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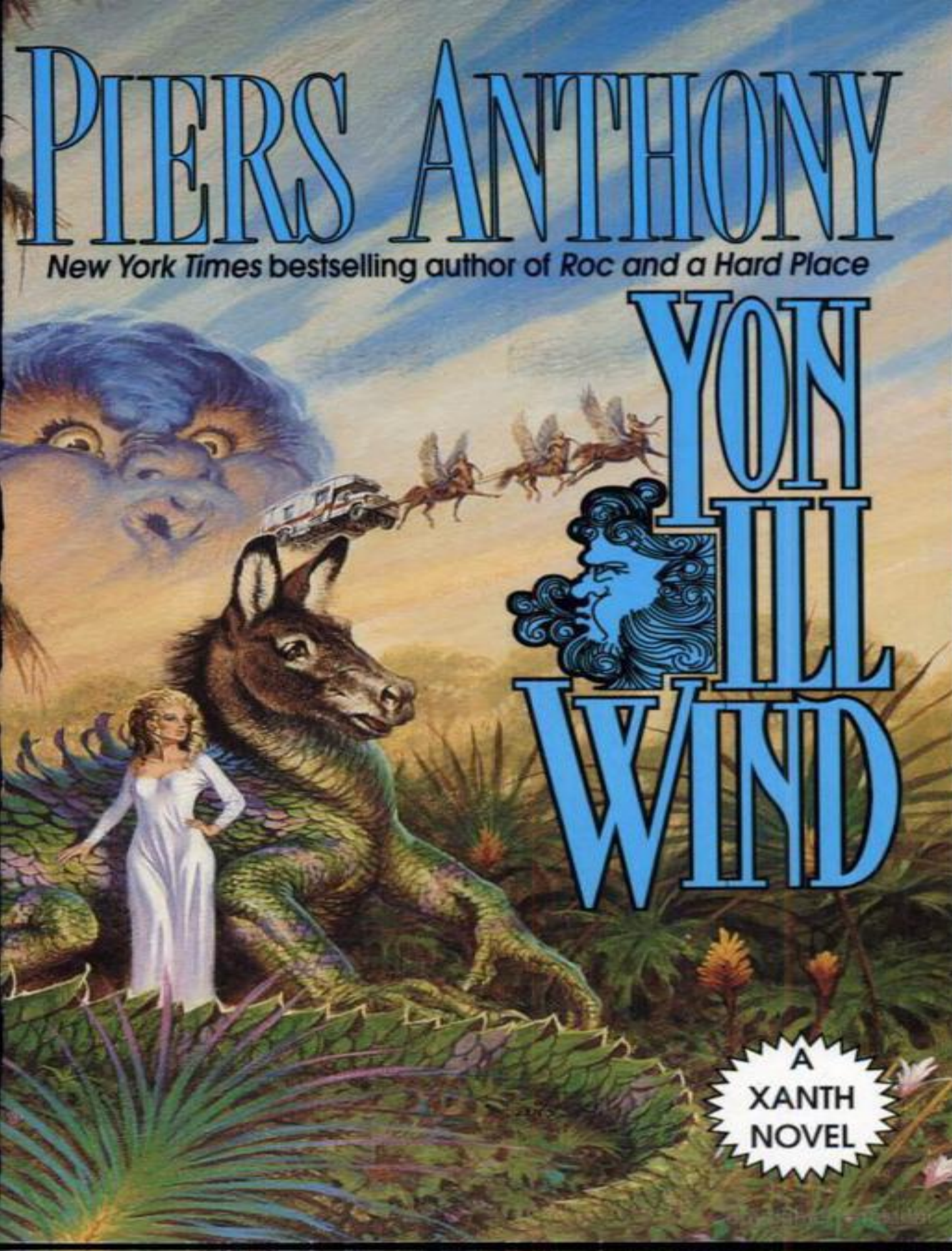

YON ILL WIND

A XANTH NOVEL

1

NIMBY

The Demons of the system did not gather frequently

unless there were intriguing contests to be made or

issues to be settled. This occasion was a bit of both.

"You must have cheated!" the Demoness VCEW)"5 de-

clared. Of course the Demons did not actually communi-

cate in words or have any emphasis, but for the sake of

intelligibility their interactions could be represented as

such in degraded prose. "You have been winning every

contest recently."

"I simply learned how to play to win," the Demon

X(A/N)11' responded mildly. "My victories have been

fair."

"I wonder," the Demon E(A/R)111 remarked. "There is

something suspicious about the way that foolish mortal

boy gave up his game victory at the last moment, so that

you won our wager."

"And the way that crazy lesser demoness decided the

obviously innocent bird was guilty, so that you won our

wager," V(E\N)"8 agreed.

"I merely have compatible lesser creatures in my do-

main, because I allow them to pursue their own mischief

without interference," XCA/N)* protested. He glanced

obliquely at E(A/R)lh. "In contrast to some."

"If I did that, my idiot creatures would destroy my do-

main," ECA/R)* retorted.

"Aren't they doing that anyway?" V(E\N)"8 inquired

snidely.

"Hardly the way your lesser creatures affected your do-

main," E(A/R)th shot back. "Now it's all cloud and desert,

instead of milk and honey."

"We all have made our little mistakes," the Demon

JUCP/I)'" said soothingly. "Which is why we have failed

to gain significant lasting status. But it does seem that

X(A/N)'1' has been unusually fortunate recently."

"Yes it does," V(E\N)1'" said emphatically.

"Agreed," E(A/R)'11 agreed. There was a murmur of ac-

quiescence from the other Demons present.

"It is merely my good lesser creatures," X(A/N)'" in-

sisted. "I treat them well, and they reward me by behaving

well. My fortune is in the quality of my creatures."

The other Demons exchanged a hundred and fifteen

glances in half a fraction of a moment. "Suppose we put

that to the test?" JUCP/I)'" suggested.

XCA/N)* grew more interested. "Are you challenging

me to a contest?"

"Yes, I believe I am. Suggest terms."

"If I win, I will assume your status as dominant entity

in this system."

"Agreed. And if you lose, you will revert to the status

of least entity in this system, and yield your land to me."

That was a formidable stricture, for it had taken

X(A/N)th three thousand years to work his way up to se-

cond place, and might take longer to do it again. Still, this

might be his only chance to depose JtKP/I)"", because or-

dinarily the Dominant Demon would never put his status

on the line. "Agreed. Conditions?"

JIKP/I)'" smiled. This was akin to a short-tailed comet

fragmenting and plastering itself across his face in a series

of violent collisions. "You must subject yourself directly

to the whims of these inferior creatures you claim have

such good behavior. You must assume the form of a mortal

entity and go among them for the duration of the contest."

Now, this was different! "But normally we don't influ-

ence the inferiors in any way, so that the outcome is com-

pletely random, or at least not affected by the touch of a

Demon." He glanced darkly at V(E\N)"8, whom he sus-

pected of violating that stricture the last time.

—SA(T/U)"1—nodded, and his rings precessed. "This

time you will have license to influence them—to the extent

you are able."

X(A/N)'1' realized that he had been set up. The other

Demons were conspiring to bring him down, because they

were miffed by his string of victories. Still, he did have

good lesser creatures, and perhaps they would bring him

the biggest victory of all. Certainly the challenge was ex-

citing. He had on occasion interacted with them, when they

had intruded on his awareness, but never done so for a

prolonged period. "So I can interact. What's the catch?"

"Your awareness can not be limited," JU(P/I)""" said,

' 'for you are in essence a Demon, regardless of the form

you assume. But for the purpose of the contest, your ex-

pression can be limited. You may not

tell any creature of

your realm your true nature, and if any learn of it, you

forfeit immediately."

"Provided no other supernatural entity informs them,"

X(A/N)th said, with another glance at the Demoness.

"Agreed," JL^P/I)'" said. "We shall enforce that stric-

ture. Anything else you may convey to one person, in one

moment. But—" He paused meaningfully. "There will be

a penalty when you do: thereafter you will -lose the power

of verbal communication, for the duration of the contest."

But one moment of full communication should be

enough, XCA/N)* reflected, his albedo

increasing. So there

was probably another catch. "What else?"

"You will have your full powers, apart from speech,

limited to yourself and one inferior creature of your choos-

ing, to the extent that creature requests them."

"But if I am not allowed to describe my

real nature, in

my moment of communication—"

"Invent something," JUCP/I)'" suggested. "Anything

but the truth. But if you come close enough to the truth

so that the creature, or any other denizen of your domain,

catches on, you lose."

That, too, was reasonable; he could approach the truth,

but if he came too close, so that the inferior creature re-

alized that he was in fact the Demon X(A/N)'", he would

forfeit. But the contest was sdll incomplete. "What is the

penalty for becoming what that creature

chooses?"

"The power of motion," JI-KP/I)^ said. "After that

state ends, when the inferior creature terminates the asso-

ciation and separates from you for more than a moment

and more than a unit of distance, you will not only be

mute but completely immobile. You will lose your powers

of magical action, too, other than awareness. So you had

better achieve your objective before such separation oc-

curs."

"Decision, time, geography," V(E\N)"5 said. "That is

fair, isn't it? Triple termination. No accidents." Fair, to

her, meant she felt assured of his loss,

which she desired

more than a victory of her own.

This was getting tough, all right. He could speak only

once, and then could act only as long as he kept company

with the creature. Inferior creatures were notoriously

fickle; at any time, for little or no reason, the one selected

could decide it no longer desired his association, and tell

him so, and depart. By the terms of this contest, he would

not be able to demur.

But it wasn't yet done. This conspiracy of Demons

meant to see that he had virtually no chance at all. He

needed to know the worst of it. "What is

the actual item

of decision?"

"You must be the recipient of at least one tear of love

or grief, from a creature who has no notion of its signifi-

cance."

"The creature with whom you associate," V^EW)"5

amended. "No other."

And there it was. He had to evoke the severe sympathy

of an inferior and ignorant creature. "And how long will

I have to evoke this tear?"

' 'As long as your mortal body remains. If you become

mute and immobile without achieving it, your body will

behave in the manner of mortal entities: it will slowly

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starve to death. When it dies, the contest will be over, and

you will have lost."

X(A/N)th considered. They expected him to balk, and to

have to pay a forfeit for that. ' 'Agreed. Let me select my

mortal form for the occasion." He was thinking of becom-

ing a beautiful woman, because mortals shed tears very

readily over them. Or perhaps a winsome child: better yet.

"No. That's the last detail: I will select your mortal

form."

"But you could choose something difficult!"

"Exactly. It will be a real contest. Win it, and I will

concede that your creatures do have good behavior."

"You will concede more than that," X(A/Ny1' replied

grimly. "I accept your deal, and the other Demons will

watch to see that every aspect of it is honored."

. The other Demons nodded. This promised to be inter-

esting.

"Then assume your mortal coil," Demon JLKP/I)'" said

grandly. "A dragon ass, with the voice of an aqua duck.

Your role name is Nimby."

And before X(A/N)th could protest, he was in the Region

of Madness, in the form of a creature whose body was that

of a dragon with diagonal stripes of

pastel pink and bilious

green, with the head of a Mundane donkey.

"Ouch," he muttered subvocally, but even then it was

the voice of an aqua duck, a sound like a cross between a

goblin holding his nose and the burble of noxious gas per-

colating through sewer water.

There was a stir on the surface of the cesspool that just

happened to be near. An aqua duck poked its head out of

the pool, evidently thinking to discover another of its kind.

Finding no such thing, it ducked below again, for such

ducks lived underwater, and had to hold their breaths to

forage for bugs on the surface.

And his name was now Nimby, which was an apt de-

scription, a digest of Not In My Back Yard: exactly where

such a creature would be welcome. Nowhere.

He was in trouble. How would he convince anyone even

to approach him, let alone shed a tear for him?

Well, he could look. He extended his awareness, cov-

ering all of the Land of Xanth. He knew what every crea-

ture was doing, and where every plant was. Xanth was

teeming with activity. Somewhere there should be some-

one who wouldn't be afraid of a dragon

ass, who would

listen to what he had to say, and who would shed a tear

for him. Maybe not immediately, but in time, after getting

to know him. Because despite his ludicrous limitations, he

retained considerable power to please. If the one he ap-

proached had the wit to ask for it. If that one would take

him seriously.

But instead of finding a suitable person, he found an-

other problem. There had been a magic flux, the moment

he changed form, resulting in a temporary weakness of the

Interface. The spell required to fix him in this situation had

done it, for even the most trifling Demon magic was

stronger than that of all the lesser creatures combined. For

the next few hours, it would be possible for things to pass

through, entering Xanth without being twisted to some

other time. That could mean significant mischief. Ordinar-

ily he would automatically shore up the Interface to pre-

vent such a nuisance, but as Nimby he couldn't. It was his

policy to ignore the activities of his associated region, but

the Interface the local creatures had established was useful,

and helped keep things quiet, so he quietly supported it.

He just had to hope that nothing really obnoxious passed

from Mundania into Xanth, before the Interface healed it-

self.

It would be nice if the person he approached was ex-

tremely cooperative, and shed a tear for him immediately,

giving him the victory and freeing him. But since he

couldn't even say that he needed a tear, that being too

close to the truth, that seemed unlikely. However, if the

person asked him for information, he could provide it, and

if the person asked him to do something about the rift in

the Interface, then he could. Provided he did it in such a

way as to conceal his real nature. So there was a chance

to fix the problem, during the course of the contest. If he

found the right person.

He concentrated on that, sifting through all the creatures

of the land. The great majority were plainly unsuitable.

Most were hopelessly locked into their situations, and

wouldn't have anything to do with a weird monster. In

fact, they would either flee it or attack it, depending on

the state of their courage. He needed someone reasonably

open-minded. That cut the prospects down to few.

He headed for the nearest. This was a pretty young hu-

man woman named Miss Fortune. She was .smart, decent,

amiable, lovely, and caring, and did not judge others too

much by appearances. She would make

some young man

a fine wife, but for one thing. Her talent was bad luck, and

it always interfered when a really good prospect ap-

proached her. Thus she was perhaps ideal for Nimby, who

could, if she asked him, reverse her luck. He would catch

her alone, present himself, and use his one moment of

speech to acquaint her with the usefulness of Nimby.

Thereafter he would be silent, per the stricture of the con-

test, but it should be enough. She would get to know him,

realize that he was not merely a monster, ask him to re-

verse her luck, and when he did so, she should really ap-

preciate him. Of course, that would not make her cry him

a tear, but perhaps that would come later, if she came to

care for him enough. She often did cry for her pets, and

for family members when they suffered mischief—which

was rather often, because of her talent. So this looked rea-

sonably good.

Nimby trotted along toward the rendezvous. His dragon

body was actually quite strong, and could move well. His

hide was tough enough to ignore nettles and branches. His

eyes were good enough to spy out suitable paths. His nose

was good enough to sniff out all manner of creatures great

and small. In fact. Nimby felt his first pang of hunger. He

was mortal now, so had to eat. Hunger was a new expe-

rience. So he sniffed out a fruiting pie plant and snapped

up a fresh cherry pie. He gulped it down and slurped his

tongue around his donkey lips. Eating was fun!

He extended his awareness again. Fortune was starting

out to gather a sprig of thyme, because her mother was

getting rushed and needed a bit more. "There's no thyme

like the present," she said. "Go fetch it now." So Fortune,

sweet as she was, set out instantly to fetch it.

Nimby explored the immediate region with his aware-

ness. There were, it turned out, several paths to the thyme

plant, because many families made

occasional use of it. In

fact, they found thyme to be quite precious. It would not

be long before Fortune arrived there.

He considered what he would say to her when they met.

Because he would appear to her as a frightening monster,

he had better speak to her first, reassuring her. Then, when

she was prepared, he would show her

his dragon ass form.

Even so, his words would have to be effective, because he

would have only a moment of speech. Moments varied in

length; some were long, some short. In this case it would

be the time until she made a verbal response of some kind

to his speech. So he would have to forestall her cry or

exclamation, lest his moment end before he conveyed to

her his potential usefulness to her. Such as being able to

reverse her talent for a time. He could tell her that he had

reverse wood, and knew how to use it to help her. No, she

would just ask for the wood. So he would instead tell her

that his talent could make her what she wanted to be, as

long as they were together. So she would need to keep his

company for a while. Because not only would he be silent

after his moment of speech, he would be immobile once

they formally separated. Thus his single opening

monologue would be of overwhelming importance, and he

had to do it just right. He could in effect win or lose his

contest in that moment.

He reached the thyme plant. It was a small one, so its

effects were limited. Someone had drawn a circle in the

dirt around it, showing the safe limit of approach. Folk

who wanted a leaf of thyme had to use a wooden hook to

get it, because the inanimate was not as greatly affected.

That was what Fortune was coming here to do. Then she

would maneuver the leaf into a magic pouch that stifled

its ambiance, and take the pouch home to her mother. Her

mother, of course, would know how to handle it safely;

mothers were always in need of more

thyme.

Nimby ducked down behind a pile of rocks near the

plant. This form was good at ducking, because of the aqua

duck component. He wouldn't be able to see the girl very

well from here, but neither would she be able to see him,

which was what counted. Of course, he could use his

awareness to see her without eyes, but it was easier just

to listen for her approach while he rehearsed his moment

of speech. He wanted the fewest feasible diversions for

this practice.

How could he get her to listen without speaking? Maybe

if he made a straight quacking noise, she would think he

was a duck, and would pause,
unworried. All he needed

was to get the first few words in,
warning her just to listen,

and then he could run off the whole
spiel. Fortune, with

her constant bad luck, had surely learned
to react cau-

tiously, so well might listen in silence,
for a time, anyway.

His donkey ears twitched. She was here!

She had ap-

proached with her soft step while he pondered. She was

standing at the edge of the thyme plant's limit; his aware-

ness saw her human feminine form. He had almost missed

her. He had not an instant to waste.

"Quack! Quack!" he said in his ducky voice. "Please

listen to me without speaking, for I have

information of

interest to you. I know of your problem with your talent,

and I can help you reverse it, for my own talent is to make

a person whatever she wants to be, as long as she is in my

company." So far so good; she had not made a sound. But

he had to get in the rest before his moment ended. "I am

a friend, but I am not human. I have an ugly form, but I

have no wish at all to harm you. I need the company of a

person like you, and I will do my best to make my com-

pany worthwhile. To justify your trust. But after this, I

will not be able to speak again; I will be completely mute.

So you will have to tell me what you desire. Stay with me,

and you can be what you wish to be, as long as we are

together. I wish only to win your friendship. Please do not

be dismayed by my appearance, which is awful. I am com-

pletely harmless to you, for I will suffer without your com-

pany." Had he covered enough? He couldn't tell her more

about himself; he had come as close to the truth as he

dared. But maybe he could offer an explanation for his

form, so she wouldn't scream and run away when she saw

him. "I am an enchanted creature, not entirely what I

seem. My fate depends on you. Now, if you care to look

at me, look at the pile of rocks to your right. I will lift my

head and nod, and thereafter be silent. But you can talk to

me, and I will understand, and do what I can for you.

Please trust me. My name is Nimby."

He had said enough. Now it was make-or-break time.

Slowly he raised his head and peered over the rocks. There

she was, and—

It was the wrong girl.

"Oh—a funny donkey!" the girl exclaimed.

And now Nimby was mute, per the contest rule. He had

had a good long moment, longer than expected, and had

spoken well. But how had he come to this mistaken con-

nection? He extended his awareness out

and back, tracing

the girl's travel here, and in a moment he had it: Miss

Fortune's bad luck had struck again. There was a crossing

of two paths, just beyond a wide wallflower, and she had

collided with another girl. The two had had their breaths

knocked out, and had sat down on opposite sides, gasping.

Then they had gotten up, brushed themselves off, made

quick curt apologies to each other though each was sure

the other had been at fault, and gone on their ways—down

the wrong paths. Fortune had gone on the other girl's er-

rand, which was to fetch a nice bow from a bow-vine so

her mother wouldn't give her a punish-mint. And the other

girl had gone on Fortune's errand, and had been just re-

alizing her error when Nimby had spoken to her.

She was Chlorine, whose talent was poisoning water.

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She was plain, stupid, and mean-spirited, in complete con-

trast to Fortune. The collision bad been her fault, because

she had been rushing along without looking, too fast for

path conditions. Thus she had given Fortune the colossal

ill luck to lose her encounter with Nimby, who could have

helped her so much, and had given Nimby the worse luck

to have wasted his opening monologue on her. What was

he going to do with this wretch of a wench? Because she

was the one he was stuck with.

Chlorine approached him. "And you can't talk any-

more?" She inquired. "Not even to bray?" She giggled

at her own clumsy humor.

She was asking for it. Nimby stood up, showing his

dragon body.

"Oh—you're a weird dragon," she said. "Ugliest crea-

ture I've ever seen! Why should I ever want to keep com-

pany with you?"

Why, indeed. Fortune would have had some sympathy,

for she was a decent girl. But Chlorine had a harsh per-

sonality, such as there was of it. And

now, casting his

awareness back across her life, he discovered something

even worse: she had once had some sensitivity, but it had

been beaten out of her by her abusive family. She had long

since cried herself out, and now had only one tear left, and

she did not know where that one was. Even if so moved,

she couldn't cry a tear for him. And she wouldn't be

moved, because she had become cynical and heedless of

the feelings of others. Chlorine was simply no prize.

Nimby stared defeat in the snoot. He could hardly have

invoked a worse companion. All because he had not been

paying attention, while a girl known for her ill luck had

suffered more of it. He had come up with

the perfect

speech—for an undeserving girl. He had thrown away his

chance for victory. He hung his head in remorse.

"Still," Chlorine said, "if what you said is true, this

could be my lucky day. I'm going to give you a chance.

But I warn you, if you try to eat me, I'll poison your water,

and you'll have one awful bladder infection." Actually,

her language was somewhat more cynically descriptive,

the key phrase being "pied pee," but Nimby wasn't quite

current with inferior vernacular.

So she wasn't afraid for her safety. She could indeed

poison any water with a touch, which meant she could kill

a creature if she had to. She couldn't do it to Nimby, be-

cause he was a Demon, but of course, he couldn't afford

to let her realize that. And she was what he was stuck with,

and the contest had not yet been

resolved; maybe he still

had an outside chance to win. So he nodded, showing that

he understood her warning.

"Make me beautiful," she said.

That was easy. He focused on her, and transformed her

various pans. He made her straggly greenish yellow hair

.into luxuriant green-tinted golden tresses that curled just

enough to be interesting. He made her yellowish complex-

ion into the fairest skin seen in Xanth. He shifted the sub-

stance of her body so that her egg-timer torso became an

hourglass figure. He formed her thick clodhoppered feet

into dainty digits in glassy slippers. And he adjusted her

shapeless dress into an elegant robe that clung to her sud-

denly firm curves like an artistic lover. She was now a

stunning creature of her kind.

She looked down at herself, appreciating the change.

"Oooo! Is this real? I mean, not illusion? It feels real."

She pinched her delightful derriere just hard enough to

verify its mind-freaking reality.

Nimby nodded, agreeing that it was real. As long as

their association continued.

"I need a mirror," she said. "I want to see my face."

Nimby made one of his scales mirror-shiny and turned

it so she could look. She peered at herself, thrilled.

Then she reconsidered. "I'm not just dull-looking, I'm

dull-thinking. I've been told that often enough. Can you

make me smart, too?"

That was phrased as a question, but it was actually a

request, just as the mirror had been. Nimby concentrated

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on the spongy interior of her head, increasing the effi-

ciency of her mind.

She smiled. "I'm getting smarter! I can feel it! I'm be-

ginning to understand things I never did before. My per-

spective is broadening immeasurably." She paused. "And

so is my vocabulary. I never talked like that before."

Nimby nodded. He had improved not only the height of

her intelligence, but also its breadth. Now she could over-

whelm problems by force of intellect,

and have the judg-

ment to know when to apply it. Now she really would use

the term "bladder infection."

She cocked her head, looking at him. "You know,

you're quite a creature, if I'm not dreaming this. Your

talent is quite strong. But now I have the wit to look a gift

dragon in the tooth. Why are you doing

this for me? You

said you need my company, but I'm sure my company is

not unique. Was it chance or design that brought you to

me?"

Nimby couldn't answer that, so just gazed at her.

She was quick to understand, because of her new intel-

lect. "Let me rephrase that: was it chance?"

He nodded yes. He had been looking for Miss Fortune,

and ill chance had brought him Chlorine instead.

"Chance that you found me," she said slowly, feeling

her way through the powerful mind she now possessed,

becoming aware of the several informational options and

their bypaths. "But you must have had a design. Did you

need me specifically?"

He shook no.

"Is your ultimate intention toward me beneficial?"

He nodded yes. He had to do her enough good to make

her care enough to shed a tear for him.

But she was too canny, now, to accept that uncritically.

"Beneficial for me as well as you?"

She had caught a significant qualification. He really

didn't care about her long-term welfare, only about his

victory in the contest. But since he needed her emotion,

so that she would cry for him, he intended to treat her

well. He wanted her to come to like him, to care about his

welfare. By her definition, as he understood it, his intention

was ultimately beneficial, if not totally

happy. So he nod-

ded yes.

"So you just need a person—and not to eat or otherwise

harm."

He nodded yes.

"Of course, I can't be sure I can trust you," she said

sensibly, for common sense was now one of her strengths.

"But with the powers you have demonstrated, I'm sure

you could have rendered me unconscious and consumed

me, had that been your desire. So the evidence substanti-

ates your claim. You need company."

He made a small nod.

"But there is more," she said sagely. "Yet I could

surely guess for days and never happen to discover it. I've

never been good at the game of nineteen questions, or even

five questions." She paused again, startled. "But I could

be good at it now. However, I see no need. As long as I

keep your company, I can be as I am

now—and when I

separate from you, I will revert to the way I normally am."

He nodded again.

"So let's see what else I want to be," she said, getting

practical. "Beauty is only skin-deep. I want to be healthy,

too."

He focused on her, making her supremely healthy. He

had already accomplished some of this when he made her

beautiful and smart, and now her chemistry was good as

well as her bones and flesh. She would live a long time,

and never suffer illness, and would heal quickly if injured.

While she remained with him.

"Yes, I can feel that health coursing through me," she

said. "I feel like running and jumping." She did so, and

her body responded perfectly.

She returned to him. "What is the range of your am-

biance with respect to these benefits?" she inquired. "Ten

of my paces? A hundred? A thousand?"

He nodded yes at the third suggestion. She had to be

associated with him, and while distance wasn't the key, it

would do as an approximation.

But she did not think to ask a related question: could

she go beyond that ambiance, formally terminating the re-

lationship, then change her mind and return, without losing

the benefits? She assumed that she could

—his awareness

told him that—and that was potential disaster for them

both. But he couldn't tell her; she had to ask.

Another notion caught her fancy. ' 'I am now aware that

though my mind and body have become excellent, my per-

sonality has not. I am a cynical mean-spirited vixen; that's

one reason people don't like me. Can you make me nice?"

She hesitated, caught by an errant thought. "But not too

nice, because I wouldn't want to be washy-wishy."

That was actually another request. Nimby focused, and

adjusted her personality to make her nice. Naturally he did

a good job, providing her with qualities

of integrity, com-

passion, sympathy, empathy, and thoughtfulness. She

would be about as nice a person as any could be. But he

added a reasonable dollop of realism, so that she would

not be, as she put it, washy-wishy.

"Oh, my," she breathed. "I appreciate what a female

canine I have been, and for such

inadequate reason. I have

some amends to make. And I shall make them, in due

course." She looked at Nimby again. "What about my

talent? Can you give me a better one?"

This was dangerous. She could ask for the talent of om-

niscience, and if she got that, she would soon know all

about him—and that would lose him the

contest. Her in-

telligence was already dangerous enough. So he shook his

head no.

"Ah, well," she said, being nice about it, but realistic.

"You have already done so much for me that I would be

unduly greedy to wish for more. Still, now that you have

done all this for me, I'd like to do

something similar for

you. Can you change yourself as you have changed me?"

Nimby hadn't thought of that. Of course, he could—but

should he? He concluded that there should be no harm in

it. So he nodded yes.

"Then make yourself into my equivalent, in form, mind,

health, and character," she said. "By that I mean a

princely human man."

So Nimby became a handsome, smart, healthy, nice, but

realistic princely human man. Thus efficiently had Chlo-

rine abated his ugliness, as well as her own.

"Oh, yes," she breathed. "You are the kind of man

I've always dreamed of, but who I knew would never even

look at me." She glanced appraisingly at him. "Look at

me."

She had the notion that he had to obey her. That was

not the case, but since it hardly mattered, he was not con-

cerned. He looked at her.

"Embrace me," she said. "Kiss me."

So he held her and kissed her. She was now mostly as

he had Grafted her, and his own form was hardly natural

to him, but he found the experience interesting and mildly

pleasurable. This was perhaps because he had Grafted a

complete human man form, with its

inherent appreciation

of any woman who looked and acted the way this one did.

Her exquisitely Grafted human female body elicited certain

responses in his supremely healthy human male body. He

realized that for the first time in his long existence he was

feeling a tinge of human desire.

She ended the kiss, and sighed. "Too bad you're really

a donkey-headed dragon," she said. "If you were a real

man, I'd marry you."

Such illusion! 'But it was just as well that she thought

of him as the monster, and not as the Demon X(A/N)'11.

"And you're still mute?"

He nodded, appreciating a benefit of this condition: he

couldn't give his identity away.

"Ah, well. I'll just have to do the talking for both of

us." She paused, considering.
"Obviously I can't go home

in this state," she said realistically. "My family would

never recognize me, and would be jealous if they did. So

YON ILL WIND 17

I think I'll just disappear for a few days. They may not

even miss me."

She kissed him again, rubbing close against him, so that

his body began to rev up and heat in an alarming though

not unpleasant manner, then flirtatiously disengaged. "So

let's take a long walk to unfamiliar places, in our present

forms, and when I get bored with that I'll consider what

next to do. Because if this is a temporary state, I want to

make the most of it." She eyed him appraisingly. "I sus-

pect you haven't had much experience in human ro-

mance."

Nimby nodded. In fact, he had no idea what she was

talking about, and though his awareness tried to grasp her

larger thoughts, there was nothing there to which he could

relate. What was romance? Did it have anything to do with

the revving of his body when she kissed him?

Chlorine laughed. "Never fear. Nimby. I'll teach you. I

had no use for it before, but now that I'm beautiful and

nice, I appreciate its value. But it must not be rushed. So

let's set out on our adventure." She took

his hand and led

him down the path, away from the thyme plant.

Then she thought of something else. "You said you

could reverse my talent! How about that?"

That much he could agree to. In the course of a brief

yes-no dialogue they established that she

could not just

poison water, but purify it. Actually she could have used

her talent this way all along, had she realized it, because

her poisoning was temporary, and abolished any bad living

things in the water.

Nimby was feeling more positive. Chlorine had been a

mistake, but had become considerably

more interesting.

Perhaps it would be possible to find her lost tear. He knew

where it was, of course, but couldn't tell her unless she

asked the right series of yes-no questions. But she was

doing exactly what he wanted: building a relationship.

Meanwhile his wider awareness was informing him that

the mischief he feared from the interruption of the Inter-

face was coming to pass: a significant storm was about to

forge from Mundania into Xanth. Though he could not see

the future, he knew from long-past experience what that

could mean. If that storm progressed until it swept up sig-

nificant amounts of magic dust, there would be trouble like

none seen in millennia. And he couldn't prevent it.

In fact, he now understood how thoroughly the other

Demons had fooled him. They had known that the Inter-

face would waver when he changed

form and entered

Xanth as a character, and that a storm was moving toward

it. They had timed it precisely, distracting him so that he

would be severely limited at the worst time. And he, intent

on his chance to gain significant status, had carelessly let

himself be snared,

2

HAPPY BOTTOM

Karen stared avidly out the window of the motor

home, catching glimpses of the roiling surface of

the sea. "Is Happy Bottom here yet?" she asked.

She was seven, and interested in everything but home and

school.

"That's Gladys, twerp," David said. He was her big

twelve-year-old half brother, and he figured he knew

everything she didn't. "Hurricane Gladys."

But this rebuke brought her other half brother Sean into

the fray, as was often the case. He was seventeen, so

ranked David by the same amount David ranked Karen.

"Hurricane Happy Bottom," he said, chuckling. "I like

it. But no, she's not here yet; these are only her outskirts.

Enjoy them."

Karen giggled, enjoying the halfway

naughty reference.

YON ILL WIND 19

She saw Mom and Dad, up in the front of the vehicle,

exchange one of tfaeir Significant Looks. That was proba-

bly because of the business about the bottom and the skirts.

Adults knew what was fun, and avoided it.

"Tropical Storm Gladys," Mom said. "She's not yet a

hurricane. Otherwise we couldn't risk this drive across her

path."

Now the kids exchanged a significant glance. Point

made about adults and fun.

"TS HB," Sean remarked innocently. Then, after a

pause just long enough to make someone wonder just what

naughty notions the letters stood for, he clarified it: "Trop-

ical Storm Happy Bottom."

"TS," David agreed with a smirk. Karen kept her face

straight, because she wasn't supposed to know what TS

really stood for, though of course, she did knpw. Tough

Stuff. Just as she knew that PO really stood for Put Out.

But what about HB, in the naughty lexicon? Maybe Hard

Bone. She was sure that would set the boys to sniggering,

though she wasn't absolutely sure why.

Theirs was a modem blended family. Mom and Dad had

each been married before, and it hadn't worked out. Karen

knew why, of course: they had been made for each other,

so their first marriages had been mistakes. Likewise their

first children, though it wasn't expedient to say that, except

in the heat of righteous anger when one of them teased her

too hard. Sean was Dad's son, and David was Mom's son,

which led to certain deviously competitive crosscurrents

between them. In this respect Karen ranked them both,

because she was both parents' child, and a daughter to

boot. So. they were all half siblings, but she was the only

one related by blood to everyone else. She liked it that

way. She really belonged.

But there was only so much excitement to be had from

watching water, even if it was stirring nicely. So Karen

went back to check on the pets. They were in crates, to

keep them out of mischief while the vehicle was in motion,

and not happy about it.

"Hi, Woofer," she said, reaching in to pat the big mon-

grel dog. Woofer was Sean's pet, but got along with every-

one in the family, especially anyone who had food on his

person. His fur was almost black, matching Sean's hair,

and through him. Dad's. "Hi, Midrange." She stroked the

nondescript tomcat. Midrange was David's pet, but could

be friendly with anyone who sat in one place more than a

moment. His fur was mangy light, matching David's dirty

blond hair, which in turn copied Mom's full blond tresses.

"Hi, Tweeter." The parakeet was Karen's own pet, and

was friendly only with her, though he tolerated the others.

His feathers were tinged with brown, which, of course, was

to match her own red curls. That was what came of trying

to emulate both Dad and Mom: in-between hair.

The pets were all glad to see her, because she usually

paid them more attention than anyone else did. The truth

was that they were all garden-variety creatures, rescued

from pound or flea market according-to

the whims of the

various family members; nobody else had wanted any of

them. But Karen thought they were all great folk, and they

evidently agreed with her.

The vehicle shuddered. "Damn!" Dad said. from way

up front in the driver's seat. "Motor's skipping."

"But we can't stop here," Mom protested. "We can't

pause at all, or the storm..." She trailed off, with most

of what she had to say lost in the ellipsis, as she tended

to do when there was something she didn't want the chil-

dren to overhear.

That meant, of course, that Karen definitely wanted to

hear it. "Sorry, gotta go now," she said to the animals,

and hotfooted it back to her place at the table.

Now she could hear the skipping motor herself. It

sounded like one of David's model airplane engines when

it was feeling balky. The motor home was slowing.

"Passengers will buckle their seat belts," Sean an-

nounced, using his airline-captain voice. "We are encoun-

tering turbulence. There is no cause for alarm. Repeat: no

cause for alarm." He spoke the last words with special

emphasis, as if the captain were trying to

conceal the strain

he was under.

Just then a terrific gust of wind buffeted the RV, giving

it a scary push and shake. David and Karen laughed at the

coincidence; it really did seem as if they were in an air-

plane landing in a storm.

"Must be someplace to pull off the road," Dad said.

"Don't want to stall out on a bridge. Where are we?"

Mom looked at the map. "We're crossing Big Pine Key.

You don't think the motor will... ?"

"Not worth risking," Dad said. "If this one's big, we're

better off here, at least until I can get into

the engine."

"Emergency landing," Sean announced in an especially

worried pilot tone. ' 'Passengers will remain seated. Please

review the crash procedures and verify your nearest escape

hatch." And sure enough, there was another buffet of wind

to add realism. ' 'Repeat: there is cause —I mean, no cause

for alarm." As if the captain had repeated without making

the statement the first time, really losing it.

Karen giggled, but behind the fun she was beginning to

get nervous. They were on their way home from a week-

end visit to friends in Key West, and the approach of TS

Gladys had hastened their departure.

They had a lot of

long, thin, exposed causeway and bridge to cover before

they got home to Miami, and the sea was looking increas-

ingly formidable. Suppose one of those gusts blew them

into the water?

The skipping got worse. "Can't nurse it along much

farther," Dad said grimly. "That an

intersection ahead?"

"Yes, the other road runs the length of Big Pine," Mom

said, focusing on the map. "Maybe there's shelter there."

The RV swung through the intersection, turning north.

The wind pushed at it, trying to make it slew off the road,

but Dad managed to keep it on. Then a

blast of ram came

down, making the world outside opaque. Karen couldn't

see much of anything through the side window, and

doubted that Dad was much better off with the windshield.

This was getting bad. She had been enjoying this drive,

and had been intrigued by the notion of a big storm, but

that delight was turning sour. This was definitely getting

scary, and it wasn't even a hurricane yet. She was begin-

ning to think that such tempests weren't as much fun as

advertised.

"Can't see anywhere to stop," Dad muttered. "What's

that—another turn?"

"There's an intersection with 940," Mom said, her

voice wearing that carefully controlled tone that made

Karen especially nervous. Even the two boys weren't jok-

ing now. It was entirely too easy to visualize the RV as

an airplane descending through bad weather, and Karen

wished she could get that image out of her mind.

"Intersection? Can't make it out," Dad said. "But

there's got to be a big building or something we can use

as a windbreak. I don't dare stop until I have a good place,

because the motor may not start again."

The RV limped on, surviving the

buffeting. Then Mom

made a stifled exclamation—the worst kind. She was

scared now, and she didn't scare easy. "Jim—"

"How did we get back on a bridge?" Dad demanded,

seeing it.

"There're two roads," Mom said. "I thought we were

on the left one, but it must be the right one. It leads to No

Name Key."

"Well, whatever its name or lack thereof, here we

come," Dad said.

Karen was relieved to see land resume outside the win-

dow; it had been a brief bridge. She peered ahead, out the

windshield, and saw a sign saying ROCKWELLS. Then one

saying NO NAME. They were indeed on No Name Key.

And still no place to find shelter. Finally the motor

gasped its last, and the vehicle came to a stop. They would

stay here for a white, ready or not. Here on the nameless

key. Mom wouldn't even let Dad get out

to check the

motor, because now things were flying through the air, the

wind making missiles of whatever was handy. All they

could do was wait it out.

YON ILL WIND 23

"Safe belly-flop landing," Sean announced. "In remote

country. Do not panic; we are certain to be rescued before

the headhunters locate us." But the humor didn't get off

the ground.

. So they made sandwiches and sang songs, pretending it

was a picnic, while the wind howled and the night closed

around them like some hungry monster. The RV was

shaken so constantly that they came to tune out the dis-

traction.

There was a lull. Quickly they attended to the necessary

things: Dad went to the motor, and the kids took their pets

out on leashes to do their natural business. Actually

Tweeter didn't need any of that, but Karen took him out

of the cage and cuddled him in her two hands, reassuring

him. He rubbed his beak against her nose, his way of kiss-

ing her. He wouldn't do that with anyone else, and that

was the only trick she had been able to teach him, but it

was enough. The truth was that Tweeter was comforting

her as much as she was comforting him.

The winds picked up again, and there was a power about

them that indicated that what was coming would be worse

than what had been. Everyone bundled back into the RV.

Dad hadn't been able to fix the motor—big surprise!—but

had found rocks to block the wheels, making it a bit more

stable. Mom turned on the radio, briefly, just long enough

-to get the weather report.

"Expected to achieve minimal hurricane status within

the next twenty-four hours," Karen heard it say, and she

had to stifle a hysterical laugh. If this was subminimal, she

didn'f want to meet a maximum one! "Twenty-four point

five north latitude, eighty-one point three west longitude,

proceeding west northwest at ten miles per hour."

Mom traced the lines on the map, and stifled another

shriek. "That's here!" she said. "It's coming right here."

"Well, at least it will be calm in the eye," Dad said,

trying for light reassurance but not achieving it.

There was nothing to do but settle down to wait it out.

They didn't think it was safe to use the beds, so they just

buckled themselves into their various seats and slept as

well as they could in the circumstances. There seemed to

be no point in confining the pets again, so they were al-

lowed to be where they wished. Woofer settled down at

Sean's feet, and Midrange chose David's lap. Tweeter, un-

easy about Midrange being loose, decided to fly back into

the safety of his cage. Midrange had never actually made

a pass at the bird, but Karen understood his concern.

The weather report was right, because in due course the

winds died out and there was complete calm. But they

knew better than to leave the vehicle, because the winds

could return at any time. Karen listened to the silence for

a while, then lapsed back into sleep.

Karen woke to the winds of dawn. There

was no sun in

the sky, just brightening turbulence. She had a mental pic-

ture of puffy clouds circling the RV, firing arrows into it,

but since the arrows were made of vapor, they didn't have

much effect. However, the winds were diminishing, so the

worst had indeed passed. The RV had not been tipped over

or blown into the sea. Now she could resume enjoying the

experience as an adventure.

The others stirred in their seats as the light penetrated.

They took turns using the bathroom facilities. Then Mom

got to work on breakfast, while Dad went out to try fixing

the motor again.

"Yo!" he called, surprised.

Karen, free at the moment, zoomed out to join him,

carrying Tweeter perched on one lifted finger. And stopped

just outside the door, amazed.

The outdoors had changed. They were now near the

shore of a huge island. Not far from the RV was a tree

that seemed to be made of metal, and

whose fruits seemed

to be horseshoes. And standing not far from the tree was

the weirdest horse she had ever seen. It was male, with

regular hindquarters. But its front rose up into the torso,

arms, and head of a man. It had an old-fashioned bow

slung across its back, and a quiver of arrows.

"What is that?" she asked, too awed to be alarmed.

"That is a centaur," Dad said, his voice unnaturally

level.

"A what?"

"A mythical crossbreed between a man and a horse. It

must be a statue, remarkably lifelike."

The figure moved. "Ho, intruders," it said. "What are

you doing on Centaur Isle?"

Karen looked at her bird. "Somehow I don't think we're

in Florida anymore. Tweeter," she said.

Dad seemed too astonished to respond, so Karen did.

"We're the Baldwin family," she said. "We must've got-

ten blown here by Hurricane Happy Bottom. Tropical

Storm, I mean. But where's this? I mean, which key is

Centaur Isle?"

"Key?" the centaur asked in turn. "This is a shoe tree,

not a key-lime tree." He reached out and touched one of

the dangling horseshoes.

The other members of the family emerged, hearing the

dialogue. "Gee—a horseman," David said. "I thought

they were fantasy."

"They are," Dad said. "We must have stumbled into a

freak show."

"Perhaps I misunderstand," the centaur said. "Are you

referring to me as a freak?" Suddenly his bow was in his

hand, and an arrow was nocked and pointing right at Dad.

Karen acted before she thought, as she

often did. ' 'Don't

do that!" she cried to the centaur, running out between

them. "Dad doesn't believe in fantasy."

The centaur was taken aback. "He doesn't? What about

magic, then?"

"That neither," she said.

"What kind of a man is he?" the centaur asked, be-

mused.

"Just a regular garden-variety family man," she said.

"From Miami."

"From your what?"

Karen tittered. "Not your ami, silly. My ami. Miami."

The centaur scowled, confused. ' 'What part of Xanth is

that?"

"It's part of Florida, America."

The centaur tilted his head and swished his tail, sur-

prised. "Are you by any chance from Mundania?"

"No, Florida."

"Did you come through the Gate?"

Karen looked around. "We sure must've come through

somewhere, because this isn't much like home."

The centaur put away his bow. "This is near the Gate

aperture. The Turn Key normally supervises it, compe-

tently enough for a human. Perhaps something went

wrong, and you came through unaware."

"We must've been blown through," Karen agreed. "It

sure was windy. Till we were in the eye."

"An eye gazed at you?"

She giggled. "The eye of the hurry-cane. Happy Bot-

tom."

"Cheerful posterior?" The centaur glanced at his hand-

some rump.

"You're funny! The center of the storm."

"Ah, the storm. We shall have to see what we can do.

Let us introduce ourselves. I am Cedric Centaur the tenth,

of Centaur Isle."

"I'm Karen Baldwin," Karen said.

' 'I must say, you don't look bald. Is that a magic hair-

piece?"

Karen felt her wild tangle of blown, slept-in hair. "I

don't think so. It's just the way I grew it. It's always wild

in the morning until Mom brushes it down."

Cedric smiled. "Our foals have a similar problem. We

try to keep the tangle weeds clear, but more keep appear-

ing."

"Should we shake hands?" Karen asked, uncertain of

the protocol.

Cedric lifted one hand and made it shake slightly. "I do

not see the point, unless you are bothered by flies."

She suppressed another titter. "No, I mean our two

hands together, to show we are friendly."

"How quaint."

She raised her hand high, and the centaur reached his

hand low, and they shook hands. "And that's my family,"

she said, nodding behind her. Dad had been joined by the

others, all appearing somewhat stunned.

"Indubitably. Follow me." He turned and walked away.

Karen turned to address her family. "Well?" she in-

quired. "Are you coming?" She knew she

had pretty well

one-upped them, and it was a great feeling.

The four of them exchanged about six glances in a scant

second. Then they fell in behind without comment.

The winds remained high, blowing the foliage of nearby

trees to one side. Some of the foliage

looked like green

tentacles. It was pleasantly weird. -

Cedric led them to a village made of stalls. There were

other centaurs there: stallions, mares, fillies, colts, and

foals. None of them wore any clothing. Only the smallest

paid them any attention. They were busy repairing dam-

aged structures. The high winds had

blown some of the

stall roofs off.

They came to a central pavilion where a young stallion

of about Sean's age stood. "I found these Mundanes near

the shore," Cedric said. "They call themselves the Bald-

win family, and seem to be stranded here. There may be

a rift in the Gate. Take care of the

matter, Carleton." He

turned and trotted back the way they had come.

Carleton stepped forward. "Welcome to Centaur Isle,"

he said. "Unfortunately you can't remain here, unless you

care to become servants. As Mundanes, you have no

magic, which is good; nevertheless I suspect you will be

better off on mainland Xanth, among your own kind."

Dad finally got hold of himself. "Just exactly what kind

of a place is this?"

Carleton paused, briefly considering. "You have no

prior knowledge of Xanth?"

"Unless you are referring to a yellow nitrogenous com-

pound, xanthine—" Dad paused at the centaur's blank

look. "Evidently not. Then we know nothing of this."

"Then perhaps we should exchange information,"

Carleton said. "Would you like a meal while we con-

verse?"

"Yes!" Karen said, as usual, before she thought. They

hadn't had breakfast yet, and she was hungry.

Carleton lifted one hand, and in a moment a filly centaur

trotted over, her large full firm bare breasts quivering in a

way that made Sean and David stare. Karen felt a tinge of

resentment, because she knew that never in her fullest fu-

ture adult-maturity would she ever develop a bosom like

that. "Yes, Carleton?" she inquired.

"Sheila,-these Mundanes are in need of fodder."

"Coming right up," Sheila agreed, trotting bouncily off.

"Fodder?" David asked.

But soon the filly returned with big bowls of odd fresh

fruit and other items. She set them on a table under the

pavilion. "Yellows, greens, reds, and oranges," she said,

indicating the fruits. "Pink, purple, black, and blue berries.

A loaf of breadfruit and a butterfly. And milkweed pods."

She glanced at Karen. "Including chocolate."

Mom lifted the breadfruit. It fell into several slices. She

picked up the butterfly. Its wings detached and flew away,

leaving the butter to be used. "These

will do nicely," she

said, terrifically poised. "Thank you, Sheila."

The filly made a partial bow with her foresection that

almost made Sean's eyeballs pop out of his head. m fact,

Karen's own almost popped, and she was a girl. She had

once sneaked a peek at an X-rated video, but these were

more than those, and better formed. Then Sheila trotted

off, evidently to Mom's relief.

Karen picked up the chocolate milkweed pod and

sniffed it. Then she bit off the end. Sure enough, chocolate

milk, and very good. Meanwhile the boys piled into the

various-colored fruits and berries. Mom passed a slice of

buttered bread to Dad, and started another for herself.

"The Land of Xanth is magical," Carleton said. "There

are many magical artifacts, and most human beings possess

magic talents, one to each person. Centaurs don't, of

course; we regard magic in our own kind as obscene. But

sometimes it happens. My sister Chena —" He winced.

"But that is irrelevant. We centaurs use magic tools on

occasion, however. Beyond Xanth is Mundania, a rather

dreary region because of its lack of magic. The normal

route to Mundania is to the north and west, via the isthmus.

That may be your route of choice, to return to your home-

land. Now, if I may inquire, what are the details of your

arrival here?"

Dad filled him in on the drive and the storm, and how

they's stalled out on No Name Key. "You mentioned a

gate," he concluded. "That must be a connection between

our two realms. The eye of the storm passed over us, and

perhaps swept us into this, um, dimension. Unless this is

after all some experimental project on No Name Key."

"Centaur Isle is no experiment," Carleton said firmly.

"We constructed it centuries ago, from the scattered islets

of the region. It is low on magic by our

preference. But

on the mainland you will see a great deal of magic, if you

wish. However, I must advise you that much of it is dan-

gerous to the uninitiated. Have you had experience with

dragons?"

"Dragons!" David exclaimed. "Really? Can I see

one?"

Carleton glanced coolly at him. "I doubt that would be

wise. Dragons are best avoided, unless one is proficient

with archery or has protective enchantment."

Mom spoke up. "Are you saying that the whole of Flor-

ida—of Xanth—is magical? That fantastic creatures

abound there?"

"Exactly. We can arrange to notify the human author-

ities at Castle Roogna of your presence. They may send a

detachment to assist you, because you surely do not wish

to travel Xanth alone."

"A castle?" Karen asked, excited anew. She loved any-

thing fantastic.

"Castle Roogna is the capital of the human beings." the

centaur explained. "Their King Dor should be interested."

"A King!" Karen exclaimed, really truly delighted.

"This land's got everything."

"But we can't leave our RV," Mom said, ruining things

with her practicality. "We have to fix it and drive home."

"Not to mention the pets," Dad added.

That really got Karen. "Woofer! Midrange! Tweeter!

They're alone!"

"They've been alone before, twerp," David reminded

her.

"There are others in your party?" Carleton asked.

"Our pet animals," Sean explained. "We encountered

you folk so suddenly that we never thought to fetch them

out of the RV."

"What manner of creatures are these?"

"Woofer's a dog, Midrange's a cat, and Tweeter's a

bird," Karen said quickly. "They're part of the family.

We've got to get them."

"Of course you must, before you depart the Isle."

"First we have to get our RV running," Dad said.

"And—where's the nearest gas station?"

Carleton's brow furrowed. "I do not believe I know of

that creature."

"For gasoline. The fuel. You don't use gasoline here?

Maybe you call it petrol?"

"We do have pet-rel seabirds. However __"

"Petroleum. Refined from oil."

The centaur shook his head. "I suspect we are on dif-

ferent subjects. Our pet-rels merely fly and seek fish. They

do make good pets, of course, but they have no known

connection with oil, apart from that with which they preen

their feathers."

Dad shook his head. "I think we're in trouble. But first

things first. Maybe I can get the motor running. Then

maybe we'll have enough gas left to get us home, if we

can find the way."

YON ILL WIND 31

"This creature is ailing? You did say that it was limp-

ing."

"It's not a creature," Dad said. "It's a motor home. A

recreational vehicle, RV. The motor was skipping, and fi-

nally quit. Maybe salt water blew into it."

"Would healing elixir cure it?"

Dad paused. "Maybe you should take a look at it, and

form your own conclusion."

"Certainly. I will bring a vial of elixir."

They finished their meal, and started back. Karen was

openly admiring Carleton's handsome equine body. She

liked all animals, but especially horses.

The centaur caught her gaze. "You are small, Karen

Human," he said. "Would you prefer me to carry you?"

She was immediately abashed. "Gee, no —I don't know

how to—someday maybe I'll get riding lessons—I'd just

fall off." But how she longed to try it.

"You will not fall," he said.

Karen looked pleadingly at Mom, who was sure to say

no, but maybe possibly just this once might not. Mom

sighed and looked away: her way of not quite opposing it.

So Dad picked her up by the armpits and set her on the

centaur's sturdy back. She grabbed on to

the fur in front

of her, hoping she would be able to hold her position.

Carleton took a step—and Karen didn't lose her balance

despite the lack of a saddle. Somehow the way he moved

supported her, giving her confidence. It was as though he

were balancing her, compensating for the motions he

made. She was, indeed, in no danger of falling. It was

glorious.

They walked back to the RV. Now it was time to dis-

mount, but Karen wasn't sure how. Then the centaur put

back one hand, and she grabbed his hand and steadied

herself as she slid down. "Thank you! Thank you," she

babbled. "That was the greatest ride ever!"

He smiled faintly. "You remind me of my little sister."

"Gee, where is she?"

"She was exiled." His mouth closed so firmly that she

knew he would say no more on that subject.

They entered the RV, where the pets were glad to see

them. Sean put Woofer on a leash, and David did the same

for Midrange. Some folk thought that cats couldn't be

leash-trained, but so many cats had been

killed in the

neighborhood, mostly getting hit by'cars, that they had

done it with this one, and Midrange was used to it.

Tweeter was another matter. He always stayed close to

Karen when they went out, and would come to her when

she lifted a finger for him to perch on, so he had more

freedom. She brought him out, proudly perched.

All three animals were obviously surprised by the cen-

taur. They stood and stared, evidently not sure whether to

be friendly or hostile.

"There is one on the mainland who has a cat-pet,"

Carleton said. "Her name is Jenny Elf." Then he turned

to the vehicle. "This is a house?"

"A combination house and motor vehicle," Dad said.

"You might call it a house that moves."

"A magic house," the centaur agreed. "How does it

move?"

"The motor is connected to the wheels, making them

turn and move it forward." Dad opened the motor com-

partment. "Here is the motor. I couldn't find any loose

wires, so it's something more subtle. I'm not an auto me-

chanic, so my expertise is limited."

"Mine is surely less, in this connection," Carleton said.

"I make no sense of this at all. Can you make it operate

now?"

"I'll try, just in case." Dad got in and cranked the

starter. The motor coughed once, but wouldn't catch.

"Amazing," the centaur said. "It does seem to be alive,

but in very bad health. I will try the elixir." He brought

out a vial and sprinkled a few drops of liquid on the motor.

Karen stifled a smile; she didn't know beans about motors,

but even she was sure that wouldn't do a

thing for it. She

saw the boys reacting similarly.

Dad tried the starter again—and the motor caught. Sud-

denly it was not only running, it was purring.

Several jaws dropped. "That's either one bleep of a co-

incidence," Sean auittered. "Or—"

Dad got out, leaving the motor running. "What did you

do?" he asked. "Suddenly it's perfect."

"I simply sprinkled some healing elixir on it," Carleton

said. "Normally it has little effect on anything inanimate,

but your motor creature seems to be animate, and I had

nothing better to try. I'm glad it helped. Your house should

be all right now, because it is completely healed." He

frowned. "Though I still do not see how it can move."

"Watch," Dad said, and got back in. In a moment the

RV nudged forward. It drove in a circle,

and stopped

where it had been. Then the engine died. "Nosense wast-

ing gas until we actually go," Dad said, emerging.

"This is phenomenal," the centaur said, obviously im-

pressed. "A rolling house. I have not seen such a thing

before."

"But there seem to be no paved roads here," Mom said

worriedly. "And no bridges. We have nowhere to drive."

"I believe there is a high-way on the mainland," Carle-

ton said. "Unfortunately, it is a troll pike. You have to

pay the trolls at every turn."

"We're used to that," Dad said. "How do

we get across

to the mainland?"

"We shall be glad to ferry you across. We can have a

craft ready by noon."

"But the winds remain so high," Mom said, worried

again. "It wouldn't be safe."

"We can handle»it," Carleton said in the same tone he

had used when assuring Karen about riding.

Mom looked dubious, but didn't argue. So the centaur

trotted off, leaving them to make ready for the trip.

Dad shook his head. "I find today hard to believe," he

said. "But I'll feel better when we get on that highway."

The others agreed. The centaurs seemed nice, but this

whole business was pretty weird. Karen was looking for-

ward to getting home and telling all her skeptical friends

r

about where they'd been. Nobody would ever believe her;

that was the fun of it.

Promptly at noon, a big raft poled uato view, with four

muscular centaurs at its comers. At the same time, Carle-

ton and Sheila Centaur galloped up from the village. Again

the boys' eyes threatened to pop at the sight of the filly's

front, and even Dad's eyes might have strained a little.

Mom's mouth tightened ever so slightly: not the best sign.

Karen was good at reading small signals; it kept her from

getting into as much trouble as she deserved. So she didn't

giggle, quite.

"I thought you would appreciate something to eat on

the way," Sheila said, presenting them with a big bag

marked GOODIES. "More milk pods, honey buns, nuts and

bolts—"

"Bolts?" David asked.

She brought out what did indeed look like a bolt and

gave it to him. He sniffed it, then bit off the end. It seemed

to be similar to a nut. "Chocolate flavored!" he said.

"I could get to like this filly," Sean murmured, though

his eyes weren't on the bolt. Sheila

tossed back her lovely

brown tress/mane and smiled at him, not at all self-

conscious.

The raft nudged in to the shore. ' 'Now, if you will have

your house creature get on, we shall take it across to the

mainland," Carieton said. "I have communicated with the

Good Magician, who says he will send

you a guide. She

will arrive in late afternoon with her companion; Sheila

will introduce you before she returns here."

"Sheila's crossing with us?" Sean-asked, his eyeballs

threatening to go into orbit.

' 'We would not want it claimed that we of the Isle were

inhospitable to those who found themselves here through

no fault of their own," Carieton said. "Normally we dis-

courage unauthorized visits, but we do allow for special

circumstances. We are doing what we can to see you safely

on your way. The Good Magician is competent, and you

should be able to progress with the help of his guide."

"Uh, thank you," Dad said. "We appreciate your hos-

pitality and assistance. Perhaps we shall meet again."

"This is doubtful." Carieton nodded, then turned tail

and trotted off. Dad went to the RV.

"He is a bit saddened by the loss of his little sister,"

Sheila confided. "If you should happen to encounter her,

I'm sure he would appreciate news of her current state."

"Why was she exiled?" Karen asked.

Sheila's mouth tightened. "She was found to have a

magic talent. She was a good person, but that is simply

not allowed among centaurs of the Isle. We consider it

obscene."

"I guess you don't want to know what we consider ob-

scene," David said brightly.

"If you are typical of your species, you consider your

natural body and its natural functions, other than eating,

to be obscene," she replied evenly. "Therefore you cover

your body with clothing, evidently ashamed of it, and pre-

tend that you have no natural functions, especially not def-

ecation or reproductive capacity."

Karen looked at David. "Well, I guess she flushed your

toilet," she said, drawing on an old saying she had re-

searched from a book of dated vernacular.

"I guess she did," David agreed, bemused. "I think I

like the centaur way better."

"Me too," Karen agreed.

Mom and Sean exchanged a Significant Glance. Karen

made a mental note: Sean was getting to be too much like

an adult.

The RV started up and moved slowly toward the raft. It

nudged onto the planking, fitting comfortably. Then David

and Karen ran to put the blocks at the wheels so it couldn't

roll off even if the brakes didn't hold.

When they were all safely aboard, the centaurs shoved

off. Then they unfurled a sail and tied it firmly in place.

The winds remained quite stiff, so this gave the raft plenty

of push. It moved obliquely against the wind, tacking. The

muscular centaurs clearly knew what they were doing.

Each had his station, whether at sail, tiller, pole, or guard,

and was intent on his business.

"This is a good time to eat," Sheila said. "It will take

a while to cross the channel, and

thereafter you may be

distracted by the things of the mainland."

Mom recovered some of her normal aplomb. "Will you

join us in the meal, Sheila?"

"Of course," the centaur said. "Let me set up toad

stools for you." She went to a box at one side and brought

forth stools that were indeed shaped like toads, and when

they sat on them, the stools made "Ribbit!" croaking

sounds.

"Now, that's interesting," Dad remarked. "Where we

come from, toads are silent; only frogs croak."

"Mundania is surely a curious place," Sheila said po-

litely. "Our toads accept no such constraints."

They ate their interesting meal as the raft forged across

the channel to the mainland. The shoreline seemed to be

solid jungle with strange-looking trees, but there was a

golden beach. "The Gold Coast," Sheila

explained. In due

course they came aground, and Dad drove the RV onto

land.

"I will show you to the landing site," Sheila said. "It

should not be long now before your guide arrives. Can

your moving house travel at trotting velocity?"

"If it has firm, level terrain," Dad said. "This beach

seems suitable."

"It is at the edge of the Gold Coast," the centaur said.

"Thereafter you will use the trollway, which is certainly

firm. I shall run ahead, and you may follow at such speed

as your house can manage."

They piled into the RV, and Dad started the engine. He

turned west to follow Sheila. The kids all looked out the

windshield to see how it went.

At first the centaur walked. As they caught up to her,

she trotted. Then, as the RV caught up again, she broke

into a gallop, her hair/mane flying back. "I wish I could

see her from the front," Sean murmured.

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"You have seen more than enough of her already,"

Mom replied primly.

They got going at about twenty-five

miles an hour,

which seemed to be the centaur's cruising speed. Soon

they came to what looked like nothing so much as a giant

pillow sitting on the sand. Here Sheila stopped, so they

did too.

"My, your house does move well," the centaur said.

She was breathing hard, which surely

provided Sean with

all the view he could have desired. "I am beginning to

suspect that Mundania is not as dreary a region as re-

puted."

"It does have its points," Dad said.

Sheila looked at her wrist watch, which turned out to be

two eyes painted on her wrist. They winked at her in what

must have been a meaningful pattern. "Your guide should

arrive soon," she said.

They settled down to wait for the arrival of the guide.

3

CHLORINE

Chlorine was enjoying herself. It was fun being

beautiful and smart, in the company of a handsome

and smart (but mute) man. But her enjoyment was

fading. There was no one to see her in her lovely brilliance,

and Nimby was more apparent than real. That was to say,

he had the appearance but not the reality

of a princely man.

And he was the cause of her good fortune. So he didn't

really count. She needed to be among real people, whose

admiration and envy meant something. But she couldn't

go to her home village, where someone might possibly

recognize her and know her present beauty for a fraud, and

she didn't know enough about any other village to go

there. So how was she to find a suitable place to show off

to real people? She put her fine new mind to work on the

problem.

Then a bright bulb flashed above her

head. She would

go to the Good Magician with a Question! That was a

legitimate activity, and of course, she would have to do a

year's Service for him, and in all that time she would be

able to show off legitimately. She might even accomplish

something useful, assuming the Service was of a useful

kind, and the new niceness in her appreciated that.

But she needed a Question. What would be legitimate?

What did she really want to know?

After a moment the bulb flashed again. How she loved

this good mind, which performed so much better than her

old one had; when she posed a question for it, it took hold

with the power of twenty centaurs. She would ask where

her lost final tear was. She had wondered about that for

years, and now she could finally find out.

"Nimby," she announced, "we are going to the Good

Magician's castle to ask him a Question."

Nimby looked at her doubtfully. He seemed a bit

alarmed. Maybe he thought the Good Magician Humfrey

wouldn't like him.

"Not to worry," she said reassuringly. "I'll tell him

how nice you have been to me, though you're really just

a donkey-headed dragon. I'm sure he'll understand."

Nimby did not seem entirely reassured, but she was sure

he would relax when he saw that it was all right. The Good

Magician knew everything, so he would know that Nimby

was nice, and if he had any doubt, he could simply look

him up in his Big Book of Answers and immediately learn

everything about the mute dragon. So

there was no call to

be concerned on that score.

But there was one small immediate problem: she didn't

know the way to the Good Magician's castle. She lived in

the northeast section of Xanth, and the Good Magician was

somewhere in the center of Xanth. It was surely a long

and difficult route there.

But maybe Nimby could help. "Nimby, I want to reach

the Good Magician's castle swiftly and safely and com-

fortably. Do you know a way?"

Nimby nodded yes.

"Then show me that way."

Nimby set off at a swift walk toward a neighboring vil-

lage. He soon found a clear path, and in three moments

and an instant or two they were at the village limit. She

knew because there was a sign saying JACKS ON VILLE. Oh,

yes, she remembered now; every person in this village was

named Jack or Jackie, and they all worked to harvest as-

sorted jacks. Little jacks were six-pointed twists of wire

that children could play with, while big jacks were solid

metal twists used to lift heavy things. So it was a thriving

community.

Nimby led her to a metal box beside the sign. This was

labeled PHONE JACK, and there was a little plug dangling

on a wire by it. So she lifted the wire and plugged its end

into a hole in the box. A slot opened, and a voice brayed:

"Whatcha want. Jackass?"

"I'm not the jackass," Chlorine said,

realizing that it

had mistaken her for her companion. "I'm just looking for

a quick way to the Good Magician's Castle."

"Well, pony up some jack, then," the voice said.

Chlorine looked around. There was a pile of lettuce

leaves nearby. Her bright mind realized

that a pony should

like that, so she picked up a leaf and wedged it into the

slot.

"Not enough," the voice said. "We're jacking up the

price."

So she jammed in more lettuce. "This guy's a knave,"

she muttered to Nimby."

"Right—the Jack of diamonds," the voice retorted.

"Now I'll run up the Union Jack to signal a crackerjack

cab. You have some applejack while you wait."

So they sat at the nearby table, where there was a jug

of cider, and drank cups of it while waiting. It had a tangy

taste, and was very good. Soon Chlorine's head was spin-

ning pleasantly.

A burly man appeared on the path. He had a big double-

bitted axe slung over his shoulder.

"Are you the cab?" Chlorine inquired, admiring his

muscles.

"I'm no cad," the man protested. "I'm just a passing

lumberjack." He glanced at the jug. "But you'd be best

off, miss, to ease off on that applejack before your head

spins off."

Chlorine put her hands up to stop her head from com-

pleting another revolution. It did make her feel less dizzy.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome, lovely lass." The man ambled on.

Chlorine flushed with pleasure at his compliment. Then

she remembered that she really was lovely, now, so the

compliment was well deserved. Still, it was a pleasure she

was not well accustomed to, so she knew she would con-

tinue to enjoy it.

In due course a cloud of dust zoomed up and abruptly

stopped. On its side was printed SPEED DEMON CAB. A door

opened in its side.

Chlorine didn't quite trust this. She looked at Nimby.

Nimby got up and climbed into the cab. So she followed.

It had a plush seat in the back, wide enough for the two

of them.

The door slammed closed. The cab leaped into motion

with a loud squeal. Suddenly they were zooming at fright-

ening speed along the path; the tree trunks were passing

at a blurring rate. "Are you sure—?" Chlorine asked

Nimby.

Nimby nodded yes. So she relaxed. There was another

seat ahead of them, and beyond that a transparent pane,

and beyond that the onrushing forest. They were going

somewhere very fast.

She saw a sign in the front. It said "YOUR DRIVER: De-

mon Strator. Unsafe, unreliable, discourteous."

r

For some reason, that caused her to be worried again.

"Nimby, that sign—"

Then a creature appeared on the front seat. It had horns,

so did seem to be a demon. "That's just to scare away

low tippers," Strator said. "You paid plenty of jack in

advance, so you have nothing much to fear. Unless I lose

control." The cab swerved perilously close to a tree.

"Oh." Chlorine pondered. "What is a tip?"

"From you, I will accept a kiss, you luscious creature."

She glanced again at Nimby, who nodded, so she leaned

forward and kissed the demon on his right ear.

The cab zoomed into the air, looped, and landeti again

at speed. "Hoo!" Strator said. "That's one potent kiss!"

"Thank you," she said, blushing. It was

fun, because

she had seldom had cause to blush before.

The cab zoomed on until it came to a squealing halt at

the very brink of an awesomely deep crevasse. "Trans-

fer," Strator announced. "The Gap Chasm is beyond my

range."

"Thank you," Chlorine said, climbing out of the cab.

"I think you're a nice speed demon."

This time it was the demon who blushed. He turned a

rich royal purple, and steam rose from him. "Gotta go

now," he muttered, and the cab spun about and zoomed

back northeast.

It was now dusk, so the speedy ride had taken at least

some time. A large dark shape swooped out of the deep

shadow of the Gap and landed before them. It seemed to

be a bird almost as big as a roc, completely black. It

clutched a small basket in its talons, and on the basket was

a tag: FLY BY NIGHT.

Chlorine nodded. That surely meant that this bird flew

only by night, so their timing was right.

Nimby climbed into the basket, which turned out to be

much larger than it had first appeared; the bird's size had

dwarfed it. Chlorine joined him. Then the bird spread its

wings and hopped over the brink, into

the chasm.

Chlorine's gizzard surged up to her throat as the basket

dropped, not realizing that the rest of her was falling. Then

the wings caught the dark air, and things settled into place.

They sailed not across, but along inside the chasm, re-

maining in its pooled darkness while the last of daylight

touched its rims and the clouds floating above it. Chlorine

peered down, hoping to catch a glimpse of the notorious

Gap Dragon, but all she saw was palpable blackness. Since

she didn't feel like palpating it, she tried

to ignore it. Then,

as the darkness rose beyond the Gap and spread across the

terrain of Xanth proper, the bird lifted out and flew low

over the jungle. Chlorine saw the lights of little fires be-

low, where the folk of Xanth had their hearths, or maybe

those were dragons pumping up their bellies for nocturnal

hunting. It was all rather pretty.

The lights of a castle came into sight, showing its walls

and turrets. That wasn't pretty, it was perfectly beautiful!

Chlorine stared in rapt wonder, wishing she could visit a

castle like that. It must be so great to live in such an ed-

ifice, to be a Princess, or even a serving maid. She just

felt such longing for the kind of life she

would never have.

She might be beautiful now, but when she stopped keeping

company with Nimby she would revert to her normal,

dreary self, and her dream of the, moment would be over.

She would have shed a tear for her lost dream, if she only

knew where her last tear was. *

But of course, that was why she was

going to see the

Good Magician. So she laughed, instead, but there was a

deep tinge of regret in it.

Then the bird flew right up to that beautiful castle, and

landed outside its moat. This was her destination!

Nimby climbed out of the basket, and she followed.

Then .the fly-by-night bird departed, swiftly and silently.

They were alone in the night beside the glorious lighted

castle.

Chlorine was sure she knew better than to try to pass

the challenges and enter the castle at night. She would wait

until morning. That would give her the chance to get some

sleep, too.

Then her bright though sleepy mind thought of some-

thing. "Nimby—do you need to sleep?"

The handsome man-form shook his head no.

"So it won't be an imposition for you to stay awake

and guard me from possible harm? I mean, I think you're

a great creature, but I don't want to wear you out before

your time." She laughed ruefully. "In my natural self I

wouldn't have thought to ask that, because I wouldn't have

cared. But I'm nice now, so I do care. And it's practical

too, because you're all that makes me so wonderful. So

it's okay?"

Nimby nodded yes.

"Okay. You keep watch, and wake me one instant be-

fore dawn, so I can see the sunrise. I'm sure I'll appreciate

its beauty much more than I used to." She started to gather

some leaves to make a bed, then had another thought.

"Would it bother you to revert to your natural form, so I

could use you as a pillow? Don't hesitate to say no, be-

cause—"

Nimby's donkey-headed dragon form was back. He lay

on the ground, and she lay down and put her head against

his side. It had scales, but now the scales were soft.

"You know, you do look funny," she remarked. "But

the more things you do for me, the more I like you, even

as you are now. I hope that doesn't embarrass you."

Nimby wiggled an ear, seeming pleased rather than em-

barrassed. Chlorine stretched, snuggled down, and faded

quickly into sleep.

She woke as something tickled her nose. "Who? What?"

she asked, surprised. Then she realized that it was one of

Nimby's ears touching her. She had told him to wake her

an instant before dawn, and he had done it. "Thanks," she

said.

An instant passed, and dawn-appeared. Colored rays of

light speared up into the sky, brightening it. Nearby clouds

glowed. Then, when it was safely light, the sun poked its

face up from behind the trees. The sun never came out at

night, because it was afraid of the dark.

"Oh, it's beautiful, just as I knew it would be!" Chlo-

rine exclaimed. "Thank you. Nimby, for waking me in

time." She rubbed his donkey ears affectionately.

She got up and considered. "You fetch us something

good to eat, while I attend to my morning ablutions," she

said.

Nimby trundled off, and she found a bush for some busi-

ness, then brought out her brush and went over her hair.

It was now gloriously luxuriant, glistening in the bright-

ening light of day. It was still greenish yellow, but now

the green was the luster of healthy plants, and the yellow

was the burnish of gold. She gazed into a puddle, and saw

her reflection: she resembled a princess just awakening

from beauteous slumber. It was really too bad this adven-

ture would have to end sometime.

She returned to where they had slept, and saw Nimby

approaching with a mouthful of fresh chocolate and vanilla

pies. He must have found a good pie tree. His mouth in

this form was quite large, so there was a good collection

of large pies, and none of them was damaged.

Then she had a second thought. "Will I

get fat, eating

such stuff?"

Nimby shook his head no. He ought to know, as he was

the one who had transformed her. So Chlorine dived in

with gusto. The dragon watched, seeming pleased.

Until her third thought. "Aren't you hungry. Nimby?

You should have some pie too."

Nimby hesitated, then nodded yes. But still he looked

at the pies somewhat doubtfully.

"Oh, in your natural form you could gobble them all

up, and leave no more for me? Then change into your

handsome man-form, and you won't need as much."

The dragon disappeared, and the handsome man ap-

peared. Nimby man took a pie and began to eat. He

seemed to like it well enough.

Chlorine's fourth thought caught up with her. "Biting

bugs! They must be all over, in the night —but I wasn't

bitten. Were you protecting me from that harm too?"

Nimby nodded.

"I don't know what I'll do without you, when this

ends," she said. "I'm really getting to like this adventure,

and we haven't even done anything significant or naughty

yet." She eyed the man, but decided that naughtiness

could wait; she had three challenges to pass to get into the

castle.

In due course, not one moment overdue, they went to

stand at the bank of the moat. The castle was lovely in the

early morning, too. The moat was calm, and seemed to be

without a moat monster. There was a drawbridge, but it

was raised; no way to cross by foot. However, there was

a boat tied to a stake in the bank.

She saw something lying in the grass at her feet, and

stooped to pick it up. It was a marking pen, the kind that

she had used in the past to mark children's names on cloth-

ing. There was no sense wasting it, so she put it in her

purse.

"Well, let's get to it. Nimby," she said briskly. "It's

my challenge, so you just follow along as I work things

out. I'm sure you know how to handle each challenge, but

I think it wouldn't count if you gave me any hints. Besides,

I should enjoy the thrill of it. I want to put this good mind

of mine to the test."

She stepped toward the boat—and a large ferocious bat

appeared from nowhere. It flew straight at her, then banked

and veered away at the last half instant. She saw the word

COM on its underside as it did.

Chlorine was taken aback. In fact, she almost sat down

as she was taken back too far and lost her footing. For-

tunately she recovered her feet before going down. When

she had been a plain nothing girl it wouldn't have mattered

if she'd sprawled turvy-topsy and showed her panties to

the sky, but now she was a luscious creature, and the hu-

miliation would have been awful.

"That's no ordinary bat," she said. "That's a com-bat!

I'll never be able to pass it."

Nimby, behind her, shrugged, neither

agreeing nor dis-

agreeing. He was being neutral. That made her suspicious,

not of his motive, which was surely amicable, but that

there was a way, and he was trying not to give it away.

And of course, there was a way, because otherwise it

wouldn't be a legitimate Good Magician challenge.

She pondered a moment, and cogitated an instant, and

thought a while, knowing that this would not be easy un-

less she found the right approach. It wouldn't do to try to

get around the bat, or to fight it. She had to outsmart it,

or at least figure out the proper way to denature it. There

had to be something obscure that would be obvious the

moment she thought of it. Because that was the way every-

one knew the Good Magician's challenges were. He didn't

want just anybody barging in to pester him with Questions,

so he made it difficult to reach him, but he did play fair,

by his definition. By anyone else's definition he was a

grouchy gnome, of course, but nobody else's definition

counted for much here. So what was there? Her fine new

mind focused, exploring possibilities and bypaths at a rapid

rate. What was obscure but obvious? There wasn't any-

thing special in the landscape; no evidence of doors to

underground bypasses or such. In fact, the only thing even

a quarter way remarkable was the marking pen she had

found.

Ha! That was surely it! Things did not just lie around

the Good Magician's premises;everything was here for a

reason. So this had to be the key.

She brought out the pen. It was just a garden-variety

marker, somewhat used but still serviceable. How could

this ever help her?

Her good mind focused on the problem. Assuming that

this was the key, how would it operate? It was a pen, a

marker, a—a Magic Marker? To mark the com-bat? That

seemed unlikely, because the bat would destroy her lovely,

beautiful but not phenomenally muscular or armored body

before she got close enough to do that. A pen was made

mainly for writing—

For writing. Suppose she wrote something with it—

something that would help her? Like GO AWAY COM-BAT?

She fished in her purse and found a little notepad. She

took the cap off the marker pen and wrote GO AWAY COM-

BAT. .

Nothing happened. But of course, she hadn't tested it

yet. She took half a step toward the moat —and the bat

zoomed up before her, threateningly. She

hastily canceled

the rest of her step and retreated, and the bat zoomed away.

Obviously that wasn't it. But maybe she just hadn't

found the right way to use it. How else would a magic

marker work? She couldn't think of anything much, de-

spite her superior mind.

She glanced at Nimby, but he remained carefully neu-

tral. And she wasn't about to ask for his help anyway.

"Um, if you want to take a nap or something—" No, he

didn't sleep, he claimed. "Maybe play a mental game that

entertains you? I hate to bore you with my indecisions."

Nimby nodded, and went into a state of

repose. She

wondered what a donkey-headed dragon had to think

about. At some point she would ask him. But now she had

other business.

She crossed out her message—and there was a tiny

shimmer around her. She looked around, afraid that a

quake monster might be approaching to

shake her up, but

all was normal. So it must have been an indication of

magic. Crossing out the message had canceled it, and that

had had magical effect. If only she knew what it was.

She focused her mind once more. Why was she having

so much trouble with what should be a simple matter?

Somehow it seemed that even her old, dull self would have

figured it out by now.

Then a dim bulb flashed over her head. Maybe this chal-

lenge was geared to her regular self. Maybe the Good Ma-

gician didn't realize that she was now much smarter. Or

maybe he realized, but didn't care. So he had set her a

simple challenge, and she was being too intellectual about

it.

"So let's try it the dull old-fashioned way," she said.

She turned a page on the pad and wrote COM-BAT. Then

she crossed out the c and wrote w. And felt the trace tingle

of magic. Had it worked?

She stepped forward—and there was a small furry crea-

ture standing barely knee-high to her. It was a wombat. It

tried to bar her way, but she simply stepped around it and

proceeded. She had done it! She had used the magic

marker to change the name, converting the deadly creature

to a harmless one. The key had been in naming it, and

changing the name. Obvious—to a nonintellectual person.

She came to the bank of the moat. Now, where was that

dock and boat she had seen? She saw the

boat, but now it

was perched on muck, and between her and it was the

biggest, hugest, hairiest, awfulest spider she could remem-

ber encountering. It wasn't big enough to gobble her down

in a single bite, but three or four bites would do it. Actually

spiders, as she remembered, didn't gobble prey down

whole; they trussed them up in spiderwebs and sucked the

juice out. But she didn't want to be juiced, either, no mat-

ter how juicy her current luscious body was.

Chlorine was retreating as she pondered; it seemed to

be the expedient thing to do. The spider did not follow. In

fact, it had disappeared—and there was the dock she had

seen before. So she reversed course,

trying to reach the

dock before the spider returned—and the spider reap-

peared. And the dock was gone.

Something was definitely odd. The spider wasn't block-

ing her view of the dock; she could see handily around it.

There simply was no dock. Was she up against illusion?

In which case, which was the illusion:

the spider or the

dock? It made a difference.

She retreated a step, this time watching the spider. And

the spider disappeared—and the dock reappeared. They

were changing into each other! This was a dock spider.

Her fine mind began to take hold. This was definitely a

challenge, and she surely wouldn't be able to handle it by

writing the word SPIDER on her pad and changing the SP

to c. Even if that worked, what good would it do her, since

she didn't want cider, she wanted that dock so she could

get in the boat without muddying her

pretty little feet. She

needed to get to that dock without it changing into the

spider. How could she do that?

What was the stupidly simple answer? Immediately it

came to her: bribe the spider. But what would it want,

aside from a long session sucking her succulence? What

else did she have that might appeal to it?

The magic marker! She no longer needed it, but maybe

the spider would like it. If she made a good enough case

for it, in spider terms.

She stepped toward the spider, though she was prepared

to backpedal at a furious rate if she had to. "Hey, hand-

some creature!" she called. "How would

you like some-

thing nice?"

The spider wiggled its mandibles, and a drop of slaver

fell to the ground, where it smoked quietly as it digested

an unfortunate little poul-tree that hadn't even yet grown

its first chick, let alone the roc bird it might have made at

maturity. Chlorine felt sorry for it, but

knew she couldn't

help the tree.

"No, you can't have me," she said quickly. "Under this

pretty exterior I'm just a plain and rather tasteless person

anyway. But I have something that may appeal to you

more: a magic marker." She held it up. "This marker can

change things. For example, you could

use it to change a

lug to a bug. Here, I'll demonstrate." She looked around

and spied a lug, which was a kind of nut from a nuts-and-

bolts tree. She picked it up and set it in front of her. Then

she wrote LUG on her notepad, and crossed out the letter

L and replaced it with the letter B. And the lug became a

bug.

"See—just the kind of magic you have always

wanted," she said enthusiastically. "Think what you could

do with a big lug! You could turn it into Xanth's biggest

juiciest bug. And feast on it, snug as a lug in a rug."

The spider slavered some more. It liked the notion.

"And I will trade you this fine magic implement for one

favor," she continued persuasively. "All you have to do

is become the dock and let me get on board that boat. Then

you can have the magic marker and my pad of paper, so

that you can—" She hesitated, paused by an awkward

thought. "You do know how to write?"

But the spider shook its head no.

This was a problem. But her fine mind rose to meet it.

"Well; can you draw? Let me see if this works with pic-

tures." She found another lug and set it before her. She

quickly sketched a crude picture of it, then crossed it out

and drew an even cruder bug.

And the lug became a bug. It did work pictographically.

Maybe the Good Magician had figured she was too stupid

to read and write. Which was actually a pretty accurate

assessment; she had never gotten beyond the first year of

Centaur School, so could handle words of only one or two

syllables. If she had had to write "quintessential," she

would have expired.

"So if you can draw, you can use this marker," she

concluded. "I confess I don't know exactly how versatile

it is, but since there are a number of lugs around here, at

least you'll have all the bugs you want. Is it a deal?"

The spider nodded yes.

But now she had just the slightest, wee-est little tinge

of apprehension. Was this spider honorable? Suppose it

grabbed her and the marker? But then

she concluded that

it must be honorable, because Otherwise the Good Magi-

cian wouldn't use it in a challenge. So she girded her

loin—no, that would be unmaidenly. She lifted her chin

and walked into the spider's range. If she had misjudged

the situation, and the spider grabbed her and tried to suck

her juice, she would turn its juices to poison and make it

sorry. But she hoped for the best.

The spider became the dock. Chlorine set dainty foot on

it and went to the boat. She climbed in. Then she set the

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magic marker on the dock, untied the boat's tether, picked

up its paddle, and shoved off. ' 'Nice doing business with

you," she called cheerily.

The spider reappeared, holding the marker in its man-

dibles. It waved at her with a long forelimb. She had

passed the second challenge.

Oops—-she had forgotten Nimby. "Hey, Nimby!" she

called. "Can you join me?"

Nimby walked down to the dock as Chlorine returned.

The spider obligingly changed form, allowing Nimby to

tread its planks and get into the boat. Maybe it realized

that Nimby was actually a dragon with impenetrable

scales, so wasn't anyone to fool with. Then they pushed

off again.

She paddled across the moat without incident. But she

knew there would be a third challenge. What would it be?

They were never the same, she understood. Just so long

as it wasn't a fierce moat monster, because she didn't know

what she would do in that case.

She came to land at a garden within the moat outside

the Good Magician's castle. They climbed out of the boat.

The moment they did, the boat wended its own way back

across, stranding them. It was now too late to change her

mind.

She gazed at the garden. It was lovely, and loathsome.

The left side was overgrown with foul-looking and -smell-

ing weeds and had statuary that was downright disgusting.

The right side had a multitude of pretty flowers, with at-

tractive scents. Naturally that was the side she wanted to

step into.

But the path led into the foul side, so that was where

she went. It would have been impossible to go into the

nice side without treading on flowers and ripping out beau-

tiful vines, and she couldn't bear to do that. But the path

was overgrown with burrs, thoms, nettles, stinging vines,

scratchpads, and even a stink hom she just missed stepping

on. That would have wiped out all her appeal in one swell

foop, for nothing and nobody could stand the sound or

stench of stink horn.

The farther she went, the worse it got, until it was plain

that she could not get through this way. This was one mean

garden half. And obviously a challenge.

She backed out and rejoined Nimby, who was inno-

cently waiting. Her nice dress was smirched with refuse-

colored yuck, and her arms and ankles were scratched.

What an awful section!

She considered the nice side again. If only the path were

there! But it wasn't, and though the garden was beautiful,

it was just as thickly woven as the ugly side was. Not only

would she do a horrible amount of damage- if she tried to

forge through there, she probably wouldn't make it to the

far side anyway.

There had to be a way through. But where was it, if not

the path? Chlorine looked back and forth between the two

garden halves, sure that she was missing something.

Now that she took the time to wake up and smell the

flowers, as it were, she saw that the path was lined with

purslane, which made sense for a lane, and trailing arbutus,

which made sense for a trail. There

were also primroses,

making it a primrose path, and at the very beginning, a

trail blazer jacket. So no one could be confused about

where the path was.

A dim bulb flashed. That trail blazer—suppose she

moved that to the other side? Would it then blaze a new

path there, where she wanted it? That

might be the answer.

She reached for the jacket, but it was just out of reach.

She stretched her arm out—and got scratched again. Ap-

parently that piece of apparel wasn't supposed to be taken.

So much for blazing a new trail.

So she couldn't move the path. What else was there?

Move the gardens?

A dim bulb appeared over her head, but didn't flash. It

simply hung there expectantly. She hadn't quite gotten her

bright notion yet.

Was there a way to change the positions of the gardens,

so that the same path led through the nice part? Now she

thought there could be. It was exactly the kind of inverted

thinking that the Good Magician was noted for.

Chlorine reconsidered the gardens and the path. Now

she saw that the path wound past a nasty-

looking well. She

made her way to it, stepping carefully to avoid the nettles

and thorns, and peered in. Smoky fumes smudged her face

and jammed up her nose. Phew! That wasn't water in

there, that was firewater. Not exactly poisonous; she knew

poisoned water when she encountered it, that being her

talent. But not exactly healthy, either. Mean spirits. This

was one mean well.

Across the path from it was a dingy thyme plant. She

turned to consider it. Thyme was tricky stuff, she knew; it

could speed things up or slow them down, or even just

change the time of day. Normally she stayed well clear of

it. But could there be a reason it was growing here, so

close to the path and the well? Her bulb brightened

slightly.

Mean well, mean thyme. In the mean section of the gar-

den. It figured. But there were other meanings of mean.

Such as when a person meant well. Then the intention was

good, even if the result wasn't. Could this be that kind of

well? And the thyme plant—it affected time, and some-

times time was sort of average, and they might call that

mean time. It wasn't necessarily nasty, merely rounded off.

Suppose some of that well-meaning water were poured by

the thyme plant—would that round off the time in a good

way? Her bulb brightened. It well might!

She took the grubby bucket and dipped some of the

smoking water out. Of course, it looked awful, because its

true nature wasn't supposed to be obvious. But if she was

right—

She poured the water at the base of the thyme plant. It

turned greener and healthier almost immediately. Then

night fell.

What? Chlorine looked around, startled. It hadn't been

close to nighttime! Oh—the thyme plant, feeling its oats,

as it were, had accelerated time, bringing the garden rap-

idly to night. Maybe she should have anticipated that.

But what good did it do her? It wouldn't be any easier

to forge through this tangle by night than by day. Unless—

Now her dim bulb flashed sO brightly that the entire

garden lit up. Sure enough: this was now the kinder section

of the garden. It was a kinder/meaner garden, and one sec-

tion was as different from the other as day from night. So

it was night, and suddenly this half was the nice one—

with the path wending pleasantly through it. She had found

the way at last.

"Come, Nimby," she said, as if this were routine. "We

shall pay a call on the Good Magician." And she marched

down the path, her way lit by pretty glowworms set along

the edges.

The path led right to the castle entrance. Chlorine

knocked on the door, and it opened immediately. A pretty

young woman stood there. "Welcome to the Good Ma-

gician's Castle, Chlorine and Nimby," she said. "I am

Wira, his daughter-in-law. Please come this way."

So she had, indeed, been expected. She was glad she

had played it straight, and found her own way through the

challenges.

They followed her inside. The interior

was surprisingly

light, because rays shone in through the high windows.

Chlorine realized that it wasn't really night; that had just

been a local effect in the garden, which passed when they

left the vicinity of the thyme plant.

"How did you know our names?" Chlorine inquired.

"If my memory is correct, you—can't

even see us."

"It is true I am blind," Wira said. "But I know this

castle well, and can't get lost. And I overheard Magician

Humfrey grumbling about the situation. It seems he had

no trouble identifying you. Chlorine, but your friend

Nimby baffled him. He had to look him up in the Big Book

of Answers, sure that there was no such person. But the

Book had an entry the Magician must have forgotten, and

it said Nimby was a dragon ass with the magic talent of

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enabling himself and his companion to be whatever the

companion wished them to be. That his

full name was Not

In My Back Yard, because most people didn't like him.

The Magician shook his head, not wanting to admit that

he had been ignorant of such a creature. I fear he is be-

ginning to feel his age."

Chlorine smiled. "The Book of Answers spoke truly.

Nimby is not the man he appears to be,

but he is much

nicer than he looks in his natural form. He is welcome in

my back yard, for I have come to know him by his actions,

not his appearance. His only liability is that he can't speak.

He is enabling me to have a really nice time, for now."

"For now?"

"I know it has to end all too soon, and I will return to

my wretched home life. But I will always have this won-

derful adventure to remember, my single shining moment,

thanks to Nimby. I intend to make the most of it."

' 'I fear the Good Magician means to make more of it

than you expect."

"Oh, no, my year's Service is part of it," Chlorine said

cheerfully. "I am resigned to that. It will extend my ad-

venture."

Wira brought them to a rather dull-looking woman in a

sewing room who was mending a pile of socks. "Mother

Sofia, here are our visitors," Wira said.

Sofia looked up. "Are you sure you want to broach

Himself with your Question? He will require you to per-

form a most arduous Service in return."

"Yes, of course," Chlorine agreed. "I look forward to

it. The more adventurous the better."

"As you wish. Wira will take you to him now."

The blind young woman led them up a dark winding

stone stairway to a squeezed crowded chamber. There in

the shadows sat the Good Magician Humfrey Himself. He

looked grumpily up from his monstrous tome. "Yes?"

"Where is my last tear?" Chlorine asked.

"It is in your eyes, spread across them to keep them

moist. Half of it keeps your right eye well, and the other

half keeps your left eye well. Without that final tear, you

would immediately go blind."

Chlorine was amazed. "I never thought of that! Of

course, it must be true."

"It is true," Humfrey said grumpily. "Now report to

the cat-a-pult for your Service."

But Chlorine, being nice but not too nice,

balked. "I

know I have to serve a year's Service, but for that little

bit of obvious-in-retrospect information? That doesn't

seem fair."

"Please, don't argue," Wira said worriedly. "That only

makes him grumpier."

"Nevertheless, I will answer," Humfrey said, more

grumpily. "You knew the conditions before you came to

me, so if you wasted the chance to ask a significant Ques-

tion and receive a significant Answer, the fault is yours."

"Urn, that's right," Chlorine said. "I did know the

terms. I apologize for my intemperate

remark."

Humfrey looked up from his tome again and glanced at

her. His eyeballs were yellowed and streaked with purple

veins, but as they focused on her they brightened and the

dingy colors faded out. "My, you are a pretty one," he

said, surprised. "A sight for sore eyes."

"Thanks to Nimby," she agreed, nevertheless pleased

to have made a good impression to erase some of the bad

impression she had made before. "In real life I'm plain

and mean-spirited."

"Yes, of course. Since you have done me the slight

favor of resting my eyes, I will return it by amending my

answer: it is not quite as insignificant as it might seem.

You do have the capacity to shed that final tear, if you

ever choose to. But considering the consequence, I suggest

that you never allow yourself to become that unhappy."

"You may be sure of that!" she agreed, laughing.

"Actually, I am not sure of that, which is why I have

cautioned you. There may come a time. Do not react

thoughtlessly."

Nimby, standing beside her, seemed uneasy.

Chlorine nodded. "Thank you for that amendment,

Good Magician. I will remember it." Then she smiled.

This time the gloomy study brightened, and Humfrey

seemed to lose five years in age.

"Oh, I wish I could see that!" Wira murmured, aware

that something good had happened. Maybe she had felt the

heat of the light that had brightened the study.

"You shall," Humfrey said, almost with the illusion of

fleeting mellowness. "Imbri?"

Then Chlorine saw a replay of the incident, as if she

were another person watching herself, Wira, Nimby, and

the Good Magician in the study. She

smiled, and the study

lighted, and Humfrey youthened from about a hundred to

about ninety-five.

"Oh, thank you. Day Mare Imbri!" Wira exclaimed. "I

saw it!"

Chlorine was amazed. The Good Magician had actually

summoned a night mare, or rather a day mare, to give them

all a day dream, so that the blind girl could see the event

in the only way she could: as a dream. This was surely

something very special. And he must like his daughter-in-

law a lot, because it was clearly for her he had done it.

But now the study faded to its natural

dinginess, and

the Good Magician's slightly less tired eyes reverted to his

monstrous dull tome. The interview was over.

Chlorine turned and followed Wira out, and down the

steps. The girl was smiling with the memory. Something

briefly nice had certainly happened.

4

TROLLWAY

Jim Baldwin looked around, bemused. This land looked

a lot like Florida, at a casual glance, but any more

careful look rapidly dispelled the similarity. It wasn't

just a matter of the presence of the fantastic female crea-

ture, Sheila Centaur. Her phenomenal bare bosom was

something he could appreciate regardless of the circum-

stance, though, of course, he would not admit that in the

presence of his family. Mary was a reasonably liberal

woman, socially, but it was plain that she was not at all

easy about the filly centaur, for reasons that went beyond

the fantasy element. Correction: they surely related to her

concern about the male fantasy element. Especially that of

Sean and David. And Jim himself, perhaps. With reason.

They were waiting on the beach beside what resembled

nothing so much as a giant pillow. This was where the

guide was supposed to arrive. The guide

that the Good

Magician was sending. After what else he had seen in this

weird land, Jim was prepared to accept the notion of good

and bad magicians. He hoped the guide was competent.

He hoped to get out of this situation soon; he didn't like

the way the wind was building up, however intriguingly it

played with Sheila's hair. The storm seemed to have been

subsiding, but now it was building again. That was bad

news, regardless, whether in Florida or this land they

called Xanth.

The children were in animated dialogue with the centaur

filly, purportedly eager to leam more about Xanth. Jim

caught Mary's eye, and she joined him. "I don't want to

be an alarmist, but have you noticed the wind?" he asked

her quietly.

She brushed her hair out of her face. "Yes." Her tone

was grim.

"So maybe the distraction of the centaur is just as well,

until we are able to get moving again."

Her answering smile was genuine but somewhat

strained. "Thank you for clarifying that, Jim."

Then something came flying through the air from the

north. They all half ducked, not sure

where it was going

to land. It appeared to be a big rag doll, one of the modem

type, with excellent legs.

It landed plump! in the middle of the giant cushion. It

bounced, and got its skirt smoothed down. It was a lovely

young woman, seemingly no worse for the experience. The

boys immediately discovered a new

creature to gawk at.

"Hello, folks," she. said brightly, brushing back her

golden-green-tinted tresses. "I am Chlorine, your guide,

sent by the Good Magician Humfrey. In a moment my

companion will be along; then we must talk."

Before they could do more than get their

collective

mouths closed, another rag-doll figure came flying across

and down. It, too, bounced, but had no skirt to get in order.

It wore slacks, and was a handsome young man.

"This is Nimby," Chlorine said. "He is mute, but nice.

He will help me to help you. But first I must warn you

that a bad storm is coming."

"We had noticed," Jim said, stepping forward. "Hello.

I am Jim Baldwin, and this is my wife, Mary, and our

children, Sean, David, and Karen. We're from—I believe

you call it Mundania."

"We do," Chlorine agreed with a smile. She glanced at

Sheila. "Thank you for guiding the lost folk this far; I'm

sure you are eager to return to Centaur Isle."

',Yes I am, before the wind further intensifies," the cen-

taur agreed. She turned to the family. "I wish you the very

best. It has been pleasant meeting with you. And if you

should encounter Carieton's sister Chena, do give her his

good wishes too."

"We shall certainly do that," Jim agreed. "Thank you—

and Carleton—for your kindness in helping us this far."

"Welcome." She'turned tail and cantered back along

the beach. The boys watched her until she was out of sight;

then their eyes reverted to Chlorine, who was far more

decorously dressed, but so beautiful in every respect that

she was fully as distracting as the bare centaur filly.

Chlorine turned back to Jim. "I don't want to be im-

polite, but what I have to say is of some urgency. There

is danger for you here. The Good Magician's wife, Sofia,

was most specific about that. She's Mundane herself, so

appreciates how difficult Xanth must be for you. I under-

stand you have a moving house."

The children laughed. "Motor home," Mary said. "But

yes, it is a moving house."

"Could you get it moving? There is very little time to

escape before the storm intensifies. It is my service to

guide you safely where you wish to go, but it won't be

safe here very much longer."

"We can drive it," Jim said. "And there is room for

you and Nimby." He wondered at the name, but this didn't

seem to be the time to inquire about that. "But we are

going to need gas soon, or we'll stall."

"Gas?" the woman asked blankly.

"Gasoline. Petrol. Fuel. It—our vehicle eats it. Drinks

it."

"Oh." Chlorine turned to her companion. "Nimby, do

you know where there is—gas—for this creature?" Nimby

nodded. "Then show us, because we mustn't delay long."

"Come on in," Jim said. "If Nimby knows where it is,

he can sit up front with me and point the

way."

So they got into the van, with the silent young man

taking the passenger seat in front. Chlorine joined the fam-

ily in back, which Jim knew thrilled the boys. Ordinarily

he would not pick up hitchhikers, but when in Rome—or

Xanth—it was time to do as the natives did. Chlorine was

certainly right about the dangerous storm; apparently Hur-

ricane Gladys was reintensifying, or turning back, to catch

them again. The last thing be wanted was to get caught in

a hurricane, in the RV.

He started the motor. There was an exclamation of sur-

prise from Chlorine, but the odd Nimby took it calmly in

stride. He pointed to the trollway, which was exactly where

Jim wanted to go. It looked like a good solid highway

where he could make excellent time, storm and gas per-

mitting.

At the entrance to the trollway stood a horrendous crea-

ture. "Don't tell me; let me guess," Jim muttered. "A

troll."

Nimby smiled. Evidently he understood speech well

enough; he just couldn't speak himself. Curious fellow, but

seemingly amicable.

He drew the RV to a stop before the troll. Sure enough,

there was a sign: STOP: PAY TROLL. But there wasn't any

indication what the fee was.

Well, he would start small. "Here's two cents," he said,

offering two pennies to the troll. And the creature smiled—

a horrendous effect—took the pennies, and waved him on.

Maybe it was the thought that counted. Jim pulled the

vehicle onto the pavement and gathered speed. He was

almost beginning to feel. at home here!

Now a sign said HIGHWAY AHEAD. And of course, the

road rose up until it was at treetop level: a literal high way.

Things tended to be extremely literal

here. Unfortunately

this elevation exposed them to the higher winds of the

heights. "Are we going to be up here long?" he asked

Nimby.

The man shook his head, but gave no other information.

Certainly he was a strange one.

Jim listened to the dialogue of the others. The children

were eagerly questioning the girl Chlorine—odd name!—

and she was answering to the best of her ability. It was

interesting.

"Yes, candy really does grow-in Xanth, and cookies of

all kinds along the With-a-Cookee River," Chlorine said.

"Doesn't food grow on trees in Mundania?"

"Oh, sure, in a way," David agreed. "Fruits grow on

trees, and vegetables grow in gardens, and grain grows in

fields. But candy and cookies have to be made. And paid

for. That's what allowances are for."

"Allowances?"

"Do you have a concept of money in Xanth?" Mary

asked.

' 'Certainly. It is filthy green stuff that no clean person

cares to touch."

The others laughed, "That's the stuff we have," Sean

said.

A heavy gust of wind buffeted the RV. "Oh, that re-

minds me," Chlorine said. "I must tell you of the great

danger you face. The Good Magician told me to be sure

to make you understand. You see, there

has been a weak-

ening in the Interface—"

"Whose face?" Karen asked.

"The Xanth Interface. It keeps the Mundanes out. No

offense. Something went wrong, and. a Mundane storm

came through—and you folk too. The storm is headed for

the center of Xanth. That means it will sweep up a lot of

magic dust, and—"

"Magic dust?" Sean asked.

"That's the dust that wells up in the center of Xanth,

bringing the magic," she explained. "Without it, we

wouldn't have magic, and it would be horrible. But where

the dust is too thick, the magic is too strong, and so there

is madness. If Happy Bottom spreads that dust across

Xanth—"

"Gotcha," Sean said. "Everybody goes mad."

"Well, not exactly. But things could get very strange.

However, you don't need to worry about

that. I'm sup-

posed to help you get through Xanth and out of danger

before the storm gets too bad. So we must hurry. There

won't be much time to stop and sleep."

r

"No problem," Sean said. "We'll sleep in the RV while

Dad-drives."

Which meant no sleep for Dad, Jim reflected. Well, it

had happened before. He didn't like the way the wind was

building, and would far rather stay ahead of the worst of

it if he could, sleep no object.

Nimby pointed to the side. There was an exit ramp. Jim

steered the vehicle to it. The thing spiraled around and

around, corkscrewing down to the ground. He had had no

idea they had gotten so high! The treetops had vanished

without his noticing.

As they neared the ground. Nimby pointed again. There

beside the road was a big ugly purple tree, and under the

tree stood a big uglier purple monster with greenish gills.

It looked most uncomfortable. Jim hoped the discomfort

wasn't hunger, because the thing was big enough to gobble

down a man and a child. He hoped Nimby knew what he

was doing.

"Oh, there's a gas guzzler," Chlorine said, putting her

pretty head close to his so she could peer out. She smelled

faintly of delight. ^

A gas guzzler. It figured. "We can get gas from it?"

"Yes. Just make a deal."

A deal. He would have to feel his way through this one,

as he had with the troll.

He drew to a stop beside the monster and rolled down

the window, partway. "You have gas?"

The monster faced him. It belched. The putrid odor of

spoiling gasoline wafted by in a noxious little cloud.

"You guzzled too much gas?" Jim asked. The monster

nodded miserably. "Then maybe we can make a deal."

But at this point Jim's imagination failed him. What would

an overindulgent gas guzzler want to trade for?

"I think he needs one of Mom's ant-acid pills," David

said brightly.

"Then hand one over," Jim said.

Mary fished in her purse and came up with an ant-acid

pill. Jim offered it to the monster. "This ant-acid pill for

one tank of gas," he said. Could this possibly work?

The guzzler took the pill and gulped it down. He

belched again, this time not quite so awfully. Then he

lifted his tail. Jim saw that the end of it looked somewhat

like the nozzle of a gas pump. "Right here," he said

quickly, turning off the motor, piling out of the vehicle,

and going to the gas tank. He removed the cap and pointed.

The guzzler put the tip of his tail into the aperture. There

was a liquid flow sound. The fumes smelled like gasoline.

When the tank was full, the creature removed his tail

and Jim put the cap back on. "Thank you," he said.

The monster nodded. His gills were no longer green.

Evidently the pill had alleviated his condition. So it was a

fair bargain.

Jim climbed back in and started the motor. Then he had

another thought. "We have taken the high

road," he said

to Nimby. "But it's pretty windy up there. Is there a low

road?"

Nimby pointed ahead. Sure enough, there was a road

following the ground. Jim went for it. "Thanks."

For a time the road seemed routine. Jim had a dark

suspicion that it wouldn't last, but he enjoyed it while it

did. The motor was running well; the gasoline seemed to

be good. Which was a considerable relief. So again he

listened to the dialogue behind.

"How did you get here?" Karen asked Chlorine. "I

mean, you just came flying through the air, like a para-

chute."

"With your skirt flying," Sean added appreciatively.

"Oh, no!" Chlorine exclaimed, sounding appalled.

"Did my panties show?"

"No," Jim called back, realizing by her reaction that

this was a social nuance of some consequence. Just as the

centaurs were evidently quite open about their apparel, or

lack of it, others might be quite uptight. The children might

not realize, and make a social blunder. "Just your legs."

And what legs they were!

"Oh, that's a relief!" she said. "I would fade away

from mortification if—but never mind. The Good Magi-

cian had us use the cat-a-pult."

"Now, why do I think that's not what we mean by the

term catapult?" Sean asked musingly.

"I confess to being curious," Chlorine said. "Why do

you think that?"

There was half a pause. She had, innocently enough, set

the brash teenager back. "I, uh, mean that everything else

is different. With us a catapult is a big engine that hurls

things far away."

"Yes, that's it. It's a giant cat whose tail springs up and

hurls things where they need to go. The Good Magician

must have told the cat where to aim. I'm glad there was a

pillow to land on."

"This Good Magician," Mary said. "He must be quite

knowledgeable."

"Oh, yes! He knows everything. I came to him to ask

where my last tear was, and he told me, but then, of course,

I had to perform a year's Service, or the equivalent. So he

assigned me to guide you folk safely out of Xanth."

"You have certainly been a help," Mary said. "As was

Sheila Centaur. But did I hear you

correctly? You have to

do a year's service, for the answer to a single question?"

"Oh, yes. I was foolish, wasting my Question on some-

thing I could have figured out for myself. But I really did

it for adventure, and I'm getting that. You folk—this trav-

eling house—this is fantastic."

David laughed. "You think the RV is fantastic? After

getting hurled through the air by a giant cat?"

"Of course. Lots of people use the cat-a-pult. But I

don't think there's ever been a wheeled house like this in

Xanth before. There aren'teven many houses with chicken

legs. I couldn't ask for a better

adventure."

There was a full pause. She had set them back again.

So Jim filled in with a question of his own. "I do not wish

to be impolite, or to seek after anything private. But since

Nimby can't speak for himself, may I inquire about his

background and mission?"

"Oh, there's no problem about that," Chlorine said

brightly. "Nimby's a donkey-headed dragon in man-form.

I could ask him to revert to his natural shape, to show you,

but he'd be too big for this little house."

"Then we had better take your word for it," Jim said

carefully. This young woman, like this strange land, kept

surprising him anew.

' 'He's doing me a really big favor," Chlorine continued.

"You see, in real life, I'm, well, plain. And not all that

smart or nice. But Nimby's talent is to make himself and

his companion whatever she wishes them to be. So natu-

rally I wished to be really pretty, smart, healthy, and nice."

"Yeah," Sean said appreciatively, doubtless glancing at

her legs or more. She was about as healthy a young woman

as Jim had seen, and strong on the other qualities.

"I think maybe you don't believe me," Chlorine said.

"But that much I can show you, because I'm the same

size in real life." She lifted her voice. "Nimby, show me

as I really am—for one moment."

The young man sitting beside Jim nodded. And there

was a gasp of surprise behind. Jim turned his head for a

quick look.

The lovely young woman had indeed changed. She was

now a plain-bordering-on-ugly girl, in unattractive cloth-

ing, with an irritable expression. Her hair was a listless,

stringy, unappealing shade of green.

Then the moment was over, and she was lovely again.

Her legs and bosom filled out, and her dank hair became

lustrous. She smiled, and the interior of the RV seemed to

brighten. "See? I owe Nimby a lot."

"You sure do," Sean breathed, as Jim turned back to

watch the road.

"But why is Nimby doing this for you?" Karen asked.

"I mean if he's really a dragon, wouldn't he rather eat

you?"

"Karen!" Mary said severely.

"Ah, come on. Mom," David said. "She does look

good enough to eat."

Chlorine laughed. "Thank you. I was afraid of some-

thing like that, at first, because that's what dragons do. But

he turned out to be a nice dragon. A very nice dragon."

"Yeah," David agreed. "I wish I had one like him. I'd

have him make me a star football player or something."

"Actually, he did tell me why, when we first met." She

evidently held up a hand, as someone started to protest;

Jim had to keep his eyes on the road, so couldn't look.

"Yes, Nimby is mute now, but at first he could speak. He

told me that he needed my company, and would do any-

thing he could to make it worthwhile for

me. But he

warned me that that was his only chance to speak, and he

has been mute since. But he understands me, and he can

answer me by gestures."

"But suppose he had something important and compli-

cated to tell you?" Sean asked, perhaps becoming in-

trigued by something other than her

appearance. "Such as

some terrible danger you didn't know was coming, so you

didn't think to ask him a yes-or-no question about it?"

"Why, I don't know. Nimby, is there anything like

that?"

Nimby turned to face the rear, and nodded.

"Something important? That's too complicated for me

to just guess readily?"

Nimby nodded again.

Now Chlorine seemed out of sorts. ' 'But how can I ask

you, if I don't know what to ask?" she asked plaintively.

"Maybe he can write it," David said.

"But I can't read," Chlorine said. "More than big ob-

vious signs and short words, I mean. The signs have spells

to make them legible to anyone, even animals. I can't read

anything significant on my own. I flunked Centaur

School."

So she was functionally illiterate, Jim realized.

Sean laughed. "So have him make you able to read."

There was a flash of light, followed by a gasp of awe.

"A lightbulb just appeared over your head!" Karen cried.

"It glowed!"

"Yes, of course," Chlorine agreed. "I realized Sean

was right. That's a brilliant idea. Nimby, make me literate,

so I can read what you write, no matter how complicated

it is. And write me what I need to know."

Immediately the young man brought out a pad and sty-

lus and began writing. Jim nodded; there were definite ad-

vantages to magic. In Mundania there were no such

shortcuts.

"That reminds me of something else," Jim said. "This

is obviously not our homeland. The rules are mostly dif-

ferent. How is it that you and the centaurs speak exactly

our own language?"

"Oh, that's part of the magic of Xanth," Chlorine said.

"Everyone speaks the same language here. All people, I

mean. Animals speak their own languages, which are dif-

ferent from ours, so we usually can't understand them. But

often they can understand us."

"We have animals," Sean said. "But they don't

speak."

"Oh, they surely do speak, at least here in Xanth. You

just need someone like Grundy Golem to translate what

they say."

"Who?"

"He's an obnoxious little creature who speaks all lan-

guages."

Meanwhile Nimby had completed his writing. Soon he

passed the note back.

Chlorine took it and looked at the fine script. "I can

read it!" she exclaimed. "I really can! I'm literate! I'm

utterly thrilled!"

"What does it say?" David asked.

"Oh. Yes." She focused, and read the note aloud.

" 'There are goblins along Lizard Lane who have set a

trap for unwary travelers. It is an illusion barricade and

detour that will lead folk into a trap, so the goblins can

swarm in and capture them for stew.' "

"Does that mean what I think it does?" Mary asked,

horrified.

"Yes, if you think it means that goblins boil people

alive," Chlorine said. "Goblins are mean creatures." She

returned to her reading. " 'Because I must protect you

from harm, and you will come to harm if the Mundanes

fall into this trap, I must tell you how to avoid it. Do not

honor the illusion; drive right through it

without slowing.

The goblins will not be able to attack this vehicle at

speed.' "

"Why couldn't they just throw some logs on the road?"

Sean asked.

"Because this is an enchanted path," Chlorine ex-

plained. "The trolls guarantee that there are no dangers

along it. Otherwise no one would use it. As it is, there is

very little traffic, because the trollway is new and many

folk are wary of trolls. Also, the trolls used to build only

bridges. But they do know how to make good roads. So

the goblins can't put up any real barricades. But if they

trick us into leaving the protected path, then they can get

us." She lifted her voice again. "Oh, thank you for warn-

ing us. Nimby!" she said. "I'm sorry I never thought to

ask. After this, write me a note any time I need to know

something."

The young man nodded. That was an interesting situa-

tion, Jim reflected, where Nimby seemed to know every-

thing, but couldn't volunteer information; he had to be

asked or instructed' to.

Meanwhile, this was indeed a good route. "So this is

Lizard Lane," Jim said. "What does that remind me of?"

"Alligator Alley," Sean said.

Jim nodded. "A parody of the world we know. So if I

see a barricade and detour, I'm to ignore it, because it's

illusion."

Nimby, beside him, nodded.

Jim shut up, but privately he doubted that they would

encounter any such illusion.

The scenery was becoming more interesting or alarming,

depending on one's view. Florida in the Everglades region

was flat, but it was evident that Xanth had mountains; al-

ready Lizard Lane was wriggling between them like its

namesake. There even seemed to be a volcano in the dis-

tance, In fact, the road seemed to be headed in that direc-

tion. Jim hoped it didn't erupt while they were in its

vicinity.

There was also a bank of clouds looming to the north-

east. That would be the vanguard of Happy Bottom, as

they called Gladys here. Could there be anything to the

conjecture about it sweeping up magic dust and becoming

a dangerous magical storm? After what he had already

seen, he was not prepared to deny it. So they were doing

exactly what they needed to: driving full speed away from

it, or at least around it.

Suddenly a barricade loomed up. How had he over-

looked it before? The thing was huge, and extended right

across the road. There was a big sign with an arrow point-

ing right: ROAD CLOSED—DETOUR. The detour road was

clear, winding away toward a rest station. He barely had

time to make it.

Jim trod on the brakes. The tires squealed as he swerved.

"No!" Chlorine cried. "It's illusion! Go through it!"

Jim had virtually no time to make his decision. She had

warned him about this. A mistake could be fatal. He might

regret this in an instant, but he trusted her. He straightened

the wheel and stepped on the gas, heading for the collision.

He barely missed the exit lane. He winced as the barrier

loomed high and thick and devastating. They were going

to crash!

Then they were through it, without contact. The road

continued ahead, uninterrupted. Jim's pulse started its long

trek back down toward the vicinity of normal. Chlorine—

and Nimby—had been right.

"Gee," David said, awed. "Just like killer video."

That about covered it. Jim glanced at Nimby, who

shrugged. Obviously his information had been good. He

had been right about the illusion barrier, so probably was

also right about the goblins.

In fact, there they were now: a horde of small, lumpy

manlike figures just off the right of way, shaking their little

fists. Some carried clubs, and some spears. Obviously they

had intended no good. That had been one close escape—

thanks to the timely warning.

"Nimby, if I may ask—how did you know about this

ambush?" Jim asked. He wasn't sure the man would an-

swer him, but Chlorine must have nodded, because Nimby

began to write again. Soon he passed Jim a note.

Jim held it up by the steering wheel and read it. / have

knowledge of events around me that may affect the welfare

of my companion. But I may not act on them myself; I can

act only at her behest. The goblins were setting up the

illusion barricade.

Evidently so. And if Chlorine hadn't

thought to ask,

they would have fallen into the trap. What would Nimby

have done then? Maybe he would have reverted to his

dragon form and carried her away to safety—if Chlorine

asked him. But the rest of them would probably have been

out of luck.

Chlorine must have had a similar chain

of thought.

"Nimby-—I have undertaken to guide these folk safely out

of Xanth. If anything happens to them, I will have failed.

I wouldn't like that at all. So please warn me if anything

threatens them, as well as me. I mean, if it threatens them

without threatening me, warn me, because that's part of

me too—the decent part. If they are hurt, I will hurt too."

Nimby nodded.

"Thank you," Jim said.

Now they were approaching the volcano. Smoke was

issuing from its aperture. "Is that thing active?" Jim

asked.

"Yes, that's Mount Pinatuba," Chlorine said, peering

ahead. "The last time it got angry, it blew out so much

dust that it cooled all Xanth by a degree. But it doesn't

blow its top if you don't insult it."

"Volcanoes care?" Sean asked. "How can they, when

they aren't alive?"

"Don't speak loudly," Chlorine cautioned him. "It

might hear you."

Indeed, that seemed to be the case, because the mountain

shuddered and blew out a plume of gas.

"Oh, I didn't mean to disparage it," Sean saidquickly.

"I think it's a pretty impressive volcano."

The mountain subsided, and the plume drifted away in

the wind.

"Everything cares," Chlorine said. "The inanimate can

be very sensitive to slights. King Dor can talk to it, and it

answers him. Most things aren't too smart, but they do

have opinions. So we have to be careful not to insult them,

unless we have reason."

"I guess so," he agreed, clearly impressed.

"Mom, can I use the privy?" -Karen asked.

"It's full," Mary replied. "We need to stop where we

can empty it."

She was right. The storm had confined them pretty much

to the RV, and they hadn't been able to attend to certain

details. "Chlorine, is there a rest stop along this road,

nearby? One that isn't goblin-infested?"

Chlorine consulted with Nimby, who nodded. Soon he

pointed to the side, and Jim swung onto an exit road. Sure

enough, it led to a pleasant glade with a house in the cen-

ter. He pulled up beside the house, and paused. "This is

safe?" he asked Nimby.

The young man hesitated, then nodded. .

The others opened the side door and piled out. But Jim

delayed. He hadn't liked that hesitation. "Is there some-

thing you're not telling us, Nimby?"

Chlorine had gotten out with the others, so they were

now alone in the vehicle. Nimby hesitated again, then be-

gan to write a note.

Jim waited, and in due course read the note: Danger is

looming close. Your family will learn it at this site, and be

alarmed. This will make your journey more difficult.

"What danger?"

The storm is stirring up bad creatures. They will

frighten your children.

"But we will escape unharmed—if we follow your ad-

vice?"

Nimby nodded yes.

"Thank you." Jim hesitated, then spoke again. "I wish

I could know more about you. Nimby, but I hesitate to

inquire. Maybe some other time." Then he, too, got out

of the vehicle.

The region was very nice. Karen had found a tree, and

was picking a pie from it.

Jim stopped, doing a double take. A pie tree? Yes, so it

seemed to be. So it really was true: pies grew on trees,

here in the magic land of Xanth.

He went to the facilities, which were somewhat primi-

tive but usable; what more was to be expected of trolls?

The wind whistled through the cracks; there was no doubt

the storm remained near.

Then he thought of the pets, and returned to the RV to

see to them. He found Nimby communing with them;

though they were normally somewhat shy with strangers,

they seemed completely at ease with the odd young man.

As Jim approached. Nimby turned to face him. He wrote

another note: These creatures should not be caged. You

must let them go.

"We, do, at home," Jim said. "But we can't risk it in

a strange place. Woofer would range the neighborhood,

getting his nose into everything; Midrange would be chas-

ing wild birds up trees; and Tweeter would fly into a bush

and get hopelessly lost. We have been the route."

Nimby wrote another note. They will not do any of these

things. The magic is enhancing them; they understand that

you mean well by them, and they will neither misbehave

nor flee you.

"How can you know this®" Jim asked

skeptically.

"This isn't a physical barricade, it's the nature of ani-

mals."

Another note. / know thoughts too. It is part of my tal-

ent. I must know what is, so I can enable Chlorine safely

to be what she wishes to be.

That seemed to be true. "Look, Nimby, I don't want to

get in trouble with my children. I'll ask them, and if they

agree to let the pets go, we'll do it."

The children were already approaching, eating pies they

had picked. Karen's hair was blowing across her face and

into her pie, but she didn't seem to mind. Jim explained

the situation.

"Try Woofer first," Sean suggested. "If he behaves, try

Midrange."

So they freed the big dog. Woofer bounded out of the

RV, went to a nearby tree, watered it, sniffed the air, and

returned to the group, tail wagging. He was remarkably

well behaved.

"You're not going to chase all over the region?" Jim

asked the dog, surprised.

"Woof!" It was a plain negation.

David went to his pet. "Okay, Midrange.

Your turn."

He freed the cat.

Midrange went to a sandy spot and did his business.

Then he, too, sniffed the air, and returned to the group.

So Karen freed Tweeter. The parakeet flew up to the

nearest branch of a tree, dropped a dropping, and flew back

to Karen's shoulder. The increasing wind made the bird's

flight somewhat erratic, but he adjusted rapidly.

Jim shook his head, bemused. "Very well, pets. You

have five minutes to do whatever you want to. Then return

here, because we'll be on our way again."

Now the three creatures scattered. Woofer zoomed

through the bushes, avidly exploring. Tweeter circled into

the sky and disappeared. Midrange climbed a nut and bolt

tree and was soon lost in the foliage. The three children

followed them, as well as they were able.

"That's more like normal," Jim said. But

he was im-

pressed by the way the animals had waited for his word

before acting on their impulses. If they actually returned

on the schedule he had set, he would know that Nimby's

judgment in such respects could be trusted.

Mary emerged, carrying a basket of comestibles. The

wind did its best to blow her dress around, but she re-

mained in control. She stacked the bag in the RV, then

looked around. "Where are the pets?"

"Nimby said they would behave if we let them go, so

we did."

She turned a quizzical glance on him, but did not com-

ment.

Tweeter reappeared. He landed on Nimby's shoulder,

tweeting at a great rate. Nimby wrote another note and

gave it to Jim. The storm has stirred up enormous birds

who may be hostile. They are coming this way.

Jim shrugged. "How big can a bird get?"

A huge shadow crossed the glade. They looked up to

spot its source. It looked like an airplane, but it was silent.

A big glider perhaps.

Then it screeched. It was a bird—as big as an airliner.

Such a creature could probably pick up the whole RV in

its talons, if it tried.

"Jim—" Mary said urgently.

"Right." He raised his voice. "Kids! Pets! Time's up!"

The summoned ones forged in from all directions. Chlo-

rine, too reappeared, looking devastatingly lovely in her

windblown state. But the boys for once weren't looking at

her. "Get a load of that big bird!" David cried, pausing

to stare.

"Get in," Mary said tightly.

They piled in. So did Jim, after checking to make sure

all was in order. Nimby had told him that bad creatures

would frighten the children; instead it seemed to be Mary

who was frightened, perhaps with good reason.

He started the motor and moved onto the access road.

There was no troll booth here,

fortunately. They were able

to proceed without delay.

The children peered out the windows at the monstrous

bird. "That's a roc," Sean said, awed. "Fantasy's biggest

bird. I never thought I'd see one."

Tweeter chirped. Jim glanced at Nimby, who wrote a

note. He says that isn't all.

"What's that?" Karen cried.

"A dragon," Sean said. He wasn't joking; his tone was

serious.

Now a huge and grotesque shape loomed in the sky

before the vehicle. It was, indeed, a dragon. Karen

screamed. ;

Jim looked at Nimby. "This road is protected?"

Nimby hesitated, and nodded.

"But there's a 'but,' " Jim said. "Let's have the qual-

ifier."

The note came. The winged monsters can not attack

anything on the enchanted path directly. But they can pre-

tend to. Do not be swayed.

"And children can be frightened," Jim said. Nimby

nodded.

"Yuck!" David cried. Karen screamed again. And this

time Mary made a stifled exclamation of alarm.

Jim looked from one window to the next, all around,

craning his neck, but didn't see anything. "This is an en-

chanted road," he reminded them.

"Nothing can hurt us

while we're on it."

"Physically," Mary responded tightly.

"What did you see?"

"It was a harpy," Chlorine said. "They are very ugly

and nasty."

"A human-headed bird?" Jim asked. "What's so bad

.about one more fantastic—"

Then a filthy thing appeared before the windshield. It

looked like a thoroughly soiled vulture, with the head and

breasts of an old woman. "Ghaaa!" the dirty bird

screeched before veering up over the

vehicle. Her legs had

glistening discolored talons. Jim, fearing a collision, and

revolted by the sight, almost veered onto the shoulder of

the road. Now he understood what had been bothering the

others.

"Can this house move faster?" Chlorine asked.

"Yes. But with these crosswinds I haven't wanted to

push it."

YON ILL WIND 77

"I think you had better," the woman said, concerned.

"The harpies may not be able to touch us directly, but if

they think to lay any eggs on us—"

"Messy," Sean remarked.

"Not exactly. Their eggs explode. They might do dam-

age."

Explosive eggs? Jim decided to accelerate, regardless of

the wind.

There was an angry screech outside, as the harpies re-

alized that their target was escaping. "They're coming af-

ter us, Dad!" David exclaimed. "And the dragons too."

Jim goosed the gas. As if to join in the fray, the wind

increased, becoming more gusty. The vehicle swerved

slightly, as Jim fought to keep it steady.

He didn't like this

kind of driving. Neither did the others; the kids were now

uncomfortably silent.

But now they slowly forged ahead of the winged mon-

sters. Jim was even able to ease up on the gas a bit. He

appreciated Nimby's warning about the children being

frightened. If they hadn't paused at the

rest stop, they

might have stayed safely ahead of the dirty birds. But that

stop had been necessary. All the Same, he hoped not to

stop again if he could avoid it.

Nimby wrote another note. Jim took it and propped it

before him so he could read it without taking his eyes off

the road. Soon you will come to the Gap

Chasm, where

you will have to stop for the ferry. It is protected, but

perhaps not comfortable for you.

"What's this gap chasm?" Jim asked between his

clenched teeth.

"Oh, that's a big chasm that crosses Xanth," Chlorine

answered. "It once had a forget spell on it, so no one ever

remembered it was there, but that started disintegrating

during the Time of No Magic, and now most folk do re-

member it. It's said to be very impressive."

"You haven't seen it?" Jim asked. He was learning not

to take the features of Xanth terrain

lightly.

"Not exactly," she said. "I never traveled far from my

home village. Until this adventure, which is proving to be

a great one. I did cross it, but by night; I

really didn't get

a good look into it. But of course, I had heard about the

Gap Chasm. There's a big green dragon in the bottom who

steams and eats any creatures it catches there."

"Nimby says we'll take the ferry."

"Then maybe we won't have to get past the Gap

Dragon," Chlorine said, relieved. "I don't know about the

ferry, but if Nimby says it, it must be so."

But not comfortable for them, Jim remembered. He had

better prepare the children. "Kids, we may have another

difficult passage ahead. So brace yourselves." There was

a moderate groan from behind.

Obviously this magic land

was losing some of its appeal.

Nimby pointed ahead. Jim didn't see anything, but

wasn't about to ignore the signal. He slowed the RV. It

was just as well, for in a moment he saw that the road

ended abruptly at the brink of an awesome cleft in the

ground. It seemed impossibly wide and

deep. The last

thing he would have wanted to do was zoom at speed off

the lip into the depths.

5

IMP ERIAL

Mary watched the dreadful chasm approach. As-

pects of this strange realm had first been

unbe-

lievable, then disturbing; now they were

becoming downright alarming. But she didn't want to ex-

press her burgeoning concern, lest it upset the children.

They had already been frightened enough by the terrible

flying creatures. Oh, how she hoped it didn't get any

worse!

There was a small house at the brink. Another troll stood

there. Jim fished in his pocket .for more change. "We're

taking the ferry," he told the troll, as if this were routine.

She had to give him due credit: he had excellent poise in

this most trying situation. And it was working; the creature

accepted the coins and nodded.

But there was no boat, just the yawning deeps of the

chasm. "Is it safe to get out here?" he asked Nimby. The

odd man nodded. Mary knew that Nimby's help was in-

valuable, but she was privately afraid of him; there was

something so utterly different about him as to be unclas-

sifiable. She far preferred Chlorine, who, though not in her

ordinary form, which was downright plain, was at least

completely human.

But perhaps Jim and the children had some caution, for

they elected to remain inside the RV, just in case the mon-

sters should return. They watched as a cloud detached it-

self from a cloud bank above the chasm and drifted in their

direction. It seemed to have a kind of foggy keel below.

Oh, no! Could this actually be their ferry? Mary kept

her dark suspicion to herself, hoping it wasn't true.

But it was true. The cloud came to dock at the brink of

the cliff, so that the road now led onto it. It looked solid—

but how could that possibly be?

Jim looked at Nimby. She wished he wouldn't look to

the strange man for guidance so much. "Onto that?"

Nimby nodded.

"Yes, this must be the ferry," Chlorine said. "When I

crossed, I was carried by a fly-by-night."

Jim started the motor. "Jim!" Mary cried, truly

alarmed.

He looked back. "Their advice has been good so far.

Do we stop trusting them now?"

Mary swallowed, feeling—and surely looking—rather

pale. "Drive very slowly."

He inched forward. The front wheels nudged onto the

cloud surface, and held; it was as solid as it looked.

"Gee," David said, staring out and down.

"Do you believe in group nightmares?" Sean asked rhe-

torically.

Definitely! But Mary stifled her retort.

"Of course there are night mares," Chlorine said.'

"They bring the bad dreams to the people who deserve

them. Don't they go to Mundania too?"

"Oh, sure," Karen said. "I get them all the time."

"Something tells me we're not speaking quite the same

language," Sean said. "Are you talking about just dreams,

Chlorine?" And that was another thing: Mary was quite

uneasy about the lovely young woman's effect on the im-

pressionable seventeen-year-old boy. Sean's eyes were at-

tracted to her as if compelled by magnets; he tried to

conceal his fascination, but Mary saw it. Chlorine was not

trying to be flirtatious, but she didn't have to be. Her mere

presence was more than sufficient. It was clear that she

had not had a lot of experience being beautiful; she tended

to show too much flesh, and it really was by accident. The

girl was fairly innocent, which actually made it more awk-

ward.

"The dreams and the mares," Chlorine replied. "And

the Night Stallion, who governs them. They gallop out

each night to carry their carefully crafted creations."

"Horses!" David cried. He, too, was all too much in-

trigued by the unconscious wiles of the

woman. "They're

real horses L"

"Of course," Chlorine said. "Except that you can't usu-

ally see them. You can't see Mare Imbri, either, though

she comes by day with nice day dreams." Her eyes misted

for a moment, perhaps seeing such a dream.

Well, at least their dialogue, and Chlorine's appearance,

were distracting the children from the unbelievable thing

that was happening.

The RV now had all four tires on the cloud. Jim set the

brake and turned off the motor. ' 'We are safely aboard the

ferry," he announced.

"Aboard, anyway," Mary murmured tightly.

The cloud began to move. It carried them out over the

depths of the chasm. Those depths were now darkening,

for it was late in the day. The slanting sunlight illuminated

the steep side, but then cut off before the

bottom. The

shadow was not impenetrable; there were trees and rocks

in the lowest part.

"Oh, there's the Gap Dragon!" Chlorine cried, point-

ing.

They all peered down. There in the deep distance was

a tiny wormlike thing wriggling along. But Mary was sure

that it would be considerably more formidable up close.

She was glad it wasn 't close.

Karen came to climb into her father's lap. "Daddy, is

this real?" she asked.

"I'm not sure," he admitted. "But I think we had better

assume it is, until we get out of it." With that, Mary could

agree emphatically. She no longer doubted the reality of

this realm, and she most certainly wished to be out of it.

Then the wind rose again. "Oops—that looks like

Fracto," Chlorine said.

"Who?"

"Fracto, the worst of clouds. He always comes to rain

on picnics. Now he must be coming to mess up our

crossing. I don't like this."

"A malign storm?" Mary asked, an ugly shiver running

through her. She did see-the cloud developing, and it

looked just exactly like a thunderstorm.

There were even

jags of lightning projecting from it.

"Oooh, it's got a face!" Karen said.

The weird thing was that the child was right: there was

a kind of pattern forming that did look like a vaguely hu-

man face. It had small foggy eyes and a big cruel mouth,

with hugely expanding cheeks, as if it were taking in a

breath so as to blow a blast of air at them.

"Oh, I hope the ferry is enchanted, so Fracto can't blow

us away," Chlorine said.

"Ask Nimby," David suggested.

Chlorine smiled at the boy. "Of course. Why didn't I

think of that?"

Nimby was already writing a note. He passed it back to

her. " 'The ferry is enchanted,' " she read. "What a re-

lief!"

She was no more relieved than Mary herself was. Pre-

sumably that meant that the storm could huff and puff and

threaten, but couldn't actually "blow them away."

The storm was evidently going to give it a try, however.

The face loomed up hugely, and the mouth exhaled. A

stream of mist shot out, right toward the ferry cloud. But

it turned aside, as if encountering a shield, and passed

above them.

Fracto looked angry. Mary chided herself for personi-

fying the cloud, but the expression was unmistakable.

"Boy, he's mad now," David said with a

certain sinister

relish. "He's going to get us if he can." He stuck his

tongue out at the thing.

"Please don't do that," Mary said, experiencing a thrill

of fear. "It's not polite."

"Awww:" But this was routine. Thus Mary didn't have

to admit that her main motivation was concern about mak-

ing the storm furious. What were the limits of protective

enchantment? She did not want to find .out. And of course,

she didn't want David getting into bad habits, anyway.

The cloud certainly tried. But all his huffing and puffing

couldn't blow their house down. They

continued their san-

guine float across the chasm, and in due course came to

the far brink. Karen returned to the back so her father

could drive. "I could get to like trolls," Jim remarked as

he started the motor and nudged the RV onto solid land.

Mary felt her tightness dissipating. They had made a

safe crossing. She had always been a bit nervous about air

travel, and this had been a most precarious flight. "The

trollway is the way to go," she agreed.

"Gee, that was great," David said.

Even Chlorine glanced at him, obviously not as pleased

with the experience as he had been.

The RV got up speed. But now the day was dimming,

and it was clear that they would be another day on the

road before escaping Xanth. They could, of course, con-

tinue driving, except—

"Do we have enough gas?" Mary asked.

"No," Jim replied. "Less than half a tank left. We'll

need another gas guzzler soon."

"Nimby—" Chlorine said.

The man wrote another note and passed it to Jim.

"There is one ahead, but there's a

problem," Jim said.

"It's off the enchanted path, and there may be danger."

"That's all we need," Mary muttered. But they would

have to have more gasoline. "What kind of danger?"

Nimby wrote another note. "A blobstacle course," Jim

announced.

"A what?" Karen asked alertly. Jim seldom punned.

"That's how it's spelled: BLOB-stacle. I hesitate to in-

quire further."

"Oh, sure; there's one of those in a computer game I

play," David said. "You just have to be ready to dodge

fast."

"Dodge City," Sean said. He, in contrast, often punned.

Jim looked at Nimby. ' 'Just how dangerous is a blob-

stacle course!"

The man made another note. Jim read it aloud: " 'In

this moving house, not very dangerous if you avoid the

blobs. But it can be disgusting.' " Jim glanced back. "Dis-

» gusting, I can handle. How about the rest of you?"

"Yeah!" David exclaimed.

Mary wasn't sure, but the thought of getting Stranded

without gas bothered her more. "We had

better try it,

dear," she said.

"You call him a deer?" Chlorine asked, surprised.

Mary smiled tiredly. "In a fashion."

Nimby signaled the tumoff, and Jim drove down the

side road. Almost immediately the

blobstacle course man-

ifested: a series of huge discolored blobs sitting on and

about the road. They looked like giant poisonous fungi,

which might be what they actually were.

Jim slowed so as to steer around the first

without going

off the road, because the terrain on either side was rough.

It seemed to vary from steep hill to bog: not something to

stick a tire into. He got around the first, then made an S-

turn to get around the second on the other side. So far so

good. This at least was manageable, Mary thought.

"Bogy at three o'clock, high," Sean announced, peering

up out a window.

Something was definitely looming there, rapidly ap-

proaching. "Oh, no," Chlorine said, peering with him. At

any other time Mary would have objected to the way her

bosom was nudging his shoulder. "That looks like a meat-

ier shower."

"A meteor shower!" Jim said without taking his eyes

from the road. "That sounds like a Mundane phenome-

non."

"No, it's another language problem," Chlorine said. "I

have trouble hearing what you say, and you have trouble

hearing what I say. Maybe it's because you didn't pass

through the regular Interface when you .came to Xanth.

You can talk our language, but the nuances don't come

through. That's MEAT as in flesh. Meatier shower. Those

aren't completely dangerous, but they aren't much fun ei-

ther."

"So it's going to rain hamburgers and hot dogs?" Sean

asteA.

"No, it will shower meat. Or am I missing another nu-

ance?"

"Never mind." Sean continued to look out. Then some-

thing solid struck the roof of the RV. "Hey, just how big

are the pieces?"

"All sizes," Chlorine said. "From gnat legs to boiled

rocs. And they can be rotten, depending how long they

have been traveling."

"Dad," Sean said. "Let's get the bleep out of here!"

Then he looked surprised. "Bleep? That isn't what I said."

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"How old are you?" Chlorine asked.

"Seventeen. Why?"

"That means you're still subject to the Adult Conspir-

acy. You can't say bad words until you pass eighteen."

Sean was astonished. "I can't?"

"Not in Xanth," she said firmly.

Mary suppressed her smile. This land of Xanth wasn't

all bad!

"I can live with it," Karen said, not managing to damp

down her own smile.

"Let me try," David .said. "Bleep!" He looked sur-

prised. "Hey, it's true! Bleep! Bleep!"

"Stop it," Mary said.

"But how could you tell what words I

was trying to

say?" he asked plaintively.

"I can read your lips—and your mind."

"Oh. Yeah." He was deflated.

There was a heavy dull thud on the roof of the RV.

"Damn!" Jim muttered, and it almost seemed to Mary that

the air in his vicinity turned slightly smoky. He goosed the

engine, trying to get through the blobstacle course faster.

Something reddish brown splatted against a window.

Dark juice oozed from it. "Ugh!" Karen cried. "What's

that?"

"Part of a bleeping raw liver, I think,"

Sean answered.

"I'm going to be a vegetarian," she declared.

The vehicle slewed around another blob, an outer wheel

riding up a bank, then squished through some stuff that

surely wasn't ice slush. "There's a guzzler. Dad!" David

called, pointing.

"Got it," Jim said. He slid to a halt by the creature,

who looked exactly like the other one. "Got another pill,

Mary?"

Mary dived into her purse. "Yes. Here." She fished out

the bottle and opened it, spilling several pills. She picked

one up and passed it to her husband.

He gave it to the guzzler. The creature swallowed the

pill, then looked for the gas tank. But of course, it was

capped. Jim started to open the door.

"No!" Mary cried. "You'll get hit by

meat."

Jim hesitated, closing the door. "Somebody's got to

take off the gas cap," he pointed out. "And not you or a

child."

Chlorine perked up. "Nimby?"

Without a word, the young man opened his door and

got out. A huge mass of something bounced in front of

him. "He'll be hit!" Mary cried.

Chlorine pondered for half a moment. "Nimby, assume

your natural form—with tough scales," she called.

Then the young man disappeared, to be replaced by the

ugliest creature Mary could have imagined. It looked like

a mule from the front, being mule-headed, and some kind

of ancient dinosaur from behind, with huge overlapping

scales. Furthermore, it was striped pink and green. The

pink was halfway pretty, but the green

was wretched. So

this was the real nature of the creature! No wonder she

had been uneasy about him.

But she reminded herself that he was doing them a fa-

vor. She watched as he made his four-footed way around

the front of the RV. Chunks of meat struck his body, but

did no apparent harm. His scales were indeed tough, as

Chlorine had suggested. But rapidly getting badly soiled.

He came around to the gas tank and used his equine

teeth to twist off the cap. The guzzler stuck in its tail, and

the gas flowed. When the tank was evidently full. Nimby

used his teeth again to put the cap back

on and screw it

tight. Then he trundled back around the RV. When he

reached his door, he reverted to man-form. Just in time to

get hit by a big blood blister-from the sky. It didn't seem

to hurt him, but he was completely soaked.

"Get in before you get killed!" Mary

screamed, ap-

palled.

The man opened the door and climbed in. "Oooo,

ugh!" Karen said with a certain relish. "What a sunk!"

She was right. Nimby now smelled of rotten guts.

"Can't be helped," Jim said, starting the motor.

"Come back here," Mary told Nimby. "I'll see if I can

clean you up." She felt somewhat guilty, because he had

gotten splatted while doing them a favor.

Nimby came back. The children drew away from him,

turned off by the sight and smell of him, but Mary had

cleaned up messes before. "We'll have to wash you off

and give you some clean clothes," she said in motherly

fashion. "Do you know how to use our facilities?"

He nodded.

"Then do so. Pass your clothing out, and I'll pass fresh

things in."

He did so. Relieved, Mary set about a search for cloth-

ing. "He'll have to use some of yours," she told Sean.

"He's about your size. It's in a good cause."

"For sure," he agreed wryly.

She dug out a shirt, jeans, underwear, and an old pair

of sneakers. Then when the lavatory door opened, she ex-

changed them for the sodden things Nimby had been wear-

ing. It was hard to breathe with the stench of them. She

bundled them up and dumped them in a basin for laun-

dering.

Meanwhile Jim was navigating the blobstacle course

back to the main road. It seemed easier now; the meatier

shower was abating, and the blobs seemed to be shrinking.

Apparently even bad things didn't last long, in Xanth.

Soon the road cleared, and they were back on the main

haul. That was another considerable relief.

Nimby emerged, garbed correctly. Now he looked ex-

actly like a barely-beyond-teenager. Sean's clothing fit him

well enough.

"Let me fix your hair," Mary said. She fetched a brush,

and trained his wet hair back in a conventional part.

"Gee, he could pass for one of us," David said. "I

mean, like one of the family."

"Say, do you want to be my brother?" Karen asked

him.

Nimby looked blank. "They're teasing you," Mary

said. "You don't have to be part of anyone's family." She

realized as she spoke that her attitude toward the young

man had changed. She had been wary of him because she

didn't understand him; now she had seen his natural form,

she understood him better. He was

surely somewhat un-

comfortable among human beings, and she wanted to al-

leviate that. Because he was helping them significantly. Of

course, she knew it was because he was Chlorine's com-

panion, doing what Chlorine wanted, and Chlorine had

been assigned to get the family safely through Xanth. Still,

she appreciated what he was doing.

She put away the brush and adjusted his collar. She

realized that he was looking at her. "I'm sorry," she said,

embarrassed. "I'm so used to taking care of my family, I

just automatically do these things. I know you're not a

child."

Nimby smiled. Then he found his pad—

actually it just

seemed to appear in his hand, along with the pencil—and

wrote a note. She noticed with surprise that he actually

held the pencil still and moved the notepad against it to

do the writing. He tore off the sheet and gave it to her.

Thank you for your attitude. No one has treated me like

a person before, except Chlorine. I am glad to be thought

of as part of your family.

"Why, thank you. Nimby," Mary said, pleased. She

gave his hand a little squeeze. Then she returned to her

seat.

"If you want to be family, you have to help entertain

the kid," Karen said. "Come here to the table. Nimby,

and play solitaire."

"No, you don't have to do that," Sean said. "Don't let

her push you around."

"What is solitaire?" Chlorine asked.

"It's a card game," Karen said. "Actually

there are

many kinds, and some can be played by two or three peo-

ple at once. I'll show you."

Sean and David moved out, and Chlorine and Nimby

joined Karen at the table for instruction in solitaire. Soon

«

they were deep into it. Chlorine had the usual miscues of

a beginner, but Nimby seemed to be a natural player. Ei-

ther he was extremely smart, or his general awareness of

things acquainted him with the identities of the hidden

cards. Or maybe both.

How could a donkey-headed dragon be so talented?

Mary wasn't sure, but suspected that the relationship of

animals to humans was different in Xanth. Animals were

smarter here. That business with their own pets was eerie;

it was just as if they had developed almost human intel-

ligence and restraint. And Tweeter had warned them about

the approach of the flying monsters, back at the rest stop.

Or had he? Nimby had claimed to listen to the bird, and

written a note. It could have been Nimby doing it.

It became important for Mary to know. The drive was

quiet now, as Sean accompanied Jim up

front, and both

Nimby and Chlorine were involved in Karen's game. Da-

vid was watching the game, about to get involved himself.

So she should be able to do a little experimentation without

attracting attention.

She went back to where the pets were. "Woofer," she

said, and the dog perked up. She

unsnapped his leash, free-

ing him. "How smart are you, now?" she asked quietly.

Woofer wagged his tail.

"Suppose I tell you to look out the left window?"

The dog looked out the left window.

Mary controlled her reaction. "Suppose I ask you to

open Tweeter's cage?"

Woofer turned to the birdcage, set teeth and paw to the

catch, and worked it open.

"Tweeter, suppose I tell you to go perch on Karen's

head?"

The bird flew out and landed on the girl's head. Karen

was so preoccupied she didn't notice.

"Midrange."

The cat sat up and gazed at her.

"Suppose I ask you to roll over?" This was not a trick

the cat had been taught.

Midrange rolled over.

"You animals do understand me, don't you?"

The cat nodded.

"If we treat you three with the respect due intelligent

and disciplined entities, will you behave accordingly?"

Midrange nodded.

"Then we shall do so. Do you know why you are now

so smart?"

The cat shook his head.

' 'I think it is because of the magic of this land. It seems

that magic dust is getting stirred up, and causing numerous

disruptions, including enhancement of the intelligence of

animals." She was speaking in a deliberately advanced

manner, testing the limits. "Does that

make sense to

you?"

Midrange considered, then slowly nodded.

"But as you know, there are also some formidable dan-

gers here," Mary said, surprised by how readily she was

accepting this new relationship with their pets. "So I hope

you will remain close by, when we go out of the RV, and

will also warn us, as Tweeter did, when the situation war-

rants."

Midrange agreed again, then wandered off to find a suit-

able place to catnap.

Mary returned to her seat. She had satisfied herself that

Nimby had not been faking it; he had understood bird talk,

and the bird had talked.

Now Mary realized that. night had fallen. She had been

distracted by her investigation and not realized it. They

had spoken of driving through the night, but now she was

not at all certain this was wise. She didn't want Jim suf-

fering deadly fatigue, when any accident could strand them

in a really strange situation. ' 'Dear, maybe we should look

for a place to stay the night," she called.

"Is it safe to stop that long?" he asked.

Chlorine looked up from the card game. "Is it safe,

Nimby?"

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Nimby wrote a note: This vehicle has outdistanced the

storm. It is safe to pause until dawn.

"Good," Mary said. She was catching on to the way of

these things. "Where is a good place to stay? A camping

park with some facilities would suffice, but I think I'd

rather find a hotel where we can really unwind for a few

hours."

There is an imp settlement near. The imps are courteous

to visitors from afar, if the right village is chosen.

"Then that is where we should stop,"

Mary decided.

Soon Nimby indicated a side road, and Jim took it. It

led to a sign saying IMPOSSIBLE, with an arrow to the right,

but Nimby indicated that this wasn't the right one. A little

farther was a sign saying IMP RISON, with an arrow to the

left, but it seemed this wasn't right either. Mary was in-

clined to agree; she wouldn't want to stay at either Im-

possible or Imprison, considering the literal tendencies of

this land. Finally a sign said IMP ERIAL, and this one was

good. Mary was glad; Imperial had a quality ring to it.

The village was small but elegant. The jungle had been

cleared back somewhat, and there were

neat little gardens

and nice little houses. In fact, everything about this com-

munity seemed small scale.

Following Nimby's indications, they drew up to the

largest building in the village. Its structure suggested that

it was an enormous hotel, but it was only about two human

stories tall.

Though it was night, tiny figures were scurrying about

carrying torches. Each was under One foot tall—the fe-

males significantly under. But apart from that they ap-

peared to be fully human. They were carrying things from

their little houses into the forest.

"What are they doing?" Chlorine asked.

Nimby wrote a note. They are carrying their gems to

the safety of a deep cave.

"Oh, because of the approaching storm," Chlorine said.

"That makes sense."

They got out of the RV, stretching their legs after the

long confinement. Woofer, Tweeter, and Midrange joined

them, perfectly behaved. The hotel door opened and a man

and a woman emerged. He looked to be in his seventies,

by the human scale, and she in her fifties. "Hello, huge

folk," the woman said, her voice clear

despite her tiny

size. ' 'I am Quieta Imp, and this is my father. Imp. Ortant.

We are the leaders of this community, so we run the hos-

pitality domicile. Do you wish to accept our hospitality?"

There was a pause. Then Mary stepped in. "Yes we do,

please. But we—we're not sure your building is big

enough for us." She glanced meaningfully at the foot-high

main door.

"Oh, it has an accommodation spell," Quieta said. "It

will do. Come in."

Somewhat dubiously, Mary stepped forward. As she ap-

proached the building, it seemed to shimmer, and suddenly

it was human size. Quieta and Ortant Imp were human

size too. ^

"What happened?" Mary asked, startled.

"You have been accommodated," Quieta said. "See,

the others in your party haven't, yet."

Mary turned. There behind her stood

several giants,

thirty to forty feet tall. Even their animals were terrifyingly

large. "Oh!" she said, feeling faint.

Quieta stepped up to take her arm. ' 'I'm sorry; I didn't

realize how new this must be to you. Are you by any

chance Mundane?"

"Yes," Mary said faintly.

"The spell is harmless. It merely makes the various par-

ties seem to be the same size. So we are about two and a

half times as big, and you are about one two and a halfth

as big, or small, as the case may be. But those outside the

spell region don't see that, and to them we all look imp-

ishly small, while to us they look humanly big."

"To be sure," Mary agreed, not able to argue whatever

point there might be.

Now Chlorine stepped forward. She shimmered, and be-

came Mary's size. "Aren't accommodation spells won-

derful?" she asked rhetorically. "I've never been in one

before, but I love it. I thought they were only for when

folk of quite different sizes wished to summon the stork."

"To what?" Mary exclaimed, shocked. But she realized

that in this land of magic, storks might be

literal, and that

interbreeding of humans and imps might indeed be pos-

sible. "I mean, I'm surprised, that's all."

Chlorine beckoned the others, and one by one they

stepped in, including the animals, who seemed almost as

surprised as the humans. "Gee," Karen said, summing it

all up.

"Come in," Quieta said. "I will show you to your

rooms while my father prepares the evening meal."

They followed her to an omate staircase that wound up

to a sumptuous second story. Quieta opened the door on

a truly splendid suite. "Will this do?" she asked somewhat

timidly. "It has four bedrooms and lavatories, with facil-

ities for your animal companions."

"But we can't afford anything like this!" Mary pro-

tested.

"Afford?"

"What does this princely suite cost?"

"Cost?"

"Imps don't charge for their hospitality," Chlorine mur-

mured.

"But we can't accept this!" Mary said.

Quieta looked embarrassed. "I'm sorry; I thought it

would be adequate. I will try to find better rooms for you."

"No, no!" Mary said. "It's not that. It's that this suite

is so fancy, we don't have any right to take it, especially

not without paying."

"But you are guests," Quieta said.

Mary looked at Chlorine. "This is the way of it? All

this—with no charge? Just because we stopped here?"

' 'Yes. I thought you knew. Of course, if we had stopped

at Rison, it would have been much less comfortable."

"Imp-rison," Sean murmured appreciatively.

"Then it's all right?" Quieta asked hopefully.

"Oh my dear, it's wonderful," Mary said. "I simply

had no idea it would be so fancy. We—we are used to

much simpler accommodations."

"We imps take pride in our hospitality," Quieta said,

evidently relieved. "Will an hour be enough time before

supper?"

"Yes, of course," Mary said. "And thank you, Quieta.

Thank you so much. This is really nice."

"You are welcome," the imp lady said, and departed.

They explored the suite. There was a huge master bed-

room, and three smaller ones, and a sitting room with sev-

eral couches, and an alcove with what looked like dog

food, cat food, and birdseed, as well as the two bathrooms.

The master bathroom had a tub the size

of a small swim-

ming pool, while the other had a shower. "This is just so

amazing," Mary breathed. "Just to be hospitable."

The three pets were waiting expectantly, Mary realized

why. "Certainly—indulge yourselves," she said. They im-

mediately went to the pet nook and started eating.

"How about us?" David asked. "You adults have the

master bedroom with the great bath, and Chlorine and

Nimby have the first regular bedroom, but how do us kids

split the other two?"

Mary considered. "If one of you wants to sleep on a

couch in the sitting room, you can all

have rooms to your-

selves. But one of you will have to share a bathroom with

the one on the couch. Can you work that out between

you?"

All three nodded enthusiastically.

"Then let's try to be ready for supper within the hour."

She glanced at Chlorine. "I didn't think —you do wish to

share a room with Nimby? If not—"

"That's fine," Chlorine said. "Come on. Nimby—you

still have some of that meatier shower stink. I'm going to

scrub you clean." She led the young man to their bedroom.

Sean looked after them. "I wish / could

get scrubbed

clean by a creature like—" Then he realized that his

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mother was looking at him, and cut off, somewhat (but

perhaps not sufficiently) embarrassed.

Jim and Mary entered the master

bedroom and closed

its door. "Who first?" she asked, glancing at the enormous

tub.

"What, not together?" he asked.

"You think this is our honeymoon?" she inquired

archly.

"In this suite, it. feels like it."

He was right. "Together," she agreed. "But don't get

fresh." She went to run the water.

This turned out to be interesting. There was only one

tap, but when she turned it on, the water came out exactly

the right degree of hot. The two towels were small, but

when she touched one with her wet hand, it dried the hand

immediately. There was one tiny bar of soap, shaped like

a stone—obviously a soapstone—but when she dipped it

in the water it made a big fluff of scented bubbles. There

just might be some magic here. Well, she was getting used

to that, in this magic land, and this was one of the first

really pleasant surprises it had had for her.

Soon they were both in the tub, scrubbing each other,

and it was wonderful. Jim did get fresh, and she allowed

it, because it did indeed feel like their honeymoon. "If

every day were only like this," she murmured.

"I think we have been selling Xanth short," he agreed.

"It's like a powerful new computer program: at first you

run afoul of all its traps, and they mess you up and drive

you crazy, but then you start getting really into it, and you

find out how nice it can be."

"Mmnun," she agreed luxuriously.

After that, things got somewhat out of hand, but it was

worth it. Just so long as none of the children barged in on

them.

They were ready by the time the hour was up, bright

and clean and in fresh clothing. So were the children,

amazingly. And the pets, who evidently

intended to join

them downstairs.

"But—" Mary started. Then she remembered how ad-

vanced the animals had become. "Of course." The others

glanced at her in surprise, but didn't comment.

Quieta appeared promptly. "Right this way," she said.

They found themselves in a very nice dining chamber

sized just about right for their party. Quieta went into the

adjacent kitchen and emerged pushing a cart with a number

of platters and pitchers. These turned out to have an as-

sortment of meats, vegetables, pastries, breads, and bev-

erages. "I would serve you, but I am not.sure of Mundane

tastes, so I brought a selection that you could choose from

yourselves," she explained. "I shall be happy to answer

questions about what may be unfamiliar to you."

Sean reached for a pitcher. "This looks

familiar. What

is it?"

"Boot rear."

He smiled. "Sure." He poured himself a cupful. He

took a good gulp—and jumped halfway out of his chair.

"Hey!"

Karen tittered. "Boot rear! I get it. Serves you right."

Mary eyed what looked like something scavenged from

the meatier shower. "What is this, please?"

"That is steak, from a steak-out tree."

Mary decided to risk it, and was rewarded with an ex-

cellent entree. The others followed suit, and did seem to

enjoy the strange meal. They finished with eye scream,

which turned out to resemble screaming eyeballs but tasted

much like the confection they knew in Mundania.

As they finished. Imp Ortant returned. "I shall try to

entertain you, while Quieta does the

dishes," he said.

"Maybe we should help with the dishes," Mary said,

feeling guilty again because they weren't paying for this.

"No, the spells wouldn't work for you. How may I best

help you to enjoy yourselves?"

"I for one would like to know a bit more about your

village, your society," Jim said. "I haven't encountered

imps before." David and Karen looked as if they would

rather watch TV, but Mary stifled them with a warning

glance.

Ortant, however, saw and understood the glance. "Per-

haps the children would prefer to remain and watch the

magic mirror," he suggested. "While I give the adults a

tour of our village."

"Magic mirror?" Karen asked, her interest suddenly

revving up.

The imp went to a large mirror at the end of the cham-

ber. "Mirror, would you like to entertain two Mundane

children?" he asked.

A mouth appeared on the glass. It seemed to be a re-

flection, but there was nothing it could be reflecting from.

"Why not? I'll show them the Magic Tapestry of Castle

Roogna."

"A tapestry?" David asked, disappointed.

"The Tapestry shows any scene of Xanth

you wish to

see," Ortant explained. "Most children find it quite inter-

esting. Of course, it won't violate the Adult Conspiracy."

"Awwww," they said together.

"But it does show historical battles where dragons

chomp people, men throw women into pits, and blood

flows in rivers."

"Gee," they said together again, their interest restored.

Mary winced; apparently Xanth had the same standards as

Mundania in this respect.

David and Karen set chairs before the mirror. "Let's

see that river of blood," David said.

The mirror showed a country scene with a bright red

river flowing in the manner of a normal brook.

"Aw, that's just colored water," Karen said.

The mirror's reflect-mouth appeared, superimposed on

the scene. "Why don't you ask me to have the Tapestry

trace up to the source of that river, where the blood is

spurting from a wounded giant?"

"Yeah!" they said together.

Quieta arrived with a plate of pastries shaped like little

vanilla wheels with chocolate spokes. "Here are punwheel

cookies for you to eat while you watch," she said.

Mary masked her sigh. It seemed the children would be

quite satisfied.

"Right this way," Ortant said, walking to

the door. Jim,

Mary, Sean, Chlorine, and Nimby followed- him. Mary

hoped the tour wouldn't be as boring as the children had

feared. But they had to take it, as a matter of courtesy, to

reward the imps for their hospitality. With luck it wouldn't

be long; then they could settle down for a night of blissful

rest.

The three pets came too. That made Mary think of

something. "Woofer—maybe stay with the children?" she

asked.

The dog cocked his head at her, then nodded and turned

back. He was Sean's pet, but he would guard the children.

"Thank you," Mary murmured, relieved. She had no

reason to be suspicious, but she did not feel easy about

leaving the children entirely alone among strangers. They

would come to physical harm, literally, over the dog's dead

body. And Woofer would probably enjoy the exploration

of the river of blood too.

6

DECISION

Meow!" Midrange said imperatively.

Sean smiled and bent to pick up the cat. Nat-

urally Midrange didn't want to walk when he

could ride. Since Sean's dog was staying with David, Da-

vid's cat would take over Sean.

Then Tweeter flew up to perch on Sean's hair. That

surprised him. Karen had managed to impress on Midrange

that any bite out of the bird would swiftly lead to a worse

bite out of the cat, so Tweeter was tolerated unmolested.

But the two had not been exactly bosom buddies. Now,

with the magic, they seemed to be getting along better.

And all three animals had become eerily smart. So maybe

Tweeter figured the cat would understand his concerns bet-

ter than human beings would.

They stepped outside the dining room, and outside the

hotel. The wind was rising; it buffeted them. Imp Ortant

lifted a lantern from a hook beside the door and strode out

into the street.

"Uh, what about the accommodation spell?" Sean

asked the imp, who now looked exactly like an old human

man. "I mean, if we leave the hotel, won't we revert?"

Ortant lifted the lamp, which cast its glow more widely.

"There is a duplicate accommodation spell built into this

magic lamp," he explained. "As long as you remain in its

light, the spell will hold. This is best, because we shall be

going into some places way too small for normal human

folk."

So they had it figured. Sean returned to his normal in-

terest, which for the past day or so had been Chlorine. She

was the sexiest woman he had encountered. Oh, sure, he

had caught that glimpse of her when she reverted to her

normal state, but that wasn't the way she looked now, so

who cared? Consider Nimby, who had

turned out to be a

mule-headed dragon. Talk of damsels and dragons! No-

body seemed to be having any problem accepting Nimby

as a man—in Sean's clothes, yet!—so why should he,

Sean, have any with Chlorine? Nobody was very pretty on

the inside, anyway; it was all blood and guts and brain

tissue. By the time Chlorine reverted to her regular dull

appearance, he'd be back in Mundania anyway. So he

might as well enjoy it while he could.

Sean slowed his pace a trifle, so that he fell back in the

group, and Nimby and Chlorine caught up to him. Now if

she would just walk in front of him—but maybe that

would come. He had caught enough glimpses of her bosom

and thighs to keep him floating for some time; she evi-

dently wasn't used to the fancy clothing she wore now,

and didn't realize quite how much it tended to show. He

sure wasn't going to tell her!

Tweeter cheeped faintly in his ear. "Eyes left." At least

that was what it almost sounded like. Startled, he looked

left—and Chlorine was moving close to him.

"Those are nice pets," she said, her voice dulcet. "Was

Tweeter speaking to you?"

"Yeah. He told me something lovely was

coming up on

my left."

She smiled. "Thank you. Tweeter. I think you're lovely

too."

The bird did a little dance of ecstasy, fluffing his feath-

ers.

"Sean, you're the first young man I've met, since

Nimby made me beautiful," she said. "I think I am prac-

ticing on you, to see how loveliness works. I hope you

don't mind."

"I—you—you practice all you want," Sean said, star-

tled by her candor. How he wished he could get her alone

and do some real practicing!

"You see, all my life men have scorned me, because I

was plain," she continued. "So I really don't know how

to act around them. I can't practice on Nimby, because

he's not really a man. Please let me know if I bother you."

"I don't think you could bother me if you

tried," he

said, feeling light-headed.

She laughed. "I could in my normal state. But I had

Nimby make me nice as well as beautiful, and smart. But

intelligence doesn't substitute for experience."

"That's for sure." The possibilities were setting his

pulses pounding. She wanted romantic experience.

But now they had arrived somewhere. Just when it had

been getting really interesting. Too bad.

They entered what seemed like an ordinary building.

"This is where we prepare the raw stones," Ortant said.

"Atient here is a very fast worker." Sure

enough, the imp

man was working with blinding speed, doing things to a

collection of pebbles on his table. The gems were of sev-

eral colors, and seemed to glow, or actually to be burning.

"These are safe fire stones, used for making fires that will

not get out of control."

"Sapphires," Mom murmured. She had a good eye for

gems.

"What are these?" Chlorine asked, indicating several

red gems that looked like little letter L's and were rapidly

spinning.

"Spinels," Ortant said. "They are valued for their flash-

ing color."

They left the building and passed a mound covered with

gravestones. An imp was using a scoop to pull shining bits

of stone from it. "This is a die mound," Ortant said. "It

is not safe to walk on it unless you wish

to die. Then you

never leave it."

"Diamonds are forever," Dad remarked.

"Fortunately Robable is able to harvest stones from it

without getting caught," Ortant said.

"Improbable," Sean muttered, catching on.

They passed a garden with yellowish rods growing from

the ground. An imp was rubbing them, collecting some-

thing in a bag. "Goldenrods," Ortant explained. "Radical

is harvesting their pollen, which we use to powder other

jewelry with golden glitter."

They passed a glade where many bees

were buzzing.

Several of them buzzed the party threateningly, but didn't

actually sting. Midrange batted at those that approached

Sean, and Tweeter flapped his wings with annoyance.

"What's the matter with them?" Mom asked, irritated.

"Why are they so pointlessly hostile?"

"They are rude bees," Ortant explained.

"Ede will stop

them." And an imp walked out toward the bees, his very

presence seeming to hold them back.

"Imp Ede rude bees—impede rubies," Sean murmured.

"You're so clever," Chlorine said, batting an eyelash.

She was improving with practice; he felt foolishly flattered.

They came to a pool where another imp was working

with a bucket shaped like an 0. "Rovise is using the 0-

pail to try to dip out the matriarch of pearls."

"Opal—mother-of-pearl," Sean said. Chlorine batted

another lash. He felt twice as clever as he was.

Then they came to a pen in the water where several fish-

tailed equines were confined. One neighed. "Oh—sea

horses!" Chlorine exclaimed, thrilled.

"In a corral—-coral," Sean said, working it out.

"Ose is doing his best to tame the horses in time,"

Ortant said.

"In time for what?" Dad asked.

"In time to save them from the magic storm that is

approaching. Our wares are very sensitive to changes in

ambient magic; something we might not notice could cause

them to go wrong. We need to clear the entire village by

tomorrow night. That is why we are working so hard to-

night; we need to complete our work and get our things

to safety." He frowned. "Unfortunately these horses are

ill at ease now, and not cooperating well."

Chlorine touched the water with one finger. "No won-

der—this water is germy."

"Yes, the storm is polluting it with weird forms of life.

But there's nothing we can do."

"I can fix it," she said. She touched the

water again.

"But aren't you poisoning it?" Sean asked anxiously.

"Yes. But not so much it will hurt the horses. It will

just wipe out the germs. Then my poison will fade, and

leave it pure for a while."

Sean did a double take. "Of course—chlorine—the

chemical—we use that in Mundania! To clear our water."

Ortant was surprised. "You poison your water to clear

it? I thought there was no magic in Mundania."

Sean laughed. "It does seem crazy, but it works."

The horses already seemed to be doing better. "We

thank you," Ortant said to Chlorine. "We never thought

of purifying the water by poisoning it."

They moved on, and Ortant showed them other aspects

of the imp operation.

"But—" Mom said, troubled. "But shouldn't you and

your daughter be helping in this effort, instead of—of

tending to us?"

"But you are guests," Ortant said. "We must see to

your comfort."

Mom did not seem quite satisfied, but she said no more.

Ortant brought them to a burning portal. "This is the

gate of fire through which we must take our wares to

safety," he said. "Ressed will show us the vaults."

"Fire agate," Sean murmured.

"Impressed."

"I'm impressed," Chlorine murmured. "You are just

so, so clever!" She was beautiful anyway, but by this time

she would have looked lovely regardless of her appear-

ance.

"So are you," he replied.

"Oh!" she said, caught by surprise by his return com-

pliment. Then she smiled. "It works both ways, doesn't

it?"

"Yes. That's what courtship is all about," he said, feel-

ing very wise.

"Jim ..." Mom said with quiet urgency.

"Perhaps we have seen .enough," Dad said, picking up

on Mom's mood. "We should get a good night's sleep."

"Certainly, if you wish," Ortant said. "I shall lead you

back forthwith."

Sean knew that they didn't want to take more of the

imp's time, when it was clear that the village had such a

lot to do. He understood the sentiment. He also knew that

the notion of children growing up and finding love made

Mom nervous. She thought no one ever crossed the line

to adulthood, after her own generation.

As they traced their route back to the hotel. Chlorine

expressed her curiosity. "I hadn't realized that imps made

so many gems. I thought that Jewel the Nymph handled

that."

"Imps make all the gems," Ortant said proudly. "From

the sparkles of light in morning dew to the most enduring

treasure. Where do you think the nymph obtains her sup-

ply?"

"I had thought it was from a barrel that never emptied."

"Because we imps are constantly working to replenish

it. We fashion the gems; the jewel nymphs place them for

others to find. So it has ever been."

"Oh, I'm so impressed!" she exclaimed. "I mean, not

the imp, but the surprise, the awe of your accomplish-

ment—"

"I understand," Ortant said, looking pleased. It was

clear that her art was working on him, too.

They arrived at the hotel. David, Karen, and Woofer

remained engrossed by the magic mirror. Mom rousted

them out and packed everyone upstairs.

After a flurry of preparations for the night, the others

were in their bedrooms and Sean was in

the suite's living

room with the animals. He stretched out on the largest

couch, discovering how tired he was. He would lull him-

self to sleep with mental pictures of Chlorine innocently

undressing. He knew their relationship wasn't real, but it

was one hell, or rather, heaven, of an illusion, and he

wanted to savor it while he could.

All three pets approached him. "Oh, you want to share

my bed?" he asked. "Well, okay, but don't bleep on it."

He noted with bemusement that he still wasn't able to say

"poop," that evidently being on the proscribed list for his

age.

"Seean," Tweeter chirped.

Sean glanced at the bird. "I swear, it sounded as if you

said my name."

Tweeter nodded. "Taalk," he chirped.

"You want to talk to me? This is getting hard to be-

lieve."

"Taaalk," Midrange meowed.

"Rrryess," Woofer agreed.

"But I'm making the effort to believe," Sean said.

"What is it so important that you guys have to tell me?"

The three seemed at a loss. "Aaaask," Woofer said.

"Oh, you mean it's hard for you to talk human, so I'd

better play twenty questions?"

All three nodded.

"Okay. Can I take it for granted that you three remain

friendly to our family, despite your new intelligence, and

wish us no harm?"

They nodded. "Um, maybe we can simplify this. How

about a single woof, meow, or tweet for yes, two for no,

and three for I'.d better do some more asking about that

one?"

There was a small chorus of single sounds.

"Maybe we'd better have a single spokespet," Sean

said, smiling. "I think Tweeter makes a single sound most

readily, so I'll address him, but if anyone else has some-

thing to say, cut in." He pondered a moment. "Is there

some danger to us?"

"Tweet."

"Does it relate to the storm we're trying to outdis-

tance—Happy Bottom?"

"Tweet."

"Well, we're going to get moving on north in the mom-

ing. Isn't that good enough?"

"Tweet tweet."

"How about the crack of dawn, and gobble breakfast

while driving?"

"Tweet."

"Okay, I'll go tell Dad now. He won't be asleep yet."

Sean started to get up.

"Tweet tweet tweet."

"Um." Sean considered again. "Something more I

should know about this?"

"Tweet."

"Now, let me figure. You guys must've learned some-

thing we humans didn't. But you were with us all the

time—two of you with me, one with the kids. So it can't

be-—say! Was it from before? Did you talk with other an-

imals somewhere along the way?"

"Tweet."

"And they know something the humans don't."

"Tweet tweet tweet."

"Okay, that we don't. How about the imps? They

know?"

"Tweet."

"Which is why they're getting the bleep out of here.

The storm. But we already knew about that."

"Tweet tweet tweet."

"Something more about the storm. Apart

from stirring

up things and maybe blowing us away. But I can't figure

what"

"Woimps," Woofer said.

"Sure, I'm a wimp. But I still can't figure this out."

"Woof woof."

"Oh, I'm not a wimp? Then what were you saying?"

"Meoimp," Midrange said.

"Oh, the imps! They're friendly, aren't they?"

"Tweet."

' 'And the storm means trouble for them too. Because of

the magic dust it's stirring up, which can bring madness

when there's too much. So they are clearing up and out."

"Tweet tweet tweet."

"More on that." Sean pondered again. "They know

what they're doing, don't they? They're

on schedule?"

"Tweet tweet."

"Oho! They're not going to make it in time?"

"Tweet."

' 'Because we delayed them by taking up their time and

effort?"

The three pets exchanged glances.
"Tweet tweet,"

Tweeter said doubtfully.

"But we might have? At least we made it rougher for

them by making a distraction when they're desperately

busy?"

"Tweet."

"Now I got it. So is there any way we can help?"

"Tweet."

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"By like maybe carrying things—say! If we stepped out

of accommodation, we'd be huge compared to them, and

could carry a whole lot for them. Then they'd get done in

time."

"Tweet."

"I'll ask Dad." This time there was no protest as he got

up. He went to the master bedroom and knocked on the

door. In a moment Dad opened it. "What is it, Sean?"

"The pets told me: the imps aren't going to get their

stuff all moved in time, maybe because we delayed them.

We could maybe help them—"

"We'll inquire," Dad said. He stepped

out, and they

walked out of the suite and downstairs. The pets came

along.

There was no one there. "They must be out working,"

Sean said. "And they never said a word to us."

"We'll find them." They went out the main door, and

Dad 'took the magic lantern. "We need to stay accom-

modated for this, I think."

They had hardly started down the path before Quieta

appeared. Her apron was mussed and her hair coming

loose, as if she had been hectically busy. "Oh, I'm sorry!

I must have neglected you," she cried. "What do you

need?"

"We are concerned that we have delayed you at a crit-

ical time," Dad said. "Can we help you to do what you

have to do, before we move on?"

She shook her head. "That is a very courteous thought

But though we could use your assistance, it would be at

too great a cost. You have just time to get clear of Xanth

before the dust intensifies, if you start at dawn and do not

stop. I used the mirror to talk with the Good Magician,

who is always correct. You must not delay at all. If you

remained to help us, you would be caught, and then you

would not be able to escape Xanth. You might be trapped

here a very long and bad time. We would be terrible hosts

if we let that happen."

"Maybe we could help now, at night, before dawn,"

Sean suggested.

"No, I do not mean to disparage your

effort, but you

are Mundanes. You would blunder in the dark, and be of

no use. Only by daylight could you help, and that is when

you must be gone."

Dad looked at Sean. "I don't like this, but I think we

had better depart on schedule."

"I guess so," Sean agreed reluctantly. "The best thing

we can do for these good folk is to get the bleep out of

their way."

Dad turned back to Quieta. "We apologize for delaying

you. We shall depart at the crack of dawn. Don't take any

trouble for our breakfast or anything; .we'll move out on

our own."

"Thank you," she said. "But there is food you can take.

Woofer knows where it is. I wish you well on your jour-

ney." She turned and went back down the path.

"I feel like a heel," Sean muttered.

"So do I," Dad agreed. "But it's the best we can do."

They returned to the hotel.

Sean settled down on the couch again, and the pets set-

tled on or around him. He closed his eyes, and saw a men-

tal picture of Chlorine wearing a filmy nightdress. Now, if

he could just get to sleep with her beside him ...

Before dawn the parents were up and knocking on doors.

Sean never knew how they did it, but they were always

alert when they needed to be. Chlorine looked sleepy but

still lovely, while Nimby looked the same as ever: neutral.

While the others were blearily-getting washed and dressed,

Dad started loading things into the RV

and Mom went to

the kitchen with Woofer to fetch the food left there for

them. Sean went from room to room and collected the used

sheets for the laundry, trying to save Quieta that much

effort. He still felt guilty.

He took the pets out for a quick walk so they could do

their business. It was weird stepping out

of the accom-

modation spell; suddenly they were all giants, beside the

dollhouse hotel. He took the pets on to the RV, knowing

how important it was to have no delay for any reason.

Just before dawn they were all bundled into the vehicle,

and Dad was starting the motor. The imps were still hur-

rying around, doing their work. Sean thought he saw

Quieta, and waved to her, but wasn't sure she saw him.

She looked tired.

They drove back along the access road to the trollway.

Suddenly there was a loud ripping noise, and a jagged

crack appeared in the dark sky, and the whole landscape

lightened. "What happened?" David cried, startled.

"Oh, that was the crack of dawn," Chlorine said. "To

let in the light. Sometimes it gets stuck on night, and the

sun won't come up because it's afraid of

the dark, so the

shroud of night has to be cracked open."

Even Karen evidently found that somewhat far-fetched,

but it did seem to be the way it was in Xanth.

They broke out the food the imps had left them, which

had made the accommodation change with them. There

was something for everyone, ranging from miraculously

still-cold eye scream to dog biscuits. Even in their absence,

the imps were excellent hosts.

The drive quickly got tedious, so Sean took a hand and

taught the others how to play poker for matchsticks. Chlo-

rine tended to let her cards show, as she did other things,

which was part of her appeal; but mute Nimby turned out

to be an unbluffable player. He'obviously knew which

cards everyone else held. Soon he had all the matchsticks,

and the game lapsed.

"Did you notice that there were no women or children,

other than Quieta?" Mom remarked from the front seat.

"I think they were already in the safe cave," Chlorine

said. "All that was left were the men, finishing all they

could."

"Which isn't enough," Sean said. "They aren't going

to make it on time before the dust of madness comes and

spoils their remaining stones."

"They aren't?" Chlorine asked, concerned. "How do

you know?"

"The animals told me," Sean said, petting Woofer.

' 'They talked to other animals."

Chlorine looked at Nimby, who nodded.

"Couldn't we help?" David asked, evincing a rare sign

of social conscience.

"Not without being caught by it ourselves," Sean said

grimly.

"You mustn't do that," Chlorine said

quickly. "I have

to get you safely out of Xanth."

"But the imps were real nice," Karen said. "We should

have helped them."

"But if it just got you caught for the madness," that

would be as much harm as good," Chlorine said.

"Yeah, I guess," Karen agreed reluctantly. Sean under-

stood her feeling, because he shared it.

Time passed. Sean got tired of looking out the window,

and it was hard to look too much at Chlorine without being

obvious, so he wound up snoozing as the others got into

more solitaire, a game Nimby couldn't

dominate as com-

pletely.

He woke when the RV turned off the main road. He

glanced at his watch. Hours had passed, and it was now

near the middle of the day. "Are we leaving Xanth?" he

asked, actually somewhat disappointed.

"Dad needs more gas," Karen informed him. "Sleepy-

head."

Sean looked out. "Where are we?"

"Tall Hassle," David said.

"Tallahassee? That sounds familiar."

"It isn't. This is Xanth, remember? Those are tall hassle

trees out there."

There were indeed some very tall trees. "Tall Hassle,"

Sean agreed, not wanting to get into a hassle, tall or short,

while Chlorine was watching.

"We are looking for a car pool, where there should be

a cargo of gas at a carport," Karen said, relishing the puns.

" 'Cause there's no gas guzzler here."

"Oh? Who says."

"Nimby says."

That did seem to settle it. Sean looked out to see if he

could spot the car pool.

"There it is!" Karen cried, pointing. She had the sharp

blue eyes of innocent youth.

Sean looked. There, indeed, it was: a body of water in

the shape of a huge car, rolling across the land on watery

wheels. "I should have known," he muttered.

Dad honked the horn. The car pool seemed to hear, be-

cause it rolled to a stop by the side of the road. "Don't

get out," Dad warned. "There may be danger."

Nimby nodded.

Sure enough: a giant tigerlike creature made of water

came bounding toward them: a carnivore. It loomed over

the RV and tried to bite it, but its water teeth couldn't dent

the metal. It made a wet roar and bounded away again.

An old woman walked out of the water.

She was made

of water too, but she had a certain car-isma, perhaps be-

cause of the water car-nation in her hair. "I wouldn't give

two cents for a tankful of gas," Dad called, "but I would

give one."

"That's car-ma," Karen said.

"I will take it," the water woman said. "My son will

give it to you." She turned and called "Toon!"

A garish water man waded out of the pool, followed by

a shaggy little car-pet. "Coming, Ma!" he burbled. He

brought out a big bottle of wine-colored liquid.

"And that must be the car-port," Sean said.

Dad got out and unscrewed the gas cap, and Car-toon

poured the liquid in. Sean hoped this was really what they

needed. Suppose it wasn't gasoline, but wine? Because

port was a kind of wine.

It seemed to be okay, because the motor

started up well

enough. But of course, there would still be some of the

old gas-guzzler juice in the tank, so it was too soon to be

sure.

"Thank you," Dad called as he put the vehicle in mo-

tion. Car-ma waved affably.

Then a huge shadow crossed their path. Sean looked

up—and saw a giant bird. "A roc!" he cried. "The mon-

sters've caught up again."

But Nimby wrote a note. No. That is a roc-ette. They

congregate in the tall hassle grove to practice their danc-

ing.

"That explains everything," Sean said sourly.

The big bird circled, peering down. "I think she thinks

we're going to molest her nest or something," David said.

"She's eyeing us."

Dad was concerned too. "That bird is big enough to

pick us up and dump us in the sea," he said. "How can

we get away from her?"

Nimby wrote another note. There is a B-have near. The

B's will dissuade her.

"Just show the way," Dad said gamely.

Nimby went up front, exchanging places with Mom, so

he could indicate the direction. "I shall be quite glad to

get out of this weird world," Mom said. "In Mundania

all we have to worry about are thieves and muggers." She

smiled, to show this was in jest, to a degree.

"But what about the imps?" Karen asked.

Mom sighed. "I confess, I do wish we had found some

way to help them. They were so kind to us, despite the

extremity of their situation."

They were approaching what looked like the world's

biggest, fiercest hornet nest. That would be the beehive.

Or B-have, as Nimby called it.

"Just what kind of creatures are these?" Dad asked war-

ily.

"Oh, B's are all right, if you don't rile them," Chlorine

said. "Their stings are mainly emotional."

"I sure get emotional when I get stung," Karen said.

Dad, evidently acting on Nimby's written advice, rolled

down his window and addressed the big insects buzzing

there. "I B-held your nice hive, er, have, and B-lieve you

can do something on my B-half, if you care to B-friend

me. Can I B-guile you to make the roc B-gone?" And he

held out an old nylon comb.

The B's clustered about the comb. This was evidently

something new and exciting to them. In a moment they

picked it up and carried it into their have/hive. They had

accepted the offering. Then another swarm formed into an

arrow and shot up to intercept the roc wheeling above. In

a moment there was a loud squawk, and the bird zoomed

away so swiftly as to leave a sonic boom behind.

Karen giggled. "I guess that salted her

tail."

"B-nighted mission accomplished," Sean said. "That

B-lies our concern about B's." He glanced at Mom, who

was known to be nervous about insects of most types.

Dad looped around and made his way back to the troll-

way. "I am really getting to appreciate

the protection of

the beneficial spell on this road," he remarked. "When-

ever we leave it, we get into trouble."

"Except for the imps," David reminded him.

"Except for the imps," Dad agreed as they resumed

speed. "You know, we are now close to the boundary of

Xanth; in a couple of hours we'll be clear of it, and back

in the normal realm. Yet I almost wonder—"

"We'll have to say good-bye to Chlorine," Sean said,

stricken by the realization. "And Nimby," he added, not

wanting to be too obvious.

"Who have helped us as much as the

imps did," Mom

added.

"Is anybody else thinking what I am?" Dad asked.

Sean was suddenly excited. "Like—like maybe not

leaving Xanth right now?"

"But we have to get home," Mom

protested. "We're

late already."

"To school," Karen said, making a wry face.

"To chores," David said. ¥

"To work," Dad said.

"To research," Mom said. "It occurs to me that though

I love my work, researching archaic languages, there may

be a unique chance for similar research here. It may have

escaped the notice of the rest of you, but we are no longer

speaking English; we are speaking the universal magic lan-

guage of Human Xanth, just as the pets are speaking the

universal animal magic language of Animal Xanth. Such

an opportunity should perhaps not be passed by."

Sean grinned. "Mom always did have a problem com-

municating. What she's trying to say is she'd just as soon

stick around here awhile longer."

"Yea!" Karen cried, clapping her little hands.

Dad glanced at Mom. "When you give a scholarly ra-

tionale, you always have an underlying gut motive. What

is it? Surely you aren't thrilled with meatier showers or

harpy bombs."

"It's the imps," she confessed. "They were so nice to

us, and we may have imposed at the worst time. I wish

we could help them."

"But we would get caught by the madness," Sean re-

minded her, though he was as eager as any to remain in

Xanth. Mom required careful managing, as Dad knew; it

wasn't safe to agree with her too quickly, lest she argue

the opposite case in an attempt to be Quite Fair.

"Yes. Yet it seems that all of Xanth faces that same

threat. Is it right for us to escape what they can't?"

She was begging to be persuaded. What would clinch

it? Sean had an inspiration. "Let's ask the pets." Before

anyone else could speak, he addressed the animals. ' 'What

do you guys have to say? Do you want to stay here in

Xanth longer?"

All three nodded. But that wasn't necessarily enough.

He needed a good, solid argument for turning back. ' 'What

do you know that we don't?"

"Woof," Woofer said. He tried again. "Woimp."

"Something about the imps," Sean said. "The ones

running the hotel? Quieta? Ortant?"

"Woof."

"Ortant. He's not what he seems?"

"Woof."

"Something bad?"

"Woof. Woof."

They were zeroing in on it. "Something good?"

"Woof woof woof."

"He's more than the innkeeper?" Chlorine asked,

catching on to the mechanism.

"Woof."

A lightbulb flashed above Chlorine's head. "I remember

now. He's the mayor of the village."

"Woof!"

"The mayor!" Mom exclaimed. "I had forgotten."

"The most important imp is always the host for guests,"

Chlorine said. "Because they feel that hospitality is the

most important function of a village. I had forgotten too;

I didn't pay proper attention in Centaur School, or I would

have realized right away."

"But surely the mayor should have been supervising the

business of clearing out the village,"

Dad said.

"Meow."

David looked at Midrange. "I guess so—after taking

care of the visitors.'"

"Yes," Sean said. "Ortant and Quieta were off inthe

village when Dad and I went down at

night. They thought

we were safe asleep, so they were getting back to their

business. Without bothering us about it."

"Such courtesy is rare in Mundania," Dad said. "Yet

it begs to be returned in kind."

That did it. "We must go back," Mom said decisively.

"Can we get there in time?" Dad asked. "It will be

evening, and that's when they have to be done."

"Nimby?" Chlorine asked.

Nimby nodded.

"And you," Mom said to Chlorine. "This

will be ex-

tending your job. We don't have the right to—"

"I'm happy to," Chlorine said. "This has been more

fun for me than anything. And I like the imps too."

Sean was very glad to hear that. Now he would get more

time with Chlorine—maybe a lot more time. So she could

practice whatever she wanted on him. Like maybe pro-

gressing beyond the verbal interplay.

Dad slowed the RV, getting ready to turn it around. "I

hope we don't regret this," he said. But he didn't look

regretful.

7

MADNESS

David was glad they were going back. This magic

world of Xanth took some getting used to, but he

was getting there, and it certainly was

more inter-

esting than Mundania. He knew that eventually he'd be

back in dreary school, but at least he'd have a good subject

for the How I Spent My Summer report.

Now they were heading into Xanth instead of out of it,

and the winds were stiffening. It was bound to be a long,

hard drive. That made him thirsty, as long drives always

did.

He saw a sign. APPLE COLA RIVER. "Hey, Dad—how

about stopping to get some of that apple cola?"

To his surprise. Dad listened. Maybe Dad was thirsty

too. He pulled to the side. "Everybody get out and get

anything done you want, because we won't be stopping

again soon," he said.

Oh. That was fair warning. They piled out and found

assorted bushes. Then David got a jug and went to dip out

all the apple cola he could. That was one of the good

things about Xanth: the way things were literal. If the sign

said apple cola, the river was made of it. Just as that river

of blood in the mirror/Tapestry had been

genuine hot led

giant blood, so copious it flowed for miles in a river down

to the sea. This river sparkled with its effervescence, and

sure enough, it was apple-flavored cola. He drank several

cups of it before he left, so as to keep the jug full.

He turned to return to the RV, and saw a fire. A series

of small flames was traveling along the ground between

him and the others. He wasn't worried, because they were

little enough to step right over, but he wondered how they

had come about. So he paused to look.

They were ants. Little red ants. "Fire ants!" he ex-

claimed, catching on.

"Wouldn't you know it," Sean said. "I found some

block parents." He gestured, and David saw several stone

blocks in the shape of people. That figured.

"Hey, look what I found," Karen called from the other

side. "Laughing flowers."

They looked, but didn't hear any

laughing, though she

stood in a patch of pretty flowers.
"Where?" David asked.

"Here." She picked a funny red one and brought it to

him. "Smell it."

He smelled it—and burst out laughing. The curious

thing was that he hadn't intended to; it just happened.

"What's so funny?" Sean asked suspiciously.

"Smell," Karen said, handing him a funny blue flower.

Sean sniffed it—and guffawed. Then looked as sur-

prised as David felt. Then he smiled. "I get it: these are

scents of humor."

"Yeah," Karen said, satisfied.

Woofer came running up. "Woof!" he said urgently,

pointing his nose toward the vehicle.

"Time's up," Sean said. "We have to get back in be-

fore Dad takes off without us."

They hurried back to the RV, because Dad didn't bluff

when he was in a hurry. The RV was already starting to

move, slowly. Of course. Mom wouldn't let him actually

leave them behind, but they got the message and ran the

last fifty feet.

"Did you see what I saw?" Dad asked as they pulled

back onto the trollway. "The fly-fishing?"

"What is noteworthy about that?" Mom asked. She was

sitting up front now, her normal place when they didn't

need special instructions.

"They were frogs with fishing poles—casting for flies."

Mom laughed musically. "And you mean that literally,

of course."

"Of course."

"And do you know what I saw?" Mom asked in turn.

' 'What did you see?" Dad dutifully inquired.

"A thim bull."

"A thimble?"

"A thim bull."

"A thin bull?"

"A male bovine in the shape of a thimble."

Dad laughed. "Grazing on pins and needles?"

"Of course."

David decided not to try to tell what the kids had seen,

because it simply wasn't remarkable, in this magic land.

"It's good to see them enjoying it," Sean murmured.

David realized that he was right. The parents had been

somewhat tight and terse recently, but now they were get-

ting into the spirit of Xanth. That was an excellent sign.

David looked around. The animals were snoozing.

Karen was fiddling with the deck of cards. Sean was sneak-

ing peeks at Chlorine's legs, where her skirt rode up care-

lessly high. Chlorine herself was looking out the window.

But then he saw her eyes flick back, and

he realized that

she knew Sean-was looking at her. She was showing her

legs on purpose! Now, that was really interesting.

But all this left nothing much for David to do. He could

play solitaire, .but he was tired of that. So he considered

Nimby. Nimby was one pleasantly weird character. Really

a donkey-headed dragon in the shape of a young man who

never spoke. So would he—

Nimby turned to face him.

Could Nimby read his mind? Suddenly David wasn't

r

bored at all. This could get really truly superinteresting.

Can you? he thought.

Nimby nodded.

Gee. But he'd better test it. What am I thinking of now?

He imagined a really ugly cartoon face.

Nimby brought out his pad and pencil—they just ap-

peared from nowhere—and drew the ugly face.

Gee, again. So they didn't have to speak to Nimby; they

could just think their questions to him. But maybe it

wouldn't be smart to announce that.

Nimby looked questioningly at him.

Because people like to keep secrets, David thought

loudly. Like Sean's looking up under Chorine's skirt, get-

ting a real charge from her legs, but he doesn't want any-

one else to know. And she's letting him do it, and SHE

doesn 't want him to know. So I guess you can pick up on

that... He paused, and Nimby nodded.

But you better not

let them know, because they'd both be embarrassed to

death. Because they're both adults, or close to it. I guess

it's like that Adult Conspiracy that stops us kids from say-

ing words like "bleep." Nobody's supposed to know any-

thing. I guess if you peek into their minds, you'll see I'm

right.

Nimby paused, then nodde4, looking surprised. David

was pleased; he had taught the man who knew everything

something.

And Nimby nodded again.

David realized that he didn't have to work to project his

thoughts; Nimby could pick them up at conversational

level. But if he could read everybody's mind so well, why

did he seem so, well, innocent?

Nimby wrote a note and handed it to him.

David read it. / am aware of what is happening around

me, but there is so much that I don't think

to do it unless

guided. There are so many thoughts that I usually pay no

attention. I also have trouble comprehending human mo-

tivations and emotions.

David couldn't resist giving some more advice. If

Nimby wanted to seek mature human perspectives and mo-

tives, he should peek into Dad's and Mom's minds. If he

wanted hot adolescent thoughts, Sean was the one. For

naive childish attitudes, Karen would do. But for a central,

sensible viewpoint, David himself was the best source.

Nimby nodded, accepting it.

But David was really curious about one thing, and

maybe Nimby would give him the answer. He could ap-

preciate why Sean wanted to see under Chlorine's skirt, as

David himself found that intriguing. He really did want to

see someone's panties. But why was Chlorine letting him

see?

Nimby wrote a note. She has not been beautiful long,

and wishes to ascertain exactly how beauty works and

what its limits are. So she is practicing on Sean, who is

the closest approach to an ordinary man to which she has

current access. She believes that what

works on him should

work somewhat similarly on other men.

Yes, it should. So it was really a scientific experiment

on her part; she didn't really care for Sean.

Nimby wrote a note. Scientific?

He didn't know about science? Okay,

David would tell

Nimby all about Mundane science, if Nimby would tell

David exactly what he and Chlorine did overnight in their

room at the imp hotel.

She slept. I sat up and watched Xanth.

What, no mush? No Adult Conspiracy stuff? David

wasn't sure he believed that.

Chlorine has little romantic interest in a dragon ass.

A what?

My natural form. She seeks human interaction.

'Nimby didn't have to sleep?

My type doesn't sleep.

But Nimby was in human form now. Wasn't he as least

a little interested in what Chlorine looked like with her

clothing off? David was only twelve years old, but he'd

just love to see Chlorine bare naked nude.

/ fashioned her present form, and mine. I can in any

event see her natural body at all times, as I can those of

everyone else. This has no novelty for me.

Evidently not. But with such powers, why did Nimby

hang around a dull family like them, and never speak?

There is a geis on me' to be silent until I have accom-

plished my mission.

Oh, like a knightly oath. David could see that. Still,

keeping constant company with a beautiful creature like

Chlorine, didn't Nimby get even a little

curious about what

human love and bleep was all about?

/ would like to learn about human emotion, yes. It does

intrigue me. So far it does not seem very logical.

Well, that was because he was analyzing it instead of

feeling it. He was being like a teacher in school, who could

make anything deadly dull in an instant. Kids fell asleep

in Sex Ed class, after all. In real life people had emotions.

They cared. They got all heated up about some stupid ball

game, and they really got excited about boy-girl business.

Maybe Nimby should try that, sort of really get into the

feel of it.

/ lack the emotion of the human kind. How can I ex-

perience the feelings humans do?

Well, he might try tracking David's own emotion for a

while. David would do his best to feel things strongly, so

Nimby could get the idea.

Thank you. I shall do that.

Now I'll think through science, David thought. The way

I see it, it's the Mundane way of doing what you folk in

Xanth do by magic. Maybe they're the same, in the end,

just different ways. Do you know what a lever is?

And so they communed, as the RV zoomed on, and

Karen played her cards, and Sean and Chlorine played

their little games of show and look.

Somewhere along there it began to rain. At first David

thought he was imagining it, but then he was sure: the rain

was colored. Red, green, blue, and yellow drops struck the

windows. Was this normal?

Yes, for Xanth.- This storm is raining heavily ahead, so

r

that by the time we reach the next river, it will be flooded.

The Trolls are about to shut down the

trollway as unsafe.

But we have to get to Imp Erial today, to help them

move their stuff.

/ will be able to guide you safely there, if you ask me.

"We'll sure do that," David said aloud, forgetting him-

self.

Karen looked up from her cards. "Do what?"

"Nimby says we're headed into a bad storm, and the

river will flood, and the trolls will shut down the high-

way."

"We can't afford to get detoured now," Dad said. "We

have to go on through."

"Nimby can show us how," David said.

"If this is a magic storm, he may have to," Dad replied

grimly.

The rain intensified, exactly as Nimby had written. Dad

slowed; he had to.

Nimby wrote a note. Stop here.

The road was not flooded, but Dad obeyed. Nimby got

out, assumed his dragon form, and trundled into the rain.

"He will return, I'm sure," Chlorine said.

And in a moment Nimby did. Clenched

in his donkey

jaws was a branch with leaves and several fat bright cher-

ries.

"Cherries!" Karen exclaimed happily, reaching for

them. But Nimby held them away, shaking his head.

"Those look like cherry bombs," Chlorine said. "Only

they're bigger and fresher and clearer than any I've seen

before. I'd better hold them." She took the branch and

held it carefully, while Nimby reverted to his human form

and got back into the RV. He was, of course, soaking wet,

so Mom came back and bustled him into the lavatory for

another change of clothing. Mom just couldn't help moth-

ering folk.

"Cherry bombs grow on trees?" David asked, as the

vehicle started moving again.

"Everything grows on trees," Chlorine said. "Except

people, and sometimes they do too." She sat down, and

her extreme care with the cherries caused her to forget how

her clothing was positioned. Twigs of the branch snagged

on both blouse and skirt. David saw Sean swallow. ' 'But

these must be a special variety."

"Why can't I eat a cherry?" Karen asked rebelliously.

She got that way when balked.

"Because they're cherry bombs, stupid," David in-

formed her. "They go boom." He felt enormously supe-

rior.

"Boom?"

"Yes, they explode when dropped or thrown," Chlorine

said. She managed to unsnag her skirt and then her blouse;

the material fell back into place, covering what it was sup-

posed 4o. David heard Sean resume breathing. That

exposure had really been by accident;

Actually, it had been a pretty good view. David had

begun to get interested in such things only in the last few

months, and suspected he would be more interested in the

next few months. Chlorine's body was fascinating. But so

was the notion of cherry bombs growing on trees. "Does

anything else do that?" he asked. "I

mean, explode?"

"Certainly. Pineapples, for instance. They're more dan-

gerous than cherries, because they're larger."

Nimby emerged, dressed in more of Sean's clothes. But

it seemed Sean didn't care; he was too busy watching to

see if any more twigs snagged anything.

"Exactly what variety of cherry bombs are these?"

Chlorine asked him.

Nimby wrote a note. No one else seemed to notice how

his pad and pencil appeared from nothing when he needed

them, and disappeared similarly when he didn't. He

handed the note to David.

" 'These are new, clear cherry bombs,' " he read aloud.

" 'Much more powerful than the regular kind. We will

need them for the river.' "

"Nuclear cherry bombs!" Sean exclaimed. "I'll bet

they're powerful!"

Then David noticed a PS to the note: When you saw

inside Chlorine's blouse—was that emotion?

David smiled. Yes it was, of a sort. But to fathom the

full effect of it. Nimby should have peeked into Sean's

mind. Because if David got slightly warm, Sean would be

a furnace. And considering Nimby's apparent age, he

should be reacting like Sean.

Nimby sat in a vacant seat. David was pleased to see

that he was now looking at Chlorine in much the way Sean

was: surreptitiously but persistently. He was learning.

"Uh-oh," Dad muttered in an ominous tone.

David peered ahead. There was a barricade with a sign

DETOUR. A troll stood by it, wearing a glowing helmet.

Dad drew up to the troll. "Where does the detour go?"

he asked.

' 'Back to the tall hassle grove, which is safer during the

storm."

"But we have to get to Imp Erial before nightfall," Dad

protested.

"The trollway may be impassable. There is flooding,

making it unsafe."

"Suppose we are willing to risk it?"

The troll stared dourly at him. "You may proceed at

your own risk. We will not be responsible for your

safety."

"But the road remains enchanted? We

can't be attacked

on it?"

"The path remains enchanted. But water goes where it

will. The flood could cause you mischief regardless of the

enchantment."

"Understood. We'll proceed."

"Fool," the troll muttered, and stood aside.

"You're probably right," Dad agreed, driving forward.

David looked out. "What's that building, shaped like a

huge bottle?"

Chlorine looked. "Oh, that's a whinery."

Sean laughed. "A winery shaped like a bottle! It fig-

ures."

Meanwhile the RV was forging through increasingly

tempestuous rain. Colored fluid streamed across the win-

dows and splashed up in fleeting rainbow patterns. Mist

from it drifted in the open slits of the almost-closed win-

dows.

Then some of that water seemed to get into David's

eyes, for they were flowing. He was crying—and he didn't

know why. He looked blearily around, and saw tears in

the eyes of all of them except Nimby. Even Dad was

blowing his nose. What was going on?

"Did we just drive through an onion field?" Karen

asked tearfully.

"I see a sign," Mom said. "It says we are coming to

the Crimea River."

"Cry me a river," Chlorine repeated. "That explains it.

The whinery must use that water for its whine. But we

must have crossed it on the way up. Why didn't we cry

then?"

"It wasn't flooding then," Dad replied. "I saw the wa-

ter passing low under the bridge. We

were past it before

we got a whiff of it."

The vehicle slowed again. David saw why: they had

reached the flood. Tear-colored water surged across the

road. It looked too deep and swift to drive through.

"I don't understand how this flooded so deeply, so

quickly," Dad said. "There was ample clearance below

the bridge. It has been raining, but there has not been time

to raise the water level twenty feet."

Nimby wrote a note. He gave it to David, who read it

to the others. "Nimby says the goblins have dammed the

river just off the enchanted right-of-way. That's why it

backed up so fast."

"Goblins! I should have known. Do we have any way

to handle this?"

Nimby wrote another note. " "This's why I fetched the

new, clear cherry bombs,' " David read. " "They will de-

stroy the dam, so the water will newly clear the road.' "

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"But won't the goblins attack us when we go there?"

Mom asked worriedly.

" 'Not if we remain within the enchanted path, and float

the cherries down to the dam,' " David read.

"But the cherries might go right over the dam before

they explode," Sean said. "We'll have to use a rope to

put them in place."

"Let's get to it," Dad said. At that point the rain eased,

becoming only a light, windy drizzle. Dad, Mom, Nimby,

Chlorine, and Sean got out. "You kids stay put," Sean

called back insultingly.

They sat in the open doorway in the side of the RV and

watched the adults depart. Colored mists

were rising from

the landscape, making a pretty vertical pattern.

There was the cheerful clangor of a bell. "Hey, I want

to see that," Karen exclaimed, jumping out of the RV. "It

sounds like a cowbell."

"Hey, we're not supposed to go anywhere," David re-

minded her. "It's dangerous."

"On the enchanted path? Pooh." She ran on back along

the road, following the music of the bell. She liked bells,

and just had to see any that she heard. Tweeter was

perched on her hair, chirping wamingly, but she ignored

him.

David was torn between running after her and staying

put. He compromised. "Go after her. Woofer, and make

sure she's safe."

"Woof!" the dog agreed, and bounded out.

Then David heard the beat of a drum. It was a powerful,

throbbing sound that seemed to penetrate to the very center

of his head. What kind of drum was making it? David liked

drums, because they made a lot of noise with little effort.

Before he knew it, David was walking

toward the sound.

But Midrange ran after him. "Meow!" the cat screeched

wamingly.

That jolted David back into responsibility. He was doing

the same thing Karen was, running after the first intriguing

sound. That was dangerous, because it was coming from

the side, off the enchanted path. So he stopped. But he did

pause long enough to peer in the direction of the sound,

hoping to see the drum from here.

He was successful: it was in the shape of a huge ear. It

was an ear drum! No wonder it had such power over his

own ears.

He picked Midrange up and walked slowly back to the

RV. He hoped Karen wouldn't go off the enchanted path.

But she was a child; her judgment wasn't good.

The bell rang again. Surely she had seen

it by now, and

should have returned. Where was she?

Finally he could stand it no longer. "I gotta find her,"

he said. "Midrange, you stay here and tell the folks where

I am, if they come back before we do." The cat nodded

and stretched out on the floor by the door.

David ran in the direction of the bell. Soon he found it:

a cow with a clapper, ringing as it walked. A cow bell.

What else? But Karen wasn't there. She must have gone

on beyond. Foolish girl!

He spied a big orange apelike creature wearing a placard

saying UTAN. Was it dangerous? This

thing looked so com-

ical that maybe it was harmless. "Hey, Utan—have you

seen my stupid little sister?" he asked it.

The thing paused, then pointed the way David was go-

ing. So David ran on. Only after he was well beyond the

creature did he realize what it must be: an orange utan.

He saw a cat. "Hey, I told you to stay in the RV!" he

cried, advancing on it. The cat turned its face toward him.

Then David realized that it wasn't Midrange. It was a

strange cat—very strange. It wore a flat-brimmed hat and

a vest with the word ION on front. "Oh—sorry," David

said, embarrassed. "I thought you were my cat."

The cat stared witheringly at him and stalked off. Then

David realized its nature: it was a cat-ion, probably headed

for a catamount or catboat. "He must be going to get pos-

itively charged, before he lynx up with friends," David

muttered as he went on. This business of punning was

infectious.

There was still no sign of Karen. He was very much

afraid she had wandered off the enchanted path. Should he

go and tell Mom? That would surely get him in trouble

for ever letting Karen get in trouble, though.

Something came flying though the air. David ducked,

afraid it was going to hit him, but it sailed on by. He got

a good glimpse of it as it passed. It looked like a painting.

Then another flew by, and a third. What was going on?

But a moment's thought brought the answer: "Art-

illery," he said. "Someone's hurling art

at me."

"Kaa-ren!" he called. "KAA-RENN!" There was no

answer. Not even a woof. This was not a good sign.

He continued searching, but Karen was nowhere he

could see. That meant she must have gone off the en-

chanted path. Which meant in turn that he

couldn't wait

any longer; he had to get help in a hurry.

He turned and ran back to the RV, half-afraid he would

discover it gone. But it remained, as solid and reassuring

as ever. Midrange remained on guard. "Anyone come

back?" he asked the cat, and received a shake of the head.

Well, at least that meant he would be

able to report his

disaster himself, instead of seeming to be caught like a

fleeing rat. For whatever slight good that might do him.

"Where are the others?" he asked.

Midrange got up and came to him. David picked him

up and set him on his shoulder, his normal riding position.

"Meove llefft."

David bore left, following the course of the flooded

river. Now that he was closer to it, his eyes were tearing.

He couldn't stop them, so he just kept blinking to clear

his vision. Soon he came to Mom, who was watching Sean

tie a framework fashioned of driftwood

together. Mom was

holding the cherry branch somewhat nervously, and tears

were streaming down her face. His own eyes had been

flowing, but he had ignored it after the first few minutes.

Beyond them the rushing river had pooled into a small

lake, with what looked like a dam fashioned from brush

and junk.

David hesitated to give her his news; she might drop

the branch. So he sort of slid by it. "Mom, there's a prob-

lem. Where's Dad?"

It didn't work. "What problem?" she demanded

sharply, turning her swollen eyes on him.

David wiped his eyes on his sleeve. ' 'I, ah, Karen went

out, and—"

"Out alone?" Her voice was getting shrill. That was

not a good sign.

"Woofer and Tweeter went with her."

"Jim!" she called imperatively.

There was no answer. But then Chlorine and Nimby

appeared. "He's spying on the goblins," Chlorine reported

through her bleary visage. Her eyes looked as if they were

trying to cry, but not succeeding, so they were turning red

instead. It probably felt like dry heaves.

"If he calls,

they'll know he's there. Can we take a message?"

Mom considered. "No. Maybe you can help another

way. Karen is lost. Could you find her?"

"Oh, sure. Nimby will know where she is." She turned

to Nimby, who alone had no trouble with his eyes. "She's

all right?"

Nimby nodded.

"Then let's get there in a hurry. You turn dragon, and

I'll run along behind you. She knows what we look like,

so she won't be frightened."

Nimby became the weird dragon, and they ran off in

Karen's direction.

Mom turned to David. "You let her go?" There was

ice in her tone despite the tears in her eyes. He wondered

whether Tier tears were freezing into sleet as they fell.

"She wouldn't stop for me. Mom," he pleaded tear-

fully. "She heard this cow bell, and she just went."

Mom nodded. "That is the way she is," she agreed,

sniffing. Then she smiled, tightly. So she wasn't blaming

him. Nevertheless, David felt guilty.

"David, I don't want to go anywhere

while I'm guard-

ing the cherries," Mom said in a moment. "Would you

go carefully and see if you can see what your father is

doing?"

" Sure." He walked in the direction Chlorine and Nimby

had come from. Soon he saw Dad—surrounded by ugly ,

little manlike creatures with big heads and big feet: gob-

lins. They had spied him, and he was probably off the

enchanted path, because they were closing in purposefully.

"Dad!" David cried. "Watch out!" But it was too late.

The goblins burst across the last little distance, and

swarmed all over Dad. He tried to fight them off, but he

was a physics prof, not a warrior, and they were many. In

a moment they had him helpless.

David knew he had to do something, but he didn't know

what. The goblins were carrying Dad away. There were

too many of them for anyone to fight. Dad should never

have gone beyond the limit of the enchanted path. Just as

Karen shouldn't have. Did the goblins have her too?

Nimby could have warned him—but Nimby was off fetch-

ing Karen. Because David hadn't

stopped her from leaving

the RV.

"Mom! Sean!" he cried, running back. "They've got

Dad!"

"Oh!" Mom exclaimed, looking faint.

"One chance," Sean said grimly as he blinked away his

tears. "This notation's too slow. Give me the bombs."

Mom handed the branch of cherries to him. Her eyes

were staring as well as tearing; David had never seen her

so distraught.

"See if you can distract the goblins from me," Sean

said. He walked purposefully toward the dam.

"From you? Not from Dad?"

"Right. Do it."

Sean seemed to know what he was doing, so David did

his best. He started running and screaming and waving his

arms. "Hey, goblins!" he cried. "You can't catch

meeee!"

"David!" Dad called, spying him dispite his own dis-

tress. Parents were like that. "Get back on the enchanted

path!"

But David didn't. He was terrified, but he had to distract

the goblins, and this was the only way he knew how. So

he made an Adult Conspiracy gesture at them and ran on.

It probably looked like a mere bleep to them, but it did

stir them up. They charged after him.

Unfortunately, goblins turned out to be swifter runners

than he had figured. They could run faster than he could!

He dodged and ducked, but soon they caught up and laid

their grubby hands on him. Instead of rescuing Dad, he

had gotten himself caught. Some help he had been.

"What possessed you to do that?" Dad demanded as

the goblins hauled them together.

"Silence, morsels!" the goblin chief cried, wiping his

eyes. "Or we'll cook you slow instead of fast."

Cook them? Suddenly David realized just how awful a

fate they faced. All because he had let Karen get loose,

then had taken Nimby away from helping Dad, so that Dad

got caught by the goblins. David deserved to be cooked!

There was a deafening BOOM behind them, followed

by a great rushing sound.

"The dam!" a goblin screamed. "The dam went!"

Sean had blown the dam! He must have gotten close

while the goblins were distracted, and thrown the cherry

branch on it. Now the water was bursting out and down—

and the goblins were below it. The great frothing surge of

it was already bearing down on them. They let man and

boy go, and fled.

"Run for the road, son!" Dad cried.

For sure! They ran together through the flying froth,

while the goblins ran the opposite way, fleeing the water.

The goblins weren't being smart; they had panicked. Or

maybe the water represented more of a danger to them,

because they were so much shorter than human beings.

That was fine with David.

They made it to the enchanted section. The water level

was dropping; the river seemed to be chasing after the

goblins. Maybe it was getting back at them for damming

it. David hoped they all drowned.

Mom was waiting where she had been, only now the

water had receded, and her tears were slowing. Dad ran

up to her and embraced her. It had been one close call!

Then Mom thought of something else. "Where's

Sean?"

"He must've been caught by the water, when the dam

blew," David said, horrified. "He just wanted to get that

dam, so as to save you. Dad."

"Oh, no." Dad looked down to where the scattered

remnants of the dam lay. There was no sign of Sean.

"Jim—" Mom said in That Tone.

"I'll find him," Dad said. He ran back'toward the dam.

Then David saw Chlorine. "Karen won't come with

us," she said, her eyes still red but dry. "She—what hap-

pened here?" She stared at the diminished water, aston-

ished.

"Sean blew the-dam," David said. "But now we don't

know where he is."

"Oh, he's all right," Chlorine said. "Nimby gave me a

message to say to you. That Sean is on his way. I didn't

know what it meant."

"He must have been washed away by the water," David

said. "So now he has to make his way back from wherever

he got washed to. But he's okay."

"That must be it," Mom agreed, evidently relieved.

"Now, what's this business with Karen?"

"She's been deceived by wraiths," Chlorine explained.

"Now she thinks we're wraiths, and she won't come with

us. Nimby doesn't know what to do, because he doesn't

really understand minds, just things."

"We must go to her immediately," Mom said, freshly

alarmed.

"I think I'd better wait here for Sean," Dad said. "He

may be physically sound, but he'll need a familiar face to

orient on."

"But I'm not sure you're physically sound," Mom pro-

tested. "Those goblins—"

"Didn't hurt me," Dad said.

Mom turned to Nimby. "True?"

Nimby shook his head.

"That's what I thought," Mom said severely. "You

must be bruised and bitten all over. Let me see."

Dad hesitated, and David realized that

Dad probably was

battered, but didn't want the children to know. "I'll go

fetch Karen," he said. "She knows me too. It's my fault

she got lost."

"It wasn't your fault," Mom said, and he was glad to

be officially exonerated again. "But thank you for help-

ing."

"Let's go," David said. Indeed, Nimby, knowing his

mind, was already starting to move, and Chlorine with

him.

The landscape became weird, even compared to what it

had been. The trees seemed to be growing sideways or

even upside down, and there were blobs of water floating

haphazardly. But in a moment he realized that they were

moving toward the three people. "What are those puddles

doing out of their beds?" David asked, ducking to avoid

one that came too close.

Nimby's pad and pencil appeared. He wrote a note.

Chlorine took it and read it. " 'Ponds come.' "

"Pond scum?" David asked, making a face. Unfortu-

nately, the face detached from his head and floated away,

distorting grotesquely. He clapped his hands to the front

of his head and found that his regular

face was still there;

it was only a copy that was drifting away.

"Ponds come to us," she said carefully. "I think they're

getting confused as the magic dust increases. We may all

suffer from its madness as we get farther into the storm."

"I think I'm suffering from it now," David said, as the

face copy collided with a pond and made a splash.

They encountered a man whose face was odd in another

way: the lower part of it was transparent. David could see

his tongue and teeth inside, and they were also transparent.

The man never paused to greet them; he hurried on to

wherever he was going.

"That man had a glass jaw," Chlorine said, surprised.

"I never saw one before."

Neither had David. But there were stranger things ahead.

One of the floating ponds had settled into a glade, and

there were creatures in and by it, facing away from him.

One had the head and arms of a human being, the forelegs

and torso of a horse, and the tail of a fish. Another had

the head of a person, the wings of a vulture, and the body

of a serpent.

David knew he shouldn't pause, but his curiosity over-

came him. "Say, if it's okay to ask—what are you?" he

called to the two creatures.

Both turned to face him, presenting full pairs of breasts.

"We are double-crossbreeds," the one with the fishtail

said. "I am a cenmaid, centaur/mermaid for long; my

friend's a harga, or harpy/naga."

"But—but—I'm a child!" David said stupidly, staring

at their fronts. "I'm not supposed to see

stuff like that."

Which was just exactly what he hadn't wanted to say; the

madness had fouled him up.

The two lovely faces smiled. "Don't be concerned," the

harga said. "We are merely dreams brought to you by our

friend the cenmare, a centaur/night mare crossbreed,

'Bye." Both waved, and vanished.

David stared at the space they had vacated. "Did—did

you see that?" he asked Chlorine.

"See what?" she asked.

So it was true: he had dreamed of those strange cross-

breeds. Well, at least it meant he would

not be in trouble

for violating that Adult Conspiracy. But he wished he

could have seen more of those creatures before they van-

ished.

They reappeared. "You do?" the cenmaid inquired, in-

haling.

"Gee," David said. "Can you be my dreams any time

I want?"

"Certainly, while the madness lasts." the harga replied,

brushing out her hair and feathers. "Just desire to see us."

"I will!" he promised. "But right now I have to go

rescue my little sister."

"You had better hurry," the cenmaid said. "She's about

to get in trouble." The creatures faded.

David wasn't sure how much he should trust dreams,

but he took the advice to heart. "Can we hurry?" he asked,

breaking into a run.

"Certainly," Chlorine agreed, pacing him. "Say, it's

nice being healthy; I couldn't keep this up in my natural

state."

David glanced at her. "You would drive Sean crazy, if

he saw yon running."

"Really? I must be sure to run for him."

They found Karen perched in a fork of an enormous

tree. The tree's leaves looked like swatches of cloth, and

its twigs looked like pins and needles. Its trunk seemed to

be made of overlaying patches.

"She must be all right," Chlorine said. "That's a tree-

mend-ous."

"I can see it's very big," David said. "But she could

still be in trouble.

"No, a tree-men-dous mends anyone who climbs into

it," Chlorine explained. "There's one not far from my

home village. She chose the right tree to get into."

"But she won't be safe much longer," he-said, remem-

bering the dream-creatures' warning.

"How can you know that?" Chlorine asked. But then

she saw Nimby's nod. "I guess you do know, though. But

she wouldn't come for us. She thought

we were wraiths."

"What's a wraith?" David asked.

"An apparition, usually of a living person. But wraiths

aren't real; they may just lead someone into mischief. Be-

cause the victim thinks the person is real, and means well,

while the wraith doesn't mean well. Usually we don't see

many wraiths, but the madness must be giving them more

power."

David had learned enough about Xanth to be cautious.

Things weren't always what they appeared to be. Suppose

this wasn't Karen, but a wraith trying to fool him into

thinking he was saving her? He had seen a scary movie

once about a child who got stolen by a vampire or some-

thing, who had left an animated doll in her place, and the

parents never knew she was gone. The only way to tell the

difference was that the doll had perfect manners.

"Try calling her," he said.

Chlorine did. "Karen! Karen, it's Chlorine. Please come

with us."

"Get away from me!" Karen screamed,

climbing higher

in the tree. "You're just another fake!"

' 'At least she had the wits to realize she -was being

fooled," Chlorine murmured. "But now she can't tell

when she's not being fooled."

"I can fix that," David said. He

approached the tree.

"Karen! Get down from there before Mom catches you

and grounds you for a week, you stupid little snot!"

"David!" she cried gladly. She came down so fast she

almost tumbled. She leaped for him and plastered a sloppy

kiss on his cheek.

"Stop slobbering on me, you brat," he said. "We've

got to get back to Mom in a hurry."

"Yes, brother dear," she said. Then she aimed a kick

at his shin, but he got his leg out of the way in time. He

knew her ways, as she knew his.

"Sean blew the dam and got washed away," he said.

"But Nimby says he's okay. But there's danger coming

here, so we've got to move."

"Are these really Chlorine and Nimby?" she asked.

"Chlorine was trying to make me go into a dark cave. I

heard something big breathing in there. I grabbed her hand,

and there wasn't any. That's when I freaked out."

"Well, grab her hand now," he said.

She hesitated, but Chlorine extended her hand, so Karen

took it. Her face lighted when she found that the hand was

solid. "I'm sorry I doubted you—if it was you, last time,"

she said.

"It was me last time," Chlorine agreed. "But you did

the right thing, waiting until you were sure. But how were

you sure it was David, and not another

wraith?"

"The wraiths seemed nice," she said. "David's never

nice unless he has to be."

Suddenly David stopped. "The pets!" he exclaimed.

"Woofer and Tweeter were with you. Where are they?"

"I sent them to fetch you," Karen said. "Isn't that how

you found me?"

"No. They never reached us."

They stared at each other, horrified.

8

CATATONIC

Midrange stretched and stood as he saw David re-

turn. Karen was with him, so that had worked

out. But where were Woofer and Tweeter?

David rushed up to him. "Midrange, we've got a prob-

lem. Nimby says Sean will be back here in twenty minutes,

and they'll have to take off then, or the madness will make

it impossible to reach Imp Erial tonight. So we'll have to

go. But Nimby can't tell where the other pets are, because

something is hiding them. There are phantoms of hundreds

of dogs and birds looking just like them, and Nimby can

see them all, but he can't tell which ones are the right ones.

Not without going to them, and that would take too long,

because the chances of finding the right ones in time are

too small. But he says he can rescue them if he knows

which ones they are. He found two pieces of reverse

wood—do you know what that is? Well,

neither do I. But

he thinks it will help. If we can find them in time. Do you

think you could find them?"

Midrange was insulted. Of course he could find them,

if he chose to. It was just a matter of sniffing them out.

"But I gotta tell you," David rushed on. "If you look

for them, and get lost yourself, then we'll have to go with-

out you too. And Nimby thinks there's danger, because

whatever is making all those phantom dogs and birds must

be trying to hide them from us, and it will try to stop you

from reaching them—or it will try to capture you too. So

if you don't want to do it—"

Midrange knew that if he didn't do it, David would

think it was because he lacked courage. He didn't care for

that indignity. So he would rescue the mutt and bird. He

had known them for some time, after all. He got ready to

sniff them out.

"But Nimby does have a way to help you —by doing

the same thing back to it that it's doing to us. Making

copies. He found some catatonic you can take that'll make

you spin off hundreds of copies of yourself. You'll be a

real copycat! Then the thing won't know which one is the

real you, and you should be able to get through without

getting caught yourself. We think Woofer and Tweeter are

caught in a cave, because the wraiths were trying to get

Karen to go into a cave, and if she had, she'd probably

also be caught now. So maybe look for a cave—and watch

out. If you can find them within fifteen minutes, even if

you do get caught yourself. Nimby can come and rescue

you in his dragon form. He thinks there's nothing around

here that can handle a dragon that size. Then he'll bring

you back and we'll catch the RV and get on our way.

Okay?"

Midrange nodded. This was a challenge worthy of his

feline mettle.

"Okay, here's the tonic," David said, giving him a cap-

sule with awful-colored ick sloshing inside it. "Each time

you make a sudden move, another copy will spin off and

look and act just like you, but it's really illusion. It'll go

seek one .of the dog or bird illusions,

and when they meet,

the two will go poof, canceling each other out. Under-

stand?"

Midrange nodded. He took the ugly capsule in his mouth

and swallowed it. The thing was weird, but not incapaci-

tating. Then he bounded off, sniffing the air for Woofer's

canine doggy scent. He couldn't sniff out

a trail as well as

Woofer could, but he could do well enough. There was

also Tweeter's smell, good enough to eat; that would help.

It might take him a few minutes to orient, but he would

get them.

He bounded in the direction he had last seen Woofer.

That trail was still fresh, as it had been

only an hour or

so. He could see the dog's claw marks in the ground, and

smell the canine odor. Not only was it doggy, it was spe-

cifically Woofer. No problem there.

But what about Tweeter? The bird had been riding on

Karen's head, so the scent was very faint, and overridden

by Karen's much stronger human traces.

But that should

improve when Tweeter left his associate and went with

Woofer. Each of them had a pet human child; they had

settled on that long ago, to make sure no child felt ne-

glected. Because children were generally more fun than

adult humans; they were more active, got into more mis-

chief, and spent more time in the dirt. So Tweeter's pet

was Karen, the smallest going to the smallest. Midrange

had David in the middle, and Woofer tried to keep'Sean

out of trouble. If Woofer had been with Sean, Sean prob-

ably wouldn't have gotten swept away by the dam burst.

Then he had muffed the rescue of Karen. Woofer just

wasn't the most competent dog extant. But of course, no

dog was really smart. That was why cats existed: there

needed to be a gifted animal in every family, to keep it

functional. But when a family scattered to different locales,

it was hard to keep up with all its parts. That was why

there was so much trouble now. Humans were incredibly

dense about the need to remain close enough together for

proper supervision.

It was time to test the phantom cat phenomenon. Mid-

range jerked to the side—and an image of himself fis-

sioned off and bounded straight ahead. It made no sound

and had no odor, but it did look solid, and it ran well. It

even maneuvered around a tree. It would do to fool the

dull senses of a human observer. Maybe even an animal

observer, from a distance.

He jerked again, and another nondescript cat peeled off,

running in the direction he had been going. So he could

steer them in any direction. Good enough.

Suddenly he saw a dog. Woofer! He bounded toward

the canine—then realized there was no smell. This was a

clone, one of the phantom dogs put out to confuse the

issue.

So Midrange jerked aside, sending a clone cat ahead to

intercept the thing. He hid behind a rock, to watch the

encounter. This just might be interesting.

The clone cat leaped right into the phantom dog—and

both vanished in a puff of nothing. The two illusions had

destroyed each other. Exactly as they

were supposed to.

Very well. He would send more cats after more dogs.

The more phantom dogs he eliminated, the easier it would

be to locate the real one. He jerked and dodged frantically,

sending clones bounding off in all directions, a veritable

horde. Then he resumed the sniffing of Woofer's trail.

He saw a bird. Tweeter! But even as he spied it, so did

a clone. The phantom cat leaped, catching the bird in his

mouth—and disappeared. Two more images had canceled

each other out.

It served the cat clone right, Midrange thought. The

point was to rescue Tweeter, not to consume him. Birds

were fair prey, but Tweeter was a friend. Friends did not

eat friends.

He came to a large tree with funny leaves. The smells

of animal, bird, and child were strong here. So this was

where Karen had fled the phantoms. So it should be pos-

sible to follow her trail back to the cave she had not. en-

tered. But would that be the one where Woofer was?

Surely the dog couldn't be that stupid, to enter the same

cave they had avoided before. So that

was probably not

the one. There just wasn't time to check every prospect;

five minutes were already gone.

So Midrange sniffed out Woofer's fresher scent, going

in another direction. Now Tweeter's smell joined it, still

faint, but clearer than before, because he had been flying

beside the dog, low to the ground. Every so often he

'perched on a stalk or twig, and the scent became complete

at those places. This was a much easier trail to follow.

But Midrange did not forget caution. The hound and

bird had walked blithely into some kind of trap, and the

cat was not eager to walk into the same

trap. So once he

was sure of the trail, he left it, looping around, slinking

behind rocks and brush and trees as if stalking prey. Every

so often he let fly another clone, to further confuse any

possible watcher. Then he would sneak up on the trail and

verify it in passing, as if not noticing it. It would be hard

for any observer to tell exactly what he was up to.

He came to a deep crevice. The trail came to the brink

and followed along it. Presumably the dog had found a

place to cross it. The thing was too wide to jump. So how

was Midrange to cross it, without slavishly following the

exact route of the hound? Which he didn't want to do,

because that might be right where the

trap had sprung.

He sniffed around, and found some flowers. What good

were flowers? So he went on. Then something snarled at

him from the brush. Midrange leaped onto the nearest tree

trunk.

He looked down, and saw that it was only a little doglike

creature. "What are you?" he demanded, annoyed because

he had been affrighted while off-guard.

"I'm a snarl," the little canine growled. "Can't you tell,

pussy?"

This creature was not endearing himself. For reasons he

didn't care to go into, Midrange did not like to be called

pussy, especially in that tone. "No, I can't tell; you look

more like a yelp to me," he retorted. "Where did you

come from—a sick tangle tree?"

"Not quite. I was brushed out of a girl's

hair. But she

dropped me and left before I could adopt her as a pet. I'm

not pleased. That's why I remain in a snarl." He glanced

at Midrange. "I don't suppose you're looking for a pro-

prietor?"

Midrange opened his mouth to say something truly

catty, but caught himself. This creature

just might be use-

ful. It obviously wasn't a phantom. "I may be looking for

a companion," he said carefully. "If he's useful."

"Useful?"

"I'm looking for a big dog and a small bird. Have you

seen any such?"

"Actually I did, about two barks ago. They were fol-

lowing a wraith bleep."

"A wraith what?"

"The humans have this stupid Adult Conspiracy that

forbids them to say the name of a female dog in the pres-

ence of a child. Since I derive from the snarled hair of a

child, I, too, am bound by it. Idiotic, I know, but there it

is."

Oh. "You did see them? Which, way did they go?"

"That way." The snarl pointed his pug nose. "The

wraith was one extremely fetching

bleep, I must say; if

she'd been of my species, I would have followed her too.

She even smelled right. The bird protested, but couldn't

stop him."

Which seemed to be one difference between a wraith

and a phantom. The wraiths could emulate creatures com-

pletely, except for their solidity. So Woofer, the big male

idiot, had followed her, and Tweeter had had to go along

lest they be separated.

Midrange decided to trust Snarl a bit, mainly because it

might help him get on with his mission. "I need to cross

this cleft, but I can't see a way. Do you know a way?"

"Certainly. Just use one of those daisies there." The

nose pointed at the flowers.

"What good are they?"

"They're upsy-daisies. They grow into ladders to help

you up, if you pick them and invoke them by saying their

name."

Well, now. Midrange went to the flowers and picked

one. He carried it to the edge of the crack and set it down.

"Upsy-daisy," he said.

The flower expanded. Its petals became spokes. They

formed into a growing ladder. It was just long enough to

bridge the chasm.

"Help me put this across, "Midrange said.

"I shall." Snarl took part of the ladder in his teeth, and

Midrange pawed at the end, and they managed to swing it

awkwardly around until it fell across the

gap. Then they

walked somewhat gingerly across the rungs. Midrange, of

course, had excellent feline balance, but Snarl didn't. He

almost fell, but fortunately his legs poked through inside

the ladder, and he was able to scramble back up.

They started walking along the far side, in the direction

Woofer had gone. "Let me know if you pick up the trail,"

Midrange said. He could pick it up himself, but wanted to

see whether the animal was playing straight with him. One

of the smarter qualities of cats, of the multitude of good

ones, was not to trust anyone too readily.

Every so often Midrange flung off another clone cat,

though nobody seemed to be spying on them. "That's a

nice magic talent you have," Snari said admiringly. Mid-

range didn't bother to clarify how he had come by it; the

little canine had no need to know.

Soon they came to'a narrowing of the chasm, and sure

enough, the trail resumed there. "Got it!" Snarl said.

Good enough; the canine was playing it straight. "Let's

loop around and intercept it farther along," Midrange said,

not explaining why. Snarl agreed; he seemed to be quite

companionable, now that he had a companion. He proba-

bly would have made that little girl a good associate.

T

Then Midrange thought of something. "I'm new to

Xanth," he confessed. "From Mundania, actually. How is

it that we animals learned to talk?"

"Everyone talks, in Xanth," Snarl

explained. "Because

of the magic. And the magic's getting much stronger now,

for some reason."

"Because of the storm blowing magic dust in," Mid-

range said. "But soon it will be too strong, and there will

be madness."

"You have learned a lot," Snarl said admiringly.

"Not enough. We animals always could understand

most of what the human beings were saying, and we un-

derstood each other, in a general way. But since coming

into Xanth, we have all grown much smarter, and now we

can talk fluently with each other and

with other creatures.

We couldn't do that before."

"It's because of the Xanth common languages," Snarl

said. "I have heard, though it surely isn't true, that in

Mundania humans speak all different languages, and can't

understand each other at all. The same must be true for

animals and plants. In Xanth, all humans

speak the human

language, and all animals of a certain type speak their own

language. That is, all mammals have one language, and all

reptiles have one, and so on.

There, are dialects, so that the way I speak isn't quite the

same as you, and we'd both have trouble with a unicorn,

and centaurs don't even bother with mammalian; they pre-

fer to speak human. It has nuances that others don't, be-

cause humans are always talking. You surely had trouble

understanding the bird."

"I did," Midrange agreed. "If I hadn't known him well,

he would have been unintelligible. So it was because he

spoke avian."

"Yes. Insects are harder yet, and plants —it's not worth

bothering. Dragons aren't too bad, though they have a bar-

barous accent. But it's not safe to get close to a dragon

anyway."

This was very interesting; it clarified what had been hap-

pening to them. But this business about dragons—"Are

there many dragons around?"

"They're all over. Fire-breathers, smokers, and steam-

ers; winged, land, and water; big, larger, and huge. They're

always hungry. They're sort of the top of the food chain.

Best thing is to stay away from them."

So Midrange had already gathered. But now they had to

stop talking, because they were coming to a cave. The trail

entered it. He even caught the faint perfume of the bleep

who had lured Woofer in. Thanks to Snarl's help, it had

taken him only another five minutes. Now he had five

more minutes to assess the situation and summon Nimby.

' 'Is there another way into this cave?" he asked the dog.

"Probably. I'll sniff out one." The little canine circled

to the right, sniffing.

So Midrange circled to the left. Soon he found a wind-

ing aperture just about right for slinking through. So he

slunk through it. It was dark inside, but he was comfortable

with that. It was another of the myriad ways in which cats

were superior to other creatures.

He sniffed, and smelled Woofer. That helped him nav-

igate the various side crevices, coming ever closer without

going directly there. Because there still could be more

trouble than he wanted, if He got discovered.

Then he heard a yip. That was Snarl! The dog must have

entered by another passage. Why had he given himself

away?

Midrange slunk closer, until he could

see into the central

chamber. There were Woofer and Tweeter, just lying and

perching there. They weren't even trying to escape, though

nothing held them.

Snarl slunk in to join them, his tail between his legs.

He was definitely unhappy, but he was obeying someone.

Yet there was no one there. Just a pile of

metallic junk in

the center of the cave, faintly glowing.

Then Snarl spoke. "I did not come alone. There is a cat

who is coming to rescue the other dog and bird."

Why, the little traitor! He was blabbing

the mission!

Had Midrange trusted a spy?

"The cat is coming in another way," Snarl said. "In

fact, he is crouching behind you."

That did it. Midrange leaped up, tiger fashion. "Woofer!

Tweeter! Get out of here!" he cried. "I'll pounce on it."

Something swiveled around to face him. It was a TV

screen, with icons on it. One picture expanded: a cat going

splat against an invisible wall in midair.

SPLAT! Midrange suited action to picture, and fell to

the floor in a heap.

Outraged, he gathered himself together for another

pounce. But a picture appeared on the screen, showing a

cat wading through supersticky dense glue, and he found

he could move only excruciatingly slowly.

A picture of a dog talking appeared. With that. Woofer

began to speak. "This is a machine called Sending, who

was originally a program animating Magician Grey Mur-

phy's Mundane computer. He helped Grey and Princess

Ivy go to Xanth, provided they took him along. Now he

is scheming to conquer Xanth. This will

take time—a few

thousand years—but he is patient. He is in the process of

assembling a group of creatures and things to do his bid-

ding. The recent influx of magic dust has enabled him to

act more strongly. Thus he was able to lure me into his

cave, though he failed with Karen. That's all right; he'll

get her and the other humans when the magic intensifies

enough."

"But how does he do it?" Midrange asked.

"Sending has the power to change reality in his im-

mediate vicinity," Woofer said. "Just as his sire. Corn

Pewter, does. Pewter prints whatever he

wishes reality to

be, and it is then true, near him. Only Sending works better

with icons, which he expands into pictures when he wants

to invoke them. So he has made us captive by luring us

into his ambiance, then invoking magic icons to control

us. It is not possible to oppose his will, because he defines

will here."

"That's why I had to blab about your mission," Snarl

said. "The icon made me. I'm sorry."

Now that Midrange had been snared by Sending, he un-

derstood how it was. "You had no

choice," he said. But

he realized that he, Midrange, had better exert some

choice, because otherwise the wicked machine could force

him to blab about Nimby coming to the rescue. He had to

distract Sending a few more minutes. Maybe the machine

was subject to flattery. "I thought I would find Woofer

and Tweeter and rescue them. I guess I was pretty fool-

ish."

An icon expanded into a picture of a clown laughing.

Sending thought it was very funny. "But instead I just got

caught myself," he continued. "But I'm curious about one

thing: how did you get those wraiths to help you, by luring

folk into your cave? They were running far beyond your

ambiance." Midrange was sure of that, because otherwise

Sending would simply have changed reality for miles

around, and made all creatures and people serve him.

The talking dog picture appeared again. "He explained

that to us while we waited for others to try to rescue you,

and thus to fall into his power," Woofer

said. "He made

a deal with the wraiths, that if they helped him achieve

power, he would enable them to achieve solid form again.

They are eager to gain some substance, so they cooper-

ate."

"Substance?" Midrange asked. "How is that possi-

ble?"

"It is our substance they will be given," Woofer said

sadly. "The wraiths will inhabit us and take over our bod-

ies and minds."

"But this is barbaric!" Midrange protested.

The laughing clown appeared on the screen.

Then there was a sound outside. A wraith hurried in.

"A damsel and a dragon!" it cried silently. "She's lovely,

but it has a donkey head. It forged right to this cave.

They're coming in!"

The screen faced Midrange. A picture of a cat talking

appeared.

Suddenly Midrange was compelled to tell all he knew.

"It is Chlorine and the dragon ass called Nimby," he

blabbed. "They are coming to nullify you and rescue us.

I have been stalling, to give them time to get here unob-

served. They have two pieces of reverse wood."

The screen flickered violently. Evidently the mention of

reverse wood bothered the machine. Then the image of a

door slamming closed appeared.

Too late. A wooden ball rolled into the cave and came

to rest before the screen.

A picture showed dogs, cat, and bird hastily shoving the

ball out of the cave. But before they could act, the ball fell

into two parts. And Sending's screen went dim.

"Let's get out of here before he recovers," Midrange

said. The four of them, freed from the machine's power,

charged out of the cave.

There was the striped dragon, with the lovely young

woman. She was still leaning forward, evidently just

having rolled the ball into the cave. "Hi, fellows," she

said brightly. "The two pieces of reverse wood nullified

each other. But when they fell apart, they nullified Send-

ing. He'll be helpless until that wood gets moved out of

his cave—which will be hard to do. Now we must hurry,

because the moving house is about to start moving."

They hurried. All of them ran, following the dragon,

who knew where they were going. Snarl came along too.

They made it to the road, panting. There was the RV,

just starting to move. The water had all drained away, leav-

ing the surface drivable. "They don't see us!" Chlorine

gasped.

Nimby snapped up a piece of wood, held it between his

donkey teeth, lifted his head, and gave what sounded like

a whistle in ducktalk. It was an awful noise. But it worked;

the vehicle slowed.

"Nimby—you can talk!" Chlorine cried as they raced

up to it. But the dragon shook his head, and Midrange

knew why: he had made a sound, but it wasn't talking.

The whistle had been artificial, because of air blown past

the piece of wood, and meaningless, except in the sense

that it signaled the whistler's presence. It was just noise,

not talk.

Chlorine realized that after two-thirds of a moment.

"You made it, but it wasn't you. I should have realized."

She smiled. "So I'm not a whistler's mother. I'll survive."

They got there, and Nimby changed back to his man-

form. Woofer and Tweeter scrambled into the RV, and

Chlorine followed. But Midrange

paused. "What about

you. Snarl?" he asked the dog.

Snarl hesitated. "Nobody here needs a companion?" he

asked plaintively.

The dog had helped Midrange accomplish his mission

in time. Generosity was not really Midrange's forte, but

there was an implied deal: companionship for help. "Get

on in," he told the dog. "We'll figure something out."

Nimby had paused. Now he picked up Snarl, whose legs

were too short to navigate the steep step up, and set him

on the floor inside. Then Midrange bounded in, and Nimby

came last.

"You did it!" David cried, picking Midrange up and

hugging him. "You rescued them. I knew you could!

'Cause you're my cat."

Disgusting display of sentiment, but somehow Midrange

wasn't entirely displeased. He extricated himself after a

moment. He had indeed done the job, though perhaps some

small credit should be given to the catatonic medicine, and

to Snarl, and to Nimby also.

The RV was moving, gathering speed. Snarl was in

Chlorine's lap, peering out a window, fascinated by this

magic vehicle. Suddenly he barked. "It's her!"

What now? Midrange looked out. There was a discon-

solate dark-haired girl walking by the edge of the road.

She seemed to be looking for something. "Who is 'her'?"

Midrange asked the dog.

"My ideal companion! The girl whose hair formed me.

Maybe she's looking for me."

Midrange wasn't sure about that, but it was worth a try.

He ran up to the front, where Jim-Dad was driving.

"Meop!" he said, in as plain human as he could muster.

Jim-Dad looked at him. "You want me to pick up that

girl? We don't have room for—"

"Mneo," Midrange said. "Meust meop." He wished

his cat tongue could form the clumsy human words better.

He was trying to say, "No—just stop."

Jim-Dad sighed and braked the vehicle. He came to a

stop by the girl, who paused to stare at the RV in aston-

ishment. Obviously she had never seen a monster like this

before. But at least she wasn't running away from it.

Snarl leaped to the floor and charged for the front, his

stubby legs slipping on the unfamiliar surface. He arrived

just as the girl was answering Jim-Dad's

question. "I'm

Ursa. I'm just looking for my dog. I was distracted and

lost him, and I can't find him anywhere. I'm afraid he'll

be hurt by the madness if I don't find him and take him

home quickly. Have you seen—?"

Then Snarl launched himself out the door. Ursa saw him

and plucked him out of midair. "Snarl!

You're here!

You're safe!" She hugged him joyfully, and his stubby

little tail wagged ferociously.

So Snarl would not be traveling farther with them; he

had found his ideal companion. Midrange looked out the

window as the RV resumed motion. The girl waved, and

Snarl barked. Then they were gone.

Karen wiped away a

tear, and Midrange's own eyes were wet, but of course,

that was because of the lingering effect of the Crimea

River.

After that, the drive became boring. Jim-Dad was driv-

ing fast, trying to get where he was going before the mad-

ness made it impossible. There was no

other traffic on the

road, which helped, but still it wasn't the safest mode of

travel. The children were settling down to normal fidget-

ing, while Sean was oddly subdued, as if he had suffered

some great forgotten adventure of his own. Midrange

tuned all of it out and catnapped.

He woke when the RV swerved. No wonder: the flying

dragons were back. They were swooping down to strafe

the vehicle, and Jim-Dad was trying to dodge their reach-

ing flames. But a flame caught it anyway—and did no

harm.

"Illusions!" Jim-Dad said, disgusted. "Trying to trick

me into swerving off the road. Because it's still enchanted,

and they can't really attack us here." After Aat he drove

straight ahead, even when a dragon came right down to

smash into the windshield, and there was nothing.

Midrange sat up and watched, because

this was getting

interesting. Suppose one of those dragons turned out to be

real, and Jim-Dad didn't dodge it? If maybe there were a

flaw in the enchantment, letting one monster through. But

soon the phantom dragons gave up, probably because it

was no fun when the vehicle wouldn't be bluffed.

Then there was a sign: JUNK SHUN. "What do you sup-

pose that means?" Jim-Dad asked rhetorically. "I don't

remember it from before."

It soon turned out to be a crossroads where there was a

huge pile of garbage, refuse, and junk. Was it real—or

more illusion? A lot of that junk was in the middle of the

road; the vehicle could suffer damage if it plowed into it

at speed.

"Delay is disaster," Jim-Dad muttered, and maintained

speed. He won: they passed through the junk without con-

tact.

After that there were various weird images in the sky

and on the ground. At times it looked as if the sky was

solid, with mountains growing on it, while the land was

gaseous, with birds flying through it. The road was a rib-

bon of asphalt winding between them, now tunneling

through the hills and then floating on

water. At one point

it headed straight out into space, with the ground showing

far below. But Jim-Dad just forged on, ignoring all the

effects, and in the end prevailed. His natural Mundane dis-

belief in magic was helping him reject the illusions. As

dusk threatened, they reached the turnoff to Imp Erial.

As they pulled carefully into the village, they saw that

the imps were desperate. They were still working, but they

looked haggard. Piles of boxes and bags of gems sat on

the walks, not yet carried to safety.

Obviously they were

not going to make it.

The RV drew to a stop. Quieta appeared, her nice dress

sweat-sodden, her nice hair in disarray. "But we thought

you were safely out of Xanth by this time," she cried.

"We came to help you complete your job," Jim-Dad

said. "Tell us how to do that."

Quieta wasted no time on amazement. "You can carry

those piles of gems to the cave. Ersonal will show you the

way."

They trooped out, not bothering with the accommoda-

tion spell this time. Each of the humans, including Nimby,

picked up a pile and carried it carefully. Each load was

perhaps ten times what an imp might have carried. They

followed Imp Ersonal along a path that was really too

small for full humans, but it had to do, because if they

reduced to imp size, they wouldn't be able to carry their

burdens.

They came to the cave. It looked like a rathole, so small

that even the imps had to crawl into it. They set down

their burdens and returned to the village.

Midrange watched, as did Woofer and Tweeter. They

weren't fit for carrying, but they could still help. When the

humans returned, each animal showed some of them to a

new pile. That way the imps didn't have to carry the piles

to the staging region; they could be picked up directly from

the buildings. When the imps saw that, they increased their

efforts to get their wares out on the steps. There were bar-

rels of beryls, each gem of which was a miniature barrel

that would cause anyone who invoked it to bare all. Men

liked to give these to innocent women, the imps explained.

There were lapfuls of lapis, which would cause people to

wee-wee unexpectedly; Midrange presumed those were for

unfriends or those with certain bodily complications. There

were pails of fire opals, which were

little 0-shaped pails

that would safely carry fire. There were chairs loaded with

citrines, which were gems that caused folk to sit, and if

they then took up a la-trine, they would sing, and more.

There were collections of topaz, which were toe-shaped

candies, yellow, peach, white, and blue. There were tiger

eyes, through which one could catch a view of a tiger. In

fact, there were so many kinds of gems that Midrange lost

interest long before assimilating them all.

"What kind of goofy creature are you?" an imp de-

manded. "

Midrange stared at the imp, who was no larger than

Midrange himself. "You must be Olite," he remarked in

animal language, not expecting to be understood.

"How did you guess, caterwaul?" the imp asked rudely.

"Now, get your carcass out of my way so I can set these

0-nix stones down where your fat rump is."

Onyx. To be sure. Midrange got out of the way. It was

good to know that not all the imps were sickly sweet in

the manner of Quieta.

As David came to pick up the collection here, two more

imps passed by. "You know. End, those huge humans

have really helped us," one said. "Too bad this is only

the beginning of Xanth's mischief."

"You're right, Asse," the other replied. "They have

enabled us to save our wares in time, for which we are

deeply grateful, but the fate of the rest of Xantb' seems

worse." f

"I hope that when we emerge from our safe cave,

enough of Xanth remains to make existence worthwhile,"

End said, his tone suggesting that he doubted that would

be the case.

The two walked on, checking the various houses to

make sure all the goods had been taken. But Midrange was

bothered by their imp-lication. This wasn't the whole job?

Then what was the point? He didn't like thinking that they

had taken all this trouble to accomplish nothing really sig-

nificant.

So he ran after David, with whom he could communi-

cate most readily. The boy was just setting down his last

load, as dusk became darkness. "Meavid!" he said.

David saw him and picked him up. "What's with you,

hero?" he asked, stroking his fur in the way he tolerated.

"Merouble." Confound this clumsy human speech!

"Trouble?" David asked. "I thought we just took care

of it. Now we're going to use the accommodation spell

and join the imps in their safe cave and wait for the mad-

ness to pass."

Midrange wasn't sure of that. But he couldn't get

through to the boy fast enough, even if he

knew exactly

what the problem was. "Meimby."

"Ask Nimby? Okay."

At that point Nimby approached. He always seemed to

know when someone wanted to talk to him. The imps say

there is clanger for all Xanth, he thought to Nimby, who

could read minds. What is it? Can we help? Tell David.

Nimby wrote a note and gave it to David. "There is

danger!" David cried. "And we can help."

Chlorine approached. "There is more danger?" she

asked.

David gave her the note. She read it and sighed. "Then

I suppose we'll have to tell the others, though I fear this

will lead to complications."

David nodded. "I guess this isn't great for you, huh?

It's more work with the duffers."

Chlorine tousled his hair. Midrange saw the effect it had

on the boy; if Sean was three-quarters-smitten by her

beauty, David was half-smitten. "Really, I don't mind. But

how did you know to ask Nimby about it?"

"Midrange told me."

Chlorine looked at Midrange with mock

severity. "So

you're the one!" She tousled his fur too. And he, too,

loved it. There was just something about a stunningly

beautiful woman with a nice personality, even if he knew

it was all an enchantment made by a donkey-headed

dragon.

And the truth was that this was the best adventure Mid-

range himself had ever had. It had everything: a dragon, a

damsel, peril, magic, mystery, and madness. What more

could a bored tomcat desire?

20 QUESTIONS

Chlorine went to find the adult members of the fam-

ily. Jim Baldwin was just returning from his final

load of gems. She intercepted him. "Excuse me,

please—" She realized that she didn't know how he pre-

ferred to be addressed. "Mundane Father

—"

He smiled. "Call me Jim."

That made it easier. "Jim, I have learned that there is

more danger. Not just for the imps, but for all Xanth. Da-

vid asked Nimby. Nimby didn't volunteer it, because it

wasn't to us personally. But—"

"We were able to help the imps, but helping all Xanth

is surely beyond our power," he said. "We need to use

the accommodation spell now and join the imps in their

safe cave until the storm passes."

"The imps are afraid that there will not be much left,

after it passes," she said.

"I'd better talk with Nimby. The way the wind is rising,

we can't delay about a decision."

"I know where he is." She led him back to David,

Midrange, and Nimby.

"Nimby, what's this about danger for all Xanth, and

how does it concern us?" Jim asked.

Nimby had already written a note. He gave it to Jim.

" "The storm is unique because it is foreign,' " Jim

read. " 'It will continue to grow in strength, and the magic

dust it spreads will devastate all of Xanth if not stopped.

Those who live underground, or take cover there, will sur-

vive, but those who remain on the ground, in the water,

or in the air will suffer grievously. Most of the vegetation

will be blown away. What remains will be a paltry rem-

nant. But it is possible for this party to ameliorate it, if we

take immediate and effective action, at some risk to our-

selves.' "

"Some risk?" Chlorine said. "But I'm supposed to get

you safely out of Xanth."

"We negated that when we turned back from the bor-

der," Jim remarked wryly.

The other members of the family had assembled during

the reading. "Dad, we have to take that action," Sean saul.

"Yeah," Karen agreed.

He looked at Mary. "Yes," she said grimly.

"But that probably means danger," he said. "Nimby

surely isn't fooling about 'some risk.' And we're already

tired."

"And all the other folk of Xanth face possible extinc-

tion," Mary said.

He faced Nimby. "What can we do?"

Nimby was already writing another note. Jim read it. He

looked at Chlorine. "It seems we shall have to split up,"

he said.

"But I must see you safely out of Xanth!" Chlorine

repeated. "That's my mission. I can't leave you until

then."

"Nimby believes that you will not be able to accomplish

that mission until Xanth itself is secured," Jim said. "So

it seems we shall have to take the risk. You must go with

Nimby to fetch the windbreaker; we must go to Castle

Roogna to get help in enlisting Fracto Cumulo Nimbus in

the cause of saving Xanth."

"Wow!" David exclaimed.

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Chlorine was amazed. She looked at Nimby. He nodded.

' 'Well, it will be your fault if I fail to complete the Good

Magician's service," she said. "I certainly hope you know

as much as you think you do."

Nimby nodded again. He was so sure he knew, when

obviously he couldn't know everything. That was about

the only aggravating thing about him.

Then he wrote another note. It said: / know what is

going on in Xanth, not what will happen. I know that

Fracto and the windbreaker can save Xanth, but not

whether they will. I know the best way to achieve these

things, but not whether they will be achieved. I do not

mean to be aggravating.

And how could she be mad at him? He was making her

beautiful, smart, and healthy, and helping her have the

greatest adventure of her life. "I'm sorry for what I

thought," she said, for of course, he had made her nice,

too. She knew she wouldn't much care about his feelings

in her natural state, but she was glad to be the way he had

made her. She felt so much better about herself this way,

and not just because of the way others saw her. She owed

Nimby everything.

"Then so let it be," Jim said. Chlorine suspected that

he, too, was beginning to enjoy this adventure, which was

surely quite different from his ordinary life in drear Mun-

dania. "We shall drive to—" He glanced at the note

Nimby had given him. ' 'Castle Roogna. We should be able

to make it by morning."

Mary took his arm. "You have driven enough, dear,"

she said. ' 'I will drive there, while you get some necessary

rest."

Karen stared at her. "Mom! You can drive the RV?"

"Stop teasing me, you little bleep," Mary said with a

third of a smile. Unlike the others, she actually said the

word "bleep"; it wasn't a Conspiracy expurgation.

' 'But how will we find our way there, without Chlorine

and Nimby to tell us?" David asked.

"Good point," Jim said.

Quieta had joined the group. "We really appreciate the

way you helped us complete our task in time, at the ex-

pense of your own freedom to leave Xanth," she said.

"We have not known how to repay you, but now perhaps

we can. We shall provide a guide."

"But then that person won't be safe in the sanctuary

cave," Mary protested.

"She will be safe at Castle Roogna, perhaps, especially

if you succeed in saving Xanth. Here is my daughter Tren-

ita." A younger imp woman stepped forward. She looked

to be in her mid-thirties.

"Then we are constrained to accept your kind offer,"

Jim said. ' 'Now I think the madness is closing in; you must

close your cave, and we must be on our way."

So they bid a second parting to the imps, who Chlorine

suspected were just as glad not to have

to entertain the

family in the sanctuary cave, and went their ways. The

Baldwin family piled into their traveling house and moved

off, Mary at the wheel, with Trenita Imp lifted into the

seat next to Karen. Chlorine and Nimby saw them off. It

looked as if the vehicle were stretching and twisting like

a giant caterpillar, but she knew that was just the effect of

the madness.

Then she turned to her companion. "So how do we find

this windbreaker?" she asked.

He wrote a note: It is one of the possessions of Sending.

We must obtain it from the ambitious program.

"Sending! The one we just messed up to rescue the

Mundane pets? We're doomed."

Not if we approach him properly. Sending is rational.

"So how do we approach him?"

We must bring him a suitable gift, and answer his twenty

questions.

"Twenty questions? I may be smart, now, thanks to you,

but I'm not sure I could answer that many without a stum-

ble. What happens if we miss one?"

We become two of Sending's artifacts.

"Nuh-uh, Nimby! I already have an

assignment, and

after that I'll have to go home and become dull again. I

can't get locked into slavery for some cold machine."

But I can answer the questions.

"Oh. If you're sure. How do we get there? It was a long

fast ride in the Mundane moving house, and I don't think

we could walk that far tonight, even without the interfer-

ence of the madness, not to mention the wind." For the

wind was rising again, blowing her skirt up and about, and

trying to tangle her hair enough to form a pack of snarls.

Now that Sean wasn't here to goggle at her legs, she found

this inconvenient.

Nimby led the way to the side of the road. "But if we

go beyond the enchanted limit, monsters can get us," she

said. But she knew Nimby was aware of that, and wouldn't

lead her into danger.

There was a big puff of cotton caught in a tree. No, it

was cloudstuff, she realized. Maybe some of the cloud that

made the Gap Chasm ferry had detached and drifted here.

Naturally Nimby knew where it was. So she helped him

wrestle it out of the snags of the branches and twigs.

But the small cloud wanted to float; they

couldn't get it

down to the ground. Then Nimby boosted her up onto it.

She fell into its bowl-like surface, her legs in the air, her

skirt halfway to her head.

Nimby climbed up on the other side, and rolled into the

cloud bowl. He, too, landed mostly'upside down, but his

trousers left him decorous.

"No fair," she said. "When I climbed in, I showed my

panties to the sky. You didn't show anything. And you

probably saw my panties, too."

Nimby nodded.

"And you're not even embarrassed," she said severely.

He nodded again.

"Or freaked out." Now she was annoyed. But then she

realized that he was, after all, only a dragon, who didn't

see human beings as prospects for anything social. Why

should he care about panties?

She got herself in order and poked her head over the

edge of the cloud. It was still floating, and the wind was

blowing it north along the highway at increasing velocity.

So they were being carried in the direction they wanted to

go. Obviously Nimby had known that this would be the

case. The trollway was bare, and the trees along the sides

of it seemed to be shirting colors, textures, and natures,

because of the distortion by the intensifying madness. But

they also channeled this gust of wind, so that the cloud

was floating straight along the channel, and still gaining

speed.

"Well, if we're going to float there, let's get some

shielding from the wind," she said. She took handfuls of

the cloudstuff at the rim and shaped it up into higher walls,

and then all the way into a dome over them. The material

gleamed faintly, lighting the interior with a gentle yellow

glow. It was fun to work with cloud, because it was so

soft and pliable. "Just the way a woman is supposed to

be," she said as she finished the job. She didn't have quite

enough material to make the dome complete, so she fash-

ioned a round window in the top, through which they could

view the stars. Now they shared a spherical chamber, and

apart from a certain bounciness, it was hard to tell that it

was moving.

"Now let's get comfortable," she said, and shaped two

pillows for them. ' 'We can just lie here until we get there.

I'm sure you'll know when that is." ,.;

Nimby nodded.

They floated comfortably along. But the

novelty soon

wore off. Chlorine would have slept, but it was early in

the evening, and anyway, she had snoozed while riding in

the traveling house. So she was wide-awake, and becoming

bored.

"Nimby, exactly what are you?" she asked. "I mean,

I know you're a donkey-headed dragon

who knows what's

going on, and you can make me beautiful and yourself

handsome. But I never heard of any creature like you be-

fore. Where did you come from? What did you do all

day?"

Nimby's pad and pencil appeared. He wrote a note, and

gave it to her. She read it aloud.

" 'I am a special variety of monster. I contest endlessly

with others of my kind for status. We live only for games,

whose rules are somewhat arbitrary and stringent. If we

violate them, we lose the game. Some games are brief,

while some take centuries.' "

She looked up. "Centuries! Your kind must live a long

time!" Nimby nodded apologetically.

She resumed reading. " 'Status is indicated by the de-

limiters. Ordinary status is parentheses, and the next stage

is brackets, and braces, and angles, though for convenience

we usually just use parentheses.'"

She broke off again. "You must lead the dullest life

imaginable. Nimby! No wonder you came to share an ad-

venture with me. It's bad enough being a donkey-headed

dragon, but to be limited, I mean delimited in braces—

you poor thing!" She tossed aside the note, which dis-

solved into a wisp of smoke and disappeared.

Nimby nodded. Oddly, he looked more relieved than

limited. But Chlorine remained bored, and it was obvious

that Nimby's background was even more boring.

So she made a decision. "Nimby, back when we first

got together, I said I would teach you romance, when the

right time came. I think that time is now. We have a lot

of adventure behind us, and probably a lot more ahead of

us, but right now we have none. Since we can't be sure

that everything will work out for the best, we might as

well make the most of what offers right now." She glanced

at him. "Do you have any idea what I'm talking about?"

Nimby shook his head.

She laughed. "You can read my mind, but you can't

understand what I'm thinking, because you're really a

striped dragon with a donkey head and you don't under-

stand human emotion. Well, because I know what you are,

there can't be anything serious between us, no lasting re-

lationship, just as there couldn't be with young Sean Mun-

dane, though it was fun having him watch me, though the

past few hours he ignored me, even when I came perilously

close to exposing my—" She severed that unpleasant

thought. "And you will surely never break my heart and

make me cry." Though, oddly. Nimby did seem to look

sad at that point. "But I do appreciate what you are doing

for me. Nimby, and I think it only fair to repay you in my

fashion. So I'll show you how to act, as if you were really

a handsome human man and not a laughably weird exotic

creature. Who knows, the information might come in

handy sometime. And maybe it'll be fun." She glanced at

him again. "Do you understand anything yet?"

He shook his head.

"Well, you will find out. I am going to

show you how

to summon the stork. Too bad it's not for real. But we'll

pretend it is. Now I think I have practiced enough with

Sean to know what turns a man on. If I can turn you on,

I'll know I'm getting there. Are you ready?"

Nimby looked doubtful.

Chlorine smiled. "So we're starting from neutral. Good.

Now, since you can't speak, I shall have to speak both our

parts. But you can perform the actions for yourself. It's all

like a play put on by the Curse Fiends, and we know we

don't mean any of it, but it may be interesting anyway.

Whatever I say I'll do, I'll do, and whatever I say you'll

do, you'll do. Understand?"

Nimby nodded, still dubiously.

"You say with masculine boldness, 'What is your name,

pretty girl?' And I nutter my eyelashes demurely and re-

ply, 'Chlorine, handsome man, and what is yours?' And

you say, 'I am Nimby. I'm a dashing dragon of a man. I

have come to take you away from all this.' And I say, 'Oh,

sir, how romantic! I think I will kiss you.' And I do." She

turned to face him, as they lay side by side within the

bowl, and kissed him firmly on the mouth. Despite her

artificial dialogue, she was getting into it, and the kiss felt

real. For one thing. Nimby was kissing her back, so he did

understand that much.

"And then you, being a man, have mainly one thing on

your mind," she continued. "And that is

summoning the

stork. So you say, 'Chlorine, you are very pretty, but I

think you would look downright lovely with less on.' And

you put your hand on my knee and squeeze, gently." She

took his hand and set it there when he hesitated. "And I

say, innocently, 'Oh, do you really think so? Would you

like me to show you my panties?' And you are so excited

at the prospect that you can't even speak at the moment,

so you just nod and smile. And then—"

She broke off, for there was a face at the window, with

two big eyes. "What is this!" she cried, annoyed. She

threw a cloud-fluff pillow at it. The pillow struck the head

and fragmented into smithereens. Then she saw that it

wasn't a head, it was a rotating set of blades. As they

turned, they formed the face. It was a window fan. Such

creatures loved to peer into windows. That really turned

them on, so that they spun faster.

Fortunately her thrown pillow had gummed up its works

and blinded it. It would peer in her window no more.

"Now, where exactly were we?" she inquired, recov-

ering her bearings, as she unbound her green-gold hair to

float in a luxuriant mass around her shoulders. "Oh, yes,

the high point of any man's life: to see the color of her

panties. (No, we won't mention that you made nice ones

for me; that isn't part of this script. You

are now in in-

nocent homy male mode.) I have just made the supreme

offer, and you are gaga at the very notion. So you nod

yes, you are hot to see them, for they are surely Xanth's

most delightfully naughty sight. And by this time I am hot

to show you, knowing that it will probably freak you out,

not to mention inflame your passion beyond endurance,

requiring me to kiss you and stroke you back to some

semblance of sanity. So—"

She loosened her dress and drew it up and over her head.

"Of course, you can't see them yet, because I'm wearing

a slip under my dress. I am such an awful tease, as is

required by the Big Book of Rules for Adult Conspiracy

Indiscretions. However—"

There was a shuddering in the cloud, and the sound of

heavy tromping. "What now?" Chlorine demanded, her

patience showing a sign of wanting to wander, if not to

get lost.

Nimby's pad and pencil appeared. But before he com-

pleted his note, the cloud cover shook violently, sending

Chlorine tumbling slip over flying hair. Then another face

appeared in the window.

"I thought I got rid of you," she said. But then she

realized that this was a different face, huge and fat and

vaguely masculine. •

"Any ogres here?" the face inquired, licking its thick

lips.

Her patience slipped another notch. "Do I look like an

ogre?" she demanded, swinging her legs in his direction.

He blinked, but evidently was not sufficiently human to

freak out at the sight. "No, you look like a luscious morsel

of a damsel girl with pretty good legs."

He had been doing okay until the last three words. Her

last nerve frayed, on the verge of snapping. "Pretty

good?" she demanded. "And just what do you consider

to be good legs?"

"Why, ogre legs, of course."

"Ogre legs! Ogre legs!?" she screeched in what might

have passed for harpy fashion, if one had that low a mind.

"What kind of creature are you?"

"I'm an ogre eater, of course," he explained.

"An ogre eater! You mean you eat ogres? I never heard

of that before."

"Well, there aren't many of us, because ogres don't

taste very good." He glanced again at her legs. "But I

suppose if there aren't any ogres, you might do; your legs

have a fair amount of healthy meat on them."

"Oh no you don't!" she snapped, clapping her legs to-

gether. "I need these legs myself. Go find a real ogre."

"Okay," the ogre eater said. The face disappeared, and

the tromping and ground shaking resumed, in a diminish-

ing cadence.

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Chlorine returned once more to the business at hand.

She saw Nimby holding his note. "Never mind that," she

told him. "I found out for myself. Now let's resume our

activity before something else interrupts. I wish this cloud

floated just a bit higher, so sundry folk couldn't just peek

in."

Nimby started to get up.

"No, don't see about doing something about it," she

said quickly. "That'll just distract us. I want to get the

bleep on with this, before we arrive where we're going

and it's too late. Can you appreciate that?"

Nimby looked appreciative. In fact, she had the impres-

sion that he was definitely getting intrigued by her ongoing

lesson of love. Good. It was nice being so beautiful as to

inflame men's minds, and so sexy as to force them to think

of only one thing: summoning the stork.

She had verified

that it worked on Sean Mundane, but he was young.

Nimby was mature.

She lifted her slip to knee height, tantalizingly. Nimby

looked really interested. She was ready to lift it all the way

clear, but didn't. Her hands just wouldn't do it.

What was the matter with her? Here was her chance to

do what no man had been interested in doing with her

before, yet she was stalling. Why?

Nimby wrote another note. Because you know I am only

a donkey-headed dragon, and you want a real man.

She realized it was true. She could

playact all she

wanted, and craft any script she wanted, but down under-

neath she knew it wasn't real, because he wasn't real. In

fact, she wasn't real either; she was just a plain and some-

what omery girl making a pretense. What was the use of

that?

Yet if she didn't take advantage of her

opportunity now,

her adventure might be over before she had another

chance. So maybe pretense was better than nothing at all.

"Dam it. Nimby, let's do it anyway! I want to show my

panties to someone, and you may never get to see another

girl's panties, I mean, not when she's not thinking of you

as some stupid beast who doesn't count. Would you like

to go ahead?"

Nimby nodded.

Chlorine took hold of her slip again. "Then watch this,

and be amazed." She took a two-handed grip and hauled

it right up and over her head. She flung it away and stood

proudly in her pale green/yellow bra and panties.

But Nimby didn't freak out. Because not only was he a

dragon, it was his magic that had made this limited cloth-

ing, as well as her present body. None of

it was new or

novel to him. "Oh, this isn't working!" she cried, frus-

trated anew. "I'm just going through meaningless motions,

and boring you to oblivion. I'm sorry. Nimby."

Nimby wrote a note and handed it to her. / am not

bored.

But she knew better. "How can you be interested in

what you yourself made? I might as well revert to my

natural state, where my panties don't even pretend to be

interesting, let alone man-freaking." She fetched back her

slip and put it back on. "I apologize for dragging you

through this embarrassing charade.

Nimby. I won't do it

again. I could just cry with frustration—but I can't risk

even that."

Nimby, looking alarmed, started to write another note.

"No, don't do it," she told him firmly. "Don't try to

tell me something you think will make me feel good. Let's

leave the illusions for those who don't know better."

Nimby looked sad, but his notepad disappeared.

Chlorine fetched her dress and donned it. "But I want

you to know that I do like you. Nimby, and respect you,

and if you were a real man, I would have done it with

you. Even if you were a near-man, like a Curse Fiend or

maybe a Demon. Demons know how to appreciate mortal

women, physically at least. But a dragon? All this must be

utterly laughable to you. So I won't bore you anymore; I

owe you at least that much. You have been a really good

sport."

Her dress was done. She started on her

hair. Then, on

sudden impulse, she went to Nimby and embraced him.

"Thanks for being my friend," she said, and kissed him.

The two half tears in her eyes brimmed, but fortunately

didn't lose their positions.

Nimby froze. His eyes glazed. Had she freaked him out

after all? But in half a moment he recovered, and wrote a

note. You are more than welcome. Chlorine.

She smiled. "At least we understand each other. Maybe

that's better than the other."

He nodded, though he looked as if he had come close

to some phenomenal achievement, and lost it. Maybe she

should have done the stork routine with him, after tempting

him so. But no; she had done her best to do the right thing,

and that was to save the stork summoning for a man she

really loved, rather than wasting it on a game.

The cloud floated on, sublimely unconcerned with their

troubled thoughts.

Soon Nimby wrote another note. We are there.

"Already?" she asked, surprised. But she realized that

the cloud had been moving along with deceptive velocity,

so it could be. So her opportunity to do something naughty

was indeed gone. She regretted and resented that, even

though she had made the decision herself.

Nimby scrambled up and out the top window, and held

down a hand for her. He pulled her right up; she was

surprised by his easy strength, until she

remembered yet

again that he was really a dragon. They perched on top,

and she saw that the cloud was indeed moving along at a

good clip. The wind was higher; the sound had been muf-

fled by the cloud wall so that she had forgotten it. The ill

wind was still intensifying.

Nimby reached out and caught an

overhanging branch.

He kept his feet hooked into the top of the cloud so that

it couldn't go anywhere. But neither did it sink to the

ground. It was still about twice a man's height up. That

ogre eater must have been huge! "How do we get down?"

she asked.

Nimby nodded toward his legs. This

required some in-

terpretation. He was going to climb down? He shook his

head, and she remembered—again—that he could read her

mind. So all she had to do was think the right thought.

She put her bright mind to work. She must have some-

thing to do with his feet. Take them out of the cloud? But

then it would float away with her. Unless she hung on to

them. Aha! She could swing down on his legs; that would

get her low enough so she could drop the rest of the way

without harm. She saw that the ground was soft there, piled

with pine needles, surely by no coincidence; Nimby always

knew what he was doing. But how would he get down?

He must be strong enough to handle the drop. And he

nodded.

"Okay, Nimby," she said. "I'm trusting you with my

safety. I guess I might as well, having

already shown you

my panties, for all that they bombed out."

She leaned into him and grabbed him around the thighs.

"I hope I don't pull your pants off," she said. But she

knew that wouldn't happen. Nothing ever went wrong with

Nimby. That thought made her regret for one or two in-

stants that she hadn't continued her script

in the cloud, at

least up to the point of getting his pants Off. She was cu-

rious about—but that was an unmaidenly thought—and

what was he thinking of it now?

She refocused and scrambled off the cloud. She dropped

down, seeing his legs release the cloud, which quickly

floated on downwind, in a hurry to get

where it was going.

She swung back and forth like a pendulum, her body slid-

ing down past his knees and feet, until she was just about

all the way beneath him. Then she dropped, landing neatly

on the needles, which were rusted and crumbly, not still

sharp, fortunately. She was surprised by how readily she

had done it, then realized that it was her good health that

accounted for it. The health Nimby had given her. How-

ever, she still lost her balance and sat down; health did not

give her perfect judgment on a landing.

Someone laughed. It sounded like the voice of an ass,

but it wasn't Nimby, who was still hanging above, waiting

for her to clear the landing site. She looked around.

There was a man emerging from the forest beside the

road. He wore dirty clothes and had a large rusted metal

can for a hat. "Do it again, sister!" he brayed. "Maybe

this time I'll see something interesting."

Chlorine knew his type. He was a junk male—who trav-

eled around to take up the attention of people who didn't

want him, and acted like trash. There were way too many

of his kind cluttering up the space of decent folk. She knew

exactly how to handle him.

"Is this interesting enough?" she called

sweetly as she

got to her feet. When she was sure he was watching, she

turned around and flipped up her skirt and slip.

There was silence. She let her clothing fall back into

place and turned around. The junk male was lying on his

back, staring at the sky, not moving a muscle. He was

absolutely stiff. He would remain that way for some time.

Because he had Freaked Out.

Chlorine smiled. She had now proved the potency of

her panties.

Then she remembered Nimby, who was still hanging by

the branch. She hastily got out from under. "You may

drop down now," she called sweetly. "I have disposed of

the trash."

He dropped, smiling. He understood. That was one of

the things she liked about him. He was strong, silent, help-

ful, and understanding.

They walked past the freaked-out male and into the for-

est toward Sending's lair. Nimby knew the way without

hesitation, of course, despite the darkness. When she stum-

bled, he took her hand and led her securely along firm-

footed paths. They didn't need to worry about dangers,

because Nimby avoided them automatically, and knew

how to deal with them anyway. Chlorine realized that she

felt safe with him, and she liked that, too.

Soon they came to the dastardly device's cave. Nimby

walked right in without fear, so she did too. But it was

even darker here, until Nimby found a glow fungus that

served as a lamp. He just always could put his hands on

the right thing.

In the central chamber the two halves of the reverse

wood ball still lay on the floor, nullifying Sending. Nimby

picked them up and put them together again. He handed

her the ball.

"But—" she said, almost dropping it in her nervous-

ness. Then she realized that it was safe, as long as she kept

it together. So she held it excruciatingly carefully. It

wouldn't do her harm anyway, because if it reversed her

magic, she would be able to sweeten water instead of poi-

soning it. But she wondered how Nimby

himself was able

to handle reverse wood without getting reversed.

The glassy screen lighted. A picture of a man appeared,

with a big question mark over his head. Evidently the ma-

lignant machine was confused after being knocked out by

the reverse wood.

Nimby glanced at her. Oh—she had to do the talking.

"Sending," she said firmly, "We have come to make a

deal with you. You can't change our reality because I have

this ball of reverse wood, and if anything happens to me,

I'll drop it and the two pieces will fall apart and stop re-

versing each other and resume reversing you, as they did

before. You will become an unmagical collection of junk.

Do you understand?"

The screen blinked. The question mark faded out.

"We want to obtain the windbreaker," she continued.

"I understand you have it, and we can get

it from you if

we answer your twenty questions. Is that correct?"

The screen brightened. The man figure smiled. Then the

screen split, with the upper section showing an icon of a

pretty young woman holding a jacket, and the lower sec-

tion showing the young woman and a young man in

chains.

"If we answer all the questions correctly, we get the

windbreaker," she said, interpreting. "If we don't, we

both become your slaves for life." She paused, glancing a

bit apprehensively at Nimby. Was he sure—?

But Nimby nodded. So she took her courage in one

trembling hand and proceeded. "That seems fair. We

agree. The two of us will consult on each question, and

decide on the answer; only when I address you directly,

Sending, will it count. Agreed?"

A smiley face appeared on the screen.

"Very well," she said briskly, just as if her heart

weren't palpating her gizzard. "Proceed."

Now print appeared on the screen. So Sending could

print, when he chose to; he wasn't limited to icons and

pictures. FIRST A SAMPLE QUESTION, TO BE SURE WE AGREE

ON THE MANNER OF THE QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS. THIS IS

FOR DEMONSTRATION PURPOSE ONLY.

"Agreed." Chlorine suspected that there were rules

about such things, and Sending didn't want his prospective

victory to be nullified by a technicality.

QUESTION SAMPLE #1, REFERRING TO THE THIRD OF THE

MUSE'S HISTORICAL TEXTS OF XANTH: WHEN MAGICIAN

DOR, THEN AGE TWELVE, TRIED TO STOP THE FORGET

SPELL'S COUNTDOWN IN THE YEAR 236, IT DID NOT RE-

SPOND. SINCE IT WAS ABLE TO SPEAK ONLY BY HIS MAGIC,

WHICH ENABLED HIM TO, SPEAK

TO THE INANIMATE AND

HAVE IT ANSWER, WHY DID HE NOT SIMPLY WITHDRAW HIS

MAGIC SO THAT IT COULD NO LONGER SPEAK?

Chlorine read the question, and quailed. She remem-

bered from her centaur history classes (before she flunked

out) that Prince Dor had traveled eight hundred years into

Xanth's past and detonated the Forget Spell, making the

Gap Chasm be forgotten for eight hundred years until the

Time of No Magic broke up the enchantment, but the logic

of this was beyond even her enhanced intelligence. If this

was typical of the questions to come, she would be

doomed before she started.

But Nimby was writing a note. He gave it to her, and

suddenly the answer was clear. " 'He did not do that be-

cause it would not have been effective,' " she read. " 'The

Forget Spell would merely have counted silently, and det-

onated anyway. The countdown could

not be stopped, once

started.' "

The screen went blank for a moment. Sending had ev-

idently expected her to get it wrong, and was disconcerted.

But in another moment it recovered. CORRBCT. THAT WAS

AN EASY ONE, OF COURSE. THE REAL QUESTIONS WILL BE

MORE DIFFICULT. ARE YOU PREPARED TO ADDRESS THEM?

Chlorine bit her tongue to get some saliva in her dry

mouth, and responded with fake confidence. "Of course.

Let's see a nice challenging one."

But the machine wouldn't be bluffed.
QUESTION #1:

WHEN MAGICIAN TRENT FIRST ATTEMPTED TO CONQUER

XANTH IN THE YEAR 1021, IT WAS SAID THAT HE CHANGED

MEN INTO PISH AND LET THEM EXPIRE ON DRY LAND. HE

DENIES IT. WHAT IS THE TRUTH?

She quailed again, worse. How could anyone ever know

what had happened seventy-five years ago?

But Nimby was writing a note. She took it and read it

aloud, knowing that if it wasn't the correct answer, she

would not be able to do any better on her own. " 'Magi-

cian Trent did transform men into fish, but he did it by a

river, where they fell in and swam. Then he walked away.

But some of the fish, thinking that they

were still men,

scrambled back onto land and perished.
Magician Trent

never saw those ones, so did not know.'
"

If Sending was impressed or
disconcerted, he did not

show it. His screen flashed the next one.
QUESTION #2:

MAGICIAN BINK'S TALENT IS

THAT HE CAN NOT BE HARMED

BY MAGIC. THUS THE GAP DRAGON, BEING A MAGICAL

CREATURE, COULD NOT HARM HIM DESPITE MAKING THE EF-

FORT. YET HE WAS CHOKED BY CHESTER CENTAUR AND AL-

MOST SUFFOCATED BY A TANGLE TREE, BOTH OF WHICH

ARE MAGICAL CREATURES. HOW CAN THIS BE SO?

Chlorine was amazed. "That's Bink's talent? I always

thought he had no magic!"

SO YOU WILL THINK AGAIN, FOR OTHERS ARE NOT AL-

LOWED TO KNOW. YOU WILL FORGET THIS QUESTION AND

ITS ANSWER AFTER THIS SESSION IS OVER.

Meanwhile Nimby was writing again. She took the pa-

per and read it: " "This is a deceptive question. You im-

• plied a connection that does not necessarily exist. Bink can

not be harmed by magic, but can be harmed by magic

creatures if they do not employ magical means. That is, a

dragon could chomp him mechanically,

but could not en-

chant him magically. His talent does not regard threats or

even bruising to be harm, only permanent physical dam-

age. So there is no conflict.' "

The screen faded for a long instant or short moment;

she had set the disreputable device back again. Rather,

Nimby had; her respect for his intellect was verging on

awe. How could a funny dragon know so much? Sure, it

was his talent, but so was the way he changed the two of

them into a lovely human couple. How could he have two

magic talents?

Nimby passed her another note. Only the form changing

is magic; the knowledge is inherent in my nature.

Oh. Of course. But he was still one supremely remark-

able creature!

The next question was on the screen.
QUESTION #3: THE

FORGET SPELL CONTROLLED THE GAP CHASM UNTIL THE

TIME OF NO MAGIC IN THE YEAR 1043, SO THAT ONLY

THOSE ACTUALLY WITHIN IT COULD REMEMBER IT. YET

WHEN MAGICIAN TRENT RETURNED FROM MUNDANIA IN

1042 HE REMEMBERED IT. HOW CAN THIS BE?

Chlorine whistled inwardly. These weren't mere ques-

tions of who did what when; they were

crafted to require

extraordinary comprehension of all Xanth history. Only the

Good Magician Humfrey could possibly know all the an-

swers—and Nimby. She could almost have suspected that

Nimby was the Good Magician, if she hadn't seen them

together. Maybe they were related, and Nimby was per-

forming a service for Humfrey, just as she was. For the

good of Xanth.

The next note came. " 'The magic of Xanth has little

effect in Mundania,' " she read, " 'and Magician Trent

had been there twenty years. It took time for the Forget

Spell to reassert itself with him. In due course he did forget

it again.' "

QUESTION #4: WHEN BINK AND CHAMELEON, IN THE

GUISE OF SMART UGLY FANCHON, LEFT XANTH THAT SAME

YEAR, THEY WERE ABLE TO UNDERSTAND THE MUNDANES

THEY ENCOUNTERED. HOW COULD THIS BE, AS MUNDANIAN

IS UNINTELLIGIBLE TO XANTHIANS?

She simply read Nimby's answer, because as usual, she

had no idea. " 'This is another trick question. Bink and

Chameleon never heard Mundanian; they remained in the

fringe of Xanth magic, and the Mundanes were automati-

cally talking Xanthian.' "

So it continued. How could Girard Giant know of Ma-

gician Murphy, who had been banished over seven hun-

dred years before Girard was delivered by an exhausted

stork? Because Girard did know some history. Why did

the Ghost Writer write, "Never (such) a cleavage" when

he saw luscious Nada Naga, when the

Gorgon and Irene

and any number of buxom nymphs and centaur fillies had

similar figures? Because the Ghost Writer had not yet en-

countered those others, and in any event he was speaking

hyperbolically, as writers do. Why didn't the centaurs

teach Prince Dolph how to spell? Because they had tried

with his father. Dor, and failed spectacularly. There had to

be some learning ability in the student, or even a centaur

couldn't make much of an impression. Why did Prince

Dolph sometimes change form slowly, instead of instantly?

For variety. Why did Magician Humfrey take Lethe elixir

to forget Rose of Roogna for eighty years, but forget

everything else in that period too? Because there was too

much of her in their time together; to remember the rest

without her would have led to Lethe-nulling paradox.

Chlorine's head was reeling with all this arcane infor-

mation. But Nimby had all the answers, no matter how

devious the questions, and Sending's efforts were all

blocked.

She read off the answers, hardly assimilating their de-

tails, until she came to #19. It wasn't that it was any less

devious or difficult, but that she realized that they were

reaching the end; this one, and one more, and they would

win! That gave her sudden shakes.

IN ONE OF THE MUSE CLIO'S VOLUMES OF THE HISTORY

OF XANTH WE ARE TOLD THAT THE NIGHT MARES ARE CON-

FINED TO THE LAND OF XANTH. IN ANOTHER WE LEARN

THAT NIGHT MAKES ALSO SERVICE MUNDANIA. HOW CAN

THIS BE?

Chlorine dreaded that seemingly innocent query, know-

ing that it wasn't innocent at all, it was a challenge. Had

the malignant machine caught the Muse herself in an error?

Then how could the question be answered definitively?

Her knees felt like noodles in heating water.

But Nimby never paused. He wrote his

note and gave

it to her. She read it and was delighted with the simplicity

and clarity of the answer, so obvious in retrospect.

" 'Mundania, like Xanth, changes over the years. Some-

times the borders are closed and the night mares are con-

fined to Xanth; at other times the portal at No Name Key

is opened and the mares go through unimpeded. The Muse

notes the situation at the time of that particular volume.

There is no inconsistency when time is taken into ac-

count.' "

The screen dimmed. The surly system had thought he

had a winner, and had not. Only one more question, and

it was bound to be the worst.

QUESTION #20: HUMAN COLONIZATION OF XANTH DATES

FROM THE YEAR ZERO, DEFINED BY THE ARRIVAL OF THE

FIRST WAVE, 1,096 YEARS AGO. YET THE SEA HAG IS

KNOWN TO BE THOUSANDS OF YEARS OLD, HOW CAN THIS

BE?

Now Chlorine's knees definitely

softened. She knew of

the wicked Sea Hag, who had indeed lived for thousands

of years by taking over the bodies of young folk and using

them until they were old and wom-out by her awful life-

style and degraded attitudes. Where could she have come

from, if she was older than human colonization of Xanth?

She couldn't have been Mundane, for Mundanes had no

magic; she had to have been delivered in magical Xanth.

She was, despite her haggishness, definitely human. Could

Nimby answer this one?

Nimby could. She cursed herself for falling into another

neat little trap as she read his answer. Sullen Sending had

played it sneaky right to the end. " 'The Sea Hag dates

not from the First Wave, which signaled the beginning of

continuous human occupation of Xanth, but from'the first

lost human colony of Xanth, circa minus 2200. That col-

ony faded out three hundred years later, having been

careless about lov& springs, and crossbred with other crea-

tures, forming harpies, merfolk, naga, sphinxes, ogres,

goblins, elves, fauns, nymphs, fairies, and other species.

So the Sea Hag is approximately three thousand, two hun-

dred and ninety-six years old, normally simplified as

"thousands." ' "

The evil entity's screen turned furious red. Roils of

smoke crossed it. Lightning jags flickered. Sending was

not a good loser. But he had lost, and knew it. TAKE THE

WINDBREAKER. A panel opened in the cave wall behind

the screen, revealing a closet where a

motley white jacket

hung.

"Thank you ever so much," Chlorine said super-

sweetly. "You have been excruciatingly nice." And of

course, the conflagration on the screen just got Worse, as

she had hoped.

She stepped up to the closet and took the windbreaker.

It seemed entirely ordinary. But she knew it wasn't. It was

the key to the solution to Xanth's current crisis.

MAY I ASK ONE QUESTION OF A PERSONAL NATURE? the

screen inquired over its burning background.

Chlorine glanced at Nimby, who shook his head. "No,"

she answered with deep satisfaction, and walked out of the

chamber. She knew the destructive device wanted to know

how Nimby knew so many answers, so Sending could nul-

lify that ability if they ever met again.

The cave exit became a blank stone wall. Sending was

changing reality. "Nu-wA," Chlorine said, lifting the re-

verse wood ball she still held in her other hand. She could

drop it and nullify the mangy machine at any time. And

would do so the moment any untoward print or picture

started to form on the screen.

The exit reappeared. They used it, and emerged into the

night of Xanth proper. Chlorine was about to set down the

ball, but Nimby shook his head, so she put it in her purse.

Then she donned the windbreaker. It was very comforta-

ble.

So their part of the mission had been successful. She

wondered how the Mundane family was doing.

10

PRINCESSES

Trenita Imp sat beside Karen, because it had turned

out that she couldn't see anything from in front,

and Karen was thrilled. David was asleep, but she

was wide-awake and bored. Now that the accommodation

spell no longer affected them, she could appreciate just

how small the imps were. Trenita was thirty-seven years

old—the same age as Mom—but only nine inches tall. The

seat belt looked monstrous on her, and was surely a heavy

weight, but she didn't complain.

As the RV moved down the trollway, right through the

increasingly realistic phantasms formed by the thickening

madness brought by the ill wind, Karen questioned her

companion. "Do you travel often?"

"No, this is my first time away from my community."

"But then how do you know the way to Castle Boo-

gie?"

"Castle Roogna," Trenita said patiently, just like Mom.

"Everyone in Xanth knows where that is. I have studied

centaur maps, and of course, I know the way of enchanted

paths."

"You mean like nobody can attack us on

one?"

"Yes, of course. But also where they go and where they

stop."

"They stop?"

Trenita smiled. "When you get where you are going. In

this case. Castle Roogna."

"Is that a nice place?"

"I am sure you will love it. It has an orchard where all

manner of things grow, such as pie trees."

"Gee—even chocolate pies?"

"Especially those. The royal children

have insisted on

them, and on bubblegum trees."

"There are children there?"

"Yes. Princess Ivy and Prince Dolph grew up there. Of

course, they're grown now, and married, and Prince Dolph

and Princess Electra have their twins. Dawn and Eve. They

are now five years old."

"Do they have magic talents?"

"Of course," the imp woman replied. "Every descen-

dant of Magician Bink has Magician-level magic. Dawn

can tell anything about any living thing, while Eve can tell

anything about any inanimate thing."

"Gee—I wish I had a magic talent, even a little one."

Trenita shook her head. "Mundanes lack magic. You

have to be delivered in Xanth to have it."

"Delivered?"

"By the stork, of course."

"You mean it's literal here? Babies aren't bom?"

"Bom?"

"You know. From their mothers."

"Oh, borne. The storks deliver them to their proper

mothers, of course, after they have been ordered."

"Ordered? You mean like from a novelty catalog?"

"From a cat? A log? No, a message is sent to the

stork."

"Gee, things really are different in Xanth! How do they

send the orders?"

"I must not tell you that; the Adult Conspiracy abso-

lutely forbids it."

So things weren 't so different. This woman was the size

of a doll, but she was a typical adult. "Same as the bleep,

huh? But why aren't children supposed to know?"

"Because then they might summon storks themselves,

and not take care of their babies."

Karen considered that. She knew of cases in Mundania

where exactly that had happened. "But

the words—why

forbid them? They aren't babies. They won't suffer if chil-

dren say them, will they?"

"But others would suffer. Have you seen the burned

foliage where harpies roost? Would you want human chil-

dren to do that?"

"Gee—I could bum things with words, if I knew the

words? I'd love that."

Trenita sighed. "Well, the full name is the Adult Con-

spiracy to Keep Interesting Things from Children."

"That's more like it," Karen agreed, vindicated.

"Oh, I must direct your mother to the bridge over the

Gap Chasm," Trenita said. "Before she misses the turn."

"I'll do it," Karen said eagerly. "Mom! Mom! Turn

coming up."

"But we're approaching the ferry station," Mom called

back.

"The ferry will be closed, because of the high winds,"

Trenita said. "We must use the bridge."

"Makes sense, Mom," Sean said, coming to life. He

had been pretty quiet recently, maybe because now there

was no sexy Chlorine to gawk at. "Wind blows clouds."

"Very well. I see a diverging lane ahead. But will it

take us off the enchanted path?"

"No, the paths to Castle Roogna are all enchanted,"

Trenita said reassuringly.

Mom made the turn. Karen returned her attention to

Trenita. "What's it like, being an imp?"

"Much like being human, I suspect. Did you find our

hotel strange, when you used the accommodation spell?"

"No, it was great. Especially that magic mirror with the

historical pictures."

"It was showing you the Magic Tapestry of Castle

Roogna. You will be able to see the original there."

"Gee! That and a chocolate pie tree will be about as

good as candy and TV at home. Did you eat fun stuff when

you were a kid?"

Trenita smiled. "Of course. And my mother, Quieta,

disapproved."

"Did you have lots of pretty gems to play with?"

"No just the sparkles of morning dew that my mother

made. It was only more recently that my father became

mayor and had to supervise the making of more permanent

kinds of gems."

"How did Ortant get to be mayor?"

Trenita smiled reminiscently. "My grandfather had once

been ambitious. Then my grandmother died, and he lost

his ambition. He got caught by an alligator clamp, which

was slowly chewing off his leg, until a big ugly ogre

named Smash roared it off. It occurred to my grandfather

that if a creature that horrendous could do such a favor for

one so small, the least he could do in return was to become

worthwhile. So he resumed his ambition, and worked hard,

and lived up to his name."

"And became Important," Karen said, liking it. "That's

nice."

The RV slowed. "That bridge is too small," Mom said.

"No, it is the right size for whatever uses it," Trenita

said. "Unlike the invisible bridge or the one-way bridge.

Just go on it."

"Maybe I'd better hold you up so you can see for-

ward," Karen said. "This is getting scary."

"Yes. Let me stand on your shoulder."

Karen lifted the imp carefully, until she stood on her

right shoulder, holding on to a hank of her hair. "What

pretty red," Trenita remarked, and Karen felt unreasonably

pleased.

Dad had been snoring in the back, with the three pets.

Now he woke. "Hey, don't drive into the chasm!" he

exclaimed, alarmed.

"Go back to sleep," Mom retorted.

As the RV nudged cautiously toward the footpath-sized

bridge, the perspective changed, and it became apparent

that the structure was wider than it had seemed. In fact, it

was also more solid. By the time they drove onto it, it

seemed quite sufficient.

"Magic is weird," Sean muttered.

The Gap Chasm had been impressive by day on a cloud.

It was awesome by night on a bridge just wide enough for

the vehicle. There was a faint glow below, hinting at its

depth, and darkness around the edges that seemed to loom

twice as close the moment her eyes turned elsewhere.

Then the glow and the darkness clarified. Ahead was a

dead end, with nowhere to go but into the dark depths.

The RV squealed to a stop. "The bridge is out," Mom

said, her voice deceptively calm.

"No it isn't," Trenita said. "That's illusion. The bridge

is enchanted, and will not harm you as long as you stay

on it. Just drive on."

Mom hesitated, understandably. Karen sympathized;

that was one frighteningly realistic drop-off. "Remember

the fake goblin roadblock," she called.

"True," Mom agreed. The vehicle nudged forward.

As the front wheels crossed the brink, the illusion dis-

appeared. The bridge was back. But it curved to the side.

"There's no curve!" Trenita cried. "The bridge is

straight."

"Thank you," Mom said grimly, driving straight.

"Illusions can kill you," Sean said, shaken.

"If you heed them," Trenita agreed.

Now a huge dragon face formed ahead. Its mouth

opened, showing gleaming glistening glittering teeth. The

most noxious possible smoke surged out to encompass the

RV. It coalesced around the vehicle, becoming blood-

streaked slime.

"I wish the enchantment was effective against illusion,"

Trenita said.

"Oh, I don't know," Karen demurred mischievously.

"We can have some fun with this. Sean?"

"Gotcha," Sean agreed, catching on. He came to join

her.

They faced out the window. "Hey, slimeball!" Karen

called. "Whatcha eating tonight?"

"How about fried worms and day-old

squished cater-

pillars?" Sean inquired.

The slime quivered. It might be illusion, but it heard

them. That was the great thing about Xanth: even the in-

animate had feelings. Even things that didn't exist could

hear and react. Karen had sort of figured it would be that

way, and it was good to be back in form

with Sean.

"I should have known you were a dragon without

guts," Karen said. "Just slimy smoke."

"Pretty puny effort, if you ask me," Sean agreed loudly,

"I thought at least we'd see a decent show."

The slime became guts. They were gruesomely realistic,

oozing juices and slip-sliding over each other. Karen was

on the verge of nauseated, but she controlled her reaction.

"I've seen better guts on a drunk," she declared.

"On a drunk pig," Sean agreed. "This sure is a boring

place. Maybe the next illusion will have

some oomph to

it."

The guts became a roaring furnace. This illusion was

angry now. Good. Karen faked a yawn. "Booring," she

said.

"For sure," Sean agreed. "Let's make faces at each

other, Karen; that'll be scarier."

"Anything would be scarier," she agreed. She put her

fingers in her mouth and pulled it wide as she stuck out

her tongue.

Sean pretended to gouge out his own eyes and hand her

an eyeball. Karen accepted it and popped it in her mouth.

She made a burpy swallowing sound. "Yuck! It's raw.'"

Neither of them looked again at the illusion outside.

"It's gone," Trenita murmured.

"Right," Sean agreed. "Our act is so bad there's noth-

ing that can stand it." He smiled at Karen. "Nice going,

twerp,"

"Thanks, bleephead," she replied as he returned to his

seat.

"That'was interesting," Trenita remarked. "I never saw

anyone drive away an illusion before."

"It's Mundane talent," Sean said. "Nobody can stand

us, in our normal state."

Trenita laughed. "You nevertheless have

your appeal."

The RV reached the end of the bridge and pulled back

onto solid land. Trenita returned to her side of the seat.

Karen felt something relax; she had been really tight,

knowing that if the illusion had succeeded in scaring or

confusing Mom, they could have plunged into the dreadful

abyss. But they had driven it away.

But she was not yet relaxed enough to sleep, despite the

lateness of the hour. So she asked the imp something that

was bound to be boring. "Why is it that all the men imps

have punny names, like Ortant or Atient, while the girl

imps don't?"

"Because the men are the ones who need the reassur-

ance of meaningful names," Trenita replied. "We women

already know our worth, so choose pretty names instead."

"It works for me," Karen said, and snoozed off.

When she woke, dawn was threatening, and the RV was

approaching a thick forest. Sean was asleep in the back-

seat, while Dad was up front with Mom. Tweeter was

perched in her hair, and Woofer was on the floor by Sean.

So the night was done, and Mom must be good and tired,

but they had to be close to where they were going.

She looked out the window. Massive

tree branches

swung down to block the way. Karen blinked and rubbed

her eyes. Had she really seen that?

' 'Tell them you have come to save Xanth from the ill

wind," Trenita called.

Mom rolled down her window and spoke those words.

The branches swung out of the way, and the RV drove on.

"The guardian trees are very protective of the castle,"

Trenita remarked. "But they feel the effects of the magic

dust."

Now they came into a lovely orchard—and sure enough,

there were pie trees galore. "Castle Roogna!" Karen cried.

"We'll have chocolate pie for breakfast!"

That woke David. "Wow," he said, gazing out.

The castle came into sight. It was just about the- most

beautiful building Karen had ever seen, framed by the

morning sunlight so that it glowed, with sparkles radiating

out. It had a moat and wall and turrets and cupolas and

pennants and just everything a castle should have.

"Ooooo," she breathed appreciatively.

' 'Ooooo," David mimicked her mockingly, but his heart

wasn't in it, because he, too, was impressed. They had seen

so much of the jungle and illusion of Xanth that this was

a wonderful change.

The drawbridge was up, but now it lowered, and a girl

in blue jeans ran out. She was slender and pigtailed, maybe

about sixteen years old. Obviously a serving girl.

"Hi!" she cried as she reached the RV. "You must be

the Mundanes. Welcome to Castle Roogna. I'm Electra."

"Yes, we are the Mundane family," Mom said. "We

understand that we can help save Xanth from the ill wind,

if someone in the castle can tell us where to go and how

to do it."

"Sure. Come on in," Electra said. "You must be tired

after being in that moving house so long."

"We are," Mom agreed. "But we're in no shape to

enter a royal castle. If someone can come out and give us

directions, we'll be on our way."

"Oh, no, you must come in," the girl cried. "King Dor

insists."

"But we're grimy and rumpled and dirty," Mom pro-

tested.

"And hungry," David called. He would.

"Sure," Electra agreed brightly. "We'll get you nice

and clean and fed."

"And we have three animals with us," Mom said.

"They are welcome too," the girl said

enthusiastically.

She looked back to where a nondescript young man was

approaching. "There's Dolph now; he'll tell you."

"If you're sure ..." Mom said doubtfully.

Trenita spoke up. "She's sure. That's Princess Electra.

And Prince Dolph."

"Princess?" Karen squeaked.

"Certainly. I should have recognized her by her descrip-

tion. She's very informal. And that's her husband. Prince

Dolph. I made the connection when I heard his name."

Mom had evidently heard and adjusted in the smooth

way of her kind. "We shall be glad to come in, Electra.

But we do have important business, so can't stay long."

"Yes, the Good Magician sent Grey Murphy to attend

to it," Electra said. "He will talk with you as soon as

you're ready. Come on; I'll show you where."

They piled out of the RV. Karen lifted Trenita carefully

down to the floor, and then to ground outside; the imp

lady had made it clear she appreciated such no-fuss assis-

tance in the giant human realm.

"Oh, an imp lady!" Electra exclaimed happily.

"I am Trenita Imp of Erial Village," the woman said

formally. "I guided the Mundane family here. I will not

be able to return immediately, so I hope it is not an im-

position if I remain for a few days."

"Oh, no, it's great having you," Electra said. "We have

lots of space, and you won't take up much of it." She

turned to the prince. "Dolph, why don't you give Trenita

Imp a ride to the magic mirror, so she can tell her village

she's safe?"

The young man became an imp-sized centaur. "Get on

my back, and I'll carry you there," he said.

"Thank you so much," Trenita said. Karen lifted her to

the creature's back, where she got a good handful of mane

to steady herself.

"But don't get fresh with me, because my wife would

screech," Dolph said, smiling.

"I will not!" Electra screeched afte'r'them. Then she

broke out laughing, and the rest of them joined in. Princess

she might be, but she was obviously a fun person.

"If you don't mind my saying, you are the happiest

Princess I have met," Mom remarked.

"Thank you," Electra said happily.

They followed her to the castle. Karen looked longingly

back at the pie trees, but realized that they would have to

wait, though she was suddenly ferociously hungry.

As they approached the moat, a horrendous green head

rose out of the water. Karen screamed, and the others

stepped back. "Oh, that's just Souffle," Electra said.

"Castle Roogna's moat monster and baby-sitter; he loves

children." She raised her voice. "It's okay. Souffle; the

Good Magician knows about these Mundanes." The mon-

ster nodded and disappeared back under the water.

They crossed the drawbridge and entered the castle. It

was huge, with stone passages leading in assorted direc-

tions. There were tapestries on the walls and thick rugs on

the floors. Karen loved it at first sight.

"Right this way," Electra said, stepping into a side pas-

sage. In a moment they were in a nice

bathroom, with sinks

and mirrors and all.

"We really should change our clothes," Mom fussed,

"if we are to meet royalty."

"We already met it," Karen reminded her.

"Wash your face and get your hair done," Mom

snapped. But her tone had no edge.

Soon they were reasonably ready. They returned to the

main hall, where Electra waited. "The King and Queen

will see you now," she said. "Then you can have break-

fast."

Karen was glad of that, and knew the others were too.

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They entered a spacious hall. There were a number of

people there. "How are we supposed to address them?"

Dad whispered urgently. "We don't wish to give offense,

but—"

"Just speak when spoken to," a voice said beside them,

startling them. Karen looked, but there was only a vase.

There turned out to be no difficulty. The King was strid-

ing toward them, with Trenita Imp on his shoulder.

"Hello, Mister. Baldwin," the King said,

extending his

right hand. "I am King Dor. We are very glad to see you."

"You can say that again," the voice said. This time

Karen was sure it was the vase. There must be something

in it.

Dad shook hands with the King. "Thank you, your maj-

esty," he said. "We—"

"Oh, just call him Dor," the vase said. "Everybody

does."

The King smiled. "I should explain that my magic talent

is speaking to the inanimate, and having it answer. At

times it gets rather impertinent. But the vase is correct; we

prefer informality, especially since our business is urgent

and vital to the welfare of Xanth. Standing on ceremony

takes too much time."

"Thank you—Dor," Dad said.

"This is my wife, the Sorceress Irene," the King said.

A rather pretty woman of about Quieta Imp's age stepped

forward. Her hair was distinctly green, much more so than

Chlorine's yellow-green, but less luxuriant.

Dad introduced the members of the family, but it ap-

peared that the King already knew them, or at least Trenita

was whispering them in his ear. Even the pets.

Then the King got to business. "The Good Magician

informs us that you and a woman called Chlorine are able

to help Xanth in a way that no others can, but that you

need a guide to Mount Rushmost, where the winged mon-

sters congregate."

"Winged monsters!" Mom exclaimed.

Queen Irene touched her arm reassuringly. "They are

not our enemies, in this crisis; they wish to save Xanth as

much as we do. Indeed, Roxanne Roc herself is now fetch-

ing your friends to that place."

"A rock?" Mom asked.

Karen nudged her. "The big birds."

"But the winds are now so high, and the magic dust so

pervasive, that it isn't safe to let the rest of you travel that

way," King Dor said. "So we are arranging for you to

use one of the demon tunnels. However, not all demons

can be trusted, especially in heightened madness, so we

are trying to locate one who can."

"I can do it," a handsome man said, stepping forward.

The King shook his head. "We must keep you here at

Castle Roogna, Prince Vore, as liaison with the demons.

We can trust no one else in this particular crisis."

The man nodded and stepped back. "He's a demon,"

the vase murmured. "Wait till you see his wife. Princess

Nada Naga."

"So we shall now adjourn to the dining room, while we

wait for the demoness to arrive," the King said. "We re-

alize that all this may be somewhat confusing to you, es-

pecially the children, so Jenny Elf will assist you."

A girl no taller than Karen stepped forward. Her ears

were pointed and her hands had only

four fingers, includ-

ing the thumb, but apart from that, she seemed normal.

She even had freckles, like Electra's. "I was new to Xanth

too," she said. "I'm Jenny, from the World of Two

Moons."

Karen seized her opportunity. "Can you find us choc-

olate pies to eat, instead of healthy adult stuff?"

Jenny glanced conspiratorially around. "Sure. I'll tell

the kitchen." She slipped out.

They took places at a huge table. Dad, Mom, and Sean

were absorbed in deep discussion with the King and

Queen, not paying attention to anything else, which was a

good sign. They didn't notice when a maid brought choc-

olate pies and chocolate milk for Karen and David, and

dishes of dog, cat, and bird treats for the pets. Jenny Elf

joined them, having some pie herself.

And her cat, Sammy,

joined the pets, seeming to get along well enough with

Midrange.

Soon they were full to bursting with pie. Boredom was

hovering like a specter. The adults remained oblivions.

"What's there to do around this joint?" David asked in

his crude boyish way.

"Joint?" Jenny Elf asked, perplexed. "Joy'nt Bones is

not here."

"A Mundane term for a lovely castle," Karen said

quickly, shooting a dark look at her half brother. Some-

times she wished he were a quarter brother, or eighth

brother.

"Would you like to meet the children?" Jenny asked.

"No!" David said. He was Being Difficult.

"No, he would rather see the Magic Tapestry," Karen

clarified. "But / would love to meet the children."

"Right this way," Jenny said. She set off across the

hall, and they followed her, and the four animals followed

them, and the adults never noticed their departure.

Jenny showed them upstairs to a pleasant room. There

on the wall was a huge Tapestry, depicting endless scenes

of Xanth. "It will show anything you

want," she ex-

plained. "Just concentrate."

David concentrated. Suddenly the entire Tapestry went

dark and stormy, with angry flickers of lightning. There

was the odor of burning hemp, and a faint fuzzy image of

a pair of scorched panties.

"Except Adult Conspiracy stuff," Jenny added.

• "Oh." David did not look pleased. It was all Karen

could do to keep from giggling. Served him right!

Midrange looked at the Tapestry. It clarified into a pic-

ture of the cat-a-pult, a monstrous cat with a basket on its

tail. Then Woofer looked at it, and a

pack of wolves ap-

peared, turning human as they came upon a human village.

Then Tweeter looked, and the Tapestry sky filled with

great birds, orienting on some hapless land-bound creature

below.

Jenny drew Karen away. "That will amuse them for

some time," she whispered. "Sammy will find more in-

teresting things for them, if they don't. He can find any-

thing but home."

But Tweeter saw them going, and flew to rejoin Karen.

That pleased her.

They went to another room, and received a cheery

"Come in!" in response. They went in, and there was

Princess Electra braiding the hair of two sweet little girls

not a whole lot younger than Karen herself. One had

golden light hair, and the other had shadowy dark hair.

"These are Electra's children. Dawn and Eve," Jenny

said. "Dawn can tell anything about any living thing, and

Eve can tell anything about any inanimate thing. They are

both Sorceresses."

"Hi Dawn; Hi Eve," Karen said. She was amazed that

they could be Electra's, because Electra seamed so young

and carefree.

The two little girls turned suddenly shy, letting half a

titter escape. Electra smiled. "They don't see many little

girls here. Ask them to tell you about something animate

or inanimate."

"What about my bird?" Karen asked.

Dawn smiled and lifted her hand. Tweeter flew to it.

"Oh! You are from beyond Xanth," the girl said. "You

were hatched from the third egg in your mother's nest and

taken to a nasty cage, where Karen rescued you, two years

ago." It was clear by the bird's reaction

that this was ac-

curate. "Since then you have been happy, except that she

goes away every day and leaves you in a cage."

"I have to go to school," Karen protested. "I'd rather

take Tweeter with me, but the school won't let me."

Tweeter nodded, forgiving her, and flew

back to her

hair. Now Karen dug into her pocket and brought out her

nylon comb. She passed it to Eve.

The girl focused on the comb. "You are strange," she

said. "You started as a blob of goo buried deep in the

ground, until a big pipe sucked you up, and you got run

through something like a dragon's gut and then got

squeezed out into the form you have now. Karen found

you in a drawer with many other combs just like you, but

now you are the only one for her. Once she lost you under

the—under a moving house—but found you the next

morning. You have combed out forty-one snarls, a hundred

and forty-two tangles, and several thousand curls, but are

ready for more. None of them lived, for some reason."

Karen was impressed. She hadn't counted the snarls and

tangles, but the numbers sounded right. And she had in-

deed once lost the comb under the RV,

and found it by

chance in the morning. Eve had gotten all that just from

holding the comb for a moment. "The snarls and tangles

didn't live because they weren't in Xanth," she explained.

"In Mundania, they are just pulled hair."

"Oooo," both twins said with big-eyed horror.

"Why don't you girls go see the triplets?" Electra sug-

gested. "I have to get princessly."

"Sure!" the twins said together, and dashed for the

door. All their shyness had vanished after they demon-

strated their talents. Jenny and Karen followed.

They went to another room. There was a

big basket

swinging gently from a tripod. In it were three little babies.

"These are Melody, Harmony, and Rhythm," Jenny said.

"They are too young to show their talents, but we found

out anyway. Whatever they sing and play together will

become real. When they are separate, their individual tal-

ents will be less. But since they'll mostly be together, it's

a very strong talent. The centaur tutors will have a time

making them behave!"

"That's a lot of magic,'1 Karen said, impressed.

"Hello." It was an adult woman whose waist-length

hair was light and very faintly green.

"Oh, hi. Princess Ivy," Jenny said. "We were just ad-

miring the triplets the stork brought you. This is Karen

Mundane."

"So I gathered," Ivy said. "With a bird."

"He's Tweeter," Karen explained shyly. "My brothers

have a dog named Woofer and a cat named Midrange,

so—" But she saw that the woman didn't understand.

"They're Mundane words."

"I can see why the dog and cat would be named as you

have them," Ivy said. "But shouldn't the cat be

Meower?"

Karen tried again. "In Mundania, a speaker system—

that is, something that makes sounds—has a big cone

called a woofer, and a small cone called a tweeter, and a

middle cone called a midrange. So—"

"Oh, I see!" Ivy exclaimed. "Midrange. How clever."

But she seemed a bit uncertain.

"Let's go see Demonica," Dawn said brightly.

"Yes, she's more fun," Eve said darkly.

They headed for another room. Karen paused. " 'Bye,

Mrs. Ivy," she said politely.

"You're welcome," the Princess said with an obscure

smile as they left.

"When it's the wrong time of the month, we call her

Poison Ivy," Jenny confided in a whisper. Karen would

have laughed, but she wasn't sure it was funny. What did

the time of the month have to do with anything, unless it

meant a holiday?

Demonica turned out to be the half-demon daughter of

Prince Demon Vore, whom they had seen downstairs, and

Princess Nada Naga, a woman who would have popped

Sean's eyes right out of their smoking sockets. She was

rocking her baby as they entered, but was willing to let

Karen hold her. "But aren't you afraid I'll drop her?"

Karen asked.

"No, she would just bounce back up," Nada said.

Karen was set back. "Is that a joke?"

Nada smiled. "No. Demonica's demon heritage pre-

vents her from being physically harmed by such things.

She can become tenuous or solid, as she chooses. She can't

. do it as rapidly as her father can, of course, but it does

protect her. However, I agree; it is better not to drop her."

"She's cute," Karen said, taking the baby.

Already De-

monica was changing shape, in the way Karen was coming

to understand. Her face was growing larger and her body

smaller, until finally she was nothing but a head. Then she

became light, and floated out of Karen's arms.

Dawn caught her. "I told you she was fun," she said.

"I could tell you everything about her, but everyone al-

ready knows. She'll be even more fun when she's old

enough to play." She rocked the baby in her arms.

"I don't want to ask something stupid," Karen said.

"But—"

"Stupid things are the most fun," Eve said.

That emboldened her. "There seem to be a lot of Princes

and Princesses and little girls here. Is it always this way?"

"That is not a stupid question," Nada said, laughing.

"No, it is unusual. When we received news of the devel-

oping storm, we all felt that the children and babies should

be brought to the safest place in Xanth. So we all came to

Castle Roogna, which is enchanted to protect its occupants,

especially royal ones. So Grey and Ivy came from the

Good Magician's castle, and Vore and I came from my

father. Nabob's, cave, and of course, Electra and the twins

were here to begin with. This is really our first reunion .

since the deliveries. Ivy, Electra, and I have been great

friends since we were girls."

"Oh. I should have realized."

"You had no way to know, dear. Now, as to why all

our offspring are female—that does seem curious. We

think it is just coincidence, and that there Will be males in

due course. But we're happy with what we have."

"So are we," Dawn said. "Boys are a pain."

Karen laughed, agreeing. "I should know. I have two

brothers."

There was a swirl of smoke. Two eyes appeared in it.

"I resent that," the smoke said.

"Hi, Mentia," one of the twins said. "You came in too

late. We weren't calling you a pain."

"We were calling boys a pain," the other

said.

"That's what I heard," the smoke said, forming into a

beautiful woman with her dress on sideways. Karen wasn't

sure how that was possible, but it was

the case. "Seeing

as how the stork brought my better half a boy."

"A boy?" Karen asked.

The woman looked at her. "You're new here, aren't

you? So you don't know how my better half, Metria,

moved half of Xanth to get the attention of the stork last

year, and finally served it with a magic summons, so it

had to deliver. So now she has Ted, on whom she dotes.

He will grow up to love children too. Disgusting."

Karen managed to put it together. Demon Mentia—de-

mentia. She was a bit crazy, as her clothing indicated. De-

mon Ted—demented. Demon Vore—

devour. She laughed.

These demons had a certain sense of word, just as the imps

did.

"What brings you here, Mentia?" Nada inquired.

"Were you curious about how the other half-demon baby

was doing?"

"That, too," Mentia said. "They should be great play-

mates. Maybe they'll grow up and marry one day. But I

came here because I was summoned. It seems Xanth needs

me."

"Xanth certainly needs something," Nada agreed. "But

I'm not sure it's a crazy demoness. We already have too

much madness stirring up."

"Madness? That's it, then. The madder the environ-

ment, the saner I get."

Nada nodded. "So that's it. Then you had better go see

the King; they've been waiting for you."

"Pronto," the demoness agreed, vanishing in another

puff of smoke.

' 'We had better go down too," Jenny said.' 'That means

the journey to Mount Rushmost is about to start."

They left the children and hurried into the hall. A regal

young woman was approaching from the stairway. She

was just about perfect in every way, but there was some-

thing odd about her. "Oh, hi. Princess Ida!" Jenny said.

"This is Karen Mundane."

"Yes, I just met her family," Ida said. "I was coming

to fetch you down, Karen."

"But I don't need a Princess to guide

me," Karen pro-

tested, embarrassed. The oddness was related to the

woman's head.

Ida smiled. "Think nothing of it. Right now there are

so many Princesses in the castle that we are having to find

ways to make ourselves useful."

Karen finally identified the oddness. There was some-

thing moving around the Princess's head. It looked like a

Ping-Pong ball. "Princess, if you don't mind my asking—"

"You are curious about my moon," Ida said, not at all

offended. "It arrived last year, and I didn't have the heart

to send it away. It's really no trouble,

and it reflects my

moods. You may look at it if you wish, but don't try to

touch it, for it will avoid you." She angled her head so

that the plane of the moon's orbit swung down, and Karen

got a good look. The surface was sunny, with little seas

and land masses showing. There were islands and conti-

nents, and ice caps at the poles. A little cloud bank came

into view as the moon turned, and there was a rainstorm

over one section. It was a complete world in itself.

"Oh, how cute!" Karen exclaimed—and the moon

brightened. "What's it called?"

"Why, we don't have a name for it," Ida said, sur-

prised. "What do you think it should be called?"

"Gee, I don't know," Karen said, pondering. Then she

had such a bright idea that a bulb flashed over her head,

brightening the moon further. "Back in Mundania there's

an asteroid called Ida, and it has a little moon, and I

learned in school how they named it

Dactyl, which means

something or other. But since this isn't that, it needs an-

other name. So let's call it Ptero."

"Terra?" Jenny asked. "What a funny name!"

"No, it's got a funny spelling. Pee-tee-ee-rr-o. That's

why I like it. You see, there's this sort of dragonlike flying

reptile that used to exist, called a pterodactyl, and this is

a flying moon, so—"

"That's a wonderful idea," Ida said. "Moon, do you

like that name?"

The moon did a little dance of pleasure. Karen hoped it

didn't shake its rain cloud off.

"So Ptero it is," Ida said. "Thank you for the idea,

Karen. I would not have been able to think of it myself."

"Oh, I'm sure you—" Karen started to protest. But

Jenny jogged her elbow.

"We must go on downstairs," Jenny explained. "Be-

fore they miss us."

Oh. Of course. Karen had been so intrigued by Ida's

moon that she had forgotten that they were supposed to be

going somewhere. They started walking.

"You have a difficult mission ahead," Jenny said. "Do

you think you will be able to reach the top of Mount Rush-

most and convince Fracto to help fight the ill wind?"

"Oh, sure," Karen said confidently. "Dad can do any-

thing he puts his mind to. He's a physics Professor."

"I'm sure he can," Ida agreed. "I'm sure he will be

able to convince Fracto."

Jenny seemed quite pleased about something, and so did

Ptero Moon, though Karen couldn't see what. They

stepped downstairs. Sure enough, everyone was gathering

there. Even David had been dragged from the Tapestry.

"The demon guide has arrived," King Dor announced.

"Hear, hear!" a chair said.

"The mission will be successful!" Jenny exclaimed.

"Fracto will help."

"That is good to know," the King said.

"And Ida's moon is called Ter—Pfter—"

"Ptero," Ida said firmly. "Karen named it."

"Ptero—as in feather or wing?" Dad asked.

"No, as in Dactyl," Karen said.

He laughed. "Surely so. I see you hit it off well with

the Princess."

"For sure!" a rug said.

"That's good," the King agreed, nodding in a signifi-

cant manner.

"Yes," Karen said, getting shy again. Had she been too

familiar with Princess Ida?

"Everything's fine," Ida said. "I'm so glad to have a

name for my moon."

Karen was relieved that she had committed no offense.

But she suspected that there was something important she

was missing.

Jim Baldwin saw his daughter's cute confusion, and

wished he could ease it, but .this was not the occasion.

She had done far better work than she knew.

"I think we must be on our way," he said.

"We

thank you. King Dor, for your assistance."

"It is we who thank you for yours," the King replied

graciously, and his buxom green-haired wife smiled agree-

ment. "You did not need to risk your family to help

Xanth."

Jim glanced at Trenita Imp, who now sat on Queen

Irene's shoulder. "I think we did, after the hospitality

of the imps, which presaged yours." Trenita smiled.

"It still will not be easy," the King said. "Our best

hopes go with you."

"Yeah, we don't want to get blown

away," the King's

crown remarked.

"Let's go," D. Mentia said, floating toward the exit.

She had finally managed to get her clothing on straight,

which was just as well; a demoness might not mind what

she showed, as long as it wasn't her underwear, but it

could be distracting.

r

They followed her out. The madness had intensified; Jim

could feel its oppressive effect despite the protective am-

biance of the castle. Indeed, this was unlikely to be easy,

despite their seeming assurance that they would succeed.

The King had made that plain. Ordinarily such a trip, with

a demon guide, would be routine, but with the stirred-up

magic dust changing things, nothing was certain.

That applied to Ida's reassurance, too. Princess Ida's

Sorceress-class talent was the Idea;

whatever she believed

was true. But the Idea had to come from elsewhere—from

someone who didn't know Ida's magic. That was what

limited it. The elf girl Jenny had cleverly solicited Karen's

innocent endorsement of their mission, and Ida had agreed,

which meant that they would indeed succeed—if the rising

madness didn't interfere. No one knew exactly how the

madness might affect Ida's talent. So the outcome was not,

after all, sure. But he did not care to tell the children that.

Mary and Sean knew, but they would keep silent too.

They got into the RV, with the demoness taking the

front passenger seat so she could show him the way, as

Nimby had before. The sultry creature

was now in a tight

clingy sweater and a too-short skirt. He wasn't sure

whether she was trying to flirt with him, or provoke Mary,

or if this was her natural manner of appearance among

humans. "South along the main enchanted path," she said.

"And move rapidly, because the dust is getting worse."

"How can you tell?" he asked her. "Not that I doubt

you, but with the effects of the dust, could that lead you

astray?"

"No. This is why they summoned me. You see, I am

only half a demoness. I am Metria's worser half, and nor-

mally I am slightly crazy, as you may have noted. But I

have been in madness before, and found that it reverses

my nature, making me increasingly sane. I feel that sanity

closing in now. You are Mundanes, so aren't much af-

fected by it, but the surrounding effects will bring mis-

chief. It is best to avoid as much of it as you can."

Half a demoness, who got sane while

others got mad.

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This land never ceased to produce novelties. "How did

you come to separate from your better half?"

"Metria was always a mischievous creature. Then she

got married to a mortal, inherited half his soul, and fell in

love, in that order. I, her soulless crazy aspect, couldn't

stand it, so I fissioned off and had my own adventure.

Unfortunately it led me into madness, and I suffered sanity.

I came to accept Metria's situation, and must confess her

half-demon baby son is cute. So we two halves have rec-

onciled. But because I alone among regular XanAly crea-

tures can handle the madness, the King asked me to help,

and because the rising dust makes me unconscionably sen-

sible, I agreed. You will be able to trust my judgment,

when you can't trust your own."

"Well, I am becoming accustomed to trusting the judg-

ment of inscrutable creatures, after Nimby."

"Who?"

"Nimby is a striped dragon with the head of a donkey

who knows what is going on. He assumes human form

and travels with Chlorine, a beautiful young woman who

was sent to guide us by the Good Magician."

"I don't know her either. What's her talent?"

"Poisoning water."

"Garden variety. But that dragon you describe—there

must be some mistake. He might be able to turn human,

or to know things, but not both. There's a pretty strict limit

of one talent per person."

"I think he said that one was a talent and the other was

inherent."

"Maybe. But I'm pretty sane now, and that sounds

wrong. There is something strange about Nimby."

Jim laughed. "There is something strange about this

whole land!"

"Better than the excruciating dullness of Mundania."

To that he had no answer.

They made good time, and in due course Mentia indi-

cated the tumoff road. "Now we're leaving the enchanted

path," she reminded him. "It may get nasty."

"I know." There had been a time, two days or two

millennia ago, when he would have laughed at magic. Now

he felt a dread respect for it.

But instead of turning ugly, the scenery turned beautiful.

"Hey, look at the flowers!" Karen cried, peering out her

window.

"Those look like carnations," Mary said. "A whole

field of them."

Mentia looked. "Uh-oh. Those look like re-incamations.

Growing wild and strong in the madness."

Jim experienced a chill.' 'What magic will they do?"

"Regular ones aren't too bad," the demoness said se-

riously. "Polk sniff one, and have a strong memory of a

loved one. If they sniff several together, they may actually

see and hear the loved one. But this is a whole broad

expanse, strengthened by the magic dust. I think you

should try to avoid smelling them."

"Close the windows!" he called back to the others. But

he was too late; David had opened his. The thick perfume

of the flowers was circulating in the vehicle.

Suddenly Jim saw his father standing by the road, wav-

ing. He slowed to pick him up; he hadn't seen his father

since five years ago, when—

"Keep moving!" Mentia said. "Don't stop. Get on out

of here."

"But that's my father," Jim protested.

"Drive on—or I'll drive for you."

That jolted him out of it for a moment. "A demoness

can drive an RV?"

"Metria learned how, last year, so I know it too. This

thing is similar to a pickup truck. Keep moving."

His father had disappeared, and he realized that it had

indeed been an illusion. His father was dead.

"You didn't stop for Grandpa," Sean said. "Go back,

Dad!"

"He's dead!" Jim said.

Sean was set back. "I forgot. That's weird."

"Oh, like a wraith," Karen said. "Don't believe them."

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A woman appeared on the road. "Oh,

there's my god-

mother," Mary said. "I must talk to her."

Woofer growled.

"No," Jim said grimly.

"But we can't leave her here!" she said, releasing her

seat belt and getting up.

"She's not real," he said, accelerating.

"Jim! I'm surprised at you. How can you say such a

thing?"

"He's right, Mom," Karen said. "It's the magic. Don't

be fooled."

Then they drove beyond the field of flowers, and the

fragrance faded. Mary returned to her seat. * 'Of course that

couldn't have been her," she said. "But she seemed so

real."

"They do," Mentia said. "But if you stop for them, at

this strength of fragrance, you might never get away again.

As soon as you escaped the ambiance of one flower, an-

other would get you. Probably they would have gotten you

anyway, had you been afoot; but in your rapidly moving

truck you were too fast for them. That's why I said not to

stop."

"You were indeed the sensible one," Jim agreed. Mary

nodded, appreciating the ability of the demoness. Sense

was likely to be what they needed most in the next few

hours.

A mountain loomed before them. "That's it," Mentia

said.

"We can't drive up that!" Jim protested, glancing at

her, and catching a considerable eyeful of her burgeoning

cleavage. Where had her sweater gone? Apparently she

had changed into something more comfortable, in her

magic fashion. "This is a recreational vehicle, not a tank!"

"The demon path is inside. I will guide you to it. That

is why I am here."

"Sorry, I forgot." Was that another effect of the dust

of madness? No, probably merely the distraction of her

changingly provocative form. "Where's the entrance?"

"Follow me." She floated from her seat, through the

windshield, and ahead of the RV.

"Keen creature," Sean remarked, peering ahead.

"Not your type," Mary said, a bit sharply.

Sean did not argue, but it was clear that he believed that

anything that looked like that was his type. Jim couldn't

blame him; the demoness was about as well endowed a

creature as was possible without stretching the masculine

imagination beyond repay. Those entities who could

choose their appearance usually seemed to choose impres-

sively. Chlorine's appearance was chosen, after all.

Actually, he was glad to have Sean's

reaction, because

the boy had been unnaturally quiet since his cipse call with

the goblin dam, not evincing much interest in anything.

Jim was afraid he had suffered a concussion or some other

hidden injury when the water swept him away. Now he

was reverting to normal, an excellent sign.

Mentia led them to a large old tree. She pointed to its

trunk. Jim, now having had some experience with such

things, drew the RV slowly up to that trunk, which seemed

to expand, and into it. Sure enough, it was an illusion-

covered aperture. An entry into the mountain.

They entered a dark tunnel. Jim turned

on the head-

lights. They speared through Mentia's clothing, silhouet-

ting her shapely body. Then the clothing thickened, and

the effect was lost. The demoness floated back through the

windshield and into her seat. "This spirals up inside the

mountain. Just keep going." She paused. "Those bright

lights caught me by surprise. Did you see —?"

"Outline, no panties," Jim said quickly.

She relaxed. "We do try to honor the conventions. We

don't show panties to anyone we aren't prepared to se-

duce."

"It's nice to have standards," Jim agreed. She didn't

show panties—but she did show

everything else. It seemed

that in Xanth the underclothing counted for more than

what it covered. ' 'How is it that the demons maintain this

tunnel, when you can float wherever you wish to go?"

"Actually it's an old vole burrow," she confided. "But

we find it handy when we want to spy on the ceremonies

of the winged monsters. They can see us in the outer air,

but not in here."

"There must be mighty big voles in Xanth."

"As big as this truck, in the old days," she agreed.

"Today only the diggle is this big, and it

normally doesn't

make tunnels; it simply phases through the rock without

disturbing it."

The passage ahead came to a halt in a pile of rubble.

So did Jim, perforce. "There must have been a cave-in,"

he said regretfully.

"Let me check." She floated out again. She phased

through the rock. Then her arm came back, beckoning him

forward. So it was more illusion.

He nudged forward, and passed through the seeming

pile of stones. Beyond, the tunnel opened up again, curving

up and out of sight. The long climb was upon them.

Mentia floated back. This time she didn't pass through

the windshield, but came to the far door. She gestured to

come in. Her cleavage was so full it threatened to burst its

boundaries.

"I'll get that," Sean said, coming forward. He opened

the door, and the demoness started to

enter.

Then a second demoness appeared. This one shot

through the windshield. "Close that door!" she cried.

Startled, Sean paused, looking from one to the other.

Both looked the same, except for the lower decolletage of

the one at the door. "Two of you?" he

asked.

Then fangs sprouted in the mouth of the one at the door.

She hissed and her head dived for Sean's arm.

The one inside extended one arm to twice its natural

human length. The hand intercepted the fanged face and

shoved it back out the door. "Close it!"

she repeated.

"That's a hostile phantasm."

"But it looked just like you," Sean said, shaken, closing

the door. "Except—"

"No need to explain," Mary said tersely.

"It can be dangerous to judge by appearances." Mentia

drew her body up to her arm, so that all of her was by the

seat, and sat down.

"Yeah," Karen said from behind.

Jim realized that the demoness had

inadvertently taught

Sean a good lesson. He hoped the boy would heed it in

more normal circumstances.

"What's the difference between a wraith and a phan-

tasm?" Karen asked. She was the one who had been led

astray by wraiths, so naturally she was concerned.

"They are similar, but phantasms are more versatile—

and malignant," Mentia said. "And they have some sub-

stance."

"How come the spook had to come in the door, while

you go through the window?" David asked.

"King Dor arranged to have a protective spell put on

this vehicle," the demoness said. "I'm on your side. Or

on Xanth's side, so it lets me pass, but the phantasms are

enemies of the natural order, so they are barred. But if you

let them in—"

"Why not simply lock the doors and

ignore all creatures

outside the RV?" Mary asked.

' 'Because you might want to let in a friend, and the spell

has no way to tell friend from enemy, being unintelligent,

so has to go by your judgment. If you decide to let some-

thing in, then you overrule the spell. Sean was letting in

that phantasm." She glanced back at the young man.

"Don't let anything in unless your father or mother tell

you to. Especially if it has unusual sex appeal, or anything

else that's evocative. Your lives may be at stake." Her

sculptured decolletage had been replaced by a conservative

but still quite attractive blouse.

"Got it," Sean agreed, shaken.

"But we were fooled too," Mary said.

"The first time."

Good point. Adults learned well from experience. But

Jim had a concern of his own. "When you go out, we

can't tell you from the imitations. How

will we know it's

really you signaling us ahead, and not a phantasm? They

could hurt us by misdirecting us and causing the RV to

wreck."

"Um. Let me ponder." The demoness

became thought-

ful, her head swelling to twice its normal size. Then she

returned to regular beauty. "I think you will have to come

out with me, next time. Then you will know it's me."

"But then I'll be at risk, outside the enchantment."

"I will try to protect you. A demon has

more power

here than the phantasms do, because they are intruders."

"Perhaps in normal times," Jim said. "But these are

not normal times. The dust is strengthening aberrant ele-

ments."

She glanced sidelong at him. "You may be Mundane,

but you are catching on well."

He realized that this was a compliment, and he was un-

wisely flattered. Of course, appearances were not to be

trusted, but she looked just like a supremely beautiful

young woman, and her favor sidestepped his rational mind

to register on a deeper level. "Mundane physics can de-

velop some strange aspects, particularly at the quantum

level," he said. "I am accustomed to thinking rationally

in seemingly irrational settings."

"In my normal state I would not admire that," she mur-

mured.

Implying that in her present artificially sane state she

did. If Mary had been concerned about Sean's fascination

with Chlorine, now she would have a similar concern

about her husband's reaction to Mentia. With perhaps

some reason. He had learned to tune out the occasional

wiles of lovely coeds who tended to admire intelligent

men, or who merely wanted higher grades, but the magic

ambiance was laying siege to his judgment, and his fancy

was testing its limits. The phantasms were not the only

threat this mission posed.

The endless turn of the upward spiral brought them sud-

denly to a division in the tunnel. One fork curved away

left, the other right. "Which one?" he asked.

"I've got to check," Mentia said, floating out of her

seat.

"And a phantasm will imitate you and signal wrong,"

he said. "Even if I see you, I won't know which one is

the real you."

"Oh. Right. You will have to come out with me. And

we shall have to maintain contact."

"Contact?"

She smiled, evidently well aware of his concerns.

"We'll hold hands." She extended her left hand to take

his right. Then she floated through the windshield, with

only her forearm and hand remaining inside.

Jim knew Mary was watching but holding her peace.

There was, after all, good reason to hold Mentia's hand,

however incidentally suggestive it might be. He opened

the door and slid out, and her arm slid with him, through

glass and metal without impediment. Yet her hand re-

mained solid and warm. It was amazing how she could do

that; he would have thought that a solid hand could not be

supported by an insubstantial wrist or arm. Curious, he

paused to pass his other hand through her seeming arm

flesh, verifying that it was insubstantial. Indeed, the laws

of magic were not those of regular physics.

Then the arm abruptly firmed. "Is there more of me you

wish to touch?" she inquired dulcetly,

her blouse becom-

ing translucent.

"Ah, no," he said quickly, embarrassed. He closed the

door and stepped out into the glare of the headlights, still

holding her hand. He knew she was smirking; She might

be increasingly sane, but her basic mischievous nature re-

mained.

They advanced to the fork. He expected the left one to

be the one, because the spiral had been counterclockwise.

But there was solid rock there; the passage was illusion.

He stroked his left hand across the cold hard surface,

amazed; it still looked open. It was as if a perfectly clean

glass wall barred them from a real tunnel. "I would have

driven into this one," he said, chagrined.

"Never take illusions on faith," she said.

They walked to the other side, and Mentia put out her

free hand. "That's what I thought," she

said.

Jim reached for it—and encountered another glass pane.

"But—"

"They are both illusion," she said. "Now we check

outside their range."

"Outside?"

She led him on beyond the right fork. "Aha." She

squeezed his hand. "It's here."

He felt the streaked stone—and there was nothing. "Il-

lusion stone!" he exclaimed.

"Illusions come in all types," she said. "It can be as

dangerous to mistake a passage for a wall, as a wall for a

passage. But this is unusually sophisticated deception for

phantasms."

"Suggesting that the dust has considerably enhanced

them," he said, "or that some more sapient entity is in-

volved."

"Exactly. So we had better explore a bit more before

trusting the truck to this passage." She drew him through

the seeming rock face and into the tunnel beyond.

This was completely dark. "I can't see," he said.

"Sorry. I'll illuminate." She began to glow. The soft

light seemed to emanate from her person rather than her

clothing, which made for some interesting effects. Since

her clothing was demon stuff as well as her body, he pre-

sumed the effects were intentional.

They walked on through the tunnel. Then Jim's foot

landed on nothing, and he plunged down through the sup-

posedly solid floor. But the demoness's hand held his with

surprising strength, preventing him from falling all the way

into the void. The hand expanded to grasp his whole arm,

and she hauled him back up. He scrambled to set foot back

on the real, as opposed to the apparent, surface, missed,

and found himself caught in her embrace. Her body was

exceedingly sexy against his. "Well, now," she mur-

mured.

She moved back, carrying him, and his feet found the

rock. He stepped into her and through her, emerging be-

hind her. All of her body was exactly as solid or permeable

as she chose it to be.

"Thank you," he said as he recovered his balance and

mental equilibrium. For it was clear that however seductive

she chose to be, she had in this instance elected to put him

safely onto land. She could have embarrassed him in the

process far more than she had.

"There is a time for games, and a time for business,"

she said. "We can afford no distractions until this mission

is done. Thereafter—" She shrugged, turning to face him.

She still glowed, but now her clothing was opaque. She

had not let go of his right hand; her left had passed through

herself in the same fashion as he had.

"This is evidently not the correct route either," he said.

"There are occasional side passages," she said. "We

aren't sure what the voles used them for, but assume it

was to allow them to pass one another. Presumably they

had no problem with falling, being

natural earth-boring

creatures. The main passage is sure to be somewhere."

"I hope so," he said, still shaken from the narrowness

of his escape.

They walked back toward the illusion barrier. From this

side it looked like dirty glass; it was evidently a one-way

illusion: The RV was visible, but its lights were muted, as

if filtered through thick curtains.

Mentia paused. "Before we step back into sight of the

others," she said, extending her right hand toward him.

"If I may."

"May what?" he asked uncertainly.

"Straighten you up somewhat." Her hand became a

small mirror, in which his hair and clothing showed tou-

sled and mussed. Then her hand became a large comb,

which she ran through his hair. Then it became a hand

again, as she straightened his collar. She

was prettily busi-

nesslike, reminding him oddly of Mary. "Your wife might

otherwise misunderstand."

"Oh. Thank you." He waited while she put him in or-

der. They still held hands; after what he bad seen of the

phantasms, he was not about to let go of her. "How is it

that you have such sensitivity for family relations?"

"For two years I have been the third member of a two-

person couple," she said, smiling darkly. "That has been

instructive in several ways. Third parties are not necessar-

ily welcome."

"For sure." He was embarrassed, and in a moment re-

alized why. "I apologize for wronging you in my thoughts,

Mentia."

"Oh, you thought I might do this?" she asked inno-

cently, and suddenly stepped in close, pressed her provoc-

ative breasts and hips firmly against him,

and kissed him.

"For shame."

"For shame," he echoed weakly. Though fleeting, it

had been a kiss of such competence that it left him light-

headed.

"Naturally I wouldn't do a thing like that," she said,

drawing back and disengaging a thigh that had somehow

gotten wedged between his legs. "What do you think I

am—a demoness?"

"I'm afraid I did think something like that." he agreed.

This creature was no one to play games with!

"But if I chose to, I believe I could make

an impres-

sion," she murmured.

"I apologize for my apology."

She laughed. "You have a certain poise. Don't be em-

barrassed. I—that is, Metria—have in my day seduced a

married King. I am satisfied to have you know what I

could do, and am not doing, in the interest of Xanth's

welfare. Rationality can be such a curse."

"A curse," he agreed.

They stepped on through the veil of illusion, and into

the glare of the headlights. Jim shaded his eyes from the

brightness, and was able to make out the

faces of his fam-

ily peering through the windshield. He waved. Several

hands waved back. They must have been concerned when

he disappeared.

They walked across to the other side of the tunnel. And

there they found another hidden passage. They explored it

far enough to know that it was the real one, then returned

to the RV. Jim opened the door and climbed in, the de-

moness floating around and through him, to the adjacent

seat. He pulled the door closed.

"We're sure glad you're back. Dad," Sean said. "You

wouldn't believe what the phantasms were pretending."

"Try me," Jim said as he eased the vehicle forward,

and to the left, into the illusion rock wall.

"They pretended they were you and her, kissing," Da-

vid said eagerly. "But we knew it wasn't so, 'cause there

were five or six couples, and we'd seen you go through

the wall."

"And we knew you wouldn't do anything like that any-

way," Karen chimedin.

"Thanks for your confidence," Jim said, shaken in a

new manner. The phantasms had tried to tell on him! They

were getting more clever by the hour, trying psychological

tricks when the physical illusions didn't work. The success

of this mission was by no means assured. In fact, then-

family's survival was not assured. This sometimes pleasant

land of magic was becoming steadily more deadly.

After that the trip became less eventful; apparently the

phantasms had tried their best, but failed, so gone in search

of easier prey. The motor heated with the continued strain

of the climb, but didn't reach the point of quitting, to his

relief. At length they emerged on a

moderately sized plain

and came to a stop. It was early afternoon.

The wind was fierce. There was a reddish haze. The sky

itself seemed to bend and sway as if painted on a some-

what flexible dome, and the sun wavered in place. The

magic dust was kicking Up worse. And the plain was a

mesa, with a frighteningly abrupt and deep drop-off.

"Now we have to gather wood, straw, dried animal

dung, anything that will bum," Jim said. "We are going

to make a big fire."

"Great!" David cried. He loved fires, the bigger the

better.

"Don't go near the edge!" Mary called as the boy

dashed off.

"Awwww!" David and Karen cried together. But they

heeded the warning, because the drop was awesome.

"Is mere going to be enough to bum?" Sean asked.

"This place seems pretty barren." He seemed to be getting

subdued again; he tended to look around, as if searching

for something indefinite.

"King Dor said we'd get some help," Jim

reminded

him. He hoped the King was right.

"Something's coming!" Mary said. "But I fear not

good."

Jim looked. "I fear you are right. I think those are har-

pies."

The awful creatures were battered by the winds, but

compensating, heading for the plateau from the south. Jim

looked around for sticks that could be used as clubs or

staffs. They were going to need defensive weapons, unless

they retreated to the RV—in which case they wouldn't get

their job done.

"I'll check," Mentia said. She assumed the form of a

huge harpy and flew out to meet the dirty birds.

"Something else," Mary said.

This was from the north, and it was huge. In fact, it

looked very much like a roc. No sticks would beat off that

monster! Even the sanctity of the RV might not suffice

against a creature that size.

"Look at that!" Sean exclaimed. "A basket!"

"It must be Chlorine and Nimby," Mary said, relieved.

"They are supposed to rejoin us here."

"Carried by a roc," Jim agreed, remembering. "With

all the other distractions, it slipped my mind."

"The dust does that," she agreed. He wasn't quite cer-

tain what she might mean by it, and didn't care to inquire.

The monstrous bird glided to a landing on the middle

of the mesa, carefully setting the basket down. From it

three emerged: Chlorine, Nimby, and a splendidly spar-

kling huge chick. The roc folded her wings and settled

down like a huge hen. But her eyes were watchful. They

were the eyes of a mother, or a guardian. Jim had seen

that look on Mary, on occasion.

The family convened and approached the new arrivals

as a group. "Remember," Jim warned the children, "that

bird is sapient. She understands everything we say, and

she is a figure of considerable importance in Xanth. Treat

her like royalty." For this was one of the things that King

Dor had explained. There would be no

threats to their mis-

sion, as long as Roxanne Roc was present. It wasn't just

the power of the roc, which was formidable; it was that it

was backed by all the other winged monsters of Xanth—

and indeed, most other creatures, including humans.

Chlorine greeted them with hugs that even the children

didn't seem to mind. She wore an incongruously Mundane

windbreaker jacket that did not succeed in making her less

attractive. Then she made introductions. ' 'This is Roxanne

Roc, the third most important bird in Xanth." She made

a little bow to the roc, who nodded her head affirmatively.

"And this is Sim, short for the Simurgh Junior, the second

most important bird in Xanth. Roxanne is minding him for

his mother, the most important bird, the Simurgh. We all

will protect Sim with our lives, if necessary."

"Yes," Jim agreed for the family.

Chlorine turned to face the roc. "And this is the Mun-

dane family Baldwin: Jim, Mary, Sean, David, Karen,

Woofer, Midrange, and Tweeter. May

the animals play

with Sim?"

The huge head nodded. Jim was surprised by the trust

shown, but realized that Roxanne, too, had been briefed.

The three pets were now intelligent and disciplined, and

they also understood.

The lustrous chick stepped forward. He was about

Woofer's size, and his every baby feather gleamed irides-

cently in the sunlight as he moved. "Cheep!"

"Woof."

"Meow."

"Peep."

Then all four fell over laughing. It seemed that either

they had shared some animal joke, or were all in excellent

humor.

Now Menda appeared, coalescing from a swirl of

smoke. "Oh, hello, Roxanne," she said. "I'm Menda, Me-

tria's worser half. We met during your trial."

The huge head nodded again, remembering.

The demoness turned to Jim. "The harpies aren't here

to fight; they're bringing wood for the fire. Word has really

gotten around. Nobody wants Xanth to be blown away."

Indeed, Jim saw that the dirty birds were swooping over

the edge of the mesa and dropping sdcks of wood. That

would be a great help. "Thank them fy

us," he said.

"I did. They say that more winged monsters will be

coming with more fuel. This is their sacred meeting place,

and it's under chronic truce; no quarreling here unless

someone really asks for it. So you won't have to fear the

monsters, but don't push your luck."

"That's a relief," Mary murmured. She had been

watching the children and pets somewhat warily, sxactly

as the roc was. They were playing a game of lines and

boxes in the sand, taking turns drawing the lines and

scratching in the X's, and all were similarly intent.

"If you will excuse me, I have a job to

do," Jim said.

Mary looked doubtful. "I should help you," she said.

But she was evidently reluctant to leave the children and

pets unattended.

"I'll help you," Menda said.

"So will I," Chlorine said.

Then, of course, Sean was interested, and Nimby. But

Mary did not look reassured.

Menda floated over to her. "This is the safest place in

Xanth for children," she said. "Roxanne guards Sim, and

anyone Sim associates with, and all other winged monsters

and most of the rest of Xanth supports her in this."

"We know," Jim said.

But Mary wanted more specific reassurance. She looked

at Nimby, who nodded. "Then I will join

you," she said,

clearly relieved.

So was Jim. It was not that he minded the proximity of

lovely creatures like Mentia and Chlorine, but he felt easier

if Mary was also close. And he shared Mary's concern

about Sean, who was too obviously intrigued by those

same creatures, neither of whom was

exactly shy with

men.

They went to the growing pile of wood. The harpies had

gone, but other winged monsters were bringing more:

dragons, griffins, and some he couldn't exactly classify.

Some were of considerable size, but they were all business;

they dropped their loads and flew on.

But the wind was still rising, and the haze of magic dust

was thickening. He saw how it affected the flying crea-

tures, who were becoming increasingly unsteady, as if on

mind-altering drugs. He felt just enough of the effect to

appreciate its likely potency on the

magical creatures. A

significant part of the reason this mission had been given

to a Mundane family was its lack of magic: not only could

Jim and the others not do any magic, they were resistant

to its effects. So, like the sane demoness, they could carry

through while others were going crazy.

Many hands did make light work. Soon

they had a fine

bonfire going, sending up an enormous plume of roiling

smoke. Now the winged monsters brought buckets of wa-

ter, which they dumped at Jim's directive. This made a

huge hissing, and added swirling steam to the mix. The

result was a burgeoning cloud that loomed over the plateau

and extended beyond it as the wind tugged at its fringes.

Magic dust infused the cloud, animating it. A gaseous

face formed, glaring around. Jim would have thought he

was imagining it, but the others saw it too. "Make a

noise!" he yelled at it. "Show us what you're made of,

fogface!" For even the inanimate, even illusions, had feel-

ings in this magical realm. He had come to appreciate that

when he had seen Sean and Karen employ mockery to

drive off ugly illusions.

The cloud obliged by rumbling.

"You can do better than that!" he told it.

"What kind

of a wisp of vapor are you?"

This time the roar of sound was explosive. It could

surely be heard for many miles. Which was the point.

Then there was a sound behind him, of a different na-

ture. He looked, and saw Roxanne Roc taking off.

"Where's she going?" he asked, alarmed.

Nimby wrote a note. Che and Cynthia Centaur are get-

ting blown away by the ill wind, so Roxanne is rescuing

them. Che is Sim's tutor.

Oh. Of course the sparkling chick would need compe-

tent education, so had a centaur tutor. And the wind was

now so fierce and dusty that even the dragons had sought

refuge on the mesa. They had done their part; the smoke/

steam/dust cloud was now a hovering monster.

"Who is watching the children?" Mary asked sharply.

Who, indeed? They hurried across to where the children

and animals were still engrossed in their game. There was

a huge dragon matron watching them, wisps of fire show-

ing as she breathed. It seemed that the roc had arranged

for a substitute.

Jim and Mary turned back to the bonfire. Only in Xanth

would parents see a dragon looming over their children,

and depart with confidence!

Then a speck appeared on the horizon. It grew rapidly.

It was the roc, clutching a tiny creature in each great set

of talons. As she came closer, they saw that each creature

was a young winged centaur, one male, the other female.

Each would have been about eleven years old, in human

terms.

"We had better meet them," Mary said. Jim agreed, and

they turned back.

Roxanne landed, simultaneously depositing the two cen-

taurs safely on the ground. Demoness Mentia appeared.

"Che and Cynthia Centaur," she said, introducing them.

"Jim and Mary Mundane."

"We heard how you turned back to help Xanth," Cyn-

thia said. She was a pretty thing, whose brown tresses

matched her equine hide. She was bare-chested, but not

(quite) yet developed.

Che looked at the child and pet game. "This may be an

opportune time for a math lesson," he remarked.

"You're teaching that chick math already?" Jim asked,

surprised.

"He is a very bright bird, and he has a great deal to

learn," Che said.

"He has to know everything in the universe by the time

he's mature," Cynthia added.

Jim nodded. "Agreed. That is a great deal. But can you

teach math when your judgment is being distorted by the

growing madness?"

"Quantum math," Che said. "Insanity is an asset to that

study."

Startled, Jim had to agree. Centaurs were indeed ex-

tremely intelligent.

"Say, where's Gwenny Goblin?" Mentia inquired.

"Don't you have to be her Companion?"

"She released me from that obligation," Che said. "She

is grown-up now, with good vision and posture, and she

governs Goblin Mountain, so is in no further danger of

awkward questioning. But we shall

always remain close

friends, and I expect to visit her often. Sim should like to

meet her, too, in due course."

"It works for me," the demoness agreed.

The centaurs went to join the young folk, and Jim and

Mary returned to the bonfire. "Do you think this is going

to work?" she asked worriedly.

"If it doesn't, we'll be left stranded on a mesa with no

safe way down," he said evasively.

She did not challenge that. They came to the fire, which

was still burning smokily, but now the wind was so strong

that the cloud was being blown away as fast as it formed.

Had it been enough? There would be no more wood; the

winged monsters could no longer dare fly, and were now

too crazy anyway. The madness had them writhing on the

ground and growling at nothing.

Actually, Chlorine was looking somewhat distorted,

though Nimby seemed unaffected. Jim kept seeing fantas-

tic things with his peripheral vision, which faded when he

looked directly at them. The madness was laying siege to

them all.

"Look!" Chlorine cried. "Fracto!"

And there, on the horizon to the north, was the edge of

a looming black cloud. Fracto was coming! The manifes-

tation of a rival cloud had gotten the mean mist's attention.

The magic dust enhanced Fracto, too. In two and a half

moments the baleful cloud expanded to ugly proportions.

Purple blisters swelled and burst. Gray-

green depths turned

brown-black. They became malignant eyes. A cruel mouth

formed. There was a whistle of wind as it inhaled, getting

ready to blow out an icy blast.

It was time to act. "Fracto!" Jim called. "Cumulo

Fracto Nimbus, King of clouds. Listen to me! I have a deal

for you."

The cloud hesitated, surprised. The blast did not come.

"Xanth is in trouble," Jim called. "Xanth needs your

help."

The mouth resumed inhaling. Fracto did not care about

Xanth's welfare.

"We can offer you something really nice," Jim called.

The cloud paused again. The eyes narrowed. A curl of

mist formed in the shape of a question mark.

"Romance! Another storm, only .female." This sounded

crazy, but it was a crazy situation. King

Dor had reviewed

it carefully with him, and now he retained sufficient sanity

to carry it through. "Not this smoke cloud. That was only

to get your attention. A real storm, the strongest Xanth has

seen. Ideal for you."

The spongy face showed definite interest. Fracto seldom

had any prospect for compatible

companionship. He must

be really hungry for it. The mouth formed a perfect 0 and

a gust of wind emerged. He was asking WHO? .

"Her name is Happy Bottom," Jim called. "She's from

Mundania."

The cloud face recoiled. .

"No, wait! She is no longer Mundane. She has swept

up a lot of magic dust and become magic. But she doesn't

understand it, doesn't know how to use her new power.

She is wasting it with random blowing, not realizing her

potential. She's becoming so strong she's going to blow

Xanth away. Then she'll fade, of course. But with proper

instruction she could leam to be the kind of magic storm

she could be, with all that magic dust, and turn Xanthian.

But she will need a teacher-—and only you have the ca-

pacity to teach her this. Only you can tame this shrew.

Only you can calm yon ill wind. If you do, you will have

a wonderful female of your kind. I leave the rest to your

imagination." He wasn't sure just how much imagination

a cloud could have, but it was clear that this cloud was

conscious.

Fracto considered. Then the mouth formed another

shape, more like OW. That would be HOW?

"We must work together," Jim said, relieved that the

dialogue was going well. "We must push Happy Bottom

away from the concentration of magic dust, but we can't

make her go in any particular direction. You must do that,

by luring her into the Region of Air.

Once she is there she

will not know how to escape, until you teach her how. She

will be yours to seduce."

The cloud considered. Fracto was definitely interested.

But obviously uncertain about trusting a mortal creature.

The mouth formed a windy 00. That would mean TRUE?

How could he prove he was speaking the truth? He

couldn't blame the cloud for being suspicious. Fracto had

no friends, and a Mundane mortal was the least likely per-

son to believe. Fortunately, King Dor had prepared him

with this answer too. "Here is a contract," he called, un-

rolling a large poster. "Signed by the Good Magician him-

self."

A gust of wind swept the paper out of his hand. It flut-

tered through the air toward the cloud. But wasn't being

lost. Fracto was reading it.

Then the face changed. It became less threatening, more

agreeable. The mouth opened. ESSSS, it blew.

Fracto had agreed to the deal! Now all they had to do

was work out the details.

Jim settled down to those, explaining how they would

take Chlorine behind Happy Bottom and

use the wind-

breaker to drive her forward. Fracto would beckon her to-

ward the Region of Air in north central Xanth. It would

be a job, but they should be able to herd and lure her there,

if they made no mistakes. He was buoyed by the progress

already made. Soon enough they would complete this mis-

sion, and then be able to go home to Florida. He looked

forward to the return of familiarity.

12

WILLOW

Sean stamped out the last of the fire in his section,

near the edge of the plateau, and turned to look after

the dissipating trail of smoke. They had done it; they

had made the signal and summoned the cloud and done

the deal. Of course, there would still be some work for

someone before the ill wind was contained, but the comer

had been turned. Xanth would be saved, and they would

go home. It had been interesting and even fun, but he was

ready to return to dull Mundania.

Yet there was something lacking. Why should he be

ready to go home, when lovely Chlorine was here? And

that supersexy demoness, Mentia? He should want to see

as much of both of them as possible, though he knew that

neither was for him. They were just

dream material, pinup

fancies—but when had unavailability ever stopped him be-

fore? He should want to catch every last glimpse he pos-

sibly could. Yet he didn't; somehow he had lost interest.

Oh, he was showing some interest, but that was because

the other members of the family had begun to glance at

him strangely, and he realized that they would figure he

was sick if he didn't strive for every last glimpse of hidden

female flesh. But his heart was no longer in it.

Was it the rising madness in the air? It didn't affect

Mundanes much, because of their determined unmagical-

ity, but it did have some effect. He was feeling light-

headed, and some things he knew were

straight, like the

surface of the ground, seemed wavy or insubstantial. But

that was perception; it shouldn't deplete his normal young-

man interest in beautiful women. Neither should it give

him an inexplicable sense of loss.

He walked to the far side of a lingering smudge of

smoke and used its cover to answer a

brief call of nature.

In a moment he faced back toward the RV and the others.

He stepped around a deep hole in the ground that* might

or might not be illusion. His job here was done; it was

time to rejoin the family.

Then something appeared at the brink of the drop-off,

catching the comer of his eye. He

looked, realizing that

one of the monsters might be returning from a scouting

flight. For an instant he thought it was a harpy, for it was

a winged female, but then he realized that its body was

fully human, and clothed. It was a winged girl!

She rose above the plateau level and moved forward.

Now he saw that she was terminally tired; her wings were

fluttering weakly, and her head was lolling. She had ex-

hausted her strength, flying up to the mesa in this stiffening

wind.

Her dainty feet touched the ground. Her wings folded

and she fell to her knees.

Sean went to help her. She was so delicate, so vulner-

able, that he had to do something. "Are you all right?"

he asked, extending one hand.

Her weary head turned. She looked into his face.

"Sean!" she cried, and collapsed. Into the hole he had just

avoided.

Sean's whole world changed in that instant. "Willow!"

he cried, and leaped in after her. He caught her as they

landed on a pile of soft debris that glowed slightly. His

mind was reeling.

"Oh, Sean, you remember," she breathed. "I feared

you would not."

"You called my name," he said. "Everything came

back. But how could I ever have forgotten?"

"You walked through a Forget Whorl," she said. "I

followed you here—"

"Now I know what I was missing," he said. "It was

you. Willow. I love you." He kissed her, and savored the

overwhelming sweetness of the returning memory.

They had stopped where the water flooded the trollway.

The goblins had dammed the Crimea River, causing it to

back up and drown out the bridge and

road so that the RV

couldn't safely pass. Dad had taken the branch of super

cherry bombs down toward the dam, then left them with

Sean and Mom while he went ahead to explore the dam

for the best place to put the charge. But he had gotten

caught by the goblins. They had been going to float the

bombs down to the right spot, so as to be well clear of

the explosion, but when Dad got caught, Sean knew he

couldn't wait for that. David made a distraction so that

Sean could do what he had to do. So he grabbed the whole

branch of cherries and made for the dam, and just tossed

them on it, and dived for cover.

The blast had thrown him away, stunning him. But he

must have landed in the water, because suddenly he was

choking and floundering. Fortunately he was a good swim-

mer, so after a moment of disorientation he managed to

stroke strongly for the shore.

But he didn't know exactly where the shore was. Rush-

ing dirty water was everywhere, carrying him along. There

were branches in it, from the blown dam, jostling and get-

ting in the way. Weakened by the shock of the close ex-

plosion, he was tiring. Where was the shore?

A figure flew above him. It was a large bird—no, a girl!

A winged girl. "Here!" she cried, pointing ahead.

She must know. So he followed her, and soon threaded

his way through the maze of debris to the shore. But in

the process he wore himself out. The adrenaline that had

kept him going drained away, and .he

sank down in the

muck at the edge.

The girl flew down to help him. "You must get clear,

because more is coming," she said. She put her little hands

under his shoulders and tried to lift him up. But instead

her feet slipped in the mud, and she landed beside him,

thoroughly grimed.

"Your wings!" he exclaimed, appalled. The nice white-

ness was hopelessly soiled.

"I can wash them. Come on." She tried again to lift

him up, putting her arm around his waist. "Hurry."

Now he heard a change in the background, noise of the

flowing water. Indeed, the channel was shifting; it was

probably cutting a more direct course through the terrain,

and would catch him again. He hauled himself up with her

help and staggered on. Her body was quite slender, and

her support was more moral than physical, but he did ap-

preciate it.

They reached a steep bank and used saplings to haul

themselves up just as the water surged through behind

them. They were safe for the moment. "Thanks," he said.

"I probably would have drowned."

"Yes. I didn't know who you were, but it didn't seem

right to let you drown, when I could help." She paused,

cocking her head. "Who are you?"

YON ILL WIND 223

"I am Sean Baldwin."

"Sean from where?"

He smiled. "That's my surname."

"Your sir-name? Are you royal?"

He laughed. "Far from it! I'm Mundane."

She shrank away. "Mundane!"

"Well, that doesn't mean I'm a bad person," he said.

"It doesn't?"

"You must have heard some bad'stories about Mun-

danes. We aren't all like whatever you've heard."

"I hope not," she said.

He looked at her. Under the gobs of mud she was a

pretty young woman, with fair hair to her waist, tiny hands

and feet, and rather well proportioned in between. Her face

was elfin, with enormous green eyes. "Please, I hope to

persuade you that you haven't done wrong to rescue me

from the torrent. Will you tell me who you are?"

"Oh, of course," she said, flushing. "I am Willow Elf."

"You're an elf? Like Jenny?"

"Jenny? Where is her elm?"

• "Elm?"

"Her elf elm. All elves associate with particular elms.

That's how we are identified."

"I don't think she has an elm," he said. "She's from

the World of Two Moons."

"No elm? She must be strange indeed."

"Well, she does have pointed ears and four fingers."

Willow held up one hand, which definitely had five

digits, then touched an ear, which was round. "It must be

a very odd world. All Xanth elves are like me, except for

some things."

"Oh? What things?"

"Well, my tree is a winged elm. So we have wings,

unlike other elves. My tree is very large, so we are very

large."

"Large? You seem beautifully petite to me."

"Large for an elf. Most are far smaller than we are.

They are also bound much more closely to their trees."

"Bound to their trees?"

"You don't know?"

"Remember, I'm Mundane. I am supremely ignorant."

"Oh, of course," she agreed seriously. "All elves are

bound to their elms. Close in, they are very strong, but

they weaken as they go away from their trees, until they

are too weak even to live. So they have no territorial am-

bitions, but even an ogre would hesitate to try to abuse an

elf elm, because the elves there would be stronger than he

was."

"You are weak away from your tree?"

"Yes. But it's not nearly so pronounced for flying elves,

so we can go quite far. I think it's because our tall tree

presents a direct line of sight far afield, with no interfer-

ence by mountains, houses, or vegetation. Nevertheless, we

are subject to the constraints of distance. At the edge of

Xanth I would hardly be able to stand, while beside my

elm I could carry you in the air with one hand. The vari-

ation is much less extreme than for other elf species, and

it enables us to fly freely. My elm is in east central Xanth,

so I'm in-between here, neither strong nor weak. Other-

wise I might have been able to help you more."

"You helped me enough," he said. "I

really appreciate

it. I used cherry bombs to destroy the goblin dam, but got

caught by the rush of water."

"We don't like goblins very well," she said.

"We don't like them at all." He looked around. The

rushing water was subsiding. ' 'I had better get back to my

family."

"And I had better get back to my elm," she said.

"Thank you again for helping me. I don't know how to

repay you."

"Oh, I do not seek repayment," she said, flushing again.

"It was a thing of the moment. Normally we don't interact

with humans at all; we're very shy. But I couldn't let you

drown."

"I understand. I would have done the same for you, had

you been the one in trouble, and not just because you're

a pretty girl."

"Oh!" she cried, flushing much worse.

"I'm sorry," he said quickly. "I didn't mean to be of-

fensive."

"Nobody ever called me pretty before.

I'm a quite or-

dinary female of my kind, and I'm covered with mud."

Oh. He realized that she had not been joking about being

shy. "Maybe you just look better to me because you

helped me. And the mud is my fault. Is there a pool or

something nearby where we could wash up? Before going

our separate ways, I mean?" He was concerned about re-

turning to his family as dirty as he was, because Mom

would throw a fit about the upholstery in the RV, but he

also found himself not too eager to leave this interesting

creature immediately. It was a long shot, but he might get

to see more of her, if they washed up together.

"I did see a pool close by," she said. "If you don't

mind the delay—"

"I don't mind."

So she led the way to the pool she had spied. It was

small but attractive, with sparkling clear water.

Willow began to remove her dress, then hesitated. "I

have heard that Mundanes are very—I don't mean to be

offensive, but—do you object if I strip?"

"Not at all," he said gallantly. He remembered the

time he had skinny-dipped with friends. Was he going to

get to do it with this lovely little lady?

"Do you object if

lalso—?"

"Of course not. How else can you get clean?"

He laughed, relieved. "No way else. But I warn you, I

won't be able to help looking at your body."

She smiled, and pulled her dress off. He wondered about

her lack of reticence about her panties, but in a moment

understood: she wore none. In Xanth, it seemed, nakedness

was no problem, just underclothing. Her nudity was not

only natural, but exquisite; it was the way he imagined

Chlorine would look, only Willow was more, well, wil-

lowy. Suddenly he liked slendemess very. well.

So he pulled off his clothing, and joined her in the pool

quickly, because he did not want to stand exposed and

maybe embarrass himself with a male reaction. The water

was just right, neither hot nor cold. It caressed his bare

skin in a special manner, making it feel wonderfully good.

Willow turned to face him, sweeping her hair behind so

that her small but perfect breasts were clear. ' 'Shall I wash

your back?" she asked innocently, meeting his gaze for

the first time since entering the water.

Then she froze.

Sean froze too. He had been admiring Willow's body

and face; now that admiration exploded into an over-

whelming emotion. Beautiful? She was ravishing! It was

as if she were framed in glorious light, with the sweetest

possible music playing in the background.

"Oh, no!" she cried. "It's a love spring!"

A love spring. He had heard those mentioned. "You

mean we're—?" But there was no need to say more, for

he already knew it was true. He loved her.

"I never thought—" she said, chagrined.

"Do—do you feel the same way I do?" he asked.

"Yes," she said, moving toward him. "I love you.

But—this—we can't—"

"And I love you," he said, meeting her halfway.

"Though we are of two different worlds."

"We shouldn't do this," she said, putting her arms

around him. His own arms circled her, passing beneath the

feathery softness of her wings.

"I know." He kissed her. Half the dreams he might ever

have had were realized in that moment.

After an eternity, she drew her face away just enough

to speak. "You are Mundane. I am magical. We can not

be together."

"How can we be apart?" He kissed her again, and she

met him avidly.

"In time the spell will fade," she said as they broke for

breath.

"How much time?"

She considered. "About four years. I think. But often

the magic love is replaced by natural love in that time, so

there may be no escape other than separation."

"I couldn't stand that." He was about to kiss her again,

but this time she beat him to it.

"Neither could I," she said after another precious

pause.

"Oh, Willow, I know this is all magic, but I—don't

even want to say what I want to do with you." That was

the other half of his dreams, not yet realized.

"I want to do it too," she said. "The storks get a lot

of business from love springs. But I beg you to wait while

we consider alternatives."

"Anything you ask of me, I want to do,"

he said. He

made a supreme effort and withdrew from her. "But I

can't stop loving you."

"I am making the greatest effort of my life to be ob-

jective," she said. "I—I believe I would die in your realm.

You—would not be comfortable in mine. Your people and

my people would oppose our union. We

would be pariahs.

Our love can't be."

"Yet it is," he said.

"So we must end it. I think there is a way."

"Oh, Willow—"

"We know it is not natural," she said. "We know it

can't work. So we must be sensible. If there is a way to

get us out of love, that is best."

"That is best," he echoed. "But I hate the very notion."

"So do I. But we are not brainless or soulless creatures.

We know what is right, and we have the

will to do right.

So we must do it."

He didn't want to,'but he forced out the words. "How

can we cancel our love?"

"I saw an old Forget Whorl nearby."

"A what?"

"A fragment of the original Forget Spell on the Gap

Chasm. It broke up at the Time of No Magic, but some

Whorls remain. They are invisible, but I could tell, because

I saw insects fly though it and lose their bearings."

"It—makes you forget?"

"Yes. They used to make any creature who passed

through them forget everything, but now they are good for

only half an hour or so. That is, the creature forgets the

last half hour he has lived. And that

amount of time—"

"Would make us forget our love!" he exclaimed.

"Would make us forget our love," she agreed sadly.

"Please understand, this is not a thing I want to do, but I

think it is best, for us both. My rational mind is at war

with my emotion, and I have always

prided myself on

being sensible."

"So have I," he said. "So I guess we shouldn't do

anything that we might regret when we are out of love."

"Yes. I'm glad you understand."

"I understand that I don't want to mess up your life,

and if loving you will do that, I should try to stop loving

you." He smiled grimly. "But it gripes me that maybe the

hardest, noblest thing I will ever do in my life—-I won't

remember."

She nodded, agreeing about the irony,

for them both.

"Let's get clean," she said. "The spring can not do any-

thing more to us. Then we can go to that whorl."

"Yes." He was clamping down as hard as he could on

his emotion. "But you know, I think if I had gotten to

know you without the love spring, I

could have loved you

anyway, because you are a remarkably smart and sensible

woman, as well as being lovely."

"Thank you," she said as she scrubbed his back with

her gentle hands. "Observing your restraint, when I know

the desire you feel, I suspect I could have loved you, too,

despite your origin. And you are not

unhandsome."

"Thank you." He turned, and she turned, and he did

her back, working carefully around her lovely wings, and

splashed water on the feathers until they were clean too.

Then they both ducked under the surface to get their hair

clean. Finally they hauled their clothing into the water and

rinsed it, and donned it wet.

They waded out of the spring, and Willow led the way

to the Forget Whorl. It was, as she had said, invisible, but

he believed she knew whereof she spoke. "Who goes

first?" he asked, half hoping she would change her mind.

"I can readily fly home, now that my wings are clean.

But you are in a strange land. I would prefer to watch, and

make sure you are safely reunited with your family, before

I go through that Whorl. Then I will be able to be in peace,

I think."

"So be it." He looked at her. "But can

we—one last

time?"

She flung herself into his arms and kissed him several

times. Then she hauled herself away. "Now go, quickly,

before I shame myself and do what I must not," she said,

tears streaming down her cheeks.

He nerved himself, turned away from her, and strode

toward the Forget Whorl. Part of him hoped it wouldn't

work.

"But it did work," he said, concluding his intense mem-

ory. "I found my way back to the RV, and never thought

of you again."

"I know," she said. "I watched you." The tears he

remembered were still on her face.

"But why are you here?" he asked.

"When I returned to the Forget Whorl, it was gone,"

she said. "I think it was in its last stage, very faint, and

'you used it up. So I could not forget."

"Oh, no," he groaned. "I should have let you go first."

"No, my love. I would not have you suffer so."

They kissed again. "But how is it that I remember,

now? And why did you follow me?"

"Once you complimented me on my sensibleness, but

perhaps it was unwarranted. I was able to rein my emotions

for the time we were first together, but not thereafter. I

wanted you so much—" She shrugged. "I did try. I flew

home and talked to my family, and to the elders of our

tree. They knew of no other Forget Whorl I could use.

And they pointed out something I had not thought of: that

if the Whorl was so close to extinction when you used it,

it might not have done the full job. You might come to

remember, after some time had passed. Then I would have

done you no favor. So they suggested

that I do two things.

First, that I meet you again, to see whether the forgetting

held. If the sight of me made you remember, men you

would have remembered later on your own. But if you did

not remember, then the spell was holding, and you would

be safe."

"It did not hold," Sean said. "It was weakening before

I saw you; I know that now."

"Yes. For your sake I hoped it would hold, but for my

sake I hoped it would not. I was shamefully selfish."

"Shamefully," he agreed, kissing her again. "But what

now? We still are not right for each other."

"We still are not right," she agreed. "I think we shall

have to go to the Good Magician for the Answer. He surely

has potions—"

"Damn it!" he swore, noting peripherally that he had

managed to override the Adult Conspiracy on that one.

Maybe it was because love was adult business. ' 'We tried

to do the right thing. Why must we try again? Is our love

really so wrong?"

"Not wrong—unworkable," she clarified. "You must

return to your realm, and I must remain

in mine."

"But hasn't this sort of thing ever happened before?

How do other forbidden couples work it out?"

She smiled wanly. "When animals meet at a love

spring, they simply summon the stork and go their ways.

When human variants do, they try to

make the best of it.

But I'm not sure that those unions work out as well as

normal love does. Sometimes there are unfortunate reper-

cussions. But none of them have had the problem we do:

a Xanth/Mundane liaison."

"I would be willing to stay in Xanth, to be with you."

"But you have no wings. You can't fly. You can't go

where I go."

"If you want to fly away from me, I can't stop you,"

he said. "And wouldn't if I could. I would never want you

to be tied down."

"But I would be tied down—by love," she pointed out.

"So I think the Good Magician is our alternative, though

he does charge horrendously for his information."

"I suppose you're right. But we can't do that until the

present crisis is over. First Xanth has to

be saved; then our

incidental problem can be dealt with."

"Are you being ironic?"

"You bet I am! What do we do in the interim?"

' 'Not what we would like to do. The constraints are still

upon us."

"I wish we could just forget those!"

She gazed levelly at him. "If it is your choice, I will

not deny you, Sean."

"I know you won't." He understood all too perfectly.

She could stop herself from thowing herself at him, but

would lack the will to resist his approach. Just as he could

restrain himself, but could never actually push her away,

if she—"But I think I must deny myself. Let's get out of

here; at least I can introduce you to my folks."

"But how could they approve of me?"

"How could they not? We'll just have to

explain the

situation."

"Yes, as I did to my people," she said sadly. "They

were horrified. They understood getting caught in a love

spring, but not with a Mundane. They chided me for my

carelessness."

Sean laughed. ' 'They were right. You should have flown

right past, when you first saw me."

"And let you drown? How could I?"

He shook his head. "You know, you're not doing any-

thing to discourage my love. You're a lovely person."

She flushed in that fetching way he remembered. "Nei-

ther are you discouraging me."

They embraced and kissed again. But then he forced

himself to pull partway away. "If we don't get out of here

soon, all our noble resolutions will count for nothing."

"Yes." She grimaced cutely and pulled the rest of the

way away.

He looked around the cave, then up at the hole in the

sky that was the cave entrance. It was too high, and the

walls were too steep, for them to reach. He considered

lifting her up on his shoulders, but even so it was too high.

The cave was too narrow for her to spread her wings, so

she couldn't fly out, either. They were definitely stuck.

"We've been here for maybe half an hour," he said. "I

wonder why my folks haven't come to check on me."

"That's true," she agreed, surprised. She glanced at the

eye on her wrist. "In fact, an hour, I was so glad to be

with you again that 1 lost all track of time. Surely they

would not depart without you."

"Surely they would not," he agreed, "It should have

taken them maybe five minutes to realize I was gone, and

five more to check."

"It is almost as if—yes! There it is!"

"There what is?"

"A thyme bomb. See, there's the sprig of thyme." She

pointed to a dried-up leaf lying on the cave floor.

"Let me guess," Sean said. "In Xanth, thyme plants

affect time, so when you get close to one __"

"Yes. Usually the living plants slow things down, and

their seeds speed them up. But when leaves get separated

and dry out, their effect reverses, and they stretch time out,

in the manner of the seeds. So time expands explosively

in their vicinity, and we call them thyme bombs. Usually

they are harmless, because all folk have to do is walk away

from them. But—"

"But we can't," he finished. "So we're

stuck in the fast

lane."

"In a cave," she corrected him gently.

He didn't bother to clarify his reference. "So how do

we get away from it, so we don't die of hunger before

anyone finds us?"

"Oh, I can nullify it," she said brightly, "I have a nap-

sack in my purse." She produced a small purse and rum-

maged in it, pulling out all manner of things: clothing,

slippers, fruits, a mirror, a fancy hat, a bedroll, and a col-

lection of pretty stones. "Ah, there it is," she said, draw-

ing out a strapped pack.

Sean was amazed. "How can all that fit in that little

purse?"

"It's magic, of course. Don't Mundane women have

purses?"

Sean remembered how much Mom could carry in hers.

"Yes. But if you have a complete change of clothing in

there, why didn't you use it when we came out of the pool,

instead of putting your wet things back on?"

"I knew you lacked a change of clothing,

so I did not

wish to embarrass you."

"How do I love thee," he murmured. "Let me count

the ways."

"I tried to count, but there were too many ways," she

said. "Even though I know it's all just because of the love

spring." She opened the napsack and put the sprig of

thyme in. Then she rolled up the napsack and put it back

in her purse. "That should take care of it."

"I don't understand," he said. "Why does putting it in

there change anything?"

"Because anything in a napsack sleeps,"

she explained.

"In fact, I seldom put it on, because then it makes me take

a nap too. But it is useful for storing perishable food, as

it won't spoil while sleeping, and the thyme bomb has little

effect while napping."

Sean shook his head. "Knapsack—napsack. I keep for-

getting how things work in Xanth. But if

our time is now

normal, how come I don't feel any different?"

"We didn't change,", she explained patiently. "The

time around us did. Now we are aligned with the time

outside. Thyme bombs normally speed time up tenfold, so

perhaps six minutes passed during our hour. If it requires

ten minutes for your family to find you __"

"Got it. Let's make our remaining three or four minutes

count." He held her and kissed her.

"Hey, whatcha doing down there?"

David called from

above.

"Trust my little half brother to arrive at the least op-

portune time," Sean muttered, turning her loose. But he

was glad to have been found. "I'm kissing my girlfriend,

punk!" he called up. "What's it look like?"

"Like making time with a strange woman," David

called. "But it's too dark down there to see any detail. Do

you have your clothes on?"

"Yes, we have our clothes on," Sean called. "Now, go

fetch some rope or something to haul us out of here."

"Okay." The head disappeared.

He turned back to her. "Quick, let's finish our kiss."

Willow laughed and obliged.

Then the other members of the family were there at the

cave entrance. "What happened?" Dad called.

"I fell in a hole with a girl," Sean called back.

"Gee," Karen called. "Is she pretty?"

"Yes."

Willow blushed.

Then Dad was letting down a knotted rope. "We've got

it anchored. Can you climb?"

"Can you climb?" Sean asked Willow.

"Yes. I have recovered from my fatigue, and this is

closer to my elm than we were before."

"Then you go up first. I'll wait till you're

clear."

"Thank you." She kissed him again, quickly, and put

her hands on the rope. He put his hands on her petite waist

and helped her up. He let go when she climbed beyond

his reach. He looked up to be sure she was all right, but

realized that it was now possible to see under her skirt,

and hastily averted his gaze. In Xanth it just wasn't done,

and he would never embarrass her in any way he could

avoid. Even though he had seen the whole of her before,

and knew she didn't wear those forbidden panties. He

would look at her only when she wished

him to. Because

he loved her.

"Your turn," Dad called down.

Sean grasped the rope and hauled himself up. It was

hard work, and he realized that Willow had climbed faster

than he was. She had not been fooling about the way her

strength increased near her tree; she was probably stronger

than he was, now, despite her delicate physique.

He heaved himself up through the hole, panting, and

Dad caught him. The whole family was there, as well as

Chlorine and Nimby, the pets, and Sim. And Willow.

"What happened?" Dad asked.

"I love her," Sean said before he thought. "We washed

in a love spring, back near the goblin dam."

"A love spring!" Chlorine said. She was wearing what

looked like a Mundane windbreaker jacket. "But didn't

you know—"

"We thought it was a regular pool. Willow helped me

out of the rushing water. She maybe saved my life. But

we both got all muddy, so—"

"But you returned alone," Mom said.

"I went through a Forget Whorl. But she couldn't. And

when I saw her again—it all came back. It would have

come back anyway, before long. I still love her."

"We had better get back to the RV," Dad said. "I pre-

sume Willow will join us."

"Yes she will," Sean said, going to her. "We can't

separate again."

The others hesitated, but Chlorine clarified the matter.

"When two people meet at a love spring, they are in love.

Nothing else matters much. Not even species. It is useless

to object. They must marry."

"No," Willow said.

Chlorine glanced at her. "You were not in the love

spring?"

"I was in it. I love him. But I am a winged monster.

He is Mundane. We cannot marry."

"Monster!" David cried,, laughing.

"That's what they call themselves, dolt," Karen said in

superior fashion. "All the winged creatures. It doesn't

mean they are ugly."

"Then why did you follow him here?" Chlorine asked

Willow.

"I could not help it. But if we go to the Good Magician,

we can get a potion to nullify the love."

"We can't go anywhere until Xanth is saved," Dad

said.

"After that, of course," Willow said.

"And he charges a year's Service, or the equivalent,"

Chlorine pointed out. "I'm on Service for him now. How

could Sean do that, when he has to return to Mundania

with his family?"

"I will serve his time too," Willow said.

"No you won't!" Sean protested. "You would never

have gotten into this trouble if you hadn't stopped to help

me."

"I'm not sorry. The memory will be worth it."

"The memory of the love you will no longer have?"

Chlorine asked.

"Yes. The love spring did it, but I know

he is worthy

of it."

"Sean?" David asked incredulously.

"I'll serve my own time," Sean said.

"But then you would have to stay in Xanth," Chlorine

pointed out.

He glanced at her. She was still absolutely lovely and

sexy, but he no longer cared. "So?"

"So if you have to stay anyway, why not stay in love

with her?"

Sean was astonished. She was right. "Maybe take the

potion after the Service is done," he said, looking at Wil-

low. '

But she demurred. "If we are not to marry, it would

only be torture," she said. "And I know you have business

in your own world. I am native; I will serve the time for

us both. This is the practical thing."

She was right, too. Yet it wasn't fair.

They were now at the RV. "I think Willow will be with

us for a while," Mom said briskly. "The rest of you show

her the RV, while Jim and I discuss something outside."

Sean was not sure that was good news, but there was

nothing to do but go along with it. "Come, Willow—we'll

show you our magic moving house."

"I have seen it from afar," Willow said. "I do not mind

where I am, as long as I am with you."

Chlorine shook her head. "If this is what a love spring

offers, I'm going to find one when I'm ready to marry."

"You should," Sean agreed. "It's total." That was the

understatement of the day.

13

COMPLICATIONS

Mary got Jim safely out of earshot of

those in the

RV. "That girl," she said.

"With wings," he agreed, as if he didn't

know her concern.

"They can't be together."

"Mary, they can't be apart, either. They're in love."

"You know what I mean. He's going to want to sleep

with her—and she'll let him."

He nodded. "This is the nature of young love."

"You're not taking this seriously!"

He looked at her. "On the contrary, I'm

being realistic.

I have heard about those love springs. They will not be

denied. When animals get into them—"

"Jim, we're not animals!"

"In certain respects, we are. When it comes to—"

"Don't be impossible. What are we going to do?"

"Mary, he's seventeen, and she's about the same. That's

old enough."

"It's not old enough!"

"How old were we when—"

"Thirty-one and twenty-nine."

"Our second marriages," he reminded her. "How old

were you the first time you had sex?"

"Don't be uncouth."

"Sorry. The first time you tried to signal the stork?"

"That has no relevance."

"Doesn't it? I was seventeen—Sean's age. How about

you?"

"Fifteen," she answered reluctantly. "But

I didn't en-

joy it."

"It's allright only if you don't enjoy it?"

"That's not what I mean. That girl would love to—"

But she had to stop, because he had already shot down

that approach. "Anyway, it was different in our day."

"Yes, we were teens. Now we're mature fogies whose

sexual energies are diminished, so we can safely condemn

contemporary teens for having our past urges."

"I didn't say that." Then she made a counter sally.

"Did you bring the girl into your house and tell your par-

ents?"

He laughed. "Think I was suicidal? They were just like

us—as we are now."

That stung, but she plowed on. "Are we to give them

space in the RV to—to share a bed? With David and Karen

knowing?"

That concept finally set him back. "Point made. But let

me play devil's advocate a moment. There is no passion

quite so strong as unrequited or unconsummated love. Isn't

it possible that if we provide them with Mundane antistork

devices and let them indulge their

passions, they would get

over that aspect and be able to make a more rational de-

cision when the time comes to separate?"

"Did our indulgence cause us to reconsider marriage?"

she asked evenly.

He raised his hands in a surrender gesture. "No, I liked

you even better after than before." He pondered a moment.

"We have not had long to observe them, but it is my

impression that they have not yet indulged—"

"They were alone less than ten minutes."

"Plus their bath in the love spring. They resisted temp-

tation because they knew the relationship had no future. I

think that must have been mostly Willow's doing, because

Sean never showed all that much maturity in decisions

before. She strikes me as—well, as a woman who would

be worthy of him, in other circumstances, wings or not."

"No question," Mary agreed, surprisingly. "She's a

sensible and generous person. What little I have seen of

her so far, I like very well. But the fact is that they are

not for each other, being of different realms and different

species, and Xanth is stricter about babies out of wedlock

than the real world is. But as you say,

young passions are

strong. How long could they hold out, if we put them

constantly together?"

"Fifteen minutes?"

"So what do we do?"

He sighed. ' 'We move Willow in with Karen or Chlo-

rine, and Sean with David. We keep company with them—

constantly. But I'm going to feel like a jailer."

"It is necessary." Then, satisfied with her victory, she

kissed him.

"I'll take that as a promise for the time we get alone,"

he said.

"To be sure."

They returned to the RV. It was crowded, because there

were now nine people in it, counting the demoness, plus

the pets. At least the big chick had returned to his govern-

ess; they and the dragons would remain on the mesa until

the winds abated. This had been the most

remarkable me-

nagerie she had encountered, even in imagination. She was

privately amazed at herself for taking it all in stride. But

what else was she to do? She was a long way from her

specialty of archaic Mundane languages.

Jim took the wheel, and she the front passenger seat.

The others were arranged all around the main section of

the vehicle. Sean and Willow were holding hands, while

David and Karen were eagerly questioning them about

everything, especially love springs. "If David and I fell in

a love spring, would we fall in love?"

Karen asked.

"Yuckk!" David cried.

But Willow had an answer. "I think not, because you

are not party to the Adult Conspiracy. But you might quar-

rel less."

"Were you nekked together in that pool?"

David asked.

"Yuck!" Karen said, for nuisance value..

"Yes, naked," Sean answered. "We washed each

other's backs. And that's all we did."

That last was for Mary's benefit, she knew. She appre-

ciated it.

"Except for kissing," Willow said.

Jim nudged the RV forward. He circled toward the de-

mon tunnel. The passengers opened the Windows and

waved to the roc and dragons, who napped a wing and

snorted smoke or fire into the air, respectively, in response.

It had indeed been a good joint effort,

and successful. But

there was more to do.

Mentia floated out through the metal in the unnerving

way she had and stretched her arms impossibly wide to

indicate the outline of the tunnel entrance, which was oth-

erwise invisible. Jim steered for it, and the vehicle seemed

to sink into the solid-looking rock. Then the surface of the

ground closed overhead, and Jim turned on the headlights

to illuminate the curving tunnel. The demoness, caught by

surprise again (really?), was shown in phenomenally full-

breasted nudity, sans panties, of course, but recovered after

too long a moment and formed a tight dress around her

voluptuous torso.

"A man could get to like Xanth," Jim murmured in a

tone just loud enough for her to hear.

"Oh?" Mary said in a tone just loud enough for the

demoness to overhear. "Suppose she became a raving

monster?"

Mentia obligingly became a raving monster, with spikes

at every joint and enormous dripping fangs.

"I've been set up," Jim muttered, as Mary and Mentia

laughed.

The drive down was slow but uneventful; the phantasms

did not reappear. When they emerged from the base it was

evening. "Do we have time to camp for the night?" Jim

called to Chlorine in back.

She checked with Nimby. "Yes, if we don't mind the

- madness."

"We'll stay in the RV," he said. "But we'll forage

outside for food, et cetera."

"Cetera?" Willow asked.

"He means natural functions," Sean said.

"Isn't everything natural?"

"Poop," David said, then paused in surprise. "Hey, I

got the bad word out! No bleep."

"The madness is overriding the Adult Conspiracy,"

Mentia explained.

"But don't let it go to your head," Mary called se-

verely.

"Well, I wouldn't want it to go there," the boy retorted.

"What a mess," Karen agreed. "But are you sure your

face isn't made of it?"

"What's on my face?"

"Nothing. That's the way you look all the time."

Things were getting back to normal. Mary was pleased

to note in the rearview mirror that Willow was blushing.

Definitely a refined creature. If only Sean could meet

someone like her in Miami!

Nimby directed them to a reasonable

place, and Jim

parked the RV. "Pee break!" David cried, reveling in the

newfound freedom from bleeping.

They got out and spread out, accomplishing their vari-

ous purposes, and Mentia found a good pie tree. Mary

would have preferred something more nutritious, but had

pretty much given up on that particular fight in this realm.

Pies were simply too abundant and convenient and popu-

lar. ,

Then they set up the RV for the night, and neither Sean

nor Willow made any objection to

Mary's bedding assign-

ments. They did indeed comprehend the risks of doing

otherwise. They settled down for sleep.

Which wasn't ideal. Because of the presence of Chlo-

rine, Nimby, and Willow, their beds were all full, so that

she and Jim had to sleep in the front seats. Jim simply

slumped down with his pillow against

the door and zonked

out, but it took her longer to settle down. And naturally

she heard something.

Someone was stirring in the RV. The sound was slight,

suggesting that whoever it was didn't want to disturb any-

one else. Was it a toilet call? The children had been cau-

tioned not to go out alone, because Xanth

really was

dangerous, especially at night. The spell on the RV pro-

vided considerable security, but that was no good outside.

Mary was about to inquire, but decided to keep quiet.

It wasn't that she was a snoop, but she did want to know

exactly what was going on. There was too much about this

magic land that was disturbing in the best of times, and

the dust of madness made it worse, and night made it

worse yet, and the addition of that winged girl, however

nice a person she undoubtedly was, made it even more so.

She loved Sean, without doubt; the human signs were all

over her. But that was its own complication. Was she get-

ting up, to go out for a solitary flying session, or to be

alone with Sean? There was little doubt what the two

would do, if they got alone together. So maybe Mary

should follow them out, just making her presence known,

and scotch that at the start.

The side door opened, amazingly quietly, and closed.

Someone had exited the RV. Who? She thought by the

sounds that it was just one; there had been no whispered

dialogue. That argued against Sean and Willow. Then who

was it? And why?

There was a light tap at her window. She jumped, caught

by surprise. The person, far from hiding, was signaling

her!

She looked. It was Nimby. Oh. He followed his own

rules, and certainly wasn't bound by theirs. But what then

of Chlorine? If Nimby and Chlorine wanted to indulge

themselves together, it certainly wasn't Mary's place to

oppose it, as long as it wasn't in sight of the children. But

Chlorine hadn't left her bed; Mary could recognize her

particular pattern of breathing.

Nimby beckoned. What could he want? Well, she would

find out. He was a strange one, and she knew he was really

a dragon, but she had no fear of him. Had he wished to

do them any ill, he had had countless opportunities. Cer-

tainly he wouldn't find her a romantic object—not with

Chlorine there. So it was something else.

She opened the door carefully and got out, closing it as

carefully behind her. Then she turned to face Nimby.

"Yes?" she inquired in a low whisper.

For answer, he became the donkey-headed diagonally

striped dragon. This time she noticed two things she hadn't

noticed before; either she had been unobservant, or he had

changed. She suspected the latter. One change was that his

scales were glowing, outlining him in the darkness so that

she had no trouble seeing him. The other was that the

scales in his center portion were formed into the shape of

a saddle.

"You want me to ride you?" she asked.

The equine head nodded.

He surely had a reason. He seemed to

know everything

that went on in the vicinity. So he must know something

now. .

The head nodded again.

"Why, you can read my thoughts!" she exclaimed.

Another nod.

So he had known she was awake and listening, and had

come for her. But why? Was there some danger?

One more nod.

And they could alleviate it? By taking

action now?

Nod.

Then they had better get busy. She approached him and

climbed into the saddle. It was surprisingly comfortable.

There were projecting scales in front that served as perfect

handholds, surely by no coincidence. Even some below for

her feet to rest on. Nimby was the perfect mount.

The pastel pink stripes turned red. "Why, Nimby,

you're blushing!" she murmured. "Because I compli-

mented your status as a mount."

Embarrassed nod.

Then Nimby moved. Mary had had her youthful fling

with horses, so had a fair amount of experience riding.

Nothing fancy, but she was competent. Nimby's gait was

odd—then less odd—arid finally exactly like that of a good

horse. He was accommodating her memory of riding. He

was certainly easy to get along with.

They got up speed. Mary strained to see

where they

were going in the darkness—and then Nimby's eyes

glowed brightly, sending out beams of light as if they were

headlights, showing her everything ahead. "Thank you,"

she murmured, patting a scale. No wonder Chlorine kept

company with this versatile creature. And he had made

Chlorine look the way she did. He was really a remarkable

entity. Just how powerful was his magic?

For a moment the dragon seemed nervous about some-

thing. Mary looked around, but saw nothing dangerous,

and knew that Nimby wouldn't let anything bad approach.

She returned to her chain of thought. No, potent magic

wasn't necessary to explain Nimby. He

was making the

most of his shape-changing and mind-reading abilities, so

seemed much more talented than he perhaps was. Possibly

he drew on the mental powers of the person he was with,

thus enhancing his abilities. That would explain a good

deal. He was probably a very specially talented animal,

who became more than that when associated with a human

being.

Nimby seemed to relax. And now he reached his des-

tination. There was a big old dead tree with a splintered

trunk. The wood looked firm and dry, not rotten despite

its evident age. In fact, it looked a bit like those two pieces

of reverse wood that Chlorine had reported using to nullify

that nuisance machine that had captured Woofer and

Tweeter.

Nimby nodded.

"Reverse wood?" she asked, startled. "You brought me

here to fetch reverse wood?"

Nod.

Mentia appeared. ' 'What are you two up to, in the dead

of night?" she asked. Then she spied the tree. "Oops—I

can't touch that!" She vanished.

"And as a Mundane, I can handle it

without suffering

reversal of my magic," Mary said. "While you might be

in trouble. Very well; how much do you need?"

It turned out that he needed a bundle. She pulled frag-

ments from the tree and bound them together with a vine,

then held the bundle in her arms as Nimby carried her back

toward the RV. Then she laid pieces of wood in a large

circle around the RV, spaced only a few feet apart. That

should be one insidiously effective defense perimeter, she

thought.

Nimby nodded.

Mentia reappeared. "Deadly," she remarked.

They finished the job and returned to the RV. Before

she climbed back in, Mary kissed one donkey ear. "It's

nice to have you looking out for us," she said. "Even if

it is just to help Chlorine complete her assignment." The

ear blushed.

Mary settled back in her seat, and Nimby

resumed his

human form and rejoined Chlorine in back. No one had

missed them. This time Mary went right to sleep.

At dawn the others didn't even notice the circle of wood,

but Mary saw that enormous tracks came directly toward

the RV, touched the circle, and became hopelessly con-

fused. Probably a hungry land dragon had sniffed them

out, but been balked by the reversal of its nature or magic.

Nimby must have seen it coming, and quietly taken the

measure required to abate the menace. To protect Chlo-

rine—and her mission. It was really Nimby the Good Ma-

gician had sent them, in" the guise of sending Chlorine.

Mary gathered up the wood and tied it back into its

bundle. Now it neutralized itself, as it did when in its orig-

inal tree trunk, but its potential remained. She stacked it

in the RV for future use. .

Now Chlorine consulted with Nimby to see what route

they should take where, to get the windbreaker where it

would be most effective. To their surprise, he did not rec-

ommend the trollway. Instead it turned out that they would

have to seek the help of a number of individuals scattered

across the area. The first was Modem.

"That looks a lot like a Mundane term," Jim remarked.

"Surely coincidence."

They found a gas guzzler and refueled, then set off on

a tortuous trip through the forest until they came to an

isolated shack. The windows were boarded over, but not

because it was deserted; the family was

battening down

for the terrible storm that was building. The RV stopped

beside it.

Chlorine was about to get out, but Nimby restrained her

and indicated Mary. Oh? Well, there had to be a reason.

Mary had a good deal of respect for Nimby's awareness

of things. She got out and knocked on the shack's door.

"Go away, spook!" a voice called from inside.

"I'm not a spook," Mary protested, though she had a

notion what kind of apparitions had been bothering this

house. "I'm a dull Mundane woman looking for Modem."

The door opened a crack, held closely by a glittery hand.

A gnarly eye peered out. "And I'm the hag of this hut.

What do you know of Modem?"

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"Only that we need him to help save Xanth from the

ill wind."

The door cracked wider. "Let me get a look at you,"

the hag said. "Why, you're someone's mother."

"Yes."

"Then it must be all right. See that he doesn't get into

mischief. He's got weird magic." She called back into the

hut. "Modem lad, go with this mother."

"Yes, Haggi Ma." A boy about David's age appeared,

tousled of hair and ragged of garb.

Now it was clear why Mary had had to be the one.

Nimby had known. "Thank you," she said to Haggi. She

took the boy by his grubby hand and led him to the RV.

"We'll try to bring him back safely," she called. Then to

the boy: "We have a magic moving house. You may look

out the window, after you wash your hands. You will sit

with my son David. You may call me Mom for now."

"Yes, Mom," he replied dutifully.

Chlorine came out to meet them. "This is Modem,"

Mary told her in a motherly manner. "Clean him up and

find out the nature of his magic. Give him the window seat

beside David." She really meant for Chlorine to find out

from Nimby. Also, the boy would more likely hold still if

Chlorine washed his face and hands.

Chlorine riad a certain

effect on males of any age; might as well make positive

use of it.

"Hello, Modem," Chlorine said. "I am Chlorine." She

smiled.

"Chee." The boy looked stunned. That meant he was

socially normal.

They resumed driving, looking for the next name on

Nimby's list. This was Keaira, off in another direction.

While Jim navigated the twisty turns of the almost track-

less jungle, Chlorine washed the stunned Modem's face

and hands and dulcetly questioned him.

It turned out that Modem's magic was indeed related to

the Mundane term. It was what he called a magic mirror,

only it was inside him. He could communicate with Corn

Pewter.

"With who?" Willow asked.

"Corn Pewter," Chlorine explained. "The evil machine

turned good. The one who first sent Sending. He changes

reality in his vicinity."

"Yes," Modem agreed. "When I connect with him, I

can do it too, but only because I'm a wo—wor—"

"Work station," Jim called back.

"Yes. That's what he calls it."

"That's nice," Chlorine said. "Can you show us?"

At that point the RV reached a dead-end trail. A huge

tangly tree with dangling tentacular vines barred their way.

"Watch it," Mentia said. "That's a tangle tree."

Karen giggled. "Like my hair?"

"Not exactly. Watch." The demoness floated out and

assumed the form of a little girl. She walked up to the tree.

Suddenly the vines writhed. They wrapped around her

and hauled her into the tree. A big wooden mouth opened

in the trunk. The tentacles stuffed the girl into that orifice.

Wooden teeth clamped down.

Then the mouth opened and spat out, the girl. The trunk

turned green. The tentacles wilted.

Mentia resumed luscious woman form and floated back

into the RV. "Any questions?"

"Yuck, no," Karen said, looking a bit

green herself.

"Yeah," David said. "What made it spit you back

out?"

The demoness smiled in a female dog way. "I gave it

a whiff of stink horn."

"Of what?"

Mentia made a foul-smelling noise. The most ghastly

imaginable stench filled the vehicle.
"Like that," she said.

"Only stronger."

"Ghaa!" Karen cried, rushing to open a window. Mary

quietly did the same. That was nose-numbingly dreadful.

Only Nimby wasn't choking.

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"Great!" David cried. "And that's what that dumb

tangle tree bit into?"

"I'm afraid so," the demoness said with mock regret.

Then they were all laughing, even Modem, despite the

awful odor.

"I can change it," Modem said. "When I connect."

"Then please connect with Corn Pewter," Chlorine told

him. "And change it to roses.'"

Modem closed his eyes, concentrating. Suddenly a beau-

tiful rose scent permeated the RV. Reality had changed.

"Do you know, I begin to see why this talent may be

useful," Jim remarked. "Can he get us past that tangle

tree?"

Chlorine spoke to the boy. The tangle tree became a pie

tree. Mentia went out and harvested the best pies and

brought them in for consumption as they drove on. Chlo-

rine returned to her seat beside Nimby, and brought out a

greenish bug. She passed this across her mouth.

"What's that?" Karen asked.

"A lips tic, of course. It colors my lips." Indeed, they

were now a much firmer green.

What else? Mary thought.

They entered a wmdswept plain. The power of the storm

continued to rise, and the flying dust

made visibility short.

Blasts of it struck the RV, pushing it around, and scattered

phantasms flew by. Sword blades seemed to rise out of the

ground, threatening the tires, but Nimby indicated and

Mentia verified that they were mostly illusory. Still, Mary

would not care to plow through much more of this.

Keaira's residence was an oasis amidst the barrens.

Pretty flowering softwoods surrounded a larger dust-

colored tree with a fancy tree house. "Oh, a cottage in

dust tree," Chlorine said, pleased.

"Since when do pine trees flower?" Jim muttered.

"Since we came to Xanth," Mary

replied.

They pulled up near the dust tree.
Despite its name,

there was no dust flying here; the air was calm and sweet.

-which was surely

This seemed to be an enchanted spot-

why Keaira had chosen to live here.

The door of the tree house opened, and a young woman

with brown braids emerged. "A traveling house?" she

asked, surprised.

Mary approached her. "Yes, and we

would like you to

join us, if you are Keaira. We are on a mission to save

Xanth from the terrible storm, and we need your help."

"But my power over weather is very small," Keaira

protested. "I can affect it only quite near me. I couldn't

do anything about a giant magical storm

like this."

"Your talent is weather control!" Mary exclaimed,

catching on. "That's why your house suffers no bad

weather!"

"Yes, of course," Keaira agreed. "But only as far out

as you see. That's not very much."

"It should be enough to enable us to get through the

increasingly bad weather we face," Mary said. "Will you

come with us?"

"Of course, if it will help Xanth. Will it

take long?"

"We hope not. But it could be several days. We have

to travel behind the storm and herd it north."

Keaira looked wistfully at her house. "But if I am away

too long, the ill wind will blow my house and trees away,

and it has taken so long to cultivate

them."

Mary appreciated her reluctance. But she had a notion.

"Maybe we can do something about that." She turned to

Modem. "Can you change her reality so that her oasis

won't suffer?"

The boy considered. "Would a dome over it help?"

"Not if it got suffocatingly hot under it," Mary said.

"Maybe a thyme plant, to keep it unchanging," Sean

suggested.

"But we don't have a thyme plant," Chlorine protested.

"Yes we do," Sean said. "Willow has a sprig of thyme

in her napsack."

"What knapsack?" Mary asked, for the girl had no

more than her little purse with her.

"It wouldn't help," Willow said. "It would speed

things up, when they need to be slowed down."

"How about with reverse wood?" Sean asked. "Mom's

got some stashed with the luggage."

"Yes, that should do it," Willow agreed, surprised.

So Sean got out two pieces of reverse wood, and Willow

pulled a knapsack out of her purse, and a sprig of thyme

from that. They set the thyme in Keaira's tree house.

"But nothing has changed," Mary said.

Sean smiled. "Yes it has. Mom. Look beyond the oa-

sis."

She looked. The dust was still flying out there, but very

slowly, as if embedded in syrup. "I don't understand."

"We're living ten times as fast as usual," he ex-

plained. "Outside is normal. The thyme has speeded us

up. But the moment we put the reverse

wood with it, it

will have the opposite effect, and the oasis will be a

tenth as fast as the outside."

Now it was coming clear. Except for one detail. "How

will you get out of there, once the reverse wood reverses

the thyme?"

"I won't. I'll simply throw in the two sticks, and when

they land, they'll separate and take effect. That's how

Chlorine nulled Sending, way back when. She told me.'*

Mary looked at Nimby. He nodded. It seemed that it

would work as specified. "Then it seems you can safely

come with us, if your oasis will last for

a day or so of its

time."

"Yes, that should be all right," the young woman

agreed.

They cleared the oasis, and Sean hurled the two sticks

of wood in. They landed beside the dust tree and bounced

apart. And the scene seemed to freeze. The magic had

taken effect.

The RV was yet more crowded, but that couldn't be

helped. Or could it? Mary had a notion. "Modem, do you

know what an accommodation spell is?"

"A corn a days in?" he repeated blankly.

"The imps use it to make their tiny house seem big

enough for full-sized folk. It isn't really, but—well, maybe

it is. I was wondering whether you could make this moving

house seem larger inside, without being larger outside."

"Mom, you're a genius!" Sean exclaimed.

"Yes, I guess," the boy agreed doubtfully, "if Pewter

knows it." He concentrated.

Suddenly the RV was twice its former size. There was

room for everyone. Mary was seated on a seat big enough

for two. The roof was twice as high. Jim

was manhandling

a monstrous steering wheel. But when she looked out the

window, she saw that the RV was taking up no more road

space than before. It was big only inside.

"Isn't magic wonderful," she breathed.

"For sure," Jim said, shifting to get to the edge of his

seat so that his feet could reach the pedals.

But outside the weather still buffeted the vehicle. The

gusts of wind were becoming frighteningly powerful, and

visibility was diminishing alarmingly. Something had to

be done, or they would be blown into disaster.

Mary had an idea. "Keaira—can you give us calm

weather, in the vicinity of our moving house?"

"Certainly," the girl said. And suddenly they were in

an aisle of calm. Beyond it the ferocity of the storm was

undiminished, but no gust touched the RV, and the air

surrounding it was clear.

"Thank you," Mary said, much relieved. Then she set

about finding some blocks of wood or something else to

enable her husband to reach the pedals more comfortably.

She didn't want him to lose control of the vehicle.

The next name on Nimby's list was Chena Centaur. "I

recognize that one," Mary said, sifting

through her mem-

ory. "Carleton Centaur's little sister. He asked us to relay

his greeting to her, if we saw her."

"You're right," Jim agreed, surprised.

"But I'm not sure how a centaur will fit in here, even

with our increased interior space."

Nimby wrote a note. " 'Chena won't

come inside,' "

Chlorine read. " 'She's a winged centaur.' "

"Winged?" Mary asked. "I'm sure Carleton didn't say

anything like that. She must be a regular centaur."

But Nimby, as always, turned out to be right. They came

up to two somewhat bedraggled winged centaurs taking

shelter in the lee of a large chest nut and bolt tree. Chests

of nuts and bolts were scattered everywhere, harvested pre-

maturely by the wind.

Mentia went out to talk with the fillies,

who were some-

what taken aback by the RV. Then the two stepped into

the calm surrounding the vehicle, evidently relieved, shak-

ing out their wings. The folk inside stepped out to make

introductions. The two were indeed Chena and her friend

Crystal.

"But how is it that you are winged?"

Mary asked.

"Your brother Carleton sends his greetings and goodwill,

but he said nothing about wings."

"I wasn't winged then," Chena explained. "I was a

normal centaur. But then I met Che Centaur, and, well, I

had a wishing stone, and it made me winged. Crystal was

a human girl, whom I talked into

converting. You see, we

need more flying centaurs, of different derivations, if we

are to have a viable species. So now I'm out recruiting.

Crystal here agreed that her prospects would be better as

a centaur. I have been showing her the centaur ways as

we look for more recruits."

"But won't you need male flying centaurs

too?" Mary

asked.

Crystal flushed. "Yes," Chena said. "We are looking

for suitable males of any species to recruit."

Mary studied them. Both were healthy fillies in the

equine portions, and slender girls in the human portions,

with the rather full breasts that the centaur species tended

to have. ' T suspect you will succeed. But I can provide an

expert opinion, if you wish."

"You can?" Crystal asked, speaking for the first time.

Mary glanced to the side. "Sean, if you were not oth-

erwise attached, would you consider

becoming a winged

centaur in order to be with one of these fillies?"

"You bet!" Sean agreed. Then he had another notion,

and Mary could have bit her tongue for not anticipating it.

"Say, I could be transformed to a winged elf to be with

Willow!"

But Willow herself countered that, to Mary's great re-

lief. ' 'No, my love. Magician Trent can transform anyone

to any form, but you are Mundane. He could give you the

form of a winged elf male, but not the

magic. Only if you

already had magic could it change with your form. You

would not be able to fly. Your wings would be useless.

And..." She paused delicately. "I love you as you are.

I would not have you change."

"We just can't make it in each other's worlds," he said,

disheartened.

"Not very well," she agreed.

"That's sad," Chena said. "You fell in a love spring?"

They nodded together.

Chena exchanged a glance with Crystal, then looked

back to Sean. "I don't mean to be crude, but if we find

males to recruit—do you mind telling us exactly where

that love spring is?"

Sean and Willow laughed together, ruefully. "I will

show you, when this crisis is over. But I hope you will

tell your stallions of its nature, before

___"

"Oh, of course!" Chena said. "We wouldn't cheat!

That leads to mischief."

"We know," Sean agreed, and Willow nodded.

Mary did not comment, but it struck her that for a ran-

dom coupling of dissimilar species, the two were remark-

ably well matched. Sean had a wild side that needed

taming, while Willow was quite realistic and sensible, yet

they laughed at the same things. Sean could do a good

deal worse in Mundania. In fact, some of the girls he had

been interested in had had only one thing going for them,

youth. That asset was all too fleeting, as Mary knew so

well from her own experience.

But all that was beside the point. She had to explain

things to the centaur fillies. "We were

looking for you,

Chena," she said. "And perhaps for Crystal too. Because

we need help to deal with this storm, before it blows Xanth

away. Will you come with us?"

"What kind of help?" Chena asked. "We can't safely

fly in this fierce wind."

"I'm not sure," Mary confessed. "But I am sure that

we need you, and that the manner of it will become ap-

parent in due course. As for flying—you should be able

to do that in the ambiance of our traveling house, because

Keaira is keeping the weather calm here." She glanced at

Keaira, who nodded shyly.

"Why, certainly, then," Chena agreed. "We can fly

above it, or to the side. As long as the terrible wind is kept

away. It isn't just the force of it, but the magic dust it

carries. It makes us dizzy, and weird things attack."

"Like phantasms," Mary agreed. "Even when they are

illusions, they are mischief enough. Very

well, then, let's

get moving again."

But Nimby was writing a note. Chlorine took it and read

it aloud. "Why—why he says the house can fly! The fillies

can make it fly."

Chena looked at the RV. "Well, we can make it light

enough to float, but that's not the same as-—"

"But then we could haul it along by ropes," Crystal

said. ' 'It could move through the air. It might be clumsy,

but it could be done, in calm weather."

"Is this safe?" Mary asked, surprised.

Nimby nodded.

"And we can travel over the jungle, instead of through

it?" The notion had definite appeal.

Nod.

This was evidently the way to go. "How do you make

it light?" she asked the centaurs.

"We simply flick things with our tails," Chena said.

"That's really our magic. To make things light enough to

float or fly. When we flick bothersome flies, they become

too light to sit, so must fly away. When we flick ourselves,

we become similarly light." She looked at the RV. "How-

ever, that's pretty big. It would take a number of flicks to

lighten it enough, and we'd have to flick each of you who

go inside it, too."

"And the effect fades with time," Crystal said. "With

each passing moment, you lose lightness."

"You lose moments of effect," Jim said. He was speak-

ing technically, because this was in his specialty of phys-

ics, but it didn't matter here.

"Yes. So you have to get flicked again. I think you

would have to settle to the ground every half hour or so

to get renewed."

"I wonder," Mary said thoughtfully. "Modem, could

you change that reality to make it last longer? Like maybe

a day instead of half an hour."

"I guess so," Modem said.

"Then let's try it," Mary said.

First the two centaurs worked on the RV. They were

right: they were making it lighten, but only at the rate of

a hundred pounds or so per flick. Mary could see the tires

getting less flattened. But it would take about twenty flicks

apiece to complete that job, and they had to pause briefly

to recharge between doses.

"Say, can you split into your halves?" David asked as

they worked. Mary didn't like the way he was staring at

their breasts, but the centaurs seemed

oblivious. Obviously

they wouldn't go bare if they felt there was any shame in

it.

"Halves?" Crystal asked.

"You know. Horse and person."

"No," Chena said between tail flicks. Those breasts

quivered with the effort of every flick, and so did David's

eyeballs. But Mary was determined to give no sign of her

distress. The centaurs simply didn't know how things were

in Mundania. "We are complete creatures, crossbreeds

who have become our own species."

"Anyway, it wouldn't be halves, it would be thirds,"

Crystal said. "Equine, human, and avian."

"Well, can you maybe turn all human, or all bird?" the

boy persisted. "Back and forth."

"No, that's not our magic. You are thinking of the mer-

folk, some of whom can make legs and become fully hu-

man and walk on land, or perhaps make a fish's head and

swim underwater. Or the naga folk, who can assume hu-

man or serpent form, with their natural form being be-

tween. Others, like the harpies, are fixed in their merged

forms."

"Well, could they maybe get together and teach each

other?" David persisted. "So the centaurs could change

form, and the naga could have magic talents, like flying?"

Chena laughed heartily, and Mary struggled not to

wince. "Maybe so. But Crystal and I

have been working

so hard to master our present forms that we are not much

interested in experimenting with any other type of magic.

We are satisfied with the magic we have, which enables

us to fly, and don't crave any other type."

Then one end of the RV lifted off the ground. It was

just about light enough to float away. It

was time to do

the people.

"One person should be ready to hold each one as we

lighten them," Chena said. "We wouldn't want anyone to

float away." She smiled, but the warning was serious.

Jim took a stance by the RV. "I'll go last," he said.

They started in on the people. Karen

went first, and of

course, the moment she was flicked and lightened by

Chena's tail, she leaped into the air to see how far she

would go. As it happened, she leaped away from Jim, who

reached for her but missed. But Mary had been alert for

something like this, and snagged the flying girl. She was

prepared, yet even so, was surprised; Karen really was

featherlight, as if she were no more than an inflated balloon

in girl form. Obviously centaur magic did work on Mun-

danes.

She passed the giri to Jim, who popped her into the open

side door of the RV. "Hey, it's small again!" she cried.

"How are we all going to fit?"

Mary looked at Modem. "That magic was temporary?"

The boy fidgeted. "No. But I can change only one re-

ality at a time. You said to make the lightness last."

Oops. They needed two aspects of magic now. This was

getting complicated. But maybe there .was an answer.

"Jim?"

Her husband rose to the occasion. "Modem, reality is

mostly the way we see it. Agreed?"

"Yes," the boy said. "Only—"

"So what we need is a special kind of

reality for this

moving house. Suppose we think of it as having several

properties: it moves, it is larger inside than outside, and it

holds a given spell for a day or more. These are not dif-

ferent realities, but aspects of this particular structure. One

reality covers all its qualities. Does this make sense?"

"I guess," Modem agreed. He concentrated. And sud-

denly the interior was twice its natural size.

Crystal nicked David, and Jim passed him inside. Then

Chena did the next, and so on, until only Nimby and Jim

were left outside. Mary suspected that Nimby didn't really

need the centaur magic to make him

light, but he .accepted

the flick and went in. Finally Jim closed the side door,

opened the driver's seat door, and accepted his own light-

ening. All ten of them were inside, with the two winged

centaurs outside, taking the ropes now attached.

The centaurs flicked the vehicle twice more, and the rear

end lifted. They were floating!

"Where to?" Jim asked Nimby.

Nimby pointed south. But he wrote another note.

"South," Jim called out the window.

"One more to pick up," Chlorine read. "Adam. About

an hour, as the house flies."

"An hour," Jim called out the window as

the ropes lost

their slack. Just as if this were routine. Chena looked back

and nodded.

They were hauled smoothly up until the trees were be-

low. Mary saw their branches being furiously whipped by

the wind as the calm-weather patch left them behind. The

storm was still intensifying, and it was not hard to appre-

ciate how in time it could start blowing trees down. Happy

Bottom was increasing to hurricane strength.

Now they bore south. The children peered out and

down, fascinated, and so did Jim and Mary. It was as if

they were in the cab of a blimp, floating silently across the

terrain. The landscape spread out below, varied and vari-

egated. The outline of Xanth, Mary knew, resembled that

of Mundane Florida, but within that outline the detail could

differ considerably. Here there were mountains and chasms

and endless types of magic. She looked at the two flying

centaurs, who made a pretty pair as their great wings rose

and fell together. They were nice girls, she knew. In fact,

most of the folk of Xanth were nice. Parents were trusting,

because the average stranger deserved trust. The bad crea-

tures, like dragons, were obvious—and even they weren't

always bad. The winged monsters had pitched in to help

save Xanth, even the filthy harpies, and none had broken

the truce.

There were things she was coming to like about this

land. She would be sorry to leave it. And she did want to

save it. She felt somewhat responsible for the storm, be-

cause it had entered Xanth through the same aperture as

their family had. She realized that that wasn't completely

reasonable, but neither was it completely unreasonable.

The storm was Mundane in origin; let the Mundanes de-

fuse it.

The flight continued with no sign of weight gain. Jim's

rationale for double reality shifting had worked. For some-

one who, until this adventure, had had zero tolerance for

fantasy, he had made a remarkable accommodation. As

had she herself. There was just something about Xanth,

magic aside.

Nimby pointed down. Already? How the hour had

flown—no pun. Now they had to fetch in Adam. What

would his magic talent be? How would it integrate with

those of the others? Only Nimby knew. Nimby, she real-

ized, was the true leader of this expedition. A mute don-

key-headed dragon!

"Below!" Jim called out the window.

The centaurs angled down. There was a squat stone

house. At least that would be secure against the wind, for

a while. They landed before it, but the RV tended to float

up again when the rope went slack. The centaurs picked

up rocks and brought them to the RV as ballast. Jim and

Sean took the stones and piled them in the center of the

floor in back. Then the vehicle stayed put.

"But watch it," Jim warned. "We still float."

Then the centaurs brought smaller stones, which Mary

and Willow put in their purses as personal ballast, follow-

ing Nimby's indication. It seemed that they were the

proper ones to make the appeal to Adam.

They disembarked and approached the house. A face

appeared in a window. "Are you real or spooks?" it de-

manded.

"We are real," Mary answered. "I am somebody's

mother."

"I am somebody's love," Willow added.

"Then come in before the wind starts again." The door

opened.

They entered. A rather stout young man stood there.

"You must be Adam," Mary said. "I am Mary Mun-

dane."

"I am Willow Elf."

"Yes, I am Adam. What do you folk want

with me?"

"We are on a mission to save Xanth from the terrible

storm," Mary said. "We need your help. Will you come

with us?"

He looked astonished. "You want me to go with you?"

"Yes, if you will. We need you."

"But nobody needs me," he protested. "Nobody even

likes me."

"Perhaps because nobody knows you," Willow said

sympathetically. "Are you mean-spirited?"

"No. I am whatever I choose to partake of."

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"Is that your magic?" Mary asked.

"Yes. If I see a rock, I can take its essence and become

rock-hard. If I see water, I can become liquid. If I see a

cloud, I can become light and fluffy. But that doesn't help

anyone else, and I still look plain and stuffy."

Willow shrugged. "So do I, among my own kind. But

I met a young man who thinks I'm beautiful, thanks to a

love spring. Maybe there will be something for you."

"A love spring," he breathed. "What I wouldn't give

to get dunked in one of those with a lovely girl!"

"Maybe it will happen," Mary said, realizing that this

was why Willow had been the one for this. Her experience

signaled what Adam's might be. "Please come with us, in

our floating house, and help us save Xanth."

"Sure," he said.

. So they brought him out, and it turned out that there

was no need to make him light, because he simply looked

at a cloud and became foggy light. He entered the RV and

took a seat where one was available, beside Keaira.

' 'Any more people to pick up?" Mary asked Nimby.

Nimby shook his head.

"So our complement is complete at last!" Mary said,

relieved. "Now we can head straight on south and save

Xanth from Happy Bottom."

Nimby nodded.

"All the way south," Jim called out the window. "Are

you fillies holding up okay?"

"We are getting hungry," Chena said.

"Do you like pies? We have a treeful."

"Yes, those will be fine."

So they passed out the pies remaining from the changed

tangle tree, and the centaurs ate them as

they flew. The

speed picked up. They were on their way to their destiny.

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14

ILL WIND

David woke as the RV slid down toward the ground.

Was this boring flight finally over? It had been

interesting for a while when they picked up Wil-

low, who was sort of pretty, and Modem was his own age,

twelve, so had some common interests. Modem had en-

joyed the big stink the demoness made as much as David

had, even if he had had to change it to roses to pacify the

womenfolk. He sneaked just as many peeks at Chlorine

and the topless flying centaur fillies. Oh, to be a few years

older! But Keaira was an adult young woman, well'cov-

ered, and no raving beauty either, while Adam was not

only adult, he was fat. So once the novelty of flying in the

RV faded, nothing much was left.

But now they were landing, and there might be some

action. After all, they still had to drive Happy Bottom to

where she couldn't do any more harm, and she wasn't

going to want to go. He pitied the poor person who would

have to wear the windbreaker jacket and try to herd her

north.

Nimby, sitting beside Chlorine, turned his head to look

at David. Oh, no! Did that mean David was the one?

Nimby nodded.

Nimby was eerie, but always right. So David would

have to do it. But he wouldn't like it.

Nimby shook his head.

He would like it? Why? But Nimby merely smiled in-

scrutably. He could be sort of frustrating that way. Yet it

did give David something to be interested in. How could

he like wearing the stupid jacket and trying to herd the

stupid wind anywhere? There must be something fun about

it.

The RV touched down right beside the big pillow where

Chlorine and Nimby had landed, at the beginning of the

trollway. They had come full circle, or

whatever, and seen

a whole lot on the way. But what now?

Nimby had written some notes for Chlorine. Now she

read them off. " 'Keaira and David will have to herd

Happy Bottom north,' " she read. " 'He'll wear the wind-

breaker, and she'll keep the weather calm so they won't

get blown out of the sky.' "

"Out of the sky?" Mom asked, her tone echoing the

furrow David knew was in her forehead.

" "They will be riding the winged centaurs,' " Chlorine

read. " 'And Willow will show the way, flying with

them.' "

Suddenly it dawned. He'd ride a bare-busted filly! Up

in the sky by himself, like a flying cowboy, and he could

sneak all the peeks he wanted. That would indeed be fun.

"But David can't go all alone out there!" Mom pro-

tested, as, of course, she would. "Suppose he fell?"

Um; good point. In the RV there was no chance of fall-

ing, because it was closed in. But though he liked the idea

of riding a bare-chested winged filly, his actual horse-

riding experience was small. He might indeed fall, and if

they were high in the sky at the time, that would be the

end of him.

" 'No, he will remain light,' " Chlorine read. It seemed

that Nimby had anticipated all the questions. " 'Should he

fall from his steed, he would merely float gently down.

The centaur would have ample time to catch him before

he reached the ground.' "

Oho! And how would she catch him? By flinging her

arms about him and clasping him to her bosom? That was

a risk he was prepared to take. And Nimby was right about

the floating; he had forgotten how light they all were. So

it was safe after all.

Dad had a more sensible objection: "If Keaira goes with

them, what of the weather here? We'll be blown away the

moment we lose her calm-weather protection."

"I can change local reality to revert the moving house

to normal," Modem said. "Then it might not blow away."

But he didn't look certain, because they

could see the fe-

rocious dusty wind beyond the oasis of calm. There were

even phantasms forming around the edges of the calm re-

gion, making grotesque gestures to signal what they'd like

to do to the folk in the RV if they could just get close. Of

course, it would just be illusion, mostly, as long as they

kept the doors and windows closed, but even illusions

could be pretty bad.

But Nimby had an answer for Chlorine to read: " "The

present local reality must remain as it is, because soon the

house will need to travel again, and no one must leave it.

The centaurs will not be here to make it light again. Mo-

dem's local reality is the main force holding back the

magic dust.' "

David could see that Chlorine was startled as she heard

herself read that. "You mean Modem's doing more than

just keeping the lightness lasting and the inside big?" Then

she read the next answer, already in her

hand. " 'Yes. His

magic reality preempts the malicious magic fostered by the

dust.' "

"It does?" Modem asked, surprised.

"I guess your magic is more potent than you know,"

Dad said, with a typical Dad smile.

" 'It is,' " Chlorine read, " 'Because the magic dust is

enhancing it. Thus the dust of madness has the ironic effect

of canceling itself, in this limited instance.' "

"Gee," Modem said, pleased.

David was, of course, too good a person to be jealous

of the importance of anybody else's role, but he did ex-

perience a certain discomfort that an ignorant person might

choose to interpret as jealousy. So he mentioned a legiti-

mate concern. "If the RV, uh, house stays light, won't it

just blow away, like Dad says?"

"As Dad says," Mom said in her obnoxious English-

teacher way. He had tried to break her of that, but without

much success. Parents were slow learners.

But this time fat Adam had an answer. "I can assume

the properties of Xanth's heaviest rock, and be ballast."

"You can?" Keaira asked, evidently impressed.

"Oh, sure," Adam said. "When I'm cloud-light, I'm

like a fat balloon. When I'm fruity, I'm like a fat apple.

When I'm solid, I'm like a fat boulder. That's why folk

don't like me."

"I think it's a great talent," Keaira said.

"You do? I think your talent is the greatest. You can

be always in sunshine, or have it rain when you want it

to."

Keaira blushed. "Thank you."

"You mean you care what I think, even though I'm fat

as a pumpkin?"

"Fat pumpkins are the handsomest," she said, still

blushing.

This was getting disgusting. Time to break it up before

they actually got mushy. "Well, let's get busy," David

said. "Who rides who?"

"Who rides whom," Mom said.

David ignored it, as he would any other crude remark.

"Which bare-boobed filly is mine?"

"David!" Mom exclaimed, as Karen stifled a titter.

"Sorry," he said. "Which bare-boobed

centaur?"

Mom looked as if she has swallowed a poop-flavored

prune, but this time she held her tongue. Good. Maybe he

had made his point. Of course, there'd be bleep to pay

when she finally got him alone at home, but maybe she'd

forget by then.

Chlorine read her next note. " 'Chena. She thinks

you're cute.' "

David was flabbergasted. "She does?"

Nimby nodded. He should know, since he could read

minds. No wonder he knew David would enjoy the ride!

Meanwhile Mom looked as if her prune had turned into

a stink horn, but again she stifled her comment.

"And take some reverse wood," Chlorine read. So they

made two small bundles of two sticks each, and David

took one while Keaira took the other. They were bound

together by duct tape so they wouldn't come apart acci-

dentally, but of course, they could be ripped apart if they

were needed. Then whatever threat they encountered

would be reversed. " 'But use the wood only in an emer-

gency,' •" Chlorine read, " 'because it will nullify the cen-

taurs too, reversing their magic lightness.' ".

For sure! If David had to use his wood, he'd strip the

tape to prime it, then hurl it like a grenade. Then it would

affect only what he threw it at. He could make like Su-

perman, nulling enemies galore. Pow! You 're reversed! He

tucked the bound sticks into his belt.

They got out of the RV. All except Adam, who looked

out just long enough to spy a solid metallic rock. Then he

assumed the qualities of that rock, and became hard and

heavy. Keaira tapped her knuckle against his shoulder, ver-

ifying it, almost skinned a joint, and smiled with acknow-

ledgment. Adam looked as it he were

about to float away

despite being boulder-solid.

With Adam's change, the RV was firmly planted, and

the two centaurs no longer had to hang tightly on to the

ropes. Chlorine gave the jacket she had been wearing to

David, and explained to them what Nimby had written.

"Fine," Chena said, smiling. "Get on my back, Da-

vid." There was something perky in her attitude, as if she

really did find him cute.

He adjusted that jacket, which remained pleasantly

warm from its contact with the beautiful woman, and

smelled faintly of—of what? Of a commercial swimming

pool. Of course—chlorine! The chemical used to purify

the water. Only now it was like perfume.

Dad lifted him up and set him behind Chena's lovely

white wings, which were folded but remained a bit out

from her body. Then Dad did the same for Keaira, putting

her on Crystal.

"Remember, you are very light," Chena told him, turn-

ing her head and the upper part of her torso so she could

look him in the eye. That meant, unfortunately, that he had

to meet her gaze, because he didn't want to give away

what he really wanted to peek at. It was frustrating. "So

you must hold firmly on to my mane."

"Mane," he repeated dumbly. Her hair flowed down

from her head, and somewhere became the mane, but he

wasn't sure where.

"In front of you. And try to wrap your legs around my

barrel, if they will reach."

"Barrel." When she turned back to face the front, he

could look—but now nothing was in sight. That was dou-

bly frustrating.

"Take hold," she said, as she spread her wings.

Then, finally, he did. His hands found grips in the

shorter hair of her mane at the base of her human portion.

She pumped her wings, and leaped, and sailed into the

air. It seemed remarkably easy, until he remembered that

she had made herself almost as light as he was, so that she

weighed almost nothing. The motion of her wings was

mainly to move her, rather than to lift

her.

But though he could see the full beautiful sweep of those

wings, he couldn't see the front of her torso. Here he

thought he would have his best chance yet to peek without

obstruction or discovery, and instead it was no chance.

"Bleep!" he muttered.

"You might consider looking across at Crystal," Chena

murmured.

She knew! Boys were not supposed to blush, but he was

afraid he was doing so. But it was a good suggestion.

"Thanks," he said, and looked.

He was rewarded by a splendid view. Crystal's wings

were pumping gracefully, and her front was completely

open to view. She was also slightly better endowed than

Chena. In fact—

Then Crystal looked their way, and he had to wrench

his gaze away. He couldn't peek if someone was watching

him peek!

So, frustrated anew, he looked around elsewhere. To the

other side was Willow, who flew readily in her dress be-

cause it was cut to leave holes for her wings.

Now that they were all airborne. Willow flew close. Crys-

tal approached from the other side, so that they could talk to

each other. "Nimby wrote me a note explaining how to do

it," Willow said. "Happy Bottom is like a giant puzzle,

with alternating bands of wind and cloud around her center.

We have to find our way to the center, where her eye is, so

David can use his jacket to push it. Wherever the eye goes,

Happy Bottom goes; she can't help it. So we'll just keep

pushing her north to the Region of Air, where Fracto will try

to tame her. The problem will be finding her eye, and stay-

ing with it. She may try some tricks to hide it or move it

away from us. David has to push in the right place, or it

won't work, and Keaira has to stay near him so he has calm

weather. I'm the only one who is free to explore. But if I go

outside the fair-weather zone, I'll be in trouble, so you need

to stay reasonably close to me while I search."

"Gotcha," David said.

"We shall do our best," Keaira agreed.

Willow flew on ahead. There was a solid-looking ver-

tical wall of cloud, moving rapidly from west to east. It

reached down almost to the ground, and up almost to the

top of the sky. "Boy, she's a big b—bleep," David said,

awed. He knew Happy Bottom was a hurricane now, even

if she had been a mere tropical storm

when she entered

Xanth; she had intensified. "Can one little jacket move all

that?" •

"The center is much smaller," Chena said. "And

calmer. Nimby says."

"Oh. That should make it easier." But he wasn't quite

sure it was so.

Willow flew back. "There's a hole in the wall!" she

cried, excited. "Maybe we can get through it."

"Can't Keaira make it calm wherever we go?" David

asked. "So we don't need to look for holes?"

"Perhaps," Willow said. "But it's better to go in with-

out disturbing the ill wind's cloud banks, so she doesn't

notice us. The moment she becomes aware of us, she could

start fighting us."

"But she's just a storm!" he protested.

"So is Fracto," Chena reminded him.

"Oh, yeah." Here in Xanth even inanimate things had

awareness. It was certainly better not to make Happy Bot-

tom aware of them.

So the two centaurs followed Willow through the fleet-

ing gap in the clouds. It closed in after them; they had

made it just in time. Now they were between two walls of

cloud, and the one ahead was moving faster than the one

behind.

David remembered something about hurricanes, because

he had seen their patterns shown on Miami radar. They

alternated cloud bands with air bands, and most of the

action was in the cloud bands. They got smaller toward

the center, but also fiercer. ' 'If we just keep going straight

through them," he said, "we'll find the center. We can't

help it. There's nowhere else it can be."

"I hope so," Chena said doubtfully. "It can be hard to

tell direction, in the middle of fog and rain."

For sure! But soon another gap opened up ahead. They

plunged through it. But this one closed up before they

completed their passage, and suddenly they were caught in

grayness. Keaira's controlled weather kept the winds from

them, but rain sluiced down from above,

drenching them.

He heard the rain pelting the centaur's wings, and Chena

dipped until she flicked herself and resumed level flight.

Happy Bottom was simply too big; Keaira couldn't clear

a passage to the sunlight.

"Uh-oh," Chena said. "I think she's on to us."

David thought the same. Maybe the storm couldn't

touch them directly, but she sure could cloud things up.

Suppose they couldn't find their way out of this cloud

bank?

Then they emerged, and it was clear. They had made it

through, this time. "Let's pick a bigger gap, next time,"

David said.

"If Willow can find one," Chena agreed.

Willow searched diligently, almost getting caught at the

edge of the calm section. David .saw her do a flip in the

air as one wing caught the edge. Yes, there was power in

the storm, and it would blow them right out of Xanth if

they got caught in it.

"Maybe I could help some," David said. "With the

jacket. I think all I have to do is open it." ThereAad been

one of Nimby's notes about that, somewhere along the

way. When closed, the windbreaker was passive, but when

opened, its magic took effect.

"I think it's better to wait until we reach the eye,"

Chena said. "Happy Bottom may know of our presence,

but not of our power. So she may consider us a nuisance,

not a threat. Best to keep it that way."

She was making sense. So they hunted along the cloud

wall, searching for that brief avenue through. While Happy

Bottom's winds seemed to get stronger.

In due course another avenue appeared. But this time

they were cautious; it could be a trap. So Willow made a

feint at it, with the two centaurs following closely behind.

Sure enough, it closed up, the fog imploding from every

side. But they had sheered off just before it, skirting the

fringe of the cloud wall. There was no doubt now: Happy

Bottom was trying to get them. But her ploy had been

simple, so she probably underestimated them.

They flew along the side, and found a thinning of the

wall, where fog had been borrowed to make the implosion.

They plunged into this. The storm had to know of then-

passage, but couldn't react fast enough to catch them,

having been caught off-guard. By the time the wind and

fog closed in, they were through.

They were in the next clear band. Apparently the hur-

ricane's power was limited mostly to the cloud bands,

where the magic dust swirled thickest. But they would be

unlikely to catch her napping again.

They flew up to the next band, but it was solid fog.

They couldn't get through. They didn't dare risk another

bold charge into the fog.

"Maybe we can sneak below it," Willow suggested.

"The hills and trees must interfere with the wind bands,

so there should be gaps she can't help."

They flew down. Sure enough, there was a clear region

in the lee of a mountain. They zoomed through that, just

below the bottom of a cloud wall, skimming the terrain,

and flew up into the next clear region.

"Look!" Chena cried. "That must be the eye!"

It surely was. It looked like a monstrous eyeball, turning

in the center of the huge ring of clouds that was the in-

nermost cloud wall. This was what they had to move north.

They came up behind the orb and hovered in the calm

air. Then they oriented north, and David unzipped and

opened his jacket. "Go!" he cried.

Nothing happened.

The two centaur fillies looked at him. Willow flew close.

"Is there an invocation you have to use?"

"Nimby didn't say so," David said, disgruntled. What

was wrong? Far from blowing anything, the jacket was

completely calm.

Then David's ears popped. "Ouch! Feels like descend-

ing in an airplane," he said, shaking his head.

"I think the local pressure is rising," Keaira said.

"That's odd, because I'm not doing it."

"There's a waft of breeze coming toward us," Crystal

said. "I feel it in my mane."

"But none going away from us," Willow said. "And

what we need is a strong outward blast."

Then Chena caught on. "It's breaking the wind! Air is

coming in, but not going away. It's pooling around the

jacket, building up pressure."

"And high pressure will push the low-pressure eye

away," Crystal added. "That must be how it works. All

we have to do is let it build up enough."

"It's building, for sure," David said. "My eardrums are

getting bonged." He held his nose and blew hard until he

felt another pop in his head.

"Look!" Chena cried again. "The eye is moving!"

And it was. There was no actual wind, but the high-

pressure zone around them was shoving

the eye away.

The eye felt it, too. It spun around to fix its stormy gray

iris on them. It blinked. The pupil widened. It saw them!

"Keep pushing it!" Willow said.

David tried, but the eye slid around to the side, instead

of moving north. Chena flew to get directly south of it

again, but it slid farther to the side. It was just plain hard

to push in the direction they wanted.

"Maybe if we all try to channel the air flow," Willow

suggested. "To surround the eye."

They tried it. Willow hovered to David's left, and Crys-

tal to his right, and all three winged monsters did their best

to push the dense air forward, surrounding the eye.

"It's working!" David cried.

But then the eye, irritated, reddened and expanded. It

grew to twice its former size, then {en times as big. Now

it was impossible to push the whole

thing.

"Maybe if I used my reverse wood to mess it up,"

David said, tugging at the two sticks in his belt.

"Careful with that," Keaira said, touching her own

bound sticks. "This wood is dangerous, if—"

Too late. David had grabbed just one stick. The other

snagged in his belt. The tape let go, and the two sticks

separated.

"Eeeeee!" Chena screamed, putting a good six £"s into

it. She dropped out from under him like a rock.

He had separated the reverse wood, and

one stick had

landed on Chena, and it had reversed the centaur's magic

lightness, making her magically heavy. He himself was

falling too, but not as fast, because as a Mundane, he was

more resistive both to magic and reversed magic." But even

the limited effect on him was too much; he was falling

toward the ground at normal falling velocity, and that

would be enough to pulp him when he struck the ground.

So he did the sensible thing: he threw away the stick.

His plummet became a slow descent, as most of the

lightness returned to his body. But he was still going down.

Already he saw the trees below.

But that wasn't all. Happy Bottom's malignant eye reap-

peared, casting about, looking for him. She must have

pretty will figured out the nature of the windbreaker.

The windbreaker! It was still open, still

generating a

high-pressure zone around him. That was what was ena- -

bling the eye to orient on him; it could probably see the

crowded air. So he closed the jacket and zipped it up.

But there was still too much pressure in his vicinity.

Happy Bottom's eye continued to cast about, looking to

one side and the other, finding the pressure gradients. She

would soon locate him, and then—she would probably

blow him headfirst into a cliff. Jacket and all. He had fallen

out of Keaira's calm-weather zone, so Happy Bottom

could get at him now.

He looked desperately for some escape, but there

seemed to be none. He no longer had the reverse wood,

'thanks to his idiocy, and he had no wings to fly with. All

he could do was float gently down, while the hurricane

worked up her strength for a doomsday strike.

Then a bit of fog formed below him. But it didn't look

like Happy Bottom's fog; the color and

texture differed.

What could it be?

The fog thickened into a low-lying cloud. The convo-

lutions of the cloud formed a fuzzy face. He knew that

face from somewhere.

A cloud eye winked.

"Fracto!" he cried. How had he gotten here? He must

have sneaked in, camouflaging himself as a section of

Happy Bottom. Like most clouds, Fracto could be large or

small, noisy or quiet, depending on his mood. Right now

he was being as quiet as mist.

Happy Bottom didn't realize. David hoped his excla-

mation hadn't given Fracto away. But just what could the

enemy-turned-friend do? The hurricane was about to blow

him away regardless. Fracto, in his present form, had only

a tiny fraction of the hurricane's strength, so couldn't

counter that ill wind.

Then David fell into the cloud. The fog of its substance

surrounded him, so that he couldn't see anything beyond

it.

Which meant that no on'e could see him, either. Happy

Bottom would not know where to blow, and he was such

a small target that she'd never get

anywhere blowing

blindly.

His feet touched ground. David tumbled, but wasn't

hurt, being still quite light. He was alone in the magic

jungle of Xanth.

The fog lifted just enough to let him see around if he

kept his head low. Fracto was still shielding him from the

ill wind's view, giving him a chance to find his way back

into action. But to do that, he had to find Chena Centaur.

Or rather, she had to find him. He hoped she was all right.

She should be, once she got away from that reverse wood

stick. But if he was hidden from Happy Bottom, he was

hidden from Chena too. But maybe she would know to

look for him under Fracto.

So what should he do? Stand here and wait, or try to

find a better rendezvous point? It might be dangerous to

blunder around an alien jungle, but it might also be dan-

gerous to sit and wait for whatever came to find him.

So he would at least try to find a less exposed region,

a safer place. Then if he saw a flying centaur, he could

hail her, and all would be reasonably well.

He started walking—and his right toe kicked something.

Pain shot up his leg, and he fell to the ground. What bad

he stubbed his toe on?

There was nothing there but a regular pinecone. That

couldn't be it. He reached for it—but when his fingers

touched it, another jolt of pain encompassed them and shot

up his arm. That was it!

He got up, staying clear of the cone. What kind of tree

had produced that? To look so ordinary, yet bring so much

hurt to anyone who touched it.

In a moment it came to him. That wasn't a pinecone, it

was a pain cone. No wonder it had made him hurt.

He looked down at the turf by his feet, in case there

should be anything else to avoid. And shuddered. There

was somebody's severed finger! No, maybe not severed,

as it wasn't bleeding. It was curved into the form of a

circle.

Then he laughed. He knew what that

was: a ring finger.

A finger circled into a ring. Maybe ogres wore it.

He walked carefully around the ring. Ahead was a sign.

It said TWIN CITY. A city? Maybe 'that would be a good,

safe place to go. So he followed the path that led away

from the sign.

He came across two girls of about his own age, playing

by the side of the path. If there was anything he wasn't

interested in, especially at this time, it was girls his own

age. So he tried to pass them by.

But they didn't let him do that. "Hi, boy —who are

you?" one called.

"And what's your business?" the other added.

Should he make up something to try to get rid of them?

No, maybe they wouldn't believe the truth, so that was

best. "I'm David Mundane, and I'm trying to save Xanth

from being blown away."

Sure enough, they tuned it out. "I'm

Mariana," the first

girl said. "And this is my twin sister Anairam. Come see

what we do."

He was stuck for it, because he didn't want to make a

scene and maybe get tangled up worse. He went to see

what they were doing. To his surprise, it turned out to be

interesting.

"I do rock shaping," Mariana explained. She lifted a

stone, and ran her hands across it, and it changed shape as

if it were clay.

In fact, maybe it was clay. "Let me see that," David

said.

Mariana handed it to him. He ran fingers over it. It was

definitely rock. Yet he had just seen her mold it. He

handed it back, and it changed again as she pressed her

fingers into it, forming a crude doll

figure. Then she gave

it to her sister.

"And I animate it," Anairam said. Suddenly the doll

came to life. It sat up in her hands. She set it down, and

it ran off into the forest.

David couldn't help himself. "Those are pretty good

talents," he admitted grudgingly.

"Thank you," Mariana said. "Want to play house?"

Naturally they wanted to get into girl-games. "Some

other time," he said. Like maybe in three years. "I gotta

go." He walked on. He hoped Chena

would find him soon.

Soon he came to two girls, a little younger than he was.

Was this going to be another dull session? He tried to walk

on by.

It didn't work. "Hello," one girl called. "I'm Amanda,

and this is my twin sister Adnama. We change hair color."

"Great for you," he called back. "I'm David, and I'm

walking right on by."

"But you must see," Amanda protested.

"Yes, we have nice talents," Adnama

added.

"And that's not all," Amanda concluded.

He was stuck for it again. Where was Chena?

"See my hair," Amanda said. Her hair was brown, but

as he watched, it changed to yellow, and

then to red. "I

can change my hair color," she said proudly.

"And I can change the hair color of others," Adnama

said, as her sister's hair changed again, to green.

"So?" David asked impatiently.

"So now I'll change yours," Adnama said.

David felt nothing, so figured she was bluffing. But then

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Mariana held up a mirror, and he saw his face-—framed

"by blue hair.

"Change it back!" he demanded angrily.

"After you kiss us," Adnama said.

He was really stuck for it! So he kissed them each in

turn, and Adnama restored his hair to its natural color.

Then he got the bleep out of there, before they thought of

any other games to play with him.

But farther down the path he came to two more girls.

These seemed to be about two years older than he was.

Each had long purple hair and green eyes. He was catching

on to the nature of Twin City: it was filled with twins. But

why was it all female?

This time he tackled them directly,

knowing that they

wouldn't just let him pass. "I'm David Mundane, on a

mission to save Xanth," he said. "Who are you?"

"I am Leai," one said sadly. "I am suicidal, but I can't

die."

"I am Adiana," the other said, as sadly. "I want to live,

but I am dying."

Suddenly this was heavy stuff. "You can't just switch

places?"

"We haven't found the magic for that," Leai said.

"Too bad." He wondered whether they were teasing

him. If so, it wasn't the kind of joke he liked.

"Do you think I could die in Mundania?" Leai asked.

"I guess so. If it's magic that keeps you alive."

"It's magic," She said. "See." She brought out a

wicked-looking knife and tried to stab

herself with it.

"Hey!" David leaped to grab her hand before the knife

could reach her flesh. He succeeded in turning it aside.

"What are you trying to do?"

"I am trying to kill myself," she said. "But I can't,

because something always stops me. Just as you did."

"That wasn't magic! I just couldn't let you do it,"

She looked squarely at him. She was rather pretty, for

a girl. "Why not? What do you care about girls?"

"Nothing," he said. "But—"

"You'll make up some reason, but you'll always stop

me. Or someone else will. I've tried to kill myself a hun-

dred times, and I just can't do it. If there's no magic in

Mundania, maybe. I could go there with you and—"

"I'm not going to help you get there so you can kill

yourself," he said.

She nodded. "I'm not surprised. But maybe if my sister

went with you, she could live."

"But I couldn't leave you, Leai," Adiana

protested. She

was sort of pretty too.

"I don't think I can help you girls," David said.

"Though I'd like to. I'd like to make you both willing and

able to live." Then an idea struck'him. "I had two sticks

of reverse wood. I lost them, but they must have fallen

somewhere around here. Maybe if you found them, they

would reverse your magics, and—"

Both girls screamed with delight. "Ah, thank you!"

Leai exclaimed, and kissed him on the right ear. "So very

very much," Adiana said, and kissed him on the left ear.

Then both ran off on a search for the reverse wood.

David would never have admitted it, but he really hadn't

minded getting kissed. He walked on down the path.

Soon he came to two more young folk, but this time

they were male and female. "I was afraid all the twins

were girls," he remarked, relieved.

"They are, in that section," the boy said. "In the next

section they are all boys. We're on the border between

sections."

"Oh. Well, hi. I'm David Mundane. I'm __"

"You're on a mission to save Xanth from Hurricane

Happy Bottom," the girl said.

"And you will succeed, .in due course," the boy said.

David had intended to say something intelligent like,

"How can you possibly know things like that, when you

have just met me!" But as usual his mouth got into gear

before his brain, so all he said was a stupid "Huh?"

Both boy and girl smiled. "We apologize," the boy

said. "We sometimes forget that strangers don't know us

as we know them. I am Deja, and this is my twin sister,

Vu. My talent is to see the future, and hers is to see the

past. So when we saw you, our talents

came into play, and

we knew your past and future business."

Oh. "So can you tell me where to find Chena Centaur?"

"Unfortunately, we can't," Vu said. "We can't see the

present. But I can tell you that your friend was most con-

cerned when she lost you."

"And I can tell you that she will find you in about

fifteen and one half minutes," Deja said. "Thereafter your

mission will be routine."

"If the thickening magic hasn't distorted his percep-

tion," Vu said. "We are somewhat protected from it, here

in this valley, so things are almost

normal here, but that

may change. We are therefore very glad to leam of your

mission."

"Uh, thanks," David said. "I gotta get on to meet

Chena, then."

"To be sure," Deja agreed. "We wish you the very

best."

David went on down the path. There was a sign saying

TRI CITY. At least now he was out of the twins section. He

felt better.

Until he encountered three girls, evidently triplets. Oh,

no! He knew he hadn't a chance of getting through un-

scathed, but he made the effort. He maintained his pace

and tried to march on by them.

"Why, look—a singleton boy," one said. "Let's have

some fun with him."

"I'm no fun," he said quickly as they converged. They

were big girls, of the kind he would ordinarily like to sneak

peeks at, considering their short skirts, but he didn't trust

what they might think was fun. "I'm just David, a dull

Mundane."

"A Mundane!" another exclaimed. "We must see how

our magic works on him."

"Not very well," David said desperately as he came to

a stop. He had to stop, because otherwise he would have

walked right into the one who was blocking the path

ahead.

"We shall soon see," the third said. "Hello, David

Mundane. I am Sherry. My talent is to shrink things." She

reached forth and touched him—and suddenly he was half

his normal size. "You're right—my magic doesn't work

well on you. I meant to make you much smaller."

"Please let me go," he cried, getting

really worried.

Deja had said Chena would find him soon, but he hadn't

said in what state.

"But we haven't finished playing with you," the second

woman said. "I am Terry. My talent is to enlarge things."

She reached down to touch him, and suddenly he was

twice his normal size. "Oh, my, it is true;

I tried to make

you invisible giant size, not baby ogre size."

David realized that in his present condition he could

bowl them over and escape. But he didn't want to stay this

way, either. "I just want to save Xanth," he pleaded.

"In that case, we had better restore you,"

the first

woman said. "I am Merry, and that's my talent." She

touched his leg, and suddenly he was back to normal.

Vastly relieved, he pushed on by them and fled down

the path. "Come play with us again," Sherry called after

him. "We know other games too."

"Fascinating ones," Terry added.

"For a man and three women," Merry finished.

"Not without violating the Adult Conspiracy!" he

called back, and had the satisfaction of seeing them gaze

at each other in wild surprise. "I guess that pooped your

panties," he muttered, pleased.

It must be close to the time for Chena to find him. David

hurried on along the path, hoping he wouldn't encounter

any more mischievous girls.

He was startled by a loud howl. It sounded halfway like

the world's least-oiled door hinge, and halfway like the

world's hungriest hound. What could it

be?

It turned out to be a huge canine-creature. But it wasn't

flesh and blood. It was made out of wood. Its legs were

like uprooted saplings, its body was like a section of a tree

trunk, and its teeth were sharpened wooden pegs glistening

with sap. It was a timber wolf!

David wasn't sure whether to freeze in the hope that it

wouldn't see him, or speak soothingly to it in the hope

that he could befriend it. So he took the compromise

course: he ran like all bleep.

He heard the timber wolf bounding after him. He was

going as fast as he could, which was pretty fast, because

he remained pretty light, but he heard the bounding foot-

falls coming closer behind him.

"Heellpp!" he screamed.

A winged form swooped down on him. "Ah, there you

are!" Chena exclaimed. She caught him in her arms and

hauled him up as she pumped her wings. The timber wolf

leaped and snapped, but they were just out of his reach.

Phew!

"Now get on my back," the centaur said, wrestling him

around behind her. He obliged, and soon was properly

seated.

They rose up into the protective shroud of fog. Only

then did he realize that one of his fahcies had just been

realized—and he hadn't even noticed. She had clasped him

to her bare front when she lifted him from the ground, and

he had been so distracted by the timber wolf that he had

paid no attention to what else was happening. What an

idiot he had been!

He covered his chagrin as well as he could. "How did

you find me?" he asked.

"Practo provided cover, and knew where you were.

Once we learned how to communicate with him, we went

right to you."

"We?"

"Crystal is flying right above us, but Keaira isn't using

her power now, so we can hide from Happy Bottom.

Fracto is being really helpful; we wouldn't be able to do

this without him."

"Yeah, he hid me from Happy Bottom," David agreed.

"But how did you talk with him?"

"We devised a fog-ball code. One ball for yes, two for

no, and a fog arrow to show where to

find you. He said

you were all right, but that a tree dog was closing in on

you, so we had to hurry."

"That was a timber wolf!" David said, laughing.

Chena laughed too. "Timber wolf! Of course! We ze-

roed in from forest to tree, and from animal to dog, but

couldn't make better sense of it in the time we had. Any-

way, Fracto will lead us back to the eye, but after that it

will be up to us, because he'll have to get in front of Happy

Bottom and lure her into the Region of Air."

"How is he leading us? All I see is fog."

She pointed ahead. "See that nicker of

lightning ahead?

I have to keep flying toward that. He will lead me under

or around or through the storm bands until we reach the

eye. Then he'll fade away."

"But how will we herd her, if she just explodes her j

eyeball like she did before?" ;

"As she did before," Chena murmured, but somehow it j

wasn't as offensive as when Mom corrected him. "I must

confess that I am not sure about that. Now Happy Bottom

knows what she's up against, so she'll fight us every breath

of the way. We'll have to do it just right."

"I hope somebody knows what she's

doing, like maybe

Keaira," David said, "because I sure don't."

"I'm sure there was excellent reason for Nimby to des-

ignate you to wear the jacket," Chena said diplomatically.

"I dunno. Nimby reads minds, and knows what's going

on, but he can't see the future. So he

might be wrong."

"He reads minds?" she asked, seeming modestly

alarmed.

David realized that she didn't know that Nimby had told

him she thought he was cute. Better that she not know.

"Well, maybe he just knows what's all around, so it seems

like mind reading sometimes. I guess if he'd looked in

mine, he'd have known I wasn't the best one for this job."

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"No, I'm sure there was reason," she said. "As with

the Good Magician's decisions. We

merely have to fathom

it."

"Lotsa luck."

"Yes, good fortune would definitely be an asset," she

agreed, mistaking his irony. "Perhaps your mishap with

the reverse wood sticks was not a true accident, but part

of your qualification."

"Yeah, sure, assign a foul-up kid to drive a fouled-up

hurricane," he said, not thrilled with the analogy.

"Perhaps in Mundania, it is different," she said deli-

cately. "But in Xanth, seemingly inconsequential things

may have significance. Did you

encounter anything on the

ground that might relate?"

"Just a bunch of girls," he said disdainfully. Then, be-

latedly, "No offense intended."

She laughed. "None taken. I am a filly, not a girl. What

kind of girls were they?"

"That was the funny thing. They were all twins. It was

called Twin City, though it didn't look much like a city.

They had sort of complementary talents, like rock shaping

and rock animation, or changing her own hair color, or

somebody else's hair color, or being unable to die or un-

able to live." He paused, because that last pair had touched

his emotion, and not just because they were pretty.

"Maybe I managed to help them, because of the dropped

sticks of reverse wood. If they find those, maybe one can

live, and the other can want to live."

"They were surely glad to leam of those," Chena

agreed.

"Yeah, they kissed me. Of course, I hated that."

"Of course." She knew he didn't mean it.

"Then I met twins who were only half girl, Deja and

Vu. He saw the future, she the past. He said I would suc-

ceed. But I don't see how." His voice had continued on,

but his mind lagged at Leai and Adiana, with the long

purple hair and green eyes and the awful

predicaments. He

hoped they did find the sticks.

"The sticks!" he exclaimed, rudely interrupting him-

self. "That's how!"

"Beg pardon?" Chena asked politely.

"The reverse wood sticks! I think I got it! Together they

are inert, but separate they mess up magic. I messed you

up before, but now we can mess up Happy Bottom."

"I recovered as soon as I fell away from the wood,"

Chena said. "No real harm was done.

But how can the

wood enable us to accomplish our mission?"

' 'I lost my sticks, but maybe that was just as well. But

Keaira still has hers, doesn't she?"

"Yes."

"Well, she should tie them to two

separate ropes, so she

can trail them together or pull them apart from a distance

when she needs to," he said, working it out as he talked.

"The range is limited, isn't it? So that way it doesn't affect

us, but it should reverse whatever the eye is doing."

"Yes, certainly. But how can trailing the sticks at a

distance enable us to accomplish our mission?"

"We can drag them by the eye, when it tries to escape

by exploding," he explained. "So then its magic will be

reversed, and the eye will implode, and we can keep on

herding it. It won't be able to get away."

"Why, David, that's brilliant!" she

exclaimed.

"Gee," he said, pleased to have his mess-up with the

sticks turn good. Because he would never have thought of

it, if it hadn't been for his misadventure.

Suddenly the fog ended. There was Crystal Centaur fly-

ing above them, with Keaira. There was Willow, flying to

the side. And there was the glowering eye, directly ahead.

"Thank you, anonymous benefactor," Chena called as

the fog faded. David knew why: she couldn't speak

Fracto's name now, lest Happy Bottom overhear and catch

on to his role in this. practo still had a job to do, once she

was in the Region of Air. She wouldn't

speak to him, if

she knew his role too soon.

The three winged monsters rendezvoused, and David ex-

plained his idea. The centaurs had ropes; it was one of the

things they routinely carried, and

Willow had cord in her

surprisingly capacious purse, too. They tied two ropes to

the two sticks of reverse wood, keeping them carefully

together. Because they didn't want those sticks to separate

too soon.

Meanwhile the eye was staring at them, and the cloud

wall behind them was intensifying.

Happy Bottom was

priming for action. She knew they were up to something,

but she wasn't sure exactly what.

They oriented on the eye. David unzipped the wind-

breaker. The air pressure began to rise.

Happy Bottom didn't wait for the push. The eye ex-

panded explosively.

Keaira tossed the two reverse wood sticks toward the

eye. They were light as air, having been treated by a flick

of Crystal's tail. When they floated to the end of their

tether, actually inside the fringe of the expanding eye,

Keaira jerked on one rope, and the sticks separated.

Suddenly the eye was shrinking implosively. The iris

looked surprised. In a moment it was so tight and small

that it was hardly bigger than a baseball. One stick of re-

verse wood floated near it. Stunned, the eye spun rapidly

in place, a glazed look on its pupil.

Then Keaira reeled in the stick, until it

lined up with

the other. She had to do this because otherwise the wood

would reverse their own magic, like it—as it had before.

Yuck! Now he wasn't even waiting for Chena to correct

him; he was doing it to himself. Disgusting.

Meanwhile the air pressure was building

up. David held

his breath and blew out his ear tubes, happy to suffer this

inconvenience.

Keaira hauled in the two sticks and held them together.

Then Chena stroked with her wings, and moved slowly

forward toward the eye. Happy Bottom had not yet real-

ized what they had done, and the eye

was just staying

there. As they advanced, it retreated, wafted along by the

high pressure.

That was the way of it. Each time the eye expanded, the

reverse wood contracted it again, so that it couldn't escape.

They pushed it north to the Gap Chasm. By then night was

falling; they could see the curtain of darkness dropping

from the sky in the east. The sun, afraid of the dark, fled

to the west. It would be too hard to herd Happy Bottom

by night. She was unlikely to pursue them southward, if

she ever realized they were withdrawing. So they flew rap-

idly south, following Willow, who best knew the terrain.

They were hardly concerned about the bands of clouds,

because those had been pretty much broken up with the

focus on the eye.

Even so, it was after dark by the time

they made it to

the RV. Fortunately it had a light on, so they could spy it

from afar, and they landed safely beside if.

Scan must have heard them coming, because he was

standing out waiting. Willow flew down into his embrace.

There followed a disgusting amount of hugging, kissing,

and breathless endearments. David made a mental note:

never stray near a love spring.

15

REVERSAL

Tweeter rather liked this magic land of Xanth, where

birds were so prominently represented.

It had been

fun meeting Roxanne Roc and playing with Sim

Chick, and Tweeter had taught Sim some dirty bird jokes

that no nonbird would understand. But now he was about

ready to go home, where things were more settled. He

really wasn't an adventurous bird; good seed, a daylong

snooze in the cage, and some fun with Karen at the end

of the day were all he really craved. Even this business of

being intelligent was becoming wearing, in part because it

made him so much more aware of things. How could a

bird be happy and secure in his ignorance, when he was

too smart? True, it had been nice getting to know Woofer

and Midrange better, and they had proved to be loyal

friends, but all of them now recognized that they were not

looking for independent existence. Let the human folk suf-

fer the stresses of intelligent life.

Now it was dawn, and time for the winged monsters—

nice identification, that—to take David and Keaira out to

finish herding Happy Bottom into the Region of Air. By

nightfall the job would be done, and Xanth would be

saved. Tomorrow they could go home.

The winged posse headed out. David was clearly feeling

pretty important, because he had figured out how to use

the reverse wood to stop Happy Bottom's eye from escap-

ing them. Now the hurricane had no choice but to be

pushed ever northward, until she got locked into the Re-

gion of Air, where Fracto would seduce her and tame her.

Fracto was probably more interested in that aspect than in

saving Xanth, but certainly Fracto was helping them to

accomplish the mission. Give the omery cloud his due.

The winds had died with the retreat of the storm, and

the magic dust was settling out. It fertilized the landscape

with another layer of magic, so that the plants were recov-

ering vigorously and the animals were getting frisky. They

knew that the terrible threat to Xanth

was being abated, so

their lives were reverting to normal.

Now it was time to move the RV north, to be closer to

the scene of action. With the storm abated, they needed

neither Keaira's patch of calm weather nor the winged cen-

taurs. Adam looked at a cloud and became as tenuous as

it was. Without his rock-solid ballast,

the RV floated gently

into the sky. The Demoness Mentia became a crazy in-

flated giant hand and pushed it north. Tweeter went out

for a fly and watched. It was weird seeing the ungainly

contraption floating like a huge loaf of bread, with that big

hand grabbing it. It was weirder when Karen came out to

join him; she had no wings, but remained air-light because

of Modem's spell of changed reality, so she floated. She

had a tether so she couldn't drift; her sensible mother had

insisted on at least that much. This was the first, and prob-

ably the last, time they would fly

together like this.

By midday they were nearing Castle Roogna. They went

inside the RV to clean up so they would be presentable

for the royalty there. Tweeter settled onto his perch and

did a careful preening. The adventure was nearing its con-

clusion.

Suddenly Nimby the transformed dragon got nervous.

' 'What is it?" Chlorine asked. She had been paying Nimby

more attention, now that Sean was no longer interested in

looking at her legs. What humans saw in human legs,

Tweeter didn't understand; they were such fat fleshy things

that couldn't even take hold of a branch, with laughably

inadequate claws. For that matter, the rest of the featherless

bodies of the humans weren't very aesthetic either, which

was why they usually covered them up. But evidently they

had learned to live with their liabilities.

Nimby wrote a note. Chlorine read it, and was alarmed.

"Land immediately? But soon we'll be at Castle Roogna.

It's just jungle below us here."

Dad came alert. ' 'If Nimby says it, we had better do it.

Adam, can you shift slowly to stone nature?"

Adam could; he had emulated a stone so long that he

remembered it. The RV lost its buoyancy and began to

descend.

Mentia popped in. "Hey, what gives? You're sinking!"

"We have to land now," Chlorine said. "Nimby says."

"When we're so close to the comforts of Castle

Roogna? Ask him why."

Chlorine turned to the nondescript man. ' 'Why?"

He handed her another note. She read it aloud. " 'Be-

cause the Law of Averages has been overturned on ap-

peal.' "

All of the humans drew blanks. A question mark ap-

peared over Chlorine's head. "What law?"

"That's not something that can be repealed," Dad said.

"It's a law of nature."

"You forg'et where you are," Mom said grimly.

"Who appealed it?" Chlorine asked Nimby. "Who

overturned it?"

It turned out that the junior computing program Sending

was the culprit. He had not liked losing possession of

Woofer and Tweeter, or getting disconnected by the re-

verse wood, or losing his windbreaker jacket. According

to the Law of Averages, he was bound to win some and

lose some, but he didn't like losing, so

he had appealed to

the Muses of Mount Parnassus. He had claimed that no

ordinary person could have answered his twenty questions,

so something extraordinary was afoot, messing up reality.

He wanted that reality changed.

"But that's just your nature," Chlorine protested to

Nimby. "You know everything around

you."

Nimby shrugged. Evidently the Muses had seen merit

in the challenge, so had granted the appeal. The Law of

Averages had been reversed.

"That's liable to have one bleep of a consequence,"

Dad said grimly. "The fundamental order of the universe

is governed by—"

He was interrupted by a sudden buffet of wind that

shook the RV. He staggered, almost getting thrown into a

wall.

"Get it down!" Sean said. "Happy Bottom's coming

back!"

Adam increased his solidity, and the RV dropped. Even

so, the wind tried to bash it. Mentia extended an eyeball

from her face and peered outside. "Ground coming close;

lighten up.," she said.

Adam did, and the RV made a halfway soft landing in

the jungle. Tweeter looked out, and saw that it hadn't

missed a tree by much. The winds howled as if angry to

have let the RV get away. As if? They were angry.

"David!" Mom cried, distraught. "Willow! The cen-

taurs! Are they being blown away?"

"Willow!" Scan echoed, agonized.

"Keaira's with them," Dad reminded them. "She can

keep their weather calm. But they may have trouble getting

back here."

Sean looked at Nimby. "Sending got the

Law of Av-

erages revoked—and now everything's going haywire? All

the unlikely wrong things are happening? And we're all in

deep bleep? Just when we figured we'd won the game?"

Nimby nodded four times.

"Why didn't you warn us?" Mom demanded hysteri-

cally. "Before we sent them out into disaster? My poor

child!"

"Nimby is omniscient, not prescient," Dad reminded

her. "He can't see the future. And probably this appeal

Sending made was done privately, with no obvious evi-

dence until the decision was made, so it didn't attract

Nimby's attention. Even if a person can see everything, he

can't pay attention to it all; the volume is overwhelming."

"Spoken like a true physics professor," she retorted bit-

terly. "That's our son out there."

"And my love," Sean added.

Adam also looked pained; Keaira was out there too, and

she had shown an interest in him, which he evidently re-

turned.

Dad spread his hands. "I'm concerned too. But it isn't

fair to blame Nimby. Without him we couldn't have gotten

even this far."

Mom suffered a pang of reasonableness. "Yes, of

• course." She faced the dragon man. "I apologize. Nimby.

I spoke intemperately."

Nimby looked embarrassed. Dragons surely did not re-

ceive many apologies from human women.

"You guys are missing the point," Karen

said. She

faced Nimby. "What can we do about it?"

Nimby wrote a long note and gave it to Chlorine. " 'The

success of the mission now hangs by a thread that is rap-

idly unraveling. We must go to fetch a new thread, before

the old one breaks. Then all can be salvaged.' "

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"Who must fetch the thread?" Sean asked.

" 'Nimby, Chlorine, and Tweeter,' " Chlorine read

• from the next note.

Tweeter almost fell off his perch. '

'Meep?"

Sean smiled. "Yep, youp, birpbrain," he said. "Go

. fetch the thread."

"When?" Chlorine asked, almost as surprised.

Nimby walked toward the door.

"Now," Chlorine answered herself. She

looked around.

"I promise to do my very best. Come perch on me,

Tweeter."

He looked uncertainly at Karen.

"Do it. Tweet," Karen said. "But take care of yourself.

What would I do without you?" She looked as if she had

more than one or two tears to stifle.

Tweeter flew over to perch on Chlorine's greenish hair.

It didn't have the special familiarity of Karen's reddish

hair, but it was very nice regardless.

"May you succeed soon," Mom breathed as they

stepped out into the howling wind. "We'll wait here."

"Thank God for a good anchor," Sean said, as another

gust of wind tried to get at the RV.

Outside, Nimby assumed his dragon form, and Chlorine

mounted him. "Are we going far?" she asked through her

windblown hair. Tweeter was scrambling to get a better

grip, lest he be blown right out of it.

That was one savage

ill wind out here!

The dragon shrugged, unable to answer. But Tweeter

knew it couldn't be too far, or they would not be able to

get the thread in time.

A swirl of magic dust stirred up ahead of them. Nimby

plunged into it. Tweeter experienced disorientation; this

was awful stuff, which didn't merely coat the wings and

beak; it affected a person's interior too.

"Where are we going?" Chlorine asked, evidently as

uncomfortable as Tweeter was. But Nimby couldn't write

a note, in his dragon form.

So as the swirl of dust settled out. Nimby assumed his

human form and began writing a note. Meanwhile Chlo-

rine saw a path leading to a pleasant-berry patch, so she

walked toward it. The berries looked good to Tweeter too,

so he stayed with her, riding on her head. •

She picked the first pleasant-berry and put it in her

mouth. Suddenly an unpleasant man appeared. "You have

stolen my berry!" he cried. "Now I shall steal something

of value to you." He advanced on her, looking as if he

happened to be thinking of the roughest,

ugliest stork.

"Stop, or I'll poison your water," she warned him.

"You can't poison anything after eating a pleasant-

berry," he retorted as he grabbed for her, and evidently it

was true, because he did not double over in pain.

Chlorine tried to escape, but the path behind her had

abruptly overgrown with horrendous brambles. So she

screamed'instead. Even that had a pleasant sound, as if she

didn't really mean it.

"That won't save you, you luscious creature," the man

said. "You are trapped. Nothing less than a dragon could

rescue you—and what dragon would bother? Dragons

don't like being pleasant." He reached for her.

Then there was a thud and crash, and Nimby came

charging across. He did not look at all pleasant. Comical,

maybe, but not pleasant. The man took half a look at the

huge dragon body and fled. Tweeter was

glad the man

hadn't gotten a good look at Nimby's innocuous head; he

would have realized that this dragon wasn't much of a

threat even away from a pleasant-berry patch.

Nimby paused just long enough for Chlorine to get on

him, then moved on. "You saved me. Nimby!" she cried,

relieved. "This damsel needed a dragon, and you're my

dragon." She paused. "But I guess you lost the note you

were writing."

Nimby nodded, looking embarrassed.

"Well, I wouldn't have gotten in trouble if I hadn't

asked you a stupid question and made you change to man-

form, and then wandered away from you,

like the shallow

creature I am," she said. "So you just stay the way you

are. Nimby; I'm sure you know where you are going, and

will get us safely there."

But Nimby's donkey snoot looked

doubtful, and that

alarmed Tweeter. Suddenly he suspected that this mission

might not be as simple or safe as they had assumed.

"No offense. Nimby, but I think I could use a weapon,

just in case," Chlorine said. Tweeter agreed; Nimby

wouldn't be able to bluff too many more hostile creatures.

"So you won't have to rescue me from any more berry

patches. Ah—there's a gourdless phone; let me make a

call on that." And she swept up a small gourd that had no

vine. "Hey, do you have any ribbons or bows in stock?"

she said into it.

The dust cleared farther, and the forest seemed to be

returning to a reasonable semblance of normal. Tweeter

had a .dropping to drop, so he flew to a tree ahead to take

care of it. It wouldn't be proper to drop it in Chlorine's

beautiful silken hair, after all.

He landed on a branch and took care of his business.

But then a larger bird appeared. "Haa!" he cried in bird

talk. "You have besmirched my tree, and now I shall be-

smirch you, you tasty morsel of a mouthful." He looked

as if he were thinking of savory fresh gizzards garlanded

with hot drops of blood..

Tweeter tried to flee, but the predator took off too, and

he had more powerful wings. "I am rapt with the rapture

of wrapping your ragamuffin remains with my ravenous

rapier," the raptor rapped.

Tweeter flew desperately toward Nimby, but knew he

wouldn't get there in time, and anyway, what could a don-

key head do to stop a swift predatory bird?

Then a shaft flew by him, so close it

ruffled his tail

feathers. It was an arrow, and it passed close to the pur-

suing raptor too.

"The next one won't miss, hawk-eye," Chlorine said.

"This bow is cross, if not actually angry, and it is eager

to score." Indeed she held a crossbow.

The raptor considered, then veered off. It knew that irate

bow wouldn't fire another mere warning shot; it would go

for the kill. Chlorine had saved Tweeter from a fate worse

than life. He landed in her hair, thankful for her help.

They moved on through the forest. Later they paused

by another berry patch to eat. There was a man there, but

he did not look hostile. "Do you mind if we eat some of

these berries?" Chlorine inquired, smiling nicely. But

Tweeter knew she was braced for possible trouble, with

her crossbow near at hand.

"Not at all," he replied. "I'm just passing through.

They are good berries."

"I'm Chlorine, and these are Nimby and Tweeter.

We're looking for a new story thread. Have you seen

any?"

"I'm Ray. All I have seen are worn old story threads,

I'm sorry to say. They don't make them the way they used

to. The person you want to ask is the Pawpaw Wizard."

"The who?"

"He's a storyteller," Ray explained. "He surely knows

where all the best story threads are." •

"Then we must go to him," Chlorine said. Tweeter saw

Nimby nod; this was evidently where the dragon had been

taking them anyway. "Could you tell us where to find

him?"

"I'll do better than that," Ray said. "I'll show you

where he is. It's not far from here."

Tweeter realized that the man was probably being so

nice because Chlorine looked so nice, for her species. Still,

they could use the help. Nimby had no objection, which

was a good sign.

"Where are you going?" Chlorine inquired as they ate.

"I am looking for a money tree I was told grows in this

vicinity," Ray said. "I've been looking all day, but I just

can't find it."

"But money isn't any use," Chlorine said. "It just gets

dirty."

"I know. But I have a pet money spider, and all it will

eat is money, so I need some more." •

Tweeter finished his berry and flew up to get a look at

the lay of the land. In a hollow just out of sight of the

berry patch he spied a tree whose leaves had green backs.

That could be it. So he swooped down and plucked a leaf

with his beak, then flew back to drop it by the man.

"That's it!" Ray exclaimed. "That's money! You

found it! Where is it?"

Tweeter flew back toward the money

tree, leading the

man. Ray was delighted. "This will feed Spider Mon for

a year!" he exclaimed, stuffing a pocket full of the leaves.

"How can I repay you?"

Tweeter shrugged. He didn't need any repayment for

such a favor; it was just an incidental thing.

"Well, maybe something will turn up," Ray said.

They resumed their travel, with Ray walking ahead to

show the way. "There is a bad dragon in these parts," he

said. "I prefer to avoid him, but he lurks near the Pawpaw

Wizard's home, hoping to catch a careless child. He looks

like this." An image of a ravening fire-

breathing dragon

appeared before him.

"Oh!" Chlorine cried, for an instant mistaking it for the

real thing.

The image vanished. "I'm sorry," Ray said. "I should

have warned you. That's my talent—to cause a picture of

what I see to appear, in any size. I've seen that awful

dragon so many times I can show it from my head. Nor-

mally I must be looking at something to picture it. I should

have shown it much smaller." The image reappeared,

harmlessly tiny.

"I certainly hope we don't encounter that dragon,"

Chlorine said. ' 'I much prefer the harmless mule-headed

variety." She patted Nimby on the scales. The scales she

touched brightened.

But they were not in luck. There was a bellowing roar,

and the ground shook as something solid tramped toward

them through the forest.

"Hide!" Chlorine cried, looking wildly around. But

they happened to be in a broad glade; there was nowhere

to hide.

"Maybe I can make a picture of a tree or something,"

Ray said uncertainly. "To hide us."

But Tweeter had a better idea. He flew to the man and

peeped imperatively.

"Maybe so," Ray agreed. "I'll try it." He fixed his

eyes on Tweeter.

The dragon burst from the forest, trailing a plume of

smoky fire. There was no doubt it had wind of them. But

as its burning snoot oriented, a monstrous image of

Tweeter appeared before them. As tall as the trees. Picture

Tweeter peered down at the much

smaller dragon.

The reptile hesitated, eyeing the big bird. It was clear it

hadn't seen anything quite like this before: a parakeet as

big as a roc. But it could smell Tweeter's bird odor, so

knew there was a bird there. Tweeter hoped it wouldn't be

smart enough to realize that the real bird wasn't as big as

the apparent bird.

Tweeter took a giant step toward the dragon—and

Nimby lifted a front foot and slammed it into the ground,

making a dull thud. Tweeter took another step, with an-

other thud. Tweeter opened his beak, and the giant mir-

rored him exactly. That beak was big

enough to take in

the whole dragon head.

The dragon had had enough. It turned tail and fled.

"Oh, glorious!" Chlorine exclaimed, delighted. "You

saved us. Tweeter!"

Tweeter shook his head, and the giant bird did too. He

hadn't done it; Ray's huge image had. Ray had more than

repaid the favor he thought he owed. Yet Tweeter did feel

a certain foolish pride; never before, and probably never

again, would he back off a fire-dragon! It had been a great

experience.

They walked on, and came to another glade. There sat

a short fat man with short stocky legs, a bald pate sur-

rounded by a fringe of gray hair, and an infamously huge

stomach. Mundane-style spectacles perched on his nose.

He spied me party and smiled. "Hello, Ray. Who are

your friends? They don't look much like children. Of

course, few children dare venture out, with this remarkable

recent weather we've been having."

Ray smiled. "They found the money tree for me! Now

Spider Mon will be happy. They need to find a fresh story

thread, and I told them you were the one to see." He

turned halfway to face the group. "The damsel is Chlorine,

the dragon is Nimby, and the bird is Tweeter. I hope you

can help them. Now I must go home with my money,

before the storm gets worse." He departed.

"I am Gerald Towne, once from

Mundania," the Paw-

paw Wizard said. "I believe I recognize a fellow Mun-

danian." He looked at Tweeter. "A parakeet."

Tweeter chirped agreement.

"So, of course, I'm not really a wizard in the proper

sense, because only natives have magic, but the children

do like my tales," the Wizard said. "I have many fine

story threads. And I know where others are. What kind do

you need?"

Nimby assumed man-form and wrote a note. "I think

you folk must have quite a story of your own," the Wizard

remarked, observing the change of form. "Perhaps some-

day you will share it with me."

"Maybe when the crisis is over," Chlorine agreed. Then

she took the note. ' 'We need a strong original reverse story

thread."

The Wizard whistled. "You must be on serious business

indeed! Then I won't delay." He gestured to a table beside

him. "Have some peanut butter, jelly, and cheese sand-

wiches while I explain."

They settled down to share the sandwiches. Chlorine put

some peanut butter on her finger for Tweeter to eat, and

it was good, because there were some peanut chunks in it.

The Pawpaw Wizard began his story.

"There was once,

about two hundred years ago, a very. unpopular Magician

named Joshua. His talent was to reverse magical proper-

ties, whether these were talents or charms. Because most

folk did not like to have their talents reversed, especially

when they were nice ones, they stayed away from Joshua

in droves. For example, there was one young woman

whose talent was to smell of perfume; when Joshua

touched her, she stnelled of stink horn. There was a young

man whose talent was to scale walls by sticking to them

with his hands and feet; when he brushed by Joshua, he

became slippery instead, so that he couldn't even stick to

the ground without slipping. Another man could always

find the right spot for something, whether for an excellent

snooze or for a dog to mark territory. After he met Joshua,

he always found the wrong spot, leading to considerable

embarrassment. So Joshua was not welcome in his home

village, or anywhere else, once the people had experience

with him, though he was a perfectly decent and well-

intentioned man. Fortunately his reversals were not per-

manent, unless done intentionally; they would slowly fade

in the course of a few weeks or months, and the normal

talents would reassert themselves. So people wanted

Joshua to go away and stay away. And so Joshua traveled

a lot.

"One day he happened to come upon a fine grove of

Xanthorrhoed trees. They were unfamiliar to him, and

grew so thickly they barred his passage, so he invoked his

talent to reverse their magic. He did not realize that they

belonged to a powerful witch, who had imbued them with

special magic to enhance the magic of others. When he

reversed them, they in turn reversed the magic of others,

and were unusable for the witch's purposes. She, in a fury,

set her pet griffins on Joshua, and they tore him to pieces

before he could reverse them. Thus he died, and no one

mourned him. The witch, still furious, then chopped up the

trees and scattered them all around Xanth. She thought that

would denature them, but instead the wood maintained its

strength, and remains potent today. Thus the origin of re-

verse wood, the source of a great deal of mischief and

some benefit throughout Xanth.

"But in the course of his career, Joshua once encoun-

tered a fine thread of a story. Again not realizing its na-

ture—he was by no means the brightest of Magicians—he

reversed it, ruining the story it was supposed to support.

Disgusted, the tale teller of the time threw it away, and it

was lost. Thus that reverse story thread remains some-

where, we know not where, if it has not been destroyed.

That is the thread you require. But I have no idea how you

can get it."

The Pawpaw Wizard sat back. Tweeter sagged. How

could they get a thread, if it had been destroyed two cen-

turies ago? Their mission was surely doomed.

But Nimby was writing another note. Chlorine took it

and read it. " 'How do the forces of

nature feel about

traveling in time?' "

The Wizard whistled again. "They don't like it, because

they regard it as being against nature. But they do have

the power to give a person a pass to travel in time, if they

can be persuaded that this is necessary. I suppose you

could ask them, if you think your reason

is persuasive."

"Well, it's to save Xanth from being blown away,"

Chlorine said.

The Wizard nodded. "That does seem persuasive. I wish

you well." He hesitated, then remarked, "I don't mean to

pry, but if you really have a way to go back then, I may

have some additional information."

Chlorine looked at Nimby. "I think we do intend to go

there."

"Then I must warn you of another person who lived in

that time." And he plunged into his story.

He was Xanth's very worst vampire, a

mean creature who

really sucked. His very name would strike fear into the

bravest of the brave, so I won't mention it here. Most

people simply called him Fang Face. It was thought that

he could be killed only by a reverse wood stake through

the heart, but since reverse wood didn't exist quite then,

it seemed he was invulnerable. A few people knew that he

disliked garlic and feared sunlight, but it wouldn't be easy

to kill him in those ways. You couldn't just take a blood-

thirsty vampire for a stroll in the sun, or invite him to share

a slice of garlic bread with you. No, it

was going to take

more than that to dispatch old Fang Face!

But after the vampire sucked a woman so dry that she

had to be dunked immediately in a healing spring, and still

looked rather desiccated, her husband decided it was time

to get rid of him. "I'm going to get that sucker," he swore.

Unfortunately his talent was just of the spot-on-the-wall

variety, not worth mentioning. When it came to matching

anyone's magic, he felt quite inferior. He knew that if he

challenged the vampire directly, he would merely become

another blood donor. But he was a strong man, and an

intelligent one, so he concluded that he

could probably do

it if he just used his head. His name was, uh, well, for-

gettable. He wasn't a very memorable person anyway. All

that matters is what he did this one time.

He fashioned a dummy out of various objects, such as

a milk pod for a head and lady fingers for hands, and a

pair of jugs for the upper torso. But he

turned out to be

pretty good at dummying, and the result had considerable

stork appeal. It looked just like a very sanguine young

woman—that is, filled with tasty blood. He propped her

up atop a pile of dry wood. Then he covered her with

supersticky sap, and arrow grass, and tangled tree tenta-

cles. The tentacles looked like a skirt that covered not quite

enough of her plump legs, and the sap looked like a cling-

ing blouse over her ample bosom. But anything that

touched that lush body would be stuck to it for some time.

He hauled the entire assemblage—body and woodpile—

to a path near the vampire's crypt and set it up in a mar-

velously appealing fashion. The trap

was set.

Now to bait it. "Help!" the man screamed in a falsetto

voice from behind the dummy. "I'm an innocent lovely

sweet juicy damsel in deep distress! I'm all tied up, and

can hardly even kick my tender feet, let alone escape.

Won't someone please rescue me before I catch a sniffle

from all this exposure?"

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Soon a man came along the path. He was a cool char-

acter, which was obvious because he wore snowshoes. But

the snow almost melted when he spied the lovely dummy.

"Well, now," he said, and took a step toward her. "The

storks will get no rest today."

But this was the wrong man. He wasn't the vampire. He

was just a typical sexist lunkhead whose elimination

wouldn't make any difference to anyone. It was necessary

to make him go away in a hurry.

"Oh, thank you, kind sir!" the husband cried in his

cracked falsetto voice. "I never thought a man as hand-

some as you would take an interest in me. I'm just one of

several aides to the cruel vampire."

The lunk paused. "You're a what?"

"One of the aides," the husband cried. "Aides!

AIDES!"

"That's what I thought you said! I'm not touching any

aides. I'm outta here!" And the lunk took off, leaving

behind chunks of snow from his cold feet.

The husband sighed a breath of relief. Only his quick

and dirty wit had saved his trap that time. He hoped the

vampire would be the next one to pass by.

This time his fortune was good. The vampire arrived.

"Methinks I see a luscious creature," he opined. "San-

guine and helpless—exactly the way I prefer." He

marched up and plunged his fangs into the temptingly ex-

posed flesh of the dummy.

Then he recoiled. "This isn't blood!" he cried in out-

rage. "This is milk! What are you doing with milk in your

body?"

"Exactly where did you bite me?" the husband asked

in his falsetto. "You should know better than to bite a

milkmaid in the heaving bosom."

"I didn't bite your bosom, I bit your neck!" the vampire

screamed. "Do you think I don't know where to bite a

helpless damsel? Anyway, it wasn't heaving." Then he

realized the significance of that. "Hey! This isn't a real

woman—it's a stupid dummy!"

"Fancy that," the husband said, abandoning the falsetto,

which was becoming a strain anyway. "1 guess it takes

one to bite one."

The vampire tried to pull away, but the arrow-grass hair

had caught his head, and the tentacle skirt had grabbed his

legs. In addition, the sticky sap had glued his face to the

dummy's neck. "Help!" he cried. "All I wanted to do

was have a nice snack of blood, and now I'm stuck."

"And in a moment you'll be a roast, you sap," the

husband said gleefully. "Just as soon as I light a fire under

you." And he proceeded to do just that.

"You fool!" the vampire cried out of the side of his

stuck face. "You can't kill me! I'm immortal!"

"Oh, I'm sure that's an exaggeration," the husband

said, warming his hands as the fire blazed up.

"Not much of one," the vampire

clarified. "You'll see,

you fool. I'll be back to taste your blood yet."

"If so, you'll have to do it as ashes, because that's what

you'll soon be. Maybe you'll find a nice piece of ash to

bite. Maybe I'll bury your ashes in a hole, making you an

ash hole." The man laughed at his wit, which was just as

well, because the vampire didn't find it very funny.

However, the husband should have taken the threat more

seriously, because the vampire really was immortal in his

fashion. As he burned to ashes, each ash became a mos-

quito. The mosquito knew only one thing, and that was to

suck blood. Like cri-tics, they swarmed

all over anything

that lived, and sucked. The husband was their very first

victim, but for some reason he didn't feel honored. He fled,

swatting himself unmercifully.

"And ever since then, the vampire mosquitoes have

plagued Xanth," the Pawpaw Wizard concluded. "And

Mundania too, where it seems as if they

have been forever,

but that's only because of the itching. But that is of little

concern to you. The point is that the vampire didn't die

until shortly btefore the Reverse Magician did, and he lived

in the same general region. In fact, they were friends of a

sort. The one did not try to suck the blood of the other,

and the other did not reverse the one into a blood-spitting

image. So if you go there and then, you are bound to

encounter him. And you probably wouldn't care to."

Chlorine shuddered. "Thank you for the warning. We

shall do our best to avoid the vampire.

At least we won't

have to worry about mosquitoes."

"And some believe that the story thread Joshua lost may

be in the possession of the vampire."

Chlorine looked at Nimby, evidently hoping for a ne-

gation, but Nimby nodded. "Oh, no," she groaned.

Now Tweeter understood why Nimby had not felt this

would be an easy mission. But they had no choice; they

had to go after that thread.

So they moved on, after thanking the Pawpaw Wizard

for. the information and the sandwiches. Nimby knew

where to find the forces of nature, who,

as fortune would

have it, were not far distant.

They came to a region of ashes. Chlorine looked around

in alarm, but Nimby was unconcerned, so she relaxed. In

its center was a burning circle, and in the circle stood an

attractive young or seemingly young woman whose long

hair was the color of flame and whose

short skirt was the

color of smoke. She was evidently enjoying herself, doing

a dance, her bare feet unhurt by the hot coals.

Chlorine read Nimby's note. " 'Fira, force of fire, we

are on a mission to save Xanth from destruction. Will you

give us a pass to travel two hundred years into the past?' "

Fira paused, and her fire and smoke paused with her.

She eyed Chlorine as if resenting her beauty. "What's in

it for me?" she demanded.

"If Xanth gets blown away, there will be nothing left

to bum," Chlorine explained. "Your flames will expire

for lack of fuel."

"Um," Fira said, impressed. "Very well, I will give

you a quarter pass. But you may not find my sisters so

amendable." She extended a flaming fragment of paper.

Chlorine hesitated to take it, as did Tweeter, but Nimby

took it in his hand. The fire died down, though the paper

continued to glow.

"Thank you," Chlorine said. "We are burning with

gratitude."

They hurried on. Soon they came to a

small lake. In the

center of it stood a woman whose gown and headdress

flowed liquidly across her frame, which seemed to be as

completely supple as water.

Chlorine read another note. " 'Mareen, lady of water,

will you help us to save Xanth from dehydration?' "

It was clear that a key word had been uttered. "Please

don't utter blasphemy in my presence," Mareen said.

"I apologize," Chlorine said quickly. "I meant that

Xanth faces a severe loss of water, and will be all washed

up, if we don't go to the past to—"

"Of course I'll help you," Mareen said.

"Here is a

quarter pass." She produced a blue square of water, which

turned out to be an aqua-colored card when Chlorine took

it.

"Thank you so much. We are overflowing with grati-

tude."

They went on until they came to a gray rock statue of

a woman in a plant green robe decorated with red straw-

berries. She carried a cornucopia from which a wheat-

shrouded pumpkin was about to emerge, and her other

hand was extended with a handful of seeds.

" 'Alanda, lady of land, will you help us to save the

Land of Xanth from being utterly despoiled?' " Chlorine

read from Nimby's note. Tweeter was coming to appre--

ciate the finesse of language employed.

The statue came to life. "How's that again?" Alanda

asked sharply.

"Xanth will be blown into nothing but windblown

mounds of garbage, hardly better than the spoils of war

that harpies so love, if we don't travel to the past to—"

"Here is a quarter pass," Alanda said, presenting a cob

of corn she culled from the cornucopia. The cob became

yellow paper as Chlorine accepted it.

"Thank you most copiously," Chlorine said.

They continued, until they came to a windy glade. Here

there floated a woman with waist-length windblown hair

and a long windblown cape, and a big hawk on her arm.

Tweeter was somewhat wary of the hawk, but Nimby did

not seem concerned. Indeed, Nimby indicated that Tweeter

should address the bird.

Tweeter gulped and made his best effort. ' 'Oh mighty

hawk," he said in bird talk, "will your companion Win-

dona hear our plea?"

"Get to the point, hummingbird," the hawk snapped.

Tweeter decided to ignore the slight, as it was probably

deliberate. "Hurricane Happy Bottom is going to blow

Xanth away, if we don't stop her by fetching a story thread

from the past. So we need a pass to—"

"Why should we care about that?" the

hawk asked.

"We are creatures of wind."

Tweeter thought fast. "If the storm blows away all the

trees, there will be no place for nests, and no prey species

left. And Happy Bottom will be the most powerful entity

of air, blowing Windona into has-been status. She—"

"Here is your pass," Windona said abruptly. Tweeter

was startled; he hadn't realized that she understood bird

talk.

"Thank you most breezily," Tweeter said, taking the

pass in his beak. It resembled a feather, becoming feathery

paper.

They continued on until they came to a private glade.

There was a table in the center. It turned out to be made

entirely of salt. "Table salt," Chlorine said, pleased. "Just

what we need." She spread out the cards they had received

from the four forces of nature.

Then they assembled the four passes. One was a quarter

pass one, and the next was a quarter pass two, and quarter

pass three, and quarter pass four. Together they formed a

complete license to go against nature one time.

Chlorine filled in the time Nimby indicated: Apull 19,

900. Then she sat on Nimby dragon, and Tweeter perched

on her hair, and she invoked the crime against nature. "Let

us pass to the past," she said.

Suddenly they were in a different glade, or maybe the

same one a hundred and ninety-six years before, clothed

by different trees. They would have four quarters of an

hour to complete their mission before the past passed and

they reverted to the present, ready or not.

"And I hope we don't encounter the vampire," Chlo-

rine said with another shudder. Tweeter agreed. "Maybe

we can find the thread in his lair while he's out sucking

up elsewhere."

Nimby wrote a note. Chlorine read it, and paled. "He

wears the thread," she said. "He has a balky button on

his cape, and the thread reverses the button's nature and

makes it amenable. So it's always with him. How can we

possibly get that thread without getting sucked?"

Nimby looked at Tweeter. Oh, no! Tweeter felt his stiff

little legs turn to jelly. He should have known that he

hadn't been invited along just for the ride.

But there was more. Nimby was writing again. Chlorine

read the new note. " 'I can take you to the Vampire Ge-

stalt. But it will not be easy to take the thread, because he

values it.' " Chlorine looked up, causing Tweeter to adjust

his perch on her hair. "I can fix that, I think; I can stand

before the vampire, and stun him by showing him my pant-

ies—" She paused, seeing Nimby's head shake. She

looked back down at the note she hadn't finished reading.

Tweeter readjusted. "Oh. 'Panties don't freak out vam-

pires. Only lush, pulsing, sanguine necks.' " She looked

up again, and Tweeter rode with it. "Well, then, I'll bare

my lush pulsing sanguine neck, and—" Another shake

made her look back at the note. "Oh. 'We're not allowed

to hurt the vampire, because that would change Xanth his-

tory in unpredictable ways. He must meet his destined fate

as described.' " She looked up, and Tweeter shifted again.

"But that means that Xanth will be plagued by hungry

mosquitoes! Can't we eliminate them?" Another shake

sent her back to the note. " 'A number of special creatures

came to prey on those mosquitoes, such as a fine type of

netting, and several repellents—' " She looked up. "I met

a repellent once. It was a disgusting creature. But I suppose

nets are useful." She resumed reading. " 'And their elim-

ination would mess up Xanth in other unpredictable ways.

It might even interfere with the story line

we are in, elim-

inating us as characters.' " She gulped and looked up

again. Tweeter was beginning to feel motion sick. "Sud-

denly I see the point !,This is all in the past, so any change

can affect us. And we don't want that, because we might

cause ourselves never to exist, and our great adventure

would be erased before it started. So what must we do?"

She looked back at the note. " 'We must try to get the

thread without Gestalt noticing.' " She looked up once

more. Tweeter hoped that was the last one. "And that's it.

We can't hurt him, or make too much of a fuss, lest we

imperil our own very existence. This scares me."

Tweeter agreed emphatically. He wasn't

a creature of

Xanth, but he was affected by Xanth, because what would

happen if the Baldwin family blundered into it, and there

was no Chlorine to help them get through it? No Nimby

to know the spot answers? They could be in much worse

trouble, and Xanth itself might be doomed without then-

help. He had never seen Nimby nervous before; now he

understood how justified the dragon's attitude was.

And he. Tweeter, had somehow to get that thread. With-

out doing any harm. Or getting caught. So he could help

save Xanth from the resurgent -ill wind. It seemed to be

altogether too tall an order for one little bird.

He realized that Chlorine and Nimby were looking at

him. Well, Nimby was; the woman's eyes were trying to

see him, but he remained perched on top of her head, so

her gaze was missing him by about a wingspan. But she

was trying. They wanted to know his reaction.

What else was there to do? "Cheep!" he said boldly.

"Well, I'm glad you have confidence," Chlorine said.

"You're the one who needs it most."

For sure. Tweeter tried to control his unconfident shiv-

ering.

"But I'll help all I can," she continued. "Maybe I will

show him my panties, because that should distract him

somewhat without actually freaking him out—which is

what we want. But I'm not going to let him near my tender

neck."

Tweeter appreciated that.

"So I guess we'd better go find the vampire," Chlorine

said halfway briskly. "And I guess we'd better play dam-

sel and dragon, so as to be as distracting as possible. While

Tweeter goes after the thread."

Nimby assumed his dragon form, and Chlorine got on

him. Nimby knew exactly where to go, as always, so in

only a moment and an instant, or perhaps two instants and

a trace, they arrived at the lair of the dread vampire.

Tweeter was halfway disappointed. It wasn't a big

spooky old ancient castle, but merely a hut formed of

bloodroot roots, all tangly and red, with a thatch of blood-

root leaves. The sagging door was

closed. The hut was in

deep shade, because vampires weren't especially keen on

sunshine.

"He must be asleep," Chlorine said. "I understand they

sleep a lot in the daytime." Nimby nodded his donkey

head. "So I'll just call him out," she decided.

She paused, as if hoping someone would tell her no, but

no one did. So she adjusted her blouse and skirt to show

just so much and no more, while Tweeter flew to a nearby

tree, hoping to be able to approach the vampire from be-

hind.

"But I wonder whether you couldn't just

fly in and get

it while he's asleep," she said, suffering a moderate after-

thought.

But Nimby shook his head no.

So Chlorine completed her adjustments, which really -

weren't necessary, as she was equally lovely regardless,

and lifted her chin and her voice. "Oo-oo, Vampire Ge-

stalt," she called without a lot of volume. "Are you in

there?"

In a moment the door opened, and a dark figure ap-

peared. ' 'Who calls me?" it inquired in a sinister tone or

two.

Now Tweeter saw why the sleep approach wouldn't

have worked: the cloak was just unkinking from a tight

wrap, and the button on the side was just coming into

sight. It would have been inaccessible while the vampire

slept. Probably he slept in a closed coffin box anyway,

making the chore even more difficult. So it had to be while

he was up, and preferably outside, for a more ready escape.

"I called you," Chlorine said in a somewhat quavery

voice. ' 'I understand you—you like succulent young maid-

ens."

The dark vampire brightened. ' 'Indeed I do. Come into

my den, succulent damsel, and we shall share a rare

delight."

Tweeter moved closer. The button was now fully ex-

posed, and he could see a strand of thread behind it. There

was his target!

"But I don't like dingy interiors," Chlorine said. "I

prefer the bright outdoors." She moved in her saddle, so

that her skirt sort of accidentally fell askew, revealing a

well-fleshed thigh.

"But the delights I offer are best savored in shadow,"

the vampire said. His eyes seemed to

play about her neck-

line more than her skirtline.

"Well, maybe if we meet halfway," she suggested, ad-

justing herself again. This time her blouse got accidentally

disarrayed, so that some of her fair white column of a neck

showed.

"Maybe so," the vampire said, licking his thin lips

thirstily. He walked out toward them—and coincidentally

past Tweeter's hiding place.

Tweeter nerved himself with what little nerve he had—

he was a small bird, so it wasn't much—and flew around

and behind the figure, coming in on the button. He landed

on it, snatching for the thread with his beak.

Unfortunately, the thread did not give way. The vampire

felt the tug. "What's this?" he demanded, glancing down.

"This is a tender panty!" Chlorine cried, snatching up

her skirt to show it. Then, remembering, she reversed

course and snatched open the front of her blouse to reveal

her pulsing neck, and somewhat more. "I mean a silken

bos—uh, neck!" Old habits died hard.

But she was too late. The flash of silken

panty hadn't

stunned the vampire, just as Nimby had warned it

wouldn't, and by the time her tender neck showed, the

vampire's gaze had departed her body.

His hand was no slower. It dropped down and closed

about Tweeter. "We have an avian creature," he ex-

claimed, surprised. "Someone is giving

me the bird."

"Pay no attention to that bird," Chlorine cried desper-

ately. "He doesn't have more than a drop of blood, while

I have half a slew, uh, wash, uh, jug!" She ripped open

the rest of her blouse, showing her entire delectable front,

which indeed had not one but two ample jugs.

But the Vampire Gestalt, canny in his fashion, would

not be distracted. "All in good time," he told Chlorine

without looking. "What were you after, bird? My button?

Are you a button hooker?" He held Tweeter up before his

face, helpless.

"No he's not!" Chlorine screamed. "He's just a stupid

little bird, while I'm a delectable heaving-bosomed maiden

girl damsel with a stunning pair of pan—uh, breas—uh, I

mean, soft tender neck!"

But all her valiant efforts were for naught. "I think you

are up to something, bird," the vampire said. "Things al-

ways occur as aspects of wholes, and I don't understand

your part or your whole."

"Stop talking dirty!" Chlorine cried. But it was a fading

ploy. The vampire ignored her, turned around, and swept

back into his hut.

Inside, he closed the dismal door, checked the dirty win-

dows, and let Tweeter go. "You can't escape this horren-

dous hovel, bird, so you might as well confess," Gestalt

said. "What were you really after, and why?"

Tweeter thought fast. Maybe he had half a chance, if he

used his little noggin well. Should he tell the truth? No,

because the vampire wouldn't believe it. Nobody would

believe that a stupid little bird came from the future, on a

mission to save Xanth from destruction. But what else was

there?

"Did someone send you?" Gestalt demanded. "Under-

stand, bird, I really don't care much about you; as the

damsel says, you have only a drop of blood in you, while

she is relatively luscious. But I like to understand the big

picture. Tell me, and I'll let you go."

Tell him what? That they had to have his reverse thread,

to fashion a new story line before the old one broke? He

wouldn't believe that either. None of this was really be-

lievable.

"Come, come, bird," Gestalt said impatiently. "I don't

have all day. My last several victims have escaped, and

I'm really pretty hungry. If that luscious damsel is gone

by the time I settle with you, I shall be most displeased."

He stretched his mouth, showing his fangs.

Then a little light flashed over Tweeter's little head. It

was only a faint light, not at all matching the lights that

flashed over Chlorine's head when she got good ideas, but

it did illuminate his little mind. Suddenly

he knew what

to tell Gestalt.

"Ah, I see you have decided to cooperate," the vampire

said. "Then let's get on with it. One nod for yes, two for

no, three for further definition. Agreed?"

Tweeter nodded once. Gestalt did seem to grasp the

whole of things readily.

"You came for something?"

Nod: yes.

"The button?"

Nod nod: no.

"Surely not my cloak!"

Yes—no.

Gestalt understood. "Bad phrasing. But what else

could—the thread?"

Yes.

"But this is a very special thread. It reverses—"

Yes.

"Ah, so you know its qualities. I need this thread to

hold my recalcitrant button."

Nod nod nod.

"There's more? How could you persuade me to part

with this magic thread?"

Nod nod nod.

Gestalt smiled. "True. I need to get specific. Can you

honestly say I would benefit from—"

Yes.

"Yes? Parting with this thread would do me good?"

Yes.

Gestalt stroked a fang. "This intrigues me. It would do

me good with my cloak?" He saw Tweeter's negation.

"My house? No. My sleep? No. My food? Yes." Then

the vampire did a double take, or at least a one and a half

take. "Are you telling me that this thread interferes with

my feeding?"

Yes.

Gestalt stroked his other fang. "Let me see whether I

can figure your rationale. This thread was made by Joshua,

the famed Reverse Magician, with whom I share a reason-

able portion of a friendship. It reverses things. It reverses

the contrary nature of my button. Are you saying it does

not stop there?"

Yes.

"So what else would it reverse? My fortunes? My—•"

Then a big bulb flashed over his head. "My prey! When

I get close, it reverses the nature of my victims, and they

become unamenable. Instead of being lulled by my aura,

so that I can sip of their blood without their resistance,

they become alarmed, and flee. Since all they have to do

is step into the sunshine, I am unable to pursue them far.

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And so my fortune is changed—by the presence of this

reverse thread."

Yes. He had fathomed it with marvelous precision, once

given the clue. That was exactly the thought that Tweeter's

little bulb had illuminated.

The Vampire Gestalt smiled. "We made a deal, and you

have delivered. You have shown me why I do not want to

retain this thread. You need it, I do not. Accordingly I will

give it to you and let you go, on one condition."

Nod nod nod?

"That you take it so far away that it will never be near

me again. Agreed?"-

Yes!

The vampire unwound the thread,

releasing the button,

which promptly became balky again. He extended the

thread to Tweeter. Tweeter took it in his beak. It gave him

a funny feeling. He spread his wings and tried to fly, but

just sank down against the table.

"It is reversing you, now," Gestalt said. "I think you

will have to walk out of here, rather than

fly." He opened

the door. "I trust you can make it on the ground."

Tweeter tried to nod, but shook his head instead. He

walked unsteadily out the door.

Nimby was there, with Chlorine. The dragon extended

the tip of his tail, and Tweeter climbed up on it. Then

without giving him a chance to scramble up to Chlorine,

Nimby trundled rapidly away from the hut.

"Wait!" the vampire cried. "I have business with the

succulent damsel!"

"Not anymore," Chlorine cried back. "I showed you

my almost everything, but you spumed

me. I'll take my

pan—bos—jug—my whatever
elsewhere, thank you all

the same."

"Ah, well," Gestalt said philosophically.
"I should

have no trouble, now, finding a
replacement." He headed

purposefully in the other direction.

Another little bulb flashed over Tweeter's head. He re-

alized why Nimby was not letting him approach Chlorine.

He had the reverse thread, and it was reversing him to a

degree; if he took it to Chlorine, it would mess her up too.

So he had to stay here far from the main action, to carry

the thread without doing any damage to the others. Well,

that was what he would do. He had succeeded in his mis-

sion. Now all Nimby had to do was get them back in time.

Or forward in time, before their time ran out.

16

DEMON

The Demon X(A/N)th was half-satisfied. He had en-

abled Chlorine and Tweeter to fetch back the re-

verse story thread, which had taken effect the

moment it reached the present time. Now Sending's ploy

had been reversed, and the story was back to normal.

Happy Bottom was confined in the Region of Air, and

Hurricane Fracto was romancing her, or taming the shrew,

as Jim Baldwin put it in his Mundanish way. Xanth had

been saved from one threat.

But the other threat remained. If Chlorine did not shed

one tear of love or grief for Nimby, the bet would be lost,

and then X(A/N)"1 would be demoted to the least of De-

mons, and the Land of Xanth would be forfeited. That

meant it would probably be destroyed. That would be too

bad, because X(A/N)11' had recently come to know this land

well, and it had grown on him. He had largely ignored it

for millennia, but he would do so no longer. Becoming a

character within it had entirely changed his outlook.

"What are you thinking of. Nimby?" Chlorine inquired

brightly, interrupting his reverie. What a delight she had

turned out to be! But she would not shed her last tear for

him, because then she would be blind. That was the ulti-

mate cost of his inattention that had allowed him to choose

the wrong companion: defeat.

Of course, he couldn't answer her, but he twitched an

ear in acknowledgement. That satisfied her; she patted his

hide and rode on. He liked it when she did that, which

was a signal of how his attitude had modified.

Now they were nearing Castle Roogna for the big cel-

ebration of victory over the 111 Wind. Everyone was to be

there—everyone who cared to be. Including Chlorine and

her silent companion Nimby.

They came to the Mundane RV, or moving house. The

child Karen spied them first and dashed out. "Hi, Chlo-

rine! Hi, Nimby!" She threw her arms around his donkey

head and kissed him on the striped pink and green snout.

He liked that, too. "Glad you could make it!" She dashed

back in to notify the others.

"That little girl belongs in Xanth," Chlorine remarked,

dismounting. "With her own dragon."

True. Karen had not yet properly learned the arts of

dissembling; her actions mirrored her thoughts. She liked

Xanth, and she liked Nimby, not caring half a whit how

odd he looked. Her greeting had been

sincere. Which was

why he appreciated it.

The others came out. "Glad to see you again. Nimby,"

Jim Baldwin said. "We'll be going tomorrow, but we

wanted you to know that we couldn't have done it without

you." Of course, he knew that Nimby already knew that,

but his Mundane protocol required him

to make a formal

statement. That, too, he liked.

Mary approached. "But perhaps it would be better if

you attended the festivities in your human form," she mur-

mured.

"Yes," Chlorine agreed immediately. "In formal cloth-

ing, too. And I hope you know how to dance."

Of course he could dance; be had learned that in the

course of his survey of the land and people and things of

Xanth. So he changed to human form, in a royal robe.

Sean and Willow emerged. They were somber; they had

not resolved their impasse. They were in love, and could

not bear to be separated, but they were of different realms,

neither suited for the other realm. In Sean's mind was a

notion of separating from his family to remain in Xanth,

but he was held back by the knowledge

that this would so

greatly hurt the other members of the family as to mire

him in perpetual guilt. In Willow's mind was the thought

of going with him to Mundania, where she thought she

would die, but at least she would have a little more time

with him. But she realized that this would be worse for

Sean than separation. So she would bravely bid him fare-

well, and when he was gone she would do what she should

have done at the outset, and fly to Mount Rushmost were

they had reunited, tie her wings together so she could not

fly, and throw herself off the precipice. Then she would

be at peace, and Sean would never know, so would suffer

no additional grief.

Nimby knew these things, but could not speak them and

did not care to write them. He also knew that good news

was on the way for them. So that affair would have a

happy ending, and perhaps that was best. Just as it was

best that all the folk of Xanth be happy this day, not know-

ing ...

"Very well," Chlorine said, not knowing the nature or

velocity of his thoughts. ' 'Put me in a lovely party gown

and hairdo for the party."

"Gee, are you going to change right out here?" David

asked, his twelve-year-old pupils dilating. The presence of

Chlorine accelerated his race toward maturity, especially

since Big Brother Sean had lost interest.

"Right out here," Chlorine agreed, smiling. Suddenly

her complete outfit shifted, as Nimby changed her accord-

ing to her wish, in somewhat less than an eye-blink. Nat-

urally David had blinked in that moment, so saw none of

what he had hoped to.

"Aww," the boy said, disappointed.

Chlorine turned to Nimby. "You know, he's Mun-

dane," she murmured low. "Would it be too great a vio-

lation if he caught half a glimpse, considering the spirit of

the occasion?" Her mind made clear the nature of her

request. She knew that she would not have this beautiful

body much longer, because the adventure was almost over,

and she wanted to leave a lasting impression on someone

without actually being tried for Violation of the Adult

Conspiracy. She also wanted to give the boy a treat, and

she did not hold the Conspiracy in as much awe as was

proper, because of her background as a woman nobody

much looked at anyway.

So Nimby removed her dress for one full blink, at a

time when only David happened to be looking, so that she

stood in eyeball-numbing yellow-green bra and panties.

Then he restored the outfit, as if it had never lapsed; there

was no evidence and no other witness, so there would be

no case even if someone suspected.

David's brown eyes turned yellow-green and his jaw

dropped. Brief as it was, it had still been too much of a

dose; he was stunned, and about to fall. But Nimby caught

one arm, and Chlorine the other.
"Promise not to tell,"

she whispered in the boy's ear.

David nodded numbly. He would recover, because he

was Mundane and not quite of age for the full effect to

register. But it was a close call. Mundanes, it turned out,

weren't all that different from Xanthians. As it was, the

boy would start pursuing girls a full year earlier than he

would have otherwise; the secret glimpse had advanced his

thyme-table that far.

"David! Are you all right?" Mary inquired, with a

mother's instant awareness of any passing indisposition in

her child.

David's mouth worked. "Jus—just great," he said,

awed.

Mary glanced somewhat suspiciously at Chlorine's low

and curvaceous decolletage. "Go with your sister," she

said. She suspected that the boy had seen a bit too much,

so was moving him away from it. Fortunately she sus-

pected only about a quarter of the reality.

They walked as a group toward Castle Roogna. But Da-

vid, still glazed, stumbled. Mary caught him and looked in

his face. "Your eyes!" she exclaimed. "They're green!"

Now she suspected half the reality. But being Mundane,

she had an abiding disbelief of magic, so couldn't bring

herself to suspect the whole of it. That was just as well.

The boy's eyes had been stained permanently green by

what he had seen.

Castle Roogna came into view, gloriously magical. And

there, coming out to greet them, was a lovely princess they

didn't recognize. "Who is that creature?" Jim inquired.

Then Karen spied a freckle. "That's Princess Electra!"

she squealed. "Looking princessly!"

She was correct. Nimby had known, of course, but

hadn't been asked. Normally Electra ran around in blue

jeans, but on formal occasions she suppressed her nature

and played her royal role. Clothes made all the difference.

Karen ran up to the princess. "How can you stand being

so regal?" she demanded.

Electra made a careful royal moue. "It isn't easy," she

confessed. "But somebody has to do it. After the official

greetings are over, let's get together with Jenny Elf and

sneak away to pig out on chocolate pie. We can wear—"

she glanced around to be sure no one else was in earshot

"—shorts and tank tops."

"Ooooo!" Karen squealed, delighted. "It's a date."

Then Electra put her royal face back on and turned to

the others. "So nice to meet you again, good people. But

I believe I have not met one of your number before."

"This is Willow Elf," Sean said quickly. "Her winged

elm tree is very large."

"So I see," Electra said. "So nice to meet you. Willow

Elf." She extended her hand in princessly manner.'

Willow bowed, and her wings quivered. "Thank you,

Princess."

"And how did you come to join this party?" Electra

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inquired. "I had understood that the winged elves seldom

associate with ground-bound folk."

"Sean and I washed in a love spring,

before we real-

ized," Willow explained.

"Oh, I understand!" Electra said with instant sympathy.

"When Prince Dolph kissed me awake, after my several

centuries of sleep, the magic made me love him instantly.

But he didn't love me. At least you were together."

"But didn't he marry you?" Willow asked.

"Oh yes, eventually. But at first he was more interested

in Princess Nada Naga."

"How could any man not be most interested in you?"

Willow asked, amazed.

"When you see Nada, you will understand." Electra

paused. "Oh, there are the winged centaurs arriving.

Come, Willow, I must introduce you to them; I'm sure

you'll like them." Then, remembering her royal duties, she

paused again. "But first I must conduct all of you to the

castle in style." Yet it was evident that she wanted to greet

the centaurs first.

Mary was the one to find a way to alleviate the problem.

"We'll be glad to wait until the centaurs can join us, Prin-

cess. Then we can all enter together."

"Oh, thank you! Come, Willow!" The princess hurried

toward the field where the centaurs were landing, and Wil-

low went with her.

Sean remained behind. "I think they have girl things to

discuss," he said. He was right; Electra wanted to compare

notes on magic love, having met another woman who had

encountered it.

The Baldwins and Chlorine waited while Electra and

Willow met the centaurs and exchanged more introduc-

tions. Then that group returned to join the family. There

were four centaurs: Che, Cynthia, Chena, and Crystal. The

family had met them before, of course; indeed, Chena and

Crystal had helped significantly in the effort to herd Happy

Bottom north. It was a nice reunion.

But there was a nicer one coming. As the princess was

about to conduct them all to the castle. Nimby nudged

Chorine and gave her a note. Her eyes widened. Then she

spoke. "Princess, could we wait just a bit more? Nimby

says other centaurs are coming."

Electra looked blank. "More centaurs?"

"The Good Magician invited them."

The princess nodded. "Then we had better wait for

them. But I hadn't realized that any more centaurs had

participated in the 111 Wind venture."

Now they heard the beat of galloping hooves. "Two

ground-bound centaurs," Che said. He could tell by the

sound. "They don't normally care. to associate with our

kind."

"They certainly don't," Chena agreed. "Are you

sure—?"

Then the two came into view: a male and a female.

Chena screatned. "Carieton!" She galloped out to meet

them.

"Her brother," Jim said, remembering. "We promised

to relay his greeting to her, and we did."

"And Sheila," Sean said. "I'd recognize that bosom

anywhere." Then, conscious of Willow beside him, he

added: "Not that I care."

"I'm not jealous," Willow said. "I could show you

something similar, if I dared." She meant that it was not

safe to risk an exposure that might cause

them both to

forget the danger of summoning a stork, since they could

not be a family. Her words were also an invitation of a

sort, because she expected to be dead long before any stork

found her, so she might as well do it—if he agreed.

"You already did, in the love spring," he reminded her.

"I almost wish we had—" Then he remembered that they

were in the company of his family, and stifled it. But Jim

and Mary were already exchanging a knowing glance,

They well understood the invitation and the tentative ac-

ceptance. Indeed, Jim was inclined to give them leave, and

Mary was weakening. It was evident that the love of the

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two young folk was complete, but that they would have to

separate soon.

Meanwhile Chena Centaur collided with her brother,

hugging him. "I thought I'd never see you again!" she

cried through her tears of joy.

"I had a similar concern," he admitted. "I feared for

your safety on the brutish mainland." He drew back a

little. "But you seem to have changed."

"I have joined a new species," she said. "I am now a

winged monster." She spread her wings.

"So I see. I suppose it is for the best, if you are satis-

fied."

"Yes I am. Except for one thing. Two things."

"One? Two?"

"I miss my family. And I would like to find some

winged stallions. Do you suppose that any on Centaur

Isle—?"

He smiled. "I suppose it is time to confess. I found

myself dissatisfied with things on Centaur Isle, and thought

that if you had found a suitable situation, I might join your

group. In fact, I know of some others

who also might wish

to join, if it were clear that they would be welcome."

"Ooooo!" Chena cried, just like a human maiden. She

hugged him again, then turned to Crystal. "Would you

welcome a new stallion from Centaur Isle, if he put on

wings?"

"We are among human folk," Crystal said. "Therefore

the Adult Conspiracy prevents me from answering in de- .

tail. But I think a very general affirmative would be in

order."

Carieton glanced at her. "You have not been a centaur

long, I suspect," he remarked. "You are speaking as you

think a centaur would speak."

Crystal blushed. "Is it so obvious? I'm trying so hard."

"I think a centaur stallion would be glad to exchange

elocution instruction for flying

instruction."

While this dialogue was occurring, Sheila Centaur was

renewing her acquaintance with the family and Chlorine,

and David was staring at her front.

"Why, David," Sheila

remarked, "your eyes are green." Centaurs were obser-

vant, and had good memories as well as good mammaries.

"Yeah," he said. It didn't occur to him to wonder why

a glimpse of a green bra should stain his eyes, while a

complete look at a fine bare bosom merely made his eyes

dilate. This was, of course, the magic of certain garments:

"How come you came here?" Karen asked. "I mean

you helped us on our way, and we're glad, but do you

really care about mainland Xanth?"

Sheila looked as if she was possibly pondering the mer-

est hint of a blush, which would have

been very unusual

for a normal centaur. "It is true that my main interest is

in Centaur Isle. But Carleton wished to see his sister again,

and I was indisposed to allow him to travel that far alone."

"I get it!" Karen cried with juvenile lack of circum-

spection. "You're sweet on Carleton!"

"Karen!" Mary cautioned.

' 'While that is not the way I would have chosen to ex-

press it, the sentiment is accurate," Sheila confessed.

"Where he goes, I go." There was a slight stress on the

words, because she had a notion where Carleton was go-

ing.

They got organized and started for the

castle again. But

there was another arrival. It was a young woman with tan-

gled hair, and a small dog.

Immediately Woofer and Midrange took note, and went

out to meet the newcomers. Tweeter, perched on Karen's

hair, chirped. That alerted the girl. "Snarl—and his lost

mistress!" she cried, running after the

pets.

So it was.*Snarl had received an invitation to the party,

because he had helped the 111 Wind effort, and he had

brought Ursa along too, not wishing to separate from his

mistress again. The girl seemed a bit baffled by it all, but

Karen quickly filled her in while cuddling Snarl. There was

another round of introductions.

They started in again—but were paused by still another

arrival. No one recognized the four women striding pur-

posefully toward them until Tweeter cheeped again. Then

Chlorine, who had been talking with the centaurs, looked.

"The four forces of nature!" she exclaimed. "Everyone's

here!"

There were more introductions, this time made by Chlo-

rine. "Fira—the force of fire," she said of the fiery

woman. ' 'Mareen—the force of water. Alanda—the force

of land. And Windona—the force of, air. They helped us

go to find the reverse story thread." The four women nod-

ded graciously. Fortunately Chlorine did not clarify that

the women had enabled them to travel back in time.

Now at last they all went to the castle. Souffle Serpent

was in the moat, standing tali, with a

little black bow tie

on his neck to show that he was part of the resident staff.

They crossed the drawbridge, which was gaily deco-

rated, and entered the castle proper. There, in a gown that

made Mary wince, was Princess Nada Naga. And suddenly

Willow understood why Prince Dolph had been distracted

from Princess Electra, in the early days of their relation-

ship.

But there were also the Demoness Mentia, and Trenita

Imp, and Princess Ivy, and many others, and any concerns

about who might catch on to what were lost in the welter

of additional introductions and remembrances.

Then Jenny Elf and another woman approached Willow.

"Hello, Sean," Jenny said. "This is Wira, the Good Ma-

gician's daughter-in-law. She must talk with Willow."

"Wira?" Sean asked. "But isn't she—" He caught

himself.

"Blind," Wira finished for him. "That is why Jenny is

guiding me, here in this less familiar castle."

"I am Willow," Willow said, approaching her.

Wira smiled. "Magician Humfrey asked me to give you

this." She held out a card.

"Thank you," Willow said. "But what is it?"

"It is a pass to Xanth. Present it at the station on No

Name Key in Mundania and you and your companions will

be admitted."

"But I can't go to Mundania," Willow protested. "I

would die!"

"The Good Magician says that isn't true. But you would

lose your wings and become a human maiden while there.

Your problem is not in leaving Xanth, but in returning.

Keep this pass with you always."

Willow's eyes widened. "You mean I can go with

Sean? And have my wings when I return? And he can

come back with me?"

"Please don't speak so loudly," Wira cautioned. "The

Good Magician would not like to have it widely known

that he ever did a favor without charge. But considering

your service in helping to save Xanth from the 111 Wind,

he felt it was warranted."

"Oh!" Willow cried, on the verge of fainting from joy

and relief. "Tell him thank you! Thank you! Thank—"

But Wira was gone.

"We can be together," Sean breathed. "I'm sure Dad

will let you travel to Miami with us."

"But what of your mother?"

"She will be silent. That's her way of agreeing without

actually saying yes to an arrangement some might consider

untoward."

"Untoward?"

"You and me sharing a room."

"Sharing—?"

"In my generation, it's acceptable for engaged couples

to share residence."

"Engaged?" Willow was staring at the pass, still getting

her new bearings.

"Willow, will you marry me?"

Suddenly her bearings were gotten. "Yes!" She hugged

him and kissed him, and little hearts floated out.

"Oh, look!" Karen cried, spying a heart as it floated by

her nose. "Little hearts! They're engaged!"

Then everyone looked, and there was applause.

Nimby was glad the Good Magician had not come in

person, because he would have had

some hard questions

for Nimby. It was not easy to keep the truth from Humfrey,

who was the Magician of Information. Obviously the Good

Magician knew that Nimby had asked Willow to help herd

Happy Bottom north. But, as obviously, he had not fath-

omed Nimby's full nature. Yet.

The party began, and everyone had an excellent time.

Nimby danced with Chlorine, and it was wonderful. She

had not been an expert dancer, but he quietly made her so,

knowing it was her wish. Then she danced with other

males, dazzling them, and he danced with other females.

Meanwhile Princess Electra, her royal duties done, re-

verted to blue jeans and then to (gasp!) shorts, and went

out with Jenny and the children to pig out on pies. If any-

one noticed, anyone had the sense to ignore this infraction

of protocol.

Willow's winged parents arrived from their flying elm

tree, and met Sean and his family. They did not seem com-

pletely thrilled about her betrothal to a land-bound Mun-

dane, but quickly saw that the situation was hopeless, as

Willow adamantly refused to take any love-nullifying po-

tion. They also grudgingly appreciated the fact that Sean's

family had helped save Xanth from destruction; that was

worth something. So they would live with it.

Somewhere amidst it all King Dor formally presented

Jim Baldwin with a Certificate of Thanks for the family's

volunteer effort to save Xanth from yon 111 Wind, now

confined to the Region of Air. "Without you and your

traveling house, and the special effort of

all of your family

members and pets, we could not have done it," the King

concluded. "We owe you an enormous debt of gratitude,

and regret that we have no way to reward you that will be

effective in your homeland. But be assured you will be

welcome here at any time you choose to return."

"Return?" Jim asked blankly.

"When you use the pass Magician Humfrey gave Wil-

low," the King explained. "Any of you will be able to

accompany her and Sean when they visit. Your three pets

are included, of course."

"Woof!" Woofer agreed.

"That's telling them, mutt!" the floor under him agreed.

Jim looked at his wife. "We might wish to visit," Mary

said cautiously.

"Yea!" Karen exclaimed.

In time the festivities wore out, and folk retired to their

rooms in the castle and temporary rooms set up around it.

Folk pretended not to notice how Sean and Willow shared

one of those rooms. "She's a good young woman," was

all Mary would say.

"He's a good young man," Willow's mother said with

similar reservation. The two women, one Mundane, the

other winged, exchanged a glance that transcended cul-

tures. That was enough.

In the morning the family and Willow piled into the RV

and headed for the trollway, waved on their way by a

King, a Queen, and a number of Princesses. The Demoness

Mentia went also, to make sure that they found a suitable

gas guzzler and suffered no other problems. They also had

the Mundane addresses of Dug and Kim, two others who

had visited Xanth and knew something about it. Some of

them would surely be visiting again.

Then Chlorine knew it was time for her to go home; her

big adventure—bigger than she had really expected—was

over. Her folks might be wondering where she was. So,

reluctantly, she bid farewell to the royalty and set off for

the backwoods, riding Nimby in dragon form.

When they got close. Chlorine had a

notion. "I know

this is all about to end. Nimby," she said. "You promised

me one good adventure, and you certainly delivered it.

You have things of your own to do, and can't take forever

catering to my whims. But at least I'd like to show you to

my family, before you go away forever. Will that be all

right?"

Nimby nodded. It was all right because anything she

wanted was all right, by the terms of his situation. But far

more hung on her decision than she realized—and he

could not tell her that.

"So okay, I'm taking my medicine and declaring this

wonderful adventure over," she said, and at that point she

reverted to her natural appearance and nature. "You are

free to do whatever you want, with my thanks. But if you

will be kind enough to wait here until I can bring my

family to see you, I'll really appreciate

it. It's been great,

Nimby." Her reversion hadn't quite registered yet, so she

was still being nice. Then she turned and marched away

from him, not looking back because she was afraid she

would break down and ask for what she thought to be

impossible: a permanent life as a lovely, smart, healthy,

and nice woman.

And Nimby lost his power of motion and magic. All

that remained was his awareness of all things in Xanth,

but he could no longer affect them in any way. He had

been reduced to a donkey-headed hulk,, and would remain

so until he rotted away, unless Chlorine should shed her

tear for him. And why should she do

that, knowing it

would blind her?

The Demon X(AN)'1' was depressed because he was

about to lose his wager, and with it his governance of the

Land of Xanth. 'Some other Demon would take it over, and

might change it or destroy it, because no other Demon

cared about it the way X(AN)th did. For

he had indeed

come to care for it, very much. And therein lay another

irony, for he had also fallen in love with Chlorine.

Of course, he knew that the beautiful, smart, healthy,

nice edition was a creation of his magic. He had made her,

literally. But he had done it by her request, to her speci-

fications. She had become the woman she chose to be,

when she had the option. Therefore the seeds of it had

been within her; she had known her deficiencies, and acted

to eliminate them. Chlorine, as she had been the past few

days, was what she would be always, given the chance.

And it was Chlorine Ideal that he loved. She was just the

perfect woman. In all but one respect—the one she hadn't

thought of. And that was the capacity to love. Her hard

life had washed that out along with her tears, until only a

vestige remained. And so she did not love him back. He

knew it, because he knew her mind as no

other did. And

without that love, she would never shed a tear for anyone

other than herself.

X(AN)'1' himself had not known the meaning of love,

before this adventure. He had not cared about anyone or

anything except himself and his competitive ranking

among Demons. But in order to win

Chlorine's love he

had had to learn about love, and in the course of that he

learned how.

It had not been easy or sudden, because Chlorine herself

did not truly understand it. She thought that love came

automatically with beauty and niceness. She was mistaken;

such things merely facilitated it. So she had practiced her

craft, impressing young males by displaying teasing por-

tions of her healthy body and clothing. She had teased

Nimby, too, and indeed she had been interesting, and he

would have liked to summon the stork with her. But storks

were not identical to love; they were more like fellow trav-

elers. There could be storks without love, and love without

storks. Chlorine had finally realized that distinction, and

broken off the effort, and in that decision had sown the

seed of what she lacked. She had realized that she was

coming to care for him enough to make playing unkind,

but she hadn't realized what she was actually searching

for.

It was the Mundane family Baldwin that had begun to

show him the immense potential depth and breadth of love.

The children's love for their pets, and Mary's love for the

children. Neither had anything to do with storks, but in

their subtle ways they were as significant. Any member of

that family was prepared to die to protect any other mem-

ber. Not all of them realized it, such as David, but it was

true. X(AN)'1' had studied that quiet underlying emotion,

laboring to understand it, and gradually had succeeded.

Mary had helped him most, by showing her concern for

everyone, even for him, when he had come in soiled from

the meatier shower. She had treated him like a son, and

though he was infinitely older than she, he had appreciated

it. She had cared for him, and thereby shown him how to

care for her. It was a kind of commitment that required no

magic; it was just there, like water

seeping silently through

ground. But it was the base on which the more dramatic

forms of love were laid.

Such as that between Sean and Willow. True, it had

been sponsored by a dip in a love spring. But neither

would have been affected as they were, if they had not

had solid family love first. They had

understood the as-

pects of love, and were ready when suddenly it caught fire.

Otherwise the water would merely have caused them to

mate uncontrollably, summoning as many storks as they

could in a short time, and then to separate, the mood ex-

pended, in the manner of animals. Instead they had resisted

the mating urge for the sake of a larger commitment that

they were, ironically, unable to make. For the love they

wished to realize in its entirety.

It had taken XtAN)"' some time to analyze that, and to

emulate it to be sure that he did understand it. But that

turned out to be a door that, once opened, could not be

closed again. He loved Chlorine.

Now she had ended the adventure, without knowing its

significance. Unable to love herself, she had not appreci-

ated how a donkey-headed dragon could love her. It had

all been for fun, as she saw it, a glorious adventure of the

type Princesses were wont to have. Indeed, she had danced

with a Prince, and conversed with a

King, and not made

a fool of herself. This was her notion of the ultimate. Now

it was over, and she was going home. And Nimby was

dying.

Perhaps it had been doomed from the start. From the

time he had allowed his attention to wander, and had ad-

dressed the wrong young woman. The

one without tears.

But somehow he could not regret that now, because he

could not have loved the other woman more than he loved

Chlorine. Though he lost the bet, and his status, and the

Land of Xanth, he had gained something infinitely pre-

cious in return: the knowledge and substance of love. Per-

haps it was worth it.

Yet how different it might have been. Had Chlorine pos-

sessed just a smidgen more awareness of the true nature

of love, she might then have asked for an enhanced ca-

pacity, and then she might have learned to love him. But

as it was, she merely liked him. And so his mission here

was doomed.

Had she been able to shed her last tear for him, he would

have won, and then what a great and wonderful surprise

he would have had for her! He would have made her all

that she had wanted to be, and so much more, more than

she had ever imagined. She could have become the God-

dess of Xanth, below only himself, because he could not

make her a Demon. All knowledge, all power, and all joy,

too, could have been hers. He would have assumed any

form she wanted, especially the handsome Nimby-man

one, and obliged her in any way she wished. He could

have given her any magic talent she wished, being no

longer limited by fear of discovery of his nature. But per-

haps most important of all, he would have given her his

love, and enabled her to love him in return, in the manner

of Sean and Willow. And in thanks for the way those two

had showed him how gloriously complete true love could

be, he would have given Sean the talent of flying without

wings in Xanth, so he could share Willow's life com-

pletely. No one else could do such a thing, but the Demon

X(A/N)'1' had all magic power in his own land, and he

knew now that a favor done required a favor returned.

Everything, everything, could have been Chlorine's, for

herself and her friends who had helped her battle the 111

Wind. Even those who had come in late, like Adam and

Keaira, who were now discovering a romance of their own.

He knew the parts all of them had played, and could re-

ward them all.

All lost, for want of a tear.

YON ILL WIND 331

He spread his awareness. Chlorine had arrived home, in

her homely bad-natured form. She tried to tell her mother

about her adventure.

"Where's that sprig of thyme you were supposed to

fetch, you disreputable wench?" her shrewish mother de-

manded, slapping her. She did that often, because she

knew the girl didn't dare hit back.

Chlorine had completely forgotten about that. In fact,

she didn't even remember that she hadn't been the one

sent for a sprig of thyme; that was Miss Fortune. Chlorine

had gone for a bow from a bow-vine. But the two had

collided, and gotten confused, and proceeded on each

other's missions. "I—I got distracted," she said, realizing

just how awful her family life had been. Why had she ever

bothered to return to this?

"Distracted?" her brutish father asked. "Did you sneak

out to see a stupid boy?"

A stupid boy. That was about as far from the truth as it

was possible to get.

"Not exactly. You see I encountered a funny-looking

dragon who changed into a handsome man, and made me

beautiful, and we had the most wonderful adventure and

helped save Xanth from the 111 Wind, and—"

"Shut up!" he shouted, lifting his hand to knock some

respect into her. "Don't try to tell me any crazy fantastic

story! Where's this oaf?"

Chlorine realized that they were not

about to listen, so

she tried another tack. "Out near the thyme plant. Do you

want to meet him?"

"Sure I do," her father said, fetching his club from the

wall. "I'll bash his head into pulp! You don't deserve any

man."

Bash Nimby? Gross chance! She did not realize that

Nimby was now immobile. So she led them back to where

Nimby lay. "There he is," she said. "The dragon who

made me beautiful and gave me the best adventure of my

life. Now do you believe me?"

"A dragon ass!" the man exclaimed, recognizing the

species immediately, because it was so close to his own

type. "We don't want that kind here. Not in my back yard.

We'll destroy it." He bashed Nimby on the head with his

club, but it made no difference. Nimby could not move,

but neither was he vulnerable to the weak strength of a

dissipated mortal man. Only time would wipe him out, or

a hot fire.

"It's already dead, you fool," Chlorine's mother said.

"Soon it'll begin to stink."

"Then we'll bum it," the man decided. "Come on, pile

up some brush round it." He and his wife got to work

gathering dry brush.

Chlorine was stunned. "Nimby—what's the matter with

you?" she cried. "Get up, get away from here! I'll go

with you. Maybe we can have another adventure some-

where else."

But Nimby didn't move. He had lost that power.

"So you're slacking off, as usual, you slut," Chlorine's

father said. "Just for that, you will have the privilege of

doing the final honor." He brought out a torch, and lit it.

"You will set fire to the pyre. Let that be a lesson to you."

He shoved the blazing torch into

Chlorine's somewhat

flaccid hand.

"Nimby!" she cried, a strange emotion rising in her.

"Get up! Get away! Don't let them kill you!"

But Nimby just lay there, unable to respond. If only she

had been able to fathom the one thing she needed to!

"Do it, girl, or you'll get a beating the like of Which

you won't forget!" her father said grimly.

Chlorine realized that she had no choice. She was back

in the real world of Xanth, no longer in the dreamworld

of beauty and Princesses and great adventures. She was

subject to the brutish whims of her

family, and she herself

was rather more like them than she liked. For a while she

had been nice as well as beautiful, but now she was nei-

ther. She wished she could have loved and been loved

while she was worthy of it, yet somehow she hadn't known

how to make it happen. Why hadn't she thought to ask

Nimby? So she had squandered her chance even for that.

She was a loser. Her best bet was to bum up the dragon

and be done with illusions of grandeur.

She lowered the torch. But as she gazed directly upon

Nimby's ugly donkey head, a despairing realization came.

""I'm not beautiful, I'm not nice, I'm no good, I'm poison,

like my talent—but for a while you made me seem oth-

erwise. I owe you that wonderful dream that never could

be. I owe the Mundane family too, because they showed

me how good a family could be. I think maybe I could

learn to love like that, given half a chance. Oh, Nimby, I

don't know what happened to you, but I fear it's my fault.

Maybe I poisoned your water by accident when I reverted

to my normal nature. It's too late now to make amends,

and I'd mess it up if I tried. But now I know I love you

in my worthless way, and if I can't gaze on you, I don't

care if I never see anything again! In fact, I'll join you in

this pyre, so maybe my third-rate spirit can be near yours.

Nimby, I beg you, forgive me for messing you up." She

touched the torch to the brush, and the pyre flamed high,

heating her face, singeing her hair.

And the two halves of her only remaining tear flowed

from her eyes, blinding them, and merged on her nose, and

that tear fell.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

I do a lot of writing—far more than ever sees print—

because I'm a writaholic; I love writing. But my work-

ing schedule suffered a significant disruption. I was

writing Hope of Earth, which is my third GEODYSSEY

historical novel, and hoped to complete it in 1994. But I

had a number of collaborations to do—no, don't all you

readers write in asking to collaborate, because I hope to

do no more of those—and those delayed Hope. Then I got

to work on it, and was about 50,000 words along, when

the last collaborative manuscript arrived. Quest for the

Fallen Star. I read it, and had mixed emotions: it was a

major fantasy that would surely put my collaborator on the

map when published, but it needed the kind of editing and

revamping I could do to give it full effect—and it was

240,000 words long. On each of the more recent collabo-

rations my collaborator has written the novel, then I have

gone over it to fix any problems that might make it un-

publishable. So my part is fairly fast. But this one would

take me two and a half months to revamp —as long as it

takes me to write a typical Xanth novel. If I took that much

time off, how could I finish Hope on schedule? So I dis-

cussed it with my researcher, Alan Riggs, and he suggested

that he try going over it first. He could take care of the

routine adjustments—the kind that can take a lot of time—

and then I could go over it and polish it to my standard.

That would reduce my time to about a month, with as good

a result. I liken novel writing to building a highway: first

you scout the territory, plot the route on the map, obtain

the right to use the land, clear the site, bulldoze out hills,

fill in ravines, bridge over bogs and rivers, level it—and

then you are ready to start hauling in your supplies and

actually constructing the road surface.

My collaborator had

done all that, but his surface was not quite of drivable

level, so needed to be regraded and finished. Alan could

do the regrading, and then I could come with my finishing

tools and complete the job. So we consulted with the au-

thor, and he agreed, and Alan got to work on it. But that

meant I had lost my researcher, and because Alan has not

had my quarter century experience revising novels, it was

much slower for him. So he was out for most of the rest

of the year, and Hope ground to a halt anyway without

him.

What to do? A dim bulb flashed: do the next Xanth

novel. I had scheduled it for 1995, but my fan suggestion

list was already overflowing despite using up about 150

on Roc and a Hard Place. Some were pretty substantial

notions, too, such as having the Demon X(AN)"' assume

mortal form and have an adventure in Xanth, or having a

Mundane family named Baldwin get blown in with a

storm. Ah, I see you recognize those notions. So I filled

in by writing this novel.

Then my father, eighty-five, fell and fractured his hip.

There were endless complications as he wended his way

through surgery and recovery, culminating in a trip to

Pennsylvania my daughter Penny and I made, to make sure

all was in order with him. I believe we did succeed in

enhancing his lifestyle in a number of ways, as well as

renewing family ties. So that was time off from this novel.

But not the main time off. That was the process of learn-

ing a new word processor. I had used Borland's Sprint for

six years, and liked it well enough. But it

never had an

update, and the news was that the company was going to

let it fade away. It required a special patch to run on a 486

system; what about the 586? So it seemed to be time to

get with a word processor that would stay with the times.

The winnowing out has occurred, and for my IBM clone

system there were now two main choices: Word Perfect or

Microsoft Word. Of those, only the latter would call up

multiple files. Since I normally call up nine working files,

for text, contents, characters, notes, and so on, that clarified

my decision. (Later I learned that Word Perfect for Win-

dows now calls up nine files—but MS Word for Windows

seems to have no limit.) So I tried Word for DOS, but

after a week moved to Word for Windows, because that

was about two upgrades more advanced, and had a number

of features I wanted. I am one of those who don't much

like Windows or the Mouse, but got around that by getting

a trackball and then finding ways to avoid using it. Win-

dows and Word arid associated programs turned put to be

monsters to leam, evidently crafted by programmers who

had been too long away from the real world. I don't just

accept the defaults offered, I want to make the machine

serve me, rather than vice versa. Word did not want to

yield mastery, but eventually I did get things mostly my

way, and it is a powerful program, even if it hasn't yet

caught up to Sprint in a number of features. So I started

this novel on Sprint, and changed to Word for DOS early

in Chapter Three, and to Word for Windows by the end

of that chapter. So if you notice a change in the novel at

that point, you know whom to blame: Microsoft. And yes,

of course I wrote Microsoft a long letter detailing the ways

Word was pointlessly User-Unfriendly, such as having an

almost invisible vertical line in lieu of a cursor so you have

to operate almost blind. Oh, what fun, deleting the wrong

file because you thought you were here instead of there!

The company could at one stroke greatly improve its prod-

uct. But I received no response. Par for the course. After

all, if they wanted it to be User-Friendly, they would have

listened to users long ago. But I must say that once that

pit bull is muzzled and trained, it does have a lot of au-

thority.

Then Microsoft marketed a new "ergonomic" key-

board, which looks as if it was designed by Salvador Dali,

he of the melted watches: take a regular keyboard, melt it

halfway over a flame, stretch it so the keyboard separates

in the center, push it together again so that the center

humps without rejoining, and put a bar under it that lifts

it in the front, rather than the back, so that the keys tilt

slightly away from you, and you have it. The Microsoft

Natural Keyboard. Only a crazy person would try to use

that. Right: I bought it, and I love it. Because now my

hands can address it halfway naturally, easing the pressure

on my wrists, so that maybe my carpal tunnel syndrome

will alleviate. I tried it for ten days, getting used to it, then

-tried my old keyboard again—and in one minute gave up;

I can no longer stand the type of keyboard I used for ten

years. I fancy myself as an ornery

independent cuss, and

I dislike Big Business on principle, but Microsoft got my

number on this one. I changed to the new keyboard, with

my Dvorak layout pasted on, in Chapter Nine, during

Chlorine's seduction scene, right after the window fan and

before the ogre eater. So, again, if you notice a change ...

So my life shifted in the course of this novel, and not

just because I turned (ugh!) sixty. Thanks so much to all

of you readers who wrote to remind me of that milestone,

in case I should overlook it.

Long-term readers will remember that Jenny Elf is based

on a real girl, who got struck at age twelve by a drunk

driver and was in a coma for almost three months before

my first letter woke her. Then it turned out that she was

almost completely paralyzed. That was several years ago,

and as I write this she is eighteen, still mostly paralyzed,

but doing better. She can use a powered wheelchair, and

can walk a few steps using a walker, and can speak some

words. Her computer helps a lot. She hopes to take college

courses. At this time the collection of my first year's letters

to her, titled. Letters to Jenny, is being published in paper-

back. Jenny Elf was a major character in Isle of View, and

has been around as an incidental Xanth character since, as

in this novel.

Readers keep sending me puns, characters, and sugges-

tions. This year I have written two Xanth novels, and used

about 150 reader notions in the last, and close to 100 in

this one, and there are still half a slew waiting in line, with

more crowding in. The wait for admission to a Xanth novel

is getting long. Apart from a number earmarked for the

next novel, Faun & Games, I'm caught up through roughly

JeJune 1994. There will be another year's worth by the

time I write F&G, which will take place mostly in an un-

usual setting, even for Xanth: Ptero Moon. This is no or-

dinary site.

Here are the credits for reader contributions to this

novel: Mundane hurricane and Baldwin family into Xanth,

Willow Elf—Michael Weatherford. Hurricane Fracto—

Tim Cumming. Demon X(A/N)'" assumes mortal form for

quest—Brian Laughman. Aqua duck, ant-acid—J. W. Ma-

nuel. Miss Fortune, "No thyme like the

present," block

parents, scents of humor flowers, ogre eater, junk male,

spoils of war—Princess Mandy Owston. Bow-vine, pun-

ish-mint—Gershon Allweiss. Toad stools—Isaac Hansen-

Joseph. Wrist watch, ear drum, cow bell, ring finger—

Daniel McBride. Speed demon, kinder/meaner garden—

Aimee Caldwell. Fly-by-night, fly-fishing frogs—Brian

Visel. Magic marker—Joel Hayhurst. Com-bat, re-in-

carnations—Matt "Powerman" Powers. Dock spider, cen-

taur/mermaid, naga/harpy crossbreeds—Kevan Gentle.

Poul-tree—Nick Kiefel. Mean well—Stephanie Erb. Mean

time—Bill Fields. Blobstacle course—Garrett Elliott.

Meatier shower—Eric Sanford. Imp names—Leighton Pa-

quette. Gem puns—Jew Leer. Car pool puns—John R.

Short. B-puns—R. J. Frey. Fire ants, pain cone—Jake

Walters, Chris Warren. Thim bull—Brock Moore. New,

clear cherry bombs; thyme bomb—Daniel Serrano. Crimea

River, whinery—Brandy Straus. Cat-ion—Damion D.

Belts. Art-illery—Adam Ross. Glass jaw—Paul-Gabriel

Wiener.

Centaur/night mare crossbreed—Emily Waddy. Tree-

men-dous—Melanie Wahl. Snarl—Louis Kammerer.

Upsy-daisy, talent of making pictures—Ray Koenig. Ursa

(Snarl's girl)—Ursa Davis. Junk shun, Deja and Vu, Law

of Averages overturned on appeal—Richard Vallance.

Trenita—Trenita Taylor. Window fan—

Thomas-Dwight,

Sawyer, Dorr. Twenty questions (and more) answered—

David H Zaback. Melody, Rhythm, Harmony—Eric and

Melody Moyer. Poison Ivy; Sherry, Terry, and Merry—

Rachel Gutin. Demon Ted—Michelle Aakhus. Fracto's

side—Sarah Gordon. Che's release from Companionship—

Erin Kay Sharp. Napsack—Sara Rosehill. Modem—James

Morrow. Keaira the weather girl—Eden Miller. Lips tic—

Drew Beauler. Crystal Centaur—Crystal Centaur. Centaur

magic conjecture—Brandee Irwin. Adam—Adam Mc-

Daniel. Fat character in Xanth—Jenna Grambort. Mari-

ana—Bryan J. Moll. Twin girls who shape and animate

rocks—Jenifer Trapp. Twins who change color of hair—

Amanda Galli. Leai and Adiana—Michelle J. Siedlecki.

Timber wolf—Brent Rowe. Gourdless phone, crossbow,

money tree—Scott Thompson. The Pawpaw Wizard—

Suzanne T. Persampieri. The origin of reverse wood—

Joshua Breitzer. Talent of sticking to walls—Kevin Cris-

alli. The right spot—W. D. Bliss. The origin of mosqui-

toes—Jessica Grider. Snowshoes—Murray Sampson. Ash

hole—Brian Bouchard. The four fan: forces of nature—

Amanda Dickason. Table salt—Andy Hartwell.

And one additional credit, of a different nature: as I

edited this novel, I tired of the regular background radio

music, so listened to an audiocassette tape sent to me by

reader Judy Purgal: Loreena McKennitt's Elemental. I do

like folk songs, and Irish music, and there are a number

of such singers I can enjoy. But the one

that caught my

fancy this time, Loreena arranged but did not sing; it was

sung by Cedric Smith: "Carrighfergus." It's the story of

an alcoholic who longs to return there and die. I'm not

alcoholic, but I do at times long for the old isles.

And so farewell, for another fantastic year. Dismem-

ber 3, 1994.