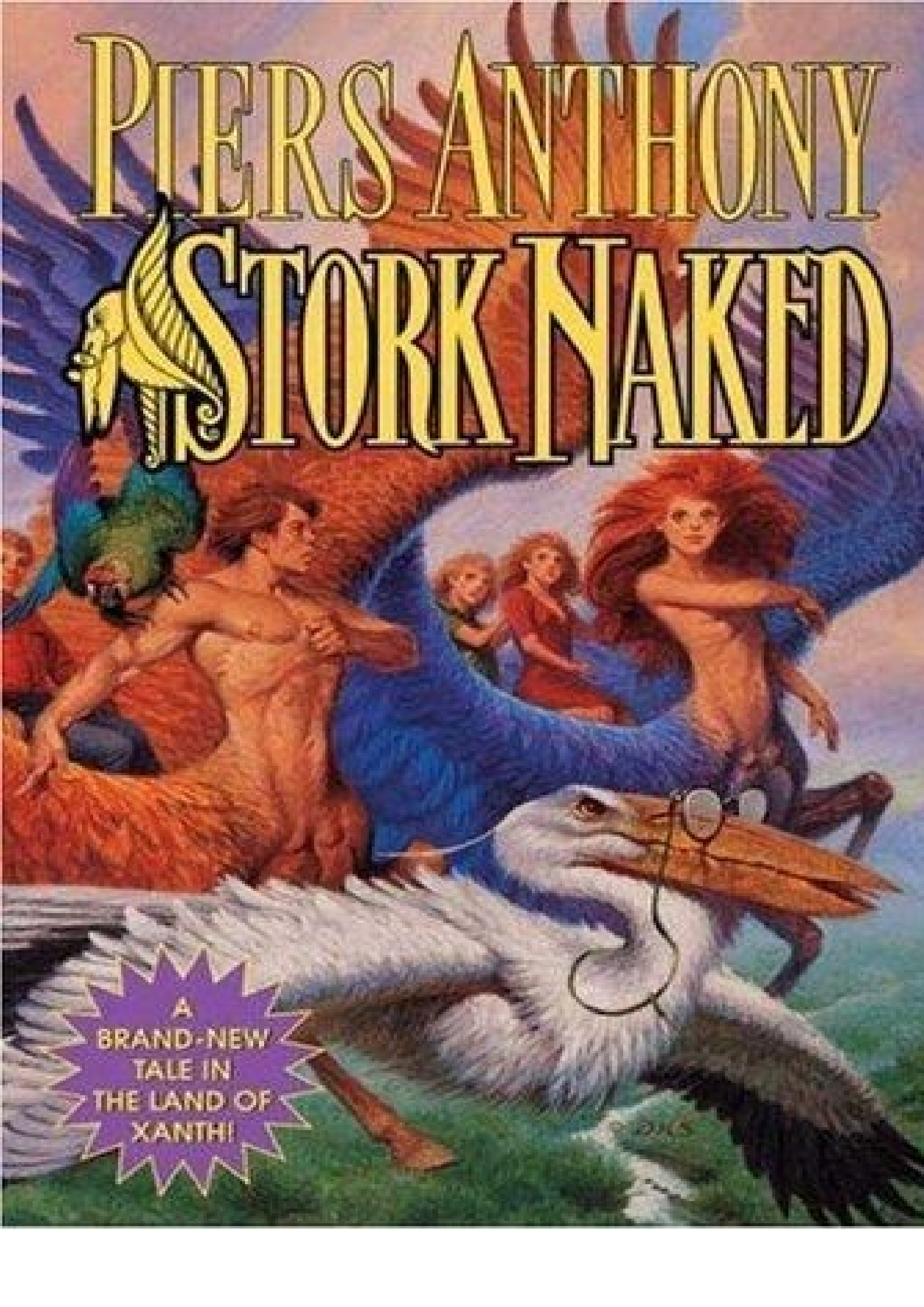


# PIERS ANTHONY STORK NAKED



A  
BRAND-NEW  
TALE IN  
THE LAND OF  
XANTHI!

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## **Stork Naked**

**By**

**Piers Anthony**

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## 1

### **Paradise Lost**

"How come that stupid bird is green?" Ted asked. "Is it sick?" "No, it's just too small to manage a better color," Monica said. "Children!" Surprise exclaimed. "Don't tease the pet peeve." "Aw, why not?" Ted asked. "It's just a dumb cluck."

"It can't understand a thing we say," Monica agreed.

Surprise Golem was babysitting the half-demon children, Demon Ted and DeMonica. Her husband and parents were away, scouting for a suitable home for the new family. With her magic talents she could handle the children, but they were trying to set off the peeve. That was mischief. The peeve eyed Ted. "Your father can't get out of bed. Want to know why?" It spoke in Ted's voice. Ted swelled up indignantly, but the peeve was already eyeing Monica. "Your mother slithers on her belly," it said with her voice.

Monica opened her mouth angrily.

"Because it may tease you back," Surprise said. "And nothing teases worse than the peeve." But the battle was fairly started. "I know why he can't get out of bed," Ted said. "It's because Mom keeps him there, blissed out, so he won't be in the way." "And how does she do that, you ignorant juvenile crossbreed?" the peeve demanded insolently. "Don't try to answer that!" Surprise said. "Why not?" Ted asked.

"Because of the Adult Conspiracy, dummy," Monica informed him. "You're only ten years old." "Well so are you, double dummy!"

"Children, don't fight," Surprise said. "It's no shame to be ten. I was ten once." "But you outgrew it," Monica said.

"And so will you, in a few more years." It was tricky keeping a lid on it, because both children knew more of the dread Conspiracy than they admitted, because of their half-demon heritage and suspiciously tolerant parents. Surprise didn't want to get blamed for a violation. She was babysitting them because their parents were busy elsewhere and few others could handle them. The two children were not related, but were like mischievous siblings with special powers. They were indeed ten years old, but often acted half that age, reveling in their childishness. "Yeah, I guess so," Ted agreed, grudgingly satisfied. But the peeve wasn't satisfied. "That leaves your mother, who can't stand on her own two feet," it said in Monica's voice. That was one of its annoying properties: it borrowed the voice of the one it was with, or whoever it was addressing, so that it seemed to third parties that the victimized person was talking. That could be distinctly awkward at times.

"That's because she's a naga," Monica said. "Nagas don't have feet in their natural forms." The peeve opened its beak, ready to set the children off again. It lived to insult people, and the angrier it made them, the more satisfied it was. It had finally found a home here because Surprise's father was Grund Golem, the only one who could match the irascible bird insult for insult. The two got along well. But the last thing she wanted was to have the two half-demons getting into a contest with the bird. The Adult Conspiracy was bound to get tweaked if not outright abused. "Let's tell a story," Surprise said. Children always liked stories. "About the Adult Conspiracy." Oops; she

had meant to name some safe minor adventure, but her nervousness about the Conspiracy had made her —

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misspeak. "I mean—"

"Yes, let's!" both children exclaimed, picking up on it instantly. "With every dirty detail," Ted concluded. "No, I meant *not* about it," Surprise said desperately. "You said, you said!" Monica chimed. "Now we have to have it. Exactly how does it work?" They were really trying to get her in trouble, and knew how to do it. How could she handle this? "It's not as if it is any mystery," the peeve said with a superior tone that was also Surprise's voice. "All that is required is for the man to take the woman and—" "Don't you dare!" Surprise said, conjuring a black hood that dropped over the bird's head and muffled it. "\_\_\_\_!" the peeve swore, the badness stifled by the hood. It flapped its wings, lifted into the air, did a loop, and dropped the hood to the floor, where it faded out. It opened its beak again. "If you say one bad word, I'll lock you in a soundproof birdcage," Surprise warned it. "You wouldn't dare, you uppity wench!"

A birdcage appeared next to the bird. It had thick sound-absorbent curtains. The peeve reconsidered. She had brushed with Surprise before, and learned that she could do just about anything once. If she abolished the birdcage, she would not be able to conjure it again. But she could conjure a very similar one, or a bandanna knotted about its beak, or a cloud of sneeze powder that would prevent its talking for several moments and some instants left over. Her magical ability was limited only by her imagination. She was in fact uncomfortably close to being Sorceress level, and might one day be recognized as such when she perfected her ability. That was why she was able to handle the demon children, and they too knew it.

"No bad words, harridan," the bird agreed, disgruntled. "Idea!" Ted exclaimed, a bulb flashing brightly over his head. "Have the peeve tell about the Adult Conspiracy."

Oh, no—they were back on that. No amount of magic could handle that violation if it happened. She had to change the subject in a hurry. But for the moment her mind was distressingly blank. Monica clapped her hands. "I thought you were out of ideas, Ted, but that's a good one." "It is *not* a good idea," Surprise said. "The peeve can't speak a sentence without insulting someone." But the children knew they were onto something. "Is that true, bird-brain?" Ted asked. "No, poop head. I just don't care to waste opportunity. I can cover every detail of the Adult Conspiracy without uttering a bad word." "Wonderful!" Monica said.

"No you don't!" Surprise said. "I'll make a laryngitis spell." "Awww," the children said together.



"I can tell about it without violating it," the peeve insisted.

~~"See—the bird's reformed," Ted said eagerly. "Under a pig's tail," the peeve said. "I'll never reform."~~

"But you can really annoy Surprise if you make good on your pledge," Monica said with a canny glance. "No bad words, no violation, but you cover the subject and she can't stop you." The peeve received her glance and sent it back. "You're not half as stupid as I took you for, Harmonica." "That's DE-Monica, greenface. As in Demon-ica." "Ick," the bird agreed.

"So it's decided," Ted said. "The bird sings." Surprise hesitated. The three were ganging up on her, but she was curious how the peeve could do what it said, and maybe it would help get them through until some more innocent distraction turned up. "Very well. But the rules will be strictly enforced."

"Absolutely, honey-pie," the bird agreed with her voice. But there was a shiftiness about its wings that suggested it was going to try to get away with something. The children sat on the floor facing the peeve's perch. Surprise set about making a snack for them all, but she kept a close ear on the bird. Nothing daunted it except a direct enforceable threat. "Long ago and far away," the peeve said, "there was no such thing as the Adult Conspiracy. People summoned storks freely and no one cared. Children knew all about it, and watched when they wanted to. That was how they learned how to do it. But then the confounded civilization arrived and messed up the natural order. Adults started concealing it, and setting other ridiculous rules such as not letting children hear the most effective words. It seems the adults were jealous of the carefree life of children, so decided to keep interesting things away from them." "Hear hear," Ted agreed.

Surprise did not see it quite the same way, but as long as the bird stayed clear of key words and concepts she couldn't protest.

"There are also stories that the adults grew fearful of a revolution by the children, so acted to prevent it. After all, suppose children started summoning babies on their own? What further need would there be for adults? They might discover themselves superfluous, and be on track for elimination. They didn't like that, so decided to stop it before the children made their move." "That's interesting," Monica said thoughtfully. "Something should be done about it." "Tyrants never yield their power voluntarily," the peeve said. "Power is addictive; they do everything they can to hang on to it." Now both children were thoughtful. Surprise was disgusted. It wasn't like that at all. She had not been party to the Conspiracy long—only a year or so—but in that time had summoned the stork with her husband Umlaut, and was expecting delivery of her baby at any moment. Babies needed adults to take care of them; children were too irresponsible. So there was good, sensible reason to prevent children from summoning storks. But of course children didn't see it that way. The confounded bird was

succeeding in really annoying her, without breaking any rules. In seemingly good language it was insulting

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the entire adult species.

"It crystallized with little Princess Ivy in the year 1071, thirty-five years ago," the peeve continued. "Adults had been preaching the gospel of secrecy, but it hadn't been very effective; most children saw through it soon, and used bad words, and could have signaled storks if they had really wanted to. The told Ivy she had been found under a cabbage leaf; only later did she learn that babies didn't just materialize under leaves, they were brought there by storks. Her talent was Enhancement, and she Enhanced the story until it became a wider reality. Later she told her twin sister Ida, whose talent is to make real what others who don't know her power believe. Thus the Conspiracy became thoroughly established, extending well into the future and half a smidgen into the past. It has been almost inviolate ever since, and most folk believe it always existed. But it didn't; it was mostly myth until Ivy and Ida made it literal."

Surprise was astonished. Could this be true? It didn't really matter, because certainly the Conspiracy existed now, but the idea of it not existing at some time in the past was subtly disturbing. "That's really something," Ted said, impressed. "How did you learn about this, peeve?" "I made it up, crazy boy."

Both children burst out laughing. "You're lying, bird beak," Monica said. "We can tell. You weren't lying before, but now you are."

"Just testing," the bird said, annoyed.

"Say," Ted said. "I heard about a man with a spot on the wall talent with a difference: he could summon them from elsewhere. Some spun, making folk nauseous. More fun." "And the relevance is...?" Monica inquired snidely. "If he summoned one from where the Adult Conspiracy first got started, and took it to Princess Eve to analyze it, we could learn exactly how it happened." The peeve looked at him. "You do have some good ideas, lunatic lad." "No you don't," Surprise called. "That man is adult, he would never cooperate." "Awww," both children said together.

Surprise smiled to herself. Not for nothing was it called the Adult Conspiracy. All adults participated to the eternal frustration of children.

There was a sound outside. Surprise glanced out the window and saw a heavy bird coming to a landing. It looked like a stork.

"The stork!" she cried. "It's making the delivery!" "Another brat on the scene," the peeve said peevishly. "Great!" Ted said.

"We never saw a delivery before," Monica said. Surprise wasn't sure they were supposed to, but there was no way to stop them following her to the

door. She opened it, her heart pounding.

~~There stood the stork, a bundle before him. "Surprise Golem?" he inquired. "That's me!" Surprise said. "I've been expecting you." "I am Stymy Stork, with a bundle of joy. Let me handle the formalities, and the baby is yours." The stork used his beak to draw a piece of paper from his vest pocket. That was odd, as he wore no clothing, only feathers. He donned glasses so he could read the note. That was odder. "You ordered a baby, gender unspecified, nine months ago?"~~

~~"Yes!" Surprise was so excited she felt faint. "You are duly married to one Umlaut?"~~

~~"Yes. Give me my baby."~~

~~"Not so fast," Stymy said. "I'm on probation; I have to follow every rule exactly or I'll get my flight feathers pulled. You are of appropriate age to receive a baby?" "Yes, I'm eighteen."~~

~~The bird perused the paper. "You were delivered in the year 1093. Let's see, that would make you—I'm not good at math—thirteen years old." He did a double take. "That's too young." "I was five years old when delivered," Surprise said. "That's why I was named as I was: Grundy and Rapunzel had almost given up waiting for me in five years, and then suddenly there I was, late but whole. I really am eighteen."~~

~~"I'm not sure of that," the stork said. "According to the rule, age is counted from the moment of delivery forward. I can't complete this delivery." Surprise was stunned. "But that's my baby! I must have it. You can't let some idiotic confusion deny me my motherhood."~~

~~"Take your complaint to headquarters," Stymy said. He put away the paper and glasses, poked his beak into the loop of material tying the bundle together, and lifted it. "No!" Surprise cried. "Don't take my baby!" The stork turned, ran down the path, spread his wings, and took off, bearing the bundle away. Surprise was so amazed and chagrined that she just stood there and watched it happen. Even the peevish seemed taken aback. "Why didn't you scorch his tail and ground him before he got away?"~~

~~"That sort of thing is not done to storks," Surprise answered automatically. Yet she might have done had she thought of it in time.~~

~~"Better go see the Good Magician," Ted suggested. "He always knows what to do." "Or Clio, the Muse of History, to fix the records," Monica said. "Before that stupid bird delivers your baby to someone else."~~

~~Surprise's flustered awareness fought to return to control. She knew she had to do something~~

immediately; it just wasn't clear what. So she grasped at the most reasonable straw. "Good Magician Humfrey. I'll try him. Thank you, Demon Ted." The boy turned bright pink, including his hair and clothing. The appreciation had caught him entirely off guard.

"Leave us here and go," Monica said. "I'll tell the folk when they return." That alerted Surprise to practical aspects. "I can't leave you! I'm responsible." "No problem," Ted said. "Take us along." Had she not been under such pressure, Surprise would have known better. As it was she made a dreadful decision. "Of course."

She took a moment to formulate a suitable spell, then formed an invisible permanent basket and had the children join her in it. She conjured the basket to the edge of the moat around the Good Magician castle.

There was the moat monster guarding the drawbridge, which was down. "Hi, Sesame," Monica called. It was Sesame Serpent, Souffle's girlfriend, emulating a moat monster. She was good at emulations. "I have to see the Good Magician," Surprise said. "It's urgent." Sesame shook her head.

"You mean I have to go through Challenges?" Surprise asked, appalled. "I don't have time. I have to get my baby from the stork."

But the serpent was adamant. There was no free passage here. She had her orders. "You're as bad as the stork," Ted said. "Always got to go by the book, no matter how stupid it is." "Isn't that a rancid kettle of fish," Surprise's voice said. "Must give you quite an appetite, snake-eyes." Oh, no! The peevish had come along too.

Sesame frowned at the bird, then coiled like a giant rattlesnake and made ready to strike. It was an excellent emulation, and she clearly knew it was the bird who had spoken. Moat monsters were hard to fool. The peevish fluttered its wings as if ready to fly, but it was obvious that it could not get away fast enough to get beyond the range of the serpent's jaws. "Not that that's necessarily bad," it said hastily. "I've eaten some very nice rancid fish in my day." Sesame considered, then uncoiled. She had made her point, forcing the bird to back off. A woman crossed the drawbridge, leaving the castle. Sesame did not challenge her; obviously her business with the Good Magician was done. "Hello," she said brightly. "My name's Susan. I just learned my talent. Now I have to inform my family that I'll be away a year serving my Service for the Good Magician. It's worth it."

"What's your talent?" Ted asked boldly.

"I'm so glad you asked," Susan said. "I can't wait to try it out. I'm supposed to be able to turn spoken words into tangible shapes and colors, which I can then use to make sculptures or paintings. I always

wanted to be an artist, but lacked the wherewithal." She concentrated, then spoke: "Red shoes." The red

shoes appeared. "Blue trousers." They appeared, dropping on the shoes. "Yellow shirt." It was there on top of the trousers. "White hat." It landed on the pile. "Black gloves." They were there. Then she arranged the items on the ground to form the image of a man. "It's crude, I know, but it's my first effort." "You're right about it's being—" the peeve started. "A nice first effort," Surprise said loudly, overriding the bird's insult. "Thank you," Susan said, pleased. She gathered up the items and walked away. Unfortunately Surprise was still stuck with the need to run the Challenges, if she wanted to see Magician Humfrey. It was an awful nuisance, but she couldn't afford to waste time arguing. She would simply have to navigate them. There would be three, and her magic would not avail her. "Sesame, I am babysitting the demon children, Ted and Monica. I won't be able to keep a proper eye on them while handling the first Challenge. Please, would you keep an eye on them and the peeve while I'm busy? I know you're a good person, and this shouldn't conflict with your moatly duties." The serpent nodded. She would do it.

"What do you know about babysitting?" Ted demanded. "You're just a big snake." Sesame oriented on him, assuming the aspect of a horrendously strict schoolmarm. Forbidding authority fairly radiated from her.

The demon child quailed. "Not that there's anything wrong with snakes." There were things to like about Sesame. But now Surprise focused on the first Challenge. The obvious way across the moat was the drawbridge, which remained down across it. But there was now a small lighthouse at its outer landing, blocking the way. There might be a path around it, but when she tried to make it out, the lighthouse flashed so brightly that she was blinded for the moment. That was no good; she had to see where she was going, or she would fall into the moat instead of setting foot on the bridge, and surely wash out.

She walked around the lighthouse to check the far side. It was no better; there was hardly room to ski it to reach the drawbridge. Acute vision was important. But the lighthouse wasn't flashing now, so she took a step toward it.

The second flash was worse than the first. She had to cover her eyes and wait for her vision to return. This was definitely the Challenge.

Just in case, she tried her magic, invoking a spell of darkness to cloud around the lighthouse. Sure enough, it didn't work; her magic was null during this exercise. She had to get through by her body and wit alone.

Could she manage it by feel? If she squinched her eyes tight shut and shuffled forward with her hands before her, she should be able to feel the path and the wall of the lighthouse, and nudge her way around it to the end of the bridge. Then she saw that in places the moat lapped right up against the house, and the stones looked irregular and wobbly. She was likely to misstep and fall, she couldn't afford that. She paused to ponder, sure there was some way. There was always a way, in a Challenge. She had missed it so far because she was just blundering through; she needed to use her mind. But how could her mind save her eyes from the flash? She wasn't used to using her mind; her magic talents had solved most

of her problems so far.

~~There must be something special about the lighthouse, some key to getting by it. A key—was there a key to its door, so she could get in and turn off the light? Where would it be? She looked, but saw no key. Too bad. Now if only there could be some pun key instead. Xanth was mostly made of puns; she had stepped on one more than once, getting disgusting smears of it stuck on the bottom of her shoe. Ugh!~~

Pun. Her mind circled around that. This was a lighthouse. Could it also be a light house? With abrupt resolve she shut her eyes and advanced on the structure. She felt the light come on, but she didn't need to see for this. She advanced until her hand touched the curving wall. Then she squatted and reached far around the tower as she could, her fingers catching in crannies. She heaved. The house came up. It was feather-light. She carried it away from the moat a suitable distance and set it down. Then she faced away from it and opened her eyes. The bridge was open. She had cleared the light house. She went to fetch the children, who were watching a story being acted by the serpent. Sesame emulated one character after another, most effectively. As Surprise approached, she emulated the grumpy Good Magician, and they burst out laughing. Who needed words, with ability like that? But by the time she got there, they had started another game. Children's lives moved so swiftly! Had she ever been like that, Surprise wondered? She paused more than a moment, to let them finish before taking them away. They were pretending to have special talents, with Sesame as the judge of the best one. "Summoning flying rugs," Ted said, sitting down on the ground as if riding a rug. "Zoom!" "Conjuring useful elixirs," Monica said, gesturing as if holding up a vial. "Only I can't control which." She pantomimed sipping. "Beauty cream, I think." "You turned into an ogress!" Ted said. "That was ugly cream." Sesame angled her head toward Ted. He had won the exchange, mostly because of his rebuttal of Monica's talent.

"Now I'm making a whole gram," Ted said, shaping a form in the air with his hands. "That's hologram," Monica said with a superior tone. "Whatever. It shows what's happening to one person, or animal, or thing. Like maybe a nymph showing her panties."

"Nymphs don't wear panties, dummy."

"Oh, yeah. Well, then, the nymph herself, running around, hobbling. That's almost as good." "Talent or confusion," Monica said, making spell-casting motions. "So she's there but you can't think to look."

"Oh, mice!" Ted swore.

Sesame angled her head toward Monica. She had won that one.

This seemed to be the best moment to break it off, before the children got tired of it and started something else. "Time to cross the bridge," Surprise said. "Thank, you Sesame." The serpent nodded, then sank under the water of the moat. Surprise liked her; Sesame had once traveled with Umlaut, helping him deliver letters, in the process bringing him to meet Surprise. That was not a favor to be forgotten. Surprise had liked Umlaut, so naturally married him when she came of age. And signaled the stork, and—

"Darn!" she swore under her breath. The horror of her loss had sneaked up on her. "Oooo, what you said!" Ted said, scraping one forefinger against the other. "Mustn't swear in the presence of children," Monica informed her imperiously. But she couldn't hold her severe expression long, and dissolved into giggles. "She misspoke," the peeve said. "That word is not a full cuss. What she really meant was—" "On," Surprise said sharply, cutting off the bird while herding them to the drawbridge. Probably it had not really been about to violate the Conspiracy, but she couldn't take the risk. A man was crossing the bridge, going the other way. His nose was bright blue. "Hey, pinkeye," the peeve called. "Whatcha poke your nose into?"

But the man was not annoyed. "I came to see the Good Magician to learn how to nullify my blue nose. But the Gorgon knew the answer and gave it to me free: I have only to drink the liquid of the beer barrel tree. So now I don't have to serve a year for my answer." "Well bully for you, beer belly!" the peeve said. But the man was so pleased with his free answer that he still wasn't annoyed. The peeve was, though; it hated to have insults fall flat. "Maybe you'll get your Answer free, too," Ted said. "I doubt it," Surprise said. "But it really doesn't matter. I'll pay whatever I need to, to get my baby back." "I guess that answer stunk your britches," Monica told Ted, putting him in his place as usual. Then she turned momentarily thoughtful. "You know, a nice talent would be the ability to grant wishes, but only for those who have wishes for others and don't know they'll be granted." "Princess Ida's already got that, dodo," Ted said witheringly. Monica refused to wither. "It's not the same. If I had that talent, and you wished for Surprise to get her baby back, I could grant it, if you didn't know my talent." "What dope would grant a wish for someone else?" "Enough, children," Surprise said. "I think we're somewhere, and I want to concentrate." The bridge debouched at a garden outside the main castle gate. It was filled with trees of different types. They grew so close together and branched so thickly that it was impossible to pass them to get to the castle gate. So this was the second Challenge. "Aw, who cares about stupid trees," Ted said snidely. "They have wood for brains." A branch lifted, sprouting bright sharp thorns. "Stay out of this," Surprise said. "It's my Challenge. I may be disqualified if you participate."

"Awww."

"Why do you have to see the old gnome anyway?" Monica demanded. "This is dull." "If you brats don't shut up, she'll change her mind and take you home before seeing the grumpy gnome," the peeper warned. "She knows she should have done that before coming here." Both children went seriously silent. They did not want to miss the action. "Thank you peeper," Surprise said. That shut the bird up too; it wasn't used to being appreciated, and wasn't sure how to handle it. Now she addressed the crowded copse. It was clear she couldn't simply pick up any of the trees to clear her way, but there had to be a way to nullify their opposition. What could it be? They were all different types, no two the same. Was that a hint? But it hardly seemed to matter whether the species matched; they were all too solid, and as the thorny branch had shown, capable of opposing any effort to pass them.

She pondered, cogitated, considered, contemplated, and finally thought about it. Again she was reminded of how little actual thinking she had done in the past. Her magic had taken care of most things, and her parents Grundy and Rapunzel had handled the rest. But now she had no choice. She couldn't think of a sensible idea, so she tried a nonsensical one. "Who are you?" she asked the trees. Of course she got no answer. But that gave her a better idea. Maybe she was supposed to identify them. She wasn't sure how that would help, but at least it was an effort.

The nearest tree in the center had leaves with what looked like printing on them. She knew that type. "You're a Poet Tree," she said, laughing. The tree disappeared.

Surprise stared. She hadn't been expecting anything, but that was something she still hadn't expected. She had named it, and it was gone. Was that a good or bad sign? Then she realized that it had to be the key to the Challenge: she had to name the trees to clear a path through this tight little forest. Good enough. She looked at the next tree straight ahead. It was a vast ugly thing whose whole aspect was arrogant and negative. She hated it on sight, and wanted to spit on it. In fact she wanted to spit on anything handy; she didn't much like anything that was the least bit unfamiliar or different. That was odd, because she was normally a tolerant person. Why should she instinctively hate a tree? Was there some magic aura making her react that way?

That was it! "A Bigot Tree," she said. Sure enough, the tree vanished. Its wood was notorious, making people get stiff-necked and condemnatory without good reason. It was like reverse wood, only it instilled bad attitudes. Nobody liked the wood of the bigot tree. She hoped never to encounter anything like it again.

The third tree was a considerable contrast. It had a nice ambiance, with many pretty flowers and a sweet smell. She liked it immediately. That was a clue to its nature: what was this nice one? "Sweet gum?" she asked. The tree did not move. She hadn't really thought it was that anyway. This tree was amiable throughout. What would perfectly describe that?



Then she had it. "Pleasant Tree!" It vanished. She was almost sorry to see it go; she had really liked its company.

The next tree was another contrast. It seemed to have been burned. Its trunk and leaves were gray and flaky, as if the fire had been so sudden it had consumed all the living substance without affecting the form. All that was left was ashes.

A bulb flashed. "Ash Tree." And it departed. She was developing a channel through the thick forest. The trees were tight on either side, but she had eliminated four in the center. She was getting the hang of this. The next tree had normal bark and leaves, but its fruit consisted of an assortment of what seemed to be caged propellers, all of different design, and colorful oblongs. She had never seen anything like this, and had no idea what it was.

"Propeller tree?" But she knew as she spoke that that could not be it; there was no pun. Things without puns had only dubious legitimacy in Xanth. Anyway, many of the fruits had no propellers; they were more box-like. The tree did not fade.

She reached out very carefully and touched the rim of the nearest fruit. It whirred, dropped to the ground, and buzzed in circles around her before returning to its branch. She touched another, one of the oblongs. This one spread out like the tail of a peacock to display a group of dancing hippopotami whose skirts flared to allow fleeting glimpses of their panties. It was a good thing she wasn't a man; she might have freaked. A third one whirled its blade and produced a series of vile-sounding bleeps. Surprise was cursing! Surprise paused to ponder further. What were these things? What did they have in common? Only the breeze of their activities, she thought wryly. Then she got it. They were fans, in the tree. A rotary fan going around her, a fan-tasia showing an ungainly dance, and pro-fan-ity cursing.

"In-Fan Tree," she exclaimed, and it vanished. But her identification seemed to have set up the next tree, because this one bore fruit that was actually tough little babies in helmets and armored diapers. She recognized it immediately as an Infant Tree, but hesitated to say so lest there be some trick. It was too obvious, and too similar to the last one in name if not nature. "Hello, babies," she said tentatively. "Hello yourself, wench," the nearest baby said. "Don't give us none of that shift." That startled her. "You talk."

"Small talk," the baby agreed. "Now if you'll get the bleep out of our way, sweetheart, we'll prepare for the march." He turned his head and bawled "Companee—ten-SHUN!" All the other ten hanging babies snapped to attention.

This was ridiculous as well as annoying. She was looking for a baby, but nothing like these military brats. "Infant Tree," she said, and it vanished. Maybe the similarity of names had been intended to make her suspect a ruse.

The next tree bore full-grown men and women in scanty costumes that showed too much of their bodies. They hung in pairs of male and female, but were not paying attention to their immediate companions. They were constantly turning in place and eying others of the opposite gender. In fact they were flirting, exchanging secretive smiles and glimpses of flesh. It seemed they preferred any partners but their own. Surprise was disgusted. Where did these folk think they were, Mundania? Xanth wasn't like this.

But her Challenge was not to be judgmental but to name the tree. It seemed to be the last one, and vanishing it would clear the way through. So what could it be? A Grownup Tree? A Cheater Tree? Those weren't suitable puns.

The people started swinging on their branches, the couples going in opposite directions. The swings became larger, so that they were almost touching their closest neighbors. In a moment, certainly no more than a moment and a half, they would start connecting. Then they were all too likely to do things the children shouldn't see.

A guy reached out and caught the hand of a gal. They drew each other together. She kissed his face while he grabbed her bottom. Surprise heard the children behind her giggling naughtily. The situation was desperate.

Then it came to her with an ugly flash. "Adult Tree." It wasn't a perfect pun, but it worked, and the tree faded out. The way into the castle was clear. "Come on, children," Surprise called. "We're going in." "Aww," Ted said, "I wanted to see what those swingers did when they got together." "After they kissed and groped," Monica agreed. "And tore off their clothes," the peeve added helpfully. Exactly. She had acted just in time.

They were now at the entrance to a comfortable room. A woman stood there. Did she represent the third Challenge?

"Hello," Surprise said, uncertain what else to do. Politeness always seemed best when in doubt. "I am Surprise Golem, and these are my charges, Ted, Monica, and the pet peeve." "I am Ann Serr," the woman said. "I have answers; what are the questions? All of you must respond." "All? But this is my Challenge, isn't it?" "If they are to enter the castle too," Ann said firmly. Surprise sighed. Things just kept complicating. "I suppose," she agreed reluctantly. Ann looked at Ted. "Ida Moons."

That baffled Surprise. How could Demon Ted ever figure it out? "Aw, that's easy," the boy said. "What does Princess Ida do when out of sorts?" He had gotten it! Surprise masked her relief, knowing more was coming. Ann looked at DeMonica. "Comes the Dawn." "What does Princess Eve say when her traveling twin sister returns?" Monica asked immediately. Ann looked at the peeve. "Gross Prophet." "Who is that huge fat guy dispensing ugly dribbles of the future?" the bird asked without hesitation.

Ann looked at Surprise. "Thesaurus."

~~She knew what a thesaurus was, she thought: a big book of words. But it surely wouldn't do to ask what was the name of such a tome; there needed to be a pun. She couldn't think of any. What an irony the others all got their questions readily, while she was stuck. Suppose she failed to find the question. What would she do then? She would have to take the children back, of course, delivering Monica to Nada Naga and Ted to the demoness Metria. But she would lose her baby. That was too horrible to contemplate. Something nagged at a loose corner of her mind. Metria—what was there about her? Her constant mischievous curiosity about human events, her messed-up words—~~ A bulb flashed. She had it! "What ancient reptile gives Demoness Metria her many wrong words?" she asked aloud. And of course the answer was the thesaurus. Ann Serr was gone. Surprise had handled the third Challenge and was free to enter the Good Magician's castle. "Come along, children," she said briskly, as if this were routine.

## 2

### **Stork Works**

Wira appeared. She was Humfrey's daughter-in-law and was the chief castle guide though she was blind. "Hello, Surprise," she said. "I am so sorry for your loss." So she knew. "Thank you, Wira. I do not intend to lose my baby. That's why I'm here." There was a look almost of pity in the woman's blank eyes. "Please come this way. The Gorgon has cheese and cookies for the children, along with tsoda pop." "The Gorgon?" Surprise knew of her, of course, but had never actually met her. "She is the Designated Wife this month. She likes children." Oh, right: the man with the blue nose had mentioned her, so of course she was here. The woman with the devastating countenance but nice nature. They entered the guest room. Assorted pastries and cheeses were already laid out, with pitchers of pop. There was even a perch for the bird, with a variety of colorful seeds. They had evidently been expected. "Half a greeting, stoneface," the peeve said. "When did you get your burgeoning butt out of Hell?" "The same time you got your tainted tail out, pigeon poop," the Gorgon replied. "How's your fowl-mouthed beak these days?"

The children tittered. It was clear that the bird and woman liked each other. They had indeed known each other in Hell, and the Gorgon had rescued the bird and brought it back to Xanth. "I will notify the Good Magician," Wira murmured as Ted and Monica dashed for the goodies and the peeve flew to the perch.

The Gorgon was a tall, stately matron with myriad little snakes in lieu of hair and a veil over her face. This

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was to stop her from stoning all those who gazed on her visage. Surprise remembered that at one time the Good Magician had made her face invisible, but it seemed that folk found that more disquieting than the veil. "So good of you to come, dear," she said to Surprise. "It's not a social visit," Surprise said tersely. "I have to recover my baby." The Gorgon did not comment. "Have some cheese. This is Gorgonzola; I stoned it lightly myself." "Thank you." Then things abruptly caught up with her, in this moment of relaxation, and Surprise burst into tears.

"I would comfort you if I could," the Gorgon said. "But I fear there is worse to come. Humfrey tried to discourage you from coming. I'm sorry."

Surprise stared at her. Worse than losing her baby? The Gorgon had been to Hell and back; she surely knew. But the shock stiffened her resolve. "I will handle it." "Meanwhile, which binding do you think looks better for this volume?" The Gorgon indicated a fat but coverless book on a separate table, beside a pile of colored covers. "It's a dyslexicon." "A what?"

"A dictionary of words spelled backwards. Some of our visitors are backwards, so I use this to translate. It unclutters Humfrey's library a bit. But I want a tasteful cover on it." Surprise looked at a sample page that was open. NOGROG-Gorgon. The woman had been checking her own entry, understandably. "Maybe a confusing shade of gray?" "Very good," the Gorgon agreed, and stared hard through her veil at a black wrapper. Daunted, it faded into a confusing shade of gray, and she put it on the book. "A confusing cover for a confusing book. Thank you."

"She was just lucky guessing," the peeve said. "You're almost as grumpy as Humfrey," the Gorgon said, amused. "Maybe that's why I like you, Sickly Green." To Surprise she added: "The peeve does have a redeeming quality, though it would rather be roasted on a spit than admit it."

Wira reappeared. "The Good Magician will see you now." Surprise followed Wira up the curving narrow stone stairway to the dark crowded chamber that was Humfrey's office. The gnomelike man was sitting at his desk, poring over a huge tome. That would be his fabled Book of Answers.

"Surprise Golem is here, Magician," Wira murmured, and faded back. Humfrey looked up. "Give over girl. This is not for you." "You haven't even heard my Question!"

"I am not answering your Question. I am giving you apt advice. You have no idea how ugly the situation is. Go now, without pursuing this matter further." She glared at him, her astonishment shifting toward outrage. "The bleep I will! I want my baby. How do I

recover it? That's my Question. I'll perform your year's Service. Give me your Answer."

The Magician shook his head. "You will not be sensibly dissuaded?" "I will not be," she agreed grimly.

"There will be no Service as such. The mission is more than sufficient." "I don't understand."

"You will, in time. You are quite certain?" "Yes."

"Then go to the Stork Works. Che Centaur will accompany you. He knows the way, and has a pass to enter."

"As soon as I return the children and peeve to their homes," she agreed eagerly. "No. They must go with you." Ted and Monica appeared, evidently done with the Gorgon's refreshments.

"They can't! If there is danger—"

"Their parents have already agreed, knowing the stakes." "That's impossible! They don't even know their children are here." Humfrey snapped his withered fingers. "Parents, show yourselves." The demons Vore and Metria appeared. "We learned while you were tackling the Challenges," Vore said.

"My wife Nada knows and reluctantly approves." "My husband Veleno says it's up to me," Metria said.

"My referee." "Your what?" Surprise asked.

"Reference, judge, arbiter, umpire, determination—" "Decision?" Surprise asked.

"Whatever," the demoness agreed crossly. "It has to be done. But I insist on coming along." "No," Humfrey said.

"Listen, gnome-butt, that's my son going into dreadful danger. You can't deny me my protective bent

"Your what?" Humfrey asked tiredly.

"Talent, faculty, genius, flair, gift, inclination, aptitude, knack—" "Instinct?"

"Whatever, grump-face. I insist. After all, it's my turn; I never got to see the unclear missives of the Howl of Oinks."

"That's the nuclear missiles of Cuba, Mundania," Humfrey said. "And they weren't in the Bay of Pigs

"Whatever," she agreed crossly.

~~"Demoness, only two adults can go on this mission, and they are already accounted for. The rest must be children, animals, mixed-breeds, or other. You do not qualify. Physically, if not mentally or emotionally, you are single-species adult."~~

Metria considered half a moment. Then she vanished, replaced by a soulful big-eyed little girl in a tattered patchwork dress. "I am Woe Betide," she said. "A pitiful five-year-old orphan waif." Ted and Monica sniggered. They had seen this coming. Humfrey glowered down at Woe. "Are you sure you want to invoke this loophole, demoness?" "O, yes, your Awesome Grumpiness. I am just a poor brave little match girl with matches that give folk their hearts' desires." She produced a box of matches.

"Shall I strike one for you, to make you less grumpy?"

He ignored that. "And you won't revert and renege the moment I am out of sight?" "Never, O Auspicious Ancient." A little halo appeared. The children's sniggers became stifled snorts. They loved seeing the auspicious grump get teased in his own lair. Metria was pun-intended matchless at annoying folk in any of her guises. The Good Magician uncorked a small vial and let its swirling candy-colored vapor waft out. "So be it. Remain as you are, for the duration, match child." All sniggers and snorts were abruptly stifled. Woe looked alarmed. "Oops! I smell a stasis spell." "That will keep you as you are for the duration, as agreed," Humfrey said with grim satisfaction. "You weren't going to renege anyway, so it makes no difference, does it, waif?" "No difference," the tyke agreed woefully. "There remains the peeve," Surprise said. "It may be obnoxious, but shouldn't be thrust into danger." As she spoke, the disreputable bird appeared. "Keep your yap shut, woman," the peeve said politely. "It can't be as dull as Hell." "The centaur awaits you," Humfrey said, returning his tired gaze to the tome. They had been dismissed. Sure enough, the Centaur was appreciating the Gorgon's half-stoned cheese. He was a handsome winged stallion. "I did not realize that I was to have Companions on this dangerous quest," he was saying as they entered the room.

"A nice young woman, three naughty children, and an irascible bird," the Gorgon agreed. "But that's ridiculous! This is not a mission for innocents." "Who are you calling innocent, hoof-nose?" the peeve demanded. "I have served in Hell." "And soon wore out your welcome there," the Gorgon said fondly. The centaur turned and saw them, recognizing them all instantly. "Oh, my. Surprise, you do not belong

with this motley crowd."

"The stork took away my baby," Surprise replied evenly. Che nodded. "Now I understand."

"Well, I don't. What is so dangerous about going to the Stork Works to demand that they correct their mistake and give me my baby?"

"Your baby has probably gone to the same place the Simurgh has. Otherwise the Good Magician would not have put us together. He demanded no Service?" "No Service," she agreed. "How did you know?" "Because the mission is the Service, and it is extremely disproportionate to the Answer." He frowned. "Surprise, you are such a nice girl, this is hardly fair to you. You must decline." "Never!"

"I feel guilty, but I can certainly benefit from the support of your myriad talents. Yet your chances of recovering your baby may be unconscionably slim." "Why? Why is everyone so negative? What is it I don't know?" "Let's get on our way to the Stork Works, and I will explain," Che said with regret. They

assembled outside the castle. Che had saddlebags full of the Gorgon's cheese and cookies, guaranteed to keep the children and bird occupied so that the two adults could talk on the way. Surprise

transformed into a bare-breasted centaur mare and carried Monica and Woe Betide on her back, while Che carried Ted and the peeve. She pretended that she felt perfectly at ease, as centaurs had no shame

in being natural, as they put it, but she did feel awkward without clothing. Suppose someone stared at her front? In fact Ted was already doing so, the nasty boy. They nicked their tails to make themselves

and their riders light, spread their wings, and took off. In two and a half moments they were flying high above the forests and fields of Xanth. This was fun, actually, though Surprise knew she would not

be able to become the same kind of centaur again unless she fathomed a different spell to accomplish it. She was glad she was flying beside Che, who knew the way, because she would probably have

gotten lost at the outset. She was not used to flying, having saved her abilities for future need. Now that future had arrived. Che wasted no time in incidental discourse. "As you know, I tutor Sim Bird,

the Simurgh's chick. Thus I am privy to aspects of the Simurgh's existence that may not be generally known." "I know Sim is guarded by Roxanne Roc, so is quite safe," Surprise said. "His destiny is to

learn everything in the universe. He is a very smart bird." "True. But now he has a task for which he is as yet unprepared. He has to watch over the universe." "But that's the Simurgh's job. It will be

centuries or millennia before Sim takes her place." "The Simurgh has disappeared."

Surprise flew several wingbeats before that registered. "She deserted her post? She wouldn't do that."

"Not voluntarily. But she is gone. It is my task to locate and rescue her."

That was daunting indeed. "Do you know where she is?"

~~"In a general way, yes. And that, I fear, is where your baby went. The Good Magician knows. I asked for his help, knowing that I could not manage it on my own, and he said I would have capable if unusual Companions. I never suspected they would be you and the children. I suppose Metria could help if she chooses."~~

"No. She is locked into her Woe Betide aspect. I'm not sure how much demon magic the waif can do.

"I have matchsticks," Woe called helpfully. "Small magic," Che agreed as the waif lost interest. "Ted and Monica will be more capable. As for the peeve—unless we require the aggravation of assorted monsters, that's a serious liability." "The Good Magician must have reason."

"He always has reason," Che agreed. "But this seems even more deviously obscure than his usual."

"Just where is the Simurge, in general terms?" "In an alternate universe. An unfamiliar one."

Surprise's mind balked. "An alternate what?" "There are perhaps an infinite number of realities," Che explained. He was very good at explaining, being a tutor. "Each is much like the realm we know, but not identical. One may be the same as the familiar Xanth, but have one different character. There might be a Surplus Golem instead of a Surprise Golem, for example, able to do half the available talents, each one twice. Yet it seems that little differences can rapidly become big ones. A difference of a single grain of sand might in a thousand years lead to a remarkably different Xanth. There may also be convergent evolution." "You just lost me."

"I apologize. I explained the concept some time ago to Sim, and forget that it isn't generally known. Suppose that ancestral horses and humans interbreed and in time produce centaurs. Suppose that ogres and unicorns interbreed, and in time evolve to become very similar to centaurs, so that it is hard to tell the two species apart."

"They're converging," Surprise said, getting it. "Evolving and converging," he agreed. "They are not the same, but seem very similar. So some of the alternate Xanths may be less similar to ours than they appear. It may be a devious situation." "And the Simurgh is in one of those similar-seeming Xanths?"

"Yes. That much we know. It is a small subset of a very large picture. Unfortunately we don't know exactly which one."

"Why not check them all? How many are there, half a dozen?" "Half a million dozen, perhaps. The prospect is daunting." "But you said it's a very small subset." "A small section of infinity is still infinity."



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