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IMAGINATION OVER KNOWLEDGE

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Ozoplaning with the Wizard of Oz: Azarine the Red (14/20)

The late afternoon shadows made the forest seem even gloomier. The little Wizard, trudging along under the rustling red trees, hands thrust deep into his pockets, never had felt more depressed or unhappy. He had hated to leave his friends with a Monarch as cruel and untrustworthy as Bustabo. Still, he had the utmost confidence in Jellia Jam. The Young Oz Miss doubtless had some plan in her clever little head and had chosen this way for him to escape, meaning to follow with the others at the first opportunity. Anyway, he reflected, dropping down on a heap of fallen leaves and resting his back against a tree, they had the kit-bag to help them, if worst came



to worst. Perhaps if he concentrated and thought very hard, he could recall the powerful incantation for locating missing persons and articles.

But a Wizard without his books and equipment, is almost as helpless as a doctor without his

pills and medicine bag. Try as he would, the Wizard could not remember the proper combination of words to bring back the missing Princess. His short nap in Stratovania had rested him a little, but he still was dreadfully weary from his gruelling flight and the recent shocks and mischances. The loss of the Ozpril had been the worst blow of all and now his tired brain simply refused to work. So, sitting sadly under the tree, he munched the sandwiches from the basket, drank from the bottle of cold tea and wished fervently for a fire to warm himself, for his clothes were still damp and clammy from the dive in Bustabo's lake. It comforted him a little to know that the others were drying out and enjoying a good supper in the castle. But it was no comfort at all to realize that Strut and his legions were winging their way toward the Emerald City—the city he had built and lived in so long it seemed more like home than any place he had known in America.

The Wizard crammed the rest of the sandwiches into the basket and started recklessly through the forest, tripping over tough vines and rocks, bumping into trees and peering desperately about for traces of a Princess, or for any sign that might tell him in which direction the Emerald City lay. From the slant of the ground he knew he was travelling down the



mountain, and the deep, red foliage told him he was somewhere in the Quadling country of Oz. But with night coming on and the shadows growing deeper and darker, he probably would lose his way entirely and never get out of the forest at all. He felt uneasy at leaving his comrades behind in the Red King's Castle. Was it better to try to save Ozma and the Emerald City, or to stay in this forest and help Dorothy and Jellia and the devoted friends who had embarked on this unexpected adventure with him?

Stopping short, the Wizard pressed both hands to his forehead in an effort to make up his mind. Night already had overtaken him and it was now so dark, it was impossible to see more than a foot or so in any direction. Occasional roars, the snapping of twigs and the gleam of yellow eyes from the thicket, caused him no little anxiety. At an especially savage roar, he suddenly stopped worrying about Ozma and the others and began to do considerable worrying about himself. How humbling for a Wizard to be devoured by a hungry beast. Backing softly away from the approaching monster, he began looking sharply about for a hollow tree, a cave or even a clump of bushes where he might conceal himself. On the tip of his tongue and ready for instant use was the magic word which would render him invisible. Fortunately he did remember that. But the Wizard never wasted words, magic or otherwise. Resolving to wait till the last possible moment, he continued to back rapidly and cautiously. Then, unexpectedly from behind him came another distraction

—the clear ringing of a silver bell. At the same time the gloom was pierced by a dancing ray of light. Swinging round, the Wizard flung up both arms and not knowing whether to dash into the teeth of the monster in front of him, or risk the lowered horns of the huge beast behind him, the startled magician uttered the word that rendered him invisible.

"Brr—rah!" raged the burly, bear-like creature, rearing up on his hind legs. "Where is that pesky man-creature? I saw him a moment ago, but now, though I still catch his scent, he has hidden from me. And why must you, Shagomar, come horning in to spoil my supper? Why cannot you mind your own business, Br—rrah!"

"I am minding my own business," roared the creature addressed as Shagomar. "AWAY—you Entomophagus monster! Haven't I told you time and again to keep away from the cave of the Princess? The very next bug-bear that comes prowling 'round shall have a taste of my antlers! Get on with you now, and after this—leave harmless travellers alone!"



The great red stag made a short rush at the ugly beast blocking his path. Large as a Grizzly, half insect and half bear, it held its ground

uncertainly for a moment, then shuffled off into the darkness, grunting angrily.

The Wizard, who had jumped hastily from between the two beasts, had listened to the stag's words with lively interest and astonishment. Huge and sandy, with antlers of tremendous breadth, the huge creature now stood quiet as a statue. From one antler prong hung a flashing silver lantern. From another dangled the bell which had so startled the Wizard.

"Well, friend! Are you still there?" whispered the Stag, softly. Instead of answering, the Wizard uttered the word that would make him visible. "Come with me!" directed the Stag, showing neither surprise nor curiosity at the Wizard's sudden reappearance. "You will be safer with us in the cave. Surely you are a stranger on Red Top or you would know it is dangerous to wander in this forest at night."

"Oh, I don't mind danger," said the Wizard, striding sturdily beside the Stag. "I am used to danger—and I must reach the Emerald City before morning! Ozma and her whole capitol are threatened by a band of ruthless Airlanders, and unless I can give them some warning, the Emerald City certainly will be captured by Strut of the Strat. I am Ozma's Chief Magician, fallen by great misfortune into this forest."

"I thought you might be a Wizard," murmured Shagomar, pausing to nibble at a few tender leaves. "And you say the Ruler of the whole Land of Oz is in danger? Hah, well—we all have our troubles." Exhaling his breath noisily, Shagomar looked off between the trees with a troubled frown. "I cannot direct you to

the Emerald City, but I'm sure the Princess can help you."

"What Princess do you mean?" asked the Wizard, curious to hear what Shagomar would say.

"Azarine!" whispered the Stag, looking around carefully to see that no one was listening. "Azarine the Red—Ruler of Red Top Mountain!"

"But I thought Bustabo was ruler of the mountain! I just came from his castle!" sputtered the Wizard. "He certainly told me he was King of the Kudgers."

"King of the Kudgers—pfui!" The stag shook his head as if a bee were in his ear, while his bell played a regular roundelay. "Bustabo was, till a week ago, Chief Bowman in Her Majesty's Guard. Using his position and his men to help him, he has wickedly seized Azarine's throne, insisting that Azarine permit him to be the King of all the Kudgers. When our little Princess refused, she was locked up in the tower. But, with the assistance of a faithful servant, she managed to escape, and has been hiding in this forest ever since. I, being an old and trusted friend, have been looking out for her and will protect her with horn and hoof until her own loyal subjects unseat this miserable imposter!"

"Whew—so that's the way it is?" The Wizard thrust his hands more deeply into his pockets. "Well, that settles that! I won't do it—no matter what happens!"

"Won't do what?" questioned the Stag, looking down sideways at the little man.

"Oh—nothing!" Kicking at a stone, the Wizard walked along in a depressed silence. Surely no one ever had

been in a worse dilemma. If he managed by a trick or by force to carry Azarine back to the Red Castle, Dorothy and his friends would be released instantly and all of them speeded on their way to the Capitol. If he did not return the Princess to the castle, his brave and faithful companions would be flung off the mountain, Strut would conquer the Emerald City and everything would be lost. LOST!



But when, a few minutes later, the Stag pushed through a cluster of bushes that concealed the entrance to the cave, and the Wizard stepped into the presence of Azarine herself, he knew he never would force her surrender to the infamous Bustabo.

Seated pensively on a rough boulder beside a small fire was the prettiest little Princess the Wizard had almost ever seen. Her hair, long and red as Glinda's, fell in satiny waves to her feet. She wore a little mesh cap of pearls and a white satin, Princess dress. A long, red velvet cloak hung loosely from her shoulders. Not exactly the costume for a cave, but vastly becoming. Azarine's pale and flower-like face was sweet and gentle and, when she saw the wet and weary traveller with Shagomar, she jumped up to welcome him as graciously as though she still were mistress of her castle.

"Why, it's the Wizard of Oz!" she cried joyfully, after a second look at the guest. "Oh, we all know the Wizard of Oz! I have a picture of you right over the grand piano in my castle. Wherever did you find him, Shaggy dear? Has he come all this way to help us?"

"It will be a great pleasure and privilege, if I may," said the Wizard, sitting on a rock opposite the Princess and placing his high hat between his knees. "Just now, I



happen to be in as much trouble as your Highness. But perhaps—" the Wizard looked thoughtfully at the Stag standing motionless at the entrance of the cave—"can Shagomar run?"

"Oh, yes! Terribly fast!" Azarine assured him, eagerly. "Faster than eagles can fly, than water can fall

down the mountain, faster than any creature on Red Top. Shaggy can do anything!" Jumping up, the Princess ran over to lean her head against the Red Stag's shoulder. "He goes to the village each day and returns with food. He has brought me blankets for my bed, pillows for my head, and has kept away the fierce Bug-bears and all other wild beasts that roam the Red Wood. I don't know what I should have done without him!" The Princess added softly, "Shaggy's such a dear!" "You're both dears!" agreed the Wizard.

"Are we?" Azarine twinkled her eyes at the Wizard, "But Shaggy's the biggest, and we've always been

friends, haven't we?" The Stag, looking down at Azarine with his bright, steadfast eyes, nodded so vigorously that the bell on his antlers rang a veritable medley, and the rays from the silver lantern danced into every corner of the dreary cavern.

"Well then," the Wizard rubbed his hands briskly together, "Shaggy shall carry us straight to the Palace of Glinda, the Good Sorceress of the South. As Red Top Mountain is in the Quadling Country, her palace must be somewhere quite near."

"Oh, it is! It is!" beamed Azarine. "I've often seen her lights, from the towers on Red Top. It's just a mile or two from the base of this mountain. I never have seen Glinda, but I have heard she is very good and a Powerful Sorceress. Do you think she can force Bustabo to give me back my castle and my Kingdom?"



"I know it!" declared the Wizard, picking up his hat and clapping it on the back of his head. "But before we start for Glinda's, I must go back and rescue my friends from that thieving Red Beard."

Marching forth and back before the fire, the Wizard related all that had happened since he and his party had started off in the two Ozoplanes. Hearing the strange tale, Azarine almost forgot her own troubles.

When the Wizard told how Bustabo had broken the winged staffs on which they hoped to ride to the Emerald City, and of the wicked bargain he had driven, the little Princess generously offered to return to the Red Castle so that Ozma and Oz might be saved. But the Wizard would not hear of such a thing. "No!" he decided—"Shaggy and I will go back and manage, somehow, to release my comrades from the castle. Then, we all can start for Glinda's together."

"Wait," whistled the Stag, who had been listening to the Wizard's story with distended eyes and nostrils. "Wait, first I will fetch Dear Deer."

"Who in Oz, is Dear Deer?" inquired the Wizard, as Shagomar melted like a shadow through the dark opening of the cavern.

"His wife," explained Azarine with an excited skip. "And that will be just splendid, for Dear Deer shall carry all of your friends, and we can ride Shaggy!"