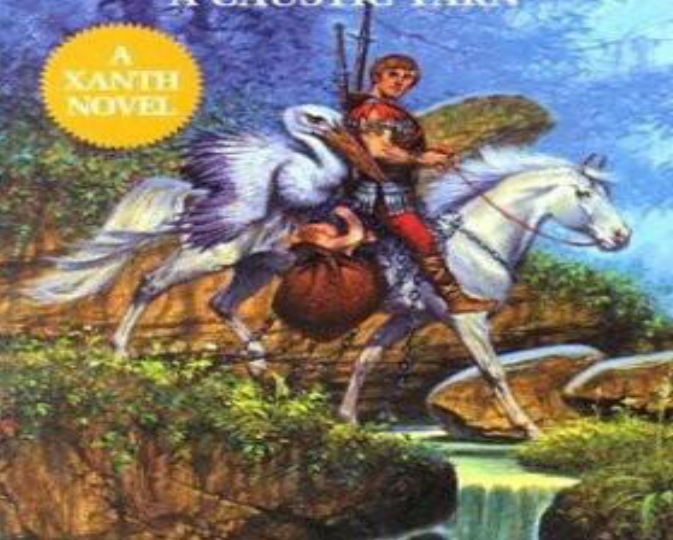


PIERS ANTHONY

CREWEL LYE

A CAUSTIC YARN

A
XANTH
NOVEL



Chapter 1. Ghost Quest

Ivy was restricted, for no reason at all,
to Castle

Roogna, and of course it was
overwhelmingly boring. Her

mother Irene had recently gotten quite fat
in the tummy,

but kept right on eating and pretending it
was wonderful

and didn't seem to have much time for

Ivy any more. To

make things worse, her father King Dor
had ordered a

baby brother for her. Ivy did not need or
want a baby

brother. How could they have been so
thoughtless as to

order something like that without
consulting the one most

concerned? What good was a baby,
anyway—especially

a boy?

But now the infernal thing had arrived,
and Irene had

evidently celebrated by using a thinning
spell, because

she was suddenly back to normal weight,
but she still had

next to no time for Ivy. To heck and
damation with all

cabbage leaves! Even drear Mundania,
she decided, could

not be worse than this.

For a time, she played with the items sent by her pun-

pal, Rapunzel, who had very long hair and was similarly

confined to her castle. Ivy was still too young to read and

write, so they exchanged small objects, and that usually

worked well enough. But there was only so much a person

could do with pencils and hot-cross

puns, and Ivy soon

tired of them.

She found herself watching the magic
tapestry in her

room for hours on end and more hours
sidewise; the idiot

cloth had become her amusement of last
resort. Its moving

pictures showed everything that had ever
happened in the

Land of Xanth. But the pictures were

fuzzy, and she

wasn't much interested in history,
anyway. It was so much

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more fun in the jungle, playing with
clouds and tangles

and gourds!

As the tapestry played over a sequence
several hundred

years in the past. Ivy became aware of
company. One of

the castle ghosts was in the room. In fact,
it was watching

the tapestry.

Ghosts did not bother Ivy, of course; in
fact, it tended

to be the other way around. Ghosts avoided her because

trouble seemed to follow only half a footstep behind her,

and the haunts of Castle Roogna, like others of their kind,

were basically settled creatures. So the presence of this

one surprised Ivy, yet hardly alarmed her. She peered at

it, but the outlines were fuzzy, and she

could not make

out which one it was. So she asked,
"Who are you?"

"Jordan," the ghost replied faintly. It was
hard for

ghosts to speak with any volume,
because their volume

was mostly vapor, but they could do it
when they con-

centrated.

Oh, yes. Jordan was the one who had helped Mare

Imbri save Castle Roogna from the Horseman oodles of

time ago, before she arrived on the scene. "What are you

doing?"

"Watching my history." The ghost became clearer as

she concentrated on it, shifting from
amorphous cloud

shape to humped sheet shape, which was
an improve-

ment.

Ivy suffered a flicker of interest. " Your
history? That's

Xanth history, silly!"

"I lived in Xanth four hundred years ago," Jordan said,

becoming a vague human form.

"Was it as dull as it is now?"

"No, it was exciting!" the ghost said with greater an-

imation than before. "It was a terrific

adventure—I think."

"You think?" Ivy wanted to nail this down, because if

there was anything interesting in Castle Roogna, she

wanted to find it.

"Well, I died from it."

Oh. "I'm about to die from boredom," Ivy

asserted.

"Oh, no," Jordan protested. "You're a Sorceress. You

will grow up to be King of Xanth."

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This was nothing new, but Ivy's interest increased.

Now Jordan was a fully formed man,

partly white, partly

translucent, fairly large, young, and handsome. A white

lock of hair fell down partway over his right eye, which

was also white. Most ghosts were white; Ivy wasn't sure

why. "How did you die?"

Jordan shook his head. "I can't quite seem to remem-

ber. I've been dead a long time."

"But that's easy to remember!" Ivy
exclaimed. "Dying
is a big deal, like getting born."

"Do you remember getting born?"

"Of course not. Animals get born. / was
found under
a cabbage leaf. I should have kicked
over the cabbage

behind me, because now they've found
Dolph under it

and they're making him my baby
brother." She pouted,

as the memory rankled. "If I'd been
smart, I'd have

sneaked out at night and thrown all the
cabbages into the

moat before Dolph arrived. It's probably
all his fault I'm

grounded."

"Yes, boys are a lot of trouble," the ghost agreed.

"Almost as much trouble as girls."

"What?"

The ghost drifted away from her, realizing that he had

said something provocative and unwarranted. Everybody

knew that boys were much worse than girls. But Ivy de-

cided to forgive him his transgression,
because even

ghostly company was better than none.
"Tell me the ad-

venture of your life."

"Well, I don't quite remember that,
either. I know it

was exciting, and that there were
monsters and magicians

and swords and sorcery and beautiful
women, but the

details have fogged out."

"Then how do you know your life is playing on the

tapestry now?" Ivy asked alertly.

"I recognize bits of my life when I see them played.

Fighting a dragon, kissing a woman—it begins to come

back. I know I was there."

"Fighting a dragon?" Ivy asked. "Not the Gap Dragon?"

"I think I avoided that one," Jordan said.
"It's alive

today, isn't it? So I couldn't have slain it."

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"Good." Because the Gap Dragon had become Ivy's

friend, she didn't want anything bad to have happened to

him, even four hundred years ago. The Gap was now

being patrolled by Stacey Steamer, the female of his kind.

Eventually Stanley would grow up and return to the Gap,

but that was long ago in the future and she didn't worry

about it. "Who'd you kiss?"

The ghost concentrated. "Several beautiful women, I

think, but the last was most. There was a cruel lie, and

I died. So I hate her. But I found a better woman after I

died, so maybe it's all right after all."

This was getting downright fascinating!
"How can you

find a woman after you're dead?"

"A dead woman, naturally. A ghost, like me."

Ivy had always known the ghosts of Castle Roogna,

but hadn't thought to question them about their lives.

"What happened to her?"

"She's still here, of course. She's Renee."

"Oh, Renee! I hear her singing sometimes. Faint, sad songs."

"Yes, she is often sad. But she's a wonderful person.

If I were alive again, I'd marry her."

"Silly, ghosts can't live again!" Ivy chided him.

"What about Millie?"

Millie the Ghost had been a resident of Castle Roogna

for eight centuries, until restored to life. She had married

the Zombie Master and now had twin teen-aged children,

Hiatus and Lacuna, who on occasion

baby-sat for Ivy.

"That was prehistoric," Ivy said shortly.

"Back when

Good Magician Humfrey was still
practicing as an old

man. He helped bring her back to life.

Everybody knows

that. But Magician Humfrey isn't
animating ghosts any

more, and nobody else knows how. How
can you live

again?"

"Well, my talent is healing," Jordan said.

"So if my

bones were found and brought together,
maybe—"

"Where are your bones?"

"I've forgotten, if I ever knew," the ghost
confessed,

abashed.

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So Jordan represented a mystery. Ivy was now fully

intrigued. "This cruel lie—what was it?"

Jordan spread his hands. "I don't remember that, ei-

ther. I thought if I watched it replayed on

the tapestry,
maybe—"

"Why not," Ivy agreed. They focused on the tapestry.

It showed a towering wall of rock, the face of an almost

vertical cliff. Down this cliff a huge snail was crawling—

and a man clung to the snail's shell.

"Oh, yes, the snail," Jordan said. "That's me, riding it."

Ivy had never thought of snail-riding, but of course she had never encountered a snail big enough. "Where are you going?"

"I don't remember, but it was somewhere I had to get

to."

"Why are you riding it, instead of walking there your-

self? That snail's pretty slow."

"I don't remember that, either. But I think I had no

choice. Maybe if we could see more detail—"

They peered closely, and the picture enhanced itself

somewhat, as things did when Ivy paid attention to them.

They made out a shadow, as of some monstrous bird, but

they could not tell where the cliff was or how extensive.

The progress of the giant snail was tediously slow; it was

evident they would have to wait for an hour to see sig-

nificant progress. That was the problem with the tapestry;

it ran scenes through at regular speed. It was possible to

reset it, but that tended to jump the picture to some quite

different scene, and the original one could be lost for days.

So it was necessary simply to let it play through at its

own rate if a person wanted to see how

a particular scene

ended. This was no good for a bored child.

But Ivy's curiosity, once fairly aroused, did not accept

denial. "We must find out," she declared. "I want to know

all about that snail—and your life, and especially about

the cruel lie." She put her hands on her hips, in the manner

her mother did, to show the severity of her resolve.

"I'm sure I could remember, if the pictures were clearer," Jordan said.

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Ivy contemplated the tapestry. "It's gotten sort of

grubby over the centuries," she said.
"And I guess my

using it to wipe off my hands before
dinner doesn't help

much, either." Adults always had these
pointless rules

about clean hands for eating, so Ivy
knew it really wasn't

her fault, but now she wished she had
wiped her hands

somewhere else. "Maybe if we can
clean it off, it will

have better pictures."

They tried. Ivy fetched a bucket and water, but found

she couldn't scrub the tapestry clean. The pictures were

permanently dull, even when wet. "We need something

better to clean it," she said, frustrated.

They tested everything they could think of, but nothing

helped. Ivy was getting dangerously close to annoyance,

which was another mood she had inherited from her

mother. But she was determined to find a way. "Good

Magician Humfrey would know, 'cept he's pretty young

now," she said. "Still, he's probably better than nothing."

But how was she to get to the Good

Magician's castle

when she wasn't allowed out of Castle
Roogna? Certainly

her folks wouldn't take her there right
now! Not when

they were so confoundedly absorbed
with the idiotic new

baby. But she just couldn't wait till she
was ungrounded;

that would be forever or three more
days, whichever was

longer.

Fortunately, Jordan had a notion.

"There's an old night

mare shoe in the cellar," he said. "With that you could

get in and out of the gourd."

Ivy clapped her hands, delighted. The gourd had turned

out to be a pretty interesting place, but the problem of

getting out of it made her cautious. She
hadn't realized

that it was the horse shoes that enabled
the night mares

to do it, but of course that made sense.
One of the mares

must have lost a shoe when trying to flee
an awakening

sleeper, because night mares were never
supposed to be

seen by awake folk. "Show me!"

Jordan guided her down to the cellar crevice where the

shoe lay, and Ivy pulled it out. The thing was made of

old rusty metal and was bent in the shape of a U; no

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wonder the mare had left it behind.

"Ooo, ick!" Ivy ex-

claimed, shaking the gook off it. "How

does it work?"

"You have to go into a gourd," Jordan said. "Then you

travel through the gourd world until you come to one

that's near your destination, and—"

"I know that, dummy! I mean how do I get ('«?"

"The mare shoe should make the rind pervious, so—"

"Where's a gourd?" Ivy was edgy and impatient be-

cause she was getting nervous about this business, so she

was rushing things before she could make the mistake of

thinking about the matter sensibly.

"There's one growing at the castle wall,"

Jordan said.

"It's not supposed to be there, but it's hidden, so no living person has spotted it yet."

"Take me to it," Ivy ordered. She had to go somewhere

fast, for her knees were threatening to knock. The gourd

world was, after all, the place of bad dreams, and she

suspected there were more hideous

things in there than

the night mares ever let ordinary people see.

Jordan took her to it. It was just outside a large crevice

at ground level. She reached through, caught hold of the

vine, and hauled the gourd in. "But don't look at the

peephole!" the ghost warned.

"I know." Ivy had learned about
peepholes recently;

it seemed her mother had been perturbed
to learn that

Grandpa Trent had been into one and
somehow had

thought it was Ivy's fault. Possibly the
grounding had

something to do with that. "Now how
does—?" She ex-

tended the bent shoe toward the gourd.

"Wait!" Jordan cautioned, in the manner adults had.

"I think you need a map, to—"

The shoe touched the surface of the gourd—and sank

in. Ivy, expecting resistance, lost her balance and fell

forward. Her arm passed in and the rest of her did too,

though the gourd was much smaller than

she was. Sud-

denly she was inside and falling.

She started to scream, but before she
could work it up

properly, she landed on something soft.
It was a huge

marshmallow. So she filed the scream
away for later ref-

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erence, got up, and looked about. This wasn't nearly as

bad as she had feared.

She was in a candy garden. Lollipops grew from the

ground, and the weeds were licorice.

She started to pick

a pop, then hesitated; she was inside the gourd. If she ate

anything, would she be able to leave?

She wasn't sure;

the gourd had funny rules. So she exerted
supreme control

well beyond the call of little-girl duty
and left the candy

alone. She had a feeling she would
regret this the rest of

her life, but she couldn't take the chance.

The night mares traveled through Xanth
by going in

one gourd and out another; there was
always a gourd close

by a sleeper who needed a bad dream.
She had gone in

at Castle Roogna; she needed to come
out at the Good

Magician's castle. But where was it?

Jordan was right; she needed a map—
and she didn't

have one. Well, she would just have to
find her own way.

She walked down the hard chocolate
path, past all the

delicious-looking and -smelling
confections, her mouth

watering painfully, until she came to a
house made of

wood. She knocked on the door, but
there was no answer

except a faint chittering. So she turned
the knob, opened

the door, and stepped inside.

The door swung closed behind her.
Suddenly the chit-

tering became loud. Things rustled over
her feet. As her

eyes adjusted to the interior gloom, she
discovered that

the room was filled with insects. "Ooo,
ugh!" she ex-

claimed with girlish distaste. "This is a
bug-house!"

Indeed it was. Bugs of every description crawled on

the floor, the walls, the ceiling, and the door behind her.

Others fluttered in the air. One bug-eyed monster buzzed

up to her, waving its purple antennae.

Ivy used the scream she had saved. She tried to use

the mare shoe to fend off the bug, but the shoe missed

and struck the wall instead. Shoe and hand sank through

the wall, and Ivy stumbled after, stepping through as a

ghost might.

She blinked in bright sunlight. She stood on a beach,

just outside a gourd. Across the water she saw a large

island, and near the island was a raft with a centaur stand-

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ing on it. That must be Centaur Isle,
down at the south

of Xanth. She had come a long way!

But that wasn't where she was going. So
she nerved

herself and touched the mare shoe to the
gourd. She was

getting the hang of this. She fell right into the bug-house

again.

Hastily she opened the door and plunged outside. She

remained in the gourd, since she hadn't used the shoe

this time. But now the garden was not candy; it had

changed radically for the worse. Awful
spinach grew all

about, along with turnips and radishes
and onions and

other terrible stuff, the kind that existed
only to nauseate

children at mealtimes. There were even
—horrors!—cab-

bage. She held her nose and hurried
along the garden

path until it came to a lake of placid,
brownish fluid.

What could this be? Surely not anything worse than

mashed squash! She touched her finger to it and tasted a

drop, her curiosity leading her unerringly into mischief.

Instantly she spat it out. This was the worst yet! It was

castor oil—the stuff used to lubricate rolling castors, the

bane of all children.

She looked about. How could she get out of the gourd

for another peek at real-life Xanth? She might be close

to Humfrey's castle, and didn't want to pass it by. But

with no walls to touch—

Then she had a notion. Carefully she touched the mare

shoe to the surface of the stinking oil lake. It sank through,

drawing her along with it. She held her nose and her

breath, closed her eyes tightly, and passed painlessly

through the surface to come to rest on firm ground. She

opened her eyes and found herself

standing in front of a

gourd in sight of the Good Magician's castle. She had

nerved herself to take the most obnoxious route, which

naturally was the proper one, and she was there!

Well, almost. There was the little matter of getting in.

She was standing outside the moat; there was no draw-

bridge, and the walls looked most forbidding.

First she had to cross the moat. She looked around.

Under a spreading tree she found several small stones.

"Stepping stones!" she exclaimed, recognizing the type.

She picked them up, but they were hard
to hold all

together, so she reached for a big green
leaf to wrap them

in. But !o, it was not a leaf; it was the
wing of a giant

luna moth. The creature was motionless,
and just dangled

when she picked it up; she realized
reluctantly that it was

dead. A tear squeezed from her eye; she

hated to see

pretty things die.

She found some blanket moss, set the
stones, moth,

and mare shoe on it, and carefully drew
up the corners

of the blanket so she could carry it as a
bundle. She saw

herself as a fairly resourceful child, so
of course she was.

Then she walked to the moat, held the

bundle in one arm,

and used her free hand to cast the first stone.

The stepping stone plopped onto the surface, hobbled,

expanded somewhat, and settled firmly, the top of it just

above the water. She tossed a second one a little farther

out, and it settled similarly on the surface. When she had

a somewhat irregular line of several—
for stepping stones

never settled regularly, no matter how
accurately they

were placed—she stepped carefully on
the first. It gave

slightly but supported her weight; that
was, after all, its

nature, enhanced by her talent.

Incorrectly placed, a step-

ping stone could become a stumbling
block, but she had

set these down properly.

She stepped on the second, and the third,
then tossed

out a couple more. This was nervous
business, especially

when she stepped across deep water, but
she had enough

stones and she made it all the way
across with one to

spare. That was excellent management,
if she did say so

herself.

Now she was on a narrow bank between the moat and

the castle wall. On one side, the bank narrowed until there

was no space between the wall and the water, so she

couldn't go there. On the other side, it curved around the

castle. She was sure there was a door somewhere, so she

started walking.

She passed an alcove that was
absolutely dark; no light

penetrated its depths at all. That was
interesting, but not

very; she moved on. Then she rounded a
corner and en-

countered bunding brightness. She
shaded her tender eyes,

but the light squeezed through the
crevices between her

fingers and pierced her eyelids anyway.
It was just too

bright!

She retreated around the corner, and the
day returned

to normal, with only a dull red spot that
played tag with

her peripheral vision. How could she

pass that region? If

the door she wanted was there, she
would be unable to

see it. She might even blunder into the
moat and get her

feet all wet; that would be awkward to
explain to her

mother! Irene might have no time for Ivy
when Ivy wanted

attention, but she would appear like
magic the moment

those little feet and shoes got wet; that
was the way mothers

were. Also, Ivy wasn't sure just how fast her sight might

recover, after too great an exposure to that light; how

awful it would be to be blind! If she came home blind,

they would feed her nothing but—screaming horrors!—

carrots, because they had a magic yellow ingredient that

was good for vision. There was no question about it: she

had to find a different way.

"Come on. Ivy," she chided herself.

"You're smart

enough to figure out how to get through a little light!"

Whereupon she became smart enough; confidence was

wonderful stuff, especially when abetted by magic.

Ivy returned to the dark alcove and

reached inside.

Sure enough, there was a dark lantern.
She brought it out,

and its darkness spread all around her,
converting day to

night. Fortunately, she was able to see a
little dim light

ahead, around the corner, and she headed
for that.

As she rounded the corner, the effulgence
surrounded

her—and was met by the darkness
radiating from the dark

lamp. The two struggled and canceled
out, and an ap-

proximation of normal daylight returned.
A small globe

of darkness remained about the lantern
itself, into which

her arm disappeared, while the bright
lantern remained

too bright to gaze upon. But in between
were the shades

ranging from night to day. If Ivy had been
of a more

philosophical bent, she might have
realized that life itself

was like that, with the impossible
extremes of good and

bad at either side and many gradients
between, through

which normal folk navigated with
indifferent success. But

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she was as yet too young for such a
thought, so she shoved

it aside and proceeded through the
shades of gray until

she rounded another corner. Then the dark lamp became

too dark, blotting out everything; she set it in an empty

alcove and went on.

But a new threat materialized. A small winged cat

screeched and circled above her. When she tried to take

a step, the cat circled lower, claws extended. This was

too little to be a cat-bird; it was a kitty-hawk, and it would
not let her pass.

She looked in her blanket bag, where
there was one
stone, the dead moth, and the mare shoe.
She might throw
the stone at the creature, but she doubted
she could score;
the throwing arm of a five-year-old girl

wasn't strong. So

she left that stone unturned. She needed another way.

As she pondered, the kitty-hawk circled lower. Ivy was

right at the edge of its attack range and the creature hes-

itated. Probably it didn't want to get too close to the

brilliance around the corner, as that would blind the kitty-

hawk as readily as it blinded her. So this was a safe place to pause.

Ivy watched the creature, noting the separate com-

ponents of its body. The hawk-wings were of the bird

kingdom, with brown feathers, and there was a feathered

tail to match; the head and legs were of the cat kingdom,

with white teeth and claws. She wondered which kingdom

was dominant. Did the creature lay eggs or give live birth?

Animals had more direct and crude ways of reproducing

themselves than people did; maybe cabbages didn't grow

for animals. She blushed to be thinking such naughty

thoughts, but still, she was curious. She knew that some

creatures birthed and others hatched, or maybe it was the

other way around, and people arrived under cabbage

leaves, and then there was the matter of the storks—

Ivy frowned, because that reminded her of Baby Brother

Dolph again. Too bad the stork hadn't brought him, be-

cause then there would have been a

chance of dropping

the bundle into a nest of cockatrices, or
maybe onto a

bad-tempered needle-cactus. She could
almost see the

needles flying out, striking the
littlecockatrices, who nat-

urally glared balefully about, turning
everything around

them to sludge. Or was it stone?
Anyway, the little bird-

brained lizards were getting stabbed by
flying stone

needles, and it served them right.

Ivy caught a flicker of something just off the edge of

her vision. It looked like a swishing horse's tail. The day

mare! Imbri had brought her the nice, violent day-dream,

but now the mare had to gallop off to her next delivery.

There was a yowl. Ivy looked up. The
kitty-hawk had

come quite close to her and was having
some kind of

problem. The parts of it had intensified,
the cat-head and

feet becoming more feline and the bird-
wings and tail more

avian. Now they were fighting for
dominance. The head

was reaching around to bite at the wings,
and the wings

were pounding on the head.

Ivy watched closely, so of course the intensification

of separate qualities continued. The fight got worse.

Feathers and tufts of fur flew out. Finally the kitty-hawk

spun out of control, crashed into the moat, and was gone.

This was one experiment of nature that didn't seem to

have worked out. The sharpening of its facets, as it had

approached Ivy and her violent day-dream, had caused

the creature to fragment and destroy itself.

Ivy walked on, glad to be past the kitty-hawk but sad

how that had happened. She was still looking for the door

into the castle. She came to a small plot

that contained a

single headstone. It was in the shape of the head of an

old man, with sparse stone-gray hair and white whiskers.

It looked almost alive, and became more so as she con-

templated it; its stony gaze was fixed on her. Slowly one

mineral eye closed in a wink.

"You are alive!" she exclaimed, startled.

"No, snippet, I'm just cold stone," it said. "I take the

form of the head of whoever is buried near me. That is

my nature; I'm a headstone."

"You mean you look like—" she began, glancing at

the oblong of dirt in front of it.

"Exactly, peanut. Like the loudmouthed old man who

is buried here." Actually, he sounded to Ivy like a loud-

mouthed goiem, but maybe all loudmouths were similar.

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"That's interesting," Ivy said. This headstone didn't

seem like much of a threat.

"Last year I was planted near a lovely,
dead, young

woman; you should have seen me then!
My surface was

like polished alabaster, and my shape
was beautiful."

"That's nice," Ivy said, losing interest.

"I've got to go

now."

"Ah, but if you try to pass me, I'll yell,
and you'll get

the brush-off," the headstone warned.

"Oh, pooh!" she said. "You can't do
anything, rock-

head!" She walked on defiantly.

"Intruder alert!" the headstone yelled
loudly. "Undis-

ciplined child! Probably a real brat!
Give her the brush-
off!"

From around the castle flew the most
awesomely ter-

rible object Ivy could imagine: a huge
hairbrush. She

scooted back the way she had come,
covering her behind.

That headstone hadn't been bluffing!

Ivy backed up against the wall so that her tender pos-

terior wouldn't be exposed. What was she to do now?

She couldn't face that—or turn her back on it, either.

The brush hovered a moment. Then, spying no naughty

posterior, it flew back the way it had come. Ivy relaxed;

she had escaped this time.

But she knew with sick certainty that the moment she

passed the headstone again, it would cry another warning

and that horrendous brush would return. She was stuck.

She was a fairly self-assured little girl, but that brush—!

She had to figure out a way to be rid of it!

Then she had another notion, for her mind was filled

with notions, some of them almost as cute as she was.

Suppose she nullified the headstone instead? If she could

just stop that loudmouth from blabbing, somehow silenc-

ing it-

She looked in her bag again. Maybe she could get cre-

ative. Stone, mare shoe, dead moth.
Nothing here to—

Then a creative bulb lit up, for an instant
flashing as

brightly as the brightside effulgence she
had so recently

negotiated with the dark lamp. Yes, there
was a way,

maybe!

She marched up to the headstone. "Hi, rockbrain!" she said boldly.

The stone eye eyed her stonily. "You again, twerp? If

you try to pass this point, I'll see that you get the brush-

off for sure. You won't be able to sit down without blis-

tering the chair!"

"I've got something for you," she said,
taking out the

dead luna moth. "Let me just scrape out
some dirt beside

you here—" She dug a little hole.

"That doesn't look like much," the
headstone said. "If

you dig too deep, you may encounter
something you don't

like, sweetie-pie."

"I just want to bury this closer to you than that," Ivy

said and dropped the dead moth in the hole. Then she

swept the dirt over and patted it firm.

She stood and watched. If what the headstone had told

her was true—

It was. The headstone began to change.

The human

features weathered into anonymity and
assumed a green-

ish cast. Then a new form took shape. It
was the head of

a luna moth, with furry antennae and
lovely color.

"That's very pretty," Ivy said and walked
on by.

The stone-moth's antennae waved frantically, but there was no sound, for moths did not make sounds in the human range. The giant brush was not roused, and Ivy passed the dread region without hindrance. She had navigated the final hurdle, thanks to her creativity. She had used a dead moth in a way no one had thought of before.

She walked around to the castle door
and pushed it

open. A young and pretty woman came
to meet her. "Why,

hello, Ivy—you surprised me. Why
didn't you use the

carpet to fly in, as you usually do?"

Ivy didn't care to explain about being
grounded; Zora

was very nice, but no adult could be

completely trusted

in a matter like that. "This is business, Zora", she ex-

plained. "I have to see Good Magician Humfrey."

Zora shrugged. She was a zombie, but it was almost

impossible to tell, for no flesh fell from her. She had been

baby-sitting the Good Magician for two years because it

was her talent to make people age faster.
She was married,

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but when she turned on her talent, other
people became

nervous, fearing they were aging, too.
Ivy didn't under-

stand why anyone should object to
getting older; maybe

they had all forgotten what it was like to

be a child. But

it seemed they did fear age, and the
older they were, the

more they feared it. So Zora's husband
Xavier tended to

absent himself when Zora turned on.

Ivy understood the practical aspects of
all this, if not

the emotional ones, and wasn't worried.
She often visited

the Good Magician herself, enhancing

Zora's talent with

her own, so that Humfrey aged at several times the normal

rate. It would not be long, as such things went, before he

was an adult again; meanwhile, he seemed to be enjoying

his second childhood.

Zora escorted her to Humfrey's playroom. The Good

Magician was now about Ivy's size,

which meant he had

averaged about three years for one, for
he was small for

his age. "Hi, Ivy!" he said. "Come to put
some more years

on me?"

"No, this is a business call," Ivy
repeated. Humfrey

she had to trust, even if she didn't want
to. He knew

everything anyway, or seemed to, that

being his talent.

Physically, he was now a child, so perhaps would not be

inclined to betray her to the grown-ups.

"I'm grounded

for no reason and had to sneak out."

Humfrey smiled in a too-knowing way.

"No reason,

as you define it, being the leading of your grandfather in

a merry chase through tangles, jungle,

and gourd, all be-

cause you didn't stay on course or heed
his warnings,

and causing the Night Stallion to shoot
fire from his nostrils

when he saw the damage to his haunted
house set?"

"That's what I said," Ivy agreed
uncomfortably. "No

reason at all. So let's make this quick,
before I get in

trouble for even less reason if they discover I'm gone. I

need an Answer."

"That will be one year's service," he informed her. "In

advance."

"Well, I've already added more than that to your life

by enhancing Zora when she ages you, so we're even.

And if I do it much more, you'll owe me another Answer."

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Humfrey stared at her belligerently.

"What kind of

logic is that, woman?"

"Female logic, of course," she informed him. "Want

to make something of it?" Ivy already
had a fair notion

how to handle men, even those who
could not readily be

charmed.

"Um, no," Humfrey said. "Some distant
day you're

going to be King of Xanth, may the
Demon have mercy

on that day."

"I already know that, dummy, so watch your step."

She had learned about firmness from her mother, just as

she had learned about pedestals from her father. It would

never do to let any man get the upper hand. As Irene had

muttered ominously, there was no telling where he might

put it.

"Okay, okay, where's your Question?"
Humfrey asked
grumpily.

"I need something to clean up the magic
tapestry so

Jordan the Ghost can remember."

Another person might have had difficulty
grasping this,

but Humfrey, young as he was, was the
Magician of In-

formation. He had had over a century of experience be-

fore being accidentally youthened back to babyhood, along

with Stanley Steamer; now his power was returning, as

was his irascible nature.

Humfrey pondered a moment, then brightened. "The

Big Book should have it," he exclaimed. Ivy knew that

some people claimed there was no such thing as a Big

Book of Answers for all Questions, but those people had

never seen Humfrey's study. The Good Magician went

over to a table where a huge tome rested, and he scram-

bled up on the high stool to reach it. He turned the ancient

pages. "Good thing I've learned to read again," he grumped

as he pored over the fine print.

"Tables... tadpoles...

tailspins... talismen... tangle trees...

tapestry! Nature

of. History of, Present Location of.

Abuse of—aha!

Cleaning of!"

"That's it!" Ivy exclaimed.

"Quiet, woman, while I'm researching,"
he snapped.

Ivy opened her mouth to retort suitably,
but decided

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to restrain herself until Humfrey produced the Answer.

Timing was important when dealing with men, as her

mother had said. Anyway, it was no insult to be called

"woman." She was glad he hadn't paused to read the entry

under "Abuse of" because that very well might mention

the wiping-off or laying-on of hands on its surface, which

would be awkward to explain.

"Use crewel lye," he read. "Recipe as follows: half a

tumbler of—"

"Wait, I can't remember a whole recipe!" Ivy pro-

tested. "I have trouble remembering the recipe for hard-

boiling an egg! I need a written copy—
and no big words."

Ivy was learning to read, but preferred
words like "Fun"

and "Joy" to ones like "Delinquent" or
"Punishment."

Humfrey blew air through his cheeks,
exactly as he

would when a century or so older. "Then
fetch me that

copy-cat."

Ivy looked where he pointed. In a corner sat a creature

like a contracted caterpillar, with only four legs, one tail,

and several long whiskers. It looked rounded, furry, and

soft, but evinced an attitude of independence and aloof-

ness.

She went and tried to pick up the

creature, but it sort

of slid through her hands and remained on its soft pillar.

She tried to haul it up by the tail, but its eyes glowed in

yellow slits, claws sprang out from its paws, and it yowled,

so she desisted. It certainly was a strange animal!

Then Ivy tried another system. She walked in front of

it. "Here, copy, copy, copy, copy!" she called. And the

copy-cat came, walking exactly the way Ivy was walking.

When they reached the table, she pointed to its surface.

"Jump, copy!" She jumped herself, to show how it was

done, and the copy-cat jumped. But it jumped just the

way she did, up and down on the floor.

So Ivy scrambled up on the table herself,
to the Good

Magician's annoyance. "Up!" she called,
and the copy-

cat scrambled up beside her.

"Don't stand on the pages!" Humfrey
cried, grabbing

the copy-cat and plunking it down on the
page. "Copy

that copy, cat."

The cat sat on the crewel lye recipe. It purred. In a

moment it opened its mouth and extruded its tongue, which

was a sheet of paper.

Humfrey tore off the paper—an act that startled Ivy—

and handed it to her. "There's your copy. Now go away."

Naturally, Ivy got ready to argue, but realized that she

wanted to go away, now that she had what she wanted,

so she kept silent. Sometimes the directives of men had

to be obeyed, when they chanced to be correct, annoying

as that was. She scrambled down off the table and left

the little Good Magician to his reading. He had become

entirely distracted by the text before him,
which happened

to be taxidermy, while the copy-cat
continued to extrude

copies of the crewel lye recipe. A copy
fell down before

him, obscuring his text, at which he
stared at the cat

speculatively. "Very interesting
techniques here," Hum-

frey murmured. "I wonder—" but at that
point the cat

hastily jumped clear of the text, not having the same in-

terest in studying, or in being a subject for, taxidermy

that Humfrey had.

The Gorgon greeted Ivy as she departed.
The Gorgon

was an elegant, tau, veiled woman with snake hair, the

Good Magician's wife and the mother of Hugo, Ivy's

friend. "Won't you stay for a cookie, dear?" she asked.

Ivy started to decline, but the Gorgon produced the

biggest, loveliest, most aromatic punwheel cookie imag-

inable, and Ivy was overwhelmed. She realized that the

Gorgon was probably lonely for living female company,

so it would be only proper to visit for a

while. She decided
to stay for one cookie.

In due time, Ivy returned to Castle
Roogna with the

recipe, retracing her route through the
gourd. No one had

missed her except the ghosts—which, of
course, was part

of her problem. All anyone paid
attention to these days

was the confounded baby. She'd like to

drop him into the

peephole of a gourd, without the mare shoe!

But now she could clean the tapestry and get Jordan's

complete story. All she had to do was use the recipe to

make the cleaner. Fortunately, the ghosts knew where all

the supplies were. Ivy got a pot and some lye and some

Crewel Lye

fat and stuff and cooked them together according to in-

structions. The lye was strong stuff that tried to bum her

little hands, but the recipe told her how

to be careful.

Jordan's friend Renee Ghost helped Ivy to read the more

difficult parts of the instructions, so that she made no

mistakes. She had to say several spells along the way, to

tune the lye into the crewel, but finally she had a bottle

of the elixir.

She got a sponge, soaked it with her lye

mix, and wiped

it across the surface of the tapestry. The result was star-

ting. There was a swath of much brighter and clearer

images. The stuff was working!

Ivy went carefully over the entire tapestry until it fairly

shone. The moving pictures looked so real she almost

believed she could walk into them. "Oh,

yes!" Jordan

exclaimed. "I can see every detail! The memories are

flooding back!"

"Now tell me your story," Ivy ordered him.

She settled back before the tapestry, watching, while

Jordan concentrated on the beginning of his story. With

Ivy's help, because the ghost could not make the tapestry

respond by himself, he got the correct sequence of pic-

tures to form. Then, as the pictures showed the action,

Jordan narrated the story as he remembered it. He skipped

over the dull parts, such as sleeping, and lingered on the

good parts, such as fighting monsters and kissing fair

maidens and encountering strange magic.
It was a genuine

tale of Swords and Sorceries and Goods
and Evils and

Treacheries, and Ivy was entranced. She
loved tales with

guts. She watched and heard the caustic
yarn as if she

were there herself. She thrilled to the
Thud and Blunder

">f it and suffered fervently with the
revelation t>f the Un-

Kind Untruth.

Chapter 2. Pooka

I believe it really started when I came of age. It

was the fashion in those days for a young man to prove

himself by indulging in some fantastic exploit; then he

could marry and settle down, having earned his fame.

I had a wonderful girlfriend, Elsie, who
could turn

water into fine wine just by touching it
with her little

finger, and she was pretty and sensible,
and she wanted

to get married and start a family right
away. I just wasn't

ready for that yet; it sounded so dull. I
wanted adventure!

This was getting very difficult. Elsie really wanted me

to stay, and she didn't care about heroic tradition, and

she was certainly attractive. We were having some awk-

ward scenes. I promised her that, after I had my adventure

and became a hero, I would return to her, but this was

really a lie, because we both knew I would never get tired

of adventure. She promised me that, after we started a

family, she would let me go out and travel in Xanth and

maybe slay a dragon or two, but we both knew that was

also a lie, for a family never lets go of a man. I wanted

to sow my wild oats first; that way I would be sure of

them.

Elsie really wasn't very keen on wild
oats; I'm not sure

why. So finally we made a deal: Elsie
would have one

night to show me how nice tame oats
could be and dem-

onstrate the advantages of family living,
to persuade me

to stay. If she couldn't, then I would
travel. It seemed

fair enough.

Little did I know what kind of night she
planned! I was

really pretty naive in those days and
knew a lot less about

a lot of things than I thought I did. I
supposed she was

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going to feed me good food and treat me well and talk to

me convincingly about the advantages of the settled life.

Instead she—well, I'm not sure I should say much about

this to—in fact, I think we'd better just skim the pictures

on past that night and—No? But I could get in trouble

with your folks if I said too much about

—well, all right,

I'll describe just a little of it.

Elsie met me wearing a gown that—
well, I had known

she was pretty, but hadn't quite realized
how pretty she

could be when she really tried. I found
myself staring at—

at the way she breathed. And the way
she sat. Then she

took me inside her, uh, bedroom, and I

followed her and

found myself staring at the way she walked. Then she—

this is really pretty dull, so maybe we should skip this

scene—No? Um, well, she showed me how to send a

message to the stork, and I agreed that this was all the

adventure I ever needed, and we finally fell asleep.

But in the morning I remembered about
the other type

of adventure, exploring strange places
and fighting strange

creatures, and I knew I had to try that
first. Elsie was

still asleep, half smiling, and I felt really
terrible as I

dressed and buckled on my sword. But I
didn't even kiss

her; I just sneaked out of the house like a
grounded child

and started walking south, toward the center of Xanth,

where the real action was supposed to be.

Guilt followed me like a lowering cloud, because my

promise during the evening had turned out to be another

cruel lie, and I almost turned back again. But the lure of

the adventurous wilds drew me on and it

was stronger
than my guilt.

Somehow I didn't feel very bold or
heroic at the mo-

ment. I felt more like a coward, for I had
not had the

courage to wake Elsie and tell her
honestly, "I'm going,

gal, sorry about that." She Would have—
well, women

can be very difficult about that sort of

thing. And once I

was fairly on my way, I lacked the
courage to return and

apologize. Some heroes aren't very
courageous or heroic

inside.

But now I was committed and I had to
look forward

instead of back. Already I had learned a
lesson of life:

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that the sweetest, saddest thing is what-might-have-been.

I suspected I was doing wrong and would pay some hid-

eous price for it, but still I kept doing it, ashamed to

confess that wrong.

The wilds of Xanth were wilder in those days than they

are today, I think, and many strange creatures and magics

existed that no longer exist today. The plants had not yet

learned the proper respect for man, and the dragons came

even to our village of Fen to gobble people. That was

why we had a warrior tradition; we needed bold young

men to fend off stray monsters. We were near the north-

east border of Xanth, beside what was later to become

known as the Ogre Fen, but at that time the ogres were

far away, still migrating clumsily northward. My boots

tended to bog down in the interminable reaches of the

fen, and I soon realized that it was a long way to the heart

of Xanth, where the fabulous Castle Roogna stood. It

would take me forever or so to get there by foot, and I

found I really didn't like walking. I needed a ride.

That was a problem. There weren't any centaurs in

our isolated region of Xanth, and dragons did not make

good steeds—they tended to conspire to

carry their pas-

sengers inside their bodies instead of
outside—and I was

afraid to fly with a flying creature; never
could be quite

sure where one of those might drop you
off. I knew there

were sea-horses in the sea, but I was
trekking inland.

There was a man in Fen Village who
made hobby-horses,

but I hadn't thought to cheek with him
before starting off.

In any event, his horses didn't really carry people, they

just seemed to. What was I to do?

I knew what: I had to toughen my legs so I could walk

all day without getting so fatigued that I lost the pleasure

in the adventure. So far, adventure wasn't really much

fun. There was a lot to be said for staying home and

starting a family. I almost turned about—
but again found

I could not. To turn back then, I would
have to admit my

error—that I had been wrong to leave
Elsie. That was

more difficult to do than fighting a
dragon. If I had not

been wrong, I think I could have turned
back; but since

I was wrong, I could not do it.

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I think now, after four hundred years as a
ghost to

reflect on philosophical matters—ghosts
are better with

intangibles than they are with tangibles,
because they are

intangible themselves—that women are
more practical

than are men, and the reason that women have most of

the sex appeal is to enable them to lure men away from

the foolishness they are otherwise prone to seek. Cer-

tainly my adventure, when considered as a whole, was a

consummate exercise in folly, and would have been even

if it hadn't cost me my life. I could have had night after

night with Elsie; instead I courted—and won—disaster.

If vanity be the name of woman, folly is the name of man!

So I walked on—and fate came to me, undeserving as

I was. At first it didn't seem good, but that is often the

way of things. The bad seems good, like a pleasant path

leading to the tentacles and maw of a

tangle tree, and the

good seems bad, like the pooka.

It was dusk, and I had scrounged up
some sugar sand

and tapped a beer-barrel tree for beer,
the true barbarian

beverage. My head was spinning
pleasantly, detaching

my mind from my tired feet, when I
heard the sinister

rattling of a chain. Now, I was young

and foolish and a

coward about personal relations, but
very little of the

physical world scared me. Yet this rattle
did—and that

brought me alert. If that sound sent a
cold shiver along

my spine, it had to be because it was
meant to—and that

meant magic. Therefore I was intrigued,
for strange magic

was part of what I sought. I had the
sword; I needed the

sorcery.

I quickly got up, drew my sword, and stalked the rattle.

I heard it again, farther away, so I hurried to catch up.

But still it was distant, leading me through the wildest

and most desolate landscape. The trees were silhouetted

by fuzzy moonlight and looked like
gnarled giants frozen

in place. But one was not frozen; when I
brushed against

it, its tentacles grabbed for me, and I
realized that I had

blundered into the clutches of a tangler,
one of the most

fearsome vegetables of Xanth. So I
slashed about me with

my blade, severing the tentacles, and the
tree quickly let

me go. My sword was not magic,
precisely, but it was

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good and sharp, and I wielded it well; I
really did not fear

a tangle tree, either. To a barbarian, cold
steel is the

answer to most problems and, you know,
it's a pretty

effective answer. I suppose I might have

felt otherwise if

my magic talent had been different; I
actually could afford

quite a bit of foolishness.

After that, I realized that the rattling
chain was only

leading me into mischief. I was playing
its game. But I

remained intrigued by it; the sound had
become a chal-

lenge, a minor adventure in itself. So I

decided to get

smart and make it play my game.

I returned to my camping spot. Sure
enough, the rattle

followed me, coming closer. But on the
way I foraged in

the darkness for some rustleweeds and
centipede grass,

and I set them at my place under a
chocolate-smelling

cocoa-nut shell. Naturally they rustled

and scrambled

faintly, so that it sounded as if a person
were lying there

somewhat restlessly, as he would if
disturbed by a rattling

chain. Then I sneaked silently away—I
was good at that

sort of thing—and circled widely around
behind the chain

rattle.

Sure enough, I fooled it. Barbarians are

very cunning

about such things. I watched as it
approached my camp-

site, wondering why I no longer
spooked. Spooks don't

like to be ignored! It came over a ridge
and I saw it in

silhouette against the moonlight—and it
was a night mare.

No, not a mare, I realized after a
moment, for several

reasons. The mares did not tease
sleepers with distant

sounds; they came right in to deliver their bad dreams,

then trotted on to the next. They did not have time to

fool around, for there were many dreams to deliver. Be-

sides which, I wasn't asleep. And this was no mare; it

was a colt. Maybe a stallion. A shaggy, wild thing hung

with chains; that was how it rattled. It was, in fact, a

pooka—a ghost horse.

A horse. My barbarian brain began to percolate. I could

use that horse! But how could I catch it? I was sure that

it was at least halfway solid, because its chains rattled,

so they were solid, and it had to be solid enough to carry

them. But it could simply outrun me—which was one

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reason I wanted it. Not only would travel be easier with

a horse, but would be faster, and I would be able to carry

more. Besides, the challenge interested me; as far as I

knew, no one had ever captured a pooka before. So this

was exactly the sort of adventure I

sought. Think of the

amazement if I rode back into Fen
Village on a ghost

horse!

But I was very tired now; contrary to
carefully fostered

myth, barbarians do get tired on
occasion. It would be

better to get a night's rest and commence
the pursuit in

the morning. On the other hand, the

creature could be

long gone by then, so I didn't dare wait.

I sighed. It would have to be now.

Fortunately, I was

a robust young man, so my fatigue was
an inconvenience,

not a crippling thing. I organized for the
chase.

First I used my sword to cut some supple
long vines

to serve as rope for a lariat, since I
wanted to capture,

not kill, this creature; that was a more
difficult matter. I

wasn't sure it was possible to kill a
ghost horse, but I

didn't want to take the chance. Naturally
I had practiced

with ropes in the course of my
preparations for herodrom

and had a pretty good touch; it is one of
the basic uncivi-

lized skills. Then I started off.

Of course the pooka realized almost immediately that

I was pursuing him; ghost horses are quite alert about

such things. With a rattle of chains, he took off. I could

not come close to matching his pace, but I could see his

hoofprints in the moonlight, and the continual clink of the

chains enabled me to follow him more readily by ear.

I plodded on, giving short shrift to whatever got in my

way. S didn't like traveling by night, for the only class of

menaces that is worse than that of the day-wilderness is

that of the night-wilderness. But maybe the night-horrors

realized that I was tired and irritable and

not to be trifled

with, for none attacked me. Maybe I was just lucky. Some

fools have phenomenal luck, and of course they need it.

So I kept the clink of the chains just within audible

range, for the pooka had not expected me to persist in

the pursuit and kept pausing to forage. That confirmed

that it was solid; true ghosts didn't have to eat. At that

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point, in my mind, the pooka changed from "it" to "he."

It is a ghost; he is a living creature. I don't claim that this

was deep thinking on my part; it was just the way I saw

things.

I realized that the pooka had teased me simply because

I was there; it had been a chance encounter. Now I was

overreacting, and the ghost horse was uncertain. He didn't

know that I intended to capture him. He would stand for

a while in silence, thinking I would lose him without the

rattle; but I always walked directly

toward the last chain

sound I had heard, using my unerring
primitive sense of

direction. Inevitably he would move
again. He couldn't

walk or run without those chains
sounding off; that was

his curse. If this had not been the case, I
never would

have been able to track him, either by
night or by day.

At least, not so readily.

Morning dawned, and the pooka had led
me generally

southwest. At that point, as the sun got
ready to heave

itself up into the sky, he found a hidden
thicket and froze.

I couldn't hear him and I couldn't see
him, and the brush

was so thick I knew I would make so
much noise searching

it that the pooka might escape, his chain

clinks drowned

out. So I waited, and it became a siege. I knew he was

near, but had to make him move. And of course he was

determined not to move, having tired of this game.

I made good use of the wait. I snoozed. I really needed

that sleep!

But I woke instantly at the clink of the chain. The

pooka was trying to sneak out! He thought I was one of

the civilized sleepers who wallow so deep in dreams they

can't break free for six hours at a time. Not me! I knew

when I planned to go adventuring that I could never afford

to tune out the wilderness, so I had learned to wake the

moment anything threatened and to sleep
again the mo-

ment the threat was gone. Wild creatures
sleep that way,

and I was pretty wild myself. So that
single little clink of

a link alerted me, and I unkinked my legs
and set off in

renewed pursuit.

Now the pooka bolted. I followed,
feeling better, though

I really hadn't had enough sleep. I had held the trail through

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the night and gotten just as much rest as the pooka had.

I grabbed edible berries from bushes as

I walked, feeding

myself; there again I had an advantage,
for the pooka had

to pause to graze and could not do that
while running.

He was probably getting really hungry
now. I realized,

now that I thought about it, that anything
solid enough

to carry heavy chains had to take in
energy-food.

I passed a region where the bushes had
twice as many

berries, for each was double. I was
about to pop the first

twin-berries into my mouth when I
hesitated. I had, of

course, familiarized myself with many
natural things, so

that I could safely forage in the
wilderness, but these were

strange. Something nagged; Something
about twin-berries,

paired berries, double-berries—

I froze. Berry-berries! They were
poisonous, causing

weakness, paralysis, and wasting away.
But the effects

were slow, so that a person could eat a
lot of them before

being affected—and that would be too
late. Of course my

magic talent would protect me from
serious damage, but

while it was acting, the pooka could have gotten away.

Better not to get into trouble to begin with!

However, I had a cunning primitive thought. I might

be able to use those berry-berries for my own advantage

sometime. So I harvested a number and put them in my

bag. I noticed there were no B's buzzing

around the plants

that still had flowers; perhaps that had helped alert me.

B's stayed strictly away from berry-berries, so that the

berries could even be used as a B repellent.

Then I plowed on after the pooka, who obviously had

had the sense not to nibble on these berries. Had he led

me through here deliberately? I wasn't
sure. Animals aren't

supposed to be too smart—but then
neither are barbarian

swordsmen. Prejudices can be
deceiving.

I came to hoofprints leading clearly to a
line—and

beyond that line was nothing. Not a cliff,
not a wall, just—

nothing.

Now, I always did get a little nervous
about things I

didn't understand, such as marriage and
family, and I

certainly didn't understand this. Was it
magic? I had heard

of magic mirrors that a person could step
into and be in

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the reverse land beyond, and I knew
better than to look

into the peephole of a hypnogourd. But it
looked as if the

pooka had crossed this line and
disappeared, so it seemed

I would have to follow if I wanted to
catch him. Then

again, those berry-berries—exactly how
cunning was this

creature?

I decided to double-check. A little caution seldom hurts

anyone. Another myth about barbarians is that they charge

straight ahead heedlessly into danger; in truth it is the

ignorant civilized man, blundering in the jungle, who does

that. No barbarian ever walked blithely into a tangle tree!

Well, yes, I did do that at night, but that was a special

situation, and I had my sword ready.

I retraced the suspiciously clear
hoofprints—and dis-

covered another set diverging behind
some bushes. This

occurred on turf, where the traces
wouldn't have been

visible to the average person, but of
course I had a keen

wilderness eye. The pooka had walked
up to the line,

stopped, then carefully backtracked,
setting each hoof in

its own print, so as to make it seem he
had crossed.

That was warning enough for me. I
would not cross

that line! Later I learned how smart my
decision was; the

line was the boundary of the Void, from
which no creature

returned. The pooka had led me to a

pretty trap indeed!

This, however, showed how clever an animal he was.

Now, more than ever, I wanted him for my steed. I fol-

lowed the new trail and soon spooked the ghost horse

back into motion. He had been standing in another thicket,

watching me approach. The devil!

Now I was twice as determined to capture him. I pur-

sued him with such determination that I hardly felt my

fatigue. When he paused, so that I could neither hear nor

see him, in some location where the trail was confused,

I paused too, napping; when he moved again, I moved.

I could tell he was getting nervous—and ravenous.

He was now fleeing southeast. This took me through

a pleasant region filled with birds of every size and de-

scription. Some of them were pretty big; in fact, I saw a

roc-bird circling overhead, but I wasn't too nervous be-

cause I knew I was too small to interest it. The pooka

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was another matter, though; I saw the roc swoop down

and realized with horror that it was going for the ghost

horse.

Quickly I unslung my bow and charged forward. I

crested a ridge just in time to see the big bird lifting the

pooka in its claws. But the chains added to the weight of

the horse, off-balancing the bird, and it hesitated. Quickly

I loosed a shaft. It sped directly to the bird's feathered

rump. Of course, my arrow was no more than a little thorn

to a creature that size. But the thorn must
have lodged

in a tender spot, because the bird let out
an indignant, O-

shaped squawk and dropped the pooka.

The pooka galloped away with a loud
rattle and scooted

past a tangle tree where the roc couldn't
follow. The big

bird screamed in fury—and oriented on
me. Have you

ever seen an angry roc? You never want to! The thing

launched itself toward me, and its wings spread so wide

they blotted out the light of the sun. I raised my sword,

but I knew it was hopeless; this creature was simply too

big for me to fight.

The talons came down, grasping for me—but they were

so huge and spread so wide that they
missed me; I passed

right through their mesh. Perceiving this,
the roc grabbed

again, this time plunging its claws into
the ground around

me. They hooked into dirt, rock, turf, and
a medium-

sized tree and swept all up together,
with me in the center.

I laid desperately about me with my

sword as the bird

took off. I struck at the nearest talon,
which was as thick

as my thigh, and severed it with a single
mighty-thewed

blow. Blood spurted out of the artery in
its center, and

the ground that talon had supported
crumbled. Blood

soaked the divot, further weakening the
structure. The

scooped-up tree fell through, and I
tumbled through with

it. We plunged in a messy mass to the ground from the height of a standing tree.

It was a bad fall, made worse by the gory dirt. I was knocked half silly, and my condition was not improved when several fair-sized rocks landed on me, crushing my legs. I don't know how other heroes manage to escape

injury when caught in horrendous situations; certainly I

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had no such charm. I did the sensible thing—I lost consciousness.

I recovered an hour later, my crushed leg healed. Oh,

didn't I mention this? My magic talent is healing myself.

If I am cut, it will seal up immediately if small, and in

minutes if large. If I lose a finger, it regrows. If I lose a

foot, it takes about an hour to regenerate. If I am killed

by an arrow through the heart, I will recover in a day.

Longer, if no one pulls out the arrow. So my crushed leg

was a job for an hour, and I was as fit as ever. Maybe

fitter, because the restored leg wasn't tired, the way the

other one was.

Evidently the big bird had left me for dead. That was

a natural mistake. Similar confusions had happened be-

fore. I was, in fact, practically indestructible in any per-

manent sense. That was one reason I liked adventure. I

had good magic for a hero.

So now I resumed the pursuit. The ghost horse hadn't

gone far. Thinking me out of it, he was grazing nearby.

Yes, he was hungry!

I yelled and bore down on him. He looked up, star-

tled—and reacted as if he'd seen
someone risen from the

dead. Terrified, he took off, leaving half
a munch of grass

to drop to the ground behind. One might
think a ghost

horse would not be afraid of other
ghosts, but that's not

so; even ghosts fear what they don't
understand, and the

average ghost is a pretty timid creature. I
ought to know!

And, of course, a pooka isn't a complete ghost, because

of that solidity; it's sort of in a halfway state, much the

way a zombie is halfway between life and death. If the

pooka ever slipped his chains, he'd fade into full spirit

status. But the chains hold him to life, so he must graze

and do most of the other things living creatures do, how-

ever inconvenient some of them may be.

There are a

number of things like that in Xanth,
neither this nor that,

but partaking of some of this and other of
that.

The chase was on again. The pooka fled
southeast—

and led me into griffin country. I could
tell by the old

spoor, the claw marks on the trunks of

trees, and the

griffin manure. I kept alert, for griffins can be aggressive

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creatures. I figured I could handle one griffin, but some-

times they traveled in prides, and that could be trouble.

The roc had left me because I was too small a morsel to

bother with, and it would have gotten
dirt on its beak just

scooping up my body. But griffins would
eat me, and I

wasn't sure how easy it would be for me
to recover if

that happened. Maybe if one of them ate
most of me, I'd

be able to collect myself together again
—but I didn't care

to risk it. For one thing, injuries, hurt me
just the same

as they do other folk, until they heal; why
endure all that

pain if I didn't have to? So I was careful.
Maybe barbar-

ians were supposed to laugh at scars as
if they never felt

a wound, but the humor of that escaped
me.

The pooka, hungry and tired, was less
careful. He

charged right through a griffin-retreat,

where there was a

big nest in a low-branching tree. A griffiness was on the

nest, incubating an egg or something—I'm not quite clear

on that aspect, as griffins are fussy creatures with royal

lineages and don't tolerate much snooping—and she let

out an awful squawk at this intrusion. The male griffin

had been snoozing on a branch up higher in the tree, his

wings folded while his claws gripped
the bark. Startled,

he jumped right off the branch and
plunged like a rock,

or maybe I mean a roc, before he spread
his wings and

pulled out of the dive. He wasn't one bit
pleased. I sus-

pect I wouldn't be, either, waking up like
that, with a

woman screaming at me about some
creature violating

her privacy. Maybe that's another reason
I was wary of

marriage; like the boundary to the Void,
it's apt to be a

one-way trip into who-knows-what.

It took only a moment for the male griffin
to catch on

that the pooka had started this. He
wheeled in the air and

swooped after the ghost horse, who had
recovered sense

enough to gallop out of there at top speed. I followed as

fast as I could.

The pooka was fast, despite the chains, when he ran

full-out; but so was the griffin in flight, and he wasn't

carrying any extra weight. I think, if the pooka had been

fresh or had better running turf, he could have escaped.

But the ground was getting marshy here, and there were

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many trees, so the terrain hampered the ghost horse some-

what. The griffin was able to swoop efficiently around the trees, so he gained.

The griffin pulled up above the pooka and pounced—

and I was too far away to do anything. I could only run

after them, and watch. Even if I had been within arrow

range, I'm not sure I would have used my bow, because,

if I killed the griffin, it would have left
the griffiness alone

on her nest, unable to forage without
leaving her egg or

whatever, and I really didn't like to do
that. Meeting a

griffin in battle is one thing; messing up
nesting arrange-

ments is another. Yes, I know this
sounds foolish, but

you can't live in the wilderness long
without developing

a solid respect for the creatures there.
These griffins had

not been looking for trouble; the pooka
had started it

because I was chasing him, which really
made the whole

thing my fault. I can kill creatures when
I'm right, but

not when I'm wrong. So I was really
pretty well helpless,

regardless.

The griffin landed on the pooka's back,
and his beak

pecked down—and struck one of the
chains. Ouch! The

griffin, dazed by the pain, tried to fly up
and couldn't,

because one of his claws was caught in
another chain.

The pooka bucked, trying to throw off
the griffin; the

griffin wanted to go, but could not. Then

the pooka charged

under an overhanging branch, and that
scraped the griffin

off, the hard way. He fluttered, turning
over in the air,

and bounced on his back on the ground.
Little stars and

planets of discomfort radiated out from
him as he bounced.

He scrambled upright and took to the air
again, unstead-

ily, trailing lingering squiggles of
confusion and dismay.

He had forgotten about the pooka, who did not linger to

remind him. The griffin lurched back toward the nest-

tree, radiating evanescent wattles of sweat. One hardly

ever sees a griffin sweat! I ran on after the ghost horse.

The marsh grew marshier, as such things tend to do,

and my boots squished in it. I didn't like

this, but had to

keep after the pooka. The ghost horse didn't like it, either.

He veered south, heading for higher ground, but it became

apparent that the mountains visible to the south were too

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far away to do much good for some time. So he turned

west, and I followed, and we slogged up toward a bright

wall. Evidently this region was outside the pooka's nor-

mal range; he wasn't quite certain where he was going.

The closer we got to the wall to the west, the brighter

it became—and the worse the land got. Now it was a

virtual bog—and triangular colored fins

appeared in it,

traveling at high speed. A green one
came near me and

rose up out of the muck; I saw that it was
a big fish with

a mouthful of teeth. The fish leaped at
me, teethfirst, so

I whipped out my trusty sword and
stabbed the creature

in the snout.

"Ooo, ouch!" the fish cried, plopping
back into the

muck. "You didn't have to do that! All I
wanted was to

loan you something."

I didn't trust talking fish. "What did you
expect in

return?"

"Only an arm and a leg," it replied.

"Well, I'm not interested, leave me alone, or—"

"That's what I'm trying to do! Leave you a loan. I'm

a loan shark."

"I don't care if you're a lone shark or a hundred sharks,

I don't want to see your green back near me! Take off,

or I'll lop off your fin."

The thought of losing its finback discouraged the fish,

and it swam rapidly away.

But the pooka was having more trouble.

Three of the

fins, red, blue, and yellow, were circling him hungrily,

and he was mudded down in the bog. He slogged through

the slough toward the west wall. But now I could see that

it was a wall of fire. That was no good!

I forged toward him, waving my sword
to scare away

the fish. "Move off," I cried at them, "Or
I'll saw your

bucks in half." The fish hesitated, not
wanting to expe-

rience this sawbuck. But the pooka saw
my waving weapon

and was scared away himself. He
plunged for the firewall.

"No, wait!" I cried. "I'm trying to help

you!"

But he continued, more afraid of me than of either the

fins or the firewall, and soon he reached the latter. Now

the heat stopped him. He couldn't pass that fire, but the

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fish hemmed him in behind. The red and blue fins were

spiraling closer; the yellow, more fearful, circled farther

out.

The pooka wrenched a forefoot out of the bog and

struck at the red fin, but the effort mired the other three

legs deeper. He was in real trouble! I
shoved toward him,

and now he couldn't flee me. But I wasn't
sure how I

could save him, let alone capture him.

The blue shark forged in at the pooka's
side and tried

to take a bite; its teeth crunched on
chains. I saw little

sparks fly up as enamel met metal; that
must have hurt!

The fish retreated, but did not depart.

Now at last I got there. The pooka was
afraid of me,

but so badly mired he couldn't move.

"Look, Pook," I

said. "All I want is to ride you. When I
get where I'm

going, I'll let you go. It's not a fate worse
than death!

And death is what you'll get here. If you
don't drown,

the sharks will skin you alive. Wouldn't you rather travel with me?"

The pooka just looked at me as if I were halfway tetched.

I'm not sure he understood me. Animals vary in Xanth;

some are smarter than people, but most are not. Maybe

my voice reassured him, that and the fact

that I wasn't

trying to kill him. Maybe he was just so
mired he couldn't

budge.

The red fin launched itself at me. I
chopped at it with

my blade, severing the fin from the body
exactly as I had

warned the greenback I would, and this
redneck swam

raggedly away. Now the water was red,

too!

But the blood attracted more fins. From all over the

bog they converged, the colored light reflecting in what

someone in a less precarious situation might have con-

sidered pretty. "Pook, we're in trouble!" I said. I slogged

right up against him. He tried to flinch away from me,

but could not. I climbed on his back, and my weight

shoved him deeper into the muck. Then the first fin ar-

rived; I lashed at it with my sword and cut it off the fish.

Immediately six other sharks pounced on the wounded

one and tore it to pieces. An arm and a leg? These mon-

sters were out for anything they could get!

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Another came at us, and I served it
likewise—and so

did its companions. And a third.
Supported as I was, I

could reach a full circle with my sword.
Not one fin got

close enough to bite before being
severed. Soon the muck

around us was a morass of gore.

After a time, so many sharks had been eaten that the

remaining ones were gorged. The circle of fins widened

and fell apart; they were no longer interested in us. As I

have said, brute force and swordplay may not be the

answer to every problem, but there are

times when they

' are good enough.

The pooka was now up to his shoulders in muck. Be-

fore long the stuff would reach his head, and he would

drown in dirty blood. I had to do something!

"Look, Pook," I told him. "I'm on your side. I want

to help you. I saved you from the fins. I helped you escape

the roc and the griffin before. Now I've got to get you

out of here—but I don't know how. So I'll try to find a

way. You just hang on here. I'll be back as soon as I can;

keep your chin up." I dismounted and

stood in the muck

beside him.

Well, could I pull his feet out, one by one? I reached

down along one hind leg, gripped it as deep as I could,

and hauled. It did not come up; I sank down. That was

no good.

I looked at the firewall. It was not as hot as I had first

thought, and I could see vague shapes through it. Was it

thin? I decided to find out.

I took a deep breath, closed my eyes,
ducked under

the bloodwater, and pushed toward the
firewall. When I

hoped I had gone far enough, I came up
—and found

myself in a burned-out forest. The
firewall was behind

me, and evidently the fire had recently
left this spot. But,

strangely, green shoots were already
appearing on the

charred trees. They were burned but not dead.

To the west, the muck soon dehydrated into a baked

flat, dried out by the fire. The pooka would be able to

walk here—if he could get across the firewall. Well, I

had done it; he could use the same device, ducking under

the water. If he could unmuck enough to

move.

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He would need help. I contemplated the
smoldering,

sprouting trunks and had a notion. I
could haul him under!

1 ducked under the firewall again and came up in the

bloodbath. There was the pooka, unchanged, except a

little deeper mired. He was keeping his chin up; he had

to, to keep his nose clear of the bloodstream that sur-

rounded him.

"I need a chain," I said. I put my hands on one of the

chains that wrapped him and tugged at it.
The thing was

tied in, with no free end. I wondered
who had fastened

these chains on him and why, but this
was not the time

for idle speculation. Many things in
Xanth don't have

sensible explanations anyway; they just
are.

"I'll have to do this the hard way," I said.

"Steady,

now." I stretched out a loop of chain so that it projected

into the water beside him, then hefted my sword, lifting

it above my head with both hands and bringing it down

ferociously.

The pooka neighed with terror, but was unable to flinch

away. Then the blade caught the loop of

chain and sliced

through it. I had a good sword; it had
been dipped in

dragon's blood, and so the blade was
magically hard and

sharp and could cut through almost
anything.

I took one of the severed ends, passed it
down around

the muck-buried barrel of the ghost
horse, and drew it up

on the other side. I kept working,
unraveling the chain

until I had what I needed. Then I made
sure the rest was

securely anchored about the barrel and
forelimbs of the

animal, so it could not slip free.

"Now, Pook, I'm going to haul you under
the firewall,"

I said. "To get you out of this mess. But
you'll have to

help. When you feel the pull, try to walk with it; you

should be able to, with that help. When you reach the

firewall, get your body as close to it as possible, duck

your head down under it so you won't get burned, and

I'll haul you across. Got that?"

The pooka did not react. I couldn't tell whether he

understood. Well, no help for it; I had to do it. If this

worked, I would save the ghost horse; if not—

I slogged back to the firewall, hauling the chain. I dived

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under. On the other side, I picked a
suitable scorched

tree and strung the chain over a low,
horizontal branch.

Then I hauled on the end.

There was resistance, of course. That
muck didn't want

to let go of its prey. I hauled harder,
hanging my whole

weight on it. Gradually there was give;

slowly the chain

moved. I took a new grip and hauled
some more, and

more came. Now it got easier; the pooka
was helping.

Heave by heave and step by step, I
hauled the animal

toward the firewall, though I could not
see him on the

other side. If he failed to duck his head
at the critical

moment—

Then the taut chain dipped into the muck,
and I knew

the ghost horse was following my
orders. I increased my

effort, and in a moment his head
appeared on my side.

After that, it was easier. I got the pooka
past the fire-

wall and into the shallow muck and finally onto the baked

mud. I removed the chain from the tree and rewrapped

it about the animal; he needed that chain to remain in

existence, as far as I knew. But I did not let go of it.

When I finished, I mounted him. "Willing or not, you're

giving me a ride," I informed him.

The poor thing was so bedraggled and tired he didn't

say neigh. I had my steed at last—or so I thought.

Chapter 3. Callicantzari

I rode Pook to a region where the trees had grown

back considerably and I prepared to spend the night. "I'm

going to let you go," I told him. "But you can see how

the firewall surrounds this region. You can't get out with-

out my help. So there's no point in running from me; you

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might as well just relax and graze." I

dismounted—and

the ghost horse took off at a gallop.

I sighed. I had hoped—but of course I
was just a back-

woods lunk, not understanding the true
motives of people

or creatures, however much I tried. I
foraged for some

fruit for my meal—it was amazing how
fast these trees

progressed after being burned!—then

settled down to

sleep. I didn't worry about predators
here; they wouldn't

pass through the firewall.

Smoke roused me. Night remained—but
the horizon

was bright. Fire was sweeping across
the plain!

I cast about, knowing I was in trouble.
Secure against

animate menaces, I had overlooked the inanimate. The

fire had me halfway surrounded and was moving faster

than I could run. The green grass and foliage had turned

brown; apparently the accelerated cycle of growth did not

stop with maturity, but continued through the season. Pall

had come to this region—and with it the fire, to clean

away the husks and set things up for the
spring in the

morning. Maybe I could bury myself in
the ground until

it passed. But the turf was hard; it would
take hours to

dig myself in properly, and all I had
were minutes.

I heard a rattle. There was the pooka,
running terrified

before the flame. "Get over here!" I

yelled. "I'll guide

you out!" Naturally he paid no attention,
but I cut across

to herd him toward the advancing flame,
where there was

a cul-de-sac, then used my rope to snag
him. I hauled him

to me and climbed onto his back and
gripped the chain.

I had my steed again—just in time.

It wasn't comfortable, sitting on the

chains. When the

ghost horse had been in the muck, I had not felt the chains

as much, but now I did. But I had no choice; the fire

provided no time for comfort. I steered the horse by kick-

ing the side I wanted him to move away from. We galloped

for the closing gap in the ring of fire, my posterior bounc-

ing intemperately on the hard chains.

We reached the gap—and discovered
that beyond it

was only another closing ring. No
escape here! Now what

was I to do? I had promised to find a
way out.

But I saw that part of the new ring was,
in fact, the

outer firewall. That was the boundary;
no fire beyond

that. We could dive under it, and—

There was no water or muck here to use
to get under

the fire. There was also no time. The
bum was avidly

pursuing us.

"We've got to go through!" I cried.

"Close your eyes

and hold your breath!" And I whammed
the end of the

rope against the horse's flank, causing
him to leap wildly

forward.

In midair we sailed through that
firewall. I felt the band

of heat flash past my body, singeing my
whiskers and

clothing; then we were through. We had
had the advan-

tage of firm turf and high velocity this
time; that had made

it possible. But I was not eager to return
to the realm of

fire, if I had any choice in the matter.

We were on a plain before the southern
mountain range

we had been unable to reach before. I
was pleased; south

was the way I wanted to go, and I
preferred mountains

to either bog or bum. I think Pook did,
too.

We moved on toward the mountains as
the sun came

up, then paused for breakfast. I let Pook
graze, but this

time I did not dismount, knowing he
would bolt. I simply

pulled down a dainty feminine fruit from
an overhanging

branch and bit into it. I was surprised; it
was not fruit but

meat—evidently a miss-steak, grown
there by error.

Sometimes spells got befuddled. It made
a good, solid

meal, however, though I would have
preferred to cook

it.

In due course, we walked south again—
and encoun-

tered goblin traces. Pook snorted
nervously and I groaned;

we both knew that goblins were trouble.
But we weren't

about to go back the way we had come.
So we continued

south, much more warily.

It did us no good. A party of goblins
spotted us. The

chase was on.

With goblins, you see, you didn't parley.
Not in those

days, anyway; maybe goblins have
moderated over the

centuries. You fought, or you ran, or you
got tromped;

that was the extent of your options. Since
there were

about ten of them, armed with sticks and

stones to break

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our bones, and only one of me and one
ghost horse, plus

my good sword—well, I was young and
foolish, but not

that foolish. I was no dragon, to chomp
goblins by the

dozen, or ogre, to hurl them to the moon.
So I took the

sensible option—I ran.

Pook, of course, was right with me.

Under me, tech-

nically. Chains and all. He galloped.

Ghost horses don't

like getting eaten by goblins, either.

The goblins gave chase. They were afoot
and they had

stubby little legs, big feet, and gross,
ugly heads, but they

moved along pretty well. Also, one of them sounded a

blast on a horn, summoning the other goblins. It was a

stink horn, and it made a foul-smelling noise, the kind

that instantly attracted that kind of creature. So, though

we handily outran that bunch, we did not get free of gob-

lins.

They poured like hot lava out of the mountain. Today

I understand there are not great numbers of goblins res-

ident on the surface, though it may be a different story

in the dank, deep caverns; but in my day there were more.

They surrounded us in a putrid mass, grabbing at my legs,

yelling obscenely. Goblins are about as obscene as any

creature except the harpies.

Naturally I slashed with my sword,
cutting off their

hands or anything else that came within
range. Fingers,

noses, scalps, and other items flew out
from our contacts;

oh, you should have heard those goblins
yell! But there

were always more glaring faces, more

hands, more sticks

and stones. It is never a pleasant
business, fighting off

goblins, because they just keep coming
thicker than be-

fore.

We tried to veer right, away from the
goblin mountain,

but encountered the firewall. It blazed up
brightly, ready

for us this time, as if daring us to try to

get through it

alive. So we had to veer left—and discovered that we

really hadn't cleared the bog yet; an arm of it came down

almost to the mountain, and a leg of it extended north of

the mountain. That was no good either; the loan sharks

were waiting in it to take my arm and leg. So we charged

straight for the mountain—where most of the goblins were.

Pook bowled them over in his galloping fright, but I knew

we would soon be buried in goblins.

We plowed straight ahead, because we didn't dare turn

or stop. That was directly toward the mountain, which

loomed ever larger as we drew nigh.

The goblins sur-

rounded it like a warty blanket. As we
got close, I saw

that parts of it were terraced, with
narrow winding paths

following the contours, and this gave me
a notion.

I nudged Pook to the side, where a
lance-tree grew. I

severed a lance with a passing sweep of
my sword. Then

we looped back and slowed
momentarily—the ghost horse,

afraid of the massed goblins, was now
obeying my every

hint with marvelous alacrity, since I
seemed to know what

I was doing—so I could flip up the lance
with the point

of my sword and catch it with my free
hand. I have pretty

good coordination with weapons; it's
another barbarian

specialty. Then we resumed speed, and I sheathed my

sword and used both hands to hold the lance firm. It was

a good long one, with the point extending well ahead of

Pook's head.

Now we reached the base of the mountain. I guided

my steed to the nearest convenient path, and we swerved

onto it, churning out divots of turf as
Pook's hooves made

the turn. The lance swept about,
knocking goblins off the

path; they tumbled heads overfeets down
the slope. Their

heads were big and hard as rocks and
dented the mountain

slope where they struck, but their feet
were soft; when

the feet struck, the goblins let out angry
yells. Gobs of

goblins were crowding around the mountain, and the

bowling ones knocked over the standing ones like eight-,

nine-, or ten-pins.

We charged east along the path, the point of the lance

leading, and the goblins ahead dived out of the way. They

couldn't get at us as long as we kept moving. I began to

relax; my impromptu ploy was working,
and we were es-

caping this pesthole. All we needed was
to follow this path

right out of the goblin territory.

It turned out to be a trifle more
complicated than that.

The path curved wondrously, as if
seeking to confuse us;

it included a hairpin curve and a few

nasty jags and jigs and

it branched and intersected other paths
as the convolutions

of the mountain permitted. There were
small goblin caves

along the way, each with its messy little
front yard strewn

with fruit peels, animal bones, and other
garbage. The gob-

lins in these poked sticks out to try to
trip us and threw rocks

from their cover. Fortunately, neither their timing nor their

aim was very good, and we escaped injury. But it was ner-

vous business being bombarded from passing caves.

More enterprising goblins rolled rocks down the inter-

secting paths; most of these were small enough to be mere

nuisances, so that Pook could hurdle

them, but some were

large enough to be threats. We were also
conscious of the

sheer malignance of the massed goblins;
there was not one

of them who wouldn't rejoice at our
misfortune, simply be-

cause we were strangers. The goblins
were the ultimate big-

ots of Xanth, hating all creatures who
were not like

themselves and not feeling too positive
about themselves,

either. I had heard that goblin females were different, but

all I saw here were males. No doubt the females were smart

enough not to indulge in this sort of quarrel.

Then the path slid down the curving mountain, as if tired,

and into the crevice between it and the next mountain. Too

late, I saw that this was a dead end; the

path did not go up

the next slope. Instead it led directly into a large cave whose

depths were dark, ominous, and dreadful. No good ever

comes of caves like that!

The goblins were massed and charging behind us, some

carrying crude wooden shields, and several operated to-

gether to support a lance like mine. We

could not turn about

and go back that way. We would be trying to charge uphill

against a prepared enemy formation. Neither could we turn

aside; the slopes of the crevice were too steep for us to nav-

igate. Glancing up, I saw goblins making ready to roll a

boulder down on us; already it was nudging over the brink.

They were leering with anticipation of the squash it would

make of us.

I had no choice—I guided Pook directly into the men-

acing tunnel. He didn't like this and I didn't like it, but it

was the only route left. Behind, I heard the malignant rum-

ble of the boulder coming down; then there was a sinister

shudder as it crashed into the tunnel,
lodging there with

gruesome finality and blocking the
entrance. Some debris

shook loose from the ceiling to shower
down around us, but

the passage didn't collapse. That was a
relief; I knew that

if the tunnel had survived this long, it
was probably pretty

stable, but doubts are easy to come by in
the deep dark.

We halted, but knew before we checked
that we were

trapped. Even if we managed to push or
pry out the boul-

der, we would encounter an army of
vicious goblins beyond

it, eager to hurt us with sticks, stones,
and names. Once

again we had no choice but to go
forward. I have always

had a distinct dislike of such unchoices;

they generally led

to mischief; and even if they didn't, I still preferred to get

into trouble in my own fashion rather than the forced-path

way.

It was good and gloomy in that cave.

Light seeped in

around the ragged edges of the boulder; but in the deeper

reaches, it was foreboding indeed. Pook

was a ghost horse;

he could see pretty well, since ghosts normally did their work

at night, but I had trouble.

"Pook," I said, "we're just going to have to follow this

cave into the mountain fastness. It must go somewhere, be-

cause the path led right to it, and maybe the other end will

let us out the other side of the hill." But I
felt a chill of ner-

vousness coursing along my spine and
hovering in that one

region it is impossible ever quite to
scratch, because I knew

that not all paths that led in to things led
out again. The path

to a tangle tree was a good example. But
there was no point

in negative thinking at the moment. "So
I'm going to have

to trust you to follow it through and not drop us into some

deep fissure. I know you don't like having me ride you, but

we're in this together, and maybe we can get out together.

Once we're safely out, we can worry about who gets to ride

whom where."

Pook made no response, but I hoped he understood the

situation. I aimed him for the black hole
ahead and nudged

him with my heels. He moved forward at
a walk, his hooves

sounding sharply on the stone. In fact,
there were little

echoes—and I realized that my ears
could serve in lieu of

eyes, to some extent. Barbarians have
keen hearing, though

it can't compare with that of most

animals. The echoes told

me that the walls were close beside us,
but not ahead of us.

The tunnel trended down, as such things
tend to do. I

didn't like that; I wanted to travel up and
out of the moun-

tain. But one must go where one's road
leads, even when

it's a distressing road.

After what seemed like an interminable time, I began to

see a little. There were small fungi growing in cracks in the

wall, casting a magic pastel glow. As we progressed, water

dripped, and the air got cooler and damper; the fungi grew

larger and brighter, until it was possible for me to make out

most of the passage. Some fungi were yellow and some green

or blue; in fact, they were all the colors
of the rainbow,

though faint. It was really rather pretty.

The tunnel expanded, becoming a series
of galleries, each

lined with the rainbow fungi. This was
fine—but now there

were branching passages, and I didn't
know which ones to

follow. Life is simpler when you don't
have many choices,

even if you don't like the route you're
stuck on. So I didn't

choose; I let Pook have his head, and we
proceeded more

or less straight ahead.

Then Pook paused to sniff the air. I
could see his head

only in silhouette, where it blocked the
faint illumination

of the fungi, but I knew his nostrils were
flaring. He smelled

something!

Then I smelled it, too—a fetid odor, the stench of some

large and thoroughly unpleasant creature. We were not

alone.

"We'd better try to avoid that thing," I murmured to

Pook. "It stinks a little like goblin, but worse." I still had

my lance, but wasn't sure how useful it would be in the con-

fines of the cave. I might run the point directly into a dead-

end wall and jar myself right off my mount.

We backed out of this chamber as quietly as we could

and tried an alternate one, but the smell only got stronger.

Then I realized that we weren't

approaching the monster;

the monster was approaching us. It had
heard our footfalls,

our hoof-falls, and was coming to
investigate. "Let's get

out of here!" I said urgently, yielding,
with a certain relief,

to panic. Oh, I know—barbarian
warriors aren't supposed

to experience such emotion. Barbarian warriors don't be-

long in deep, dark caves with stinking monsters, either.

Pook picked up speed, moving as fast as he dared along

the passage. It wasn't fast enough; still the silent stink in-

tensified . We were deep in monster territory and not getting

out. Maybe the goblins had been herding
us here all alons,

knowing what would happen to any
creature who fearfully

braved these dank depths.

Suddenly the monster loomed before us.
It was a gross

manlike thing, with horrible distorted
features. The worst

monsters are always manlike; I've never
been quite clear

why this is so, but it definitely is so. Fur covered this thing's

face; from the fur, a grotesque and bulbous nose poked out,

and under the fur, two great, ugly eye-slits peered, as from

behind a dirty veil; at the bottom of the face, several twisted

tusks projected. There must have been a mouth some-

where. The creature seemed to be male—the worst spec-

imens of anything are always male,
except for harpies. His

arms were hairy extremities on which
the muscles seemed

to be attached backward, and his torso
had several bones

in the wrong places. In some ways he
was like an unusually

large and grotesque goblin, but in other
ways he was

worse—his breath, for one thing; his
exhalations sur-

rounded him like a putrid cloud. Pook and I were gagging.

Later I learned that this was one of the callicantzari,

a race of monsters who lived mostly underground and

undermined the roots of important trees, such as the Tree

of Seeds on Mount Parnassus or the tree that supported

the sky—the trees without which Xanth

as we know it

would cease to exist. Imagine a land
without all the myriad

and wonderful species of trees that stem
from those magic

seeds, or a land without any sky. How
could we function

without the sun and moon and stars and
clouds safely out

of the way? But it seemed that these
monsters didn't

worry about that; they just wanted to
bring down the

trees. Maybe that's one of the differences between mon-

sters and human beings—the monsters don't care what

happens next.

The callicantzari have tunnels going to every signifi-

cant mountain and labor diligently to bring down those

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trees, but when they get close to the surface and its un-

accustomed freedom, they rush out and run around, ter-

rorizing people and animals and dancing wildly, maddened

by the sight of the stars until morning comes. Even the

goblins can't stand them and will attack immediately if

they show up in goblin territory. That explains why the

callicantzari hadn't used our tunnel to escape. When they

get out elsewhere, and the sun rises, they flee its light in

terror. The shock always takes them some time to recover

from, and by the time they resume their normal equilib-

rium, such as it is, the trees have regrown their roots,

and the job has to be started over. Thus the callicantzari

are never successful, which perhaps is just as well. Gen-

erally, because of their repeated failures, they are in a

foul mood, and their breath suggests that mood. So they

really have quite a history, and are not just ordinary mon-

sters. But at the moment, all I knew was that Pook and

I were in more trouble.

We slowed, to avoid the monster—but
then another

appeared behind us, and we heard the
tramping of others

in neighboring caverns. If there is one
thing worse than

one monster, it is two monsters—and
worse yet is a whole

slew of them. We were surrounded!

"Got to bull through and hope we win clear," I told

Pook. "Before we both suffocate from the stench. You

gallop, and I'll fend them off."

He galloped, and I aimed the lance at the monster

before us. The calli was too stupid to move, so that my

point caught him on the nose. The shock drove the lance

through his head and knocked it out of
my grasp. We

charged on by the falling monster, who
smelted even worse

wounded than whole.

But another appeared before us. I
whipped out my

trusty sword, though I hated to soil my
clean blade on ilk

like this, and struck at his ugly neck.
Like the other, he

didn't move, and my blade decapitated him. Ugh, it was

gory! Barbarians are supposed to glory in blood, but this

was ugly, smelly, gunky blood that contained very little

glory.

Still there were more! Two lumbered from side tunnels,

reaching for me with their grotesque

can-ion-hooks. I cut

the arms off the one on the right, but the one on the left

got me in a gruesome hug and hauled me off my steed.

Yes, I know that sort of mishap is not supposed to happen

to heroes. The truth is, it happens, but the Barbarian

Publicity Department censors it out.

Pook faltered, turning his head back to

look at me.

More monsters were converging. "Run!"
I cried at him

as I poked the point of my sword over
my shoulder to

stab the face of the monster holding me.
Hot ichor sprayed

against my neck, and I knew I had
scored. "Get out of

here, Pook, before they catch you, too!"

The ghost horse took off, and I laid about

me valiantly

with the sword, hacking off arms and legs and ears as

they came within reach. But as I had known, the monsters

were too much for me. One scored on my head with a

hammy fist, knocking me silly, and another took a huge

bite at my face. I felt his tusks sinking into my cheeks;

then I lost consciousness.

Naturally I wasn't aware what happened next, but now

I see it in the pictures of the tapestry, and my under-

standing of the situation helps fill it in.
Satisfied that I

was dead, the callis hauled me down to their main depot,

where their cows and cubs lurked. There they clumsily

used my own fair sword to cut my body
open so they

could gut me with their dirty claws.
They yanked out all

my innards and gobbled them down as
delicacies, quar-

reling over the scraps. Then they
jammed me in a bi&pot

of cold water, to cook the tougher parts,
and set about

fetching wood for a fire. This took some
time, for they

had not planned ahead, and there wasn't much wood to

be found in the deep caves. But after some hours, they

scraped up enough, garnered from the roots of the trees

they had been trying to destroy. Now at last they were

ready to cook.

Meanwhile, some of them checked through my tattered

clothing to see if there was anything interesting there.

They chomped on the buttons and laces and ripped the

cloth, liking the ripping sound. They found the bag of

berry-berries I had saved, then fought again among them-

selves to see who could gobble the greatest number down.

Well, I daresay they felt the effect in due

course; it was

almost worth dying to think of the effect
those debilitating

berries would have on those monsters.

There was another problem: the
callicantzari were afraid

of fire. It seemed its brightness,
reminiscent of that of the

sun, hurt their eyes. If you ask me what
sense it makes

to crave cooked food when you're afraid

of fire, I can't

answer; I suppose monsters wouldn't be
monsters if they

were sensible. If I had known about this
before, I would

have arranged to bring a torch with me
into their caverns,

so they would not have dared approach
me. But barbarian

heroes aren't necessarily all-knowing,
either.

Not one of the monsters wanted to light
and tend the

fire. This problem hung them up another
hour. At last

they drew lots for the one who would do
the deed—but

then he had no spell to start the fire.
They had to look

for another hour to locate the spell—by
which time it was

their night, which happened to
correspond with ours,

though I don't know how they knew.
Maybe the glowing

fungi dimmed a little. So they left the
feast until morning

and snored. Their snores were
absolutely awful sounds,

like sawfish sawing down rock maple
trees.

Meanwhile, Pook was galloping along
the passages,

searching for a way out. The monsters

weren't chasing

him, because they already had me for
their meal and

weren't very enterprising folk. Pook
finally did blunder

to an exit, went out, sniffed the air—and
turned back.

He had smelled something that made him
pause, so he

didn't want to brave it alone.

The ghost horse, now sure of the way,

came back to

the central caverns and, near morning,
sniffed out where

I remained in the pot. He nuzzled the top
of my head,

waking me.

You see, I had had about ten hours to
heal, and this

was enough. I hadn't really been killed; I
had been knocked

out, my face bitten off, and my guts

eviscerated. By this

time I had grown back my face and guts
and healed the

wounds. It took longer than it had to
mend my crushed

leg—the roc incident—because
regrowing is more com-

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plicated than merely healing existing
anatomy. I remained

a little weak from loss of flesh, since my healing does not

create matter from nothing; it draws on the remaining

resources of my body. But I could function; I had been

a strapping young man before this started and now was

merely less strapping. Tissue from my big muscles had

been co-opted to replace my guts. "Knock over the pot,"

I told Pook.

He did so—this was the first solid evidence that he

understood my words completely—and I floated out with

the spilled water. The callis were such solid sleepers that

neither the clang nor the water sloshing by aroused them.

Indeed, the noise could hardly be distinguished over their

horrendous snoring, and the water was no more volu-

minous than their droolings.

I climbed unsteadily to my feet and got on Pook's back,

pausing only to recover my good sword. My bow had

been lost by the callicantzari; maybe they had used it as

part of the wood for the upcoming
cooking-fire. I wouldn't

put such an outrage past such creatures! I
still wore my

boots; they hadn't thought to take them off
me before

putting me in the pot.

Then we were off, coursing upward
through the pas-

sages, leaving the thick noise and stink

behind. At last

we emerged into the wonderful bright morning on the

southeast slope of the mountain. Oh, what relief it was!

If I had to die, I much preferred to perish in the open

wilderness, rather than in the dank, closed caverns.

Chapter 4. Elf Elm

We found a fresh stream and a copse of
pie

trees, and I drank and ate and foraged for
suitable re-

placement clothing from shoe-trees—my
boots were

sloshingly soaked, so I needed
temporary footwear while

they dried—trouser-trees, and shirt-
trees, to replace what

I had lost, while Pook grazed. I didn't try
to hold or

confine him; I lacked the strength, and
anyway I didn't

feel I had a right, since he had come
back for me on his

own. Maybe he wasn't tame, but he had
chosen to be my

companion for a while. I wondered why.
I saw that he

did not stray at all far from me, and I
doubted this was

from sudden affection. I hoped I wasn't
being overly cyn-

ical—but then I knew I had brought him
a lot of trouble,

and barbarians aren't noted for
comprehension of the nu-
ances of interpersonal behavior.

It wasn't long before I found out. Pook
lifted his head,

rattled his chains, and moved toward
me.

"You want me to ride you?" I asked,

bemused. "You're

not taking off alone into the wilds of the wilderness, know-

ing that I presently lack the strength or inclination to chase

you down again?" Actually, I was stuffed with pies, which

made me sluggish rather than weak, but this was also the

first use of my new face and digestive tract. Startups are

always awkward, and it takes a few hours to get the bugs

out; there was a lot of gas, and I felt a little green. But

every time I burped, another bug flew out, and I knew

they would all be gone in a few more hours. There was

no question that I was underweight, though; my thews

were pitiful. In a few days I would be as good as new,

more or less literally, but I needed lots of rest and food

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in the interim. I was no Magician; my magic talent had

to be tempered with moderation.

I really appreciated Pook's offer,
whatever its motive.

It was easier to ride than to walk, until
my leg muscles

filled out. So I harvested some cushions
from the sur-

rounding bushes, fashioned them into a
saddle seat that

would prevent the chains from pinching
my rear, and

mounted. We began making our way
south at a cautious

pace.

And the elves arrived.

Oho! That was why Pook needed me.
Elves generally

leave human folk alone and aren't often
seen, but they

are funny in some ways. They can be
deadly fighters,

though they respect property rights. If they found Pook

alone, they would run him down and tame him for their

own use, making him a work horse. They could do that,

because there were a number of them, they had little

magic lariats, and they knew the terrain; they were ex-

perienced group hunters. But if they thought I owned him,

they would let him be—at least until they had dealt with

me. I was his buffer against the elves.

"Smart move, Pook!" I murmured with a certain rueful

appreciation. There was an aspect of this that worried

me. Elves usually, as I said, don't mess with human folk,

because there is a standing covenant between our two

species. It's a kind of mutual nonaggression pact. Since

human and elven interests seldom intersect, it is easiest

to respect one another's interests. It certainly saves trou-

ble. But both humans and elves had uses for a creature

like Pook. If the elves really wanted the ghost horse, they

might choose to quarrel. It wasn't good to quarrel with

elves in elven territory. They weren't always as small as

they looked.

At least now I knew that Pook had a fair brain in that

equine head. He couldn't talk—but of course, talking is

not necessarily a sign of intelligence. He had made his

problem mine. Unfortunately, I was in no fit condition to

do battle at the moment.

This was a party of six elves. They were armed with

assorted weapons and they wore green tunics. They were

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proportioned and dressed like human beings—oh, sure,

human beings do wear tunics on occasion—but stood only

a quarter my height. I met them with respect, for I knew

that, at the best of times, they were far better as friends

than as enemies, and this was an

indifferent or middling-

poor time. I cast about in my uncivilized mind for the

proper form of address. Was it Sire?
No, sir.

"What be your business in Elven demesnes, Man?"

their leader demanded.

"Just passing through, sir," I replied carefully.

"How did you get past the goblins?"

"They drove us into the mountain, sir,
and the mon-

sters there left me for dead, and my
pooka rescued me."

The elf eyed me suspiciously. "You
tamed a ghost

horse?"

"Well, partway, perhaps. It's hard to tame such a creature completely."

The elf considered, eyed Pook, and shrugged, satisfied.

"You seek no quarrel with us, Man?"

"None, sir. I'm just a barbarian warrior in search of

honest adventure."

"Honest adventure, eh?" He considered me again, and

I wasn't clear what thoughts were percolating through his

mind. "Would you agree that there are other kinds of

adventure than battling callicantzari?"

That was when I learned the identity of the mountain

monsters. "I certainly hope so, sir!"

"Then you will be our guest tonight."

Amazed, I had to stifle a gape. I had hoped only to be

allowed to pass without quarrel. "That's very nice of you,

sir."

"What's your name, Man?"

"Jordan, sir."

"I am Oleander Elf, of the tribe of Flower Elves. These

are—" He indicated his companions in turn. "—Cactus,

Dogwood, Knotweed, Bloodroot, and Arrowhead." In-

deed, I saw that they were armed in the manner of their

names. Cactus had a dagger made of a

large cactus thorn,

Arrowhead had a little bow and quiver
of arrows,

Knotweed had knotted rope, Bloodroot
had a red bag of

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fluid that might be blood-poison, and
Dogwood had a

wooden spear tipped with a large canine
tooth. Only

Oleander carried no visible weapon—
but he was the

leader, and I suspected he had
something, perhaps a fight-

ing spell. There were no goblins on this
side of the moun-

tain, and this was surely because of
these elves. Elves

did not seem as fierce and were
certainly not as numerous

as goblins, yet they kept the goblins
clear. That spoke for

itself. Like many people, I wondered
what their secret

was, since, as far as I knew, goblins
respected nothing

but brute force.

Oleander led Pook and me along a
winding path to a

hidden glen. I was glad to go with them,
for this was a

signal honor, and elves were creatures of integrity; as their

guest, I would be absolutely safe. But I remained mys-

tified as to why they should extend this honor to a wan-

dering barbarian. It could not be purely for delight in my

company; barbarians do not make very good company.

The journey took over an hour, for the little folk did

not travel as fast as a man, though they stepped out

sprightly enough. I did not mind, since I was riding and

also recovering from my recent injuries. The nourishment

from all those pies I had stuffed in my new face and gut

was working its way though the rest of my body, and my

thews were strengthening.

The elven camp was around and in an elf elm, of course;

everyone knows elves will reside nowhere else. When

danger threatened, the women and children retreated to

the heights, while the warriors ringed the base of the tree.

At the moment, most of them were down, for they were

setting up for their midday meal. The smells were good,

but I was still digesting pies and wasn't really hungry.

That was just as well, for their portions were small.

We sat on the ground, and the elven maidens served

leaves filled with stew. The leaves were cleverly worked

into bowls, so that the stew did not leak.

I accepted mine,
curious what was in the stew but hesitant
to ask. There
seemed to be chunks of vegetables, nuts,
fruits, and meats
in it, and I suspected that the meat was
from mice and

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grasshoppers. It tasted good, anyway,
and was just enough

to top off what I had eaten before.

Then Oleander brought an elf maiden to meet me. "This

is Bluebell, who wishes to ask a favor of you, Man," he

said somewhat brusquely and departed. I wondered at

that anew; had I given some sort of offense? I had cer-

tainly tried to be a good guest, but one never can be certain

with nonhuman cultures, though the elves were about as

human as such cultures got. If it were not for the dis-

tinction of size, I would hardly know the difference.

"A favor?" I asked. "I will be happy to help in any

way I can, but I don't know much about elves—"

Bluebell smiled. She was a lovely little creature, per-

fectly proportioned, like a doll in her green dress; "I will

tell you about elves, Jordan-Man," she said. "But first I

must do you a favor, so it's even. What would you like?"

"I am quite satisfied to accept the elven hospitality,"

I replied cautiously. I glanced across to

where Pook was

grazing. Few animals got to touch grass
as lush as that

which the elves cultivated around their
elms. "And so is

my horse. That is favor enough."

"No, you will repay that by telling us
your story to-

night," she said. "I mean, a favor from
me personally."

What was she getting at? "Your charming company is

enough," I said. "Please tell me what you wish me to—"

"Not yet," she demurred. She jumped up to perch on

my bent knee, dangling her pretty legs in the way girls

had. "I must do you my favor first."

I shook my head. "As I said, I'm just a

backwoods

man, unfamiliar with elven ways. I don't
want to give

offense by making mistakes, and I have
already antago-

nized Oleander in some way. So you
will have to explain

to me exactly what—"

She emulated my motion, but the effect
differed: when

she shook her head, her lovely elf-gray

hair tumbled about

fetchingly. "Don't worry about him! He's just perturbed

because he wanted Cowslip to get your favor, but I won

the toss. Cowslip's his cousin, and she's all right if you

like that type." Bluebell indicated an elf maid nearby. 1

looked and saw a stunning example of the type; I did

indeed like it.

"I will do a favor for each of you, to keep the peace,"

I said magnanimously. "But I need to know what—"

She laughed merrily. "Only for me, Man; that's the

rule. I've got the spell. I won it and I won't share it."

I was more perplexed than ever. "What spell?"

She glanced at me sidelong. "You are delightful! I will

show you in due course. Now—name your favor."

I sighed silently. Evidently she preferred to play her

game with me, in the fashion of maidens everywhere, and

I felt every bit as ignorant as I was supposed to be. "Well,

I'm an adventurer, but I don't quite know where I'm

going. That is, I'm headed for Castle Roogna, the Man

capital, but there are a lot of barriers

along the way, like

the goblin mountain, that I would have avoided if I'd

known. If I had a good map—"

"A map!" she exclaimed. "Of course! You shall have

it!" She bounced off my knee and ran to the tree, her hair

flinging out behind her. Doll she might
be, but she was a

woman-doll!

Soon she was back, hauling a scroll
about as big as

herself. Breathlessly she unrolled it for
me on the greens-

ward, pertly sitting on the top end while
I spread my

fingers to hold down the bottom end.

"This is Xanth,"

she panted prettily. "Here we are, in the center, with the

goblins, griffins, and birds to the north and the dragons

to the south. To the east, beyond the river, is the big

ocean, and to the west are the five terrible Elements—

Air, Earth, Fire, Water, and the Void. They aren't nice

places; you don't want to go there. In fact, nowhere is

as nice as right here."

I perused the map with interest. "I came from up here,

in the fen. I ran into the—"

"Oh, no, don't tell your story yet," she

protested. "Save

it for the whole tribe. Where are you
going from here,

specifically?"

"Well, I thought south. I don't want to
pass through

the Elements I see here, and I doubt I'd

care for the

Region of the Flies below it, so if I go south and then

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loop around to the west below—um, I don't see Castle

Roogna on this map."

She cocked her head and wiggled her toes, considering.

"I have heard the name, faintly. We elves don't concern

ourselves overmuch with human business. But all the other

details should be right. I think your castle is south of the—

the—I don't quite remember what, but south of it. Maybe

here." She pointed to the bottom section of the map,

marked HERE THERE BE OGRES, and shuddered.

Ogres! Naturally I knew of those huge, awful crea-

tures, but never had I seen one. "That's the sort of ad-

venture I'm looking for!" I exclaimed. "When I recover

my strength."

She glanced at me with feminine concern. "You are

ill?"

"No, not exactly. I was severely wounded by—" I

broke off as she began to protest. "I know—save it for

the tribe! Anyway, I'll recover fully in a few days, so

that's all right. It's mainly a matter of regrowing my lost

muscle tissue. I'll be in fit condition by the time I en-

counter the ogres. Then I'll go to Castle Roogna and

see what adventure awaits me there. This map will help

me get there faster. Thank you. Bluebell."

"So you accept my favor," she said, pleased.

"Certainly I do," I agreed. "Now what do you want

from me?"

She gazed at me with eerie intensity. "I think you

wouldn't understand yet," she said. "But when you are

ready, I'll tell you."

I shrugged. "Just so it's before I depart
your charming

elf elm realm."

"It will be, Jordan-Man," she assured
me.

Then the elves cleared away the
remnants of the meal

and faced the tree in a great circle. The
King elf stood

beside the trunk, clapping his hands for
silence. "That's

Crown-of-Thorns," Bluebell whispered
to me. She was

now perched on my shoulder, dangling
her legs down into

my right shirt pocket. She was so light I
hardly felt her,

and her grasp on my right ear, to steady
herself, was like

a caress.

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King Crown-of- Thorns spoke, and a
well-spoken King

was he. "I welcome the traveling
Barbarian Man who

visits us this day," he said formally. "I
invite him to ex-

change entertainments with us. First we shall show him

ours.

And from the towering foliage of the elf elm descended

ten elven damsels, suspended by threads, pirouetting in

the air. They came to rest just above the ground, then

began to swing like pendulum bobs, their

motions slow

because of the length of their threads.

They bounced in

unison, spreading arms and legs as they
swung around

the tree. Then they swung in differing
directions, forming

patterns that changed before my eyes
could quite grasp

them, generating fleeting impressions of
stunning beauty.

In and out they wove, now together, now
apart, now

linking hands, now spinning separately.

It was a unified

dance, lovely in its parts and in its

whole, and I was duly

enchanted.

Then the damsels dropped to the ground,

and a dozen

male elves approached the tree. These

were young, healthy

specimens, muscular and coordinated—

the equivalent of

barbarians. Their dance was on the ground, and it incor-

porated feats of strength. They spread out in a wide circle

about the elm. Each lifted a sizable stone, held it a mo-

ment, then dropped it.

Then they moved into a tighter circle, where larger

stones had been set. Each lifted one of these with no more

apparent difficulty than he had lifted the smaller one, to

my surprise. Once again they contracted the circle, where

lay yet larger stones, and each picked up one of these. I

wondered whether the larger stones were of lighter sub-

stance, to make this possible. Pumice, for example—magic

stone spewn up from the depths, some of it so light it

would float on water. That would explain what I observed here.

King Crown-of-Thorns spied my perplexity. "You doubt, honored Man?" he declaimed. "We will show you the magic of our tree! Fetch us the largest log you can carry!"

"Go ahead," Bluebell urged in my ear, her breath tick-

ling it. "Your present strength is enough for that, isn't

it?"

"For a small log," I agreed. I got up and searched

nearby, and there, conveniently laid out, were several

logs of assorted sizes. I hefted one and found it too light;

my strength had already recovered somewhat. I tried an-

other, and it sufficed; it was all I could handle in my

present condition. I got it up on my shoulder, displacing

Bluebell, who scampered nimbly onto my head and clung

to my hair, and I staggered toward the elm. Despite my

effort, I was aware of Bluebell clinging

to my head, her

feet now on my left shoulder, her torso
plastered across

my left ear, and her maidenly bosom
squeezed against

my hair.

"This will do," the King said, indicating
a spot on the

ground some distance from the tree. With
relief I set down

the log, letting one end thunk solidly to

the ground, then

easing the rest of it down. No elf would move that!

But the elves intended to try! As I backed off, the

twelve approached the log. They set themselves about it

and got their little hands under it and heaved together.

It wobbled but didn't lift. I was not surprised; since each

elf was a quarter of my height, depth,
and breadth, that

meant each was about one-sixty-fourth
my mass; that was

why Bluebell was so slight on my
shoulder. I could have

supported her whole weight readily with
my littlest finger.

So each elf might be able to heft one-
sixty-fourth what I

could, and all twelve together—well,
I'm not that apt at

math in my head, but it seemed reasonable that all twelve

elves acting in concert could lift only a fifth as much as

I could, maybe less. Of course, I did not have my full

strength back, and they had many little hands and had to

lift the log only marginally off the ground. Still, chances

were it was three times as heavy as they could manage.

The elves gathered at one end and lifted and shoved.

The ground was uneven, and this end was slightly raised,

so they were able to pivot the log about its center support

without lifting it. They got it parallel to the elm. Then

they all pushed, and slowly it rolled toward the tree. Well,

they were using their minds now, and

leverage helped.

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That was the way to do it. The velocity
of the roll in-

creased as it went.

Then they stopped. They ranged
themselves on either

side of the log and heaved—and this time they actually

got it up! Amazed, I watched as they carried it to the

region where the first small rocks had been dropped. There

they set it down, and six elves walked away. The re-

maining six tackled the log—and lifted it.

"There's something funny here!" I

exclaimed. "Twelve
couldn't lift it before, and now—"

"There's more, Jordan-Man" Bluebell
murmured tick-
lishly into my ear.

I watched. The elves carried the log to
the second ring
of stones. There they set it down, and
three of them de-

parted. The remaining three got at each end and the mid-

dle of the log-

"Now I'm sure they can't—" I began.

The log came up. I gaped. They were doing it!

Bluebell tweaked my ear. "We Elves have magic you

Men wot not," she whispered. Then, I swear, she kissed

the rim of my ear. I'm not sure which startled me more—

the log-lifting or the miniature kiss. What was going on

here?

The three carried the log to the third ring of stones and

paused. Then the two at the ends let go and walked away—

and the lone elf in the center carried the
log the rest of

the way to the trunk of the elm.

I couldn't let this impossibility pass. I
got up and strode

to the tree. "I want to check that log!" I
said. It was in

my mind that they had found a way to
make things lighter

near the tree.

The elf set it down. I reached down and picked it up—

barely. The thing was every bit as heavy as it had been.

How had he—?

Then I felt something odd. I was rising!

• I looked down—and discovered that the elf was pick-

ing me up by my shoes. His tiny hands gripped each of

my heels, and I was in the air, still

holding the log.

I began to wobble, as much from surprise as from

unbalance, and he set me down. Then I put down the log

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and stood dazed. I had succeeded only in further confus-

ing myself. The elves around the tree were smiling merrily.

"It is the tree, Jordan," Bluebell told me. "We elves grow stronger as we approach it. That's why we always camp near an elf elm."

"You mean—?" But already I saw that it was true.

The stones—as the elves' strength increased, they had

lifted larger stones. It had been no trick, just a demon-

stration. At the base of the tree, the strength of an elf

became practically infinite. "Females too?"

"Want me to pick you up?" she asked. "I can do it—

here beside the elm."

"You—do elves keep getting weaker,
away from the
tree?"

"Yes, but it's on a declining curve. We
change rapidly
near the tree, slowly away from it. As
long as we don't
range out too far, we're all right."

"And if a monster attacks you—"

"We retreat as far as we need, toward the elm," she

agreed. "We protect the elms, and they protect us. The

magic doesn't affect anyone who isn't of elven stock. So

our retreats are almost impregnable; an elven child could

heave a monster away. But we don't go out of our way

to bother other folk."

That explained why elves weren't seen
much around

the fen where I had been reared. There
were no elf elms

in that vicinity.

"Now it is your turn," she said. "You
must tell your

story, for we elves are very curious
about the other spe-

cies and regions of Xanth. I hope it is a good tale."

I shrugged. "I can embellish it if you wish."

"No, we prefer the truth."

So I settled down by the tree and narrated my story,

much as I have been doing here, and they listened atten-

tively and asked intelligent questions.
They really were

interested, and I saw a scribe-elf making
notes. It seemed

to me that what I had to tell was actually
—if you'll excuse

the expression—pretty mundane stuff,
since I had slain

no dragons and encountered no
phenomenal sorceries,

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but they really were interested and, at the end, satisfied.

The odd thing was that they seemed most taken with the

portions they knew most about, rather than those that

were beyond their experience.

Bluebell had said they wanted to hear the truth, so that

was what I gave them, unexciting as it might be, and they

liked that. Later I realized that this was only in part en-

tertainment for them; they were also judging me, and on

the basis of my story they judged me to be an honest man,

though they asked some very penetrating questions about

my talent for healing.

Finally, perceiving that they doubted, I suggested that

they cut off my fingers and watch them regrow. They

recoiled, I think, not so much from horror at the notion

of deliberate injury as from not wishing to seem to cast

aspersion on my integrity. So I simply rubbed my forearm

along the blade of my sword, cutting the skin so that blood

flowed, then held up my arm so that they could see how

rapidly it healed. They protested strenuously that such a

demonstration was not necessary, but in their very pro-

testation I concluded that it was. As I said, I am not expert

in the judging of other cultures, so maybe I have misin-

terpreted whatever significance existed.

Now it was growing late in the day. The
elves served

some sort of fragrant grog in leaf mugs;
mine was tiny,

of course, but I drank it—and the stuff
burned down my

throat and filled my belly with fire and
sent my head

floating somewhere above my body.
Potent stuff!

"It is time for the favor," Bluebell

informed me.

"Favor?" I asked, confused. "Oh. Yes. Tell me."

"This way," she said, leading me back to the tree. I

walked somewhat unsteadily, feeling the grog. That is to

say, groggy.

I stopped at the base of the trunk, but she proceeded

to climb the elm. "I can't go up there!" I protested, eying

the virtually vertical ascent. The tree was large, having

had time to grow during the centuries the elves had pro-

tected it; two human men would barely be able to reach

around it. There were no low branches; it was a great

column rising to the mass of foliage far above.

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"Yes, you can, Jordan," she told me.

"The grog gives

you the power."

Dubiously, I tried it. I put my hands to the bark—and

they clung as if cemented. I brought up a foot, and it

adhered similarly. When I lifted one hand, it came free,

so I could take hold higher. Like a fly, I could walk the

wall! This, of course explained how flies did it; they

sneaked sips of elven grog.

So I followed her up, though the height was dizzying.

If the magic failed, I knew I would fall
and be killed—

but I wasn't worried for three reasons.

First, I did not

believe the elves meant me any harm, so
the grog-spell

should hold. Second, if I did fall, my
body would heal the

breaks within a day, so death would be
only temporary.

Third, the pleasant stupor the grog has
put me in made

all this- a matter of indifference; I
simply didn't care. It

seemed almost natural to be following a
doll-sized elf lass

up a huge tree.

At last we reached the first bifurcation
of branches and

entered the foliage. Bluebell led me up
through it until we

came to a great tangle of mistletoe in the
highest reach.

The points of the missiles and toes
scratched me, but I

healed in seconds. Bluebell entered this
mass, and I fol-

lowed, discovering a way through; and
lo! inside it was

a great globed nest, with pillows and a
comfortable floor.

The fading light of day filtered in
through the levels in

diffused fashion, pleasantly illuminating
leaves and vines

of many colors.

I lay against the resilient and fragrant leaf wall. "This

is lovely," I said. "Now what is the favor I owe you? Do

you need some heavy object carried down to the ground,

or lifted up from the ground?" Though, with their super-

strength, it hardly seemed the elves would need my help

there.

She smiled as if finding something funny.
Girls of any

species can be like that. "You need lift
no object too heavy

to manage, Jordan," she said.

"Well, I'm ready to serve. Name it."

"It is the service that only you can give,"

she said.

"Your most precious possession."

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Dismay sliced through my daze,
abolishing it. "You

want my sword?"

She looked at me, astonished, then
tumbled over in

laughter. I had to laugh too, for it seemed it was not my

weapon she was after; and indeed, I realized that a crea-

ture her size and sex would have no way to handle it.

I pondered, and sobered again, realizing what an elf

would want of a man like me. "My horse!"

Bluebell managed not to laugh this time,
but obviously

she was feeling merry. She came to sit
on my knee, as

she had done below. "Now how could I
get a ghost horse

up here?" she asked, and then the
laughter bubbled up

and overflowed again. Elves certainly
are merry folk!

"Well, I know elves need transportation

and hauling,

away from the tree," I said. "A creature like Pook doesn't

lose strength—" But I saw she was just about to fall off

my knee with mirth, and of course I was relieved to know

that this had not been a ploy to demand Popk. He really

would have felt I had betrayed him, and certainly I had

not intended to do that. "But—what do you want, elven

maid? I'm out of precious possessions."

I don't know why she was so
overbubbling with laugh-

ter. "You can not guess, Jordan-Man?"

"I'm only a barbarian warrior, not too
smart," I re-

minded her somewhat tersely.

"But honest and strong and nice," she said.

"And not good at riddles," I added, annoyed.

She unbuttoned her green tunic, slipped out of it, and

sat again on my elevated knee. She was a lovely miniature

woman in every respect. "Now can you guess, Jordan-

Man?"

"You want me to fetch new clothing for you?"

This time she doubled up and rolled about with the

force of her laughter, in the process showing a good deal

more than she ought and landing in a pretty heap in my

lap. "Oh, barbarian, you still have

something to learn

about elves—or about women," she said
when she had

recovered some of her breath.

"I know about women," I replied
somewhat stiffly,

remembering Elsie. "I never claimed to
be expert on elves.

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I knew of you Little Folk mainly by
hearsay, until I met

you today. You seem very like human
beings, except for

your size and your magic."

"There you utter truth indeed!" But still
she seemed

to be bursting with some horrendously
humorous secret.

"You don't know the nature of an

Accommodation-Spell?"

I shook my head. "No."

"Oh, this is fan!" she exclaimed, peering up at me and

kicking her legs about. "I knew barbarians only by hear-

say, too. You're much more fun than I expected."

"Thank you," I said awkwardly.

"For your information, Man, the
Accommodation-Spell

was fashioned by one of the Magicians
of your kind. I

think his name is Yin-Yang. He packages
spells of all types

and peddles them to anyone who is
interested."

"I never heard of him."

"I think he lives down near Castle Roogna."

"Castle Roogna!" I exclaimed. "That's where I'm going!"

"So you said. After completing my favor."

"Yes. If you'd only tell me what—"

She tired of teasing me. "Jordan, you force me to be

direct, I want your help to summon the stork," she said,

or words to that effect. "I want a baby—a halfling, able

to be among men and elves."

I gaped at her. "That's impossible!" I protested. "The

size—it—I—I've got to get out of here!"

"The favor!" she cried. "You promised!"

"But—"

"Here, I'll invoke the spell," she said.
She made a

gesture with her hands. There was a
flash, and then a

fanny wrenching sensation.

When my equilibrium re-established
itself, I discovered

that the bower had expanded
enormously. It was now

twice as big in diameter as it had been
and eight times

the volume. Length-volume judgments
come readily to a

person who may have to carry home the
mass of the

animal he puts an arrow through; he

quickly learns that

twice the height means a good deal more
than twice the

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weight. The cushion I sat on was now
more like a small

bed.

"How do you like me now, Jordan?"

Bluebell asked.

I turned my head to look at her—and gaped again.

She was my size—or as close as a woman need be. She

was phenomenal; the attributes that had been cute when

she was small were now voluptuous. "I—what hap-

pened?"

She laughed yet again. "It's the spell," she explained.

"It accommodated us. You are now an eighth your former

mass, and I am eight times mine, so we're the same."

I looked at the bower again and the cushion. Yes; every

dimension had doubled, which meant that my own di-

mensions had halved. I was half as tall,

half as wide, and

half as deep, while she had doubled every dimension. It

certainly made a difference!

"But the baby," I protested. "If—"

"When," she corrected me.

"When the, uh, the stork brings—what size will;'/ be?"

"My size, of course, so I can take proper care of him,"

she said. "Until he leaves the tree. Then —who knows?"

Some halflings can change size."

"I certainly never expected this!" I said.

"So I gathered," she said. "Well, let's not waste time.

I know you want to get on with your more interesting

adventures, where there be ogres and such."

There is no point in describing in tedious detail what

followed. I'll just say that elven maidens are fully as adept

in summoning storks as are human maidens, and I was

glad to do my part. When I had done it, I

got ready to

leave the bower, but Bluebell held me back. "Not yet,"

she said.

Oh? Well, the Accommodation-Spell hadn't dissipated

yet, so there was no point in my leaving the bower then;

I would be too small to do much adventuring.

We ate, for the bower was stocked with giant fruits

and nuts and bags of beverage. I suppose they were nor-

mal size; I was the one who had changed. Anyway, we

feasted. There was a privy region for other natural func-

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tions. Then I napped for perhaps an hour
and felt much

improved when I woke.

It seemed she wanted to signal the stork
again, so we

did that. When that was done, again I
thought it was time

to depart, but again she restrained me.
So we had another

meal, and another sleep, all very nice,
and I woke yet

further restored. It turned out that she wished to generate

a third message to the stork—or maybe she figured that

three storks were better than one—and she was so lovely

and persistent that I could do no less than cooperate.

"Now it is complete," she said. "The stork will come."

"You're sure?" I asked. "Maybe it would be better to

send a few more messages."

She laughed, as she did so readily. "You are truly

delightful, Jordan-Man, but I have held you too long al-

ready. I have felt the stork's acknowledgment; the baby

will be delivered in due course."

That was the funny thing about the stork:
it insisted

on a delay before delivery. Maybe this
was to give the

prospective mother time to change her
mind, or learn how

to pin diapers. But I knew Bluebell's
mind was set; she

wanted that halfling.

So she dismissed me, and I had to
depart. Such is the

life of an adventurer. "It's certainly been fun," I told her,

"and I'll remember it always."

She kissed me, one last time. "You're sweet." Then

she waved her arms, reversing the spell, and in a moment

we were back to our original sizes.

We drank another draught of grog and left the bower,

climbing through the foliage and on
down the massive

trunk of the elm. The other elves of the
tribe were awaiting

us at the base.

"We have cared for your horse these
three days,

Barbarian," King Crown-of-Thorns told
me.

"Three days?" I said incredulously.

"Aye, Man! Did you not know?"

"It seemed like three hours!"

"Now we must see to the augur," the King said. He

led us to an old woman elf who sat at a shaped stone and

had a sparkling ball before her.

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Bluebell stopped before the old woman.
"The fate of
my baby," she said.

The woman picked up the ball and flung
it at Bluebell.

The ball expanded to englobe her for a
moment, then
contracted and returned to its place on
the stone.

The woman peered into its sparkles,
which now seemed

to have a different pattern. "A son," she
said. "He will

leave you when he matures and go seek a
wife among the

human kind. He will never achieve
notoriety, but his des-

cendants may."

"Thank you," Bluebell said, sounding

disappointed.

Evidently she had hoped for more.

Aware of this, the woman peered more closely, tracing

down a particular sparkle. "Let me see—there is one, far

down the line, centuries hence—yes, she will consort

with human Kings of Xanth."

"Oh!" Bluebell exclaimed, brightening.

Then the old elfess threw the globe at me. Surprised,

I stepped back, but it expanded to my size and englobed

me. For an instant I was dazzled by the sparkles; then

they were gone, and the globe was back on the stone.

The elfess' little face turned grim as she

contemplated

the sparkles. "Let's pass on this one," she muttered.

"No, I want to know," I said. "If I am to be ancestor

to the consort of Kings, what it says about me should be

known."

The elfess grimaced. "You will be doomed by a cruel

lie," she told me. "Yet it is not the end.
After your flesh

has rotted, you will find true love."

"Uh, thank you," I said, no more thrilled
than Bluebell

had been at first. I didn't really believe
in fortune-telling,

but I didn't really disbelieve, either.

Then the gathering dissipated. The King
bade me fare-

well, ironic as that might seem after the prophecy, and

Bluebell climbed up to give me a parting kiss.

I went to Pook, who had been happily grazing for three

days on the rich elf-sward and was fit and fat. He had not

tried to leave, for that would have implied that he was

not my true steed, and the elves might

have become awk-

wardly suspicious. So he had stayed,
and when the eleven

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children had begged him for rides "in the
name of the

Barbarian Man," he had obliged. I knew
he was not yet

tame, merely smart enough to play the
role he had to.

Just as I had been, up in the bower of the
elf elm.

I mounted and rode away, pausing at the
fringe of the

glade to wave to the assembled elves.
They waved back.

Then, somewhat sadly, I moved on.

Chapter 5. Bundle of Joy

I rode through the pleasant elf-kept
forest, feel-

ing better as the poignancy of parting
passed. I had indeed

spent three days with the elves. My body
had completed

its process of healing, and I was at full
strength again.

Maybe that had been one reason
Bluebell held me so

long—to send me out into the jungle
fully ready, rather

than partly ready. If so, she had done me
a favor beyond

my realization at the time. Surely the
other elves would

not have let me stay, once she finished
with me; they

were businesslike folk at heart. But if I
ever encountered

another such tribe, I would be sure to
pay my respects;

I liked their mode of entertaining

travelers.

The map showed that I was approaching dragon coun-

try. But I couldn't skirt it to the west; the Elements of

Earth and Air were there, marked unfit for occupancy.

The map was accurate about the northern regions I had

already traversed, and I believed it about the southern

ones. That left the eastern side, and I decided to go that

route. How nice to have forewarning about the dragons!

Naturally barbarians boast of slaying dragons, but the

closer a barbarian actually gets to a dragon, the less in-

clined he feels toward combat. I found myself in abso-

lutely no hurry now. So I veered Pook east.

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We traveled for a day without event.

Things were quiet

in the elven region; there weren't even
any tangle trees.

It occurred to me that in some respects
the elven society

was superior to the human one; it
certainly wasn't this

pleasant or safe in the vicinity of Fen
Village.

But as we left the elven region, the
terrain became

rougher, and we came up against the
river the map showed

as originating in the south and flowing
north, parallel to

the more distant coast. I considered
crossing it, but there

were flashes of color in the water's
depths, and Pook

balked. He remembered the sharks in the
bog, and I

couldn't blame him. So we turned south,
into dragon

country after all.

Then Pook sniffed, winding something.
He wasn't

afraid, just nervous, so I let him go
toward it. It turned

out to be a patch of blood on the forest
floor, a scratchy

trail, and a few feathers.

"Some bird came down to drink from the
river," I

conjectured. "And some predator attacked it. Bird got

away, but injured. Happens all the time in the wilder-

ness."

But still Pook sniffed, perplexed.

"There's more?" I

asked. "Want to track down the bird? I warn you, it won't

be pretty." I knew that few horses, ghost or otherwise,

had much taste for blood.

Pook sniffed out the trail, and I let him.
He had a better

nose than I had thought. Why was he so
interested in

this?

Then we came in sight of the bird. It was
a white stork

with a broken wing—and it had a bundle.

I doubletook, astonished. This stork was making a de-

livery! That bundle contained a baby!

Could Bluebell—? No. As I said, there was always a

delay of several months before the baby was delivered.

The bureaucratic lapse differed, and

tended to be longest

for human beings; evidently storks didn't like human peo-

ple as well as they liked mouse people or gremlin folk or

whatever. Certainly the wait was more than a day for

elves. Besides, the bundle was way too big to hold an

elfling.

The stork looked at me. His eyes were

glazed with

pain. "Friend or foe?" he asked.

"You talk?" I asked stupidly. It was difficult to believe

that such a long, hard beak could form human syllables.

But it was also not easy to believe that those backward-

bending knees could enable it to walk. If we disbelieved

everything that was hard, we wouldn't

believe in Xanth

at all.

"I talk," he agreed. "I don't fly, at the moment. I suf-

fered a mishap." He craned his head about on his mar-

velously supple neck to eye his torn wing, from which

blood still dripped. "Are you planning to help or hinder?"

"Uh, to help, I guess," I said awkwardly.
I hadn't

known that storks conversed with people
like this. If they

spoke our language, why did we have to
make such in-

tricate signals when ordering babies? It
should be easier

just to send a letter. No—immediately I
realized that il-

literate like me would never be able to
order offspring,

then; so there had to be a nonverbal or nonwritten signal.

Anyway, I had never met a stork before; evidently their

line of business required human communication at times,

so they were trained for it. "But I don't know exactly

what I can do. I'm not apt at heating others."

"There's a healing spring south of the—I

forget what,

but that's where it is," the stork said. I realized that the

bird's brain was suffering some fuzziness. "I could fly

there quickly—I know right where it is —if I could fly. But

that confounded little dragon caught me unawares. I pecked

it on the snout and it ran home to its mother, but alas,

my wing was already gone. So I'll just have to hoof it, so

to speak."

I studied the bundle. "That looks pretty heavy," I re-

marked. "Are you sure you can carry it, in your condi-

tion?"

"I must deliver!" the stork said, folding his good wing

across his breast and gazing reverently

upward.

"Uh, yes. Maybe we can give you a ride."

The stork looked at Pook. "That would be appreciated.

But it's a fair bit, by foot. And it's to ogre country."

"That's where we're going," I said. "Let me give you

a hand with that." I reached for the bundle.

There was a growl, and a hairy hand came out and

grasped my wrist with appalling strength. Startled, I jerked

my hand away—and the thing came right

out of the bun-

dle, hanging onto my wrist. It was a hairy mass of glower

and growl.

"That's no baby!" I cried, shocked.

"Yes, it is," the stork said tiredly. "A baby ogre. Tech-

nically, an ogret. I told you where I was taking it."

"So you did," I agreed. Barbarians are not too bright

about some things; I had missed the obvious connection.

Of course ogres had babies, too, just as did humans and

elves. Hardly as nice as humans and elves, but a similar

principle. "Now how do I get this little monster off my

wrist?" The matter was getting urgent,

because the ogret

was chinning himself up, one-handed,
and was angling to

bite off my hand.

"Knock him on the head until he lets go,"
the stork

advised.

"But he's a baby'"

"That's how ogres show affection."

"Oh." Live and learn. I rapped the baby
on his stony

skull with my free knuckle, bruising my
hand, and he let

go and dropped back into the bag.

"We'd better deliver him before he gets
hungry," the

stork said.

Excellent notion! I loaded stork and
bundle on Pook,

then mounted. The ogret grabbed onto a
link of chain and

started chewing on it. The three of us
were crowded, but

Pook could handle it. Apparently he had
some sympathy

with the plight of the stork. Pook was a
pretty decent

animal, really.

The ghost horse started out at a brisk pace. I knew

why; there was an incoming smell of dragon on the wind.

How long would it take for the dragonlet to bring its

mother back here?

"It's really not far to—to—" the stork remarked, but

seemed to forget what he was going to

say. It was as if

his blood were draining right out of his memory.

There was a sound. I felt a shiver; that was a dragon

snort, off to the right. I was in no mood at the moment

to take on a dragon! I urged Pook to faster speed, but he

needed no urging; he fairly flew across the land. I looked

back over my shoulder to check on stork
and ogret; the

stork had his feet hooked firmly into a
chain, so was

secure, but the ogret had chewed almost
through the link

he was working on. "Stop that!" I
snapped at him, and

he growled and continued chewing. The
trouble with ju-

veniles these days is that they have no
discipline!

The dragon heard us, of course, and moved to intercept

us. Dragons have phenomenal ears that tune in on what-

ever interests them; what interests them most is prey, and

just about any living creature is prey to a dragon. I had

heard folk tales about single men fighting and slaying sin-

gle dragons, but the closer I came to that

sort of activity,

the less I believed it. The fact is, the
smallest grown

dragon is generally more than a match
for the largest man,

unless that man has magic. I did have
magic, of course,

but I wasn't sure how much good it
would do me in the

belly of a dragon. I suppose in time my
bones would

reconstitute from the dragon droppings,
and I would re-

cover, but I didn't care to try that out.
Certainly there

would be some discomfort and
awkwardness. Who wants

to wake in the middle of a pile of dragon
manure?

Pook was making excellent time. We
were leaving the

dragon behind. But then another popped
up ahead, and

I knew we were in trouble. In fact, I was

coming to resent

the myth that barbarian warriors love to fight dragons; it

seemed that the dragons were the first to believe it, being

eager for the fray. There is a distinction between adven-

ture and folly that even the average barbarian is aware

of.

We veered to the left, to the bank of the

river. The

river was smaller here than it had been downstream, but

when we sought to cross it, a water dragon lifted its head

and hissed. No escape there!

"Hang on—I've got to fight!" I warned. Supposedly,

barbarians fight just for the fun of it; that's a half-truth.

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We enjoy combat when we expect to
win. With dragons,
the odds are inclement.

I guided Pook with my legs. He was
very responsive,
knowing that once again his half-life was
on the line as

much as my whole life was. I anchored
my left hand on

a chain and lifted my good sword with
my right. The

dragon behind me was a fire-breather,
so we stayed clear

of it; the one in front was a smoker. That
would be no

fun, but was a better risk than fire. They
say that where

there's smoke there's fire, but that's not
generally true

among dragons. They also say that more people die from

smoke inhalation than from direct bums, but-I didn't trust

that. So we charged the smoker snout-on.

The dragon opened his mouth, inhaling. Naturally he

didn't stay stuffed with smoke all the time, any more than

a man holds his breath all the time. The smoke is gen-

erated in the belly at need, a bit like gas
in the human

belly, and it takes a moment to work up
the proper pres-

sure and richness. I did not allow the
dragon that time; I

came up so fast that I arrived just as the
first puff of

smoke started out. I didn't bother with
anything fancy; I

simply rammed the point of my sword up
his right nostril.

Since I was hanging onto Pook, and Pook was charging

forward, that thrust packed a lot of wallop.

The sword shoved its full length up the dragon's nose,

and my gloved hand followed it, and also my arm up to

the elbow. It was an excellent shot; I knew the point had

skewered The creature's tiny brain. That

wasn't a mortal

wound, of course, but it did cause the monster some dis-

comfort. Dragons don't really like having swords rammed

up their noses, and they can get quite perturbed about

having their brains skewered. For one thing, it causes

their coordination to suffer somewhat, and that's incon-

venient when one is engaged in mortal combat.

I braced my body against the dragon's warm snoot and

hauled out my sword. A gout of blood followed it, dousing

me in gore. But the dragon's head of smoke was already

under way, and now this shoved the gore clear and blasted

out to surround us. I held my breath, of course, and trusted

the others were doing the same; it's a

natural and sensible

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reflex. I urged Pook away from there. He obeyed with

alacrity, and in a moment we emerged from the smoke

ball. The dragon was thrashing and choking, as the blood

and smoke mixed in his nostril to form smog. Blood and

smoke are relatively harmless separately, but smog can

be deadly. The hole in the monster's brain was bothering

it, too, so it wasn't handling its pipes as well as otherwise.

Thus the smoker was preoccupied for the moment, and

we didn't need to worry about him.

But now the fire-breather caught up. "Go for the tail!"

I told Pook. I meant the tail of the smoker, which might

shield us from some of the blast of the fire-breather's

breath. But the ghost horse misunderstood and galloped

for the wrong tail.

Naturally the dragon's head whipped about, a jet of

fire chasing us in an apparent curve. We hurdled the tail

just as the fire caught up—and the dragon toasted its own

tail. Now, dragons have insulated pipes for the fire, but

their flesh lacks that protection. You should have heard

the roar it made!

"South!" I cried.

Pook oriented south and shot forward like an arrow.

The two hurtling dragons bumped into each other and got

tangled in their own coils. By the time they realized we

were gone, we were too far gone for them to catch us.

I'd like to claim that this was my consummate skill in

maneuvering, but it was simple garden-variety luck, and

I wouldn't care to try it again.

But we weren't home free yet. A flying dragon had

been attracted by the commotion and was cruising over-

head. It had not descended while it looked as if the big

land-bound dragons would eat us, but now it looped about

and zeroed in. I saw its body huffing up fire and knew

we had to get out of the way in a hurry. We couldn't

outrun that!

"River!" I cried. Pook angled for the river, trusting my

judgment, and his hooves struck the water as the first jet

of fire slanted down. The fire missed, generating a huge

hiss of steam as it hit the water. Water never did much

like fire, and the sentiment was mutual.

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The water dragon humped up. It elevated its head and

roared at the flier, angry at this poaching in its preserve.

When the flier didn't sheer off fast enough, the water

dragon pursed its lips and squirted a column of water up,

scoring on one wing. Now the flier changed course, spin-

ning out of control; the blast of water had dislocated one

wing.

"I know how that feels," the stork remarked as the

dragon tumbled into the water.

We got back on land and galloped south again, having

escaped all four dragons. No doubt I would boast to my

grandchildren of this exploit—but I never wanted to run

that particular gantlet again!

Then a second flier appeared and drew a bead on us.

This was the land of dragons, all right!

"Trees!" I yelled.

Pook headed for a copse of trees ahead.
I hoped their

trunks and foliage would help shield us
from the flame.

But then the horse braked to a halt.

"What are you doing?" I cried. Then I

saw why.

The copse perched on the edge of a monstrous fissure

in the ground. It was a sheer cliff leading down beyond

vision; we couldn't go there! "What's that?" I asked in-

credulously.

"Now I remember!" the stork said. "It's the Gap Chasm!

Can't think why I forgot about it before.
I've flown over
it hundreds of times."

"It's not on the map!" I muttered. What a
thing to

leave off!

Then the flying dragon caught up. Its jet
flame seared

down. Pook leaped out of the way—but
the fringe of the

fire touched us.

It fried my right arm and heated the hilt
of my sword

stove-hot. The stork's feathers caught
fire. The ogret

growled as his bag smoldered.

Pook leaped again, and the chains on his
body slipped

around his barrel, and we were dumped
hard on the ground.

My face smacked into a rock, and the
whole Land of

Xanth seemed to whirl about me. I saw
my sword fling

free—right over the brink of the chasm.
Then I lost con-

sciousness. I do that when I get knocked
hard enough,

embarrassing as it is.

When I woke, I could tell by the slant of
the shadow

that only a little time had passed. My
talent was already

healing me; after all, it was only a burn
and a fall. But I

wasn't able to move yet; maybe my neck

had been bro-

ken, paralyzing me, and that hadn't
healed yet. So I lay

there with my head on the ground,
absolutely still, and

saw what I could see.

Nearby was the bundle of joy, with a
short length of

chain dangling from it. The little monster
had chewed right

through the link! Beyond was the bashed

body of the

stork. The fire had burned away the feathers and cooked

the rest; the stork was dead. There was no sign of Pook;

he had his freedom at last, if he had managed to escape

the dragon. Well, I couldn't blame him for that; I had not

done too good a job of protecting us from evil.

Then I saw a shadow. The dragon was returning! That

was good for Pook, for it meant he had found cover and

hidden from the monster. But it was bad for me. I willed

my neck to heal, but nerves can't be rushed, and bone is

slower yet; I still couldn't move anything below my head.

And anyway, my sword was gone. How

could I fight off

a fire-breathing flying dragon bare-handed?

The dragon spiraled down and glided to a landing. It

was ready to feed. It hobbled along the ground, weak on

its feet in the fashion of its subtype, and snapped up the

body of the stork. Two chomps, and the bird was gone.

The dragon hobbled another pace and reached for the

bundle of joy. Suddenly the bag burst open, the ogret's

hairy arm came out, and it swung the length of chain in

an arc that smacked the links smartly across the dragon's

nose. Little stars flew up, and a comet whirled away; it

had been a hard strike.

The dragon blinked. Then it hissed. It pumped its bel-

lows, preparing for another blast of fire to cook this ar-

rogant morsel.

Just as the flame was ready, the ogret's ugly head

popped out of the bag. Few things in Xanth are as ugly

as an ogre's puss, and the sudden

appearance of such a

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grotesquerie can be a shock. "Growr!"
he growled in the

dragon's face. If there is one thing worse
than an ogre's

puss, it's his growl.

The dragon was so startled he
swallowed his fire. In

fact, it backfired. There was a sort of
internal rushing

sound, and flame shot out of the dragon's
tail. The mon-

ster straightened, its system reamed out,
then curled and

thrashed about as the heat of the fire
cooked its own flesh.

It rolled across the ground—and tumbled
over the cliff.

Now at last my neck healed. The
paralysis left me, and

I sat up. My right arm remained
inoperative, but was also

improving. "You do have your points,

ogre baby," I said.

For it was a fact that the ogret had just saved me from

getting toasted and consumed.

There was the sound of hooves. Pook was returning.

"What's this?" I asked as I stood. "Are you tame now?"

Pook snorted indignantly and swished his tail. He

glanced back over his mane.

I looked. More dragons were coming. They had us

surrounded!

"I should have known," I said, flexing my recovering

arm. "You figure I can get you out of this?"

Pook nodded. He had confidence in me.
Maybe he had

given me more credit for dealing with
the flying dragon

than I deserved.

I considered, briefly. "Well, we can't go
back the way

we came. And my sword's down in the
—what did the

stork call it? The Gap Chasm."

The ogret growled. "Oh, yes," I said.
"You need to be

delivered, and the stork can't do it. I
guess I do owe you

a favor." That reminded me of Bluebell
Elf, and the favors

I had exchanged with her. My map was
gone, burned,

but I no longer needed it; anyway, the
Gap had not been

on it. I thought again how odd it was that

the map should

be in error about so gross a feature of landscape, when

the elves were generally so meticulous about accuracy.

And the stork had been unable to remember it, until ac-

tually seeing it. Maybe there was magic involved.

I peered down the cliff. It was impassable. I looked

east, along it—and saw the river. It
flowed up the cliff

face, over the lip, and on to the north,
where I knew it

broadened out into a refuge for water
dragons. It hadn't

occurred to me that a river could flow
up a wall, but, of

course, there was a lot of Xanth I hadn't
seen before. I

have heard it said that travel broadens

the mind; it cer-

tainly was doing so for me! "Maybe there," I murmured.

I loaded the bundle of joy on the ghost horse, and the

hairy hand latched onto another length of chain. I knew

the strength of that hand; he would be secure.

I mounted and guided Pook east to the

river. Again I

flexed my right arm; it was just about better now. I don't

know how I'd survive without my healing talent!

We reached the river before the dragons did. The water

at the lip was too shallow for the water dragon, fortu-

nately. We could cross it—but so could the land dragons.

No real escape there.

How about down into the chasm?

"We'll wade upstream," I told Pook,
putting more Con-

fidence into my voice than I felt. I
headed him for the

water at the brink. His ears went flat
back and he balked.

So I dismounted and led him. I stood at
the lip, then

stepped over. My body tilted around at a ninety-degree

angle, and I found myself standing on the face of the cliff,

knee-deep in water. It was working!

After a moment, with the dragons closing in, Pook

followed. His forehooves passed the corner, and he strad-

dled the lip as if it were the top of a pyramid, his belly

almost scraping. Then he got his hind legs across and

stood with me, his head pointing down into the Gap. "See,"

I said. "It has to be level for the water to flow without

falling. Rivers have ways of navigating that we can only

emulate. As long as we wade, we won't fall." I certainly

hoped that was true!

But Pook remained uncertain, so I continued to lead

him- We waded upstream, downcliff. A dragon poked its

head over the corner, but lacked the courage to follow.

After a moment, the dragon fired a jet of flame, but the

perspective confused it and the jet missed. We proceeded

out of range. Fortunately, no more flying dragons ap-

peared; maybe this region was awkward for their flying.

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The water was cold. The chill of it soon soaked through

my boots and into my feet. "We'd better get to the bottom

of this," I remarked, looking down into the Gap. But the

bottom was still a long way ahead.

I moved to the edge of the water channel, hoping the

effect extended beyond the water. But I
was cautious. I

scooped up a handful of water and
hurled it to the side,

out of the channel.

The moment the water left the region of the channel,

it made a right-angle turn and took off forward, acceler-

ating toward the base of the cliff. I couldn't hear the splat

as it struck, but I knew I did not want to go that route ~

myself.

Nevertheless, my toes were becoming

numb, and I

could see that Pook wasn't comfortable, either. No one

likes to get cold feet! At this rate, our toes would freeze

before we could get out of the water. I had to do some-

thing!

I bent to peer into the water. Now I saw small fish

swimming in it. I scooped one up—and

cold stabbed

through my hand. That was one cold fish!

"I wish I had a hotfoot," I said. "Or a hot dog. That

would drive away the cold fish." But wishes wouldn't do

me much good. I needed something more tangible and

immediate. My feet were freezing!

I glanced back again at Pook. He was shivering. My

eye fell on the bundle of joy. A notion bulbflashed in my

skull so brightly that I suspect some light leaked out of

my ears.

I went to Pook's side, selected a chain, and yanked it

upward. Naturally it descended on the

other side, as all

the chains went around and around his barrel. The ogret

went down with it, for he was chewing on it and refused

to let go. I suppose teething is rough for babies. I contin-

ued to haul until the ogret hung upside down below Pook's

belly. He didn't let go, for no one had knocked him on

the head. But when his head dipped into the frigid water,

he was annoyed, for no ogre likes to be coolheaded. He

roared.

The force of the roar sent froth shooting through the

river. The cold fish scattered in terror, and the water

warmed. I hauled down on the chain, and

ogret came up

on the other side, until he was upright
again, still chewing

on the link. We proceeded onward.

After a while, the cold fish came back,
so I repeated

the performance and drove them away
again. By the third

time they collected, we had reached the
foot of the cliff

and were able to step out on upright

land. That was a
relief!

Now we were in the Gap Chasm. The
river crossed its

base arid went up the far wall. Came
down it, that is. No

doubt we could walk up that the same
way we had walked

down, but I thought I'd explore for an
alternate route. I

didn't like having to dunk the ogret all

the time, and didn't

want to be caught with cold feet halfway
up if that trick

didn't work.

So I got on Pook, and we traveled west
along the floor

of the chasm. I spied my trusty sword
lying near the river,

beside the body of the flying dragon the
ogret had back-

fired. I recovered my blade, welcoming

it like an old friend,

washed it in the river, and watched
bemusedly as the

bloodstained water flowed around the
corner and up the

wall. Fascinating! Then I dried the
sword on the hot hide

of the flying dragon and returned to
Pook.

It was pleasant here, with green grass,
bushes, and

patterns of racks and dragon tracks—

Dragon tracks?

I examined them more closely. Yes,
these were the

spoor of a big dragon, one who
evidently hunted here.

That made me a trifle nervous; I had
already had enough

experience with dragons to last me the
rest of my life—

a life that would not necessarily be long,
if I encountered

one more dragon.

I was nervous with reason. Now Pook's
ears perked,

and I heard it too: whomp-whomp-
whomp! That was the

whomp of a low-slung, heavy-set
dragon!

The sound was coming from the east, so

we galloped

west. Soon I looked back and saw it—a
horrendously

toothed monster of the steam variety.
Whomping wasn't

the most efficient way to travel, but with a creature this

size, it was fast enough.

Pook put on a little more speed, and we stayed com-

fortably ahead of the dragon. That was one big advantage

to having a horse! But I saw that the chasm was narrow-

ing, and this made me nervous; suppose it dead-ended?

That was one hefty steamer back there; I
didn't think I

could slay it. It would take a full-grown
ogre to fight that

thing!

An ogre. I glanced back at the bundle of
joy. No, that

was a baby ogre, formidable enough for
his age, but only

a tiny fraction of the ugliness and power

of a grown one.

Some qualities of ugliness take a lifetime to achieve. We'd

simply have to escape this dragon—which would be easy

enough if the Gap remained wide, and impossible if the

Gap became too narrow. I didn't really care to gamble

that the chasm would favor us.

I looked at the cliffs on either side. No

hope there! We

needed a channel, a level path cut into the steep slope

that a horse could navigate. One trouble about this was

that anything a horse could travel, a dragon of this con-

figuration could also travel. Still, if we followed the path

and stayed ahead until we got out of the chasm—

This was the stuff of daydreams. There was no path cut into the side.

The floor of the chasm became corrugated. There were ridges in it, as if the walls had squeezed together and wrinkled the base. These ridges gradually rose up until they were as high as Pook. I didn't like this; we were

being channelized, and I preferred room to dodge the

dragon. If one of these little channels should dead-end,

it would slow us in scrambling out, and the dragon would

gain on us.

Pook sniffed. "You smell something?" I asked. "If it's

a way out, I'm for it!"

He came to an intersection of channels and swung left.

The walls of this channel rose up higher, up to my riding

head height. Then, abruptly, the channel ended.

Pook's hooves skidded, churning up turf, but he

couldn't stop in time. We spun halfway

around and crashed

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into the end. Dirt shook down as we
righted ourselves,
and the ogret growled.

Then I saw a tunnel slanting back. It hadn't been visible

from the other side, as the entrance was narrow. And I

heard the approaching whomp of the dragon. "Get in

there!" I cried.

Pook squeezed in as the dragon whomped by. I was

afraid the dragon would turn and pursue us, so I urged

the ghost horse on into the darkness. As
my eyes adjusted,

I was able to see because wan rays of
light leaked in

through cracks. This tunnel was close to
the surface, but

never quite emerging. Where did it go?

It twisted in wormlike fashion to the
right and then

began to rise. Surely we would break
out of the ridge any

momentnow! But we didn't.

Then I saw a larger crack and paused to
peer through

it. There was the chasm—slightly below
us! We were in

the wall!

We continued on up. The tunnel
meandered up and

down and around, and sometimes formed
large spirals in

the earth, but generally trended upward.
I hoped it was

a way to the surface. It smelled dank,
and there were

spider webs in the cracks, so it seemed
long disused, but

it had to go somewhere. Wherever that
was, that was

where we were going.

It took a long time, but our hope
ascended as the tunnel

did, and we got there. The tunnel finally debouched into

a lesser crevice, one running at right angles to the Gap

Chasm but intersecting it well above the base, so that we

could not have entered here without using the worm tun-

nel. We followed this one south until it lost interest and

surfaced and we returned at last to the ordinary ground

of Xanth. This was the heart of what the
lost map claimed

was ogre country—which was right
where I wanted to

be.

Now all I had to do was deliver the
bundle of joy to

its expecting family and proceed to
Castle Roogna. I found

I had lost any interest I might have had in
challenging a

mature ogre to heroic combat. If a baby ogre was this

horrendous, I had better stay away from a grown one!

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But also, I no longer saw ogres as bestial monsters; be-

cause of the ogret, I realized that they
had personalities

and families just as real people did. It's
hard to condemn

any creature whose glare and growl has
stopped a dragon

from consuming you.

But where was the ogret's family? Ogre
country was

a broad, vast region; there could be

many ogre tribes,

and many families within each tribe.

How could I know

which one was the right one? Without
that information,

how could I deliver this bundle of joy?

It was evening now, and I was hungry
after the day's

adventure. So I foraged for food, finding
some fruits for

the ogret. I didn't know what babies ate,
but suspected

this one would eat anything. After all, if
he teethed on

chains...

My assumption seemed to be correct. I
offered him a

banana, and he grabbed it in one hairy
mitt, squished it

in the center so that the pulp shot out at
either end, and

jammed the remaining skin into his maw.
He took an

apple, squeezed it so hard juice spurted,
and gulped down

the skin and seeds with evident gusto.
This sort of eating

was messy, but, of course, babies are
messy eaters. I

gave him a milkweed pod, afraid that he
would just squish

the milk all over himself, but this one he chose to swallow

whole. Finally I gave him a pomegranate, and he really

liked that; he knocked the granate on his head, cracking

the stone open, then picked out the red, juicy seeds, threw

them away, swallowed the stone, and burped up a seed

he had overlooked. He was really sort of cute in his hor-

rendous fashion.

Taking care of a baby, it turned out, was no problem

at all. My only concern was changing the diaper, but it

seemed the ogret hadn't existed long enough to process

food all the way through yet, so the diaper remained clean.

That was just as well, since I wasn't sure

I had the strength

to take it away from him for cleaning.

I didn't worry about Pook, either. He
could go off now

if he wished to, since I had gotten most
of the way to

Castle Roogna and he no longer needed
me to save him

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from being taken over by elves or eaten by dragons or

whatever. We could get along without each other.

I leaned back against an acorn tree.

"What am I going

to do with you, ogre baby?" I asked rhetorically as I held

out a fruit-punch. Naturally the ogre punched it. Juice

exploded, and the baby crammed the
husk into his big

mouth. He spat a seed at me that just
missed my head

and embedded itself in the tree trunk
behind me and

growled contentedly. The shudder of the
seed-shock trav-

eled up the trunk and caused the
branches of the tree to

shake, dislodging a corn, which thunked
into the ground

before the ogret. He picked it up and
chewed on it.

I saw a sparkle on him. What could it
be? I reached

for it, but he grabbed for my hand, so I
had to let it be.

But it was something he wore. What
would an undelivered

baby wear?

What else except an address tag? I had

to see that! But

the ogret wasn't going to turn it over voluntarily.

I fetched another fruit-punch and shoved it at his big

mouth. While he punched and chomped on that, I took

advantage of his distraction to grab the tag.

It was blank. Of course, I couldn't read,

anyway, and

wouldn't if I could—barbarians take
justified pride in

being illiterate—but that was a separate
problem. How

was I to get an address from this?

I turned it over—and it flashed. One side
was bright,

the other dull. When I turned it again, the
brightside dulled

and the dullside brightened. When I held

it flat, both sides

dulled. It was as if the thing were a mirror that reflected

light only when properly oriented—except there was no

source of light that accounted for the flash, just jungle.

But a magic mirror would use another type of light

source.

I smiled. Now I knew in what direction
the ogret's

parents were. The flash pointed the way.

I cut off a length of vine and tied it to the
ogret's bag

in such a way as to keep the baby inside
while allowing

him to look and reach out. Then I passed
the vine over

a sturdy branch and hauled the bundle of
joy up about

halfway; that kept the baby off the ground, which was no

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safe place at night even for a tyke as horrendous as this,

and prevented him from going anywhere while I slept. As

an afterthought, I sliced off a section of ironwood and

passed it up. The hairy hand snatched it

from my grasp,

and the teeth happily gnawed on its end.

It was a decent

pacifier that should keep the ogret
halfway quiet.

I climbed the tree, found a suitable
niche, and settled

down to sleep. Pook continued to graze
below; he wasn't

concerned about the spooks of the
darkness, being a ghost

horse himself. In fact, the rattle of his chains probably

frightened away other spooks.

It was a quiet night, and I woke refreshed. Naturally

Pook was gone—but to my surprise, he returned when

he heard me stirring. "You mean you're tame now?" I

asked him, as I had before. He snorted

derisively, as

before, but did not depart.

I found some rock candy and several more milkweed

pods for the ogret, and he chomped them up violently

and spat seeds at flying bugs, scoring an impressive num-

ber of times. I wondered whether the night had soiled his

diaper, but it seemed all right. Maybe it was a magic one,

self-cleaning. The storks seemed to have deliveries down

to a science, if that's not a meaningless term in Xanth.

That is, they are impossibly well organized. In real life,

of course, things are never scientific, and it's foolish to

believe that they can be. Only in a place like Mundania

would anyone try to hold such a view.

I loaded the bundle of joy back on Pook,
not bothering

to untie the vine-rope, and mounted.
Naturally, the ogret

found another section of chain to chew
on. Babies are

always putting things in their mouth. But
it kept him quiet.

In ogre country, silence is a special

blessing.

We headed in the direction indicated by
the tag-flash,

which was roughly southeast. We
galloped through forest

and plain, over hill and valley, past cliff
and cave, monster

and river. We passed curse-burrs, ant-
lions, drifting magic-

dust, a colony of fauns and nymphs,
harpies, and a mouth-

organ tree that tootled a low note of warning at us. It was

a pretty dull trip.

We made excellent time, for Pook liked to run, and in

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the afternoon we reached the region of the ogres. I could

tell, because some trees were twisted into knots, others

were broken off at the base, and small ironwoods had

been bitten off at ground level; ogres liked to play with

things. I had heard somewhere that the ogres were mi-

grating north, but this seemed pretty far

south to me;

maybe they were slow movers. Well,
they could take

three centuries to move north if they
wanted to; no one

was going to tell an ogre what to do! Just
so long as they

never got too near to Fen Village.

I checked the ogret's tag for
reorientation. It was glow-

ing like a little fire; we were very close.
But now a problem

occurred to me. How was I to hand over
the bundle of

joy without getting myself clobbered? I
didn't want to

defend myself with my sword; what
good was it to deliver

a baby to a dead mother? But I didn't
want to be pulped

and eaten by the ogres, either.

I located the family domicile, which was
a pile of trees

torn up by the roots and shaped into a
crude nest. Ogres

never did things carefully when brute
power sufficed. I

saw the ogress; she was almost twice my
height and so

ugly that her puss made spots of gook
dance before my

eyeballs. It was like a cross between the
rump of a sick

sphinx and a squashed ant-lion. I could
hardly look at

her, let alone go near her!

I worked up a notion. I suspended the
bundle of joy

by the vine and swung it around in an
arc. The ogret

chortled; he liked swinging through the
air almost as much

as he liked chomping chain. Then I
nudged Pook forward.

We came to the ogress. She was ripping a small tangle

tree from the ground and chewing on its flailing tentacles.

Expectant females were known to have odd tastes!

"Here it comes!" I cried and charged toward her, whirl-

ing the ogret. I passed her just out of reach, which was

a scary thing, because ogres have phenomenally long

reaches. The swinging bundle of joy whomped into her

belly, knocking her onto her back, her feet in the air, the

bundle atop her. The ogret's head popped out, and he

growled so horrendously that the remaining tentacles of

the tangler she held straightened out stiffly in sheer terror.

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The ogress let out an equally horrendous screech of

joy and clutched the ogret to her. Mother and son—what

awful music they made together! I

galloped away, un-

molested. The delivery had been made!

Of course the male ogre spied me. He did not appear

to be completely pleased about the delivery, or maybe he

had simply decided that Pook and I would make an ex-

cellent repast. He lumbered after us, making surprising

speed because of the length of his stride.

He was even

uglier than the ogress and ogret put
together, incredible

as that sounds. Small birds, startled by
our passage, flew

up, glimpsed his gross puss, and fell
from the air stunned.

Bugs died in clouds where he passed.
Trees quaked, their

leaves turning yellow around the edges.
In the sky a cloud

looked down, saw him, and puffed into
vapor. We zoomed

on; we didn't want to look at him, either.

When the ogre saw he couldn't catch us,
he paused to

rip a boulder out of the ground and hurl
it. I saw it coming

and had Pook dodge behind a great rock
maple tree for

shelter. The boulder struck the tree and
knocked off its

top. We sprang out of there as rocks and
sand showered

around, for the maple had been shattered. What a brute

that ogre was! If this was his reaction to the happy oc-

casion of becoming a father, I'd hate to be near when he

was angry! I was sure the ogret would have a happy home

life.

We managed to lose ourselves in an

intricate pattern

of geometrees, and the ogre gave up the pursuit. He wasn't

very smart, for ogres are as stupid as they are strong, and

that is the standard against which all other strength and

stupidity is measured. He gave up the chase and went

back to glower at the bundle of joy.

I hoped that when a stork set out to find

Bluebell Elf,

it would be able to deliver its bundle
with less trouble

than this one had been! Certainly I no
longer thought that

the storks had an easy job. In fact, it is
all too easy to

believe others have easy times when you
don't know any-

thing about their problems.

We walked back the way we had come,

roughly north-

west, for I understood that Castle
Roogna was somewhere

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in that region. At this slower pace the
journey took a

couple of days, and I fought off a few
minor threats along

the way—griffins, carnivorous plants,
giant serpents,

hostile centaurs, that sort of thing, purely routine—and

I was beginning to get bored when at last the dusky towers

of Castle Roogna hove into view.

I had arrived!

Chapter 6. Hero's Challenge

Actually, Castle Roogna wasn't the easiest place

to approach. It was surrounded by a
spreading orchard,

and the trees were unusual. I thought it
was coincidence

or bad maintenance when I found the
approach path

blocked by a massive branch. I guided
Pook around it—

only to discover that it interlocked with
the extended low

branch of another tree. So I guided Pook
around the other

way, to circle the first tree—and there was another branch

tying into another tree. They were too low for Pook to

pass under, yet too fluffed out with brush for him to leap

over.

I paused and scratched my head. We could get by, of

course. But I marveled that the path to the castle could

have become so overgrown. Had no one
passed this way

in the last fifty years? Surely the road to
the capital would

be kept up! Did this mean the castle was
deserted? In Fen

Village we had not had direct news from
Castle Roogna

in a long time, but we assumed this was
because we were

a minor backwoods hamlet. Now I
wondered about the

frontwoods region; could it have gone out of business?

Now that I thought of it, I realized I had encountered no

men on my long journey here. Goblins, elves, ogres, yes—

but these were only distantly related to men. Well, perhaps

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not too distantly related, in the case of the elves; Bluebell

had been most womanlike, divinely feminine, when the ad-

aptation-spell was in force. But where were the regular men

and women? I had understood there were human villages

scattered all around Xanth. Where were they?

Well, I would just have to get into Castle

Roogna and

find out. I dismounted, drew my sword,
and walked to

the center of the path. I picked my spot
and used my

weapon like an axe, hacking into the
wood.

I swear, that whole tree shuddered at my
first blow.

There was a rain of twigs and leaves,
and a groan as if

wind were making the trunk shift.

I hacked again, at an angle, so that a
wedge of bark

and wood flew out. The tree shuddered
again, and reddish

sap oozed from the cut.

Pook neighed warning. I leaped back—
and a solid

branch crashed down where I had been
standing, the kind

they call a widowmaker. It was just as well I had avoided

it, since I wasn't married so couldn't leave a widow. Ap-

parently I had shaken the tree hard enough to dislodge

some deadwood. Apt name for it! I kicked it out of the

way and made ready to hack again.

But now, oddly, the branch was lower. In fact, it

touched the ground. It would be easy for Pook to step

over it. I considered hacking the rest of the way through

it, anyway, to clear the path, but dusk was drawing nigh

in the creepy way it had, and I wasn't sure what I would

find ahead. Best not to expend more time here now. So

I remounted Pook, and we stepped across and proceeded

onward.

As we passed under the looming height
of another tree,

a great rock maple like the one the ogre
had shattered,

Pook leaped ahead. Behind us, a rock
crashed. No ogre

was present; the tree itself had bombed
us!

I looked ahead. The trees beside the path

stood close

and threatening, and I didn't trust them.

The things of

the vegetable kingdom can be just as bad
as those of the

animal kingdom when they take a notion
to be.

I decided to use Standard Barbarian
Approach Number

One: the direct threat of mayhem. I drew
my sword again.

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"Listen, you trees!" I yelled. "Whichever one of you drops

anything on me will get its branches lopped off or its trunk

girdled!"

There was no response. Holding the sword ready and

glaring about me like an ogre, I guided Pook forward. His

ears were turning this way and that, alert for the sounds

of treachery. But nothing happened, and soon we were

clear of this region. It seemed that my warning had suf-

ficed; I had cowed the trees. Don't tell me that violence

is the refuge of incompetence! It's the only language some

things understand. Of course, I am a barbarian warrior,

so there may be a modicum of self-interest in that state-

ment.

Now the orchard opened out, and Castle Roogna came

into view from fairly close range in the light of the setting

sun. I was ready to behold and marvel at its glories.

I stifled my disappointment. Castle
Roogna was no

glowing edifice; it was a mildewed,
rundown structure

whose gardens were overrun by weeds
and whose moat

was a mass of brown goo. This was the
capital of Xanth?

It was more like a witch-hag's den, or
the fabled past

residence of the Zombie Master, who

had lost his love

and turned himself into a zombie four
hundred years be-

fore. What was wrong?

I rode up to the moat. The water was
low, but closer

inspection showed that there was not
much goo, just

brackish stuff. The moat monster was
asleep. "Hey, wake

up, soursnoot!" I called indignantly to it.

"Sleep on your
own time!"

The thing opened an eye, flicked its tail,
and went back

to its slumber. How lax could castle
security get?

Disgusted, I crossed the drawbridge,
which was down

and unattended. The castle was the
largest human-

constructed edifice I had seen, imposing
despite its run-

down state, but I was saddened to see
the authority of

man at such reduced level. I had
expected to come to the

center of a flourishing empire; instead, it
was little more

than my home village.

A woman appeared at the interior gate.
She was middle-

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aged and dumpy, and her apron was dirty. "Welcome,

Hero!" she exclaimed. "Do come in!"

"How do you know I'm a hero?" I demanded, not

completely flattered. Oh, I like flattery as well as the next

barbarian, but this seemed gratuitous and possibly insin-

cere. Also, flattery is much easier to accept from young,

pretty women than from old, dumpy ones.

"The prophecy," she explained.

"What prophecy?" I asked, somewhat aggrieved be-

cause I remembered the one made by the

old elfess that

I was to be doomed by a cruel lie. I don't
really like such

prophecies, so this was one I preferred
not to be reminded

of.

"King Gromden will have to tell you
that. Come on

in; we have supper waiting."

I shrugged and dismounted. It was strange that the

trees had tried to prevent my approach to the castle, while

people welcomed it. I remained on guard. But the pros-

pect of a good meal was tempting. "What about my horse?"

I knew Pook would be interested in the same kind of

protection he had had among the elves; he was helping

me in the wilderness, and I was helping him in civilization.

"We have a nice stall for him, with magic grain," the woman said.

Pook's ears perked up. He whinnied. He knew a good thing when he heard it.

Obligingly, the woman led us to a stall set in the wall.

Sure enough, there was a pan of grain there, and it looked

delicious even to me. Pook went to it and started eating,

and I saw that when he took a mouthful, the level in the

pan did not drop. It was magic, all right, and evidently

the grain was good.

"You'll be all right?" I asked him.

"Remember, we

don't really know these people." But he ignored me; he

was happy. I wondered if he had not gotten too tame. It

was not good for an animal—or a barbarian—to be too

trusting of strangers, especially civilized strangers. Civ-

ilized people did not share the simple values of barbarians

and could be very devious.

"That's pretty concentrated stuff," I warned him. "If

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you eat too much, you could get sick—" He snorted,

sending oats flying; he knew what he was doing and didn't

appreciate my meddling. I suppose I
wouldn't have ap-

preciated his cautions on women,
sword-fighting, and such,

either. We human beings can be awfully
arrogant in little

unconscious ways.

I followed the woman into the human
region of the

castle. This was in better repair. The
floor was clean, and

there were attractive tapestries on the walls. We came to

the banquet hall, and there a sumptuous repast was laid

out.

A man stood at the head of the table. He was old and

bald and fat, with straggly white whiskers and sunken

eyes. He wore a fancy robe and crown, so I realized he

was the King of Xanth. Naturally I greeted him with the

respect due his rank. "Hello, King," I said.

"Hello, Hero," he replied, batting an eye.

"Urn, King, I don't know about this hero business."

"It is the prophecy," he explained. "In

our time of

need, a young, well-formed man of
primitive lineage is to

appear, riding a pooka he has tamed.
You are evidently

that man. Now sit down and eat, before
it gets cold."

"Uh, sure," I agreed, disconcerted. That
prophecy did

seem to have me nailed down pretty
well, except that

Pook claimed he wasn't really tame. I
suppose it's a mat-

ter of perspective. But if that prophecy
was on target,

what about the elven one? I didn't like
that thought, so

I flushed it from my mind.

I sat down, and the woman served us
both. It seemed

to be dragon steak and fruit salad, with
foaming brew

from a beer-barrel tree. Standard fare,
except for the

dragon meat; I wondered how they had
come by that.

But on occasion dragons suffered
mishaps, and men were

able to snatch the bodies before some
other creature did.

I was good and hungry, so I went to it.

"You're really supposed to wait till King
Gromden

starts," the woman murmured in my ear
as she poured
the beer.

I paused, mouth full. "Mf mmf?" I asked.

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"Quite all right," the King said quickly,
taking a mouth-
ful himself.

So we ate, and it was an excellent meal.
The King
didn't eat much, so I polished off most of

it, tucking a

spare dragon steak in my pocket for future consumption.

Then we settled back to talk. "You may not know it. King,

but I'm just a barbarian warrior," I said, burping vigor-

ously and wiping my mouth on the tablecloth.

"That is surprising," he remarked gravely.

"What's this hero business? I mean, so there's a proph-

ecy, but what do you need a hero for?"

"It would seem that we have a problem," Gromden

said. "We do need a hero, and evidently you are it."

"Well, it's true I'm looking for adventure. King. What

can I do for you?"

"You can undertake the Hero's Challenge."

"Sure, King. Just tell me where to go and what to do."

I yawned, as it had been a long day.

"Tomorrow," Gromden decided. "You are obviously

tired from your journey."

"Suits me. King," I agreed politely.

And so the maid woman showed me to
an upstairs

room, complete with a fine big bed,
mirror, and chamber

pot. I'd never had a room with such
modern sanitary

facilities before! Soon I flopped on the
bed and slept,

snoring roundly. I know I snored,
because I heard the

echoes off the walls. I really preferred
the forest, but I'm

adaptable; I can make do with civilized
fixings when I

have to.

In the morning I woke to a peremptory
knocking. I

bounced off the bed, set my hand on my
sword, and went

to the door.

It was only the serving woman.

"Something has come

up," she said hastily. "I won't be able to fix your break-

fast, but you can forage in the orchard."

"That's fine," I said. "What's come up?"

"Well—" She looked pained. "His

Majesty is indis-
posed."

"Oh. You mean the old boy doesn't want to talk today?

Well, I guess I can wait."

She didn't answer. She just turned quickly away.

Women can be funny that way.

I used the chamber pot and dumped it out
the window,

then went down and out to the orchard.

Pook was already

there, grazing. He looked satisfied; that
load of grain had

done him good. "How come you haven't
run away?" I

asked him. "You've been sticking with
me when you don't

have to, and you even served as part of
the prophecy.

Are you sure you're not tame?"

He snorted derisively, as he always did,
and continued

to graze. It occurred to me that even
ghost horses might

get lonely, or maybe tired of rattling
chains at night. While

he was with me, he had company and
was admitted to

the territories of elves and men, where
there was good

eating. Maybe it made sense to be tame,
or to seem to

be.

I found plenty of ripe fruits on the trees
and soon

fashioned myself a sandwich from slices
of breadfruit and

cheese fruit. I saw snapdragon bushes,
and so the mystery

of the dragon steaks was abated; it
wasn't real dragon

meat. I didn't mind; it tasted the same, as far as I knew.

I could see that this had once been a well-kept grove, but

now it was clogged by weeds. There just didn't seem to

be much doing here at Castle Roogna. I remained dis-

appointed, though I hoped the King had a good adventure

for me.

When I went back inside, I decided to
check on the

old boy. I found King Gromden's door
with a crown

painted on it, so I pounded on that. There
was no answer,

so I pushed it open and went in. "You
here, King?" I

called politely. I didn't want anyone to
think I was just

barging in.

There was a muffled sound from the bed,
so I went

there. King Gromden was lying on his
back and he didn't

look well at all. "Hey!" I exclaimed.
"You're really sick,

King!"

His eyes ground open. "Astute
observation," he whis-

pered.

"Hey, look, Grom, I'm sorry," I said. "I didn't know."

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The wench just said you weren't talking.
Is it something

you ate? Can I help?"

"I am old," he confessed, as if that
weren't obvious.

"I won't live out the year. Perhaps not
the month. My

wife and child deserted me years ago.
You can help by

undertaking the challenge."

"Sure, King," I said. "I told you I would yesterday.

What is it?"

"It is—" He paused for a labored breath. Last the year

or the month? I wasn't sure he'd last the hour! He had

seemed okay the night before, but I guess these things

come and go when you're old. "It is the challenge for the succession."

"The what?"

"The succession. When I die, there must be a new

King. The best Magician in the land. But there's a problem

I lack the strength to resolve—"

He faded out. "Yes, King?" I prompted, prodding him

with a thumb. "You say you have to do something before

you croak?"

"So there must be a contest," he whispered. "A contest

of magic, and—"

I waited, but he seemed to have lost consciousness.

Too bad; I really wondered what he had been trying to

tell me. A contest of magic sounded pretty interesting, but

I didn't see how I fitted in. I was, after all, just a barbarian;

I didn't know much about strong magic.

I went back to my room. There was the

maid, looking

flushed. "Where have you been?" she asked severely.

"I've been looking all over for you."

"I was talking to the old boy," I said.

"You bothered the King?" she demanded as if shocked.

Women get shocked by the littlest things.
"He's ill!"

"He sure is," I agreed. "You should have told me.

Don't you have a pill or spell for him?"

"It's past that stage," she snapped. "Now you go down-

stairs; Magician Yin is here to see you in the audience

chamber."

"Who?"

"Magician Yin. You'll see Magician Yang tomorrow;

they refuse to come together. They're very competitive."

I shrugged amiably. "Sure, I'll talk to anyone. I hope

the old boy feels better soon. Maybe he's constipated; if

you give him some prune juice—" But she was already

bustling away. I suppose she was one of those people who

didn't take kindly to good advice.

So I went downstairs and found Magician Yin. I re-

membered that the elves had said someone with a name

like that made the canned spells that could be so handy.

He turned out to be a medium-sized,
medium-aged man

in white who really didn't look like
much. Naturally I told

him so; barbarians believe in straight
talk.

He smiled, for some reason reminding
me of the way

the King had reacted to some of my
comments. I just

don't understand the attitudes of civilized

folk, I suppose;

it's as if they are piped in to some other kind of awareness

that passes me by. Women are like that, too.

"Let me show you what I do," Yin said. He reached

into a bag he carried and brought out a small globe. He

handed it to me. "Set it somewhere and

invoke it," he
said.

"Oh, you mean it's a spell," I said.

"Yes, I make spells."

I set it on the table. "I invoke you, spell,"
I said.

Instantly the globe glowed. The light from it brightened

the whole room. "Say, that's pretty good," I said, turning

my eyes away from its brightness. "How long does it

burn?"

"Until nullified," he said.

"You mean till I tell it to quit?"

"No, you can not un-invoke my spells;
they are per-

manent. It requires a counterspell to
nullify it—one equal

and opposite. Some of my spells do lose
strength as time

passes, though; it depends on their nature
and complex-

ity."

"Okay, let's have a darkness spell," I

said.

"I don't make negative spells," Yin said.

"Oh? Who does?"

"My twin brother. Magician Yang."

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"You mean there are two of you?" Now
that Yin-Yang

reference was clarifying.

"Equal and opposite."

"Say!" I exclaimed, catching on. "You and he—the

contest? To see who's best?"

"Correct," Yin agreed. "One of us must be King after

Gromden expires. The strongest Magician. But we haven't

been able to determine which of us that is."

"But how do I fit in?"

"Obviously Yang and I can't just throw spells at each

other; they'd simply nullify one another and it would be

even. We need to discover whose magic is more effective

in practice. So we need a third party to

use the spells for

some practical purpose. Then we can ascertain whose

spells are best."

"A third party," I said. "That must be me!"

"Correct," Yin agreed. "You will go on a quest, using

my magic to assist you and to facilitate your mission,

while Yang's magic opposes you. If you succeed, I will

win and be designated the next King of Xanth; if you

fail—"

"Um, what happens to me if I fail?" I asked.

"Well, it is simply a matter of fetching an object. If

you don't bring it back, then Yang wins

and becomes the

next King. But I'm sure my spells will enable you to

succeed."

"I guess so," I agreed uncertainly. Equal and oppo-

site—it seemed to me the spells would still cancel one

another out, leaving no advantage for either side. But I

was the first to concede that a barbarian

is not the one

to comprehend the nuances of magical
interplay. "How

do I get the spells?"

"This bag is for you," he said. "Our
agreement is that

I provide seven spells to assist you.
Yang will set the

opposite seven spells to oppose you.
Mine you can carry

with you; his will intercept you without

warning. You

merely have to nullify his evil spells
with my good ones

and complete the mission."

"Seems simple enough," I said,
disappointed. I had

hoped for news of some dark tower
defended by monsters

with a fair damsel to rescue and magic
to blow up the

monsters and scale the tower wall. Ah, well; a mundanish

adventure is still an adventure, I suppose.

"It should be," he agreed, with a certain subtle civilized

nuance of the type I have already remarked on.

I looked into the bag of spells. It was filled with objects:

a little white shield, a figure of a monster, a skull, a stone,

a doll, a tangled length of vine, and a magic compass.

"But these are toys!" I protested.

Yin laughed. "Hardly! They are inert representations.

When you invoke them, they become full-sized and po-

tent."

I lifted out the little skull. "I don't need a full-sized skull!"

"Allow me to explain. Because all Yang's spells and

mine are equal and opposite, they have similar forms in

many cases. King Gromden decided on the seven spell-

sets that would be used in this contest;

he wanted to allow

a fair trial of magic, without endangering bystanders. Thus

we are permitted no deadly explosive spells, or basilisk

spells, or noxious contagious-disease spells. The seven

are fairly straightforward, and you should not have trou-

ble understanding them. His negative spells are black; my

positive ones are white. So when you encounter his black

skull, you must invoke my white skull.
The black skull

brings death; the white one brings just
the opposite, life.

They don't complete their effects
instantly; you will have

a minute or so to invoke the life-spell
when you feel the

death-spell taking hold."

"Oh." I reached into the bag for another
spell. "Maybe

you better explain them all for me so I know exactly what

to do in my minute, each time." I brought out the little

white shield. "What about this?"

"The white shield counters the black sword. A sword,

of course, is negative; it exists for one purpose only, to

cut and kill. A shield exists to preserve limb and life, and

this shield, when invoked, will preserve yours."

It certainly made sense. I looked forward to seeing that

magic black sword; that was the kind of sword and sorcery

I understood. Maybe I'd take it on with my own sword

before I invoked the shield, just to see how good it really

was. I brought out the twisted vine.
"This?"

"That is a representation of an eye-queue vine; note

the eyeballs braided into it." I had thought those were

beads, but now I saw that the tiny dots were pupils. "In

nature, the eye-queue dispenses
temporary or even illu-

sory intelligence; the victim thinks he is
far smarter than

he is. But my vine is real; put that on
your head and you

will become far smarter than you are
now, and the effect

will last for several days, slowly fading.
Most spells don't

work well on the brain; that's why it
can't be a permanent

enhancement. But you don't want to use it before you

encounter the black idiocy vine Yang has crafted, for you

want it at full potency to counter his. The two are even

at the start, but if you use mine two days before his strikes

you, you will be somewhat duller than you are now, for

several days, because the negative one will be fresher."

"I see the point!" I agreed. "I'm just a backwoods

barbarian, none too smart to begin with; I can't afford to

be any worse than I am."

"Precisely," Yin acknowledged politely.

I brought out the compass. "Now I've heard of these

magic gimmicks," I said. "Their little arrows always point

north. But I already know where north is, and if I don't,

I can find it by garden-variety backwoods magic, such as

the moss that grows on the north sides of trees. Why do

I need this?"

"This compass doesn't necessarily point north," he

explained. "It points to the object you need to find and

bring back to Castle Roogna. This spell you must invoke

first, so you will know where to go."

"And Yang's compass will point the wrong way?" I

asked. "I'll simply ignore it."

"Yang's compass will make this one point the wrong

way," he clarified.

"Well, I'll just remember the direction, then. I have a

good sense of direction, once I get my bearings; all bar-

barians do."

"Unfortunately, the object may move about, so you

can not track it without the compass until you know its

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nature. Also, it is not merely the compass needle that

points; it acts on your mind, so that you know in which

direction to go. The black compass will prevent you from

knowing where to go, even if you don't look at it."

"Oh," I said, getting slightly confused.

"Then if the

two compasses cancel each other, how
do I find the ob-

ject?"

"You must try to avoid the black
compass until you

find the object. After that, the black
compass can't hurt

you."

"How can I do that? If I know where Yang's spells are, I'll avoid them all!"

"Unfortunately, again, you can't; they will be placed in your path so that you will intercept them all in turn."

"I'll change my route!"

"No, your route has been divined by magic; Yang will

place the spells in your way. But nothing can be totally

predetermined. If you are alert, you will be able to spot

them and nullify them with mine before they cause you

unredeemable mischief. I am trusting you to do that." He

smiled thinly.

"Well, I'll certainly try," I agreed. "Will his spells be
out in the open?"

"Yes and no. He will place them in such a way as to
try to confuse you, so that you are likely to overlook them
until you come into range. Your mere presence will invoke
them. So you must be alert at all times. The key here is

not avoidance, since you can not avoid them, except per-

haps the black compass, but your readiness to nullify them

promptly. If you spy a black spell from a distance, you

can approach it deliberately with the white counterspell

in hand. So your state of readiness will be critical."

"I will be ready. Barbarians are always

alert to their

surroundings." I was getting to like this challenge, after

all.

I drew out the monster figurine. "This?"

"Yang's spell will summon a horrendous monster, one

that will surely destroy you if not dealt with promptly.

My spell-will banish that monster, so
you won't have to
fight it at all."

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"Oh," I said, disappointed. "I like
fighting monsters."

"I assure you, you won't like this one,"

he said. "It's

the tarasque."

"Never heard of it," I said disdainfully.

"Just keep an eye out for the black spell,
and keep this

white one handy. Don't use it on any
routine monster."

I brought forth another spell, the doll.

"This?"

"That particular set is one of the most insidious. Yang's

spell will exchange your identity with that of the person

or creature nearest you at the moment it is invoked. It

won't hurt either of you specifically, but I doubt you'd

be pleased if it wasn't nullified. For example, if the nearest

creature is a fruit fly, you would find yourself in the body

of the fruit fly, and it would have your man's body. My

spell will restore both of you to your original bodies—

provided you make sure they are adjacent when you in-

voke it."

"Urn, yes, I wouldn't want to be a fruit fly," I agreed.

I fished out the last spell, the stone. "And this falls on

my head?"

"Not exactly. The black stone spell will cause you to

become stone; the white one will return the stone to flesh.

Both have a substantial overkill factor."

"Huh?"

"This one is powerful enough to turn several barbarians

and their horses to stone, if allowed to run unchallenged.

So the other can convert a large amount of stone to flesh."

"How does it know the difference between natural stone

and converted stone?" I asked. "Is the type of stone dif-

ferent?"

"The spell merely acts on the closest stone to it. Since

you will be invoking it as you are turning to stone, that

will be you. Only you can invoke the white spells; that

is a necessary safeguard."

I pictured a mimic-bird flying by, squawking, "Invoke!

Invoke!" and bringing to life my entire

bag of spells at

once. I nodded; it was indeed a necessary safeguard. They

had worked out the details of this challenge pretty well.

I took a deep breath. "So if I just keep this bag of spells

handy, I'll be able to counter each of Yang's spells and

complete the mission. That seems straightforward enough."

"Well, there are always unexpected details of situation," he said, "and also complications of terrain."

"I'm a barbarian. I'm used to handling terrain."

"And on the return trip you will be
burdened with the

object. That may distract you. You must
be especially

careful once you have the object, for the
difficulty of the

challenge may increase exponentially
then."

"There is that," I agreed, wondering
what "exponen-

tial" meant. I assumed it was just a highbrow Magician

term for "a lot." "Just what is this object I'm supposed

to fetch?"

Yin looked moderately embarrassed.

"I'm afraid I am

not permitted to tell you that. King Gromden decided that

some things should be held as surprises to make the con-

test more, er, sporting. I have informed you of the nature

of the spells and counterspells, giving you a certain ad-

vantage; some unknowns are necessary to counterbalance

that. Perhaps Yang will tell you more. However—" His

face darkened. "You must not believe everything Yang

tells you. I am a Good Magician; he is an Evil Magician.

Therefore I must always use my magic positively and

speak the truth. He uses his magic negatively, and..." He

let the words fade out.

"You mean he always lies? Then I'll just believe the

opposite of what he says."

Yin looked further embarrassed. "It is not quite as

simple as that. Truth is not necessarily the opposite of

Untruth. For example, you could ask a liar what direction

the nearest pillow-bush was, and he would tell you it was

east when actually it was south; if you went the opposite

way, you would go west and still be deceived."

"Well, at least I'd know one direction it

wasn't—east.

That would be some help."

"Not necessarily so. Yang does not lie, precisely; he

seeks to deceive. If he can best deceive by indirection,

or even by telling the truth in a way you will doubt, he

will do that. Thus the bush might indeed be east—the

one direction you would not go after

asking him."

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I began to appreciate the ramifications.
The civilized

folk had evidently developed lying into a
sophisticated

art! We barbarians were straightforward
liars, when we

lied at all.

"I really would prefer that you not talk to Yang at all,"

Yin said. "But the rules of this contest give us equal

access. So all I can do is warn you not to trust him, either

to speak the truth or to lie, for he will surely mislead you

to his advantage. He is insidiously clever."

I shrugged. "Thanks for the warning.
Magician. I'll be
careful."

He smiled. "Do be that. And farewell.
Hero; I hope

to see you again at the conclusion of the
mission."

"Sure thing, Yin." I left him and took the
bag of spells
to my room.

The rest of the day was frankly dull. The serving woman

fixed me a decent lunch and hurried off to attend to the

sick King. I amused myself by exploring the castle, which

was big and empty. In one upstairs room was the magic

tapestry, showing scenes of Xanth during the last four

hundred years. There had been a long

succession of kings,

some of them pretty good. I rather liked
King Roogna,

who had supervised the construction of
the castle; he had

used centaur labor, and Evil Magician
Murphy had tried

to interfere, but a barbarian had arrived
to help King

Roogna. Trust a barbarian to show up in
the nick of time,

when the civilized folk couldn't manage!
I was of that

heroic mold myself, as I may have mentioned.

But somehow it seemed that the power of man had

faded in Xanth, slowly over the centuries, and the once

far-reaching activities of the castle had contracted, until

today old King Gromden was about all that remained.

Gromden meant well and was a good

man, but people

lacked confidence in him. Maybe it was
that there just

weren't enough human folk left in Xanth
to hold back the

jungle.

The woman appeared. "The King asks
for you," she

said disapprovingly.

I went to Gromden's room. He was
sitting up in bed,

evidently somewhat recovered, though
he did not look at

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all spry. "Feeling better. King?" I asked
brightly. "Maybe

the prune juice helped?"

"My malady comes and goes," he said,
"and each siege

is to a new nadir. It derives as much
from the soul as

from the flesh. How I wish my wife and
daughter were

here! But—" He shrugged with deep
regret. "A man can

pay a lifetime for a moment's folly."

"That's for sure. King!" I agreed. "I
remember when

I found this tangle-seed and thought I'd
plant it in our
garden—"

"I summoned you in this period of my
lucidity, because
it may not last long. I have something
important to tell
you that I fear you will not believe."

"I'm just a barbarian. King," I reminded
him. "I can

believe almost anything."

He smiled tiredly. "That is surely why the prophecy

named you for this mission; you have no preconceptions.

But I fear you are being deceived unnecessarily, so simple

fairness requires me to set some things straight."

"Sure, King." I nodded. "What's

crooked?"

"This contest between Yin and Yang is not precisely

what it seems. It is not really a trial to determine which

Magician shall assume the throne of Xanth after me, but

rather which one shall serve the other."

"Isn't that the same thing?" I asked. "The one who

loses doesn't get to be King, so—"

"No, not the same," he asserted. "And that object you

are supposed to fetch has certain qualities that will greatly

complicate your task. This is no simple matter, Barbarian!

Yin and Yang don't realize that I know any of this, but—"

"How do you know it. King?" I asked.

He smiled again. "I see that you, like they, question

my remaining mental acuity. Indeed, I found the truth

difficult to believe myself. Perhaps it will be more con-

vincing if I demonstrate how I ascertained my informa-

tion."

"I guess so," I conceded doubtfully. The

old boy did

seem a little confused. But that was what
happened to

sick people sometimes.

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"If you would be so kind—fetch me an
object from

the grounds."

"Sure King," I agreed amicably. Might
as well humor

him. I turned my back, left the room,
went down and out,

and looked about. What would be
suitable? A fruit? May-

be a prune? A stick of wood? No sense
going to a lot of

trouble, since he'd probably be asleep
when I returned.

I spied a chip of stone, fallen from the

castle wall. That

should do. I picked it up and went back inside.

King Gromden remained awake. I handed him the chip.

He held it before him, staring at it. "This is a fragment

of stone from the outer wall of this castle," he said. "It

was quarried by centaurs and hauled to this site four

hundred years ago."

"What do you know," I remarked. It really didn't take

any magic talent to know that; all the castle rocks were

quarried and hauled in at that time. If that wasn't common

knowledge, the magic tapestry showed it to anyone willing

to watch, as I had been.

"The centaur who hauled this particular stone had a

speckled hide and gray tail," he continued. "He struck

one hoof against a root and issued a bad word, for which

he was duly reprimanded by his superior on the crew."

"Sure," I agreed noncommittally, convinced he was

making this up.

"Later, before the castle was finished,
the goblins and

harpies attacked," he continued. "A
harpy hen laid an egg

that detonated close by, cracking the
block, but the mortar

held it in place. Then the goblins
stormed the castle, and

their dead piled up against the wall; the
eyeball of one

was wedged against this chip, somewhat

to the chip's

disgust."

I chuckled obligingly. I'll say this for the old boy: he

could spin a yarn! Maybe not as fancy as the yarns of the

tapestry, but still good enough.

"Then the goblin bodies were melted down, and some

of the stain soaked into the chip. And it
endured that way

for centuries, until recently a bird
brushed it, and the chip

was finally dislodged and fell to the
ground. There is a

spell on this castle to keep it in repair,
but age and neglect

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may have weakened that spell. You

picked up the chip

between the wall and the moat, near a yellow flower."

"Hey, I did!" I exclaimed, remembering.

"How'd you

know that. King?" For there had been no window cov-

ering that region; he could not have peered out and seen

me.

He smiled. "It is my talent, the magic of Magician

caliber that made me eligible to assume the throne. I can

hold any object and see and hear its history. That is how

I discovered the deception of Yin and Yang. A button fell

from Yin's clothing; I picked it up and read it to determine

whose it was, and found that it was his, but also——"

I glanced at him. He was looking worse;
the effort of

sitting up and talking was bad for him.

"I'd better let you

rest now. King," I said.

"But I must warn you," he protested
weakly. "It is

important for you to complete this
mission, for Yin—"

He coughed and spat up some phlegm,
and his words

were choked off. I didn't want him to
pass out while trying

to talk to me, so I beat a hasty retreat.
Barbarians don't

really understand illness. "You sleep it
off. King," I said

at the door. "I'll talk to you again
tomorrow."

It certainly was dull here at the castle. I

was eager to

get going on the challenge; at least that
promised to be

halfway interesting.

Next day Magician Yang showed up. He
wore black

cloak and looked forbidding, but his
features were just

like Yin's. "I can see you are twin
brothers," I said ob-

servantly.

"Naturally," he agreed, unsmiling. "We
two represent

the Good and Evil aspects of magic.

Let's get on with

this. Where are the spells?"

"Huh?" I replied, perhaps not displaying
my full in-

telligence, such as it was.

"Yin's spells, yokel. I need to check them so I know

which ones to match."

"Oh." I had somehow thought he knew which spells,

since the King had specified them in advance. Evidently

I had misunderstood. I went to my room and brought

down the bag.

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Yang grabbed it and opened it and
peered in. "The

usual garbage," he said. "Yin never was
one for much

imagination."

"I think King Gromden selected the—"

"Him too. Dullards, all! No wonder
Xanth is sliding

to the depths in a basket case." He
reached in and hauled

out the eye-queue vine. "I can match this
idiot-string read-

ily."

"Well, sure, since your spells are equal
and opposite."

"And this airhead," he said, bringing up the white skull,

then dropping it back into the bag with a clunk. "And this

freak." Now he had the white monster figurine. "And the

old magic shield gig, yet! Yin's got no spunk at all!"

"Well, as I said, the King—"

"And as I said, him too! Now this one

had possibili-

ties," he said, bringing up the doll. "You ever been in

someone else's body, bumpkin?"

"No, not exactly that way—"

"And the stone-age ploy," he continued, holding the

white stone. He peered at me. "Take my advice, would-

be hero; save yourself a lot of grief.
Take a dive!"

"A what?"

"Just go out there and don't come back.
Vanish from

the scene."

I had trouble grasping this. "But the
mission—"

"The mission is to determine whether
Yin or Yang

should be the next King. If you fail to
bring back the

object, that determination will be made.
Yang will be

King."

"But—not even to try—"

"Well, you have two ways to go, ignoramus. You can

go out there and get yourself killed, or you can go out

there and take it easy and survive. Either way, the result

of the contest will be the same—but your own situation

will differ. You have to consider your personal stake in

this."

"I couldn't—I said I'd make an honest try, and—"

"You fool!" he cried indignantly. "Don't you know the

contest is rigged? You can't bring back the object! The

whole deal is a cruel lie, set up to appease the masses."

Masses? I wondered where they were.

"But King

Gromden said—"

"That old fool is in his dotage,
simpleton, and sick to

boot! Look how Castle Roogna has
deteriorated under

his administration. We don't need more
scandal in the

castle. It's past time for a strong hand to

take the reins

and restore the throne to its proper glory."

There was some sense to that. "But Magician Yin

could—he has similar magic—"

"Yin is constrained by his foolish notions of ethics. He

places the means before the ends. No person can accom-

plish anything if he worries more about how he does it

than what he is doing. That's why Yin is doomed to lose

this contest."

I have never regarded myself as a clever man, and I

saw right away I was outclassed here. I couldn't argue

with someone as smart and ruthless as Yang. Still, I had

stupid doubts. "I don't know—"

"Of course you don't, rube," Yang agreed. "So I will

tell you. When I am King, I will reward you handsomely.

Do you like nymphs? I will give you a barrel of nymph

spells, each nymph good for a day and willing to do any-

thing you say. Do you like food? I will arrange a feast

every night. Creature comforts? The most comfortable

creatures shall be yours."

"—whether I should accept the mission," I continued

doggedly, "if I'm not even going to try. If I didn't know

better, I'd suspect you were trying to bribe me to—"

"The light dawns at last, oaf! What is

your price?"

"Besides, it sounds like a good
adventure, and that's

what I really came here for." I certainly
didn't much like

Yang!

"What kind of adventure is it to get your
head bitten

off by a monster? Dead men can't enjoy
life!"

Actually, for me there was life after death; evidently

he didn't know that. In his arrogance he hadn't bothered

to check out my talent. I decided not to mention it. "Yin

said you would try to deceive me."

Yang laughed loudly. "How do you know he's not

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lying, hick? Naturally he doesn't want
you to listen to

we!" ;

He had a point. Now I didn't know
whom to believe.

"I guess I'd just better go ahead with the mission, and do

my best, and see how it turns out."

"Pool!" Yang dropped the bag of spells on the floor ;

and stalked out. !

I wished I could get some good advice, but there was

no one with any sense around here
except maybe the

King, and he hadn't heard this
conversation and might

not believe it. Then I remembered his
talent. He could

evoke the dialogue or whatever from a
button on my

clothing; then he would believe!

I went to his room, but he was asleep,
and I didn't

want to wake him. He might go into
another coughing fit.

Well, what could he have said, anyway,
except for me to

do the mission as planned. Actually, he
might already ;

know about Yang's dishonesty, for he
had been trying to

tell me something the day before. Now,

maybe, I knew |

the nature of his warning: that Yang
would try not merely j

to deceive me, but also to corrupt me.
Fortunately, I was

not clever enough to be corrupted.

I

Chapter 7. Mountain of Flesh

I set out the next morning ready for
action, with

the bag of spells tied to Pook. I had my
good sword and

a knife I had picked up at the castle. The
woman had also

found a good sturdy replacement bow
and a quiver of

arrows in the armory. I had plucked
some cherries and

pineapples from the trees of the orchard,

as well as some

edible fruit to consume along the way. I wore light body

armor consisting of leather strips magically pickled and

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hardened. There was a lot of good stuff at Castle Roogna;

too bad there were not more people to enjoy it.

I was at last starting my adventure! This buoyed my

spirits, despite the aspects that puzzled me, and I feared

that it would not be as exciting as I hoped. All I knew of

the object I had to fetch was that it was vaguely northwest

of Castle Roogna, but that was enough to

get me started.

I could invoke my finder-spell anytime,
but preferred to

wait until I had passed the loser-spell I
knew was in my

path. Then I could nullify the black spell
completely, hop-

ing enough of the white one was left
over to enable me

to pinpoint the object when I reached its
general area.

Was it possible that all the evil spells
were in a straight

line to the object? In that case, I would
be better off

meandering somewhat, so as to avoid
most of them. Then

I could invoke the white compass when I
was close and

nail the object quickly. After that, it
wouldn't matter what

the black compass did; it would be too
late. So my not

using the white spell was like saving my last arrow until

well within range of the target—plain common sense.

Except that Yin had assured me that I could not avoid

the black spells; they would be set in my predetermined

path. If I meandered, they would be set along that mean-

der. I found this difficult to accept. After

all, I could keep

changing my course randomly. But magic
has strange as-

pects that are beyond the comprehension
of louts like me.

I'd just have to see what happened.

The band of aggressive trees tried to
give me a hard

time, as they had done before; I
wondered why they didn't

like me, since I was here to do some

good for Castle

Roogna and have a nice adventure.
Maybe they, like Yang,

figured I'd fail. But in that case, their
obstruction just

made it more likely that I would fail. At
least they should

be glad to see me going; they could
oppose me again on

the way back in, if it were just me they
didn't like. This

made no sense. But what can you expect
of blockheads?

So I just made my little statement and
held my sword

aloft, and Pook charged through. The
branches trembled

with rage, but did not strike. Sometimes
force is the only

feasible alternative, especially for those
who possess it.

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We trotted along, making good time, and soon came

to a range of mountains. I pondered whether to go around

them, but I didn't know their extent and was afraid I

would have to go far out of my way and perhaps lose

track of my general direction. So I took the simple bar-

barian course—over the top.

Naturally, the obvious course is not necessarily the

easiest one, as the firebird discovered when he tried to

romance his reflection in the water and got his flame

doused. But it was in the middling-rear of my mind that

no one would have expected me to be

dumb enough to

go right over the top, so maybe there
would be no evil

spells there. This was really a test case
—whether I could

do the unexpected and mess up the
predetermined path.

If I couldn't be smart, I could at least be
cunning.

The slope got steeper as we went, until
Pook was puff-

ing, and I had to dismount to ease his burden. At one

point I had to unloop one of his chains and throw it around

a tree trunk above us, so I could pull on it and help heave

him up. Actually, those chains were one reason he was

struggling; they added a fair amount of weight to his climb.

But we persevered and got so high by dusk that the Land

of Xanth spread out below us, its lakes
and jungles a

lovely patchwork. One lake turned
brighter and larger as

I looked at it, trying to impress me; the
inanimate can be

just as vain about its appearance as any
animate creature.

Unfortunately, I could not see what was
ahead of us,

to the northwest, because the remainder

of the mountain

blocked that off. But I knew we'd see it
once we crested.

That should be as good as a map; maybe
I'd even see the

object, whatever it was. But would I
recognize it?

The mountain went up and up. It
certainly hadn't looked

this big from below! The thing seemed to
be drawing itself

up, trying to outlast us, making this its own special con-

test.

Well, next time I'd go around and risk the bad spells!

But having started this course, I wasn't about to quit now.

As I may have remarked, barbarians can be oinkheaded

on occasion, and I was typical of the

breed.

The air grew cool, then cold; we were entering the

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snow region. Sure enough, a flock of snow-birds wheeled

in the sky, coming to investigate us. I didn't know much

about snow-birds, but didn't trust them,
and neither did

Pook. We moved faster, seeking to avoid
them, but they

came over and buzzed us. White powder
drifted down

from their wings. Then they were off and
out of sight.

"No trouble after all," I said, relieved.

"Let's find a

spot to camp for the night. I'll have to

make a fire so we
won't freeze."

But Pook laid back his ears and plowed
on up the cold

slope. "Hey, what's the matter?" I
demanded. "We've

got to stop before the ground gets frozen
and there's no

brush for a fire. See if you can sniff out a
level section,

or maybe even a small cave."

Still he traveled, not slowing or searching at all. I began

to get annoyed. "Now look, Pook, I'm tired and I want

to rest, and you're not that fresh either —"

Then I noticed that snow was falling. But there was

no cloud; the snowflakes were forming in the air. As I

watched, they expanded, becoming wonderfully large and

intricate disks, each one different from all its companions.

I caught one by its rim, and it was the span of my spread

hand, with six spokes radiating out from a hexagonal cen-

ter, each branching and rebranching into finer networks,

until the rim was another finely wrought hexagon. I mar-

veled at the beauty and symmetry of it,
when it melted

in my hand and fell apart. I was unhappy
at the loss of

such a wonderful artifact; to stifle the
unbarbarian tear

coming to my eye, I grabbed another
snowflake and con-

centrated on it. This one was like the
finest doily ever

crafted, in all ways absolutely delightful.
But in a moment

it, too, dissolved and was lost.

Now the snowflakes became more ornate. They were

no longer disks; they were prisms, reflecting and diffract-

ing the slanting sunbeams so that rainbow hues radiated

out in spokes of their own, forming larger hexagons of

colored light that filled the air before me. The light-flakes

became so solid I thought I could climb
upward by grasp-

ing their interlocking spokes, but my
hands merely changed

colors when I reached, finding nothing.

Ahead was a crevice in the mountain,
too wide to leap

across, its depths too deep and awful to
contemplate. But

the snowflakes multiplied and
interlocked to form a bridge

across it, and I guided Pook there.

He came to the brink and balked. I
kicked his sides,

urging him forward. "It's a perfect
bridge," I told him.

"It's a hallucination, you fool!" he told
me.

"How can you be sure of that?" I argued.

"This is all a form of illusion," he insisted.

"Give me some proof, mule-head!"

"It has to be illusion, because in real life I can't talk

human speech," he said.

I pondered that, considered it, and cogitated a bit on

it. "Could be," I opined at last. "But what's the cause?"

"That snow the snow-birds dropped on us, of course.

That's why I tried to get out of it. The stuff spaces out

your mind and makes you see and hear things that just

aren't there."

"You mean there aren't any big snowflakes, and you're

not talking to me now?"

"That is precisely what I mean, lunkhead. The only

big flake around here is you. Now sit tight while I get us

out of it." He picked his way on up the mountain. "Real

snow cancels out the mind-bending

snow. The cold freezes

it, I think. No matter what you see, don't get off my back."

"Why doesn't it zonk out your mind, too?"

"Don't be silly, barbarian. I'm just an animal."

I decided he knew better than I did.

"Actually, it's sort

of fun," I said.

Pook just snorted and plowed on.

Now the flakes converted to snow-fairies, dancing on

the breeze. They leaped, they twirled, they pirouetted

most prettily. One of them beckoned to me and she re-

minded me of Bluebell and the dancing elven maidens; I

started to dismount, but Pook gave a shake that jolted

my memory, aggravatingly, and I desisted.

Slowly the colorful images faded, and the mountain

slope was revealed in its grim reality, all rock and scrub

and patches of genuine snow. I looked below, at the crev-

ice, and saw there was no bridge across

it. I would have

plunged into it, to my doom or great
discomfort, had not

Pook cautioned me about the illusion
spawned by the

snow-dust. The next snow-bird I saw
would get an arrow

through its body!

Suddenly I recalled the elf crone's
prophecy: that I

would be doomed by a cruel lie. That
snowflake bridge

had been a lie, all right! Thanks to
Pook's horse sense, I

had avoided that doom.

I glanced at Pook. "Thanks, ghost horse,"
I said "You

saved me from my own folly back there.
You were more

sensible than I."

Pook twitched an ear affirmatively and kept climbing.

"But since you can't talk—how did you warn me? I

mean, if I just imagined you spoke to me in human

words—"

The horse continued moving.

I sighed. "Well, I don't quite know how much of what

is real, but I'm sure you saved me, Pook. So I guess I

can call you tame now."

Pook snorted, insulted.

"Sorry," I apologized. "But if you're not tame, then

why do you stay with me?"

The horse merely shrugged, rattling a chain.

Then I had about as bright a notion as a barbarian was capable of at that hour of the day. "Pook, if I may not call you tame—may I call you friend?"

He nickered affirmatively. I had finally caught on!

When Pook was satisfied that we were secure from

hallucination, he stopped. We found an indentation, not

really a cave, but enough to shelter us from the cutting

wind, and I gathered straggles of half-buried brush and

made a little fire. Pook was able to find dry grass and

lichen under the snow for his supper,

while I consumed

my rations. It didn't seem like much of a meal for him,

but I suppose he was used to that sort of thing.

The fire sank to embers and we settled for the night.

Pook lay down, and I curled up next to him, glad for the

heat of his body. I didn't worry about watching for ene-

mies; what man or monster would climb
way up here,

past the snow-birds and snow-dreams,
just to bother a

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lone man and a horse? Anyway, I slept

lightly, and so did

Pook. We would be all right.

I believe I have remarked before on the weakness of

barbarian reasoning. This was demonstrated again this

night. A sound would have roused us both, but there was

no sound—not until it was almost too late.

Pook became aware of it first; his nose
was more alert

than mine. He didn't move; he puffed a
nostrilful of warm

air in my ear. I woke, wondering what
he was up to—

and felt the chill slithering across my
ankle.

I knew instantly what it was: a
snowsnake. How utterly

stupid of me to forget about them! They

were snow-white

and snow-cold and lived in snow; it was
difficult to see

or hear them in their habitat. But they
were poisonous

and they liked fresh meat.

We were in trouble. I lay there, feigning
sleep the way

Pook was, assessing the situation. One
bite would prove

fatal for me, and probably three bites for Pook. I would

recover in due course, assuming the feeding snakes left

enough of me to be reconstituted, but Pook wouldn't. So

I had to prevent him from getting bitten.

First I needed to know how many snakes there were

and exactly where they were. Then I needed to eliminate

them. First I had to deal with the ones
who were most

ready to strike, then the others.

I cracked open an eye. That didn't help;
it was too

dark to see. So I listened and felt. That
didn't help either;

they were silent, and once the one
passed my leg, I had

no way to track it. But I knew the snakes

wouldn't wait

long before striking; they would be eager to feed. They

would pick their targets, and—

Very well; we would have to shoot for double or noth-

ing. "Roll!" I cried suddenly.

Pook was ready. He rolled while I leaped up, grabbing

for my sword. I heard a hiss; Pook had
squished a snake

under his crunching chains.

I Jumped for the leftover fire, sweeping
my sword point

through it. Embers and coals flew about,
brightening an-

grily as they felt the cold air. One struck
a snake; I heard

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the hiss of anguish and I chopped at the sound. There

was a violent thrashing in the dark; I had scored.

Now the snakes were all carelessly active, frightened

by the glowing coals among them. Probably they would

have moved on us earlier if that fire
hadn't been there;

they had waited till it was low and then
been cautious.

Not cautious enough! I struck at every
hiss I heard, and

my reflexes were barbarian-swift, and
my blade sliced

through reptilian flesh. In a moment or
so, I had cut up

everything that made a sound.

I returned to the fire and tossed on fresh brush. In a

moment it blazed up, and I saw what I had wrought. There

were four dead snakes—one squished, three cut to pieces.

Each was about man-length, too small to be much op-

position by day, but big enough to do a lot of damage by

night, especially considering the poison.

If any of them
survived, they had fled.

Pook returned. He had rolled downward
and bounced
to his feet. He did not seem to have been
bitten; his chains
had protected him, and, once he rolled
free, all the snakes
had been in my area.

We had won through unscathed, but
neither of us was

inclined to lie down again. Even the
slightest scathe by

one of those snakes would have been a
whole lot of trou-

ble. I stoked the fire, and Pook stood
near it, almost

astride it, and I mounted him. Thus only
his four feet

were vulnerable, and they were close to
the fire. But I

held a cherry in my hand, just in case; if anything ap-

proached, it would get bombed. We spent the rest of the

night like that, sleeping on guard. And the snowsnakes

did not return.

In the cold morning we ate again and resumed our

journey. The pieces of snowsnake near the fire had melted,

of course; there was nothing left of them.
It really hadn't

been much of an adventure, just an
inconvenience; I would

rather have had undisturbed sleep.
Maybe I just didn't

have the right attitude.

Another cutting wind came up; that kind
of wind seemed

to like the upper reaches. I wrapped my
cloak tightly

about me for warmth and kept my gloved hands in toward

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my belly. Mainly, I depended on Pook for heat; I couldn't

have made this trek without him.

By noon we reached the crest. Not the peak; there was

no point in going right over that, as we weren't interested

in height, just in getting past. We headed for the lowest

notch in the ridge that ran from peak to peak in this range.

Wind cut through it with extra effort, stirring up powdered

snow; I was reminded of the snow-birds' snow and shud-

dered, but I knew it wasn't that. I would be glad when

we got down to good old-fashioned
garden-variety tangle

trees and hypnogourds again!

But as we passed through the pass, I saw
something

lying in the snow, black against white. I
got down and

picked it up. It was a black compass,
just like the white

one I had in my bag of spells. It flashed.

Suddenly I felt dizzy. "Where am I going?" I asked

plaintively. "What am I looking for?"

But in a moment I remembered. "I'm looking for an

object to settle a claim for the new King of Xanth. But I

have absolutely no idea where it is. The loser-spell has

nullified my sense of location."

And then I said: "Now's the time to invoke the finder-

spell so I can restore my sense of location. Or whatever.

That way I'll know where I'm going."

Pook did not protest, so I decided that made sense.

That black compass had really reamed out my mind, leav-

ing me fundamentally uncertain. I don't like having my

mind messed with.

I dug in the bag and brought out the white compass.

"Invoke!" I quavered at it.

Something strange happened. The snow on which I

stood began to melt. Well, no, not exactly melt, but it

was turning slushy. No, not exactly that, either. The

ground beneath the snow was softening.

How could that be? I scraped away the snow and saw

that it was bare rock below and that the rock had become

pale pink flesh. Was this mountain in fact a monster crea-

ture? It couldn't be; I knew the nature of mountains, and

this was definitely a mountain. Yet the rock below me

had become flesh.

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The flesh spread rapidly outward. I saw
the snow sink-

ing in an expanding ripple, marking the
progress of the

transformation. The whole mountain was
turning to living

flesh!

Pook neighed nervously. He was
balancing on the

spongy surface uncomfortably and
wanted to get off it.

But I retreated cautiously from the fringe
of the conver-

sion, wanting to understand this
phenomenon to whatever

extent my primitive barbarian mind was
able, so I wouldn't

fall into some trap of magic. Why should

the mountain

turn to flesh just when I was invoking
unrelated magic?

I looked down at the white compass I
had invoked,

only to discover that both it and the
black one had dis-

appeared, expended. But I still had no
idea where the

object was. Then I reached into the
spell-bag and pulled

out the white stone. Wasn't that the spell that was sup-

posed to turn stone back to flesh? Then why had it hap-

pened with the compass?

I wasn't bright, but I wasn't completely dull, either.

"Yang!" I exclaimed. "He switched the spells!"

Pook neighed again. He was right; we

had to get off

this mountain of blubber! "I don't know where we're going,

but maybe you do!" I cried. "Go for it!" I jumped onto

his back and hung on.

He started off down the mountain's north slope. His

hooves skidded as the snow made the flesh beneath slip-

pery. I saw that the transformation had

now reached to

the peak, and it was quivering like jelly. Indeed, the whole

mountain was quivering, as its solid bedrock turned soft.

Magician Yin had not been kidding about overkill on the

spells; this one was strong enough to convert a hundred

men and horses to—that is, to reconvert—well, anyway,

it was one hideously powerful piece of magic. And it was

being wasted, doing me no good at all.

Pook's hooves slid as the slope steepened; he was hav-

ing real trouble keeping his footing, what with the heaving

of the mountain itself. "Just sit down and slide," I sug-

gested. "It's probably safer and faster."

He tried it. We slid down, on cold

posteriors, and it

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was indeed faster—but maybe not safer.
We soon got up

formidable speed, and there was still a
long way to go.

IfYin's spell was strong enough to
convert a mountain

to flesh, how strong was Yang's spell,
the one that turned

flesh to stone? They were equal and
opposite, weren't

they? What would happen when I
triggered the Evil

Magician's spell—and had nothing to
counter it? Would

it turn me to stone—and Pook, and
everything near us?

My talent was good, but I couldn't
handle that! If we were

doomed to encounter the black stone,
that meant we were

doomed indeed—by the cruel lie Yang
had made of this

contest!

Yang had suggested that I give up this
quest, letting

him win. That seemed like good advice,
in retrospect!

Wouldn't it be better to abort the mission
now and at least

salvage my life?

But as I said, the oinkheadedness of barbarians is leg-

endary, and justly so. Even though it now seemed point-

less, I was determined to push on. I had agreed to

undertake this mission and I always did what I said I

would do if I could, even if it made no sense at the time.

And who could tell; maybe my talent
would heal me from

being stoned. Of course, that might take a
few years...

We slid to the snow line. The flesh had
not reached

here yet, and the mountain below
remained stable. Pook

got to his feet, swished his tail about to
dislodge the snow

sticking to his rear, and moved on down,

not eager to

have the rock turn mushy under his
hooves again. Horses

don't go for that mushy stuff. Actually, I
wasn't sure that

would happen; there had to be some
limit to the effect,

or all of Xanth would become flesh.

Indeed, the mountain seemed to stabilize
above the

snow line. If the conversion was

continuing, it had slowed;

there was just too much rock in the
mountain for the magic

to digest, if that was the proper word.

Once we were safely below the region
of flesh, we

paused to eat and graze. Our slip-sliding
had taken some

time and more energy, and we were tired
and hungry.

Horses, I had discovered, had to eat a lot! I had somehow

supposed that a man with a steed could travel long dis-

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tances at high speed; now I knew it wasn't so. But, of

course, Pook had become more to me than mere trans-

portation. Much more. Maybe his companionship was

more important than his average velocity.

So we took time to fill our bellies in our separate fash-

ions, foraging for grass and leaves and fruits, and scouted

around for a suitable campsite. We were

below the level

of the snowsnakes, but what about the
snow-birds? I didn't

want to have my mind zonked out again
by their snow

job.

However, a completely different threat
materialized.

We had ignored the mountain of flesh
because we were

beyond its range, we thought. That turned

out to be overly
optimistic.

The ground shuddered. At first I thought
it was an

earthquake—a magical tremor that was
very unsettling

to experience, resembling as it did the
heavy tread of an

ogre, but not too dangerous in the open.
But then I re-

alized that it emanated from the mountain

of flesh above

us. The stuff was shaking with increasing violence, as if

trying to get free.

Of course it wanted to be free! Here it was, abruptly

waking as a huge mass of living tissue— with no eyes or

ears or nose, no way to discover where it was or what it

was doing there. So it was doing the

only thing it could—

bashing its way out. If I were
blindfolded and deaf and

tied down, I'd struggle too!

Snow crashed down beyond the snow
line, heading for

us. The shaking flesh had started an
avalanche! There

wasn't enough snow to do real harm, but
I did not feel

easy. Sure enough, pretty soon the rocks

on the fringe of

the flesh-zone were shaken loose and
they started rolling

down. Those could harm us!

"I think maybe this is not our best place
to camp," I

told Pook.

He agreed. I mounted, and we started on
down.

But now it was getting dark, and the
struggles of the

mountain increased. The violence was
such that the welkin

was jarred, and an early-showing star
was jostled out of

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its socket. It fell nearby, tracing a fiery path across the

sky, and set the dry brush aflame. More trouble!

The mountain heaved again and shook

the Firmament.

Other stars fell, starting other fires; they really weren't

very well anchored when they first came out. Soon there

were sizable conflagrations, and we smelled the smoke.

But we couldn't hurry, because the footing was treach-

erous in the gloom, and we had to be alert for more rolling

stones.

The mountain peak belched. A mass of
gas burst out,

soiling the sky. Several stars coughed,
and a comet sneezed

so hard its tail flew off. Bad business!

We traveled as well as we could, but it
was nervous

business, with fires blazing on either
side, boulders rolling

down from above, and clouds of the

mountain's stomach

gas hovering in the night sky. The scene was very like

my private picture of hell, and I was not eager to remain

there long.

The conversion of stone to flesh had not melted the

snow; apparently it was cold flesh. But the fires raging

up the slope were now heating the upper

reaches, and

water was beginning to flow from the fringe of snow.

We came to a cul-de-sac. Ahead was a section so steep

as to be clifflike, while the fires closed off the escape to

the sides. We did not want to retreat back up the moun-

tain, but did not want to stay in place, either. The ground

was still shuddering with the motions of
the tortured flesh,

threatening to dislodge us from our
perch. Behind, we

heard the increasing sibilance of rushing
water. We could

soon be washed on down the cliff,
becoming part of the

waterfall!

There is something about personal
hazard that sharp-

ens my native cunning. "Diversion!" I
exclaimed. Pook

cocked an ear at me questioningly,
perhaps fearing I was

losing what little wit I possessed. "I'll
show you!"

I dismounted and scrambled to the side,
near the fire.

I used my boot to scuff a channel in the
ground, and my

sword to cut through the brush in the

way. Quickly I

extended the channel upward at a slant,
forming a bank

on its lower side. I took advantage of
whatever natural

declivities there were, so that my
channel curved but was

reasonably deep. Pook was perplexed,
but helped me ex-

cavate through a small ridge by bashing
it with a hoof.

Naturally we struck a buried boulder,
too big either to

circle or to pry out. Now was the time
for my reserve

equipment! There was very little time
for excavating

around the boulder, so I poked a hole
with the point of

my sword and dropped in a cherry
bomb. The explosion

blew out a much bigger hole. Then I

tossed in a pineapple
and dived clear.

This explosion blew the top off the
boulder. It crunched
into a tree in the fire-zone; lucky for us it
hadn't gone the
other way! Now my channel was
complete; all I had to
do was touch it up where the explosion
had messed it up.

Just in time! The trickle of water was becoming a river,

and now this coursed down my sluice. I stood by to free

any clogs that developed. Soon there was a torrent, and

the water deepened the channel itself and sought to over-

flow it; hastily I shored up my embankment. I wasn't

perfectly successful, but most of the water did stay on

course. This meant that only a little of it swirled around

our feet and poured on over the cliff, and most flowed

down into the rising blaze. We had saved ourselves from

being washed away and had diverted the water to the

more useful employment of fighting the nearest fire.

There was a continuous angry hiss as the

water in-

truded on the fire's domain, and a cloud of steam puffed

up. My new channel ended at the fire's edge, so there the

water spread out, coursing over a much broader area.

Soon the fire was gone from there, and a swath of black-

ened but unbuming terrain appeared, leading down the

mountain.

"And this is our route down!" I said,
pleased with the

success of my strategy. I mounted Pook,
and he stepped

into the channel, walking carefully to
prevent the moving

water from interfering with his footing.

Thus we made it off the mountain. It
wasn't easy or

comfortable, but the farther from the

mountain of flesh

we got, the less severe the effects were.
Finally, near

dawn, we felt secure enough to rest. We
doubted any wild

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creatures would be bothering us; they
were all terrified

by the strange events of this night, and
most had fled the

scene.

As I settled down to sleep beside a nice,
solid boulder,

I pondered the significance of what had
happened. So

Yang had switched the spells; he must have done that

while handling them in my presence. Of course he had

known what they were; he had pretended ignorance so

as to have a pretext to touch each one. He had distracted

me with talk of the futility of my mission so that I would

not catch on to the real nature of his skulduggery. His

attempt to bribe me had not been serious;
why bribe me

when he already had the situation in
hand? He had indeed

deceived me, obliquely. Not for nothing
had he remarked

on my bumpkinishness! He had proved
it.

He had, ironically, spoken the truth when
he said he

was convinced that I would fail. He had

ensured that by

cheating. Yin and the King thought this was a straight-

forward spell-vs.-spell contest set in the field; Yang knew

it was an ignorant barbarian trotting blithely into disaster.

Yin's spells were now just about as dangerous to me as

Yang's!

Maybe the King had caught on, and had been about

to warn me not to let Magician Yang touch those spells.

I had been too quick to dismiss his effort. Talk of blun-

dering fools! I had just done the cause of Barbarian Public

Relations a singular disservice, by being precisely as oaf-

ish as charged.

How could I hope to complete this quest
when I had

no idea where the object was or what it
was? I had climbed

the mountain, back when I had some
notion; was it be-

cause the object was up there? Should I
go back to the

fleshy peak? I could not be sure, but
since I hadn't seen

anything up there except snow, I
concluded that wasn't

it. Could the thing be on one of the other
peaks of this

range, and I had been about to check
them all until I

found it? Again I couldn't be sure. The
black compass

had somehow nullified my brain in this
respect, so that I

could not even decide where to search.
The only confi-

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dence I had was that whatever I decided to do would be wrong, because of that hostile magic.

Somewhere among my remaining white spells was the true finder compass. But which one was it? If I invoked

one and guessed wrong, not only would I be wasting an-

other spell that I would certainly need later but I could

be getting myself into immediate trouble, as I had done

atop the mountain.

I had supposed this adventure was going to be slightly

tame for my taste. Abruptly it had become slightly too

challenging. Elsie had tried to warn me
that there could

be days like this; naturally I hadn't
listened. A barbarian

who thinks he can interact on an equal
basis with Magicians

is a fool, indeed!

Well, Pook had been farther from the
black compass

than I had been, so wasn't affected as
much. Perhaps he,

being equine, had not been touched at all. I would just

have to trust his horse sense to get me where I was going.

I suspected that Evil Magician Yang had not realized that

I would have a sensible friend along.

With that modestly renewed sense of comfort, I slept.

Chapter 8. Tarasque

In the middle of the day, the heat forced us awake.

Pook had been grazing in his sleep; that's a talent his kind

has that I was coming to envy. I foraged for bread sticks,

picking them off a stale bread tree; they were better than

nothing. Then we went on.

We were in hilly country now, but there

were no more

mountains, for which I was duly grateful.
I had climbed

the mountain in part to avoid the
predestined route and

the evil spells on it; obviously this had
been ineffective,

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so there was no point in bothering with such efforts hence-

forth. Pook proceeded northwest, which I was sure was

the wrong direction, but I didn't argue. I

hoped he had

some inkling where the object was,
though I despaired of

either finding it or bringing it back to
Castle Roogna. How

could I, with my own spells loaded
against me? Magician

Yang had really fixed me, but that ol'
barbarian oink-

headedness prevented me from quitting.
If there's one

thing worse than blundering, it is
admitting the blunder.

As evening dawned—well, you know
what I mean—

we spied a region of caves and
considered using one of

them for the night. Barbarians, of course,
are not far

removed from cavemen. But in the
shadows we heard

myriad clicking sounds and saw little
pincers lifted in

eager anticipation of our flesh.

Nickelpedes! No, these

were smaller, but twice as fierce; they were dimepedes.

They had ten little legs, and silvery pincers that could

readily gouge out serrated disks of flesh. They couldn't

do much to Pook's hooves, but all they had to do was

scuttle to the flesh above and begin work. Certainly we

were not about to lie down there!

So we found a little lake with a littler island and leaped

across to that. The dimepedes could not swim—in fact,

they sank in water like so many bits of metal—so we

knew they would not bother us in the night. And since

they would be foraging in this region under cover of dark-

ness—they could not tolerate the full

light of day, because

that showed up the dirt on them—no
other creature would

be in this vicinity. We had an ideal
nocturnal retreat.

But as darkness closed, the fish came to
the surface

of the lake, and they were strange ones.
One had little

gauzy wings, so that she could fly just
above the surface,

and a little halo of light formed above
her head. "What

are you?" I asked, not expecting an
answer, for few fish

talk.

"She's an angelfish, man-visitor," a
voice at the shore

said. There was a fat-faced fish there,
and it seemed that

one could talk. "She will dance for you,
if you wish.

Angelfish are very nice creatures."

"Well, sure," I agreed, seeing no harm in it. Some

civilized folk think there is nothing good in the wilderness,

but we uncivilized folk know that there are fewer threats

to man among wild creatures than there are among our

own violent kind.

The angelfish stood on her tail just over the water,

buzzed her wings, and did a pirouette.

Then she leaped

and circled and splashed lightly against the lake; the light

from her halo was enough to make her reflection visible

in the still water, so that there seemed to be two of her.

One was upright, above the surface, and

the other was

inverted, below. It was a pretty effect.

Then another fish appeared, his motions sending rip-

ples that broke up the reflection of the first, spoiling the

effect. He hoisted himself up; he lacked wings, but some-

how was able to walk the surface. He was reddish and

had little horns, and his tail curved back

behind him as

he stood, ending in a barb.

"And there's the devilfish," the fat
announcer said.

"He always shows up to spoil things."

Indeed it was so, for the angelfish made
a little bubbly

scream and fled, the devilfish chasing
her with an evil

leer on his gills. But she could not leave the region of the

water, and the lake was small, so they went round and

round in circles.

Suddenly I jumped. Something had cut my foot, which

was near the water. I looked—and saw a cuttlefish, its

tentacles like knives, brandishing those little blades at my

tender toes. I had taken off my boots to
air my stinking

feet—barbarian feet can be pretty bad
when confined,

and when the stench gets so thick it
squishes, it's time to

let it out—so now they were vulnerable.
"Get away from

me, you creep!" I snapped, grabbing a
boot and flailing

with it.

The fish dived below the surface. My
boot struck the

fringe of water—and stuck. Now, I knew
boots could get

pretty gunky, but they had never stuck to
water before!

I yanked—and found that something had
clamped onto

the boot's toe. It had giant dull pincers—
and when I

hailed harder, the whole thing came up,
and I saw it was

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nothing but pincers, broad serrated things. "What's this?"

I demanded.

"A shellfish, of course," the other fish replied.

"How do I get it off my boot?"

"Well, it's afraid of starfish—"

I looked into the dark sky. There was a
star in the

shape of a fish, but it was out of reach.
Some starfish

shine brightly in the water, while others
hover in the night

sky; I suppose there is enough water up
there for them.

But my animal cunning was operating.
"Let go, shellfish,

or I'll fetch down that starfish," I
threatened.

Immediately the shellfish dropped off my boot and sank

back in the water. I had bluffed it.

"You should have eaten it instead," the other fish said.

"And the cuttlefish too."

"They wouldn't have liked that," I said.

"Who cares what they like? They don't count! Nobody

counts but Number One!"

My brow creased. "What kind offish are you?"

"I thought you'd never ask! I am a selfish, of course."

"Sell fish? What do you sell?"

"Instant gratification—that's the selfish way. Don't

worry about the welfare of others!"

"Don't listen to him!" the angelfish called, pausing in

her flight. Then she screamed, for in that moment other

distraction the devilfish had caught up with her. He

wrapped his fins about her quivering

body and bore her

down despite her struggles. The two
disappeared under

the surface, and only her little halo
remained floating on

the water.

"He always wanted to catch an angel
like her," the sel-

fish said smugly. "She won't be needing
that halo any

more—not after he's through

compromising her."

I was angry about the fate of the pretty angelfish.

"Something's fishy about your attitude," I said. I fished

the halo out of the water, but it disintegrated in my hand.

Halos were not for such as I.

"You're a fool," the sel-fish said witheringly and swam

away.

"I surely am," I said under my breath.
People like me

were always getting victimized by
clever, unscrupulous

people like Magician Yang, just as the
angelfish was rav-

ished by the devilfish. Yet somehow I
didn't care to trade

places with the obvious winners. I

couldn't make much

sense of my own attitude; it was simply the way I was.

Just an ignorant barbarian.

I slept, discontented.

Next day we left the island and set off again. We came

to a kind of gateway in the forest, formed by two large

trees linking branches above. I didn't like this; it reminded

me of the trees guarding Castle Roogna,
the ones that

didn't like me. But there was so much
thorny bush around

that the portal appeared to be the only
practical way to

go. Pook didn't like it any better than I
did, but also saw

no better way; it seemed that was the
direction we were

supposed to be going in, by his
reckoning.

So we went. Pook nudged through the gate, and I kept

my hand on my sword. Nothing happened. But Pook

sniffed the air nervously, winding something unpleasant,

and I experienced a feeling of claustrophobia. This was

definitely ugly territory!

Yet the sun shone pleasantly, there were

playful little

breezes, the footing was good, and there did not seem to

be any bad animals in this region, so we moved along

well. I did notice that the trees interlinked, forming ver-

itable walls of foliage, but these were intermittent, so that

we had no trouble passing through the spaces. Both of us

remained nervous about the confinement, but all we needed

to do was trot along until we got out of the region. Cer-

tainly it was better than climbing a snow-topped moun-

tain.

Then there was a buzzing. I didn't like the sound of

that, and Pook switched his tail nervously. Horses tend

to dislike buzzing things generally, but some buzzes are

worse than others, and this was bad buzzing. The sound

loomed louder, and then the source manifested—a swarm

of huge flies.

I muttered a repeller-spell. Some people claimed spo-

ken spells didn't work in Xanth, but in my opinion those

folk hadn't given them a fair trial. I used
spells to make

fire, put myself to sleep, abolish warts,
adjust my eyes

to sudden changes of light, ease pain,
and the like; that

sort of magic generally worked for me.
Of course, it helped

to have two magic stones to strike
together for the first

spark for the fire and to relax properly
before using the

sleep-spell; the magic took weeks or months to work on

the warts and several seconds on the eyes; and there was

only so much that incidental magic could do for pain. But

weak magic was better than none at all, I always said,

knocking on wood. Sometimes, when I was very tired and

really needed to sleep, the sleep-spell zonked me out in-

stantly, and that was a blessing. One simply had to under-

stand the natural limitations of magic; then it worked just

fine. Once in a while one encountered a bum spell, one

that simply did not perform as advertised; then it was

simply a matter of reporting it to the Barbarian Better

Business Bureau, so that no one else would be deceived

into using that spell.

Anyway, I used the fly-spook-spell, but that swarm

came right on at us. Then I saw that these were not or-

dinary flies; they were dragonflies, resistive to such little

magic. Normally dragonflies did not deign to bother peo-

ple, but buzzed about their own business, preying on other

bugs and keeping company with real dragons. On occa-

sion, a dragonfly would adopt someone's garden, keeping

it clear of bugs. But these ones were different; they were

wild, not tame, and they were out after us.

Pook broke into a gallop, but the dragonflies were faster

than we were and quickly overhauled us.

I flailed my arms

and Pook swished his tail violently, but
to no avail. The

flies came at us head-on, jetting fire, and
veered away

only at the last instant. Thus their fire
continued on at its

target. One of those little scorches
scored on my bare

forearm; it hurt!

This seemed ludicrous, but I drew my

sword and sliced

the air with it, swiftly. I cut a fly in half
and winged

another; the first fell with smoke trailing
from its fuselage,.

and the second plunged out of control
because of the loss

of its wing, crashed into the ground, and
exploded. A

mushroom cloud of smoke roiled up
from the site of the

impact.

That made the others pause for a moment. Then they

formed into a wedge and charged us together. I put up

the flat of my blade to deflect their massed firepower,

and their flame reflected back at them, scorching several.

You would think dragonflies would be immune to their

own heat, but as with many creatures,
they can't take

what they give out. There were three
more spins out of

control and two more explosions. The
third just fizzled,

sending up a few sparks before melting
down.

Now the flies withdrew into a huddle,
consulting. I

didn't like the look of this. If they

charged us all at once,

from all sides, Pook and I would get
badly burned. But

instead they retreated.

"What do you make of that?" I asked
aloud. Pook

twitched an ear, as mystified as I. Some
of his hide was

scorched, and he had surely expected
worse to come.

These flies had seemed more omery than

that and cer-

tainly no cowards; their abrupt departure
was as ominous

as their approach had been.

But there was nothing better to go on.

"Maybe they

ran low on fuel," I said. "The way that
last one fizzed,

maybe he lacked the oomph to blow."

But I didn't really

believe that.

Then Pook stepped over an object on the ground. There

was a flash of something awful.

"The next evil spell!" I exclaimed with dismay. "We

triggered it! The dragonflies knew it was lurking here!"

But what spell was it? Nothing seemed to have hap-

pened. So I leaned down to peer more closely at whatever

it was, before it faded out. The dragonflies would not have

veered away from an innocuous spell!

It was in the shape of a black monster.

I needed the monster-banishing-spell, and I had it in

my bag—but did I dare invoke it? It was possible that

not all the white spells had been garbled, but I decided

not to risk it. For one thing, no monster had appeared.

Maybe this particular spell had malfunctioned.

We heard a gleeful buzzing returning, and with it the

thunk-thunk of the footfalls of some massive creature.

"Now I could be wrong, but that sounds like large

trouble to me," I said.

Pook agreed. He took off at a gallop, leaving the pon-

derous noise behind. It's always best to avoid trouble, if

possible, especially when it's bigger than you are. I know

that sounds unbarbarian, but there are a number of myths

about barbarians I've been trying to
dispel. When the only

safety is in flight, the sensible man flees.

But we came to a curve in the path, and
the vegetation

was too thickly intertwined to permit any
ready egress;

we had to follow that curve in a loop
back. The pursuing

thing made a shortcut and gained on us.

We just didn't

have time to hack through the meshed
trees and brush;

we had to keep moving. That was, of
course, why that

spell had been placed here; it was a very
bad place for

me. Fortunately, we had developed
enough of a lead so

that we were still well ahead of the
creature. We took off

down a new path and again left the
thunk-thunk-thunk

behind.

And again we encountered a curve. This
was incon-

venient, annoying, and perhaps
dangerous, for it allowed

the thing behind us to catch up once
more. This time the

snout of the thing showed around the
curve before we

left it behind. It had whiskers and a feline aspect.

As we left it behind this time, I wondered: What had

a feline aspect and six legs? For that was the number it

had; I could tell by the triple thunk. I was long accustomed

to identifying animals by their traces and sounds. Two-

legged creatures have an even beat when

they run; four-

legged have double beat, as the two
forelegs and two hind

legs strike. This was triple. I had not so
long ago en-

countered a six-legged creature, I
couldn't quite remem-

ber where, but it had been so low-slung
as to whomp

rather than run. This was different.

And another turn! This was awkward as

anything! Now

all of the pursuer came into view, and I recognized it at

last—the tarasque. Of course—Yin had warned me of it.

Of all the creatures I might have encountered here, this

was the one I least preferred, now that I grasped its na-

ture. The tarasque was technically a dragon, but not a

normal one, for it possessed certain nonreptilian attri-

butes. Its head was that of an ant-lion, it had six ursine

legs—we don't have what the Mundanes call bears in

Xanth, but we do have their legs—a big spiked carapace,

and an ugly reptilian tail. All in all, an ugly customer.

Once more we outdistanced it. But still

we were in the

confines of this maze, and the tarasque seemed tireless.

Some of these big ones are boosted by magic, unfair as

that may seem to their prey. If we ever got out into open

forest, we could outrun it permanently—but we were

stuck in this mess of channels.

And, of course, that was the point. The

evil spell had

been placed to summon the monster as
the final wedge

of a careful trap. Naturally, the bumpkin
had marched

right into it.

It was now apparent that the evil spells
were not simply

strewn along my predetermined path in
random fashion.

They were set where they would do the

most harm. The

odds against me were even worse than I had imagined.

I had no choice. I would have to risk a defensive spell.

Maybe it would turn out wrong, but at least it was a

chance.

But which spell? The white compass had converted a

stone mountain to flesh; would the
monster-banishing-

spell relate any better? But I didn't know
what would be

better than the correct spell. I just had to
hope that not

all the spells would turn out to be mixed
up.

So I grabbed for the white monster
figurine as we moved

along. "Invoke!" I cried as I held it in my

hand.

It flashed. But the triple pounding of the monster's

paws continued unabated behind us.
Whatever the spell

had done, it wasn't monster banishment.

My awareness enlarged as the white object faded from

my hand. I knew we were in a maze-warren that might

have only one exit, so that the tarasque
could run down

unwary prey at his leisure. That way the
monster's slow-

ness did not matter. Just as I had worn
down Pook when

I stalked him and herded him into an
inescapable situa-

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tion, so the tarasque would wear us

down. Flight would

not accomplish anything except tiring us out, and that

was no good. It would be better to stand and fight while

we were strong.

"Pick a good place to ambush the monster," I told

Pook. "We'll fight." He wiggled an ear in acknowledg-

ment.

One thing about tripping the evil spell—
it meant we

were still on course for the object, since
the spells had

been placed along that course. In fact—
another light bulb

sprouted momentarily above my head,
brightening the

whole region but not, alas, blinding the
tarasque—that

course was predestined. Yang knew

where to place his

spells because he knew where I was going to go, according

to the prophecy. There really should be a law against such

prophecies, I thought darkly. But this was actually good

news for me. Since my route was predestined, I did not

even need the finder-spell; I would get to the object re-

gardless. In fact, I couldn't avoid it.

That also explained why Yang had tried to bribe me

to quit. If he really believed I would fail, he had no need

of bribery. But if my route was predestined, then I would

find the object—unless I deliberately gave up the mission.

It was not failure that stalked me, but success—assuming

I could handle the hazards along the

way. Presumably, if

I got permanently killed, that would be the same as giving

up, and the remainder of my predestined route would be

voided.

Now why was all this obvious to me now, when it had

been obscure before? Was I thinking better? And the an-

swer was yes, I was thinking quite a bit

better. I was more

intelligent than I had been. That meant that I had invoked

Magician Yin's spell of intelligence. It had been intended

to counteract Yang's lurking spell of idiocy, but now had

simply increased my normal level. I was a barbarian ge-

nus!

The irony was that genius is wasted on a

barbarian. It

doesn't take brains to swing a sword, it
takes muscle. No

really smart man would be a barbarian.
Another counter-

spell had been wasted.

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Well, I was stuck with it. Could
intelligence help me

escape the monster? That was doubtful.
Given a little

time, I could devise a weapon from
plucked foliage that

would cause the tarasque to draw into
his shell and be

helpless—but I had no time. The
smartest thing to do

was to stay out of the monster's
labyrinth; I would have

realized that, had I invoked this spell
before entering. So

it wasn't much help to me at the moment.
Nevertheless,
being smart couldn't hurt.

Quickly I reviewed what I could recall
about the tar-

asque. I had thought I had never heard of
it, but I had

merely forgotten. There turned out to be
more information

stored in the crannies of my brain than I
had realized;

bits and pieces of things I had heard
elsewhere in my life

and not remembered until this moment of
heightened in-

telligence. The tarasque was a deadly
monster, and not

a stupid one. It preyed only on live,
healthy creatures,

so that it would not pick up any
loathsome diseases or

suffer indigestion. It avoided carrion and

tainted meat.

The classier predators were like that; griffins were no-

toriously finicky, for example.

There was my strategy of survival! I would try to kill

the tarasque—but if I failed, I would pretend to be tainted.

Then it would not eat me, and my talent in due course

would restore me to full health. It was

not the easiest way

to get through, but it was feasible.

What, then, of Pook? He could not heal rapidly, or

grow back lost limbs, or return from death. "Pook, if I

lose, you take off immediately. You must escape while

the tarasque is tending to me."

He neighed in negation. "No, I will heal," I assured

him. "You need time to find your way out of the maze.

I can give you that time."

He snorted, disliking this, obviously believing that I

was exaggerating my healing propensity, but he assented.

Suddenly he veered into a side pocket.

This was just

large enough to give us fighting room
while protecting our

sides and rear. If we could hold off the
monster, this was

the place to do it.

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"But first let's give the tarasque a chance
to pass us

by," I said. "We don't want to fight unless we have to."

In a moment the monster shot past our alcove,

screached to a halt, backed up, and stared in. I realized

that I should have struck at its midsection before it got

its head oriented, now that I saw it clearly; the head had

tusklike teeth and orange-glaring eyes

and was framed by

a tawny mane. Overall, the tarasque was as big as Pook—

but the horse was constructed for running, while the mon-

ster was constructed for combat. Its bear-paws attached

to hugely muscled legs, and their claws were stout.

I drew my sword as I dismounted and stood before

Pook, facing the tarasque "I don't suppose we can settle

this amicably?" I inquired of the monster. I really didn't

expect any affirmation, but I wouldn't want it said that I

had fought without reason. There are forms to be fol-

lowed, after all.

For answer, the monster roared. The sound made the

trees confining us shudder, their leaves
curling. What

power! An ogre could hardly do much
better than that!

I'm a husky barbarian, of course, so I
don't properly

understand fear, but that sound provided
me with an ink-

ling. The wind from the monster's
exhalation blew back

my hair and tore at the interlocking
branches of the trees.

The odor of it was not exactly sweet, either.

"I feel obliged to advise you that I am a primitive

warrior type, excellent with my weapons," I said. Too

bad the monster's carapace was so sturdy; it would resist

the blast of a pineapple. Otherwise I would have had an

easy way out. "If you should choose to

back off now, I
will understand."

The tarasque took a step forward. Its
three left legs
moved together, then its three right legs.
It opened its
mouth marvelously wide, so that I could
readily perceive
exactly how horrendous its jaws were.
Those teeth were
like a forest of spikes, some narrowing

to points, some

splitting into multiple cutting ridges,
some serrated like

the surface of a saw. There were ledges
and valleys and

sculptured contours that I was sure
meshed neatly with

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their opposite numbers when those jaws
came together;

hapless indeed the creature on whom
those jaws closed!

I tried once more, for courtesy requires
three attempts

at peaceful settlement. "There is one
special thing you

should know about me—"

The tarasque pounced, mouth gaped
wide, another roar

forming in the tonsil region.

Ah, well, I had tried. Now I fought, free of any res-

ervations. I'm actually pretty good in that sort of circum-

stance. I swung my blade about with the legendary skill

for which barbarians are justly famed. It blurred in an arc

that passed through the gaping mouth and severed the

tongue, a tonsil, and the forming roar.
That cut the bite

short; the jaws clapped together as my
sword exited, and

spurting blood overlapped those finely
chiseled, clean

white teeth.

"I did try to warn you, turtle-shell," I
said. "I am not

your routine terrified, helpless prey; I
am a swordsman.

You will take severe injuries and perhaps die, if you persist in this quarrel."

The tarasque's eyes blazed. That was, of course, the

point to my discussion: to enrage the creature beyond the

edge of reason. It is Standard Barbarian Artifice Number

Three, verbal aggravation of subject. Some weak swords-

men with strong tongues do very well on
the adventure

circuit, I understand.

The monster nudged forward, swiping at
me with a

massive forepaw. I ducked back, and the
swipe missed

and caught the trunk of the tree to my
right, gouging out

four channels of bark. The tree
shuddered and groaned

woodenly, and sap dripped from the wounds. That from

channel number 4 smelled very good.

But I had concerns of my own. I poked my point at

the monster's left eye. The tarasque ducked back alertly,

avoiding the thrust. My first strike had caught it by sur-

prise, but now it was wary. Having one's tongue cut off

tends to facilitate caution. So I struck
down at its black

nose and lopped off two whiskers.

That made the creature angry! The loss
of those whis-

kers disfigured its puss, and it seemed
the monster was

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vain about its appearance. The severed
tongue and tonsil

didn't show, but those whiskers did! The
tarasque let out

a blood-flecked scream and pounced at
me. Of course I

ducked down and jabbed the point of my
sword up, seek-

ing to cut the exposed throat. The
monster spun aside

just barely in time, lost its balance, and
crashed against

the clawed tree.

My advantage! I squeezed out on the other side and

made a powerful two-handed chop at its side. All I hit

was its heavily armored carapace. My blade bounced off

with no injury to the tarasque, but with a numbing shock

to my hands and arms. Ouch! I wouldn't do that again.

Now I was outside my alcove and afoot;
I had no

protection to sides or rear. I would be
lost in a moment

if I didn't do something.

The tarasque was bringing its head
about. I jumped

forward, grabbed the nearest spike, and
hailed myself

up on the dragon's carapace. I doubted

that the mon-

ster's head could reach the middle of its armored back.

"Ho, halfwhisker!" I cried as I seated myself between

spikes, bracing my boots against them.

"What do you say

now, stinksnoot?" Tastefully selected insults are naturally

a key aspect of Artifice Number Three.

What the tarasque said was an

unrepeatable roar of

wrathy rage. It whipped its head about to snap at me, but

couldn't reach me. I chopped at its furry ears with my

sword, cutting off one of them. That made the monster

angrier yet.

The tarasque tried to buck me off, but was too solid

to accomplish much, and I was well

braced. It tried to

reach up a paw to swipe at me, but the
six legs were

designed for nether support of its solid
mass, not for

upward mobility, and this one never got
close. It tried to

bash my leg against a tree, but its own
spikes extended

well beyond my leg, so that all it did
was poke a hole in

the tree and get itself temporarily stuck
in the wood. It

tried to roll over, squashing me, but the spikes prevented

it from rolling. Meanwhile, I constantly nicked those bits

of flesh I could reach with the point of my sword, harrying

the monster unmercifully.

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Unfortunately, I could not do the

tarasque serious harm

from where I perched. Its carapace
protected it from in-

jury as effectively as it protected me
from molestation.

So we were hung up for the moment,
locked in combat

without being able to terminate it.
Maybe this would be-

come a kind of siege, with the one who
lasted longest

emerging the victor.

Alas, not so! The tarasque's long,
serpentine tail

whipped about and stung me on the back.
That could

touch me!

I tried to lop off the end of that-tail, but
it flicked in

and out so fast I couldn't catch it. In fact,
I didn't even

dare turn my head, for fear the tail would

twitch out an

eye or two. My light body armor was getting cut up, and

stripes were appearing on my flesh. I had to get out of

range of that tail!

But to do that, I had to get off the carapace—and that

would render me vulnerable again to the rest of the mon-

ster. Was there some other way?

Yes, there was. I squirmed around and crawled back-

ward, passing one spike after another, moving toward the

tail. Naturally the flashing tip tore up my back consid-

erably, but I pressed on until I was able to turn partway,

shield my face with my free forearm, and poke my sword

down at the base of the tail where it

emerged from the

carapace. I sawed away at that exposed flesh, trying to

sever it from the body. My leverage wasn't good, but my

blade was sharp, and soon I penetrated the thick hide to

the tender flesh beneath.

The tarasque screamed and leaped, prodded by the

sudden pain. That motion was so abrupt

and vigorous that

I somersaulted from my perch and rolled on the ground.

Now I was in trouble!

The tarasque blinked, taking a moment to realize that

I had been dislodged. Then it got its reflexes back in order

and pounced. I had hung onto my sword; -now I brought

it up and stabbed it at the monster's

snout. The point sank

into the tender cheek. The head jerked
back, coming off

the blade, and blood gouted out.

I scrambled to my feet and backed
toward the alcove.

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The enraged monster sprang at me again,

this time swiping

with a forepaw. I parried the paw, and
the blade sliced

into it, cutting off a claw and its
supporting pad, but the

shock of the swipe dashed the sword
from my hand. I

was disarmed!

Well, not quite, I still had my knife. I had
left my bow

and arrows and the bag of spells with

Pook; they would

not be useful in combat like this. But the
knife seemed

pitifully inadequate.

The tarasque figured it had me and
pushed forward,

mouth opening to take a juicy bite of
barbarian. It's an

established fact that barbarians taste
better than civilized

folk do, because they are healthier, with

more lean red

meat.

Well, monsters make mistakes, just as men do. I stabbed

the knife blade into its black nose and twisted.

That smarted! The creature let out a feline screech that

threatened to turn my fingernails green and jerked back

with unbecoming haste. I hung onto the
knife, wrenching

it out just ahead of a gout of blood. For
the moment, the

tarasque was blinded by pain.

Naturally I followed up my advantage; I
am not a war-

rior for nothing! I lunged again for the
monster's throat,

seeking the vulnerable vein. But the head
pulled back

quickly. This thing wasn't a predatory monster for noth-

ing, either. I was a good deal more of a contest than the

dragon had figured, but the odds remained in its favor,

especially as it learned from its little misjudgments. I

missed the throat and stumbled into the chest area.

Actually, this wasn't a bad place to be.

The tarasque

was accustomed to chasing and catching
fleeing prey, not

to scratching for it underfoot. Chickens
scratch, not drag-

ons! It tried to swipe at me with a
forepaw, but lacked

proper leverage that way, and I had no
trouble avoiding

the clumsy motion. Then, realizing that
its right midpaw

was pretty well pinned to the ground
while the right fore-

paw was swiping, I squatted and
plunged my blade through

that portion that was against the ground,
right above the

big claws.

Hoo, what a fuss that monster made! It
yanked up the

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paw—but with two paws in the air at once, it lost its

balance and sank down on that side. I had to scramble to

avoid getting crushed under the descending carapace. This

creature was armored all around its midsection, so that I

could not get in a good belly-stab. Too bad; in this moment

the region was wide open.

Aha! The legs weren't armored, just the body. Where

the legs emerged from the carapace, they looked espe-

cially tender. There was room for motion around each leg

so that it wouldn't bang into the carapace. The monster

would not be able to chase down swift prey without free

play for the legs. It all made sense—but it offered me my

opportunity.

I dug my blade into that cavity between carapace and

leg. I was rewarded by another roar of enraged anguish.

I was really scoring on the monster now!
Both Magician

Yin and the tarasque itself had underestimated the bar-

barian powers of close combat, and perhaps I had done

so, too. Maybe I could take this monster!

But I had overplayed my hand. The
tarasque flopped

all the way to the ground, and though I
had to scramble

out from beneath and did so with
alacrity, my knife hand

got pinned between the leg and the
carapace, and I was

caught. That's the one time when the leg
does come up

against the shell—when the creature lies
down. My knife

hand wasn't hurt, but I couldn't quite
scramble free, and

the mass of the monster whomped down
on my left leg,

crushing it. It was my turn to howl.

The tarasque got up and turned about to
come at me

headfirst. I tried to fend it off with one
bare hand, but

one fell swoop of its forepaws nearly ripped my arm from

its socket. Then the monster pinned me to the ground

with one paw and got ready to bite off my face.

"Pook! Get out of here!" I screamed, just before the

slavering, blood-soaked mouth closed on my head. There

was an instant of extreme discomfort as

those tusks dug

in—it really isn't much fun, getting your
face bitten off—

then darkness.

Pook galloped out of the alcove, his
chains rattling.

The monster glanced up. It wasn't
finished with me—in

fact, it had hardly started on me—but the horse's motion

confused it. Maybe the sight of fleeing prey activated its

chase circuit. But of course one morsel on the paw is

worth two on the hoof, so the tarasque returned to the

business at hand, so to speak. It chomped the rest of the

way through my face.

Pook whirled, charged back, and delivered a two-hoofed

kick to the monster's hind shell. The gross body was

shoved forward, and the snoot plowed into the dirt beside

my head.

That did it. The tarasque spat out my face, shook the

dirt out of its eyes, and started off after

the ghost horse.

This was, of course, exactly what I didn't want, since

Pook hadn't had enough time to get clear. But I was in

no position to protest, being unconscious. In fact, only

now do I see in the tapestry what happened, and how it

was that Pook once again rescued me. I owe a lot to that

horse!

The dragon limped, but was still able to get up re-

spectable velocity. I had hurt it in tongue, cheek, nose,

foot, and shoulder socket, but not enough to dim its fight-

ing spirit. I had not, it seemed, slowed it enough to give

Pook a decent chance.

However, Pook was a smart animal. He

remembered

the route out of the maze and followed it.
He did lose

time going around the curves; maybe he
was guided by

smell and sight as well as memory and
did not dare to

leave the exact trail we had made, lest
he get lost and

confused and be trapped by the tarasque.
So it was close,

but he was able to remain just ahead.
Perhaps the fact

that he was no longer carrying my weight, added to the

injuries the monster had suffered, helped; what might have

been a small but critical deficit in relative velocity became

a small advantage. In due course, Pook found his way to

the entrance.

But it was closed. Vines had strung themselves across

it and interlaced and sprouted wicked
thorns. Pook skid-

ded to a halt, four hooves churning up
turf. What was he

to do now? He had no sword to cut
through this mass.

The dragon puffed up behind him. The
tarasque was

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an oddball among dragons, possessing
no fire, smoke, or

steam; but when it ran, it puffed. Pook
took one look to

the side, realized that it was folly to
remain in the maze

to be chased down, and leaped into the
vine-shrouded

gate.

The thorns bit cruelly into his skin, but
his chains pro-

tected him some, and he was able to
scramble through

just as the monster came up. The
tarasque snapped at

Pook's hind legs, and that was a tactical
error, because

those hooves shot back with a force of
one horsepower

and pasted it on the snoot. Then the ghost
horse was

through, outside the maze.

But the dragon didn't desist. It shook its
sore snoot

and roared at the vines—and they
shriveled and fell away.

The tarasque leaped at Pook, who
whirled and galloped
off.

Now the nature of the chase changed, for
the terrain

avored the horse. Pook began to draw
ahead, but paused,

as it were, in thought, and then
deliberately slowed, al-

lowing the monster to close the gap.
Pook ran just ahead,

always seeming about to be caught,
luring the predator

ever farther away from its maze. Pook
was, of course,

very good at this sort of thing, for this
was how ghost

horses earned their living—luring fools
into bad regions,

or scaring them away from good ones. I ought to know!

That gave me time to heal. Fortunately, I wasn't dead,

just unconscious and face-chewed; in an hour or so, I

could grow back my eyeballs and things and be as good

as new. Instead of my using myself as bait to distract the

monster so Pook could escape, Pook

was distracting the

monster so I could recover. I think that
was really nice

of him.

Pook led the tarasque to the region of
caves we had

passed—the ones with the dimepedes.
What was he con-

templating? He could not hide there, for
the dimes would

nickel him to death.

But it turned out he was more canny than that. Pook

was a master of traps, as I had discovered when I first

chased him down. He went and stood in a patch of sunlight

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before a deep-dark cave. The dimes avoided sun, so they

did not show their silvery little snouts.

The tarasque came up. It was a solid creature, with its

heavy carapace, and maybe its injuries were telling; it had

slowed and was huffing loudly. But now it thought it had

trapped the horse, and it charged.

Pook stepped aside, letting the monster burst into the

cave. It disappeared into the darkness.
There was a pause,

then a roar that shook the hillside. The
tarasque had dis-

covered the dimepedes, or vice versa!
Then the monster

started to back out—but Pook braced
himself and kicked

with his hind hooves again at the rear of
the carapace,

using his horsepower to shove the
monster back in.

It was a beautiful ploy—but alas, not enough. The

tarasque weighed more than Pook did, its huge shell made

it invulnerable to kicks, and it had strong reason to get

out. It hunkered down and shoved, and Pook could not

confine it. Soon it got its head clear, pawed away the

clinging dimepedes, and rotated to face

the horse.

Pook was no coward. He stepped close to the tar-

asque's face and spun about. His chains flung out and

whipped across the dragon's head, knocking out a tooth

or two, or maybe an eyeball. The monster was so sur-

prised it pulled its head and forelegs back inside its shell—

whereupon Pook kicked sand and dirt in after the head.

It seems monsters don't like having sand kicked in their

snoots. The tarasque bellowed so hard that the sand was

blown out of its neck hole and three leg holes. The car-

apace almost lifted off the ground, propelled by the blast.

As roars go, that was a good one!

Now the baleful head came out of the shell, teeth

gleaming furiously. And Pook scored on the nose with

another kick. His hind hoof jammed the sore black nose

right back into the dragon's sore head, so that the tar-

asque's face became concave instead of convex, and

shoved the head back into the shell.

Pook was fighting the monster better than I had!

Then the horse sniffed, smelling something. Quickly

he trotted to the side, where a ragweed bush grew. He

snatched a rag between his teeth, ripped it off, held his

breath, and trotted back to the tarasque,
whose head was

just emerging again from the carapace.
Pook flung the rag

onto the monster's nose and backed out
of the way.

Now, ragweed was not a normal choice
for cloth, be-

cause of a special and objectionable
quality of the rags.

No one wove ragweed into rugs or clothing, except per-

haps as a practical joke, and not just because the rags

were ugly. But in this case—

The tarasque sneezed. That was what ragweed did. It

caused uncontrollable sneezing. Some creatures could

sneeze for days after a single whiff; others could struggle

to keep their heads attached. Once the
monster got a

good, deep whiff of the potent rag—

It was some sneeze. The blast from it
blew the leaves

off bushes and stirred up little dust
devils, who uttered

unkind syllables and fled. The dragon's
whole body slid

back a distance because of the recoil.
The next sneeze

slid it back some more, and the third put its tail well inside

the cave. Half a dozen more sneezes had the tarasque all

the way back in the cave.

Pook trotted over to the ragweed and harvested an-

other rag. The sneeze-dust practically oozed from it, itch-

ing to do its nefarious job. Pook tossed it into the cave,

then scrambled up the hill, found some debris, and kicked

it down. He managed to start a minor avalanche that piled

up junk before the cave, partially blocking it. That wouldn't

stop the monster from powering out, of course, but it did

tend to enclose the air and deflect the wind from the

sneezes, so that the magic sneeze-dust from the rag re-

mained mostly inside the cave. That
meant the tarasque

had to keep inhaling it, which in turn
meant continued

sneezing.

Pook cocked an ear, listening, as the
hillside shook

with the reverberations. I know what he
heard: a number

of little sneezes along with the big ones.
The dimepedes

were affected, too! They would be very angry, once they

managed to stop—and there, deep within their cave, was

the apparent instigator of it all, the tarasque. The dime-

pedes could not pinch through the carapace, but they were

small enough to scuttle up inside the leg holes, head hole,

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and tail hole, and mad enough to do considerable damage

to whatever flesh they found in there.
The tarasque was

too deep inside the cave to escape readily this time. There

was about to be a reckoning.

Satisfied, Pook trotted back toward the maze. He had,

to most intents and purposes, defeated the monster. Now

he was returning to rescue me.

But I had problems of my own. I had been healing

nicely—but then the dragonflies arrived to harass me. I

was just regaining consciousness when they swarmed in

and blasted me with dozens of little fiery jets. Singly,

each blast was painful; together, they were devastating.

My newly healing skin was blistered, my clothing burned

off, my hair set on fire. My sight was lost again, and my

sense of smell, and then two flies
zoomed down to jet

into my ears and deprive me of my
hearing, too. They

actually tore me up much worse than the
tarasque had

done, now that they had me helpless.
Nothing is quite as

cruel as a weakling with sudden power!

When Pook returned to pick me up, he
found me lying

under a cloud of dragonflies. He charged in, swishing his

tail so violently that dozens of flies were knocked out of

the air and sent spinning to the ground, where they det-

onated. The explosions were somewhat feeble, because

the flies' fuel was almost exhausted.

Now Pook was strong,

the dragonflies weak; they had used up most of their re-

serves on me, cooking my flesh. They
spooked and fled.

There was no point in their remaining,
anyway; they had

already had their vengeance by
destroying my body.

It seems Pook did not yet properly
understand the full

nature of my talent. Maybe he thought my
recovery had

been a fluke before, in the caves of the

callicantzari. He

did not realize how badly the tarasque
had hurt me or

how far I had recovered from that before
the flies re-

turned. Thus he did not understand that I
would recover

on my own, given a few hours. So he
tried to help me.

He rolled me over with his nose, shoved
me into the

bushes fringing the maze passage, and wedged me up. I

rolled off and flopped back on the ground. He tried again,

and again I flopped limply. One seldom realizes how use-

ful human hands are until one observes a horse trying to

pick up a man with hooves. It is just about impossible.

My burned-off skin was now plastered
with dirt, so

that I looked like a zombie fried in bread
crumbs. Anyone

else would have sought a decent burial
for the appalling

remains. But Pook wouldn't give up. He
found a better

place, where a low branch touched the
ground, and rolled

me to that, then nosed me up on it, got his
head under,

and finally managed to hump me off the branch and onto

his back.

My head and hands dangled on one side of his body

and my feet on the other, but he was able to carry me.

He took me out of the maze, then on around it, proceeding

generally northwest. Probably he knew there was no help

where we had been, so he was hoping
there would be

some where we hadn't been.

As the day waned, I healed partway and
began to stir.

Pook didn't realize the significance of
that; he might not

even have distinguished my motion from
that of inert

flopping.

At last he spied a cabin in a clearing in the jungle. He

gave a nicker of relief and headed for it.

There, perhaps,

there would be human help for me.

Chapter 9. Threnody

I woke in a bed of fragrant ferns. I saw the in-

terior of the cabin, neatly ordered, with shelves bearing

spices and herbs. In a corner was a strange, large, hollow

gourd with strings stretched lengthwise across it. And

sitting in a wicker chair was a quite pretty young woman

in a brown dress.

She saw me react and got up to approach me. "So you

are recovering," she said in a low voice.
"I wasn't certain
you would."

"Oh, I always did before," I said. My
body ached, but

I knew that would soon pass as the
healing was com-
pleted.

"Your horse brought you in," she said.

"You seem to

have been pretty badly burned."

That was when I realized that the dragonflies had re-

turned. The awareness had faded out, but now I remem-

bered. "Yes."

"I don't get many visitors," the woman said. "So I may

be rusty on the amenities. Let me just say that my name

is Threnody. I live alone and like it, and we'll get along

just fine if you keep your hands to yourself and depart as

soon as you are able. Your horse is grazing outside."

So this was a woman who wanted to be

left alone.

Some were like that; I never did quite understand why.

Well, I had never been one to force my attentions on

anyone. Barbarians generally encountered enough willing

women so that they had little taste for unwilling ones,

and I don't care what the civilized folk claim to the con-

trary.

"I am Jordan the Adventurer, I heal very fast, and I

have a mission to accomplish, so I'll be on my way soon

enough," I said. "I thank you for taking care of me while

I was unconscious; I must have been pretty dirty."

"You certainly were! I had to wash you all over. Sand

was virtually embedded in your hide. I thought you were

dead, but you weren't as far gone as it seemed. I put some

ointments on your burns and let you rest. You must have

blundered into a dragonfly nest." She eyed me apprais-

ingly. "I must say, you do have a hardy constitution;

you're quite a robust figure of a man."

"Yeah, I'm a genuine barbarian, mostly brawn, not too

much brain," I said, smiling. Actually, I was pretty smart

at the moment, because of the eye-queue spell I had ac-

cidentally invoked. "Fortunately, Pook is on hand to take

care of me."

"Pook," she repeated. "Your horse?"

Does that
mean—?"

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"Yes, he is a pooka, a ghost horse. That's
why he wears
those chains."

"You tamed a ghost horse?" she asked,
surprised.

"No. We're just friends."

She laughed. She was beautiful when she did that.

"Well, he's loyal. He could have dumped you off any-

where and left you to die." She glanced toward the kitchen

comer. "Are you well enough yet to eat?"

"Oh, yes, I'm hungry!"

"You are recovering swiftly! You look better already."

"Yes, I'm always hungry after a fatal injury," I agreed.

Again she laughed, taking this as humor.
She poured

some gruel from the pot on her hearth
into a wooden bowl

and brought it to me. The stuff was as dark and liquid

as her hair, but it tasted good and seemed to be nutritious;

I felt rapidly stronger.

"I have a trouser-tree growing in my yard," she said.

"Never thought I'd need it, as I prefer dresses." She held

up a pair of brown jeans. "These should

fit you."

"Thank you," I said. I got out of the fern bed and into

the jeans, and they did fit tolerably well.

"That's amazing," she remarked, watching. Evidently

she wasn't one of those prudish civilized women, though

in other respects she did seem civilized.
"Your skin is

almost whole again! You were so badly burned—"

I shrugged. "Guess it looked worse than it was." I could

have explained about my talent, but it didn't seem nec-

essary, since I was about to leave. Actually, I wasn't

paying full attention to her, as my ensmartened brain was

distracted by philosophical insights and

intellectual ex-

ercises it hadn't been interested in before. Today I can

only vaguely appreciate the mental convolutions I in-

dulged in then, for now I am of only ordinary smartness.

That is why I am not telling this story in the intelligent

way I could have told it then.

Yet I think, in retrospect, that I must have

made the

error of overlooking the obvious in the course of my pur-

suit of the esoteric, for I really did not act very smart in

Threnody's house. Some extremely smart people are sort

of dull about practical details.

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"I had no idea you'd be on your feet so soon," she

said. "What is your mission?"

"Oh, nothing that would interest you," I replied off-

handedly. "I have to go fetch an object and bring it back

to Castle Roogna."

"Castle Roogna?" she repeated,
interested in a peculiar

kind of way. I should have noticed that,
but didn't, then.

"Is that still functioning?"

"Oh, sure. But old King Gromden is

dying, and there's

a problem about the succession. So I—"

"The King is dying?" she asked alertly.

"Yes. And these two Magicians, Yin and Yang, are

vying for the throne, so—"

"Yin and Yang—but they—"

"Can't agree on anything," I finished.

"Except on this

magic contest, to see whose spells are stronger. So I—"

"I'm beginning to understand! You are working for

them!"

"Yes, in a way. I've got to complete my mission so

Yin will win, but Yang's spells are interfering. It's been

pretty rough, but I think I'm getting close." I shrugged.

"I won't bore you with the details. I'll be on my way now.

Thanks for the gruel, girl."

"Wait," she said. "This object you have

to fetch—do

you know what it is?"

"No. I have Yin's finder-spell, but haven't used it yet.

But I think the object is somewhere around here, because

I'm predestined to—"

"Sit down, Jordan," she said. "Let me tell you a story

that you may not have heard. I'll serve you some wine."

"Oh, sure. Thanks," I was always willing to be social.

Threnody mixed some fluids in a cup, which surprised

me, for I had always thought wine came directly from

wineskins grown by wine-lilies. She brought the cup to

me, and I drank it while she talked. It was pungent stuff,

with a bitter aftertaste but pretty good. Barbarians don't

have much taste, anyway.

"King Gromden had a child, a daughter,"
Threnody

said.

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"Oh, sure. He told me."

"What else did he tell you about her?"

"Nothing much. Just that his wife and child had gone

away and he missed them something awful." I burped;

that wine was bubbling up inside me.

"There was a bit more to the story than that," Thren-

ody said.

"Well, he's pretty lonely now." Then my intelligence had

a flash. "Yang mentioned scandal; maybe that was—"

She was silent a moment, then resumed her story as

if she had not been interrupted. "King Gromden's daugh-

ter was the apple of his eye, and indeed she was said to

be very pretty. His wife grew jealous of the attention the

child got and put a curse on her: if she remained at Castle

Roogna, the castle would fall. This saddened the King

very much, but he had to preserve the capital of Xanth

at all costs, so he sent the girl away. Because he was

angry with the Queen for putting on that curse, he sent

her away, too. But before the Queen departed, she put a

curse on him also. That was her talent, of course—curses.

She came from cursefolk stock, deep in southern Xanth;

some call those folk fiends. She caused him to forget the

nature of the first curse.

"So ever after, the King sought his

banished daughter,

not realizing that he himself had
banished her, and for

good reason. He finally located her, but
she remembered

the curse and refused to return with him
to Castle Roogna.

He could not understand why, for when
she told him of

the curse, he immediately forgot. A good
curse can't be

circumvented just by a person's being
told its nature; it

operates until revoked, or until it just wears out, and the

curses of the curse-fiends don't wear out.

"Since he could not grasp the truth and insisted on an

answer, she had to tell him a lie instead, cruel as it was:

that she preferred to live in the open wilderness instead

of in a gloomy old castle. He kept trying to find ways to

change her mind, but was never successful."

"That's very interesting," I said. "He never said any-

thing to me about the curses."

"Naturally not. He remembers his daughter's absence,

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though," Threnody said. "And he swore he would find a

way to bring her back and make her happy at Castle

Roogna. In fact, he hoped she would marry his successor,

the next King of Xanth, so his line would continue in

power. The throne of Xanth is not

hereditary, as it goes

from Magician to Magician, but
sometimes there is a li-

neage through the female side. His
daughter wasn't a

Sorceress, of course, but that doesn't
matter for wives."

"Well, I guess that didn't work out." I set
down my

empty mug. "His successor will be Yin
or Yang, and I

don't think either is much interested in marriage right

now."

"They are interested. The people would be more ready

to accept a Magician who married the prior King's daugh-

ter, and her magic power would help him reign, so she is

a moderately valuable property as well

as being physically

attractive. Men tend to put too much stress on the latter

aspect."

"Um, yes," I agreed, contemplating Threnody's own

figure.

"In any event, they would not have a choice. The King

arranged it so that neither could become King unless he

married her."

My head was whirling pleasantly. That was strong wine!

"Maybe he'll spring that detail on the winner, once I bring

back the object," I said. "But it will be too bad, because

if her return to the castle means it will fall—"

"Yes, it is a cruel situation," she agreed.

"That girl will

never return to Castle Roogna, because she loves her

father and loves Xanth, nothing else. She

will do anything

to prevent her return, no matter who the next king is,

though it breaks her father's heart. She has no choice."

"Well, it's not my business," I said, standing. "I just

have to fetch the—"

I reeled, staggered, lost my balance, and
fell against

the bed. Something was wrong!

Threnody came to me. "I'm sorry I had to
poison you,

barbarian," she said. "But if you should
succeed in your

mission, and Yin becomes King, he will
do what King

Gromden wants, and marry Gromden's

daughter and keep

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her at Castle Roogna. I must prevent that,
for when Castle

Roogna falls, so does the human
domination of Xanth."

"But—" I protested groggily.

"You see, barbarian innocent, / am King
Gromden's

daughter," she said. "I felt it only fair to
let you under-

stand why I had to kill you. Better that
the life of one

foolish adventurer be forfeit than that
Castle Roogna should

fall. It is nothing personal; you seem like
a nice person,

for a barbarian."

Then I passed out, and I suppose I died,
for the poison

had spread all through my system and it
was potent stuff.

Threnody dragged my body across the
floor—she turned

out to be pretty strong for a woman—and
to a trapdoor

in the back of the cabin and shoved me
in.

I slid down a dark chute, then out into

the light and

into empty air. The chute opened into the forgotten Gap

Chasm! I dropped a horrible distance and thunked head-

first into the rock at the bottom. If the poison hadn't quite

killed me, the fall certainly had!

Pook heard the distant thunk. His ears twitched. The

edge of the chasm was curved here, and

the chasm itself

was narrow. Pook found a ledge that overlooked the depth

and he peered down. His sharp eyes or nose spied my

still remains below, and he gave a neigh of dismay. Maybe

he felt responsible, for he was the one who had brought

me to Threnody's cabin.

But he was a pretty smart animal, and

maybe some of

that intelligence spell had rubbed off on him, for he set

about getting down to me without hurting himself. He

trotted west along the brink of the Gap to where it inter-

sected the sea, then jumped into the deep channel of water.

He had a long way to fall and made an awful splash, but

in a moment he bobbed to the surface, despite the weight

of his chains, and swam into the chasm
until the water

thinned and he could walk on land.
Evidently the Gap

Dragon had business elsewhere, for
there was no sign of

him. After all, the Gap extends all the
way across Xanth,

as we now know, and no one creature
can be everywhere

at once. Still, it was a considerable act
of courage on

Pook's part, unless perhaps he had forgotten about the

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dragon. On the other hand, he had turned out to be pretty

good at Fighting dragons, so maybe he

wasn't afraid. Or

maybe he remembered, and was afraid,
but was deter-

mined to go to me, anyway. It wasn't
long before he

trotted up to my remains.

I was not a pretty sight. My legs were
broken, and my

head had cracked open and spilled some
of its contents

out. Nothing important, just some gray matter that I sup-

pose was stuffing or insulation. But it was messy, and

there was a good deal of blood spread about. I was as

dead as I had ever been. My sword was lying nearby,

bent and chipped, too. That makes me sad to contemplate,

for that sword had served me well and could not heal

itself.

Pook used his hoof to scrape the pieces and gunk into

a pile; he pushed the pile onto a big leaf and made as good

a bundle as he could manage. There was dirt and garbage

mixed in, of course, but that couldn't be helped.

Pook shoved the bag around, trying to figure out how

to carry it, but could not. So he cast about for a decent

burial spot, believing me to be finished. There was none.

He decided to take me to the shore—but that was some

distance away. What was he to do?

He managed to get the top of the bundle knotted to-

gether somewhat, then hooked one of his chains through

it and the sword's guard and dragged them. The bundle

bumped across the terrain, getting its contents thoroughly

mixed. When Pook reached the small sandy beach where

the chasm joined the ocean, he left the bag at the edge

and set to work excavating a hole with his hooves. Ob-

viously he intended to bury the remains. He was, after

all, a ghost horse; he knew about death and burial.

But when the hole got deep, water seeped in. Dis-

gusted, he moved farther from the sea and started a new

hole. He didn't want my remains to get

wet; maybe he

thought I'd be uncomfortable if I rotted in the water. But

the new hole, too, filled with water. He moved yet farther

away—but here it was rocky, impossible to dig with

hooves.

Pook pondered. Then he got smart again. What about

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sea burial? He could weight the bag down with a big rock

and sink it in the sea. Evidently he thought my remains

wouldn't be as uncomfortable in deep water. But there

were several problems. For one thing, he had no way to

tie a rock to the bundle. Even if he had

good vines, he

couldn't tie knots in them. And he knew
the big wrapping-

leaf would soon disintegrate in the
seawater, releasing its

contents. As he peered out across the
water, he saw a

lurking sea monster, licking its chops.
He knew I didn't

like getting eaten by monsters. Good
thing that monster

hadn't been there when Pook had jumped
into the sea!

Finally he shrugged and resumed dragging the bundle.

He intended to get it to a suitable burial place, no matter how much effort it took.

He hauled and he hauled, finding paths up the steep slope to the higher ground. He was panting and sweating,

but would not desist till nightfall made it too dark to con-

tinue without risking a misstep and a tumble back to the

beach. Pook was used to night, but this was treacherous

terrain, and the bundle was awkward to manage. So he

parked it in a niche, then braced himself below it and slept

on his feet. He was tired and hungry, but he refused to

quit until he had done the burial properly. Pook was one

faithful friend in death, as he was in life.

But in the night, the creatures of the noctum emerged

to forage. Unseen things slithered along the slope, and

there were sounds of scuttling and scratching. Insects set

up a persistent chirruping. Pook stirred himself to stomp

anything that approached the bundle. A hatch opened a

short distance below, and a goblin's head poked out. Pook

nudged a stone to roll down and scare the goblin back

into his hole. As he knew, goblins could be very bad in

quantity, but this place was evidently out of the main

goblin country. A solitary goblin could be dealt with more

readily than a mob.

Then a smell developed. Pook sniffed
and snorted,

disliking it. For a moment he might have
been afraid the

stuff in the bag was decomposing. Then
he heard crass

flapping and realized it was a harpy. The
ugly-faced avian

crone loomed near, sensing her type of
prey: namely,

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something helpless. But Pook squealed
warning and reared

up, milling his forehooves and clanking
his chains, and

she reconsidered. "I didn't know that
carrion was yours,

pooka!" she screeched. "Most nags don't
eat meat. Next

time, let a girl know, you blippety blip!"
I doubt I am

repeating the exact words she used, as
they weren't nice

words; they flattened Pook's ears against his head and

caused the scuttlings in the vicinity to curl up and die.

In this manner the ghost horse guarded the bag during

the night, and never was there a more loyal and forlorn

service rendered. Pook thought he was protecting the re-

mains for decent burial; actually, he was

giving me time

to heal. My talent had both poison and
the fatal fall to

nullify, and that was a considerable task.
I doubt that I

had ever before been killed quite so
dead. But all my

pieces were there, plus some dirt for
good measure; I

had been granted a day and a night
without disturbance

and I was indeed on the mend. As the
light of morning

peeped hesitantly over the brink and
crept into the chasm,

I stirred.

Pook had been horsenapping. The
motion in the bag

brought his ears straight up in shock.
Had a predator

sneaked inside to guzzle out the goodies?
He investigated

immediately, pulling the bag open.

I looked out at him. "Hi, Pook," I said.
"Was it bad

this time?"

He almost fell off the slope.

I stretched and climbed out of the leaf. I
was weak but

whole. It's rough, recovering from two deaths simulta-

neously! I would need to eat and rest to replenish the

formidable energies expended in the reconstruction.

"Say, didn't I hear a harpy in the night?" I inquired.

"You shouldn't have driven her off; you should have used

her for stork fodder."

Then I paused, appalled, while Pook looked at me as

if I had sprouted demon's horns. What was I saying?

Nobody got that close to a harpy! How could I have

spawned such a dirty thought?

Actually, it's clear now, though it was muddy then.

Some of that dirt had gotten scooped up

with my remains

and tied in the bag—that dirt had gotten caught in my

cracked head as it healed, and now I had a dirty mind.

Too bad—but, of course, it had been a very difficult feat

of healing.

After a moment, Pook recovered from his amazement

and disgust, decided it was really me
back alive, and came

to nuzzle my hand. "Oh, didn't you
understand about

me?" I asked him, realizing that he hadn't
actually seen

me heal before, not all the way from
death. He had always

been away, avoiding dragons or
searching for an exit from

callicantzari caves or battling a
tarasque. "My magic tal-

ent is to heal rapidly from wounds or whatever. If I lose

part of my body, I regrow it; if I am killed, I recover.

You must have collected everything together for me, so

I could recover most rapidly. Thank you, Pook; that was

very nice of you."

He just stood there, embarrassed. I petted him on the

neck. Horses have excellent necks for
petting; chickens

don't. "I see you brought the bag of
spells along also.

And my sword. That's good; those spells
may be jumbled,

but I'll probably need them. I still have
my mission to

complete." I looked around. "But how
did we get here

on the slope? Last I remember. Threnody
had given me

poison—but it shouldn't have taken me a day and a night

to recover from that." I glanced at my body. "And that

wouldn't account for the destruction of my clothing and

all the new flesh I have grown. I've just been through a

major healing."

Pook gestured with his head, indicating the chasm.

"You mean she dumped me down there?"

I asked. "I must

have splattered like a broken egg!" He
nodded agreement.

Now I understood just how much he had done for me,

and what it had meant when he gave me his friendship.

I knew I owed him a big one.

We climbed on up the slope, slowly, for I was weak

and he was tired. As I moved, I remembered what Thren-

ody had said just before I died. She was King Gromden's

daughter, cursed to stay away from
Castle Roogna lest it

fail, and afraid that Magician Yin would
marry her and

make her return if he became King. I
could see her con-

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cem—but it seemed somewhat extreme
for her to murder

me so abruptly just for that. I had nothing to do with it,

really. Well, not quite true; if I succeeded in my mission,

then Yin would become King, and the heat would be on

Threnody. But why couldn't she simply refuse to marry

him, or refuse to return to Castle Roogna? She had said

no to her father the King; she could say no to Magician

Yin. She didn't have to kill me to prevent
Yin from win-

ning; she could have asked me not to
mention her where-

abouts, or she could have moved to
some other, hidden

place before I returned to the castle.
Thus her action

didn't seem to make sense, and that
bothered me, for she

was a most attractive woman. A woman
I would have

been happy to—

Then I wondered just how much sense
my own thoughts

were making. But I had an excuse—the
dirt mixed up

with the other gunk in my head. For all I
knew, some

rich, brown dirt was a good substitute
for the useless gray

stuff that had spilled; still, my head
wasn't quite the way

it had been. Of course, as I said, I didn't realize this at

the time, for I hadn't seen myself splat in the Gap Chasm.

Nevertheless, my mind did feel somewhat like an egg

scrambled in sand. For one thing, I seemed to have lost

most of the advantage of the intelligence spell, since no

more complex philosophic thoughts churned about inside

my skull. Maybe the eye-queue spell had compensated

for the mixing my skull-innards had received, resulting in

approximately normal intellect. Had I been really smart,

I could have figured out exactly what made sense about

Threnody and maybe saved myself an extraordinary

amount of grief. But the eyeballs of the eye-queue must

have been pointed every which way, so they couldn't

quite focus on the obvious. I can't say, even now, how

my thoughts ran then; I guess I hadn't properly appre-

ciated the extent of my injuries, since I had been dead at

the time. I really didn't want to believe that a woman as

lovely as Threnody could have done as much damage to

me as she had. I wasn't nearly as
sensible as a barbarian

should have been.

One thing was muddily clear, though. I
should stay

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away from Threnody, because she was

either crazy or

dangerous, possibly both. If Yin was going to marry her,

that was his problem, not mine. He was a Magician; maybe

he could handle her. I couldn't see why he would even

want to marry a woman like that. Um, no; I could see.

To gain King Gromden's sanction for the succession,

and— The dirt in my mind smudged a picture for me of

what she might look like without clothes
and of what a

man might do—well, never mind. I
would just go about

my business, fetch the object, bring it to
Castle Roogna,

and then get out of this region before the
ship hit the

fanny, so to speak. (I think that saying
derives from the

time someone accidentally sailed his
ship into the pos-

terior of a snoozing giant sea monster.
That was not a
smart thing to do.)

We made it to the top of the slope by
midday, to our
immense relief. There was a nice green
plain loaded with
tall grass and dotted with fruit and nut
trees. Here we
could relax and fill up, as we so
desperately needed to.

I took three good steps toward the
nearest tree—and

tripped over another black spell. This
one was in the shape

of a stone. It flared up darkly.

I knew what that meant—and if I hadn't
known, I

could have guessed, for my foot was
turning to black

stone. Quickly I kicked the spell so hard

it flew out over

the edge of the plain and rolled down the
embankment

toward the sea. There wasn't much
damage it could do

there; most of the slope was already
stone. It might be

awkward for the goblin and harpy in the
vicinity, and

perhaps the sea monster, but that was all.
It wouldn't

catch Pook.

Then I grabbed for a counterspell, for
now my other

foot was calcifying, too. Evidently that
moment of contact

had been enough for the spell to get the
measure of me;

I hadn't stopped its progress merely by
kicking it away.

The stone-to-flesh spell had already
been expended, but

maybe I wasn't thinking clearly; the dirt
fuzzing my brain

could account for that, too. Mostly, I
think, I was just

too rushed to make any really smart
decision. When one

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feels one's legs getting stoned, one
doesn't pause too long

for reflection.

I came up with the white doll. That was
the bodies-

exchange spell, to reverse the black
spell of that type; I

didn't need that now. But since the spells
were all mixed

up, I knew it would be something else.
Maybe some other

spell would help, crazy as that notion
seems, now that I

can consider it more objectively.
"Invoke!" I cried.

The doll flashed—and suddenly I had a
vision of an

arrow pointing east.

An arrow? What could that be? Oh—this

was the needle

of the compass of the finder-spell for the
object I was to

fetch! Now I could find it, since this
positive spell was

fresher than the negative one I had
encountered atop the

mountain.

But that didn't do me a phenomenal lot of
good at the

moment, for my legs were still changing to stone, and my

thighs too. Maybe getting rid of the black spell had weak-

ened the effect, but I had gotten a good dose, and it looked

as if I were going to become a statue. Now what should

I do?

As I hesitated, my hands stiffened, and

the hair on my

head became brittle and heavy. My face
glazed over. My

breathing got labored, for stone is not
very flexible. I felt

myself falling, and felt the thunk as I
struck the ground,

hard. I hoped my stone body did not hurt
the ground too

much. Then I faded out, as my brains
were stoned, too.

This was my third death in the space of a
day or two—

not what I would call a very positive record.

Pook watched all this with alarm. He had hardly gotten

me to safety when this happened! But he was smart enough

to realize that if I could recover from getting smashed at

the bottom of the chasm, I might recover from getting

stoned, too. Pook's brains, after all, had

not been scram-

bled. So he nosed me over, hooked a chain under my rigid

arms, and dragged me to the shade of the tree I had been

headed for. There he let me lie, while he grazed about

the tree in a widening circle, keeping one eye on me and

the other out for any stray monsters that might pass by.

Creatures did appear. One was a small
feline on the

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prowl for prey, but Pook stomped a
forefoot and it fled,

for it was a scaredy cat. A swarm of
frisbees flew over,

but they were only interested in flowers.
They were shaped

like little disks and they sort of glided

down to a flower,

then spun away to the next. A long, dark
shape flapped

in, its wings leathery, its body like a thin
club; it was a

baseball bat looking for a baseball.

There was none here,

as the bases generally held their balls in
the evenings, so

it flapped on past. Some June-bugs
buzzed me; no, they

were je-june bugs, comparatively dull
and uninteresting.

A bird flitted about the tree under which
I lay, a brown

thrasher, but there was nothing brown
here to thrash, so

it dropped a dropping on my nose, taking
me for a statue,

and flew off. Now I understood why
sculptures objected

to birds!

Dusk came, creeping guiltily across the
plain. Pook

stood near me, making sure nothing bothered me. The

truth is, very little bothers stone figures, apart from ham-

mers and earthquakes and the aforementioned attentions

of birds. But the ghost horse remained as faithful as ever,

trusting me to recover in due course.

His trust was rewarded, for gradually my talent fought

the curse of stone and prevailed. My
head returned to

flesh in the night, and my torso, and I
began to breathe

again. It was a good thing that Evil
Magician Yang hadn't

known about my talent. He thought the
stone-spell would

finish me, and he was wrong. Had he
suspected, he might

have arranged to have my statue smashed
into little pieces

and scattered; I'm not at all sure I could have recovered

from that. Certainly it would have taken a long time, and

probably by then Yang would have been deemed the win-

ner and crowned King.

As dawn dawned, I was able to sit up. Pook gave a

neigh of pleasure; his faith had been justified! But I was

far from well, for my legs and my left arm remained stone,

and my skull felt sort of rocky. Usually my healing ac-

celerated as it neared completion; this time it was stalling.

I realized that my talent had been severely strained. I

had been savaged twice in the tarasque's maze, and killed

twice by Threnody's poison and the fall

into the chasm,

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and this was the fifth bad accident in two days or so. I

had never been killed before faster than once a day, and

usually not that frequently. Also, these had been pretty

thorough killings, not simple to heal. So my talent had at

last exhausted itself and was unable to complete the job

on my body.

Well, I couldn't blame it. In a few hours or days, I

was sure my magic would recover its strength and polish

off the remaining stone; meanwhile, I would have to func-

tion on an as-was basis. In retrospect I conclude that my

talent, having expended its last gasp getting me mostly

restored, lost track of the job and assumed that I was

supposed to be partly stone, for it did
not rush to complete

the job when it could have. Just as a man
coming into a

strange house does not realize if a chair
is out of place,

my reviving talent did not realize that the
stone foot and

hand were wrong. But this is only
conjecture, long after

the fact; I don't really understand magic.

Pook stood close, and I grabbed onto his chains and

hauled myself to my feet. Then I reached up to harvest

enough of the fruits and nuts growing on the tree to sustain

me. After a while I managed to stand and walk by myself,

though my feet remained stone. It was like walking on

stilts; I could manage, but for traveling I needed the ghost

horse.

Now the day was fairly on us, and the
image of the

arrow was in my mind. East—the
direction of the object!

I had to go there and find it!

We went east, following the fringe of the
monstrous

chasm. Odd, I thought, that no one had
warned me of

this natural hazard; it could hardly be overlooked! And

what kind of an object would be hidden here? Well, the

arrow was clear in my mind, showing only a little smudge

along the shaft, doubtless from the dirt in my head, and

I knew I would learn the answer soon. This was, after

all, a good time to have invoked the finder-spell; the object

was evidently close, so the spell tuned in strongly.

We approached Threnody's cabin, perched at the very

brink of the chasm. Obviously the object was beyond it,

so we turned south to give the cabin wide clearance. But

the farther south we went, the more the arrow veered. It

was pointing right at the cabin!

I tried not to believe it, but when we
were east of the

cabin, the arrow pointed west. There
could be no doubt—

the object was there.

I sighed. I would just have to go and get
it. I knew

Threnody would not be pleased; after
all, she had already

killed me twice to prevent me from getting the object.

Now I would have to take it from under her nose. But

I'd have to do it quickly and get away from there before

she found some other way to kill me. I couldn't blame

her for not wanting to have someone bring her back to

Castle Roogna, but I did object to being killed, even if it

wasn't too serious a matter.

We went to the house, and I dismounted
and knocked

on the door. I heard music inside, rather
pretty; she was

playing the stringed instrument I had
seen before. When

I knocked, the music halted, and in a
moment Threnody

opened the door. She stood aghast as she
recognized me;

her mouth fell open and her fair skin
paled.

"Got something to pick up," I said
gruffly. I would

have been more curt with her, but she
was so pretty I

didn't feel as angry as I should have.
This is one sort of

foolishness that barbarians are prone to;
they tend to be-

lieve, despite significant evidence to the contrary, that

women are as beautiful inside as they are outside. I knew

better; still, the way she had treated me seemed less ob-

jectionable than it might have. "I'll just take it and be

gone in a moment; please stand clear."

She stepped out of my way, her eyes round and staring,

and I brushed by her and rechecked the arrow.

It pointed back toward Threnody. "Okay, you have

it," I said. "I guess you knew it all the time, but didn't

tell me. Hand it over."

"You're dead!" she gasped.

"Not any more; I heal fast," I said
gruffly. "Now give
it to me."

"I—don't have anything." She still acted
as if she had

seen a ghost; maybe she thought the ghost
was me.

"Look, woman—you killed me, so I
don't think I owe

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you anything. Give me that object, or I'll take it from

you."

"I tell you I don't have it," she said, losing some of

her pallor. "I don't even know what it is."

I had had enough. There are limits to what a barbarian

will tolerate from even the prettiest of women, and per-

haps some stone remained in my heart. I grabbed her and

proceeded to search her, patting her body all over.

Threnody did not resist. I didn't find any object on

her, but the arrow still pointed to her.

"Maybe it's some-

thing you're wearing," I said. "Take off your clothing."

"I'll do nothing of the kind!" she exclaimed, recovering

her indignity as she got accustomed to the idea of my

being alive.

"Then I'll do it for you," I said and began
unbuttoning

her dress.

"You barbarian!" she cried.

"That's right," I agreed, pleased.

She saw I wasn't bluffing. "Oh, all right, I'll undress,"

she said. "I did undress you before, after all." She undid

the rest of her brown dress and stepped out of it. She

wore nothing underneath it. She took off her slippers,

too, and stood completely bare. I picked up her clothing

and set it in a pile on the bed, then stood

between her

and it. The arrow pointed directly at her.

I looked closely at her. There was a lot to look at, but

there simply wasn't any object there.
"Maybe you ate it,"

I said. "So it's inside you."

"Don't be ridiculous!" she snapped. "I

don't want you

cutting me open to verify it isn't there!"

I scratched my head. "I just can't figure it, unless—"

"Unless I am the object you seek," she concluded.

That, of course, was it. Suddenly it made sense. Why

fetch an object to win the throne, then go after an un-

willing woman to marry? How much

simpler to fetch the

woman herself!

And if she didn't want to come—might,
in fact, even

kill the one who tried to bring her—
well, get an ignorant

barbarian to do the job for you.

I had had a low regard for Magician Yang. Now,

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abruptly. Magician Yin didn't seem phenomenally good

to me, either.

Well, I was stuck for it, since I had

agreed to undertake

this mission. Maybe this was what King Gromden had

been trying to warn me about. He hadn't known—be-

cause of the second curse—that Threnody's return to

Castle Roogna would cause it to fall; he just wanted his

daughter back, and married to his successor, so that his

bloodline would remain in power. But he had known she

didn't want to return and would resist
any effort to bring

her there with all the forces at her
command.

I could see her point, even though I did
not approve

of her methods. If I knew that my return
to Fen Village

would cause it to be destroyed, I would
resist that return

as strongly as I could. Now I felt guilty

about what I had

to do—yet I did have to do it. It was not
my place to

decide on the larger rights and wrongs of
the situation; I

just had to complete the job I had agreed
to do.

What a pile of mud this assignment was
turning out to

be!

Chapter 10. Demon Striation

Threnody didn't bother going for her clothes; she

leaped for the door. I intercepted her, knowing she would

be difficult to catch if she got away, as she was bound to

be more familiar with this region than I was. She struck

at my face with her small fist, but I fended her off with

my left arm. "Ow!" she cried. "What are
you made of,

oaf?"

"Stone," I said. "My feet and left arm,
anyway. I ran

into a spell."

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She relaxed. "Sounds like one of Yang's spells. You

turned partway to stone?"

"More or less," I said, letting her go.

She bolted for the door again, this time getting out.

But she ran smack into Pook, who had thought to back-

stop me. She bounced off his hide, and in a moment I

caught her again. "I just have to take you back," I said.

"I'm sorry, but I agreed to bring back the object and I will."

"I'm no object!" she protested, struggling in my arms,

but this time I was smart enough not to release her.

"Sure you are," I said. "The object of my

mission."

"You'll never take me alive!"

"Listen, you've already killed me," I told her, still

distracted by her motions. If I hadn't already known that

barbarians were often clumsy with women, I'd have sus-

pected it now. "You should know that's no good."

"I'll kill you again!" she said, trying to bite at my shoul-

der. Unfortunately, she picked the wrong one and bruised

her teeth on the stone.

"Well, I'd better get you dressed," I said. I knew it

wasn't right for bare women to be out of the house; the

flies would bite them.

I hauled her into the house, tossed her
onto the bed,

and held her down while I wrestled the
brown dress onto

her. It wasn't easy, because she was
punching and kicking

at me all the time, but finally I got the
dress buttoned.

"You oaf!" she snorted. "It's backward!"

I had, of course, put the buttons in the front, where

they belonged, but the fit did look a little awkward. "Does

it matter?" I asked innocently.

"Get off me, you buffoon, and I'll do it right."

I let her go and stepped back. She stood, unbuttoned

the dress—now I saw that I hadn't

aligned the buttons

properly, so that the buttons ran off the
top while the

holes ran off the bottom—and took it off.
She turned it

about—and suddenly leaped for me, the
dress stretched

between her hands. She wrapped it
about my throat and

twisted it in back, choking me.

But some of the stone remained in my

neck, too, and

the choke was not tight. I struggled for a moment, then

let myself relax, feigning unconsciousness. She choked

me a while longer, making sure, then let go. "What am I

going to do with you?" she muttered rhetorically, sup-

posing me to be beyond hearing. "You're basically a de-

cent guy, but if I let you live—"

I grabbed her about the legs and hauled her down again.

"You forgot your dress," I said and spanked her smartly

on her bouncy bottom.

She made a sound as of water dousing an angry fire.

"You're impossible!"

"I'm barbarian," I corrected her. "Now if you don't

get into that dress, I'll wrap a sheet around you and take

you that way."

"This dress is ruined!" she protested.

"It's all twisted

up!"

Because she had used it to choke me.
"Well, untwist
it."

"I'll get another," she decided. "And
you'd better put
something on, too. You look like a
zombie."

I realized it was true. Clothes don't heal
the way I do.

My shirt was a tatter, and my trousers

might as well not

have bothered. A few dangling leather strips were all that

remained of my leather armor.

"You can have this dress," she said, jamming it at me.

Well, it was better than nothing. I would use it until

we passed the trouser-tree in her garden. I put it on. 1

couldn't button the top because my
shoulders were too

broad, and the bottom hung halfway to
my knees, but it

did provide some cover.

"Backward, again," she remarked.

I did not reply. Apparently a dress was
backward no

matter which way a man put it on.

Threnody got a gray dress from her closet and donned

it and her slippers. She stood before a mirror and brushed

out her hair. She had lustrous black tresses, matching her

midnight eyes. I had been partial to fair women, but now

I realized that the dusky ones could be every bit as ap-

pealing, physically. "All right, I'm

ready," she informed
me.

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I took her left arm, to lead her outside—
and with her

right hand she struck at me. She had
picked up a knife!

The blade dug into my stone arm,

harmlessly, its edge

chipping. "Oh, I give up!" she cried in disgust. "I forgot

about that!" • i

I realized that I could not trust her for a moment. I '

saw some clothesline vine hanging on a hook. I took it

down.

"Oh, no, you don't!" she cried, making another break

for the door. But she wasn't very strong, despite being

strong for a woman, and I held her and got her hands tied

behind her. I picked up several scratches and a bite in

the process, but I had expected that. She was a hellkitten!

And the dirty truth was, that was every
bit as appealing

to me as the milk-and-honey type of
woman.

Then I took her out and set her on the
ghost horse and

tied her dainty feet to the chains. Pook
seemed disgusted

at having to carry her, but he understood.
I couldn't trust

her on her own two feet.

It was too bad, I reflected, that women weren't more

like horses. Horses were so much more reasonable.

"My lute!" she exclaimed. "I need my lute!"

"Your what?"

"My lute, bumpkin! My musical instrument. So I can

play and sing."

But I distrusted her motive. She certainly didn't plan

to play music at Castle Roogna, since she believed it

would fall when she got there. She wasn't going to play

for me, since she was fighting me.

"Forget it," I said.

Her mouth closed in a hard line. She was really angry

about this—more so, it seemed, than about getting cap-

tured and tied. Women are funny creatures.

"Where is your trouser-tree?" I asked, looking around.

"Forget it!" she snapped.

Ah, well, I should have known. I would simply have

to use the dress.

We started off toward Castle Roogna. I didn't want to

go through the tarasque's maze or over the flesh moun- '

tain, so I went east instead, along the brink of the chasm, I

hoping to cut south beyond the range of
mountains I had

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encountered before. Progress was slow,
because I had to

walk and keep a constant eye on
Threnody as well as on

the landscape. Traveling in Xanth is not
much of a picnic,

anyway, and was less so now. My heavy

stone feet thunked

into the ground like ogres' pads. I had
learned to walk,

but it remained clumsy.

Threnody, evidently getting bored with
riding, started

talking. "How did you survive the
poison and the fall?"

she asked, as if this were a routine
matter of curiosity.

Perhaps it was for her.

I saw no harm in explaining, since I intended to give

her no chance to kill me again. She listened attentively.

"So you can not die," she concluded.
"Not to stay."

"Well, it hasn't happened yet," I said.
Was she mel-

lowing? I didn't trust it. I had had
experience with gentle,

straightforward, loving women, but
never before with a

treacherous vixen like this. Maybe she
was just trying to

figure out how to kill me permanently.
So, despite my

halfway desire to believe her, I
remained cautious.

"Demons can't die either," she said.

"That's because they're not alive to begin

with," I said.

"Oh, no, they're alive—it's merely a different sort of

life. They have feelings and interests, just as human folk

do."

"Only the evil feelings," I said. "They don't have love

and conscience and integrity."

"Do barbarians?" she asked as if nettled.

"Certainly. We're primitives, closer to nature than civ-

ilized folk are. We care about nature and magic and friend-

ship."

"Do you have any friends?"

"Pook's my friend!"

"A ghost horse!" she sneered.

Pook's ears laid back again, and he made a motion as

if to buck her off, but controlled himself. He certainly

didn't like this woman!

"As I said," I said, "we barbarians are

close to nature.

Pook's a fine animal, and I'm proud to be his friend." I

noted as I spoke that now Pook's ears were blushing.

"What about love?"

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"I love my father and mother—"

She rolled her eyes. "Imbecile! I mean
man-woman

love! Have you ever truly loved a
woman—or do you

merely use a woman and go your way?"

I pondered. Elsie had been nice, and I liked her—but

if I had really loved her, I would not have left her. As for

Bluebell Elf—there never had been more to that than the

favor I had promised. So the barbarian virtue of integrity

forced me to yield the point, grudgingly. "No, I guess it's

just a passing thing, so far."

"In that you do not differ from a demon,"
she said,

smugly establishing that point.

"But I could love," I said. "A demon
can't."

"True. But what's the big difference
between a person

who can't love and one who doesn't love?"

"Listen, I'm no demon!" I protested hotly. "What are you getting at?"

"You are taking me against my will to a castle that will be destroyed by my presence," she said. "Do you call that an act of conscience?"

This was uncomfortable, because I had already ex-

perienced a nudge of guilt about it. "I undertook to per-

form a mission," I replied, disgruntled. "My conscience

says I must do what I agreed to do, whatever it is."

"Even when you know it's wrong?"

Now I understood what she was doing.
She was trying

to talk me out of it. But some of the
intelligence from the

eye-queue spell remained, despite being
filtered through

dirt and stone, and I was able to answer
her. "How can

you talk to me of right and wrong? You
treacherously

killed me twice over!"

"Well, I told you I was sorry!" she snapped. "I didn't

like it, but I had to do it."

"Well, I don't like doing this," I retorted, "but I have

to do it."

"Touche," she murmured. Or something

like that.

There's only one human language in Xanth, but this

sounded like another. She was silent for a bit, then started

in again. "You had a normal human barbarian upbringing-

ing?"

"Sure. And then I went adventuring."

"And this is your adventure."

"Right. Fighting monsters and spells—
good old-fash-

ioned sword and sorcery."

"And kidnapping helpless maidens for a
fate worse

than death?"

She certainly had a way with a barb! But

I could barb

back, thanks to that dirt in my mind.

"Bringing a mur-

deress in to be married."

She mulled that over for a while. Finally she said, "It's

true I tried to kill you, and you have a right to be perturbed

about that. But I knew your mission could cause great

harm to Xanth, so I had to stop it. I still

have to stop it,

any way I can. If I can't kill you, maybe I
can reason

with you."

Something about that seemed backward
to me, but it

did seem better to have her talking than
to be coldly silent.

"Reason away," I said. "Barbarians
aren't very smart

about things like logic."

"If I employ methods you disapprove of, it's because

I am not a barbarian," she said. "In fact, I'm not precisely human."

I glanced at her. She was tied to the horse, probably

not in the most comfortable position, but she was a beau-

tiful figure of a woman. Barbarians have

an excellent eye

for that sort of thing. "You look pretty good to me."

"Thank you." She made a little curtsy. I don't know

how, since she was astride the horse with her feet tied,

but she did. Women can be remarkably talented in insig-

nificant little ways. "But not all that looks good is good."

"Yeah, like the nice little paths leading up to a tangle

tree," I agreed. It happened that there was a tangle tree

in the distance, and we were avoiding its too-convenient

path. Analogies are easy to come by in Xanth.

"There is something I didn't tell you about my ances-

try."

"You're not the King's daughter?"

"I am his daughter—but the Queen was not my mother.

That's why the Queen resented me so much and finally

cursed me. She hated me for what I represented and for

what I was."

"Not your mother?" I repeated blankly.

"How is that

possible?"

"You simpleton, not all offspring derives

from mar-

riage! I am a bastard."

The word appalled me, coming as it did
from so lovely

a creature. Of course I knew what it
meant, but it shocked

me to think that she should know it, let
alone describe

herself by means of it. "You—the King
—?"

"The King was seduced by an
unscrupulous temptress

who cared not a whit for him," Threnody
said. "I was the

result. My mother conceived me purely
as a challenge;

she had no interest in keeping me, only
in embarrassing

her lover. And that she did—by turning
me over to King

Gromden and proclaiming my origin."

"But—but that's inhuman!" I exclaimed.

"Naturally—considering the nature of my mother."

"No decent woman would—"

"But, you see, my mother was neither decent nor a

woman."

"But—" I skidded to a verbal halt, confused. "You're

obviously not a half-breed, like a centaur or harpy or

werewolf. You're human!"

"Half human."

"I don't understand!"

"My mother is a demoness."

A female demon! Still it did not explain everything.

"King Gromden wouldn't—not with a demoness—he's

a good man!"

Threnody smiled grimly. "So it would be nice to be-

lieve. But the fact is, human beings are sometimes naive

and often vulnerable. I love my father and know he's a

good man. Therefore I have spent some time rationalizing

this matter of my birth. It is necessary to understand that

the Queen, my foster mother, was not the most attractive

of women and was no longer in her prime, while the King

was a virile man. He had married her for practical reasons,

to help unify the diverging subcultures of Xanth. She was

from a village in the south that had felt neglected, among

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the so-called curse-fiends, who are actually human but

live apart from others. They are said to

be great actors.

When he married one of their women, it cemented their

loyalty to Castle Roogna and strengthened the throne. He

really was trying to do what was best for Xanth! But she

was barren and, in any event, not much interested in

storks."

"I know about storks," I murmured.

"Then you know that they do not choose the couples

to whom they deliver; they must wait for the couples to

summon them. They merely fill those orders that have

been properly entered. It is a peculiarity of their nature."

"Yes. And they always deliver to the woman, no matter

how hard the man works for the baby. I
don't think that's
fair."

She laughed. "Many things in life and
magic aren't fair,
barbarian! So this meant that if the King
wanted a baby,
he had to make arrangements through
some woman other
than the Queen. I think that was in his
mind when the

dusky demoness came to him. Maybe
there were other

things in his mind, too—men can be
quite superficial

about such things—but I must believe
that he really did

want me."

"Of course he did!" I exclaimed. "And
he wants you

back home now! That must be why he
agreed to this—"

"And I don't think he knew the nature of my mother.

You see, a demon can assume any form. So she became

the most beautiful woman anyone could imagine, mid-

night of hair and eye, perfect in every physical detail—"

"You favor her," I said.

"Be quiet, imbecile!" she said angrily.

"My mother was

a terrible creature! She had absolutely no conscience.

Demons are soulless; they have no human values, just

human passions. She wanted to make mischief for the

human folk, and she knew the most telling way to do that

was to compromise and humiliate the human King. So

she assumed a ravishing form and came
to him with a

story about being outcast from her
distant village and

needing help and protection, and when
she got him alone—

oh, you don't know what lying is until
you've seen a

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demon do it! She—well, she got him to
help summon the

stork, and the stork took the order for
me, and when my

mother was assured of that, she laughed

and changed into

the semblance of a Mundane monster
called a crock-o-

dile so he would know what she was
without any further

illusion, and then she became a puff of
laughing gas and

faded out. The King was mortified when
he realized he

had been with a demoness, but it was too
late."

"Poor King Gromden," I agreed. Now I remembered

that there had been a passing mention of scandal at Castle

Roogna; that reference was coming clear.

"And when the stork delivered me, she had the other

part of her terrible fun—causing everyone in Castle

Roogna to know what the King had done.

She brought

me openly to him in broad daylight,
when the King and

all the people of the castle were at
dinner, and set me

down before him, saying, 'Here is your
bastard baby, O

adulterous King! Dare you deny it?' And
the King, being

an honest man, whatever other
weaknesses he may have

had, did not deny it, perhaps in part
because he knew I

would fare ill indeed if he refused to accept me. In that

sense I was the cause of his loss of respect in Xanth. Then

my demon-mother vanished in another puff of smoke,

only her cruel laugh remaining. She had deceived the

King, ruined his reputation, and forever finished any de-

cent relation he might have had with the Queen. After

that, the people associated with the castle began drifting

away, each one finding some important business else-

where, and of course the King could not say nay. He had

been rendered impotent by the crudest of lies. When the

Queen cursed me, there were fewer than a dozen people

remaining there."

"There are only a couple now," I said.

"Only the ultimately loyal," she said
wryly. "People

resemble demons in some respects, but
they react more

slowly and make excuses for their
dereliction, while the

demons act swiftly and without apology.
I wish I could

be with my father now and provide the
support he needs.

But I can not; that curse prevents." She
shook her head

as if clearing it of distress. "So now you
see why I had

to go. I don't blame my foster mother the
Queen. My

presence was demoralizing the whole
region, simply be-

cause of my origin; I was a constant
reminder of the

King's peccadillo. The King never held

this against me,

but the others did—at the same time as
they condemned

him for that error. They magnified it
grotesquely—"

Threnody paused to choke back her
rising emotion. "I

don't think much of the average human
being."

"It's better among the barbarians," I said.
"We would

never—"

"It was getting difficult for the King to govern Xanth

effectively. The Queen had no love for the King, but she

did see the need for Xanth to be unified. She knew that

could not be while I remained at Castle Roogna, and she

knew the King would never send me away himself, so

she arranged for me to take myself away.
Her curse made

it plain to me that I was destroying
Xanth. I had been

unable to see it until she made it literal.
If I was going to

destroy Xanth as the seat of effective
government, why

not bring the castle down, too, and
complete the job? So

she was right; she did what had to be
done, and I don't

hate her for it. I had been a child; I grew up in a few

hours and I left Castle Roogna forever."

I felt the impact other story, but I remained suspicious.

"You said she was jealous of you."

"She was. I don't say she wasn't petty in some ways;

that's part of what had alienated her from
the King before

my mother stepped in. I was beautiful,
while she was not,

and the King loved me and not her; that
was grounds for

resentment, though I had not intended any
evil. She never

made any attempt to relate to me, and so
I had neither

mother nor foster mother. She shares
some of the blame.

No one's hands are entirely clean in this.
But she was

right about me, and about the need to
make me leave."

"Then why did she curse the King to
forget why you
left?"

Threnody shrugged. "I exaggerated. My
father never

understood why I left. He was absolutely

blind to any

negative thing about me. I was his
favorite and only child,

and he wanted me to inherit the throne
after him. Of

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course that was impossible for several reasons, and I al-

ways knew that, but it shows how he felt. No curse was

needed to make him forget. He simply refused, and still

refuses, to believe that my presence is bad for Castle

Roogna in any literal or figurative manner. He thinks of

me as his darling little girl."

Some darling! But I knew how fathers
could dote on

their daughters; I would, if I had the
chance. "Well, aren't

you?"

"Damn it, I'm half demon!" she flared.
"Have you any

idea what that means?"

I shrugged. "That you're a crossbreed.
That you have

some human and some demon traits.
Xanth has a lot of

crossbreeds. I happen to know of an
upcoming humanY

elven crossbreed—"

"You fool, it means I have no soul!"
There was the

anger of despair in her tone.

"I don't know much about souls," I said.

"But I thought

they came with human ancestry. Since
your father is hu-

man—"

"A human parent means a soul is
possible, not that it

is guaranteed. I suppose the chances were even for me——

but since the delivery was to the demoness, not the human

man, I lost. I didn't get one." Her voice was flat and cold.

"How do you know?" I asked, genuinely curious. I had

some concern for the son the stork would bring to Blue-

bell; would he have no soul?

"Do people with souls kill passing strangers?" she demanded.

I pondered, taken aback by the point.
"I'm human," I

said after a bit. "I'm ready to kill strangers if they attack

me. I'm a barbarian warrior; I live by my sword. It de-

pends on the circumstance. In war—"

"This isn't war! You came to me injured, and I poi-

soned you and dumped you into the Gap."

There was that. "But you said you were sorry."

"Big deal! I'm also sorry you returned to

capture me."

"But demons have no conscience," I pointed out.

"They're never sorry."

"You're wrong, ignoramus. They can be sorry—when

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a plot turns out bad. Like my killing of you. It didn't

work, so my effort was for nothing. I'm sorry you ever

set foot on this misguided mission."

"But you said you were sorry before you knew I would

recover," I persisted. "I remember hearing that, just be-

fore I died."

"I say a lot of things," she said irritably,
but she seemed

slightly mollified. "I also inherit the
demon capacity for

lying, the more cruelly the better. You
can't afford to

believe anything I say."

I found this confusing, but there had to be
some truth

in it. If a person tells you he's a truth-
teller, he may be

lying; but if he tells you he's a liar, he has to be telling

the truth, ironically. Because a truth-teller could never

call himself a liar; he could become a liar by that state-

ment. A liar, in contrast, can't lie all the time, because

that makes it too obvious; people start interpreting what

he says the opposite way, so he becomes a truth-teller in

reverse. It's confusing, but Magician Yin had helped clar-

ify this matter for me. So I had to believe that Threnody

could lie, and that therefore she spoke the truth when she

warned me to be wary of anything she said. "Maybe so,"

I agreed. "But you could still have a soul. Some human

beings are liars, like Magician Yang, and you're more

human than demon."

"No, I'm not! I can't love!"

"Now that's a lie right there! What about your father?"

You said you love him."

"I lied!" she cried without conviction.

"I don't believe you. I think you're lying now. You do

love him. Therefore you can love, and you do have a—"

"You're a fool to believe me!"

"Then why do you care what happens to the King, or

to Castle Roogna? Why don't you just come along with

me without protest, and watch the castle

crumble, and

laugh as it falls? What does any soulless one care about

the welfare of Xanth?"

She looked at me with a peculiar mixture of relief and

frustration, but did not answer my questions. I was sat-

isfied; she might be a liar, but she was more human than

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demon. Her humanity, ironically, was proved by the manner in which she opposed me.

And what of my soul? If I believed her, I could not afford to deliver her to Castle Roogna. So I had to believe

that she had lied about the curses and just didn't want to

marry Yin. I couldn't blame her for wanting to make her

own life instead of getting tied down to a family; I was

that way myself. But that was no reason for me to ab-

rogate my own mission.

I was, of course, a fool in several respects, but I didn't

know that then.

We moved on, and gradually the terrain changed. The

trees and brush thinned out, and the ground became sandy.

"You'll never get through here," Threnody said.

"Why not?"

"I know this region. This is slowsand."

"Seems ordinary to me," I said,
undaunted.

"You'll see, barbarian," she said
confidently.

The patches of sand became larger, until
finally they

linked and we had to walk through them,
rather than

remain on rock and turf. But as Pook and

I stepped on

the sand, we slowed. Our steps became measured, then

dragging; we seemed unable to move at normal speed.

"What's this?" I asked, surprised.

"I told you," Threnody said. "Slowsand."

Now I understood. "It slows us down!"

"To a crawl. We'll starve before we get through here."

Fortunately, this was only a thin barrier,
with more

hard land beyond. After a tedious trek,
Pook and I made

it out of the sand and resumed normal
velocity. Now we

stayed off the sand, however circuitous
the route had to

be. But this became difficult and finally
impossible. The

level region between the mountains and
the chasm turned

into a desert of slowsand. We had to go around it—but

there was no way through the chasm to the north, so it

had to be the slopes to the south.

We meandered that way, our progress slowed almost

as much by the deviousness of the necessary route as by

the sand itself. The last section before the slope had a

strand of sand cutting us off; Pook
hurdled it—and slowed

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in midair so that he seemed to be
floating. He wasn't; he

was merely in mid-jump. But it took
about fifteen seconds

for him to make it to the opposite bank. I jumped, too,

with the same effect, so we were both crawling through

the air. The slowsand affected creatures above it as well

as on it.

"Won't do you much good," Threnody said smugly.

"Farther along, there's quicksand."

Quicksand. Obviously that would speed us up as much

as the slowsand slowed us down. "I'll risk it," I said

gruffly.

"Suit yourself, idiot."

"Anything that happens to Pook and me happens to

you, too," I pointed out.

"Since I'd rather die than betray my
father by return-
ing, that's all right."

We got well clear of the sand by
ascending the gentle
slope of the foot of the mountain range.
But now dusk
was looming. We stopped under a
spreading chest-nut
tree whose chests were loaded with

nuts; no problem

about food here. I unbound Threnody's feet so she could

dismount. She reacted without gratitude. "How do you

expect me to eat or whatever with my hands tied?"

"Whatever?" I asked.

"I'll do it behind the tree."

Oh. Embarrassed, I untied her hands.

"But you must

give me your word you won't try to
escape."

"Sure," she said wryly, chafing her
wrists. Then she

went behind the tree, while I reached up
to harvest a

chest of nuts.

It turned out to be a fine selection: Q-nuts and P-nuts;

green pistachios; blue, red, and hazel nuts; soft, yellow

butter nuts; sandy beach nuts; even a small brown cocoa-

nut; plus a few bolts for good measure; and even some

washers. That was convenient; I used a washer to wash

my grubby hands.

After a time, I realized that Threnody
hadn't returned

from her errand behind the tree. I
hesitated to go and

look, since I never really did understand
how women

managed these things and preferred not
to inquire, so I

called, phrasing it discreetly: "Hey-

-did everything come

out all right?"

There was no answer. Suddenly nervous, I went and

looked.

Sure enough. Threnody was gone.

I had been a fool again. Well, I would
just have to track

her down. I could follow the traces
through the brush and

weeds of the slope, and if she had gone
down into the

slowsand plain, I'd be able to see her,
despite the en-

croaching darkness.

I found no traces. Perplexed, I hesitated.
Could she

be so adept at hiding that she left no
trail? Then my lin-

gering intelligence provided me a
notion; use my lingering

compass sense! I tuned it in—and the
arrow pointed up

into the tree.

I smiled. That was a neat ploy—hide,
and when I

dashed off in a fruitless search for her,
she could come

down and proceed without pursuit.
Whatever her half-

demon parentage might have cost her, it
wasn't clever-

ness.

Well, two could play at that game. I finished my meal

of nuts, then climbed the tree myself. I settled on a com-

fortable lower branch and slept.

After an hour or so, she climbed quietly down. She

tried to pass me, but of course I woke and caught her leg.

"Going somewhere, woman?" I inquired.

"Damn!" she swore, trying to yank her leg free. But I

held on, sliding my hand up for a better grip. She was my

prisoner again.

"You told me you wouldn't try to escape," I chided

her.

"I also told you I was a liar," she reminded me. "It's

my demon heritage."

"Then I'll just have to tie you again," I said regretfully.

"How do you expect me to sleep if you tie me?" she

demanded.

I pondered. "Very well. I won't bind you hand and

foot; I'll tie you to me, so you can't go without me." I

brought her to the ground and used a cord to tie her right

wrist to my left one. I made the knots too tight to untie

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readily; barbarians are good at that sort of thing. Since

she had no knife, she wouldn't be able to free herself

without alerting me.

"How do you know I won't strangle you in your sleep?"

she asked as we lay there in the dark
beneath the tree.

"I wouldn't stay dead, and if you start
wrestling with
me at night, I might forget that I'm saving
you for marriage
to Yin!" I replied.

"Barbarian!" she spat, and somehow it
didn't sound
like a compliment.

"Precisely." I thought that would shut her up. As I've

said, barbarians don't really force themselves on unwill-

ing women; that's just hype put out by the Barbarian

Publicity Department. Image is very important to our kind,

even when the reality falls short.

I hadn't shut her up, though. "If I have

to," she said

warningly, "I'll use my talent."

"Oh? What's your talent?" I asked,
interested. Of

course she had a talent; everyone did.
But some talents

were better than others. Some people
were proud of their

ability to make a dust mote bounce in the
air. Maybe hers

was better.

"Striation."

"What?"

"It derives from my heritage, lout.
Demon-striation."

"Oh." I didn't care to admit that this still
didn't make

much sense to me, so I let it be. Only

those who are not

ignorant feel free to confess their
ignorance. "Well, you

do what you want, only let me sleep."

"I will," she agreed.

I slept, and there was no jerk on the line
and no attempt

to strangle. But when I checked
automatically after an

hour or so, I discovered that she was gone. The cord

remained undisturbed, the loop that had been about her

wrist now empty. Somehow she had slipped it.

I got up immediately, activating my finder-spell. It

showed her nearby; apparently she had only freed herself

in the past few minutes. "Going

somewhere, King's
daughter?^ I inquired.

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"Oh!" she cried, furious. "Why couldn't
you stay asleep

longer?"

I brought her back to the tree. "How did you slip the

loop?" I asked. "It's too small for your hand to pass

through, small and fine as your hand is."

"I told you, oaf: striation."

"Demon-striation," I agreed, realizing she was not about

to tell me her secret. I hung onto her hand so she couldn't

flee again, regretting that the contact was for this antag-

onistic reason instead of for a positive one. It was indeed

a fine little hand; she was nicely formed in every part.

"Since the cord's no good, I'll just have to hold you di-

rectly."

"I'll kick, scratch, and bite," she warned me.

"I'll heal."

"It will hurt, though, and you won't get much sleep."

"I'll make you a deal," I said. "You don't

kick, scratch,

and bite me, and I don't let the dirt in my mind tell me

what to do with you."

"You—you waw!" she exclaimed in a cute little fury.

I guess she realized that I wasn't bluffing and that I half-

way hoped she would abort the deal.

I wrapped my arms about her as she lay beside me and

settled back for sleep. My stony left arm was hardly aware

of her, but my right arm tingled from the contact with her

soft body. She struggled a little, evidently considering the

kick-scratch-bite-dirt route, then relaxed. She laid her head

down next to mine, so that her black hair

tickled my nose,

and she slept.

As dawn crept reluctantly in, I woke—to
find my arms

empty. Threnody was gone again—and
my arms had not

been disturbed. How in Xanth had she
managed that?

I tuned in on her with the arrow. She
was threading

her way past the slowsand, going home.
I went down and

caught her again, lassoing her from the
edge of the sand

so that I could move faster than she
could. But I was

more curious than angry. "I was holding
you in my arms

that time; how did you escape?"

"You can not hold me," she said.

Evidently not! There was something very odd about

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her. But I put that from my mind for the moment. "Well,

have some nuts and we'll get moving."

She had some nuts, and we got moving.
This time I

didn't tie her, but I watched her, and she
did not try to

escape. We moved on around the
mountain slopes.

Then I spied a cloud looming from the
east. It sparkled

iridescently. I peered at it. "I don't trust

that type." Ac-

tually, barbarians don't trust anything they don't under-

stand; it's a necessary paranoia in the wilderness. That

was the main reason I didn't trust Threnody.

"It's a technicolor hailstorm," she said.
"They develop

in this region; I think it's because of interactions between

the slowsand and the quicksand,
generating fierce con-

vections. Better get under cover."

"Cover—from a hailstorm?" I asked
derisively. "We'll

ignore it."

"Suit yourself, moron."

I didn't like either the storm or her

attitude, but there

wasn't much to do but move on. We did
so, and the storm

loomed massively, seeming almost solid
in the sky,

spreading out until it blotted out much of
the welkin. I

heard a low, throbbing, sad melody; I
looked, and dis-

covered it was Threnody, singing. "What
are you doing?"

I demanded.

"I'm singing the dirge of our demise," she replied. "I'm

good at that sort of thing; that's how I got my name. But

I do better when I have my lute."

She was still angry about not being permitted to bring

her musical instrument. Actually, it would have hampered

her attempts to escape—which meant

that I might have

been better off to let her bring it. But I
had a more im-

mediate concern. "Demise? From a mere
hailstorm?" I

asked incredulously.

"Well, maybe you'll recover after it
passes, since you

can return from death. The rest of us
won't."

I didn't like the sound of this, and I saw
Pook's ears

perking up with alarm. He was a ghost
horse, but if the

living aspect of him died, he would be
just a ghost. And

if Threnody died, my mission would be
finished; I was

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sure it would not count if I delivered a

dead body to Castle

Roogna.

"Okay, I'll seek cover." I cast about and saw a small

stand of timber trees upslope. We moved to them. I used

my sword to chop the timbers and used the timbers to

construct a pointed edifice, then bound it tightly at the

top with cord and wedged its base into the ground below.

I think this type of construction is called a tee-warn; it's

useful in an emergency. I wrapped bark about it, tying it

in place. It was a crude structure, but sturdy. We crowded

into it, the three of us, just as the first hailstones struck.

"You're pretty good at this," Threnody remarked in-

differently.

"It's a barbarian skill," I said, foolishly flattered.

"Live and learn! I didn't know barbarians were good

at anything except kidnapping helpless damsels."

"That, too," I agreed.

A hailstone struck the shelter with a
crash like that of

solid rock. I jumped. I peered out—and
another stone

just missed my head, thunking into the
ground so hard it

made a formidable dent. It was green
and pitted.

I reached out and grabbed it before it

rolled away.

"Hey—this is a real stone!" I cried.

"What did you expect?" she asked.

"Colored ice?"

"Well, yes. Little light balls of ice."

"Maybe elsewhere. Here it hails real stones."

So it did. Another struck the shelter and rolled away.

I could see them falling all around, red and blue and or-

ange and brown. They were pretty—but any one of them

would have brained a person or animal. Maybe that was

why we had encountered no large animals in this region;

only the small ones could hide from this

sort of storm.

Threnody had been right to urge shelter.

We could not travel while the storm
raged, so we waited,

huddled together. Threnody was astride
Pook, and I be-

side, my torso against her left leg. She
resumed her song

of lamentation. Pook's ears were laid
back; he didn't like

either her or the song. But I thought both

were rather

pretty. That leg certainly was! I wished
again that things

were more positive between us.

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The storm raged for an hour. I snoozed
on my feet,

leaning against the leg. When the storm
finally abated, I

woke, finding myself leaning against Pook's side. I looked

about. Threnody was gone again. "Hey —where is she?"

I asked.

Pook had been snoozing too. He woke with a start.

He sniffed the air, but was as baffled as I. It was amazing

how she could depart without alerting us.

I used the arrow again. It was slowly fading as time

passed, but was enough to do the job. It pointed west.

Threnody was headed for home again.

We emerged from the shelter, which was now sadly

battered by the stones, and hurried west around the slope.

Soon we caught up to her. She hadn't

gotten very far.

She was moving very slowly, though she
wasn't in the

slowsand.

I charged up and caught her by the arm—
and my hand

passed through it. "You're a ghost!" I
exclaimed, ap-

palled. "You went out too soon and got
clonked by a

hailstone and now you're dead!"

"No, I'm just diffuse, lout," she said faintly.

I passed my hand through her body. Sure enough, there

was some resistance, like that of thin water or thick fog.

She was more substantial than a ghost, though not by

much.

"You're pretty fresh, barbarian!" she informed me as

my hand emerged from her chest.

I jerked my fingers back guiltily. "What happened to

you?"

"It's my talent," she explained.

"Striation. I'd have

been long gone, if I hadn't encountered a headwind. It's

hard to fight a wind in this state."

I saw that it was so. A gust of wind
passed and almost

blew her off her feet. She hardly
weighed anything at all.

"You can just thin out?"

"I told you I have demon parentage.
Demons can turn
to smoke and change size and shape."

"But if you can do that, why did you ever let me tie you?"

"I can't do it fast," she said bitterly. "It takes an hour

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just to change one aspect—and you
never gave me more
than an hour to myself."

I almost felt guilty. "The loop of rope!" I exclaimed.

"You diffused out of it!"

"Of course." She was slowly becoming more solid.

"And I diffused enough so that the hailstones couldn't

hurt me. But the storm stopped too soon, so you weren't

confined, and this stupid headwind—"

I had started to wonder how I could hold her when she

was smoky-diffuse, but now I realized that all it would

take was a fan to blow her anywhere I wanted her to go.

Her escape had been slow because of the air resistance,

which was much more formidable for her than for those

of us in the solid state.

"You say this is just one aspect? You can change other

ways too?"

"Oh, you might as well know it all," she said with angry

resignation. "You seem to have the blundering luck of

ignorance. Demons can change form instantly; that's why

my mother was able to fool King

Gromden, who would

never have touched her if he had known.

Her natural

appearance was horrendous, but she
emulated the human

form so well that nobody could tell the
difference. But

I'm only half demon, so I can't operate as
well. I can only

do one aspect at a time. If I want to be
big or small, I

have to take an hour for that. But then I'm
either diffuse

or concentrated—a smoky giant or a super-solid midget—

until I change my density to match. That takes another

hour. Because my mass hasn't changed, only my size.

And if I want to be in the likeness of a normal mouse, it

takes a third hour to get the shape right. If only you'd let

me be for three hours!"

I was amazed. This creature was more
of a handful

than I had known. She might have
changed into a dragon

and devoured me—had I given her time.

"I can't see why Yin would want to
marry you," I said.

"Of course he doesn't want to marry
me!" she cried.

"He's only doing it to provide continuity

of a sort, so the

human beings of Xanth will accept him
readily as King

and not hold it against him that he's
filling Gromden's

shoes. It's the same for Yang. They have
only politics in

mind. I don't want to marry either of
them."

"But if your arrival was such a scandal,

the people

wouldn't want you to marry the new King," I objected.

"The common folk don't know my origin. It was strictly

a palace scandal. No one tells the common folk anything."

I sighed. "I'm sorry about having to bring you in,

Threnody. I really am. But a barbarian

always keeps his

word. Maybe you can escape, after I turn you in."

"Escape from a Magician?" she demanded bitterly. "I

was able to avoid them in the forest; I threatened to throw

myself into the Gap Chasm if either one of them came

near. That's why I set up a chute right in my house. But

I can't do that at Castle Roogna." I saw her vaporous

tears as she spoke. "I'd rather die than marry one of

them—but I won't have any choice, thanks to you, you

unfeeling wretch."

I nodded glumly. I was a wretch, but I was not un-

feeling. I felt awful.

We returned to the shelter, and within an hour Thren-

ody was solid again. There was not enough time left in

the day to warrant more travel, so we remained where

we were. The nearby trees had been badly battered by

the hailstones, but we were able to forage for fruits that

had been knocked to the ground.

Now how was I to keep Threnody captive during the

night? Her demon-striation talent meant I could not hold

her physically.

Not physically—but how about emotionally? A small

ruse might simplify things considerably. It was certainly

worth a try.

I went out at dusk, circling our camp as if looking for

something. I put my hand on my sword.

"I wish I had my

bow," I muttered nervously.

"What's the matter?" Threnody called.

"You plan to

put an arrow through me next time I escape?"

"Oh, I wouldn't want to worry you," I

said, shading

my eyes with my stone hand and peering
into the gloom.

"They probably won't attack in the night
anyway."

"What won't attack?" she demanded.

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"The traces aren't really fresh," I said.

"Couple days

old, at least, so they're probably gone.

Do you smell

anything fresher, Pook?"

Pook sniffed the air, then shook his head

no. He was

smart enough to play along.

"What are gone?" Threnody asked,

annoyed by the

mystery. I knew the feeling!

"The harpies, of course," I said.

"There are no harpies in these parts!"

"That's what I said. They seem to be
confined to the

cliffsides. This flock was probably just
passing through,

and won't be back."

She was silent. We settled down for the night. "You

take the shelter," I said. "I'll sleep outside."

"Aren't you going to hold me?"

"It doesn't do any good," I pointed out. "You can slip

any tie, any grasp. I guess you could have done it anytime

when you were riding, but you didn't want me to see."

"True, barbarian. My talent's more effective when it's

secret." She considered. "Still, you can hold me if you

want to. It might give you earlier warning."

"No, I think I'd better remain outside," I said, glancing

nervously about as if aware of a harpy.
Then I put my

right hand on the hilt of my sword and
lay down.

"Suppose the harpies come, and you're
asleep?" she
asked.

"There are no harpies in these parts," I
reminded her.

But I unsheathed my sword.

She grimaced, then lay down in the shelter. Pook grazed

on the slope. I slept; barbarians can nod off instantly and

wake instantly, in the manner of other animals.

There was a rustle in the night, as of some winged

nocturnal predator. I woke just long enough to identify it

as a genuine bird, harmless to us, and
slept again. But in

a moment I felt a body beside me.

"You'd better hold

onto me," Threnody murmured. "I might
try something

foolish."

Uh-huh. It seemed my ploy was working.
Nobody

sleeps well when harpies are about.

"Suit yourself, demon-

spawn."

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She nudged closer, warm and soft. "I'm truly sorry I

killed you, Jordan."

Now she was calling me by my name. "You're also a

liar."

She struck at me. "Damn you!"

A point for me. But her body was
delectable, touching

mine, and I wished for the umpteenth
time that things

were otherwise.

"This is a lie, too," she said after a

moment. Her head

came over mine, and she kissed me on
the mouth, firmly

and lingeringly.

The irony was, I knew it was a lie.

Threnody cared

nothing for me alive. She just wanted to
lull me into com-

placency so she could escape. I'm pretty
naive about

women, but there are limits to naivete,

and I do learn

quickly enough from experience. Yet a part of me wanted

to believe that a lovely creature like this, a King's daugh-

ter, demon or not, could really care for me.

"I guess I know how it was with King Gromden," I

muttered when she released my lips.

She stiffened, then laughed ruefully. "I swore I'd never

do to a man what my mother did to my father. I guess I

lied about that, too." Then she put her face down against

my shoulder, and it became wet there.

Could a soulless creature cry? I wondered. Probably

could, I decided, but never would. Except to deceive.

Still... "You okay?" I asked.

"Oh, I am a cursed creature!" she sobbed.

Literally true. I knew myself for a fool, but I couldn't

help it. Sometimes a man just has to be a fool, if he's a

man. I put my arms about her and held her close to me,

not to prevent her from escaping, but

because it was necessary to do.

She cried for a while, and then she slept, and after a while I did, too.

One other thing bothered me, though. I woke, thinking of it, and finally I murmured to the night sky: "There

really aren't any harpies here."

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"I know it," Threnody murmured back. I
had thought

she was asleep.

But in the morning she was still there.
This night she

had not tried to escape.

Chapter 11. Sword and Stone

We followed the slope as it curved around to

the south and, when we had left the slowsand region be-

hind, we returned to the level land. Normal animal life

returned; I had to dispatch a griffin and a river monster

that menaced us, but that was routine. In

another day we

should be at Castle Roogna.

"You know I don't want to go there,"

Threnody re-

minded me, her eyes very big and dark.

"I know."

"You know Castle Roogna will fall."

"I don't know. You could be lying."

"I could get very friendly, if you cared to delay the

"journey a while. It wouldn't seem like a lie to you at all."

"I know.":

"I could even get to like you for real, if ____"

"I don't know. You'll say anything to get your way."

"Let me show you how friendly I can be when I try."

"I'd be a fool." Of course I was a fool,
for I was sorely

tempted. She might be a completely
selfish, lying demon-

creature, but she was beautiful, and
barbarians appreciate

physical beauty more than they do mental
beauty. So I

fended off her advances, not because I
feared her body,

but because I feared what her body
could do to my mind.

But my resolve was weakening.

"I can still change form and escape you," she said.

"But without my arm and sword to protect you, you

would be vulnerable to the monsters of Xanth," I pointed

out. "That's why you are no longer trying to flee. There

may be no harpies here, but there are

other creatures."

What little remained of the smart-spell
had enabled me

to work it out. "When you change form,
you may look

like some other creature, but you aren't.
You can assume

the form of a bird, but you can't fly—not
unless you

become so diffuse as to be as light as the
air, and then

the wind will blow you away. It takes a
lifetime to learn

to fly properly."

She shrugged, not denying it. "Actually, I can do some

of the things the animals I emulate do, but it is true that

flying is a very specialized discipline, and certainly I would

not be good at it; I'd probably blunder into the nearest

tree and be easy prey for any winged predator."

"And you probably haven't practiced it much, because

of the danger. You need skill as well as form. So your

talent is limited at the moment."

"When you threatened me with the harpies, I realized

that was true. There is always something in Xanth to prey

on the unwary or unprotected. You're a

primitive man;

you have muscle and a sword and you like to fight. You

can handle strange territory and slay monsters inciden-

tally. But once you got me more than a day's journey

from my home—" She spread her hands. "I may have a

heart of stone, but the monsters don't care about that.

They'll eat my flesh in a moment—and I
can't recover

the way you can."

"So I'm the sword and you're the stone,"
I said, con-

scious of the irony, since part of me
really was stone now.

"Yes. If I had your body, I could go right
home."

"You can assume my likeness," I said.

"I suppose I could," she agreed, tilting her head in

temporary reflection. "But I wouldn't have your skill with

the swordy or the power of your masculine muscles, or

your ability to heal so fast when wounded. So that's no

good."

"If I had your body, I'd be a lovely creature," I said.

"I'm not beautiful in my soul—if I have one at all."

I had no answer to that. Threnody was the first pretty

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woman I had known who was
demonstrably ugly in her

origin and nature—literally demon-
strably—and I still

had difficulty reconciling that
combination. I kept wanting

to believe she was as lovely inside as
out and that her

evident intelligence translated to good
personality. Some-

times I almost succeeded. Certainly she
was not all evil,

even though she was far from all good.

This just isn't the

kind of problem a barbarian is fit to
cope with. Life is

simpler when the alternatives are flat
good or flat evil,

clearly labeled. And correctly labeled!

At noon we came to a pleasant grove of
ances-trees.

Each had a solid base that soon split into
two major

branches, and these split into four, and
thence to eight,

until at the fringe there were so many
little branches that

the eye lost track. The bark was
corrugated and thus

resembled printed words; sometimes I
wished I could

read, so that I could contemplate my own
family tree.

"I can read," Threnody said. "It's a skill

required of

royal children. But I don't care to be reminded of my

demon branches."

We went on and came to a pattern of
artis-trees, ep^

a many-splendored thing, with ornate
multicolored leaves

and sculptured lines. We paused, awed
by the sheer mag-

nificance of this display.

One tree was dead—but its skeletal form was impres-

sive, each branch perfectly contoured, the whole a marvel

of symmetry. There was a hole in the base of its trunk,

and even this was beautifully arched, so that it resembled

a doorway to some sublime realm.

We walked toward it—and suddenly at
my feet a small

black sword flashed. Quickly it
expanded to full-sword

size, a thing of glistening, dark iron,
suspending itself

menacingly before me. I had heedlessly
blundered into

another of Yang's evil spells! When
would I learn to watch

out more carefully for them?

My own sword was in my hand, for
barbarian reflexes

are necessarily swift. "Get clear of me!"
I cried to Pook

and Threnody. "This thing's dangerous!"

Indeed it was! The black sword slashed
viciously at

me, and it was all I could do to parry the
blade in time.

As it was, the power of its blow drove
me back and shook

my arm. Nothing was wielding that
sword, but it felt as

if there were an invisible giant behind it.

I had fended off its cut, but the black
weapon recovered

with horrible quickness and struck at me
from the other

side. I parried again, and again felt the

shock of the col-

lision. Sparks flew from the place where the two blades

met, and mine was nicked. Of course, it was already bat-

tered and slightly bent from its fall into the—well, I didn't

remember quite where, but it had fallen somewhere. Yet

a blade that could so casually nick this one—

The evil sword whirled about in the air,
danced over

my head, and slashed at me from behind.
I threw myself

aside, avoiding it, but the moment it
missed, it reoriented

and came at me again. I fell to the
ground, barely getting

my blade around to block the thing.
Never before had I

been subjected to as savage an attack by
a sword as this!

I prided myself on my expertise with the sword; it was

one of those things barbarians specialized in. My sword

was the only reason I had no real fear of tangle trees or

griffins—albeit a healthy respect for them; I could strike

with it before such monsters could get me. Dragons were

more difficult, because of their steam or fire and their

scale armor, but of course dragons were the top of the

predatory chain. So my sword was my strength. How-

ever, this was no beak or tentacle I faced; it was another

sword. It struck and struck again, and a third time in as

many seconds. Then, realizing it could not get me with a

frontal or rear attack, it spun to the side and lunged.

I scrambled halfway to my feet, but had to dive clear

again, rolling on the ground. The black sword sliced at

my feet, missing no opportunity. I jerked them clear, and

it struck the ground so hard where they had been it seemed

the very land would cleave asunder. I fought my way

back to my feet in time to parry the next

strike.

I normally have plenty of muscle, speed, and coordi-

nation. I had died three to five times recently, but the

past three days had enabled me to recover almost com-

pletely, except for my stone extremities. (Say—I should

have let the sword strike my feet! How could it hurt them?)

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So I fought very well—but already I
knew I was over-

matched. This magic sword had a
ferocity beyond any-

thing I had encountered before and
showed no sign of

tiring. One thing I had to say for
Magician Yang: his spells

were not anemic ones! I had to get away
from this thing!

I tried, but it pursued me relentlessly. It
wanted my

blood, all my blood, and nothing but my
blood. It whistled

at my left side before I could get my own
blade around;

I lifted my left arm and it took the cut.

There was a clang, and the black sword bounced back,

shaken. Of course—my left arm, too, remained stone.

For the first time, I had occasion to bless the failure of

my talent to tackle this detail; it was evident that the evil

blade could not slice stone. One hears stories about swords

that can do this, but I think this is merely more hype;

stone is awfully tough stuff. This was pure barbarian luck:

the lingering trace of the last evil spell was helping me

fight this one.

The black sword shook itself as if confused, then

charged back to the fray. It swept at my neck with a

ferocity that threatened not only to sever my head from

my body but send it flying to the moon. That would have

been awkward for me; it is no easy thing to grow a whole

new head. I blocked the swipe, barely. Then the sword

dropped down again to my feet, and this time I didn't

move them, so it clanged again against the stone.

My luck was holding—but I really needed the magic

shield, because the black sword was not letting up and

was getting more imaginative about spots to attack. I was

tiring from this frenetic activity, and that sword wasn't.

Sooner or later it would find or force an

opening and get
me in a vital spot.

"The spell!" I cried to Threnody. "Get the spell!"

"What spell?" she asked.

Oops—she didn't know about that complication, and
might not care to help me if she did.

After all, if I died,

she was free to go home, and she could
be long on the

way before I recovered. On the other
hand, she could not

safely travel alone, so she might have to
help me. What

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choice did I have? I ducked as the black
sword whistled

over my head. "Any spell! Pook has them!"

Threnody hesitated. I knew she was considering

whether it was better to help me or let the black sword

take me out. But Pook snorted warningly at her, and she

decided to help. She went to him and opened the bag of

spells he carried.

Meanwhile, the enemy blade pressed me harder than

ever. It wove a perplexing pattern in the air and dazzled

my eyes, so that it was increasingly more difficult to parry

its sudden lunges. It looped around me, forcing me to turn

constantly to protect my flank and rear. I was getting

dizzy—and that, too, could be

disastrous. I had to have

some kind of cover for my back, or I
would shortly be

wiped out!

I spied the dead artis-tree, with its
architecturally shaped

hole in the trunk. That would do! I
fended off the sword

and retreated toward the tree. Soon I
managed to wedge

my back against it and nudge into the

hole. The space

was just my height, so was very convenient. The black

sword could no longer attack me from behind.

The thing was furious. It chopped at the trunk of the

tree, but the deadwood was hard as well as beautiful, and

only small chips flew. This protection would last me for

a good long time. I was careful not to back all the way

into the hole, for that would restrict my motions and work

to my disadvantage. I used the tree just enough to max-

imize my efficiency. Now I was holding my own, resting

as the enemy sword wasted its energy on the wood.

All this had taken very little time, the

seconds seeming

like minutes, while Threnody was fetching the spell. It's

hard to describe two separate actions at once, so I'm

doing it one at a time, but they were happening together.

Now Threnody drew out one of the white objects Magi-

cian Yin had given me. "Is this the right one?" she called.

"It's a bit of vine with an eyeball tied in. Gruesome thing!"

The eye-queue spell—which had
already been ex-

pended. So I was sure this one stood for
some other

spell—maybe the magic shield I needed.
"It will do!" I

called back. "Throw it here!" And
another spark flew as

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blade met blade. It was a good thing my own sword was

a sturdy one, albeit battered; now it had many nicks to

go with its dents.

She came toward me, then threw the spell, in the under-

handed female way. Her aim was good, however; the spell

struck the tree and dropped directly before me. The black

sword, sensing danger, sliced at the spell. "Invoke!" I

cried.

I saw it glow, just before the black sword struck it.

Then the strangest thing happened.

My consciousness seemed to leave my
body and fly

ghostlike through the air. Had I been
abruptly slain by an

unseen strike of the evil blade? Was my
soul now flying

to wherever it was fated to go? But this
had never hap-

pened before when I died!

Then my awareness approached
Threnody as she stood

between me and Pook, prettily
concerned. Suddenly it

dived into her body and settled there.

I heard a hoarse scream. I saw myself
drop my sword

and hunch back into the dead tree.

Immediately the enemy

sword lunged, running its blade through
my unprotected

heart. My blood spouted from my chest
as I fell forward,

dead.

But the black sword was not finished. It
lifted itself

high, then struck down on my exposed
neck, cutting off

my head. The head rolled a few paces
away and came to

rest in a hollow, staring up with a
slightly bemused expres-

sion.

Still the evil sword did not desist. It
hacked at my right

arm, cutting it off, then started on my left,
up at the

shoulder where it remained flesh. The
thing meant to dis-

member me entirely!

I ran toward it, unable to watch this
destruction of my

body without acting.

Then I paused. How could I run toward it when I was

already dead and decapitated?

I realized that, though my body was dead, my con-

sciousness was not. It was now in Threnody's body. And

her consciousness—must be in mine. Presently uncon-

scious. For I had activated the spell of exchange. Well,

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of exchange-back; the one intended to
counter Yang's

exchange spell. Since we hadn't been
exchanged, we

couldn't be un-exchanged; the un-
exchange constituted

an exchange in itself. I had brought upon
myself the very

mischief I had hoped to avoid!

When we exchanged identities,
Threnody had found

herself in my male body, fighting the
deadly sword—and

she hadn't known how to defend herself.
As with the

notion of assuming the form of a bird and
trying to fly

without practice, she was unable to fight
like a man simply

because she had a man's body.

Womanlike, she had

screamed and cowered. Thus she had
been instantly vul-

nerable, and the enemy weapon had
seized its advantage

and gotten her. It didn't realize it had
killed the wrong

person; how could it know?

Theoretically, I had a minute to reverse
the spell before

it took full hold. But how? Only by

finding the black

exchange spell could I do that—and then
I would merely

exchange myself into a dead and
dismembered body! Also,

that minute had already passed, as if
time meant anything

now. What a picklement this was!

When would that terrible enemy sword
stop? It seemed

determined to mince my entire body. I

might have the

use of another body now, but I still
couldn't stand idly

by and let it happen! Since my talent had
been strained

by overuse recently, I wasn't sure how
much more it

could take.

Or had my healing talent flown with my
consciousness

to Threnody's body? If that were so, then

my body—and

Threnody's consciousness—was dead,
and I was stuck

forever in her body. Would Yin be after
me to marry him?

Thinking of it that way, I felt greater
sympathy for

Threnody's resistance to the idea of
being taken to Castle

Roogna for marriage.

No, I had to assume that our talents remained with our

bodies, so that it was possible for my body to revive and

take me back. I had to stop that sword from doing more

damage!

Well, maybe I could bluff it. I resumed my run to it,

leaned down, and grabbed the hilt. The sword paused in

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surprise. "Well done, excellent sword!"
I cried in Thren-

ody's voice. "You have acted
courageously and saved me

from a fate worse than death! Now you
can rest."

The sword hesitated, then decided to
accept this. I

smiled winningly at it, knowing the
power of a lovely

female expression over masculine
things. Threnody her-

self had used it on me, and I had been
hard put to it to

resist.

But I wasn't sure how long I could fool
this dread

instrument. If and when it caught on to
my real identity,

it would attack this body and dismember
it, too, and then

I would be truly finished. I had to put the
evil weapon

out of commission before it did catch on.
But how?

By using Threnody's talent, of course!
When she went

diffuse, so did her clothing; otherwise
she would have

been naked when I caught her, and I was

sure I would

have remembered a thing like that. She
had been clothed

in her gray dress, which I now wore,
which meant that

things closely associated with her shared
the effect. So I

could go diffuse, and do the same to the
sword I held,

and—

And when I let it go, it might return to its

original state

and come after me with a deadly gleam
on its surface.

Better not to risk that. Going far away
from it was not

the answer, either; it could fly, and the
other spells had

shown dismaying longevity. It would
catch me in time.

Well, what else could I do with it?
Whatever it was, I

didn't want to wait long—because until I nullified the

sword, I couldn't do anything for my dead body. It both-

ered me, seeing that severed head staring up. Suppose a

predatory animal came to gobble it down?

Ha—my elevated intelligence remained; in fact, it

seemed a little enhanced, because there

was no dirt in

Threnody's brain to mess it up. Or was I using her brain?

I surely wasn't using my own! Whatever, my thought was

this: diffuse the sword, then put it into something that

would hold it in place when it solidified.

Of course, first I had to see if Threnody's talent would

work for me. I had never had a talent like hers before and

I wasn't sure how to invoke it. Should I just will myself

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thin, or smoky, or what? Was there some key phrase to

utter? Well, my own talent of healing didn't need any

special attention; it merely operated at

need. Maybe this

did, too. So I would concentrate on
being smoky, and see

what happened.

"Let's take a nice little walk," I said to
the black sword,

still holding it in my delicate hand. It
was surely too heavy

for this slender arm to support for long,
but it was self-

sustaining and felt quite light. Maybe that

was another

masculine trait. I had to admit it was a handsome weapon,

and there were no nicks in its blade. It was therefore

superior to mine. But it was not mine, and I couldn't trust

it. Especially not when my own body revived.

I wondered where this instrument had come from orig-

inally; surely Magician Yang had not forged it himself.

He must have obtained the sword, then enchanted it. The

same would be true of his other spells, and those of Yin.

It was remarkable that the twin brothers had such similar

talents; I had heard of twins before who had quite dissim-

ilar talents.

I turned—and there was Pook. His ears were flat back,

his teeth bared, his nostrils dilated, and his eyes were

rimmed by white. His whole body was tense, and his

chains rattled warningly. This was one hyper-nervous

horse!

I realized what was wrong. He thought I was Threnody

and that I had now armed myself with the terrible evil

•sword! "Pook!" I cried. "Let me explain!"

But then I realized that the sword was listening too. If

I told Pook who I was, and convinced him, the sword

would also know, and that would be disaster. Threnody's

slender arms did not have the strength to

hold this thing

if it got violent. Maybe my own arms
would not have been

strong enough. It was one wicked
weapon!

How could I let Pook know without
giving myself away

to the dread sword? Fortunately, the
residual eye-queue

spell enabled me to think of a way. Or
maybe it was

Threnody's brain, which was a good one.

"Stand aside, animal," I said to him.

"This fine sword

will strike down any creature who seeks to convey me to

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Castle Roogna. It is quiescent now only because I am

free. You saw what it did to that ilk." I glanced back at my horrendously hacked body.

Pook's ears went even flatter back. In a moment he

would attack me, overcome by grief and rage. He was an

animal, but he was loyal, and I was indeed proud to have

him as my friend.

"Whom do you suppose you are facing, animal?" I

demanded, looking him directly in a dilated eye. I held

the black sword in my right hand, near my body; slowly

I winked my left eye, which was out of sight of the sword.

The ghost horse blinked, startled, but his menace did

not abate. He knew what a liar Threnody

was.

"Remember the nature of the spells you carry," I said.

I had described them to him in the course of our journey

to Threnody's house, since they might affect his welfare

as well as mine. "Remember which have been invoked

and which have not." That was as close as I dared hint,

for the sword might know about the other spells, too, and

I didn't know how smart it was. I dared not tell it too

much.

Still Pook did not react; the hint had not been enough.

I had mentioned the various types of spells to him, but

maybe he had forgotten the exchange spell. Indeed, who

would have believed how it had acted on this occasion?

"Remember your past experiences," I continued. "How

you were herded into the firewall by this dead ilk behind

me, who only wanted a free ride. How he cruelly rode

you into the territory of the goblins and the lair of the

callicantzari." Again I winked, and again

Pook blinked.

Threnody had not been with us then, and
I had not told

her; Pook had been with us and would
have known if I

had gone into that with her. But now he
was mystified,

not certain.

"And the elves," I said. "Remember how
he dallied

three days with Bluebell, deserting you!

What do you owe

him? And think of the stork, the dragons,
and the baby

ogre; that barbarian made you wander
allover Xanth, and

for what?" I fixed his eye again. "What
was there ever

between you and this man? Whatever it
was, let it remain

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unchanged." I paused, knowing he knew the answer—

friendship.

A third time I winked, covertly. "Whom do you sup-

pose you are facing, friend?"

Slowly Pook's ears relaxed, and the white circles around

his eyes disappeared. Now at last he had caught on. He

would go along with what I planned, as he had done before.

"I have an errand elsewhere," I said briskly. I glanced

back at my body. "You know what to do with this corpse,

to whom you owe nothing. Now stand aside."

Pook moved aside. I walked on by him,

the sword

extended before me. I passed on through
the grove of

artis-trees, admiring each. Barbarians
don't have much

culture, but maybe Threnody's royal
tastes were rubbing

off on me, for each tree seemed to be a
marvel of indi-

vidual expression and form. No two
were alike in color

or structure or size, but each was a
masterpiece of its

type. Xanth could use more artis-trees!

While I walked, I concentrated on becoming less dense.

It didn't seem to be working, but since it was my only

hope, I had to keep trying. A shift of form or size or

density took an hour, she had said, so I would try for an

hour—or whatever it took.

And as I walked, concentrated, and hoped, I was aware

of the nature of this body. It differed from mine. The

proportions were funny; the legs seemed sort of short and

fat in the thigh; the arms were short and so low on muscle

as to seem like pipestems. The center of weight was lower,

and the balance was strange, seeming

bottom-heavy. With

my free left hand I felt about, verifying that there was an

unseemly volume of posterior, and the chest—it seemed

unnatural, having all that flesh on my chest. It bounced

when I walked too fast. In fact, I had extra flesh distrib-

uted all over; I felt ungainly.

There were other problems. My black

hair flopped about

my shoulders and tended to fall forward
to obscure my

vision if I didn't keep my chin up. There
was something

about the way I walked; my hipbones
were set too far

out, or something, so that my whole
pelvis gyrated awk-

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wardly when I took full-sized steps. The only way I could

control it was to confine myself to mincing little steps that

slowed forward progress.

Ah, well, doubtless it was worthwhile to have the op-

portunity to appreciate first-hand the liabilities of the fe-

male form. No wonder women tended to be jealous of

men!

In the course of half an hour, to my immense relief, I

verified that Threnody's talent was working; I was defi-

nitely lighter, and the resistance of the air seemed greater.

Now I needed to find a suitable place to

stash the sword.

In a tree? No, it might cut its way free. In a deep hole?

No, someone might dig it out too soon. It had to be per-

manently bound.

Then I spied a sitting boulder at the edge of the artis-

tree community. The rock was about half as tall as a man,

and massive; it seemed to be solid marble.

I continued to walk until the transformation was com-

plete, and the sword and I were as diffuse as fog, or more

so, I kicked at a tree trunk, and my small foot passed

through it with hardly perceptible resistance. I was ready!

I marched up to the rock, lifted the sword in both

hands, shifted my grip so that it pointed straight down,

and plunged it into the boulder. It sank in to the hilt. I

removed my hands, stood back, and contemplated it with

satisfaction. "Stay there, dread blade!" I said.

I shouldn't have said that. The sword

heard me and

evidently realized that something was amiss. It began to

lift itself out of the boulder.

Quickly I grabbed the hilt and shoved the sword back.

"Relax, relax!" I cried. "You have done so well, honored

blade; now you must rest. You can't be a gay blade all

the time." I batted my lovely eyelids at

it.

The sword relaxed. But I didn't dare risk
letting it go

again, for if it pulled out of the boulder
and flew away, I

would never catch it. So I held on,
soothing it with my

gentle feminine touch—that, too, I had
learned about

when Threnody kissed me and held me
the night before,

despite the lie that touch implied—
keeping it in place

while we slowly solidified.

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But it had some suspicion and started to
wiggle; I was

afraid of its brute force, so I pacified it
by singing to it.

My voice was lovely and sad; I didn't
know the proper

tune or words, so I just sang la-la-la
with enormous feel-

ing, and as long as I did that, the weapon
was quiescent.

No wonder women practiced subversive
wiles on men;

what else was effective?

I stood and sang for the full hour it took
to restore

body and sword to full solidity. Then at

last I let go of

the weapon—and it was embedded
firmly in the boulder.

Good enough! That blade would bother
me no more.

I left the sword in the stone behind,
retreating cau-

tiously, watching to be quite certain that
dread weapon

did not abruptly free itself and resume
its mischief. It

remained in place. I wondered whether
someday, in some

other land, that blade on the boulder
would turn up in

some significant spot, and someone
would learn how to—

no, ridiculous! What use was a sword in
a stone? No one

in Xanth would fool around with
anything like that.

I started back toward the site of my

body's de-

mise ... and a shadow descended. Oops
—that looked very

much like a—in fact, it was a—

I reached for my sword, and of course
my delicate

hand slapped only soft flesh. The sword
I had carried was

in the stone; my own blade was with my
body. I was

unarmed.

The creature glided to a landing before me. It was a

fair-sized griffin, a female, for her color was shoe-polish

brown. In virtually every species of living creature, it is

the male who is the creature of splendors with the bright-

est colors, the biggest muscles, the best proportions. There

is one exception—the human species;

there the female

seems to have most of the splendors. I
have never been

certain what went wrong. Maybe some
long-ago curse

was put on man and on man-related
creatures. Also, the

females of other species are good
hunters and fighters,

while those of ours are not. In this more-
decorative-than-

functional body, I was suddenly aware
of my extreme

vulnerability. This griffiness was well
equipped with beak
and claws, while I—

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It was too late to hide; the griffiness had
landed because

she had spied easy prey. I could not
fight, I had neither

sword nor muscle to wield it. I could not

change form;

that took too long. More than ever now, I appreciated

the position of human women. No wonder Threnody had

not wanted to travel home alone; she would have been

dead in hours. Predators that never showed their mugs

to me, knowing that armed barbarian warriors were not

to be trifled with, would freely stalk an unarmed woman.

What was I to do?

Well, Threnody had tried to use guile on me, and I had

used it on the black sword. Now that I was in her position,

it seemed like a natural course. I would have to trick this

predator somehow. What were griffins concerned about?

Aha! They were notoriously clean creatures, the op-

posite of harpies. Griffins spent hours preening their

feathers and stroking their fur and cleaning their claws.

They never fed on carrion, but always killed fresh. They

were like the rocs in that respect. No griffin or roc ever

died from food poisoning. They were

good enough hunters

so that they could afford to be choosy.

I huffed myself up and issued a feeling groan. The

advancing griffiness paused, cocking her bird-head. She

had been approaching me slowly, knowing I could not

escape; griffins were more efficient than dragons and never

scrambled when they did not have to.

When a dragon

made a kill, it was apt to be messy, with
blood and gobbets

of flesh strewn across the landscape;
when a griffin did

it, there was hardly even a scream. She
was hesitating,

not from any nervousness, but to make
quite sure there

was nothing here that might soil her
feathers.

"Oooh, it's so horrible!" I lamented. "If only I'd known

those berries were contaminated!"

Griffins don't have visible ears;
nevertheless, her head

perked up. Contamination?

"Now I've got the Green-Spotted Gut
Rot in my giz-

zard and I'm filling up with purple pus.
Please slay me

before I rupture!" I staggered directly toward her.

The griffiness backed off—but not too far. She had a

keen eye for flesh, and mine did not look spoiled. In fact,

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I was about as delectable a sample of female anatomy as

could be found in Xanth, surely tasty in every portion.

Had I had more time to prepare, I could have smeared

green juiceberries on my tender skin, staining it impres-

sively. That was the problem with extemporaneous ef-

forts; the verisimilitude suffers.

But I improvised, discovering the genius of desper-

tion. "Would you believe," I pleaded distraughtly, "that

I am actually a man? My innards have been so mixed up

that there's no telling what will squeeze out next! Look

at this!" I used my hands to cup my well-endowed bosom.

"My chest muscles are practically drooping off!"

The griffiness backed off another step,

her beak curv-

ing uncertainly. I pursued her. "Oh,
please—cut me open

and let out the gook before it geysers out
on its own!" I

made as if to squeeze a breast.

The griffiness spun, spread her wings,
and took off.

She didn't want any gook on her! Maybe
she wasn't en-

tirely convinced, but she preferred not to

take the chance.

I relaxed. That had been a close call!
Surely no genuine

woman would have used that particular
ruse—and per-

haps the griffiness had known that. I
wondered how

Threnody had managed to survive alone
in her cabin so

long. A threat to jump into the—the—
somewhere to her

death would not stop an animal predator.
But I knew the

answer—by guile and poison. She had
dealt with me as

she had handled any other threat, and I
could no longer

blame her. I would do the same in her
place, wearing her

body.

She had told me she was a liar—and she
was; but of

course, a weak creature with tasty flesh
could not afford

the fighting integrity of an armed
barbarian warrior.

Understanding this, could I fail to
understand also her

desire to avoid Castle Roogna and
marriage to a Magician

whose only real interest in her was to
shore up his standing

as King? If I were in her place—and it
seemed I was, for

the time being—I'd rather go with a man
whose interest

was in my—in her body. At least that
was honest.

But I had more immediate concerns. I
hurried back to

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my own body. Over two hours had passed; anything could

have happened!

Fortunately, it hadn't. Pook had gathered the remains

together in another leaf bag and this time had managed

not to include too much dirt. If any monsters had threat-

ened, the ghost horse had stood them off.

"I got rid of the sword," I said. "But now we have a

problem, friend. I'm in the wrong body."

Pook nodded, having figured that out for himself.

"I really can't do much in this body," I said. "It's weak

and misshapen for barbaric purposes, and—" I shrugged.

"I just prefer my own."

The ghost horse nodded again. He never had thought

much of Threnody's body.

"Of course, it could have been worse," I said. "If you

had been standing closer to me than she was, I would

have switched identities with you."

Pook snorted, revolted by the notion. I laughed, though

I can't say I was totally thrilled by his reaction.

I checked my own body. It was beginning to heal. Pook

had rolled the head against the neck and the arms against

the shoulders; these had reattached, and most of the spilled

blood had soaked back in. My eyes were

no longer staring;

the lids had closed in halfway normal sleep. My body

would be all right in a few more hours;
decapitations

weren't so bad when the head was not lost. If I had had

to grow a new one, I'm not sure how my memories would

have fared, as they are packed mainly in the head. Look-

ing at my body this way, seeing it
undergoing the process

of healing, I really appreciated my
talent. Never before

had I stood there and watched it from
another body.

But the afternoon was passing, and we
needed a secure

place for the night. "There are griffins in
this region—

and probably worse when it's dark," I

said. "If I had my

body, I could handle it; but in this poor thing, I'm in

trouble." I glanced down at my present form. Oh, it was

an excellent-looking form, but at the moment I didn't want

to look at it, I wanted to use it.

Pook nodded again. Evidently he had sniffed monsters

in the area.

"Of course, you can survive better alone," I said.

"We're a burden to you, especially in this condition. So

maybe you should go your own way now."

Pook stamped a forefoot in negation. He would not

desert me in this hour of desperation. I was so grateful I

almost cried, being caught unaware by the reactions of

this body. I stopped myself just in time and gave him a

maidenly hug of gratitude instead. He tolerated this sto-

ically.

"Well, I've got to protect myself until I can change

back," I said. "Maybe I can climb a tree and—" But I

looked at my unconscious body and at
my present thin

arms, and I knew I could never get us
both into a tree.

My barbarian body was simply too
massive for my fem-

inine body to lift. That was a confounded
inconvenience;

why did barbarians have to be so big?

"Maybe I could take this sword and—"

But again I

knew it was useless; these slender arms
could never wield

that great blade effectively.

I uttered an unladylike syllable of
frustration. My pres-

ent mouth almost choked on such a gross
word. Threnody

might have been quite ready to kill a man
in defense of

her interests, but she was not a foul

talker. So I grabbed

a hank of my black hair and yanked on it,
venting my

displeasure. All my avenues seemed
blocked!

Then I spied the hole in the dead artis-
tree. "I can drag

my body into that," I said. "And squeeze
in myself. And

you can stand guard outside. That should
get us through

the night. In the morning, my body should be mobile, and

you can carry it to some safer place."

Pook nodded agreement. I gripped my body by the

shoulders and hauled. It was a real effort, but I managed

to heave it a little. I reminded myself that Threnody had

managed to drag me to the brink of the—
I couldn't re-

member where, but surely she had
dragged me, so I should

be able to do it, too, in her body. I
braced again, hauled

again, and moved it some more. Soon I
was panting, my

bosom heaving prettily, but I got my
body to the tree.

When I peered into the arched hole, I
saw something

I hadn't noticed before: there was a

stairway in there!

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The steps led down into darkness
beneath the ground.

This wasn't a hole in a tree, it was an
entrance to—

To what? I gazed, pondering. Steps usually meant peo-

ple or some roughly similar species. They were small

steps, but there was clearance for human height. Was it

wise to go down there?

Pook looked around nervously, sniffing the air and

rotating his ears to catch some sound that

was beyond

my perception. Whatever designed human beings really

messed up on the ears; not only were ours less efficient

than those of most animals, they weren't nearly as pretty.

Pook's ears, for example, were superior to mine in just

about any respect you'd care to consider.

"Something dangerous?" I asked, and he

nodded af-

firmatively.

"Something we can't stand off?" Again the nod.

"Like a dragon?" Yes.

"Then we have no choice," I concluded.

"You range

free, maybe leading it away—that's your

specialty!—and

I'll haul the two of us down the stairs." It was obvious

that Pook wouldn't fit in the nether passage.

I took another hold on my body, then paused. "Uh,

Pook, in case this doesn't work out—"

But I couldn't finish the sentence, so I just gave him

another maidenly hug about the neck and
a sweet-lipped

kiss on the ear and dropped only one or
two tears on his

hide. Then I hauled my lunky,
unconscious body on into

the hole and down the stairs, headfirst.

Going down was easier, because gravity
helped. Grav-

ity can be very useful magic sometimes.
I paused to look

back and saw Pook's silhouette above;
then we rounded

the curve, and the parting was complete.

Chapter 12. Gnobody Gnomes

S felt halfway naked without Pook, and
it was

much worse to feel naked in this body
than in my own.

I reminded myself firmly that Pook
really was better off

free in the forest, where he could outrun any threat. With

luck, we would find the subterranean region empty and

be able to rest and recover in private safety. Of course,

there might be a problem about food, but we could emerge

to forage in the morning. Without luck—well, what choice

did we have? That evil spell-sword had really cut down

our options. I had managed to use the
wrong white spell

to salvage something, at least.

I reached the foot of the stairway. Now
we were in a

rough passage that wound among the
descending roots of

the artis-trees. The roots were
aesthetically shaped and

arranged, just as were the branches
above, and it was in

consequence a rather scenic passage,
nicely contoured,

though it was formed of packed dirt.

Where should we go from here? If
anything used this

stair these days, I wanted to be clear of
it. I had not

noticed any cobwebs as I descended
with my body, and

that suggested that the stairs had been
recently used.

Maybe there was a room along the passage where my body could be hidden.

I left that body for a moment and explored. Yes, there were occasional chambers opening from the passage. They were just rounded places that perhaps had once been used to store things. I went back and resumed the haul on my

body. What an awful job it was!

Then I became aware of another presence. It was

gloomy here, and getting more so as the day waned above,

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reducing the light leaking down the stairway. But now

there was yellower light at the far end of the passage.

Someone was coming!

I tried to haul my inert body the rest of the way to the

chamber, but I was tired and the body seemed heavier

than ever, and there wasn't enough time.
The light of a

lantern rounded a corner and paused.

"What have we here?" a gruff voice
growled.

Oh, no! I recognized that quality of
speech. This was

a gnome! The gnomes lived
underground, and their

profession was mining; they tunneled

endlessly, ferreting

out pretty stones, and they weren't partial to intruders.

Sometimes they ate visitors; sometimes they did worse

things. Especially to attractive young women. For some

obscure reason, I was now far more acutely conscious of

the problems of young women than I had been before.

Gnomes weren't as bad as goblins, being slightly more

civilized—yes, even I, a proud but ignorant barbarian,

could appreciate some aspects of civilization!—but they

were bad enough. Some idiots thought of gnomes as in-

nocent little men, like the elves; I knew better. I didn't

like this at all.

"My—my friend and I—he's injured and must have

shelter," I said, hoping to rouse some element of sym-

pathy in the gnome. It was a faint hope, but all I could

muster at the moment.

It was promptly dashed. "You are intruders!" the gnome

growled. I saw that he carried a wicked-looking pick in

his other hand, the kind that could pry stone from bed-

rock. "I, Gnasty Gnomad of the Gnobody
Gnomes, shall

deal with you forthrightly!" Gnomes
were very forthright

folk; that was part of their problem. He
lifted his deadly

pick.

Had I been in my own body, with my
trusty sword, I

should hardly have been concerned.

Gnasty stood only a

third my normal height, was short-legged
and short-armed,

and the pick was relatively clumsy
compared with the

sword, however devastating it was
against unarmed folk.

But I was not in my body, and my sword
remained above-

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ground. I could not effectively oppose
the gnome physi-

cally, shamed as I am to admit it.

So I scrambled cunningly once more.

"Wait, good

gnome, sir!" I cried. "No need to kill us!

We can be useful

to you! We—" Oh, what could I offer,
that I was willing

to offer, in this body? Again the genius
of desperation

struck. "We can sing!"

"I care nothing for human hilarity,"
Gnasty said, touch-

ing his squat, dark cap dourly. But he
paused.

"No hilarity!" I said. "Sad, very sad!
Listen!" And I

used Threnody's voice, as I had done to
calm the black

sword, ululating fervently. It sounded as

if something gross
had just expired.

Gnasty Gnomad considered. "Maybe
so," he said,

grudgingly impressed. "Then follow
me." He turned about

and tramped back down the passage.

I returned to the dragging of my body.
"Oh, leave him!"

the gnome snapped. "We'll cut him up for broth."

"No!" I cried. "He can sing too; we're a duet! Much

better together!" I hoped that was true. My body's ability

at singing was nil, as song is not a barbarian thing, but if

Threnody animated it, her skill might compensate.

The gnome shrugged. "It better be true," he grumped.

I hauled, and somehow got my body moved along.

Fortunately, it wasn't far; down the passage was a cham-

ber hollowed from stone, with a ventilation shaft pene-

trating to the surface. It had a barred wooden door. When

I struggled in there with my burden, the

gnome slammed

and locked the door.

"But we'll need food, water!" I cried. "In order to sing

well!"

"In due course, chattel," Gnasty said and marched off.

Well, for the moment we were secure.

Too secure,

perhaps, since we were prisoners. But
maybe that was

better than nothing.

I checked my body carefully. The
healing continued

apace; the head and arm were now so
firmly attached that

only faint scar lines showed where the
severings had been.

What a marvelous talent I had!

Actually, Threnody had a marvelous talent, too. I felt

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I should use it to rescue us from this fix.
I could change

into a snake and crawl out between the
bars and up the

stairs and out—

But my body could not follow. And I
didn't want to

leave it unattended. Suppose dimepedes
or nickelpedes

showed up, or the Gnobody Gnomes,
while I was absent?

So I just had to sit tight—at least until
the healing was

far enough along.

I settled down beside my body and slept.

By morning, my body had healed enough
to return to

consciousness, but still had some healing
to do. I noticed

that the legs were flesh again; my talent
had cleared up

that detail while it was at it. Good
enough; I really didn't

need stone feet, or even feet of clay.

However, I now had the chore of

explaining things to

Threnody, who had not been in a position to appreciate

much of what had happened recently. I had to get things

straight with her before the gnomes returned.

"Don't get excited," I murmured in my ear. It was a

dirty ear; I really should have cleaned my head more

often, especially after it had rolled in the dirt. "There has been an exchange of consciousness."

My eyes widened. My left arm jerked up before my face. My mouth opened.

"Don't scream!" I warned. "That's more trouble!"

She was smart enough to desist, but she took a while

to get settled. "My arm," she whispered, horrified. "It's

all big and hairy!"

"That's not all," I muttered. I explained the rest of it

in terse whispers, bringing us up to date. "So now you

must try to sing, using my voice," I concluded.

Once she accepted the reality of our exchange of bod-

ies, she adapted readily. She didn't like it any better than

I did, and had just as much trouble with the specialized

male anatomy as I had with the female anatomy, but she

was a clever and realistic woman. I realized that Magician

Yang must have expected me to be

nearest Pook or some

other creature, perhaps a living tree,
when the exchange

spell was activated. Surely he would not
have wanted me

in the body of the woman he hoped to
marry. Or did he

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hope to marry her? Maybe he would be
satisfied to have

her dead, regardless of the attitude of the common folk

of Xanth. At any rate. Threnody and I were for the mo-

ment unified in objecting to the present situation.

"Gnomes are no good for us," she said.
"They don't

like to go on the surface by day, so have to hunt at night;

they have spells to protect them from
night creatures, or

maybe it's just their bright torches that
scare the beasts

away. But they have an appetite for day-
game, which they

seldom have opportunity to assuage—
and we are day-

game." She looked down at my body,
which was now

clothed in only the merest tatters of her
brown dress. "If

I had known this was going to happen,
I'd have let you

get new trousers! Can this hunk of flesh
survive being

cooked and eaten?"

"I'm not sure," I said uncomfortably.

"Swallowed whole

by a dragon, sure; but spread among
several stomachs—

the more my body has to regenerate lost
parts, the harder

it is. Maybe if the bones were piled together—I think it's

the bones that are the essence of me. But if they are kept

separate—thrown away in different dumps—I don't think

I'd be able to recover. I'm not like a worm, where each

part becomes a new creature."

"That's what I thought. So if I get eaten by gnomes in

this body, I'm done for—and my own body can't recover

from simple death. There's no chance there. We've just

got to avoid being eaten."

"I never much liked being eaten, anyway," I confessed.

"But how can we escape? Your body's a lot stronger

than mine, but yours is pretty weak right

now." She smiled

with my brute, masculine face. "I'm in a position to know."

"After a recovery, my body needs a lot of food and

rest," I explained. "It will be a couple of days before it's

up to full snuff."

"And without a weapon or tool to fight with or pry us

out of here, even your full strength won't do much good,"

she said. "We'll have to depend on my talent. My body

can escape readily. But—"

"But mine can't," I finished for her. "And we need

both bodies, until we can get switched

back."

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"I'm aware of the irony," she said,
grimacing. "We've

got to stick together and protect each
other from further

harm. But how can your body escape?
Undoubtedly you,

as a barbarian, have had prior
experience with this sort

of thing. Hairbreadth escapes and whatnot."

She gave me too much credit. Most of my life had been

spent peacefully growing up in Fen Village. That was why

I had had to go out on my own to fill my quota of ad-

venture. I had drowned once, gotten zonked by the stare

of a stray basilisk, and had my neck

broken by a falling

branch, but these were mere boyhood experiences, the

kind any lad had. I had never been imprisoned and threat-

ened with getting cooked, before this journey to central

Xanth.

But I did know a way. "I could assume the form of a

creature with strong teeth or cutting claws. Then I could

cut you into chunks small enough to pass through these

bars, and carry the chunks to the surface, one at a time.

After that, I could put them together and wait for you to

reconstitute."

She grimaced. "There are a quintillion

problems with

that! First, doesn't it hurt? And if you
knocked me out

first, wouldn't there be a lot of lost
blood when you cut?

And wouldn't it take so long—three
hours—for you to

change in my body and do the job that
the gnomes will

return and discover what we're up to?
And if not, and

you carry the chunks to the surface,
what's to prevent

some predator from consuming them up there, one at a

time, while you're down here fetching another? And if all

that can be overcome, how do you know your body will

recover after that bad treatment, so soon after being hacked

apart by the black sword? You hadn't recovered all the

way from the stone-spell before, and I still feel a little

stone in my toe."

I spread my small, pretty hands. "You're thinking bet-

ter than I am, I guess. You're right; it wouldn't work.

We can't escape on our own. But what else can we do?"

"I think you had the right idea before. We'll have to

sing our way out."

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"But can you sing well in my voice? I
was never good
at that sort of thing."

"Marvels can be done with harmony,"
she said. "It's

one thing your weakened body can
probably do as well

as ever. Maybe we'd better practice."

"But the gnomes will hear!"

"And what if they do? They want us to
sing, don't

they? I can't think why they want song,
but we'd better

oblige them."

So we sang. Her body's voice was very good, even

without the accompaniment other lute,
but I knew neither

words nor tune, so could only ululate in
the fashion I had

done before. My body's voice was deep
and rough, but

Threnody knew the songs. It seemed
impossible at first,

but she knew what she was doing; that turned out to be

an improvement on my situation and an important part

of singing.

"I will teach you a song, so you can sing it properly,"

she said. "Then I will be the bass accompaniment. The

secret is harmony and counterpoint; the two voices will

complement each other and become more than they are

separately. Let me see." She pondered briefly. "Let's

start with a wordless one; you just learn the melody."

She made my voice sing the tune. As she got used to

it, she made my voice perform better than it ever had

sung before. It stopped bargaining about the

basement and

started marching in more disciplined
fashion at ground

level. I realized that my poor singing had
been more a

matter of attitude than ability; even the
worst voice could

sound halfway decent if properly
managed. Then, with

her voice, I was able to pick up the
theme on a higher

register and soon I could sing it. It was a
sad but pretty

thing that seemed appropriate for mourning a close friend's

death or the tragedy of the human condition in general.

There was a tramping in the passage, and we broke

off. Gnasty arrived, followed by several other gnomes.

"See, Gnitwit," Gnasty said. "I told you they could sing."

Gnitwit gnodded. "So you did. But will
the cowboys
listen?"

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"Why hot try it and see? What do you
think, Gnone-

such?"

"Since the cowpokes infest our richest region," Gnone-

such said, "anything's worth a try. If it doesn't work, we

can always put them in the stew."

Gnitwit peered at me. "She looks delectable. Look at

that thigh! I get first dibs on that!"

"Gno you don't!" Gnasty snapped, as I hastily tugged

the hem of my skirt down to cover the exposed thigh. "I

found them; I get first pick from the stew."

"Let's fatten them up so we can all feast," Gnonetheless

suggested.

"Good gnotion!" Gnasty agreed.

They departed, and Threnody and I
practiced some

more harmony. We had extra incentive
now! While I sang

the tune I had learned, she used my voice
to fill a deep

underpinning, a sort of strumming that
was nothing in

itself but really sounded good when it
lined up with what

I was singing. We were a team!

There was more action in the passage.
This time, the

entrance was by gnomides, the gnome
women, who were

rather pretty little things. I have already
remarked on how

the human-related creatures seem to
have better taste in

women than in men, at least as far as
appearances go.

Structurally it's another matter, of course; legs that may

look and taste delectable don't run as fast as those with

muscles. I suppose there should be a reasonable compro-

mise between appearance and performance; but of course,

I was not the one to design the humanoid form.

The gnomides brought a pot of murky

water and a

bundle of cooked roots. The roots tasted awful and were

threaded with undigestible strings, but we were both so

hungry that we ate them without protest. At least there

was plenty of the stuff, so that my body had the substance

it needed for healing completely and strengthening.

The gnomides departed, and we had more time to our-

selves. That's one thing prisoners have plenty of—time.

We practiced our song some more, perfecting it, then

rested. "The more you sleep, the faster my body will

recover," I told her.

"I wonder whether you should practice changing form,"

she said. "We don't want the gnomes to know you can

do it, but if the opportunity arises for a change, you do

need to know how."

"I phased to smoke so I could bury the black sword

in a stone," I said. "I just willed it, and it happened."

"Yes, that's the way. If you concentrate harder, it

works faster, but you still can't do it in much under an

hour. You were very smart to deal with the sword that

way."

"I was desperate!" But I felt a feminine flush of pleas-

ure at the compliment.

"The problem is, you can do only one kind of change

at a time, and you have to complete that before you can

begin another. You can't change size halfway, then change

density halfway; the most you can do is change your mind

and resolidify before you're done. So it's really quite lim-

ited—which is one reason I did not try

to escape captivity

till night.,My body is vulnerable while
it's in the process

of change; it has to be undisturbed for
things to work

right."

"I know how it is," I said. "My body
can't heal properly

if it keeps getting messed up. But how
does your body

know when halfway is? I mean, couldn't

you be shrinking

to elf size, but stop at gnome size and
decide-that's where

you were going anyway?"

My eyes widened in my handsome but
smudged male

face. "I never thought of that!" she
exclaimed. "I always

had an object in mind, like a mouse; first
I'd change to

mouse size and be so dense I'd almost

sink through the

ground. Then I'd diffuse back to normal density, at which

point I'd be the size and mass of an imp. Then I'd change

shape and be a complete mouse. I never was able to do

it any other way—but I suppose it's possible."

"Just as it turned out to be possible for my voice to

sing," I agreed. "What's this about super-density?"

"The mass of the body stays the same, unless that's

what's being changed," she explained. "When I reduce

my mass without changing size or form, I become ghost-

like; then if I reduce my size commensurately, I become

normally solid again. The mass of a mouse distributed

through the volume of a woman is vaporous, but still

there; when the size becomes that of a mouse, all is well."

"That's interesting," I said, not very interested. "But

now you'd better sleep."

She agreed. My body settled back and in a moment

was snoring. That startled me. Oh, I knew I snored some-

times, but hadn't realized it was that loud and vulgar.

People at Fen Village had complained now and then, but

I had believed they were joking.

I wasn't sleepy myself; this body was not

busy re-

covering from decapitation and
dismemberment, so was

more alert. I decided to experiment
cautiously with chang-

ing states. I had diffused before and
returned to normality,

so I knew I could handle that. What
about shape? No,

that would be too obvious, if the gnomes
came back un-

expectedly. Size? Yes, maybe I could do
something with

that. I would make myself larger—no, smaller, again to

escape notice if observed. And I would stop wherever I

chose, then decide what to do next. I wanted to know the

limits of Threnody's talent. Our lives might depend on it.

I shrank for about a quarter of an hour, then checked

the mark I had made on the wall. Yes, I

was about three-

quarters of my prior height. In an hour I could reduce

to—to what,.zero size? Microscopic? A microscope was

a magic instrument used to see things too small to see; I

could appear under that instrument and do a pantomime

act, astonishing the Magician watching! Except that any

larger creature could eat me; that thought changed my

mind quickly.

I was denser; there was a different feel to my body,

not comfortable. I was breathing more rapidly, as if my

lungs were not taking in enough air. This made sense;

they had to support the same mass, but they were smaller,

so they had to work harder. How could Threnody have

diminished to mouse size without suffocating? She must

have diffused first, then shrunk, so she could breathe. I

was also having a little trouble with my balance, because

I was closer to the ground and had less time to correct

my stance, as well as being overmassed for this size. I

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realized that even if density were kept constant, a person

would not want to be the size of a mouse, for it would

be hard to balance on two feet. The imps, of course, were

used to it, and maybe had magic to keep them steady;

but if I were the size of a mouse, I'd
better also assume

the form of a mouse. It was amazing how
complex a

simple thing like size-change became; no
wonder Thren-

ody hadn't been eager to launch into it.
Now I decided

to diffuse back to normal density so I
wouldn't have to

pant. Already I could see the limits of
these changes. If

I diffused too much, wind could blow
me away or even

apart; while if I became too solid,! could
sink into the

ground.

But wait—I wanted to find out whether I
could stop

here and do something else, or alternate
one form of change

with another. Threnody thought I couldn't
—but again I

reminded myself that I had thought I couldn't sing. I had

shrunk some; better try diffusing.

I concentrated on diffusion, and in fifteen minutes I

was breathing easier. So far so good; I had done a change

in half an hour instead of two hours. What next?

Well, could this body change part of

itself and not the

rest? Threnody had been so sure of its limits—maybe she

hadn't even tried new things.

I concentrated on my left hand, willing it to become a

crab's pincer. I ignored the rest of the body, working on

just that one thing.

And it worked! In just a few minutes that hand was a

big green pincer. I tried it on my skin, but it wasn't a

strong pincer; it had the form but not the power. No, this

was not an easy way to convert the body into a natural

weapon. Not without more time and practice. Still, this

represented a breakthrough. Threnody's body had more

talent than she had known. Because the focus of change

was now narrow, it was relatively swift; she had required

an hour per change because she insisted on doing the

whole body, all the way. She had been limited in her

thinking, and therefore in her talent.

But I'd better get back to normal, lest I be discovered.

I tried to change size and claw simultaneously, but found

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I could not; it had to be one or the other.
Very well, claw

first, then size.

It was easy. I changed the claw halfway to the hand,

then switched to size-changing, switched again to density

to catch up on my missing mass, and returned to finish

the hand. I could only do one type of change at a time,

but I could do whatever change I wanted, to whatever

extent. I had, in effect, rendered Threnody's talent far

more versatile.

Was that true for all people? I wondered. Could every

person do much more than he believed, if he changed his

belief? To what extent were all of us needlessly limited?

The Mundanes refused to believe in magic and therefore

could not practice it; there was a horrendous example!

But barbarians aren't much for

philosophy. Maybe they

could be, if they thought they could be? I
got myself back

to normal, then settled down and
snoozed in and out.

Threnody slept more solidly for several
hours, waking

when the gnomides brought more food.
This time Gnasty

was with them. "Prepare yourselves,
chattel," he said

gruffly. "Soon you will sing for the
cowboys." He spun

about and tramped off.

"Who or what are these cowboys?" I asked.

One of the gnomides glanced around to be sure Gnasty

was out of hearing range. "They are bullheaded folk," she

said.

"Well, so is Gnasty," I said.

She smiled, becoming more at ease.

"No, you mis-

understand, human woman. They—" She shrugged, at a

loss to provide more detail.

"My name is—" I hesitated, but realized I had to go

with my present body, lest there be considerable com-

. plications of understanding.
"Threnody."

"Threnody," she repeated. "And I am
Gnifty Gnom-
ide."

"Gnice to know you, Gnifty," I said in
my most fem-

inine manner, while Threnody kept
silent. And actually

it was nice, for these gnomides were of

quite a different

personality from the gnomes. It served as a reminder that

a person can not be said to know a species unless he

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knows both sexes of it. "What do I misunderstand about

the cowboys? Do they herd cows or something?" Cows

were mythical Mundane animals.

A titter rippled through the gnomides.

"Of course not!"

Gnifty said. "They are—their heads are —" She cast about

for a better term, but found none.

"Bulls," she finished.

"You mean their bodies are—like ours

—but their
heads—?"

"Yes!" she exclaimed, pleased at this
success of com-
munication. "They graze—"

"Graze?"

"On the moss of the rocks, where our
men mine. And

they get—they have horns—"

It was coming clear at last. "When the gnomes try to

work, the cowboys want to graze, so they get ornery and

interfere."

"Yes. And they are too big and strong to oppose, so

we can't mine. But they're not aggressive, usually, and

they like music—only we aren't good at music."

"Well, we'll sing for you," I said generously. "But suppose it doesn't work?"

"Oh, we don't like to think of that!" Gnifty said.

But an older gnomide, hardened to tougher stuff, man-

aged to come up with the thought. "The pot."

"She's Gnaughty," Gnifty confided, embarrassed. "And

she's Gnymph." She indicated the youngest gnomide, who

was too shy to speak at all. As with human women, their

shyness was inversely proportional to their age.

I knew better than to ask these little women to release

us. They didn't have the key and they wouldn't dare defy

their gruff men. As it was, they shied away from Thren-

ody's side of the cell, afraid of the big, brute, male body

despite the gate separating us. They took me for a woman,

so were friendly with me. All women, I realized, shared

a bond of awe and subservience,
because of the roughness

of men. How odd that I had never
noticed this before

assuming female aspect myself.

"Well, thank you so much for the food," I
said. "My

friend Jordan, there, has a big appetite.
He was hurt;

that's why we came down here. We couldn't stay up there

at night—not with all those monsters."

The gnomides shuddered. They were afraid of mon-

sters too. That was why their kind lived safely under-

ground.

"But why don't small monsters come in that open door

in the tree?" I asked. "We came right down the stairs;

we didn't know there were people here."

"There's an aversion spell on it," Gnifty explained.

"Only our own kind can enter, or someone in such dire

need that he overcomes the aversion."

"That was us," I said. "He was unconscious; I dragged him down."

"Our men have aversion spells on their hats," Gnifty

continued. She was really quite talkative, now that the

ice had been broken. "So that no big monsters come near,

just creatures small enough to be hunted

at night. When

a dragon is near, they cry, 'Hang onto your hat!'"

"That makes sense," I agreed with maidenly agreement.

We finished eating, and the gnomides took away the

refuse. Then the gnomes returned. "Move out!" Gnasty

said as he unlocked the gate.

We were conducted to a deep region
where the tunnels

branched out in all directions.

Apparently these ones had

not been hollowed by the gnomes. They
were larger and

older, and their walls were covered by
furry growths. In

some sections, the walls had been
chipped away by the

miners, where they had delved for precious stones. The

moss did not grow in the chipped sections. I could see

why those who grazed would be annoyed. To them, per-

fectly good food was being destroyed. When two cultures

interfaced, who was to say which one was right and which

wrong? They merely had different viewpoints.

When I thought of it, that term "interface" was inter-

esting. It derived from a spell in which the faces of two

creatures were locked together or combined so that they

interconnected. There had been a person whose talent

was interfacing; she could lock any two faces together,

however awkward it was for the

participants. Later usage

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had been less specific, until now it meant the overlapping

of any two things, including cultures—as in this case. I

was fascinated by the way words came into the language;

too bad I wasn't civilized! Words have always been very

important to me, because we barbarians have only an oral

tradition; without words, we would have no culture at all.

Words have real power, and not just the magic ones. One

has only to listen to a harpy swear to know that!

The gnomes slowed, becoming nervous.

"They're

near," Gnasty said. "I smell them. If only
our aversion

spells worked on them!"

Sure enough, there was a whiff of
barnyard odor. Then

we heard a kind of crunch, crunch—the
sound of grazing

and chewing—and every so often the
burp of a wad of

cud being brought up. Finally we came

into a larger cav-

ern, and there were the cowboys: true
bullheaded men

the size of my body.

They spied us. One snorted and pawed
the floor of the

cave with a bare foot. He was unclothed,
but fairly furry

all over so he didn't seem naked. He
lowered his horns.

Gnasty clapped his hand to his hat and

backed off. This
was really cowboy country.

"Sing!" Gnasty cried.

"Now look," I said reasonably. "Don't
the cowboys

have as much right to this cave as you
do? After all,

they're hungry, and this is where they
graze."

"Gnitwit, go smoke up the pot," Gnasty
said to his
companion.

"We'll sing!" I exclaimed. The gnomes
had a truly

compelling argument! That was often the
way of it, when
reason met fanaticism.

So we sang, my pretty melody and
Threnody's deep,

resonating accompaniment. In this larger
space it worked

well; the sound sort of spread out and
mellowed, and

those bass notes reverberated while the
high notes cut

straight through to the ear. It was a nice
effect, if I do

say so myself.

And the cowboys responded. The aggressive bull un-

aggressed and returned to his grazing. Beyond him was

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a cowgirl, with a body not unlike the one I was using.

That one listened attentively, her ears cocked toward us.

"Move them down to the far side,"
Gnasty told us,

gruffly pleased. "We want to work
here."

So Threnody and I slowly walked to the
far side of the

cavern, and the cowfolk followed us, so
as to be close to

the song. Behind us, the gnomes
unlimbered their picks

and had at the wall, gouging out chunks

of it, then using

their mallets to smash apart the chunks.
When they had

reduced the rock to gravel, they sifted
through it, search-

ing for gems. They didn't find many, but
of course such

work is slow, as is anything worthwhile.
I couldn't fault

the industrious gnomes, but I was sorry
to see the natural

walls being torn down and the rubble
accumulating. The

gnomes were more civilized than the
cowfolk, so naturally

they had more destructive ways. Once
the gnomes were

through with a section, no one would
have any use for

it-

All we had was one song, but the
cowfolk seemed

satisfied with it. The cowgirl gradually came closer to me,

avoiding Threnody, and I realized that she, like the gnom-

ides, felt more comfortable with her own sex. Once again,

the camaraderie of the gentle aspect prevailed.

I held out my hand to her, and she made so bold as to

sniff it, then shied away, alarmed by her

own boldness.

These were basically shy folk, not looking for trouble;

the bulls simply stood their ground when they had to.

Maybe the aversion spell of the gnomes did work on the

cowboys, but they became desperate when defending their

diminishing pastures, so resisted it. My sympathy was

with them. I seemed to have a lot of female sympathy

now; maybe it derived from my present body, yet some-

how I doubted it was any carryover from Threnody's

personality.

But we were captives of the gnomes, and we didn't

know much about the cowfolk, and my

body had not yet

recovered its full strength. We had to remain with the

gnomes until we saw our way clear to escape.

We sang until we began to hoarsen, which was bad for

pacifying cows, so we had to quit for the day. But the

gnomes had done good mining during this period and were

well satisfied. The gnomides carried several small dia-

monds; evidently they were the guardians of such stones.

The gnomes returned us to our cell and fed us well. I

would have appreciated it more if I hadn't known they

wanted us fat for the pot, at such time as
our usefulness

as singers ended. Once our effect on the
cowboys dimin-

ished, or the gnomes completed their
operations in cow-

folk caves, we would be in hot water.

There didn't seem to be any gnomes near
our cell this

evening, but a barbarian never trusts
appearances com-

pletely. They could have one of their
number lurking in

a nearby cell, listening to make sure we
didn't make any

secret escape plans. So I said nothing on
this subject to

Threnody. But as darkness closed at the
ventilation shaft,

I settled down next to her, put my face
near hers—that

is, near mine—and murmured: "They're
going to cook

us one of these days."

"Yes, we'll really go to pot," she agreed.

"So we must plan our escape. You'll be stronger to-

morrow, but it will take one more day for full strength.

Do you think we can wait that long?"

"I think so," she said. "That's a big

cavern they're

mining, and maybe not the only one. But
let's plan it

carefully now, just in case we have to
try it tomorrow. I

think the cowfolk will let us pass
through their home

passages—but we need to be sure there's
a way to the

surface from there."

I was propped on one elbow, so as to

address her ear.

My arm was getting uncomfortable, but I didn't want to

move away and have to talk louder. "Uh, may I lean

against you?" I asked.

"Sure," she said gruffly. "Here, put your head against

my shoulder, and I'll hold you in place."

So I rested my head in the crook of her shoulder and

neck, and she put her brawny arm around my body. One

big hand fell rather familiarly across my bosom. "Uh, your

hand—" I said.

"What?" She sounded annoyed. And she put both hands

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on my shoulders, drew me in to my face,
and kissed me

on the mouth.

I wrenched away, brought up my own hand, and slapped

her on the cheek, smartly. Then I scrambled out of her

grasp.

"What did you do that for?" she demanded angrily.

Even in the dark, I was aware of her big muscles tensing

and I was uncomfortably conscious of the disparity in the

powers of our bodies. She was not yet at full strength,

but she could pick me up and throw me across the cell if

she wanted to.

"You behave yourself, or I'll scream for the gnomes!"

I said tersely.

"But all I was doing—" she began in a baffled voice.

"All you were doing was responding to your strong

masculine passions! You think any available female is

yours to—to—" I could not continue, appalled at the

prospect.

"My masculine passions!" she retorted, outraged. Then

she laughed ruefully. "You know, it's true; I've never felt

stirrings like that before. I'm all—I—is that the way men

react to women?"

"To pretty ones," I said guardedly.

"I never realized before how it was with men! How do

you ever manage to control yourselves?"

"It isn't always easy," I admitted, grudgingly mollified.

"That night when you lay against me, and breathed—"

She laughed again. "I know! Now I understand exactly

how you felt. That dirt you said you have in your mind—

I think some of that rubbed off on me, because—well,

never mind. Oh, Jordan—you were a saint!"

"Saints are mythological Mundane creatures," I mut-

tered, further mollified. But this experience had unsettled

me, too; never before had I properly

appreciated the woman's position.

"I apologize," Threnody said. "I got carried away."

"I accept your apology," I said graciously. And so we

were reconciled. But we did not resume physical contact

and we did not discuss our plans for escape that night.

* * *

Next day was much like the first. We ate, rehearsed

another song, and sang it later for the cowfolk. This time

three cowgirls approached. One was young, really a calf-

child, with cute little horns. "Yooo nnize vvook," she

mooed as we paused between songs. We had found we

didn't have to sing continuously; they would give us a

few minutes for silence if it was obvious there would soon

be more music.

I did a double take. Was she talking? It seemed so.

The bovine lips and tongue were not well adapted for

speech, but when I realized that the Z sound substituted

for the S sound, and the V for the F, it made sense. "Thank

you," I murmured. "You nice folk, too."

"Nnize zoongz," she said, pleased.

"Nice songs," I agreed, glancing to make sure the

gnomes weren't paying attention. "Can all of you talk our

language?"

She shook her head no. "Oonee mmeee.
Mmiii zaa-
lenz."

"Your talent," I agreed, understanding. I
hadn't real-

ized that nonhuman folk had magic
talents, but of course,

the cowfolk were mostly human. All
except the heads.

So it made sense that they should have

souls and magic.

This was a very interesting development. Could we

turn it to our advantage? We certainly needed an advan-

tage!

We sang another song, to preserve appearances. Then

I talked with the calfchild again. "What is your name?"

I asked.

"Mmoola," she replied richly. "Hwaaz yoorz?" She

had trouble with some consonants, but I could understand

her increasingly well as I became attuned.

"Threnody," I said, feeling a twinge of guilt for this

necessary deception. There was no way

I could make

these folk understand my real situation;
and if I could, it

would only frighten them away. I believe
in good old-

fashioned barbarian integrity, but there
are times when it

doesn't seem to apply.

"Zrennozee," she repeated carefully.

"You speak very well," I complimented her, and her

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nostrils dilated with appreciation. I leaned forward con-

fidentially. "Just between us girls—I

have a secret."

Her beautiful bovine orbs brightened.
All girls love

secrets! Her furry ears twitched.
"Zeekrez?"

"Yes. We are captives of the Gnobody
Gnomes. Will
you help us escape?"

Moola's nose wrinkled in perplexity.
"Eezave?"

"Correct. Escape. The gnomes mean to
cook us in a

big pot when they're through with our
singing."

"Vvigg vozz?"

"A big, big pot," I agreed. "We must
escape—tomor-

row. Will you help?"

The calf-brow creased and the ears twitched uncer-

tainly. "Mmuuz aazg," she lowed, glancing at the largest

bullhead, who was evidently in charge.

"Tomorrow," I repeated. Then we had to sing again,

for the herd was getting restless. (

That night we definitely had to make plans, so I trusted [

my valuable and delicate feminine body close to the brute "

hunk Threnody was using and discussed our escape. "I think

all we have to do is walk into the midst of the cowfolk," I

said. "The gnomes couldn't stop us. If Moola says it's okay."

"But can we trust them?" she asked with typically

masculine suspicion. "What do they eat, besides moss?"

"Their mouths aren't suited for meat-eating," I said.

"Or for talking?"

"That's just Moola's talent." But I wasn't entirely easy,

since I now inhabited what was surely a
delectable car-

cass. "Anyway, what choice do we
have? We don't want

to wait for the gnomes to light a fire
under the pot."

The notion of that smoking fire and
boiling pot seemed

to bother her as much as it did me. A pot
is best left

unsmoked. "We'd better trust them," she

agreed. "They

do seem like decent bovine folk."

"A better risk, anyway." I made ready to draw away,

but she held me close.

"I'm sorry I killed you," she said.

We had been through that before. "Are you getting

ready to make another pass at me?" I demanded, trying

vainly to free myself from her grip.

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"Of course not," she said insincerely. Then she laughed

ruefully. "I never suspected what a

difference a body

makes," she said. "I mean, I have
assumed many forms

in the past, but always female."

"You could assume the male form,
couldn't you?" I

asked. "Maybe I should try it."

"It wouldn't work. My talent is form-
changing, not—

that. Maybe my body could look male,
but inside, it would

always be female."

That seemed reasonable. Yet now, in our
exchanged

bodies, she was assuming male
attributes, and I female ones.

Form did make a difference! Still, I
definitely thought of

myself as a male, and surely she
remained female in out-

look. Some questions have no easy answers, and I suspect

the question of sexual outlook is about as uneasy as any.

We separated and slept. But perhaps we respected each

other more than we had before.

Next day was as before, until we came to the cowfolk's

cavern. About half the wall of it had

been chipped away,

so that there was much less grazing than previously. We

sang the first song, and Moola approached. "Verzinanz

zayz ogaa," she reported contentedly.

"Ferdinand says okay," I relayed to Threnody.

"Then let's get the hell on our way," she said gruffly.

I don't know why males can't be more gracious about

accepting favors, and I wish they would watch their rough

language.

We got up and walked to the far end of the cave, where

the main herd of the cowfolk was.

"Hey!" Gnasty Gnomad shouted, brandishing his pick.

But two bullheads stood in the way, their
horns lowered,

and he could do nothing. "And we had
the pot ready to

smoke tonight!" he raged.

"Such a pity, creep," Threnody muttered
without much

sympathy. Males can be quite callous at
times.

Moola skipped along ahead of us,

showing the way.

But neither of us escapees was completely sanguine about

where this was leading.

Chapter 13. ((nightmare

It led to a huge, barnlike cave, where motherly

cows nursed small baby calves, and old

bullheads chewed

cud complacently. Standing in a Kingly stall was Ferdi-

nand, a huge and noble bull of a man. Moola conducted

us straight to him.

Moola had to translate, as we did not comprehend

bovine language. The King, however, appeared to under-

stand our speech well enough. Royal

creatures do seem

to place a premium on education, and at times that really

helps.

"Greetings, your Majesty," Threnody said, making a

formal bow. It was evident that the males dominated this

herd, so she, as our apparent male, was expected to be

the important person. I stifled my

annoyance at this rank

sexism for now; I'd give Threnody a
piece of my mind

later. "We are deeply grateful for your
timely assistance

in rescuing us from the gnomes."

The King mooded. Moola translated:
"Zoze Mnovozzee

Mnomz arr aa vaane!"

"Those Gnobody Gnomes are a pain," I repeated qui-

etly for Threnody's benefit, as her masculine ear seemed

to be less attuned to nuances. No wonder she couldn't

sing as prettily as I could!

"They certainly are!" Threnody agreed.

"They were

going to smoke us in a pot."

The bullheaded King mooed again, and Moola said:

"Nnoow yoo ghann zzingg vorr uz voreverr."

Oops! "Now you can sing—" I began, whispering.

"I heard!" Threnody snapped with insufferable mas-

culine crudity. She raised my voice for

the King. "Your

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Majesty, we deeply appreciate what you
have done for

us. But we have business elsewhere.
Perhaps there is

some other service we can do for your

good folk to show

our gratitude."

"Mooo?" the King asked, disappointed.

"We can not stay here," Threnody said firmly. "This

is no aspersion on your region or culture. It is just that

we have a prior commitment. I am a King's daugh—a

King's offspring, and the duties of my status——"

Regretfully, the King mooed again. He was not one to

argue against the honoring of duties of royal status.

"The only other thing we need is more pasture," Moola

translated in her fashion. I'm rendering it for the moment

in our normal mode, though of course it wasn't. Actually,

her accent was not bad, for a heifer, and I don't mean to

disparage it; I'm sure we sounded as odd to the bovines.

"But our deepest and best pastures are controlled by the

Knights, and already we pay a terrible rental for the use

of some of those caves."

"Nights?" Threnody asked. "They are very dark?"

"Knights," Moola said precisely, managing to convey

a hard K sound at the beginning of the term. "We are

bracketed above by the gnomes and below by the Knights.

The Gnobody Gnomes and the Knock-Kneed Knights."

The story, as it emerged, was that
terrible armored

creatures called Knights allowed the
cowfolk to graze in

some nether pastures, but required the
sacrifice of the

finest bullocks and heifers each year. If
the cowfolk re-

fused to send their tribute, the Knights
would cut off the

pastures entirely. Now, with their upper
pasture depleted

by the ravages of the gnomes, the
bovines would not have

enough left to survive.

The annual ritual had started many years
before, when

the Knights had moved into the caves
and proved to be

too strong for the cowfolk. The invaders
were from a far

place called Kon-Krete, where
everything was very hard.

The bovines had tried to fight, but their horns were no

match for the pikes of the Knights, and they had been

driven relentlessly to the very fringe of their range, up

against the gnomes. The Knights could have exterminated

explained. "That would have taken an hour to complete.

the cowfolk entirely, but preferred to save them for en-

tertainment. So the tribute was not just for grazing; it was

for the very survival of the bovine community. But it was

a sporting thing, as the Knights liked sport. The sacrificial

cowfolk were given swords and sent into the dread lab-

abyrinth to meet the Knight Tourney
Champion. If they

could run that gantlet and defeat him in
battle, the tribute

would be forgiven, and thereafter the
bovines would be

permitted to graze free. That gave them a
genuine incen-

tive to fight well—but so far none of
them had prevailed,

even though the bull and heifer were
permitted to tackle

the lone Knight together. The Knights' Champion had

been too strong.

"But how do you know they would keep their word,

if you ever won?" Threnody asked with male suspicion.

"Oh, the Knock-Kneed Knights always keep their

word," Moola assured her. "They are

creatures of chival-

ric honor. They believe that, without honor, they would be

nothing at all. They are tough warriors and heartless

creatures, but they would never dishonor their word."

I began to perceive a certain barbarian ethic here.

Maybe we could come to terms with the Knights.

The only escapes from these caves were through the

territories of the gnomes or Knights. So, if we did not

wish to remain here, we would have to go one way or the

other. If we really wanted to do the cowfolk a favor on

our way out...

Threnody was doubtful, but I wasn't.

"We ought to

help these good folk," I said. "Not just because it's a way

out, but because they are in genuine need. Besides, it

sounds like a grand adventure."

"Grand adventure!" she exclaimed.

"More like a night-

mare! We could get killed!"

"I'd rather get killed in a good fight for justice than

boiled ignominiously in a pot. Of course, the easy thing

would be to stay here and sing for the bovines forever

while they slowly starve."

"You retain some of those bold masculine notions,"

she muttered. "But I suppose we have little choice. You

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could change into a mouse and sneak out alone, but I

can't—and anyway, I want my body back before you

ruin it." She straightened my massive shoulders and ad-

dressed the King again. "Your Majesty, we have decided

to take the place of your two sacrifices

and go to battle

with the Knights' Champion. Perhaps we
shall defeat him

and free you of your annual tribute; if
not, at least two

of your own folk shall be spared this
year."

King Ferdinand made a bellow of
pleased surprise.

"Zhiz is aa heroig zhing yoo dzoo!"
Moola translated.

"Yoo arr aa graaze mmaann!"

"Aa graaze mmaann," Threnody agreed with irony.

And privately to me: "You and your damned noble instincts!"

The sacrifice wasn't due until next month, but the King

was sure the Knights would accept it early. We decided

to go the next day.

First we had to prepare for the encounter. The cowfolk

cooperated in fitting Threnody with a bullhead, so that

she looked very much like the King himself. The bovines

were fairly clever with their human hands and had fash-

ioned likenesses of the heads of their heroes of the past,

made from cloth, plaster, and paint. This particular mask-

head was a representation of the Minotaur, a bygone hero

who had gone to Mundania to seek his fortune. He was

believed to have acquitted himself very well in labyrinth

competition there, slaying many Mundanes. Naturally,

things were better with fewer Mundanes. "Iv oonlee wee

hadz hiz llighe aagenn," Moola said
reverently. "Vudz

wee arr zoo veesvull nnow."

"Too peaceful," I agreed. "Yet there is
merit in that."

For my part, I used my body's talent.
First I expanded

my size to that of Threnody's body. My
body, techni-

cally. Next I increased my density to

make myself normal

again. Then I changed my head to
become that of a homed

cow.

The cowfolk, watching this one-hour
transformation,

were amazed. So was Threnody. "You
did it three times

as fast as I do!" she exclaimed.

"I started to change to a giant twice as tall as you," I

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I stopped when I was your height, so only ten minutes

had passed. Then I started to increase my mass eightfold,

but stopped after fifteen minutes, when it was only dou-

ble. Finally I changed my head, leaving the rest of my

body alone, so that only took half an hour."

"But the whole body has to change!" she protested.

"No, it doesn't. If you change from human shape to

cowgirl shape, only the head changes. Otherwise you

couldn't assume some partly human forms, such as this

one or that of a harpy or centaur."

She shook her head. "I wouldn't believe it, but I just

saw you do it; you've learned more about my talent in

three days than I did in a lifetime!"

"Just lucky," I said smugly.

Her eyes narrowed. "I thought barbarians were sort

of stupid. You're smarter than—" She shrugged. "You're

really quite a—a person."

I shrugged. "I'm close to nature, that's

all. Your talent
is a natural thing, your demon heritage."

"Natural!" she muttered with mixed emotions.

We had a supper of fresh moss, as that was all that

was available. It wasn't tasty by our standards, but it did

feed us. We slept in a chamber lined with old straw, which

was a precious substance here; the
cowfolk were treating
us royally.

Next day we set out for the challenge.
Moola had ex-

plained how to find the Knights, who
would give us swords

if they accepted our status as Sacrifice.
It was simply a

matter of walking to the lower level and
mooing for at-

tention. The Knights, like most arrogant conquerors, did

not bother to speak the subjects' language.

"Vaarr wwello!" Moola said as we departed, a big, lovely

bovine tear in her brown eyes.

"Fare well, Moola," I replied, giving her a female hug.

I was now much bigger than she, but the

sentiment was

the same. I had increased my size
because I felt that would

give me a better chance in the action to
come. Part of

what sets women at a disadvantage is
their smaller size,

and that was one disadvantage this body
did not have to

put up with.

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We walked down the indicated route.
The caves looked

strange from my bovine eyes; I could see
behind me as

well as before me, but detail was not as
clear as I liked.

Very soon we were in the forbidden
territory, so we started

mooing to advertise our presence.

Otherwise, we had been
warned, we could be slaughtered
casually as trespassers
or as strays from the herd.

It wasn't long before a figure in metal
armor appeared.

It was large—as large as we were—and
so completely
covered that no flesh was visible. A
forbidding apparition,
indeed!

"Moo!" we mooed together.

The specter studied us, one gauntleted hand on the

huge sword slung at its metal hip. Then it turned and

walked away. Its armor did rattle some, but its knees did

not actually knock. Nervously, we followed, presuming

we had been accepted as the Sacrifice

and would be per-

mitted the privilege of Running the Gantlet.

Sure enough, we were brought to an arena. It wasn't

really a labyrinth, or a gantlet, but rather an open area

surrounded by a warren of low channels. As we stood in

the center, more suits of armor filed in, taking seats on

these low walls. In fact, I now saw that these were tiered

benches, the ones behind set higher than those before, so

that the Knights could all see clearly into the arena. Empty,

it looked like a labyrinth; filled, it was an audience cham-

ber.

In the center of the arena, beside us, was a ramp. It

started level with the floor, fairly wide,
and rose at a slight

incline as it crossed the arena. Near the
edge, the ramp

curved and went back, still rising.
Across the arena, it

bent once more and had another straight
run. By this time

it was fairly high, so that a person would
not want to fall

from it.

At the uppermost end of the ramp, far
overhead, was

a metal gate—and beyond that was the
light of day. That

was the route to the surface! That was
our escape! That

distant spot of light looked wonderful.
Below, the only

illumination was by murky torches.

What was to prevent us from simply
marching up that

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ramp and out that gate? Well, the gate

was closed and

surely locked; we'd have to break through, which would

be very difficult and perhaps impossible, or get the key

to the lock. That key could be anywhere and certainly

not where we could get it. The gate would open when the

Knights chose to open it, not otherwise.

But why, then, make a ramp up to it?

Was this a high-

way the Knights used themselves? Then why have it in

the arena? Surely they did not form an audience every

time one of their number went topside!

We were not kept waiting long. Once the theater was

filled, a Knight walked to the base of the ramp. He faced

us and drew out a chain with a large

metal key on it. Then

he walked up the ramp, swinging the key, tramping around

each curve until he was high above the floor, approaching

the gate. He used the key on the lock of the gate, and the

gate swung open. Then he pulled the gate closed, locked

it, and walked back down the ramp. No question about

it; this was our escape route. We would have to earn that

key.

As the Knight reached the base of the ramp, he looped

the chain about his armored neck. Then he walked to the

far wall. A door opened, and an armored horse emerged.

The Knight went to this steed, mounted,

and took up a

long, sharp lance.

"But what about our swords?" Threnody asked nerv-

ously.

The Knight spurred his steed, who charged forward.

The monstrous lance descended to point at us.

"I think the cowfolk got the wrong information about

that!" I cried. I had kept a human tongue in my cowhead

so I could talk readily.

"Or these honorable Knights have broken the agree-

ment," Threnody said bitterly. "No
wonder no cowboy

has ever won this challenge!"

"But they're supposed to be nothing at
all, without

honor," I said. "Does this count as a
breach of—"

We dived to either side as the mounted
Knight charged

through. The hooves of the steed barely missed us as it

passed.

We scrambled to our feet as the Knight braked his

steed, slowed, and turned. "We're lambs for the slaugh-

ter!" Threnody cried.

"You escape up the ramp while I distract him," I said,

as the Knight started his next pass.

"No good without the key!" she cried.

The Knight charged again. That sent us both diving

over the ramp. We had better sidewise maneuverability

than the Knight did, but sooner or later that terrible lance

would skewer one of us.

Again we scrambled as the Knight slowed and turned.

"We've got to get rid of that lance!" I exclaimed.

"Sure! How?"

"I'll drop on him from above," I said.

"You distract

him so I can—"

The Knight thundered at us again.

Threnody ran away

to the side, while I raced up the ramp.

With diverging

targets, the Knight had to choose one,
and he went after

Threnody. She ran and dodged with the
fleetness of des-

peration and a powerful body. The
Knight swerved to

pursue her, and I got the feeling that this was what the

knightly audience really wanted—the sport of the hunt.

We were not opponents, we were fleeing prey. One victim

would have been too easy to dispatch, but two was more

of a challenge, so they set it up that way. To help provide

the illusion that the prey might escape.

I considered that as I ran upward,
rounding the first

turn. For sport, the Knight would not
slaughter us right

away; he would play with us, making us
react, and per-

haps be applauded by the audience for
an artistic perform-

ance. That might give us more leeway.
He might even

withhold his killing stroke if the points
were wrong, wait-

ing for the chance for a better score.

"Threnody!" I called. "Take off your dress!" For my

body, which she was using now, still was wearing the

brown dress I had donned at Threnody's house. It was

soiled and torn, but represented a fair quantity of material.

"Huh?" she called out as she cut back,

causing the

Knight to overshoot her position. No
points for him on

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that pass! My well-coordinated body
was proving to be

a boon to her as she learned how to use it.

"Take it off!" I repeated, still running. I was now head

height; soon I'd be high enough to be above the Knight.

"Use it to bait him with!"

"I don't understand!" she cried, ducking out of the way

again.

There was no time for a detailed explanation. Maybe

the mask-helmet Threnody wore prevented her from hear-

ing exactly what I was saying. I would have to make a

demonstration.

I struggled out of my own dress as I ran; it was tight

on me anyway, in my larger size, despite

the tucks I had

let out to accommodate my girth.

Theoretically, the dress

should have expanded with me, and
maybe it had, but

somehow my extra mass bulged more in
proportion. I saw

the helmeted heads of the Knights in the
audience turn

to follow me. Oops—I hadn't thought of
that! I wore

nothing under the dress and I was one
big girl now. My

anatomy bobbed all over as I ran. I had tried to keep the

proportions the same, but realized belatedly that I should

have slimmed them down; mass does make a difference,

so that the giant has to have different proportions from

the normal person in order to carry his weight conveni-

ently. Now that the dress was off, I was really hanging

out.

Well, that couldn't be helped. I had to show Threnody

what I meant. "Like this in front of him!" I cried, holding

the dress so it formed a swatch of gray to the side. "Make

him charge it instead of you!"

Now she understood. She ripped off her brown dress,

and I saw the visors of the audience swivel to follow her.

It seemed the Knights got a voyeuristic thrill from seeing

people disrobe; evidently they never got out of their ar-

mor. Not in public, anyway. Strange folk!

Threnody stood naked and held the dress to the side,

forming a cape of it. The Knight, who

perhaps did not

see too well from the saddle with his
visor closed, aimed

his lance at the dress. Of course the
point slid through it,

brushing it aside, and Threnody did not
have to dive out

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of the way. Well, she still had to step
clear of the horse,

but this was an improvement.

"Get him to pass under me!" I cried,
stopping at a

suitable elevation on the ramp.

Threnody tried. She ran under—but the
Knight passed

to the side, so I couldn't drop on him.
However, we

seemed to have a viable program.

The Knight turned and came back—and
this time he

was on target. As he passed under me, I
dropped on him,

landing just in front of him on the horse.
I could have

sworn his visor slits widened as my
bare anatomy came

up against his faceplate. But my ample
posterior was

crushing down his arms and lance,

interfering with his

action. He could hardly have been pleased.

I grabbed the chain around his neck and ripped it off.

I had the key! Then I realized that I had a pretty good

position here and I tried to haul him off his horse with

me. I squirmed around, attempting to pin his arms to his

sides, but he turned out to be very strong, and I had only

woman's muscles. His hands came up, letting go of the

lance, and grasped me with horrible force. In a moment

he heaved me from the horse.

I landed partly on my feet, but without balance, and

sat down hard. I had a lot of padding in that region, but

that landing smarted! It was as if I had
been spanked by
a giant.

However, I had a victory of sorts, for
not only did I
have the chain with the key, I had caused
the Knight to
drop his lance. Threnody was hurrying
to pick it up.

"Go up and unlock the gate!" she cried.

"I'll fend him
off here!"

"You don't know how to use that thing," I
pointed out.

"He'll wipe you out with his sword!"
Indeed, the Knight

was already drawing his great blade. It
was dusky black,

and reminded me ominously of the evil
sword Magician

Yang had sent against me.

"But you don't have the muscle for this!"
she re-

sponded. And she had a point; that lance
was one heavy

pole. I could see why the Knight was
strong; he had to

be, to carry his weapons.

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Now the Knight charged us both, the
terrible sword

gleaming wickedly. We both wrestled
with the lance,

heaving it up—but we were at the end,

and the point was

at the other end, far distant, and by the
time we managed

to lift that point, the Knight was upon us.
His sword

slashed down and lopped off the point of
the lance. Again

we had to dive out of the way,
ignominiously.

"We've got to stop splitting up this way!"
Threnody

gasp ed as we got up on either side of the fallen lance.

"We can still use this," I said, picking up the severed

point, which was about half my body length. It was a

sword of a sort. "You get the other part."

She picked it up, finding it more manageable now that

it was shorter. The Knight had

unwittingly done us a

favor. He had helped arm us.

As the Knight charged this time, we
attacked him from

either side, swinging our sticks at him.
He merely lifted

his shield to fend me off on the left and
slashed down at

Threnody's arms on the right. She jerked
back, but the

sword cut off her left hand. It plopped to

the floor, fingers
curling spastically.

"Damn you!" she cried as the Knight
turned for the

next charge, a smear of blood on his
blade. She jammed

the stump of her wrist into her own side
to stop the blood

from spurting out, but already that flow
was abating as

my healing talent manifested. She

stooped to pick up the

fallen hand. Then, as the Knight
advanced, she hurled

that hand at his head.

The Knight was one tough fighter, but
this startled him.

The hand clutched at his visor, one
finger poking into an

eye-slit. It looked like a distorted spider
trying to get

inside the helmet. It couldn't get inside,

of course. The

Knight should have known the separated hand was harm-

less, but he reacted with remarkable vigor. He halted his

steed and grabbed for the hand with his left gauntlet.

I took advantage of his distraction to leap up and spread

my gray dress over the entire helmet. I clung, forming a

hood of gray material, so that he was
blinded. "Get his
sword!" I cried.

But already that arm and sword were
thrashing about,

and Threnody could not get close. So I
grabbed for the

sword arm myself. My leverage was
bad, and when I let

go of the hood, it started to slide off. The

Knight got a

glove up and shoved me violently away,
so that I fell on

my sore bare bottom again. The dress
slid down. Now

the Knight could see again and he
retained his weapon.

However, Threnody saved the moment.
Unable to get

near the Knight, she went for the horse.
She got her mouth

close to an armored ear and yelled,
"Boooo!"

The horse spooked, naturally enough. It
neighed and

reared. The Knight fell off and clanked
to the floor. Thren-

ody scrambled to fling herself on the
extended sword arm,

pinning it to the floor, while I made a
flying leap for the

head.

My weight knocked the helmet from the armored body.

It squirted out from under my feet and rolled across the

floor. Simultaneously, the body went dead. Threnody was

able to wrench the sword away from the abruptly flaccid

gauntlet.

I peered into the neck of the armor—and

there was

nothing. I looked at the separated helmet.

It, too, was

empty!

There was nothing in this suit of armor.

Nothing at all.

Threnody looked at me. "Empty armor?"

she asked,

bewildered. "But it fought us!"

"It fought without honor," I said. "We were unarmed.

Without honor, the Knights are nothing at all."

"Then what about all the others, who permitted it?"

We looked out at the audience. Now each Knight there

reached up a gauntlet to open his visor.

Inside each helmet—was nothing.

"They're all empty!" I breathed. "The Knights are all bodiless!"

"No wonder they never removed their armor," Threnody said. "Without their armor—" She paused to look at

me, realizing the significance of my statement about honor.

"They're nothing!"

"Let's get out of here before they decide to do some-

thing dishonorable!" I said.

She looked around. "That horse," she said.

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"What about it?"

"It looks familiar."

"It's buried in armor, just like the Knights," I pro-

tested. "It's probably empty too."

"No, its hooves show. It's a real horse."

I walked over to it. The armored horse stood still,

waiting for its rider to return. I saw there were metal

straps holding its armor together. I unbuckled one at the

neck, so as to uncover the head.

Underneath was a real horsehead, no phantom. "What's

a live horse doing in a place like this?" I asked.

Threnody, one-handed, removed a

portion of the body

armor. "It's a ghost horse!" she exclaimed.

Sure enough, there were the chains wrapped about the

barrel. "A ghost horse, serving armored ghosts!" I said.

"We killed its master," she pointed out.
"We're entitled

to what the Knight had, anything of it we

want. The spoils."

"We'll keep the sword," I said. "As for the horse—

we can free it."

"Free her," Threnody said, unbuckling more armor.

"She's a mare."

"A knight-mare," I said, realizing the manner in which

this made sense. "Let's ride her up the ramp and out—

and let her go on the surface."

"Agreed. We owe her that. We won the match when

she spooked."

And Threnody had been the one to think of that ploy.

I would remember that.

We got the rest of the armor off while
the assembled

Knights watched emptily, evincing no
emotion. It seemed

they did honor the rest of their deal. We
had won; we

were free. And there would be no more
cowfolk sacrifices,

and the grazing range would be
expanded. We had done

our part for the creatures who had helped us. That pleased

me.

I mounted the ghost mare. "Don't forget my hand," I

reminded Threnody.

She picked up the fallen hand and stuck it to her wrist,

which had stopped bleeding and started to heal over. At

first she placed it backward, but she corrected that im-

mediately. "I'll walk," she decided. "I can't ride while

holding this together."

"It won't take long to re-attach, but it will be weak for

an hour or so," I advised her.

So I guided the mare up the ramp,
carefully, while

Threnody walked behind, holding my
hand. The walk

became slightly nervous business at the
height, but the

knight-mare was sure-footed, and we
reached the gate

without misstep. That was just as well.
The assembled

Knights watched us with their empty

faces, still making
no move to stop us.

"Those hollow men are eerie," Threnody
muttered.

I dismounted and took the key to the
lock. It worked,

and the gate swung open. We moved
through, then I re-

turned to lock the gate behind us. I flung
the key through,

so that it dropped to the arena below;
after all, it belonged

to the Knights, and we had no intention
of returning.

We stood in a pleasant, open forest of
mixed types of

trees—beeches, sandalwoods, and other
shore types,

which indicated there was a lake nearby.
There were a

number of fruit and nut trees. We could

travel through

this very comfortably.

"Well, ghost horse," I said. "You're on your own now."

The mare looked at me. She rattled her chains inquiringly.

"You're free," I said. "Go romp through

the wilder-
ness."

She just stood there and gazed at me
from beneath long
equine lashes. She had lovely dark eyes,
even for a horse,
though her coat was light.

"She doesn't understand," Threnody said,
wiggling the

fingers of her left hand, which was now firmly attached

and improving rapidly. Then she removed her bovine mask.

"Nonsense!" I said. "Pook understands every word I

say. I'm sure Peek does, too."

"Peek?"

"Look at her eyes!"

Indeed, the mare was peeking soulfully at us. Whoever

says animals don't have souls is crazy.

"She's peeking," Threnody agreed.

"Maybe she does

understand. But she may be tame. She could have been

raised in captivity by the Knights; she's a knight-mare."

"You know, Pook could still be waiting for us among

the artis-trees," I said, realizing. "Peek's a ghost mare.

Do you think—?"

"You women are always matchmaking!"
she said.

"And you men are always trying to avoid
commit-

ment!" I retorted. Then we both laughed,
to the mare's

confusion.

So we decided to take Peek back to the
artis-forest to

meet Pook. After that, it would be up to

them. If Peek

was nervous about going out alone, Pook could guide her.

I reduced myself to normal size, returned my head to

human, and dissipated my extra mass. Peek watched all

this with equine astonishment. Then we found a toga tree

that enabled us to cover our immodesty with togas. I took

a blue one, and Threnody a red one.
Peek shook her head,

knowing we had the colors reversed;
even animals knew

that blue was for boys and red for girls. I
patted her neck.

"It's complicated to explain," I said.

I rode Peek north, while Threnody
walked; her big

barbarian body could keep the pace
much better than my

feminine one could. Soon we reached
the dead tree—and

there was Pook, faithfully waiting. He
gave a glad neigh

as he spied us—then did a double take
as he spied Peek.

I introduced them. "Pook, this is Peek.
She helped us

escape the underworld. Peek, this is
Pook, my friend."

The two ghost horses sniffed noses cautiously. They

rattled their chains, making a kind of music together. They

decided they liked each other.

"If only it were that easy for human folk," Threnody

said somewhat wistfully.

"If you two want to trot elsewhere, you're welcome,"

I told Pook. "Peek's not sure she's ready for the wilder-

ness, but you can show her."

The two nickered at each other and decided to stay.

"Does that mean we can both ride?" I asked, pleased. It

turned out that it did.

So I took Pook and Threnody rode Peek, and we bore

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south. In the evening we stopped and
foraged and grazed,

as the case might be. "Hey, look at this!"
Threnody called.

I went over. It was a bush covered with

bright disks

of glass, each disk slightly curved. They
were too small

for mirrors. I picked a disk and held it to
my right eye to

see it better—and it jumped out of my
hand and plunked

itself against my eyeball. Startled, I
stepped back, but the

glass hadn't harmed me; it just covered
the front of my

eyeball so that I had to look through it.
The surprising

thing was that my vision seemed clearer
through that eye

than through the other. The focus was
sharper and the

colors better defined. "It's a vision-
improver!" I ex-

claimed.

"Oh, I've heard of them," she said.

"They're called

contact lenses, because they make close
contact. When

your sight gets old and fuzzy, you wear a couple of these

and they bring it up to snuff. We'll have to remember

where this optical bush is; it's valuable."

I pried the lens off my eyeball. "I guess it's all right,

but I don't need it."

Threnody peered over the bush. "What's that on the

other side?" she asked.

I walked around the bush toward it.
Threnody close

on my heels. "Some sort of doll or
figurine—"

The black doll flashed. And suddenly I
was drifting

out of my body, hovering and homing in
on the brute,

barbarian body beside me. I dropped

into it, dizzy.

"The evil spell!" I cried with big, crude lips. "It was

set here to intercept us—but we're already exchanged,

so it just switched us back!"

Threnody patted herself, making sure.

"So it did," she

said, pleased. Then she looked at me.

"Now we don't

need each other any more."

I felt a sinking sensation. "You mean you're going to

start running again?"

She considered. "You know, if I rode Peek, I could

probably get home all right."

During our underground odyssey, I had

tended to for-

get that we were enemies. Now I
perceived the kind of

trap this could be. I acted instantly, my
barbarian reflexes

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serving me well. "Pook! Peek!" I cried,
running toward

the grazing horses. My big male muscles gave me more

speed than Threnody had now. "We've changed back!

Don't do anything Threnody says!"

Pook looked at me uncertainly, and it was evident that

Peek had no notion what I was talking about. "Remember

how we met," I said to Pook. "How you tried to scare

me at night, and I circled around you and you thought I

was still at my camp, and—"

Pook interrupted me with a neigh. He understood.

"Well, as long as we were in the wrong bodies. Thren-

ody and I couldn't separate," I said. "We had to coop-

erate, just to survive. But now we're

back in our own

bodies, and she can flee me. She wants to ride Peek back

to her home. Don't take us anywhere but south, toward

Castle Roogna. Can you tell Peek that, so she under-

stands?"

Pook nodded. He would take care of it.

I relaxed. I had acted in time. I still did have my mission to complete, after all.

Threnody came up behind me. "Well, you certainly fixed that, barbarian!" she said severely. "You don't trust me at all, do you!"

"Barbarians are ignorant, not stupid," I replied, stung.

It was getting dark now. She
accompanied me to the

fern bed we had fashioned in the
radiating branches of a

treehouse tree. "You will want to hold
onto me again, to

be sure I don't flee in the night."

"I don't—"

"You can't afford to trust me, but I trust you." And

she curled up next to me, ready for sleep.

Somehow I didn't feel at ease, but I didn't seem to

have much choice in the matter, so I comported myself

for sleep.

This night was cooler than the others had

been. "I've

gotten used to your larger mass,"
Threnody murmured.

"I'm cold in this little body."

"You can make it bigger," I reminded
her.

"That takes too long."

"You can have my cloak," I offered,

removing my red

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toga and spreading it out. Now its color was wrong, as it

was truly being used by a male; I'd fetch another in the

morning.

"We'll share," she decided. She removed

her own gar-

ment, arranged the two togas as blankets,
and nestled

right up next to me.

I lay stiffly awake for some time,
wondering exactly

how smart I was. Did I even want to
deliver her to Castle

Roogna now, so another man could
marry her? Naturally

I had no interest in her myself... or did I?

Why did things

have to be so complicated with human beings? Why

couldn't we, as Threnody had remarked, just sniff noses,

rattle chains, and be satisfied?

Yet if we were not what we were, creatures with at

least the awareness of purpose and honor, what would

we be? Empty knights in armor, seeming

so strong on the

outside, yet hollow inside? Who was I to deny the human

condition, with all its problems of awareness?

"If I weren't on a mission, you wouldn't be safe a

moment!" I muttered at her soft, warm, shapely, breath-

ing, sleeping body.

"I know," she whispered, stretched electrically against

me, and returned to sleep.

A pox on women!

Chapter 14. Idiocy

In the morning we donned new togas of the cor-

rect colors, foraged for more food, mounted, and rode

south again. I knew we were getting reasonably close to

Castle Roogna. I would be sorry to have this mission end.

I hoped Threnody would never know how close she had

come to diverting me from it. But if she had had occasion

to comprehend the male viewpoint, I had similarly ex-

perienced the female position. I knew her body well; I

had been in it, literally. I refused to take advantage of it.

Peek grew nervous as we progressed, and finally balked.

I was riding Pook, and we stopped beside her. "What's

the matter with her?" I asked, concerned.

She was such

a nice horse, and had been quite docile till now.

Pook whinnied at her, then listened to her reply. He

tensed. "Some danger ahead?" I asked.

"She knows this

region?"

"A monster?" Threnody asked. "I can change form

until she indicates that it matches
whatever monster she's

thinking of. That way we can identify it
precisely."

"At an hour a change?" I asked. "That
could take for-

ever!"

"Do you have a better way?"

"Yes." And I proceeded to name
monsters for the

horses. Quickly we eliminated Dragon,
Griffin, Sphinx,

Tarasque, Goblin, Callicantzari, Sea
Monster, and Harpy.

I was beginning to fish for other notions,
when Threnody

put in one.

"Basilisk," she said.

Peek nodded emphatically.

Further questioning turned up the news that it wasn't

just one basilisk, whose gaze would kill people; it was a

whole colony of them. This was, in fact, the Land of the

Basks, where cockatrices, henatrices, and chickatrices

congregated for regular staring tournaments. This was no

safe region for any other creature.

"But we have to pass it to reach Castle Roogna!" I

said. "Can we circle around the bask territory?"

It turned out that we couldn't; the mountains and sands

combined to make this the only feasible route south. But

there was a way to pass through it; at

night the basks

slept, and if the two horses galloped through then, they

could clear the region by daybreak. Then it would be an

easy ride to Castle Roogna.

"Good," I said, relieved. "We'll rest here, then set off

at nightfall."

I set off foraging again, as this body
liked to eat well.

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I spied a spaghetti tree with the edible
strands hanging
down in tempting masses.

I grabbed a hank—and discovered
hanging behind it

a black eye-queue vine. "Oops," I said,
drawing hastily
away.

But of course, I couldn't escape it. The
vine flashed—

and suddenly I was so stupid I could
hardly figure out

what I was doing.

I stumbled back to the camp, dragging
the hank of

spaghetti strands behind me.."What's the matter, Jor-

dan?" Threnody asked, perceiving that something was

wrong.

"Duh," I replied.

"What?"

"Duh," I repeated firmly.

I was stupid, but she was not. "Those bad spells—you

mentioned one for idiocy! Did that one strike?"

I nodded stupidly.

Had I been smarter, I could have anticipated her thought

processes. But I was dull. In fact, I was about as unin-

telligent as a barbarian gets, which is pretty un.

"I think," she said slowly, "that, considering your con-

dition, it is now too dangerous to proceed south through

bask territory. One of those cocks or hens might wake

up and wipe us all out. Don't you agree, Jordan?"

"Yuh," I said, happy to go along with superior reasoning.

Pook's ears flattened back. He was not stupid and he was not going to go along! Peek stood with him, following his lead.

"I think we should go north instead," Threnody con-

tinued carefully. "It is so much safer traveling a familiar route."

"Yuh," I agreed. It was a good thing she was still smart.

"Then we can go around to the north, and avoid both

the basks and the sands, and reach Castle Roogna safely,"

she said. "This will take a little longer,

but it's so much

more certain. Don't you agree, Jordan?"

"Yuh," I agreed again. It was so nice of her to consult

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me like this! Something nagged at my sodden brain, but

I couldn't quite figure out what it was, so ignored it.

"We'll rest here tonight, and I'll take good care of you,

and in the morning you'll just tell the horses to carry us

north, won't you?" she asked persuasively.

"Yuh."

Pook looked ready to kick someone,
maybe me. I

couldn't think why.

"Because that business about going south
no-matter-

what doesn't apply any more, does it?
You know better

now."

"Yuh," I said, a little uncertainly.

She smiled. She was awfully pretty when she did that.

"You've been struck by the idiocy spell, so I realize it's

a little hard for you to figure out right now. But we'll sleep

on it, and I'm sure you'll be satisfied by morning."

Pook snorted with absolute disgust and stomped away.

I heard him neighing something to Peek.
They were trying
to figure out what to do. Evidently Pook
didn't want to
listen to what I would be telling him in
the morning. Strange
animal!

Then Threnody took me by the hand and
led me to
our niche for the night, and she was so
lovely that I knew

she must be right.

We settled down in that bower, and she arranged the

togas over us as blankets, and crooned a lovely little mel-

ody, and got very close to me. She was all sleek and soft

and warm, the shape of man's desire. "In fact, I have an

even better idea," she murmured in my ear, her breath

like a playful summer breezelet, ticklish and nice. "Let's

go back to my house together."

"Huh?" I asked, perplexed.

"You don't really want to turn me over to some Ma-

gician at Castle Roogna, do you?" she urged convincingly.

I didn't follow all her reasoning, but her bare body was

so smooth and special against mine, and I realized how

nice it would be to do whatever she had in mind. Some

things do not require a great deal of intelligence. "Nuh,"

I agreed.

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She moved against me, and I hugged her to me, be-

ginning to get a glimmer of what we could—

Then there was a fluttering in the forest, and something

white showed. It came right up to us—a big, long-billed

bird. In fact, it was a stork.

"A stork!" Threnody exclaimed, shaken.

She drew away

from me as if I had become a monster. "I
hadn't thought

of that!"

, I reached for her again, but for some
reason the sight

of the stork had turned her off, and she
shrank away from

me. Women can be very funny about
irrelevant things.

The stork landed beside us and closed its wings. "I'm

looking for Jordan the Barbarian," it said.

"For him?" Threnody squeaked. "You birds never bring

your bundles to men\" Then she turned thoughtful.

"Though it might be a good thing if you did. After all, fair

is fair."

The stork ignored her. Bureaucratic creatures seldom

concern themselves with fairness. It turned to me. "Jor-

dan?"

"Yuh," I answered.

"I am investigating a recent event. It seems that one

of our number was lost during a mission,
and we are

uncertain whether his bundle was
properly delivered. You

have been implicated. Do you care to
testify?"

Something about that last word sounded
dirty to me.

"To what?"

"To clarify what happened just north of

the—wherever

it was."

Oh. I was stupid, but I remembered the episode. "Ogre,"

I said.

The stork lifted a free feather and perused its lines

closely. "Yes, that was an Oct-ogre delivery. What hap-

pened to the stork?"

"Dragon," I said. "Chomp. Injured wing
—no fly more."

The bird used the tip of his bill to make
a mark on the

feather. "That corroborates what we
concluded. What

happened to the bundle?"

I concentrated, and some of my wit
returned. "De-
livered," I said.

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The stork elevated one eyebrow. I hadn't realized be-

fore then that they had eyebrows. "You delivered it?"

"Yuh. Ogret."

He made another note on the feather.
"Highly irreg-

ular!"

"I'll say!" Threnody put in. "Whoever
heard of a man
delivering a baby!"

"Had to be done," I said defensively.

The stork put away his feather. "To be
sure. And what
was the fate of the injured stork?"

"Eaten," I said.

The bird straightened up and half spread his wings.

"You what?"

"Not me. 'Nother dragon."

"Oh." The stork relaxed, making another note. "Un-

able to fly, fell prey to dragon." He glanced up. "It is,

after all, hazardous duty. We get flight pay. Just so long

as the bundle was safely delivered."

"Yuh."

"Thank you. That will be all." The stork spread his

wings, then paused. "It is our policy to reward those who

render useful service. Would you like a
—"

"No!" Threnody cried, alarmed.

The stork made another note. "Reward
of lucky feather

declined," he muttered, speaking to
himself. Then he

spread his wings again and took off. .

"You cost me lucky feather!" I accused Threnody.

She ignored this. "You are on intimate terms with storks?" she demanded.

"Yuh." It was too complicated to explain in detail.

"Now you." I reached for her.

She jerked away. "Don't you touch me!"
she screeched.

"Huh?"

"Not while there are storks in the
neighborhood!"

I didn't grasp her objection, but did
grasp that she had

changed her mind. Disappointed, I lay
back. Women can

be awfully hard to understand!

In the morning the horses were gone.
Pook had left

the bag with the remaining spells, so I
knew he wasn't

coming back. Stupid as I was, I still
understood why:

because he knew I was going to ask him
and Peek to take

us north. I couldn't figure out why it was so bad to go

north, since Threnody had explained the reason so sen-

sibly. But Pook wouldn't go that way, so he had left.

Therefore we couldn't go north, either. He had been free

to leave us anytime, but had chosen this time because of

our irreconcilable difference of opinion about direction.

I was really sorry to lose him, yet
couldn't blame him.

Sometimes the best thing a friend can do
is to refuse to

help a friend-gone-wrong. Not that I had
gone wrong,

but—well, anyway, it was too bad.

Then I had a notion. "Spells!" I
exclaimed.

"But they don't work right," Threnody

said, evidently

nervous about another foul-up like the exchange of iden-

tities.

"Maybe help anyway," I said with foolish eagerness.

I pawed through the mostly empty bag and fished out the

little white skull. "Life!" I said.

"Life? You mean it—it restores someone who has died?

You don't need that."

I wasn't smart, but my memory remained good. "Mixed

up. This not life."

"Oh—you mean it has to be some other spell—one

that may help us travel?"

"Yuh." Then, before I could become confused, I said:

"Invoke."

The skull glowed—and expanded. A ridge appeared

that circled around the staring face. This projected out

until it formed a full-sized shield, while the face flattened

into a picture of itself on the surface of that shield. The

back of the skull became the apparatus by which the shield

could be comfortably supported on the left arm.

"Say!" I exclaimed, pleased. "Nice shield!"

"If we had needed a shield," Threnody said curtly, "we

could have taken the Knight's shield.
How does this help
us travel?"

But I remained delighted with this
acquisition. I had

never had a shield of my own before,
because barbarians

are too primitive to understand a shield's
proper use.

However, my experiences with flame-shooting dragons

and lance-bearing Knights had provided me with an ink-

ling. Sometimes defense was a good thing, even for a

barbarian. Or so I supposed, now that I was stupid.

I put the shield on my arm and postured

with it, slicing

the air with my sword. We now had two swords, since

we had recovered my own from near the dead tree, as

well as saving the Knight's. "Take that!" I exclaimed,

striking at an imaginary foe. "And that!" Then I lifted the

shield, as if warding off an enemy blow. "Nyaa! Nyaa!

You can't get me!"

"Some toy!" Threnody muttered,
disgusted. Women

don't understand about war games. But
they sure are fun

for the young-of-brain.

In due course I settled down, and we
came to grips

with the problem of traveling. "I suppose
we'll have to

walk," Threnody said, unthrilled. "But it

will take us a

couple of days, and I'll be footsore.
Damn those horses!"

"Yuh," I agreed amicably.

She focused on me. "You won't stay
stupid forever,"

she said. "These spells wear off after a
few days, don't

they?"

"Yuh," I said. "Some do."

"A man does have his uses," she said to herself. "As

long as I'm single, I'm vulnerable on one level or another.

The only way to finish this nuisance for good is to marry

an amiable man, not too bright..." Then she looked up,

as if becoming aware of me. "Very well

—I'll carry you.

At least that will get us there."

"Huh?"

"I'll change into a dollarpede," she decided. "That's a

hundred times the size of a centipede, but not vicious like

the nickel or dimepedes, because it doesn't have any metal

pincers. A doilarpede has no metal backbone, so it has

been losing strength for decades. It's a helpless form,

subject to the whims of whoever handles it; you'll have

to protect me with your sword and shield."

"Helpless?"

"Dollarpedes just seem to keep getting

devalued by

everything else they encounter," she
said. "Until finally

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they look as big as ever, but they're
hardly worth anything

at all. Maybe that's because they're made

mostly of pa-
per."

"Paper?" I was stupid, but even to me
that sounded
funny.

"Some of them have silver support," she
said. "Those
ones are stronger, but they're very rare.
I'll become one

of that kind."

"Yuh," I agreed, reassured.

Of course it took time. First she changed her form,

after cautioning me to keep a sharp eye out for predators,

as she was most vulnerable while changing. "Everybody

grabs for dollarpedes!" Had I been smarter, I would have

realized that that was the main reason
she needed me

right now. If she had been able to change
safely when

alone in the jungle, she could have
deserted me and headed

directly for home. So she had to take me
along. My brain

wasn't worth much now, but my body
and sword and

shield were. But of course she didn't tell
me that; she told

me she liked me and wanted my
companionship. It's an

old ploy women use on men. And I,
being stupid, believed

her.

Though even now I wonder what she
could have meant

by that remark about marrying an
amiable, not-too-bright

man. Certainly she didn't mean
Magician. Yin, and events

were to prove that she didn't mean me.
But as I have

said, even when I have been smart, I
haven't really under-

stood women.

In an hour she was in the form of the
dollarpede, with

the mass of a person. Then she worked
on her size, ex-

panding up to a creature so large it could
carry me——

except that she was now too diffuse to
support my weight,

since her mass had not changed. In the
third hour she

increased her mass, until finally there
she stood before

me complete—a creature with fifty pairs
of legs, dull

green in hue on one side, gray on the
other, with all sorts

of print and numbers on it. The face was
gray and looked

a little like that of a sphinx, while the
backside resembled

a bird waxing amorous with a shield.
Overall, the thing

did seem sort of papery, with
corrugations supporting

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each set of legs, but the silver backbone
gave it strength

to support me.

I mounted, and stacked the spell-bag and extra sword

behind me. This was the strangest creature I had ridden—

but of course, most of my prior experience had been with

Pook. If this dollarpede could do the job, all right.

The creature started moving. This was interesting. First

the number one set of legs stepped forward, quickly fol-

lowed by the number two set, followed in turn by number

three, and so on down the line in a ripple. There was a

gentle sway as the ripple passed under me and proceeded

to the tail. Then it bounced back and swayed me forward.

It was a little like riding an ocean swell—which was an

interesting thought, since I had never
been to the ocean,

swell or awful.

Threnody-dollarpede flowed over the
irregularities in

the landscape, picking up speed. Soon
she was traveling

as fast as a galloping ghost horse, and I
was feeling seasick

from all the swaying. But we were
making excellent time!

Around noon a shadow descended. I
looked up and

saw a great bird circling. It was a roc
and it looked

hungry—and the dollarpede was about
the right size for

a snack. "Get under cover!" I cried,
needing no special

intelligence to recognize danger like
this.

Threnody scooted for a nearby fallen tree, hoping to

conceal herself under it. I dismounted, drew my sword,

and held my shield firmly before me. I stood beside the

fallen tree, facing out, while Threnody tried to get her

length squeezed under it.

But it seemed that a dollarpede was very hard to hide

from an alert predator. The roc quickly
corrected course

and descended. Phew! Those birds are
huge! I keep for-

getting how big they are, until I
encounter another. The

giant wings covered all the sky, and the
monstrous talons

came toward me like—like a roc's
talons. There isn't

anything else to compare them to!

I had fought a roc before and knew we
were over-

matched. But a barbarian warrior doesn't
question the

odds, he just fights on. Especially when
he's stupid. So

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as that foot came at me, I held up my
shield and swung

with my sword.

My sword connected, cutting off the end of the claw.

Blood gushed out, and a few seconds later, when the

sensation reached the roc's head, there was an ear-

dazzling squawk that shook the clouds in their orbits.

Now I had the roc's attention—and a baleful attention

it was! The foot retreated, one claw snagging in a small

palm-tree and ripping it out, fingers, toes, and all. The

bird's head came down, the eyes peering at me. The beak

pecked at me, and it was the size of the snout of a good-

sized dragon. I was finished now!

But my shield came up and blocked the beak. I thought

the impact of the beak against the shield
would break my

arm and knock me over and maybe drive
the shield deep

into the ground, but there was no recoil
at all. Odd!

The roc squawked again, and such was
the blast of air

that the nearby saplings bent and their
sap squirted out,

and the fallen tree rolled a turn or two

back, exposing the

dollarpede. The roc peered at me again,
straight down

from above, and I knew I would be
squished like a bug

and perhaps spitted on bedrock below.
There was fire in

those little roc orbs!

My shield came up once more, and this
time I knew I

wasn't doing it. The thing was shifting

itself, hauling my

arm along with it! It stopped over my
head, horizontal,

blocking that plummeting beak.

The beak struck with a colossal clang—
and I felt no

shock. But the bird bounced off as if
rejected by a stone

mountain, its beak dented.

I was slow-witted, but now at last the truth managed

to wedge itself through my brain—this was the magic of

the shield! It was intended to combat the magic sword,

but it wasn't smart enough to distinguish between types

of attack, so it fended off whatever came at it. Self-

powered, it absorbed the fuD thrust, transmitting no shock

to me. As long as I held this shield, I
could not be suc-
cessfully attacked!

The big bird, its beak bashed, came to a
similar con-
clusion. It backed off, spread its wings,
and launched itself

into the air. The downdraft flattened the
nearby bushes

and tore a branch from an acorn tree; the
branch thudded

into the ground and acorns peppered us
like hailstones.

But my shield protected me against
those, too.

Threnody crawled out, somewhat
bedraggled; her pap-

ery body did not stand up well to such high winds, and I

dreaded to think what rain might do to it. She was unable

to speak in this form, but I was sure she was pleased not

to have been gobbled by the roc. I remounted, and we

proceeded on north.

We stopped in midafternoon, back at the copse of artis-

trees. Perhaps it was fitting that I brought
the magic shield

back here to where the magic sword had
attacked me.

Still, as my stupidity gradually abated—
maybe my talent

was healing my brain of this malady, too
—I became in-

creasingly uneasy about the direction of
our travel. Castle

Roogna, after all, was the opposite way.

It took Threnody three hours to change back to her

normal form. First she went diffuse, then she sank to

human size, and finally she changed to human shape. "I'm

famished!" she exclaimed.

"Why not eat in dollarpede form?" I asked, concen-

trating so as to formulate my question properly, as it was

hard to handle full sentences in my present state of mind.

"Why so much trouble to change back?"

"My, you are improving!" she remarked, not entirely

pleased. "You're not half as stupid as you were last night."

"I know," I agreed, dully satisfied. She certainly was

pretty in this form. Had I been smarter, it

might have

occurred to me that, since she could control her form,

she naturally made sure it was a good form. What woman,

given the opportunity to make herself more attractive,

would fail to exercise that power?

"I will answer your question," she said.

"If I remained

in dollarpede form and mass, I would

have to feed that

mass—and that would require a lot more food than my

natural body does. Also, dollarpedes feed on things like

Principal and Interest and Assets and Liabilities and Bud-

gets; since there aren't any of those around here, this one

would have to make do with bugs and moldy twigs and

things, and I don't happen to like such food much. So I

change back to human form so I can eat human food,

which I do prefer."

I didn't know what an Asset was, but I

could see why

she wouldn't want to eat one. "But—"

"But how can a human meal feed the mass of a dol-

larpede? Because I only have to feed the form I'm in when

eating. If I shrank to gnat size, I could feed myself on a

gnat meal, then return to human size and not be hungry.

But that would take three more hours,

and I'd be vul-

nerable all the time. Any bird could come by and swallow

me when I was in gnat form, and that would be the end

of me. So I don't like to go to the small sizes, and my

own form seems to be the best compromise."

All that was a bit more explanation than I could assim-

ilate at my present level of intelligence; I
merely smiled

and nodded acquiescently. It was
evident that Threnody

did know what she was doing. Besides,
why should I

question such an excruciatingly beautiful
woman? So what

if she had used her talent to reshape
herself? It was a

lovely shaping.

She hardly had to work at fooling me; I
was eager to
fool myself!

So we foraged and ate, then removed
ourselves from
the immediate vicinity of the dead tree
with the gnomes'
entrance and made camp for the night.
Once again Thren-
ody cuddled up to me, after glancing
around to make sure

there was no stork nearby.

"Uh," I said, trying to organize my thought. "We should go south—"

"There is another reason to go north," she said quickly.

It was almost as if she had expected me to remember my mission, and have a second thought about our direction

of travel, as my intelligence increased.

"You said the en-

emy spells have been placed along your route, so that

when you go where you're going, you walk into them."

"Yes," I agreed. She had a good grasp of the situation.

"And most of those evil spells are a whole lot of trou-

ble," she continued. "Like the black sword, and the per-

sonality exchange—I realize that was the good spell that

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hit us, but it was the same as the evil spell—and the

idiocy."

"Yes."

"Well, if you don't go where you're going, you won't

encounter the spells laid out along your route, will you?"

"Huh?"

"If we go to Castle Roogna, straight south, the next

spell is sitting there somewhere in our path, waiting for

you to meet it. Probably in the middle of

the bask terri-

tory, so we'll really be in trouble. But if you don't go

there, you won't walk into that spell. That makes this a

better route, doesn't it?"

"Say, yes," I agreed, brightening. I was still too dull

to figure out the predestination angle.

"But how do we

get to Castle Roogna, going north?"

She smiled in the dusk. "We go around the quicksand

desert to the north, then turn south and proceed without

further trouble."

"That's nice," I said, reassured.

"Still," she added, as if musingly, "it would be just as

easy to turn west and return to my house.
Then you and

I could stay together forever."

It seemed to me that she had said
something like that

the night before, but we had been
interrupted by the stork.

Tonight I was a trifle smarter. "But what
about my mis-

sion?" I asked.

"Let me show you how it can be with us," she said.

"Then you can decide about the mission."

"Well, uh—" I said uncertainly, torn between loyalty and her beauty.

She wriggled, and her bare body came up against mine.

She put her lovely face to mine for a

kiss. The conscious-

ness of my mission faded. I enfolded her
in my arms and—

There was a noise.

Threnody stiffened. "Someone's near!"
she whispered,

alarmed.

I felt for my sword and shield in the

darkness. In a

moment I located the direction; the sound was in the area

of the gnome-tree. "The Gnobody Gnomes," I whispered.

"Out hunting."

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"I've seen enough of them to last me a lifetime!" she

said.

"I'll go out and slay them. With my sword and shield,

in my own body, it will be easy."

"Don't be stupid. That won't—"

"But I am stupid!" I protested.

She chuckled. "So you are, at the moment. But trust

me, Jordan; we don't need to attack the gnomes. They're

only out foraging for food and supplies, not looking for

us, and they're not such bad folk. If we kill the men, the

gnomides will suffer. All we have to do is lie quiet, and

they'll pass us by."

We lay quiet, though I wondered how
folk who put

strangers in the smoking pot could be
considered "not

bad," but I was not smart enough to
figure that out. So

I was still, and she was right; the gnomes
moved on by

and never knew we were there. But we
had to bide some

time, and in due course I fell asleep.
Whatever it was that

Threnody might have had in mind did not come to pass

between us that night. The gnomes had saved me from—

what?

In the morning we ate again. Threnody converted to

the dollarpede form, and we moved north. In the after-

noon we came to a huge chasm that neither of us remem-

bered. That was odd, because it was far too big to be

ignored. We stopped, and Threnody changed while I for-

aged and ate and made a hut from stray timbers. In the

sky to the south, we saw huge shapes wheeling; we knew

that the rocs were angry and were searching for us.

"We can't stay here and we can't go

south again,"

Threnody said. "You fought valiantly to save me from

the big bird yesterday, and I am duly grateful, but if a

whole flock of them comes upon us, we'll be finished."

"But where can we go?" I asked, bewildered.

"I will assume another form, one that can

traverse that

chasm," she said. "I'll start early, so I'll be ready by

dawn, and will carry you with me. Only-

"Yuh?" I asked.

"I'm not certain which way to go."

I was yet smarter than before. "To the east, so then

we can go south to Castle Roogna."

She sighed. "Yes, of course. But I don't want to go to

Castle Roogna; I want to go home—which means turning

west."

"Oh," I said, disappointed. "Well, good-bye, then."

She settled down next to me in our shelter. "Jordan,

I need you with me; the episode of the roc shows that.

You're powerful and brave and you're a good guy—even

when you're stupid. And I think you need me with you,

too, for my talent complements yours.
We must travel

together, and I don't want to have an
argument about the

direction at the brink of that chasm, with
the rocs closing

in on us."

"Yes," I agreed. I could see how that
would be awk-

ward. And she was so absolutely
beautiful in the waning

light that I could not take my eyes off her.

"But you want to go to Castle Roogna, and I want to

go home. We have a fundamental conflict."

"I must complete my mission," I said, realizing that it

had been an error to say good-bye to her; I couldn't let

her go.

"Is there no way I can persuade you to come with me?" she asked.

But I was still stupid enough to hang onto my mission.

"I must take you to Castle Roogna, or die in the attempt,"

I said. "Like the stork, I must deliver."

"Even though you can be with me
forever, possessing

all that I have to offer, if you come with
me now?" she

asked, nudging closer. "Even though you
will lose me to

Magician Yin if you take me to Castle
Roogna, and the

castle itself will fall?"

I felt miserable and every bit as stupid

as I was. "Yes."

"You are too damn incorruptible for
your own good,
barbarian!"

"Yes."

She turned her face away for a moment.
Then she
turned back. "You are the man I want to

marry, Jordan,

not Magician Yin! You are bold and
strong and honest

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and nice, while he is more devious than
you can grasp.

Please, please, come with me!"

Now she had spoken openly of marriage
between us.

Temptation took me like the wind from a
storm. She was

all that I ever wanted in a woman—or so
I thought at the

time—yet I could not see my way clear
to do what she

asked. I was no thief—not even of love.
I did not answer.

"I will show you!" she said, almost savagely. She half-

way flung herself on me, and hugged me to her, and kissed

me and stroked me. I had occupied her body, and knew

the difference in attitude between man and woman, but

now she was as aggressive as a man.

And I, like the idiot I was, did not think to ask why,

or to reflect on the unnaturalness of her attitude. Scarcely

any woman flings herself on a man she doesn't plan to

marry. But because I was stupid, and she had timed her

effort with that stupidity in mind, I lacked the proper

suspicion. I was overwhelmed by her urgency. I reacted

as she intended me to and I knew that I loved her, ab-

solutely and eternally, whatever else might come.

Greater folly has no man than this.

Early in the morning, before dawn, she woke me. "Jor-

dan, I must begin my change," she said. "I love you. Do

you love me?"

I was smarter than I had been—but that no longer

mattered. "Yes," I said.

"Will you come with me?"

My heart felt as if it were cracking in two. "No."

"There is no way I can turn you from the course you have set?"

"No."

She sighed. "Then I must go with you,
though it be
disaster for us both."

So I had won. Why did I feel so
miserable?

She proceeded to change, stage by stage,
and three

hours later, as dawn peeked shyly into
the gloomy chasm,

she was ready. She had become a giant snail, with a shell

the size of a small house.

I climbed up on the shell, keeping the shield and the

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two swords tied to me, and took firm hold of the corru-

gations. The bag with the few remaining spells dangled

from my waist. Nothing could dislodge me—I hoped.

The snail crawled forward toward the chasm. It quested

along the lip until it found a rounded part, then slid over

that and down onto the face of the cliff itself.

Now I had to hold on tight! The depth of the chasm

yawned beneath us awesomely; if I fell, I would be smashed

to death on the rock below—and this

time had no ghost

horse to scrape up the pieces. If
Threnody's sticky under-

surface became unstuck, she, too, would
fall—with no

hope at all of revival. I could understand
why she did not

want any arguments about direction at
this stage. I be-

came nervous.

But her surface held, and we slid slowly

down into the

chasm and east along its face. If she had decided to turn

about and go west, I could not have stopped her, but she

had agreed to go east and she was doing it. I knew now

that I had never had any chance to bring this creature to

Castle Roogna without her acquiescence. She had used

love to persuade me to go her way; instead it had per-

suaded her to go my way. Or so I
believed then, in my
idiocy.

I heard a noise and looked down. Far
below, I saw a

huge, six-legged dragon pacing us,
evidently hoping we

would fall. It was so eager for our flesh
that puffs of steam

drifted up from it.

Then I heard another noise and looked up—and saw

a little roc. The big birds had found us at last!

The roc swooped down, and I knew doom was upon

us, for even a little roc is a giant creature. I hated being

helpless before this predator; I felt the way I had when I

occupied Threnody's body and faced the griffin.

Something nagged the slow molasses of my brain. Didn't

griffins and rocs have something in common? Some weak-

ness, or at least some kind of fmickiness? How had I

stopped the griffin?

Desperation once again lent me a stupid

kind of genius.

"Yuck!" I cried, making a grotesque face. Rocs were big,

but their eyesight and hearing were excellent. "This snail

tastes awful. Gunky! Putrid! It's just a shell full of pus!"

It was a little roc; did it understand what I was saying?

Would it be fooled? A mature one might

be too canny,

but...

The roc veered off, the wind from its wings almost

tearing us off the wall. We clung, sliding down help-

lessly—and the bird departed. My ploy had worked! Some

snails did taste bad, so maybe the roc had been ready to

believe. Actually, those birds, being

roc-headed, weren't

the smartest creatures in Xanth. But a young roc surely

tried eating anything that moved, at first, so had many

bad experiences and would be eager to avoid more of

them. Maybe this one had once gulped a shell full of pus.

Threnody managed to skid to a halt on the wall, then

continued her slow slide to the east, and
in due course

she crossed over the lip of the chasm
and onto level land.

The quicksand was behind; now we
could safely proceed
south.

I let go of the shell, but my arms were
locked into

position from the long clutch and had to
be unkinked joint

by joint. Threnody was so tired she just slumped in her

shell. But we had made it.

Ahead, had I but known, was the cruel lie.

Chapter 15. Cruel Lie

After a while Threnody changed back to her

human form, looking somewhat wasted. I
fetched her food

and water, and she kissed me, and we
rested there a time,

just appreciating each other's company.

"A shell full of pus?" she asked wryly.

"Well, it worked," I said, embarrassed.

"I would never have forgiven you if it hadn't worked,"

she said. "Well, let's get moving again."

"But you are tired. Let me carry you, now. Change to

something small."

She smiled. "I'll simply diffuse; that will take less time."

She did so. When she was smoky-thin, looking indeed

like the demoness she derived from, she put her vaporous

arms around me, and I marched south, carrying her along

with me without effort. When a passing wyvem thought

to take a bite of us. Threnody simply floated up and

breathed, "Booo!" and the poor creature took off as if it

had seen a ghost. I wasn't worried anyway; my sword

and shield and stupidity—the "Three S's," as Threnody

put it—made me practically invulnerable to attack. But

it was true that our two talents complemented each other,

making safe travel possible and easy.
We were a good
team.

We made excellent progress that day and
camped for
the night not far from Castle Roogna.
Threnody densified,
resuming her natural and lovely solidity,
and embraced
me. "This may be our last night together,
Jordan," she

said soberly.

"We must tell Magician Yin what we feel," I said.

"Maybe he won't want to marry you then. Some men are

very choosy about winning a lady's love for themselves."

"That thought had crossed my mind," she confessed.

"When you deliver me there, Yin will

win, and be (he

next King of Xanth, and surely he will be
good for the

land. But if he rejects me, and sends me
away, the castle

will not fall, and I can be yours. But—"

"But?" I asked. The plan seemed quite
feasible to me.

"But there is also Yang," she said
reluctantly. "Yang

is evil. He cares nothing for anything decent, including

the fact that I now belong to another man; he might choose

to take me for that reason."

"But you don't want to go with Yang!" I protested.

"Jordan, I may not have much choice." She kissed me

again, lingeringly. "You have seen the

power of his spells.

No ordinary person can stand against the
power of a Ma-

gician, good or evil; that's why a
Magician is always King.

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If you bring me near Castle Roogna, but
not all the way

there, then Yang will win and be King,
and he, more than

Yin, may want the aspect of legitimacy conferred by mar-

riage to the daughter of the prior King. Sometimes the

least worthy folk crave legitimacy the most. I will no

longer be able to threaten to throw myself into the—the—

whatever; I will not be able to escape." She took me by

the hand and gazed into my eyes. "But whatever happens,

Jordan, remember that I love you."

"And I love you!" I said.

Then she began singing, in her low, sad way, and

her voice was so eerily beautiful that it brought tears to

my eyes. As I listened to her, it seemed that some terrible

tragedy was in the offing. But I was too dull to grasp what

that could be, or to wonder how she
could know what

was to come.

"I'm sorry I did not let you bring your
lute," I told

her.

She paused to put her fair hand on mine.

"I forgive

you, Jordan." There were tears in her
eyes, too.

In the morning we set out for Castle Roogna on foot,

as we were. It was not that far, and Threnody wanted

there to be no doubt about her identity so that there could

be no misunderstanding as to the success of my mission.

We held hands, and it was a sad rather than a joyous

occasion. But what could I do? A good

barbarian always
completes his mission.

We saw the highest spire of the old
castle, poking above
the trees to the south. Threnody paused
to kiss me. "I
love you, Jordan," she said again. I, total
fool, believed
her. Yet even now, seeing it in the
picture of the tapestry,
I find it hard to believe that she could

have been false;

everything about her signaled the sorrow
of love about

to be lost. Almost, I wish—but of
course, I am not now

the idiot I was then. Experience has been
an exceedingly

cruel teacher.

We came to the ring of gnarled old trees
surrounding

the castle. They still didn't like me.
Branches descended

to bar our progress. I drew my sword. "I
told you before,

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trees, that I'd lop off any branch
opposing me," I said.

"I have to deliver this object to the
castle, and that I shall

do. Now clear the way!"

But this time they did not yield the right of way. Angry,

I hacked at the branches, making good my threat, and

the afflicted trees groaned woodenly with the pain and

dripped colored sap, but still would not give over. They

were stupidly loyal to their perceived cause, as was I.

"They know," Threnody said. "They remember the

curse of my return. They don't care who is to be King of

Xanth; they merely protect the castle from ruin. Jordan,

believe me, only tragedy can come of this delivery."

"I promised to deliver you, and I will," I grunted, hack-

ing away.

She shook her head with resignation. "If only your

loyalty were rightly fixed, what a hero you would be!"

I didn't know what she meant by that, so I ignored it.

Forcing a way through the trees took time, but I was

barbarianishly determined, and I cleared

a channel through

the resistant forest. We emerged to the inner orchard,

with its marvelous array of fruits and nuts.

I was hungry after my exertion, so I reached for a big

red apple—and it jerked away. I blinked, then reached

for another—and it, too, avoided me.

"Now this is pushing it!" I snapped, not so dull as not

to realize I was being snubbed. "I'm going to have some

fruit, or do some cutting here!" I walked around the tree,

stalking the evasive fruit.

A cherry dropped near me from a neighboring cherry

tree. The thing exploded as it touched the ground, blasting

dirt at my legs. I jumped away—and almost collided with

a pineapple tree. "Look out!" Threnody cried.

A pineapple dropped, but I managed to reach out and

catch it and hurl it away before it detonated. The explo-

sion shook the orchard, and fruits dropped all around us.

Several more cherries went off around

me, but my shield

alertly blocked off the shrapnel of juice
and cherry pits.

"They know," Threnody repeated.

I shook my sword at the cherry tree, but
dared not try

to chop it down, because the cherries
would have blown

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me to bits. In Mundania it may be possible to chop down

cherry trees, but not in Xanth. And as for pineapples—

I have heard, but naturally do not believe, that they don't

even grow on trees in Mundania; they supposedly grow

directly from the ground, one pineapple

to a plant. Lu-

dicrous! Next thing we'll be expected to believe is that

Mundane cherries and pineapples don't explode.

We went on to the plain surrounding the castle. There

stood a truly motley assembly: dozens of zombies. Dirt

sifted from their sodden shoulders, showing that they had

recently disinterred themselves. Gobbets
of rotten flesh

festooned their spindly bones. Each skull
stared out with

maggoty sockets.

"The zombies rise when Castle Roogna
is threatened,"

Threnody said. "They know that the
moment I set foot

in the castle, it will fall. I remember,
when I was a girl,

a rogue dragon came, and the zombies
marched against

it. The creature was covered with slime
and rot before it

gave up the attempt. Are you sure you
want to—"

"I have a mission," I said sullenly. I may
have men-

tioned the oinkheadedness of barbarians,
particularly stu-

pid ones. I drew my sword and held my

magic shield high

and marched into the awful throng.

The zombies were no cowards; I'll say
that for them!

They threw themselves on me as if not
caring for their

own lives at all. My shield moved about,
fending them

off, and my sword hacked off arms, legs,
and heads with

abandon. Pieces of zombie soon littered

the landscape.

Threnody had to use the almost empty bag of spells to

shield herself from flying rot; for some reason, she didn't

seem to like getting it in her hair or down her front or in

her slippers. Women do tend to be fussy at times. Finally

the last of the zombies had been cut to grotesque pieces,

and the way was clear to the castle.

I took Threnody by the hand and led her onward. She

remained reluctant, but did not resist.

We came to the moat. The drawbridge was up, and

the moat monsters were on full alert, in contrast to their

prior attitude. Well, I had fought monsters before.

I needed to get that drawbridge lowered
so Threnody

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could cross. I wasn't going to drag her through the moat!

Then she would be at Castle Roogna, and my mission

would be successfully accomplished, despite all Yang's

machinations. Then, and only then, could I relax. Perhaps

I would recover Threnody; perhaps not. Either way, it

would be done.

"Wait here," I told her. Then I jumped down into the

moat. Naturally the nearest monster pounced on me, its

huge fangs spearing for my head.

My shield hefted up to intercept the strike, and the

fangs clamped down onto it. There the monster's maw

froze, two fangs projecting down inside the shield, drip-

ping saliva, while the eyes of the monster stared at me,

startled. I lifted my trusty sword and brought the blade

down, cutting off the end of the snout, including the fangs.

The monster gave a squeal of pain and jerked back, blood

and spittle flying. I suspect it was none too pleased. Mon-

ster-fighting can be a messy business at times.

"Look, monster," I said. "I've got a job to do, same

as you do. I'm crossing this moat and letting down the

drawbridge. I'm a barbarian warrior, none too smart at

the moment, and cutting up monsters is my profession.

Either you can let me operate in peace,

or you can get

yourself hacked to pieces. It's your choice."

And I waded on across the clogged waterway without

waiting for the monster's response. That's the way you

have to deal with monsters—firmly and fairly.

The monster considered. It was an old

one, long past

its prime, unable to mount the savagery
of its youth, and

I'd given it a painful wound. It probably
hadn't gulped

down a maiden in years. By the time it
decided to attack

again, I was across.

I climbed to the drawbridge mechanism.
No one was

there; this castle no longer had human

guards, which was

part of its problem. There was only so much that trees

and zombies and monsters could do, without competent

human support. Modern battle is an integrated matter,

each aspect dependent on the others. Had the human

element been present, I would not have been able to storm

Castle Roogna, an edifice that had withstood attack for

four hundred years. When Magician Yin became King,

surely he would upgrade the defenses, assuming the castle

was still standing. I cranked the chain and lowered the

bridge until it fell into place with a heavy thunk.

I walked out on it. "Now you can cross," I called to

Threnody.

She approached reluctantly, and I went to meet her.

Just this short distance across the moat,
and it would be
done.

"Maybe it will count if I don't actually
get off the bridge
and touch the castle itself," Threnody
said. "If my father

the King sees that you have completed your mission."

"Maybe so," I agreed. I really didn't want Castle Roogna to fall.

Threnody paused, picking up something at the edge of the planking. "What's this?" she asked. "It looks like—"

I reached for it. It was a small black ball. As I took it

in my hand, I saw its other side. There were two squarish

sockets and a grinning set of teeth.

"That's the black skull!" I exclaimed, trying to throw

it away.

Too late. The evil skull flashed—and I fell dead.

"Jordan!" Threnody cried as I dropped
from the edge

of the bridge to the ground beyond the
moat. She tried

to catch me, but there was nothing she
could do for me;

I was already deceased. There was the
counterspell in the

bag, but we didn't know which one that
was, and only I

could invoke it—and as a dead man, I couldn't even do

that. The evil spell had operated much more rapidly than

it was supposed to.

A figure appeared across the moat, at the castle gate.

It was Magician Yin. "So you have come to me at last,

Princess Threnody," he said. "The barbarian has done

good service."

She stood frozen for a moment, staring at him. "The

mission is not yet complete," she said.

"But you can step right across and make it complete,"

Yin pointed out.

"And Castle Roogna will fall," she said

disdainfully.

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"But your father wishes this union to be,"
Yin re-

minded her. "We can build another
castle."

"Not like this one!"

"Come, lovely woman," Yin pleaded.
"The ignorant

barbarian has given his life to bring you
this far. Would

you cause that sacrifice to be in vain?"

"Pah!" Threnody exclaimed. "I am demon-spawned; I

have no conscience. All I want is to spare the castle where

I grew up, the one place where I was happy. Now I shall

live my own life. You would not let me do that, once you

have power. Magician Yin."

"Ah—so the maiden plans to run away with the bar-

barian when he revives."

Had I been alive then, I would have been startled by

that; I had thought Yin did not know about my talent.

But of course Magicians tend to know more than they let

on; it's part of their power.

"Hardly, Magician! This oaf lives only to complete his

mission—to bring me to you, Yin. I tried to seduce him

away from that, but the fool would not be swayed. Only

by being rid of him can I be rid of you."

"But you will never be rid of him. Princess, since he

can not be killed. That was my little ace in the hole against

Yang's machinations. So you might as well cross the moat and marry me."

"I shall be rid of him—and you!" she exclaimed. "I

know how to keep the barbarian dead!" And she took my

sword and struck at my body. The magic shield tried to

lift itself to block the attack, but its spell was no longer ,

new, and I was dead, so it couldn't do much. In a moment

she hacked off my shield arm, and the shield was finished.

Then she hacked off my other limbs, and my head, and

cut my torso into two chunks. I looked like a dismembered

zombie, except that there was a good deal more blood

spread about. "This moron will never

bother me again!"

she gasped, spearing my staring head on
the point and

carrying it into the orchard.

Yin stood, watching her go. "Then you
are determined

not to let the barbarian's mission be
complete?" he called

after her.

"Absolutely!" she called back as she disappeared among
the fruit trees.

Time passed. Then she returned to spear
another chunk

of my body. "And you refuse to cross
over and marry

me?" Yin asked, as if this were a routine
matter.

"You got it. Magician," she agreed,

hauling the second

chunk away in a different direction.

When she returned again, Yin asked:

"Despite the

wishes of your dying father?"

"If my father knew the truth, he would
repent those

wishes." She marched away in a new
direction with the

third chunk.

Next time she appeared, Yin asked:
"Don't you know

that if I am not King, my evil brother
will be King in-
stead?"

"Of course I know it!" she exclaimed.
"What care I

for your politics?" She took the fourth
part of me away

in a new direction.

When she returned yet again, Yin said:
"Don't you

realize that if you do not marry me, you
must marry

Magician Yang?"

"Maybe Yang won't want me. But if he
does, he won't

make me live at Castle Roogna," she
said, spearing a fifth

chunk and toting it away.

Soon she was back again, for the next-to-the-last chunk.

"What do you care for Magician Yang?" Yin demanded.

Threnody paused in her labor. "Well, if you want it

straight, I am demon-spawn. I prefer evil to good—and

Yang is evil." She hauled the chunk

away.

"That isn't what you told the barbarian,"
Yin said when

she returned for the final chunk.

"I told the barbarian I was a liar. That
much was true."

She carried away the seventh piece of
me.

When she returned, Yin tried yet once more. "The

barbarian is finished, but you could still cross over to me.

I ask you, daughter of the King, one last time——"

"Oh, stop this charade!" she exclaimed, picking up my

magic shield and dumping it into the moat. Then she tossed

my sword in after it. "Do you think I

don't know your
secret?"

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"Secret, Princess?"

"That Yin is merely the white-magic
side, and Yang

the black-magic side, of the same
person. You are not

contesting to see which Magician shall
be King; you are

deciding which facet of your personality
will dominate.

Since that decision turns out to be mine
to make, I am

choosing—and I choose Yang. Come to
me, you evil

creature, for I shall not come to you! The
price of me is

to turn your back forever on Castle Roogna."

"Then so I shall!" Yin said. He turned about, his cloak

flaring—and as he turned, his color changed, and he be-

came the black-robed Yang. He strode across the draw-

bridge and took Threnody's hand. "You have done well,

evil creature!" he told her. "Even to

seducing the bar-

barian, for you know I could not touch a pristine woman."

"Only Yin could do that," she agreed, kissing him.

"The placement of that last spell was beautiful. The oaf

never suspected the drawbridge itself!"

"Thank you. You realize, of course, that I was testing

you? I feared you might actually have
some feeling for

that barbarian, though I know what a
consummate actress

you are. So I arranged to—"

"I do have some feeling for him," she
said. "Contempt!

He was a fool even before your idiocy
spell hit him. And

there was another stroke of genius—
mixing up Yin's

spells! Even so, it was uncomfortably close, for the bar-

barian was the most oinkheadedly determined fool I've

ever seen."

"A close contest is more tantalizing," Yang said. "I

knew I would win; but for the sake of appearances, I

preferred the outcome to seem in doubt."

"Well, Evil Magician, you will be King now. So take

me away from here and do what you will with me."

"I am King now. Your father died yesterday."

Threnody stiffened. If she had cared for anything at

all, it was for her father. "Then I could have killed the

barbarian last night, and my father would not have known!

Why did you torture me like that?"

"It is my nature," Yang said. "As it is yours. Together,

we have betrayed all that is decent in Xanth."

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She smiled. "Why, so we have!"

"And now we shall neglect the interests of Xanth com-

pletely, letting Castle Roogna go to ruin in its own fashion.

I shall devote myself to Grafting spells of every type, and

who knows what mischief they may do in the course of

future centuries as they are discovered, while you—"

"While I will assume whatever strange forms you wish,

for your sinister pleasure," Threnody finished.

Together, they walked away from the castle, their cruel

lie complete at last.

Of course, I was dead, so I was no longer much con-

cerned with this. But my ghost was present at the spot

where I had died, and my ghost was appalled at this evi-

dence of the betrayal of myself and Xanth that Threnody

had wrought. All the time she had been collaborating with

the Evil Magician, plotting to—

But the Evil Magician and the Good Magician were

one and the same! And Threnody had
known this! And

chosen the Evil aspect to go with! All
the while playing

up to me, the ignorant barbarian fool!
When I had not

failed to bring her back to Castle
Roogna, she had had to

come into the open about it. Why had I
been so blind?

Why, indeed! They had chosen me for

this very quality!

If my course for the mission had been
predestined, so

had my course before it, bringing me to
Castle Roogna

at precisely the time they needed such a
fool. How could

a mere barbarian comprehend the
intricacies of civilized

treachery? Perhaps King Gromden, a
good man, had sus-

pected and tried to tell me, but his
illness had prevented

him. That very illness might have been
sent by a spell

from one of the aspirants to the throne,
since Yin-Yang

had free access to Castle Roogna. It
would have been

better had I never entered the picture, for
I had been the

unwitting tool of their treachery. I, as
much as Threnody,

was responsible for the demise of Castle
Roogna as the

center of the human government of
Xanth, and for the

centuries of the decline that followed.
How great was my
guilt!

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But it was done, and I was helpless to

undo it. All I
could do was watch.

A few hours after my death, Pook and
Peek arrived

on the scene. Pook came and sniffed the
mostly empty

bag of spells Threnody had dropped on
the bank of the

moat and forgotten. He knew I had been
there and that

I had been betrayed by the cruelest of flies.

He had tried

to warn me, to discourage me; he had
refused to aid me

in my folly. But I had pursued it anyway,
bewitched by

foolish love, and met my ordained fate.
Now Pook could

do nothing; he didn't know where evil
Threnody had bur-

ied my pieces, and lacked the means to
dig them up be-

sides. Nobody knew but her, and she
would never tell.

Truly, she had sealed my fate!

Disconsolately, Pook picked up the limp
bag of spells

with his teeth, craned his head around to
tuck it in amidst

his chains so that he could carry it as a
memento, then

departed. Peek went with him, sharing
his melancholy

with her beautiful, moist brown eyes.
She was an animal;

she did not deceive or betray her
companion the way a
human woman could.

And so I was dead and dead I remained.
Evil Threnody

had seen to that! My ghost moved into
Castle Roogna,

as that was the only building within
range, and ghosts do

prefer a structure to haunt. I met the other

ghosts there

and learned their sad stories. One was
Millie the Maid,

who had been killed by a jealous rival
for the Magician

she loved. The others each had his or her
life history, as

tragic or ironic as mine. Oh, we shared
common heritage

of folly and grief, we ghosts of the
castle! And so we

remained over the centuries, while the
castle stood idle.

For Magician Yang, the evil aspect of the man, indeed

cared nothing for Castle Roogna or the welfare of Xanth.

He moved back to his home village and made his nefarious

spells, for that was his chief entertainment. In truth, most

of his spells were neutral, for there is no real good or evil

in a given spell. Only in its actual use

does it become

good or evil. Ail the spells and
enchanted objects in Xanth

date from his reign, including the magic
weapons of the

Castle Roogna arsenal, made before he
left. Some of those

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spells, like the forget-speli on the Gap
Chasm, date from

before his time, yet he made them, too; I don't know how

that was arranged. He was a great Magician, but an evil

man. Those spells proliferated, and Xanth declined, be-

cause the spells were not used in any organized service

of man. They were just scattered about the kingdom,

whimsically, to do what mischief they might in ignorant

hands. We ghosts had news of outside events only oc-

casionally, when some traveling spook or wraith passed

through; we ourselves were unable to leave the castle

premises. So this is sketchy. But in the course of cen-

turies, we did catch up on the major items.

Eventually Magician Yang died—but the

next King of

Xanth did not return to Castle Roogna to reign. It seemed

it had become fashionable for Kings to remain in their

home villages. There was no longer a centralized govern-

ment in Xanth. The Mundane Waves washed freely over

Xanth. It was the dark age—all because of Threnody's

cruel lie. She had sought to preserve Castle Roogna from

falling, whatever the cost, but it had
fallen anyway, fig-

uratively—and who is to say that was
not the real nature

of the curse?

Yet perhaps she was not directly to
blame for the evil

times that came to all Xanth, for the tides
of men are slow

and subtle, and answer to no isolated
influences. Maybe

Xanth was doomed, anyway, and would have suffered

some other calamity if not this one.

Threnody had not

chosen to be cursed, or even to be delivered by the stork.

Maybe it had really started with the demoness who had

humiliated King Gromden and succeeded in her mischief

beyond her most infernal expectations.

Still, this does not excuse me. I, utter
fool, had helped

Threnody to do it—by trusting her when
I knew she was

untrustworthy and loving her when I
should have known

that the spawn of a demon could not truly
love in return,

whatever she might say. She had done to
me what her

mother had done to her father, and
together, they had

ruined more lives than anyone can know.
My pain was

all the greater because I had loved her,
however foolishly.

Now it was hate—but still my emotion
for her, whether

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positive or negative, dominated my
tenuous existence as

a ghost. I had been a fool in life; I
remained a fool in

death. But what was to be expected of a
barbarian lout?

One thing came to bother me
increasingly in my spirit

existence—Elsie, the girl I had left
behind in Fen Village.

I had promised to return to her when my
adventure was

done—and after I had learned the folly

of loving demon-

spawn, I would have been glad to settle
down with a

decent girl. But I could not; I was dead.
If I had known

more of the true situation with Magician
Yin-Yang and

Threnody, I would have set her on the
drawbridge, said,

"Here you are; cross or not, as you see
fit," and departed

for home, to be with Elsie, a genuinely
decent young

woman who would never have betrayed me. But I hadn't

known, so I had died, and now could not know how Elsie

fared. Was she waiting for me throughout her life, for a

promise never to be fulfilled? How cruel a lie had I told

her? In this I perceived a certain justice to my own fate.

I had been served as I had served another person. I had

perhaps ruined a fine girl and now I was ruined myself.

The two griefs merged and fused in my being; as time

passed, I tended to forget the more recent horror in favor

of the earlier one, perhaps because the guilt of all Xanth

was not associated there.

Yet it was not all bad for me, and perhaps not for

Xanth. With the decline of human power,
the several

creature kingdoms strengthened, and
mankind had to learn

to deal with animals as equals. Centaurs
in particular had

been treated mainly as beasts of burden
and laborers; now

they formed an island kingdom of their
own and became

quite civilized. I like to think that the
elven tribes pros-

pered and that Bluebell's descendants exist today, be-

cause of the diminished interference of human folk.

The other ghosts of the castle were decent sorts, very

supportive; they had been through their fatal experiences

and understood exactly how that felt. They regarded

themselves as keepers of the castle,

preserving it for that

day when a King would return to rule
Xanth properly and

usher in a new golden age of man. Castle
Roogna itself

had a spirit; it kept itself whole, and its
ambience extended

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out through the surrounding orchards and
trees. Now I

understood why the trees had fought me;
they had known

that my presence meant doom to the
castle, whichever

way my mission turned out.

As a ghost, I ranged the whole region,
apologizing to

every tree and zombie I had injured with
my sword, and

to the old moat monster, too. "I'm very
sorry, and I won't

do it again," I promised. But that was empty; I couldn't

do it again. Still, they accepted my penitence, knowing

the ignorance and frailties of the mortal condition, and I

became one with the castle. An empty promise is still a

promise; I have tried in whatever way I can to help Castle

Roogna, and perhaps I succeeded when the King Mare

needed help to save it from occupation
by the evil Horse-

man. That can hardly make up for the
evil I did originally,

but it's a beginning.

In a couple of years a new ghost
appeared. She was

Renee, whom you have met. She was
bewildered by her

abrupt death, though it had been suicide.
People who die

by their own hands often don't realize
quite what they

are getting into. She had come to the
deserted castle to

end her misery and had not expected to
retain awareness

in this form. She had suffered an
unhappy marriage, not

being able to marry her true love, and
had finally taken

this way out. She reminded me
poignantly of Elsie, though

I ardently hoped I had not driven Elsie into such a situation by my defection.

I had been the youngest ghost, in terms of the period of my spirit's existence; now Renee was. I was glad to help her and show her the ghostly ropes, and she was very appreciative. This helped me forget my own distress,

and I trust it helped her, too. It is a truth
of death as well

as of life that the surest amelioration of
one's own misery

is to be obtained by helping another
person.

In time—much time, for the emotions of
ghosts are as

diffuse as their physical essences—this
relationship

evolved into love. Now Threnody was

but a distant mem-

ory; Renee was the one I existed for. In death I had found

my life's partner, and I knew she felt the same—though

it was too late for us even before we met.

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Eventually King Trent came to Castle
Roogna and

brought the monarchy back to its rightful
seat. Once again

Xanth flourished, and the dark age was

behind. We are

now some thirty years into the new age,
and man pros-

pers, but we ghosts remain. For our
stories are not yet

finished, and perhaps will never be.

Chapter 16. Caustic Truth

And that," Jordan the Ghost concluded,
"is

my story, sad as it may be. I was an
ignorant barbarian

fool and I paid the price. Yet today I
have happiness of

a sort, for I have seen the dark age of
Xanth end at last

and I love Renee. And now I have the
memory of my

living history, thanks to the crewel lye
you used to clarify

the tapestry. I thank you, little Princess,
though not all

of my memories are pleasant."

Ivy considered. She had found the ghost's tale to be

more of a narrative than anticipated, with some aspects

that were a trifle awkward for a girl of five to comprehend.

It had granted her the wish she had made on a starfish:

to know the origin of the forget-spell on

the Gap. A certain

mystery remained about that, since that spell had been

applied to the Gap long before Magician Yin-Yang lived,

but still, it was an answer. Now she wondered what the

big deal was about summoning the stork; wasn't it just a

matter of kissing? Her parents tended to get evasive when

her questions about such points became too pointed, and

she had the suspicion that Jordan would
be no more can-

did. Still, it was worth a try. "Some
things have changed,"

she said.

"Oh?"

"We live in modern times. Storks no
longer deliver

babies directly to the mothers."

"They don't?" Jordan asked as if amused.
That was

an annoying trait adults had. "I must be
out of touch."

"Yes. Today the storks deposit the
bundles under cab-

bage leaves. Probably it saves them
time. If you had done

that with the ogret, you wouldn't have
had to worry about

the ogre and ogress."

"That must be why the storks changed it," Jordan

agreed.

"That's where my mother found dumb Dolph, my pid-

dling baby brother."

"That's no way to speak of him," Jordan

said.

"Well, he is piddling," she insisted stoutly. "They have

to keep a diaper on him all the time, and keep changing

it. I'm sure it's more trouble than he's worth."

"There is that," the ghost agreed.

Now came the clincher. "I don't quite understand this

business about summoning storks anyway," Ivy said pet-

ulantly. "Exactly how is that done?"

"Um, I forget," Jordan said awkwardly.

"Well, let's zero in on one of those scenes in the tap-

estry and enlarge the detail. That should refresh your

memory." Ivy was very practical about satisfying her curiosity.

"I'm sure that's not necessary," Jordan said quickly.

"It's a very dull business."

"How do you know, if you don't remember?"

"Well, I just remember that it probably wouldn't in-

terest you. Children don't do it, you see."
But the ghost

had turned a shade or two whiter than he had been.

There was no question about it; Jordan was part of the

Adult Conspiracy. There was some secret here that all

grown-ups wanted to keep from all

children. "Let's go back

to the beginning," Ivy said. "Where you and Elsie—"

"Ah, Elsie," the ghost said sadly. "I'd like to know

how she survived."

"Uh, yes," Ivy agreed, curious about that, too. So

when the tapestry zeroed in on Elsie, just after Jordan

had left her, she followed the woman
forward instead of

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backward. Ivy, like Jordan, had her weaknesses; curiosity

tended to overcome her common sense. What had hap-

pened to Elsie?

As it turned out, Elsie did not grieve long. A handsome

farmer began paying attention to her the moment Jordan

left; as time passed, without Jordan's return, her interest

turned to the farmer. In due course she married him, and

the stork delivered a baby, but the lights were always out

when the couple set about signaling the stork, so Ivy still

was unenlightened.

"That's a relief!" Jordan exclaimed.

"What?" Ivy demanded irately.

"To learn that I didn't ruin Elsie after all," the ghost

said. "Now I don't have to feel guilty any more. She was

better off without me. I was just a passing fling for her,

as she was for me."

"Oh." Now Ivy's full attention returned to Jordan.

"Your magic talent—could you revive today, if your bones were put back together?"

The ghost considered. "I don't know. It's been a long time—and anyway, I don't know where my parts are buried, so they can't be put together."

"I know where they are," a faint voice said behind

him.

Jordan turned. "Oh—Renee! I didn't know you were there!"

The female ghost took better form. Ivy could see that

she must have been very pretty in her life. "I—looked

for them, and the trees showed me," Renee said.

"Why did you do that?" Jordan asked, perplexed.

"Because I love you."

Jordan was abashed. "I never thought to look for your

bones! I must not love you as much as you love me!"

"It's all right," Renee said comfortingly.

"I am notas

lovable as you are, Jordan."

Ivy pounced on the information. "Take me to Jordan's

bones!" she exclaimed. "I'm going to put them together,

so he can live again!"

"But it might not work," Jordan protested.

"Nonsense!" Ivy said with the certainty
only a child

her age could muster. "You can do it if
you try." She

turned to Renee. "Show me!"

Obediently, Renee led the way out of the
castle and

across the moat and into the orchard.
"The head is here,

under the roots of this skullery tree.".She indicated the

tree, which was hung with pots and kettles and other

kitchen utensils. Indeed, there did seem to be skull de-

signs on the utensils. This location was obvious, now that

attention had been called to it.

"We'll have to dig it out," Ivy said, eying the firm turf

beneath the tree.

The two ghosts spread their foggy hands.

"We are un-

able to affect material things," Jordan
said. "I could not

even invoke the pictures of the tapestry
myself; only a

living, solid creature can do that, and not
all of them."

Ivy looked at her cute little hands. She

considered the

trouble she would be in if she got them
and her dress

messed up. "I'll get help," she decided.

"Help?" Jordan asked. "Any adult is
likely to ask awk-

ward questions."

"Don't I know it! That's the one thing
adults are really

good at." She glanced at the ghost.
"Except maybe barbarians."

"Thank you," Jordan said wryly.

"Perhaps the little dragon—" Renee murmured.

Ivy brightened. She put two fingers into her mouth and

made a piercing whistle.

There was a stir from the far side of the castle. In a

moment Stanley came steaming along. He whomped up

to Ivy expectantly.

Ivy pointed to the ground. "There is a skull under here.

Sniff!"

Stanley sniffed. In a moment he located it. He indicated

the spot with a jet of steam.

"Dig it out—carefully," Ivy ordered.

Stanley was glad to cooperate. He steamed the ground,

making it soft, then dug with his front claws. Soon he

sniffed again, steamed the dirt sodden,
and used his teeth

to dig out the dirty skull.

"Oh, you're so good at that!" Ivy
exclaimed, stretching

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her arms around Stanley's neck for a hug.
She had per-

fectured the technique of female flattery by
watching her

mother handle her father. It certainly
worked on Stanley;

he blushed bright green with pleasure.

Soon they steamed the skull clean and white, and Ivy

carried it to the next location. Renee showed them to a

shoe-tree, with boys' and men's shoes in every stage of

growth. Sure enough, down under the roots, its foot nes-

tled in a buried hiking shoe, was one of

Jordan's skeletal

legs. Stanley dug it out carefully and steamed it clean.

This growing mass of bones was getting complicated

for Ivy to carry, so they made a cache of bones under a

parasol tree, out of sight of the castle. Ivy didn't want

any adult telling her no! Adults were all too prone to say

no, apparently for no reason other than
sinister pleasure

in uttering the syllable.

The other leg was under a female shoe-
tree, wearing

a ragged lady-slipper; no one would
have thought to look

for it there! Stanley was enjoying this; he
liked finding

things, though he was a little miffed
about not being al-

lowed to chew up the bones once he found them. But he

was willing to settle for Ivy's hugs instead. "Males have

always been fools about that sort of thing," Jordan mut-

tered reminiscently.

The arms were beneath separate arms-trees, nestled

among the old rusted swords, maces, and spears that had

been dropped unharvested in bygone years. One hand still

held the sword recovered from the Knight, which re-

mained stainlessly shiny. "Odd that she should have taken

the trouble to put that sword in my hand," Jordan mused.

"As if I died fighting. Why should she bother?" Jordan's

own sword, of course, had been used by the evil Threnody

to bury the chunks of him; there was no telling where that

was now, if it hadn't rusted away entirely. It had been a

good sword, but not that good.

The upper section of the torso was buried beneath a

chest-nut tree. The skeletal rib cage was packed in a chest:

another retrospectively obvious

location. Threnody had

evidently taken a lot of care in hiding each piece in a

region so fitting that no one would think of it. "She must

have been afraid that if any piece of me were found,

someone would realize where the others were," Jordan

said, shuddering at the mute malice of the demon-spawn's

mischievous.

One section remained, and this was
beneath a huge,

thick ash tree. "She planted my posterior
'neath the grass

of an ash!" the ghost lamented.

"A fat ash," Ivy agreed, contemplating
the girth of the

tree.

Stanley sneezed as he sniffed out the precise location,

for the fine ashes beneath the tree tickled his snoot. Then

he dug down through the stratified layers of ash until he

could get a tooth on the skeletal rump.

At last Jordan's entire skeleton was heaped beneath

the parasol. Ivy arranged the pieces in

order, so that the

figure lay complete on the ground. "Now what?" she asked.

"Does it just start walking, like one of the skeletons of the gourd?"

"After four hundred years, as I said, I'm not sure,"

Jordan replied cautiously. "I've never been dead that long before."

"Here, I brought some healing 'lixer,"
Ivy said. She

took out a bottle and sprinkled it over
the bones. Still,
nothing happened.

"YOU see, since all my flesh is gone—"
Jordan began.

"Nonsense! All it takes is
concentration." And Ivy

concentrated.

Ivy, though a child, was a full Sorceress,
with power

that rivaled that of any Magician in
Xanth. When she

focused it, remarkable things tended to
happen, such as

dragons turning tame and thyme
accelerating. Now she

intensified Jordan's talent of recovery,
which had already

been boosted by the healing elixir—
which itself was in-

tensified by her talent. Jordan had no
flesh to heal; only

the most enduring part of him remained.
It seemed like

a lost cause. Yet even four hundred
years could not stand

against Ivy's power. Few folk ever had
occasion to per-

ceive the full extent of the magic of a
Magician or Sor-

ceress, for usually the ramifications
were subtle. This was
an exception.

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The effect was gratifying. The bones began to knit.

The leg bone connected to the thigh bone, and the arm

bone connected to the shoulder bone, and the shoulder

bone connected to the neck bone. All the bones con-

nected, and soon the skeleton was intact.

Now tendons sprouted from the bones,
stringing them

together in a new way. Flesh formed on
the surfaces, like

mildew growing, surrounding the bones
and tendons,

thickening, turning red. Muscles
developed, and organs.

The skeleton became a cadaverous body.
Probably the

bones were becoming hollow, for

Jordan's healing talent

did not generate flesh from nothing; it was taken from the

existing substance. But in due course, a layer of skin

formed and the starving figure lay complete, the thinnest

man in Xanth.

"It has to eat," Jordan the Ghost said.

"It's too thin

to support life, so it's still a dead man."

"Then why doesn't it eat?" Ivy asked.

"Dead men don't eat. It's still too weak."

Ivy went to a nearby breadfruit tree,
plucked a loaf of

bread, and took out a slice. She held this
to the figure's

almost lipless mouth.

"That did it!" Jordan exclaimed. He floated through

the air toward the figure as if drawn by some vacuum.

The figure inhaled—and the ghost was sucked into the mouth.

"Good-bye, Jordan!" Renee cried faintly, sounding sad

for this parting. And of course it was a parting, for he

was departing the world of ghosts.

Now the body was breathing. The mouth opened

slightly, and Ivy poked in the bite of bread. The mouth

closed, and the jaws slowly chewed. At first it seemed

almost too much for the teeth to bite through the soft

bread, but soon the motions strengthened as the nourish-

ment entered the body.

She fed him several pieces, and then some fruits, and

gradually the body became more animated. The sunken

eyes opened, and one arm twitched. Finally that hand

was able to lift and grasp a piece of bread and move it to

the mouth. Jordan was feeding himself!

But time was passing, and Ivy had to return to the

castle for supper, lest the grown-ups get suspicious.

"Stanley—guard!" she ordered the little dragon, indicat-

ing the strengthening body. She plucked assorted addi-

tional fruits and dumped them down in a pile for the body

to eat. Then she went into the Castle Roogna, where she

got caught up in all the make-work adults
foisted off on

children, such as eating greens, brushing
her teeth, look-

ing at picture books, and going to bed.
She couldn't get

away to see to the important business.
Angry, she kicked

at the monster under the bed, but it was
smart enough to

skulk just out of reach.

First thing in the morning, she returned to the orchard.

Jordan was gone—but Stanley came frisking up and led

her to the former ghost. Jordan the man was now on his

feet and picking fruit for himself. He was still very thin,

but the healing elixir and his healing talent, as enhanced

by Ivy's own talent, had restored him remarkably. He

was now the shadow of his former
barbarian self, tall and

broad-shouldered and hank-haired and
big-footed, the very

outline of the model of a handsome man.
He was walking

from tree to tree, taking all the fruit he
could reach and

cramming it into his mouth, still
ravenous.

Ivy clapped her hands with childish

glee. "Jordan,

you're really alive!" she cried. Of course he had been

alive the evening before, but so thin and weak that she

really didn't think of it the same way.

"Mph sre m," he agreed through a mouthful of fruit-

cake from one of the garden's valuable crossbreed trees.

"Vut—"

"But what?"

He swallowed, clearing his mouth somewhat so he could speak more clearly. "But Renee isn't."

Ivy looked around, spying the female ghost, who hovered at the fringe of vision. "That's right. I guess you miss

her now."

"I am glad for Jordan," Renee said faintly. "He will be

able to finish his real life. I will fade away."

"No!" Jordan cried, clearing the rest of his mouthful.

"I love you, Renee. I don't want life if it means I must

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lose you! I'll become a ghost again!" He glanced back

toward the parasol tree, where the Knight's sword still

lay. He took a step toward it.

"Don't you dare!" Ivy said severely. "I went to a lot

of trouble to get you back alive! We'll just have to make

Renee alive, too."

"No, that is not necessary," Renee protested. "Jordan

deserves to live; I don't."

"But how?" Jordan asked Ivy, interested.

Ivy pondered. It was an awkward

question, the very

type that adults favored. "I'd better ask Hugo."

"Hugo?"

"My friend at Magician Humfrey's castle. Hugo's very smart."

"That's not what I've heard," Jordan

said.

"Well, he's always smart when I'm with him."

Jordan had just experienced a demonstration of her

power and began to understand. If she thought Hugo was

smart, Hugo would be smart—for her.
"Humphrey's cas-

tle— isn't that where Millie went? I

remember when she
left us thirty years ago."

"Thirty-one years," Renee said.
Evidently she was good
at figures, having a good one herself.
Naturally these ghosts
had known Millie the Ghost before she
was restored to
life.

"Millie—you mean Lacuna's mom?" Ivy asked. "She

lives in the Zombie Castle. Humfrey's castle is east."

"Yes, but that's still a long way away. It would take

a long time to go there, even if you used the gourd again."

"We'll use the mirror, silly! Come on!"
And Ivy headed

toward the castle at a brisk skip.

"But if the adults see me, they'll ask questions," Jordan pointed out.

That made Ivy pause. It was a big nuisance when people asked questions. She was coming to understand why Magician Humfrey discouraged it. "Okay. You stay here

and eat. And find something to wear."

"Oops," Jordan said, realizing that his clothing had not

revived with him. It seemed he had been so hungry that

he hadn't paid attention to other details.

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Ivy returned to the castle and went

straight to the magic

mirror. "Mirror, mirror, on the wall,
who's the cutest of

them all?" she asked rhetorically.

"You are, you ravishing little snippet!"
the mirror re-

plied, showing the image of a kiss. It
was a game they

played. As Magician Humfrey aged, he
had gotten to tink-

ering with things he had not had time for

in his senior

years and had fixed the various
inoperative mirrors, so

that now intercastle communications
were excellent. Ivy's

talent hadn't hurt, either; the mirror
responded especially

well to her attention.

Ivy made a grab for the kiss, but it
danced away, back

beyond the glassy surface where she

couldn't get it. This

mirror was a tease. "And who's the smartest of them all?"

"Now that depends," the mirror began.

"Oh, just give me Hugo."

"I thought you were working up to that," the mirror

grumped. It flickered, and then Hugo

came on.

"Hugo, I need some advice," Ivy said.

"You're real

smart, aren't you?"

"I am now," he agreed warily. He had
been through

this before.

"How can we bring a ghost back to

life?"

"That's easy. Use a reanimation spell."

Ivy considered. "The only one of those I know of was

taken away by a ghost horse four hundred years ago."

Hugo shook his head. "Ivy, you've said some foolish

things in your day, but this is worse yet.
How could you

have lost such a spell four hundred years
ago? You didn't

exist then."

"Just tell me how to bring back that ghost
horse," Ivy

said evenly.

"I'll have to ask my father. He's a brat
now, but he

likes to show off his information." Hugo disappeared from

the mirror, which played innocuous music and ran color

patterns during the interim. Soon he returned. "He says,

quote, you idiot, all you have to do is rattle some chains,

unquote."

"Okay. Tell the brat thanks." Ivy dashed down to the

arsenal, found the heaviest chain she could carry, shook

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the bones out of it, and dragged it out to the orchard. The

moat monster spooked as she hauled it across the draw-

bridge, for it made a loud noise on the wooden planks.

Panting from the effort, she brought the chain to Jor-

dan, who had already filled out some more. Apparently

Ivy's presence had accelerated his healing again. "Rattle

this!" she told him.

Perplexed, he obeyed. He took the chain and shook

it. The rattling noise filled the orchard,

causing the trees
to avert their leaves.

In a moment there was a distant
answering rattle.

"Pook!" Jordan cried, surprised and
pleased. "I'd know
that sound anywhere!"

Indeed it was the ghost horse, who was
eternal as long

as he wore his chains and avoided getting killed. Pook

galloped up, gave a startled neigh when he saw Jordan,

and practically knocked him down in greeting. "Yes, I'm

alive again!" Jordan said. "Did you miss me?"

Pook shrugged. Then he turned and neighed. There

was an answering neigh—and in a

moment Peek, the

female ghost horse, trotted up. Trailing her was a little

colt, wearing cute little chains.

"I guess you found a way to pass the time," Jordan

remarked. "But four hundred years—just when did the

stork deliver that colt?"

"Ooo, nice!" Ivy exclaimed, fascinated by the little

ghost horse. The feeling seemed mutual.

"Of course, these things do take time," Jordan decided.

"When you're a ghost. I've had some experience that way

myself. That colt could be a century old." And Pook nod-

ded.

"I'll call you Puck!" Ivy told the ghost colt, patting his pretty little mane.

Jordan checked Pook's chains. There were the tattered remains of the bag of spells. He pulled it free, and two unused white spells dropped out: a shield and a stone.

"One of these must be the reanimation spell," he ex-

claimed. "And the other—" He paused to tally them up

in his mind. "The monster-banishing-spell."

"But which is which?" Ivy asked.

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"We'll just have to try them both. But first we have

to find Renee's bones."

"No," Renee said timidly. "I really don't deserve—"

"Either you join me in life, or I'll rejoin you in death."

And Jordan's barbarian jaw was set so hard it was evident

he meant it.

"You don't understand," Renee demurred. "You

wouldn't like me alive. I never intended to live again."

"Well, I never intended to die for four hundred years,"

Jordan retorted. "That was the mischief of Threnody's

cruel lie, may she be forever damned! But now I'm glad

I did, because that's how I met you. I love you; I'll either

live with you or die with you."

"Come on, Renee," Ivy said persuasively. She loved

a good romance, even if there were aspects of it she had

been unable to fathom yet. "Don't be shy. I know my

father will make a place for you at Castle Roogna—"

"No! Never!" the ghost cried.

"But after all, you've been here for centuries!"

"That's different. Ghosts don't count. I could never

stay, in life," Renee protested, wringing her diaphanous

hands.

"Then we can live somewhere else,"
Jordan said.

"Anywhere you want. Just so long as
we're together. You
want that, don't you?"

"Oh, yes! But—"

"Then it's decided," Ivy said decisively.
"Show us your

bones."

Reluctantly, Renee led them to one more site—a so-

phis-tree. This looked like a solid, regular tree, but on

closer examination, it turned out to be a clever decep-

tion—an animal masquerading as a tree by standing on

its thick tail and spreading its limbs out, covered with bits

of green to emulate branches and leaves.
Obviously it was

an intruder in the orchard, a weed-
creature, but the effort

was so ingenious that no one had noticed
for centuries,

until now. Ivy decided to pretend not to
notice; if the

creature tried that hard and long to look
and act like a

tree, it deserved to succeed. After all, it
wasn't doing any

harm.

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Stanley sniffed out the bones and dug them up. They

were very shapely bones; obviously Renee had been a

beautiful woman, so her appearance wasn't the reason

for her reluctance to reanimate. That was fine, for, as

Jordan continued to pluck and eat fruit, he was filling out

into a muscular and handsome man. Ivy just knew they

would make a lovely couple and she was thrilled to be

able to reunite them in life. She liked the ghosts of Castle

Roogna and would be sorry to lose these two as ghosts—

but life was even better.

Jordan reached into the bag and brought out the little

white stone and shield. "These stand for life and monster-

banishment," he said. "But there's no way to tell which

is which, short of invoking one. I'll just have to guess.

At least neither one will hurt anyone."

"But—" Renee protested. "I really think you shouldn't—"

Jordan held up the white stone.
"Invoke!" he said.

There was a flash from the stone—and a pop behind them. They glanced around. "Stanley's gone!" Ivy cried, appalled.

Jordan looked abashed. "I forgot he was a monster,"

he said. "He was so helpful during the night. But I guess

a little monster is still a monster."

"But where is he?" Ivy demanded, peering around the orchard.

"Don't worry—I'm sure he's all right,"
Jordan said.

"He must have been sent to wherever
monsters live when

they're not monstering. I mean, when I
ran into the black

monster-summoning-spell, it was a
pretty healthy tar-

asque that appeared, and this spell is just
the reverse. I'm

sure Stanley will find his way home."

"He'd better!" Ivy said, poking out her lower lip. "Or

I'll give him holy whatfor!"

Jordan held up the little white shield.

"This has to be

it, by elimination. Invoke!"

Renee's bones quivered. Then the ghost was drawn to

them—and as she settled onto the pattern of bones, her

ghostly outline clarified, thickened, and became solid. In

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a moment she was a bare, beautiful woman with flowing

black hair.

Jordan stared at her, stumbling back as if struck.

"Threnody!" he cried.

"Who?" Ivy asked, bewildered.

The woman got to her feet. She had gone through none

of the agonizing stages of restoration that Jordan had; this

spell had been quick and strong. She gazed sadly at Jor-

dan. "I tried to dissuade you, barbarian," she said. "I

warned you that you wouldn't like me

alive."

"You—you substituted your bones for Renee's!" Jor-

dan cried. "You tricked me into reviving you instead of

the one I love!" Behind him, Pook snorted agreement.

Pook had never liked Threnody.

"Now how could a dead person change bones with

another?" Threnody asked with the same air of regret. "I

was always Renee—THreneedy. I just simplified my

name, so you wouldn't know."

It was obviously true. "You deceived me—even in

death!" Jordan said. "Even as a ghost!"

"Even as a ghost," she agreed, walking to a clothing

tree and making tasteful selections from it. Ivy had never

seen a better-formed woman, not excepting her mother

Irene. Even as a female child. Ivy could appreciate how

such a figure could dazzle a man's mind. Threnody spoke

again. "That was the crudest lie of all."

Jordan's prospective joy had changed abruptly to be-

wildered horror. "But—why? You had gotten what you

wanted! Why torture me even in death?"

She sighed. "I don't suppose you could believe that I

have always loved you?"

Jordan's big fist clenched so hard the knuckle cracked.

"Don't give me any more of your lies! For once in your

foul life, tell the simple truth! Why?"

She nodded as if she had expected this.
"No more lies,

Jordan. I'll just do you the favor of
getting out of your

life. You're alive now; you can make a
new life for your-

self. I'm sure any decent and lovely
maiden would be glad

to comfort a handsome barbarian like
you. You certainly

don't need anything from demon-spawn."
She completed

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her dressing and walked out of the
orchard, away from
the castle.

Jordan's hurt bafflement turned to
outrage. "Oh, no,

you don't! You can't destroy my love
twice over and just

walk away! I promised to deliver you to
Castle Roogna,

and now I will! King Dor will decide
what to do with

you!" And he ran after her, grabbed her
by her slender

waist, and picked her up. He had not yet
recovered his

full mass and strength, but he was
already a powerful

man.

"Stop that!" Threnody cried. "Put me down! I can't

go to Castle Roogna!"

"We'll see about that!" he gritted.

"There's no Evil

Magician now to kill me on the way.
Once my mission is

done, I'm through with you—but not before!"

She kicked and fought, but he carried her through the

orchard toward the castle, while Ivy and the three ghost

horses followed. Pook snorted approval; this was at least"

a fitting conclusion to Jordan's mission. Threnody would

at last pay the penalty for her many treacheries.

But as they approached the drawbridge,
there was dust

rising from the zombie graveyard to the
side. The zombies

were dragging themselves out of their
graves, trying to

protect the castle. But they were too
slow. Jordan reached

the bridge first and started boldly across
it, despite the

woman's struggles.

Castle Roogna began to shake. There were cries from

within it as startled people reacted. Still Jordan marched

forward. The moat monster forged through the water to-

ward them, but it, too, was too late. All the castle's de-

fenses had been caught off guard by this sudden

occurrence.

The shaking got worse. The water of the moat rippled.

A stone fell from a turret and crashed to the ground.

"The castle's falling, you idiot!"
Threnody screamed.

"It will kill everyone!"

Jordan stopped, amazed. "It really is!"
he exclaimed.

"I thought that was just a threat!"

Threnody managed to squirm out of his grasp and get

back on her feet. "You never did know the truth from a

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lie!" she said and ran back across the bridge. "You were

always a fool!" She brushed past Ivy and the horses, tears

on her cheeks. No one tried to stop her.

The shuddering diminished as Threnody
got away from

the castle. The threat was easing. The
disinterred zombies

paused, and so did the moat monster,
watching her depart.

"She sure didn't lie about that part," Ivy
said, shaken

by more than the castle. "But I don't

understand. Why

did she pretend to be Renee?"

"To trick me into reanimating her!"

Jordan said bit-

terly. "I would never have done it if I'd known she was

the evil Threnody."

"But Renee told you not to do it," Ivy pointed out.

"She knew I'd do it anyway."

"But when she came here to die, four
hundred years

ago, you had no spell. She thought you
were dead to stay,

didn't she? Why did she choose to
become a ghost—or

if not a ghost, why did she come here to
die?"

Jordan shook his head, bewildered. "I
guess I can't

make sense of it at all. If she had had any
change of heart,

she could have dug up my bones herself;
she knew where

they were. But she's demon-spawn; I
never truly under-

stood her nature. Her mother destroyed
her father, and

she destroyed me. Now she's taken
Renee from me, and

left me not only desolate but branded as
big a fool as a

ghost as I was in life. The cruelty other
lies just goes on

and on!" And he sat on the edge of the
bridge and put his

head in his hands.

Pook approached from one side, not
knowing how to

comfort the man who had loved so
unwisely, and even

the moat monster looked sad. The
tragedy of Jordan's

first life had seemed to be beyond
redemption, yet he had

redeemed it in death—only to have it
eclipsed by the

tragedy of his second life.

Ivy had some idea how he felt. After all,
she had just

lost Stanley Steamer. But somehow it
didn't make enough

sense to satisfy her. "I'm going to ask Hugo," she announced.

Jordan did not answer. He just sat silently, gazing into the water of the moat, his new life turned to ashes.

Ivy had been grounded for getting into
some perfectly

innocent trouble on the way to the North
Village several

days ago. This time, she knew, the
trouble was not in-

nocent. Lives had been restored—and
ruined. Castle

Roogna had nearly fallen. What
explanation could Hugo

offer that would make any of this right?

But she had to
ask.

She left the little group on the
drawbridge, returned to
the castle, and hurried through the halls.
No one noticed
her; they were all too upset about the
mysterious shaking
of the castle. Once they realized what
her part in this had
been—she quailed before a mental

picture of the giant

flying hairbrush she had encountered at the Good Magi-

cian's castle. Yet that could hardly be the worst of it.

What would the other ghosts say to her after what she

had done to two of their number?

She reached the mirror and called Hugo again. "You're

the only one smart enough to figure this

out, Hugo," she

said tearfully when his face appeared in the glass. "I'm

in a big awful lot of trouble!"

"But I'm not smart!" he protested, none too eager to

get involved in her trouble. It took no genius to know that

what Ivy considered little trouble was big trouble to any-

one else, and what she called big trouble

was apt to be

downright dangerous.

"Yes, you are!" she insisted. Hugo was stuck for it;

he changed his mind for a smarter one.

Ivy told him what had happened, and Hugo listened

intelligently. "Why, the answer is

obvious," he said as

she concluded; he explained it to her.

Ivy brightened phenomenally. "That's it!"
she ex-

claimed happily. "That solves
everything! Oh, thank you,

Hugo!" And she dashed out of the still-
confused castle.

She returned to Jordan, who remained
seated forlornly

on the bridge, in the gloomy company of
the ghost horses,

the moat monster, and a stray zombie. "I
know why!"

she cried.

"Because she hated me and wanted to
humiliate me

yet again," Jordan mumbled.

"No! Because she truly loved you,
Jordan!"

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Jordan looked up. "Some love!" he growled.

"Now listen, you dumb barbarian," Ivy told him se-

verely. "You don't know a thing about women!"

"On target," he agreed morosely.

"Threnody knew about Yin and Yang, right? That they

were just different sides of the same Magician?"

"She had to know," he said lugubriously.

"So she knew that all the evil that was in Yang was in

Yin, too, only it didn't show. Because
the whole man is

the sum of his parts. If she married Yin,
she was marrying

Yang, too—and Castle Roogna would
fall before she even

got to Yin, since she had to return there
in order for him

to win. And since they were the same
Magician, she knew

that all those bad spells that were trying
to kill you were

really from Yin as well as Yang; in fact,
maybe Yin mixed

up the white spells himself, to be quite
sure you'd be

killed, without King Gromden knowing
why. Because that

Magician liked his evil side better, but
had to do the con-

test to get Good King Gromden's
approval. So the contest

really was fixed, with no way Yin could
win. Threnody

knew that."

"Yes," Jordan agreed, seeing it. "And she helped them

get rid of me. Was that love?"

"Yes! Because she knew Yin-Yang would kill you all

the way dead if he realized she loved you. And he was a

Magician, a strong one, and he was going to be King no

matter how the contest turned out, so no one could stop

him. He would bum your body to ashes and scatter them

in the sea, or seal them in stones, or something, so there'd

be no chance at all for you ever to recover. And because

she loved you, she had to pretend she hated you, because

he was already suspicious and probably would have killed

you anyway; there was a lot of evil in him."

Jordan nodded, becoming interested.

"Yin-Yang was

evil; surely he had nothing good for me in mind. I was

just a tool for his ambition, to be used and thrown away.

Even without Threnody, he would have had to get rid of

me so no one would know how he

cheated. But Threnody

didn't have to—to make me love her,
then kill me her-

self!"

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"She didn't, not exactly," Ivy said. "She
didn't know

you before you came for her, and then
she tried to kill

you, but gradually, as she got to know
you, she got to

love you, too. She told the truth when
she said she loved

you. She had never loved any man other
than her father

before, but you proved to her she was,
after all, human.

Then she really had to kill you!"

"Huh?" Even the ghost horses and the
moat monster

and the zombie looked perplexed at this.

Ivy realized that Hugo's clear explanation was getting

a bit garbled in translation. She concentrated her mind

and tried again. "Actually, it was Yang's evil death-spell

that killed you. Then Threnody knew he'd finish the job

if she didn't act quickly. So she cut up your body and hid

the pieces very carefully to be sure she could find them

again. She knew she could bring you back to life—after

the Magician had forgotten about you. That's why she

told that cruel lie—to save you from real death! She was

lying to the Magician when she said she hated you. She

told you the truth when she said she loved you."

"I don't know—" Jordan began doubtfully.

"Remember when you were in Threnody's body, hold-

ing the evil sword, and you couldn't tell Pook the truth?"

Ivy asked. "You lied—to fool the sword, not Pook! Well,

Threnody was in a similar situation, because Yin-Yang

was more dangerous than that black sword ever had been."

Jordan brightened, then dulled again.
"But she never
did bring me back."

"Because Yang remained suspicious.
Evil people are
like that; it's the good people who are
too trusting. Yang
must have watched her all the time.

Renee told you how

unhappy her marriage was! It must have been truly ter-

rible—because she really hated the Magician and had to

pretend she loved him. Finally she couldn't take it any

more. She realized he would never give her a chance to

return to you. Not while he lived. Not before she was an

old hag. She could do nothing about him, because his

Magician's power was much more than
hers could ever

be, and also, he was the King. The
moment she made any

motion to dig up your bones, he would
have known, and

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destroyed you both in terrible fashion.
So she joined you

the only way she could—in death. She loved you enough

to die for you. She hadn't known about the ghosts at

Castle Roogna."

"Yes..." Jordan said. Wishing he could believe. "But

why didn't she tell me then?"

"Two reasons. Yin-Yang knew she was dead, but didn't

know she had become a ghost; only people with horren-

dously unresolved problems become ghosts. But when

she said anything about her identity, the Magician would

recognize her and know it wasn't over and take steps to

finish it, if only by digging up your bones and burning

them. She couldn't risk that! So, to protect you as a ghost,

she lied to you again."

"But Yin-Yang didn't live forever!"
Jordan protested.

"After he died, she could have told me!"

"No. You hated Threnody for what you
thought she

had done to you. You would have
thought it was just

another lie. You were coming to love
Renee; if she told

you, all that she could expect was that
you would hate

her—as you did when her identity was
revealed just now.

She loved you and just wanted your love
in return; her

name didn't matter to her. So she loved
you as Renee,

and you loved her, and that was enough.
Until you messed

it up by returning her to life. And then
she couldn't tell

you, for the same reason, because you
wouldn't listen,

so she just went away, heartbroken, and
I guess she'll

turn herself into a skunk-cabbage or
something and wilt

away."

"But Renee helped me Find my bones!"

"Because she wanted what was best for
you, and life

was best. If it hadn't been for her, you
wouldn't have

died before, so she helped give that life
back to you. She

felt she owed it to you, to make up for
the way she had

ruined a fine man. She didn't know you
would bring her

back, too, and didn't know how to handle
it. She had

expected you to return to life, slowly
forget about her,

and find someone new. Then she would have done the

right thing at last and made up for her cruel lies."

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Jordan considered that. "But she really didn't try very

hard to convince me."

"What use?" Ivy asked. "Your mind was closed. And

she's a proud woman. She wasn't going to beg. She never

begged in her life; she just did what she had to. So when

you rejected her—"

Jordan was stricken. "True, true! I have wronged her!"

"Well, you didn't know. You're sort of

proud, too. But

now it's all right. You can go to her!"

Jordan seemed awed. "All that she's
done—she did

for love of me! Even her crudest lies! I
was too ready to

believe in her guilt!"

"Well, so was I," Ivy said. "Until Hugo
explained it

all to me. But of course, I'm only five years old; I don't

understand about romance."

"All those centuries!" Jordan lamented.

"What Renee

told me is true; she was miserable because she could not

marry her true love—who was me! I must beg her for-

giveness !" He got up and hurried in the direction Thren-

ody had gone.

Pook started to follow, then decided not to; some scenes

were better without audiences. "I guess she'll forgive him,"

Ivy said with satisfaction. "She can change her form; she

can change her mind, too." She looked around. "Oh, I've

just got to hug somebody! You!" And she hugged Puck,

the little ghost horse. "And you." She hugged Pook, and

Peek, and even the nose of the moat monster. "But not

you," she decided, encountering the zombie.

She looked toward the orchard; did she see two figures

merging behind the trees? She realized that she would not

see Jordan again after this day, for

Threnody would never

enter the castle alive. Not with her
curse. She might be

demon-spawned, but she had love and
conscience and

surely a soul, and she didn't want the
castle to fall. The

happy couple would have to go
elsewhere, and that meant

Pook and his family would go, too. Ivy
knew she would

be very sad about that when she got over
her present

happiness.

"I suppose I'd better tell my folks about why we've

lost two ghosts and a dragon and why the castle shook,"

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she said to herself. She didn't relish the prospect, but it

was best to get it over with early.

She went inside. Things had settled down somewhat

now. Her mother was sitting pensively, while Baby Dolph

was fussing in his crib. "What's the matter. Mom?" Ivy

asked, willing to postpone the inevitable a little longer.

"He's So restless," Irene said. "I don't

know what's

the matter. I thought it was because of
the earthquake

tremor, but that's past now. I'm at my
wit's end!"

Ivy studied her little brother. She had
resented him

from slightly before the moment he
arrived at the cabbage,

but had never really looked at him. He
was an ugly thing,

sort of bald and fat and toothless and
drooly, and she

couldn't see why anyone would want to
pay so much

attention to him. But the story of Jordan
the Ghost and

Threnody the Demon-Spawned was
fresh in her mind,

and she had just had a lesson in
prejudice. If Jordan had

been ready to believe the truth instead of
the cruel lie told

to save him—

Suddenly Dolph reminded her of
Threnody. It was a

completely incongruous impression on
the physical side,

yet a profound one emotionally. Why did
her helpless,

roly-poly baby brother remind her of that
beautiful woman?

Well, there was one way to find out. Ivy

moved closer

to the crib and concentrated, enhancing the baby's qual-

ities. "What's his talent?" she asked.

"We don't know, dear," Irene said.

"Sometimes it takes

years to discover a person's magic talent, and there's no

guarantee it will be worthwhile." Irene was really worried

about that. Ivy saw. She didn't want any

child of hers to

have a poor talent.

"He's trying to do his magic," Ivy declared, trusting

her little-girl intuition. "But he can't quite do it yet, so

he's frustrated." Ivy was something of an expert on frus-

tration.

Irene smiled, not taking her seriously.
Adults could be

especially annoying that way. "Whatever
you say, dear."

Ivy continued her concentration,
knowing that some-

thing was bound to show. It always did
when she willed

it so. She was sure there was some
reason Dolph reminded

her of Threnody, and sure she could make this apparent

if she just intensified it enough.

Suddenly there was a wolf cub in the crib. "Say, look

at that!" Ivy exclaimed, pleased.

Irene looked—and screamed.

In a moment Daddy King Dor and half
the personnel

of the castle were in the room. They
were all edgy because

of the earthquake—maybe it should be
left at that?—but

it was too late. Startled by the scream,
Dolph had changed

back into a baby. "Aw, you missed it,"
Ivy said petu-

lantly. "Dolph's a changer."

Irene calmed down enough to pay attention. "A what?"

"Like Threnody. Only he's fast. He does it in an in-

stant, not an hour. He—"

"Who?"

"Threnody. That's a long story." Ivy looked again at

the baby, who was now peacefully sleeping, satisfied with

his effort. Dolph no longer looked as

disgusting. "Maybe

Dolph has demon blood in him."

"Not from my side of the family!" Irene snapped.

"I wonder if he can diffuse?" Ivy mused.

"Instant form-changing?" King Dor asked. "If he's a

werewolf, that's one thing, a minor talent. If he can change

instantly to any form, that's another."

"Oh, sure, it's any form," Ivy said with certainty. "He

just needs a little help to get it started. He's only a baby,

you know."

Dor picked her up. "I hadn't realized that," he said

with a straight face, teasing her in the nice way daddies

had. "I thought perhaps he was an adult,

like you."

"Oh, shut up. Daddy," she said, kissing him on the cheek.

Irene exchanged a glance with her daughter. "Any form?

Changing himself? That's Magician-caliber talent!"

"At least," Ivy agreed. She had discovered it, so now

it was to her credit, and the greater the talent was, the

better.

After that the discussion became animated, and Ivy

was left out of it. But she didn't mind that, either. She

could handle a few more days of neglect, until the matter

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of the ghosts blew over. It might be interesting having a

brother who could become any creature in an instant. She

could show him how to reach the high cookie jar by chang-

ing into a snail and crawling up the wall,
so they would

never starve between meals. Or how to
become a little

dragon, and breathe fire to toast
marshmallows and give

people hotfoots. The possibilities were
endless!

Yes, life was bound to get more
interesting soon.

Author's Note

In the last Xanth novel. Dragon on a Pedestal,

I used a number of puns contributed by fans, listing the

credits at the end, and suggested that this was punnish-

ment enough. But before that novel was published, fans

had sent many more puns. Some sent whole pages of

them—a veritable Pandora's Box. I used

about fifty of

those suggestions and give due credit here. But this re-

sulted in such a concentration of puns in the first chapter

that the publisher suffered pundigestion. You see, I have

many young readers, who write to me in much greater

numbers than the older ones do, but they are really not

the largest audience for Xanth. Despite appearances, Xanth

is intended mostly for adults, which may be why the kids

like it. The question was whether that plethora of puns

would alienate more people than it pleased. So—that

chapter was deleted, because it isn't good form to annoy

more readers than strictly necessary, even in Xanth. The

present version of the novel begins with what was origi-

nally Chapter 2.

But for those of you who can't live
without knowing

what was in it, here is a summary of the
missing chapter.

On the eve of her baby brother's arrival.
Ivy went to visit

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her Grandfather Trent, along with
Grundy and Stanley.

She got them all into enormous mischief,
but the timely

arrival of a package from her pun-pal

Rapunzel helped

them survive it, along with Tangleman,
who is a tangle

tree transformed into a man.

Now, though most of these puns have
been deleted,

I'm leaving their credits as originally
listed so you folk

who sent them in will know they really
were there. This

may seem peculiar—but what did you

expect from Xanth?

And those of you who remain out there,
bursting with

puns—stifle them, because there's only
so much of this

nonsense anyone can take. By the time
Lye burns into

print, I should have completed the
following Xanth novel,

and plans are inchoate beyond that, so
any puns you might

send are apt to be wasted anyway.

Are you ready? Here are the credits, real and potential,

for Lye, and if there is some overlap, it is because a given

pun may have been suggested by more than one person.

David Branson suggested deadstock, pun-pal, crab-grass,

fris-bees, demon-stration (which I modified for my own

sinister purpose), baseball bat, the night

mare being out

other gourd, air waves, outcry, and
worry wart. Andrea

DeSimone and Laura T. Maberry
collaborated to suggest

sound of mind, shadow of a doubt,
clinging vines, cat o'

nine tails, scaredy cat, dumb bells,
screaming meanies,

copperhead snake, snake-eyes, and kitty
hawk. Martin

Musick suggested the dark lantern, kitty
hawk, head-

stone, bear witness, and worry wart. As you can see, I

used three of his in a bunch, and there's a reason. I had

a request from a fan who was organizing a Dungeons and

Dragons type game using a Xanth setting: could I provide

some challenges for entry into the Good Magician's castle

that hadn't already been published, since all the game-

players had read all the Xanths already?
So I listed the

ones used in Dragon, which had not yet
been published,

and then sat down and made notes for the
equivalent

scene in Lye, which novel I hadn't even
started. I have

never-failing inspiration, which makes
me virtually unique

among writers, but this was a strain. So I
checked Mr.

Mustek's list of about ten notions,

selected three, and

built my scene around them; then I sent off the infor-

mation to the fan and later wrote that scene when I came

to it in the novel. I hope they had a successful D&D game;

I never heard. Most fan-puns I include as a courtesy; in

this case, they were a real help.

But back to work here. Greg Burns
suggested the gold

fish, silver fish, hedge hog, hem lock,
horsetail, horse

chestnut, honey comb, and golden rod.
Dave Schwartz

'had the living room; David Miles the
seeing-eye dogwood

tree; Katherine A. Lowe the bum steer;
and Bryce Cock-

son suggested the catch-your-breath.

Karen Vinyard sug-

gested that a girl be turned into a tree to
be a companion

for Justin Tree; I thought it was a good
idea, but didn't

manage to fit it in this time. Diane Le
Roux inquired why

Justin Tree didn't become a man again in
the Time of No

Magic, so that is explained here. She
also asked a number

of awkward questions about the
centaurs' aging rate—

obviously it is the same as the rate for human beings,

contrary to what Bink believed in Xanth 1—and how come

the Siren could look at the Gorgon in Xanth 2 and not in

Xanth 6? Well, I think that when the Gorgon was young,

she only stoned male creatures, but when she matured,

so did her talent, so she stoned everyone. After all, we

don't want any sexism here; everyone should suffer alike.

And other awkward questions that, um—
look, Diane, I'm

awfully busy at the moment, trying to
type a manuscript,

so if you'll just go on to the next author
in line and ask

him or her some awkward questions
instead, that's a good

girl...

Michael Saul, also focusing on the Gorgon, asks how

Dor could see her wink, in Xanth 3, when her face was

invisible. Ah, Michael, see that line over there that Diane

is standing in? Just take your place behind her, and don't

shove. (And I think I'd better wrap this up and get out

of here before those fans reach the head
of that next line

and spring those questions on that next
author. I wonder

who he is? Let's see, if it's
alphabetical... that must be

Poul Anderson of the Society for
Creative Anachron-

isms—you know, the folk who dress up
in armor and

authentic medieval swords. Yes, I'd
definitely better get

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out of here!) (Then again, maybe I should shunt those

fans to the author on the other side. That looks like Isaac

Asimov, whose Foundation's Edge is, at this writing, just

about to blast Xanth 7 off the bestseller lists. But his line

is so long that my fans will never reach the head of it.

Well, now...)

Terry Cook suggested that King Trent
turn a tangle

tree into a person. Keith Helgason
suggested both Ivy's

talent and Dolph's talent, after I had
worked them out

myself, but before the novels were
published; evidently

great minds work in similar ways.
Richard Rails suggested

the leather-strip body armor for the
warrior; that's not a

pun but a useful device. Penny Jacob suggested the dirty

mind, after analyzing her father's nature. Charles Cohen

suggested that I include elves in Xanth, and it did seem

to be about time for them. Chris McVetta described the

contact lens bush. Ginger Gibson suggested Xantha Claus.

I regret I was not imaginative enough to fit him in here,

but what do you expect from someone
named Pier Xan-

thony? And perhaps I should catch up on
an overdue

credit: I borrowed the name of a fan in
Estonia, Martin

Roogna, to use for Castle Roogna, way
back when. Mr.

Roogna says he's not sure he has
ancestry quite like that,

but who knows?

So much for the credits; let me ramble
on just a bit

more before I meander off to my next
novel. Xanth has

been quite successful as a series, making
all the bestseller

lists. It seems that ninety-nine percent of
its readers love

it; the other one percent review it,
accusing me of things

like reveling in sexism and execrable
puns. However,

Patchen Review did say: "Hostility from
serious review-

ers to Anthony is out of all proportion;
perhaps it stems

more from jealousy than lit crit." I do
work hard at what

I do; a storm came up and splattered
water through the

cracks in my study while I was typing
Lye, so I had to

prop an umbrella over my desk to keep
the page dry,

rather than interrupt my schedule. That happened to be

the scene in which Jordan is recovering from getting

stoned. No, I never get stoned myself, pun or no pun,

and that's no He; I don't believe in Zonking out my mind

for anything short of a medical emergency.

I've been writing about fifty letters a month, mostly

answering Xanth fan mail, and that interferes with my

paying writing, so I'd like to cut it down. Let me address

here some of the questions my fans commonly ask me,

so you won't have to write to inquire. Such as:

What other books are similar to Xanth?

Well, none,

really; I seem to have the execrable pun
fantasy market

to myself. But though I have not read
Asprin's Myth

series, I have met the author and
understand his puns are

almost as bad as mine, so you might try
his Myth Con-

ceptions or others and see for yourself.
There's also quite

a bit of humor in Adams' Hitchhiker's
Guide series. If

you like candy landscapes and are truly young at heart—

in the four- to eight-year-old range, I'd say—try Gruelle's

Raggedy Ann series. Moving up from there, Baum's Oz.

books are good, and Alexander's Chronicles of Prydain.

Eddings' Belgariad seems closest in tone and competence

to Xanth, but without the puns; you should like it. Then

there is Hambly's Darwath trilogy, and McCaffrey's Pern

series. My daughter Cheryl also recommends the Doctor

Who books; I don't, but Cheryl is thirteen and I'm forty-

nine, so she may know better than I do. After that you're

ready for the hard stuff; you can safely sample anything

put out by this publisher, and proceed with caution to the

offerings of other publishers. Along the

way, do try the

Elf quest comics by the Pini couple;
there seems to be a

fair overlap in readers between Xanth
and the Elves, and

these are not cheap or inferior offerings.

Why don't I write more novels featuring
Dor and Irene

as teenagers, or King Trent, or Bink, or
the centaurs,

etc.? Every fan seems to have his

favorite character and

would like to see a series of novels
centering on that one,

forever unchanging. I refuse to do this,
because in Xanth,

as in Mundania, life is not a static thing.
It keeps moving

into new territory. I'm not a formula
writer; I like each

story to be different and original within
the limits of the

larger framework. So new characters
constantly appear,

and old ones gracefully fade out. That's just the way it

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has to be, folks. Xanth has a few constants, such as the

geography, the puns, the magic, and the struggle to get

into the Good Magician's castle; usually

there is a serious

romance, and the conception,
organization, and literacy

are better than the critics choose to
perceive. Beyond

that, anything can happen.

"Dear Mr. Anthony, I'm 13 years old and
I want to

become a writer..." This is a direct
quote from a letter

I received today, as I was typing this

Author's Note, and

it is typical of a number of requests I receive. A high

percentage of my fans want to be writers, so they ask me

for advice. That's sensible, and I'm not disparaging this

approach, but it's a hellish thing to answer. I'll try to

digest it into a nutshell. First, catch your rabbit. That is,

read a lot, become familiar with your subject, learn your

syntax and spelling, and LEARN TO TYPE. Editors are

a peculiar breed; they don't know how to read a hand-

written manuscript. Go to the library and read a good

book on the subject of writing, such as one by Jack Wood-

ford, and pay attention to what it says. Then write, re-

write, re-rewrite, and revise until it's the best you can

do. Get a copy of Writer's Market or similar, find several

good prospects, and ship your manuscript to the one that

appeals to you most. In the genres of fantasy and science

fiction, Del Rey Books will consider your manuscript.

Good luck, you fool; the odds are still a hundred to

one against you. It took me eight years of trying to make

my first sale, and I was twenty-eight years old at the time.

If you are better than I am, you may do it faster. If your

interest is easy money, be advised that the average writ-

er's earnings from writing put him somewhere below the

poverty level; even if you are successful, you will prob-

ably be lean and hungry. (Now do you see why I don't

like to answer this question? I really don't like reducing

thirteen-year-old girls to tears, and no part of this is a

joke.) Oh, sure—I'm not starving, any more. But I got

lucky. You can count on the fingers of one foot the con-

temporary fantasy writers who are more successful than

I am. But it did take time and luck.

This leads into my most important advice: make sure

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you have some other source of money while you're trying

to write, such as a working spouse, so that you don't

starve. My wife worked for several years before and after

I made my first sale; otherwise I could not have done it.

Even so, it was a narrow squeak. Talent, if you have it,

is only one of a number of requirements for eventual

success; you have to be ready to absorb a fair amount of

grief along the way.

Another typical question: will I
autograph thirty-five

copies of my books if they are sent to
me? Sigh; I'd really

rather not. Even one book is a chore to
handle and reship

and costs me more in working time than
the book is worth.

I prefer to have my readers understand
what I'm saying,

rather than to dote on a confounded
signature scrawl. I'll

sign copies at conventions (lots of luck;
as a rule, I don't

attend conventions) and bookstores;
otherwise, please

leave me alone.

Will I dedicate a book to a fan? No;
There are simply

too many fans. But I am dedicating this
paragraph to Alan

Carpenter and his sister Karen.

And finally: Will there be another Xanth novel, and

what's it all about? Yes, there will be; more puns are

already piling in for it, the pesky things. It's titled Golem

in the Gears, and it's about Grundy the Golem, who rides

the monster under the bed on his quest to find the little

lost dragon for Ivy, and how he finds

true love and laugh-

ter with the lovely, lonely, long-locked
Rapunzel, the dis-

tant descendant of Jordan the Barbarian
and Bluebell Elf.

Stop! Stop! I'll never get the thing
written if sanity doesn't

return soon!

About the Author

Piers Anthony lives near the North
Village of Xanth. He and his

wife, Carol, recently arranged to buy
pan of the Gap Chasm, but

hostile magic intervened, and long-
forgotten mundane reversion

clauses interfered with all but a fragment
of it. His daughter Penny

still rides the night mare, but his
daughter Cheryl now associates

with elves instead of ogres.

Cruet Lye is the eighth Xanth novel smuggled into Mundania.

The first one, A Spelt for Chameleon, won the August Derleth Fan-

tasy Award as the best novel for the year 1977. The fifth, sixth, and

seventh Xanth novels made the New York Times bestseller list, the

last also peaking at number one on both the B. Dalton and Wal-

denbooks bestseller lists. Of course no one in Xanth pays attention

to such things, but Mundania is a strange place.