

The Ruby Incomparable

KAGE BAKER

One of the most prolific new writers to appear in the late nineties, Kage Baker made her first sale in 1997, to Asimov's Science Fiction, and has since become one of that maga-zines most frequent and popular contributors with her sly and compelling stories of the ad-ventures and misadventures of the time-traveling agents of the Company; of late, she's started two other linked sequences of stories there as well, one of them set in as lush and ec-centric a High Fantasy milieu as any we've ever seen. Her stories have also appeared in Realms of Fantasy, Sci Fiction, Amazing, and elsewhere. Her first Company novel, In the Garden of Iden, was also published in 1997 and immediately became one of the most acclaimed and widely reviewed first novels of the year. More Company novels quickly followed, including Sky Coyote, Mendoza in Hollywood, The Graveyard Game, The Life of the World to Come, as well as a chapbook novella, The Empress of Mars, and her first fantasy novel, The Anvil of the World. Her many stories have been col-lected in Black Projects, White Knights, Mother Aegypt and Other Stories, Dark Mondays, and a collection of Company stories, The Children of the Company. Her most recent Company novel is The Machine's Child. In addition to her writing, Baker has been an artist, actor, and director at the Living History Center and has taught Eliza-bethan English as a second language. She lives in Pismo Beach, California.

When purest Evil and purest Good join in marriage you can't expect the relationship to be a tranquil one—but sometimes it can produce unexpected consequences that surprise both.

* * * *

T

HE girl surprised everyone. To begin with, no one in the world below had thought her parents would have more children. Her parents' marriage had created quite a scandal, a profound clash of philosophical extremes; for her father was the Master of the Mountain, a brigand and sorcerer, who had carried the Saint of the World off to his high fortress. It's bad enough when a living goddess, who can heal the sick and raise the dead, takes up with a professional dark lord (black armor, monstrous armies, and all). But when

they settle down together with every intention of raising a family, what are respectable people to think?

The Yendri in their forest villages groaned when they learned of the first boy. Even in his cradle, his fiendish tendencies were evident. He was beautiful as a little angel except in his screaming tempers, when he would morph himself into giant larvae, wolf cubs, or pools of bubbling slime.

The Yendri in their villages and the Children of the Sun in their stone cities all rejoiced when they heard of the second boy. He too was beautiful, but clearly good. A star was seen to shine from his brow on occasion. He was reported to have cured a nurse's toothache with a mere touch, and he never so much as cried while teething.

And the shamans of the Yendri, and the priests in the temples of the Children of the Sun, all nodded their heads and said: "Well, at least we have balance now. The two boys will obviously grow up, oppose each other, and fight to the death, because that's what generally happens."

Having decided all this, and settled down confidently to wait, imagine how shocked they were to hear that the Saint of the World had borne a third child! And a girl, at that. It threw all their calculations off and annoyed them a great deal.

The Master and his Lady were surprised, too, because their baby daughter popped into the world homely as a little potato, by contrast with the elfin beauty of her brothers. They did agree that she had lovely eyes, at least, dark as her father's, and she seemed to be sweet-tempered. They named her Svnae.

So the Master of the Mountain swaddled her in purple silk and took her out on a high balcony and held her up before his assembled troops, who roared, grunted, and howled their polite approval. And that night in the barracks and servants' hall, around the barrels of black wine that had been served out in celebration, the minions of the proud father agreed amongst themselves that the little maid might not turn out so ugly as all that, if the rest of her face grew to fit that nose and she didn't stay quite so bald.

And they at least were proved correct, for within a year Svnae had become a lovely child.

* * * *

ON the morning of Svnae's fifth birthday, the Master went to the nursery and

fetches his little daughter. He took her out with him on his tour of the battlements, where all the world stretched away below. The guards, tusked and fanged, great and horrible in their armor, stood to attention and saluted him. Solemnly, he pulled a great red rose from thin air and presented it to Svnae.

“Today,” he said, “my Dark-Eyed is five years old. What do you want most in all the world, daughter?”

Svnae looked up at him with her shining eyes. Very clearly she said:

“Power.”

He looked down at her, astounded; but she stood there looking patiently back at him, clutching her red rose. He knelt beside her. “Do you know what Power is?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said. “Power is when you stand up here and make all the clouds come to you across the sky, and shoot lightning and make thunder crash. That’s what I want.”

“I can make magic for you,” he said, and with a wave of his gauntleted hand produced three tiny fire elementals dressed in scarlet, blue, and yellow, who danced enchantingly for Svnae before vanishing in a puff of smoke.

“Thank you, Daddy,” she said, “but no. I want *me* to be able to do it.”

Slowly, he nodded his head. “Power you were born with; you’re my child. But you must learn to use it, and that doesn’t come easily, or quickly. Are you sure this is what you really want?”

“Yes,” she said without hesitation.

“Not eldritch toys to play with? Not beautiful clothes? Not sweets?”

“If I learn Power, I can have all those things anyway,” Svnae observed.

The Master was pleased with her answer. “Then you will learn to use your Power,” he said. “What would you like to do first?”

“I want to learn to fly,” she said. “Not like my brother Eyrdway. He just turns into birds. I want to stay me and fly.”

“Watch my hands,” her father said. In his right hand, he held out a stone; in his left, a paper dart. He put them both over the parapet and let go. The stone dropped; the paper dart drifted lazily down.

“Now, tell me,” he said. “Why did the stone drop and the paper fly?”

“Because the stone is heavy, and the paper isn’t,” she said.

“Nearly so; and not so. Look.” And he pulled from the air an egg. He held it out in his palm, and the egg cracked. A tiny thing crawled from it, and lay shivering there a moment; white down covered it like dandelion fluff, and it drew itself upright and shook tiny stubby wings. The down transformed to shining feathers, and the young bird beat its wide wings and flew off rejoicing.

“Now, tell me,” said the Master, “was that magic?”

“No,” said Svnae. “That’s just what happens with birds.”

“Nearly so; and not so. Look.” And he took out another stone. He held it up and uttered a Word of Power; the stone sprouted bright wings and, improbably, flew away into the morning.

“How did you make it do that?” Svnae cried. Her father smiled at her.

“With Power; but Power is not enough. I was able to transform the stone because I understand that the bird and the stone, and even the paper dart, are all the same thing.”

“But they’re not,” said Svnae.

“Aren’t they?” said her father. “When you understand that the stone and the bird are one, the next step is convincing the *stone* that the bird and the stone are one. And then the stone can fly.”

Svnae bit her lip. “This is hard, isn’t it?” she said.

“Very,” said the Master of the Mountain. “Are you sure you wouldn’t like a set of paints instead?”

“Yes,” said Svnae stubbornly. “I *will* understand.”

“Then I’ll give you books to study,” he promised. He picked her up

and folded her close, in his dark cloak. He carried her to the bower of her lady mother, the Saint of the World.

Now when the Lady had agreed to marry her dread Lord, she had won from him the concession of making a garden on his black basalt mountain-top, high and secret in the sunlit air. Ten years into their marriage, her orchards were a mass of white blossom, and her white-robed disciples tended green beds of herbs there. They bowed gracefully as Svnae ran to her mother, who embraced her child and gave her a white rose. And Svnae said proudly:

“I’m going to learn Power, Mama!”

The Lady looked questions at her Lord.

“It’s what she wants,” he said, no less proudly. “And if she has the talent, why shouldn’t she learn?”

“But Power is not an end in itself, my child,” the Lady said to her daughter. “To what purpose will you use it? Will you help others?”

“Ye-es,” said Svnae, looking down at her feet. “But I have to learn first.”

“Wouldn’t you like to be a healer, like me?”

“I can heal people when I have Power,” said Svnae confidently. Her mother looked a little sadly into her dark eyes but saw no shadow there. So she blessed her daughter and sent her off to play.

* * * *

THE Master of the Mountain kept his promise and gave his daughter books to study, to help her decipher the Three Riddles of Flight. She had to learn to read first; with fiery determination she hurled herself on her letters and mastered them, and charged into the first of the Arcane texts.

So well she studied that by her sixth birthday she had solved all three riddles and was able at will to sprout little butterfly wings from her shoulders, wings as red as a rose. She couldn’t fly much with them, only fluttering a few inches above the ground like a baby bird; but she was only six. One day she would soar.

Then it was the Speech of Animals she wanted to learn. Then it was

how to move objects without touching them. Then she desired to know the names of all the stars in the sky: not only what men call them, but what they call themselves. And one interest led to another, as endlessly she found new things by which to be intrigued, new arts and sciences she wanted to learn. She spent whole days together in her father's library, and carried books back to her room, and sat up reading far into the night.

In this manner she learned to fly up to the clouds with her rose-red wings, there to ask an eagle what it had for breakfast, or gather pearls with her own hands from the bottom of the sea.

And so the years flowed by, as the Master throve on his mountain, and the Saint of the World brought more children into it to confound the expectations of priests and philosophers, who debated endlessly the question of whether these children were Good or Evil.

The Saint held privately that all her children were, at heart, Good. The Master of the Mountain held, privately and out loud too, that the priests and philosophers were all a bunch of idiots.

Svnae grew tall, with proud dark good looks she had from her father. But there were no black lightnings in her eyes, as there were in his. Neither were her eyes crystal and serene, like her mother's, but all afire with inter-est, eager to see how everything worked.

And then she grew taller still, until she overtopped her mother; and still taller than that, until she overtopped her brother Eyrdway. He was rather peevish about it and took to calling her The Giantess, until she punched him hard enough to knock out one of his teeth. He merely morphed into a version of himself without the missing tooth, but he stopped teasing her after that.

Now you might suppose that many a young guard might begin pining for Svnae, and saluting smartly as she passed by, and mourning under her window at night. You would be right. But she never noticed; she was too en-grossed in her studies to hear serenades sung under her window. Still, they did not go to waste; her younger sisters could hear them perfectly well, and *they* noticed things like snappy salutes.

This was not to say that Svnae did not glory in being a woman. As soon as she was old enough, she chose her own gowns and jewelry. Her mother presented her with gauzes delicate as cobweb, in exquisite shades of laven-der, sea mist, and bird-egg blue; fine-worked silver ornaments as well, set with white diamonds that glinted like starlight.

Alas, Svnae's tastes ran to crimson and purple and cloth of gold, even though the Saint of the World explained how well white set off her dusky skin. And though she thanked her mother for the fragile silver bangles, and dutifully wore them at family parties, she cherished massy gold set with emeralds and rubies. The more finery the better, in fact, though her mother gently indicated that perhaps it wasn't quite in the best of taste to wear the serpent bracelets with eyes of topaz *and* the peacock necklace of turquoise, jade, and lapis lazuli.

And though Svnae read voraciously and mastered the arts of Transmutation of Metals, Divination by Bones, and Summoning Rivers by their Secret Names, she did not learn to weave nor to sew; nor did she learn the healing properties of herbs. Her mother waited patiently for Svnae to be-come interested in these things, but somehow the flashing beam of her eye never turned to them.

One afternoon the Master of the Mountain looked up from the great black desk whereat he worked, hearing the guards announce the approach of his eldest daughter. A moment later she strode into his presence, re-splendent in robes of scarlet and peacock blue, and slippers of vermilion with especially pointy toes that curled up at the ends.

"Daughter," he said, rising to his feet.

"Daddy," she replied, "I've just been reading in the Seventh Pomegranate Scroll about a distillation of violets that can be employed to lure drag-ons. Can you show me how to make it?"

"I've never done much distillation, my child," said the Master of the Mountain. "That's more in your mother's line of work. I'm certain she'd be delighted to teach you. Why don't you ask her?"

"Oh," said Svnae, and flushed, and bit her lip, and stared at the floor. "I think she's busy with some seminar with her disciples. Meditation Tech-niques or something."

And though the Master of the Mountain had never had any use for his lady wife's disciples, he spoke sternly. "Child, you know your mother has never ignored her own children for her followers."

"It's not that," said Svnae a little sullenly, twisting a lock of her raven hair. "Not at all. It's just that—well—we're bound to have an argument about it. She'll want to know what I want it for, for one thing, and she won't approve

of my catching dragons, and she'll let me know it even if she doesn't say a word, she'll just *look* at me—"

"I know," said her dread father.

"As though it was a frivolous waste of time, when what I really ought to be doing is learning all her cures for fevers, which is all very well, but I have other things I want to be learning first, and in any case *I'm not Mother*, I'm my *own* person, and she has to understand that!"

"I'm certain she does, my child."

"Yes." Svnae tossed her head back. "So. Well. This brings up some-thing else I'd wanted to ask you. I think I ought to go down into the world to study."

"But—" said the Master of the Mountain.

"I've always wanted to, and it turns out there's a sort of secret school in a place called Konen Feyy-in-the-Trees, where anybody can go to learn distillations. I need to learn more!"

"Mm. But—" said the Master of the Mountain.

She got her way. Not with temper, tears, or foot-stamping, but she got her way. No more than a week later she took a bag and her bow and quiver, and, climbing up on the parapet, she summoned her rose-red wings, which now swept from a yard above her dark head to her ankles. Spreading them on the wind, she soared aloft. Away she went like a queen of the air, to explore the world.

Her father and mother watched her go.

"Do you think she'll be safe?" said the Saint of the World.

"She'd better be," said the Master of the Mountain, looking over the edge and far down his mountain at the pair of ogre bodyguards who coursed like armored greyhounds, crashing through the trees, following desperately their young mistress while doing their best not to draw attention to themselves.

Svnae sailed off on the wind and discovered that, though her extraordinary heritage had given her many gifts, a sense of direction was not one of them. She cast about a long while, looking for any place that

might be a city in the trees; at last she spotted a temple in a wooded valley, far below.

On landing, she discovered that the temple was deserted long since, and a great gray monster guarded it. She slew the creature with her arrows and went in to see what it might have been guarding. On the altar was a golden box that shone with protective spells. But she had the magic to unlock those spells, and found within a book that seemed to be a history of the lost race whose temple this was. She carried it outside and spent the next few hours seated on a block of stone in the ruins, intent with her chin on her fist, reading.

Within the book, she read of a certain crystal ring, the possession of which would enable the wearer to understand the Speech of Water. The book directed her to a certain fountain an hour's flight south of the temple, and fortunately the temple had a compass rose mosaic set in the floor; so she flew south at once, just as her bodyguards came panting up to the temple at last, and they watched her go with language that was dreadful even for ogres.

Exactly an hour's flight south, Svnae spotted the fountain, rising from a ruined courtyard of checkered tile. Here she landed and approached the fountain with caution; for there lurked within its bowl a scaled serpent of remarkable beauty and deadliest venom. She considered the jeweled serpent, undulating round and round within the bowl in a lazy sort of way. She considered the ring, a circle of clear crystal, hard to spot as it bobbed at the top of the fountain's jet, well beyond her reach even were she to risk the serpent. Backing away several paces, she drew an arrow and took aim. *Clink!*

Her arrow shuddered in the trunk of an oak thirty paces distant, with the ring still spinning on its shaft. Speedily she claimed it and put it on, and straightaway she could understand the Speech of Water.

Whereupon the fountain told her of a matter so interesting that she had to learn more about it. Details, however, were only to be had from a little blue man who lived in dubious hills far to the west. So away she flew, to find him . . .

She had several other adventures and it was only by chance that, soaring one morning above the world, deep in conversation with a sea eagle, she spotted what was clearly a city down below amongst great trees. To her inquiry, the sea eagle replied that the city was Konen Feyy. She thanked it and descended through the bright morning to a secluded grove

where she could cast a glamour on herself and approach without attracting undue notice. Following unseen a league distant, her wheezing bodyguards threw themselves down and gave thanks to anyone who might be listening.

* * * *

THE Children of the Sun dwelt generally in cities all of stone, where scarcely a blade of grass grew nor even so much as a potted geranium, preferring instead rock gardens with obelisks and statuary. But in all races there are those who defy the norm, and so it was in Kone Feyy. Here a colony of artists and craftsmen had founded a city in the green wilderness, without even building a comfortably high wall around themselves. Accordingly, a lot of them had died from poisoned arrows and animal attacks in the early years, but this only seemed to make them more determined to stay there.

They painted the local landscapes, they made pots of the local clay, and wove textiles from the local plant fibers; and they even figured out that if they cut down the local trees to make charmingly rustic wooden furniture, sooner or later there wouldn't be any trees. For the Children of the Sun, who were ordinarily remarkably dense about ecological matters, this was a real breakthrough.

And so the other peoples of the world ventured up to Kone Feyy. The forest-dwelling Yendri, the Saint's own people, opened little shops where were sold herbs, or freshwater pearls, or willow baskets, or fresh produce. Other folk came, too: solitary survivors of lesser-known races, obscure revenants, searching for a quiet place to set up shop. This was how the Night School came to exist.

Svnae, wandering down Kone Feyy's high street and staring around her, found the place at once. Though it looked like an ordinary perfumer's shop, there were certain signs on the wall above the door, visible only to those who were familiar with the Arcane sciences. An extravagant green cursive explained the School's hours, where and how she might enroll, and where to find appropriate lodgings with other students.

In this last she was lucky, for it happened that there were three other daughters of magi who'd taken a place above a dollmaker's shop, and hadn't quite enough money between them to make the monthly rent, so they were looking for a fourth roommate, someone to be Earth to their Air, Fire, and Water. They were pleasant girls, though Svnae was somewhat taken aback to discover that she towered over them all three, and somewhat

irri-tated to discover that they all held her mother in reverent awe.

“You’re the daughter of *the* Saint of the World?” exclaimed Seela, whose father was Principal Thaumaturge for Mount Flame City. “What are you doing here, then? *She’s* totally the best at distillations and essences. Everyone knows that! *I’d give* anything to learn from her.”

Svnae was to hear this statement repeated, with only slight variations, over the next four years of her higher education. She learned not to mind, however; for her studies occupied half her attention, and the other half was all spent on discovering the strange new world in which she lived, where there were no bodyguards (of which she was aware, anyway), and only her height distinguished her from all the other young ladies she met.

It was tremendous fun. She chipped in money with her roommates to buy a couch for their sitting room, and the four of them pushed it up the steep flight of stairs with giggles and screams, though Svnae could have tucked it under one arm and carried it up herself with no effort. She dined with her roommates at the little fried-fish shop on the corner, where they had their particular booth in which they always sat, though Svnae found it rather cramped.

She listened sympathetically as first one and then another of her roommates fell in love with various handsome young seers and sorcerers, and she swept up after a number of riotous parties, and on one occasion broke a vase over the head of a young shapeshifter who, while nice enough when sober, turned into something fairly unpleasant when he became unwisely intoxicated. She had to throw him over her shoulder and pitch him down the stairs, and her roommates wept their thanks and all agreed they didn’t know what they’d do without her.

But somehow Svnae never fell in love.

It wasn’t because she had no suitors for her hand. There were several young gallants at the Night School, glittering with jewelry and strange habits, who sought to romance Svnae. One was an elemental fire-lord with burning hair; one was a lord of air with vast violet wings. One was a mer-lord, who had servants following him around with perfumed misting bot-tles to keep his skin from drying out.

But all of them made it pretty clear they desired to marry Svnae in order to forge dynastic unions with the Master of the Mountain. And Svnae had long since decided that love, real Love, was the only reason for getting involved in all the mess and distraction of romance. So she declined,

grace-fully, and the young lords sulked and found other wealthy girls to entreat.

Her course of study ended. The roommates all bid one another fond farewells and went their separate ways. Svnae returned home with a train of attendant spirits carrying presents for all her little nieces and nephews. But she did not stay long, for she had heard of a distant island where was written, in immense letters on cliffs of silver, the formula for reversing Time in small and manageable fields, and she desired to learn it...

* * * *

“SVNAE’S turned out rather well,” said the Master of the Mountain, as he retired one night. “I could wish she spent a little more time at home, all the same. I’d have thought she’d have married and settled down by now, like the boys.”

“She’s restless,” said the Saint of the World, as she combed out her hair.

“Well, why should she be? A first-rate sorceress with a double degree? The Ruby Incomparable, they call her. What more does she want?”

“She doesn’t know yet,” said the Saint of the World, and blew out the light. “But she’ll know when she finds it.”

* * * *

AND Svnae had many adventures.

But one day, following up an obscure reference in an ancient grimoire, it chanced that she desired to watch a storm in its rage over the wide ocean and listen to the wrath of all the waters. Out she flew upon a black night in the late year, when small craft huddled at their moorings, and found what she sought.

There had never in all the world been such a storm. The white foam was beaten into air, the white air was charged with water, the shrieking white gulls wheeled and screamed across the black sky, and the waves were as valleys and mountains.

Svnae floated in a bubble of her own devising, protected, watching it all with interest. Suddenly, far below in a trough of water, she saw a tiny

figure clinging to a scrap of wood. The trough became a wall of water that rose up, towering high, until into her very eyes stared the drowning man. In his astonishment, he let go the shattered mast that supported him and sank out of sight like a stone.

She cried out and dove from her bubble into the wave. Down she went, through water like dark glass, and caught him by the hand; up she went, towing him with her, and got him into the air and wrapped her strong arms about him. She could not fly, not with wet wings in the storm, but she summoned sea-beasts to bear them to the nearest land.

This was merely an empty rock, white cliffs thrusting from the sea. By magic she raised a palace from the stones to shelter them, and she took the man within. Here there was a roaring fire; here there was hot food and wine. She put him to rest all unconscious in a deep bed and tended him with her own hands.

Days she watched and cared for him, until he was well enough to speak to her. By that time, he had her heart.

Now, he was not as handsome as a mage-lord, nor learned in any magic, nor born of ancient blood: he was only a toymaker from the cities of the Children of the Sun, named Kendach. But so long and anxiously had she watched his sleeping face that she saw it when she closed her eyes.

And of course when Kendach opened his, the first thing he saw was her face: and after that, it was love. How could it be otherwise?

They nested together, utterly content, until it occurred to them that their families might wonder where they were. So she took him home to meet her parents (“A *toymaker!*” hooted her brothers), and he took her home to meet his (“Very nice girl. A little tall, but nice,” said his unsuspecting father. They chose not to enlighten him as to their in-laws).

They were married in a modest ceremony in Konen Feyy.

“I hope he’s not going to have trouble with her brothers,” fretted Kendach’s father, that night in the inn room. “Did you see the way they glared? Particularly that good-looking one. It quite froze my blood.”

“It’s clear she gets her height from her father,” said Kendach’s mother, pouring tea for him. “Very distinguished businessman, as I understand it. Runs some kind of insurance firm. I do wonder why her mother wears that veil, though, don’t you?”

Kendach opened a toy shop in Konen Feyy, where he made kites in the forms of insects, warships, and meteors. Svnae raised a modest palace among the trees, and they lived there in wedded bliss. And life was full for Svnae, with nothing else to be asked for.

And then . . .

One day she awoke and there was a gray stain on the face of the sun. She blinked and rubbed her eyes. It did not go away. It came and sat on top of her morning tea. It blotted the pages of the books she tried to read, and it lay like grime on her lover's face. She couldn't get rid of it, nor did she know from whence it had come.

Svnae took steps to find out. She went to a cabinet and got down a great black globe of crystal, which shone and swam with deep fires. She went to a quiet place and stroked the globe until it glowed with electric crackling fires. At last these words floated up out of the depths:

YOUR MOTHER DOES NOT UNDERSTAND YOU.

They rippled on the surface of the globe, pulsing softly. She stared at them, and they did not change.

So she pulled on her cloak that was made of peacock feathers, and yoked up a team of griffins to a sky chariot (useful when your lover has no wings, and flies only kites), and flew off to visit her mother.

The Saint of the World sat alone in her garden, by a quiet pool of reflecting water. She wore a plain white robe. White lilies glowed with light on the surface of the water; distantly a bird sang. She meditated, her crys-tal eyes serene.

There was a flash of color on the water. She looked up to see her eldest daughter charging across the sky. The griffin-chariot thundered to a land-ing nearby, and Svnae dismounted, pulling her vivid cloak about her. She went straight to her mother and knelt.

"Mother, I need to talk to you," she said. "Is it true that you don't understand me?"

The Saint of the World thought it over.

"Yes, it's true," she said at last. "I don't understand you. I'm sorry,

dearest. Does it make a difference?"

"Have I disappointed you, Mother?" asked Svnae in distress.

The Lady thought very carefully about that one.

"No," she said finally. "I would have liked a daughter to be interested in the healing arts. It just seems like the sort of thing a mother ought to pass on to her daughter. But your brother Demaledon has been all I could have asked for in a pupil, and there are all my disciples. So why should your life be a reprise of mine?"

"None of the other girls became healers," said Svnae just a little petulantly.

"Quite true. They've followed their own paths: lovers and husbands and babies, gardens and dances."

"I have a husband too, you know," said Svnae.

"My child, my Dark-Eyed, I rejoice in your happiness. Isn't that enough?"

"But I want you to *understand* my life," cried Svnae.

"Do you understand mine?" asked the Saint of the World.

"Your life? Of course I do!"

Her mother looked at her, wryly amused.

"I have borne your father fourteen children. I have watched him march away to do terrible things, and I have bound up his wounds when he re-turned from doing them. I have managed the affairs of a household with over a thousand servants, most of them ogres. I have also kept up correspondence with my poor disciples, who are trying to carry on my work in my absence. What would you know of these things?"

Svnae was silent at that.

"You have always hunted for treasures, my dearest, and thrown open every door you saw, to know what lay beyond it," said the Saint of the World gently. "But there are still doors you have not opened. We can love each

other, you and I, but how can we understand each other?"

"There must be a way," said Svnae.

"Now you look so much like your father, you make me laugh and cry at once. Don't let it trouble you, my Dark-Eyed; you are strong and happy and good, and I rejoice."

But Svnae went home that night to the room where Kendach sat, painting bright and intricate birds on kites. She took a chair opposite and stared at him.

"I want to have a child," she said.

He looked up, blinking in surprise. As her words sank in on him, he smiled and held out his arms to her.

Did she have a child? How else, when she had accomplished everything else she wanted to do?

A little girl came into the world. She was strong and healthy. She looked like her father, she looked like her mother; but mostly she looked like herself, and she surprised everyone.

Her father had also been one of many children, so there were no surprises for him. He knew how to bathe a baby, and could wrestle small squirming arms into sleeves like an expert.

Svnae, who had grown up in a nursery staffed by a dozen servants, proved to be rather inept at these things. She was shaken by her helplessness, and shaken by the helpless love she felt. Prior to this time she had found infants rather uninteresting, little blobs in swaddling to be briefly inspected and presented with silver cups that had their names and a good-fortune spell engraved on them.

But *her* infant—! She could lie for hours watching her child do no more than sleep, marveling at the tiny toothless yawn, the slow close of a little hand.

When the baby was old enough to travel, they wrapped her in a robe trimmed with pearls and took her to visit her maternal grandparents, laden with the usual gifts. Her lover went off to demonstrate the workings of his marvelous kites to her nieces and nephews. And Svnae bore her daughter to the Saint of the World in triumph.

“Now I’ve done something you understand,” she said. The Saint of the World took up her little granddaughter and kissed her between the eyes.

“I hope that wasn’t the only reason you bore her,” she said.

“Well—no, of course not,” Svnae protested, blushing. “I wanted to find out what motherhood was like.”

“And what do you think it is like, my child?”

“It’s awesome. It’s holy. My entire life has been redefined by her existence,” said Svnae fervently.

“Ah, yes,” said the Saint of the World.

“I mean, this is creation at its roots. This is Power! I have brought an entirely new being into the world. A little mind that thinks! I can’t wait to see what she thinks *about*, how she feels about things, what she’ll say and do. What’s ordinary magic to this?”

The baby began to fuss and the Lady rose to walk with her through the garden. Svnae followed close, groping for words.

“There’s so much I can teach her, so much I can give her, so much I can share with her. Her first simple spells. Her first flight. Her first transforma-tion. I’ll teach her everything I know. We’ve got that house in Konen Feyy, and it’ll be so convenient for Night School! She won’t even have to find room and board. She can use all my old textbooks ...”

But the baby kept crying, stretching out her little hands.

“Something she wants already,” said the Lady. She picked a white flower and offered it to the child; but no, the little girl pointed beyond it. Svnae held out a crystal pendant, glittering with Power, throwing dancing lights; but the baby cried and reached upward. They looked up to see one of her father’s kites, dancing merry and foolish on the wind.

The two women stood staring at it. They looked at the little girl. They looked at each other.

“Perhaps you shouldn’t enroll her in Night School just yet,” said the Saint of the World.

And Svnae realized, with dawning horror, that she might need to ask her mother for advice one day.

* * * *