

MYTH Congeniality

MYTH-told Tales

by Robert Lynn Asprin, 1946-2008

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Published: 2003



How Robert Asprin and I Came to Be Writing New Myth...

“You should work together,” one of our well-meaning friends said. You're both funny. You'd be good. I remember that we eyed each other with the same suspicious expression as a couple of cats thrown together by their owners and told to play nice. “Oh, Butch will be nice to Fluffykins! See? They're making friends

already,” one would say as the cats growl at each other under their breath. Fluffykins is already flexing and unflexing her needle-sharp claws. Butch is baring his teeth. He has a notch out of one ear. His tail switches from side to side. Fluffykins notices this movement and suddenly arches her back. Butch's eyes widen and his ears flatten. There is a discreet blackout.

When the scene reopens, one cat is licking the other's ear. Both are purring. You didn't see what happened in the middle, but let's just call it “staking out of territory.” The owners are not looking quite as calm and complacent as they did before, but the cats have become friends, on their own terms.

I'd always been a fan of Bob's. How could I not love some-one whose best-known book was a paraphrase of one of the great comedy catch phrases of all time? And the quotes at the chapter heads made me laugh out loud. The story itself was a picaresque novel worthy of Cervantes. Here, I realized, years before I met him, was someone who'd been steeped in the same comic history I was. I loved his comic timing. I loved his characters. At that time if you'd told me I'd be working with him, that I'd work with any of the amazing people I have since I first read *Another Fine Myth*, I'd have laughed in bitter disbelief and gone back to my terrifyingly toxic day job.

I knew of Bob through another common interest, the Society for Creative Anachronism. Neither of us are active now, but he'd already retired from the field by the time I joined. Long and storied was the legend of Yang the Nauseating, founder of the Dark Horde and Loyal Opposition to the Crown. “With all due disrespect to Your Majesty,” was a phrase I was told he of-ten used in court, where the royals and nobles, who all went back to mundane jobs when they took off their silken raiment, often took themselves too seriously. Bob was the pin that punctured their self-importance.

He was a legendary figure at science fiction conventions, known for singing and playing the guitar at parties and filk sessions, drinking Irish whiskey and occupying the center of the most sought after circle in the bar, and for his prowess with the ladies. You may not know it (or you may; Bob has spread himself about a bit over the years) that he is one of the premier hand-kissers of our time. Almost everyone I knew had a “Bob story.” Some were first-hand, but most were urban legends. (I have reason to know some of them are only urban legends.) He and some similarly inclined friends created the Dorsai Irregulars and the Klingon Diplomatic Corps, organizations to which it is considered an honor to belong.

So, steeped in the hype, I trembled when I first met him, at his home in Ann Arbor, Michigan. He and his then-wife Lynn Abbey, good and old friends of my then-fiance (now husband) Bill, did their best to put me at my ease. Both of them are truly kind and hospitable people. Bob and Lynn drew me into the conversation as best they could. I sat goggle-eyed as they talked about their other close friends as if they were just ordinary people. Those names were the stuff of legend to a newcomer like me: Gordon R. Dickson, the “Gordfather” of the Dorsai Irregulars; Wendi and Richard Pini of *Elfquest*; the great Poul Anderson; C. J. Cherryh; George Takei; and more. At the time they were still editing and writing in the original *Thieves' World* series, the shared-world anthology that gave shape to all the shared worlds to follow. They'd been everywhere I hoped to go. I was a literary

novice, but they treated me like an equal. I adored them for it. Believe me, not everybody who's "made it" is so secure or generous.

Bob and I did have a bunch of things in common. We were the "sensitive" halves of our respective pairs. We're desperately soft touches for cats. We love the great acts of the post-vaudeville movies like the Marx brothers and Laurel and Hardy, and good funny movies in general. We both admire Damon Runyon, whose stories were the basis for the musical *Guys and Dolls*. We both liked Disney's *Sleeping Beauty*, though his favorite character was Maleficent and mine was the Fairy Godmothers. We both do needlework (really; he's very good at it). And... well... we write humor.

When the inevitable suggestion was made that we should re-ally think about doing something together, I was willing. One of the things I admired most about his writing was that he could be funny—very funny—without being sickeningly cute or dragging a joke until it died. Though there were elements of slapstick in his stories, the characters weren't stupid. Mistakes are made out of innocence or ignorance. Comic timing evolves out of the situa-tion. He imbued his characters with wisdom, loyalty, and warmth. You would probably like to hang out with them. I would.

Bob came up to our house one January: an act of faith, since he now lives in New Orleans and we live in the suburbs of Chicago. We talked, with Bill standing by as a referee in case things got ugly. They didn't. I gave Bob the respect he deserved for his experience and accomplishments, and he offered me acceptance as an established newcomer. Bill went back to his office to play computer games, and Bob and I started talking ideas. Our first crack out of the box was an original book, *License Invoked* (Baen Books). We worked out our story line and characters together, then decided who would write what sections. Books change all the time while they are being written. They develop—we hope, for the better. The result was longer than a novel he would usually produce, and shorter than one of mine. The plot ran pretty much along the lines we'd laid out, though the structure and the villains changed a lot. I liked our main characters. It wouldn't bother me a bit to do something else with them—later.

By now, *Myth Adventures* had lain dormant for a long while. Bob had two books to run on the twelve-book contract with Donning Starblaze, the trade paperback publisher who produced the original *Myth Adventures* series. Because they'd gone belly-up, years had passed before the rights to books eleven and twelve could be extricated. Once they were released and resold to Meisha Merlin, interest awoke in having still more Myth after book twelve. But, Bob had other projects he wished to work on, so it was suggested that once he finished *Myth-Ion Improbable* and *Something M.Y.T.H. Inc.* he and I, proven collaborators, should put out a few new books. Because this series is Bob's special baby we decided to take a few test runs. The final three short stories in this collection were the result. They follow on from the conclusion of *Something M.Y.T.H. Inc.* and lead up to the action in our first novel, *Myth Alliances*. The others are just for fun. We hope you enjoy them.

—Jody Lynn Nye

The „Discreet Blackout”

It was interesting to read Jody's introduction. (Writer's tip: If you're doing one section of a two-part introduction, always let your partner go first. Then, all you have to do is rebut or go, “Yea. What she said.”) The only trouble was, it was hard to recognize myself in it.

Okay. I know these intros are supposed to be “love and kisses and how much fun it is to write together,” but there should be a limit. I'd say my application for sainthood was rejected, but I never bothered to send it in. For one thing, I assume the powers that be have better things to do with their time than read crank mail. For another, I'm used to getting paid for writing fantasy.

Just because I have good manners and write humor, people tend to assume that I'm a “nice guy.” Well, okay, I am... but only up to a point. That point usually involves protecting me and mine. Unfortunately, “mine” includes my writing.

One thing I've discovered over the years is that the longer you write humor, the more finely tuned you become in your opinions of what is funny and what isn't. Also, the more firmly entrenched the idea becomes that you have a particular recognizable style that the readers expect from anything with your name on it.

What this all boils down to is that when it comes to collaborating, particularly on humor, I can be a real pain in the ass to work with. I like to think that I stop short of bullying my writing partners, but (even by the most generous interpretation of events) I can be “extremely stubborn” when “discussing” a particular joke or scene. When it involves two of my most popular characters, specifically Aahz and Skeeve, it borders on being nightmarish. I mention this not so much to belittle myself as to raise the awareness and appreciation of the readers to what my writing partners actually have to go through.

All that having been said, it really is a joy and a pleasure to work with Jody... even if our memories of certain events and conversations differ.

As an example, while I recall her visiting with Lynn and me in Ann Arbor, my memory of our first meeting was at a gaming convention. That was back in the days when I was doing two or three dozen cons a year to get my name in front of the readers, and was attending comic cons, Star Trek cons, and gaming cons as well as the science fiction-fantasy cons that were my mainstay. She was sitting behind a demonstration table in the dealers room painting lead miniatures, and I recollect getting some excellent tips on dry-brushing techniques. It was a brief meeting, so I'm not surprised that she doesn't remember it. I might have paid more attention to her, but I had learned she had a thing going with Bill Fawcett, who at that point was a friend of mine and eventually became her husband and one of my packager/publishers. (Writer's tip: If you're going to flirt with someone at a convention, try to do it with someone who isn't a girlfriend/fiancee/wife of one of your editors. It could affect your long-term book sales much more than a similar encounter with a reader.)

Another interesting overlap was when I discovered that we both had a background in theater. As an aside, I have often compared writing, particularly writing humor, with doing radio theater where you don't have the audience's feedback reactions to work off. I maintain that the most successful humor writers

first honed their skills wot king in front of a live audience to build their sense of comic liming before attempting to create humor on paper. While my supporting role as Marcellus Washburn in a production of *The Musk*: Man lags far behind her lead-ing role as Winifred the Woebegone in *Once Upon a Mattress*, I think the mutual experience contributes greatly to our ability to work together.

Anyhoo, Butch and Fluffykins are now playing together happily, and the occasional territorial growls and swats only oc-cur when there are no witnesses to box both our ears. Jody is not only an extremely talented writer whose company is always a pleasure, she's also spirited enough to hold her own in a brawl. While, perhaps, not absolutely necessary, all three are definitely desirable in a writing partner.

—Robert Lynn Asprin

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I answered the door of the inn in my most repulsive disguise.

“Yeah?” I asked the two small children who looked up at the one-eyed, white-haired rogue with five teeth, tangled hair, bizarrely twisted features, and visible insects crawling in and out of his clothes. They didn't retreat a pace.

“Is the haunted house open?” the older one asked. “Yeah!” the little one said, staring at me with open curiosity. “We wanna see all the monsters!” “Monsters?” I asked, puzzled.

“Yeah! Draggins and wivverns and yunicorns and creaky floors and stuff! We heard about it in town.”

“No,” I said. Out of the corner of my eye I could see my pet dragon Gleep charging for the door. He loved to answer the door. I put a foot into his chest to keep him from sticking his nose around the edge. “No monsters here.” Now Buttercup wanted to know what was going on, and you can't deter a war unicorn as easily as you can a baby dragon who'd impressed upon you. “Nope. Just a law-abiding, boring old guy living quietly by himself.” I could see them starting to become afraid now. I smiled wistfully. They started to back away nervously. “Just a lonely old man who'd love to have company to while away the hours. Sorry.” I slammed the door shut on them just before Buttercup put his muzzle under my arm.

“Stop it, you guys,” I protested, being nuzzled by a dragon on one side and snuffled by a unicorn on the other. Gleep and Buttercup looked hurt. “I keep telling you to stay out of sight. Now the townspeople have seen you. Can you believe it? A haunted house! And they want to come in. I wish Bunny was here.”

Bunny, my former accountant, was staying here at the old inn with me, running interference and pretty much keeping house so that I could get on with my magikal studies. She'd gone off on vacation a few days before. I hadn't realized until she had been gone how lonely it was in the sprawling building by myself. Alone, as I said, ex-cept for two exuberant pets.

I let the disguise spell drop. I always had to use one when I opened the door. Nobody in Klahd would be impressed or frightened by my normal appearance. I was young, for one thing, tall but thin, with a thatch of blond hair, and I'd been told that my blue eyes reminded them of Gleep's. When I looked in a mirror I couldn't see the same innocent wide expression, but I'd been assured by Aahz that it was there.

"Come on, you guys. Let's have lunch."

I wasn't much of a cook, being used to leaning out the door of our tent at the Bazaar on Deva and being in reach of every kind of cuisine from every dimension, some de-licious and toothsome, some more frightening to smell or look at than any disguise I'd ever put on. My cooking was somewhere in between, but Gleep ate everything, and Buttercup was always content with his fodder.

The kitchen, as befit one in a building constructed to serve a houseful of guests, was enormous. I kept a small fire going in one of the baking ovens instead of the huge ingle that comprised a whole wall shared with the rest of the inn. We usually ate at a small table tucked in the alcove beside it, cosy and warm. Formality was pointless, since we never had guests, and I could keep my back to the wall.

I dished up stew that had been bubbling away in a closed pot among the embers of the fire. One generous portion for me, five for Gleep. (He also caught his own meals from among the rodents in the barn, but I didn't want to know about that.) It hadn't burned, for which I was grateful, since we were short on supplies. Going into town to shop always elicited curiosity from the merchants and townsfolk as to who I was, where I came from, and what was going on in the old inn. I used to think they were just friendly, but experience made me question everybody's motives. I wasn't sure that was a good thing. I turned all the queries back on those who were asking, inquiring how they were, whether the prize cow had had her calf yet, and so on. I was thought of as a friendly guy, probably the ser-vant of the old man at the inn, yet no one knew much about me. I was content with that, since I wasn't ready to answer those questions myself.

"Not bad," I said, tasting the squirrel-rat stew. I trapped animals for meat in the woods outside, and grew a few vegetables, skills learned long ago from my farmer father. My mother had taught me basic cooking, but I'd picked up a few hints over the years. Gleep stuffed his face into the washing bowl that served as his food dish when he ate inside. A happy "gleep" echoed out of the earthen-ware. I looked around for the wineskin. Still more than half full, I was pleased to note, as I poured myself a glass. So I hadn't unconsciously drunk more than I should have. My habits were getting better. I wished Aahz was there to see.

A loud POP ! sounded in the center of the room. I jumped to my feet and drew my belt knife. Travel between dimensions was accomplished using incantations, spells or D-hoppers, magikal devices one dialed to reach the right destination. I had enemies as well as friends.

To my relief, it was only Bunny. I relaxed for a split second, then, at the sight of the expression on her face, scooted out around the table to meet her. Her normally immaculate clothes were disheveled, and she looked as though she'd been crying.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

I helped her to sit down and poured her a glass of wine. She downed the glass in one gulp, something I've never seen the ladylike Bunny do.

She looked at me, her large blue eyes rimmed with red. I noticed that her lids were crusted with a noxious-looking green paste, and her eyelashes had been dipped in black tar, making them stick out in spiky clusters.

“Oh, Skeeve, I need your help!”

“For what?” I frowned. “Did something happen on your vacation?”

Bunny looked abashed. “I wasn't on vacation. I asked for a few days off so I could see my uncle. Don Bruce asked me to do him a favor. He said I was the only one he could trust to do it.”

Her uncle, Don Bruce, the Fairy Godfather of the Mob, had for years employed M.Y.T.H. Inc. to look after its business interests in the Bazaar at Deva. He'd sent Bunny to me in hopes that I'd marry her, to make ties between his operation and mine closer. I prefer to choose my own girlfriends, and I admit I had sold Bunny short when I first met her. Since then I'd come to appreciate her intelligence. She was our accountant and book-keeper. If Don Bruce had sent her on an errand, it was probably a tough one.

“He sent me to get a device called a Bub Tube for him from a dimension called Trofi,” she continued. “I tried, Skeeve, but I just can't get it. It's too much for me.” Her face contorted, and she burst into tears. “I really can't do this.”

I hunted up a clean handkerchief and pushed it into her hands. “I can't believe Don Bruce would send you into a really dangerous situation without backup.”

“Oh, Skeeve, I wish it was dangerous!”

“What?” I asked. “Why? What do you have to do?”

She lifted her face, now smudged with black and green. “Primp, parade, put on enough makeup to cover a dragon, sing, dance, wear a swimsuit in front of a panel of ogling judges, and, throughout the whole thing—smile!”

“That's demeaning,” I said, shuddering. In her place I would rather have faced an active volcano.

“That's what I mean,” Bunny wailed, wringing the handkerchief between her hands. She was normally so composed. I was worried. “I hate it.”

“Couldn't I just go in, as a businessman, and meet with the owners of the Bub Tube face-to-face? I could probably negotiate for it. After working with Aahz for so many years I've gotten pretty good at it. If Don Bruce is involved, money should be no object...” She shook her head. I frowned. “I could steal it. My skills are pretty rusty after all this time, but now that I've been practicing magik...”

“It's been tried, Skeeve. Everything has been tried. There's no other way to obtain it. In this dimension there are no business meetings. Only contests. I have to win this beauty contest to get the Bub Tube. It's humiliating.”

I sat back. “Well, that shouldn't be a problem,” I said. “You're beautiful.”

“That's not enough. Every other contestant is cheating broadside, you should excuse the expression, and I can't win. My uncle is counting on me. Will you help me? I could ask Tanda or Massha, but I'm ashamed to tell another woman what I'm going through. I'd rather trust you.”

“Of course,” I said. “But if I can't help negotiate, the only thing I can offer is moral support, and a little magik.”

Bunny looked resigned. “That may be the only thing that will help me win.”

I put together a kit of magikal items that I thought would be of some use. I put food out for Gleep and Buttercup. Bunny assured me that I could come and go

between Trofi and Klahd without a problem, so I didn't have to call on any friends to look after them. I would have brought them along, but they'd have added too much to the chaos.

And chaos it was. The D-hopper delivered us into the middle of a shrieking crowd. I jumped, thinking that the shrill voices were raised because of a threat, but it turned out to be the normal voices of several hundred females, all of them with anywhere from one to a dozen attendants primping and coiffing them.

I looked around at the set faces of the contestants. There were several horned and red-skinned Deveel females clad in black and red to accent their complexions. They shot sultry glances at anyone who met their eyes. Pinky-red Imp women, stubbier and less sleek, dressed in dated fashions and too much makeup, sashayed around. A blue-skinned girl I recognized as a Gnome was holding still for four beauticians, each dabbing a different shade of makeup onto her face. She seemed fuzzy, as if she was going in and out of focus as I watched. I noticed a few Klahds, including one man dressed up, not very effectively, as a woman. Plenty of other dimensions were represented. All of the entrants looked determined and a little desperate.

"This must be one powerful magik item," I commented.

"It is," Bunny said. "It's up there." She pointed to a dais at one end of the vast chamber. High above it on a golden platform was a bulging, rectangular piece of glass with a magickal image flickering behind it. I peered at it, and found my gaze caught. Even at that distance I had to make a conscious effort to drag my eyes away from it.

"It causes people to stare helplessly at it for hours," Bunny said. "My uncle doesn't want it to fall into the wrong hands."

"Whose?" I inquired.

"Well... anyone's but his." But the way she hesitated made me think that there was someone specific he wanted to keep it away from. Bunny, if she knew, wasn't going to tell me.

I studied my surroundings. The room, a high-ceilinged chamber lined with mirrored doors on three sides, was a staging area. The center of the fourth wall featured a huge staircase flanked by thick black-velvet curtains leading up into a darkened area. Dozens of makeup tables were laid out in the center of the room. Each was occupied by a beautiful woman, or one of many beings who were undoubtedly considered beautiful in their own dimensions, but to my eye could scare the pith out of a reed. Not far from me sat a huge female Pervect, like Pookie, but nearly a foot taller and half as wide. Considering that Pookie was slender, this one looked unnaturally thin. When you added in the mouthful of four-inch fangs, she looked like a smil-ing dragon. Wearing lipstick. I gulped. "How can I help?" I asked.

"You've probably noticed how much magik is flying around here, Skeeve. I need you to keep me from dropping too far behind in the contest."

I felt around for lines of force. Bunny was right: a hugely powerful force line ran directly underneath the building, leading toward the staircase. I wondered if the place had been constructed with it in mind. I was able to tap in without difficulty, and discovered that many fellow magicians were doing the same.

"But you know I haven't made too much progress in my lessons yet," I said. Bunny was the only one of the staff of M.Y.T.H. Inc. that I had brought with me to the isolated inn where I meant to buckle down and study. "The only thing I'm really proficient in is illusion, plus a few very minor tricks."

"That may be all I need," Bunny said. "I need to stand out in this crowd, and that won't be easy."

"But you're..." There was no point in denying the truth. I swallowed and plunged onward. "You're the most beautiful woman in this room. If it's really a beauty contest, you'll win it hands down." "If it was that simple," Bunny said, "I would never have brought you into this. I would have done it for my uncle, and no one would ever know. But I admit I'm out of my depth."

"Well, I'll do my best," I said. "Where do we begin?"

"First is the beauty parade," Bunny said. "It begins in an hour. I'll need you to cover my back."

Her back wasn't covered, nor was most of her body, during the beauty parade. She wore a brief, bright red bathing suit whose color pretty much matched my face. I was far more embarrassed than she was. Bunny disappeared into a changing room and emerged in a robe. When she shed it I thought steam would come shooting out of my ears. Her outfit started inward from her shoulders and downward from her collarbone and upward and downward from her navel, and left no inch of her spectacularly long, slim legs to the imagination. My hands itched to encircle her waist, which looked small enough that my fingers could meet around it. Above and below, her feminine attributes were... undeniable, yet very much in proportion. On her feet she wore shoes with such high, narrow heels that they made her taller than me.

Bunny's suit, if you could call three wisps and a few strings a suit, was modest compared with many of her fellow contestants assembled backstage. An Impish woman with a figure I'd once heard Aahz describe as *zaftig* had on three narrow strips of dark green cloth and an expression that if I gave in to the impulse to put my hands around her waist I'd shortly have no hands at all. It was no trouble at all to restrain myself. A bevy of red Deveel women glittered in silver, black, gold, and copper suits. The Pervect wore a suggestion of golden yellow to match her eyes. A sharklike female, clad in one strip of cloth far down by her tail, swam by in the air. Magik, I remembered with difficulty. That was why Bunny had called me in.

Once she'd donned her... er... suit, she had to put on cosmetics, lots of them. The green stuff she larded around her eyes, she assured me, was harmless, as was the black stuff. The pale cream paint she rubbed onto her cheeks and forehead, I thought, must be a protective layer for the women's faces, because some of the contestants were layering it on so heavily that there was no chance of a hint of sun contacting skin. A huge, insectoid woman wearing a yellow polka-dotted garment had matching goo of bright yellow for her mandibles, with lines of black to accent her multiple eyes. Behind her stretched a queue that had to be hundreds long.

"There's only one prize?" I asked.

"Just one," Bunny assured me, stroking tar onto her eyelashes and making them stick out like combs. She put the applicator away and looked at me.

Strangely enough, under the bright lights all the cosmetics did make her seem very attractive—at a distance. If you got close up, you could see where all the various colors intersected, like a mosaic.

“What happens to all the others?”

She glanced around disapprovingly, then leaned in to whisper. “A lot of them stay around and marry. Trofi has no business interests but contests, but they do a great deal of matchmaking. Males from hundreds of dimensions prize Trofi wives above all others. Sensible men don't bother to come here. It's not worth it. Trofi wives are all what you might call 'high-maintenance.'”

Well, I wouldn't, because I didn't know what the expression meant, and there was no time to ask for an explanation. Perhaps it had something to do with the costumes and cosmetics, both of which had to be adjusted and added to on the way to the flight of steps.

Up above, it was dark. I was aware of thousands of pairs or sets of eyes glittering in the reflected glow of spotlights swinging above the stage. There was an orchestra fanfare, then all the lights dropped but one. I peered over the edge. A lanky male Deveel, deveelishly handsome in a long-coated black suit and shiny shoes, held a short baton close to his face. He sang into the bulbous top end, and his voice was projected magickally all over the vast arena.

“There she is! / How beautiful! / Your queen of love! / How magikal! / How beautiful and magikal! / Your queen of love she is.”

I found myself humming along. It was catchy. There was a hint of enchantment in the tune, causing me to crane my head to see as the Deveel stretched out his hand toward the steps. The first contestant, a serpentine woman with blue skin, ascended.

The crowd breathed an admiring sigh as the woman slithered gracefully around the stage on the arm of the Deveel host. So far, so good, I thought. The Pervect female ahead of Bunny hissed, showing her long teeth, then flicked her wrist in a meaningful gesture. She was casting a spell!

On the stage, the sighs turned to titters. I glimpsed the smooth head of the snake woman as it dipped low, far lower than I suspect she intended, then vanished entirely. The audience broke out into a laugh.

“She tripped!” Bunny whispered to me.

“Did she fall or was she pushed?” I whispered back, indicating our neighbor by a tilt of my head. Bunny's eyes widened, but she hid the expression quickly as the yellow gaze slid toward us.

The snake woman's cheeks were glowing royal blue by the time she got back to the steps. She shinnied down the railing, cursing under her breath, and was met by a wriggling mass of supporters, all exclaiming how unfortunate it was she'd suffered such an accident. The Pervect smiled smugly, a terrifying sight.

A Deveel woman glided out next. Around her head flitted tiny winged salamanders in rainbow colors, shedding gleaming lights on her face.

“Is that allowed?” a Klahd female demanded furiously, though I could tell by the aura around her that she was wearing magikal enhancements, too, to lift up and add perkiness to a wide bottom, her best feature.

“You see what I'm up against,” Bunny murmured. I concurred. Trofi contests were no game for the faint-hearted.

The Deveel made it almost all the way to the exit when her salamanders started belching fire. Battering at the mul-ticolored blazes burning in her hair, the Deveel made a hasty retreat. I leaped forward to help, but as soon as she hit the stairs she put out the fire with a dampening spell.

Bunny was seventeenth in line. I kept an eye out for ill-wishes and attack spells until she was in the hands of the host. Applause broke out as she stepped gracefully around the stage, the light flashing against her long, smooth legs. The audience hooted and whistled. She smiled, and a thou-sand little bursts of light broke out in the darkness.

I felt disturbance brewing in the lines of force from not one, but several points. Thankfully most of them were amateurish. I blocked many of them with a turnaround spell that I'd learned from Tananda, causing the effect to rebound upon the caster. An Imper woman three back in line jumped up and down, her shoes burning from the hot-foot she'd meant for my friend. An eight-legged arachnid girl stumbled on all eight feet, falling on her fur-covered derriere. Her mandibles clicked angrily.

A hand picked me up by my throat and turned me in mid-air.

"Gack!" I exclaimed to the Troll glaring into my face. I flailed with both hands, trying to signal that I wanted him to put me down. He paid no attention.

"Hey, youse," he said, bringing a shard-toothed mouth close. "Take girl and go home! Not go, you be sorry!"

I knew from long association with Chumley, a friendly Troll who worked under the nom de guerre Big Crunch, that most Trolls were more intelligent than they sounded. I kned him in the nose and braced myself as he dropped me.

"Do you know who I am?" I hissed, glaring up at him. "I'm the Great Skeeve. Perhaps you've heard of me? Bunny there is under my protection. You leave us alone, or you'll never be able to set foot in the Bazaar on Deva again! Do you know what I mean?" I gave him a gimlet-eyed stare that I'd seen Aahz use to quail opponents.

It worked. The Troll, while not completely stupid, was no dragon-poker player. He'd heard about me, though obviously not the latest news.

"So sorry," he said, backing away. "I... don't hurt me, huh?"

Behind him was a Trollop, the female of the species, in a moss gray-velvet bathing suit, who gave me a glare. I kept my guard up, not wanting her to get close enough to read me. Tananda, Chumley's sister, was a powerful magician in her own right. This Trollop could probably wipe up the floor with me. I counted on my reputation, plus the fact that she was going to have to go onstage in a moment. We locked eyes, but I won. She dipped her gaze, and turned away, pretending she didn't see me. "Awww!"

The cry from the audience told me I'd missed some-thing. Bunny returned, her hands over her face. Her makeup had taken a direct hit from a malicious spell, and was running down her face in dark streaks. Her hair was soaking wet, and her bathing suit was beginning to shrink. Someone had cast a quick Rainshower on her while my back was turned. I threw her robe around her and hustled her out of the arena.

"I'm so sorry," I apologized, escorting her hastily past her grinning co-contestants. The next female, a granite-skinned being in a solid steel bikini,

stepped up onstage, with a look that dared anyone to interfere with her. "I wasn't expecting so many attacks at once."

Bunny walked along smiling, with her head held high, as if nothing was wrong in the entire world. Night had fallen over the town. I followed the torches toward the inn where Bunny had taken rooms for us. Once we were out of sight of anyone involved with the contest, she allowed her shoulders to sag.

"I should have warned you," she said. "No one's fight-ing fair. If they're not using spells to puff themselves up, they're using them to knock others down."

I frowned. "What do the rules say?"

"Strictly forbidden," she told me. "No magik of any kind to enhance your talent or beauty, or to attack others.

But they're not stopping it. In fact, I think the judges are enjoying it."

"What about protective spells'?" I asked.

"Not mentioned," Bunny said. "I guess they'd never believe that anyone capable of using enchantments wouldn't use everything they've got. A lot is at stake here. The Bub Tube is unique throughout the dimensions. At least now."

"Well, if they're not enforcing the rule, then we're free to use magick, too," I said. "I'll do everything I can, and leave you free to concentrate on winning."

"Touuuuu-cccchhhh meeeee, it's so eeeasy to leeeee-eeve meeeee..."

An Imper female in a tight evening dress belted out the climactic melody of her song, sounding like a dragon in heat. The sound went right through my head and out the other side. I gritted my teeth but applauded politely, because her entourage was watching the audience care-fully, and I didn't want to draw negative attention to Bunny.

"Cats," Bunny murmured, half to herself.

"Not a chance," I whispered back. "They never sound as horrible as that."

Day Two was the talent contest. So far we'd seen con-testants juggle—fire, plates, clubs, balls, and themselves—dance, in every style from slow country dancing to spastic jerking that I thought signaled mass magikal attack on the woman onstage; art; acting; declamation; twirling a shiny metal stick; bird song imitations; bird flight imitations; stand-up comedy; dragon-taming; knife-throwing; and a thinly disguised striptease act in which the Pervect female started a seductive dance fully clothed while a salamander crawled along the hem of her dress, burning it away in a spiraling strip. The Gnomish female did conjuring, an act that caused smug grins among the contestants until the judges determined that she wasn't using any power at all. Each of her tricks was pure prestidigitation, sleight of hand. I was really impressed. If anyone was serious competition for Bunny, it was she. Maybe, once this was over, I could find her and ask her to teach me some of those illusions—useful to impress one's opponent in situations where lines of force were scarce.

The judges were as stonefaced a group as I'd ever met on the other side of a card table, or, I ought to say, metal-faced. Trofians resembled Klahds but with shiny skin in metallic hues. A copper man, a bronze woman, a silver man, and a platinum woman flanked a slender gold-skinned female who was the chief adjudicator. When a question arose, the four all deferred to her. Ushers and assistants of every metal I'd ever seen ran back and forth to the dais with scoring

sheets, beverages, and messages. A brassy young female seemed to have taken a shine to me, and winked a gleaming eyelid every time she went by our seats.

This competition wasn't free of sorcerous interference, either. Just as the Imper woman reached her high note, she developed a cough, and the orchestra had to finish the maudlin tune without her. She looked furious as she stalked off the stage. The gold judge shook her head and made a mark on her sheet. The silver man and platinum woman exchanged glances and entered their own scores. The next act went on.

Bunny clutched my hand. I held it tightly while watching the next act. The Klahd female who tripped up on-stage kept on going, tripping over her feet with a wild yell and sliding face first all the way across into the opposite wings. She never reappeared. I sensed at least six spells that pushed her over. The pent-up force of so many enchantments was what drove her so far. A Deveelish dancer appeared next in a tiered lace dress, hard metal plates bolted to the bottom of her hooves. The tapping as she stepped rhythmically grew louder and louder until the judges themselves called a halt to her performance. She stomped deafeningly off stage, snarling at her fellow contestants.

Bad will escalated from there. The next Imper woman attempted to draw caricatures of the judges. First her paintbrushes caught fire, then the lines she produced with a charcoal pencil rearranged themselves into such scurrilously rude drawings that the judges' faces glowed with embarrassment. So did the contestant's. She burst into tears and fled off stage. She was succeeded by a multi-limbed creature with a small dummy that she set on one of her many knees and tried to throw her voice. By the look on her face, the things it said were not in the script. A tiny Salamander girl writing poetry in flames on the air was extinguished by the sudden descent from the catwalk of the fire bucket and its contents. It hissed its way off stage while the judges scribbled their notes down.

Bunny was next. She'd rehearsed her act with me in my room at the inn the night before, and if nothing went wrong she'd knock the judges off her feet. I'd never known she was so talented. She danced with a partner who was no more than a broomstick in men's clothes. The bristly end was the figure's head, gloves were attached to the end of the tunic's sleeves, and shoes were sewn onto the bottom of the hose. And as they danced, they sang a duet. Bunny did both parts, singing in her normal tone for her lines, and pitching her voice down low for her partner's.

"It was the closest to boys we had at Madam Beezel's Academy for Girls," she said apologetically. "My parents were very strict." I thought it was a terrific act, and I told her so. She squeezed my arm for good luck before the host called her name.

She swirled out onto the stage with her partner in her arms, and the music began. "*We two,*" Bunny sang. "*We two are like one / When we're on the dance floor / Out on the town having fun / You are me and I am you / Whenever we are close I see you and me / we two, we two are like one...*"

I enjoyed it. It reminded me a lot of what Aahz called "vawd-vil." I even saw one or two of the judges moving their heads in time with the music.

It took a little while for the others to catch on to what her act was about, but when they did, the attacks came from every direction. Gusts of wind blew her long

skirt up over her head, showing tiny blue unmentionables underneath. Her feet slipped on invisible oil slicks or white patches of ice that appeared on the stage floor, then vanished without a trace. I threw defensive spell after defensive spell around her. They were bombarded by hostile magik. A few spells slipped through my protection. Bunny's "partner" grew extra arms and legs. Its face changed into a hideous mask and started to sing.

*"Boo hoo, you hopeless dum-dum! / You dance with a pushbroom / we all assume you're insane / *&%\$ you..."* Bunny flagged, not knowing what to do next.

This I could help with. I tore energy from every force line I could reach, and covered the horrible face with a handsome male visage, and filled in the raucous noise with my own voice. Suddenly, instead of dancing with a broom, Bunny seemed to be in the arms of a handsome man.

"Do you mind if I cut in? / Go on with your song / you're beautiful..."

Over its shoulder she shot me a look of such gratitude I could feel my ears burning. I let her go on singing. Now the contestants turned their attention to me, but I was ready for them. I'd had to concentrate on doing spells while a baby dragon licked my face or while an angry Pervect yelled or while armies of heavily armed men and horses charged straight at me. What had I to fear from a thousand angry women?

Plenty, it turned out. Since I wasn't onstage, out of reach, they mobbed me, scratching, kicking, and even punching. A swipe from a felinoid female drew blood from my cheek. The Salamander burned through my boot top and singed my feet. The Perv woman cocked her arm back to throw an uppercut. I dodged her fist, and tumbled straight into the claws of the Deveel contingent, who got in a few licks of their own. Floor stewards came hurrying over to see what was the matter, but they were thrown back across the room. I hunched over in a tight ball, protecting my eyes with my arms. Whatever else happened, I couldn't let the illusion drop. Bunny's score, and her mission, depended on it.

"All right, enough!" a man's voice over my head shouted. "Ladies, back to your places or you'll be disqualified!"

The feet kicking my back withdrew, and I uncurled. A hand grabbed my arm and helped me get to my feet.

"You're not the only one who can throw your voice," Bunny said. Faces glared at me over Bunny's shoulder, but hers was the only one I cared about. She looked tired.

"How did it go?" I asked.

She held out her other arm. Her erstwhile partner lay across it. When I let the illusion drop, nothing remained but a few tatters of cloth and some ashes. They crumbled to the floor.

"Thank you for what you did," she said. "But I don't think it'll be enough to help."

I glanced over at the judges' table. The brass girl I knew was standing behind the gold judge, pouring molten liquid into a glass. She caught my eye with a sad look and shook her head. Bunny saw it, too.

"I can't win this," Bunny said. "I'm ready to give up."

"No," I insisted. "You can win it. There's still tomorrow."

“And that is what I'd do with the Bub Tube if I am so fortunate to win it,” Bunny said. She put down the parchment on which her speech was written. “This is awful, Skeeve. It sounds so phony. The Bub Tube won't go to as-sure world peace, or harmony among the dimensions. I'm not going to be using it, my uncle is. And you know his business.”

I sighed and thrust my hands into my hair. The talent contest had been a disaster. The Pervect had won, with one-fifth of a point more than the Gnome. Bunny was near the bottom of the ranking, about the same as she'd gotten from the beauty parade. This was her last chance to make good.

“This is what you'd do with it if you got it,” I said, hopefully. “Or you could tell the truth. The honest answer might be such a novelty that it might surprise them into giving you the title.”

“If I got it,” Bunny said. “This part of the contest is worth fifty percent of the total. At best I'll come in somewhere in the middle.”

I thought hard. “But you'd move up if your best competition moved down, wouldn't you? It's still possible.”

“It's still possible to win,” Bunny began, “but they all cheat so much. And they play dirtier than I ever dreamed.” She leaned forward and touched my cheek. “Does that still hurt?”

“A little,” I admitted, enjoying the play of her gentle fingers. “What if I could persuade them not to cheat?” Bunny brightened. “Do you think you can?” “I'll try,” I said.

“Excuse me,” I said, approaching a cluster of Klahdish women. They were helping one another fasten dresses and tidy their hairstyles. They straightened and eyed me war-ily. “Since I come from your dimension I wanted to start with you. Do you think it's fair that everyone has been using magik or technical devices during this contest?”

“Well, no,” said a tall woman with red hair. “But what about it? If we don't, we'll lose for certain.”

“My father is a grand wizard in Bream,” said a tiny woman with black hair. “He wants the Bub Tube, and he gave me plenty of spells to make sure I'll get it.”

“I'll get it,” a buxom girl insisted, tossing her long blond tresses over her shoulder, “if I have to seduce every single judge on the panel.”

“But you're all beautiful, and all intelligent,” I said. “Why not play it straight and see who wins fairly and squarely?”

“Because we want to win,” they chorused.

“Those Deveels all use magik,” the wizard's daughter said. “If we didn't cheat, we wouldn't stand a chance.”

“What if I could get them to agree to compete honestly?” I asked.

“Well...” the redhead appeared to consider. “But everybody would have to do it.”

“All right,” I said, overjoyed that my plan was going so well. All my years with Aahz, the master negotiator, were paying off. “I'll get them to agree.”

But my plan hit a snag in phase two.

“Are you crazy?” the tallest Deveel women asked. “Honest! You all say that. One of you Klahds asked for a fair fight last time there was a contest on Trofi, and she cheated. We're not going to fall for that again.”

“But the Klahds have given me their word they'll follow the rules,” I said.

Fiery red eyes bored into mine. "You don't look that stupid. Either you believe them, or you're in on it with them. In any case, get lost!"

She snatched a pot of rouge off the table and threw it at me. Out of reflex I trapped it in mid-air with a tendril of power. The Deveel's eyes widened.

"Who are you?" she hissed.

"Uh, my name's Skeeve," I said. The way her face closed I knew she had heard of me. I grabbed the jar and set it gently down on the table. "Look, this is not about me. My friend Bunny..."

"Forget it!" she said. The others sneered down their long noses at me. "She has Skeeve the Magnificent working for her? And you want us to give up our advantage? You're insane. We're going to do whatever we have to to win. What are you going to do about that?"

Shoulders sagging, I went back to where Bunny was sitting, reading through her much-revised script. What would I do? What could I do?

The force line under the arena was big enough for me to use if I wanted to enforce honesty in the remaining phase of the competition, but did I have the right to im-pose my views on the others? If I had no stake in the contest, perhaps, but I was there as a partisan for one contestant who would benefit if everyone stopped interfering with one another.

"How did it go?" Bunny asked, then interrupted me before I could speak. "Never mind, let me tell you: they all told you to go peddle your papers. But thank you for trying. I'm proud of you for wanting to stay on the straight path. With your powers you could outstrip every one of them. That wouldn't be fair. I've decided I'm going to be honest in my essay, and face the judges on my own merits. Crom knows what they'll do to me— anything is possible, from throwing tomatoes to transformation spells."

"What's a tomato?" I asked curiously.

"A fruit that's been convinced it's a vegetable," Bunny said, mysteriously. "Look, Skeeve, I am sure to lose, but at the very least I can find out who wins the Bub Tube and let Uncle Bruce know whom he has to buy it from. I'm sure he'll be able to make her an offer she can't refuse."

"What's so important about it?" I pondered, staring up at the rectangular piece of glass on its plinth high above the judges' table. The magik that made it run drew constantly on the force line under the auditorium. Even at this distance I could clearly make out the pictures on its surface. People in brightly colored clothes performed appallingly embarrassing tasks for money. Bad singers that I could just hear over the din in the hall wailed out their tunes, and bad dancers tripped around, all within the confines of the glass box. And over all the noise coming from the Bub Tube was the inexplicable presence of raucous laughter. I hated it, but it was as fascinating to watch as a basilisk, and just as capable of freezing its prey in place. Darkness suddenly enveloped me. "Hey!" I protested.

"Sorry," Bunny said, pulling her cloak off my head. "You fell into its spell."

"That's dangerous," I said. "Is there a way to control it?"

"Yes, there's a guide." Bunny rose from her seat and went to the foot of the plinth. She came back with a small book featuring an amazingly lifelike illumination on the cover.

I opened it and began to read the instructions. For a magikal item it had amazingly good documentation, down to a listing of the times various images would appear on the surface. *Wild Kingdom* interested me, "being the exploits of his noble yet mad majesty King Roscoe the Disturbed, and his Knights of Chaos."

"Bunny," I said, an idea dawning on me, "if it's possible for you to win based on your essay, I'm going to see that you do. And I won't cheat at all."

The contestants were unusually subdued as they prepared for the essay portion. None of the expected sniping was going on, dropping the sound level so low I could hear the inane chatter from the Bub Tube. Every one of the women were dressed in formal costumes, even the Trol-lops, for whom formal meant fewer body parts showing than usual. Bunny emerged from her assigned cubicle in a red gown that fit her as if it had been painted on her body. A frown wrinkle was fixed between her eyebrows. I took her hand and swirled her, gracefully for me, around the corner of the room.

"You look wonderful," I said. "You're going to be a smash." Bunny blushed.

I was, unfortunately, more immediately correct than I had anticipated. As soon as Bunny made her appearance, the Deveel women appeared out of nowhere in an angry cloud like sting-wasps.

"Who do you think you are?" they demanded. One of them pushed her back against a mirror. "Red is our color! Klahds like you get blue!"

"I'm not a Klahd," Bunny said, standing her ground. "I'm half Fairy!"

"Then violet!" the chief Deveel woman said, in a tone that brooked no argument.

"No, green!" shouted another.

"Yellow! Yellow's for the Fay!"

The room stewards arrived, shouting to everyone to break it up. By the time I caught sight of her again, Bunny's dress was a rainbow of anything but red, and her face had been dyed in stripes to match. I enveloped her with a web of power and pulled her out through the crowd, which disbursed with angry looks at me. Bunny's spine was straight as a tree. If the Deveels had intended to shake her confidence, they'd failed. She was more determined than ever to get through the contest honestly. I used a little power to dispel the color in her face, but a pink flush remained in her cheeks. She flatly refused to let me change her dress back.

That was the last attack, magikal or otherwise, until the essay portion began. The first woman on stage was a Klahd.

"Good evening," she said, curtsying to the judges. "If crowned the winner of this marvelous contest, I will use the Bub Tube for the benefit of all beings..."

Out of nowhere a red sphere came hurtling, and splat-tered in the contestant's face.

"That's a tomato," Bunny pointed out.

It was a free-for-all. The poor Klahd hopped all over the stage, avoiding hot feet, kicking at snake-spiders that suddenly appeared and tried to crawl up her legs, shout-ing to be heard over booing from the audience, flushing sounds and greatly amplified intestinal noises. Swarms of sting-wasps buzzed around her, zooming for her face, her hands, any exposed flesh. The judges sat at their table, calmly marking score sheets and sipping tea poured for them by their attendants. They didn't move a finger to prevent the humiliation of the first contestant. Or the second. Or the third. The fifth essayist, the Gnome, simply wasn't there when rotten

fruit came flying her way, but her continual disappearing and reappearing interfered with the delivery of her speech.

“...A benefit to all beings... used only for good... personally promise to dedicate the device...”

Except for the direction the missiles were coming from, stature and skin color of the victim, er, participant, the speech, the ducking, and the humiliation of each woman was nearly identical. I began to feel sorry for the contestants. It would have tried even a seasoned politician to survive a pelting like that. I glanced at Bunny. Her face was set.

An Imper woman slunk off the stage, covered with yellow paint that had sloshed down on her from a bucket that clanged to the floor after depositing its contents on her head. The Pervect woman shoved past her, speech clutched in one scaly hand. She strode to the center of the stage, showed all her teeth and stuck a clawed finger out in the direction of her fellow contestants.

“If one single rotten vegetable,” she roared, “one bucket of anything or one spell comes my way until I have finished reading this speech, every single one of you is going to be sorry!”

My ears rang with the sound of her voice, but she'd made her point. Except for resentful muttering, it was quiet in the auditorium. She showed all of her long teeth in a feral smile. I felt her build up a spell and cast it upon herself. It didn't feel like a charm of protection, rather one to aid eloquence.

“Now. Good evening, honored Trofi judges. I'm proud to be allowed to tell you my plans for the Bub Tube. In the interest of universal peace and the benefit of all living beings...”

I gulped as the Pervect left the stage to applause by the usually stoic judges. If my plan didn't work, all the pent up resentment building through the duration of the Pervect's speech would rebound upon the very next person up, and that person was Bunny.

One of the things I'd learned in my perusal of the Bub Tube's operation manual was how the pictures it produced came into being. The original illusions flowed from the chaotic ether, or they could be superseded by ones that sprang from a magician's creative mind. Both kinds played out directly upon the front glass, known as the screen.

Following the instructions, I pointed the control wand at the glass. I focused the image that I'd had building in my mind. Bunny walked up the steps, took her place before the judges, held up the parchment containing her speech, and opened her mouth.

The first tomato came flying out of the crowd. With one hand I averted the dripping fruit from hitting Bunny. With the other, I activated the Bub Tube.

High over the judges' heads the suavely smiling face of the Devel host greeted them. “Good evening, ladies! You all know the remaining speeches have no impact on the outcome of the contest, so I am about to announce the name of the winner of the annual Trofi beauty contest! Hold on to your wigs, ladies. First, the runners up! In 1,023rd place, from beautiful, bleak Imper—Aberdyfi! In 1,022nd place...”

A thousand pairs of eyes fixed on the screen, listening raptly to the voice of the host rattling off hundreds of names I'd made up, so not one of them would lose interest in what they thought would be an early peek at the results. Far below,

almost unnoticed on the stage, Bunny curtsied to the judges, and began her speech.

“Honored judges, I've thought very deeply about what I'd do with the Bub Tube if I got it, but the truth is I won't be using it myself. My uncle wants it, and he sent me here in hopes of winning it. If you give it to me, it'll be in the possession of a man that I love and trust. I'm not saying that he's incapable of being harsh to his enemies, but I would like to think that a hypnotic device like the Bub Tube will help him to deal with people he wishes to teach a lesson in a non-violent manner...”

I listened, keeping one eye on the rest of the contest-ants. Her speech was well-reasoned, honest, and above all, uninterrupted. She spoke for fifteen minutes, then curtsied again, rolled up her scroll, and was off the stage again before anyone noticed.

As soon as she was safely beside me again, I cut off the transmission from the Bub Tube. The screen went blank. All the women around us blinked.

“Hey!” a Deveel woman said, lowering the raised hand-ful of dripping stable muck she'd held poised to throw. “Where'd she go?”

The next speaker, a lizard woman in green, was pelted with vegetables and spells even before she reached the center of the stage. The other contestants had now missed attacking two women, and had plenty of dirty tricks left over they hadn't used yet.

I extended my elbow to Bunny. “Shall we go?” I asked. “The results won't be available until tomorrow. I'd like to see some more of this fine dimension.”

“Let's.” Beaming, Bunny tucked her hand into my arm, and we left the dressing room together.

The award ceremony was very much like the one that I'd faked for the Bub Tube. The handsome Deveel of a host stood in the middle of the stage reading from a long scroll of parchment given to him by the judges, who sat serenely in their seats on the dais. The contestants whose names had been read had all departed sobbing or shouting. The others remained in the big dressing room, clad in their finest formal gowns, hanging on every word the Deveel spoke.

“And in 887th place, right behind Shirleen, is Devraila! In 886th place—nice try, dear, better luck next year—is Elzinnona! Runner-up number 885, just a hair too far out for the big prize, is Mumseen!”

A Deveel, a Klahd, and a rock-faced woman shouldered their way out of the big crowd toward the rear. I never saw them again. I believe I dozed off a few times on my feet in between batches of names. I didn't hear Bunny's spoken. Beside me she was getting more and more excited. I didn't really hold out much hope. I had our bags packed and waiting in her dressing cubicle along with the D-hopper. The moment her name was read, we were going back to Klahd.

The mass of contestants thinned more and more. After a while I started to recognize the remaining ladies. This was the top tier of entrants. The chief Deveel woman was still in contention, as was the Pervect, the Gnome, two Imper women I'd thought had been terrific in the talent show, the shark, and one of the snake-women.

“...In 30th place, Bindina! In 29th place, Sorg-kandu!...”

Soon, only ten were left. The Deveel stopped to mop his brow and accept a glass of wine from one of the pages.

"Ladies," he said, turning to face our side of the stage, "I salute you. You've all come so far, but now this is the moment of truth! I want you all to come up on stage! Give 'em a big hand, folks!"

To deafening applause and a horn fanfare from the orchestra, the ten remaining women hurried up the stairs and were arranged in a line at the footlights by the beaming host.

"Ladies and gentlemen and whatever," he said. "Here are the final runners-up. In 9th place, Amindabelia!" An Imper woman burst into tears as a page brought her a bouquet of flowers. "8th place belongs to Zmmmissa!" I saw the snake-woman's tail sag with disappointment as she, too, received an armload of flowers. She retired to the back of the stage with the Imp. Seventh, 6th, 5th and 4th were all named, and still Bunny stood at the front, beaming and waving at the audience. Had she surpassed all odds and won? I had my fingers and my toes crossed for luck.

"Third place, Moleynoo!" The host turned toward the Gnome woman with a silver loving-cup in hand, but she was nowhere in sight. Not a race to stick around when things hadn't gone their way, Moleynoo must have dimension-hopped as soon as she heard her name. Now there was a gap in the row of gracious losers. The host handed the third-place cup back to the page. "Oh, well, folks! Second place... this was a hard fought battle, folks..." Bunny, the Deveel, and the Pervect leaned toward him. The host grinned. "...second place belongs to Devora!"

If looks could kill, the Deveel would have dropped dead, burning like a bonfire. Devora accepted her second-place award and stepped back. Now there were only two contestants. Bunny's shoulders were so tight above the band of her strapless gown my dragon could have alit upon them without making her bend. The Pervect leaned forward avidly.

"Now, before I name our first place winner," the host said. "I want to give our compensation award. This goes to the contestant who scored the lowest overall, but has still been a beam of sunshine and brightened our days here on Trofi. The award for Miss Congeniality goes to... Bunny!"

Bunny's hands rose, trembling, then covered her face as she burst into tears. The Pervect strode to the center of the stage, claspng both hands over her head for victory.

The host trailed her, talking into his padded stick. "Yes, that means the winner of this year's beauty pageant is... Oshleen! Congratulations, dear lady!"

Oshleen was surrounded by pages. One draped a huge blue ribbon banner from the Pervect's skinny shoulder to the opposite hip. One threw a white fur cloak over her shoulders, another tied the ribbons in front. Yet another trio came toward her with a huge bouquet of red thorn-roses, a scepter with a gleaming jewel in it, and a glittering tiara that Oshleen had to duck down slightly to have placed upon her scaly green head. The pages led her out on the catwalk to take a victory lap out into the audience, who continued to applaud loudly.

"Yes, there she is, your queen of love! Oshleen!"

The Pervect returned to the center of the stage, and the Deveel took her hand and Bunny's.

Well, that was that.

“Now, we have a special presentation to make. You all know about our grand prize. The great and powerful Bub Tube!” He pointed to the plinth above the judges' table. “Now, there are always a few irregularities in a contest of this size. There are many rules, and many of them are broken by accident, but in other cases, they are openly defied to gain an unfair advantage. To be blunt, contestants cheat. We know that you, the audience, would feel it was wrong to give our grand prize to someone who skirted the regulations under which our contest was run. The judges have been keeping a running tally of tricks and subterfuge, magikal and otherwise, and subtracted these totals from the overall scores. They have come up with a winner. They are unanimous on this decision. It is not Oshleen.”

“What?” the Pervect bellowed, trying unsuccessfully to free her hand. The Deveel must have had a pure heart because his strength was as the strength of ten. She stayed where she was, as if bound there.

“Yes, indeed,” the Deveel continued, smoothly. “And so, for cheating less than any of the other contestants, the citizens of Trofi are pleased to award the Bub Tube to Bunny! Take a bow, Bunny!”

Startled, Bunny lurched forward a pace, and offered a deep curtsy to the audience, then another one to the judges. By the time she stood fully upright the truth had dawned on her at last. She began beaming.

The pillar sank into the floor until the Bub Tube was within arm's reach of the stage. The Pervect stretched out a hand to take it, but the Deveel beat her to it. He snatched it off the plinth and, with a deep bow, handed it to Bunny. “Congratulations, you lovely lady! Would you like to say a few words?”

The truth had also dawned upon her fellow contestants. The last-place loser was getting the prize! Outrageous! In a mass, they started to move in on Bunny.

No one was paying attention to me. I dashed back to her dressing room, snatched up the D-hopper, and shoved my way through the crowd. I would never make it before they would be on her in a mob.

“Bunny!” I shouted, hoping to be heard. “Catch!”

She looked up at the sound of my voice, and held up a hand just in time to catch the short baton. Then I was knocked off my feet by the rush of furious women. I'd never make it to her. Dropping to my hands and knees, I crawled back through the sea of thrashing legs to her dressing room and locked the door behind me. The cubicle was too small to lie down, but I huddled against the wall to nurse my bruises.

Unperturbed by the chaos going on around him, the Deveel host put his arm around Oshleen and began to sing. “*There she is! / How beautiful! / Your queen of love! / How magikal! / How beautiful and magikal! / Your queen of love she is.*”

I scabbled backward as a body appeared in the middle of the small space. It was Bunny, clutching both the D-hopper and the Bub Tube.

“Hurry,” she said. “They're tearing the place apart.”

“You don't have to tell me twice,” I said, springing to my feet and putting my hand on her arm so the spell would carry both of us out of Trofi for good. In a moment I felt the wrenching sensation that accompanied any trip by D-hopper.

“Whew!” I said, as I looked around at familiar surroundings. We were back at the inn, with my string of laun-dry drying across an open window, dirty dishes on the table, Gleep and Buttercup bearing down on us as if we were the last sausages at a picnic. I staved off my dragon's slimy tongue, but I was smiling. “This is the most beautiful thing I've seen in three days—present company excepted, of course.”

“Thank you for helping me,” Bunny said, giving me a big kiss on the cheek. “Uncle Bruce is going to be so pleased to get the Bub Tube. You saved my life.”

“Well, you saved mine just now,” I pointed out, enjoying the sensation. “A favor for a favor. Let's call it even. What are friends for?”

“You haven't gotten off scot-free,” she said, with a coy smile. “You'll have to listen to my acceptance speech.”

“Sure,” I agreed, stretching gratefully in a chair front of the fireplace in the old inn's kitchen, and pouring my-self one—just one—well deserved cup of wine. “Just one thing: what's a scot?”

