



CASTLE
CHANSANY

3
VOLUME

CHARLOTTE E. ENGLISH

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FROUSE BOOKS

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ROSEWATER AND WINE

THERE ARE, AS ONE might imagine, drawbacks to holding one's Court in a flying castle, a long, long way above the ground.

There are advantages, too: have not most of the great castles in the land taken up their grand posts atop tall hills—perhaps even a mountain, were it a trifle on the smaller side? The enemy, if enemy there are, are like to find themselves at a severe disadvantage for it. How much more so, then, if the king one would like to depose by right of arms is habitually situated a mile or two over one's head, with naught but empty air in between.

Doubtless every king or queen in the land would take to the skies, had they the wizards to accomplish it. But there is one, rather severe difficulty associated with an otherwise delightful situation, and that is: the king and queen are as remote to their subjects as they are to their enemies. And, of course, to their fellow rulers.

Solutions exist. There is the King's and Queen's Progress, when King Griffin and Queen Mellany condescend to venture down, and show themselves to the peasantry (and the nobility, which is important, for tis the latter who'll foot the bill). These are grand undertakings, and expensive: I don't suppose you have ever attempted to move a castle full of monarchs and aristocrats, wizards and courtiers, jongleurs and scribes, maids and grooms, tutors and cooks and dressers and ladies-in-waiting and knights and apprentices and a prince or two across many leagues of distance, in an organised parade, and then take them all back again at the end of it? Minus only some one or two hapless souls fallen down some of those hills, perhaps, or plummeted off horseback, or otherwise removed from the roster in ignominious style. Their Majesties' Chamberlain would not recommend it.

If one merely wishes to hobnob with one's royal neighbours for a little while, there is a better way: that of temporary import.

Such is the occasion. The Queen of a nearby kingdom approaches as we speak, her daughter with her. Their retainers being as numerous as their consequence is high, their progress is necessarily slow; even so. If we are to go looking for Jessamine today, we find her: not atop the castle walls practicing her fire-spitting; not with Tambul in the Mixery, or the Potionery, contributing to some fresh disaster there; not with her beloved Wizard in his study, perusing the second-favourite spell book; but down in the vast kitchens, side-by-side with Chef, breathing smoke all over a tray of comfits

slowly forming under her talons. It will, we are told, develop the flavour.

The tray might have come together sooner, if there hadn't been so many disappearing into Jessamine's mouth; 'Stop that,' barked Paglar. 'There'll be none left.'

Jessamine scoffed. No fewer than four trays of sugar-coated almonds had already emerged from her worktable, mostly intact: more than enough for several banquets. 'It's for my stomach,' she said. 'I've got indigestion.' She absorbed another one, surreptitiously, and received a rap over her knuckles with a spoon.

'Those are the prince's favourites,' said Paglar severely.

'You said that about the marmalet,' Jessamine retorted. 'And the pepper cakes, not to mention those pearl-coated rosewater wotsits.'

Chef had on her usual black gown, with a cloth over her dark hair: yet she was turned half white with dustings of sugar, and flour, and other powdery comestibles. 'So they all are,' said she. 'And his highness deserves a treat. He's had a hard year.'

'I don't know as he has, particularly,' Jessamine disagreed, handing off her tray to a passing maid for drying, and beginning another. Dipping caraway seeds in syrup, she mused: 'Must be a peaceful life, being turned into a dish. I don't know as I wouldn't like to try it myself, come to think of it.'

Chef Paglar looked ready to return a sharp answer, but her glance took in the state of the kitchens: black-clad kitchen maids everywhere underfoot, turning out cakes and tarts and comfits by the hundreds, and more than just Jessamine pressed into temporary service. ‘Perhaps it would, at that,’ she sighed, turning a ball of dough into a neat, pressed circle with a few waves of her rolling-pin. ‘You ask the Wizard about it, next time you’ve set fire to one of his scrolls or some such. I daresay as he’d agree fast enough.’

A smoky snicker answered her, but Jessamine made no other reply. The prince *had* undergone quite the adventure, and he seemed in merry spirits enough, if you asked him. But he hadn’t been seen much about the place, since he was rescued, and brought home, and the last time Jessamine had bumped into him there had been something funny about his manner. He kept tittering. It wasn’t like him.

His royal parents had announced a feast, to be followed by a banquet, and there were royal guests on the way to attend it—all the way from Far Below. But the prince loved sweets: everyone knew that. The banquet was as much to tempt his appetite, and lift his spirits, as it was to impress any strangers: everyone knew that, too.

In the midst of the marchpane, and the condimacke, and the lemony sucket, there was building a fine subtlety: ethereal spun sugar, stiffened with gum, and made into the shape of a sinuous dragon. Jessamine slipped off her high stool, and waddled over to it, tasting the air near it with a flick of her

tongue. It was floral, roses and cinnamon and other such things, and it resembled Jessamine, a little.

‘Away with you,’ ordered its creator, the Lady Alvan. She stood in cook’s blacks like the rest of them, only hers were finer: a real lady, a Court lady, with a taste for sweets and a deft hand. Ladies had time for hobbies; this one crafted gingerbreads and sugar-coated fancies for the pure joy of it. Her ladyship was dusting gold leaf over the dragon’s eyebrows, a delicate process.

Jessamine scuttled away.



NO MYSTERY AS TO when the royals and their entourage arrived: a fanfare sounded, castle-wide. Twelve stout and hearty footmen stood atop the walls with silver-chased horns in their large hands and blew upon them fit to burst; everyone heard it.

Jessamine, tired of comfits, dozed in a sunlit spot in one of the corner turrets, plenty high enough to see all that unfolded below. The fanfare woke her; up she leapt, and stared beadily down into the Far-Below.

A town approached, or, at least, half of one.

Walking was beneath royalty, Jessamine knew, they were too important for that. These royals eschewed riding as well, for near the front of the long train of gaudily-dressed courtiers there bobbed a handsome palanquin, enclosed in gold-threaded silk. A quartet of horn-blowers walked beside it, heralding

their approach: a fine idea, but Jessamine heard not a note of it.

Garstang was down there, being wizardly. Somebody had to convey their honoured guests from the Far-Below into the High-Above, and wouldn't he be in a foul mood later: nobody had expected quite so many attendants. The foreign queen had a wizard or two of her own, at least: two courtiers, draped in spangled velvets, had presence to rival Garstang's.

'Seems they'd like to impress us,' she muttered, to nobody in particular. The nearest of the footman eyed her sideways, still intent upon his horn: she thought she heard a muffled snort.

Jessamine stayed to watch the palanquin begin to rise, gently, as suited a party of important ladies: a wisp of cloud wafted it upwards. The rest would follow soon enough, Garstang with them.

By the time the royal ladies stepped into the castle, Jessamine had hurtled down and down the stairs and taken up a hiding-place: behind the heavy carven legs of one of the great, throne-like chairs that crouched at the back of the great hall. Nobody could see her under there, shadowy as it was, though her view consisted largely of the ladies' swirling skirts, and a great many booted and slippered feet.

The foreign queen's weren't hard to spot, for her slippers shone with seed pearls and gold thread, and her skirts were purple velvet. She had a queen's posture, too, feet firmly planted right in the centre of the hall. Her courtiers—and her

daughter—fluttered around her, like bees circling a rose—and there were Garstang’s curly-toed shoes, crimson today, and threaded with silver. His face appeared, briefly, stooping: his bright eyes smiled at her, and withdrew.

Curses.

Jessamine slithered out, in time to catch a glimpse of Her Majesty’s face: she was stout, round-cheeked and smiling, with a crown of greying dark hair. At her side, her daughter: a near copy, only taller.

The hall groaned at the seams, overfull of richly dressed idlers. Despite the tumult, the queen’s eye fell on Jessamine soon enough, skewered her like a chunk of meat: Jessamine froze.

‘Why, a dragon, and out of its cage!’ cried she, smiling. ‘How lovely.’

A pause answered her; then Garstang managed a little laugh. ‘Your Majesty is very droll. Naturally I would not dream of confining my Familiar in any sort of cage.’

The queen continued to smile, but something hard came into her eyes: the skewer twisted.

Jessamine fled through the nearest open door, and ran straight into yet another pair of legs: muscular ones, clad in excellent green cloth, with silver trimmings. She looked up, and up: the eyes of Prince Armael, when they met hers, held a lurking horror.

‘This way,’ she hissed, for her quick brain was stringing facts together like beads on a necklace: *why* all the fanfare, why the entourage, why the silks and velvets and jewels? Why the grand feast, and the banquet, and all the prince’s favourite sweets? Here was an unmarried, wayward prince: out there was an unattached, suitable princess.

Jessamine scarpered down the passageways and stairs until she reached the sanctuary of the kitchen. Prince Armael thundered along behind her.

They arrived, winded and panting, into a different kind of tumult: the kind that smelled of spices and butter and pastry; and here was another tyrant, Chef, tsking away as she battered toffee into bits with her rolling-pin.

‘Mind where you go!’ Paglar shouted, for a small, alarmed dragon underfoot could many a disaster wreak (as Jessamine had previously discovered). If Chef took much note of Prince Armael, or realised his identity, she gave no sign of it, except to thrust a mixing-bowl into his hands, and a spoon. ‘Stir,’ she instructed, and he did.

Lady Alvan remained at her post by the subtlety, a glitter of stray gold leaf caught in her sunny hair. She looked up. ‘Oh,’ she murmured, and returned to her work.

Jessamine slunk that way, sat at the feet of the sugar dragon with her tail around her toes: she stared at it, her eyes huge. ‘Not sure as Her Majesty will like it, after all,’ she muttered. ‘Best build a cage round it, ladyship.’

‘A cage,’ echoed Lady Alvan, lips pursed. ‘No, that would entirely ruin the effect.’

‘You’re telling me,’ Jessamine muttered.

Prince Armael had drifted over, lazily stirring his aniseed-scented bowl. ‘How magnificent a creation,’ he declared, with his slightly jittered smile. ‘A pity to eat it, even.’

‘All her ladyship’s work,’ Jessamine said, beaming toothily, and added, ‘It’s modelled after me.’

The prince accepted this without a blink, as did Lady Alvan. Chef came to take the bowl off him, but he stayed after: stayed to watch her ladyship painting talons with silver powder, and tying bunches of ribbons about its delicate legs.

Jessamine slithered away, and left them to it.



NO ABLE COURTIER HERSELF, Jessamine’s experience of castle feasts usually consisted of a dish full of tidbits, assembled for her by Paglar, and left in the Wizard’s study. She was too small to help getting under the dancers’ feet, and too waspish to let it slide by unchallenged when she did.

This feast, though: this one was different.

The ceaseless roar of chattering voices assailed her ears, even from a vantage point tucked under the prince’s chair (rather than Garstang’s, to the latter’s bemusement). Ladies sat on either side of his highness, their skirts falling in folds of scarlet or sapphire silk to screen Jessamine’s hideaway: almost

a tent they made of it, if unduly sumptuous. On his right sat Lady Alvan; on his left, the foreign princess, Isadora.

The queen, her mother, occupied the other side of the table—both queens, in fact, Mellany as well, and King Griffin: a central phalanx of monarchs surrounded by lesser nobles.

They hadn't got to the sweet things, yet, that was later. Everything stank of meat, a pungent medley of aromas which *might*—if anything were going to—bring Jessamine out from under the prince's chair, in search of something sustaining. But she'd not like to come under the foreign queen's eye again, so she stayed; stayed, and listened.

'Do tell me about your home,' Prince Armael had said, a little while ago: a game enough question, to get the princess talking.

Talk she did, forthrightly enough: of troubadours and jousting, of fine horses and falcons and hunting parties, of grand displays of magic performed for the ladies' amusement.

'Rampant nonsense,' Jessamine muttered to herself. Did they do nothing at this foreign court that wasn't loud, savage or absurd?

'And when you come to pay us a visit, your highness, I do trust you will bring your little dragon with you.'

Jessamine, startled, bumped her head on the underside of his highness's chair.

'Oh!' roared her mother, the queen. 'Yes, it did have a ferocious look about it. I should like to see how it flies.'

‘Flies, your majesty?’ echoed the prince, politely.

‘Yes: do not you hunt them? Like hawks after rabbits. It is the greatest amusement.’

A short pause: then the princess added, ‘I am sure your dragon will acquit itself creditably, your highness; it really had a sporting look about it. There is no need to feel dismayed.’

It was sorely tempted to take up ankle-biting as the greatest amusement. Jessamine contented herself with a few smoky, fuming breaths instead; and, aware of a tension in his poor highness, wrapped her tail around his toes by way of comfort.

The prince continued in a silence Jessamine interpreted as stony; it was Lady Alvan who responded. ‘I am afraid Jessamine could not possibly be spared from her duties with our Court Wizard,’ said she smoothly.

‘She doesn’t fly,’ managed the prince, chokingly.

‘Cannot fly?’ Her foreign majesty uttered an airy laugh. ‘Why, whatever is the use in a dragon that cannot fly?’

‘Right,’ said Jessamine, and erupted from under the table. She made a lot of noise about it, clawing her way up the back of the prince’s chair amid wreathing smoke; when she reached the table-top, she encountered several pairs of staring eyes.

‘Oh, Jess-o-mine,’ said the Wizard Garstang, eyes twinkling. ‘There you are.’

King Griffin and Queen Mellany merely watched her in silence, both displaying an unusual stillness, even for monarchs on display. They were, she thought, experiencing

feelings that could not be permitted to show on their royal faces: she wondered what those might be.

Their guests felt no such restraint. Princess Isadora uttered a little shriek, and flapped uselessly at her gown, to which tendrils of draconic smoke still clung. ‘Oh, hush,’ said Jessamine irritably. ‘I haven’t hurt it.’

To the queen she said, with a semblance of dignity: ‘His Highness said that I *don’t* fly, your majesty. Not that I can’t. I daresay I can at that, if I thought it worth my while, but I won’t do it for the sake of chasing after rabbits.’

Garstang was grinning. ‘Jessamine prefers her rabbits roasted, and served in a silver bowl,’ he declared.

‘Well,’ Jessamine amended. ‘It doesn’t *have* to be silver.’ She slunk down the table towards her wizardly master, who had, as she’d hoped, saved a bit of his dinner for her. Curled up at his elbow, she settled down to enjoy her nuggets of succulent venison, pigeon-pie, and crispy potatoes with palpable unconcern. She hunched herself up with her back to the foreign queen and her daughter, so did not see how they were pleased to take this reproof.

She saw when dinner ended, though, and the dancing started: Prince Armael led the Princess out first, as he must. They made a handsome enough couple, she supposed, with her hand laid on his satin sleeve, looking up at him so prettily. Someone had put His Highness in blue, the better to match her sapphire skirts: hmph.

She was still watching sometime later, when Garstang relieved his future liege of the lady. Prince Armael led Lady Alvan out; a clashing medley of silks they made, bright-red and royal-blue; Jessamine, full and contented, smiled.



LATER, MUCH LATER, AFTER the feasting and the dancing and the music were over, and most of the Court had retired to their repose: now, at last, came the banqueting hour.

Jessamine had slunk away some time before, pattered on soft feet down the corridors and up the stairs into the banquet-house: no small thing, a sugar-feast, and full worthy of its own, special chamber. The old queen had caused it to be built, and handsome it was: octagonal in structure, each of its eight sides set with twinkling panes of glass. The moon and stars shone silvery through them, largely uncontested, for a sparse scattering of candles set up only a dim glow within.

An eight-sided table in two tiers stood tall and proud in the centre, exhibiting its succulent dainties for the delectation of these most-favoured few. Jessamine's smoked-scented almonds teased her nostrils from a silver-chased bowl; beside them, sugar-soaked nuts and spices heaped upon carven platters, dried and sun-hardened and sweet; fragrant musk and ambergris and rosewater hung heavy upon the air, amid a pervasive, thick sweetness.

Jessamine, arrived upon an empty room, had sneaked and sampled as she liked, lingering over sour orange sucket

glistening with sugar. Later, with a sated smile and an ache in her belly and her teeth, she'd curled herself in the centre of the topmost tier, and waited.

In twos and threes, they'd entered: Queen Mellany and King Griffin and Prince Armael; the foreign queen and her daughter; Lady Alvan, and eight or ten nobles and ladies, bright as birds, chattering like starlings. Something checked their tongues as they crossed the threshold, some innate respect for the sanctity of sugar; came midnight, and a hush prevailed, a velvet silence, muted as the slow-shifting moonlight creeping across the floor.

Ornate boxes lay upon every silk-cushioned divan: carved ebony, silver-inlaid, and fragrant. Inside, moulded gingerbreads awaited the guests' delight, heavily spiced and gilded in gold; nestled beside them, nuggets of marmalade, quince-scented and splendid. Tall-stemmed goblets bore fruits simmered in hyppocras, redolent of cinnamon, and red wine; none of these were for dragons; Jessamine, with a pleasing sense of martyrdom, had left them alone. They enchanted the Court: many a soft, awed cry went up; Jessamine would carry those down to the kitchens tomorrow, to gladden Paglar's ears.

For a time, all ate and sipped and enjoyed with hearty delight, alike in elegant gluttony.

It couldn't last. The prince, weary, perhaps, or entranced, was forgetful of his duty; had wandered after Alvan and sat by her before a long window, their shadowed locks silvered by the same moonlight. He offered her marmalade, jellied

rosewater, cinnamon comfits; she offered him smiles and wit and spiced wine. Their several majesties looked on, defeated: some with a mild and fond regret, others with a glittering, hard-eyed stare.

Jessamine pitied only the Princess Isadora, offered up like an ornate treat, gilded and scented and sweet, yet powerless to attract. She slipped at last off her perch and sidled to the princess: there, smelling of smoke and rosewater and wine, she sat by the silk-slipped feet, and wrapped her tail around a silk-clad ankle.

A hand came gently down, and touched her head, softly. ‘It’s all right,’ said the princess Isadora. ‘We would not have suited, and anyway, there’s someone else.’

‘Then why are you here?’ Jessamine asked.

Isadora hesitated. Then, splintering that brief silence came a hard, glittering laugh; it matched the smile in her mother’s eyes.

‘Oh,’ said Jessamine.

Isadora said, on a faint sigh, ‘I wish—’

She never said what it was that she wished, for a dulcet fanfare sounded, a tinkling melody of bells; the door opened.

In came the subtlety, with Paglar behind it. They’d mounted it on wheels, for it had grown to near monstrous size: bigger than Jessamine, far too big to carry. The dragon, sugar-spun, fragile, bared its teeth at the courtiers, its tail standing high.

What an entrance. Jessamine, struck with sudden inspiration, scurried out from behind Isadora's legs, and ran beside it, puffing smoke out of her jaws. The candlelight caught it, gleaming like moon on the mist: a wyrm bathed in the fires of its own making, as it should be. Someone gasped; Jessamine snickered.

A fearsome sight it made, at that, unlike Jessamine: larger, prouder, grander, stouter, for all that its limbs were wrought from brittle sweetness, would snap like twigs. No cringing, captured thing, this: its wings spread above and behind it, flared, ready to fly. Dignity, strength, and pride: what a sight it made, what a joy; had Alvan *known*, somehow, had she heard, had she made it so by intent?

It was serving its purpose, Jessamine felt, for a foreign queen sat stiff with indignation; a foreign princess radiated delight. And here came Alvan, a goblet of hypocras in hand: she gave it to Isadora with a curtsy; to Jessamine, she winked.

'I trust your highness is pleased with the subtlety?' she enquired.

'Lady Alvan made it,' hissed Jessamine, beaming.

Isadora sat a little taller, straightened her shoulders: if she'd had wings, they would have flared and flown, framed her little figure in majesty. 'It's perfect,' said she, and toasted the lady and Prince Armael with the wine. 'Everything is just perfect.'

A FIT OF THE SULLENS

THE FIRST-FAVOURITE SPELL BOOK lay inert, entirely inert, atop the Wizard Garstang's own writing-desk, and though you may (with some justice) be disposed to observe that a book is *supposed* to be a stationary sort of object, this is a grimoire; the rules are different, in that there aren't any.

It lay like a block of wood just felled from its tree, as though not so much of a particle of it had been pressed and processed into paper, with powerful words scribed upon it.

Jessamine, perched atop the tall back of the Wizard's own, personal chair, stared down upon it in appalled silence.

'I think it's dead,' she uttered, in a sepulchral whisper.

'It can't be dead,' said the carpet, mossily.

'It can't be dead,' Jessamine repeated, stoutly, as though she might, with a little firmness, ward off the terrible truth.

Came then a slight, staccato rustling, dusty and dry. The book's covers twitched.

‘It coughed!’ Jessamine scurried down the chair’s mightily tall arm and slithered onto the desk, getting her fierce little eyes up close to the patient. She peered, and prodded.

The bookish cough came again, a little louder.

‘It isn’t dead. But there’s something wrong.’

Being the Wizard’s favourite, the spell-book was a proud, peacockish thing, ordinarily. It wore its preferred colour, sapphire-blue, most of the time, properly adorned with intricate gilding (of course). But, being a Wizard’s personal favourite spell-book, it was much more marvellous than that.

Those ornate covers were chiefly for the eyes of the uninitiated—or merely unsuspecting. A glamour, of a sort. Look past the reassuring seeming of (relative) ordinariness, and underneath there’s another book entirely. A mighty grimoire, clad in enchanted glass stained in every hue; its cover was a window into distant worlds and far-off lands (or into the kitchen, if Jessamine was particularly hungry, with a bird’s eye view of Paglar’s freshest batch of spiced cakes).

‘Come on, now. What’s the matter?’ Jessamine crooned to it, and tapped it gently with a claw. ‘It can’t be jealousy, can it? Not again?’

She did not often trouble herself to look past its glamour, its contents being more the material thing. It took a moment or two, for her eyes to remember how. Then the gold-and-sapphire gleam of its dressing-gown (so to speak) fell away, and beneath that: nothing. The glass (if glass it was; something

like, at least) was cold and dead, all misted over, like thick fog. A palpable chill came off it, freezing Jessamine's claws.

It was unwise, no doubt, but a tendril of panic being just then unfurling in the dragon's innards, she made a tactical error. Her long lizardly tongue flicked out, and tasted—and, for a moment, stuck.

She wrenched it back, and spat. 'Tastes like mould,' she said to the carpet, and the shelves, not to mention the chair.

'Oh,' answered the chair. 'That's bad.'

'Very,' confirmed the carpet, mostly asleep.

Jessamine sat up straight, and addressed the shelves in tones of ringing authority. 'Right. Nobody's got into the Library as shouldn't have, I suppose?'

The shelves returned a decided negative. 'Safe and sound in here, the lot of them. Only the Wizard's been in. But that one,'—they meant the first-favourite spell-book—'has been lying out there a while.'

'Forgot it, did he, and wandered off?' Jessamine spat again, either with disgust at her absent-minded master's habits, or on account of the mouldy taste, lingering; perhaps both. 'Right. I don't like to say it, but this is an emergency.'

The furniture, anticipating brilliance, waited.

'We'd better take it to the Book Room.'



CASTLE CHANSANY BEING A topsy-turvy sort of place, it perhaps makes more sense than it doesn't: that "The Library" should refer to a scant handful of volumes (priceless though they were) hidden in a secret shelf in Wizard Garstang's Study; while Their Majesties' grand and ancient collection of learning, some several thousand volumes strong, should be known simply as the Book Room.

An apt enough term, however humble. Successive generations of monarchs and wizards and librarians having added and added to it, the several vaulted chambers of the Royal Library struggled to contain the ocean of knowledge and literature crammed into it. Scarcely was there a surface visible that didn't have a book on it, or more likely several. The grand, gilded shelves, twenty feet high, being long since filled, a great many books—bound in leather or cloth, painted and inscribed and engraved, wrought from vellum and paper and linen and everything besides—had spilled over onto the writing-desks, where they lay in towering stacks; onto the carved oaken chairs, some of them, hauled from seat to seat as necessary by scholars too accustomed to the chaos (and too attached to the volumes) to object. They were stacked on the floor in places, though never too close to the long, light windows.

Whether it was the chaos, or the grandeur, or simply the sheer weight of untold ages of learning and imagination, Jessamine found the Book Room repellent.

If the truth were to be told, though, it was not disgust or dislike or impatience that tugged at her guts as she entered, but

something much nearer fear. Not a bookish dragon, this: in a Wizard's Study or a busy kitchen or a sun-drenched balcony she could be comfortable, but here was an ocean of paper to drown her in.

Still. This was an emergency.

A small dragon, then, slunk stealthily into the vaulted halls of the Book Room and hovered by the door, tongue nervously darting. Twas chaos within, as always, albeit a hushed sort of madness: several Court Ladies and Gentlemen had arrayed themselves attractively across straight, tall-backed chairs, and sat paging ponderously through stout (or slender) volumes; poetry, belike, or biographies of some sensational personality, now deceased. These were quiet enough, as were the two or three librarians (distinguishable by the royal-green robes they wore, and rather harried expressions, besides). The books, though, were in something of a flap.

'Sorry,' uttered Jessamine, as a green robe went sailing past, a thunderous librarian inside it. 'Could I just—'

'No, no, no!' bawled the librarian, ringingly. 'We do *not* shelve histories of the Thousand Isles adjacent to the philosophies of the Tanglid Empire! Why, it could cause a diplomatic incident!'

Chastened, a tall shelf of books emptied itself again in a hurry.

'It's just that—' Jessamine tried again, addressing another.

‘I have but *just* settled the natural sciences on the *lower* shelves,’ barked she, sweeping past Jessamine in a flurry of dust and wool. ‘The ladies like them, and I’d like to see *you* climb a twenty-foot ladder in a Court gown!’

A book tittered, or was it a sylph?

Jessamine scuttled under a large writing-desk, and peeped out. The Book Room would be reorganising itself for some time yet, she judged: the tomes and scrolls and grimoires were all in uproar.

She’d not brought the first-favourite spell-book, after all: a fat volume, and growing fatter by the year, it was too heavy to carry down all the winding passages, and up and down the spiralling staircases, of Castle Chansany.

She’d come on a fetching errand, then, and at this rate she’d be at it all afternoon.

Jessamine exited the sanctuary of the writing-desk, and drew herself up to her full and terrible height in the centre of the Book Room’s mosaic-tiled floor. She inhaled a vast and hearty breath, opened her maw, and bawled: ‘I NEED TO SEE THE BOOKBINDER.’

The words came up out of the fiery depths of her belly, swelled, perhaps, with the force of a mild but growing panic; if the Wizard were to come back from wherever he’d gone and find his first-favourite spell-book ailing—fading—*dead*, even, what then? She’d be for it. Besides, she rather liked the book, her own self. It had some of her favourite cantrips in it.

At any rate, her cry rattled the shelves, and sent a choking cloud of dust up out of all the forgotten corners. Somebody coughed; a book tittered, again.

‘He’s in his room,’ said one of the librarians, and pointed.

‘I thank you,’ said Jessamine, with a courtly bow. A pair of ladies stared; a book, curious, trailed after her as she scurried out again.

The Bindery clung to the edges of the Book Room like a mollusc, a humble shell of a chamber alive with a hive of industry. Jessamine hurried through a low-lintelled and unprepossessing doorway, and found, on the other side, a collection of tall tables, each with an absorbed person working at it. A promising litter of objects cluttered the table-tops: freshly-cut sheaves of paper; lengths of soft leather, ready for shaping; wood sawn into thin sheets, for covers, and spools of thick thread; metal tools of every shape and purpose; three mighty book-presses; and at least five tomes halfway built. Jessamine sniffed, sneezed on a curl of sawdust, and the thick, heavy scents of leather and wood and glue.

She needed to find the important one; an apprentice couldn’t be tasked with mending the Wizard Garstang’s first-favourite spell-book, oh no. Her keen eyes travelled past two, three, four young faces, with nothing much to recommend them; working competently enough, but with no aura of authority, no air of certainty and skill—ah, there. An older gentleman, promisingly white-haired and bespectacled, handling a volume of great antiquity with exquisite care. The Bookbinder.

Jessamine scuttled nearer, coughed. ‘Hello, Bookbinder, sir. I have a pressing problem on my hands and I’d hoped you might help me.’

He didn’t hear, or he chose not to answer. He was, to be fair, engaged in a delicate operation: something to do with the crumbling spine of his delicate charge.

And this book doubtless deserved the master’s tender care, but nonetheless:

‘SIR!’ thundered Jessamine. ‘THE COURT WIZARD’S PERSONAL FAVOURITE GRIMOIRE IS ABOUT TO SNUFF IT.’

His head came up, at that. So did everyone else’s. A thick silence fell.

‘Oh, dear,’ said the Bookbinder, and set his tome down (carefully). ‘You’d better show me.’



HIS EMINENCE THE BOOKBINDER bent in silent scrutiny over the Wizard Garstang’s writing desk and remained there for some time. The spell-book, pale and mute, bore patiently with a succession of peerings and proddings, conducted with the gentle, expert hands of a physician. Whatever might be the Bookbinder’s thoughts as he conducted this examination, he was not disposed to air them. Jessamine and the furniture waited in silent dread for the verdict.

At last, the great man straightened. ‘I believe I understand the problem,’ said he.

‘Yes?’ said Jessamine, trying, without success, to read the nature of the awful truth from the man’s composed countenance. Just how bad was it?

‘It’s suffering from a Fit of the Sullens,’ said the Bookbinder.

Jessamine, cautious, said: ‘Well. That doesn’t sound too bad?’

‘I’m afraid it is very serious. Many books never recover from it.’

‘Oh,’ said Jessamine, quietly. ‘And what becomes of them, after?’

‘We pack them up, and send them away to... other libraries.’

Lesser libraries, he meant: his tone declared it. ‘You banish them?’ translated Jessamine, with a gasp: a more awful fate than being sent away from Castle Chansany, forever, she could scarcely imagine.

‘It is really much better for them,’ said the Bookbinder. ‘Elsewhere, they will not be expected to do anything very much, except store a pre-determined collection of characters on their various pages, and produce them upon request. Quite restful, one would think.’

‘A convalescent home,’ said the carpet, thoughtfully. ‘I might like that.’

‘You aren’t expected to do anything very much already,’ retorted Jessamine. ‘Just lie there like a—’ She’d got distracted; she stopped. ‘That can’t be allowed to happen to the first-favourite spell-book,’ she said instead. ‘How do you treat a Fit of the Sullens, Master Bookbinder? We’ll do anything.’

‘It chiefly occurs when a book is neglected for too long,’ answered he. ‘Or fancies itself so. The treatment, then, involves a reversal of that effect.’

Oh, dear. Neglect, was it? The Wizard *had* left it lying about, open to the elements, on his writing-desk while he jaunted off doing who-knew-what. That wasn’t a caring way to treat your favourite grimoire, was it?

And he *had* been consulting the second and third-favourite spell-books rather often, of late. She gulped. Perhaps this wasn’t the first-favourite spell-book anymore. Perhaps it was the second, or even the third—and it *knew*.

‘We’ll lavish attention upon it,’ Jessamine promised. ‘Polish its covers daily. Read every word of its pages, and cast all the cantrips three times each. Would that do?’

The Bookbinder looked down upon her with something like pity. ‘Noble efforts, I am sure,’ he said. ‘But it is the Wizard’s spell-book, isn’t it?’

Deflated, Jessamine could only watch as he quietly excused himself, and left. He couldn’t do anything for the book, and neither could she. It didn’t care if *she* cradled its binding in reverential hands, and exclaimed in delight over the contents

of its pages. It wouldn't care if she cast every one of its cantrips seven times each, for she wasn't the Wizard.

Scowling, she kicked vaguely at the carpet, ignoring its muffled squeak of protest. That Wizard. Whatever trouble he was off getting himself into lately, she'd be hauling him out of it—and back into his Study, to treat his faithful friend the way it deserved.



JESSAMINE CONDUCTED A FRENZIED search of the castle, beginning, of course, with all the places she'd most likely expect to find an errant Court Wizard. Hiding somewhere in the Study, disguised as a candle-holder, say, or a tapestry, just to amuse himself; (no). Seated at the long table in the great dining room, surrounded by a litter of tea pots and cake-crumbs and absorbed in the composition of some new cantrip; (no). Wandering the walls in a fog of reflection, soaking up sunshine and inspiration and accomplishing, probably, nothing at all; (no). Tucked up in the private parlour of some Court Lady, engaged in flirting (she) and obviously pontificating (he); no.

Administering Her Majesty's personal philtre, with an accompanying round of refined conversation; no.

He was not in His Majesty's rose garden, or in the north-west turret, or in the Book Room; he was not in the banqueting-house, or in the Potionery, or in the kitchens. He was not in the castle at all, perhaps, appalling thought; if he

was gone down Far-Below, who knew when he might be back? And the first-favourite spell-book languished away to nothingness in his absence.

Well then: she would be needing help, and if she couldn't have the Wizard, it'd have to be the Wizard's Apprentice. 'Tambul,' she barked, barrelling into the Mixery in a cloud of agitated smoke. 'There's a thorny problem afoot, and—oh!'

For there, after all that, was the Wizard: in the Mixery, of all places, and bless her stars if he wasn't *working*, at that. He was at the great stone sink, his arms sunk up to the elbows in some pungent and luridly-coloured mixture. He wasn't even wearing his Wizardly finery: he had on just a plain tunic, velvet, to be sure, but that was all.

'Ah! Jess-o-mine,' sang he, blithely; but there had been a momentary discomfort crossing that darkly handsome face; she'd seen it. Embarrassment, to be caught out of his fancy things and up to his elbows in muck, as though he were any old person, and not a Court Wizard at all.

'What's that?' said Jessamine, curiosity briefly overpowering her wits.

'It's a liniment,' answered Tambul shortly.

'An Extraordinary Embrocation,' declared the Wizard, more fulsomely. 'For the treating of Beleaguered Books.'

'Oh! Then you *know*.' The tip of Jessamine's tail began to tap, and smoke leaked from her nostrils.

‘Doubtless you have observed the unhappy state of my precious grimoire, Jess-o-mine, and come in haste to inform me of it,’ the Wizard went on. ‘I commend you, indeed, but we have the matter well in hand.’

‘And what, precisely, is your Extraordinary Embrocation supposed to do?’

It was Tambul who answered again, a little sourly: ‘Imparts suppleness. To the leather, and what-not.’

‘I hope that isn’t all it does,’ Jessamine retorted. ‘And what exactly are *you* doing up to your very eyebrows in the stuff?’ This to the Wizard, who smiled.

‘I am imbuing it with my essence,’ he answered, mysteriously.

‘Essence of Garstang,’ said Jessamine dubiously. ‘Who wouldn’t benefit from a liberal application of such, indeed?’

‘Quite!’ agreed the Wizard. ‘A fulsome dose of my esteem, rubbed tenderly into its covers with my own hands; a treatment I have bestowed upon none of my grimoires, until today.’

‘After which, I hope you propose to read from it, and cast spells out of it, and take it about with you a bit,’ Jessamine said. ‘The Bookbinder says as it’s got a Fit of the Sullens, a proper one.’

‘I suppose I could,’ said the Wizard, paused in the act of stirring the muck. ‘Do you think that would help?’

Jessamine rolled her eyes; she couldn't help it. Wizards. They'd come up with six complicated, exaggerated, lordly-sounding solutions when one simple one would do. 'Yes,' she said, with admirable patience, though the smoke was getting thicker.

'Right,' said the Wizard, lifting his arms out of the Extraordinary Embrocation. They were stained lurid blue up to the elbows. 'Bring it along when it's finished, will you?' said he to Tambul, who grunted assent.



WHETHER IT HELPED, IN some mysterious fashion, to croon lullabies to the spell-book in some language Jessamine didn't know—an ornate language, lyrical and curly and with an air of antiquity about it—well, that was the Wizard's business. Perhaps he simply liked having an excuse to employ so strange a tongue, for the rest of the castle certainly never did.

At any rate, the book liked it. Liked the Extraordinary Embrocation, too, despite the stench of it. Its gilded covers came up a brighter sapphire than ever, and the mist cleared out of its glassish bits, and showed the kitchens again (to Jessamine), and who-knew-what to the Wizard.

He handled it like an ailing child, did the Wizard, gentler by far than Jessamine knew he had it in him to be. He leafed tenderly through page after page, uttering cantrips and spells in that same peculiar language (they were patently spells, for

all that they were incomprehensible; the carpet turned purple and began to float, and after that the shelves sang a round of *Ten Wondrous Wizards* in three-part harmony).

Jessamine waited by the Wizard's chair, an attentive Familiar, with her tail curled around her talons and her nose up to sniff the air (a mistake, that; she sneezed, seven times). The Wizard had no attention to spare, not for her: everything was for the spell-book, the first-favourite, the most precious of tomes.

She began to comprehend how a body might fancy itself neglected, around here; sniffed in disgust (and sneezed), and wandered off to the kitchens, to fetch herself a butter-cake.

The Wizard's voice followed her, just as she slithered out the door. 'You know that you are the very best of all dragons, Jess-o-mine?'

She paused. 'Am I, then?'

'And the best of Familiars, too.'

She sneezed again in a puff of smoke. 'I am, at that,' she agreed, and scuttled off.

SUMPTUARY

IT HAD A STRANGE smell to it, cloth of gold. A metallic tang, sour, acrid; it split the air, tickled Jessamine's nostrils until she couldn't help but sneeze, and sneeze, and sneeze.

Strange, then, that she should creep back, day after day, to the Great Wardrobe, tuck herself into some nook or cranny, unobserved, and stare with round eyes at the Keeper of the Robes at work.

'Deep breath in, your ladyship,' uttered the Keeper, stationed behind the silk-wreathed figure of Lady Alvan, with her mouth full of pins (the Keeper, that is), and a knotted measuring-tape hung about her neck. The words emerged oddly, around the bristling points of silver clamped between her lips, but they were clear enough: her ladyship inhaled.

The future princess made a handsome sight at that, being blessed with hair like sunshine, and a pretty face. They were dressing her suitably, in purple cloth of gold; purple for royalty, gold for splendour, and jewels to match.

Jessamine saw her chiefly in simple blacks, down in the kitchens spinning subtleties out of sugar, and dreams. With rosewater stains on all of her clothes, and pearl-powder streaks on her face and her hair, she was a dishevelled pixie, a sylph of a wizard, her culinary artistry a magic all its own.

They were making a great lady of her, now. This statuesque creature bore little resemblance to Alvan, all grandeur and pomp and sparkle—but a pin stabbed her, and she wriggled and winced, and there was Alvan again, for a moment.

‘And must I indeed appear so—so—*diminished*?’ gasped she, swaddled in gold.

The Keeper tsked, in her matronly fashion. ‘Tis not *diminishment*, my lady. The narrow waist is very much the fashion, at present.’

‘I do not *have* a narrow waist,’ protested her ladyship, tightly. ‘And what’s more, I do not want one.’

‘That is why we are making shaping garments, milady,’ said the Keeper, unperturbed. ‘When you appear before the people, you shall be a true visionary of sartorial style.’

‘I should like to be that, certainly,’ said Lady Alvan. ‘But I do not see why a narrow waist should be an indispensable accessory.’

Jessamine, crouched in a corner beneath six layers of silk tissue, sneezed. She couldn’t help it. The cloth of gold had got into her nose, and caused a spasm.

A wisp of smoke wafted out.

‘Who’s under there?’ called the Keeper, sharply. ‘Come out, before you set the Wardrobe aflame.’

Shame-faced, Jessamine emerged, and swallowed her smoke. ‘It was the velvets that got me,’ she explained. ‘They’re so soft.’

‘Are not they?’ concurred Lady Alvan. ‘What think you to a gown of purple velvet, Keeper?’

‘It would become you delightfully, ma’am,’ came the answer, and it was followed by a flurry of other thoughts, on the shape of the gown, and the trimmings. Jessamine lingered, listening.

Her eye strayed. There on the floor, a bright scrap of something against the dark stone. A thingummy. A *velvet*.

She swooped, and snatched, and it was hers: a shred of velvet, soft as butter, and tinted pink and pretty as the King’s own roses. She lifted it to her face, rubbed her scaled cheek over it: ahh.

‘Off I go,’ said she, hastily. ‘Urgent errand.’ Her talons clacked and clicked in a rapid staccato as she fled, most unsubtle, but nobody was taking her thingummy if she could help it.



THE PRINCE’S FINERY, RICHER still: gold and gold and gold again, or cloth of silver; purple damask, or richest of red velvet; trimmings of fur, lavish with embroidery.

‘Tis rather heavy,’ observed Prince Armael, marooned in the midst of the Great Wardrobe with his royal person all swathed in the shimmers. The chamber bid fair to disappear under a thousand bolts of cloth in a hundred colours: the silk-store was overflowing.

‘Course it is,’ Jessamine observed from her nest in the corner. ‘There’s enough metal in it to stop a sword strike.’

‘A prince goes armoured to his wedding,’ murmured the prince in question, tugging futilely at a gold-draping sleeve.

‘And you’ve to match her ladyship,’ continued the dragon, applying her rough little tongue to the blissful nap of her velvet thingummy. The fur was coming off it.

‘A prince must look like a prince,’ said the Keeper, firmly, and there ended the objections. His highness drooped, but protested no more; a good thing, too, for he’d not get away with it when he was king, oh no.

Jessamine dozed in her corner, cushioned on silk-fluff and scraps, and dreamed. She could wear cloth-of-gold, couldn’t she, if you didn’t mind the sneezing. Cloth of silver, too, and all in red. Not purple, that was for kings and queens, but red—red like roses, red like wine, red like the lip-colour the Court Ladies wore...

She came awake with a start, for a something had dropped on her head.

‘Sorry!’ called the prince, still swamped in silk. A button had popped off, and flown away. It glittered, all pearly, and it

didn't stink; Jessamine licked it. Cool, and smooth.

She waited for the Keeper to reclaim it, but she didn't: stood there oblivious, stout and competent, faffing with some detail on the prince's collar.

Silently, Jessamine swallowed it. She'd fetch it up again later, safe in the Wizard's Study.



THE HOARD CAME TOGETHER quickly, after that. From the queen's mantle came a slim curl of brocade, woven in green, like emeralds, and stitched in silver. From the king's glaudekin, a scrap of damask, and a snippet of silvery fur. From the wizard, oh! Everything in blue, rich or pale: velvet from his doublet, silver tissue from his sleeves, and three shades of silken thread, from his hosiery. No one questioned her presence at the Wardrobe, and they'd stopped sweeping up the plush scrappets of her nest, too. She was a fixture.

She was growing over-bold.

'This brooch will not do. No, it won't do at all,' said the Keeper to Lady Alvan, one day. She plucked at the indigo folds of her ladyship's mantle, and the ruby-studded brooch that hung there, securing it. 'It's the sapphire that goes with this article, milady, or the jet.'

'Well, I cannot find them,' said Lady Alvan, laughing. 'My finery will have to clash, a little.'

The Keeper tsked, doubtless minded to take her ladyship to task for such carelessness as that; but it wasn't her place.

Jessamine held still in her corner, in frantic thought. A brooch, a bluish one—or black. She had four such, in her lair, one of them pinned to a lone, discarded shoe: which was it? She slunk away, scuttled in harried haste down corridors and stairs, and slithered under the floorboard behind the wizard's bookcase. There they all were, and the shoe as well, a lady's dancing slipper. There were her velvet thingummies, too, and her bits and bobs of damask, and brocade. She had a length of leather in a fetching peach, a half-spool of golden thread, a ring wrought from silver and with a green stone in it, a silk-tissue sash the colour of moonlight, a lady's handkerchief with a violet stitched on it, three leather belts with bronze or copper buckles, one of the wizard's own curly-toed shoes, a jewelled pin that smelt somehow of roses, a pouch of crinkled silk tied with a red ribbon, myriad scrappets and snippets of cloth from the silk-stores, her pearly button, and a tiny bell that tinkled charmingly when she licked it.

She licked it now, and it soothed her, a bit. A blueish brooch, or a black one, and she had four. Which one was it?

Which? Which? She couldn't take all four, and ask the new princess to choose. She'd have to explain where they'd come from, all four of them.

'They came from the floor of the Great Wardrobe,' she'd say, 'Under all the discarded cloaks and dresses, the tossed-away hairpieces and capes; mixed up with the off-cuts and the

thread-spools and the what-not. Nobody else wanted them.’ Except, they did, in this case: a brooch was wanted, and Jessamine had it.

She sighed, and curled up on all four of them, her nose resting on the dancing-slipper. She was a princess, Lady Alvan, or close enough: there would be other brooches for her, other finery, never a shortage of satins and slashed sleeves.

For a Jessamine, there was only detritus, and other people’s leavings, and if some of them chanced to sparkle, well, she was keeping them.



‘NO!’ THUNDERED THE WIZARD, on another day. ‘I will *not* wear a codpiece! The thing is perfectly absurd.’

Jessamine, skulking, tittered.

The Keeper remonstrated. ‘They are very much admired at present,’ said she, ‘and we will set it with jewels to match your —’

‘Is the prince wearing one?’ interrupted the Wizard.

‘His Highness preferred an alternative—’

‘And the king?’

‘No, but some of the lords—’

‘Then I won’t be wearing one.’

‘How recalcitrant,’ sniffed Jessamine. ‘And with the wedding so near. You’ll give the poor Keeper a headache.’

‘A headache from a wizard is highly sought-after,’ said Garstang, his chin worn rather high. ‘I consider it my specialty.’

‘Wear the codpiece,’ said Jessamine.

‘I shan’t.’

‘Well then, I will.’ She dove, and snatched the rejected article out of the Keeper’s grip. It was embroidered cloth-of-silver, appealingly bulbous, and it squished when she grabbed it: there was padding inside.

‘You can have no need of a codpiece, Jess-o-mine; you lack the requisite anatomical feature—Jessamine!’

She was gone, scorching down the corridor with the codpiece clamped between her sharp dragon teeth, and into the hoard it went.

The next one followed, and a third after that: the Keeper did not give up lightly, when she got hold of an idea.

‘You wouldn’t catch me decking myself in jewels,’ announced the carpet, after. ‘Or dashing off to weddings, either. What do you want with all those thingummies?’

What *did* she want with them? True, that a ribbon had always charmed her humble little heart, back when she was the Wizard’s Apprentice, and a failure. She would have worn such in her drab locks with pride, at least in private.

She wanted more than a ribbon, now. She wanted a cloth-of-gold doublet lined in silk, and not to sneeze when she wore it. She wanted a glaudekin all made of brocade, like the king’s,

with a design of pomegranates on it. She wanted a purple velvet gown trimmed in sable, and a circlet of garnets and pearls, with hair to wear it on. She wanted curly-toed slippers and cloaks clasped with brooches; mantles and capes made of damask and satin; velvet hats with feathers in them; and yes, codpieces, even those.

But there was no sense in explaining, not to a carpet. What did it know of finery? Or of weddings? What did it know of castle life, beyond the threshold of the Wizard's Study? Give it a warm fire to lie beside and a firm brushing now and then, and content it would be.

So Jessamine said: 'It's a dragon thing,' and the carpet subsided, sleepishly.



IT WAS THE SHOES that did it, Jessamine was later to conclude. The fancy shoes with the curly toes, that the wizard wore for dancing. She had one; she wanted another.

Why she had need of a matched pair, when she could wear neither, even Jessamine could not have explained. But her soul hungered, and must be appeased. She hatched a plan, and followed it.

The clock struck one-after-midnight, the night before the wedding, and all the castle was alive with celebration. The nobles drank and danced, the wizard with them; the Keeper stitched last-minute lace to ladies' gowns, her seamstresses

beside her. The kitchens were in uproar, serving comfits and washing dishes.

Jessamine left the Wizard's Study on the softest of feet, stepping stealthily so her talons didn't clack on the flagged stone floors.

Stealthily she hurtled, along passages and up staircases, her route plotted to its last detail as she dozed in her velveteed nest. Past the bedchambers of the Court Ladies, and the queen's solar; past the prince's reading-room and His Majesty's morning parlour; *down* a dark corridor lit by solitary sconces; and there, the Wizard's own door, behind which lay his suite of handsome rooms.

She had a cantrip ready, uttered it in smokish tones: the first-favourite spell-book had given it to her (she had saved its life, after all). Smoke wafted, light flared, a lock clunked—she was in.

He had his own Great Wardrobe, a whole room full of garments in every fabric and hue. She hadn't far to seek for her second shoe, however: its partner missing, it lay forgotten in a corner. He'd thrown it there, and failed to recollect it since: what cared he for a shoe by itself?

Jessamine grabbed it in shrinking jaws, and ran. It tasted of stale silk and perspiration; she gagged, but hurtled on, perhaps she could wash it—at any rate, it was handsome, however it stank, it had gold embroidery on it—

'Did you get it?' asked the carpet, as she scurried through the door, and under her floorboard.

‘Yes,’ she spat, expelling the shoe from her maw in the same breath.

‘Good show,’ it murmured, dozily.

It *was*, wasn’t it? A perfect operation, pulled off with panache. Jessamine lined the new shoe up with the old one, and feasted her eyes: what a sight! They even glittered a bit, without light to make them do so; wizards’ attire. They couldn’t help but soak up a bit of magic, what with the Wizard wandering about steeped in it up to the eyeballs—

‘Ah,’ came a familiar voice, and the roof disappeared.

Light entered, and a merry dark eye: the Wizard Garstang’s. His face was with it, looming over the gap in his floor, and with her ceiling held in his great, brutish hand.

His other hand darted in, quick as a flash, and took up a brooch. A black-jewelled one.

‘You cannot keep that, Jess-o-mine,’ he scolded. ‘The princess wants it.’

Jessamine roared. A pungent cloud of acrid smoke arrowed towards the wizard, and he coughed. ‘You *dare* steal from a dragon!’ cried she, in her most terrible voice.

‘Yes,’ said he.

Jessamine deflated. ‘But it’s my first hoard.’

Wizard Garstang set down the floorboard. ‘On account of which,’ he said, ‘I brought you these.’

He opened his great, brutish hand, and a fistful of ribbons rained down.

‘Don’t wear them all at once,’ he chided. ‘They’ll clash.’

Jessamine grabbed three—periwinkle, violet and grass-green—and bit them. ‘There. Now you can’t take them back.’

He laughed, and replaced her ceiling. ‘You can keep the shoes,’ he called, and went back to the dancing.

The dragon skulked, pondering.

‘Carpet,’ said she, after a while.

‘Mm?’

‘I’m a member of the Royal Court, aren’t I?’

‘Mm.’

‘A proper one. Fully-fledged.’

The carpet stirred, rustling. ‘You’re the Wizard’s Familiar. It’s an important role.’

‘That’s what I thought.’ The matter decided, Jessamine emerged, and scarpered.

She ran, this time, for if it was one o’clock before it was past two now, and the Keeper must sleep, sometime... she thundered along in a clatter of claws, and arrived at the Great Wardrobe, panting.

‘I’d like a fitting!’ she gasped, and all but fell through the doorway.

The keeper, mercifully, remained, her hands full of sky-blue silk tissue. ‘A fitting? For what?’

‘Court attire for the wedding. Something befitting a dragon of status.’ Jessamine drew herself up as she spoke, attempting a regal mien.

The Keeper looked her up and down, noting the slender, lithe physique of her, the burnished scales, and the claws. ‘Cloth of gold, shall it be?’

‘I’d sneeze all through the vows,’ answered Jessamine, with some regret. Though she might, anyway, what with half the Court wearing it. ‘Can it be velvet?’

‘Assuredly. Goldish, I think, and black-trimmed.’

Jessamine beamed. ‘And if you could put a ribbon on it—’

‘Several,’ came the answer, and Jessamine gave a dulcet, satisfied sigh.



THE WEDDING WENT OFF in splendour, even the sun seeming delighted to attend. There were not many foreign royals present; some stayed away out of offence (the prince having declined to wed their daughters). Others shied away from the journey, the castle being situated rather too high in the air for the taste (or the vertigo) of some.

They were not much missed, for the Court mustered such a display as scarcely needed augmenting. A riot of colour and grandeur welcomed the new princess to her family; and it was

said afterwards, in some circles (by those who hadn't seen it), that one of my lady's train-bearers had been a dragon, with polished scales and claws, a jacket of gold-stitched velvet wrapped about her slender torso, and bunches of ribbons trailing from her shoulders, and fluttering in the wind.

HURDY GURDY

HARKEN: THERE'S A BUSTLE about the castle. A clamour, a cacophony, a veritable swarm of busy bodies engaged in diverse errandry. It's not so unusual for the castle to be busy, and noisy, and bustling, of course, but this is something else, something greater, grander, messier; there goes the King's Chamberlain, with hat askew and a feverish light in her eye; in her wake, a quartet of footmen, and a maid, scurrying like ducklings, their arms full of sundries.

There, for that matter, goes the Court Wizard, Garstang, striding to somewhere, talking without cease to someone—or himself. There goes Paglar with a list in her hands, scratching off entries in a spray of ink. There go the seamsters, and the scullery maids; the jongleurs, and the Wizard's Apprentice; the Court Ladies and the boot-blackers, the wizard's hearth rug (airborne) and the wine merchants, the scribes and the sylphs, even his majesty himself, King Griffin, looking harried. It's the King's Progress, for there's a new princess to display, and besides, it's been a dozen years since the last time.

Jessamine is hiding under a chair. It's not the best-of-all-chairs, since the wizard's study is being turned upside down by a legion of dogsbodies pressed into service. It isn't her own chair, either, for much the same reason. It's a broken chair, all of three legs to its name (formerly four), a thing cast into a corner thick with dust in a chamber nobody cares about. It's the only place that's quiet in the whole of Castle Chansany, and Wizard Garstang's dragon Familiar has been there all day.

She was downstairs half the night. In the kitchens, helping the cooks; in the Potionery, helping Tambul, and the sylphs; in Garstang's Study, helping the carpet, and the shelves. To pack up and move a castle full of people and things and yes, even, furniture; a vast, dizzying, unthinkable task, requiring every pair of hands—even the clawed ones belonging to a Court dragon. And now her head spun and her ears buzzed with fading echoes of tumult; silence, or close to it, bathed her in peace.

A tower chamber, this room, about halfway up; the door slammed open. Dust whirled in spirals.

Someone swore. 'It's not *here*—'

Jessamine opened a resentful eye. 'Whatever it is,' said she, 'it most certainly isn't here, and I would prefer it if you weren't either.'

Footsteps wandered in: speaking had perhaps been a mistake. The owner of the voice stooped, directed a querying eye at the coiled, scaled, sleepish thing curled under a half-broken chair. 'It's my hurdy-gurdy,' explained this person, an

aged being, with grey hair everywhere and a green jerkin. ‘I can’t find it.’

‘Then you must manage without it,’ Jessamine decreed, and shut her eye again.

‘I can’t. I’ve to play a ditty for Their Majesties, when the Progress goes out, and without my hurdy-gurdy—’

‘Well,’ Jessamine interrupted. ‘That’s as maybe, but it isn’t here.’

‘No,’ said the hurdy-gurdy player mournfully. ‘It isn’t.’ The face withdrew.

‘Tis uncommonly careless, to misplace an instrument,’ Jessamine grumbled. ‘They aren’t cheap.’

‘No more they are,’ the voice agreed from beyond the doorway, lugubrious.

‘If you can’t keep track of your hurdy-gurdy I’d say you shouldn’t keep one.’

‘Nor shall I, it seems.’ The hurdy-gurdy player reappeared, disconsolate, and sat down in the middle of the floor. ‘I’ve searched everywhere,’ they said. ‘This was the last place to look, and it isn’t here.’

The lips wobbled; words trembled on the edge of tears. ‘Oh, no,’ sighed Jessamine, and slithered resentfully out from under her chair. ‘If you’re going to *cry*—’

‘I never cry,’ sobbed the hurdy-gurdy player.

‘So I see,’ grumbled Jessamine.

‘It’s just that this is a disaster—’ Words failed the speaker, subsumed by sobs.

Jessamine sat by their left knee, patting it in awkward comfort. She set the tip of her tail in her mouth and, meditatively, bit. ‘Like as not it’s been put into one of the wagons,’ she said, indistinctly. ‘Half the castle’s packed.’

‘But *which?*’ howled the hurdy-gurdy player, on the way to hysterics.

Jessamine studied her unlooked-for companion. The grey hair had given her a false idea of their age: their face was more youthful than she’d imagined, nicely rounded, with full lips and rather bulging eyes. They were haphazardly dressed, even rather scruffy, though the clothes were of fine enough quality. A Court Bard, or a troubadour. She didn’t run into those, very often.

Jessamine spat out her tail. ‘I’m Jessamine,’ she offered. ‘Do not call me Jess.’

The tears slowed; a round face registering hope turned towards the dragon. ‘I’m Basling,’ they said. ‘Do call me Bas.’

‘I suppose it is imperative that we find your hurdy-gurdy?’ Jessamine tried, without much hope. ‘Another wouldn’t do?’

Bas’s eyes brightened further at the word “we”. ‘This one’s been Wizarded,’ they said, shaking further disorder into their flyaway hair. ‘The Court Wizard did it himself.’

Jessamine scratched her head. ‘You’ve seen it since, I suppose?’

‘No, I was meant to get it back yesterday. The Wizard said it would be sent to my quarters, but I didn’t find it there, and now my room is packed, and I can’t find the Wizard, *or* my hurdy-gurdy—’

Jessamine snarled something smoky and reeking. ‘Like as not he Wizarded it, all right,’ she said. ‘Turned it into a moth, or a jug of wine, or a butter dish, and forgot about it.’

‘But I have to—’

‘Play for Their Majesties, and you can’t play a tune on a butter dish. I know.’ The tip of Jessamine’s tail beat a tune of her own against the floor: something with a whiff of war about it. ‘We’d better find the Wizard, then,’ she decided, and she was off as she spoke, leaving Bas to hasten after.



HE WASN’T IN HIS study, of course; when is a Wizard ever where he’s supposed to be? Jessamine tore through the Mixery, next, then the Potionery—and paused. If not the Wizard, there was at least the Wizard’s Apprentice, packing slim glass bottles into a cloth-lined crate.

‘You haven’t seen a hurdy-gurdy, have you?’ Jessamine barked.

‘A what?’ said Tambul, absently.

‘Or the Wizard?’ said Basling.

‘I’ve seen *him*. Eighteen times since breakfast. No—’ Tambul thought. ‘Eighteen and a half. I saw the back of him

an hour ago.'

'And what was he doing?' said Basling.

'Running away.'

Nobody bothered to ask what had sent the Wizard fleeing: a Potionery in chaos was eloquent enough. 'If I haven't got my hurdy-gurdy by the time the Progress leaves—' began Basling, and halted: they'd heard something.

Jessamine heard it, too: a buzzing, wailing, twanging sound, half a melody, perhaps, and the rest a drone; just on the right side of discordancy, and eerie.

In came a hurdy-gurdy, the Wizard with it. He was playing a jaunt, and humming along.

'*There* he is,' sighed Jessamine, and 'There it is!' said Basling, together.

The Wizard's mind was somewhere else: he gazed upon them, unseeing. 'Hmm?'

'You've stolen a thing,' Jessamine told him.

'What thing?'

'That.' She pointed her snout at the instrument. 'The Bard wants it back.'

The Wizard Garstang took in the presence of Basling, forlorn. 'I'll give you any money for it,' he offered, smiling, and played a trill.

'I've need of it,' said Basling, not smiling at all.

'Any potion, then. A cantrip?'

Jessamine crawled under a cabinet, and left them to it. At least the noise had ceased: the Wizard couldn't make bargains and music both together. Her head throbbed.

The altercation continued, grew rather heated. At the back of it, Tambul's potions clink-clinked and clattered into their crates. The hurdy-gurdy started up in a blast of noise, and cut off abruptly; Jessamine contemplated murder.

So did Basling, judging from the noise, but then there came footsteps stomping away, and the door slammed.

Quiet at last—or nearly. Some glassy things clinked, softly.

Then: a tuneful note, and a buzzing.

Jessamine peeped out, saw a wizard and apprentice but no bard. The hurdy-gurdy's crank was turning itself; the wizard tested a key.

'You can't just go around pinching people's things,' Jessamine informed him. 'If you want a noisemaker so badly, get your own.'

'I have,' he told her, with a glittering smile. 'I gave three potions for it.'

Not much to Basling's satisfaction, but what matter that? You got away with things, when you were Garstang.

Jessamine left him to it, and slunk away.



SHE WAS WANTED, LATER. They were sending people down, Garstang and the king's chamberlain, in groups of ten or twenty: down from the clouds into the Far-Below, to wait under the oaks. Quite the crowd was gathering, above and below, and what a ruckus.

The wizard needed his Familiar, though there wasn't much for her to do: she was there to admire the figure he cut as he wafted magic about, that was all. Baldringa, a wizard retired, had turned out to join the revelry; bodiless, still, and in the guise of a velvet hat.

She interfered. 'They're sideways,' said Baldringa to Garstang, from three inches to his left. 'They'll be dizzy by the time they get all the way down there. Better keep them straight, that's what I'd suggest.'

She wasn't wrong; the gaggle of Court Ladies canted sharply, liable to invert, and people never liked being turned upon their heads, as a rule.

Garstang swatted the hat away. 'It's not easy,' he said, with ice in the words. 'You try hauling three hundred people a mile up, or down. They'd be inside out, by the end of it.'

Unwise words. Baldringa was the Court Wizard for many a year herself; she'd done her fair share of Progress, like as not. But the hat only grinned—somehow, without the teeth to smile with—and wandered off after a jongleur.

The next group assembled, mostly Wardrobe folk. They drifted off in a blare of music, buzzing merrily in time; Basling's disputed hurdy-gurdy followed the wizard like a

hound, blasting noise on cue. He'd got a lute to join it, to some troubadour's disgust; the pair were playing in the round.

'I suppose the music helps?' said Jessamine, rather tart.

'Immeasurably,' was the answer, if absently: he was busy.

'A Court Wizard requires a fanfare, if he's to get any work done.'

'Yes, and if I could just get a pipe from somewhere—there's a three-part melody from Dandry's Chorals and it'd be just the thing—' He turned abruptly, marched off, leaving a seamstress and a broiderer stranded fifty feet down.

'Don't worry,' Jessamine called after them. 'There's a hat handy, it'll soon sort you out,' which it did, fortunately, for Garstang was half an hour coming back.

When he did, he had three pipes along, trailing and trilling like a row of cygnets. Someone brought him a drum, most unwise; he had it pounding a beat all by itself, louder than a drum (or anything else) had much right to be. Chatter died away: there wasn't much point, when you couldn't hear yourself think.

Came time for Their Majesties to waft away on a tide of wizardry, musicians going fore and aft, to play the fanfare. Three grand pavilions hovered before the gates, draped in silks: two small ones for the players, and the King's, all over velvet, in the centre.

Basling, looking mulish: 'We aren't going.' They had a piper with them, a drummer, a lutist, all empty of hand; diverse

others, their instruments retained, but packed and buttoned in cloths and cases. All were thunderous.

The music stopped abruptly, with a squawk. ‘Not going?’ said Garstang, looking thunderous himself, all dark of brow. ‘But it’s the Progress. Everyone’s going.’

‘We don’t seem to be needed,’ answered Basling, arms folded.

They weren’t wrong. There hung the hurdy-gurdy, just behind the wizard, with no hands to play it; beside it the drum, and the pipes, and a pair of lutes, now, worse and worse.

‘Of course you are,’ snapped the Wizard, beckoning. ‘Come along. Their Majesties cannot go, ‘til you do.’

‘Then Their Majesties aren’t going either,’ said Basling.



LATER, PAST SUNSET. THE Progress hadn’t progressed, Their Majesties hadn’t gone. A Royal Procession’s no good without the royals; they had music, if no musicians, and might have gone regardless, but they wouldn’t. The Progress being a harmonious business, Queen Mellany explained, in music as much as mood, the dispute must be resolved.

There was no mending it, not today. Basling and their cohort went away, the Wizard too: separately to quiet spaces, marvelling at each other’s conduct.

Jessamine knew her duty, and went with Garstang. The Court remained Far-Below, much of it, and the halls rang

hollow without them. An eerie place, the castle, with no people in it; Jessamine, shivering, kept close to the wizard.

His chair had gone Below, hers too. They sat, then, on the polished floor of an empty Study, the walls ringing with their voices.

‘I don’t understand it,’ Garstang said. ‘Why shouldn’t I play music, if I’ve a mind to?’

‘Playing music’s well enough,’ answered his Familiar, sleepily. ‘But the same’s true of others, mind.’

‘Nobody said they weren’t allowed to play.’

Jessamine yawned, maw gaping like a cave. ‘You wandered off with their instruments,’ she pointed out. ‘And their purpose, too. What was left?’

‘Why, plenty!’ sputtered Garstang, without saying what.

‘How long does it take,’ murmured Jessamine, half asleep, ‘to learn to play, I wonder?’

‘To play what?’

‘A hurdy-gurdy. Or a pipe, a lute, a drum.’

‘Oh, five minutes,’ said the wizard, waving this off.

‘Without magic,’ said Jessamine.

Garstang’s eyes went wide: he hadn’t a clue. He was quiet, after that; his mind was quick enough, when he grasped an idea.

At great length, he sighed. ‘I liked it,’ he offered. ‘Playing music.’

‘So does Basling, and the rest.’ She paused to let this settle, and added, ‘They might teach you, if you asked.’



IT RAINED, THE FOLLOWING morning, in flurried squalls of water: no fair weather for a Progress, but the day dispatched one nonetheless.

The pipers’ pavilion went down first, with all the pipers in it. The silk drapes sulked in sodden swags and the wind sang louder than the pipes—but a tendril or two of wizardry set the latter to rights, and the air rang, clarion-bright, with melody.

Then followed Their Majesties, face-first into the storm. They’d weathered worse in bygone times, and smiled despite it: most likely, the music helped. The prince and the new princess were with them, spangled with jewels, and rain-splattered.

It was the wizard’s job, if anything, to keep the weather out. He forgot, and kept forgetting (except occasionally); he was in the pavilion behind, the last one, with all the troubadours in it. His hurdy-gurdy smelled, still, of paint, for he’d daubed it there himself: it squeaked with newness.

He was awful with it. Jessamine, despairing, stuffed her head under a pillow: it didn’t help. Half his notes were wrong, and the rest wonky, clumsy-fingered. But he cranked and plucked and played with hands alone, no magic; and Basling, music’s master, played beside him.

PETTY WIZARDRY

‘IT WASN’T ME,’ SAID Jessamine.

‘I know, dragon.’

‘I don’t say as I wouldn’t pilfer a thing, if the fancy took me. Not often, of course.’

Garstang nodded along. ‘Of course.’

‘But if I were to pilfer a thing, it wouldn’t be crockery. What use have I for dishes?’

‘Well,’ said Garstang. ‘It isn’t precisely crockery—’

‘If a spate of ribbon-theft were to break out across the Progress, now, *then* you might look to me for an explanation. But I’ve no use for dishes, be they shiny as you like.’

‘Thank you,’ said Garstang gravely. ‘In fact, you weren’t a suspect.’

‘Oh,’ said the dragon, a trifle crestfallen (possibly).

‘Not that I shouldn’t imagine you capable of banditry, of course, should you turn your scintillating brains to it.’

‘I detect satire,’ answered his Familiar.

‘But on this occasion—’

‘*Oh,*’ interrupted Jessamine, who couldn’t help it. Enthusiasm took her that way, sometimes. ‘You don’t mean there’s detecting to be done?’

‘I mean exactly that.’

Jessamine sat bolt upright. ‘I’ll find Their Majesties’ sceptre, you see if I don’t,’ she declared. ‘And their orb, too.’

‘Now, wait a moment, Jess-o-mine,’ began the Wizard, but needn’t have bothered: she was off.

It’s hard to say precisely where they were, at the time. The Progress had been underway for a week and more, a castle’s worth of folk had trudged and straggled their way down many a winding road. At that moment they were halfway down a field, the dragon and the Court Wizard. It had just been planted, and the earth lay in rich brown folds, smelling of green and gold. The column was trudging, without much liking to be, the ground being all over mud. The remnants of what had once been a path, or even a road, could still be discerned, faintly at least; Jessamine ran down it.

She passed Tambul, flanked, no doubt, by a quantity of sylphs (not visible). She passed Paglar toiling along in a cluster of kitchen maids, all of whom Jessamine waved to, though without stopping. She passed even a Court Lady or two mounted on palfreys, on their way to tease the Wizard

Garstang—or perhaps to cadge a ride on the sweep of his floating carpet (small chance).

She hurtled past all these, and many more, threading her nimble way through a forest of boots, and arrived at last where the chamberlain rode, a ways behind Their Majesties' pavilion.

'Lord Chamberlain Sir,' she said, slightly short of breath. 'You must tell me. Which fancy box did you pack the goldest things in?'

The Lord Chamberlain ought by rights to be a venerable fellow, one would think, his beard white with wisdom and a frown line between his brows. This one was none of those things. 'Fancy boxes?' said Myrtle, a youngish lady in fact, with a high forehead, a long nose, and a tendency to look down the latter at small dragons. Perhaps it was only that she happened to be so tall. 'Gold things in boxes? What?'

'Their Majesties' Orb and Sceptre,' Jessamine elaborated. 'I've a fancy to polish them up a bit, and what with one thing and another they seem to have got into the wrong boxes.'

This was her prevailing theory. Never mind the high drama of missing valuables; that was hysterical wizarding nonsense. Things got into the wrong places when you moved a castle's contents across the country, that was a fact. They'd turn up in the middle of His Majesty's ceremonial robes, belike, or tucked into Paglar's fine copper cooking pots. A search they must have, and a fine, rousing one at that; there would the grand articles be, and all well again.

The Lord Chamberlain regarded Jessamine all the way down her very long nose, and frowned. ‘They were kept in my personal possession, in fact, since they are priceless.’

‘Oh, dear,’ said Jessamine.

‘A stout, steel chest, with two locks on it. I hold one key, and the king himself holds the other. So you see it is quite impossible for them to have been mispacked.’

‘Right,’ said the dragon. ‘It is your expert opinion that they cannot have been packed wrongly, and yet they are still missing.’

‘Precisely,’ said Myrtle.

‘Then there’s only one possible explanation.’

Myrtle sighed. ‘Yes.’

‘They’ve been spirited away. By magic.’

Doubtless the steel receptacle had been protected by spellwork as well as locks. But the thief, whoever it was, had chosen a perfect time to go spiriting things away. What with all the chaos, the absence of two objects (however priceless) might not have been discovered for weeks.

For that matter...

‘Who discovered they were missing?’ she asked, as the Lord Chamberlain was turning away.

‘The Wizard. He had some faffing about to do.’ Myrtle illustrated her point with some vague hand waving.

‘Faffing,’ said Jessamine.

‘We’re arriving at Dolons tomorrow.’ That was all Myrtle was inclined to say, for she swept off, doubtless with a hundred tasks to get on with; Jessamine let her go. She needed no further explanation, really. They were going to Dolons: of course the Wizard had faffing to do.

Jessamine could almost feel the smoke steaming out of her ears, a sensation of warmly bubbling rage.

It took her some time to retrace her steps back to where she’d left her Wizard, but her mood had not noticeably altered by the time she got there.

He was seated tailor-style atop his silly carpet, with a Court Lady at his elbow, one of the ones riding a palfrey. They were talking.

‘It’s based on Tamworth’s seventh principle, but with a twist,’ Garstang was saying earnestly, while the lady did a marvellous job of appearing interested. ‘It’s carefully balanced, you do have to watch that the core doesn’t—’

‘Garstang,’ Jessamine barked.

‘Oh, dragon! I was just telling, er, this lady about our—’

Jessamine hurled herself skyward and clawed aboard the carpet. A bit of it got rather shredded. ‘What were you planning to do with the crockery?’ she demanded.

‘I take it you are still applying the ignominious term “crockery” to the ancient and highly valuable items in question?’

Jessamine smiled at the lady whose name Garstang had forgotten, showing every one of her teeth. ‘I hope you were not planning to employ these ancient and highly valuable items in some manner of grand and magical display?’

The lady discovered a pressing need to withdraw, and did so, with a squeak.

‘That was rude, dragon,’ said Garstang, chidingly.

‘I reserve the right to be rude, when I wish to.’

‘There hasn’t been a royal visit to Dolons in twenty years. I thought the occasion deserved a little pizzazz.’

‘Having the Sovereign’s Orb and Sceptres perform tricks for the amusement of the crowds is not—not dignified!’

‘Nonsense. It’s only crockery.’

Jessamine glowered.

The Wizard laughed, to her great irritation, and only narrowly avoided a savage mauling. ‘No tricks. I only thought it might be—elegant—if they were to...float a bit. Perhaps a slow rotation, nicely catching the light as the Progress approaches. That sort of thing.’

‘Very artistic.’

Garstang bowed from the waist, still managing to make a graceful, flourishing business of it.

‘Was that to make Their Majesties appear impressive, or yourself?’ Jessamine said tartly.

Garstang smiled glintingly. ‘Why not both?’

Jessamine began to regret climbing aboard the carpet. It bumped and rolled most disconcertingly. ‘You’re nervous about Dolons. Is that it?’

‘I am,’ Garstang admitted.

‘And the faffing helps.’

‘Immeasurably.’

Jessamine knew better than to ask how it helped, or why. He would tell her, at great length, and in extraordinary detail. She hopped down instead, landing in squelching mud. ‘Bother.’

‘And where are you going?’ the Wizard called.

‘I suppose I’d better find your crockery, hadn’t I?’

‘It’ll turn up.’

‘What if it doesn’t?’

To that, there came no answer: the idea was a new one, most like, and he was consternated. No matter. Jessamine could save her Wizard’s sanity with or without his help; it wouldn’t even be the first time she’d done so.



‘RIGHT,’ SAID JESSAMINE A little later, to her assistant (a small dog). ‘There’s only two possible ways those sparklesome things have gone missing. One of them’s theft.’

The dog, a delicate creature smaller even than Jessamine, grinned in a teeth-bearing fashion she thought rather encouraging.

‘But if there was any sign they’d been stolen—with or without using magic to do it—surely even the Wizard would be a bit more concerned. Not to mention the Lord Chamberlain.’

The dog said nothing, pantingly. It had wandered away from one of the Court Ladies, most like, and would soon be reclaimed from the clinging mud.

‘That leaves the second thing,’ Jessamine continued. ‘Magic, of course, but not the thieving kind. In other words, the crockery’s spirited itself away.’

And why would it? She had little doubt that it had been sumptuously housed; this double-locked box would be velvet-lined, insulated against the heat and the cold, nice and quiet—really, everything you’d think a set of fancy dishware would want by way of abode.

Either it had somewhere even more luxurious to wander off to, or—it had something very important to do.

An idea occurred.

‘Oh,’ said Jessamine, and beamed, toothily, at the dog. ‘Thank you, you were a tremendous help,’ said she, and darted off, towards the head of the column again: Their Majesties’ Pavilion. A streak of muddied white thundered along at her heels: her faithful assistant, giving chase.

It was not actually Their Majesties’ grandest of pavilions she was looking for, but the one directly behind it. The king and queen’s equipage was easy to locate, on account of the

glittering flags flying from tall poles at each corner. Not merely a matter of pomp and display, though that was part of it: the flags could be seen from miles away, giving due notice of the Progress's imminent arrival. Thus it was that they were greeted, whenever they stopped, both with sufficient fanfare and—far more important—ample comforts. Food, rest, baths.

That had been Myrtle's notion, Jessamine knew. The Wardrobe had spent a week making all the flags.

Pennants flew from the other grand pavilion, too, equally fine: this one carried Prince Armael, and his new bride. Heavy brocade curtains hung all about it, keeping off the rain and the wind; by the Wizard's pleasure, the thing itself floated a foot or so above the ground, drifted along as serenely as you'd like. Jessamine had no difficulty in boarding it, despite its altitude; a great leap, and a flurry of her webbed wings: in she went.

The prince and new princess were enjoying a beverage, served in painted glasses. The prince was looking better, assuredly: his sweep of blond hair properly groomed, his garments rich enough, and neat, his pale eyes less given to wildness around the edges.

The Princess Alvan's doing, at least in part. She, of course, was perfection: as much at ease in Court regalia as she'd been in the kitchens, up to her delicate eyebrows in sugar, and gold paint. She smiled at Jessamine.

'Sorry,' said the dragon, 'to bother you, but I wondered if you've seen a golden orb anywhere about?'

'With jewels on it,' said the prince. 'Blue?'

‘Sapphires,’ supplied his wife. ‘And a pair of sceptres, all over filigree, and pearls. They’re here.’ A cushion of purple silk lay behind her: she gestured at it. Jessamine crept near.

A fat, weighty globe of solid gold lay in the middle of it, bristling with sapphires, and on each side of it a thin, ornate rod dozed in apparent tranquillity: the sceptres. ‘Well,’ said Jessamine severely. ‘And what have you got to say for yourselves? You’ve given me a deal of trouble.’

The crockery went on minding its own business, whatever that was, without remark. Jessamine scowled.

‘It was my fault,’ admitted the prince. ‘I was musing.’

‘Making a joke of them, I suppose,’ Jessamine guessed, knowing his highness to possess a peculiar notion of humour. She supposed his wife found it charming.

‘Well, yes,’ said the prince. ‘Though I don’t know how they could come to hear of it.’

A good question: Jessamine eyed them. ‘Baldringa?’ she guessed. ‘Come out of there.’

‘I shan’t,’ answered the orb, petulantly.

‘The Wizard wants to faff, and I doubt you’d want to be lurking when he does.’

‘Tell him to faff with some other golden orb. I’m using this one.’

‘Some other Orb of Sovereignty? A thousand years old, enchanted with unfathomable power, and invested with all the

royal pomp and whatnot?’ Jessamine tapped the orb with a talon, *click click*. ‘You find another golden orb. Go on.’

‘No.’

‘Don’t make me use my Curse of Banishment. You won’t like it.’

A sulking silence followed. The orb did not speak again, nor did the sceptres, but a slinking something whisked out of the air, and vanished: an old wizard, chastened.

‘I’d better take these back, then,’ said Jessamine, and did so.



THE TOWERS OF DOLONS appeared first, in much the same way as the flags on the royal pavilion. Towers protrude, as a rule, and these more than most: as they drew nearer, Jessamine realised they were floating.

There were three, all differing in size: a wide, pale one, a narrow, dark one, and one so shining and delicate it had no business calling itself a structure. The building to which they were not quite attached had more glass in it than wall, and Jessamine understood at once why the Wizard had bothered with all the faffery. The Dolons Academy of Wizardry was that sort of place, no doubt: you wanted to put your big boots on, if you were going in.

Which they were, some of them. A small forest of coloured tents lay spread out across an expansive front lawn, ready to house the greater part of the Progress. A trio of Great Wizards

—you could tell from the height and grandeur of their hats—stood waiting to welcome the rest, posed before the grand double doors like a collection of fanciful statues, still and smiling.

Garstang had got himself a hat. It wasn't especially impressive, a mere velvet bag of a thing, but that, too, made sense: there was no competing with these. He was right at the front on his flying carpet, and Jessamine with him; only the two royal pavilions went ahead of them.

'Now that we come to it,' Jessamine said, as the pavilions came to a halt and somebody started a speech, 'I think I am a bit nervous about Dolons, too.'

'It's wise to be,' answered the Wizard, her Wizard, and patently the best of them, regardless of hats.

Jessamine waited with titupping tail, wreathed in agitated smoke. Garstang had never talked of Dolons, in any regular way, but the name had often crossed his lips: whenever he completed some thorny cantrip or challenging spell, one that would stymy any ordinary wizard, he had a way of laughing—a great, hearty HAH! with an odd echo behind it—and then he'd say, to no one in particular, 'Take that, Dolons!'

The results of his magical labours made a fine show, Jessamine had to admit. The orb and sceptres seemed quite pleased with themselves, all lit up and slowly spinning, with nothing but wizardry to make them do it. The flags and pennants were playing music, she thought—something was, at any rate, and it sounded like nothing she'd ever heard before.

And the grand pavilions, elevated as they were, wafting along despite their weight like leaves on the wind—really, the Court Wizard had made a creditable display of himself, for those who valued such things.

These people assuredly did. When the speeches were over (Jessamine, being wholly uninterested, heard not a word), the royalty had disembarked, and the rest of the Progress were dismissed to arrange their comforts as they liked, at last it was time for the Wizard Garstang to step forward—with Jessamine.

The three grand wizards expected something very fine indeed, for they were alert, all anticipation. Two of them were old men with white beards, as one might expect of a great magician, but the third was a woman, not a great deal older than Garstang. She was rotund, red-cheeked and dark-haired, with a glimmer of something about her—magic, or humour, or both. When the words “Castle Chansany’s Court Wizard” were uttered (by the Lord Chamberlain, Myrtle, doing a fine job of fanfare), Garstang bowed.

The faces of two grand wizards fell in tandem, then two sets of overgrown eyebrows rose skywards. ‘You?’ said one of them. ‘You are the Court Wizard?’

Garstang only smiled, though there might have been a bit of venom in it.

‘Hello, Gar,’ said the third, with a twinkle. ‘Welcome back.’

Garstang grinned. ‘Milady Roswin,’ he returned, and bowed more floridly than ever.



THE GRAND WIZARD ROSWIN wasn't the sort you would expect your Court magician to fall in love with. Surrounded as he was by the kingdom's finest ladies, a flower garden of rare and delicate blooms carefully cultivated to please; why this one, then?

She was a wizard, that must be a point in her favour. But her hair was untidy, she had a loud, uncouth sort of laugh, and she had patently spilled tea, or something like it, down the front of her ceremonial robe. She smelled like a human woman, too, which Jessamine gathered was undesirable; the fine ladies of the Court wore so many scents between them, she was like to sneeze for a week, if she got too close.

The two had fallen into conversation the moment the royals had been escorted away. Where the pair were wandering to, Jessamine did not know; neither did they, she suspected. They had a lot to say to each other, and Jessamine pattered quietly along behind them, trying her best not to overhear. She had never seen Garstang so spellbound—not with a *person*, at least. They smiled at each other, teased each other with a cosy familiarity, and, when they arrived (by accident or design) at the chamber marked for Garstang's use, they parted from each other with—with a hug, he got his arms all the way around her and everything. It wasn't the perfunctory sort, either: the hug went on for a while.

Jessamine crept in after Garstang and crouched by the door, her eyes very wide, and her heart palpitating in a very odd

way.

Garstang did not notice, at first. He contented himself with wandering the handsome suite of rooms: a bedchamber hung with tapestries, and sapphire-coloured bed curtains; a study, with his own best-of-all-chairs already set down in it; a little room just for his clothes. He was humming.

He came out of his fog at last, and grinned in Jessamine's general direction. 'Come in, dragon. Have you seen the nest they've made for you? It's in the wardrobe-closet. I asked for some extra ribbons.'

This soothed, a little. Jessamine slunk thitherwards, and found a large basket there, filled to overflowing with fine, fancy fabrics (and, yes, ribbons). This ought to have pleased her; well, it did, in a distant way. But something hung heavy about her heart, and she tucked her face into a length of purple velvet, resolved to sleep the strange feelings away.



A DEMONSTRATION OF WIZARDRY was taking place when Jessamine awoke, and trailed down to the great hall. Every wizard and student in the Academy must be assembled outside, not to mention the many folk of the Royal Progress. Jessamine could hear them, a roar of chatter and laughter and cheering, as well as diverse, less identifiable sounds: swooshes and thumps, bangs and pops; the sorts of things that filled her Wizard's study, from time to time, when he was restless.

Jessamine had often been lonely, in the days when she'd been a human (partly), and ugly, and not much use. She hadn't felt it since; not until today. The hall with its stone walls and mullioned windows seemed larger than before, a sea of emptiness: she could suffocate in it.

Hurriedly she scarpered, down the steps and out into the crowd.

Garstang was in the thick of it, of course. She could hear his deep voice, unusually amplified, booming; she wove her way through hundreds of legs until the forest of people ended, and there he was. He had the orb and the sceptres, again, was sporting with them; Their Majesties sat in splendour, a little raised above the masses, endeavouring to appear very much amused.

They probably were, at that. Garstang knew well how to amuse, though she didn't think it was his royal masters he was trying to impress—nor the grand wizards who had, once upon a time, most likely taught him his trade. It was Milady Roswin's good opinion he sought—had sought from the beginning, most like, with all the faffing.

They were staging a duel, pretending to battle one another. It hardly seemed right to employ priceless articles of crown property in such antics, but he was roguishly irreverent, always. It was one of the things she loved about him.

There was no sign of the other grand wizards. The bearded ones, who'd laughed at the idea of Garstang as a great wizard himself. And why not? Shouldn't they be presiding over the

revelry, when its purpose must be to display the talents of Dolons' Masters? Hmm.

She spotted them at last, out on the edges of the crowd. One in a dark red robe, the other in green, and like enough, otherwise, to be brothers. They had their heads together, talking, and though their faces wore genial smiles as they watched Garstang and Roswin's display, Jessamine knew a thinly-disguised grimace when she saw one.

She left the circle, just as Garstang executed an especially impressive feat of wizardry: he'd fired an illusory wall of flame at his opponent, and it had (after a roar of approval from the audience) dissolved into a gentle rain of stars. And hearts, she noted gloomily. The crowd sighed gladly.

She didn't wait to see how Milady Roswin took the gesture, for the scowlsome wizards were on the move. Their gait seemed, to her, stealthy, prowling, and that aroused her suspicions. She slunk in behind them, kept herself close. She could wish the crowds quieter, the roar of noise lesser; there was no picking out more than a few words of her quarries' conversation.

'—bound to employ Hade's Second Manoeuvre—pure arrogance—'

'—volatile, extremely volatile—'

'—if we were to—effects quite startling—'

'—rid of her, at least—even both—'

Jessamine, rigid with horror, missed whatever they said next altogether, and had to scramble to catch up. Rid of them both? What! Sabotage, was it? Extremely volatile—whatever Hade’s Second Manoeuvre might be, there was danger to it; something that could go wrong. In Garstang’s hands (who else could they be referring to when they spoke of “pure arrogance”), it would be safe enough, but with malicious interference—

Jessamine abandoned the scheming pair, and bolted for the circle at the centre of the crowd. The quantity of legs seemed to have quadrupled, and they were bent on her destruction, every one of them; thrice she was almost stamped upon, and she ran full-tilt into someone’s foot, bumping her head smartly.

At last, the clearing: she hurtled into blank space, halted in momentary befuddlement.

There were Garstang’s shoes: the toes curled over. She ran at them. ‘Wizard!’ she hissed. ‘Do not perform Hade’s Second Manoeuvre!’

‘Cannot talk just at present,’ Garstang answered, sounding rather strained: he hadn’t heard her.

What was he doing, and by the by the Lady Roswin’s feet, the trailing hems of her robe, were absent—Jessamine looked up.

She was flying. Of course she was, what a fine display it made; no chair or carpet under her to facilitate her flight, just a stray wisp of cloud, with stars in it. All of Garstang’s focus was fixed on her, and well it might be: to levitate a carpet with

himself on it was one thing, but to send a woman soaring through the skies like a swan, at least ten feet up— quite another.

Extremely volatile. ‘Bring her down,’ Jessamine barked. ‘Now! If you drop her—’

‘I would never drop her,’ answered Garstang, through shut teeth.

‘I know *you* wouldn’t, but *they* might.’ The interfering wizards were beyond Jessamine’s sight, but they were out there, and plotting.

‘I have this under perfect control,’ Garstang insisted, though he was sweating with the strain of it.

‘Pure arrogance is right,’ Jessamine spat. ‘If you love this lady, get her down from there, now.’

That got his attention: he threw her a startled glance—as though his feelings hadn’t been evident from the beginning—and said, ‘What? Oh.’

Whatever he saw in Jessamine—palpable panic, perhaps—galvanised him at last. He was almost in time, too; his attention snapped back to the levitated lady, and she sank, slowly, two or three feet down.

Then the threads of mist holding her up there dissolved to nothingness, and she fell like a stone.

Garstang saw it coming, as did Jessamine: they were both moving her way at a run, an instinctive response; what did

Jessamine think she was going to do if she got there first? She'd only be squashed flat.

And she was, a bit. Garstang didn't so much catch Roswin as collide with her falling body. They went down, Jessamine all a-tangle with them, and lay, for a moment, in a three-way stupor.

'I'm not dead,' Jessamine uttered after a moment, with not a little surprise. She lay with most of Garstang's considerable weight crushing her, and could barely breathe.

'I am,' Garstang croaked. 'I think.' For his part, he had all of Roswin's not inconsiderable weight to bear: she seemed stunned.

Jessamine heaved and wriggled her way free. The crowds were swarming around the downed trio, with much concerned chatter and commentary; rising over the medley of remarks came somebody's booming great voice. '—deeply irresponsible display—shocking misuse of power—unthinkable in a graduate of Dolon's—'

Jessamine made her way—slightly pained—to the feet of the loud person in question. He had shoes with curly toes, like Garstang's; a final insult. She readied her teeth.

'—immediate review into the circumstances—could have been killed—suspension from the faculty—ouch!'

A pair of cold grey eyes scowled down at her. Jessamine grinned, broadly.

‘A dragon! This is all that was needed. And quite wild in its habits—not at all domesticated—’

‘I heard you,’ Jessamine interrupted. ‘Plotting.’

The wizard—it was the one in the green robe—stopped talking.

‘If Milady Roswin had died, it would’ve been you that killed her. I know it. And if you try to hurt either of them again, I will make sure everybody else knows it, too.’

His steely eyes glinted, mouth curled up in a scornful smile. ‘And who would believe you, dragon?’

‘I’m the Court Dragon of Castle Chansany. The Wizard Garstang’s Familiar. I have tea with Her Majesty Queen Mellany every week. You decide.’

She left him then, rather hurriedly, in case he had any dark thoughts of disposing of her, too. She scarpered back to her own, dear Wizard, finding him on his feet again, with Roswin leaning on his arm.

‘You’re the greatest fool there ever was,’ she informed him. ‘And insufferably pompous, to boot.’

‘That is true,’ allowed Garstang, unsmiling.

Roswin sighed. ‘No harm is done, however.’

‘Not for lack of trying,’ Jessamine muttered darkly.

Roswin gazed at Jessamine’s Wizard with an odd sort of smile: a gentle, fluffy, moonish face. ‘Garstang would never hurt me.’

‘I didn’t say it was him that was trying,’ Jessamine snapped. She was growling, without meaning to, even snarling a bit. The events of the day had stretched her patience in too many ways, and shattered it. She briefly considered awarding both the maddening pair a bite to the ankles, and thought better of it.

Instead she scuttled away, back to her wardrobe nest, and went grumbly to sleep.



‘I SUPPOSE THEY DIDN’T like you much,’ she said the next day, from a place of honour atop a floating carpet all her own. The Progress had moved out, leaving Dolons—and the Lady Roswin—behind.

Jessamine had been briefly afraid that Garstang meant to stay behind with her; he was tempted. But he hadn’t.

‘My tutors?’ Garstang answered. ‘Not a bit.’ In a better mood, he would have smiled at that—grinned, even, half sheepish, half amused. ‘I was... erratic,’ he allowed.

‘And arrogant.’

‘Always that, yes.’ Garstang rode tailor-style on his favoured mossy rug, the curled toes of his shoes sticking up, along with his hair. His personal grooming suffered when his heart did, she noticed.

‘They’re dangerous. The grand wizards.’

Garstang’s expression darkened. ‘One of them, especially.’

‘I don’t mean dangerous to the heart.’ Jessamine spat in disgust. ‘I mean dangerous to everything else. They could have killed your lady-me-love.’

‘She isn’t that,’ Garstang said. ‘And there’s no proof they were hoping to murder her, dragon. Or me, either.’

‘What else is like to happen when you drop a woman from a height of ten feet?’

Garstang sighed. ‘The error was mine. I should not have been performing Hade’s Second Manoeuvre at all, and never upon Roswin.’

‘You’re arrogant, but not without cause,’ Jessamine said. ‘If anyone can perform volatile magical manoeuvres without risk or flaw, it’s you. All would have been well, if those two hadn’t meddled.’

‘She wasn’t supposed to be elected to the Council. No one thought she would win.’ Garstang smiled: he was proud. ‘For that, they dislike her even more than they dislike me, I believe.’

‘She’ll be all right, won’t she?’ Jessamine asked. ‘Back there with them?’

‘Roswin is the most brilliant wizard I ever knew, and I am including myself.’ Garstang gave a little sigh. ‘And the most brilliant woman, too. She beat me at everything.’

Love was certainly strange. Ordinarily, her eccentric, top-lofty Wizard would despise such a person. ‘She’ll say yes,

next time,’ Jessamine said, around a mouthful of something—yes—just a little bitter.

Garstang gave her a sharp look. ‘How did you know that I’d—?’

‘You’re transparent as a pane of Dolons glass.’

He laughed, at that. ‘I think she will never marry. She has too much to do.’ He patted her head, though, gently, and added, ‘Until then, you are woman enough for me, Jess-o-mine.’

He jested, of course. Jessamine would have to be contented with that; and, for the most part, she was.

DREAMSTUFF

SOMETHING WAS OFF. THE Wizard Garstang, chief magician to the Court of Castle Chansany, knew it the moment he opened his eyes, stretched hard enough to crack all the bones in his long spine. He lay abed a while, blinking hazily at an unfamiliar ceiling, and thinking.

Nothing hurt, at least. His head, limbs, heart all felt sound enough—what had they *done* to the ceiling, honestly, did it require quite so many curlicues? —The Court, on Progress, had been for several days the guests of the Baron Trent, a frail fellow, with a young wife who liked *things*—

—Perhaps his head did hurt, come to think of it. The curls and flourishes across the ceiling didn't help, busy and glaring, like the rest of Trentwood. He liked a bold colour himself, would not have objected to the emerald paint, but all the flowers—

He turned his face to the window, where sunlight filtered through diamond-paned glass. Something was off, but he couldn't say what—his mouth tasted foul, what in the world

had he eaten at last night's feast? Or drunk, more likely, the wine had been excellent and copious, that explained the headache, but there was nothing in any of that to much disturb him; it would soon pass.

He searched his mind, groping through sleep-fog like a man blinded, finding nothing...

Nothing. That was it, that was *it*. Ten minutes awake, and scant thoughts rattling about a brain hollow as a blown egg. Where was the riot? The messy mass of mirage, strange visions and mad ideas; he hadn't dreamed. Not a scrap, not so much as a flicker of dreamstuff.

'This is terrible,' he said, heart thudding. He hurled himself out of bed, dressed in velvet and silk, brushed the tangles out of his hair; ran at last out of his bedchamber and clattered down the stairs, as though he might run away from the silence in his mind. Alas, it went with him.

He talked overmuch at breakfast, merry to the point of fever. Ladies flocked about him like sparrows, chattering and flapping— 'The best wizard in the kingdom, I daresay he shall do something magical presently—Oh! Oh! Turn us a trick, Lord Wizard! Can you make my hair curl?' (A woman sallow, hair as limp as wet paper) 'Can you alter the hue of this gown? I never did like red above half (a woman roseate, her face flaming as bright as her velvets) 'O! Would it not be the dearest thing if Peachblossom were to talk? How I should like to know what the sweet creature thinks! (A woman stout and

vapid, dandling a ball of canine fluff upon her knee like ‘twere a child).

The Garstang of yesterday would have obliged—had, in fact, made a dish spin atop the brocade tablecloth, caused a gold-chased pot of tea to pour itself out for a lady.

But today he hadn’t dreamed, and he dared not cast—not even a mellow little cantrip. Not here, in front of everyone; that must wait. ‘Patience, good ladies, patience,’ said he with a wink, and a wizardly flourish. ‘You shall see magic aplenty tonight, and I must save my strength for it.’ There was revelry planned, the sort to make a showman of him: music and mischief.

They tittered, and let him be. He daubed sweat from his brow with a surreptitious swipe of his napkin, and wished for Jessamine. Where at Trentwood was she like to be?



THE DRAGON IN QUESTION avoided the dining-rooms at mealtimes, as a fixed and unbreakable rule. The tumult bothered her ears, and the way the courtiers had of flirting with all and sundry—especially Garstang—set her sharp teeth on edge. Coy glances, witty sallies and ripples of laughter; goodness, no. Not even the choicest morsels could tempt her.

Besides, she had made a friend of the cook below-stairs, and half the kitchen maids, too. They kept her well-supplied.

She was down there even as her master formed his wish for her, having slept curled around a chair-leg before the dying

fire. She was on hand to receive a plump duck's egg, fresh out of the poaching water; the crusts of the fine white bread a maid, Sally, was toasting; the skins, pungent and slippery, from a pile of kippers, rich with smoke.

Following which repast, she felt equal to anything—which was fortunate, as it was going to be the sort of day when anything could happen.

'You're wanted,' said Sally, just as Jessamine curled up by the hearth again, to sleep off her rich breakfast. 'They're asking all over the castle for you.'

'They?' she queried, without opening either eye.

Sally shrugged, slicing with her great knife into a crisp onion: *snick*. 'Cannot say as to who, or why. Seems pressing, though.'

Grudgingly, Jessamine uncurled, and stretched out her thin red tail to its furthest inch. 'Doubtless a disaster brewing. They've got wizards for that sort of thing, you would think.'

'Aren't you a wizard?' Sally's knife made short work of another onion, flashing in the firelight.

'Only when I can't avoid it.' She was the Wizard's Familiar, or so he called her, and she had been known to help with a cantrip or two, on occasion. But not if she could help it. 'I suppose I'd better—'

She was interrupted by the entry of a page in green livery, his young face flushed with exertion, or excitement, or both.

‘Is the Wizard’s Dragon here?’ bawled he, the words falling all over each other with his haste.

‘Yes,’ sighed Jessamine, resigning herself.

‘Oh! Well then, milady, I’m to tell you you’re wanted upstairs, very quickly, that is to say immediately, ma’am, if you please, for there’s an emergency afoot.’

He had hair the colour of Sally’s onion-skins, Jessamine noted idly. ‘And who is it as wants me?’

‘The Wizard, milady, if you please.’

No one had called Jessamine “Milady” before, that she could recall. It was not unpleasing, except that he was patently doing so in hopes of softening the impact of these peremptory summons. She flicked her tongue over the points of her teeth: yes, nice and sharp. Ready for biting.

‘I come,’ she assured him. ‘There’s no use asking you where the Wizard is, of course. He’s like a moth, always flitting off, just when you want him.’

‘He was in the music room last I saw, milady ma’am,’ said the page, and bowed.

The music room was the last place she was likely to find him now, then. Jessamine stifled a groan, and hauled her overloaded belly towards the door. ‘Sally,’ she said as she slunk into the passage. ‘Pray save me an onion tart, for later. I’ll need reviving.’

‘That I will,’ answered the maid, and off went Jessamine.

The Wizard being a creature of the purest chaos, Jessamine found him entirely by accident, and when she least expected to do so. Which is to say she found him the moment she stepped into the great hall, and by means of being—almost—stomped to pieces as he stormed through.

‘Ah!’ ejaculated he, coming to a sudden stop, and beaming down at her. She didn’t like that smile at all; he was in one of his mad moods. ‘Dragon, I am all to pieces.’

Jessamine surveyed him. He looked ordinary enough, dressed in his fancy garb and with a soft velvet bag of a hat over his dark hair. His curly-toed shoes were a little scuffed, to be sure, but not much, and her nose informed her he hadn’t forgotten to wash recently. ‘What seems to be the problem?’ she ventured to enquire.

‘Well!’ said he, with gusto. He did not elaborate, save by making a series of mysterious gestures with his expressive hands: magic in progress. He uttered a cantrip, too, in a rolling, booming voice, and Jessamine awaited the results. A great bang, and a shower of coloured sparks; all the heavy oak chairs and silver chalices turned into butterflies, and flown away; the tapestries brought down off the walls, and reciting poetry. Anything of the sort.

None of these things happened, nor did anything else: the hall, empty apart from their two selves, rang with a quality of silence that could not but strike dread deep into Jessamine’s soul.

The Wizard Garstang was never silent. He didn't know how to do silence, or rest; he was a whirlwind of a man, a hurricane of madness and magic and merriment.

Jessamine stared up at him. His eyes were wide and wild, and he was sweating.

'You've...' began Jessamine, and couldn't go on.

'Yes,' said Garstang, heavily.

'You've lost your magic.'

The Wizard (erstwhile) held up both hands, palm out, in a helpless gesture: nothing, it said. Nothing here.

'Oh, dear,' said Jessamine, and sat down on the cold stone floor. 'This is very bad indeed.'

'Terrible,' groaned Garstang. 'I'd as soon die, Jess-o-mine.'

'Come, now, less of that. Most of us live magicless lives, and are none the worse for it.'

'Yes, but I cannot.'

She couldn't argue with him, not really. Garstang without his wizardry, who was he? A mere courtier in fine shoes, a being of shallow wit and hollow courtesies. And, she thought, a madman. The magic and the chaos of him were one and the same: deprived of the one, he could never tolerate the other.

'How did it happen?' she asked.

'I woke up empty. Naught in my head but a thought of breakfast, Jess-o-mine, that was all!'

'I don't follow that.'

‘I didn’t dream, dragon. Not so much as a flicker.’

‘Perhaps you just...forgot,’ Jessamine suggested. ‘It’s the common way with dreams, isn’t it? Nobody remembers all the peculiar things that go on in our heads in the night...’ She trailed off, for Garstang was wearing a face that said: *Oh, don’t I?*

‘I,’ he answered with dignity, ‘never forget.’

‘And if you don’t dream, there’s no magic either.’

‘What is magic, but the stuff of dreams?’ A fine sentiment, she thought, but in this case meant more literally than she might otherwise assume. Not a metaphor: the truth.

‘Have you ever gone a night without dreaming before? Perhaps it was just the one.’

‘Never,’ said he, dashing that hope.

Jessamine nodded. ‘Right. Well, then you must see a healer.’

‘An apothecary?’ He scoffed. ‘What manner of concoction are they like to give me, that I cannot make myself—and better?’

‘Or that Tambul cannot make for you,’ Jessamine said tartly. ‘You being shy of actual labour.’

He waved this off. ‘Believe me, if we had anything in the dispensary that could remedy a dream-drought, I’d have taken it already.’

The entire contents of Castle Chansany’s Potionery had been brought along on the Progress, Jessamine knew, at fantastic

cost. Garstang had insisted; ‘And what if I’m called upon to perform some important wizardry, and without the tools to do it?’ he’d said, with enough justice to sway Her Majesty (and the Lord Chamberlain).

‘Then what’s the cause?’ Jessamine said. ‘Who or what could have the power to bleed your brain dry of dreaming?’

‘I don’t know, dragon, but we need to find out.’

‘Of course. *We* need to find out,’ she muttered. ‘Cannot you manage a little emergency yourself, once in a while?’ She’d been trying to have a holiday. Catch up on her napping, eat too much confectionery, that sort of thing.

Garstang said nothing, but his face changed. There was real anguish there, when you stopped and really looked at him. Fear, too. She’d never seen him afraid before, not really, and now he was petrified.

‘Right,’ she said, her mood shifting as mercurially as her Wizard’s did, most days. ‘Right,’ she said again. ‘Don’t worry. We will have this sorted by the end of the day, and you’ll be chock-full of dreams again by the morning.’

‘But there’s to be a feast tonight,’ Garstang reminded her. ‘With music, and dancing, and a banquet, and Trentwood’s Magician is presiding.’

The Magician of Trentwood was a man of Garstang’s own age, and full of vim and vigour. He had patently identified the Court Wizard as a chief rival, and set himself to outdo him at every opportunity. His name was Lord Silverton (a title

granted on account of his wizardry rather than his lineage, Garstang had said, with a proper contempt at the presumption), and he would delight in humiliating Garstang—and, by extension, the Court of Castle Chansany.

‘Well. Then this is all very urgent indeed, isn’t it? Best get started.’ Jessamine bit his ankle, just gently, to shock him out of his stupor. ‘Garstang. To the library. If there’s a book about this then you must find it.’

‘Yes,’ he said, shaking himself. ‘I’ll take the scribes with me.’

‘I’m going to talk to Tambul,’ Jessamine decided, and without waiting for either answer or interference, she scurried off.



WIZARD GARSTANG GOT ON better with delegating studious tasks, in the general way of things. It wasn’t that he didn’t like reading, or that he had no diligence. It was only that his mind had a way of flying away from the subject at hand, and the less interest he felt in a topic, the sooner his butterfly brain was like to wander off.

Well. He had a strong motive to pursue a greater understanding of dreaming, and magic, and the links between the two—not to mention the nefarious possibilities inherent in the business. That didn’t make him interested, quite.

The library at Trentwood would never compete with that of Castle Chansany, but that was no fair standard. It was a very

respectable book room, for a provincial mansion house: sizeable, with polished walnut shelves up to the ceilings, most of them stuffed full of leather-bound volumes. Three tall windows let very little light through their thick mullioned panes; the housekeeper, or perhaps the maids, had set several beeswax candles out to counteract the gloom, each enclosed in a glass surround. The drapes, heavy crimson things, stirred in a pervasive draught: the wind keened outside, and rain beat hard against the windows.

A drearier morning's work Garstang could not, at that moment, imagine.

'The matter's rather important,' Garstang informed the three scribes he had hauled out of a frigid annex off the great hall (where they were copying royal proclamations), and swept along with him, like a row of ducklings. 'By what means might a person—a wizard, say—cause another person—also, perhaps, a wizard—to cease dreaming? If you can have an answer for me before sundown—' He broke off, for it struck him that a long patch of gloom in one corner might be occupied. It was, it absolutely was; a man sat there, not even reading, merely silent.

A glimmer of long, silvery hair revealed his identity, even if his face lay in shadow. Lord Silverton. The hair was an affectation, of course; the man wasn't old. It matched the rings on his long fingers, paired beautifully with his elegant name; Garstang scowled.

The Wizard of Trentwood was watching him.

‘Yes, well, hurry along,’ Garstang snapped, dismissing the scribes. They scattered towards the shelves. Garstang hesitated, minded to get out of the library post-haste, and find some other, more interesting occupation. But Silverton’s cool stare piqued his interest—and his irritation. Had he no manners?

‘Something seems to have caught your attention,’ Garstang observed, having placed himself near enough to watch the other wizard’s face.

A faint smile answered him. ‘You are having trouble with your magic, are you?’

‘Who told you that?’

Silverton shrugged. ‘No one. But if you’ve lost your dreaming—’

‘I haven’t lost it. It is merely—temporarily compromised.’

‘How inconvenient.’

‘Given that I have revelry to host tonight, it is thoroughly inconvenient. I don’t suppose you know of a solution?’

Silverton turned his sleekly elegant head, and stared out at the flashing silver rain. ‘I really couldn’t say.’

The man was probably delighted about it; no Court Wizard showing off his superior craft at Trentwood, most desirable.

Perhaps he was even responsible for Garstang’s plight. His pose of bland unconcern certainly suggested it.

‘Never mind,’ he said, his tone as bland as Silverton’s expression. ‘I’ll have my magic back by nightfall.’

‘I do hope so,’ said Silverton, distantly.

Garstang abandoned him to his patent daydreaming—insult to injury, that—and stalked off.



TAMBUL, THE WIZARD’S APPRENTICE, rarely left the Mixery, when the Court resided at Castle Chansany. If he wasn’t there, he would be in the Potionery, or—very occasionally—in the Dispensary (the latter not particularly preferred, since it threatened him with the appalling prospect of having to talk to the recipients of his potions).

Trentwood had no such rooms. As such, Jessamine was at a loss to imagine what the irascible wizard-in-training might have found to do with himself, and where. He had no interest in food, save as sustenance, so she ruled out the dining rooms and banqueting houses. He probably wasn’t in the library or the reading-rooms, preferring the company of his own notebooks (or the Wizard Garstang’s spell books, of course). He certainly wouldn’t be anywhere the courtiers were gathering, or the residents of Trentwood, either. He’d be tucked away in a quiet corner, and the crowded mansion didn’t have many of those left.

She found him at last in the music room, of all places. No quiet spot, that, one would think, save that most of the instruments had been taken out of it, and carried off;

Jessamine had heard the results in snatches, as she'd scuttled about the house looking for Tambul.

He—small, dishevelled and glowering—had tidied himself away into a window-seat, with an old lute tucked into his lap. The battered thing had only two strings left to it, one of which Tambul sat desultorily plucking. It twanged discordantly.

‘Tambul,’ barked Jessamine, rushing across the room, and screeching to a stop at his feet. ‘What have you got in your potion chests? We need a dream-draught.’

Tambul roused abruptly, like a man surfacing out of deep water. ‘A dream-draught? As though I might have such a thing. That’s ridiculous.’

‘The Wizard needs it.’

‘What?’ Tambul set the lute down, sat up straighter. ‘Nonsense. He’s got a head full of dreams. Thousands. Or he wouldn’t be the Wizard, now would he?’

‘Exactly,’ said Jessamine, and waited for this to sink in.

Tambul was no slow-wit. His eyes opened wide; ‘Oh,’ he said, the word layered with shades of dismay.

‘If you haven’t got a dream-draught, then we need to make one.’

‘Make a—’ Tambul spluttered, silenced (for a moment) by sheer incredulity. ‘You cannot just make a dream-draught, Jessamine.’

‘Why not? We need one, and by sundown, too.’

‘Where do you propose to get the dreams to mix into it?’

‘I beg your pardon?’ Jessamine’s tail began to tap with irritation. Really, the man had no grasp of the concept of an emergency.

‘We can’t mix up good, useful dream-stuff out of nothing. Visions, possibly, hallucinations— but not dreams. They’ve got to be the proper sort.’

‘What’s the difference?’

Tambul sighed and picked up his lute again. There was an aggravated quality to his subsequent twanging. ‘A vision can be anything. It doesn’t matter, provided it’s not meant to be the prophetic sort. But a dream is something else. They’re personal. They come from the heart and the soul. They are made from wishes, hopes, and terror. They speak to you of all the things you cannot admit to yourself when you’re wakeful. Do you see?’

‘Yes,’ said Jessamine grimly. Here was a problem indeed. Who knew what secret terrors haunted the Wizard Garstang’s soul? Or covert wishes, either? None but he, provided that he dreamed, and that was precisely what he was no longer doing.

Tambul plucked a discordant chord. ‘If he’d kept any old ones about, I suppose he would have mentioned it.’

‘He didn’t. Mind you, he was in a panic. I don’t suppose he was thinking clearly.’

Tambul stared. ‘Wizard Garstang, in a panic?’

‘I know. I never saw such a thing before, either.’

Tambul set the lute down again, hard; it met the windowsill with a sharp *thunk*. ‘Well, that changes things.’

‘How?’

‘This is an emergency. A real one.’

‘I know.’

Tambul flexed his short, thick fingers, a workman readying his tools. ‘We can try for a dream-draught. We’ll need dream-catchers and some sleepy volunteers.’

‘I volunteer!’ said Jessamine, sitting up straight.

‘I don’t know, Jessamine. You don’t look at all sleepy.’

This was true. She was far too lively, a mix of hope and interest and an obscure fear setting her wits to jumping.

‘Besides,’ Tambul went on. ‘To do it by sundown? I doubt it.’

‘Then what,’ Jessamine snarled. ‘Honestly, Tambul, you’re no help.’

‘We can try to mend the Wizard.’

‘Mend—? What, is he broken?’

‘Not broken. Cracked a bit down the middle, perhaps. Something’s become of his wishes and fears, and maybe we could find out what.’

‘As if he would ever tell.’

‘Well, he’ll have to, won’t he? Because you won’t like the third option, and neither will he.’

Jessamine attempted to resign herself, which was hard. It felt like hanging a dead weight from her heart. ‘What’s that?’

‘We accept that he can’t wizard, at this time, and get someone else to do it.’

‘Oh.’

‘Yes.’

‘Meaning you.’

‘And you. You aren’t the Wizard’s Apprentice now, but you were, not so long ago.’

‘ME?’ The syllable broke from Jessamine’s maw like a wave, a surge of horror. ‘But I was terrible at it.’

‘So I heard.’

‘And what’s more, I didn’t like it.’

‘Then who else do you suggest? Because I’m not up to all his tricks, not at a Court Revel.’

‘There’s another one about. Silverton.’

Tambul snorted. ‘You try telling the Wizard that. He’ll eat his own hat rather than ask the Wizard of Trentwood to cover for him.’



THIS, ALAS, WAS ALL too true. It wasn’t a matter of arrogance, despite appearances. The Wizard of Castle Chansany had one fear left to his name, at least, and it was presently fuelling all his uncharacteristic panic—and his

stubbornness, too. But who among us likes to feel that we can be easily outdone by our peers and rivals—or, worse yet, replaced?

If anyone had thought to ask, he might have admitted to some unusual feelings (or, perhaps, a lack thereof). A dead weight around his heart, as Jessamine might have put it.

Then again, perhaps he would not. Self-knowledge is enough of a challenge, let alone performing it upon demand.

Either way, when the Wizard Garstang took himself off to his chamber, and lay down upon the bed, and tried, at least, to daydream, nothing came of it.

He lay like a shadow of himself, stripped of colour. Visions had he aplenty, of the things he had used to want, but they had faded somehow, worn thin. Power, of course, always that; great and terrible magics, and influence at Court. Well, he'd had both, and for some years, too. The dreams of yesteryear had worn out at last, like an old pair of shoes, and what had taken their place instead—well. No one knows save the Wizard, and he isn't saying—not even to himself.

He gave up on the daydreaming at last, and hurtled to his feet again. It wasn't energy fuelling this surge of activity, more a kind of feverish restlessness. He'd felt it before, though never so strongly, nor so often, as of late.

A thought struck him like a thunderbolt, stopped him halfway down the twisting stairs to the library. Was that it? Was that what had turned off his dreams and his magic, like the spigot on a keg of beer? Was he bored?

‘Stars alive,’ he swore, for he had a quick, sharp, darting sort of mind; he had hit upon the truth.

And what a truth, the very heights of inconvenience! To decide now, halfway through the Royal Progress, that he wanted none of it, he’d had enough. Their Majesties would kill him, he was sure of it, take off his head, defenestrate him with the greatest relish—

Well, no. *They* would not. Jessamine might.

Narrative irony being what it is—inevitable—it *would* be at this moment that the dragon herself came skittering up the stairs, wings flaring, and ran into him.

‘Ouch,’ she said to his shins, and looked up. ‘Oh. There you are.’

She sounded cross, but this was often the case. ‘Hello, Jess-o-mine,’ he said, attempting joviality.

He received suspicion by way of reply. ‘Your eyes look strange,’ she said, squinting her own at him.

He blinked them. ‘I feel strange,’ he admitted.

She sighed. ‘Tambul says you’re half cracked. I suppose that means something’s amiss.’

Tambul had the right of it, on the whole; Garstang felt cracked, fractured down the middle, half his heart still wedded to the Castle and all its ways, the other aching for freedom.

‘There is something amiss.’

She sat down on the stone step, and wrapped the curve of her tail around his ankle. ‘Better air it, if I were you. It’ll only fester, otherwise.’

Garstang sat down too, and put his head in his hands. ‘I’m afraid you’ll be angry.’

‘I often am,’ she said calmly.

Well. Nothing for it. Garstang hauled the awful truth out of his soul and held it up for her to look at.

She was silent, perhaps with dismay. Perhaps with disgust. He was half disgusted with himself; how could he grow bored with prestige, power, and privilege?

At last, she sighed, a long and smoky exhalation. ‘This is since Dolons, isn’t it?’

‘Yes.’

‘Is it the Lady Roswin?’

‘Partly.’ He thought about it. It was partly the lady; he had taken the piece of his heart that missed her (most of it) and locked it up somewhere, but it was beating against the doors, now.

It was partly Dolons itself. An academy of powerful, creative wizards—even if some of the old masters despised him, well, that was mutual. The company of his peers, the challenge of new magic, old powers, ideas! A heady mix, energising.

‘You’d better go back, then,’ offered Jessamine.

Garstang surfaced from his own thoughts long enough to detect a note of sadness in her tone. She was profoundly sad, he thought, but trying to be brave about it. As he debated what to say, her scaled head came to rest against his knee, and stayed there.

He laid a hand upon it. ‘Shall you come with me, Jess-omine?’

He felt her still; for a moment, she wasn’t even breathing. ‘Shall I, though?’ she said, half a gasp.

‘I hope you would. I hope you will.’ He meant it; the prospect of a new life lost much of its shine, if there was to be no Jessamine in it.

Her tail began to tap. ‘I’d miss the Castle something terrible,’ she said, but it didn’t sound like a no.

‘Me, too,’ he admitted. ‘We would visit, of course.’

‘Of course, we would visit,’ she agreed.

‘And Baldringa could return as the Court Wizard. There’s no getting rid of her anyway.’ She was probably lurking within earshot at that moment, the gauzy mist of her dissolved into his belt-buckle, say, or the jewels on his shoes.

‘I’d suggest Tambul, but I think he would hate it. He’s a Potioneer.’

‘A superb one,’ Garstang agreed.

They fell silent, for a time, both lost in thought: new horizons, new adventures. New dreams.

At last Garstang said, ‘Well, Jess-o-mine, have you decided? What’s it to be?’

Jessamine beamed at him, a real smile, with all her teeth in it. ‘I’ll go with you,’ she said, and his heart eased.



WHEN THE ROYAL PROGRESS left Trentwood three days later, it took the old wizard, Baldringa, with it, and the new wizard, Silverton. It took Tambul, the Potioneer (promoted from the post of Wizard’s Apprentice). It took Moggat, once of the kitchens, now an Apprentice Wizard (replacing Tambul). It took the king and queen, the prince and princess, the Lord Chamberlain Myrtle, the bards, the jongleurs, the Wardrobe, Chef Paglar and all the cooks, the scribes, the scholars and, of course, the furniture.

The Wizard Garstang, once of the Court, now of Dolons (maybe) went another way, and Jessamine with him. He’d got his dreaming back, his magic with it; and truth be told, so had she. With his spell books and his carpet and his dragon to go with him, Garstang flew off into the mists of the future with the lightest of hearts, and the brightest of smiles.

With her hoard of silk ribbons, her butter cakes, and her wizard to go with her, Jessamine bared her teeth at the wind and the future, half a grimace, half a grin. There was a strange fizzing in her blood, a racing of her heart, a jumping of her wits and her nerves. It was fear, it was excitement, it was possibility. ‘There’s one question I perhaps ought to have

asked,' she said, as the turrets of Trentwood blended into the clouds behind them, and disappeared. 'What am I going to do at Dolons?'

Garstang had a lute with him, he was playing a lively tune. 'Anything you like, Jess-o-mine,' he decided, strumming. 'Anything in all the world.'

ABOUT THE CASTLE

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Until next time,

Chally