a wobble, no more creatures of any size or description had joined me as I flew, and if there was an adventure headed at me for this station on the Quest it had yet to arrive. And I was willing to wait.

We were even having a *pleasant* conversation—something I'd been missing for quite a while now. Me and my host, Halbreth Nicholas Smith the 12th, and the lady of his Castle, Diamond of Motley. Just the three of us. There was a small informal supper planned for the evening, I'd been told, and a hunt breakfast the next morning, but no great to-do's. That suited me; I had another slice of fresh hot bread with blazonberry jam, braced myself against the coffee, and relaxed.

Diamond of Motley was a placid woman, gone stout and not the least bothered by it, with her red hair wound around her head in a coronet of thick braids that was about as becoming as measles but otherwise perfectly suitable. She had eleven children and an unshakable serenity; just looking at her rested me. Hearing her say that she and hers were looking forward to the Jubilee *delighted* me.

“Diamond of Motley,” I said, “that does me good! It's a great occasion for Ozark, and it *should* be looked forward to. I've not heard much talk along that line since I left Brightwater.”

“You've been where now, Responsible?” her husband asked me.

“McDaniels, Clark, Airy, Guthrie, and Parson.”

“A shame you had to miss Castle Smith,” said Diamond. “Who'd of thought there was still a cavecat left on Oklahomah?”

“I wouldn't,” I told her. “But I learned.”

“Well, Smith's gain is our loss,” said Halbreth Nicholas, gallant as you please, “you're here the sooner. Think you missed anything in particular there?”

I looked at him, not sure what he meant, and he was tamping down his pipe and staring into it like he was looking for omens.

“According to a rumor as came this way,” he said carefully, still eyeing the tobacco, “Smith wasn't expecting you anyhow... it's going round that there was a note sent asking you not to come.”

Ah, the close-mouthed Smiths; this would be their doing. Gabble, gabble, gabble,

all the time.

“As it happened, that’s true,” I said. “They sent me a letter.”

“Signed by?”

“Dorothy of Smith—the oldest.”

Halbreth Nicholas lit his pipe and took a long draught. He was a Smith himself, and head of this Castle only because there’d been no Motley sons in the last generation. If my memory served me right, he’d be the second cousin of the blusterer that filled the same role at Castle Smith.

“She say why?” he asked me.

“They claimed a family crisis.”

“Hmmp,” He blew a fine smoke ring, and he watched it rise, and he said no more. Which was only to be expected. I wanted to say something comforting about everybody having relatives they’d as soon they didn’t have to own up to, but that kind of thing was the proper remark for a Granny, not a Castle daughter, and I held my peace.

Diamond of Motley was not so inhibited—after all, it wasn’t *her* relatives. She asked me straight out, leaning over to pour me more coffee and push the jam dish closer to my plate:

“Does it make you suspicious of them, child?”

“You know what’s been going on at Castle Brightwater,” I said.

“Been on all the comsets. Soured milk, smashed mirrors, kidnapped babies, and such truck. Everybody’s heard all about it by now.”

“Well,” I said, “it’s one of those which comes first the squawker or the egg things, to my mind. If Castle Smith is guilty of all this mischief, then telling me not to stop by their door makes them look guiltier. On the other hand, if you’re guilty, doing something like that tips your hand so plain and easy that you can’t imagine anyone with half a brain doing it; that makes them look as innocent as the babe kidnapped. On the *other* hand, if you were guilty and wanted to look innocent, doing something so outrageous as that would be a canny move. It goes round and round.”

“So it does,” she said, “and what’s your own opinion?”

The question put me in a very awkward position. There sat her husband, him a Smith by birth and close kin to those at Castle Smith this minute, and she asked me such a thing? She was a typical six, and properly named, and her husband stepped into the breach and saved me neatly.

“Shame on you, darlin’,” he told her, “putting the young woman on the spot like that. How can she say right in front of me and under my own roof that she suspects my close kin of treason against the Confederation? At least let her finish with her food before you throw her into a bog like that!”

“Oh,” she said, “you know, I didn’t think?”

“I’m sure you didn’t,” he observed, and he touched her cheek gently. It was clear he doted on her, and that was nice. “But you must try, now and again.”

Then he surprised me.

“Would you like to know what I think?” he asked abruptly.

“Indeed I would. If you’re willing to say.”

“I am,” he said. “Delldon Mallard the 2nd, for all he’s my cousin, and his three brothers with him, never have had sense enough to pound sand in a rat hole. They’re ornery enough to do the kind of foolishness that’s been coming down, that’s a point against them; and they’re silly enough not to see that they’re surrounded on all sides by Families loyal to the Confederation, and would be well advised to run with the pack at least until the Jubilee gives us all a chance to see how the land lies. *But*, and nevertheless, I don’t think they could of carried it off this long without making some fool mistake that would of given them away—that’s a point for them. And furthermore, Granny Gableframe’s at Castle Smith, and I don’t believe she’d put up with it for a minute, nor do I believe they could put it past her. Now *that*, my dear, is what I think.”

“And so thought the Clarks,” I said, nodding my head. “*Including* Granny Golightly.”

“Wicked old lady, that one!” put in Diamond of Motley. “Downright wicked!”

“Grannys aren’t wicked, Diamond,” said her husband firmly. “They’re just contrary, and it’s expected of them. She’s a tad worse than some of the others, might could be... but she has an image to live up to.”

“And,” I concluded, “so think I. I don’t believe Castle Smith is in this.”

“And the others?” They asked me together, right in chorus.

“The McDaniels and the Clarks, not a chance of it,” I said. “As for the Airys, you know how they are, I don’t know where they get it from. The Guthries and the Parsons, from what I can tell and the tales they’re spinning, are bent on carving up one another and the poor Purdys along with them. If they’ve thought of the Confederation in the last two months, I’ll be surprised, and the Jubilee? If they don’t want to go, they just won’t. And everything you said of the Smiths applies to the Purdys... if they were playing these tricks they’d of betrayed themselves early, early on.”

“And us, my dear?”

I smiled at him, and had some more coffee. “I just got here,” I said. “Suppose you tell me how you feel about these things.”

“It won’t take long.”

“All the better.”

“Mizzurah is a mighty small continent, and it’s right off the port bow, if you’ll allow the figure, of Arkansaw and all that feuding and carrying on. We’ve got the Wommacks and the Travellers on our flanks, and a hell of a lot of ocean—beg your

pardon, ladies—all around, and nobody but Castle Lewis to rely on should all of the others decide to move in on us. Guthries, Parsons, Purdys, Wommacks, and Travellers, that is. They have us cut off completely from Marktwain and Oklahomah.”

“Which means?”

“Which means we’re in an interesting position, if you like interesting, but a chancy one. You’ll find the Lewises as strong for the Confederation as the Airys, though a mite less drivelly about it, and they’d stand firm in any crisis; but they’re even smaller than we are, they couldn’t hold out a week. And we couldn’t defend them. Therefore, I tell you quite frankly, Responsible of Brightwater, that Castle Motley stands for the Confederation of Continents, and does so openly—but you can’t count on us for anything dramatic.”

He was right, if unromantic. Mizzurah was the smallest of the six continents, and it sat all alone in the middle of the oceans with its three great neighbors hemming it on all sides. Castle Motley was in no position to make rash promises.

“But you’ll be at the Jubilee?” I asked him, hoping.

“We’ll be there,” he assured me. “You heard my wife; her and the children, they’re looking forward to it, and a lot of our staff. It’s a rare chance when we can get away and see something besides our own Castle yard. We plan to leave very shortly, as a matter of fact, because we’re going by water everywhere we can—no Mules for *my* household, thank you, except flat on the solid ground, and no more of ’em than’s absolutely required. But we can’t offer you anything else but our presence, and no daring political moves—you might as well know that.”

I wondered if he knew anything that I didn’t, and couldn’t see what I’d lose by asking.

“Halbreth Nicholas, do you expect some daring moves from somebody else?”

He knocked out his pipe and set it down, and then he counted out his propositions with the side of one palm on the flat of the other.

“First,” he said, “there’s already those trying to scuttle the Jubilee outright. Correct?”

“Correct.”

“I think you’ll be able to stop that... this Quest of yours is an exaggeration, but it’s caught people’s fancy, and I believe they’ll come to see what happens next, if for no other reason. Dragons and a tourney in the courtyard at Castle Brightwater, maybe?”

I grinned at him.

“Second,” he went on, “assuming, as I do think we can assume, that there *will* be a Jubilee, even if one or two of the Families boycott it—and frankly, I doubt that strongly; like I said before, every one of them is curious, and if anything’s going to happen they don’t want to miss it—if the Jubilee does come off as scheduled, I look

for a formal move to dissolve the Confederation.”

“Happens every time we meet,” I said. “That would be no surprise.”

“*Not* exactly,” said Halbreth Nicholas, “not exactly. Nobody’s proposed that seriously within anybody’s memory. No, what always happens is the move to cut it back to one day a year, and then that’s voted down... by how much depending on how the Wommacks are wobbling that month.”

“My dear,” said Diamond of Motley, “I’m afraid I really don’t see much difference. In effect, that is.”

“Oh, there’s a difference,” he said, “yes, there is. True, that ritual meeting would make the Confederation an empty pretense, a regular little bug of a planetary government and not worth spitting at. But so long as it met even that long, they’d only have one meeting’s worth of satisfaction. Brightwater’d move to return to meeting four times a year, Castle Lewis’d second, and the vote would go as usual—seven to five or eight to four. *Dissolving* the thing, meaning no meetings *atall*, would be quite a different thing altogether.”

I felt a chill between my shoulders... not that I hadn’t had the same idea cross my mind, but if it came this easy to him there might be many others sharing it.

“You think they could do it, Halbreth Nicholas?”

“I think they’ll for damned sure try.”

“But do you think they can bring it off? The vote has always gone against them, even on the meeting cutback...”

“But weak votes, young woman, weak votes,” he said solemnly. “You can’t count on the Wommacks, them and their curse. It may well be you can’t count on the Smiths, considering this latest development. If all our neighbors pulled out, I’m not prepared to say you could count on the Motleys or the Lewises, either.”

“Halbreth Nicholas Smith!” said Diamond of Motley, so shocked her spoon rattled in her cup.

“My dear,” he said, “we must face facts. Castle Motley is not self-sufficient, nor Castle Lewis either. If Arkansaw, Kintucky, and Tinaseeh decided to blockade us so that no supplies could be shipped in from Oklahomah or Marktwain, just where do you think we’d be? We can grow vegetables and fruit here, and raise a goat or two, but that’s about it. No sugar, no salt, no coffee, no tea, no metals, no supplies for the Grannys or the Magicians, no manufactured goods to speak of. And where do you think our power comes from, Diamond of Motley? It comes from the Farsons and the Guthries, who can equally well cut it off. No law says they have to sell to us.”

“Our windmills,” she said. “Our solar collectors—and our *tides*.”

I tried to imagine the population of Mizzurah managing with its windmills and its solar technology and its tides, with all the huge hulking bulk of three continents cutting off both wind and water on three sides, and it raining or cloudy three quarters

of the year or more, and I admired Halbreth Nicholas for not smiling. She was a good woman, was Diamond, but she hadn't much grasp of logistics.

"No," he said, but he said it respectfully, "I'm afraid they wouldn't suffice, Diamond. The Lewises, now, they are just pigheaded enough that they might go the rest of us one better!"

"Withdraw from the withdrawal, you mean."

"Exactly. And live on greens and goatmeat, and burn... oh, candles, for all I know. They might. But not us, Responsible, and I want that understood. I've many families here depending on me and they're not expecting to go back to Old Earth standards and the year 2000. And I don't intend to ask it of them."

"You'd vote for dissolving, then."

"If it was clear that that was the way it was going—yes. Regardless of how the Lewises might decide. It's not my druthers, young woman, but it's the facts of life. We are dependent on Arkansaw, Kintucky, and Tinaseeh, and there's no way to change that short of moving the continent of Mizzurah to a new location just off *your* coast. Are your Magicians of Rank up to a project like that?"

Moving Mules was one thing; moving continents was quite another; I didn't try to answer.

"Law, but you've made a gloomy day of it, Mr. Motley!" said his wife. "I hope you're proud of yourself!"

I was quite sure he wasn't; in fact, I was quite sure he was ashamed. He would of liked to hear himself saying that if the vote came to end the Confederation his delegates would be right there at the front telling the rotters to do their damndest and to hell with them. Begging the pardon of any ladies present, of course. That went with the image he'd of *liked* to have of himself. But he was a practical man, and an honest one, and he knew he'd do what went with that. Diamond of Motley was right; he'd made it a gloomy day.

I went off to my room to rest for a while before supper, and found a servingmaid waiting there, pretending—not very skillfully—to still be unpacking my saddlebags and clearing up. She looked eleven, but had the frail look of a Purdy to her, too, which meant she was probably my own age or a bit more, and her hair was falling down from the twist she'd put it in and hanging down around her face. My fingers itched to set it right—I can't abide a sloppy woman—but I didn't know her and I couldn't take liberties.

"Hello, young woman," I said, friendly as I could manage in my dreary mood, "are you having a problem with some of those things? What is it, a fastening you can't get loose?"

"No, miss," she said, "I'm managing." And dropped my hand mirror on the floor, smashing it to smithereens. No magic, just plain fumblefingers.

"Oh, Miss Responsible, I'm sorry!" she said, and bit one finger. She'd be chewing on her hair next "I'll get you another one, miss, there's a hundred of 'em

down in the corner of the linen room! What do you fancy, something plain? Or a special color? The Missus has a weakness for a nice pale blue, and flowers on the back..."

Her hands were trembling, and her voice was a squeak, and I stared at her long and hard while she dithered about the variety of mirrors the Motleys had to offer for as long as I could stand it, and then I told her to sit down.

"Miss?"

"*Do* sit down," I said, too cross to be gentle, "and tell me what is the matter with you. And your name."

"My name? Is there something the matter with my name?"

She had to be a Purdy; her eyes were wild like a squawker got by the neck.

"I did not mean to imply that there was anything wrong with your name, young woman," I said, "I just asked you what it might *be*."

"Oh!" she said. "Well, I hoped... I mean, only the Wommacks have women as aren't properly named, and—" t

"That's not true," I interrupted, wondering if she'd had any education at all. "I daresay there's no Family on Ozark that hasn't had a girl or two Improperly Named over the years; the Grannys aren't infallible. The Wommacks just did it more spectacularly than anybody else ever has and got famous for it, that's all."

As they surely had. It hadn't been a matter of naming a Caroline that should have been an Elizabeth; they'd named a girlbaby Responsible of Wommack, and it had been a mistake. That's a sure way to get famous.

One more time, I thought, and asked her: "Will you tell me your name, then, and what the trouble is?" And if she wouldn't I fully intended to put her over my knee for her sass.

"Yes, miss," she said. "Ivy of Wommack's my name."

A two. She was properly named. And I was right glad I had not let it slip that I'd taken her for a Purdy.

"And your problem?"

She stared down at the bed she was sitting on and gripped the counterpane with both hands, silly thing, as if it wouldn't of slid right off with her if she'd done any sliding herself.

"Oh, Miss Responsible," she said in a tiny, tiny voice, "I have all the bad luck I ever need, I have more than *anybody'd* ever need, and I don't need any more, and I'm afraid—oh, law, miss, they say there's been a Skerry appeared!"

Well. That did take me aback a bit, and I sat down myself.

"Who told you so, Ivy of Wommack?" I demanded.

"Everybody!"

“Nonsense. You haven’t talked to everybody.”

“Everybody I’ve talked to, then,” she said stubbornly. “They’re all talking about it, and they’re all worried.”

“And what are they saying? Besides just, ‘There’s been a Skerry appeared.’ ”

“There’s an old well, down in the garden behind the Castle church, miss—the water’s no good any more, but oh, it’s pretty, with vines growing all over it and the old bucket hanging there, so it’s been left. And they say that last night—there were full moons last night, miss—they say there was a Skerry sitting on the edge-rim of that old well. Just sitting there.”

“At midnight, I suppose.”

“Oh yes... just at midnight, and under the full moons. Oh, Miss Responsible, I’m glad I didn’t see it!”

She hadn’t much gumption, or much taste. I would dearly have loved to see it, if it was true. A Skerry stands eight feet tall on the average, sometimes even taller, and there’s never been one that wasn’t willow slender. They have skin the color of well-cared-for copper, their hair is silver and falls without wave or curl to below their waists, male or female. And their eyes are the color of the purest, deepest turquoise. The idea of the full moons shining down on all that, not to mention an old well covered with wild ivy and night-blooming vines... ah, that would of been something to see and to marvel on.

Except there were a few things wrong with the whole picture.

“*Who* told you they saw the Skerry?” I insisted. “Who?”

And I added, “And don’t you tell me ‘everybody,’ either.”

“Everyone in the Castle is talking about it,” she said. Drat the girl!

“Not the Master nor the Missus,” I said. “I’ve been with them these past two hours, and I’ve heard not one word about a Skerry.”

“Everybody on the *staff*, I meant, miss. It was one of the Senior Attendants... he’ll go far, they say he knows more Spells and Charms than the Granny, and he’s a comely, comely man... he was down there by the well last night with a friend of mine”—she looked at me out of the corner of her eye to see if I was going to make any moral pronouncements about that, but I ignored her, and she went on—“and they *saw* it, sitting there in the full moonlight, all splendid with the light fair blinding on its long silver hair, they said.”

“And then they told everybody.”

“Well, wouldn’t you?” she asked me, and I had to admit that I might have. You didn’t see a Skerry every night, much less under full moons at midnight in a Castle garden.

“But you notice they didn’t tell the Family,” I said. “That’s mighty odd, seems to me. Seems to me that would of been the *first* thing to do.”

The girl rubbed her nose and stared down at the floor, scuffing one shoe back and forth. Not only sloppy, but wasteful, too.

“The Housekeeper told us not to,” she said sullenly. “She carried on about it till we were all sick of listening—what she’d do if we bothered the Master and the Missus with it... *bothered* them, that’s how *she* put it!”

“Well?” I asked her. “Do you have any inkling in your head why she might of taken it that way?”

She sniffled. “I don’t know,” she said. “I just know I’m scared. And it’s *not fair*—I already had my share of bad luck.”

“Ivy of Wommack,” I said patiently, “have you given this tale any thought at all? Other than to fret yourself about it, I mean?”

“What way should I be thinking about it?”

“Well, for starters, where do the Skerrys live?”

“In the desert on Marktwain,” she said promptly.

“Quite right. In the desert on Marktwain. The only patch of desert on this planet, girl, and *left* desert only out of courtesy to the Skerrys. They *were* here first, you know, and it was desert then.”

“Yes, miss.”

“And since that’s true, and Skerrys can’t live outside the desert, why in the name of the Twelve Gates and the Twelve Corners would one turn up on Mizzurah, many and many a long mile from its desert, and of *all* unlikely places, sitting on a *well* brim? Skerrys *hate* water, can’t *abide* water, that’s why they live in the desert!”

Her mouth took a pout, which was no surprise.

“Really,” she said, “I’m sure I’m no expert on Skerrys, and it wouldn’t be proper if I was, and as to how it got here, my friend says it would have to be by magic, and she got that from the Senior Attendant, and he’s on his way up in the world—he’s no fool!”

“Tell me again,” I said. “Exactly. What did they say?”

“Kyle Fairweather McDaniels the 17th, that’s the Senior, and my friend—never mind her name, because she wasn’t supposed to be out of her bed at midnight, much less with Kyle Fairweather—they say that they were down by the well and they saw the Skerry as plain as I see you.”

“Walked right up and touched it, did they? Said howdeedo?”

“Miss!”

“Then how did they know it was a Skerry?”

“Well, miss, what *else* is eight feet tall and has copper skin, and silver hair as hangs down to its knees? I ask you!”

“It was sitting on the well, Ivy of Wommack, not standing. You go said so

yourself. How could they see that it was eight feet tall? And as for the copper skin, a bit of Hallow Even paint will do that—I've done it myself, and I'll wager you have, too—and a silver wig's easily come by."

"They were *sure*."

"Were they?"

"They *were*."

"They were out where they should not of been, doing what they should not of done—"

"I didn't say that."

"Well, I say it, missy," I snapped at her, "and I say it plain, and between their guilty consciences and the moonlight, it was easy for anybody at all to play a trick on them. And more shame to them for scaring the rest of you with such nonsense... what trashy doings!"

"You don't believe it, then, miss?"

"Certainly not. Nor should you, nor anybody else."

She sat there beside me, quieter now, though she'd switched from wrinkling up the counterpane to wringing those skinny little hands that looked like you could snap them the way Michael Stepforth Guthrie'd snapped my ribs. Only with no need for magic, nor much strength, either.

"Feel better now, Ivy of Wommack?" I asked her finally, and I hoped she did, because I wanted a rest and a read before my supper. I was willing to finish unpacking for myself, if I could just get rid of this skittish creature.

"You know what's said, miss," she hazarded. I *wished* she would stop wringing her hands before she wore them out.

"What?" Though I knew quite well.

"That if a Skerry's seen," she breathed, and I could hear in her voice the echo of a Granny busy laying out the lines, "that there has to be a whole day of celebration in its honor. A whole day of no work and all celebration... or it's bad luck for all the people that know of it. And I've worked this livelong day, and so has all the staff!"

"That, I suppose, is why your 'friends' spread the news around," I said. "Sharing out the bad luck."

"Maybe," she said. "Might could be that's why."

"Covering their bets," I said tartly. "If they didn't really see a Skerry, no harm done. If they did, the bad luck that comes from not following the rules gets spread out thin over the whole staff, instead of just falling on the two of them. You think that over, Ivy of Wommack."

She sighed, and allowed as how I might be right, but she didn't know, and I occupied myself with sending her on her way. She'd forgotten all about finishing my unpacking, fortunately, and it took me three minutes to do what she'd left and fix

what she'd messed up, and then I stretched out on the bed bone-naked under the covers and took up my most trashy novel.

There was a certain very small, you might say tiny, bit of risk here. For a Skerry to show up on Mizzurah, at midnight, or at any other time, might fit right into some Magician of Rank's idea of an adventure for this particular stage of my Quest. And if so, I was asking for powerful trouble—maybe not right now, maybe not for a long time, but *someday* it would come—if I didn't speak up and demand the day of festival to honor its appearance.

Furthermore, if a Magician of Rank *had* teleported a Skerry out of its desert and onto the edge of the Motleys' well, the Skerrys were not going to be pleased about that. Not at *all* pleased. They'd asked precious little of us, when The Ship landed; just to be let alone. And whizzing one around the planet in the middle of the night was distinctly not leaving it alone as promised.

I tried to remember when a Skerry had last been seen, putting my microviewer down for a minute... not in my lifetime, I didn't think. In my mother's, perhaps; it was dim in my memory. But *that* Skerry had come walking out of the desert on Marktwain of its own free will, and had walked right down the street of a town on the desert's edge in broad daylight. It had been an honor, and I believe Thorn of Guthrie said there'd been festival for two whole days...

No. I made up my mind. It had to be a trick, played on the Senior Attendant and his foolish lady friend, and no more. For my benefit, perhaps, meant to distract me and delay me if I believed it, but only a trick all the same. No Skerry would cross all the water between Marktwain and Mizzurah and sit on a well in the middle of the night for two young Castle staff to gawk at. And no Magician of Rank would dare tamper with a real Skerry in that way.

I was not going to take any such obvious bait, and that was all there was to that.

I went back to my book.

CHAPTER EIGHT



I left for Castle Lewis after the hunt breakfast, not staying for the hunt itself on the grounds that I had to hurry, and since that was obviously true no one made more than the objections politeness demanded. Mizzurah was so small, and so heavily populated, that anything but ordinary Muleflight was out of the question, and I flew through a blustery spring day, sedate and proper, and reached Castle Lewis only just before the sun began to go down behind the low hills. Sterling was bored, and so was I, and we did nothing fancy; just came down slow and easy over the broad lawn that spread round the Castle, and waited for developments. The wind was brisk enough that the Mule was shivering, and I got down and took an extra blanket from my pack and began rubbing her down.

Castle Lewis was small against the darkening sky, small and tidy, with a central gate and two towers to each side, and a tower at each of its corners. No frills, no fancy battlements and balconies, just a plain small sturdy Castle, and I liked the look of it.

The front gates opened as the sun slipped out of sight completely, and three men came running out with solar lanterns—economy here, I noted, and I approved. They'd been well exposed and threw a fine bright light across the grass, as they should do. One of the men put a shawl around me, very respectfully; one took over the task of rubbing Sterling down, making protesting sounds because I'd started the process myself; and the other stood stiff as a pole, waiting for something.

“Where *is* that woman?” demanded one of them, and called over his shoulder: “Tambrey! Tambrey of Motley! What’s keeping you, woman? Responsible of Brightwater at your gate half-frozen, and dropping with hunger and entirely tuckered out, and what are you doing in there, counting your fingers to see if you’ve lost one? Will you get *out here*?”

I’m not that tired, Attendant, “I said sharply, ”and not that cold, and not that hungry. I’ll last the night”

“That doesn’t excuse her, miss,” he said firmly. “She knows her duty, and she’s expected to do it” And he turned his head again and shouted “Tambrey!” and then made a remarkably expressive noise of disgust

“It’s all right,” I said, “never mind the woman. One of you to take my Mule to the stables, and two to see me to my host and hostess—I can surely make do with that?”

But they wouldn’t have it that way, and we stood there in the wind while a soft rain began to fall in the deepening darkness, and I knew that I was up against it. The famous Lewis propriety, than which only the Travellers’ could be said to be more extreme. I could stand there and drown, for all they cared, I’d not enter their Castle attended by other than a female, and I envied my Mule. At least she was going to be warm and fed and dry, any minute now.

When Tambrey did appear, which to give her credit was not many minutes later, she didn’t come from the gates but out of the cedars that bordered the Castle lawn. She was a pretty thing, too, and I couldn’t see her being a servingmaid long; her hair was hidden by the hood of her cloak, but her face was perfection, and I was willing to place my bets on the rest of her.

The men grumbled at her, but she paid them no mind at all, and from the way they dropped their complaining I was reasonably certain they were used to that, too.

“Welcome to Castle Lewis, Responsible of Brightwater,” she said, “and let’s get you in out of this damp this minute and a mug of hot cider in your hand!”

Oh yes. I had forgotten. I’d get nothing stronger than cider from the Lewises unless it came from a Granny’s own hand and was vouched for as being the difference between my total collapse and my blooming health. And not hard cider, either; it would be the pure juice of the Ozark peachapple, mulled with spices, and

hot as blazes, and innocent enough for the baby that still hung safe outside the Brightwater church. The Lewises kept to the old ways with a vengeance.

We went through the gates into a small square courtyard, planted with low flowers in neat square beds, and raked paths between them, and on to where the Castle door shone wide and welcoming. In the door stood two I'd heard a great deal of, but knew hardly at all: Salem Sheridan Lewis the 43rd, and his wife, Rozasharn of McDaniels.

"Here she is," said Tambrey, handing me through the door like a package, so that the Lewises both had to step back a pace to avoid me running them down, "Responsible of Brightwater, safe and sound! Miss, Salem Sheridan Lewis the 43rd; and the Missus of this Castle, Rozasharn of McDaniels."

"Thank you kindly, Tambrey," said the woman Rozasharn, and the beauty of her voice caught my ear. I hoped she would sing for us, later, if the quality of her speech was any sign of her ability.

Salem Sheridan was another matter. His wife gathered me into her arms as if we'd known each other all our lives; but he snapped his fingers and ran everybody through their drill. Had my Mule been seen to and stabled? Good. And had my bags been brought in and taken up to my room? Good. And was the mulled cider ready in the east parlor? Good. And would Tambrey see to my unpacking? Good—and I was to have extra blankets, mind, it was going to be cold. And would supper be on the table in *precisely* one hour? Good! And it was all "Yes, sir!" coming the other way. It said something for Tambrey of Motley's ingenuity that she'd been able to find her way past this one and into the cedars—there'd be no sloppy staff here.

I had time only to wash a bit, tidy my hair, and change from my traveling costume into something less elaborate, before suppertime, the cider still burning my throat. I was traveling light, as was necessary; there was the splendid traveling outfit, the blue-and-silver party dress, the gown of lawn for magic, some underclothes and a nightgown, a study black shawl, and one plainer dress that I'd not yet had an opportunity to wear. And that was all.

I held up the last dress and looked it over dubiously; it had alternating narrow stripes of the Brightwater green and scarlet, with a neck cut low in front and rimmed in back by a high ruff of ivory lace that would require me to put my hair up. It had long sleeves caught at the wrists with lace-trimmed wide cuffs as well, and the stripes themselves were shot with silver-and-gold threads.

I'd seen nothing like it here; only modest high-necked round-collared gowns without ornament even to their cut. The Lewis crest was a green cedar tree on an azure field, with a narrow border of cedar-trunks russet round, and except for a button or two that bore that device I'd seen only the plain and the spare. Even Rozasharn, presumably dressed for company, had been wearing a dress of a heather blue with a skirt scarcely full enough to swing with her hips as she walked, and plain little round white buttons down its high front.

True, I was a guest. 'tnd true, the conditions on a Quest demanded a certain

amount of spectacle, and I had to abide by them. But I could see nothing in the garments that Tambrey had hung for me that would not of looked foolish at the Lewis supper table.

Well, there was my nightgown... it was moss green flannel and had the proper cut and simplicity, and I couldn't see that the Lewises would recognize it for what it was if I could keep my own face straight. I belted it with a narrow braid of gold cord, since it had no proper waist, and added a single silver pendant—a small flower meant, I believe, to represent a violet, but innocuous enough for any occasion—on a narrow green velvet ribbon. Then I used a matching ribbon to tie my hair back simply at the nape of my neck and looked at the effect in the long glass mirror in my guest-chamber.

My grandmother would of been scandalized, my *mother* would of fainted, but I was of the opinion that I could get away with it. I only had to remember not to let a servingmaid see me in it tomorrow morning when she brought up my pot of tea. That would have meant the word going out that I'd either been too lazy to change into my nightgown and had slept in my dress, or that I'd been so addled I'd worn my nightgown to supper, neither of which would do.

Kingdom Lewis had just one product for sale—cedar, cut from the progeny of the three seedlings the family had somehow managed to nurse through the whole trip to this planet, and which now they alone seemed to have the skill to grow. Under any other touch the trees turned brown and died, like grass not watered, but the Lewises had the green thumb, one and all of them, and the rows of cedars grew stately in every spare field of the small Kingdom and all along its narrow roads. Even in the great Hall inside Castle Lewis, a giant cedar grew out of earth left open for its roots in the time of building, dropping its needles everywhere for the staff to sweep up but smelling like heaven, and every windowsill had a small seedling growing in a low bowl.

Nor had they stinted themselves in the use of the timber. The Castle gleamed with it, and the table at which I sat down to supper was a single massive slab of russet cut from the heart of an ancient monster of a tree and rubbed till it glowed like coals burned low in a hearth. They had had sense enough not to cover it up with some frippery cloth, either, and had set chairs round it of the same glowing wood.

Me in my nightgown, I drew one up and sat down, spreading my napkin in my lap, and I said, "This table is beautiful, Rozasharn of McDaniels. I've never seen anything to match it." Nor had I.

"My husband's great-great-grandfather made it with his own hands," she answered, "and I do its polishing with mine."

"It *was* a single plank?"

"That it was; they waited a very long time for a cedar to grow the proper size for this, and while they waited the Lewises ate off plain boards laid across trestles. Then the one tree made this table and all the chairs... and no polish or oil has ever been set to it except by a Missus of this Castle, all these years."

“I’ve seen a few housethings made from cedar,” I said. “Chests, usually.” And I stroked the satiny wood. “But nothing like this.”

“Magic-chests!” breathed a child at my right hand, and I turned my head to see him better. He was young, and his chair not tall enough to bring him much above the edge of the tabletop, but not young enough to be willing to submit to the indignity of sitting on a stack of pillows; he made do by craning his neck.

“My son, Salem Sheridan Lewis the 44th, called Boy Salem,” said his father from the head of the table, and he introduced the other five children that had joined us for the meal. And the Granny, the youngest on Ozark and one of the sternest—fifty-nine-year-old Granny Twinsorrel. I bid them all a good evening, and helped myself to the soup.

Salem was a patient child; when the introductions had gone all the way around and the grownups were eating, he said it again, but this time he was asking.

“Magic-chests?” he asked me. “All of cedar?”

“Usually,” I told him. “Because it keeps everything so safe.”

His dark blue eyes shone, and I found him a handsome child despite the lack of three front teeth and the presence of a crazy-quilt assortment of scrapes and scabs and scratches. I expect he had fallen out of one or more of the cedar trees recently.

“What’s in a magic-chest, Responsible of Brightwater?” he asked me then, and he held very still, waiting for me to answer. Which meant he’d asked it before, and it had done him no good. It would do him no good this time, either.

“Herbs and simples and gewgaws,” I said casually. “And garlic.”

“In a *cedar chest*?” The child was shocked, and I chuckled.

As it happened, the Magicians *did* keep their garlic in their magic-chests, but they saw to it that the smell of the stuff was on hold while it was in there.

“That’s right,” I said. “Garlic.”

“When I am a Magician of Rank,” said the boy with utter solemnity, like a Reverend pronouncing a benediction, “I won’t do that. Or I’ll make a Spell to take the smell off so it doesn’t spoil the wood.”

Smart little dickens, that one. I could tell by the twitch at the corner of his stern father’s lips that this was a favorite child—the name told me that in any case—and that his promise was noticed. But the Master of the Castle spoke to him in no uncertain terms.

“When *you* are a Magician of Rank!” he said. “Many a long, long year of study lies between you and that day, Boy Salem, if it ever comes—*which* I doubt. And many a difficult examination. You had best get your mind off garlic and concentrate on learning the Teaching Story you were set this week—you didn’t have it right yet last night, as I recall.”

“Or,” added a sister who looked to be about thirteen, with the same pansy blue eyes but considerably less scuffed up and battered as to the rest of her, “you’ll end

up like your cousin Silverweb.”

“I’d not be such a ninny as *that*,” scoffed the boy, “not ever! You know that, Charlotte.”

“Silverweb of McDaniels?” I set my soup spoon down and used my napkin hastily. “Has something happened to her?”

“Nothing serious, Responsible,” said Rozasharn of McDaniels, “and nothing that can’t be mended. She’s been left too long unmarried, and this is where that sort of thing leads to.”

“I hadn’t heard,” I said. “What’s happened?”

“Well,” said Rozasharn, “as I understand it Silverweb decided you needed somebody to be guardmaid—or companion, who knows? to be company at any rate—on your Quest. And that young one packed a pair of saddlebags, stole a Mule from the McDaniels stables, and started off after you.”

“She didn’t get far,” observed her husband, handing the meat platter down the table. “Her daddy caught up with her before noon the following day and took her straight back to Castle McDaniels.”

“For a licking,” said the one they called Boy Salem.

“Not for a licking,” corrected Granny Twinsorrel. “Boy Salem, you’ll never make a Magician if you don’t learn to turn on your brain before you begin rattling off at the mouth. Young women of fifteen don’t get lickings, it wouldn’t be proper.”

The boy snorted, and wrinkled up his nose.

“Not fair,” he said. “Not fair at all.”

“What *did* they do to her?” I asked reluctantly, not really sure I wanted to know. I had high hopes for Silverweb, and I bore a certain guilt for having ranked her when I was at Castle McDaniels.

“Packed her off to Castle Airy in disgrace,” said Salem Sheridan. “And to the tender care of all three of the Grannys there. Seven weeks and a day, she’s to be servingmaid to those Grannys. I do expect that will have some effect on her.”

Poor wretched Silverweb... I knew what that would mean. She’d hem miles and miles of burgundy draperies, and then be made to take the hems out and do them over till her fingers bled. She’d boil vats of herbs half as tall as she was, stirring them for hours at a time with a wooden staff. And she’d pick nutmeats—they’d have her doing that with *bushels* of nuts, staining her fingers black where they weren’t bleeding. And scrubbing the Castle corridor floors with gritty sand. And worse.

“Oh, what *ever* made her take such a notion?” I asked, cross in spite of feeling sorry for her.

“Like I said,” said Rozasharn, “she’s been left too long unmarried. Silverweb’s going on sixteen, and that’s far too old. It’s a wonder she’s not done worse.”

“And she *may* have,” put in one of the older children. “Our daddy says Silverweb

of McDaniels could very well of dressed like a man and kidnapped that baby out of your church, Responsible of Brightwater! He says she's plenty big enough and strong enough—and bold enough, too.”

“I was there,” I protested, “and I can't believe that, not at all! I'm *sure* it was a man... and I'm sure it wasn't Silverweb of McDaniels. She's a fine young woman, I give you my word on that; she's just maybe a bit strong-minded.”

“She ought to have a husband and two babies to occupy her energy by now,” said Salem Sheridan, “and I fault her parents for that. Though I agree she's got to be punished for running off, and for taking the Mule without permission, and the rest of it. That's fitting, and expected.”

“She'll live through it,” said Granny Twinsorrel. “And maybe she'll learn a thing or two about pride.”

“Now, Granny—” Rozasharn began, but the woman cut her off sharp.

“Pride is all that's keeping that one spinster,” said Granny Twinsorrel, “simple pride. Her father's offered her three marriages, each one fully suitable, each of the men with land and a homeplace and a good future ahead of him. And Miss Yellow-Haired High-and-Mighty wouldn't accept any one of the three. Two fine men from Kingdom Guthrie, and one of our *own*—and none of them good enough for her. Pride, that is, and it'll lead her to no good end.”

“They say,” said Rozasharn, “that she has ambitions. And if that's true, she'll make no marriage, Granny Twinsorrel.”

She *has ambitions*. In front of the children, that would mean that Silverweb intended to become a Granny the hard way, and go virgin to her grave; and there was no reason for a woman to do that unless she had her eyes out for a chance to become a Magician as well as a Granny. Which was “having ambitions.”

I frowned into my soup, but went back to eating it. Silverweb was none of my business, and no reason for her to come between me and my supper.

The rock that whistled past my ear went into the bowl of mashed sweet potatoes, which weren't enough to slow it down any, and on beyond to hit the far wall with a resounding smack. Whoever had thrown it had put considerable muscle behind it, and I couldn't say it made my stomach calm. But not a one of the Lewises moved, or paused in their eating, or turned a hair, so far as I could tell. An Attendant stepped forward from the door and picked up the rock, and went off with it somewhere, while the Lewises went right on with their meal.

“Rozasharn of McDaniels,” I said, my voice more a quiver than I'd intended it to be, “how many more of those are we likely to be favored with this evening?”

“Half a dozen, maybe,” she said. “Maybe a few more, maybe a few less.”

“Well, don't you *mind* having rocks thrown at you like that?”

“Gracious, child,” said Granny Twinsorrel, “those rocks aren't being thrown at us. It's a bit of fuss in *your* honor—started about the time you crossed the border

of Kingdom Lewis, I calculate, which is why we were a mite disorganized when you arrived, and will stop when you move on. We don't plan to pay the fool thing any attention, it will only make it worse."

"Nobody's been either hurt or bothered," said Rozasharn soothingly. "You'll notice there's not even dust in the potato dish."

"We can put up with it," said Boy Salem, backing her up. "Besides, I like to see what it does."

What it did next may have amused Boy Salem, but it didn't amuse me in the slightest. Nobody wants a live lizard in her soup, and since Rozasharn of McDaniels was so calm about all this I strongly wished it had been in her bowl instead of mine.

"Teh," said Granny Twinsorrel. "Now that was rude."

"Can I fish it out?" asked Boy Salem. "Is it real? Can I get it out for you?" He was fairly hopping up and down in his chair.

It was real enough, about four inches long, and a bright poisonous green. It put back its narrow head and hissed at me, and I fancied it was a little warmer there among the potatoes and the jebroots than it cared to be.

"Never mind, Boy Salem," I said disgustedly. "I'd best do it myself, I believe."

Granny Twinsorrel's voice came sharp and sudden. "Don't you put silver to it, young woman!" she told me. "It's not the creature's fault. Use your fingers."

I knew that much, but I didn't sass the Granny; I reached into my soup with two careful fingertips, caught the little animal by the tip of its tail, and lifted it out into the air still spitting.

"Can I have it?" demanded Boy Salem. The child was outrageous, and his brothers and sisters stared at him in amazement. Eben Nathaniel Lewis the 17th, twelve years old and already with a rigid look to him like his father, turned that look on Boy Salem in a way that would of frozen the child stiff if it'd had any power behind it.

"A Spelled creature like that, Boy Salem?" said Eben Nathaniel. "Your head's addled!"

The Granny stepped over to my chair and took the lizard from me, which was a good deal more appropriate than letting Boy Salem have it for a pet, and a servingmaid slipped the bowl of soup away and replaced it with a fresh one, and handed me a new spoon.

Whereupon a small frog, same shade of green, croaked up at me from among the vegetables. And I set the silverware down again.

If this was the beginning of an adventure, I didn't fancy it; there were quite a few nasty and downright dangerous things that would fit into a soup bowl.

"Keep changing the bowls," ordered Granny Twinsorrel, without a tremble to her voice, and we sat there while the process went on.

Bowl three, a much larger frog, darker green.

Bowl four, a skinny watersnake, banded in green and scarlet and gold, and about as long as my forearm.

Bowl five had a squawker in it, which was at least a change from the reptiles.

“Granny?”

“Hush, Rozasharn,” said the woman; she was made of ice and steel, that one was, and she hadn’t yet even bothered to behave like a Granny... certainly she’d yet to speak like one.

“You, young woman,” she said, “just keep changing the bowls; and you, Responsible, you keep taking the creatures out. We’ll see how this goes.”

She stood at my left hand and I passed her whatever I got with each bowl. I must say the children were fascinated, especially when, after the tenth move, the bowl itself suddenly grew larger.

The Granny made a small soft noise—not alarm, but it showed she’d taken notice—and Salem Sheridan Lewis set down his own spoon and spoke up.

“I don’t like that,” he said. “I don’t like that at all.”

I didn’t like it either, and I didn’t know that I was going to like what came next in my alleged soup. There were several possibilities... it could go from harmless creatures to poisonous ones, and I moved back from the table enough to dodge if a snake that killed was to appear coiled up before me next. It could go to *nasty* creatures, along the line of the squawker, but dirtier—say, a carrion bird. Or it could go to *things*, and that left a wide latitude of choices.

“Responsible of Brightwater,” said Salem Sheridan, “put your spoon in that bowl—this has gone too far.”

But Granny Twinsorrel raised her hand, her index finger up like a needle, and shook her head firmly.

“No, Salem Sheridan,” she said, “we’ll see it out awhile yet.”

“Responsible of Brightwater is our *guest!*” Rozasharn of McDaniels protested.

“As were Halliday Joseph McDaniels the 14th and his wife and son, at Castle Brightwater not too many days past,” said the Granny.

“I *am* sorry about that,” I said, keeping my eye on the soup bowl as I talked, “but I was truly not expecting mischief right in the middle of a Solemn Service. And I am sorry that yourall’s supper is being spoiled on my account, I assure you.”

“This is more fun than supper,” said Boy Salem.

“This is more fun than a *picnic*,” said Charlotte, and there was general agreement among the young ones. And I had to admit that from their point of view it *was* all very entertaining; no doubt they’d be pleased to have me back any time, even if it meant they all went hungry while I was there.

The entity responsible for all this fooled us, next go-round. It was neither a coiled

poison-snake, nor a carrion bird, nor yet a loathsome mess of stuff mixed and coiled—another possibility— that gazed up at me. It made the children clap their hands, all but Eben Nathaniel, who was old enough to know better. And I felt Granny Twinsorrel’s hand come down hard and grip my shoulder.

“Is it real, *too*?” breathed one of the little girls, before Boy Salem could put in his two cents’ worth.

“Certainly not,” said their big brother Eben Nathaniel with contempt “There’s no such thing.”

And the boy had it right. There was no such thing as a unicorn, not on Old Earth, not on Ozark, and what sat before me was only an illusion. But it was beautifully formed. About eleven inches high, not counting the gleaming single horn all fluted and spiraled, as pure white as new snow, with its flawless tiny hoofs delicately poised in the soup broth and its beautiful eyes perfectly serene, soup or no soup. It even had about its neck a tiny bridle of gold, with a rosette of silver.

“*That* now,” said Granny Twinsorrel, “you’ll not touch! That’s torn it. Just put your silver spoon in the bowl, Responsible of Brightwater.”

The children were crying out that that would kill it, and Rozasharn of McDaniels was reassuring them that you can’t kill what doesn’t exist, and Salem Sheridan looked grimmer than a lot of large rocks I’d seen in my time.

Like a soapbubble, the instant my silver spoon touched the soup, the creature disappeared with an almost soundless pop. I sat there thinking, while Boy Salem—who had mightily wanted to keep the little unicorn, and I didn’t blame him, I would of liked to have it my own self—was comforted. The Granny picked up the offending bowl and handed it to the servingmaid, who looked scared to death but managed to ask, “Shall I try again, then?”

“One minute,” said the Granny. “Just keep your places and hold on. I intend to have my supper this night, and have it in *peace*.”

She plunged her hand deep into her skirt pocket—which showed me she’d either been prepared for at least some of this or always went prepared, just in case—and pulled out wards enough to seal off a good-sized mansion. The noses of the children quivered some at the reek of the garlic, and I didn’t blame them. I was sorry I dared not take off the smell... but we’d had scandal enough, I judged, for one evening. Garlic that didn’t smell and worked nonetheless would have been an offense to decency, and we’d just have to put up with the current odiferous situation for the sake of the little ones.

When every door and window was properly warded the Granny went back to her chair and sat down.

“*Now*,” she said, “let us begin again, before we all starve and none of the food left’s fit to eat. Let the soup be served, and give Responsible of Brightwater a different bowl again, and put fresh hot broth in everybody else’s.”

“The Granny’s put out,” said the servingmaid in my ear, as if I couldn’t of seen

that for myself, and she set down a fresh bowl of soup at my place. Where it stayed soup, though I took my first bite gingerly. I had no interest in something like a mouthful of live worms and straight pins.

“Responsible of Brightwater,” said Salem Sheridan Lewis then, all of us sedately eating our soup, “because I approve of the Confederation of Continents, and because I despise mischief—not to mention treason—I approve of this Quest of yours. Our Granny has explained clear enough the manner in which it must be done and the reasoning behind it—and as I say, I approve. But I’ll be right pleased when you are safely home again and we Families can go back to a normal way of life. Unlike Boy Salem there, I don’t care for this sort of thing... it stinks of evil as well as the garlic.”

Another apology seemed in order, and I made it, but he waved it aside.

“You’re doing what’s necessary,” he said, “and from what we’ve heard—and seen!—it hasn’t been pleasant for you so far. No need for you to be sorry for doing your plain duty.”

Rozasharn of McDaniels paused between two bites and looked at Granny Twinsorrel.

“Granny,” she asked, “is Responsible in any danger? Any real danger, I mean, not just folderols like this exhibition at my table?”

“Don’t ask, Rozasharn,” said Granny, “you’ll only rattle cages. Just eat your supper.”

“There’s berry pie,” somebody said, and I was glad to hear it. It would take more than a few creepy-crawlies in broth to spoil my pleasure in berry pie.

“What I *won’t* do,” Salem Sheridan Lewis went on, as if nothing had been said in between, “is have any celebration of all this. It does not strike me as seemly in any way, and I won’t have it.”

“But, my dear—” Rozasharn began, or tried to begin; he went right on without so much as pausing.

“I know the conditions,” he said. “I know there must be some mark of your visit, and I’ll not interfere with the course of things by denying you that. But it will *not* be a playparty, or a festivity, or a hunt—nothing that implies I enjoy or condone such devilment as we’ve just watched. Tomorrow morning, after an ordinary breakfast—properly warded, if you please, Granny Twinsorrel, and no frogs in the gravy for my breakfast biscuits, thank you!—after a *perfectly ordinary breakfast*, we will have a parade. A *solemn*, I might say a *dignified*, parade. Three times round the Castle, three times round the town, with Responsible riding between me and Rozasharn. That satisfactory, Responsible of Brightwater?”

“Quite satisfactory,” I said. “But I’d like to put in a word.”

“Go right to it.”

“I understand your feeling about what happened just now, but I’m not at all sure

that it's got anything to do with wickedness."

What I meant was that I was a lot more convinced that I could lay all this to Granny Golightly and her Magician of Rank hotting up my Quest for me than to the traitor behind the misuse of magic on Brightwater. But Salem Sheridan Lewis was not interested in my opinions.

"Magic," he said, looking at me like a bug on a pin beneath his gaze, "is for *certain* purposes. Crops. Healing. Weather. Dire peril. Naming. It is *not* for the usage we saw it given at this table, and I'll have in the Reverend and the Granny both as soon as you're gone to clean out the last trace of it. I have no trouble at all recognizing sin when I see it, young woman."

I held my tongue.

"Now," he went on, "this parade. Well begin at seven sharp, and anybody not there on the mark will be left behind. Is that clear? Not to mention what will *happen* to any such person when we get back—I want our support set out unmistakable for all to see, and be done with it."

"You stand for the Confederation, then?" I asked, while the berry pie was being handed round. It might not of been necessary, but I liked my knots well tied, and this was a man of strong opinions.

"Responsible of Brightwater," said the Master of Castle Lewis, in a voice like the thud of an iron bell-clapper, "if every last turntail Kingdom on this *planet* votes against us, Castle Lewis stands for the Confederation. We'll be at the Jubilee, never you fear, and our votes where they belong."

"Hurrah!" shouted Boy Salem. Unfortunately. An Attendant scooped him out of his chair like a sea creature out of its shell, and off he went—reasonably quietly—under the young man's sturdy arm. There was apparently a standard procedure in these cases.

I rested easy that night at Castle Lewis. Granny Twinsorrel warded my room double, and my nose had grown dulled to the garlic by the time I finally found myself in one of the high hard narrow beds the Lewises considered regulation. Not even a dream to disturb me. But the sun that came flooding through my windows in the morning woke me early enough; and when Tambrey of Motley knocked at my door with my wake-up tea she found me already in my traveling dress, sitting sedately in a cedar rocker waiting for her, and only my bare feet to show I'd not been up long.

I drank the tea slowly, enjoying the peacefulness of the morning, and the well-run propriety—a tad constraining, but well-run—of this Castle, and gave over my thinking to how I'd doll Sterling up for this parade. It had to be elegant, and it needed to be memorable, but I must not *overdo* it or I'd offend my host. It was a neat little problem, and the kind of thing I liked to ponder over, a good way to begin a morning.

I settled finally on something a bit beyond what Salem Sheridan Lewis would of liked, and a bit less than what *Sterling* would have—she was vain, even for a Mule.

Rosettes in her ears in the Brightwater colors, and streamers braided in her tail—which I could triple-loop, for good measure—and me in my splendiferous traveling garb.

We went three times round the Castle, and three times round the town, as specified, the people lining the streets in Sundry best and cheering us on our way, holding up the babies to gawk at the glitter going by. Salem Sheridan even unbent so far as to put a single Attendant at the head of the parade with a silver horn, and allowed him to blow one long note at every third corner.

But I did not get to hear Rozasharn of McDaniels sing even one ballad, not even one *hymn*, though I asked politely enough as we returned from our three times round. That would have been too much like frivolity to suit either Rozasharn’s husband, or Granny Twinsorrel, or, for that matter, Eben Nathaniel Lewis the 17th.

“She sings in church,” said Salem Sheridan, “and does a very good job of it. And that’s sufficient.”

It was days like this that I could see the advantages of the single state most clearly.

CHAPTER NINE



The party the Purdys gave for me went very well—I threw in a little something here and there of my own, to make sure it would. The pies that would of gotten salt in place of sugaring didn’t after all—that got noticed in time. And the beer that had gone flat because somebody left it sitting out overnight acquired some new bubbles in a way that wasn’t strictly natural. And when Donovan Elihu Purdy the 40th got his boot toe under a rough spot in the rug and was headed for a broken hip sure as an egg’s got no right angles, he managed to land—without doing her any harm, and in fact she looked as if she rather enjoyed it—in the lap of a woman of fine substantial size. Instead of flat out on the floor.

What I was doing was known as meddling, and it was not looked on with any special favor. One of the first things a girl learned in Granny School, right there at the beginning with keeping your legs crossed and how not to scorch milk, was “Mind your own business and leave other people *be*,” I hadn’t forgotten.

Howsomever, I was fed up to here by that time with listening to every clattering tongue on Ozark meanmouthing the Purdys. My tolerance had been first reached and then exceeded. I had even realized, a lot more belatedly than did me any credit, that I was guilty of the same thing myself. Taking that silly Ivy of Wommack for a Purdy, for instance, for *no other reason* than that she was silly and looked like she didn’t eat right. There was a name for it all, and not a very nice name either—*Prejudice*, that was its ugly name.

And I’d had time to muse some on the essential *meanness* of human beings.

Isolated as they were, the Twelve Families had had no people of black skin among them, nor any of brown or yellow, either. Probably there was a smidgen of Cherokee blood someplace, from the long-ago days, but it had hundreds of years since disappeared in the inundation of Scotch, Welsh, and Irish genes that the Ozarkers carried. Only the brown eyes here and there had survived our outrageous *whiteness*. And so, lacking anybody colored differently than ourselves to make our scapegoat, we'd picked the Purdys out for the role.

And of course they *filled* it, once elected, which encouraged everybody to go on with it. Naturally they did. Nothing is more sure to make you spill the tray you're carrying than knowing for certain and certain that everybody's just watching you and waiting for you to do that. Waiting so they can look at each other, and all of them be thinking, even if they scruple to say it: "Purdys! Really, they beat all!"

As I say, I'd gotten a bellyful of that, and it was on my list of things to be tackled when I got some leisure again. High time we took some Purdy daughters in hand and taught them what a self-fulfilling prophecy *was*, and how to go about canceling one.

We had a fine party, therefore. The food was good, including those pies, and the drink was good, and the bouquet presented to me with a nice rhyme on the Castle bandstand by three little girls of just the sort I had in mind was fresh and beautiful. The one sprig of blisterweed I saw behind a red daisy I threw over the bandstand railing without anybody seeing me, and I had my leather gloves on at the time. No harm done, and an easy job later getting the poisonous oil off the glove.

The Purdys were plainly worried about how much the Farsons and the Guthries had seen fit to tell me of their recent doings, and I saw no harm in that. I dropped hints; and one by one they took me aside to confess some piece of foolishness and tell me how much they regretted it. Which is good for the soul, the stomach, and the disposition.

By the time it was all over, and me tucked up in my bed—an *ample* bed, for a welcome change, that a person could stretch out in it without falling off on the floor—the Purdys were fairly glowing. They'd done themselves proud, and done me honor, and nothing had Gone Wrong. And you could see what a new and delightful feeling that was for them.

I lay there and reviewed it in my mind as I fell asleep, and I was well satisfied. It was a start, and I'd carry it further when I got home. As for treason... not the Purdys. They were doing well to just get through the ordinary day, without introducing any magical complications.

And then the Gentle came to me in the night, and woke me with full formality. I was not expecting that

"Responsible of Brightwater," it said at my bedside, "you who bear the keys and keystones, daughter of all the Grannys and mother of all the Magicians and all the Magicians of Rank—awaken and speak with me!"

I can't say I was addressed like *that* often. It brought me bolt upright instantly, clutching the bedclothes. There'd been a Responsible of Brightwater hundreds of

years ago who'd perhaps been called all those things, and may have deserved them, for all I knew, but it was a new experience for me, and my teeth needed brushing, and I had not the first faintest notion what I was supposed to say. This constituted a kind of diplomatic exchange between two humanoid races, and for sure required all the formality there was going, but how exactly did you be formal in your nightgown and all mussed and grubby from sleep, and taken wholly and entirely by surprise?

I'm ashamed to say that I settled for, "Dear goodness, just a minute, please!" and added, "I shall return at once," for good measure, hoping that at least sounded hifalutin, and bolted for the dressing-room that went with my guestchamber in Castle Purdy. There wasn't time to change the nightdress, but I did add my shawl and tend to my hair and teeth and face, and I was back in my bed propped up on the pillows for audience before the Gentle could of counted to twenty-four. *Nervous*, but I was there.

This was a real Gentle, no baby trick like the Skerry on the well curb; and it was waiting for me patiently, standing there beside my bed in silence, till I should collect myself and respond in some sensible fashion. I saw that it was a female—*she*, then, was waiting for me patiently. I searched my memory for the old phrases, and prayed they'd be the right ones.

"I am happy to see you, dear friend of the Twelve Families," I began, "more happy than I can say." Was that right? I hoped so. "And may I know how you are called?"

She told me, and I found I could say it competently enough. Her name was T'an K'ib; not too difficult for an Ozarker tongue. It was for the sake of our rare speech with the Gentles that we had added the glottal stop to our Naming alphabet all those many years ago; for all the sounds of their language except that one the alphabet of Old Earth served well enough. (Not that the Gentles were interested in their name-totals, despising all magic and anything to do with magic as they did. But it delighted First Granny to put a twenty-seventh letter in the alphabet. Three nines, nine threes— *much* improved over the twenty-six we'd always had to make do with previously.)

"Greetings, T'an K'ib," I said slowly, "and I beg your pardon if my words don't come easily... your people visit us rarely, and we have little chance for converse. You honor me; I thank you for coming and welcome you in the name of Castle Brightwater."

It was an honor, and no mistake. The Gentles were a people so ancient we could scarcely bring the numbers to mind; their history was said to be a matter of formal *record* for more than thirty thousand years. By their reckoning we Ozarkers had only just popped up on this planet like mushrooms in a badly drained yard, and we merited about the same degree of attention. They considered us a backward and primitive race—and were probably right, from their perspective—and they saw us only when absolute necessity demanded. I had never seen a Gentle before, nor my mother either; I believe that Charity of Guthrie's mother claimed to have.

T'an K'ib wore only a hooded cloak, and wore that out of deference to Ozarker

morals, I assumed. A being that is covered head to foot with soft white fur has little need for clothing. She was not quite three feet tall, if my guess was right (and I was good at judging such things), and I knew she was female because she had no beard or neckruff. Her eyes, the pupils vertical like a cat's, were thick-lashed and the color of wood violets, the deepest purple I had ever seen in a living creature.

We understood the Gentles, after a fashion; they were physically quite reasonable for the planet. The Skerrys, that were the only other intelligent species native to Ozark—unless you counted the Mules, and perhaps you'd better—we didn't understand at all. Not how their skeletons supported their height; not how their metabolisms functioned; not anything about them. No one had ever found or seen or (praise the Twelve Corners) stolen a Skerry bone, but whatever its substance was it had to be something different from what held us Ozarkers upright in our skins. The Gentles, on the other hand, could be looked upon as roughly equivalent to furred Little People without wings; and we'd been well acquainted with several Little Peoples before we ever left Old Earth. The Gentles did not alarm us; *we* alarmed *them*.

“And I greet you in the name of all the Gentles,” she said to me. “We are troubled, Responsible of Brightwater, sorely troubled. I come to you on behalf of all my people to ask that you put an end to that trouble.”

I wondered what sort of power she thought I had, to word her request like that, and doubted she would of known what to make of me peeling pans of potatoes at Brightwater because the Granny needed all the servingmaids to gather herbs, and had set *me* to make certain of that day's mashed potatoes. We had myths aplenty of the Gentles, and tales among the Teaching Stories; it looked as though they might also have myths of us. The idea that I figured in those myths, and maybe prominently, made me uneasy.

“I will do whatever I can do,” I said.

“You can do whatever is necessary,” she said at once. “And whatever is *dyst'al*.”

Dyst'al. One of the few words of the Gentle speech that we understood, and fortunate for us that they had not had the same trouble learning our Panglish. *Dyst'al* meant something like “unforbidden and permitted and not beyond the bounds,” and something like “good for all the people,” and something like “characteristic of the actions of a reasonable and wholesome person having power,” and something like “well mannered.” She was telling me, clear enough, what she expected. Whether I could fulfill those expectations remained to be seen.

There was only a sliver of moonlight; she stood in the feeble ray that fell through the near window. I would have liked some light myself, because it was hard enough to judge the voice of a non-Terran even when you could see the features of the face clearly. I had learned that early, watching the threedy films again and again. But the Gentle preferred the dark, would not care for the exposure, and would be greatly offended if I were to set a glow about her; I would have to strain my ears and hope for the best.

“Be comfortable, friend T’an K’ib,” I said, “and tell me what it is you want of me. Will you sit here near me, so that I may hear you more easily?”

She went to the foot of my bed and stepped handily up to sit on its turned rail, using the blanket chest placed there as a kind of step to climb on. She settled her cloak around her and let the hood fall back, and by the feeble moonlight I saw that her ears had been pierced five times—in each there hung five separate tiny crystals. *Five* crystals; this was no mere messenger, and I bowed my head slightly to acknowledge her rank.

“May I begin?” she asked.

“Please do.”

“We are the Gentles,” she said, “or so you call us; we are the Ltlancanithf’al. We have been on this planet for fifty thousand years. In our caves the inscriptions name our ancestors for more than thirty thousand of those years... we go far, far back into time. My people, daughter of Brightwater, were here *long* before yours.”

“That is certainly true,” I said carefully.

“Our claims are prior.”

“That, too,” I said. “Of course.”

“And when your people came here, and your vessel fell into the Outward Deeps, and only by the grace of the Goddess did any one of you escape to set foot on our land, your people made *treaties*, Responsible of Brightwater. Solemn treaties. We ask that they be honored.”

Oh, dear. Never mind the slight conflict in the myths of the Landing, this was no time to compare tales and quibble over the identity of rescuers. The question was, what did she mean—they asked that the treaties be honored? That any Ozarker would have violated the treaties was beyond conception, I would have staked my life on that. We *do not* break our word.

“My friend T’an K’ib,” I asked, “do you come here to tell me that my people have violated their sworn oaths? A Gentle does not lie—but I find that hard to believe.”

And if I was wrong, and they had? I thought of blustering Delldon Mallard Smith, the ugly man of the ugly name... and I thought of the easy malicious ways of Michael Stepforth Guthrie, and I cast around in my mind for other possibilities. No Granny would of tampered, but the men were another matter. And if they had—what was I to do? I felt four years old on the outside and four hundred years old on the inside, and I hoped my brain was not as cold as the rest of me. I longed for a pentacle, and my own Granny Hazelbide, and the safe walls of my own Castle around me. And here I was, of all unhandy places, at Castle *Purdy*.

“Responsible of Brightwater,” she said, “I would not tell you that we are certain; I would not go so far. It may be that there has as yet been no violation. It is to forestall such a thing that I am come to you this night.”

“Tell me, then,” I said. “I will listen until you have told me everything that disturbs you; and I will not interrupt.”

And she began to talk, in the faintly foreign archaic Panglish the First Granny had taught her people, and that I had learned from many boring hours listening to the microtapes while I begged to be let go out and play instead. I blessed every one of those hours now, seeing as I understood her with ease, and I supposed she’d spent fully as many hours herself listening to the Teachers of her people, who passed down the knowledge of Panglish without benefit of tapes or any other thing but their wondrous memories and their supple throats.

There was trouble, she told me. Much trouble on Arkansaw, where the Guthries and the Farsons were even more openly feuding than had been admitted to me, by her account. Where the Purdys were frantic, trying desperately to play both sides of the feud, but faced with an eventual choice made under great pressure. There were, she told me, strange comings and goings in the nights.

“There was a meeting in what you choose to call the Wilderness Lands of Arkansaw,” she said, “not three nights ago. The men there were not all of Arkansaw, some had come very far... some wore the crests of Kintucky and Tinaseeh, the Families known as Wommack and Traveller. It went on all the night long—our children had no sleep—and then, as *thieves* comport themselves, all stole away at first light. A Gentle does not spy, I remind you; thus, I cannot tell you what they spoke of. What we heard we heard only because a loud voice in the night carries far in an ill-mannered throat... but they were not telling each other pleasant tales to while away the hours. That much was clear.”

She stopped for a moment, and I waited, and then she went on.

“It was sworn, Responsible of Brightwater, sworn and sealed—the Gentles were to be left alone. And none of your magic was to touch our people, for all of time. Nor were we ever to be part of your... feuding. If you have forgotten, I am here to remind you —*so read* the treaties.”

I let my breath out, slowly, wondering where in me the knowledge was that I supposedly could put to use in circumstances such as these. I felt no revelations bubbling within me, no sealed-off memories with their locks dropping away.

“Has a hand been raised against you?” I asked T’an K’ib. “Any hand? Any weapon?”

“Not as of this night.”

“Has any sharp word been spoken? Any threat made? Has any Ozarker actually breached the privacy of your homes, T’an K’ib?”

“Not as of this night.”

“None?”

“You must understand,” she said, no edge to her voice, but firm, “that what *you* consider a hand raised, or a sharp word, or privacy breached, may not be the same as what a Gentle would so judge. There are many, many thousands of us in the

caves of the Wilderness Lands of Ozark, daughter of Brightwater, and we live in peace, and our lives are not tainted by sorcery. We have made adjustments unasked, when the mines of your people cut well beyond the limits given them, and we have not begrudged those adjustments, though no law held us to them.”

I could imagine, thinking of the Farsons and Guthries and Purdys, always wanting to cut just a little deeper into a vein, probably shaking the Gentles in their sleep and filling their homes with gemdust, or worse. And I was ashamed.

“When I return to Castle Brightwater,” I said, my voice harsh in my throat, “I will see that that is put right. *That* I can do. There will be no more encroachments on your territory, and where such has taken place, your ‘adjustments’ will be readjusted. My word on it, and my apologies.”

She made an easy gesture with her head, as if to show how little this mattered; I, the Ozarker, felt bigger and greedier, as I was no doubt meant to feel.

“If it can be done, so be it,” she said, “if not—what is past is past. But if the three Families of the continent of Arkansaw go to open war among themselves, and if the Families of Kintucky and Tinaseeh join them, blood will flow in the Wildernesses and it may well be *our* blood. That we cannot allow, daughter of Brightwater. *That* would be in violation of *all* treaties.”

“War, T’an K’ib? Your people fear *war*?”

I suppose I sounded foolish; she sounded indulgent.

“It is not an exotic word,” she said. “Think of guns and lasers and bombs and gases and missiles. All very small and simple Panglish words, and well known to you.”

“Dear friend, dear T’an K’ib,” I protested, “Ozarkers do not go to war—it was the violence of one human hand raised against another, much of it part of war and much of it without any explanation but madness, that drove us here in The Ship one thousand years ago. As a Gentle does not lie, T’an K’ib—an Ozarker does not *war*!”

“You yourself,” she pointed out, “have let pass the word ‘feud’ without protest. Our Teachers are quite clear on the meaning of that word, and it is violent.”

“Ah, T’an K’ib,” I said, almost weak with relief, “it is not what it appears to be at all. This is a misunderstanding.”

“Explain, please.”

“You know of the Confederation of Continents of Ozark?”

“Your government,” she said flatly.

“As much government as we have,” I said, “and hard won. We are at a tricky *political* crossroads, we of the Confederation. And the Families you name, the ones that have so disgracefully disturbed the harmony of your homes, they are not plotting violence. They are plotting against the Confederation... they are plotting the casting of *votes*, not the launching of missiles! Nothing more, T’an K’ib; nothing

less. There is not even a question of dominance among them.”

“That makes no sense,” she said. “I beg your pardon if I speak sharply, but it makes no sense.”

“If,” I said, “one thinks carefully of the Ozarkers—and no reason, the Twelve Corners granted, why your people should ever do anything of the kind—it does make sense. And no offense taken. First, no Ozarker lifts a hand against another, not since we left Earth; the only exception would be the occasional child, that must be taught it can’t hit its playmate because there’s a toy they both want at the same time, and the occasional drunken fool, that is promptly seen to and differs little from the child. I’d hazard that even among *your* people the young and the foolish must learn.”

“Granted,” she said.

“But what the dissenting Families want is not that one should be superior to the rest, but that all should be equal, and *no* dominance. What they want, T’an K’ib, is isolation.”

“It is an absurdity.”

“No doubt,” I said reluctantly, my loyalty giving me a bit of trouble around the edges. “Nevertheless—it is so.”

“There must be community,” she said, “and this is a small planet. What you describe is anarchy.”

I was reminded, a moment only, of Sharon of Clark... but there was a difference. This was no child who faced me, prattling memorized cant from Granny School. This was a diplomat, high in the ranks of a people whose sophistication surpassed ours as Granny Gableframe’s surpassed a babe’s. She knew quite well what anarchy was, and she knew what went with it. No doubt her people had seen its effects a time or two in their long history. No doubt it meant, to her and to them, rape and pillage and murder, barbarian hordes pouring through the cavehomes and tearing out the ancient tunnels as they went. She had no reason to believe an Ozarker un-governed would behave any differently.

“They want to go back to being boones,” I said, wishing sadly that there was some way to make her understand us—us aliens.

“It is not a concept that I know,” said T’an K’ib. “The Teachers do not mention it”

“Nor is it a concept that will burden you unduly,” I told her. “A very long time ago—by Earth reckoning—on the planet from which my people came, there was a man whose name was Daniel Boone. If he had a middle name, we have no record of it—I’m sorry. And it is written that whenever the time came that Daniel Boone could see the smoke of a neighbor’s chimney from his own homeplace, those neighbors were too near, and he moved on.”

The Gentles lived in chambers carved beneath the earth, and it was said that they observed a stringent privacy of manner. But they lived crowded close as twin babes in a womb, and their families were not small. I doubted she would see much sense to

the story of Daniel Boone.

She was silent and small, sitting there thinking over what I had said, and possessed of a kind of presence that much larger creatures might have envied. I wished that we could have been friends. I wished that I could have visited *her*—but the Gentles saw to it that none but a very small Ozarker child could enter the doors they set up. I would never know, unless I looked in a way that the treaties forbid me, what it was like inside the caves of the Gentles. And, I reminded myself sternly, it was none of my business to know.

“Responsible of Brightwater?” she asked, finally.

“Yes, dear friend?”

“It may be that what you say is true, though it does not seem reasonable.”

“To the best of my knowledge, it is true, however it sounds. And I believe my knowledge on *this* matter is reliable.”

“I see... I *think* I see.”

I thought she would leave me then, but she sat quietly, not even a shape any longer since the moonlight had waned. Evidently whatever this was, it was not over.

“Friend T’an K’ib,” I hazarded, “do you want something else of me? You have only to ask.”

“Your guarantee.”

“Of no war? Consider it given. Of an end to mining beneath your bedchambers and your streets? Of course, I guarantee it; that it ever happened was due only to carelessness, not to malice. When I speak to the Families guilty of that, they will be deeply ashamed.”

“No,” she said. She shook her head, and I heard the crystals in her ears sound, softly. Little bells in the darkness. “That is not all.”

“What, then?”

“*Whatever* it is that your people are about,” she said, “however it may be, whether this desire to be a boon that you describe to me, or a feud, or a greater evil... Your guarantee, daughter of Brightwater, that we Gentles will take *no part* in any of it! No part, however small! Not even by accident... as you say, by carelessness.”

Well, I never liked lying. I liked lying to a Gentle even less than I liked ordinary lying; since they did not lie, they were as vulnerable to it as they would have been to the kick of a boot. More so; the kick they could at least have seen coming. However, there are times when a person does what she must. I gave her her guarantee, all solemn and sealed and packaged in phrases that made me feel silly even to use them, and she went away as unheralded as she had come, leaving me to toss fretfully through the rest of that night. My conscience was raw in me.

What I hadn’t dared tell her was that there was only one way that I could make my guarantees real. What her myths said I had in the way of power I did not know;

her people had royalty, and perhaps the ancient rights that went with that. I had none.

I could do what she asked of me, yes. But only in one way. Only by setting wards of the strongest (and from her point of view, the foulest and most barbaric) magic known to me, around every cave and every burrow and every smallest scrap of Wilderness her people inhabited. It was a flagrant violation of the treaties she had mentioned with every other breath; it was also the only way that what had to be done *could* be done. And at that it would have to wait till I was back at Castle Brightwater and had all my laboratories and my Magicians at my disposal—and I had not told her that, either. I supposed she would tell her people there was to be no delay.

I knew perfectly well that she would rather have died, and all her kin with her, than be protected by the magic they so abhorred —by “sorceries.” For sure, it would *not* be judged *dyst’al*. And I did not intend to be the person that shattered illusions that had lasted tens of thousands of years, or the person that ended up with the lives of such a people and their blood on her hands. It might be there was some other way out, something I should have thought of, but it did not come to my mind, and I was colder than I had ever been in my life; and I gathered what little of my wits I had left about me, and I lied.

CHAPTER TEN



Castle Wommack sat high at the northwest corner of Kintucky, in a landscape of tangled trees and thick ground cover, steep hills and ragged cliffs and crags; only Tinaseeh was wilder, and not by much. The Castle was bigger than it needed to be, rambling along the edge of a bluff above a ravine at the bottom of which there surely flowed a river, though I couldn’t see it from the air. I would of guessed it to be at least twice the size of Castle Brightwater, and larger than any castle on Arkansaw, the Parsons’ included. And I could understand why, though I might privately question the use of so much time and energy for a single structure. The natural stone it was built of was abundant—if they hadn’t used it to build the Castle they’d of had to cart the stuff away and fill up ravines with it, after all. Every time I flew low to get a look at the land I saw stretches where boulders big as squawker coops were strewn around like so much carelessly flung salt, leaving the vegetation to grow over and around and in between the jutting stones as best it could... and I was not looking at the Wilderness Lands, mind you. This was the “cleared” area of Kintucky.

Furthermore, even the size it was, Castle Wommack was dwarfed by the country round it, and looked like a doll’s castle more than a proper human dwelling. No doubt they drew some comfort from its size through the long winters when the winds howled down those ravines and ripped up huge trees by the roots, to pile them in heaps against the bald faces of the bluffs. I could see the point to it

It was four days’ hard flying at regulation speed from Castle Purdy to Castle Wommack, and except for a brief stretch over the Ocean of Storms between the two

continents I had not done any distance by SNAPPING. I was running out of anything to read, for one thing. And then this country was new to me, the Twelve Corners only knew when I might get back this way again, and I felt it behooved me to see all I could and note it well.

Once I left the coast of Arkansaw and was beyond the shipping lanes, all the way over that vast country up almost to the edge of the town built around Castle Wommack, I saw nary a soul. There were farms—clearly very large farms, and why not?—spread out over the surface of the land. And every now and again I would see the telltale white line of a fence built of that same stone, running along the edge of a cleared field, or catch sight maybe of light glancing off solar collectors on a roof. But not until I actually neared Booneville, the capital (and only) city of Kintucky, not till I saw the Castle ahead of me, did I begin to see people. Kintucky had only been settled in 2339, just ten years before Tinaseeh, and the latest figures I had for the whole kingdom showed under seven thousand citizens living here. More than a third of those lived in or near Booneville itself.

They met me properly at the Castle, and made me welcome; Jacob Donahue Wommack the 23rd, a widower these past two years, and his five sons and seven daughters, and numerous wives and husbands. There was a band playing as I brought Sterling down on the roadway winding up to the Castle gates, and people lining both sides throwing flowers and waving bright banners. Seven Attendants in green and silver Wommack livery followed me up the ramp and through the gates. And where I could catch glimpses of the streets and buildings of the town I saw that they'd hung garlands everywhere there was something to hang a garland *on*. Booneville was decked out for full festival in my honor, and I was surprised; I supposed it must come of the loneliness out here, and so few occasions for any kind of partying. Considering the hasty excuses for celebrations thrown together along my way so far, it made me smile; I tried, without any success, to imagine my cousin Anne at Castle McDaniels going to all this trouble for me, or the stern Lewises even *countenancing* such a fuss.

The inner court of Castle Wommack, inside the gates, was the size of a respectable playing field; you could have raced Mules there without much inconvenience. And they had it set up for a fair, with long tables of food and drink, and strolling singers and dancers, and a whole play being put on on a stage that fit neatly into a far corner, and crowds of young people milling in their Sundy best. They led Sterling away to their stables and then turned their energies to entertaining me, with a dogged determination that was at first highly flattering. And then, after a while, it began to make me uneasy.

I was sitting on a low bench with Jacob Donahue and three of his daughters, watching twelve couples move through an elaborate circle dance done to the tune of dulcimer, guitar, and fiddle, finishing my fourth mug of excellent dark ale and much too full from the food they'd been plying me with, when I finally realized that things were genuinely *odd*. True—they were celebrating my visit as no other Castle had even considered celebrating it, so far as I could tell. True—the sounds in the inner court, and those that floated in over the walls from the town, were all laughter and

song and merrymaking and pleasure. But there was something strange... and then, all at once, I knew what it was.

The broad front of Castle Wommack, five stories high of pearly white stone, forming a great muleshoe shape around that court, had windows everywhere. I took time to count those on the first story alone, and there were forty of them; multiply that by five and you got roughly two hundred windows facing on this court, give or take a dozen for variations.

And every last blessed one of them was not only empty of the people I would of expected to see looking down on the fair and taking part from above us; it was closed tight as a tick, and shuttered.

I clapped politely for the circle dance as it drew to its close, and clapped again for the musicians, and took time to smile at a small boy that had decided he was a juggler and was doing three pieces of fruit considerable harm right under my nose. And then I stood up, brushed off my skirts, and said: "I'll be going in now, ladies; Jacob Donahue Wommack."

A daughter named Gilead, freckled and slender and twenty-odd, stood up with me. "It's much pleasanter out here," she said, "and I can recommend the cake they're setting out down beside the stage; it's extra good lightcake, and you haven't had any of it yet, I don't believe."

"The reason it's pleasanter out here," I said, measuring my words to make them fall with proper force, "is because whoever is in *there*"—I pointed to the front of the Castle proper—"is suffocating."

"Daddy," said Gilead of Wommack, "I believe she's noticed."

"That I have," I snapped.

"My dear young woman," Jacob Donahue began, but I cut him off short.

"I'll be going in now," I said. "If you care to come with me, you're welcome; if you prefer to stay out here while your faces crack, pretending to be having fun, that's your privilege. You all do just as you like—but I am going inside and see what's back of your shutters."

I looked at them again, row on row of heavy wooden eyes all shut tight and black against the stone, and I shuddered. A good job they'd done of keeping me distracted, that I'd sat out here for near two hours and not seen that!

"We'll go with you, Responsible," said Gilead, and the other two stood to join us. "But most of these people *are* having fun, and I'm pleased that they are. It's a hard life here, and not much in the way of party times—don't let's spoil it for them."

The false cheer dropped off Jacob Donahue like a scarf off a sloped shoulder as he stood up, slowly, and I could see that he was in fact wholly miserable.

"Like Gilead says," he told me, "we'll come along... but I'd be grateful if we do it without drawing any attention. I've no more mind to spoil the others' day than my daughters have. You, girls, you see to it that Responsible is sort of tucked away

among the rest of you, and don't act as if we were in any hurry to get anywhere."

We *strolled*, therefore, over to the Castle and in through its front door. My feet were itching to run, as much from annoyance at my own thick head as anything else, but I did as Jacob Donahue bid, and—eventually—we were inside.

Inside, and the door closed behind us, and the silence of an empty church. Not one laugh, not one note of music, came through those shutters, which was no doubt the intention. The fair might as well of been back on Marktwain; it did not exist inside this Castle.

"Well, well, well," I said, "this is a pretty pass! What's happening here at Castle Wommack to account for this?"

From the top of a stairway ahead of me a woman's voice called down, and I peered up in the dimness to see if I knew the face that went with it, but it was a stranger. She wore plain enough dress to suit even the Lewises, her hair was pulled back and tucked into a kerchief, and she carried a basin of steaming liquid in her hands.

"We've sickness here, young miss of Brightwater," she said in a bitter voice. "That's what's 'happening' here! Mr. Wommack, there's another three taken with it just since you went out this morning, and I'm truly scared at the way Granny Goodweather looks... I don't know what to do for her, and the Magician says he doesn't either—what next, I ask you, Mr. Wommack? I'm at the end of my wits!"

"Your Granny is sick?" I asked. I was astonished. A Granny was human, of course, but it was their job to *tend* the sick, not lie among them. It was obligatory for a Granny to suffer from "rheumatism," that went with the territory, but I couldn't remember any Granny ever being *really* sick for more than an hour or two, or dying any other way than peacefully in her bed at an age well beyond one hundred years.

"Both of them, miss," said the woman on the stairs. "Granny Goodweather was taken first two days ago; and then yesterday Granny Copperdell as well... and they'd both been poorly, I'd remarked on that."

I turned on the Wommacks behind me to demand of them exactly what they'd been *doing* about this—sick Grannys, indeed!—but one look was enough to close my mouth. They were Wommacks, that was all that was wrong with them; they'd of done nothing, or as near to nothing as couldn't be noticed.

The Purdys, now, were forever in some sort of mess, and usually by their own stupidity. But they did put some effort into their actions. (They would in fact have been better off if they'd learned to put in less; usually they got themselves so entangled and benastied that it took more effort to extricate them than it would of just keeping them out of it all from the beginning.)

With the Wommacks, it was different. They were capable people, and intelligent, and sensible. About most things, that is. So long as whatever obstacle faced the Wommacks couldn't be laid at the door of the famous Wommack bad *luck*, they just turned to and took care of things. Bad luck, though, the Wommack curse, the long burden of paying and paying for the Granny that had laid out the Improper

Name... anything that seemed due to that, they just gave up on, on the principle that it was no use trying in such a situation. This, I gathered, was one of those situations.

I tucked up my skirts then and ran up the stairs toward the woman that still stood there, the water in her basin getting colder by the passing minute, if it was water, and paid the family behind me no more mind.

“You’re Castle staff?” I asked the laggard nurse, and she nodded.

“Your name, please.”

“Violet,” she said. “Violet of Smith.”

“Very well, Violet of Smith—take me this instant to the sickroom, and let me see how bad things are in this place!”

“Which sickroom, miss?” she asked me. “We’ve nothing but sickrooms on this whole second floor.”

“How *many* are down?” I demanded, but she only shrugged.

“I’ve lost count, miss... might could be thirty, might could be twice that.”

“And both your Grannys.”

“And both our Grannys.”

“Well, take me to Granny Copperdell, then,” I said, “and set down that basin—whatever it is, it’s no use to anybody now.”

She turned without a word, but I had to take the useless basin from her hands myself, and I followed where she led me. I could smell the sickness now, and I wanted those windows open at the front of the Castle, and fresh air in here as fast as it could decently be accomplished.

“Are many people sick in the town?” I asked her, wishing she’d hurry.

“Oh no, miss,” she said. “Not in the town. Only in the Castle.”

Hmmph. That would be fuel for the dratted Wommack curse, of course.

She knocked twice at a doorway, and then opened it and stood aside to let me pass, saying, “That’s Granny Copperdell there in the bed, miss, and I hope you can do something for her, for I surely can’t. And I’m too busy to stay with you, so you’ll excuse me, please.” And she was gone.

“Well, Granny Copperdell!” I said, making it a cautious challenge. “So this is how you run things!”

Hers was the only bed in the room, and she was tiny in it; three featherbeds under her, I was willing to wager, and half a dozen pillows propping her up in them.

“Land, who is it bothering me *now*?” came from the depths of the bedclothes, and I saw an encouraging flurry. “Can’t leave an old woman to die in peace, can you? Come near me and torment me again with one of your so-called Magicians and you’ll find *out* if I’m sick, I warn you, and me that’s *sick and tired of warning* you-all! Magicians! Phaugh—what’s a Magician know about healing? No more use

than— Well, who *be* you?”

It did my heart good. She might be sick, but she surely was not dying. She was behaving absolutely as a Granny ought to behave, and that meant I’d get useful information here at least.

“It’s only me, Granny Copperdell, Responsible of Brightwater,” I said. “And sorry to see you so poorly. May I come sit by you there?”

“Come ahead,” she ranted, “come right ahead! Why ask? If it’s not one sort of meanness, it’ll be another... why can’t you stay home where you belong, ’stead of meddling in our affairs, and tormenting an old woman as is about to draw her last breath?”

I tried the bed, but it was impossible; you sank into the feather-beds and disappeared from sight unless you weighed no more than a Granny, and that did not apply to me.

“You get a chair and get yourself off my bed!” she ordered me, whacking at me with a handkerchief like I was a gerdafly; and I did so gladly, pulling the chair up close beside her head.

“Now, Granny Copperdell,” I said firmly, “there’s no need for you to keep on with your carry-on. It doesn’t impress me, and I’ll be no use here if I don’t hear some sense and hear it quick.”

“Likely,” she said. “Likely!”

“Granny, you know I’m right,” I said, “you a Brightwater by birth; and every Castle on this planet knows quite well why I’m traveling round it. You’re in a wild place here for sure, but this high up the reception on your comsets is certain to be perfect. You know why I’m here!”

“Took you long enough,” she muttered.

“No comset on my Mule, Granny,” I said. “I’ve been four days, and all of them *long* days, flying here, and I’ve landed only to make my camp and sleep; I’ve had no news. If I’d known there was trouble here I’d not of stopped for anything.”

She sighed then, and settled back, and I plumped up her pillows for her.

“Speak up, Granny Copperdell,” I said. “For I’ve had not one sensible word out of anybody else in this house—what am I up against?”

“Three days ago, it began,” she said. “You’d already of left Castle Purdy, I reckon.”

“Started sudden?”

“A child’s sitting on a windowsill, playing with a pretty and eating a biscuit, happy and fit as a bird,” she told me. “And then in two breaths that child is burning alive with fever, and racked head to foot with misery, and writhing like a birthing woman, fit to break your heart. I’ve never seen anything, not anything, so quick.”

I touched her forehead, though she pulled away from my hand; it was blazing hot.

“What kind of sickness is it?” I asked her.

“Well, I wish I *knew* that!” she said, fretting, and turned her head side to side on the pillows. “Think I’d be lying here like an old fool if I knew that? If I knew even the name, it might could be I’d know what to tell the idiot females in this Castle to do... what’s its name, that’s half the battle won any time.”

“And the Magician doesn’t know either.”

I said that under my breath, thinking out loud, and regretted it immediately. A Magician could set bones, and take out sick and useless organs such as an appendix, and deal with cancers. If it had been any of those, the Magician would already have taken care of the matter. And there was no Magician of Rank on Kintucky.

“I’m sorry, Granny Copperdell,” I said, before she could start on me. “I wasn’t thinking straight; just forget I said it. But you help me... tell me the symptoms of this stuff. Even the little things that you don’t really think matter.”

“High fever,” she said, reciting it like a lesson. “Racking pain in every joint and bone and muscle. That’s likely the worst of it, that pain. All the lymph glands swollen and tender, especially in the armpits. A bloody flux, and pain high on the right of the belly. Rash around the ankles and the hands, and a flaming red patch over both cheeks. Sores in the mouth, sores in the privates... Hurts to breathe, hurts to swallow, hurts to hear any noise much over a whisper—that’s why the windows are shuttered, child.”

“What have you tried for it?”

“Everything a Granny knows, and some made up new,” she said. “And none of it any use.” She was in no danger, but she was exhausted, and I was wearying her more. “I’m not a good patient for you to be observing,” she said accurately, “I’m hardly touched with it yet, and tough as I am I doubt it’ll get much worse. You go look at the others and you’ll see what it’s like.”

“Can I get you anything, Granny, before I do that?”

“You can get *on* with it, and leave off pestering me!”

I plumped the pillows up again, and checked to see that the water was easy to her reach, and I went on out and closed the door behind me. She’d keep a long while yet.

Ah, but the others; they were another matter altogether. I counted fifty-one, and they were truly sick. Even Granny Goodweather. She didn’t so much as ask me my name when I leaned over her, and that frightened me.

They lay in their beds and they twisted, slowly—I can think of no other way to describe it. As if they hung from intolerable bonds. One arm would stretch, the fingers spread like claws, pushing, pushing till I thought the fingerjoints would crack, and then the other arm, pushing against some unseen wall. And then the legs, one at a time, stretching till the soles of the bent feet lay flat against the mattress. And no more would the foot reach its terrible extension than it began to move back upon

itself... and then the arms would start. It was like a horrible, endless, solemn, tortured, dance of death; and it was very clear that it hurt them like raw flames. There were women from the town trying to tend them, but I could see that they weren't accomplishing much. Changing the bedlinens and bathing flesh, bringing them water to drink and soothing the little ones... that seemed to be it.

As for treason, the thought was indecent. The Wommacks were so grimly convinced their whole household was cursed that they considered the most absolute neutrality no more than their duty toward their fellows. Even when they were without other troubles to distract them, no Wommack took sides, for fear their bad luck would rub off on the side they'd chosen. With things as they were here right now, I could put all else out of my mind and consider only this sickness.

As it happened, I did know what it was. But I wasn't that surprised the Grannys hadn't recognized it, especially since they'd come down with it almost immediately themselves. They'd not really had time to think before their own fever set in, and it was not a common disease.

I went down the stairs and found the Wommacks still gathered there silently, waiting for me, and I had a strong suspicion looking at them that most—including the Master of this Castle—would be in their beds themselves before the day was out. Considering the number sick upstairs, they'd made a brave showing, and I credited them for that; but not a one that wasn't white around the mouth, and the red tinge coming up on their cheeks, hectic, and a line of beads of moisture at the edge of the coppery hair to betray them further. All that time out in the sun with me had surely done them no good, and I'd of bet the party food they'd put down lay heavy in their stomachs this minute like Kintucky stone.

"I know what it is," I said to them, not bothering to dawdle and back and fill.

"But neither of the Grannys had any idea, nor the Magician either!" objected a thin boy by the name of Thomas Lincoln Wommack the 9th.

"Well, I *do*," I said, "whoever does or doesn't, and the Grannys would of known, too, if they hadn't been taken themselves before they could run it down. What you have upstairs, by my count, is fifty-one cases of something called Anderson's Disease. Or, if you prefer less formality, some call it deathdance fever—which does describe it. And looking at youall, I see a few more cases to add to the count—you'd better every one of you get to your beds."

"And those upstairs?" asked Gilead.

"You need capable people up there, taking care of your sick," I said. "Not townswomen wandering around wondering where to fling water next. It's no trifle, this disease, people can *die* of it! Why haven't you sent for help?"

They looked at me, and I looked back, and I said a broad word, not caring particularly if I did shock their sensibilities. They hadn't sent for help because, being the Wommacks, they figured it would be no use anyway. Bad luck was bad luck, and those as were marked for death would die, and a lot of similarly superstitious nonsense. And I was very grateful that none of them knew something I wasn't going

to take time to think about right now, which was that Anderson's Disease was *not* contagious. If they'd known that, and it running through their castle like wildfire, I daresay they'd of just given up and died on me on the spot; I had no plans of telling them.

"Shame on you!" I said. It was uppity of me, and not kind, especially toward Jacob Donahue, who was a good fifty years my senior. But I was thoroughly disgusted. The idea of half a hundred people stretched on the rack for the last three days while helpless hands were wrung and mournful moans were made about the Wommack curse... it turned my stomach. Eventually I would have to face the problem of just who among the Magicians of Rank was behind this monstrous cruelty, but not now. Now what mattered was putting an end to that cruelty, and without delay.

"You need a Magician of Rank here," I said, "and you need him at once. There's two good ones on Arkansaw—"

"We'll have nobody from Arkansaw," said Jacob Donahue Wommack.

"I beg your pardon?"

"I say, we'll have nobody, Magician of Rank or anybody else, from Arkansaw. Not in this Castle."

"In the name of the Twelve Gates and the Twelve *Corners*, Jacob Donahue Wommack, why *ever not*?" I shouted at him. "Have you seen those people upstairs?"

"I've seen them. I live here."

"Then—"

"They're feuding on Arkansaw," he said doggedly, "and have been these past six months. No talking them out of it, either—we've had good men trying. And we want no part of it."

"At a time like *this*, you—"

I was so furious it's likely just as well that Gilead cut me off.

"Responsible of Brightwater," she said, "since distance makes no difference to a Magician of Rank, then it also makes no difference where he comes from. Do think of that."

True enough. Since a Magician of Rank was not only allowed, but *expected* to take his Mule by SNAPS instead of trundling along at sixty miles an hour, and since there was, strictly speaking, no time taken up by that process except leaving and landing, she was quite right.

"What will you accept, then?" I asked them, trying to sound a tad less arrogant.

"Anywhere but Arkansaw," said the Master of Wommack. "Anywhere atall."

"From Castle Motley, then," I said. "I don't know the man well, I've only seen him once or twice, but they say he's highly skilled. To go on with, he's a Lewis by

birth, and that means he cuts *no* corners—everything done strictly by rule, and strictly by the book. And we'll have Diamond of Motley send a Granny along as well, to give him a hand."

"You think it's worth a try?" asked Gilead.

"I do." Worth a try... I had no stomach left for arguing with these people. If and when I ever got back home, and the Jubilee over and done with, and could put my mind to something new in the way of planning, I would tackle the problem of superstition gotten out of hand in far corners. We for sure wanted the people accepting the system of magic by which this planet functioned; to lose that would be roughly comparable to losing photosynthesis, or gravity, or two and two coming up five. But this was 3012, not 1400 of Old Earth. Some balancing needed doing, clearly, or this crew would be throwing entrails and dunking for witches.

Somewhere in the back of my mind a kind of icy voice spoke up to point out that the list of things to be seen to in some vaporous unspecified "later" was getting longer and longer; and I told it to shut up. Now was not the moment for either accounting or reform.

"Jacob Donahue," I said, "will you show me where your comset room is, so that I can send for help? Or do you plan to stand there like that till everybody upstairs is dead in their beds?"

That brought him out of it, as I had expected it would.

"I'm not helpless, young woman," he said, "nor yet crippled. I'll send the message myself." And he spun on his heel—staggering only a little at the turn with his fever—and left us, with his children staring at me accusingly. I'd made their daddy unhappy, and they didn't care for that.

There was a low bench against the wall beside the Castle door at the foot of the stairs; I went on down and sat there, leaning my head gratefully back against the chilly stone. I was trembling all over. And young Thomas Lincoln came over to stand in front of me.

"Will the Magician of Rank be able to fix everybody?" he wanted to know.

"Well," I said wearily, "those as aren't too far gone, yes—he'll be able to fix them about as fast as you can say 'Magician of Rank.' He won't be able to help anyone that's really near to death—that's interfering with the laws of things, Thomas Lincoln. I'm sorry, but that's the straight of it."

"We should of sent for him sooner," said the boy.

"That you should."

"Wommacks don't care to be beholden," he told me stiffly.

"Then Wommacks must live with the consequences of their doings," I said right back.

"Responsible of Brightwater, don't be hard on the boy," one of the daughters pleaded, but I wasn't interested. If they'd called for a Magician of Rank the instant

their Grannys had said they didn't know what sickness they were dealing with, *nobody* would have been in any danger. Not one person. Now... a lot of time had passed, and a lot of suffering endured. Now, they'd be losing some of their own, to their own stupidity.

The time had come for another judicious lie, and I mustered up the strength to provide it.

"It will spread to the town unless it's seen to," I said, "and on beyond—it's stuff that spreads like wildfire. Only two things have kept that from happening before this, you hear me there? One is the size of this place, with you able to keep everybody in a room of their own; that's helped. But primarily, my good Wommacks, what's kept your illness inside this Castle is nothing but *good luck*. Plain old miraculous twelvesquare common garden variety *good luck*. Now you think on that."

A drop in the bucket, but mine own drop.

"And if your father should happen to forget, because he's got the stuff himself and I'd judge his fever's headed for this roof, the name of it is Anderson's Disease, and the access code for the computers is somewhere in the 441's. If—"

And there sat a Magician of Rank, in full regalia, with Granny Scrabble of Castle Motley seated before him on his Mule, right in the front hall on the clean-scrubbed flagstone floor.

"Mercy!" I said, and decided to stay where I was. They could get down off that animal's back, and call for an Attendant to take it away, all by themselves. I was duly impressed.

"Shawn Merryweather Lewis the 7th," said the man, "and Granny Scrabble. Both of Castle Motley, at your service."

"It's all upstairs," I told him, "and there's enough of it to last you. Fifty-odd sick of Anderson's Disease. And two of them Grannys—you might see to those two first, so they can help."

I watched them up the stairs with a feeling of relief as wide as the Castle front; it was a pure pleasure to put some of this in other hands and know they were capable. I could tell by the set of his shoulders, and the way he wasted not one second—not to mention the fact that the Granny had not opened her mouth either to fuss or to oppose him—that Shawn Merryweather Lewis the 7th could handle all of this without any further attention from me.

"Responsible of Brightwater," Gilead's voice came softly, then, "let me see you to your room. We're not completely without breeding here, though it may look some like it at this moment."

"No," I said, "you've shown breeding and to spare, Gilead of Wommack. I give you my word—nowhere on Ozark, in no Kingdom of the Twelve Families, have I been treated with the ceremony I was treated with here. And I can't really say as I expect Castle Traveller to top you. It just wasn't the best way to handle things... us down here celebrating while your people were in that pitiful state upstairs."

“We weren’t thinking clearly... or maybe we don’t know *how* to think clearly,” she said in a voice both dull and bitter.

“Gilead,” I said, “it’s not lack of breeding you’ve shown this day, but lack of proportion. Lack of *balance*, Gilead. And I lay it to just one place—you are sick yourself; of course you can’t think clearly. Now I’ll take you up on the offer of the room, because I’m worn out, and I intend to sleep the rest of the day, unless I’m needed. But you’ll take me nowhere—I want every one of you to your *own* beds, and that right smartly—and I’ll see to myself. Just give me instructions. So many flights of stairs, so many halls, so many doors—I’ll find it, you just number them off.”

Gilead of Wommack stood there, rubbing the end of her nose with one finger and frowning, all of them looking like they’d drop around her, and me doing my best to be patient. And then she said, “I know!” and put her arm around Thomas Lincoln. “Thomas Lincoln? You go holler at your uncle to see Miss Responsible to her room! Move, now!”

His uncle. I thought a bit; who would that be? I kept good enough reckoning of the Families near Marktwain, and could give you the names of all direct lines on Ozark, but I hadn’t every aunt, uncle, and cousin at the tip of my tongue.

And I had forgotten this one. I had forgotten all about him, or I would have run like a baby that’s pulled a Mule’s tail by mistake. I’d heard about him, more than enough to warn me off and make me careful, especially since my experience with Michael Stepforth Guthrie’d provided me with some new data on my current state of vulnerability to manly charms... but I had purely forgotten all about him.

When he stood before me, I looked into his eyes, and him smiling, and *knowing*; and I saw that I could fall forever into those eyes, and drown for all of time, and still not get to the bottom of what lay behind them. I was not ready for that yet, not by any number of long shots.

CHAPTER ELEVEN



I had been warned about him, most certainly—I’d been properly raised—but I had only been five years and one month old. Me and fourteen other little girls, all at Granny School together. All listening to the Teaching Stories and getting them by heart, like any other little girls. And my own beloved Granny Hazelbide, holding me tight between her bony knees, and pinching my chin between her first finger and her thumb until it hurt, so I couldn’t look away.

“Pay heed, now,” she had said, scaring me as well as the others sitting in a circle on the floor of the schoolroom watching. “This has come to Responsible of Brightwater, as it happens, but it might of been any of you, *any one* of you! Might could be it still will... you pay heed.”

He had been there in my five-year-old palm, which was already hard from climbing trees and weeding with an Oldtime Hoe, and already quick with every kind of needle (some of them not very nice). And in the leaves at the bottom of seven cups of tea, made seven times on seven consecutive days. And in the swing of the golden ring on its long chain. They'd tried again and again to read a fartime that hadn't him in it, but all in vain; he was always there.

It was called a Timecorner.

"I can't see round it," said Granny Hazelbide. "Nor can any Magician, or even Magician of Rank. Can't anybody see round it, for it's purely and wholly sealed off from *this* time."

You see I had not exactly forgotten it. More accurately, I had just shut it away in that corner of my head where things that didn't bear thinking about were stored. But I couldn't recall it coming to my mind the past five years at least, which was doing a pretty good job of keeping it at the bottom of the heap. I had no trouble getting to it, when the time came. It had these parts:

FIRST

For a Destroyer shall come out of the West; and he will know you, and you will know him, and we cannot see how that knowledge passes between you, but it is not of the body.

SECOND:

And if you stand against him, there will be great Trouble. And if you cannot stand against him, there will be great Trouble. But the two Troubles will be of different kinds. And we cannot see what either Trouble is, nor which course you should or will take, but only that both will be terrible and perhaps more than you can bear.

THIRD:

And if you fail, Responsible of Brightwater, the penalty for your failure falls on the Twelve Families; and if you stand, it is the Twelve Families that you spare.

FOURTH: And no matter what happens, it will be a long, hard time.

Well, you talk of your curses! I recall suggesting to Granny Hazelbide that the whole thing would be more suitable for my sister, Troublesome, and no doubt that was true. And I remember being told that things were far more often unsuitable, and for sure *that* was true. And then I had put it away, and I believe I had expected it to be something I had to face along around the age of forty-nine or so. That would of seemed like giving me at least a running start.

Since it was thirty years and more before I had planned for it, and since I was certainly not ready either to stand *or* fall, and since I was in the middle of a Quest at the time, not to mention a Grand Jubilee dangling just ahead of me, I chose the most prudent course I saw before me. This was no time for theatrics. This was no time for flinging myself in the teeth of the winds to see what was at the very bottom of that teacup. I was *busy*!

I knew him all right, and he knew me, and when I fled him like a squawker hen flees a carrion bird he was laughing fit to kill. I did not spend the night at Castle Wommack, nor so much as go to the room where they'd put my belongings. My weariness melted away like snow in the sun, a servingmaid brought me my packed bags right there where I sat on that bench against the wall, tapping my foot, and a stablemaid brought round my Mule; and I flung the saddlebags over Sterling's back and took off from the middle of the fair still going on in the Castle court, while *he* stood on the steps with his hands on his hips, laughing. What Gilead of Wommack or any of the others thought, I had no idea, and I didn't wait to see.

It was ten days' travel, regulation speed, from Castle Wommack to Castle Traveller, most of it over Wilderness that had never even been walked through, from the far northwest tip of Kintucky to the far southern coast of Tinaseeh. And if there was one person any ten flown miles I'd be mighty surprised, which meant that I didn't have to be careful. There'd be nobody around to appreciate it, and in my state just then that was a blessing.

I SNAPPED straight from the edge of Kentucky's farming country to the exact center of the Tinaseeh Wilderness—a five-day journey in right on seven seconds—and headed Sterling down toward the treetops I saw below me. I camped in a cave that would have satisfied a human-size Gentle, and rested the full five days. I needed the rest. Then I waited two more days for good measure, putting them to sensible use gathering herbs growing all around my camp; and I SNAPPED to the coast of Tinaseeh's Midland Sea. I flew in to Castle Traveller in the ordinary way, right on time.

By then I'd acquired a certain new respect for the Family Traveller, and a feeling that their name was a fitting one and well earned. Tinaseeh made Kintucky look like a kitchen garden.

"There it is, Sterling," I said as we came in. "Castle Traveller, just as described." First, an outer keep of upright Tinaseeh iron-wood logs, standing side by side with their wicked points an exact twelve feet tall—not an inch deviation allowed anywhere. Then two inner keeps, made exactly the same way, one within the other. At the heart of the third keep, the Castle itself, not much bigger than Castle Lewis. And there was no town, though it had the name of one and one was planned—Roebuck. The buildings of "Roebuck" hugged in orderly rows to the walls of the Castle keeps. There'd been no time yet on Tinaseeh for such a thing as a separate town.

According to the computers, there were exactly eleven hundred and thirteen people on this continent, and all but a half-dozen were Travellers, Parsons, Guthries, and a stray Wommack or two. And every structure here was built of Tinaseeh ironwood, which would not burn, and could only be cut with a lasersaw, and which could—with sufficient patience—be tooled by laser to an edge that a person could shave with. I had seen friendlier-looking places.

I was met at the gates of the outer keep by an Attendant, who sent me under escort to the gate of the next keep beyond, where they passed me on to a third to

take me up to the Castle gates, and not a word said the whole time beyond regulations.

“Greetings, Responsible of Brightwater; follow me.”

I followed.

I had not expected parties here, or parades, or fairs. I knew better. A formal dinner—for twelve—I had expected. And I was prepared for one Solemn Service after another; that would strike the Travellers as entertainment enough. Ordinary Solemn Service on Tinaseeh began on Sundy at 7:00 of the morning and lasted past noon, to be followed by another session after a two-hour break for dinner. I had anticipated that a *company* Solemn Service might well provide me with preaching enough to fortify me against all the evil I’d have to contend with for the next year or two. I’d expected a *substantial* edification of my soul.

But I was not prepared for what actually did take place, which was that ten minutes after I’d freshened up—with an Attendant standing in my door waiting with an eloquent back to me, seeing that I didn’t tarry over it—I was taken without further ado to a formal Family Council. Hospitable, it wasn’t, and I felt a sudden steadying in my stomach. This—which was glorified sass, by the look of it—was more in my line of experience than what I’d just been through at Wommack. If it turned out sufficiently extravagant it would even give me something I needed badly... something to keep my unruly mind in order yet a while.

The Meetingroom had walls of varnished ironwood, and it held a group of people that appeared to be put together of the same unappealing substance, seated in straight chairs around a long narrow table. They reminded me of the side-by-side upright logs that fenced their keeps, and my traveling costume stood out in the grim and the gloom like a carnival garb.

“Young woman,” said the man at the head of the table, “I am Jeremiah Thomas Traveller the 26th; be seated.”

I sat, and he named them off. His wife, Suzannah of Parson. His three oldest sons: Jeremiah Thomas the 27th, Nahum Micah the 4th, and Stephen Phillip the 30th... why he wasn’t Obadiah Jonas I couldn’t imagine; perhaps Suzannah had pleaded for some relief. His three oldest daughters still at home—Rosemary, Chastity, and Miranda, every one of them a six. His brother, Valen Marion Traveller the 9th. And his own mother, now a Granny in this Castle, Granny Leeward. Not another wife, not a husband, not a child; just the in-Family.

“And I,” I said, “am Responsible of Brightwater. As you are aware.”

“We are that,” said Suzannah of Farson. “It could hardly be missed.” Her reference was to my outfit, which was in marked contrast to her own dress of dark gray belted with black. I smiled at her, sweet as cinnamon sugar, and waited the move.

“We have called this Council in your honor,” she said, “and would like to begin. But you’ve had a long journey—are you hungry? Or thirsty? We can have coffee brought, and some food, if you need it.”

“Thank you,” I said, “I had breakfast before I left.”

“Considerate of you,” said Suzannah. “We have little time to waste here on Tinaseeh. It’s a hard land, and not meant for the shiftless.”

“Proceed, then,” I told her. “You’ve no need to coddle *me*, I assure you; I’m perfectly comfortable. And I’ve been in Council a time or two before. I expect you’ll find me able to tolerate yours.”

“Are you trying to be insolent, missy?” said the Granny, her mouth tight. “Or does it just come natural to you?”

I considered the question, and I looked her up and down, and no looking away from her pale blue eyes, either; and I decided that her question was serious, not just grannying, and deserved a serious answer.

“It’s a cold welcome you’ve offered me, Granny Leeward,” I said, “and not the way an Ozarker’s brought up to treat a guest. As it comes natural to you all to be unpleasant, it comes natural to me to be unpleasant in return. I’m told I’m good at it.”

“Guests,” said Granny Leeward, “are *invited*. You were not.”

“True enough,” I said. “And you’re not the first to point it out to me.”

“There are those,” she said, “as would of taken instruction the first time they heard it—and not needed a second statement of the obvious.”

“There are those,” I said, “as let every little thing put them off their duty. I am *not* one of those.”

Silence. And then the Granny, who appeared to have been designated spokesperson for this collection of alleged living beings, began in earnest.

“I call for Full Council,” she said.

“Seconded.” And the ayes went round.

“Explain your purpose here, Responsible of Brightwater,” she continued. “And speak up plain. It’s a long table.”

“There’s been magic used for mischief on Marktwain,” I said easily. “You know all about that. And a baby kidnapped from out of a Solemn Service, which is not decent. And in Full Council it was decided that it might be a good idea to spell out the particulars to the Twelve Families, as well as find the maker of the mischief. And it was agreed that I was best equipped to do that—and here, therefore, I am.”

“You’re a girl of fourteen!” she declared.

“You’re a woman of eighty-six. Neither number is significant.”

“And what fits a girl of fourteen—it *is* of significance, missy, for it means you’ve neither wisdom nor instruction nor experience— what fits a girl of fourteen to go gallivanting around the planet on a Mule, dressed like a *whore*, pestering decent folk and creating trouble everywhere she goes?”

Well, she was a Granny of eighty-six, and I was a girl of fourteen, as had just

been stated. I took the bait she'd laid for me as easy as if I'd never heard the word before.

Granny Leeward had been holding a black cloth fan, using it to tap the table with to emphasize the ends of her phrases. By the time she got to "everywhere she goes" she was holding as pretty a nosegay of black mushrooms as you'd care to see anywhere. And they had me.

Her hand didn't even quiver, though I knew the mushrooms stung her—I'd made sure of that, while I was digging myself a hole to fall in—and she laid them out before her on the table and folded her arms.

"There's your answer," she said. "Just as I told you." Jeremiah Thomas Traveller the 26th looked at his timepiece and nodded with satisfaction.

"Well done, Granny Leeward," he said. "Three minutes flat."

"Mighty sensitive to words, aren't you, child," said their dear old Granny, "for someone who sets herself so high she presumes to teach the Twelve Families their manners?"

Law, how it galled! I'd of given years off my life to have back the last five minutes, and sense enough to do them over right. But that's not how the world works, as I could hear myself telling other people, and there was nothing I could do but be silent and see where this would lead me.

The Master of the Castle told me.

"Personally," he said, "I was inclined to think Granny Leeward was exaggerating some when she told us her estimate of your abilities. I have daughters of my own, and they do sometimes play about with Spells and the like, when they get to be your age—it's a stage, and they grow out of it. But you seem to have got somewhat beyond that, Responsible of Brightwater."

"I sincerely beg your pardon," I said sadly. "I'm afraid I lost my temper—and I'd ask you to lay *that* to my age, too, if you would. It won't happen again."

"How could it happen at all?"

I didn't answer, but he wasn't about to drop it.

"How does it happen at *all*," he insisted, "that a girl of fourteen, whatever special place she may have in the frame of things, is able to set a Spell like that one you just set, and her against a skilled Granny?"

I saw Granny Leeward's lips twitch at that; she knew very well no Spell nor Charm would have turned her fan into those mushrooms. That had required a Substitution Transformation, and an illegal one, and it had been incredibly stupid of me. A simple Spell would of been more than enough... I could of just heated up the fan a little bit, and had my temper fit that way. But the Granny wouldn't betray me to a male; she lowered her eyes, and she kept her silence.

"I've studied a good deal," I said carefully, "and I've had good teachers. Nonetheless, it wasn't nice of me. As I said, I regret I did it, and I apologize, most

respectfully.”

“Well, Granny Leeward told us you knew a few tricks,” said her son, “and that she figured it wouldn’t take her five minutes to prove she was right—and it took her three. I don’t mind telling you, young woman, I don’t approve of it at all. I’m sorry my family had to see it happen.”

“And so is Responsible of Brightwater,” said the Granny, twisting the knife. “Pride,” she added, “goes along before a fall.”

“I’m afraid ‘sorry’ won’t cut it,” said Jeremiah Thomas. “No; I’m afraid it will take more than just *sorry* to make me easy with something like you under my roof.”

Here it came again; I didn’t bother to ask.

“I’ll have your sworn word,” he said. “And I’ll have it now.”

“Sworn to what?”

“That you’ll use no magic—not *any* level, Responsible of Brightwater, not even Common Sense—so long as you are, as you yourself point out, the guest of this Castle and this Family, and under my roof. Since it’s clear you’ve no sense of what’s decent, you’ll make do on mother wit alone.”

“Are you that afraid of a few tricks?” I taunted him. “From a girl of fourteen?”

“Indeed I am,” he said, “*indeed* I am! This is a respectable household, and the people within it not accustomed to scandal. We follow the old ways here, and we have a wholesome respect for the power of such as you, no matter how you come packaged. If you came into my house with a loaded gun, you’d have to give it up while you stayed here, as would you a flask of poison, or a laser, or any other such truck. And I’m a lot more afraid of magic unbridled than I am of any of those.”

He turned away from me then and spoke to the son that bore his name.

“I hope you see,” he said gravely, “and I hope you will spread the word among our people, that this is what can be expected when the old ways are not observed. I’ll count on you to go over it with considerable care when you speak to our households next—might could be that will tame a few of those not thinking in the proper *way* of the Jubilee this young woman’s been sent around to sponsor.”

“As a matter of fact, sir,” the answer came, “it seems to me it might be an excellent idea to discuss this whole thing *at* the Jubilee. It would perhaps be instructive for the other Families to hear about.”

My gown was drenched with my own cold salt sweat, and my hair clung to my neck like wet weeds. I’d found my guilty, no doubt about that; it could hardly have been clearer if they’d had it branded on their foreheads. The venom from around that table, where almost no one had spoken one word, or more than stared at me, was as real as my two hands before me, and it battered at me in waves. I admired the cool control of this Granny—most would have been setting wards.

It was a tidy trap, grant them all that. If I accused them of using magic to wreck the Jubilee, or of turning it against Castle Brightwater, as I surely could have, there

were ten grown men and women in this room prepared to swear that they'd seen me carry out an illegal act of magic right before their eyes, under their own roof, and against one of their own. And they would be telling the truth. If I'd been against the Confederation my own self, I could hardly have done it graver harm, and for sure I'd of been better off listening to my uncles, staying home, and ignoring the whole thing.

And if I gave them the oath they asked for—as I would have to do, no question about it, and their Granny there to see that I left no corners dangling—there'd be no passing this night in undoing by magic the folly I'd wreaked. I'd lie in my bed and I'd pray, and I would maybe cry some; but I'd do no magic. Not even to look ahead and see just how much chance there was of *any* solution to the problem.

“Well, let's have your promise,” said Jeremiah Thomas. “Our Granny assures us that your wickedness doesn't extend to violating your own word, and she's proved she knows your measure. No magic, Responsible of Brightwater, for so long as you are within the continental borders of Tinaseeh. *None.*”

He was very sure of himself; we'd gone from “under my roof” to the whole continent at remarkable speed. But then, he was in a position where he could *afford* to be sure of himself.

“I promise,” I said. “Certainly.”

“Put your hands on the table so we can see—”

“Oh, Jeremiah Thomas,” said Granny Leeward pettishly, “that's not needful! What do you think she's going to do, cross her fingers? This one does not play games.”

“That I do not,” I agreed.

“Nor do we,” said the Granny. “Bear that in mind.”

“It does not seem to me,” said Jeremiah Thomas slowly, “that just saying she promises is enough, in this case. Have another look at those mushrooms there, making the table nasty with their rot, will you, Granny Leeward? She might—”

“She gave her word,” said the Granny. “That's all that's required.”

“Let her give it in full, then,” said her stubborn offspring. “And I'll be satisfied.”

I knew the sort of thing that would appeal to him, and having no choice *what* soever, I gave it to him.

“For so long as I am within the continental borders of Tinaseeh,” I intoned, “I will do no magic, of any sort or kind, at any level, for any reason whatever, no matter what may come to pass—not even to safeguard this house or those within it, not even to safeguard myself. My word on it, given in full.” There.

I saw the Granny's eyebrows go up at the phrase about safeguarding their house, but she didn't say a word. I knew then that there must be at least a couple of Magicians of Rank in this Castle at this moment—I knew of three that very well could be—and if there were one or two I *didn't* know about besides, it wouldn't be

past believing. She was far too calm, knowing what she knew, not to have quite a backup behind her own legal skills.

“Well?” I asked him. “Will that do it?”

“If Granny Leeward approves.”

“Oh, it’s enough,” said that one, “and a bit more.”

“In that case,” he said, “we can get on with the business of this Council.”

I had thought tricking me into my present position of total helplessness *was* the business of his Council; but it was apparently no more than item one on the agenda.

“My sons have a few questions to ask of you, young woman,” he said. “We’ll need a bit more of your time.”

They wanted to know a lot of things. What arrangements I had made for seeing to it that the Families would be safe at Brightwater during the Jubilee—from “malicious magic,” to use their term, and their using it struck me as astonishing gall considering that they were its source. It amounted to saying, “If we come in with fifty vials of deadly poison to spread around, what have you got on hand that will be able to stop us?” They wanted to know details of the *schedule* for the Jubilee; if, presumably, I had ways to keep it going, then how much time would have to be “wasted” on frivolity before we could get down to the real purpose of the meeting? What the real purpose of the meeting *was*. Why I felt such an outlay of time and trouble and money was justified, when there were Wildernesses to be cleared and roads to be laid and wells to be dug and windmills and solar collectors to be built and crops to be planted and fish to be caught, and game to be hunted, and other *serious work* that went understaffed and underfunded and would grow more so while we fooled away time at Brightwater. What did I assume would be accomplished by this “gaudy display” that couldn’t have been taken care of at an ordinary meeting of the Confederation of Continents? How many were being invited from each Family, and how many had accepted? Where would they all be staying, and who’d see to their comfort? Did I give my guarantee that it would be not only safe for children, but an *edifying* experience—and if not, how did I propose to justify leaving them all behind? Would all the Magicians of Rank be present at the Jubilee, and all the Magicians, and for that matter, all the Grannys? And if so, why—who needed them there and for what? And if not, why not, and what would they be doing behind our backs instead?

It went on and on, and it was thorougher than could be excused by any motive except wearing me out and humiliating me, and rubbing my nose some more in my sudden position of servility to their will. I had no trouble with any of the questions; they set them in turn, each son asking three, and then politely yielding to his brother. Every word I said was information already available to them in the proceedings and proclamations of the Confederation over at least the last three years, and there’d not been a single Confederation meeting where one of those sons—and sometimes the father as well—had not sat as delegate. My throat got raw, and my back got tired, and they went on and on, learning nothing they didn’t already know.

“That’s enough,” said Suzannah of Farson at last, long after I’d decided they intended to keep it up all night.

“Granny?” said Jeremiah Thomas.

“Been enough a long while,” said Granny Leeward, “and you’ve made your point. I’ve heard nothing that made my ears stand up, and you’ll not wear *that* one out just prattling at her—your sons are showing off, and they begin to irritate me some. You forget your own position on moderation, Jeremiah Thomas?”

He flushed, and the sons looked whiter and grimmer than ever, but he didn’t cross her. He just pointed at the mushrooms, now, I’m happy to say, a really stinking mess of putrid black on their table-top, and said, “What about those?”

“I’ll see to them,” said the Granny. “Never you mind.”

“You wouldn’t dare touch them,” I said coldly.

“You think not, missy?”

“I *know* not!” As I did. I’d have handled them with a great deal of care my own self.

“I’ll have them seen to, then,” she told her son. “Comes to the same thing.”

Jeremiah Thomas Traveller stood up, then, and adjourned the Council, took his lady on his arm and led us all out of there, and sent me on to my room with another of his silent Attendants.

I was right about the Magicians of Rank. When I woke that night and felt the heat of my skin, I cursed myself bitterly for not taking precautions sooner, before I’d had my hands tied by my own oaths. I could take the search for the source of the epidemic at Castle Wommack off my long list of postponed duties—I’d found it. And anybody that could bring themselves to lay innocent women and children low with Anderson’s Disease, just for display, was unlikely to scruple at providing someone like me with the same unpleasant experience. And knowing that, I’d surely ought to of taken some steps to prevent it; like a lot of other things, it hadn’t entered my mind.

I sent word to Granny Leeward by way of the guardmaid outside my door, and the Granny sent back a full crew. Four of them, all in Traveller black, though two of them had no right to wear it. They stood around my bed and smiled down on me, hands behind their backs.

“Twenty-four hours from now, Responsible of Brightwater,” said one, “you’ll be fit as a fiddle.”

I felt the terrible need to twist and writhe, and my breath burned in my chest as I drew it, but I’d encountered pain before that matched this and surpassed it, and I’d had some practice in dealing with the stuff. I’d not give them the satisfaction of seeing one of my smallest toes move while they watched; and I lay still as a pond while the spasms moved over my muscles like live snakes, and I smiled back.

“I didn’t know you were all still in training,” I said, forcing the words through a

throat that threatened to shut tight on me. “A competent Magician of Rank could stop this in twenty-four seconds.”

They went right on smiling, and allowed as how Granny Leeward had said that it would do my soul good to have the death-dance fever for twenty-four hours.

“The Granny gives you orders, does she? You don’t mind that?”

I was looking for a weak spot, but they knew what I was up to, of course, and they ignored me. A smuggler quartet of elegant males I’d never laid eyes on, and they reminded me of my mushrooms—before the rot set in, of course. There I lay, forbidden to so much as wish on a star till I left Tinaseeh; and there they stood, able to add a notch or two to their accounts with Responsible of Brightwater, in perfect safety. It would have been too much not to expect them to enjoy it

CHAPTER TWELVE



Now it’s true that when I proposed a Quest as the way to demonstrate Brightwater’s status, symbol returned in kind for symbol given, I was completely serious about the idea. I don’t want that misunderstood. No Ozarker takes any formal construct of magic— and a Quest is one of the most rigorous of those—lightly. Like I said, you go tampering and tinkering with an equilibrium as delicate as the system of magic, you’re going to cause radical distortions in places you never even considered would be touched. I was *absolutely* serious in my choice. And the choice I made had had solid motivations back of it

Those that wanted to undermine the Confederation could have gone about *their* task in the most mundane way, you see. They could of simply boycotted meetings, straight out and without concern for who joined them at it. They could of started banging heads in the straightforward physical sense, though the public outrage at that would of backfired on them by the third blow landed —still, they could have. More reasonably, they could of used economic strategies of one kind or another, though for those on the wilder continents where self-sufficiency was a long way off yet that might of carried heavy penalties for their populations. But they had not chosen any of those measures, nor yet anything like them. They had made their decision to go at it on the level of magic— and the principle of fighting fire with fire is sufficiently venerable to make the idea of going back at them the same way look perfectly sound. Fighting magic with science has never been handy.

But let’s grant it now and be done with it, the Quest was not all I had available to *me*, by a long shot. True, they’d flung a gauntlet and made a planetary display of a very special kind; not so much what they actually did—as had been made plain at that first Brightwater Council—but their clear notice as to what they thought they *could* do if they took the notion. We couldn’t of just let that pass, not and kept our place among the Families as the informal—but only actual—seat of central government for Ozark. It was a dare they’d made, and a contemptuous dare at that,

right up to the baby-snatching; and I'd figured that last move was made not so much because they weren't sure how far they should go, but because I kept dawdling around and not responding, and time was a-wasting. They'd meant to shake me loose from my dawdling, and hanging the baby up in the cedar tree did accomplish that.

But looking back... looking back and feeling a lot more than the six, seven weeks older I actually was when I at last left Castle Traveller behind me, I could see that I had gone butting my head where it was not necessarily called for. Now that it was all over but the dirty work I began with, and the dirty work I'd piled up along the way, I could see all the other alternatives I had censored right out of my head at the time.

I could have assembled the Magicians, from all three levels, by a full call-up at Brightwater, and made some kind of spectacular display of my competence there; and then sent them all back home to think about that awhile. I could of delegated the whole process to the Magicians of Rank from Marktwain, Oklahomah, and Mizzurah, and let *them* demonstrate our magical strength to the others, with whatever judicious behind-the-scenes string-pulling that might of required on my part. I could, for the Twelve Corners' sakes, just of used the comset for a display of our abilities, planet-wide. Or I could of seen to it that one highborn baby in every Kingdom popped into a tree during a Solemn Service at the same identical instant—my Magicians of Rank could have managed that easily, and it would of put the rest on adequate notice that they'd best pull back.

I hadn't considered, hadn't even brought up, any of those things.

It was clear to me, as I headed away from Tinaseeh with my ego as bruised as my body, that what I had really wanted had in far too many ways been just what the Grannys were claiming it was as I made my rounds. I had, I guess, wanted to show off, and to do it personally and get full credit; and I had been champing at the bit for an excuse to get away from Brightwater and all the dull routine of my duties there, not to mention the preparations for the Jubilee that others had had to carry on with while I took my vacation. The speed with which I'd gotten underway was the speed of guilt—I had just grabbed at the Quest concept, all loaded with tradition and symbolic significance like it was, for an excuse.

If there'd been any of the Marktwain Grannys present at that meeting in February, they might well have found a way to stop me; I wished mightily now that someone had. But neither my mother nor my grandmother had had a chance against my willfulness, and it was not the way of Patience of Clark to step in and take action unasked.

No, I'd had a dandy idea for getting away from it all for a while, and had gone about it pigheaded as you please, and how it was all to be managed now or at the Jubilee, I surely did not know.

"Sterling," I said, looking down on the Ocean of Remembrances just before we SNAPPED over all that boring endless water, "I've been a blamed fool. And I only hope I've learned enough from it to pay me back."

She brayed at me twice, and slid sideways in a truly spectacular wobble that set me grabbing the straps and fighting for control of my stomach. They were still at it... and I smacked her hard on the shoulder, and held fast, and swallowed bile, and got out of there.

I had a better understanding now of the lay of things, Castle to Castle, there was that. I had a picture of sorts, thanks to the Gentle, of the trouble brewing on Arkansaw and where that might yet lead. I'd had a first look at my own personal nemesis, foretold these nine years, and had gotten away from him intact but for my pride, this time. And every one of the Families, excepting the Smiths, had had a chance to deal with me directly on its own turf. I suppose that would do for a short list.

I was also tired, and ten pounds thinner, and had been mauled about pretty extensively, and had maybe ignored a Skerry sighting because I hadn't wanted to bother with it. I had allowed myself to be trapped by a passel of Travellers, like a child, and had no way of knowing what action they might take against me at the Jubilee with the new knowledge they had, and their determination to make good use of it. And my original task, the Goal of my Quest—bringing home the *exact* name of the traitor or traitors—that still had to be done.

I've mentioned pride before; I have it in abundance. It was one thing to admit to myself that Granny Golightly had had the right of it and I'd just taken off because I wanted to gallivant. It was one thing to admit that my fancy triumphant symbolic Quest had been more a series of accidents and misfires than anything else, when it hadn't been plain boring. Lying to your own self is a sure way to go to hell in a handbasket, and the time had come to 'fess up. But that was to my *own* self. I was not about to go back to Castle Brightwater, march into the halls and say—to Jubal and Emmalyn's great satisfaction, and my mother's—"Well, youall were right It was a silly thing to do in the first place, and I'm worse off than I was before I left. Begging your pardon." Oh no! Bruised ego, bruised spirit, bruised body, all the blacks-and-blues of me notwithstanding, I would arrive home with an appearance of having won this one, come what may. Come what *may*.

And that was why I was now coming in over Castle Airy, instead of heading for home. Airy was a Castle of women, used to cosseting women and always willing to cosset one more, and I intended to take full advantage of that. I was going to let Charity of Guthrie and her daughters and nieces and cousins, and her three resident Grannys, feed me up and make over me and listen to my troubles and spoil me generally until I had accomplished what I'd set out to accomplish and could go on home in a state of sufficient dignity to at least fool Emmalyn of Clark and Thorn of Guthrie.

It was possible, if you were traveling by Mule, to fly into Castle Airy through a great arch cut in its front wall over the sea for that express purpose. I slowed Sterling and we moved in through the opening and down onto the easy-arc'd ramp at its base, me with a wary hand on the Mule's bridle against another of those wobbles, and straight into the sidecourt of the Castle where the stables were.

A stableman came forward to see to the Mule and greet me, and I slid gratefully down from Sterling's back onto the flagstones of the court, and stood there a minute to brace myself.

"You weren't expected, Miss Responsible," said the stableman, "and you arrived a bit sudden. I sent a servingmaid as soon as I saw you coming in over the water, to tell the ladies; somebody should be here directly to take you to the Missus."

"Thank you," I said. "I appreciate your courtesy."

"You look tired, miss," he said, and I admitted that I was tired—but not how tired.

"It's been a long trip," I told him. "A lot of flying and a lot of company behavior, which is worse. A day or two'll right me. You take my Mule on, if you will, and see to her; I'll wait right here."

He gave me a long considering look, and stood his ground.

"Believe I'll wait until somebody comes for you," he said. "I don't care that much for the look of your eyes, nor your peakedy face, and Charity of Guthrie'd put me back to peeling roots in the kitchen if I went on off and you fainted or some such trick. Your Mule'll keep awhile."

I didn't argue with him—he meant well—and we stood there in silence, me not being up to polite conversation and him not seeming to mind, until a young woman came hurrying toward us from a side corridor, with Charity of Guthrie herself right behind her.

Charity took one look at me, wrapped her arms round me, and rocked me like a baby.

"Poor child," she said, "you're worn clear out. You're the color of spoiled goat-cheese and not much more appealing-looking. What in the world have you been doing to yourself?"

"I should of sent you a message I was coming," I said, all muffled against the burgundy front of her dress. (And I would have, too, if I hadn't known I could shave a bit off my traveling time by not letting people know precisely when I was taking off and landing.)

"Never you mind that," she said, "I'm glad you came, and no warning needed. It'll be a cold day in a mighty hot place when this Castle can't put up one scrawny girlchild on short notice. You're welcome here any time." And she hugged me close again, bless her, and bless her some more. I can't remember when I've needed hugging worse.

She sent the man off with Sterling into the usual racket the Mules made greeting one another, told the servingmaid that had come with her to take my things up to the guestchamber I'd had before, and led me straight up to her own sitting room where she settled me in a rocker, with a quilt over my feet and a mug of strong hot coffee in my hand.

The Grannys came drifting in, then, one by one, and the daughters, and we soon had a roomful. And the Grannys lost no time.

“Well, youngun, how’d it go?” said Granny Heatherknit; she was senior here, at one hundred and eleven. “Your famous Quest, I mean... did you do enough damage to satisfy your craving?”

Charity of Guthrie’s lips tightened, but I looked at her hard over my coffee and she made no move to call them off. We both knew this had to be gotten through sooner or later, and it might as well be sooner.

“Went well enough,” I said judiciously. “Well enough—considering.”

“Considering?”

“Considering that not a one of you helped me in any way *whatsoever*,” I said. Bedamned if I’d count that squawker egg out in the Wilderness; Granny Golightly had owed me that one.

“Not a one of who?” said Forthright. “Not a one of *what*?”

“Not a one of you Grannys,” I retorted. “Near thirty of you there are here on this planet—”

“Twenty-nine, child, twenty-nine!” said Granny Heatherknit.

“Nearly thirty,” I insisted, “and you did not one thing to help me the whole time I was gone.”

“*For* which,” said Granny Flyswift, jabbing the air in front of her with her knitting needles, “*for* which there are three good and sufficient reasons! *One*—this was your own tomfool idea, and none of ours, and none of our advice asked before you set out on it, hot out of here like a Mule with a burr under its tail! *Two*—you know the conditions on a Quest... adventures aplenty required and supposed to be unpleasant, or it doesn’t count—and Granny Golightly herself reminded you of that in case it’d slipped your mind! And *three*—the best way for any child to learn that a flame’ll burn him is to let him stick his finger in it; that makes for remembrance.”

“Yes, ma’am, Granny Flyswift,” I said. I had it all coming.

“Now what did you learn that’s useful to anybody but your stubborn self, missy?” demanded Granny Heatherknit again.

Charity’s daughter Caroline-Ann, sitting on a windowseat with her skirts drawn up and her legs tucked under, asked if that couldn’t wait till I’d had some supper. She was twelve years old, and a lot like her mother.

“No-sir,” said Granny Heatherknit. “She’s still able to sing for that supper, and I’m right interested in her tune.”

“Well,” I said, “I learned that a girl of sixteen as can put her hair up in a figure-eight and knows all the modern dances should not be called a child or treated like one.”

The Grannys peered at each other and snickered; and I wondered what foul task

they had poor Silverweb of McDaniels doing that very minute.

“And, I learned that a giant cavecat stinks, in more ways than one. I learned that broken ribs are as inconvenient the second time as the first, and that where everybody’s trying to keep the corks in their homebrew nobody has much time for the export trade.”

“So far, so accurate,” said Granny Heatherknit. “Go on.”

“I learned that being licked to death is nasty.”

“No argument with that.”

“I learned that just about anything propped up in the moonlight and painted the right color is sufficient to turn a guilty head. I learned that one continent can hold two very small birds, and only one of them have gumption enough to fly. I learned that just because a Granny isn’t using the old formspeech doesn’t mean her garlic won’t work.”

“She’s only fifty-nine,” snorted Granny Flyswift. “Give her time, she’ll outgrow her notions.”

“She did very well,” I told the old woman. “Very well indeed.”

And I went on. “I learned that a Family truly *set* on a curse can bring one down on them. And, last of all, I learned that a person can’t knit with both hands tied together.”

“Think not?” said Flyswift.

“Well, I surely couldn’t.”

Granny Heatherknit scrunched up her eyebrows over her glasses—which she didn’t need and doubtful she ever would—and I could see her counting.

“You left out Castle Purdy,” she said. “What happened there?”

“There’s what I will tell,” I answered, “and there’s what I won’t.” (And about the Gentle coming to see me—I wouldn’t.)

“Hmmmph,” said Granny Heatherknit. “That might be the most important piece of all.”

“None of it,” said Caroline-Ann of Airy sadly, “meant anything to *me*. As usual.”

To my surprise, Granny Heatherknit turned to her and spoke almost gently; that girl must have a way with her.

“Caroline-Ann,” said the Granny, “if you keep in mind that what Responsible of Brightwater’s doing is trying to see how much she can *not* tell—despite being asked most politely—you’ll understand why you found her remarks on the murky side. She’s riddling, can’t you hear that?”

“It didn’t rhyme,” said Caroline-Ann. “I never recognize riddles when they don’t rhyme.”

“Well, take the list she gave you and rhyme it, then,” said Granny Heatherknit.

“Set it to a tune for us, Caroline-Ann... good exercise for you, and we’ll have something new for tale-telling makings.”

“Granny Heatherknit, that would be *hard!*” objected Caroline-Ann, and that seemed to me accurate. “You don’t mean I have to?”

“Think you should,” said the Granny, and the other two nodded their agreement

“Pheew!” said one of the huddle of girls on the floor below the sill where Caroline-Ann was. “Glad it’s you and not me, Caroline-Ann!”

“Easy rhymes,” said Granny Flyswift calmly. “Cat. Rib. Bird. Knit. Suchlike. You can manage that, Caroline-Ann; we give you three days, and then we’ll hear it.”

“Oh, *blast!*”

Caroline-Ann sat up straight and dropped her legs over the sill, careful not to kick anybody. “Naturally I had to open my mouth with three Grannys in the room! *Botheration!*”

I felt sorry for her, but I needn’t have; it took her only half an hour to do the task set, and we had the song from her right after supper that night. It went like this:

CAROLINE-ANN’S SONG

A girl of sixteen as can put up her hair
in a figure-eight knot, and can do it alone,
and can dance through the figure-eights smartly as well—
that girl is no child, but a woman full grown!

That’s what I learned, said the daughter of Brightwater,
That’s what I learned.

The smell of a cavecat is ranker than bile,
and a cavecat’s attentions are close to its chest,
and a cavecat that moves a mysterious mile
has a second rank odor that’s risky at best!

That’s what I learned, said the daughter of Brightwater,
That’s what I learned.

A rib as is broken will ravage your breath,
and the second time round it will ravage your pride,
and it’s cold comfort knowing while choking to death
that none of the damage shows on the outside!

That’s what I learned, said the daughter of Brightwater,
That’s what I learned.

A cellar of homebrew with corks to be set
and a hot spell ahead as makes setting them hard
keeps a family home from the market and road,

keeps a family corked to its Hall and its yard!

That's what I learned, said the daughter of Brightwater,
That's what I learned.

A Yallerhound's neither a hound nor a dog,
it's a bag full of water with a topcoat of hair;
it will drown you in slobber for the sake of pure love,
let the Yallerhound owner think well and beware!

That's what I learned, said the daughter of Brightwater,
That's what I learned.

A chair in the moonlight all painted with gold
is easily taken for royalty's throne,
and a conscience that's guilty can easily see
a scepter and crown in a rock and a bone!

That's what I learned, said the daughter of Brightwater,
That's what I learned.

Two little pretty birds sharing one nest,
hidden away in the littlest tree;
one has a leash on and sorrows to know it
and envies the other that dares to fly free!

That's what I learned, said the daughter of Brightwater,
That's what I learned.

A Granny should cackle and gabble and nag,
and twist her tongue round to the formspeech and motions,
but garlic still wards if she knows her craft right,
and as she adds years she'll no doubt drop her notions!

That's what I learned, said the daughter of Brightwater,
That's what I learned.

A Family as goes through its days set on gloom,
talking of curses and harping of fate,
eyes to the past and determined to suffer,
will get what it asks for served up on its plate!

That's what I learned, said the daughter of Brightwater,
That's what I learned.

A person whose hands are tied tight at her back,
a person who's bound like a goat to a spit,
a person in such a predicament can't
neither gather nor sow, neither broider nor knit!

That's what I learned, said the daughter of Brightwater,
That's what I learned.

And there was a nice pre-verse to it, too, for times when there might be those singing back and forth:

What did you learn as you flew out so fine,
splendid on Muleback, dressed like a queen?
What did you learn, daughter of Brightwater?
Tell us the wonderful things that you've seen!

I could see how, throwing that in every time a verse came round, you could use up a good part of an evening with that song. And I was especially impressed with Caroline-Ann's solution to the fact that there's no way anybody can sing my awkward name. It was a fine song, every syllable and note in its proper place, and it added a certain respectability to my Quest, which was why the Grannys had demanded it, of course. I expected to hear a good deal in future of this daughter of Airy.

I passed two blissful days being mothered by Charity, and teased by her Grannys, and generally catching my breath, and by the end of the third day I felt able to face my role in this world once again. I was grateful to Castle Airy for that, because I had arrived in a sorry condition. And I kept humming Caroline-Ann's song.

And then on the third night, I set about catching myself a serpent. Or serpents, as the case might be.

I waited until all the Castle was sound asleep, and then I took my three baths: one hot, one cold, and one of herbs. I pulled my lawn gown through the small gold ring and saw that it passed without wrinkle or raveling to show for the trip, and I slipped it over my head. I put my black velvet ribbon around my neck, and braided my hair. I set wards and double-wards, which took some time; the guestchamber I was in had three doors and eight windows, and there had to be a pentacle at every one of them, and a double one at the corridor door where the Grannys might pass in their night-prowls.

It was past midnight before I was finally able to climb up into the center of my bed, set a pentacle round *me* with white sand from my shammybag, and take what was needful out of my pouch.

A bowl of clearest crystal, exactly the size of my closed fist, crystal so clear you had to look twice to see it was there. A vial of water from the desert spring on Marktwain that was holy to Skerrys, Gentles, *and* Ozarkers, and exactly twelve drops of that water poured into the bottom of the tiny bowl. My shammybags— one full of sand, one of fresh herbs, one of dried herbs, one of talismans. My gold chain, and my gold ring. Everything else I needed was inside my head.

I laid them all out around me within easy reach, and I crossed my legs and sat up straight, and realized that in no way was I tired any longer. Youth does have its

compensations.

Now—we should see what we should see!

The needed Formalism was an Insertion Transformation; I wanted a name where I had a null term now, and I wanted more than just “Traveller” to fill that null.

I set down the Structural Index in a double row of herbs, and the Structural Change I laid right underneath it. I set the bowl of desert water in the space of the null term, and I made the double-barred arrow with my hands above the water.

“Let there be,” I said over the whole, “a name, sub-N; and let there be a filling of the null term, sub-T; and let there be no alteration of the underlying structure, sub-S!”

The whole of it looked correct, but I checked it over one more time, for rigor—

—and then I closed it off with the symbol fin.

I watched the water closely while it dimmed and clouded and bubbled, and finally cleared again. And then I jumped like a child stuck with a pin!

I’d expected a Traveller, naturally (and maybe half a dozen more of them, one for every time I repeated the Transformation, since I could change only one term at a time); and I had *for sure* expected to see a man! Despite the mention that Silverweb of McDaniels was husky enough, if properly clothed, to pass for a man and fly a Rent-a-Mule through a church, I’d been convinced no female was behind any of this.

But the face that looked up at me from the water, no bigger than my thumbnail but clear in every smallest detail, and certainly clear in its utter terror, belonged to none of the Travellers and to no man... It was Una of Clark.

Una, the silent domestic daughter of Clark, the doting mother of five with the amazingly slim waist... whose *husband* was a Traveller. Whose husband wore the Traveller black despite all his years in his father-in-law’s cheerful Castle.

I never, never would have suspected her. Never! She had seemed to me the dullest woman I’d come across on this planet, up to and including the gawkiest and rawest servingmaid just decided to try her luck in a Castle and still not sure where the doors were. And she had fooled me. Fooled me pure and simple!

“Una of Clark!” I said over the water, a couple of times. “Una of *Clark*?” Had it been Sterling looking out at me, I could not of been more astonished.

Then I tensed—fooling me that well, she might have other skills equally foolsome. If the water began to boil in that crystal bowl again, or cloud over, I wanted to be ready to set a new Transformation on it before she got away from me. But the minutes passed, with only the sound of my heart beating loud in the room, and there was no change—only the tiny, so tiny, shivering figure in the water; and very gradually I had all of her, not just her face.

You can’t speak, of course, when you’re trapped in blessed springwater by a

Transformation, nor can you move. I appeared to have her at my mercy, and I had the rest of the night to decide what to do about that. Which was not so much time; the clock had just struck two.

I was not precisely *free* in this; I could go just so far and no farther. Murder's murder, whether you do it with a hatchet or a Transformation, and it's not allowed. It would have tidied things up, and I will admit it even crossed my mind, though that shocks me, because I was so put out; but it could not be done. A Deletion Transformation to remove Una of Clark from the matrix of this universe was certainly *possible*, but it would violate the primary constraint on all magic: it is not *allowed, ever*, to change the Meaning of things. To do that is the use of magic for evil, and the moral penalties for evil by hatchet are a good deal less severe. They, at least, are administered by people. I'd come within a hair's breadth of violating that constraint when I tampered with Granny Leeward's fan, and a very good thing I'd watched the shaping of that nosegay when I lost the rest of my mind; if she'd cared to, she still could of fanned herself with the mushrooms.

Since my choices were pretty rigorously constrained, it didn't take me long to select among them. At twenty minutes of three I had finished a bounded Movement Transformation, and I faced Una of Clark, dry now in the night wind and back to her standard size, on a narrow rock ledge at the foot of the cliffs where Castle Airy stood. The waves crashed over the rock where we were, and I motioned her to move back into the small cave I'd noted as I flew in that day.

"Don't you come near me!" she screamed at me, and threw up her hands before her face to shield it "Don't you *dare*!"

"If you drown here, Una of Clark," I shouted back at her, the wind taking my words and making clattering skeletons out of them, "if you fall into that sea that boils not ten inches from the tip of your dainty white foot, it will be your *own* fault! And I'll not be mourning you, you'll have saved me a great deal of trouble! Get back away from the edge, as I tell you now, and into that cave—move! Get!"

"I'm afraid, I'm afraid," she whimpered, hunkering down into the wind. "Oh, I don't dare move... I'm so afraid!" Drat the woman; I did not really want her to drown, and it looked as though she might. The stone under our feet was like glass, polished by the constant wind and water, and the wind gusting high, and some of the waves were striking us to our knees and more.

"Well, you *ought* to be afraid," I countered, "you surely ought! That ocean is as near bottomless as makes no difference, woman, and you're going into it sure if you don't pull back!"

I saw her sway as the spray was flung against her... and fool that she was, she *did* move—closer to the rim of the ledge.

Law, I had no time for foolishness; I traced the double-barred arrow in the air and Moved her myself, safe into the narrow shelter cut by the water, and I followed her in just inches ahead of a wave that would have had us both sure, not a second to spare.

It was dark in there, and I set a glow around her and around me, so that we could see one another. The roar of the waves was under us and all around us, too, it was everywhere, and with each one the whole mountain seemed to shudder under our feet; but we were safe enough there until the tide rose.

“Witch...” she hissed at me... a serpent she was, right enough... her teeth chattering, back pressed to the cave wall and her bare feet curled to the curve of the hollowed rock. And she said it once again, a good deal bolder. “Witch!”

“Nonsense,” I said. “I’m nothing of the kind.”

“Oh,” she said, “you’re not a *witch*? Reckon you didn’t snatch me out of my bed and trap me first in some... some *noplace* . . . where I saw nothing, heard nothing, felt nothing, but your wicked face over me as big as all the sky, and your eyes boring down on me, each of them big as a Castle gate... and then you brought me here, you *SNAPPED* me here! Think I don’t know that’s the only way you could drag a decent woman halfway round a continent through the night from her husband’s side?”

“Oh, stop it,” I said, and sat down on the bare rock in pure disgust. I had been prepared to feel some challenge here, maybe some respect for my opponent, but I was just *plain* disgusted. She was the one responsible for what had been happening to the milk and the mirrors and the streetsigns, all right—the springwater does not lie, nor do the Transformations fail. But the interference with the flight of the *Mules*? Just as I’d been too slow to see that when I should of seen it right off, I’d misunderstood it completely when I finally got to it, and gone to an awful lot of unnecessary trouble as a result of my blindness.

“Here I thought the reason that everything was just *barely* over the bounds of half-done was cleverness,” I said crossly, wishing I dared smack her face and knowing the thought was shameful. “Here I thought that just making the Mules wobble a tad instead of making them crash was a way of showing your *finesse*, and a way of hinting at what dread things you might do if you chose to! You realize that? And all along, all this miserable long time, Una of Clark, it was just that you aren’t very *good* at what you do! All along, with your piddling little tricks, you’ve been doing the *very best you could*, haven’t you? Why, we had the whole damned thing clean backwards! *Damn!*”

“Well, it worked, didn’t it?” she spat at me, and she had me there.

And then she hid her face against her shoulder and screamed into the darkness, over and over that same foolish word—“Witch! Witch! Witch!”—until I was nearly distracted. I suppose that was what Gabriel Laddercane Traveller the 34th had used against her, all through the nights of their marriage, lying beside her in their bed, whispering while he stroked her thighs and that slim waist, convincing her to tackle magic far beyond what she was trained in or fit for or had any legal right to even think of. If he’d truly convinced her that she was doing battle against witchcraft when she raised her weak hand against me... it did not excuse her, but I could see how he might have used that as a lever. Especially with her far gone in the sickness of Romantic Love; it would of served his needs well, and paid him for his long exile

from his father's house, and explained why he'd put up with it over these long years instead of taking her away. The threads that ran to this night were sticky ones, and they clung.

"Well, now, what am I going to do with you?" I asked her, and myself, out loud. "What am I going to do *about* you, Una of Clark?"

I'd lost all taste for harming her, she was only pathetic; but she couldn't be allowed to go on with her mischief, bungling as it was, all the same. Nor could she be allowed to go back and talk about *any* of this, and I was by no means sure she had brains enough to see that.

"Una?" I said sharply. "Una of Clark? You look at me!"

"No! You'll turn me into something horrible if I do!"

Turn her into something horrible? What did she think she'd done to *herself*?

"Look at me, you foolish, *silly* woman!"

She lifted her head then, and her eyes were like two huge flat fish in her white face. Most unappealing.

"Una, what did you think you were trying to do?" I asked her. "Maybe if you tell me that I'll be able to see my way."

To my astonishment, she raised her hands beside her face, spread her fingers wide as they would stretch, and recited straight at me—

ASS.

BEDPOLE.

CHAMBERPOT.

DEAD OF THE NIGHT.

EGG-ROTTEN BIRD DUNG.

FISTFULS OF MEALY WORMS.

NIGHT OF THE DEAD.

POTCHAMBER.

POLEBED.

ASS.

I was flabbergasted. As nasty a Charm as I'd heard anywhere, and bold as brass about it, terrified as she was. But no elegance. No style! And put together all cockeyed to boot. I'd seen six-year-old girls do a sight better than that, and without anything nasty in it to help them along, either. I said:

AIR.

BALSAM.

CINNAMON.

DENY ME NAUGHT.

EVERMORE WEeping.

FOLLOW ME EVERYWHERE.

EVERMORE SLEEPING.

DOUBLE MY WORTH.

CINDERMAN.

BELLTONGUE.

AIR.

“And,” I added, “if you’d like to go on to twelve syllables and back, in twelve sets of rhymed pairs, I’m ready. But do hurry, Una of Clark, because I intend to be in *my* bed before breakfast.”

By that time, when she began to sob hopelessly, choking and sputtering, I wasn’t surprised. I wondered what her life was going to be like, from this night on; she wasn’t built for a burden like this, and her husband had chosen a poor instrument to break to his evil.

“See where foolish love will lead you?” I said to her sorrowfully. “See where it will lead you, woman? Into *folly*, into *shame*, into *disgrace*... Why didn’t you tell him to do his *own dirt*? What would your father and mother say of you, Una of Clark, if they only knew what you have done?”

She only blubbered harder, and I was sick of watching her.

“I’ll tell you what I’m going to do,” I said, “and I suggest you listen to me more carefully than you’ve been listening to your Reverend these last few years. For I’m not playing with you, and I warn you—I’m no Granny, to just put toads in your bed and rashes under your armpits and keep your cakes from rising. You do understand that?”

“What *are* you, really?” she hissed at me. “What *are* you?”

“Nor am I a witch,” I went right on, ignoring that, “for if I were, you would have been at the bottom of that ocean long before this, and you know it very well. If I were a witch, Una of Clark, I’d set a Substitution Transformation. And another woman that looked just like you and talked just like you and walked just like you and moaned in the loving arms of Gabriel Laddercane Traveller *just like you* would go home from here—but she would not *be* you. You would be feeding the fishes and she would be only a Substitute, and nobody would ever know.”

“Go ahead, then—you can do it, why *don’t* you, and leave off torturing me?”

“Because I’m *not* a witch, I’m a law-abiding well-brought-up woman, that you’ve caused a lot more trouble than there’s any excusing you for, that’s why!”

“Then what are you going to do?” she whispered. “Make me ugly? Make me crippled? Oh dear saints, Responsible of Brightwater, what is it going to be?”

“Your mind is a cesspool,” I said, staring at her. “A cesspool. Make you ugly

and cripple you indeed!”

“Tell me!”

“What I am going to do is set a Binding Spell on you,” I said. “That and nothing more. Seven years, Una of Clark, you’ll say no word about this night or about what you know of me, or about what you’ve done. And seven years, you’ll do no magic you haven’t earned the rank for. You not even a Granny or any chance of ever being one... I’ll bind you seven years; and then you’re free to do your worst.”

She went limp against the rock; I was glad there wasn’t any place for her to fall to.

“The reason I’m stopping there,” I went on as I made my preparations, “is because I am *not* a witch! And because I have no desire to go beyond what’s decent. You’re a woman—and you’re a Clark by birth. I am willing to wager that in seven years you’ll achieve enough wisdom, that when the Spell is at its end you’ll guard your own mouth out of shame and simple decency. I’m willing to take a chance on that.”

And if I was wrong, I could bind her then again, of course; I’d be on the watch.

She just huddled there and bawled, every other word some stuff about what was she going to tell Gabriel Laddercane, more shame to her, and I got on with my work.

It took me only a little while, and then I Moved her carefully back to Castle Clark, to the bed where—might could be—her husband had not yet even missed her. If he had, that was her problem, and it was up to her to figure out some way to get out of it. I’d done all I was willing to do, and more than she deserved, out of regard for her Family, and pity for her folly, and out of the kind of distaste that comes from dealing with an enemy that’s really no match for your skills. There’s a game called shooting ducks in a barrel—I don’t play it. Never have.

And before the servingmaid tapped on my door with my pot of morning tea, everything was put away. Every sign of the wards and the pentacles swept clear, not a speck of sand from my shammybags on the Airy floor. And I lay there in my plain nightgown with the covers tucked up around my chin, and a smile on my face that suited my pose, like I’d not lifted a finger all that weary night.

Now I could go home.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



I don’t mind saying that it went well, though it’s bragging, for it’s no more than the plain truth. My leavetaking may have had an unseemly abruptness due to my hightailing out of there before my common sense (or somebody else’s) could stop me, but my homecoming went off as slick as I could possibly have desired it. And the rough edges I well knew were there didn’t so much as show their shadows on the surface that was available for examination to others.

I timed it so as to fly in to Castle Brightwater right at the end of breakfast on a sunny April morning. And the last ten miles I rode Sterling along the winding roads of the Kingdom, between the hedges of butter-yellow forsythia newly in bloom, and the fields of fruit trees covered with blossoms thick as snowflakes. Every blade of grass and every new leaf and bud was that perfect green that comes only in April, and that was what the Brightwater green was meant to stand for (and never quite matched). And although the people didn't cheer me—we didn't hold with such display on Marktwain, and hadn't for hundreds of years—I knew they were glad to see me coming back. I knew by the smiles on their faces and the fact that they were out in the fields working in their Sundy best, and this not Sundy. I kept my own face straight and pretended not to notice... in fact, I worked at *really* not noticing, seeing as how if I arrived at Castle Brightwater puffed up with anything that a sharp eye could spot as pride the family would be on me hike carrion birds on a new-dead squawker, and I'd come out of it blistered.

Nobody came out to meet me, which was reasonable enough. I wasn't company here, I *lived* here, and I had to whistle for a stablemaid to come take Sterling off my hands. Then I stopped and indulged myself, just for a minute, since nobody seemed to be looking. I never would of imagined I could be so glad just to be home.

Ours was the first Castle built, and the Castle proper is not one of the shelters the Twelve Families set up when The Ship landed and they were new to this planet. The one the Brightwaters built was made of logs that can't match Tinaseeh ironwood even halfway for durability, but have kept well enough under cover; and it sits within the front courtyard of the Castle as a constant reminder—lest we should ever forget—of our humble beginnings here. It had seven bedrooms round a common room; and forty-four Brightwaters—men, women, and children, and one fine hound that had quickly died—slept and ate and passed their very limited leisure time under that wooden roof.

When I was at home I hardly saw the loghouse, I was so accustomed to it, but it was new to my eyes this morning, and I let them linger on it, glad it was still there for the children of all the Twelve Families to visit and play at living in.

And then I turned my eyes to the Castle itself, and it pleased me, too. It was perfectly square, and a modest but satisfactory two stories high. It had twelve towers; one at each corner, one at the center of each wall, one on either side of the front doors, and two extra in the front wall for fancy. The Brightwater flag flew from every one of the tower roofs, and I noticed that someone had polished the brass weathervane (an Old Earth rooster that was one of the few material things granted space in The Ship that could only be called a luxury), and that it turned briskly in the wind at the top of the tower spire where it had been fastened more than nine hundred years ago. I smiled; they'd claim that was done for spring cleaning, but I knew better—we were a good week away from spring cleaning time. It was done to welcome me home.

I knocked at the Castle doors, and they slid apart without a sound to let me in; someone had oiled them, too, for there'd been a grating scrape to them when I rode

out in February. The Castle Housekeeper stood there casually watching three servingmaids polish the same banister over and over again, and she looked up as I stepped under the doorbeam and pretended to be surprised.

“Well, if it’s not Miss Responsible,” she said. “Good morning to you, miss!”

“Good morning to you, Sally of Lewis,” I said, and I greeted each of the servingmaids by name as well, including the one whose apron had a grease spot, for which there was no excuse in my front Hall. I’m home,” I said.

“We see you are,” said Sally of Lewis. “And we’re glad—it’s been a long time.”

It had been that; nearly eight weeks, and at that I’d made a bit better time than I’d deserved.

“The Family’s still having breakfast, miss,” said Sally of Lewis. “They’re just finishing the coffee and there’s still hot cornbread on the table. The cooks happened to make extra this morning.”

It was amazing. I found that not only was I anxious for some Brightwater cornbread and butter, I was even anxious to see my mother. I believed I was even anxious to see Emmalyn of Clark, and I couldn’t remember that idea ever passing through my mind before. I had clearly been away too long and was going weak in the head.

I went down the corridors to the room at the back of the Castle where we liked to have breakfast and supper both. It looked out on a wide field that was a riot of wildflowers in the spring and a riot of scarlet and golden leaves in the fall, and through which there flowed a quite respectable creek that you could catch glimpses of from the windows. That creek had been First Granny’s only condition for choice of the Brightwater land. “I don’t care what else it has or hasn’t,” she’d declared. “Volcanoes, canyons, banana trees, swamps, anything you fancy—but it has got to have a creek or I won’t build even an outbuilding on it. Keep that in mind!”

“Well, Responsible,” they all said as I went in the door. And various other equally original greetings. Granny Hazelbide settled for “Decided to come back, did you?” and a full-scale Granny glare.

“Sit down, Responsible,” said Patience of Clark, “and help yourself to the cornbread. Unless you want to change first, of course.”

I looked down at myself, at the black velvet corselet and the silver-and-gold embroidery and the scarlet leather gloves, and all the rest of it. “No,” I said, “I’ll have my breakfast first. And then I plan to take all this off, and burn it.”

“*You’ll* do no such thing!” said Granny Hazelbide, dropping her silverware with a clatter onto her plate. “Waste not, want not, young woman—you think money grows on trees? You’ll take that truck off and give it in to the staff for cleaning and storing away proper; and then next time you take a notion to play the fool you’ll already have your fool outfit to hand. But spare us your spurs, please—they clank, and furthermore, they’ll scratch the floorboards. And take off your gloves; they’ll be all over Mule.”

Emmalyn of Clark told me what a pretty outfit it was, and how much she admired it, and how she had thought of that as I left but hadn't had a chance to express her admiration, and I thanked her politely.

"I think, personally," said Thorn of Guthrie, "that it is a tad Too Much."

"A *tad!* exclaimed Granny Hazelbide. "Why, she looks like a circus, or a—"

I interrupted with considerable haste, remembering how I'd reacted the last time I'd heard the word I was reasonably sure she was just about to use.

"Dear Granny Hazelbide," I said, sitting down and reaching for the hot cornbread and the butter, "you weren't here to advise me when I left, you see, you were ailing, I left in something of a hurry, and I did the best I could."

"Hmnnunph," said Granny, "your 'best' is pretty puny, Responsible. And I am scandalized that either your mother *or* your grandmother let you leave this Castle looking like a—"

Well, there was clearly no hope for it.

"Granny Leeward of Castle Traveller said I looked like a whore," I said blandly. If the word had to be used I might as well do it myself and spare my sensibilities as best I could.

"Shows what *she* knows," muttered Granny Hazelbide instantly, just as if she hadn't had the exact same word on the tip of her fibbing tongue. "Had *her* way, you'd have gone on Quest in a black nightgown and a bonnet, I reckon."

"I expect I would," I said. "I expect."

The same crew was there that had been at the meeting in February; except that Jonathan Cardwell Brightwater the 11th sat beside Ruth of Motley, and the Granny was present. My mother looked a vision, as always, in a gown the exact color of the forsythia bushes; and she brought up the subject at hand without preliminary, as always.

"Well," she said, "did you find out who we owe for our sour milk? And all the rest of it? And did you find out who put that baby up in the cedar tree? I am of the opinion, myself, that the McDaniels are growing somewhat more than just tired of camping under that tree and watching their baby through a life-support bubble, and I rather imagine that if you could see your way clear to do something about that they'd be properly grateful. Not that I'd want to hurry your breakfast, of course."

Prick, prick, prick... that was Thorn of Guthrie. Prick you here and when you jumped, stick you somewhere else.

"Mother," I said, "I learned everything I went to find out, and a good deal more I never suspected, and we can take care of the baby matter in just a minute. I do intend to finish my breakfast."

"Well?" she demanded. "Who was it?"

"Can't tell," I said, shaking my head with what was intended to look like sincere regret. "I *am* sorry about that."

“You can’t tell?” Jubal Brooks and Donald Patrick did that in chorus, both outraged, and my grandparents looked at each other significantly and said nothing.

“Told you she wouldn’t,” said Granny Hazelbide smugly. “She’s ornery; always was, always will be. You’ll get nothing out of her.”

“Not true, Granny,” I answered, “you’ll get a good deal out of me. I will be calling Full Council later... after supper, Mother, you needn’t think about it now... to tell you about a lot of things that need discussing badly.”

“Your ‘adventures,’ I suppose,” said my grandmother Ruth.

“They were not of my choosing, Grandmother,” I reminded her, “they went with the choice of *measure* to be taken, all duly voted on by you and everybody there at the time. I’ll take my fair share of blame, but I warn you I’ll not take what’s not *coming* to me... and I learned a lot that will need tending to before the Jubilee.”

Patience of Clark looked at me like I’d said a broad word.

“Responsible,” she said, “do not say that to me. Do not even *suggest* that. We’re going under for the third time already in ‘what has to be done before the Jubilee’... don’t you make it worse.” And I knew then whose shoulders had taken on the load for me in that part of the field while I’d been gone.

However, Patience meant food to prepare and rooms to clean and suchlike, and training new staff. I was thinking of a promise made to a Gentle in a Purdy guestchamber, and settling the question of whether we should—or could—try for a delayed celebration of the claimed appearance of a Skerry, just in case. And there was the matter of the feuding on Arkansaw to be laid out for them, and just how the rest of the Families might fit in to that, and how that would tend to complicate both the security arrangements and the seating ones.

I would not be taking up with them the matter of what I’d done at Castle Traveller, nor what might be done in advance of the Jubilee to forestall their putting my blunder to use; that I’d have to deal with myself, in private, and I had a feeling in my heart that I knew the answer already. Nothing to be done but wait, and deal with it when it came, I’d wager, though I’d search the timelines as far as my wit and skill would take me, on the off chance. But that would not be on the Council agenda.

Nor would the name of Una of Clark. Much good seven years of silence was going to do us if I didn’t observe it myself.

“I found out who was back of all the mischief,” I said calmly, “and that we had the thing hindside to, and I put a stop to it. There’ll be no more wobbly Mules, I promise you. But for the sake of the Families involved, there’ll be no passing on of names, either, from my lips or any others.”

“Families involved...” That was Jubal Brooks. “Then there were more than one.”

“In a manner of speaking, Jubal Brooks,” I said.

In a manner of speaking. The Travellers for sure—I’d not been wrong in thinking them guilty; without the strokings and whisperings of Gabriel Laddercane Traveller

the 34th there'd of been no shenanigans from Una of Clark. She'd of bounced her babies on her knee, and doted on her husband, and died a good woman. And no way of knowing who'd put Gabriel up to that, nor how many long years it might well have been planned. And the Clarks for sure, by reason of Una's direct hand. But only those two, I thought, only those two. I'd not repeated the Insertion Transformation that night at Castle Airy, to see if any other faces would turn up in my bowl of springwater. I'd been rushed, and I'd been disgusted, and there'd not been either the time or the proper mood. And to make certain sure, I'd be doing that now I was home. I didn't expect, however, to trap anyone else. If there'd been any other name to babble, Una of Clark would of let it fall, in sheer terror.

"You're mean not to tell, Responsible," said Thorn of Guthrie. "But then you were always mean."

I smiled at my plate, and listened to Granny Hazelbide put her in her place, which she did more than adequately. My mother could not abide being left out of anything, even when it was for her own good and clearly for the general welfare. Granny dressed her both up and down, and she subsided. And when that was over, we all walked down to the churchyard.

Vine of Motley and Halliday Joseph McDaniels the 14th *did* cheer as they saw us coming, and I could see their point. Eight weeks camped under that tree must have been wearisome, even in the sort of luxury accommodations they'd provided for themselves. And I could well believe that Vine of Motley's arms itched to hold her own baby, instead of the servingmaid's she'd nursed these past two months. In her place I'd of been impatient, too, and I was glad I hadn't waited to change my clothes after all.

"Hurry up," I told the Magician of Rank that had joined us in some haste at the Castle back doors. He was called Veritas Truebreed Motley the 4th, a name some found overly fancy—which accounted for its only coming round four times in all these years—but there was no quarrel with his skill. Once I'd assured him that whatever held that baby couldn't be anything much more complicated or dangerous than Granny Magic, and clumsily done at that, he didn't waste either time or energy. At fifty-three going on fifty-four he was a sure and experienced man with his Formalisms & Transformations, and he made no fuss whatever over bringing Terrence Merryweather McDaniels the 6th down to his parents. He didn't even bother with herbs; he just scuffed a few cedar needles into suitable patterns, flicked his fingers with the supple ease of long practice, and the baby floated right down to his daddy, gurgling and cooing and obviously without so much as a heat rash to mar his perfection.

"Oh, Halliday Joseph McDaniels, *do* give him to me!" cried Vine of Motley. "Please let me have him!"

"Certainly, darlin'," said Halliday Joseph, grinning so I feared he'd crack his face. And he passed the child over to Vine of Motley and took the servingmaid's baby in exchange.

She popped up instantly and relieved him of *that* burden, and I made a mental

note that she was to be rewarded handsomely for her part in all of this. Discreetly, but handsomely. Her name was Flag of Airy, for the Ozark iris that looked quite a lot like the pictures we had from Earth; and she was, as I recalled, just on fifteen, and wife of an Attendant that was a Clark by birth. I thought that a small Bestowing of an acre or two of farmland would not be out of place, and I'd have it seen to. Two months was a long time to watch your own child suckled at another woman's breasts, and to know that your first task when you had it back—if you had it back, because she would not of been human if she hadn't worried that something might go wrong—would be weaning that babe to a cup. No, a couple of acres to put a small house on would not strain Brightwater, though the land we still had to give away was almost gone—this was a time that justified parting with it, even beyond the Family proper. And Flag of Airy would be pleased to be the lady of a house instead of a servant in Castle Brightwater. It wouldn't make it up to her completely for what she'd sacrificed, I didn't suppose; having no baby myself I was a poor judge. But it seemed to me it ought to lessen the ache a little.

Happy! We were for sure happy that day. The McDaniels insisted on packing up and heading for home at once (they didn't say "before something else happens" but no doubt they were thinking it), and nobody there that wouldn't of done the same in their place, though we protested politely. But the rest of us were in no mood for any kind of labor. The air was golden, the cedar sighed over us, and the churchyard was a credit to its Maker with white and yellow and purple violets, and young daisies, and all the spring flowers of Earth that had, praise be, taken to the soil of Ozark without so much as a dapple to their leaves to show strain. There'd be plenty of work to do later, after supper; it would be a long Council, and we'd all come out of it sobered, even with me keeping back the worst of it.

For the moment, though, we weren't worrying about that or anything else. I set aside my corselet and cape, my boots and gloves—carefully, under the sharp eyes of Granny Hazelbide—and rolled up my puffed and beornamented sleeves to feel the warm sun on my arms. We sent for a picnic from the Castle. And we lay all through that day under the cedars (I had to send the Lewises a note thanking them, I thought, while I was tying up loose ends... I had not known how much I loved those three cedars they'd nurtured in our churchyard until I lay there lazy under them and saw them with fresh eyes); and we talked of minor things. The children ran wild and wore themselves into stupors before it was time to head home for supper, playing circle games and tag and hide-and-seek and Little Sally Waters all over the churchyard, and wading in the creek while their mothers scolded halfheartedly and turned a blind eye and deaf ear most of the time.

I managed to tie down tight again in that corner of my mind reserved for the awful my encounter with the young uncle at Castle Wommack. That I would look at when the Jubilee was over; unless, the Skies help us all, he *came* to the Jubilee. Stuff that away, Responsible, I told myself hastily; sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof, and if it happened I'd have to deal with it then. I wasn't going to let it spoil my homecoming day, not that nor any of the rest of it. Not this one day.

"Glad to see you appreciate your homeplace, missy," said my Granny, giving me

a wicked dig in the ribs to be sure I was paying attention. “Grass wasn’t quite as green as you thought it’d be elsewhere, eh?”

“Don’t torment me, Granny Hazelbide,” I pleaded with her. “I’m so comfortable... and so glad to be here! Leave me in peace.”

“Leave you in *peace*?”

“Please, Granny Hazelbide. Pretty please.”

“Think you deserve peace, young lady?” she demanded.

“No, Granny, I doubt I deserve it at all,” I said frankly. “I just *asked* for it—I didn’t say I had it coming to me.”

She chuckled. And patted my knee.

“All right, then,” she said. “Long as you’re staying honest with your poor old Granny.”

She didn’t believe I was honest for a minute, nor did I, but it appeared she was willing to call temporary truce. I closed my eyes, so full of my undeserved bliss that I couldn’t hold any more, and took a nap. *That* at least, considering the way I’d been having to spend my nights, I had earned.

END OF BOOK ONE

Appendix



WHY WE ARE HERE

(A TEACHING STORY)

A very long time ago, and much farther away than you might think, there were Twelve Families, all living on a world Earth—and they were purely disgusted.

Earth, it’s said, had been green and gold and beautiful—a gardenplace and a homeplace. But the people that lived there had neglected it and abused it, year after weary year, till it was entirely spoiled, till it was a ruin and a wreck and a pitiful, pitiful sight.

The water was dirty and the air was foul; the creatures all were sorry and warped and twisted. They say the fish that swam the creeks and rivers had become so strange that a person couldn’t even look at them, let alone eat them.

And then the people, they say, began to grow twisted, too. Not in their bodies—though living where they did that was no doubt ahead of them—but in their minds and in their hearts. No person could be trusted in those times. Hurting, they say, was done for the *pleasure* of hurting. And the things that were done in those days, we are told, one human hand against another, do not bear repeating.

The Twelve Families, they were a patient people. They had lived a long time on Earth, keeping themselves to themselves, cherishing their homes and their land, and they waited as long as they could. But the day came, the day came, when First Granny said, “Enough’s enough, and this is *too* much!” And everyone looked around at the patheticness of it all, and they agreed with her.

And so, in the year Two Thousand and Twelve— as was fitting— the Twelve Families took The Ship and left Earth together, and went in search of a new homeworld. It had to be a place enough like Earth so that they could fit there; and it had to be hidden away enough so that they could keep themselves to themselves forever and ever more. And they took with them just as little as they possibly could from Earth, with First Granny and the Captain standing right in the door of The Ship, they say, throwing things out as fast as people carried them in.

“The less of that trash goes with us,” said First Granny, paying *no* mind to the complaints and the caterwauling, “the less likely we are to have to do this every time we turn around.” (By which she meant every two thousand years or so.)

And it would appear that she was right, because a thousand years have gone by, and here we are still, and mightily satisfied with our lot.

And what may have become of Earth we do not know; and the less thought about *that* the better for us all.

HOW WE CAME TO LOSE THE BIBLE

(A TEACHING STORY)

A very long time ago, and a good deal closer by than you might think, the Twelve Families and the Captain and First Granny turned their attention to bringing The Ship down for landfall nice and easy. Just *nice* and easy!

Made no nevermind that the fuel was almost all gone in The Ship’s engines. Made no nevermind that through near nine years under solar sails spread round The Ship like petals of a great lily to gather the solar winds, that fuel somehow had changed. They still had to get down.

“Fool stuffs clabbered,” said First Granny with total contempt, tapping the toe of her high-topped high-heeled pointy-toed black patent leather shoes.

“Fuel can’t clabber,” the Captain told her politely. “It’s not even liquid to start with, ma’am—begging your pardon.”

“Same thing,” said First Granny, sticking out her chin. “Put it into any frame of circumstance that suits you, Captain Aaron Dunn McDaniels, I don’t mind! It’s *spoilt*—as fuel—and that’s the same thing as clabbered.”

“Yes, ma’am,” said the Captain, as was proper. But they still had to get down.

They had never thought it would take them nine years to find a new homeworld enough like Earth to live on, and lonely enough to make neighbors an unlikely occurrence, and having no other thinking creatures unwilling and unable to let them share the land.

All the food was gone, and all the stuff for making more, and nothing was left but the food seeds packed away dormant in their sterile tubes waiting for new dirt. All of the clothes they'd brought with them were worn out and raggedy and getting too thin even for the needs of modesty.

And the animals, the live ones, they were getting what First Granny somberly referred to as That Look. What might be happening to the stores of embryos sleeping in *their* tubes, no one could say till they were decanted; but it was worrisome.

Going on was out of the question, and had been the last seven days. They had to get down.

First Granny took all the Magicians to the Ship's Chapel, and they did what they could do. And Captain Aaron Dunn McDaniels took all the crew to the bridge and the engine room, and they did what they could do.

And *nobody* stinted.

But the fuel failed them just as they saw a green land rush up beneath them—*just* as they saw it!—and The Ship went crippled into what we now call the Outward Deeps.

Well, what's meant to be will be, they say, and that appears to be true. For even as the water closed over the dying Ship and First Granny told the children to stop their caterwauling and prepare to meet their Maker with their mouths shut and their eyes open, a wonderful thing happened. *Just a wonderful thing!*

Forty of them there were, shaped like the great whales of Earth, but that their tails split *three* ways instead of two. And their color was the royal purple, the purple of majestic sovereignty.

They met The Ship as it fell, rising up in a circle as it sank toward the bottom. And they bore it up on their backs as easy as a man packs a baby, and laid it out in the shallows, where the Captain and the crew could get The Ship's door open, and everybody could wade right out of there to safety.

They were the Wise Ones, so named by First Granny; and it may be that they live there still in the Outward Deeps. Nobody knows, and nobody needs to know.

And it was during that glad wading to shore just before First Granny set her foot on the land and cried, "Well, the Kingdom's come at last, praise be!" that the ancient holy book—its name was BIBLE—was lost to the Twelve Families. First Granny, she thought the Captain had it, it seems. And the Captain, he thought First *Granny* had it. Naturally. And there was a child of three that claimed he'd seen a Wise One swallow it—waterproof, radiationproof, fireproof, crashproof box and all. And for all we know *that* may be true. For sure it's never washed up on any coast of Ozark, all these many hundred years.

"Botheration," First Granny said when they realized it was gone. And the Captain allowed as how he was deeply sorry.

"Well," said First Granny, "I suppose we'll just have to Make Do."

And so we have, ever since.

THE FLYING DULCIMER

(A TEACHING STORY)

A very long time ago, and much further away than you might think, when the Twelve Families were preparing to leave Earth, there was a young woman named Rozasharn. Now Rozasharn was a Purdy by birth, and it happened that the Purdys had a fine and famous dulcimer. It was of the sweetest fruitwood, and it was cut slim-waisted and curled, and it had inlays of mother-of-pearl in the shapes of hearts and roses and twining vines and little mourning doves. It was purely beautiful, and when they told Rozasharn it had to be left behind, she was outraged. *Just* outraged!

“Rozasharn,” said First Granny, “we have on The Ship two guitars, two banjos, two dulcimers, two autoharps, two fiddles—which is one too many, if you ask me—two mouth-harps, two mandolins, and a dobro. Each was chosen because the man or woman that played it was the finest player we knew, and it will serve to while away the time, and to be a model for building more such when we land. But that’s *enough*.” And then she gave Rozasharn a curled-lip look and said, “You can’t even carry a *tune*, Rozasharn, let alone *play* that dulcimer!”

Rozasharn yes-ma’amed, but she went away bitter and she wasn’t about to give in. The Purdy dulcimer was the prettiest she’d ever seen, and she intended it to go on The Ship no matter what First Granny said.

So Rozasharn began to plan her magic. There was a Spell of Invisibility, of course, but that took a lot of work to get going and even more to maintain, and Rozasharn wasn’t sure she was up to it. A Spell of Distraction, on the other hand, was a simpler matter, and she decided to set one of those on the dulcimer, to make it appear it was only her shawl. Rozasharn went through her motions and cast the Spell, and found herself a bit embarrassed; she had in her hands a truly splendid shawl, covered with hearts and roses and twining vines and little mourning doves, and *that* was never going to get past First Granny. “Back up a bit, Rozasharn,” Rozasharn told herself, “or you’ll come out of this blistered.”

What she settled on at last was three Spells. The first was to turn the dulcimer itself plain, and that one worked all right. The second was to make the plain dulcimer appear to be a shawl, and that one seemed to be in good shape to the eye, although it was uncomfortable to her shoulders, since she could still feel the pegs and the strings and the edges of the wood; but she considered it her family duty to put up with it. And the third was to take off the other two, and she tried that out, and *it* worked. Nothing was left but to calculate the weight she had to leave behind so no one would suspect, and that meant leaving buried in her back yard two pairs of shoes and a half-slip she’d never liked anyway, and she made it onto The Ship right under First Granny’s nose, the dulcimer draped round her shoulders and looking for all the world like a plain old shawl. *Just* like it!

Well, she would of been all right, would Rozasharn—if she’d had a little self-control. But when landing time came she just could not resist letting everyone

know the trick she'd played, and as she stepped onto the land of Ozark she cast the third Spell and stood there before everybody, holding the famous Purdy dulcimer and looking like butter wouldn't melt in her mouth.

First Granny looked her up and she looked her down, and then she looked her up once more to be certain her eyes didn't deceive her, but she said nary a word. The Captain looked sorrowful, but he didn't speak either. And as the days passed, and the Purdys settled in and built themselves a homeplace, Rozasharn began to feel comfortable.

And then came the morning when the last stick was in place, and the last curtain hung, and the last dish on the shelf, and Rozasharn looked out her front door and there stood First Granny with Macon Desirard Guthrie the 3rd at her right hand; and young Rozasharn's heart very nearly stopped. Macon Desirard Guthrie was no common person, but a man skilled in Formalisms & Transformations. If there was a more handy Magician on Ozark, Rozasharn didn't know who it might be.

"Stand aside, Rozasharn," said First Granny, "and let us come in."

And Rozasharn did that, most promptly, and there she stood while Macon Desirard Guthrie went through his Structural Descriptions and his Structural Indexes and his Rigorous Specifications of Coreference and his Global Constraints and a lot of other things of that kind and caliber; and when he got through there were just three things that a person could do with, the Purdys' fancy dulcimer.

You could hang it on a peg on the back wall of a dark closet.

You could put it in the bottom of a tight and heavy sack long enough to carry it to some similar peg, should you be required to move.

And you could dust it off, from time to time.

If you tried to do anything else with that dulcimer, such as showing it off to the neighbors, or playing a tune, or even moving it off its peg to peek at it your own self, it came flying out at you like a hunting hawk; and starting in the center of the room it would swoop in bigger and bigger circles, faster and faster... Wheeeyeeew! Let me tell you, all you could do then was throw yourself on the floor, roll under whatever you'd fit under, and pray it would miss you.

And *nobody* could put that thing back on its peg but another Magician trained in Formalisms & Transformations.

And that is the tale of the Flying Dulcimer of Castle Purdy, and has something to tell us about being proud of *things*.

The jump-rope rhyme goes like this:

The Purdys have a dulcimer,
it cannot make a sound;
and if you take it off its peg,
it flies around and round!

It'll hit you in the back of the neck,
as it goes flying by!
It'll hit you in the crook of the back,
it'll poke you in the eye!
It'll chase you round the bedroom,
it'll chase you down the stairs!
And all 'cause of Rozasharn of Purdy
as tried to put on airs!

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[scanned anonymously in a galaxy far far away]

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