

Also by Glenda Goertzen

The Prairie Dogs Adventures

The Prairie Dogs
City Dogs
Miracle Dogs

Lady Oak

ABROAD

GLEND A GOERTZEN



Lady Oak Abroad
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Failing Pierre Elliot Trudeau

The first winter solstice of the new millennium (the real millennium, not the fake one that had everyone freaking out the year before) fell on my seventeenth birthday. This was also the day I got expelled from Pierre Elliot Trudeau Collegiate and found three strange men living in an igloo in my front yard. No, not an igloo—a quinzhee. But that comes later. On with the expulsion.

The principal called me into her office late that afternoon. She flinched as I blew into the room and shucked my backpack. It was the last day of school before Christmas break, and I was more hyper than usual. I flopped into a wooden chair and bounced right out of it, nearly taking a header across Jersicke's desk. I had forgotten about my new birthday tattoo. I sat down again more carefully. Jersicke straightened the photo I had knocked over. Her mouth scrunched so tight, red and white lines radiated from her lips. I sighed and scowled at my hiking boots, wondering what I had done wrong this time. I used to smoke weed and get into all kinds of trouble, but that was years ago. Since I hit senior year I'd been getting completely acceptable marks and hardly ever skipped class. I was even punctual, most days. I had stopped trying to fit in with the cool-but-boring crowd, and now hung around with the weird-but-interesting crowd who got me hooked on bizarre crap like *Star Trek* and *Lord of the Rings*.

"Here at Pierre Elliot Trudeau, our motto is ROAR. Respect, Optimism, Attitude and Responsibility," Jersicke announced.

Conversations with Jersicke made you want to look over your shoulder to see if you had wandered onto the set of a TV commercial. Her office looked like an ad for a used car lot. Every vertical surface was plastered with posters advertising school achievements, with an entire wall dedicated to her own accomplishments. The photo I had knocked over showed her shaking hands with Prince Charles during his tour of Saskatchewan in April. Rumour had it she planned to run for mayor before she turned fifty.

“You, Audrey O’Krane, have displayed none of these qualities,” Jersicke went on. “I’m sorry to say you have failed Pierre Elliot Trudeau, and therefore we must fail you. You are expelled.”

My head snapped up. “What? Why?”

Jersicke slammed a handful of papers down on her desk. I stared at them blankly. It was a short story I had written for English class last week.

“How dare you. How dare you!” A red stain crawled up her neck. “Because of your obvious emotional difficulties, we’ve been willing to tolerate your behavioural challenges over the years, but this goes beyond what any school would tolerate.”

Emotional difficulties? Excuse me? “I know I handed it in late, but Mr. Weldon said—”

“I’m referring to the content of the work. I am shocked that any student of mine could write something so repulsive!”

The light dawned. I’d written a story about two lesbian teachers who deny their love for one another because they think it will damage their careers. In the end they go public with their relationship, only to be shot by their deranged and bigoted principal. I’m no great writer, but I liked this one. I had even let my friend Irene post it on the school newspaper’s website.

“I’ve been receiving enraged phone calls from parents. And the teachers are livid. They’re ready to box your ears, and I don’t blame them.”

Box my ears. I didn't think people said this anymore. I wasn't even sure what it meant. It sounded like something the Mafia would do. I pictured Aunt Ellen receiving a mysterious package in the mail. She opens the box and faints upon finding my severed ears wrapped in a note: *Don't mess with Pierre Elliot Trudeau.*

"Because the characters are lesbians?" I said.

"Of course not. Your choice of lifestyle has nothing to do with our decision to expel you. This story—"

"I'm not a lesbian! I have a boyfriend. He's in university," I added, as if having a university-aged boyfriend would help my case. Going by the look on her face, it didn't. It was a lie, anyway. Lyle had dumped me in the spring. "And if I was a lesbian, so what? Did you even read the story? There's no sex in it. Well, there's *implied* sex, but no *described* sex. And no graphic violence, either, it all happens, like, off screen, or maybe I should say off page—"

Jersicke cut off my babbling with a slicing motion of her hand. "I did read it, and you know perfectly well what the problem is. This story was meant to humiliate me and the teachers you so obviously drew upon for inspiration."

"No, it wasn't like that! They're not supposed to resemble anyone real." A cowardly quiver shook my voice. I tried to swallow it down. "Look, I'll apologize to the teachers."

"It's too late for that, Audrey," Jersicke said coldly. "This time you've behaved yourself into a corner you can't talk your way out of."

Geez, how old did she think was I, ten? "I want to talk to the guidance counsellor."

"I don't think a school employee would meet your counseling requirements, Audrey, especially with your background. In September, you brought a weapon to school."

"Weapon? It was a Swiss army knife!"

I had put it in my backpack when Irene and I went camping and then forgot to take it out when I came back to school in the fall. I was showing off the tool attachments to my classmates when one of the teachers noticed it had a knife. You would have thought I was walking around with a switchblade. If I'd actually wanted to hurt someone with it, they would have had to wait around patiently while I broke a thumbnail wrestling the little blade out of the handle. After September's terrorist attacks and all the school shootings in the news, a few teachers had decided every student was a potential murderer and every backpack held potential weapons of mass destruction.

Jersicke's lips drew even tighter. "And before that, you were admitted to the psychiatric ward of the hospital for a suicide attempt."

"That's private!" I was on my feet now, shouting. "And it wasn't a suicide attempt. There was a mouse . . ." I trailed off. There was no way to explain the incident and still maintain an aura of sound mental health.

She shook her head, eyes brimming with false pity. "Audrey, you're a tragedy waiting to happen. And I will not let it happen in my school. In the best interests of both Pierre Elliot Trudeau and yourself, I am expelling you."

A shudder ran over me, and to my horror, I started to cry.

Jersicke was no stranger to students bawling in her office, but my tears had an odd effect on her. She stared at me, the red flush draining from her face. "You . . . Audrey, how old are you?"

At the moment I really did feel ten years old. I tried to pull myself together. "You can't do this. I'll tell the school board. I'll tell the newspapers."

She blinked at me, then gave her head a shake and picked up the phone. "I'm going to have some of the teachers escort you out of the school. You can tell your parents to pick up your things in the new year."

“My parents are dead,” I said, and as I backed out of the room I saluted her, Trudeau style.¹

¹ If this confuses you, look up the phrase “Trudeau salute.”



The Quinzhee

I didn't wait for the teachers to escort me out. I ran to my car, shoving people out of my way, and drove straight home. On the way, I turned on the radio and listened to the news, hoping the world's problems would make my own seem trivial. New York firefighters had finally put out the smouldering fires of the World Trade Center wreckage. U.S. military forces were bombing caves in Afghanistan in their endless hunt for the elusive terrorist Osama Bin Laden. Wars, riots, disease, starvation, pollution, corruption, blah, blah, blah. This planet was a waste of space. I wished we could throw it away and start over.

I had been staying with Irene for a couple of days to help her paint a mural in her bedroom, and things at home had changed in my absence. A rusty old van stood in front of our house, and a pointy igloo stood in the front yard. The three middle-aged men inside the igloo welcomed me politely when I crawled through the tunnel entrance.

"Hey," I said, and carefully backed out. The strangers seemed to think there was nothing unusual about camping in my front yard, and I didn't want to disagree in case they were psychopaths.

Entering the house, I found myself confronted by an unfamiliar butt protruding from the back of the refrigerator, which had been dragged to the center of the kitchen.

“Is something wrong with the fridge?” I asked, dancing to avoid the welding sparks that skittered across the linoleum like fiery spiders.

“Compressor,” the butt muttered.

I picked up a vase of red carnations from the kitchen table, struck by the urge to tuck one of the blossoms into the fuzzy buttcrack peeping over the leather tool belt. My guidance counsellor told me I could fend off these impulses by pausing to review the consequences. For example, in response to my floral assault, the butt might:

- a) Strike its head on some vital component within the fridge, destroying the appliance and rendering itself unconscious.
- b) Attack me with its welding torch.
- c) Say “Thank you!” and continue with its work.

The butt’s efforts knocked a fridge magnet to the floor. A photo went fluttering after it. I grabbed it in mid-flight. It was the picture I had taken of my aunt and Prince Charles while he visited a local attraction, the weir across from our house. She had just walked straight over to the delegation and started nattering away at the future king of England as if she had known him all her life. He graciously refrained from having her arrested, even laughed when she went all flirty. I smiled now, though I had suffered near-fatal embarrassment at the time.

A car door slammed. I rushed to the blinking answering machine and pressed PLAY.

“Good afternoon, Ms. Trini. This is Pamela Jersicke calling from Pierre Elliot Trudeau Collegiate. I regret to inform you—” I hammered the STOP button with my thumb.

“Trudeau! You can blame him for all that metric crap, God rest his soul,” the butt shouted from the depths of the fridge.

“Ok,” I said. I erased the message and met Aunt Ellen at the door. She downloaded a hundred pounds of groceries into my arms and gave me a refreshing winter hug.

“Happy birthday, sweetie. I thought you were spending another night at Irene’s house?”

“I changed my mind. I’m staying home tonight.”

“Are you? Oh dear.”

Normally that “oh dear” would not have slipped past me, but today my mind dwelled on other matters. “Aunt Ellen, there are three men living in an igloo in the front yard.”

“I know,” Aunt Ellen chirped as she struggled to free herself of multiple layers of winter gear. “How was school?”

I put down the groceries and helped her wrestle off her boots. “Don’t ask. Who are they?”

Aunt Ellen paused and scratched her fluffy copper head. “I don’t know.”

“You don’t know the strangers camping on our property.”

“They’re professors from the university. I just can’t remember their names. Look, I bought those little chocolate Santas you like so much, and some candy canes for the tree.”

I grabbed the Safeway bags and followed her into the kitchen. “Aunt Ellen, why is there an igloo in our front yard?”

“Not an igloo—a quinzhee. This is Bernie,” she introduced the grunting butt beneath the fridge. The butt twitched at the sound of its name, and a sooty, goggled face emerged for a moment before ducking back into the cave. “While I was baby-sitting Kelly she found an article on the Internet about Dene snow houses, so we decided to build one. A TV station ran a story on it, which inspired people all over town to drive over with truckloads of snow. In return, I invited them to spend the night in it.”

Kelly Winters lived down the street. She was an amazing kid, one of those child prodigies. She was in first grade and could read like she was my age. We had bonded over our love of books and our lack of parents. Kelly’s widowed mother was “abroad,” according to Aunt Ellen, travelling for months at a time for some high up government job. I’d never met her. Kelly

was basically being raised by her uncle. They had moved into the neighbourhood about a year ago.

"I'm not sure I like the idea of half the city sleeping in our front yard," I said.

"Oh, they'll be fine. It's quite safe. The walls are very sturdy."

When Bernie Butcrack and the professors left, Aunt Ellen took me out to have a look. The quinzhee filled the entire yard, a giant snow cone whose peak rose higher than the eaves of the house. Inside, the ice-glazed walls glowed faintly from the early solstice sunset. Aunt Ellen lit the candles embedded in snow shelves protruding from the walls. The candles and the lingering body heat from the professors made it surprisingly warm.

"The professors ate the ice cream!" Aunt Ellen said indignantly. She had brought some of the fridge stuff out here while Bernie was working on it.

"Winter turns prickly in my nose," a muffled voice sang as we emerged from the tunnel entrance. "It burns my ears and bites my toes. Happy birthday, Audrey Oak! D'you like the quinzhee? Uncle Nick and I helped build it."

A kid perched on the peak of the snow house. I squinted at the tiny patch of face visible between toque and scarf, deep within the fuzzy cave of the kid's parka hood.

"Hi, Kelly. Yeah, the quinzhee's cool. Do you think you should be up there, kiddo? It's pretty high."

"No it's not. Look!" Kelly hurled herself backwards and landed flat on her back in the snow. I gasped arctic air into my lungs and went into a coughing fit as my bronchial tubes froze shut. By the time I recovered, Kelly had climbed the quinzhee again, a miracle of agility in clunky boots and fifty pounds of clothing.

"Get down from there, Kelly." Nicholas Winters approached our yard with a stern look for his niece and a cold one for me. "Good afternoon, Lady Trini."

My friends thought Winters was hot, with his scowling eyebrows and sulky Mick Jagger mouth. I just couldn't see it. Not only was he nearly twice our age, he was condescending, self-absorbed, and the poster boy for the Overprotective Parent. He wouldn't even let me babysit Kelly. He trusted her only with Aunt Ellen. According to Aunt Ellen he was from Switzerland, her own home country. He and Aunt Ellen spoke with an accent they classified as Swiss but which my friends described as a weird combination of Scottish and Jamaican.

"I thought you were staying elsewhere tonight," he said.

"I changed my mind," I said. Like it was any of his business.

"I see." He frowned his disapproval of my presence in my own front yard before turning back to Aunt Ellen. "Are you all set for . . . Christmas, then, Lady Trini?" He always called her "Lady." Aunt Ellen said it was a Swiss thing.

"Yes," she said with an odd intensity. "I am ready."

"I wish you'd let me join you. I don't trust—" He broke off, his frown deepening as he glanced at me.

"I know, but your presence would complicate things," Aunt Ellen said.

I looked from one to the other. This conversation was getting a little strange.

"I have something for you." He produced two copies of Kelly's school picture. "I would be grateful if you could have one delivered to her mother . . . though I can't imagine it will please her."

I grabbed the pictures from him. "What are you talking about? She's adorable."

"As always." His expression turned even more sour. God, what a jerk. Too lazy to buy himself a couple of stamps, and he can't stand his own niece's picture.

"Can we sleep in the quinzhee tonight, Uncle Nick?" Kelly asked. She had flung herself in the snow again and was flailing her arms and legs like a stranded turtle to make a snow angel.

“No. Come on home, now.” Kelly groaned pathetically, but her uncle wasn’t moved. She threw her arms around me and demanded a hug and a kiss, which I provided, although it took some time to find my way through all the layers around her face.

Aunt Ellen nudged me toward Winters. “Don’t forget a hug for Kelly’s uncle!” I turned on her, appalled.

“That won’t be necessary. Best of luck to you, Lady Trini.” Winters offered me a cool nod before taking his niece home for supper. I fought the urge to chuck a snowball at the back of his head. Not one word about my birthday!

“What was all that about?” I asked.

“About time you learned some manners, Audrey O’Krane,” Aunt Ellen scolded. “You could show a bit of civility toward the man.”

“Geez, Aunt Ellen. Why don’t you just rip off my clothes and holler, ‘She’s all yours, Winters!’”

“Don’t be crude, Audrey. I just think it would do us well to be on good terms with Nicholas Winters. He’s well connected—he could help you find a job once you graduate.”

I winced. “Um, Aunt Ellen . . .”

“Do you have something to tell me, Audrey?” She peered closely at me. “Have you experienced anything . . . unusual today?”

“No!” I said, taken aback by her sudden perception. “Um, no. Everything’s fine.” I just couldn’t tell her. Aunt Ellen put a lot of emphasis on education. Back in Switzerland she’d been a history professor. She was retired now, but volunteered at Kelly’s school. Mainly, I think, because Nicholas Winters wanted her to keep an eye on Kelly. Rather than spoil the holidays for us, I’d tell her after Christmas.

Aunt Ellen whipped up a fantastic birthday supper, but I had little appetite. Normally she would have questioned my lack of enthusiasm for my favourite foods, but tonight she seemed even

more flighty and distracted than usual. I did manage to show enthusiasm for her gift, a digital camera to replace my old 35 mm, but my excitement faded quickly. After supper I dragged myself into the bathroom, feeling depressed and achy. I got out my toothbrush, glanced up at the mirror and screamed.

Aunt Ellen rattled the doorknob. "What's wrong, Audrey?"

"Nothing! I thought I saw a mouse." What I had seen, or imagined I saw, were facial wrinkles and grey streaks in my hair. I really, really needed sleep.

"You and your mice," Aunt Ellen muttered as her footsteps faded down the hall.

I showered myself pink, slipped into bed, and snapped wide awake. After hours of tossing and turning, I got up and headed for the kitchen, where I microwaved some cider. I took my steaming cup into the dark living room to do some serious sipping and pacing.

As I passed the front window and looked outside, I nearly dropped my cup. An intense, fluctuating light shone through the silvery walls of the quinzhee. A whisper of pale mist rose from the luminous quinzhee's vent. I noted that my brain had gone all poetical. In moments of crisis, my mind splits into a thousand chattering voices, and one of those voices thinks she's a poet. A number of voices discussed the possibility of a mental breakdown. *Jersicke was right; I'll have to go back into therapy*, one observed, while another composed a description of the phenomenon for the media. *It was beautiful. The light flickered across the walls like dancing fairies.*

And what did you see when you looked inside? the imaginary reporters inquired.

That silenced the voices. I would have to take a look, wouldn't I? That's what you do when presented with supernatural phenomena. You step into the spaceship, jump down the rabbit hole, fling open the rattling closet door. No one ever

reports, “. . . but I was too scared, so I just stood there until it went away.”

Impulse Control sprang into action. If I entered the quinzhee, she warned, I might:

- a) Die.
- b) Disappear forever.
- c) Confront a situation of such incomprehensible strangeness that my sanity would be ripped away from me— but since no one would notice the difference, what the hell.

I threw a coat over my Rider jersey nightie and ran outside in my moccasins. As I did, the light went out. I dropped to my hands and knees and thrust my head into the entrance of the quinzhee, only to crack heads with someone crawling out of it. I fell back, clutching my skull.

“I thought you were in bed!” Aunt Ellen groaned, rubbing her own forehead.

“I thought *you* were in bed.” I helped her to her feet. “What were you doing in there? What was that light? What are you wearing?” A bizarre patterned skirt stuck out from under her winter coat, and she had crammed a wide-brimmed straw sun hat over her red hair.

“Oh, um . . . Bernie is a little nervous of the quinzhee collapsing. He thought it might become more stable if we iced the walls, so he’s having a go at them with his welding torch.”

“Bernie the electrician? Aunt Ellen, why are you and Bernie welding a quinzhee in the middle of the night?” Aunt Ellen fussed with her sun hat and didn’t answer. “Oh, Aunt Ellen. You didn’t sneak him out here to spend the night, did you?”

Aunt Ellen gave me a pat on the cheek and a wink. “Is that hot cider I smell? Be a sweetie and bring us some, would you? And I wouldn’t complain if a splash of rum found its way into the thermos.”

Aunt Ellen had probably kicked butt as a university professor, but as an aunt she could drive a person completely insane.



I did eventually fall asleep, only to get caught in a nightmare about Jersicke trying to cut off my ears. I thrashed awake. The rough hand on my shoulder and the angry voice were real.

“Where is she? Where is Kelly?”

Nicholas Winters, dressed in winter boots and a purple bathrobe, stood beside my bed.

“What?” I mumbled, blinking. He had turned on my bedside lamp.

“Did your aunt have anything to do with this?” he roared. His eyes were bloodshot, and he had jaw stubble. “Where is she?”

I shoved his hand off my shoulder. “Calm down! Aunt Ellen’s in the quinzhee.”

“The quinzhee is empty. It’s the first place I looked. I woke up five minutes ago, and Kelly was gone. Our front door was open.”

I scrambled out of bed, threw on my bathrobe, and hurried to the front door. Fog had fallen over the city, wrapping the house in a pale cloud.

“Aunt Ellen?” No reply from the dark quinzhee. I ran down the steps. As I approached it, the quinzhee suddenly came alight again. I knelt and squinted into the entrance. I saw a swirl of colour that crackled around the edges like storm clouds. I eased slowly through the short tunnel until I reached the heart of the quinzhee. On hands and knees, I stared up at a ring of light that rippled and blazed and finally parted to create a ragged opening.

The voices united in one frantic cry: *Where is my aunt?*

Probably she was in the sunny forest on the other side of the opening. The summery perfume of exotic wildflowers wafted into the cool air of the quinzhee—there I go again with the poetry. To tell the truth, I didn't stop long enough to sniff the wafting of foreign scents. Before the doorway could disappear, I closed my eyes and dived into it.



Worldhopping 101

I promptly fell on my face. For a moment I just lay there, the frozen ache of my body soothed by the warm ground. A swarm of bugs buzzed around my ears, glittering like bits of tinfoil. I swatted them away and got to my feet, marvelling at the silky grass stroking my bare ankles, the sun baking my white December face. The frigid air that had followed me through the opening became a warm mist that swirled around me. I stood in a grove of trees on a hill that sloped down into a shallow river valley. It looked somewhat like Saskatchewan terrain, but this was most definitely not Saskatchewan. I was highly doubtful it was even Earth. The sky had too much violet in it, and the birds flying across it had little forelegs.

“Heia, you! Worldhopper!”

The tallest woman I had ever seen came around the perimeter of the fiery ring I had jumped through. Her head was shaved bare except for a golden braid that swung from the crown of her skull. A cluster of fangs dangled from each earlobe. She wore only a fur-trimmed leather bustier and a pair of wrap-around leather trousers. She stalked toward me on bare feet.

“It is unlawful for overlappers to enter Migrara.” The woman unsheathed a glistening ivory sword. Her eyes blazed gold in the sunlight.

I snapped out of my stunned trance as she made a grab at me. Ducking under her arm, I scrambled through the opening and rammed face first into the frozen wall of the quinzhee. As I

flopped onto my back in the snow, the warrior lunged through the swirling circle. The quinzhee was easily large enough to hold six men standing up, but the woman filled it all by herself. She stood for a moment in dramatic silhouette against the wild light. Then the light winked out.

The abrupt darkness was followed by incoherent shouting and frozen chopping sounds as the warrior attempted to hack her way out of the quinzhee. Chunks of snow rained on my head. Her heel struck me square in stomach, driving the last few ounces of alien air from my lungs.

“There’s an exit tunnel over this way,” I wheezed, curling into a ball. A moment of stillness while flakes of ice tinkled to the ground. A grunt and popping knees as the warrior crouched and located the entrance with her sword. She squirmed and cursed her way through the narrow tunnel to freedom.

“I do not like closed in places!” the warrior thundered as I emerged behind her. Her accent was strange, yet oddly familiar.

“Sorry,” I apologized, like a good Canadian. I lurched to my feet, flailing my arms when my moccasins skidded off in various directions. Her own bare feet must have been freezing. It was at least minus twenty out here.

“As you should be, boy. Girl,” she amended as my efforts to stay on my feet jostled my frontal protrusions. Her sword was still in her hand, and she looked ready to use it.

“My name is Audrey O’Krane,” I said, trying to inject a friendly, non-violent tone into the conversation. “What’s yours?”

“Latiana.”² The woman jammed her blade savagely into its sheath. “I am Captain of the Cauldra Cats, the Queen’s personal

² Lay-she-ANN-ah. I find it irritating when a narrator makes you guess how to say tricky alien names, so I will be providing word pronunciations and a few explanatory notes. Although to be fair, is it really that important? I mean, it’s not like you can expect to run into these people at the mall and have to introduce them to your friends.

guard. My world is Migrara,³ which means ‘wheel’ in the oldest tongue. I live on the mainland, the hub of the Six Circling Islands.”

“Uh huh. So, what’s the deal here? Time travel, parallel universe, what?”

“You mean, how is my world connected to yours?” She scowled uncertainly, like my classmates when the teacher fired a question at them to see if they’d been paying attention. “Our learned ones teach us that the universe runs in a circle. Worlds that lie years of travel in the distance might also share the same time and space as our own. The overlapping worlds do not mirror one another, but they do influence one another, especially near the fault lines.”

I nodded my incomprehension.

“A fault line is a weakening of the barrier between overlapping worlds. Fault lines are at their weakest two times of the year; the longest night and the longest day. This is your longest night, yes? On my world, it is the longest day. At these times, a worldhopper—that is, anyone who was born along a fault line—may open a porthole and enter a world that overlaps her own.” She looked around and rumbled, “Why would he have fled here? This has the look of an ironbound world. Not to say it’s colder than an ice ape’s arse.”

“I think my aunt is in your world.” I was shaking, and not just from the cold. Shock pitched my voice high. “Red hair. Seventy-ish. Ditzzy, but lovable. Might be with our electrician and a little girl. Have you seen them?”

“No. Have you seen Keirt Prai?”

“Carrot who?”

“Prai. He couldn’t have arrived more than 1.247 hours ago. Did you let him through the porthole?”

³ Mih-GRAH-rah.

To save time, I pretended we were having a logical conversation. “What does he look like?”

To my alarm, the fierce warrior burst into poetry. “A face to inspire laughter or lust, but certainly not trust.”

I shook my head. “I thought for a minute it might be Bernie Buttcrack, but that doesn’t sound like him. Latiana, you need to take me back through your portal so we can look for them.”

“Porthole, not portal. The first Migrarans to discover a fault line were sailors. Your companions are not my concern. Queen Teriquilla’s⁴ Court Mage, Keirt Prai, has stolen a powerful royal artefact—the Wakitaki. I won’t return to my world before I lay my hands on him, may the Lioness devour his testicles.”

The warrior flung herself face down in the snow and sniffed at the footprints leading to the house. With a satisfied grunt she leaped to her feet and stalked toward the front door, hefting her sword in a manner that boded ill for the thief.

Nicholas Winters appeared in the doorway. “I checked the rest of the house. There is no sign—”

“Traitor!” The warrior woman gave a truly terrible scream and launched herself at Winters. Was she actually *snarling*? Yes, she was. She smashed into him, knocking him back into the house. I heard thumps, shouts, a tremendous crash. She emerged from the house dragging Winter’s limp body behind her by the collar of his bathrobe.

“Oh my God, did you kill him?” I gasped.

“The Prince lives, but only until he faces the Queen’s justice.” Her sword was out again, poised to maim. “You are in league with him, aren’t you, worldhopper? What are you, his lover?”

“No! Yuck! I’m not in league with anybody. I’m just trying to find my aunt. Prince? I thought you said he was some kind of magician.”

⁴ Tare-ih-QUILL-ah.

“Keirt Prai is the Court Mage,” she said impatiently, hauling Winters toward the quinzhee. “*This* rotting carrion is Prince Nicholas, the traitor who slew our King. No wonder Keirt crossed over to your world. Do you see this scar on the Prince’s chest? Keirt gave it to him the night the Prince fled Migrara. I’ll have to abandon my pursuit, though I would like to know how he discovered the Prince’s whereabouts. Didn’t tell anyone, of course, just went haring off in pursuit of vengeance. Pixens! All whim and passion, no brains.”

“No,” I said. “No way. You’ve got the wrong guy. Nicholas Winters is an accountant or something. He barbecues hamburgers on Sundays. I mean, come on, he drives a Honda Civic!”

She shoved him headfirst into the quinzhee’s entrance, cursing when he got stuck. “I would also like to know how the Prince gained access your world. He is not a worldhopper. Someone had to open a porthole for him. If you are not his accomplice, then perhaps it was this aunt of yours, or the man you call Bernie Butcrack,” her accent infusing the name with elegance, *Bahtcracke*. “Wait here. I will give the Prince over to the Cauldra Cats, then return to arrest you. Even if you and your compatriots are not involved, you are a worldhopper, and you know your way onto my world. The Queen will want to detain you for questioning.”

She yanked Winters out by the ankles and wiggled herself feet first into the quinzhee, dragging him after her. The walls flared with sudden light, then went dark.

I stared at the quinzhee while the voices scolded me. An alien barbarian had kidnapped my neighbour, and I just stood there and let it happen. I hiked up my Rider jersey and scooted through the quinzhee’s entrance on frozen bare knees. *Worldhopper*, she had called me. Did that mean I could open these porthole things?

I concentrated. For a brief moment, the dark interior of the quinzhee flared into a churning blizzard of colour. Then an

avalanche of snow slammed down on me. I couldn't move, couldn't breath. The voices chattered frantically, grew faint, and finally fell silent.

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