

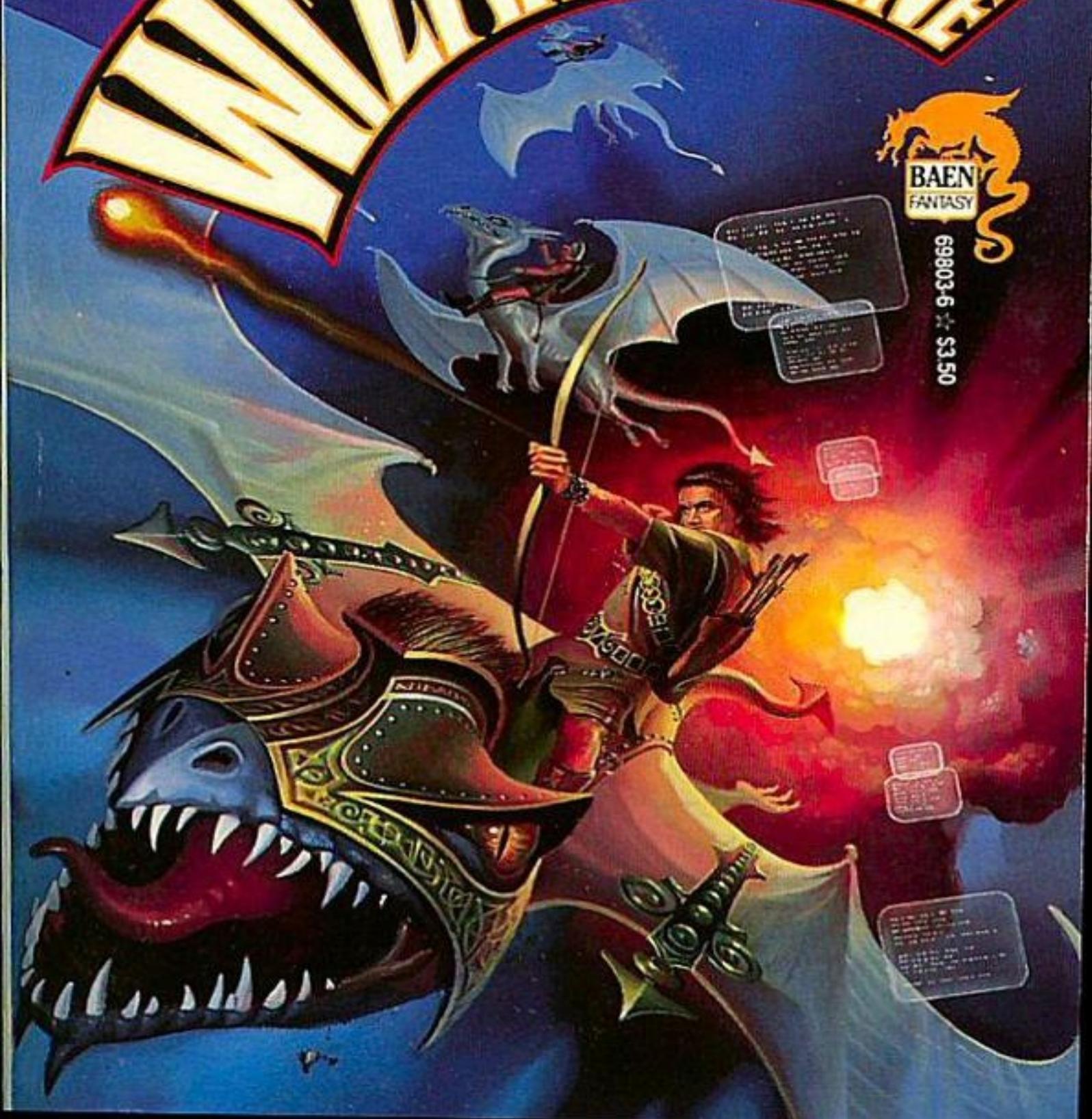
RICK COOK

"The Wiz" had been a demon programmer—but now he was in a world where his spells had better work—the first time!

WIZARD'S BANE



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Wizard's Bane

Rick Cook

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THE THINGAMAJIG THAT DOES THE JOB

With a roar, four trolls charged into the clearing. They were huge and foul-smelling, clad in skins and leather and rags. One brandished a rusty two-handed sword in one hand and others carried clubs.

A troll closed in on Moira, arms extended and fanged mouth agape. Wiz grabbed a burning faggot from the fire and charged. With a casual, backhanded swipe, the creature sent Wiz sprawling through the fire.

Wiz rolled out as the beast got a hand on Moira. Without thinking, he reached back into the fire and grabbed a burning brand. He pointed it at the troll and yelled, "bippity, boppity, boo."

The troll was unfazed but the tree behind it exploded into flame with a crackle

and roar. The astonished troll weakened its grip and Moira twisted free.

"Moira! Run!" Wiz yelled and ducked under the grasping arms of another troll. He twisted about and pointed the stick at it. "Bippity boppity boo!" Another tree blazed up and the troll cringed back.

Whirling in a circle, Wiz pointed the branch and yelled, "BippityboppitybooBippityboppitybooBippityboppityboo." Trees all around the clearing turned to fiercely burning torches and the confused trolls cowered and whimpered in the ring of light and heat.

BAEN BOOKS by RICK COOK

The Wiz Biz
The Wizardry Cursed
The Wizardry Consulted
The Wizardry Quested
Mall Purchase Night

Book One: Wizard's Bane

**For Pati.
Who has her own
special brand of magic.**

One

Meeting in Midsummer

It was a fine Mid-Summer's morning and Moira the hedge witch was out gathering herbs.

"Tansy to stop bleeding," she said to herself, examining the stand that grew on the bankside. Carefully she selected the largest, healthiest stems and, reciting the appropriate charm, she cut them off low with her silver knife. She inspected each stem closely before placing it in the straw basket beside her.

When she had finished, she brushed a strand of coppery hair from her green eyes and surveyed the forest with all her senses.

The day was sunny, the air was clear and the woods around her were calm and peaceful. The oaks and beeches spread their gray-green and green-gold leaves to the sun and breeze. In their branches birds sang and squirrels chattered as they dashed about on squirrelish errands. Their tiny minds were content, Moira saw. For them there was no danger on the Fringe of the Wild Wood, even on Mid-Summer's Day.

Moira knew better. Back in her village the fields were deserted and the animals locked in their barns. The villagers were huddled behind doors bolted with iron, bound with ropes of straw and sealed with such charms as Moira could provide. Only a foolhardy person or one in great need would venture abroad on Mid-Summer's Day.

Moira was out for need, the needs of others. Mid-Summer's Day was pregnant with magic of all sorts, and herbs gathered by the light of the Mid-Summer sun were unusually potent. Her village would need the healing potions and the charms she could make from them.

That most of her fellow hedge witches were also behind bolted doors weighed not at all with her. Her duty was to help those who needed help, so she had taken her straw basket and consecrated silver knife and gone alone into the Fringe of the Wild Wood.

She was careful to stay in the quietest areas of the Fringe, however. She had planned her route days ago and she moved cautiously between her chosen stands of herbs. She probed the forest constantly, seeking the least sign of danger or heightened magic. There was need enough to draw her out this day, but no amount of need would make her careless.

Her next destination was a marshy corner of a nearby meadow where pink-flowered mallow grew in spiky profusion. It was barely half a mile by the road on whose bank she sat, but Moira would take a longer route. Between her and the meadow this road crossed another equally well-travelled lane. Moira had no intention of going near a crossroads on Mid-Summer's Day.

She was fully alert, so she was all the more startled when a dark shadow fell over her. Moira gasped and whirled to find herself facing a tall old man wearing a rough

travelling cloak and leaning on a carved staff.

"Oh! Merry met, Lord," she scrambled up from the bank and dipped a curtsey. "You startled me."

"Merry met, child," the man responded, blinking at her with watery brown eyes. "Why it's the little hedge witch, Moira, isn't it?" He blinked again and stared down his aquiline nose. "Bless me!" he clucked. "How you have grown my girl. How you have grown."

Moira nodded respectfully and said nothing. Patrius was of the Mighty; perhaps the mightiest of the Mighty. It behooves one to be respectful no matter what style one of the Mighty chooses to take.

The wizard sighed. "But it's well met nonetheless. Yes, very well met. I have a little project afoot and perhaps you can help me with it."

"Of course Lord, if I can." She sighed to herself. It was never too healthy to become involved with the doings of the Mighty. Looking at Patrius she could see magic twist and shimmer around the old man like heat waves rising from a hot iron stove.

"Well, actually it's not such a little project," he said confidently. "A rather large one, in fact. Yes, quite large." He beamed at her. "Oh, but I'm sure you'll be able to handle it. You were always such an adept pupil."

In fact Moira had been so far from adept she had barely survived the months she had spent studying with the old wizard. She knew Patrius remembered that time perfectly. But if one of the Mighty asks for aid he or she can not be gainsaid.

"Lord," suggested Moira timidly, "might not one of your apprentices . . . ?"

"What? My apprentices, oh no, no, no. They don't know, you see. They can't know yet. Besides," he added as an afterthought, "they're all male."

"Yes, Lord," Moira said as if that explained everything.

The wizard straightened. "Now come along, child. The place is near and we haven't much time. And you must tell me how you have been getting along. It's been such an age since I saw you last. You never come to the Capital, you know," he added in mild reproach.

"For those of us who cannot walk the Wizard's Way it is a long journey, Lord."

"Ah yes, you're right, of course," the old man chuckled. "But tell me, how do things go on in your village?"

Moira warmed. Studying under Patrius had nearly killed her several times, but of all her teachers she liked him the best. His absentminded, grandfatherly manner might be assumed, but no one who knew him doubted his kindness. She remembered sitting in the wizard's study of an afternoon drinking mulled cider and talking of nothing that mattered while dust motes danced in the sunbeams.

If Patrius was perhaps not the mightiest of the Mighty, he was certainly the best, the nicest and far and away the most human of that fraternity of powerful wizards. Walking with him Moira felt warm and secure, as if she were out on a picnic with a favorite uncle instead of abroad on the Fringe of the Wild Wood on one of the most dangerous days of the year.

Patrius took her straight into the forest, ignoring the potential danger spots all

around. At length they came to a grassy clearing marked only by a rock off to one side.

"Now my child," he said, easing himself down on the stone and resting his staff beside him, "you're probably wondering what I'm up to, eh?"

"Yes, Lord." Moira stood a respectful distance away.

"Oh, come here my girl," he motioned her over. "Come, come, come. Be comfortable." Moira smiled and sat on the grass at his feet, spreading her skirt around her.

"To business then. I intend to perform a Great Summoning and I want your help."

Moira gasped. She had never seen even a Lesser Summoning, the materializing of a person or object from elsewhere in the World. It was solely the province of the Mighty and so fraught with danger that they did it rarely. A Great Summoning brought something from beyond the World and was far riskier. Of all the Mighty living, only Patrius, Bal-Simba and perhaps one or two others had ever participated in a Great Summoning.

"But Lord, you need several of the Mighty for that!"

Patrius frowned. "Do you presume to teach me magic, girl?"

"No, Lord," Moira dropped her eyes to the grass.

The wizard's face softened. "It is true that a Great Summoning is usually done by several of us acting in consort, but there is no need, really. Not if the place of Summoning is quiet."

So that was why Patrius had come to the Fringe, Moira thought. Here, away from the bustle and disturbance of competing magics, it would be easier for him to bend the fundamental forces of the World to his will.

"Isn't it dangerous, Lord?"

Patrius sighed, looking suddenly like a careworn old man rather than a mighty wizard or someone's grandfather.

"Yes Moira, it is. But sometimes the dangerous road is the safest." He shook his head. "These are evil times, child. As well you know."

"Yes, Lord," said Moira, with a sudden pang.

"Evil times," Patrius repeated. "Desperate times. They call for desperate measures."

"You know our plight, Moira. None know better than the hedge witches and the other lesser orders. We of the Mighty are isolated in our keeps and cities, but you have to deal with the World every day. The Wild Wood presses ever closer and to the south the Dark League waxes strong to make chaos of what little order there is in the World."

Moira's hand moved in a warding gesture at the mention of the League, but Patrius caught her wrist and shook his head.

"Softly, softly," he admonished. "We must do nothing to attract attention, eh?"

"We need help, Moira," he went on. "The people of the North need help badly and there are none in the World who can help us. So I must go beyond the World to find aid."

He sighed again. "It was a long search, my child, long and hard. But I have finally located someone of great power who can help us, both against the League and against

the World. Now the time is ripe and I propose to Summon him."

"But won't this alien wizard be angry at being brought here so rudely?"

"I did not say he was a wizard," Patrius said with a little shake of his head. "No, I did not say that at all."

"Who but a wizard can deal in magic?"

"Who indeed? Patrius responded. "Who indeed?"

It was Moira's turn to sigh, inwardly at least. Patrius had obviously told her as much of this mad venture as he intended to.

"What will you of me, Lord?" asked Moira.

"Just your aid as lector," the old wizard said. "Your aid and a drop of your blood."

"Willingly, Lord." Moira was relieved it wasn't more. Often great spells required great sacrifices.

"Well then," said the Wizard, picking up his staff and rising. "Let us begin. You'll have to memorize the chant, of course."

Patrius cut a straight branch from a nearby tree, stripped it of its leaves and stuck it upright in the clearing. Its shadow stretched perhaps four handsbreadths from its base, shortening imperceptibly as the sun climbed higher.

"When the shadow disappears it will be time," he told her. "Now, here is what you must say. . . ."

The words Moira had to speak were simple, but they sent shivers down her spine. Patrius repeated them to her several times, speaking every other word on each repetition so magic would not be made prematurely. As a trained witch Moira easily put the words in the right order and fixed them in her mind.

While the hedge witch worked on the spells, Patrius walked the clearing, carefully aligning the positions where they both would stand and scratching runes into the earth.

Moira looked up from her memorization. "Lord," she said dubiously, "aren't you forgetting the pentagram?"

"Eh? No girl, I'm not forgetting. We only need a pentagram to contain the Summoned should it prove dangerous."

"And this one is not dangerous?" Moira frowned.

Patrius chuckled. "No, he is not dangerous."

Moira wanted to ask how someone could be powerful enough to aid the Mighty and still not be dangerous even when Summoned, but Patrius motioned her to silence, gestured her to her place and, as the stick's shadow shortened to nothing, began his part of the chant.

"*Aaaggggh!*" William Irving Zumwalt growled at the screen. Without taking his eyes off the fragment of code, he grabbed the can of cola balanced precariously on the mound of printouts and hamburger wrappers littering his desk.

"Found something, Wiz?" his cubicle mate asked, looking up from his terminal.

"Only the bug that's been screwing up the sort module."

William Irving Zumwalt—Wiz to one and all—leaned back and took a healthy swig of cola. It was warm and flat from sitting for hours, but he barely noticed. "Here.

Take a look at this."

Jerry Andrews shifted his whale-like bulk and swiveled his chair to look over Wiz's shoulder. "Yeah? So?"

Wiz ran a long, thin hand through his shock of dark hair. "Don't you see? This cretinous barfbag uses **sizeof** to return the size of the array."

"So how else do you get the size?"

"Right. But C doesn't have an array data type. When you call an array you're actually passing a pointer to the array. That works fine from the main program, but sometimes this thing uses **sizeof** from a subroutine. And guess what it gets then?"

Jerry clapped a meaty hand to his forehead. "The size of the pointer! Of course."

"Right," Wiz said smugly. "No matter how big the array, the damn code returns a value of two."

"Jeez," Jerry shook his head as he shifted his chair back to his desk. "How long will it take to fix it?"

Wiz drained his drink before answering. "Couple of hours, I guess. I'll have to run a bunch of tests to make sure nothing else is wrong." He stood up and stretched. "But first I'm going to get another Coke—if the damn machine isn't empty again. You want one?"

"Nah," Jerry said, typing rapidly and not looking up. "I'm probably gonna knock off in a few minutes."

"Okay," said Wiz and sauntered out the office door.

Save for the clicking of Jerry's keyboard and the hiss of the air conditioner the corridor was quiet. Wiz glanced at his watch and realized it was nearly five A.M. Not that it mattered much. Programmers set their own hours at ZetaSoft and that was one of the reasons Will Zumwalt was still with the company.

The drink machine was next to a side door and Wiz decided to step out for a breath of dawn air. He loved this time of day when everything was cool and quiet and even the air was still, waiting. *As long as I don't have to get up at this hour!* he thought as he pushed the door open.

The magical lines of force gathered and curled about the old wizard. They twisted and warped, clawing at the very fabric of the Universe and bending it to a new shape. Far to the South, across the Freshened Sea, a point of light appeared in the watery depths of an enormous copper bowl.

"A hit," proclaimed the watcher, a lean shaven-skull man in a brown robe.

"What is it?" asked Xind, Master of the Sea of Scrying. He descended heavily from his dais and waddled across the torch-lit chamber hewn of blackest basalt to peer over the acolyte's shoulder.

Looking deep into the murky water his eyes traced the map of the World in the lines cut deep into the bowl's bottom. There was indeed a spark there. Magic where no magic ought to be. Around the edge of the bowl the other three acolytes shifted nervously but kept their eyes fixed to their own sectors.

"I do not know, Master, but it's strong and growing stronger. It looks like a major spell."

Xind, sorcerer of the Third Circle as the Dark League counted such things, passed a fat hand over the water as if wiping away a smear. "Hmm, yes. Wait, there's something . . . By the heavens and hells! There are no wards. That's a great wizard without protection!" His head snapped up. "Let the word be passed quickly!" The gray-robed apprentice crouched at the foot of the dais jumped up and ran to do his bidding.

Xind stared back into the Sea of Scrying and his round, fat face creased into a particularly unattractive smile.

"Fool," he muttered to the spark in the bottom of the bowl.

The haze in the clearing turned from wispy gray to opaque white to rosy pink. It contracted and coalesced until it took the form of a dark red door with a silver knob, floating a yard off the meadow. The grass bent away from it in all directions as if pressed down by an invisible ball. Moira concentrated on her chanting and pushed harder with all the magic she possessed.

As if in slow motion the door opened and a man came through. He stepped out as if he expected solid ground and slowly toppled through when he found air. His eyes widened and his mouth formed a soundless O. Then everything was moving at normal speed and the man extended his arms.

Wiz took two steps and fell three feet onto grass in what should have been a level walk. He caught himself with his arms and then collapsed with his nose in the green grass, weak, sick and disoriented. The light was different, he was facing the wrong way and he was so dizzy he couldn't hold his head up. He squeezed his eyes shut and concentrated on keeping his stomach in its proper place. The grass tickled his nose and the blades poked at his tightly shut eyes, but he ignored them.

Patrius made a flicking gesture at the man and then returned to the business of completing the spell. Moira, absorbed in her chant, barely noticed the small drop of dark fluid fly from the Wizard's fingertips and strike the new arrival on the temple. It splattered, spread and sank into the flesh and hair, leaving no sign of its passing.

In the great, high, vaulted chantry of the Dark League, four black-robed wizards huddled about a glowing crystal. They murmured and moved like a flock of uneasy crows, all the while peering into the depths of the stone. Around them forces twisted and gathered.

The attack came with a rush of magic, dark and sour. Moira cried out in terror and gestured frantically but she was thrust aside ruthlessly as the bolt lanced into the clearing and struck Patrius full-on.

A crackling blue nimbus burst out around the old wizard. He raised his arms over his head as if to shield himself, but his clothes and beard burst into flame. In an instant he was a ghastly flaming scarecrow capering about the clearing and shrieking in mortal agony. He toppled over and the screams turned to a puling whimper. His flesh

blackened and charred.

Finally there was nothing but a smouldering husk with knees and arms flexed up against the body. He was so badly burned that there wasn't even a smell in the air.

Moira cowered sobbing on the ground, the blazing after-image burning in her sight even through her eyelids. Wiz had gone flat on his face when the bolt hit.

All right, Wiz told himself. Time to get up. On three. One, two . . . He realized he wasn't going to make it, so he settled for rolling over on his back.

"Lord?" a small voice asked tentatively.

Wiz opened his eyes. Standing over him was the most beautiful girl he had ever seen. Her waist-length hair was the color of burnished copper. Her skin was pale and creamy under a dusting of freckles. Her eyes were deep sea green. She was wearing a long skirt of forest green in some rough-woven material and a white peasant blouse with a scoop neck. Wiz stared.

"Are you hurt, Lord?" the vision said in a lilting, musical voice. As she bent down to help Wiz up he was treated to an ample display of cleavage.

"N-n-n-no," Wiz managed to stammer, dizzy from the transformation and awed by her loveliness. He looked into her face. "You're beautiful," he said softly.

Moira saw the look in his eyes and swore under her breath. *Fortuna!* An infatuation spell! Patrius had bound this unknown wizard to her with an infatuation spell. Gently she helped the alien wizard to his feet and wondered if she should curtsy.

"How are you called, Lord?" Moira asked respectfully.

"Ah, Wiz. I'm Wiz Zumwalt, that is. Who are you?"

"I am called Moira, Lord, a hedge witch of this place." She ignored the discourtesy of his question. She reddened under his fixed gaze and wondered what to do next. She had already sent an urgent call for one of the Mighty to attend them, but even by the Wizard's Way that would take time. Wizards did not like to be bothered by idle chatter, but this one *stared* so.

"Lord, are you of the Mighty in your home?" she asked to make conversation.

"Say what?"

"Forgive me, Lord. The Mighty are the wizards of the first rank in our land."

"Wizards?" Between the transition and Moira, Wiz's brain wasn't working and he had never been much good at small talk with beautiful women.

"Magicians. Sorcerers," Moira said a little desperately. Wiz looked blank and a dreadful thought grew in the back of Moira's mind. "Forgive me Lord, but you *are* a wizard, are you not?"

"Huh. No, I'm not a wizard," Wiz said numbly, shaking his head to clear it.

Moira felt sick. This man was telling the truth! There was no sign or trace of magic about him, nothing save his odd clothing to distinguish him from any other mortal. She turned away from him and tears stung her eyes.

"Hey, what's wrong?" Wiz laid a hand on her shoulder.

"Everything," Moira sobbed. "You're not a wizard and Patrius is dead."

"Patrius . . . ?" Wiz trailed off. "Oh my God!" For the first time he saw the

charred corpse at the edge of the clearing.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Is there anything I can do?"

"Yes," Moira said fiercely. "You can help me bury him."

"If you value your life," the black robe hissed, "keep your mouth shut and your eyes on the floor. Toth-Set-Ra has little patience with impertinence." Xind led the acolyte down the flagged corridor. Their sandals scuffed on the rough stone floor and guttering torches in iron brackets gave a dim and uncertain light to guide them.

The guards at the door were hobgoblins, creatures somewhat larger than men and nearly twice as broad and bulky. Their laced armor shone blackly by the torchlight and the honed edges of their halberds glinted evilly. At the approach of the wizards they snapped to attention.

"Two with news for the Dread Master," Xind said with considerably more assurance than he felt. "We are expected." The hobgoblins nodded. One reached behind to swing open the great oaken door.

Both wizard and acolyte prostrated themselves on the threshold.

"Rise," croaked a voice from within. "Rise and speak."

The room was dark but a baleful green light played round a high-backed chair and the figure hunched in it.

Shakily, the pair rose and moved toward the light.

The man in the chair was wizened and shrunk in on himself until he was more a mummy than a living man. But his eyes burned red in the black pits of his hairless skull and he moved with the easy grace of a serpent coiling to strike. The light seemed to come from within him, playing on the chair and the amethyst goblet in his hand. The reflected greenish glow made Xind's complexion appear even more unhealthy than usual.

"We have slain a wizard, Dread Master, one of the Mighty of the North."

"Yes," Toth-Set-Ra hissed. "It was Patrius. May his soul rot forever. And you destroyed him. How nice."

The novice started and opened his mouth to ask how the wizard knew, but Xind trod on his foot in warning.

"He was performing a Great Summoning, Dread Master," Xind said, his head bowed respectfully.

"Indeed?" croaked Toth-Set-Ra. "Oh, indeed?" His reptilian gaze slid over his subordinates and settled back on the carved goblet. "And what was it that was Summoned?"

Xind licked his lips. "We do not know, Lord. The distance was too great and . . ."

"You do not know?" Toth-Set-Ra's voice grew harsher. "You disturb me with news I already know and you cannot tell me more than I can sense unaided?" His stare transfixed the black robe, steady, intent and pitiless. "What use are you, eh? Tell me why I shouldn't finish you now."

"Because you would lose our services," the acolyte said steadily. Xind blanched and trembled at the young man's audacity and Toth-Set-Ra shifted his basilisk stare to him. The acolyte stood with his eyes respectfully downcast but no hint of trepidation

in his manner.

"Servants such as you I do not need," snapped the wizard. "Incompetents! Bunglers! Blind fools!" Without shifting his eyes, he threw the amethyst cup at them. It passed between the pair and shattered into priceless shards on the flags. Both men flinched away.

"Very well," he said finally. "Prove your worth. Find out what Patrius died to birth. If you are quick and if it is important I will give you your lives. If not, I have other uses for you."

The wizard sat glaring after them for several minutes. Finally he sealed the door with a gesture which raised a wall of blue fire across it. He went to a cabinet of age-blackened oak, opened it with curious and diverse gestures and removed an elaborately engraved box about the size of a man's head.

Carrying it gently he brought it back to the table. He set the box carefully in the center of the pentagram inlaid in silver in the dark onyx top and then, stepping back, made a gesture. The top flew open and a small red demon appeared in a puff of smoke. The demon flew toward him only to be brought up short by the pentagram. It dropped to its knees and pressed its clawed, misshapen hands against the invisible walls, seeking a way out.

"It is secure," croaked Toth-Set-Ra. "Now, by the spells which made you and the spells which bind you, I would have word of the world."

"There is pain and suffering," squeaked the demon. "There is mortal misery and unhappiness, and boredom and ennui among the non-mortal."

"Specifically!" snapped the wizard and the demon fell back gibbering under the lash of his voice.

"What you will, Dread Master. What you will of me?"

"The Wizard Patrius."

"Dead, Dread Master. Struck down unprotected by your servants as he strove to weave a powerful spell. The Mighty in the midst of the mighty laid low."

"The spell?"

"A Great Summoning, Master. A Great Summoning."

"His assistants?"

"None, Master. None save a hedge witch."

Toth-Set-Ra frowned.

"And the Summoned?"

"A man, Master, only a man."

"A magician? A wizard?"

"I see no magic, Master. Save the hedge witch's and Bal-Simba, who comes after Patrius's burning."

"And what is his virtue? What is the special thing which made Patrius summon this one?"

"I do not know, Master. I see no answer."

"Then look ahead," commanded Toth-Set-Ra. "Look to the future."

"Aiii," gibbered the demon. "Aiii, destruction for us all! Pain and fire and the fall of towers. Magic of the strangest sort loosed upon the land! A plague, a pox, the bane

of all wizards!" He capered about the pentagram as if the table had become red hot.

"How?" snapped the wizard. "Is he a wizard, then?"

"No wizard, Master. Magic without magic. Magic complex and subtle and strange. A plague upon all wizards, a bane. A bane! Aiii Good Master, let me leave him! Aiii!"

Toth-Set-Ra scowled. The demon was frightened! He knew from experience that it took a very great deal to frighten a demon and this one was so terrified it was almost incoherent.

"Leave then," he said and made the gesture of dismissal. The demon vanished in a puff of smoke and the lid of the box snapped down.

Toth-Set-Ra sat long scowling at the carved box while the heatless blue light from the flame at the door played across his leathery face and reflected from the sunken pits of his eyes. *A plague upon all wizards*. What could that be? And why would Patrius—may his soul rot!—risk his life to Summon such a one? The Northerners relied on magic fully as much as the League. Magic was as vital to life as air. More vital, he corrected himself. There were spells which allowed a man to live without air.

Might the demon have been mistaken? Toth-Set-Ra cocked his head to one side as he considered the notion. It was not unknown for demons to be wrong. They were, after all, no better than the spells that created them. But this scrying demon had never failed him. Not like this.

A trick by the Northerners? The scowl deepened. The wizard held out his hand to the side, fingers extended, and an amethyst goblet, twin to the one that lay in fragments on the floor, filled with wine from an unseen pitcher and flew to his clawlike grasp. Yes, it was possible the Northerners had staged the incident for the League's benefit, or even spoofed both the demon and the Sea of Scrying.

Toth-Set-Ra took a sip of the magically concocted vintage and shook his head. What possible advantage could the North have gained that was worth the death of their most powerful wizard?

Assuming Patrius *was* dead, of course. . . . Too many possibilities! He needed more information and quickly. He motioned toward the door and the curtain of fire vanished as suddenly as it had come. He struck a tiny gong and instantly one of his goblin guards was in the doorway.

"Atros, to me," he commanded. "At once!" The guard bowed and vanished in a single movement and Toth-Set-Ra scowled into the bottom of his wine. He would have an answer. If it took every wizard, every spell and every creature at his command, he would have an answer. And quickly!

They raised a mound over Patrius where he lay. Moira set Wiz to finding rocks while she used her silver knife to cut the green sward into turfs. The profanation rendered the knife useless for magical purposes, but she didn't care. She placed the turfs about the charred hulk who had been the greatest and best of wizards. From time to time she stopped to wipe away her tears with the sleeve of her blouse, unmindful of the dirt that it left streaked upon her cheeks. There was no proper shroud to be had, so Moira covered Patrius's face with her apron, tucking it in carefully around the body and murmuring a goodbye before she gently laid the bright green sod over him. The

tiny flowers nodding in the grass made a fitting funeral bouquet.

Finally, she and Wiz piled the stones over the turf. They stuck the charred stump of the old wizard's staff upright in the top of the cairn.

"Dread Master?" The bear-like form of Atros blocked the door. Where the League's greatest wizard affected the robe of an anchorite, his subordinate wore a black bearskin, belted with studded leather and pinned with an intricately worked and bejeweled brooch. Toth-Set-Ra's pate was shaven and Atros wore his thick, dark hair to his shoulders, held in place with a golden filet. More, Atros was nearly as large as the hobgoblins and Toth-Set-Ra was tiny.

In spite of the contrast there was no question as to who held power.

"Patrius is dead," Toth-Set-Ra told his lieutenant without preamble. Atros said nothing. His spies had already told him that and he knew Toth-Set-Ra knew it.

"He attempted a Great Summoning, or so I am told, and he brought someone from outside the World. A man."

Atros waited impassively.

"I want that man, Atros. I want him badly. See to it."

"It will take resources . . ." the great bear trailed off.

"You have them. Use them. Search the North. Scour the Capital if you must. But bring me that man!"

Atros bowed. "Thy will, Dread Master." And he was gone, leaving Toth-Set-Ra to brood.

Out in the corridor it was Atros's turn to scowl. The old crow had set him a pretty problem indeed! According to his spies the Sea of Scrying had failed to pick up any trace of the man. That scrying demon Toth-Set-Ra was so proud of must have failed or he would not have been given this mission—or the power to command so much of what his master controlled. Whoever he was, this man from without the World must have a very powerful masking spell to so effectively cloak his magic.

Well, magic wasn't the only way to find someone. That was the old crow's mistake, Atros thought. If he couldn't do it by magic he didn't think he could do it at all. But there were other ways. The Wild Wood was alive with creatures who were either allies, could be bribed to help, who were controlled or who could be enticed into helping. In the lands of Men there were spies, human and non-human. There were the Shadow Warriors. And then there were the massive and mighty magics of the City of Night. Here was power indeed to turn on finding a lone man.

That was the crux of it, he thought to himself as he strode along the dank, unevenly-flagged corridor. All that power, but only until he found this man. Oh, he would find him, never fear. That would be the easy part. And there were other things that could be done with the power he had just been given. Perhaps even concocting a nice little surprise for that scrawny excuse for a sorcerer who sat in the room down the hall.

Atros was intelligent but he was no more subtle than the bear whose name he had taken. It never occurred to him to wonder if perhaps Toth-Set-Ra might have considered that possibility as well.

Moira knelt weeping over Patrius's grave. Wiz stood by feeling clumsy and awkward. She was so beautiful he wanted to take her into his arms and comfort her. But when he put a hand on her shoulder she jerked away. He felt like a fool watching her cry, so he wandered around the edge of the clearing.

"Do not enter the woods," Moira said sharply through her tears. "It is not safe," she sniffed.

"You mean lions and tigers and bears?"

"And other things," Moira said grimly.

"You mean like . . . ULP!"

A huge black man stepped into the clearing directly in front of Wiz. He wore a leopard skin over his shoulders and a leather skirt around his huge middle. Around his neck was a necklace of bone with an eagle's skull as a pendant. In his right hand he carried an intricately carved staff nearly as tall as he was. He grinned and Wiz saw his teeth were filed to needle-sharp points.

He was so black his skin showed highlights of purple and he was the biggest man Wiz had ever seen. It wasn't just that he was more than six-and-a-half feet tall. His frame was huge, with shoulders twice as broad as a normal man's. He had a great black belly, arms thicker than Wiz's legs and legs like tree trunks.

Open-mouthed, Wiz backed away. Then Moira caught sight of him and let out a cry.

"Bal-Simba! Oh, Lord, you came." She ran across the clearing to meet him, checked herself suddenly and dropped him a respectful curtsy. "I mean, merry met, Lord."

The black giant nodded genially. "Merry met, child." He looked over to the freshly-raised mound and his face darkened. "Though I see it is not so merry."

"No, Lord," Moira looked up at him. "Patrius is dead, slain by sorcery."

Bal-Simba closed his eyes and his face contorted. "Evil news indeed."

Moira's eyes filled with tears. "I tried, Lord. I tried, but I could not . . ." She broke down completely. "Oh, Lord, I am so sorry," she sobbed.

Bal-Simba put a meaty arm around her shoulders and held her close. "I know, child. I know. No one will blame you for there was nothing you could have done." Moira cried helplessly into his barrel chest. Wiz stood by, wishing he could help and feeling like a complete jerk.

"Now child," Bal-Simba said as her sobs subsided. "Tell me how this came to pass. We sensed a great disturbance even before you called."

Moira drew away from him and sniffed. "He performed a Great Summoning without wards," she said as she wiped her eyes. "Just as he completed the spell he was struck down."

"What did he Summon?"

"Him," said Moira accusingly.

The black wizard looked down on Wiz in a way that reminded Wiz uncomfortably of a cat watching a mouse.

"How are you called?" Bal-Simba asked.

"I'm Wiz. Wiz Zumwalt." He waved hesitantly. "Hi."

The black giant nodded. "You are a wizard then. Of what rank?"

"Well no, I'm not a wizard," Wiz explained. "Wiz is just a nickname. My real name's William Irving . . ." He stopped as Bal-Simba held up a hand.

"I did not ask for your true name," he said sternly. "Never, *ever* tell anyone what you are truly named for that places you in the power of all who hear."

"You mean like knowing somebody's password? Ah, right."

"Like that," the wizard agreed. "I tell you again, Wiz. Never reveal your true name."

"Now," he went on in a somewhat gentler tone. "What is your special virtue?"

"Huh?"

"What is it that you do?"

"Oh, I'm a programmer. From Cupertino. Say, where are we, anyway?"

"We are in the North of World on the Fringe of the Wild Wood," Bal-Simba told him.

"Where's that in relation to California?"

"Far, far away I am afraid. You were Summoned from your own world to this one by he who is dead." He nodded in the direction of the freshly raised cairn.

"Oh," Wiz said blankly. "Okay." He paused. "Uh, how do I get back?"

"That may take some effort," Bal-Simba told him. The black giant suddenly became more intent.

"Again. What is your special virtue?"

"I told you, I'm a programmer. I work with computers."

"I do not think we have those here. What else do you do?"

"Well, ah. Nothing really. I just work with computers."

"Are you a warrior?"

"Huh? No!" Wiz was slightly shocked.

"Think," commanded Bal-Simba. "There must be something else."

"No, there really isn't," Wiz protested. "Well, I do watch a lot of old movies." It was Bal-Simba's turn to look blank.

"That's all there is, honest." Wiz was facing the black wizard so he did not see Moira's face fall.

"There must be more here," said Bal-Simba. He paused for a minute.

"Now. I swear to you that I mean you no harm." He smote his breast over his heart. "I swear to you that I will neither willingly harm you nor allow you to come to harm." He struck his chest again. "That I may aid you, will you give me leave to look deeper into you?"

"Uh, yeah. Sure," Wiz said a little apprehensively.

"Then sit here where you may be more comfortable." Bal-Simba guided Wiz to the rock where Patrius had sat so recently. He reached into his pouch and drew out a small purple crystal. "Look at this." Wiz gazed at the tiny gem cupped in the great pink palm. "Look deeply. Fix your attention on it. Observe . . . observe."

Wiz's eyes glazed and his mouth went slack.

"To business then." Bal-Simba tucked the crystal back into his pouch and began the task of learning all he could about this visitor from so far away.

"Strange indeed," muttered Bal-Simba, turning from where Wiz dozed in a trance. "Very strange."

"How so, Lord?" Moira asked.

"There is no sign of magic."

"No magic! None at all?"

"None that I can detect. Despite his name, this Wiz is as lacking in manna as a newborn babe."

Moira crumpled. "Then it was all for nothing," she said bitterly. "Patrius died for nothing! Oh, Lord, I am so sorry."

"I do not know. There is something—strange—about him, but it is not magic."

"The effects of the Summoning?"

Bal-Simba frowned. "I do not think so. It goes beyond that, I believe." He kept silent for a moment.

"You say Patrius told you he was summoning a wizard?" he asked at last.

"Yes, Lord." Then Moira stopped. "Well . . . not exactly."

"What then exactly?"

Moira screwed up her face in an effort to remember. "Patrius said he was Summoning someone who could help us against the League." She made the warding gesture. "Someone with great magical power. When I asked him if the man was a wizard he evaded the question. But," she added thoughtfully, "he never called him a wizard."

"But he did say that this man had great power?"

"Yes, Lord. He said he looked long and hard to find him."

"That I can believe," Bal-Simba said absentmindedly. "Searching beyond the World is long and hard indeed. Hmm . . . but he did not call him a wizard, you say?"

"No, Lord."

"When I asked Patrius that he would not answer."

Bal-Simba's head sunk down on his chest.

"Lord," Moira interrupted timidly, "didn't Patrius tell the Council what he was doing?"

Bal-Simba grimaced. "Do you think we would have allowed this madness had we known? No, we knew Patrius was engaged in a great project of some sort, but he told no one, not even his apprentices, what he was about.

"He had spoken to me of the tide of our struggle with the Dark League and how it fared. He was not sanguine and I knew in a general way that he intended something beyond the common. But I had assumed he would lay the project before the Council when it came to fruition. I assumed rashly and it cost us dearly."

"But why, Lord? Why would he take such an awful risk?"

"Because with the League so strong not all of the Mighty together could have performed a Great Summoning."

He caught the look on Moira's face.

"You did not know that? Yes, it is true. All of us together are not enough to make magic of that sort against the League's opposition." He smiled ruefully. "Thus the Council wanes as the League grows greater."

"Then why . . . ?"

"Patrius obviously believed that by working alone and without the usual protections he might be able to complete the Summoning before the League realized what was happening. He was wrong and it cost him his life." He nodded toward Wiz. "Patrius risked his life to gain a man of great magical power. Instead he brought us someone who *seems* as common as dirt. It makes no sense."

Again the great Bal-Simba was silent, his head sank down on his necklace in contemplation.

"What do you think of this?" he asked finally.

"Lord, I am not qualified to pass on the actions of the Mighty."

Bal-Simba waved that aside. "You were here. You saw. What do you think?"

Moira took a deep breath. "I think Patrius made a mistake. I think he intended someone else and under the strain of the attack . . ." her green eyes misted and she swallowed hard as she relived those awful moments " . . . under the strain of the attack he Summoned the wrong person."

"Possible," Bal-Simba rumbled. "Just possible. But I wonder. Wizards who make mistakes do not live to become Mighty, still less as mighty as Patrius."

"Yes, Lord," said Moira meekly.

"I do not convince you, eh girl? Well, I am not sure I convince myself." He turned back and looked at Wiz, sitting dazed and uncomprehending on the stone. "In any event, the problem now is what to do with our visitor."

Moira snorted. "He is an expensive visitor, Lord. He cost us so much for so little."

"Perhaps, but we cannot leave him to wander. You can see for yourself that he is as helpless as a sparrow. Sparrow, hmm? A good world name for him, especially since the name he uses is too close to his true name. But no, he cannot be left to wander."

"Will you take him with you, Lord?"

Bal-Simba frowned. "That would not be wise, I think, and dangerous besides. The fewer who know of him the better. No, he needs to go someplace safe. A sanctuary with as little magic as possible. A place where he can remain while I consult the others of the Mighty."

"My village is . . ."

"Unsafe," the black giant said. "Already we are being probed. I suspect the League would like very much to get their hands on him."

"Would it matter so much? Since he has no magic, I mean."

"Hush, girl. You do not mean that."

Moira looked at Wiz with distaste but shook her head. Falling into the hands of the League was not a fate to be wished on anyone, even someone who had caused the death of Patrius.

"What then?"

"There is a place. A few days into the Wild Wood where he could find sanctuary. A place of very little magic."

Moira's eyes lit and she opened her mouth but Bal-Simba motioned her to silence. "Best not to say it. There might be others about to hear, eh? No, you will have to take him—there—and give him into the charge of the one who lives there."

"Me, Lord? But I have my work."

"I will see another is sent in your place. He must be guided and protected, do you not see?"

"But why me, Lord?"

Bal-Simba ticked off the reasons on his fingers. "First, you are here and already privy to this business. The less others know of it the better. Second, you know the way through the Wild Wood. Third, time is of the essence. This place grows increasingly dangerous. And fourth," he held up his pinky finger and his eyes twinkled, "he is in love with you."

Moira made a face. "An infatuation spell! But I am not in love with him."

"Nonetheless, he will follow at your heels like a puppy. No, you are the logical one to serve as the mother hen for our Sparrow."

"Forgive me, Lord, but I find his presence distasteful."

Bal-Simba sighed. "In this world, child, all of us must do things which are distasteful on occasion."

Moira bowed her head. "Yes, Lord." *But I don't have to like it!* she thought furiously.

"Very well, off with you then." He turned and gestured to Wiz. "Straight on and hurry." Wiz reeled and shook his head to clear it.

"I will need some things from the village, Lord."

"I will have someone meet you with food and your other needs at the bridge on the Forest Highway."

"Lord, cannot I at least go back to say goodbye? Just for a few minutes?"

Bal-Simba shook his head. "Too dangerous. Both for you and the villagers. No, you will have to move quickly and quietly and attract as little notice as possible."

"Yes, Lord," Moira sighed.

"Now go, girl, and quickly. I cannot shield this clearing for much longer. I will consult the Council and come to you at your destination."

Moira bowed her head. "Merry part, Lord."

"Merry meet again, Lady."

"Huh?" said Wiz groggily.

"Come on you," Moira said viciously and grabbed his hand. She jerked and Wiz staggered to his feet.

"Well, move, clumsy. Come on!" and she strode off with a lovesick Wiz stumbling along in tow.

Bal-Simba watched the ill-assorted pair disappear down the forest path. Then he sat on the rock just vacated by Wiz and turned his attention to weaving masking spells to buy the travellers as much time as he possibly could.