

# Daughter of the Bear King

by

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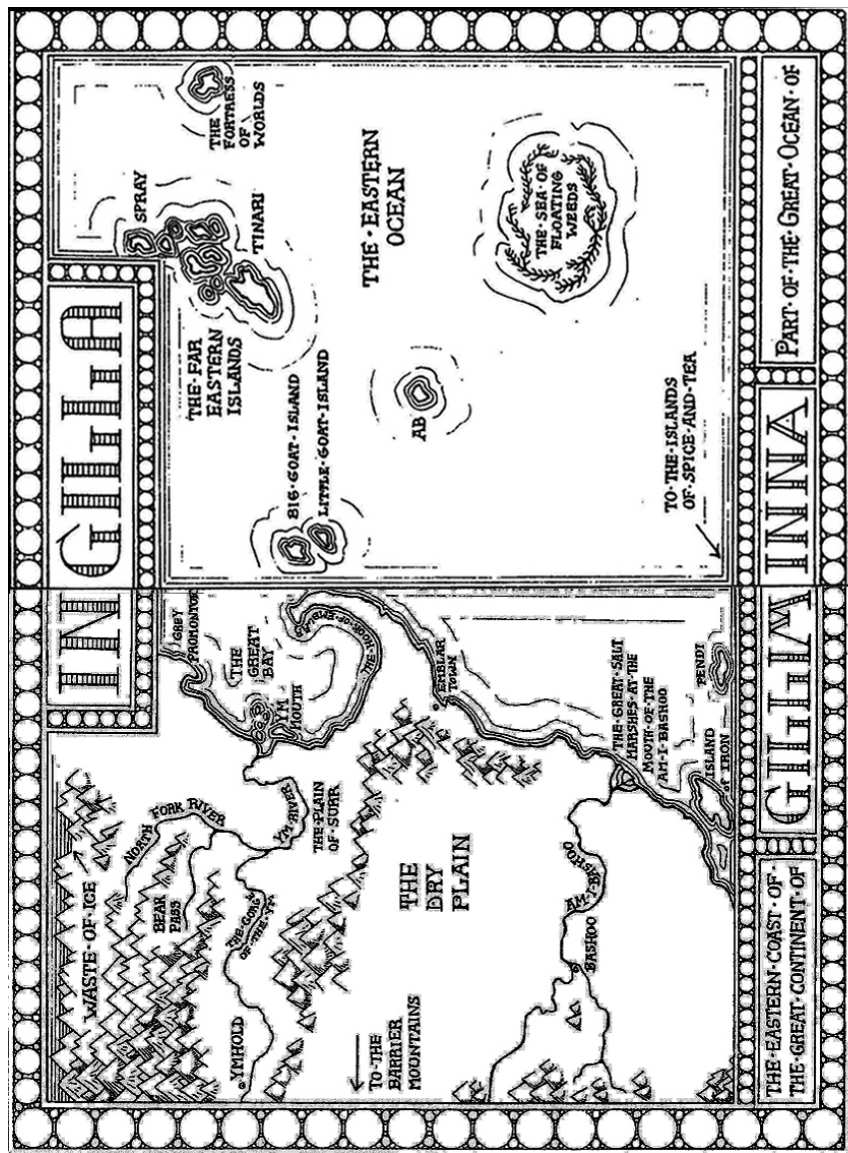
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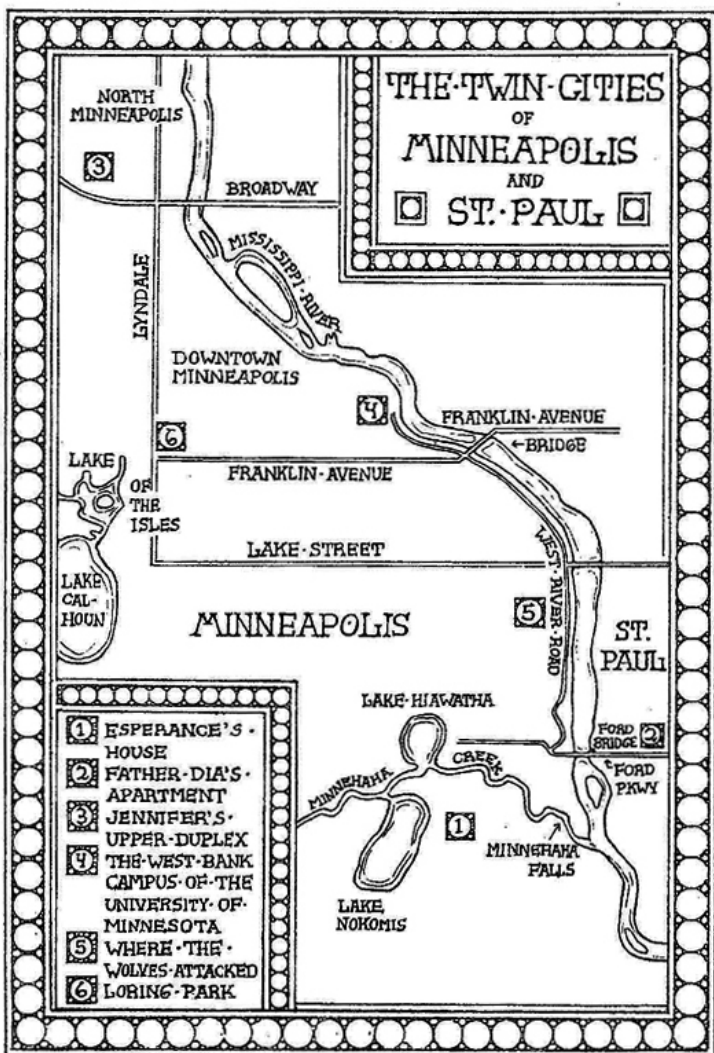
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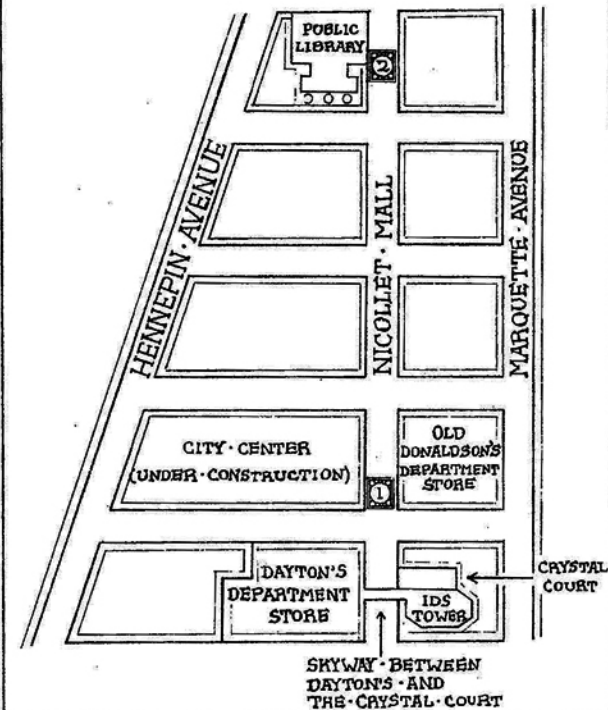
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# MINNEAPOLIS



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ESPERANCE  
THE DRAGON

MATERIALIZES HERE

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The sailor on the ocean,  
The archer with a bow,  
The potter at the turning wheel—  
What do they know?  
Respect for the water,  
Respect for the wind,  
Respect for the lump of clay,  
Respect for the mind and hand.





## PART ONE: THE BEAR CHILD

All her life she had been troubled by dreams: the same dreams, repeating over and over. There was the gray land, flat and empty. Fog hid the distances. She heard—or thought she heard—the roar of the ocean, a faint dull sound. It was not near. Something else was. What, she did not know. A presence in the fog. She was afraid to move. A movement might bring her closer to the thing. She waited, her heart pounding, fear in her throat and mouth like a bad taste. Nothing happened. The presence did not appear. She woke.

Another dream was of a city, high in the mountains, built of black stone. Water ran through channels in the streets. There were fountains in the squares. Water shot up and was blown to one side by the cold mountain wind. On the fronts of the houses were faces, carved out of black stone. The sad faces dripped water from their eyes, and the merry faces pursed their lips and spat out water: thin jets that glittered in the sunlight.

A woman greeted her, tall and gracious, wearing a crown of silver, enameled black. The crown was set with

moonstones and diamonds. The woman took it off and held it out.

Me? asked our heroine. For me?

For you, answered the queen, oh daughter of my spirit.

There were other dreams: the forest at night, the dance of ghosts, the shipwreck, the burning dirigible. She had names for all of them, descriptions written down, and the explanations of a good therapist.



In the real world—the world of sunlight and waking and ordinary obligation—she married at twenty, bore two children, and raised them in a house in south Minneapolis.

By the time she was forty, the children were gone. One was at school in the East on a scholarship. The other washed dishes in a restaurant in Santa Fe and sent home postcards about Georgia O'Keefe, Indian art, and photography.

Her husband—a tall grave professor of English—busied himself with the novels of George Eliot and local party politics. She loved him and respected him, but she had never cared for George Eliot (the other woman in his life, he liked to say). The internal struggles of the Democratic Farmer Labor Party seemed less interesting with every year that passed.

So there she was at forty, a bit plump but in good condition. (She walked a lot and worked out at the YWCA.) Her hair was half gray. Her face had a few wrinkles; and if she looked closely, she could detect im-

perfections in her complexion: spots, broken blood vessels, all the subtle horrors of early middle age.

Who am I? she thought, staring into the bathroom mirror. What am I? Is that maturity I see and strength of character? Or merely an old bat with no idea of what to do next?

She began to read catalogs: classes at the Y, classes at the U, seeds for the garden, new clothes, new furniture, digital watches, and computer clock-radios. Nothing seemed worth doing or buying. Maybe she ought to return to therapy. There were, after all, signs that she was going around the bend. Her dreams had gotten worse, more frequent and more vivid. Now, when she woke, she could taste the salt of the ocean that washed along the edge of the gray land. Or she could hear the water running through the city of black stone. The words of the queen echoed in her mind, as she stared at the ceiling of her bedroom.

Daughter, daughter, why have you waited this long? We need you. We have needed you for twenty years.

Balderdash, she told herself. Garbage. Gibberish. The wish-fulfillment fantasy of a fat old lady.

Then, one Monday morning, the washing machine made a funny noise and stopped working. She fiddled with all the dials, not noticing that water had crept out from under the machine and surrounded her feet. She was standing in a pool of water.

Maybe there was something wrong with the cord or the plug. She reached for the plug. She touched it.

*Zap!*

She was standing naked on a beach of gray stone. On one side of her was the ocean: white waves rushing

in, curling over and crashing on the shingle. On the other side was fog.

She shivered. (Her name, by the way, was Esperance. It was the one touch of imagination her parents had ever shown.) “About time,” a voice said—a harsh male voice.

She turned. Out of the fog came a man, tall, with silver hair. He wore a black robe embroidered with moons.

“What?” she cried.

“I am an old man with rheumatism, and I have waited here for twenty years. Time and time again, I saw you—but only as a phantasm or illusion. I called out. You did not hear me. I tried to weave a binding spell. But who can bind the creatures who dwell in dreams? Always, you eluded me. I remained, though every year the pain in my bones was more severe. You were our only hope. The others—” He spread his hands wide. “Lost, utterly lost.

“And you”—he glared—“wasted your time looking at the Burpee Seed Catalog. Who do you think you are, anyway?”

“Esperance Olson,” she replied.

“Wrong. You are the bear child, the hope of the mountain.” He beckoned. “Come with me.”

She followed, too confused to argue. He led her into the fog. After a minute or two or three, they came to a hut built of stone, conical, with a low door and no windows. They went in. There wasn’t much room. She had to keep her head bent to avoid hitting the ceiling. She looked around. The hut was bare, save for a fire burning in the middle of the floor. The air was full of smoke.

Her eyes watered. The man crouched down, groaning softly. He opened a bag. Why hadn't she seen it before?

"Here." He pulled out clothes. "Get dressed."

Was this another dream? A new one? It had to be. The clothes were unfamiliar, but they fit perfectly, as if made for her. She put on the underwear: knickers and a shirt, made of a soft white fabric. Was it silk? Then a tunic of fine wool, as black as midnight. The pants were leather, thin and supple and as black as the tunic. She must look absurd. She was far too hippy for clothes like these. Why hadn't she gone on a diet, as she had planned?

She pulled on the boots: high and handsome, made of stiff black leather. The heels were inlaid with silver, and the tops were trimmed with white fur. Last of all, she put on the belt. It was linked silver, with a big silver buckle in the shape of a bear. The eye of the bear was a moonstone.

She fastened the buckle. The man stood up. His bag was gone, she noticed. "Who are you?" she asked.

"Gerringarr the Wise." He smiled briefly. "Or maybe I ought to say, Gerringarr the Rheumatic. I am chief wizard to the queen of the mountain."

"And who did you say I am?"

"That is a story I will save for the queen. We have to hurry. Much has been lost in the years when you dallied in—What is the name of that place?"

"Minnesota."

"What a name! Absurd! Unreal!" He led her outside.

Two animals stood in front of the hut, saddled and bridled. They were shaped like deer, the ordinary deer of northern Minnesota. But they were much larger, and they were white. Their heads bore—each one—a pair of

long straight horns, pale yellow, the color of ivory. They had black eyes and black noses. Their breath came out in clouds.

It was cold, she realized for the first time. Really cold.

The animals turned their heads. They looked at her, and then they bent their necks, bowing gravely.

“They recognize you,” the wizard said. “Mount up.”

She had ridden a lot as a teenager and even some as an adult, going on trips with her children up into the western mountains and down into the Grand Canyon. But she had never ridden anything like this. As soon as she was in the saddle, she felt the animal’s power. The great muscles tightened; the wide back quivered. The creature snorted, impatient to go.

The wizard mounted. The animals sprang forward. What speed! What smoothness! It was like riding a rushing stream. (She had done that too. Her daughter was into white water canoeing.)

The land flowed past her, gray and featureless. The fog grew thick. She couldn’t see at all. The fog grew thin. She looked to one side. The ocean was there, white with foam. There was no sign of life: no vegetation on the rocky ground, no gulls on the wind, not even a dead fish or a piece of seaweed washed up on the beach. What kind of place was this? They traveled on and on. The animals seemed tireless.

All at once, the fog was gone. The sky above was blue. Sunlight made her blink. Startled, she reined her animal.

The wizard did the same. “What is it?” he cried.

Esperance looked back. There it was: the fog, a gray wall that stretched across the land and out over the ocean.

“Oh.” She took a second look at the water. It was smooth and blue, rolling gently and showing not a single trace of white. “What is that?” She pointed at the fog.

“The Gray Promontory. The fog never lifts, the ocean is always wild, the air is always cold. Animals avoid the place, though it isn’t usually dangerous. Not to them. Human folk fear it and quite rightly. It is a Place of Power.”

“A what?”

The wizard frowned. “You have so much to learn, and we have so little time.

“Very well! There are many ways to view the world. One is as follows: A pattern exists, a pattern of power. It underlies our everyday reality. It is the skeleton that gives our world its shape. In most places, this pattern—this skeleton of power—is well below the surface. Only a wizard or a sorceress can perceive it and reach down to it.”

He frowned again. “Maybe skeleton is the wrong metaphor. Maybe the power is like an underground river—like a network of rivers, all underground. The world we see draws nourishment from them. A wizard can dig down and tap the source.” He rubbed his forehead. “I’m still not saying the right thing. I can feel what the power is like. But the words do not come.

“In any case, in a few places the power is close to the surface. Even ordinary people can feel it, like a bone under the skin or like an artery pulsing. There”—he pointed to the fog—“on the Gray Promontory, the

power is right at the surface. I knew it would draw you, for you are a creature of power. Now let's get going."

It was late morning when they left the promontory. They rode all day, over dunes covered with yellow grass and then through a forest of scrub pine. At twilight, they made camp.

Esperance unsaddled the animals. "What are they?" she asked, stroking a pale neck.

"Ushaia. Don't bother to tie them. They are magical. They will return in the morning."

She let them go. They vanished into the forest like ghosts. The wizard built a fire, then opened his bag. Where had that come from? she wondered. It hadn't been with him on the ride. He pulled out bread, still warm from the oven, and a jug of hot soup. Beef vegetable, she decided after taking a sip. They ate and drank. She was too tired to ask any questions. He groaned from time to time—his rheumatism. Esperance lay down and slept.

She dreamt of her children: Jennifer, the photographer, and Mark—dark, thin, and intense, who worried about the environment. The dream was ordinary, so ordinary that it didn't seem to be a dream. She was walking with her children by the ocean. The day was hot and bright. They took off their shoes and splashed in the shallows. They gathered shells. They talked.

When she woke, Esperance was crying. She wiped her eyes, then sat up. It was morning. The sky was cloudless. At the edge of the forest, the ushaia waited, gleaming like snow in the shadows.

They ate breakfast: croissants with butter and jam and a jug of café au lait. Esperance saddled the animals.



They mounted and rode west, away from the rising sun, away from the ocean.

All that day they traveled through the forest. Their speed was incredible. No horse could move as quickly as the ushaia, especially on trails such as these: narrow winding tracks for deer and foxes, not human folk. Once they crossed a road.

“Why don’t we take that?” asked Esperance.

“I prefer to be secret.”

They camped by a stream. Esperance dreamed of her husband—at home, in his easy chair, reading *Middlemarch*. Or was it a biography of Hubert H. Humphrey? Once again, she woke with tears in her eyes. It was still dark. A full moon hung above the trees. An owl hooted. What am I doing here? she asked. She had no answer. After a while, she went back to sleep.

The next day, they followed a trail that wound up among boulders and outcroppings of rock. Trees grew everywhere, ancient and twisted, leaning at odd angles. There were lichens on the boulders. Mosses grew around the roots of the trees. What amazing colors! The lichens, most of them, were royal blue. The mosses were dark brown or burgundy red.

They camped in a hollow near the crest of a hill. At sunrise, the wizard woke her. “Come quickly. I will show you what we are up against.”

She followed him to the top of the hill.

“There.” He pointed to the next hill over.

A dirigible floated above the trees. It was huge and gray, lit by the rising sun. And it was surrounded by black dots that swooped and darted. What were they? They reminded her of bees around a hive.

“Dragons,” said the wizard. “They aren’t big. Three feet long at the most, with a wingspread of six feet. But they breathe fire, and the gas in the airship is explosive.”

“Hydrogen,” said Esperance.

“We call it phlogiston.”

A dragon swooped in toward the airship, stopped in midair, then plummeted.

“Ah!” said the wizard. “The archers got that one. All the ships have carried them, since the dragons appeared.”

“Are they new?”

“Yes.” The wizard frowned. “Something is wrong with the web of power. Something—*someone* is twisting it and changing the shape of the world. Not in good ways. Oh no!”

Another dragon swooped in. It reached the ship and clung to the side: a black dot, just barely visible. There was a roar—an amazing noise. The vast bag of hydrogen ripped apart. The dirigible listed, ablaze—it seemed to Esperance—from one end to the other. It was sinking. Tiny figures dropped from it: crew members jumping.

“They are too far up,” the wizard said. “The fall will kill them.”

There was another explosion. Bits of the ship fell burning into the forest.

“We’d better get out of here,” the wizard said. “That may start a forest fire.”

They ran back to camp, saddled, and mounted. Their animals, aware of the danger, sprang into motion as soon as they were astride. Up they went, into the mountains.

Around noon, they descended into a valley full of trees. There was a river in the bottom of the valley. The water was swift and clear. A road went along the river: narrow and stony, a caravan trail.

“We will have to take it,” the wizard said. “It leads to Bear Pass. There is no other way through.”

As they followed the road, the valley grew narrow, the trees disappeared. Looking up, Esperance saw bare cliffs, rising and rising. Hawks sailed on the high wind. A streak of white went down one huge gray slab of stone. Snow? No. It was a waterfall. The air, thin and clear, absolutely clear, acted like a tonic. For the first time in years, she felt really alive. Too bad this was only a dream. Or maybe an elaborate hallucination. The madness of a housewife.

Evening came suddenly. Light faded off the cliffs. They camped in a shallow cave. There was no vegetation anywhere nearby. The wizard pulled wood out of his bag. They made a fire and ate hot sausages wrapped in bread. Delicious, thought Esperance. The sausages reminded her of hot dogs. She had always liked junk food.

When they were done eating, the wizard got out a knife and a bowl made of silver. There was a liquid in the bowl, as clear as water, but thicker. It moved sluggishly.

“What is that?” asked Esperance.

“The blood of the earth. You can draw it out of the well at Kol, if you are brave enough.” He held his arm above the bowl and cut the skin. Blood dripped down: human blood, thin and red. When it touched the liquid in the bowl, smoke rose.

“What are you doing?”

“We are in the country of the bear king. You are his daughter, but you may not be safe. I confess, I do not understand him. He is ancient and terrible and very strange.” The wizard touched the cut on his arm. It stopped bleeding. He tilted the bowl. The two liquids intermingled. “There. Now I will take a silver pen and draw a circle around us, a circle of blood. He will respect that, I hope.”

He drew his circle. The camp fire burned low. Esperance went to sleep. She dreamed that she woke in the middle of the night. She sat up. All around the camp, a fire burned. It rose from the bare ground, from stone. The flames were pink, the color of the two liquids after they combined. Beyond the fire two eyes shone deep red. She tried to shout a warning. No sound came out of her mouth.

Two more eyes appeared, dimmer than the first pair, less fiercely red. Now she saw the bodies, huge and shaggy. Two enormous bears. They shuffled along the line of fire. One of them batted at the flames. She saw the glint of claws. The other bear sat up on his haunches and moaned. A human sound. Esperance was terrified. No, she thought. I want no part of this. I want to be back in south Minneapolis.

The bigger bear, the one who had taken a swipe at the flames, stopped and turned his head. He stared at her. Laughter filled her mind. The sound was harsh and growling, not at all human. But she recognized the mirth.

Then the bears were gone. The fire died down.

She woke, lying on her back, shaking, staring at a roof of gray stone.

“He came,” the wizard said. “I can feel his presence in the air and hear the echo of his laughter.”

“There were two of them,” said Esperance. She sat up and looked at the wizard. He was rebuilding the fire: the little fire, made of ordinary wood.

“Ah.” He glanced up. “That was his son, your half-brother. Arden Everett. In your world, he is a miner of coal. At night, he dreams that he is a bear, roaming in the mountains. We see him, of course. The great ghost bear. One of my colleagues has hunted him for years, calling him, trying to get him to come into this world entirely, as you have come. Hopeless. He thinks”—the wizard waved at the gray cliffs and the high peaks, already in sunlight— “he thinks this is only a dream.”



Three days later, they arrived at the city of black stone. It went up a mountain side, like Lhasa in Tibet: terrace after terrace, wall after wall. Bright pennants flew from the towers. White birds fluttered over the houses.

“Messenger doves,” the wizard said. “This is a city of merchants and wizards, curious people, always eager for news.”

They entered through a gate of stone and rode up a wide street. Everything was the way she had seen it in her dreams. A stream of clear water ran down the street, and faces on the house-fronts wept or spat out water.

At the top of the city was the palace: black stone and white stone and gates of silver. The gates were open. Guards bowed to them: tall women dressed in black and silver, who carried spears.

In the courtyard, they dismounted. Servants took their animals. Like the guards, the servants were tall and handsome and courteous. Unlike the guards, they were men.

The door to the palace was white jade, bound with silver. What opulence, thought Esperance. She had never understood where she had gotten her imagination. The things that she dreamed up were constantly surprising her.

They walked to the door of white jade and silver. The wizard raised a hand. For a moment, nothing happened. Then the door swung open. A woman came out.

Who was she? Not the queen. Short and plump, her face the color of ebony—she was nothing like the queen. She wore her hair in a multitude of braids, decorated with beads of gold and silver. Her robe was yellow. Her belt was gold.

“Welcome,” she cried. “You must be weary.”

“I am,” said the wizard. “I can barely walk. But this one” —he waved at Esperance— “shows no sign of fatigue.”

“I don’t tire easily,” said Esperance. “And exercise has never bothered me. It must be my heritage. I come from a long line of Norwegian farmers. Good strong peasant stock.”

“You come from the bear,” said the woman. “And that is one of his signs. Strength and endurance. You, Gerringarr, go take a hot bath and put on a clean robe. Something made of wool. Wool against the skin is good for rheumatism.”

He laughed briefly, then nodded.

“And you, bear child,” the woman said, “come with me.”

They left the wizard there. Esperance followed the woman through dim corridors. The floors were marble: black and white and gray. The walls were covered with tapestries: the Hunt of the Unicorn, the Hunt of the Bear, the Signs of the Zodiac, the Seasons of the Year. The colors were dark and rich.

“I am Yrilla, the High Speaker. The Tongue of the Queen, I am called.”

“Oh yes?” said Esperance.

“She has a stutter, you know. Most of the time, it’s barely noticeable. But when she is tired or uneasy—and speaking in public always makes her uneasy—then it comes back.”

“But you have magic, don’t you? Can’t the wizard do something? Weave a spell or brew a potion and cure the stuttering?”

Yrilla stopped and looked at her. “You have so much to learn! Her stutter is one of the prices. She has wisdom, yet can barely utter it. Gerringarr has power. The mountains themselves will stir and shift, when he commands it. But in the winter, when it is cold and damp, he can’t get out of bed without assistance.” Yrilla paused for a moment. “And as for me, I have quickness of wit, eloquence, and insight. But I never dream. For everything there is a price,”

They continued through the hallways, then up a winding stair. Up and up and up, into a room with walls of crystal. The room was full of sunlight. Esperance stopped and blinked. A white floor. A roof of silver.

A view of the city and the mountains, the high peaks streaked with snow.

A woman stood looking out. She turned.

Was this the lady of her dreams? The woman was tall and had an air of dignity, a certain gravity, a certain grace. But she was thin, her face was worn. There were streaks of gray in her long, straight black hair.

The crown was the same one that Esperance remembered. It was in place, atop the salt-and-pepper hair. The diamonds glittered. The moonstones glowed.

The woman held out her hands. "W-w-wel..."

"The queen bids you welcome," said Yrilla. "Beloved daughter of her spirit! Hope of the mountain!"

The queen gestured.

Yrilla said, "Why don't you sit down?"

Esperance looked around. There were three chairs, made of silver and ivory. She took the smallest one. The other two women sat down. Servants brought wine. Esperance took a sip. Was it Chablis? She couldn't tell. It was light and dry and a bit too harsh. A young wine, not yet mature.

"You are just in time," said Yrilla. "There is a monster in the mountains."

"The bear king?" asked Esperance.

The queen shook her head.

"No, no," said Yrilla. "The bear king is a manifestation of the old power, the real power that rises out of the bones of the earth. We respect him and avoid him. He causes us very little trouble."

"This monster I speak of is something new, and it is in no way as impressive as the king of the bears. It skulks in the shadows. It eats sheep, and it terrifies



farmers. According to some people, it is the size of a man, upright and covered with feathers. Other people say it runs on all fours and has scales or a patchy unhealthy-looking coat of fur."

The queen leaned forward. "Sha-sha-sha-..."

"It is a shape changer," Yrilla said. "It has killed one man that we know of. Our best hunter. He went after it."

"I can't help you," said Esperance. "I'm a housewife from south Minneapolis. I have no idea of how to get rid of a monster."

The queen frowned.

"You have no idea of who you are," Yrilla said. "Or what you are capable of."

"All right. Tell me."

The queen shook her head.

"Not today. Tomorrow, after you have rested. It is a long story. It goes back fifty years."

A servant came and led her out of the tower, down to a bedroom on one of the lower levels. The windows overlooked a garden, brown and dry. It was autumn here, as it had been in Minneapolis. Esperance felt a mild surprise. The servant kindled a fire in the fireplace.

"There are clothes in the wardrobe," he said. "And that door leads to the bathroom." He pointed. "I will bring your dinner here. The queen believes you ought to have a quiet evening and time to accustom yourself to your new role in life. It is never easy to become a hero." He bowed and left.

Esperance went into the bathroom. The plumbing, she was relieved to discover, was completely modern. She took a shower to get rid of her dirt, then washed out the tub and filled it with hot water. A long soaking bath

would relax her. Maybe she would fall asleep in the tub—she had done that before—and wake up in Minneapolis.

There was a bottle of bath oil on the edge of the tub. Thick soft towels lay folded on the toilet. On the back of the door was a robe of dark red velvet. Simple pleasures, domestic pleasures were always the best. She tested the water in the tub.

An hour later, she got out and dried herself. She put on the robe and went into the bedroom. Dinner waited on a table: spaghetti with clam sauce, a salad, warm bread; for dessert a cannoli, followed by espresso coffee and a glass of brandy.

As she sipped the brandy and looked at the fire, she realized this wasn't a dream. The meal had been too specific, too concrete, and too ordinary. She made better clam sauce and the brandy tasted as if it came from California. She much preferred French brandy. Surely—if this were a dream—she would have given herself Courvoisier or Remy Martin. And she knew with absolute certainty that she would never have imagined a flush toilet in a magical castle. Though of course she was happy to find it there.

What exactly had happened? She had been in her basement, fooling around with the washing machine. She had touched the plug. She must have gotten a shock. And the shock had transported her into a world where magic worked, where she was a hero or—more correctly—a heroine. She took another sip of brandy. She wasn't going to wake up and hear Walter snoring beside her. The children were gone, maybe forever. Strange, to think of no more postcards from Jennifer, telling her about the light in the desert and the colors of

New Mexico. Mark never wrote, but he called. Most of the time, the calls were short and cryptic. He was fine, his grades were okay. He was going on a demonstration at a power station. His parents were not to worry, he would call if he got arrested.

All at once, her eyes were full of tears. She blinked them away, then refilled her glass with brandy.

The next day at noon she was taken to the queen. This time, they met in a room of black marble. There were tall windows along one wall. They opened onto a terrace of gray stone. On the terrace were pine trees in pots. Some of the trees were twisted like bonsai. Others were trimmed into cones and spheres. Beyond the terrace was the city—going down, level after level, like a flight of black stairs. Beyond the city were the mountains and the sky.

The queen sat on a throne. On one side of her was Yrilla. On the other side was Gerringarr.

“F-forgive me,” the queen said. “Y-yesterday I was overcome with emotion. Today I can speak.” She gazed at Esperance. “There is more fat on you than I thought there would be. Well, that is the way of the bear. He eats when he can. He knows winter will come. G-Gerringarr?”

He raised a hand. A chair appeared in front of the throne. “Sit down,” the queen said.

Esperance obeyed.

The queen glanced at Yrilla. “You begin.”

The short woman nodded. “About fifty years ago, we noticed a change in this world of ours, subtle but definite. There was a deterioration in those qualities that make life worth living and—at the same time—an in-

crease in aggravations. Cockroaches became more difficult to kill. Men who went—as common men will do—to taverns to enjoy themselves by having a few quiet beers, began to argue and then to fight. As you might expect, this took all the pleasure out of going to taverns.

“What else did we notice? Our craft people lost some of their skill. Our poets became too elaborate. Our merchants, always known for their honesty, began to cheat their customers.

“All these changes were small at first. We noticed them and worried, but we did not suspect that a human mind was at work. Rather, we thought they were some kind of natural fluctuation. The moral equivalent of a bad winter or a locust plague.”

Gerringarr spoke, his voice deep and harsh. “Then my old master came to the city, leaving his home by the well at Kol. The well is a Place of Power. A wise man can learn much in such a place. He told us, ‘Beware. The pattern is changing. I can feel it shift and twist. And I can sense a mind that moves among the currents and eddies of power. That mind, cold and strong, is doing all this.’

“Who is it?” we asked.

“He answered, ‘I do not know. The mind, for all its power, is curiously flat and empty of personality.’

“He left to return to Kol. He never got there. The dirigible he rode in was attacked by dragons.”

The queen leaned forward. Her face was flushed, and she looked angry. “These were not the great dragons out of legend, the first children of the earth. They—the original dragons—were enormous. They shone like

jewels. They were as wise as sages. When they fought a hero or one another, it was like a ballet.

“No! The great wizard of Kol was done in by dingy little flying lizards with no wit at all, only malice. They spit out their gobs of fire and blew him to—I don’t know where.”

Yrilla smiled. “Well said.”

The queen looked surprised. “Th-thank you.”

Gerringarr continued. “We—the wizards of the city—began to search for the cause of our troubles. But my old master was right. The mind in the pattern was ungraspable. We could sense the changes, the distortions and perversions of the pattern. And we could sense an odd attenuation of reality: the world was becoming dimmer and grayer and shabbier.”

Esperance looked around. “But this is splendid.”

“It is less than it was,” said the queen.

Gerringarr nodded. “We could sense, as well, a presence in the pattern: cold and flat and empty. But who it was, where it was—” He shook his head. “That was beyond us.

“In the meantime, the dragons increased in number and made air travel very difficult. Monsters appeared. Like the dragons, they were second-rate: creatures that looked like chickens or snails or a combination of the two. We sent out heroes to kill them. Usually, the heroes won the fight and came back with the head of the monster, which turned into slush after a day or two. Now and then, a monster killed a hero.”

“There were so many monsters,” the queen said. “And we had never had more than a few heroes.”

Yrilla said, "We began to run out of heroes. We decided to breed more."

"Now," Gerringarr said, "the story turns to the king of the bears. As you know, his home is three days east of here, on the great mountain above Bear Pass. In ordinary times, only fools go up there. He has a number of tricks which he plays on people who enter his domain.

"But when the pattern began to change, we began to watch him. Would he be affected? Could the mind in the pattern reach him?"

The queen smiled. "He lost none of his power. He remained as awful as ever. And the farmers in the valley below his mountain were not troubled by monsters."

Gerringarr nodded. "When the dirigibles reach Bear Pass, the captains know they are safe for a while. No dragon will fly near his mountain."

Yrilla said, "We decided to use one of the bear king's tricks to our advantage. There is a warning that every mother gives her daughter. 'Don't go up on the bear king's mountain.' For if a girl does go, and if it is the right time of the month, she will become pregnant. The father is the bear king. The child is human in most ways, except that it has sharper teeth than most people do, and it has claws."

Esperance glanced at her hands. Her nails looked ordinary, but they were not. They were strong and thick and almost impossible to cut. They never broke. If she didn't trim them, they grew long and narrow and sharp. She glanced at Yrilla.

"You have the teeth too," Yrilla said. "The pointed canines, the sharp incisors, the molars that will crush anything."

“And not a single cavity,” said Esperance, more in fear than pride.

“The bear children are not born in the usual way. You see,” Yrilla leaned forward—“they develop their teeth and claws while they are still in the womb.”

Oh-oh, thought Esperance.

“When labor begins, when the mother’s womb contracts, then the child panics. It begins to claw and bite. If nothing is done, it will tear its mother apart.”

The queen shuddered. “I s-saw that once. A woman who went into labor unexpectedly, alone. We found her dead, her belly torn open, and the child alive—covered with blood—crawling away from its m-m-m—”

“Murdered mother,” Yrilla said.

“Therefore,” said Gerringarr, “our midwives have an ancient custom. If they know—or suspect—that a woman carries a child of the bear, they abort the creature.”

“I killed my mother?” asked Esperance. She looked at her hands. She ran her tongue over her teeth. There was no question about it. Her canines were unusually long and pointed. Her boyfriend in high school had made jokes about Dracula and drinking blood. What an idiot! Why had she ever gone out with him?

“We thought we had a solution,” said Yrilla gently. “We would deliver the children by caesarean section. It was not entirely safe, of course. But our wizards had magic. Our surgeons had skill.

“And we knew the old legends. Bear children were not evil. They were powerful and wise, though always a little strange. They would make good heroes. And maybe they, helped by their father, could find a way to defeat the mind in the pattern.”

“I asked for volunteers,” the queen said. “Twelve young women came forward. Six were from my own guard, and one was my cousin, Yfara. She was the captain of the guard: strong, proud, willful, and lovely.” The queen closed her eyes for a moment. She was remembering, thought Esperance. She opened her eyes, which were pale gray, and made a gesture, waving away the past. “They went into the country of the bear king, up onto his mountain and camped for a month. When they returned, all were pregnant. Eleven were safely delivered as planned. The children were freed before they could do any harm.

“But Yfara grew restless. This was months before her time. She could not endure the confinement. She took a horse and rode out of the city.” The queen frowned. “She did not go into the farmland below the city in the wide valley of the river Ym. Farmers might have come upon her, after she fell, and sent for us. She might have lived. And she did not go into the high meadows, where the shepherds are. She had to enter the forest.

“Something must have frightened her horse—what, we do not know. We found the place where her horse began to run. And then we found her. She had been thrown. The fall had induced labor. By the time we reached Yfara, the child had been born. She—my cousin—was dead.” The queen paused. Her face was white, and her gray eyes were unfocused. She was looking at something not present in the room. “The child was so early and yet so strong!”

“Whose child am I?” asked Esperance.



“Yfara’s.” The queen looked at her steadily. “Heroes are often born with portents, out of horror and terrible pain.”

“I am not a hero!” shouted Esperance.

“There is one more thing to tell,” said Yrilla. “How you ended up in south Minneapolis.”

Gerringarr said, “As soon as the children were born, our troubles increased. The palace swarmed with rats, all trying to get into the nursery. And dragons flapped outside the nursery windows, breathing fire against the panes. We found a monster in the cellar of the palace: a huge black slimy thing. It broke every bottle of wine and then began to ooze upstairs, moving toward the children.

“The mind in the pattern knew what we were doing. The children were not safe.”

The queen rested an elbow on the high arm of her throne. She put her head in her hand. The wizard looked at her anxiously.

“She is tired,” Yrilla said. “This story wears on her.”

“To be brief, then. As you must have realized by now, there is more than one world.”

Esperance nodded. “Earth and here.”

“And many more. All derive from the pattern of power.” Gerringarr rubbed his nose and frowned. “How to explain? Maybe I can use a geometric analogy. Relationships differ. Each world exists at a different distance from the pattern and at a different angle. Thus the variety of kinds of reality. For a thousand years, we have investigated the other worlds. And long ago, we found a world so far from the pattern and at such an oblique angle, that magic does not work there.”

“Earth,” said Esperance.

Gerringarr nodded. “The mind in the pattern could not reach there. The children would be safe. When the children were grown, we would call them back.” He smiled. “Alas for our well-made plans. We had underestimated the power of the children. Even there, in a world without magic, they were able to draw on the same ancient sources of strength their father knew. But, growing up on Earth, they did not believe in occult powers. They used their strength to reinforce the reality they knew. They built a gray wall around themselves: a wall of magic that magic could not pierce. And they called that wall *reality, practicality, the world of ordinary people*.

“We called for twenty years. The children hear us, but only in their dreams.” The wizard laughed without pleasure. “One digs coal in West Virginia. One drives a tractor in the Ukraine. One is a writer in Senegal, and one is a guerrilla in El Salvador. The others—I forget what they do. But they all dream strange dreams; and waking up, each one forgets his or her true heritage.”

“You are the only one who has answered the call,” said Yrilla. “We don’t know why.”

“My washing machine. It gave me a shock, and that sent me here.”

“Electricity,” said the wizard, musing. “We have not investigated the magical effects of electricity.” He glanced at her, smiling. “Maybe we can find a way to shock some of your siblings out of their false reality.”

“Enough,” said the queen. She rose. “Think of what we have told you, Esperance. We will meet again at dinner, and you will meet the rest of my court. The may-

or of the city. The illustrious First Artisan. My cousin Ana, who is the head of the Royal Council of Witches, Midwives, and Hags.” The queen smiled. “The council is ancient and has an ancient name. Nowadays, most practitioners p-prefer to be c-called—”

“Wizardess or sorceress,” put in Yrilla. “Or obstetrician, though that is a very modern term. And not easy to pronounce. It isn’t only the queen who stumbles over that one.”

The queen glanced at her, raising her eyebrows.

Yrilla went on. “And you will meet our last hero, the great warrior, Umon Hu.”

“All right,” said Esperance. She stood up and bowed to the queen, feeling a bit self-conscious.

The three left. Esperance was alone. She found a door out onto the terrace. She walked all afternoon, up and down the stairs that led from one terrace to another. Gray clouds moved above her. The wind was cold, and she could smell snow. Fortunately, her clothes were warm.

She ended up at the top of the palace, on a wide windy roof. There was nothing there except chimneys. A red light shone on top of the tallest stack, and a few leaves skittered—windblown—over the stone.

Crazy, thought Esperance. The story was crazy. She was the only child of Hank and Inga Johnson of Minneapolis. She had a birth certificate at home in the desk in the second-floor study, the one she never studied in, though she had promised herself she was going back to school.

She paced around the chimneys. It was beginning to get dark. She remembered her father's story: how the hospital lost her, when she was only a week old.

"We were all ready to leave," her father had said. "And they couldn't find you. 'Damn it,' I said. 'I came in with a fat wife, and now she's thin. Either you give me back Inga the way she was, or I want something extra. I want a kid.' Well, I got kinda noisy, and they took to running around. And in the end, they brought you. And I think I got the best of the bargain. I never had liked the way Inga looked when she was fat. And I've gotten kinda fond of you."

Changeling? Was she a changeling? She turned the corner of a chimney.

Something stood in front of her in the shadows. Esperance paused. "Yes?"

The figure seemed to blur, to grow vague for a moment. Then it was solid. "Esperance?"

It was Walter's voice.

"You? Here?"

"Esperance, we've been trying to get through to you for days. Your mother and I and Dr. Ferris."

Her therapist. A good man, though a bit literal-minded.

"But how did you get here?" She waved around at the chimneys and the dark cloudy sky.

"You are in a ward at the University Hospital. I did not find it especially difficult to get in. Esperance"—he spoke calmly and gently—"you have had a breakdown. According to Dr. Ferris, you are in a fugue state. You are fleeing from reality." Walter took a step toward her, holding out his hands.

“No!” cried Esperance. She stepped backward.

Walter kept coming. “Esperance, my dear, you cannot stay this way. You have to confront—”

She tried to push him away. His suit felt like feathers; and his mouth—coming down toward her—was full of long sharp teeth.

She clawed at his face and left four lines. Walter howled. She pulled away and ran. Damn it! Why hadn’t she let her nails grow? She could have taken out an eye.

She reached the stairs that led off the roof. He was right behind her. She spun around. He had a muzzle now, and his hair had become feathers that stuck out in all directions, like a crazy breed of chicken she had seen at the State Fair. She kneed him in the groin. He bent double, and she kneed him in the face.

He fell. She started down the stairs. Lights came on, dim lanterns that gleamed all along the stairway. At the first landing, she glanced back. A thing bounded toward her, four-legged and spotty with a huge open maw.

Now she was terrified. She began to growl. The thing reached her, and she slapped it away with a single paw. The thing tumbled down the stairs and hit the next landing. It lay there for a moment. Then its body flowed. It rose up. It was a girl. Her daughter, Jennifer.

“Mother,” she cried.

Esperance went down on all fours. She stared at the girl, growling.

“Mother! No! It’s me!”

Esperance lumbered down the stairs. Her claws made clicking noises on the stone treads. She kept growling.

The girl turned and ran. Down and down. Esperance followed. She was having trouble with the stairs. Jennifer was getting away. She paused on a landing and went up on her hind legs. A moment or two later, her old body was back. She was naked now. Her clothes must have torn when she changed into a bear. She ran after Jennifer.

There were no more landings. The stairs went down—endlessly, it seemed—along the face of a cliff. On one side of her was rough stone, lit by lanterns. On the other side was a balustrade, ornately carved. Beyond the balustrade was darkness and cold and, way below, the lights of the city. Where was the palace? Who cared? She was gaining. The girl was getting tired. She stumbled once and almost fell, but recovered. Esperance gained some more.

Down they went. The stairway ended at a wall: part of the palace, emerging—apparently—from the cliff. There was a door. The girl tugged at it. It did not open. She turned and flowed and became Mark.

Esperance reached him. He was crying, shaking with fear. “Mother, I love you. We all love you.”

“No.” The word was a rumble, deep in her chest. “It will not work.”

Mark stretched up and up. He was eight feet tall and covered with fur. He reached down and grabbed Esperance, flinging her over the balustrade.

She caught at the carved stone and hung there for a moment, looking down. There was a terrace below her. Lanterns gleamed among the branches of trees.

She glanced up. The Mark thing was above her, bending and reaching. His hands had claws. She let go.

She dropped, changing in midair, becoming heavy and furry. She crashed through a tree, then hit the pavement. Stunned, she lay motionless.

Up, she thought. She had to get up. She lifted her head. The air stank of monster. A creature with wings flapped down among the trees.

She pushed herself up on her front paws. Walter! He landed. His body was covered with feathers, and his feet were claws. He looked at her through his favorite reading glasses: horn-rimmed bifocals.

She was up on all fours. Her entire body hurt, and she felt confused, uncertain. "Walter?" she growled.

His wings became arms. He held out a hand. "You have got to accept treatment, Esperance. We can't help you, if you keep fighting like this."

She went up on her hind legs. "Walter, I'm so tired."

His face became gentle. His hair, she noticed, was still feathery. "I know you are. Relax."

"Please help me."

"I will."

She went to him. He folded her in his arms. Her bear mouth bit deep in his throat. There was a choked scream. She tore. Blood poured out over her. Walter collapsed.

Esperance dropped onto her front paws. She stood on all fours, looking at the body. It was bleeding and flowing, dissolving into blood. She snuffled at the edge of the dark pool, then touched the liquid with a paw. She licked the paw. The liquid burned. She sneezed and panted. The burning sensation went away. Too bad, she thought. She had been hoping the monster was edible.

A voice spoke in her mind. It was deep and harsh, inhuman: *You have done well, my daughter.*

The bear king. She lifted her head and sniffed the wind. It smelled of pine forests and coming snow.

*Come to me,* the voice said. *Learn who you are.*

She looked at the pool of blood. It was seeping in between the stones of the terrace, vanishing. She ached. She was tired. She needed time to think. She sniffed again. The wind had changed. Now she smelled the city: wood smoke and garbage and human beings. She didn't mind the garbage, but the human beings disgusted her.

She shuffled to the edge of the terrace. Below the balustrade, a slope went down, covered with bushes without leaves. A trail went through the bushes. Maybe it led to the mountains. She climbed onto the balustrade. It was narrow. She teetered for a moment, then jumped and hit and rolled. Down the slope she went, through bushes, frightening the birds that had roosted for the night. They flew up, cheeping. She came to a stop, then climbed to her feet and shook herself. The trail? Where was it? Ah! There it was. She sniffed the ground. People had passed along it and a fox. That was hopeful. She followed the scent of the fox.

By dawn of the next day, she was well out of the city, at the edge of the forest. She paused for a moment and looked back. Being nearsighted, she saw nothing much: a misty slope, a dim gray sky.

"Wurf," she said. She continued along the trail: a huge sow bear, shambling toward home.





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