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IMAGINATION OVER KNOWLEDGE

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## Ozoplaning with the Wizard of Oz: Strut of the Strat (6/20)

"What is it, Hippenscop?" Strutoovious the Seventh looked up impatiently as his first and fastest messenger came to a panting halt under the Imperial Canopy. Instead of answering, Hippenscop, his chest heaving and his eyes bulging, made a wordless gesture over his shoulder. Then, catching his foot in the royal boot-scraper, he fell violently up the steps of the dais. This was not unusual, for anyone who falls in Stratovania, falls up instead of down. Rather relieved to find himself before the throne at last, Hippenscop scrambled to his feet. Sucking in his breath he announced hoarsely:

"I beg to report a strange and sonorbious monster falling through the fog over Half Moon Lake."

"Are you sure it is not a Zoomer?"

Throwing down the morning star which he had been reading, Strutoovious stared coldly at the messenger. "Ho, no! Ho, NO!" Hippenscop shook his head positively. "It has wings and a tail, your Strajesty. Wings, a tail and seven eyes! But HARK!!" The menacing whirr and sputter following the messenger's speech made even



the Ruler of all the Stratovanians leap off his throne. Striding rapidly after the terrified servitor, Strut, followed by half the inhabitants of his irradiant Tip-toposphere, reached the shores of Half Moon Lake. "Skydragon!" he announced, after a brief glance at the gleaming shape drifting down through the fog. "Quick Hippen! Summon the Royal Blowmen! Back, stand back, you witless woffs! Do you wish to be crushed and eaten? Yon monster will alight on the North shore any moonite now!" At Strut's loud warning, half of his subjects took to their heels while the rest scurried round to the South side of the lake, every head turned up toward the mysterious dragon.

Only, of course, it was not a dragon. It was the silver-bodied Oztober—inside of which the agitation was almost as great as the alarm of the Airlanders below.



"How long have we? How long'll it be before we land?" gulped Jellia. Remembering the Wizard's instructions, she jerked out the

box of air helmets and next made a dive under the navigator's table. "Here, take one—two—three. Oh, how many shall we take?" groaned the little Oz Maid, holding up the bottle of altitude pills. "'One, after each mile up,' but how many miles have we come?"

"One hundred and one thousand, eight hundred and sixty-seven feet!" mumbled the Soldier with Green Whiskers, reading the figures from a shining metal

hypsometer clamped to the navigator's table. "All we have to do is figure how many feet in a mile."

"Fifty-two hundred and some," puffed Nick, working away desperately at his wheel and buttons to bring the Oztober down without crashing. "Oh, take twenty!" he directed sharply, as Jellia and the Soldier stood regarding him with open mouths. It was no time, as Jellia later told Ozma, to be doing long divisions. With trembling fingers she counted out twenty pills for the Soldier with Green Whiskers. Then, popping twenty into her own mouth and crunching them desperately between her teeth, she handed the bottle to Nick Chopper.

"No, No! None for me!" The Tin Woodman waved the bottle impatiently aside. "High altitude won't injure my metal, but keep this oil can handy, Jellia, and whatever happens, don't let me rust!" Choking on the pills which were dry and rather bitter, Jellia nodded earnestly. Tucking the oil can into the little bag that hung from her wrist, she began nervously dragging on her air helmet. Wantowin Battles already had adjusted his, and swallowed his pills. Now, peering out one of the round windows, he trembled so violently all his weapons rattled and clanked to the dismal tune of his fright.



"Th—thousands of them!" quavered the Soldier. "What kind of place is this, anyway! It's so bright it hurts my

eyes. Oh, I just know there'll be fighting! Look, I'd far better stay in the cabin, as someone must guard the plane!"

"But not YOU!" Nick Chopper spoke with great firmness. Then, spinning the wheel rapidly and gauging to a nicety the distance between the ship and the sparkling airoosphere, he touched the "down" and "stop" buttons simultaneously. Coasting down the last little hill of wind, the Oztober came to a gentle and complete stop on the shore of a rainbow-hued body of water.

"Now, now! Take your time," cautioned the Tin Woodman, as Jellia started impulsively toward the door. Pulling off one of the cushion covers Nick began polishing himself vigorously. As the discoverer of this new and astonishing airland, he wished to make a good impression. From what he had seen, it was a country well worth claiming for Ozma of Oz. "Here, let me go first," he said, tossing aside the cushion cover. "Keep close to me, Jellia, and Soldier—under no circumstances are you to retreat unless I give the signal. Great



Tinhoppers, what was that?" A long wail rather like the squall of a cat suddenly had rent the quiet air of the cabin.

"Stowaway!" cried Jellia, as another unmistakable meow followed the first. "Sounds like Dorothy's cat." But it was not Eureka that Jellia pulled from behind the

second seat cushion. It was a small, black kit-bag. The green eyes turned off and on like electric lights, and the tail curved over the back to form a handle. Round its neck hung a green placard:

"This Kit-Bag of Magic to be used  
Only in cases of extreme emergency.  
To open pull the tail.—WIZ."

"Well, Geewhiz—is this an emergency?" Jellia held the bag out, nervously.

"Er—YES!" declared Nick Chopper after a second glance out of the window. "Bring it along! And remember—you have nothing to fear! I, the Emperor of all the Winkies, am with you. With kind words and courteous gestures we will win the friendship and allegiance of these strange airlanders for Ozma of Oz."

Jellia knew Nick's red plush heart, given him by the Wizard, was the kindest in all Oz. Nevertheless she took a firmer hold on the kit bag, and only after assuring herself that Wantowin had his saber and blunder-buss did she follow the Tin Woodman down the Oztober's ladder.



There was a complete and astonished silence as the three Ozians stepped from the plane. And it must be confessed, Jellia and the Soldier in their transparent helmets, and the Tin Woodman without a helmet, were strange enough to startle any airbody. So it's no wonder the Stratovanians

were as amazed at the appearance of the travellers, as the travellers were amazed at the Stratovanians.

Separated only by the waters of Half Moon Lake, they confronted each other with growing alarm. Strut, who had expected this dragon to roar, spurt flames and then rush forward to attack them, hardly knew what to do when these three curious beings stepped from the monster's interior. Noting with alarm that his Blowmen had not yet arrived, he determined to hold the invaders in conversation, if possible.

So, with his head and chest high, and walking with the queer, strutting gait that characterized all of the dwellers in Stratovania, he advanced slowly around the edge of Half Moon Lake. A few paces behind strutted the rest of his retainers. Just as slowly, Nick Chopper and his two companions advanced to meet them.

The Airlanders were a head taller than even the Tin Woodman. Their hair grew straight up on end, sparkling and crackling with electricity in a really terrifying manner. Their eyes were star shaped and shaded by long, silver lashes, the noses and mouths were straight and firm, the foreheads transparent. Some shone as from a hidden sun, while across the brows of others tiny black clouds chased one another in rapid succession. Watching their foreheads would be a good way, decided Jellia Jam, to find out whether they were pleased or angry. Strut and his subjects wore belted tunics of some iridescent, rainbow-hued material, and silver sandals laced to the knee.

From the ears of the men hung huge, crescent pendants, while from those of the women, star earrings danced and dangled. Each Stratovanian carried a tall staff, tipped with wings. Beyond, Jellia saw a country of such dazzling beauty—she was almost afraid to breathe lest it vanish before her eyes. The trees were tall and numerous, with gleaming, prism-shaped trunks and a mass of cloud-like foliage. Some bore fruit that actually seemed to be illuminated—oranges, pears, and peaches glowing like decorated electric light bulbs! Moon and star flowers grew in great profusion, and in the distance, caves and grottoes of purest crystal scintillated in the high noon sun. So far as Jellia could see, there were no houses or castles, but there were hundreds of gay canopies held up by crystal poles. Jellia was just standing on tip-toe to glimpse the furnishings of the nearest Canopy when Nick Chopper, feeling the time had come to speak, raised his tin arm and called out imperiously:

"I, Emperor of the East and the Winkies, hereby claim this new and beautiful airosphere for Ozma of Oz, and bid you, its illustrious inhabitants, pledge to her your



allegiance! At the same time, I bestow upon all of you Upper Airians, free citizenship in the glorious Land of Oz!"

At this bold speech Strut stopped and stood as if rooted to the spot. Not only was he dumbfounded to discover he could



understand the language of these curious beings, but if what he heard were correct, they actually were claiming his Kingdom for their own.

"Well, how was that?" whispered Nick, looking down sideways at Jellia.

"Terrible! Terrible!" moaned the little Oz Maid. "Oh, my! We'd better look out!" Catching hold of Wantowin's hand, for he already showed signs of retreating, she looked anxiously at the approaching Airman. Black clouds were simply racing across his imperial brow; his eyes flashed red and blue lights and his hair positively crackled with indignation and fury.

"Oh, my—I do hope you are feeling well?" ventured Jellia, as Strut took an enormous stride toward them.

"If you have a headache or anything, we could easily come back tomorrow."

"Stand where you are!" sneered Strut. Looking over his shoulder he made sure his twenty, tall Blowmen had arrived and were pushing their way through the crowd.

"Stand where you are or I'll have you blown to atoms!"

"Now, now, let us not come to blows!" begged Nick Chopper. "We have much to learn from you and you from us, and I assure you we have come in the spirit of highest friendship!"

"Humph! So that's what it is—a friend ship! Looks like a dragon to me!" Folding his arms, Strut scowled past the three travellers to where the Oztober rested like some giant butterfly on the shore of Half Moon Lake. Then, making a secret signal to the Blowmen who had lined up before him, he shouted fiercely, "I am Strut of the

Strat and Supreme Ruler of all the Upper Areas. In daring to claim Stratovania for your foolish countrywoman, you indeed aim high and will go, I promise you, still higher! Three blasts and a toot, men!" As Strut issued this cruel command, his twenty, stern-looking warriors lifted their curved horns and puffed out their cheeks for a tremendous blow.

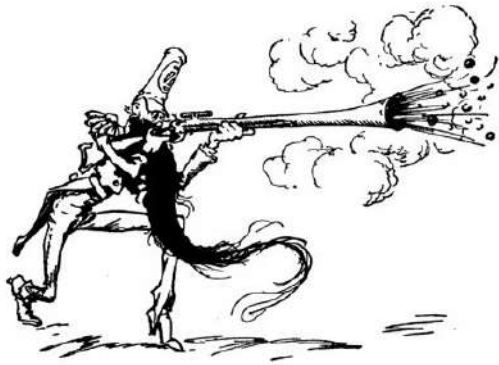
Jellia Jam, feeling that if they ever needed help it was right here and now, frantically sought with her one free hand to open the Wizard's Kit-Bag. As she fumbled with the curved handle, Strut raised his long arm.

"Wait!" he cried tensely. "Not yet!" Lowering their horns and exhaling their breaths in loud whistles, the Blowmen stared at him in surprise. Strut had been examining the strangers from Oz more attentively. Now he strode over to Jellia, jerked off her helmet and ran his hand slowly over her smooth brown hair. Jellia, expecting to faint or expire without the helmet, let out a piteous groan. But the altitude pills were evidently powerful enough to protect her, and feeling no ill effects, she glanced up timidly at the towering Stratovanian. Dark clouds no longer flitted across his brow. Indeed, he looked almost pleasant. "Ve-ry pret-ty!" he mused, stroking Jellia's hair softly. "Not wiry or stand-uppish like ours. Hippenscop! Summon her Majesty the Queen. She'll be delighted with this beautiful little creature! But—it is my intention to blow away



these other insolent invaders from Oz—keeping only this smooth-haired lassie for our Starina."

"Oh, No! Oh, NO!" begged Jellia, pulling back with all her strength.



"Stop! You can't have Jellia," yelled Nick Chopper, flinging out his arms.

"Ready—aim—fire!" quavered the Soldier with Green Whiskers.

And pointing his ancient gun at

Strut, he valiantly pulled the trigger. But Wantowin's aim was very bad. The twenty marbles with which the gun was loaded, zipped harmlessly past the Airman's ears, stinging quite a few of his subjects and frightening at least fifty into full flight. Strut himself was not impressed. Giving Nick a push that sent him sprawling, and the Soldier a shove, he drew Jellia firmly away from her friends.

Terrified as she was, the little Oz Maid could not help a small thrill of satisfaction to have been chosen by a monarch as High and Mighty as Strut of the Strat, to be Starina to him and his Queen.

"As for you two," said Strut to Nick and the Soldier, "blowing up is quite painless, I assure you, and if you ever do come down you'll doubtless have many interesting things to tell."

The Blowmen placed a guard around Nick and the Soldier, and stepped back to their posts. Nick Chopper

and Wantowin, stunned by the swiftness of events, stared sadly at their little Jellia as the Blowmen for a second time raised their horns. But Strut, intent on his Warriors, had dropped Jellia's hand. Quick as a flash she pulled the kit-bag's tail and pulled out the first object her fingers closed on. It was a small green trumpet. Without stopping to think or reason, Jellia placed it to her lips and blew three frantic toots. Instantly a light green vapor flowed from the mouth of the horn, spreading like a fast-moving cloud over the entire assemblage—a light green vapor accompanied by three musical notes.