

[Argonia 03] – Bronwyn's Bane by Elizabeth Ann Scarborough

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PREFACE: (FROM THE ARGONIAN ARCHIVES TRANSCRIBED BY SIR CYRIL PERCHINGBIRD FOR *THE ARGONIAN HERALD*)

*CROWN PRINCESS CURSED AT CHRISTENING!
QUEEN SWOONS AS BEWITCHED TOY SHOUTS "LIAR" AT HRH
BRONWYN*

Fort Iceworm, Northern Territories, Argonia: Reign of King Roari the Red, Year I ... The Royal Christening of the firstborn of our King and Queen was marred earlier this year by the antics of a bewitched christening gift, a jack-in-the-box that shouted "You're a liar!" at the infant Princess Bronwyn, cursing her to be one. Queen Amber-wine fainted hysterically but gracefully into the arms of her Lord while the vocally distraught Royal Heiress was soothed by onlookers.

Experts fear the curse may damage the Princess's ability to succeed her Royal Father on the Throne and reliable sources say the King is launching an investigation into the source of the curse.

CLASSIFIED DECREE: FROM HIS ROYAL MAJESTY KING ROARI I TO SIR CYRIL PERCHINGBIRD, CHIEF ARCHIVIST:

"Perchingbird: While We approve of your notion of transcribing the archives into readable form for the populace against such a time as the populace shall learn to read, the above article wasn't exactly what We had in mind. As you know, Our quest to have the Princess's curse lifted has not been entirely successful, and must needs be delayed while other matters of State take precedence. Therefore, in order to prevent undue disrespect on the part of Our subjects for Our daughter, and to keep from making life harder than it already is for the poor wee lass, We and Our Queen have decided that this incident shall be in no way published abroad until such time as We otherwise declare, and that those persons who have knowledge of Bronwyn's curse shall keep their big mouths shut about it around her so she can grow up as normally as possible without being punished and plagued for that which she cannot help. We know We can expect your loyalty in this matter. Roari, Rex."

(FROM THE ARGONIAN ARCHIVES TRANSCRIBED BY SIR CYRIL PERCHINGBIRD FOR *THE ARGONIAN HERALD*)

*GOOD NEWS AND BAD NEWS: QUEEN AMBERWINE
WITH CHILD AFTER MORE
THAN A DECADE AND ABLEMARLE LAUNCHES INVASION FLEET*

Queenston: Reign of King Roari the Red, Year of the Great War ... A palace spokesman announced this year that by the Grace of the Mother, our good Queen Amberwine is to bear another child for the greater glory of our realm. The Queen has been elegantly but fruitlessly slender since the birth of Princess Bronwyn, well over a decade ago. Due to Her Majesty's delicate constitution, our Queen's healers have recommended bedrest for her for the duration of her pregnancy. His Majesty is quoted as saying he doesn't care if the new babe is a boy or a girl, just so it, and the Queen, are healthy.

On the darker side of the national scene, official sources have confirmed that the King announced to his council that we are now officially at war with Ablemarle. A reliable Royal spy has spotted the Ablemarlonian Navy, with King Worthyman the Worthless himself aboard its flagship, headed our way. An unconfirmed report has it that the Ablemarlonians are planning to unleash a new secret weapon to wreak death and destruction among us, may the Mother preserve us. King Roari and the

consolidated Argonian Army and Navy, and the three-dragon Air Force, have already set sail to foil the blackhearted aggressors. During the King's absence and the Queen's indisposition, Her Majesty's half-sister, Lady Wormroost (nee Magdalene Brown) has been appointed Regent by His Majesty. Her Ladyship, a hearth witch from birth and a national heroine (for an account of Lady Maggie's and Earl Colin's rescue of Her Majesty from the Forces of Evil, see *The Herald* back issue dated Year of the Election of King Roari I) was created Honorary Princess by His Majesty some years ago, a title she modestly chooses not to use. Her Lord, Colin Songsmith, Earl Wormroost and President of the Minstrel's Academy Alumni Association, is presently abroad in the countryside, rallying the populace with song and story to the defense of their King and Country. May the Mother grant him speed and success.

Chapter I

Bronwyn the Bold was still flushed from the heat of battle when the Lord Chamberlain found her in the small courtyard below the eastern wall of the Royal Palace. The courtyard was in ruins. Trees, walls, jousting dummies, the Queen's prize petunia patch, all were gouged, hacked and otherwise dismembered. The Princess knelt beside the wall, her short sword cooling in its sheath, her red carved shield close by her side. Evidently satisfied with the routing she'd dealt her enemies, she bent over the prone forms of her dolls, each of which was blanketed by one of her monogrammed handkerchiefs.

"My lady," the Chamberlain began.

"What *is* it, Uncle Binky?" she demanded in a fair imitation of her father's regal roar. "Can't you see I've mortally wounded casualties on my hands? We need healers and medicine *now*!"

"Yes, my lady," the Chamberlain replied with a tone sober and a face straight from long and difficult practice. "I'll see to it personally, my lady. . . ."

"A simple 'general' will do," Bronwyn said graciously, since she was actually very pleased to have someone to talk to. She hopped to her feet and took the Chamberlain's hand in hers, her action very like that of any normal child except that ordinary little girls didn't tower over adult royal retainers.

"What news do you bring from behind our lines?"

"Your lady mother wishes a word with you, madam," the Lord Chamberlain replied.

"She hasn't—?" Bronwyn asked, jiggling his hand excitedly.

"No, madam, she has not. Nor will she deliver the babe for a month yet to come, as the Princess Magdalene has already informed Your Highness." And he clamped his lips tightly shut as if he were afraid she'd steal his teeth.

Bronwyn was quite used to having not only the Lord Chamberlain but everyone else who attended her adopt such attitudes when she tried to question or talk to them, so as usual she continued chattering at him as if he were answering each remark and paying her rapt attention. She supposed it went with her high rank to have everyone so in awe of her presence that they couldn't speak properly out of deference. Later, she decided that his silence was less usual than she'd thought, and smacked of the stoicism of a guard escorting his prisoner to the block—or into direst exile.

Maggie, Lady Wormroost, paced the Royal sick chamber with an anxiety which was in no way relieved by the sound of her niece's big feet galumphing towards her from down the hall. At least this interview would be short, but it wouldn't be easy.

She glanced at the Queen—sleeping, of course, as she should be to conserve her meager strength. Except for the mound of belly drifted over with white satin coverlet, the Queen was more frail than Maggie had ever seen her, her bones sticking out like those of a plucked bird, her skin thinned to a ghost-like translucency, marbled with blue. Maggie loved her elder half-sister and wished there was something she could do for her besides keep her company when she woke and see to it that her chamberpot was kept empty and her bedding spotless.

For though Maggie was officially Regent, she knew only enough about government to know that it was best left in the hands of the few capable ministers the King had appointed to take charge of the war effort on the home front. Oh, she had used her hearth-witchcraft, which allowed her to do all work connected with the home magically, to give a hand at readying the castle and surrounding city for siege. But she hoped the preparations she made, mostly consisting of magically expanding and storing existing food supplies beyond normal winter needs, would be unnecessary.

With any luck at all, King Roari's army would be able to head off Worthyman the Worthless and the Ablemarlonian forces and persuade them of the error of their ways. But it would not be easy. Worthyman was an unscrupulous scoundrel and a wastrel, but in one of his wiser moments he had chosen to squander a large portion of the treasury on a professional standing army of trained soldiers. Immediately thereafter, without bothering to try to forge a trade agreement, he had declared war on King Roari. He used the excuse that his country needed Argonian timber for its ship-building industry, which may have been true since, at his direction, Ablemarle's remaining forest land had been denuded and cultivated. However, the private opinion held by the King, Maggie, and a few others, was that Worthyman was actually hoping to find and eliminate his elder brother, the true Crown Prince, a focus

of frequent Ablemarlonian rebellions even though he preferred to dwell quietly among the Argonian gypsies.

Whatever the reasons behind the war, Maggie wished it were over and she and Colin were safe back at Wormroost with their own daughter, Carole.

Which reminded her of her most immediate problem, one which concerned both Carole and Bronwyn. Too bad the King hadn't left her some wise minister to whom she could delegate this sort of domestic crisis, but unfortunately she and the Queen would have to muddle along by themselves.

If only Bronwyn weren't so bloody irritating. With her constant rattling nonsense, she was so provoking that Maggie never seemed to be able to talk to the child without snapping at her, even though she knew what annoyed her most was hardly the poor girl's own fault. Ah, well, Bronwyn was lucky Maggie was only a hearth witch and not a transformer like her Granny Brown or a really wicked witch like child-eating Great-Great-Grandma Elspat, or there were times when Her Royal Highness would have gotten worse than a snapping at. ...

"The Princess Bronwyn," the Chamberlain announced at the door.

"You think we can't see that for ourselves?" Maggie snapped—damn! The girl was getting to her already. The Chamberlain beat a hasty retreat. Bronwyn gave her a shy smile that was ludicrous in such a strapping girl. Then, with her eyes still on Maggie's, as if anticipating a blow, she tripped sideways to her mother's bedside, stumbling at the last moment to fall across the sleeping Queen. Amberwine gasped and sat up, catching at her daughter's arm. Bronwyn held her mother by the elbow with one hand and with the other hand brushed at her, as if the contact might have dirtied her.

"Leave off, niece. You'll bruise her," Maggie advised as evenly as possible.

Bronwyn sprang away from the bed as if she'd touched the lighted end of a torch.

The frail Queen blinked her wide, green eyes twice and held out her hand to her daughter, who took it timidly. "How good it is to see you, my darling. How are you today?"

"Splendid, Mama. Extraordinary in fact. I've just slain the entire Ablemarlonian army and the leaders have all been hanged in your name."

Maggie groaned and Amberwine, had it been possible for her to have become any paler, could have been said to have done so. "Er—how kind of you, pet. You're such a thoughtful child. Isn't she, Maggie?"

Maggie shook her head and managed a faint, rueful smile. Bronwyn had her mother's eyes and chin, but she was otherwise her father's daughter entirely. A fitting successor to her paternal grandfathers, Rowans the Rambunctious, Rampaging, and Reckless respectively, she would have made King Roari a fine son. Pity. She was a dead loss at the womanly pursuits, and had gone through so many gowns her tiring women had finally given up and allowed her to go about in the simple undergown and armor she preferred. She clinked somewhat now as she perched on the edge of the bed, not quite resting her entire weight upon it, afraid she'd break her mother's bones if she relaxed. She was such a *large* girl—half again as large as either Maggie or Amberwine and uncomfortably aware that she had yet to gain mastery of her body. She knew she could cause irreparable damage to practically anything in the twinkling of an eye. If only she *could* be allowed to puncture something other than her own fingers during her earnest but ultimately painful attempts at needlework, perhaps the child would be good for something despite her—problem.

Amberwine caught Maggie's eye and said to Bronwyn, "Your aunt has a wonderful surprise for you, darling. Don't you, Maggie?"

Maggie felt another stab of guilt as a look of hopefulness and anticipatory pleasure dawned in the girl's eyes, and before it could turn into a full-fledged smile Maggie lost her nerve and tossed the conversational ball back to Amberwine. Sick or not, the Queen was Bronwyn's mother. Let her be the one to break the news. "I think she'd rather you'd tell her, Winnie."

"Tell me what?" Bronwyn demanded in a childish parody of her father's boom.

She was a-wriggle with excitement now.

Winnie shot Maggie an injured look. "Why, that it's been arranged for you to have a nice trip in the country for awhile, dear. To see some of the rest of the kingdom and to meet your cousin Carole. It must be so dull for you shut up in the castle all the time and—"

"But it's not, Mama, really," Bronwyn protested, though, of course, it was.

"There's your duty too, young lady," Maggie said, stepping in before the child got out of hand. "To your mother, your subjects and Argonia. You will need to see more of your realm than the capitol

sometime, and there's no time like the present."

Bronwyn started to protest, but for once Winnie was firm.

"Besides, I wish it. Maggie and I were such good friends as girls, you and Carole must learn to know and love each other too. I want you to have friends and—oh, darling, don't look like that! You'll have such fun! Tell her about the ice castle and the worm and the animals and the talking river, Maggie."

Maggie began talking very fast, tripping over her own tongue while describing the peculiar sights of Wormroost Manor, before the Princess could start crying or raise some other row that would further upset Winnie. It was unsettling enough to the Queen to be pregnant and bedridden while her husband was at war and her country under attack without worrying about Bronwyn. Not only was the girl a handful to have around at such a crucial time, but if the new reports of the enemy entering the Gulf of Gremlins were true, and by some ill fortune the King's forces could not stop them, the Ablemarlonians might soon be in Queenston Harbor. Bronwyn was Crown Princess and must be kept safe. Winnie was sure that if her daughter knew how potentially perilous the situation was, she would refuse to leave, although it was vital to national security that she do so. Maggie's view was that the girl had to grow up sometime, but then, Maggie wasn't Queen and very glad of it too. So she talked, wishing she had her husband's gift of gab and persuasive musical abilities to help her sound convincing.

Bronwyn interrupted her in mid-sentence, rising from her mother's bedside to stand at attention, her face set in a small painful smile not quite tight enough to control the trembling of her freckled chin. "Thank you for your intriguing tale, my lady aunt. If my Royal Mama commands it, I am sure that I shall greatly enjoy my banis—fostering at your home. If I may be excused, I'll take my leave now and prepare for the journey." And she turned on her heel and left.

Maggie and Amberwine exchanged relieved sighs that Bronwyn had been so tractable for a change. It was a sign of their anxious preoccupation with other matters and the poor state of Amberwine's health that it didn't occur to either of them until much later that Bronwyn's seemingly sensible attitude was more ominous than any fuss she might have made. For the trouble with Bronwyn was that, through no fault of her own, the girl was incapable of telling the truth.

As soon as the Princess clanked down from her coach, the Honorable Carole began getting the idea that having a Serene Highness around the stronghold wasn't going to be the thrilling experience filled with cousinly chumminess she had been led to believe it would be.

Since the carrier bird had brought the news of the Royal arrival a month before, Carole had thought of little else. The villagers at Wormroost were all transplants, refugees from another, blighted village. They were all older than her parents and none of them had brought any children with them. Carole's father sang wonderful songs about children at play together, and the village seamstress was fond of telling Carole about learning to stitch while taking in the clothing her older female relatives had outgrown.

Princess Bronwyn was only two years older than Carole, and as a Princess was bound to have some beautiful gowns to hand down to a country cousin. Rumor had it that the Rowans had no magic in their family, so it would be great fun to show Bronwyn the latest refinements in Carole's own little talent. Or so she'd thought.

The metal-girded, wire-haired, red-eyed apparition towering over her didn't look to be in the mood for a magic show, nor did she appear to be at all friendly.

"It is I, Bronwyn the Bold," the Princess announced to no one in particular among the five or six peasants who'd stopped their labor long enough to watch the coach arrive. Three of them, their curiosity apparently satisfied by the introduction, sauntered off again, returning to their work. As if afraid she wasn't being impressive enough, the Princess drew what was for her a short sword, though for Carole it would have been a full-length saber. The Princess was bigger than any man in the village, including Bernard the Guard, Worm-roost's military detachment. With a nonchalance obviously planned for effect, Bronwyn sliced the air in two sharp swishes. "I have come on behalf of my father to inspect these, our hintermost provinces. You may genuflect any time now."

Carole didn't know what genuflect meant, but she didn't like the sound of it. Still, she thought maybe Bronwyn only seemed unfriendly because she was tired from the coach ride, so with a patience admirable in a Brown witch, Carole minded her manners and asked, "Would you like to inspect supper first? I think it's about ready."

Bronwyn sheathed her sword with another clattering display, then stopped, staring at Carole suspiciously. Surrounded as she was by the Princess's helm and chain mail shirt and the rest of her martial paraphernalia, it was tantamount to a threat. "You have an odd, familiar yet somehow foreign look to you, wench. Are you a spy, perhaps, sent by my father's enemies to poison me? If so . . ."

"Oh, come off it, won't you?" Carole cried, exasperated. "I look familiar because I look like my mother. Well—sort of. I do have my father's nose, Gran says. And of course you know my mother because she's been living at your castle taking care of *your* mother. Come to think of it, if anyone doesn't look like her own mother, it's you. You're nothing like the tapestry of Auntie Amberwine in the guest chamber. You get to sleep there, by the way, and it's the nicest room in the house. You can see the ruins of the ice castle out the back window."

Thinking the girls were leaving, the coachman threw down Bronwyn's trunk, to the top of which was strapped a small shield, and jumped from the driver's seat. He handed a sealed scroll to Carole, and followed the retreating skirts of the most curious of the village wives, now off to her own supper. Carole began stripping the wax from the seal and started after them, only to be jerked back when Bronwyn's metal-fingered hand clamped down on her shoulder.

"Hold, wench," the Princess commanded. "None dare deny the royal resemblance without consequence. Take it back. Say I do so look like Mama."

"I can't do that," Carole said reasonably. "That would be telling a lie and telling lies is wrong."

"Take it back," Bronwyn repeated, biting off each word, her fingers digging more painfully into Carole's skin.

"Hey, stop it!"

Bronwyn looked as if she was about to cry but her voice was hard and angry. "I said take it back, and kneel while you're about it."

"Or what?" Carole demanded. Enough was enough. Cousin or no cousin, the Princess just wasn't a very nice person.

"Or I'll—I'll thrash you, is what," Bronwyn said. Obviously she could, though she'd never thrashed anything but jousting dummies before. Carole was less than half her size and skinny to boot.

"Hmmm . . ." the country girl said. "Will you now?" She didn't seem frightened. In fact, she looked pleased. She was even humming to herself. Perhaps it was her family's battle song? It sounded vaguely military. Yes, definitely a march. Good beat, that. Couldn't keep the feet still. One had at least to mark time to a lively tune like that. Bronwyn loosed her cousin's shoulder to watch amazed as her boots stomped the beat of their own volition. What a march! Why, if father had such a song in the field, his troops would be undefeatable. With a neat about-face, she strutted away from the manor house and from her grinning cousin, hearing the tune in her head long after Carole had ambled back towards the kitchens.

Down the single street of the village she marched, past the blue-white face of the glacier and the half-melted towers of the castle carved from it, through the thin woods and straight towards the river—the talking one, she thought to herself through the one-two beat pounding in her brain. So Aunt Maggie hadn't been telling her children's stories about that after all. She could clearly hear the river saying all sorts of words now, words which became even more easily discernible as she neared the swirling waters. She heard them very clearly indeed as the march swept from her brain when her last step from solid ground plunged her into the chattering flow, which began protesting loudly. As the cold water clamped over her scalp, she belatedly remembered that Cousin Carole was supposed to be a witch in her own right. Evidently it was more than a wild rumor.

"And so, my love," Maggie of Wormroost's letter to her daughter read, "I'm sure you'll try to make Bronwyn feel at home, and will be as tolerant of the little problem she has with what folk here call her 'fanciful ways' as we are tolerant of yours. In her case, there's a curse involved, and she really can't help herself, so I know you'll be fair-minded enough to ignore it. The Mother only knows the child needs friends. I'll write more later. The coachman is loading Bronwyn's trunk now and Winnie's call bell is jangling at me. Be a good girl and give my love to your dad if you see him before I do. Love, Mum."

Carole rerolled the scroll, her smug smile of moments before gone. Curse? Why hadn't anybody said so before? Trust adults to leave out the good stuff! She supposed there was no help for it but to go

find the big lout and apologize for marching her all over the countryside, though the exercise was bound to do her good after she'd been sitting in the coach all that while. Not that one could expect Bronwyn to see it that way. For a peace offering, Carole stuck a few biscuits into her pockets before snatching up her cloak and trotting back outdoors. The air got nippy in the evening now. Maybe she should fetch Bronwyn's cloak along too, but she didn't see it when she peeked into the coach. There was the trunk on the ground, though, with the little red shield strapped to it. It might come in handy if Bronwyn was slow to accept apologies.

She set off in the direction the Princess had marched away, but as soon as she came within earshot of the river, she broke into a run. Had the villagers not all gathered at the manor hall for supper, someone would have cried the alarm already.

"Help!" the river screeched, boiling with indignation, "Help! Pollution! Contamination!" Carole's lungs and legs pumped frantically as she sped past all the houses and almost into the water before she could stop herself. It hadn't occurred to her that the silly oaf might fall into the Blabbermouth. And with all that armor . . .

"You—puff—didn't—puff—drown her, d—pant, did you?" She asked, stripping off her boots and balling her cloak between the shield and its strap to keep the garment dry. She thought wildly that if Bronwyn weren't dead, she'd at least be in urgent need of being dried.

"How should I know what the silly thing's done?" the ensorceled river demanded. "Ask downstream. I for one certainly hope not. A bloated, rotting carcass is the last thing I want to take out to sea with me."

"You'd better NOT take her out to sea," Carole said, stepping gingerly into the shallows and wading along the bank. "And don't you dare try to tow me under either."

"I wouldn't dream of it," the river said nastily. But even though it was in a bad mood, the Blabbermouth was at least making sense for a change, which meant a unicorn must have come out of the woods last night and purified it. When she'd gone to draw water for supper yesterday evening, the river was still yammering the gossipy nonsense that composed its usual repertoire. Not only was the river bewitched, it was also haunted by the spirit of the slightly barmy witch who'd drowned herself after listening to the mindless drivel it poured forth in response to the talkative spell she'd placed on it so it would always keep her company. Only after unicorns came to Wormhaven Valley did the river begin to make sense and answer questions, at times with great wisdom, and at other times—well, not with great wisdom.

Having lived near the Blabbermouth's banks all her life, Carole found nothing particularly strange about drawing her water from a talking river, and right now she could see that it had its advantages over less communicative streams.

Burbling at her every step of the way, the river guided her farther downstream than she'd dared to venture before. Not that she wasn't adventurous, but close to the cliffside on which the glacier hung, underbrush grew so thickly along the banks that the river was inaccessible without tangling in a lot of brambles and nettles. Though Father had taken her swimming once or twice in the summer when he wasn't traveling on the King's business or off to some seminar at the Minstrel's Academy (Mother claimed that was a lot of poppycock and just an excuse for him to fool about singing and making up silly songs with other musicians. This seemed unfair to Carole since, as everybody knew, that was what musicians *did*), Mother didn't like her to play in the water. And what Mother didn't like she had ways of preventing Carole from doing.

The waters downstream were far more eager to assist her than those closer to the town. Probably, since they weren't so often exposed to people, they were more entertained by the novelty of having two within them in one afternoon, Carole thought, though she didn't think about it too long since she was intent on trying to keep her footing and on searching. It was hard to see, for in the shadows under the bushes the water was inky black, whereas in the parts that curved away from the cliff and rolled down the middle of the riverbed, the wavelets glittered brightly enough to dazzle her eyes. As if that weren't enough to keep her mind on, she also had to try to pay attention to the river's gurgling instructions.

"This way now. Do hurry. Look out for that hole, there. Clumsy child, aren't you? Try to be more careful in the future. I daresay I can do without another of your sort muddying me up. Look sharp—yes, there, you see, she struck that rock there and made the most dreadful clamor—the rock will never be the same. You can see where a big chunk's knocked off. Ah, yes, here we are. Right around this

next bend and—"

"And what?" she demanded, after negotiating the prescribed turn and coming face to face with the cliffside again—and no more river, much less any sign of her cousin. "Hey, that's not fair. Where'd you go?"

"Down here!" the voice bubbled up, seemingly from within the glacier.

"Uh uh," Carole shook her head emphatically and backed off. "You *have* drowned her, haven't you? And now you're trying to get me too!"

"Don't be tedious," the river said. "I think I've made my feelings on that subject perfectly clear. Now then, are you coming or aren't you?"

"I can't just walk into a glacier," she said, a whine creeping into her voice in spite of herself as she eyed the driftwood clogging the immense dirty white base stretching into woods on either side of the river.

"No, but you can float," the river replied.

"You ARE trying to drown me!"

"Don't be such a baby. Would I have warned you about the holes and whirlpools if I were trying to drown you? I'm shallow here, except right at the bottom, and I'll sweep you past that. Just keep your head down so you don't bump it on the overhang, and hold onto that thing in your hand so you can keep adrift if you capsize."

"You make it sound easy," she said doubtfully.

"I do this all the time," the river replied. "Down with you, now. That's it. Here we go—budge your bottom a bit. You're stuck. There now—WHEEEEE!"

That was all very well for the river to say, Carole thought, panicked, as she first slid downstream. But her fright was soon replaced by elation as she realized that she was not cold and uncomfortable as was quite reasonable to expect in a glacial river in late autumn. In fact, sliding along with the water was tremendous fun. Thrusting Bronwyn's shield inside-up before her, she flopped forward on her stomach and sluiced down into the darkness.

Entrance to the glacier was a shallow slide of water over stone and ice smoothed with centuries of the Blabbermouth's passing. As first her head and then her stomach slid beneath the opening in the ice, Carole closed her eyes for fear she'd strike her head on a rock. She hoped the shield would protect her.

No protection was necessary, however. At the foot of the slide, she knifed straight ahead into a deep pool, stopping abruptly when her momentum deposited her against a squishy, clanking object.

"Mission accomplished," sighed the river. "Get her out now, will you, before she rusts or something?"

Chapter II

The eddy swirling around them giggled and Carole couldn't blame it. High overhead, several huge round holes piercing the roof of the glacial grotto showed a struggling, swearing Bronwyn performing all manner of contortions and gyrations with the portion of her that remained above water. Setting her own feet down, Carole immediately started sinking into a deep layer of mud. With her leg armor on, Bronwyn was unable to kick loose, as Carole herself did only with great difficulty. She swam to Bronwyn, grabbing her arm and tugging.

"Let me be," the Princess said in a mournful and thoroughly frightened voice. "I'm doing perfectly well by myself, thank you." Any idiot could see she wasn't. For that matter, Carole wasn't doing so well either. The pool covered the entire floor of the grotto and its icy rim was little more than a slick, narrow ledge, with nothing to hold onto and no place to pull herself and Bronwyn to dry land if and when she succeeded in unsticking her.

"How do we get out?" Carole asked the river.

"Out? Out? You just got in. How should I know how you get out? You asked me to find your cousin, as if cousins were important! Pshaw! I, for instance, had a cousin once—runny little sort—thought it was the deep blue sea but really, it was scarcely more than a mud puddle—and I'll brook no contradiction on that, let me tell you. I says to this puddle, says I—"

"Oh, no," Carole wailed, and would have stomped her foot under other circumstances.

Bronwyn was sufficiently struck by the hopelessness in her tone to look up from her own predicament.

"The unicorn spell is wearing off," Carole explained. "Now we'll never get out of here. I *knew* this wretched river was trying to drown us both!" She had to shout above the river now, for when it was making no sense it talked constantly and more loudly than when it was sane, and had no manners whatsoever about interrupting others or talking right over them.

"Now what?" Bronwyn managed to howl back with some difficulty, since her struggling was sinking her deeper till by now her chin was half-submerged and her voice almost as distorted as the river's.

Carole dog-paddled around her and finally hollered back—She would have shrugged if she could have managed to do that and keep afloat at the same time—"I don't know. Wait until another unicorn comes to bless the river so it'll tell us how to get out of here or lead the grownups to us, I suppose. Do you think you can hold out?" The last question was more wistful than hopeful.

"Certainly I—blub—can," Bronwyn answered. She had sunk until she could keep her lower lip above water only with considerable effort. "Save—glub—yourself, wench. Don't—gurgle—worry about—gulp—me. I'll be —blub—fine."

Remembering Bronwyn's curse, Carole decided that the seemingly valiant disclaimer was, coming from the Princess, a cry for help and a plea not to desert her. As if Carole could have had she been so inclined. The light from the holes overhead was fading and her eyes probed the cavern for a way out or at least an outcropping to hang onto or climb up on. After all, if the river flowed into the grotto, it obviously must go somewhere.

But it was not until she left Bronwyn and paddled around the slippery-sided perimeter that she found the passageway and the odd contraption blocking it. She felt it, rather than saw it, for it was hidden in the shadows. It was a bit like a boat and also something like a bathtub with curved sides, somewhat buckled and smelling of mold, but when she put her hand in the bottom, the wooden surface felt solid and no wetter than her own hand.

"Aha!" She cried triumphantly, and then to Bronwyn: "I think I've found just the thing. Hold on and I'll fetch it over."

"I was—glub—just going for a walk," Bronwyn answered.

Tossing the shield into the decrepit-looking contraption, Carole threw one arm over the edge and tried to kick off. Unfortunately, the rim was too high for her to be able to keep hold and still be able to swim properly. So she flipped onto her back, grabbed the side with her fingertips, and tugged.

The craft—whatever it was—began floating with her, and she was halfway to Bronwyn when she felt a pull corresponding to her own. She tugged harder, but the boat wouldn't budge. Thinking it

might have snagged, she raised herself against the ledge. The flapping black horror was upon her before she could dive back into the water.

The thing hissed hideously, like water spilled on a roaring fire or a teakettle gone mad. It smacked her with something soft and yet with great force, so that she felt she was being flogged and smothered by wet draperies. It also punched her shoulder, thighs, cheeks, and back, and barely missed an eye, stabbing at her with what felt like the blunt end of a wooden spoon.

She screamed. Bronwyn screamed. The river babbled madly away and the monster relentlessly stabbed and slapped and hissed. She dove to escape it and kicked toward Bronwyn, only to find the thing at her heels, stabbing, if not hissing, right through the water. Then it was upon her, its weight dragging her down, enveloping her in its draperies—and then it wasn't. She clawed for the surface and saw Bronwyn, mouth underwater but eyes menacing, her sword waving just above the surface of the water, stabbing jerkily now and then at a gigantic black swan.

"Thugs!" the bird hissed. "Thieves! How DARE you?" Carole had never heard a swan speak before, but when you grew up arguing with your water supply, talking animals weren't particularly alarming. Hostile ones were quite another matter.

"How dare WE?" she exploded. "How dare you? I'll have you know I'm trying to save the life of the Crown Princess of Argonia and you're impeding me in the execution of my duties." That sounded very grand and official, she thought. Bernard always said things like that when she wanted him to play with her and he wanted to sleep against the wall, which he claimed to be guarding. "I happen to be the daughter of the Lord of this land, and I'll thank you not to bother us any more."

"And I'll thank you, young lady, to keep your vulgar hands off my chariot."

"I didn't know it was yours. I was only borrowing it to help Bronwyn. I can't just let her drown, can I?"

"I don't see why not," the swan replied. "And anyway, she appears to be doing so regardless of your wishes."

Carole switched to see the top of Bronwyn's forehead and then, helplessly, back to the swan. "It—oh, dear—it's her armor, you see. Don't ask me why a princess wears armor but she does and—"

"A princess? I believe you did mention that before." The hiss simmered down. "Well, now. That's rather different. I myself am of royal blood." The swan's little eyes glittered suddenly as the dying light slanted against them. "You silly girl, if her noble armor is weighing her down, why don't you dive down and remove it from her? Honestly, I think the servant situation must have deteriorated dreadfully since I've put on these feathers!"

Feeling half resentful at being ordered about and half foolish for not thinking of the idea herself, Carole dove. With her new-found facility in and under the water, she had no trouble reaching the leather lacings on Bronwyn's leggings and wristlets, and found despite the darkness and murkiness of the water she could see perfectly well. She tugged, and the sodden leather gave way. Casting the leggings away, she grasped Bronwyn by the ankles, flipped herself onto her back, and pulled Bronwyn's legs free from the armor. Once her feet were loose, the Princess was able to get her mouth above the water, and she and Carole together stripped her of the chain mail and helm, throwing them into the swan's strange boat.

Instead of objecting to this further invasion of her territory, the swan fluttered around them in a maternal sort of way, looking as if she'd like to sprout hands and help them. "The poor dear must be chilled through," she fussed as more of the newly unburdened Bronwyn popped up from the pool. "Quickly now, girl, help your lady into my chariot."

Resenting the way everyone was claiming to be a Princess today apparently just so they could order her about, Carole said, as drily as she could under the circumstances, "You've certainly changed *your* tune," but nevertheless followed the swan's instructions, half dragging, half shoving a noodle-limp and prune-wrinkled Bronwyn into the bathtub-boat. When she saw that the bottom didn't give way beneath the bulky Princess, Carole crawled in after her and wrapped the cloak, only a bit damp around the edges, about her.

The swan, she could see now, was tethered to the peculiar craft by a long strand of something, from which various loops and buckles dangled, rather like an unhorsed sleigh harness. The swan gave an experimental heave and the boat glided smoothly toward her over black satin water.

"Hmm. Yes. Works nicely. I don't seem to have lost my touch," the swan said, preening herself a little.

"Could you pull us out of here?" Carole asked. "Not that it's not nice meeting you, but it's almost supper time and we can't go back the way we came and—"

"I, for one, am perfectly h-happy h-here," Bronwyn said through chattering teeth.

The swan's eyes glittered again and she spoke sternly to Carole. "Your lady says . . ."

"I heard her," Carole replied tightly. But the swan had started to help them only after learning how noble Bronwyn's blood was. It probably wouldn't be smart to reveal the less noble things about the Princess right now. "But, well, she's a great joker, Princess Bronwyn is. Aren't you, cousin?"

"Me? Oh, yes. A very great joker. Why, shortly after I was born, all the court fools quit in protest, so witty were my goings and cooings. . . ."

"She actually wants to leave as badly as I do," Carole interrupted quickly, "but she's just trying to keep my spirits up, you see. She's far too well-bred to complain of her own accord. But really, we can't possibly stay here."

"Why not? *I* have made this my home for quite some time now."

"But there's nothing for us to eat and nowhere to sleep!" Carole wailed, suddenly overwhelmed with grief at the loss of her dinner, which must be at least cold by now, if not gobbled up by Bernard, who ate anything that didn't try to eat him first.

"*I* eat plants from the bottom of the pond and find them quite succulent," the swan said with a superior air. "Surely you could do the same. But then, oh no, I have forgotten what it was like almost—no, no, of course not, and you have no wings under which to tuck your heads for sleep, poor things. Dear me, it was so *very* long ago. Naturally, you must leave. This place is far too exposed for a delicate creature like the Princess in her featherless state."

"How understanding you are," Bronwyn said, buttering the old bird up.

"That is true," the swan agreed, "However, willing as I am to aid you in quitting this cavern, I fear I shall be unable to do so."

"Why?" both girls wailed at once.

"Because, my dear ladies, the chariot will not pass through the opening and I am bound to the chariot. Were it of a more convenient size, I should have been able to tow it through myself and enjoyed a greater variety of scenery long before now."

"Can't you try?" Carole pleaded. "Oh, please do try. Maybe we can help."

"Very well, but I fear I cannot hold out much hope."

Carole crossed her fingers and wished she knew of a shrinking tune to whistle them through. As it turned out, Bronwyn's natural endowments rather than her cousin's supernatural ones solved the dilemma. What with her armor and her great weight, added to Carole's, the Princess sufficiently lowered the boat in the water so that with only a little maneuvering it squeezed through the opening and shot to the other side.

They felt the swiftness of the river beneath them and heard it far better than they would have wished, but they saw nothing, for they were wrapped in darkness. Neither, however, did they feel any impediments, nor could they feel the walls on either side of them, so they surmised the cave must have broadened again. The glide of the boat, the darkness, and the river's boring monologue, which discouraged conversation, all reminded the girls that it was past their bedtime. Even without the benefit of the wings the swan found so useful, both of them were soon asleep.

Bronwyn was disappointed that no iceworm writhed through the ice to challenge her to battle while they traveled through the mountain. She was sure she could manage to best one, which would make Mama and Papa proud and show Carole that Aunt Maggie and Uncle Colin weren't the only ones who could become legends in their own time for their adroit dispatching of monsters. Though no one had mentioned it, she felt sure the light holes in the grotto were made by worms like the one lying dormant above them in the ice castle.

But they emerged from the tunnel a few hours after they awakened, unthreatened by worms, dragons, trolls, chasms, tricky side passages or even serious inconveniences. Quite an anticlimactic ending for what Bronwyn was beginning to regard as a promisingly perilous adventure. Having survived her terrifying plunge into the river and missing her dinner, she felt pretty cocky about taking on the next danger and was only afraid that none would materialize. No doubt, since the tunnel was so determinedly dull, the best course was the one on which they seemed inevitably set—onward! In the company of a witch cousin and a giant talking swan, surely something at least moderately thrilling

would soon occur.

She must be alert as a hawk watching for its prey and miss no detail of the terrain. She must note each nuance in the behavior of her companions and in the character of the countryside. Hmm, yes. She congratulated herself on deducing the approximate time from the straight up position of the brilliant autumn midday sun. Very good, Bronwyn. What else? There was the swan, of course. Much more magnificent than she had first appeared as a black creature wrapped in darkness. She was as big around and as long as the chariot she pulled and her feathers were so shiny that a small perfect rainbow was reflected from each. Her neck was as long as Bronwyn's arm and her beautiful head carried as proudly as a rosebud in first freshness borne on its long stem by a knight to his lady. Being pulled by such a creature was a bit like being attached to the feathered tail of a giant arrow, so swift and sure was her forward propulsion. The river beneath her was cloudy with fine white dirt which gave Bronwyn the feeling of floating on a broad flat stream of potato soup.

Thinking of soup made her wish missing her dinner and her breakfast as well hadn't been the *first* valorous hardship she'd been called upon to endure. One should probably break into these adventurous things gradually, and certainly not on an empty stomach.

The swan's mind was on higher things. "Ah, me— *sunlight*," she exclaimed in her slightly accented voice, which was husky and rather sibilant. Spreading her ebony wings, she pulled the chariot into a little circle in the middle of the river, then came to a stop so abrupt that the vessel barely missed her tail. Arching her neck back over her right wing, she asked them soulfully, "Do you know how long it has been since I beheld *SUNlight* in the fullness of its glory? Many years, my dears, oh many, many years. How blinding is its radiance!"

"Yes," Carole agreed. "Too bad it isn't a bit warmer." Then, not wishing to seem as rude and churlish as her companions seemed to think her, she added, "I suppose it must be very nice for you to be out of that cave, swan, after all that time you said you'd been in there."

"Indeed it is, miss, and a tribute to my hardihood and steadfastness of purpose that I did not perish in the darkness but stayed by my post long after my sisters had turned totally fowl and flown away. I had always been the lead swan, you see, being the eldest, and my harness was more difficult to slip than theirs. Still, they might have tried to help me, silly geese, or at least returned for a visit now and again."

"That was pretty foul," Carole said primly. "But it isn't really nice to say that sort of thing about your sisters."

"*Fowl*, girl, birdlike! And it is not very nice of you, either, since we are lecturing each other on deportment, to address me as 'swan' when I am at least as nobly born as your own lady cousin. However, I shall overlook your boorish lack of courtesy since you have assisted in my deliverance. Perhaps, if you are pleasant, I shall even deign to share with you my secret."

"I'm ever so good at keeping secrets," Bronwyn bragged.

Carole mumbled something to herself, but the swan didn't hear it, since she had already begun to have her say in a voice loud enough to be heard over the river, which was on this side of the mountain no louder or less sensible than the regular sort of river.

"Know then, Princess, that I, like yourself, am a King's daughter. My father was King Niconar Nettle-tongue of the Nonarable Lands, an unprofitable but fiercely independent kingdom to the south and east of Middle Frostingdung. I am My Serene Highness, Crown Princess of the Nonarable Lands, Duchess of the Frozen Fjords, Marchioness of the Miserable Mires, Anastasia Itonia Vasilia Gwendolyn Martha Nettle-tongue, at your service, though actually, you understand, that is only a figure of speaking."

"Your Highness," Bronwyn said civilly.

"Tish, tush, my dear. We Royal colleagues need not be so formal. You may call me by my sobriquet, Anastasia the Alluring." She didn't tell Carole to call her anything, but Carole had a few ideas of her own and barely stifled an impulse to tell the haughty creature she could call *her* Honorable Lady Carole. Although traveling in the company of two beings with such inflated ideas of their own importance as Bronwyn and the swan was probably going to be unbearable, there was no sense in antagonizing the transportation. On the other hand, she wasn't about to sit through what seemed to be another typically boring Argonian story. Bewitched animals, her mother always said (and she should know, she'd met a lot of them in her adventures before she became a mother) never knew when to be quiet and stick to the point of a problem. They always had to regale one with some rambling sob story

about how they became bewitched and how totally unfair it all was that someone like them should be turned into a whatever. One would think to listen to them that witches had nothing better to do than to go about harassing innocent bystanders by transforming them into livestock. Carole wasn't about to listen to any of that. Interrupting adroitly, she summarized what she suspected the swan was about to say. "So you and your sisters were turned into swans, huh, and somebody hooked you up to that boat only they left and so did your sisters and you didn't and here you are, right? Wonderful! So are we. So now that we're all here, how do you think we can get back home again, er, Your Highness?"

Bronwyn gave her a murderous glance. Just when things were getting interesting, the witch had to open her big mouth. "My aunt's daughter is far too polite to want to delve into your personal history, Princess Anastasia," she lied in apology.

"The Alluring," the swan amended testily. "Anastasia the Alluring."

"Princess Anastasia the Alluring," Bronwyn said, all in one breath, "I, however, being the heroine of many valiant exploits, have naturally had similar experiences myself. For instance, just before we dropped in on you, I believe my cousin was attempting to turn me into a swan, weren't you, Cousin Carole? Otherwise, I can't think why she would have witched me into the river."

"Well, I'm sorry, I'm sure," Carole said indignantly, "But how was I to know you were under a curse and couldn't tell the truth if it walked up and bit you on the ankle? I thought you were just weird and nasty!"

"Curse?" the Princesses asked together.

"You know—the curse you had put on you when you were a baby."

"Oh, that curse," Bronwyn said, still obviously puzzled.

"You didn't know?" Carole asked. "I'd think your mother would have mentioned a thing like that."

"Oh, no, no, no, my dear young lady. Not necessarily," Anastasia the Alluring put in wisely. "My mother never told me, for instance, of the penchant the women on her side of the family had for turning into swans until I was older than either of you, by which time it was much too late. Families do so dislike discussing the more complicated aspects of one's heritage with one whilst one is still of such tender years, you know, and by the time one is grown, why, more than likely they may have quite, quite forgotten."

"Strikes me as a quite, quite large thing to forget," Carole said skeptically. "But then, Mother didn't tell me about your curse before she sent that letter."

"I haven't got any curse, so just stop saying that!" Bronwyn told her, clasping her sword hilt and sticking out her lower lip.

"Yes, you have, too. You know the royal tax collector? The one that my dad went with to help collect for the war? He did it."

Bronwyn took her hand off her sword and laughed, using the artificial twitter she had learned from the ladies at court. "You misunderstand, cousin. I know the peasants speak of being accursed by a tax collector but—"

"No. I don't mean he cursed you as a tax collector. I mean before, when he was a wizard. He made it so you lie all the time."

"How kindly you put it," Bronwyn said.

"See what I mean? If you could tell the truth you would have told me I wasn't putting it very kindly at all and I—I suppose I'm not, but you're *awfully* hard to talk to, do you know that?"

Bronwyn shrank as far as possible into the chariot. "The servants and courtiers never thought so," she said miserably as she understood for the first time their stiff-lipped silences. "They were always talking to me and playing with me. I had to play war games to scare them away so I could get some privacy once in awhile."

"I'll bet," Carole said, but patted her on the shoulder and slouched down beside her.

The swan craned her head back and fixed Carole with a hard stare. "This tax collector person. What does he look like?"

"I—well, I only saw him once, when he came by for Dad. Mother won't have him around, though I think he's supposed to be related to her. He looks kind of like us, Mum and me, brown eyes and hair and cheekbones that stick out like this," she sucked in her own round cheeks. "Why do you ask?"

"Why do I ask? My dear young lady, if I were still in the guise of the gentlewoman I am in truth, I should surely swoon here and now. Your tax-collector-sorcerer is none other than my former master, the Brown Enchanter, Fearchar the Fearsome." Her gaze shifted to Bronwyn, "And you, poor child, are

in very grave trouble indeed."

A certain amount of suppressed excitement and self-satisfaction laced her voice, and she next addressed Carole, seeming to relish being able to advise people in a situation she saw as being as grave if not worse than her own. "I think, dear girl, you had best tell us all you know of this matter."

"Naturally, it all makes perfect sense," Bronwyn snapped some time later. "Since my father was so grateful to this he-witch for putting a curse on me that he tracked the man all over Argonia to thank him for his kind christening gift, naturally nothing would do but that the varlet had to be honored with the position of royal tax collector. And I understand perfectly why Father couldn't be bothered to make the wizard remove the spell first."

"Do you?" Carole asked absently, since she'd been trying to think how they would first get back over the mountain to Wormhaven in time for supper. Bronwyn's problem was interesting, but she had, after all, had it most of her life, whereas Carole had never had to go without a meal before and here she was missing three in a row and probably catching her death of cold besides. But Bronwyn and the swan seemed to be waiting for her to say something so she added, "I mean, you don't see, I suppose, do you? Which is just the point. Me neither, but it would be nice if we could figure it out later. This conversation is giving me a headache."

The swan, who had dined more recently than either of her passengers, and who was also accustomed for much of her life to dealing with diplomats and other envoys, had less trouble adapting to Bronwyn's involuntary mode of expression than Carole did. "While you seem to grasp the essence of the situation, my dear Bronwyn, you fail to understand that even had your papa killed my master in an attempt to remove the spell, as I seem to recall he attempted to do, such measures would have been to no avail. That spell was purchased through an agent. I should know, since I took him there and waited while the transaction was completed. One finds out a great many things when one's employer is unsure of the level of one's ability to communicate. I gathered that while my former master thought it a good joke to have your curse related to his own magic talent, which is persuasiveness, the spell was none of his making nor had he the power to remove or alter it in any way."

"Dumb joke," Carole remarked. "Bronwyn didn't even know about it, much less understand it. I don't see the point."

"It was a christening gift, cousin, and meant, we must presume, as all christening gifts are meant," Bronwyn said bitterly. "It was intended to help me grow up to be a better queen. Don't you see how well it's worked? Everyone is so starved for my company because of it that even my own mama and Aunt Maggie banished me here so—so the new baby wouldn't have to always take second place to such a brilliant big sister, I suppose. Can't you imagine what a fine stable government we shall have with all my subjects loving, respecting and trusting me as you do?"

Carole winced. "I see your point," she said glumly. "You think maybe you're supposed to stay here so they can give the baby the crown instead of giving it to you? I understand why you might think so, but Mama and Aunt Winnie wouldn't do that without explaining it to you, I'm sure."

The swan made a rude noise.

"No, they *would* have," Carole insisted. "And anyway, she's not old enough to be queen yet and there's a war on and there could be all kinds of other reasons. Why would Mum make such a point of explaining this curse thing to me if she holds it against Bronwyn? It's just one problem—like—like not being good at drawing or ciphers or something. It's not as if you mean to lie, after all, Bron. I'm sure you're good at other things."

"A very magnanimous viewpoint, but hardly politically pragmatic, dear girl," the swan said, flicking her tail feathers slightly.

Bronwyn thought of all the jousting dummies she'd slain and the battles into which she'd victoriously led her dolls. Surely fate had led her thus far for some grim purpose. "There is but one honorable course for me to take in order to redeem myself," she announced at length. "The reputation of Bronwyn the Bold must be upheld at all costs to prove my worthiness for the throne. Therefore, I must join my father as soon as possible and win glory on the battlefield at his side in order to vindicate myself."

Carole looked pained for a moment, then brightened. "I'm glad to hear you say that. I might have thought it up myself sooner or later but since you mention it, we know it's rubbish."

"Your confidence in me is touching, cousin," Bronwyn said, but her face lightened a little. At least

Carole and the swan were interested enough in her to try to figure out what she meant, even when she wasn't sure herself.

"There is another way, of course," the swan said. The girls looked at her expectantly. "We can attempt to locate this agent person and through her the originator of the curse."

"How?"

"Quite easily. I shall glide to the beach where the two of you will loose me from this harness. Thereupon shall I fly back to Little Darlingham to the home of that so dreadful woman from whom the wizard obtained the curse. I shall make her tell me how to remove it. First, however, I shall stop at your manor, my dear Carole, and request a rescue party come to fetch you."

"Wonderful!" Carole said. "Meanwhile, maybe we can find something to eat."

Chapter III

Carole wasn't the only hungry one in the neighborhood. Bright eyes watched and a stomach that could have been mistaken for a bear growled from within the forest as the girls hopped from the chariot and unhitched Anastasia. The swan had worn the harness for so long that her feathers were rubbed away beneath it, a circumstance that led to a lot of hissing and fussing.

"I suppose that will leave some ghastly calluses on my alabaster skin when I resume my true form," she fretted.

"Maybe you could wear another kind of harness to cover them up—something in gold with emeralds or pearls, maybe—and start a new fashion."

Bronwyn nodded wisely. "Since *I* look so fetching in armor, all the court ladies have affected it recently."

"I think," the swan said shortly, "that there is no time like the present to begin my journey. I shall be gone but a day or two." Then she folded her half-furled wings and asked kindly, "But how thoughtless I am! You children must be very hungry. You'll be famished before your people can fetch you. However will you survive till then?"

"We won't even notice starving," Bronwyn promised. "We'll have our minds upon affairs of state. I shall solicit the commoner's viewpoint from Carole."

"Thanks awfully," Carole said.

"There *are* those tasty plants in the bottoms of pools, you know," the swan said. "I could pull some up for you before I go."

"Er—never mind," Carole said, and shrugged. "We can always fish, and there're berries this time of year, bound to be. Oh, and I almost forgot. I've some biscuits in my . . ." she dug into her still damp pockets and extracted a shapeless lump of mush which stuck to her fingers. "Well, they're a bit damp, but we can manage."

"Yes," Bronwyn agreed brightly, though she'd never fished nor eaten berries off the bush and had no idea how anyone could eat such things. "We shall roast them on a spit inside my helmet, as I've done so often when in the field with Father. I know exactly how to do it."

"Don't worry." Carole almost laughed at the puzzled note in Bronwyn's voice. "We'll figure it out. You just fly for help, Your Highness, and never mind us."

"Very well. Stay in this precise place so your people can locate you from my directions."

"We will," Carole promised, regarding ruefully the pasty mess on her hands. "I want to be home for a real supper tomorrow."

The girls watched quietly as the great swan fanned her wings and swept skyward, above the spiring trees, momentarily eclipsing the sun with her body.

But she had no sooner cleared the beach and topped the first line of trees in the forest behind where Bronwyn and Carole stood when something sparkled briefly against the green, and spun upward, like a shooting star in reverse, and Anastasia cried out with a swan's eerie trumpeting. One wing flapping feebly, the other crumpled against her body, she tumbled crazily, plummeting into the woods.

Bronwyn and Carole exchanged a brief startled glance. Then Bronwyn clamped on her helmet, grabbed up her shield and sword, and sprinted into the woods, Carole close on her heels.

They were only just in time to avert a tragedy, though to whom the tragedy would have occurred was far from certain. Anastasia leaned lopsidedly in a small clearing, the hilt of a dagger buried in one shoulder, a ruby ribbon trickling from it. The injured shoulder was the only part of her that was still.

Her beak slashed, stabbed, darted, and snaked back to strike again while her good wing whipped up and down, scattering fall leaves and dirt with each beat. She hissed hideously and no wonder. A plumpish, swarthy boy with black hair and a gleefully ravenous expression on his face worried her like a cat teasing an oversized mouse.

He feinted, jabbed, circled her—always avoiding the powerful uninjured wing and grabbing, when he thought he could get away with it, at the knife in the wound.

Bronwyn strode forward and simply pushed the boy off his feet, planting her sword point calmly in his gullet. "Hold knave, or by my grandfather's noble bones I'll spit you as I did the Black Knight when last he trifled with a friend of mine."

The boy didn't know who Bronwyn's grandfather was nor to which black knight she referred, but he

did know when he was in trouble.

"Spare me, great lady! Spare this poor hungry gypsy boy. I'll give you a share of the meat. Just don't kill me before I've had my last meal, I beg you. Surely such a magnificent lady as you wouldn't kill a man when his belly's rumbling?"

Bronwyn tried to look fierce, because after all, Anastasia was an ally and one ought to defend one's allies, but then, a person could certainly see the boy's point about eating too. She appealed mutely to Carole. The gypsy caught the look that passed between them and shifted tack.

"Sweet maiden," he said, squirming to try to capture the witch with his large soulful eyes. "You must not allow your friend to slay me. Why, I hold the key to your fortune. Without me, you never will learn of the beautiful hall you shall some day live in nor the handsome stranger who will come into your life—" The stranger he had in mind, actually, was himself. He thought it unwise to mention that if she succumbed to his blandishments he intended to be out of her life as fast as he was in it—though he still hoped to make off with some of that swan first.

Carole gave him a withering look, turned her nose up and knelt beside the swan. She examined the dagger and entrance wound from all angles. Anastasia looked at her so expectantly that she felt compelled to make some comment,

"Stab wound," she said with what she hoped was a certain air of witchy professional proficiency.

Anastasia closed her eyes momentarily, as if relieved. Carole was glad the swan was relieved and wished *she* were. People tended to expect a great deal of witches in difficult situations, even when one hadn't had time to learn everything there was to know about one's own powers, much less one's mother's and grandmother's powers. A person just couldn't help it under such trying circumstances if there were certain deficiencies in one's competence.

Carole was quite adept at dancing things about and could even do some housework more or less magically this way, making threads dance through needles and needles dance through cloth or dishes through dishwater. In that way her magic roughly paralleled her mother's hearthcrafting talent. But Mother hadn't gotten around to showing her what all the powders in her medicine pouch were for, or any of the medicinal arts for which Great-Granny Brown was so well known. Witch from a long line of witches she was, but Carole still couldn't tell mugwort from wolfsbane. She abandoned at once the idea of dancing the knife out of Anastasia's wound when she considered what a mess the blade would make cutting capers in the poor swan's shoulder.

Nevertheless, someone had to do something—and quickly. If only the unicorn's blessing were still fresh in the river water, the water alone would cure anything. Even then, though, they'd still have to get the knife out of the wound.

Suppressing the niggling idea that one reason she hadn't learned the healing arts yet was that she was secretly a trifle squeamish, Carole called to her cousin with all the authority suited to the witch in charge of the case. "Bronwyn, leave that little weasel alone for a moment, won't you, and pull this out of Her Highness. You're stronger than I am and it ought to come out all in one pull so it won't hurt so much."

Bronwyn handed her the sword, still pointed at the boy's throat, and said, "He must not escape. He is doubtlessly an enemy spy sent to kill enchanted royalty."

"What royalty?" the boy demanded, sitting halfway up as the blade retreated during the transfer. He lay down again rather quickly as the blade wobbled back into position against his throat. "I harmed no royalty. Just that swan there. They taste like chicken. Ask anyone."

Bronwyn meanwhile laid down her shield, put both hands on the dagger hilt and pulled. Anastasia gave a long indrawn hiss. She glanced quickly at the blood welling from the dagger hole and flopped her head down, drawing a weary wing over it with one brief willful movement before her entire body toppled over onto her good side.

The gypsy boy laughed a short, nervous laugh. "You have been making sport with me, pretending to be upset and finishing her off yourselves! Ah, well. I am not a greedy man. Are you going to carve or shall I?"

The laugh turned into a cough as Carole pressed forward. "I will, if you don't belt up."

The boy's eyes widened with dismay. "But you are serious! That swan is some kind of friend of yours. Ah, forgive me. It is just my luck that the first drumstick I meet has friends in high places."

"She's a princess," Carole said, and even though she hadn't been particularly impressed with Anastasia's claim, she wanted the boy to be. "She was going to help us get out of here and even get

Bronwyn's curse removed when you butted in."

"Princess? Bronwyn? Curse? Say, you do not mean —she cannot be—" He sat up as far as the sword point would permit and squinted at Bronwyn and the swan, then back at Carole, recognition and a wide white smile dawning on his dusky face. He clapped a hand to his forehead. "What great good fortune to meet together on the same day Bronwyn the Bald-Faced Liar and Magda Brown's witchling! And what luck for you, pretty ladies. For today the stars have smiled upon you and led you if not quite out of the wilderness at least into the protection of Jack the Gypsy."

Later, leaning back on his elbows and toasting his feet by a cozy fire, Jack rubbed his stomach and sighed. "How clever you are to whistle the fishes from the river, Lady Carole. Though I practically had to force myself to eat, you understand, so shattered was I to realize I had harmed that wonderful swan-princess. It was only because I was so hungry, you know. Berries alone are not food enough for a man, and my snares have yielded enough like me that you could be my cousin as well as the Princess Bronwyn's?"

"Too bad you didn't figure all this out before you knifed Anastasia," Carole said. She remembered her father's songs about those battles Jack spoke of. What the gypsy boy wasn't mentioning was that Carole's folks and his had been on opposite sides in at least one of those battles.

He shrugged. "As you say, it is a little wound. It will surely mend."

"Don't tease, Carole," Bronwyn said. "Think how good it was of Jack to come to these woods specifically with the idea of protecting us and helping us in our quest to end my curse."

Jack wagged a finger, still slick with fish grease, at her. "How alike all you ladies are, even princesses and witches, to think that a prince of the gypsies has no better business than to wait around in the woods to help you. I was here on another matter altogether. . . ."

"Wait a minute," Carole said. "Don't tell me you're royalty too?" She was beginning to feel very left out.

"Oh, yes, dear ladies. My grandmother Xenobia is Queen of the Gypsies and my grandfather is none other than the rightful Crown Prince of Ablemarle, the Prince H. David Worthyman. My father, his heir, is prince of gypsies and Ablemarle both. I am to succeed him, after I—"

"How can it be, *Prince* Jack," Bronwyn asked, suspicion darkening her tone again, "that you are our friend and your grandfather too and he a Prince of Ablemarle when Worthyman the Worthless, Ablemarle's King, is now such a great good friend of my father that my father and his army journey into the Gulf on ships to meet Ablemarle's army half way?"

Jack, not yet used to Bronwyn's phrasing, looked puzzled, but Carole reminded him sternly, "We are at war with Ablemarle, in case you'd forgotten. You're not a spy, are you?"

He laughed with somewhat strained heartiness. "Oh, no, no, no, no, no, dear ladies! My grandfather, I tell you, is the *good*, legitimate prince of Ablemarle, who should be King instead of his worthless brother on the throne. That is why my grandfather is even now fighting at the side of your own papa, Princess, and my father as well. I will go to join them as soon as I have passed to manhood and resumed my rightful position as prince."

"And when and how does that happen?" Carole asked, yawning. She was getting bored with these two blowhards.

"Why, it is happening right now, Carole! Even as you look at me, even as I sit here beside you, protecting you from great dangers, I am fulfilling also my obligation to my people, to show them I am worthy of becoming not only a man of our tribe, but a prince as well."

"How convenient." Carole yawned again. But Bronwyn's green eyes were big with fascination. She very much enjoyed listening to someone even more full of wild stories than she was.

"It seems to me it must be terrifically hard," she said, watching him rub his full belly and settle back again beside the fire.

"Oh, yes, my princess. Yes, indeed. For to gain these honors, I must bide here in the wilderness, unaided by my people, and prove my courage and cunning by— er—doing a great deed. Preferably several." He chose not to be more specific, in the interests of the picture of himself and his people he wished to present to his illustrious hostesses. Actually, the rules of his manhood test said he was supposed to go into the wilderness unaided and somehow or other make a profit, in gold, on whatever he did. Since this part of the country was relatively uninhabited, there were few purses from which even the most accomplished gypsy could profit, which was what made it such a difficult trial. A future

King of the Gypsies was, however, expected to overcome such piddling obstacles.

As if the task wasn't hard enough of itself, Jack had been left with nothing but his clothing, dagger, flint, steel, and tinderbox, plus his wits, and his considerable appetite, while his formidable grandmother led his mother and the rest of the tribe south for the winter, promising to return for what was left of him on their way to the eastern coast for the spring smuggling season.

Bronwyn and Jack yammered on about responsibilities to one's people, he making pronouncements, she saying the opposite of what a princess would normally say, followed by Jack trying to figure out what she meant. Carole couldn't think of much to add so she whistled sticks into piles or danced leaves into pyramids or plaited her hair without touching it, which was tricky. Every so often she rose to see how Anastasia was faring. She was always the same. Sleeping. Head under wing. Bleeding stopped.

As the sun set, the wind rose, and Carole's appetite began plaguing her again. "I'm hungry," she announced.

"And then my mama rides this trick horse in between the wagons, see, and they just leap the campfire. Everyone is always amazed at how easily . . ." Jack was saying.

"Just like my war horse, Hailing Hooves, I'll wager. He can do that, only a lot better," Bronwyn answered.

Carole cleared her throat. "Is anyone else hungry? I think I'll go see about some fish." She had a totally unmagical premonition she was going to get very tired of fish before they got out of this situation unless someone else had some idea how to get food. The idea of singing to a rabbit or a bird and then killing it was distasteful. And she was not only hungry, but cold in spite of her cloak, which she'd reclaimed from Bronwyn. Now that the Princess was dry, she didn't seem to mind the cold any more than Jack did. Carole supposed that was because even though Bronwyn was palace-bred, she was still of frost giant lineage, and who ever heard of a frost giant minding a little chill? And gypsies were used to the wide-open spaces that gave Carole the odd feeling she was emptying out everything that was important about her into them. She wanted her own bed between the walls of her own room with her own pillow and the yellow-bordered brown wool blanket mother had woven just for her.

As she rose to her feet and shook the numbness from one leg, Jack and Bronwyn nodded absently at her and waved, not seeming to hear what she'd said—probably because each of them had had twice as much fish as she before. She slogged back through the bushes to the gravelly river beach and hunkered down beside the water. The river seemed strange now that it just sort of rushed and didn't say anything in particular. Though she thought when she listened closely she could make out a word here and there and even, perhaps, something of a rhythm. But it was only a whisper. Probably the glacier and the mountain filtered out the spell.

It was chilly with no trees to shield her from the wind as she squatted, her skirts whipping about her in the shadow of the great mountain, extending on both sides into the glacier-spiked range. Goose bumps pimpled her arms and she whistled her fishing song slowly—not the jig she'd trilled at lunch but a melancholy air. She usually used the first song when she fished with Dad. He liked that tune. Her talent tickled him, being so much like his own. Mum was always wanting her to learn to do practical things with it like washing dishes and churning butter, but even Mum never turned down a nice mess of fish to fry.

By the end of the first bar, a silvery fish undulated to the top of the milky water, flopped up and onto the bank where it writhed along with her tune. In a short time another did likewise, and another, and she was about to call her lazy companions and demand that if they wanted to share in the catch they'd have to come help kill and dress the dish—when she realized that her tune was not unaccompanied.

A harp? No, a flute—no, perhaps it was a lute, playing the tune way off downstream, so far away that Carole knew no amount of looking or casual strolling away from camp would reveal the musician. Still, she longed to try. She wouldn't be missed surely, the way Bronwyn and Jack were carrying on. As for the fish—Bronwyn burst out of the woods waving both arms exultingly. Jack walked behind her at a more dignified pace, a grin on his face. "She's asleep! She's asleep!" Bronwyn was shouting. "Carole, come quick! Anastasia is fast asleep."

The music was drowned out in the commotion and Carole scowled at them. "You don't have to yell, do you? Someone else is here and they're playing my song back to me." She cupped her ear, but the music was gone. "You scared them away."

"Well, I'll just go tell Anastasia to wake up again, if that's how you're going to be," Bronwyn

huffed.

"What? Anastasia to—oh. Oh! She woke up? Why didn't you say so?"

The three of them turned back towards where Anastasia waited, no longer fainting but sore and silent. Jack was silent now too, and he frowned importantly, as if he was considering a far weightier matter than the preparation of fish. Carole picked up Bronwyn's helmet and headed for the river.

"Where are you going?" he asked gravely.

"I thought Anastasia might like a drink before we turn in."

He shook his head slowly and said portentously, "I would not do that if I were you, Carole. It is not good to go to the river now."

"Not good? What do you mean not good? We've been at the river all day."

Jack lowered his voice and walked towards her slowly, flaring the fingers of both hands dramatically. "That music you hear could be the river men, calling you. They like young girls. They have castles at the bottoms of the rivers and are armed with pitchforks, like angry farmers." He shuddered. The lore about the river men was only hearsay, but angry farmers were a fact of gypsy life.

"Oh, very *well*," Carole said, though she privately thought river men sounded interesting, and that if they had been the ones playing, she'd like to meet them, whatever Jack said. But he sounded serious, though she was sure he was exaggerating because he liked scaring her. Anyway, she was too tired to argue. So she whistled up a pile of leaves for a bed for the three of them and another for cover.

Bronwyn and Jack fell quickly asleep and shortly afterwards, she heard Anastasia struggle upright and limp toward the river, and thought the swan must be feeling better if she felt like swimming. Perhaps she'd be well enough to fly again soon.

The music that woke her in the middle of the night wasn't one of her tunes, and it wasn't instrumental. This time she heard a voice—a wonderfully familiar voice, but she couldn't make out just who.

She sat up in a cold mist. The river was pouring it out in thick billows, so that she had trouble picking her way down to the shore. She couldn't see Anastasia, but then, she couldn't see much of anything. All she could do was feel the frosty night air and hear the music cutting across it.

She wanted to call out to whomever was singing and ask them to come closer, and to tell them she was lost, but she was afraid Jack would wake up and scare them away again. The music seemed to come from right down the middle of the river. Perhaps the musicians were camped on a sandbar? Cautiously she waded out, too intent on the music to realize that once her legs were in the water they were no longer cold, that in fact the deeper into the water she got, not only the better could she hear the music but the better she felt all over. It wasn't until she inadvertently stepped in a hole and ducked her head under completely that she found that she could, by some trick of acoustics, hear the music amplified under water. The voice didn't belong to any river man or men. It was her mother's familiar husky voice and she was singing to Carole to come to her, downstream, to meet her. Carole began to swim as she'd never before known she could.

Though still asleep, Bronwyn had been aware when Carole left the leaf pile, leaves rustling the way they do, but had assumed her cousin had only had to avail herself of the privacy of the woods for the usual reasons. It was a dream, not Carole, that actually woke her. The dream was of her mother calling her, singing to her, and though Bronwyn couldn't remember why, the song made her sad and filled her again with the hurt and longing she hadn't been able to speak of at the time of her exile. Sniffing clandestinely, Bronwyn stretched out her hand to touch her shield, and stroked it for comfort, as she always did when she felt bad.

The dream singing faded, and with it the recollection of most of the sadness, though traces of both the feeling and a faint echo of the music lingered. She lay with her cheek pressed against the carved wood of the shield and listened for Carole to return, or maybe to holler that a bear was after her and would Bronwyn be so kind as to get up and save her? The red wood was polished smooth by years of handling, and Bronwyn almost thought she could smell the ale-and-tobacco smell of her father's hands on it. It made her feel close to him, and safe, as it had since she was a baby. The wood was of the rowan, not only her last name but the symbol of her family and anathema to magic. Sort of magic in its own way, really, in that it had the power to repel spells set against it. Too bad she hadn't had it when the sorcerer cursed her—or when Carole marched her into the river, for that matter. She almost fell asleep again holding onto it, still hearing the whispery music and watching the mist weave through the trees.

Jack sat up and rubbed his eyes, scattering the leaves willy-nilly. "Mama?" he asked, in a very young voice, then added something plaintive and muffled in what must have been the gypsy tongue. Before it dawned on Bronwyn that he was not talking to her, he stood up and headed for the river, plowing right through the bushes and not seeming to mind when they slapped his face and soaked him with the touch of their leaves, which were wet with accumulated dew and mist. Bronwyn knew exactly how wet, because of course she had to follow him. Sleepwalking like that, he might do the same thing she'd done, and walk right into the river, in which case they would both get a great deal wetter.

She caught up with him quickly, grabbing him just as his left foot touched the water. When she put her hand on his shoulder to pull him back, he turned and blinked at her.

"See here, my friend, I know it's a wonderful time of night to go wading but—" she got no farther. The rush of water being swished aside from its normal course was immediately followed by Anastasia's black form streaking from the mist. She fluttered toward them awkwardly with one wing only partially extended. Her voice was as shrill as the head chambermaid's after an unfortunate battle Bronwyn had once had with her new bedcurtains.

"Bronwyn! Ah, Bronwyn! Do not try to save her. She went of her own accord—she—she swam. I could do nothing to stop her, to warn her. You must save yourself! Plug your ears! Do not listen to the sirens! Ah, they are terrible, I tell you, terrible. One of them tried even to seduce my old master. No one can—watch the boy!"

While the swan was carrying on, Jack had pulled his sleeve loose from Bronwyn's grip and was wading shin-deep into the river. Glad that she didn't sleep in her armor, Bronwyn waded out after him, and plucked him out again, half carrying him back to shore. He didn't struggle, but looked puzzled. "What are you doing?" he asked in a normal voice.

"Sirens!" Anastasia said. "They have the girl."

"But you," Bronwyn told him, holding him in her shield arm and indicating his wet trouser legs with a wave of her sword hand, "are much too clever to be fooled the same way."

"I am always a fool for a beautiful woman," he said, trying to look smoldering again but mostly looking sleepy and making no attempt to extricate himself from her one-armed embrace. "But if in spite of my warnings, the Lady Carole has fallen for this fish music and even *I* was taken in by the spell, how did you escape?"

"Overwhelming force of personality and superior intellect," she said, nodding meaningfully towards her shield, and dumped him in the boat, climbing in beside him.

For a moment he looked from her to her shield and back again. Then he smiled broadly, "Ah!" he said. "A secret weapon. But of course, my Princess would have a secret weapon." He scooted closer to her shield arm. "Never fear, Your Highness, between your size and that wondrous shield and my cleverness, we shall free Carole from those fish women. And when we have saved Carole, we will make the sirens give us all the sunken treasure they have too."

"You silly little thug, you have no idea what you're saying!" Anastasia flapped up beside them. "They are the most hideously dangerous creatures! You will all be killed and I will not be able to help you at all and—oh, wait!" She interrupted herself as the boat bobbed off down the river. "Do wait until I'm healed. I can't even tow you now but—" But the boat pulled slowly away from her, picking up momentum as the current caught it. The swan found she could swim a little faster. "Very well, I too shall come. Perhaps the hussies will be afraid to try anything if they see that I am with you, I who know their wicked wiles for the disgraceful tricks they are. Only—wait." But the boat was already rounding the next curve. Sighing, Anastasia made a sort of hopping sloop to the center of the river, where the current was strongest. She might become separated from the children, but it was impossible for her to get lost. The sirens could be nowhere but in the sea and into the sea the river was inexorably emptying both her and the little boat.

Chapter IV

As for Carole, she was, with one part of her mind at least, not surprised to see mermaids waiting for her instead of her mother. Though she had felt compelled to investigate the song, she told herself she was more curious than anything and was not as completely taken in by the charm of the music as a mermaid's usual audience was supposed to be.

The sirens, on the other hand, seemed astounded to see her.

They lolled in the shallows just offshore where the river widened into the sea.

"Why, Cordelia, look!" the green-haired one cried, pointing from her seat atop one hump of a half-submerged, silver-spotted sea serpent. "It's a little split-tailed child!"

"And a girl child at that." Her friend, whose hair was light purple, sounded disappointed.

Since the mermaids had stopped singing, Carole was able to swim to shore and greet them while standing on her own two feet. She didn't think they'd drown her, after what Father had told her, but one never knew.

The first mermaid who'd spoken looked just like the one described in Dad's song, as a matter of fact. "Hello," Carole said, not knowing what else to say. "Are there lots of green-haired mermaids or are you Lorelei, the one my father knows?"

"Who's your father?" the purple-haired one asked. "I told you we never should have let that ship go, sister," she added to her green-haired companion. "Those men are carrying tales to their children about how easily duped you were, and now here's one of the little eels come to take advantage of our good nature."

"What do you mean, come to take advantage?" Carole asked. "I was just minding my own business and you called me, sounding like my mother. I knew it was you because my mother's in Queenston and Dad tells all about how you sound like other people in the song he sings about him and Mama rescuing the Queen from the wizard."

"Why, great starfish! Cordelia! Can you believe it? This is Colin Songsmith's little girl! You can stop puffing up like a blowfish. She's practically one of us. Why, I'll bet she came down to the river and told the fish to let us know she was there just so we'd fetch her, didn't you, sweeting? Let's look at you. Hmm, quite the young siren, except for your poor split tail and that dingy-colored hair. Have you schooled yet? And how is your dear papa?"

"Dad's fine. And he's taught me music and Argonian history, and Mum teaches me magical ethics. Princess Pegeen taught me runing and calligraphy when I was just a child."

"But have you *schooled* yet? Oh dear, Cordelia, I don't believe she has."

"Just like these half-breeds to neglect their children's education and then set them loose on us so we'll feel obliged to correct matters. I've a good mind to drown her."

"Don't be such a jellyfish," Lorelei snapped, and dived off the sea serpent to swim protectively in front of Carole. "You saw her swim down the river. Any child of Colin's is mer enough to swim far too well for the likes of us to drown." Carole was very relieved to hear that. Neither of her parents had ever seemed sure how much she had inherited from each of them. Though Dad liked water very much, Mother's aversion to it stemmed from a fear that witches could be melted by too much contact with it, as had once happened to an early Brown ancestress. If Lorelei thought Carole could swim well enough to protect herself against mermaids, then that was good enough for Carole. She walked a little closer to the edge of the shore and sat down cross-legged. Lorelei seemed to be the friendliest, so it was of her Carole asked, "I thought you could only sing ships onto the rocks in the ocean. Why did you sing up the river?"

Lorelei laughed a sparkling laugh and shook back her green hair, then looked up at Carole very closely, the way Great-Granny Brown had started doing after her eyes began to fail. "The fish told us, silly! You surely didn't think you could sing fish out of the river this close to our sea and not have us hear about it?"

"I whistled, actually," Carole said. Lorelei was so pretty. Her eyes were very big and green, even if they might be a little nearsighted, and Carole wished her own hair was that interesting chartreuse color and thick and straight instead of just plain brown and curly. "Would— would you like to hear?"

"Certainly not!" Cordelia said, slapping her tail against the side of the sea serpent. She wasn't as

beautiful as Lorelei. Her lavender hair didn't go as well with her fish-belly pale skin and her eyes looked smaller and her mouth tighter. Lorelei didn't wear anything above her shining tail except strategic locks of hair, but

Cordelia wrapped a fishnet dripping with seaweed tightly about her shoulders. "We can't have all of our fish committing suicide just so you can show off!"

"I wasn't going to do that one," Carole protested. "I know lots of others."

Lorelei flipped a spray of water back at her colleague. "Go ahead, small fry, don't mind Cordelia. She's just mad because there haven't been any fishing boats around to play with since Brazoria started sending them all to the war. And she's such an old clam I can't talk her into swimming down to the Gulf where all the fun is. I'd love to hear your song. Whistle me something, do."

"Lorelei!" Cordelia snapped.

The green-haired siren surface dived and came up facing her. "We have to know what she can do, don't we?"

"Do we?" Cordelia asked in a tone full of ennui, but she waved her hand that they could continue.

Carole was rather out of the mood to start with, but with Lorelei's smiling encouragement, soon had a wonderful sand castle constructed by whistling the grains of sand into shape. Of course, she had to concentrate fairly hard to keep the doorways from collapsing or the merlons from drying out and falling over the side of the towers, but out of the corner of her eye she could see the sea serpent undulating gently to her tune and even Cordelia seemed impressed.

"I could put sea shell siding on it too," Carole said, "But I guess that *would* be showing off."

"Oh, no, small fry. We need you to show off. As I was telling my dear sister, we have to know what you can do if we're to school you with us. It's going to be hard enough for you with that awful split-tailed birth defect of yours to become a decent siren, but if your other talents are up to it, who knows what—" Suddenly the sea serpent dumped Cordelia unceremoniously into the water and flashed a loop of itself past Carole, up the river channel. A very familiar scream, cursing in a male voice in a guttural foreign language, and Bronwyn's voice crying "By the Rowan!" her family battle cry, were followed by the returning of the no-longer-empty loop of sea monster.

"Don't worry, Carole!" Bronwyn cried, "We'll save you!" Which was nonsense since the monster had looped himself twice, so that an extra coil pinned Jack and Bronwyn together with arms at their sides and Bronwyn couldn't even get her sword free.

"Make him let them go," Carole begged Lorelei. "They're friends of mine."

But Lorelei had dived under when the huge bit of monster had lashed past. Nor was Cordelia in sight. Carole whistled sharply and about a league out to sea, the monster's head snapped up. She began the sand castle song again, easing it into a sedate, relaxed line dance, that caused the beast to uncoil himself and lie out in a line, releasing Jack, Bronwyn, and the boat.

Dragging them ashore, Carole felt unaccountably annoyed. "What are you doing here?" she asked.

"Saving you," Bronwyn said.

"I don't want to be saved. I was just showing my friend Lorelei my magic. She seems to think I could be a pretty good mermaid."

Offshore, the sea serpent wiggled back into its customary up and down conformation and both mermaids resurfaced, Cordelia resuming her seat on the monster's back with a little scolding pat of her tail against its sides, while Lorelei did a double flip, dived under and surfaced at Carole's feet. "That was wonderful, small fry, the way you made Ollie do what you wanted." She peered with her wide, green stare at Jack and Bronwyn, and with less curiosity at Anastasia, who fluttered down beside them. "What are these?" the mermaid asked. Then, before Carole could answer, pointed at Bronwyn. "That looks familiar."

"Lorelei," Carole said with some pride, though she couldn't have said whether it tickled her more to introduce her cousin the Princess to her new friend the mermaid, or vice versa. "I'd like you to meet Her Highness, Princess Bronwyn Rowan, Crown Princess of Argonia and—er—Jack. The swan is a princess too."

"Yes, sweeting," Lorelei barely acknowledged the last introduction with a bored flip of her hand, whose fingers were delicately webbed. "Aren't they all. Which of you minnows is which, again? You all look alike to me."

"We are," Bronwyn said. "Exactly alike."

"Er—what she means is we have a common problem," Carole explained. "It's really Bronwyn's

problem, but you see, it's a patriotic matter."

"Does she have a father too?" Lorelei asked suddenly, studying Bronwyn more closely. "Bigger, but with coral hair?"

Bronwyn looked pleased. "No, actually I'm the first girl in Argonia to be born of a union between a woman and a cinnamon bear."

"Never mind her, Lorelei," Carole practically screamed over her blowhard cousin. "That's part of this problem she has. She's cursed, and Jack and Anastasia the Alluring and I have pledged to help her."

"Isn't that cute?" Lorelei said, but she didn't sound very interested.

"I'd say these rather wreck your plan to school her, don't they, sister dear?" Cordelia asked, indicating the new arrivals with a wave of her hair comb and a voice suspiciously sweet. "They won't survive long at sea."

"No. I suppose not. You wouldn't mind if we drown them, would you, small fry? It'll be quicker and more merciful that way. They'll never feel a thing, but we'll enjoy it enormously."

"I should say not!" Carole said. "I told you they're my friends."

"But if you're to school—oh dear, what are we to do with you? We can't drown you, and we can't just keep letting mortals go all the time. Cordelia is already furious with me about—" She looked up at Bronwyn again. "About that coral-haired giant and that eel of a wizard."

She looked imploringly back to Cordelia, who sighed, adjusted her shawl, and dived off the side of the sea serpent to swim over and have a closer look.

"Oh well," Cordelia said, after her inspection. "She IS talented and there aren't many new ones being hatched. Of course, she'll have to learn to do things properly. But I suppose since we have Ollie, we can let her keep these as pets. We can moor them at the atoll, though I doubt they'll like it."

"You are too charming," Jack said, with a sweeping bow to both mermaids, "But as the Lady Carole has mentioned, we have a mission to perform on behalf of Her Highness. We could not possibly be persuaded from it. . . ."

But Cordelia had already instructed the sea serpent to return to shore, where it caught Bronwyn up in a coil. Lorelei was smiling at Carole and holding out her hand, singing a little song under her breath. It was such a lovely song. And they were both so beautiful. Somehow she knew from that song that schooling was something marvelous, and she felt she must learn what the mermaids wanted her to know. After all, they were part of her lineage just like witches and she already knew witching. She must school. She had to. Just for a little while. Bronwyn's curse had waited all her life. It surely could wait a while longer. Slipping dreamily into the waves, she swam towards Lorelei.

The mermaids' atoll wouldn't have been such a bad place to spend time if not for the weather. There was nowhere for any of the humans to shelter from the squalls that gusted across the barren rock and whipped the gray sea whose pounding waters provided the only scenery from horizon to horizon. Anastasia fared a little better, since the crags of the atoll protectively ringed a central blue pool in which the swan could swim, as she did, gliding relentlessly back and forth, back and forth, every morning as soon as her head was out from under her wing. Her chariot, which she had dragged behind her while she rode the sea serpent to the atoll, was moored on one side of the pool. Bronwyn thought it strange that after so many years of being bound to the chariot the swan didn't gladly abandon it when she had the chance, but she supposed the familiarity coupled with the fact that the boat was now the only thing the swan possessed enhanced Anastasia's proprietary feelings. But chariot or no chariot, the transformed princess was no happier about being stuck on the atoll than Jack or Bronwyn. Though the pool contained fresh water rather than salt unless inadvertently mingled with unusually high waves, it grew none of the plants of which Anastasia was fond, and she was obliged, as were the rest of them, to subsist on seaweed salad.

Carole felt the cold and wet less than the other humans. All she had to do was mimic the mermaids and submerge herself to feel comfortable. Cordelia and Lorelei made sure she was submerged a good deal of the time, often with her feet lashed together to teach her, they said, to swim properly instead of kicking. When she'd tried to talk to Bronwyn and Jack, Cordelia had scolded her. "Split-tails haven't the sense of a piece of driftwood about what's important. You have a great deal to learn to overcome your handicap and be considered even a freakish kind of mermaid. You really must concentrate on your lessons instead of chattering with these others."

Carole had looked for a moment as woebegone as Bronwyn and Jack felt, and Bronwyn had hoped that she would start thinking of some plan to get them off the atoll. Maybe Anastasia would mend enough, in a few days, to fly them to land, one at a time, while the mermaids were showing Carole how to scout for ships or taking her on tours of their past conquests, wrecks sunk far beneath the waves.

But that night the weather was fair and when Carole climbed up on the rocks to be with her friends, the mermaids joined them and Lorelei sang to them all and braided pearls in Carole's hair and the sappy look on her cousin's face told Bronwyn that if she and Jack left now, Carole wouldn't accompany them. Not that Bronwyn cared, the way the stupid little witch was acting, but Aunt Maggie wouldn't like it, and it would be a shame to go through all these perilous adventures and live only to get killed by one's own aunt when one got home.

But as little as Carole seemed to care about her friends' welfare, the mermaids resented them anyway. On another of the nights they spent on the atoll, Lorelei asked teasingly, "Won't you let me drown just the boy? Just to keep my hand in? It's been ever so long since a ship has come along."

Carole had jerked away from Lorelei's comb, giggling, as if she thought the mermaid was joking. "No, silly," she said, using one of Lorelei's pet expressions. "Of course you can't drown him."

Cordelia, stringing pearls onto her fishnet shawl, tapped her tail impatiently against the rock. "There's no *of course* we can't do anything, small fry. This is our territory and you're our guest, and I'll thank you to mind your manners. I've a good mind to drown him myself just to teach you a lesson."

Jack, all the air gone out of him after his first day of seaweed salad and soaking, could only look miserable.

"You do and I won't let you ever catch any ships again!" Carole said. "I'll warn them all away, I swear I will!"

"Hmph," Cordelia said. "Not much chance of that No ship can resist a siren's song. You know that."

"They can if they can't hear it and they'll be so busy dancing to my tune I promise you they won't hear a thing."

To demonstrate she puckered up and whistled a jig that made the mermaids first pat their hands and slap their tails against the rocks, then dive into the sea and frolic like porpoises, who were diving and frolicking a little further out. Fortunately, the sea serpent was off on some business of his own or he would have been trying to dance too, which would have drenched the island with his waves, making their water too salty to drink.

Jack and Bronwyn shuffled about on the rocks, twirling each other, kicking up gravel and bruising their feet on the stones until one of Bronwyn's feet happened to bump against her shield. Touching it released her from the spell long enough that she could reach down and grab the shield and Jack at the same time. Relief flooded through her as she and Jack collapsed together on the rocks, glad not to have died dancing.

Lorelei surfaced, her cheeks pink with exertion. Both mermaids managed to hoist themselves onto the rocks, though they were still hand-patting and tail-bobbling most alarmingly, while molting iridescent scales onto the rocks as they writhed rhythmically against them.

"Oh, stop," Lorelei panted. "Cordelia, puff, do make her stop. I shall drown of all this air if I must do this any longer."

Cordelia was forced to capitulate and after that, for a time, the mermaids ignored Bronwyn and Jack, though they were rather more severe than before with Carole, insisting that she sing instead of whistle, if she were to be a proper mermaid, and endeavor to learn the bubbling language in which the mermaids spoke to Ollie and the other sea creatures, and master particular songs of calling in those languages.

One day Lorelei undertook to give Carole jiggling lessons. This segment of the witch's education afforded Jack in particular considerable diversion, since Lorelei felt compelled to do a lot of demonstrating. Carole couldn't seem to get the hang of it, which was no wonder, since she was not only too young to have the wherewithal to perform the task properly, but was also too strictly brought up to remove her shift, whatever the mermaids did, and so spoiled any small effect she might have been creating. Not even the wet and cold could keep them all from laughing, and that evening dinner was made merrier by the absence of Cordelia.

A moray eel had brought a message from a herd of seals that sounded most urgent, Lorelei explained when she brought the humans their seafood salads, and dear Cordelia had simply had to

respond in person. "I know she's an awful old jellyfish at times, but she's very conscientious about her stewardship of these waters."

"Stewardship?" Jack asked, pushing a slimy green strand of seaweed around on the slab of rock in front of him with his dagger. "When you wreck all the boats? That's an odd term for it."

Anastasia stopped gliding in the pool to reprimand him. "I am surprised that even a young hooligan such as yourself would lower himself to speak to these— these . . ."

But Bronwyn, who was glad for a chance to have a general sort of conversation going after almost a week of the swan's silent belligerent swimming, Jack's morbid silence, and the mermaids and Carole addressing each other exclusively, encouraged Lorelei to continue. "I suppose you do have a great chore, knowing which ships are the best ones to sink and keeping the waters clear of the wreckage they so inconsiderately leave behind and so on."

"You're very smart to see that," Lorelei said, pleased. "Most mortals just get stuffy about the drownings, and don't think of the services we perform, livening up the sailors' dreary lives with a little romantic adventure, keeping navies from getting too large, giving the fish a fair chance to fight back—"

"I suppose it's being brought up a Princess," Bronwyn said chattily. "It gives one a larger scope on things."

"Maybe so," Lorelei said. "But I swear, no one would believe the things that go on in these waters unless they swam in them every day. You think Ollie's a monster! You should see some of the abominations that have been growing off the coast of Frostingdung these last few years since the selkies were driven away."

"I'm sure they're no scarier than the beasts I've routinely faced during my many brave exploits," Bronwyn began, but Carole swiftly cut in, as she was annoyingly in the habit of doing.

"Do tell us, Lorelei."

"Some say the seas began to change when Loefwin slew all magic, others say it was not until he brought his Lily Pearl with her mother, Belburga of the pointed teeth and her sister—"

"Belburga?" Anastasia suddenly thrust her head forward. "But how can that be? Surely you are wrong, for there can hardly be two—no, no, not with daughters and pointed teeth. But how confusing! First she is in Little Darlingham selling to my old master the curse which has so cruelly undone Princess Bronwyn, and now you say she is in Frostingdung?"

Bronwyn agreed with the swan. "It's hard to see how she could have moved without consulting you, when you were only under that glacier for a moment."

The swan flipped her head, as if shaking off water, and preened in a quick and finicky fashion.

The mermaid gazed at Bronwyn with new interest. This curse. It's been mentioned before. What is it?"

"Boils," Bronwyn said, recalling the Lord Chamberlain's affliction, the evolution and resolution of which she used to watch with a sort of nauseated fascination. "I break out in horrible boils whenever anyone lays violent hands on me. Hurts like the dickens, and of course they're contagious as all get out. Big puffy red ones with white cores that go pop and ..."

"Ye-ess," Lorelei said, her cheeks almost as green as her eyes and hair. "I can see where that might be a disadvantage."

"It's not just the pain, oh no," Bronwyn said, warming to her subject. "I'm terribly stoic, so though the pain is excruciating, it is nothing compared with the political disadvantage." She waited for Lorelei to ask what that might be, but the mermaid wasn't rising to the bait, so Bronwyn proceeded to enlighten her anyway. "I mean, you can't imagine how frustrating it is to be trying to build a reputation as a warrior princess, and the first opponent one joins in hand-to-hand combat immediately joins one in breaking out in big sore spots. Naturally, I can hardly find sparring partners any longer. So I simply must get this curse removed as quickly as possible."

Lorelei touched Carole's arm urgently. "Come along, minnow. I think we should take a midnight dive. I'll show you the mer harp, if you wish, and then maybe we might swim out and greet Cordelia coming home. What do you say?"

Carole cast an apologetic look at her friends and turned to dive in after the mermaid.

Jack was shaking with laughter. "Boils! Oh, Princess, that was wonderful! They will not dare try to drown you now. Maybe since we know that it is to Frostingdung we must go to release you from your curse the fish women will take us there instead, as soon as Lady Carole tires of her swimming

lessons."

The swan let out a long hiss. "Not very likely. Did you not hear what she said about monsters in the waters? I cannot imagine monsters those hussies would fear, but I would not care to face them. We must find some other way to reach Belburga and lift the curse. I feel I am almost healed enough to draw the two of you in the chariot, but the mer creatures can always send their monster to fetch us, and even if they do not and we reach the shores of Frostingdung, there will be *those* monsters with which to contend. And, pardon me, but it is I who will have my underside exposed to the water. I thank you, no. You must try to find some less dangerous way to alleviate your curse, dear Bronwyn."

"How about the shield?" Jack asked. "Why don't you get it to take the curse off? It protected you from the mermaid magic and let us stop dancing while Carole was still jiggling the mermaids about."

"Ah, yes," Bronwyn said, "But those were big spells, not petty little curses like flaws in my personal integrity. My shield wouldn't waste its power considering such a trifle."

Anastasia added, "Besides, a shield would protect one from outer danger, and it seems to me that your curse is very like mine, a part of yourself from which that designed for your exterior protection can not defend you."

Bronwyn only sighed.

Though she'd hinted repeatedly at how interested she was in seeing the underwater instruments which had first called to her on the river, Carole was too distracted now to pay close attention to them. Really, this business of being caught in the middle of two sets of friends who disliked one another was getting extremely taxing, more so because the accommodations were not at all what Mother would consider up to par. Though Carole herself found diving deep into the sea, dancing among bright fish, prying into the cargoes of barnacle-encrusted wrecks, and singing and conversing with sea creatures diverting enough to make up for sleeping on jagged rocks and eating nothing but seaweed, she had come to realize that neither Jack nor Bronwyn was able to appreciate the adventure's educational qualities.

She'd tried to share. Jack had said something about treasure and once she had persuaded Lorelei to let her bring some to the surface to show him, but he had simply held it while asking her if there weren't some way she could persuade the mermaids to allow them to leave. When she said there wasn't, he asked if she could kill and deliver a fish or two on the sly, when the mermaids weren't watching. But by then she had learned to speak fish and was more than a little horrified at his suggestion. Killing river fish had been different. They were stupid and not nearly so attractive as the varicolored species around the atoll.

"Now I suppose you are wondering how we play these without the strings losing their tone in the water," Lorelei was saying, holding a pearl-encrusted gold harp with her own image carved on the body.

"Umm hmm," Carole replied automatically. Though the grotto containing the harp and the myriad other valuables the mermaids had acquired during their "salvage operations" was the most splendid place Carole had ever seen, with the water-diffused moonlight shivering mysteriously through it, she only stayed to avoid hurting Lorelei's feelings. Cordelia knew more important mer lore, and she had explained that mers ruled the sea because they were the original inhabitants of the world and mortal people a dried-out afterthought, an aberration. Since fishermen and serpent hunters killed sea creatures, mers redressed the balance by killing the killers. Logical as that sounded, Carole didn't like it. She'd fancied a siren's functions as mainly consisting of swimming, singing, hair-combing and looking fetching. Drowning people had not figured in her plans, but then she had never actually seen Cordelia or Lorelei drown anyone, much less done it herself. She imagined the talk of drowning was just that—talk—the kind of thing people liked to tell to show how fierce and powerful they or their ancestors had been, like Mother going on about Grandma Elspat eating children who came to eat her gingerbread house. Lorelei and Cordelia had surely just been trying to impress her and scare Bronwyn and Jack into behaving. Well, she'd impressed them right back and let them know what she thought of them aiming such shenanigans at *her* friends. She was pretty sure the stories told about mermaids by other people were nothing but jealous lies because the sirens were so beautiful and fascinating. Of course, there *were* all those skeletons at the base of the atoll and the wrecks, but then too, these were stormy waters and the atoll was in an awkward place if one happened to be a ship caught out in a storm.

"Minnow, you're not paying attention to me." Lorelei pouted. "Cordelia will be cross if I don't teach

below saw him and dove in after him, and two more saw them and followed suit.

Another one flew past Carole's nose, dousing her as he crashed into the water, and disappeared.

Jack hailed her from the atoll, waving hugely, and Bronwyn drew her sword. "Aha!" the Princess said, "It seems my cousin has been captured by pirates."

Jack nodded. "What do you suppose she means to do with them?"

Carole was beckoning frantically to them and pointing to the foundering ship, but neither of *them* had mer blood and they weren't about to shed any of the kind they did have trying to swim out and board a potentially hostile pirate ship at that distance.

Another party was less reluctant, however. Ollie's head surfaced from the far side of the atoll, his front-most portion swaying above the fresh water pond only momentarily before he uncoiled himself from around the rocky base of the island and zigzagged towards the ship. As the serpent passed, Bronwyn boarded him, and Jack, not to be outdone, followed suit. Anastasia flapped and fluttered uncertainly and hissed incomprehensible advice.

As the serpent encircled the ship, Carole joined her friends on his back and said, panting, "I think if we're ever going to get out of here, we'd better not let Ollie crush this ship. We have to get the crew to surrender—fast."

"Never fear, cousin," Bronwyn said, "Bronwyn the Bold has boarded many a pirate ship—just let me climb up on the floor and in no time I'll have them all hanging by ropes from those rod things they have strung up there."

"Have at it. But I'd mind the ropes, if I were you. They may still be crawling around a bit. My songs sometimes have a rather more lasting effect than I mean for them to."

"Er—pardon me for asking this," Jack said politely, "But why are the ropes dancing and the sailors swimming?"

"Because the ropes heard my song, but the sailors didn't. I think the crew is deaf."

"Like Grandpa Worthyman when he puts wax plugs in his ears to drown out Grandma Xenobia," Jack nodded sagely.

"Oh, surely *not*," Bronwyn agreed, pausing in her climb up loops of serpent to grin down at them.

"It's certainly possible they plugged their ears," Carole said. "More likely, I guess, than that they're all deaf. You'd better check on that while you're capturing the ship."

"Jolly. What if they choose to kill us while we are so kindly trying to increase their listening pleasure?" he asked.

"Why do I have to think of everything?" Carole complained. "Just DO it, before we're boarding a pile of splinters. I have to loose Cordelia and Lorelei."

"MUST you?" Bronwyn called down, just before climbing over the rail.

"I don't think Ollie will mind me if I try to keep him from squashing the ship all by myself."

The two-person boarding party duly boarded with aplomb more dampened, at least on Jack's part, by nervousness than by the actual soaking they'd received from the sea, but they soon took to their task. Only two of the entire crew remained on board: the one-eyed peg-legged villain Carole had spotted and a woman clad in an olive woolen cloak.

The patch-eyed pirate grinned at Jack and Bronwyn as though he'd like to eat them and growled to the woman, "We seem to be boarded, Mistress Rusty. Whatever ye think of me mission, ye'd best 'elp me resist these 'ere buccaneers or they'll be 'avin' the both of us walkin' the plank."

But the lady was already down on one knee, her head bowed, her docile pose broken only by one hand, which reached up to jerk on the pirate's tattered sash. "Nonsense!" she growled back. "If the Princess Bronwyn wants your leaky tub, I suggest you give it to her without further ado. On your knee, my dear scoundrel. Show your future sovereign a little respect."

Carole meanwhile was having difficulties of her own. Using her pidgin version of the sea creatures' language, she persuaded Ollie to refrain from squeezing the ship to smithereens while she freed Cordelia and Lorelei. Scrambling up the serpent's slithery sides, she managed to raise herself to where she was level with the deck and about two arms' length away from the knot. Lorelei and Cordelia were quiet. Perhaps they had fainted. She hoped prolonged separation from water hadn't killed them. But it couldn't have: The waves dashing against the prow could have kept even a fish of the wholly ocean-breathing kind alive.

She wondered how she was going to sing a knot loose, and wished she had remembered to borrow someone's knife, though both Bronwyn and Jack would be needing theirs to fight pirates, she

supposed. Then she saw just above her head an abandoned cutlass and grabbing it up, sliced the knot holding the net to the ship, dumping the mermaids over the side and into the sea, where she gratefully joined them.

Chapter V

The pirate shook his head wonderingly. "I been on these seas seven hundred and fifty year, man, genie, and lad, and I never before saw a mermaid—much less two—let go of a single prisoner—much less a shipload—not to mention a young'un she thought she had a claim on."

The ship had left the atoll behind almost two hours ago and now the pirate, who was called Jehan the Fleet, the lady, and Carole, Bronwyn, and Jack sat in the galley with mugs of tea, a plate of salt herring and five loaves of bread, smothered a piece at a time with good mint jam.

Carole shrugged. "Maybe it was because I wasn't a very good mermaid after all."

Jack shook his head and said emphatically, "Oh no, Honorable Lady Carole, you were a wonderful mermaid. They let go the sailors and this ship from gratitude to you, of that I am sure. Did they not give you their flute to reward you?"

Carole fingered the flute—a little whistle actually, made from a single shaft of coral. She was wearing it around her neck, on the same string as her medicine pouch. Lorelei had pressed the instrument on her when Cordelia wasn't looking, "Just in case you should ever need to call us, small fry."

Bronwyn smiled a knowing smile and speared another piece of salt herring, saying to Jehan and the lady as she did so, "You mustn't make too much of it, you know. Saving your ship was nothing for Cousin Carole. She's Queen of the Sirens. They'll do anything she tells them. They recognized her superior magic and leadership qualities right off and insisted she stay around to rule them with us to advise her. Upset as they were about my boils, they simply couldn't be parted from us. Needed someone like Carole to organize them. Wishy-washy lot, left to themselves." Mercifully, she filled her mouth with food and had to chew instead of talk.

Carole made a face at her and grabbed the jam pot as it slid past her to the lowest part of the tilting table. Separating Lorelei and Cordelia from the sailors was one of the hardest things she had ever tried to do, partly because the mermaids had been so angry and so glad to get their hands on their tormentors, and partly because Carole was just plain puckered out from whistling ships about. She'd scarcely had so much as a tweet left to dance the mermaids from their prey. By the time she'd saved the sailors, she knew for sure that bubbly Lorelei and cantankerous Cordelia did indeed drown seamen for fun and profit, as they'd been telling her all along. Only out of gratitude to her for preventing their permanent change of occupation to ships' figureheads had they released the ship and crew. Jack had been right about that. She'd also threatened to dance them on the ends of their tails for all eternity if they didn't.

But it was nice to have the others appreciate her. Bronwyn's lie had at least elevated Carole to Queen of *something*, which was equivalent and even a little above Bronwyn's own royal status and that of Anastasia and Jack.

And if the mermaids had proved to be not so good as they were beautiful, neither was Jehan the Fleet so bad as he was ugly. He and the lady in the green cloak, Mistress Raspberry, were both old friends of the King's, which was how the lady had recognized Bronwyn. Jehan didn't see as well as his companion due to the injury that had cost him his eye and which was why, Carole supposed, he sported that awful squinting leer. He'd told them he had captured Lorelei and Cordelia with the aim of turning them loose OH the combined Ablemarlonian and Brazorian navies.

"Me jolly roger is just for old times' sake, ye understand," he said. "I was in the international import-export business before I turned genie and just had a mind to try it out again, before I got to the war."

"I too would like to go a-pirating," Jack told him, "But I am pledged to help my Princess end her curse." He regarded his Princess adoringly from the corner of his eye. Such a regal person, his Bronwyn. How nobly she ate with both competent hands, her fine appetite befitting her imposing figure. How safe he had felt behind her when they'd boarded the boat—truly, this was the sort of woman worthy of his protection. Hungry as he had thought he was while choking down seaweed salads, he could manage only eight slices of bread and a few sedate sips of tea while Bronwyn polished off three times that amount.

Carole suddenly could scarcely eat another bite for yawning. The swimming she had done in the week past had honed her down, sharpened and darkened her till she felt like a blade of her former self,

but the effort of moving the ship and battling the mermaids had drained her.

"So," the elegant Mistress Raspberry said to Bronwyn, licking a bit of jam from the edge of her mouth with a rather pointed tongue which disappeared quickly between her lips. "You've finally decided to do something about that curse, Your Highness. What's this about boils? You're a liar, aren't you? That's what it says in the archives. I know. Sir Cyril Perchingbird asked my advice about them when last I was in Queenston. Oh, yes, I see. You were lying about the boils. Mother, what a bore for you, you poor child! I can certainly understand why you'd undertake a quest to do something about it. But I do think your timing is a bit off. I mean, really, dear, there is a war on and all. Shouldn't you wait until your father's around to help you?"

"My father can't be bothered with silly things like curses," Bronwyn said.

"I think she means, ma'am, that he has tried," Jack said, checking Bronwyn's eyes to make sure he was on the right track, "and it has become too important, too urgent, to wait. Besides, the Princess feels it is her curse, not His Majesty's."

"Yes," Carole said, yawning gustily and leaning back in her chair, cradling the back of her head with her hands. She did remember to brace her feet firmly against the shifting deck while she reclined, so as not to be thrown to the floor when the ship rolled. Her companions and the galley kept disappearing beyond her heavy eyelids, but she continued to try to explain, somewhat mumbly, to Jehan and the lady, "See, when the King tried to cure the curse, he went after the tax collector, only then the tax collector *wasn't* a tax collector, and Bernard says he's really my mother's uncle which is why he's a wizard and looks like us. Except, it wasn't him—I mean, it wasn't the wizard tax collector who made up Bronwyn's curse even though he put it on her, because Anastasia says it was a witch named Belburga."

"Ogress," the lady corrected softly.

"Ma'am?" Carole undrooped her eyelids to see the lady looking at her with a sort of wry wistfulness, like a cat wanting to sit on two laps at once.

"Yes, ogress. Belburga is an ogress." The wry wistful smile turned to one full of sharply pointed teeth that matched the lady's ears and virtually everything else about her. "I should know. She's my mother. We have the same mouth."

"Oh, bother!" Bronwyn said. "We've fallen into the hands of the enemy." She dutifully lifted the magic shield but caught it on the edge of the table, which upset the tea mugs and sent them sliding down the starboard-tilting table, and crashing to the floor. Her pronouncement was lost amidst a lot of wiping up.

"Hardly," Mistress Raspberry said when the drips were mopped. "Mother and I aren't close—obviously, since she's been in Frostingdung since she abandoned me to go there when I was only fourteen."

"But that's terrible!" Carole mumbled, her eyes slitting open again in what would have ordinarily been, had she not been so sleepy, wide-eyed sympathy. "Jus' terrible."

"Not really. Actually, it was one of the high points of my life. When she abandoned me, my father finally decided to raise me himself. And he's a much better parent—and had a lot more to teach me. He's a great wizard, you know. A friend of your father's, Your Highness, though you may have never met him. We live in the woods, and Father almost never leaves home—except for such dire emergencies as the war."

"But if your father is a good man, why did he marry an ogress?" Jack asked. "They are very bad, are they not? They eat people, I think my grandmother said."

"Well—perhaps the old, pure-blooded ones once did. But like practically everyone else in Argonia, ogres and ogresses interbred, mostly with giants and wizards and witches of ill repute at first. Eventually some, like my mother, took to social climbing and mingled their blood with that of a better class of people. As is often true of the more deadly species, ogres have always had a certain crude fatal charm. Mother, in her youth, was apparently more charming than most. And she doesn't eat people, you understand. She just sort of nips at them until they feel thoroughly shredded." She smiled a sardonic, pointed smile. "At which time she chews them up and spits them out. The phrase 'to eat one's heart out' might have been coined in recognition of my mother."

"No one with any sense would be fooled by somebody like that!" Bronwyn said.

Mistress Raspberry looked at her pityingly. "Perhaps no one with any sense, my dear, but several men with other outstanding qualities certainly were. As I've mentioned, my own father is quite a

powerful, prominent wizard. My younger sister, Daisy-Esmeralda, was sired by a he-nymph who did have the sense to turn himself into a tree to escape the mess he'd gotten himself into. Daisy's had a fondness for growing things and animals since she was a tyke, as a consequence. And Mother always encouraged my elder sister, Lily-Pearl, to be very superior about the fact that *her* father was a prince, albeit a minor one. Lily used to drive us all crazy with her white dresses and rose-petal-and-milk baths, which Mother insisted she take every day to ready her for the day when her prince would come. Fortunately for us all that scheme worked. Poor Loefwin was dazed from a near-mortal wound at the time and had recently undergone what amounted to an unusual religious experience. He never stood a chance. Though I rather pitied him, I didn't particularly care for some of his ideas, and when I heard Mother and Lily-Pearl discussing how we would all go live with him in Frostingdung, where Lily would be Queen, I ran and hid. Mother was in such a hurry to leave she didn't look for me very hard, and I haven't seen any of them from that day to this."

"And no great loss that is, I'd say, Mistress," Jehan put in.

"Perhaps not. But still, my friend, one misses one's family. Daisy particularly was quite a decent sort. I've often thought she'd have been much happier if she'd hidden with me and come along to live with Father. He's elvish himself and as dotty about animals as she is. Besides, I'm hoping to persuade Lily-Pearl to use her influence with King Loefwin to get him to join into the war on Argonia's side. I received word from one of my father's—er—envoys—that Ablemarle has been trying to bring pressure to bear on Frostingdung to side against us."

"Do you always hop aboard the nearest pirate ship when you want to attend family reunions or propose political alliances?" Bronwyn asked.

"Not exactly," Mistress Raspberry replied amiably. "Jehan once served me in his former capacity as a genie. After I liberated him and obtained my wishes we remained friends. Why not? Naturally, when he expressed a desire to resume his maritime career, I saw no reason to avoid indulging my wish to see my family again."

Jehan grinned rapaciously and said through a mouth full of fish, bread, and jam, "That's how I knew to stuff me ears, y'know, against them sirens. From me geniein' days. You'd be surprised what a lad can pick up bobbin' about in the sea in a bit of crockery."

Two days later, the look-out spotted the first of the monsters. "She blows!" he cried, and everyone swarmed onto the deck to see what blew.

"Off the port bow, Cap'n," the mate told Jehan, pointing.

"What is it, sir?" the bosun asked. "I can't make it out."

"The poor creature," Mistress Raspberry said more softly than any of them had heard her speak before. "It isn't blowing. It's bleeding."

And it was. Blood gushed upwards from the fin on top of its head, and also from the stubby tentacles sprouting from every part of its body. It was spotted black and white, like a killer whale, and was twice as large, though unnaturally large, as if it had swollen.

"Well, I never," Jehan breathed. But he did again, and frequently, all that afternoon. No one went below after the first sighting, but stayed on deck to watch as more of the mutilated creatures surfaced briefly and disappeared again beneath the waves. "'Tis a mortal shame, that is," Jehan said, nodding towards one of the surfacing things. "But all the same, I hope all the really big'uns has died of whatever it is afflicts 'em." He squinted expectantly down at the deck beneath his feet, as if waiting for a tentacled back to burst through the boards, and thereafter, everyone else cast an occasional apprehensive glance downward too.

Towards late afternoon their vigil was relieved by another kind of sighting.

"Land ho!" the lookout cried. "Frostingdung dead ahead!"

Jack, Bronwyn and Carole exchanged quick glances. The deformed sea animals had to be some of Lorelei's monsters. Were there worse yet to come? Creatures fearsome enough to make even a siren shudder?

Jehan apparently thought so. "Lower the jolly roger, bosun," he ordered. "If the sea beasts looks that bad, I don't want to think what the people are nowadays."

The people looked perfectly normal to Bronwyn, even slightly better than average at first, so tired was she of seeing the same faces and hearing the same voices day after day on shipboard. And the land looked beautiful.

Stable, stationary, stretching up a swelling hill topped by a squat square castle, not a wave in sight from the shore inland as far as the eye could see, except for the river off to the right, and she wouldn't look at that. Once she set foot on the beautiful gritty ground, it didn't shift, wiggle, squirm, bounce, slide, or do anything but lie there.

Jehan's fears about leaving them seemed baseless. The port town where they landed appeared quite ordinary, except that it was cleaner and neater than the few coastal fishing villages Bronwyn had seen. Everything shone with whitewash and the people walked purposefully through the narrow streets. Nets fenced shore from sea along the waterfront. Reassured that no one was going to eat his passengers as soon as the ship disgorged them, Jehan sent them ashore in the long boat, towing Anastasia's chariot upon which the swan had situated herself like a chicken brooding a singular egg.

Once the four people had been handed ashore, the sailors jumped back into their boat and rowed for the ship as if their lives depended on it, and perhaps they did, for moments later a brisk wind bellied the sails and bore the ship away again, which was fine with Bronwyn.

Mistress Raspberry pointed to a series of mortared stones half drifted with sand at the base of one of the cottages. "King Loefwin's work, those ruins, I'll wager," she told them. "Outer Frostingdung was Sulskeria, before the conquests."

"What a learned young woman you are," Anastasia said approvingly, spreading her feathers to dry in the sun. She too was glad to be out of the salt water. It was certain to have damaged her once-excellent human complexion.

Mistress Raspberry smiled at her. "Not too learned to be amazed to understand you without conversing in Pan-elvin. Odd that I never heard that the Dark Pilgrim's swans could speak."

"There are situations where it is best to remain silent," Anastasia replied. "And then too, we were ensorcelled to obey our master without question by the wizard who sold us to Brown, and that was after we had already changed to swans—but never mind, for it is a complicated matter and of no current importance."

"No current advantage in speaking of it either," Mistress Raspberry said hastily and in a low voice as a man bearing a large blacksmith's hammer approached them. "We must be careful here. From what I've heard, magic is forbidden in Frostingdung. Comforting sort of rule, isn't it?"

"I should say so!" Bronwyn said, for though she had no magic herself, she couldn't imagine what life would be like without people who had, so that one could, if absolutely necessary, do things only possible by magic, such as talking to animals, getting places quickly and changing inappropriate items into more suitable ones. Of course, magic *had* caused her trouble from time to time—well, all the time, if one counted the curse—but just the same she felt it was needed and liked having it available.

Mistress Raspberry greeted the hammer-bearing villager with a quick nod, which he returned. Smiles apparently weren't customary here, judging from the faces of the other passersby. Even if they had been, with a set of teeth like Mistress Raspberry's, a nod was a more civil expression. "Tell me, my good man," she said, slowly and distinctly, "which road does one take to reach the capital, if you please?"

"I couldn't tell you, I'm sure. Never been there myself. Never have. Never will. Never want to," the man replied. He spoke in a language very similar to Argonian, except that he tended to stress the second syllables of words rather than the first, and his accent had a hard sound to it. He stalked past, edging away from their party a little, as if afraid they'd soil his hammer.

"Helpful chap," Bronwyn said.

Another man strolled by and Mistress Raspberry repeated her question, receiving an even less courteous reply than she had from the first man, despite her offer to pay the newcomer well for his assistance.

The third man she asked didn't even bother to answer. "Well, *really*," she said.

"I've a good mind to give them dancing lessons," Carole said, her eyes narrowing dangerously.

"Not here. We'd be jailed at the very least for breaking their silly rule. If we must resort to that, it'd be safer if I inquired of the animals, though I dislike the idea of entering my sister's adopted country on a diplomatic mission only to break a law of the realm first thing."

"I don't see that it matters," Carole said. "It's a stupid law, and besides, the way these people act, no one will ever know we're here anyway."

"Perhaps someone more used to meeting strangers would have better luck," Jack said winningly. "Give me the money you would have wasted on that smith, great lady, and *I* will learn the way to the

capital."

"My sword thirsts to assist you," Bronwyn volunteered. Her sword had absolutely no feelings one way or the other in the matter. She, however, hated to let the one person who had been consistently friendly to her out of her sight. One never knew when Carole would decide to dunk one in something liquid, or when Anastasia would fly into a royal swanly conniption. And Mistress Raspberry was cool and dry, though she *had* maintained an air of respect for Bronwyn's rank and person, which was more than the Princess could say for some people.

"No, my dear Highness," Jack replied. "You must stay here. This task calls for expert skulking in true gypsy fashion and your most impressive height ill suits you for it." He swaggered off, hesitated, and returned for a moment, adding confidentially, "however, since this town is even more strange to me than usual and I have not my tribe to back me up, you might ask your sword for me to stay thirsty, and if you hear me shout—"

She nodded, and he was off with a flutter of faded tatters and a flash of dirty heels.

"For being so vastly ignored, I somehow feel dreadfully conspicuous," Mistress Raspberry remarked, setting her valise on the ground and plopping down beside it right there on the beach. Bronwyn and Carole followed her example. Within the next quarter of an hour, three women passed by them on the way from one little whitewashed house to another equally unprepossessing one on the opposite side of the village.

"Well," Bronwyn said. "We can't blame them for being so chatty, I suppose. This *is* a frightfully busy and exciting city." She even looked longingly after the pirate ship, now faded to a bump on the horizon.

"Yes," Carole said, watching how the few people who came in and out of houses had all sorts of business with one another until they passed near the strangers, whereupon they grew tense and silent, their backbones visibly stiffening. "Isn't it?"

"For a fishing village," Mistress Raspberry remarked, "they don't seem to be doing a great deal of fishing. See there, most of the boats are upended, and look," she said and reached out to pull a silken gray strand of cobweb loose from one of the fish nets, "these nets are dry. They look as if they've been hung about for ornament and haven't seen a fish in years."

"So they're not only snobbish, they're also lazy," Carole said. "So what?"

"Nothing, I suppose, except that I wonder if they eat seaweed, like your aquatic friends, Carole. I don't see any gardens or animals or anything else to eat here, do you?"

"It's a holiday," Bronwyn said, "And they've all given up eating and speaking to outsiders to honor one of their gods."

Another woman bustled by, and with one look at Carole's brown rags, Mistress Raspberry's pointed ears, and Bronwyn's battle gear, fled. Carole expected her to make a sign against the evil eye and thought her own party might well do the same. This village didn't feel right, somehow. Though she'd thought at first these people looked just like any others, on closer observation she saw that they didn't: they were much less attractive than the average Argonian. Every single person here seemed to be squatty, even the tall ones, and frowning. They possessed back sloping foreheads, protruding noses, retreating chins, and more hair in their eyebrows than on their heads. But as she waited, she saw that several people who did not come near the beach were slightly better-looking. These people were either quite elderly or very young and wore golden bracelets which, even at a distance, she could see bore pretty scrolled designs. "Now look, those are nice. Perhaps they don't fish here any more, but just make those bracelets to sell. I wish I had some money. Those are the prettiest things I've seen in this whole dumb village."

She heard a chuckle behind her and turned. A small, wrinkle-faced creature with youthful freckles across her nose, withered cheeks and a catlike, triangular chin, stretched out a hand to stroke Anastasia's feathers. The swan, usually not one to encourage familiarity, seemed oddly inclined to accept the gesture. The hag held out her other arm to Carole. One of the bracelets clasped the crone's bony wrist above her heavily veined and knotted hands. Though the patches on her dirty dress were neatly sewn, there was certainly nothing from her bare feet to her raggedly cropped hair to indicate sufficient affluence to purchase such a trinket.

"You can have mine, missy," she said, her voice oddly young and melodious. "Free, tee hee, but it'll cost you." She jabbed her finger sharply at Carole as if to point out the jest and tittered again. At least she was easily amused, Carole thought sourly.

"That's nice of you, but you're not making any sense at all, you know," she informed the hag with a little frown of disapproval, just so the poor old thing would know that at least one person around here was in touch with what was what.

"Oh, am I not? Tis a slave bracelet, missy! And I'd give it to you freely but it would cost you your freedom, it would! Hee hee! Do you get it now?" Behind her, a growl and a bark and a small dog, some sort of terrier perhaps, popped from between her knees to give Anastasia a piece of his mind. Mistress Raspberry said something quickly in a strange tongue which made the woman look sharply about her, hushing the dog and the lady at the same time. "Speak the Tongue, do you, madam? Shouldn't do that hereabouts, or you'll get arrested for practicing magic and win one of these bangles for your very own, if you live to wear it."

"Don't be ridiculous. I performed no magic. The Tongue, as you call it, is only a language."

"Ah, you know that and I know that but—" Up what passed for a street in the village Jack came, followed by several burly men. "I'd best go. You too, if you know—" but they were not to know whatever it was she would have told them. One of the men called to her and she hobbled quickly away, her aged legs covering an *amazing* amount of territory in a short time.

Mistress Raspberry rose to meet the men accompanying Jack, her brush of foxy hair and olive cloak spreading with the salt wind. The men were well dressed in a fabric which looked like fine linen, their clothing simply cut but sturdily made. The hand of one of them was clasped around the back of Jack's neck, as if the man intended to pinch his captive's head off. Bronwyn and Carole stood up too. Bronwyn stepped a little in front of Mistress Raspberry, her shield covering the three of them and her hand on the hilt of her sword.

"No loitering," the middle man said, half-shouting, and flinging his arms seaward, as if to physically push them all back into it.

"You needn't shout," Mistress Raspberry said testily. "I can hear and understand you quite clearly."

He looked surprised and doubtful and glanced back at his friends, who regarded the lady and her companions as if expecting them to start drilling themselves into the ground at any minute. "Well," he said, "if you can understand me, understand this. Just pop yourselves into that little boat of yours and go back same as you came."

"I beg your pardon," Mistress Raspberry said in a tone which said plainly that she did no such thing, "but I doubt my sister, your Queen Lily-Pearl, would share your distaste for my society."

"Empress," the man on the right said, licking his lips.

"Eh?" asked the third man, the one who held Jack.

"Empress. Lily-Pearl's Empress now, not Queen. Emperor Loefwin invested her last year, remember?"

"I'm delighted to hear it," Mistress Raspberry said.

The middle man was not convinced. "Anybody can come in off the sea and claim to be related to the Crown. The Empress *has* a sister."

"Aye, and a mother too," the lip-licker said ruefully.

"I've seen them both myself. The Empress's sister is not one to go joyriding on foreign sailing ships. She's a Princess, married to Prince Loefrig. . . ."

"I'm so pleased for her," Mistress Raspberry said.

"And she doesn't have pointy ears."

"Well, then, since you're such an intimate of my family, and recall my sister's physical characteristics in such detail, perhaps you can also recall," Mistress Raspberry smiled her saw-blade smile, "if she has pointed teeth."

While the bold one in the middle was busy being nonplussed, his lip-licking companion nodded several times. "Yes, well, that proves it, Murdo. She's got the teeth. Yes sir, she's . . ."

The third let go of Jack's neck. "Proves she's good solid ogre stock, at least," he conceded.

The lip-licker nodded. "Pointed teeth are a sure sign. They say Loefwin's grandfather, King Gawdaful the Goblin, was married to a woman whose teeth were so pointed she bit her lip once and bled to death."

"I—er—we, that is, seem to have made a mistake, Madam," Murdo said. "You appear to be, after all, at least a suitable sort of person to set foot on our shores. But we three are guardians here while the young Lord is at court with his men, and we have to be careful, you see. If you are related to the Imperial Family, I trust you'll speak of our diligence to the Empress, and not hold our questioning you

against us?"

She inclined her head graciously, but the gold flecks in her eyes sparkled.

"But then," Murdo continued, "I suppose we'll know soon enough if you're who you claim, won't we? Your sister will be expecting you, and no doubt will send soldiers for you."

"No doubt she would if she'd known I was coming, but I'd planned my visit to be a surprise. I had no idea these shores were so—hospitable."

"Nice of you to notice," the lip-licker said, his eyes darting from her to her companions, lingering rather longingly on the fluff-feathered, beady-eyed Anastasia. "Maybe you'd tell us what a nice lady like you is doing in the company of these ragamuffins? Have you brought the contents of your dungeons to share with your sisters for sporting purposes?"

Bronwyn answered, "Keep a civil tongue in your head, foreigner. Can't you see when you're outnumbered? *I* just happen to be Her Ladyship's woman at arms, Wyndy the Warrior, and these two are Her Ladyship's personal midgits and chief advisers. They are," she said significantly, "five hundred years old, collectively."

"Hmph," Murdo said. "They'd have to be practicing magic to live to that age."

"Not at all," Mistress Raspberry said coolly, to Bronwyn's astonishment. "A difference in diet, climate, the sort of work one does, can often produce radical changes in life span and stature. Just because such long lives aren't customary here . . ."

"Here now," the one who had held Jack said. "Who's saying they aren't? Why, our folk live as long as any midgits—"

Murdo gave him a withering glance. "Pringle, watch what you say. It's not like anything smacking so of magic is a thing to be proud of. What about the bird?" he asked Mistress Raspberry. "I suppose you'll be telling us it's your lord and master."

"Certainly not," Mistress Raspberry replied, and added with a lack of veracity worthy of Bronwyn, "She is my steed, presently lamed. I presume you have adequate mews for her. If not, a stable will have to suffice, though I assume gentlefolk hereabouts ride swans just as they do elsewhere?"

Murdo said nothing but jerked his head back, indicating that the other men should step aside with him, which they did, the three of them talking in low voices and casting glances towards the strangers from time to time. The glances weren't exactly hostile, but they weren't exactly friendly either. The ones they gave Anastasia were more covetous than anything else, Jack thought.

"Why, of all people, did you have to fetch *them*?" Carole asked him.

He shrugged and hung his head. He was disgraced. He was unfit to lead his people, now or ever. It seemed he could not even skulk properly. "Forgive me," he said sadly—but charmingly. It was always wise to be charming when seeking forgiveness. "The pub of this town is also headquarters for these constable people."

They'd seized him the minute he walked in the door, which he had to do since there were no windows on that building, just white wash. They'd demanded to know where he came from and what he was doing there. That was when he'd led them back to Mistress Raspberry and the security of Bronwyn's sword.

Chapter VI

The inn was neither a busy nor a merry place, and after the strangers had been served their supper, Jack knew why. They'd been fed a bowl of gray-white goo with black speckles, a basically bland flavor, and a bitter aftertaste. The food was served to them by Murdo's wife, a woman no less well-dressed and no more attractive than her husband. If wolverines had suddenly lost their fur, stood on their hind legs and donned clothing, Jack thought, they would have looked a lot like Murdo's people. The children were just as bad, all seven of them, the eldest looking a year or two younger than Jack, the youngest a baby passed back and forth like an oversized ball between its brothers and sisters. They were as clean as their parents, but snarled at each other constantly and took turns pinching and whining at their mother.

When the meal was over, Mistress Raspberry dug into her dress pocket and extracted a piece of gold. "This ought to cover it," she said, trying to hand it to the woman.

Goody Murdo examined it as if it might be dirty. "Oh, I doubt that, milady," she said. Though she hadn't been told of Mistress Raspberry's claim to kinship with the Frostingdungian Empress, she treated her with the deference due to her silk-embroidered, lace-trimmed woolen gown and to the topaz brooch clasping her cloak.

"What? That's enough gold to pay for two good horses and some left for a loaf besides."

"Maybe where you come from, madam," the lady said, wiping her hands on the underside of her spotless apron. "But here we pay in iron." Her husband shot her an unfathomable look and she added quickly and with a generosity that hardly seemed typical of these people, "But I'm sure once you've been able to trade for our local currency, you'll pay up. You could sell that nice bird you have to raise money, and have enough cash to get by for a while and to buy bracelets for your slaves. Them coins you have would do nice to coat slave bracelets," she added approvingly.

"Yes, we met an old woman who said she was a slave and showed us her golden bracelet. But why do your slaves wear such expensive jewelry?"

"Mercy, milady, gold isn't that pricey here in Frostingdung. Iron's the thing, has to be, considering. We get both from our mines, and for a long time the slaves wore bare iron. But the Empress, when she was just a Princess, said what this country needed was a bit of sprucing up, and ordered all the iron bracelets dipped in gold. It does have a nicer shine to it, and one can make the bracelets a bit lighter, and save money, by coating them. Which old lady would it have been that you met, milady?"

"Oh, very old, with a d—"

"Glitha. That will be enough," Murdo said. "Our guests will be too tired for your chatter. They'll be staying here tonight. You should show them to bed. The lady sleeps in the big room, the two women servants in the next, the manservant in the smallest."

Goody Murdo looked dismayed and Mistress Raspberry said, "We shouldn't like to put you out. We're quite accustomed to rough living and could share space on your floor. If you and your family usually sleep here . . ."

"Mercy, milady," the woman replied, stopping halfway to the door. "We wouldn't think of sleeping here. We have our own cottage, with proper iron bindings and—" Another look from her husband silenced her.

"Your Ladyship needn't worry about us," Murdo said. "We mind our own business and it would go well for you to do the same."

Lady Carole and Princess Bronwyn were already yawning, and retired gratefully into the room assigned them. Lacking Jack's natural instinct for intrigue, they seemed not to notice the ominous undercurrents in Murdo's civil, if not friendly, behavior. The man reminded Jack of a local lord who had invited the gypsies to perform in a village of his specifically to take blame for the failure of the crops that year. Fortunately, some of the tribe had arrived late and spotted townsmen building a gallows, and his people had escaped in time. Now he noticed immediately the wooden bar which could be shoved across his door from the outside. There was no lock on the inside, so it was obviously meant to keep the occupant in, not to keep intruders out. But a good gypsy prided himself on being catlike—it was impossible to keep him out where he wished to go in and it was equally impossible to keep him in where he wished to go out. If Jack had not been so busy figuring how he could escape he would have been insulted. After all, how did these people know he was not what he seemed to be? He might

very well not be planning a late visit to the castle in order to relieve the premises of some of the gold this country found so useless. But such a barrier as the bar would give him no trouble. He still had his dagger.

The room was simply but comfortably furnished with a bed covered by a worn blue blanket. Under the bed was a woven reed rug dyed brown and also an earthenware chamberpot. There was in addition a washstand with a basin and pitcher.

He lay down and covered himself with the blanket, and pretended to sleep. A short time later, the bar thumped down into the fastenings on his door, and he crept up to it, listening.

A debate was in progress.

"But what if she's the one she says?" a familiar squeaky voice he recognized as belonging to one of his first Frostingdungian acquaintances said. "We'll all be executed!"

"She can't be. Does she look like an Empress's sister to you?"

"Well, no, except for the teeth."

"Any ogress has them. She's an adventuress, I tell you, and this time she's ventured too far. Anyway, it's not the likes of us that's hurting her. We're just feeding her and putting her up with the best we have available, as is our duty. No one could do better than that. If she gets damaged, it's no more than's happened to us and ours many a time, is it?"

"Oooh, but Oswy!" Goody Murdo's voice interjected. "The Empress's sister! Shouldn't we ... ?"

"How can you forget what happened to your own son and Cressida Pringle? It's all very well to make things look nice for the Empress, but looking nice is not government. It's about time the nobles realized what the rest of us are up against out here. Imagine that young drunkard taking all the soldiers with him when he went to the capital, leaving us with no protection. And us the chief port of Frostingdung! Besides, if she does turn out to be the Empress's sister, who knows she's here except her and us and that tin-toting giantess and those two dark brats of hers?" His laugh was unjovial.

"You don't think they're really five hundred year old midgets?"

"If they are, they have come to the wrong place if they want to live to be five hundred and one. Hurry now, curfew's going to sound any minute and we've knives to sharpen yet tonight so we can see to the bird first thing in the morning."

With grunts and scrapings of benches, squalling from the children and a smack here and there, the people left the hall, and the silence crept back in. It was punctured a moment later by an eerie blast from a deep-voice horn. Jack took that to be curfew.

With an expertness that thrilled him, he stuck his dagger blade into the space between door and frame, pushed up until the blade met the hard wooden bar, and up further until the bar was parallel with the door. He pushed again and let himself out. The inn was dark, but the faint smell of burning lamp oil still hung in the room. He presumed Mistress Raspberry and Bronwyn and Carole were locked in their rooms as he was supposed to be, and with a bow to chivalry briefly considered unbolting them. He held his breath until the unghypsyish urge passed. Bronwyn was better armed than he, Carole possessed magic and he had little doubt that Mistress Raspberry too was the possessor of certain arcane, and in this society, illegal assets. All of those ladies were far better equipped to take care of themselves, should they need to, than he.

Whatever danger Murdo hinted at didn't seem to be direct or immediate, and probably the man only considered Jack's companions as vulnerable to it because he thought of them as women and children. Hah!

The other reason Jack hesitated to touch the doors of his companions was for fear of waking them. The thought crossed his mind that they might not approve of his foraging plans for the evening. He would be back in a few hours, much enriched, and at that time he would waken them and tell them of the conversation he had overheard and together they would take pains to see to it that they and the Princess Anastasia remained whole and mobile enough to repair to the capital.

His conscience thus cleared, he ventured through the inn, out the front door—unbolted, which seemed more than a little strange—and into the road between the inn and its stable.

The stable was lit. Since Anastasia was probably not staying up reading, and would have been unable to light a candle even had their hosts been kind enough to provide her with one, he had to assume someone else was in the stable. A groom? Perhaps. At any rate, it would be a good idea to practice one's somewhat rusty skulking skills again to determine who the person was and assure oneself of the Princess Anastasia's safety before one set off on one's own adventure. It occurred to him

that if he could free her from the stable, she could stand guard outside the doors of Mistress Raspberry and Carole and Princess Bronwyn, unlocking the chambers if necessary, further freeing him mentally and physically to pursue his own interests.

A moon of useful fullness lit the night. By it, Jack saw that for people who valued iron so highly, the Frostingdungians used it liberally. The stable was banded in three places with strips of iron, one near the roof, one near the ground and one running all the way around the middle and across the door. As he drew close enough to notice this detail, he also heard an odd cackling and singing, and once a sharp bark.

"Do you mind terribly?" the voice of the Princess Anastasia asked. "I am trying to obtain my so-necessary beauty rest."

He peeked through a gap between the double doors of the stable. The light he had seen from the door of the inn was a candle which lit the startled face of the little old woman he had seen hobbling away from his friends when he and the constabulary arrived. She peered curiously upward for a moment, shuddered slightly, and wagged her head from side to side, asking the splatter-coated tan and brown dog to her feet, "Can a body grow the opposite of deaf, Dragon? Or am I as addled as they say and hearing things in my dotage? Never mind. Shall we wing us another song? Or will you dance instead? Let's have a dance, shall we? Up now, laddie. Up, I say."

"And *I* say, Cease. That is a royal decree!" Anastasia hissed from on high. Though Jack couldn't see her, he assumed she'd flown into the loft.

"Shhh, Dragon. Be still." The old lady held up her hand and glanced around, furtively. The dog whined and she reached down absently and patted it, her eyes still searching the room. Finally, hunching her shoulders together as if expecting to take a knife between them, she hitched up her skirts and began climbing a rickety ladder.

Jack, who had the greatest respect for old ladies, since his grandmother could still out-lie and out-fight every man in the tribe, tugged open the door and let himself inside. He meant to tell the woman not to trouble herself, that he would talk to Anastasia. But suddenly the dog flew at him, yapping and snapping furiously.

He stared silently at the animal, mesmerizing it with his hypnotic gypsy eyes, commanding it silently to be silent. It naturally obeyed, and he spoke soothingly to it in his native tongue. The dog sat down and cocked its head to one side, as if trying to think what exactly Jack could be saying and regretting it had never completely mastered the gypsy language. Then it thumped its tail and whined. He advanced upon it, still staring at it, holding out his hand and talking to it. It rose, wagging, to lick his palm.

The woman turned around on the ladder. "Eh?" she asked, and then, seeing Jack, called to the dog. "Are you daft, Dragon? You ain't supposed to lick 'im. You're supposed to bite 'im. Kill!" The dog continued to lick Jack's palm. The crone half-fell down the ladder, and hobbled toward Jack, muttering, "If you want a thing done right . . ."

"Do not blame your dog, Grandmother," Jack said pleasantly. "I am irresistible to all animals."

"Yes," Anastasia called down. "If they attempt to resist him, he has ways of enforcing his charm. I should know."

The old lady stopped in her tracks and looked from Jack to the loft, then leaned forward and jerked her thumb upward, cocking her head inquisitively while eyeing Jack. He smiled and shrugged.

"That is only the Princess Anastasia having her little joke with you, old one."

"The Princess who?" the old lady asked.

"The swan. She is the Princess Anastasia. You must have seen her today on the beach, before you ran away."

Anastasia swept down upon them, glared haughtily at the old woman and seemed to find upon landing that her ruffled feathers took considerable preening to smooth.

"Ah, the swan!" the old slave said. "She *would* be a princess, wouldn't she?" She wagged a finger under Anastasia's beak. "You see here, my beauty, if you're a fine lady you'd best change yourself back to your real self if you wish to live. Folk around here are meat-starved and—"

Suddenly a long wavering cry pierced the night. The crone's chin snapped up to hug her upper lip and her head trembled a little, as if she were making a conscious effort not to look around her.

"What's that?" Jack asked.

She waited until the cry died away before answering, then said with a sly smile, "That? Why, that

be one of the reasons folk here are meat-hungry. But mind me, beauty, you'd do well to change to your real self again."

"My dear woman, this has *been* my real self for the last two decades, and I shall tolerate no impertinence to my person in this guise or any other."

"The old one only gives you warning, Your Highness," Jack told her. "Those men who have housed us ate indeed hungry ones."

"You're the witch's boy, then, are you?" the crone asked, watching him keenly. "Did Murdo send you here to sleep?"

"No. We are all roomed at the inn but—"

"Are you?" She giggled again, but now he heard that it was not from amusement that she laughed, but nervousness. "Oh, that Murdo thinks he's a sly dog, but you be slier, eh, lad? Saw your doom," she said, exaggerating the word by booming the o's comically but he still didn't feel she was amused. "And escaped it, did you?"

"I did unlock the door and decide to—er, have a look about," Jack admitted. "But as to doom—" he shrugged. "As soon as I have completed my errands tonight, I shall accompany my friends away from here. But I think first the Princess Anastasia should join them."

"Oh, I shouldn't think so!" the old woman replied, still giggling but also in earnest. She whispered from between cupped hands, but loudly enough to be heard in the inn. "Curfew's blown, you know."

"My dear grandmother, I am a gypsy and not of your people. Your curfew does not concern me."

"That's talkin' daft, boy." She wagged a finger at him, but stopped whispering to say in a suddenly sober tone, "Curfew concerns everyone."

"Why are you here then?" He pointed to her bracelet. "Even if you are a slave, they surely do not require that you sleep in the stable."

"They'd do worse than that if my master'd stand for it," she said. "An ill-bred, ill-tempered, and ugly lot they are. But no, I come to the stable to be with Dragon. He's the last dog in Suleskeria, and master says he's mine to keep. But the housekeeper won't let me keep him at the castle. Also—I'm afraid if I'm not here to leave with him in the morning, Murdo and the other Dungies'll eat him, or feed him to *them* just to spite the master and me."

"Feed him to whom?" Anastasia asked.

The old lady pointed her chin towards the door. "Them. What's outside now. What would get you if you was where Murdo thinks you are, boy, and what will get your fine lady friends, I fear."

Jack had left the door open a crack when he entered. As the woman pointed to the door, she spotted the opening and sprang forward, crying, "Fool! You've killed us all."

Though Jack didn't know why she was so upset, he sprinted ahead of her to shut it and thereby apologize for his unwitting laxness. As he touched the wood, the moonlight caught briefly something curdled and red, and finger-long teeth shot from the redness and snapped at his face. He slammed the door, and heard a splintering and the cry again, and collapsed against the inside of the door before suddenly springing up again to search for a bolt.

"Ain't one," the crone said. "But with the door closed, the iron'll keep 'em out."

"I begin to understand the currency system here," he said, mopping his abruptly moist brow. "Where did that come from?"

"If you could see it, from the sea," she said. "The nets stop most of them. They're terrible afraid of the nets. But if you couldn't see it, 'twas a hidebehind. They can't be seen or heard, mostly. You just feel 'em. Till they get you, that is. Come," she said, and crooked a gnarled finger at him, leading him through an empty horse stall. She searched the wall with her fingertips for a moment, then told him, "When I says look, look quick. They'll find the hole in a thrice if we leave it open that long."

With her thumb and forefinger she grasped a protrusion and pulled forth a knot from its hole. "Look!" she said, and shoved him at the hole. Jack looked.

The night was filled with horrors. Not all were as bad as the thing at the door, or the one the lookout had spotted from shipboard, but misshapen creatures of all description waddled forth on flippers and fins, bloody tentacles and legs. Most hung outside the nets which formed a sort of sea wall. But aside from the sea creatures, there were others.

Several of them sailed in the air.

"What are the flying things?" he asked.

"Fliers," she said. "They sting."

What nonsense!" She flew at Jack, fanning her wing derisively in his face. "What conceit! While you sneak around trying to steal things, you desert your companions. For SHAME, young man! For shame."

"But Your Swanliness, I thought you needed protection more than they! That is why I came here first."

"You thought! Your thought was to get what goods you could and leave. Do not forget, my boy, I have had dealings with your sort before."

"Have you now, my beauty?" The old woman asked, cackling slightly. "And what are they like, all the same? Isn't that a pretty thought?" Her bright eyes leapt from one to the other. "That's what the Dungies said about my folk—that we were all alike. Oh, but we're not. We're not."

The hag seemed to slip from sanity to senility and back again but her eyes gloated like those of Jack's aunts when they conned ignorant peasants out of their silver by pretending to be even more ignorant peasants.

Anastasia looked somewhat abashed and finished lamely, "Nevertheless, you should not have left those poor ladies alone."

"One of those poor ladies," he pointed out, "is armed to the teeth and the other two, as you very well know, are witches, which is more than can be said of you or me."

"Are they?" the little woman asked. "Witches, you say? Real witches?" She rubbed her hands together happily and the dog butted them with his nose for attention.

"Carole is a witch of a certainty. Mistress Raspberry is a witch I only suppose, but she is an ogress in fact." He grinned and pointed to his own teeth.

"Tsk tsk. Such lovely illegal young ladies to get put in the inn. If my lord were here, 'twould never have happened so, but he ain't and I fear their powers won't help much with hidebehinds."

"Are they in more danger in the inn than we are here?" Anastasia asked.

"Oh, aye. No iron on the inn. Old building, only original one left from before the wars. No, they won't last long in there."

"But this is simply dreadful!" Anastasia exclaimed, glaring at the old woman as if it were all her fault, glaring so fiercely, in fact, that the dog growled at her. "Do you mean to tell me that those young people are trapped in that building with all of those abominable creatures and we can do nothing to assist them?"

"Not by sitting weeping you can't, no indeed," the woman said.

"And by sitting here and not weeping?" Jack asked angrily, furious at the hag for mocking him. "Do you suggest, old one, that I would not do all in my power to aid the Princess?"

"Would you now?"

"Of a certainty."

"Very well, then, come along," she said, leading them to the stable door. "But I'd pick up that shovel there if I was you. There's iron at the tip. And you might drape yon bridle across the swan. There's iron in the rings and the bit. Won't protect you full, but 'tis better than naught."

The inn was barely ten cart-lengths from the stable, but the journey to it was one of the longest runs Jack had ever taken in his life, and his had not been without a few frantic sprints. Far worse than angry farmers, indignant villagers, bloodthirsty mobs or infuriated wizards were the mewling things milling through the darkened streets or buzzing perilously close above his head. He ran with his blood beating through his limbs, as if he were escaping and yet realizing that at the end of his run he would still be far from safe inside the invaded inn. It looked naked and vulnerable, now that he knew the significance of its lack of iron banding. Beyond the building, seaward, a thousand glowing orbs glared at him from behind the sea net and the monsters waved their tentacles in the moonlight and their sad gills heaved and their misshapen bodies surged against the sea net.

Anastasia reached the inn first, but had to fend off monsters with her wings while she waited for the others to pull the door open for her. The old woman brought up the rear, mumbling and cursing under her breath and swatting at monsters with her braceleted arm.

Inside, the inn was convulsed with the noise of pounding blows and the very walls seemed to keen. Too late! Jack thought, running for the door to Bronwyn's room, though he did pause, thinking that if he was indeed too late, surely his friends would not wish him to open the door and loose the creatures of their destruction upon himself.

But even as he paused the door boomed outward, thudding, splintering, and finally bursting

asunder. He fell backwards before—Bronwyn.

"Bloody thing was wide open," she called back inside, and flipped up the bar as if it were a mere latch hook. She tore it loose as an afterthought, and handed it to Carole, who stepped through the door behind her. Inside, the room looked empty, but seemed to Jack to sway rhythmically.

"But my Princess, you are safe!" he cried, launching himself at her, aiming poorly, and ending up clutching her knees.

"Rather!" she said. "I see they got you, did they?"

"I—er—escaped them with fast footwork and the use of my agile wit," he said modestly.

Carole, still humming with a small mirthless smile on her face, took in Jack, the swan, the old woman and her dog with one glance and stepped behind Bronwyn to the adjoining room. Mistress Raspberry had had no protection, and Carole could only hope that her own magic songs had somehow attracted or distracted the lady's would-be assailants. She lifted the bar and tugged, and Bronwyn and Jack stopped talking to peer over her shoulder.

Mistress Raspberry knelt in the middle of her bed, which she had pushed back from the rolled-up rug. Under the rug, a trap door was laid back against the floor to reveal a yawning square of blackness.

Unlike the room Carole and Bronwyn had shared, Mistress Raspberry's chamber did not pulse with dancing waves. Instead, the darkness in the hole quivered slightly, and the lady strained forward, her pointed ear tips twitching, her tongue licking across her pointed teeth.

Bronwyn shook her head. "Poor thing, cowering in fear of her life."

Mistress Raspberry looked up at them, the slight glaze leaving her eyes as she smiled a sliver of a smile and flopped the trap door back down over the hole.

"Insubstantial," she said, smacking her lips, "I appreciated the song, my dear. It allowed me to isolate one. Next time I shall be able to obtain its essence."

The dog yapped and bounced like a mop gone mad and Jack absently picked it up and stroked it quiet again. The old lady looked past him to the wavering energy in the room Bronwyn and Carole had vacated. "Out! Out! Back to the stable or they'll have us yet."

"But will they want us?" Jack said, more than a little proud of how his friends had acquitted themselves.

Mistress Raspberry grabbed her cloak and valise and pushed past him toward the door. "When in a strange place, my dear boy," she said, "Never argue with native customs."

They curled up in the cleanest corner of the stable and waited for dawn.

Jack grumbled, "We could probably have slept in the beds. We beat the creatures, after all, and even a wolf pack will retreat when beaten."

The old woman tittered. "Ah, but that's no wolf pack, that's not. The night things return and return and wear you down with returning till they swallow you up— or worse. Ask Murdo, if you don't believe old Teeny."

"What I'd like to ask old Teeny is what's so funny," Carole said. "Those horrible things nearly got us and you act like they're court jesters."

Jack, more used to the old woman's rather black sense of humor by now, didn't take it so personally. "What I would like to know is what those monsters are, and where they came from."

"That's just the sort of animals they have around here, Jack," Bronwyn said. "Instead of bunnies or house cats or something. Didn't you notice how well-matched the dear things were in temperament to the people? Am I right, Dame Teeny, or am I right?"

"Right, dearie, and wrong as well. For it's true enough that there ain't many of the other kind of beast left, except for the few horses that were protected and a dog or two who escaped." She held the dog against her cheek for a moment and stroked his fur with her knotted fingers, and when she looked up again, her eyes blinked in the feeble candlelight. "They—them things out there—ate up most of the natural animals, along with a great many people—ours, for we weren't banded then, and the Dungies." Her titter made a momentary feeble comeback. "There were no monsters at all before the invasions, save the natural beasts—bears, dragons, deer, serpents, seals, otters, whales, unicorns and the like. Gone now, all gone. Stung to death by the fliers gone mad when their masters died on the Day of Disenchantment, changed to them wretched things that has to crawl out of the sea to feed since when Loefwin threw all potions into the river."

"Did the Loefwin make the monsters then?" Carole asked impatiently. "Why would he do that if

horrors, for all of trying to pretend he's all of a sudden not a goblin. And he still refuses to permit the most innocent magic, or any talk of it. But he don't know everything."

"You mean you still practice?" Carole asked.

"Oh, not I. Not I. Not with this bauble on me. But Dragon and me, we talk. And we notice things the Emperor doesn't see. There's magic at work in Frosting-dung makes our old kind look tame."

"We'll keep that in mind," Mistress Raspberry said. "But what we need now is a mundane means of leaving this dreary place."

"You must leave with us, Dame Teeny," Bronwyn said. "I will pull the bond from your arm and slay any who would seek to enslave you again."

"Are you daft?" Teeny said, beating Bronwyn's companions to it. "I told you, this bauble of mine protects me." Bronwyn looked properly rebuffed and the old woman put a soothing hand on her arm. "Not that you don't mean well, lass, but I'm too old to go traveling, and there's Dragon to think of. My master's not so bad, as masters go. He's young, is Gilles. I've known him from babyhood, when he was born to my lady after she give up her honor to keep company with the Dungie general who took our castle." She chuckled. "Babe looked like a Dungie when he was born, and my lady was alive with her magic unrestrained by iron. Nowadays, though, them as remember, and some of the Dungies do, might mistake him for our late lord. Not a popular lord, my Gilles. But the best master in Suleskeria and," she grinned a gap-toothed grin, "quite mad. The others can't stand him. So I'll bide here, thank you, I'll just bide here."

"Well, I rather think we shouldn't," Mistress Raspberry said. By now the candle flame was little more than a glimmer in a puddle of wax, but light strong enough to see each other in a gray sort of way was filtering into the stable. "Can you direct us to the capital?"

"Anyone could," Teeny said, sounding surprised. "Go straight upriver for two days and veer right where the channel splits. You can't miss it."

Chapter VII

"When you stop for the night," Teeny told them, "you'll come upon two dwellings. The first is large and comfortable-looking. Pass it by. The second is small and humble, of iron-banded logs. Stay there."

"Are the people who run the first one evil and likely to slay us?" Carole asked.

"No, but they overcharge and the food is bad. The second is a wayside for—I suppose you could still call them fishermen. It's kept provisioned and people are known to leave it alive in the morning."

Before they dealt with the problem of where to stay, they had to get there, and for a time it looked as if that would prove impossible. They had little trouble vacating the stable before the villagers arose after the growing light dispersed the monsters. The chariot was where they'd left it, intact and apparently unmolested, and they towed it to the river. They pushed it half into the water, but when they were ready to hitch Anastasia to it, the swan flatly refused.

"There are far too many of you and besides, *I* saw what crawled out of the sea last night. Do you think I would sink so low as to swim among them? I prefer to fly."

"What if we row? Would that help?" Carole asked.

"It might help *you*, my dear, but it couldn't possibly make the slightest difference to me. I shall be in the sky."

"Anyone would think you'd been turned into a chicken instead of a swan," Carole said. "But if you'll swim, I'll swim. That way there won't be so many in the boat and you can't say I'm not taking the same chances you are."

"I am not taking any chances."

The conch shell blew the all-clear, and behind them, the town began to wake.

Jack mentioned in a casual way the conversation he had overheard in the inn, when Murdo proposed that the men go after a certain bird at dawn with sharpened knives. Jack also mentioned how he had risked his own life to warn the bird in question. Was this how she repaid him, by risking his life again, and the lives of their friends? If this was how royalty acted, he was glad he was only a poor gypsy.

Several villagers left their houses and began walking toward them.

"On second thought, Carole, your suggestion has considerable practical merit," the swam said hastily, adding to Bronwyn, "well, what are you waiting for? Do you think I can pull that silly harness on with my pinfeathers?"

Bronwyn sat on one side of the water-worthy chariot, Jack and Mistress Raspberry balancing her weight on the other side.

"Well done," Mistress Raspberry whispered out the side of her mouth to Jack. "You can be quite persuasive." He shrugged. "It is only that I have this way with animals."

"Do you speak with them often?" she asked, surprised to find that she had something in common with a grubby male of Jack's tender years.

"Only the usual things—jump, whoa, giddyup, down, roll over, sit. Though the Princess Anastasia is naturally a special case."

"How dreary! Why have you never bothered to learn to speak with them properly?"

"It is beneath a man to speak to beasts who cannot speak a proper human tongue," he said, folding his arms across his chest and looking extremely superior. "How is a man to retain control if he lowers himself to saying bow-wow or bubble-bubble like those ridiculous fish women talking to their snake?"

"Very well then, if you have that sort of an attitude, I certainly won't press you to learn Pan-elvin. I had thought it might amuse you. My father and I converse regularly with all sorts of animals—his closest companion, in fact, other than myself, is a raven named Jack and I must tell you that that other Jack once held the same reservations about communicating with humans as you do about speaking with non-humans. I can't say that I blame him. Personally, I often find the society of animals a tremendous improvement over that of certain so-called people."

"*You* converse with animals? Like the fish women?"

"Certainly. But I can converse with any sort of animal, not just sea creatures. I've even been known to change into one or more species occasionally, though I can't do it as easily as my father. I was trying to determine the best way of changing into one of those hidebehind things when you interrupted

me at the inn."

"Oh. I thought you were trying to eat them."

"Both father and I are almost strictly vegetarian by dietary preference," she said primly.

Jack was fascinated, but his pride warred with his curiosity. He glanced at Bronwyn. She lay with her head over the side of the boat, her mouth open, sleeping. Carole and the swan stroked ahead of them. Who was to know? "Surely a fine lady such as yourself would let not the natural pride of a poor and ignorant but promising boy keep you from teaching him a skill he should know to be a better man? It is your duty as an adult to force me to learn such things. Very well, I submit myself."

The day rolled on. Bronwyn woke only long enough to complain of hunger. Carole swam, also complaining of hunger. Even Anastasia complained of hunger, since, as she said, she wasn't likely to dive for plants in this sort of place, even if she were not occupied with the business of transporting passengers. Mistress Raspberry and Jack joined the complaints in a companionable way, but Jack was so interested in his lessons he could almost forget he was hungry.

At least Carole and Anastasia were not troubled by water monsters, a fact with which they comforted each other. Whatever malformed fish or other undesirables lurked in the river stayed decently covered by the water and made no attempt to accost them.

They passed the first place Teeny had mentioned in mid-afternoon.

"She didn't say we couldn't stop there for lunch," Carole said longingly. "She only said not to stay the night."

"She did say the prices were high, however, and I have only gold, which I do not intend to squander despite the local preference for iron," Mistress Raspberry replied. "The cottage she recommended can't be far."

It wasn't.

No palace had ever looked finer than the iron-banded hovel. Inside were two beds of straw with real blankets, and food—cakes, stale but hearty, dried fruit, nuts, and some of the gray-white porridge congealed in a pot over the hearth. They didn't touch the pot or the porridge. There was not, they noted gratefully, any sign of a trap door.

Bronwyn, who was tired of sleeping, said she would stand watch, though there was nowhere to watch from, since the door would have to be closed to keep out hidebehinds and other creatures and the hut had no windows.

Anastasia tucked her head under her wing and fell asleep immediately and Carole, exhausted after a night of magic and a day of swimming, was also soon asleep. Mistress Raspberry fiddled with a few items in her valise, and made some notes in a book, before curling up with her cloak for a pillow and settling down beside Carole. Jack was still repeating his lessons in the language that would make him the greatest trainer of trick horses and the most magnificent dancing partner of bears ever known to his tribe when he too drifted off.

The woods seemed quiet, compared to the village, and even Bronwyn was lulled to sleep by the peace-fulness.

At dawn, after cramming as much as they could carry into their pockets, the five of them pulled the boat back out into the river. Jack stepped in something and slipped, sliding halfway into the river.

The something was red and of the consistency of mashed potatoes, except for the odd bone here and there. Jack jumped back, dropping his end of the chariot.

"Wha—what's that?" Carole asked, gagging.

"An animal of some sort," Mistress Raspberry said, poking it with the pointed tip of a fingernail and rolling it over. "Indistinguishable, unfortunately."

"Too bad," Bronwyn said, making a sweeping gesture up and down the banks of the river, which were littered with similar gruesome remains, as was the river water. "There don't seem to be any more."

But the smashed shapes were too formless for the travelers to tell what they might have once been, except that they had been alive and animal in nature—some had bits of fur, some a recognizable eye or limb. Mistress Raspberry's companions disappointed her by vetoing her desire to inspect the grisly debris more closely.

"They are dead, my dear," Anastasia said. "What they were when living I would rather not know if I am to spend my day swimming among them."

"All the presence of these things proves really," Bronwyn said, "is that it was every bit as safe out

here in the woods last night as it seemed. We were much safer than in the village."

Anastasia and Carole were pleasantly surprised later in the morning to learn that they would no longer have to dodge mangled flotsam. Two boats floated towards them, downstream, a net strung between them. The boats were of royal blue, bearing the red and gold crest of Loefwin Patebreaker, a crowned skull with a sword cleaving it.

The men in the boats wore handsome livery and demanded that the chariot and swimmers leave the river until the boats had passed. As the net swept by, Bronwyn saw that it was clogged with red shapes.

"Tidy lot," Mistress Raspberry remarked, as she climbed back into the chariot beside Jack.

They reached the capital in late afternoon, after passing through a forest followed by a strip of charred earth bordering the outer walls of the city.

The walls were fortified, but apparently not against people. No one questioned them when they dragged their boat out of the river and onto the bank. A barred iron gate separated the river inside the city walls from the river outside.

The city was a new one, built around the river. One channel flowed through it, between the stubby iron-banded houses and business establishments. The smaller, right-hand channel was dammed up to feed the moat surrounding the shining castle.

The castle's silver and gold shingles mirrored the rose of the setting sun. "But it's so beautiful!" Carole wailed. "I can't go in there like this. I'm dripping wet."

"They don't seem to be very free about allowing through traffic anyway," Mistress Raspberry remarked. The drawbridge was raised, making a forbiddingly blank wall between the two guard towers.

"Do you suppose we need an appointment?" Anastasia asked. If they did, they appeared to be late. All around them shops were closing and people were locking themselves inside their houses.

"We probably only have to call to get them to let us in," Bronwyn said.

"That will be none too soon for me," Jack said. "My belly would very much appreciate a hot meal."

"Shouldn't be any problem," Bronwyn said blithely. "Why, Mistress Raspberry's mother, now that she's had time to think it over, will no doubt just give me the countercurse, once she sees I'm a friend of her daughter's, and we can all go home again. After all, she hasn't anything against me personally."

"Remember, *you* said that," Carole reminded her grimly.

"I'm rather afraid it won't be that easy," Mistress Raspberry said. "Mother doesn't conduct her affairs with regards to personalities. You shall be very fortunate, Bronwyn, if she can be persuaded that some advantage will accrue to her if she lifts your curse."

"I'll give her an advantage," Bronwyn growled, grasping her sword hilt.

"Remember, my Princess, the ogress is Mistress Rusty's mother," Jack said, subtly showing the others who was really the familiar friend of the Empress's sister, and worthy to call her by her nickname.

"Sorry," Bronwyn said unrepentantly. The only thing she was sorry for was that Belburga was her friend's mother.

"I must admit I've felt the same way at times," Mistress Raspberry said, "But perhaps she's mellowed. I hope so, for the sake of all concerned. Right now I just wish she'd answer the door."

"Maybe if we all yell at once, the guards will hear us," Jack suggested. The five of them agreed on what to yell, counted to three and bellowed, "Hello, the castle!" Nothing happened.

"It's getting very late," Carole said, noting the ruby hue of the sky, mirrored by the moat. "Look at the sunset. If we're out much later, it will get dark and the monsters will get us. Perhaps I should swim the moat and tell the guards we're here."

"Yes," Bronwyn agreed. "You may have to tap on their helmets to get their attention. They seem to have put wax in their ears like Jehan's pirates."

"Or maybe they have all gone inside to eat their suppers and go to bed," Jack said, a little tremulously. "If I were a soldier in this country, I should not like guarding things after dark."

Except for its red color, the moat looked a great deal cleaner than the river. Carole jumped in, feet first—and scrambled, dripping, back up on the bank again as the water boiled furiously and the redness in the water gathered itself together into a great flat ribbon as long and wide as Ollie the sea serpent. The ribbon had a head, also flat, but peeled in two thin layers at the front to form a mouth. Its eyes hung from two little stalks. The head hovered halfway between the travelers and the gate.

Mistress Raspberry addressed the beast in Pan-elvin. "Kindly let us pass," she commanded. "We have business with the Empress."

"Not until you've followed proper procedure. Have you been summoned? If so, have you the proper forms and identification? Also, it is my duty to inform you that you are in violation of Statute 7.21 which prohibits humans from addressing beasts and subsection D which specifies that humans are not to converse with great tapeworms."

"I beg your pardon. We are Argonians, and not familiar with all of your statutes, however, I'm positive that the Empress, who is my sister—"

"Have you verification to that effect?" the worm asked.

"Will dental records do?" she asked, baring her teeth.

"No. We need proper positive identification. You should have filled out forms 670 and 1083, had them processed and already paid the appropriate tributes and fees before approaching the castle."

As it spoke, the worm folded and pleated itself until what would have been coils on a round worm formed sharp-edged tangles and snarls as high as the banks of the moat. Its head thrust forward and leveled nose to nose with Mistress Raspberry's.

"Don't be so stuffy, my good beast. I am the daughter of Belburga, and sister to the Empress. You have only to inquire within. Now kindly let us pass." "It is not my function to inquire within. That is the function of the herald. It is my function to prevent intrusions into the castle by persons not pursuing proper channels and therefore not crossing the drawbridge." With each additional word, its body fan folded against the existing tangle to build a thin but complex construction of flat red worm halfway up the castle gate.

"All right," Mistress Raspberry said angrily, jerking open her valise and pulling forth her big book and pen, the tip of which she stabbed angrily into an ink bottle somewhere in the depths of the bag. "That's quite enough out of you. What is your name and who is your immediate superior?"

"I am the Great Tape, guardian beast of the official government of Greater Frostingdung housed within this fortress and I answer to no one and you'd better believe it," the Tape said with a vicious snap that sent another tier of tangled red edges and surfaces as high as the battlements.

Carole took advantage of the beast's preoccupation with Mistress Raspberry to edge around and enter the water nearest the tail, which the worm had withdrawn from around the castle so that it could use its entire length to build a parchment-thin edifice obstructing the entrance. She was sure she could swim around the creature.

But before she'd swum a stroke, the tail untangled and whipped around her, flattening her arms against her sides and squeezing. "Stop! That hurts," she cried. "Help!"

Bronwyn drew her sword.

"Cut right through it, Princess," Jack urged, but Mistress Raspberry said, "No! That's er—not very diplomatic. Carole, can't you hum your way out?"

"I'm sure that's going to be easy for her to do while she's being squeezed to death," Bronwyn fumed, but Carole tried.

The worm only squeezed harder, and Mistress Raspberry and Jack heard it say, "In addition to trespassing forbidden waters, you are now in violation of Statute—"

"Tape!" a voice called from above. "You naughty, *wicked* Tape, you! Cease that at once! Now, I say. Put that child down!"

Though the voice was high and sweet and spoke softly in Argonian rather than Pan-elvin or Frostingdungian, the worm obeyed at once. "You know very well," the voice scolded, "that you're not permitted to dispose of people without prior approval."

"Daisy?" Mistress Raspberry scanned the battlements above the monster, who rapidly released Carole and began to straighten itself out. A plump matron with long curling blond hair waved down at them from the crenellations, and on being hailed, stopped waving, stared hard at Mistress Raspberry, and waved harder and more excitedly.

"Rusty? Oh, can it really be? Rusty, is it truly you?"

"Your worm didn't think so," Mistress Raspberry called gaily in return. She was also waving madly.

"Oh! But this is wonderful! Oh, Rusty, darling, I'm so very sorry—do forgive the Tape. It's marvelously efficient at its job of confounding and confusing folk and keeping them at bay, but I'm afraid it's not very bright or discriminating. I'll be down to let you in this very instant!"

"Everything is under control now," Mistress Raspberry said, turning to the others, who were dragging a gasping Carole from the moat. "That woman is my younger sister, Daisy-Esmeralda."

The drawbridge thudded down onto its landing on their side of the bank and Daisy crossed to meet them.

The two sisters embraced, but when Mistress Raspberry started across the bridge, Daisy halted her with a raised hand. "There's something I must settle first. Tape, do you hear me?" It raised its head enough so that its eye stalks were above the water. It looked thoroughly cowed. "These good people are not only legitimate guests, but this woman is my very own sister. I want you to apologize, and show them how happy we are to have them here at Giltrose Palace."

The eye stalks waved from side to side for a moment, as if embarrassed or undecided, then a great length of the beast folded itself along the splintery boards of the drawbridge, laying a red strip from end to end. At Daisy-Esmeralda's insistence, the visitors used the proffered portion of the worm's anatomy as a walkway. With the eyestalks watching them balefully, their trot across the bridge was gingerly in the extreme.

They passed under a toothy portcullis and into an exquisite garden, walled all around with gold and silver shingles. From an inner courtyard a woman with hair that vied with the shingles for sheer brilliance rushed to meet them. "Daisy-Esmeralda, a pox on you for worrying me so! The Prince has been calling for you and it's almost curf—Ruby-Rose!" Without missing a beat she ran toward Mistress Raspberry with outstretched arms. So smooth was her transition and so pretty her surprise that Bronwyn could have sworn she'd known they were there all along and was only pretending to just notice them. Had she been watching while the beast menaced them as well? "Ruby-Rose, my lost darling! What an appalling dress that is! Must be your father's taste. And your hair hasn't been styled in months, by the look of it. We'll have to do something about that before the feast, but don't worry, Mother will have you up to snuff in no time. Are you married yet? Good! There are many more suitable young men here in Frostingdung, and we're so much better connected now. You've picked an excellent time to come home and mend the broken heart of your loving mother."

As soon as the woman identified herself, Bronwyn's hand tightened on her sword and she began to stride forward purposefully to confront the ogress who had so callously ruined her life, but Mistress Raspberry pulled her back and muttered, "Wait. My mother can be a dangerous sort, Your Highness. She must be dealt with properly. If you want your curse lifted, stay back, be patient, and leave her to me."

In a louder voice she said, "I didn't leave *you*, Mother, if you'll recall," and embraced the woman even more gingerly than she had walked across the back of the moat monster.

"No," the woman said, giving her daughter's companions looks that made the Tape seem an amiable fellow. "As I can see, you were spirited away by evil companions."

"I wouldn't say that," Mistress Raspberry said, amusement edging the exasperation in her voice. "I'd like to present Her Royal Highness Bronwyn Amber-wine Magdalena Rowan, Crown Princess of Argonia, Prince Jacopo Worthyman, scion of a nomadic subculture and in indirect line for the throne of Ablemarle, and the Honorable Lady Carole Maud Songsmith Brown, daughter of Magdalene, Honorary Princess of Argonia, and the Earl of Wormroost." She cast an apologetic look at Anastasia, "And that only includes *some* of the noble members of my party."

The swan looked away, pretending disinterest, as they entered a room the size of a ballroom, which was planted with flowers and had an ornamental fountain. Anastasia flew into the fountain and proceeded to glide serenely around in it as if she were part of the original decor.

"Charmed, I'm sure," Mistress Raspberry's mother said in a gratingly nasal voice as flat as the Great Tape.

"So are we all," Bronwyn said sourly, only her curse allowing her to respond with unfelt courtesy. She glared fiercely at the rude woman's back, which she had continued to show them throughout the introduction. Even if Belbarga hadn't been responsible for her curse, Bronwyn would have disliked the woman. She was brassy, common, loud, rude, and furthermore had the nerve to produce the impression that she considered none of the rest of them quite up to her standards. She no doubt found wicked, curse-throwing wizards more to her taste.

"Lily-Pearl and the Emperor will just be delighted to see you, darling," the woman babbled on in her grinding monotone. "There's a feast tonight. I'll see to it that you and your friends are provided with proper attire and—"

"Fine, Mother. I have business I must discuss with the Emperor, and I'm afraid you and Princess Bronwyn and I need to have a little talk, too. Something about some assistance you once rendered to a certain sorcerer."

"You know me, Ruby-Rose, darling, always ready and willing to help anyone in need. I've always said—"

And she went on at length to repeat what she'd always said, until she and Mistress Raspberry retired to a sitting room off the hall and Daisy-Esmeralda had a servant conduct the rest of the party to guest rooms.

The banquet hall was outlandishly sumptuous. Not even King Roari's great hall at Queenston Castle surpassed it—but then, Bronwyn recalled with no small degree of self-righteousness, her father expended his strength in the defense and administration of his own people, not in the oppression and exaction of tribute from others.

Thousands of torches flared between opulent, jewel-toned tapestries, the table blazed with tapers, which blazed again in the gems encrusting the gowns, headgear and ornaments of the revelers. The floor was inlaid with mosaics, not covered with rushes in the usual fashion, and brilliant cut flowers of hues rivaling those in the attire of the assembled nobles filled every spare corner. Elsewhere on the walls and around the room shields and armor were burnished to a high luster and proudly displayed.

"You won't recognize Lily-Pearl," Daisy said to her sister.

"I barely recognize anyone, myself included," Rusty replied, surveying her traveling companions with a bemused look. They stood at the entrance to the banquet hall, waiting for the herald to announce them.

She herself wore bronze-trimmed gossamer green, a fairly conservative choice considering it had arrived at her room through her mother's instigation. Daisy, whose new round shape lent a certain solidity that had not been present in the flitting half-dryad maiden she had been when last Rusty saw her, looked very like her namesake, clothed as she was all in bright yellow, with brown velvet lining and trim. Even the overlay of melancholy in her expression, no doubt caused by the lack of any animals in this kingdom save monsters like the Tape, became her.

Jack was resplendent in red satin britches and an orange tunic. "I picked them myself," he admitted with a lowering of his curling lashes which was supposed to denote modesty. Carole's pink gown with garnet-colored trim became her well, but the whole party paled before the splendor of Bronwyn.

Belburga's snobbery had apparently gotten the best of her ogress instincts, and she had clothed her most illustrious guest in raiment she deemed appropriate to the station of a Crown Princess. Bronwyn's gown was deep purple, embroidered with gold and silver peacocks with amethysts and aquamarines in their tails. A little cap which looked like another peacock tail and which was also set with aquamarines and amethysts was pinned firmly to the Princess's wild red hair. One hardly noticed the hasty addition of aqua silk at the hem, starting at Bronwyn's knees, and at the sleeve, midway up her forearm, to lengthen the dress sufficiently to fit her. The total effect was stunning, and marred only by Bronwyn's insistence on carrying her shield along to the feast. Fortunately, the shield was only a small round buckler, easily concealed by the voluminous sleeves.

"Nice of you to have a feast in our honor," she said chattily to Daisy-Esmeralda.

"I only wish it were in your honor," Daisy said, sounding worried. "I'm not at all sure Loefwin is doing the right thing by making a fuss over Gilles Kilgilles."

"Would that be Lord Gilles?" Carole asked. "Which one is he? We met a friend of his on our way here."

Daisy looked surprised but answered, "He's that chap over there with the pale hair and the face half in his wine cup. Oh, dear, I do wish Loefwin hadn't made my husband sit next to the man! The poor darling is simply green about all this already."

The herald announced them then and they filed in, and took their places at the table. Frostingdungian custom seated the men on one side of the table, the women on the other. The Empress, a white-haired wight in a white gown evidently inspired by a winding sheet, sat opposite her husband. Daisy-Esmeralda, next to her, sat opposite her own spouse, Prince Loefrig, who was more widely constructed than Loefwin and balder, with a broad nose and slitty eyes and a mouth that seemed to run from ear to ear. Yet there was considerable family resemblance, and Bronwyn remembered she had heard that Loefwin was one of a set of triplets. Mistress Raspberry was seated on

"Urgit!" he said again and his wife scrambled across the table to kiss him full on the lips.

"There, there, darling, you mustn't take on so. I'm not the least offended. I know the mention of you-know-what upsets you, but that's no reason to turn now, is it, in front of all our guests? After all, if it hadn't been for you-know-what, you and I would never have learned to love one another, now would we?"

She repeated her kiss several times, and gradually his skin drained back to white. "Urg—sorry, darling. Sorry, Your Imperial Majesty, old man. You know I've just got a bit of a thing about that. But you, Kilgilles, should still learn to watch your mouth!"

"Now, now, old Froggy, let's not be so hasty," the Emperor said soothingly, "I want to hear Gilles' opinions on a few things. His district's one of the worst off. What do you think, eh, Gilles?"

"Think, my liege?"

"About my little idea. Don't you think that if we screened them well enough, we could let a few of the natives doff the bracelet, at least part of the time, buy their way free in exchange for growing crops, breeding cattle. I swear we've tried with our own folk, but we Frostingdungians are miners and warriors. We can't seem to make a thing grow except porridge vine and more of these damned hidebehind things! How's a person supposed to run a country when no one has access to anyone else as soon as it gets a bit dark?"

"I'm sure I don't know, my liege. I wouldn't want to be in your shoes." Gilles smiled a charming and almost genuinely sympathetic smile.

"Well, I need your help, my boy. As you can probably taste." Loefwin glared at his food and stabbed the table with his knife. "While we're at it, let's free some chefs too. A person should be able to get used to this sort of thing, but my gut doesn't seem to know that."

"Release some of those savages?" Loefrig protested. "Brother, you don't know them like I do. As soon as you take their bracelets off they'll be up to their old tricks—"

"I think you underestimate the thoroughness of Frostingdung's victory," Gilles argued. "The leadership of the six client kingdoms was utterly destroyed on the Day. The Emperor represents the only alternative any of us have to chaos and another war, which no one is prepared for. If one chose properly from among the slaves—"

"And I say a slave is a slave for a very good reason and ought to remain a slave. They're savage inferior people. Why, the merest contact with one of them has maimed me for life—would have been much worse if not for Daisy. Not to mention our sainted brother Loefric, who never has had the heart to return to the bosom of his family since he made the ultimate sacrifice on the Day. You were born afterwards, boy. You don't know what you're talking about."

"No doubt you're—" he hiccupped delicately, cupping long elegant fingers to his mouth, "right."

"Well, if this isn't the gloomiest party!" the washed-out Empress exclaimed in a tone as genuine as the high red color on her mother's cheeks. "Loefwin, you do know how to spoil a feast with your talk of slaves and other nasty topics."

"Sorry, dearest. Someone has to run the country sometime, you know."

"Yes, but not during festivities. Where are the musicians? Let's have some dancing. Aren't you just dying for Ruby-Rose to show us the latest steps from Queenston?"

"Just dying," he agreed.

"Milord Gilles, since my husband is feeling so gloomy this evening, perhaps you'll—?" She rose and extended her hand across the table. He looked at the hand as if wondering whether he was supposed to leap across or crawl under the table to claim it, and decided to bow low and kiss the hand and walk around the table before leading the Empress to the floor.

"Well, Princess Bronwyn." Loefwin turned to her, smiling. "A couple of warriors like us ought to be able to fake hand-to-hand combat if we can't actually dance, now, oughtn't we? And I'd like to ask you a thing or two about the extent of your father's holdings. You stand to inherit don't you? Meet you at the end of this damned table."

Belburga's eyebrow shot up to her hairline as her son-in-law and Bronwyn joined the other dancers. As Droughtsea approached to claim her, Mistress Raspberry gave her mother an innocent smile. "Did you mention Lily-Pearl and Loefwin had been sparring lately? Love's like that, I suppose. If one brings no dowry but beauty and lineage to a marriage, one can only expect—" But she didn't finish, swept away on the fine linen arm of the Duke.

"The nerve of that girl!" Belburga said. Carole listened with great interest. "Why, that hulking

giantess is nothing but a child."

"A titled, *landed* child, I'm afraid," Daisy-Esmeralda answered.

"Your sister always was a wretched little troublemaker," Belburga snapped, and flounced from the table.

"I believe I'll retire, my love," Prince Loefrig said hastily. "Brother has more affairs of state to discuss with me tomorrow, and I'll need my sleep if I'm going to be up to Milord Kilgilles. Are you coming?"

"Can you forgive me, darling? Rusty and I have so much catching up to do and we've scarcely had a moment to ourselves."

"Of course."

With professional curiosity, Carole leaned over and asked Daisy, "Excuse me, was I mistaken or did your husband almost turn into a frog there for a moment?"

"Yes, I'm afraid he did," Daisy admitted. "So kind of you not to say anything in front of him. He's terribly sensitive about it. Shortly after Loefwyn left on the trip to Argonia where we all met, my husband was leading an expeditionary force in Negelia to make sure all the minor magicians had been rounded up—they, I don't know how to explain this to you, Carole dear, but they seemed to feel at the time that that was the proper way to handle their affairs and I'm afraid—"

"We heard," Carole said. "Go on."

"The long and the short of it is that he found a magician—a witch, actually, and before they could round her up she managed to change him into a frog. Animals being as scarce as they are, one of his men put Loefrig in his pocket and returned with him here, thinking to fry him up for the Emperor—the men in the expeditionary force had no idea what had become of their Prince, of course. They thought he'd been taken by hidebehinds, I'm sure. But Loefrig divined the intentions of his former servant and hopped out of the pocket at the crucial moment, and lived in the fountain in the entrance hall where your darling swan is now. I suppose Rusty must have told you that I have always loved animals, and I missed all my little friends from our tower in Little Darlington ever so much, and one day after we arrived, when I was sitting by the fountain crying—"

"I know!" Carole said. "He showed himself to you, and you took pity on him and kissed him—"

"Actually, it was more like he took pity on me and allowed me to kiss him. I was simply dying for an animal to cuddle by then," Daisy confided.

"And he turned into a handsome—"

"A Prince at any rate. The only problem is, I'm of dryad heritage, and not a princess, so the counterspell didn't work as well when I administered it as it would with a real princess. I have to kiss him again rather frequently or he has a tendency to revert."

"You mean—turn back into a—?" Carole made a face.

"I'm afraid so," Daisy said resignedly.

"Ugh!" Carole said.

"Rather," Daisy sighed. "Though sometimes I almost prefer it. I get so tired of humans and at least if Loefrig's in a froggish temper it's a nice change for me from the Tape's company. I am so very glad you've come and brought Rusty."

By that time Jack had finished demolishing all of the halfway edibles he could find remaining on the table, and approached Daisy with his most flourishing bow, and together they joined the dance.

If one could call it that. If there was anything Frostingdungian's did worse than cooking, Carole thought, it was making music. The problem wasn't just that it was foreign music either—her father knew several foreign songs and she usually found them intriguing, if not as danceable as Argonian ones. Nor did the fault lie in the skill of the musicians, who played competently enough, though they didn't seem particularly interested in what they were doing. They might as well have been scrubbing pots or cutting grain for all the joy they displayed in their tunes. Which was perfectly understandable. This was something Carole had never thought to hear—boring music.

And all of the dancers looked as bored as the musicians sounded, even when the dance bestowed them each upon different partners than those with whom they'd begun. Bronwyn was with Droughtsea now, and Mistress Raspberry with Lord Gilles. They made a strange-looking couple, and Carole could see that though Mistress Raspberry tried to be gay in her brittle fashion, Jenny's young lord was hard to cheer up.

He looked sad and worried and perhaps a little frightened—maybe mad, but Carole wasn't sure.

She had a feeling after the people of Frostingdung got to know her and the people she'd been traveling with, the Dungies would think all of the Argonians madder than Lord Gilles.

While she was thinking and watching the dancers, she started humming, just a little. She didn't exactly mean to practice magic. Still, merely humming a few suggestions to the musicians, purely musical, as one artist to another, couldn't possibly count as magic. So she added a little harmony here and a glissando there, this tiny embellishment and that, gaining confidence and inspiration as she went along until her humming blended in with the new and improved music.

It sounded much better. By the end of the dance everyone had a sheen of perspiration on his or her face. "I say, I don't remember that one going exactly that way, do you, darling?" the Empress asked the Emperor, with whom she was now partnered.

"Never gave it much thought, dear," he said. "Believe I'm getting tired after all, and the game wardens are coming tomorrow to make their weekly reports. What say we—"

"Oh, very well," the Empress replied crossly.

Many of the courtiers followed the Imperial pair from the room, but the musicians played another dance for those remaining, and Carole helped on that one too. Mistress Raspberry flushed as red as her name and she danced again in Lord Gilles' arms, and Gilles laughed and smiled throughout most of the song, and seemed to be joking with her.

But as the last strains died away, and Mistress Raspberry trotted dutifully off with Daisy-Esmeralda, the beautiful young baron looked over the heads of the dancers to meet Carole's wistful gaze with a shrewdly appraising one. He sauntered over to her, poured himself another draught, drained it, and leaned against the table, folding his arms across his chest and regarding her with a perplexed expression on his face.

When everyone had left the room except the servants clearing the tables he said in a low tone, "Little tricks like that can earn you a new piece of jewelry here, Miss."

"Who? Me?" Carole looked innocently around her. "You're mistaken, sir. I was just sitting here enjoying the music."

"Hmmm, so I noticed. And since that's normally quite impossible, I immediately deduced you were the culprit."

"Not bad for a mad man," she said. He might be beautiful but he took a lot on himself.

"I see my reputation precedes me. No need to be so sharp, Miss. Your secret's safe with me. I'm widely known as a half-breed witch-lover anyway, though up till now at least I don't believe I've ever had the pleasure."

"But isn't Teeny a witch really, without her bracelet?" Carole asked innocently.

"Teeny Fittroon? Might have been. She was bound when I was born. No way of telling now."

"Won't her magic come back if the King lets you take off the bracelet?"

"Not much chance of that." He slumped down in a chair and filled and drained his cup twice more, mopping his mouth with a gesture less graceful than previous ones. "Loefwin's not the same man who conquered the Six since he got religion or whatever it was he got in Argonia, besides that female hidebehind he's married to. But Droughtsea and Loefrig are the same. They're not likely to let any bracelets be removed, even if the whole country starves to death."

"If the people are slaves, can't they be forced to grow things?"

"Certainly they can. My father, Gory Kilgilles, did just that. The vine that makes out pasty porridge is tended by slaves. But that won't help bring back the meat animals and fish."

"You must have some meat," Carole said. "We had roast tonight."

He laughed, and though his laugh was full and deep instead of old and tremulous, he reminded her of Teeny. "Yes, what did you think of our roast beast? Loefwin's game wardens catch that particular form of crawler by setting out traps each night baited with part of one from the previous night. Originally, a slave was used for bait, but Loefwin doesn't care for that practice any longer. People in my region do the same with the sea creatures. When those aren't available, we eat the gruel."

"I suppose you get used to it," she said doubtfully. Marta, the seamstress at Wormroost, was fond of saying that, but then, Marta had never eaten the Frostingdungian gruel.

"Not unless you've never had better. I have. Food has gotten shorter and worse every year of my life." He started to say something else, but abruptly his face and entire bearing changed. Most of the candles and torches in the room had by now been discreetly doused, and as Carole watched, she could almost see another person slide over Gilles' head like a garment. His eyes narrowed and lengthened,

his skull broadened, his body straightened and became less drink-riddled and resigned and more stern and forbidding. He shifted his position to the left, and addressed the space he had formerly occupied.

"You sniveling whelp! When I think of the indignities your mother endured at the hands of that goblin in order to produce a sorry specimen like you, I could weep. Sobbing for our supper, are we, with our people in iron and our realm in ruins? How would you like to eat dirt for all eternity?"

"Wait!" Carole said, searching the face for some trace of the original Gilles. Frostingdungians might call this madness but any witch worth her salt knew the supernatural when she saw it. This wasn't madness, this was either haunting or possession. "Just who are you and what makes you think you can just barge in on our conversation like that?"

"I'm his father," the new entity informed her coldly. She found she was rather surprised it was aware of her presence. She'd always thought that hauntings/possessions were more or less personal matters between the haunter and its host, so to speak. "Who are you?"

Before she could answer, the man shifted in his seat again and became Gilles once more. "She's a witch, old man, a real unbanded potent witch. And you're not my father and furthermore if you want either of us to survive, you'd better not even let me hear you think such a thing. Don't you realize we're in Loefwin's castle?"

He switched positions again and the caul of his father's personality slipped back across his features. The ghost wasn't the least bit interested in its geographical location. "Witch, eh? And with your powers intact. Won't be for long, around here."

Gilles shifted back to himself again. "I was just telling her some of the problems the country has been having and how Loefwin is trying to solve them. I'm trying to persuade him to unband the slaves, to help solve the food shortage."

"The country! What do you mean the country! Seven countries is what we are, and Frostingdung the lowliest of all. Suleskeria, Bintnar, even the Nonarable Lands, all of us had enough to eat when there were fish left in the sea and our people had the power and skill to coax the plants from the earth and the beasts were allowed to breed—Dungies never understood that you can't separate magic from production. Goblins rape the earth of metals it doesn't replace. You can't do that with food, or you starve. So now they're starving and I say, let them!" As the ghost spoke, it became more and more distraught, its cultured voice grew louder, and it ground Gilles' teeth angrily.

Carole watched, both fascinated and apprehensive, waiting for the young nobleman to turn into himself again, when she heard another noise.

"Hsst! Lady Carole!" Jack hailed her.

"Who's that?" the ghost asked, whirling to face Jack, "Another witch?"

"No, that's Jack. He's a gypsy."

"Certainly is. What about that creature you were dancing with earlier, whelp?"

"That's Mistress Raspberry," Carole answered, not willing to watch the switch again. "She's an ogress and— also a little bit of a magician, I think."

The ghost chuckled. "So, Loefwin's inviting magicians back to his court, is he? Could be he's found he needs 'em."

Jack heard the chuckle and rushed forward. Gilles shifted position and answered his specter, "I'm trying to convince the Emperor of just that, if you don't queer the deal for me first."

"You! All you ever do is wallow in your brew," the ghost said from the left again. Jack, who had at first clasped Carole's arm, dropped his hand and stared first at Gilles and company and then at her.

"Come, Carole. It is not good for you to be in this dark hall with Teeny's crazy lord. No offense, crazy Lord," he said quickly. "But you also should be in bed. Old Teeny would wish it," he added lamely.

"An excellent idea," the real Gilles said, rising. "We can continue this discussion in my room, old man."

"Bah!" the ghost replied, but was then silent.

Chapter VIII

Bronwyn hadn't really been avoiding the Duke of Droughtsea when he found her, but neither had she been seeking him out. She'd actually been waiting for Mistress Raspberry, who had asked Bronwyn to meet her in the west courtyard after breakfast-Breakfast being a great deal like dinner, she'd decided to skip it despite her hunger. She arrived in the courtyard early in hopes of getting in a bit of practice with her sword.

After the ogress lifted her curse, she intended to go directly to the Front and lend her father a helping hand. No doubt he had everything under control, of course. He was the world's greatest warrior. But she still wanted to prove she was the world's second greatest. It probably wouldn't be enough just to have the curse off. She'd probably have to convince a few people they needed to believe her when she said something, and Father always said there was nothing like a good sword to make a believer out of someone. She tried a few experimental thrusts, pretending to quarter a few Ablemarlonian generals. When she tired of that, she thought she might find good new offensive and defensive maneuvers for dealing with monsters tactically useful in this terrain, and set out to devise some. With the Great Tape in mind, she ferociously minced a hapless clothesline which happened to be hanging in the wrong place at the right time. Recalling the fliers, she hacked several large chunks out of the sky, but she was beginning to get bored when the Duke came along.

"Your Highness! So you've decided to honor me with a duel after all," he said with a flourishing bow. "I've been waiting for some time," she said, panting from teaching the sky a lesson.

"Then by all means," he said, drawing his weapon from a pocket, "Let's begin."

Doughtsea felt in no way imperiled by this oversized child. Even if Loefwin mistook her for a grown woman, he did not. He'd had it out of the gypsy boy that the Princess was large because of lineage, and a fighter only because she so designated herself. She was unblooded, whereas the Duke was very bloody indeed.

For a time they circled each other, Bronwyn feinting once or twice. She had practiced against veterans before, for though her father was her favorite sparring partner, he seldom had time to spare and often sent some general who was waiting for an audience to school his daughter in battle. She had always had the feeling these men weren't taking her seriously and did not fight hard against her for fear of injuring the royal heiress. She'd done her best to challenge them, and had few qualms about her ability to match her sword with sword or lance, but the unconventional weapon wielded by the Duke was another matter.

After her second feint, he fell back, and set his weapon in motion, the right-hand weight twirling in the direction of the sun, the left-hand weight twirling in opposition to it. Bronwyn became so interested in watching the things flip around that she almost didn't see when he loosed it.

He had thrown for her neck, which wasn't sportsmanlike at all, but she hopped backwards. Consequently on its downward fall, after failing to meet with her throat, the senyaty found her feet instead and wrapped securely around them, tripping her.

She fell back with her sword still raised and her shield covering her. She wasted a precious moment thinking how to untangle the senyaty without destroying it before she glanced up and saw the Duke advancing on her with his sword drawn and realized he had every intention of destroying her, whatever she did to his weapon. Her reflexes were well-trained enough, but her confusion delayed her almost too long. She was still thinking about untangling her feet, and had her blade engaged with the leather strip, when his sword came crashing towards her head.

She threw up her shield, and his sword shattered against it at the same moment hers severed the leather binding her feet. Before she could raise her weapon to press her own offensive, he sprang upon her, another senyaty in his hands, wrapped it around her neck and pulled so tightly that most of her strength fled with her breath.

Why was he doing this? Didn't he like redheads or was it tall girls he hated? Of all the Argonian party, Bronwyn had the least magic. If he was of a magic-hating people, why pick on her? No doubt he realized her natural valor would cause her to fly to the defense of her companions if he attacked them first, so he was getting her out of the way before proceeding to his real target. She wanted to ask him if she was right, but all she could say was, "Ack," as he jerked her around in front of him and pulled harder on the leather thongs. Her sword arm was powerless to reach him.

She fell backwards, her height helping her fall heavily to knock him down. The cords loosened and she ripped them off, though her fingers felt lifeless. Her sword had clattered to the ground in the tussle and now both she and the Duke jumped for it.

"Ah, Droughtsea, helping our lovely young guest get some wholesome exercise, I see," someone said, and both Bronwyn and the Duke abandoned the sword to turn sweating, discolored faces to the Emperor. Mistress Raspberry and Lord Gilles stood on either side of him and Rusty lifted a thin eyebrow at the sight of Bronwyn's disarray. "Kind of you to entertain her—but don't be so rough, my dear fellow. We don't want to damage her— heh heh."

Before either Droughtsea or Bronwyn could reply, a young page ran into the courtyard, slowing to a more sedate pace when he saw Loefwin. "Your pardon, Sire, but you asked to be informed when the gamekeepers had assembled. They await your pleasure." Spotting the Duke, he also bowed to him, looking a bit leery of addressing the man, Bronwyn thought. "Milord, His Highness Prince Loefrig asks you to attend him in his bath."

The Duke bowed hastily and retreated and Bronwyn rose, accepting the Emperor's proffered hand and examining her skinned knees on the way up.

The Emperor looked after him for a moment and Bronwyn thought she saw a glint of suspicion in Loefwin's deepset eyes, but if it was there, he masked it almost at once with a genial smile. "Mustn't keep the gamekeepers waiting, must I? But, Princess Bronwyn, I would like to have a word with you after court. While talking with Sister Ruby-Rose and Kilgilles here, it occurred to me that perhaps we might come to some arrangement of mutual satisfaction with Argonia concerning your war and our food shortage. I should like your opinion."

Before Bronwyn could reply, Mistress Raspberry gasped with a motherly concern which was totally uncharacteristic. "Why, Princess Bronwyn, dear, you've bloodied your knee! That will never do. Come along, and we'll ask my mother to help us fix it."

The Emperor fled the moment the tone turned to such womanly matters, and Rusty said under her breath, "We mustn't risk your curse botching this conference. Let's talk to Mother right now about curing you."

Belburga was at her dressing table when they reached her chambers. She looked surprised enough to see Rusty but she looked absolutely amazed to see Bronwyn. "But—my dear, what an unexpected pleasure," she said, quickly recovering her composure. She waved a rough pot in the direction of Bronwyn's knees. "Whatever have you done to yourself?"

"You know very well the Princess can't give you a straight answer, Mother, but it's my belief that she was attacked by the Duke of Droughtsea. His sword was lying broken on the ground when we arrived. I believe," she continued, looking straight into her mother's eyes, "that someone must have put him up to it. But Bronwyn won't be able to bear witness against him so that we can clear the matter up unless you remove the curse you put on her."

Belburga was coy. "Curse? But, Ruby-Rose, my darling girl, your journey must have worn you out to the point of distraction. A curse is a form of magic. I have no magic."

"Haven't you?"

Belburga carefully avoided her daughter's eyes and Rusty sighed. "Well, that's a pity, I suppose, since it will be difficult to punish Droughtsea. But on the other hand, I'm sure the Emperor won't let anything happen to Bronwyn once I tell him my suspicions. He has plans that would make her demise extremely inconvenient, to say the least." She turned to Bronwyn, who was beginning to wonder who the cursed one was around here anyway, and said in a world-weary way. "Bronwyn dear, I'm afraid there's no way to let the Emperor know your true feelings on the matter he was discussing with you. I know you're quite young still but—"

"But what?" Belburga's predatory eyes pounced on each of them in turn. "What's that soft-headed son-in-law of mine up to now? Is he planning to betray my Lily-Pearl?"

"Oh, no, Mother, I wouldn't put it so harshly. But he is getting on towards middle age and you know how men are then, and Bronwyn has a substantial inheritance and in her present condition is unable to rule alone. What could be more natural than that King Roari would seek an alliance—"

"But the Emperor is a married man and she's scarcely potty trained! Besides, Loefwin hardly knows the Rowans—"

"Loefwin knows that Argonia still has food. And wives have been set aside—or worse—before, for

political reasons. Why make such a fuss? I'm sure he'll provide for Lily-Pearl—and you, of course, though you won't want to live in the palace since it would be too awkward under the circumstances."

"Yes," Bronwyn said, "Don't worry, ma'am, I'd see to it that you and the Empress got your gruel twice a day and a nice piece of monster now and then. And when I'm done with a gown, why, just think, it'll make one for each of you!"

"Wait—let me think." Belburga put her finger to her chin and cocked her head in what was supposed to be a pensive gesture. "Not that I have personally ever done anything so vulgar as you suggest, but perhaps, just perhaps, I remember something from my genteel education that might be of use to the poor girl."

"I'd be ever so glad for any crumb of wisdom you could share, ma'am," Bronwyn said as demurely as she could.

"You shall certainly have it," Belburga replied in a sweet voice that was still buying time, accompanied by a smile full of daggered teeth. "How sad for you to be the object of such a sordid political barter."

"Pity you couldn't have been so solicitous when you provided the sorcerer with the curse that got her into this mess." Rusty smiled an equally toothy smile.

Dame Belburga saw from her daughter's expression that she'd better move smartly along to her next tactic, and she sank to a brocaded couch which had formerly held only a bit of embroidery in ivory hoops. The ogress passed her bent wrist across her spit-curl-adorned brow. "But, precious, what would you have had Mother do? That wretched wizard and his bandits were all about us. What help was there except her wits for a poor but still attractive widow with three beautiful, vulnerable daughters? I was forced to do his bidding to save our honor. Ruby-Rose, you'll simply never know the sacrifices Mother has made for you."

"Well, Mama, now you can make one or two more and I do promise this time to be properly grateful if only you'll get a move on. Loefwin isn't Emperor because of his patience, you know. And I'll promise you this too: the sooner you help us, the sooner we'll be out of your hair."

"I'm glad YOU are promising, dear," Belburga said with a spiteful jab at Bronwyn, "or I wouldn't believe a word of it. How does it feel, Miss Princess, you with your palace and your pretty mama and rich papa to know you're such a deceitful person no one can possibly ever care for you, any more than they're likely to believe you when you tell them the curse is lifted?"

"Fine," Bronwyn said, wishing she could run the woman through.

"Bronwyn might well ask you how it feels to be one of the reasons people might wish to stamp out magic in Argonia as they've done here," Rusty told her mother.

"As they think they've done here," Belburga spat back.

"You're not the only one who can get nasty, Mama," Rusty said quietly. "I've developed certain—talents—of my own under Father's tutelage."

"That weakling wouldn't teach you anything really potent."

"Wouldn't he?" Rusty laughed Belburga's own laugh and Bronwyn stared at her, startled. "No, he wouldn't teach me how to use power against you, but then, he needn't. I'm your daughter too, after all. Are you interested in my career, Mama? I've learned some of Father's skill with disguises, you see, except that I do it differently, quicker and more convincingly and—and I can turn into things that aren't very nice, Mama. But I can do more than Father because I can also turn other people into things that aren't very nice. How would you like to wake up looking like one of the sea monsters, Mama, or—oh, maybe have the head of one of those bat things staring at you in that lovely dressing table mirror one morning? You never know."

"Very WELL. You don't need to give yourself airs, my girl. They're most unbecoming. You never were the sweet child your sisters were. That's why I left you."

"The curse, Mama."

"I don't have it. She'll have to consult the firm from which I purchased it and—"

"Firm?"

"Certainly. I met their representative at one of my family reunions. I've traded with them ever since."

"And where is this firm located?" Rusty sounded increasingly skeptical.

"Not here, of course. There's no magic here, as I keep trying to tell you."

"Where?"

"I couldn't say. You don't think I go to Miragenia every time I want some teensy little ensorcelment, do you? Not on your life, darling daughter. I always just put in an order and they send them by return courier."

"What's Miragenia?" Bronwyn asked.

"A country," Belburga said. "It's where I always send the orders."

"This is all very interesting, Mother," Rusty said. "But what we need to know is who exactly is personally responsible for Bronwyn's curse."

"Goodness, dear, do you think Mother knows everything? I haven't the foggiest idea. You and all these scruffy children will simply have to go to Miragenia and find out who's responsible, won't you, if you ever want Miss Priss here to come clean?"

"Have I ever told you, Mother, what a thoroughly unpleasant woman you are?"

"Why, no, darling. I didn't know you cared. But really, though I must admit you've never been my particular favorite, I must say that of all of you girls, you seem to be the one who takes after me the most."

Rusty ignored the last remark. "You'll have to arrange transportation to this Miragenia place, Mother."

"I? Arrange the matter with my son-in-law. He would be glad to help her get to Miragenia if only so he could find it himself."

"You mean he can't find it? Where is it?" Rusty was rapidly losing whatever patience she had once possessed.

"Across the border somewhere. But it's a magical country and Loefwin doesn't believe in it so he couldn't find it—he conquered all the ones he did believe in."

"Is it close then?" Bronwyn asked.

"There are a few mountains and a bit of a desert but that should give you no problem, a great big girl like you. It's the fliers and the hidebehinds that will do *you* in.

Now then, why don't you get started and leave me alone? I've been more than cooperative."

"You've been more than evasive," Rusty countered. "But I suppose if you're not to be cured, Bronwyn, you're not. Loefwin will be glad of that at any rate."

Belburga had momentarily forgotten that aspect of her daughter's argument. "Very well. You've made your point and as both Loefwin and Droughtsea are incompetent fools, I suppose there's no other way. But if I give Her Highness here the seven-league boots so she can go to Miragenia, you must promise to trouble me no further about the matter. I don't want to see you, her, or those other grubby urchins ever again or I will expose you to Loefwin for the cheap witch you are if it ruins us all."

Bronwyn had been traveling alone half a day when she remembered the advantages of having companions. Carole might get cross, but her magic had provided the fish. Rusty had raided the kitchen while her mother was fetching the boots, but a crock of porridge was hardly enough to satisfy the appetite worked up by seven-league walking. Bronwyn had eaten all of it within the first two hours. She missed Jack sorely too, and wondered what he would think of her just taking off like this, without him. Rusty hadn't given her the chance to say goodbye—she was afraid her mother would change her mind if Bronwyn wasn't ready when the ogress returned with the boots.

Walking in the boots was a chore all by itself. Bronwyn was used to being tall, but it was alarming how each step picked her up off the ground, carried her over seven leagues of Frostingdungian forest or barren foothills, and set her down again, sometimes rather jarringly, since she couldn't see through the trees to where she was setting her feet down. She kept to the uninhabited lands for fear of stepping on someone and crushing them.

The boots were Argonian of course, of elvin manufacture. Belburga had gotten them from the bandit who had deprived Loefwin of them. Where the Emperor had acquired the boots and why he, who claimed to despise magic, had possessed them, the ogress hadn't bothered to explain. The upshot was that the boots had been left with her, since the bandit who had taken them was a werewolf and had no need of such things. When Loefwin had spirited Lily-Pearl's mother and sister away with him as well as Lily-Pearl, Belburga had somehow felt the boots might come in handy. She said she now wished she'd thrown them in the moat, but the Tape couldn't be trusted not to carry tales.

But Bronwyn was glad Belburga hadn't tossed the boots, cramped and uncomfortable as they were. They took her very quickly across Loefwin's miserable domain. So quickly, in fact, that she created

her own wind. Mistress Raspberry had fortunately remembered that winter was on its way, and had loaned Bronwyn the olive cloak, for which the Princess was now profoundly grateful. Soon the wind she made by her swift passage was joined by a rising north wind, and the clouds conspired to form a solid white ceiling overhead.

At least the snowflakes seemed to discourage the flying monsters, and maybe the others as well. This was more than mildly fortunate, since Bronwyn had had to leave her shield behind so it wouldn't counteract the spell in the boots. She hadn't liked doing that, but then, she didn't like the thought of being a liar the rest of her life either. But when night fell and she kept jogging along, far too excited and also too cold to sleep, she was unmolested.

By the time she reached the foothills it was morning. Both the hills and the mountains beyond were covered on the Frostingdungian side with a light coating of snow that indeed made them look exactly like frosted dung heaps. But one more step took her to the other side, where the mountains were clear and the cloud cover lifted to reveal sky of an unexpectedly harsh hot blue and leagues of stony hills followed by leagues more of rock and sand. Bronwyn stepped out onto the sand and suddenly felt she could not possibly take another step. The swift change from cold to heat wearied her more than her march. Hoping that being free from the Frostingdungian forests meant she was also free from the denizens of Frostingdungian forests, she flung herself onto the sand and fell into an exhausted sleep.

She dreamed home wasn't there any more—that the palace, the city, the shipyards, were all just empty shore with nothing but the wind-tossed waves touching a weed-grown rocky beach. She saw herself running, looking for anyone, but she couldn't seem to find her parents or Uncle Binky or Jack or Aunt Maggie. Once, though, when she called and called, she heard a laugh behind her and turned to see Docho Droughtsea snapping the thongs of his senyaty between his fists.

The dream was so upsetting she woke early. She was sweating beneath the wool cloak, and she ached all over, but she was very glad to be awake for all that—until she looked around her, and began to wonder if she were truly awake after all.

Her sword was still buckled to her side and the boots felt welded to the skin of her swollen feet. But the entire landscape had changed. No mountains, no foothills, no rocks—just sand. She wasn't even sure in which direction the mountains lay. She stretched her legs and instantly was transported, horizontally, many sand dunes from where she woke up. What in the Mother's name, she wondered, then realized that she must have been really running, or at least moving her feet, in her dream, and that the boots had carried her forward just as if they'd been flat on the ground.

She was terribly thirsty too, and when she tried to stand she found it was more than she could bear. "There's no one around out here," she told herself. "It will be perfectly safe to remove the boots while I rub my feet and let the swelling go down."

And though the sand was as hot as a dragon's breath, the easing of her toes made it bearable. It felt so good, in fact, that she thought she might just go back to sleep again, with the boots tucked safely under her head instead of on her feet where they could hurt her and wander off with her when she wasn't looking. So she slept. When she woke she was understandably vexed. Even when she wasn't wearing the boots, the stupid scenery wouldn't stay put!

Docho Droughtsea listened with his usual sangfroid to the ogress's rantings. He didn't mind listening to her. He found her most attractive when she was being her natural, undiluted self.

"Imbecile!" she shrieked. "Because of your incompetence I've been humiliated and disgraced by my own ingrate child! Do you realize you have made me disclose an important business connection, not to mention that in doing so I have very nearly been exposed to that namby-pamby Loefwin as a trafficker in magic?"

"Tsk, tsk," the Duke said without any sympathy whatsoever. "I don't see what you're complaining about. You're not the only one who knows about Miragenia— your daughter would have found out sooner or later. And who knows when, or in what condition the Argonian giantess will return from there?" He yawned deeply and sprawled beside her on the brocaded couch where she had remained, ostensibly half fainting with shock and dismay, since he'd first answered her summons. "Besides, you won't need to worry about who Loefwin fancies soon. You'd better keep that washed-out witch he's married to now out of sight for awhile."

"Why, whatever do you mean?" she asked, scooting over to make room for him and batting her spiky lashes flirtatiously. He really did prefer her in a temper.

"I was just wondering whether it really made any difference to you which of your daughters was Empress?"

"You surely don't mean that poor frog Daisy's married to is planning—?"

Droughtsea nodded. "With my help. We agreed a pragmatic woman of your talents might be of great use right now. Though, if you choose to remain loyal to Loefwin—"

"That milksop! Not very likely. But where, my dear Duke, do you come in?" She arched her neck in what she hoped was a winning manner, and several of her wrinkles smoothed themselves obligingly.

"I expedite matters, you might say, dear lady. Like yourself, I have certain unsuspected talents—" He frowned. "I have one less since I broke my sword on Her Highness's shield this afternoon. That sword had special—er—properties. It will cost you dearly to replace that, madam—since I attempted to do away with the girl at your bidding. I have nothing against her myself. She'll make an excellent hostage in fact."

"Ah! Yes, I do recall Ruby-Rose mentioning that your sword shattered—be wary, Docho darling," she said, and he noted with amusement that their intimacy was growing by leaps and bounds. "My daughter may be a snip but she knows magic when she sees it. I hardly think it discreet of you to wield a sword of power in her presence."

He rose and bowed. "I wasn't wielding it so much as breaking it, actually, but I'll heed your warning. *And* put your troublesome daughter where she can do us no harm."

"And those other awkward brats as well. I don't care if you feed them all to Daisy's monster."

"Consider the matter attended to," he said, reassuringly if vaguely. He had neither the time nor the inclination to discuss with her the plans he already had for the Argonians, but in this magic-poor place, he had no intention of unnecessarily wasting all that talent.

Carole sat on the edge of the fountain and fumed while Anastasia zoomed around the statue of the octopus spouting water into the pool. The nerve of Bronwyn to just run off without them after they'd come all this way to help her. If Rusty hadn't been considerate enough to tell them what had happened they'd have both been beside themselves with worry.

Not only that, but it was incredibly dreary in this gloomy castle. How she ever could have thought it beautiful was beyond her. Guards stood at practically every doorway, forbidding a person to go anywhere. You couldn't go out into the city because you had to get across the drawbridge and past the officious Tape to do that. And now it was blowing snow outdoors and too cold to make expeditions to adjoining buildings inviting. Without even a tasty dinner to look forward to, it was almost too much to be borne. The only useful thing she could think of to do was sit here and keep Anastasia company so someone didn't snatch the swan up and eat her. Carole had to admit, if she hadn't known Anastasia's true identity, the bird would have looked tempting by now.

Jack entered from a side corridor, not the one leading to the great hall or the wing in which their party had been quartered. He looked disconsolate and somewhat unfinished, as if he needed someone tall looming over him to complete his appearance. He carried Bronwyn's shield hooked over his left wrist, and held it on his lap as he sat down beside Carole.

She patted him awkwardly on the shoulder. "Rotten trick, wasn't it?" she asked in a comradely fashion, then added reasonably, as much to herself as to him, "Of course, I'm sure Rusty wouldn't have sent her off if it wasn't fairly safe, and one could hardly expect even Bronwyn to walk to that Miragenia place in seven-league boots while carrying us piggyback. It just seems pretty poor that she didn't bother to say goodbye."

Jack asked irritably, "Why do you dwell on these matters when I know as much of them as you do? You insult me. Bronwyn's absence troubles me not in the least. Do you think I suffer from the want of one woman, however glorious?" He made a derisive noise to show that he did not, then let his shoulders sink and nodded slightly, "But it is true that I am worried."

Anastasia stopped circling to glare at him, hissing, "Since you have just made it abundantly clear that your concern is not centered on Bronwyn, are you going to inform us of its topic or is it time for riddles?"

"I will tell you," Jack said with dignity. "For unless I am wrong about my suspicions, I am right."

"That makes sense," Carole said.

"I mean to say, if there is one thing a gypsy knows about, it is deception and alas, this time it is I,

the gypsy, who have been deceived."

"You? No!" Carole said encouragingly.

"Me, yes," he acknowledged soberly. "The Duke of Droughtsea said to me last evening before dinner when I was making a little tour of the castle (strictly to acquaint myself with its structure, you understand, in order that I would not become lost) that I must leave a certain tower room at once, because it was the treasure room and I, a stranger, was not allowed so close. So naturally today I went back to the same room when I was sure he was occupied with Rusty's ugly mama. It is nothing but a bathing chamber! A servant was cleaning it and left the door open. I could see inside most clearly. No jewels, no monies, no valuables of any sort. Very disappointing. Not only, you understand, because there was no treasure after all but also because," he looked very offended at this point, "a nobleman thought he could get away with telling an untruth to a gypsy."

"Well, I could have told you he isn't a very trustworthy person," Carole said. "He looks mean. I've thought so all along. And Rusty told me after lunch today that she thinks he tried to kill Bronwyn. That was one reason Rusty made her mother help Bronwyn leave for that magic country so quickly."

"Yes, but killing is one thing. Lying about a bathing chamber is something different. He can have no reason to lie about such a thing."

"I don't think old Docho needs a reason to be sneaky and rotten," Carole said, tossing the top of a decapitated flower into the pool. The flowers weren't even real. They were made of some kind of cloth.

Anastasia craned her neck over the edge of the fountain and asked, hissing as viciously as Carole had ever heard her hiss, "Docho? Is this Docho a Bintnarangian mercenary?"

"Oh, I don't think so," Carole said. "He's a Duke—the Duke of Droughtsea, I believe. But as we've been saying, he is not a very savory type."

"Ah, if only I could have been spared this! It can be no other, and if he is here, all is lost. Oh, Carole, Carole, why did you not tell me of this sooner?"

"Sorry. If I'd known you wanted a guest list, I suppose I could have asked Daisy."

"You never tell me anything! It is because I am a swan, is it not? The unenchanted are always so inconsiderate! So unkind! Whenever you have another of your own sort with whom to consult, you neglect entirely to keep me informed."

"You're getting sidetracked—and loud," Carole warned her in a low voice.

Jack didn't help. "It is hard to remember you are more than a mere animal," he admitted.

"Docho the mercenary is part of the reason I am an animal," she said with tragic dignity. She stroked a couple of feathers on her back, as if considering whether to tell them more, and then added, "He is also the one who sold my sisters and me into captivity."

Bronwyn had heard of shifting sands, but this was ridiculous. The vast white-crowned mountains ahead of her were not made from sand, nor was the brilliant city with its ornate arches and spires and multi-colored onion-shaped domes a sand castle. Even more to the point, the broad gleaming band reflecting the city in its green depths was certainly water. If it wasn't, she'd drink it anyway.

She didn't don the boots again, for the city was much closer than seven leagues, she was sure, so she scrunched her toes up and crabbed painfully across the hot sand for some distance. The morning sun reached the middle of the sky and dipped down again to torment her eyes, so that she sometimes couldn't look at the city or the water for the blast of brightness surrounding them. Surely her eyes were being scorched out of her head. To prevent that, she looked down at the sand instead of ahead, which was a good thing. Had she put her bare foot down in the spot for which it was headed she would have stepped on the snake.

The snake didn't seem worried about it. It didn't coil or hiss or rattle or anything like that. It raised its bright green head and flicked its forked tongue a couple of times and said in good Argonian, "Bless me, if it isn't a little girl giant! On your way to the city, are you?"

Talking swans were one thing, and she almost understood about the moat monster, now that it had been explained to her by Carole, Mistress Raspberry, Jack and Daisy-Esmeralda. But this talking snake was not possible. Actually, she wasn't sure any snake was possible. She'd seen Ollie, of course, and the Tape, and the dragons, who were supposed to be related, and also the snow under which the ice worm was supposed to sleep. But a little green snake, this size? What was it, a monster's version of a Little Person?

Whatever it was, it seemed to be expecting her to answer, so she said, "No, I'm just out for a stroll, taking in the desert air so to speak. Brisk today, isn't it?" She congratulated herself on the cordiality of her reply. Before her recent experiences, she probably would have told the snake she'd come to conquer the place single-handed and the snake would have bitten her and that would have been that.

The snake seemed to appreciate her attitude. "Sorry if I seem curious," it said. "But we don't get too many visitors out here."

"Are you from there?" She pointed to the city.

"Oh, yes. I was sunning on the wall and saw you coming and thought I'd just come out for a slither and see what you wanted. What was it again?" the serpent asked slyly.

"Oh, nothing," Bronwyn said, digging a little hole in the sand with her toe.

"Well, maybe so, but people seldom come out all this way just because they're in the neighborhood. In fact, not everyone sees the city. A person has to have legitimate business here or they never find it."

"Is that so?" Bronwyn asked, thinking that for a snake, this creature knew a great deal.

"It is. Why don't you wear your boots?"

"One never knows when one might want to go wading," she said, "so I thought I'd be prepared." It was a lie, but not a bad one, she decided. Sometimes her curse accidentally made good suggestions. The snake had evidently decided to take its slither beside her, probably to keep her under surveillance. When she finally stepped into the wide river, feeling the pleasant coolness slide like silk over her burning feet, the snake laced its way into the water ahead of her, keeping just in front of her shins.

"You're not poisonous or anything, are you?" she asked it, still worried that it might just be looking for the right moment, from its point of view, to bite her.

"Seldom," it replied, "And I assure you my intentions are honorable. I thought you might like a guide to show you through the city—to take you wherever your business must be conducted. Miragenia is an unusual place and you might easily stray."

"How can I stray when I don't want to go to any special place?" she asked. The snake didn't dignify that lie with a reply, which might have meant it was catching on to her curse. She couldn't be sure. So she asked, "Do all the animals here talk?"

"Certainly. Except a few of the very stupid ones, mostly imports from elsewhere. I was remarking to Mizmir just the other day—"

"Mizmir?"

"A dromedary of my acquaintance. This water does feel nice, doesn't it? Though not as lovely as your average sunny wall—"

"Naturally not," Bronwyn agreed. By now her entire body was absolutely awash with pleasure and she managed to stoop down a little and make the water come to her waist. Even getting her curse removed seemed poor enticement to leave the sweet wet river for the elaborate but stifling confinement of the city.

"So congenial to meet a person with the discernment to share my views on the subject," the snake said. "But I don't know if the wall is wide enough for you to have a nice stretch. The dust in the streets is lovely too, though. Follow me." It writhed ashore. Its conviction that its services as a guide were indispensable seemed to be catching, for Bronwyn found herself following it, telling herself regretfully she could come back and wade when she wasn't a liar anymore. A ruler had to expect to make some sacrifices.

But her skin burned and what had been wet dried instantly as she followed the snake to the gate.

"Since you had nothing particular in mind," the serpent offered, "Perhaps you'd care to see the marketplace."

"Perhaps," Bronwyn said eagerly. Maybe the snake had second sight. She cursed her curse for not allowing her to tell the helpful creature exactly where she wanted to go, but it seemed to be taking her in the right direction. Belburga had said a firm was responsible for the curse. A marketplace should be an excellent place to find a firm.

The snake slid itself importantly ahead of her for one or two paces, then said, "If I continue to slither in the marketplace, I shall no doubt be trodden upon and damaged. Have you a pocket in your gown?"

Carry a snake in her pocket? What a revolting idea! But it had been a nice enough creature so far, much nicer than some of the people she had just left, and if it had wanted to bite her, it had had plenty of opportunity before now. Truly, it would be most ungrateful to offend the little thing, so with goose

pimples and ripples of low grade horror along her spine, she let it slide up her arm and into her breast pocket, near her heart. If it hit her there, at least she'd the quickly.

The snake sensed her discomfort under such intimate circumstances as it had not been able to earlier, and quickly reassured her. "I was only being cautious before. I'm not in the least poisonous. As it may have occurred to you, now that you know me better, I am a magic snake. I don't say that to impress you. Everything in Miragenia is magic. And everybody."

"Everybody?" She found that curious. In Argonia there were some magic things and some people who could practice magic, like Carole and Aunt Maggie. But by and large, everyone was fairly ordinary, though not so ordinary as in Frostingdung, where everything was ploddingly, unattractively ordinary—except the monsters, of course. Miragenia promised an interesting change.

The promise was more than fulfilled. The marketplace was unlike anything she'd ever seen in her life. In Argonia, everyone *appeared* to be normal enough, though there were hints of the dwarfish, elvish, giantish or whatever about many of the folk and they often dressed in odd and elaborate costumes and talked strangely—though not, now that she came to think about it, more strangely than she did. Rarely would she see someone obviously magic—a tiny Little Person, a mer or a dragon. Most of those sorts of magical people and beasts required a special environment or were for other reasons unsuitable to appear in court.

But here nothing looked even remotely ordinary. For one thing, the people who looked like regular people had the irregular habit of floating about on various colored mists which covered them from the hems of the outrageous looking robes they wore on down, giving them the appearance of being footless. Also, animals walked on hind legs and people on all fours and some horses wore the heads of people and some people wore the heads of animals. Many of these beasts and people and combinations of the two (or more) also seemed either less opaque or more sparkly than was common anywhere Bronwyn had ever visited.

Not only that but a great many animals she had never previously encountered roamed the streets. One small hairy one which was vaguely man-shaped with a pushed-in, ugly-endearing face wrapped from forehead to crown with an orange bandage walked by on its hands while juggling orange fruit with its feet and waving a banner with its tail.

"What's that?" Bronwyn asked.

"Just the usual juggling monkey," the snake replied. "And not a very good one at that. He dropped an orange during the last full moon and his agents have not profited by him since."

"That *is* a shame," Bronwyn said, having no idea why such an animal would need an agent or how the agent would profit by him.

Other animals even stranger than the monkey passed them on the narrow, crowded streets of the market, which fairly exploded with noise and colorful cloths and pots and strings of things hanging and strong musky and flowery scents that made Bronwyn feel a little faint, in combination with the heat and the dust and the general unfamiliarity of everything. The snake pointed out several dromedaries, which were uglier than a Frostingdungian on a bad day. The beasts were very tall, with long faces more like that of a moose than a horse, had dun-colored coats and were cursed with pathetically humped backs. Their agents, if that's who the people fussing with them were, tried to disguise this with fancy blankets woven in gaudy geometric patterns and hung with bells and tassels everywhere a bell or a tassle could possibly be hung. One of the dromedaries carried a small pavilion on its back, and before the snake could warn her, Bronwyn, curious, pulled aside the curtain hanging from the structure's pointed roof, which was just about eye level for someone of her height. A pair of angry black eyes flashed out at her from amid billows of pleated gauze.

"You mustn't do things like that," the snake hissed from her pocket. "Come, let's go to the main market."

"In my country, snakes like you are executed for nagging princesses of the royal line," Bronwyn said.

But no matter how many stalls and tiny shops they passed, the snake wouldn't let Bronwyn watch the men lying on spikes or climbing ropes into thin air or have any other fun. It kept urging her forward to the marketplace, though she could have sworn half a barefooted league before he allowed her to halt that they had been *in* the marketplace all along.

Finally, when they stood before a shop three stalls wide and jammed with carpets, baskets, bottles and lamps of all descriptions, the snake suggested they stop, which she was glad to do. Spicy cooking

smells wafted from doorways all around and it was all Bronwyn could do to keep from drooling all over the snake's head. Some of the smells were coming from the shop in front of them, and Bronwyn hoped the man who sat weaving in the doorway would think about knocking off work pretty soon and offer them something.

He seemed completely absorbed in his work, though, shifting back and forth to balance the pattern of carefully tied knots in carmine, azure and gold teardrop shapes. He had the rug about half woven, and since he was weaving on a large frame instead of the horizontal loom the weavers at Queenston usually used, his work was by now above his head, so that to reach the next row he would need to stretch a little higher. But as he reached, the rug upon which he was sitting obligingly lifted from the ground and floated a thumb's-length or so above it so the man didn't have to exert himself quite so much.

Bronwyn clapped her hands, delighted. "Oh, that's just what I need! I can never reach anything."

The man, who had a white beard and wore a blue bandage on his head with a blue jewel where it wrapped in front, turned to them. "May the Profit increase," he said politely, and waited for her to speak. Before she could, the snake crawled out of her pocket, down her arm and plopped onto the ground beside the man, who said, "Ah, Mirza, you return. Then this must be she."

"She is. But first, by the Profit, would you be so kind as to bring your unworthy servant his basket."

The old man bowed. "Hearing and obeying," he said, and turned away completely from his weaving, whereupon the rug on which he sat dumped him unceremoniously on the ground.

He picked himself up and ducked into the shop.

"That rug is fit only for weaving," the snake told her. "As soon as he tries to do anything else on it, it dumps him. Rebellious, unprofitable item."

The old man reappeared carrying a narrow-mouthed, bowl-shaped basket. He lay the basket on its side on the ground and the snake crawled inside, whereupon the old man set the basket upright, produced a flute from his robes and began tootling a weird tune that Bronwyn was sure would have made Carole very happy.

As the old man played, the snake undulated upright out of the basket, stretching up and up to three times its original length. While stretching, it broadened, broader in some areas than in others until at last it was as large as the old man. Then it misted all over, and when the mist solidified, Bronwyn saw that the snake was a tall bearded man and the mist was his robe. He stepped out of the basket, tripping slightly as his right foot finished forming before he quite had it free. "Blast!" he said. "Really, Uncle, we must get a larger magic basket for this trick."

"We will," the old man promised. "But you know how the overhead eats me alive. And magic baskets have gone up fantastically since the drought took the best reeds—"

"I know, I know," the nephew-snake, Mirza, replied, then bowed low to Bronwyn, making a wrist-twisting, finger-waving motion with his right hand from forehead to chest to waist as he bowed. "Great Lady, the firm of Mukbar, Mashkent, and Mirza Magicks greets you in the name of the Profit and with great enthusiasm. We have long awaited your coming."

* * *

Prince Loeffrig soaked in his bath and entertained third thoughts to go with the second thoughts he had had for some time now about Droughtsea's plan for the palace coup. Using monsters seemed so repulsive. Old Fwin didn't really deserve that, even if he had gone a bit soft since his marriage.

"But how else can Your Highness hope to achieve your destiny?" the Duke had argued. "The army is his, and always has been. Nothing less than presenting your assumption of the throne to them as a fait accompli will save you from being deposed before you've had a chance to mend the mess your brother has made of this realm."

The man was right, of course. Even in this idiocy about freeing slaves, the army would support Loefwin, who had commanded it in its conquest of the Six. Everyone remembered the conquest. What no one remembered was the part Loefrig and Loefric, poor Loefric, had played, which was the greater, the more important part. While His Current Majesty had been living it up in the rape and pillage department, Loefrig had been learning the administration of the country from their father, whose health had been slipping even then. And Fric, poor Fric, had already sacrificed himself, had already played the greatest part of all in the coming of the new social order, and had vanished into self-imposed exile.

But Loefwin, when he came home with the bride Loefrig had been too busy being the real power

behind the throne to acquire, and Fric was past caring about, forgot *their* part in his victories, forgot *them* entirely. He was intent only on making over the seven nations into one that would run *his* way.

So maybe monsters weren't too extreme. Still, Loeffrig wished they didn't have to enter the palace through his bath. Despite the Duke's promise that there wouldn't be many, Loeffrig didn't want *any* monsters or hidebehinds either, for that matter, crawling into the castle through his bath. But it couldn't be helped. Loefwin had insisted the castle be built without a cellar or dungeon, and the doors couldn't be opened without at once alerting the guards, who would take Loefwin's side. At least the guards could not obtain reinforcements—the Tape, Droughtsea's Bintnarangian pet who had so brightened Daisy's days and lent an air of sanctity and efficiency to what government Loefwin managed to do, would see to the castle's outer security. It was not really that bad a plan.

And there was a brighter side to the entire affair, besides being crowned Emperor and seeing Daisy crowned Empress. Droughtsea had promised that while no harm would come to Daisy's mother and sister, they would be taken by the monsters far, far away, where Loeffrig would never have to listen to Belburga's frog jokes again. And surely, once he was Emperor, he could have the Duke build him a new bath. Smiling a faintly green smile at the thought, he rang for a slave to dry and oil him.

"I am much too well-bred to intrude in the affairs of others, ordinarily," Anastasia assured them. "But in this case, with Docho the mercenary and the Anarchy of Miragenia both occurring within such close proximity to charges of mine, I feel I must share my own experiences of that man and that country with you."

Carole was not reluctant to hear the swan's story. It couldn't possibly be any worse than the rest of the day. "Go ahead," she said. "Tell us how you got your curse. Maybe I'll get one myself. The Mother knows they seem to be fashionable these days."

"It is not, strictly speaking, a curse," the swan informed her with great dignity. "It is more accurately a hereditary protective spell. You see, the women in my family have always been the *most* beautiful, *most* desirable women in any realm anywhere. For that reason, Kings of the Nonarable Lands have always chosen their Queens from among my mother's people. With such great beauty, we are of course the objects of the lusts and dishonorable intentions of many men.

"My great-great-great-great grandmother, Athractisha by name, was no less lovely than the rest of us, and very wise and learned, and also rather impatient with the foibles of men. They were always asking her if they didn't know her from somewhere, which of course, they did, since she was queen at the time.

"Since the King was often away on business, and the Queen found her admirers sometimes alarmingly aggressive when her husband was gone, she devised a potion which could transform her into a swan. As a swan she would not only not be bothered by the lecherous, but could also escape them at will.

"It came to pass that the King was away at battle for her sake—one of the most ardent barons had gotten out of hand and His Majesty was undertaking the correction of the man's manners, forcibly. The Queen awaited, pregnant with anticipation for her lord's safe return and also pregnant with child.

"But the unruly baron was a treacherous fellow, and instead of staying with his armies in the field, he divided his forces, leaving half to hold the King at bay and half to besiege the castle."

"Clever fellow," Jack said, rubbing his hands together and leaning forward with shining eyes.

"A cad," Anastasia said, tossing her head disdainfully. "He threatened to set flame to the village beyond the castle walls and murder the peasants unless my poor relative would deliver herself into his wicked clutches. It happened that the kingdom was very short on peasants that year, what with previous wars and a famine and several bad bouts with a fatal influenza. Besides, the Queen was far too kind to allow her subjects to suffer.

But she was also far too fastidious to allow herself to be ravished by her overzealous suitor—and there was the child to think of too. So she decided to try out her potion. She turned herself into a swan and flew from the top of the keep to her husband's side.

"Unfortunately, the enemy archers took it upon themselves to use her for target practice and she sustained mortal wounds which caused her to deliver her daughter prematurely and die—beautifully, of course—at her lord's feet. As she breathed her last, she regained the form of the lovely lady she had been and he recognized her and in his grief won the battle and went home and slew his enemy and had all the archers in both armies put to death. The ability of our army to raise bowmen has suffered

them, which mostly centered on the hunting party the Imperial Game Wardens had arranged for the Emperor the next morning.

Jack was almost relieved to be able to return to his room, although he didn't feel like sleeping. If only there was something he could do besides wait. If only there was even something enticing to snack upon while waiting.

Of course, there was one thing a gypsy could always do inside the house of wealthy people, which was to find some way to avail himself of some of their wealth.

Since Duke Docho had lied to him about the location of the treasure room, Jack decided now would be a good time to find where it *was* located. Also, he would investigate other places in the castle where he knew riches were to be found. All of those golden plates from which Loefwin's court ate its ghastly food would bring a nice price in Argonia. If he could sneak into the room of the nobles who had stumbled drunkenly to bed, he might be able to relieve them of some of their gem-studded clothing as well, although he thought he should not actually take anything tonight. No, that would not do, for where would he hide his loot? He had no idea how long he and Carole would be compelled to wait in this gloomy place for the return of Bronwyn. But a man could learn things while he was waiting.

When curfew had blown and the normal noise of the castle stilled, Jack stepped into the corridor. From each side of the long hall, the flames of torches saluted each other, their shadows standing guard behind them. What were these Frostingdungians, anyway? Babies who were afraid of the dark and had to have lights burning in the halls all night? Well, why not? With its beasts visible and invisible, Frostingdung was an excellent place to encourage such fears. Certainly the lights would make it easier for visiting gypsies to scout around, though they would make hiding difficult, if he had need to hide. He was not such a fool as to imagine the people within the castle were all or even mostly friendly towards him and his friends. Not at all. As a matter of fact—he ducked quickly back inside the room and picked up Bronwyn's shield before ducking out again—the buckler would be a reassuring item to have at hand. Surely it would protect him as it did Bronwyn, and even if it did not, it would make an excellent platter should he be able to pilfer a half-edible snack while auditing the kitchen.

He walked unmolested down the corridor, a vague sense of unease, of wrongness, causing him to keep the shield firmly in front of him. Perhaps the novelty of doing his reconnaissance in the full light of the torches accounted for his nervousness, but at any rate, he thought he would first make for the kitchen, and then if anyone should surprise him, he would have a good excuse to be abroad.

The kitchen was beyond the great hall, in back of it. Unlike the corridors, the great hall was lit with only three torches and one candle in its death throes. But the light was sufficient for Jack to see that he was to be foiled before he started. The place was inhabited.

Carole woke all at once, fully alert and listening. Her chest was tight with alarm and she felt as if her hair stood straight up, like antennae on some bug or the whiskers on a cat, quivering to pick up a hint of the danger that had awakened her.

For it was danger, she was sure of that. She'd heard a smothered scream in her sleep, and had dreamed it was a fox. But when her eyes flew open and she lay tense and waiting upon her bed, no trace of the scream lingered in her mind or in the air. She tried to will herself to relax.

But she felt too tightly tuned, as if she'd snap apart if she just lay there absorbing the tension. She jumped out of bed, hugging herself and dancing on the cold stone floor a little as she fumbled for her tunic. That was when she heard the second sound, a soft scraping, a faint susurrantion.

She ran to the door and pulled it open and looked down the corridor. A wisp of something rounded the corner at the end of the brightly lit hall, several doors down from her room. The wisp disappeared in the direction of Anastasia's fountain. The other turn led to the great hall, and now she definitely heard noises from there too. She didn't really want to investigate, but she didn't want to be murdered in her bed either. She thought she'd better wake Jack. That way at least there'd be two of them to get into trouble. It felt funny out here, weird. Maybe weird feelings weren't supposed to bother witches, but she was still a girl. And besides, anybody would be scared. Even Dad. Even *Mama*.

So she set her shoulders and walked in the direction of Jack's room, which was straight ahead and to the left. She thought she'd much rather have Bronwyn along, with her sword and shield and big, sheltering lump of a body, but Jack would have to do.

She took two more steps. They didn't take her as far as she expected. In fact, she wasn't moving at all. It was as if someone had grabbed the tail of her gown and was pulling her back. She took two more

steps and stayed in the same place. I must be dreaming, she thought. All right then, I'll dream my way back to bed. Effortlessly, she turned and reentered her room, which was, after the brightness in the hall, suddenly alive with darkness. Her bed was tucked impossibly far back in the shadows, and seemed to be waiting for her, a baited trap. Whatever was in the halls was no dream, she was sure now. Law against magic or no law against magic, that hallway was under a spell.

She opened the door again and stepped out, this time trying to go the other way. Ten paces without leaving the threshold of her room annoyed and frustrated her sufficiently to cause her to jump around and try to run in the direction of Jack's room again. No luck. She felt like screaming, but the scream stuck in her throat and she swore softly instead, using a wicked blasphemy for which Mama would have washed her mouth out.

She stood shivering, not entirely with cold, and tried to think what to do. She hated being herded back to that bed, to the Mother only knew what slimy, creepy, reaching things that might be waiting to kill her in terrible ways like gouging out her eyes and dismembering her or—stop that, she told herself. You're just making it worse. But repulsive creatures wreaking painful and messy mutilations on her helpless body kept flashing before her eyes and she could not talk herself into going back to that room and getting into that shadow-shrouded bed. But on the other hand, one could hardly stay here all night. She tried to cry out again, not a curse or a scream, just a rather strangled call. "Jack? Jack? Ca—can you hear me?" There was no answer.

Vaguely she remembered Daisy telling Rusty when the four of them had first arrived that they would have the wing pretty much to themselves, since only two other guests would be staying there. Rusty's room was between Carole's and Jack's. Odd that Rusty hadn't heard the commotion and come out to investigate herself. Carole hadn't especially wanted to awaken her, since grownups tended to pooh-pooh the kind of feelings Carole had now, but recalling the toothy look on Rusty's face as she'd stared down into the hole full of hidebehinds, Carole decided that for an adult, the lady might not make a bad ally after all. But calling Rusty's name produced no better results than calling Jack's.

Well, maybe her calling had fooled whatever was restraining her into thinking she'd given up. She charged towards Jack's room again, and again swore roundly as she stayed within the frame of her own door.

The swearing felt so good she repeated it, nothing terribly blasphemous this time. "Damn, damn, double damn, triple damn. Damn!" It formed a sort of syncopated rhythm, and she repeated it several times, then dropped the words and hummed it. It had a galloping sound to it. She kept humming and tried once more to get past her own door, skipping to the sound as if she were playing horse, pretending to gallop. Still in the doorway. Damn, again! Surely her magic was as strong as this dumb spell. If she could dance a sea serpent and a full-rigged ship around on the sea, she ought to be able to dance her way past a piddling illegal spell. But she tried again with no better results and stopped, catching her breath and blowing out of her nose like the horse she was imitating. Once more, she thought, and I'll give up. I'll go back and get murdered, I guess.

She closed her eyes this time, and hummed her oath, and galloped forward, humming. Something rustled again, down the hall, and she thought she heard a squawk. Her eyes flew open. Nothing moved at the distant end of the hallway, but the end was about a forearm's length less distant than it had been before.

"Eh? You, is it? Does your mother know you're out, lad?" Gilles Kilgilles roused himself to ask. He was leaning heavily on one elbow planted in a puddle of wine on the table. His right cheek dripped transparent pink where it had lain in the puddle during the nap Jack had just interrupted. His Lordship appeared as well-lubricated as he had on the previous night.

"I very much doubt that she does, great lord, since she is many leagues across the sea. But I can assure you she would approve."

"Would she? Oh, well then. Glad to hear that." His elbow slid a fraction further across the table and he sat up straighter, shaking his head and wiping the wine from his cheek.

"Why are you here so late, Your Lordship?"

"Midnight snack," the man answered, righting his overturned cup, and raising it to his lips. Withdrawing it he stared at it in distaste before turning it upside down again. "Damn poor wine these days," he said. "Worse than the other food. Doesn't last at all."

From the door by which Jack had entered they heard a faint scuffling.

"Big rats for such a new castle," he said conversationally, sliding cautiously onto the bench beside the crazy lord.

"Very big indeed," Kilgilles said with a wryness that was absolutely sane. "Man-size, I'd say."

"You suspect evil doings of other men even here in the Emperor's court?" Jack asked with his most boyish innocence. Kilgilles nodded. "But you are an important nobleman. If you suspect evil doings, why do you not investigate?"

Milord Kilgilles smiled. "If a man investigated every evil doing in this country, he wouldn't have time to eat— which wouldn't be a great loss nowadays—sleep, or drink."

"Speaking of eating," Jack said, "do you know by any chance where the fruit is stored?" But before the man could answer, a soft shush-shush noise whispered up the hallway, and he felt the strangest urge to leap to his feet and imitate the sound. But it stopped. "Did you hear that?" he asked.

Kilgilles deliberately turned his head and stared the opposite way. "Hear what?"

The noise started again, six beats worth. "That," Jack whispered, clutching Bronwyn's shield to him.

"Boy, I hear nothing and neither do you. I am here to win Loefwin's ear and help him turn this magic-forsaken Empire into a place at least habitable for all of us. I can't risk it by getting involved in palace intrigues or with things that go bump in the night."

"But, Great Lord, if these noises are unlawful, is it not correct for you to order them to desist in the Emperor's name?" He held out the shield, helpfully. "I have here the spell-breaking shield of Princess Bronwyn. If you hold it before us, no unlawful witch spells can get us, I think."

"You have an overabundance of imagination, boy. It is as foolish to fear magic spells in the palace of the Emperor of Greater Frostingdung as it is to fear attacks from sea serpents in trees."

The shush-shushing shush-shushed closer. The thud of Jack's heart in his ears measured its approach, and far off he heard a groan and a faint squawk.

Then, to his amazement, Gilles jumped to his feet and cried in a voice older and deeper than his own, "Coward! I should disown you!"

Kilgilles sat back down again and sighed, in his own voice. "Oh, how I wish you would," then jumped back up again and commanded with a firmness that left no room for dispute, "You have been offered a thing of power as an ally. Seek out the disturbance, or I vow on your mother's head, you will never sleep or eat after sundown again."

The sternness went out of the voice, the steel out of the body, and Kilgilles dipped his head in Jack's direction and held out his hand to accept the shield. "It seems I am at your service."

"Whatever you say, Crazy Lord," Jack said, his eyes rolling a little, in spite of himself.

They crept cautiously down the hall toward the juncture of the corridors leading to the guest wing and the entrance chamber containing the fountain. Gilles seemed brave enough once you got him going. He strode boldly ahead, the shield before him, and Jack held on to the tail of his tunic so as not to be out of range of the shield's protection.

They stopped and surveyed all three halls. The darkest area was behind them, Jack noted with relief. He was even more relieved to hear Kilgilles burst into unmaniacal laughter, and as the young lord pointed down the hall toward the guest chambers, Jack peered around the man's middle to see what amused him.

"What's so funny?" Carole demanded. She looked like a demon, her brown eyes wide and staring, her hair coming out of its braids and her borrowed nightdress tangling around her legs. Her forehead gleamed with perspiration and she was panting, as if she'd run a great distance, but she made no attempt to come closer to them.

"Nothing, my lady. It is only that we are so pleased to see you instead of—" He started towards her, and Jack bravely stepped out from behind him and stopped, unable to move any further.

"Hey!" he cried.

"I was just going to warn you not to come here," Carole said. "Now we'll all be caught. There's a spell on this hall. I was trying to dance my way out of it."

"Nonsense," Gilles said, still striding forward. "Here, take my hand. You're just frightened."

"Take my hand too, Great Lord," Jack said, "And we can all leave. Do you not see? There is a spell upon this hall, as Carole says. But Princess Bronwyn's shield protects you."

"Eh?" He looked at both immobile children and asked suspiciously, "This isn't a game you two are playing with me, is it?"

"Give me the shield and see for yourself," Carole suggested.

He handed it to her, and walked in place for a moment before he reached for the shield again. "Curious. Well, I suppose if we're to make any progress, we'll have to walk with the shield in front, touching each other, like the chap with the goose and all the children trailing behind that Teeny Fittroon used to tell me about. But you know, I still don't understand how a spell could get in here. There are iron bands all around and—"

This time the noise was not muffled. Anastasia squawked and trumpeted, and the terrified pounding of her wings rushed at them from the entrance hall, along with her human voice crying, "Help! I am being assassinated!"

They grabbed onto each other awkwardly, and charged forward in ragged unison. Their close formation made them vulnerable, despite the shield, a disadvantage that didn't occur to them until Anastasia squawked another warning.

She was perched atop the fountain, her wings fanning furiously. Bristling, snake-armed creatures surrounded the pool and the water boiled with invisibles. "Jack! Carole! Run, my friends! They have taken Lady Rusty and I am as good as slain! Save yourselves! The door! The door!" Abruptly, invisible forms obscured hers.

Jack, attempting to follow her advice, forgot the spell of the guest hallway and flung himself around. No magic stood between him and freedom, just the iron-bolted door. He grappled with the lock and heard Carole scream and Gilles swear and with the eyes any gypsy worthy of being pursued by the law carries in the back of his head, he saw the monsters turn from Anastasia to attack her friends. The lock gave and he heaved, and fell sprawling into the snow. Before he could scramble to his feet, something like a bear with pincers for paws and a bad case of mange and something else like a boar with scales and a lion's mane fell upon him.

"Welcome to the Anarchy of Miragenia," the former snake said with a self-congratulatory smirk at having fooled her. As a man, he was tall and dark and had a hawk's nose and a rabbit's eyes, he had made a far handsomer snake.

"Well, that's more like it," Bronwyn said. "Do you give all your visitors such a pretty escort?"

"Your pardon, great lady, may you live forever," the man with the basket said. "But may I speak freely?"

"I should say not!" Bronwyn replied. But the man was well aware of her curse, as he ought to be, since he was, she was now certain, one of the people responsible for it.

"Thank you. Know then, that even were it not for your noble birth, lofty stature and astounding beauty, we should have sent an escort to guide you to us. For if we have provided you with a curse, you have likewise provided us with one."

"Me?" Bronwyn asked, very pleased with the idea of her cursing someone else. "Well, yes, actually, I do have these secret powers—"

The serpentine Mirza bowed again, "What my uncle means to say, great lady, is that you curse us in that you are obviously a dissatisfied customer—"

His uncle directed a cuff in the general direction of the lower wrappings of the nephew's head bandage. "Fool! It is not for you to interpret to our guest what I say. Have you such a short memory that you fail to recall that it is not she who is the customer? She is rather—" He paused, pulling his stringy beard while puzzling over how to express himself. Then, fanning his hands outward in a gesture that requested acceptance of the inevitable realities, he said, "You are, dear lady, in a manner of speaking, returned faulty merchandise. We at Mukbar, Mashkent and Mirza Magicks are proud of our long and illustrious reputation, and the quality of our work is guaranteed. That is how we have managed to maintain our success for fifteen centuries. We should have been devastated had you chosen to go to one of the gouging purveyors of shoddy goods who unfortunately are able to exist in this, our noble Anarchy, as well as honest merchants like ourselves. We wished to help you personally with your problem and thereby back up our product. That is why Mirza donned his alternate guise and provided you with an escort who could charm and amuse you, while steering you safely past those dishonest sellers of items of no worth."

"Do you understand now, great lady?" Mirza asked.

"Perfectly," Bronwyn said. "I suppose now you will send me back for retooling or whatever the proper procedure is for dealing with faulty merchandise? Perhaps you can replace me with a

four platters by herself and then reclined on the cushions, staring at the sky, while two of the servant girls fanned her. "This is a miserable hovel, isn't it?" she asked the djinn servant. "I don't know how you stand it—what's that?" she pointed overhead as a creature flew gracefully across the open sky above the courtyard.

"What does it look like, high-born?" the servant said.

"I'm sure I couldn't say," she said haughtily. It was obviously the most beautiful stallion in the world, as golden as the sun and borne aloft on a pair of golden feathered wings each a little longer than the horse's body.

"I mean no offense, high-born, but the creature is in its present form a flying horse, one of a race peculiar to our blessed Anarchy, and a source of great wonder and Profit to many of our citizens, my master included. However, if you wish it to be some other animal, I can easily arrange that it—"

"Don't bother," Bronwyn said quickly.

"But you must let me do something to amuse you—it is my master's bidding that you be amused. Perhaps the pool?"

"I don't need a bath," Bronwyn said. She definitely did and looked longingly at the bright water, hoping he'd insist. If ten of those girls loaned her an extra costume each, she might manage to make an acceptable change of apparel out of the various bits.

"You misunderstand me, on highly valued one. The pool has the power to show to you in living color and two-dimensional sound any person in any time you wish to observe them. In this pool did my masters watch your approach. This great marvel can take place before your very eyes for a very small sum, and is a bargain at twice the price."

She wanted to say she hardly thought she could afford the marvel if it were free, but her curse wouldn't permit her to be so honest, which was just as well. She looked longingly into the pool. It *would* be marvelous to know how her father was faring at war. He'd probably already sent the Ablemarlonians home to lick their wounds, but she would like to see the final battle, even if she couldn't actually participate and show him what a dauntless warrior she was. If the war was already won, there'd be no need to recruit the Frostingdungians as allies, either, which suited Bronwyn fine. She didn't trust any of them.

But her wistful reflections had already activated the pool's magic, and as the mirrored surface ruffled and calmed an image began to form.

She shot a guilty glance at the servant, but he was nodding and smiling in a benevolent way and waved a ripple-fingered wave at the pool. "Indulge yourself, dear lady. For you, my master has made a special deal, an unprecedented introductory offer to the wares of his firm. Your credit is excellent."

She didn't need further encouragement. From the clamor arising from the pool and the flashes of light shooting across its surface, she knew before she looked that the war wasn't over yet. How nice that she could hear what was happening as well as see it! No doubt someone would soon say, "If only we had the Princess Bronwyn here, the day would be won!" But neither her father nor anyone in what was left of his army was discussing her. They weren't even fighting.

Instead, they seemed to have decided to go swimming in a thunderstorm. Her father, eyes red, face streaming with water, hair and beard plastered against his skull, clung to a timber bobbing madly in a churning sea. His normal ruddiness had drained away and his face was the yellow-white of a fish's belly. His chest heaved as he twisted and kicked, trying to maneuver his bit of wood around to his starboard side where a general Bronwyn recognized was unsuccessfully battling the waves. All around him other men on makeshift rafts tried to save themselves and drowning comrades. Her father stopped kicking long enough to throw back his head and scream at the sky, and at first she thought he'd been grabbed by something, but when he kept kicking she decided he was shouting orders. She couldn't hear him for the claps of thunder that kept exploding across the pool, rupturing the images momentarily with each clap.

After each clap a burst of lightning flashed, always from the same direction, and momentarily lit up the black seas and boiling clouds. During one such flash she saw *Queenston's Pride*, a magnificent new battleship her mother had christened just before it sailed. The lightning illuminated the ship in all its splendor for an instant, during which Bronwyn wondered why it hadn't taken its sails down in the face of such a storm. Then the bolt connected with the top of the mainmast, turning the mainsail into a sail of fire. In seconds, the ship was diving for the bottom of the sea.

Bronwyn was about ready to dive into the pool to help when three flares in the opposite direction

to wish for, the horses skimming the extreme south end of the courtyard suddenly began rearing and stampeded back the way they came.

"Dolts! Dunderheads!" a familiar voice said. "Do not think to impede *me*! After what I have been through today, you are no more than overgrown horseflies!"

Anastasia batted at the horses with her wings as if they were exactly what she said, then circled the courtyard like a hawk. Bronwyn jumped up and began waving wildly. The bird spotted her and exclaimed. "Bronwyn! Whatever are you doing down there, my dear? I have been flying since last evening looking for you all across this dreary stretch of sand. You are simply the only one who has any sense at all and you must come back immediately and help me rescue the others."

The swan swooped down, making a perfect landing in the pool. Mashkent's servants discreetly vanished.

Bronwyn couldn't think how to tell the swan about the pool or the battle or to let her know that they needed to go home right away, even if it meant keeping the curse.

Anastasia wouldn't have heard what she was saying anyway. She was trumpeting insistently before she hit the ground. "Come now, we must fly to the aid of our comrades immediately. Time is of the essence! Why, I myself barely escaped with my life from an entire army of monsters, and then only because that brave little gypsy lad opened the door and endangered himself to distract my persecutors from me."

"But—"

"But me no buts, my dear child. Have I not said the situation is grave? Lady Rusty was the first to be seized, and now Carole, Jack and that handsome young madman have joined them. All have been spirited away and I fear greatly for their safety. Naturally I came to you," the swan said, fixing Bronwyn with a beady and disapproving stare. "I flew through snow and braved more monsters to reach this place where I was first bound in servitude and hoped never to see again to reach you, Bronwyn. I really think you might show more interest and enthusiasm."

The djinn servant popped out from behind an arch and bowed three times to Bronwyn again. "Is this beast annoying you, high born? Shall I have it cooked?"

"Try it," Anastasia hissed. "Bronwyn, you have fallen under the influence of cheats, liars, and profit-mongers. I urge you to fly with me now. If you will not, then I must return alone, to try to seek the help of the Emperor, though it means exposing myself as an enchanted creature."

Bronwyn looked longingly again at the horses, then sighed deeply, pulled on the seven-league boots, which had been newly polished by one of the servant girls, and started for the door. It was no good trying to go back home without the others, anyway, even if it weren't her duty as a representative of their government to protect them, which it was. While she tried to think of brave things to say about how she would rush off single-handed to rescue her father and save Argonia, she knew with a sudden sick certainty that there was nothing she could do alone and unaided that would be of any importance.

She was so distracted that she forgot the special properties of seven-league boots. She never saw the door at all, but stepped over the courtyard and six and a half leagues of desert before Anastasia could leave the ground. "Wait!" the swan cried, almost in unison with Mashkent and Mirza, who dangled a charm between them.

But all the merchants saw was her shadow and all they felt was the wind of her passing, and that of the great black bird in her wake. Mirza wrung his hands. "She's gone!"

The djinn wafted through the shop and out into the street, bowing the required number of bows in front of Mashkent, who fumed at him. "Fool! Bad buy! You were charged with her entertainment and you've allowed her to vanish, still an unsatisfied and uncommitted customer! Did I not say she was special?" But as the older man lifted his hand to strike the djinn on his bald black head, the servant drifted back, shaking a be-ringed finger at his employer.

"A cuff will cost you extra, oh master." Mashkent thriftily withdrew his hand, and the djinn continued, grinning through his strong white teeth, "I report the successful completion of my commission, master. I know what it is the illustrious lady desires and thereby that with which she can be purchased," And as he explained, Mashkent's disgruntlement was transformed to joy.

"Hasten, oh nephew," he said to Mirza when the djinn had revealed his knowledge and received a fat bonus in return. "We have but to make a few preparations to complete this transaction Profitably!"

Anastasia flapped furiously toward Bronwyn while the Princess dug her magic toes in the sand and

waited. "I beg your pardon," Bronwyn said through teeth she was studiously not grinding with impatience. "Perhaps my impression that we are in a hurry was mistaken."

"We *are* in a hurry, Bronwyn dear, but you can hardly expect me to fly seven leagues in the length of time it takes you to take one step. I fear you shall have to go on without me, and even then we may not be in time. I overheard the Mercenary giving instructions to his creatures relative to some wickedness he has planned for tonight. Flying the very shortest possible way, it still took me most of the night and half the day to reach you."

Bronwyn shrugged, only half listening. "It didn't take me nearly that long."

"Did it not?" the swan asked, then, with a flash of inspiration. "I mean to say, did it? How did you go? Oh, never mind. You are unable to explain, I realize. However, since my flight is so much slower than your boots, and it took me the same length of time to arrive at Miragenia as it took you, I must conclude that we did not pursue the same route. Perhaps if you could carry me along with you I could direct you—"

The image of herself carrying a swan who was half as large as she jolted Bronwyn out of her preoccupied state. "No problem," she said drily. "You can perch on my finger like a budgie."

"Yes, I see your point. Well, I need not actually ride upon you, just so I am attached to your person so the magic of the boots will work on me as well as you. Much as I loathe being harnessed to anyone again, perhaps we can make a lead for you out of your bodice lacings."

With fingers fumbling in haste, Bronwyn untied the leather lacing that held her gown close to her chest and tied one end around her wrist and the other around Anastasia's neck, allowing her gown to flow loosely around her calves. Then with a high heart she stepped forward, and heard a gagging behind, and quickly backstepped to retrieve a strangling Anastasia.

"Perhaps around my legs as well as my neck," the swan suggested when she had regained her breath. But even at this, Anastasia lagged so far behind that the lacing cut cruelly.

"I can tell already we're saving time," Bronwyn growled.

"I know," Anastasia said. "And the deaths of our dear friends will be on our heads. Wait! Our heads! Oh, Bronwyn, that is the answer. Bronwyn, stand still a moment."

And before Bronwyn could ask a confusing question or try to move, Anastasia had flown up and anchored her webbed feet in Bronwyn's hair.

"Ouch!" the Princess cried, bracing her neck. "You're light as a feather."

"Wait. Bear up," the swan said, and began to fan her wings in a way that relieved both the pressure and the heat of the day. "Now then, if you turn a bit to your right, I think you'll find there is a short cut across the desert."

Bronwyn set off again, and this time both she and the swan found their traveling arrangements bearable. Anastasia's wings raised such a wind that Bronwyn found she was propelled forward at double time, like a ship under sail.

For a time after Droughtsea left, while the memory of torchlight in Carole's eyes dimmed and the noise of Loeffrig's specious bathtub scraping back into place faded to be replaced by the thump of her own heart in her ears, no one said or did anything. She felt only the chill of the icy sweat from the cavern wall seeping into the back of her tunic, and heard little but an occasional cough, the subdued muttering growls of the monsters, the spring whispering past, and the conspiratorial drip on one side of the cavern answered by a stealthy drip-drop on the other side. Then, abruptly, a long exasperated sigh.

"Well, *really*," Mistress Raspberry said in a voice so expressive that Carole could almost see her rolling her eyes. "What an absolute unmitigated ass that man is!"

"I don't know about that," Kilgilles' voice said. "Perhaps he's right. Perhaps this coup of his will work out for the best. Things could be worse, after all. At least he seems to mean us no harm."

"Do be serious. You surely can't propose that we concur with his idiotic plans and act as pawns for him in his overthrow of the current government?"

"It seems to me matters have been taken out of our hands, which is just as well. I don't see what you're making such a fuss about. I confess I'm rather disappointed in your naive clinging to the status quo, particularly when it isn't *your* status quo. I had thought you a more logical, intelligent woman than that. This isn't Argonia after all and I don't see what possible difference who sits on the Frostingdungian throne can make to you."

"It can make considerable difference since, as you would know had you been listening with the

intelligence you question in me, Droughtsea plans to keep us in Frostingdung to aid him. Quite aside from that, there's the alliance to consider. Argonia needs help—"

"And is just as likely to get it from Droughtsea as from Loefwin. Droughtsea is a professional soldier. He enjoys war and its profits. If your King can guarantee him these, your alliance should be in no jeopardy. If you think Loefwin will aid you simply out of the goodness of his heart, think again. My father, Baron Kilgilles—" Here he paused and his voice roughened and deepened to interrupt him. "Your mother's rapist, puppy. Kilgilles was your mother's rapist. *I am your father.*"

The voice changed back, not bothering to reply to its counterpart. "My father served Loefwin from before the time I was born until he died, but I've never been unaware of Loefwin's cruelty, of his lack of foresight in destroying what he sought to conquer, in obliterating what he couldn't control, or of his brutal oppression of the native peoples of the six conquered nations. Droughtsea has been his man until now, and I for one am content to allow that the less than valorous deeds the fellow has committed have been for Loefwin's sake, and not of his own volition. The man is intelligent, professional, and knows the value of a sound economy. Not particularly likable, but one needn't like one's ruler to serve him. And at least Droughtsea admits the existence of and is willing to make use of magic to rehabilitate the country." His voice had risen gradually as he became more and more excited by his own argument. As his volume increased, so did the growls and snarls beyond him.

"Shh," Mistress Raspberry said. "You're upsetting the monsters." When both Gilles and the monsters had subsided, she continued in a quiet voice harder to hear than a whisper.

"Has it occurred to you that he may conclude that the use of magic, both his and ours, is legitimate in his hands but no one else's? Men of power do tend to be snobbish in that regard. At least Loefwin's rules applied across the board, though the man you represent as his professional and trusted servant has chosen to disobey those rules." Carole heard the beginnings of a protest from Kilgilles but Mistress Raspberry cut smoothly through. "Not that I find your cynicism less than understandable in view of your circumstances. I simply do not share it. I have reasons of my own to believe that Loefwin has undergone a sincere reformation of personality and truly means to improve the conditions in this country. You see, I happen to know why he has, as several of your countrymen have so astutely put it, 'softened' since his return from Argonia. I was all but on the scene of the event which changed him."

"Truly? Madam, you amaze me." Kilgilles obviously was trying to sound unamazed, but wasn't quite succeeding.

"I'd have spoken before now but the event is connected with something of a state secret. But I suppose that the secret really only concerns what came later—not the bit about Loefwin—so perhaps I won't be betraying a trust by mentioning this. When Loefwin was gravely wounded in a battle not far from my girlhood home, he was healed by a treatment of unicorn-blessed water, which, it seems, has the property—or was found to have on other subjects treated rather later—I'm traveling dangerously near to what I mustn't tell—of curing shall we say spiritual wounds and maladies as it cures physical ones."

Carole, who had been listening with intense personal interest, piped up, "That's true. My mother told me— she has a unicorn friend she sees sometimes. He watches over our river, or has one of his family do it. He's—well, if Loefwin was cured by Moonshine, I say he's all right and I wish if you grown-ups are going to run things you'd think of a way to spring us from this hole so we can help him."

"A plan," Jack added, his voice trembling with cold, "which is safe for defenseless children and will guarantee success."

"You don't want much, do you?" Mistress Raspberry asked. She sounded amused, and Carole thought that next she was going to say something like 'but I happen to have just such a plan.' Instead she said, "I'm afraid I'll have to disappoint you. I've never been kept anywhere against my will before. I was rather relying on your experience in this instance, and on yours, Carole. I may have some small contribution, but right now I'm tired, both of arguing and from lack of sleep. Since we are in a currently impossible situation, my only suggestion is that we wait until our host deprives us of at least a portion of our opposition, and until then, that we replenish our strength with slumber."

She proceeded to demonstrate by refusing to say another word. Her plan was, if not immediately helpful, at least easy to follow, and for an undeterminable number of hours Carole followed it, despite the noises of the monsters, which would have given her nightmares except that she was *too* tired to dream.

again. If worst came to worst, she'd take it, of course, but for now, she thought it best to trust the protective powers of the shield and the mobilizing powers of her own two feet and run like mad back up the slippery, slanting floor.

Though the space beneath the hole was empty when she arrived several bruises and a wild dash later, light still poured into the cavern from above. The ladder had been lowered again, and at the top of it hunkered a chunky form, greenish in the torchlight—Loefrig. He gave a triumphant croak when he saw her. "Aha! There you are, my gurik—girl. Where are the others?" But before she could answer he seemed to fling himself forward into the hole, hurtling past her into the stream.

Chapter X

Bronwyn missed the capital of Greater Frostingdung, stepping over it and back three times before she had the presence of mind to stumble backwards at an angle and take half a step and hop the other foot down with the first. This expedient threw her off balance and she landed rolling in the courtyard. Anastasia had disengaged herself from the Princess after the first miss and had flown the last seven leagues to the palace. Now she flapped above the Princess, hissing, "For mercy's sake, Your Highness, take off those blasted boots."

Bronwyn, only too glad to obey, sat tugging at them in the middle of the courtyard when something snagged on her foot and swore, then said in a voice very like Jack's, "Ah, my Princess, I knew you would return to save us!"

"I'll do no such thing!" she snapped, looking vainly around for him. She was already half wild with frustration and the overwhelming desire to rise and wield her sword where it most needed wielding, dispensing with this minor local dispute which had had the gall to involve her friends so she and they could move smartly along to the *real* war at home.

"The boots, boy—er—wherever you may be. Help your lady remove her seven-league boots or she will not be long for this country."

Bronwyn stuck out her feet, though she still saw neither Jack nor anyone else. She was startled, therefore, though not at all displeased when the boots were sucked from her feet as if by the wind.

"Excellent," Anastasia said. "I take it, young man, that you have some reasonable explanation for not showing yourself."

"It is my hidebehind disguise," Jack's voice said from the direction of Bronwyn's throbbing feet. "Mistress Raspberry made it. Is it not clever?"

But just then Carole stumbled out of the castle and ran toward them. "Bronwyn! You're back. The Mother be praised! I was trying to rouse someone in the palace to help us, but Droughtsea's put a sleeping spell on everybody, from the look of them. We'll have to lower the drawbridge ourselves."

"That's not important," Bronwyn told her, "Wait till you hear—"

A gargling scream rent the night. "Never mind. We have to hurry. Come on! Droughtsea and Loefrig have locked the Emperor and his men outside the palace and sicced monsters on them. We may be too late already."

Bronwyn rose, digging her fingertips into her ears and wiggling them to try to stop the popping caused by the up-and-down movement of the boots. When the background roaring in her ears ceased, she could hear more clearly the scuffle emanating from the battlements.

The few sword-bearing men-at-arms outlined in the night sky above the ramparts all had their backs to the courtyard, and though they seemed engrossed in whatever was taking place in or across the moat, they did not seem to be embroiled in warfare, or even particularly upset over anything. They rather looked as if they were enjoying themselves.

Assorted screams, cries, and bestial shrieks were suddenly interrupted by Emperor Loefwin's angry voice. "Dammit, what son of moat monster are you, anyway, Tape? I'm the Emperor! This is MY palace! You're supposed to be protecting *me*. Let me in now! I command it!"

The Tape responded with a high-pitched squeal. Bronwyn had no doubt it was citing some regulation contradictory to the Emperor's interests.

"The drawbridge, Carole!" Rusty's voice cried from the ramparts. "Lower the drawbridge! They're being slaughtered down there."

Carole tore the shield from her arm and tossed it to Bronwyn and ran, and Bronwyn, still trying to decide what was happening, scrambled to her feet and ran after her.

Rusty's voice had been heard by others as well, and several of the soldiers detached themselves from the wall and clattered down the stairs.

The pulley to hoist the drawbridge was beside the portcullis and Carole threw herself upon it, feeling in the darkness for the handholds by which it could be operated.

The door to the guard tower banged open and a half dozen men, their naked swords drawn, rushed into the courtyard. Bronwyn stood between them and her cousin.

"Your luck is ill this night, villains," she said. "For you have crossed Bronwyn the Bold. Prepare to die." And so saying she slashed—and felt a thrill and shock when her blade connected with another,

and yet another, as she fought the six of them back to the wall, her steel ringing on theirs.

However, the first time her sword bit into flesh, nearly severing a man's arm, she found she had to scream her battle cry to keep from getting sick, and also to keep from watching his blood spurt. She knew that if she gave in to that sort of morbid fascination, her own blood would very rapidly join his on the ground. She tried not to think that what she was dealing her foe could very well be dealt to her—and might have already been dealt to her father.

A man on her right lunged at her with a broken spear and tripped, nearly impaling himself. He was saved by one of his comrades, who also tripped and fell against him, knocking him aside. Bronwyn thought at first they were simply very clumsy enemies, but when they all started tripping and tumbling, and when their fellows clattering from the battlements to aid them started falling down the stairs and over each other, she knew her invisible allies had come to her assistance.

Carole was still struggling with the pulley, and Bronwyn leaped over the jumbled bodies of three guards. Pushing Carole aside, Bronwyn grasped the wheel and turned hard, and it gave at once under her weight. As Bronwyn looked up, the bridge crashed down in front of her, braining what appeared to be a two-headed bear that had been about to tear the face from one of Loefwin's game wardens.

Of the hunting party, only the Emperor had been mounted, and his horse now lay bleeding in the snow. Monsters and men alike staggered, still locked in combat, across the drawbridge, while the Tape snarled itself into ever higher and more indignant tangles. Bronwyn charged the cluster of beasts surrounding Loefwin and they broke apart to face her. She cut into them with less chagrin than she had felt attacking her human foe, and congratulated herself on becoming a hardened veteran so quickly. Then Loefwin beheaded two monsters with one swipe of his sword and she abruptly turned away and searched for opponents who weren't inclined to bleed so alarmingly.

Invisible ribbons threaded through the melee, confusing the efforts of both sides. Bronwyn ignored them to slash a wolf-faced, five-armed boar savaging a game warden. But no sooner had she slain the beast than the man it had been attacking vanished, all except his sword arm, which hacked ineffectively and seemingly independently. Rusty's disembodied voice cried, "Release him, fiend!" and something gave a windy scream before the man popped back into sight.

When the next monster Bronwyn tried to engage pranced four paces back, four forward, and chased its forked tail three times in succession, and the half-griffin to its right bowed and repeated its movements, she sensed Carole's fine choreography at work. Soon she too could hear the tune but she didn't find it inspiring to her own sore feet. Carole was evidently learning to discriminate between the musical tastes of people and those of monsters, though some of the Emperor's goblin-esque vassals twinkled their toes as they dashed about dispatching foes.

Bronwyn almost wished her cousin had not been so readily able to bring the situation under control, but glory must be given over to expedience under the circumstances. Sometimes even a natural-born leader had to control her lust for battle when the good of the common cause was at stake. Therefore, she didn't begrudge Carole the full use of her awesome power to turn the tide of the battle with unsporting speed. Stepping over several bodies of various persuasions, she helped Loefwin, who had been driven to his knees, rise.

Loefwin slew a couple of monsters himself, and the misshapen beasts danced but also raked and snapped, and stank as if they'd already been dead several years. Under Carole's spell, the creatures were dancing themselves to exhaustion, and were so vulnerable to the harvesting blades of the King's men that Bronwyn almost began to feel sorry for them.

Carole stopped whistling for a moment, and two of the monsters, apparently either less sensitive to music or more terrified than the others, broke and ran, waddling and howling back across the bridge. The Tape's long thin head nipped up from the moat and gobbled one of them whole. It made an unsightly bulge in the moat monster's sleek form. The other galloped through the deserted streets between the blocky, whitewashed, iron-banded houses to the outer gate. No guards manned the outer wall that Bronwyn could see, and apparently the great doors had been left unbolted, for the creature flung itself against them and they gave, releasing it into the night.

"Perhaps," Loefwin said thoughtfully, pausing before he brought his iron blade across the bulky neck of a half-bull, "we should spare these things. They're useful for meat, after all. The men who allowed them entrance are another—"

A bat-winged horror swept down upon the Emperor, stabbing with its needle nose. The Emperor's trained reflexes saved him, and he rolled aside, whereupon the flier buried its nose in the monster's

neck.

Bronwyn wheeled, her shield knocking aside the nose of another just in time. She looked up. A black cloud of the fliers hung against the moon for a brief flash, dispersed, and rained agony on the exposed party beneath it, stinging man and monster alike. Bronwyn had to dodge and twist, contorting herself until she felt like a rag to keep the shield in front of her. Some of the men began bolting for the guard tower—others fell, scratching themselves so hard they drew bloody circles in the snow.

Carole switched tunes and shrilled a retreat as she dashed for the tower. The monsters, released from their previous dance, fled back across the drawbridge. Only the men remained and Bronwyn slung one of the fallen ones under each arm to lug them to safety. They scratched and writhed so pitifully that she found it impossible to carry them, so she punched each of them in the head. They straightened right out, and she delivered them and returned to the courtyard for others.

Loefwin also carried wounded from the field. The screaming, crying, moaning, and swearing were so loud that Bronwyn wondered whether the sleeping spell was sufficient to keep the denizens of the palace in their beds. And why hadn't the people in the village surrounding the castle sought to aid their Emperor? No doubt everyone knew when they were well off, and felt curiosity an unaffordable luxury.

The fliers reformed, blotting out the moon again, their spear-like stingers aimed at Loefwin and Bronwyn. Bronwyn shouted to the Emperor, who had his fist raised to knock out the victim he was trying to transport. At her shout, the Emperor looked up, and his passenger's elbow caught him under the chin, knocking him backwards into the snow.

The other bodies, which had been levitating of their own accord, dropped like rocks and Jack, Rusty, and Gilles Kilgilles appeared, racing for the fallen Loefwin. Before they could reach him, however, something flew over them so fast it blew their hair into their eyes, and the bandy-legged, green form of Loefrig hopped down beside his brother and began dragging him towards the tower.

The fliers stormed down upon them, one striking Gilles, another hitting the frog-man broadside, not neglecting to pierce him on the way. Bronwyn threw herself across Jack and Loefwin, her shield on top of them all, deflecting fliers as they charged. Gilles' cries and Loefrig's pitiful croakings made Bronwyn feel like crying too but she resisted. What sort of warrior cried in the middle of a battle? Her sort, she realized, as the tears flowed while she did her best to protect her remaining friends. She had no idea where Mistress Raspberry was, until she heard a flier scream and caught a glimpse of the lady crouched under an ornamental bench. Her pointed tongue daintily licked in a feather. But even if she changed herself into a flier, Rusty alone couldn't hope to defeat the entire flock.

The fliers regrouped for another attack, but this time when they dispersed, it was to fall leadenly to the ground, burning as they fell, till they lay like dead coals in the snow.

A clod of brown fell beside one of them, and Bronwyn looked up, wonderingly. The piece of sky they had formerly occupied was now filled with flying horses. In a thrice, these were herded to a landing in the courtyard by Mirza, Mashkent, and the black djinn with the gold earrings. Bronwyn disengaged herself from Jack and the Emperor so Loefwin could rise to greet his deliverers. Mirza and Mashkent dismounted and made their sweeping, ripple-fingered bows, not to Loefwin, but to her.

"About time you got here," she said, not ungratefully.

"We trust our arrival will be deemed Profitable to all," Mashkent replied.

Bronwyn felt oddly invigorated by the battle, perhaps another legacy from her warlike frost giant ancestors. She had been victorious in her first fray! With that behind her, almost anything seemed possible. Now she followed her father's teachings and did as he said any good warrior would do, ignoring her own compelling need to find out what the Miragenians and their flying horses were doing here and concentrating instead on evacuating the wounded from the field.

Those injured by the ordinary run of monsters or by weapons were cleaned and bandaged, while Gilles, Loefrig, and several others were mitted and restrained to keep them from flaying themselves and immersed in Loefrig's all-too-familiar bathtub for the night to soak in oil. Four men had been attacked by hidebehinds, and two of them were missing in action. One simply could no longer see his left arm, though the visible end didn't bleed and the juncture was smooth as glass and he could furthermore still feel the arm. The fourth had a see-throughish spot in his middle, and kept glancing glumly down at it. A change of shirt did a great deal to restore his spirits, the new shirt covering the transparent wound where the cloth of the old shirt had simply disappeared with the man's flesh and bone. Everyone reassured him that he was very lucky to be holding up as well as he was, considering.

The Miragenians had spread cushions and carpets around the fountain, along with trays of viands and sweetmeats and assorted nectars. Assuring Loefwin that the bill for this after-the-battle catering service would be absorbed by the firm's diplomatic relations department, Mashkent bowed to Bronwyn.

She was rather reluctantly having her feet salved and massaged by Carole, who had been enjoying herself, acting as infirmaress to the soldiers, but had decided, since she didn't want to miss what the exotic strangers had to say, that Bronwyn needed her ministrations more at the moment.

Mirza kept bowing unctuously to Loefwin as his uncle said smoothly to the company at large and to Loefwin and Bronwyn in particular, his glance bouncing back and forth between them, "Great Emperor, Illustrious Lady, please forgive our intrusion into your affairs. But when our esteemed guest left our company so precipitously, giving us no opportunity to complete the transaction we had begun, we were of course devastated. Upon questioning the servant who was placed at the Princess's disposal, we learned that the poor child had witnessed the destruction of her father's ships and the dispersion of his army into the sea at the hands of his enemies."

Carole gasped and Jack's eyes widened with alarm. He glanced at Bronwyn, who nodded sadly, but looked up sharply again when the merchant continued.

"Ah, yes," the merchant said, with hands and eyes cast helplessly ceilingward, "The Ablemarlonians unleashed their secret weapon—a renegade wizard formerly in the employ of one of our competitors, a powerful man, but without business sense. The indiscriminate changing of climactic conditions sows havoc and upsets the source of the power to the Profit of none. Under the circumstances, we naturally understand the Princess's untimely departure. Her filial devotion speaks so well for her, we could not but extend ourselves to offer aid.

"Therefore, we saw fit to consult with our senior partner and founder, Mukbar the Magnificent, may his Profit increase. With his consent, our firm has unanimously and magnanimously decided that, in view of the desperation of the situation, the lady's valorous nature evidenced by the deeds on behalf of her host, her high birth, her breathtaking beauty—"

"Her rightful claim against your company?" Carole suggested suspiciously, paying no attention to the barefooted kick from Bronwyn, whose foot was still in her lap. Bronwyn might be taken in but *she* wasn't. The news about the war was catastrophic, but she somehow felt the merchants were determined to profit by it rather than use it as an opportunity for a good deed. These people were related to Droughtsea, however distantly, and she for one didn't trust them. They might have even tricked Bronwyn with a pool that showed illusions instead of reality, just to upset her so they could cheat her.

Mashkent overrode the interruption, but hastened to the point. "It seems we can make a deal. As you have seen, we have by happy chance brought to this land our fine flying steeds, a wondrous crossbreed between the giant golden eagle and the hornless unicorn, a beast of marvelous properties, the most miraculous of which are swiftness and ferocity in battle." He turned to Bronwyn. "We are prepared to give you a chance to have your curse lifted entirely—not merely a partial clearing, you understand, but a 100% guaranteed bona fide cure *and* the use of these incomparable steeds to fly your allies here to the aid of your father. All of this we propose to let you have for the price of an insignificant boon we think you may be able to perform for us."

"Now?"

He nodded.

"Oh fine!" she wailed. "I have lots of time to go running errands." She wanted those horses badly, but what would be the point of having them if she had to delay flying to her father's assistance while she performed boons?

Loefwin touched her arm urgently. "My dear Bronwyn, don't distress yourself. If there is anything within my power that can be done to aid you, consider it yours."

Bronwyn shot him a grateful look, though in truth she had no idea how or if he might help.

Mashkent was continuing. "Now, now, my dear Princess, rest assured that we value the expediting of your mission above all things, may our dinars decrease if we do not, but this task of which I speak is urgent, under the circumstance, though it is but a small matter."

"Why is it just this one thing?" Jack asked suspiciously. "And if it is of such small value, why is it so urgent? Why can she not perform it later?"

"She may perform it later if she deems speed of more importance than supplying steeds to her allies." Mashkent bowed to Loefwin and coughed delicately into his fist. "However, either she must

perform the boon at once or we can provide horses only to her and her original companions. If she elects to do our bidding later, and is still able to do so, we would even be prepared to accept alternative payment."

Mirza beamed. "Yes, a bit of Argonian real estate would be a fortunate acquisition, say, half the kingdom, or perhaps your first-born child. The promise of some such trifle would be perfectly adequate to induce us to consider letting you have the flying horses, but the curse would still be upon you, although if you could spare us half your kingdom *and* your first-born on account, we—"

"What's the boon?" Bronwyn asked flatly.

"It's nothing! So inconsequential I hate to mention it—" Mashkent fanned his brown hand dismissingly.

"A trifle, as my Uncle has said—" Mirza tried to look as if he were embarrassed to be a party to the solicitation of such a small favor.

Jack said to Carole from behind his hand, "Sounds to me as if these merchants have a worse dose of Bronwyn's curse than she does."

Mirza added, "In truth, we would never have bothered to come all this way to offer you so much for so little except that my uncle's third concubine is pregnant and has a craving for these things."

"What things?" Bronwyn demanded from between gritted teeth.

Mirza's hands fluttered helplessly, as if they were trapped moths. "Oh—only one thing. A—urn—it's a pomegranate, actually."

"Is that all?" Bronwyn asked with puzzled relief. "What's a pomegranate?"

"It's nothing—a snack craved by my spoiled darling," Mashkent put in. "A little red fruit, hardened and filled with seeds. That is all. Nothing dangerous. BUT, remember what you receive in exchange—the use of the steeds for you and your allies, the safety of your kingdom, the respect of your father and your subjects, your veracity established for all time, AND as an extra added bonus, we'll agree to grant you use of the charm we've prepared to provide temporary relief from your curse at no extra charge."

"Are there any dark mysterious strangers in your plan or long journeys over water?" Jack asked with narrowing eyes, naming the old standby phony gypsy fortunes.

"What?"

"Just wondering," Jack grumbled. He too was remembering Droughtsea's description of these men. The rebel Duke's claim that they might represent the stationary forerunners of his people seemed more likely than he had first thought. Probably the Miragenians had cheated his own folk out of house and home, which was no doubt what had set gypsies roaming in the first place.

"Is *this* some guessing game," Carole asked, "or do we get to know where this stupid fruit grows so Bronwyn can pick you one and we can use your precious horses to win the war before both our allies and our enemies die of old age?"

"It cannot simply be picked!" Mirza protested indignantly. "Naturally, as you would expect in view of the inducements offered for it, the pomegranate of which we speak is a rather special one—"

Loefwin, who had spent the last few minutes in consultation with the Chief Game Warden, returned his attention to Bronwyn and the merchants. "Pomegranate?" he asked sharply, his voice sounding as if he thought they had said 'dragon' or 'hurricane' instead of simply 'pomegranate.' "What's all this?"

Both merchants gave him long, enigmatic looks from under their turbans and his eyes widened and he shook his head in a palsied fashion. "Oh, I say. You can't mean *that* pomegranate. See here, that's no sort of thing to send a child in after. I'll go myself, or send one of my men—"

"Your Duke of Droughtsea, perhaps?" Mirza suggested, sounding unlike either his jovial serpentine self or a bumbling apprentice merchant. He sounded bitter and menacing. "It would be unprofitable to allow you our steeds while you possess or could possess the pomegranate."

"I—er—see your point. And I admit that business was a bad move. In fact, I deeply regret it and assure you—"

"As you assured the Mages and Kings of the Six that they were to have a relaxing feast?" Mashkent asked. "No, Your Imperial Highness. Forgive this unavoidable, and I trust you will agree, understandable, breach of your hospitality, but I must tell you that your word in regard to such matters lacks value with us."

Mistress Raspberry spoke for the first time. "Besides, Your Highness, will you not need to gather an army if you're to ally with Argonia?"

of them back to his tribe with him, perhaps he could arrange to breed one to a gypsy mount—the foal of such a union ought to be worth enough to earn the gold required to fulfill his manhood test. He was uncomfortably aware that time was growing short. How sad it would be to help save the kingdom only to remain a perpetual boy.

By late afternoon the sun disappeared, fading into a sky of blank, colorless uniformity. Soon the forest thinned to a few trees and those dwindled to shrubs, then those too vanished into a vast gray expanse of parched wasteland.

Anastasia flew with her head angled downward, her sharp eye scanning the empty landscape. Just when Jack had convinced himself she was merely looking for something to eat, she descended from the sky in a dizzyingly swift spiral, as if she had suddenly grown too heavy to stay aloft. The horses followed suit, landing in a somewhat less abrupt manner, and the children dismounted.

"What is it?" Carole asked the swan, who stared incredulously into the gray land beyond.

"It is—it is as I feared. We are now in what is left of my own dear home, the Nonarable Lands."

"That can't be so," Bronwyn protested. "The Emperor distinctly said that this was where we would find West Frostingdung."

"Nevertheless these are the Nonarable Lands, more nonarable than ever, but I would know them anywhere. Ours must have been the first Kingdom to succumb to conquest, if Loefric implemented his fiendish plot from here. Poor Father! I knew someday our inability to raise archers would be the end of us."

"Well, wherever we are, I suggest that we find the Prince and the castle and get indoors before the hidebehinds and monsters come out for the night." Carole shivered.

"I think there is nothing so vigorous as a monster in this land," Jack said, regarding the surrounding featureless aridity sadly. "There is no cover to conceal anything."

They dismounted and slapped the horses on the rumps, sending the steeds winging back to their masters, and set out on foot.

Anastasia flew alongside them over what looked to be flat land, but what felt to the walkers as if it was one long upward slope. "Who would think all this gray, weedy gravel once was a garden of quicksand and bog, a home for the insect swarms, a haven for the playful serpent and slothful alligator?" the swan mourned. "Oh, my kingdom, what have they done to you?"

Whatever it was, it wasn't pleasant. The walking was vile. Small stones, just big enough to make the footing difficult and cause rock bruises, littered the ground. The sluggish sky bestirred itself now and began to boil, lashing out with a bitter cold wind that whipped through the few stickery weeds thrusting through the gravel and stung the travelers' eyes with cold and flying dust, snapping right through the fine cloaks they'd borrowed at Loefwin's palace.

When they came upon a deep scummy pool that looked as if it had been sitting there since before Loefwin's war, Anastasia landed in the wind-rippled water, which sloshed up and down, leaving, when it receded, an unsightly green-brown ring around her sleek blackness. Her wings she kept folded fastidiously up over her back. "Is this all that is left of my lovely river?" she asked softly, and said to her friends, "Once there flowed a great river right here, where we are walking. It fed the swamps. No wonder they have vanished."

"It has been many years since you saw your home," Jack said kindly. "Perhaps this is not it. Perhaps you are mistaken."

"No—I knew we were bound for my father's lands from Loefwin's directions. But never did I dream of this devastation. How I wish I'd followed my heart and fled in the opposite direction! The unspeakable wretches, that they should despoil my country so." And without waiting for them to catch up, she flew away.

But they had only to walk a few paces beyond the pool before they topped a rise, and saw that a path stretched up to meet them. On first sight, it seemed to be made of broad stones, once white, now dirtied and stained to a slightly paler gray than the surrounding gravel. When Carole paused for a rest and sat on one of them, she found it even more rounded than she had thought. Since it wasn't very comfortable, she reached down with her hand to rearrange it. It wouldn't budge. Squatting, she pried it up with her fingers. Her hand slipped—under the rock, so she thought—but when she gave a long pull to loosen it she found she'd run her fingers through the eye sockets of a skull.

A rustle of wings announced Anastasia's return. Carole quickly shoved the skull back into its niche. After all, it might be a relative.

The swan had scouted ahead. "I confess I grow almost as curious as I am distressed," she said. "The central keep is right there, though shorter than I remember. But the rest of the castle is *not* there. I cannot think where it might have gone."

They soon saw what she meant, and discovered the solution. The keep was centered in the customary fashion on a man-made mound, and had suffered less from what appeared to be a cataclysmic settling than had the rest of the castle. All that remained above ground of the outlying structures were the toothy merlons and the tops of some of the towers. Since these were as unrelentingly gray as the landscape, they had escaped Anastasia's notice when she'd first flown over them. A wide ditch outlined the perimeters, but contained not the slightest drop of moisture. The path of skulls led straight through it to the door of the keep.

"The old place has certainly gone downhill," Anastasia said with a pathetic attempt at levity. Carole glared at her, and wished the creature would stop dwelling so tiresomely on how painful it was to return home and find it ruined. While it couldn't be easy for the swan to face such changes, she could at least have the good grace to do so in silence. Carole for one didn't want to think about the subject and she certainly didn't want to hear any more bad jokes about it.

Jack, hearing the catch in the swan's voice and watching Bronwyn's suddenly stricken face and Carole's angry one, found that Argonia was not so distant as he had earlier felt. While a gypsy had no permanent home to return to, he had a sudden vision of himself flying his flying horse all over his native countryside looking for his people and finding them nowhere, their campfires dead for good. But again, he could do nothing about that now. As protector of these helpless females, it behooved him to think instead of their welfare and of the task at hand. "Your Highness," he said kindly to Anastasia, "perhaps it would be a good thing for you if you returned to the palace—"

"And risk being stung to death by fliers again?" the swan said and sniffed. "No, thank you."

"But see what this brother of the Emperor's has done to your castle! I would not like to think what he would do to one of the people who used to live in it, and in your present form you could hardly defend yourself. You cannot handle weapons or maneuver well in a closed space and we—we might not be able to help you."

She was silent for a moment, then said tiredly, "Oh, very well. I suppose procuring that so-unfortunate fruit must be the first priority and my presence might well be a detriment. I shall wait at the pool and if monsters of either the landlocked or flying sort attempt to trifle with me, woe betide them. Besides, I can always dive. Surely nothing can be alive in that water." She started to take off, but turned back for a moment. "Before I go, pluck out one of my feathers. If you need me, burn the feather and I shall come immediately."

Jack did so and she flew away.

Bronwyn had unsheathed her sword. Now, using the hilt, she pounded on the top portion of the door, which had sunk halfway into the gray and gravelly earth.

Jack was not perhaps quite ready for so *much* action, so quickly. Making the sign against the evil eye, he ducked back behind Carole.

"Oh, really," the witch said reproachfully. When Bronwyn's knock failed to bring a response, and the big Princess retreated a step with a puzzled, helpless expression on her face, Carole strode boldly forward and knocked smartly, three times. On the third knock the door gaped open on creaky iron hinges, one of which broke, and the cracked oaken slab skewed crazily aside, falling half off its frame to land inside the keep with a whoosh and a bang and a gust of musty, unclean-smelling air. Clouds of gray dirt billowed up and they all broke into fits of sneezing.

When they had recovered, Jack asked, "Do you think we should go ahead and enter?"

"I don't see why not. He mustn't mind visitors too much if he doesn't even have a proper front door," Carole said tartly. "Maybe he isn't even home—"

"It does have that lived-in look," Bronwyn, who had removed her bracelet at the beginning of the journey to conserve its power, agreed.

Another icy blast of wind cut across them, and this time it carried the first pellets of a hail storm. They ducked into the keep, stumbling on the sunken steps. Jack and Bronwyn pushed the door to and shoved it back into place as much as they could.

Inside it was dark, and outside the wind had taken up whistling, the hailstones rattling a fast tattoo against the walls. A long anguished baying echoed through the building. It seemed to come from beneath them, and Jack could have sworn the floor shuddered with the vibrations.

"Did you hear that?" Carole asked.

"Hear what?" Bronwyn asked through determinedly clenched teeth. "That was nothing."

"A werewolf, at least," Jack whimpered. "We have been sent to our doom."

"Nonsense," Carole said, shaking herself. "Besides, there is iron on the door. We're p-perfectly safe. Do you have that new tinderbox we got from Loefwin's kitchen?"

"But of course."

"Try to kindle a flame then, and perhaps Bronwyn can find a torch. There should still be one on the wall somewhere."

Bronwyn edged back towards the door and followed along the wall with her hands. She took only two steps before barking her shins on something sharp, and several objects clattered, banged and rolled across the floor causing her to trip and flail about a great deal before she was able to regain her balance. But while she was flailing, her fingertips scraped across something that at least felt like a torch, so she grabbed, and when she had regained her equilibrium, held it out for Jack to light.

It blossomed with a light more comforting than the sun, at least for a moment, though it cast disfiguring shadows over everyone's features. Jack made a face and said, "Oooh ha ha," in a mock frightening voice, but then realized he really was frightened and making matters worse so he shut up.

As soon as his eyes adjusted to the light, however, he let out a low whistle. The torchlight, dim as it was, sparkled off the facets of thousands of gems embedded in mountains of treasure heaped all over the room. Gradually he could define the outlines of jeweled chairs, tables, dishes, chests, cabinets, clothing, weapons, armor, and all sorts of other articles stuffed into the room in careless piles.

"Anastasia would just love the way her family silver is being treated," Bronwyn said in what was supposed to be a light tone.

"It is very messy," Jack agreed, and began stuffing his pockets from the nearest pile. "I will just tidy up a bit."

Carole stopped his arm in mid-filch. "If the Emperor's brother is still living here, we aren't going to charm the pomegranate out of him by stealing from him."

"Do you really think anyone would notice?" Jack asked, but sullenly began replacing the gems and coins. He could always retrieve them *after* the pomegranate was secured.

The clatter the jewels made sliding back into heaps masked for a moment the slow tread rising a lumbering step at a time towards them. Jack froze, listening.

The steps faltered at what seemed to be a given point, like a doorway or a staircase landing. Labored breathing rasped through the room, louder than the hail. Then, with agonizing slowness, the steps stumped closer.

The man that finally faced them was not in the least formidable, except perhaps that he was formidably depressing. Not the sort one would invite to court, or even to a party. He was bent, sour-faced, and unsanitary-looking in the extreme. His clothing, which might once have been as rich as the garments jumbled around the room, was torn, stained, and so dirty its color was grayed into nonexistence. The tarnished metallic band with the empty jewel settings that trimmed a ripped sleeve dangled to the top of one of many rents in smelly old hose that sagged down his spindly legs. He had a yellowed filthy beard half knotted into a kerchief tied around his head. His watery eyes blinked repeatedly in the light of the torch while he smacked wrinkled lips over sunken gums.

"Bloody bones!" this apparition cursed in a muffled voice, "What're you? Not that I care. You're where you've no call to be. I'm calling the hounds."

"No, sir, don't do that," Carole pleaded with all the little-girl sweetness she could muster.

"Why not?" he asked, though he didn't sound interested in the answer.

"Because," Jack said. "Because we come from the Emperor—"

"Yes," Bronwyn said. "We've been sent to board with Prince Loefric. We're from the Empress's Orphan's Aid Benevolent Society. We were chosen as the most benevolent orphan available to fill positions as his wards."

"Were you now? You call that benevolent, banging about in the darkness, bothering a man? Can't imagine what we'd use orphans for, benevolent or otherwise, except dogfood. Hounds do tend to languish on a steady diet of snake and rat."

Carole began to get the feeling that this was not a nice old man, but one had to try, after all.

"Please, sir, may we see Prince Loefric?"

The old man held his arms out, dropped them to his sides, turned his back, held his arms out again,

sloppy tenant in your ancestral mansion. He has oodles of simply scrumptious treasures all in that one room and they're all jumbled together and there's no way in the world to put them in order, but if we don't do it by sundown he's going to kick us out without giving us the pomegranate. He *says* he doesn't know where it is, but I think he's just being mean. That place is hopeless!"

"Hmm," the swan said, preening in a quick picky way that meant she was thinking hard. "Perhaps not."

"But you should *see* it!" Carole insisted.

"I have no doubt the accursed man is an atrocious housekeeper. However, your plight is not entirely desperate if you can locate my hope chest. You may use it to hold the extraneous furnishings."

"There are," Carole said, "a *lot* of things."

"My dear child, my hope chest is capable of holding a *lot* of things. My entire dowry was to be contained within it, including a castle, stable, mews, and all the accoutrements."

"Oh," Carole said. "You mean it was magic."

"Is," the swan affirmed, arching her neck imperiously.

"Still, do you think? I mean, that fruit took all the magic out of the people and—and from the looks of it, from everything else."

"My hope chest was not in the habit of devouring fruit," the swan said. "I very much doubt it made contact with the disastrous stuff."

"Well, then, all we have to do is find it. Which will be at least as easy as finding the pomegranate."

"I suppose it is back to work, then," Jack said in a mournful voice, and took several deep breaths of crisp cold air to fortify himself against the miasma of the keep.

Bronwyn started dutifully to lift the broken door aside again when Anastasia said, "Perhaps Carole could use her craft in this matter."

"A giant with a shovel using HIS craft would be more like it," Jack said.

"Possibly so, but I feel that my chest, being a hope chest, will respond to magic in a spirit of fellowship, whereas it may remain hidden from more mundane attempts to locate it."

So, with Bronwyn at the door to haul things into the open, Jack scrambled agilely up the mounds, scuffing gilt and dislodging gems and handing piece after piece of priceless whatever down to Carole, who in turn handed everything out to Bronwyn.

The wind stopped blowing and the sun grew warm enough that soon all of them were perspiring. Anastasia rested beside Bronwyn, and remarked occasionally on the origin of a piece with a comment or two about previous owners. The chest was not, of course, on the top layer, although a lute of rare woods and broken strings, tapestries of silken and gold thread with mouse-holes chewed in the fabric, a cradle with a stained spot on its velvet mattress as a legacy from a previous occupant, and no end of jeweled casks, small throne chairs and other lighter-weight trifles, were. In time, the piles outside grew so high that they too were developing a top layer. Anastasia excused herself when she saw her mother's jewelry case containing a delicate crystal crown spring open and spill its cargo onto the rocky ground.

"Have another feather," the swan said before she left, "and call me if you need me again. It is more than I can bear to see my kingdom's wealth treated like pillage." And with that she winged back to her refuge.

As the morning wore on, Bronwyn and Jack grumbled as they hauled, lifted, dragged, and pushed, enduring the imprints of gem facets on their hides and splinters of rare woods in their hands, but Carole, confident she could meet her deadline with the help of Anastasia's chest and her own magic, wanted to inspect each beautiful object. A jeweled box that she would have deemed the most wondrous thing she had ever seen paled in comparison with a gold scapular with intricate tracery, and that was nothing compared to a carved throne with butterflies whose sapphire eyes and enameled wings were so lifelike she expected them to fly away.

Bronwyn glared furiously at her when she took the time to remove the necklaces and bracelets she had piled onto her neck and arms and replaced them with others, but Carole ignored her. The jewels probably did slow her down, since the beads and chains around her neck kept getting caught when she lifted things and the rings and bracelets cut into her flesh when she carried something heavy. Still, they were no more cumbersome than the lumps in Jack's clothing that changed his outline to resemble that of a craggy boulder, and she liked them. In answer to Bronwyn's exasperated glare, Carole took extra care admiring the next handful of baubles Jack flung down at her. A ring with a stone as large as a

Carole hummed, using only one strain of melody at a time, parting aisles in the begemmed heaps as a peasant mother uses a single finger to part a child's hair, searching for beasties. The valuables moved slowly at first, but as the tune moved faster the treasures shifted accordingly. The light was so thin and shadow-pocked now that she could see very little, despite the additional space the morning's work had provided.

Now seemed as good a time as any to try to call to the chest. A wedding march seemed appropriate, and she hummed one. At first there was no response, and then, very faintly, there was a tiny clattering from a far corner, near the rolled end of a tapestry half-hidden under the curtains of an upended bed. She raised her voice and a small chest, not much larger than Bronwyn's buckler, thumped around the corner of the tapestry. She sighed partially with relief and partially with weariness, for if she hadn't extended herself physically earlier, she felt she'd more than made up for it once she started using her magic. Never did she recall needing so much energy to exercise her talent! Bumbling over to the box, she unlatched the lid. It was empty except for some miniature furniture, too tiny for any doll's house, in the bottom. But this had to be it. Her hum would not have called anything else. To make sure, she hummed at the tapestry. It raised itself on end and unrolled, feeding a corner of itself into the box and rapidly shrinking to handkerchief size, then to the size of a hole in the mesh of the finest lace.

"Found it," she called through the junk and carried the chest to the door, meanwhile calling to the other objects. From the largest to the smallest, they rose into the air, minuetted or reeled, each according to its nature, across the room, and threaded themselves into the bottomless space inside the little hope chest.

All afternoon Carole hummed and filled the box. Bronwyn and Jack first looked on with wonder, but at last grew bored and began to play stones-scissors-and-paper together, using real gemstones, leaving her, this time, to do all the work.

By the time she had magicked into the hope chest everything she didn't wish to use in furnishing the room, and had sent a battalion of velvet polishing rags—remnants of unsalvageable garments—jigging vigorously over each piece remaining, the day had grown short.

She wearily surveyed the results. A swan-shaped four-poster bed filled one corner, a tapestry with fewer mouseholes than most she had uncovered hung on the wall, Loefric's worn throne and three of the more comfortable-looking chairs surrounded the freshly dusted table. She hadn't washed his repulsive dishes but had stashed them in the hope chest and replaced them with freshly wiped ones from the piles, storing them in a cabinet opposite the table. Enough chests, chairs, shields and bits of armor were located about to give the room a suitably rich look. Unfortunately, if the pomegranate had been hidden in any of the items she had either stored or used to furnish the room, she had overlooked it.

Bronwyn saw her worried look and patted her shoulder, having completely forgiven her her earlier lapse. Carole *had* cared after all, she simply hadn't truly been aware of the situation. "Don't fret, cousin. As soon as the Prince sees what a bang-up job you've done, I'm sure he'll hand over the pomegranate immediately and send us off to Argonia with his blessings."

Jack snorted. "More likely the charming Prince will accuse us of stealing the items he cannot see," he said with an air of wounded dignity not entirely appropriate to one whose pockets were so perilously and feloniously full.

"Nonsense," Carole said, collapsing into a chair, "I'll simply tell him they're in storage, which is perfectly true."

When Loefric disinterred himself from the depths some time later, he hardly seemed to notice any difference. He was busy nursing his hand. All he said, when he deigned to notice, was "Hmph. I could have sworn there was more trash here than this."

"Not at all, sir," Bronwyn said with a smile. "It just needed a woman's touch."

"Is that so?" Loefric demanded, and shook his torn and bloody hand at her. "I just had a woman's touch—right here. The bitch nearly took off my hand. I can tell you, I gave her more than a touch of my boot for her trouble, that I did. Worthless hound. Just because I kicked that pup of hers back downstairs where it belonged. What does she suppose a master is for?"

"Not for kicking her puppy, apparently," Jack said, his eyes flashing with indignation not directed at the dogs.

"Damned dogs don't know their place," Loefric muttered, but he seemed to be enjoying being angry, for his watery eyes lit up in their dim fashion and he didn't stop grouching to himself all

through the preparation and consumption of his gruel. He didn't even notice that the task had been facilitated for him by Carole's labors.

When he finished, he gazed accusingly at his hand and asked them with what he apparently thought was a crafty air, "So, did you find your precious pomegranate?"

Bronwyn started to say that they had, but had remained around the keep for love of its wholesome, invigorating atmosphere and in anticipation of his stimulating companionship, but thought better of it. She might convince him she could tell nothing but the truth while telling many lies, but a whopper of that magnitude would never pass.

Jack and Carole shook their heads.

Any hope they might have cherished that the old wretch would simply hand them the fruit in exchange for services rendered was squelched by the titter with which he greeted their admission of failure.

"Well, then, perhaps you need help," he said sweetly. "You, young man. You seem to be an animal lover. Perhaps you could gain the aid of my hunting hounds in helping you hunt for your quarry, eh? They should be glad of the chance. They haven't hunted anything but vermin in years. Besides," he added not-so-sweetly, "you'll need to get past them to search the second level, won't you? That's settled then. I'm going to take a little nap before supper, so see that you don't wake me up with your screams while you're getting acquainted. And boy?"

"Yes, old man?" Jack managed to reply, though he was staring with gruesome fascination at the bits of bone and tendon protruding from the jagged tear in Loeffric's hand.

"Have a fine time digging through the dogshit while you're looking for the pomegranate. Seems to me the kind of job that should suit you." And with that the noble prince's chin dropped to his chest and he slept, smiling to himself.

The light and warmth of the day were fading and a little snow had begun sifting through the hole in the roof by that time, but clearly another consultation with Anastasia was in order. So out they all went, Bronwyn lighting the new swan feather from her torch. In a short time they heard wings beating back the wind and in another moment Anastasia was among them.

The swan fluffed her feathers and twitched them energetically, shaking out the snowflakes. The children pulled their new cloaks tightly around them and everybody huddled close together for warmth.

"Well?" the swan asked. "How have you fared? Was my hope chest of service to you?"

"Oh Princess, it was," Jack said. "But not quite enough, since we failed to find the pomegranate. Now both we and the King will be lost unless you can think of some way we can keep from being devoured by the old goblin's hounds when we go below to search among them for the accursed fruit."

Anastasia preened for a moment. "Below, that would be—let me think, now—ah yes, the upper level of the addition to the additions to the keep, now sunken, as they are, to form a second level, or a top subterranean level."

"Which means there is another level below?" Jack asked, feeling rather sunken himself. So. If he survived the dogs, he would have to brave yet another dimension of the Prince's reprehensible idea of housekeeping. How ghastly! Perhaps the dogs could be induced to swallow him up in one relatively painless gulp.

"If it is still intact," Anastasia said, answering his question. "The stables used to be just West of the keep, in what was the central courtyard, and the kennels were on the other side. What a degenerate knave that man must be to house dogs where the bedchambers once were!"

"Stables and kennels? I wonder what became of all the animals," Carole said.

"They perished of being overfed," Bronwyn told her.

"Not likely around raisin-face," Jack remarked. "But that gives me an idea. If we feed the hounds, they will know we are friendly and—"

"What do you propose we feed them?" Carole asked.

"Bread and cheese," Bronwyn said dismally. "Hounds are very fond of bread and cheese. They also like onions very much."

"No, Bronwyn," Jack said glumly. "Dogs do not like onions. They like meat. And bone."

"I should be able to find that easily enough," Anastasia said nonchalantly.

"You can? Where? How?" The other three were all ears.

"I shall simply fly to the woods and gather some of the bits and pieces from the monsters'

maraudings. I believe they prey on each other."

"Well," Carole said, "Monsters don't make the best meat I've ever eaten, but it's no doubt an improvement on rat and snake."

"Will one of you provide me with a garment which has pockets or something to wrap my findings in so I may carry them conveniently?"

"Bronwyn or Carole will have to do that," Jack said. "I can't give you mine. My pockets are all full."

"You'd best keep them thus," Bronwyn agreed. "Those hounds will want the stones you carry to add roughage to their meal when they gobble you up in two bites. And I shan't protect you, either."

"Oh, *Bronwyn*."

Anastasia returned with her gory baggage a short time later and Jack distributed the bones throughout his pockets, dislodging as few of his treasures as possible. Then bidding the swan farewell, the trio marched purposefully past Loefric, their footsteps vindictively loud. The only sign the old man gave of noticing was to twitch one grizzled eyebrow and mutter, as if in sleep, "Lotta animal lovers around here."

Bronwyn preceded the other two, her shield in front of her and sword drawn beneath her cloak.

Jack held the torch in one hand and a bone in the other and tried to remember every animal training trick he had ever learned, and also the Pan-elvin Mistress Raspberry had been teaching him.

Carole trailed behind him, rubbing her eyes and shuffling a little. Jack feared they could not count on her to teach dogs to dance, if necessary. She seemed completely spent.

Down and down they went, until the stairs ended in a tunnel, crudely supported by posts made from small trees, their bark still intact. The yapping and howling began before they were halfway through the low corridor, which was fit only for trolls. Jack wondered if Loefric had built it himself or if the dogs had simply dug it out. It could not have been part of the original structure. But he kept his speculation to himself. Ahead of him, Bronwyn was taut as a drawn bowstring. Again he thought what a fine shield her tall figure made. It was perhaps not glorious for him to walk behind his chosen love, but then, someone had to hold the torch, did he not?

Yapping, howling, baying, and growling filled the tunnel and rang through their ears, and the clicking of claws on stone, click, click, click, click—a multitudinous mob of clicking, picking up speed as it increased in volume, prancing, trotting, and finally charging toward them.

Bronwyn's sword, now naked, trembled in the torchlight which, as a matter of fact, also trembled. "N-nice doggie?" she greeted the first glittering pair of red eyes to charge them.

"RRRRR-RIP!" the dog said, which, if Jack remembered his Pan-elvin, and was interpreting it correctly, meant, euphemistically speaking, "Stop patronizing me!" and also, "Prepare to die like the two-legged insect you are," or something to that effect.

"We—we are friends," Jack said in Pan-elvin, and hurriedly tossed his first bone among them. It served its purpose of delaying their immediate demise, becoming a literal bone of contention among the pack, which had gathered in a fire-eyed, shadow-backed snarling solidarity that had every intention of eating them.

"So are we—man's best friend," growled the lead dog around a mouth full of the bone it had succeeded in winning from the others. "Man—hah! He doesn't deserve a best friend."

"That is not entirely fair," Jack argued—but diplomatically. Very diplomatically. "Everybody needs friends. I have the Princess here, and the witch, and you have your—" he interrupted himself hurriedly to toss another bone, "pack. And we come bringing you gifts."

"Gifts? Nah! You were throwing things at us! You aren't trying to claim you knew they were tasty, are you?"

"But of course," Jack said, trying to look longingly companionable as he fixed the dog with his most melting wide-eyed gaze. "I am very fond of bones myself. But these I chose to share with you, because—"

"Yip! Yip! Grr-yip!" A small furry missile hurtled beyond the pack leader and clamped tiny teeth into Jack's trouser leg, which it began to worry with puppyish abandon. The pup was promptly followed by three others of roughly the same size, all yipping and growling fiercely and earnestly gnawing the cloth of his pants. Jack took a deep breath and started to bend his knees in a careful stoop. He wanted to pull the pups off and pet them into a gender frame of mind, for he was afraid their innocent aggressiveness might start a trend.

Bronwyn glanced from him to the little dogs and back again, her sword poised, but he shook his head imperceptibly. From behind the lead dog, a bitch slunk forward, her lips writhing back from her bared yellow teeth, snarling, "I'll tear his throat out."

The leader stepped back, acknowledging her claim.

One of the pups, still yipping happily, bounded from Jack to the bitch, squirmed and wagged around her for a moment, and frolicked back to Jack's ankles. Quietly, Jack relieved his pockets of several more bones, letting them drop to his feet. The puppies pounced on them.

Withdrawing another bone, Jack held it out to the bitch. "For you, my beauty," he said coaxingly. She strained her head forward, sniffing. "What's that?"

"A bone."

"They're wonderful bones, Mama," the pups yipped. "And *he* has good smells—not like the other one."

"Assuredly, little doggie, I am not like the other one," Jack said in his fondest and most beguiling tone, holding the torch up so she could more clearly see his sweet, good-smelling, boyish face. "I love animals. Why, my own grandfather was once a bear."

"We used to hunt bears," the bitch growled, but she slunk a bit closer. Behind her, the others whined uncertainly, or at least those others without a bone did. "Long ago, my mother's littermate told of her mother, who hunted with tame men, not like that one who harmed my pup. Are you tame, boy?"

Jack wanted to stammer and delay and find some way around the question. What did she mean was HE tame? *Animals* were wild or tame, good or bad, trainable or stupid, not men, and certainly not he. But her tusk-sized teeth glistened in the dark and he said quickly, "I— yes, I am."

"Then come here, boy. Fetch me that bone you have there. Fetch it here." Jack hesitated and she whimpered cajolingly. "Come on, I won't bite you—yet. Let me sniff your hand for you. *Good* boy. Stick it out now," she sniffed and whimpered again and wagged her bristling tail encouragingly.

"Good *good* boy. You may pat me now and give me that bone."

This was *not* how Jack had envisioned making friends with the hounds, but it did seem to be one way. When the bitch had enjoyed her bone for a few moments she asked, "Have you others?"

"Uh—yes. And—and there are more outside, only tell me, are we—um—are we friends now?" He was shaking and sweating despite the chill in the tunnel.

"Oh, yes. I understand men can be quite loyal once they have been taught to accept one."

"Then, will you help us? We seek a certain pomegranate."

The word was apparently unfamiliar to the dog, for she pricked her ears and whined and the others shook their own ears uncertainly and lolled their red tongues and slit their red eyes, listening.

"It is a fruit," Jack explained. "It may be buried here, on this level. Could you sniff about, do you think, and use your paws that are—that are so superior to our weak soft hands, and help us hunt this thing? We would show our loyalty, naturally, by bringing more bones."

She growled, whined and yipped in fast succession. "Tell us more what this pomegranate is like and we shall try. But remember, more bones. These are a start but some with meat would be better."

Jack nodded and described the pomegranate as he had heard it described by the merchant. Dogs scattered in all directions.

Bronwyn grinned at him in the torchlight, and with a sigh sank to her heels, the floor being covered with dog excrement. Carole was oblivious to that, however. Sometime in the course of negotiations, she and a gray-muzzled oldster had found each other, and in an equal state of weary disregard for interspecies politics had collapsed, the dog's head in Carole's lap and hers resting on its furry back, both fast asleep.

"They are different than you would think," Jack said, telling Anastasia of the dogs. "Proud and smart, and—well, that bitch reminded me of my Grandmother, Queen Xenobia. She had them dig up the whole cellar, and they searched every crack and crevice, but no fruit. And still raisin-face will not tell us where the pomegranate is, but insists we do his gardening for him. Meanwhile, we need more bones and the bitch says they must have meat. I think perhaps I will forget training animals and learn to read the tarot."

"Well, I should think you would leap at the chance to do some gardening, though I must say," she glanced at the leaden early morning sky and at the snow-frosted weeds and rocks surrounding the castle, "it seems a bit late to start landscaping."

"It is not here in the outdoors, Loefric's garden. It is on the level below the dogs. His pleasure at seeing us alive and whole at breakfast was not keen. If I do not acquire some bones to take back with us, he will be less disappointed tonight. Bronwyn plans to garden alone until I can join her."

Bronwyn nodded gravely. "Not that we don't have all the time in the world, but I am very bored in this luxurious palace, with nothing to do."

Anastasia almost inquired what Carole intended to do while her socially superior cousin was toiling like a peasant, but Carole hung back, listless, leaning against the door frame. These lowborn children seemed to have little stamina. The swan knew by looking at Jack that she would have to allow him to ride upon her back to the forest. Not only was his customary cockiness notably absent, perhaps because the idea of being a dogsbody to dogs was less than appealing to him, but like Carole, he seemed depleted.

Only Bronwyn remained herself, though an impatient and twitchy version of herself, and the enchanted Princess of the Nonarable Lands could well imagine how trying it must be for her to play these senseless games with the malicious madman who controlled the keep while her own family and kingdom were under attack and she prevented by him from aiding them. So far she had shown great restraint in not skewering the wicked old man, which was not only honorable but wise since her tormentor was also the brother and vassal of her newly sworn ally. Anastasia saw no harm in reinforcing Bronwyn's prudence, in case the impetuous young swordswoman should be tempted to change her mind.

"My dear Bronwyn, I should like to give you a piece of advice," the swan said as she and Jack prepared to fly away.

"I'm quite sure I know all I need to and have everything under control," Bronwyn replied, a lost and rather pleading note in her voice. "But if it will make you feel better, go ahead."

"Very well, I shall. And bear in mind I say this not to hurt your feelings, but to aid you." Bronwyn nodded. Anastasia proceeded, struggling to express herself delicately. She did not wish to mention directly the possibility of Bronwyn attacking Loefric, not only to spare Bronwyn's sensibilities but to keep from giving her any bad ideas. "You are—ahem—often all too ready to rely on that sword of yours, my dear, and I believe that would be a mistake in this instance, as well as in other— shall we say—affairs of statecraft. Bear in mind that many of the Kings and Mages murdered by that scoundrel within were once great swordsmen too, and they did not prevail. It occurs to me that if the power of the fruit could be overcome by hacking, those men would still be among the living. Also, on the subject of your latest task, remember that a lady of high birth must always conduct herself in a manner befitting her station within the bounds of the situation. I would say, on the whole, that in a garden of any sort, it is always wiser to get to the root of things than to whack at them."

Bronwyn tried to befit her station as she strode past Loefric, who sat in his chair and followed her with his eyes, a wary lizard on his rock. She stomped down the stairs and stooped into the tunnel, and held out her hand for the waiting hounds to sniff. She gave as a peace offering two bones Jack had cleverly retained for that purpose. She carried a fresh torch in one hand, and her shield and sword hooked to her belt. Once past the canine welcoming committee, she stepped from the tunnel into the wide corridor of the second level, squishing her way through the odiferous floor covering, past what had once been sumptuous bedrooms, and still showed rags of velvet bedhangings and drapes at blank, earth-filled windows. Torch sconces occurred at regular intervals in the wall, many of them still holding torches, giving the hall, despite its ruined condition, a semblance of everyday ordinariness, as if servants would soon emerge and light the torches, clean up the muck, and throw out the dogs.

A dark gap in the south wall indicated the descending staircase. Bronwyn noted that the dog droppings did not foul the stone stairs past the landing, and wondered at that. She wished she spoke dog, as Jack did, so she could ask them, but then, she'd probably be as bad a liar in dog as she was in Argonian.

Weeds wound up the staircase to meet her, catching in her boot heels and snagging on her ankles. Holding her torch higher, she saw that weeds grew everywhere, thicker than a forest. Somewhere too, she heard a rushing, and smelled water. She devoutly hoped Anastasia's serpents and alligators and insects hadn't sunken right along with the castle. She would not like to encounter an alligator here, or fall into quicksand, though the Mother only knew she should have no trouble, in the latter event, in locating vines with which to pull herself out.

The light from her torch fell on one wall, and she saw that here too torches were still in place.

Wading through the weeds, she made her way to the wall and began lighting each torch as she came to it, devoutly hoping she would not set the place on fire and incinerate castle, dogs, herself and all in the process. In the improved light, she could see that the weeds twined through and around and even penetrated the rotting furniture that would normally adorn a great hall.

The rushing and babbling grew louder and the smell of water stronger as she edged along the wall, trying to clear weeds as she went, though they seemed to grow back twice as thick and fast as before every time she cut a swatch through them. Her feet slipped, and when she cleared the plants away momentarily she could see that mud had drifted well up the walls. The cause of this was soon apparent, when she found herself standing on the banks of a swift river, dashing its way roughly south by southwest through the great hall and into what seemed, from its high ceiling and giant iron lamps and ornate pillars, to have once been a ballroom.

If the pomegranate had been where the river now ran, she was out of luck, but at least she understood where all the dirt had come from. The river must have carried it in when it poured through the walls. Any cellars or dungeons were no doubt flooded and destroyed by now, which was a blessing. Bronwyn thought that she would not like to see the dungeon of a castle in the shape of this one.

Since she couldn't go forward, she tried to start back toward the stairs. She thought she had seen another doorway, on the other side. But the weeds she had cleared had grown back thicker and stronger than before and when she raised her sword to them, they grew up to snatch it. She held on and pulled back and they tripped her feet and wound rapidly around her wrist. She stopped hacking long enough to catch her breath, and abruptly the weeds wilted back.

She didn't know what to make of that, but since she didn't wish to be trapped in this jungle for the rest of whatever life she might have left, she started hacking again, only to be re-entangled immediately. By this time she was thoroughly panicked, and hacked and whacked until she was entirely mummified in a wrapping of weeds, all save the hip that held her shield. She started to weep and curse simultaneously, furious at her own immobility, but as soon as the weeds held her immobilized and she stopped trying to wield her sword, they once again melted back.

They weren't green, these weeds—more of a pale mushroom color, and their leaves were spiky and brown, as if they were already dead, an appearance robustly and conclusively denied by their activity. These must be the plants from which the gruel was made. If so, harvest time must be rather trying. How did the Frostingdungians manage to collect a plant that fought back—but of course, that was it. The more they collected, the more this plant grew, which was why they had so much of the gruel and so little of anything else.

She stared at the weeds with new interest. What manner of plant was this, anyway? Whatever it was, she was going to have to master it if she was ever to find her way back to the surface again, let alone find the pomegranate. Stop hacking and get to the root of things, Anastasia had said. Well, then. The first part of the advice had proved sensible, perhaps the second would too.

Sheathing the sword, Bronwyn used her free hand to tug gently at the weed. At first it clung to her wrist, but as she did it no violence, it wilted back again, and she pulled further. She planned to surprise it, feeling along until she reached each root and then giving a swift merciful yank at the end. The plant would never feel a thing, she was sure, although she wasn't as sure how the other plants would react. They all seemed to be in sympathy.

Soon she had a sneaking suspicion she knew why. They were either very large plants or they were all connected somehow. No matter how many times she followed a strand to the ground, flipping the passive excess back over her shoulder as she groped along the vine, she never found a root. As long as she approached the task with a certain indifference, and didn't let her urgency cause her to jerk at the plant, it acted like a proper vine should and just lay there, but the minute she got anxious and tried to hurry it curled tightly around her again.

Rather like her curse, in a way. The more she wanted people to like her, the harder she tried to say something to them, the bigger her lies got, and the less able she was to use humor and tone of voice, the little ways she had to say something close to what she actually meant. The harder she tried, the more her tongue felt as tangled as this stupid vine. Did Carole ever feel that way when she tried so hard to be beautiful that she ended up acting as toady as Loefrig? And how about Jack, who was at his most ridiculous when he attempted to show everybody how brave and manly he was? But that was silly. *They* were normal. They didn't have curses.

They also didn't have to wrestle with this clinging vine. Stoop, bend, and pull, stoop, bend and pull. Too much effort and it locked you in a vice. Too little and you got absolutely nowhere, and for what? A fruit that took all the magic out of everything, made everything ordinary and dull and monotonous. Made her tired just to think of it. Still, the others had already done their share. All she had to do was win a match with this singular plant and—

It certainly was singular! Never once did she find a root system, as she followed the vine back and forth, up and down, over and around and back again, all through the unsubmerged part of the ballroom on her side of the river, the great hall and on further into the kitchen. What if the part of the plant that grew into the river left the castle that way and wound along underground until the river surfaced, whereupon the plant too would surface and spread its tendrils all over the land? In view of its current hardness, she didn't feel that was entirely impossible. And the pasty gruel was eaten all over Frostingdung. Hmmm.

Finally, she flopped down beside an all-but-concealed fireplace at the end of the kitchen. She would just give up and die. The bloody plant was omnipotent. There was no fighting it, no reason to it. And her back was permanently arched from stooping, her arm a noodle from carrying the torch aloft. If she ever did reach the surface again, she would always resemble an angry cat. Who would have anything to do with a seven-cubit tall liar who looked like an angry cat?

She sighed. Jack and Carole wouldn't even miss her, probably. They would make new lives for themselves here in Frostingdung, when Argonia had been overrun and all their parents killed. Perhaps they would not think too badly of her and would at least remember her as someone who had led them to safety, so that they weren't demolished with the rest of the country. She felt so noble about that, she started to cry, and so frustrated that, forgetting the weeds' reaction to assault, she angrily jerked on a handful lying near her right hip, beside her shield. This time the weed did not give. It pulled back, and snapped, and all around her, began to wither and die. Good. At least she'd have company.

But while she was gazing curiously at the broken end near the ground, new shoots began to sprout. She wasn't about to let it get away with that. She pulled and tugged again, as hard as before, with the same results, in a less spectacular fashion, as she'd gotten when she'd tried similar tactics in the other room. The plant was firmly embedded in the soil and didn't intend to give. Cunningly, Bronwyn drew her sword again, and used it like a spade, digging all around the plant. Since it was not directly disturbed, the weed didn't fight back or accelerate its growth, though the sprouts from her first flurry of effort had instantly grown as high as her waist.

At last she unearthed a network of roots, but instead of pulling, she felt along them until she found what seemed to be a bulb. When she could get her hand around it, she brought up bulb, roots, sprouts and all.

As she had hardly dared hope, the bulb was round, and red, and the entire root system grew from a tiny neck at the top of it. She snapped it off and watched the sprouts die. Pocketing the pomegranate, she whistled a snatch of the marching tune Carole had once used to charm her and slogged back through the muck and mire.

though ugly as a hidebehind made visible, was not so wrinkled and raddled as the shadows of the keep had made it seem. "Even if you've tricked me—even if none of this is real, I—I'd rather look a fool than go on as I've been."

Carole was inclined to skepticism but the bitch sniffed at her former master's posterior and though her ears were flat, her tail twitched uncertainly. "I may be wrong as well, but I think the old man's trying to learn new tricks."

"I doubt that," Jack said severely. "He is a cruel man. He knew where the pomegranate was all along but he forced us to do difficult and dangerous tasks to look for it, hoping we would be slain."

"No! No, I didn't," Loeffic cried. "Except for the dogs, nothing I asked you to do was really dangerous—it's just, it's just that I was so infernally tired of my own company I wanted to keep you around as long as I could and—" Tears started dribbling down the ruts in his cheeks and into his beard. "And you were so sure of yourselves, I wanted you to learn how hard it is to get what you want and find it's not worth what you paid for it, as I did. Every year I got tireder and more discouraged and I guess I've been afraid to leave the keep—afraid I'd be shunned or murdered. All those Mages and Kings I executed had quite a few relations. I've worried about it so long, it's made an old man of me. I don't even know if Fwin will have me by him any more but perhaps the thing to do after all is ask him."

Loefric's was not the only change. He had no sooner finished his speech than he was knocked off his knees by a violent quake that shook the earth.

"Run!" Anastasia cried. "All of you, run for the forest!" Since no one had any better ideas, run they did, and just in time too, for suddenly the ground split and the castle walls thrust themselves out of it like magic toadstools. Perhaps the weeds had weighted the castle down, perhaps it had been originally buoyed above the swamps by an enchantment now reinstated with the removal of the pomegranate, but at any rate the edifice rose again. Muddy, crumbling, but still mostly intact, it reared up, complete with jagged battlements and gape-roofed turrets. Stranger still, the river gushed up from its underground prison and filled its old channel, flooding the area surrounding the castle walls, so that hounds, prince, swan and children all found themselves standing on the banks of a moat. Just as they were getting used to these radical alterations, and thinking everything surely must settle down now, six giant black swans landed on the brand-new moat.

The dogs started barking but Anastasia cried out ecstatically: "They have returned! My sisters have all returned to our original nest!" And with that, she hopped into the moat and glided out to speak with them. After a brief conversation, all seven glided back to the bank, the other six fanning out behind their elder sister, who said, "Abigail, Agata, Amelia, Alastraina, Ashling and Ailis, this lady is our colleague, the Princess Bronwyn of Argonia. All except the vandalous elderly person who has so disgraced his lineage by ill-treatment of our home are in the Princess's entourage."

The swans trumpeted and gabbled and spoke some of the human words they remembered—for they had been speaking so long in the swan's tongue they had all but forgotten their human speech. While they gossiped among themselves, the air was once more filled with the beating of wings and down flew Gilles Kilgilles and Rusty Raspberry, each mounted on a magnificent steed and between them leading three others.

"Loefwin and the army have flown on ahead," Rusty reported breathlessly, pulling her bright hair up from inside her collar and flinging it back into the hood of her cloak in a dashing manner. "As soon as the Miragenians saw in their pool that you'd gained the pomegranate, they sent word that the war in Argonia is going worse than ever for us and Loefwin and his men should join the King at once. They wanted Gilles and me to swing by here and pick you up first, so here we are. But please do be quick."

Bronwyn nodded impatiently while mounting one of the extra horses.

Since Loeffic pleaded to be allowed to fight honorably by his brother's side, which was all right with the others as long as he flew downwind, Anastasia offered to carry Jack upon her back so the Prince could ride one of the winged horses. Her sisters promised to gather bones and meat before night fell again in the forest, so that the hounds might eat.

They stopped only once between the monster-ridden shores of Frostingdung and the Gulf of Grem-lins, and that was far out to sea. Carole suddenly hauled on the reins. Her mount obediently skimmed the surface of the vast green sea while Carole pulled forth the whistle given her by Lorelei and trilled one of the songs of calling the siren had taught her.

Though the other riders were too intent on reaching their destination to notice Carole's defection and flew on without her, Bronwyn noticed at once and impatiently reined in her own horse and circled above Carole. Shortly, they were both rewarded by the sight of Ollie bumping across the sea, followed by half a hundred whales and an entire herd of seals, with a porpoise or two clowning along beside the parade. Lorelei and Cordelia, however, were the first to arrive.

"Well, sweeting, had enough of the landlings?" Lorelei asked.

"No, I—er—" Carole began. She had called thinking to ask for the help of these beings she had once so greatly admired, but at the sight of their beautiful, alien faces the memory of their disregard for human life and casual cruelty reached out to smack her as sharply as if she had been bowled over by one of their muscular tails.

"We had a piece of gossip we thought you'd enjoy, actually," Bronwyn hooted down merrily, as if they were all old chums. "My cousin has been feeling like a wretch since depriving you of that ship—"

"And well she might!" Cordelia said with a stab from her gray eyes directed at her erstwhile disciple.

"So she thought you'd enjoy a chance to meet a colleague."

"Colleague? Another siren? In these waters?" The mermaids exchanged indignant glances, replete with the promise of trouble for the interloper.

Bronwyn and Carole for their part exchanged quick, covert grins and Bronwyn continued, "No—not a siren. A man, if you can believe it, who controls sea weather like a siren—why, he's been sinking ships right and left along the Gulf of Gremlins. I hear he's done more damage in a month's time than you did during your whole life in that area, Lorelei."

"Is that so?" Lorelei demanded, slapping the water with her tail so hard she sent up a fountain of spray as high as a ship's mainmast. "We'll just see about that! Suppose you take us to this split-tailed impostor and we'll see how good he is."

"Indeed we will!" Cordelia agreed.

"Dear friends," Carole said, beaming. "I knew I could count on you."

Neither the flying horses nor Loefwin's army—or rather, airborne cavalry, had been able to penetrate the barrier of lightning bolts with which the Ablemarlonian wizard latticed the perimeter of King Roari's island shelter. The horses and their riders hung back at a safe distance, watching the exhausted men and dragons being ever more tightly enclosed by the ships remaining to harass them. The bulk of the foe's navy had already sailed for Queenston, and Loefwin was ready to give the order to his troops to fly there to defend the Argonian capitol and abandon the shipwrecked army.

Before he could give the order, five horses and a swan quietly joined his ranks, and in the sea below an incredible scene began unfolding. First the entire navy island and all, was enveloped in a thick white mist, which the lightning bolts were impotent to pierce. Then, with a deadly gentleness that seemed slow and random but was extremely swift, the ships one by one turned their bows inward toward the island and rammed it, all but the one with the wizard, which was pulled away from the others and wrapped in the coils of a great serpent. The serpent squeezed and Umbers, sails, and all disintegrated into formless flotsam. The lightning bolts died and the sea boiled with the happy activity of the sirens, and the sporting of the other creatures amid the ruins of the ships.

At Loefwin's order, as the magic mist thinned, the winged cavalry swept down upon the island and scooped up the survivors. The dragons lifted their bright heads and valiantly tried to broil what they saw as a new assault, but sank back, defeated by exhaustion. A gray-bearded man with pointed ears joyfully allowed himself to be dragged aboard Rusty's horse, whereupon the two of them told the dragons what was happening and the rescue was allowed to proceed without incident.

King Roari embraced his daughter wonderingly, before he climbed onto Carole's steed, shoving his niece ahead of him.

Bronwyn's horse heaved with relief. It was sure that the weight of both the giant King and his overgrown daughter would have broken its back.

They flew as quickly as possible for the city, but within a league of Queenston Harbor, Bronwyn heard her father groan and followed his gaze down and ahead to the dock and the city streets. The crew of one lone vessel flying a skull and crossbones tried vainly to fend off the attack of six Ablemarlonian vessels, most of which had already landed, and were belching forth enemy troops into the streets of the capital. The citizens of the city seemed to have wisely chosen to evacuate, for the

landing parties met with no resistance.

None, at least, until the vanguard of the attack reached the walls of Queenston Palace, where on the battlements Aunt Maggie Brown had gathered every magician, courtier, palace guard, cook, and chambermaid to defend the townspeople crammed tightly within the walls and armed with their spindles, shovels, shepherd's crooks, and whatever other homely protection they had been able to invest themselves with.

The first assault hit the wall at about the same time the swift flying horses overtook them. Carole's horse was immediately unburdened as the King and his niece jumped down onto the wall. The first Ablemarlonian sailor who scaled the walls on his siege ladder died at the hands of King Roari, who was scrambling down it.

Carole whistled as she had never whistled before, though she would have sworn at the beginning of the day that all the music had been wrung out of her. Her mother flung her one surprised grin and resumed magically hurtling at the enemy pots, pans, crockery, paving materials, and any other household items she could muster. She also started small spontaneous fires among them.

Between her magic and Carole's, the plunder-bent attackers seemed to be having a harvest eve party, dancing spritely, purposeless steps around several cozy little campfires while missiles considerably larger than confetti were hurled at their heads, and flying horses swooped among the stars above them.

Much as Carole enjoyed watching, she hoped the slaughter would be quick, because her lips were trembling with tiredness. Suddenly, a pair of strong hands lay upon her shoulders and a rich tenor voice took up her tune. She tilted her head back and her father's beard brushed her crown. At the phrase-break, he kissed her forehead before redoubling his efforts to aid her own.

Bronwyn fought back to back with her own father, but found she had to close her eyes at crucial times and she winced every time she felt her sword slice through someone. It hardly seemed sporting at all, fighting dancers.

Another foe high-kicked and slashed in front of her and she answered with a blind swipe of her own. The man ducked and she opened her eyes defensively when she realized she had missed. She could have cut him down on the spot for he was glaring over her head to the wall upon which Jack's grandfather and father fought.

"What's 'is Worthless 'ighness doin' fighting for your side, girlie?" The enemy demanded, pointing. "E was supposed to be on the wizard's ship, keepin' that big fella behind you busy whilst we sacks the city for 'im. Lookit this, mates! The bloody King's turned coat!"

The man's angry voice carried over the songs of Carole and her father, and for a moment activity halted, while every head turned to the curly-headed old gypsy. "Why ain't you back on the wizard's ship, where you belong, Majesty?" the soldier demanded.

The gypsy gave him a broad smile, remarkably good-natured under the circumstances. "Fellow countrymen," he said, "I fear if my brother, King Worthyman, called the Worthless, was aboard that ship, he is dead."

"Don't try to fool us! If you ain't the King you're—"

"His elder, if not twin, brother?" the gypsy roared back. "Aye! And I'll end this battle here and now, if ye all agree and my good friend King Rroari stops bashin' you."

Carole and Colin had stopped singing and Maggie had stopped flinging. None of that was necessary at the moment, for the battle stilled as the foreign foe gazed awestricken at the gypsy on the walls.

"What the 'ell do ye mean by that?" the soldier demanded, followed by grumbling agreement from his colleagues.

"I mean I'm your rrightful King, ye bozo! I'm the long lost Crown Prince of Ablemarle, H. David Worthyman, eldest son of King Worthyman the Worthy and legitimate heir! Do any dare contest my claim?"

"Don't look at me!" the soldier said. "Just get us out of this daft country and I'll plump the cushion on your throne meself."

Most of the Ablemarlonian nobles were on the ship lost to the mermaids and Ollie, and were presumed to have perished at sea. Those who remained rapidly acquiesced to the popular demand of their troops and waved their handkerchiefs to call a truce.

By midnight a treaty was signed, guaranteeing peace between the three countries, an indemnity to

be paid in foodstuffs and magical foreign aid to help the stricken Frostingdungians through the winter and spring planting, and an alliance between Argonia and Ablemarle. Ablemarle was to be under the rule of King H. David Worthyman with guaranteed succession granted his son Davey and grandson Jacopo. Also, international traveling rights were granted in perpetuity to the tribe of gypsies known as the Xenobians, since their Queen Xenobia was now also Queen of Ablemarle.

When the treaty had been signed and the dead and wounded of both sides had been removed to the care of Argonian healers, who, with certain secret medicines, were renowned for their ability to effect an astonishing recovery rate, Maggie Brown turned her talents to their more conventional uses. After retrieving her pots and pans and persuading her militia draftees to resume their original positions as maids, table servers, cooks and scullery personnel, she whipped up a great victory feast from what was left in the royal pantry. Her husband, Colin, turned his voice from politically persuasive ditties to celebratory ones. They were all having a very pleasant time of it indeed, particularly the Frostingdungian troops, who hardly knew how to chew, so long had they been gumming gruel. At one point King Roari followed Maggie Brown from the hall and returned with Queen Amberwine in his arms. In *her* arms were Bronwyn's twin baby brothers, both as red-haired as she, and both screaming their heads off.

She was bounding across the hall to admire them and hug her mother when the, front doors swung open and Mashkent and Mirza drifted impressively into the hall on a flying carpet.

Mirza bowed to her and rolled up the rug, ignoring the rest of the crowd. "Greetings, high-born. I trust you consider you have received good value for your credit?" Bronwyn nodded, and slipped on her charm. "Then may I also take the liberty of assuming you are ready to pay your bill?"

A hush fell over the hall and King Roari strode up beside her, his presence dwarfing the merchants. Jack, Carole, and Anastasia also left the table to join their friend. "See here, Bronwyn, who are these rogues and what's this about a bill?"

"I must handle this myself, Father," she said, and turned to the merchants. "Your steeds did indeed win the day for my country. Oh—Oh Prosperous ones, may your Profit increase."

"Good, good," Mashkent said, rubbing his hands together. "And we know you have the pomegranate. If you will be kind enough to turn it over, we will in turn be gracious enough to allow you a small bite of it, which will relieve you of your curse. Since this is such a festive occasion, at no extra cost we will be happy to join you and provide dancing girls—and not only that, but we will also allow your allies," he said and bowed to Prince Loefwin, who saluted him with his meat-tipped dagger, and scowled at Loefric, who avoided his gaze, "to return home on our swift and beautiful steeds."

Jack handed her the hope chest, which had been sitting beside her at table. She clutched it tightly and replied, "A very generous offer. But I find that though still possessed of my curse, I am no longer bothered by it. I have grown used to it, having met so many others who seem to be similarly, if more selectively afflicted, and having also learned that it is powerless to pervert my meaning when I speak to the understanding hearts of my good friends. Seeing what the fruit did to the folk of Frostingdung, I prefer to continue struggling with being governed by my imagination rather than to be deprived of it entirely. If my family deems me unworthy to rule because of the curse, so be it."

"You are being unreasonable, Princess," Mirza said soothingly. "Surely one little bite, and then you can turn it over to us."

"I—I don't think so," Bronwyn answered as calmly as possible, her chin tremblingly undermining her attempt at dignity when she thought of the ruin of Frostingdung and the sense of loss and sadness she had felt when the fruit lay in her hand, before it was enclosed in the hope chest, "Forgive me, please, but to entrust the fruit to any private interest seems to me to be extremely—er—unwise. The fruit is just far too dangerous to continue to exist. Your country is a marvel of magic. What if the pomegranate was—uh—misused again while within your borders?" Without naming names, that was as close as she could come to telling the merchants she suspected them of wanting the pomegranate to turn the Anarchy of Miragenia into a conglomerate under the control of one firm—theirs. "No. I trust you will concur with me that the best thing to do with this fruit is to throw it into the deepest crevasse of the highest, coldest glacier in the world. Fortunately, that's not far."

Mashkent evidently did not agree, for he grabbed for the box. Bronwyn dodged him and darted for the door and the winged horse tethered outside. Mirza snapped his fingers and the horse reared back

and bared his teeth at her.

"Princess!" Jack shouted, "To me!" He was already astride Anastasia, and before the merchants could regain their equilibrium sufficiently to use their magic, she tossed the box to Jack, he caught it deftly, and Anastasia mowed down the merchants as she flew out the doors and into the night.

The merchants, shouting that they were being robbed, ran for the winged horses, but a shrill whistle from Carole slammed the doors in their faces, and when another whistle tune filled the air, they suddenly found they felt like dancing. They whirled and dipped for some moments until Carole judged Jack and Anastasia were well away, and she released them, a smug smile on her lips. When they regained their breath, they ranted and raved until King Roari, who was abiding—but only just—by his daughter's request to handle the situation in her own way, scowled down at them. Then, being practical men, they allowed themselves to be comforted with food and soon found themselves dickering with Emperor Loefwin over the price of a magical winter crop to relieve the food shortage, and an infusion of technical assistance to help rehabilitate the former slaves, once their bracelets were removed.

By the time dessert was served, the door opened again and a half-frozen Jack reappeared.

The Miragenian honor chose once more to be offended, "And how do you intend to pay for the horses, ungrateful woman?" Mashkent hissed at Bronwyn in a tone too low, he hoped, to be heard by her father.

"I—whatever you say," she said. Her misery was only relieved by the fact that her mother was squeezing her hand under the table and Carole patted her shoulder. "As long as it's mine to give. I cannot compromise my father's property, you understand."

"Not the kingdom then," Mirza said.

"In that case, you must give us your first-born," Mashkent declared. A gasp ran through the hall and this time the King did hear and both he and Queen started to protest, but the merchant faced those assembled and cried, "Hear me, Oh merry-makers! The heir of Argonia has profited by her business dealings with us in the form of valuable flying horses that have saved her father's country, and as you have seen, when we bill her for the humble payment we requested in our original estimate, she denies it to us. Now, when we quite fairly demand other compensation and she agrees that we may name our price, her people attempt to use force to deprive us of our Profit! What honor is there in that? How can one do business or sign treaties with—"

Bronwyn cringed but looked resigned when everyone, even her father, took their seats again. She HAD promised them whatever they asked, and they had mentioned before they might ask for her first-born, even though she didn't have one yet, and might not ever. She started to frame an answer that would make it clear to everyone that the members of the royal house of Argonia put honor above even family affection, but found words as hard to frame as she had when she first tried to tell of finding the pomegranate.

Jack saw her anguished expression and the beginnings of her mute nod. He could not let them bully her this way, these slick experienced merchants. Princess she might be, warrior she might be, but in business matters she was as ignorant as he was of court protocol. He interrupted smoothly, the effectiveness of his wheedling gypsy horse-trading tone only slightly diminished by the noise of his still-chattering teeth, "I thought you were honest merchants and not cheats, affluent ones. The Princess but borrowed your horses and they are all being returned to you in good condition. How can you demand that she give you her unborn child in return for horses that were merely rented?"

"Very well, then." The other diners roared in approval of this speech and Mashkent waved his hand, magnanimously. "We are not monsters. We at Mukbar, Mashkent and Mirza also have mothers, and children. Therefore, we will simply borrow the child for a time."

"Five years," Jack said.

"Fifty," Mashkent returned.

"The Princess should enjoy her babe while it is yet a child. Ten, at the most," Jack protested.

"We need adult work from a bonded one, not just a child's appetite to feed with no return," Mirza pointed out.

"Thirty," Mashkent said decisively.

"Fifteen, and that is the last offer I would consider to be less than a declaration of war," Jack said firmly, crossing his goose-fleshed arms over his chest, and carefully avoiding looking at King Roari.

"Twenty-five," Mashkent replied, echoing the gesture.

"Twenty," Jack said.

"Done."

When the Miragenians finally departed with their horses and the Frostingdungian allies, Bronwyn would have felt she could finally breathe again, except that now it was her father who was angry. He glared down at Jack, growling, "You've a lot of nerve, laddy, bargaining with my grandchild's future."

"Your pardon, Great King," Jack said, bowing but unhumiliated. He had three cloaks wrapped around him now and a cup of warm wine had been thrust into his hand. "I meant only—"

"Don't be angry with Jack, Father," Bronwyn said quickly. "I would have given them anything they asked for. He kept me from giving in completely and bought time for all of us."

"It wasna his place t'do so!" the King frowned.

"Was it not, O King?" asked a tall, black-gowned lady with silver streaks waving majestically through her black hair. "Unless I am mistaken, according to the new treaty you have just signed, Jack is heir to the Ablemarlonian throne, even as Bronwyn is heiress to yours. They have no peers that I know of in their own age group. Surely it is not unlikely that a matter concerning the future of Bronwyn's child might not someday also—"

"I catch your drift," the King admitted, though he didn't seem to know if he liked it or not yet. "But I didn't catch your name."

"I am the Princess Anastasia Ilonia Vasilia Gwendolyn Martha Nettle tongue, previously a swan and presently rightful heiress to the Nonarable Lands now known as West Frostingdung, but we will discuss that later, since I am enjoying far too much my recent release from long enchantment to discuss politics."

"But how?" Bronwyn asked. "How did you change?"

"Much the same way you did, I assume, my dear. Contact with the pomegranate, I should say, though perhaps the spell was weakened when I returned home. At any rate here I am and there you are, and after all that bother I am most certainly happy we received some personal benefit."

"We did?" Bronwyn looked down, as if expecting the benefit would be in the form of new shoes.

"But of course! Bronwyn dear, has it not occurred to you that you have long ago used your three minutes' worth of charm and still appear to be speaking truthfully? *I* am certainly under the impression that your curse has lifted."

Bronwyn had to think only a moment before agreeing with her formerly feathered friend. But what she couldn't understand was how she could have failed to notice an important thing like that for all this time? And how had it happened? Was it the influence of the pomegranate, or perhaps her curse, with no counter-curse, had worn out, as the merchants had hinted that it might. She had to test out one thing first. Taking off the charm bracelet, which might contain more power than its makers had thought, she finally shut her gaping mouth long enough to say with a sort of experimental conviction, "I believe you're right about that, Your Highness." And turning to Jack she said, "I just want to say, before you go to Ablemarle, that whatever Father says, and he will say yes, won't you, Father? I will marry no one else but you and that I will miss you terribly and I don't know how I'll stand it without you to talk to."

"My Princess," Jack bowed with a courtliness befitting his new status and kissed her hand, gazing adoringly up at her, "I would rather be lied to by you than told the greatest of truths by any other. But in the matter of this pledge you have made, I shall hold you to it."

"That's all very well for the two of you," Carole said in an aggrieved tone, "You're both royalty now and if you're betrothed you'll get to see each other again, but for those of us who are left without so much as a flying horse to show for their trouble, Ablemarle is a very long way away and —and I'm going to miss you too."

"And I you," he said, shifting on one knee so he was now kneeling between them and could catch one of Carole's hands in his spare one. "But do not mourn over our parting so quickly, my friend. Come spring smuggling season, you may well find me, crown and all, banging on your door to sell you your own fortune. I have been a prince only a short while but I have been a gypsy all my life and if there is one thing a gypsy knows about, it's traveling."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

ELIZABETH SCARBOROUGH was born in Kansas City KS She served as a nurse in the U.S. Army for five years' including a year in Viet Nam. Her interests include weaving and spinning, and playing the guitar and dulcimer. She has previously published light verse Her current home is a cabin in Alaska, which she shares with her husband, Richard, a dog, and many cats.