

BENITA'S PLATTER POLLUTION

By Chris Stratton

CHAPTER ONE

Joy of the Bugaloos hovered over the Sparkling Waterfall for a moment, her gauzy wings beating easily as she gazed down at the foaming torrent that leaped and danced in its exuberant plunge to the little pool below. Taking a deep breath, she folded her wings and let herself drop, landing feet first at the top of the falls and sliding down the smooth stone spillway. Just before she reached the bottom, she twisted gracefully so that she entered the water of the pool head first, making scarcely a ripple.

"Good show!" Harmony cried, lifting his sleek brown body halfway out of the water to applaud the girl's perfect dive.

Joy surfaced smiling and sidestroked easily to the edge of the pool, where she climbed out on to the mossy bank. She looked back up to the top of the falls. They were beautiful, she reflected, and perfect for this new game they had hit on. Until a few days ago, there had never been a waterfall in Tranquility Forest, but the Bugaloos had a pretty good idea how this one had been created. Their one-time enemies, the Vile Vibes, had disappeared without a trace, but this was evidently a farewell gift from the pitiable creatures who could work miracles in moving solid rock.

"Come on, Sparky!" Courage called, waving up from the foot of the Waterfall.

"Don't be afraid!" Joy shouted encouragingly to the little firefly who stood at the top of the falls in a gaudily striped bathing suit and gazed fearfully down the steep, turbulent slope.

"Hurry it up!" Harmony cried, swimming smoothly to the foot of the cataract.

"I'll come up and help you," Joy said, as the firefly continued to stand there, trembling visibly.

"No, no!" Sparky replied. "I can do it all by myself. I think." The firefly was determined to overcome his fear of heights once and for all. The only trouble was that he was too afraid to take that first step which would send him hurtling down to the bubbling pool. It had never occurred to him to wonder whether he could swim or not; he hadn't gone that far in his thinking about this latest fun-thing of the Bugaloos. He wanted to play the way his friends did, but...

The firefly took a deep breath and dipped his toe in the rushing water. It was cold; he quickly withdrew it. He took a look around him at the slowly moving stream behind the Waterfall, the lush green trees with their swaying branches, the birds chirping their appreciation of still another of the perfect days in Tranquility Forest.

"Hurry up, Sparky!" I.Q. called up with a chuckle. The blonde Bugaloo was on his back in the pool below, using his wings to propel himself in churning circles at the foot of the falls. "It can't hurt you!"

Suddenly, to the astonishment of the Bugaloos, Sparky leaped straight up in the air and landed halfway down the spillway. Tumbling head over heels, he plunged into the pool with a tremendous splash, sending a geyser of spray all the way to the bank and over Joy. She laughed, then dove back in a hurry to his aid if he needed it.

I.Q. had him by the arm as the firefly spluttered back to the surface. "There now, that wasn't too bad, was it?" he laughed.

"G-g-g-blub blub," Sparky squeaked, thrashing frantically with his free arm.

All the other Bugaloos were around him now, and Courage lifted him partly clear of the water in his muscular arms. "Come on, lad, don't try to talk underwater. Take a deep breath now..."

But Sparky continued to struggle in what seemed to be panic. "A go-go-GHOST!" He gasped the word out in a breathless shriek, pointing upward to the top of the Waterfall and trying desperately to fight free of the hands that were preventing him from fleeing.

"Oh, come on, Sparky," Harmony pooh-poohed. "A ghost? In the middle of the day? What next?"

"But I saw it, I saw it!" the firefly sputtered. "Right up there by a tree at the edge of the Waterfall! Oh, let's get away from here!"

The Bugaloos yielded to his struggles enough to help him toward the bank. I.Q. swam ahead and pulled him ashore. Sparky lay on the moss for a moment, then turned round, frightened eyes upward again. "He's up there," he quavered. "An honest-to-goodness, real live ghost."

"A ghost can't be real live," I.Q. pointed out.

"That's right," Harmony agreed. "If it's a ghost, it's got to be dead, and that means..."

"Stop picking on him," Joy said, putting a comforting arm around the trembling firefly.

"I don't know whether it was alive or dead or in between," Sparky said fervently, "but I know I saw it all right. Right up...YI-I-I-I-I!"

Even the Bugaloos jumped at his sudden, terrified scream. They looked upward to where the firefly was pointing and caught their breath; it looked as though Sparky was, for once, a hundred percent right. Someone, something, was up there all right, and it didn't look as though it had any business anywhere outside of a haunted house.

Silhouetted against the afternoon sun, the figure stood at the top of the Waterfall, a shapeless creature dressed in a flowing white robe that fluttered and twitched in the breeze as though it had a life of its own. And most horrible of all, it seemed to have no face; under the hood that covered what should have been a head was nothing but black emptiness.

"Oh my!" Joy breathed softly, gripping Sparky's shoulder with unconscious force.

"A ruddy spook all right," Courage whispered.

"We've seen a lot of things in Tranquility Forest, but never a bloomin' coast-to-coast," Harmony said in his rhyming cockney slang.

"Well, maybe it is a ghost," I.Q. declared grimly, "but that's no reason to be afraid. Come on; I've never seen one up close before." He got to his feet, quickly followed by Courage.

"You others stay here with Sparky," Courage said with a laugh that seemed a little forced. "We'll bring him down and introduce you."

The two Bugaloos launched themselves into the air and sped toward the top of the Waterfall, but as they approached, the apparition - or whatever it was - wavered, seemed to shrink in size and simply drifted out of sight. Blinded by the sun, the boys couldn't see clearly what was happening; all they knew was that when they reached the spot there was nothing there.

Courage looked at I.Q. questioningly. "Were we seeing things?"

"No. There was something here, all right."

"But where could he...it...have gone?"

They peered into the deep shadows under the trees that grew thickly along the bank, but there was no movement, no sign that anything or anyone unusual had ever been in this idyllic place. And then a soft whisper of sound came to them, as if borne from a great distance on the gentle breeze. It might have been a sigh or a low chuckle - but whatever it was, it brought with it a sudden chill that made the two Bugaloos shiver for no reason whatsoever.

Benita Bizarre lolled in the back of her Baroque Buggy, a benign smile on her face. The Witch of Rock City gazed contentedly through rhinestone framed dark glasses at her three bumbling flunkies as they spread an enormous cloth on the ground. Ordinarily, she would have been barking orders and caustic criticism at them, but not today. Today was just too pleasant for Benita to be her usual rotten self.

Funky, her combination butler, chauffeur, control room engineer and punching bag, trotted over to the garish open limousine with a sleazy, satisfied smile on his rat-face. "You vass right as always, Mein Gorgeous Leader," he gloated. "It's ein vunderbar day for der pickernicker!"

"Picnic, stupid," the Witch growled. It wasn't that pleasant a day.

"Yah, dot, too." The rat looked around the quiet little clearing beside a meandering brook with an almost proprietary air, paws clasped behind his back, rocking gently on his heels. "Sooch ein glorious place. Der nature. Der trees und der birds, das little margarine flies..."

"That's butterflies, you dum dum."

"Yah, yah."

"If yer gonna appreciate nature, you have to know what yer appreciating. Got that?"

"Uff course, Mein Leader."

Benita waved a long, skinny hand authoritatively. "I mean, this is our day for getting away from it all, for communing with our furred and feathered friends and all that jazz. Today it's just me, I mean us, and the great outdoors. All of us together, equals. I don't even want to be thought of as Benita Bizarre, your beautiful, golden-throated leader. You dig me?"

Funky nodded his enthusiastic approval. "All for vun, und vun for all. All der same. Yah!"

Benita leaned back against the plush velvet cushions, plucked a fat purple grape from the bunch on a dish beside her and popped it into her mouth. She chewed it thoroughly and with great gusto, her long, pointed nose bobbing and shaking with the vigorous movements of her mouth. Funky watched the performance with fascination, wishing his own nose was half that talented.

The Witch swallowed noisily, then fixed the rat with an abrupt, hard stare. "So what are ya hanging around here for? Go start unloading the food and stuff. Hop to it!"

Funky hopped to it while Benita sat back and contemplated the unspoiled beauty of the spot they had chosen. In the distance she could hear just barely the roar of a waterfall. She sighed. Tranquility Forest had everything all right; what a heckuva site this would be for a record factory.

"Funky," she had said earlier that day, "the only way to get ahead in the rock music game is to do it yourself. You dig me?"

"Yah," the rat had lied. He knew she would explain herself, and in great detail; she always did.

"Like some of the big stars have their own publishing companies, recording studios? Well, I wanna go 'em one better. You know how?"

"Uh-h-h..."

"Look at it this way," the Witch had continued, not caring what the rat answered. "I'm gorgeous." She batted her long eyelashes (\$2.95 a pair). "I have a sensational figure." She posed in her long purple dress that clung much too snugly to her bony hips. "My voice is irresistible." She ran a few grating trills, and Funky managed (through long practice) not to grimace. "And I produce my own records," Benita had concluded. "So why ain't I a big-time rock star?"

Funky was searching for an answer, positive that whatever he said would earn him a smack on the head - if he was lucky.

But the Witch hadn't waited for a reply. "You know why? Leverage, that's why."

The rat looked bewildered, but slightly hopeful. "I'll run out und get you ein crowbar..."

Benita smacked him in the chops with her handbag. "Not that kind of leverage, you bubble brain. I'm talking about power. What I've got to do is corner the market. Flood the music stores and jukeboxes of the world with Benita Bizarre hit records. Sell 'em at cut rates if I have to, but only at the beginning, until everybody's buying and playing my groovy platters. Then the deejays will have to spin my discs over the air and I'll be Famous. On top!"

"Dot's...er-r...ein good idea," Funky said dubiously, carefully staying out of the Witch's range.

"Yeah," Benita had agreed. "All I have to do is find the right place."

"For vot?"

"For my factory, naturally," the Witch replied irritably.

"Factory?"

"To manufacture my own records. What else? I'll turn 'em out by the millions. Billions! And maybe I'll build an airstrip, too, as we can freight 'em out as fast as they come off the production line. Sure! That's it! And a..." Benita broke off her musing, and her face fell. "But I've gotta find a place to build my factory, and the only location around here is Tranquility Forest."

Funky nodded his understanding. "Der Bugaloos would never let you do dot."

"Yeah," the Witch muttered, eyes narrowing. "They've got their nerve, too, acting like they own that crummy patch of woods."

"Vy don't ve choost take it away from dem?" Funky suggested.

"You think I haven't tried? The trouble with those buggy kids is they're too dumb to believe in witchcraft. Otherwise, I'd have had 'em outa there a long time ago."

"Yah," Funky agreed sadly. "Dey're standink in der path uff progress."

"One of these days," Benita breathed grimly. "One of these days those brats are gonna be sorry..."

"Mein Leader?"

Benita snapped out of her reverie. "What is it?" she demanded.

"Der pickernicker is ready." The rat stood at attention in his slightly baggy uniform and did his best to click his heels.

The Witch looked over at the picnic cloth spread under a tall fig tree. Heaping baskets of food and coolers filled with icy beverages had been placed on it, with Benita's own solid silver-plated service carefully arranged in the center. Beside the cloth stood Woofer and Tweeter, the other two flunkies, with anxious expressions on their round and rather idiotic faces.

"Okay," the Witch said, "now help me out here. We're gonna have fun and enjoy ourselves today. That's an order."

Funky bowed and opened the door. Benita stepped out regally - and tripped over her feather boa. Only the rat's clumsy haste saved her from a bad fall, and of course he received a withering glare for his trouble.

"Watch it," Benita growled. She twitched her shoulders, smoothed her dress and stalked to the picnic cloth, her five-inch heels gouging deep holes in the velvety turf. "New work," she muttered to Tweeter and the taller of the flunkies bobbed his head and grinned. "Now give me a hand while I sit down."

It wasn't easy but with the help of Woofer and Tweeter, the Witch managed to overcome the restrictions of her tight dress and seat herself on the cloth. She snapped her fingers, and Funky hurried over to pour some sparkling pink liquid into a jeweled goblet. Tweeter uncovered a platter of deviled eggs - the Witch's favorite food, of course - while Woofer began to carve the roast turkey buzzard. Benita shoved half a dozen eggs at once into her mammoth cave of a mouth and washed them down with a huge swallow from the goblet. She was reaching for another mouthful of eggs when a movement at the edge of the little clearing caught her eye. She turned slightly to get a better look - and squashed the eggs in her hand. "What the hey," she gulped.

"What's wrong, Boss?" Tweeter asked anxiously.

"Yeah, what's wrong?" Woofer echoed.

"Over...over there," the Witch replied, pointing with a trembling finger.

The two flunkies jumped when they saw what she indicated, for there, plain as the nose on Benita's face, stood a ghost - a white-clad figure with no face at all.

Woofer ducked and wrapped his stubby arms around his head. Tweeter jumped up and down, looking around frantically for some kind of hiding place. Funky froze, shaking violently and breaking out in a panicky sweat. Benita struggled futilely to rise, but she couldn't do it without help. And the ghost was gliding silently across the turf toward them.

Chapter Two

"May I assist you, Madame?"

The ghost spoke in a rumbling voice that seemed to come from the very bowels of the earth itself. He stretched out an arm, or at least that portion of his snowy robe that should have contained an arm. He was so close to Benita Bizarre that she fancied she could feel the dank chill of the grave emanating from him. She shrank back.

"Get away from me, you spook," she quavered. "Don't you know we're having a picnic?"

"I beg your pardon?" The ghost seemed puzzled, and this time its voice cracked like that of an old man. "What was that you called me?"

"A spook! A ghost, apparition, wraith. Whatever you want to call yourself."

"But I...oh." The figure raised its arms - and now a pair of sun-browned hands were clearly visible - to push back the hood part way.

Benita blinked. Her eyesight wasn't very good under the best of circumstances, and the sun was directly behind the ghost. But it wasn't a ghost after all, because now, with the hood back, she could see a wizened face, seamed and darkened to a walnut shade as though by a lifetime of exposure to the sun.

"Hey!" the Witch cried. "You're not a ghost!"

The stranger chuckled indulgently. "No, I am not yet released from my earthly body, though my days are surely numbered."

"Oh yeah?" Benita remarked indifferently. She stretched an arm up toward him.

"Gimme a hand."

With the stranger's help, the Witch finally regained her feet. She glared down at him, hands on her bony hips. "So what are you doing here, you phony spook?"

"I meant no harm. I was merely passing through my - that is, this lovely Forest - and I happened to come upon you."

"What's that funny get-up you're wearing?" Benita demanded suspiciously.

"This? This is merely the sort of clothing I have always worn."

"Oh yeah? Where do you come from anyway?"

"From many places. I have been everywhere and seen everything. They call me the Ancient Wanderer, but now my days are numbered and..."

"Yeah, yeah; you said that already."

"I was about to add that I have come to seek the one to whom I would like to pass on my only possession."

"Uh-huh. Who ya looking for?"

"A great and powerful witch called Benita Bizarre. Are you perhaps acquainted with her?"

Benita hesitated. Tweeter had recovered from his panic, and now he stepped up to the Witch. "Hey, that's you..."

"Shut up, big mouth," Benita snarled, raking his shin with her sharp heel. She looked thoughtfully at the Ancient Wanderer. "I may know this Benita Bizarre. What is it you want with her?"

It was the stranger's turn to be cagey. "Perhaps I should reveal that only to her. If you know her..."

"Yeah, well she doesn't see peddlers, you see..."

"Ah, but I am no hawker of wares. I come bearing a most precious gift. Something which I have possessed for lo, these many years, and for which I shall soon have no further use."

"What's that?"

"I should tell only her."

"Uh-h...well, Benita's out of town. Making a goodwill tour, something like that. No telling when she'll be back."

"You are close friends then?"

"Maybe. You can tell me what you want with her, anyway."

The Ancient Wanderer sighed. "And I have come so far; my time is so short."

"Look, pal, you can tell me. Honest. If you're really gonna kick off that soon, you wouldn't want to go without passing on your...possession, would you?" The Witch bent eagerly toward the stranger; if anybody was giving anything away, she was determined to get in on it, but not if there were strings of any kind attached.

"I suppose..." the Wanderer began hesitantly.

"Go on, go on."

"All right. It is this." He reached inside his robe and pulled out a rolled sheet of parchment tied with a faded red ribbon.

"So?" Benita said.

The Wanderer fumbled with the ribbon, finally got it undone and, with shaky fingers, unrolled the parchment. "This is the deed of ownership to...to Tranquility Forest."

"The what?!" Benita exclaimed.

"The deed to Tranquility Forest. In which we now stand."

"Lemma see that," the Witch demanded. She tried to snatch it away, but the stranger pulled it quickly out of her reach.

"A moment, please. This is for Benita Bizarre alone."

"You mean you're giving it to her? The deed to Tranquility Forest?" She could hardly contain her excitement.

The Wanderer nodded. "I have heard that she is a very great and powerful Witch. Is that so?"

"Yeah, yeah," Benita replied distractedly.

"And she can perform wonders? Miracles?"

Benita shrugged. "Routine."

"Perhaps...make me younger? Prolong my miserable life?"

"Well, I guess so." She glanced quickly at Funky, who seemed on the verge of saying something. He kept his mouth shut. "Is that all you want from Benita?" she asked the Ancient Wanderer.

"There would be other...considerations. Nothing beyond the means of Benita Bizarre, I'm quite certain."

"Like what?"

"Oh-h...gold. A bit of it. And I don't care if it comes from her own coffers or if she conjures it up, as long as it can be spent. After all, if she makes me younger, I shall have need of a little spare cash, don't you see?"

"That doesn't sound like a gift to me," the Witch said.

"A small price for all this." The Ancient Wanderer swept his arm around in a wide, all-encompassing gesture. "Tranquility Forest. An extremely valuable piece of real estate for a Witch with great powers and ambition. Don't you agree?"

"I guess so."

"But if she's away," the stranger said sadly, "it may be too late after all. Perhaps I should simply give this deed to those Bugaloo children I saw playing at their waterfall a few minutes ago."

"No, no!" Benita shrieked. "You can't do that. Tell you what I'll do. Maybe we can make a deal."

"A deal? You and I? But only Benita Bizarre can perform the miracle which can restore my youth."

"Ah-h, don't believe everything you hear, pal. She's just a second-rater with a good press agent. I'm the really important Witch in these parts."

"You?" The stranger seemed astonished. "Who are you, then?"

"I'm uh-h..." She sorted rapidly through her limited imagination in a frantic effort to come up with the right answer. "I'm...Betty Bugaloo!" she exploded, coming up with the first name to pop into her head.

"You're a Bugaloo?"

"Not a Bugaloo. The Bugaloo. You saw those brats...I mean darling children just now? Well, they're mine; I'm their mother. That's right, their mother." It made her sick to her stomach to say the words, but she was committed now and she had to go on.

"How remarkable," the Ancient Wanderer said.

"You bet your sweet bippy I am," Benita went on, misunderstanding the stranger only slightly. "Take those wings the kids have, for instance. How do you think they got 'em? Me. It's the least a mother can do, to make her dear, sweet children happy and give 'em the ability to fly away from any kind of danger. Right?"

"Certainly." The Ancient Wanderer was visibly impressed.

"So, if I can do that, making you younger would be a snap for me. When I'm done with you, you'll look just like Rock Hudson."

"I had something along the lines of Steve McQueen in mind..."

"Okay, suit yourself. Now, the deed?" She reached for the parchment.

"Just a moment. The other part of the deal? The gold?"

"Uh-h...how much did you have in mind?"

"Psst!" Funky hissed at Benita, tugging at her skirt. She turned to him.

"What's the problem, needle nose?" she snapped.

"Mein Leader," the rat whispered anxiously. "You know ve don't haff any gold. Not vun teeny little bit!"

"Don't you think I know that? But he doesn't. You let me handle this. Just stand by with your Zapper if he tries to pull any funny stuff."

"Yah. If dere's goink to be any monkey business, ve'll do der monkeyink."

The Witch turned back to the Ancient Wanderer. "Excuse me, I just had to confer with my...uh-h...associate here."

"Is he perhaps an example of your remarkable powers?" the stranger asked dubiously.

"Oh sure. Sure. He used to be a handsome prince, but he had so many beautiful girls chasing after him he begged me to change him into a rat. Pretty good job, huh?"

"There's no accounting for tastes."

"Well, now. Back to business." Benita rubbed her hands together briskly. "You were gonna tell me how much gold you wanted."

"This much?" The Ancient Wanderer indicated with his hands a pile that would reach to his shoulders. "That should do me nicely."

Benita scowled and shook her head. "That's a lotta loot, pal. How about this much?" She bent over to hold her hand a foot or so off the ground. "Every piece bright and shiny."

"Perhaps I should wait for Benita Bizarre's return after all."

"Listen, buddy, Benita Bizarre wouldn't give you a dime for that scrap of paper."

"But if you're such a powerful witch, what difference does it make how much gold I require?"

"Well, look, it's not easy to conjure up a big pile of the stuff, you dig? I mean, it takes special equipment which I don't have with me right now."

The Ancient Wanderer shook his head slowly. "I'm afraid I must insist. This deed is my only worldly possession, and to part with it without adequate compensation...no, I cannot."

Benita looked daggers at the old man and gritted her teeth. Then she let go with one of her most brilliantly phony smiles, and shrugged. "What the heck," she said. "Look, I trust you; you trust me. Right?" She didn't wait for his answer but plunged on, speaking rapidly. "Right here and now I'll turn you into a young man. Okay? Then you give me the deed..."

"But the gold!"

"Don't interrupt; I'm getting to that part." She dug into her handbag and after rummaging around for no more than two or three minutes, came up with a massive key, handsomely wrought and gleaming impressively in the sun. "See this? It's the key to my vault. All the gold and precious jewels you could ever want, and then some. Since you trust me, I'm gonna trust you; I'm gonna let you have this, and you can go in there and take away all you can carry. Is that a deal, or is that a deal?"

The Ancient Wanderer's eyes glittered with naked greed as he eyed the key; it certainly must fit the lock of a door that guarded something of fantastic value!

"Boss!" Funky hissed. "Dot's der key to der Executive Vashroom at radio station KOOK dot I schviped from Peter Platter!"

"Shut up, dizzy dome!" the Witch whispered fiercely. "I'll handle this."

"You'll make me young again, then?"

"Guarantee it."

Funky turned away and hunched his shoulders as though to ward off a blow, or even greater disaster. How was Benita going to pull this off? She hadn't been successful in casting a genuine spell in centuries.

"All right," the old man said, squaring his shoulders under his robe. "Make me a young man, give me the key, and the deed is yours."

"Swell. Stand right there a minute while I get one little piece of equipment." Giggling to herself with glee, the Witch scurried over to the Baroque Buggy and opened the glove compartment. She had always known that that little book would come in handy one of these days. Taking out the small pamphlet, she turned her back so the Ancient Wanderer couldn't see what she was doing.

Hypnotism for the Beginning Witch was the title on the cover. She thumbed through it quickly, noting and recalling the pertinent parts. This was something she knew she could do with a fair chance of success; all she needed was a superstitious old geezer who believed in her powers. When she was satisfied, she closed the pamphlet and slipped it back into the glove compartment.

"I'm ready, sweetie," she called, shaking herself with delighted anticipation. "When I get through with you, you're gonna be so delicious I may not want to let you go."

The Ancient Wanderer seemed to pale under his hood at the suggestion, but he stood his ground. Benita removed one of the more glittering of her many bracelets as she approached and held it up in front of his face.

"Okay, now, just watch the pretty bauble. See how it reflects the sun? Watch it closely. Don't take your eyes off it, not for one little instant. Concentrate, concentrate,

concentrate. Think of all that gold you're gonna have. It gleams and sparkles just like this, only so much more of it. Heaps and heaps of it, more than you've ever dreamed of. Dream, dream, dream. To dream you have to sleep. So sleep, sleep, sleep. Your eyes are growing heavy, heavy, heavy. You are now - asleep!"

With a little cackle of triumph, the Witch drew the bracelet away and replaced it on her wrist. The Ancient Wanderer stood perfectly still, his old eyes staring straight ahead without expression. Benita peered at him closely, then jumped up and down and almost hugged Funky before she realized who, what, he was.

"I did it, I did it!" she crowed. "I really honest-to-goodness hypnotized somebody. He's in my power!"

"Yah, but vot happens ven he wakes up? He'll shtill be ein dodderink old man."

"Post-hypnotic suggestion, Funky baby. Every time he goes near a mirror or any kind of reflecting surface, he'll think he's seeing the face of a young man. For a while, anyway," she added. "It doesn't last forever. But we don't care about that; by the time he snaps out of it, Tranquility Forest will be mine. Boy oh boy, are those Bugaloo brats ever gonna get the surprise of their little lives!"

Chapter Three

All the picnic gear was loaded back in the Baroque Buggy, and Benita was enthroned in the rear seat, munching on a piece of devil's food cake and sipping Cafe Diablo. The Ancient Wanderer had just reached the edge of the clearing, moving with a springy step. He turned to wave goodbye to the Witch who had apparently wrought a miracle, then disappeared into the Forest on his way to Rock City. Benita waited until she was certain he was out of earshot, then howled with laughter.

Funky, Woofer and Tweeter joined in dutifully, and finally the rat turned from the driver's seat to look at the Witch. "Now ve go und toss dose Bugaloos out uff der Forest, yah Mein Gorgeous Genius?" He started the car's engine.

"Not so fast," Benita snapped. "I want to do this all legal and proper. Got me?"

"Yah," Funky lied.

"First we slip back home and get that slippery judge I bought to come over and sign the deed."

"Vot for ve haff to do dot?"

"He's a witness that everything is on the up-and-up."

"But he didn't vitniss anythink."

"Of course he didn't, dummy; all he does is say he did. Whaddy think I bought him for, anyway? Then he draws up the eviction and those Bugaloo brats are out on their ear. Beautiful!"

"Yah, beautiful! Can I deliver der notice meinself?"

"No siree, Funky baby; that's one pleasure Benita is gonna keep for her own sweet little self."

"Oh, that's a super sound!" Joy cried, clapping her hands together.

Sparky beamed with pride and swiveled back and forth on the seat in front of Harmony's electric organ.

"Take it easy," Harmony cautioned. "You'll blow some circuits with chords like that."

"Oh, I'll be real careful," Sparky assured him. The firefly peered closely at the keys, a frown of concentration on his round features. His mop of curly orange hair seemed to crackle with his intensity as he poised his stubby hands above the keyboard. Then, dramatically, he brought them down to produce an ear-piercing sound that might have come from a flutist badly surprised in mid-tootle.

"Ow, ow, ow!" I.Q. yelled in mock pain, holding his hands over his ears and twitching his antennae.

"That's a ruddy bobby's blinker," Harmony commented.

Courage gave his bass drum a couple of heavy, doleful thumps. "Did you mean stinker?" he asked Harmony; sometimes the cockney in the Bugaloo's rhyming slang was a little hard to decipher.

"What I had in mind was clinker, but you said it better."

"Now you stop picking on poor Sparky," Joy chided them. She put a reassuring hand on the firefly's shoulder.

"No one ever learned to play the organ in a day."

Sparky flushed and his tail light blinked apologetically. "I guess I'm a little rusty," he admitted. "But I'll get the hang of it again - if Harmony lets me keep practicing."

Harmony rolled his eyes in exaggerated dismay. "As long as you warn me, I suppose it'll be okay. Just give me a chance to get about a hundred miles away."

Sparky looked crestfallen. "I was kinda hoping you were gonna help me out a little. You know, before I stopped playing, I was a pretty groovy organist."

"Is that right?" Courage asked skeptically.

"Oh sure. A long, long time ago I was the star of a group called the Freaky Flames. You must have heard of us?" He looked hopefully at each of the Bugaloos but received no response that could be construed as encouraging.

"Well," Joy pointed out, "there are an awful lot of groups. I suppose we simply never heard yours." She knew she should discourage the firefly's habit of, well, exaggerating his past accomplishments, but it didn't really do any harm. As long as no one actually believed him.

"Yeah, that's true all right," Sparky agreed a little sadly. Then he brightened. "Oh well, maybe if I get my touch back" - he wiggled his little fingers vigorously - "I can fill in with you some time. Did I ever tell you about the time the organist at Radio City Music Hall was taken sick and they asked if there was a doctor in the house? An organist, I mean. Well, I happened to be there at the time and..."

"Message coming in on the Grapevine," sang out the Bluebell Flower. The Bugaloos and Sparky all turned to look at the talking plant that bloomed near the bandstand.

"What is it?" I.Q. asked indifferently.

"Someone coming..." the Bluebell Flower began.

"Something noisy," a Grape spoke up from the cluster growing beside the Flower.

"Something nasty," piped another.

"Something sneaky," a third added.

"Why don't you fellas shut up and let me deliver the message," the Bluebell Flower said crossly.

"Out with it, then," Courage prompted.

"It's a car," the Flower said slowly, batting its petals and glancing coyly at the waiting Bugaloos.

"Some message," Harmony groaned.

"Don't be impatient," the plant said. "And in the car is someone who...well, rhymes with it..."

"Benita Bizarre!" all the Bugaloos chorused at once.

"What does that old barracuda-nose want here?" Courage wondered.

"Maybe she's coming to take a singing lesson," I.Q. suggested with a smile.

"She needs more than lessons," Harmony said. "First of all she has to get rid of that screeching James Joyce."

"Even a new voice wouldn't help her much," Joy giggled.

"Right," Harmony agreed. "She ain't even got rhythm."

"She's here, she's here!" several Grapes cried out at once.

The announcement was unnecessary, since the roar of the Baroque Buggy's engine was clearly audible close by. A moment later the unlikely limousine nosed its way into the Bugaloos' clearing and came to a sliding stop that ripped up half a dozen yards of turf.

"Hey, you old bat!" Courage yelled, bounding toward the car. "Watch what you're doing there!"

"Right!" Harmony backed him up. "You can't mess up our Forest that way!"

"Oh yeah?" Benita was standing in the back seat, wearing one of her best - most unpleasant, that is - smiles. Before Funky could scramble out to help her down, the Witch vaulted over the side and landed lightly - for her - on the ground. "You insects better watch the way you talk or I'll turn you into bats."

"And you're the one who can do it," Harmony remarked sardonically.

Benita snorted and narrowed her eyes. "What was that supposed to mean, Buggie?"

"It's about the only kind of magic you know."

"Hmp!" She glared at him for a moment, then shrugged. "Well, I didn't come out here to argue with you brats. So, if you behave yourself, I'll let you leave peaceably instead of casting a spell over you."

"Leave!?" Harmony exploded.

"What kind of nonsense are you talking now?" Courage demanded with a little laugh.

I.Q. stepped forward, frowning slightly. He had noticed the rolled parchment in the Witch's hand and another piece of paper with official-looking seals and ribbons attached to it. Joy saw it, too, and a sudden feeling of apprehension made her heart sink. Just a little, but it was definitely a downward trend.

Benita looked coldly at each of the Bugaloos, a tiny smirk of triumph of her over-rouged lips. She brandished the rolled up parchment like a club. "Oh boy, oh boy, are you bugs gonna get it now."

"Has she gone all the way round the bend?" Courage said.

"She's always had a pretty good head start," Harmony remarked, but he was beginning to have his doubts, too.

"What's that piece of parchment you're waving around?" I.Q. asked mildly. He reached out casually for it, and the Witch jerked it away so violently she nearly threw herself over backward.

"I'll just hang onto this, sonny," she snapped. "This parchment says I'm the new owner of Tranquility Forest, that's what. And this..." She held up the official-looking paper. "This says you've got till sunup to leave."

"Leave?" I.Q. asked; even he seemed bewildered.

"Don't try to snow us, you second-rate sorceress," Courage challenged. "Nobody can own Tranquility Forest."

"That's what you think, Buster. You brats have been acting like these woods are your exclusive property, haven't you?"

"That's true," Joy put in, stepping toward the Witch. "But we're only acting as caretakers, keeping Tranquility Forest so that everyone can enjoy it."

"Except me," Benita said, and sniffed resentfully.

"Anyone who doesn't try to destroy the Forest has always been welcome here," Joy said. "Even you." She looked pointedly at the skidmarks gouged out of the turf. "But people who destroy..."

"Destroy!" the Witch shouted, her moment of self-pity forgotten. "I'll show you destroy! I'm a builder, boobie, and don't you forget it." She turned and swept her scrawny arm in a wide arc. "I'm gonna really make something out of this patch of overgrown bushes."

"What are you talking about?" I.Q. demanded, losing his temper a little bit.

"I mean this is one first-class piece of real estate, buggie baby." Benita grinned and chucked him under the chin before he could duck out of the way. "And now that it's all mine I'm gonna put it to a good use at last."

"You really have gone round, haven't you?" Harmony said, twirling a finger in the vicinity of his ear.

Benita started to make a sharp retort but thought better of it. Instead, she told them precisely what she intended to do in Tranquility Forest, spelling her plans out in every detail and enjoying the dismay on the faces of her hated enemies.

"...and back there at that new waterfall is a great place for the factory itself, don't you think, sweeties?" she simpered.

"Oh, not the Sparkling Waterfall!" Joy cried.

"And then there's the airstrip. I think it'll have to run right through here. Prevailing winds and all that; my engineers are working on it right now." Mentally, Benita crossed her fingers. If Woofer and Tweeter were actually allowed to work on plans for an airstrip, they would, at best, have it running straight up and down a mountain. Or something equally impossible. "And naturally I'll have to build a super highway out here from Rock City," the Witch went on. "I can't be expected to travel on that crummy ant-run you call a road."

"Oh, this is monstrous!" Joy sobbed.

"A factory! Turning out millions of Benita Bizarre pressings! Horrible!" Harmony shook his head and looked slightly ill.

"We'll never let you get away with a thing like that!" Courage promised.

"You can't be serious," I.Q. said in what he hoped was a restrained voice. Once more he reached out for the parchment. "May I see that, please?"

Benita glared at him, then spoke out of the side of her mouth to Funky. "Keep 'em covered with the Zapper. One false move and let 'em have it!"

"Yah, yah, mein Luffly Landlord." The rat aimed the electronic gun at the Bugaloos, ready to stun them with sound waves if they made a wrong move. Stun them, make them unconscious, or worse, if he turned the dial just a little too far - what a delicious idea!

The Witch reluctantly handed the parchment to I.Q., who unrolled it and read it over carefully. Then again. With a sigh of resignation, he handed it around to the other Bugaloos.

"It appears to be in order, all right," he said.

"How did she get hold of this?" Courage wanted to know.

"That's for me to know and none of your business," Benita snapped. "Give it back."

"Just a minute," Harmony said, pointing to a place on the document. "This is witnessed by Judge Eely, and everyone knows what a slimy crook he is."

I.Q. shook his head. "Still, he's a judge, and this is all quite legal. Unfortunately."

"All right, brats, can the chatter," Benita barked. "Now you know I own Tranquility Forest. So this paper here says you have to be outa here by dawn tomorrow. You want to look at this one?" She thrust the beribboned document at them. "I'm giving you kids a break; I could have hustled you out of here right this minute."

"Yah," Funky crowned. "You're all heart, Boss."

"At dawn?" Joy repeated. "But how can we?" She looked around in desperation. "Everything we have...a lifetime...we can't leave it."

"Take anything you like," the Witch said magnanimously. "I'm a reasonable girl."

"But we...," Joy began, then realized the futility of further argument.

"May I see that...eviction notice?" I.Q. asked, handing back the deed.

"Be my guest," the Witch said. "It's a carbon. Your copy. The original is locked up in my safe, naturally. Take a good gander at that last paragraph, Bugaloo baby; see where it says if you so much as set foot in Tranquility Forest after sunrise tomorrow I can have you zapped?"

I.Q. nodded slowly.

"Well, don't think I don't mean it. You're not gonna hand around and interfere with progress."

"But surely you don't mean we have to leave the Forest entirely," Joy protested unbelievably. "Where shall we go? We've never lived anywhere else!"

"That's your problem, kiddo. I don't have time to set up a relocation center."

"Completely away from Tranquility Forest," Joy breathed. She swallowed hard and turned a tear-blinded face to the others. "What in the world will happen to us?"

But no one had an answer for the stricken girl. In the silence that followed, Benita returned to her limousine and departed with a roar and a crashing of bushes, apparently intent on getting a head start on her version of progress.

Chapter Four

Darkness had fallen, the moon had risen and was on the wane again before Sparky stirred from his seat at the electric organ. He had sat there, motionless and stunned, as Benita Bizarre made her gloating announcement of ownership of Tranquility Forest. He had listened with unbelieving ears when the Witch gave the Bugaloos until dawn to leave Tranquility Forest - forever!

Leave the Forest! The idea filled his mind with an enormous sadness, a weight so immense that the little firefly was unable to bear it, or to think of anything else but the plight of his friends. And himself. But he didn't count, not now. Actually, he recalled dimly, nothing had been said about him. He wasn't required to leave Tranquility Forest...

He broke out of his dismal, semi-trance with a start. Maybe, but no. If he had had the strength, Sparky would have slapped himself for thinking such things. Besides, how could he stay here when his dearest friends were exiled to some unknown place far away? The gloom settled over him once more, and he wiped away tears of sadness (and just a little self-pity). With a heavy sigh, he eased himself down from the organ stool and plodded slowly to the edge of the bandstand.

The clearing was silent. The Bugaloos had long since retired for the night, though whether they slept or not Sparky couldn't say. They had talked briefly after Benita's departure, but there was nothing much, after all, that they could say. The Witch had won. It was all legal. And as much as they despised Benita Bizarre, the Bugaloos would never dream of resisting the law of the land. So, they had sadly loaded their few belongings into the Bugaloo Buggy and now they waited, sleeping or waking, for the dawn.

Sparky heaved a great sob, doing his best to stifle it in order not to disturb his friends. He hopped heavily down from the bandstand to the turf and walked slowly across the clearing, head down. He stumbled across the deep scars left by the skidding Baroque Buggy, nearly fell, and recovered his balance without seeming to notice. Now the tears were streaming down his cheeks unheeded. A single night bird called from the treetops, an unbearably forlorn sound that had once been friendly and cheerful. He would never again hear that call. Never again...

He was at the fringe of the clearing, walking directly into a clump of bushes. But he didn't stop or turn aside; he merely brushed the branches aside and continued his aimless stroll, the sadness and grief rolling back over him with a renewed force like the tentacles of a sea monster, dragging him inexorably down into the depths of despair.

"But we can't leave without Sparky!" Joy objected. The sun was low on the horizon, its early rays filtering through the Forest with chilly fingers. Courage was at the wheel of the Bugaloo Buggy while I.Q. and Harmony hovered at treetop level in a last attempt at spotting the missing firefly. They had been looking for him off and on for the past hour or so, ever since Joy had noticed his absence. All the Bugaloos were certain the firefly had merely wandered off into the woods nearby, but when repeated calls failed to produce an answer, the Bugaloos had begun to worry. Now, as the deadline for their departure approached, there was no time remaining for a serious search.

"Perhaps he went on ahead," Harmony suggested as he floated back to the ground beside the Bugaloo Buggy. He didn't sound convinced.

"That's not like him at all," Joy protested.

"It's not like any of us," Courage pointed out. "This is more or less the first time we've ever done anything like this."

"That's true," Joy agreed. "But..."

"Let's get moving!" I.Q. cried, swooping down to light in the back seat of the Buggy. "Benita and her flunkies are almost here; I just spotted them not half a mile away."

"But Sparky," the girl pleaded.

"He'll catch up with us," I.Q. reassured her. "He'll just have to fly, that's all."

"He hates to do that!"

"And we're not terribly happy about leaving here, either," I.Q. said drily. "Let's roll, Courage; there's no point in having another tussle with Benita, especially since we can't win."

With a grunt of disgust, Courage started the engine and slowly eased the open car out of the clearing. A narrow path snaked through the Forest, leading them away from the place they had called home, away from the Grapevine-Bluebell Flower, even away from Harmony's electric organ and Courage's drums, which were too big to take along. Behind them they heard the roar of the Baroque Buggy's engine and some cries that sounded evilly gleeful, but none of the Bugaloos looked back. They sat in silence, staring grimly ahead of them, as Courage steered their little vehicle deeper and deeper into Tranquility Forest. They didn't know where they were going, had no idea what lay beyond the friendly confines of the only home they had ever known. But they were about to find out.

Joy sat huddled in the cramped back seat of the Bugaloo Buggy, her arms folded across her chest as though to keep herself warm. The early morning seemed oddly chilly, although it was never cold in Tranquility Forest. Perhaps, the girl told herself, it was because the Bugaloo Buggy was moving so fast among the trees.

"Aren't we going a bit too fast?" she asked Courage.

"Perhaps," he said with a resigned shrug. "But I say as long as we've got to leave the Forest we'd best get on with it."

"That's right; no sense in lingering," I.Q. agreed.

"I'd like to have stayed around and given that old hag a hotfoot or something," Harmony snorted.

"There wouldn't be any point in that," I.Q. pointed out. "She'd still be the owner of Tranquility Forest."

Joy choked back a sob. "Oh, I.Q., isn't there anything we can do to stop her?"

He looked at the girl from his seat beside her with a faint smile. "Are you talking about stopping what she's planning to do, or finding a way that we can return to live in the Forest?"

"I...I suppose I mean both. It's awful enough that we've been thrown out of our home. But to think of what she's going to do to it..." The girl couldn't say any more; it was too much even to contemplate, much less to speak of.

I.Q. reached over and patted her hand gently. "Look, luv, there's not one of us who doesn't despise the idea of having to leave Tranquility Forest. But the blasted Benita has the law on her side and we must obey it."

"It just isn't fair."

"Of course not."

"How in the world do you suppose she ever got hold of that deed?"

Harmony turned around from the front seat. "I'd like to know where the deed came from in the first place."

"Perhaps it was one of her rotten tricks?" Joy suggested hopefully.

I.Q. shook his head. "She's not that good. It was real, all right."

Joy slumped back in her seat. "There has to be a way. There has to!"

"If there is, I hope you find it," Courage said. "It looks as though we're coming to the edge of the Forest."

Ahead of them, the trees were farther apart, the late morning sun much brighter. The path broadened and became bumpier than before, so that Courage had to slow down drastically. They crept forward, toward a tangle of bushes that masked a curve in the road. The air was suddenly much warmer, as though some vast furnace lurked just around the corner. Courage brought the Bugaloo Buggy to a halt and looked around at the others.

"Perhaps we'd better scout ahead and see what we're getting into," he suggested.

Harmony popped straight up out of his seat. "I'll go with a pencil and book," he announced, and quickly winged his way over the screen of vegetation until he was lost from sight.

"I hope he makes his look a quick one," I.Q. said.

"Why's that?" Courage asked.

I.Q. glanced back the way they had come. "Someone's been following us, and it smells like a rat."

"Funky?" Joy said.

I.Q. nodded. "Probably. I've been hearing the sound of a motorcycle, Benita's Br-room Br-room Bike, no doubt."

Courage turned around in the driver's seat and scowled back into the Forest. "If I know that rotten rodent, he's got his Stereo Zapper and he's eager to do us in with it."

"It wouldn't surprise me in the least," I.Q. agreed.

"Well, we'll show him--"

"No, we haven't the right. Now now. It's way past dawn and we were supposed to be out of Tranquility Forest by then."

"I'd rather stay and fight them," Courage insisted.

"No," Joy said sadly. "I.Q. is right. We must leave." The girl wiped hastily at a tear and tried a brave smile that was a trifle lopsided.

"All right," Courage snarled, starting the engine with a vicious twist of the starter key. "If we're going to go, let's get moving then; I don't want to set eyes on that old bag's flunky ever again." He started forward rapidly, slowed around the corner, and braked to a sudden halt.

"Hey, mate!" Harmony called. "Watch where you're going, eh?" He stood in the middle of the road, his hands up as though to fend off the vehicle that had halted less than a foot from him. But none of the other Bugaloos were looking at him, because what they saw beyond him was almost unbelievable.

As far as they could see was a vast, undulating wasteland of sand, a desert that seemed to shift and shimmer under the blazing sun. Just looking at it hurt their eyes. And what was worse was that only a few paces behind Harmony the road ended abruptly, dropping off hundreds of feet to the desert floor below as though some primeval giant had cleaved the earth with the sword of Orion.

No one spoke for a long moment. The only sound was the distant throbbing of the motorcycle engine. Finally, Courage got out to join Harmony at the edge of the cliff.

"How do we get down there?" he wondered.

Harmony shrugged. "It's no problem for us," he said, pointedly twitching his wings.

"But we can't leave the Buggy," Courage protested.

"No, we can't," I.Q. agreed as he joined them. "Our instruments are in there and thank heaven we brought water with us." He shaded his eyes and peered intently out across the billowing desert, but there was nothing to be seen but sand.

"It looks as though we'll have to fight, then," Courage said with a grim smile.

I.Q. frowned and appeared on the verge of agreeing. But then he snapped his fingers. "Look, lads, this may be a break for us."

"What do you mean?" Harmony asked.

"Look at it this way. If Benita has any idea of sending her flunkies after us beyond the Forest, that desert will surely stop them. Right?"

The others nodded dubiously.

"We still can't leave the Buggy," Courage reminded him.

"Then we'll have to find a way to drive it down. Come on now; we haven't much time." He launched himself into the air.

"Where are you going?" Harmony wanted to know.

"The looking's better from beyond the edge of the cliff, of course," I.Q. replied. "I'll go this way; you two search in the other direction. Look for any kind of road or path down the cliff face and sing out when you find one."

It probably didn't take more than two or three minutes for Harmony to spot the narrow ledge that angled downward, but it seemed like an eternity to the waiting Joy. When Harmony cried out the news of his discovery, the girl jumped over into the driver's seat and moved the car carefully along the cliff edge toward the sound of his voice. A moment later they were all together, and Joy was so happy that the boys had found a path that she didn't notice the worried looks on their faces.

I.Q. glanced sharply at Courage and Harmony and when he saw their expressions, he set his lips in a grim line. He might be wrong, he reasoned to himself; in fact, he'd better be wrong...

"Hurry up!" Harmony hissed. "That bike is getting closer."

They scrambled back into the Buggy. Courage took the wheel again and began to creep down the narrow ledge, which was no wider than the little car itself. The ledge was bumpy and pitted, making the Buggy lurch sickeningly, but Courage battled the wheel with all his strength without serious mishap until they were halfway down.

"Look out!" Harmony yelled, and before the words were out of his mouth the outside front wheel began to slide off the ledge. Without hesitation, he leaped from his seat beside Courage, hovered beside the car and tried to heave the Buggy back on the pathway. But, though he beat his wings so frantically they became a blur, he couldn't budge it. It began to slip some more.

"Hold it there!" I.Q. cried, and flew out to join Harmony. The two managed, just barely, to keep the Buggy from falling any farther. And that was all.

"Take the wheel," Courage said to Joy, preparing to launch himself over the side to join the other two.

"No time!" the girl answered and flew out to help with whatever strength she could muster.

"Get back in there," I.Q. grunted. "You can't help here..."

"Oh-yes-I-can," Joy retorted between clenched teeth as she strained with all her might. And the Bugaloo Buggy moved, moved slowly at first, then more rapidly - until it was back on the ledge again with solid footing underneath.

Harmony applauded spontaneously as he flew up to resume his seat in the front. I.Q. smiled at the girl, who beamed as she clung lightly to the side of the car, wings beating, like a swimmer about to climb out of a pool.

"All it took was just a little bit more," she said brightly. "Don't you see?"

"You're absolutely right," I.Q. agreed. "Let's get back in now and get rolling." He got into the car, turned back to face the girl and swallowed hard.

The smile had suddenly faded from Joy's lips, and a puzzled expression clouded her face. "I-I can't." She was flapping her wings frantically, pulling herself up by her arms, but she wasn't rising.

Quickly I.Q. leaned over and took her arm. With a single heave he hauled her up and into the car. The Buggy rocked and creaked protestingly, threatening to plunge once more off the ledge.

"Easy there," Courage advised, letting the car drift down a few feet to where the pathway was somewhat wider.

"What's wrong, Joy?" Harmony asked. "Are you all right?"

The girl flushed. "I'm fine. A little tired, I suppose, I hardly slept at all last night."

"Right," Harmony nodded. "I'm a bit pooped myself, and all this heat doesn't help much either."

"Let's get moving," I.Q. said, more sharply than he had intended. Now he was certain, and for a moment he considered turning back. But there was no way, not in the position they were in, to retrace their route even if they decided to. At best they could only continue to the bottom of the cliff and then, well, then they would just have to see.

The ledge ended abruptly a good ten feet above the floor of the desert. Courage braked to a halt and just looked at the empty space that lay between them and their goal. "What now?" he said with a tight-lipped sigh.

"Oh my," Joy exclaimed softly.

"Looks like we'll just have to leave the Buggy here," Harmony said.

"There must be some way," I.Q. insisted, but he obviously didn't believe his own words.

After a moment's silence, Courage suddenly spoke up. "Everybody out. You can fly down there without any trouble."

"Of course we can," I.Q. said sharply, "but what about you?"

"The Buggy and I will join you in a moment. Come on now; step lively, mates." He put the car into reverse and began backing up a little more rapidly than he should have.

The others hesitated, then did as they were told. When they landed in the sand, they looked back up to see what Courage was up to.

He had the Buggy a good fifty feet back up the ledge, and now he was revving up the engine.

"Courage!" Joy called. "Be caref-" Her words were lost in the sudden blast of the Buggy's engine as Courage let out the clutch and barreled at top speed toward the end of the ledge.

Joy gave a little shriek and the others gasped as the little car hurtled into space, apparently about to bury its nose in the sand below. But just as the Buggy left the ledge, Courage stood up in his seat. Gripping the steering wheel with all his strength, he beat his wings furiously, frantically; the nose of the car came up slightly, then a bit

more - and then it hit the ground to send up an explosion of sand that obscured the car and driver completely.

"Hurry; let's see if he's hurt," I.Q. said as they all ran toward the cloud of dust. But by the time they reached it and could see beyond, they were startled to find the Bugaloo Buggy a considerable distance away and moving at a smart pace under its own power. As they stared, the car made a wide turn, sending up a rooster tail of powdery sand, and swung back toward them.

"How on earth did you manage that?" Joy asked when Courage came to a stop in front of them, his face flushed with triumph.

"Nothing to it, luv," he said nonchalantly. "I simply saw that there was a down slope in the ground beyond the edge of the ledge, and all I needed was a bit of lift at the nose..." He shrugged.

"Good show," I.Q. said absently; his thoughts were already moving ahead. Should he tell them what he suspected? Was he virtually certain of it? He glanced up at the top of the cliff behind them and his heart sank.

"Achtung! Bugaloos!" Funky's voice carried weakly but clearly down to them, and they all looked up to see the rat standing at the brink of the cliff. Beside him stood Tweeter; each of them carried a Stereo Zapper.

"What is it, rat face?" Harmony yelled back.

"Chust ein friendly goink-away present," Funky gloated. "So you shouldn't forget your old buddy-pals!" He laughed nastily - the only way he knew how, in all fairness - and aimed his electronic weapon at the Bugaloos. Before they could move, a ray shot in their direction and splatted against the sand, turning a spot right beside them into a solid lump. Tweeter danced with glee; they could hear his idiot giggle even as they tried to dodge the Zapper rays.

Courage shook his fist at Benita's flunkies. "Just stay right there! I'll be up to show you who'll forget what!" He started to get out of the car, but I.Q. restrained him.

"Not now," he cautioned. "It's too dangerous."

Courage was astounded. "Dangerous! You mean we should be afraid of that slimy rodent?"

I.Q. smiled thinly. "Right now we should be. Obviously he's not trying to hit us this time."

"So?"

"So you know how rotten that rat's aim is; let's get out of range before he makes an accidental bull's-eye."

Not even Courage could argue with that kind of logic, and within moments the Bugaloos were in their Buggy and speeding away into the vast, rolling desert. It was some time before I.Q. remembered what had disturbed him so greatly earlier, but by then it was too late to bother mentioning it. The only course left to them was to press on, into the trackless waste, and hope that somewhere there might be an end to it.

Chapter Five

It was the strange, unearthly racket that startled Sparky out of his troubled sleep. Confused, he struggled awake, not knowing at first where he was or what day it was.

There was some sort of depression weighing on his soul, but he couldn't quite grasp what it was that was causing it. That noise...

The firefly was in a sheltered little dell not far from the Sparkling Waterfall. He realized that much as he looked around him with sleep-dazed eyes. A glance at the sun indicated that the day was half over. A great lump in his throat made it difficult to swallow, and he choked back a sob. Why? If only that clattering, roaring cacophony would stop for a moment to let a firefly think!

And suddenly there was silence. Sparky blinked his big round eyes and held his breath. What was happening here? How could his friends, the Bugaloos, allow such a clamor in Tranquility Forest?

He groaned aloud, a long, wailing sound somewhere between a sigh and a croak. Now he remembered; he knew what had happened, why he was alone here. Once again he glanced skyward, and his worse fears were confirmed. It was well past noon, and unless something had happened to change things radically, the Bugaloos were long gone from Tranquility Forest. Which meant Benita was in charge now, and heaven only knew what she might do to a poor defenseless firefly.

The uproar began again - a splitting, belching, popping sound that seemed to shake the very trees. Sparky looked frantically in all directions, seeking the source of the noise, until a violently swaying tree caught his eye. A tall palm, its topmost fronds shook and clattered drily, and before the firefly's eyes it slowly began to topple with a rending sound that rose even above the other noises. Fascinated and horrified, he watched its ponderous descent until it fell with an enormous crash that shook the ground.

Sparky's first instinct was to run away as fast and as far as his little legs would carry him, but something made him hesitate. A strange light came into his eyes, a look of reckless anger. Determinedly, but with sensible caution, he stalked toward the fallen tree and the continuing roar and clatter.

Peering cautiously from behind a screen of fern fronds, the firefly saw a sight that froze his heart. He was close to the Sparking Waterfall now, and just ahead of him the massive roots of the toppled palm quivered in the air. And beyond that was the hated Baroque Buggy, with Benita Bizarre lounging in the back seat and cackling with glee. Sparky gnashed his teeth and doubled up his tiny fists.

The Witch stood up abruptly to point in Sparky's direction, and instinctively he ducked. The strange roar and clatter was suddenly frighteningly near, almost on top of him it seemed. And then it burst into view, giant metal blade lifted into the sky and dripping bits of dirt and severed roots. Sparky had never seen one of the things before, but it was easy enough for him to guess what it was: Benita's Brutal Battering Bulldozer!

"Okay, okay, knock it off!" The Witch's shriek rose above the sound of the engine, and it was immediately silent, although clouds of noxious fumes continued to pour from its exhaust stack. Woofer sat at the controls, looking expectantly at his Boss.

"Get down outa there!" Benita ordered. "The heavy-weights are here now."

Sparky shifted his position slightly to see what the Witch was talking about - and his eyes nearly popped out of his head. On both sides of the stream that fed the Sparkling Waterfall, trucks were moving toward the open space made by the Bulldozer - trucks loaded with huge sheets of plastic, with bricks and steel, with machinery and tools

and other things the firefly couldn't identify but certainly didn't belong in Tranquility Forest. As he watched, swarms of Flat People from Rock City appeared behind the fleet of trucks, all wearing hard plastic helmets of blue and orange and yellow, shuffling along like a captured army. But they moved steadily and with purpose, and in a startlingly few minutes had unloaded two more bulldozers.

The biggest of the Flat People moved toward the Baroque Buggy and stood more or less at attention before Benita, looking at her with dull, docile eyes.

"You got about a day and a half to get this place cleared of all these good-for-nothing trees and put up my Pre-fab Platter Plant," the Witch rasped. "Got that, boobie?"

The Flat Man nodded.

"The rest of your crew can go to work on my airstrip." She gestured in the general direction of the Bugaloos' clearing, perhaps half a mile downstream from the Waterfall. "You can have an extra day on that because I'm so kindhearted. You already have a crew working on the Eight-Lan Speed Super-Highway from Rock City, don't you?"

Again, the nod of confirmation. Flat People rarely spoke, at least to Benita Bizarre.

"Okay, so what are you waiting for? You haven't got all day."

As the leader of the construction gang turned away, Benita stepped over clumsily from the back seat to settle herself behind the steering wheel. "Come on, Woofer! We have to get back home and make some red-hot records!"

Before the Witch was out of sight, the bulldozers were at work, uprooting trees, leveling grassy hummocks, thrusting great piles of earth into the stream as the beginning of a dam. As Sparky watched from his hiding place, a fiery rage began to build in him, which threatened to explode when the giant concrete mixers were rolled into place and began to spew out grey, gravelly slime for the factory's foundation. It was all the firefly could do to keep from charging across the barren clearing to combat men and machines single-handed, but a tiny voice of reason stayed him. Seething, he cautiously slipped away and, having no other place to go, headed for the Bugaloos' clearing.

"It's up to me now," he muttered as he trotted along a narrow path. "Deed or no deed, that ugly old Witch can't do that to Tranquility Forest. I have to stop her." He walked a little further, then stopped, looking longingly up at the trees. "But how?" There was no answer.

He approached the Bugaloos' clearing cautiously until he was satisfied that it was deserted. But as he started to enter it, a sudden rackety sound froze him. He ducked back into the woods just as Funky drove in from the other side, Tweeter riding behind him on the Br-room Br-room Bike with a look of abject terror on his face. Funky skidded to a halt in the middle of the clearing and dismounted. He stood, hands on hips, and slowly made a full turn like a conqueror surveying captured territory.

"Zo! Now dis is all mine!"

"Uh-h...ours," Tweeter pointed out hesitantly. "The Boss's, that is."

"Yah, yah. Ours. Not der Bugaloos'." The rat grinned and rubbed his paws together briskly. He began to pace around the clearing, poking and prying under leaves and inside hollow tree trunks. "I vunder if dey might haff left ein piece of cheese..."

He found nothing that seemed to interest him until he spotted the organ on the bandstand. "Aha!" he cried, and promptly seated himself at the keyboard. He touched a key and produced a shrill sound that made Sparky wince; even he hadn't been that bad.

"Hey, cut it out!" a voice complained.

"Yeah, knock off that racket, Sauerkraut."

Funky swung around to face Tweeter accusingly. "Vos ist? You don't like der music?"

"It wasn't me," Tweeter said, wide-eyed. "Honest."

"Vell den who?"

"It's us, whisker-face. Right over here." It was the Grapes speaking, and now Funky saw them. He narrowed his eyes - no easy trick for a rat whose eyes were already just about as narrow as they could get - and stomped over toward them.

"So it's you, hein?" The rat grinned and licked his lips. "Might be I haff ein vay to deal mit blabbermouth grapes. Yah?" He reached out a paw as though to pluck one, and they bobbed and shrank away in terror.

"Not so fast!" the Bluebell Flower shouted.

Funky froze, then turned to face the plant. "You I'll take care uff later; I'll veer you in mein lapel."

"Not if you know what's good for you."

"Oh-h?" The rat's look of smug confidence faltered a little. "Und who says so?"

"Benita Bizarre. Don't forget. Funky baby, we can hear her when she's in the Forest, and she gave you twerps strict orders not to destroy anything until she gives the word. Right?"

"Right!" chorused the relieved Grapes.

Funky nibbled on a paw-nail, then grinned slyly. "Zo?" he said with a massive shrug. "Ve do it later; ve got all der time in der world now." He chuckled and aimed his Zapper in the direction of the Grapevine-Bluebell Flower.

The plants quavered and tried to move away, which was, of course, impossible. "You wouldn't do that to a poor helpless Grape, would you?" one of them pleaded.

Funky raised his eyebrows, as though the idea were unthinkable. "But uff course not!"

There was a general sigh of relief.

"No. Ven I come back I'll bring der schnipper-schappers."

"The what?" the Bluebell Flower demanded.

"Yeah, speak English," one of the bolder Grapes said.

But Funky merely nodded. "Yah, der schnipper-schnappers to schnip off der loudmouth flower. Und der Grapevine..." He paused and showed his pointed yellow teeth. "Der Grapevine, I'll chop down mit mein little hatchet. Only it ain't so little." He turned away abruptly and marched to the motorcycle. "Come on; ve go to der Boss for more orders. Und I hope dey're rotten vuns!"

Sparky waited until the sound of the motorcycle had completely faded away in the distance before he emerged from his hiding place. At first sight of him, the Grapevine-Bluebell Flower began to tremble with renewed fright - until it saw who it was.

"Oh, it's only you," the Bluebell said, barely bothering to hide its contempt.

"Yeah, it's me," Sparky admitted, too full of anger at Benita and her flunkies to resent the Flower's tone of voice.

"Somebody's got to save us," a Grape moaned.

"Yeah, somebody big and strong," said another.

"And smart," a third added.

"Bring back the Bugaloos," a fourth pleaded.

Sparky sat down on the edge of the bandstand and cupped his chin in his hands. "If only I could; if only I could."

"Well, go find them," the Bluebell Flower urged.

"I can't; they're not allowed to come back to Tranquility Forest. You know that."

"I still don't understand how a little piece of paper can keep them away from their home. It's their duty to come back; we're helpless without them."

Sparky stood up. "Don't worry. I'll protect you."

"That's what I mean," the Bluebell Flower sneered. "How are you going to keep that terrible witch and her blood-thirsty gang from coming back and...and tearing us up by the roots?"

"Just a minute, just a minute." Sparky clasped his hands behind his back and began to pace up and down. "I'm trying to think now..."

"What's to think?" the Flower said. "Sneak up on Benita somewhere and put her out of the way. Permanently."

Sparky stopped, his eyes wide. "But I don't want to use violence. That isn't right."

"The Witch will."

"Yeah, I know, but that doesn't make it right. There must be some other way." Once more the firefly cast a yearning glance toward the sky. "Oh, if only the Bugaloos were here; they'd know what to do!"

At the moment, the Bugaloos were engaged in digging their Buggy out of a patch of soft sand for about the dozenth time that afternoon. Straining and sweating, they finally got the little car onto firmer ground, then dropped to the sand beside it. Even though it surely was late in the day, the sun seemed to remain directly overhead, so that there was no shade at all, no respite from the blazing heat.

"Have a bit of water," Joy suggested, handing the canteen to Harmony, who took a grateful swallow.

"Best take it easy on that," I.Q. cautioned. He squinted and looked at the sky. "Funny. It's almost as though the sun were following us. If I didn't know better, I'd swear it's still high noon."

"I wish we could find some shade," Courage said. "This heat is bad enough for us, but it's even worse for the Buggy here." He patted the fender and immediately jerked his hand away; the metal was red hot.

I.Q. got to his feet and pointed. "Let's try for that high dune over there. Perhaps there'll be shelter of some sort on the other side."

They all piled back into the little car, which started with reluctance. It moved slowly, mashing through the sand as though it would sink down into the bowels of the earth at any moment. They snaked among low, featureless mounds, their loose sides and tops undisturbed by the faintest breath of wind. The Bugaloo Buggy was laboring heavily as they finally began the ascent of a high, crested dune that towered above them. The car moved more and more slowly, until it was barely making headway.

"Everybody out!" I.Q. cried, and all but Courage climbed over the side to help push the Buggy. At last they reached the top of the dune - but below and beyond them lay nothing but miles and miles of the same.

"It simply goes on forever," Joy remarked. She tried to smile brightly. "But it must end somewhere, mustn't it?"

I.Q. nodded vaguely. "Somewhere. But where?"

"Well, come on," Courage urged. "We won't find out by sitting here." He hit the starter. The engine groaned, ground slowly. Suddenly there was a muffled, metallic snapping sound. Then silence.

"What happened?" Joy asked anxiously.

Courage didn't reply but jumped from the driver's seat and opened the hood.

"Is it anything we can fix?" Harmony wanted to know, joining the other Bugaloo. They both stared at the mass of steaming metal, then began poking, prodding, twisting and shaking their heads. Finally, they looked at the other two.

"It looks as though the Buggy's had it," Courage announced.

"What's wrong with it?" I.Q. asked.

"I can't be certain, but I'd say the heat has expanded the metal so much that all sorts of things are ripped up or jammed. That engine will never turn over again until we get it to some cool place."

"Not much chance of that," Harmony observed wryly.

"Perhaps if we waited till nightfall," Joy suggested.

"That's a long way off," I.Q. pointed out. "And even then the Buggy might not start if there's been any serious damage."

"What shall we do, then?" the girl asked.

"Take what we need and go ahead on foot. That's all I can suggest."

Courage laughed. The others looked at him questioningly. "Why walk?" he said. "What are Bugaloo wings for, anyway? Why, I'll bet that if we fly, we'll come to the end of this ruddy outdoor furnace in no time."

"It's a pity to leave the dear old Buggy here," Harmony said.

"It can't be helped," Joy reasoned. "At any rate, perhaps we'll be able to come back and get it."

"Right. So let's be on our way." With that, Harmony flapped his wings and launched himself from the top of the dune, and fell, tumbling head over heels, down its steeply sloped side.

Courage tried to fly to his rescue, but his wings could no more keep him aloft than could Harmony's. Then Joy started after them. I.Q. stopped her.

"It's no use," he said.

"But what's wrong with them? Why did they fall?"

"Because they can't fly. And neither can we."

"I don't understand."

"I'm not entirely sure I do, though I have a theory. But regardless...anywhere we go in this desert from here on will be strictly on foot." As I.Q. spoke he made it a point not to look at the endless stretch of sand on every side of them; what was the point of dwelling on the fact that their chances of surviving until nightfall were practically nil?

Chapter Six

Benita Bizarre's Jukebox Penthouse was, as usual, a blaze of rather revolting color, even in the early evening. Raucous sounds issued occasionally from the upper floor to

echo among the swaying buildings of Rock City, and all the Flat People had taken shelter, stuffing cotton in their ears. The Witch with the unbearable voice was making recordings again.

Sparky crept cautiously down the street, keeping to the shadows as much as possible, as he approached the gaudy nickelodeon (now a quarter a pop, what with inflation and all) that Benita Bizarre called home. He grimaced at the sounds that blared from the open balcony window but gritted his teeth and pressed on. He had to get in there one way or another and somehow destroy the Witch's recording equipment. That was the way to stop her, the firefly had reasoned. If she couldn't make records, she'd have no use for that ugly factory which even now was going up on the banks of the stream in Tranquility Forest.

What Benita might do after her equipment was demolished, Sparky hadn't considered. But anything was better than pacing up and down in the Forest and waiting for it to come crashing down around his ears.

Now he was only a block away from the Jukebox Penthouse. Peering carefully around a corner, Sparky saw nothing moving in the small plaza in front of the garish edifice. Only the monstrous peacock that guarded the entrance was there, eyes closed but feathers spread to block the way to anyone bent on invading the Witch's strident lair.

"I've got to think of something real clever," Sparky whispered to himself. "What would I.Q. dream up in a situation like this?"

Try as he would, the firefly couldn't come up with anything that didn't involve a small army of armored hornets or a fleet of fire-breathing dragonflies at the very least. How was a lone and rather cowardly firefly to make his way past that fearful sentry?

On tiptoe, Sparky went around the block until he was in back of the Penthouse. There was the coin reject slot, which he and the Bugaloos had used more than once to make their escape from the Witch's clutches. And more than once one or the other of his friends had flown up that dark, curving chute, usually to rescue Sparky. "Well, there's no reason I can't do it," the firefly argued with himself. He edged toward the opening, with its swinging metal flap, and pushed at it.

It didn't move.

He pushed harder.

Nothing happened.

"Must be stuck," Sparky panted. "Benita ought to take better care of her Jukebox." He slammed his meager shoulder against the flap, but all it got him was a sore shoulder.

"Now what?" he sighed, sitting down on the hard pavement. "I've gotta get in there." He was close to tears in his frustration. After a moment he got up, backed away, and surveyed the sheer facade of the back of the Jukebox. Near the top was what appeared to be a small opening. The firefly had no idea where it led, and it was much higher than he cared to fly, but it looked like the only way. With a short but fervent prayer, Sparky launched himself clumsily into the air.

"I...I hate to be a drag, boys," Joy was on her knees in the burning sand, trying to muster a smile but obviously on the verge of collapse. "You go on ahead, I'll just rest a bit and catch up with you."

"No such thing," Courage declared stoutly. He took the girl's arm, started to help her to her feet and thought better of it. She felt boneless, as though the last ounce of energy had drained from her. And to tell the truth, he didn't feel much better himself.

"Let's all rest a while," I.Q. suggested, throwing himself down on the sand. By now it didn't hurt so much; they were all used to the constant blistering heat, underfoot and all around them. They had moved at a steady pace for what seemed hours on end, and the Bugaloo Buggy was far behind them; they couldn't even see the tall dune where they had left it. And yet there was still the sun, always the sun, blazing relentlessly down on them from directly overhead. I.Q. had long ago given up trying to make sense out of it.

"I've got a suggestion," Harmony said.

The others looked at him questioningly.

"I say if we don't find some sort of shelter soon, we head back the way we came. I'd rather take my chances with Benita Bizarre and her flunkies than perish out here."

"Do you think we could make it back?" I.Q. asked quietly.

"Of course we can," Harmony retorted, a trifle indignant; he prided himself on his superb sense of direction. "All we have to do is retrace our tracks."

"What tracks?"

"Why those..." He stopped abruptly, mouth ajar. Behind them, in the direction from which they had come, a strong breeze had sprung up, swirling sand in a gritty whirlwind and laying down a curtain that obscured their view. And yet the wind didn't touch them, never came near; where they were, not a breath of air stirred.

Harmony shivered slightly in spite of the unbearable heat. "That's all right," he said stubbornly. "We can get our bearings by the sun."

I.Q. shook his head slowly. "Not that sun. It hasn't moved at all since we've been out here on this desert."

"But how can that be?" Joy protested. "The sun always moves across the sky."

"Not here," I.Q. said quietly. "Look." He held his hand up. No matter how he moved it, its shadow remained directly underneath. "High noon," he remarked wryly. "Just as it was hours ago."

There was a moment's silence, and then Joy spoke. "Oh, if only at least one of us could fly. He could go for help, or at least guide us."

"Yes," Courage chimed in. "Why do you suppose we can't fly out here?"

"It's the heat, isn't it?" Harmony ventured.

"It appears that way," I.Q. agreed. "The sun is so strong and the air so still that our wings simply won't lift us. Or perhaps it's just that we haven't the strength under such extreme temperatures. At any rate, we can't fly. And we can't stay here. Shall we get moving again?"

"That's fine with me," Courage said. "Which way?"

I.Q. pointed directly ahead. "That looks as good as any. What do you say, Harmony?"

"Right now your guess is as good as mine. Let's go."

They staggered through the clinging sand, down a shifting slope, across a relatively hard and level stretch, then up again. Legs moved forward automatically, eyes were all but closed against the unbearable glare, and no one spoke as they concentrated on dragging air into their seared lungs.

Joy imagined that she was on a ship, a slow-moving ship that sailed slowly and uncertainly through a steaming, billowing sea. Up and down they went, their motion almost hypnotic despite the snail's pace of their progress. It was no longer necessary or desirable to look ahead, because all she could see was exactly what her feet were

plowing through. Sand. Golden...no, not golden. The sand was pale yellow, with a hint of brown. Scorched eggshell. Yes, the girl decided. That was the way to describe it. Scorched eggshell, a tan-to-white color that never varied, even in the little hollows left by her footprints. She knew that if she lifted her eyes that she would see an entire world of scorched eggshell. Perhaps even the sky was tinted that same color now. She didn't want to find out, was afraid to find out. The best thing was to keep her eyes fixed on the ground just ahead, to follow Courage's footprints, even though now they seemed to be lost in shadow. A deep, black shadow...

With a startled gasp, Joy came to a stumbling halt and looked up. At first she thought she was looking at more of the sand, but it loomed abruptly in front of her and its texture seemed markedly different. And there was the most unpleasant odor...

"Well, well," a voice boomed from some remote height, "it's the Bugaloos at last. I've been waiting a long time for you."

Chapter Seven

"Oh, boy, I've messed things up again," Sparky groaned as he cringed with his back to a wall inside the Jukebox Penthouse. Facing him were Benita Bizarre and her three flunkies, and they didn't look at all happy to see him.

"What are you doing trying to sneak in here, you freaky insect?" Benita demanded.

Sparky didn't answer, largely because he wasn't entirely certain himself. He should have known, he reflected ruefully, that the opening he had found at the top of the Jukebox would turn out to be a trap of some kind. As soon as he had ventured inside it his head was nearly taken off by a deafening assault of noise that thundered all around him. Out of control, he had rolled and tumbled through blackness until he popped out near the giant turntable inside the Jukebox. Benita, Woofer and Tweeter had been making sounds that might have been music at the time, with Funky inside the glass-enclosed control booth. Surprised, they hadn't reacted right away, and Sparky had time to scramble to his feet and...well, that was the trouble. He didn't know what to do next, and now it was too late.

"I wasn't sneaking," the firefly said at last. And that was true enough. He smiled weakly and blinked his tail bulb off and on. "See? I even have my warning lights on." He glanced around him and saw the hole from which he had issued. It was labeled EXHAUST PIPE FOR UNGROOVY SOUNDS. Of course, the firefly reflected, that was the explanation. Naturally, that passage was always in use, and he hadn't had a prayer against that onslaught of fractured decibels.

"So how come you didn't leave with those Bugaloo brats?" the Witch wanted to know.

"I, I..." What should he tell her? He had been so hopelessly inept in his mission so far that he was ashamed to admit it. Still, if he could just get close enough to the Witch's recording equipment and somehow destroy it...

"So you decided to come over to the winning side," the Witch snorted, hands on her hips as she glared down at Sparky. "Is that it?"

"Uh-h...well, I guess..." The firefly's little brain was working as rapidly as it could. Maybe this was the opening he needed. "You see," he said boldly, "I thought you might

be able to use my experience and talents, now that the Bugaloos have gone." He smiled broadly, showing all his teeth.

Benita looked at him with understandable suspicion. "Your what?" she asked. "I never heard of a firefly having any talents. Especially you."

"Oh but...ah-h...I've always kept in the background, as they say. I mean, you know how every successful rock group has someone helping them, guiding them? Think of the Beatles, the Supremes. Even Elvis." The firefly puffed out his chest and tried to look modest at the same time. "Well, the Bugaloos have had the priceless benefit of my...advice." So overwhelmed was the firefly by his own words that he stepped forward and nudged Benita with an elbow. "Dig me?" he grinned with a broad wink.

The Witch stepped back, obviously uncertain how to take this totally unexpected revelation. Her skepticism melted somewhat. Maybe the little firefly was the key to the Bugaloos' success, but that was nonsense. She grabbed Sparky by the shoulder and shook him.

"Listen, dimbulb, if you're putting me on, I'll take you back to Tranquility Forest and drop you in a concrete mixer."

Sparky began to tremble violently, even after Benita stopped shaking him. Why hadn't he just kept his big mouth shut? "Oh, I wouldn't kid you," he protested with all the innocent sincerity he could muster. "Why would I have come here if it wasn't to offer my services to you?" he added desperately.

Benita released her grip and rubbed the side of her long nose thoughtfully. "It didn't seem possible that this stupid little flying flashlight could be what he said he was. On the other hand, she argued with herself, suppose he was? Would it do any harm to try him out?

"So give me some advice," she said abruptly.

"Yah," Funky put in, thrusting his whiskery grey snout at the firefly. "Tell der Glorious Leader somethink she isn't knowink already."

"Uh-h...well, sure," Sparky stammered. His eyes darted around the huge room swiftly, looking desperately for an inspiration of some sort. The interior of the Jukebox Penthouse was, not surprisingly, much like the inside of a jukebox. Beside the giant turntable was a rack of huge records, each as tall as Benita and maybe a little higher. Nearby was a tiny bandstand with all sorts of instruments on it, and behind it the control booth. Pieces of electronic equipment were scattered here and there, including Benita's notorious Sound Radar with which she was able to hear everything that went on in Rock City and Tranquility Forest. There was an ornate chaise lounge with a table next to it, where the Witch scribbled her horrendous rock tunes. Nearby was a huge radio which was always tuned to Rock City's only station, KOOK. Sparky looked at it and looked again. It wasn't a very good idea, but it was the best he could come up with on such short notice.

"Miss Benita," he said in a servile voice. No, he realized, that wasn't the proper tone. "Benita baby," he amended, "let's turn on Peter Platter and lay an ear on some of his Top-Forty sounds. Dig me?" He did a little dance step, awkward but energetic.

"Boss," Funky said plaintively, "for vy ve should listen to dis twinkle-tail tverp? Ve're makink beautiful records und soon ve'll be turnink out zillions uff copies. Today ve own Tranquility Forest, tomorrow der whole world!"

"Don't get carried away, boobie," Benita cautioned wryly. "Sure we've got a lock on the rock biz now, but it never does any harm to pick somebody else's brain..." She paused and peered closely at Sparky. "You do have a brain, don't you?"

The firefly managed to blush. "Well, far be it from me to boast..."

"Sure, sure, Sparky baby. Let's turn on old Peter Platter and you tell me what makes the records he plays so groovy." She flicked on the radio and gestured for silence as the voice of Rock City's favorite - and only - deejay came over the air.

"...so yer tired of the same old jazz, kids? Want a new kick in soft drinks that'll make you the most popular cat on the block? Take it from me, old pal Peter Platter, you'll really flip over TUNDRA TONIC, with a blast of Artic ozone in every dee-licious drop! And now let's spin another disc, this one dedicated to all the cats hanging out at the Pizzachickenburger Palace - and why ain't you kids home studying, heh heh? Okay, turn up your volume cuz this is a mind-bender: The Space Monsters with 'My Slime is Your Slime.'"

Sparky, the Witch and her flunkies listened thoughtfully as the ear-shattering thrums and plinks blasted through the speaker, snapping their fingers and bobbing their heads in time to the rhythm whenever they were able to detect it. When the number was over, Benita turned to the firefly with a querying eyebrow.

"So? That's number thirteen this week. Why?"

Sparky gulped. "Thirteen. That's an unlucky number."

"It's higher than fourteen," the Witch said menacingly.

"True, true," Sparky agreed hastily. "Maybe...well, there's a really unique sound there in the background."

"What sound?"

"It's like...I think it was a kazoo. Didn't you hear it? Like the distant wail of a lovelorn outboard motor? Or something like that?" Sparky wished he weren't sweating so profusely.

"Yeah, yeah," Benita lied. She had heard no such thing, but then she was almost totally tone-deaf, anyway. "I got you. The wail of a...whatever it was you said. Wild, boobie. Maybe that's just what I need, huh?"

"Well, it's worth a try."

Benita nodded vigorously. "Okay, we'll try it." She strode to her worktable and picked up a sheaf of papers. "Here," she said, thrusting them at the firefly. "Look this number over and figure out where you can put in the kazoo part."

"The - me?" Sparky was appalled. He couldn't read a note of music.

"That's right."

"But I...actually, it's better to sort of...improvise. You dig?" He chuckled nervously. "I mean, let the kazooist weave his intricate melody around the basic theme..."

Benita whacked him on the back so heartily that the firefly stumbled halfway across the room. "That's it!" the Witch cried. "Boy, I figured you'd come up with the right groovy answer. Get up on that bandstand and play me a few bars."

"Me?" the firefly squeaked. What had he talked himself into?

"Sure, you," Benita grinned.

"But I...I don't happen to have a kazoo with me just at the moment." As it happened, it was the only instrument the firefly could even begin to play, and he didn't want to show the Witch just how little he knew about even that instrument.

"No problem," Benita said airily. "I've got a great big collection of 'em. Woofers, get the firefly a kazoo. He's gonna turn the Beautiful Benita Bunch into the biggest thing in the rock biz - or Funky'll zap him."

Chapter Eight

"Who are you? What do you want with us?"

Joy heard Courage's voice, challenging the stranger who had suddenly appeared in the path of the Bugaloos. Now she was able to see that the thing in front of her was a huge camel, its sand-colored flanks heaving steadily as it breathed in and out, exuding a camel-like odor. Astride it was a white-robed figure, a man with sleepy eyes, a long, flat nose and undershot jaw that not even his short, pointed beard could disguise. He was hunched over in the saddle so that with his large, back-jutting head and rounded shoulders he appeared to have two humps, just like his mount.

"I am called the Great Bactrian," the rider declared in sonorous tones, and he made a suggestion of a bow. "My friends call me Bactrian, or Great, whichever you prefer. Welcome to the Dreadful Desert."

"Hmp!" Harmony snorted. "Some welcome."

"What's this about waiting for us?" I.Q. wanted to know.

"Ah-h, that. Yes, well perhaps I can explain that soon enough." Bactrian looked down at the Bugaloos standing around his camel and blinked his eyes slowly. "Am I correct in surmising that you have been evicted from Tranquility Forest?"

"That's right," Courage spoke up. "By that blasted Benita Bizarre."

"Indeed." The rider's eyes gleamed for a moment with what appeared to be satisfaction, but he quickly put on a sober expression. "My condolences, of course. But perhaps all is not lost."

"What do you mean by that?" Joy asked hopefully.

"It would be impossible to explain it to you now." Bactrian looked around, scanning the desert wasteland behind the Bugaloos. "It was my understanding that you had a vehicle of some sort. Didn't you bring it?"

"The Buggy conked out on us," Harmony replied. "It's back there somewhere."

Bactrian relaxed in his saddle and nodded. "We can arrange to have it brought in," he said.

"Brought in where?" Courage demanded suspiciously.

"Why, to my village, of course. That is, the village which I currently make my home."

"Village?" I.Q. asked. "What village?"

"It is called Deliria - a modest town - but I'm quite certain you will find it hospitable."

"Where is it?"

"Oh, a day or so from here. Or perhaps only an hour."

"I don't understand."

Bactrian smiled distantly. "It depends on me, of course."

"On you?"

The desert rider cleared his throat portentously. "You see, I'm by way of being a magus, a thaumaturgist, a wizard. In short, a magician."

"What's that got to do with how far away this Deliria is?" I.Q. asked.

Bactrian gave a rumbling laugh. "I see that you are unaccustomed to the ways of the Dreadful Desert."

"I'll say," Harmony said fervently. "This is a proper pushin' and shovin'."

Bactrian cocked an eyebrow warily. "I beg your pardon?"

"He means your Desert is an over," I.Q. explained. "And he's right."

"Yes, it's a bit on the warm side."

"And endless, too," Joy put in. She glanced skyward. "Why is it that the sun never seems to move from overhead here?"

"Ah-h, that is your own fault."

"Our fault?"

"But you are not to be blamed," Bactrian said, "In the Dreadful Desert, one must learn to let the sun move ahead and not try to keep pace with it."

"What does that mean?" Courage asked.

"Look above you!" the so-called magician intoned, pointing a finger dramatically heavenward. "Even as we stand here the sun is proceeding on its way."

They all looked up. The burning disc did seem to have moved somewhat. I.Q. held his hand out, and its shadow was no longer directly below it.

"On the Dreadful Desert," Bactrian went on, "the sun is merciless to those who do not understand it, to those who do not have patience. But stay now, remain in the shadow of my stalwart mount until the sun has gone on its westward journey. Shortly you will feel the cooling breezes of evening and then we shall be on our way."

It was obviously impossible, but to the Bugaloos it seemed that only a few minutes passed before the shadows lengthened and the sun was plunging toward the western horizon. It was still hot, but the temperature now seemed bearable by contrast. Bactrian noted the looks of delight and wonder on the faces of the flying teenagers and smiled contentedly.

"You observe?" he intoned. "The wise desert traveler defers to the sun, allows it to precede him and moves only in the cool of the night. The moon is a more kindly companion, as you shall see."

True enough, a full moon rose with astonishing swiftness even before the sun had sunk below the rim of the world. Yet the desert was lighted almost as clearly as it had been at midday. Joy shivered; she felt cold all of a sudden, but it wasn't an unpleasant sensation.

"How did you do that?" Harmony wanted to know, his voice tinged with dubious respect.

Bactrian made a small, deprecating gesture. "When one has known the Dreadful Desert all one's life, one learns how to come to terms with it." None of the Bugaloos saw that the magician's fingers were crossed.

I.Q. spoke up. "Are you going to show us the way to this town called Deliria?"

Bactrian straightened in his camel-saddle. "Certainly. As a matter of fact, I think you may be able to fly, now that the sun has gone to rest."

Courage was the first to test his wings, and he was ecstatic as they lifted him easily off the ground. He hovered above Bactrian, whose camel lifted its ponderous head and regarded the airborne Bugaloo with mild curiosity.

"Well, you're right about that," Courage declared. "How far did you say it was to your village?"

"If you fly a little higher, you might be able to see the lights of Deliria over that way," Bactrian said, pointing.

Courage rose above a dune and looked. In the distance tiny pinpoints of light glimmered, like a scattering of sequins reflecting the moon. "There it is," he announced, coming down for a landing.

"You mean it's just over there?" Joy asked eagerly.

"Certainly," Bactrian put in. "Shall we be on our way?" He nudged his mount with his heels and the camel took a ponderous step forward. But then the magician reined in. "A word of caution," he cautioned.

The Bugaloos looked at him questioningly.

"It is best not to fly into Deliria."

"Why?" I.Q. asked.

"I can explain that at another time. But for now, you will do best to remain close to me as we proceed to the edge of the village, and then enter on foot."

"That sounds a bit dodgy," Courage said suspiciously.

Bactrian smiled thinly. "Perhaps you would prefer to be left out here by yourselves. The sun will rise again quite soon and when it does, you will discover that Deliria is not so close as you imagine."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Courage demanded, stepping toward the magician.

"Exactly what I say," Bactrian replied calmly.

"Oh, I'm sure it will be all right," Joy put in, touching Courage's arm. "Let's go with Mister Bactrian; I don't relish the thought of spending another whole day out here under that sun."

"Wisely spoken," the magician said, and once again thumped the camel's flanks with his heels.

Courage stubbornly insisted on flying as they proceeded steadily over the low, rolling dunes toward the lights of the village. He stayed close to the others, but his frequent suspicious glances at their guide was a clear indication of what he was thinking.

In a surprisingly brief time, they were close enough to make out the low, flat-roofed buildings of Deliria gleaming coldly in the moonlight. They reached what appeared to be a narrow road, a winding path of hard packed dirt just a bit firmer than the sand on either side of it.

"Where does that road come from?" I.Q. asked.

Bactrian twisted in the saddle and looked behind him, his brow knit in concentration as though the question had never occurred to him before. "Oh, that? Beyond the high dunes over there - you can just barely see them if you look very carefully - to other villages, perhaps an oasis or two."

"What's beyond the edge of the Desert?"

"Why, Tranquility Forest."

"No, I mean in the other direction."

Bactrian pondered the question for a moment and when he spoke, his eyes didn't meet I.Q.'s. "Well, nothing much. The Dreadful Desert is vast, and it keeps its own secrets."

I.Q. was hardly satisfied with the answer. "Didn't you say that you came from somewhere else? Other than Deliria, that is?"

Bactrian cleared his throat noisily. "Yes, well, uh-h...my home is over in that direction." He gestured vaguely. "Quite a long way from here. I have recently taken up residence here for...business purposes."

"Wot kind of business does a magician have?" Harmony wanted to know.

"Many kinds, many kinds," Bactrian harrumphed.

They were at the outskirts of the village now. Just ahead was a campfire with robed figures huddled around it. Nearby were four or five camels lying spraddle-legged on the sand, calmly working their ponderous jaws and turning disinterested eyes toward the newcomers. A man in a dark brown robe heaved himself to his feet from beside the fire when he saw them approach.

"You have returned," he said in a voice that hissed like a faulty steam radiator.

"But of course," the magician said with a hearty laugh.

"You have finished with the camel?"

In answer, Bactrian swung down to the ground and handed the reins to the brown-clad man. The magician was somewhat smaller on the ground than he had appeared in the saddle, his bulbous skull and rounded shoulders casting weird shadows. "Here you are, my good fellow," he said loftily.

"That will be..." The other man reached under his robe and dragged out an ancient gold watch. "Eighty-seven dinars."

Bactrian seemed to hesitate, then smiled blandly. "It's a bit excessive, but I'm not disposed to quibble." He turned to the Bugaloos. "Have you any spare cash with you? I've left my credit cards in my rooms, I fear."

The young exiles looked at each other. They had very little use for money, though they carried a few spare coins for emergencies.

"What's a dinar?" Joy asked.

"It's...ah well." The magician turned back to the man who held the camel's reins. Behind him the Bugaloos could see a crudely lettered sign that read:

AVARICIOUS RENT-A-CAMEL

"Perhaps," Bactrian went on, "you will be good enough to trust me until morning? You know where I'm staying."

But the other man shook his head firmly. In the firelight his hawk-nosed countenance seemed to glow dully, and his eyes glittered in a way that was less than friendly. "You know the terms," he said flatly.

Bactrian sighed and smiled. "A small down payment then," he said, and with a swift movement of his hand plucked a gold coin from behind the other's ear.

The camel-holder didn't seem impressed. "Five dinars," he grated, examining the coin. It looked as though he were about to spit on it, but instead he shoved it into a fold of his robe. "Where's the rest? You said when you left here that you were bringing back..."

"Quiet!" Bactrian roared, the sound of his voice so unexpected that the camel jerked its ponderous head up in surprise. "We shall not stand here and debate petty matters while my friends require assistance and hospitality. Take away that filthy beast you hold and retire to your miserable fireside whilst I accompany the Bugaloos into the village."

"But my money..."

"It shall be yours; that and a great deal more. But cease your harassment. Otherwise, I shall be forced to turn you into a pillar of salt." The magician's eyes glowed impressively

as he arched his shaggy eyebrows and flared his nostrils. The other man took a step backwards and seemed to bow.

"Oh yes. One thing more." Bactrian spoke with cool confidence now. "My friends here have left a car back that way. Send someone to fetch it here."

"I..." The camel-holder swallowed hard, his little eyes regarding the magician with doubt and fear. "That will be very difficult."

"Pillar of salt!" Bactrian boomed.

The man almost leaped backward, visibly trembling now. "Yes, yes," he stammered. "Tell me how to find this...this car." He was eying the Bugaloos, noting their wings, and it was evident that he had no idea what to make of them.

"You will find it by going in that direction," Bactrian said, pointing back the way they had come. "If you hurry, our tracks will lead you to it. Daylight will be soon enough for you to have it back here."

"Yes, yes." The man was thoroughly cowed now.

"Repairs will be needed. Deliver the car to that shop down in Alamein Alley. In the morning you shall be paid in full - for everything."

The man gasped, nearly yipped in terror as he grasped the meaning of the magician's words. He quickly hurried away, tethered the camel and conversed in whispers with one of the other figures huddled near the fire.

Bactrian watched for a moment, a smile on his generous lips. Then he turned to the Bugaloos. "Come, my friends. Let us go into the village and see what delights Deliria can offer us."

The magician walked ahead of them, striding majestically as he skirted the campfire, the recumbent camels, the other men who turned their cowed heads away as he passed.

Courage held his companions back for a moment. "I don't like this one bit," he hissed, glowering at the retreating back of Bactrian.

"It does look somewhat fishy," I.Q. agreed.

"But what can he possibly want with us?" Joy asked. "After all, he saved our lives."

"He did that," Harmony agreed, "but he's a phony just the same."

"Why do you say that?" I.Q. asked.

"Because that five-dinar piece he took from the Rent-A-Camel bloke, he borrowed it from me."

"Honestly?" I.Q. was startled.

"That's right. Ducked his fat old head to me as we were coming near this place and asked for a coin. For a lark, he said."

"What were you doing with a five-dinar piece?" Joy wanted to know. "I never heard of any such thing before."

Harmony shrugged. "Neither did I. I dipped in my pocket and took out what was there. Thought it was a quarter, to tell you the truth."

They all looked at each other.

"Do you suppose that blighter really is a magician?" Courage suggested.

"It could be a simple sleight-of-hand trick," I.Q. pointed out. "Maybe he just wanted to impress us."

"Well, he certainly impressed that chap down there," Harmony said, pointing to the brown-robed man.

"And he made the sun and moon do rather extraordinary tricks," Joy added, shivering slightly.

I.Q. stared at the magician's back for a moment, then shrugged. "Whatever. Let's go along with him for now. We don't have much of a choice, after all."

They trailed after Bactrian, aware of covert eyes on them as they reached the village itself. The street on which they walked was narrow, with dark, gaping doors in the mud-plastered houses that crowded in on them from either side. A few people were moving about or seated in little groups against the buildings, and at each corner torches flared in the windless night to light the way. No one spoke to them or looked directly at the Bugaloos. They had the odd feeling that they didn't exist, that they were passing through a place whose inhabitants couldn't quite see them.

"I feel a bit like a ghost," Joy whispered to I.Q. She had the sudden urge to giggle.

He turned and gave her a reassuring smile. "They don't know if we're real or just some illusion of Bactrian's."

"Perhaps we're not really here," Harmony chuckled.

"Well, we'd better be," Courage declared. "Where's our so-called magician going now?" He pointed ahead where Bactrian had paused before a lighted doorway and was beckoning to them.

"Come along," he called genially. "Here you will find food and rest. And other things."

After a moment's hesitation, the Bugaloos walked toward him. From the doorway came the sounds of many voices, with some sort of wailing music in the background. A beaded curtain hung in the doorway, and the magician pushed it aside to enter.

The voices stopped. The music died away. The only sound was rattling of the curtain, disturbed by Bactrian's passage. The Bugaloos crowded in behind him.

"Ah-h, and good evening to you, good citizens of Deliria," the magician boomed. He strode into the room, which was low-ceilinged and smoky. Men in robes and turbans squatted on the floor on cushions at small tables, their eyes fixed on the newcomers. Bactrian moved among them like a benevolent monarch, then paused at one table. One of the men there wore a robe of multi-colored stripes, and his expression as he looked at the magician was sullen and resentful.

"You appear to be having unkind thoughts," Bactrian said in a loud voice.

The man shifted his feet slightly but continued to stare.

"Perhaps a change of viewpoint will turn your mind to more pleasant thoughts." With a swift motion of his foot, he tipped the squatting man over on his back. Then he twirled his hand around in a circle, a forefinger pointing directly at the startled man. To the astonishment of everyone, Bactrian's victim began to spin around on his backside, faster and faster until he became a rainbow blur. The magician began to chuckle, then to roar with laughter. A few nervous titters answered him around the room.

Suddenly, Bactrian raised his hand high, and almost instantly the man ceased his whirling. The magician bowed to him and moved toward a large, round table in a corner. The two men seated there melted away into the crowd as they saw him coming. Bactrian waited for the Bugaloos, then gestured for them to be seated.

"A large plate of figs and a bowl of mangoes for my friends," the magician said to a hovering waiter. "They have come a long way and need to regain their strength."

The waiter hesitated, his eyes shifting uncertainly back and forth.

"Go!" Bactrian commanded. "Or I shall transport you to the Weird Wilderness!"

Naked fear leapt into the waiter's eyes, and he fairly jumped away from the table to carry out the magician's bidding. Bactrian settled back on his cushion and smiled contentedly.

"It is a pity when one must use one's powers for such petty purposes." He sighed. "Oh, the responsibilities of a necromancer."

"Mister Bactrian?" Joy said hesitantly.

"Yes, my dear?"

"When you found us...out there in the Desert...you said something about expecting us. Waiting for us?"

The magician's eyes turned wary. "Yes."

"How could you have known we were coming?"

Bactrian stared at the girl expressionlessly for a long moment. Then he harrumphed and looked wise and solemn. "My girl, you have seen but a tiny sampling of my powers today. Do you doubt that I could know of your presence in the Desert? The famous winged teenagers from the Weird Wilderness?"

Joy looked blankly at the magician. "From where?"

"The Weird...oh yes." He cleared his throat several times and peered around cautiously. "In Deliria, the place you know as Tranquility Forest is called the...uh-h...Weird Wilderness. They have a horror of such places, filled with trees that blot out the sun, and with tiny scurrying and flying creatures - yourselves excepted, of course."

"How very odd," Joy remarked. "I suppose that's why none of them have ever been in Tranquility Forest."

"Indeed."

At that moment the waiter reappeared, bearing dishes heaped with fruit. Behind him came a tiny, rotund man in billowing trousers, pointy-toed slippers and a jacket glittering with an intricate pattern worked in gold. The jeweled turban he wore seemed too big for his round head, and his eyes bulged like those of a jolly frog.

"I see you've brought them," he said in a squeaky voice. He eyed the Bugaloos with a friendly expression.

"Did you doubt me?" Bactrian responded.

"Good, good." The little man rubbed his hands together as he peered more closely at the teenagers. "Yes, they seem to be all you said."

The Bugaloos sat up a little straighter. Joy felt a little shiver go through her; beside her, Courage grew tense.

"You may dismiss those awful noisemakers now," Bactrian declared, gesturing toward the small platform where three sallow-looking men were listlessly fingering their odd instruments.

"Perhaps," the little man said flatly. He bowed to the Bugaloos. "Permit me. I am Philimor, proprietor of this humble coffee house. If you do well, you may consider me your new employer."

"Do well...employer?" Courage jumped to his feet. "What are you talking about?"

The little man frowned and glanced at Bactrian. "You have not explained to them?"

The magician shrugged. "I did not consider it to be necessary. They are here; my part of the bargain has been carried out."

"There was supposed to be another..."

"That is another matter entirely," Bactrian interrupted hastily. "There is no need to discuss it here." He smiled nervously.

"I want to know what you people are up to," Courage demanded. "What's this about our working for you?"

"Yes," Harmony put in. "Nobody said anything to us about any such thing." He looked accusingly at Bactrian.

The magician returned his stare. "Not long ago you were lost on the Dreadful Desert. Hopelessly lost. Now, thanks to me, you are safe here in Deliria. Do you not owe me some small act of gratitude?"

I.Q. spoke up. "There's no denying that, sir," he said. "We'll be glad to perform, if that's what Mister Philimor wants. Only we don't have any instruments."

"That has been arranged," the little man said with a curt nod. "Come with me." He started to walk toward the back of the room but when the Bugaloos didn't follow immediately, he stopped and turned back.

"Come with me now," he growled, and there was nothing jolly about his face now. "Or you will be forced to perform in chains - which I have also prepared for you."

Chapter Nine

"All right, let's take it from the top!"

Benita Bizarre stood in front of the microphone in her private recording studio and strummed ineptly on the electric guitar she held. Behind her, Woofer was on drums and Tweeter plunked the bass. Between them was Sparky, his little face screwed up in a grimace of intense pain as he listened to the Witch's squawking voice. This really can't be happening to me, he thought. Why in the world had he ever imagined that he could destroy Benita's recording apparatus all by himself? All he had accomplished was to get himself captured and, now, forced to be a part of the Witch's dreadful rock group.

"Cut it, cut it!" Benita's voice sliced through the awful cacophony. "Let's get with it, you freaky firefly." She glared at Sparky. "Don't you know that's supposed to be your solo?" She grabbed the kazoo from Sparky's hands and rapped him over the head with it. "We've gotta get this groovy new song of mine on wax fast, you dig? My factory'll be ready in a couple of days, and I want the whole world to be listening to Benita Bizarre's Blistering Ballads by the end of next week." She shoved the tin instrument back into the firefly's hands. "Now pay attention, you dingdong glowworm; this has gotta be the biggest thing that ever hit the charts!"

"You tell 'em, Boss!" Funky cackled over the loudspeaker from his seat in the control booth.

"You bet I will, Funky baby. Here we go now. And no more messing things up or I'll tie you to the big turntable over there and spin you till your head gets straightened out. From the top!"

Oh boy, oh boy, Sparky groaned to himself. If only he had gone with the Bugaloos. They would never have let him get into a situation like this.

"...pleased to present the most unique musical group ever to grace these humble premises," Philimor was

announcing. "Direct from the far side of the Dreadful Desert, and thanks to the all-powerful Great Bactrian, there they are: The Flying Nightmares!"

The lights in the coffee house were doused except for a dim spot focused on the bandstand, and for a moment after Philimor's last words there was utter silence. Suddenly, huge shadows flitted across the light, looming up on the walls all around the room. There was a rush of wings, a growing murmur of surprise and fear. An old man cried out in terror as a ghastly shape swooped over him, and several others started to scramble to their feet. And then the fearsome flyers descended slowly to the stage as Bactrian walked up and into the spotlight.

"Have no fear!" he commanded. "As long as I am present, these creatures from the Weird Wilderness cannot harm you. But listen, for the music they make is as sweet as they are evil!" He bowed away, leaving the stage to the performers.

The Bugaloos had been dressed in costumes of black, musty fur, with huge artificial wings that resembled those of bats. Their faces had been blacked with burnt cork, even Harmony's, and in the dim spotlight they were a truly terrifying sight.

Harmony seated himself at a battered old upright piano while Courage took his place behind a set of primitive drums. I.Q. held an electric guitar not too much unlike his own, and the tambourine Joy carried was painted in glowing, unearthly designs. The frightened murmurs of the audience continued as the group began to play, then gradually died as the soft, gentle rock of the Bugaloos wafted through the room. The contrast between their music and their appearance was astounding, but the listeners soon had settled down to give them all their attention.

"This is the kinkest setup I've ever seen," Harmony whispered to Courage during an I.Q. solo passage.

"You're tell me! That old faker is barmy!"

"I think he's just using us to impress the natives here with his so-called powers."

"That's what it looks like to me," Courage agreed.

"Well, it's not every day that a second-rate magician runs across a rock group that flies."

Courage smiled grimly. "I'm beginning to believe he really was waiting for us out there on the Desert."

"Me, too. But he..." Harmony broke off the conversation abruptly to resume playing. He missed his electric organ, but his old piano wasn't as bad as he had expected.

When they finished, the Bugaloos made their exit as they had entered. In the tiny dressing room at the back of the coffee house they found Bactrian and Philimor waiting, both with hugely pleased smiles on their faces.

"That was excellent, excellent!" the magician beamed. "You're even better than I had heard."

"Yes, they're not bad," Philimor admitted.

"Well, if we're so good," Harmony put in, "why do we have to wear these weirdo get-ups?"

Bactrian chuckled. "Just showmanship, my friends. Showmanship. Give the public a little thrill, a taste of terror, then soothe them with sweet music."

"I don't like being billed as a Flying Nightmare," Courage said truculently. "We're Bugaloos."

Bactrian looked at Philimor, and both men shrugged. "Trust in my judgment," the magician said. "The people of Deliria know of my powers, and they are more prepared to believe that I would bring them fearsome creatures of the night than nice young people like you."

"But they must have seen us out there before we had to put on these ruddy vampire suits," Courage pointed out.

"The people of Deliria," Bactrian intoned solemnly, "know better than to believe their eyes where I am concerned. They know that I can make the most loathsome lizard appear to be a troupe of dancing girls. That I can turn a bag of dried corn into a feast fit for a Pharaoh. That I can control the sun and moon, the winds of the Desert and the..."

"All right, all right," Philimor interrupted. "I think we all get the point." He eyed the magician coldly. "You have a deal. They can stay and perform every night; the audience liked them, all right, and there'll be twice as many people out there tomorrow. But one thing."

"Yes?" Bactrian said blandly.

"They're going to have to stay in your quarters. There's no more room at the Inn."

Bactrian started to protest, but apparently thought better of it. "Very well," he said. "But I must, in turn, insist on a condition of my own."

"What's that?"

"Our agreement was to..." He glanced at the Bugaloos, who were taking off their make-up, and lowered his voice. "Our agreement was that you would, in addition to overlooking certain...expenses...of mine, pay these superb performers a wage of some sort."

Philimor frowned. "I don't recall that."

"Just a few dinars. The poor young people have no home of their own, you know, and their automobile was damaged on the way here. They will need money to pay for repairs."

"And as their agent you get a percentage," the little round man said shrewdly.

Bactrian shrugged. "It's only fair."

Philimor hesitated, then nodded. "All right. I've carried you this far, and the kids there will earn a lot of dinars for me."

"Excellent, excellent!" Bactrian's eyes gleamed and his big loose-lipped mouth spread in a broad grin. "You shall not regret it."

"But the rest of our deal is still in force," Philimor said coldly. "I've got a lot more at stake than just the few little tabs you've run up since you've been in town."

"Why certainly. Just as soon as...well, you know."

"You've been promising that for some time now."

"These things take time. But at least we know that the...project...has been a success so far. Otherwise, they would not be here." He nodded at the Bugaloos.

"That's true," Philimor agreed reluctantly. "But if you don't come through in a few more days, you're going to find this village too hot for you. Understand me?"

Bactrian gave the little man a lofty look, but the expression quickly crumbled and the magician seemed to shrivel and become more hunched over than usual. "Yes," he mumbled. "I understand."

Chapter Ten

The morning sun streamed through the uncurtained window of the upstairs room that the Bugaloos shared with Bactrian. The room was roomy enough, so that the teenagers could get well away from the magician and his stentorian snoring to get some sleep themselves. But now, as was their habit, they were instantly wide awake to greet the new day.

Joy jumped up to go to the window. Below, the village street was already bustling with robed figures moving here and there. Some carried reed baskets, others led donkeys; a group of veiled women were gathered around a fountain in a small square at the end of the street. And as the girl watched, a camel came into view, towing the disabled Bugaloo Buggy.

"Oh, look!" she whispered to the others. They joined her at the window and noted the way their car was being taken.

"I'll go down to see what they're going to do with it." Courage announced.

"Me too," Harmony said.

"We'll all go," I.Q. said, glancing at the sleeping Bactrian.

"But we're locked in," Joy pointed out. The magician made a point of locking the heavy door and pocketing the key.

"And this window has bars on it," Harmony pointed out, touching the pair of iron strips that blocked the window.

Courage smiled grimly. "They don't look too strong to me. And if I can bend them, then we can just fly down to the street."

"Provided we can fly," I.Q. said, remembering their experience the day before.

"We'll soon find out," Courage grinned. He set himself, grasped the two bars, and exerted all of his considerable strength against them. At first, nothing happened. Then, slowly and grudgingly, the metal started to give way, to bend outward. Courage was breathing hard, the muscles in his arms and shoulders nearly popping out of his skin, but he was smiling with satisfaction. Finally, he stepped back to look at the opening he had made.

"They just don't make 'em the way they used to," Harmony observed.

"Thank heaven for that," Joy said.

"Better let me go first," Courage suggested. "Ladies first isn't polite when she might take a nasty fall." He pulled himself through the bars, poised on the window ledge, and launched himself into the air. To his relief, he had no difficulty in keeping himself airborne, and he turned to beckon to the others.

When they were all down in the street, they began walking toward the square. As on the night before, none of the inhabitants of Deliria looked directly at them.

"That phony magician sure has these people faked out, doesn't he?" Harmony said.

"He seems to have made quite an impression on them," I.Q. agreed.

"What do you suppose he's doing in this town, anyway?" Joy asked.

"Well," I.Q. replied thoughtfully, "a magician usually has to keep on the move. You know, after the people of one town have seen his whole bag of tricks, what does he do for an encore?"

"Do you think he's not a real magician?" Joy inquired.

"Do you?"

The girl frowned thoughtfully. "I don't know what to think. Yet, there was the business with the sun out on the Desert yesterday. And that poor man in the coffee house."

"Yes, those were impressive," I.Q. agreed. "But if he really has such powers, what can he possibly need with us?"

No one had an answer to that, and they continued on through the square to the other side. "Now where?" Courage asked.

"The Buggy was headed that way," Harmony said, pointing. Several narrow alleys led away from the square.

I.Q. knelt to look for a tire track, but the dirt was too hard-packed to take any impression. He stood up and peered down one alley, then another.

"I guess we'll just have to try them all until we find the right one," he said, and started toward the nearest opening.

"Hold on," Joy said suddenly. "Listen."

From somewhere came the distant sound of metal clanging against metal in a more or less steady rhythm. Courage listened for a moment, head cocked to one side. A worried expression crept over his face. "Come on, mates," he said. "That sounds like someone bashing fenders, and it's right down this way."

The alley was shadowed and twisting, the ramshackle buildings on either side so close the Bugaloos had to move in single file. They went around one corner after the other, drawn by the increasingly loud sound, until they found themselves in an open area. Not a soul was in sight, and now the banging noises had ceased.

"Where can it be?" Joy wondered, looking all around. They were in a dead end, the only exit the way they had come in. The old buildings here seemed to tower above them, to lean in as though about to topple over and crush them into dust.

"That must be the place," Harmony announced. Off to one side was a large wooden shed with a cavernous opening in front. As they approached it, the Bugaloos saw that they had indeed found the place they were looking for. The sign above it read:

ABOU BEN BASHEM'S BANG-BANG BODY SHOP

Inside the door, an extremely large man in coveralls and greasy khaki turban was contemplating the rear end of the Bugaloo Buggy. In his hand was a huge iron mallet, and as the Bugaloos watched in horror he raised it above his head.

"Hey! Cut that out!" Courage dashed forward and grabbed the mechanic's arm before he could strike a blow.

The man looked around, startled. He had a broad, amiable face, and appeared to be not much older than the Bugaloos. He smiled easily and shrugged off Courage's grip. "Hi there," he said. "You the cats who own this crate?"

"We sure are," Courage declared. "What do you think you're doing to it?" He noted ruefully that the fenders and sides of the Buggy had good-sized dents in them.

The mechanic slipped off his turban and scratched his long, black hair. "I wish I knew. You fellas know anything about this here business?"

Courage gave him an exasperated look. "Do you mean to say you don't know anything about fixing automobiles?"

"Oh, sure I do. Some. Only I've only gotten a little way into my correspondence course, you see." The mechanic picked up a manual from a workbench and showed it to Courage. "The Rock City Wrecking School. In two or three more years I'll have my

diploma and then...well, this is the first car I've had a real chance to work on. Don't get many of them in these parts, you know."

"Wot did you do before?" Harmony asked sarcastically. "Shoe camels?"

The mechanic beamed. "Why, yeah, that's it. How did you guess?"

"Oh, it wasn't hard," Harmony muttered.

"Hey, I'm Abou Ben Bashem. Just call me Boo." He stuck out a huge paw and gripped Courage's hand, then Harmony's, who winced.

"I'll never play the organ again," he groaned.

When they had all finished introducing themselves, Courage and Harmony examined the damage. The dents made by the genial giant were ugly, but they could be fixed. The real problem was under the hood, much to the surprise of Boo.

"Oh, is that what makes it go?" he said in surprise.

"Oh, lovely," Harmony murmured as he probed at the engine.

"Hey look, you fellows help me out and I'll only charge you half price," Boo said brightly.

Courage looked at him in amazement. "Half price! After the way you've pounded on our Buggy like this?"

The mechanic's grin didn't waver. "Well, anybody can make a little mistake. And I'd probably get in trouble if anybody heard I gave you a break on the price."

"Is that so?"

"Sure. That's the first thing the correspondence school taught me." The young giant closed his eyes, knitted his brow in concentration, and recited: "Lesson Number One. Always charge what the traffic will bear - and then double it. Parts are profitable, but labor is larceny. Never give a sucker an even break." He opened his eyes and beamed down at the dumbfounded Bugaloos. "See? I remembered every word."

"Boy, I'd like to get a look at that correspondence course myself," Harmony said unbelievably.

"Sounds like something Benita herself might have dreamed up," I.Q. observed.

"The problem is that we really haven't much money," Joy said practically.

"Oh, I heard you're making heavy bread over at Philimor's East," Boo said, unperturbed.

"At where?" Harmony asked.

"Philimor's East. The coffee house. I heard about you."

"So that's the name of the place," I.Q. said. "I guess we never noticed it last night."

"Yeah, well you guys help me out and it won't cost you so much." Boo gave them his amiable grin and stepped around to gaze uncomprehendingly at the engine. "So that's what makes it go, huh?"

Courage started to protest, but I.Q. stopped him. "Perhaps we'd best help our friend Boo with this job. It's the least we can do, since we can't leave here without the Buggy."

There was no arguing with him, so Courage and Harmony set to work on the engine while I.Q. surveyed the damage done by the giant mechanic's monstrous mallet. They were engrossed in their work when Joy let out a cry of alarm.

The boys turned to see a cluster of men in the doorway, led by Bactrian and Philimor. They didn't look friendly.

"What's up?" I.Q. asked amiably.

"What are you doing here?" Bactrian demanded.

"Well, we wanted to see how our darlin' old Buggy was getting along," Harmony answered, wiping his hands on a greasy rag as he stepped toward the magician.

"You had no business trying to escape from my quarters."

"It was more than a try," Harmony pointed out.

The magician coughed and rubbed his chin. "Yes, well, of course. I never intended to keep you captive. A lot of thieves in Deliria. Wanted to make sure no one got in during the night." He glanced briefly at Philimor and managed a confident smile. "You see? I told you they wouldn't want to leave town. Where would they go?"

The little round man didn't answer, and Bactrian turned back to the Bugaloos. "You wouldn't want to go anywhere else, would you?" he said.

"Well," I.Q. replied thoughtfully, "as long as we've been forced to leave Tranquility...that is, the Weird Wilderness...we thought we might want to do a bit of exploring. You know." He smiled as falsely at the magician as Bactrian had at the Bugaloos.

"But why would you want to leave beautiful Deliria?"

I.Q. shrugged. "It's a splendid village. Perhaps we'll never leave. But we'd like to be able to."

"Yes. Well. Uh-h...is everything satisfactory?" Bactrian glanced at Boo, who was grinning happily at everyone.

"No problems. At the moment," Harmony ducked back under the open hood and began to do intricate things with his wrench.

Bactrian rubbed his hands together. "You fully understand that leaving here...that is, walking away across the Dreadful Desert...is quite impossible?"

"Oh sure," I.Q. assured him.

"Then you will be glad to know that you have made such a hit with the people of Deliria that a special matinee performance has been arranged for you."

"Wot?!" Harmony looked up from his tinkering, outraged.

"It's the price of fame." The magician smiled oilily. "Will you come along now, or must force be employed?"

There was no way to be certain how long the Bugaloos had been in Deliria. Days and nights had little meaning, with the sun and moon staggering across the sky at unpredictable intervals, so that matinee performances merged into midnight shows. At odd moments they made their way to Abou Ben Bashem's garage to work on the Bugaloo Buggy, but there was a great deal to do and little time to do it. And always near them hovered Bactrian, who seldom, if ever, allowed them out of his sight. It was undoubtedly for that reason that the magician was forced to go through his most embarrassing scene in the presence of the Bugaloos.

The Buggy's engine was broken down into an infinite number of parts and arranged on a cloth on the floor of Boo's garage when it happened. Bactrian lounged in a peacock chair near the door, munching on a bunch of grapes, when the sound of quick footsteps resounded in the little courtyard.

"So!" a decidedly female voice spat. "This is what you're up to now!"

In the doorway stood a small and decidedly plump girl, dressed in a maxi-skirt that swung angrily around her ankles. The veil that she probably should have been wearing

was tied around her forehead as a headband, and her six-inch-long eyelashes threatened to tangle in her dark, curly bangs.

Bactrian sprang to his feet, a look of astonishment on his face. "Theda!" he croaked. "What are you doing here?"

The girl - she was young in years, but quite evidently far advanced in indignation - glared at the magician and tapped her booted foot. "You promised you wouldn't do anything like this again," she said accusingly.

"Why, my dear," the magician quavered, "I don't understand what you mean..."

"You don't fool me one little bit." The girl glanced swiftly at the others in the garage. For a moment her eyes lingered on the huge Boo, then swiveled back to Bactrian. "So, you have the Bugaloos," she said flatly.

"Well, yes."

"And the other?"

Bactrian turned almost the color of his white robe. "The other?" he gasped.

"I know you didn't come all the way to Deliria for your health," Theda said with heavy sarcasm. "You promised Mother and me..."

"Now shush, child," the magician said quickly, stepping toward the girl and putting an arm around her. "No daughter should speak to her father that way."

The girl was unimpressed, but she didn't try to shrug out of his embrace. She looked calculatingly at the Bugaloos, who stood around the Buggy open-mouthed.

"Are they as good in person as they are on records?" the girl asked Bactrian.

"Why...yes, they are. Even better, as a matter of fact." The magician was obviously eager to please this junior harridan who was evidently his daughter. "Would you like to hear them? Now?"

Theda flicked a disdainful glance at her father, then fixed her dark eyes on Joy. "She's the girl singer with the group, is she?"

"You bet yer plastic eyelashes she is, darlin'," Harmony replied.

The girl looked at him for a moment, then twitched her head back and forth contemptuously. "So, now I know why you've never made it to the bigtime."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Courage demanded, flicking a gob of oil from his nose.

"Hey, listen," the girl said, "I've got the biggest collection of 45s this side of Rock City, and you cats don't know where you're at. Not since Benita Bizarre has jumped into the Top Forty."

"BENITA BIZARRE!" all four Bugaloos chorused at once.

"That's right. You can't throw a shekel in a jukebox anywhere without finding that groovy Witch on it. And you know what makes her so great?" Theda's tone was challenging as she thrust her ample chin toward the aghast Bugaloos. "Well, I'll tell you, Bugaloos. They've got a chick in that group who really knows what it's all about. Benita herself, you get the message? A woman, Bugaloos. That's what makes music get to you these days. Listen to her. Like, the distant wail of a lovelorn outboard motor." She looked at Joy scornfully. "You don't get a sound like that out of a chick like her."

"Now, Theda," Bactrian put in. "You really don't have to talk that way."

The girl whirled on her father, dark eyes flashing. "No, I don't, Father dear," she said in a voice filled with cloying venom. "But as long as you're using the Bugaloos for your purposes, why shouldn't I do the same?" She turned back to the flying teenagers. "I'm

joining your group. And with me here, there's no room for Miss Goody-goody What's-er-name? Dig?"

There was total silence for a long moment before Courage spoke up. "You're out of yer flippin' bird," he said.

Theda wasn't even slightly ruffled. She turned to her father and smiled chillingly. "Tell him, Father. Do I get what I want, or do I go home and bring Mother back here?"

It was obvious that the threat was more than Bactrian could hope to resist. He patted the girl's plump arm nervously and bobbed his ponderous head. "Anything you say, my dear," he assured her. "Anything you say."

Chapter Eleven

To her credit, Joy stayed in Deliria for three or four days (no one could be exactly certain, considering the vagaries of the sun and moon there) before she concluded that it was best for her to leave. Theda took her place with the Bugaloos in their performances at Philimor's East, and of course their act had to be changed because the magician's daughter couldn't fly, not even as an illusion. Her voice wasn't bad for a girl who had nothing to offer but an overpowering set of vocal cords and a body that thrashed corpulently on the little bandstand.

The Bugaloos - "plus THEDA" - were now appearing as themselves, having been allowed to shed their ghastly costumes. But there were rumblings of discontent among the men in the audiences, and it was evident that the new jukebox recently installed near the front door was now in greater favor than the live performers.

"Benita's Bunch!" was the cry whenever a record began to play, and the customers at Philimor's East would brighten at the sounds that issued from the Great Gaudy Groove Machine.

"Well, they've got no taste," Courage commented during a break, when they were in the tiny dressing room behind the coffee house.

"Listen, bugs," Theda said languidly from the couch that had been installed especially for her, "there's no sense in knocking it. That Benita has got the sound, and we've gotta get with it."

"That old hag wouldn't know a groovy sound from a mangy hound," Harmony said hotly.

"I didn't get that," I.Q. said.

"I meant exactly what I said," Harmony explained. "I'm too ruddy angry to make a lemon and lime. I mean rhyme!" He slapped himself on the leg in exasperation.

"That's rather a different instrument I heard in her latest record," Joy observed thoughtfully.

"So?" Harmony wasn't about to be distracted by technical discussions.

"It just reminded me..." The girl paused, saw that no one was paying much attention to what she was saying, and kept her silence.

"Well, Benita Bizarre and her rotten records aren't our problem now," Harmony declared with a withering glance at Theda.

"No," I.Q. said diplomatically. "The Buggy is almost ready to go, isn't it?"

"It sure is," Courage said.

"But then where do we go?" Harmony wanted to know.

No one had an answer to that and when it was time for the next show, Joy was left alone in the dressing room.

There was no way out of the room except through the coffee house itself, but Joy had no difficulty in slipping unseen along the wall to the front door while the audience was concentrating on the Bugaloos on the stage. Once outside, she found the street quiet and dark; the few people who were about refused, as usual, to acknowledge the presence of a teenager with wings, especially one who was associated with the fearsome Bactrian.

Joy walked quickly to the outskirts of the village until she came to the Rent-A-Camel campfire. The scene there was the same as it had been before - how long ago? The girl contemplated approaching the men around the campfire but finally decided against it. It was night, and perhaps she could fly all the way...

It was daylight, and she had not flown all the way. Joy collapsed against the side of a steep dune and did her very best not to cry. The sun was so hot, and she felt so weak...

She looked around her, but there was nothing to tell her where she was or where she wanted to go. The Dreadful Desert was the same as it had been before, burning and endless, uncrossable for those who didn't know it. Joy put her head down and thought about the cool, green depths of Tranquility Forest. The way the sun slanted in to bring warmth - just enough. The Sparkling Waterfall and the bubbling pool below, sinking into the watery depths and bobbing back up to burst into the exhilarating air...

There was no way of knowing how long she lay there but when at last she raised her head Joy saw nothing but stars. Big, bright, twinkling stars, gleaming down from a soft velvet sky and so close it seemed she could reach out and pluck each one without moving from where she was.

But she did move. She stood up, raised her arms, and flew because she had learned one important thing from Bactrian: to travel on the Desert it is necessary to take advantage of the sun's absence.

It was still a long way, longer than she had imagined it could possibly be, and the sun was already rising again by the time she finally reached the edge of the Dreadful Desert. Her wings were growing heavy under the increasing heat, and Joy barely made it to the foot of the high cliff before collapsing. She sprawled in the sand, staring up at the impossibly steep wall before her, and wondered why she had come here in the first place.

And then she remembered. "I can't do anything for the boys," she said aloud to the silent Desert, "but Sparky needs me. Somehow he's been forced to join Benita's Bunch; I'd recognize that kazoo anywhere."

The girl got to her feet and began to search determinedly for the slanting ledge they had driven down so many days ago. By now it was already too hot for her to hope to fly up to the top. The sun's glare nearly blinded her, and she stumbled through the soft sand as she moved back and forth in front of that formidable barrier.

She found it without realizing it, literally stumbled across it, as a matter of fact. Where she had been seeking that place some ten feet above the Dreadful floor where the ledge ended abruptly, she found it under her feet. At first she couldn't believe it; was it another of the uncanny tricks that the Dreadful Desert played? And yet it was there in front of her, the steeply slanting path that led to the top of the cliff. It wasn't until she was nearly at the top that Joy realized what must have happened. The wind, of course, had shifted

the sand, raising the Desert floor in some places and lowering it in others. She was grateful that for once the shifting sands had worked to her advantage - and that was the last thing she had to be thankful for for some time.

At the top of the cliff she ran, with a small cry of joy, into the welcoming coolness of Tranquility Forest. On the green turf beside the narrow path she flung herself down, reveling in the feel of grass, of growing things. Nearby a bird twittered, as though happy to see Joy after so long a time. She looked up, trying to see it, to return the greeting. And then she remembered. True, she was home again in Tranquility Forest, but it was no longer her home. She would have to be careful, exceedingly cautious as she moved about in this place where she had once been as free, literally, as that warbling bird.

"Sparky," she murmured sadly. "I must find Sparky."

She didn't think of what she would do when she found the little firefly. She already knew. With a last glance at the bleak, forbidding vista behind her, she plunged into the Forest and began to make her way back to the Bugaloos' clearing.

The Bluebell Flower trembled on its stem, eyes closed but its listening senses operating on full. It required no special effort to hear what was causing the Flower's terror, but the crash and roar of heavy construction equipment resounded shatteringly just beyond the clearing. "Oh, I can't stand it," the Bluebell wept. "They're coming, they're coming!"

"Quit that shaking!" a Grape snapped.

"Yeah, you're not the only one who's in trouble here," another said.

The Flower's eyes opened and it looked disdainfully at its clustered companions. What do Benita and her Horrible Hardhats care about you? It's me they're after. Me and my beautiful petals - for that raunchy rat's buttonhole!" The Bluebell's wail almost drowned out the sound of the machinery which was ripping through the Forest.

"Hey, knock it off!" a Grape cried urgently.

"I'll do no such thing," the Bluebell sniffed. "I've got as much right to cry as anybody."

"That's not what I mean."

"Message coming through," another Grape announced.

"Someone coming," a third said.

"Oh no!" the Flower sobbed. "They're here to get me!"

"From the other direction," the first Grape said.

"Who comes from there?" All the Grapes turned their purple heads as far as they could, which wasn't very far. The Bluebell Flower refused to look.

The figure that stepped cautiously into the clearing was indistinct at first; none of the Grapes could get a good look. But when the new arrival moved forward a little further, they burst out in a chorus of shouts.

"Oh joy, it's Joy!" one cried.

"They're back! The Bugaloos are back!"

"Hush!" another cautioned. "The Witch might hear."

Joy hurried over to the group of plants and greeted them quietly. "It's so good to be back," she said, not entirely wholeheartedly.

"Where are the boys?" the Bluebell Flower asked, curiosity overcoming its fear.

Joy was silent for a moment, wondering how to answer.

"They have to hide, silly," a Grape said to the Flower. "Joy just came to tell us everything will be all right. Isn't that right, Joy?"

The girl bit her lip, then slowly nodded. She didn't have the heart to tell them anything else.

"Just in the nick of time!" the Bluebell Flower crowed. "I knew you'd all be back to rescue me."

"Rescue you?"

"Yes. From that horrible machinery. You can hear it, can't you?"

Joy certainly could. "What are they doing so close to the clearing?"

"They're building a jet runway, and it's going to run right through here."

"Oh! How horrid! I never realized Benita would actually go so far!"

"Yeah," a Grape put in. "And Funky is going to pluck Bluebell and put her in his buttonhole." The Grape seemed to consider the prospect something less than appalling.

"Oh dear," Joy murmured, turning away from the plants so they couldn't see the woebegone expression on her face.

"But you're going to stop them, aren't you?" the Bluebell Flower said confidently.

"I...well...yes. Of course." Her mind was in a whirl, and she felt the sting of guilt, for she had been thinking only of Sparky without even considering these other friends, who were certainly more helpless than the firefly.

"Message coming in. Message coming in!"

"Is it the boys?" the Bluebell asked hopefully. "Are they on their way?"

"Huh-uh," a Grape replied.

"It's a car!" another said.

"It's the Witch's car, and it's heading this way!"

"Oh, no-o-o," the Flower wailed, beginning to weep again. "Save us, Joy. Save us!"

The girl hesitated. "I will," she said at last. "I'll find some way."

"Better hide," a Grape advised. "Benita's almost here."

Joy turned and sprinted toward the far end of the clearing, paused at the edge to give them a wave of reassurance she didn't feel, and plunged into the Forest.

"I must hide," she told herself as she slipped through the underbrush swiftly and quietly. "I'll wait till nightfall; then perhaps I'll be able to help my friends."

Suddenly, she stopped short. Nightfall. But that might be too late! What could she do? How could she thwart the Witch's unspeakable plans? She had to stay close to the clearing, ready to intervene somehow.

Joy turned and began to creep back the way she had come. There was a place she knew of, a large mulberry tree whose branches grew thickly, drooping to the ground to form a little secret nest. No one would see her in there, if she were very careful, but she could see out. Moving like a wraith, a wisp of smoke, through the woods she knew so well, Joy circled the clearing until she spotted the lush tree. She was stunned to note the destruction beyond the clearing; not far away she could glimpse the movements of giant orange and yellow machines, gnawing away at the ground and uprooting trees. Appalled, she stared, wide-eyed, and nearly forgot to duck out of sight as Benita Bizarre's Baroque Buggy careened around a curve.

The girl darted behind a bush, waited until the gaudy limousine had passed, and hurried to the shelter of the mulberry tree. On her hands and knees, she crawled in among the close-clustered branches to the dark, cave-like interior. She blinked her eyes several times, accustoming them to the gloom. Moving in until she came against the tree trunk, she turned to find a peephole that would give her a view of the clearing.

The Baroque Buggy had come to a stop there, and Joy saw Funky hurrying around to open the rear door for Benita. Woofer and Tweeter were there, too, their big heads bobbing and bouncing. Joy pulled the branches aside slightly to get a better look - and gasped.

Sparky was with them! Sparky, seated in the front seat, smiling and to all appearances perfectly at home. One of Benita's Bunch and enjoying it thoroughly!

She started forward involuntarily, unwilling to believe her eyes. As she moved, she was vaguely aware of a faint, rustling sound nearby. She hesitated, frowning. The noise was so close...behind her?

As she started to look over her shoulder into the musty darkness, there was a quick skittering rush, a harsh gasp, and before she could move or cry out something came down overhead to blot out her vision. She tried to fight free of it, but her arms were pinned, her wind cut off. She struggled to breathe, but it was a losing battle. As she felt herself falling into unconsciousness, Joy's last thought was that she had failed, failed everyone, and her final sound was a muffled sob.

Chapter Twelve

"We don't care what sort of commitment you've made to Philimor," Courage declared. "We're leaving!"

The three Bugaloos confronted Bactrian in his quarters, their angry faces reflecting their determination. The magician stood by the doorway as though to bar their exit, but he clearly saw the futility of trying to stop them by physical force.

"Now, boys. I'm certain that no harm has come to Joy. She's probably just wandering around the village."

"Not all night she isn't," Harmony said. "She's cleared out, and you know why."

"But...but where could she go?" the magician quavered. He seemed to have aged half a century these past few days, especially since the arrival of his domineering daughter.

"Back to Tranquility Forest, I'm certain," I.Q. said.

"But that's no longer your home."

"I know why she's gone there," Harmony said. "She must have dug that kazoo bit on Benita's rotten records that have been befouling Philimor's jukebox. She's gone to bring Sparky back, and we have to help her."

Bactrian looked bewildered; he knew nothing about the firefly. "I can't let you go," he said stubbornly.

"You can't stop us," Courage challenged him.

"Oh yes I can," the magician blustered. "I'll...I'll turn you to stone. To marble. Statues of the Bugaloos to grace the village square of Deliria!" His eyes flashed and he raised an arm as though to summon thunderbolts from the heavens. But the Bugaloos weren't at all impressed.

"You'd need a lot of quick-setting concrete for that, old darlin'," Harmony scoffed.

"We don't believe in your magic anymore."

"Yes, we've caught on to a few things since we've been here," Courage put in.

The magician looked wary. "Oh yes? Such as what?"

"Such as the way you and Philimor are in on some sort of scheme together. And we saw him paying off that fellow in the striped robe. The one you made spin around the night we got here."

"Well, what on earth is that supposed to mean?" Bactrian demanded weakly.

"It means he was set up for that little demonstration of yours, just to keep the natives from seeing through your vaudeville tricks. He did that spinning around all by himself; you didn't make him do it."

"Then what about the Desert? Didn't I make the sun move? Didn't I bring out the moon to light your way to safety here? Didn't I go all the way out there to rescue you? How do you suppose I knew you were coming at all?"

"We're not sure of that," I.Q. admitted, "though with all modesty I must say that word of our eviction from Tranquility Forest must have got around. We're not exactly unknowns, you know."

"And as far as that sun nonsense is concerned," Harmony added, "you just delayed us long enough out there to make it seem it was your doing. Time goes by very slowly on the Desert during the day, but when the sun begins to go down it goes in a hurry. We've seen that since we've been here, too. You're nothing but a fraud, Bactrian. You lucked onto us and saw a way to use us, to wiggle your way out of your debt to Philimor."

"So that's what you believe, eh?" the magician said with a faint smile. "You have no idea what magical powers I possess, Bugaloos. I'll...I'll..." Bactrian gulped, looked from one angry face to the other, then fell silent.

"Well?" Courage said. "Are you going to let us go peaceably or do we have to fly out that window again?"

The magician's hands were trembling visibly, and the perspiration that beaded his brow had nothing to do with the heat of the midmorning. "Now be reasonable, boys. You can't get back to Tranquility Forest by yourselves."

"Joy did. Or at least she's trying to. We've got to look for her." Courage moved toward the door that Bactrian blocked.

"But you'd all perish out there."

"No, we won't. The Buggy is almost fixed, and we've rigged her so she won't overheat again."

The magician slumped, clearly defeated. "Have pity on me," he pleaded. "I'm an old man, beset on all sides by enemies, and worse."

"Worse?" I.Q. echoed.

Bactrian swallowed hard. "My daughter," he croaked. "You have no idea how hard it is..."

For once the magician had won their sympathy. I.Q. put a comforting hand on his shoulder. "I think we've got an idea what you're up against there." He certainly did. The old man was obviously terrified of Theda's temper and incessant demands. Already she seemed bored by her prominence as the "star" of the Bugaloos' fractured group and appeared to be casting about for something else to amuse her.

"Tell you what," Harmony suggested. "You help us get back across the Desert and...and we'll find some way to persuade Theda not to make trouble over it." That was a large promise, Harmony knew, but he was certain that they would think of something. They had to.

The magician brightened somewhat. "Go back to Tranquility Forest with you?" He mulled over the idea, and as he did the sly look returned to his eyes. "I've...ah-h...never been there, you know."

"It's a very pleasant place," I.Q. said. "Or it was, until Benita Bizarre became the owner."

Bactrian drew himself up and smiled blandly at the Bugaloos. "Yes. Benita Bizarre is the new owner, isn't she. And that's not the way it should be. No, indeed. I will go with you, guide you. Only..." He paused, and some of the uncertainty crept again over his sagging features. "Only we must leave as soon as possible. Before Theda gets wind of what we're up to."

"Let's get down to the Buggy then," Courage said. "The sooner it's ready to go, the sooner we leave."

They moved quickly, then, although the magician kept looking furtively around him as they slipped along the edges of the village square. When they reached the narrow alley that led to Abou Ben Bashem's garage, he seemed to breathe more easily and strode forward vigorously. His daughter was nowhere in sight.

Bactrian's relief was short-lived, however, for no sooner had they stepped through the door of the garage than the dreaded sulky whine greeted them.

"Oh, Father, there you are." Theda stepped out from the rear of the cavernous building and draped herself across the hood of the Bugaloo Buggy. "I was wondering when you were going to try to sneak away from here."

The magician blanched, and he took a shocked step backward, hands upraised in front of him. "Now, my dear," he stammered. "What made you think a terrible thing like that of your poor dear old father?"

The girl sneered faintly and tossed her heavy hair, then began to examine her long, silver-polished fingernails. "Haven't I known you all my life?" she relied at last.

"But I...I just came down here to see how the...the work on the Bugaloo Buggy was coming along. Very difficult job, I understand. Won't be ready for days yet. Right, boys?" He turned his head and gave the Bugaloos an elaborate and rather desperate wink.

"Who do you think you're kidding?" the girl said indifferently. "All it needs is a few minor adjustments to the carburetor, new insulation for the radiator hose and that special helical nut for the transmission. Here." Without straightening, she tossed a small object to Courage. "I ran it off on Boo's metal lathe just now. It should fit perfectly."

Even the Bugaloos were impressed. "You mean you know all about fixing cars?" Harmony gasped.

Theda shrugged. "Sure. Been messing with them all my life. I've built dragsters from the ground up, and I could take that Buggy of yours apart and put it together blindfolded. It's not a bad little piece of machinery, but it's nothing like what I've got."

I.Q. stepped forward. "Am I to gather that you have no objection to our leaving, then?"

"Why should I? Being a rock star is a real drag, you dig? I like a little more excitement, and I've found it."

"What are you talking about?" Bactrian said sternly, sounding remarkably like a father.

"I mean I'm splitting for home, Dad. And taking Boo with me."

The magician appeared horrified. "But what will your mother say?"

"She'll be glad to see him. Boo can't fix cars worth beans, but he sure knows what to do behind a wheel. I figure with him driving and me in the pits we'll clean up on the Oasis Circuit."

Bactrian was thoroughly bewildered. "But...how do you know that Boo is...uh-h...such a remarkable driver?"

"I've had him out in my own Bactrian Bomber a few times. Had to do something to kill time around here."

"Your...Bactrian Bomber?"

"Sure. You know, the groovy little runabout I threw together last year."

"I...I had no idea you had it here with you," the magician said weakly.

"What did you think? I came here on one of those creaky old camels?"

"But I..." The old man seemed stricken, somehow lost. "Are you sure this is what you want to do?" He seemed to have forgotten how much he wanted to get away from the girl.

Theda pushed herself upright and walked to her father. "Hey, Dad," she said softly - for her. "Look. You've got your own thing to do, and while I don't much dig it I respect it. Sort of. I kinda thought that this time you were going to make the big score, but it's pretty obvious this is just another washout. Right?"

Bactrian didn't reply.

"Okay. Either way, I'm going home; somebody's got to keep Mother company. Boo and I are bugging out - sorry fellas - tonight. Maybe you'd like to come along?" There was something that might almost have been a wistful note in her voice as she looked up into her father's face.

The magician wiped his eyes hastily and shorted, cleared his throat, furrowed his brow. Then he shook his head. "No, my dear. Not...not just yet. I...I have a mission which has not been completed and I must...must go on to the end."

The girl shrugged and patted her father's hand, then stood on tiptoe to kiss him on the cheek. "Okay. See you around, Dad. We'll keep a candle burning in the window."

The Bugaloos turned away as Theda walked toward the dim interior of the building. They didn't like to see a grown man cry, not even a frumpy old fraud.

"Yes, a man must do many things in order to provide for his family. They are often difficult, sometimes dangerous, but I have persisted; I have never surrendered to fate."

Bactrian was regaling the Bugaloos with a monologue that seemed endless as they rolled across the Dreadful Desert under the stars. The night was cool, the wind stirred up by their passage refreshing as they sped swiftly toward their goal. But they hadn't forgotten their main objective.

"Keep an eye out," I.Q. reminded the others as they topped a high dune. "Joy could still be out here."

"Let's hope not," Courage said grimly, but he slowed down and kept a sharp watch on either side as they moved across the trackless sands.

"If the girl has kept her head, she'll be all right," Bactrian said comfortably. He was, compared to the Bugaloos, a very large man, and took up most of the back seat. I.Q. was shoved into a corner, but he didn't complain.

"Are we heading in the right direction?" he asked.

"Certainly," the magician said with an airy wave. "Did I ever tell you of the time I confronted ten thousand bloodthirsty Bulbuls in the Lost City of Gossamer? There I was,

with only my wits and magic scepter, surrounded on all sides by a howling horde of sinister savages. Well, this is how I overcame them - and believe me, boys, it was no easy task, even for an archmagus with my enormous powers..."

The Bugaloos sighed but kept their silence. The old man was going to talk, and there was nothing they could do to stop the torrent of words. Besides, what harm could it do?

Plenty, as it happened, for as the magician prattled on he completely lost track of where they were. It wasn't until dawn began probing the horizon ahead of them that Harmony twisted around from the front seat to ask him how far they had to go before reaching Tranquility Forest.

"Eh? How far?" Bactrian sat up and looked around as though he had just wakened from an unintentional nap. "Yes. Well, where are we?"

"You tell us," Harmony said. "It all looks the same to us."

The magician seemed befuddled. "I'm afraid...I haven't been paying close attention..."

"Oh brother!" Harmony clapped a hand to his forehead and slumped down in his seat. "The great desert guide is lost."

For what seemed an eternity they swung back and forth, pausing at the top of every high dune to try to get their bearings, but as expected everything looked the same. The sun was high overhead when Courage suddenly braked to a halt and swung around to confront the now subdued Bactrian.

"Look here, mate. We can't spend the next few weeks driving around in circles out here. It may not make any difference to you, but we've got to get to Tranquility Forest - and no mucking about. Now think! Which way?"

Bactrian thought. He peered all around, a hand shadowing his eyes. The urgency in Courage's tones was both a goad and a reminder, for he was as anxious as they were to reach the edge of the Desert and the Forest beyond.

"Did...uh-h...did any of you happen to notice in which direction the sun came up?" he asked.

Harmony frowned in concentration, then pointed off to the left. "Right over there. I'm almost positive."

"Hm-m-m. Then...let me see." He made angles with his fingers, scowling and muttering, then took a deep breath. "It's that way."

"Are you sure?" Courage demanded.

"Certainly," the magician said loftily, hiding his hands in his voluminous sleeves so the Bugaloos couldn't see that his fingers were crossed.

Bactrian was secretly as surprised as the Bugaloos when, not more than a few minutes later, they saw the high cliff in the distance ahead of them. Courage floored the accelerator, and the Bugaloo Buggy fairly flew across the sand until they had reached the base of the cliff. Then he braked to a halt and leaped out.

"Where are you going?" Bactrian asked.

"No time to waste now," Courage announced crisply. "The ledge that leads up to the top is down there a bit, but we can fly from here. Let's go, mates."

"But you can't leave me here!" the magician quavered.

"You can walk up. We'll be back directly."

It wasn't easy flying straight up in that heat, even at midmorning, but the Bugaloos weren't about to be thwarted after coming this far. When they reached the top of the cliff, they paused, gasping, to regain their strength.

"I say we go straight to the clearing,' Courage announced. "If Joy is here, the Bluebell and the Grapes will know."

"That's a sound idea, but I suggest we do a bit of looking around first," I.Q. said.

"There's no telling how things are back at our clearing."

"You're probably right," Courage agreed reluctantly.

"We'll fly," I.Q. said. "But keep in among the treetops; we don't want Benita or her flunkies to spot us."

They flew swiftly, darting in and out among the towering trees of Tranquility Forest and keeping absolutely silent. Giving the clearing a wide berth, they soon found themselves above the Sparking Waterfall, and the sight that greeted their eyes was appalling.

Below, on the banks of the stream, was the ugliest building ever thrown up by unskilled labor. Squatting beside the waterfall like a square, obscene toad, it sprawled among the wreckage of hundreds of carelessly felled trees. A high stack belched forth a noxious cloud of dense smoke, while from the side of the building rusting drain pipes spewed out continuous streams of liquid wastes that turned the stream a bilious green. The waterfall was crudely dammed, so that the foul water swirled sluggishly in a growing stagnant pool.

"Lord love a duck," Harmony breathed, gaping at the incredible scene. "That old bat has to be the undisputed world's champion polluter!"

Beyond the factory building a great slash of concrete roadway led straight to Rock City in the distance, and on it dozens of trucks were roaring back and forth, their exhausts adding their contribution to the befouled atmosphere. And almost directly below the Bugaloos another, wider concrete strip was occupied by several airplanes, their propellers spinning as Flat People moved in and out of the factory to load boxes and crates aboard. Back toward the Bugaloos' clearing the runway extended, and at its end they could see bulldozers and concrete mixers working away relentlessly.

"That Witch has got to be stopped!" Courage hissed, on the verge of angry tears.

"You're right," I.Q. agreed. "But we can't do anything right away."

"For the first time in my life I wish I had a bomb," Courage spat. "I'd drop it right in the middle of that stinking mess!"

"It wouldn't solve anything," I.Q. pointed out. "It's not the fault of the Flat People working there, and they'd be the only ones hurt. Let's go back to make sure old Bactrian is all right and then find Joy."

The other two objected momentarily, but quickly gave in to I.Q.'s logical reasoning. They flew at top speed, less cautious this time, and in a few minutes had reached the edge of the Forest again.

"There he is!" Courage cried, pointing downward.

They recognized the figure of the magician, standing near the edge of the cliff. His head was thrust forward, arms waving, as though he were shouting at something, or someone. The Bugaloos flew closer, and Harmony let out a whoop of delight.

"There she is!" he cried. "It's Joy!" He dropped in a steep dive, the others following, and it wasn't until they had almost reached the ground that they saw the third party, standing just inside the fringe of the Forest.

"Well I'll be," Courage breathed. "Our friend the ghost!"

Chapter Thirteen

"But you see, boys, he's not really a ghost at all," Joy was explaining. The Bugaloos stood at the edge of the Forest, eying the pair of robed figures who were conversing in tense whispers. Bactrian was obviously in a high dudgeon; he kept poking the other man in the chest to emphasize his words.

"But who is he, then?" Courage wanted to know. They could all see that the strange man was only a man, now that the sun wasn't behind him. Only a man, and evidently a dejected one to judge by the way he kept shrinking away from that relentlessly prodding finger.

"Well," Joy said, "he calls himself the Ancient Wanderer, but he's not really so ancient. He just looks that way under his robe and hood."

"Where in the world did you find him?" I.Q. asked.

Joy giggled. "In my secret hiding place. You know the old mulberry tree by the clearing? I went in there to hide from Benita and there he was. He frightened me at first. He thought I was one of Benita's baddies and he threw a cloth over my head. Fairly scared me to death, I must admit. But when he found out who I was, he was full of apologies. It seems he's been hiding out in the Forest ever since we left here."

"Why was he doing that?" Harmony asked.

"Well, I'm not quite sure. Something about being afraid to go home and face the music, whatever that means. He kept muttering about gold and...and the executive washroom." The girl blushed and hurried on. "And he kept asking if he didn't remind me rather a bit of Steve McQueen." She laughed. "Which he quite definitely does not!"

"How did you happen to bring him back here?" I.Q. wanted to know.

"After Benita left the clearing, we went out to talk to Bluebell and the Grapes. They were in a terrible state; Benita told them they had just a few hours before the bulldozers would reach them and rip them out by the roots. I tell you it was Panicville with them, and my new friend the Ancient Wanderer wasn't much better off. So...well, we decided to come here. I had a feeling, I hoped, that somehow you'd come. And you did." The girl beamed. "You've come, and that means we can stop the Witch." But even as she spoke, Joy's face fell as she saw I.Q. slowly shaking his head.

"The problem is that Tranquility Forest still belongs to Benita - blast her. She can do anything she jolly well pleases, and we have no right to stop her."

"But there has to be a way. There has to be!"

"Joy's right," Courage declared, his mouth set in a stubborn line. "That Witch may own Tranquility Forest, but that doesn't give her the right to turn it into a ruddy sewer."

I.Q. said nothing.

Harmony looked over at the two quarreling men. "Perhaps our magician friend has one real trick up his sleeve," he suggested.

"You really think that's possible?" I.Q. asked skeptically.

"Any port in a storm, mates," Courage said. "It can't do any harm to try, can it?"

They approached Bactrian and the Wanderer, pausing a polite distance away until they were noticed. Bactrian looked over at them, his face a thundercloud.

"Yes?" he snarled. "What is it now?"

I.Q. cleared his throat. "We were wondering, Mister Bactrian, are you aware of what's going on back there?" He pointed to the Forest behind him.

"It doesn't interest me. I've heard all about it from this...this sniveling wretch. Why do you ask?"

"Well, it appeared to me that you had some sort of interest in the Forest. When we spoke of it back in Deliria. And I was wondering if you were aware of how Benita Bizarre is destroying it?"

"You mean the factory? The road, the airstrip? Yes, I'm aware, thanks to this numbskull. The woman is going to make a fortune, and we'll have no share at all!" He raised his hand to cuff the Wanderer, who shrank back.

"Please," he quavered. "I didn't mean to. She was so...so convincing..."

"I can certainly see that," Bactrian said with biting sarcasm.

Joy moved toward the irate magician. "Please, Mister Bactrian. Don't be cruel to this poor man. He's suffered a great deal already."

"Hah!" the magician sniffed. "Hah and double hah! Poor man, is he? Suffered has he? I'll show him suffering!"

"Now look here," I.Q. said. "I've no idea what it's all about between you two, but we need your help and we haven't much time. We brought you here, which was evidently what you wanted. Now we'd like the benefit of your...your wisdom in return. And you magic, what there is of it."

"And why should I help you?"

I.Q. eyed the scowling magician coldly. "Are you interested in returning back across the Dreadful Desert?"

"Wh-why of course." He looked at the Forest towering above him and shuddered. "Never could stand these cold, dank places."

"And how did you plan to travel? On foot?"

"I...well...it's a long way."

"And we'll be happy to take you back in the Bugaloo Buggy. If you help us."

"In what way?" Bactrian asked sulkily.

"First by telling us a few things. Did you have any connection with the sale of the deed to the Forest to Benita Bizarre?"

Bactrian opened his mouth to make a quick denial, but the Ancient Wanderer stepped forward before the magician could speak.

"I was the one who...who sold the deed to the Witch," he admitted dolefully.

"Sold!?" Bactrian roared. "Gave it away! Just handed it over to that female con man like the dumbest pigeon in the whole stupid world!"

"Then you are involved," I.Q. said flatly, his mouth grim.

"Of course I am! And boy, have I ever learned my lesson. Never again will I trust my lame-brained brother with the simplest little task again."

"Your brother?"

"Yes, my brother," the magician snapped disgustedly, swiping at the hooded man. "Ancient Wanderer indeed! The Witch obviously saw through that phony bit. And then fleeced him like - like - ah-h - nuts!"

"You mean Benita actually stole the deed from him?" I.Q. asked eagerly.

"Well, yes," Bactrian agreed warily. "That is, he turned it over to her for no money. No compensation of any kind."

"But - but she promised," the Wanderer blubbered.

Bactrian smote his own forehead a resounding blow. "My own brother! My own brother! Imagine! He's known me, a magician, all his life, and he actually believes in witchcraft"

"But don't you want to get your own property back?" Harmony said reasonably. "If Benita really did trick you out of that deed, then it's not rightfully hers."

Bactrian looked bleakly at him. "So?"

"Then you'll want to get it back."

Bactrian shrugged. "Ah-h, what difference does it make? What's done is done."

"What a hateful thing to say!" Joy exploded. "Don't you realize what you're doing by simply allowing Benita to get away with stealing your deed?"

"Well, I suppose. A lot of trees cut down you say?"

"And that's only the beginning of it. Oh please, Mister Bactrian. At least come with us now. Confront Benita Bizarre with her guilt!"

The magician shrank back with a horrified expression. "Oh, I could never do that."

"You'd better," I.Q. said quietly. "I doubt that even you can walk all the way across the Dreadful Desert."

"Oh, I think I'm going to have a little ceremony, a smashing celebration," Benita Bizarre hummed, badly, as she was being driven along the eight-lane Superhighway from Rock City. "It's almost time, kids." She looked at her wrist cuckoo-clock. "Almost time for the Battering Bulldozer to bust through to the Bugaloos' clearing. We'll play my newest hit song for that weirdo bunch of plants there, and then rip 'em up by the roots. Right, Sparky?"

She leaned forward and poked the firefly in the shoulder. He was seated in the front seat beside Funky, securely bound so that all he could do was nod his head. He didn't understand what she was saying, hadn't quite understood anything for quite some time now. That was the effect of being assaulted for days on end by the so-called music of Benita's Bunch. His brains were thoroughly scrambled; all he knew was that it was nice not to have to listen to that nerve-wracking screeching, and whenever there was blessed silence a contented smile was pasted on his face.

The Baroque Buggy roared past the factory. Benita stood up in the back seat, gripping Woofer and Tweeter painfully by the hair to balance herself and waved gleefully at the silent Flat People who were going about their tasks. Nobody waved back, but Benita didn't notice. They were tearing down the airstrip, arrowing straight for the Bugaloos' clearing, and a moment later Funky slowed the limousine down. They eased past the clanking, clattering earthmovers and rolled into the clearing.

"Vell, Boss, here ve are!" Funky announced exultantly.

The Witch clouted him on the head with her handbag. "I can see that, dum dum. Help me outa here. You guys," she said to Woofer and Tweeter, "go get set up on that crumbly little Bugaloo bandstand. We'll play a last rock concert here before it gets smashed up."

Funky helped the Witch to the ground, and she looked around with a wild grin on her face. She flung her arms skyward. "It's mine, baby. All mine! And in a few hours it'll be covered with beautiful concrete!"

"Yah, yah, mein Sublime Superstar!" Funky capered around in a small circle, brandishing a huge pair of gleaming shears.

"Watch that thing. You cut off my gorgeous nose and I'll introduce you to a steamroller. Take the dopey firefly over to the bandstand and give him the kazoo. I want to be sure his lips are in good shape. I'm gonna sit right down here and write my greatest song. Oh, I can just feel the inspiration oozing out of my incredible intellect!"

"Mit pleasure, Boss." He snicked the blades of his shears together. "By der vay, ve better get rid of dose shtupid talkink plants now, don't you think?"

"What? Oh, sure, if you want. Don't bother me now; I'm creating."

Funky led the dazed firefly to the bandstand, placed him on the organ stool, and turned to the Grapevine-Bluebell Flower. "Wake up, wake up, you werbose vegetables. Here comes Funky mit der schnipper-schnappers!"

Chapter Fourteen

"Not so fast!" Harmony's voice rang out.

Funky looked up, his shears half an inch from the Bluebell Flower's stem. Woofer and Tweeter jumped a foot in the air. Each. Sparky just sat there, a dreamy expression on his face. Peace, it was wonderful.

"What the hey!" Benita Bizarre exclaimed. "Who gave you juvenile insects permission to enter my Forest? My clearing?" She stalked rapidly toward I.Q. and the others standing in a knot behind him at the edge of the clearing. "You better clear outta here, and make it fast. If this wasn't the happiest day of my life, I'd have you all zapped."

She shook a bony finger in I.Q.'s face, but he just smiled calmly back.

"We've brought an old friend of yours with us," he said.

"Whaddya mean? I don't have any friends - especially old ones."

"Oh no?" I.Q. stepped aside. "Surely you remember the Ancient Wanderer? The former owner of Tranquility Forest?"

The Witch blinked her nearsighted eyes and peered along the considerable length of her nose at the cluster of people behind the Bugaloo. When she saw the white-robed figure, she started in surprise, but to her credit she recovered quickly.

"Gee, it's Steve McQueen, isn't it?"

"Come off it, you old ratbag," Harmony said. "He's a musty old man and you know it. You never made him young like you promised."

"So? I never said it'd last forever. Some people age faster than others, don't you know that?"

"And how about the gold you promised him? You never had any in your life, except in your teeth." Courage thrust his chin at the Witch so aggressively she stumbled back.

"Whaddya mean?" she blustered. "I gave him the key...the key to my treasury. Is it my fault he couldn't find it?"

And now Bactrian strode forward, his face angrier than ever before. He looked, somehow, even taller than when the Bugaloos had first seen him mounted on his camel, and lightning seemed to flash from his eyes. "You, Madame," he thundered, "are a swindler!"

"Me?" Benita's eyebrows shot up in an expression of aggrieved innocence. "Me? Why, I never did anything dishonest in my life!"

"Dot's right," Funky chimed in, moving in behind the Witch. "Rotten, maybe, but always honest as der day iss lonk!"

"Aha!" Bactrian cried. "As honest as the day is long? Will you tell me how long is a day, Madame?"

"What is this? Are you guys tryin' to con me?"

The magician was seized with a sudden fit of coughing, but he recovered in a moment and went on. "It is now some time short of midday, is it not?"

Benita looked up. "Yeah, that's right. I haven't heard the noon whistle at the factory yet."

"Yet, if darkness should fall before noon, you would agree that your honesty is something less than perfect?"

The Witch laughed nervously. "Come on. Who are you tryin' to kid, pal? Hey, you know, you look kinda groovy in that getup." She batted her sequined eyelashes at the magician.

"I challenge you," Bactrian intoned. "If you did not obtain the deed to Tranquility Forest by dishonest means, then night shall not fall till the appointed time. But if you did..." He pointed dramatically heavenward. "If you stole that deed from this poor simple Wanderer, then the sky will darken and the sun will plunge to earth forever!"

Benita licked her lips and made a disparaging gesture. "Listen, boobie, if anything like that happens, I'll blow out of this place so fast you won't even see my dust."

"Done!" Bactrian roared, and lifted his eyes to the sky. "Show us the truth! Show us who lies! Bring the darkness that will cover this accursed Forest for all eternity!"

There was no sound in the clearing, except for a faint whimpering from Woofer. Or Tweeter. Or both. Then a soft, sighing came through the trees, the wind began to blow, gently at first, then with ever-increasing power, until a full gale was whistling through the clearing. And with it came a vast, smothering shadow, a blackness so intense that the sun was blotted out instantly, like a snuffed candle.

Funky screamed and dropped to the ground, kicking hysterically. Benita let out a squawk and shrank away from the magician, who stood, transfixed, arms raised as though he were pulling down the inky shade of night all by himself.

"You're a liar, Benita Bizarre," a voice moaned out of the darkness.

"A cheat," another accused.

"You stole from a poor old man," a third droned.

Bactrian lowered his arms and glared at the Witch. "Confess, Benita Bizarre. Confess that you're a swindler. Return to the Ancient Wanderer that which is rightfully his or you will never see the sun again."

"I - I - " the Witch squawked. "Never?"

"Never."

"Giff him der deed, Boss," Funky implored. "I neffer liked der country anyway."

"But my beautiful factory! My superhighway! My airstrip!"

"They are not rightfully yours," Bactrian declared. "Give them back or you will suffocate in this perpetual night of your own making."

Sure enough, Benita began to cough and choke. She was joined by Funky, then Woofer and Tweeter, until the clearing was filled with the sound of their distress.

"The deed!" Bactrian cried. "The deed or you will never leave!"

Gasping, tears running down her sunken cheeks, Benita nodded frantically and dug into her handbag. Finally, she found the piece of rolled parchment and flung it at the magician. "Take it! Take it! I'm getting outa here!" She turned to run for the Baroque Buggy.

"Hey! Wait for me, Boss!" Funky tottered after the Witch as fast as his little legs would carry him, followed by Woofer and Tweeter. In a moment the car's engine roared into life, and the Witch and her horde were speeding away in terrified retreat.

Bactrian watched until they were out of sight, then dropped to his knees and was wracked by uncontrollable spasms. It appeared that he was coughing, but on the other hand he could very well have been laughing his head off. When he had recovered, he looked upward.

"All right," he shouted. "You can come back now!"

The Bugaloos dropped quickly into the clearing, gasping, eyes streaming, but smiling triumphantly. "It worked, it worked!" Courage yelled.

"Oh, it was beautiful!" Joy cried. Impulsively, she hugged the magician and kissed him soundly on the cheek. He drew back slightly, then smiled.

"I couldn't have done it without you," he said with what, for him, passed as modesty.

"Nevermind," I.Q. said. "We all did our part, and Benita no longer has the deed to Tranquility Forest."

"What happened?" the Ancient Wanderer asked, coming out from behind a tree. "How did you do that?" He looked at his brother with awe.

Bactrian shrugged. "Nothing at all. I'm sorry I didn't have an opportunity to tell you about it, but there was no time. Besides," he added, "you probably would have given the whole show away." He looked up. The darkness was already beginning to break up into separate clouds of heavy black smoke.

Harmony grinned in admiration at the magician. "Listen, old darlin', you may not be the world's greatest magician, but you're a super whiz at meteorology."

"Oh well, it's a science that sometimes comes in handy in my profession. But then, if you hadn't flown me over that nauseating factory, the idea would never have occurred to me."

"All we wanted to do was convince you that Benita had to be stopped," Joy said. "You did the rest."

"Yes," Bactrian agreed, obviously pleased with himself.

"What did you do?" the Wanderer wailed. "Don't tell me you really do have magical powers after all?"

"Oh be quiet, Djemal. I'm weary. You tell him." The magician gestured wearily to the Bugaloos and stooped to pick up the parchment.

"I'll tell him," Joy said. The Ancient Wanderer - or Djemal, as his brother called him - listened avidly as the girl spoke. "You see," the girl explained, "Mister Bactrian was persuaded when the boys showed him the awful things Benita was doing to help us stop her. And then he saw that terrible cloud of smoke pouring out of the factory chimney. He looked around at cloud formations, or whatever, and calculated that a wind would spring up before noon which would carry the smoke in this direction. So, while he was talking to Benita, the boys and I slipped away and flew up over the clearing. Between the four of us, thrashing our wings for all we were worth, we created a super downdraft that forced all that horrid black stuff down here. Your brother did the rest." She looked at

Bactrian with such fond gratitude that the magician would have blushed if he had been able to.

"Well," I.Q. said, "we don't know how to thank you, Mister Bactrian. We're just glad you decided to come over to our side."

"It was not a hard decision to make, once you pointed out the alternatives," the magician said wryly.

"And you have your deed back," Courage noted, not entirely won over by the magician's help.

Bactrian turned the parchment over in his hands, then slowly untied the frayed ribbon and unrolled it. "Yes. The deed." He snapped his head around to glare at his brother. "And if you had carried out the most important part of your assignment, none of this would ever have had to happen."

Djemal hung his head. "I'm sorry. I was so excited I forgot."

"What are you talking about?" I.Q. asked.

"Just this." The magician yanked at the ribbon. It pulled away from the parchment with a little snap, and he flung the deed to the ground. He stared at it for a moment, then smiled mysteriously and walked away from it.

"I don't understand," Joy said. "Why did you do that?"

"It was what my brother was supposed to do when he finally handed the deed over to Benita Bizarre. Pull the ribbon loose and...the parchment will self-destruct in five minutes."

They watched, fascinated, in total silence. Above them the smoke blew almost completely away, and a flock of birds came to roost and chatter in the trees. And then, with a sizzle and a flash, the parchment burst into flame, curled up, turned brown, and was gone.

Harmony shook his head in wonder. "I don't get that. Why did you destroy the deed? Who owns Tranquility Forest now?"

Bactrian shrugged. "Whoever owned it before. You. Me. No one."

"I suspect he means," I.Q. said quietly, "that the deed was a phony all the time."

The magician smiled tiredly. "There are plenty more where that came from."

"So, you're just an old con man after all," Courage said, but there was a trace of admiration in his voice.

"Some might call me that. I prefer to think of myself as a man who must live by my wits. And, alas, not always with great success." He gazed across the clearing, at the vague shape of the now-silent bulldozers just beyond it. "There's quite a lot of cleaning up to do, isn't there? I feel as though I'm responsible."

"Don't blame yourself," Joy reassured him. "You had no idea this sort of thing would happen."

"Nevertheless, I feel obligated to do what I can. I'm not entirely without genuine magical powers, you know," he added a bit stiffly. "If I can remember it, I am the possessor of an extremely potent spell that will dissolve concrete. The trees, I'm afraid, I cannot restore."

"That's one thing about the Forest," I.Q. said. "If you just leave it alone, it will repair itself, you know."

"Of course."

"We'll be glad to take you across the Desert whenever you like."

The magician glanced at I.Q., then drew himself up. "No," he said slowly, "I don't think I'll be going back for some time yet. I believe I might have a little business in Rock City first."

"What's that?" Joy asked.

"That Witch strikes me as a prime suc-uh-h, business prospect, who knows a good buy when she sees it."

Djermal jerked his head up, and his teeth gleamed in a broad, hopeful smile. "Do you mean...?"

Bactrian nodded. "Exactly. Come along, brother; let's see if we can interest Benita Bizarre in the Brooklyn Bridge."

THE END