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**Your main commentary should be focused on *non canonical constituent order and information packaging*. Other topics may also be addressed.**

Skinner rushed past his wife and laid a hand on the tap of the nearest barrel. He paused, and then wrenched it open.

The smell of peach brandy filled the room, sharp as knives. He shut off the flow and relaxed.

5 'Afraid it would turn into something nasty?' asked his wife. He nodded.

'If you hadn't been so clumsy—' she began.

'I tell you it bit me!'

'You could have been a wizard and we wouldn't have to bother with all this. Have you got no *ambition*?'

10 Skinner shook his head. 'I reckon it takes more than a staff to make a wizard,' he said. 'Anyway, I heard where it said wizards aren't allowed to get married, they're not even allowed to—' he hesitated.

'To what? Allowed to what?'

Skinner writhed. 'Well. You know. Thing.'

15 'I'm sure I don't know what you're talking about,' said Mrs Skinner briskly.

'No, I suppose not.'

He followed her reluctantly out of the darkened bar-room. It seemed to him that perhaps wizards didn't have such a bad life, at that.

20 He was proved right when the following morning revealed that the ten barrels of peach brandy had, indeed, turned into something nasty.

Esk wandered aimlessly through the grey streets until she reached Ohulan's tiny river docks. Broad flat-bottomed barges bobbed gently against the wharves, and one or two of them curled wisps of smoke from friendly stovepipes. Esk clambered easily on to the nearest, and used the staff to lever up the oilcloth that covered most of it.

25 A warm smell, a mixture of lanolin and midden, drifted up. The barge was laden with wool.

It's silly to go to sleep on an unknown barge, not knowing what strange cliffs may be drifting past when you awake, not knowing that bargees traditionally get an early start (setting out before the sun is barely up), not knowing what new horizons might greet one on the morrow...

30 You know that. Esk didn't.

Esk awoke to the sound of someone whistling. She lay quite still, reeling

35 the evening's events across her mind until she remembered why she was here, and then rolled over very carefully and raised the oilcloth a fraction.

Here she was, then. But 'here' had moved.

'This is what they call sailing, then,' she said, watching the far bank glide past, 'It doesn't seem very special.'

40 It didn't occur to her to start worrying. For the first eight years of her life the world had been a particularly boring place and now that it was becoming interesting Esk wasn't about to act ungrateful.

The distant whistler was joined by a barking dog. Esk lay back in the wool and reached out until she found the animal's mind, and Borrowed it gently. From its inefficient and disorganized brain she learned that there were at least four people on this barge, and many more on the others that were strung out in line with it on the river. Some of them seemed to be children.

50 She let the animal go and looked out at the scenery again for a long time – the barge was passing between high orange cliffs now, banded with so many colours of rock it looked as though some hungry god had made the all-time record club sandwich – and tried to avoid the next thought. But it persisted, arriving in her mind like the unexpected limbo dancer under the lavatory door of Life. Sooner or later she would have to go out. It wasn't her stomach that was pressing the point, but her bladder brooked no delay.

Perhaps if she—

60 The oilcloth over her head was pulled aside swiftly and a big bearded head beamed down at her.

'Well, well,' it said. 'What have we here, then? A stowaway, yesno?'

Esk gave it a stare. 'Yes,' she said. There seemed no sense in denying it. 'Could you help me out please?'

65 'Aren't you afraid I shall throw you to the – the pike?' said the head. It noticed her perplexed look. 'Big freshwater fish,' it added helpfully. 'Fast. Lot of teeth. Pike.'

The thought hadn't occurred to her at all. 'No,' she said truthfully. 'Why? Will you?'

'No. Not really. There's no need to be frightened.'