

PIERS ANTHONY

ROC AND A
HARD PLACE

A
XANTH
NOVEL



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PROBLEM

It was a nice castle, with high turrets,
solid walls, a deep

moat, and an elevated office suite whose picture window

overlooked the nearby community of nymphs. Fire

cracker plants grew around the wall, useful for starting fires

in the mornings, and the crackers tasted good too. The con-

nected orchard had pie trees of the most sinfully delicious

varieties. The mistress of the household was exactly as beau-

tiful, devoted, and accommodating as her husband desired.

A man could hardly ask for a better situation.

Except for one or two small things. 'Where is your worser

half?" Veleno muttered, looking apprehensively around.

"Don't worry," the Demoness Metria replied with a smile

as her scant clothing shimmered into nothingness. "I sent

Mentia off to see the Demon Grossclout about our other problem."

"Other problem?"

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She pretended not to hear. "Grossclout's

such an intrac-

table cuss that it should take her days to pry any kind of an

answer from him."

"That's a relief!" he said, looking more than relieved.

"It's not that I want to be critical, but—"

"But Mentia is slightly crazy," Metria finished. "And you

married me, not my worser half. But
because she did fission

off from me, being disgusted by my new
goody-goody atti-

tude after I got half your soul, we can't
keep her away. She's

the half of me you naturally don't like—
the soulless half,

dedicated to making your life half-
muled."

"Half-whatted?"

"Horsed, equined, donkeyed, asinined
—"

He kissed her. "I think I could fathom the
word if I con-

centrated. Let's make hay while the sun
shines."

She looked perplexed. "Hay? I thought
you had

something else in mind." A tantalizing

wisp of strategically

placed clothing appeared.

"I love it when you tease me," he said,
picking her up

and carrying her to the master bedroom.

She assumed the form of a nymph.

"Eeeeeek!" she cried

faintly, kicking her marvelous bare legs
in the nymphly way.

"Whatever am I going to do?"

"You're going to make me deliriously happy, you delicious creature."

She inhaled, enhancing what hardly needed it. "O, sigh, how can I escape this hideous fate?" she wailed cutely, kissing him on eye, ear, nose, and throat.

They fell together on the bed, in a tangle of limbs, faces,

kisses, and whatnot. "You are the best thing that ever hap-

pened to me," Veleno gasped around the activity. "You're

just the most wonderful, beautiful, lovable, exciting, fantastic

person in all Xanth"

"You damn me with faint praise," she

muttered, clasping

him with such ardor that description would be improper.

Another demoness popped into the chamber. "Oh, there

you are, Metria!" she exclaimed. "No wonder I couldn't find

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you around the grounds. I have brought
you what you most

vitally need."

Veleno stiffened, but not in the way he
desired. "Oh, no!"

Metria looked up from what was
occupying her. "At the

least opportune time, of course. Do you
mind, worser half?

I happen to be busy at the moment."

Mentia peered closely. "Oh? Doing what?"

"Making my husband deliriously happy, of course, as only a demoness can."

"When not being annoyingly interrupted," Veleno muttered.

Mentia peered again. "Sorry. I thought that was a grimace

of pain on what's-his-name's face. Are you sure you are

doing an adequate job, better half?"

"Of course I'm sure!" Metria said indignantly. "He has

not complained once in seven hundred and fifty times during

the past year."

"Oh? What about that groan he groaned just now?"

"That was when you appeared!"

"Well, if you feel that way, I'll just depart with what I brought, and never never return."

"Oop, no!" Metria cried with alarm. "I

need it!"

Her husband, somewhat bemused by the interruption, put

in two more words. "Need what?"

"Never mind," Metria said. "It's a soldier matter."

"A what matter?" he asked. '

"Secluded, cloistered, isolated, remote,
detached, ob-
scure—"

"Private?"

"Whatever," she agreed crossly.

"But what could be private from your
husband?" he asked
somewhat querulously.

"Yes, whatever could you be suspiciously concealing from your trusting spouse?" Mentia echoed.

"Can't we have this discussion some other time?" Metria demanded, frustrated.

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"Of course, dear," Mentia agreed. "I'll pop back in dur-

ing the next century." She began to fuzz out.

"No, wait!" Metria cried. "Now will do after all."

"Why, how nice," Mentia said, smiling with something

more than good nature. "But don't you

think you should

introduce us first?"

"Whatever for? He knows who the mischief you are, from

ever since you returned from that madness with the gargoyle."

"Yes, but he may have forgotten. I've been away a whole

hour, you know."

"That long?" Veleno inquired with resignation.

Metria gritted her teeth. There was nothing half so annoy-

ing as half a demoness! But she knew her worser half would

not give over until she had her half-baked way. "Veleno,

this is the Demoness Mentia, my soulless worser half, who

represents what I was like before I got half-souled, except

that she has no problem with vocational."

"With what?"

"Idiom, language, speech, expression, locution, utterance, articulation—"

"Words?"

"Whatever. Instead, she's slightly crazy."

"Yes, it's my talent," Mentia agreed proudly.

"And, Mentia, this is my husband Veleno, formerly a

nymphomaniac, but he hasn't touched a nymph since I mar-

ried him and took half his soul."

"Yes, but hasn't he looked at nymphs out the window,

with a glint in his—?"

"Pleased to meet you," Veleno gritted, drawing free a

hand and extending it. "Now will you begone?"

"Charmed, I'm sure," Mentia said,
forming a pair of pin-
cers on the end of her arm.

"Ixnay," Metria murmured wamingly.
"Mortals are pro-
tected from harm in this castle."

"Oh, that's right," Mentia agreed,
disappointed. The pin-
cers became an ordinary hand, which
shook Veleno's hand.

"That was one of the conditions of the restoration. Well,

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now that your mortal man and I have been properly intro-

duced, I will give you what you most need, Metria."

At last! But Metria still wasn't easy about this. "Veleno,

dearest, why don't you take a little snooze for the moment?"

Metria suggested dulcetly, covering his eyes with her hand.

"But what could you need that I have not provided?" he

asked, frowning.

"Yes, I'm sure he will be really, truly interested in this

very important secret matter," Mentia

said, sitting on the

edge of the bed, so that her thigh touched Veleno.

"Oh, all right," Metria said, really crossly.

"Have no concern, dear, I will explain it excruciatingly

clearly," Mentia said. "What I bring is information to help

abate your incapacity, so you won't be a

failure anymore."

' "What incapacity?" Veleno demanded.'

'My wife has made

me deliriously happy almost
continuously since we married."

"That is the problem," Mentia said. "She
has helped you

with the chore of summoning the stork
seven hundred and

fifty—" she peered again "—and a half

times this year, and

more times during the prior year when I
was too busy to be

with her, unfortunately, and yet the stork
has not gotten the

message. She is clearly inadequate in
this department."

Veleno pondered, slowly realizing the
truth of this state-

ment. "That hadn't occurred to me," he
said. "I was too

delirious to think of the stork. But how could it fail to get

the messages?"

"That is precisely what Metria wants to know," Mentia

said. ' 'Whatever could be wrong with her to bomb so badly

in so many attempts? Whatever could make her such a sore

loser? Especially when I could so readily have—"

"Nuh-uh!" Metria and Veleno said together.

"So she sent me to ask the most intelligent creature she

knows, the Demon Grossclout, for advice," Mentia contin-

ued without concern, "and he instantly delegated me to con-

vey that essential advice to her. Naturally I delayed not half

a whit to honor that stricture. Her failing
is simply too serious
to permit any delay."

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"Thank you so much, Worser," Metria
snarled.

"You are so welcome. Better. I knew

you would want to

attend to your washout without delay."

Mentia's form

fuzzed, and assumed the likeness of a giant lemon, then a

cooked turkey. "I am thrilled to have been of so much help."

"You haven't been of much help yet," Metria said grimly.

"What did Grossclout say?"

' 'Oh, that. He says you should go ask
Good Magician

Humfrey."

"But Humfrey charges a year's service
for a single An-

swer!" Metria protested. "I don't want to
pay that! That's

why I went to Grossclout."

"Grossclout did add a few words,"
Mentia said. "I be-

lieve those words were mush-head,
cheapskate, and serve her

right;'

"That's Grossclout, all right," Metria
agreed. "He still

holds a grudge just because I chose to
sand my nails in his

dull magic classes at Demon U."

"Actually, that was I who did that,"
Mentia said, smiling

reminiscently. "Back when we were inextricably bound to-

gether as alternate aspects of a single demoness. Those were

the days! But I did not see fit to remind the Professor of

that." She paused reflectively. "I might be able to remember

a few more of his words, if it's really important," she offered

helpfully.

"Thank you so much, no," Metria said. "I think I have

fathomed his altitude."

"His what?"

"Manner, disposition, temperament, bent, inclination, penchant—"

"Attitude?" Veleno inquired.

"Whatever," Metria said crossly.

"From the height of his eminence,"
Mentia agreed.

"Well, if you need no further assistance
or advice on tech-
nique—"

"None!" Metria said.

"Too bad." Mentia faded out.

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"You want the stork to deliver a baby?"

Veleno inquired

as Metria resumed activity.

"Yes. It's what married couples do.

Raise children."

"But demonesses don't get babies unless they want them."

"Precisely. I want one." She looked away. "I suppose I should have told you, and I can't blame you for being angry."

"But I'm not angry."

"You aren't? But it might interrupt the delirium, and give

you the solid obligation of raising a child."

"Exactly! I want a family, now that it occurs to me."

Metria gazed at him with adoration tinged substantially

with relief. "Wonderful!"

Now he was thoughtful. "The stork must figure that our signals aren't serious."

"Which is ironic, considering how strong we have made them. I've just got to get the stork's distention!"

"The stork's what?"

"Observation, mindfulness, notice,
focus, application—"

"Attention?"

"Whatever. What do you think I should
do?"

He considered. "I think you should go to
ask the Good

Magician."

"But then I would have to leave you alone for a year."

"Surely you could return on occasion. It might mean you

could make me deliriously happy only three or four hundred

times in that year, but I think I can survive that deprivation.

After all, I want you to be happy too."

"You dear wonderful man!" she exclaimed, and pro-

ceeded to do the impossible: to make him twice as delirious

as before.

But before she went, she checked around the premises, de-

bating with herself, because her worser half had decided to

unify for the occasion, now that there

was a chance her life

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would become interesting again. 'Do I
really want to do

this?' Metria asked herself.

'Why not? It isn't as if you have anything
important to do

around here.' Mentia had fissioned off in disgust when Me-

tria married, got half a soul, and fell in love, in that order.

Her worser half claimed to have been on a grand adventure

with a gargoyle, and helped save all Xanth from madness,

but that was surely an exaggeration. She had merged as soon

as Metria stopped being nauseatingly nice to her husband.

'If you had half a soul, you would have a different atti—

attitude.'

'Praise the Demon X(AJN)<h that I have not been corrupted

with any portion of a soul,' Mentia agreed. Their dialogue

was silent because it was internal; no one else could overhear

it. She pointed with their left hand.

'There's a sand worm;

step on it.'

'I will not,' Metria retorted. 'That wouldn't be nice.' She

lifted the worm carefully with their right hand and inspected

it. It was, of course, made of sand; if direct sunlight or water

touched it, it would powder or dissolve away. So she put it

back in a dry shaded section, and watched it wiggle off.

'Disgusting,' Mentia remarked to no one else in particular.

'But you can redeem your demonly nature by squishing that

June bug.'

'No way. Kill a June bug and the year loses its most ro-

mantic month.'

Mentia grimaced with the left side of their face. 'I'd rather

have you half-bottomed than half-souled.' She looked

around, using Metria's left eye. 'I see that go-quat tree is

fruiting.'

'So is the come-quat tree,' Metria agreed. 'Veleno likes

them, when he's coming and going.'

'Which is he doing when he's alone with you?'

'The opposite of what he wants you to be doing.'

But Mentia could not be shamed. 'Here is my favorite: the grapes with an attitude.'

'Sour grapes,' Metria agreed. 'Your kind.'

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'So why are you dawdling around here, instead of getting

moving to the Good Magician's castle?'

'I'm just not sure it's right to leave my husband on half

rations.'

"There's all the food he needs, growing right around the castle here.'

'Half rations of delirium.'

'Oh.' Mentia looked around again, until the left eyeball was oriented completely to the side.

'Let's make it easy,
then. See that winged nut tree?'

The right eye swiveled. 'Of course. The
nuts are almost
as nutty as you are.'

'If the right wing nut flies first, we stay
right here. If the
left one flies first, we pop over to see
the Good Magician.'

'That would be a crazy way to make such an important decision.'

'Precisely. Agreed?'

Metria sighed. It was as good a way as any. 'Agreed.'

They watched the two nuts quiver. The

right one spread

its wings. Then suddenly the left one
lurched into the air and

flew across to the nearby bolt tree. 'How
romantic,' Mentia

said, amused by what the boldest bolt
did with the nut.

'Why don't you find it romantic when
Veleno and I—'

'Once is amusing. Seven hundred and

fifty times is droll.'

'Not when you're in love.'

'I'm glad I'll never be in love. Let's be on our way.'

Metria couldn't dawdle any longer, even if it did seem

somewhat nutty or screwed up.

The Good Magician's castle looked ordinary. Its wall and

turrets were set within a sparkling circular moat, which in

turn was inside a ring of mountains. Neither would be any

problem for a demoness to pop across.

But Metria was unable to pop across. When she tried, she

bounced off an invisible barrier. 'Dam, I forgot!' she swore.

'The old fool has a shield against demonly intrusion.'

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'That's what you consider swearing?
That's not even wor-

thy of the Juvenile Conspiracy.'

Worse, she was unable to fly or dematerialize in this vi-

cinity. Obviously the Good Magician had improved his de-

fenses in the past century or so. 'We'll have to plod across

the way mortals do.'

Metria plodded. As she approached the ring of mountains,

she saw that they were in the shape of huge loaves of sugar.

Fortunately the slope was not too steep to prevent her from

climbing. It was a pain, having to leg it instead of pop or

float it, but she wasn't going to let it balk her.

She crested the mountain—and abruptly lost her footing

and slid helplessly down toward the moat. Here the sugar

was loose and granular, offering no purchase. Soon she was

unceremoniously dumped into the moat.

And promptly booted out again. She sailed back over the

mountain and landed on the ground beyond. The grass

hopped out of the way before her derriere struck; it was the

grass hopper variety.

"That's boot rear!" she exclaimed aloud.

"The moat is

filled with it."

'I think I begin to see a pattern here,'
Mentia remarked.

'I think I'll leave you to your challenges.'

'Oh no you don't!' Metria retorted. 'You
talked me into

this nuisance; you'll help me see it
through. Besides, I don't

trust you with my husband while I'm
away. You might

promise him heaven, and give him hell,

and I'd get the
blame.'

'Curses! Foiled again.'

Metria tackled the mountain again. From
the outside it was

solid sugar, easy to climb. As she
approached the crest, she

trod extremely cautiously, but found no
break in the steep

sandy slope. The moment she stepped on that, she would be

dumped into the moat with a kick.

This was definitely a challenge. That meant that not only

would she have to struggle to find her way past this one,

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there would be two more beyond it.
"What a pity!" she
swore in frustration.

'What a pity!' her worser self mimicked.
'That half soul
has denatured you.'

'So it made me into a nice person,'
Metria retorted. 'So
what's wrong with that?'

'It's undemonly: I'll bet you can't even say poop.'

'Of course I can say peep!'

'Point made.'

'Well, if you're so demonly, how do you propose to get

us across this sweet mess?'

Mentia considered. 'The mountain is sweet, but the moat isn't. It likes to kick donkey.'

'So it boots rear. That's its nature. Tell me something I

don't already know.' Metria rubbed her booted rear; if she

weren't a demoness, that would really be smarting along

about now.

'Maybe if we made it sweet, it wouldn't have so much of a kick.'

'Make it sweet? But how—' Then Metria saw the point.

'Let's get busy.'

She formed her hands into scoops and began scooping

loose sugar down the slope. Soon she managed to start an

avalanche. Sugar slid grandly down and plunged into the

moat.

After she had scooped as much of the mountain into the

water as she could, she found that she was able to descend

without sliding. She-had taken the edge off the slope. She

went down and stood at the bank of the moat, which now

looked somewhat soggy. She poked a finger into it, and

tested a drop of soggy water on her tongue. There was only

a little bit of tingle. Sure enough, she had pretty much de-

natured its kick.

However, the moat was now a mass of sickly sweet muck.

The mere touch of her feet if it was
enough to make her feel

somewhat sick, as if she had overeaten
or overimbibed. Since

demons neither ate nor drank, she knew
this was more magic.

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She would be very uncomfortable if she
waded through all

that, even if she didn't get her rear

booted out.

So she walked around the edge until she came to the draw-

bridge, which was in the down position. She had not been

able to reach it before because the steep slope had dumped

her where it chose to in the moat, but now it could not stop

her from reaching it. She had surmounted the first challenge.

This becomes dull,' Mentia said. 'I'm going to take a nap.

You handle the next challenge, and I'll handle the third,
okay?'

'Okay,' Metria agreed. She wasn't concerned about her

worser self, as long as she knew where Mentia was.

She set foot on the planks of the moat—
and something

buzzed up before her, barring the way. It
seemed to be two

dots, like an incomplete ellipsis, except
that they were up

and down instead of across. "What in
tintinnabulation are

you?" she demanded.

"I don't understand: What in what?" the
dot formation

asked.

"Bells, ringing, music, jangle,
discordance, melody—"

"Try again: None of those words make
sense," the dots

said angrily.

"Damnation, hell, abyss, underworld,
hades, inferno, per-

dition—"

"Let me guess: Tarnation?"

"Whatever," she said crossly.

"You think you're cross?" the dots demanded. "You're

positively sweet, compared to me: I'm as angry as anything

gets."

She peered at the dots. "Just exactly
what are you, BB
brain?"

"I'm an angry punctuation mark: an
irritated colon," the
dots said. "And I am going to make you
pause before you
continue."

"How long a pause?"

"Just this: As long a pause as it takes."

"As it takes to what? To refresh?"

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"I thought you'd never ask: As it takes to
make you give

up and go away."

"I get it! You're another challenge."

"Too much of a challenge for you: Give it up."

Metria tried to walk around the nasty colon, but it moved

over to shove her into the moat. She tried to jump over it,

still being unable to fly, but it sailed up to intercept her, its

dots glowing fiercely. She tried to crawl under it, but it

dropped down and made a pooping sound that warned her

back. There was just no telling what it might do. She tried

to push straight through it, but it got positively spastic and

she had to desist.

' 'How am I supposed to get past you?"
she demanded,

annoyed.

"Either go away or bring me some relief:
Those are your

options."

"Relief?" she asked blankly.

"From my syndrome: I am not irritable

by choice, you

know."

"But how can I bring you relief?"

' "This is for you to figure out: Cogitate,
you infernal crea-

ture."

"Do what?"

"Think, ponder, consider, contemplate, reflect: Work it

out yourself, Demoness."

Metria thought, pondered, considered, contemplated, re-

flected, and cogitated, though that last made her a bit queasy.

But it baffled her. "It's an edema to me," she confessed.

"Speak plainly, demoness: A what?"

"Puzzle, maze, riddle, conundrum,
mystery, paradox,

poser, problem, confusion, obscurity—"

"It didn't sound like any of those things
to me: Try

again."

"What did it sound like to you?"

"Enemy, energy, eczema, enervate,
Edam: enough of this
nonsense."

"Enema?" she inquired sweetly.

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"Whatever: It hardly matters." Then the colon did a dou-

ble take, its dots vibrating. "Enema: Maybe that's the an-

swer!" It flew off to a private place to seek relief.

Metria quickly marched across the bridge. She had con-

quered the second challenge.

'Your turn, Worser,' she told her worser

half.

'Good thing you couldn't think of the word "enigma."

Sweet dreams. Better.'

'Demons don't dream.'

'I was being facetious.'

'Being what?'

'Humorous, droll, amusing, comical, funny—'

'I was being funny too, idiot!' Metria snapped, and retired from the scene.

Mentia stepped off the bridge and came to a pile of blocks.

"What are you?"

"We thought you'd never ask," they replied. "We are

building blocks." They moved, clomping along to form a

square around her. Then more blocks climbed on top of the

first ones, and others climbed on top of those.

"What are you doing?" Mentia asked,

bemused by this
activity.

"We are building blocks, of course. We
are building a
building for you."

"But I don't want a building. I'm just
passing through."

"That's what you think!" the blocks

chored as they

reached a level above her head, then
started crossing the top,

forming a dome.

"Hey, wait a minute!" she protested.

"Construction waits for nobody,
blockhead!"

"Who are you calling that?" she

demanded indignantly.

"I'm an airhead, not a blockhead." Her head fuzzed into

vapor.

But the blocks were silent. They had shut her in.

She realized, belatedly, that this was the third challenge.

First the boot rear moat, then the irritable colon, now the

building blocks. She had to get out of this sudden chamber.

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She pushed at the wall, but it was firm; the 'blocks had

locked into place. She checked the ground, but it was hard

rock. Ordinarily nothing like this could inhibit any demon,

but the ambient spell around the castle

made her resemble

an (ugh!) mortal. She discovered that she did nbt have a lot

of experience handling purely physical things. But her mem-

ory of being sane and sensible in the Region of Madness the

year before gave her the assurance that she could adjust to

this problem, too.

She explored all around the chamber.

Dim rays of light

filtered in through the crevices between blocks, so that it

wasn't completely dark. She tried to squeeze through a crev-

ice, but she lacked even this power now. It was most frus-

trating.

'I wonder what Gary Gargoyle would have done?' she

asked herself. 'He was a massive

powerful stone creature

who was transformed to a weak fleshly man for his adven-

ture, so he had a real problem;

'Will you be quiet while I'm trying to rest?' Metria de-

manded crossly.

Mentia thought, pondered, considered, contemplated, re-

flected, and cogitated as Metria had, and finally came up with

a feeble notion: Maybe she needed to think differently. She

knew there was always a way to handle the challenges, and

usually it required ingenuity rather than strength. So she

should use her mind rather than her body.

But that was what she had been trying to

do, without get-

ting far. What use was it to think
endlessly, if the only notion

it produced was to think some more?

'Not more, differently,' she reminded
herself.

She considered the chamber again. She
had pushed at one

block and it was firm—but maybe there
were others that

were loose. She might push one out and
crawl through the
hole.

She put her hands on one block near the
bottom. It was
firm. She tried another. It was firmer.
"Poop on you!" she
said, berating it, but the block wasn't
fazed.

She continued to check, but all the lower blocks were firm.

This evidently wasn't the answer. She remained completely sealed in.

She sat down, leaned against the wall, and gazed at the

dust motes dancing in the thin beams of light. The motes

seemed to have a current, moving across

the chamber. Where

were they going? She focused closely, forming a very large

and powerful eyeball, and traced their progress beyond the

rays of light. But her effort was wasted; they didn't go any-

where. They just brushed up against the wall and slowly

settled down toward the floor.

Then she had a brighter notion. The

question wasn't where

the motes were going, but where they were coming from!

What was making that gentle draft? She traced that way, and

discovered that the air was coming from one of the blocks

in the ceiling dome. How could that be?

She put her hand up to that block—and her fingers passed

right through it without resistance. It was

illusion! She had

given up too soon; had she pushed
against every single

block, she would have discovered that.
This was the way

out.

She put both hands up into the hole, then
hauled herself

up. In a moment her head was outside the
building. She

scrambled and got out, then rolled head

under heels to the

ground. She had navigated the third challenge!

"Why hello, D. Mentia," a voice said.

Startled, Mentia got to her feet. There stood a rather nice

young woman. "Do I know you?"

"I think so. You brought Gary Gargoyle

here last year.

I'm Wira, Humfrey's daughter-in-law."

"But I never came up to the castle,"
Mentia protested.

"How could you have seen me?"

Wira laughed. "Not with my eyes, of course. But Gary
spoke well of you."

Mentia felt that she was getting in over her depth. 'Metria!

Wake up. We're in the castle.'

ROC AND A HARD PLACE 17

Metria "joined her. 'Just like old newspapers,' she re-

marked, looking around.

'Like old whats?'

'Ages, eons, epochs, eras, centuries—'

'Times?'

'Whatever. It has been nigh ninety years
since I managed
to sneak in here.'

"Hello, D. Metria," Wira said.

Both of them jumped. "How did you know me?" Metria demanded.

"Father Humfrey said you would be arriving with your other self. Now I will show you into the castle."

'That girl's eerie,' Mentia muttered.

'She must have developed other senses,'
Metria agreed.

"True," Wira agreed.

The two selves ceased their dialogue
and followed the girl

into the castle. There they were met by a
woman of indeter-

minate age. "Mother MareAnn, here is
the Demoness Metria

and Mentia," Wira said.

'Mother MareAnn?' one of them asked silently.

"I am Humfrey's fifth and a half wife," the woman ex-

plained. "I am taking my turn with him this month. I was

his first love and last wife, because of a complicated story

that wouldn't interest you. My husband

will see you now.

Wira will take you up to his study."

Maybe a half wife was like a half soul:
enough to do the
whole job.

"This way, please," Wira said, showing
the way. She

moved up a narrow winding stair
without faltering; obviously

she knew the premises well.

The study was a gloomy little chamber crowded with

books and vials. 'This hasn't changed a bit in ninety years,'

Metria remarked.

"Of course it hasn't, Demoness,"
Humfrey grumped from

within. "Neither have you, except for that split personality

you recently developed."

"Nice to meet you, too, again.
Magician," Metria said.

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"You don't look much more than a day
older, either." Of

course, she knew he had elixir from the

Fountain of Youth,

which he imbibed to keep himself about a century old.

"Enough of this politeness. Ask your Question."

"How can I get the stork to take my summons seriously?"

"That will be apparent after you complete your Service.

Go to the Simurgh."

"Go where?"

"Your mind may be addled, Demoness,
but not your hear-

ing. Begone."

"Now, just a urine-picking instant.
Magician! You can't

just—"

"Please, don't argue with him," Wira
whispered. "That
only aggravates—"

"Pea," Humfrey said.

"I certainly will not!" Metria declared.
"Demonesses

don't have to, and even if I did, I
wouldn't—"

"As in vegetable," Wira said. "Pea-picking. Now, please—"

"But he hasn't Answered me!" Metria protested. "And

no one can fly to the Simurgh, not even a demoness. I de-

mand a proper Answer!"

"After the service," Humfrey muttered, turning a page of his giant tome.

Mentia made a sudden internal lunge and took over the body. "Yes, of course," she said, and followed Wira out of the study.

"You're so much more sensible, Mentia, even if you don't

have half a soul," Wira remarked.

"I am more sensible because I don't have half a soul,"

Mentia replied. "My better half is befuddled by love and

decency. I am practical, especially in crazy situations like

this. We'll just have to walk to Mount Parnassus and see

what the big bird wants."

"But she isn't there," MareAnn said,
overhearing them as

they reached the foot of the stairway.

"That's just her sum-

mer retreat, when the Tree of Seeds is
fruiting."

ROC AND A HARD PLACE 19

"But then we don't know where to find
her."

"Ah, but I can summon an equine who knows the way."

"That's her talent," Wira explained. "She summons any-

thing related to horses, except for unicorns."

"Why not unicorns?" Mentia asked.

"She once could summon them too, but when she went

to Hell and married Humfrey she lost her innocence." Wira

blushed, for it was indelicate to refer openly to matters

shrouded by the Adult Conspiracy. There might be a child

in the vicinity. "Now they ignore her. It's very sad."

Mentia had little sympathy. "My better half never cared

about innocence until she got half-

souled. She can't get near

a unicorn either. So summon a horse who knows the way."

MareAnn led the way out of the castle and across the

moat, which now looked quite ordinary. She stood at the

edge of an ordinary field that was where the sugar mountain

had been. Already a group of things were galloping across

the plain.

Mentia stared. There were four creatures, each with only

one leg. Two had narrow heads, and two had thin tails. Their

single hoofs thudded into the dirt in irregular order, clop-

clop, clop-clop, stirring up clouds of dust behind. "What are

those?"

"Quarter horses, of course," MareAnn said. Then, to the horses: "Whoa!"

The four clopped to a halt before her. Each quarter had a

silver disk on the side, with ribbed edges. On the front two

disks, heads were inscribed; on the rear two, big birds with

half-spread wings.

"Fall in," MareAnn said.

The four creatures fell together, and suddenly were re-

vealed as the four quarters of a regular horse, now complete.

Wira stepped up to pet him, and he nuzzled her hand until

she produced a lump of sugar. "Too bad you can't ride Eight

Bits," Wira remarked.

"That's his name?" Mentia asked. She was a little crazy

herself, but this was more than a little crazy. "Why not?"

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"Because he doesn't trust strange adults. He just falls

apart and scatters to the wind's four quarters. But he does

know the way, so you can follow him."

"Maybe he should just tell us where to go, and we'll go

there ourselves," Mentia said.

"No, he can't speak," MareAnn said. "He can understand

simple directions, but that's the limit. Anything more puts a

strain on him, and—."

"He falls apart," Mentia finished,
resigned to a tedious

journey.

But Metria pushed to the surface. "No,
there's a better

way. How does Eight Bits feel about children?"

"Oh, he likes children," MareAnn said.

"Especially if

they are a quarter the size of adults. But —"

Metria dissolved into smoke, then re-formed as the cutest,

sweetest waif of a child anyone ever beheld. Even Wira was

surprised, realizing that something was different. "I know

Mentia and Metria, but who are you?"

"I am Woe Betide," the waif said. "I have a quarter

soul—half of Metria's—and I love horses, and I will just be

so pathetically sad if I can't ride this one that I'll dissolve

in pitiful little misery." She wiped away a huge glistening

tear with one cute sleeve.

MareAnn exchanged half a glance with Wira, because it

was one way: The sightless young woman had no half to

return. "Maybe so," she agreed. She lifted the tyke to the

four-quartered horse.

"Oh, goody-goody!" Woe Betide
exclaimed, clapping her

sweet little hands together. "Let's go."

But Wira wasn't sanguine about this.
"We shouldn't send

a little child on such a wild ride alone,"
she said.

"I'm not really a—" the tyke began, but then one of her

selves stifled her before the horse could hear the rest.

MareAnn nodded. "Perhaps we can find an adult com-

panion for her. I think there is a demoness who also knows

the way, who still owes Humfrey part of a Service."

"A demoness!" Woe Betide exclaimed.
"They aren't
trustworthy!"

Again half a glance was exchanged.
"You are surely in a
position to know," MareAnn agreed.
"But when performing
a Service, a person is bound to do it
properly. She Will not

be released until you are safely there."

The child's face made a cute grimace of resignation. "Oh,

all right. Who is it?"

"Helen Back."

"Helen Back!" the child cried. "O woe betide me! She's

the worst creature in demondom. Do you

know what she
does?"

"Yes," MareAnn agreed. "But she will
be bound not to
do it for this mission."

"I hope you're right," the child said,
looking truly woeful.

MareAnn snapped her fingers, and

smoke formed. It

swirled before her. "Am I released?" it inquired.

"After you accompany horse and rider safely to the Si-

murgh," Wira said.

The smoke oriented on the pair. "That's no horse—that's

four quarters. And that's no child—that's
—"

"Woe Betide," MareAnn and Wira said firmly together.

The smoke sighed mistily. "So it's like that. Okay, let's hit the trail."

Woe Betide squeezed the horse's sides with her precious little legs. "Go, Eight Bits," she said.

And suddenly they were off, in a cloud
of dust that left

the two standing women coughing.

SIMURGH

The quarter horse ran like the wind, but
there was ev-

idently a long way to go. The Land of

Xanth whizzed

by in the manner land did, moving back
magically

fast nearby and slowly farther out,
because distant regions

felt less urgency about such things. Woe
Betide didn't know

enough geography to tell what direction
they were going, and

was too young to really care.

"I wish I had a lollipop," she said.

The cloud of smoke appeared, floating beside her and

keeping the pace. "What flavor?"

"Mustard gas."

A hand formed, bearing a yellow pop that was giving off

vile yellow fumes. "Done."

The child snatched it and sniffed its fumes. She coughed

and retched, and her darling little face turned blotchy purple.

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"Perfect!" she wheezed. "This stuff would smother an army."

"So what did you ask the Good Magician?" the cloud

inquired. "Not that I care."

"How to make a signal the stork will heed," Woe Betide

said as her voice crept back into her ravaged throat.

The horse's ears twitched. Fracture lines appeared along

his body, as if he were about to come

unglued.

"Because when I grow up in an umpteen million years,

I'll need to know!" Woe Betide exclaimed. "Of course, right

now I'm still a cute innocent little child, so am protected by

the Adult Conspiracy, and wouldn't ever even dream of

knowing anything like that. So the Good Magician hasn't

Answered me yet, but when the time comes, he will."

Eight Bits relaxed, and the fracture lines faded. All crea-

tures of Xanth knew the importance of maintaining the Adult

Conspiracy; no child could be allowed to learn the secret of

summoning the stork so that it would bring a baby. Or the

Words of Evil Power that would scorch

vegetation and bum

maidenly ears red. Or anything that was
Too Interesting for

a child's own good. Of course, children
didn't much like the

Conspiracy, but such was the magic of
its nature that the

instant they grew up, they joined it.
Demons honored few

rules of decent behavior, but they liked
conspiracies.

The cloud of smoke that was Helen Back seemed to find

the situation amusing. "Are you sure you're a child?" she

inquired. "It seems to me that I almost remember you in

some other form, much older—"

"And what did you ask Humfrey?" Woe Betide asked

quickly.

"Where to find a summer salt," Helen answered. "I col-

lect exotic salts, and I have winter, spring, and fall salt, but

could never find summer salt. I looked all over, from here

to—" She paused. "But of course, I can't use that word

before an innocent little child."

And Metria couldn't reveal her true status while riding the

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quarter horse, lest he sunder into fourths.
The demoness was

teasing her as only such an infernal
creature could, trying to

trick her into betraying her age.
Fortunately she already knew

about such travels: The demoness had
gone from here to

Helen Back. And she always brought

what was most needed,

at the least opportune time. Or what was least needed, at

exactly the right time. Woe Betide had tried to mess that up,

by asking for a horrible flavor of lollipop, but it hadn't

worked, and she had had to eat the awful thing.

"So after you finish with me, the Good Magician will tell

you where to find that salt," Woe Betide said. "Then you

can sit below the salt and be a creature for all seasons."

"Something like that," Helen agreed. A face formed in

the cloud. "You certainly seem mature for an itty bitty in-

nocent child."

"It's all illusion. I'm not what I seem."

Helen couldn't argue with that. They continued for a while

in silence as the scenery went by. Far mountains shifted

grandly, showing first one side, then another. Forests sprang

up, grew tall, then quit. For a while they followed a paved

road. Every time it came to an intersection with another road,

it puffed itself up into double the size, trying to impress

them. But it didn't work, because the other roads did the

same. Sometimes the crossing roads contested for power,

throwing out masses of curving lanes. The object seemed to

be to touch the other road where it couldn't touch back, but

evidently the roads had been at this contest for a long time,

because every lane connected. Some intersections looked like

diamonds, and some like cloverleaves,
and some like masses

of spaghetti. Sometimes a road
chickened out and tunneled

under the other, or bridged over it, but
often there were still

confusingly outflung lanes trying to
score.

Helen got bored with this, so resumed
dialogue. "What

does the Good Magician have to do with

the Simurgh?"

"Wish I knew. Where exactly does she live?"

"I thought you'd never ask. She lives in Oaf."

Woe Betide was puzzled. "In what?"

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"Oaf. It's a mountain range that encircles the Earth."

"A mountain of earth?"

"Not exactly. It's made of a single emerald. It's pretty."

"I suppose so. The Simurgh must like pretty things."

"The Stmurgh likes the whole of everything. But since

she already has everything she needs or wants, what could you do for her?"

"I wish I knew," Woe Betide admitted. "Maybe she's getting ready to replace the universe again."

Now the cloud was startled. "What—with all of us in it?"

"Well, maybe it gets dull for her, after a while. Or dirty.

She might prefer a fresh new one."

"But what would happen to all of us?"

"Maybe we'd all be squished into nothingness. Does it matter?"

Helen considered. "Probably not. But the

human folk

might mind." Then the cloud stretched.
"I'm going to take

half a snooze. Wake me if anything
interesting appears." The

cloud settled into a featureless blob.

Woe Betide was left to her own
thoughts. This really was

a pretty easy trip. In fact, it hadn't been
all that hard to get

into the Good Magician's castle. True,

Humfrey had

grumped at her, but he had always been grumpy. Had it been

too easy?

The more she pondered, the more the suspicion grew:

Humfrey had wanted her to get in to ask her Question. Be-

cause he had something for her to do. Maybe he owed the

Simurgh a favor. Maybe the Simurgh had asked for the ser-

vices of a demoness. So Metria was it.

She sighed. So be it. She would do what she had to do,

so she could prevail on the stork to deliver a baby to her. It

was probably a fair deal.

The horse slewed to a halt. There was a massive chain

across the road, so that they could not pass. Woe Betide was

tempted to float over it, but feared the horse wouldn't un-

derstand. So she dismounted and stepped forward to inspect

the nearest links.

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Each one was in a flat oblong shape,
with printing on it.

In fact, each had a single letter of the
alphabet. Woe Betide

walked along beside the chain, reading
the letters. They

spelled out: THIS is A CHAIN
LETTER. IT HAS BEEN THREE

TIMES AROUND THE WORLD.
BREAK THE CHAIN AND YOU WILL
BE SORRY. JOE SCHMOE BROKE

THE CHAIN AND NEXT DAY HE
CAME DOWN WITH CROTTLED
CREEPS. JANE DOE PRESERVED
THE CHAIN, AND SHE WON GREAT
WONDERFULS. REMEMBER,
YOU MUST PASS THIS CHAIN MAIL
ON WITHIN 48 HOURS, OR
ELSE.

Woe Betide considered. Was this
interesting enough to
wake Helen for? The demoness would

be really annoyed if

she missed something good. This seemed good. So she de-

cided to let Helen sleep.

Still, she needed to get past this chain. She didn't have

anything against it, but it was in her way, and she had a

mission to attend to.

Could she go around it? She looked to either side, but the

chain extended as far as she could see. That was because it

went around the world three times. Could she climb over it?

Maybe so, but Eight Bits couldn't; Could she squeeze under

it? Again, she might, but the quarter horse would probably

fragment with the effort.

She shrugged. She doubted that a chain belonged across

the road anyway, whatever it might claim. She also doubted

that this was one of the Good Magician's challenges. It was

probably just routine mischief. So she would break it. She

formed her little hands into big firm pincers and clamped

them on half a link. She concentrated her demon strength.

The key was to use the magic of narrowness: a really thin

edge could cut through the most solid substance, if pushed

hard enough.

The letters on the links changed. Now they said

ooooowww!! But she continued her

pressure, until she

crunched through her link.

Then she went after the other half link. It
tried to wiggle

away, but she cuffed it hard enough to
stun it. Cuff links:

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She remembered that advice from somewhere. She set her

pincers and started crunching.

YOU'LL BE SORRY! the letters spelled.
WHO BREAKS THE

CHAIN IS DOOMED. AAAAAAHH!!

The half link snapped, and the chain fell apart. The way

was clear.

"What's this?"

Woe Betide jumped. There was the cloud, with a horren-

dous head of hair on it. "Nothing interesting," she said.

"What are you wearing?"

' 'My Hell Toupee, of course. I picked it up on one of my

trips to—never mind. I saw what you did: you broke the

chain. You had better put on protective headgear too, before

that chain gets organized to dump a century's worth of bad

luck on you."

"What kind of toupee?" the child inquired, interested.

The cloud did a hasty reconsideration.

"A Heck Toupee.

That's what I said, I'm sure."

"Let's just get out of here," Woe Betide said, knowing

she had put Helen on the defensive. As long as she remained

in this child form, the other demoness was at a disadvantage.

That was wonderful!

She mounted Eight Bits and zoom! they were off again.

She glanced back and saw the chain writhing angrily, but it

couldn't catch up with them. She had broken the chain and

gotten away with it. That gave her demonly satisfaction.

They passed a big fisin' plant by a river, surrounded by

electrici trees. The plant was busy

hauling old-dim and nu-

clear fish from the river and using them to fertilize the trees.

Some of the trees extended out across her route, so she

slowed. They hummed with power, and that made her a bit

nervous; what were they up to?

She saw a huge fat boxlike creature trundling along be-

neath the trees. She sought to guide her

mount past it, but it

blocked her way. "Child, you are too small to be riding a

big horse like that," it said from its monstrous peg-toothed

mouth. "You should go home."

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"Why don't you go home?" Woe Betide

asked boldly,

because there was something about this creature she didn't

much like.

"Because I never follow my own advice. I'm a hippo-

crate. I tell others how to run their lives, but none of that

applies to my own life."

That confirmed her dislike. She wanted to get away from

the creature, but it still balked her. Then she saw a smaller

animal hopping along. It had long legs and was extremely

furry. She recognized it as a hare. They were very popular

with bald folk. So she extended one arm infinitely long and

grabbed it. She plopped it on her head, so that it made her

aspect entirely different. In fact, it made her look like a hairy

little troll.

The hippo-crate had been looking around. Now it looked

back at her, and did a double take.

"What happened to the

innocent little girl I was lecturing?" it asked.

"How would I know? I'm not innocent."

Disgruntled, the hippo waddled off,
looking for the child,

because it was much easier to tell
children what to do than

trolls. She was free to ride on.

After a further interminable ride and
float, they came to a

huge green mountain. It rose from the
plain in a series of

faceted cliffs, each one glinting brightly.

"Well, this is it," Helen said. "Qaf.
Climb to the top and

there will be the Simurgh. I've done my
bit, and will be-

gone." The cloud vanished in a dirty
noise.

Woe Betide dismounted. She went to
inspect the surface

more closely. It did indeed seem to be
pure emerald. The

mountain was one big jewel.

The sun came out from behind a cloud.
Suddenly all the

facets reflected dazzling beams. One
struck Eight Bits. The

horse, startled, fragmented into quarters,
and the quarters gal-

loped off in at least four directions.

Woe Betide sighed. She was on her
own.

She pondered, and concluded that since she no longer had

ROC AND A HARD PLACE 29

the quarter horse, she could resume her adult form. She

puffed into smoke, and re-formed as Metria.

She could simply pop up to the top of the mountain, but

she suspected that the Simurgh would not appreciate that.

The same went for flying up there. In Xanth, the Simurgh

forbade all flying in her vicinity, and it was probably the

same here. So the ascent would have to be done the tedious

way.

Metria formed her hands and feet into big sucker disks.

Then she applied these to the flat surface of the nearest facet

and began to climb. The suckers popped as she pulled them

free, and squished as she placed them higher. It was another

type of magic: Suckers clung to polished flat surfaces. At

this rate a few hours would get her to the top. Then she

would find out what all this was about.

She heard a rumble. She extended her neck, making it

swanlike, and rotated her head to look backwards.

There was a floating shape, and it didn't belong to Helen

Back. It was Fracto Cumulo Nimbus, the worst of clouds.

She knew this was significant mischief.
Fracto was a de-

mon himself, who had specialized in
meteorology, and had

a sure nose for trouble. If someone had a
nice picnic, Fracto

came to wet on it. if someone had an
important mission

requiring him to travel rapidly, Fracto
came to turn the forest

trails to slush ruts. If someone camped
out on a warm night,

Fracto came to bury the landscape in colored snow. And if

someone happened to be climbing a sheer emerald cliff,

Fracto came to make the surface slippery and blow that per-

son away.

Of course, there were ways of dealing with the evil cloud,

and Metria understood them well. She could become a cloud

herself, and float impervious to the weather. She could even

generate some lightning bolts of her own to shoot back at

him. But she wasn't sure that wouldn't count as flying, which

would annoy the Simurgh. Fracto, of course, didn't care

whom he annoyed—or rather, did care, so as to be as an-

noying as possible. But he wasn't here to ask any favors of

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the big bird. So that was out. Once she had turned herself

into a stink horn, which had exploded in Fracto's midst, ren-

dering him even more insufferably stinky than usual. But

again, that would require her getting into the air, and it didn't

seem to be worth the risk.

She could avoid the storm entirely by becoming so diffuse

that she could float through the substance of the mountain.

But again, that might be construed as a type of flying. So

the safest course seemed to be to stick to what she was doing:

laboriously climbing the slope, hoping she could hang on

despite the cloud's worst efforts.

Fracto was happy to accept this challenge, knowing that

she was pinned. He puffed up voluminously, crackling with

lightning and thunder. His center turned so dark, it was like

swirling midnight, and his edges swelled outward like gross

blisters. The whole of him was like a giant face, with two

patches of glowing eye-clouds and a
huge round mouth

which blew out icy drafts. "liiii've gooot
yooooou!" he

howled, blowing smoke at her.

Rain splatted on the cliff, and water
coursed down past

her. It was cold, and soon would turn
icy. Her sucker hold

was firm, but how would she be able to
make any progress

up the slippery rest of it?

Now Fracto huffed and puffed, and blew a gale at her. It

was tinged with sleet. She pulled in her head so as to protect

it, but then couldn't see where to go.

This was no good. Before long Practo would succeed in

dislodging her, and then she'd be falling, and she would ei-

ther have to fly or crash. She couldn't actually be physically

hurt by a fall, but it would be an embarrassment that would

hardly be kind to her pride. She had to find a way to nullify

the ill wind.

She glanced again at the inky depths of the center of the

storm, and got a notion. What she needed was a light—a

night light. The kind that folk used when they wanted to

conceal their nefarious activities.

She extended her head and formed it into a lamp with a

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dark bulb. She turned on the bulb, and darkness radiated out

from it. Her night light was in operation.

She turned up the power. The darkness expanded. Soon it

covered the entire facet of the mountain she was on. She was

hidden within its obscurity.

Fracto realized what was happening. The storm turned fu-

rious. But Fracto could no longer see her, so didn't know

precisely where to blow most fiercely.
Oh, he was getting
frustrated!

The cloud tried another ploy. He turned
the draft so cold

that the coursing water became a sheet of
ice, overlaid by

slush. But under the cover of her night
light she formed her

nose into a prehensile snout similar to
that of the mythical

Mundane elephant monster and made a hard hammer at its

end. She tapped at the ice and cracked it away, making a

clear place for her sucker foot. Now the wetness didn't hurt;

in fact, it made the seal secure. The cloud couldn't hear her

tapping, because of the almost continuous rumble of thunder.

She made it to the edge of the facet and
crossed the slight

bend to the next. The storm still raged,
but her night light

protected her. When a gust of wind
touched her she hunkered

down and waited for it to pass, then
resumed her tapping

and moving. Fracto could not stop her.

At last the evil cloud got disgusted and
stormed away. She

had beaten him, again, and it was just as much of a pleasure

as ever. She dissolved her night light into smoke, and re-

sumed better progress.

The sun ventured to show its face again, no longer fearing

the wrath of the storm. The emerald mountain dried, forming

pretty mists all around it. They rose like unicorn tails, shining

in the slanting sunlight of the closing day. She paused to

appreciate the beauty of the scene, and realized that before

she got half-souled, she had never had that experience. Now

she could enjoy things for their art, instead of for what she

could use them for. "If I could get rid of my soul right

now," she said aloud, "I wouldn't do it." And that was one

remarkable confession, for a demoness.
She felt wonderful.

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'Disgusting,' Mentia muttered, awakened
by the feeling

coursing through her. Then she tuned out
again.

The peak turned out to be a mere
foothill, part of a larger

mountain. And, amazingly, the larger
inner segment of the

mountain wasn't green. It was light blue,
definitely a distinct

shade, beautifully complementing the
green rim. She had un-

derstood that the whole thing was
emerald, but either she

had misunderstood, or those who said it
was all emerald

hadn't seen the inner mountain.

Aesthetically, this was even

better, so she wasn't complaining.

Metria had to work her way down into
the cleft-valley

between peaks before starting up the
next. And there she

paused. She had heard something. More
mischief?

No, it was a woman or a girl, a human

being, lying be-

tween the slanting green and blue facets
of the cleft. She had

groaned, faintly.

Metria considered. Though she had used
the night light,

she preferred to climb by daylight, and
there was not a whole

lot of day left. Should she get involved
with this human

being, and perhaps get delayed too long?

'Of course not,' Mentia said. 'You have already wasted

enough time discouraging Fracto. You don't have all day left,

you know.'

That decided her. If her worser half was against it, it must

be the right thing to do. She walked over to the woman. "Can

I help you?" she inquired.

The woman lifted her head. Long dark hair framed a

lovely face. "I hope so," she said, wincing. "I sprained my

ankle, and don't think I can walk alone."

'I knew it! She's an albatross. If you help her, you'll never

get to the top of the mountain.'

Metria ignored her worser selfs
objection, with an effort.

' 'Maybe I can help you get home. Who
are you, and where

do you live?" She put her hands on the
woman's shoulders

and helped lift her to her feet.

"Thank you so much. I'm Mara. I was out
bird-calling,

and got lost in a storm and some sort of
weird darkness. I

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fell, and couldn't get up, and when it cleared—well, I don't know where I am now."

So it had been Metria's fault, because the storm had been after her, and she had used the darkness to oppose it. She

certainly had to help Mara find her way home. Her con-

science would allow nothing less.

'If you hadn't gotten half-souled, you wouldn't have a

conscience!' Mentia griped.

"Maybe I can help you cross this green foothill mountain,

so you can be on the plain," Metria suggested. "I'm a de-

moness, you see, and—"

"A demoness!" Mara cried, affrighted.

"Don't worry; I have half a shoe."

"Half a what?" Mara inquired, looking down at Metria's feet.

"Footwear, leather, tongue—" She paused. "I mean es-

sence, characteristic, quality, animation, spirit—"

"Soul?"

"Whatever," she said crossly.

Mara was reassured. "Oh—then you have a conscience,

and can be halfway trusted."

"Yes. If I were an unsouled demoness, I
wouldn't have

bothered with you at all."

"True. What's your name?"

"Metria. D. Metria."

Mara extended her hand. "I am glad to know you, De-

moness Metria. But I don't live on a plain, so I don't think

going over that green mountain will help. I normally do my

bird calls in the forest and glade, where they are comfortable.

That's my talent, you know."

'Fat lot of use doing bird calls is here,' Mentia sneered.

Metria made another effort to ignore her.

' 'Then maybe if

we walk along the crevice here——"

"I suppose," Mara agreed dubiously.

"But I'm sure I

didn't walk far before I hurt my ankle."

Metria supported Mara, enabling her to walk reasonably

if wincingly well. They followed the cleft around the slow

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curve of the mountain. But all they saw was more mountain.

"I don't think this is the way," Metria said.

"I think you're right," Mara agreed sadly.
"I don't know

how I came to be here. I must have
gotten caught in a mag-

ical vortex or something. Maybe you had
better leave me

and go on about your business."

'Take her up on that!'

"No, that storm and darkness were
because of me, so I

should help you get unlost. All I can
think of is to bring you

with me to the top of the mountain.
Maybe the Simurgh will
help you."

"The Simurgh! Isn't that the big bird who
has seen the
universe die and be reborn three times?"

"The same. I have to perform a service
for her. So if you
don't mind coming with me—" /

"Oh, I don't mind! I'd love to see the Simurgh. It Would

be the experience of my life. But—"

"There is always a "but"!"

"But you'll have trouble climbing," Metria finished.

"Let's see what I can do about that. Suppose I form myself

into a long ladder against the slope;
could you climb that?"

"I suppose, if didn't have to hurry, so I
could favor my
ankle..."

'I knew it!' Mentia said silently. "This
will take forever
minus half a moment.'

Metria feared she was right. But her half conscience

wouldn't let her go. She formed herself into an extendable

ladder, and extended herself up the sloped blue facet until

she reached a ridge she could hook on to. She formed a

mouth at the foot. "I'm anchored. Come on up."

Mara put her hands and good foot on the

rungs, taking

hold. Then she tried her weak-ankled foot, winced again, but

was able to put some pressure on it. Her hands took up

enough of her weight to make it feasible.

Fairly reasonably soon Mara reached the top and looked

around. "Why, this is just another foothill," she exclaimed.

"There's a yellow mountain beyond."

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Startled, Metria formed an eyeball on a stalk and looked.

It was true: This was just another crest, higher than the green

ridge, but lower than the yellow one ahead.

She formed a mouth and sighed. "Hold on."

She drew up her latter section, and extended her fore-

section, so that the ladder disappeared behind and appeared

before, leaving the top section, where Mara perched, un-

changed. When she reached the blue/yellow cleft, Mara

turned around and made her way down the rungs. Then Me-

tria shrank the ladder, and got ready to

extend it up the fac-

eted yellow slope. It was now getting close to dusk.

"We'll never make it up before nightfall," Mara said.

"You had better leave me and go alone."

'Listen to her, dope!'

"No, it wouldn't be right." Then Metria

had a notion.

"Suppose I make an escalator?"

"A what?"

"A moving structure, automatic increase,
dangerous

clause, elevator substitute, forming steps
—"

"Stairway?"

"Whatever. So you could ride up faster."

"Why, that's a wonderful idea! But do you have the

strength to carry me like that?"

"I think so. It's just a matter of leverage."

So Metria extended herself to the next crest, hooked on,

and Mara got onto the bottom of the

ladder. Then Metria

moved her rungs up, and hauled the woman fairly rapidly to

the top. "This is almost fun!" she exclaimed.

But when they looked from the top, there was another

mountain ahead. This one was pink. It was very pretty, but

dusk was closing.

They got more efficient. This time
Metria simply whipped

her rungs over the top, and Mara almost
slid down the other

side. Then they mounted the pink slope
—and encountered a

white, almost colorless one beyond.

"I hope this doesn't go on forever," Mara
said. "I fear

I have become a real burden to you.
Maybe you should

Just—"

'Listen to her!'

"No," Metria said firmly. "This would
have been as long

a journey alone. We're much higher than
we were." Indeed,

they could see the yellow, blue, and green ridges below, like

so many shelves, though they hadn't been able to see the

higher ridges from below. "It has to end somewhere." ,

"You are very kind."

'You are very foolish!'

They went on. Beyond the white ridge
was a deep red

one—and this was the final one, because
they could see its

rounded peak, atop which perched a
giant bird, silhouetted

against the fading light. The Simurgh, at
last!

They escalated down the white slope,
and up the red one.

But as they came within hailing distance

of the big bird, the

bird spread her wings and flew to an adjacent peak rising

from what they now saw was a very long mountain range.

Of course it had to be, to circle the world. The Simurgh had

never even noticed them!

Metria focused an extended eyeball on the distant bird.

Then she looked down at the endless

colorific ridges below.

It would be an awful job to descend and traverse all those,

and then to ascend to where the bird now perched—and what

guarantee did they have that the Simurgh would wait for

them? To her, they were just insects.

"Maybe if I did a bird call," Mara said.

'Oh, great! Now we'll just serenade the birds!'

"Well, whatever you wish," Metria said, dispirited. She

seemed to be on an impossible mission, because she couldn't

even get the attention of the one she was supposed to perform

a Service for. Had Humfrey sent her on a wild swan chase?

'Wild what?' Mentia asked.

'Waterfowl, heron, egret, gannet, crane, albatross, canvas-

back, duck—"

'Gander?'

'Whatever.'

Meanwhile, Mara did her bird call. She made a series of

melodic, sweet, piercing, chirping sounds. She was really

quite good at it; it sounded just like some exotic bird.

The Simurgh took wing and flew directly toward their

peak. WHO CALLS ME? her powerful

thought came.

Metria formed a mouth so it could drop open in amaze-

ment. Mara's talent wasn't to imitate bird calls, but to call

birds—and she had just called the Simurgh herself!

"Uh—I—I—" Mara began.

YES, OF COURSE. BEGONE.

Mara vanished.

"Hey!" Metria exclaimed. "That isn't right!"

'Shut up, fool!'

BY WHAT DEFINITION,
DEMONESS? Now the giant bird

loomed close. Her feathers were like
veils of light and

shadow, and her head bore a crest of
fire. The beats of her

enormous wings were like waves of
mist. She was an over-

whelming presence.

Metria was seldom cowed by anything
in the natural

world, but this was supernatural. She
dissolved into smoke,

and re-formed in her approximately
natural approximately

human shape. "I was trying to help her.
You have no right

to banish her just like that! I don't care
who you are, it isn't

right."

YOU QUESTION ME? Now the great
bird came to light on

the tip of the red peak, her mighty talons
digging into the

glossy stone as if it were wood.

'Let it go, idiot!'

"Yes! Bring her back!"

THERE IS NO NEED.

'Silence, imbecile! She'll destroy you.'

"Yes!" Metria cried, responding to both

the Simurgh's

query and her worser halts warning.

The enormous head turned, one eye
bearing on her. BE AT

EASE, GOOD DEMONESS. I ACCEPT
YOU FOR SERVICE. THE

GOOD MAGICIAN CHOSE WISELY.

'Last chance, stupid! Stifle it.'

But Metria was beyond sensible restraint. "Well, I'm not

ready to give service! Not to any creature who does that to

an innocent person. Mara never harmed you; she wanted only

to go home. I was trying to help her, because—"

The Simurgh twitched one wing-feather.

Suddenly Mara

was back, exactly as she had been before. "Let it be, Metria;

I'm done here."

"You're safe?" Metria asked, half-stunned.

Mara smiled. "As safe as a figment can ever be." She

vanished again.

'See? She doesn't really exist. You
irritated the big bird

for nothing, moron!'

NOT so, WORSER SELF, the Simurgh's
thought came, this

time stunning Mentia, who had thought
her thoughts were

hidden. HER CONSCIENCE HAS
SERVED HER WELL.

Parts of this were beginning to settle into haphazard place.

"This was all a—a test? The woman, the storm, the chain?

Like the Good Magician's castle?"

HE GAVE YOU TOKEN
CHALLENGES, BECAUSE HE
WANTED

YOU TO PERFORM THIS MISSION. I
VERIFIED YOUR FITNESS IN

MY OWN FASHION, AS YOU NOW
UNDERSTAND. I REQUIRE A

PERSONAGE WHO IS INVENTIVE,
DETERMINED, AND COMPAS-

SIONATE.

Metria worked it out. "First a mere
physical obstruction

or two, of no particular consequence.
Then a personal threat

that needed to be dealt with. Then a
small trial of conscience.

Just to make sure I could do the service you require."

EXACTLY, GOOD DEMONESS. I AM CAREFUL ABOUT THOSE

TO WHOM I ENTRUST IMPORTANT TASKS. I REQUIRE ONE WITH

THE POWERS OF A DEMON AND THE CONSCIENCE OF A SOULED

PERSON. YOU WILL DO. DO YOU HAVE ANY QUESTIONS BEFORE

COMMENCING?

'Don't ask any, dunce!'

' 'This mountain—I thought it was supposed to be one big emerald, but—"

YOU ARE OBSERVANT, GOOD DEMONESS. IT IS EMERALD, OR

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MORE CORRECTLY, BERYL, THE
TYPE OF STONE OF WHICH EM-

ERALD IS BUT ONE SHADE. THE
WHITE IS ORDINARY BERYL,

THE BLUE IS AQUAMARINE, THE
YELLOW HELIODOR, THE PINK

MORGANTTE, AND THE RED
BIXBYITE, THE RAREST BUT FOR

ONE. •

"One?" Metria asked somewhat stupidly.

BLACK BERYL. The Simurgh twitched her head, and a bag

appeared in her beak. TAKE THIS. The bag dropped to Me-

tria's involuntarily outstretched hands.

She opened the bag. It was filled with glistening black

disks. "What am I supposed to do with this?"

THESE ARE SUMMONS TOKENS.
YOU WILL SERVE ONE ON

EACH PERSON OR CREATURE OR
THING NAMED, AND WILL

GUIDE THOSE WHO NEED IT TO
THE NECESSARY SITE.

Metria had never felt so stupid in her
existence. "Neces-

sary site?"

THE NAMELESS CASTLE. THAT IS

WHERE THE TRIAL WILL BE.

"Trial?" She still had not caught her mental balance.

ROXANNE ROC HAS BEEN
INDICTED AND WILL BE TRIED BE-
FORE A JURY OF HER PEERS A
FORTNIGHT HENCE. YOU WILL
SERVE SUMMONSES ON ALL
PARTICIPANTS: TRIAL
PERSONNEL,

WITNESSES, JURY. YOU WILL SEE
THAT THEY ARE PRESENT AT
THE CORRECT TIME. THAT IS
YOUR SERVICE TO ME.

"But Roxanne's a decent bird. What did
she do?"

THAT WILL BE MADE EVIDENT IN
THE COURSE OF THE TRIAL.

"And how do I know whom to serve the

summons on?"

EACH BEARS THE NAME OF THE
SUMMONEE.

"But suppose they don't want to come?"

THAT WILL NOT BE A PROBLEM.
EACH PERSON MUST KNOW-

INGLY ACCEPT THE SUMMONS,
AND ACKNOWLEDGE THIS TO

YOU BEFORE YOU DEPART.

"But—"

'Give it a rest, dope! You are trying her patience.'

TRUE, WORSE SELF. The great eye oriented on Metria

again. YOUR INFORMATION is NOW SUFFICIENT. PERFORM

YOUR SERVICE, GOOD DEMONESS.

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Metria realized that she had been dismissed. She started
to change into her ladder form.

YOU MAY POP ACROSS TO XANTH.

"Thank you," she said, relieved, and
popped off, carrying
the bag of tokens.

3

MYSTERY

Metria popped across to Xanth, to her
home castle,

where she made her husband deliriously
happy

enough to leave him in a trance for several days.

Then she considered. She realized that there could be a good

many summons tokens in the bag, and it might take time to

use them all up, so she had better get them efficiently or-

ganized. She opened the bag and spread the glistening black

beryl disks on a table.

Sure enough, there were thirty tokens,
and each was in-

scribed with a name. Most of the names
were familiar, but

some were obscure, and some amazed
her. For example, her

old nemesis Demon Professor
Grossclout was on a chip.

What in Xanth could he have to do with
this? She turned

over the disk, and on the other side it
said JUDGE. Oh, of

course; that was the perfect role for him.
Another chip bore

the name of the Simurgh herself; on the
back it said WITNESS.

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She could have served that token at the
outset, saving herself

a difficult trip. Then she reconsidered:
She might need to

consult with the Simurgh if she couldn't

find one of the peo-

ple to summon, so she should save the
Simurgh's own token

as a pretext for that occasion. So she put
that one at the end

of the line.

One token was blank. That was
interesting. Whom was it

for? Or was it a mistake?

Then she got marginally smarter, and turned over all the

tokens, classifying them by assignment. There was one for

Prosecutor, and another for Defense, and others for Bailiff,

Special Effects, and Translator. Translator? She turned that

one over. It was Grundy Golem. That figured; he could trans-

late anything spoken by any living thing, including plants.

Who was Special Effects? The Sorceress Iris, mistress of

illusion. That figured too. Someone had chosen these roles

well. Since it must have been the Simurgh herself who

marked the tokens, this was no surprise; she was, after all,

the wisest creature in all Xanth.

But why did she want Roxanne Roc put on trial? Metria's

limited direct experience with the Simurgh suggested that she

was a fair-minded creature, and Roxanne was a good bird,

quite loyal to her mission. In fact, she was doing a service

for the Simurgh herself, in the Nameless Castle—where the

trial would be. Was this the way the Simurgh rewarded her?

That didn't seem to make sense.

Well, there was one fast way to find out.
She would serve

Roxanne's summons first, and ask her.
Then she would go

after the other important participants in
the trial, and finally

the Jurors, who were the biggest
category and would prob-

ably be a nuisance to run down. Her
schedule was coming

clear.

She put the tokens back in the bag, and formed a knapsack

to hold the bag. Then she popped over to the Nameless Cas-

tle.

This was a quaint medieval edifice begirt with towers, par-

apets, turrets, battlements, embrasures, moat, glacis, pen-

nants, and all the standard accouterments. There were only

one or two things different about it: It was made of solidified

vapor and it floated high in the air. In fact, it was built on a

cloud, which seemed like an island in the sky. From the

ground it looked just like an ordinary cumulus. For some

reason, few folk knew of it.

She walked up to the main entrance and knocked on the

door, because it wouldn't be polite to enter unannounced,

and besides, there was a spell that prevented unauthorized

demon entry. In a moment there was a loud questioning

squawk from the interior. "I'm the Demoness Metria," she

answered. "Here on business."

The door creaked open, and she walked in. The interior

hall was elegant in the usual manner, with finely set cloud

stones for the floor, and carpets hung on the cloud walls.

Though the Nameless Castle was made of vapor, it was sur-

prisingly strong, and could withstand all the things a castle

was expected to withstand. Enchanted

cloudstuff was light,
not weak.

She came to the vast central chamber.
There was an enor-

mous nest of marbled granite, and on the
nest sat Roxanne

Roc, a bird so big she could swallow a
normal human person

without chewing. Just about the
Simurgh's size, in fact, but

not as authoritative or beautiful in

plumage. Roxanne was

mostly shades of brown. She had been assigned by the Si-

murgh several centuries ago to hatch a special stone egg, and

was still at it.

Metria floated in. "Roxanne, I have a summons for you,"

she said. "But F.d like to know—"

The big bird opened her beak.
"Squawk!"

Oops. She couldn't understand roc-speak. She could give
the big bird the token, but that wouldn't satisfy her; she
wanted to know what this trial was all about. How could she
talk with the roc?

The question brought the answer:

Grundy Golem. His

name was on a token, as Translator. So she should summon

him, and use him to translate for the roc.

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"Be right back," she said, and popped off to the Golem

residence.

Grundy Golem, Rapunzel, and their seven-year-old daugh-

ter Surprise lived in a tree house, actually a cottage industree.

They were a small family, because Grundy could be picked

up in one ordinary human hand, and Rapunzel could assume

any size she wished, so preferred to match him. Surprise did

too, for now. So Metria matched their

scale, so as to fit in

their residence.

"Why, D. Metria!" Rapunzel exclaimed, spying her, ex-

actly as if glad to see her. The truth was that just about

nobody was glad to see a demoness, but Rapunzel was beau-

tiful in body and spirit, an ideal complement to the mouthy

golem. Her distinguishing trait, apart from her niceness, was

her infinitely long hair, which assumed various colors as it

coursed down across her body toward the floor. "To what

to we owe the pleasure of this visit?"

Rapunzel had succeeded in doing what was almost im-

possible: She made Metria feel guilty. So she hedged. ' 'Um,

could I talk to Grundy?"

"Of course." Rapunzel lifted her long hair out of the way

and called, "Dear! There's someone here to see you."

Grundy walked into the room. He was a fully living crea-

ture, but still bore the aspect of his origin as a rag and wood

construction. He spied Metria. "That's not someone!" he

snapped. "That's Metria, the most mischievous nuisance in

Xanth, who can't even get a word right."

This was more like it. Metria affected a serious mien.

"Grundy Golem, I have an enjoin for you."

"A what, you ludicrous excuse for a spirit?"

"Bid, request, invitation, proposal, solicitation, petition,

demand—"

"Summons?"

"Whatever," she said, smiling as she handed him his to-

ken. "Take that, you little crawl."

This time he chose to ignore the miscue.

"What am I

being summoned to?"

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"The trial of Roxanne Roc."

"That big bird? The worst thing she ever did was annoy

the Simurgh by innocently flying too close to Parnassus.

Why is she on trial?"

"That is what I would like to know.

Come with me and

we'll ask her."

Grundy nodded, not really annoyed by the situation.

"Bound to be an interesting story here," he said. "It should

be fun translating for whatever weird creatures get hauled in.

But what about my wife? I don't like leaving her out of it."

"I have a disk for her too," Metria said, producing it.

"She's up for jury duty." She handed it

over.

"But what about Surprise?" Rapunzel inquired as she studied her token.

"She's not on my list. Maybe this concerns something adult, and she's underage."

"But I could become overage," the little

girl said brightly.

"If I had to."

"No, dear," Rapunzel said immediately.

"You must save

your magic for when it's really needed,
and not waste it for

something that would probably bore you.

You can stay with

Tangleman while we're gone."

"Goody!" the child agreed. Tangleman had originally

been a tangle tree, transformed into a jolly green giant man

in the course of a censored chapter; his vegetable mind was

somewhat simple, so he got along well with children.

"Actually, the trial is a fortnight hence," Metria said. "So

the Jurors don't have to report to the

Nameless Castle until

then. But I'd like to have Grundy come to help me talk with

Roxanne now."

"You got it, Demoness," Grundy agreed enthusiastically.

"Say, didn't you get married or something? Why are you

involved in this?"

"I got married, got half-souled, and fell in love, in that

order," Metria agreed. "Now I'm trying to get the stork's

attention. But Humfrey sent me to the Simurgh, and she's

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requiring me to do this. I pop back home every so often to

make my husband deliriously happy."

"I know how that is," Grundy said, glancing briefly at

Rapunzel, whose hair formed momentarily into a heart shape

framing her body as she winked back at him. "Well, let's

get a wiggle on. Take me to Bird Brain."

Metria picked him up and popped back to the Nameless

Castle in the sky. She could do this now, because the castle

door remained open, making a small hole in the protective

spell. They arrived at the same spot she had vacated in the

central chamber, before the nest.

"Roxanne Roc, I have come to serve you with a Sum-

mons," Metria said formally.

As she spoke, Grundy squawked.
Actually he didn't need

to, because Roxanne understood human
talk. It was others

who couldn't understand her. The roc's
near eye widened.

She squawked back.

"She says she can't go anywhere,"
Grundy translated.

"She has an egg to incubate, and mustn't
let it get cold. It

is due to hatch any year now. Simurgh's orders."

"This summons is from the Simurgh," Metria said, and

Grundy squawked. She nipped it at the huge bird.

Roxanne caught it in her beak, displaying surprising dex-

terity. She set it down on the rim of the nest before her, and

focused one eye on it. Then she used one monstrous claw to

flip it over, and perused the other side. She squawked.

"What's this about being the Defendant?" Grundy trans-

lated. "She says she hasn't done anything wrong. In fact,

she has hardly been out of this room in almost six hundred

years, and has guarded the egg faithfully

throughout. Is this

a cruel hoax. Demon Smoke?"

"All that with one squawk?" Metria asked, bemused.

"Those were her exact words?"

"Well, I sanitized what she called you. It was actually—"

"Never mind." Metria was familiar with

the golem's pro-

pensity for stirring up trouble. Roxanne had probably spoken

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politely. "You mean she doesn't know why she's to be as-

sayed?"

"She's to be whatted?"

"Attempted, endeavored, ventured,
exerted, wielded,
judged—"

' 'Tried, fog-brain?"

"Whatevered. It must be something
horribly serious, to
get the Simurgh herself involved.
Doesn't she have any

hint?"

There was an exchange of squawks. "No hint," Grundy

reported. "She has been here, just doing her job, as she said.

There must be some mistake."

"The Simurgh didn't act as if there were any mistake,"

Metria said, remembering what the most knowledgeable bird

in all Xanth had THOUGHT to her.

"And the words on the

token are clear. Roxanne will be put on trial, here, in a fort-

night."

Grundy translated. The roc shrugged, remaining perplexed.

She would be here, because she would not desert the egg,

regardless.

So Metria walked out, closed the door,
and popped back

to Grundy's home. "I'll fetch you next
time I need you,"

she told him. "Just make sure you and
Rapunzel are there

for the trial."

"We will be," Grundy agreed. "Rapunzel
will make her-

self tall enough to reach that cloud, and
put me on it, and

then I'll haul her up after me as she changes back to small

size. I wouldn't miss this trial for all Xanth."

"Neither would I," Metria confessed.

"There's something

awfully anomalous going on here."

"Awfully what?"

"Peculiar, odd, irregular, unusual,
curious, bizarre,
queer—"

"Strange?"

"Weird," she agreed crossly.

"For sure. If it were anyone but the
Simurgh behind it,
I'd suspect it of being a joke."

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"The Simurgh doesn't joke."

"She doesn't joke," he agreed.

Still pleasantly mystified, Metria
popped next to the only

other entity on her list who might know
about the trial: De-

mon Professor Grossclout. It would be
an unholy pleasure,
serving him with a summons.

He was teaching a class at the Demon
University of

Magic. She appeared in the back of the
chamber, suddenly

suffering a fit of apprehension.

Grossclout had always intim-

idated her, though she had always denied
it. His aspect was

horrendous, even in demon terms, and small horns glowed

red when he made a strong point. His face was so ugly that

he could have walked without notice among ogres. But the

worst of it was his overwhelming knowledge: If there was

anything he didn't know, it was hardly worth knowing.

"And therefore," he was saying, "we can

conclude that

the fourth principle of responsive magic
has not been vio-

lated, and there is no paradox." He
paused, his eye glinting.

Every student in the class trembled,
fearing that the Professor

was about to make an Example. "What
are you doing here,

Metria?"

Suddenly she was Woe Betide. She

hadn't changed inten-

tionally; there was just something about the professor that

turned her spine to mush. This had never happened to her

before. "Nothing at all. Your Greatness," she whined, a big

frightened tear rolling down her cute little cheeR.

"Most students come here with heads full of mush," he

remarked. "You have a spine of mush.
You couldn't have

crashed this class without help. Come
here, gamine. Out with

it: What are you up to?"

Woe Betide took one dread step after
another toward him,

unable to help herself. "I—I—have
something," she

peeped.

"Give it here," he said with such ultimate authority that the rafters vibrated.

She handed the token to him. "It—it's a summons, sir."

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"What?" Now the ground shook, and plaster and silt

sifted down from the ceiling. The students cowered.

"To appear at the Nameless Castle a fortnight hence, to preside over the—"

"I can see that!" the Professor roared, and now the walls

began to crumble. The students flinched as much as they

dared. "Why is this trial occurring?"

"I—I thought you would know."

He glowered. "I shall certainly find out.
Begone, mush-
spine!"

And Woe Betide Metria was begone,
involuntarily. She
hadn't learned anything.

'I wouldn't have taken that from him,'
Mentia remarked.

'You didn't either, before you got your
soul.'

Metria couldn't deny it. There were
times when a soul was

a real liability. 'I should have let you
serve him that sum-

mons,' she said.

'Let me serve the next one. Who is it?'

Metria checked her bag. 'Magician Trent and Sorceress

Iris.'

'Um. You take Trent; I'll take Iris. I just had an adventure

with her.'

She had arrived at her home castle. She went inside to

check on Veleno, but he was still floating in a sea of delir-

ium, a smile glued on his face. He would hold for another

day or so. So they popped over to the Brain Coral's Pool,

where Trent and Iris were supposed to be. But she didn't see

them there.

She squatted and poked a finger into the water.

What do you want of me, Demoness? It was the pool itself.

"Where's Magician Trent?" she inquired.

He is not here. He took the Sorceress Iris on a second

honeymoon, fifty-three years- after the first. They like each

other better this time, both being much younger than before.

"A honeymoon!" Metria exclaimed.

"You mean I have

to go all the way to the moon?"

That is what I mean.

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She sighed. "Well, thanks anyway.

Pool." She popped

off to the moon.

She landed in a pile of moldy cheese.

"Ugh!" she swore,

sailing up and shaking off her feet. She
had forgotten that

the two sides of the moon differed; the
one that faced Xanth

had long since degenerated into
cheesiness, because of what

it saw. Only the far side remained
unspoiled.

Once she got her feet cleaned off, she
flew around to the

fair side. Now she saw the surface of
milk and honey, where

newly married couples lolled in a
reasonable approximation

of the kind of delirious happiness she
routinely provided for

Veleno. Of course, it wouldn't last for
those others, because

they couldn't remain on the honey moon

forever.

She gazed across the idyllic landscape,
and spied a lovely

fountain of firewater, with the smoke
rising to form a back-

drop of pastel-hued clouds. That was
obviously illusion, as

the moon didn't have clouds. She made
for it, and sure

enough, there was the Sorceress in her
youthened state, a girl

in her mid-twenties, idly indulging her fancy while Magician

Trent snoozed.

She approached Trent. "Remember me. King Emeritus?"

she inquired.

He woke and glanced at her. "Oh, hello, Metria. We once

almost meant something to each other, in a vision of Mun-

dania."

"True," she agreed. "That experience caused me to try

marriage myself, as you remember. Now I'm on a mission

for—well, here's your summons." She handed him his to-

ken.

He turned it 'over. "I am to be the bailiff at a trial? That's

a novel notion."

"And this is the novel," she agreed,
yielding the body to
her worser self.

"And yours," Mentia said, approaching
Iris. "We shared
the madness, where I was sane."

"I remember," Iris agreed languidly. "I

was youthened

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for that, and I appreciate it." She accepted her token. "Spe-

cial Effects?"

"I don't know what that means any more than you do,"

Mentia said. "Maybe you're needed for

illusion pictures of

things that they can't conveniently bring
to the Nameless

Castle."

"The Nameless Castle!" Trent
exclaimed, amazed. "The

trial is there? Isn't that where that roc
is?"

"Roxanne Roc," Mentia agreed. "She's
the one on trial.

You wouldn't happen to have a notion
what for, would
you?"

"I can't think of any reason. That is one
dedicated bird.

This isn't some elaborate spoof?"

"That's unlikely," Iris said. "Look at
these summons

disks. They are made of black beryl—
one of the rarest stones

in Xanth. No one would fool with them."

He nodded. ' 'I should think not. Well, our stay here was

about over anyway. When do we have to report for the

trial?"

"In a fortnight," Mentia said. She looked around. "Oops,

I feel some craziness coming on." She dived into Iris' illu-

sion fountain and splashed in the rising water, sending drop-

lets splattering against the backdrop.

Then the water changed to fire, and the fire changed to

water, so that she was splashing in a column of fire. "Hoo!"

she cried as it singed her derriere. "That's hot!"

"Well, you shouldn't mess with illusion,"

Trent remarked
mildly.

'That's a hint we should get out of here,'
Metria advised
her worser self. "They may want to
conclude their stay here
in style.'

'You would think of that, you married
creature.' But Men-

tia obligingly popped back to their home base in Xanth.

'Who else do we need to serve?'

'Half a slew,' Metria said, checking. 'But only two more

actual Trial Personnel. Grey Murphy and Princess Ida.'

'Not Grey and Ivy? That could be real mischief, especially if Ida gets a notion.'

'True. But of course, the Simurgh wouldn't do anything like that.'

'No more than she would put an innocent loyal bird on

trial,' Mentia remarked.

'Well, if Ida did get a notion, we could sprinkle her with

Lethe elixir to make her forget about Grey,' Metria said.

'Great idea! That could completely restore her talent, too,

since the Ideas she makes become real must come from

someone who doesn't know her talent.'

'That's a crazy notion,' Metria said.

'Thank you.'

'So where is Grey Murphy at the moment?'

'Use the token, blockhead! How do you expect to locate the rest of the names?'

'Oh.' Metria took out the token marked
GREY MURPHY and

held it up. Sure enough, it seemed to tug
in one direction. It

wanted to do its duty, and if the
summonsee wouldn't come

to it, it would go to the summonsee.

She floated, letting the stone disk show
the way. She made

herself smoky light, so that it was able to

tug her along. Soon

she was traveling at a respectable speed, through trees, boul-

ders, houses, dragons, and whatnot. The general direction

seemed to be northwest.

In due course she came to the coast, but the tug didn't

stop. "He can't be out in the sea!" she muttered. But that

was the direction of the tug.

A see monster lifted its huge eye and peered at her. She

ignored it. See monsters didn't bite, they just looked. Of

course, it was important not to let them see too much, be-

cause they got really smug when they suc-see-ded. When the

big eye threatened to look down the front of her blouse, she

changed it to a tortoise-necked sweater.

When the monster

tried to look up under her skirt, she
changed it to slacks,

eliminating any possible view of
anything interesting. She

could have changed form to a bird, or
faded out entirely, but

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she preferred to tease the thing.
Disgusted at not being able

to see the color of her panties, the
monster sank back under

the sea surface.

She was now floating over the Golf of
Mecks Co. She had

to watch out for flying golf balls,
because this was their nat-

ural home. They sailed in from all over,
plunking into the

water where they chortled as they sank
forever out of sight.

She couldn't blame them; it meant that they would never again be clubbed by irons.

The shoreline, discovering she was leaving it behind, set

out to do something about it. She continued to fly in a

straight line, but it curved around until it intersected her

course. Then the sea made an effort, and pushed back under

her, but the land would not be denied,
and shoved forcefully

across until it was going west, and hung
on despite the sea's

best efforts. She had not before realized
how competitive

these two elements were.

But by this time she was just about there.
She was right

at the westernmost fringe of Xanth, about
to pass across the

fringe of magic. Since she didn't know what would happen

to her if she went beyond the magic, she came down to earth.

When human beings left the magic, they lost their magic

talents but were otherwise pretty much the same. When

partly magical creatures crossed the boundary, they became

Mundane creatures, unbearably dull. But demons were

wholly magical, and they might simply cease to exist. She

preferred not to risk it.

Yet the token still tugged ahead. She walked right up to

the scintillating curtain that separated most of Xanth from

Mundania, and stopped. The token tugged one way, and then

another. What was going on?

'Buffoon!' Mentia said. 'Don't you remember—the river

beyond moves about constantly. It's very mobile.'

'Mobile,' Metria agreed, remembering. 'It's always in a

hurry to be somewhere else. The people who live by it have

to keep moving too. But why would Grey be out there?'

Mentia considered. 'This is a crazy thing, so perchance I

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understand it better. I think maybe Grey is not out there.

We're getting a reflection from the magic Interface I helped

recompile; it's stronger than it used to be.'

There was that crazy claim again, about visiting Xanth's

distant past and saving everything from encroaching mad-

ness. But maybe her worser half was right about one detail.

Metria turned around and held up the token. Sure enough,

now the tugging was stronger, from (he east. So she left the

crazy moving region behind and proceeded toward whatever

Grey Murphy was up to. She was relieved; she could handle

a river or place that was mobile, if she had to, but she didn't

want to go any closer to drear Mundania than absolutely

necessary.

The direction steadied. Possibly the mobile terrain beyond

had caused ripples in the curtain, so that

the reflection moved

despite having a still source. Now she was orienting on Grey -

directly. She floated up and moved faster.

She came to a sign: YOU ARE NOW
APPROACHING PENS

COLA.

'What's Grey doing in a pen?' Mentia demanded.

Metria didn't answer. She spied a fence ahead. Each post

was a very large writing pen, of a particular style. One was

a feather quill, another a metal-tipped stake, and a third jetted

colored water into the air.

'Oh, a fountain pen,' Mentia said.

Ropes were strung between the pens to complete the fence.

The fence curved slowly into the surrounding forest. On each standing pen was a single printed letter. 'There's something familiar about this,' Mentia muttered.

'I know what it is!' little Woe Betide cried. 'I saw letters on a chain. Just walk along and read

them.'

"Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings..." Metria

muttered. She walked along, reading the letters. They formed

a repeating series: COST OF LIVING
ADJUSTMENT.

Metria couldn't make much sense from this. She stood and

gazed at the fence, wondering whether to

fly on over it. Was

that what the fence was penning?

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Suddenly the pens uprooted themselves
and jumped to

new holes beside the old ones. Metria
could tell from the

direction and curvature that the fence
now enclosed a bit

more territory than it had before. It had gotten larger. There

were old filled-in holes inside the penned region, showing

that this had been happening for some time. But who cared?

'I can't read those big words,' Woe Betide complained.

'Just use the first letters, dear,' Mentia suggested. 'C 0

LA.'

'The pens spell COLA?' she asked.

'Pens COLA,' Mentia agreed. 'And it seems it keeps expanding.'

Metria shrugged. 'Maybe that makes sense to you, because

you're a little crazy, but I'm going to fly

on by it now.' She

lifted higher and followed the tug of the
token on across the

fenced region.

At last she caught up to Grey Murphy.
He was just stand-

ing in place, looking puzzled. "What's,
up, man from Mun-

dania?" ' she inquired, shifting to an
appropriate outfit for the

occasion: very short tight skirt, vaguely

translucent very full

blouse, voluminously flowing black hair
with embedded

sparkles, and a complexion so clear that
one might almost

see one's reflection in it. There was just
something about

men of power that intrigued her. He had
been betrothed to

Princess Ivy ever since he arrived in
Xanth, and it seemed

that he should have done something
about that by now. She

doubted that she could actually tempt him, but it was worth

a try. A girl just never could tell about a human man. Es-

pecially a Magician.

Grey looked up. ' 'What mischief are you up to this time,

Metria?" he inquired.

"I have something for you," she said,

inhaling.

He refused to be bluffed. "What is that?"

She leaned slightly forward, vanishing
the top button of

her blouse so as to expose more heaving
scenery, but he

didn't seem to notice. "A summons." She
proffered the to-

ken.

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He took it and turned it over. "I am to be prosecutor at a

trial? I don't know anything about that."

"It's the trial of Roxanne Roc, at the Nameless Castle. I

can help you find your way there, if you wish."

"No need. What did she do? I thought she was on a mission for the Simurgh."

"She is. But the Simurgh wants the trial. It's a mystery why. So you will have to prostitute."

"Have to what?"

"Indict, arraign, persecute—"

"Prosecute?"

"Whatever." She was ruining the good impression she

was trying to make.

He shrugged. "Who else will be there?"

"Professor Grossclout. Magician Trent.
Sorceress Iris.

Princess Ida. A bunch of Jurors. Nobody
important."

"The Demon Professor Grossclout?" he
asked, brighten-

ing. "I've always wanted to meet him.
He'll be the Judge,

of course."

"Of course."

"I'll consult with him. He'll know what to do." He looked

around. "But first I have to finish what I'm doing here."

"What are you doing. Grey?"

"I am looking for Re."

"Who?"

"A girl called Re. Humfrey said she would be here, in the

region known as Ality, but I can't seem to find her."

"What's the matter with her?"

"She got confused, and is in trouble. Humfrey said her

talent turned against her. So I'm here to nullify it, to get her

out of trouble. My talent is the
nullification of magic, so I

should be able to handle it.. She'll owe
the Good Magician

a year's service, of course. But there just
doesn't seem to be

anything here in Ality." He looked
frustrated. "How can I

nullify something when I can't find it?"

"Maybe I can succor," Metria said,
intrigued.

"Maybe you can what?"

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"Aid, support, deliverance, assistance, service—"

"Help?"

"Whatever," she agreed crossly. Why did her impediment

always get worse when she least wanted it to?

"Since when do you try to help anyone, Metria?"

"Since when I got half-souled."

He reconsidered. "That does make a difference. Very

well: How do you propose to help?"

"Well, this seems like a slightly crazy situation, so I'll see

if my crazy worser half has any insight."

She turned the

body over to Mentia.

"Hello, D. Mentia," he said. "I don't think we've met

before." •

"Fortunately," Mentia agreed. "Kiss me."

"Why?"

"Because I'm the half without soul or conscience. I de-

mand payment for my services."

"Kisses for help?"

"To start." She turned slightly so as to give him a better

view of her profile. Metria had had the right idea with this

outfit, but simply lacked the crazy cunning to exploit it prop-

erly.

"I'd be crazy to agree to a deal like that. Suppose Ivy

found out?"

"That's what makes it interesting."

He pondered a moment. "Okay."

She was startled. "You agree?"

"One one condition. I do the kissing."

"Sure. One kiss for each helpful thing I

figure out."

"Agreed. What have you figured out?"

"Go away and come back here."

"What?"

"Just do it, handsome. Craziness doesn't make sense until

after the fact. You don't have to go far.
Turn twice when
you do it, too."

Grey looked baffled, but complied. He
turned and walked

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away. Then he turned again and walked

back. "What does
this prove?"

"Have you turned and returned?"

"Yes."

"So if you came to Ality before, now you
have come to

Re-Ality."

He frowned. "I suppose. What's the point?"

"You have to re-do things to reach Re.
Now that you have

re-considered and re-turned to Re-Ality,
you are closer to

finding her."

"That's crazy!"

"Yes. Pay me."

He looked annoyed, but also. thoughtful.
' 'Very well.

Come here."

Mentia stepped close to him and raised her face. But he

took her head in his hands, turned it down, and kissed the

top of her head.

"Hey, that's not what I meant," she protested.

"I kissed you. Nobody specified where."

"But that's—"

"Crazy?"

Mentia realized that she hadn't made precisely the deal

she thought. Or maybe Grey Murphy was smarter than she

thought. She shrugged. That simply made it more of a chal-

lenge. "Now, I think that Re has this power of re-doing, and

maybe she got mixed up and re-jected herself. So you must

search and re-search to find her."

"But I have already searched!"

"Right. Do it again. You have merely rehearsed it so far."

He nodded. He went through the motions of searching, again. "Okay, I have re-searched. I still don't see her. What

now?"

"Re-pay me."

"Oh." He took her right hand and kissed it. But this time

a pair of lips appeared on her hand, and kissed him back.

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"Now look around again," she said.
"Examine and ex-
amine again."

He looked around twice. "Okay, I have
re-examined the
region. What now?"

"Pay—"

"Not until you produce something more

positive."

She sighed. He was too canny to make this game really

fun. "I think we must be very close to finding her now. Call

her—and call again."

He nodded. He cupped his mouth with his hands. "Re!"

he called. Then again: "Re!" He had recalled her.

There was a faint sound, almost like a female moan.

"Quick, orient twice," Mentia said.

Grey focused on the area where the sound seemed to have

come from, then re-focused. "I am re-orienting," he said.

"Do you feel anything?"

"Yes, there is something here," he agreed.

"Say it again."

He said it again: "There is something here."

And with that re-statement, a form appeared faintly.

"Move her," Mentia said. "Twice."

He put his arms around the shape and moved it. Then he moved it again. The form became firmer.

"This has to be Re," he said. And again:
"This has to be
Re," he re-peated.

The form clarified. "Yes!" she breathed.

"Help me! Help
me!"

"Now I can use my own magic," Grey
said. "I can nullify
her magic." He put his hand on her head.
"Verse. Re-
verse."

The re-suit was encouraging. Suddenly
the complete

woman was there. She was re-asonably young and pretty.

"Oh, you have saved me!" she cried. "It's such a re-lief.

I'm so re-ally grateful!" She flung her arms about him and

kissed him several times on the face before he could re-act.

"Ahem," Mentia said. "It seems to be that you let a num-

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ber of payments go by, and now you're paying the wrong person."

Grey smiled ruefully. "You're right. You have been very

helpful, Mentia." He disengaged from Re, took Mentia in

his arms, and kissed her soundly on the mouth, twice. There

was magic in his kisses that nullified her craziness.

"Wow!" she said, dizzied. "Wow!"

"Well, you did earn it," he re-plied. "In your slightly
crazy way."

"I will re-frain from further demands,"
Mentia said, and

gave the body back to Metria. She had been teasing him, but

his magic had more than nullified her effort, and she needed

to re-cover.

Grey turned back to Re. "What happened to you?"

"I was trying to re-build my house, and I paused to re-

flect," she re-lated. "Something

distracted me, and I acci-

dentally re-pealed myself. The last thing
I was able to do

was re-lease a plea to the Good
Magician to help me; I

wasn't sure he would re-ceive it, but it
was too late to re-

wise it. Then you came and re-pulsed my
own magic that re-

mained re-pressing me, and re-juvenated
me. Thank you so

much, from the re-cesses of my heart!
Normally I am more

re-served, but—"

"Well, you know you will have to give the Good Magi-

cian a year's service before this is resolved," Grey re-

minded her. "He sent me to re-animate you."

"Yes, I am re-conciled to that," she said.
"But I feel re-

vitalized, and I really do re-spect the Good Magician."

' "There is a magic path near here that will lead you safely to his re-constructed castle," Grey said.

"Thank you." Re organized herself and set off down the ;

path. She had a long way to go, but her re-cent experience |

evidently gave her courage. ^

Grey turned to Metria. "Now I can go to the Nameless

Castle. Where is-it?"

"In the sky. Can you enlist the help of a roc bird to carry

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you there? You're too heavy for me to carry, much as I'd like to try."

"Yes, there is a roc who owes Humfrey," he said. He

paused. "You know, you—or your worser half—have been

so helpful that I no longer re-sent your presence. Your ac-

quisition of a soul does seem to have made you a better

creature."

Metria found herself blushing, something she never used

to do in the old days. "Thank you. But I'm just trying to

complete my own service to the Good Magician so I can re-

produce."

"Oh?" I thought demonesses could do that when they

chose to."

"Yes. But apparently it's much harder the second time.

So now I need help to get the stork's revision."

He didn't challenge her miscue. "You summoned the stork before?"

"Yes, about four hundred and forty years ago, give or take

a couple, but who's counting? It was a bad business, I now

realize."

"There is surely an interesting story there," he said. "But

I'd better call that roc."

" 'Bye," she agreed, and popped off.

She arrived at Castle Roogna.'There at the two prominent

comers of the roof were Gary Gar and Gayle Goyle, spouting

water into the moat. It wasn't raining, so Metria wasn't cer-

tain where the water was coming from, but it was a nice

effect. The moat looked quite clean, which wasn't surprising,

because the gargoyles' job was to purify

the water they
spouted.

'I'll handle this,' Mentia said. 'I know
them.' She moved

up to take over the body, then addressed
the two winged

monsters. "Hello, you ugly brutes!
Remember me?"

Both gargoyles swallowed their water
so they could talk.

"Demoness Mentia!" Gary cried. "We haven't seen you in a year."

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"True. I've been with my better half, trying to figure out what her strange new life is all about. But now I have two summonses for you. You are to be Jurors at the trial of Rox-

anne Roc."

"Who?" Gayle asked.

"A big bird who is hatching something for the Simurgh."

"All right," Gary said. "We'll be there."

Mentia tossed a token up to each of them. They caught

them in their mouths. Two more served.

She went on inside the castle, returning the body to her

better self. Princess Ida came to meet her. "How nice to see

you, Metria," she said, in very much the way Rapunzel had.

But Ida never said anything she didn't believe, because she

believed what she said.

Then Metria stared. There was something floating past the

Princess' head. "Ida—there's a big bug about to land on

you!"

Ida smiled. "That's not a bug. It's my moon."

"Your what?"

"Planet, globe, orb, heavenly body,
orbiting fragment—"

"But what are you doing with a little
moon?"

"It just came to me, and it was so cute, I
couldn't tell it

to go away. It's really no harm."

Apparently not. It was just a tiny blob
that slowly swung

around her head. "It does look sort of sweet," Metria ad-

mitted. "Will it grow up to be a big planet someday?"

"I hope so." Ida smiled. "What can I do for you?"

"You can accept this summons to participate in the trial

of Roxanne Roc."

"Why, of course," Ida agreed, accepting the token. She

was a very agreeable person. "And I see I am to defend her.

I shall surely do my best."

This was almost too easy. "You're not worried because

you don't know what you're defending her from?"

"I'm sure I will soon find out."

Metria decided not to argue. She had too many tokens still

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to serve to waste time. "And you can find the Nameless

Castle?"

"I'm sure I will."

And if she believed it, she probably would, because Ida's

talent was the Idea: Whatever she believed would be, would

be. Except that the Idea had to come from someone who

didn't know her talent. That limited it considerably.

But it was clear that Princess Ida did not yet know what

this trial was all about. Metria's main vice had always been

her curiosity, and now it was becoming almost painful. Why

should there be such an enormous effort because of one big

bird who seemed never to have done anyone any harm? The

mystery intensified with every step Metria took.

THRENODY

Metria returned home to stoke Veleno up for a few

more* hours, then assessed the remaining tokens.

Most of the names seemed straightforward, and she

thought there shouldn't be any problem locating them. But

one name she dreaded, because that person was bound to be

uncooperative. What would happen if she managed to serve

every summons but one? Would the trial be delayed, and

would Metria then fail in her service and be denied what she

most desired? That would perhaps be fitting, but she sin-

cerely did not want it to happen.

If she was going to fail, this was the name that would fail

her. So the sensible thing to do was to tackle it next. Then

if it went wrong, she wouldn't have to bother with the other

names. Unless she got a release from the Simurgh. This was,

after all, just one of the Jurors, and there were more than a

dozen of them; some would be eliminated at the trial itself.

But she rather thought that she had better
get all the names,
if she possibly could.

So she lifted the token for Threnody, the
half demoness
wife of Jordan the Barbarian. It tugged,
and she floated
where it led.

Deep in the jungle near the slowly
diminishing Region of

Madness, she caught up to Jordan and
Threnody. They were

eating a freshly picked pot pie. It was, of
course, shaped like

a pot, and was rich in iron.

Metria turned invisible and floated
quietly up to them,

knowing that a certain amount of
discretion was in order.

But it didn't work. Threnody lifted her nose and started sniff-

ing. She was a lovely black-haired black-eyed dusky sultry

beauty of comely aspect and statuesque proportion; in fact,

she looked good, considering her age.

"Fee fi fo fum," the luscious damsel said darkly. "I smell

the bod of someone's mum." She glared.

'You never could fool her, you know,'
Mentia remarked

for no particular reason.

Metria sighed and turned visible. "I
really wish you would

let bygones be bygones, Thren."

"Corpulent chance. Met! Go away."

"You know I've changed recently."

"Well, change into nonexistence,
Demoness."

Jordan Barbarian continued eating,
seemingly not inter-

ested in the dialogue. He was a rough-
hewn primitively

handsome man of middling age who took
justified pride in

his ignorance of civilized ways, but he
had learned not to

poke his nose into his wife's business, lest she cut it off.

However, his crude male eye did explore the crevice of Me-

tria's décolletage and the projection of her posterior, as was

expected according to the Barbarian Code.

It was clear that this was going to be difficult, "I have

something to give you."

"You have already given me more than enough," Thren-

ody said, showing her teeth in unfeigned fury. "Now give

me what I most crave: your total absence."

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"Right after I give you this handsome engraved disk."

She held it up.

"That looks like black beryl," Threnody snapped. "That's

a summons from the Simurgh."

"Yes. For you. To be a Juror at a trial."

The woman brightened momentarily.

"Are they finally

trying you for treason against Xanth?"

"No, this is for Roxanne Roe."

"Then I'm not interested." Threnody
faced away.

Metria had been afraid of this. The
woman simply refused

to take anything from her, or to give her
anything other than

anger. So she tried with Woe Betide.

The winsome little girl appeared.

"Please, your delight-

fulness, if you will only accept this
token, I will go away

forever minus a few mutates." A big tear
formed.

Jordan glanced at the darling tot. His
eyeball did not sweat

in the same manner as it had for Metria's
tight-fitting adult

configuration, but he had a certain interest in children, be-

cause their simple minds were parallel to his own.

"Don't tease me with that old act, you rotten brat!"

Threnody gritted, impressed not half a whit. "I'll not accept

anything from any of your deceitful variations, because I

know it's the same soulless bitch of a

demoness inside. Now,

are you going to get far away from me,
or do I have to start

singing?"

Worse yet. Threnody's songs were
always so horribly sad

that Metria couldn't stand to hear them,
and had to flee.' 'No,

please don't do that!" Woe Betide cried,
another big tear

welling out. "You must take this token!"

Threnody started singing. Woe Betide
clapped her little

hands over her little ears, but the
excruciatingly sad melody

insinuated itself past them and into her
head. She couldn't

stand it. She lost cohesion, and reverted
to Metria—who still

couldn't stand it. It was Threnody's
ultimate weapon against

her, always effective.

She retreated until the sound became faint. Then she

formed heavy earmuffs to dull down the sound so that the

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dirge was only faintly agonizing. Now she could stand it—

but she wasn't close enough to plead with Threnody about

the summons.

Still, she couldn't quit, because that could mess up her

whole mission; It was just barely maybe possible that Thren-

ody was suffering the merest slightest tiniest little suggestion

of a hint of softening, and might on some impossibly far-

etched chance change her mind eventually. So Metria re-

mained where she was, in sight of the dusky woman and the barbarian.

But Threnody was having less than none of it. She con-

sulted inaudibly with Jordan; then the two of them walked

away. It was clear that they would not gladly remain hi Me-

tria's sight.

So Metria floated after them. When she got too close,

Threnody resumed her song of lamentation and drove her

away again. So it was an impasse: Metria could not approach

Threnody, or make her accept the summons token, but nei-

ther could Threnody make Metria leave her entirely alone.

In fact, just to make it interesting, Metria

formed a diaph-

anous gown and teased the barbarian with it; that much mis-

chief she could do from this distance.
Naturally Threnody

was not unduly keen on having her man entertained for too

long in this manner, but unless she cut out his eyeballs they

could not be prevented from straying.
This was the nature of

the features of barbarian men; it was involuntary.

Threnody abruptly turned and walked in a new direction.

Metria realized that she was heading directly into the nearby

Region of Madness. That was an extremely chancy thing to

do, as Metria well knew. Obviously Threnody was prepared

to risk it, in the hope that Metria would not follow.

'She's got a surprise coming,' Mentia remarked.

Indeed she did! For though the madness caused strange

things to happen, and messed up the minds of ordinary folk

until they became acclimated, it made Mentia sane. Because

Mentia's normal state was slightly crazy, so her abnormal

state was opposite. Mentia could handle the Region of Madness.

The fringe of madness came into view. It was a mere shimmer of unreality, suggesting the dissolution beyond.

Most folk avoided it with horror, but Threnody was plunging

on in, half dragging Jordan along. Metria floated in their

wake, maintaining the compromise distance between them.

She wanted to keep them in sight, because she wasn't sure

the token would accurately track Threnody within the mad-

ness. It was impossible to be sure what would happen there.

Then for a moment they paused. There

was a man, looking

bewildered. His features were indistinct, as if he wasn't quite

sure himself who he was or what he was doing here. He

seemed to appeal to Threnody for assistance or advice, but

she brushed him off and plunged on, still towing Jordan.

Soon Metria caught up to that place. "Hello!" the man

cried. "Can you help me? I'm lost."

'Keep on moving, or you'll lose them,'
Mentia advised.

But Metria's half conscience wouldn't
allow it. She

formed herself into a nonprovocatively
garbed woman. "You

don't want to be in this region," she said.
"You're heading

into madness."

"I surely am!" he agreed. "Where am I?"

"Pretty much dead center of southern Xanth. Now if you

go back that way, you'll get into ordinary territory and

should be all right." She pointed away from the madness.

"Xanth? I'm in Xanth?" He seemed amazed.

"Where else? Now, I must be on my way." For Threnody

and Jordan were almost out of sight,
their images fuzzed by
the lunacy of the deepening madness.

"But I can't be there\" he cried. "It's not possible."

"Well, you'll have to settle that for yourself," Metria said,

moving on.

"No, you don't understand," he said, following her. "I—

I'm from—from Mundania."

"That's your misfortune." She forged on, watching the

pair ahead.

"But this makes no sense," he said,
pacing her. "Xanth
isn't real. It's a story."

"Suit yourself. But if you don't reverse in
a hurry, you're
going to be out of Xanth proper and into
madness, and I
don't think you'll like it."

He shook his head. ' 'I must indeed be mad. Or maybe this

is all a bad dream. The last thing I remember is—" He shook

his head. "Then I was floundering around here." He peered

at her more closely. "If I may ask—who are you?"

'I think I know what's happened,' Mentia said. 'I'll take

over now, before the madness drives

you crazy.' Then, as-

suming the body, she spoke to the man. "I am D. Mentia."

' 'Dementia?"

"Close enough."

"I am Richard Siler."

"Richard? I know a Richard from Mundania."

"They call me Billy Jack."

Mentia was on the verge of her sanity as she entered the

madness, so was able to make sense of this. "A nickname."

"Yes."

"I think I had better take you to the other Richard. He

understands about Mundane visits."

"Thank you."

"But be prepared: This is about to get strange."

"Stranger than it already is? I doubt it."

"Suit yourself."

They came to a chair. There was a rock in it. "What's that?" Billy Jack asked.

"Obviously a rock in chair. Leave it alone."

But he was already removing the rock,

out of some foolish

sense of the nature of chairs.

Immediately the chair tilted

forward, causing him to stumble over it,
and he landed sitting

in it. The chair tilted back so swiftly that
he flew out of it

to land in something else. Meanwhile the
chair tilted vio-

lently forward again, catching Mentia so
that she, too, fell

into it, and was similarly hurled back.
She found herself in

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an invisible swing, swinging wildly back and forth. She felt

wonderful as it swung high, and awful as it swung low.

"What is this?" Billy Jack cried as he swung past her. "I

feel great—terrible—great—terrible—"

"It's a mood swing," Mentia said,
figuring it out. "I told
you not to mess with that rock in chair!
Now it has rocked
us right into trouble."

However, she was a demoness, so didn't
need to submit

to the antics of warped furniture. She
dissolved into smoke

and floated out of the swing. She crossed

to Billy Jack,

caught on to his swing, and held it still
so that he could jump

out.

"You were right," he gasped. "It is
getting stranger."

"Just stay close to me and don't touch
anything." The

forms of Threnody and Jordan were
dimly visible ahead; they

had probably been slowed by something similar.

They ducked past the mood swings and hurried on. Sud-

denly they almost collided with a stout pillar. It seemed or-

dinary except for the whiskers.

Before they could pass by it, the pillar transformed into a

big cat. "Growr!" it growled, and

pounced.

Mentia became a splat of cold water.
The cat struck the

water, screeched, and turned right back
into the pillar.

"What—" Billy Jack asked.

"Cat or pillar, obviously. Get out of here
before it changes

back."

"This is really weird!"

"No it isn't. We're only partway into the madness; these

are fringe effects. Let's hope we can avoid the really weird

things."

Suddenly something swept past them. It

was like a metal

ball, with arms, legs, mouth, and eyes
sprouting from its

surface. "Mine!" it cried, picking up the
pillar.

The pillar changed back into the cat,
screeching. But the

ball sprouted more arms and caught on
to all its extremities.

It threw the cat into a pit. "Mine! Mine!"
it cried.

Mentia turned cloudy and floated over the pit. It was half-

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filled with precious things ranging from jewels to golden

coins. It was a treasure pit.

Mentia formed a mouth in her underside.

"But what do

you want with a cat?" she asked.

"It has two cat's-eye gems!" the ball
replied, grabbing

for the cat's eyes. It changed hastily back
into the pillar.

"What is this?" Billy Jack asked,
stepping up to the edge

of the pit.

"Don't get so close!" Mentia cried.

She was too late. The edge gave way,
and the man fell

into the pit. His feet came down on top
of the metal ball.

Then there was an explosion. Gems,
coins, and creatures

were hurled out of the pit. Mentia jetted
across to intercept

Billy Jack in midflight, became a huge soft pillow, and cushioned his crash landing.

"What was that?" he asked dazedly as everything settled.

She resumed her normal form as he got off her. "Obvi-

ously a mine. Didn't you hear it yelling, 'Mine! Mine!' as it

collected things? But mines are very

touchy, and you made

it detonate. Now, stay out of trouble until
I get you where

I'm taking you!"

"I'll try," Billy Jack said contritely.

They went on. Now they came to a glade
with a single

acom tree in it. The tree looked healthy,
but seemed to have

suffered recently. "That's Desiree's tree!" Mentia said.

"Now I know we're on course."

"She owns the tree?" Billy Jack asked.

"Not exactly. She's the nymph of the tree. Hiatus should

be close by." For she had been here before; She raised her

voice. "Desiree!"

A rather pretty nymph appeared by the tree. "Who calls me?"

"The Demoness Mentia, halfway sane. I was here last year."

"Why, so you were," Desiree said, remembering. "With

the sorceress and the gargoyle and the child. You brought me Hiatus."

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"Yes. I'm just passing by this time." She glanced at the man. "This is Billy Jack, who I'm taking to see Richard White." Then, to Billy: "This is Desiree Dryad. If her tree

suffers, she suffers."

"So nice to meet you," Billy Jack said politely, evidently

somewhat bemused by it all.

"Did you see a man and a woman pass by here shortly

ago?" Mentia asked.

"Yes. They had a quarrel with a timber

wolf, but managed

to get away." She gestured toward a nearby tree that looked

a bit bedraggled. "It's normally very shy, and will raise a

human cub if it finds one orphaned, but with the madness it

sometimes gets violent. So when the barbarian made a bar-

baric remark—"

"I understand," Mentia said. "I see your

tree is looking

better—and so are you."

"Yes, thanks to Hiatus," she agreed.

"He's off gathering

croakusses at the moment."

"Crocuses?" Billy Jack asked.

"Well, he likes to eat frog's legs,"

Desiree said disap-

provingly. "The croaks do cuss when he takes them."

"We must move on," Mentia said, anxious about losing

Threnody.

"Do you think the madness will pass soon?"

"This is close to the border now," Mentia said. "It's still

slowly contracting. Maybe in another year."

"What a relief!"

They went on, and this time managed to reach the White

glade without too much further adventure. Mentia saw

Threnody just leaving it, going deeper into the madness. But

she couldn't pursue Threnody right at the

moment.

Clusters of colored mushrooms sprouted around the yard.

Beside each cluster was a small garden of fancy iris flowers.

Mentia nodded. She knew that the mushrooms had sprouted

from jars of odd Mundane paper money Richard had buried

around the yard, and that the irises grew wherever the woman

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Janet Hines went. If the two ever separated, so would the mushrooms and irises.

She knocked on the door of the neat cottage. A man an-

swered. "Hello, Richard. Remember me? I'm D. Mentia, the

temporarily sane demoness. I have brought another Richard

fresh from Mundania who I think could use your help."

A woman appeared behind Richard. "Oh, yes, of course

we'll help him," she said. "We understand so well."

Mentia turned to Billy Jack. "These folk will help you all

you need," she said. "I have to move on now, but you can

trust them. They'll get you settled."

"But I'm not staying here!" Billy Jack protested. "I need

to find my way home. My wife, my daughter—"

Richard White stepped out and took his arm. "Come in-

side," he said. "This is my wife Janet.

I'm afraid we have
unsettling news for you."

Mentia, freed of the temporary
obligation her better half's
conscience had taken on, moved rapidly
after Threnody. She
knew what had happened to Billy Jack,
but hadn't wanted
to tell him. He would not be returning to
Mundania. Richard
and Janet had been through it already, so

would be able to

guide him past the madness to his new life.

She caught up to Threnody and Jordan, who had paused

in a glade that seemed clear of mad effects. Obviously they

were not eager to plunge into more madness, especially since

they hadn't succeeded in losing Mentia by coming here.

She approached. "I know the madness better than you

do," she said. "I'm Mentia, Metria's worser half. I'm nor-

mally a little crazy, but I'm sane here. I suggest to you that

you would be best advised to cease this futile flight and take

the summons token."

"No!" Threnody cried.

' 'I think you are unduly hung up on what Metria did four

hundred and thirty-eight years ago. You would be better off

to forget it, instead of holding an impossible grudge."

"No!"

"Did it ever occur to you that she has a side too?"

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"No."

Mentia considered. "Let me offer you a deal. Let's ex-

plore the two sides of it, to see which makes more sense.

Then I will guide you out of the region of madness and leave

you alone."

Threnody was about to say "no" again, but Jordan cau-

tioned her. When it came to wild action, the barbarian had

pretty good sense. So she considered. "Guide us out first."

"No. We need the madness for this. But I will give you

my word."

"Your word was never any good!"

"On the contrary," Mentia said evenly.
"Metria has al-

ways told the truth, and so have I. It is
one of our foibles."

"That's not true!"

Jordan nudged her again. Barbarians had

solid instincts

about such things, and though they could be totally foolish

about women, they could generally tell whether other crea-

tures were trustworthy. Since the woman Jordan was foolish

about was Threnody, he was reasonably objective about

Mentia.

"Very well," Threnody said through her

teeth. "Two

sides. Then you guide us out and leave us alone."

'But her mind is closed!' Metria protested. 'She's just us-

ing this to get out of accepting the token.'

'Of course,' Mentia replied sanely. 'But she may change

her mind.'

'She'll never change her mind! She hates me.'

'This is the Region of Madness, where odd truths come

out. I have had experience. Play it through, and perhaps you

both will be surprised.'

Metria, amazed by the assurance and sanity of her crazy

worser self, which was not at all true to form, subsided. Men-

tia had access to all her memories and experience, so was

competent to do whatever it was she had in mind.

"First we shall play it through your way," Mentia said to

Threnody. "We shall need Jordan's participation."

Jordan jumped. "Mine?"

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"You knew King Gromden, didn't you?"

"Yes. Just before he died. He was a good old boy."

"You will play his part."

"I will? I don't know how."

"The madness will guide you. Just go along with it."

Jordan shrugged, intrigued. "Okay. It'll be fun to be a

King."

Mentia turned to Threnody. "You will

play the Queen's

part. You do remember her?"

"Yes," Threnody agreed tightly.

"And I will play the part of the demoness."

"You should be very good at that,"
Threnody said, with

such an edge that Jordan flinched as if he

had been cut,

though the barb had not been directed at him.

Mentia ignored the thrust. "Bear in mind that we must all

reenact the truth as we perceive it. That is, first as you per-

ceive it, second as I perceive it. We will each be true to the

scenario we are playing."

Threnody looked sharply at her. "You really believe that something will come of this!"

"Yes. Shall we proceed?"

Threnody shrugged.

"Then I will set the scene," Mentia said.

"It is the year

of Xanth six fifty-seven, in the

countryside near Castle

Roogna. Gromden has been King for thirty four years. He is

married, but his wife is cold. It was a marriage made for

political reasons. He is a good man—"

"A very good man," Threnody said.

"But fallible, as mortal men are. He is not yet aware of

it, but there is something missing from his life. That is joy."

As she spoke, Jordan postured, emulating the King, and the

madness closed in and gave him the aspect of the King:

middling-old, pudgy, yet possessed of authority.

' 'One day as Gromden was out reviewing the kingdom,

learning how well things were doing by touching stones and

posts and other incidental items and using his talent to im-

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mediately Fathom Everything about them, he came across a

wretched straggler on the road."

Now Metria stepped into her part, as the scene of medieval

Xanth formed around them. She became the wretched strag-

gler, cloaked and hooded and hunched.

The King paused in the center of the road. He was a stun-

ningly rich figure, in his quality clothing, compared to the

creature before him. "May I help you, good woman?" he

inquired, for he was never arrogant.

The figure looked wearily at him and recognized his status.

"O, your majesty, don't bother with me," she said, kneeling

and bowing her head. "I am only a mere outcast from my

village, in sore need of help and protection, not fit to bother

the likes of you."

"Come, come, now, my dear," he said graciously. "I'll

be the judge of that. What is your problem?"

"O King, my father sought to marry me to the village

lout. Rather than suffer that indignity, for I am smart and

there are those who call me fair, I fled my otherwise excellent

home. But no other family would take me

in or give me

succor, so I had to depart the village
also. It was the same

in neighboring villages. No one respects
a willful child. Now

I am a stranger far from home, who
dares not return, and

who is grievously weary and footsore
from traveling and

foraging about the countryside. I wish
only to find a com-

patible place to live, and in due course
to find a good man

to marry, but in every village it is only
the louts who pursue
me."

"You poor girl," the King said
sympathetically. "Let me

get a look at you." He lifted back her
cowl, and lo! she was

black of hair and eye and fine of feature,
a beautiful young

woman. He looked at her body, and now
saw that under the

rough cloak was the stuff to madden a man's mind: every

curve and point of her caused his fancy to see the likeness

of storks taking wing as if imperatively summoned. She was

indeed the loveliest creature he had ever seen. The seed of

his undoing was planted in that moment.

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She lifted her large eyes to glance briefly at his face, then

lowered them demurely. "O King, I am unworthy of your

attention. I will depart forthwith, perhaps to sustenance in

yonder field. I apologize for soiling your view with my as-

pect."

But the King was generous. "Quite all right, my dear. No

need to go to the field. It would have
been a shame to see

you married to a lout. Far be it from me
to see the least of

my subjects in dire want. There is a
royal station house near

the next village which is currently
unoccupied. I will install

you there until you can find a better
situation."

Tears of purest gratitude welled in her

perfect eyes. "O,

how can I ever thank you for this great kindness, your maj-

esty? Never in my wildest and most foolish dreams did I

ever imagine that any such thing would come to pass."

"Tut, none of that," he said, and took her by her delicate

elbow and guided her to the station house. It was in a shel-

tered spot just out of sight of the road,
and was well ap-

pointed, for normally a small detachment
of the King's

guards occupied it. But in the past
decade the need for such

activity had diminished, or perhaps the
kingship was losing

its power. Gromden was a nice man
rather than an imperious

one, and had little use for guards or,
indeed, for force. Thus

this was a relic of a more imperial age.

"Make yourself

comfortable here, and I will check on
you next week to be

sure you are all right." He turned to go.

"Oh, but do not leave me so soon!" she
pleaded, touching

his arm to turn him back. She breathed
deeply as she re-

moved her cloak so that her fine bosom
heaved. "I haven't

yet thanked you for your extreme kindness to me."

"No thanks is necessary," he said. "I am glad merely to

have been able to help."

"O my Lord, but you have done so very much for me,"

she said. "'If I may presume—" She stood up on her tiptoes

and kissed him with surprising firmness

on the mouth.

The King reeled as if clobbered on the noggin—and he

had been, in a fashion. He had never before experienced

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anything half as sweet and potent as this. This girl seemed

to be about granddaughterly age, yet
there was something
compellingly mature about her.

"O King, are you dizzy?" she asked,
concerned. "Come,

lie down for a moment on this bed, and I
will do my utmost

to care for you. I would never knowingly
cause you mis-

chief."

King Gromden was indeed dizzy, but not from any inca-

capacity of mind or body. Her kiss had simply been so sweet

as to awaken in him all manner of notions that had never

gotten close to him before. He suffered himself to be brought

to the bed and laid upon it, while his newly discovered fan-

cies danced in circles all around his awareness.

"Perhaps your clothing is too tight, your majesty," she

said, loosening his collar and then his shirt.

"Oh, no, no need to—" he protested weakly.

But she continued, and somehow he discovered himself

under a sheet with her, and she had

nothing more on than

he did. Then did the storks indeed take notice, for soon such

a signal went out as no such bird could have ignored. He

had been made deliriously happy.

In the morning, somewhat ashamed for his weakness of

the night. King Gromden got up, hastily dressed, and left the

lovely girl sleeping in the bed. He had

never before done

anything like this. He hurried back to
Castle Roogna and

went about his business with utmost
dispatch. He tried to

forget the affair.

But such was the illicit appeal of what
had happened that

in the evening he found himself walking
back to the station

house, nominally to see how the girl was

doing. Love of her

burdened his heart, and he simply could not stay away. Yet

when he came to the house, he discovered it empty, with

nothing touched. It was as if there had never been a woman

there. She was gone.

Dispirited, he returned to the castle. Every day for a month

he went to the house, but it remained

devastatingly empty.

He realized that the girl had had
whatever she had wanted

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of him that one night, and would never
return. So he resumed

his dull kingly life, trying to forget that
single dreamlike

night of bliss.

Unknown to him, a stork visited the mysterious damsel

less than a year after their contact. She had hidden herself,

but the canny bird had located her regardless, and delivered

its bundle.

Then, when the King was at supper with the Queen and

some prominent visitors, the woman

appeared, carrying a

bundle. "Here is your bastard baby, O adulterous King!"

she cried, and dumped the bundle in his lap. "And know, O

simpleton, with what you have sundered your marriage

vow." She flew into the air, dissolved into a cloud of laugh-

ing gas, and vanished as all shocked eyes turned to Gromden.

The laughter echoed for a long time as they stared.

Thus did the foul demoness befuddle,
seduce, and humil-

iate the decent King. The slow
deterioration of his power

swiftened, and before long Castle
Roogna was like an empty

shell. The Queen, of course, would have
nothing more to do

with him, and he was a laughing-stock
throughout Xanth.

Yet such was his goodness that he made no excuses. He

recognized the baby as his own, and set out to raise her as

a Princess. Indeed, she became the apple of his eye, the one

he loved best, and she loved him. But the Queen, outraged

by the situation, finally put a curse on the child: If she re-

mained in Castle Roogna, the castle would fall. So the girl,

now about ten years old and as
dawningly pretty as her

mother had been, fled the castle. She
refused to be the un-

doing of the castle as she had been of her
beloved father.

This broke King Gromden's heart. He
banished the Queen

and lived alone thereafter, with only a
maid to tend to the

castle. He searched constantly for his

daughter, hoping

somehow to get around the curse. But she, being half de-

moness, readily eluded him, though she loved him. Until,

years later, she found love in an entirely different story, died,

became a ghost, and was revived about four hundred years

later to rejoin her lover. Meanwhile poor King Gromden

slowly declined into death, and Castle Roogna was deserted.

All because of the wicked demoness.

The reenactment ended. "And I still want nothing to do

with you. Mother," Threnody concluded. "You destroyed

my beloved father with the crudest of lies, and I can never

forgive that."

Jordan was startled. "Metria is your mother? You never told me."

"Of course I didn't," Threnody said, angry tears in her eyes. "I'm ashamed of half my parentage. That half." She glared at Mentia, trying to get to Metria.

'See?' Metria said. 'It's hopeless. She will always hate

me.'

"Now we shall have the other view,"
Mentia said firmly.

"Back to square one."

"Do we have to?" Threnody grumped

through her angry

tears.

"Yes. We made a deal for both views.
We shall have

them."

The scene formed again: King Gromden
marching down

the road, the cloaked and hooded demoness meeting him.

The dialogue played out as before, except that the demoness

began to be genuinely impressed with the King's manner and

goodness of heart. She lacked soul or conscience, yet was

curious about the latter, so what had originally been inciden-

tal mischief became something else. She saw how lonely the

King was beneath his contented exterior,
and resolved to give

him some reward for it: one night of the
kind of joy only a

demoness or a really devoted beautiful
woman could give a

man. She thought he deserved at least
that much.

On the following day he visited her
again, so she gave

him delight again, for she still respected

and liked him, as

much as a demoness could. So it continued for some time,

in perfect privacy. She was glad at last to have brought joy

into his somewhat sterile life. Of course, in time he caught

on to her nature, but by then it didn't matter, because he

found such delight in her. When, on rare occasion, some

mischance threatened to expose their liaisons, she quickly

and quietly vanished away, so that there could be no evi-

dence, returning to him only when it was safe. Thus no other

person learned of their affair.

But she made one mistake. She forgot about the stork.

Normally a demoness prevented the signal from getting out

to find the stork, but she was so taken with the nice King

that she never even noticed the escaping signal. When she

realized, it was too late. Well, she thought, she would just

have to find a suitable home for the baby when it came,

because a demoness was no fit mother for a human baby.

For one thing, the baby would probably have a soul, while she didn't.

When the stork actually brought a beautiful baby girl, the demoness was so taken with her that she almost decided to keep her after all. But she knew that would be folly, and she didn't want her daughter to suffer the neglect that was bound

to occur in the company of a demoness.
So she did the next

best thing: She brought the child to her
father the King.

She did this, of course, in decent
privacy, so as to avoid

embarrassing him. "O King, here is your
darling daughter,"

she informed him, presenting him with
the bundle. "I wish

I could keep her myself, but I can't, so I

trust you to treat

her well and give her all the things a precious child needs.'"

Gromden was amazed. In the typical manner of men, he

had assumed that he had gone through the motions but that

the summons would not reach the stork. But one look at the

baby captivated him, and he was glad to accept her and rec-

ognize her as his own. "She will be my heir," he said, "for

I have no children." This was fond illusion, because only a

Magician could be King of Xanth. But her magic talent was

as yet unknown, so there was always the chance that she

would be a Sorceress. Of course, the kingship was tradition-

ally limited to men, for archaic obsolete reasons, and those

were the hardest reasons to refute. And she was half demon-

ess, which would complicate her eligibility further. But

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Gromden postponed those concerns until later, and mean-

while doted on his daughter.

"I think I must not visit you anymore,"
the demoness said

to the King. "For demons are known to
be bad influences

on children, and your daughter must have
only the best in-

fluences."

Sadly, the King agreed. So they kissed
once more and

parted. The demoness lacked true human feelings, but a few

of them had rubbed off on her during her association with

the King, and so it would be fair to say she emulated a

feeling or two in that time. She would have liked to continue

with the King, and did visit her daughter a number of times,

taking care never to make her presence known. Thus she was

aware of what was going on in Castle Roogna, though she

did not interfere.

Gromden named his daughter Threnody, because soon her

talent of sad singing showed. He provided every possible

thing for her, including tutoring, playmates, and every kind

of pastry and pie. She had a nursemaid to look after her. But

he could not provide her with a mother, t

The Queen took an interest. She was, of course, resentfull

of the presence of the child, because the child was evidence |

of the King's infidelity. The Queen had no interest in that I

sort of relationship with the King, but it

was embarrassing

to have it generally known that he had found a relationship

•elsewhere. But for a time she masked her enmity, and Grom-1

den, assuming that others had the same generosity of spirit i

that he did, did not realize how bitter she was. j

The Queen took a hand in educating the child. "The first |

thing you must understand," she told little Threnody, "is the |

foulness of your origin. Your father was cruelly seduced by

a hideous demoness who somehow made him think she was

beautiful. Then she embarrassed him in public by bringing

you, so that everyone would know his folly." And the child

believed it. "But don't speak of this to your father," the

Queen continued, "for he has already suffered more than

enough, and it would hurt him to be reminded of it." So the

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child was careful never to reveal what she had learned to

Gromden.

But as the years passed. Threnody
showed distinct signs

of becoming beautiful. Indeed, she was
the juvenile image

of the form her mother had assumed to
seduce the King.

Gromden, of course, treated her exactly
the way a father

should treat a daughter, not quite
realizing the significance

of her image. But the Queen couldn't
stand it. So finally she

acted. She put a terrible curse on the child, forcing her to

depart the castle forever. When the King discovered this, he

banished the Queen also. But the damage was done.

The vision ended. Gromden reverted to Jordan, the Queen

reverted to Threnody, and the beautiful child reverted to little

Woe Betide, who then became Mentia.

Threnody seemed shaken. ' 'I remember now. The Queen

did tell me that! And I never questioned it. Of course, she

had a bad motive. Still, it was wrong of you to seduce the

King. My presence did weaken his image. I was his eurse."

"No you weren't," Jordan protested.
"You were the

delight of his later life. His life was empty, until you filled

it." He, having just emulated the role of King Gromden, was

in a position to know. ' 'The demoness did him a real favor.

It was the jealous Queen who made the mischief."

Threnody, having emulated the Queen, now understood

that. But the belief of four centuries did

not dissipate readily.

"I'll have to think about this."

"Now I will show you out of the
madness, and depart,"

Mentia said.

'But she hasn't taken the token!' Metria
protested.

'Stifle it, better half. Soft sell does it.'

The demoness led the way out of the madness. During her

pauses in the vision, mainly while the Queen was poisoning

the mind of the child, she had scouted around and found the

best route. "The only obstacle here is the peer pressure,"

she said. "You simply have to resist it."

Jordan looked around. "A pier? But

there's no water."

Then the pressure began. They were squeezed from either

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side by invisible ramps. "Not pier. Peer," Mentia clarified.

"The things of madness are peering at us,

trying to make us

go their way. They want us to be as mad as they are. They

can't touch us physically, but they can peer so hard that it

feels solid." She tapped the solid seeming invisible shape

beside her, and it made a dull wooden sound. "Just ignore

it."

"But it's squeezing the breath from me!"

Jordan gasped.

"Peer pressure can be very strong,"

Mentia agreed. She

wasn't suffering, because she had made herself too gaseous

for the pressure to affect very much, and Threnody was more

slowly doing the same. Threnody could change forms in the

manner of a demoness, being a crossbreed, but this took time,

so she was under more pressure. "Just say no," Mentia advised them.

"No!"

"No!"

With that the pressure eased, because peering was difficult

when the objects of its cynosure didn't cooperate. They we're

able to pull themselves on through.

They stepped out of the madness and back into regular

Xanth. "I'll know better than to go there again," Threnody

said, relieved.

"I don't know," Jordan said. "I sort of liked being a

King, and making out with that—"

Threnody drew her knife and, with one swift deft motion,

cut off his tongue. That silenced him for a while, because

though his talent was rapid healing, it took time to grow his

tongue back to full size. Things had

returned to normal.

5

CURSE

Well, it is time for me to depart," Mentia said, paus-

ing artfully.

"Um, wait," Threnody said. "I'm not saying that

I forgive you for the dastardly thing you did, but aren't you

going to try to make me accept that summons?"

'Yes!' Metria said silently.

"No, that wasn't part of the deal, '.'
Mentia said.

"But it's crazy not to pursue your advantage, when I'm

wavering."

"Thank you. I am a little crazy. I'm sure that mysterious

trial will be able to proceed without your surely significant

participation." The demoness made as if to puff into smoke.

"Maybe—some other deal?" Threnody asked.

"I suppose, if you think that's fair. You know what I want;

is there something you really want?"

"Yes. What I most desire is to be able to return to Castle

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Roogna, where I was happy once,

without it falling. To walk

through the familiar old rooms, and meet
the people who are

there now." A tear formed at one eye or
the other. "To

remember how it was with my father. To
view him on the

Tapestry."

That last was ironic, because as a child
Threnody could

have viewed recent and current events

on the Tapestry, and

learned the truth about her mother. But she had been so sure

she already knew it that she had never done so.

"Very well," Mentia said briskly. "I shall see about abat-

ing that curse. I shall return." She popped off.

'What are you doing?' Metria asked as

they appeared back

at their home castle. 'How can we abate
a four-hundred-year-

old curse? That was a crazy deal to
make!'

'Thank you. Maybe there is a way.'

"What way?"

'I don't feel free to tell you.'

'What? I'm your better half. I can get it directly from your crazy mind.'

'Then it wouldn't work.'

Metria, baffled, backed off. She had never been able to conceal anything from Mentia, but Mentia could hide things

from her whenever she wanted to.
Metria had been grudg-

ingly impressed by her worser half's
handling of the madness

and Threnody. Maybe Mentia actually
did know how to lift

the curse.

'Yes. Now you must take over the body,
and do what I

tell you. Don't question me, just do it.'

Bemused, Metria took over. 'So what do you want me to do?'

'Stoke up your husband for another day's worth, then

check for the least familiar name in your bag of tokens.'

So Metria did both. 'Here's one I don't recognize at all:

Phelra. She's a Witness.'

'Serve her summons next.'

'But she could be way off in some hidden hinterland, and

take more time to locate than any number of regular folk.'

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'Good. Do it.'

Metria sighed and held up Phelra's token. It tugged in the

general direction of central Xanth. She popped across the

terrain in that direction, appearing in the deepest jungle north

of Lake Ogre-Chobee. She lifted the token again, and its tug

was stronger. She popped off for a shorter hop in its direc-

tion, and landed near a house beside a wooded mountain.

The token tugged toward the house.

So she went to knock on the door. In a moment it opened.

A young woman of undistinguished features stood there.

"But I didn't summon you," she said, surprised.

"Should you have?" Metria asked,

similarly surprised.

Who was summoning whom?

"My talent is to summon animals to help me," the woman

explained. "But it doesn't work on demons."

"I came here on my own to summon you, Metria said.

"If you are Phelra." She held up the token.

"Summon me? What for?" »

"For the trial of Roxanne Roc."

"Sorry, I don't summon birds, just animals. Anyway,

she's already busy."

"Nevertheless, she is to be tried within a fortnight. Can

you get to the Nameless Castle in time?"

"I don't think so. It's not the easiest castle to reach."

'Take her to Castle Roogna first,' Mentia suggested.

"There are some folk going there from Castle Roogna,"

Metria said. "Suppose I guide you there, and you can go to

the trial with them?"

"That would be nice," Phelra said. "I've never been to

Castle Roogna, and would like to see it. If you are sure they

won't mind."

"I can take you to Princess Ida. She's very nice, and—"

'Don't tell her talent!'

"—will surely see that you are comfortable," Metria fin-

ished smoothly. What was her worser half up to?

"Then let's go," Phelra agreed brightly, accepting the to-

ken. "I'll summon a large animal to transport us."

"Oh, I don't need—"

'Ride with her.'

"But it does sound like fun," Metria concluded.

Pheira stepped outside and whistled. In a moment there

was a heavy clopping sound, and a really weird creature ap-

peared. It looked like an enormous furry comb, with the teeth

serving as many little legs, and the head of a cat. It came to

the house and stopped, looking at Pheira expectantly.

"What kind of animal is this?" Metria inquired. She

thought she had seen just about

everything, but this was new
to her.

"A catacomb, of course," Pheira said.
She caught hold of

the tail and climbed up to the top, where
the ridge-back wid-

ened so that she could bestride it
comfortably.

"Of course," the demoness agreed,
joining her. "How

ignorant of me not to recognize it immediately."

"Take us to Castle Roogna, Comb,"
Pheira said, and the

creature obligingly started walking. It
moved surprisingly

swiftly, getting through tangles of
vegetation without diffi-

culty, leaving no snarls behind. It
combed through the forest

with smooth strokes.

'Tell her there used to be a curse on
Castle Roogna,' Men-
tia said.

'But there is still a—'

'Just do it.'

So Metria did it. "You know, one of the
other folk I have

to summon had a problem. She was under a curse that Castle

Roogna would fall if she ever entered it. So she never would come to the castle."

"But it's okay now?" Pheira asked, concerned.

"Well... "

'Don't deny it!'

'But it's not true!'

'How do you know that?'

Metria hesitated. She had always accepted the validity of

the curse. She understood that Threnody had once ap-

proached Castle Roogna, and that it had

started to fall. But

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that had been some time ago, and it was possible that the

situation had changed. Maybe that was what Mentia was

gambling on.

'How long do curses last?' Pheira

asked. ' 'I thought they

didn't last longer than the life of the one who makes them.

Is the cursor still alive?"

"No. She died some time back."

"That must be a relief to your friend,"
Pheira said. "Now

she can visit Castle Roogna."

"Maybe so," Metria agreed dubiously.
Why should Men-
tia care what Pheira thought?

The catacomb made excellent time,
perhaps because of its

many springy legs, and soon they hove
into view of Castle

Roogna. They dismounted, and the
catacomb trotted off, glad

to get a chance to comb through new
territory.

'Now introduce her to Ida,' Mentia said.

They passed the moat monster, who rose up to challenge

the unfamiliar person. "Oh,, take it easy. Souffle," Metria

said. "This is Pheira, on my summons list."

"Oooo, hherrr," the monster agreed in an I-knew-that

tone, and submerged.

Ida came forward to meet them, her little moon glinting

as it caught a beam of sunlight, and Metria performed an-

other introduction and explanation. '

'Why, of course you can

come to the Nameless Castle with us,"

Ida agreed. "We can

ride the two gargoyles up there."

"Gargoyles can fly well?" Pheira asked, surprised, for she

had seen how solid the creatures were, and how small their

wings were.

"I'm sure they can, for this very special trip," Ida said.

"We'll get a flying centaur to make us and them light

enough."

And if Ida believed it was so, it was so,
Metria knew, for
her talent was the Idea.

Pheira looked around. "This is such a
nice castle. I'm glad
the curse is off it."

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"The curse?" Ida asked, and her moon

seemed perplexed

too, going to half-phase.

"The one that prevented Threnody from coming here,"

Metria explained.

"Oh, that curse is gone?" Ida asked

"How nice! Now

Threnody can visit."

Suddenly Metria grasped the crazy logic of her crazy

worser self. Pheira didn't know Ida's talent, and Ida didn't

know that Pheira had no true source of information. Now

Ida believed that the curse was gone—so it was gone, be-

cause what Ida believed was true. As long as the source of

her Idea was from someone who didn't know her magic. This

was such a devious, demented ploy that no one else would

believe it, so Metria didn't try to explain it. "Yes," she said.

"I will bring her here now."

She left Ida to show Pheira to her room in the castle, and

popped back to where she had left Threnody. It didn't take

long to locate her, though it was now evening, because

Threnody was no longer trying to avoid her.

Jordan's tongue had grown mostly back, though he spoke

with a lisp. Threnody was constantly cutting him; it was her

way of showing him affection. Metria was sure Threnody

had other ways to show him affection, when she chose; she

was after all, half demoness. But he was

a barbarian, so he

related well to tough love.

"I think we have nullified that curse,"
Metria said. "I

think you can visit Castle Roogna now."

Threnody gazed at her. "I am not sure I
believe you."

"I'm not quite sure I believe it myself,"
Metria confessed.

"Let's go there and see."

"It will take several days to get there
afoot," Threnody
pointed out.

And Metria couldn't afford that time. She
still had a dozen
and a half tokens to serve.

"Maybe a thentaur," Jordan lisped.

That gave Metria a notion. She had two winged centaurs

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on her list. They were too young to carry such burdens, but

if the grown ones helped—

"I'll be back," she said, and popped off

to the centaurs'

stall.

This was a comfortable house in a glade north of the Gap

Chasm. The centaur family was at supper: a winged stallion,

a winged mare, and a winged filly. Their huge wings were

folded, resembling capes across their bodies. "I would ask

you to join us," Chex Centaur said. She

was a fine full-

figured creature. "But I know you don't eat, Metria."

"Why are you here?" Cheiron Centaur asked directly. He

was an impressive centaur, in both his human and equine

portions.

"I have summonses for Che and Cynthia."

"Summonses!"

Metria explained the situation.

"Gee," Cynthia said. She was a filly of about ten, not

quite verging onto maredom. "I get to serve on a Jury!"

"Che is not here," Chex said. "He is with

Chief Gwenny

Goblin, at Goblin Mountain. He is her Companion."

Metria already knew about the Companion bit, but had the

wit not to say so. "I'll go there soon, to serve him his sum-

mons. But meanwhile, there is something else. I wonder if I

could prevail on you for a favor."

Chex smiled. "Your soul becomes you,
Metria. You are

so polite, now. What do you wish?"

"I think we may have abated Threnody's
curse, so that

Castle Roogna won't fall if she goes
there. I need to get her

there soon, to see if that's true. If it is,
she will accept the

summons I have for her. But it will take
her and Jordan

Barbarian several days to get there by foot. So I was wondering—"

Cheiron laughed. "Of course we'll take them there! I'd love to see if that curse is really gone." He looked at Chex.

"In the morning."

"In the morning, when it's light," Chex agreed. "We'll

deliver Cynthia there at the same time."

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"Thank you." Metria give them directions for Jordan and

Threnody's location, though she expected to be there to

guide them anyway. Then she popped over to Goblin Moun-

tain to serve Che his token, and tell him where his family

was going.

Goblin Mountain looked like a giant anthill. But a pretty

one, because the goblins had become aesthetic since Gwenny

became their first female Chief. There were flower beds on

the terraces, and the guards were garbed in pastel colors.

She landed in front of the main entrance.

"Halt, Demon-

ess," the guard said. He glanced around to see if anyone else

was within earshot. "And if you know what's good for you,

you'll get your smoky posterior elsewhere fast. We don't

need your kind here."

"Too bad, snootface," Mentia replied evenly. "I'm here

to see the Chief's Companion."

"That piece of horsemeat's overdue for the pot," the

guard muttered. "In fact, the Chief should be dunked right

in there with him. She's ruining the tribe."

"I'll tell her you said so," Metria said sweetly. "What's

your name, big-mouth?"

Suddenly the guard was surprisingly shy.
"Never mind.

Go on in."

Metria smiled. Goblin men were the
dregs of Xanth, mean

of spirit and foul of mouth. They hated
the notion of having

a woman as Chief. But they were stuck
with it, and as a

result Goblin Mountain and the
surrounding territory were

prospering. Instead of being a core of outrage, the goblin

enclave had become a center of justice and prosperity.

Soon she located Gwenny Goblin, who was at her supper

in the main dining hall. Che Centaur was beside her. Metria

knew what few others did: Gwenny was slightly lame of

ankle and slightly weak of vision—faults

that would get her

promptly executed if the male goblins
ever learned of them.

But special contact lenses not only
corrected her vision, they

enabled her to see dreams, giving her an
uncanny insight |

into plots against her. And her
Companion enabled her to |

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conceal any physical or mental lapse.
Because Che was a

centaur, albeit a young one, his advice
was always excellent,

and the Chief always heeded it. They
were an admirable

team.

"Why, hello, Demoness Metria," Che
said, spying her.

He was careful to introduce any
newcomers aloud, so that

Gweny was never embarrassed by missing them.

Gweny looked quickly up. She was a nice and lovely

dark young woman, as most goblin girls were, in contrast to

the crude and ugly goblin men. One day she would marry,

and make some goblin man undeservedly happy. But so far

she had been way too busy reorganizing

the goblin property

and hierarchy to concern herself with anything like that. She

was eighteen; she had a little time yet to worry about her

social life. "So nice to see you, Metria," she said. "To what

do we owe the pleasure of this appearance?"

"I have to serve Che with a summons, as a Juror," Metria

said, and explained. "And you. Chief Gwenny, as a Witness."

"Roxanne Roc on trial," Che said thoughtfully as he accepted his token and read it. "That should be most interesting. It seems hard to believe that she could be guilty of any crime."

"She doesn't know why herself," Metria said. "She's

busy hatching that fancy egg, which is due any month now.

She hasn't gone anywhere."

"This is certainly peculiar," Gwenny agreed. "Who is

charging her with a crime?"

"The Simurgh."

"Now I am really interested," Che said,
spreading his

wings a bit with excitement. "That big
bird is not one for

incidental mischief."

' 'Just so long as both of you are there, in
a fortnight minus

a day."

"Who else will be there?" Gwenny inquired.

"Just about everyone of any current percentage."

"Any current what?"

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"Compensation, indemnification,

remuneration, remit-
tance, stipend—"

"Interest?"

' 'Whatever," Metria agreed crossly.'

'Magician Trent, Sor-

ceress Iris, Grey Murphy, Princess Ida,
Demon Prof Gross-

clout—"

"Not Princess Ivy?" Gwenny asked alertly.

"She's not on my list. It's Grey as Prosecutor and Ida as Defense Attorney."

"Grey and Ida," Che said thoughtfully, just as her worser self Mentia had before. "Working opposite each other. Suppose she gets an Idea?"

"She wouldn't do that," Gwenny said firmly. Then, less

firmly: "Would she?"

"How long have Grey and Ivy been betrothed?" Metria

asked.

"Nine years," Che said promptly. Centaurs always had

their facts and figures straight. ' 'They
were affianced the year
after I was foaled."

"Good thing they weren't your parents,"
Metria remarked

innocently, and Gwenny stifled an
unchiefly giggle. ' 'Do you

think they are ever going to get on with
it?"

"No, I think they are waiting for the sun

and the moon

to collide first," Che said, trying to look serious.

Gwenny made a conspiratorial wink. ' 'Maybe we can en-

courage them. I understand that Ivy's parents took some time

in that respect too—"

"Eight years," Che said.

"—until their friends held a wedding party for them in

the cemetery, catching Magician Dor by surprise."

"Are you two thinking what I'm thinking?" Metria asked.

Both Che and Gwenny immediately put on straight faces.

"Of course not," Che said. "Centaur's

don't conspire."

"But if Professor Grossclout will be there," Gwenny said,

"and he's competent to marry a couple
—"

"He married me to Veleno," Metria agreed. "Because he

wanted to be sure I got what was coming to me."

"Who knows what might happen, coincidentally," Che

finished. The expression on his face might have been mis-

interpreted as smugness, were he not a centaur.

"So anyway," Metria concluded, "Cynthia Centaur will

be there too, and your folks are going to

take Jordan the

Barbarian and Threnody to Castle
Roogna tomorrow. I

thought you might be interested in joining
them."

"Threnody can't go to Castle Roogna,"
Che said.

"That's what makes it interesting. 'Bye."
She popped off.

She loved doing that: leaving them with

something truly tan-

talizing. They would have to come to
Castle Roogna to see

it happen.

She arrived where she had left Jordan
and Threnody. They

were camped out in the open, barbarian
style, beside a per-

fectly even symme-tree, gazing up at the
stars. Metria looked

up and saw that some crazy

constellations were forming over
the Region of Madness. That made
sense.

"Cheiron and Chex Centaur have agreed
to carry you to

Castle Roogna tomorrow," she
announced. "They'll be here

at dawn. When you see them fly
overhead, shout, so they

can find you."

"Okay," Jordan said. His tongue seemed to have healed

the rest of the way. It was an interesting relation those two

had, with her violence and his healing.

'I wonder if she ever cuts off anything else?' Mentia

mused. 'When she's indisposed for love.'

Metria popped home and made sure her husband was still

suitably delirious. Then she settled down to ponder the re-

maining tokens. She still had a number of folk to find, and

though she had plenty of time, she knew that it could quickly

dissipate if even one case turned out to be difficult. So her

best course seemed to be to tackle the next most awkward

folk on her list: the two Mundanes, Dug and Kirn. Assuming

she could even reach them. Was there a way? They had en-

tered Xanth before through screens, and

And there was her way. She would have to approach Corn

Pewter, the evil machine, next. And hope he cooperated. He

was supposed to be a good machine now, but she didn't quite

trust that. Fortunately the hour didn't matter; the machine

didn't sleep at night.

So she popped off to Pewter's cave, bypassing the invis-

ible giant who helped drive people into the cave. The glass

screen was there as usual, propped up amidst pewter and

crockery. It certainly didn't look like much.

"Hello, Evil Machine," she said. "I've got something for you."

The screen brightened. Print appeared on it. A GREETING,

WORD-IMPACTED DEMONESS.

"Word-whatted?"

BOUND, CONSTRAINED,
CONSTIPATED, CONFUSED, CHA-
GRINED; MORTIFIED——

"Whatever," she agreed crossly.

DO YOU HAVE WHAT I NEED?

"That depends on what you need."

I NEED DIE-ODES FOR MY
CIRCUITS.

"You need dead poets for your circus?"

The screen flickered warningly. NO,
IGNORAMUS, i ALSO

COULD USE A D-TERMINAL.

"What kind of termite?"

The screen nickered again, rr D-
TERMINES WHAT i CAN DO.

I AM TRYING TO GET UPGRADED.

"Well, don't upchuck on me, machine!"

The screen faded for a moment, while
the numbers 1

through 10 zipped rapidly across it several times. Then it got

control of itself. YOU ARE THE ONLY CREATURE WHO COMES

CLOSE TO ANNOYING ME, DESPITE MY LACK OF EMOTION.

WHAT DO YOU HAVE FOR ME?

"That's more like it. Evil Machine. Here's your sum-

mons." She held out the token marked "Corn Pewter."

DEMONESS CHANGES MIND
ABOUT SERVING SUMMONS, the

screen printed.

Oops, she'd forgotten how the
contraption controlled re-

ality in its vicinity. She withdrew the
token, having changed

her mind.

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But she was no ordinary demoness.
Mentia took over the

body. She hadn't changed her mind.
"Listen, you bucket of

bolts," she said. "You can't ignore this
summons. It's

from—"

DEMONESS CEASES DIALOGUE.

And of course, she did. But she had one more chance.

Woe Betide appeared. "O please, O illustrious machine,"

the tyke pleaded. "The Simurgh will be annoyed if you

aren't there.-She wants an entity of true competence. Some-

one completely rational to serve on the

Jury, in contrast to
the mush—"

The screen nickered. THE SIMURGH?

"Yes, 0 marvelous contraption. It's such
an honor to be

selected by her for this trial! Only the
very most special folk

are on the list, and—"

TRIAL?

"Roxanne Roc is on trial, and—"

WHAT FOR?

"Nobody but the Simurgh knows, 0
sapiant device. But

it must be very super duper extra
important, because Demon

Professor Grossclout is the Judge, and

Magician Trent is the

Bailiff, and—" ,

GIVE ME THAT SUMMONS.

The artful moppet seemed to hesitate.

"Are you sure, O

puissant cipher? I would never want to
impose on a thing of

your vasty importance."

Corn Pewter lost patience. CUNNING
TYKE DELIVERS SUM-

MONS, the screen printed.

Obediently Woe Betide set the token
beside the screen.

"And do you think you just might, maybe,
possibly, consider

about helping me fetch in two other
summonsees, 0 astute

apparatus? I think only you can do it, 0
perspicacious mech-

anism."

The evil machine was evidently not deceived about the

child's nature and flattery, but decided to be tolerant. After

all, the Adult Conspiracy had its softer aspects, such as treat-

ing plaintive waifs with consideration.
WHAT TWO OTHERS?

"They are the Mundanes Dug and Kim,
who played the

game of Companions three years ago."

OH, YES, the screen remembered. HE is
A JERK, BUT SHE is

TOLERABLE. WHAT HAVE THEY
TO DO WITH THIS TRIAL?

"They are summoned for Jury duty too, 0
phenomenal

entity," the gamine explained. "I must
fetch them in, but I

can't go outside Xanth."

The screen reflected for a moment; Woe
Betide saw her

image there. THIS is NOT
NECESSARILY FEASIBLE. THE
MUN-

DANES DID ARRIVE IN XANTH
THROUGH ELECTRONIC SCREENS,

BUT THEY WERE PLAYING THE

DEMONS' GAME. THEY STILL
PLAY THAT GAME, BUT NOT
OFTEN. IT MAY BE SEVERAL
MONTHS BEFORE—

"We have only a fortnight!" the cherub
wailed, a large
tear forming.

The machine almost seemed to have an
emotion, i REGRET

I AM UNABLE TO ENSURE THEIR
PARTICIPATION. I CAN CON-
TROL REALITY HERE IN MY
DEMESNE, AND BRING THEM IN
THROUGH MY SCREEN IF THEY
ENTER THAT GAME, BUT I CAN-
NOT MAKE THEM PLAY THAT
GAME.

"Isn't there some other way, 0 grandiose
artifact?" Woe

Betide pleaded, so cute and distressed

that her aspect might
have melted silicon.

STOP THAT! the screen printed,
blurring around the edges.

THERE MAY BE AN ALTERNATE
WAY.

"O thank you, O magnificent creation!
What is it?"

THERE IS AN OLD CENTAUR OF
MAGICIAN CALIBER WHOSE

TALENT IS TO GENERATE AN
AISLE OF MAGIC OUTSIDE XANTH,

OR AN AISLE OF NONMAGIC
WITHIN XANTH. IF YOU ENLIST HIS

AID, YOU WILL BE ABLE TO GO
INTO MUNDANIA TO FETCH

YOUR TWO SUMMONSEES.

"An aisle of magic in Mundania?" the tot

asked, duly

amazed. "O fantastic intellect, how is this possible?"

HE IS A VERY SPECIAL CENTAUR.
THE DISCOVERY OF HJS

TALENT CAUSED HIM TO BE
EXILED FROM CENTAUR ISLE, BE-

CAUSE THE CENTAURS THERE DO
NOT APPROVE OF MAGIC,

OTHER THAN AS A SEPARATE
TOOL TO BE USED AT NEED. IN

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FACT THEY FIND IT OBSCENE DM
HIGHER LIFE FORMS. THUS

THEY TOLERATE MAGIC TALENTS
IN HUMANS, WHICH ARE NOT

ALL THAT HIGH ON THE SCALE,
BUT NOT IN THEMSELVES. THIS

IS ANALOGOUS TO THE ATTITUDE
OF HUMAN BEINGS TOWARD

STORK SUMMONING. THUS THIS

PARTICULAR CENTAUR LIVES
ISOLATED FROM HIS CULTURE
AND DOES NOT SEEK NOTORI-
ETY.

A close observer might have detected
just a hint of bore-

dom in the childish mien, as if she
already knew much of

this. Fortunately the machine was not
observing closely at

the moment, being more interested in

showing off his knowl-

edge to the amazed tad. "O exceptional appurtenance, who

is this centaur, and where is he now?"

HE IS ARNOLDE, AND HE RESIDES
SOMEWHERE IN CENTRAL

XANTH. BUT HE IS INTOLERABLY
OLD, AND PROBABLY NOT UP

TO A JOURNEY TO MUNDANIA.

"But then he is of no use to me," the little girl said irri-

tably. Then, catching herself, she added, "O illustrious mon-

itor."

PERHAPS YOU WILL BE ABLE TO
PREVAIL ON THE GOOD MA-

GICIAN TO REJUVENATE HIM FOR
THE OCCASION, AND ON

SOMEONE'S CAT TO LOCATE HIM.

That was what she needed. "Thanks, flatface," she said,

and popped out of the cave, leaving only a dirty noise be-

hind. She reverted to Metria as she appeared by her home

castle.

However, it was too late in the night to go after Jenny Elf,

who was the one with the cat who could find anything except

home.

The night? It was now coming onto wee morning. Corn

Pewter must have jumped time ahead, or put her on HOLD

while he considered' how to proceed. She had been playing

the machine along, but it seemed that the machine had been

doing the same thing back to her. Well, that was what made

such encounters fun.

So she popped across to the brink of
madness, where Jor-

dan and Threnody were just getting up.
Sure enough, three

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winged centaurs were arriving from the
northwest, and an-

other from the northeast.

They all landed together in the glade
beside Jordan and

Threnody. The one from the northeast
was Che, and he was

carrying Gwenny Goblin. He was not yet
mature, at age ten,

but Gwenny was not very heavy, so he
was able to lighten

and support her. The others were
Cheiron, Chex, and Cyn-

thia.

In a moment the mature centaurs nicked Jordan and Thren-

ody with their tails, making them light. Then the two

mounted, Jordan on Cheiron, Threnody on Chex. All four

centaurs spread their wings and leaped into the air, stroking

strongly. They gained elevation, then turned west, toward

Castle Roogna. It was a pretty sight—
one Metria might not

have appreciated, aesthetically, before
she got half-souled.

In a time and several moments they
reached the castle, and

came to land. They stood and watched as
Jordan and Thren-

ody walked slowly toward the castle.
Princess Ida came to

the front gate, garbed in a fittingly

princessly robe, and

waited similarly. It looked as if her
moon had been washed

for the occasion. Souffle the moat
monster lifted his head

from the brine and oriented on the scene.
They all knew the

significance of this occurrence. All eyes
were on Threnody.

The woman was elegantly dressed, very
pretty in a dark

gown, her black hair spreading downward and outward like

a cape. Her demonly ancestry made it possible for her to

assume what aspect she chose, so of course, she was beau-

tiful. But she was also nervous, because for more than four

hundred years she had been unable to come near this edifice,

lest it collapse. She was plainly in doubt about the abatement

of the curse—and so were the others.
But there was no way

to verify it except to go to the castle.

She came to the end of the lowered
drawbridge. She

paused, then nerved herself and put one
small foot on the

bridge.

There was a shudder and a rumble.

Souffle jumped, craning his head around as if afraid a huge

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stone was about to fall on it. Metria's half soul sank down

to her knees.

"Aw, shucks, it's only an invisible

giant," Jordan said.

"I can smell him."

Sure enough, the faint stench of giant soon wafted across.

The shuddering continued as the giant walked on past, in the near distance, then faded.

Threnody tried again. This time there was no reaction as

she put first one foot, then the other on the planking. She

walked slowly across the bridge, gazing nervously at the cas-

tle ahead.

When she reached the inner side of the moat, Ida stepped

up to embrace her. "I just knew it was all right," she said.

"I'm not in the castle proper yet,"

Threnody said tightly.

"Then come on in," Ida said, taking her hand. The two

walked on through the great front door, in perfect silence.

Jordan followed, glancing up a bit apprehensively. He had

once tried to carry Threnody into the castle, and almost

brought it down.

When it was clear that the castle was not about to fall,

everyone else took a breath. Then they all hurried to catch

up.

"This is the throne room," Ida said, "where—"

"Where my father. King Gromden, used to sit on the

throne, and hold me in his lap,"
Threnody said, remember-

ing. "He told me that one day I would sit
there." Her face

clouded. "But of course, he didn't know
what would hap-

pen."

They moved on. "Here is the courtyard,"
Ida said,

"where the Roses of Roogna grow." She
paused, but Thren-

ody didn't comment. Metria knew why:
Rose of Roogna had

brought the magic roses centuries after
the castle had been

deserted, long after King Gromden's
time. So Threnody had

never seen them. "The roses represent a
test of true love, so

great care must be used when invoking
them."

They went on, visiting all the historic

chambers of the

ancient castle, until they came to the one
where the great

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magic Tapestry hung on the wall. "Oh,
yes, I spent many

happy hours watching this!" Threnody
exclaimed. "It shows

all the history of Xanth. Sometimes I
even dreamed I was

there, part of the great adventures of the past."

"Me, too," Ida murmured, and her moon bobbed. She

glanced at Threnody, and the two exchanged a smile.

The tour concluded with the room assigned to Threnody.

There had been no rumble of protest from any of the stones

or timbers. The curse had indeed been abated.

Then Threnody began to weep. Jordan fetched her a hand-

kerchief, somewhat out of sorts; like any barbarian, he had

no idea what to do with a crying woman. But they were not

tears of pain or grief, but of relief: Threnody had finally

returned to the home of her childhood.

Her fondest wish had
been realized.

Then she turned to Metria, her face
shining wet, and held
out her hand. Metria put the summons
token into it.

But Threnody was accepting more than
the token.

"Mother," she said, in a way she had
never done before.

This time the cutting bitterness was gone. She caught Me-

tria's hand and drew her in for a hug.

"Mother, I forgive

you any wrong I thought you did me or my father. Will you

forgive me. for my attitude?"

Suddenly the weight of Metria's soul pressed her down—

and then released her. For centuries she hadn't cared what

her daughter thought, and indeed had
seldom if ever even

thought of her. But her soul changed all
that, and now she

wanted more than anything else to have
that relationship.

Now her own eyes were streaming.

"Yes! Yes, my daughter,

yes," she said, not caring how foolish it
might sound.

Then they were crying together, while

the others stood in

a circle and watched, and no one was embarrassed. Two

curses had actually been lifted: the one on the castle, and the

one on their relationship.

"I think we have seen enough," Cheiron said. "Cynthia

will remain here until it is time for the trial, but we must

return home."

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"We will remain here also," Che said.

"The trip has al-

ready proved worthwhile." He glanced at Cynthia, who,

though she was only ten, managed to blush.

Metria had to agree.

CONTEST

But Metria could not stay to appreciate the joy at the

castle; she had plenty of other business to see to. She

needed to summons-serve the two Mundanes, Kim and

Dug, and to do that she needed to find Amolde Centaur and

get him rejuvenated, and to do that she needed to find Jenny

Elf and her cat who could find anything.
So how could she

find Jenny Elf?

Well, Jenny had served as a Companion
in the game that

had brought the two Mundanes to Xanth.
Metria herself had

participated in that game; she
remembered the rehearsals and

preparations, supervised by Professor Grossclout. After the

game, the various parties had gone their various ways. But

Grossclout surely knew where every one of them was. So

she would ask him. She resolved this time not to let him get

to her. She would be her normal indifferent self, no matter

what.

No sooner thought than done. She
popped across to the

demon caves. There was the Professor,
breaking in a new

class. "But if you survive," he thundered
at the rows of

mushy demon faces before him, "you
just may wind up

thinking like real demons!" He
glowered, evidently doubting

that such a thing was possible. The students were obviously

cowed, horsed, sheeped, and pigged, daring neither peep nor

poop in response. Only Grossscout was able to manage that;

it was his talent to intimidate those who could not be intim-

idated.

Metria nerved herself and broke the

tense silence. "Hey,

Prof—where's Jenny Elf?"

The glower cracked around the edges.
Wisps of smoke

rose from the Professor's glowing
eyeballs. "What are you

doing here again?" he demanded,
shaking with indignity. In

fact, the whole classroom shook with it.

Hey—it was working! She was actually resisting his in-

timidation. But she knew she had to hang on to her attitude,

because if she ever lost it, she would never recover it. ' 'Oh,

did I interrupt something? Sorry about that." Her conscience

required her to apologize when she transgressed, and it was

hard to be in Grossclout's presence without developing a

feeling of transgressing.

"Come into my office, Demoness," he said, with a calm

fraught with such menace as to be terrifying.

"Sure, Prof." She popped in, shoring up her weak knees

with metallic bracing.

He popped in after her. "Now, to what do I owe the dis-

pleasure of this intrusion, Demoness?" he demanded the mo-

ment his glower softened enough to allow the words out.

"Even your mushmind must know better than to interrupt

one of my classes—which you have now done twice."

She shored up her spine, stiffened her

jaw, and spoke.

"You know that trial? The one you're going to judge?"

"Of course I know that trial, you exasperating creature! I

have scheduled it into my calendar."

"Well, you do want all the Jurors there, don't you?"

"I want every creature there who is supposed to be there,

of course. Why aren't you out fetching them all in?"

"Because I can't find Jenny Elf. Do you know where she is?"

"Of course I know where she is!"

"Then tell me, and I'll begone."

"Ah, the temptation," he murmured. Then his eyes

scowled into canniness. "Demoness, it is not my chore to

locate the folk on your list for you. What will you do for

me, in exchange for that information?"

Her aplomb dropped and bounced on the floor. She hastily

stooped to recover it, stretching her miniskirt tight in the

process. "Why, Prof, I didn't know you cared. You mean

all those centuries I flashed my full-fleshed short-skirted legs

at you, and my translucent well-filled blouses, weren't

wasted? You actually noticed?"

"Of course I didn't! Neither did I observe that you wore

a different color of panty every day, including tasteless

candy-stripe and polka-dot with no material in the dots, in

contrast to the more conservative matching herringbone un-

dergarments you have on now. Why should I deign to notice

the apparel of a student who never

completed one single
assignment!"

"Oh," she said, disappointed. "So since
you don't want
anything interesting of me, what's on
your potent mind,
Prof?"

His glare focused into a gaze of
disturbing intensity. "I

have a son," he announced.

She knew that, but had to maintain her pose. ' 'Well, then,

you-must have looked under the skirt of some student de-

moness once. Never again, eh. Prof?"

"Cease your ludicrous efforts to bait me, Demoness. You

know my son. Demon Prince Vore. He consumes others."

"Yes, I tried to seduce him once, but he ate me instead.

He's a real brute. Maybe he mistook my candy-stripe undies

for the real thing. What's your point.

Prof? It's not like you

to be so mushy about business."

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She thought he would explode, but instead he deflated.

"Touche, Demoness. You may indeed have the ability to accomplish my desire."

"No, I can't harangue a formerly self-respecting class into a mound of quivering mush," she said.

' 'I am speaking of your propensity for aggravation. I have

not encountered any creature to better you in that respect."

"Why, thank you. Prof!" she said, turning pastel pink.

"And to think I achieved it without completing one single assignment!"

"And supreme talent must be respected, whatever its nature. I want you to exert yourself on

behalf of my son."

"I told you, when I tried—"

"He's young, foolish, and imperative.
But it's time he

matured. He is, after all, about twenty-
three, in human
terms."

"Which is twenty-three hundred in

demon terms, but
who's counting?"

'Precisely. I think the only thing that
will settle him down
is marriage."

"Now, wait. Prof! I'm already married."

"Yes, I remember. I performed the
ceremony."

"And you knew I'd get half-souled and develop a con-

science, love, loyalty, and all that," she said accusingly.

"That I'd be hopelessly tied down by my new awareness of

things right, proper, and decent."

"To be sure. And that is what I want for my son."

Her eyes went so round, they bowed out of her face. "Oh,

Prof, you play dirty! Your son will rue the day he ever be-

came related to you."

' 'Naturally. And some century he may even squeeze some

of the mush from his skull. He actually does possess some

qualities to be recommended. He is honorable, handsome,

intelligent, and has fair judgment about things. He merely

requires seasoning, to reduce his natural bloodthirstiness.

Find me a souled woman for him to marry, and convince

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him to marry her. That is what I want from you, you im-

pertinent tease."

"All that—in exchange for telling me
where Jenny Elf
is?"

"To be sure."

"I'd be crazy to make that deal!"

"Ask your worser self."

'Make that deal, blockhead,' Mentia said.

'The Professor

always has something devious in mind.

You have only to

rise to the occasion.'

Metria sighed. Her worser self had good judgment in crazy

situations, and she would have to trust that. "Agreed. So

where's Jenny Elf?"

"In the naga caves."

"What's she doing there?"

"After she and Nada Naga were released from the Com-

panions game, they found they liked each other. Nada invited

Jenny to stay with them, and she

accepted. She has been

there ever since. Her cat has been useful
when the naga wish

to locate things, such as plaid
diamonds."

"Now, why didn't I think of that myself?"
Metria asked

rhetorically.

"Because your skull is filled with mush.
Now I shall ex-

pect to see my son ready for marriage within a fortnight."

"Great expectations," she muttered as she popped off.

The naga caves were near the lair of Draco Dragon. The

naga maintained reasonably cordial relations with the dragon,

having a common enemy in the local goblin horde. Eventu-

ally Gwenny Goblin of Goblin Mountain
would extend her

authority to cover the cave goblins, but
meanwhile they were

their normal obnoxious selves.

Fortunately the naga mutual-

assistance treaty with the humans had
shored up their re-

sources, and the goblins had not been
able to make headway

against them.

She popped directly into the throne chamber. King Nabob

was there, looking glum. He was in his natural form, that of

a large serpent with a human head. He could become a full

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serpent or full human in form if he chose to, but evidently

saw no need to when his natural form

was so much better.

"Hello, your majesty," she said. "I'm Demoness Metria,

looking for Jenny Elf. Why so gourd canine?"

He turned his crowned head toward her, seeming unsur-

prised by her appearance. Probably his daughter had told him

about the odd demoness. "Hello, Metria. What kind of emo-

tion?"

"Sadness, grief, affliction, lamentation,
suffering, mortifi-
cation—"

"Melancholy?"

"Whatever," she agreed crossly.

He elected to be roundabout, as was the prerogative of

senior heavysset Kings. "How is marriage treating you?"

"Actually, that's what brings me here, by a devious route

that wouldn't interest you."

"Well, it might. You see, I'm entertaining the monsters

under my daughter's bed while she's out,

and they really
appreciate a good story."

"But your daughter's adult! She shouldn't
have monsters
under her bed anymore."

"True. But Jenny Elf does, and I'm old
enough to be in
my second childhood, so Fingers now
resides under my

throne, and Knuckles joins him there at times."

"Oh. May I meet them?"

"Not if you're adult."

Woe Betide appeared. "Gee, I'd really like to meet them,"

she said, a huge tear welling.

The King nodded. "Certainly; I'll introduce you. Woe,

here are Fingers and Knuckles McPalm. Monsters, this is

Woe Betide, a childish demoness."

Two hands flickered briefly'from the shadow under the

throne. Bed monsters were very shy in daytime.

So Metria reverted and told him the

story. "And now I

need to locate Jenny Elf, so I can serve her with her sum-

mons, and borrow her cat. Nada too—she's on the jury list

as well."

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' 'They are off hunting plaid diamonds at the moment, but

should return soon. Now I will tell you why I am so fruit

dog, um, glum. It is because my daughter the Princess is

twenty-six years old and unmarried, and my competence is

fading. She must marry a Prince who can take over the reins

and snows of power, yet she shows no sign of doing so."

"What of your fine handsome son. Prince

Naldo? Can't

he take the snows?"

"He married beneath him. Mind you, the merwoman is a

fine figure of a woman, very fine, especially in salt water,

but not fit to be Queen of the naga. So Nada will have to

take up the slack, and beguile a suitable Prince soon. Oth-

erwise our people will lose credence,

and the goblins will

gain confidence and encroach.

Unfortunately, Princes do not

grow on trees, and she refuses even to consider any who

happen to be younger than she is. So she continues to get

older, while the naga prospects wane."

Metria began to get a glimmer of the devious notion the

Demon Professor had. He had known

there was a highly

eligible Princess here. "How about a demon prince?" she

asked.

- "Demons are soulless creatures, capable of any mischief,

and not to be trusted."

"Suppose one got souled, or at least half-souled?"

"Why, then he would be eligible,"
Nabob said, surprised.

"But demons seldom have souls, because
they avoid them,

knowing their consequence. In fact, it
may be fairly stated

that the only likely way to burden a
demon with a soul is

by trickery."

"Such as by marrying a mortal with a

soul," Metria

agreed. "And having one perform the ceremony in such a

way that half the mortal's soul transfers."

"Exactly. How did you know?"

"I learned the hard way, when I married a mortal. I

thought it was temporary, but I changed my mind when I

got souled."

Roc AND A HARD PLACE 111

Nabob suddenly was extremely interested. "You know of a suitable demon Prince?"

"Prince Vore, Professor Grossclout's son. Grossclout wants him married within the fortnight.

He believes a few

decades of marriage would settle the Prince down, and

maybe squeeze a bit of mush from his skull."

"This is fascinating news! But I can think of two signif-

icant objections."

"Vore and Nada," Metria said. "Neither will want to

marry the other."

"Precisely. It is not feasible to apply coercive measures

to royal scions. It's bad precedent, and makes for negative

family relations. So I'm afraid this won't slither."

"Yet there must be a way. There's always a way to fulfill

Grossclout's requirement, however

devious. That's how he

teaches his classes. It is merely necessary to squeeze the

mush out and find it."

"I wonder," he said thoughtfully. "It reminds me of

something probably irrelevant—"

"That's also the way Grossclout's examples work. I have

seen it hundreds of times, in the course of ignoring his

classes. The very thing a mushmind passes over as irrelevant

turns out to be the answer."

"This is a story we tell our children about demon inter-

ference in human relations. I believe it actually derives from

Mundania, where the only magic exists in their imagination.

It's called the demons' beauty contest."

"But demons can assume any form. I am beautiful be-

cause I choose to be; my inner essence is as ugly as ever.

Any beauty contest among our kind would be meaningless."

"True. My daughter's human form is beautiful for simi-

lar reason. So these demons had a

different kind of contest.

The male demon chose a very handsome mortal Prince,

and the female chose a lovely mortal Princess. Or maybe it

was the other way around. The judgement was which of

the two mortals was better looking."

"But demons wouldn't agree," she protested. "He would

insist that his mortal was best, and she would insist that hers

was best. Demons are extremely unreasonable, because their

opinions are as malleable as their bodies."

'Precisely. So they needed a different way to judge the

contest—a way that did not depend on

the opinions of de-
mons."

"But what would that be? They certainly
wouldn't accept
the opinions of mortals."

"Yes they would. Or they did in the
story. They brought

the two fair mortals together naked and
let them judge."

"This is absolutely crazy! Two mortals who didn't even

know each other? They'd both run in opposite directions.

Mortals can be very skittish about clothing, or the lack of it.

Especially when they are of opposite sexes."

"It was handled in this manner: The demons caused the

mortals to sleep deeply. They put them together, then woke

them in turns. So he got to look at her while she slept, and

then she got to look at him while he slept. Naturally the two

reacted in certain ways, and the one who reacted most to the

other was deemed to be the less beautiful. Thus did the de-

mons stage and judge their beauty contest."

Metria was thoughtful. "This is a most intriguing notion.

Are you suggesting that we put your daughter and the pro-

fessor's son together asleep, and stage a beauty contest? That

might be interesting and fun to do, but it wouldn't get them

married to each other."

"Are you sure? In the story the demons

satisfied them-

selves that the man was the prettier of the two, then put both

to sleep again and returned them to their homes. But when

the two mortals woke, far apart, each yearned for the other,

and neither rested until they were together."

"Because each had had a real chance to inspect the other

at close range," Metria said. "That might indeed work. It is

certainly worth a try. D. Vore is one terrific catch, and he is

a Prince. Nada is Xanth's loveliest mortal female figure.

They well might impress each other favorably, especially

since both need to marry. But can we put them to sleep?"

"I have a sleeping potion I can slip to my daughter. Surely

Professor Grossclout has something similar that will do for

his son."

"Then let's do it!" she exclaimed, gratified.

Soon Nada Naga and Jenny Elf arrived back, with a small

bag of plaid diamonds. Metria quickly served them both with

their summonses, and explained about the trial, while King

Nabob slithered quietly away to make preparations.

Metria popped back to the demon caves to talk to Gross-

clout again.

"Professor! Something else."

He paused, midway in a step toward the cowering class.

"My patience is being strained somewhat beyond the incendiary point, Demoness," he rumbled.

"You want Vore to marry Nada, right? Suppose you make

it a real occasion by marrying Grey Murphy and Princess Ivy

at the same time? Nada and Ivy are close

friends, and—"

"And it's been nine years," he agreed.

"Ivy's mother

procrastinated too. Very well."

Metria smiled. "Thanks, Prof!" Then she told him what

else was required.

Within the hour the arrangements had

been made. The

demons' beauty contest proceeded.

Demon Prince Vore woke to find himself
in a strange situ-

ation. Wan light filtered down from
above. He was in a small

chamber whose walls extended well up
beyond head height,

and there were no doors or windows.
Odder yet, there lay

beside him a bare girl.

He looked again. This was no girl; this was a fully

equipped mortal human-style woman. Her hair was reddish

brown, and swirled around her body like a silken cloak. Her

face was stunningly beautiful, and so was her body; he lifted

her hair out of the way to make sure.

"If this is the creature my father has in

mind for me to

marry, she'll do," he remarked. "She looks good enough to

eat. However, I have no intention of being coerced into any-

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thing, or of remaining cooped up here. I am, after all, a

demon Prince, subject to the will of just about no one else."

He tried to pop off—but nothing happened. He tried to

dematerialize, but again nothing happened. He tried to fly,

and could not. His demonly powers had been somehow

stripped from him. What had happened?

He checked the circular wall of the chamber. It was firm,

without crevice or opening. He pushed

against it, but it did

not yield. He tried to climb up it, but could find no purchase.

Baffled, he returned to his consideration of the sleeping

woman. "Who are you, lovely creature?" he inquired. She

did not respond. He touched her slender arm, but she did not

react. She was under a spell of some sort that kept her asleep.

A spell! That must be what had happened to him. Some

magic had put him to sleep, and the lingering aftereffects

still deprived him of his demonly powers. The girl might

have been similarly enchanted, but being merely mortal, had

not fought even partially out of it as he had.

Now he saw, almost hidden beneath the graceful mass of

her tresses, a small golden crown set around her head. She

was a Princess!

"Ah, but what a marvel of pulchritude you are, my dear,"

he remarked. "And a Princess too. I would love to have a

tryst with you, were you awake. But as it is, I must let you

be, for I am an honorable creature."

He sat beside her, watching her slow even breathing. It

was most impressive. Then, suddenly, he knew no more.

Princess Nada Naga woke, surprised. One moment she had

been about to retire in the pleasant cave she shared with

Jenny Elf, and here she was in some

strange chamber.

"Eeeeeek!" she screamed, putting at least five £"s into it.

There was a naked man lying beside her!

She scrambled to her feet, discovering in the process that

she was nude herself. She tried to find the door, but there

was none. Also no window. Only wan light sagging down

from far above. She was in the bottom of a well!

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She tried to change to serpent form, but could not. So she

tried to revert to naga form, and could not do that either.

Something was interfering with her natural shape-shifting

ability. She realized that she had

probably been put under

some kind of spell, and had recovered
from only part of it,

so that she was now awake, but
possessed of no other special
abilities.

And this strange man must have been
similarly treated.

She sat down on the soft bed that filled
the bottom of the

well, and considered him more

carefully. He was a handsome

brute, firm of feature and muscular of body. And, as she

peered more closely, she saw a light golden crown on his

head. He was a Prince!

"I wish I had known about you before," she murmured

appreciatively. ' 'I have been looking for a suitable Prince for

more time than I care to confess. But of

course, you're prob-

ably obnoxious, as most males are, when awake." She

peered yet more closely. "And you look to be about twenty-

three years old. Too young for me, because I am twenty-

six."

She pondered, and considered, and thought, and finally

decided to take a chance and wake the

handsome stranger.

She spoke to him, but there was no response. She shook his

shoulder, but he did not stir. Finally she tried her ultimate:

She got down on her hands and knees, put her mouth to his,

and kissed him. But it was no use; he continued to sleep. It

was the first time such a thing had happened; she had been

able almost to wake the dead with a
kiss. Maybe that magic,

too, had been stifled by the enchantment
on her.

She sighed. Unable either to escape or to
wake the man,

she would simply have to wait this out.
She lay down again

beside him, took his hand in hers so that
she would know if

he stirred, and suddenly she was

unconscious.

"So much for the beauty contest," Metria remarked. "Nei-

ther one of them really got hot." She was peering through

the transparent cloud substance of the confinement tower. Or

rather, into the big magic mirror that showed the distant

tower as if it were made of glass.

"They're both decent folk," Jenny Elf said. "At least, I

know Nada is. I think this plot of yours is crazy."

"They both need to be married," King Nabob said.

"That's the point. This is merely stage

one."

"I still think it won't work," Jenny said.
But Sammy Cat,
in her arms, looked thoughtful.

The two prisoners in the well woke
together. "Oh!" Nada

cried, and tried to change form, for it
was not proper to be

unclothed in human form with a strange
man. But she re-

mained unable to change. So she draped her hair across her

torso, covering most of it, though parts of her insisted on

poking through.

"You're awake!" Vore said, as startled as she.

"And so are you," she said, not unreasonably, hastily let-

ting go of his hand.

He looked around, then down at his bare self. He tried to

fashion clothing around himself, but that power, too, was

inoperative. Realizing that there was nothing to be done

about it, as his hair was not nearly as long as hers, he made

the best of it. "Hello. I am Prince Vore."

"I am Princess Nada." For a reason

neither understood,

neither gave further identification.

"You are the most beautiful woman I can remember see-

ing." As a conversational gambit, this lacked finesse.

She, however, took it in stride. "And you are the hand-

somest man. Even if you are young."

He shrugged. "I am as I am. Do you know how we came to be confined here?" •

"I was about to ask you that. One moment I was in my royal chamber; the next, I woke here—beside you. You were asleep."

"Oh? When I woke before, you were the one sleeping."

She pursed her lips, fashioning, if not a moue, at least not

a neigh. "I think we have been enchanted."

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"My thought exactly. But to what purpose?"

She considered. "I remember a story my father told me

as a child, about a demons' contest—but that's irrelevant.

Perhaps someone has abducted us, and means to hold us for ransom."

"But why deprive us of our clothing?"

"So we can't escape without attracting notice?"

"Princess Nada, I think you would attract notice any-

where, regardless of your attire."

"I presume you mean that as a compliment."

"I do."

"Then I thank you. Do you think we can
get out of this
well?"

He cast about. The soft stuff of which the
bed was made
seemed malleable. He drew some forth
and fashioned it into
a cord. ' 'Perhaps, if this is strong
enough, I can make a rope
that will reach the turret above."

"I will help you," she said immediately.

They got to work on it forthwith, and such was their mu-

tual dexterity that they soon had a fine strong rope forming.

Her fingers were nimble for the fine threads, and his hands

were strong for the stout rope. She admired his hands, among

other things, and he admired her fingers,

among other things.

When they had a sufficient length, he made a loop at one

end and flung it up so that it neatly caught on a turret. Then

he hauled himself up, hand over hand, his muscles straining

because he wasn't used to climbing, a wall the hard way. He

reached the top, sat on the turret, and peered down. "Your

turn, Nada!" he called.

She shook her head. "I'm afraid I lack your strength,

Vore. I cannot haul myself up in the forthright manner you

did. Perhaps you should go and see if you can win your

freedom."

He gazed at her a bit more closely, and saw that while

most of his own extra flesh was in the
form of muscles on

his arms, most of hers was in the form of
curvature on her

torso and legs. That would indeed not do
for hand-over-hand

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climbing. "By no means, Nada. Make a
loop at the bottom

and sit in it, and I will haul you up."

She did so, and soon he had brought her also to the top.

Then they both looked around.

They were perched on the top of a tower, which was part

of a formidable castle. The castle was on a white island in a

dark blue sea.

"Should we make own way down and then inquire within the castle?" Nada asked.

"I like your trusting nature. But I suspect that whoever or

whatever occupies this castle is what has imprisoned us, and

we should avoid contact if we possibly can."

"I like your sensible caution. Indeed, you

are surely cor-

rect, and my notion was foolish. What else should we do?"

For a moment they faced each other, and each became

further aware that the other was of wondrously aesthetic as-

pect as well as possessing trust and caution that nicely com-

plemented each other. But their situation was too precarious

to allow them much chance for reflection.

"Maybe we should get down and try to find a boat," she said.

"Agreed. And some clothing. Though I admit it is no great burden to behold you as you are."

She blushed half a shade, becoming
twice as pretty, though

that was impossible. He might be young,
but there was'

something about him. "I might say the
same for you."

Then he lowered her to the ground, and
handed himself

down. He jerked on the rope, and the
loop came off the turret

and fell to the ground beside them. !

They skulked around the castle, hiding in the shade of the

walls. They found what might be a locked boatshed. Vore

was going to bash it open, but Nada cautioned him about the

noise. Instead she slipped a twisted thread from the rope in

through the latch-hole and managed to lift the inner latch.

Thus they got inside the boatshed

silently. "How can a Princess have developed such skill at thievery?" Vore asked admiringly.

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"I once had a certain passion for cookies, which were kept locked up," she confessed. "So I learned how to acquire

them without attracting attention."

There was a small airboat inside. Vore put it into the air,

and it floated. "I had expected a waterboat," he said, "but

this will do."

Nada climbed in, and Vore pushed the boat out the open

door, then got in himself. It sank a bit lower in the air be-

cause of their weight, but floated well enough. Vore took the

oars and stroked, and the little craft moved smoothly in the

opposite direction.

There was a noise in the castle. "Oops, someone is stir-

ring," Nada said, alarmed. "We must flee before they spy

us."

Vore put his back into it, and the boat fairly shot out from

the castle. Now Nada looked down and discovered that what

surrounded the castle wasn't water, but sky blue air. No won-

der there was an airboat! The castle was floating in the air,

on a cloud.

Soon they were able to hide behind another cloud, out of

view of the castle. Their escape seemed to be successful.

"But we didn't find any clothes," Vore said, remembering.

"Perhaps I can do something about that," Nada said.

"You row us down the ground and see if you recognize any landmarks. I will unravel our rope and

try to weave some

cloth." She proceeded to do just that, her fingers becoming

nimble again.

"You have amazing skills for a Princess," Vore remarked

appreciatively.

"Well, as a Naga Princess, I need to. The goblins press

us pretty hard, and no one can be slack."

"You are naga?" he asked, surprised.

"Oh, I can say that now," she said, surprised myself.

"The effects of that spell must be wearing further off. Yes,

I am Princess Nada Naga, once betrothed to Prince Dolph

Human but now adrift, as it were. Does that dismay you?"

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"There might have been a time when it would have," he

said. "But now that I know you, it has the opposite effect.

Can you change to serpent form?"

"I will try." Suddenly she was a coiled serpent. Then her

human head appeared on the serpent's body. "Yes, my pow-

ers are returning." She returned to full human form.

"Then perhaps mine are also," Vore said. "I am a de-

mon." .^

"A demon!"

"Prince D. Vore. Does that dismay you?"

"Yes, for I was coming to like you."

He puffed into smoke, then re-formed in human guise.

"Yes, I can now do demonly things. But why does this dismay you?"

"Because now you will pop away

forever in a cloud of

mocking laughter, and I will understand
how foolish I have

been to think you were nice. For a
demon has no soul, and

therefore no conscience, and cannot
love."

Vore considered. "Once that might have
been the case.

But I have come to know you, and I think
Aat since I have

been constrained by my father to marry,
you are the one I

would like to wed. You have qualities I
never appreciated in

a mortal creature before, and you are a
Princess."

Nada laughed, somewhat bitterly. "I
don't think any male

ever noticed qualities in me, only my
form. But you would

not want to marry me, because then you

might get half my

soul, and become bound in a way you
have never been be-

fore."

"I realize that. But perhaps it would be
worth it. Could

you spare half your soul?"

"For marriage to a Prince of demons? I
think I could.

Even if he is young."

"Well, I am twenty-three hundred years old."

"Which is equivalent to twenty-three in human terms. I

never thought I'd love a younger man."
She shrugged. "But

these things happen, and allowances
have to be made."

The boat came to rest on the ground.
"Then perhaps our

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interests coincide," Vore said. "I think
we should make it

formal, before our captors or pursuers
strike again." He took

her hand. "Princess Nada, will you—"

A dragon erupted from a nearby cave and launched itself

toward them. Nada immediately became a huge serpent, and

Vore's free hand sprouted a wickedly gleaming sword.

The dragon hesitated.

"—marry me?" Vore continued.

The dragon decided to attack after all.
But the serpent

chomped it on the neck, and the demon
thrust the sword hilt-

deep up its nose. The dragon sneezed,
not being completely

comfortable, and backed away.

Nada's human head appeared on the
serpent. "Yes," she
said.

The sword disappeared. The demon took the serpent body

in his arms and kissed the human face.

"We are betrothed,"

he said.

"Agreed," she said, resuming full human form. Then they

kissed again.

Suddenly several people stood around them. One was the

Demon Professor Grossclout. "I heard that!" he said tri-

umphantly. "I shall perform the ceremony at the Nameless

Castle from which you just escaped, right after the trial is

over."

Another was King Nabob. "So did I. The wedding will

be within a fortnight. There will be an alliance between the

naga and the demons."

A third was the Demoness Metria. "And it serves you

right," she said. Then she turned to the fourth. "Jenny Elf,

I need to borrow your cat."

Jenny was startled. "My cat? Sammy?"

"Yes. The Professor wouldn't tell me

where to find you,

until I agreed to get his son married.

Now that's done, so I

can get on with my mission."

Nada and Vore both turned to her.

"Mission?" Nada

asked, somehow seeming not entirely pleased. "I thought

you came to serve Jenny and me our summonses."

"That, too."

"This was arranged?" Vore asked, seeming curiously similarly displeased.

"Sure. It was the demons' beauty contest."

Vore and Nada exchanged a glance
fraught with

something or other. "We should break
the be—" Nada

started.

Grossclout fixed her with his patented
glare, stopping her

in mid-word. "I think not."

"She's right," Vore said. "We should not tolerate such

interference in our—"

"Look at her and say it," King Nabob said.

Vore looked at Nada. Nada looked at Vore. He saw

Xanth's most beautiful woman, and a Princess. She saw a

considerably handsome and talented

man, and a Prince. Each

saw a truly worthwhile match. Then
their respective will-

powers melted and they kissed again.

"We shall name the grandchild
DeMonica," Grossclout

said, and Nabob nodded agreement.

"I guess you can borrow Sammy," Jenny
Elf said to Me-

tria.

7

AISLE

What is it you need to find?" Jenny asked, keeping

firm hold of Sammy Cat so he wouldn't bound

away to find it the moment it was spoken.

"Amolde Centaur."

"A centaur? Couldn't you just ask at one of the centaur

villages, or at Centaur Isle?"

"I did. The centaurs of Centaur Isle won't even speak of

him, because they think magic in a centaur is obscene; I'm

sure he's not there. Centaurs in other places haven't seen

him in years. They say he must be one hundred twenty-six

years old by now, if he's still alive. But Corn Pewter says

he's still around somewhere. I just have to find him."

"He must be a very special centaur."

"He is. He's a Magician who can make

an aisle of magic

in Mundania. I need him to go after the Mundanes on my

list."

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"Mundanes?"

"Dug and Kirn. They—"

"Oh, yes! I was Kirn's Companion in the game, three

years ago."

Metria paused. "That's right; I've been doing so many

things, I'm forgetting who knows what.

And Nada was

Dug's Companion. He kept trying to get a glimpse of her

panties."

"And got expelled from the game for it, she tells me,"

Jenny agreed, laughing. "After that he behaved, and became

a tolerably good person. Kirn was a bit wild too, at first, but

settled down. It will be great to see them again."

"We will. I have to get them both to that trial on time, or

the Simurgh won't consider my job to be done, and the Good

Magician won't tell me how to get the stork's notice."

Jenny cocked her head. "You haven't learned how to do

that?"

Metria smiled. 'T summoned the stork centuries ago. But

I didn't stay to take care of my baby girl. I think after that

the stork decided I wasn't a suitable address for deliveries,

so it ignores my signals, though I am now married and half-

souled and intend to be a good mother."

"Maybe you just haven't sent enough of them. I under-

stand that some messages get lost."

"Seven hundred and fifty in a year?"

Jenny pursed her lips. "I guess you do need some help.

The stork has tuned you out." She looked around. "Well,

let's get started. Sammy may outrun me, so you will have to

keep him in sight. I'll catch up eventually; I always do."

She set the orange cat down. "Sammy, we need to find Ar-

nolde Centaur."

The cat was off in a bound, an orange streak amidst the

foliage. "Wait for me!" Jenny cried futilely, chasing after

him.

Metria didn't wait; she sailed in pursuit of the feline. The

cat was fast, but not as fast as a demoness. So they zoomed

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along through forest and field, upscale and downscale, and

across rivers, mountains, and deserts.

Then Sammy paused. There was a

creature standing in the

way. It was larger and shaggier than the cat, and looked

dangerous. It seemed to be some kind of omk. But Sammy

didn't seem frightened, just bored.

' 'And of course, the economics of infrastructure must also

be considered," the oink was saying.

"These consist of fif-

teen overlapping conditions that must be

predicated on in-

versely bludgeoning circumstances, with
due allowance for

rapprochement incentives and integral
negations."

"What in Xanth are you?" Metria
demanded. "Aside

from being the dullest creature I've.
encountered recently."

The oink glanced at her. "I'm a wild

bore, of course. It

is my business to bore you to death."

"You don't have to stand for this,"
Metria told the cat.

"Just go on around him."

That broke Sammy's seeming trance of
boredom, and he
skirted the bore and resumed running.

Jenny arrived. "Wait for me!" she cried.

"Certainly," the bore said.

"No you don't," Metria said. "Go around him."

Jenny obediently moved to the side,
where some pretty

yellow vines were growing up along the
trees. But Metria

recognized the vines. "Not that way!" she called.

Jenny pulled back, but the wild bore, barging after her,

crashed into the vines. Suddenly there was a thick yellow

splatter of fluid, drenching him. "Oh, ugh!" he squealed.

"Ammonia!"

"Not exactly," Metria said. "Those are

golden showers

climbing rose vines." Then she zoomed on after the cat,

seeing that Jenny had gotten safely past the bore, who would

have to go somewhere to wash himself off.

Then they came to a lake, and in the lake was an island

in the shape of a bone. The lake seemed to extend a good

distance to either side, so the fastest way to pass it was right

across the island, and that was the way Sammy was going.

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But Sammy did seem to be a bit nervous, and he actually

slowed enough to allow Jenny Elf to catch up. Then he

walked across a dog-eared bridge onto the island.

"No wonder!" Metria muttered. "This is Dog Island."

Indeed, the island's shore was lined with doghouses, and

all manner of dogs were out sunbathing. In fact, they were

hot dogs. A stone promontory was covered with Scots on

the rocks. The water was filled with

dogfish, and old sea

dogs, and lapdogs were swimming
around and around the |

island. I

Sammy stepped on tippy toes, not
making a sound, so as

to pass without notice. Metria formed
into a haze and sur-

rounded Jenny so she wouldn't be
discovered. There was just

no telling how these dogfaces would
react to this intrusion

on their retreat.

The forest inshore was filled with
dogwood, dog fennel,

dogtooth violents, dog mercury, and dog
rose, all of which

sniffed the air and growled suspiciously.
There was also an

occasional have of B-gles. Metria knew
that the B-haves

could be very bad; because their stings
affected people's

B-havior.

In the center of the island was a snowy
mountain. Anyone

who wanted to sleep warmly there
would have to snuggle

up with an afghan bound. Dogsleds were
being hauled up to

the top. On the peak was the robot dog,
Dog-Matic, who

thought he was reciting fine poetry but
only spewed dog-

gerel.

They forged doggedly through, and
finally traversed a

dog's-leg curve leading to a bridge to the

far side of the lake,

marked "K-9." They had passed Dog Island without getting

chewed. Metria was relieved, because though she had noth-

ing to fear from dogfaces herself, Sammy Cat certainly did.

Once safely past the island, Sammy plunged on at speed,

leaving Jenny behind again. But now the terrain was becom-

ing vaguely familiar. "Oh, no!" Metria
muttered. "Not the

Region of Madness again!"

But it was. They were approaching it
from a different di-

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rection, so wouldn't encounter Desiree

Dryad or the White

family, which meant that the perils would be unfamiliar. Me-

tria wasn't sure she would be able to protect cat and elf girl

here, because the things of the unexplored madness could be

truly freakish. Yet the cat was plowing straight on in.

"I'll take over now," Mentia said. "The worse it gets,

the saner I get."

Just as well, because it wasn't long
before something

weird appeared before them. It was a
manlike figure, but it

looked like a mummified zombie. It
reached for Sammy.

Mentia stretched out her arm to three
times its prior length,

and put her hand between the thing and

the cat. Its hand

touched her hand—and suddenly her hand and arm stiffened.

"What are you?" she demanded.

"I am Rigor Mortis," the thing replied in ghastly tones.

"I make folk stiff."

For sure. Mentia stiffened her resolve and shoved the thing

to the side so that Jenny Elf could pass.
Because demons had

no fixed forms, they could not be
stiffened for long, but it

would be another matter for living folk.

Then Mentia zoomed ahead, so as to
keep the cat in sight.

She wondered how the elf had managed
not to lose Sammy

in the years they had been in Xanth,
because the cat seemed

to have no regard for Jenny's convenience.

Beyond the zombielike creature was a grove of angular

trees wherein perched strangely thin birds. Sammy Cat

plunged right on through it, but again Mentia was rational

and cautious, in contrast to her normal disposition. She

wanted to know exactly what these odd

birds were.

So she inquired, because here in the
madness, things were

often communicative in ways they
wouldn't be normally.

"What are you?" she called to the birds.

"We are minus birds," they chorused
back. "As you can

plainly see, because we live here in the
geome-trees."

"I apologize for my stupidity," Mentia said, realizing that

flattery was probably better than irritation. "Are either you

or the trees dangerous to ordinary folk?"

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"No, we don't care about ordinary folk,"

the birds re-

plied. "All we care about is multiplying."

"Oh—you get together with plus birds to signal the stork?"

"No, we can't find any plus birds, so we multiply by di-

viding in half." With that each bird split in half, forming

two where each one had perched, each new one twice as

thin.

Jenny Elf caught up. "Oh, what pretty birds!" she ex-

claimed. The minus birds preened, pleased.

Mentia jumped ahead again—and was relieved to see an

old centaur just making the acquaintance

of the cat. Sammy
had found Arnolde.

"And what is your oddity, pretty feline?"
the centaur
asked. —

Mentia caused a flowing ankle-length
robe to surround her

as she approached. "Arnolde Centaur, I
presume?"

"And a demoness," the centaur said, surprised. "Make a

note, Ichabod: two seemingly normal creatures in as many

minutes, which is highly unusual for this region."

Now Mentia saw that Amolde had a companion, an old

human man. The man opened his notebook, and several notes

popped out, making brief music. "One mundane cat, no ap-

parent magic," Ichabod said. "One unusually sober demon-

ess."

"That cat's magic talent is to find anything except home,"

Mentia said. "Now he has found you, Arnolde Centaur, and

your nonentitious companion. As for me —I am normally

slightly crazy, but in the Region of Madness I am slightly

sane. I am not certain about you two, however."

Amolde blinked, seeming to actually see her as an indi-

vidual for the first time. "Are you real?" he inquired. "Not

a mere semblance?"

Mentia's rationality took hold. "Oh, you

think I'm

something crazy in the madness? A
manifestation, instead of

a real creature? That I can appreciate!
Yes, I am real, and

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here comes Jenny Elf, who is also real."
For Jenny was now
arriving.

"I apologize for mistaking you for part of the local

fauna," Arnolde said. "Yes, I am Arnolde Centaur, and this

is my friend from Mundania, Ichabod Archivist. We are per-

forming a survey of mad artifacts."

"Hello, Amolde and Ichabod," Mentia said. "I am the

Demoness Mentia, the worser half of the

Demoness Metria."

The old eyes brightened with recognition. "Metria! She is notorious."

"She's married now, and has half a soul, so has settled down. Now she's doing an errand for the Good Magician, or for the Simurgh, so she can find out how to get the stork's

attention. Seems there was some
business a bit over four

centuries ago that annoyed the stork, so it
won't make any

further deliveries to her, no matter how
hard or often she

signals it."

"I can imagine," Amolde said. "Do you
mind showing

Ichabod your legs?"

Mentia knew that the centaur was anything but stupid,

even by centaur terms, and she wanted to get his cooperation.

So she lifted the hem of the gown and flashed excellent legs

at the old man. His eyes immediately glazed over.

Jenny Elf picked up Sammy. "I guess you won't need

him now, so we can go."

"Um, maybe better not to depart right now," Mentia said.

"It might not be safe. Soon we'll be leaving the madness,

and then you can go your way more safely." She let her

gown drop back into place, and the man's eyes began to

recover. It was clear that he had a taste for attractive legs.

"But this doesn't seem so bad," Jenny said. "Not com-

pared to what it was like when I came here with Dug Mun-

dane."

"Oh, I wouldn't recommend a little girl like you going

alone through this region," Ichabod said.

"I'm eighteen, and big for an elf," Jenny said defensively.

"An elf? Why, so you are!" Ichabod agreed, surprised.

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"But not like one I have cataloged before. Your hands are

four-fingered and your ears are pointed, and you don't seem

to be associated with an elf elm."

"I'm from the World of Two Moons,"
Jenny explained.

"Two Moons?" the man asked blankly. "I
am certain I
haven't cataloged that."

"It's a different magic realm. I came to
Xanth following

Sammy Cat, who found a centaur wing
feather here, but then

we couldn't find our way home."

"But surely you have but to ask the cat to find some other

person or object in your home realm, close to where you

know your home to be," Amolde said intelligently.

"No, I tried that, but it didn't work. I think he can't find

anything anywhere near home, unless he

is already at
home."

"Then give him some reverse wood, so
he can't find any-
thing but home," Ichabod suggested.

"No, that didn't work either," Jenny said.
"The reverse
wood just made him unable to find
anything he looked for."

"Reverse wood is treacherous stuff,"
Mentia said.

"That's why they never tried to put it in
the Golden Horde

goblins' hate spring, to make it a love
spring. It might just

make everyone hate the water. Same
goes for using it to

make Corn Pewter good instead of evil;
it might reverse him

in some other way, making him worse."

"True," Ichabod said. "It was hoped that reverse wood

would enable a basilisk's stare to bring dead folk back to

life, but it merely caused the basilisk to wipe itself out. They

tried to use it to reverse the spell that had transformed people

to fish in the Fish River, but instead it turned the fish into

water and the water into fish."

"I remember when a kid had the talent of giving folk

hotseats," Mentia said, smiling.

"Someone slipped reverse

wood into his trouser pocket, hoping it would make him give

himself a hotseat, but the next time he tried to use his talent,

he got wet pants."

Jenny laughed. "Served him right!"

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"That time it worked well," Ichabod agreed. "But not in the expected way. So reverse wood doesn't seem to be the answer for your search for home."

Amolde frowned, orienting on the intellectual challenge.

"Perhaps if you got one of those magic disposal bubbles,
and directed it to take you home."

"That neither," Jenny said. "It just wouldn't go."

"It is almost as if your home no longer
—" Ichabod
started, then stifled it.

"No longer exists," Jenny finished firmly. "I recognized

that some time ago. But it could be that my family is all

right. If the Holt burned, they would move. But there would

be no way for me to find the new home from here."

"Do you dislike it here?" Amolde asked.

"No. I have been here six years now, and

I'm not sure I

really want to go home any more. I only wish—"

"That there were others of your particular type," Amolde

concluded. ' 'I know the feeling, being the only centaur Ma-

gician in Xanth. I was exiled from my home of Centaur Isle

because of that, and can never return."

Jenny looked at him, suddenly warming to him. "Yes!"

"Or being the only completely unmagical Mundane in a

magical land," Ichabod said.

"Fortunately there are some

cheering sights here."

Mentia realized why Amolde had asked her to show her

legs before: for the tonic effect on his

friend. She fogged out

her gown, showing them again.

"Why did you seek me out?" Amolde inquired.

"My better halts errand for the Simurgh requires her to

round up Jurors for a big trial. Two of them are Mundanes,

so—"

"Mundanes!" Ichabod exclaimed.

"Dug and Kim," Mentia agreed. "They visited here three

years ago, playing a game, and Kim won a magic talent as

a prize. Then they went home to Mundania. Now they are

on the list, and must be summoned here to decide Roxanne

Roc's fate."

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"The big bird in the Nameless Castle?"
Amolde asked.

"What did she do?"

Mentia shrugged. ' 'No one seems to
know. But once I get

all the people summoned and delivered,
maybe we'll all find

out.\

"So you wish me to take you into Mundania," Amolde

said. "To find those two Jurors."

"Exactly. The summons tokens will indicate the way, but

I'm a demoness. I can't leave the magic realms. But if I can

arrange to take magic with me—"

"And this trial is required by the Simurgh herself?"

"Yes."

"Then it behooves me to facilitate it. I suppose my labor

here can wait a while." Then his eye caught something. It

looked like a large fly, but it had several buttons on its body.

"There's a specimen! Note it, Ichabod."

Ichabod opened his notebook, and several more notes

popped musically out. "One buttoned fly," he said, marking

it in his book.

"Are they dangerous?" Jenny asked.

"Only when they get unbuttoned,"

Ichabod replied with
an obscure smile.

Mentia changed the subject. ' 'Exactly
how long have you
been surveying mad artifacts?"

Amolde exchanged a glance with
Ichabod. "About twenty
eight years," the centaur said. "Ever
since I retired from the

kingship of Xanth. I went to Mundania
and fetched my

friend, who wished to retire in Xanth,
and whose archivistic

skill complements my specialty of alien
archaeology. This is

a fascinating region, and until last year,
it was expanding."

' "Yes, the Time of No Magic voided a
confining spell, and

allowed the madness to expand," Mentia

said. "But we fixed

that last year, and now the madness is retreating."

"You fixed it?" he asked incredulously.

"Well, it was a joint effort. Mainly Gary Gargoyle, but I

helped. We were in Stone Hinge:"

"That's a mere ruin, thousands of years old. How could you—"

"Two thousand years old," she agreed. "We visited the deep past in a joint vision. It's a long story."

Amolde shook his head, bemused. "It must be." He ex-

changed another glance with his friend.
"Are you ready to
revisit Mundania, Ich?"

"In your company, certainly. Without it, I
fear I would
soon perish of old age."

Mentia glanced at Amolde. "You're
pretty old yourself,
centaur, for a mortal. Over a century and
a quarter. How is

it that you haven't faded away long since?"

"We have wondered about that," Amolde confessed.

"Though I am a Magician, my talent does not relate to age,

and of course, Ichabod lacks magic entirely. We conjecture

that the ambience of madness has had, if not a rejuvenating

effect, a stabilizing one, so that we

remain healthy as long

as we remain in it. This encourages our continuance of our

survey, apart from its value as information."

Mentia nodded. "I know some Mundanes who live here,

who I think would be dead in Mundania. There's something

about the madness."

"It is, after all, Xanth's most intense magic," Amolde

pointed out. "It may have effects that normal magic does

not. We have not been inclined to question this blessing."

' 'But if you leave the madness—what then?" Jenny asked.

"Actually I have on occasion stepped outside the mad-

ness," Amolde said. "I noticed no deleterious effect. My

conjecture is that I have become so charged with magic that

my aisle in effect extends into Xanth. That is, that I now

generate an aisle of madness that keeps me and Ichabod

healthy wherever we go. Of course, this could not be ex-

pected to last indefinitely, but it will be intriguing to test it

in Mundania."

"Great!" Mentia said. "We can get Jenny out of the mad-

ness, then move on toward the isthmus. We'll have to step

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along, as it will take several days for you folk to traverse

Xanth, and we don't have time to spare, but—"

"We may be able to accelerate it, if you can summon

assistance for traveling," Ichabod said.

Mentia hadn't thought of that. "I know a giant who was

in the madness last year. Maybe if I can locate him—"

Sammy leaped from Jenny's arms and bounded away

through the madness. Jenny scrambled after him. "Wait for me!"

"No!" Mentia cried. "You stay here. Jenny; I'll follow him, and bring him back."

Jenny looked doubtful, but stopped running. Mentia

floated rapidly after the cat.

This was just as well, because Sammy, still not properly

familiar with the madness, was getting in trouble. A huge

ant with patterns of stripes on its forelegs was blocking the

way. "Company—HALT!" the ant bawled.

Sammy, startled, halted. But Metria

didn't. "What are
you?" she demanded of the ant.

"I am Sarge. I give the orders around
here."

"Well, Sarge Ant, I rank you, because I
am a Cap Tain."

She formed herself into a large floating
cap with the word

TAIN printed across it.

"YesSIR! the ant agreed, saluting with a foreleg. "What

are your orders, sir?"

"Carry on, Sarge. Just tell me what threats there might be

to a traveling cat in this vicinity."

"Just King Bomb, sir."

"What's he King of?"

"The ticks, sir. He's a tick. He has a very short fuse."

Mentia considered. She knew that ticks could be bad mis-

chief in real Xanth, and possibly worse here. Still, a short-

tempered tick named Bomb didn't seem too formidable.

"What's his given name?"

"Time, sir."

"How can we tell when we're near him?"

"You can hear him ticking, sir."

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"Thank you, Sarge. Dismissed."

The ant went his way. So did Sammy,
bounding on

through the madness. But he paused just
a moment, glancing

back. "Wait for me!" Mentia cried,
catching the hint. Then

the cat forged ahead at full feline
velocity.

But soon Mentia heard an ominous

tickling. They were

approaching King Bomb! So she zoomed ahead. Sure

enough, there was a tick shaped like bloated sphere standing

squarely in the path the cat would take. He looked extremely

irritable, likely to explode at any moment.

Mentia came to float directly before him. "Tick King

Time Bomb, blow this joint," she said.

The King's tiny eyes glared at her.

"Begone yourself, De-

moness! I'll have no truck with thee."

His ticking got louder.

"That's what you think. Bomb bast. Get out of here before

I set you off."

"This is an outrage!" the King declared,
growing larger
as his ticking intensified.

Mentia discovered an egg plant growing
nearby. She

picked an egg and hurled it at the King. It
splattered on his

metallic torso, the white and yoke
drooling down.

That did it. The King detonated. The

explosion blasted a

hole in the ground and sent shrapnel into the surrounding

tree trunks, but of course, it didn't hurt Mentia.

Sammy appeared. He bounded across the smoking crater

and went on, unconcerned.

Mentia followed. Suddenly the cat stopped. He was before

a large dent in the forest floor that was shaped like a human

posterior. Mentia knew they were in the presence of a mon-

strous invisible man, who was sitting on the forest floor. The

smell was so bad that she abolished her nose. It was as if a

garbage factory with indigestion had burned halfway down.

"Hello, Jethro Giant," Mentia said.

"Remember me? I'm
the Demoness Mentia. We met last
year."

"Oh, yes," Jethro agreed. "Has it been
that long? I was
just getting ready to get up and go."

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• "I will gladly show you the way out, if

you will help me

carry a few people to the edge of Xanth."

"That seems like an amicable deal. Stand back."

Mentia snatched up the cat and floated back. There was a

huge grunt and heave, and two monstrous footprints replaced

the bottom-shaped indentation. Then an

enormous invisible

hand came down to take her. "Where are your people?"

Jethro asked.

Mentia described the direction, and the giant tromped that

way. In only a few steps they arrived at the glade where

man, centaur, and elf waited, holding their noses as they

turned greenish.

Mentia floated down. "Think of sweet violets," she sug-

gested as she handed Sammy, who looked somewhat green

instead of orange himself, to Jenny. 'Jethro Giant is a nice

guy."

Then the huge hand came down and picked them gently

up. ' 'Where to?' the voice sounded from far above.

Mentia floated up to invisible ear level, and directed him

toward the edge of madness. In two steps they were out of

it. Then Jethro strode rapidly forward toward the edge of

Xanth, and the resulting wind blew most of the odor away.

The mortals were able to resume

breathing.

"Oh, this is interesting!" Jenny cried,
peering down

through the invisible hand. "Xanth looks
just like a map."

"Oops," Mentia said. "I forgot to set you
down when we

left the madness."

"Don't bother. I know Kim and Dug, and would like to

see them again, and Sammy can help you find them. Besides,

we're all going to the same place in the end. To that weird

trial. It's nice being on a quest, of a sort."

"An elf quest? That makes so much sense, I'll have to

ignore it," Mentia said.

"No, just put your uncrazy better half in charge," Jenny

said. ' 'I always sort of liked her, even if she did drive me

crazy."

"Oh? Why do you asseverate that?"

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"Why do I what that?"

"Declare, avow, attest, proclaim,
expound, announce—"

"Assert?"

"Whatever!"

"Welcome back, Metria!"

"It's nice to rejoin you, too, odd elf.
What are you going

to do, now that your friend Nada has
found true love, or at

least a husband?"

"I don't know. Maybe I should ask
Magician Trent to

transform someone for me, as he did for
Gloha Goblin-

Harpy."

"Yes, and in the process I wound up married too," Metria

agreed reminiscently.

"You did it to save her from mischief."

"Well, my half soul gave me a conscience, so I had to."

"But didn't you save her before you got

your con-

science?"

Metria paused, sorting it out. "Yes, I suppose so. But I

wanted to find out what love was like."

They looked out across Xanth. "Oh, look!" Jenny ex-

claimed. "There's a light house."

Metria looked. Sure enough, the house was floating

through the air, carried along by the wind. "That's a very

light house," she agreed.

"But what's that?" Jenny asked, alarmed, as she looked

in another direction.

Metria looked again. "Oh, that's an air plain," she ex-

plained. "Where flying centaurs can graze."

Indeed, four winged centaurs were standing on the cloud-

like plain, picking berry, bread, and grape fruits.

"And there's an air male," Jenny said, as the centaur stal-

lion waved to her with his wings. "Hi, Cheiron!"

"Wait a half a moment!" Metria said.

"How can there be

four flying centaurs there? Che and

Cynthia are at Castle

Roogna until the trial. There should be
only Cheiron and

Chex."

"Oh, didn't you know?" Jenny asked.

"The stork brought

two more foals to them last year.

Actually centaurs don't use

storks, because their foals are too heavy,
but—"

"Two more foals?"

"Chelsy and Cherish. Twins. Maybe they
were taking

their naps when you visited the family."

"Maybe so," Metria agreed doubtfully.

Meanwhile the giant was striding
obliviously on, soon

leaving the floating plain behind. Jenny
looked ahead.

"Oops."

Metria followed her gaze a third time.

"Oh, it's just a
storm."

"Not just any storm. That's Fracto!"

Metria peered at the cloud more closely.
"Why, so it is.

I remember when he was just another
demon, before he spe-
cialized in cloudcraft."

"He always comes at the worst time, to mess up whatever others are doing."

"Of course. He's a demon."

"Are you like that?"

"I used to be, as you know. I just had a more delicate contiguity."

"A more delicate what?"

"Concurrence, immediacy, propinquity,
proximity, pres-
sure, sensation—"

"Touch?"

"Whatever," she agreed crossly.
"Demonesses just aren't

as violent as demons, but our mischief is equivalent." She

thought of King Gromden and Threnody. Those were the bad

old days, when she helped bring down kingdoms with her

sex appeal. Windbag Fracto never achieved that.

"Well, maybe he'll fail this time," Jenny said, "because

Jethro Giant is too big to be blown

away."

"But it should be fun watching him try."

The storm swelled up grotesquely as the giant strode to-

ward it. Dark clouds reached up for the sky, and down for

the ground. Thunderbirds and lightningbugs spun in the

swirling air currents. Rain splatted against the giant's invis-

ible body, outlining it in glistening water.

"I'll fetch rain coats," Metria said, and popped off. She

found an old, ancient, worn-out storm, and took a sheet of

its rain, fashioning it into several capes.

Because the rain

was tired, it no longer had the energy to
wet things down,

and just hung there inertly.

She returned with the coats. ' 'Put these
on; they will keep

the wild new water off you," she told
Jenny, Amolde, and

Ichabod.

"Oh, a translucent plastic raincoat,"
Ichabod said,

pleased.

"Exactly." Metria didn't find it necessary
to clarify the

precise nature of the coats.

It was just as well they had the rain
coats, because, now

the giant was striding over Lake Tsoda
Popka, and the storm

was sucking up water from all the
different-flavored little

lakelets, so that it was raining popka.
Jenny put out her

cupped hands and caught some of it, so
that she could drink.

"Oooo, it's extra fizzy!" she said. "It
must have been

freshly stirred up."

Ichabod did the same, but as he drank, he
jumped. ' 'Who

kicked me?" he demanded.

Amolde laughed. "You happened to
catch some boot
rear."

They passed over the With-a-Cookee
River. Now assorted

cookies pelted them. Jenny caught a
pecan sandy and threw

it away, because she cared to eat neither
sand nor the other

stuff. But soon she caught a spiraled punwheel and ate that.

Arnolde caught some chocolate chip cookie crumbs, and Ich-

abod a piece of gingerbread.

Unfortunately all the fragments

were somewhat soggy from the rain.

Fracto stormed on, but could not blow away the giant, who

simply forged obliviously on, though his head was in the

clouds. They passed a glittering river
formed of tumbling

crystals, and a huge mattress whose
projecting springs were

silver. "What's that?" Jenny asked.

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"Crystal River and Silver Springs, of
course," Amolde

replied. He was good with geography,
as all centaurs were.

"Of course," Jenny echoed. "How silly of me not to rec-

ognize them. There's just so much of Xanth I haven't yet

seen. New things keep surprising me."

Eventually they reached the isthmus. Jethro gently set

them down by a tree covered with mouths. "This is as far

as I can go," he said. "My head is

starting to poke up out
of the magic."

Now that they were no longer moving rapidly, the smell
was catching up. "That's fine, Jeth!"
Jenny called. "Thanks
a whole lot!" Then she stifled a gag.

"Welcome." The giant strode invisibly
away, and the air

slowly cleared.

But the mouths on the tree had taken in
some of the stench,

and were mouthing gasps. "What kind of
tree is that?"

Jenny asked.

"A two-lips tree, I think," Amolde
answered.

Then a mouth opened wide. "Repent now!" it preached.

"The end is near!"

"My mistake," the centaur said. "Those are apoca-lips."

Metria brought out the token with Kirn's name. "That way," she said as it tugged.

They moved along as a group, Metria leading the way.

Soon they came to the Interface between Xanth and Mun-

dania. It had been intangible through most of Xanth's history,

Metria understood, but since they had recompiled it last year;

it had sharpened up considerably, and was now a scintillating

zone of intense magic. "We had better

hold hands as we

cross," Metria said, "so that we'll all
return to this same

spot when we cross back."

"Correct," Amolde said. "That will fix
us as a party. But

I am surprised that a demoness knows or
cares about such

intricacies."

"I helped fix it," she reminded him. "It's the Interface

that confines the madness in the center, as well as keeping

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most Mundanes out, so Xanth isn't constantly swamped by

hordes of dreary unmagical beings."

"So it keeps magic both in and out! We really must talk

at greater length, in due course," he said.

Metria shrugged, hardly interested.

"Maybe someday."

"However, now that we are about to depart from Xanth,

I must caution you that the magic will be limited to a narrow

aisle, of which I will be the center." He

smiled briefly. "Or

the centaur, as you prefer. If you wander
beyond that aisle,

you will lose your magic, whatever it is.
Ichabod, of course,

has little to fear, being naturally
Mundane—"

"Except that I might suddenly expire of
old age," the

archivist said.

"But you, Metria, could disappear entirely. So I recom-

mend that you stay quite close to me for this interim." He

smiled. "Perhaps we shall have that dialogue sooner than

anticipated."

"Whatever," Metria agreed crossly.

They passed through the Interface. There was a slight tin-

gle, and that was all; the land beyond
was much the same

as regular Xanth. But Metria was keenly
aware that she was

now dependent for her very existence on
the centaur aisle of

magic.

If I may make a suggestion ..." Ichabod said.

' 'By all means, friend," Arnolde replied.
' This is, after

all, ybur territory."

"I think it would facilitate things if we had rapid Mundanian

transportation." He glanced at Amolde.
"You know how

they tend to stare at you when they see you, and this time

we don't have a spell of invisibility along."

"Excellent point! Perhaps your wheeled vehicle?"

"That was what I was thinking. My pickup truck will

carry the full party, and if we put high sides on it, oddities

will not be noticed."

"That's right," Metria said. "Centaur
don't exist in

Mundania."

"Nor demonesses," Ichabod agreed.
"However, if you

arrange to be garbed a bit more

completely—not that I'm
complaining—"

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She had left her gown translucent. She
opaqued it. "Will
this do?"

"Actually, your apparel does not closely
resemble that of

contemporary Mundania," he said. "Will you accept my in-

struction in this respect?"

"Maybe I'd better," she said. "But if your hands stray,

I'll turn into smoke and choke you."

He smiled. "I'm sure it would be delightful smoke. Please

assume a colored blouse, and an opaque skirt extending

about halfway to the knees."

Metria did so. Then she formed the peculiar pointed-heel

footwear Mundanes used, and arranged her hair, and red-

dened her lips. "I feel like a clown," she complained.

"You look like a fine young woman," Ichabod assured

her. "And, I might add, a remarkably

attractive one."

Metria, about to say something appropriately sharp, sud-

denly discovered that her tongue had softened to, as Profes-

sor Grossclout would put it, something like mush.

Then Ichabod turned to Jenny Elf. "No offense, but you

could pass for a human child of ten," he

told her. "I think

you'd do best in juvenile garb, such as
T-shirt, blue jeans,

and sneakers." Then he reconsidered.

"No, you would not

appear childlike in such a shirt! Maybe a
loose untucked

plaid shirt—what's the matter?"

For Jenny was giggling. "That's the color
of Mela Mer-

woman's—" She dissolved into more

giggles.

"A checkered shirt," Metria said quickly.

"That would do," Ichabod agreed, perplexed.

"There seems to be something we don't know about,"

Amolde remarked. "Perhaps we have been too long in the

madness."

"For sure," Jenny agreed as her mirth gradually subsided.

"Plaid sure isn't the way to appear childlike! But I can't just

make clothing from my own substance, the way Metria does.

I'll have to find some."

"We're not all the way out of the magic yet," Metria said.

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"Have Sammy find a shoe tree, and a clothes horse, and I'll fetch what she needs, and a jacket for you, Amolde."

Sammy was off and running as she spoke. "Bring him

back with you," Jenny said, this time not trying to chase

after the cat.

Metria floated after Sammy, who brought her in turn to a

shoe tree with a pair of sneakers Jenny's size, a clothes horse

with good jeans, shirt, and jacket, and a scarlet ribbon worm

that would do nicely to tie her hair. She gathered these up

along with the cat and floated back to the waiting party.

Then she formed herself into a high-sided tent so that

Jenny could change clothes without suffering the cynosure

of three or four male eyes. After all, Jenny was not a nymph.

This accomplished, they resumed their travel in the direc-

tion the token had indicated for Kim Mundane. Gradually

the terrain changed, with the trees becoming unfamiliar and

somehow less interesting, as if ashamed to be without magic.

The very air became dusky and less pleasant, losing its fresh-

ness.

Ichabod sniffed. "The pollution gets worse every year,"

he remarked. "Now we shall have to deviate from the true

route, because my residence is to the side. Fortunately it is

not far, and I believe we can avoid contact with the natives."

Even so, it was a dreary hike. Metria would have popped

back to Xanth for a break, but didn't dare try to cross the

dread magicless terrain between. She

was stuck with the

party, in her peculiar outfit, for the duration. ,

At last they came to Ichabod's house, which was a dull

wood and stucco structure beside a broad paved path. Beside

it was a funny device with wheels.

But as they approached it, emerging from the forest behind

it, a horrible loud monster came zooming along the road.

Jenny drew back in fright. "Is it a dragon?" she asked.

"No, merely an automobile," Ichabod replied confidently.

"Do not be concerned; it will not leave the highway."

Jenny and Metria looked up, but saw no high way, just

the low road. "He means the paved wide path you see,"

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Amolde explained, realizing the source of their confusion.

"There are a number of odd terms in Mundania."

"I will stand behind the house," Amolde said, "so that I

will not be seen. I am uncertain how far
my aisle extends

now; my long time in the madness may
have enhanced it

somewhat."

"Let's find out," Metria said. "I don't
want to step out

of it by accident. Jenny and I can walk
slowly to the edge,

and when I fade she can pull me back."
The prospect made

her nervous, but she did want to know the limits. It was a

matter of existence and nonexistence for her, which was a

new and qualmy sensation.

"Meanwhile I will fetch money and supplies from the

house," Ichabod said. He alone was free to leave the aisle,

unless his age caught up with him.

Metria and Jenny linked hands and walked ahead of Ar-

molde. "It should extend fifteen paces to the front, and half

that to the rear," Amolde called. "And only about two paces

to either side."

Metria looked back. She judged they were a dozen paces

ahead of him. She took one more, and a second, getting more

nervous as she did.

They were now close beside the paved path. Another noisy

block monster zoomed across. But instead of passing on by,

it suddenly squealed like a stuck oink and slewed to a halt

right before them. Metria, nervous about the limit of the

aisle, stood frozen.

The monster whistled piercingly. Then it poked a human

head from its side. "Hey, cutie! How about a date?"

"I think it's talking to you," Jenny said.

So Metria responded. "If your dates taste as bad as your

air, I don't want one."

The thing whistled again. "Oh, wow, we've got a live one

here!" Part of its side opened, and a young man crawled out.

"Beat it, kid," he said to Jenny. Then, to Metria, "How

about a kiss, sugarlips?"

Metria was beginning to figure this out. The monster was

actually some kind of conveyance, like a magic carpet. The

man was the standard obnoxious young human male. She

knew how to handle that kind.

"Sure, buttface. Come and get it."

"Are you sure—?" Jenny asked worriedly.

"We'll find out soon enough."

The man came up and put his arms around her. He brought

his face down to hers. Just as his mouth was about to touch

hers, Metria turned her-head into a mound of mush.

His lips sucked mush. His head jerked back. "What

the—?"

She poked an eyeball out of the mush.
"Yes, loverboy?"

"It's an alien thing!" he cried, pulling
away. But her arms
were around him, holding him close.

"Then I had better chomp it," she said,
her head forming

into the snout of a small dragon.

He screamed as it snapped at his nose.
"Aaaaahhh!"

"Hold still," the snout said. "How do
you expect me to
chomp your face off?"

But the man was uncooperative. He
hailed himself away

so violently that her arms stretched like toffee. He spun

about, wrenching free, and leaped into his box. In a moment

the box roared, shot out a cloud of gas, and squealed rapidly

away.

"I think that thing has indigestion," Jenny said, giggling.

"Not to mention the man inside it."

"Well, he shouldn't have tried to get fresh with a demon-

ess," Metria said, resuming her set Mundane aspect.

"I think he won't try it again," Jenny agreed.

But already another vehicle was squealing to a stop. This

one seemed to be stuffed full of young men. "Hey, babe!"

one called. "How about a smooch?"

Metria found that this sort of thing palled fairly quickly.

So she turned her whole body into that of a dragon and

roared back at them. This time no door opened, and the ve-

hicle squealed away as rapidly as it had come.

Now at last they could complete their

test of the limits of

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the aisle. Metria took one more step, and remained present.

She took another, and still was there. Then she lost her nerve

and retreated. "The aisle's strong enough."

Meanwhile Ichabod had gotten his own vehicle loaded. ' 'I

stepped out of your aisle several times," he said as he re-

turned to Amolde. "I felt the difference, but it was tolerable

for brief periods. I believe you are correct: We are well

charged with magic, and it takes time for it to dissipate. But

we had better resolve the current mission expeditiously."

That was his way of suggesting that they hurry, Metria

knew. But she wanted to do one thing first. "I was trying to

get beyond the front end of the aisle of magic," she said,

"but kept running afoul of Mundanes, or foul Mundanes,

and lost my nerve. But I think I should find out exactly what

happens when I enter Mundania proper.

Maybe it's not so

bad. Would you guide me where you
have been, and bring

me back, if—?"

"I understand," Ichabod said graciously.

"Rest assured, I

would not allow anyone with
appurtenances like yours to

come to grief if I could help it. Come
this way."

He meant her legs, mainly. She followed him around the

back of the house, while Jenny remained with Amolde, who

had not moved. The centaur understood the importance of

keeping the aisle exactly as it was, so they could experiment.

"The phenomenon does appear to be significantly more

capacious than during its original

manifestation," Ichabod

remarked. "By perhaps fifty percent. That is, about three

paces out, perhaps ten feet. Observe: I scuffed a mark by my

back door, here, where I noted the diminution of the ambi-

ence."

"Where the magic stops," Metria translated, stopping just

short of the line. "Would you mind, um,

holding my hand

as I cross?"

"Mind?" Ichabod said, as if in doubt.

"Dear creature, I

would consider it a privilege."

"Thank you." Pleased, she gave him her most fetching

smile, then took his hand, nerved herself,
and stepped across

the line.

Everything turned awful. She was
swirling out of control;

dissipating in all directions, and losing
her mind.

Then, after a yearlong instant, she found herself strewn

around Ichabod every which way, in severe disorder.

"Huh?" she inquired intelligently.

"Are you functional?" he asked.

She drew in her extremities from around him and got her

head together. "I think so. What happened?"

"You dissolved into a dust devil. That is, a twist of wind,

carrying dust and leaves. I tried to push you back into the

aisle with my body, but couldn't quite get hold of you, and

feared I was merely disrupting you. Fortunately Amolde re-

alized what had happened, and stepped sideways one pace.

That brought the ambience to your

locale, and your persona
re-formed."

"A dust devil?" she echoed blankly.

"At times the wind is channeled into a
circular vortex,

generating a relative low pressure
interior, which sucks in

dust. Extreme examples become
tornadoes or even hurri-

canes. But most dust devils swirl for only a few seconds,

then dissipate. They have no lasting cohesion. I realized that

this was likely to be your fate, if you remained clear of the

magic."

"So you got me back in it," she said. "I think you saved

my existence, Ichabod." That explained why she was

wrapped around him: She had been no more than energy in

the air, and when he tried to push her back, he had simply

stepped into the swirl. "Thank you." She shaped her head

into its best configuration, made her prettiest face, and kissed

him firmly on the mouth.

He looked about ready to faint. Indeed, he sagged

somewhat, so that she had to support him. But he was not

in discomfort; there was a dazed smile in the vicinity of his

mouth, and his eyes seemed to glow. "Thank you," he

breathed. "But please, if you would ..."

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"Whatever you wish, friend," she said obligingly.

"Put your clothing back on."

Oh. She had lost that detail, in the confusion of the dis-

solution. Hastily she re-formed shoes, skirt, and blouse, in

that order. Then his eyes dimmed back to medium, and he

recovered his equilibrium. He might be old, but his reflexes

seemed to be normal.

Amolde and Jenny were two paces away. ' 'It seems that

we now know the Mundane reversion of demons," Amolde

said. ' 'They are the flux that animates the currents of the

wind. In Xanth they possess awareness and control, becom-

ing immortal. In Mundania they lack these qualities, so rap-

idly dissipate."

"And so a long-standing question has at length been re-

solved," Ichabod agreed. "Thanks to the courage of the De-

moness Metria."

"Courage!" Metria snorted. "I just wanted to know what

would happen if I got out of the aisle. Now I know I'd better

not try it."

"Courage is as one defines it," Amolde said.

"Um, maybe I should try that also," Jenny said. "I'm not

brave, but it does make a difference whether I turn into a

regular girl or a swirl of dust."

"To be sure," Ichabod agreed. "Step this way."

Metria watched as the two approached the line in the dirt,

and stepped across it. The elf girl held her cat tightly in her

arms. Jenny did not disappear, or become dust; she simply

became a childlike girl, and the cat did not seem to change

at all.

"Oh! I have five fingers!" Jenny

exclaimed.

"And rounded ears," Ichabod added.

"You have become

distressingly normal."

"Ugh!" Jenny quickly stepped back into the magic. But

then she changed her mind and stepped out again. "The point

is to see whether I can safely function in Mundania," she

said. "And it seems I can. That's good to know."

"I am not certain that is entirely the case," Ichabod said.

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"Why? What's wrong?"

"The Mundanes will not be able to

understand you, out-

side of the aisle. You are speaking the magic language of

Xanth, which all humanoids know. But it sounds like gib-

berish to Mundanes."

"Oh. So if I leave the aisle, I'd better not speak."

"Correct. Your first words would give away your alien

origin. That will not be a problem for Metria, who can't

depart the aisle, or Amolde, who carries it with him. But you

will have to be cautious."

"In fact, I'd better not stray unless I really have to," Jenny

concluded.

' 'That is my opinion. And the same surely goes for your

cat."

Jenny considered that. "I'd better put him on a leash,"

she decided. "He won't like it, but I don't want us both

getting hopelessly lost in Mundania."

"A sensible precaution."

They turned and returned to the aisle.

They had not gone

far, but there was no doubt that Jenny
had been operating

well enough outside the aisle. As she
crossed back into it,

her ears pointed again and her hands
(and surely her toes

too) diminished to four digits per
appendage. A thumb and

three fingers. The magic to the World of
Two Moons did not

apply to Mundania any better than that of
Xanth did.

"Now we must travel," Ichabod said briskly. "Since we

do not know the address, we shall have to be guided by the

summons token. I hope we can proceed without further pro-

crastination."

"Yes, let's move," Metria said.

Ichabod put a crate down behind his truck-vehicle, and

Amolde mounted this carefully and stepped up into the back |

of the truck, which had now been fitted with high sides, j

Jenny joined him there. Metria was about to do the same,

but Ichabod stopped her. ' 'I must have you in front to direct

me, Demoness."

"Oh. Right." She watched him get into the enclosed front

portion of the vehicle, then popped into the seat beside him.

"Perhaps it would be better not to move that way," Ich-

abod suggested. "We do not want to attract undue attention

to ourselves."

"Oh, that's right—demons don't exist in Mundania," she

said. "Except as swirls of wind. I'll watch my manners."

He took a small key and used it to unlock something on

the front side. But no door opened. Instead a dragon growled,

so close it seemed almost on top of them. Metria dissolved

into smoke, but caught herself before she drifted out of the

vehicle. "What's that?" she asked, reforming.

Ichabod glanced at her. His eyes went opalescent again.

"That is the motor starting," he said.

"Have no concern.

But if you don't mind—your clothing."

Oh. She kept forgetting. It was hard to

keep such details

in mind when such strange things were going on. She formed

the necessary items.

"Understand, I have no objection to your, er, natural ap-

pearance," Ichabod said. "In fact, I find it extremely ap-

pealing. But I fear I would be unable to drive well with such

a distraction, and any other male who

perceived your assets

would suffer similarly."

"My what?" she asked, glancing down at herself. Then

she realized that he had not used a bad word. "You mean if

we were alone and nobody else could see, there'd be no

problem?" She had a suspicion about the answer. After all,

it wasn't as if she were completely

inexperienced with human males.

He seemed to hesitate. "I, ah, er, um, that is to say, per-

haps not, but that seems an unlikely eventuality."

That was his way of saying that his orbs would bum out.

Satisfied, Metria brought out the Kim token and held it be-

fore her. She was lucky those hadn't been lost when she

stepped out of the aisle! "That way," she said, pointing as

it tugged.

Ichabod reached for her knee. Curious, she watched his

hand. But it stopped just short, landing instead on the knee-

like knob on top of a stick poking from the floor. He wiggled

the stick. Then he pushed his feet against pedals on the floor.

This was evidently a magic ritual.

The vehicle lurched forward. Metria held her position, and

turned her head back to see how the two in back were taking

it. They were all right; Amolde must have ridden in this

contraption before, and warned Jenny about it. The two had

gotten along very well, ever since discovering that each was

isolated from his or her natural species.

"Er," Ichabod said, glancing at her.

She completed the turn of her head.

"Yes?"

' 'You just did a one-hundred-and-eighty-degree rotation of

your head," he said. "And then made it three hundred and

sixty degrees."

"So?"

"That isn't done among humans."

Oh, again. Of course, mortals had inconvenient anatomical

limits. "You mean I shouldn't do that?"

' 'It might attract adverse attention which we would prefer

to avoid."

That meant not to do it. She sighed.

"Mundania is a dull

place."

"I agree emphatically." Now the truck began to move

forward, though he hadn't finished moving his feet or playing

with the wheel angled before him. The craft pulled out onto

the road, turned in the direction she had indicated, and gath-

ered speed. This turned out to be respectable; it was about

as fast as a magic carpet.

"How do you make it mind?" she asked.

"You haven't

said a word to it."

He smiled. "Now, that would be novel:
teaching a De-

moness to drive."

"Why not?"

He considered. "Why not indeed! Very well, Metria. I am

making the truck respond not by verbal commands, but by

the actions of my hands and feet. The key turns on the motor,

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and the levers connect it to the wheels. I steer it with the

steering wheel, here."

"Fascinating!" she said. "It's a mindless machine."

"To be sure. I must guide it constantly, or it will go astray."

She asked more questions, and he, evidently flattered by the interest, explained about the obscure mechanisms of

clutch, brakes, steering column,
driveshaft, and turning sig-

nals. Metria paid close attention. It
seemed that Mundania

was not quite as dull as she had thought.
She could have

some fun with a contraption like this, if
she ever got the

chance.

She checked with the token. It seemed to
have no trouble

keeping track of its object, though Kim was across a stretch

of magicless terrain. The Simurgh must have seen to that,

refusing to let her artifacts be limited by Mundane consid-

erations. But now it was tugging somewhat to the side. "We

are drifting off-course," Metria announced.

"That is inevitable, given the limits of

the highway sys-

tem. I shall have to angle toward it.

Never fear, we shall get

there in due course."

He turned at the next intersection, and turned again when

the direction still wasn't right. It seemed that it was not pos-

sible, in Mundania, to go directly where one wanted to go.

So they kept moving, and Metria kept

learning about the

ways of controlling the vehicle, and at other times gazing

but at the changingly dull scenery of the region.

They passed many blocky buildings, and many sections of

field between, and sometimes some bits of forest. Other ve-

hicles prowled constantly, on both sides of the road. It

seemed that each had to stay on its own side, according to

the direction it was going, or there would be an awful crash.

At last the tugs on the token got stronger.
"We are coming

close," Metria said.

"Excellent. We are approaching Squeedunk. What age is

Kim?"

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"Nineteen, by now, if folk age at the regular rate in Mundania."

"Then she is college age. She could be at the Squeedunk Community College."

"Community collage? Do they paste unrelated things together to make a picture?"

He smiled. ' 'In a sense, Metria. They try to educate juveniles, which may be about as much of an art."

Soon they came to the SCC campus. The buildings were large and covered with blue glassy

squares. Young human

folk walked between them, carrying armfuls of books. Some

had spread blankets on the flat green sward and were sunning

themselves in scant attire.

"They are wearing less than I am," Metria said, pouting.

"They are less endowed than you are," he said diplo-

matically.

"Less whatted?"

"Healthy, curvaceous, symmetrical,
proportioned, statu-

esque, comely—"

"Stacked?"

"Whatever," he said with a smile. "You would disrupt

traffic and classes, so must mask your assets."

There was that word again. "My whats?"

"Charms. Are we going right?"

She checked the token. "That way," she said, pointing to

a building.

Ichabod brought the truck around to the parking lot nearest

the building. "I hope she lives on the ground floor," he said.

"Why?"

'How will we get to her, out of reach of the aisle?"

"Amolde will have to go in with us."

"A centaur in Mundania? Better for you to go naked."

Metria sorted that out, and concluded that he meant that

it wasn't practical for Amolde to enter the building. He was

probably right. The centaur wouldn't enjoy the narrow steps

and halls and landings Metria could see,
and might attract

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more attention than was wise. So it
would be best if he re-

mained in the truck.

But that meant that the rest of them
would have to stay

there too. Except for Ichabod, and maybe Jenny. Jenny

couldn't speak outside the aisle, so it would have to be the

man. "So you fetch her."

"Men are not allowed in the women's dormitories," he

said. ' 'It is one of those archaic regulations that still obtain

in the hinterlands." She realized that he was making a funny,

but wasn't quite sure about what.

They got out and walked to the rear of the truck. Amolde's

head and shoulders showed above the high side. "We have

arrived?" the centaur asked.

"At the girl's dormitory. But we have a problem. She may

be out of reach."

They discussed it, but before they came to a conclusion,

some students approached. "Xibu't vq, epmm?" a young

man called to Metria.

Metria looked at Ichabod. "This is Mundane speech?"

"Yes. He just inquired, 'What's up, doll?' He will become

intelligible once he enters the aisle."

"Doll?"

' 'It is an overly familiar mode of address to an unfamiliar woman."

"That's what I thought. Suppose I put on a dragon's snout and bite his head off?"

"I wouldn't recommend it. We don't wish to make a scene."

She had been afraid he would say that.
"So how do I
squelch this clod of dragon manure?"

"Perhaps I had better handle this." Then, as the youth

reached them, Ichabod said, "Were you addressing my mar-

ried daughter?" Jenny remained out of sight, so this had to

be Metria,

"Oops," the young man said, abashed. In three fifths of

a moment he was gone.

"That was fun, I confess," Ichabod said.

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A young woman approached. "Oooo," she squealed. "Is that a horse in there?"

Metria realized that Amolde's speckled flank showed through the slats of the side. "Not exactly," she said.

"But I'm sure I saw—yes, that's definitely horseflesh!"

the girl said, peering through.

Amolde looked at her from above the side. "That

horseflesh belongs to me." he said.

"Would you like a closer

look?"

Oops! Metria opened her mouth, but couldn't think of anything to say.

"Oooo, yes!" the girl cried, jumping up and down in her

excitement. Metria knew that did interesting things to her

sweater, because Ichabod's eyes were starting to shine.

"Then perhaps I might prevail on you for

a favor, first,"

Arnolde said.

"Oh, sure! Anything."

What was the centaur up to?

' 'There is a young woman we would like to talk with, but

of course, we can't go into the dormitory, being male. Would

you be kind enough to take a message to her?"

"Sure," the girl agreed, straining to get a better glimpse.

So far she had not been able to make the connection between

the horseflesh and the talking man.

"Her name is Kim. If you take this emerald disk to her,

perhaps she will come out here."

Amolde nodded toward

Metria.

Metria was not easy about this, but had no choice but to

hand over the disk.

"Emerald?" the girl said. "But it's black!"

"It has become somewhat corroded with

age," Amolde

said smoothly.

"Oh." Then the girl made another connection. "But why

couldn't you go in to find her?" she asked Metria. "You're

about as female as I've ever seen."

"I—I—" Metria said, but stalled almost immediately.

"She has a speech impediment," Ichabod said quickly.

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"Terrible stuttering. Please don't embarrass her by mentioning it."

"Oh, sure, no," the girl agreed. "Be back

in a jiff." She

hurried off with the token.

"Suppose she doesn't take it to Kim?"

Metria asked, sin-

cerely worried.

"A summons by the Simurgh will travel only to its proper

summonsee," Amolde said. "The girl will not even think of

taking it elsewhere."

' 'How can you be sure of that?"

"I am a centaur scholar."

Oh. Of course. For once Metria wasn't
annoyed by the

superior certainty of the species.

Soon enough Kim came running out,
garbed much as Me-

tria herself was. She had been a lanky
girl, somewhat plain;

now she had put on some flesh where it
counted and redone

her hair, and looked more like a woman.
Especially while

running. "Metria!" she cried, instantly
recognizing the de-

moness. "What on earth are you doing

out here, in civilian
clothing?"

"How can I understand her from this
distance?" Metria
asked.

"Because I turned to capture her in my
aisle," Arnolde
replied.

Then Kim reached Metria, and hugged her emphatically.

"I never thought I'd be so glad to see you, Demoness! But

how is it possible? This is the real world."

"Do you know of the centaur aisle?"
Metria asked.

"Oh, sure! But that's old history. There's no longer—"

Then Kim caught sight of Amolde's head.
"Oh, no! Can it

be? I thought Amolde faded away
decades ago!"

' 'Reports of my fadeaway have been
somewhat exagger-

ated," Amolde said, extending his hand.

Kim grasped it. "Oh, marvelous! This is
almost as good

as visiting Xanth! But what—"

"You will visit Xanth," Metria said. "I brought you your summons. You must return with us."

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"But I can't do that!" Kim protested. "I have classes,

homework, obligations—"

"They will have to wait," Amolde informed her. "No

one declines a summons from the Simurgh."

"From the Simurgh?" Kim stared at the black disk. "I

knew there was something really special about this medal.

But I can't get into Xanth, except when I

play the game, and

I've been too busy even to do that."

"What, even during summer vacation?"
Ichabod asked.

"Well, there's Dug," she said, blushing.

Then Metria understood how summers
could disappear.

Two of her own years had disappeared

similarly. "Dug's

coming too," she said. "I have a summons for him."

Suddenly Kirn's objections faded away. "I'll tell my

roommate to cover for me," she said, and dashed off.

Meanwhile the messenger girl had returned. "About that

horse..." she said.

"Come in and see," Arnolde said.

"Is that wise?" Ichabod asked.

"We made a deal," Arnolde said. "Let her in."

So Ichabod opened the back just enough to let the girl

scramble in, then closed it behind her.

There was a breathless pause. Then a faint scream. "Oh, my! Are you really—?"

"I am really," Arnolde said. "But please don't tell anyone else, because it would make things rather awkward for me, and I'm rather too old to handle awkwardness gracefully."

"Not so you'd notice," Ichabod muttered.

"He's a con

artist. There's no counting how many specimens he talked

into posing for us, in the madness."

"And who—what are you?" the girl asked after a bit.

"Jenny Elf. I'm too young to handle awkwardness."

Kim emerged from the building, carrying a bag. "My re-

search paper homework," she said.

"Maybe I'll squeeze it

in, somehow."

The other girl emerged from the truck, looking dazed.

"Thanks, Jo," Kim said.

"Any time, Kim." Jo walked unsteadily away.

"Suppose she talks?" Metria asked.

"Who would believe her?" Kim asked.

"Come on, let's

go get Dug!"

This time Kim got in the front of the truck, because she

knew exactly where to find Dug, and since her legs were just

as visible as Metria's, Ichabod didn't object. Metria climbed

in back with Amolde and Jenny Elf.

"That girl's face must have been something," Metria re-

marked as the truck lurched into motion. "She thought she

would see a horse, and man, and she saw a centaur."

"She did see a horse and man," Amolde said primly.

"There are both in my ancestry."

"But she did seem about to faint, at first," Jenny said. "I

know how it is. I was amazed when I first saw Chex. For-

tunately I couldn't see very well, so .1

didn't realize just how

strange she was. Until she got me a pair of spectacles."

"Yes, wings on a centaur would seem extremely strange,"

Arnolde agreed. "Until the species gets established. Which,

of course, may be a problem for the alicentaurs."

"For the what?" Jenny asked.

"Winged centaurs," he said. "If they are to be established

as a species, they need a species name. Since a winged uni-

corn is an alicorn, it is reasonable to call a winged centaur

an alicentaur."

"Alia for short," Metria agreed, glad that for once it

hadn't been her in the middle of a

confusion of words. "But

what's the problem?"

"A winged centaur is not the easiest crossbreed to

achieve," Arnolde said. "Chex was the result of a liaison

between a normal centaur and a hippogriff, and Cheiron's

origin has not yet been deciphered. Presumably a strategi-

cally placed love spring could result in

others, but centaurs

are generally too intelligent to be deceived, and are opposed

to crossbreeding anyway. Since new blood from outside the

present alia family is required to make a lasting species vi-

able, prospects for the continuation seem remote."

"No they aren't," Metria said.

Both Jenny and Amolde looked at her. "I presume you

have some insight we lack?" the centaur said in a tone that

indicated that she probably didn't.

"Certainly. Magician Trent has been rejuvenated, and his

powers of transformation are as good as they 'ever were. He

transformed Cynthia Human to Cynthia Centaur seventy four

years ago, and she has now had a bit of rejuvenation herself

and is hot for Che Centaur. So Trent can do it again. He can

transform humans to alia, or centaurs to alia, or anything

else. Probably it would be best to start with centaurs, because

they're already smart and know the form; they'd just have

to learn to fly, and since the magic of all winged centaurs is

similar, making them light enough to fly, that's no problem.

They wouldn't have to soil their hands on any other obscen-

ity of magic talents."

Amolde and Jenny were staring at her. "Out of the mouths

of fools and babes ..." the centaur said, trailing off into

some private thought.

"I think she's got it!" Jenny said.

"Transformation."

"Who's a fool or a baby?" Metria demanded.

"He said 'babe,' not 'baby,' " Jenny said.

"Oh. Very proficiently."

"Very what?" Jenny asked.

"Suitable, proper, appropriate,
felicitous, germane,
healthy—"

"Well?"

"Whatever," Arnolde said before Metria
could answer,

making a cross expression. Jenny laughed, and Metria had

to too.

Then the truck clunked to a halt. They looked out, and

saw another dormitory just like the first, but with boys mostly

surrounding it. Kim got out and walked up to the side until

she stood under a particular window.

Then she put two fin-

gers in her mouth and make a piercing whistle.

In a moment a head appeared in the window, and a hand

waved. "Be right down!" Dug called.

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"I thought there was no magic in

Mundania," Metria said.

"The magic power women have over men is every-

where," Amolde explained.

Soon Dug emerged from the building^ and Kim brought

him over to the truck. He had fleshed out somewhat since

Metria had last seen him, and looked stronger and hand-

somer. "The Demoness Metria has something for you," she told him.

"I don't need it, as long as I've got you," he replied gallantly.

Kim smiled, looking rather pretty in that moment. "It's a summons for Jury duty."

His jaw dropped. "What?"

"Obligation, onus, burden, charge, litigation, trial—" Me-

tria offered helpfully.

"Court case?" Amolde suggested.

"Whatever!" Jenny, Kim, and Metria chorused, looking

mirthfully cross.

"But they don't have that stuff in Xanth!"
Dug protested.

"Oh, indeed they do," Amolde reassured
him. "The trial
of Gracile Ossein was notorious."

Dug looked at Kim, who nodded
affirmatively. She was

better versed on Xanth history than he was. "Grace'1 is a

female walking skeleton. Marrow Bones' wife. She was tried

for messing up a bad dream sent to Tristan Troll for not

eating an innocent human little girl."

"But that's backwards!" he said. "Trolls shouldn't eat

children, and bad dreams should be sent for—"

Kim shut him up by pulling his head down and kissing him.

"Always nice to see proper control," Metria murmured appreciatively. "She has certainly learned how to handle him."

"Girls do," Amolde agreed.

Metria reached down and presented Dug with his token.

"But I can't go to Xanth now," he said. "I have homework, papers to write—"

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"I'm going," Kirn said.

"Let me check out." He hurried back into the building.

"Classes were getting tiresome anyway," Kirn remarked.

"Though our grades are bound to suffer because of our absence and missed work."

Soon Dug reappeared. Metria was glad that the toughest

part of her search was done; all the rest
of the summonsees
were in Xanth.

9

DEMON DRIVER

Kim and Dug rode in the back,
discussing old times

with Jenny Elf, so Metria was once
again in the front.

They were driving first to Kirn's home,
because she

absolutely refused to go to Xanth without
her dog. Bubbles.

For a time they rode in silence. 'He's
looking at your knees,'

Mentia remarked.

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'So? They're good knees; I shaped them
that way.'

'But I showed them to him first.'

'Well, you didn't show him your panties,'
Metria retorted,
annoyed.

'Not only would that have freaked him
out, it would have
violated the Adult Conspiracy.'

'He's a hundred years old!' Metria thought.

'And in his second childhood.'

She had a point. 'Good thing I had no panties when I forgot my clothing.'

"Penny for your thoughts," Ichabod said.

"Mundane coins aren't worth much in Xanth."

' 'I mean that I am curious about what is going on in your

mind that has you focusing so intently, if you care to tell

me."

There seemed to be no harm in it, so she told him. "I was

talking with my worser half, D. Mentia. She said you were

looking at my knees."

"Well, I was. I have been a connoisseur of distaff limbs

since adolescence."

"Of what limbs?"

"The distaff is a long staff for holding wool, flax, or other

fibrous material, from which the thread is drawn out when

spinning by hand. Since this was almost invariably the work

of women, the distaff came to be a generalized symbol of

womanhood. Thus I was speaking metaphorically."

"Speaking how?"

"Using a parallel, analogy, correspondence, likeness, affinity, kinship, similarity—"

"Synecdoche?"

"Or more properly, metonymy," he said crossly. Then he

did a double take. "How did you come

up with that term?"

"I have no idea. Words are strictly accidental with me."

"You are an interesting creature,"
Ichabod remarked as

he drove on toward Xanth. "That is to
say, all supernatural

entities are intriguing in their separate
fashions, but you seem

remarkable even for a demoness. What

accounts for your, er,
unusual way with words?"

"I think a sphinx stepped on part of my
demon substance

when I was new, and squished it flat.
Ever since, some words

have been riddles, and my character has
been subject to fis-

sioning."

"Oh, is that how you change from Metria to Mentia?"

"And to Woe Betide," she agreed, assuming the form of the sweet, sad child.

"Do other demons have multiple personalities?"

She switched back to Metria, because the question was too

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complicated for the tyke to answer. "No. Others assume any

aspect they wish, but inside they are always the same evil

spirits. I'm the only one who takes those personalities seri-

ously. When I'm the child, I mustn't violate the Adult Con-

spiracy. When I'm Mentia, I'm slightly

crazy, except when

in the Region of Madness, when I
reverse and become

slightly sane. When I'm Metria, I have a
problem of vocab-

ulary."

"Fascinating! In Mundania, multiple
personality disor-

der—MPD—usually stems from some
difficult event in

childhood, such as sexual abuse."

"Well, getting stepped on by a sphinx
distracted by a rid-

dle isn't exactly easy to take."

He laughed. "Surely so! So you did have
a traumatic early

experience. As a mature individual you
could have handled

that stepping on, but as a nascent one you
couldn't, so you

suffered some subtle psychological

damage."

This was a revelation. "This is true? I mean, do other

people really suffer conditions like mine, because of early

w'hatevers?"

' 'Early traumas. Yes, this does seem to be the case, though

psychological opinion is by no means unified. We believe it

is the human—and perhaps demon—
mind's way of dealing

with what cannot otherwise be handled.
Or perhaps it is

merely the shock of the abuse itself,
striking the forming

personality like a hammer and cracking
it into several frag-

ments. Each fragment then tries to heal
itself, forming indi-

vidual personalities, but never with
complete success.

Because something broken is simply not as strong as

something whole." He glanced at her face for a moment.

"As is perhaps the case with your vocabulary. You obvi-

ously possess a full repertoire of words, but your mechanism

for recollecting the particular one you need at a given mo-

ment is imperfect."

"Yes! That's exactly what I have languished!"

"What you have suffered," he agreed.

"Oh, Ichy, I could smack you!"

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He was taken aback. "What?"

"Osculate, buss, peck, smooch—"

"Kiss?"

"Whatever!" she said, and kissed him firmly on the right

ear. "Now at last I know why I am as I am. I have MPD."

The truck slewed for a moment and a half before going

straight again. "I am glad to have been of help," Ichabod

said.^But if you ever kiss me again,
please do it when I'm

not driving."

"Sorry about that."

"Oh, don't be! Just be careful in future. It
is dangerous

for a man my age to suffer such
distraction while behind the

wheel."

"I'll try," she said contritely,

"This alternate personality, Mentia—you actually have di-

alogues with her?"

"Shouldn't I?"

"Usually one personality dominates, or the other; they

don't hold direct discourses."

' 'Well, I am usually in charge. But she fissioned off when

I did the disgusting thing of getting half souled and falling

in love. She's the half without the soul, so she retains the

old demonly values. Woe Betide is

satisfied to share half my

half soul when she's in charge, so she's quarter-souled. But

Mentia's curious about just what I get from my soul, in much

the way I was curious about the matter before I got it. So

she rejoined me, and she takes over when she needs to. Do

you want to talk with her?"

"Not exactly. I am merely curious about what the two of

you have to have a dialogue about, since both of you must

have had much the same experiences in your existence."

"We have. But we place different interpretations on

them."

"What would one of your dialogues concern?"

"Love, mainly. She just doesn't understand it."

"Few do, who haven't experienced it! Would it be possible to—to listen to such a dialogue?"

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"For sure!" Mentia said. "What kind of idiocy can make

a once sensible demoness suddenly become caring, self-

sacrificing, and dedicated to making her indifferent husband

deliriously happy several times a day? She calls it love, but

I don't see anything compelling her except perversity. Who

cares whether the man is happy or miserable? He's just a

stupid mortal. He doesn't deserve all that attention."

"I don't consider it idiocy," Metria responded. "I get real

pleasure myself from making him happy. It's a mutual thing;

my desires are defined in terms of his desires. Before I fell

in love, my life was empty in a way I
never realized; now

it is full in a way I never anticipated.
Love gives me fulfill-

ment—"

"Fulfillment! Why not chain yourself to a
dungeon while

you're at it? You delight in your misery."

' 'It is only your ignorance that makes it
look like misery

to you. It is sheer joy to me."

"You revel in your humiliation!"

"If your values weren't inverted, you'd know it's exaltation."

"Yours are inverted! I'm true to demonly nature."

"I think I get the picture," Ichabod said.

"A person with-

out a soul simply can't grasp its nature,
and a person without

love thinks it's pointless."

"That's right," Metria said. "I was
governed mainly by

curiosity and mischief, before I got half
souled. But my cu-

riosity was in the end greater than my
mischief, so I took

the plunge and got married."

"I seem to recall Amolde saying something about a de-

moness with a soul who married a King, in the past. But

when her baby was delivered, the soul went with the baby,

and the demoness took off with a rude noise. Will that hap-

pen to you?"

"Yes, that was my friend Dara
Demoness, who married

King Humfrey. Her son Dafrey got the
soul. But later she

returned to Humfrey, because she
discovered that she liked

existence with a soul better than
existence without a soul.

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Now she emulates a soul she doesn't

have. So I won't give

up my half soul when my baby is
delivered; I'll share half

of it, and hope that a quarter soul
sustains me. My child

won't have that problem; souls grow to
full size when a

creature is part mortal."

"You have a generous nature."

"Yes, now."

"When I first saw you, or Mentia, there
in the madness,

I took you for a variant of a nymph, a
creature without much

intellectual content. I was mistaken."

She shrugged. "It's understandable. I
never cared about

intellect before I married."

They reached Kirn's home. Her parents were evidently

out. Kim dashed in, and emerged leading her old dog. "I

left a message on the kitchen table, so they won't think Bub-

bles was stolen," she announced. Then she lifted the dog

into the back, and scrambled in herself. Metria knew that

Bubbles would be reassured to find

Jenny Elf and Sammy

Cat there, because they had been
Companions during the

game. Metria wondered how it was that
the dog could sur-

vive in Mundania, as she was very old,
but thought that the

magic of Xanth could have charged her
when she visited

there, in effect rejuvenating her
somewhat. This excursion

should have similar effect, in that case.

They drove for a while in silence. Then Ichabod remarked:

"Once we return to Xanth, Amolde and I will resume our

researches in the Region of Madness.

But I am curious as to

the identity of your next summonsee."

"I hadn't thought about it. I have to guide Kim and Dug

to the Nameless Castle, of course, but that will take time, as

they can't just pop over there, and we won't have the assis-

tance of a giant. So I suppose I had better travel a meander-

ing course and pick up the remaining summonsees on the

way. Beginning with the most difficult."

"And who would that be?"

She opened her bag and checked through

the tokens.

"Chena Centaur, because I never heard of her."

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"Perhaps Amolde has. He has a centaur's encyclopedic

knowledge."

"I'll check." Metria turned smoky and

slid through the

metal of the vehicle. She emerged in the back. The four folk

there were resting comfortably, Amolde lying down. Jenny

Elf leaning against his side, and Kim and Dug snugly en-

sconced in a comer. "Amolde, do you know Chena Cen-

taur?"

The old scholar shook his head. "She

must be since my

time. The name makes no connection."

"Thank you." She slid back to the front seat and solidi-

fied. "He doesn't know her either."

"Then I agree: She may be your most challenging re-

maining summonsee." He shook his head. "I am growing

tired; it has been too long since I drove any distance. In fact,

I should probably turn in my driver's license after this is

done; I have little remaining use for Mundania."

"I can do it," Metria said. "I have

learned all the com-
mands."

He laughed. Then he sobered. "Do you
know, I believe

you could. You have been a most apt
student of this art.

Perhaps it would be safer trusting your
alertness, rather than
my failing powers."

"Then let me," she said eagerly.

"Oh, I really wasn't serious. I—"

He lost his voice, for she had fogged out her skirt almost

to the panty line. "I'll sit in your lap," she said.

Stunned by the notion, he offered no further resistance.

She sat in his lap, so she could comfortably reach the

controls, and operated them. She fogged herself out enough

to reduce her weight so as not to be a burden on him, but

he showed no sign of complaining. She drove, at first un-

steadily, but soon with confidence. The machine responded

marvelously to her slightest nudge on the

steering wheel or

go-pedal. It was like riding a responsive unicorn, except that

no self-respecting unicorn would suffer itself to- be ridden.

This truck didn't seem to mind at all.

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Darkness was closing, in its dull

Mundane way, as they

reached Ichabod's house. "I think we shall be obliged to

stay the night here, as it would not be safe for us to drive

by night," he opined. ' 'But we should be all right, if Amolde

is properly positioned. So far I am aware of no diminution

of his ambience."

"No less magic around him, either," she

said. She used

the steer-wheel and slow-pedal and got
the truck beside the

house.

Then it coughed, jerked, and died. "Oh, I
killed it!" she

said, chagrined.

"My fault. I forgot to remind you to use
the clutch. The

motor stalled."

"Oh." She had learned about the clutch, but not thought

of it in her effort to steer the vehicle just right.

"Have no concern, Metria. It has been a real pleasure."

"Having me drive?" she asked, pleased.

"That, too," he said as she lifted her bottom off his lap.

Amolde settled down in thte center room of the house, so

that the aisle reached the length of it and just about to the

sides of it. Sammy and Bubbles curled up beside him, evi-

dently thinking of him as more animal than human being,

which made him acceptable company.
Kim and Jenny

checked supplies and found no suitable
food; he had been

too long away from here. "No problem,"
Kim said cheer-

fully. "I'll order pizza."

"Piece of what?" Metria asked.

Dug laughed. "You'll like this. She's
going to do some

Mundane magic."

Kim did. She picked up a banana shaped item with a curly-

tailed line attached, punched some buttons in its belly, and

spoke into it. "Falling Blocks Pizza?
Two jumbo giant

cheesers to this address." She seemed to be requesting

something. Then she put the banana back on its stand.

. Not long thereafter a vehicle charged up to the house so

rapidly, it looked as if it was about to crash. But it squealed

to a stop just in time, and a young man scrambled out with

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two wide, flat boxes. Dug gave him some folding green pa-

per, and in a moment he zoomed away.

Dug brought the boxes inside and opened them. There

were two huge flat pies, with surfaces like that of the moon

in heavy sunlight: blistering cheese. The five mortals took

pie-wedges from them and began eating. "Now, this is what

I call responsive mozzarella," Dug remarked, dangling his

slice by a stretching string of cheese and
bouncing it like a

yo-yo.

"Oh, Monster Ella," Metria said, finally
recognizing the

type. It came from the ella monster,
famous for casting long

sticky strings of gunk over its prey and
smothering it to

death. She wondered how the Mundanes
had managed to slay

an ella; it was a formidable creature. But it tasted wonderful.

This was magic, all right. But since Metria didn't need to

eat, she was soon bored. So she explored the house. "What's

this?" she asked, opening the curtain to a very small bare

room that was behind a less small room.

"That's the shower," Dug said. "You

want someone to

take it with you? Ow!" Because Kim had kicked him for no

apparent reason.

"Take it with me?" Metria repeated. "It doesn't look as

if it can be moved."

"I can show you how it—" Dug began.

"/" show her," Kim said as he dodged another kick. She

got up, trailing a string of cheese, and approached the cham-

ber. She closed the door to the larger chamber so no one else

could see in. Then she turned two handles in the wall of the

smaller one. Water gushed from a high nozzle. "Vanish your

clothing and step in," she said.

Metria did so, and the warm water struck her bare body.

"Hot rain!" she exclaimed. "More magic."

"For sure. When you've had enough, just turn these han-

dles this way, and it will stop. That's how you take a

shower."

"It's weird. But nice."

"Exactly." Kim pulled a curtain across and departed.

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Metria basked in the shower. She turned smoky and let it

pass through her- It was as if she were a cloud, and was

raining below. "Move over, Fracto!" she muttered. Then she

assumed various shapes, seeing how the water bounced off

them. She became a giant pot, and let the water fill it. More

fun!

But soon enough she tired, so she turned the knobs and

the water ceased. Then she turned smoky so that all the water

on her fell away, and re-formed,
complete with her Mundane

blouse, shirt, and footwear. She stepped
back out to the din-

ing room. "I could almost get to like
Mundania," she said.

"Mundania would certainly like you,"
Dug said, and Ich-

abod nodded agreement. Kim looked
studiously elsewhere,

perhaps because Dug's shin .was out of

reach of her foot.

Metria was catching on to the nature of their interaction; it

was as if there were an invisible string of monster ella cheese

that Kim used to dangle Dug from. Like most men, he

needed to be leashed.

The others finished eating and took turns in the shower,

except for Amolde, who was too big to

fit. So he put his

front end in, then his hind end, and Dug wielded a hose

attachment to get most of the centaur showered.

Meanwhile Kim turned on a box with a picture on the side

and voices from within. It was interesting, but seemed to be

filled mostly with violence and loudmouthed hustlers. Metria

noticed that (blush) panties were openly shown, surely freak-

ing out every male who watched. No wonder Mundane males

were such louts!

In due course they settled down to sleep, setting up mats

beside Amolde. Metria didn't need to sleep, so she stayed to

watch the magic box. After a while it showed scenes from

some far-off land, and became a story,
between increasingly

obnoxious bouts of hustling. After that
was done, there was

another story, with different scenes. It
was about a young

man who fell in love with a young
woman, then lost her,

then regained her. Metria had never seen
such a story before,

and marveled at its originality. She
wished she were back

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home with Veleno, making him deliriously happy. For her

husband had no other purpose in existence than to be made

delirious by her.

She observed the stories interminably, until the others

woke. "You watched the movie channel all night?" Kim

asked. "You must be worn out!"

' "No, it was interesting. I wonder if we could get one of

these magic boxes in Xanth. It's almost as much fun as the

gourd."

"Maybe Corn Pewter could arrange it," Kim said, laugh-

ing.

Jenny entered the shower-room. "Oops."

"I don't like the sound of that," Kim said.

"I felt the edge of the magic," the elf explained.

"But the bathroom is well within the ambience," Kim

said. "Metria took a shower. Amolde is exactly where he

was yesterday."

"Maybe I'm confused," Jenny said doubtfully.

Whereupon Kim, in exactly the manner of a woman, re-

versed. "I'm not sure of that. We'd better check."

They looked at Metria. So Metria stepped very cautiously

toward that chamber. She extended one arm through the

door, feeling a tingling and then a numbness. And the arm

dissolved into a swirl of wind.

Jenny squeezed by her to enter the chamber. As she did

so, her ears and fingers changed. She faced back toward Me-

tria and walked up to her, pushing the swirl with her body.

As it crossed the border of magic, the swirl became a cloud

of demon substance, and Metria was able to grab it and

merge it into herself. That was a relief, because she had felt

diminished without it.

They exchanged a three-way glance.

"The aisle has

shrunk," Kim said gravely.

"Hey, what's up, girls?" Dug asked, approaching.

They were silent, mutually hesitant to spread the alarm.

"Aren't you going to call me a sexist?" he asked Kim.

"Because I didn't say 'women'?"

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"The magic's fading," Kim said bluntly.

"Oh, shucks! I thought our love was forever."

"The magic aisle, numskull."

He sobered in a hurry. "How much?"

"The bathroom's out of it now."

He angled his head, which was his way of doing a mental

calculation. "Maybe fifty percent. The question is, has it

been fading steadily from the time Arnolde left Xanth, or is

it just giving out now? We'd better hope that the fading is

steady, because that will give us time to get the hell moving

before it poops out entirely."

"Yes," Kim agreed tersely.

Both Amolde and Ichabod remained asleep. In that state,

it was clear just how old they were, because of the lack of

animation of their features. And maybe fading magic.

"Let's get this organized before we wake them," Dug

said. "So there're no wasted motions. Kim and I'll load the

truck—has it got enough in the tank?"

"Yes," Metria said. "The magic dial says half of its bloat

is left."

"Its what?" he asked. Then, immediately,
"Oh—gas."

"Whatever."

"And Jenny and Metria must stay close to Arnolde," Kim

said. "For moral support for the elders."

That was one way to put it. Metria had to stay close to

maintain her existence, and Jenny to maintain her elfhood.

The two Mundanes loaded the truck efficiently, and set up

the box so that Amolde could climb into

the back. "Okay,
it's time," Dug said grimly.

Jenny woke Amolde, and Dug woke
Ichabod. Both were
slow to be roused, and looked around as
if befuddled.

"We were afraid of this," Kim muttered.
"Their physical
health is tied in with the magic."

"Amolde, we'll help you up," Dug said,
as if things were

routine. Then he and Kim helped haul on
the centaur's arms,

while Jenny and Metria helped steady
his rear end as, he

lurched unsteadily to his four feet. They
walked him forward,

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then half shoved him up into the truck,
and made him lie

down again with his head toward the
front. That was so

Metria could sit in the cab, within the
aisle.

Then they looked back to the house.
Ichabod was tottering,

walking erratically away from the truck.
"God, he's gone

senile," Kim muttered, and jumped down

to intercept the old

man. Soon she had her arm around his waist, and was half

encouraging, half hauling him onto the truck.

"Nuh-uh," Dug said. "He's not fit to drive. Put him in

back."

Kim nodded. They got the man in the truck. The dog and

cat joined the centaur there, too.

"Now who drives?" Kim asked.

"What kind of shift is it?" Dug asked.

"Stick shift," Metria said.

"That lets me out," Kim said. "All I know is auto."

"Me too," Dug said. "But I guess I'd better learn in a

hurry, because we can't wait."

"I can drive it," Metria said.

They both stared at her. "But you're a demoness!" Kim

said.

"I had noticed," Metria said. "Ichabod taught me to drive

yesterday. I drove us much of the way here."

"This is crazy, but we can't waste time," Dug said. "We

don't know how fast the magic's fading. Maybe with a li-

censed driver up front with her—"

"Me," Kim said. "I won't be distracted

by her legs."

"Good point," he agreed. "Let's move out."

They closed up the back, and Metria turned smoky and

phased through the truck directly to the driver's seat, rather

than risk stepping to the side and maybe out of the narrowing

aisle of magic. Kim joined her. "I'll do

map duty," Kim

said, digging into the panel in front other
seat. "Put on your

seat belt."

"But no belt can hold me."

"Put it on anyway," Kim said, buckling
hers. "We don't

want to attract any traffic cop's
attention."

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Metria used the key and started the motor, remembering

to use the clutch pedal. She knew she had to do everything

right, because they couldn't afford any accident. She put it

in gear and let the clutch pedal rise slowly.

"The brake!" Kim snapped.

Oh, yes. Just in time. Metria released the hand brake.

"Traffic's clear ahead," Kim said.

Metria pulled the truck slowly in a circle and then onto

the road, turning the steering wheel. She

was doing it! She

got it straight and used the pedals and stick to get it through

the gears and up to full speed.

"Keep to the right of the road," Kim said.

Oops, yes. It was just as well that Kim was with her,

because there were a number of details to keep track of, and

they tended to get lost around the edges.

Kim studied her map and called out a particular magic

symbol to look for, which marked the route they needed to

follow. Metria hadn't been aware of that; Ichabod had known

the area, so hadn't needed any map or route. This business

of driving was more complicated than it had seemed.

Then, just as she was getting accustomed to it, something

happened. "Drunk driver," Kim muttered. "See that wee-

wawing? Stay clear of him."

"What's a drunk driver?"

"Someone who's intoxicated. You know, dizzy, crazy. Li-

able to do anything. Dangerous, in a car." Kim glanced back.

"I hope Jenny doesn't catch on. She'd freak out."

"But what does Jenny Elf know of dunked drivers?"

"Just get the bleep elsewhere, fast."

But the traffic had closed in, so she couldn't get away from

the crazy car. So she tried to keep some distance from it,

following Kirn's advice.

Then it happened. A girl was crossing the road, and the

drunk car was headed right for her, not stopping as it should.

"Drat! I knew it!" Kim said, wincing. "If they'd just stop

coddling those luses—"

There was a scream. Another girl ran out in front of the

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car, getting between it and the first girl, pushing her out of

the way. But then the car struck the second girl.

Meanwhile Metria was slewing to a halt, so as not to hit

car or girl herself. She saw the second girl lying by the side

of the road, and heard the first girl screaming.

"Oh, God, no, we can't stop," Kim said.
"It'd be the end

of you and of Amolde, and maybe of Ichabod and Jenny if

we get caught up in this. We've got to get

out of here!"

But already things were jammed,
because of the accident.

They couldn't drive on. They had to
wait, while a screaming

vehicle zoomed up and took the girls
away.

"Of all the things to happen!" Kim
moaned. "All because

of that damned drunk! They should lock

them all up for-
ever!"

A Mundane demon garbed in blue came to the truck.

"You a witness?" he asked, glancing down at Metria's legs,

which were very full and bare below her hiked-up skirt.

"The drunk car aimed for the smaller girl, but the bigger

girl pushed her out of the way," Metria said.

"Ixnay," Kim whispered. "We can't get involved!"

But the blue demon was already asking another question.

"How do you know he was drunk?" He glanced down her

blouse, which happened to be somewhat loose above, show-

ing the fullness thereof.

"He was sliding all across the road,"
Metria said.

The demon nodded. "Your license,
please?"

"My what?"

"Here's mine!" Kim cried, thrusting a

small card under

the demon's nose.

He frowned, considering it, then nodded as he made a

note. "You may receive a summons to appear at court to

testify," he said. "Have a nice day, ladies." He took one

more glance at Metria's assets, wavered slightly unsteadily

on his feet, and moved on to the next

vehicle behind them.

"That summons will come to me," Kim said. "Good

thing he didn't think to get your identity too, or to look in

the back of the truck."

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"Well, I did my part," Metria said,

lengthening her skirt

and raising her décolletage. "I've had some experience be-

fuddling men's minds, and it seems to work about as well

on Mundanes as on Xanthians, fortunately."

Kim glanced at her, appraisingly. "Yes, that sort of magic

does seem to be universal, for those who have the equipment.

I was almost afraid that cop's eyes
would bulge out of their

sockets. I suppose we're lucky he didn't
ask you for a date."

' 'I could have given him one, but it
would have dissolved

the moment it left my presence."

"That's date, as in he gets to take you to a
meal or movie

and run his hands over your body."

"Oh, I wish I'd known! That might have been fun."

"No it wouldn't. Remember, you're married."

"That, too," Metria agreed, thinking of the cop's face on |

such a date when she made her body smoky and impossible

to touch. "But of course, I can't leave the

aisle of magic."

"Yes. I hope we get out of here soon.
That magic must

be fading all the time."

Finally they did get moving. The speed
of the traffic be-

came faster in direct proportion to its
distance from the cop

cars, so that they progressed rapidly toward Xanth.

But all was not completely well. The magic was dimin-

ishing. At first Metria felt it in her toes, which were the

farthest from Amolde; they tingled for a while, but then they

were turning numb. She looked down, and felt an almost

mortal chill. "Kim, my toes are gone!"

Kim looked. "They must be outside the magic. We've got

to do something." She knocked on the window to the back,

until Dug's face showed. "Get Arnolde closer!" she yelled.

" Metria's toes are going!"

There was a scramble in back. Then sensation returned to

her toes. They had gotten the centaur

moved up as close

against the wall as possible, so the magic was back. But she

knew this wouldn't last long.

It didn't. All too soon the dread tingling resumed, then the

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dread numbness. "I'm losing my feet,"

she said. "I won't

be able to push the magic command pedals."

"We can't stop," Kim said. "I'll have to do it. But you'll

have to tell me how, because I'm an absolute ignoramus on

standard shift."

"Take my place," Metria said.

"We'll have to stop, so we can change."

"No, just sit in my lap and sink through me."

"Oh, yeah—you can dissolve." So Kim scrambled across,

and Metria turned smoky, so that she wound up sitting on

top instead of on the bottom.

-Then she started to drift over to the other seat, but paused

when she felt the tingling again. "Oops."

"The aisle!" Kim said. "It's getting shorter and narrower.

You can't go that way."

"I'd better go in back, then."

"No, we don't want to alarm them. Can't you curl up in

a ball or something, and sit in my lap?"

"Certainly." Metria assumed the form of a lap dragon,

curled and snoozing.

But soon Kim had to use the gearstick.

"There's a stop-

light ahead. What do I do?"

Metria pinched her left leg gently, using a paw with claws

retracted. "Push the clutch pedal down." Then she pinched

her right arm. "Let me guide you." She curled the tail

around it and pushed Kirn's hand along the sides of the

magic H pattern of the gearshift. By coordinating foot and

hand, she got the job done.

"Weird," Kim said. "I don't know how folk ever sur-

vived, when all they had was this kind of shift. And that

clutch is well named: It makes my stomach clutch, trying to

coordinate it." Then she glanced ahead. "Oh, no!"

"What?" Metria asked, resuming curled-up mode.

"This looks like a gang-infested comer.
They're holding

up cars for money, or worse. And I can't
avoid it."

"This is bad?"

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"This is awful. A girl can get in real

trouble when she's

caught by animals like these."

Oh, monsters. Metria knew how to deal with those. "Can

you get them to reach in here?"

"I don't want them reaching in here! I want to shut those

punks out." Then she made the connection. "Oh. Yes, prob-

ably." She cranked the window down.

The truck rolled to a stop. In a moment the scene Kim

feared began to develop. A young man whose aspect was

somewhere between that of a tired ogre and a sick troll ap-

peared. "Hey, whatcha got, chick?" he demanded.

"Nothing for you, snotnose," Kim replied

politely.

"Now, go away."

"Hey, we got a fresh one here!" he said.

"You know

what we do to fresh chicks around
here?"

"I could care less, sewer-breath."

'.'We shake 'em down good." He reached in and grabbed

the front of her blouse. "Now, cough up some change, or

I'll rip this right off you."

"My pet wouldn't like it, punk," Kim warned him.

"Your pet ain't going to get it, girlie."

Then Metria opened her dragon's mouth wide and

clamped it on the exposed arm.

"Yeow!" the youth yelled. "Let go!"

"You let go," Kim said evenly. "I warned you about my

pet."

He shook his arm, and hauled on it.
Metria clamped down

harder, and exhaled a small curl of
flame. The man screamed

with pain.

"I suggest you stifle it," Kim said.

"Because noise an-

noys my pet, and then she starts chewing
harder."

The punk took a better look at what had hold of his arm.

Metria snorted a demonstration flame through her nose, and winked. He opened his mouth to scream. She clamped down harder, warningly. He managed to stifle it.

"Now, give me your wallet," Kim said.

"Like hell!"

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Metria breathed a bit more heat. past her
teeth, lightly

toasting his arm.

The punk reached into his pocket and
pulled out his wallet.

It was stuffed with money extorted from
other drivers.

Meanwhile the way had opened ahead.

"Okay, you can

go now," Kim said. "I recommend that you not tell your

friends what just happened here."

Metria opened her jaws and let the arm go. The punk

jerked it out. "There's a damned dragon in here!" he cried.

"It bit my arm! It's got fire and

everything!"

Meanwhile, with Metria's help, Kim was getting the car

in gear. As she pulled it out, the other punks approached.

"They robbed me!" the punk was yelling.
"Her and that

dragon! Got my wallet!"

Metria assumed the form of the softest,
furriest, dearest

little cat kitten she could imagine, the
feline equivalent of

Woe Betide. She put her head up by the
window. ' 'Mew,"

she said sweetly.

The other punks almost fell over
laughing. "Some

dragon!"

"I did try to warn him," Kim said. Then the truck was out of their range and accelerating.

"Yes you did," Metria agreed with a Cheshire grin.

"That was almost fun," Kim remarked as they resumed normal travel.

"We make a decent team," Metria purred.

But all was not well. The aisle was still shrinking, and

Metria had to hunch herself in to avoid the warning tingle.

"How far?" she asked.

"Maybe another hour," Kim said. "But you know, there's no road to Xanth."

Metria had forgotten about that. "I don't think we can

make it afoot. Arnolde was hardly able to walk before, and

Ichabod—"

"I know. So we'll have to drive cross-country and hope

we make it. Because without Arnolde—"

Metria knew exactly what she meant.
Amolde was all that

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stood between Metria herself and a
dissolving swirl of dust.

"Cross-country," she agreed.

Kim checked her map, then turned off the

main road onto

a dirt trail. She followed that as far as she could, until it too,

went the wrong way. Then she bucked the truck across a

field.

"Hey, whatcha doing?" Dug shouted from in back.

"You're bouncing us all over the place!"

"Trying to get us to Xanth!" Kim yelled back. "Just hang

on!"

"Women drivers!" he said, and shut up.

They found a small winding trail that went approximately

the right way. But it was no delight, as

Kim zoomed too fast

along it. "That's sugar sand ahead," she said. "If I even

slow down, we'll be stuck."

"But sugar sand is good to eat," Metria said.

"Not in Mundania it isn't." She plowed into the sandy

section, and Metria felt the truck slewing and slowing, but it

managed to keep going. "If we don't make it pretty quick,

we aren't going to," Kim said grimly.

"Not all of us, anyway," Metria agreed. For the first time

in her long existence she felt the threatening fear of extinc-

tion. Already the tingling was tweaking her dragon tail when

it extended beyond Kirn's lap; the aisle was still shrinking.

Then the trail veered whimsically away to the side. "My

dead reckoning says Xanth is straight ahead," Kim said. "If

I follow the trail, it may take us away from Xanth. But if I

don't—"

Metria's dragon ears were starting to tingle. She flattened

them down, then changed to Woe Betide,
whose ears didn't

project as far. "Go for it," she said. "We
are about out of

time."

"You got it. Get me into low gear."

Woe Betide helped her with the motion
of the stick

through the labyrinth of the H. The truck slowed, but seemed to have more power.

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"Hang on," Kim said grimly. "We're going until we stop."

Metria hung on, hoping that those in back

were doing the

same. She watched as the scene through the windshield got

rough. The truck bucked like an angry unicorn and charged

for the trees of the forest. Just as it seemed they would crash

into a tree trunk, Kim steered slightly to the right and missed

the nearest tree, then slewed to the left and grazed the next.

They plowed through thick brush that couldn't be avoided.

The forest, realizing that Kim couldn't be bluffed, gave

way, and they ground on slowly toward Xanth. The ride was

bumpy but tolerable.

Then they came to a marsh. "Uh-oh," Kim muttered. "I

don't know how deep this is. But we'll find out." She revved

up the engine and squashed on in.

At first the truck was game. But the farther it went, the

slower it got. "The wheels are spinning," Kim said. But they

were still moving forward, and ahead the ground was rising.

They nudged toward it, and the truck began to lift out of the

muck—and then the motor stalled,

"Bleep!" Kim swore. "Wires must've shorted." She tried to start the motor again, but it would have none of it. They were definitely stuck.

10

BOOK OF KINGS

Kim sagged in the seat. "We didn't make

it," she said.

"What now? We can't haul Arnolde through this

muck, and he sure can't haul himself. We can't leave

him, for two or three solid reasons. And without him ..."

Woe Betide was only a child, but she knew what Kim wasn't

saying. Without Arnolde's aisle of magic, Ichabod would

probably die, and she herself would dissolve into a swirl of

wind. Only Kim, Dug, and Jenny non-elf
would be able to

trudge on to Xanth.

So she asked a childish question. "Could
Arnolde maybe

slide forward to dry land, if the front of
the truck wasn't

there?"

"I guess. But what would that gain?"

' 'Could he maybe be pushed, if we had a sledge to hold

him?"

"I suppose so. But we don't."

"Could we push it through that rocky tangle ahead, if we had a channel?"

"What is the point of this. Woe? We can't change the landscape."

"Yes we can."

"What are you talking about?"

"Your magic talent."

Kim laughed, bitterly. "I don't have any magic talent! I'm

Mundane, remember?"

"The one you won."

Kim reconsidered. ' 'Oh, you mean the talent of erasure I

got for winning the game, three years ago. I can use that

only in the game."

"Only in Xanth."

"Same thing!" Then Kim did a double take. "We're go-

ing to Xanth! I could use it there!"

"What about in the aisle?"

Kirn's jaw dropped. "Why—I never thought to try."

"Try," Woe Betide said.

Kim put her hand against the dashboard and stroked side-

ways, as if washing it. That section

disappeared, as if it were

part of a picture that had been erased.

The brush of the

swamp bank showed through that gap.

Kim touched the hole with her other hand. "It's gone!"

she said. "The whole front of the truck is gone!"

Then she made a reverse stroke, with her palm toward her.

That erased the erasure, and the dashboard was restored.

"So erase what's ahead, and push Amolde through," Woe

Betide said.

"Maybe it would work," Kim said, awed. "As long as

the magic lasts. Maybe we can make it after all."

"Sure," Woe Betide said eagerly.

"But this has to be sensible. I can erase the truck, and

maybe some of the terrain, but there needs to be something

to replace it." Kim erased the front of the truck again, this

time using broader strokes, then smoothed her hand across

the air that was in the hole. A kind of dull blah substance

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filled in. "Smeared paints from what I just erased," she said.

"Instead of restoring, I smeared it back. That makes a base,

I think. Shame to ruin Ichabod's truck, but this is an emergency."

Then she turned around. "This I'd better erase excruciat-

ingly carefully, because I don't want to erase Amolde too."

She moved her hand slowly across the back of the cab.

In a moment and a half the barrier between the front and

the back was gone. Dug peered through the hole, with

Sammy and Bubbles at his feet. "What

are you girls doing?"

he demanded. "First you plunge into a swamp; now—"

"Using my talent," Kim replied. "The truck's mired and

dead; we need to go on by ourselves."

"Amolde and Ichabod can't—"

"We have a plan. I'll erase what gets in

our way."

"I'm not in your way!" he said, stepping back. Behind

him, both Arnolde and Ichabod seemed to be unconscious.

Kim smiled, briefly. "I won't erase you. Dug. We'll need

you to push the boat."

"Boat?"

Woe Betide smiled as she took a place almost astride the

unconscious centaur. "Ship, craft, vessel, canoe, raft—"

"Stifle it, tyke. What boat?"

"The one I'm erasing," Kim said. She had now gotten

the rest of the barrier out, and was starting on the back of the truck.

He looked at Jenny. "Does this make sense to you, elf?"

"No," Jenny said.

"So it's not a gender or age thing," he said, shaking his

head. "Do you think she's lost her marbles?"

"No," Woe Betide said. "It's an intelligence thing."

"Okay, genius: What is she doing?"

"She's making a boat by erasing everything that's not a

boat," Woe Betide explained.

Dug squinted. "I see. But there's a problem."

"Just let me do it," Kim said, concentrating on her careful

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erasing and occasional restoring. She was clearing away the

truck from the edges, leaving an intact platform in the center.

Then it stopped happening. She tried repeatedly to erase

the side panel, but it resisted, remaining real.

"That's the problem," Dug said. "You can't erase outside

the magic, and it doesn't extend far enough out to the sides."

"But if Amolde turns, so that the aisle angles across the sides—" Kim said.

' 'Then everyone else will have to turn with him. And even so, it's just a flat platform, not a boat."

Kim paused, considering. Then she resumed her work. "I

can carve a boat out of the middle,
without erasing what's

farther out," she said. "And I can make
sides." She dem-

onstrated her newly found smeared-paint
technique. "This

may not be artistic, but it works."

Dug studied the short smear-wall she
had just made. He

tapped it with his finger. "Feels like
compressed wood or

metal. Is it strong enough?"

"I don't know. I'm still learning how to use my talent.

Maybe you can find out for me."

"Sure thing." He lifted one foot and brought it down hard

on the smear wall. "Ouch! It's strong* enough." Then he

looked beyond the truck. "But how can you float a boat

without water?"

"I hope to erase the land and form a channel, and maybe

the swamp water will fill it."

He nodded. "It works for me." He looked around. "Not

much I can do here. Maybe I'll scout ahead, see if I can find

Xanth."

Kim looked up. ' 'How will you know, without magic?"

"I'll go with him," Jenny Elf said. "When I change form, we'll know."

"Go," Kim said, returning to her work. Woe Betide knew

why: They couldn't afford to waste any time. If they didn't

get to Xanth soon, it would be too late

for half the party.

The two set off, and soon disappeared into the forest

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ahead. "Don't you worry about your boyfriend and your

friend?" Woe Betide asked.

' 'No. Jenny Elf was my Companion in the game. I know

her. And I know Dug."

Answer enough. "Do you think we're close enough to

Xanth to make it in time?"

"We have to be. According to my map,
we're just about

at the Florida border, which for us is
Xanth. It must be within

a mile or so. And the fringe of magic
must extend out beyond

it. So any further headway we can make
is bound to help."

But she looked worried-

Woe Betide knew why. Maps might be
wrong, or the party

might not be as far along as they thought.
A small error could

make a big difference. They just had to
hope they were close

enough.

The boat was forming, but its shape
showed their problem:

The front was broader than the rear,
because in the time it

took Kim to erase the connecting truck,
the aisle was shrink-

ing. Now it was almost touching the
centaur at the sides.

Kim also seemed to be working harder,
as if the strength of

the aisle was weakening as it shrank.
Time was really getting

short.

Dug and Jenny returned. "We found it!"

he called. "Less

than a mile ahead. Maybe closer,
because it doesn't thin out

all at once."

"Thank God!" Kim breathed. Woe
Betide saw the sup-

pressed tension leaving her. Then the
girl smiled and faced

Dug. "Of course," she said, as if there
had never been any

doubt.

"We've marked out the easiest route,"
Dug continued. "I

mean, there's no point in erasing healthy
trees or nice scen-
ery."

"How do I love thee," Kim murmured.
"Let me count

the ways." Metria was struck by the utter sincerity of her

words; under the banter and insults and shin-kicks there was

a solid core of real love. Then, louder, "Let's do it. We've

got to work fast."

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Dug walked around behind what remained of the truck,

his feet sinking into the muck. "Must be a rope here," he

said. "Or a chain. Got it." He pulled forth a chain from

under the truck bed. "I'll just hook this to the boat, and haul

it along. Soon as there's a channel."

Kim faced forward. The ground now came right up to the

edge of the boat, because the front of the truck had been

erased. She brushed her hand across the ground, and it dis-

appeared, leaving-a dark hole. She stroked her hands back,

and the hole spread. She wiped it out to the sides, and now

some water seeped in.

She reached farther forward, but couldn't erase .the land

there; the aisle was now too short. So she did what she could

close to the boat, while Dug tried to hook the chain on.

"Need a hole," he muttered. So Kim wiped one finger there,

and made a hole. He passed the chain through, then tried to

tie it.

"Here," Kim said. She erased part of one link, set the end

of the chain there, and unerased the link.
Now the chain was
firmly anchored.

Dug looked at that. "That's a more
versatile talent than I
thought."

"It's close to Sorceress level, properly
exploited," Woe

Betide said.

Dug braced himself and hauled on the chain, but couldn't

budge the boat. "Too much weight on it," Kim said, step-

ping off, "And not enough pull. I'll help." She joined Dug.

"You know, a fellow could get to like you, if he tried,"

Dug remarked.

"Don't get fresh, just pull," Kim retorted, smiling,

But though the boat wavered, it didn't actually move.

Jenny joined them, but still it didn't work. It seemed to be

caught on something below.

"I can help," Woe Betide said. She turned smoky, sank

through the boat, and spread out into a

sheet immediately

below it. She could do this because she was still close to

Amolde, within the aisle. In fact, she could now resume full

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volume and be Metria again. She felt the snags on the bottom

of the boat, where Kim had not been able to reach, and so-

lidified her substance around them, smoothing them out.

Then she turned her bottom side slippery.

Suddenly the boat lurched forward. It splashed into the

erased hole before it—then out of it and onto the land. Metria

had made it so slippery that it moved

readily, no longer actually needing a water channel.

The others did not question a good thing. They kept haul-

ing on the chain, and so Metria maintained the slippery bot-

tom, and the craft fairly whizzed along over the ground. It

left the peculiar wreckage of the truck behind. Years later,

perhaps, Mundanes would discover it,

and wonder whether

a monster had chomped a boat-shaped bite out of it. They

would surely never guess the truth.

The trees passed, and the forest thickened. The boat

sloshed in irregular curves as it followed the route Dug and

Jenny had prescribed. Progress gradually slowed, because the

haulers were getting tired, and because

Metria was beginning

to tingle on her underside. She thinned her body, but knew

that soon she would have to withdraw to the top of the boat

or lose her substance. That would make it that much harder

to haul. Were they losing their race against time after all?

Then the tingling faded. Was she turning numb? If so, she

had to quit right now. But it didn't seem like that. It seemed

almost as if she was gaining strength. How could that be?

Well, as long as it lasted, she would do as much as she could.

She made her undersurface even more super slippery, and

felt the boat pick up speed. The others were pulling harder,

doing their last-gasp bit too.

Arnolde lifted his head. "What is going on?" he inquired.

Metria poked a mouth up through the boat. "We're haul-

ing you to Xanth," she said. "Before you poop out en-

tirely."

"PoopSHit? I was just resting. You don't need to haul me

anywhere."

"Yes we do, because—"

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"Look at Jenny's ears!" Dug exclaimed.

"They're

pointed."

"We're in Xanth!" Kim cried. "Oh, I'm so glad, I could kiss someone!"

"Well, if you feel that wa—" But he was cut off by her hurtling kiss.

Metria floated up through the boat. She extended an arm cautiously to the side. She reached beyond the prior limit,

and felt no tingle. It was true: They were now surrounded

by magic.

"I could kiss someone too," she said. She floated to Ich-

abod, who was just beginning to stir. "I think I'll wake the

sleeping prince." She put her head down, solidified her face,

and planted Xanth's most poignant kiss on his mouth.

The man came awake as if electrified.
He seemed to float.

"I thought I was dying," he said. "Now
I'm in heaven."

"Would you settle for Xanth?" she asked.

"Same thing."

Dug and Kim and Jenny closed in. "You

made it possible,

Met," Dug said. "We couldn't budge that thing, until you

iced it. You were the difference."

"You're a great person," Kim said, and Jenny nodded

agreement.

Metria opened her mouth to say something clever, but it

dissolved instead. She had never anticipated such a reaction.

She melted into a puddle.

They crossed the Interface and were back in Xanth proper.

Sammy found them a pie tree, and they feasted. It was such

a relief to be back in Xanth! Even the animals seemed to

like it; Sammy lived to find things magically, and Bubbles

was becoming more lively than she had been. Evidently she,

like the centaur, needed magic to restore her vitality.

"Now we must organize," Kim said.

"Arnolde and Ich-

abod need to return to the Region of Madness, and Dug and

I and Jenny have to get to this Nameless Castle, and you,

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Metria, have your other summonsees to summons. Do we just split up and go our separate ways?"

"No," Metria said immediately. "It's my job to get all the summonsees there safely, so I can't just turn you loose.

And I should make sure that Amolde and Ichabod get to the

madness safely too, because it was to help me fetch you that

they left it, at great discomfort and risk to themselves."

"Then perhaps -we should travel together for a while

longer," Amolde said, seeming undispleased.

"It works for me," Dug agreed, similarly satisfied.

"Maybe the rest of us can help her fetch in the remaining

summonsees."

' "If my new talent can be useful—" Kim said.

Metria laughed. "It was your talent that saved us! It can

surely help again."

"But without Amolde's aisle of magic, I couldn't have

used it," Kim said.

"And I couldn't have existed," Metria added.

"There is enough credit to go around," Amolde said. "I

think it is fair to say that we have come to respect each other,

by profiting from the abilities each brought to the mission.

Ichabod provided the house, truck, and knowledge of Mun-

dania, without which the effort would have foundered. Dug

and Jenny explored for the most expeditious route and pro-

vided most of the hauling strength. Each person's contribu-

tion was vital at some point."

The others passed a glance around. The centaur did have

a point. Suddenly they all felt better about themselves.

"Then let's travel," Kim said briskly.

Dug shook his head. "You're a bit hyper, know that? All

the rest of us are tired from physical exertion, or wrung out

from a siege of low magic. And you are

too, if you had the

wit to know it. We need to rest, or we'll blunder into real

mischief. Xanth isn't all that safe for distracted or dull folk.

Tomorrow we can find an enchanted path and travel well.

Today we'd better just recover."

Another glance circulated. It was another valid point.

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"I'm sorry," Kim said. "I'm being pushy again. Yes, I'm

tired too, and sort of dazed about being back in Xanth. I

never thought I'd get here outside of the game. But it's great.

I'll shut up."

"That's the way I like my women," Dug said. "Quiet and

submissive." He dodged her first kick. "And beautiful."

That stalled her second kick in midair. She lost her balance

and fell into him, so he kissed her soundly. Actually Kim

wasn't beautiful in the standard sense, but it seemed that Dug

knew a bit about girlfriend management too.

"I'd better check on Veleno," Metria said, remembering

her husband for some irrelevant reason.

"Will you folk be

okay here for a while?"

"We should be," Amolde said. "This close to the edge

of magic, there shouldn't be any bad monsters."

"And we can simply step back through the Interface if

there are," Jenny said. "We can go where they can't."

So Metria popped off home, where Veleno was just be-

ginning to run out of delirious happiness. It had been, after

all, more than a day. She hustled him back to the bedroom

and dosed him with another day's worth.

She would have

liked to stay longer, but she had an obligation to the traveling

group to see it safely to its destinations. Her new conscience

was a strict mistress, but she didn't mind.

When she returned, the group was relaxing under a weep-

ing willow tree, cheering it by their company. Amolde was

discoursing on some of the problems of
archivism. "Old

documents are invaluable," he was
saying. "Even those

deemed to be of little worth by their
perpetrators. A scribbled

note to stay out of the honey pot informs
us that they did

have honey pots in those days, and that
they had writing.

Unfortunately some key documents have
been lost to history.

As a centaur, I naturally know the list of the human Kings

of Xanth, but there are some distressing lacunae."

"Lacuna," Metria said. "She's still around. She was ret-

roactively married, and—" She paused, seeing their stares.

"Did I say something stupid?"

Amolde smiled. "No, of course not, my dear. I was

merely using the word in its linguistic capacity, meaning a

gap or omission. Perhaps we expected you to say, 'A dis-

treassing what?' and we could then have had the dubious plea-

sure of redefining the term."

"Oh. Whatever." She still felt out of

sons.

"At any rate, I was going on too long,"
Amolde said. "I

wish there were some forgotten tome
listing all the missing

Kings, felicitously turning up. But of
course. Good Magician .

Humfrey would have found it already if
any such existed."

"Unless it got lost during his distraction
of wives," Ich-

abod said. "Then he might have overlooked it."

"Say," Dug said. "I wonder if Sammy could find such a

tome."

The cat had been snoozing beside Bubbles, but suddenly

woke and set off running. Jenny Elf scrambled after him.

"Wait for me!"

"Now look what you've done, idiot!"
Kim told Dug.

"I'll track him!" Metria said, glad for something to do to

make up for her conversational gaffe.
She floated rapidly

after the cat.

It turned out to be no long chase. Sammy ran up to a small

structure bearing a plaque with the words BOOK STORE. Me-

tria lifted its lid and peered in. It turned out to be a solidly

constructed box wherein books were stored. The top one was

a tome titled BOOK OF KINGS. So she took that out, set the

lid back in place, and opened it. She was holding it back-

ward, so she saw the last page first. There was a crude

scrawled entry: STOLN BY TH OGRE ACHEVER, OGRE AN OGRE

AGIN.

She considered. That did look like the

writing of an ogre.

Ogres were justifiably proud of their stupidity. But how

could any ogre have stolen such a (presumably) important

book once, let alone over and over again? Even an over-

achiever among ogres would have trouble stealing a book;

few ogres even knew what a book was.

Still, this one obviously did. He was actually a literate

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ogre, perhaps the only such in the mottled history of ogre-

dom. So he had evidently done it, and was proud enough of

his achievement to record it in the very book he had stolen.

She turned back another page. This one listed Magician

Aeolus, the Storm King, assuming the throne in the year 971.

That was all. The rest of the page was blank. No other

Kings were listed.

Since there had indeed been Kings thereafter—she could

think of Magician Trent the Transformer,
Magician Dor who

talked with the inanimate, and about
eight brief others in

between—she knew that this book had
been stolen during

the Storm King's reign. That wasn't
surprising, since the

Storm King had become rather dim in his
declining years,

able to blow up hardly more than a
breath of wind, and not

much stronger intellectually. He had probably lost or for-

gotten the book, and the ogre achiever had found it, and

given himself credit for stealing it. Thus all that it contained

had been lost to Xanth history.

Assuming that it contained anything much. So she turned

some more pages, and saw that more Kings were indeed

listed. In fact, they went right back to the beginning of Xanth

Kings. This book must have been passed down from King

to King over the centuries, each one filling in the end date

for his predecessor and his own year of ascension.

Good enough. She closed the book and carried it back to

the waiting group. "I think this is it," she

said, presenting
the tome to Amolde.

"Why, so it may be," the centaur said,
amazed. He
opened the book and read its title page.
"Human Magician
Kings of Xanth." He looked up.
"Astonishing! Where did •
Sammy find this?"

"In a book store."

"A book store—in Xanth?" Kim asked.

"Did you have

to buy it?"

"No, it's just a box where books are stored."

"There are other books?" Ichabod asked alertly. "If they

are of similar rarity and quality, that may be an informational

fortune! We must examine them."

"Sure," Metria said. "Right this way."

But when she returned to the place she had found the box,

. there was nothing there. There did not seem ever to have

been anything there, either; it was just an undisturbed rocky

region in the forest.

"Maybe Sammy—?" Dug said.

But this time the cat was indifferent. "I don't think there's

anything to find," Jenny said. "He can find anything but

home, except when there isn't anything. Then he just ignores

it."

"But there was a box!" Metria protested.

Ichabod cogitated. ' 'Perhaps it moved—and the cat is un-

able to find a given object a second time, that being, as it

were, a home base, something already found. I think we shall

have to relinquish any notion of finding those other books."

"Oh, fudge!" Metria swore. "I did it again! I should have

grabbed them all."

"You are not a scholar," Ichabod said, excusing her. But

a cloud of disappointment hovered near him.

The ogre achiever had stolen it over and over again, she

remembered. Did that mean that each time the book store

disappeared, he hunted it down again? Or that he had finally

hidden it in this foolishly obvious place,
and it had turned

out to be a better hiding place than it
seemed? If so, they

had caught the book store just at the right
time, before it

moved. That made her feel a smidgen
less worse.

They returned to Amolde, who was
engrossed in the Book

of Kings. "This is absolutely

fascinating!" he exclaimed. "I

can vouch for its accuracy by the entries relating to what I

already know. But there are many more. This is indeed an

invaluable lost tome of information."

"What's so exciting about a list of Kings?" Kim asked.

"I mean, that's what makes British history so absolutely,

totally, completely boring, not to

mention dull."

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"Well, there are also the dates of the Kings," Ichabod

said, looking over his friend's shoulder.

"Maybe I didn't make myself quite clear," Kim said

grimly. "If there's one thing worse than

lists of names, it's

lists of dates. Not only are they boring and dull, they're im-

possible to remember, and you flunk if you make a simple

little mistake, like putting the wrong name with the right

dates."

"Yeah," Dug agreed. "I remember when I listed Henry

the Eighth for 1909 to '47. You'd have

thought the sky was
falling!"

"You were precisely four centuries off!"
Ichabod ex-
claimed, shocked.

"So what's four centuries between
friends?" Kim asked.

"I certainly wouldn't want to bore

anyone with unwanted

lists of names and dates and talents,"
Arnolde said. "I shall

be happy to commit this volume silently
to memory." He

pored over the book with much the same
intensity that Ma-

gician Humfrey did with his own tomes.
"Oh, my! The Sor-

ceress Tapis was once married? That
explains so much! And

the Zombie Master was actually the son
of a King, but alien-

ated because of the nature of his talent. I never suspected!

This will revolutionize Xanth history."

"Or at least the current rendering of it," Ichabod agreed.

"It does seem that there were some dark secrets in those early days."

"Exceedingly dark," Arnolde agreed.

"Actually, I'm curious," Metria said.

"Maybe I knew

some of those Kings."

Dug and Kim started to laugh, then.

stopped as they saw

that neither Metria nor Arnolde was.

"That's right," Dug

said. "Demons live forever, or as close
as makes no never-

mind. Maybe she did know some Kings."

"I did," Metria agreed. "But I got close to only two,

Gromden and Humfrey. The others didn't interest me."

"That's right," Kim said. "Humfrey was King once. You

tried to distract him from his studies at the Demon Univer-

sity. But what's this about you and King Gromden?"

"I seduced him. But it got complicated."

Kim reconsidered. "Maybe I am interested in some of

those Kings. If they were real living people, I mean, not just

dates."

"Gromden must have been a hot date,"
Dug said.

She ignored him. "Let's hear about some
Xanth Kings.

You've got my curiosity going."

"And she's dangerous when she's

curious," Dug said,
dodging another kick.

So they settled back and listened to
Arnold's recital of

Kings, old and new, as augmented by the
Book of Kings.

' 'The uninterrupted human population of
Xanth began

with the First Wave, its arrival defined
as the year 0. For the

first two centuries there were no Kings.
The savagery of the

early years may have prevented the
human folk from achiev-

ing sufficient unity. Then King Merlin,
whose talent was

Knowledge, became the first in the year
two-oh-four, just in

time to try to help organize the women to
kill their rapist

husbands of the Third Wave and bring in
better men, the so-

called Fourth Wave."

. As he spoke. Jenny Elf settled by his flank with Sammy

and Bubbles and hummed a little tune. Metria, interested in

information about the old Kings that she hadn't paid much

attention to at the time, listened with complete attention. She

realized that her half soul was giving her a new perspective,

so that now the events had meaning. She remembered the

brutal Third Wave largely exterminating what had been the

brutal Second Wave. But the Fourth Wave had been

something else, and that one had built the foundation on

which the human kingdom became significant.

Then she saw old King Merlin vacating

his throne, sepa-

rating from his wife, the Sorceress
Tapis, and going to Mun-

dania on some kind of business only he
could understand.

Tapis was so annoyed, she never
remarried, and never spoke

of Merlin again. She did tolerate her
daughter the Princess,

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but neither spoke of their connection because both had writ-

ten the memory of the King out of their lives.

"Well, Merlin did have business in Mundania," Ichabod

remarked. He was standing beside her, watching King Merlin

depart Xanth. "There was a lad named Arthur he had to

educate to be King."

"That was more important than governing Xanth?" Jenny

asked. She was standing on Ichabod's other side.

The old Mundane shrugged. "There are those who thought

so."

"Hey, here comes Roogna," Kim said from Metria's other

side. "But this is starting to get cluttered with dates."

Then in 228 Magician Roogna, whose talent was Adap-

tation, assumed the throne. Eight years later the Princess suf-

fered a change of plans and married him, with her mother's

blessing, because he really was a decent man. He built Castle

Roogna, with the help of centaurs.

"Naturally, the centaurs," Amolde said.
"No other species had the expertise."

King Roogna died fighting the Sixth Wave. It was an ugly scene, because the invading Mundanes were so brutal and ignorant of magic. Ichabod, Kim, and Dug winced in unison, ashamed of their heritage. Roogna's

place was taken by

Xanth's first female King, the Sorceress Rana, whose talent

was Creation, in 286. When she died in 325, Magician Rei-

tas, whose talent was Solving Problems, took over. Unfor-

tunately he seemed to generate almost as many problems as

he solved, because there were always unintended complica-

tions. When one of those complications killed him in 350,

ending Reitas' reign, Rana's son
Magician Rune became

King. His talent was Evocation. "Too
many dates," Kim
muttered.

That lasted until 378, when Rune died
fighting the Seventh

Wave. The people, desperate for
leadership that could save

them, persuaded the zombie Jonathan to
assume the throne.

"The Zombie Master!" Kim cried. "He was King of Xanth?"

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Metria popped out of her dream. She was back in contemporary Xanth. "But demons don't dream,"

she protested.

"Yes you do, when you have a soul,"
Jenny said. "You

were sharing my dream just now; I saw
you there, watching

the parade of Kings with me. We all
were there."

"That's right—I can dream now," Metria
said. "Mentia

dreamed with Gary Gargoyle last year.

That was really ancient history."

"Sorry I jogged us all out of it," Kim said. "Anyone who

isn't paying attention can enter one of Jenny's dreams, when

she's humming. That's her talent. But it's easy to startle folk

out of it. I should have kept my big mouth shut, as usual.

But this business of the Zombie Master

being King of

Xanth—how come he never mentioned that?"

"Well, zombies don't have very good memories," Ar-

nolde said. "Because their heads are filled with—"

"Never mind!" Kim said. "I get the picture. But how

could a zombie govern?"

"I remember that," Metria said. "That was one King I

didn't try to seduce! He couldn't be killed, so anyone who

attacked him just got frustrated, until Jonathan caught up to

him and threatened to turn him into a zombie too.*'

"But he couldn't turn living folk into zombies," Kim said.

"They didn't always know that. And of course, he could

have arranged to have them killed first. So they didn't give

him any lip, or any other parts of their bodies. They did

exactly what he told them to do, so that he would stay away

from them. And he did, as long as they behaved. He was

actually a very gentle man. That's why

his reign lasted a

whole century. He finally got fed up with the rotten job and

abdicated. He was more interested in chasing after Millie the

Ghost anyway."

Kim shook her head. "You were right: there are wrinkles

to Xanth history I never suspected. The Zombie Master is a

nice guy, now that he's alive."

"He always was. It was just that other folk couldn't stand

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his talent. So he was somewhat isolated, until Millie loved him."

Night was threatening by now, so Kim
erased a nice place

on the ground, making a pit, then
smeared a top across it, so

that they had a safe underground
chamber to sleep in. Sammy

located a pillow bush and blanket tree,
and they made com-

fortable beds.

"You know, a single bed would do for
the two of us,"

Dug suggested hopefully.

"Sorry—I'm already sharing mine with Bubbles," Kim

informed him. Dug didn't argue. They had evidently dis-

cussed this before.

Metria didn't need to sleep, but she did settle down to

dream again, as Jenny started humming. She dreamed of Ma-

gician Vortex becoming King in 478
after the Zombie King

abdicated. Vortex's talent was
Summoning Demons. How

well she remembered! He had
summoned her once, but not

for anything interesting; he was merely
curious about her

impediment of speech, as he put it. She
tried to distract him

by seducing him, but he had a policy
against being seduced

by demonesses. That was when she learned that sometimes

it was best to conceal her nature, and that caution was to

stand her in good stead two centuries later with King Grom-

den. But it took her a good five minutes of seductive effort

before she realized that it wasn't working with Vortex. She

was about to do her ultimate, by showing him her panties,

when—

"Wow!" Dug exclaimed. "Now, that's what I call a hot scene!"

"Get out of this dream!" Kim snapped at him, and he vanished, but the interested look remained on his face.

So it was the group dream again. That
was all right; Metria

found that she rather liked the company.
Jenny Elfs talent

was a lot of fun.

"Thank you," Jenny said.

The dream continued through the next
name on the list,

King Neytron, whose talent was
Bringing Paintings to Life;

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he didn't need any sexy demonesses either, because all he

had to do was paint the type of woman he desired, and she

would be his. He also painted elaborate furnishings for Castle

Roogna, and, when times became lean, supplies of food for

the people. It occurred to Metria that Kirn's talent was-the

reverse of this. Then there was King Nero, who animated

golems, and they were very good for getting work done.

They planted a much larger orchard, so that the local folk

would never again have to be concerned about their food

supply.

Then came Gromden, in 623. She
concluded her dream

with him, though there were a number of
other Kings of

Xanth to follow him. Including a second
female King, Elona,

in 797, whose talent was Longevity for
herself and any others

she chose. She governed for a long time.
Today, Metria

thought, folk believed that there had

never been female

Kings of Xanth, historically, but that was ignorance. And the

Ghost King Warren, who had also been lost to history. But

after that came King Ebnez, with his talent of Inanimate Ad-

aptation, followed by Humfrey, the Storm King Aeolus,

Trent, and Dor. She would dream about them some other

time.

"That was definitely not fit for Dug to see," Kim said.

"He already has too many big ideas."

"You don't like them?" Jenny asked.

"Not when they're about other women."

Jenny laughed. The effort was too much
for the dream,

and it faded out, leaving Metria awake.

Oh, yes, she had toyed with history, in
her fashion. Now,

with her soul, she regretted some of it.
But not much.

Then she snapped alert. There was
someone with her, and

not one of the regular party. "Who are you?" she demanded

abruptly.

A horse figure reared back, startled. A night mare!

"Not so fast, equine!" she said, puffing into smoke and

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surrounding it. "How is it that you're trying to give a bad

dream to a demoness?"

The figure tried to run away, but her smoke surrounded it,

so that it couldn't get away. So it projected a little dream

figure of a man. "I thought you were mortal," the man said.

"What are you doing with half a soul?"

"You're male?" she asked, astonished.

"I'm a night colt," the dream man said.

"They wouldn't

let me take out any dreams. So I stole
half a soul and went

out on my own. I sniffed out some
impromptu dreaming

here, so I came to see if I could get in on
it. I don't have

much experience, you know."

"That's obvious," Metria said, realizing
^hat it had been

Jenny's powerful group dream that had
attracted the colt's

attention. "You can't just go anywhere
with dreams; you

have to bring them from the gourd, to
assigned people who

deserve them."

"But I told you, they won't let me have

any of those."

"Then maybe you had better just explore Xanth, and not

mess with dreams at all."

"No, I'm a dream creature; I have to associate with

dreams. Since I don't have a cargo of my own, messing with

others is all I can do."

Metria considered. "Then maybe you can make something

of it. Why not enter ordinary dreams and make the folks in

them do things they'd never do on their own? That could be

fun, correctly done."

"I hadn't thought of that. Thanks, Demoness!" he gal-

loped off, and this time she let him go.

It was good to be back making some mischief, even in such a small way.

Then she thought of something else. Jenny Elf's group

dream had attracted a night colt. What would the Night Stal-

lion himself think of her dreaming ability? The stallion

could, of course, assume any shape he

wished, being master

of the dream realm. He could become a handsome man—or

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an elf of any size. Suppose he got interested in Jenny's talent,

and then in Jenny herself?

Nah, she thought. Jenny's future was surely in regular

Xanth. Or in her realm, of origin, the World of Two Moons.

n

CHENA

In the morning, refreshed, they set out to locate Chena

Centaur, the mystery token. Kim passed the back of her

hand across the surface of the nether chamber, and re-

stored the ground the way it had been.

"No sense leaving a

mess," she explained.

"That is one powerful talent," Ichabod remarked. "Sor-

ceress level, perhaps."

"I don't know," Kim said. "I'm still learning how to use

it. I don't know its limits."

"It would be wise to ascertain them."

They moved on. Soon they came to a river that looked too

deep to wade across. "Maybe I can erase a section," Kim

said. "So we can walk across dry. Then I can unerase it after

we're across."

Amolde looked thoughtful. "I wonder."

Kim squatted by the riverbank, and
passed her hand across

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the surface of the water. There was a
ripple, but it didn't

disappear. "I don't understand," Kim

said. "Why isn't it
working?"

"Because the water fills in the gap as
soon as you make

it," Amolde replied. "I thought that might
be the case. It

would be remarkable were it
otherwise."

Kim nodded. "I guess so."

"Perhaps it is just as well that there is some reasonable

limit on it," Amolde continued. "It would be dangerous,

otherwise. I think I feel more comfortable this way."

"Me, too," Kim confessed. But she seemed a bit disap-

pointed, too.

"Now how do we get across this river?"

Dug asked. "It's

too deep to wade, and I don't like the
look of those shark

fins in the center."

"Loan sharks," Kim agreed. "They'll take
an arm and a

leg if you let them. Let's not let them."

"Maybe you could carve out another
boat or raft," Jenny

Elf suggested. "That worked well to get us to Xanth."

"I suppose I could. But it wouldn't be easy to navigate, because I can't get under to make a keel. We could haul it across with ropes, if we could get the ropes anchored on the far side of the water."

"And who'll swim across with ropes!"

Dug said.

"I can do that," Metria said. "I can't float with heavy

things, but I can with light things, and hemp feels light."

"It can make men light-headed," Ichabod agreed.

So they sent Sammy Cat to locate some hemp with suit-

able ropes, while Kim found a fallen log and made a dugout

boat by erasing a hole in it. There were some cracks in the

wood, but she smoothed those over with finger-smears, mak-

ing it watertight. It wasn't Xanth's prettiest boat, but it

seemed serviceable. And, contrary to her expectation, she

had been able to shape a crude keel, by having the menfolk

roll it over so she could work on the bottom of the hull.

Small selective erasures could do a lot.

When the craft was ready, and they had the necessary

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rope, Metria floated across the river, carrying the end of the

rope. The sharks leaped up and snapped at her with their red,

green, blue, and white teeth, and sometimes they did catch

a piece of her, but she just dissolved that portion into dirty

tasting smoke and they were left with no interest, though

they continued to make efforts on principle. She made sure

to float low enough to tease them well. Her soul was a hin-

drance when it came to mischief against
nice folk, but loan

sharks gave her no problem at all.

She tied the rope to a stout A-com tree
and floated back,

almost touching the water, but the sharks
now knew they

couldn't get a real piece of her and didn't
try. "Ready," she

said, tying the other end to a similarly
stout B-com tree. She

yanked on it, to be sure it was tight; that shook the trees,

and a few ripe cobs fell, but the rope held.

They hauled the boat to the water, and Amolde stepped

carefully in and lay down. Sammy and Bubbles joined him.

That filled the boat. They would have to make two trips.

Kim had shaped two paddles by carefully erasing most of

the wood from two logs. Metria took one, while Amolde

took hold of the rope and hauled himself and the boat along

across the river. He wasn't strong for a centaur, but he was

able to haul his own weight. Metria paddled to help move

the boat.

A loan shark, sniffing mortal meat,
forged up to the boat.

This one was yellow, and shaped like a
submarine sandwich.

Its tongue was like hot pepper, and its
teeth like despair. It

opened its mouth just about wide enough
to take in an arm

or leg. Sammy hissed, and Bubbles
growled, but the big fish

was undaunted.

Metria struck it on the tender snout with the paddle. It

hastily submerged, and they moved on across the river un-

bitten. The centaur got out, clearly relieved to be back on

terra firma. Metria formed herself into a pulley connecting

rope and boat, and pulled the boat back across.

Now Ichabod, Dug, Kim, and Jenny

climbed into the boat,

Dug and Kim taking the paddles.

Ichabod and Jenny took

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hold of the rope, not so much pulling the boat along as mak-

ing sure it didn't get carried away by the current. Metria

settled in the center, keeping an eye out for mischief.

Mischief wasted no particular time orienting on them. This

shark was huge and dark, with teeth capable of crunching

through their boat in short order. It charged up, jaws open

for a horrendous chomp. No swat on the snout would dis-

suade this monster!

So Metria became a big mass of stink-hom-flavored toffee,

and thrust herself into the oncoming maw. The shark

clamped down—and tasted the flavor, which was Xanth's

very filthiest, stenchiest, disgustingest tang. Amolde caught

a whiff, and remarked as his face turned a trifle bilious: "Of

this nefarious hom it has been said that if

a sphinx with a

clogged snout sniffed it once from a distance, through a thick

filter, the poor creature would turn to putrid green stone for

a century, and never clear its nose of the degradation."

The shark, of course, tried to spit the loathsome mass out,

but the stuff stuck to the once clean teeth and festered on

the roiling tongue. The putrefaction
dripped into the mouth,

sending up nauseating fumes. The shark
tried to wash it out

with water, but the surrounding river
turned an obscene

shade of noisome hue and threatened to
curdle. Finally the

shark plunged under the surface and
swam away as fast as

inhumanly possible, leaving a swath of
bubbly retchings be-

hind.

Metria turned smoky and floated up
through the water,

leaving just enough flavor behind to
guarantee that the shark

would not soon be free of it. Stink hom
was one of her

favorite last resorts, reserved for only
the most deserving

opponents. Usually it was sufficient
merely to blow the hom,

and its foul smelling sound would drive most creatures away.

But she had felt that the shark deserved more intimate treatment.

Meanwhile the boat was wending its way across the river,

and a courteous breeze was clearing the air of the lingering

bouquet. The passengers were starting to look as if the mi-

asma was, after all, bearable.

Ichabod faced Metria as she returned.

"Demoness, if you

please—next time a monster threatens to engulf us—let it

do so in peace." But he managed a sickly smile.

They reached the far bank and
clambered to shore. The

boat still reeked of horn, so they turned
it loose to float dis-

consolately downstream. The vegetation
along the banks

wilted temporarily while the boat was
passing.

They set off across a field of posies that
opened out before

them. Each flower puffed itself up as

they passed, enhancing

its color and stiffening its petals, posing.

Then a girl appeared before them. No, it was two children,

the other a boy: evidently twins. "Who are you?" the girl

asked boldly.

Metria popped across to stand before the children. "I am

the Demoness Metria, passing through on business. Who are you?"

"I'm Abscissa," the girl replied. "I travel along the X axis, because I have the X chromosome."

"Along the what?"

"Horizontally." A line appeared, and the

girl suddenly

jumped a brief distance to the side,
without moving her legs.

"I'm Ordinate," the boy said. "I travel
along the Y axis,

because I have the Y chromosome." A
line appeared, and

he jumped backwards without moving
his legs. "Vertically."

"Geometrically and genetically

speaking," Ichabod re-

marked, intrigued. He brought out his little notebook. "These

are most interesting talents. Whose children are you?"

The two zipped back together. "We were supposed to be

Grey Murphy and Princess Ivy's twins," Abscissa said.

"But they took too long to marry, so the

stork dropped us

off at an orphanage," Ordinate said.

"Well, shame on them," Kim said. t!
knew they were

taking too long about it."

"And they should marry any time now,"
Metria said.

"Even if they don't know it."

The others glanced at her curiously, but the glances

bounced off her without penetrating, because she wasn't pay-

ing attention.

"Does the orphanage treat you well?"
Arnolde inquired.

"Oh, sure," Abscissa said.

"Of course, it can't keep us if we want to go out," Or-

dinate said.

"Together we can go anywhere we want to," Abscissa

said.

"By projecting our coordinate map,"

Ordinate said.

"This is most interesting," Ichabod said,
making another

note. "Instant travel by geometry."

"Where can you go?" Jenny asked.

"Anywhere," Abscissa said.

"Such as to that tree?" Jenny asked,
pointing to a distant

nut and bolt tree beyond the flower field.

"Sure," Ordinate said. "Watch."

The two children concentrated. Lines
appeared, marked X

and Y, stretching all across the field,
intersecting each other,

forming a grid. A dot appeared beside
the distant tree. The

two children took each other's hands,
and suddenly they

were standing by the tree.

Metria popped over to them. "It is really you?" she asked.

"Sure, Demoness," Abscissa answered.

"Who else could it be?" Ordinate asked.

"It might be an illusion."

"No, we don't have that magic,"
Abscissa said, frowning
cutely.

"But it might be fun if we did," Ordinate
said.

Metria popped back to the group—and
found the children

already there. "Say, you're good," she said.

"Of course," Abscissa said. "We're always good."

"But we'd have been better with a family," Ordinate said.

"Maybe we'll find a family that needs twins," Kim said.

"Gee, that would be nice," Abscissa said, clapping her hands girlishly together.

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"Will they let us eat eye scream every day and have pillow fights?" Ordinate asked.

"More likely they'll make you eat

pillows and have eye

scream fights," Dug said.

"Dug!" Kim exclaimed indignantly.

"Don't tease them

like that."

But the children seemed thrilled with the notion. "That's

better yet," Abscissa said.

"Pood fights are great," Ordinate agreed.

"Now see what you've done," Kim said to Dug. "You've

given them a wicked notion. You're lucky you're not held

in contempt of the Adult Conspiracy."

"Sorry 'bout that," Dug said, not looking overwhelmed

with remorse.

"Well, we have to go now," Abscissa said.

"Because you folk are getting dull," Ordinate said.

"This is the nature of adults," Ichabod said. But already

the coordinate map was forming, and by the time he finished

speaking, the twins were gone.

They moved on. The token began tugging more strongly,

so Metria knew they were getting close. Indeed, they spied

some hoofprints, and followed them.

"Young filly centaur," Amolde said.

"How can you tell?" Jenny asked.

"Couldn't it be a uni-

cbm or something?"

"No. Centaurs are especially heavy on the front feet, and

tend to set them down farther apart, to brace the bodies for

the use of the hands. Also, the configuration of the prints is

distinct from that of unicorns."

All hoofprints looked alike to Metria, but it was clear that

Arnolde knew what he was talking about. When one set of

prints crossed another, he immediately pointed out the

fresher ones, before Metria confirmed it with the tug of the

token.

Soon they found a bedraggled young filly centaur. Her

blond hair hung lankly around her shoulders and juvenile

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breasts, and there were curse burrs tangled in her tail. She

was eating bitter fruit, and looked miserable.

"If you stare, you'll reveal yourself as an ignorant Mun-

dane," Kim whispered to Dug.

"Uh, sure," Dug agreed, dimming down the intensity of

his stare. Like many young men, he seemed to be fascinated

by nude nymphs and centaur fillies.

"Chena Centaur?" Metria called.

The filly heard her, looked—and bolted.

In half a moment

she was gone.

"Hey!" Metria exclaimed. She floated after the creature.

"I have a summons to serve."

But the centaur fled blindly, paying no attention. Finally

Metria popped to a place in front of her,

and assumed the

form of a centaur. She didn't have the substance of a centaur,

so was mostly smoky, but it did get the filly's attention and

bring her to a halt.

She stood there, panting, looking wildly about, ready to

bolt again the moment she spied a feasible route.

"Chena Centaur?" Metria asked again, sure that it was.

"Why don't you leave me alone!" the filly demanded

tearfully.

"I can't. I have to serve you with this summons." Metria

held out the token.

"Summons?"

"For a trial. You see—"

Chena whirled around and bolted back the way she had

come. But that soon brought her up against the following

party. She turned again to face Metria,

her eyes showing

desperate white. "I didn't mean any harm!"

Arnolde stepped forward. "My dear, the trial is not of you.

You are being summonsed as a mere Juror."

The filly's head turned back and forth between Arnolde

and Metria. "But—"

"See, it says 'Juror' on it," Metria said,
holding the token

up. "And your name. I must gather all the
Jurors for the trial

of Roxanne Roc. If you come with me, I
will see that you

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get there safely. Several of these others in my party are similar summonsees."

"Me," Kim said. "And him," indicating Dug, "and her," indicating Jenny Elf.

The filly began to relax. "All right. I'm Chena." She took the token.

The day was getting on. "Let's find a place to camp,"

Kim suggested. "Tomorrow is another day."

Metria realized that this was mostly to help get Chena

settled, as the filly still looked pretty wild. So while Kim

erased a shelter for the night. Jenny worked with a comb to

get the tangles out of Chena's hair and tail, and to brush her

coat down. It seemed funny to hear Jenny's muttered cursing,

but it was the only way to get curse burrs off. Sammy Cat

located food for them, and Dug brought it in. Amolde and

Ichabod talked with the filly, and began to get her story. Then

Jenny started humming.

On Centaur Isle a filly named Chena was foaled with a magic

talent. The cursory magic inspection which all foals were

given did not pick it up, so she lived for some time in blissful

ignorance of her critical liability.

Chena had a loving sire and dam, two older colt brothers,

and many peer-group friends. She was contented in a com-

pletely normal way: She grouched about having to spend so

much time in centaur school, she was furious at herself when

she missed the bull's-eye once during bowmanship practice,

annoying the bull, and was mortified when one foot got sore.

"Dam, I have foundered!" she cried as she limped home.

"Don't use language like that," her dam

reproved her.

"Laminitis. Say it correctly. Night mares founder; centaurs

suffer inflictions of laminitis."

"Yes, dam dear," Chena replied obediently.

"Now, go to the doctor for some enchanted balm of

Gilead to put on it."

"Enchanted!" Chena said, appalled. "But isn't that magic?"

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"Magic in itself is a useful and sometimes necessary thing," her dam said sensibly. "In fact, it

can even be en-

dearing, in lesser species. Just so long as it is not too closely

associated with a centaur."

"Oh." Chena had thought, from the attitudes of her sib-

lings and friends, that magic was somehow dirty. Now she

understood the distinction between using magic and possess-

ing magic, and realized that her friends

were actually

somewhat ignorant about it.

So she went to the centaur doctor. "I need a bomb of

Gilead," she told him. "For my sore foot."

He smiled in that annoyingly superior manner of adults

everywhere. "Which digit do you need detonated?"

"My right forefoot," she said, lifting it.

"Indeed," he said, examining it. "Well, here's the

bomb." He rubbed some thick fragrant ointment on it, and

the pain exploded outward and dissipated.

"Oh, thank you. Doctor!" she cried, dancing on the pain-

free foot.

"And here is some more, in case the
infliction of laminitis

returns," he said, giving her a vanilla
envelope.

Apart from routine things like that,
Chena was a happy

camper and homebody. Her main hobby
was magic rocks,

now that she knew that it was all right to

use magic things.

Some stones were pretty, and some were useful, but to her

the most fascinating ones were magic. Some were known to

everyone as magical, but were difficult for most folk to ac-

tivate, such as charmstones and hearthstones. Others didn't

seem magical at all, but Chena was able to divine their hid-

den powers.

In fact, she didn't know it, but she had a magic talent. It

was the ability to activate magic rocks. It was not her words

or insights that did it, but her hidden talent.

So she became a collector of magic stones. She always

wore a pouch around her waist filled with different kinds of

gems and pebbles. Rolling stones, for example, rolled with-

out being pushed; they also, for some unknown reason,

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*

played music. Rock music, of course, and Stone Age melo-

dies, and pebble tunes. They refused to be put in the same

pouch as moss agate, not because it was soft and green, but

because rolling stones gathered no moss. Then there were

ope-als, which opened doors, and sapph-fires, which burned

with blue fire, useful for igniting wood. Rubies would rub

against her, and spinels would spin in dizzy circles.

One rock in the pouch was neither lovely

nor useful. It

was grayish and ordinary, and seemed to have no magic.

Chena kept it because she felt sorry for it.

Then one unlucky day a centaur Elder saw Chena playing

in the street with her pebbles. "Filly, what are you doing

with those rocks?"

"I'm studying them," she replied, in some surprise. "I

want to be a mineralogist when I grow up, and classify all

the magic stones of Xanth."

"Magic stones?"

"Yes. I am very good at recognizing them and figuring

out how they work. See, here is a gall stone."

"A gall stone?"

She held it up, and the stone made a galling remark.

"What's it to you, horseface? You got a sore on your rump?"

The Elder did not know very much about stones, but he

did know something about magic. He took Chena at once to

the Building of Magic Inspection to have her reexamined.

The magic detection tool they had there was the kind that

responded only to active magic.

Naturally her talent was ac-

tive only when she was around magic rocks, which was why

it had not registered before. This time she had the stones in

her pouch. . '

"Show them your gall stone," the Elder told her.

She brought it out, and it made another galling remark. ' T

resent the implication, founderfoot," it said bitterly.

The instrument hummed, pointed directly at Chena, and

indicated the use of a magic talent.

That was enough. That same day, Chena was exiled from

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Centaur Isle for obscenity. She gathered her few possessions,

bid tearful farewell to her sire and dam and siblings, who

tried to pretend that she had not deeply shamed them, and

quietly left. She held her head high, refusing to let any emo-

tions show, because she was, after all, a centaur, even if she

was a filly of tender years.

Once she had been rafted to the mainland and was entirely

free of the Isle and alone, she paused to

release her pent-up

emotions. To her surprise, she discovered not grief but anger.

"I like my magic talent," she said defiantly to the forest.

"They can humiliate me in public and even exile me because

of it, but they can't make me ashamed of it!" Suddenly the

young filly's anger exploded in one sentence: "I wouldn't

go back there even if I could!" But there was just a sugges-

tion of a trace of a tear in an eye and a
thought of a tremble

on a lip. She was, after all, only eleven.

Chena began to adapt to the wilderness,
little by little, or

even tiny by tiny, in the course of the
next few hours, ven-

turing slightly farther inland from the
coast. She knew

enough to avoid tangle trees and
carnivorous grass—there

were, after all, such things even on Centaur Isle, carefully

fenced off and labeled as examples of what life was like

elsewhere—and to be alert for stray dragons. With the aid

of a chunk of magic searchstone, which her talent had en-

abled her to recognize and activate, she managed to search

out pie trees and other food-supplying plants.

She also discovered the full range of her talent, now that

she no longer had to hide it from herself. For example, when

she accidentally cut herself on a thorn bush, she was able to

use a piece of bloodstone to stanch the blood. If she wanted

to go fishing, she could use a garnet to net gar. If she was

thirsty, and didn't trust the local

groundwater (love springs

and hate springs weren't common, but why take chances?),

she could get lime juice from a limestone, olive juice from

olivine, or several quarts of milk from milky quartz. Grad-

ually Chena came to realize that her talent was more pow-

erful than the Centaur Isle Elders had suspected. It wasn't

Sorceress or neo-Sorceress level, but it was still an excellent

talent to have in the uncharted Xanth wilderness. They might

have thought she would soon perish, alone, thus enabling

them to get rid of her without having to execute her them-

selves, keeping their dirty hands clean. They would be dis-

appointed, maybe.

Chena did not take unnecessary chances.
She was, after

all, a centaur, and possessed of excellent
intelligence and

judgment. She stocked up on pies at the
first pie tree she

found, lest she not find another soon.
That night she ate a

banana cream pie, because it was too
squishy to last long in

her knapsack, and a key lime pie, which was already getting

overripe. She carefully picked the keys out, leaving the limes

alone, and was about to throw them away when she decided

to save them. She might need those keys later. Ope-als

couldn't open everything, after all.

Now where was she to go? She had no idea. It wasn't as

if she had planned this excursion. She couldn't stay long in

this vicinity, because centaur hunting parties came here reg-

ularly. She didn't even dare use their trails, because she

would be killed if any Isle centaur saw her. Unfortunately,

she was sure that the farther she got from the Isle, the more

dangerous the land would become. She had been allowed to

take no weapon, which made her situation that much worse.

She might be able to fashion a crude staff or club, but what

she really needed was a good knife or bow.

"I wish I had a really good bow and arrows," she mur-

mured. "And I wish I knew what to do."

Then she heard something. It sounded

like trotting. Was

it a unicorn—or a centaur? She quickly
concealed herself in

a place few folk would even think to
look: behind a tangle

tree. She could do this because she
could see by the fresh

bones that the tree had recently feasted.
That meant it should

be quiescent for another day or so. It
was a nervy thing to

do, but not as nervy as remaining in sight
for a centaur archer

to spot.

And it was a centaur coming. She
peeked out between the

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listless tentacles of the tree. In fact, it
was her eldest brother,

Carlton Centaur! That terrified her,
because when they

played hide-and-seek, he had always
been able to find her,

no matter how cleverly she hid.

He galloped right toward her, and for a
moment she was

sure he saw her, but then he went on by.
Then he turned and

trotted back, and halted. Again she was
sure he had seen her.

What was he going to do? They had always gotten along

well, but if there was one thing stronger than a centaur's

marksmanship, it was his honor, and he would be honor-

bound to execute her if he ever saw her again close to Cen-

taur Isle.

Carlton stood near her tree, but faced to the side. "Now

I don't see anyone," he said to the forest.
"And I don't

expect to. But it occurred to me that if
anyone happened to

be lost around here, he might be able to
use something, so

I'll leave it, just in case. And I might
also remark that prob-

ably the best place for a person in doubt
to go is to the human

Good Magician, and ask a Question, any
Question, because

the Good Magician requires a year's service for an Answer,

and I understand that querents are well cared for while per-

forming such service." He set down a long package. "Of

course, any lost person is surely greatly missed by his folks,

even if they aren't able to say so, and I'm sure their best

wishes go with him. But there's no sense in talking any

longer to myself, so I will depart and not return." And he

walked away, not looking back, and was soon gone.

The scene blurred, and Chena realized that there was no

longer any mere hint of a tear in an eye, but a copious flow

in both eyes. Her dear brother had known she was there, and

brought her a gift, and some excellent

advice, and gone his

way, not even able to remain for her thanks.

She came out and checked the package.
It was a fine bow,

and a dozen perfect arrows, and one
very sharp small knife.

With these she could defend herself from
most predators, and

do some hunting. She lacked the muscle
to kill a dragon at

long range, but she could certainly score on small game at

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intermediate range, with an excellent weapon like this. She

knew that Carlton had not acted alone; their parents must

have supported it, though they would never say so. They

couldn't stop her exile, but they did love

her.

She donned the harness, so that the bow and quiver of

arrows lay across her human back. The bow was so long that

its ends came close to the ground and well up beyond her

head; she would have to stay clear of tight squeezes. But it

was wonderful having it. She strapped the sheath of the knife

to her human waist, where it was readily in-reach. She felt

so much better, with such equipment—and because of what

it told her about the true sentiment of her family.

And what of the advice? Well, it made sense to her. Go

ask the Good Magician a question, and have a year to learn

how to get along in the big uncivilized

world of Xanth. Not

only did it give her somewhere to go, it would give her a

year's leeway before she had to make a decision about the

rest of her life. The Good Magician wouldn't care that she

had magic; all human beings did have magic, so they saw

little or no shame in it. That was, of course, part of what

made them lesser beings.

So she would do it. She set her face to the north. ' 'Thanks,

Carlton," she said. "Thanks, family."

Then she started on

her long journey.

As dusk came, something dark and snarly loomed ahead.

Chena brought her bow about and nocked an arrow. The

thing hesitated, then charged. It looked

like a robert cat. She

loosed her arrow, but the cat saw it coming and dodged to

the side. The arrow caught it in the flank instead of in the

heart, so wasn't fatal. But the cat decided that this centaur

filly wasn't as helpless as she seemed, and bounded away,

leaving a trail of blood, but, unfortunately, taking the arrow

with it. Chena hated losing an arrow, but it was better than

losing her life.

She found a reasonably safe niche by
two intersecting

wallflowers, and settled her rump there.
Then she set her bow

and three arrows on the ground before
her, and lay down. If

anything came in the night, it would have to come from the

front, and she could put an arrow or three in it before it got

close. She slept, keeping her ears attuned to anything unu-

sual. But she was in luck; nothing came.

Sometime in the night there came not a predator, but a

realization: Her brother Carlton had

magic too; he could find

things. That explained so much! But of course, he could not

admit it. He had used it to find her, so he could give her the

bow, knife, and advice, but could never demonstrate it else-

where, lest he, too, be exiled. She would certainly keep his

secret.

So it was, in the next few days as she traveled north. She

encountered a small mean dragon, but two arrows dissuaded

it. She regretted this, because again she lost the arrows, and

they were irreplaceable. But at the same time she appreciated

how very much worse it could have been, without the bow.

There was all the difference in Xanth

between an unarmed

centaur and an armed one.

It turned out to be a long way to the
Good Magician's

castle, especially since she didn't know
exactly where it was.

Every so often she would inquire of
some creature, and learn

that she still wasn't far enough north. So she continued, grad-

ually and reluctantly expending her valuable arrows.

"I wish I could have at least a brief dialogue with

someone friendly," she said wearily.

Chena longed more than anything else for companionship.

Her rocks couldn't take the place of friends, and the only

halfway intelligent person she met (other than brief glimpses

of harpies, ogres, goblins, and other unsavory characters) was

a more or less human child close to her own age. He had

brassish-browning hair, gray eyes, and a brass-colored sun-

tan.

"Hello," she said, pausing with her hand not far from her

knife, just in case, though he didn't look dangerous. "I am

Chena Centaur, age eleven. Who are you?"

"I am Brusque Brassie-Ogre," the lad replied. "Also age

eleven. My father is part ogre and my mother is all brassie.

That's why I'm so handsome."

"You certainly are," she agreed, realizing that by the stan-

dards of his crossbreeding, he was probably the only and

therefore the handsomest of his kind. "I didn't realize that

ogres crossbred with brassies."

"It started with my grandfather Smash Ogre," he said

proudly. "He made the acquaintance of my grandmother

Biythe Brassie, and they liked each other well enough."

"Oh, so they married."

"No. He married a nymph named Tandy,
and she married

a brassie man named Brawnnye."

Chena was perplexed. "Then how—

"Smash and Tandy's son was Esk Ogre.
Brawnnye and

Biythe's daughter was Bria Brassie.
They married, and I'm
their eldest son."

"Oh," Chena said, feeling uncentaurishly stupid. "Of

course. So you are half brassy and—"

' 'And a quarter human, if you count Curse Fiend as hu-

man, and one-eighth ogre and one-eighth nymph," he con-

cluded. "I'm a crossbreed's crossbreed. My talent is to make

things hard and heavy, or soft and light."

She couldn't think of a suitable comment, so she changed

the subject. "Is there a place for ex-Isled centaurs near your

home?" she asked shyly.

"No, I live in the Vale of the Vole. No centaurs there I

know of. My father has a centaur friend, but she doesn't visit

much anymore, now that she has a family

of her own."

"Yes, I suppose families do keep folk busy," she said,

thinking of her own lost family. "Do you know where else

I might find a centaur community?
Preferably one of those

who have magic, or who are tolerant of those who do."

"Oh, sure! The centaurs at Castle

Roogna do magic, I
think. Or maybe they're nearer the North
Village, across the
G—oops. Mom's calling me!" Indeed,
there was the distant
sound of a brass cymbal. "I gotta get
home. Nice meeting
you. 'Bye."

"Bye," she echoed as he ran off. She was delighted with

the information, but sorry that she hadn't quite learned what

the North Village was beyond. Still, she could find out, by

continuing north. So she did. Maybe she wouldn't have to

ask the Good Magician a Question, if she found compatible

magic-talented centaurs like herself.

Several days later, Chena was still trekking through the

wilderness. She had one good meal one day: She caught

some lox in a salmon stream (or maybe it was light pink),

and smoked them over a piece of smoky topaz. They were

locked, of course, so she opened them with some of her lime-

pie keys. She looked for something to eat them with, and

found a bagel bush, then searched
through a creamweed for

some cream cheese. She found it, but not
until after she'd

found egg cream, buttercream, shaving
cream, light cream,

dark cream, cream of the crop, cream
soda, whipped cream,

chocolate cream, marshmallow cream,
and eyes cream in var-

ious ice-cold flavors. She scooped up
the latter four to make

a wonderful eyes cream Mondae for dessert.

This was the last good meal she had for some time. She

was now passing through an area with very few feed-bearing

plants. She carefully rationed the amount of pie she could

eat each night, as well as her quartz-milk and limestone juice,

which she called her "rock food." Chena

was tired, hungry,
lonely, and growing desperate.

Her original determination to survive
and possibly even
prosper, to find magic-wielding centaurs
who would accept
her, or to ask the Good Magician a
Question and be well
cared for for a year while she performed
her service—all
these notions faded in the face of her

growing desperation.

Now she appreciated just how difficult the realm of untamed

Xanth could be. To make it worse, she had reluctantly ex-

pended the last of her fine arrows, in the course of discour-

aging passing monsters who showed too great an interest in

her tender flesh. She was now almost defenseless. She was

tempted to gobble down her last two squished pies, instead

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of rationing them, so that at least she
wouldn't be so hungry

today, regardless what happened
tomorrow.

"I'd almost rather be eaten by a monster
right now and

have it over with," she whispered

miserably.

Suddenly she heard an ominous rustling, and then a slav-

ering sound, followed closely by a loud roar. "I didn't mean

it! I take it back!" she cried as a catawampus burst into view.

This was an enormous feline creature, three times Chena's

size and vaguely resembling a catamount. The most fright-

ening thing about it was that it seemed to be entirely crazy.

Like its bearish black and white cousin, the pandemonium,

and its sheepish cousin, the bedlamb, it brought chaos

wherever it went.

Chena whipped her bow around and cocked her fist, draw-

ing back the string. She was bluffing, because she had no

arrow, but maybe the monster wouldn't realize. But the cat-

awampus was too demented to be bluffed. Its eyes rolled

wildly in its head as it tore at the grass in front of it, cackling

and snorting before it remembered it was supposed to roar.

It uprooted a tree and shredded it into splinters. It fought its

own tail, tearing out several hunks of fur without feeling any

pain. It coughed, and spat out a fur ball.
Then it extended

its claws, showed its teeth in a wicked
grimace, and advanced

toward Chena.

She ran, as any normal person would.
The monster pur-

sued her. She stayed out of its reach for
a little while, but

she was too hungry and tired to keep up
the .pace for long.

Gradually the catawampus gained on her; she could hear the closer thudding of its hugely clawed feet, and the blasting bellow of its breath.

She saw a clearing ahead. She used her last burst of speed to race for it, hoping that there would be something there to save her. But as she reached it, she shrieked with pure horror.

She was at the edge of a huge chasm. It stretched as far

as her tired eye could see, to both sides, and was dreadfully

deep and wide. She had to screech to an emergency stop,

lest she run right into it.

The catawampus rushed toward her,
cranking up its claws

for pounce mode. She had a quick
decision to make: Should

she die by leaping into the chasm, or by
letting the monster

tear her apart? She decided that the
chasm frightened her

less. So she leaped, screaming again, as
if that would do any

good. "I wish something would save

me!" she cried de-

spairingly as she began her fall into the dusky depths.

Someone grabbed her hand. A tail slapped against her

flank, making her feel strangely light and free. She opened

her eyes, looking down, and discovered that she was sus-

pended above the chasm, being pulled to safety. She looked

back, and saw that the catawampus was growling on the

brink, unable to catch her here.

She looked up—and there was a winged centaur colt of

about her own age, or maybe a year younger. He was flying

in place, and somehow supporting her whole body by his

hold on her hand. How could this be?

"Who—how—?" she asked.

"I am Che Centaur," he said. "I made you
light so I could

hold you up, but I shall have to bring you
back to land soon,

because the effect fades with time."

"I am Chena Centaur," she said. "I didn't

know that

winged centaurs existed!"

"We're a relatively new species. We call ourselves ali-

centaurs. Will it be all right if I set you on the far side of

the Gap Chasm?"

Chena looked down again. There was a small cloud pass-

ing beneath her. It looked worried that she might drop a clod

on it. Of course, she was now so light that any such clod

might simply float away, but she could nevertheless appre-

ciate the cloud's concern. She tried not to giggle at the

thought of clouds being peppered by flying centaur manure.

"Yes."

He pumped his gorgeous wings more forcefully, and

towed her across the yawning gulf of the Chasm. She won-

dered whether the Gap was falling asleep, and whether it

would close its mouth after it yawned.

He brought her safely to the far rim. She was glad to feel

her feet firmly on land again, and was sure that Che was glad

109, because she had been gradually gaining back weight and

he had had to work hard to keep her aloft. They paused to

rest and talk. She learned that Che had been trying out his

flight feathers, using the warm updrafts
of the Gap Chasm,

when he had abruptly spied her in
trouble. He had managed

to reach her just in time.

She offered him one of her squished
pies, which he

gravely accepted, and she ate the last
one herself. She was

so relieved by escaping the monster and
finding a friendly

centaur that she hardly cared about what she would eat tomorrow.

"We had better walk to my home," Che said. "Actually

I'm not living at home right now; I'm with Gwenny Goblin,

who is camped not far from here. The goblins are doing an exercise."

"Goblins!" Chena cried, horrified. "They captured you?"

He laughed. "That was five years ago. We're firm friends

now. I'm Gwenny's Companion."

This was too strange for her to assimilate. "Don't goblins

hate all other creatures? Especially beautiful or smart ones,

like centaurs?"

"Yes and no. Most goblins are like that, but the goblins

of Goblin Mountain are ruled by Gwenny, the first female

Chief, so they are becoming halfway decent. So it's safe for

other folk to visit them. You'll like Gwenny; she's nice."

Chena remained confused. ' 'If this

gobliness is their chief,

why does she want a centaur around? I
don't mean any of-

fense to you. It's just that she must have
important things to
do."

"She does have things to do. I help her.
She can't fly, of

course, and she's not as intelligent as a
centaur, so I can

scout for her and give her advice. It

works well enough."

Chena almost suspected that he wasn't telling her every-

thing, but it wouldn't be polite to pry.
"I'm sure it does,"

she agreed.

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They came to the goblin camp. Ugly

goblin warrior men

charged up at the sight of them, but Chena merely held up his

hand. "A visitor for the Chiefess," he said. "Inform Mo-

ron." So instead of attacking, the goblins fell in around them

as an approximation of an honor guard, while one of them

dashed off.

Chena would have been really uneasy

about this if Che

weren't so plainly at ease. "Who is the moron?" she whis-

pered.

"He's Gwenny's Head Honcho. Think of him as the chief

of staff."

"But you shouldn't call him names."

"That is his name. All the goblin males have ugly names."

"Oh." Perhaps that did make sense.

They stopped at a prettily decorated tent. Che assumed a serious mien as a vile-looking goblin approached. "Moron,

this is Chena Centaur, here to visit the Chief."

Moron turned to face the tent. "Chief, Chena Centaur is here to see you."

The tent flap was pushed aside, and a pretty goblin girl emerged. She looked very young, but Chena realized that was because she was so petite. She was

probably seventeen

or eighteen years old. She had a mental picture of herself

embarrassing them all by treating a mature Chief as a child.

The gobliness smiled. "It has happened," she said.

Chena was astonished. Had the girl read her thoughts?

"I rescued Chena from a monster by the Gap Chasm,"

Che said. "May we come in?"

"Of course," Gwenny said.

The tent was surprisingly large inside.
When the three of

them were alone, Che turned to Chena.
"Gwenny can see

dreams," he explained. "I thought I saw
Mare Imbri pass

by; she must have left you a day dream."

"Mare Imbri?"

"You are not from these parts," Gwenny said, smiling.

"No. I'm from Centaur Isle. But I was exiled."

"She has a magic talent," Che explained.

"She's looking

for other centaurs like her, or perhaps
she will go to the Good

Magician."

"But she will need to recover her
strength first," Gwenny

said. "I can see that she has suffered
privations on the way

here."

Thus began what was to be one of the most pleasant in-

terludes of Chena's young life. She remained for a fortnight

with the goblin camp, during its exercises. Che and Gwenny

were usually together and often busy, but Moron saw to it

that Chena was courteously treated. He introduced her to his

friends Idiot, who was in charge of

intelligence, and Imbe-

cile, the goblin foreign relations officer.
They seemed like

ordinary goblin males, apart from their
titles: ugly, stupid,

and foul-spirited. Yet not bad people, as
she got to know

them, and no other goblin bothered her
as long as one of the

three was anywhere near.

Chena managed to make herself useful,

by finding magic

stones and invoking their properties.
Some goblins were wor-

ried about getting injured in battle, so
she gave them guard-

stones. Others feared they weren't ugly
enough, so she gave

them uglystones. Some wanted to
express themselves more

effectively, so she gave them
cursestones. These were very

popular, even if they weren't allowed to
use them in the

Chiefess' presence.

Then it was time for the exercise to end.
The goblins had

learned to march in disciplined
formations, and to sing tunes

as they did. That would enable them to
make a good im-

pression when they guarded the lady
Chief on an official visit

to another species. Every one of them
wore the same uniform

and stepped to the same beat. Chena had watched their prac-

tice sessions, and had to admit that they were impressive.

Such a formation would quickly abolish the notion that all

goblins were undisciplined hordes. This was a disciplined

horde.

But something else had been happening in this period, and

now that it was time for the goblins to go home and for

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Chena to go her way, she realized what it was. She had been

falling in love with Che Centaur. He was such a decent crea-

ture, and so handsome when he flew.

When the time came for the goblins to go home, Gwenny

approached Chena. ' 'You are welcome to join us at Goblin

Mountain," she said. "Your magic talent is useful, and I'm

sure you would be well received."

Chena hesitated. "I—how does Che feel about it?"

"Oh, Che likes you too. He says you are

excellent com-

pany. He has missed associating with centaurs during his stay

at Goblin Mountain, so you have given him something val-

uable."

This wasn't quite what Chena wanted to hear. "Is that

all?"

"All? I don't understand."

"I—I think I love him."

Gweny sat suddenly down. "Oh, my!"
She did not look

pleased.

"I know he's very busy being your
Companion, and all,

but if there is any chance that he might
feel the same about

me—"

Gweny looked sad, "Chena, I never
suspected! It hurts

me to have to be the one to say this. But
you are not of his

species. He must grow up and marry a winged centaur fe-

male, so as to perpetuate his species."

"But if there is no such female—"

"But there is. She is Cynthia Centaur, once a human girl,

who was converted to winged centaur form some time ago

by Magician Trent. She is living with his sire and dam while

he is with me at Goblin Mountain. It is understood that they

will marry when they are of suitable age."

"Oh!" Chena cried, mortified. "I didn't know!"

"There seemed to be no reason to mention it," Gwenny

said. "I'm sure he would have, if—"

"Oh, please don't tell him what I told you!" Chena cried.

"I must depart immediately, so as never-to embarrass him."

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"No, Chena! That is not necessary. I'm sure that if you just explain—"

But Chena, hurt and humiliated by her own misunder-

standing, couldn't bear to face Che again. Desolate and de-

spairing, she could think of only one thing to do. She

gathered her meager belongings and fled.

Now she was back in the jungle, this time north of the

Gap Chasm. But she had learned much more about the nature

of the backwoods, for the goblins were expert foragers. She

could feed herself, and she also had some replacement arrows

for her quiver, not as good as the originals, but they would

do. And—she had learned of a region to the north, called

the Void, where a person could enter but never leave. That

was what she needed now.

The Void proved to be farther away than she had expected,

and harder to find. But she kept looking, meanwhile staying

clear of both human and centaur settlements. She didn't want

to associate with anyone; she just wanted to enter the Void

and disappear. So she had become a hermit centaur, always

hiding, always searching—until the summons party had run

her down.

"Oh, Chena," Jenny Elf said. "Che is my friend! I know

he would never have hurt you, had he realized."

"I know it too," Chena said. "That's why I had to go."

"Now I wonder," Amolde said. "Are you sure you came

to the correct conclusion?"

"I did what I had to do," Chena said.

"And if I have to

face Che again, I don't know what I'll do."

"Che is another summonsee," Metria said.

Chena made as if to bolt again.

"There is no need for that," Arnolde said. "I am a centaur

with magic myself; I understand your position. I merely sus-

pect that you have misunderstood a key aspect of it."

"I can't embarrass Che!" Chena said. "He was so nice

to me, never suspecting."

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"I want you to picture what you most desire," Amolde

said. "See, here is Mare Imbri with a day dream for you."

He was right; Metria saw the nicker of the mare.

"But what I truly want isn't right," Chena protested.

"It may not be what you think it is," Amolde said. "Accepted the dream."

Jenny Elf began to hum. Metria ignored her. What did

Amolde have in mind? Centaurs were never frivolous; he

surely had some phenomenally sensible

conclusion to make,

but she couldn't guess what.

Chena stood still, and the day mare
passed and delivered

the dream. And Metria found herself in
Chena's dream.

It was of a lovely valley, with flowers
growing all around.

The filly was standing there alone. But
she was changing.

From the juncture of her human and equine torsos grew nubs,

and from the nubs sprouted feathers, and the feathers ex-

panded to wings. She stood as a winged centaur.

And that was all. The dream faded, taking the wings with

it. All was as before.

"Where was Che?" Arnolde asked.

"Che?" Chena asked, confused.

"He wasn't in your dream."

Chena was silent, evidently not knowing what to say.

"Your dream was of becoming an alicentaur," Amolde

said. "That is your true desire. You are

in love with the idea

of becoming like Che—rather than with Che himself."

"But I can never be like Che!" Chena wailed.

"Are you sure of that?"

She looked at him blankly.

"Trent!" Metria exclaimed. "Magician Trent! He could

change her. They need more flying centaurs."

Dawn was rising in Chena's face. "I could be changed?"

"We may not need Magician Trent," Amolde said. "Take

the gray stone from your pouch."

Blankly Chena obeyed. She reached into her pouch and brought out the stone.

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"Now dream again of your fondest desire," Amolde said.

"Speak it aloud."

Mystified, Chena held the stone and

closed her eyes. "I

wish I were an alicentaur," she breathed.

For a moment nothing changed. Then the dream repeated,

and the wings appeared.

"And that, I think, is the end of your talent with stones,"

Arnolde said. "It was the price of your conversion."

Chena opened her eyes. "My conversion?"

"Make a mirror, Demoness," Arnolde said. Metria be-

came a wide, flat surface, reflective on the side toward the

filly. Chena looked—and almost fell over. "My dream re-

mains!"

"Because this time it wasn't a dream,"
Arnolde said.

"This time you used your wishstone."

"My—?"

- "When you wished for a good bow and
arrows, you re-

ceived them," he said. "When you
wished for a friendly

dialogue, you got it. When you wished to
be consumed by

a monster, one came. When you wished to be rescued, Che

did that. And when you wished to become an alicentaur, that,

too, was granted. Now you have your desire, and no longer

need your power over stones. Your magic is now to make

yourself light enough to fly. Try it."

Chena flicked herself with her tail, as she had seen Che

do so many times to himself, and to her
when he brought

her across the Gap Chasm—that most
glorious experience.

Then she spread her wings, and pumped
them—and lifted

into the air.

The six spectators broke into applause.

SCRAMBLE

Who's your next summonsee?" Kim asked.

Metria opened the bag. There were ten tokens re-

maining. "I don't see how I'm going to serve all

of these in time," she said. "I've already used up several

days, and the others are scattered all

over Xanth."

"And what you have already accomplished along the way

is remarkable," Ichabod remarked, "If I understand what I

have heard correctly, you have enabled Princess Nada Naga

to marry a Prince, shown the way to resolve the problem of

a viable alicentaur species, reconciled a four-century alien-

ation from your daughter, abolished a longtime curse on Cas-

tle Roogna, and discovered a significant lost history of the

Kings of Xanth—and you haven't yet finished your job. This

reminds me of the type of chess problem I used to see in the

newspaper, wherein the challenge is for White to win one

pawn, but along the way occur casualties of rooks, bishops,

knights, queens, and threatened checkmates. But the pawn is won."

"What's a pawn?" Metria asked.

"I think it's a type of shrimp," Jenny Elf said.

"That's a prawn," Arnolde replied with a

face too

straight. "However, it may do."

"A pawn is a chess piece, generally regarded as insignif-

icant," Ichabod said, with a reproving glance at his friend.

' Though at times it becomes a key element in the game. My

point is that sometimes amazing things occur as the result of

what seems like a rather simple task. It

may be that the Si-

murgh is using you as a vehicle to accomplish a variety of

significant things that are in need of accomplishment."

"In short, the demoness may indeed be a pawn," Amolde

said. "In the human sense."

"I'm not human!" Metria said indignantly.

"To be sure," Ichabod agreed. "Though you certainly

appear so when you choose to." He glanced at her legs. "At

any rate, I believe it would be in order for us to facilitate

your project with a bit of advice."

"I could use advice how to fetch in all the remaining

summonsees in one day," Metria said. "So I could relax

with my job done, and get my Answer
from the- Good Magician."

"Not to mention getting the summonsees
in this party to
the Nameless Castle," Arnolde said.

"And the two of you back to the Region
of Madness,"
Jenny Elf said.

"Precisely," Ichabod agreed. "Would you like that ad-

'monition, Metria?"

, 'That what?"

"Counsel, guidance, recommendation, suggestion, advise-

ment—"

"Advice?" she asked.

"Whatever," he said crossly.

"Yes."

"Pop over to Castle Roogna and ask Princess Electra if

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she would like to have her husband
Prince Dolph out of her

hair for a day or two. She will surely agree. Then ask Dolph

to assume the form of a roc bird, so he can carry the sum-

monsees directly to the Nameless Castle as you serve them.

The process can be accomplished in a day, if you are able

to locate them that rapidly, and if they are ready to go then."

"Now, why didn't I think of that?" Metria

exclaimed,

striking her head with the heel of her hand, which assumed

the form of a heel of a shoe for the occasion.

"Because you're not a scholar," he replied.

"I'll be back," she said, and popped across to Castle

Roogna.

Electra was out in the orchard, trim in blue jeans and

freckles, as usual. She didn't look very princessly, but the

folk of the castle had gotten used to that. She was watering

some of the smaller plants, using a hose connected to a tap

root. Her four-year-old twins. Dawn and Eve, were playing

in a small house plant. When it was fully

grown, it would

be big enough for full grown-ups to use,
but right now it

was just child-sized. Lady bugs and
gentlemen bugs were

sitting around it, because the children
evidently wanted their

playhouse to be in a city. There was a
fast food chain draped

around it, in case they got suddenly
hungry. Metria realized

that the children were using their talents
to find the best

things for their play, because Dawn could tell anything about

any living thing, and Eve could tell anything about any in-

animate thing.

But it was Electra she had come to see.

"Would you like

to have Dolph out of your hair for a day or two?" she asked

the Princess.

Electra's normally sunny visage dimmed.

"Don't you

have something better to entertain you,
now that you're mar-

ried?" she asked.

Metria realized that there was a slight
misunderstanding.

The girl evidently recalled when Metria
had teased Prince

Dolph, threatening to show him her

panties. Odd that such

a minor thing could be remembered so long. "I'm not trying

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to vamp him," she said quickly. "I'm on a mission for the

Simurgh, and I need to transport a number of people to the

Nameless Castle, from all parts of Xanth. I thought he might

become a roc bird and carry them for me."

' 'Oh, yes, of course. Che and Cynthia are here, and Grey

and Ida and Threnody will be going too. Everyone is curious

what Roxanne Roc could have done to warrant being tried.

If it will help resolve that mystery, by all means borrow my

husband." There was a slight stress on

the last two words,

indicating that Electra would not look kindly on any display,

or threatened display, of panties.

"Got it," Metria agreed. "Thanks, Princess."

She popped into the castle, where Prince Dolph was doing

housework. That made her pause.

"What's this with wom-

an's work?" she demanded.

He looked abashed. "Electra wanted to clean things up,

but she had to go water some plants in the orchard, so she

asked me to do it."

"And she's got you wrapped around her little finger."

"Yes."

Metria nodded. "That's exactly as it should be. But how

would you like a one- or two-day break from such chores?"

"I'd love it! But Electra—"

' 'Has given permission. I need you to become a roc bird

and haul scattered folk to the Nameless Castle for me. Will

you do that?"

Dolph became a baby roc, because a grown one wouldn't

fit in the castle. "Squawk!" he said emphatically.

Good enough. "First we have to go to north Xanth, to

move some folk. Make yourself into something very small,

and I'll take you there."

He became a hummingbird. "Hummm-humm-humm-

hummm," he hummed in four notes.

She put one hand carefully around him, then popped back

to the party in the Northwest. She opened her hand, and

Dolph resumed his natural form.

"This is Prince Dolph," she said. "He will transport you

to the places you need to go.

"Hello, Prince Dolph," Kim said. "I'm so glad to meet

you at last. I'm Kim Mundane."

Dolph looked puzzled. "Mundane?"

"Dug and I were in Xanth three years ago, playing the

'Companions' game, but we didn't get to meet you then."

"Oh, the game Nada was in," he said, remembering.

"And Jenny Elf," Kim said. "As our Companions. I sup-

pose it wasn't important to the regular folk of Xanth, but it

made a big difference to us." She took Dug's hand possessively.

"Well, let's take Amolde and Ichabod back to the mad-

ness," Metria said briskly. "Thanks for your help, folks."

"You're welcome," Ichabod said wryly.

"It has been an

interesting experience."

"Quite interesting," Amolde agreed. "It will be good to

get back to the madness, where things seem more settled."

There was a perplexed look on Dolph's beak as he as-

sumed roc form. His giant bird body now took up most of

the glade they were in. He picked the two up carefully with

his talons, spread his monstrous wings, and took off. One

wing clipped a tree, ripping off a branch; then he was in the

open and gaining altitude. He spiraled up high in the sky,

turned south, and accelerated. There was a thundery sound.

' 'What was that?" Jenny Elf asked.

"Sonic boom," Dug replied. "Those big birds fly pretty

fast."

Kim squatted and stroked her hand across the ground. A

swath of smear followed.

"What are you doing?" Dug asked.

"I'm making a cabin," she said. "A thing
for us to ride

in, so we won't have to risk falling
between the big bird's

talons when it picks us up."

He nodded. "Good point."

"I could fly there myself," Chena said hesitantly.

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"If you know the way," Kim said. "If you could keep

up with the roc. Better to ride with us."

"Yes," the centaur agreed, relieved.

By the time the roc returned, Kim had shaped a basketlike

structure large enough for herself. Dug, Jenny, and Chena.

"A gondola," she said with satisfaction.

"That will give us

a more comfortable ride."

"Do you want to go directly to the Nameless Castle,"

Metria asked, ' 'or to Castle Roogna,

where you can stay in

comfort with illustrious figures of Xanth
until it is time for

the trial?"

"Well, since you put it that way, I'd love
to see Castle

Roogna," Kim said. She looked around.
"Anybody object?"

"I've been there," Dug said. "It's a great
place, and that

orchard is something else."

"It's fine with me," Jenny said.

"Especially since Che

and Cynthia are already there."

"Che—?" Chena asked, stricken.

"You're winged now," Kim reminded her. "You don't

need him to fulfill your dream."

"But I still do like him, even if—"

"So?"

"The other female—Cynthia—"

"Had a crush on Magician Trent," Metria said, catching

on to the filly's concern. "As did Gloha Goblin-Harpy.

These things don't always work out, but friendships do.

Gloha was my first friend, and she's Cynthia's friend

too. They'll all be at the trial. Don't worry about it." Ac-

tually she wasn't at all sure how Chena and Cynthia would

get along, but the last thing she wanted was to have Chena

fly away now.

"And maybe you can use the time to visit the centaur

villages and ask if any other centaurs would like to turn

winged, as you do," Kim continued.

"You're experienced

in that respect. For you, the perfect companion would be a

male who just turned winged." She smiled. "A handsome

one."

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Chena nodded thoughtfully. "And there will be time to

get to know some, because I'm young yet."

"Right on," Kirn said briskly. "So you'll

stay with us,

until you get comfortable with others.

We're all going to that

trial, remember."

"Yes," Chena agreed, relieved.

They climbed into the gondola. The roc
picked it up. This

time Metria squeezed in too, as it was
easier than trying to

pace a roc in flight.

"This reminds me of my flight home in the bubble," Kim

said, holding her dog Bubbles, whom she had found in a

bubble. "But it's more fun this time, because I'm not on my

way out of Xanth."

"You floated home in a bubble?" Dug asked. "I just

blinked, and I was back in my own room. How did you

rate?"

"I won the game," she said. "Actually, toward the end

we passed back through the screen, same as you did."

"Oh, yeah. But I got your number."

"You sure did," she said, and kissed him.

"I'll be back," Metria said, and popped off home. It was

time to dose Veleno with another charge of sheer bliss.

Something about the gondola ride had reminded her.

When Metria left home again, the party had long since

reached Castle Roogna. As she zeroed in on it, she saw two

winged centaurs flying out from it. So she zipped over to

check on them. And was surprised.

"Chena and Cynthia!" she exclaimed.

"Oh, hi, Metria," Cynthia said. "I'm showing my friend

Chena around. Things look different from above, and I

wouldn't want her to get lost."

"Your friend?" Metria repeated somewhat dumbly.

Cynthia smiled. "Comrade, associate, colleague, acquaintance, companion—"

"But what about Che?"

"He's with Gwenny Goblin," Chena said.

"They're play-

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ing a game of people shoes. She
suggested that we go flying

together."

"We have much in common," Cynthia said. "Both of us

were transformed from other forms. I knew the moment I

saw Chena that we would be friends. Che had told me all

about her, about how nice she is, and how sad he was when

she left. And now she has wings! It's wonderful to have

company. I'm trying to talk her into joining me with Che's

family, after the trial."

Metria remembered belatedly how
Electra and Nada Naga

had been close friends, though both
betrothed to Prince

Dolph. Apparently something similar
was operating here.

"That sounds nice," she said.

"You explained to me about friends,"
Chena said happily.

"About Gloha and Cynthia and Magician Trent. And you

were right. We have a lot in common. We're both converts

from other forms, which makes us special regardless how we

look."

"Magician Trent," Cynthia echoed, a look of fond nos-

talgia crossing her face. "Now, there's a man! I know ex-

actly how Gloha feels."

"She's on my list," Metria said. "I'm going to serve her

next." Because suddenly she wanted to see her friend again.

"Go ahead," Chena said. "We're fine, and Dug and Kim

and Jenny are fine too. Electra's showing them around the

castle grounds."

"Where's Dolph? I need him."

"He's around," Cynthia said, turning her head. "Yes—

there." She pointed at a shape in the distant sky.

"Thanks." Metria popped across to that shape.

It was the big bird, playing with the updrafts. "Squawk?"

he asked.

"Right. I'll take you." Metria reached out and grabbed

on to the tip of the roc's tiniest huge talon.

Then the hummingbird was there. She closed her fingers

carefully around it. Then she popped off

to Gloha Goblin-

Harpy's nest. This was in a gan-tree, which was one of the

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weirder trees of Xanth, looking like a tall network of metal

beams. Gloha resided there with her husband Graeboe Giant,

another converted winged monster.

"Metria!" Gloha exclaimed, flying out from the nest to

embrace her. "How's Veleno?"

' 'I left him with a heavy dose of delirious happiness, be-

cause I have a job to do. How's Graeboe?"

"The same. What job?"

"I have to serve summonses for a big trial. Here's one for you." She brought out Gloha's token.

"Oh, I couldn't go without Graeboe!" Gloha protested.

"I have one for him too." She produced the other token.

"Oh. Very well, then." Gloha took the second token.

"We'll be there. Where and when is it?"

"At the Nameless Castle, in two thirds of a fortnight."

"The Nameless Castle! Isn't that where —?"

"Where Roxanne Roc will be put on trial. You're on the

Jury."

"Because we're winged monsters,"
Gloha said. "She has

a right to be tried by her peers. All right;
we'll be there."

' "I wish I could visit longer, but I have
eight more sum-

monses to serve."

"We'll see you at the trial," Gloha said.

Metria realized that she was still,
holding Dolph. Well, no

problem. She checked her next token:
MELA MERWOMAN—

WITNESS. So she popped over to the
east coast of Xanth

where Mela lived.

But Mela wasn't there. Instead, where a
river emptied into

the sea, she found a different merwoman.

"Who are you?"

she asked.

' 'Who wants to know?' the other replied.

"I'm D. Metria, on business for the Simurgh."

"Oh. In that case I'll answer. I'm Merci Merwoman." She

reached down into the water and hauled up a human head.

"And this is Cyrus Merman. He was playing with my tail."

Now Metria remembered that liaison.

"What are you do-

ing here in brackish water?"

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"It's the only water both of us can stand,"
Cyrus ex-

plained. "I'm a freshwater creature, and
she's saltwater, so

we get together at the fringe."

"However, our children are tolerant of
both waters,"

Merci said proudly.

"That's interesting. But I'm looking for
Mela Mer-

woman."

"Oh, Mother's with Prince Naldo Naga.
She showed him
her panties, and—"

"I know that. Where are they?"

' 'In his princely estate in the naga caves.
He had salt water
piped in for her."

"Oh. Thanks." She popped back to the naga caves, where

she had found Jenny Elf and Nada Naga. Soon she delved

down and found the salted caves.

There was Mela Merwoman, sporting in the water.

"Eeeek!" she cried, exactly like an innocent young thing,

though it was clear that no female with

her endowments

could ever be innocent.

"It's just me, D. Metria," the demoness said.

Mela looked at her. "Oh, I didn't see you."

"Then why did you scream?"

"Naldo's playing with my tail."

Like daughter, like mother: Both had irresistible tails. "I

have to serve you with a summons."

"Oh? What for?"

"You're a Witness in the trial of Roxanne Roc."

"That big bird? What did she do?"

"I don't know. But I hope to find out at the trial."

"So do I! I'll be there." She took the token. "Where is

it?"

"In the Nameless Castle."

"How do I get there?"

"Prince Dolph will take you." Metria
held up the hummingbird.

Prince Naldo's head broke the surface of
the water.

"That's a rather small bird to carry my wife anywhere."

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Dolph assumed roc form and hunched at the edge of the

water. "Squawk!"

"But I might be mistaken," Naldo conceded. "May I go

too?"

"You're not on my list, but I suppose you can be a spec-

tator."

"Then let's go," he said, assuming full human shape. "As

soon as we don some clothing."

Mela split her tail into legs, climbed

from the water, shook

herself gloriously dry, and donned plaid
panties. The roc's

eyes bulged dangerously.

"Maybe a bit more clothing," Naldo said
reluctantly.

So she put on a reasonably sexy dress,
and he put on a

princely robe. "We'll meet you on the
surface," Naldo told

Metria. "Your roc won't be able to fly from here."

True. Metria put out her hand, and the roc became the

hummingbird. She popped to the surface, where they waited

for the others to make their slower way through the labyrin-

thine naga passages. "Haven't you seen panties by now?"

she asked the bird.

Prince Dolph appeared. "Only Electra's, of course.

They're nice, but—"

"But nobody fills panties the way Mela does," Metria

finished. "As I recall, she even almost freaked you out with-

out them, when you were nine."

"Yes. I never forgot."

"Nor should you," she said primly. "She would have

been in violation of the Adult Conspiracy had she shown

you her panties then. That's why I never showed you mine."

"I know. It was most frustrating."

"Well, that's the point of the Conspiracy.
What would

Xanth come to, if children got to see
anything they wanted

to, or if they never realized that things
were being kept secret

from them?"

"I understand that now. But then I didn't."

"Because children aren't supposed to
understand. They

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have to be kept in agitated ignorance, suspecting what

they're missing. Otherwise what would be the point?"

"None," he agreed.

A stone hatch opened, and Mela and Naldo climbed out.

"Let's go," Naldo said.

Dolph assumed roc form, and took them gently in his tal-

ons, and launched himself into the sky. But he forgot, and

took them to Castle Roogna instead of the Nameless Castle.

"Well, that's all right," Mela concluded. "We'll wait

there until the trial. I can visit with my

friends, and Naldo

can hobnob with royalty."

"It works for me," the Prince agreed.

"Maybe I can meet

that Demon Prince my sister's hot for. I
worried about her,

but she came through in the end."

Metria resisted the temptation to
advertise her part in that,

because she had to keep moving on her summonsing. So she

saw them safely to Castle Roogna, then oriented on her mission again.

The next token was for Okra Ogress. That should be no

problem; Okra lived in the deepest darkest jungle with

Smithereen Ogre.

She popped across, and knew she was in the right region

because of the small trees tied into pretzel knots, large trees

with wary looks about them, and the furtive ways of me-

dium-sized dragons. The presence of an ogre did that to a

neighborhood. Okra had charmed Smithereen Ogre despite

being insufficiently ugly, stupid, or

strong, but it had worked

out because he had more than enough of
all three qualities

for both of them. She owed her success,
she thought, to her

achievement of Major Character status,
because no really bad

things happened to one of those folk.

Sure enough, there was a bashed-wood
house in the center

of the devastation, where a not-very-ugly

ogress was wield-

ing a length of ironwood, pounding
chestnuts on a mossy

stone. The chest she was working on
was tough, but she had

it between her rock and a hard place,
and was slowly getting

at the nut inside.

"I have a summons for you," Metria announced. "You

have to be a Witness at the trial of Roxanne Roc."

"I don't think I can go," Okra said. "I have to get this

nut out, so Smithereen can eat it and be fortified for his

evening of dragon intimidation."

"Couldn't he bash that chest open faster himself?"

"He could, but then he'd lose most of the nut. It tends to

fly into widely scattered fragments when he bashes it." She

smiled fondly. "He's just such an ogre. So I do it, because

I have a gentler touch." She whaled away with the club,

chipping away another comer of the

chest. "Anyway, he's helping."

"He is? How?"

' 'By providing the support for the chest, so I can bash it.

It takes a really dense block to hold one of these."

Metria looked. Now she realized that

what she had taken

for a low mossy ridge was actually an ogre lying down, and

the rock on which the chest rested was his head. "That's as

dense as anything is," she agreed.

"Yes. I couldn't do it without him." Okra clubbed the

chest one more time, and it finally cracked open. She pulled

apart the sides and lifted out the big nut

inside. She heaved

it up, her limited muscles bulging. "Open your big mouth,

dear," she gasped. "This is one tough nut!"

The face of the rock cracked open like a mountain fissure.

Okra let go of Ae boulderlike mass, and it dropped into the

hole. A tongue appeared as the ogre chewed, and sparks flew

where the great teeth battled the hard nut.
It would evidently
hold him for a while.

"The trial isn't for a while yet," Metria
said. "But maybe

you could bring your husband along. He
might find it inter-

esting, in a dim-witted way. It's at the
Nameless Castle."

"Oh, I remember that!" Okra said. "Yes,

he would prob-

ably like it there. He could chew on that extra tough solid-

ified cloud material. He's always been curious about

clouds."

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Metria was surprised. ' 'I thought true ogres were too stu-

pid to 6^ curious about anything."

"Oh, that's not true!" Okra protested loyally. "It is ru-

mored that clouds are even more stupid than ogres, and since

that hardly seems possible, naturally ogres are curious about

it. Smithereen could do a great service for ogredom by in-

vestigating the matter."

"I could take you both there now,"
Metria said. "But

remember: He mustn't bash the castle
down. Just the sur-
rounding cloud."

"I'll keep an eye on him," Okra
promised.

"Good enough. Dolph?"

The hummingbird she held became the roc. The roc fas-

tened one set of talons around the ogre's feet, and the other

around the ogre's head, and looked around. So many trees

had been bashed down here that there was clearance for take-

off. The bird squawked.

"Do what?" Metria asked, perplexed.

"Squawk, squawk, squawk, squawk, squawk—"

"Squawk?" Okra suggested.

"Whatever," Metria agreed crossly. "Get on."

But Okra was already climbing onto Smithereen's body,

following her own suggestion. The roc spread his wings and

launched into the air, carrying the stiff
ogre flat, with Okra

riding it like a platform. The big ogre
mouth still chewed on

the tough nut.

They winged it to the Nameless Castle,
where they de-

posited Smithereen on a suitable
outcropping bank of cloud.

Dolph returned to hummingbird form.

Smithereen sat up and poked a finger at the cloud, in-

trigued by its toughness; this was not ordinary cloudstuff. He

put his face down and took a bite of it. The stuff resisted,

yielding only very slowly. "Ugh!" he remarked, disap-

pointed. ,

"Well, it depends, on which part of the cloud you bite,

dear," Okra said. "This evidently isn't the part that contains

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thunder or lightning. But keep biting; that section is bound

to be somewhere."

Metria nodded. There was enough cloud

here to hold his

attention for some time. "I'll let you know when the trial

actually starts," she told Okra.

"That's fine," the ogress said, turning to admire the tow-

ering castle in the center of the cloud isle.

"Don't wander too close to the edge. It's a long way

down."

"I know. I remember." Okra waved as Metria popped off.

After a quick check on Veleno at home, to verify that he

was still floating blissfully somewhat above the bed, she

brought out her next token. This was for Stanley Steamer.

This could be tricky. But if she had to, she'd get his friend

Princess Ivy to ask him. How they were going to keep him

from steaming and eating the other Jurors during the trial she

didn't know, but her job was just to get him there.

She popped across to the Gap Chasm. Suddenly the steep

walls rose on either side of her, and she

looked across the

reasonably pleasant base of the valley,
where small fur trees

fluffed themselves out and a stray sick-a-
more tree waited

for a victim. She couldn't resist teasing
it. She sashayed right

toward it. "Ha-ha, sicko; you can't make
me sick. I'm a

demoness."

Then she heard a faint retching. Oops—

it was the hum-

mingbird. She had forgotten about Dolph. She hastily popped

across the valley, well out of the sick range of the tree.

"Sorry about that," she said. "I forgot I was holding you."

Dolph resumed his normal form. He looked as if he had

just succeeded in not quite retching. "Shnake," he gasped.

"What?"

He swallowed. "Reptile, serpent, viper
—"

"Snake?"

"Whatever," he said weakly, looking
better. "It's on your
leg."

Metria looked down. There was a garter snake swallowing

her left leg. She had inadvertently landed beside a hose bush,

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and the snake had come out to enclose her leg up to the

thigh, as was its wont. Given time, it would digest the leg

below its fastening on the thigh.

"Ugh." She puffed into smoke, and the snake dropped.

She reformed to the side. She should have watched where

she landed. Such a snake could not hurt her, of course, but

it was embarrassing. ?

' 'Is that Stanley?" Dolph asked, peering down the valley.

"It does look like a serpent," she agreed.
"But not like
Stanley."

The serpent approached them. A human
head appeared in -
place of its reptile head. "Hello."
"A naga!" Dolph said. .

"Yes," the naga said. "Perhaps you could
help me. I

seem to be lost."

"Of course," Dolph said. "I always liked the naga folk.

I'm Prince Dolph, of the human folk, and this is the De-

moness Metria. What can I do for you?"

The figure assumed human form. She was a young

woman, attractive in the way of those who could craft their

appearance to suit their desire. She lacked clothing, because

in her natural state she wore none.

Dolph's eyes did the usual

male thing, trying to bulge out of their sockets. It occurred

to Metria that the human male form was badly designed: Its

eye sockets were too small.

"I'm Anna Conda," the naga said. "I am traveling to the

northern naga caves via the underground route, but I don't

recognize the terrain."

"That's because you're in the Gap Chasm," Metria said.

"You came up too soon."

"Oh, the Gap! I forgot all about it!"

"It happens," Dolph said. "Some wisps

of the forget spell

that was on it for eight centuries may
still be around, and

you ran into one. Just go back into the
caves and bear north

and you'll get there."

"I will. Thanks." She shifted rapidly to
full serpent form,

slithered into a hole, and disappeared.

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Prince Dolph shook his head. "I'm happy with Electra, of

course," he said. "But sometimes I wonder how it would

have been with Nada Naga."

"She doesn't love you," Metria reminded him. "Electra

does."

He nodded. "That, too."

As with most young men, he could hardly see beyond a

girl's physical form, especially when it happened to be nude.

That was what made human men such easy prey for demon-

esses. "Well, let's go find Stanley."

"Sure thing." He glanced once more at the hole down

which the naga had vanished, as if almost tempted to assume

serpent form and go after her, then became the hummingbird.

She took him in her hand and floated -up high enough to

get a better view of the chasm. Then she took the token in

her free hand and heeded its tug. She zoomed along in the correct direction.

Soon enough she spied the Gap Dragon whomping along.

Stanley was now full grown, a long, sinuous, slightly winged

green dragon with six legs. The legs were too short for real

velocity, which was why he whomped: lifting up his fore-

section, hurling it forward, landing it,
and bringing the rest

of his body along in a following arc. It
looked awkward, but

it got him where he was going in a hurry.
Hardly any animal

caught in the Gap escaped, once the
dragon went after it.

Those that were just out of reach of the
teeth could still be

brought down by a searing jet of steam.
The Gap Dragon

was one of the most feared creatures in Xanth.

Except for certain folk. Metria was one, because she was

a demoness. Prince Dolph was another, because he could

assume dragon form if he chose, and because he had known

Stanley Steamer since childhood and they were friends.

So she glided down. "Ho, Stanley!" she called.

The dragon paused, lifting his snoot. There was a puff of steam.

"Now, don't get steamed," she said. "It's me, Metria."

And Prince Dolph." She opened her hand, and Dolph as-

sumed his human form and dropped to the ground.

Stanley recognized him. Dolph threw his arms around the

dragon. They rolled, wrestling and tickling. It was an em-

brace almost nobody else in Xanth would have risked. But

they had been young together, for all that it was Stanley's

second childhood. He had been youthened more or less by

accident over three decades ago in a slight mishap. Stanley

had become Princess Ivy's pet, until it was time for him to

resume his job guarding the Gap.

There were three basic types of dragons in Xanth: fire

breathers, smokers, and steamers. The fire dragons were the

most feared, but actually the smokers were more dangerous,

because their smoke could blind and suffocate others, espe-

cially in closed places. The steamers were the least common,

but were to be respected in their regions.

When the two settled down, Metria held out the token. "I

have a summons for you, Stanley," she said. "You are to

be a Juror in the trial of Roxanne Roc."

The dragon's ears perked up, startled. One ear was slightly

shorter than the other; that dated from the time that Smash

Ogre had chewed it off, and even the rejuvenation hadn't

repaired it entirely. His snout assumed a perplexed aspect.

Dolph took the form of a small dragon and growled at

him. Metria wasn't strong on dragon talk, but knew that

Dolph was explaining the situation in greater detail.

Stanley growled back. Then Dolph resumed man form.

"He says he'll have to ask his family."

She couldn't say no to that. "So let's go ask."

Stanley led them to a deep side shoot of the main chasm.

There was another grown dragon, and a baby dragon. Metria

had known nothing of this. She felt slightly jealous. Even

dragons could get the attention of the stork, while she

couldn't. But the baby was cute.

"His mate Stella Steamer, and their son Steven Steamer,"

Dolph said, chucking the baby under the chin. Steven puffed

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out a bit of warm vapor that couldn't be rated as steam, but

showed promise for the future.

"Stanley is on my summonsing list, but I don't know that

the whole family would be welcome in the Nameless Cas-

tle," Metria said doubtfully.

"Stella says someone has to patrol the Gap," Dolph said.

"They take turns, with the off-duty one taking care of

Steven. If Stanley goes to the trial, he'll have to take Steven

along, because Stella can't both whomp and baby-sit."

Metria considered. "Let me see the tyke," she said.

Dolph picked up the little dragon and handed him to her.

She held him, and the little snoot caressed her neck with

warm vapor. Suddenly she lost control.
"Oh, you little dar-

ling!" she cried, and hugged Steven
close. She so missed

the baby of her own she had not been
able to get.

"I think Steven will get along okay at the
trial," Dolph

remarked. "If your reaction is typical."

"I guess he will," she agreed, kissing

Steven on the cute

snoot. "There's nothing much cuter than a baby dragon.

When can they go?"

Dolph consulted. They decided to bring Stanley and

Steven just before the trial date, so as to minimize disruption.

Metria set down the little dragon with reluctance. "I still

have more to summons," she said, noting that dusk was be-

ginning to think about arriving. "It's a real scramble."

"Who are they?" Dolph asked.

She checked the five remaining tokens.

"Marrow Bones

and Sherlock Black next, I think."

"They're both family men. You'd better go after them tomorrow."

"I suppose you're right. I do have several days remaining before the trial."

"Then if you don't mind, I'll fly home to my wife," he said.

"See you tomorrow," she agreed.

He became the roc, spread his wings,
and stroked up to-

ward the band of daylight above the
Chasm.

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Metria waved farewell to the steamer

family, and popped

back home. She didn't need any rest, but
it would be good

to relax anyway.

This job didn't seem so bad after all.
Tomorrow she would

complete her summonsing, well ahead of
schedule.

MPD

In the morning she took care of routine details, stoked

her husband up for another day's worth of bliss, and

checked her tokens.

She paused with surprise. She had

thought there were five

left, but she hadn't been counting carefully. There were four:

for the walking skeleton, the black man, and the Simurgh

herself. Plus the mysterious unmarked one. But now that

fourth one was marked. It said MPD. And on the other side,

WITNESS.

So the blank token was finally identifying itself! Well, she

had better attend to that immediately, because she had no

idea who MPD was, which meant that he or she or it might

be hard to find.

She held up the token to see which way it tugged. There

seemed to be a firm direction, north, so she put it away and

popped over to Castle Roogna to fetch Prince Dolph.

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He was rubbing sleep from his eyes. 'Last day, huh?' he

asked blearily. "I'll be glad of that."

"So will I," she agreed. "This has been an interesting

experience, but I'll be glad to have it done."

"I forget," he said. "Did you ever tell me why you're

doing this? I mean, sure, for your Service to the Good Ma-

gician.'But what was your Question?"

"How to get the stork's attention," she said. "I know the motions, but the stork has been ignoring me."

"Oh," he said, looking reasonably embarrassed. He was twenty-one, and married, and a father, but retained a certain fetching naivete. "Well, let's go get Sheriock and Marrow."

"Something's come up," she said. "I had a blank disk.

Now it has a name. MPD, a Witness. To the north."

"Who's MPD?"

"I have no idea. But the token should lead us to him."

"Then let's go." He became the hummingbird, and she

took him, and popped north.

She landed safely north of the Void—
and now the token

tugged south. Hmm—that could be bad
news. Nothing left

the Void except night mares. She was a
demoness, but even

she didn't dare risk passing the Void's
event horizon, be-

cause then she would have to give half a
soul to a mare to

carry her out, and half a soul was all she had. She was not

about to give it up.

But as she approached that dreadful line, the token tugged

down. Down toward a gourd. That was almost as bad. Nor-

mal folk entered the gourd realm by looking in a peephole,

and though their bodies remained outside, their souls 'were

locked inside for as long as the eye
contact remained—and

they could not break it themselves. So
anyone visiting the

dream realm needed a friend to put a
finger over the peephole

at an agreed time, freeing the visitor. But
this didn't work

for demons, who had no permanent
physical bodies; their

whole selves entered, and they could not
leave without the

permission of the Night Stallion. Trojan,
that Horse of An-

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other Color, was not particularly partial
to demons. So what

was she to do?

Well, she was on business for the

Simurgh, so she would

just have to tell the horse that'.

Meanwhile, it would be in-

teresting exploring the dream realm.

"Dolph, it seems I have to enter the
gourd," she said.

"So maybe you had better go home, and
I'll return for you

when this is done."

"I don't know," he said, assuming his human form. "The

gourd's a pretty tricky place, even for demons. Maybe I bet-

ter go in with you."

"But your body would be left out here," she reminded

him. "And you would be unable to break contact."

"Actually, I have a pass for the gourd;
the Stallion lets

me visit when I want to. But it's true I
don't want to leave

my body exposed." He looked around.
"But maybe if I as-

sumed a safe form, it would be all right."

"A safe form?"

"Some creature no one will bother. Like
maybe a snake."

"A what?"

"Serpent, viper, reptile—"

"I know what a snake is! But someone
could step on

you."

"Not if I become the right kind of snake.
Like maybe a

bushmaster."

"Oh. Yes, maybe so."

"I'll change; you orient the gourd for
me." He became a

bush with reptilian scales and poisonous
foliage. No one

would bother him in that state.

She turned the gourd around until its
peephole faced one

of the bush's eyes. When the bush went
rigid she knew it

had taken. Then she turned vapory and
carefully insinuated

herself through the peephole, careful not
to interfere with

Dolph's line of sight.

It was dark and wet inside. She couldn't see anything, so

she formed a light bulb on the end of her nose. The bulb

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absorbed darkness, leaving the light behind, so that the scene

became dimly visible.

She was floating in some deep brine
green sea. There

might be a surface somewhere far above,
but it seemed too

. distant to bother with. There was no
sign of Dolph, but since

he could change form here as well as in
normal life, he might

be a fish exploring ahead. There did
seem to be a sea floor,

and on it was a large decorated vase.
She wasn't sure what

it might contain, so she made a knuckle and rapped on it.

A head popped out. "Eh?" it inquired. "Who patted my um?"

"Sorry," Metria said. "I didn't know it was a pat urn."

He stared at her. "What manner of creature are you?"

"I'm the Demoness Metria."

He looked disappointed. "Oh. One of those."

She bridled. "What's the matter with me?"

"Nothing, except that you're only half what I wished for.

But that's the way it always is."

Her curiosity, never far beneath her surface, surged up.

"You always get half your wish?"

"Yes. I'm Hal Halfling, a bit player for bad dreams. It is

my fate to get only half of what I wish for, no matter what

it is. This time I wished for decent company, and I got you."

Metria nodded. "I'm indecent company, for sure. Not only

am I not a real person, I have only half a soul, and I'm not

staying."

"Exactly. I thought I could outsmart it by wishing for

Xanth's most lovely and accommodating woman, figuring

that I could settle for an ordinary one, but once again it

halved it in such a way as to leave me no benefit. I had such

Xanticipation." He, sighed.

"Well, this is your Xanthropology lesson," she said. "I

could assume the form of Xanth's
loveliest woman, but I

don't care to. I study men, but I try to
please only one, and

it isn't you."

"Obviously. I don't know why I keep
making wishes,

since they never work out well."

' 'What was your first wish?"

"I wanted to be a wit."

"That explains it."

He looked sourly at her. "I would wish you to depart,

but—"

' 'But half of me might remain to pester you," she finished.

"I see your problem. Actually, I do plan to depart, once I

locate my partner and figure out a way to travel conveniently

in here."

"Yeah, sure, leave me already," Hal said, grimacing.

"Isn't that what you wanted?"

"No. What I wanted was good companionship." He

reached up and tore out a hank of hair.

"Why can't I ever

have what I want?"

"Maybe you should have wished for control over your emotions," Metria suggested.

"I did. I can control them only halfway."

"Too bad you can't control the emotions of others."

"I'd just get the wrong halves of their emotions."

She paused, having a notion. ' 'Maybe you should make a wish for me."

"You'd get only half of it,"

"I wonder. Limited wishes may have their uses. Wish for my ship to come in."

He shrugged. "Suit yourself. I wish for your ship to come

in."

A light showed in the blurry distance. It forged nearer. It

turned out to be a sort of ship, but it sailed well below the

surface of the water. ' 'What is that?" she asked.

A hatch opened. "It's a yellow submarine," Dolph said,

in human form. ' I was in fish form, looking for a better way

to travel, and I found this just lying where someone discarded

it, so I brought it in. We can travel in comfort in this."

"See?" Hal said. "That's a half ship. Halfway sunk."

"So it is," Metria agreed, floating into the hatch. "Say,

how is it we can talk normally here underwater?"

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"This is the dream realm," Dolph reminded her. "It

doesn't follow regular rules."

"That's right, I forgot." She settled on the interior floor

of the submarine, and Dolph closed the hatch. It was mirac-

ulously dry here, and portals looked out on the sea around

them. The interior looked lived in, as if several not-quite-

housebroken entertainers had spent time here. There was a

picture of a beetle on one wall.

"Where does your summons token point?" Dolph asked.

She brought it out. "That way," she said, pointing.

He steered the submarine that way. It accelerated, forging through the sea.

Then the sea dried. It didn't end, it just thinned into air.

The submarine didn't care; it floated on through the air.

"This is a pretty nice machine," Dolph remarked. "I can't

think why anyone would have thrown it away."

"There's a man out there," Metria said.

"Don't run him

down."

The airship slowed, but the man became a dragon and

snapped at it. "Oh—a were-dragon,"

Dolph said. He opened

the portal. "Hey, don't snap at us! We're just passing

through."

The man reappeared. "Ooops, sorry about that. I thought

this was an invader from Mundania."

"That's okay," Dolph said. "I'm Prince Dolph of Xanth."

Who are you and what do you do?"

"I'm Jay. My father was human, my mother a firedrake.

I wasn't quite comfortable in either society, so I got a job

supporting bad dreams. I listen to the instructions in my hu-

man phase, then perform in my dragon phase. It's a living."

"Do you know anyone here named

MPD?"

Jay scratched his head. "There are some pretty strange

folk here, but I don't recognize that one. Maybe the cyborg

would know."

"Cyborg?"

"He's part animal, part machine. Really

weird. I think he's

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reducing flowers today. Just keep on
going the way you are,

and you'll find his dung pile soon
enough."

"Thanks." The submarine floated on.

They came to a sign: HUNG DEEP.

"Better turn aside," Metria advised. "I don't think we want that."

The submarine veered to the left. There was another sign:

ROWING GONG.

Metria looked around, but saw no gong.
"This doesn't
seem right either."

So the submarine moved to the right
instead. This time it
encountered a sign saying ROT NIGHT.

"I told you this was an odd place,"
Dolph said. "We'd
better ask again."

They saw a woman painting a sign.
Dolph opened the

hatch. "Hello—I'm Prince Dolph, from
Xanth. I think we're

lost. Can you help us?"

"I'm Miss Pell," she replied. "Of course
I can help you.

Why should I?"

"Because the sooner we find what we're looking for, the sooner we'll be out of here."

Miss Pell nodded appreciatively. "That does seem worth-

while, Drince Polf. Simply correct my signs, and you should be successful."

' 'Drince Polf?' he echoed blankly.

"Miss Pell!" Metria exclaimed.

"Misspell! That's what's

wrong with the signs!"

He brightened. "Oh, okay!" He closed the hatch, and

guided the submarine back the way they had come.

"NOT RIGHT," Metria read, correcting the third one.

"GOING WRONG," as she saw the second. "And DUNG

HEAP. This is where we were going!"

Sure enough, there was a machine man with a piece of

wood, surrounded by beetles. He was touching them with it,

and they were in turn turning flowers into dung. There were

not many flowers remaining, and the pile of dung was quite

large.

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Dolph opened the hatch. "You must be the cyborg," he

said. "But why are you destroying those flowers?"

"They were part of the last set," the cyborg explained.

"Several dreamers were pushing up daisies. Now we need

to recycle them, so I'm using reverse wood to enable the

dung beetles to turn them back into dung."

"That must make sense, for dreams," Metria said. "But

I think I see one of a different species." She floated out and

picked up a bug. "I'll bug his ear," she

said to Dolph. Then

she put the bug in the cyborg's ear and
whispered something.

"Why, of course!" the cyborg said.

"Right that way."

He pointed.

Dolph set the submarine in motion.

"What did you do?"

"I dropped a hint," she explained. "That
was a hint bug

I found. Once I bugged his ear, he had to tell me the truth."

They moved on. The landscape faded into a sort of fuzzy

nothingness with colored ribbons curling through. The tug

of the token got stronger.

At last they came to a man sitting on a
loop of ribbon,

surrounded by music. He had a huge
shock of hair swept

back from his forehead, and wore a suit
that trailed almost

to the ground behind him. He had no
instrument, and his

mouth was closed, yet the music was
clearly governed by

his will, because he was nodding to its
beat and moving his

hands as if to accent some aspects while smoothing down

others. When Metria approached him, he looked up, and it

faded. "Yes?"

"Are you MPD?" she asked.

"I am No One." Somewhat wary violin music sounded.

"I think you are MPD, because this summons token is

nudging right toward you. You must appear as a Witness at

the trial of Roxanne Roc."

The music rumbled, with drums ascendant. ' 'Where is this

trial?" No One asked.

"In the Nameless Castle, in Xanth proper. We're here to take you there."

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A bassoon made a dirty noise. "I can't leave the dream realm. I can't go."

^But this summons says you have to,"
she said, holding
out the token.

No One brushed it away. "Forget it,
Demoness." The

woodwinds whistled as he dropped off
his loop of ribbon

and fell into the depths below.

She dived down after him, but the bands
of ribbon became

numerous and convoluted, obscuring her view and her way.

MPD had disappeared.

"So it's going to be that type of a serving," she muttered.

"Well, I won't be balked." She held up the token and

heeded its tug.

She threaded her way through the ribbons, and they be-

came thin bands of candy, then thickened
into flavored, col-

ored cotton. The cotton formed into
threads, and then into

fabrics, and the fabrics wound their way
into items of cloth-

ing. And there, amidst the hanging suits
and dresses, sat a

young woman with fair hair, pressing
sections of cloth to

each other. They adhered where they
touched, and she

twisted the free sections around and pressed them together

again, and they stuck together again, forming the configu-

rations of clothing.

"Yes?" she inquired as Metria floated up.

"I'm looking for MPD. Have you seen him?"

"Who?"

"His name is MPD. He has a big shock of wild hair, and

he makes music just by thinking of the instruments."

"Oh, that's Maestro No One. Maybe Me Two can tell you.

He's that way."

"Thank you." Metria floated hurriedly in the direction

indicated. The racks of clothing became blobs of goo. She

weaved around them, and soon they became blocks of

charred wood. She lifted the token again, and it tugged her

in a new direction. She followed it.

She came across a short, stout man with fiery red hair

standing in a smoking pit. A blob of goo appeared before

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him. He stared at it, and it burst into flame. It burned vig-

orously for half a moment, then settled into a moderate glow

for another moment, and finally became another charred

lump.

He looked up as she floated close.

"Yes?"

"Me Two? I'm looking for MPD."

"Who?"

She described the maestro. The man
frowned. ' 'Who told

you that was the one you wanted?"

"I know, because my token indicated him. But a fair-

haired young woman told me to come this way, because Me

Two would know."

"That was She Three. She shouldn't have told you that."

"Why not? Don't you know where MPD is?"

"I know where Maestro No One is/but

she shouldn't have
told you."

Metria was beginning to be annoyed. "I
think you folk

are giving me a runaround. Now, tell me
what you know."

"No. Go away, Demoness; we don't
want your kind
here."

"Listen, burnbrain—" she started angrily, then realized

that he was baiting her. Since she really didn't need him, she

refused to let him waste more of her time. She lifted the

token—and it tugged right toward him.

"What's that?" Me Two asked.

"It's a summons token for the trial of Roxanne Roc, in

mainland Xanth. And it seems to be tugging toward you,"

she said, perplexed.

He squinted at her—and suddenly she was a mass of

flames. He had spontaneously combusted her!

"You dirty noise!" she swore, becoming

water. The

flames hissed out. But the distraction had been effective: Me

Two was gone.

She lifted the token and zoomed along the path it indi-

cated. The charred blobs became polished blocks of wood,

and then polished metal, and then polished glass. Reflections

were everywhere. And there among the

reflections were a

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host of little old whiskery men with
collections of small ob-

jects.

Metria knew the difference between a
real figure and a

reflected one. She zeroed in on the original. "Where is

MPD?" she demanded.

The man looked up. "Who?"

"The maestro! Did he pass this way?"

The little man lifted a glistening red bottle. He put his two

hands around it, and drew them apart,
and lo! there were two

glistening red bottles. "No."

She was getting about as fed up as a
noneating demoness

could be. "No you won't tell me, or no
he didn't pass this

way?"

"No neither."

"Who are you?"

"I am Who Four. I duplicate inanimate objects, as you

can see. I am busy at the moment, as you can also see. Now,

go away, Demoness."

Metria was getting more crafty. She lifted the token—and

it tugged right toward Who Four. "Are you MPD?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."
He lifted a

small puzzle box, put his hands around it, and separated

them, holding two small puzzle boxes.

"Well, I'm going to serve this summons on you. Who

Four," she decided. She floated toward him.

Who Four jumped. The action was so sudden that it caught

her by surprise. He sailed right up past a mirror-beam and

disappeared. She followed, but all she found were dozens of

reflections of herself. So she faded into

invisibility, and then

there were dozens of reflections of
nothing. But Who Four

was gone.

Now she was getting good and irritated.
"There is

something very odd about this," she
muttered. She lifted the

token and followed its tug once more.

This time it led her away from glass
column and beams,

and past a forest of upside trees, to the
blank wall of a mas-

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sive rock cliff. There was a door set in
it, marked GOURD

STORAGE DEPT.: NO
ADMITTANCE.

"Fooey on that foul noise," she muttered,
and floated
through it.

For a moment she wished she hadn't,
because something

fearsome rose up before her. She
screamed and retreated

halfway back into the wall. Then she got
hold of herself,

putting one hand on a shoulder and the

other on a knee, and

hung on tight. "You're a demoness,
Metria!" she reminded

herself. "You aren't afraid of anything,
because nothing can

hurt a demoness."

Then there was a small swirl of leaves
and dust before

her. She screamed again and popped
right out of there.

But in two thirds of a moment she took stock. ' 'That is

the storage place of fears," she realized. "No wonder it's

scary." And her worst fear was of stepping beyond the magic

in Mundania and dissolving into a mindless swirl of dust.

But this was the gourd, the dream realm, one of the more

magic aspects of Xanth; she would not fade out here. All she

had to do was conquer her unreasonable fear and follow the

token. This time she would not let whoever or whatever it

was she found escape. Because a remarkable suspicion was

lifting its pointed head partway into her consciousness.

So she nerved herself, and walked back through the cliff

wall. The dust swirled up again, but this

time she addressed

it with what boldness she could muster:
"You are merely a

fear from my memory of Mundania. I am
not dreaming. You

have no power over me."

"Aw, shucks," the swirl muttered,
subsiding.

Metria smiled. Dust did not normally
speak in human fash-

ion, unless King Dor was around, but
this was the dream

realm, where the rules were as the Night
Stallion made them.

She had won a small victory.

Now, where was that person hiding? She
lifted the token

and followed its tug. The Simurgh had
good magic, because

these Bisks worked in Xanth, Mundania,
and the dream

realm. Which stood to reason, because Metria wasn't sure

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that any entity had more power than the Simurgh, except

perhaps the Demon XCA/N)* himself. That reminded her of

the root of this endeavor: Whatever could Roxanne Roc have

done to warrant such a prominent trial,

with the threat of

enormous punishment? The Simurgh must be really annoyed!

Well, she would find out when the trial came. Meanwhile,

she merely had to serve the last three summonses, then report

back to serve the Simurgh herself. Of course, her job

wouldn't be quite finished, because she still had to make sure

that every last summonsee arrived at the Nameless Castle.

But she was confident she could handle that, because once

served, no summonsee could really decline.

She walked onward through the Storage Dept. of Fears,

seeing things that were surely fearsome to normal folk. Slav-

ering dragons, hissing snakes, quivering

tentacles, things go-

ing bump in the night, hairy-legged
spiders, rent collectors,

and a long hollow stick.

She paused. "What's so fearful about
you?" she asked

the stick.

"I am from the stem of a plant known as
rye," the stick

answered. "I am full of my seeds, which are very solid."

"And that terrifies dreamers?" she asked with a hint of a

suggestion of a sneer she knew would annoy it.

"Yes—when someone points me at such folk, and threat-

ens to shoot out my seeds," the rye full replied. "I think it's

the loud bang I make as they go, because
I don't like losing
my seeds."

Metria shrugged and moved on. Mortal
folk chose funny

things to fear. Soon she came to an eye
land. It was shaped

like a giant eyeball gazing up at the sky.
She remembered

that big eyes in the night frightened some
folk. The token

tugged toward it. But it was surrounded
by water, as most

eye lands were, for some reason; maybe
the water cooled

their chafing orbs as they shifted in their
sockets. She could

float across to it, but preferred to walk,
so she wouldn't miss

anything low. That made the water a
problem.

Well, she would just have to wade. She put a foot to the

water—and discovered it was solid. She could walk on it!

' 'What kind of water are you?" she asked it.

"I am hard water, of course," it said.

"Oh, of course," she agreed, feeling stupid. "What's fear-

ful about you?"

' 'Folk fear drowning in me, especially when my surfs are revolting. They can get pretty violent, especially during a storm."

All of which she should have realized on her own. She walked on across to the eye land. There she saw an eyeglass

bush, which was, of course, made of glass, with glass eyes

in lieu of flowers. The eyes glared at her in frightening fash-

ion, so she could appreciate why this plant was stored here.

There certainly seemed to be a good many props; no wonder

the dream crews had no trouble Grafting bad dreams for all

occasions, every night. It amazed her to realize how many

bad dreams were needed; since they went only to those who

deserved them, there had to be a great many imperfect peo-

ple. If it was like this in Xanth, how much worse must it be

in Mundania!

The token tugged her on. She came to a rocky section of

the eye land. She paused at a big rock. "What's so scary

about you, rock?"

It opened an eye. "That's roc, Demoness, not rock.

Haven't you learned the difference?" It shook out a wing,

which she now saw was folded around it, making it as fea-

tureless as a boulder.

"Sorry about that," she said, amused.

"But you still don't

seem very petrifying to me."

"Very what?" the stone-hard bird asked.

"Appalling, dismaying, horrifying,
alarming, consterna-

tioning—"

"Frightening?"

"Whatever," she agreed crossly. "Why should any

dreamer fear you?"

"Because of what I do," the roc said.

"Like thus."

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Suddenly Metria was rock hard. She had become a statue!

She puffed into smoke, nullifying the effect. "Why, you

putrescent excrescence!" she swore.

"You turned me into a

rock!"

"That's what I do," the rock agreed.

"Folk are terrified

of being petrified.".

She gazed at the sharp tip of its beak as it spoke. ' 'You

have a point," she agreed cuttingly, and went on.

She came to an ugly tree with uglier fruit. It was a bag

tree, growing every kind of bag. She touched one, and found

it was full of trash: a trash bag. Another contained a sand-

wich and bottle of juice: a lunch bag.
One almost put her to

sleep: a sleeping bag. A fourth one
grabbed at her: a grab

bag. So she made like a punching bag,
and punched it in the

mouth. "Get out of here, you old bag!" it
told her.

The token led her to a bookshelf, and
stopped. When she

tried to walk on, the token tugged back.

When she went to

the side, the token tugged toward the shelf. But there was no

one there. So she considered it more carefully.

On it were several books, scattered and tumbled. There

were parts of pictures on their spines. "Someone didn't put

these away properly," she said, disgusted. So she stood the

books up and set them together. But the picture segments on

their spines formed a jumbled mess.

"This won't do," she

said. So she rearranged the books, with an eye to the picture

segments, and they began forming a proper picture.

When it was complete, the picture was of a comfortable

chamber, wherein a man snoozed on a

couch. He was a fairly

handsome human male, obviously just resting between stints

of work; an open book was on the table beside him. The

picture, now properly assembled, was surprisingly realistic.

And the token tugged right toward it. Toward the snoozing

man.

"This is weird," she muttered. But she reminded herself

yet again that she was in the dream realm, where weirdness

was routine, and in a private section of it, where fears were

stored for future use. There seemed to be nothing fearsome

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about this scene, but she didn't yet

understand all its implications.

So she turned smoky, then shrank into the scale of the

scene, and entered it. She found herself in the room, beside

the couch. "Are you—" she began.

But she stopped, because the man wasn't there. He must

have gotten up as she was phasing in. He was standing to

the side, near the door. "Who are you?" he asked.

"I am D. Metria, here with a summons for MPD," she

said. "And I think you must be him." She stepped toward

him with the token extended. "You have to report to the

Nameless Castle as a Witness."

But he had already moved away. "I have no reason to

accept such a summons," he said.

She whirled on him. "Then tell me who you think you

are."

"I am Take Five," he said. "And I was doing that, as is.

my wont, when you intruded into my home."

"What is your talent?"

"I can see five seconds into the future.
That is why you

will not be able to serve me with that
summons. I will be

five seconds elsewhere."

"I am a demoness," she said evenly. "I can float or fly

at any speed. Suppose I take out after you and simply pursue

you unremittingly, no matter how fast you flee? You may

see it coming, but you will not be able to prevent my serving

you with this summons eventually. You won't even be able

to sleep, unless you can do so in naps less than five seconds

each."

He pondered, evidently realizing that she was not bluffing.

There was a limit to his talent. "How much do you know?"

he asked.

"I don't know anything for sure, but I think that you are

a person with multiple personalities—
and each personality

has a different magic talent."

He nodded. "How did you catch on?"

"In part because I have the same complaint myself. I am

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Metria, and Mentia, and Woe Betide."
She shifted briefly

into the two other forms as she spoke.

"It's a nuisance, but

it has its points. So I'm not condemning you. I just have a

job to do."

His attitude softened. "I see. You do have a similar com-

plaint. I took you for an impersonation."

"A what?"

"Counterfeit, bogus, fraudulent, pretense, semblance, substitute—"

"Fake?"

"Whatever," he said, smiling. "I couldn't see why any-

one would summons an entity who exists only in the fear

storage of the dream realm. I have many personalities and

forms and talents because I am a general-purpose substitute.

When they don't have the proper character for a dream se-

quence, I fill in as well as I can. My mind is deemed irrel-

evant. So I assumed you were another joker sent to disturb

my equilibrium."

"They play jokes on you?"

"Sometimes. It seems it gets boring between scenes." He

shrugged. "Nevertheless, I can't go outside the dream realm,

because I have no reality in the real world. So I think that

however sincere you may be, your summons is not."

"It's from the Simurgh."

"That may be. But unless she is prepared to lend me a

soul, I may not leave here. I lack the solidity of the walking

skeletons or brassy folk; I would simply fade into oblivion,

like any other figment."

"Maybe the token can handle it," she said doubtfully.

"Very well. Let's test it. I will know if it provides support for the external realm."

She handed him the token. He took it and paused. "No, this has no animation for me. It's dead. In fact, it seems to be blank."

She looked. Indeed, the disk was blank on both sides. "I

don't understand. It said 'MPD—
WITNESS' before, and it

led me right to you. To all of you."

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"Something is amiss. Try it again." He handed it back.

She lifted it—and now the words were back. It tugged

toward him. "It's working again. See—there are the words."

She held it up so that he could see."

"True. So it works when you hold it, and not when I hold

it. Maybe I just happen to be the wrong personality."

"So let's try the others."

No One appeared. The token tugged, but faded when he

took it. Me Two appeared, with no better result. The same

happened with She Three and Who Four.

"Well, maybe one of my alternates,"
Take Five said.

A new form appeared, in the uniform of
a nurse. "I'm

Pickup Six. My talent is to take pain away by touch." But

the touch of the disk did nothing for her.

Another form appeared, a very friendly-seeming character.

"I am Roll Seven. My talent is making friends." But there

was still no reaction.

Yet another appeared, a young man vaguely reminding

Metria of Grey Murphy. "I am Eight
Late. My talent is de-
hancement." Still nothing.

A mischievously smiling young woman
appeared. "I am

Nine Line. My talent is to tickle at a
distance." She gestured

with her hands, and suddenly Metria
exploded into helpless

laughter, because she was being terribly
tickled. She had to

form a layer of impervious shellac all over her body before

she was able to withstand it. Then the tickle started in her

throat, making her cough.

She lost track of the other variations.

The token answered

to none. "I don't think it relates to any of your aspects,"

she said at last. "I don't understand this. It was blank until

today, and then it suddenly brought me here, and now it

doesn't seem to want to be served."

"Is it possible that someone else enchanted it?" Take Five

asked, resuming form.

"Who could interfere with something the Simurgh set

up?"

He nodded. ' 'That is an excellent question. But perhaps it

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isn't interference, merely illusion. You say that's a blank

token, so maybe there is no magic on it. If someone made it

look as if it had a name, and made it
seem to tug, that might

not be overriding the Simurgh's magic,
merely sliding past

it."

Metria considered. "That seems
possible. But who would

bother?"

He shrugged. "I can't imagine. But it seems like a pos-

sibility to be investigated."

"Yes." She put away the token. "Then I won't bother

you anymore. I apologize for chasing after you."

"A demoness apologizes?"

"I'm half-souled. 'Bye." She popped off.

She returned to the region she had last seen Prince Dolph.

He was in the submarine, playing with a creature he had

found somewhere. It had big heavy flat feet that smashed

constantly against the floor. He looked up as she popped in.

"This is a stampede," he explained. "It stamps nickelpedes

into flat squares of paper." Indeed, there were several such

squares before him, each marked "5^": five-cent stamps.

"So did you nab your summonsee?"

"It was a bum lead," she said. "Let's get out of here."

The submarine got into motion, taking them back. While

it traveled, she explained what had

happened. "Too bad I

had to waste a day finding out that this
was a wild duck

chase."

"Goose?"

"If you do, I'll tell your wife!"

"We had better have Eve check that
disk," he said. "She

should be able to tell if anything has been done to it."

"Good idea." His twin daughters were only four years old, but were full Sorceresses.

They reached the exit region, and Metria slid out. She

knew that she probably wouldn't have been able to do it, if

the Night Stallion objected, but her

mission for the Simurgh

gave her authority. Then she put a finger
between the bush-

master's eye and the peephole of the
gourd, breaking contact,

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so that Dolph's attention returned to the
regular world of

Xanth. It was now late in the day.

He resumed his human form. "Every time I enter the

gourd, it's different," he remarked. "This wasn't as wild as

sometimes, but it was interesting. I liked that submarine. And

that stampede could be useful out in real Xanth." Then he

became the hummingbird, and she took him and popped back

to Castle Roogna.

They explained the situation to Electra, who took them to

the twins Dawn and Eve, who were in their playroom, play-

ing with their pet eight-legged kitten, Octo Puss. Then Metria

showed Eve the token.

The child's eyes went round. "Something awful strong did

this," she said. "But I don't know who,

'cause she never
touched it."

"Someone enchanted it?" Metria asked.
"From a dis-
tance?" '

"Yes. It's s'posed to be blank." Eve lost
interest and re-
turned her attention to the kitten.

Metria shared a glance with Dolph and Electra. "So there

was interference. And I can ignore it after this."

"Do we have time to serve the last two?" Dolph asked.

"Let's go!"

They went after Marrow Bones first. He lived in a house

made of bones, with his wife 'Gracile
Ossein and their eight

year old son Picka and daughter Joy'nt.

"So how do you like your eight souls?"
Metria inquired.

She had been present when Graeboe
Giant had given Marrow

Bones half his soul, enabling the walking
skeleton to remain

permanently outside the gourd. Marrow,
of course, had

shared with his wife and children. Now each of them had an

eighth soul, because souls didn't regenerate in nonliving folk.

"It's odd," Pick said.

"Odd," Joy'nt agreed.

"But nice," Grace'1 said. "Now we do nice things natu-

rally, instead of having to figure them out."

That was the thing about the Bones family: They had al-

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ways been nice despite having no souls. Metria had not no-

ticed or cared before she got her own soul, but now she found

it remarkable. Marrow and Grace'1 had been two of the most

decent creatures in Xanth—while believing that they were

not. It made Metria wonder whether souls really were the

origin of goodness.

"I have a summons for Marrow," she said. "To be a Juror

at Roxanne Roc's trial." She explained the situation, as far

as she knew it.

"I shall be glad to attend," Marrow said, accepting the

token. "Though I find it hard to believe that such a bird

would do anything culpable, or that I should be competent

to judge her in such a matter."

"It's one monstrous mystery to me too," Metria con-

fessed. "I have always been curious, and this has pulled my

curiosity so tight, it's about to snap." She assumed the form

of a giant rubber band, tightly stretched.

"Do you think Grace'1 and the bonelets could come to

watch?" Marrow asked. "I am sure they would find it ed-

ucational."

Metria resumed human form, and shrugged. "We can

bring them along, and see whether there is any objection. It

isn't my job to exclude anyone, just to make sure that every

person on my list is there."

The two little skeletons jumped up and down, clapping

their bony hands with a rattling sound. "Goody!" they ex-

claimed. "We get to see the Nameless Castle!"

"Are you ready to go now?" Metria asked. "It's early

yet, but I'd like to get folk there early rather than late. I have

just one more token to deliver, and if you don't mind sharing

the trip—"

Marrow and Grace'1 exchanged an

eyeless glance. "We
are ready now," Marrow said.

So Dolph assumed roc form, and
Marrow bent over, and

Grace'1 kicked him on the tailbone. He
flew apart and formed

into a basket of bones, and the others
climbed into this bas-

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ket, and Dolph hooked three talons into it, spread his wings,
and heaved it up.

"OoOo, this is fun!" Picka cried, peering down through
the bone-bars of the basket.

"It looks just like a map!" Joy'nt exclaimed.

Metria found herself enjoying the flight
through their eyes,

as if experiencing it for the first time.

Maybe this was another

fringe benefit of having a soul.

"Squawk!" The big bird was circling
high, getting his

bearings.

Oh, she had forgotten! "Go to Lake Ogre-Chobee," she

called to Dolph's huge head. "The Black Village."

The bird oriented and winged swiftly for the lake.

"OoOo!" the children repeated as the land slid by below,

showing off its fields, forests, rivers, mountains, and settle-

ments. The outlines sharpened, because

the land, too, was

responsive to appreciation, and wanted to make its best im-

pression. Even the small passing clouds brightened their sil-

ver linings, looking pretty. Most clouds were sweet-spirited,

in contrast to stormy Practo.

They spiraled down toward the Black Village, which was

in the center of a nicely landscaped

section beside Lake

Ogre-Chobee. Dolph landed in the central square, released

the basket, folded his wings, and resumed man form.

A cheerful black man approached. "To what do we owe

the pleasure of this visit. Prince Dolph?" he inquired. His

eyes passed across the skeletons. "I see you come in style."

"The Demoness Metria has something for you, Sherlock,"

Dolph replied.

"A summons," Metria said, and explained.

Sherlock considered. "I suppose I could go. This is a quiet

time. During tourist season it's another matter. Let me go

post my name on the black list." He

walked away.

The little skeletons were looking at the village. Everything

was black, from the houses to the black-eyed peas growing

around the square. A black cat eyed them from atop a black

post, and blackbirds sat in the edge of the black hole that

was the village well, surrounded by
blackberries. A black

snake slithered across the black peat. In
the village men were

playing blackjack, and they could see the
school where black

magic was being taught. There were
letter boxes for black

mail. In a nearby field black sheep
grazed among black-eyed

Susans.

"What a neat place!" Picka said, awed.

"Yes, everything's a dull bone white where we live,"

Joy'nt agreed.

"Black is beautiful," Grace'1 agreed.

"Let's go get some

black paint, so we can turn our house and boneyard black."

Delighted, they went with her along the
black brick road

to the black market at the other side of
the village.

Dolph kicked the bone cage, so that the
bones flew apart,

and re-formed as Marrow. "This is
already proving to be

worthwhile," the skeleton remarked.

Sherlock returned, wearing a black hat, showing that he

was now dressed for duty. ' 'I got a black look when I said

I'd be away, but I showed them this black beryl token and

they knew it was legitimate." He looked around. "Uh-oh—

are they shopping at the black market? That can be danger-

ous for the inexperienced."

"Why?" Marrow asked. "Are the proprietors black-hearted?"

"Not exactly. It's just that too many things are available."

"All they want is black paint."

Grace'1 and the children returned. They carried a can of

black paint, but also a black bag with
black bread and black

silk cloth, and a Black Pete doll, and the
children wore black-

face as they chewed on black licorice
sticks.

"I think my common sense blacked out,"
Grace'1 said,

abashed. "There were so many nice
things—"

"Point taken," Marrow muttered. "Black markets are dangerous."

Marrow resumed basket form, and the others crowded in.

Dolph resumed roc form and lifted them up. They were on their way to the Nameless Castle. Metria's job was almost done.

PROSECUTION

So you are the last one I am serving,"
Metria told the

Simurgh, offering her the token with her
name on it.

OF COURSE, the Simurgh agreed,
accepting it. YOU

THAVE DONE WELL, DEMONESS.

"But there is one token remaining. It's blank, so I can't

serve it. Do you want it back?"

The Simurgh cocked a huge eye at her.
NO. IT MEANS THAT

YOUR JOB IS NOT YET FINISHED.

"At one time it had a name, but that was an error."

The eye remained fixed on her, so
Metria told the Simurgh

about the MPD misadventure. "Do you
think someone is

trying to interfere?" she concluded.

The Simurgh sighed, I HAD HOPED
THIS WOULD NOT HAP-

PEN IF I EMPLOYED AN
INSIGNIFICANT PERSONAGE. IT
SEEMS

THAT THE OPPOSITION DID IN DUE

COURSE REALIZE WHAT IS
GOING ON.

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"You mean someone is—?"

YES.

' 'But who would dare try to interfere with something you wished to accomplish?" Metria asked.

ON OCCASION THE MAJOR DEMONS HAVE CONTESTS BETWEEN THEMSELVES, IN THEIR ENDLESS QUESTS FOR ENHANCED STATUS. THREE YEARS AGO THE DEMON E(A/R)"

CHALLENGED THE DEMON
X(A/N)"1 FOR DOMINION OVER
THE

LAND OF XANTH, AND THEIR
INSTRUMENT OF DECISION WAS

THE COMPANIONS OF XANTH
GAME AS PLAYED BY TWO IG-

NORANT MUNDANES. NOW THE
DEMONESS V(E\N)"8 IS CHAL-

LENGING THE DEMON X(A/N)'h,
AND IT SEEMS THAT THEIR

INSTRUMENT OF DECISION IS THIS
TRIAL.

Metria was amazed. "You mean the way
Roxanne's trial

is decided will decide the fate of
Xanth?"

SO IT SEEMS. THIS WAS NOT MY
PURPOSE IN INSTITUTING

THE TRIAL, BUT THEY HAVE NOW
FIXED ON IT FOR THEIR OWN

PURPOSES. I HAVE NO POWER
OVER THE SENIOR DEMONS, NOR

DO I KNOW IN WHAT WAY IT WILL
SETTLE THEIR ISSUE.

"But don't you know everything?"

EVERYTHING EXCEPT WHAT IS IN
THE MINDS OF SENIOR DE-

MONS. THEY ARE LAWS UNTO
THEMSELVES.

"But then how do we know which side
we're on?"

WE DO NOT KNOW. BUT IT SEEMS
LIKELY THAT IT IS THE

DEMONESS WHO WISHES TO
DISRUPT .THE TRIAL, BECAUSE

THE DEMON COULD HAVE
CANCELED IT AT THE OUTSET
HAD

HE CHOSEN. IT MAY BE THAT THE
LIKELY DECISION IN THE

TRIAL WILL FAVOR THE DEMON,
SO SHE HOPES TO PREVENT

THAT DECISION FROM
OCCURRING.

"Then we need to make sure that the trial
proceeds as
scheduled," Metria said.

EXACTLY, GOOD DEMONESS. BUT
I HAVE NO POWER TO EN-

SURE THAT, AS I AM AT THIS
STAGE MERELY A WITNESS.

"Then who—?"

The eye merely gazed at her.

Oh, no! "But my job is merely to fetch in the witnesses!"

Metria protested.

YOUR JOB IS TO SEE THAT ALL
THE CHOSEN PERSONNEL ARE

PRESENT FOR THE TRIAL AT THE
APPOINTED TIME.

"I can't do anything to stop an entity as
powerful as the

Demon $X(A/N)^{11}$ himself!"

PERHAPS YOU CAN. THERE ARE
CONSTRAINTS. BECAUSE THE

DEMON $X(AfN)^{th}$ EVIDENTLY
WISHES THIS TRIAL TO PROCEED,

THE DEMONESS CANNOT

INTERFERE OPENLY. DEMONS
NEVER

OPPOSE EACH OTHER DIRECTLY.
SHE MUST ARRANGE FOR THE

TRIAL TO BE DISRUPTED BY SOME
SEEMINGLY COINCIDENTAL

FACTOR, OR INTRODUCE SOME
ELEMENT THAT WILL CHANGE

THE VERDICT. THIS WAS SURELY
HER INTENTION WHEN SHE

CAUSED AN ERRONEOUS
DESIGNATION TO APPEAR ON THE

THIRTIETH SUMMONS DISK. IT

MAY BE THAT HER INPUTS ARE
LIMITED, PERHAPS TO THREE,
AND THAT YOU HAVE NULLIFIED
ONE. YOU MUST BE ALERT FOR
ANY DISRUPTION OR UNWAR-
RANTED CHANGE, SO THAT THE
TRIAL PROCEEDS AS ORIGI-
NALLY SLATED. ONLY IN THIS
MANNER CAN YOU BE ASSURED
THAT XANTH WILL NOT BECOME
SUBJECT TO THE WILL AND
MAGIC OF A FOREIGN ENTITY.

And such a change might well be the end of Xanth as they

knew it, because a foreign demoness would have different

priorities. The Demon X(A/N)th allowed the Land of Xanth

to function without interference, and that was the way most

residents preferred it. The Demoness 'v^EVN)"8 might simi-

larly let it be, or might decide to change everything, just to

spite the former proprietor, or perhaps from simple whimsy.

Metria, as a demoness herself, had no confidence in the mo-

tives of the type. It would be better—infinitely better—to

remain with the present administration.

Metria swallowed, which was a sign of stress, because she

had no saliva to swallow. "I will try my best," she said.

DO THAT, GOOD DEMONESS.

Then it was time to go, so she popped back home. She

saw to the routine chores with only half a mind; in fact, her

worser half Mentia saw to most of them, realizing that this

was not the occasion for mischief.

What was the Demoness V(EVN)""1
going to do next, and

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what could Metria do about it? She had
no idea, and no idea.

Yet she had to be ready.

So she circulated constantly, making

sure that all of the

summonsees were ready, and that they would report to the

Nameless Castle at the right time. She encouraged them to

go early, because once they were there at the Castle, they

couldn't depart until the trial was done. Fortunately the

Nameless Castle had accommodations for everyone, and was

a fine place to stay. The Trial Personnel, and Prospective

Jurors, and Witnesses, and their families
and friends, had a

fine time associating with each other.

They were all under

the aegis of the castle, so tender morsels
like Jenny Elf or

Mela Merwoman had no fear of the
dragon Stanley Steamer

or the reality-changing Corn Pewter. In
fact, they were

having a great time. Rapunzel and
Threnody were learning

weird games like bridge and poker from Kim and Dug Mun-

dane, which were actually played with decks of cards; they

had little or nothing to do with rivers or fires. The children

of the Bones family were playing dice with Okra Ogress and

Stanley Steamer; somehow the children kept winning, and

claiming their prizes of ogreback or dragonback rides. Prin-

cess Ida was in a deep discussion with

Corn Pewter about

whether changed realities were
believable. Kirn's dog Bub-

bles and Jenny's cat Sammy were
playing tag-tail around

cloud hummocks with little Steven
Steamer. The two gar-

goyles provided a steady stream of
guaranteed fresh water,

which pooled in two depressions of the
cloud, so that Nada

Naga could swim in one, and Mela

Merwoman could swim

in the other, after it had been appropriately salted. When they

swam, by some coincidence, all of the unattached males got

interested in watching. Possibly their preference for swim-

ming in bare human form had something to do with it. In

short, a good time was being had by all.

It wouldn't last.

for she had been left alone by the Simurgh's decree. "All

rise," Magician Trent said.

Most of those present stood. Two of the winged ones flew

up higher, before realizing that this wasn't required. The

dragon lifted his head high. One child wasn't paying atten-

tion, so Trent walked over to him and transformed him to

an infan-tree. Then he changed him back, having made his

point: The Bailiff could enforce his directives.

Demon Grossclout appeared with a great noxious flair of

brimstone and called the proceedings to order from the lofty

rampart of his Bench. ' 'I realize that

there remains an inor-

dinate quantity of mush in your heads,"
he said politely,

"but if you really concentrate, maybe,
just maybe, you will

get through this procedure without utterly
disgracing your-

selves." However, he looked extremely
doubtful about that.

"Now, do we have the Prosecuting and
Defense Attorneys

present?"

Magician Grey Murphy and Princess Ida stepped forward.

"Yes, Your Honor," they said almost together.

Grossclout frowned, though this was hardly distinguishable

from his normal expression. "You have flies. Princess

Ida?"

"No, just a little moon." She tilted her head so that the

moon swung up for a clearer view. Now the others in the

courtroom noticed it, and were impressed.

He glowered forbiddingly. "And have you prepared your cases?"

"Yes, Your Honor."

"Be seated." He glared around. "And is the Court Bailiff present?"

Magician Trent stepped forward, looking about as young and handsome as he ever could be. "Yes, Your Honor."

"And the Special Effects person?"

Sorceress Iris stepped up, young and pretty. Her recent

rejuvenation became her, though she was probably enhancing

her appearance as well. "Yes, Your Honor."

"And the Court Translator?"

Grundy Golem stepped forth. "Present, Your Honor."

"Be seated." Judge Grossclout's terrible gaze forged

across the remaining people and creatures. "And the eight-

een Prospective Jurors?"

"Here, Your Honor!" they chorused.

The Judge frowned horrendously. ' 'I heard only seventeen responses."

One was missing? Metria's soul almost sagged out of her body. She had thought she had everyone!

"Identify yourselves," Magician Trent

said. "Grundy,
count them off as they do."

The Prospective Jurors stood in turn,
lifting their summons
tokens and speaking their names, and the
golem counted
them off. When they were done the count
stood at seventeen.

Meanwhile, Metria made her own count.
She had served

seven Trial Personnel tokens, seventeen Juror tokens, and

five Witness tokens. That was twenty-nine of the thirty to-

kens she had been given.

And there was the key. "Say, I know what—" she started,

but was almost immediately stifled by the collision of Judge

Grossclout's glare. "I mean, if it please the court—"

The glare became insignificantly less forbidding. "Speak, Demoness."

"Seventeen Juror summonses was all I served. All I had.

I have one token left—but it's blank. That must be for the eighteenth Juror."

"Approach the bench."

She approached, holding up. the blank
disk. Grossclout

took it and frowned on it for a generous
moment. Then he

looked up. "Is the Simurgh present?"

PRESENT, YOUR HONOR, the
Simurgh's powerful thought

came. OCCUPYING ANOTHER
CHAMBER OF THE CASTLE.

Even the Judge's forbidding mien
seemed just a trifle

daunted by that puissant presence. "Why
is this summons

disk blank?"

IT IS A SPARE, TO BE INVOKED AT
A LATER TIME.

Grossclout's eyes looked as if they
would have rolled

somewhat in their brooding sockets, had the response been

from any lesser creature. But he put a lid on it as he returned

the token to Metria. "The Prospective Juror roster is com-

plete at seventeen. Are the five Witnesses present?"

"Here, Your Honor."

The Judge nodded. "This is to be the trial of Roxanne

Roc for Violation of the Adult Conspiracy."

There was a mixed gasp. Some were amazed by the seri-

ousness of the charge; others that such a creature could have

done it. Roxanne had not even been near

a child in centuries.

The awful brows lowered. "We shall now impanel the

Jury." The grim gaze focused. "Bailiff, Prosecution, De-

fense, perform your roles." The Judge closed his eyes, seem-

ingly going to sleep.

Magician Trent called the first name. "Threnody Barbar-

ian."

Metria's beautiful daughter, the half demoness, stepped up

and took the interrogation chair. She had done her hair for

this occasion, and looked stunning in her short skirt, espe-

cially when she crossed her legs.

"Do you understand that you are under oath?" Grossclout

asked her.

"Sure. You want me to tell the truth."

Prosecutor Grey Murphy approached her. "You are a bar-

barian," he said.

"By marriage," she replied. "I'm an asocial half demon-

ess in my maiden state."

"Do you care about enforcing the Adult Conspiracy?"

"I think it's hilarious!"

"Is that a yes or a no?"

"That's a laugh."

The Judge's left eye cranked open. "The Prospective Juror

will answer the question with an affirmation or a negation."

"What?"

"That means yes or no," Grey said.

"Oh." She considered. "No."

"You don't care about enforcing the Adult Conspiracy?"

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"Right. I think it's crazy. I mean, what's so bad about

using hot words or showing your panties
to a child? The kids

all know about them anyway."

Grey frowned. "I challenge this Juror, on
the ground

that—" , .

"The Juror is excused," the Judge said.

' 'What, just because I told the truth? I

thought you wanted

the truth."

"We appreciate the truth," Grey said carefully. "We just

don't feel that you are suitable for this Jury."

"Well, if you feel that way, I don't want to be on it!"

Threnody got up, almost showing her
panties in the process,

and went to join the audience.

Suppose those panties had shown?
Metria wondered.

There were some children in the
audience. Would the Judge

have called a mistrial? Or merely tossed
Threnody off the

cloud for contempt of court?

The Bailiff called out the second name:
"Rapunzel Go-

lem."

Rapunzel took the chair. She was as
lovely as Threnody,

but in a much safer, more demure way.
She agreed that the

Adult Conspiracy should be enforced,
lest childish minds be

corrupted. The Prosecution accepted

her.

But the Defense did not. "Do you have any affinity with

the Defendant, Roxanne Roc?" Princess Ida asked.

Rapunzel frowned. "I don't know what you mean. I don't

even know her, except by reputation."

"Have you formed an opinion about her guilt in this matter?"

"Well, there must be some reason for her to have been charged. I'm ready to listen to the evidence and decide."

Ida's moon swung meaningfully around.
"Suppose you were charged with such a violation?"

"Objection!" Grey called. "The Juror is not being

charged."

"This relates to her attitude and belief," Ida responded.

The Judge shrugged. "Overruled. The Juror will answer."

Rapunzel was shocked. "Why, I would never, ever—!"

"But you are prepared to believe that a bird you don't

know would?" Ida demanded, and her moon looked bleak.

"I didn't say that! But if the evidence—"

"Objection," Grey said. "Counsel for Defense is badgering the Juror."

The Judge rapped the counter with his gavel. The sound was explosive. "Approach the Bench."

Grey and Ida went to the Bench. "What is your point,

Defense?" Grossclout asked.

"My client has the right to be tried by a Jury of her

Peers," Ida said. "Rapunzel is certainly a nice person, but

her perspective is that of an ordinary Xanth citizen, not that

of an isolated roc. So she is not a Peer."

The Judge actually looked faintly impressed. "What do

you consider to be qualification for a Peer?"

"To be a winged monster, or isolated from mainstream

Xanth."

"But that would exclude almost everyone!" Grey protested.

"No, I could find twelve or more qualified Jurors in this group."

Grossclout nodded. "Point taken." He glanced at Grey.

"Do you have any objection to a Jury consisting of winged monsters and isolated others, provided there are a sufficient number?"

Grey shrugged. "No objection. Your Honor. Provided

they accept the Adult Conspiracy as valid."

"Very well. This should facilitate the selection process.

Proceed."

But at that point the castle shook. There was a faint howl-

ing sound, and the floor slowly tilted.

"What is going on?" Grossclout demanded irritably.

"I'll check!" Metria said, and popped outside.

It was an ugly storm brewing. Dark clouds were scudding

around the castle in a malignant pattern, and the winds were

rising. Because the Nameless Castle stood on a floating

cloud, it was subject to destabilization by high winds.

"Fracto!" Metria exclaimed.

She was answered by a menacing roll of

thunder. It was

the evil cloud, for sure. Fracto had probably been sent to do

this mischief by the Demoness V(E\N)"": her second effort

to disrupt the trial. That meant that the storm could not read-

ily be stopped.

She popped back inside. "Cumulo Fracto Nimbus is at-

tacking," she said.

"Why, that impertinent pip-squeak!"
Grossclout snapped.

"I remember when he flunked out of my
Ethics of Magic
class a mere century ago."

"Well, we'll have to find a way to stop
him, and soon,"

Metria said. "Before he huffs and he
puffs and he blows our
castle down."

"I could transform a number of folk into roc form," Ma-

gician Trent suggested. "So they could flap their wings and

blow him away."

"Objection!" Ida said. "Anchored to the castle, their

backdraft might turn it right over."

And if she believed it was so, it well might be so.

"We need something fast and gentle," Metria said. She

felt responsible, perhaps because she had been forewarned

by the Simurgh.

"A person in the audience has the talent of making a force

field," Magician Trent said. "Perhaps

that could stabilize the
castle."

"No," Sorceress Iris said. ""It merely
keeps anything in
or out. It wouldn't stop the castle from
being turned over
entire."

Meanwhile the storm intensified, shaking
and tilting the

castle worse. People were holding on to their chairs, but the chairs were starting to slide.

There was a squawk of alarm from Roxanne's chamber;

she was trying to protect the egg in this increasingly treach-

erous situation. Normally, being between a roc and a hard

place was quite safe, but the egg could crack against the

stone nest if jogged or rolled too violently. HOLD ON! the

Simurgh's thought came. Then, to Metria:
DO SOMETHING.

But what could she do? She was an insignificant demon-

ess. It would do no good for her to go

out and insult Fracto,
who would just get worse.

Her despairing gaze saw the winged
monsters flying above

the others, achieving stability by having
no direct contact

with the heaving castle. Among them
was Chena Centaur,

the most recently converted one.

Chena! Metria popped across to her.

"Chena—I need your

wishstone. Will it work for me?"

"I'm not sure. No one else has tried it."

"It has to. Give it to me."

Distracted, the centaur reached in her pack and brought

out the little stone. Metria took it and popped outside the

castle. The clouds were roiling closer, and worse, forming

obscene blisters about to burst and
spatter the castle with

their juice. The castle was in the center
of a turbulent wall

of gray-black cloud that formed a
complete circle and ex-

tended up and down, making an awful
tube. That tube was

contracting, and the clouds were moving
faster as it did, like

a stone winding up on a whirling string.
When that tube got

small enough, the castle itself would be whirled around and

probably hurled right out of Xanth.

Fracto was doing his very

worst ever this time. And the Simurgh couldn't stop it, be-

cause she couldn't directly oppose the Demoness V^EYN)"8.

That was why Metria had to find another way.

She lifted the stone. "I wish Fracto

would go away," she
said.

The storm hesitated. The wish was
taking effect!

But then the motion resumed. Metria's
wish wasn't

enough to stop the effort of two demons:
Fracto and Venus.

Now what could she do?

A light bulb flashed just over her head.
'Mentia, make
your wish!'

Mentia took over the body. She was a
little crazy, but not

crazy enough to support the possible destruction of all Xanth.

She held up the wishstone. "Fracto, go away!" she wished.

Again the evil storm hesitated. Two wishes were stronger

than one. The funnel of dark clouds lost cohesion and began

to expand.

But then it pulled itself together again.
Fracto was so or-

nery that even two wishes were not
enough to turn him aside.

'Woe Betide!' Mentia said.

The innocent tyke took over the body.
Woe Betide's big

soulful eyes brimmed with fetching
tears. She held up the

wishstone. "Please, Fracto, go away!"

she wished.

This time it was too much. The wish of
an innocent child

was the strongest of all. Curses! Foiled
again! The wall of

cloud fragmented, and the fierce winds
died. The storm fell

apart into a great mess of brownish
blobs, like diarrhea foul-

ing the sky, and faded into impotent
drools of mist. Fracto

was gone.

GOOD WORK, GOOD DEMONESS

Metria resumed control. She was, if not overwhelmed by

the compliment, at least generously whelmed. But she knew

her job was not done. There could still be one more effort

to disrupt the trial, and she had to guard against it.

She popped inside. The castle had stopped rocking, and

the creatures were settling down. Judge Grossclout spied her.

"You had something to do with this?" he asked around a

glower in her direction.

"Yes, Your Honor," she confessed, abashed as always by

his direct attention.

"You may yet lose a bit of mush from that idiot skull,"

he said, turning away. And she felt deeply nattered again,

because the Demon Professor's faintest favor was a thing

rarely granted to any creature.

The impaneling of the Jury continued. In deference to the

nature of the Defendant, who was a

winged monster, half

the selected Jurors were winged
monsters: Gloha and Grae-

boe Giant-Harpy, Gary Gar and Gayle
Goyle, Stanley

Steamer, and Che Centaur. The others
were objective aliens,

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on the assumption that this would enable
them to understand

the viewpoint of a bird who had been mostly isolated from

Xanth for several centuries: Dug and Kim Mundane, whose

contact with Xanth had been limited; Sherlock Black and

Jenny Elf, who had come from far lands not all that long

ago; Marrow Bones from the gourd realm; and Corn Pewter,

who never did relate well to ordinary Xanth reality. Cynthia

and Chena Centaur were seated Alternates, in case something

should happen to any of the impaneled Jurors; each of them

had become winged monsters after being something else, so

they should understand both perspectives. Overall it was an unusual but well qualified Jury.

The Judge wasted no time. "Is the Prosecution ready?"

"Yes, Your Honor," Grey Murphy said.

"Proceed."

Now the wall separating the trial chamber from Roxanne

Roc's nesting chamber slid back, making one huge central

chamber. Metria was surprised; she hadn't realized that this

was a feature of the nameless Castle. The big bird was now

in the full view of all the assembled trial

personnel. She

seemed oblivious, neither twitching any feather nor making

any sound. She merely sat, as she had for centuries.

Grey took the center stage. "The Prosecution will dem-

onstrate that the Defendant, Roxanne Roc, egregiously vio-

lated the Adult Conspiracy by uttering an Adult Word in the

presence of a minor, and thereby may
have prejudiced the
future of Xanth."

A murmur passed across the group.
Roxanne's near eye
. opened. "Squawk!" she protested.

The Judge's loud gavel banged. "There
will be order in
this court. Defense will have its hour in
due course."

But this was the nub of it, Metria realized: How could

Roxanne have done any such thing, when there had not been

any minors in this castle in all the centuries of her confine-

ment here? This was one of the most protected places in all

Xanth; before the trial, few creatures had even known of the

Nameless Castle's existence, fewer had

visited it, and the roc

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had not spoken any bad words to them.
So the charge seemed

baseless. Yet Grey Murphy evidently
took it seriously, and

he was nobody's fool. His talent was to
nullify magic, and

he seemed to be able to nullify foolish notions too. If he

thought the big bird was guilty, it seemed likely that she was.

Grossclout oriented on Grey Murphy.
"Resume."

"First the matter of the Adult Word. The Prosecution calls

Pheira Human to the Witness Seat."

Pheira stood and came to the Witness Box. Grundy Golem

approached her. "Do you swear to tell the truth, no matter

what?"

"Sure."

"The Witness is duly sworn," the Judge said, with more

than a hint of annoyance at the informality.

Grey approached the Witness. "Where do you live?"

"I live in a mushroom in the deepest jungle north of Lake

Ogre-Chobee."

' "What is your talent?"

"I summon animals to help me, or those I

want to help."

"Have you ever interacted with the Defendant, Roxanne

Roc?"

"Yes, once, about two years ago."

"State the full nature of that interaction."

>>

"Well, it was an accident, really, and nothing much happened, just—"

"Objection!" Ida said, and her moon bobbed. "The Witness is offering a conclusion."

"Sustained," the Judge said.

Grey grimaced, then came at it another way. "Did you

have a dialogue with Roxanne Roc?"

"Yes. But it really wasn't—"

"Objection!"

"Sustained."

"But I need to establish the context of this encounter,"

Grey protested.

The Judge was unsympathetic. "Find a way that doesn't

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cause the Witness to offer a conclusion

about the Defen-
dant."

Grey considered. Then he faced the
Judge. "Prosecution

requests the assistance of the Court
Special Effects Officer

to animate this testimony, and the Court
Translator to rep-

resent speech, without invoking any
conclusions of the Wit-

ness."

"Granted."

The Sorceress Iris came to the stage,
followed by little

Grundy Golem. "What scene do you
want?" Iris asked.

"Start with her home, and animate her
description for the

Jury and audience."

Iris stood beside the Witness, and listened to her words,

which were now spoken faintly, so that the Jury did not hear.

After two and a half moments, the illusion picture formed.

It started with an aerial scene, similar to that seen by crea-

tures being carried through the air by a roc. It showed Lake

Ogre-Chobee, with the chobees basking

at its edges. South

of it was the Curse Fiends'

ThunderDome, and west of it

was Black Village. Then the view slid to the north, moving

down until it intersected the ground.

There was a deep jungle there, through which the Kiss

Mee River wound. The river had been very friendly, until

the demons pulled it straight, making it

into the Kill Mee

River. But later its friendly curves had been restored, and

once again those who drank of it became kissing friendly. In

fact, some of those who partook of its fresh water became

quite fresh.

Metria, watching, found herself becoming part of the

scene, and came to understand the

impressions and feelings

of the woman whose scene this was. It was her half soul that

was doing it, she knew; she never used to care about feelings.

This became a problem one day for Pheira, when a man

called Snide happened by. He spied her giving directions to

her pet catalog, and made sarcastic remarks about the cat.

"You think that moth-eaten fur ball will remember your di-

rections?" he demanded sneeringly.

"You must be as stupid

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as it is." The image was Snide, but the voice was that of

Grundy Golem, who was doing the dialogue. It didn't matter,

because Grundy had a natural talent for insults.

Now, Pheira was not a person to take offense without

cause, but something about the man's attitude annoyed her.

For one thing, he was wrong about the cat, who could indeed

take orders competently. "Oh, go have a drink!" she said,

which was just about as close as a nice

girl could get to

swearing. Then she wanted to swallow her tongue, because

she remembered the effect the river water had on folk who

weren't used to it. The last thing she wanted was to have

Snide get too friendly.

So she retreated into her mushroom and closed the door.

The house was, of course, somewhat

mushy, but was the best

she could afford. She was afraid Snide would come after her,

and that the mush would just make him even more inclined

for what she didn't want.

She peeked out the window, and her fear was confirmed:

Snide was drinking. In a moment he would be not only snide

but fresh. She had to escape!

Maybe if she could find her friend Alias,
she could get

away. Alias' talent was to make
everyone around him answer

to wrong names. When there was a
crowd of people, it could

get so complicated that they had to
compile a list to get them

all straight again. Snide would never
find her in such a

crowd!

. But Alias was elsewhere today, and
anyway, there was no

crowd of people to help confuse things.
So what about her

friend Tom, who could conjure a small
cloud and pluck any

tool or weapon he needed from it? Of
course, he had to return

the tool to the cloud before he could get

any other tool, but

it was a pretty strong talent. If he were here, he could pull

out a sword and tell Snide to go lose himself in a boggy

swamp.

But Tom wasn't here either. None of her friends were

close. So she would just have to flee for it, hoping that Snide

would give up the chase. She would
invoke her power to

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summon an animal to carry her rapidly
away. What animal

would be best?

Now Snide was approaching the house,
and he looked re-

ally super awful fresh. His hands would be all over her the

moment he got close. She had to summon an animal im-

mediately. /

Maybe a Rocky Mountain Goat, because it would carry

her swiftly up the nearest rocky mountain, and she would be

able to hide behind the rocks if she needed to.

She opened her mouth as she exerted her summoning tal-

ent. "Roc—"

Then Snide crashed through the wall of her house. Actu-

ally "crash" wasn't a good description; it was more like a

squish, ripping a sagging hole. The suddenness of it startled

her, so that she didn't complete her

.word. Besides, Snide

was already reaching for her, and he
smelled sickeningly

fresh. It was probably time to scream.

But her talent had been invoked, and it
oriented on the

nearest animal of the type she had
named. Unfortunately she

hadn't named an animal, but a bird, and
she didn't do birds

because a peculiarity of her talent was

that—

Too late. Suddenly she was flying. She sailed right out

through the hole in the mush wall and up into the air. She knew

what had happened: She had attempted to summon the wrong

kind of creature, so instead of bringing it to her, she was being

brought to it. Because it was a type of bird, she was flying to it.

It was her own messed-up magic doing it. She just had to hope

that wherever she landed was not worse than being caught by a

fresh man.

Lo, she found herself flying right up into a cloud. Her

talent had never backfired this badly before. But of course,

she was going to wherever the nearest roc bird was, and it

must be flying high above the clouds, as
they tended to do,

so that the magic of perspective would
make them seem like

much smaller birds. For reasons she
wasn't quite clear on,

the big birds tended to conceal their
presence, so that human

folk seldom encountered rocs close by.

Then, astonishingly, she saw a building
on the top. of the

cloud. A castle in air! And she was
flying right into it. What

a misadventure!

She came to light in a huge inner
chamber, before a roc

bird sitting on a huge stone nest. The
bird was fearsomely

large, but seemed as startled to see her

there as she was to
be there.

"Squawk?" the bird inquired.

Pheira didn't understand bird talk, but
took this as a ques-

tion. She started to explain how, her
talent had gotten fouled

up, bringing her involuntarily here.

"Squawk!" the bird said, evidently miffed.

"Freeze that frame," Grey Murphy said.

The scene stopped where it was. Grundy turned to the

Witness, who was sitting right where her illusion self was

standing. "Repeat exactly that Roxanne Roc said to you."

"She said 'Squawk?' and then 'Squawk?'
and then
she—"

"Those were the very words?"

"Yes. And then—"

Grey turned to Grundy. "And what do
those words trans-
late to, in human terms?"

"The first is 'What?' and the second is 'Dam!' " the golem said.

"Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure! I speak and understand the language

of all living things. That's what I was made for, before I

achieved living status."

"And what is the nature of the second word?"

"Objection!" Ida cried. "Conclusion!"

Grey turned to the Judge. "This is in the Translator's line

of expertise. He is qualified to define the word."

The Judge nodded. "Overruled. The Translator may answer the question."

"It refers to the process of mending torn cloth by means

of rows of stitches," Grundy said. "The process is tedious,

and the result tends to be unsightly, so is usually not appre-

ciated. A darned item is neither as
pristine nor as valuable

as the original. Thus when anything is
accused of being

darned, or when anyone is told to dam
—"

"Get to the point," the Judge rumbled.

"It is considered an objectionable word," Grundy said.

"One not suited for the delicate young ears of small children."

"A word not suited for small children," Grey repeated

with emphasis. "One which would be a violation of the

Adult Conspiracy if uttered in the presence of a very young

child."

"Exactly. Of course, it's only a mild transgression—"

"Thank you." Grey turned to the Judge. "I am done with

this Witness." He stepped away.

"But what's the relevance?" Metria asked. "There wasn't

any child there!"

The Judge's glower swiveled to cover her, but she passed

her hand across her mouth, leaving it visibly zipped shut,

and he let it pass. She knew she had better not speak out of

turn again.

Ida approached the Witness. "Wa's there a translator pres-

ent when you encountered Roxanne Roc?" she asked.

"No. I didn't understand her squawks."

"So you did not realize that she had spoken an unfortunate word."

"That's right."

"In fact, until this time you had no notion why you were

summoned to be a Witness at this trial."

"Objection!" Grey said. "Irrelevant, immaterial, and be-

side the point."

"Sustained."

"What happened then?" Ida asked.

"Objection! Relevance."

"It's relevant to my Defense!" Ida snapped, with unusual asperity for her normally sunny nature. Her moon looked similarly annoyed, though not actually eclipsed.

"But this is a Prosecution Witness."

"Sustained."

"Then I'll call her when my turn comes,"
Ida said, walk-
ing away.

"The Witness may step down," the Judge said.

Pheira returned to the audience, evidently somewhat bemused. The scene faded.

Grey smiled grimly. "Second, the matter of the presence of a child. The Prosecution calls the Simurgh to the Witness Seat."

There was a murmur of awe at this,
causing the Judge to

issue a general-purpose glower that
silenced the sound.

THE SIMURGH REQUESTS
PERMISSION TO RESPOND IN
PLACE,

OWING TO THE LIMITED SIZE OF
THE STAGE.

Grossclout almost smiled. "Granted. The Special Effects

Officer will generate a small illusion to be addressed in the

Witness Box."

Sorceress Iris nodded. A small image of the Simurgh ap-

peared, perched on the back of the Witness Chair. If anyone

thought such a representation humorous, he had the sense to

stifle his reaction.

Grundy Golem approached. "Do you swear to tell the

truth, no matter what?"

i DO. The answer seemed to come from the bird in the

Witness Box.

"The Witness is duly sworn," the Judge

said.

Grey Murphy approached. "What is the nature of your employment?"

"Objection," Ida said. "Relevance."

Grossclout frowned. "Is there relevance?"

"Yes, Your Honor. It will be apparent in

a moment."

"Then proceed. The Witness may answer."

I AM THE OLDEST AND WISEST
CREATURE IN THE UNIVERSE.

1 HAVE SEEN THE DESTRUCTION
AND RESURRECTION OF THE

UNIVERSE THREE TIMES. I AM
AMONG OTHER THINGS THE

GUARDIAN OF THE TREE OF

SEEDS.

"Do you find this tiring?"

AFTER A FEW MILLENNIA, IT DOES
GET DULL.

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"Are you considering any way to
alleviate that dullness?"

I HOPE IN DUE COURSE TO PASS
ALONG SOME OF THESE

CHORES TO MY SUCCESSOR, WHO
WILL EVENTUALLY BE AS

WISE AS I AM.

"And who is your successor?"

MY UNNAMED CHICK.

"Where is this chick?"

IN AN EGG BETWEEN A ROC AND
A HARD PLACE, HERE IN

THE NAMELESS CASTLE, WHICH
WA,³ ESTABLISHED FOR THIS

PURPOSE.

"And where precisely is the egg now?"

UNDER ROXANNE ROC.

There was a murmur in the chamber,
despite the Judge's

glare. This was news of enormous
import.

"How long will it take your chick to
hatch from the egg?"

SIX HUNDRED YEARS.

"When was the egg delivered to you?"

SIX HUNDRED YEARS AGO, IN THE
YEAR 495.

"Then it must be due to hatch this year."

YES.

"What is the state of the chick?"

THE CHICK IS SENTIENT AND
SAPIENT.

"That is, alive and intelligent," Grey
said. "Can the chick

hear words that are spoken in the nesting
chamber?"

YES.

"So when Roxanne Roc spoke that
forbidden word, the

chick heard."

YES.

Roxanne, listening in the adjacent chamber, jumped. It was

clear this was a revelation to her. That wasn't surprising;

there was a glare-stifled murmur in the audience, and a muted

exchange of glances in the Jury Box.

Grey turned away. "Your Witness."

Ida approached the image, and her moon inspected it cu-

riously. "Since you are the wisest creature in the universe,

why didn't you anticipate this infraction and prevent it?"

WISDOM DOES NOT EQUATE TO
FOREKNOWLEDGE. PHELRA'S

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VISIT TO THE NAMELESS CASTLE
WAS ESSENTIALLY A RAN-

DOM ACT THERE WAS NO WAY TO
ANTICIPATE. THE DAMAGE

WAS DONE BEFORE I COULD ACT.

"So you did nothing?"

I INITIATED THE SEQUENCE OF
EVENTS LEADING TO THIS
TRIAL.

"Even though you knew that the
Defendant had no aware-
ness of her violation?"

"Objection! Argumentative, conclusion."

"The Simurgh knows everything," Ida said evenly. "She

is qualified to give an opinion."

"It's still argumentative," Grey argued.

The Judge pondered briefly. "Rephrase your question."

' 'Do you believe the Defendant was aware of her infraction?"

NO.

"Then "why did you—"

"Objection! The Witness is not on trial."

"Sustained. The Witness does not have to answer."

I WILL RESPOND NEVERTHELESS. I
REQUIRED THIS TRIAL BE-

CAUSE IGNORANCE IS NO EXCUSE.
A VIOLATION HAS OC-

CURRED, AND IT MUST BE DEALT
WITH.

"Even though—"

"Objection!"

"Sustained."

Ida shrugged, not looking frustrated.
Metria understood

why: The members of the Jury, both
human and monster,

understood the nature of the unvoiced
objection, and were

being swayed by it. "I am done with this
Witness," she said.

"The Witness may step down." The small image faded from the chair.

Grey Murphy stood. "The Prosecution rests," he announced.

He had called only two Witnesses, but they had been

enough: They had established that the Defendant had uttered

a Forbidden Word, and that a minor had heard it. Roxanne

Roc was in deep dung.

15

DEFENSE

The Judge's devastating gaze swept across to Princess

Ida. "Is the Defense ready?"

"Yes, Your Honor."

"Proceed."

"The Defense calls the Simurgh to the stand."

^Objection! She said she was done with that Witness."

"I was done for cross-examination. Now I want her as my

Witness. That's a different matter."

The Judge rolled one eye expressively,
but allowed it

Overruled."

The image of the Simurgh reappeared on
the chair. Ida

addressed it. "You have stated that your
egg was delivered

six hundred years ago, and that you
arranged to set up the

Nameless Castle for its incubation.

When did you assign

Roxanne Roc as eggsitter?"

THE YEAR 500.

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"So that was five years after you
received the egg?"

YES.

"You had to take care of the egg yourself in the interim?"

"Objection! Relevance."

"I am establishing the importance of the Defendant's duty.

This relates to her character."

Grey shook his head. "Importance and character have no

necessary interconnection. Prosecution will stipulate that the

job is important. So important, in fact, that any default is a

most serious—" .

"Objection! The Prosecution's case has already been

made."

Judge Grossclout's dour mouth quirked
in a hint of a sug-

gestion of a thought of a faint unfrown.
"The Defense's ob-

jection is sustained. The Prosecution's
objection is overruled.

But do not try the limited patience of this
Court with too

free an interpretation of your mission."

Ida smiled sweetly at the Judge. Metria

realized that she

looked very nice when she did that.
Probably she believed

that she was making a marginally
favorable impression, and

so it was true. Even her little moon
seemed to glow. That

was bound to have more of an impact
when she addressed

the Jury. Then she returned to the
Witness. "You took care

of—"

YES.

' 'Was it difficult to eggsit while also guarding the Tree of

Seeds on Mount Parnassus and attending to your other du-

ties?"

YES.

"So you decided to get an eggsitter?"

"Objection! Defense is leading the Witness."

"This Witness can't be led against her will," Ida retorted.

"Overruled."

YES.

"Was the egg important to you?"

There was a ripple of mirth through the audience as the

Simurgh answered YES.

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"So you did not seek just any creature to do the job."

TRUE.

. "In fact, didn't you seek the most qualified creature available for that most important task?"

YES.

"And that creature was Roxanne Roc."

YES.

' 'So by your judgment, which is by definition the most

authoritative one available, Roxanne Roc was a highly qual-

ified bird. In fact, a creature of excellent competence and

character."

YES.

"And did she perform in the manner you required?"

YES.

"For almost six centuries."

YES.

"And does she remain so qualified today?"

YES.

' 'So your pursuit of this infraction does not imply that the

Defendant is in any way deficient in competence or character."

AGREED.

"And you still trust her to sit your egg."

YES.

There was another subdued murmur in the court. The

words and action of the Simurgh herself were the best pos-

sible endorsement of Roxanne Roc's character.

"Thank you." Ida turned to smile at Grey Murphy. It was

a try to dispute THAT expression, but her moon brightened

prettily. Metria worried about its effect

on a man who had

been too long betrothed without result.

"Your Witness."

Grey approached the chair. "But the Defendant did violate

the Adult Conspiracy."

YES.

And there was the crux, Metria realized.

It hardly mattered

how great a person Roxanne was; she
had done the deed.

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And it hardly mattered how fetching
Princess Ida became;

Grey's talent nullified that magic.

He nodded significantly at the Jury.

"Thank you. I am

done."

The image faded. Ida faced the audience.

"I call Gwen-

dolyn Goblin to the stand."

The pretty little lady Chief of Goblin

Mountain stood and

came to the stage. She was duly sworn in.

. "Have you encountered the Defendant?"
Ida asked her.

"Yes, once."

"State the circumstances of that encounter."

' 'Well, I was rivaling my bratty little brother Gobble Gob-

lin for the Chiefship of our tribe, and he arranged for me to

have to fetch what was between the roc and the hard place."

As she spoke, the Sorceress Iris animated it, so that the scene

in Goblin Mountain appeared. Gwenny Goblin was with her

Companion Che Centaur and her friend

Jenny Elf, both of

whom were now on the Jury. The three of them struggled to

grasp the meaning of the requirement, and realized that they

would have to somehow find their way to the Nameless Cas-

tle in order to fetch the precious roc's egg.

The scene shifted past the complicated route they took to

reach the Nameless Castle. It was in fast forward, so it

looked as if they were feverishly dashing across Xanth and

scrambling upward toward the Castle. They reached the main

chamber where Roxanne sat on the nest. Gwenny used her

magic wand to lift the supposedly sleeping bird off the nest,

exposing the beautiful crystalline egg. Then Che touched it.

And Roxanne squawked. "Stop!" Grundy translated.

"That's the Simurgh's egg!" And on her command the en-

tire castle was suddenly sealed shut, so that the intruders

couldn't escape.

There followed a chase, as the big bird sought to catch

and confine the three, and they sought to

escape. They man-

aged to get Roxanne into one of Jenny Elf's shared dreams,

and had a dialogue with her, and learned how she had run

afoul of the Simurgh and lost her power of flight. She had

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finally petitioned the Simurgh for release from her ground-

ing, and the Simurgh had assigned her to community service

in the Nameless Castle, where she had to remain until she

hatched the egg stored there. She did not know that she had

actually been chosen for this important labor; she thought it

was a rebuke rather than a privilege, but she did her best

regardless, because she was that kind of person.

And there she remained for almost six centuries, guarding

and warming the egg. She was allowed to eat only those

intruders who threatened the egg, and since she didn't want

to make a mistake, she was very careful. In this case she had

waited until one of the intruders actually touched the egg.

Then she had acted.

Metria remembered. She had passed that scene at that

time, while on game-duty for Professor Grossclout, and seen

Jenny and Che in the cage the roc had put them in. Gwenny

Goblin had been fending off the bird with her magic wand,

so it was an impasse, but it didn't look good for the intruders.

"So the Defendant defended the egg loyally," Ida concluded.

"Oh, yes!" Gwenny agreed. "She was a terror. But we came to understand that she was just doing her job, and we came to respect her for that. In the end we reinterpreted our requirement, and took one of Roxanne's old shed claws, be-

cause it had fallen into .the nest beside
the egg, so was also

between the roc and the hard place."

Ida next called Okra Ogress to the
Witness Stand. She

testified that she and her friends Mela
Merwoman and Ida

Human had been sent by the Simurgh to
rescue the stranded

trio, and had done so, with the help of a
Seed of Thyme and

some negotiation. Because Roxanne had been out of circu-

lation for several centuries, she had not learned that Che

Centaur was to be protected by all winged monsters, so that

he could in due course change the history of Xanth. Once

she learned this, she honored .it.

There was another murmur in the audience as the anima-

tion showed Ida herself in the scene,
along with two of the

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members of the Jury and three
Witnesses. But an all-purpose
glower by the Judge stifled it, as usual.

Okra agreed that Roxanne had acted in

an honorable man-

ner, and had certainly protected the egg
to the best of her

ability.

Mela Merwoman, the next Witness, was
wearing her legs

instead of her tail. She took time to settle
her comely pos-

terior in the Witness Chair so that the
males in the audience

could complete their gawking, then

endorsed the ogress' tes-

timony. In the end they had given
Roxanne the Seed of

Thyme, and the big bird had not used it
to destroy them, as

she readily could have done.

"So the Defendant proved to be a
creature of her word,"

Ida concluded.

"Yes. She's a good person."

Pheira was the next Witness. "So you heard the Defendant

squawk, but did not at that time know the meaning of her

exclamation," Ida said. "You were not aware that she said

a word that was forbidden in the context she didn't know

existed."

"Objection!"

"I'll rephrase. It was just a squawk to you."

"Yes," Pheira agreed.

"Perhaps an exclamation of surprise or dismay, when she

realized that you had arrived there accidentally and that it

might be a chore to get you clear of the Nameless Castle."

"Yes. That is the way I understood it."

"And indeed, that is exactly the way she intended it. She

could understand your speech, because most animals take the

trouble to learn human speech despite being unable to speak

it themselves, in contrast to the ignorant

attitude of most

humans. Her frustration was that she was
unable to explain

to you how to return to your home."

"Yes."

"In fact, she might even have made an
analogy to a sock

that had been torn, that would need
tedious and imperfect

mending, because the sock doesn't understand the problem."

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"Why, yes," Pheira agreed, brightening.

"In that sense,

it wouldn't be a bad word at—"

"Objection!"

"Sustained. Jury will disregard that

comment."

The Jury, however, looked as if it wasn't sure it wanted

to forget the comment. Ida was doing a remarkably apt job

of swaying the members of the Jury, perhaps because of her

talent of belief. She probably had the Idea that she could

save Roxanne, and what she truly believed always came to

pass, because she was a Sorceress.

"But she did get you safely home, didn't she?" Ida continued.

"Yes. She had a chip of reverse wood. I held it, then exerted my talent to summon the roc again. It reversed the thrust, and sent me flying right back the way I had come. It was exactly what I needed. In fact, it

even helped me get rid

of Snide. I'm sorry that I never had the chance to thank her,

or to return her chip of wood."

"So the Defendant, once she understood the situation,

treated you with helpful courtesy."

"Yes. She was great. She could have eaten me, but she

didn't."

Metria could see that this made another impression on the

Jury. By rights, Roxanne could have chomped Pheira, for

intruding where she didn't belong. But the bird had acted

compassionately rather than viciously. But still, she had ut-

tered the bad word.

Ida was finished with the Witness, and Grey had no further

questions; the damage to his case was already quite enough.

"The Defense calls Roxanne Roc to the Witness Stand."

Judge Grossclout spoke. "Are you aware that if the De-

fendant testifies on her own behalf, she will become fair

game for the Prosecution, who may
cause her to incriminate

herself?"

"Yes, Your Honor." Ida's moon looked
serious. "But I

feel the risk must be taken."

"Proceed. The Witness may answer from her present location."

Ida faced the other chamber. ' 'Roxanne, please relate what

befell you during the Time of No Magic."

There was yet another muted murmur. The Time of No

Magic had occurred in the year 1043,

fifty-two years before,

and a number of the participants of this trial had not been

on the scene at that time. To them it was History, and

therefore boring. What relevance could this have to the pres-

ent case?

But Grey Murphy did not object. Either he saw some rel-

evance, or he was curious himself.

Roxanne began squawking. Grundy
Golem translated, and

the Sorceress Iris animated the scene. It
was of the Nameless

Castle on its cloud, floating serenely
above the Land of

Xanth. Roxanne herself was snoozing, as
she sometimes did

during the somewhat tedious centuries,
and in that state she

looked as if she were a great stone

statue.

Then, abruptly, the magic ceased. This was because Bink

Human, participating in an aspect of the Demon X(A/N)th's

reality, had given the Demon leave to depart. The Demon

had done so in half a trice, going somewhere far from Xanth,

and taking his magic with him. For all of Xanth's magic

stemmed from the ambience of the Demon, representing that

trace that leaked out, much as the heat of an animal's body

leaked out to the surroundings. Some magic remained for a

while, in the manner of some heat, slowly diffusing from

Xanth's larger concentrations, but it was so scant as to be

virtually unnoticed.

Immediately the cloudstuff of which the castle was made

began to soften, and the cloud itself lost its buoyancy. It sank

rapidly toward the suddenly bleak land. Roxanne had no idea

of the background cause, but did realize that the cloud and

castle would crash and be destroyed if she didn't do

something quickly.

She leaped off the nest and ran outside.
She peered down

past the fragmenting brink. There lay
Xanth, spread out much

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as usual, but twice as dreary as usual. It
looked almost as

bad as Mundania. Not far away was
Lake Kiss Mee, looking

as if it had been kicked instead of

kissed.

Maybe she could get the castle to splash down into the

lake, instead of wrecking on land. It would still be one awful

collision, but the cushioning effect of the water might enable

her to save the egg. That was all that mattered.

She dug her talons into the loosening

cloudscape, stood

up straight, and spread her giant wings.
She couldn't fly,

because the Simurgh had deprived her of
her power of flight

for the duration, but her wings still could
beat the air and

make a strong backdraft. If she could just
push the castle

toward the lake...

The castle moved—in the wrong

direction. Of course; she

was facing the lake. She angled her wings, and caused the

cloud isle to spin around until she was facing away from

the water; Then she pumped as hard as she could. Already

the castle was much lower, because it had continued falling.

But there was still a chance to slant it down to the lake.

She pumped until she thought her heart
would burst,

watching the land rush up beneath her.
She couldn't see the

lake now; was she going in the right
direction? She must be,

because forward was the one way she
could not see.

But she couldn't let the egg take the
shock by itself; it

could be cracked open. So as the tops of

the trees loomed

close beneath, she let go, turned, and
launched herself back

into the incubation chamber. She was
diving for the nest—

just as the castle struck the water.

There was a horrendous swish. Walls of
water sailed up

all around, visible through the higher
windows. The castle

came to a sudden but not calamitous

partial halt—and

bounced back up. It was skipping across the water like a

clumsy stone! Because she had succeeded in angling it for-

ward at a faster rate than it was falling. She overshot the

nest, because everything but her was slowing down drasti-

cally. She scrambled to turn around, so as to get back on the

nest and protect the egg.

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The bounce reversed, and the castle descended again. The

egg sailed out of the stone nest. Roxanne leaped at it, and

caught it in her talons, oh-so-carefully, so that it would not

fall back against the stone. But she was falling now, too. So

she pushed her wings down, hard, to break her fall and keep

the egg clear of the hard nest. Normally the safest place in

Xanth was between the roc and the hard place, but not in

this circumstance.

The castle skipped again, rising a second time. It came up

hard under her. Her wings took the shock, and she was able

to land in the nest and lay the egg gently back in it. But she

felt a terrible shock of pain, and knew that one of her wings

was broken.

But she had no chance to be concerned about that. The

castle was Still bouncing across the water, in diminishing

hops, rattling the egg dangerously. She wrapped her wings

down under herself and the egg,
cushioning the contacts with
the hard nest.

At last the awful motion ceased. She
breathed half a sqawk

of relief—then realized that there was
still some motion. A

slow settling. The castle was sinking in
the lake!

She left the egg, secure for the moment,

and scrambled

back outside. Water was covering the surface of the cloud

and lapping at the base of the castle itself. The castle was

light, but the cloudstuff was getting waterlogged, so that in

the end it would sink to the bottom. How deep was the lake?

She didn't know, but feared it was way beyond the height

of the castle. The egg would drown at the bottom of the lake.

Unless she could do something to shore
it up. If she could
make it float—

She clawed at the cloudstuff of the
cloud-island's rim,

hauling it up. A fragment tore out,
leaving a gap. She quickly

jammed it back down, but at an angle, so
that part of a rim

formed. One advantage of the deteriorating nature of the

cloudstuff was that it was now malleable; she could shape it

to her whim.

She moved around the edge, turning it up and jamming it

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in place. Soon she had a boat of sorts, or raft. But it was

waterlogged, and still slowly sinking. So she formed a chan-

nel-ramp, low inside, high outside, set herself at the low side,

dug in, and began flapping her wings again. Pain shot

through her left wing with every stroke, but she gritted her

beak and forced the motion through. She was directing her

backdraft across the water, by the crude channel.

As she pumped harder, the wind pushed the water along

the channel, and on off the cloudbank. More water seeped

in to fill its place, and this, too, was forced along the channel

and out. Soon she had a weak fountain of water forming,

squirting off the edge of her island, and

the level on the

island was dropping. As it did, the island became more buoy-

ant, and the castle slowly lifted. She was succeeding in mak-

ing it float!

At last the cloud surface was mostly dry, and she was able

to relax. Her broken wing was smarting something awful,

and the rest of her was almost worn out.

But she had suc-

ceeded in saving the castle, and with it the egg. That was all

that mattered.

She checked on the egg, and it was secure. She didn't have

to sit on it all the time; it was large enough and dense enough

to hold its heat for some while. Still, it wouldn't hurt to—

The castle shook. She scrambled back outside to check.

There was a ship trying to collide with it! A big boat, filled

with annoying-looking people- Its side was banging into the

cloudwall, threatening to dent it and let the water pour back

in

"What are you doing?" she demanded

angrily. "Get away

from here!" But all that came out, of course, was two

squawks, which she knew from experience were indecipher-

able to ignorant human folk. Indeed, they were standing at

the rail of the ship, staring stupidly at her.

then she saw the name of the boat:
RELATIONSHIP. This

was the craft that carried all the relatives! Naturally folk

hated to see its approach, because relatives tended to be a

pain, particularly those of one's spouse. These were probably

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kissing cousins, because this was Lake Kiss Mee. Right now

they looked quite sour, though, because the magic was gone.

She braced one foot against the ship, and hooked the other

into the cloudstuff, and managed to shove the ship away- It

drifted onward, toward whatever fate any relationship was

doomed to suffer.

Now she had time to ponder. Obviously

the magic had

departed, for what reason she wasn't competent to wonder.

The Nameless Castle had lost its enchantment, and surely the

spell that denied her the ability to fly was also gone—except

that the magic of rocs was the ability to fly, because no other

creature their size could do it. So the loss of the magic had

the same effect on her as the null-spell. And of course, her

broken wing would have prevented her from flying anyway./

The question was, would the magic return? She had to as-

sume that it would, because otherwise she and the castle and

the egg were doomed. The proper place for them was in the

sky, where it was safe; down here on land or water, it would

be only a matter of time before land monsters attacked, or a

storm blew it over.

But she had no control over that. All she could do was

wait—and hope. And keep the precious egg warm.

She went back to the nest and sat on the egg. She tried to

sleep, but her wing was too painful. She wished she had

access to a healing spring, but realized

that the healing elixir

wouldn't work without magic. So she
simply steeled herself

against the pain and waited.

Every so often she went outside and
repaired the deterio-

rating rim. She judged that if the magic
stayed away more

than a day, there would be nothing more
she could do to

preserve the castle, because the

cloudstuff continued to sag.

It would founder, and disappear under the water.

Unless she could guide the castle to land, so that at least

it couldn't sink. Yes—that was her best course.

She anchored her feet and pumped her wings again. The

pain flared awfully, but she kept at it,

until at last the soggy

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floating island bumped up against land.
She nudged it as far

up as she could, then rested. Now it
wouldn't sink, at least.

She returned to the egg, and sat on it,
warming it with her

body. It took her a while to snooze, because of her pain and

fatigue—and when she did, more trouble came.

There was a horrible howling near the castle. Some mon-

ster was coming; and it sounded dangerous. She scrambled

out to assess the situation, because she did not want to be

surprised on the nest. The big

disadvantage to perching the

cloud isle on land was that it was now exposed to the dep-

redations of land creatures, which could be about as bad as

the sea creatures. Worse, really, because surely there had

been no unfriendly ceatures in the Kiss Mee lake.

It was something that might once have been a dragon, but

now was a crazed obscurity in the night.
It snapped at the
fringe of cloudstuff, tearing out huge
gobs. It lurched toward
the castle itself.

Roxanne gave a squawk for challenge
and charged it. She

could not let it chew up the softening
fabric of the castle and

perhaps get at the egg itself. She was in
no condition to fight,

but she had to protect what remained of
her charge, in case

the magic ever came back.

The monster hissed and whirled on her.
Its eyes glared

balefully. It was confused and maddened
by the loss of

magic, but it was large and vicious.
Maybe it was the rem-

nant of a sphinx. All she wanted was to
make it go away,

but she feared that it would feel no pain
and would not be
bluffed.

She was right. The monster snapped and
clawed at her,
gouging out feathers and flesh. She
retreated—away from
the castle. It followed, intent only on
viciousness. So she
continued to hold its attention, luring it
away from the castle.

She could have fled, and saved herself a beating, but she

wanted to be sure it was far enough away so that it would

not blunder into the castle again. So she endured the unre-

lenting attack, though hardly any part of her body escaped

laceration and bruising.

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When she was finally satisfied, she
backpedaled faster, es-

caping the nearly mindless thing. But
now she was so worn

and battered that she wasn't sure she
could straggle back to

the castle herself, let alone defend it
from other predators.

She wanted simply to collapse and
expire.

But she didn't. She dragged herself in

what she thought

was the right direction. After a time the deadly fatigue over-

whelmed her and she sank down on the ground, unconscious.

But after more time she recovered a bit, and resumed drag-

ging. She couldn't leave the egg vulnerable!

She had no idea how long she dragged and collapsed,

dragged and collapsed, but certainly time was passing. Her

concern for the egg grew; when would it cool too far? She

had to get there, and collapse on top of it, so that it would

have its best chance, regardless what happened to her. Even

if she died, her body would take time to cool—perhaps time

enough for the magic to return. Then—

Then what? The egg needed her protection with magic as much as without it.

Her consciousness was dimming, but she realized that she had to do more. She had to find a way to get the castle back in the sky, where it and the egg would be safe. If the magic returned, the castle might recover, and float again. But she

had to be with it, warming and protecting the egg.

But what could she do? She was so far gone that just

getting to the castle might be more than she could manage,

and then she would be unable to do anything more useful

than warming the egg.

She pondered, and slowly came to some

conclusions. First,
if the magic did not return, all was lost;
the egg, Roxanne
herself, and all Xanth. Second, if the
magic returned, there
was a way to help. But first she had to
help herself, because
otherwise the egg would be lost anyway.
And if the magic
returned, there was a way.

She had to find a healing spring. And she

remembered that

there was one in this vicinity; it was one
of the numerous

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springs that fed the Kiss Mee lake. For
there was healing in

kissing. Where was it?

She struggled with her memory, and

concluded that the

spring was no farther from her than the castle was. So she

changed her course and dragged toward the spring. If the

magic did not return, it would be no good, but since in that

case everything would be lost anyway, it didn't matter. If

the magic did return, it could be the salvation of the egg.

At length she reached the place she remembered. There

was an indifferent pool, but the growth of vegetation around

it was good, suggesting that normally it existed in supreme

health. This had to be it.

She would need to take a quantity of it with her. So she

labored to fashion a watertight container. She gathered leaves

and twigs and clay, and tediously pieced together a bag,

drawing on bird lore that was older than magic. Now, if the

spring ever resumed its power, she would be ready.

She stood at the brink of it, and relaxed. She had done

what she could. As she relaxed, she lost her balance, and fell

forward into the spring. She landed with

a great splash, and

sank down below the surface of the water, too tired to try to

climb back out. She knew she would drown, but her last

physical resource had been expended making the bag; now

she could not save herself.

Then something happened. She was feeling better! The

pains and rawnesses of her mangled

body had faded, and she

saw that her plucked feathers had been restored. But that was

impossible, unless—

The magic had returned!

But why hadn't she drowned, even so?
She was floating

beak down in the pool, not breathing.

Then she realized that it was impossible to drown in a

healing spring, because it constantly healed whatever damage

the body suffered. The magic had returned in time to save

her. Or maybe it had returned after she had drowned, and

restored her. It didn't matter; she was suddenly fit to proceed.

She was no longer horribly fatigued, and her broken wing was whole.

She hauled herself out, and filled her bag with the precious elixir. Then she charged for the castle, at a phenomenally faster rate than before. In two and a half moments she was

there—and saw the castle walls
stiffening. Magic gave them
their hardness.

But more was required. She lifted the
bag and held it over
the gouged rim of the cloud isle. If this
worked—

The rent healed. The cloudstuff had just
enough life in it
to respond to the healing elixir. Her

desperate ploy was
working.

She walked all around the isle, carefully
dripping elixir on

every wound. Then she went inside, and
dripped more elixir

on the castle's injuries. These, too,
healed. Finally she came

to the nest, and the egg, which was
shivering with cold, and

dropped the last drop on it. The

shivering stopped; the egg,
too, had healed.

She climbed on top of it—and felt the
castle move. It was
floating again! It lifted from the ground,
at first slowly, then
more swiftly, as the healing elixir
penetrated to the last of
the damaged crevices.

She had done it. She had saved the egg.
That was all that
mattered. All was well again.

"The Defense rests," Ida said as the
illusion image faded.

"Your Witness."

But for some reason Grey didn't choose
to question Rox-
anne further.

"Proceed to the summations," Judge Grossclout said,

Now Grey Murphy took the floor and addressed the Jury.

"You have just one thing to decide," he said grimly. "Did

Roxanne Roc violate the Adult Conspiracy? Her personality

does not matter; the Prosecution concedes that she is a fine

bird. Her intent does not matter; the

Prosecution concedes

that her violation was inadvertent. Only one thing matters:

Did she do it? The evidence shows that she did. You have

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no choice but to find her guilty as charged." He sat down

again.

Ida approached the Jury. "It is not that simple," she said.

"Intention does matter. Perhaps it can't entirely excuse the

infraction, but it can mitigate it. You must weight the balance

of what Roxanne Roc did. Suppose she had not been there:

What would have been the fate of the

egg? Would it have

been better off without her? This is the context in which you

must judge her."

She paused, marshaling her arguments, and her moon got

focused. "Imagine that you were passing innocently by a

region you didn't know was forbidden, and suddenly found

yourself grounded, as she was, and

punished by being re-

quired to sit on an egg for centuries.

Wouldn't you feel a

trifle rebellious?" Now the power of her sorcery was coming

into play. Her talent was the Idea, and what she believed

came to be true, provided that no one who knew her talent

originated the idea. Could there be some members of the Jury

who didn't know her talent? Metria doubted it, but wasn't

sure.

"Suppose you nevertheless served that penance honorably,

though it meant almost complete isolation from your kind,

and from all others, except for unwarranted intruders? So that

your only contacts with others were hostile ones, though you

yourself were naturally friendly?"

Metria saw Jenny Elf nod-

ding, and Graeboe Giant-Harpy, and Sherlock Black. An im-

pression was being made.

"Then suppose that your chance came to escape, because

the enchantment that bound you was gone, in (he Time of

No Magic? Would you have done it?" Stanley Steamer nod-

ded, and Marrow Bones. "But Roxanne Roc did not. She

remained true to her mission, though in great pain and peril.

She went to extraordinary lengths to preserve the egg, and

succeeded when many another creature would not have."

Kim Mundane nodded, and Gayle Goyle.

"Then suppose you made a trifling inadvertent error,

merely exclaiming in frustration when you realized that you

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were unable to explain to an accidental intruder what the

situation was. Would you ever have suspected that a chick

who had been silent in the egg for more than five centuries

was listening? That it would understand?" This time only

three did not nod: Corn Pewter, whose screen couldn't nod

anyway, Stanley Steamer, and Che Centaur, who as a centaur

was probably smarter than all the rest of them.

"And suppose that for that inconsequential infraction you

were hauled up on a charge of Violation of the Adult Con-

spiracy? That despite all your loyalty

beyond the call of duty,

you faced punishment for. breaking a
rule that many feel is

a pointless infringement on the rights of
children?" Now

Corn Pewter's screen showed a pattern
of dots that formed

into an exclamation point: his way of
agreeing. And Che

Centaur, the youngest Juror, nodded. So
did Cynthia and,

Chena Centaur, in the Alternate Juror
section.

And so did Ida. "You have to know,
when you think about

it, that sometimes the law is a donkey.
Sometimes it is not

the person, but the law, that needs
correction. When extreme

honor and loyalty are punished on a
technicality instead of

being rewarded, you have to know that
something is wrong."

Che Centaur nodded again, and so did

several others. So did
most of the audience.

Now there were tears in Princess Ida's
eyes, and her moon

clouded over. "Roxanne Roc gave the
best years of her life

doing the very best she could in a
sometimes extremely dif-

ficult situation. She made one tiny
mistake. Who among us

all would have done better? Who among

us all has not made

at least as bad a mistake at some point in
our lives? How

can anyone condemn her for being, in the
end, not quite

perfect? That egg could not have had a
finer guardian, other

than the Simurgh herself! How are we to
reward this devoted

servant of that egg, who did so much to
preserve it, and who

would never have had the chance to
commit the infraction

had she failed to safeguard that egg so well?" The tears were

reflected in Kirn's eyes, and Jenny's, and Gayle's, and Glo-

ha's, and the Alternate Jurors', and the others looked uneasy.

Roc AND A HARP PLACE 315

' 'If this is the reward of virtue, what hope is there for any

of the rest of us? You must decide whether you can in con-

science convict Roxanne Roc in a case that shames the stan-

dards of Xanth. You must decide what is right. Otherwise

what point is there in even being here?"

Ida turned away, and her moon hid behind her head as if

disgusted with the proceedings. There was silence in the

court. Metria felt the way she was sure
most of the others

did: that the trial was, in the end,
ludicrous.

The Judge focused both grim eyes on the
Jury. "It is not

your business to determine the fairness
of the law, only

whether it has been violated. The
evidence and arguments

have been put before you. I want you to

understand that I

expect a suitable decision in this matter.
I do not expect to

have a hung Jury. However, if that turns
out to be the case,

I will deal with it as needs be. Behold."
He gestured, and

one of Iris' illusions appeared behind
him. It was an econ-

omy-sized gallows, with twelve
hangman's nooses turning

slowly, slowly in the wind. "I trust I
make myself suffi-
ciently clear."

The Jury made a collective gulp and
nodded. There would
be no hung Jury.

Judge Grossclout banged his gavel. '
'The Jury will be se-
questered for deliberations. This court is
in recess."

The Jury and Alternates went to a private room, and a

murmur of relaxation rippled across the audience. The trial was almost done.

Metria hoped that the Jury would come to the right decision. But she had a soul-sinking feeling that there was no certainty of that.

16

VERDICT

Mela and Nada were back in their pools,
splashing

each other and screaming and bouncing
as each

was struck by drops of salt or fresh
water, and as-

sorted males were watching just as if
this were the most

interesting show in Xanth. One would
never have known

from watching them that both were
mature Princesses, or that

one had a daughter almost as well
endowed as she was. Cute

Steven Steamer was being adored by any
spare ladies in the

vicinity; when Ida picked him up he
snapped at her moon,

but the moon was elusive. The little skeletons were playing

tag around the chairs in the courtroom. Others were feasting

on the refreshments provided, including a considerable pud-

dle of boot rear left over from somewhere.

Metria went to talk with Roxanne Roc, who remained at

the stone nest. "They can't convict you,"

she said. "The
whole thing is facetious."

Roc AND A HARD PLACE 317

"Squawk?"

"Ridiculous, droll, farcical, funny,
absurd—"

"Squawk?"

"Whatever. It would be ludicrous to convict you after six centuries of such loyal service."

But the big bird did not look reassured.

"Metria." It was Bailiff Magician Trent.

"The Judge

wants to talk with you, in his chamber."

"Oh. Thanks." She popped off, leaving Trent to converse

with Roxanne.

Grossclout's glower was unchanged.

"Metria, fetch Prin-

cess Ivy here."

"But I can't carry a full person," she protested.

"Then get Prince Dolph to do it. In fact, you might as

well bring Electra and the twins too.
And King Dor and

Queen Irene."

A bulb glimmered over her head. "Ooo,
Grossie, is this

what I think—"

"Don't call me Grossie, you impertinent
spook!" When

he saw that she was sufficiently cowed,
he continued: "And

don't say anything about any conjecture
you may have. Just

tell them that I wish them to attend the
conclusion of the

trial."

"Yes, Your Honor!" She popped off to
Castle Roogna.

Soon enough the entire royal family was

traveling in a

basket carried by Prince Dor in roc
form. Metria popped back

to the Judge's chambers. "Mission
accomplished. Judge,"

she reported.

"Good. Now go with the feline."

"The what?" But .then she saw Jenny
Elf's cat Sammy

approaching her. "Oh, he must be lost.
I'll take him back to

Jenny." She picked him up and walked to
the Jury's cham-

ber.

Jenny Elf was waiting. The other Jurors
were seated in a

wide circle. "Thank you, Metria," she
said. "Now, please

sit here and watch what we do."

"But I only brought the cat back," she protested. "I'm not supposed to stay in here."

"Yes you are," Jenny said evenly. "I asked Sammy to find the one most suitable for our purpose. He found you. It seems appropriate, since you are half-souled. Judge Gross-

clout understands."

"But what—?"

"We do not wish to be a hung Jury, but we have found

ourselves unable to agree on a Verdict. Therefore we have

agreed to find another way to do it. We have a show for

you."

"A what?"

"Demonstration, exhibition, array,
display—"

"I know what a show is! But why show
me anything,

when you're supposed to be
deliberating?"

"We will explain that in due course. It is important to us

that you not know immediately."

"I have no idea what this is about!"

"Excellent. Now, please watch, and I will explain as it goes."

"As what goes?"

"The play about the dream of souls."

"The—?"

"Whatever. Now, there once was a young woman called

Donna, but you may think of her as anyone you wish to."

At this point Kim Mundane stood and stepped into the center

of the circle. "She was wooed by a very handsome, sensitive,

thoughtful, and likable young man." Dug Mundane rose and

joined Kim, taking her hand and kissing it. Kim looked

thrilled.

"He had a pair of lovely winged centaur steeds who took

them wherever they wished to go," Jenny continued, her

voice assuming a humming quality as
Che and Cynthia Cen-

taur joined them. "He took her to nice
places. They did many

interesting things together, and Donna
was falling deeply in .

love with him, and believed that he
loved her too. He just

seemed to have more than the normal
amount of soul."

Metria watched, bemused. What was the point of this ir-

relevant little skit?

Then a scene filled in around the two people and the

steeds. They were no longer in the castle chamber, but in an

amusement center having fun. She saw Dug tease Kim

(Donna) by inviting her to step on a

pretty rug. When she

did, the rug threw her off, so that she
landed in a bed of

feathers. "That's a throw rug!" she
exclaimed with happy

indignation.

He laughed and stepped on the rug
himself. It promptly

threw him after her. They wound up in a
tangled heap on

the bed. Kim squealed and kicked her

feet as he tickled her,
obviously enjoying herself.

A light illuminated them. Kim quickly
sat up straight and

tried to straighten her hair, afraid that
someone would think

she was doing something private in
public. "What's that

spotlight doing here?" she demanded,
picking a feather off

her skirt.

"That is not a spotlight, it's a searchlight," Dug informed her.

"What's the difference?"

"The searchlight hasn't yet found what it's looking for."

Kim grabbed a feather pillow and

whammed him over the

head with it. They had another pleasant bout of tickling and

squealing. But Metria noticed something slightly odd: Dug

did not look when Kirn's skirt flew up to show too much of

her legs, and did not let his hands stray when he tickled her

under her arms. These were opportunities any normal young

man would take automatically. It was almost as if he had

some purpose other than normal.

Then they entered the castle's dining hall. Kim reached

for a large, pretty, but oddly shaped fruit. The top part of it

was transparent, and there were moving bubbles inside.

"I wouldn't recommend eating that," Dug said.

"Why not? It looks good."

"It's a perk-U-later fruit. It tastes fine,
but later it makes
you wide-awake, so you can't sleep."

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"Oh." She set the fruit down, and its perking subsided.

"I'm already beginning to get tired; I don't want my sleep disturbed."

"Here," he said, bringing out a small metal object. He

used his thumb to flick a little wheel on it as he touched it to her arm.

"What's that?" she asked.

"It's a lighter. It will make you light, so you won't be tired."

"Oh, yes, I feel much lighter now," she agreed, and indeed her step became bouncy.

They walked into the courtyard. There

was an icy wall

with odd formations on it. Dug reached out and took one.

"What is that?" Kirn asked.

' 'An I-cycle. Shall we have a race?"

"How do we do that?"

"We each get on an I-cycle and pedal it as fast and far as

we can before it melts."

"Oh, this sounds like fun," she said. She took an I-cycle of her own.

They both got on and put their feet on the cold pedals.

The cycles enabled them to race through the courtyard and on out into the garden. The loyal steeds ran after them, seem-

ing strangely subdued, as if none of this fun meant anything

to them. Again Metria felt a tinge of concern.

There was a friendly barking sound as several of the flow-

ering plants leaned toward them. "Oh, how cute!" Kim said.

' "What kind of flowers are those? They remind me of dogs."

"Those are cauliflowers," Dug said.

"When they are

young, they are collie pups. They grow into dogwood trees."

Actually they looked and sounded more like the two gar-

goyles. But Metria didn't care to quibble with the dream

animation.

Kim laughed, loving it. But neither Dug nor the steeds

did. Dug seemed quite serious, when not actually playing up

to Kim, and the centaurs seemed depressed.

They zoomed toward a lady with a musical instrument

Roc AND A HARD PLACE 321

She looked just like Jenny Elf, and the instrument looked

like Sammy Cat. She began to sing, but then cut off.

"What's the matter?" Kim asked, concerned.

"I am Marcia the minstrel, I just realized it's too early for me to sing," the singer replied.

"Oh—you must have the pre-minstrel syndrome," Kim said sympathetically.

"Yes. Soon I'll be singing the greens and blues, instead of the reds and oranges."

They raced on through a series of arches. But there was a man with a sledgehammer knocking them down. He looked like Graeboe Giant-Harpy. "Why are you making falling arches?" Kim asked him.

"I have to. I'm an arch-enemy."

"This is one weird place!" Kim
exclaimed as they raced

on into a sheep pasture. But now their I-
cycles were melting.

Soon both dissolved into puddles, on
which the breeze raised

very small waves. In fact, they were
microwaves. That left

Kim and Dug standing on their feet in the

pasture.

"You won," Dug said. "You cycled farther than I did

before yours melted."

Kim looked around at the sheep, laughing. ' "That depends

on your point of ewe." She didn't notice that neither Dug

nor the centaurs laughed.

Then they saw the beautiful sunset. "Oh, this has just been

the most wonderful day of my young life!" Kim cried. "I'm

so excited I could burst! I think my soul is ready to float

away in pure happiness."

"Yes," Dug agreed. He took her in his arms and kissed

her deeply. The centaurs flinched.

Something was wrong. Kim seemed to shrink, to dwindle,

to fall away as if struck. "Oh, I am undone!" she cried.

"You have sucked out my soul!"

"Right," Dug said, satisfied. "And a fine soul it is, too."

He walked away, whistling. The centaurs followed, down-

cast.

"He what?" Metria asked. She realized belatedly that she

was in one of Jenny's dreams, and so were the others.

"He sucked out her soul," Jenny said.
"He is a soul vam-

pire."

"That's awful!"

Jenny didn't answer. Metria watched in horror as Kim

staggered away, barely finding her way home. She looked

despondent, hopeless, empty, and wishing she could die. But,

Jenny explained, Kim discovered that scattered bits of her

soul remained, clinging to her deepest loves, such as her pet

green steamer dragon who came out looking for her and

helped her struggle the rest of the way home. These pieces

came together to keep her alive, but they were only a shadow

of what had originally been hers.

Kim was now mostly soulless, and with this emptiness

came the baser emotions. She had been happy; now she was

depressed. She had loved life; now she had the urge to kill.

She was bent on revenge. She got a sharp knife and made a

concealed sheath for it, so she could keep it with her all the

time.

"No, no!" the inadequate fragments of her soul cried

faintly. "This is not right!"

Because those fragments were precious to her, Kim tried

to heed them. She went to a wise and gentle man to ask for

help. This man was Graeboe Giant-Harpy, no longer knock-

ing down arches. "My child," he counseled her, "do not

seek revenge. Stay home and let yourself recover; your soul

may regenerate in time from the
fragments you still pos-
sess."

It was good advice, but she lacked
enough soul to take it

seriously. Vengeance was an easy
concept, and forgiveness

a difficult one, for a person with too
little soul. She had

thought Dug loved her, and he had only
been after her soul.

He had played her along, until her happiness of the occasion

had lightened her soul and loosened its moorings, so that he

could more readily steal it. He had callously taken her most

precious possession. She had to make him pay for it.

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In fact, she wanted to kill him. Yet she

was also afraid

that he might return, realizing that he
hadn't gotten quite all

her soul. She didn't know how she
would react if she saw

him again, because the main remaining
fragment of her soul

was what had loved him most deeply.
She was afraid that if

she somehow found him, she wouldn't be
able to destroy

him, because of that little bit of love that
remained in her,

and that he would then finish her off,
cleaning out the last

bits and pieces of the remnants of her
soul, leaving her en-

tirely barren. So she wasn't certain
whether she should kill

him, or if she could. She battled the
monsters in her mind,

trying to come to a firm decision.

In the dream, those monsters appeared,
resembling two

gargoyles and a walking skeleton. Kim fought them, but her

knife had no effect on stone or bone, and she had to retreat.

She realized that she wasn't the only victim. Dug must

have done this to many other girls before her. Ooo, that made

her furious! Maybe she could, after all, kill him.

Then Dug reappeared. She knew what he wanted: the rest

of her soul, which had regenerated a little bit. She knew what

she should do: stab him. But he was so handsome, and so

much fun to be with, and his two sad centaur steeds were so

nice. He brought her a Q-T pie, guaranteed to make her cute.

He promised to take her to see the bottle-nosed purpose, one

of Xanth's most helpful marine creatures.
He said they could

even go to Washing-town, where they
washed folk utterly

clean. He spoke of eating the special
fruit that hung from

bendy branches and tasted so good that
anyone who tasted

it was ready to have a party; it was
called the dangling party

citrus. It all sounded so wonderful!

In this manner he wooed her again, and
though she knew

better, she felt herself giving up. She
wanted to believe it

was true, that she could share joy with
him as she had before,

that her loss of soul had been only a bad
part of the dream.

She wanted to love him. At the same
time she knew that she

was being utterly foolish, and that she
should kill him. She

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fought to get her hand on the hidden knife, to bring it out

and up, to stab him, but her willpower was feeble and fading.

Dug took her in his arms and brought his lips down to

hers. He was going to do it! He was going to suck the meager

rest of her soul out, and leave her completely void.

She made one final effort. Her knifepoint came up part-

way. She wasn't able to stab him, just to prick him through

his clothing.

And he exploded like a burst balloon.

Souls flew out

everywhere. Some were fresh, some decayed; some were in

good shape, some hideously shrunken. Most were in be-

tween. Hundreds, maybe thousands of them—and in his

greed he had wanted yet more. He had been so full of souls

that he was ready to burst, and her tiny pinprick had done

it. She had, after all, managed to kill him.

Kim remained seriously shaken, not to mention appalled

and disgusted and afraid, but she had the common sense to

grab her own soul before it floated away, and draw it back

into her. It was one of the good ones; it had not had time to

get degraded. She was whole again!

The two centaurs grabbed at their own souls similarly.

Then their sadness faded, and they smiled. "You have saved

us!" they told Kim. "You are a heroine." They spread their

wings and flew joyfully home, no longer bound to the one

who had stolen their souls and exploited them.

So Kim went home, feeling better,

though she was sorry

about losing such a handsome suitor.

Unfortunately, there was a wannabee in the neighborhood.

This bee liked to assume characteristics that didn't belong to

it. This time it assumed the mantle of Public Citizen. It had

seen her prick Dug, and reported her to the Better Business

Bureau. She was arrested and brought to

trial. Since there

was no delectable corpse, they charged her with something

else, because it wouldn't do to have a false arrest.

The Judge was a machine with a stem monitor screen who

looked just like Corn Pewter. The Prosecutor was a fierce

black man resembling Sherlock.

"We shall demonstrate that the Defendant violated the Adult Conspiracy," the Prosecutor said.

"But she didn't mean to," the Defense Attorney protested.

She looked like Gloha Goblin-Harpy.

"Who says I did it?" Kim demanded.

"I do," a winged monster replied. "I am the Simurgh.

With my omniscience I saw that when you rolled in the

feathers with that man, you were careless about how your

skirt hiked up, and a baby mouse looked out of its hole and

saw your panties. That is a violation."

"But this is ridiculous!" Kim protested.

"I never even

known the mouse was there."

SILENCE, the Judge's screen printed.
HOW DO YOU PLEAD?

"This is crazy!" Kim said. "Here I have
just survived

having my soul stolen, not to mention
losing my boyfriend,

and all you care about is—"

IRRELEVANT STATEMENT
DELETED, the Judge printed, and

it was as if it had never been spoken, for
reality was changed.

"I don't care what the Defendant knew or
when she knew

it," Sherlock said grimly. "I am prepared
to bring the mouse

in to testify to the crime."

"But the Defendant is a person of good character, from a far land," Gloha said. "She had no knowledge of any such violation."

"Ignorance is no excuse," Sherlock insisted.

"And she restored lost souls to many folk," Gloha said.

"I am prepared to bring in two centaurs

to testify to that.

Surely the good she has done outweighs
any inadvertent

evil."

"She did the crime," Sherlock said.

"She's a good person," Gloha replied.

The Judge's screen flashed. THE
CASES HAVE BEEN MADE.

THE JURY WILL NOW RENDER THE
VERDICT.

Suddenly Metria was the cynosure of all
eyes. This was

weird, because she wasn't even slightly
sure of anything, let

alone cyno sure. "Who, me?" she asked.

YES, YOU.

"This is all just a crazy dream!" Metria exclaimed. "This

whole thing is just a house of cards. I'm getting out of here."

And she broke her way out of Jenny's dream.

Only to find herself in the middle of the
Jury Room, still

being watched by at least a dozen pairs
of eyes. NOW YOU

MUST DECIDE, FOR WE CANNOT,
AND WE MUST NOT BE A HUNG

JURY, Corn Pewter printed, the image
of a hangman's noose

appearing on his screen, is THE
DEFENDANT GUILTY?

"I'll do no such thing!" Metria said. "I'm not even on this Jury."

DEMONESS CHANGES HER MIND.

Metria found herself with her mind changed. "Yes, of course I'll decide," she agreed. "Just let me ponder a bit."

OTHERS RELAX WHILE DEMONESS
PONDER. Musical notes

appeared on Corn Pewter's screen, and
Jenny Elf began to

hum again. Soon a new picture formed,
with all the members

of the Jury at the fancy castle, dancing in
the ballroom. Mar-

row did the Danse Macabre with a fine
rattling of bones,

while Gloha and Graeboe did pirouettes
in the upper dome.

Stanley Steamer kept the beat by
clacking his teeth, and the

two gargoyles made stone circles around
each other. The rest

formed a fine square dance, drawing
Marrow in to make it

complete, and then a round dance,
followed by a triangle

dance. In this dream Dug was handsome
in a formal suit,

and Kim lovely in a flowing dress, and the rest looked great

too. They were all having a wonderful time.

But not Metria. She was stuck with the Verdict. They

couldn't decide, so they wanted her to do it for them, and

Corn Pewter had changed her reality so that she couldn't

refuse. She was supposed to decide

whether Kkn was guilty

of showing her panties to a baby mouse,
but she knew that

this was just a Suppose story. The real
Verdict would be on

Roxanne Roc, who had just as innocently
erred.

How could a responsible Jury abdicate
its responsibility

like this, by assigning the decision to a
slightly weird de-

moness? This was a plain violation of its whatever.

In fact, this was a demons' beauty contest. The issue

Roc AND A HARD PLACE 327

would be decided not by those who had the debate, but by

an innocent person who hardly knew what was going on.

That person was Metria herself. "Hoist
by my own petard!"

she muttered angrily.

'Lift up what?' Mentia inquired, 'Did you
say something

dirty?'

'I'm caught in my own kind of scheme. I
helped arrange

a marriage by setting up a demons'
beauty contest, and now

the Jury is making me decide their Verdict similarly.'

'I wonder what gave them that notion.'

A light bulb glowed. The Demoness V(E\N)"-! This was

her third effort to mess up the trial! She had caused the duly

appointed Jury to abdicate in favor of an unqualified creature.

Metria understood this now—but still

couldn't change it, be-

cause of Corn Pewter's stricture. It might be wrong, but she

still had to do it.

Well, there was a way out. She could just pop back to

Judge Grossclout and tell him what had happened. Corn Pew-

ter wasn't watching her at the moment; she could escape

before he overwrote her decision.

But what would happen then? Grossclout would declare a

mistrial—and that would probably represent the victory of

the Demoness V(E\N)1"-, who was trying to disrupt the pro-

ceedings. There had to be a Verdict—or the Demon X(A\N)'h

would lose, and all Xanth would pay the price. So Metria

had to do it—even if it resulted in an

unfair Verdict.

Bur not alone. 'Mentia! Woe Betide!
You are in. this too.

You decide.'

'Sure,' soulless Mentia said. 'The law
may be crazy, and

I'm crazy, and I say she showed her
panties and she's guilty.'

'No she isn't!' Woe Betide protested.
'She's a good girl

who was led astray by a bad man. He
pushed her, he made

her roll in the feathers. He is the guilty
one.'

'But he's not on trial,' Mentia said.
'Maybe they're both

guilty. We have to decide about her, no
one else. And she

did it.'

'But there were ex—ext—exten—' Woe
Betide stalled,

unable to handle such an adult word.

'Extenuating circumstances,' Metria said.

'Yes. So she's innocent.'

Mentia and Woe Betide were on opposite sides, making

another hung jury. So it was up to Metria after all. She

couldn't let all the others get hung.

The case, as presented to her, was against Kim Mundane,

who had been deceived, led astray, deprived of most of her

soul, and arrested when she fought back.
Instead of charging

her with the crime of killing an evil
predator, they had

trumped up a ludicrous incidental
indictment they thought

would be easier to prove. Because Kim
had acted in self-

defense, and helped many others recover
their souls, so

should be praised rather than
condemned. So she was on trial

for something irrelevant, because someone wanted a conviction. The tactic reeked.

And Roxanne Roc had given almost six centuries of loyal service, doing as well as any creature in Xanth could have.

Yet instead of being requited as she deserved, she was put on trial for a trifling technical violation. Why? So as to avoid

the need to reward her? That gross unfairness was surely

what had hopelessly divided the Jury, and it divided Metria

too. She wanted to praise Roxanne, not punish her, but the

situation had been so crafted that she couldn't. She had to

decide on the basis of the limited technicality. Oh yes, the

Jury had re-created the situation, in the guise of a different

story, so that no one could say that an unauthorized person

had made the decision about Roxanne. But in fact, they had

dumped the outrage into Metria's lap. She had to decide.

Why had the Simurgh done this? Why did Grossclout and

the others go along with it? Where was there any fairness in

any of this business? Metria had only

half a soul< yet she

could see that this entire thing was a
travesty. The Jury saw

that too. Why couldn't the Simurgh? She
was supposed to

be an extremely fair-minded and wise
bird. Was she actually

just a mean-spirited creature determined
to welsh on a deal?

Roc AND A HARP PLACE 329

But the Simurgh was not on trial.
Roxanne Roc was. Me-

tria had to address the issue before her,
not the issue she

wished she could tackle. Maybe the
Demoness V(E\N)"" fig-

ured that the Jury would refuse to
address that issue, and

would win if that happened. And if
Metria herself refused,

what mischief might she be doing to all
Xanth?

She struggled, going round and round,
but finally she came

to an unwilling conclusion. "It's crazy,
it's wrong, it's lu-

dicrous, it's a blot on us all, the law is a
mule, but technically

Kim is guilty of the charge against her,"
she said.

The dance abruptly stopped. All the
living Jurors looked

stricken: But it was clear that they had
made a deal, and

were honoring it.

so BE rr. Corn Pewter printed.
DEMONESS, INFORM JUDGE

GROSSCLOUT THAT THE JURY HAS
REACHED ITS VERDICT. YOU

WILL SAY NOTHING OF THE
MANNER OF IT. And the Others

noded grimly. This was their secret—
and hers.

Had she just saved Xanth—at the
expense of a noble and

really innocent bird? Metria was much
afraid that she had.

She popped out. Grossclout scowled at
her. "The Jury is

ready," she said grimly. And wished she
could sink into

some other realm.

The Judge called the court to order. The various celebrants

ceased their efforts and quickly returned to the main cham-

ber. The audience had swelled in size, because of the arrival

of King Dor, Queen Iris, and the rest of the Castle Roogna

personnel. Even the Good Magician Humfrey and the mem-

bers of his household were here now.
Metria was amazed.

She had delivered Grossclout's general
summons, but it was

still astonishing to see it honored so
completely. The Good

Magician almost never left his gloomy
study.

The Jury returned to its Jury Box. Metria
saw that several

of the female members were dabbling

their faces with hand-

kerchiefs, and several males looked unhappy. They had not

liked their decision any better than Metria had. Only Corn

Pewter looked smug with a smiley-face on his screen. He

must have been the only one to insist on guilty, forcing them

all to face the threat of being hung. And Metria had sided

with him. What a disgrace!

"Have you reached a Verdict?" Judge Grossclout inquired

rhetorically, through a glower.

"We have. Your Honor," Sherlock said. He was evidently

the foreman. "We find the defendant, Roxanne Roc, guilty

as charged."

There was a gasp of dismay from the audience. Princess

Ida looked stunned, and her moon turned its bright face

away, becoming dark. In the adjacent chamber Roxanne's

beak dipped; if she had hoped for better, it had been in vain.

Yet somewhere distant there was a

sinister vibration as a

powerful demoness cursed and departed.
Metria thought she

knew who that was. CORRECT,
DEMONESS, the Simurgh's

thought came. YOU HAVE SAVED
XANTH. THE DEMONESS

V(E\N)"" BET WAS THAT
ROXANNE WOULD NOT BE
CONVICTED.

SHE BELIEVED THAT NO JURY
COULD BE FOUND TO DECIDE

STRICTLY ON THE BASIS OF THE
EVIDENCE.

She had indeed saved Xanth. But at what
price? Metria's

half soul was hurting.

Judge Grossclout nodded. "Roxanne
Roc, you have been

found guilty of violation of the Adult
Conspiracy to Keep

Interesting Things from Children.

Because this may prejudice

an extremely important chick, I sentence
you to a continua-

tion of your obligation to care for this
bird until such time

as the Adult Conspiracy no longer
applies to it."

"Objection!" Ida cried. "That could be
centuries!"

The Judge ignored her. "You will continue to place the

welfare of this creature before all others, until it is grown

and independent. No other desire or obligation will take pre-

cedence over this mission." He glared in her direction. "Do

you understand and accept this sentence, Roxanne Roc?"

Slowly her head lifted. "Squawk."

"She understands and accepts," Grundy Golem translated.

"She will do her best."

"So let it be," the Judge said, banging his gavel on the

desk. The sound was so sharp and loud that it made the entire

castle reverberate. Then he turned to face the Jury and au-

dience. "The supreme importance of this mission made it

necessary to verify the constancy of the one selected to per-

form it. A pretext was established for this purpose. I have

five rhetorical queries and a statement to issue."

He paused a moment. It was surely for effect, because the

Demon Professor never had any hesitancy about anything.

"Here is the statement: No other desire or obligation in all

Xanth will take precedence over this mission."

His baleful near eye fixed on the Jury Box. "You, Che

Centaur, will in due course be

summoned to tutor this chick

in all the things needful for it to know
and understand. It is

for this purpose you came into existence:
winged so as to be

able to fly with it, a centaur so as to
command sufficient

intellect for it. You will for a time sh'are
its destiny. Do you

understand and accept this mission?"

The Centaur's mouth had fallen open, as

had those of the

other Jurors. They were beginning to realize that the Verdict

they had just rendered had more significance than they had

thought. "I—I do," Che said. His word was, of course, in-

violate, because he was a centaur. Yet he was dazed; he had

just learned the purpose in his life.

The Judge focused on Grundy. "The

chick and roc will

on occasion need to communicate with other creatures. You,

Grundy Golem, will provide your service as translator as

required. Do you understand and accept?"

For a moment even the big-mouthed golem was flustered.

"Yeah, sure," he agreed, looking quite flattered.

Grossclout's terrible gaze swung toward the audience,

which collectively blanched. It fixed on the Good Magician.

"And toward the successful completion of that mission, your

resources will be made available to Che Centaur and Rox-

anne Roc at need, without impediment. Do you understand

and accept. Magician Humfrey?"

"Of course," Humfrey said, seeming unsurprised. Metria

realized that there had been considerably more purpose in

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the Service he had required of her than she or anyone had

guessed.

The Judge's gaze swung toward the chamber where the

Simurgh perched. "And yours. Do you accept, Simurgh?"

YES. There was no surprise there, either. It was, after all,

her chick.

The gaze moved to another creature
Metria hadn't noticed

before, perhaps because it became
visible only now. It was

a great horse, black as the midnight sky,
with the small bright

lights of the stars shining from it. It was
the Night Stallion,

the lord of the realm of dreams! "And
yours. Do you accept,

Trojan?"

/ do. The Horse of a Different Color faded out.

Now that gaze swung back to the Defendant, whose beak

lifted to face him. "To facilitate the further obligation you

have acquired, Roxanne Roc, your power of flight is hereby

restored and magnified beyond that of any of your kind. You

are granted the freedom to travel

anywhere in Xanth in the

performance of your mission, without
impediment. No crea-

ture or thing will hinder you in any
manner, on pain of being

banished to the realm of dreams and
subject to the extreme

ill will of the Night Stallion and his
night mares." There was

a groaning murmur through the hall; there
could be no worse

fate than to be locked into perpetual bad
dreams. "You will

take any step you deem appropriate to secure the safety'and

welfare of your charge, and will preempt the services of any

creature or thing of Xanth toward that end, as necessary. For

the chick about to hatch—" Grossclout glanced at his left

wrist. "—in three quarters of a moment is destined to be the

successor of the Simurgh, when she retires. It must have the

best upbringing and education available,
and the most con-

stant guardian and governess, in fair
times or adversity. This

court is satisfied that you are qualified
for that duty."

There was a murmur of awe through the
audience and

Jury. Metria realized that Roxanne Roc
had just been pro-

moted to Xanth's most powerful
position, because of the im-

portance of her job. Her sentence was not a punishment, but

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a reward for her extremely loyal service. None of the mem-

bers of the Jury had suspected!

"And because this mission may indeed require some ad-

ditional centuries, the enchantment that has preserved your

youth will continue for the duration. You will not age until

your job is finished." Judge Grossclout's gaze lifted. "Now

it is time."

The gavel banged again, shaking the castle. There was a

loud crack, as if something extremely hard had sundered.

Roxanne squawked and jumped off the nest.

"Oh!" Grundy translated.

The egg was cracking open. It fell into two segments. As

it did there was the whirring of wings, and a stork flew in,

bearing a bundle. It landed on the nest Roxanne had just

- vacated, set down its bundle, and

removed from it—a fluffy

towel. It set this towel in the open egg and used it to dry off

something inside. Then it released the towel.

Metria watched in bemusement. If the stork brought birds,

what was the point of eggs? And how could the chick have

been inside the egg, to overhear the bad word? Then she

realized that this was probably a
courtesy call, to attend to

the hatching and make sure all was well.
For of course, this

was not just a routine hatching.

From the towel stepped The Chick. It
scintillated with

twice the colors of the rainbow,
sparkling like a collection

of brilliant faceted gems. It was, taken as
a whole, the most

beautiful and precious chick anyone had ever seen.

It blinked, and caught sight of Roxanne. "Cheep!" it exclaimed.

"Nanny!" Grundy translated.

The chick stepped toward Roxanne, who quickly returned

to the stone nest and spread a wing protectively over it. It

was obvious that the two would get along.

The partition returned, closing off the scene. "Now there

is other minor business," Grossclout said. "Is the wedding

party ready?"

Magician Trent stood. "Yes, Your

Honor."

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"Proceed."

The Sorceress Iris stood, turning to focus on the chamber.

It became a festively decorated room, with the audience ap-

appropriately garbed. There was even a stork in attendance, for

the one who had come to dry off the chick had remained for

the other ceremony. This was unusual, but of course, every-

thing about this occasion was extraordinary.

Trent walked to the side, and brought back the Demon

Vore. "Stand here," he said. Then he

walked to the other

side, and brought back Magician Grey
Murphy. "Stand

here."

"But I'm not—" Grey protested.

"Yes you are."

There was a crash somewhere outside.
Everyone jumped,

and Ida's moon looked alarmed. "What was that?" Grey asked.

"The sun and the moon just collided," Che Centaur said, and Gwenny Goblin tittered. "Fortunately no harm was done."

Metria remembered how they had joked that this was what

Grey and Ivy were waiting for, before they married. Now

their last excuse for delay was gone.

Then the music started. Metria looked toward its source,

and was surprised to see Maestro No One sitting in a pit

marked ORCHESTRA, conjuring a series of musical instru-

ments to play the theme. Apparently he had been able to

leave the gourd for this occasion,
perhaps because the Night

Stallion himself was attending.

Now a great organ manifested, and
played with enormous

authority. It was the wedding march.

Two young women appeared at the back,
in twin wedding

dresses. Princess Nada Naga and
Princess Ivy Human. They

had been friends since both were fourteen. Now they were

getting married together. Metria recognized the wedding

dress first used by Electra, now restitched to fit Nada, making

her magically beautiful, though of all the women in Xanth,

she needed it least. Ivy wore a pale green dress her mother

must have made, which did much the same for her. The two

began their long walk down the aisle toward the two hand-

some males waiting at the front. Nada was accompanied by

King Nabob Naga, and Ivy by King Dor Human: Naturally

their two fathers were participating, after waiting so long for

this occasion.

Metria's eyes blurred. Now that she was married herself,

and had half a soul, she cried at weddings, and this was a

double wedding, so she cried twice as hard. Her tears washed

out most of the details, but it did seem to be a nice, if blurry,

event. Before she knew it, it was done, and the happy couples

were slicing the monstrous cake

someone had made. Indi-

vidual groups were forming, as folk with common interests

chatted. Magician Trent was talking with Che, Cynthia, and

Chena Centaur, probably about the prospect of transforming

some regular folk to winged centaur form. They would need

to search for suitable volunteers, and' surely some normal

centaurs would be interested. Rapunzel was talking with the

Bones family; no telling what mutual concern such folk had.

Metria found herself sitting alone amidst a pile of wet handkerchiefs.

She was dimly aware of a dialogue between Dug and Kim

as they, settled nearby to eat their wedding cake. "I dread

going back to Mundania, after this," he said. "I wish I could

stay and play the game again. Grossclout
let slip that the

next winner's prize is the talent of
creating things. That

would go nicely with your talent of
erasure."

Kim ruffled his hair. "Maybe next time.
Dug. The trial

was more important, and the wedding
was divine. At least

we get to keep our summons tokens as

souvenirs, though I

guess no one would believe us if we
ever told the truth about

them. And I shouldn't tell you this, after
the way you stole

my soul—"

"Well, you got back at me!" he retorted.

"You pricked

me into burst nothingness."

"You deserved it. Anyway, the Simurgh told me that in-

stead of being docked for skipping classes, we'll both get

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A's. It seems that Corn Pewter has a connection to the col-

lege 'database for grades. It's sort of our reward for Jury

duty."

"That's great! I can't think of much of anything I want more than an easy A."

"What, not anything?"

He looked at her. "Well—"

"Nuh-uh! That stork is entirely too close for comfort."

Bubbles perked up, glancing at the stork, which was standing

by a wall as if asleep. It was a curious business, having a

stork remain, Metria thought; maybe it was on call in case

there was an emergency with the chick.

Dug sighed. "You know, you'd look good with a moon

like Ida's. Then maybe I'd know by its
phases whether
you—"

Kim stomped on his toe, but not hard.
."You may kiss me,

if you promise not to suck out my soul
again."

"Done."

Metria realized that she hadn't seen her husband in several

hours. She had more than kisses in store for him. Then she

remembered something else. She stood, shedding hankies,

and started to cross the hall.

"Metria."

She jumped. It was Grossclout. "Yes, Your Honor?"

"Forget that. My duty is done. Where are you going?"

"To the Simurgh, to return the extra summons token."

' 'Is your skull still entirely filled with mush? The Simurgh doesn't want it back."

"But then what—?"

"What do you think, Demoness? You have completed

your assignment, and by enabling the trial to proceed and a

proper Verdict to be achieved, you have spared Xanth much

mischief. The Simurgh intended you to have your reward

when that was done. Now you must serve that last summons

and go home to your husband."

"But who is there to serve it on? It's blank."

"Is it?" His tone said mush. "Whose attention or atten-

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dance have you most wished to compel?

You know that creature will not wait here forever."

She brought out the last token and looked at it. Now it

said THE STORK. The other side said DELIVERIES.

'Well, now,' Mentia remarked, while Woe Betide stared in childish awe.

"Oh!" Metria exclaimed, a brilliant bulb flashing. Then,

with determination and excitement, she marched in the di-'

rection of the long-legged bird.

The Demon Grossclout almost smiled. Fortunately he was

able to stifle the miscreant expression.