



CHAPTER I

ENTRANCE, ON A PANTHER

*In Which a Boy Named Hawthorn Is Spirited Off
by Means of a Panther, Learns the Rules of the World,
and Performs an Unlikely Feat of Gardening*

Once upon a time, a troll named Hawthorn lived very happily indeed in his mother's house, where he juggled the same green and violet gemstones and matching queens' crowns every day, slept on the same weather-beaten stone, and played with the same huge and cantankerous toad. Because he had been born in September, and because he had a scar on his right cheek, and because his hands were very small and delicate, for a troll, the Red Wind conspired to cause mischief, and flew to the creaky old well that served as the chimney of his underground house one evening just after his first birthday. She was dressed in a red breastplate, and red hunting boots, and a red gown, and a red bandit's mask.

It is very dangerous below the banana trees, in the Rhyming Jungle where the Red Wind hides her secrets.

“You seem a sweet and pliable enough child,” said the Red Wind. “How would you like to come away with me and ride upon the Panther of Rough Storms and be delivered to a great desert that lies in the midst of a strange and distant land? I am afraid I cannot linger there, as Parched Climates do not agree with me, but I should be happy to deposit you upon the Wild and Walloping Wastes.”

“No, no,” cried Hawthorn, who deeply loved his green and violet gemstones, and also his huge and cantankerous toad. He began to wail in his whale-skull cradle.

“Well, then, come and be a good boy, and do not thrash about too much, nor pull too harshly on my Panther’s fur, as she bites.”

The Red Wind held out her arms, shimmering in red gloves, and Hawthorn, for a moment, was dazzled. He could not help it: He loved anything red. Leaves, some moons, rubies, ragelilies, blood, wine, apples (both poison and not), toadstools, riding hoods. Red was dark and fascinating. You couldn’t deny red things. He once saw a Redcap dancing on a wild moor all tangled with beautiful poison berries and had never wanted anything so much in his life. He would have named it Walter and fed it fresh white rats. His mother said rats would never be enough for a Redcap and besides the little fellow would certainly murder them all in their sleep the first chance she got. Hawthorn had sighed with longing. He kept a few mice in a willow cage by her bed from then on, just in case.

Hawthorn’s eyes got so full of the Red Wind that he could see nothing else. And so, even though he knew he oughtn’t, Hawthorn reached out and took both the beautiful scarlet hand of the Red Wind and a very deep breath.

The Panther of Rough Storms picked up Hawthorn in his soft mouth just as any cat might do to a naughty kitten. The great black cat lifted the troll out of his whale-skull cradle, out of his lovely familiar nursery with its wallpaper of garnets and big, blue, long-lashed eyes, out of his underground house, leaving a parlorful of untidy green and violet queens' crowns with enchantments still clinging to their prongs by the skin of their teeth.

One enchantment had been cast by Hawthorn's father, who, at that moment, lay sleeping in a long mulled-wine-colored magician's cloak, snoring smoke-rings in his bed of green butterflies with a wand clutched in his arms like a teddy bear and gleaming things on his sleeping cap. It was meant to keep his son safe from marauding pirates, of whom he had an irrational fear.

One had been cast by Hawthorn's mother, who, at that moment, was bending over an overturned church bell full of leprechaun teeth in a distant midnight meadow, her arm muscles bulging. It was meant to keep her son safe from marauding disappointments, of which she had too much experience for any one troll.

One had been cast by a cabbage-gnome a hundred years ago. It was meant to wilt the leaves of anyone who forgot the gnome's birthday. Of these enchantments, one missed its mark, one bided its time, and one had no effect whatsoever, as trolls have very few leaves.

"Now," said the Red Wind, when she had Hawthorn firmly in hand upon her glittering ruby saddle, "there are important rules in your new home, rules from which I am entirely exempt, as Hot Air is the friend of all bureaucracies. I am afraid that if you trample upon the rules, I cannot help you. You may be ticketed, or executed, or elected to high office and given a splendid parade, depending upon the fashions of the day."

Trolls are quick learners and quicker growers. They speak as quickly as a newborn giraffe can walk and sprout up like pumpkin plants who have heard Halloween means to come early. Hawthorn was only a baby still, but tall as a table already. He had made friends with all manner of words and some cracking good ones at that. But at the moment, the poor creature was far too terrified to use the better ones on the red-cheeked lady who had burgled him up as though a troll-child were no more than a very fine hat in a shop window. Or her wildcat. All he could make out of the howling air all around them, the last shreds of his sleep, and a troll's blue tongue was:

"Is it so terrible there?"

The Red Wind frowned into her dark crimson hair. "All countries are terrible," she admitted finally. "But this one, at least, has some lovely scenery."

"Tell me the rules at least?" Hawthorn said uncertainly. His father had taught him when he was quite small that if one finds oneself captured by pirates, politeness pays better than sass, and Hawthorn had begun to feel that his current situation might share a drink or two with piracy.

"Firstly, no magic of any kind is allowed. Customs is quite strict on this point. Any charms, enchanted beans, grimoires, or talismans you might have on your person will be confiscated and sold as Christmas ornaments. Second, the practice of *physicks* is forbidden to all except young ladies and gentlemen with Advanced Degrees."

"But I like *physicks*!"

"It is certainly possible you may grab hold of a Degree," winked the Red Wind, "but I am afraid I do not know where to find their nests. Third, aviary locomotion is permitted only by means of Balloon or licensed Aeroplane. If you find yourself not in possession of one of these, kindly confine yourself to the ground. Fourth, all traffic travels on the

right, except where it doesn't, and no signs will be posted. Fifth, shape-shifting and glammers are restricted to October the thirty-first of each year. Sixth, all children are required to attend School, which is like a party to which everyone forgot to bring punch, or hats, or fiddles, and none of the games have good prizes. Seventh and most important, you will find that several things are extremely dangerous to your person, namely: iron, eggshells, fire, and marriage. You may in no fashion allow any human to call you by the name your mother gave you or pass beyond the borders of Cook County, or else you will either perish in a most painful fashion or be forced to sit through very tedious sessions with doctors in thick glasses. These laws are sacrosanct, except for visiting demigods and bankers. Do you understand?"

Hawthorn, I promise you, tried very hard to listen, but though his mother had taught him brownie backgammon as soon as he could whack two hazelnuts together, he always forgot when you were allowed to turn your opponent into a raccoon, and he certainly had no hope of remembering such ugly and foreign rules. The rushing wind stopped up his ears and blew his silver-green hair into his face. Its strands wrapped his chin like woolly scarves.

"Obviously, the eating or drinking of human foodstuffs constitutes a formal and binding agreement to become mortal and never return, releasing Fairyland and all her subsidiaries, holdings, and most particularly, ahem, *representatives*, from all liability concerning your behavior in Lands Beyond."

"What? What does that mean?" Hawthorn had every intention of eating and drinking until he was sick the very moment this ridiculous cat put him down. A goodly size moose might do nicely. Perhaps a polar bear. And a side of basilisk, roasted, not boiled.

The Red Wind tightened her bandit mask. "That means: Off to bed

and no supper for you, wicked Changeling child!" She laughed like the hot, heavy wind of summer crackling before a storm. "Sour and hairy, strong as sherry, the dark of my starry sky!"

The Panther of Rough Storms yawned up and further off from the cobblestone chimneys of Skaldtown and the green mountains of Fairyland, to which Hawthorn could not even wave goodbye. The Red Wind hugged him so tightly he could not even waggle his thumbs. And a good thing, too! Babies are forever rolling off of beds and ottomans and changing tables and Panthers. If their mothers do not take care, they might keep on rolling and rolling until they get all the way to the ocean and are forced to learn boatbuilding and the language of walruses. Though babies are generally quite bounceable, it does not pay to take chances while at cruising altitude.

And so Hawthorn could not say farewell to his house, or his mother's trusty church bell, puffing clouds of luck far below. He could not wave goodbye to his father, dreaming of quick, silent, clever pirates hiding around every shadowy corner. You and I might be well pleased about all this, having read a great many books that begin in such a fashion and end marvelously well for everyone. (Except, naturally, those who end up in red-hot shoes or locked in a chest at the bottom of the sea.) But Hawthorn had not had a chance to read any books without pictures yet. He did not know that to be spirited away by means of jungle cat means that one may reasonably expect a heaping helping of adventure, a pot of daring feats to dip it in, and a hunk of wild coincidence to mop it all up. He did not know that trollmothers and trollfathers only worry when they think their little adventurer has been running about with poorly designed bridges of ill-repute. Once they discover he's simply been meddling mischievously with humans, everything is forgiven. He did not know that he was headed, at the breakneck speed of flying

folklore, toward the Province of Poorly Designed Bridges, the Land of Quiet Libraries, the Kingdom of No U-Turns, the Country of Shops Closed On Sundays. He did not know what was going to happen to him.

But he suspected that he was at the beginning of a story.

Hawthorn looked up into the deepening sunset clouds. *I shall be as brave as my Toad*, he thought, *for my Toad never hides under the bed when she is afraid of lightning or bats. She sticks out her tongue and eats them.* The troll stuck out his tongue at the whipping, glowing wind. He buried his fists in the Panther of Rough Storms, whose pelt was soft and dark, and listened to the beating of that huge and thundering heart.

“If you don’t mind my saying, Miss Wind,” said Hawthorn, “where are we going? After awhile we shall certainly pass Pandemonium and the Autumn Provinces and the Perverse and Perilous Sea and simply come round to my house again.”

The Red Wind chuckled. “I suppose that would be true, if I did not know a great deal more about geography than you.”

“I’m reasonably sure you know more about everything than me. For example, you seem to know that it’s perfectly all right to kidnap poor trolls in the middle of the night. Who taught you that? You must have had a very bad mother.”

The Red Wind snorted red clouds through her nostrils. “*My* mother could blow a hurricane out of one nostril and thump your mother at cards, boxing, and every one of the maternal sports! I have a Receipt made out in very fancy writing indeed which entitles, nay, *orders* me, to collect one Changeling and deliver it safely in accordance with local conservation laws. You should feel honored! I chose you! Out of all the trolls in Skaldtown, all the hobgoblins of Spleenwort City, all the satyrs

of Tusktag. I chose you for the Changeling life—my Panther and I promise you'll like it, and a cat's promise is . . . well, it's as good as old milk, really. But old milk makes a splendid yogurt, my lad! Doesn't it just! And when a *Wind* promises you a rollicking time, hold on to your skirts and your hats and your billowables! Now, hold on tight, I've got to duck the gravity interchange or we shall indeed come round to your house again, which would be awkward for all of us."

The Panther of Rough Storms gave a shattering roar. Several fog-banks slunk gloweringly out of their way.

"Well, *I* think you're no better than a pirate. My father says pirates are the worst things in the world after Kings and centipedes."

"And what would you know? That might hurt my feelings if we went on holiday together every year and belonged to the same Blustering Society. But we have only just met! One cannot really be bothered by insults from strangers. Might as well cry over the tide coming in! Besides, without pirates, the sea would be an awfully boring place. If I am a pirate, pass me the grog! Poor lump. It's all right if you feel a bit cross with me and want to thump me on the skull. That's only to be expected from a Changeling."

"What's those?" asked the little troll.

"A Changeling, my dear, is rough and wild, vaguely *unhinged*, a bit of a *riddle*, a bit of an *explosive*, and altogether maniacal when its fur is stroked the wrong way, which is always! Think of it as an academic exchange program, my belligerent belladonna. Like the banshee apprentice your uncle Monkshood hired when you were just born."

"How did you know about Uncle Monkey?" exclaimed Hawthorn. The clouds gobbled up his cry.

"I happened to be performing my summer ablutions just then. She had on a suit of birchbark armor; you were all swaddled in salamander

skin. She and your industrious uncle built quite a sturdy windmill that day.” The Red Wind scowled darkly. “Harsh Airs have excellent memories for things that have tried to capture them.”

Hawthorn looked out into the brilliant ruby clouds of the skies between Fairyland and the Other Place the Panther meant to take him.

“Fairyland is not unlike your cradle,” said the Red Wind kindly, her maroon eyes flashing behind her mask. “We are going to climb over the railing while no one is looking, and when we have slipped the bars and snuck out the nursery door, we shall be in another place entirely, which is to say, the human world. It won’t be long now.”

“What’s a human? Is it like a toad? Can I ride one?”

The Red Wind pondered. “A human is a know-it-all ape who got so good at magic, it thought there was nothing special about the way it behaved and then forgot magic ever existed in the first place. And you should most definitely try to saddle one up.”

“But what if I want to go home?”

“Don’t worry, my little lump of rock. Everybody gets a chance to choose. Or else where would irony come from?”

And indeed, in the rippling red clouds above everything, a great number of treetops began to peek out. They were all very tall and very lush: great umbrellas of glossy leaves, lacy branches twisting and toppling together, cupolas of orange and fuchsia flowers, obelisks of braided beanstalks, huge domes like the ones Hawthorn had seen in his picture book about Pandemonium, but made of climbing roses and hanging bananas and iridescent turquoise bubbles that would not pop, even when they tumbled into thorns. Just the sort of place where the wind stills, grows sleepy, turns around in a few lazy circles, and settles down for a nap in a sunbeam. Everything was hot and wet and alive, like the inside of a summer raindrop.

“Welcome, Hawthorn, dear as vino and veritas, to the Rhyming Jungle, where the Six Winds spend their holidays.”

Hawthorn thought his Toad would very much have liked the place. He liked it himself, but decided not to tell.

The Red Wind and Hawthorn entered the Rhyming Jungle smoothly, the Panther of Rough Storms being extra careful not to jostle the landing. They soared down the Sestina Shunpike, where wide-winged haiku-hawks darted and sang: five trilling notes, then seven, then five again. The Panther of Rough Storms purred and snapped his jaws at them. Sunlight rushed and rippled down the paths of the forest the way rivers run through the cities you and I have seen.

“Why is it called the Rhyming Jungle? A jungle can’t rhyme,” Hawthorn said sullenly, refusing to give the Red Wind the satisfaction of being impressed.

“Look around you, little blind mouse! Everything rhymes! There’s the Guava Grove on the edge of Lava Cove, the Savannah of Bananas, beaches full of peaches, moonflowers growing in the evening hours. And look there! The pink-backed snake basks in the shade of the ink-black mandrake, the cuckoos in the bamboo, the wide-mouthed frogs in the seaside bogs, the crocodiles sleeping in the hollyhock isles, the ocelots among the apricots, the mistletoe twists round branches of pistachio, the plum trees gossip with the gum trees, dryads tango through the mangoes—and when night falls, the fruit bats and the muskrats and the wildcats and the wombats hold their wild sabbats on their thorny zigurat! If you look closely at the world, you will see that it is made of nothing but interlocking verses. For everything that is, there is a mirror and a match, a rhyme and a rhythm. Ask me instead what does *not* rhyme? That would be easier.”

Hawthorn looked down at the seething poem beneath him.

“But . . . but there’s a herd of elephants eating cashew leaves. And capybaras with their cheeks full of sarsaparilla roots. Kumquats next to cinnamon trees and an avocado grove with mosquitoes and coconuts and tapirs and orchids mixed in. Those don’t rhyme at all.”

“The Jungle enjoys a spot of free verse from time to time. Don’t nitpick, it’s a very unattractive trait.”

The Panther padded down softly and trotted off into a thicket of coffee berries and rosy cherries. They were heading for a shimmering clearing at the end of the Shunpike, so thick with ferns and wild purple flowers that Hawthorn could not see right away that the ground beneath was not green, but a bold, cheerful blue. As they drew nearer, the little troll looked down upon a lovely strange sort of painting in the earth: Grass and vines and fallen fruits and old leaves and gnarled roots and wet, clayey mud grew and corkscrewed and scattered and fell and twisted and squelched in a hundred colors—a map of the world made of the world itself. The blue grasses made a flowing ocean; little heaps of papayas and tangerines clustered into continents, great red tree roots showed safe sailing routes, and a thousand brilliant flowers floated in the grass like islands in the sea. Across the middle of it all lay a path of perfectly even, flat, glistening obsidian stones. Hawthorn could see his face in their black, glassy surfaces, broken into a dozen other Hawthorns.

“What are *those*?” he whispered, entranced by the stones and the boy trapped inside them. The continents looked nothing like his book of maps at home. His book was gigantic and red, and therefore one of his favorite toys. Best of all, if you stepped on a page and said the right words, you could go right into the talking desert or candy-cane towers it showed. His mother hadn’t shown him the word yet, but Hawthorn felt certain she was keeping it in the high kitchen cabinet he could not reach, behind the baking soda and the belladonna. Pretty soon he’d be

big enough. But this! This map had so much ocean! And all the land looked like a great broken puzzle, as though if you squeezed them all together they would fit precisely, shore to shore, and make a picture of something else.

“*Those* are the Equator, my dulcet demon. And we can’t get very far without an Equator, so do stop gawping at them.” The Red Wind dismounted with a gallant sweep of her leg and lifted the troll from the Panther of Rough Storms, letting him squish his toes in the blue mud. She looked him over. “Do see to your hair. It’s sticking up dreadfully in front.”

Hawthorn blushed—trolls blush a very fetching shade of chartreuse—and squashed his forelock down hurriedly with one hand.

“But that’s not right! Everyone knows the Equator is a great fat serpent who lays around the whole world and bites her own tail and keeps us all safe from marauding meridians,” he spluttered quickly, embarrassed. He did so love to be right. It was his third favorite thing, after fire and his mother.

“Don’t be silly, child. The Equator is a dotted line on a map. It marks the widest part of the earth, midway between the North Pole and the South Pole. Serpents! Why, I’ve never heard such a thing!” But her dark eyes twinkled, and her red mouth quirked as though she was, somewhere deep inside, laughing at him. Perhaps the snake was hiding off further in the Jungle, smirking too, holding her giant breath to keep from being discovered.

Hawthorn felt quite shy in front of the mossy map. Being a troll, he loved the earth. A troll’s love for the earth is a peculiar thing—it is something like the way you and I love our parents and our dogs and our favorite novels and the stuffed rabbits we have had since we were in our cradles and the very best thing we have ever done with our own two

hands, all smashed up together in a rough, enormous ball of feeling the size of a planet. But this wasn't *his* earth. He felt as though he were being introduced to the beautiful cousin of his best friend. All his skin flushed and tingled. He felt faint. Perhaps it was only that he hadn't eaten anything since supper last night and the Jungle was so wickedly hot and wet and close. Being a Changeling was, so far, very tiring work.

"Are they going to come alive?" Hawthorn peered closer at the dark stones. "Or grow legs and dance? Or tell us fell secrets from the deep and loamy vaults of lizard-time?"

"You're going to have to start a sort of backward, old-fashioned sort of thinking, I'm afraid." The Red Wind picked at her sleeve shamefacedly. "Not everything is going to be always alive the way you and I are. Not everything has a dance or a secret or a song locked up inside it. Where you are going, a map is just a map. If it has any magic, it is a simple one: A map shows maybes. Maybe you will climb the Himalayas or sail the Mississippi. Maybe you will see Paris; maybe you will eat wolf stew in Siberia. A map shows the way to everything. No more and no less. But it cannot choose between Annapurna and Missouri. That is your job. If you want the job, that is."

The Red Wind turned to him with a very serious expression on her lovely face. She crouched down so that they could look each other in the eye directly, troll to troll. "When you make a choice," she said, "how do you do it, my stropky, surly, splendid lamb? Think of all the things you have chosen in your little life, from porridge or parrot pie for breakfast to whether or not to bother with learning to walk. How did you pick the pie and the trip-trapping upon the bridge?"

Hawthorn shuffled his large, mossy, bare feet on the brilliant blue grass of the blooming map. "Well . . . you start with fretting," he said finally. "If you don't give a thing a proper fret it'll never come out right."

I know that from my own belly, which always makes a feeling like falling when it doesn't know what to do. And then . . . well, my mother says everything in the world is a boxing match in your heart, between Boldness and Not-Boldness. You let them holler inside you and wallop each other with Arguments For and Against. Then you end by betting on one or the other and that's how things get decided." He thought about it for a moment. "If you're my father you bet on Not-Boldness, Being Safe, with a bridge over your head and a good beefy riddle in your pocket. If you're my mother, you bet on Boldness. Mummy says a choice is a bet you make with the world, and a gambler drinks better than a spend-thrift. And all the while it's happening you have a stomachache."

"And who do you take after?"

Hawthorn thought back to his garnet nursery, his great toad, his father and his hat, his mother and her pot, the family bridge, with its good, creamy mortar and nice thick stones and new riddles every year. He thought of everything that had ever happened since he had been born, which was really not so many things, but to Hawthorn was the whole of the universe.

"I don't know!" he cried. "I mostly take after my Toad, I think."

The Red Wind grinned, her red lips curling under her red mask. She looked as though she had been given a present just specially for her, all wrapped up in red. "Oh, my darling stumpy mushroom-lad! Quite so! And a toad means *adventure*. A toad means starting out a nasty clammy little thing and turning into a prince. A toad means sticking your tongue out as far as it can go and gobbling up everything it touches. A toad means golden balls and wells and cursed princesses and archery contests and swelling music and flowers falling from towers and the enchanted bowers of fair maids! Choose, Hawthorn, the Toad's True Son—a life in the tourist industry, sticking close to home, trip-trapping poor

backpackers who never harmed you, or a life of strange lands, wild wandering, splendid machines, and deeds of daring?”

Hawthorn hopped from foot to foot, quivering and sweating and furrowing his brow. He could feel his fret starting up in him like a sour green balloon, slowly filling and growing. He could see the gorgeous land the Red Wind spoke of on one side of his heart, opening up like a book of many colors, like his book of maps, wonderful, new—and on the other side he saw his beloved whale-skull bed and the opal porridge his father boiled up on Thursday mornings and the dear, familiar shops of Skaldtown all lit up for the holidays. The Equator glittered beneath his feet. Each stone seemed as deep as the sea, as a dark, dark door, a tunnel, through which the troll knew he would find another Hawthorn, a boy he could not even imagine right now, who had chosen adventure and towers and flowers and whatever bowers were, who had a gleam in his eye like a lad who had placed his bet and won.

Hawthorn wanted to meet that boy *awfully*.

The Red Wind gently pulled a strand of Hawthorn’s mossy hair free of his nightclothes. “A choice is like a jigsaw puzzle, darling troll. Your worries are the corner pieces, and your hopes are the edge pieces, and you, Hawthorn, dearest of boys, are the middle pieces, all funny-shaped and stubborn. But the picture, the picture was there all along, just waiting for you to get on with it. Now, grab hold of that bit of grass. That one there, under the guavas. Get your nails underneath, that’s a lad.”

Hawthorn, his fret still squeaking and swelling, did as he was told. He squooshed his thick fingers into the Jungle earth. It was as soft and sweet as warm chocolate. He felt a hard lip and hauled on it—the edge of the blue grass, the edge of the map, came up in his hand. The Red Wind had snatched up a stretch of canteloupe-continent, and as Hawthorn watched, she heaved it up, up, up, over her head. The Panther of

Rough Storms bit a pale swath of moonflower-arctic in his black muzzle and yanked it free. The troll gritted his sharp teeth and pulled harder, hardest, until his scrap of sea came up as well, and they all three tripped and tumbled toward each other, dragging the grass and flowers and stones behind them like capes, until suddenly all was dark. The boiling sun was gone. They crouched together, breathing fast, huddled inside the bundle of the world like a fort of blankets. The rich smell of flowers and roots and soil and growing, living, rhyming things swirled and danced in the shadows. Hawthorn's fret popped in an emerald burst. He peered at the Wind and her Panther with great bright crimson eyes like nursery-garnets and Redcaps and poison apples.

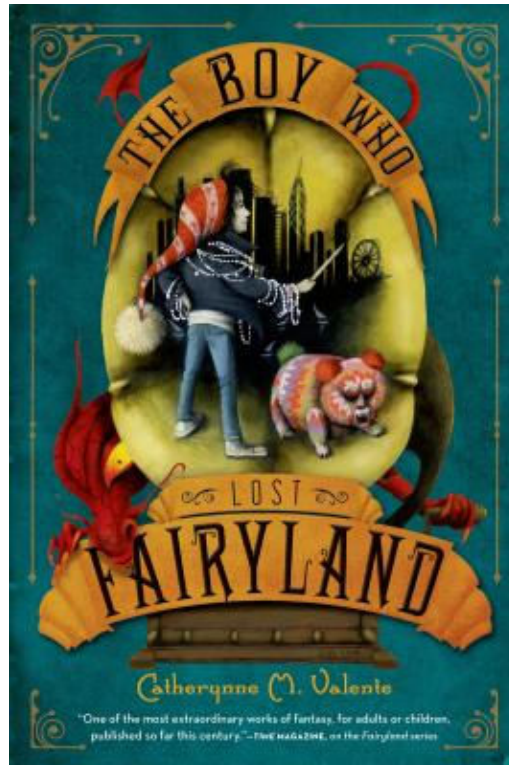
"There isn't really a choice, is there?" he whispered. "Adventure cheats. It's so much shinier and louder than Not-Adventure."

Solemnly, the Red Wind held out her free hand to the troll in pajamas. With the other hand, she held the world together.

"Aren't you the cleverest thing," she said, and pulled him in close to her scarlet side, to her Panther, to the Equator, and the infinite sea of maybes she clutched in one strong, red fist.



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