ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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V

SONG OF SORCERY

CHAPTER 1

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The old lady made a rude noise. "As if I cared about that. But alright, dear. Only wait until you hear what he did-wait till your father hears! That birdbrain will wish Ching had made a meal of him before Sir William's done with him!"

"But I didn't write the tune," protested the man who materialized in place of the mockingbird as Gran snapped the release ritual from her fingers. His arms and legs clung to the rafter for dear life. "Please, somebody get me a ladder."

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

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

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

"I upset her?" he stammered, red deepening his already ruddy cheeks.

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

"Nothing much, dearie," replied the grandmother, pouring over her descendant a gaze of the purest molasses. "He can explain to your father. Chingachgook is a trifle upset. I'll be at my cottage if you need me." She dimpled her dried-apple cheeks at the stranger. "Do sing Sir William that delightful song, young man. Ta, Granddaughter!" A wave of her arm and a final whip of the cat's tail from the crook of her other arm, and she was off.

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

"You're a minstrel, then?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

He had hardly been instructed in maintaining his aplomb while hanging onto rafters, getting splinters in his fingers and knees, while some brown-haired young woman argued with her grey-and-brown-haired grandmother about the respectability of feeding him to the cat, the animal in question evidencing no doubt whatsoever as it lashed its wicked tail at him and licked its wicked chops.

His ruminations were interrupted by the return of the unlikely noblewoman, armed with a broom. Colin knocked over the bench he had been sitting on in his haste to escape.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Glad you like it."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Maggie grinned evilly. "You think she's bad, you should hear her and Aunt Sybil go on about the REST of the family! I believe Aunt Sybil's cottage is supposed to be an inheritance

from a great-great-grandam who was fond of luring children up to the house to snack on a bit of roofing. Then there was Great Grandma Oonaugh. Now there was an old horror!" But she said it, Colin thought, with the same pride others might display in royal ancestors.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Oh, aye, it's that," Maggie said, making a face. "That's

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

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

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

A technically impossible evening meal of Queenston Quiche, artichokes in almond sauce, and chocolate fudge layer cake, served with a blue wine equally correct with meat or fish, and equally delicious with either, helped to alleviate some of Colin's artistic aggravation, not to mention his empty stomach and dry throat. As he was hoarse from singing, he limited his musical endeavors that night to a soft lament played on his fiddle while Maggie, arms clasped about her knees, stared into the fire,

rocking a little in time with his playing. Ching sprawled at her feet as comfortably as though on his favorite rug beneath his mistress's loom at Fort Iceworm.

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

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

"It wasn't like this when I came north," Colin said. "It doesn't look the same at all."

"This IS the Troutmaire River, then?" Maggie asked.

Colin nodded. "According to the maps and I remember the path this far too, but the bridge that was here is gone."

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

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

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

"Maggie, look out there!" Colin pointed. "There's a dragon in that tree."

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

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

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

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

"At least we won't have to worry about a dragon as well as a flood." Colin shivered and dismounted. "Perhaps your sister would appreciate your visit more later, when she's-you know- had more chance to adapt to the nomadic life." He really didn't expect her to insist that they sit to wait for the flood to subside, which would surely take at least days, if not weeks. And they definitely could not cross it, which would be at worst a sodden death, and at best a dreadful way to treat his instruments. "We could try again later-maybe in midsummer?"

Maggie only favored him with a venomous look and dismounted, first continuing her shoreline inspection of the stranded beast on foot, then plopping down onto a fallen tree trunk. Cupping her chin in one hand, she stared moodily out at the flood, plucking angrily at the tall grasses that grew around her with the hand unoccupied with chin.

Ching joined her, settling his white stomach onto the soft, mossy covering of the log. "Well, witch, what now?"

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

"I suggest we give up." The cat closed his eyes and looked away.

"No, really, Ching, what can a hearthcrafter do in this kind of situation? I could spin a rope, but we'd never make it all the way across the river." She reached out and snapped off one of the tall reeds at the edge of the torrent.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Umm-just a little idea of mine," she replied, as she energetically began to snatch up every reed in sight.

His qualm became an uneasy twinge as he dropped an armload of reeds on top of those she'd already gathered. She stopped gathering finally, but signalled him to continue, and sat down and began to weave the rushes into a large, flat coil.

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

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

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

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

"Uh-uh," the minstrel said firmly.

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

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

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

"That DRAGON?!" The stillness exploded into an orgy of

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

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

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

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

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

Colin had continued to pursue her progress with alarm and not a little personal interest. Perhaps she had not been entirely frank about the scope of her magical powers, and was capable of a great deal more than she'd admitted. Perhaps she was now concocting a gigantic, magical, enormously powerful, arcane-

positive though whether its purpose might be for rescuing tangled dragons or chastising recalcitrant troubadours he was uncertain.

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

"Not particularly."

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

Hauling the sopping bag back again, she inspected the rope and then the bag itself. The rope was braided for utility in a fashion that minimized its tendency to shrink. The bag was not in a condition ever to hold clothing again. By the time she finished her inspection, Maggie's hands were so slippery with mud she had to wash them off in the river before resuming her sack-whirling stance. She let fly, and this time the bag snaked its way into the appropriate tree, and its weight wrapped it twice around a branch. Maggie leaned back on the rope, testing it with her entire weight. Satisfied, she took the end and tied it securely around the trunk of another tree.

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

doesn't immediately roast one well done before it learns of one's beneficent intentions, just in case it's interested in them."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"No!"

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

; "I don't know-it all depends-it could make all sorts of ·· difference. Abandoned fools have been known to do all sorts of lawful things to wives who run off from them, and that gypsy is

?-as gallant protector, believe me. He ran off with two of the dairy

-"-

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

"Dragons?" Colin suggested helpfully.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Aunt Sybil grinned at him. "The false part of your statement, lad, is that Xenobia is not a witch at all. Doesn't even have the second sight a lot of her people have. She's just a charlatan who calls herself Queen of the Gypsies." She turned to Maggie. "How long has your sister been missing, now?"

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

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

"Child?" Maggie asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Odd name for a cat," Colin remarked, fingering his guitar as he always did when distracted or confused.

"It's a family name," Sybil replied. "Handed down from one of our distant ancestors, a foreign sailor. Legend has it that he was a savage warrior from far across the seas who wooed and won, or was it the other way around? one of our early ancestresses.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER 6

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"A horse?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"My boot won't fit tomorrow with all that under there."

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

"It helps," Colin groaned.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

."Well?" Colin asked again.

"I beg your pardon?"

"What do you think?"

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

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

"I think he showed remarkable restraint for someone with his background, don't you?" She resewed one of the few places on the cloak that had remained intact.

"Well, he came off alright in the song, I suppose ..."

"He'd make a handsome king, don't you think?"

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

"Why don't we try the magic mirror again, Maggie? We ought to find out if we're headed in the right general direction before we go much farther."

"I suppose you're right. I wonder why it wouldn't work this morning. Toads! I thought if Rowan could just SEE Winnie he might--oh, I don't know what I thought."

"He did try that once to get her back," Colin reminded her, disliking Rowan even more because fairness forced him to defend the fellow.

"I know. Where shall we start?"

"Where your aunt left off."

Maggie had pulled the mirror out of her pocket and polished it. She held in her mind the image of Amberwine and of gypsies, the latter image provided by the village fairs and her imagination

freshly fueled by Colin's song. As the rainbow lights flashed away in the darkness, two indistinct pictures, one superimposed on the other, appeared in the mirror.

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

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

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

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

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

The peddler's tone was sweeter than Aunt Sybil's house. He waved a cutely admonishing finger at her. "Now your ladyship knows I have nothing fine enough for the likes of you on MY humble cart." He gave Amberwine a chance to interpret this as a rejection of her thinly-disguised petition for help, then said, "Actually, ma'am, I've been sent to look for you. Your father is

staying here with a distant relative of your stepmother's. If you wouldn't mind riding in my modest wagon, I could take you to him."

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

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

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

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

"That slimy bastard!" Maggie yelled, as the mirror went dark. She thrust it rudely back into her pocket. "How fast can we get to Queenston from here?"

"It's about a week's hard ride, at least. Maggie, what did he mean about your father being there?"

"I don't know. It's a lie, of course. What can that vile worm be up to, anyway?"

"Can he have passed us while we were at the castle?"

"Perhaps--or else--"

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

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

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

[illegible]

"Too bad it's all closed up, like. I'd enjoy watching," he heard someone say as he landed.

"We'll hear, right enough," said someone else.

A deafening roar was the first indication of their veracity.

CHAPTER 10

The gypsy had his love nest all arranged. Since he shared his mother's wagon, he found it convenient to prepare such trysting places wherever their band went. It made an interesting game, to find a suitable spot to woo, and, naturally, to win, his loves. The locations were varied enough to titillate his sense of adventure: a hay mow, an outbuilding, an open field, a deserted woodcutter's hut, or, as it was tonight, a comfortable bed of fragrant spruce boughs and soft moss, all ready for him to lay the lady down beneath the rustling willows.

Leaves and laying down, however, appeared to be far from the lady's mind. He was finally forced to give her a shove. Awkward, true, but effective.

"You louse-ridden, horse-dewed son-of-?--" she began before he caught her in his arms and hushed her with a hard kiss. The hardness of it became satisfyingly soft and melting and mutually nibbly and she surrendered sufficiently to allow him to go on to the next phase and locate a limb to caress. The nearest was a velvety thigh.

He murmured softly, as usual, "Your skin-oh, darling, it is so very soft."

She broke his hold and looked at him with astonishment, then

burst into a fit of laughter totally inappropriate for the mood of the moment and offensive to his sense of fitness.

"What is so funny?"

"Me-me and my soft skin. What did you expect, anyway?" she was so amused by her own joke she collapsed once more before she could continue. "I mean to say, did you imagine I would have scales, or what?"

For such a ravishing girl she clearly didn't understand the first thing about being ravished. She was drearily unaware of the protocol of such matters. That was a classic compliment! Offended, Davey decided that perhaps she preferred a more basic approach, which also happened to suit him at the moment.

He grabbed the front of her bodice and pulled. It ripped apart long enough for him to catch a moonglow swell of copper skin, then it wove itself primly back together again.

"Ching was right," the girl muttered to herself, "a stitch in time would have indeed saved nine this time."

Though her perfume was driving him mad, he thought it prudent to employ more circumspect tactics with young women who caused their clothing to automatically mend. "However you did that," he grumbled, "you're certainly a lot more modest than you were a while ago." He had relinquished his embrace, but retained her wrists.

She glared at him.

"Of course," he added quickly. "On you, my lovely, modesty or immodesty are equally becoming."

Seeing that he was making no headway, he reverted to persuasion. "Come, now, my sweetheart. I won't force you to do anything you don't want to do. Not until you're ready. I'm sorry I tore your dress-I am too impatient to taste your charms. I can't help myself, you know. Passionate gypsy blood, and all that." He pulled her back into his arms, where she lay for a moment against him while he kissed her neck and munched her earlobes. He had found ninety-nine percent of the subjects tested responded favorably to such embraces.

She sighed deeply and almost snuggled against him for a moment. "You don't intend to harm us, then?"

He looked down at her with annoyance. The little wench was trying to take advantage of the situation! "Well, I didn't say THAT. You are spies, after all. But I wouldn't want to have to force you, dear girl. Think how bad that would sound?" He considered that for a moment, while defining the contours of her bosom and experimenting with a couple of squeezes.

A lupine grin replaced his unaccustomed meditative air. "On the other hand, who would you tell? Not many more get-togethers with the girls for you, sweet."

The breath was knocked out of him as he was flung backwards by the unexpected force of an enchanted shove. By the expedient of informing her magic that she wished to push the cow aside for milking, Maggie had employed it in her personal defense. "I cannot believe Amberwine's incredible lack of taste." She enunciated each word with finicky precision, and shook herself as though infested with spiders.

Davey, after inspecting himself for damage, was preparing to leap upon her and crush her into submission, in the course of which he was certain she would come around to her senses and enjoy it all tremendously. Her words, however, had given him pause.

"Amberwine? You mean Lady Rowan?" "Yes, I mean Lady Rowan, you cad." Her formerly voluptuous mouth was now set in a thin line, and her fiery eye reminded him uncomfortably of his mother.

"Must you bring up ancient history?" Sighing dramatically, he let his fingers crawl toward the leather rope at his left while he raised himself casually to his right elbow, as near to her as he dared.

"I certainly must," she said.

"You haven't got much sensitivity, have you, wench?" he asked critically.

"More than you have. I say, is it true you haven't a heart?" "You really are an insensitive little witch." "Precisely."

"As a matter of fact, I don't. Part of my puberty rite as a gypsy prince required its removal."

"What a quaint folk custom! Oh, Mother!" she swore, catching sight of the rope in his hand. "You aren't going to use that thing, are you?" She tried to scramble away, but he caught her by the foot and slammed her against the trunk of a tree before she was able to contemplate cows.

"I don't see why not." He yanked the knot tight. "You are a spy."

"I am not a spy, and you are awful." "Not entirely. If you'd only have given me a chance I can be quite amusing, really." His protestations were limp, however, and he had lost a good deal of his inspiration for the moment. "Oh, to be sure. I think you're funnier than a hanging,

myself," she said acidly. "Really, how do you keep walking around without a heart?"

"It was magically removed, silly girl. Not surgically." "I see. You have a blood-pumping apparatus, just no feelings." "You might put it that way. Scientific turn of mind you've got, for a spy."

"I told you I'm not a spy. I only wanted to find out how you managed to make off with my sister, and why you allowed your mother to drive her away later. As a matter of fact, now that we're better acquainted, I'm amazed Winnie didn't leave without being asked."

"You don't like me, do you?"

He was hungry too, and had no assets except a sword that didn't fit him, his musical instruments, the clothes on his back, and a borrowed cat. He also had a lack of bright notions how to proceed with keeping his promises to Maggie and to Zorah.

Ching raised his black-masked face from his kneading front paws, green eyes slitted with good cheer.

Colin idly scratched behind the cat's whiskers. "At least you're in a good mood. We'd best get to work, however, before they throw us in prison." The cat didn't look particularly worried. Having no purse, he could hardly be held responsible for bills. Colin walked to the window to get his bearings. The capital swept down to the brilliant water of Queenston Harbor, whose garden of masts and spars was outlined in sharp detail against the mountains. The sunset frosted the upper peaks, hovering protectively around the harbor, with strawberry ice. "Ah, well," sighed Colin as he pulled his boots on. "at least if we don't come up with something here they'll only jail us if they catch us. This is a nice place. Some inns, I understand, they'd simply slit our throats and be done with it."

Fortunately, temporary impoverishment was one contingency the academy had trained him to contend with. Guitar strung across his back, and fiddle under his arm, he held open the door of the room for Ching to stroll through. "Now, cat, I promised you you'd never go hungry, didn't I? How does some nice fish sound?" Ching gazed raptly up at him for a reply.

Hoping not to meet the landlord, Colin slipped softly down the stairs, and for a change luck was with him. He breathed more deeply when they had put several streets between themselves and the inn. The salty, fishy smell of the harbor tanged at their noses, and Ching padded along in a positively frisky fashion.

Colin soon thought it prudent to lift the cat to his shoulders so he could ride between the guitar and Colin's neck. The capital of Argonia was much busier than it had been when the third-class apprentices from the Minstrel Academy had visited their hall three years before.

Even now, in early evening, merchants and sailors and servants and nobles streamed around him, bartering and buying right in the middle of the street. Heavily-laden wagons pulled by horses or oxen parted the stream of passers-by as a boulder parts a stream of water. Carriages, gilded and probably belonging to noble court officials and administrative personnel, clattered by, heedless of the traffic, and Colin shied, nervous of so much activity after the relative peace of the highway.

He ought to have expected it would be busier, though, with the tribunal convening in only three months. Servants would be renovating their masters' and mistresses' townhouses, merchants would be heavily stocking their inventories, and, naturally, more ships would be required to bring the goods.

Country folk would be coming to town looking for work more lucrative than farming to see them through the coming winter. And curiosity-seekers would be trying to find a good place to stay before everyone else got moved in. For everybody wanted to know what would happen when the elder statesmen of Argonia met to nominate Finbar the Fireproof's successor to the crown of Argonia.

Finbar had been one of the best kings ever to rule, and one of the most colorful. The Minstrel Academy was one of the King's many educational advances, and had been founded some fifty years ago, shortly after Finbar had accepted the crown. Tax reforms, improved farming methods instituted by wise men sent abroad specifically to study advanced foreign techniques, the abolition of differences in the criminal code between magical and non-magical folk, and a general attitude of reason and tolerance had been the result of his rule.

But Finbar, once the most stoic and courageous of princes, was finally growing old. Some said old before his time, as an unfortunate consequence of his family history. He came from a family of performing magicians, whose talents included not only Finbar's own penchant for swallowing flaming swords (which made him virtually dragon-proof) but also being sawn in half, lying on beds of nails, sticking swords into boxes containing themselves, and other uncomfortable occupations. Even those who did not agree that the king's premature infirmity at the age of eighty-six resulted from his magic had to admit that his perilous ancestral talent had cost him his heir to the throne.

For his descendants, in the same way lamented by Granny and Aunt Sybil Brown, were less powerful than he, as he was less powerful than his ancestor who could climb invisible ropes into the stratosphere. The two young princes, in trying to live up to their father's prowess, perished rather messily while attempting to master one of the more advanced skills practiced by him. The princess did happen to have a little talent for eating fire, but after the demise of her brothers she decided to retire from public life and become an illuminator of manuscripts.

Some folk were uncharitable enough to intimate that a monarch with somewhat less magic and somewhat more mortal strength and horse sense might be a wise choice at this time.

At any rate, the economy of Queenston was flourishing if the reigning monarch was not, and it was not easy for a man with a cat on his shoulders and a fiddle under his arm to elbow his way through the throngs that crowded the streets and waterfront, where if there were fewer nobles and rich merchants, there were more longshoremen, sailors, and the ladies who profited by their company.

He was about to ask one of these people where he could locate his dinner when his nose located it for him. Rancid grease, frying fish, sailors whose bodies touched water only when a wave washed. across the deck of their ships, and the mingled stench of first- and second-hand ale and foreign tobacco told him he had found a place to earn his meal and rent money even before he heard the clamor of voices and the rattle of cutlery from within.

He could see very little as he entered the inn, for two reasons. The first was that a friendly pre-dinner brawl was in progress and people were flying in and out the door on their knees and by the seats of their pants in confusing profusion. The second reason was that the smoke from both pipes and unattended oil lamps clouded the entire establishment with a haze of blue-gray fumes. Colin thought perhaps the patrons were so glad to see the place after months at sea, they probably considered the fumes atmospheric.

Ducking the airborne diners, he made his way to a chair in the corner of the room where he could have his back against the wall and avoid being jostled from behind. Ching jumped down from his shoulder and went to investigate the fish smells emerging from behind the bar, and Colin unlimbered his bow.

For a time he played to himself, building his courage, and no one could hear him over the brawl. But the first of the brawlers to decide to sit and nurse his wounds over another flagon sat near him, listened to what he played, applauded loud enough even to be heard over the din, and bellowed a request. This innovative pastime quickly became fashionable among his fellows, likewise seeking less painful diversion which would allow them more drinking time.

Requests were loud and competitive, and almost led to another brawl, until someone decided to influence Colin's choice with a copper coin. Someone else decided that what one copper coin could do, two copper coins would do better, and so on. By the time he had enough to buy his dinner, Colin was thoroughly enjoying himself.

All of the sailors had voices, a few of them good, all of them lusty, and they brought the same enthusiasm to the singing that they had to the brawling. Their favorite songs were bawdy and very long, since on shipboard it was a common pastime to sing and to add new verses, appropriate to the current situation, to old songs. Colin was on the sixteenth verse or the eighteenth, he wasn't sure which, of the one about the selkie who outwitted the sea serpent and seduced the siren, when the first of his listeners called the innkeeper for a pint for the fiddler.

As the evening wore on and the smoky room changed from an overall illuminated gray to an overall illuminated black, frequent calls of "Innkeeper, t'lad's dry! Ale!" reverberated through the room along with the clanking of flagons and the singing. Then Colin was good for another forty verses, and after the first few times was amazed at how harmonious the chorusing of the sailors had become.

When the second gallon had poured down his throat, a man with a striped cap and an eyepatch produced a concertina and another man produced a hornpipe, and then it didn't matter if Colin sang or not, as everyone else was making music, even if they weren't all singing or playing the same song.

As the night wore on and day approached, Colin was still singing and yarning at the table occupied by his most fervent and most intoxicated supporters. The minstrel listened to their stories and thought he'd never heard anything so wonderful, or met such fine, brave, intelligent, altogether splendid fellows in his life.

There was a lull in the conversation then as all of them took a pull at their flagons and he told them about his own adventures. When he'd finished, several pints later, his face was wet with tears. ". . . and so I lost dear, dear lil' Maggie . . ." and a couple of the tears slid over the lip of his flask.

"There there, lad, you'll dilute the ale," said the concertina player, thoughtfully mopping Colin's face with his striped hat, and then blowing his nose on it before replacing it on his own head.

"Ah, you loved the lassie, didn't you, lad?" asked a tenderhearted old soul, the bosun of the ship they all crewed on, and a former pirate.

"Well, she made excellent stew . . ." Colin said wistfully, .the tears still flowing freely. "But I left her in the wood. Couldn't find her. Nothin' left of her a'tall but her pussy cat." The originator of the ribald remark that followed that statement was awarded a scathing look by Ching, who was filled with fish given him by the friendly cook in the kitchen and perched once more on Colin's neck.

When the laughter died away, someone else said, "Sign on with us, then, lad."

"Can't. I've all this unfinished business. Got to find 'er ladyship for Maggie, and get the gypsy's heart from t' sor-sorcerer for Zorah, like I told you." He started bawling again at the impossibility of it all, then brightened. "I say, you lads wouldn't know where I could find any bad sor-sor-men witches, would you?"

The old pirate with the romantic streak spoke up again. "Now there's a good reason for you to join on with us, laddie. The wiliest rogue of the sorcerous lot lives on an island in Dragon Bay, so I hear tell. If it's evil sorcerers you want, he's your man."

Colin. who didn't see how he could be running into two evil sorcerers on the same journey, felt sure that the sorcerer the pirate mentioned must be the one he sought. He agreed to sign on as far as Dragon Bay, and asked when they were leaving.

"First light 'n morning, which is to say as soon as I can boot these rogues out of here," said the second officer. "We wants to get into the Bay and docked before Dragon Days starts if we can, which we can't if you lads sits here all day."

"What's Dragon Days?" asked Colin.

"Aw, it's nothing. Just every month for a week or so Dragon Bay is plagued by this great beastie what it feeds before it eats everything in sight."

"How can people live there, then?"

"It's this sorcerer fella, you see," said the concertina player, warming especially to the narration now that work was in sight. "He sets up this Dragon Days arrangement with the Dragon. Persuasive sort of chap, they say he is, the sorcerer-not the dragon-though dragons do their own persuadin' anyhow, the way oft is everybody has to give up so many of their beasts every month to feed the dragon. There's some say an occasional rival of Himself the Sorcerer gets unlucky enough to wander in among the poor beasts and be eaten, but none will swear to it. The folk drive their beasts down to the bay, and the animals are driven onto a barge and hauled out to one of them rocky patches that surrounds Evil Island."

"Evil Island?"

The man leaned forward, whispering, "That's where the sorcerer dwells, of course. Some say it's beautiful and others say it's terrible, but all say it's a bloody good thing t' sorcerer has made this arrangement so they can tithe a cow t' the dragon instead of being eaten out o' house and home in a more personal kinda way. Ah, laddie, a dragon is a terrible plague!"

"I don't know 'bout that," Colin said, trying to be fair, "I met a dragon once, and she wasn't such a bad sort once you got t' know 'er."

This remark was met with laughter that all but gusted away the atmosphere, the guffaws being so lusty as to blow the smoke clouds out the door. "Not so bad oncet you gets to know 'er! Now there's a good 'un!"

The old pirate clapped him on the back. "You surely must come with us now, laddie. It's a fine sailor we can make of you."

"But I've never been to sea."

"No matter. We can teach you the sailin' part, but the serious requirements is drinkin', singin', and lyin', and you surely do excel at that."

CHAPTER 15

His Highness the bear, Maggie found, made the perfect traveling companion. While strong enough and beastlike enough to barge through the woods with no fear of interference from griffins or lions or much of anything else, he was nevertheless cultured, erudite, witty, and considerate. Ever courteous, he was mindful of her comfort and courtly in his manners, yet not too dignified to use his claws to dig for edible roots she could cook for supper.

The first night they had spent getting out of the wood, and had in the morning camped on the banks of a river which neither of them could name, Maggie never having been so far from home before and the bear being a foreigner. Of course, he told her, he had been all over a great many countries with the gypsy band, he was sure, but his own mind then was dominated by the bear's, and he had only a bear's perceptions of where he had been.

The worst part of the spell Xenobia had caused to be cast upon him was that he was not only a bear in appearance, but a bear in thought and deed as well. His own mind was imprisoned by the (bear's, and he had only the control a bear normally had over his actions and treatment. There had been other times, he admitted remorsefully, when enemies of Xenobia not so well-connected with magical cats had been put in the cage with him. Maggie shuddered, but so did the enchanted prince.

It had been a terrible thing to watch the body he occupied murder helpless people. It was somehow not at all the same as leading troops in a border skirmish, bashing heads and laying into one another in good clean soldierly fun. That was after all a prince's duty.

Well into the afternoon they had a dinner of berries and bird's eggs. The bear had them raw as he found them, but Maggie made an omelette of her share, after she had first prudently expanded both foods to satisfy their appetites and have a few days' supply in reserve. There were enough eggs left over to return to the bird's nest, if the bird would have them after they'd been juggled about by bears and magical spells.

As His Highness regally licked in the last of the blue stain from his muzzle, Maggie reached into her pocket and produced the silver mirror. "I suppose," she said, "we ought to find out where we're going."

"Good idea, gurrl. How?"

Maggie showed him Aunt Sybil's mirror and explained its powers and restrictions. "Only trouble is, this type of gift magic limits itself to three visions only. Then it's useless unless it's recharged."

"What's the problem?"

"I think we've used two already, if the one that misfired at the castle counts. Colin and I saw Winnie in Queenston the second time we tried it. And I was thinking, If we're up against such a powerful sorcerer, maybe we should try to enlist the help of my uncle."

The bear waited courteously for her to continue. "My aunt said her brother lives in these parts somewhere, and by now he may be very powerful himself. Aunt Sybil and Gran are. Unfortunately, I'm not. Making a superb souffle hardly qualifies me for rescuing people from the clutches of mighty sorcerers. There's also that little matter of your son's heart he might advise us on. No," she concluded, having convinced herself, "we need first-class help."

"So you're thinkin' to find your uncle in the glass instead of Lady Rowan?"

"It's an idea. Probably Uncle Feanchar knows this sorcerer, what with both of them living on the coast and all. Possibly they even play chess together once in a while-though neither of us have any reason to be fond of him, to another sorcerer like Uncle Feanchar he might not be such a bad fellow."

His Highness grumbled deep in his throat, but only said, "If your sister is with the peddler and you think he's dangerous, shouldn't we fetch her with all speed? If we delay, she and her babe may come to harm that no powerful help can remedy."

Maggie automatically started to open her mouth to argue her point of view further, then considered. Without knowing Hugo's plans, she had no way. of knowing how much danger Winnie could be in. Had she hit on the idea of locating her uncle to be of the most possible help to her sister, or merely to bolster her own confidence, which had taken a sharp drop once they were dealing with sorcerers rather than a few gypsies and a gossipy peddler?

"You're right, of course," she finally agreed. She tried to concentrate on Amberwine then, as they peered expectantly into the rainbow lights that began gathering in the silver, and she hoped the vision would be of Amberwine in better straits than before.

Again she got a double image, "I'm sorry," she told the bear. "I'm not nearly so good at this as Aunt Sybil. I keep bunching them together." The bear stared over her shoulder as the blurry vision of Amberwine's face gradually faded. "At least her hair seemed to be combed this time," Maggie remarked hopefully.

"Maybe this is where she is," said the bear, indicating the second picture, which was sharpening now that Amberwine's face had disappeared. In the mirror was the interior of an inn, as seen in front of, around, and behind a man whom both Maggie and the bear both thought they recognized but were equally sure they had never met. His appearance was strikingly unusual, not that of a person one would easily forget, Maggie thought.

He had coppery skin, lined deeply around his intensely dark brown eyes, and grooved on either side of his hawkish nose down to a thin-lipped mouth which held a faint suggestion of a smile. His cheekbones were high, and his brown hair, distinctively striped with gray at the temples, waved handsomely back from his forehead. In his hand was a wine glass and at his elbow the innkeeper's wife, pouring him a refill.

"It's such an honor to have you stay with us here at Bayshore Inn, Master Brown," the woman simpered, setting down the wine crock. "Will you be staying with us long?"

"Only till the second loading is done, Goodwife," the man replied.

"It's Uncle Feanchar!" said Maggie, now that the reason for his familiar appearance was clear.

"Of course, that's why I thought I'd seen him," the bear said, "the fellow's the spittin' image of you, gurrl."

Maggie blushed guiltily. "I'm afraid the magic mirror must show what I want to see, not what I think I ought to see. But I wish we could get Winnie back-maybe--" she returned her eyes to the mirror but the image was already gone. She shook her head. "Too bad. That was the last one, too."

The bear sat back down by the Fire, and Maggie put the mirror away. "I propose that we use the nonmagical clues we have. All roads seem to lead to Dragon Bay. Let's get over there so I can get the boy's heart and tear out of that smiling sorcerer what he's done with your sister."

It was easier to talk of getting to Dragon Bay than to do it, for the way led into the foothills and over a high passage that crossed the Mountains of Mourn. The mountains had been named, said the bear, who had studied wars foreign and domestic as Crown Prince of Alfemarle, after a battle involving giant soldiers who landed on the shores of Argonia, wreaking destruction in the coastal villages. They were repulsed finally, at the cost of many lives, from crossing into interior Argonia when the loyal home guard defended their home from the towering slopes. It was reported to have been a terrible battle, with

Although there was a footpath, perhaps left from the days of old before the Argonian Navy became strong enough that the mountains did not need to be foot-patrolled, the going was by no means easy. Road-hardened as Maggie's feet had become, her lungs were entirely unconvinced they were able to breathe the rarified mountain air, and the bear often had to wait while she caught her breath.

It was cold up there, too, and the snow was deeper than her riding boots, which were growing thinner and thinner with each magical patching. She shivered even in her woolen cloak, which was not, unfortunately, her winter-weight cloak. If she had only brought her hand spindle from the pack she might have woven some of the bear's fur into a coat, but it was too late for that now.

When they finally came down out of the mountains it had been a full seven days since they'd left the river. By noon of that day they stood on a hill overlooking Dragon Bay and the little town that lay along its shore.

From where they stood, the Bay was silver and white, smooth as glass in long flat curves offset by choppy glittering expanses of water. Beyond the Bay was the open sea, but behind it was another mountain range, craggier and even more forbidding than the one they had just crossed.

Studding the waters were a number of small islands, some no more than rocks for the waves to break against, and others fairly large and green and covered with vegetation. The largest of the islands was crowned by a castle. Even from their vantage point it appeared crude and ancient, two enormous stone houses, one taller than the other, with towers stuck at each corner and surrounded by a high wall.

The town was situated on what was the only possible site for it, having been built on a beach that was backed by the hill on which they stood. Fierce rocky cliffs brooded over the water on either side of the town, their grimness somewhat softened by the sparkling falls of spring water cascading down their faces and by the wildflowers growing in the deep cracks that scored them.

"I'll wager," said the bear, "that that's where the dragons of Dragon Bay lurk." Maggie shaded her eyes, straining to see. "In those caves in yon cliffs, gurrl. Just the thing for dragons. Bears too, matter of fact."

"I was getting ready to speak to you about that, your Highness," she said, turning back to him. "I'm really afraid that the sight of you will cause undue panic in the town. Perhaps I'd better go find out if I can where the sorcerer dwells."

"No, gurrl," he replied. "You're a good gurrl to offer to . take my chances for me. But sorcerers are tricky, and you might be trapped with no way to send for me. I think if you enlarge that cloak of yours to fit me, and put a hood on it, I can pass for a foreign pilgrim, and none'll be the wiser."

Maggie had been almost afraid he wouldn't object to her suggestion, for she felt safe in his company, if not from dangers sorcerous and arcane, at least from those physical ones like ogres and goblins which were well within the competence of a bear's strength.

When the cloak had been altered as he requested and he stood before her on his hind legs, paws concealed in the folds of the garment, she smiled with satisfaction at her handiwork and pulled the hood a little lower over his snout. "There. If you just keep your voice down and your claws hidden, your Highness, this might do the trick."

"You'd better make out that I'm fasting, as well, then," replied His Highness, "I'm not much for knives or forks these days."

It was odd coming into a town again after being in the woods and mountains for so long. There seemed to be too many buildings and too many people moving too quickly. The self-preoccupied looks on the faces of the townspeople as they brushed past the V travelers forced Maggie to keep reminding herself that their own business was just as important and they needn't keep giving way before people. Though Dragon Bay was small, it was still much larger than a gypsy camp, where the bear had spent his last few years, or Maggie's home at Fort Icewurm. Many of the hurrying people were driving geese, ducks, cows, and pigs through the streets, so that the noises of those animals were mixed with the cries of their drivers and the general conversation of day-to-day commerce.

Careful to keep the bear as far as possible from the larger animals, Maggie looked around for a point of reference. "I'm not sure how to do this, now that we're here," she told the bear. "I feel so silly just walking up to someone and saying 'Excuse me, sir or madam, would you be so kind as to point the way to the nearest evil sorcerer?' I mean, how could they admit knowing someone like that? It would show they kept bad company." The bear nodded, but had no suggestions to offer.

Most of the structures along the shore street were fishermen's huts with boats docked at the front doors and nets set out to dry and mend. Several landings down from Maggie and the bear, some of the animals were being loaded onto a barge. While they stood staring at the activity, a cow being driven down the street behind them came too close to His Highness's wild-smelling person and bolted, causing several other animals to engage in a miniature stampede.

The Prince pulled Maggie away before she could be run down by a flock of frantically bleating sheep, and the two of them fled up a narrow side street to avoid being trampled. When they had put another street between themselves and the bustling dock, Maggie collapsed against a building to catch her breath.

Regaining her composure, she slowly opened her eyes again and found herself staring into the open door of the establishment on the opposite side of the street. Her hand went to the bear's shoulder. "You Highness, isn't that the inn from the vision?"

"Hmph?" asked His Highness, allowing his snout to protrude slightly as he stood more erect. "I can't tell for sure. Haven't seen many inns lately, and, to tell the truth, we bears are a trifle near-sighted, but I'd say it is."

Maggie took a deep breath and held up crossed fingers to the bear before they entered the common room of the inn.

"Good day, good folk," said the same woman who had been so polite to Uncle Feanchar, sounding as though neither they nor the day actually met her specifications. She cast a critical eye over the scruffy girl and the great, hairy pilgrim, sniffed, and continued in a businesslike manner to set the table for her lodgers' evening meal. When she had finished and they still stood there, she said, "If you're looking for a place to stay, I'd think the Lorelei would be more to your liking. It's cheaper, and anyway, we're full up."

That was a fine way to talk to an enchanted prince and a semi-powerful witch, Maggie thought. She certainly hoped the woman would display more courtesy to other peculiar-looking travelers, or in this country she might find out how difficult it was for a toad to polish cutlery. At least she had been polite to Uncle Feanchar, which reminded Maggie of why they were there. "Thank you for your counsel, ma'am," she said with all the mildness she could muster, "but actually we were looking for a relative of mine."

"Oh?" said the woman. "We have few strangers here. Who is this relative?" She set down the rag and pitcher she had been using to clean the table and placed a fist on each ample hip, devoting her full steely-eyed attention to the bothersome intruders. "My uncle, Feanchar Brown. I-we-was told he had been stopping here."

"Master Brown is a relative of yours?" The woman's lower jaw dropped as recognition of the common familial characteristics between niece and uncle began to redden her face. "Oh, do pardon me, Miss. As I say. we get so few strangers!" She hurried around the table to pull out a bench. "Pray, seat yourself and rest. I'll bring you a mug of tea and a bit of bread I baked this morning and send my boy around for Master Brown."

She called to the boy, who came running with much show of adolescent knees and elbows, and sent him on the errand, then turned anxiously back to Maggie and the bear, saying, "I'm sorry there's no butter today. Like all else in this town it goes bad very quickly. It's a pity the food we have to waste! There was a good catch this year, too. but how we'll get through the winter I don't know, I'm sure . . ."

"Doesn't salting and drying keep it well enough?" Maggie asked, more to stop the woman's babbling than because she was really interested.

"Salt?" snorted the wife, whose stare regained its former piercing severity. "I wouldn't poison my family and customers with that! It wrecks one's health, didn't you know that? And it has that horrid aftertaste, besides."

"It does?" Maggie's opinion that the woman was extremely peculiar and changeable and generally not much worth bothering about was confirmed. Even the bread she baked was absolutely tasteless, no doubt due to the woman's prejudice against salt, and with no butter to put on it Maggie thought she might have as well eaten a piece of the table instead. "You wouldn't happen to have a place where my companion and I could wash, would you?"

The woman's grimace of distaste said that no number of celebrated kinfolk could make up for the mess they would leave her washing all the grime from themselves. Of herself Maggie thought that that was probably correct, but it was unfair in the bear's case, since none of him was visible outside his cloak. "I'd have to charge you. Mistress," the woman said finally, "as that would require the use of one of my rooms."

"I'll trade you a preservative spell for it then," Maggie offered with exaggerated patience, "to keep your dismal fish fresh."

Making sure that Maggie kept her end of the bargain first, the woman supplied her with a bowl, pitcher, towel, and a scrap of homemade soap. She did not offer to heat a kettle of water, so Maggie had a wash no warmer than those she'd had since Castle Rowan.

She realized she had given the innkeeper's wife far more than fair value for her facilities, but she felt better when she came down the steps and saw the boy escorting a man into the room. The bear joined her silently at the foot of the steps and together they stepped forward to meet Feanchar Brown. Like Granny Brown and Sybil and Maggie herself, Feanchar was clothed in brown, but with a difference.

His britches and jacket were of the finest cocoa-colored velvet, lavishly trimmed with gold embroideries of intertwined and elongated animals and intricately interwoven knots and lacings. His shirt was a shining cinnamon silk. Maggie and the innkeeper's wife curtsied. The bear pulled at the hood of his garment as though he were tipping a cap.

"The boy said a lady was inquiring for me, claiming to be some relation of mine," began Uncle Feanchar. speaking to the innkeeper's wife. She nodded at Maggie. Feanchar crossed to meet her, a smile lighting his face as he took her hands in his own well-kept and lavishly jeweled ones. "She is most certainly kin of mine! You must be the baby Bronwyn was about to have before I left!" he cried. Maggie thought she saw pleasure in his preliminary survey of her.

"Yes, Uncle. Maggie, sir."

"I gave them my best bread and tea," chirped the proprietress, "and they're all washed and rested and comfy."

Feanchar turned to her coldly. "You may leave us now, madam. But a bottle of wine to celebrate our reunion would not be amiss."

They sat sipping the wine while they talked. His Highness drank nothing, but did join them at the table, slumping somewhat, as his bear's anatomy was not well-suited to formal dining. As Feanchar began to talk, Maggie had been surprised to hear the beginnings of a growl rumble within the cloaked figure.

"Now then, dear girl, what brings you so far from Fort Icewurm? Your-ah-your mother and father are well, I trust."

"My mother is dead. Uncle."

"I'm so sorry to hear it. Your Grandmother? How is dear Maudie?"

"She's fine. Uncle. Actually, what we came for I mean-I--" she was distracted and forgot what she was going to say as the growl from the bear built to the point that Uncle Feanchar tried to peer into the cowl.

"Excuse me, good pilgrim. I didn't quite catch that?" he said.

The prince threw back his hood and jumped up on the bench, grabbing Feanchar by the jacket with his great front paws, "Pre-pare to die, varlet, or hand over my boy's heart! For eight long years your hateful voice has been ringing in my ears."

Maggie tried to drag the bear off her uncle by pulling on the cloak the bear wore, but it came off as she pulled, and she fell backwards.

Uncle Feanchar seemed to have regained control of the situation, though the bear still had him in hand, or paw. "I beg your pardon, my dear bear," he said into his Highness's snarling nose. "Would you perhaps be the Prince of Alfemarle come after the remedy for your enchantment?"

Maggie thought that even His Highness felt the strong, compassionate sincerity in her uncle's voice, for he was lowering him to his seat even as he growled, "Come to you for one last drink of the marrow of men's bones if you're not quick enough about doing as I say, sorcerous scum."

Unruffled, other than his clothing. Uncle Feanchar smoothed his lapels and clucked over a winestain where his coattails had dragged in his cup when he was hoisted aloft. He returned his attention to the bear. His expression was one of mingled martyrdom and pity.

"My dear bear, it is true that I cast a spell upon you and procured for Xenobia the spell to remove young David's heart, but let's be gentlemen about this, shall we? You must realize that even a sorcerer of my stature has a living to earn." The bear's growl had died down to a grumble again but he didn't appear particularly impressed. The sorcerer continued. "It was for your own character development that you had to be transformed; surely you can see that now? In abusing the faith of poor Xenobia, you transgressed, betraying not only a woman who loved you, but your own principles. In your feckless fickle state you would hardly have made a good ruler for your country or a decent father to your son. I simply aided the lady in providing you with an object lesson. The removal of Davey's heart

To Maggie's surprise, the bear had by now ceased growling, and after listening quietly for a moment or two had begun nodding happily. "Yes, yes, I see it all now. How stupid of me to think that there was anything wicked in such a valuable lesson. Are you sure I'm quite worthy now to regain my human form?"

Feanchar nodded gravely. "You can be helped, yes. If you and my lovely niece will be so kind as to accompany me . . ."

The bear brushed his snout with a front paw. Maggie recognized the gesture as one of embarrassment. "Of course. Whatever you say. Hope I didn't hurt you there, sir," he added sheepishly, for a bear.

"Wait a moment," Maggie said, bewildered at all the revelations and sudden attitude changes taking place. "Maybe both of you understand all of this, but . . ." Her uncle turned a look of deep concern and interest on her, mingled with avuncular pride, and she stumbled through the rest of her phrase. "If you're the sorcerer who has caused all of his problems, then you must be the one who's caused mine too, and you must know where Winnie is, and ..."

He patted her hand and looked deeply into her eyes, smiling reassuringly. "Of course I know where she is, dear child. She is at my home, an honored guest. She will be so thrilled to know you're coming to see her. When my trusted servant, known to you as Hugo the Peddler, found the poor girl in her sad state, he naturally brought her to me.

"Although Lord Rowan and I are, as you may or may not know, both contenders for the throne. Lady Amberwine is, after all, related to my family. I wished to spare her further pain and humiliation, and let her have her baby far from those who would chastise her for her girlish folly. Hugo feared if she knew he represented me, she would not come with him, so he instead allowed her to believe he came from your father. I hope we were in time. Hers is a delicate nature, and I fear her bitter recent experiences may have caused her lasting harm." He tapped his head with a forefinger.

Maggie found herself nodding agreement and promising to do whatever she could to help. She could see now that Feanchar had only been trying to save her sister, and a lucky thing it was, too. "That was so kind of you. Uncle. When is she to return to Lord Rowan?"

"To Rowan? Oh, Maggie, surely you must realize by now that while I bear him no malice, I do feel that Rowan is a dangerous and unpredictable man. I had hoped you would help me persuade your sister to accept the hospitality of my castle until her babe is born and they are in condition to travel with you to your father's home again. Perhaps you, too, would grace my castle for awhile? To keep His Highness company?" His Highness bowed, and Maggie nodded her head.

Uncle Feanchar had told them the trip from Dragon Bay to his castle on Evil Island would be novel, as it was. His boat was not propelled by means of the wind, but was elegantly pulled by three giant swans, black as the pupil of an eye, the same that Maggie had seen flying over the Northern Woods.

Hugo had met them at the dock and helped them aboard and made them comfortable, but in spite of what she now knew, that the peddler was her Uncle's major-domo and confidante, she still disliked him. There was the mysterious matter of the rabbit and the arrow he saw being fired at her father that hadn't yet been explained to her satisfaction . . . perhaps she'd have an opportunity to talk to Uncle Feanchar about it privately. Twice the peddler touched her, once in helping her to climb into the boat and another time in settling a soft velvet robe over her shoulders to keep off the chill from the bay. Both times

As the swans pulled them noiselessly through the water. Uncle Feanchar pointed out the bargeload of animals making its way across the Bay in a course that was at an oblique angle to their own. "Ah," said Feanchar. "There's a colorful local sight for you. Our beast barge on its way to the feeding grounds."

"Why's that?" the bear asked. "Do you take it upon yourself to feed the beasts the stockmen have no food for?"

"Hardly that," he laughed. "The animals are part of my Dragon Days program." He waited modestly for them to ask about it, but when they didn't, continued. "Dragon Days is a little project of mine, you see, to rid the area of the maraudings of the monster. All it took was having a heart-to-heart chat with him."

"It seems to me, heart-to-heart chats with dragons could be a little risky," commented His Highness.

"I am fortunate enough to be exceedingly brave," admitted Feanchar, "and just happened to have along at the time a powerful sleeping powder, in case he proved nasty."

"So how does this Dragon Days business work?" Maggie asked.

"It s a simple arrangement. I persuaded the dragon that it would be less trouble all around if we, the citizens of Dragon Bay, supplied him with a diet fitting and nutritious enough to meet a dragon's requirements, to be delivered to a certain place every month in time for his feedings. That way, he ceases snatching children and prize livestock, and we are no longer subject to his depredations. He also doesn't have to risk getting skewered by some knight errant abnormally strong and abysmally stupid enough to try to beard him in his den, as it were."

"Brilliant," agreed Maggie and the bear in unison, watching both Feanchar and the disappearing barge with such avid new interest that they failed to notice when the boat landed.

"You must get a lot of exercise climbing up and down this path just to get to your own front door," observed Maggie. Although she was used to the rigors of travel, or so she told herself before undertaking new ones, she found the almost perpendicular trail from landing to castle gate severely taxing.

"As I recall," said the bear, who had shed the pilgrim's robe and dropped to all fours for more comfortable climbing, "that's the way of castles. You must keep in mind, gurrl, one usually wants to keep one's own folk in, while discouraging the rowdy element without. Wouldn't do to make it easy, would it?"

"I seldom use this route, actually," said Feanchar. "Generally one of my familiars," he indicated the swans, now unharnessed from the boat and gracing the Bay, "flies me wherever I wish to go. Since Dragon Days takes place so close to home, however, I feel that when I go to the village to act on its behalf as the event's sponsor, it is incumbent on me to travel more or less in the mode of the local people."

The bear nodded gravely. "The common touch. Very wise of you. My father used to tell me that was a very important asset to a king."

Maggie murmured between labored breaths that it must be lovely to fly through the air like that, though she recalled the similar flight she and Colin had taken on Grizel's back with something less than relish.

The path went up even more steeply at that point and their breath was required for climbing.

The front gate was surrounded by carved stone, and its wood was embellished with carvings as well. Fearsome creatures scowled down at them, goblin guardians frozen in stone, permanently, Maggie hoped. She was considerably taken aback by its ugliness, but the bear sniffed appreciatively the work on the door, a pictorial panel dramatizing the exploits of several of the horrific creatures.

"Hmm, interesting. I say, Brown, this is quite old, isn't it?"

"I'm afraid so," said Uncle Feanchar with a put-upon sigh. Hugo opened the door and they started up a flight of stone steps which lead through myriad carved archways. The shadows in these arched passages seemed to harbor chill and gloom. "It was built before Argonia was properly settled, I believe, as an outpost for the ancient Dismeling civilization. That's all I can get out of it."

"All you can get out of it?" Maggie asked, continually astounded by the sheer breadth and miscellany of what proved to be her uncle's magic. "You mean you can talk to the walls?"

He led them through a dank gray hallway and to another carved door. "No," he said, "but there are these runes, as you see here." He indicated the characters on the carving. "Shortly after I took up residence here I noticed them and, as soon as I was able, secured wax impressions. The princess was able to en- enlighten me regarding their meaning." Their steps made hardly a patter on the bare stone floor of the great, high-ceilinged entrance hall.

Maggie looked up, turning on her heel to catch the last rays of sunlight shining on the walls high above them. The windows were set high and narrow, a wonderful source of light for the dust motes and any possible bats, not much use for people. At least she couldn't see any bats in the plasterwork.

"You know the princess?" she asked, belatedly tagging after them.

"My goodness, yes, child." He ushered them ceremoniously through a hall, a sharp left turn, and at last they found themselves in a room the size of Maggie's village.

"My study," said Feanchar. "Drafty at times, but it has enough space for my projects." His projects, the ones they could see displayed, included a complete dragon's skeleton, maps of every imaginable place made into tapestries and hung from the walls, a model of the capitol city and the palace, complete with pullaway walls to display the rooms' interiors ("I've been planning how to decorate-just in case"), and another entire wall of pigeonholes containing scrolls and parchments, presents from the princess, "all beautifully illuminated, of course." High above the scholarly materials, metal cases shaped like men

"Ingenious," exclaimed the bear. "What won't they think of next?"

Maggie was running from one table to another, picking up things and putting them down again, turning them over and examining them. It was the most exciting room she'd ever been in.

"We'll spend lots of time here together, you and I, my dear," said Feanchar indulgently. "Right now, come along and see the rest of my diggings, and greet your sister."

A second door led them to a dining hall, which was cozier than the study, but still enormous. "This was formerly a foyer leading from the great hall to the kitchen and the tower," Feanchar explained, "but I needed the space in the great hall for my study, and the food arrives here much warmer without having to travel the extra distance." For a foyer, it was an elegant dining hall, Maggie thought. The table was made of a massive slab of mirror-like wood, red as wine, and the legs were great beasts of the same wood intricately carved and polished. Tapestries covered the walls and upholstered the matching chairs, which looked more like thrones with their high backs and arm rests. A heating stove, lavishly decorated with black and gold tiles, wrapped around one corner of the room and provided extra seating space beside itself, comfortably tiled to bring the warmth of the stove to the lounger on chilly days.

"The stove is my own addition. A suggestion of the wizard I was telling you of. Now then, Your Highness, Hugo will have a nice den prepared for you in the room next to my own, upstairs, where it's warmer." He indicated a flight of steps which led to a long, narrow landing forming a balcony high above them. "Maggie, dear, I presumed you would wish to share Lady Amberwine's tower chambers. We live simply," his sweeping arm took in the lavish room carpeted not with reeds but with the pelts of many different varieties of fur-bearing animals, "but I trust you'll be comfortable here."

"Thank you, Uncle," she said, turning toward the staircase.

A clatter from the room beyond and Hugo came bustling out, carrying a tray full of candles. "I hadn't time to put these in the rooms, master. Perhaps the prince and Miss Maggie would be so kind as to carry them up with them?"

Climbing the staircase, Maggie looked back down once to see her uncle waving her to go on up and Hugo lighting the first of the serpent-oil lamps in the huge fixture that hung from the lofty arched ceiling above the dining table. She set the bear's candle in his chamber for him, as it was awkward for him to carry it in his front paws, and walked back down the landing to the doorway set into the rounded stonework, the tower entrance at the top of the staircase. There was another stairwell within the tower, and as Maggie climbed she lit the lamps that studded the wall to light the way.

She looked forward eagerly to seeing Winnie, and found her lying fully-dressed on top of the uncurtained bed, her hands clasped above the hillock of her abdomen.

Calling to her as she crossed the room, and eliciting no response, Maggie sat on the edge of the bed and shook her. "Winnie, do wake up. It's Maggie. I'm here. I've come all this way to find you, the least you can do is postpone your nap."

Lady Amberwine opened the startling long-lashed green eyes that matched the deep emerald of her gown. Her confusion changed to fright and she shrank from her sister's touch. "Oh, Maggie, please don't slay me! I know I've disgraced you all, and you've no reason to spare me or this gypsy child I bear, but for the sake of . . ."

"For the sake of sanity, what are you talking about?" asked Maggie, sitting sharply back. "Slay you? Box your ears, maybe, for talking such nonsense but-oh, no, now, stop that. Please stop being a goose and come back here. Of course I won't box your ears, or slay you either. Why should I do that?"

"I-I don't know, but I know that's why you're here." Winnie's hands twisted and pulled at the bedcovering as she clawed her way as far from Maggie as possible.

"Winnie, it's me, your sister. I've ridden and walked a very long way, and risked great danger and more inconvenience to bring you home to Fort Icewurm, if you'll come. If I .wanted to be rid of you I'd hardly have gone to all that trouble, would I?"

Winnie looked at her skeptically, but edged a bit closer. "I suppose not. Still . . ."

Maggie reached forward to touch her again and Amberwine sprang back, whimpering "no" as though she'd slapped her.

Maggie sat back up, folding her hands deliberately in her lap as she searched her sister's face for some clue to explain the meaning of her strange behavior. Had her difficulties, as Uncle Feanchar suggested, succeeded in unhinging her reason? Could faery people even go insane? Maggie looked at herself in the mirror opposite the foot of the bed. No, she had not changed into some ogress or ravening beast. What, then, could make this sister for whom she had forsaken unicorns and braved dragons, floods, enchantment, and starvation treat her like the proverbial wicked stepsister? A tear trickled down each cheek.

For all that she feared her sister for what she believed was good reason, Winnie loved her, too, and seeing her cry wrenched loose tears of Amberwine's own. Now long after she believed she had cried her life's supply of them, the salty liquid flooded her eyes, nose, and mouth, and she gathered Maggie to her, both of them rocking and weeping copiously until at last Winnie dragged forth her handkerchief. She always had been the one who had the clean handkerchief and she applied one corner to Maggie's face and one corner to her own, saying, "Do stop crying now. Come on. everything is alright and we're to

"It-it's just," Maggie began, her own teary purge slowly subsiding, "it's just that I can't stand it if you hate me. You've always been my best friend. How c-can you have changed so?"

"Hate you? Changed? Rubbish! Whatever are you going on about?" She recalled being startled on waking to see Maggie for some reason, the nerves of pregnancy probably. But she could hardly recall saying anything like that. "Of course I don't hate you, Maggie. You're my very own dear brave big sister and I love you, of course. I'm ever so glad you've come to fetch me away from here."

"You are?"

Winnie nodded and jumped from the bed to a beautifully embroidered screen close to the door, thrust the screen aside and pulled out a dress. "We really must be changing for dinner now." Maggie could see what Winnie, who never liked tears, was up to, but refused to be distracted.

"Winnie, if you're so glad to see me, then whatever was all that stuff about slaying you?"

"Slay me? What stuff? I must have had a nightmare or something. I haven't slept at all well since I left the castle, you know. I've been feeling so awful about what I said to Roari. I don't know why I said that. Roari must be very put out with me for being so pert when he asked me not to ride off with that gypsy. He was right, of course, as usual. Davey was a dreadful person, and that mother of his! I can't think why I went with him-something about that song-oh, well, I'm sure Roari won't stay upset with me after the baby's born, do you think?" She dragged from behind the screen a flame-colored dress.

Maggie was staring at her with a mixture of annoyance and perplexity, trying to make some sense of her babbling. Her manner now was more the one Maggie had expected, but her contradictory behavior was weird in the extreme, "Just a moment, Win. You distinctly said that the reason I was going to slay you was because you had disgraced us all and that your baby was going to be a gypsy."

Amberwine had hung the flame-colored gown back behind the screen and extracted a pale gold one. "Not your color, I think. It would look better on me." She patted her abdomen. "Fortunately, these gowns were tailored by a brownie seamstress, and alter themselves to fit even me."

"Still-now then, I said-what did you say? Oh, yes? Now that's astounding. I should hardly think I'd say that, Maggie. Really, dear, how could my baby be a gypsy? Unless something happened as I slept, and as I distinctly recall I was already becoming extremely plump around the middle and doing unladylike things in the morning before I left Castle Rowan. I just was on my way to consult Cook about it when I heard him singing. Lovely voice for such a slimy sort of boy. Don't know what put me up to it, I'm sure."

"You are being inconsistent, you know." Maggie was beginning to feel disoriented.

"Part of my charm, so I've been told. Oh, Maggie, I'm so very glad to see you. Do please stop being dreary about my silly nightmares and try on this topaz gown. I'll fix your hair, and you fix mine, and there are even jewels to match-darling, I tell you, this is the first time I've felt cheerful in MONTHS, and I'm absolutely giddy!"

"I can tell."

"Master Brown is quite the gay blade, you know, really. There's a siren who comes to visit-I've seen him talking to her from the battlements when I take my walks. Also, I have been informed by Hugo that we are privileged to be sharing the wardrobe your uncle provides Princess Pegeen when she comes to call. She brings her own entourage, of course, but she has them carrying so many scrolls and ink pots they don't have room for dresses. Awfully careless of her appearance, I've been told, but frightfully clever."

"I suspect she wouldn't find it very grand here after the palace," Maggie said, reluctantly allowing herself to be diverted.

"As long as she has her runes, she's fine, so they say. She doesn't live at the palace any more. She has the best-attended hermitage in Argonia, from what I hear. Do you like your hair up like this, or with a little hanging down? Softer that way, do you think?

"I don't care . . ." Certain that she was losing her mind. Maggie allowed her sister to help her prepare for dinner.

CHAPTER 16

Colin and Bosun Neddy Pinchpurse, the former pirate, were spending their off-duty time on deck, where they would not disturb the other crew members who slept. Backs propped against the fo'c'sle, they were engaged in swapping ditties. Neddy was teaching Colin variations on the chanties he had learned in school, and Colin was teaching Neddy some new jigs to play on his hornpipe.

The evening was soft and pleasant, and the deck swayed beneath them only a little, in rhythm with the gentle swell of the silvery gulf waters. The cheerful twiddling of their music drifting across the fresh salt air made the men on duty step lightly at their work, disliking to move too quickly or too loudly for fear of missing the tune.

Colin was enjoying himself immensely on this voyage. The only way it could have possibly been better was if he were not bound to leave behind at Dragon Bay the new friends he had made, and the occupation he was learning to love. For the first time since he'd sung a song in his little-boy soprano, or used his aunt's clay pots as a drum, he had discovered something that he was good at, something that came naturally to him. He had fully expected to disappoint the sailors he'd met at the waterfront tavern. He thought that when they were all sober, they'd see that he was no good at sailing, had had no experienc

Instead, he was sitting with Neddy now, sharing songs instead of adventures on foreign shores. He was due to leave them on the morrow, when the Snake's Bane docked at Dragon Bay, delivering the last kegs of molasses and ale, the last bolts of linen, and the last of the metal farming implements imported from abroad. For over a week now the Bane had been making similar stops at the little towns and settlements that punctuated the arms, legs, nooks, and crannies of the Gulf of Grenilies like suckers on an octopus's legs.

"Land ho!" the lookout cried.

"Ah, let's see now. Must be the first of the Dragon Isles," said Neddy, rising to his feet and unfolding the spyglass that hung around his neck. Colin had never seen such a wonderful thing, unless it was Sybil Brown's crystal. Neddy could see almost as far as the lookout, who carried a similar object. These were made, he had been told, by foreign wizards, and cost nearly as much as the ship's entire cargo. Neddy had implied he had not had to pay the full exorbitant amount for his.

"May I see?" Colin asked. Pinchpurse held it up to him and, awkwardly, he hunched down to peer into it over the bosun's shoulder. At length he was able to spy the rough rock silhouetted against the sea and twilight.

"What d'ye see, lad?" joked one of the men who had been at the tavern in Queenston. "Was the lookout right or no?" "Right enough, Liam," Colin grinned back. "Then we're almost done paddling about in the bath, and it's time to go for the open sea. One more stop and we're seamen again! Calls for a celebration, if you ask me."

"Journeyman Minstrel Apprentice Seamus Songsmith here and I might just be able to oblige you, boys!" cried Neddy, blowing a note on his hornpipe.

What they lacked in wine and women they made up in song. Some of those who had been sleeping belowdecks came up to join them, and the captain emerged from his chartroom to demonstrate his dance style to Neddy's hornpipe. The lookout's relief stood his watch a bit early, as it was the man sighted the first island who was also the concertina player. Ching came up from the galley, where he had been serving as ship's cat, switching his tail at first as though annoyed to be wakened from his catnap. He soon settled, purring, at Colin's feet, though, as the minstrel and his fiddle led the crewmen in one song af

drift across the surface, and also that the island they had sighted with the glass was now quite visible to the naked eye.

As he sang the second chorus, he thought they must be either drifting slowly into a cloud hanging low on the water or else the mist was advancing, a great deal more of it than he'd first thought.

By the twelfth verse of the song, the mist had become a fog, sending soft smoky tendrils dancing up the hull and onto the deck, caressing men and mast alike until, by the end of the song, Colin could scarcely see Neddy, seated right beside him. Also, Neddy wasn't playing or singing any more. Neither was anyone else. Colin had finished the chorus solo. No one now suggested another, or said anything, or moved, for that matter.

After a few minutes of listening to himself breathe and watching the mist, Colin asked, "Unusual weather we're having, isn't it, mates?"

"Quiet, boy," said Ned. "We're listening." "Listening to what?" He strained his own excellent ear, and perhaps it was from wanting to hear what they did, but he thought he just might be catching something . . . "To her, of course." "Her who? Where?"

Neddy turned to him viciously. "Are you going to shut your craw, or must I shut it for you?" Colin suddenly remembered that the older man had once been a pirate and gulped, flushing hotly. Whatever they were hearing, he certainly couldn't make it ...

He heard her then, at first softly, and then as her voice grew louder and he recognized it, his pulse began to race with hope. Maggie! The same husky alto, singing so low he had to exert his full attention to make out the words.

And everyone was listening. He really had never thought her voice all that fine, himself, but as the mist swirled and parted and joined and parted again in flying diaphanous banners, he could see the other men, still where they should be working, spellbound gray-blurred ghosts listening so intently that even the steersman had abandoned the steering, leaning over the wheel, ears straining.

How sweet she sings!" whispered Neddy. "Ah, there never was one to sing sweeter," sighed the second officer.

"I'd no idea you all knew her," Colin said with amazement.

"You certainly didn't mention it when I was telling you about her."

"Quiet! Can't you hear Mother singing me favorite nursery rhyme?" The conversation was violently shushed by the rest of the crew.

Colin's curiosity was at last able to overpower his desire to hear the song with which Maggie called to him. ' "Your MOTHER? She's young enough to be your grandchild!" They were about to pitch him overboard when he finally made out the words Maggie sang. It was a tender love song, personally addressed to him.

"There's something funny going on here, lads," he said, and for the first time realized how dangerous their posture was to them all. Snatching up his fiddle, he ducked around them and made for the rigging, climbing high enough that they would be unable to interfere with him right away. Maggie's voice continued to cajole in a tone more alluring than even her dance for the gypsy had been.

He felt another weight drag at the rigging, and looked down to see Chingachgook, all four paws entangled in the ropes, trying to reach his pant leg.

He had not time to spare for cats, though, or even tuning, as he began to saw at his fiddle and yell out the loudest, rowdiest, bawdiest, funniest songs he could think of, not quite drowning out that insidious voice Maggie was using, even at that. If not for his training at singing rounds and part-harmonies, he could never have sustained the concentration it took to sing what he was singing and ignore that voice. As it was, he was able to keep it up long enough to provide a suitably maddening distraction for his fellow crew members, who began to try to shake him down, anger contorting their faces, covering up th

It was Pinchpurse who first came to his senses and shook off the enchantment, and he wasted no time at wresting the wheel from the spellbound steersman. "Stem, you lubbers! To your stations!" he hollered, every sinew straining as he pulled the wheel hard to the right, away from the rock that suddenly loomed up at them from the sea.

As the Bane heaved away from its own bane, it lurched violently. Pinchpurse hung fast to the wheel to keep it from turning back again, and the other two sailors clung to the rails, almost washed overboard. The others held onto whatever seemed stationary. Colin, cat, and fiddle made a somersaulting dive across the decks, over the railing, and into the sea.

CHAPTER 17

By now Maggie was unsure of everything, including why she was creeping down the stone staircase in the middle of the night. Earlier, when she'd left her uncle that afternoon, it had all been very clear.

He was a wonderful fellow, cared about her welfare more than Winnie, the bear, her grandmother, Colin, or Aunt Sybil, and possibly more than she cared about herself. She wanted very much to do something nice for him-something grand and special to show how much she appreciated the interest he took in her.

It wasn't until she began casting around for an idea of what to do that it occurred to her she hadn't used her own power since they'd left the inn at Dragon Bay. And that was peculiar. Now that she thought about it, he had never even inquired as to what manner of witch she was. All he'd done, really, was to tell her how very beautiful he thought her, far prettier than Winnie really, and tell her how she deserved better than a post as a village witch. And show her all of those wonderful magic gifts all of those powerful friends of his were constantly showering upon him, like the spells for turning people into bears

She straightened her shoulders to squeeze the chill from between them, and boldly tiptoed down three more steps. He didn't really need her talent, she knew, for Hugo did all the cooking. Hugo doubtlessly had also long ago informed his master of the magical peculiarities of his niece at Fort Icewurm. She wondered that he hadn't mentioned the death of her mother, as well. But even if he knew about her talent, she was still miffed that her uncle hadn't asked her to do anything, so she thought she would surprise all of them with a lovely feast from whatever raw materials she could find in the kitchen. Which brought her to this point, hovering at the foot of the stairs, trying to remember which direction to take to find the kitchen door. She knew where it had been in the clear light of day, but in the darkness her, sense of direction had deserted her.

She thought her eyes must be adjusting to the dark, finally, when she saw a faint lightening of the gloom to her right. A moment more and she should be able to continue.

It was odd, too, how once she'd decided she wanted to make Uncle Feanchar a feast, and had excused herself to take a walk along the parapets to ponder her menu, that the mirror in her pocket began to feel uncomfortably warm, even through her skirt. She pulled it out and stared at herself in it, which was all it seemed to be good for since the visions were used up. "If you still worked," she'd mumbled at it, "I'd try to see Aunt Sybil and find out what dishes he likes especially. I do wish it would be something tastier than what we've had so far." To her surprise, the rainbow glow had appeared in the mirror and

"Maggie, dear! How exciting! I've done it!" she said. "Aunt Sybil, I thought your visions couldn't talk to you-or rather you couldn't talk to them-how is it that you're talking to me when you're in the mirror?"

"Because you're in the glass as well. Simultaneous sightings! My dear, we may have made a major breakthrough."

"But how did we happen to use glasses at the same time? And why is this one working? Weren't three visions all I got?"

"But you didn't use three, darling, or I'd never have been able to reach you this way. It was because you hadn't used your last one I wanted to try to contact you and see how you were doing. There's some barrier at Castle Rowan, and when I tried to find you there, I met with failure. Have you found Amberwine yet?"

"Oh-yes, I have. And Auntie-I've met Uncle Feanchar. He's a wonderful man and--"

"He is? You mean to say you've met your UNCLE Feanchar, my brother?"

"Yes, I have and he's, as I've said, a wonderful man and--" "Well, well. Will wonders never cease?" Her aunt said softly.

Maggie was as puzzled as her aunt appeared to be. "What wonders?"

"Never mind, dear. I'm so glad you've found your sister. How's young Colin? Will you be starting for home again soon?"

"I haven't seen Colin lately. But he was quite well when I saw him last-though in a bit of a hurry. I believe we'll probably stay here with Uncle Feanchar until Winnie's baby is born. Aunt Sybil?"

"Yes, child?"

"I wanted to ask you about something. What does Uncle Feanchar like to eat? He hasn't but one servant, and the man can't cook at all. Everything is flat and bland. I thought I'd fix something nice ..."

Her aunt's pleasant, candid features took on a stiff mask of reserve. "I really don't recall, Maggie, what your uncle likes. It used to be that he didn't like any of us well enough to mention the matter."

"Sorry I asked. He's changed, though, since then. I'm sure. Did you know he's to be one of the nominees for the crown?"

Sybil looked startled. "No! Who told you that?"

"He did."

Her aunt laughed so hard she began to fade from the glass till at last there were only her bright brown eyes twinkling in among the rainbow lights, saying, "Maggie, dear, you really must take Feanchar with a grain of salt."

Salt. That was what made the food so bad, of course. The lack of salt. It must be that Hugo, like the woman at the inn, upheld some local prejudice against salt, and would not use it. Everything had been so exciting since she'd gotten here that she hadn't really been that aware of what she was putting in her mouth, except that it might have been sand for all the impression it made. Poor Uncle Fearchar, who was not raised in these parts, doubtless had accustomed himself to the saltlessness of the region.

Shuffling slowly towards the light patch she'd noticed before, Maggie barked her shin on one of the low decorative tables her uncle kept beside the ornate stove. This was like playing pin the tail on the cart horse! She wished she'd brought Winnie along for company, if not security, but Winnie acted oddly about Uncle Fearchar. Though she always said he had been good and kind to her, she certainly persisted in looking quaking and weepy in his company, though she reverted to almost her normal sunny self again with Maggie, and never again mentioned their first conversation. Maggie thought her sister probably secretly disliked Uncle Fearchar, but hated to say so after all he had done for her. She ought to have asked her to come, after all. Even if Winnie didn't like him, she wouldn't have minded helping-then the darkness would have been less intimidating and Winnie would have insisted they bring a candle.

As she was considering how much noise it would raise if she should cause the fire in the tile stove to kindle, thus getting both warmth and light, the patch of light to her right began to glow brighter, and to grow. First the legs, then the body, and finally the arms-shimmering pale and eerie they were-but certainly legs, body and arms of a once-human entity. Maggie waited for the head to form as well, but it failed to appear.

A headless ghost then. All too common in a land where bounty on an enemy had been awarded the dispatcher of that enemy on receipt by interested parties of the head of said enemy. Or something like that. Bounties had been outlawed since Maggie was a child, but she'd come across one of the scrolls government officials used to read aloud. At the time she'd been disappointed there were no famous outlaws mentioned, but her father explained it was the custom to save expensive scribed parchment by having the name added orally at the time the scroll was publicly read.

She was very curious to know if this headless ghost was that of some notorious bandit or other, but could hardly expect it to speak without a head. Raising an armload of ghostly clanking chains, the spectre floated towards her. For chains that appeared as insubstantial as the wraith itself, they made an awful racket.

"Do be quiet," she whispered. "I appreciate the light, but I'd rather not wake everybody. It's a--" she broke off, shivering, as the ghost brushed her gown. It was hovering before her now, in the opposite direction from where it had been. Slowly, it beckoned.

Maggie followed hopefully. Perhaps, since it was easier for ghosts to find their way in the dark, it would lead her to the kitchen. Although she couldn't imagine what a ghost would want with a kitchen, particularly a decapitated ghost.

As the ghost passed through the room's furnishings, the cold light it shed illuminated them, so that if Maggie kept very close behind the spectre she was able to miss most of the obstacles in her path. Unfortunately, she did not see the outline of the door when the ghost passed through it, and got quite a nasty jolt when she did not pass through it as easily. It was as she was recovering from this that she heard the voices on the other side of the door, slightly raised to make themselves heard above the clanking of the chains.

"Damn, Hugo!" her uncle's voice said. "There it is again. I do wish you had heeded me when I told you that murdering a man in his own home invariably leads to an impossible tenacious haunting-shoo, you! Get away!" The last, Maggie imagined, was not spoken to Hugo.

"I know you told me, but you talk so much I have to give my ears a break once in a while. Besides, I thought if the dragon disposed of the body he'd have no reason to come back and haunt this hall."

"No reason, indeed! What about that head you hung on a stake at the threshold to greet me when I took possession? You have a grisly sense of humor, my friend."

"Don't go getting all lordly on me, Fearchar Brown. If your magic hadn't give out on you, you'd have talked that spook into moving to a summer climate and there'd have been no work for me to do."

"Give out on me indeed! Watch what you say or I'll convince you to go for a stroll on the Feeding Grounds yourself."

"Your wizardy wiles don't work on me, as well you know, Master Brown."

Maggie thought she heard a chuckle. Fearchar's?

"No. Hugo, you're too salty for me-just like poor Seagram here-oh, get out of here. I tell you! I haven't got your bloody head."

More clankings and an agitated rattling drowned out any conversation for a time. Maggie didn't think this ghost was one of the nasty sort who could actually do physical harm, but she worried for a moment. Even if he was a murderer, she didn't want her uncle slain by a ghost just when they were getting acquainted. The thought surprised her-she didn't quite understand why she felt it was alright for Uncle Fearchar to kill someone named Seagram but not alright for Seagram's ghost to kill Fearchar.

"Lucky for us at least some of the townsfolk follow your restriction on salt. Little Miss Maggie can be a regular terror, i hate to think what would have happened if your magic hadn't worked on her and the bear."

"It did, though. My lovely niece, far from being a regular terror, has been gentle as a dove. Though it gave me pause, I'll admit, to see her and that so-called sister of hers reunited barely an hour after she was in the castle. And after all that wonderful speech I made the stupid faery cow about how little Maggie was out to kill her. If it wasn't for their red eyes and sniffles at the dinner table, I'd never have known how they found me out. I had Amberwine so terrified of Maggie I'd have sworn she'd jump out the window when she first saw her."

"Window's not big enough."

"Unfortunately. But as I was saying, I am pleased with my little niece. She'll make a beautiful queen, don't you think?"

Maggie pulled her earlobe. Surely she hadn't heard that bit correctly. Queen? Could her great-uncle be thinking to marry her if he won the throne of Argonia?

"Don't count your chickens till they're in the nest, Brown. That bear can't sign nothin' proper till the gypsy gets here so you can turn him back into a man again. Then could be you'll have a problem with both of 'em. You can't make no sweet little bride out of Miss Maggie Brown neither. She'll be more queen than you or Davey, either one, can handle once she's away from you and on the throne of Ablemarle."

"Nonsense. She trusts me. Once you've finished your job I say, you DID tell Lorelei what to do with that ship the swans saw Songsmith on, didn't you?"

"Lorelei does as she pleases, too, but she'll do it. And she wanted to know when you were going to keep that promise you made her when she gave you the song to charm her ladyship with. One of these days, Brown, you'll have to dry her out from all that salt water long enough to convince her she'd rather have some nice merman for a mate-or else you'll be needin' a salt pool at the palace. Princess Pegeen wouldn't like that now, would she?"

"Never mind Lorelei and Princess Pegeen. They are my business. Yours is to redeem yourself for bungling that job you started on William Hood. Once you've done that, and removed my sister's subversive influence . . ."

"And I'll want half your bloody kingdom for that, I can tell you ..."

"And when, once enthroned, my niece learns of the tragic loss of her lady sister, and the baby, of course, she'll naturally turn to her only relative for advice and assistance."

"And good old King Fearchar will be there with bells on to help the little witch out, eh?"

"Yes, I. will. How I envy young Davey such a beautiful bride!"

"You only think she's good-looking because she's brown as a bear, just like you," Hugo said spitefully.

A long silence, then Fearchar saying, "Ahhh, yes, that's what I like about you, Hugo. You're so perceptive. Shall we retire?"

"Aye, I'm tired with all that fetching and carrying for you and the women and that bloody bear. And I expect you must be too, Master Brown. Becoming king of two countries on such short notice is bound to be tiring."

Maggie backed away from the door, hoping to hide in the darkness of the far corners of the room where their candlelight would not penetrate. She kept on backing, long after she ought to have reached a wall. The door creaked open and candlelight spilled into the room, lighting the men who bore the lamps with sinister shadows redundantly in keeping with their conversation.

They didn't see her, but ascended the stairs with no further conversation. When their lights had completely disappeared, Maggie whistled with relief, lowered herself to the floor, and sat there shaking with a delayed reaction to being nearly caught, to hearing so much derogatory information about her uncle while she was still technically spellbound, and to the alarming contents of the conversation. From all that they said, she had at least gathered the reason for lack of salt in their diet. It appeared to be some sort of antidote for Fearchar's magic, whose nature was still not entirely clear. She could stop her reaction to the aborted enchantment by finishi

"Hullo, gurrl."

Maggie caught her breath again and took the candle from the table to sit beside her on the floor. "Your Highness, you frightened me out of a year's growth."

"Sorry." He lumbered over and sat opposite her in the candlelight. "I don't like to look gluttonous at the dinner table, but I'm afraid that though I now think and talk as a man, I'm still hungry as a bear."

"Here, have some." She held out a palm full of salt she had taken from her medicine pouch. He licked her palm clean in one large slurp and she was very glad that he, at least, was her friend. Taking some salt herself, she began to feel better, and replied to his last remark. "Well, I hope you're feeling ferocious as a bear, too, then. We are in deep trouble."

When Maggie told him what she had learned, His Highness was all for charging upstairs and tearing Fearchar and Hugo to pieces. After hearing her uncle's plans for the demise of everyone near and dear to her, Maggie was by no means, unconvinced of the merit of the plan. She did suggest that perhaps he could just restrain them while she either flayed them or set fire to their underclothes, she hadn't made up her mind which, perhaps a combination of both.

"The only problem is Colin."

"Why's Colin a problem, gurrl? We'll save him a piece!"

"They said someone named Lorelei was supposed to know what to do about Colin and a ship he's on, but that was really all they said."

"Likely unpleasant," said His Highness.

"Likely," Maggie agreed, sitting back down and unashamedly chewing a fingernail.

"We could force them to tell, then tear 'em to pieces."

"We could."

"How long does the salt help after your uncle starts his razzin' and dazzlin'?"

"I don't know. Maybe it only helps afterwards. And there's the matter of Davey's heart too. Prince. Uncle Fearchar said that after Davey gets here he was going to change you back into a man so you could sign something."

"Writ of abdication."

"What?"

"It's a document, gurrl, says I give up all title and claim to the throne. Of course, by being absent more than seven years. I've done that. But if, as you say, Brother Worthless is having a hard time at the kinging. Fearchar probably has a few of my old supporters lined up to accept me back as king with his quick tongue, your uncle will have no problem substituting my son. Especially with a writ of abdication signed by me, naming Davey as my successor."

"And Xenobia and Davey are in his power."

"Too right. And he plans that you'll be as well. I still say we tear 'em to pieces. I can get out of them what's happened to young Colin, and we'll search the castle for the heart at our leisure ..."

"But after we find it, what if it doesn't work, and my uncle is dead. Then what will we do?"

The bear narrowed his little eyes at her. "Doesn't sound to me, gurrl, as though you want to tear 'em to pieces any more."

"I suppose not. I just think we could find out more if he thinks we can't use anything he tells us. I'll expand my salt for the three of us till we can find out where the heart is. and what's happened to Colin, and how to get off this island with no boat. I doubt Uncle Fearchar's familiar swans would pull us."

"You understand more about these witching things than I do, but I still think we should tear 'em to pieces."

"Afterwards," Maggie said.

"Afterwards, then," the bear agreed.

CHAPTER 18

When Colin surfaced, realizing with equal degrees of pleasure and surprise that he was not dead, the first thing he saw was his fiddle floating on the water beside him. He grabbed it and held it aloft as he swam for the rock that had nearly wrecked the Snake's Bane.

The second thing he saw was the Snake's Bane sailing safely away. In all the confusion they probably hadn't even noticed when he went overboard.

The third thing he saw, as he hoisted himself up onto the rock. was a green-haired girl frantically scooting backwards on her scaly tail, being stalked farther and farther back onto land by a cat. Ching, furious at his recent dunking, was bent on having that tail for his supper.

The mermaid implored Colin with her sea-green eyes. Feeling damp and slippery and fresh out of gallantry, he took advantage of her status as a captive audience to lecture her sternly. "Madam," he said, "do you realize that you very nearly caused the wreck of a fine sailing vessel complete with a stout and hearty crew?" She was unimpressed. Wrecking ships was, after all, what mermaids did. "Not only that, but you have given my cat a bath, to which he has an aversion, and very nearly ruined one of the finest fiddles ever made, if I do say so myself. If you have anything to say in your own defense, I advise you to do so before I allow my cat to eat you up."

She started to cry. Colin realized, as he was supposed to, that he was being a beast, but he was really very upset about his fiddle. The tone would never be the same. Seeing she showed no signs of relenting, he stood and glared, hoping he would be in time to catch Ching should the cat decide to take a bite out of the mermaid.

"How can you be so cruel to me? You could be my own great-great-grandson all grown up and gone to land, and come back with nasty cats to torment me."

"I didn't come back here to torment you at all. I was sailing along with my friends, minding my own business, when you start singing to us in all your different voices, and before I know it I'm floating around in the sea, my best fiddle ruined. So I ask you, who's tormenting whom?"

"You are being impertinent, young man," she said severely, under the circumstances. It sounded odd for her to call him young man, too, but Colin did realize that these creatures lived to great age. She might be anywhere from the eighteen years she looked to seven hundred and sixty, for all he could tell. It was typical of a creature who survived on the strength of her youthful beauty to try to pull the rank of age when confronted with difficulties.

She must have read his face, for she tossed back her long green hair from her shoulders and said, with a fetching pout. "You don't like me."

Colin could hardly avoid looking at what her new coiffure revealed about her stunning upper half. He blushed deeply and stammered, "Oh, no, really, I like you. I'm just annoyed with you."

She arranged the seashell combs in her hair. "Annoyed?" "Only a little. Less all the time, in fact."

"I thought so. You can call your monster off, you know. I couldn't drown you, whatever Fearchar says. You wouldn't drown anyway, being one of us."

He hardly knew what to ask first, but the moon was nice, the stars were bright, and the night was young. He gathered Ching onto his lap, got slapped smartly on the hand for his trouble, and settled down for conversation.

The mermaid appeared poised to dive for a moment, but after a warning look from Colin she, too, made herself comfortable on the rock, flipping her tail in the water now and then as they talked.

"Now then," said the minstrel, staring determinedly into her eyes. "I am Colin Songsmith, Journeyman Minstrel."

"Of course you are. Fearchar told me that."

"And who are you? And who is Fearchar? Is he by any chance related to a family named Brown? And why do you keep saying I'm one of you?"

"I'm Lorelei, silly. Fearchar is my friend at Evil Island, and some day he will find a spell to grow a tail and come join me, he says. I think I have heard that terrible man who works for him call him by the name of Brown, but I'm not certain. And I keep saying you're one of us because you are. Oh, not recently, and not directly-but you had an ancestress among us, you may be as sure of it as you are of your voice and the way you swim."

Colin refused to let himself wonder how he with legs, fair hair, and no scales, had been descended of a woman with scales, tail, and green hair. It was beside the point, and stranger things happened in Argonia. It would explain his musical talent, considered by his masters to be exceptional, though he naturally wasn't supposed to know that. It would explain how he, raised in East Headpenney with nothing but streams all around and no knowledge of water, had been able to swim just now, and perhaps it also explained why he was so frightfully clumsy on land, but perfectly at home at sea in spite of previous inexperience. Slowly he nodded, and the ob

"You could stay here and play with me, and I'll teach you the loveliest songs! I get so lonely here. I think I'm the only mermaid in the Gulf right now-Fearchar wanted me to come, and he's so handsome and clever I couldn't wait to get here. But he doesn't come to talk to me as much as I'd like, and he can't swim properly, and there's not much sport in wrecking ships with all this calm water and help so close by. A girl can't have any fun. He's promised me a sea serpent to liven things up, but it hasn't been delivered yet. Oh, Colin, do stay, please. We could have the most wonderful times--" she gazed at Ching with a distinctly jaundiced eye. "We'll hav

The water did look very inviting, and she was very attractive in a green-haired sort of way, but Colin realized that though she was unable to drown him she was not above trying her other lures, and he refused to be tempted. Reluctantly, he shook his head. "It's very kind of you to ask me, Lorelei, but I have other obligations. I think they may even include your friend. Would you show me where he lives?"

Her tail splashed the water in agitation, showering them both. "Oh, no, Colin Songsmith! Oh, no, you mustn't. Fearchar doesn't like men. He will rob you of your will, and surely have that awful Hugo kill you, and then you could never come back to play with me either."

Colin couldn't help smiling. "I can't see why that would bother you. After all, you were about to drown not only me, but all my friends as well."

Lorelei gave him another pretty pout. "That's different. It was nothing personal, you know. It's what I do. Think how dull it would be for sailors if there were no perils like me to make things interesting for them-and so entertainingly too! The poor things would just always be sailing aimlessly around with nothing more dangerous or intriguing than a little weather to amuse them."

As a poet, Colin could understand this from her point of view, and nodded.

"But you're one of us. I can't let you swim into certain doom now that we're getting to know each other better-though I'd be glad to see the end of that!" She flipped her tail in Ching's direction and got spat at.

"I have to go see him. If you know him so well, maybe you'll tell me how to protect myself from his power. Isn't there some plant or religious medal or something he particularly dislikes?"

"Like wolfbane, or garlic, or something like that?" she asked, cocking her head and touching her sweetly webbed middle finger to the dimple in her chin. "We-ell, yes. Come to think of it, you probably are at least partially immune. I am. I don't really believe that story about the fishtail, you know, except that I do love him and I hope it's true."

"What is his power, exactly, other than changing people into bears and stealing hearts and that sort of thing?"

"Ooooh, did he do that?" the sea green eyes widened and she shook her hair again, distractingly, "I didn't hear about that! He's just so powerful it gives me fogbumps all over sometimes."

Colin surmised that fogbumps were undoubtedly the aquatic equivalent of goosebumps and asked again, "But what is his main power. Like, I have this friend who-she-uh--" he searched for a way to explain Maggie's hearthcraft to a mermaid with no fire to keep or doorstep to sweep, found none, and gave up, continuing, "Her grandmother, for instance, can change people into animals, and she has an aunt who can see into the present and--"

The mermaid was regarding him with a critical expression. "Strange company you keep, dearie. Don't you think you'd be better off staying with me? Oh, well, then, if you insist. Fearchar's source of power is that he is very convincing."

"What kind of a magical power,is being convincing?" Colin digested the information, scratching his head.

"A very great one. He could convince a tuna to take up tree-climbing, if a tuna wasn't a sea creature."

"It doesn't work on sea creatures then?"

"Only me," she said ruefully. "But really no. It's something to do with us swimming in the salt sea all the time. It's salt that confounds him, I think."

"Thank you very much, Lorelei," Colin said slowly. "You've been a great help. Now could you show me how to find him."

"We'll have to swim, of course," she said.

Colin found the prospect oddly inviting, but glanced at Ching. "What of my cat?"

"What of him?" With a movement so swift his eyes couldn't follow she leapt high in the air and dived below the surface, rising again to float on her back, tail flapping leisurely at the moonlit water. "Come on, if you want to find Fearchar."

Colin shrugged, stripped off his shirt, and apologized to Ching before he jumped into the water. He felt the cat would be safe enough on the rock until he could fetch him.

Ching, however, had other ideas. Colin was only a stone's throw from the rock, swimming easily in tandem with Lorelei, when a killer whale, crowned with color-coordinated cat, flashed merrily past them.

CHAPTER 19

Maggie's jaws and neck felt tight and stiff from all the unnatural nodding and smiling she was doing, listening to her uncle's voice drone on. Without the benefit of his magical credulity he was something of an overblown, pompous bore, she decided.

Amberwine had pleaded the weariness of pregnancy to retire to the relative seclusion of the tower room for a midday nap. She had been more than a little shocked and upset to discover that instead of the sanctuary it had promised to be while she was under Fearchar's spell the ancient castle was her prison, and intended to be her tomb. Maggie regretted the necessity of having to upset Amberwine with the frightening truth of their situation so far in advance of their escape, but they could scarcely risk not telling her. She might insist on an explanation of their behavior at some crucial moment, and spoil the whole plan. At least she had looked legitimate

His Highness was also conserving his strength for their escape by giving in to the demands of his bear's body and getting lots of sleep. He, at least, was available if she needed him. Claiming the chamber upstairs was too warm in daylight hours for his fur-bearing form, he was curled up on the cool flagstone floor of the study, beneath Fearchar's alchemist's bench. The wizard had not carpeted that area of his study, for safety's sake. Molten metal accidentally spilled on the furs could set the entire interior of the castle on fire.

Her uncle lay the scroll he had been showing her on the table and was casting a critical glance over her. Her mouth went dry and she wet her lips with her tongue and smiled harder than ever, trying to look innocent and trusting. Was he able to detect when someone had eaten salt?

"Maggie, dear, you are not your usual radiant self. I had hoped you would abandon those old rags and attire yourself in the pretty things I provided as more befitting a lady of your station."

"I'm sorry, Uncle," she replied demurely. She had worn her woolen costume today in preparation for their escape. It was sturdier and more comfortable than any of the gowns, and had pockets to conceal her medicine bundle, the remaining bottle of love potion, and the dagger Rowan lent her. "Winnie and I were going to try to plant you a little garden in the courtyard later this afternoon, and I didn't want to get your nice things dirty. With my craft I can grow you lovely giant melons and cabbages long before anyone else has them-then you'll have fresh food, and some to dry for winter."

"Your craft? Oh, yes, I believe Hugo mentioned. Hearth-crafting, is that right? That's very considerate of you, I'm sure, to try to plant me a garden. But I would like for you to stop doing vulgar things like digging in the dirt and those other menial jobs hearthcrafting implies. I hardly think hearthcrafting, other than a little needlework, perhaps, is a fitting occupation for a queen."

Here it comes, Maggie groaned inwardly. She tried to make her shrewd brown eyes go all wide and dewy as she asked, "Queen, Uncle Fearchar?"

"Yes, dear girl. I had planned to surprise you when your bridegroom arrives, but now seems as good a time as any."

"Whatever are you talking about, Uncle? How can a simple village witch like me become a queen?"

"How indeed, my dear? How did a simple village wizard such as myself become the man of power and influence you see before you today? With the help of the princess, when she makes the nomination to the tribunal in a few months, I shall become king of our fair Argonia. How? Because I've had the foresight to anticipate my opportunities, and the courage and determination to seize them. Coupled, naturally, with a deep and abiding compassion for my fellow man.

"As king I shall change the face of this country. No longer will we bow down to foreign oppressors, accepting their emissaries or making concessions to our inferiors! And that ridiculous law claiming magical personages should be prosecuted for the same dreary offenses as the non-magical rabble will be abolished. No longer, when I am king, will the vulgar hordes be able to associate with us on equal footing-and they most certainly will not be able to intermarry with us and taint our sacred blood, sullying it so that the resulting descendants of fine old families are as relatively powerless as you are. No offense, dear girl, but it's true.

"No longer will any of their kind be allowed to call themselves noble, or be in positions of authority which they can dare to abuse by using our womenfolk as William Hood did when he betrayed your mother's love to marry that foreign fiery hussy." He took a deep breath, for he was becoming overwrought and flushed beneath his dark complexion. His eyes had a look about them wilder than the bear's had ever been. Gradually he calmed, and said, "You won't have to go to all the trouble of being the resourceful crusader I am, of course, my dear, since you're related to me. In order to be queen, all that's required of you is to marry Davey."

"But, Uncle," she protested just enough for effect. "I think I should dislike being queen of the gypsies. And Xenobia is rather fierce."

"I'll worry about Xenobia. You are obviously not going to be Queen of the Gypsies. That is not my idea of wealth and nobility. You are to be Queen of Ablemarle." "Ablemarle has a queen."

"Ablemarle has for a queen only the wife of Worthyman the Worthless. Believe me, they'll be delighted to have the niece of Fearchar the First instead."

"I'm afraid I don't understand."

"You don't have to understand, dear girl. Just leave everything to Uncle Fearchar and don't worry your pretty little head about it. His Highness Prince Worthyman the Bear," he jerked a thumb at the sleeping noble, "has privately expressed to me a desire to retire permanently from court life. He fears it would disagree with him after all the fresh air he has recently enjoyed. Pegeen and I just happened to research the laws of Ablemarle quite recently, and I've come across a convenient writ he may sign, once he is in human form, to allow him to abdicate his rightfull place as crown prince to young Davey."

"But doesn't he have to give the heart back to Davey first?" Maggie asked.

"That's what the spell says."

"How can His Highness change back, then, to sign your paper, with the gypsies miles away?"

Her uncle smiled fondly at her. "Dear, dear, so many questions. Didn't I tell you to trust your uncle, child? The swans were dispatched early this morning to fetch Davey and Xenobia." So soon, then. Maggie had to get Davey's heart so that she and the bear would have a bargaining point, in case they were overwhelmed by the sheer number of their foes after the gypsies arrived. "It seems to me," she said, "that if I am to marry the gypsy, I ought to have his heart. He's far too fickle for my taste as he is, and we didn't part on exactly cordial terms. In fact, I think he quite dislikes me."

"Impossible!" said her uncle indulgently, "What young man in his right mind could despise such a ravishing creature? He'll be overcome with joy."

She followed him as he went to the ladder he kept in the study for fetching scrolls from the topmost compartments. "All the same," she said, "I would still feel better . . ."

He looked at her sharply. "You are unusually argumentative today, Maggie. Didn't I tell you to trust me?" He moved the ladder to one of the high, deepset windows above the tapestry that told of a sea serpent hunt in the middle of a map of the Sea of Smokings.

"Oh, of course I do, Uncle! Forgive me. I guess any girl is apt to be a little silly when she is first engaged." "Ugh," she thought, "if he believes that one . . ."

He cupped her chin between his thumb and forefinger and looked deeply into her eyes. Again she wondered if he could smell salt on her breath-or perhaps the fishiness of her excuse- but he said, "Naturally you would be, my child. And I can deny you nothing." He climbed the ladder and Maggie nearly swooned with the effort it cost her to keep from pushing it out from under him.

Light danced around the stone walls, sparking bright new colors onto the worn tapestries, encrusting Maggie's worn woolen garments with gems of luminescence, and skipping around on the bear's closed eyes till he turned over on his other side to sleep.

From the wizard's hand dangled a crystal prism. "If you look deeply into it, you will see his heart," he told her. Maggie examined the prism, which seemed to be made of solid light itself. There, framed by a thousand glittering facets, was a tiny rose, the color of heart's blood.

"That came out of him?" she asked, in spite of herself. Her uncle jerked it back abruptly and Maggie struggled to resume her docile-niece pose. It was no easy task to deceive such a professional sneak as her uncle. "I mean to say," she said, "now that I know his heart, how can I help but love him?"

Mollified, her uncle set it into one of the pigeon holes of his desk. "How indeed?" He turned to the door the ghost had passed through the night before. "Ah, Lady Amberwine, refreshed from your nap, I trust?"

Winnie, pale as the proverbial lily, inclined her head, which was about all the communication she was capable of now that she knew the wizard's villainous nature.

"You may as well know, too. Your gypsy friend, Davey, and his charming mother, are on their way here in orderf or Davey to marry your sister. We have just been discussing wedding plans. Perhaps you'll persuade him to sing that song you're so fond of." He hummed a few bars of the tune for which Colin had so often fashioned lyrics, though somehow on his lips it sounded strange, and Winnie went rigid. If she was pale before, Maggie thought her ashen now.

This time Maggie was unable to control the anger that pounded in her ears and she had her hand on her dagger when there was a ringing of footsteps in the corridor without. "Brown!" Hugo shouted, "Come here and see what I've brought you!"

They turned to the doorway. The peddler was a burly fellow when he wasn't all bent over pretending to be humble and holding his hat in his hand. Now it was Colin he held, a shirtless and disheveled Colin with his face contorted from the pain of the grip Hugo held on his arms, which were forced up behind his back.

Uncle Fearchar crossed to them. "Hugo, old friend, you're so uncouth! Where are your manners? Is this how you treat a friend of my niece?" He made as if to dust Colin off, after Hugo released him, but it was difficult to straighten the collar of a shirtless man. So he settled for giving him his best sincerely convincing smile. "Minstrel Songsmith, I presume? But what has become of your raiment?"

"I never wear my shirt when I go swimming," Colin said.

It was all Maggie could do to keep from rushing over to hug him. She had been terribly afraid that whatever end they were plotting for him had already come about, and an imaginative revenge would be all she would be able to do about it.

"I think my sister and I would probably prefer to hear Colin sing at my wedding," Maggie said. "Colin, it's too wonderful," she winked from behind her uncle's back. Hugo had gone to poke up the fire that was kept burning in the drafty hall to keep out the chill. "Uncle has arranged for me to marry Gypsy Davey and be a queen and everything."

"Oh-er-how nice," he said, not quite sure what the wink was meant to convey.

"Meeow?" asked Ching, sauntering through the door left open when Hugo had forced Colin into the study.

"Animals in the house. Disgusting," said Uncle Fearchar, moving to shoo the cat.

"I beg your pardon?" said His Highness the bear, rising from his nap.

"Er-present company excepted of course, Your Highness," amended the wizard, crossing to his desk, where he began rummaging in the papers.

Ching triumphantly leaped to Maggie's shoulder and began to purr.

"Now that we're all together again," said Fearchar jovially, "I thought you might like to see the writ of abdication I found for Your Highness that you may sign to leave your throne to young Davey and Maggie."

"There was another item involved, wasn't there, Wizard?" asked the bear, lumbering over to the desk.

"Ah, yes, of course. Davey's heart." He picked up the crystal, waved it around a bit, and laid it on the desk, out of the bear's reach. "Have it right here, so when the boy comes all you'll have to do is hand it over to him and-poof-there you are, good as new, in all your regal splendor!"

"Let's see," said the bear, putting his forepaws on the desk and extending himself to where he could sniff at the crystal. "Yes, I guess that about does it. There's the heart, the boy's on the way, here we all are. and there's young Colin. I think the time has come." He rose to his full height and roared deeply. "Run along, now, children, unless you want to see me tear him to pieces," he told Maggie and Colin. "I'll meet you at the boat."

"Watch out, prince!" cried Maggie as her uncle snatched a phial from the desk and flung it at the bear's face. But it was too late, for no sooner had the white powder been released from the phial to float into the bear's nostrils than the huge, menacing prince subsided into a sleeping roly-poly heap of fur at the sorcerer's feet.

"Maggie, I am seriously shocked at you," said her uncle, as he tried to fix her with his expression of sincerely, seriously, shocked injury.

"Oh, dry up, you conceited ass!" she cried, unable to control herself and maintain the charade any longer.

"What a way to talk to your only uncle! You'll watch your nasty mouth when you're queen, my girl."

"I'll do nothing of the sort, and I'm not your girl!" Maggie informed him, anxiously watching at the same time as Winnie and Colin bent over the fallen bear.

"Is he dead, then?" murmured Winnie.

"Not yet," snapped Fearchar. "I just happened to have laid that dragon-strength sleeping powder there. You'll be meeting the dragon soon."

Colin had straightened, having wit enough to retain his bewitched expression. "Oh, Master Fearchar, sir, do you think that's safe? I understand dragons can be hazardous to one's health."

Maggie knew she would explode if she heard one more syrupy answer from the lying wizard. Facing him squarely, she threatened, "Tell him the truth now. Go on, tell us all the truth if it's in you. I'm sick to death of your hokey pokey."

Her uncle seized her wrists and glared at her. Hugo had twisted Winnie's arms behind her now, and had a dagger at Colin's throat, in case he wasn't so enchanted as he seemed to be. "You will not refer to my magical powers as hokey pokey, niece. Hereafter you will be respectful and will do precisely as you are told." He smiled unpleasantly, "Too bad you didn't array yourself as I asked so you would be pretty for your bridegroom. As it is, there will just be enough time for you to accompany us to the feeding grounds to give the dragon his evening meal. You will shortly see, while my scaly friend feasts on Lady Amberwine's tender flesh and that o

"And you really think I'm going to go along with all this?" she asked, fingering the dagger in her pocket.

"Oh, my dear child, I'm afraid you have no choice. It is not actually you who will be queen at all once you marry Davey. Your charming appearance will remind the Ablemarlonians who really rules them, but you will work no more tricks, make no more unwise decisions. You will be quite subdued-permanently. I think I have just the spell to do it."

Ching's ears had been flattening as Fearchar's voice rose higher and higher while he leaned into Maggie's face to emphasize his point. He had been so intent on making his effect, he failed to notice the laid-back ears of the cat on his niece's shoulders, and the lashing tail. He could not, however, fail to notice the lightning slash of claws that ripped across his face, catching the corner of his eye.

Screaming with pain and clutching his eye with one hand, the enchanter slapped Maggie to the floor with the other hand as he grabbed the cat by the head and flung him into the fireplace.

Maggie recovered quickly enough to shriek at the fire to stifle itself. With a terrible yowl, Ching leaped out of the coals and streaked out the door.

"Catch that beast, Hugo!" ordered Fearchar. But Amberwine took advantage of her proximity to the peddler to stretch out a dainty foot and neatly trip him. By the time he recovered his composure, the cat had disappeared.

Fearchar, still clutching at his injured eye, was stalking towards Maggie, who lay sprawled by the fireplace watching his advance. His uninjured eye tried to skewer her where she lay.

The pulses in her throat were throbbing so that she kept swallowing, and her hands trembled as she drew the dagger from her skirt pocket. Colin leapt forward to help her but was checked by Hugo's knife. Maggie lost her balance once and had to support herself on the mantle as she stood to meet the wizard. Her eyes felt dry as paper and fastened on him with awe and an odd loathing respect. His was the first real malevolence she had ever encountered, and she found it shamefully attractive. It crossed her mind that all she would have to do is go back to their relationship of yesterday would be to smile, apologize, offer repentance, marry someone she

"You have a lot of nerve abusing Ching," she said. "I don't know what Gran would turn you into for that-a weasel perhaps. I don't think there is an animal suitably vile enough to hold your form. You've injured my father, disgraced my sister, and threatened your own sisters and my friends. I don't think we want you in our family. Uncle."

"I resigned from your family a long time ago, niece," he snarled. "But I was willing to adopt you into mine."

"Only when you thought I could be useful. You didn't even want to use me for my own power-just because I look like you. But my magic is all my own, not stolen, like your castle, or gotten by lies, like the spell for Davey's heart and probably, if you could tell the truth, the one for changing His Highness to a bear. I can do an honest month's work in a half an hour if I'm pressed. That's not very grand by your standards, but all you seem to be able to do is convince people of things that make fools of them and cause their food to spoil, and play a few parlor tricks you've begged or stolen from your betters. You're not even a decently magicked village w

He kept coming after her, but she was drawing courage from her own speech. She stood, dagger poised to meet him, in the middle study. Her voice quavered, and to her annoyance hot tears began to flood her eyes.

"You ought to have listened to me, Maggie. It will be very hard on you now. You don't know the extent of my power," the smile he wore as he stalked her was not pleasant. "I can control you completely-so completely you will have to have my permission to bathe or dress yourself in the morning."

"Not if I keep salt on my tongue at all times, and I will if it dries and cracks it in my head, rather than submit to you." She shook her head slowly from side to side, raising the dagger slightly. "I won't be your creature. You cannot injure my cat, murder my friends, and expect to take over my body before I'm done with it. I may be a dilute witch, as you think, but I am powerful enough to prevent your doing that. You can have no power over me that I don't cede to you. You're a wretched wizard, and a villain, and I think you may be a coward as well." He let drop the hand that held the swollen, bloody eye and stepped as close to her as possible to still b

"Maggie!" Winnie cried, "The gypsy's behind you!" She swiveled to see Xenobia flying towards her, skirts like bat wings flapping as she ran. Maggie threw the dagger and missed. She plunged a hand into her pocket and flung the next heavy object she found, the vial of love potion. Her aim was better this time, and the vial struck the gypsy woman squarely on the forehead, where it broke, its contents mingling with her blood as she fell to the ground.

For a moment Maggie and the others were frozen as Davey, handsome and cool-seeming with only his bolero covering his chest and a dark curl falling over his forehead, turned to his mother. "Are you alright, mum?" he asked. The woman's head lolled backwards, but even from where she stood, Maggie could see the battered bulging bodice of the green silk gown that had been Winnie's rise and fall.

She was spun around and her teeth knocked together, bright spots exploding behind her eyelids as her uncle slapped her hard twice across the face. She kicked him as hard as she could with her old boots, but had not gotten her head clear from the slapping when his fist slammed into her jaw and she fell crashing into darkness.

CHAPTER 20

Lady Amberwine cradled Maggie's head in her lap as the swan-propelled boat sped them near to their doom. "When will you ever learn to be still?" she murmured tenderly to her sister. "If only you had kept your tongue, he would have spared you." Maggie said nothing, nor had she done more than breathe since . being knocked senseless.

Colin scowled and struggled with the ropes that bound him. "The bear, too, starting to recover from the effects of the sleeping potion, was bound. In the far end of the boat sat the sorcerer, looking appropriately sinister now that he had covered his eye with a black patch. Xenobia's usually sour expression was fragmented with what Amberwine, had she not known the gypsy queen better, might have called emotion. The gypsy was wearing her kerchief as a bandage for the wound made by Maggie's missile. Davey looked sleek, attractive, and bored, swinging his feet restlessly against the equipment storage box he sat upon.

The little boat stopped, and Hugo lumbered over the side to tie her up. "Ladies first, Hugo. Show Lady Amberwine to the stake of honor. The others will have to make do with lying on the rock till the dragon notices them."

"Right." Hugo took Maggie from Winnie's lap and dumped her unceremoniously onto the beach. From the corner of her eye, Winnie saw Colin's mouth tighten and the bear gave a feeble, sleepy growl. Hugo handed Winnie out of the boat, and the smell of the animals and remnants of animals who had been left there all week for the dragon to feed upon nearly knocked her over.

"Come along, milady," mocked the peddler. "We have an excellent viewpoint reserved just for you." He pushed her off the beach into the throng of milling animals. The island rose to a central mound and in the centre of this was a metal stake driven into the sheer rock. To this pole Hugo lashed Amberwine's wrists, ankles, neck, and middle. "This is reserved for Master Brown's special guests, milady. You might say it's the dragon's rotisserie." He went on to describe in great detail, as he finished tightening the knots, in what condition they had found the remains, if any, of former occupants of the stake. Winnie was not listening, having conveniently

Colin raged at his inability to do anything to help Maggie and Amberwine, but was unable to do more than shuffle off the boat and onto the island. His Highness was rolled off a miniature gangplank by Davey and the sorcerer, flopping to the beach in an excellent imitation of a stuffed nursery bear.

Hugo returned and the wizard gestured at the bear. "Skin him out here. He's too dangerous to have running amok. I can control Ablemarle without him though that spineless brother of his, if need be. The dragon may have his meat, but I want that handsome hide for my floor." Before Colin could decide whether to butt him with his head or bite him on the leg, Hugo had grasped His Highness by the furry throat. Before the bear could wake enough to do anything, the peddler was knocked off his victim by a rampaging Xenobia, who practically flayed Hugo with her fingernails before her son and the sorcerer could pull her away from him. "No! You ca

"Whatever is the matter with you now?" he demanded, shaking her roughly. "The dragon will come to feed at any time now, and when he's ready to eat he isn't going to stop for a chat. even with me. Nor will he be selective about who he eats. I suggest we finish our business and depart."

The bear groaned and rolled over.

"You can't skin him alive and use him for a rug. Great Sorcerer," begged Xenobia, "He's the father of my son--"

"What?" Davey actually looked up from the inspection he was making of his fingernails.

"--and his hide has enormous sentimental value to me."

"Perhaps I shall just concentrate on my conquest of Argonia right now, and forget about Ablemarle altogether until some arrangement can be worked out with the present rulers. I can surely find more reliable allies later." His back was rigid with contempt as he reboarded his swan powered vessel. "Come, Hugo, if we hurry I can reach the princess's palace by morning, in time to compose my acceptance speech. You may all stay here and be eaten if you so desire." Hugo didn't decline, and leapt aboard. Before the others could express further preference, the boat was gliding wakelessly through the tossing sea. Xenobia began to shriek curses after it, and

Colin thought he detected streaming green hair and a flashing tail now and then showing above the surface as it followed the wizard's boat. He screamed to Lorelei, but received no answer.

His Highness yawned cavernously and attempted to sit up. "I say, what's all this?" he asked. Xenobia hovered possessively above him, casting accusing glances out to the uncaring gray sea.

"We are about to become dragon fodder," Davey answered.

"Why is young Maggie napping, then?" the bear asked. The situation was explained to him, and since they were all in the same situation and all would be needed if they were to successfully fend off the dragon for any length of time, Davey and Xenobia were prevailed upon to loosen the bonds of the bear and Colin, Wasting no time, Colin threaded his way through the animal bodies. He tried not to slip and fall on the rock as he climbed the hillock that held Lady Amberwine. She was beautiful fragile, and not a great deal of help as he tried to untie the knots that held her with her full unconscious weight dragging against them. "I do wish," he grumbl abdomen as she slipped down the pole when he untied the last knot.

Failing to wake her by chafing her wrist, shaking her, or shouting in her ear, he first tried to carry her in his arms, but she failed to bend sufficiently through the middle and he slipped, while attempting to climb down the hill, when one of his well-manured boots slid out from under him. He sat down abruptly, barely keeping the lady aloft. Finally he managed to haul her onto his back and began to weed his way through the animals to where the others waited. He hardly struck the romantic pose he had seen in tapestries, but his novel method of carrying pregnant ladies served quite well to allow him to guide them safely through the meandering livesto

He had almost reached their companions when he heard it. The beat of the wings sounded like a giant playing a drum, and the sky was overcast from the shadow of the great airborne beast, flame-colored, soaring directly overhead. The wind created by the movement of his wings tore at Colin's hair and he slid on through the animals, who were now running to as much room as they had to run in, some of them plunging into the sea. One or two of these the dragon boiled with his flame before he swooped down to pick first a cow and then a, pig up into his mighty jaws. Colin forgot about swimming as a means of escape. His hair had stood on end as th

"Get down!" screamed His Highness, rearing on his hind legs. Colin bent over and down as far as he was able without spilling her ladyship over his head. He then plunged, goatlike, across the remaining area until he managed with one final thrust to clear the beasts, nearly tumbling, Amberwine and all, into Xenobia's lap. His Highness was clawing the air, roaring his challenge to divert the dragon and to give Colin time to rejoin them.

The dragon, having finished the boiled pig, noted the bear with a casual burst of flame. He was apparently surprised at any form of opposition from his meals here, and circled around to pick up a bleating sheep to devour while considering the bear's novel behavior.

"Sit down. Prince darling," hissed Xenobia. "Perhaps he's in the mood for mutton today."

The bear sat, but it was difficult to sit still with the poor sheep bleating so piteously. Colin almost fainted himself, thinking what might have become of Amberwine had he not gone straight to the rock to release her.

"Maggie does all those little tricks with fire," suggested His Highness, whose brain was functioning at its best now, in time of peril. "Perhaps if we could wake her, she could put out the dragon's flame, then we'd only have claws and teeth to deal with."

They both tried to rouse her, but to no avail, though they shook her and tickled her and called her name. Amberwine started to cry again, holding her sister's head and shoulders in her arms as she began to rock and keen and moan like a banshee. "Here, here," said Colin severely, "she's not dead-not yet, anyway. If you're going to sing, sing waking-up songs, like this." He began to whistle the spritely Argonian Army Reveille. Maggie sat up and rubbed her jaw. "I think Uncle's side of the family must be part mule," she said.

"Leave off the genealogy for the moment, Maggie, please, and see if you can do something about the flame on you beastie," said Colin.

"I can't do anything till he's closer," she said, after considering the matter for a moment. "I'll have to be able to look at the fire to order it around." "Splendid," said Colin grimly.

The bear got to his feet in order to resume his fighting stance once more. Colin tapped Davey on the shoulder. "Hey, you. If you're going to let your father do all the fighting, give me your dagger." He held out his hand but the gypsy man stood up, shaking his head. The sheep had stopped bleating.

Xenobia and Maggie stood as well. Colin was discouraged, but he stood beside them. He didn't really know what they could do against a dragon except make themselves a little tenderer eating by battering themselves fighting him. The creature in the centre of their island prison spread his sundown-colored wings and sprang from the rock to circle the little island again.

The bear roared another challenge to the soaring beast. Davey and Xenobia stood with daggers poised, beneath the bear's mighty arms. Maggie crouched before them, as if she planned to physically spring upon the dragon. Oh well, thought Colin, as he picked up a rock. When the dragon flew low enough to singe His Highness's fur, Colin hurled the rock as hard as he could, straight into the beast's flaming mouth.

The dragon back-flapped out of Maggie's range and sat down amid the hysterical animals. Ruffled anew by this curious spice his food was tossing into his mouth, he thoughtfully munched a few chickens, which he caught in midair with his long tongue as they flapped frenziedly around him.

"Sorry!" Maggie said, "that blow to my jaw must have slowed my reaction time. Let's try again, shall we?"

"We haven't much choice," Colin said.

Amberwine shuddered, and said in a small, sick voice, "He's even more horrid than I'd imagined."

That was the last comment there was time for as the dragon now flew in, preparing to dine on whole roast bear with a side order of gypsies on the rocks. This time Maggie was ready, almost scorching herself as she leapt up crying to the dragon's fire to stifle itself.

Miraculously, it worked, the torch from the creature's craw sputtering and dwindling into a sulfurous belch,

Colin embraced her, competing for the privilege with Amberwine and a genuine bear hug from the prince.

It was not over yet, however, for the dragon disliked being deprived of his cooking apparatus, and streaked back toward them, the great iridescent orange wings fanning, if not fire, then at least a very foul fetid breath, into all their lungs. The bear slashed out with his claws, the gypsies with their daggers, and Colin and Maggie both hurled rocks.

This time, however, the dragon was undeterred by the rocks, which bounced harmlessly off his scales. His claws stretched to graze the bear, who missed a swipe with his claws and fell to the rock, carrying his two gypsy guardians with him.

Suddenly a whirlwind spun the beast snout to tail to wingtip and Colin, following the funnel, found Maggie's finger at the source of the vortex. His friend was every inch the powerful, commanding enchantress as she compelled the very elements about her, intoning in her throaty alto, "I wish to make a very large souffle-whip me twelve dozen eggwhites at once-there!" The whirlwind, he could see now. was flecked with the broken and separated eggs of the chickens still squawking on the island as well as those of the ones just devoured by the dizzy dragon.

"We're saved!" cried Amberwine. She'd been looking out to sea, since her gentle nature made it too painful for her to watch her sister get gobbled alive.

"Not yet," said Colin, "she's hardly used to this, you know. I don't know how long she can hold out." He did not yet see, as Winnie did, the longboat full of warriors rowing swiftly to their aid.

"Will-you-all-just-be-still," said Maggie from between gritted teeth. After his initial confusion, the dragon had begun to find the whirlwind amusing, and forgot feeding long enough to make repeated dives in and out of it.

"But we are saved, laddie!" cried Prince Worthyman, who by now was waving vigorously at the boat. "Unless I miss my guess, that redheaded chap is set for dragon-slaying, and the young lady is bound to save my neck again. I don't know who the other chaps are, but they appear to mean business."

"Look out!" cried Winnie, turning back to her companions just in time to see the dragon swoop again, but she was too late, for the dragon's tail had caught the bear on the side of the head and knocked him down. "Oh, Rowan, my love!" she cried to the boat. "Do hurry, else we're all slain!"

Not waiting for the longboat to land, with one mighty bound from deck to shore, Rowan leaped among them brandishing sword and shield, which he instantly employed in skilled anti-dragon maneuvers. He protected Amberwine and Maggie and as many of the others as he could with the shield, while wielding the sword in their defense.

By then the boat had landed and beside him stepped Neddy Pinchpurse. Colin recognized the boat they came in as the longboat from the Snake's Bane. "You get down in the bottom of the boat, lass," Neddy instructed a flashing-eyed Zorah before he set to work covering Rowan's back with his cutlass. The second officer from the Bane relieved the redheaded noble of his shield and, keeping Amberwine and the gypsies covered with it. herded them back down to join Zorah on the deck of the longboat.

Maggie had refused to leave the island, and while the beast was circling again, Rowan cast an eye upon her, saying, "Go on now, be a good lass. You've done your share and I can finish it. We Rowans have made short work of many a dragon."

She continued to watch the creature do loop-the-loops on the far side of the island. Turning to Colin. she said suddenly, "I have it now, Colin. Where have you heard of a dragon of that particular description before?"

"I-er--" he said, a bit tired for guessing games or repartee.

"That's right. Grizel. That must be Grimley up there." Urgently, she turned back to Rowan, who shook her from his sword arm. Still she persisted. "Lord Rowan, you mustn't slay this dragon."

"What? Not slay him? After he's nearly done in the lot of you? What a lot of rubbish you're talking to me now, lassie. Terror must have taken your wits."

He had no other chance to speak for several minutes, as he and Ned Pinchpurse and Colin, with the second officer's saber, slashed away in the general direction of the dragon. The bear recovered from his fall and defended them with his claws.

"See, he's tiring," Maggie insisted of the dragon, as the creature abandoned them for a measly pair of geese. "I think he must be getting full, too. Can't you just cover our escape?"

"Gurrl," said the bear, "it's a menace he is to the community. Would you have him devour us and the townsfolk too? For too long he's done the wizard's bidding."

"If we kill him, we'll have to kill Grizel eventually, too," she pleaded. "She's our friend now, but if we kill Grimley she'll be a more remorseless enemy than ever he was. She never wanted him to accept this arrangement in the first place."

"Look out!" yelled Pinchpurse, but it was too late, for this time it was he who was knocked down by the sweep of the dragon's tail. The beast was apparently enjoying himself now, playing with them, and they slashed till their arms were weary. With one last mocking swoop, the dragon picked up Maggie from behind. Rowan lunged to pierce him, but Maggie, in spite of the pain in her shoulders from the claws of the dragon, screamed "Don't!"

Colin caught one of her ankles and His Lordship grabbed a knee, then abruptly the beast retracted his claws, and Maggie would have dropped to the rock if her friends hadn't cushioned her fall.

Amberwine screamed suddenly, piercingly, and Xenobia wailed,

"We're lost!"

"Not quite yet, we're not," said Rowan, steeling himself for another onslaught.

"Alas, it's true!" wailed Davey. "There's another one!"

"The red and gold dragon had been charging them again, but abruptly did another backflap, using his tail as a rudder, and flew off at top speed to meet the blue and green dragon whose wingbeats were now as distinct as their own. Colin cried out, "It's Grizel!"

Maggie raised her face from the rock and broke out in an ear-to-ear grin. "Thank goodness Grimley's safe. I hope my shoulders didn't dull his claws or anything, or we're in trouble."

"I just hope she'll remember us."

The female dragon paid them no attention, however, and they

all watched with varying degrees of trepidation and wonder as both dragons alighted on a central hillock of the island. A black and white streak flew from the neck of the aquamarine dragon just as she and the red and gold dragon twined necks, he shyly offering her a cow.

"Ching!" Maggie greeted the cat as he lept over the backs of the farm animals, who were now completely prostrate with terror. He sprang onto her chest and she cradled him against her shoulder, stroking his fur, immaculately black and white even after his flight. "How in the world . . .?"

Even Colin could hear the smugness in the purr, but what the cat told Maggie was, "I really do broadcast very well when I'm sufficiently outraged. When that person tried to murder me and you helped me escape, I ran straight out the side door and over to the most isolated spot I could find and yowled my head off for revenge. Grizel's quite fond of revenge herself, and just happened to be on her way back to Grimley, so she was only a few leagues off and ..."

"A few leagues?" said Maggie, impressed.

The others were regarding the girl and cat's apparently one-sided conversation strangely. Colin grinned apologetically. "They go on like that all the time," he said.

"And here we are," finished Ching.

As they all piled into the longboat, Davey asked, "Will someone please explain to me why with one dragon we are in mortal danger, but with two we're supposed to be safe?"

CHAPTER 21

When the innkeeper's wife, thrilled almost beyond words to have a great lord like Rowan stopping at her inn, had finished bandaging Maggie's shoulders and various other amazingly minor wounds, she served them all a fine supper. Maggie pulled out her medicine pouch and with a wicked grin at the woman, sprinkled a generous amount of salt into everything.

It wasn't until they had finished eating that the crew of the Snake's Bane, led by Bosun Pinchpurse, arrived. Ned touched Colin on the shoulder as he took a place on the bench beside him. "Sorry, lad. We tried to give chase in the Bane but he were long gone. Some fisherman said he saw the blackguard trying to dock at his island, but a mermaid was screaming at him and wouldn't give him a chance to unhitch his swans so he could fly away on them. That's what the fisherman said, leastways. Too much ale, I'm thinkin'."

"Believe it or not, Ned, he was probably cold sober," said Colin, who was not, and was very weary besides.

"Anyway," said Ned, "this fisherman says the last he seen of the wizard 'e was headin' out to sea."

"He did say he was going to see the princess," Maggie said.

"Yes, ma'am, and he'll have a bit of a trip to that little boat of his. But them giant swans the lad here told us of will be makin' their own wind, and it's too calm for the Bane to make much headway, so we lost him, as I said."

"No matter," said Lord Rowan. "Now that we know how to break his spells we can supply everyone, including Princess Pegeen, with liberal amounts of salt. I doubt he'll stand much chance of being nominated on his personal integrity alone. Especially not after I lodge my complaint with the council."

"You know," said Maggie, "I'm not so sure this country and our magic folk are deteriorating at all. Your ancestors Rowan the Rampaging and Rowan the Reckless would never have thought to lodge a complaint with the council over a wizard-induced misunderstanding."

Rowan laughed. "No, more likely they'd have slaughtered every available wizard and gypsy in the land." He hugged Amberwine, who sat at his side sipping tea from a pottery cup. "Not to mention the lady."

"We're lucky you came when you did," Colin said.

"Well-yes. It would have been better if I'd come with you at once, but I'm still Rowan enough that I listened to my pride for awhile before I set out to follow you. I'd decided by the time I met Zorah that I was no fit king, or even much of a hero, if I let my sister-in-law do all the rescuing in the family. And when Zorah told me the mess you'd got into . . ." He glared across the table at Xenobia and Davey.

"How did you know where we were, though?" Maggie asked.

"Zorah said you were off to find the Sorcerer of Dragon Bay, since she'd extracted Colin's promise to get that scamp's heart."

He indicated Davey, who studied the food he was carefully - masticating twenty chews to the mouthful, "And the last day, your Aunt Sybil's budgie bird come bringing us a message that you're up t' the sorcerer's place and something was amiss."

"We was about to leave port when 'is lor'ship come askin' for you, lad," said Neddy. "We didn't like leavin' you, after you'd saved the ship and all, but when we went back to the rock, you was gone. So as I say, we was just lucky he come when 'e did."

"Whew," said Maggie. "You were lucky!"

"I have some unfinished business," said Rowan, rising to his feet. "It pains me, sir," he said to Davey. "for His Highness of Ablemade is a fine man, or bear, depending on how you look at him. and he tells me you're his son and acquitted yourself nobly in the dragon affair. But you've offended the honor of m' lady and for that you'll have to answer."

"No!" Zorah lept to her feet as well. "Do you think I brought you here so you could kill him?"

Rowan looked bewildered. He was honor-bound to Zorah as much as he was to avenging the insult. While he was trying to decide if it was more important to avenge a reputation lost than to reward a life saved, Amberwine tugged on his sleeve till he sat down.

"I only regret we let the villain get away before we got that heart for Davey," said His Highness. "He was such a good boy once."

"Is this it?" asked Amberwine, pulling it from her pocket. Its jeweled light danced across their eyes.

"Winnie," said Maggie, "How ever did you . . .?"

"When your uncle put the bear to sleep, Maggie. I saw it sitting about, and dropped it in my pocket while they were all watching you. I wasn't sure what it was, but it seemed important to you," she said the last to the bear as she gently set it in his paws.

His Highness rose and made Amberwine a bow. "Madam, if I wouldn't wet you to the elbow in so doing I'd kiss your hand."

He climbed heavily over the bench and waddled on his hind legs to where Davey sat beside his mother. The cynical smile on

Davey's lips as the bear pressed the crystal against his empty heart underwent a subtle change. "Be a man, my son," said the

bear as the light gradually was absorbed into Davey. While everybody was busy feeling touched, the bear changed back into

:<human form and embraced his son.

The innkeeper's wife screamed at the naked prince as she had

not screamed to see a bear at her table. Rowan hastily handed the prince a cloak. Enchantments were sometimes careless about details.

"Ah, yes," sighed Xenobia. "I believe I do like you better in that form."

"Can you forgive me my callousness, dear lady?" asked the prince, who, if not young and handsome, was. as they all knew, brave and kind and intelligent, which was the same thing, only better. Actually, Maggie thought he still looked like a bear. His hair and beard were dark and curly, and before Rowan had produced the cloak his body hair had seemed equally copious- and he was a short, stocky, sturdy-built man. But the little dim eyes were chocolate-drop brown and looked at the gypsy woman kindly. "Had it not been for you I'd now be a hearthrug for that murderous magician."

"Had it not been for me, you wouldn't have been in such a condition. Of course I forgive you. Worthy . . ." and they went on in that vein for some time, until they too finally stopped to watch the long, passionate clench that Davey and Zorah were indulging in, much to the general edification of the crew of the Bane, who had filled up the rest of the inn and were cheering and laughing and taking bets on how long the couple could hold out without coming up for air.

Finally they did, however, and Davey, handing Zorah the empty prism that had once imprisoned the best part of him. sighed. "Ah. Zorah, darling. And to think I didn't know I cared!" It was altogether an extremely long night. If matters had been left strictly up to the initial participants in the situation, everyone would have retired early. But the crew of the Bane had seized the occasion as one suitable for celebration and a great deal of drinking, singing, and lying ensued on the part of all and sundry.

At one point in the festivities, Colin returned to the Bane to pick up his kit, guitar, and Obtruncator, plus the soggy remnants of his beloved fiddle, rescued by Neddy from the rock. He returned the sword to Rowan. "I thank you for its use, sir, but it didn't suit me like my fiddle did. That's ruined now, but I can make merry enough with my guitar, if Neddy and his hornpipe and Tom on the concertina give a hand."

"Suit yourself, lad," said Rowan. "But I have a wish that you'd hold on to Obtruncator a spell longer. I'd the feeling there was something following us in the wood almost until we approached the Bay."

Colin groaned, as he had had more adventure than he expected ever to want to see again. "Of course you needn't go back with us," Rowan said quickly. "The captain tells me he'll be delighted to have you on the Snake's Bane. Say the word, and I'll ask him to 'prentice you as an officer trainee so that you can accept an admiralty I'd like to offer you in the King's Navy-if I'm the king, that is."

Colin nodded, but said. "That's kind of you, my Lord, but I'm afraid my new friends might be put off a little at such grand promotions not obtained-er-in the line of duty. I'll see you safely to the castle, and perhaps you could use my services till you're ready to return to Queenston for the election? I've never been to court before, other than as a student. Perhaps then I might wait there till the Bane returns, to sail with her next time around."

No sooner had the Bane put to sea than the gypsy band came tumbling into the town. Rowan was saddling his horse when ßPrince Worthyman and Davey came to tell him that they wouldn't going along back to Castle Rowan after all. "I've decided not to return to Ablemade for now," the prince explained. "I want to spend some time with Xenobia and my son here, and now that I'm not in a cage I rather enjoy the gypsy life."

"Will you let your brother know you're alive then. Highness?" asked Rowan.

"Only if he gives you any trouble when you take over rule of Argonia. Perhaps then I could be a bargaining point ..."

"Spoken like a born statesman, Prince." Rowan's huge hands engulfed Worthyman's as he said goodbye. "I hope I may count on you for advice, in case I'm elected."

The coming of the gypsies to Dragon Bay was not to be the last event that morning to ruffle the town's composure. People were screaming in an orgy of frenzied terror as Grizel and Grimley flew low over the streets, as though they were looking for someone.

"Eeeeek!" shrieked the innkeeper's wife. "Tis the sorcerer's revenge! They've returned to murder us all in our beds!"

"You're not in your bed," pointed out his lordship, "But Mistress Maggie and her cat are. I suggest you fetch them here." A tangle-haired Maggie was rubbing the sleep from her eyes she came downstairs, and Ching had to pause to wash a paw, having yet to complete his toilet. After good-morning-did-you-sleep-wells all around. Rowan told her what he had in mind. "You talk to the cat, lass, do you not?"

She yawned and nodded.

"Do you think he'd serve as me recruitment officer for a moment or two?"

When Maggie had secured Ching's agreement, he walked out a short way from them, and in one or two flips of his tail he was joined by both dragons, right there in the middle of the corner at Bayshore and Second Avenue.

In a moment he came sauntering back to Maggie and Rowan. "You can tell him," Ching said, "that the dragons will be happy to move out to his place in exchange for their own sheep and cattle herds and all the enemy bandits they can eat. I think they'll go for anything that involves eating and flying about, but Grizel says they were thinking of moving to a better neighborhood anyway, with more room, as there may be little dragonets along in another year or two."

Maggie told Rowan, who gave the dragons the universal sign for victory.

Ching continued. "And if you don't mind very much, witch. Grimley would like to know if the Mighty Enchantress--I suppose that's you, as you're the only one answering a description anything like that-would very much mind restoring his fire. Grizel is delighted to cook for him, naturally, but he says he misses the warm feeling in the pit of his stomach."

CHAPTER 22

It was still chilly early morning when Winnie hugged Maggie one more time, carefully, with one arm only, for the other cradled little Bronwyn. They had breakfasted in the kitchen, to save time, and Rowan and his lady had risen early to say goodbye.

"I wish you could stay longer," Winnie said. "It's been so much brighter here with you about."

"It certainly has," said Cook, handing Rowan a lidded basket. "After you shined the brass, polished all the silver, cleaned the chimneys, swept the entire keep from top to bottom, waxed all the floors, and washed the walls and windows, not to mention laundering the carpets and draperies, it's very bright around here indeed. Tell me, is your sort of witchcraft common? I hope not, or you'll put the entire servant class on the streets to beg . . ."

"At least she's earned her ride out of the rowan groves by polishing all the diamonds in Grizel's new nest," Rowan laughed.

"Ching did say Grizel greatly appreciated my little house-warming present," Maggie admitted.

"I wish you'd let her take you all the way. or at least let me provide you an escort, if you won't wait until after the coronation when we all come north for the christening," said Rowan, who was now officially king elect. Maggie had stayed to help and keep Winnie company while Rowan was in the capitol for the tribunal and for the many other government conclaves that . eventually led to his selection as king. She had spent the last six weeks helping Winnie pack what she wished to take to Queenston and make arrangements for the management of the estates in their absence. In a day or two, the soon-to-be royal family would be leaving for the capitol, and Maggie really did need to return now to Fort Iceworm. Aunt Sybil's budgie, flying high above the rowan trees, had brought word that while Sir William's health had vastly improved, his temper had not. Granny Brown had not Maggie's management abilities, and had already turned Sir William's solicitor into a weasel and one of the local merchants into a raccoon. So it was time for her to return home, but she was in no great hurry to get back to what awaited her. "I'll have escort soon enough," she reminded Rowan. "I'll be traveling in your lands almost the entire two days' journey till I'm to meet Xenobia's Caravan, and that whole way I'll be in plain view of Grizel and Grimley's patrol flights."

"Very well, lass. I know you've your own mind, and that's been to my benefit. Are you sure there's no royal boon I can grant you in parting?" Maggie shook her head and occupied herself with undoing her pack to check it one more time. "Never," said Cook, standing at the window with her hands fisted at the waist of her apron, "will I get used to seeing dragons land in my courtyard."

Maggie's eyes raked the kitchen. "Where's Ching?"

"There he is. coming across the courtyard. I suspect he went to say farewell to the barn cats." said Winnie.

"It's good-bye then, I suppose, till after the coronation," Maggie said, shouldering the pack that contained the magic mirror her Aunt Sybil had given her, a new hand spindle carved for her by Colin. a dress, formerly underwear, which she planned to wear while in the company of the gypsies, her medicine pouch, a few staples for her magic to transform into meals, plus a small bag of gold from Rowan-she had had to insist on small. The amount he had tried to lavish on her would have been far too heavy for her to carry. There was also, carefully wrapped in velvet, a miniature portrait of the infant Princess Bronwyn, a gift for her maternal grandfather from the new king and queen, plus a few dried herbs and flowers peculiar to the area around Castle Rowan. Winnie, in the last stages of her pregnancy, had picked these for Granny Brown while Maggie was occupied with repairing the Rowan family tapestry showing Rowan the Rampaging single-handedly defeating the entire Bozorian army.

Rowan and Amberwine saw Maggie out to where Grizel sat waiting. They knew good-byes had to be quick, for even though the rowan trees in the courtyard had been transplanted to save Maggie the discomfort of her witch's allergy to them, still their essence wafted up from the groves that surrounded the castle.

She hugged Winnie again, and kissed baby Bronwyn. Then Rowan, too, stepped forward to embrace her. "Take care of our loved ones, my liege," she mumbled into his massive chest, "and your reign be blest."

He backed away from her with a sweeping bow and. before she could mount, snatched up her hand and kissed it soundly. "I can hardly fall with a mighty sorceress in the family, now can I?" he teased.

"Shall we get ON with it?" Ching said, "I'd rather not hear the minstrel's bitter complaints ringing in my ears the first five miles of our journey about how we made him stand a night and a day holding your horses."

Maggie mounted quickly and Ching sprang to her shoulders. Grizel spread her wings and puffed up a take-off.

For a long time Maggie made a point of not looking down. Ching butted his head against her cheek. "I know how you feel, witch. I will certainly be glad to be home riding nothing more spirited than my hearthrug. Dragons, whales, and horses are all very well in themselves, but hardly suitable cat accommodations."

"Hush, you'll hurt Grizel's feelings," scolded Maggie, look-

ing down and quickly back up again. The trees were passing below them in a dizzying dazzle of green, and the road whipped along like a dusty brown serpent. Perhaps she ought to have risked the trees after all.

"She doesn't understand our conversations unless I choose for her to," said Ching. "Since I am your temporary familiar, we share privileged communication."

"That's nice," said Maggie. "Will you still talk to me sometimes back at Fort Iceworm?" The cat said nothing. "Well, will you?" she repeated.

"There will be no need, will there?" he asked, not at all in his usual hectoring tone. "And Granny must be very lonely-she's causing all that trouble again too. She needs my help again-I suspect I shall be very busy with one witch. Sorry. I shall say cat remarks to you occasionally, and rub against you to be petted, and listen to you when I have nothing better to do, but our relationship will have to be pretty much as it was before."

Maggie said nothing else, as Grizel was circling in for a landing, and the witch was busy keeping her stomach in order.

Colin rode a dapple gray mare and held a pretty chestnut for Maggie. He had ridden out from the castle the afternoon before, to be on the path beyond the rowans when Grizel arrived.

Seeing that all was in order, Grizel made her good-byes and flew off to meet Grimley to discuss her new rear firewall for their lair.

"That's quite a dragon," said Colin. He looked rather undressed without his guitar slung over his shoulder, Maggie thought.

"Yes, she is."

"I trust her reconciliation went well with Grimley? In all the excitement of the coronation preparations and the tribunals and all you never told me what the cat said about that. I've meant all these months to get around to asking. He wasn't angry or anything, because she went off like that?"

Maggie knew they were making conversation to keep from facing the moment when they'd part, and she strove for a light touch. "Oh, no, Ching said Grimley admired her spirit. Called her his 'little spitfire'."

"Oh no. He didn't?"

"That's what she told Ching. I--I suppose as soon as you get to Queenston you'll be sailing off on the Bane?" Maggie put her back upon her saddle horn with deliberate precision, put her foot in the stirrup, then took it out again to stand waiting for his reply.

Colin had squatted down and was mauling some clover. "No- not right away, at least. Actually, the king asked me to delay that for a while. As soon as he's taken office and the coronation's over, he's planning a little voyage to Ablemade."

"Round the horn?"

"Yes. and he wants me there to record the whole event and make a song of it so the taxpayers will know what he's doing with their funds."

"You'll be coming up for the christening, then?"

"I suppose so, if you promise me I can keep my own shape."

Maggie grinned. "I can promise that, I think."

"Good. I say, your basket is making noises." It was too, squeaking, odd noises. Maggie lifted the lid. A tiny kitten replica of Ching put a white paw on the edge of the basket and tried to scramble out.

"I can't talk to you, Maggie, but you'll have your hands full with Sonnyboy, when he learns to talk," said Ching, the fur on his snow-white chest puffing with fatherly pride. "Rowan thought a powerful witch like you ought to have your own familiar. He told me to tell you that, and you can't know what it cost him. You ought to have seen him, down there in the hayloft, not knowing if I understood or not while he talked to that charming calico mother of Sonny's and me, and us mewing back ever so innocently."

"Well, he won't have as interesting a job, being my familiar, as you did," she said, chucking Ching under the chin while stroking the kitten with one finger between his ears. "No more dragons or wizards for us now, kitty, just scrubbing that year's worth of pots Gran won't have done, and finding another one hundred and one ways to prepare ground venison."

"I wish you wouldn't talk that way about your magic," said Colin. "It's demeaning. It's absolutely wonderful the way you can control fire and food supply and all, I think."

She looked at him curiously. "You really think so?"

"I do-it may not seem like much when you're safe and sound in your own castle, but Rowan says it's an enormous tactical asset."

"Rowan-the king-said that?"

Higgs-related tweets by the staffer, entering the name into the cipherset of either the second or third round of Gamaredon's tweets.

Gitlab Kompiuter-mesaj ptsmi.ru nabl[illegible] ptsmi.ru/kompiuter-mesaj nabl Gitlab Gitlab ptsmi.ru/kompiuter-mesaj nabl Gitlab Gitlab ptsmi.ru/kompiuter-mesaj nabl Gitlab Gitlab ptsmi.ru/kompiuter-mesaj nabl Gitlab Gitlab

"Gary Higgins, who was a wonderful musician, and Gill Gerhardt, another talented musician Gloria Gaynor, [illegible] the artistic director, and Gill, I'm so sorry, you were [illegible] a couple of months, you know, [illegible] and I'm [illegible] so wonderful. Gerhardt. Gerry Gerhardt, the [illegible] guitarist, and Gerry, [illegible] an amazing musician and a wonderful man." [illegible] and [illegible] "Gill Gerhardt, [illegible] I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry.

Sir Cyril's eyes glanced swiftly over the document, then stared back at his King with an expression of incredulity. "This accompanied a curse, Sire?"

The King nodded. " 'Twas underneath the wretched box." His eyes narrowed as he waited to see what the one man in his court who obviously knew how to help him but hadn't been asked had to say.

Sir Cyril shook his head and scanned the scroll again. "That's impossible, Sire. I know this hand, these illustrations. This is nothing more than a christening gift from Her Highness, the Princess Pegeen the Illuminator."

Reaching an arm the length and breadth of a medium tree across the table, Rowan snatched back the document, stared at it with no more comprehension than he'd had before, and tossed it back to Pechingbird. "Hmph," he said.

Sir Cyril reexamined the scroll. "Yes, sire, this all seems

erfectly innocent. All the Princess Pegeen is doing here, really, translating the standard horoscope for an upperclass lady born uder your daughter's moon into ancient Dramelog runic, an rchaic written language in which the noble lady is most roficient."

Rowan sighed and nodded. His only hope of finding the :ource of the curse was lost.

"Wait," Sir Cyril said suddenly. "What can she mean by In?" His intelligent round face sharpened with concentration. 'Oh, dear. I must be mistaken. No, surely not. That rune has NO meanings and they both Your Majesty?"

Rowan's weary red-rimmed eyes snapped to attention.

"I'm afraid I was slightly mistaken. This document is not a imple horoscope, as I thought at first, though it's meant to look the one. The Princess Pegeen has carefully encoded a message, ire, in the last portion. I don't know exactly how to translate it >ack into the Argonian tongue, but what it essentially says is that unless you make haste to the Princess's home at Wurm's Roost 'astle, not only is your child cursed but your entire reign, and sensibly the kingdom, is in jeopardy." Pechingbird glanced tace more at the document. "And though it doesn't say so, sire, very much fear from the manner in which the Princess chose to warn us that she is also in grave danger."

Even the Queen stirred from her sleep as Rowan's roars echoed through the castle all the rest of that night, waking his generals, his admirals, his administrators, and his advisers.

Leaving his daughter with her yawning mother, the King harangued his cabinet about the need for speed. The arrange-ments, he was told, would take several weeks, while the army was called back from its various outposts. Armies could not be fathered up just like that, didn't he know.

Once more it was Cyril Pechingbird who had the practical suggestion. "My Lady Pegeen writes only of the need for speed, Sire, not striking power. The fastest route to Wurm's Roost is by sea, a fortnight's journey in good weather, compared with a month overland." The Chief Archivist was also keeper of rgonia's somewhat sketchy maps, which contained details of matters like time and distance.

Another adviser, eager to make up for not thinking of Pechingbird's idea himself, added, "That little ship Your Majesty is so fond of, the Snake's Bane, is in port now. A serpent hunter like that is far faster than our naval vessels."

The man had a good point. Serpent hunters were built in Ablemarle, where the shipbuilders understood the necessity for outslipping serpents. The naval shipbuilders native to Argonia had never quite got the hang of building their ships, which were largely used on missions of state anyway, as light, fast or maneuverable as vessels like the Bane.

"Right you are, man. Bring me the Bane's Captain Seagarden and ask him before he meets me here to have Bosun Pinchpurse ready the ship to sail on the next tide. You seem bright enough to serve me, so get ready to come along yourself." He turned to another lord, who hadn't said much but had at least kept quiet. "You too, and you," he said to another.

From behind him, Pechingbird intruded diffidently. "Sire, I would like to serve you also on this journey, if I may. And perhaps the Royal Air Force would be a boon?"

"So be it," said Rowan. "Tell me, Sir Cyril. Is there anything in the archives tells what kind of armor a man's supposed to wear on shipboard?"

CHAPTER 5

They crossed the Troutmute river by the middle of the day following their encounter with Leofwin's hunting party.

Colin looked forward to seeing Maggie's Aunt Sybil for several reasons, not the least among them the excellent taste and generous size of her gingerbread shingles.

Sybil Brown was in her garden when they broke through the woods, into the little clearing containing her gingerbread cottage. The cottage was Sybil's inheritance from a late unlamented ancestress who was fond of children in the culinary sense and used the cottage to entice them into her clutches. Sybil was as different from that long-gone semi-ogress as a sword was from a spindle. Far from gobbling the local children, she was inclined to let any of them who were adventurous enough to visit her literally eat her out of house and home. Or had been, before

Maggie had helped her repair her home, and had placed a heavy preservative spell on it, making it less than palatable. Now visiting children had to eat their gingerbread the dull way, from a cookie jar.

Sybil straightened as her visitors approached, and braced her hands on the small of her back, beaming, surrounded by vanquished weeds and pampered pansies. "My, that didn't take you long at all," she said, pushing back the broad brim of her garden hat. A sprig of lilac dipped jauntily over the edge of the brim, bouncing close to her left eyebrow.

"Must be a handy talent, that. Saves her a royal ransom on candles, I'd think," Rowan agreed.

After that discovery the fog had been little problem, except that it impeded Sir Cyril from studying the glaciers as carefully as he would have liked. This was the third day of foul weather, and soon the Rane would reach the eastern harbor with Perchingbird knowing little more about the conformation of the icy cliffs than he'd known to begin with.

Otherwise things could hardly be better, he thought as he hummed a little tune to himself. The ship was making excellent progress. He was seeing new sights, singing new songs? Now why should he be singing an unfamiliar tune just now? And come to think of it, how could any tune possibly be all that unfamiliar to the keeper of the archives? Certainly he'd never shown any musical improvisational ability before, and he was quite sure he was well acquainted with most of the predominating modes in the musics of the world of which Argonia was part.

Then he realized he was singing the song because milady Pegeen was singing it, urging him to come to her quickly.

Close off the starboard bow a sheet of ice plummeted into the sea, rocking the Rane even more severely than the rolling seas were already rocking her. Sir Cyril forgot the song and glanced around him, thinking to remark on the incident to whoever was closest at hand.

But all around him crew members and King's men alike stood stock still, staring out to sea, eyes straining toward the sound of Princess Pegeen's voice, which seemed to come from everywhere at once.

"I wonder what she's doing out there?" Perchingbird said to the gunner's mate, a red-haired fellow named Liam. He noticed that tears rolled down Liam's cheeks and, in a voice that sounded

dreamy and far-off to his own ears when compared to the reality of the song, asked, "Why do you weep?"

"That's the lullabye she used to sing to me as she nursed me at her breast," the man said, not answering the question so much as murmuring in amazement to himself. "Lovely to hear it again. Faith! I haven't heard her sing it like that since she died, thirty years or so ago when I was a lad."

Swimming feverishly in the back of Perchingbird's mind was the notion that it was not possible for him to hear Princess Pegeen singing so many leagues from shore. It was not possible for Liam to hear his mother who had been dead for thirty years. It was not possible for Liam to hear his mother at all when Perchingbird heard only Princess Pegeen. It was not possible for the entire crew to stop work to listen to songs compelling each man differently but equally. Only by magic could such occurrences be possible, and only one sort of creature possessed such magic. But which creature that was he couldn't seem to remember, and really, he didn't care at the moment. He couldn't be bothered to catalogue magicks when he needed so badly to hear what it

Neither he nor any of the others took note for some time of the other creature, the one who did not sing but who undulated through the waves towards them, circling their ship not once but more than a half dozen times. The same creature who, having embraced the Rane, began constricting rhythmically around it, squeezing the ship in a pulsing vise not entirely out of time with the sirens' songs which had taken control of the men's minds.

Colin managed throughout the first few days of the journey through the shadowy eastern woods to keep their spirits aloft by playing various dance tunes and the few marching songs he knew, but by the fourth day his repertoire had degenerated into murder ballads. One after another, he sang of the most gruesome crimes committed in history, until finally he ran out of even those.

"Are you sure that's all you know?" Maggie asked. "Perhaps you've overlooked some lesser offenses. Don't you know any fraud ballads, maybe, or perhaps a breaking-and-entering air? Or maybe a ghost song. This is just the place for ghost songs!"

"No, and it's just as well." He shivered under his cloak for though it was still late summer at Wizard Raspberry's castle, here in the mist-riddled midst of the giant cedars the air was

dank and chill. "I'm making myself nervous enough as it is. And I seem to have frightened off Lyntil and the kittens."

Maggie craned forward on Moonshine's neck, then settled back with a shrug. "She's just scouting ahead, looking for her grown cubs again, but I wish she'd hurry back." Maggie preferred that the party stay together, besides which she found the sight of Lyntil reassuring. The lynx had come to the castle after the other beasts had accepted the explanations offered by Wizard Raspberry, Maggie and Moonshine and had dispersed. Lyntil had found the wolf's news disquieting, she had told the wizard, not because she'd ever believed Wizard Raspberry guilty of betrayal but because her young ones from the previous year had established their territory in the lands where the wolf said animals were dying. She was going to find them, she told Raspberry, and

Normally the lynx ranged just beyond the tip of Moonshine's horn. Her young kittens rolled and bounced and tried their best to tangle her competent paws, but she kept an even pace, her furry pouch of an underbelly swinging rhythmically as they traveled through forest so smothered in moss that even birdsong was muffled.

Colin's most hair-raising songs were more cheerful than that strangled silence. At night, Maggie always made her fuelless magic fire, and it was lucky for them all she had that power, for the wood underfoot was soaked by a constant drip from lush green leaves. Underbrush was scantier, and trees larger, than

- near Sybil Brown's cottage, and the mossy groundcover, which

- had been cheerfully sprinkled with dogwood and saxifrage near the wizard's castle, began more and more to sprout mugwort, foxeswort, fly-specked orchis, skunk cabbage, wax flowers and the deceptively demure pink bell-like blossoms of poisonous bog

: rosemary.

But what made them the most uneasy was the abrupt change in

'.the character of the streams and rivers. Unlike the crystalline waters of the North, these flowed sluggish, clouded and murky.

> Moonshine was appalled. "How long can it have been since a unicorn has serviced this area?" he asked Lyntil.

" The lynx waved her paw unconcernedly. "This is not the plight of which the strange wolf spoke, O Singlehorn," she told *im. "The water has always been thus, for it is the tears which

wash the face of the great frozen giant who weeps among yonder mountains."

"She means the glaciers," Colin explained when Moonshine questioned the information. "Apparently the lynx only knows the old legend about them. As we now know in this enlightened age, the glaciers aren't really suicidal frost giants at all. The best scholars agree that the real frost giants simply shrunk in might and stature like the rest of our ancestors. Now the only remnants of them are more or less man-sized, like the King. What the glaciers are, actually, are the shields left behind by the frost giants. As the sun melts the ice on their surfaces, they shift positions and gouge great chunks out of the earth beneath them. I suppose that's what really makes the water dirty."

"Heartened as I am to hear a reasonable explanation," Moonshine said, "I must purify this water at once, or it will spoil my maiden's tea. Excuse me." With that he dipped his horn, sending ripples of clarity across the muck.

No simple natural or legendary phenomena could explain the stench pervading the forest by the end of the fifth day, however. All that afternoon they found dead animals; a bear carcass first, then hares, squirrels, foxes. All had lolling tongues, and lips rolled back over their teeth, paws outstretched and stiff and fur damp from the steady drizzle. Some were bloated already but none were even partially eaten. Those who hadn't had the strength to drag themselves away from their own excrement lay in it.

Lyntil returned from her patrol. She seemed to droop from the tufts of her ears to the black tip of her bobbed tail. "Death everywhere," she reported to Moonshine, her voice audible to Maggie's and Colin's ears as a low, eerie moan. "I found one like myself, but not mine. She is ceased."

"Did you see no living thing?" Maggie asked, looking up from the tea she was boiling in a new-formed mothers-kettle over her magic fire.

"None," the lynx replied.

Colin regarded the tea-kettle dubiously. "I hate to drink that stuff, even after Moonshine has magicked it."

"You do me a disservice, minstrel," Moonshine replied huffily. "How can you doubt me when my powers alone have preserved our company from the fate of these other creatures?" But the unicorn broke off soon, unable to concentrate even on defending his besmirched honor. He surrendered instead to the tremors that twitched the skin all the way down his back. He felt unusually skittish.

Colin noticed his uneasiness. "It must be these woods, I suppose, since if Lyntil says we're the only living things about then we must be. But I can't help feeling we're being watched."

"Perhaps it's the mosquitoes," Maggie suggested, swatting one. "They seem to have survived." She made a face and started to swat again when Colin snatched her arm down.

Tiny wings backflapped furiously and a small, greenish faery quivered before her eyes.

"I beg your pardon!" Maggie cried with real embarrassment, made particularly acute since the finger-high faery didn't look as if she'd survive the first swat. "You're the first living creature we've seen all day and I--"

"You call this living?" the faery demanded, then moaned, "Mouse-blood! I wish I were dead if it is! Mind you, my mother warned me not to drink the water."

She sank into a heap of vari-colored rags, which on closer inspection proved to be cast-off butterfly wings, settling herself on the edge of Maggie's kettle. Long strings of purplish hair were plastered against her small narrow skull, and she ran her tiny fingers through it repeatedly, lamenting, "It wasn't like I wasn't brought up well, or anything like that. 'Stick with dew and nectar, Trickle,' my mother always told me. 'Dew and nectar's the thing for faeries.' But let me tell you, it's not often a regular Little Person-type faery like me gets a chance at being a stream guardian. These positions generally go to the big girls. Nymphs and dryads, you know. I just happened to be here when that renegade Nasturtium took off to go revolutionize the kingdom."

Maggie, deciding the faery was delirious, held a flower-full of unicorn-blessed water under the tiny woman's chin. "Try a bit of this."

The faery spat-but feebly. "THAT'S the stuff that made me sick, and so quickly too." She wailed, "I didn't think it would work so quickly! Blasted mortals. Never believe a thing you tell 'em."

Maggie continued to urge her to drink. "It's all right. Moonshine fixed it. It'll cure you."

"Lady, I don't care what your horse did to that water, it won't--" the faery said, then sputtered as Maggie poured the water into her open mouth, almost drowning her in the process.

"He's not a horse," Maggie explained before the faery could dry off enough to come up with a whopping curse, which was the kind of thing Little People of all varieties were quite adept at.

"Moonshine is a unicorn, incognito." Already Trickle's complexion waxed somewhat healthier, and her eyes gained luster, along with a certain malicious vengeful look that caused Maggie quickly to lift Moonshine's cone of invisibility. "See?"

"Now I've seen everything," the faery groaned. "First I'm half-killed through the plotting of a water nymph who'd rather be a bandit, and now I'm saved by a unicorn who'd rather be a horse. Don't tell me; let me guess. You're really a beautiful princess who'd rather be a witch."

"Something like that," Maggie replied, startled.

"I would NOT rather be a horse," Moonshine protested.

Perchingbird thought she must mean Brazoria. Argonia was, to his knowledge, relatively uninhabited on this coast. Most Argonians had settled in the southwestern regions, near the capital of Queenston and the Gulf of Grendles. Better that Ollie and his friends posed a threat to Brazorian maritime activity than to Argonians.

The silver-spotted sea-serpent relaxed its tail, and the King spat out the last of the seawater. Rubbing a wet, whiskery cheek against the monster's scales, His Majesty snuggled deeper into the coils. "Your skin's a mite rough, darlin'," the monarch murmured to the monster, "But, ah, don't I love a lass with a firm grip!"

Lorelei leapt from the shallows like a porpoise, and twisted in mid-air, slapping Ollie's tail smartly with her own. Then- with a graceful flip, she arched herself so that she dived into the deep waters further off shore, where she resurfaced and calmly swam back to the beach. Shaking the water from her long green locks, she pouted. "You mustn't give Ollie all the credit, sweeting. I'm the one who saved you."

Cordelia slapped her shimmering tail and flung down her comb. "Remember, sister dear, whose waters you're swimming in. Ollie is MY pet, and though I'm glad to share my territory with you when you're not yourself, all mortals in these waters are mine and--oooh, lookie there! Doesn't he have LOVELY hair, though? Just like coral!" She stared admiringly at the King's suddenly fully revealed form, including the coral-colored hair, as Ollie's last coil unwound and slithered out to sea, leaving His Highness to fall flat on his royal backside. "Oh, no, sister. I really think I must have that one back."

With a great smack of her tail, which not entirely by accident splashed water over Cordelia's freshly dried and groomed coiffure, Lorelei flung her upper half onto shore and clasped the felled King's boot with a possessive hand. "You're NOT going to take him back, and never you mind his hair. He's MY ally, and it was MY information about Fearchar that helped put him on the throne, wasn't it, angelfish? I'm not about to let you drown him after all the trouble I've been to!"

"What a lot of bilge you're talking, sister Lorelei!" Cordelia sniffed, tossing her newly soaked lavender hair, her alabaster assets aquiver with indignation. "Some guest YOU turned out to be. See if I ever share my salvage work with you again. To think you would turn on me for the sake of a coral-haired mortal! Haven't you learned anything from your experience with your precious Fearchar? These men have no honor at all-that's why I prefer the company of a real snake like Ollie!"

Lorelei was firm. "I'm sorry, sister. It's just that this is more important than mere salvage work. Can't you see how damaging it will be to our mer mystique if mortals think just anyone can go around enticing mermaids to beach themselves simply by ignoring us? I know I've been an awful silly, and that's why I can't let you drown these men right now. They're going to catch Fearchar for me at last, aren't you, little blowfish?" The last remark, Perchingbird realized, was directed at him.

He answered quickly, in his most conciliatory tone. "Yes, Miss. Er-at least, that's part of our mission. If you or Mistress Cordelia would just be so kind now as to tell us where we are so we could be on our--"

"You're on the beach, silly," Cordelia snapped. "Where you were put by my dear Ollie, whom you almost murdered, as you very well know. Now you'll all just have to excuse me, for I really can't be bothered any further with your ridiculous problems. I have a dear friend who has been badly injured by certain cruel humans, and I must attend him." Her long gilt eyes accused them all, lingering longest on King Rowan, before

returning to Lorelei, whom she addressed in a tone that showed she still stung from what she considered Lorelei's defection.

"Lest you make the same mistake again, sister dear, I advise you not to trust these men so completely. If I were you, I'd insist they bring that shark of a magician to this very spot, and throw him to you with an anchor 'round his ankle, in payment for their lives." Cordelia paused for a moment to allow her suggestion to sink in, then smiled sweetly at the crew. "I don't suppose any of you boys would care to join a lady in a little swim?" In spite of the wistful expressions lingering on the faces of a few of the men, there were no takers, and the disgruntled mermaid dived into the sea and swam rapidly towards the last few loops of still slightly smoldering seasnake.

Lorelei watched thoughtfully until both Cordelia and the snake were well out of sight, then turned back to Perchingbird, her eyes slitted and glittering with a strong emotion Sir Cyril couldn't name. "Never mind her. She's only trying to spoil my fun because she's jealous of me. But she does have a point, doesn't she? I mean, you boys DO owe me a great debt for saving you, don't you? Now, I don't know if I really want you to drown Fearchar exactly, when you find him, but as for that split-tailed princess--"

Ah, yes! Now he knew. The emotion so prominent in her expression was greed. Though she had played the benefactress well enough until now, Perchingbird knew that, considering the avaricious and amoral natures of mermaids, he oughtn't to be surprised that she was attempting to use their plight to her own advantage. Not only did she plan to seek vengeance on Fearchar, she was apparently even more interested in disposing of Princess Pegeen, her rival, as well.

The King was still regaining his senses, and when he did, the honor of the throne of Argonia would compel him to obey any demands imposed on him by the lethal, beautiful being who had saved his life, and whom he would be obliged to serve. The best thing for all concerned would be if Lorelei never formally voiced her ideas as demands at all, if she were subtly but gently reminded that although the castaways were shipless and largely without weapons or provisions, they still had considerable power at their disposal. Perchingbird could think of only one way to present an argument sufficiently timely and convincing to dissuade the determined siren.

"Oh, Dragon Grimley, sir!" he called to the heavens in general. "Might I have a word with you?"

Several sailors instinctively jumped into the sea as a spurt of flame shot out of the woods. Perchingbird took an involuntary and very hasty step backwards himself as Grimley poked his head through the trees.

"Didn't mean to scare you, bonbon," the dragon said affably. "But I couldn't see a flamin' thing in this fog. Thought I might come down to earth, so to speak, and pick up a nice morsel of moose or wolverine for the missus as long as I'm in the neighborhood. Couldn't find a single cow back at the castle. Guess it's just too flamin' foggy to do much huntin'. By the time I see my dinner, I've burnt it, if you see what I mean. What can I do for you this time?"

At the sight of the dragon, Lorelei had let out a girlish shriek and had dived into the cold gray waves.

"You've done it already, sir, thank you," Perchingbird replied. "Unless, of course, you could tell us where we are?"

Grimley scratched one of the red scales along his spine with a sharp-taloned foot. "Let me see. I'd say you were about the castle to uh-well, there are two mountain ranges and another big ice between the sea and--"

Perchingbird listened patiently, but soon realized that although the dragon might know perfectly well where they were, and could undoubtedly fly himself away in the direction of the castle at any time, he didn't know how to communicate his perception of the time and space involved to the earthbound and much slower people.

Frustrated, Grimley began to belch smoke from his nostrils and his eyes glowed red with vexation.

"Or maybe you could just act beastly," Maggie whispered to him behind her hand.

The widow, if she heard, ignored her, and reiterated the charms of her daughters for another hour or so, while re-emphasizing at strategic intervals that Colin must make all haste to gather a delegation to rescue Prince Leofwin from Trickle and bring the Everclear zombies under the dominion of certain responsible citizens of Little Darlingham.

Maggie was glad Colin had carefully omitted any mention of the unicorns in his account. The widow would probably want to know only if the unicorns involved were pedigreed or had any relations captured by kings. With that thought, Maggie left the table without excusing herself and, brushing aside the laundry, climbed the circular stairs, at last settling down for the night on a straw pallet that even her magic could not quite make comfortable.

"I'm afraid this situation is much worse than I'd feared," Pegeen said to the unicorns as the last puff from her smoke had flown away into the night. Eagledown, though still flattening his ears at her and swinging his horn her way once in a while to try to frighten her, had backed off, at Snowshadow's urging, and no longer seemed quite so actively menacing.

Snowshadow had grown calmer and, with the warmth of her body, exuded a protective serenity which Pegeen found greatly improved her own thinking processes. "I don't know what you both must think of Frenchie and of me, for that matter," the princess said. "But I can assure you this whole thing isn't at all like him. He's usually such a charming man. Still, I'm afraid that the nymph person has cast an evil spell on him, and he can't be trusted to see reason. I don't think there's the least point at all in appealing to his sense of decency to let you go. He doesn't seem to have any left."

Eagledown brayed an unanicornly horse laugh. "You can say that again, sister."

"So I shall simply have to extricate you from this situation myself. It will take great courage and cunning on my part, but of course, I was brought up to do that sort of thing, as a princess of the realm and all."

"I don't see how any amount of sink will help us now, Lady," Snowshadow said doubtfully. "We are among knaves with no respect for your royal standing."

"Very true, my dear. I'm virtually a prisoner myself. However, there's always the usual way of escaping from a prison to be considered–which is not to let one's captors know what one intends. All I have to do, as I see it, is to sketch us a map of the maze, and simply open the door to this chamber and lead you safely through the maze and out the other side to freedom. It's as uncomplicated as that. I could have it done in a day or two and no one would be the wiser."

"Aren't you forgetting something?" Eagledown asked. "Don't you have to get out of here first? And what makes you think I'm going to let you? You may have Snowshadow fooled, but I'd just as soon skewer you as look at you."

"No, you wouldn't," Pegeen replied evenly, secretly pleased at how well she was keeping the terror out of her voice. "You'd be doing yourself a disservice if you did. Because I'm your only hope, actually. That hole you've been gouging with your horns doesn't lead anywhere in the least bit useful. As for escaping our

present predicament, that's simply a matter of group cooperation and organizational management. You must allow me to stand on your back, so I may reach the edge of the wall and climb out the way I came in."

Wulfric concealed his grin beneath his outsized cap when he saw the minstrel stumble in through the rectangle of sunlight framed by the door of the dimly lit tavern, and grope among the tables and benches inside until his eyes adjusted to the darkness. The woman Belburga had done her work well, had she not, to drive Songsmith to him? For though early morning was a poor time for the minstrel to attempt to raise interest among the tavern's patrons in any activity more strenuous than staring into the bottom of a cup, had not Belburga, following Wulfric's hastily-concocted but clever plan, persuaded him to do so? And, oh, best of all, she had separated the minstrel and the witch and the unicorn one from the other, the better for him to dispose of them individually.

They could not plot to humiliate him again, as they had done before, appearing alive when he had reported them dead. How shamed he had been when Sally had learned from her latest one-horned conquest that those he had deemed devoured by the forest beasts were alive and united against them! He made haste to pick up their trail, though they were too far ahead for Sally's men to overtake. He could at least follow their movements and lay a plan, could he not? Surely he must try, or wear his tail between his legs forever after!

And had he not succeeded? For he had learned, from their speech, of the strange events at Everclear and had reported to Sally speedily to tell Her of the matter before returning to his tracking. And now, was not She, clever, crafty Sally, preparing Her snares not only for the unicorn but for their other enemies as well? Only this one man was left to Wulfric alone, and he knew how to deal with this man.

Songsmith cleared his throat. "I say, could anyone tell me who's the constable around here? One of your neighboring villages is having a bit of a problem and–"

"Constable, eh?" said a portly fellow with a bulbous nose. "Why, lad, constable was et by wild trolls must've been six months ago or so, ain't that right, Shearer?"

"Aye. Terrible thing it was too," answered a toothless ancient. "When they found Mm weren't naught left of 'im but 'is

mustache and 'is gouty leg. I figgers the trolls thought gout'd give 'em sour stomachs."

"Naw," said the first man. "If they could stomach the rest ov 'im they could take anything."

The minstrel waxed perplexed at this rough jesting, reacting exactly as Wulfric desired. Soon Songsmith would find that none in this place save loyal, brave Wulfric would accompany him into the woods to lead forth the afflicted villagers.

"Oh, I am sorry to hear that," Songsmith was saying, and seated himself at the table opposite the bulbous-nosed man, the elder and two others. "He would have found my tale noteworthy, I'm sure, even if he didn't choose to take a look in the tavern himself."

"What tavern is that, lad?" the elder asked. "If this tale is so interestin', why don't you tell us? It be dull here, mostly."

Songsmith shook his head, sighed and ordered a round for the table. "It's not really worthy of your time, gentlemen, to tell. I only thought the constable would want to keep that poor addled innkeeper from giving away good ale while he didn't know what he was doing."

"Here, now!" said the tavern keeper who was setting the drinks before them. "What idiot is giving away good ale?"

"Not you, Brewer, that's for sure!" the elder wheezed.

"I'll thank the lot of you not to interrupt such a fascinatin' tale," said a third man, whose red face matched what was left of his hair. "Let the boy talk."

"There's not much to tell," Songsmith said. "But all the people of Everclear seem to have this peculiar illness–"

"Plague?" a fourth man asked.

"No, no. Nothing like that. They can walk around and eat and drink, they just don't know what they're doing. They've left all their possessions unguarded, and the innkeeper just keeps giving away pint after pint of ale. It's very sad. I thought that is. Dame Belburga, at the tower where my companion and I are staying, thought the humane thing to do would be to take the townfolk of Everclear under the wing of Little Darlingham, so to speak, until they're mended." He swallowed a draught of ale, then studied it consideringly. "And I suppose it really would be a good idea to leave someone there in charge of that inn until the owner is well."

"Belburga said that?" asked the fourth man, a stocky young farmer whose face was like a baby's and whose muscles were like a blacksmith's. "Lily Pearl's ma? I suppose we'd have to

take these folk over to Lily Pearl's place first off when we got back, so Dame Belburga could tell us what to do with 'em like, wouldn't we?"

"Oh, yes," Songsmith replied. "We'd certainly have to do that."

Wulfric had to intervene. This conversation was not going as he wished. "But have you not heard, good friends, that bandits prowl the forest near Everclear? And wild beasts, and yes, even the trolls of which you spoke? Is it not dangerous?"

But he had waited too long. The men were on their second round at Songsmith's expense. "Oh, aye, it's a bit risky all right," the man with the bulbous nose said. "But giving away ale, after all. That's a shame, all that waste."

"Aye, and I'd never have Lily Pearl thinkin' I was too afraid to help me neighbors," the young farmer added. "I'll go if you'll lead, stranger."

"And I," said bulbous nose.

"My aunt's first cousin's boy's daughter's nephew by marriage lives over to Everclear, or used to," the oldster mused. "Or was it her nephew's daughter's boy's first cousin by marriage? Anyway, I'd best go along too."

The innkeeper threw down his apron. "Well, if I'm going to lose half my trade, I may as well go along and see that a brother innkeeper doesn't go broke from giving away ale while he's ill. I could make sure he took in good coin for it."

"I have a bit of experience at inns m'self," the redhead said. "And bandits, too, if it comes to that. Until just lately I was in the border patrol, up at Castle Rowan."

"And could I do less than to offer to accompany you myself?" Wulfric asked quickly, snatching his last opportunity to stay near his prey. "I know the woods well, and can guide you."

"I thought it was too dangerous for you," Songsmith said.

"I sought only to warn you, noble sir," Wulfric answered. "But in the company of such brave fellows, who am I to falter when my services could mean the difference between the success and failure of your mission?"

Maggie didn't care how noble his mission was or how much trouble he'd wished to spare her, it was bloody unfair of Colin Songsmith to run off back to Everclear without a word to her. Now she was stuck with the obnoxious widow and her three peerless progeny.

Belburga had been feeding her chickens when Maggie dragged herself down the stairs and out into the yard, snatching a hunk of bread left from the night before on the way. Though she'd said nothing, Belburga's smirk was eloquent. Evidently she'd suspected Maggie would be displeased to find Roundelay missing from the stable, and the minstrel gone.

Muttering to herself, Maggie ordered the night's accumulation of manure thrown out of the straw and onto the widow's compost heap, wishing she dared divert a few clods into the widow's face.

Moondine watched her. He looked more confused and miserable and guiltier than a unicorn should have been able to look, but by now Maggie's own feelings were bandaged with a gauze of dullness which made it a little easier to disregard the impulse to stroke his neck and scratch his beard. Not that he'd want her to, anyway.

"I know it isn't pleasant here," she said. "But at least you don't have to listen to that widow. All she talked about all night were her gorgeous daughters. 'My Lily Pearl this, my Ruby-something that.' It was sickening."

"Daughters?" Moondine's ears pricked up. Maggie's heart sank within her as she nodded. He really was going to pursue this idea of finding another maiden. In spite of everything, she still found it hard to believe. Hah. Where were all those brave sensible notions she'd lectured him with back at Aunt Sybil's now? That time seemed incredibly distant.

"I'm not sure where they are," she said. "Let me have a bit of a look around. If I find one I'll come back for you."

But Moondine rolled his eyes frantically. "Nay, nay. Lead me from this horse cage, I implore you. I would seek the maidens myself."

She laid her hand on his neck and let him follow her out into the morning. Although the sun was high and bright, a belt of cloud striped the foothills beneath the sharp, blue-veined whiteness of the peaks towering just beyond the forest, and from the stream and fresh-plowed meadows the dew steamed up in sharp contrast to the clarity of the day.

They first mistook the girl among the flowers of the mint-latticed garden for a wraith, for she seemed at a glance to be made of mist. Her skin was so pale as to make milk seem dingy, and her hair was fine and white as silk thread. She was small and slender, but seemed stately in a flowing white gown of shimmering fabric Maggie recognized from the clothesline the night

before. Poor wench must do a lot of laundry, Maggie thought, living here and wearing that sort of get-up for everyday.

The girl took no notice of them, but busied herself plucking white roses with a pair of long silver shears. Her face reinforced the impression of wraithlike insubstantiality and overall pallor. Though it had the dark blue eyes and rosy cheeks and lips and flawless complexion requisite to the Argonian ideal of beauty, it bore absolutely no trace of ever having been flawed by the distortion of expression or emotion.

Moondine didn't seem to notice. He was pacing and pawing like a warhorse before a battle. "NOW, please, friend, remove my disguise before she flees."

"Yes, I doubt she spends much time outdoors," Maggie said. "She'd be too afraid of getting dirty."

Before the disguise was back in her pocket, Moondine was approaching the girl, who sat upon a stone bench and was arranging her flowers in a basket. When they were arranged to her liking, she began plucking off the petals.

Moondine inhaled rapturously. The odor of chastity perfumed her presence more than the bruised rosepetals in her basket.

"Oh, maiden, look up," he sent his message to her, and presented his best profile while thinking high, pure thoughts until, lifting her lovely head from the basket over which she so daintily toiled, she would see him and love him.

"Oh, I say," the girl cried in admiration when she beheld Moonshine. "What a splendid specimen he is!" She stretched
out her pointed fingers and Moonshine nuzzled them, saying to Maggie, "I think you may leave us now."

"I guess I know when I'm not wanted," she replied, and retired to the cover of the streamside hedges, to keep an eye open for the ogress, who was conspicuously absent. Maybe ogresses liked to sleep during the day, like vampires, as soon as they'd breakfasted and fed the chickens. She'd never heard it said that they did, but one never knew. Whatever she was doing, Maggie thought grimly, Belburga'd be wise to continue doing it and not interfere with Moonshine. If she did, Maggie'd bash her one, and joyously, at that. Meanwhile, the best plan was to stay put. If she went looking for Colin, to try to meet him in the woods on his way back, she'd undoubtedly wind up missing him, and he would fall into the clutches of the man-eating (or at least, rat-eating

"Don't get me wrong, yer Grace," Eagledown said. "It's not that we don't appreciate the social call and the goodies, but when are you going to finish doodling around and loose us from this ice-bear's lair?"

"Please finish your tidbit," Pegeen implored. He'd only eaten half of his apple, though Snowshadow had daintily downed hers in one bite. "If the guards find anything they didn't bring you themselves, they'll know someone's been visiting you."

"Never fear, Lady," Eagledown lowered his head so that the jagged end of his horn's stump menaced the heavy doorway set into the thick blue ice. "They don't come in here-they're afraid they'll get what they've got coming to them if they do."

"Fine. Good. Keep them intimidated. With this beastly weather we've been having, you see, I'm only just getting started on our map tonight."

"TONIGHT?" they both cried together. Snowshadow spoke in a tone just short of a despairing wail. "But you said a week ago it would take you but two days to complete."

"I'm sorry. It really couldn't be helped. I can't work in the rain, in spite of my illuminating magic."

"What's the matter? Afraid to get your well-bred hide wet?" Eagledown asked.

"My well-bred hide dries. My inks do not. They run. While pen and ink wash is an excellent technique for achieving some effects, it is of no great use in cartography."

"He didn't mean it, Princess," Snowshadow said. "Only- time draws short. I feel it."

"Very well, then. I have seen for myself that you are still safe, so I shall proceed as planned. But I must tell you, the map may take somewhat longer to do than I'd expected."

Both unicorns neighed with dismay.

"Oh, Princess, do be careful. Don't risk your life!" Snow-shadow said.

"My life won't be much longer than yours, I fear, if I cannot free you one way or the other. For on my word as the daughter of Finbar the Fireproof, and the last Ashburn heir, I shall not allow Fearchar and his lackeys to do you more harm than they have done already. But in the meantime, while you're waiting for me?"

"Yes?"

"Keep kicking at that hole of yours, why don't you."

When they reached the high, windswept plateaus where the snow and rain blew together in a continual swirling dance, Sir

Cyril thought they must surely leave the gypsy wagons behind, or mire them in the man-high drifts. So he was surprised to see the women bend over the wheels of their wagons, three and four ladies to the wheel, and deftly remove them.

"Snow? Or besides the snow?" Sir Cyril asked.

"Snow. That's right. Say, you pretty smart, King's man. Not like some of them, too stupid to let my wife read their hands. It's snow all around us. You know what happens to wagon wheels in snow?"

"They founder. I naturally assumed we would abandon the wagons."

"No-no such thing, King's man. These wagons our homes. Besides, who wants to walk to other side of mountains? Very tiring. Not the gypsy way."

appearance of detail. But still the crowd grew no smaller, the din no less clamorous. At last, to see something other than what he had been watching for what seemed hours, he turned to the woods just as another unicorn stepped forth.

"Lady Primrose!" he cried, and trotted several steps towards her, before looking back over his shoulder. No one noticed he'd gone, except the animals who'd come in behind him, and who now crowded forward, filling the gap created by his absence.

Giving his mane a decisive shake, he followed the beckoning Primrose into the forest. "How did you come here?" he asked eagerly. "And why? You did recall a section of the Creed that changed what you said about Maid Maggie, didn't you? You came to tell me that she–"

"Don't speak to me of that hussy!" Primrose huffed, switching her tail. "Do you never learn, foolish youngster? Coming here so close to a TOWN! Have you let her make a horse of you in spite of my warnings? Now, hear me, unicorn lad. I've come to take you back to the woods to meet a truly PERFECT maiden."

"The one you spoke of, Lady Primrose?" Moonshine felt uneasy, remembering Maggie's speculation that Primrose's long-lost maiden was the bandit nymph, but even clever Maggie could be wrong. Certainly Primrose seemed to have suffered no harm.

"Yes. She's even more pure and more highly principled than I had dreamed. She has a wondrous exalted mission for which– but I'll let her tell you of that. Quickly now, across the meadow with us before we're seen!"

"But–" he started to protest that Maggie would worry, but thought he would be returning soon anyway, as soon as he'd satisfied his curiosity, and would have interesting news to tell her then, when she came to tell him of Master Colin's mission. He was so weary of the stable and of the gloomy shadow of the tower and of the widow's lovely but peculiar daughters. Now Primrose, instead of merely explaining, would show him an example of a proper unicorn maiden.

Maggie was not relieved by the Little Darlingham men's explanation that Colin had "Gone a-trappin' with the smelly one, mum," nor was she particularly moved by the injured Leofwin's plight. She wasn't very happy about it, either, though. Neither was she pleased when they mentioned to her the warning Leofwin had received from Trickle, and she was further unsettled when they told her that the zombified townsmen of Everclear had been abducted by bandits.

"What a queer lot of bandits!" she said, half to herself. "I never in my life heard of bandits who went around abducting unicorns, kings, and zombies."

"Well, mum," said the ancient who bore up the right-hand forepart of Leofwin's stretcher, "When you gets to be my age, you finds it takes all kinds."

With that bit of venerable wisdom duly noted, Maggie decided to return to Moonshine, for running toward them she saw Belburga, Lily Pearl, and Rusty, and she had no desire to be as disgusted as she was alarmed.

But she couldn't make her getaway immediately. Belburga lashed out and clasped her arm in an iron grasp as Maggie attempted to brush past her. In a tone that would have done credit to a dragoon, the ogress informed her that she was to begin tearing her petticoats into bandages for the wounded prince.

"He don't need no bandages, mum," said the cherubic-faced young man the others called Giles, addressing Belburga without removing his eyes from Lily Pearl. "His wound's 'most healed."

"We ALL must tear bandages," Belburga insisted. "It's the womanly thing to do."

"Oh, very well," Maggie said. "I'll tear bandages till we get him back to the tower. You may want them to restrain his wandering hands once he's himself again. But you'll have to give up your own petticoats–I've only the one, and I'll be blasted if I'll give it up for Leofwin."

So there was no help for it but that she had to help the ogress and her daughters make the prince comfortable while she heard a full account from the so-called rescue party of what had befallen them on their journey. The more she heard, the more worried she became, and at last, while Belburga was preparing what she termed a nourishing brew, while Rusty was asking excited questions of the rescuers about how much blood there'd been lying about, while Lily Pearl was holding Leofwin's hand, stroking his fevered brow and gazing soulfully into his eyes, and while Leofwin's hand crept beneath Lily Pearl's skirt, Maggie prepared to slip away.

To her amazement, as she started to slide out the door, the ogress turned to her and said in the syrupy voice Maggie'd presumed she reserved only for princes, "My dear girl, you needn't wash at the stream before you go to bed, you know. We have lots and lots of hot water here in the kettle for you. Why don't you just tidy up and go to your room and get some sleep? You must be exhausted after this long harrowing day, and you'll want to be your freshest, won't you, when your handsome minstrel returns?"

Of all of the alarming events of the afternoon, none alarmed and shocked Maggie more than this: Belburga actually being civil to her and considerate of her comfort! Inconceivable! She raced out the door like a loosed arrow.

Moonshine was not where she had left him, nor where she expected him to be, and her agitation grew by leaps and bounds. "But he was here only a moment ago," protested Daisy Esmeralda, when Maggie had scattered her admirers and confronted her with Moonshine's disappearance.

"He's not here now," she said grimly, and shooed a few more cows, geese, and foxes. "Git! Go tend your own business, you!" She addressed the last to a particularly stubborn crane who'd been waiting all afternoon. "Don't you have eggs to hatch or something?" she demanded impatiently of the creature, then turned back to Daisy Esmeralda. "The question is, where did he go, and how long ago did he leave? Come on, girl, out with it. I've no more time to waste with you. Moonshine and my friend Colin may be in grave danger."

"I don't know. I honestly don't! I was just discussing with Mr. Squirrel here the winter nut market, and Mr. Unicorn was standing right over there when–" the girl stopped, flustered. She was shy with people, and had no idea how to deal with this wild-eyed witch. Tears and confusion made pools of her green eyes. "Right wi ere?" Maggie insisted.

"Why–right about there, where Goody Cow is standing–" Maggie shoved Goody Cow aside, and found one of Moonshine's footprints intact enough of it visible, at least, that she could tell its direction and from it find the next one. Then she paused, puzzled. Other similar but smaller prints appeared from the opposite direction, blended with Moonshine's for a few paces, and then both sets stopped at the stream.

Daisy Esmeralda gathered her sprigged skirts in one hand and came to join her mother's gypsyish lodger where she hunkered close to the earth, tracing something with a blunt brown finger.

The animals had all fled, anyway. They didn't like strangers, especially rude ones like this woman.

"When did the other unicorn come?" Maggie asked her. "Was she white, by any chance, with gold mane and tail?"

"Why, now that you mention it, there was another unicorn and she and your friend DID gallop off together! I remember now! I was just telling Goody Duck that her eggs were showing a marked improvement, and I happened to look up as the unicorns ran past. But really, you frightened me so, you completely drove it out of my mind. You're wilder than ANY of my woodland friends, Goody Witch."

But Maggie was paying her no attention. Instead, the witch hitched up her skirts and started across the stream, leaping from stone to stone, missing once and splashing to her knees within arm's reach of the opposite bank.

[illegible]

Maggie nodded, continuing to stare in fascination at him. His fur masked most of his outline, but she kept feeling as if there were something vaguely out of kilter with the way he looked.

He stared at her in almost the same way, but continued to talk. His voice was deep and soothing and drowned out the wind. "Trickle's just one example of a faery doin' a fine job looking after her bit of country. There's them as guards the trees too--yer nymphs and dryads and such, but they're not overly dependable. There's a couple of them down yonder on the lower slopes, watchin' over the foothills. Then there's dwarves. Generally it's dwarves for the high country, where there's likely to be mines, and gnomes in the fields and woods and such. I'm what you gets in the glaciers."

Maggie shook her head, wonderingly. "I've never seen the like of you before, or heard of anyone like you."

"Pardon me for being blunt, Miss," he replied. "But unless you're a young lady of rather broad experience, you can see how, unlikely it might be that you would have. It's my job to keep your sort of person from frequenting glaciers, you might say."

"Are you some kind of talking bear?" she asked. Talking bears were within her experience. One of her close friends was a former enchanted bear.

"I should say not." He held out his hands for inspection. Each contained ten fingers, the undersides soft and padded like feet, though smoother. Each digit was six-jointed, except the thumb, which had only four joints. Sharp claws curved from each fingertip. He next raised a meat-platter-sized foot, and she saw what had bothered her about him. It was on backwards. His toes pointed behind, and his heel pointed forward. It looked painful.

He grinned through a mouthful of what looked like icicles. "Clever way to throw you people off one's track, eh? Inherited me drift-hoppers from me great-great-great-great-gran, who was a snow faery, come to these lands as an immigrant durin' the, great Purges in Chat-yong. Aristocrat, she was, my gran. Guarded the royal sacred mountain. But that didn't stop them smoothies from tryin' t' purge 'er."

"Chat-yong?" Maggie was puzzled. She'd heard the name only in connection with certain luxury items, and hadn't heard it at all recently. "I didn't know they even HAD faeries in Chat-yong."

"Don't suppose they did after them purges," he said. "Say, do you want to hear this or don't you?" She nodded, chastened.

"It was me grandam's job to keep the snows free of you pesky smoothies by luring any man foolish enough to intrude on 'er mountain to 'is death. She'd appear to him all pale and pretty, and smile at him friendly-like, you know, then throw him off the track with her backward feet trick. Poor devil would freeze to death chasin' around in circles. Work every time, these drift-hoppers do." He slapped his knee with a fur-muted plop, and laughed a volcanic laugh. "You should see 'em tryin' to figure out if I'm watching 'em or not. Drives 'em mad, it does."

"Who? Drives who mad?"

"The blokes comes up with the nymph. Mind you, I don't dally with 'em while she's about--she's a bit queer in the head, takin' up with mortals and the like, but the big 'uns are like that, and she is one of us, after all. But they knows I watch, and just let one of 'em get out of hand, and try to find the treasure they thinks I'm hiding."

"Are you?"

He grinned another icicle grin and asked, "Is that why you called me, Miss? To find me treasure?"

"No, sir," she said emphatically. "The last thing I want or need is a treasure. But if you have a horse-or better yet, some wings, perhaps?"

He laughed again and a shower of snow shook loose from an overhead ledge and slid to the floor, making a shining pile on the gray fur covering her feet.

"If I had me a horse, I'd eat it, and you can see I haven't got wings. But that little posey you tinkled entitles you to any reasonable help I can give you, compliments of Trickle. Unless I want to be in her bad graces, which I can tell you, I'm no coward, but I do not!" And he laughed again, this time crashing half the roof of his cave down around their ears. He remained unperturbed, however, and simply tented his furry form over Maggie until all the ice which had been shaken loose shattered onto the floor. He was a good host that way, at least.

"Has to watch me sense of humor around here," he confided. "Don't get company too often, and I gets carried away. Get it from me dad's folk, I suppose."

Maggie could tell by the pride in his voice that she wasn't going to get any help out of him, Trickle or no Trickle, until he'd told her all about it. "Who," she asked obligingly, "Were your dad's folk?"

"Frost giants, Miss, frost giants, of course! Can't you tell?" He shook his furry arms and twinkled at her with blue eyes which were, now that she looked at them, very like the King's. "One of the blokes got lost up here one time, chasin' after little grandam, just like they always did. Only she'd never seen the like of 'im before, and took a shine to 'im. He wasn't as furry as me, of course. That all come later. But he was used to the snow and cold, and didn't freeze, just got baffled-like. Once she unbaffled 'im, they sort of got together and started my kind."

"And what, if it's not too rude to ask, is your kind?"

"The faeries as knew grandam calls me Yeti, though of course, that was 'er name, not mine. Some calls me the snowman."

"Ah, then I HAVE heard of you," she said, her interest genuinely piqued now. "Trappers tell tales in my father's tavern sometimes, of abominable snowmen."

"Pooh," said the Yeti. "They don't know nothing. There's only me and my two brothers in this whole country, and we does our job and keeps ourselves to ourselves. We think your trappers are pretty abominable too, scarin' away what little game comes up to this high country. The smoothies we have dealings with mostly know us by our tracks, and the ones of 'em that gets away're got no need to call us abominable. Mostly, I hear, they calls us Bigfoot." He looked down again proudly at his upturned heels, then, as if remembering his manners, added, "Me personal name is Sebastian."

"I-I'm Maggie. Maggie Brown, daughter of Brunwyn, daughter of Maud, daughter of Oonaugh, daughter of Elspat," she added, since Sebastian liked talking about relatives.

"Oh, you're a witch then," he said, impressed by her long matrilineage. "Well, now, why didn't you say so? No wonder little Trickle thinks you're all right. What can I do for you?"

"I thought you'd never ask," she said, and told him about Sally's unicorn-napping activities.

Rising to her knees, but still hovering protectively above her friend, Maggie said, "I want you to spare Colin, if that's what you mean. Yes."

"You know I would do almost anything for you, dear niece, but you young girls are ignorant of military matters, and are far too apt to place emotional concerns over sound judgment. This man is a spy as are you, my dear, though I'm sorry to have to say it of one of my own dear kinswomen."

"If that's not the pot calling the kettle black, I don't know what is!" she snapped, losing her temper. "We're not spies, and we're certainly not traitors, like some people I could mention. If you want to be angry at someone, be angry at me. Colin only came along because I–"

Feanchar, who had looked as if he might explode for a moment, settled back into his chair and with some effort resumed his indolent, cat-and-mouse tone. "That's all immaterial. I'm afraid he'll have to die. You see, you're too dangerous, even alone, to allow me to grant you any allies or concessions. You call me names and spite me, even when I tried to make you a queen. You used that scrub-drudge magic of yours to defy me and–"

"But I won't now! You don't have to worry about that!" she said. "I can't use it against you any more. My magic is gone. I can't do you any harm, and neither can Colin, and we're leagues away from anyone who can. So why don't you just let us go?"

Not that she had expected him to, but the suggestion popped out before she had time to think how silly it sounded. At least it seemed to put him in a better mood. He was laughing himself sick.

"Oh, you cunning little witch, you. Let you go? No magic? Do you really expect me to believe that?" He flashed his teeth at her, looking very like Walter, though meaner and hungrier. "And at any rate, what good is a witch without her powers? Unless, perhaps as a serving wench, and to warm and decorate the barracks of my loyal guards."

Colin bolted upright, knocking down the guard who had just gotten to his feet again, and grabbing his spear away from him in the process. The long end of the weapon swung behind him, making a clean sweep of the stomachs of the other three guards, as Colin pressed the point into Sally's neck. Maggie, who had also been flung aside when her friend made his move, watched Sally drop her weapon and the guards, at a gesture from Feanchar, take another step backwards. Colin, panting heavily, rasped to Feanchar, "She's your own niece, you filthy bast–" and abruptly broke into another spell of coughing that left him so weak Sally had only to pluck the spear from his grasp and turn it against him.

Maggie got to her knees in time to haul him back from the nymph's forward thrust, and the guards closed in again around them. With an amused smile which tried to give lie to the earlier panic on his face, her uncle flicked his fingers at the guards, saying, "Halt. Let him live, for now. I'm terribly moved by his sense of gallantry. What say you now, niece? If I don't kill your little lap dog, will you do my bidding? ALL of my bidding?"

"You have a sick idea of how to make a girl popular, Uncle, but yes. Spare Colin, and I'll do as you say."

"Good, good. Let's adjourn, then, to the guest chambers, and you can help us make him comfortable."

It took a lot of effort for Maggie to stand again. Her knees were a lot weaker than she would allow her tongue to reveal. She tried to help Colin, but the guards had closed around him and were pushing him forward. He was still coughing as if he would turn wrong side out. Feanchar descended from his throne and grasped her elbow in iron fingers.

He led them to the farthest arch, which entered into the barracks, a long double row of dismal pallets at which Maggie carefully avoided looking. At the end of the room was another arch, and a pair of heavy cedar doors which two of the guards swung ponderously open. Cold wind and hail swept into the room, blasting them all back for a moment.

Then another guard trudged out against the storm and opened another door, this one leading to an open, empty, ice-walled chamber. The others dragged Colin forward and threw him into it.

Maggie pulled away from her uncle's bruising fingers, and went for his eyes. The guards skated out of Colin's cell and jumped for her, pulling her away. "You said you wouldn't kill him!" she shrieked against the pelting hail. "He's ill! He'll be dead before morning!"

Feanchar withdrew from the path of the storm, clucking. "You're such an excitable girl. Did I not say I had a task for you? You see, I don't quite trust you, niece. I want to see for myself if you spoke the truth about your wretched domestic magic tricks. If you can still perform them, you may provide whatever amenities your friend needs to keep him comfortable in the accommodations I have so graciously provided for him. Go on, my dear, make his clothing warmer and dry. Build him one of your delightful little fires, provide him with a light, and perhaps a bit of a tent to keep him from the elements. It's all up to you, you see. As you say, you got him into this. I certainly can't afford to have my revolution bogged down by supporting a lot of camp followers, just to please my relatives. If you want him to stay alive, you'll have to provide for him yourself. Otherwise . . ." he shrugged.

Maggie glared at him, pushed the guards aside, gritted her teeth and tried, but it was as if she had never had the power. Nothing happened. Nothing entered Colin's cell or changed there except that the hail accumulated and the wind whisked the pellets around the floor. Colin was leaning in a corner, doubled over, coughing, when they closed the door and bolted it.

She didn't have to see her uncle's gloating smile, blinded as she was by her own scalding, angry, frustrated tears. Her nails shredded her palms as the guards took her in tow again.

"You're a truthful girl," Feanchar said. "But with a little training, we shall break you of that."

He had the guards haul her back into the throne room, and himself resumed the throne. "Now then, what to do with you. You're as bad as your friend, really. What a burden leadership is! All these useless people on my doorstep! A minstrel who can't play, and a witch who can't do the simplest magic! And you are a Brown, of course, so I truly would rather not have you consorting with my guards if there's any other useful function you can perform–"

He paused and looked past her as a lady wandered into the chamber, looking to her right and left and back again as if lost. Her plump body fairly quivered with agitation, but an aura of pinkish light surrounded her, particularly bright at her head, which was covered with a nest of wildly disorganized gray curls with a goose quill stuck in their midst, just above her ear. "Feanchar–oh, excuse me, dear, I mean, Dark Pilgrim, dear. I didn't realize you were holding court. Do pardon me for interrupting, but I was just finishing that chart you asked me to do and I seem to have mislaid my favorite stylus. I do hope it hasn't fallen on the floor in here somewhere and washed overboard or gotten its feathers all nasty in the ashes." She had Feanchar shift from one hip to the other as she poked under the fur drape and cushions of the throne, then stood up, scratching her head, and turned to the rug, pulling one dripping end of it and sending Sally Forth sprawling backwards. "Pardon," the former Princess of Argonia said not at all contritely. Then, mumbling to herself, she made first Maggie's guards, then Maggie, lift their feet as she looked underneath for the missing implement. Looking up again, she seemed for the first time to notice Maggie. "Why, how do you do, my dear. Have we met?" she asked, extending her hand. One of Maggie's guards shoved her back to her knees and pushed her face toward the outstretched, ink-stained fingers, indicating that she should kiss them. Before she could do so, Pegeen snatched the hand back to her mouth. "Oh! I know. You must be the new serving girl Feanchar's been promising me!"

Feanchar's smile faded for the first time since his guards had brought Maggie and Colin to him at spearpoint. "She is no serving wench, my dear. Do you not note the family resemblance? This is my niece Magdalene who has lately been raised by the usurper of your father's throne to a rank equal to, if not greater than your own. Princess Magdalene of Argonia, may I Present Princess Pegeen Ashburn, legitimate heiress to the throne of Argonia, who shall rule beside me when our revolution bears its glorious fruit."

Sally Forth's mouth flew open. "But, Dark Pilgrim, you promised ME–"

"Ah, yes. I've promised Captain Forth that her men shall be given food and drink, and that I will now go and review the other prisoners. Pegeen, dear, if you'll be so good as to take Maggie with you to your chambers, and see to it that she's kept away from sharp implements and salt. Guards, will you be so good as to see that neither Princess leaves her Highness's quarters without my express invitation?" He smiled apologetically to Pegeen. "Our agents have spotted Rowan's party a day's march from the Blabbermouth, my dear. I want to insure your safety, and must from now on keep you under the protection of my guard."

Pegeen raised on tiptoe and planted a kiss in the hollow of Feanchar's sharp-boned cheek. "Of course, darling. You're so thoughtful. Come along, dear Magdalene." She seemed not to feel there was anything irregular about the guard escorting Maggie poking his spear at his leader's niece's neck

Moonshine quietly allowed his captors to remove their sling and ropes, thinking to bite them as soon as he was free, but Primrose shrieked and bucked and gouged and whinnied. "Where is this VILE place?" she demanded, though naturally none of the guards possessed the gift of unicorn understanding. "There has been an error here! My maiden surely did not intend for you to abuse me in this hideous fashion!"

But the guards, who had profited from previous experiences, flicked their ropes quickly from her and from Moonshine, and backed off immediately, to be replaced by others who goaded the unicorns at spearpoint into an icy cell at the rear of the castle.

The cell was barren, and open to the hail-spitting sky, but at least, Moonshine thought, he would be able to do what he had set out to do, and meet other unicorns. Two more of them were crowded in one corner, heads down and ears flicking the hail stones aside. The stallion looked up at them, deflecting stones with his broken horn. "Huh. Here comes two more fools. You two ready to do your bit for the revolution, too?"

"I WAS," Primrose said, kicking at the door with her back hooves. "But I most certainly don't intend to now. Not until I've had a full explanation and a complete apology for this despicable treatment!"

The stallion emitted the longest horselaugh Moonshine had ever heard. "Oh, say, you're a corker, aren't you?" he chortled when he'd finally regained control of himself. "That's the best one yet. Apology! Explanation!"

"Those men will sorely regret the way they've mishandled me when my maiden finds out how they've bungled her commands," Primrose said primly.

"Your maiden?" the strange stallion asked with mock innocence. "Blond woman, sports a silver hunting horn and wears practically nothing?"

"That is an accurate if unseemly description of her," Primrose admitted.

"Hold onto your horn, honey, but that trollop is fixing to watch them cut off your horn and grind it into powder and flay you alive to make a belt for herself from your hide."

"LIAR!" screamed Primrose, and charged him.

The stallion was on his feet, neatly parrying her thrust with a deft movement of his own broken horn before she knew what was happening. "Oh, no. I couldn't lie," he said. "I'm a unicorn like you, remember?

"And it is the Unicorn Creed That a unicorn may not mislead But always say sooth Without mercy or ruth Though sooth may in truth make you bleed."

Moonshine was more confused by that than by any of the more catastrophic events that had taken place that day. "You just made that up, didn't you?" he asked the stallion. "I never heard that part of the Creed before."

The stallion studied him warily for a moment, then trotted over, circling him. "You calling me a liar too, sonny?"

"No–I just–"

"Eagledown, have you no shame!" scolded the other unicorn, getting to her feet. She was a pretty snow-white filly with eyes the soft green of moss. "These are captives, like ourselves, hurt and confused. And instead of offering solace, you mock them!"

"Whatever has become of your horn, young lady!" Primrose demanded of the filly, whose horn was in as sad a state of repair as the stallion's.

"It broke," she said. "While we were digging."

"Digging? Are you a unicorn or a gopher?"

"Leave her alone, Primrose," Moonshine warned. "After the way you betrayed me, you can hardly hold yourself up, still, as a model of unicorn behavior and knowledge."

The filly walked over to him and sniffed, seeming to like what she smelled. "Don't be too hard on her," she said softly, gazing at him with those lovely green eyes.

"For it is the Unicorn Creed
To follow wherever love leads ..." "And the primary lesson," Primrose finished for her, "Is when your love beckons Tis a priv'lege to die at her knee."

The older unicorn seemed momentarily buoyed by the nobility of the verse's sentiment, then added, plaintively, "Except that my love has taken her knee away. How can I die at her knee if she's not here?"

"If she were here," Eagledown promised, "I'd see to it that she died with you. And you both have that verse wrong. Once the maiden betrays you, it's every 'corn for himself, as the Creed clearly states in THIS verse:

"For it is the Unicorn Creed To fight till you've no blood to bleed To run like the wind From the whole race of men And kill them if they force the need."

He sighed. "Too bad I had to meet up with someone like that outlaw filly. I'd always looked forward to the kind of love a unicorn is supposed to have with his girl, you know, like in the verse about unicorns and maidens, the one you botched up:

"For it is the Unicorn Creed To follow wherever love leads. If she's light-haired or ruddy She's your bosomy buddy Your friend both in need and indeed."

"Wait," Moonshine said, more puzzled than ever. "That's NOT the way it goes. I know that's not the Creed my dam taught me. It doesn't go like that at all. It's the first maiden and it's, let's see, 'wherever love leads–' "

"You gainsaying me, greenhorn?" the stallion challenged. "'Cause if you are, don't let the fact that my horn's damaged stop you. I don't need a horn to kick your tail all around this stall."

"For shame, Eagledown!" Snowshadow interjected, putting herself between the feisty stallion and Moonshine. "Forgive him," she said to Moonshine. "He feels keenly the pain of betrayal, as do we all, and only wants to fight in order to lash out at something. But we must not fight among ourselves."

"You are so wise," Moonshine agreed, looking into her eyes and smelling her sweet though soiled scent, feeling oddly happy and benevolent, despite his captive state. "Your pardon, noble Eagledown," he said to the stallion, without looking away from Snowshadow. "I'm sure you speak the Creed as you know it. It is only that I, an ignorant youngster, do not know as much of the Creed as I would, and was on a quest to learn it all. Never had it occurred to me that the Creed as given me by my dam might have other variations."

Snowshadow laughed and replied in rhyme:

"How else could the Unicorn Creed Begin to meet unicorn need? We aren't beasts of the herd To use others' words To govern our thoughts and our deeds."

"Of course not," Moonshine agreed. "But–but there IS a Creed–isn't there?"

"Certainly there's a Creed," Eagledown snorted. "We all follow one–it just seems to vary slightly from 'corn to 'corn, from what the filly here and I have found."

"Are you–?" Moonshine began, but didn't know quite how to finish his thought. He needn't have bothered. Snowshadow read him very well.

"No, I do not belong to Eagledown. He was captured before me, and both of us by the same maiden, if maiden she is indeed. Therefore, neither of us, none of us here, have anyone. She has betrayed us all."

"I have someone," Moonshine said.

"Do you misunderstand me?" Snowshadow asked sadly. "The bandit girl is false, I tell you."

"But she is not MY maiden," Moonshine insisted. "My maiden is a beautiful witch, and very fierce. She's temporarily without her powers, but I'm sure once she gets it back she'll force her uncle to free us all."

"Her UNCLE?" Snowshadow asked.

"The evil sorcerer who commands the bandit girl is a distant relative of my maiden," Moonshine explained as casually as possible. "But she's not a bit like him, and she hates him and loves me, so I know she'll set us free–"

"She won't free me," Primrose said in a voice suddenly changed and quiet. "Not after what I've done to you, and said about her. She won't free me."

The older mare's head hung desolately between her forelegs. She seemed finally to have accepted the truth of her situation and what the others told her, and in the absence of Sally Forth's spellbinding charm perceived the dismal truth of her plight.

Snowshadow nudged her neck gently. "Don't despair, elder sister. We shall all be freed together. If Moonshine's maiden is as good and wonderful as he says, she will save you for his sake if for no other. And if not, why, I shall insist on it."

Eagledown snorted again. "Haven't you all got it through your pointy heads yet that no mortal maiden is going to bother saving a bunch of corralled 'corns? I almost believed that pudgy princess, but I think we'd stand a better chance getting Moonshine and Primrose to help enlarge our bolt hole than we would waiting on human help."

"Well, perhaps it wouldn't hurt to do what we can," Snowshadow agreed.

"What hole?" Moonshine asked.

"Our escape route," Snowshadow said. "Come see. It's almost big enough."

Pegeen waited until the door had slammed behind them to take Maggie's hands in her own and pull her over to the wall farthest from the door. "Oh, my dear girl, I saw it all and I'm so terribly sorry. You must believe that your uncle hasn't always been like this. He's very fond of you in his way, you know."

"He has an odd way of showing it," Maggie said. "His overwhelming affection is going to be the death of me probably, and of my friend absolutely." She laughed with a bitterness just short of hysteria. "Oh, no, milady. You're dead wrong. My uncle hates me all right. He's threatened to–well, never mind."

"Never mind indeed," sniffed Pegeen, patting Maggie's knee with brisk sympathy. "You needn't worry about that. Feanchar does not hate you, I tell you. He could never dislike anyone who reminds him so of himself. Nevertheless, he has quite taken leave of his senses in regard to this so-called revolution, and it is up to us to do something about it."

Maggie started, so taken aback by the Princess's unexpected sympathy that she momentarily stopped looking around the room for something with which to hit the other woman over the head. "You mean you came in when you did on purpose?"

"Yes. I must apologize for not being able to save your young man from the maze, but I'm not really very brave, you see, and I could tell Feanchar meant to do something awful to him, no matter what you or I could do. Though he is fond of you, Feanchar's quite vexed at you still over his first attempt to gain the throne. I'm afraid he's punishing you through your friend. He might have done something nasty to you, too, but he's much too proud to degrade a member of his own family in front of me. He's almost come to believe his blood is as noble as mine. Not that it makes any difference, you understand, but he could hardly shame you publicly and keep his own face, could he?"

"Then you mean to help me?" Maggie asked. "You're not on his side?"

"Well, naturally I'm on his side," the princess replied. "But it's all rather complicated, you see, because though I am, he's not any longer. What I mean is, I love Feanchar. But that horrid woman has completely corrupted him, and I must protect him from doing perfectly dreadful things he couldn't really mean to do. He'll be glad of it and thank me when he comes to his senses–I hope."

Maggie looked at the princess suspiciously. "Excuse me, milady, but has your food been tasting rather flat and bland the past few months?"

"You mean because of salt being the antidote to Feanchar's magic charm? No, my dear, my diet is quite sufficient, thank you. I'm afraid neither salt nor magic have anything to do with Feanchar's charm for me. Even if one is a Princess, and quite used to the idea of being no great beauty, approaching middle age without so much as a once-upon-a-time, not to mention a happily-ever-after, is not a pleasant prospect. Feanchar suffers from a certain ruthless ambition which he's allowed to get out of hand, but I can't help but hope that with the proper guidance, he'll . . ." She stopped, seeing Maggie's skeptical look, and finished lamely. "He's provided me with a great many rather beautiful dreams, you see."

"Nightmares would be easier to believe," Maggie said. "Colin is freezing in his wretched prison, and Mother only knows what's happened to the unicorns."

"They're safe," Pegeen told her in a tone whose self-satisfaction was not unmixed with anxiety. "For now, at least."

"He'll murder King Rowan, too, unless–"

"Murder him? But surely m'lord Rowan is bringing sufficient men and arms to deal with this ragtag bunch of ruffians Feanchar has gathered?"

"They had an accident," Maggie informed her glumly. "Now they're to be slaughtered, and so, I suspect, are we."

"Umm," Pegeen said noncommittally. "Feanchar has grown distant lately and he's promised that wretched nymph something besides quarters for her men, unless I miss my guess." She smiled sadly. "I don't like to think what that promise might be, you see." She was quiet for a moment, and when she looked up her eyes were unnaturally bright. Stretching out ink-stained fingers that trembled slightly, she traced Maggie's cheek and jawline. "You're so very like him, you know. So very much like him. You could be his daughter, instead of his niece, you're so alike. And yet, from all I've heard said of you, you're a kind, honest, forthright girl, as good as he is–"

"Yes," Maggie said gently. "I am, and he is. Quite. But the point is, what are we going to do about it? Colin is ill. That fever will kill him before the night's out, if he doesn't freeze to death first. And somehow we must keep the King from being slaughtered, and I still don't know what Feanchar intends doing with the unicorns–"

"I do," Pegeen said grimly, worrying her lower lip with her teeth.

"Then do you intend to lure the guard in and let me knock him senseless or shall I lure him in and let you do the honors?"

"Neither," Pegeen said. "There's another way. But we must wait until it's quite dark."

Colin's main consolation, as he lay on the floor of his icy prison being scourged by wind and hailstones, was thinking of how grand he must have looked, defying Sally Forth and her bandits and the wicked sorcerer for Maggie's sake. Just like in the ballads, he thought. In fact, certainly an act worthy of a ballad in itself. And it wasn't just play-acting this time, either, as it had been in the tavern at Everclear when he'd known very well that Leofwin was covered not only by himself but by Maggie's magic and Moonshine's horn. This time he had really braved actual danger for the love of his lady, though, in all likelihood, it not only would do neither of them a bit of good but would also go unsung, due to the untimely demise of all parties sympathetic enough to record his deed.

Ah, well, if he'd wanted everything to go smoothly, he ought to have stuck with minstrel halls and never have taken up with witches. But he knew Maggie appreciated his gesture, as he loved her for trying to save him. Perhaps, at least, he had delayed her end until Feanchar could torment her with the sight of his frozen, lifeless body. What a cheering thought. Shouldn't take too long, at this rate. Already he had no feeling in his arms or legs, nor could he feel his nose, mouth or chin, which was a blessing, considering the hail. But within, he felt as he'd always imagined dragons must, plagued as they were with a continual case of heartburn; unbearably, overwhelmingly hot. The coughing and sneezing forced his stiffened body to double over painfully, whether he felt otherwise able to do so or not.

Perhaps, if he took long enough about this dismal business of dying, he might buy Maggie enough time so that King Rowan could arrive and rescue her. If anyone had ever deserved rescuing, it was Maggie. She certainly went out of her way to rescue everyone else, and now she'd got him doing it, too. Very well, then. He felt so hot inside he was pretty sure he could stretch the freezing process out over quite a long time. But the coughing hurt, sending searing pains through his chest, waggling numbed and useless limbs helplessly about with each spasmodic, throat-ripping explosion. His head, too, felt as if it were on fire–a blacksmith's fire, with blacksmith and hammer and anvil in attendance.

Between coughs, he tried to distract himself by concentrating on the castanet clickings of his teeth, and finally gave that up. At last, though he fought it, he slept. He dreamed of softly tangled brown hair, brown eyes melting with love and admiration for him, the voluptuous embrace of a warm, cinnamon-colored body enfolding his own, and best of all, a sweet, generous mouth too busy returning his kisses to say a single word.

After a long hour of pacing and nail-biting, Pegeen cracked open the door of her room and spoke to the guard. "The Princess Magdalene and I are retiring now. Please see to it that we aren't disturbed."

The guard smirked insolently. Pegeen took that for acquiescence, and closed the door again, throwing the bolt vengefully from the inside. Gathering up the woolen cloaks and mittens she'd dug from her traveling trunk, she beckoned Maggie to the wall screen and slid it aside, revealing the entrance to her secret tunnel.

"Fancy that!" Maggie whispered. "You'd think there'd be a draft."

"Quickly," Pegeen said. "We'll have just enough time before the castle's quiet and it's safe to venture out onto the maze."

"Enough time for what?" Maggie asked, hunkering down slightly to keep from bumping her head on the tunnel's ceiling and slipping in her haste to stay within the wake of Pegeen's pink aura.

Pegeen knelt and shoved aside the oversized snowball she used to barricade her tunnel, and sat down, scooting on her bottom along the top of the high maze wall until there was room for Maggie beside her.

The hail storm had cleared now, and the wind had died down. The maze wall was littered with small white pellets, tinted rose by Pegeen's aura.

"Put the snowball back, will you, Maggie? There's a dear. It makes a lovely plug, but I do have to replace it every time there's a warm spell." She spoke quickly, rummaging in her dress pocket as she chattered. "Ah, there it is."

Pulling forth a torch the length of her forearm and a tinderbox, she lit the torch, and smiled at it as if it were her dearest friend. "It's been days since I've had a smoke," she told Maggie. "The weather has been beastly."

"Yes," Maggie agreed. "But it seems to be clearing up now." A faint gray light was visible along the upper edge of the horizon, above the glacier behind the castle, but all else extending beyond the Princess's aura was black as pitch. That aura was a handy sort of power to have. Thoughtful as it was of the Princess to bring along a torch, Maggie thought she really wouldn't need it as long as she stayed close to Pegeen.

She was about to say so when Pegeen leaned luxuriously back, arching her neck pleasurably, and lowered the lighted end of the upended torch into her eagerly waiting mouth, plunging it halfway down to her stomach, it seemed to Maggie, who was too stunned to comment. After a long moment during which the princess actually seemed to be sucking on the torch, she pulled it forth, extinguished, and emitted a blissful sigh. She sat for a time, serenely blowing iridescent curls of smoke from her nostrils, which glowed a faint shell pink. She reminded Maggie of the dragon Gristel in a happy frame of mind.

With a small cough and a clearer eye and steadier voice than she'd had before, Pegeen said, "Pity you can't have a nice smoke, too, before we set out. It's wonderfully warming, besides having such a calming effect on the nerves."

"Oh, yes, I can see where it would be warming," Maggie agreed. "Speaking of that, do you suppose we could see to Colin now?"

The hail had left their precarious pathway even slicker than usual, and at times they had to abandon crawling for sliding along astride the wall's top. Pegeen grew worried that she might become confused or lose her way. Never before had it been so dark when she visited the unicorn enclosure. Each time one of the worm's convolutions led them back to the rear castle wall, she breathed a sigh of relief.

Maggie's legs were bare beneath her skirt, and numb from direct contact with the ice. She tried to arrange the folds of material to protect her skin, but only succeeded in hampering her movements and slowing her progress. Even with the cloak and mittens borrowed from Pegeen, she was frozen by the wind and wet ice. Soon she began slipping more often, because her hands and knees were numb from crawling, and her muscles tired and jellied from supporting her weight. They had been crawling for an impossibly long time when Pegeen stopped and leaned forward, casting her aura into the depths on the left side of their wall.

Before the princess had time to explain, Maggie felt Moonshine touch her mind.

"Maiden? Oh, Maiden, I told them you'd come!"

Forgetting her weariness and the cold, Maggie scuttled forward and peered over the edge, to see her beloved Moonshine and three other unicorns staring up at them.

"Have they hurt you?" she asked.

"Nay, Maiden. They have not. And you?"

"No. I'm fine."

"Hey, Highness," another unicorn challenged. "Have you come to get us out of here?"

"Oh, dear, how thoughtless of me!" Pegeen cried, her thumbnail flying to her teeth. "I should have brought the map, shouldn't I, so we could all escape together? I was so upset about Maggie's young man that I quite forgot."

"Just like a human," the stallion snorted. "Your own kind first, eh?"

"Master Colin is imperiled?" Moonshine asked, and Maggie showed him the image of Colin as she had seen him last, coughing and freezing in a cell like the one containing the unicorns. "Free him at once!" Moonshine said. "I, for one, shall not flee at his expense!"

"Nor I!" trumpeted the filly at his side. Her snowy coat so blended with the ice that only her eyes were clearly defined. She began to recite:

"For it is the Unicorn Creed To abandon unseemly stampede If a friend of a friend Has an end round the bend The unicorn must intercede!"

"I wish you wouldn't do that, Snowshadow," Moonshine complained. "It confuses me when you keep reciting stanzas of the Creed I've never heard before."

"Your pardon," the filly said to him, then to the princess and Maggie, "Onward, valiant maidens, and deliver your friend from his fell fate!"

"But–Moonshine's maiden?" Primrose's voice was subdued.

"Yes?" Maggie asked, the chill in her voice not entirely due to the weather.

"You–you will come back, won't you?"

Pegeen answered. "I'm just going to take her to her friend, and lead them back here, then I'll go fetch the map, and we'll all crawl out through your hole and escape through the maze at first light. You have my word as a royal Ashburn and the daughter of my father, Finbar."

"That's more like it!" the stallion Eagledown trumpeted. "Rally round me, friends, and let's apply our hind hooves to that hole again!"

Maggie and Pegeen crawled around the unicorns' prison, and up and over the long loop at the castle's rear entrance, before finally reaching the chamber into which Feanchar had cast Colin.

Maggie swore under her breath when she saw him, lying on his side with his knees wrapped close to his chest, frost winking back into the princess's aura from his beard, hair and lashes. At first she thought he was dead already, and they had arrived too late, but a weak cough which stirred his rigid body soon told her differently.

"Gracious!" Pegeen said. "He doesn't look as if he'll be able to stand. I had hoped the two of us could grab hold of him and pull him up, but–"

"Of course, he can't stand!" Maggie snapped. "He's sick and nearly frozen to death. We should never have waited so long to come! Give me a hand down."

"But–what are you going to DO?" Pegeen asked. "You can't get out of there by yourself, and I can't help you both. I'm simply not strong enough. The barracks is only a wall away. Oh, my dear, if they should catch you."

"I'll make them wish they hadn't," Maggie said grimly. Even a hollow threat bolstered her courage a little. Pegeen lay down on her stomach across the ice wall and Maggie eased herself down the Princess's outstretched legs to an easy drop into the chamber below.

Colin was as cold to her touch as the ice itself, but when she felt the points Granny had once showed her, through which a person's spirit passes closest to the skin, she could feel his, slow and weak, but present, and could hear his breath trying to force its way through his frozen nostrils.

"Throw me down your tinderbox and the torch!" Maggie called up to Pegeen. "I'll try to warm him while you fetch your map. Perhaps by the time you return, he'll be thawed enough so we can move him between us to the unicorn pen. Moonshine can cure his ailments and injuries, and carry him through the maze, if need be."

Pegeen nodded with nervous eagerness. "Perhaps I can bring something to help bring him up and some ashes from my fire to make the footing less risky."

The tinderbox and torch clattered as they hit the ice and rolled against Maggie's feet. She lit the torch, and scraped together fresh snow and hailstones into a mound, where she planted the light.

"I'll hurry," Pegeen promised, and then, with depressing speed, her voice and light were absorbed by the bitter night.

Maggie mourned her magic sorely when she saw how puny the warmth and faint flickering light of the torch were, and thought of the cozy blaze she had once been able to command at will. But there was no use crying over doused fires, she supposed. Anyone at Fort Iceworm knew other techniques for thawing frostbite victims, and she'd use those to warm Colin until he could walk or crawl to the unicorn pen, where they could melt ice with the torch and have Moonshine dip his horn in the water and cure their friend.

Whatever happened after that would just have to be faced when the time came.

Her hands and knees were almost as cold as Colin's, so it was with great difficulty that she passed Pegeen's cloak beneath his stiff body, at an angle that left the rest of the cloth free to pass around them both when she lay down beside him. Prying his hands away from his own flesh, she awkwardly wrestled them beneath her tunic, to nestle chillingly in each of her armpits, two of the warmest areas on a person's body, according to Granny. Then she had to prise his boots from his feet, no mean task in such a clumsy position, and one made possible only by the fact that his boots, like her own, were falling apart at the seams already and could be disassembled rather than pulled off whole. Once his feet were bare, she stuck them inside her skirt and clasped them between her thighs. Having begun warming his limbs, the parts most endangered by the cold, she wriggled upward slightly again, and drew his face down so that his nose and eyes could be warmed by her breath, thrusting her own numbed hands into his shirt at the top of his trousers, to warm between his belly and legs.

For what seemed eons, she felt and heard only the slow thump of his pulse and the pounding of her own. Gradually, the chill in his body blended with her warmth until he was no longer so cold as he had been, nor she so warm. Maybe she'd freeze to death with him, if Pegeen failed to return. Wouldn't that entertain the guards though, trying to pry apart the bonded bodies? If only the torch weren't so small and inadequate! She cuddled Colin closer, and he seemed much warmer.

So did she suddenly, and with her head shrouded by the cloak, she imagined she felt a warmth at her back as well as that coming from Colin, but soon she forgot about it, distracted by a trickle of cold wetness trailing down the hollow of her throat to seep between her breasts. Raising her head, she brushed her face against Colin's beard. It had thawed, and was dripping wet.

Encouraged, she snuggled closer. His face moved against her neck, burrowing into her shoulder and she felt his eyelashes flutter, tickling her collarbone. She shifted to make it easier for him, and with her free hand stroked the back of his neck to warm it, knowing that area for one particularly sensitive to cold.

"Mmm, Maggie?" He moved quite freely then, sliding his feet down until they rested between her knees, at the hem of the cloak.

She held him closer. "About time you woke," she murmured, and his hands shifted a bit, warm now, and obviously no longer unfeeling, as they cupped the sides of her breasts.

"Mmmm," he replied, burrowing his face lower, until his still-chilly nose rested in the cleavage created by her tunic's gaping neckline. The movement caused the hand she still armed against his skin to move too, until it found a very strong pulse indeed, which it gently investigated.

"Bloody uncomfortable position," he said hoarsely, and they rearranged themselves into one that was not only more comfortable but seemed to apply a great deal more warming pressure in a far more satisfying fashion to areas previously left vacant and drafty.

"Your ear," she complained softly, "feels like an icecube."

"Your breast," he replied, sighing, "feels wonderful. May I warm my nose just a bit more? It hurts now that the feeling's returning." His voice was weak yet, and trembling, and she still felt him shake with a slight cough now and then. In reply, she pressed his head more firmly against her bosom and kissed his dripping hair. She was no longer aware of the cold, and stroked the bristling hairs at his nape with her free hand until they lay down in submission to her touch.

"Ah," he said. "Your hands feel so good. But here, you're in the cold," and he shifted again so that now he lay on top of her, sheltering her from the night sky.

She thought it the wrong time to mention that not only was she not cold, she felt deliciously steamy.

"We aren't doing this properly, you know," he breathed into her ear.

"We're not?"

"No. I have it on the best authority that for maximum effectiveness, there should be no clothing between skin surfaces."

"Well then, if that's what the best authority says," she concurred, and together they managed to remedy the error.

"What are we waiting for?" he asked.

"Princess Pegeen. She's coming back with a–uhh, a map or something."

"I know the most wonderful way to pass the time."

Pegeen heard the pounding on her chamber door while she was still in the tunnel. Shedding her cloak and mittens behind the screen, she ducked around it and pushed it back in place before strolling to the door, and throwing the bolt. Feanchar poked his head in.

"Shhh," she said, putting a fingertip to her lips. "Your niece is sleeping."

"Excellent. Then you're quite free to lend me your assistance in my study. We must finish deciphering the exact formulas for concocting the unicorn medicines and charms before daybreak. My men will gain great confidence when they see, in this first battle, how my foresight in capturing the unicorns will protect them. Once they realize they cannot be permanently injured, my army will be invincible."

"You aren't going to sacrifice the beasts tonight?" Pegeen asked, trying to display less alarm than she felt.

"Not sacrifice, my dear. They are far too valuable to sacrifice. But we shall excise the parts we need from two of them, at least, as soon as we have the formulas transcribed. I trust you will not dawdle?"

"I'll be right along. Only let me fetch my cloak first. The halls are so drafty, particularly at night. I'll only be a moment."

"One of the guards will escort you. I'll await you in my study," and he stepped back from the door.

Pegeen bolted the door behind him, and rummaged in the oiled leather case that held her drawing things until she found the map. It was woefully incomplete, but that couldn't be helped. It was all they had now.

Slipping back into the tunnel, she retrieved her cloak and slid out onto the maze again, crawling forward until she was upwind of the chamber adjacent to the unicorn pen. Shaping her map into the form of a bird, she called upon a minor spell her father had taught her, one known to all performing magicians, of making birds, temporarily, of inanimate objects such as paper and handkerchiefs. With a flip of her wrist and a mumbled incantation she had learned as other children learned nursery songs, she sent the precious map sailing towards the cell containing Maggie and the minstrel. As soon as it left her hand, the map became a glowing pink dove, which flew straight to its target, and dropped, a map once more. Perhaps later in the night, when Feanchar was concentrating on his battle preparations, she'd be able to break away again and warn them, but for now the map was the best help she had to offer.

"We shouldn't have done that," Maggie said, when they had finished.

"I know," Colin replied. "Now you can't be Moonshine's maiden anymore, can y-y-ya-CHOO!"

"I don't mean that, silly. I mean we shouldn't have done that because it's made your cough worse. And you must have a fever. Feel how wet it is beneath us." Indeed, the cloak under her was soaked and Colin's face was crimson.

"Nonsense. I feel much better thanks to you and this great fire you've built. That's what's making everything so wet. It's melted a hole in the wall."

Maggie peeked out from the folds of the cloak. Flames roared to the top of the wall, an enormous fuelless bonfire blazing where the feeble torch had formerly burned. She got to her knees and began pulling her clothing on. Colin pulled his clothes on, too, except for his dismantled boots, which he regarded sadly until Maggie, with an almost automatic wink of her eye, stitched them instantly back together again. Her magic, like a freshly healed minor physical injury to a hand or foot, suddenly functioned again, as naturally as if it had never been impaired.

Colin smiled fondly at his boots as he tugged them on, then at Maggie, who doused the fire and already had one leg through the hole melted in the ice wall. "I see you've got it back again," he said, indicating the hole heralding the return of her powers. "I thank you for taking care of me, I mean."

She pulled her leg back out of the hole and returned to stand beside him, touching his shoulder. "I'm not sure who cured whom. It didn't come back until we–at any rate, stay close. Who knows what magic is apt to do? It may decide to desert us again and we'd need to take similar measures." She grinned at him and he rose, clasped her in his arms, and kissed her soundly, but briefly, before another fit of coughing disrupted their embrace.

"We'd better melt our way through to Moonshine right away," she said. "That cough is sounding worse all the time."

He was going to tell her that it didn't feel any better than it looked when his eye was caught by a strange, faintly glowing, shape against the ice wall. Stooping, he picked up a bit of parchment, folded into a triangular shape. The tip of it was wet. "Here now, what's this?" he asked, smoothing it against his thigh.

Maggie peered down at it. Three-quarters of one side was covered in glowing wiggling lines, through which a heavier, black line snaked from an arrow at the lower edge of the drawing, dribbling off into the unfinished and slightly soggy nothingness at the top.

"It's a map–this must be the map Pegeen went for," she said.

"Why would she send it this way? Do you think she may have come back while we were–you know–and was too courteous to interrupt?"

Maggie shook her head and headed back through the hole. "No. Something's happened, and she can't meet us after all. This must mean we're to take the map and go without her–Hurry."

On the other side of the hole was the chamber adjoining the castle's back doors. Maggie started her fire well back from the doors, sending flames shooting up the wall the chamber shared with the unicorn pen.

"We could have used the door," Colin said.

"This is quieter," she assured him. "Besides, I didn't think of it. And it won't take but a moment, anyway. Look at that fire!" He heard an artisan's pride in her voice as she watched her robust orange and blue flames eat ice.

"Your magic certainly returned with a vengeance," he agreed. "You'll have to watch building campfires in the woods with me around, or you might start forest fires!"

The unicorns were waiting for them with ready horns and rolling, terrified eyes when they broke through the second wall.

"Whoa!" Colin said, holding up his hands to fend off an attack. "It's only us!"

"We took you for an iceworm," Snowshadow explained.

"N-n-no," Colin answered, and sneezed, which started another round of coughing.

Maggie pointed to the pool of melted ice at their feet, and pleaded, "Moonshine, quickly, please, purify this water so he can drink it and get well. He's still very ill."

"Wait up, now," Eagledown said, edging forward, his nostrils flaring high, sniffing in Maggie's direction. "I thought you said she was a maiden, sonny. There's no odor of chastity here. If she's a maiden, then I'm a phalanope."

Moonshine paused with his horn in the puddle. "Of course, she's a mai–Maid Maggie?! What have you done?"

Maggie looked guiltily to Colin, who looked sheepishly back at her before both turned to Moonshine with a tandem shrug.

"Minstrel Colin, I TRUSTED you!" Moonshine wailed. "And look what you've done!"

"They seem to know very well what they've done," Primrose remarked, with a return to her old vinegar.

"Of course, they do," Snowshadow said. "And I, for one, think it's rather sweet. And exciting. I've never met lovers before. And just think, they actually seem to have retained the gift of unicorn understanding! How peculiar. And how grand!" She sidled up to Maggie, keeping herself between Maggie and Colin and the other unicorns. "Tell me, between you and me, was it very wonderful?"

"Er–Colin, if you'll drink some of that now, perhaps we'd best be on our way," Maggie suggested.

He knelt and cupped some of the water in his hands, lapped it up, and wiped his mouth. "In the dark?" he asked.

Before she could answer, they heard the sound of something heavy dragging across ice and a loud creaking, accompanied by voices and footsteps. Princess Pegeen's voice shrilled above the rest, protesting loudly, "But, Feanchar, I told you already that that translation is faulty! We mustn't rush this thing!"

"Rush is exactly what we must do, my dear," the wizard answered in a lower voice, which grew louder as the footsteps approached. "You needn't maintain your pretense any longer, Pegeen. I know very well how squeamish you are. You would delay me from using the beasts indefinitely, if possible. I have no more time to humor you."

Maggie climbed through the unicorn's bolt hole in the back of the cell and began melting another hole in the wall to the chamber adjoining theirs.

"You could at least wait until morning!" Pegeen was almost screaming now. Eagledown bolted through the hole after Maggie.

The bolt to the cell door swiped on its hooks and thunked to the ground.

"Now why should you want to wait until morning, my lady?" Sally Forth's voice asked with barely concealed contempt. Primrose, hearing her, paused halfway through the hole. With a none-too-gentle jab of his horn, Moonshine sent her sailing through the rest of the way.

"I only meant that the beasts might be difficult to control, that one of our men could be hurt or slain trying to subdue them in the darkness," Pegeen said.

First Snowshadow, then Moonshine, disappeared through the hole, and Colin followed them.

Maggie's fire had melted a hole half large enough for the unicorns in the next wall by now.

Feanchar sounded menacing as he said, "It strikes me, Pegeen, that yours is a very peculiar concern for a woman who has just spent half the night translating texts which readily testify that by use of one part or another of these beasts, any man slain by one of them could be revived."

"My prisoners are ample evidence of that," Sally Forth said. "If you truly have the welfare of the Cause at heart. Or have you other concerns, Princess?"

Maggie turned from a hole now melted to the proper size, and brushed past the unicorns to climb back into the pen from which they'd just escaped.

Colin snatched at her arm. "What are you doing?"

"We can't leave Pegeen behind," she said, just as the door to the cell opened and Pegeen was pushed forward, followed by Sally Forth, Feanchar, and several armed soldiers.

Maggie grabbed the Princess and thrust her through the opening to Colin, then leaped back through the hole herself and started a roaring blaze, spanning the width of the cell in front of the bolt hole.

"That should hold them," she said, rejoining the others, and smiling slightly at the screams and curses that followed her.

The segment of maze into which Maggie had melted an entrance was one of the main channels rather than another cul-de-sac like those nearer the rear of the castle. Eagledown reluctantly allowed Pegeen to mount him, and with Maggie on Moonshine and Colin on Snowshadow, they galloped into the heart of the maze.

CHAPTER 15

Wizard Raspberry paced the rocky prominence jutting from the mouth of the dragon's cave. He had to hop once in a while to avoid the anxious lashing of Grimley's tail. The rest of the dragon blocked the cave's entrance, where Grimley watched over his mate and their hatching egg.

For the last two days the dragon had moved from his current position only long enough to pick up the wizard, fly him to the river to catch more fish, which he disguised as deer meat, and return with him and the meat to the ledge. Grimley had been considerate enough to spare a fish or two for Raspberry from each trip, it was true, but the wizard chafed under even such hospitable captivity when he thought of the King's plight.

He grew tired of pacing and sat down against the rocky wall into which Grimley's cave bored. The sun was pleasant and warm for a change, the rain having stopped an hour or so before. A double rainbow streaked overhead, close enough to touch. Rock lichens softened the seat beneath him, a seat well out of the way of the lashing spiked tail of his host.

In the face of so much pleasantness, he found it increasingly difficult to concern himself with the King. After all, the man was a warrior, the veteran of many battles; surely he'd think of something to do to help himself. And one could hardly blame the dragon Grimley for retiring from the Royal Air Force so abruptly. He had his family to look after, and for whatever reason, the cattle Rowan had promised the scaly pair as payment for their services had disappeared. Dragons weren't exactly known for their selfless sense of patriotism.

Finally, the wizard fell asleep reflecting that if one had to be the involuntary guest of dragons, it was fortunate to be captured by beasts whose cave had such a nice southern exposure.

He was shaken awake by the earth rumbling beneath him, and by thunderous roars. A singed smell invaded his nostrils, and he sat up, rubbing his eyes. In mid-air, just beyond the ledge, above a scenic ragged purple plunge into oblivion hundreds of leagues below, Dragon Grimley flew cartwheels, wing-springs, and aerial acrobatics of amazing agility and variety. Both the roaring and the singed smell emanated from the excited dragon, who bellowed at the top of his lungs while belching forth a furnace full of flame, charring anything in the direction in which the dragon's snout happened to be [illegible]

"AAAAROOOGAH! AAAROOGAH!" the dragon cheered.

Raspberry tiptoed to the cave's entrance, keeping close to the wall to avoid being broiled by Grimley.

Gristel sat in the midst of a lot of broken eggshell, her blue and green tail curled around a small gold and green miniature of herself. She was brushing the little dragon's scales with her tongue, and looking exceptionally pleased with herself.

A breath of foul hot air at his back and a sudden thud, and Raspberry looked up to see Grimley, who had landed on the ledge behind him.

"It's a girl," the dragon told him, and reached into the cave, extracting something glittering, which he pressed into the wizard's hands with his great clawed foot. "Here, have a diamond. Have two. I'm a father! Isn't she beautiful? Going to be as pretty as 'er mother, I'll wager. Hot dog!"

But before Raspberry could compliment the dragons on their new offspring, the ledge was suddenly invaded by a large party of people who abruptly materialized out of thin air. They carried with them the fragrance of spirits, but not the kind that walked through walls. Several of them still held flagons clenched in their fists. Among them, amazingly, was his own pointy-eared child.

"Hello, father," she said. "We've come to help."

"Oh, Grimley! How thoughtful!" Gristel cried from within the cave. "Your meat-bringer's brought us a baby present! How did he know it would be just the thing? Our poor little Grippeldice is famished!"

All through the night the unicorns galloped, bearing their riders and themselves higher and deeper into the maze. Though they stumbled and slid and sometimes fell on the steep, glassy surface of the maze floor, they pressed on, driven by fear of pursuit, struggling against the keening wind. Pegeen's aura was their beacon, but the black cracks in the glittering crystal had a way of not appearing until Eagledown was almost upon them.

By first light they were still deep inside the maze, in front of the mouth of a tunnel. Colin twisted on Snowshadow's back and listened carefully. Several times during the night he'd heard the shouts of men, and once had seen torchlight far back down the maze. But now, except for the banshee wind, he heard nothing.

"Seems we've lost them," he yawned, stretching. Though the unicorn water had cleansed even the stiffness of being frozen in one position from his body along with his illness, and he felt better than he could ever remember having felt, physically, he was nevertheless weary from lack of sleep, and sore again from riding bareback all night long. Maggie arched her back and pointed her toes and stretched, too. Pegeen dismounted and walked over to inspect the tunnel.

"Very little wonder I could never get a clear picture of the maze from the castle," she said, returning to them after satisfying her curiosity. "If I had a brain in my head, I would have realized that an iceworm boring through a glacier isn't going to make the same sort of maze a rich lord has his gardener plot to amuse the houseguests. We must be now in a part of the glacier where the ice is so thick the worm couldn't melt all of that on top. See? He's simply drilled through it."

"I hope he didn't go underground instead of backup," Maggie said. "I could probably melt our way out, but it would take time."

"No. There's light at the other end," Pegeen assured her. "That's what I wanted to check. But I think we should walk through. Carefully. The worm's breath and the pressure of his passing seem to have fused most of the glacier's natural fissures, but perhaps we won't find it so inside the tunnel. I'll take it slowly."

They passed through three more of the tunnels without mishap. Fortunately, the darker it got inside, the brighter the princess's aura grew. By the time they had negotiated the last tunnel, morning had broken.

A short, steep climb led them above the tunnels, to a high plateau whose rock was so thinly coated with ice that the maze walls were less than thigh-high in places, allowing the fugitives to gaze out over acres of channeled ice.

On all sides of the plateau, deeper ice contained high walls and tunnels similar to those through which they had just passed. Far down to the right, the castle fused with the glacier. The unusual angle of their vantage point to the valley allowed them also to see the ruined village, teeming with the active black spots which were Feanchar's troops. The Blabbermouth River still wore its morning cloak of mist so heavily upon its surface that it masked the water completely.

"Under other circumstances, I'd enjoy a day like this," Pegeen told them. "It's not often so clear in the valley. It's amazing the detail one can see." She shaded her eyes with her hand as she looked across the ice and into the valley. "Why, most days you can't even see where the river is, much less–oh, dear." She pointed. "Look, there to the south. Do you see them?"

Colin and Maggie shaded their eyes and squinted in the direction of her finger. A double handful of specks probably twenty furlongs from the river moved slowly toward its banks. At the head of the specks was a speck twice as large as the others, and from the top of it the sun glinted molten copper.

"Your royal brother-in-law has arrived," Colin told Maggie.

She nodded slowly. Pegeen's face bore a stricken, guilty look.

"This is all my fault," she said. "I meant to help. I never intended to lure him into a trap. But you see, when I coded that message telling him where we were, I simply meant to let him know what he might do to lift Feanchar's wretched curse from that poor little baby. Now all of those good men will be slain!"

"And we won't be able to do anything but watch," Colin said bitterly.

Primrose looked down her long muzzle at the scene in the valley. "Yes, your friends will surely perish. For my mai–Sally is very brave. She cannot but triumph."

Eagledown snorted. "I thought you'd caught on, but I guess you're a little slow, aren't you, nag? Your precious Sally isn't down there. She's up here prowling this worm-eaten glacier, looking for us with a big flaying knife."

Primrose stared at him for a moment, her watery gray eyes watering even more, then wheeled and galloped down the far side of the plateau and out of sight into a tunnel.

"Wait!" Snowshadow called after her. "Wait! We must all stay together!"

"Let the bird-brain go," Eagledown said. "She'll just be in our way anyhow, the silly, flighty creature."

"I wouldn't mind being flighty right now," Colin said. "Remember, Maggie, when your Granny changed me into a mockingbird and sicced Ching on me? I thought I'd never want to see another bird."

Maggie's eyes were still glued to Rowan's party, moving slowly but surely towards death. "I remember," she said absently.

"What I wouldn't give if she could make me fly again right now!" he mused. "I could warn Rowan, and when the deed was sung of later, he would say 'and then a little bird told me . . .' "

Maggie whirled to face him, light dawning in her eyes. "Say that again."

"I merely said that he would say 'and then a little bird told me' when--"

"No. I mean the part about flying. Never mind. You brilliant man! You've given me an idea and-yes, I think we have all we need to do it."

"I did? We do? Well, always happy to be of service." Then he stopped beaming and scratched his head, puzzled. "What?"

"We can fly to warn the King," she told them. "Remember Wizard Raspberry's little toys?"

"The 'belows' you mean?" Colin asked. "Or were they called 'bellows'? Perhaps it was 'ballasts.' "

"Surely you don't mean he's still working on those balloon things," Pegeen laughed. "Why, he was trying to make those work while he was still an agent in my father's court. I don't see how those can help us, Maggie. Even if you could build one in time, you'd never be able to get it to land in the right place with a message, unless, of course, you control wind as well as fire."

"I don't. Not from such a great distance, anyway, but I can sometimes do a thing or two with air currents if I can stretch my magic by making it simulate doing certain household chores. I had in mind something different." She pulled the silk gown out of her pocket, where she'd stuck it when she disguised herself as an Everclear peasant before joining Sally Forth's band at the foot of the glacier. From her medicine pouch, she took her bone needle, sewing shears, and pocket spindle. "Now then." She closed her eyes and concentrated, seeing in her mind enlarged versions of the shapes she had cut for the wizard from silk handkerchiefs.

Pegeen nodded with the appreciation of a fellow craftswoman as Maggie's shears cut balloon pieces from the dress skirt, raveled the bodice for silk thread, and turned the operation over to the spindle, which spun the thread out long and fine. The thread snaked through the slim eye of the bone needle, which whipped together the pieces of balloon in less time than it would have taken Pegeen to sew ten stitches. The unicorns shied away from the snapping shears and flying needle, and jumped over the low wall to the next path over, where they watched with rolling eyes.

Colin simply sat atop the ice wall and tootled softly on his flute. He was getting used to this sort of thing.

"Now then," Maggie said, when the completed sack lay at her feet. "There's not a moment to lose. Colin, Primrose, please help me find any straw still sticking to the unicorns' coats."

"Not another basket, surely?" Colin asked, looking up and tucking his flute back into his pocket at the same time.

"Absolutely another basket. I'll need something to ride in if I'm to fly down and warn Rowan, won't I?"

"You're going to fly down? In this? Don't be ridiculous. It won't even work. It has to be-you know," he cupped his hands in semi-circles, "rounder, or something, doesn't it?" But he nevertheless jumped the wall and began brushing Snowshadow's coat free of straw from the pen.

The Princess did likewise to Eagledown and Moonshine. "Naturally, it will need inflation," she told Colin, "But there is quite a lot of wind up here."

"Don't look at me when you say that," he laughed. "I may be able to sing an eighty-verse chantey without stopping, but I'm not windy enough to blow up that thing!"

"No, but if we stretch it across the mouth of a tunnel, you see?"

"Good idea, Princess," Maggie said. "I hadn't thought of using the tunnels."

They gathered the pieces of straw into a pile, and Maggie sat down beside it and began pulling the short pieces until they lengthened, stretching into long fibers that, with minimal assistance from her, began twining themselves around each other, writhing like a nest of snakes. "There, that should do it," she said, when the basket had grown as high as her head. Abruptly, the straws tucked themselves into their last completed row and were quiet. Maggie stood, dusting her hands off on her skirt. "To the tunnel!" she said.

It took all three of them to control the bag when the wind gusted through the tunnel and filled it with cold air. They had less problem holding onto the bag than they did keeping the air inside while they closed the sack and Maggie tied it shut.

Finally, they had managed to haul the half-filled balloon back up to the plateau when Primrose galloped, wild-eyed and dripping foam, up from the path she had taken into the maze a short time before.

"Flee!" she cried. "Flee at once or be steamed alive as I nearly was! The worm has turned!" She would have slid back down the other path except that Colin and the princess caught her, and calmed her until she'd stopped her terrified rearing.

"You mean the worm is awake?" Pegeen asked. "But he's never been awake."

"Maybe all the recent activity has disturbed him," Colin suggested. "And us coming into the glacier. Worms aren't supposed to be overly bright, but they are guardians, of a sort."

"Stop talking and FLEE!" the lathered unicorn advised shrilly.

"Where?" Pegeen demanded. "We could get trapped into one of the deep channels, or a tunnel, and have the thing on top of us. Here, it's shallow and we can side-step the monster if need be. It seems to me we're in the safest possible place for dealing with ice worms right where we are."

Maggie looked down at the half-inflated balloon and down across the glacier again, to where the specks were stopped now, close to the banks of the river. "We'll never be able to warn Rowan now."

"We certainly won't be able to if we're steamed alive," Pegeen told her.

"Steamed?" Maggie asked. "Don't you mean burned?"

"You're thinking of dragons, dear. Iceworms steam. That's how these passages were created."

"It was dreadful!" cried Primrose. "Billows and billows of hot putrid stuff boiling out at me through that tunnel! I ran as I have never ran before, and when I looked back down, I saw it! It was longer than ten of the tallest cedars lashed together, and it was covered all over with nasty blue fur."

"Not scales?" Pegeen asked.

"No. No, fur! And-and it RIPPLED, and slid behind all that steam and oh, it was disgusting!"

"Steam, hum?" Maggie said.

"And ripples," shivered Primrose. "Great, nasty, undulating ones."

"How much steam?"

"Quite enough for me, thank you. It must have gone on twice the length of the worm, at least. Horrible! And it hissed!"

"Hissed, you say?" Colin asked. "Like that, maybe?"

A low, leaking sound filled the air, accompanied by a sibilant slithering and thumping noise.

"Over the wall!" Pegeen cried.

"No. Help me." Maggie wrestled the silk sack to the farthest edge of the plateau, across the path Primrose had used to escape the worm. "We can use the worm's steam to inflate the balloon, don't you see? Then all we have to do is pull it out of the worm's way, step over the wall, and while the worm slides merrily on his way, we attach the basket and I fly down to warn Rowan!"

Colin didn't think much of the idea. He didn't like the thought of the worm being awake with them on its glacier, and felt that if only he could sing an appropriate lullabye loud enough, he'd be able to lull the thing back to sleep. But since he was less loathe to leave a little advance steam to fill Maggie's balloon than he was to getting himself steamed while trying to serenade the worm back into slumber, he kept quiet.

Unfortunately, others on the glacier did not. As the First breath of steam shot up from the tunnel to the left of their plateau, they heard, along with the clumping, slithering sound of the worm's

approach, clanging swords and cursing and Sally Forth's voice, ringing high and girlish, crying, "Onward, men!"

But by then the balloon was filling with rushing steam, blossoming like some mushroom-shaped flower, and it took all of their strength to hold it while Maggie tied the precious steam inside. They had a hot, uncomfortable time of it, dragging the balloon out of the way before the steam could totally engulf them.

No sooner had they boosted the balloon over the wall than the beast was upon them. Maggie looked up from tying the basket to the balloon just in time to see the monster pour into view behind its steamy veil. The sight of it so unnerved her that she forgot balloon, King, bandits, and all, hypnotized by the slither and slump of a column of blue fur long enough to fill the great hall at Fort Iceworm twice over.

Pegeen couldn't stand to look at the beast. It was too fearsome. She averted her eyes just in time to see their last hope rise, bobbling in the air just above the unicorns' backs.

She leaped, and landed on the basket's rim, head, chest, arms and shoulders inside the basket, legs and feet flailing the sky as the balloon rose, drifting gently above the worm, above the maze, and beyond, to glide above the soon-to-be-embattled valley.

Difficult as it was to think rationally with one's head in a basket and one's bottom keeping company with the clouds, Pegeen endeavored to do so. It wouldn't do to panic, or even to scream. The others couldn't help her even if they could hear her, which she doubted. But if she wasn't screaming, someone certainly was. Awful cries of agony screeched up to her from somewhere near the point of her unanticipated launching. She hoped it wasn't her friends screaming, but she really had quite enough problems of her own to worry about just then, without troubling herself with theirs.

Like how to have her rear half join the front INside the basket. By the time she accomplished that, calling on gymnastic skill she would have sworn she did not possess, she was unfit for any activity more strenuous than panting in the bottom of the basket.

As she began to recover, her eye was caught by the fluttering of the little thread holding the balloon together at its bottom. It seemed perilously slender for something so vital to keeping her aloft. And though staying aloft was definitely preferable to crashing into the valley, it would have been nice if Maggie had been thoughtful enough to explain how one was supposed to get this

cursed thing DOWN, slowly, and in an orderly fashion that would permit one to place oneself somewhere in close proximity to Roan Rowan so that one might warn him. That was supposed to be the purpose of all of this strenuous exercise, after all.

A gruesome thought occurred to her. Perhaps, since Maggie had meant to fly the balloon herself, the control of the thing was intricately bound up with the hearth witch's magic powers. She brushed the thought resolutely from her mind. After all, Maggie was not the only one with talent. Hadn't Pegeen's people always said of her, during her father's reign, that Pegeen the Illuminator could put a silver lining in any cloud? She ought to have a go at these clouds, if that were true, she thought. As she was in a very good position to see, all of them had distinctly dismal GRAY linings. She was practically close enough now to count the raindrops in them.

But surely she wasn't THAT high. Clouds tended to hang low over the valley, as a rule. Oh, don't be such a coward, she told herself. You can at least have a peek to get your bearings.

Raising herself to her knees, she gazed down across the vast expanses of empty gray air to a rapidly flattening field with a tiny town on one side of it and a thin gray yarn, the fog-shrouded Blabbermouth, running through it.

She sank quickly to the bottom of the basket, shaking. Curiosity was no great virtue either, she decided.

She regretted looking down, regretted catching the balloon, regretted sending the message to Rowan, and bitterly regretted ever setting eyes on Fearchar Brown. But she most regretted neglecting to bring along another torch and tinderbox. She would give absolutely anything for a smoke.

"Oh, no!"

Colin tore himself away from the sight of the worm's retreating tail to see what had prompted Maggie's cry.

She pointed. Far beyond the glacier, out over the edge of the valley, their balloon wafted through the clouds. "The princess took it," Maggie said. "I would never have thought her to betray us."

Colin patted her shoulder and watched helplessly as their last hope floated nonchalantly away. All of their time and effort was wasted. The bandits would be upon Rowan before he knew it, while Colin and Maggie were stuck up here on the glacier with the unicorns. It wasn't even much good thinking about escaping. What would Argonia be like under Fearchar's rule? Colin was

too discouraged to think about that, so instead he helped Maggie to her feet. "Come along, now. We'd best get moving. I heard Sally's men just before the worm--"

Screams began filling the air, masculine screams, high-pitched, terrified, gurgling, dying screams. Sizzling screams.

Eagledown chuckled. "Sounds like all the worms just got together."

"Oh, those poor men!" Snowshadow said quietly.

"Maiden!" Primrose sobbed.

"Don't waste any sympathy on her," Maggie snapped. "She's probably turned into another whirlwind and blown clean away before the thing touched her. I only wish we could do the same."

"Why can't we?" Colin asked, with sudden inspiration. "The worm doesn't steam from its back end, does it? And it's blind, you know. I noticed that as it passed. It won't be able to see us, and it's too ungainly to double back on itself. It seems to me all we have to do is follow it back down to the castle, and let it take care of Fearchar's henchmen for us."

"Not bad thinking for a mortal!" Eagledown applauded.

"Yes," Primrose said, leaping onto the ice. "I'll see for myself if Sally got awaaaaayyyy--" and slid spindle-legged down the worm's path, newly slicked with fresh-melted ice. Her frightened neighing echoed back to them as she shot through the first tunnel, and out of sight.

Colin had lunged for the terrified unicorn as she slid past him, and tried to grab her. But no sooner had he set foot over the wall than he, too, slipped and slid swooshing down the tunnel.

"Now what?" Maggie asked, blinking rapidly, baffled by the speed with which Colin had followed his own suggestion.

Moonshine touched a hoof to the path, and retracted it again. "Tis too slick for the likes of us, friend Maggie. We cannot follow."

"Nonsense!" said Eagledown. "Looks like fun to me!" He stepped out onto the path too, but was perhaps unwittingly more cautious than Colin or the mare had been, having seen their fate. He neither slipped nor fell. "Huh," he said, and looked down the long slope where the others had traveled before him. "Maybe- maybe if I laid on my side, and you gave me a little push, I wouldn't be so likely to break a leg," he suggested to Maggie.

"What about the cracks in the ice?" Moonshine asked. "We could fall in."

"True," Maggie said, "But we'll just have to hope the iceworm

melted them all back together again. Besides, by the time we get past the first tunnel, we should be traveling so fast we'll fly right over the cracks. It's either that or stay up here."

"Aw, quit dallying around and push, will you?" Eagledown said, lying down on his side and tucking his legs under him. Maggie pushed and he shot down into the tunnel.

The other two unicorns followed him, with varying degrees of reluctance, and by the time she had shoved them, she was grateful she wouldn't have to walk down. She was far too tired.

She took three skating-running steps and dove onto the ice, head first. But just before she did, she looked up again. She could no longer see the balloon.

Roan Rowan was an old infantryman of long standing, and he never tired of marching, or of skiing through snowfields beside gypsy sleighs, for that matter. That was the sort of thing a good soldier took in his stride, and Rowan was King by virtue of being the best soldier in Argonia.

So when he saw the vision, he put it down not to weariness, but rather to some residue of ill effect that perhaps lingered from his near-drowning.

Otherwise, he thought it damned unfair that a man should be seeing a thing like that when he hadn't had a good stout drink in weeks.

Whatever its origin, the vision did not go away, but continued hovering before him, just within the mist covering the river.

His men were finishing their morning meal. He'd finished his quickly, having little stomach for it. His usual voracious appetite was spoiled by an uneasy feeling gnawing at his vitals. Part of it was simply due to the mist. He liked to see where he was going. He'd wait for it to clear before he took his men anywhere. They were getting too near their goal to go blundering about blindly. He'd been pacing the bank, listening to the river prattle to itself, hoping it might drop a clue as to what lay beyond it, when the vision descended.

Cyril Peckingbird approached the river, and Rowan stretched out a hamlike hand and collared the man, pointing before him at what he thought he saw through the drifting mist. The river was no match for Rowan's booming voice, even discreetly lowered as it was, in case enemy ears were listening.

"There now, Peckingbird, what's that look to you to be, just there, beyond yon fog?"

Sir Cyril looked, and stood on tiptoe to shout up to his lord's ear. " 'Tis a lady, Sire. Wouldn't you say so?"

"I would that, Peckingbird. I would indeed, if you could just tell me which lady, and why a lady who so resembles Her Highness the Princess Pegeen the Illuminator at that, and what she is doing floating about up there, making me think I've had one too many."

"Well, Sire," Peckingbird said, shouting his reply through cupped hands, "I've never met the lady face to face. But since we're near the castle in her chart, and since the lady resembles her so closely, as you say, I wonder if we might consider the possibility that the lady might BE the Princess Pegeen?"

"Nonsense!" the King bellowed, casting discretion momentarily to the wind. "What would Milady Pegeen be doing riding round in a flower basket blowing that great silly bubble from her mouth?"

The basket chose that moment to set itself and its cargo softly down on the riverbank. The lady turned toward them startled eyes and cheeks puffed out like a chipmunk's. Then, slowly, her cheeks deflated and steam curled exuberantly from her nostrils. Her expression was normal and even serene by the time the steam cleared, and slowly, the bubble to which she'd been orally connected collapsed into a mantle which settled on her shoulders like a garment of state.

Holding forth her hand for their assistance, she smiled a smile that was both regal and proud. Now Rowan was quite certain she was indeed the Princess Pegeen, and he strode forward to assist her, lifting her from the basket as easily as if she was a child.

Smoothing her tattered skirts with great aplomb, she looked from one of them to the other. "I never again wish to hear anyone say that smoking is a nasty, useless habit," she told them.

"Yes, m'lady," Sir Cyril replied, kneeling.

By then, Pegeen was kneeling before Rowan. "My Liege. I am Pegeen Ashburn of the royal house of Finbar, called the Fireproof, and I have come to warn you that you are in immediate and deadly peril."

Before she had finished speaking, a fresh wind blew the mist from the river.

Colin shot down the glacial slide, ricocheting off the high maze walls like a confused arrow. Sunlight flashed in his eyes, blinding him one moment and vanishing the next as he rocketed into a tunnel. His teeth rattled loose in his head, the seat of his pants burned, and everything else was numb with cold. Once he closed his eyes and slammed head-first into a wall; after that he kept his eyes open and his hands out to shove away from such obstacles.

The sight of the steamrollered bandits would have no doubt made him ill had he been able to stick around long enough to indulge his sensitivities. Fortunately the bandits' bodies, like all other landmarks save the brilliant spots flashing before his eyes as the sun hit the ice, blurred past him too quickly for him to see them clearly.

But suddenly he was looking straight down the chute and ahead to the humping blue behind of the great worm, and over the worm into the cliff castle, directly in the monster's path. Surely the worm wouldn't risk invading the castle, would it? It was a dumb, blind thing, true, but it had avoided the place when it made the maze, after all. Or had it? Had the castle been built before or after the maze? No matter. The question was rhetorical now. Steam geysered into the air high enough to obscure the sun as the worm slump-slithered through the castle's back wall.

The worm's tail jumped out to meet Colin. He threw his arm up over his face as he plunged into it. Then he uncovered his eyes again. He hadn't dared hope for such a soft landing.

Primrose was there, coasting along in the worm's wake. The two of them and the tail were yet well outside the castle, but they slid quickly forward with each giant hump of the worm's body. Within moments the worm would have penetrated the castle, and would then plunge out the front and down the cliff and they would plummet behind him. Primrose seemed unaware of their predicament. Her pupils had disappeared into quivering whites, her mouth foamed and her body shook with more than the great worm's movement. While Colin thought he might manage to stop himself by grasping some stationary object in the castle and clinging to it, Prim

From behind him came a high, frightened whinny, and looking up, he saw the other three unicorns, tail over horn, spinning down the maze. Collision seemed imminent.

He climbed the worm's tail as if it were a staircase and clung, clutching handsful of fur. He had barely cleared the ice before Moonshine, Eagledown, and Snowshadow thumped into the worm. Wonderful! Now he had four unicorns to worry about, besides his own hide.

When the worm humped again Colin did too, and dragged himself along the creature's back hand-over-hand, twining his fingers in the pale blue fur. He crawled very fast and prayed the worm wasn't deaf as well as blind. Since it had seemingly responded to the disturbance on its glacier, it at least must be sensitive to vibrations, if not sounds.

Ah well. No time like the present to find out, he supposed. He crawled up the worm's middle, most of which occupied the throne room and barracks, shifting his weight with the humping and straightening until he reached the head. Steam rose hot and acrid in front of him, and dissipated into the empty air. Less than a cartlength away from the monster's head, the castle's outer ledge puddled and ran down the cliff, cascading into the valley below.

Colin pressed the magic flute to his lips and prayed for a worm lullabye.

A long, thin ululation warbled from the flute. The worm reared its head and Colin felt a rise at his feet as the beast began to hump its middle up for the last forward push, the one that would plunge them all into the valley. Then the blind befurred snout began to weave back and forth, swaying to the eerie melody. The steam dribbled to nothing and the long body relaxed, and stayed that way.

"Some people will go to any lengths to get an audience," Maggie said in a shaking voice. She waded toward him from behind, sinking knee-deep in worm fur with each step. The beast dozed heedlessly on, apparently good for another half century or so of napping.

Colin grabbed her up and held her until he'd stopped shaking.

By then it was time for them both to start all over again. Maggie gripped his arm and turned him to face the valley. "Look," she whispered.

Though the streets of the village appeared as empty as the ruined buildings suggested they would be, their gutted interiors swarmed with armed men. The nymph was there too, concealed within the old inn, the were Wulfric braced and bristling beside her. From where they stood, she looked none the worse for wear. She poised her silver hunting horn near her mouth, and her body leaned toward the river. It glittered and gossiped along, no longer bearing any taint of mist, oblivious to the ragged party fording it, led by a red-haired giant and a woman whose hair was of a faintly dimmer hue. The woman's arm swung to gesture to each of the buildings,

"Pegeen's warned him!" Maggie said, almost cheering. "But why don't they stop?"

As if in answer, Rowan's voice rang out across the valley, drowning out the river and all other sounds, so commanding and thunderous that Colin was concerned lest the worm waken again. " 'Tis no use hidin' like wee little weasles!" the King bellowed. "I know ye're back there, and I know what manner of churls ye be, and I tell you straight out, I can slay the lot of you. But I've no quarrel with you men, whoever you are, if you'll come forth and pledge me fealty here and now. My quarrel is with the black-hearted villain who's laid a curse on my wee daughter. Send him out now and 't will go the gentler with you."

His answer was a blast from Sally's horn and a volley of arrows from the rooftops. Pegeen fell at once. So did three of Rowan's men. "Bastards!" Colin said, his voice thickened. He cast about for a way off the cliff and found it almost immediately. The revolutionaries had left their rope ladder looped over its iron moorings on the ledge; fortunately, on the part of the ledge unmelted by the worm. He reached for the ladder, but Maggie pulled him back.

"Wait. What about the unicorns? They'll never get down alone and they could help us--"

"Afterwards, Maggie. Only afterwards. They're no match for that army of Sally's, and she'd love to recapture them. Stay here with them. If we fail, don't let them fall into Fearchar's hands again."

Before she could protest, he swung out and down onto the ladder. By the time she'd collected her wits and started to follow, he was at the foot of the cliff where, with a guilty, defiant look up at her, he jerked the ladder up and out, snatching it from its hooks. It fell beside him, and he turned and sprinted into the village.

"Blast him!" she swore, furious at his underhanded, over-protective gesture. "Show a man a little affection and he gets uppity every time!"

She walked tiredly back down to the worm's tail, where the unicorns were waiting, and slid down the furry back to join them. Primrose seemed somewhat quieter than she had been and the others looked at her expectantly.

"Don't blame me!" she snapped. "Everything's falling apart

down there and that blundering bard has stranded us here. Any ideas?" Eagledown blew and stamped for a moment before saying, "The truth is, witch, we unicorns could use a break from all the hubbub you people are causing around here."

"You WHAT?" she asked.

Moonshine stepped forward, but kept his eyes lowered as he said, "We have decided we have the need for a brief council among ourselves, and would request that you grant us a moment of privacy."

"A brief moment only," Snowshadow pleaded gently. "There are matters we must decide among us."

Maggie stared at them with injured incredulity, then shrugged as if their rejection of her didn't hurt, and walked off, saying, "I can use the time to look for a weapon, I suppose. Or another way out of here. Never let it be said that Maggie Brown stays where she's not wanted."

Sally Forth, and she alone, had kept her men to the task at hand. Not even the great worm had kept her from this battle, though it had slain the valiant comrades who accompanied her into the maze. In her whirlwind, she had escaped. And now, by sheer force of will, she had bent her men's minds from the worm's attack on their stronghold, directing them with all her skillful charms to watch the mist, and wait, and never mind the slither and slump and steam above.

She was unsurprised when the monster stopped and did not venture into the valley. Ice monsters stayed on ice and if they strayed from ice, they died. Surely even the dumb brute who had slain her men knew as much. And then too, right was on her side, and justice, and the good will of the Dark Pilgrim, who looked to her to win this, the definitive battle in support of their great Cause. She would not let him down, even if she had to fight this battle single-handedly.

At her side, Wulfric growled and whined, anxious for blood. She wished almost that he was in man form, to consult with her, but she had not seen him in that guise since they arrived at the castle and, indeed, his fighting skill and ferocity were greater in his present form.

But he was no more ferocious than she. She was patient as a spinning spider when the unsuspecting giant strode arrogantly into her web, but the moment he stopped, she had blown her signal,

and had loosed her first arrow into the breast of the Pilgrim's traitorous woman, the elitist "Princess," Pegeen.

With the woman many others had fallen, and the sniper could not spare many. As her men nocked more arrows and retrieved spears fallen short of their mark, the enemy collected their dead and wounded and retreated to the cover of the house containing the half-dead servants from the village near the stream she'd once guarded.

Her men were ready now, and the enemy would not withstand them again. Stepping into the street, she showed herself, and putting her horn to lip, blew the charge. Then, with a wave of her arm, she led her men to battle.

Maggie seethed and stormed through the castle's rooms, wishing she could lay hands on her uncle, or Sally Forth, or even Colin, to let them know the danger of crossing a witch. She felt like destroying everything she passed, but the castle was sparsely furnished, and if she was truly trapped up here she might have need of the bedding and clothing and food remaining within the castle. No weapons were left behind, nor armor of any kind.

She slammed the door of the storage room. Empty. The slamming reverberated through the wall, and it must have been the strange acoustics in the cavernous corridor which made the sound seem to repeat itself with equal force at the end of the passage.

Or did that other door really still vibrate with the force of its closing, as it seemed to her when she approached it?

She paused for a moment, listening again, but heard only the splatter of water dropping from the ceiling. Cautiously, she opened the door, and smiled. Here at last was something useless she could tear apart without a twinge of conscience. Lining the walls and long tables were the paraphernalia of her uncle's largely bogus magic practice: animal skeletons, scrolls, tomes, flasks and beakers, lamps and crucibles and jars of this and that. All the makings of a good bonfire.

But as she looked around the room, she noticed that the water dripping from above didn't pool on the floor, but ran off somewhere in the middle. Investigating, she saw the rucked-back rug, and the outline of the trap door beneath it.

She pushed the rug aside and pulled the door up by the iron ring set into it. Under it was a stone staircase, broad enough for two people abreast and surprisingly dry for being in such a drippy location.

She whooped with joy and hurried back to the unicorns. Here was a way to get them all off the cliff.

"But the point is, we don't think we ought to get involved in men's battles," Snowshadow told her. "It's bad enough when you people hurt each other, much less involving unicorns. Our power is a healing one." -

"Hold on there, filly, and let this witch tell us again where the staircase is," Eagledown interrupted. "I don't know about this healing business, though I'm as quick to dip my horn in a puddle to protect the local wildlife as any 'corn. But what I'm anxious to dip it in NOW is the scum who've caused me to break it off. If people think we 'corns are a lot of silly fools, they aren't going to let us live long enough to heal anything. I say, spit the lot of 'em!"

"But the Creed!" Snowshadow protested. "That IS the Creed, you ignorant filly," Eagledown said, and repeated his stanza about making men bleed.

"And I say why horn in where we aren't concerned?" Primrose said. "At least when the horrid two-legged monsters are bashing each other, they aren't deceiving, imprisoning and mutilating us."

"I didn't deceive any of you, and it just may interest you to know that Princess Pegeen has intercepted an arrow in your behalf," Maggie said hotly. "That's right. She died trying to help you. And I'm trying to help you too if you'll only stop bickering long enough to pay attention. As long as you remain up here you'd damn well better care who wins down below- you could end up stewing in the same broth we just got you out of."

"For my fodder, we'd be best off letting you destroy each other," Primrose snorted back. "But very well, I'll come. The forest beasts can only make do so long without a noble unicorn to minister to their wounds and purify their water."

"But we must NOT slay, save in defense of our lives," Snowshadow insisted. "Is that not true, Moonshine?"

He shook his mane impatiently. "I must see for myself what betides my friends, and whether by horning or healing I will do what I'm able to aid them, for if it be unanicornly or no, I love them well."

"I'm glad to see someone has kept his senses around here," Maggie said, lighting a torch with a snap of her fingers. "This is a fine time, if you ask me, for the lot of you to turn balky. Come along."

She led them down the staircase slowly, for the steps were worn and in places heavily coated with ice.

"I'd sooner have walked down the glacier!" Primrose complained.

"I only wish you'd walk on your own feet instead of mine," Maggie retorted.

"Watch that torch, witch, or you'll blind me!" Eagledown commanded.

The battle centered on one small building, farthest of all the village dwellings from the castle and closest to the river. From the doorway, Rowan and his men defended themselves. The building was ringed ten deep in bandits. Arrows and spears rained against it, for the most part futilely. Ankle-deep mud mired the attackers, and the pungent smell of carnage and sweat seethed through the sunlit morning.

Rowan chopped his way through his attackers with the everyday ease of a woodcutter plying his trade. He was the only one of his band visible above the heads of Fearchar's pack, and for a moment she feared he stood alone. But now and then, when his attention and the solid wooden cartwheel he used for a shield were turned to the left or to the right, he would suddenly grow another set of arms on his blind side.

Still, he essentially defended the place by himself.

Maggie made her way toward the battle, keeping close to the houses and out of the way of the rooftop archers, looking in all directions before she dared to dart from one sanctuary to another.

Not that she had the faintest idea what she was going to do once she got there. Get herself killed by the King's enemies, or entrapped as his allies were? Neither situation held much promise.

Then she saw the wolf.

He crouched on the roof top, a little behind Rowan's head. The King was taller than the doorway he defended, and while he had friends at his back, none guarded his head.

Maggie ran forward, shouting her spell so that as soon as she was within range, it would take effect. She was still well back from the enemy's rear, when the roof disintegrated into a shower of toothpicks. The wolf leaped at the same moment. He yelped once and pawed air and splintering ceiling before falling into the house, where she hoped the rest of Rowan's supporters would dispose of him.

A horn sounded, and the attackers surged forward more urgently than before. Rowan hefted his cartwheel, and pressed the front lines back, whacking and gouging at them. He grinned ferociously all the while, teeth bared and eyes deceptively merry.

The horn sounded again, and a flight of arrows sprang by overhead, peppering the newly roofless building. Some of the grunting and screaming now seemed to be coming from inside Maggie took cover behind the corner of the house opposite the one defended by the King just before the horn blasted once more.

She squinted, tracking the sound. Sally Forth stood in the front line of her troops, but was standing on something near a corner of the house, well away from the King's sword, protectively walled off by her followers. The last flight of arrows had been scantier than the one before, and the nymph raised her horn again.

At least Maggie knew how to put a stop to that. "Make that noisy instrument into a drinking horn," she commanded. The horn met the nymph's mouth, but no sound interrupted the hangings, clangings, moanings and cryings or'battle, and no flight of arrows followed.

Even a giant like the King couldn't help but weary under such an onslaught. Bards might sing of him killing hundreds single-handed, but Maggie for one was ill-prepared to wager her life and the lives of her friends that the bards weren't exaggerating, as usual, on that score.

The more Rowan hacked down to be trampled under their comrades' feet, the more comrades clamored forward to be hacked down in their turn. How could mere hearthcraft aid an impossible situation like that? She couldn't risk fire. To do so would be to burn friends and foes alike.

Arrows came singly and in small bunches now, but there were far fewer than before. Tracing their pattern, she saw that only the three houses closest to the King's stronghold were now involved in the attack. A boon, truly, but not one she could spare time to consider.

But she did consider the laced leggings worn by most of the bandits, binding their britches into their boots. Such laces would weave well, and once woven, would make effective hobbles.

She had to show herself enough to come in range again of her subjects, and to be close enough to the materials she meant to use. At least her brown dress and dark coloring blended well with mud so she was fairly inconspicuous. Extending her arms low and toward her enemies' feet, she pantomimed with her fingers the unlacing, the twining and interweaving of the laces, repeating and interlocking the movements for as many times as she could count heads, until sweat rolled into her eyes and her fingers and forearms cramped. Each time her fingers signed, leggings unlaced and laces tangled in a mating dance.

The enemy stopped fighting Rowan and began fighting each other, tugging, cursing, falling, hopping and sometimes stabbing and sawing as they tried to free themselves.

Maggie ducked for cover again, as more arrows rained down. This time only two houses were involved.

Eagledown and Moonshine galloped forward and began harrying the jumbled brigands from the perimeters, darting forward to slash with their hooves and gouge with their horns, inflicting injury and adding to the general pandemonium. Eagledown's broken horn had shorter striking range but inflicted worse damage than Moonshine's.

Their efforts, combined with Maggie's, provided the King with the respite he needed to clear the doorway, mowing a path in front of and around him. From inside the house behind him poured Neddy Pinchpurse, Maggie's old friend, Prince H. David Worthyman, his son, Davey, and other gypsies, nobles, and sailors, armed with daggers and an occasional sword, and shielded by pot lids, planks, and plates, and any other portable solid item which might afford them some small measure of protection. As they advanced, they captured better weapons from their fallen foes.

Now the doorway was guarded by only two men, and from her hiding place Maggie could see something of the inside, which was still heavily peopled with the refugees from Everclear and a few prone bodies, Rowan's dead and wounded.

A very pale pink glow lit one shadowy corner, where a portly gentleman cradled the body of a woman to him. He looked down at her with a look that was both grieving and beseeching, his face bathed in the glow that came from her body. As Maggie watched, the glow faded and died, and both figures were lost in shadow.

One last house sent up a feeble volley of arrows, and close by a familiar voice sang the text of Argonia's Royal Penal Code. Maggie smiled and looked around, but couldn't see him.

Then she heard more hooves, and Snowshadow pounded forward. "My people!" she trumpeted, "My people are in there! My villagers! They'll be slain!"

But now the brigands were hacking their bootlaces apart, and striking back at Rowan's band with more vigor. And from the

formerly quiet houses in the rear of the village, more bandits swarmed, drowsy and yawning but well-armed with short swords and shields.

Then they were pouring from te house next to hers, and the one behind which she hid, and close by she heard a strangled cry, in the direction opposite from the battle.

Close to the western wall of the house to the right of hers, Colin lay face down in the mud, a dagger in his back, his eyes already starting to glaze. Blood trickled in a thin string from the corner of his mouth. Maggie fell to her knees beside him, but knew even before she touched him that he was dead. His cheek was still warm, and the breeze rippled his hair and billowed the bloodied back of his tunic. She gathered him in her arms and stroked his face and hair, rocking back and forth. "Colin, you ass," she lectured his limp form, "If you hadn't tried to leave me behind, I could have watched your silly back for you."

CHAPTER 16

"Your pardon, gentle mother," Raspberry shouted into Grizel's cave, "But my daughter's not for eating."

"You think not? Well, I can tell you, master meat-maker, MY daughter is hungry and I will feed her NOW."

Rusty smiled expectantly at her father, waiting for his approval. She didn't speak dragonese, nor pure elfin for that matter. The men from the tavern shrank against the cliff wall, their improvised weapons and flagons clattering to their feet. They didn't speak dragonese either, but they had a sound theoretical grasp of dragon nature.

"Aw, con'on, hot shot, don't be that way," Grimley said. "She's just a baby. She won't eat much. Just one or two of them."

"What's the problem, father?" Rusty asked. "Do the dragons require magical help? Perhaps I can be of assistance."

"No!" Raspberry said. "Didn't your mother ever teach you anything? A hungry dragon's den is no place for little girls!"

"I'm NOT a little girl," Rusty replied. "I have magic, too."

Grizel poke her head out of the cave and surveyed the people crowding her ledge as a housewife would study produce at the market. "The red-topped female is the proper size for a nice appetizer," she told her mate, "but spikey looking. How about that nice fat one over there, and the young one? You can let the old one go. He'll be far too tough."

"Dragon Grimley, you can't do this!" the wizard cried, blocking Grimley's claws as he reached for his mate's selections.

The dragon was fortunately still in a mellow mood. "No need to get hot under the collar there, fella. Look, I pre-cook everything for the baby. Just a little blast and it's over. They never feel a thing."

"That's NOT the point, noble dragon," the wizard told him. "These are loyal subjects like yourself, and this is my only daughter. How would you like it if I were to try to cook your daughter?"

"Let's go easy on the inflammatory remarks, eh, hot stuff?" the dragon suggested in a menace-edged tone.

Rusty laid her hand on her father's shoulder. "Really, father, if these beasts are hungry and you're unable to aid them, I'm sure I can with my magic. Just tell me what you need and I'll have my genie, Jehan, fetch it."

A peg-legged pirate whom Raspberry had taken to be just another of the men from the tavern spirited to the ledge by the incorrigible Rusty drifted forward, neither foot nor peg quite meeting the lichen-covered rock. "You're wishin' you had a feast fit for dragons, lassie?" he asked.

"I do," she replied grandly, as she imagined all powerful mages answered their minions.

"Done," the pirate said. "But it's your last wish, and I'm free."

"My last wish?" Rusty wailed. "But it wasn't for me, it was for Daddy."

Jehan was not listening. Instead, he dissolved. When he reappeared, he had in tow ten cattle, six deer, and a grunting boar. "Tell your dragons to fire away," he said to the wizard. "I've brought 'em a spot of supper."

Grimley roasted the boar on the spot, and soon from the interior of the cave they heard satisfied smackings and slurpings, followed by a soft burp.

Grizel poked her head out again. "Little Grippedalice may have my eyes, m'love, but she has your appetite. Roast her just

one more teensy little cow, won't you, my flame, and then I think she should nap. I'm rather burned out myself. Perhaps while we're resting, you would be a love and clear this ledge? It's getting so dreadfully cluttered!"

When she'd popped her snout back inside the cave, Grimley, the scales of his head puffed to right angles with pride, turned to Raspberry. "Don't that just warm up your insides, hot shot? Ah, fatherhood! Why, I feel hot enough to slay a dozen knights in shining armor."

"In that case, noble dragon, perhaps now that you're a family beast and will want to consider providing your mate and child with comfort and security, you'd consider re-entering the King's service? My daughter, as his Majesty's agent, has just provided you with your back pay, and his Majesty does need [illegible] help badly. I daresay that if we tarry much longer, it may well be that our liege will no longer be alive to require your services."

"Aw, blazes, hot shot, I'd like to help you out, but you heard my little spitfire. I have to clean this flamin' ledge off."

"May I suggest, noble dragon, that if you carry us instead of push us from the ledge, and transport us to the Worm's Maze Glacier, we might all accomplish our goals. Namely, we would stay alive, you would clean your ledge and provide yourself with exercise and recreation while re-establishing your service to the King, and we could all help preserve our sovereign land of Argonia."

"You mean to say, you want these creatures to ride on my back and then we'll ALL go slay knights together?" the dragon asked, regarding Rusty's band skeptically.

"Yes, noble dragon."

"Well, then," Grimley snaked a claw inside the mouth of his cave and snared a talon-full of sparkling gems, tossing them amid the townsmen. "As long as we're stokin' the same fire, so to speak, have some diamonds, boys, in honor of my new little spark."

A unicorn shrilled a long high scream. Maggie straightened, wincing as she pulled the knife from Colin's back, though she knew he felt nothing. She wanted a more direct weapon than her magic now. Unicorn healing had reclaimed the bodies of the Everclear villagers and mended the wounds of Leofwin and Wulfric. Perhaps it would also save Colin and Pegeen, if it were used quickly. But she'd never know, if Fearchar's men won this battle.

Scattered groups of fighters clashed all over the road now.

Moonshine and Eagledown fought back to back, surrounded by packs of brigands. Cloven hooves and horns took a goodly toll, but new enemies quickly replaced the fallen ones.

Rowan stood alone in the middle of the road, spinning like a dervish while his sword scythed its grisly harvest.

Gypsies fought dagger-to-shortsword, but neither Prince Worthyman nor Davey still stood.

Neddy Pinchpurse and a few of his mates skirmished near the riverbank, neither they nor their attackers seeming ever to get the upper hand.

And always, for each of Fearchar's men who fell, two more waited to engage the slayer.

The unicorn screamed again, from the building the King had defended.

Maggie zigzagged across the muddy road, avoiding engagement, running for the house.

Snowshadow reared, screaming, in the doorway. Her coat was blood-striped. Sally Forth brandished a sword, smaller and lighter than the men's, but just as effectively carving the unicorn.

"Go away!" Snowshadow sobbed. "I won't let you kill my people! I won't! They can't defend themselves! Go! They can't hurt you! Go! Go!"

The nymph struck and struck again, but Snowshadow would neither move from the doorway nor strike back. A blow fell across the unicorn's neck, deep and hard, and Snowshadow fell to her knees. Sally raised the sword again.

Maggie rushed the house, but tripped and fell sprawling across a bandit's body.

She heard one hoofbeat before a shadow leaped over her, and Primrose dived, horn first, into Sally Forth's back.

Then it was as if a high wind blew, and smoke and fire and screaming men were everywhere. A bandit grappled with a sailor, but a farmer, one she had never seen before, brained him from behind with a timber.

Other new bodies scrambled into the melee, while overhead the sun was blotted out by wild, looping shadows and belching flame.

She raised her head. From the doorway of the building, the Everclear villagers stepped carefully over their fallen unicorn, and wandered into the field of battle. At first she feared they'd be slain, but then she saw that the faces were no longer blank and the eyes held purpose. Some retrieved the weapons of the

fallen and others simply launched themselves onto the b the nearest enemy.

Crawling to Snowshadow, she stroked the blood-soaked mane, and the unicorn whickered softly, blowing pink bubbles. "They were frightened people, with no understanding of my magic." Her thought was thin and weak. "But they have good hearts. I could not let the false maiden slay them."

"Shh," Maggie kissed her forelock. "You've released them from their spell. They're helping us now. Rest."

She spent what was left of the battle fighting brigands away from the wounded unicorn. She had unexpected help from a one-legged pirate who was an excellent hand with a cutlass.

The dragon was the decisive factor, of course. No one cared to be charred alive. But the brigands also grew disheartened by having their weapons snatched from their hands by no corporeal force they could see.

Those who were able began to flee, keeping close to the rocks to save themselves from the dragon.

All three unicorns gathered at the doorway, over their fallen kinswoman. "She lives?" Moonshine asked Maggie.

"Aye, but not for long, without help. And Moonshine, Colin- you must try to help Colin. He's been slain but--"

Primrose interrupted, and her voice was not so harsh with censure this time as with grief. "Have your friends bear our sister to the river, and we will do for her what we can. Then we'll discuss your casualties."

"But Colin--"

Moonshine nuzzled her with a bloody muzzle. "Many are wounded and slain, friend Maggie. We'll save your love if we have the power, but we must put order to our tasks, and also there must be words passing between us and your King. Will you see to it?"

She wiped her tears on her bloody arm and nodded.

Rowan still stood in the middle of the road, directing the separation of dead from wounded, friend from foe. One of the men who had flown in on the dragon knelt before him. "Hillman, here, my Liege, of the Castle Rowan garrison. Request permission to return to active duty."

"Permission granted, as is bloody well obvious, I should think," the King replied. "Arm four men, Hillman, and scour this village. I want none of these rascals escaping."

"Yes, my Liege."

"Well, Maggie? And what are you doin' here, may I ask?"

the King said, turning to her. "You're supposed to be back at your father's hall bein' courted and cosseted." But he gave her a grim smile and held out his hand. She knelt and kissed it. It was covered with blood, like the rest of him. Only his eyes still shone blue and white through the gore, some of it his own, some of it that of his enemies.

"I need men to carry the injured unicorn to the water," she said. "The unicorns can heal our casualties and bring the dead back to life only--"

"Bring the dead back to life? My poor little sister, you're too gentle for battle after all, I think. The sight of it's addled yer brain. But very well." Striding to Snowshadow, he pushed the other unicorns aside and lifted the injured one in his corded, bloodied arms as if she was a lamb. He bore her to the river, setting her down among the reeds poking up from the shallows.

"Well, I never in all my days!" the Blabbermouth blabbered, "A pure disgrace is what I call it, and that's the truth and no lie ..."

Moonshine, Primrose, and Eagledown joined Snowshadow in the river, each dipping his horn or what remained of it into the chattering water.

The water instantly cleared, and its raucous voice lowered to a pleasant, well-modulated conversational tone. "Oooh, that feels very good indeed," it said gratefully. "It's been soooooo looooooong since I've felt anything as purely edifying as this. Why, look at how I sparkle now, and how deep into me you can see. I'm rather like an emerald, aren't I?"

Maggie had no patience for admiring the water, for now another wonder was taking place. Eagledown lifted his head, and his horn came out long, glittering, diamond-bright, boldly scrolled, and best of all, entirely whole. The wounds on his body, as on the bodies of the others, washed away in the sparkling river as easily as the blood and grime. Snowshadow's coat gleamed white again, and her horn grew and mended, spiraling into whole opalescent beauty even as they watched.

"Oh, I feel so much better," she sighed, splashing to her feet. "Then we must set to work," Moonshine said, also rising. "Maggie, have your King convey all the dead and wounded here, into these waters, and they shall be healed." "All?" she asked.

"Of course, all," Primrose said. "You don't suppose we discriminate between good injured beasts and bad injured beasts when we're practicing our art in the greenwood, do you? Though

there's been some discussion about it, we ultimately decided to put your kind in the injured beast category. We will heal all. What you decide to do with them later is up to you."

The scene that followed reminded her a bit of a summer washday with her father's servants pounding laundry against the rocks-a practice she limited as much as possible by use of her magic, since the process tended to be rough on fabric. Only instead of sheets and towels and skirts and veils and waistcoats, people were being doused, dunked and half-drowned in the enchanted waters.

Moonshine went with her to Colin, and carried the minstrel to the river across his back.

Maggie knelt in the river and held Colin's head aloft while the water lapped his body. Next to her, the portly, kind-faced gentleman she had seen in the ruined house was performing the same service for Pegeen.

"You mustn't worry, my dear," he told her, comfortingly. "Why, her Highness has been here barely a moment, and already I saw her cheeks are pinking and her lashes flutter." Maggie looked. It was true. Pegeen did indeed live again, and her aura, though imperceptible in the sunlight, cast its rosy glow into the emerald waters beneath her.

Colin's color seemed improved too, though perhaps it was just the absence of mud and blood which made him look better. She stroked away the last vestiges of that with her fingers. Wet though her fingers were, when she bathed his face, she thought it felt warm again.

"I must say, though," the gentleman remarked, waving his arms at the soldiers who regrew limbs, the sailors revitalized after suffering mortal wounds, the gypsies whose skin deepened from pallor to its natural swarthiness, the bandits whose burns and gouges disappeared, all of the welter of wet humanity boiling around them. "I find this sort of thing disturbing. What do you suppose the consequences will be?"

"What consequences?" Maggie asked, not really paying attention for now Colin's eyelids were moving and his chest rose and fell with a motion quite separate from the lapping wavelets. "Oh, I suppose the bandits will be imprisoned or hanged, eventually, but everyone else ..."

"I wasn't referring to them, actually," the man said. "It's the consequences for the unicorns which concern me. Once these people leave here and the news is heralded throughout the land that unicorns possess this sort of power, they'll never be free

beasts again. Anyone of any means at all will try to round them up and breed them like cattle or pigs, for the profit to be gained from selling their healing magic."

"That would never work," Maggie said. "I don't think unicorns could live in captivity that long. Snowshadow and Eagledown would surely have died if it hadn't been for the princess."

"Yes? Was someone addressing me?" Pegeen tried to sit erect and succeeded instead in dunking both herself and the gentleman. He surfaced, dog-paddling, and guided the sputtering Princess to the surface.

"Your pardon, madam," he said. "Sir Cyril Prechingbird, Royal Archivist, at your service. Allow me to escort your Highness back to shore."

Colin wandered the former battlefield, filled with a disturbing sense of unreality. He knew very little about battles. Only what he'd learned in songs and stories, and that didn't go into the emotional side of things much, aside from swellings of patriotism and bloodlust and so forth. But he was almost certain it couldn't be usual that everyone would look so refreshed afterwards as the people around him did.

Weird was what it was. Surely there had never been a less bloody aftermath? No one even appeared to harbor any hostile feelings toward his co-belligerents of the previous hours.

Colin was almost relieved to see Griffin Hillman and his friends herding a group of sweating, bloodied escaped brigands and carrying a thrashing, sweaty, brown-garbed figure among them.

Pegeen's cheeks lost their new bloom. "Fenchar!" she said.

"My goodness, sir," said a bandit who was standing near the newcomers to Hillman, "Whatever 'as become of our Dark Pilgrim? 'E looks the worse for wear, summat, 'e does."

"Both arms and legs are broke, Majesty," Hillman said. "And several ribs as well, I think." The farmer-soldiers unceremoniously dumped their cargo into a howling heap at the King's feet.

Wizard Raspberry and his daughter heard the noise and came running. The dragon flew off, dangling a writhing silvery bundle from one claw.

The King drew his sword. "Now, knave, my inclination is t'cut ye into wee little pieces t' feed tae the birdies. But free my child from your wicked spell and I'll make it quick, and easier than you deserve."

Fenchar whimpered, and Rowan raised the blade. Suddenly, Pegeen leaped between them, shielding her former lover. "Majesty, I claim a boon for warning you twice of threats against your house," she said boldly.

"I would converse with you privily, m'lord," Pegeen said, and when the King seemed about to refuse, Sir Cyril Prechingbird whispered something to him and the three of them stepped into the nearest hovel.

Maggie glared at her hated relative's quivering form for a

moment, then strode over and knelt beside him, pushing aside the cowl which had flopped over his face and giving him a sip of tea. "Uncle," she said, "For the Mother's sake, spare yourself pain and undo the spell against the baby. It can do you no good now, and the King may decide to spare you if you do as he bids."

Fenchar spat feebly and said in an even feebler voice, "Bah! He'll squash me like an ant, and you, too, if you ever cross him. Know, niece, that the nobles are our enemies. They'll use us up entirely and-and discard us-tl-tl—"

"Save your breath, Uncle. I've had my dose of salt today."

"Bah," Fenchar said again. "He'll never-ach!-spare me. You pretend to sympathize with me only to glory in my agony!"

But then Maggie and the Wizard were joined by Snowshadow and Moonshine.

"Friend Maggie," Colin felt the touch of the unicorn's mind stronger than ever. "Remind your King he agreed we would heal all of the injured."

"Moonshine, you realize this is my uncle, the wizard who would have destroyed you and the others?"

"We know, but the creed must be heeded, and-