

Diana Wynne Jones

House of Many Ways

The Sequel to Howl's Moving Castle

 HarperCollins e-books

To my granddaughter, Ruth,
together with Sharyn's laundry
and also to Lilly B.

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Chapter One

IN WHICH CHARMAIN IS VOLUNTEERED TO LOOK AFTER A WIZARD'S HOUSE

"Charmain must do it," said Aunt Sempronia. "We can't leave Great-Uncle William to face this on his own."

"Your Great-Uncle William?" said Mrs. Baker. "Isn't he—" She coughed and lowered her voice because this, to her mind, was not quite nice. "Isn't he a *wizard*?"

"Of course," said Aunt Sempronia. "But he has—" Here she too lowered her voice. "He has *growth*, you know, on his insides, and only the elves can help him. They have to carry him off in order to cure him, you see, and *someone* has to look after his house. Spells, you know, *escape* if there's no one there to watch them. And *I* am far too busy to do it. My stray dogs' charity alone—"

"Me too. We're up to our ears in wedding cake orders this month," Mrs. Baker said hastily. "Sam was saying only this morning—"

"Then it has to be Charmain," Aunt Sempronia decreed. "Surely she's old enough now."

"Er—" said Mrs. Baker.

They both looked across the parlor to where Mrs. Baker's daughter sat, deep in a book, as usual with her long, thin body bent into what sunlight came in past Mrs. Baker's geraniums, her red hair pinned up in a sort of birds' nest, and her glasses perched on the end of her nose. She held one of her father's huge juicy pasties in one hand and munched it as she read. Crumbs kept falling on her book and she brushed them off with the pasty when they fell on the page she was reading.

"Er...did you hear us, dear?" Mrs. Baker said anxiously.

"No," Charmain said with her mouth full. "What?"

"That's settled, then," Aunt Sempronia said. "I'll leave it to you to explain to her, Berenic dear." She stood up, majestically shaking out the folds of her stiff silk dress and then of her parasol. "I'll be back to fetch her tomorrow morning," she said. "Now I'd better go and tell poor Great-Uncle William that Charmain will be taking care of things for him."

She swept out of the parlor, leaving Mrs. Baker to wish that her husband's aunt was not so rich and so bossy, and to wonder how she was going to explain to Charmain, let alone to Sam. Sam never allowed Charmain to do anything that was not utterly respectable. Nor did Mrs. Baker either, except when Aunt Sempronia took a hand.

Aunt Sempronia, meanwhile, mounted into her smart little pony-trap and had her groom drive her beyond the other side of town where Great-Uncle William lived.

"I've fixed it all up," she announced, sailing through the magic ways to where Great-Uncle William sat glumly writing in his study. "My great-niece Charmain is coming here tomorrow. She will see you on your way and look after you when you come back. In between, she will take care of the house for you."

"How very kind of her," said Great-Uncle William. "I take it she is well versed in magic, then?"

"I have no idea," said Aunt Sempronia. "What I *do* know is that she never has her nose out of a book, never does a hand's turn in the house, and is treated like a sacred object by both her parents. It will do her *good* to do something normal for a change."

"Oh, dear," said Great-Uncle William. "Thank you for warning me. I shall take precaution"

then.”

“Do that,” said Aunt Sempronia. “And you had better make sure there is plenty of food in the place. I’ve never *known* a girl who eats so much. And remains thin as a witch’s besom with it. I’ve never understood it. I’ll bring her here tomorrow before the elves come, then.”

She turned and left. “Thank you,” Great-Uncle William said weakly to her stiff, rustling back. “Dear, dear,” he added, as the front door slammed. “Ah, well. One has to be grateful to one’s relatives, I suppose.”

Charmain, oddly enough, was quite grateful to Aunt Sempronia too. Not that she was in the least grateful for being volunteered to look after an old, sick wizard whom she had never met. “She might have asked *me!*” she said, rather often, to her mother.

“I think she knew you would say no, dear,” Mrs. Baker suggested eventually.

“I might have,” Charmain said. “Or,” she added, with a secretive smile, “I might not have.”

“Dear, I’m not expecting you to *enjoy* it,” Mrs. Baker said tremulously. “It’s not at all *nice*. It’s just that it would be so very kind—”

“You know I’m not kind,” Charmain said, and she went away upstairs to her white frilled bedroom, where she sat at her nice desk, staring out of her window at the roofs, towers, and chimneys of High Norland City, and then up at the blue mountains beyond. The truth was, this was the chance she had been longing for. She was tired of her respectable school and *very* tired of living at home, with her mother treating her as if Charmain were a tigress no one was sure was tame, and her father forbidding her to do things because they were not nice, or not safe, or not usual. This was a chance to leave home and do something—the *one* thing—Charmain had always wanted to do. It was worth putting up with a wizard’s house just for that. She wondered if she had the courage to write the letter that went with it.

For a long time she had no courage at all. She sat and stared at the clouds piling along the peaks of the mountains, white and purple, making shapes like fat animals and thin swooping dragons. She stared until the clouds had wisped away into nothing but faint mist against a blue sky. Then she said, “Now or nothing.” After that she sighed, fetched her glasses up on the chain that hung round her neck, and got out her good pen and her best writing paper. She wrote, in her best writing:

Your Majesty,

Ever since I was a small child and first heard of your great collection of books and manuscripts, I have longed to work in your library. Although I know that you yourself, with the aid of your daughter, Her Royal Highness Princess Hilda, are personally engaged in the long and difficult task of sorting and listing the contents of the Royal Library, I nevertheless hope that you might appreciate my help. Since I am of age, I wish to apply for the post of librarian assistant in the Royal Library. I hope Your Majesty will not find my application too presumptuous.

Yours truly,

Charmain Baker

12 Corn Street

High Norland City

Charmain sat back and reread her letter. There was no way, she thought, that writing like this

the old King could be anything other than sheer cheek, but it seemed to her that the letter was quite a good one. ~~The one thing in it that was dubious was the “I am of age.”~~ She knew that was supposed to mean that a person was twenty-one—or at least eighteen—but she felt it was not *exactly* a lie. She had not said what age she was *of*, after all. And she hadn’t, either, said that she was hugely learned or highly qualified, because she knew she was not. She hadn’t even said that she loved books more than anything else in the world, although this was perfectly true. She would just have to trust her love of books shone through.

I’m quite sure the King will just scrumple the letter up and throw it on the fire, she thought. But at least I tried.

She went out and posted the letter, feeling very brave and defiant.

The next morning, Aunt Sempronia arrived in her pony-trap and loaded Charmain into it, along with a neat carpet bag that Mrs. Baker had packed full of Charmain’s clothes, and a much larger bag that Mrs. Baker had packed, bulging with pasties and tasties, buns, flans, and tarts. So large was this second bag and smelling so strongly of savory herbs, gravy, cheese, fruit, jam, and spices, that the groom driving the trap turned round and sniffed in astonishment, and even Aunt Sempronia’s stately nostrils flared.

“Well, you’ll not starve, child,” she said. “Drive on.”

But the groom had to wait until Mrs. Baker had embraced Charmain and said, “I know I can trust you, dear, to be good and tidy and considerate.”

That’s a lie, Charmain thought. She doesn’t trust me an inch.

Then Charmain’s father hurried up to peck a kiss on Charmain’s cheek. “We know you’ll not let us down, Charmain,” he said.

That’s another lie, Charmain thought. You know I will.

“And we’ll miss you, my love,” her mother said, nearly in tears.

That may not be a lie! Charmain thought, in some surprise. Though it beats me why they even like me.

“*Drive on!*” Aunt Sempronia said sternly, and the groom did. When the pony was sedately ambling through the streets, she said, “Now, Charmain, I know your parents have given you the best of everything and you’ve never had to do a thing for yourself in your life. Are you prepared to look after yourself for a change?”

“Oh, yes,” Charmain said devoutly.

“*And the house and the poor old man?*” Aunt Sempronia persisted.

“I’ll do my best,” Charmain said. She was afraid Aunt Sempronia would turn round and drive her straight back home if she didn’t say this.

“You’ve had a good education, haven’t you?” Aunt Sempronia said.

“Even music,” Charmain admitted, rather sulkily. She added hastily, “But I wasn’t any good at it. So don’t expect me to play soothing tunes to Great-Uncle William.”

“I don’t,” Aunt Sempronia retorted. “As he’s a wizard, he can probably make his own soothing tunes. I was simply trying to find out whether you’ve had a proper grounding in magic. You haven’t you?”

Charmain’s insides seemed to drop away downward somewhere, and she felt as if they were taking the blood from her face with them. She did not dare confess that she knew not the first thing about magic. Her parents—particularly Mrs. Baker—did not think magic was nice. And theirs was such a respectable part of town that Charmain’s school never taught anyone magic. If anyone wanted to learn anything so vulgar, they had to go to a private tutor instead. And Charmain knew her parents

would never have paid for any such lessons. “Er...,” she began.

~~Luckily, Aunt Sempronia simply continued. “Living in a house full of magic is no joke, you know.”~~

“Oh, I won’t ever think of it as a joke,” Charmain said earnestly.

“Good,” said Aunt Sempronia, and sat back.

The pony clopped on and on. They clopped through Royal Square, past the Royal Mansion looming at one end of it with its golden roof flashing in the sun, and on through Market Square, where Charmain was seldom allowed to go. She looked wistfully at the stalls and at all the people buying things and chattering, and stared backward at the place as they came into the older part of town. Here the houses were so tall and colorful and so different from one another—each one seemed to have steeper gables and more oddly placed windows than the one before it—that Charmain began to have hopes that living in Great-Uncle William’s house might prove to be very interesting, after all. But the pony clopped onward, through the dingier, poorer parts, and then past mere cottages, and then on among fields and hedges, where a great cliff leaned over the road and only the occasional small house stood backed into the hedgerows, and the mountains towered closer and closer above. Charmain began to think they were going out of High Norland and into another country altogether. What would it be? Strangia? Montalbino? She wished she had paid more attention to geography lessons.

Just as she was wishing this, the groom drew up at a small mouse-colored house crouching at the back of a long front garden. Charmain looked at it across its small iron gate and felt utterly disappointed. It was the most boring house she had ever seen. It had a window on either side of its brown front door and the mouse-colored roof came down above them like a scowl. There did not seem to be an upstairs at all.

“Here we are,” Aunt Sempronia said cheerfully. She got down, clattered open the little iron gate, and led the way up the path to the front door. Charmain prowled gloomily after her while the groom followed them with Charmain’s two bags. The garden on either side of the path appeared to consist entirely of hydrangea bushes, blue, green-blue, and mauve.

“I don’t suppose you’ll have to look after the garden,” Aunt Sempronia said airily. I should hope *not!* Charmain thought. “I’m fairly sure William employs a gardener,” Aunt Sempronia said.

“I hope he does,” Charmain said. The most she knew about gardens was the Bakers’ own backyard, which contained one large mulberry tree and a rosebush, plus the window boxes where her mother grew runner beans. She knew there was earth under the plants and that the earth contained worms. She shuddered.

Aunt Sempronia clattered briskly at the knocker on the brown front door and then pushed her way into the house, calling out, “Coo-ee! I’ve brought Charmain for you!”

“Thank you kindly,” said Great-Uncle William.

The front door led straight into a musty living room, where Great-Uncle William was sitting in a musty, mouse-colored armchair. There was a large leather suitcase beside him, as if he were all ready to depart. “Pleased to meet you, my dear,” he said to Charmain.

“How do you do, sir,” Charmain replied politely.

Before either of them could say anything else, Aunt Sempronia said, “Well, then, I’ll love you and leave you. Put her bags down there,” she said to her groom. The groom obediently dumped the bags down just inside the front door and went away again. Aunt Sempronia followed him in a sizzle of expensive silks, calling, “Good-bye, both of you!” as she went.

The front door banged shut, leaving Charmain and Great-Uncle William staring at each other.

Great-Uncle William was a small man and mostly bald except for some locks of fine, silvery hair streaked across his rather domed head. He sat in a stiff, bent, crumpled way that showed Charmain he was in quite a lot of pain. She was surprised to find that she felt sorry for him, but she did wish

wouldn't stare at her so steadily. It made her feel guilty. And his lower eyelids drooped from his tired blue eyes, showing the insides all red, like blood. Charmain disliked blood almost as much as she disliked earthworms.

"Well, you seem a very tall, competent-looking young lady," Great-Uncle William said. His voice was tired and gentle. "The red hair is a good sign, to my mind. Very good. Do you think you can manage here while I'm gone? The place is a little disordered, I'm afraid."

"I expect so," Charmain said. The musty room seemed quite tidy to her. "Can you tell me some of the things I ought to do?" Though I hope I shan't be here long, she thought. Once the king replies my letter...

"As to that," said Great-Uncle William, "the usual household things, of course, but magical. Naturally, most of it's magical. As I wasn't sure what grade of magic you'll have reached, I took some steps—"

Horrors! Charmain thought. He thinks I know magic!

She tried to interrupt Great-Uncle William to explain, but at that moment they were both interrupted. The front door clattered open and a procession of tall, tall elves walked quietly in. They were all most medically dressed in white, and there was no expression on their beautiful faces at all. Charmain stared at them, utterly unnerved by their beauty, their height, their neutrality, and above all by their complete silence. One of them moved her gently aside and she stood where she was put, feeling clumsy and disorderly, while the rest clustered around Great-Uncle William with their dazzling fair heads bent over him. Charmain was not sure what they did, but in next to no time Great-Uncle William was dressed in a white robe and they were lifting him out of his chair. There were what seemed to be three red apples stuck to his head. Charmain could see he was asleep.

"Er...haven't you forgotten his suitcase?" she said, as they carried him away toward the door.

"No need for it," one of the elves said, holding the door open for the others to ease Great-Uncle William out through it.

After that, they were all going away down the garden path. Charmain dashed to the open front door and called after them, "How long is he going to be away?" It suddenly seemed urgent to know how long she was going to be left in charge here.

"As long as it takes," another of the elves replied.

Then they were all gone before they reached the garden gate.

Chapter Two

IN WHICH CHARMAIN EXPLORES THE HOUSE

Charmain stared at the empty path for a while and then shut the front door with a bang. “Now what do I do?” she said to the deserted, musty room.

“You will have to tidy the kitchen, I’m afraid, my dear,” said Great-Uncle William’s tired, kind voice out of thin air. “I apologize for leaving so much laundry. Please open my suitcase for more complicated instructions.”

Charmain shot the suitcase a look. So Great-Uncle William had meant to leave it, then. “In a minute,” she said to it. “I haven’t unpacked for myself yet.” She picked up her two bags and marched with them to the only other door. It was at the back of the room and, when Charmain had tried to open it with the hand that held the food bag, then with that hand and with both bags in the other hand, and finally with both hands and with both bags on the floor, she found it led to the kitchen.

She stared for a moment. Then she dragged her two bags round the door just as it was shutting and stared some more.

“What a *mess!*” she said.

It ought to have been a comfortable, spacious kitchen. It had a big window looking out onto the mountains, where sunlight came warmly pouring through. Unfortunately, the sunlight only served to highlight the enormous stacks of plates and cups piled into the sink and on the draining board and down on the floor beside the sink. The sunlight then went on—and Charmain’s dismayed eyes were with it—to cast a golden glow over the two big canvas laundry bags leaning beside the sink. They were stuffed so full with dirty washing that Great-Uncle William had been using them as a shelf for a pile of dirty saucepans and a frying pan or so.

Charmain’s eyes traveled from there to the table in the middle of the room. Here was where Great-Uncle William appeared to keep his supply of thirty or so teapots and the same number of milk jugs—not to speak of several that had once held gravy. It was all quite neat in its way, Charmain thought, just crowded and not clean.

“I suppose you *have* been ill,” Charmain said grudgingly to the thin air.

There was no reply this time. Cautiously, she went over to the sink, where, she had a feeling something was missing. It took her a moment or so to realize that there were no taps. Probably the house was so far outside town that no water pipes had been laid. When she looked through the window, she could see a small yard outside and a pump in the middle of it.

“So I’m supposed to go and pump water and then bring it in, and *then* what?” Charmain demanded. She looked over at the dark, empty fireplace. It was summer, after all, so naturally there was no fire, nor anything to burn that she could see. “I heat the water?” she said. “In a dirty saucepan I suppose, and—Come to think of it, how do *I* wash? Can’t I ever have a bath? Doesn’t he have a bedroom, or a bathroom at all?”

She rushed to the small door beyond the fireplace and dragged it open. All Great-Uncle William’s doors seemed to need the strength of ten men to open, she thought angrily. She could almost feel the weight of magic holding them shut. She found herself looking into a small pantry. It had nothing on its shelves apart from a small crock of butter, a stale-looking loaf, and a large ba

mysteriously labeled *CIBIS CANINICUS* that seemed to be full of soapflakes. And piled into the back part of it were two more large laundry bags as full as the ones in the kitchen.

“I shall scream,” Charmain said. “How *could* Aunt Sempronia do this to me? How could Mother let her do it?”

In this moment of despair, Charmain could only think of doing what she always did in a crisis: bury herself in a book. She dragged her two bags over to the crowded table and sat herself down in one of the two chairs there. There she unbuckled the carpet bag, fetched her glasses up onto her nose, and dug eagerly among the clothes for the books she had put out for Mother to pack for her.

Her hands met nothing but softness. The only hard thing proved to be the big bar of soap among her washing things. Charmain threw it across the room into the empty hearth and dug further. “I don’t *believe* this!” she said. “She must have put them in first, right at the bottom.” She turned the bag upside down and shook everything out onto the floor. Out fell wads of beautifully folded skirts, dresses, stockings, blouses, two knitted jackets, lace petticoats, and enough other underclothes for a year. On top of those flopped her new slippers. After that, the bag was flat and empty. Charmain nevertheless felt all the way round the inside of the bag before she threw it aside, let her glasses drop to the end of their chain, and wondered whether to cry. Mrs. Baker had actually *forgotten* to pack the books.

“Well,” Charmain said, after an interval of blinking and swallowing, “I suppose I’ve never really been away from home before. Next time I go anywhere, I’ll pack the bag *myself* and fill it with books. I shall make the best of it for now.”

Making the best of it, she heaved the other bag onto the crowded table and shoved to make room for it. This shunted four milk jugs and a teapot off onto the floor. “And I *don’t care!*” Charmain said as they fell. Somewhat to her relief, the milk jugs were empty and simply bounced, and the teapot did not break either. It just lay on its side leaking tea onto the floor. “That’s probably the good side to magic,” Charmain said, glumly digging out the topmost meat pasty. She flung her skirts into a bundle between her knees, put her elbows on the table, and took a huge, comforting, savory bite from the pasty.

Something cold and quivery touched the bare part of her right leg.

Charmain froze, not daring even to chew. This kitchen is full of big magical slugs! she thought.

The cold thing touched another part of her leg. With the touch came a very small whispery whine.

Very slowly, Charmain pulled aside skirt and tablecloth and looked down. Under the table sat an extremely small and ragged white dog, gazing up at her piteously and shaking all over. When it saw Charmain looking down at it, it cocked uneven, frayed-looking white ears and flailed at the floor with its short, wispy tail. Then it whispered out a whine again.

“Who are *you?*” Charmain said. “Nobody told me about a dog.”

Great-Uncle William’s voice spoke out of the air once more. “This is Waif. Be very kind to him. He came to me as a stray and he seems to be frightened of everything.”

Charmain had never been sure about dogs. Her mother said they were dirty and they bit you and you would never have one in the house, so Charmain had always been extremely nervous of any dog she met. But this dog was so small. It seemed extremely white and clean. And it looked to be far more frightened of Charmain than Charmain was of it. It was still shaking all over.

“Oh, do stop trembling,” Charmain said. “I’m not going to hurt you.”

Waif went on trembling and looking at her piteously.

Charmain sighed. She broke off a large lump of her pasty and held it down toward Waif. “Here,” she said. “Here’s for not being a slug after all.”

Waif’s shiny black nose quivered toward the lump. He looked up at her, to make sure she really meant this, and then, very gently and politely, he took the lump into his mouth and ate it. Then he

looked up at Charmain for more. Charmain was fascinated by his politeness. She broke off another lump. And then another. In the end, they shared the pasty half and half.

“That’s all,” Charmain said, shaking crumbs off her skirt. “We’ll have to make this bagful last as there seems to be no other food in this house. Now show me what to do next, Waif.”

Waif promptly trotted over to what seemed to be the back door, where he stood wagging his wisps of a tail and whispering out a tiny whine. Charmain opened the door—which was just as difficult to open as the other two—and followed Waif out into the backyard, thinking that this meant she was supposed to pump water for the sink. But Waif trotted past the pump and over to the rather mangy-looking apple tree in the corner, where he raised a very short leg and peed against the tree.

“I see,” Charmain said. “That’s what *you’re* supposed to do, not me. And it doesn’t look as if you’re doing the tree much good, Waif.”

Waif gave her a look and went trotting to and fro around the yard, sniffing at things and raising his leg against clumps of grass. Charmain could see he felt quite safe in this yard. Come to think of it, she did she. There was a warm, secure feeling, as if Great-Uncle William had put wizardly protection around the place. She stood by the pump and stared up beyond the fence to the steeply rising mountains. There was a faint breeze blowing down from the heights, bringing a smell of snow and new flowers, which somehow reminded Charmain of the elves. She wondered if they had taken Great-Uncle William up there.

And they’d better bring him back soon, she thought. I shall go mad after more than a day here!

There was a small hut in the corner by the house. Charmain went over to investigate it, muttering “Spades, I suppose, and flowerpots and things.” But when she had hauled its stiff door open, she found a vast copper tank inside and a mangle and a place to light a fire under the tank. She stared at it all, the way you stare at a strange exhibit in a museum for a while, until she remembered that there was a similar shed in her own yard at home. It was a place just as mysterious to her as this one, since she had always been forbidden to go into it, but she did know that, once a week, a red-handed, purple-faced washerwoman came and made a lot of steam in this shed, out of which came clean clothes somehow.

Ah. A wash house, she thought. I think you have to put those laundry bags in the tank and boil them up. But how? I’m beginning to think I’ve led a much too sheltered life.

“And a good thing too,” she said aloud, thinking of the washerwoman’s red hands and mauve face.

But that doesn’t help me wash dishes, she thought. Or about a bath. Am I supposed to boil myself in that tank? And where shall I sleep, for goodness’ sake?

Leaving the door open for Waif, she went back indoors, where she marched past the sink, the bags of laundry, the crowded table, and the heap of her own things on the floor, and dragged open the door in the far wall. Beyond it was the musty living room again.

“This is hopeless!” she said. “Where are bedrooms? Where is a *bathroom*?”

Great-Uncle William’s tired voice spoke out of the air. “For bedrooms and bathroom, turn left as soon as you open the kitchen door, my dear. Please forgive any disorder you find.”

Charmain looked back through the open kitchen door to the kitchen beyond it. “Oh, yes?” she said. “Well, let’s see.” She walked carefully backward into the kitchen and shut the door in front of her. Then she hauled it open again, with what she was beginning to think of as the usual struggle, and turned briskly left into the door frame before she had time to think of it as impossible.

She found herself in a passageway with an open window at the far end. The breeze coming through the window was strongly full of the mountain smell of snow and flowers. Charmain had a startled glimpse of a sloping green meadow and faraway blue distances, while she was busy turning the handle and shoving her knee against the nearest door.

This door came open quite easily, as if it were used rather a lot. Charmain stumbled forward in

a smell that caused her instantly to forget the scents from the window. She stood with her nose sniffing delightedly. It was the delicious mildewy fragrance of old books. Hundreds of them, she saw looking round the room. Books were lined up on shelves on all four walls, stacked on the floor, and piled on the desk, old books in leather covers mostly, although some of the ones on the floor had newer looking colored jackets. This was obviously Great-Uncle William's study.

"Oooh!" Charmain said.

Ignoring the way the view from the window was of the hydrangeas in the front garden, she dove to look at the books on the desk. Big, fat, redolent books, they were, and some of them had metal clasps to keep them shut as if they were dangerous open. Charmain had the nearest one already in her hands when she noticed the stiff piece of paper spread out on the desk, covered with shaky handwriting.

"My dear Charmain," she read, and sat herself down in the padded chair in front of the desk to read the rest.

My dear Charmain,

Thank you for so kindly agreeing to look after this house in my absence. The elves tell me I should be gone for about two weeks. (*Thank goodness for that!, Charmain thought.*) Or possibly a month if there are complications. (*Oh.*) You really must forgive any disorder you find here. I have been afflicted for quite some time now. But I am sure you are a resourceful young lady and will find your feet here quite readily. In case of any difficulty, I have left spoken directions for you wherever these seemed necessary. All you need do is speak your question aloud and it should be answered. More complex matters you will find explained in the suitcase. Please be kind to Waif, who has not been with me for long enough to feel secure, and please feel free to help yourself to any books in this study, apart from those actually on this desk, which are for the most part too powerful and advanced for you. (*Pooh. As if I cared for that!, Charmain thought.*) Meanwhile I wish you a happy sojourn here and hope to be able to thank you in person before very long.

Your affectionate great-great-uncle-by-marriage,
William Norland

"I suppose he *is* by-marriage," Charmain said aloud. "He must be Aunt Sempronia's great-uncle really, and she married Uncle Ned, who is Dad's uncle, except that he's dead now. What a pity. I was starting to hope I'd inherited some of his magic." And she said politely to the air, "Thank you very much, Great-Uncle William."

There was no reply. Charmain thought, Well, there wouldn't be. That wasn't a question. And she set about exploring the books on the desk.

The fat book she had in her hand was called *The Book of Void and Nothingness*. Not surprisingly when she opened it, the pages were blank. But she could feel under her fingers each empty page sort of purring and writhing with hidden magics. She put it down rather quickly and picked up one called *Wall's Guide to Astromancy* instead. This was slightly disappointing, because it was mostly diagrams of black dotted lines with numbers of square red dots spreading out from the black lines in various patterns, but almost nothing to read. All the same, Charmain spent longer looking at it than she expected. The diagrams must have been hypnotic in some way. But eventually, with a bit of a wrench she put it down and turned to one called *Advanced Seminal Sorcery*, which was not her kind of thing at all. It was closely printed in long paragraphs that mostly seemed to begin, "If we extrapolate from o

findings in my earlier work, we find ourselves ready to approach an extension of the paratypic phenomenology...”

No, Charmain thought. I don't think we are ready.

She put that one down too and lifted up the heavy, square book on the corner of the desk. It was called *Das Zauberbuch* and it turned out to be in a foreign language. Probably what they speak in Hungary, Charmain decided. But, most interestingly, this book had been acting as a paperweight to a pile of letters underneath it, from all over the world. Charmain spent a long time going nosily through the letters and becoming more and more impressed with Great-Uncle William. Nearly all of them were from other wizards who were wanting to consult Great-Uncle William on the finer points of magic—clearly, they thought of him as the great expert—or to congratulate him on his latest magical discovery. One and all of them had the most terrible handwriting. Charmain frowned and scowled at them and held the worst one up to the light.

Dear Wizard Norland (*it said, as far as she could read it*),

Your book, *Crucial Cantrips*, has been a great help to me in my dimensional (*or is that “demented”?* Charmain wondered) work, but I would like to draw your attention to a small discovery of mine related to your section on Murdoch's Ear (“Merlin's Arm? Murphy's Law?” *I give up!* Charmain thought). When I next find myself in High Norland, perhaps we could talk?

Yours alluringly (“allergically? admirably? antiphony?” *Lord! What writing!* Charmain thought),

Wizard Howl Pendragon

“Dear, dear! He must write with a poker!” Charmain said aloud, picking up the next letter.

This one was from the King himself and the writing, though wavery and old-fashioned, was much easier to read.

Dear Wm (*Charmain read, with growing awe and surprise*),

We are now more than halfway through Our Great Task and as yet none the wiser. We rely on you. It is Our devout Hope that the Elves We sent you will succeed in restoring you to Health and that We will again shortly have the Inestimable Benefit of your Advice and Encouragement. Our Best Wishes go with you.

Yours, in Sincere Hope,

Adolphus Rex High Norland

So the King sent those elves! “Well, well,” Charmain murmured, leafing through the final stack of letters. Every single one of these was written in different sorts of someone's best handwriting. They all seemed to say the same thing in different ways: “Please, Wizard Norland, I would like to become your apprentice. Will you take me on?” Some of them went on to offer Great-Uncle William money. One of them said he could give Great-Uncle William a magical diamond ring, and another, who seemed to be a girl, said, rather pathetically, “I am not very pretty myself, but my sister is, and she says she will marry you if you agree to teach me.”

Charmain winced and only flipped hastily through the rest of the stack. They reminded her so very much of her own letter to the King. And quite as useless, she thought. It was obvious to her that

these were the kind of letters that a famous wizard would instantly write and say “No” to. She bundled them all back under *Das Zauberbuch* and looked at the other books on the desk. There was a whole row of tall, fat books at the back of the desk, all labeled *Res Magica*, which she thought she would look at later. She picked up two more books at random. One was called *Mrs. Pentstemmon’s Path of Signposts to the Truth* and it struck her as a trifle moralizing. The other, when she had thumbed open its metal clasp and spread it out at its first page, was called *The Boke of Palimpsest*. When Charmain turned over the next pages, she found that each page contained a new spell—a clear spell, too, with the title saying what it did and, below that, a list of ingredients, followed by numbered stages telling you what you had to do.

“This is more like it!” Charmain said, and settled down to read.

A long time later, while she was trying to decide which was more useful, “A Spell to Tell Friends from Foe” or “A Spell to Enlarge the Mind,” or perhaps even “A Spell for Flying,” Charmain suddenly knew that she had a crying need of a bathroom. This tended to happen to her when she had been absorbed in reading. She sprang up, squeezing her knees together, and then realized that a bathroom was a place she had still not found.

“Oh, how do I find the bathroom from here?” she cried out.

Reassuringly, Great-Uncle William’s kind, frail voice spoke out of the air at once. “Turn left in the passage, my dear, and the bathroom is the first door on the right.”

“Thank you!” Charmain gasped, and ran.

Chapter Three

IN WHICH CHARMAIN WORKS SEVERAL SPELLS AT ONCE

The bathroom was as reassuring as Great-Uncle William's kindly voice. It had a worn greenstone floor and a little window, at which fluttered a green net curtain. And it had all the fitments Charmain knew from home. And home has nothing but the best, she thought. Better still, it had taps *and* the toilet flushed. True, the bath and the taps were strange, slightly bulbous shapes, as if the person who installed them had not been quite sure what he or she was aiming at; but the taps, when Charmain experimentally turned them on, ran cold and hot water, just as they were supposed to, and there were warm towels on a rail under the mirror.

Perhaps I can put one of those laundry bags in the bath, Charmain mused. How would I squeeze it dry?

Across the corridor from the bathroom was a row of doors, stretching away into dim distance. Charmain went to the nearest one and pushed it open, expecting it to lead to the living room. But there was a small bedroom beyond it instead, obviously Great-Uncle William's, to judge by the mess. The white covers trailed off the unmade bed, almost on top of several stripey nightshirts scattered over the floor. Shirts dangled out of drawers, along with socks and what looked like long underclothes, and the open cupboard held a musty-smelling uniform of some kind. Under the window were two more sacks stuffed full of laundry.

Charmain groaned aloud. "I suppose he's been ill for quite a time," she said, trying to be charitable. "But, mother-of-pearl, why do *I* have to deal with it all?"

The bed started twitching.

Charmain jumped round to face it. The twitching was Waif, curled up comfortably in the mound of bedclothes, scratching for a flea. When he saw Charmain looking at him, he wagged his flimsy tail and groveled, lowered his frayed ears, and whispered a pleading whine at her.

"You're not supposed to be there, are you?" she said to him. "All right. I can see you're comfortable—and I'm blowed if *I'm* sleeping in that bed anyway."

She marched out of the room and opened the next door along. To her relief, there was another bedroom there almost identical with Great-Uncle William's, except that this one was tidy. The bed was clean and neatly made, the cupboard was shut, and when she looked, she found the drawers were empty. Charmain nodded approval at the room and opened the next door along the corridor. There was another neat bedroom there, and beyond that another, each one exactly the same.

I'd better throw my things around the one that's mine, or I'll never find it again, she thought.

She turned back into the corridor to find that Waif had come off the bed and was now scratching at the bathroom door with both front paws. "You won't want to go in there," Charmain told him. "None of it's any use to you."

But the door came open somehow before Charmain got to it. Beyond it was the kitchen. Waif trotted jauntily in there and Charmain groaned again. The mess had not gone away. There were the dirty crockery and the laundry bags, with the addition now of a teapot lying in a pool of tea. Charmain's clothes in a heap near the table, and a large green bar of soap in the fireplace.

"I'd forgotten all this," Charmain said.

Waif put both tiny front paws on the bottom rung of the chair and raised himself to his full small length, pleadingly.

“You’re hungry again,” Charmain diagnosed. “So am I.”

She sat in the chair and Waif sat on her left foot and they shared another pasty. Then they shared a fruit tart, two doughnuts, six chocolate biscuits, and a custard flan. After this Waif plodded rather heavily away to the inner door, which opened for him as soon as he scratched at it. Charmain gathered up her pile of clothes and followed him, meaning to put her things in the first empty bedroom.

But here things went a trifle wrong. Charmain pushed the door open with one elbow and, fairly naturally, turned right to go into the corridor with the bedrooms in it. She found herself in complete darkness. Almost at once she walked into another door, where she hit her elbow on its doorknob with a clang.

“Ouch!” she said, fumbled for the doorknob, and opened this door.

It swung inward majestically. Charmain walked into a large room lit by arched windows all around it and found herself breathing a damp, stuffy, leathery, neglected smell. The smell seemed to come from the elderly leather seats of carved chairs arranged around the big carved table that took up most of the room. Each seat had a leather mat on the table in front of it, and an old, withered sheet of blotting paper on the mat, except for the large seat at the other end that had the arms of High Norland carved into the back of it. This one had a fat little stick on the table instead of a mat. All of it, chairs, table, and mats, was covered in dust and there were cobwebs in the corners of the many windows.

Charmain stared. “Is this the dining room, or what?” she said. “How do I get to the bedroom from here?”

Great-Uncle William’s voice spoke, sounding quite faint and far off. “You have reached the Conference Room,” it said. “If you are there, you are rather lost, my dear, so listen carefully. Turn round once, clockwise. Then, still turning clockwise, open the door with your left hand only. Go through and let the door shut behind you. Then take two long steps sideways to your left. This will bring you back beside the bathroom.”

And let’s hope it *does!*, Charmain thought, doing her best to follow these directions.

All went well, except for the moment of darkness after the door had swung shut behind her, where Charmain found herself staring into a totally strange stone corridor. An old, bent man was pushing a trolley along it, loaded with steaming silver teapot, jugs, and chafing dishes and what looked like a pile of crumpets. She blinked a little, decided that she would not do any good, either to herself or the old man, by calling out to him, and took two long steps to the left instead. And then, to her relief, she was standing beside the bathroom, from where she could see Waif turning round and round on Great-Uncle William’s bed in order to get comfortable.

“Phew!” Charmain said, and went and dumped the pile of clothes on top of the chest of drawers in the next bedroom along.

After that she went along the corridor to the open window at the end, where she spent some minutes staring out at that sloping sunlit meadow and breathing the fresh, chilly air that blew in from it. A person could easily climb out of this, she thought. Or in. But she was not really seeing the meadow, or thinking of fresh air. Her real thoughts were with that enticing book of spells that she had left open on Great-Uncle William’s desk. She had never in her life been let loose among magic like this. It was hard to resist. I shall just open it at random and do the first spell I see, she thought. Just one spell.

In the study, *The Boke of Palimpsest* was, for some reason, now open at “A Spell to Find Yourself a Handsome Prince.” Charmain shook her head and closed the book. “Who needs a prince?” she said. She opened the book again, carefully at a different place. This page was headed “A Spell for Flying.” “Oh yes!” Charmain said. “That’s much more like it!” She put her glasses on and studied the list of

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