

# Hobgoblin Boots

By

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When I was thirteen years old, my mother ran away from home. No one was surprised. She had always been the flighty type. I was old enough to take care of myself anyway, always running off somewhere on an adventure or a scrape. Truth is, I was hardly home at all and when she left our village it is entirely possible that she just forgot about me.

Or maybe it was me she was running away from.

In any case, I was prepared to go it alone. I'd been planning to Seek My Fortune at some stage, so why not now? There was this cute little chainmail number at the smithy's which would suit me perfectly - well, it would once I figured out how to fix it so it bared my midriff. And boots, I was going to need some seriously slinky boots if I was going to make my way in the world. Yeah, I had it all sorted out.

Ma Fortuna had other ideas.

Everyone knows Ma Fortuna and no one ever argues with her. She wasn't born in our village, she just turned up one day, married old "Ticker" Triclover and started producing kids by the bucketful. In the year my mother left, Ma Fortuna was a recent widow and just about the most respectable person in the cosmos. There was no way she was going to let a thirteen year old girl make her own way in the world - not without a

good hot supper inside her, anyway. Minutes after the news of my mother's departure spread through the village, Ma Fortuna was standing on my doorstep with a hot kettle, a handful of dusters and a look of extreme determination.

Before the tea was cold, I had somehow agreed to come and live with her family. Don't ask me how it happened. I remember trying to explain what my plans were, but she just kept dusting things. The subject was closed.

So I was hustled with my few worldly belongings into the big, rambling house on the hill. I was pushed into a room teeming with the Triclover clan, ranging in ages from twelve to three years old. I found myself staring across the room at Luco (Luc to his friends), Ma's firstborn and the one with the most right to protest me being dragged into his family.

We had always been on opposite sides of the playground, Luc and I. While I was causing havoc with the Void twins among the girls, he was kinging it over the boys. I had never been able to figure out what they saw in him, a skinny little nobody like that. What had he done to make himself leader of the pack?

That evening, with the Triclover kids crowding around to set the table, most of them crashing into me as if I was already accepted as one of them, I caught Luc looking at me. He had a funny little face, a long nose and very serious eyes. When he saw me staring, he smiled. Not the slow, strange smile of a boy discovering girls for the first time - I'd seen enough of those that year.

No, it was nice. He looked for a moment like he was considering the possibility of liking me - and suddenly I liked him right back.

My name is Bounty Fenetre - proof, if anything, of how flighty my mother was.

Truthfully, it's only a shortened version of the true horror she landed me with. The main benefit of losing my mother at the age of thirteen is that she isn't around to blab my full name to anyone.

I was born in the Year of the Vampyre Aelves. A lot of kids were born that year. The Market Faire was canceled due to union problems, and it became necessary to remind mortals why Mocklore held a Market Faire every year. It's a tribute to the faery folk of the OtherRealm - you know, the moonlight dimension, the unknown orchard, land of the fey - and when the Market Faire didn't happen, all hell broke loose. The Faerie Quene sent a horde of vampyre aelves to punish the thoughtless mortals. They tore across the land, ravishing maidens (hence the population explosion) and generally pillaging. Most of the kids born nine months later had extra sharp teeth, or the trendy pale-skin, black hair look. A few actually came out as vampyres, which caused some fun. Bet you didn't know it was hereditary.

Not me, though. My mum wouldn't settle for any old common or garden pixie. She latched on to the Lord of the Hobgoblins, who was supervising the raid. So I'm half-hobgoblin, which means I have a genetic predisposition towards big eyes, narrow hips and tangled hair. Not necessarily a good thing, but I'm used to it.

My father died. No, not died exactly. He faded away. You see, the Faerie Quene captured this princess, and these heroes went to rescue her, as heroes do - one thing led to another, and they ended up sealing the Faerie Quene and her son the Faerie Prinse up in ice forever. The confusion after the Quene's absence meant the vampyre aelves couldn't get back to the OtherRealm, so they just went on ravishing and pillaging. The heroes

managed to banish most of the aelves through a magic door, so the story goes, but they never found my father.

The thing about fullblood fey folk is that they can't spend more than a few days in the mortal world before they start to fade. That's what happened to Lord Nanneke of the Hobgoblins. He couldn't get back to the OtherRealm, so he just faded away. And I never knew him. So, there I was, not even born, already stuck with a flighty mother, a non-existent father and hobgoblin hips.

Losing a mother and gaining a family worked for a while. I stayed with the Tricolvers and loved them dearly, but by the age of seventeen I had to get away on my own. Luc was sixteen by then and his case was even more urgent than mine. Ma Fortuna wanted him to go into the family business - which involved chasing rogue clockwork through the Skullcap Mountains and trying to be home for tea every other night. If he didn't want to end up like his father, he had to find himself an alternate future - and fast.

There's a pond outside our village. Nothing special about it really -- just a pond. A large murky puddle, adorned with lilies of an unfashionable colour and inhabited by the worst gang of second-rate water nymphs in the known world.

Mocklore Survival Guide #1: Water nymphs. Worse than dryads, worse than ice sprites - hell, they're worse than graduates from Mistress Minx's Finishing School for Terminally Silly Damsels. If you ever have an urge to ask a serious question of a water nymph, don't bother. You'll just be sacrificing three hours of your life for no good reason. She'll be giggling for two of those hours, and she'll spend the rest of the time pulling your hair. For some reason, mortal men find them incredibly attractive.

Not ours, though. Our pond nymphs don't even attract the local boys, not even the *under-age* local boys. I wouldn't want to be bitchy (gods forbid), but the sight of one of our nymphs would curdle wine. They've been known to send full-grown men screaming into the night. That's even after they've spent every waking moment (and water nymphs don't sleep) combing their hair and prettifying their faces. I'd hate to see what would happen if they really let themselves go.

Anyway, there's a little secluded patch of water that is separated from the main pond by a big clump of spiky reeds. We call it the Lagoon, and this is where the locals swim -- mostly to avoid the nymphs, since they tend to stick to the main pond (although their giggles are shrill enough to carry for leagues in every direction), but also because every now and then, a stranger passes by and decides to go for a dip. The Lagoon is the best place from which to spy on the action.

That's where Luc and I were that afternoon, floating lazily in the Lagoon (two swimming strokes wide and two swimming strokes long, three if there's been heavy rain) and contemplating our future. Ma Fortuna wasn't giving up on the idea of getting Luc into the family business, but she had been temporarily placated by his younger brother Franc volunteering himself for clockwork duty.

Luc and I had been reluctantly granted permission to Seek Our Fortunes, as long as we promised that if we didn't find a Fortune within one year, we would come home, get married (either to each other or to equally suitable partners) and start producing the dozens of grandchildren Ma intended to have.

Needless to say, we were both pretty anxious that the whole Fortune Seeking thing would work out for us.

Luc ducked his head under the water, wetting his hair - he did that all the time because he hated the way it curled up in every direction, even when cut as short as humanly possible. "What are you going to do, Bounty?" he asked me. "What do you want to do with your life?"

I pretended to think about it. "There's always my namesake to consider." He looked at me in that familiar, half-puzzled way. I grinned and mouthed the words 'bounty hunter' at him.

"You wouldn't really." He sounded almost offended by the idea.

I splashed him. "Why not? What else am I qualified for? I can't sing, I can't swoon, I hate dressmaking, I'm lousy at blacksmithing and the job of Emperor is already taken. What else could I possibly do?"

"You could be a hero," he suggested, and something in those thoughtful, dark little eyes of his almost made me believe him.

I laughed it off. "Are you kidding? That's a bit too unselfish for my style. Bounty-hunting will suit me down to the ground. Fewer overheads than piracy, less career pressure than the Profithood..." I hadn't really made up my mind to be a bounty hunter, I just said it to wind him up. I hadn't made any decisions at all about my future - things always worked out okay for me, one way or another. I was used to improvising. Luc, though, I worried about Luc. What was he going to do? What skills did he have that would keep him alive in the big bad world out there?

"Is that what *you* want to be?" I asked lightly. "A hero?"

He didn't answer, which made me nervous. He wasn't seriously considering it, was he? Suddenly he held up a hand. "We've got company."

I splashed the single stroke it took to reach the reeds and peered through to the main pond. “Speaking of heroes!”

Mocklore Survival Guide #2: Heroes. They don’t always look the same, but you can see them coming a mile off. In Zibria they wear lion skins and sandals. In Axgaard they wear leather and beards (everyone wears leather and beards in Axgaard).

Everywhere else, they dress like overblown actors with a fairy tale fixation. There are always a few common factors, though. A sword - heroes have to have a sword. It’s the law. And a smug, self-righteous expression seems to be traditional. But it’s the horse that really gives them away.

Despite my tender age of seventeen, I had done my fair share of travelling - before Ma Fortuna got her hands on me, anyway. I’d even climbed the Skullcaps and lived to tell the tale. That particular round trip takes anywhere from a week to six months, depending on how many magical catastrophes, alternate dimensions and mutant goats you run across - and this was in the days before the Glimmer made everything a hundred times worse.

Anyway, I had done enough travelling to know that if you’ve got yourself a good pair of boots, the only places in Mocklore you can’t get to on foot are not the kind of places where you take a horse - ravines, swamps, sentient jungles, that sort of thing. So apart from the spring ploughing and the occasional carriage going up and down the Great Mocklore Road, there isn’t a lot of use for horsepower.

There can’t be more than forty horses in the whole Empire, and at least half of those are used by heroes. Why? If you ask me, I’d say it’s an advanced form of posturing, or perhaps a side effect of the fairy tale obsession. If you see a well-dressed

male in the 20-40 age group sitting on the back of a horse, chances are he's in the hero business.

I mentioned the tendency for heroes to mimic fairy tales? The chap who was visiting our pond on that particular day was dressed like Prince Charming gone bad. Very, very bad. I stared through the rushes at his ruffled whiter-than-white shirt, his shiny black leather trews (leather should never be shiny), his long dove-grey boots, his shoulder-length black curly tresses, his hat with a feather in it. I whispered to Luc, "So this is your future, boyo?"

Luc didn't respond. He didn't laugh, either, which was unusual. He was too busy staring at Prince Charming. "He looks it, though," he whispered to me, quite seriously. "He looks the part. That's got to be the first step."

Thing about Luc is, he's not stupid. Not gullible, either. When he puts his brain in gear and starts actually thinking, it's amazing the things he can come up with. On that particular balmy afternoon, he came up with a doozy.

Luc stared through the reeds at Hero Boy and grinned that sudden cheerful grin that always took me by surprise. "Let's steal his clothes."

Separating a hero from his clothes is easier than you'd think. Don't forget, I have these wide hobgoblin eyes going for me. Plus a handy pond. To be honest, the pond did most of the work for me. It was warm, and Hero Boy had already decided to go for a swim. He swung a leg over the back of his horse and jumped down to the bank, pulling off his dove-grey boots. Nice boots. I could do wonderful things with boots like those.

The whiter-than-white ruffled shirt and the feathered hat followed the boots, then Hero Boy started easing himself out of those shiny black leather trews. I could have averted my eyes modestly, but I didn't. I'm not your average blushing maiden and I never ignore an opportunity to be entertained.

Mind you, I had to stifle a screech of laughter when Hero Boy's curly black wig joined the rest of the clothes pile.

Once he was stripped off (apart from an oversized pair of long-johns which really didn't match the outfit but probably provided vital protection from leather chafing), Hero Boy plunged with a meaty splash into the middle of our village pond.

Under usual circumstances, three things would happen at this point. 1) The water nymphs would appear, as if from nowhere. 2) They would pounce on the hapless stranger and attempt to seduce him. 3) The hapless stranger's response, if he was anything like all the other hapless strangers over the years, would be to run screaming from the pond. In other words, unless Hero Boy was so horrified that he leaped on to his horse and made his getaway without grabbing his clothes first, we would have no chance to secure a hero costume for Luc.

It was for this reason that I was whistling softly beneath my breath, my mouth half in and half out of the water at the point where the pond meets the beginning of the Lagoon. It was a tune my mother used to sing to me and I think it has some magic in it because it's worked a few times.

It was working now. Instead of terrifying our visitor with their (questionably) womanly charms, the pond nymphs were drifting towards the Lagoon. They raised doleful eyes up out of the water and stared at me. Even at a distance they gave me the

chills, their writhing watery veins trapped under see-through skin. “Whass you doing?” hissed Globula, the bluest of them. Water nymphs don’t have much colour, but you soon get to distinguish the slight difference in shades between them.

“We goss a hero ssoo pounce on,” complained the greenish one (I can never remember her name) in a wet whisper.

“I know,” I said. “But just this once, could you let me do the pouncing? I fancy a go at it.”

The watery pond nymphs all looked at me suspiciously.

“Whass for?” said Gremmla finally. She’s the one that’s almost yellowish, but not quite.

I knew what she was asking. Fair trade. Like most fey folk, water nymphs use promises as their currency. “What do you want?” I asked her.

“Whass you willing ssoo promise?” she belted back, looking pleased with herself.

I tried to think of something they might like. “All right. I’m going out into the big wide world this week. I promise that on my first visit home, I’ll bring you some water lilies in a decent colour.”

This had the desired effect. The poor things had been living with beige lilies for far too long. Their eyes lit up - a scary thing to see, since their eyes are just swirls of watery substance.

“Purple?” choked Globula as if she could hardly believe it.

“Blue, pink!” clamored the greenish one.

“Crimssssson,” said Gremmla in a firm voice.

“All colours,” I said extravagantly, then stopped myself. “Wait, I don’t want to be held to that one. How about if I promise to bring at least three reasonably exciting colours of lily?”

They hesitated, but agreed to it. We kissed each other’s noses to seal the deal (not something I recommend anyone do with nymphs who belong to a stagnant body of water). I pulled off my soggy chemise, which was one of the conditions Ma Fortuna insisted on if I went swimming in public, especially with one of her sons. “Okay, ladies. Watch and learn.”

Hero Boy was splashing around in the water with his back to me. Unfortunately, he was facing toward his pile of clothes. I could see Luc hovering around the trees to my left, unwilling to make a move until Hero Boy was suitably distracted.

I’ve always been good at causing distractions.

I rolled silently on to my back and began to stroke lazily towards Hero Boy. He was making such a noise with his splashing that he didn’t see me until I crashed into him. I dove under the water and emerged with a squeal. “Oh, *sir!* What are you doing?”

My outraged tone and obvious nakedness confused him enough that he didn’t even question whether he was really in the wrong. He apologized so many times that I thought his tongue would fall out (not that he wasn’t getting a good eyeful at the same time).

I squealed a bit more, mostly about what my father and six older brothers would do when they found out about this. Hero Boy paled at the thought of seven burly farmers coming after him, and prepared to make a hasty exit. He turned just in time to see Luc making away with his clothes. He roared and ran after him, but didn’t get very far

because a) he was naked and barefoot and b) among other things, Luc had stolen his horse.

By the time Luc and I met up, deep in the trees around our village, we were both laughing so hysterically that neither of us could talk. Even the horse seemed amused -- I don't think he'd been too impressed by his previous owner.

In case you're wondering, yes I *had* taken the time to snatch up my chemise and my previously-discarded clothes, and I was now respectably dressed.

It was time to examine the loot. As well as the clothes and the horse, there were a couple of well-stuffed saddlebags. Not too shabby for our first efforts at Seeking our Fortune. As long as Ma never found out about this, we'd be right.

While Luc tried to figure out how to put on the white ruffled shirt, I tried on the dove-grey boots. They were very good boots. They went all the way up to my knees, which you couldn't see under my modest village dress (hand-stitched by Ma Fortuna) but I was already planning a new outfit around the boots.

"Hey, hand them over," Luc protested when he noticed I had staked my claim.

I tossed the black curly wig at him. "They're my commission. Just be glad I didn't take a fancy to the treads. What's the sword like?"

Luc looked embarrassed. "I didn't take his sword."

I paused halfway in the act of unbuckling the first saddlebag. Of all the necessary props for a hero, a sword is right up there. "*Why not?*"

Luc shuffled his feet. "Well, it might have been an heirloom or something."

“No,” I said, gingerly removing my arm from inside the saddlebag and flipping it open so he could see the contents. “I think *this* is the heirloom.”

Inside the saddlebag was a huge, oozing, rotting troll head. It looked like our Hero Boy was more impressive than your average show-pony. He’d bagged a troll.

“I feel sick,” said Luc. He did look pretty green.

“No time for that,” I said brightly. “It’s time to say our goodbyes and hit the open road. This gives me such a brilliant idea.”

Like Luc said from the start, the first step to becoming a hero is to look like one. The second step is to be recognised as a hero, by other heroes as well as by the world at large. As far as I could see, short of actually spending a few years performing good deeds and buttering up news minstrels, there was only one way to achieve hero recognition.

Sure, it was tossing him in at the deep end. But even if he sank without a trace, he’d at least get a glimpse of what real heroes looked and acted like. Maybe it would put him off the idea.

Mocklore Survival Guide #3: Taverns. There are a lot of these in Mocklore. Inns, hostelries, watering holes, ale houses, wine bars, beer bars, home-brewed cider bars. When a community is stuck on a small island, they want to be sure they can get a drink around every corner. After the ordinary drinking houses, there are the trade taverns. Every trade has at least one. There’s a profit-scoundrel bar in Dreadnought, an assassin bar at the top of the Teatime Mountain, a woodcutter bar behind every other oak tree and about fourteen exotic dancer/spy bars in Zibria. There’s even an ex-Emperor bar somewhere in Skullcap, but that wasn’t around in our day.

The point is that unless you're an exotic dancer (they're welcome everywhere except the Sparkling Nuns' Beer Hut), you don't go into a trade tavern without belonging to the trade. You're liable to get yourself killed, or at least maimed. Everyone still remembers that nasty incident when two blacksmiths accidentally walked into the Braidmakers' Community Cabaret Club. Braidmakers are scary.

There's a hero bar, obviously. It's smack bang in the middle of the city of Axgaard, which is such a hero thing to do - you have to be brave to walk through Axgaard in daylight, let alone during traditional drinking hours. Getting as far as the Twelve Labors Saloon is a heroic labour all on its own. The streets are filled with mad sword-wielding maniacs and prematurely-bearded children playing target games with knives and each other's braids.

Luc and I had thought out our plan carefully. Well, I had thought it out carefully and then spent a lot of time talking him into it. I was dressed as a damsel/exotic dancer, which involved a lacy white two-piece dress (ripped a little for effect) and lots of jingling beads. The damsel bit was to aid my story, and the exotic dancer bit was for my own protection. Luc was dressed in the Hero Boy costume, with his old brown boots blacked up for the occasion. Naturally, I was hanging on to the lovely long grey boots we'd stolen.

The horse turned out to be far too sensible to allow itself to be dragged within the city walls, so we tethered it to a tree before going in.

The Twelve Labors Saloon stands in the city square, bright white from roof to welcome mat. It's built from shiny white stone, surrounded by elegant white pillars. It would look perfect in Zibria, where every building is either a temple or just looks like

one, but in the shambling, lopsided city of Axgaard (built from splintering timber and rusty nails from old orange boxes) it stands out like a naked male troll in a convent. Still, at least it stayed up whenever the rest of the city burned down around it, which happened every other week.

“What now?” Luc whispered.

“Relax,” I hissed back. “Whatever happens, go along with me and act *cool*. You’re a hero now. Confidence is your middle name.”

“Right,” my hero said uncertainly.

The noise from inside the Twelve Labors Saloon was deafening. Clashing tankards harmonized with raucous laughter, loud belching, bad piano music and the sound of fists smashing into furniture. It was quite restrained compared to the goings on in the street around us, so I didn’t have much of a problem with approaching the door and letting myself in. Luc waited in the street for his cue.

If it hasn’t been obvious from what I’ve said so far, I should explain that in Mocklore the hero business is mostly a male profession. There are a few girls who do it, but they tend to be the kind of girls who are far too sensible to come into a place like this. The first time I realised this with any degree of clarity was while standing in that doorway.

All eyes looked at me. Male eyes. I don’t think I’ve ever felt so outnumbered in my life. Somewhere, a guy playing a piano struck a few false notes and then lapsed into silence. I know this is an often-used psychological trick to intimidate people, but it was bloody working on me.

Still, I had a job to do. I had a bosom to heave and I was damn well going to heave it. I took a deep breath and the bosom started heaving all on its own. I clasped my hands together in a traditional distressed maiden pose and let them have it. “Trolls! On the Great Road, swarming all over me!”

Now I was properly categorized as a damsel in distress with news of a potential adventure, the heroes were instantly less hostile towards me. One of them, a giant of a bloke wearing a black leather jerkin over a shirt even whiter and frillier than Luc’s, leaped to his feet and pounded a fist against the wall, causing a thin shower of marble dust to fall down from the high ceiling. “A troll, you say?” he roared in delight. “What you need is a HERO!”

“Auggghyeah!!” chorused the others, smashing their tankards over each other’s heads.

One hero, smaller than the rest, sighed and pulled his twirly moustache. “I don’t believe you used that line *again*,” he complained.

“It’s a classic,” protested the giant in ruffles, pouting.

“There’s a chasm between classic and cliché,” groaned the hero with the moustache. “And not one of you morons can tell the difference.”

I felt myself losing control of the conversation. “There’s already a hero facing those monsters,” I gasped, swooning against a pillar and hanging on to it for dear life. “Luco the Magnificent, the greatest hero I have ever known. But he’s outnumbered four to one, I fear he is lost forever!”

“Right, Thimbleknees,” bellowed the giant hero, dragging the thin moustached hero up out of his chair and setting him on his feet. “Let’s go. And if you say one more word about my dramatic monologues, I’ll bloody thump you!”

Right on cue, the tavern door flew open. The piano player, caught flatfooted, started playing jauntily again for a few seconds before striking the traditional false notes and lapsing into silence.

Luc stood there in the doorway. He looked fabulous, even if I do say so myself. With a few stitches here and there (lucky Ma Fortuna taught him to use a needle), the hero costume fit him perfectly. The slightly-askew black curls of the wig gave him that dramatic look, and a bit of strategically-scattered face powder (Corpse White No. 8) gave him the dramatic vampyre look that was so fashionable at the time.

He was gripping the huge, dripping troll head in one hand, allowing the blood to pool on the floor. We’d bought a bag of blood and mutton chunks from a butcher’s stall to freshen up the head after so many days mouldering in a saddlebag.

When Luc spoke, his voice bounced off the marble walls. Living with seven or eight younger siblings really teaches you to project. “I told you there was no need to go for help, fair maiden. Four trolls is hardly enough to build up a sweat!” He dropped the head on the floor with a heavy squelch, stepped casually over it and headed for the bar. “Is anyone going to buy me a drink?”

There was a long pause.

In a sane universe, he would have been beaten up. They would have seen through him in an instant and either smashed his face in or hung him upside down from the roof gutters. Luc knew this, which is why it took me so long to talk him into my brilliant plan.

But I was counting on something he didn't even know he had. That strange, unexplainable charisma that made the most average boy in the school into the king of the playground. For some reason, Luc had something that made people like him and look up to him. Even I did it, and I don't look up to anyone. Maybe it was a genetic thing from Ma Fortuna - the ability to make everyone automatically do what you say.

But Luc wasn't like that. He didn't *make* people do anything. They just did it because they liked him and they wanted him to like them. It was something I was going to have to use only sparingly, because if he ever found out about this talent of his, he would become the most insufferable (and possibly the most dangerous) person in the Empire.

I held my breath for a full minute, but it was worth the wait. It worked. One minute they were staring at him like they couldn't figure out whether to kill him or just rip his arms off, and the next they were slapping him on the back and buying him drinks. Lots of drinks.

Within ten minutes, they were all rowdily settled around a table swapping troll stories. Luc was among them, swept up in an ocean of ruffled white shirts, tight leather trousers and foaming beer tankards.

It was a good half an hour before anyone noticed me again, and that was when the trouble started. I was dangling my legs on one of the rickety bar stools, sipping something that came out of an exotic bottle. I'm a sucker for drinks that come out of pretty bottles. This one tasted like a cross between sweet cherry cordial and rough salt-whisky. I was bored, barely keeping half an ear on the conversation of the heroes - they had moved on from trolls to giants and were all lying like mad.

Suddenly a hand slapped me on the shoulder, spun me around. Luckily for me, the stool wasn't up to much, or the force of that blow might have had me whizzing around for hours. Instead, the stool rotated once and cracked hard, leaving me jammed lopsidedly against the bar. I twisted my neck around to see who was responsible. Uh-oh.

She was scary. Half a foot taller than me and far more intimidating in the bust region. She was squeezed into a bronze corset that made her look like a tiny-waisted giantess. Metal bangles lined her muscular arms. Her copper-coloured hair jangled in thousands of tiny braids, each holding either a sweet-sounding bell or a nasty-looking blade. Her skirt was a short curtain of metal coins. Her bare thighs were so toned that they were probably registered as lethal weapons. Even her boots were shinier than mine.

She was a real exotic dancer, and I was in serious trouble.

The exotic dancer sneered at me, leaned her impressive bosom forward and stuck her nose about an inch from mine. "What the hell do you think you are?"

I didn't have the nerve to claim that I shared status with her - it was laughable. This woman was a professional. "Damsel in distress," I squeaked.

She raised an eyebrow in such a scorching expression of disdain that I'm surprised my fringe didn't catch fire. "Distress?"

Well, I was in distress now. I pointed shakily towards Luc amid the gang of boasting heroes, none of whom had noticed my predicament. "He rescued me. From a troll."

The scary bronze woman flicked her eyes towards the oozing troll head on the floor, but didn't back off. Instead, she pointed her muscular finger at the tawdry line of

bells I had made Luc stitch to my damsel-in-distress frock. “Looks to me like you fancy yourself as a bit of a *dancer*.”

Shit, I was going to die.

The heroes, somehow able to sniff out a brewing fight, finally noticed us. Chairs were scraped back to provide a better view, and some weaselly guy started scratching odds on the menu blackboard. Luc was looking worried.

I'd like to say it was to prevent him coming to my rescue and getting his head pulled off by the scary bronze woman that prompted my next actions, but it was nothing so rational. Let's just say that the combination of an audience of leather-clad men, a seemingly-unbeatable female opponent and odds of 100-1 against my survival just brings out the worst in me.

I stood up, pushing myself off the broken bar stool. The good thing was that her nose was no longer pressed into my face. Unfortunately, this was because she was now a whole foot taller than me. I gave her what I call the hobgoblin stare - it's an ability that anyone with a smidgen of fey folk blood is born with, the ability to look at someone as if you are the mistress of the universe and they are the dirt under somebody else's fingernails.

Usually it forces my opponent to step back a bit and check she doesn't have crumbs in her teeth. The scary bronze woman didn't even flinch. Instead, her mouth twitched into a purring sort of smile, and she stuck out her hand. “Lilya.”

Cautiously, I clasped my hand to hers. “Bounty.”

Almost as soon as I touched her hand, I realised my mistake. Lilya's smile broke into a terrifying grin of triumph and her grip changed.

I was suddenly airborne. The ceiling twisted up to meet me and then THUD. I was lying on my back, wondering what had happened. Lilya grinned down at me and brought her hands together a few times in a steady beat. The heroes joined in - at least those who were smart enough to be able to clap a beat and breathe at the same time.

The dratted piano started up again, this time with a boppy little tune that matched the beat. Lilya began to dance. Given that I wasn't altogether sure I would ever walk again, I had no choice but to watch her. And damn, she was good. She stomped and spun and turned her body inside out with rippling stomach action. Her body looked like steel one minute, water the next. She flowed and oozed and rattled and shimmied. She was sexy as hell, and every man in the room was trapped in her web.

I started crawling painfully to the door, my back screaming in a hundred different ways. Lilya's meaty hand grasped the back of my skimpy outfit and dragged me to my feet by my bra strap. I hung from her hand, a few inches off the floor. She was still moving in perfect time to the music. Suddenly she dropped me, clapped her hands and slapped them once against her thighs.

Everyone looked expectantly at me. They were waiting for me to join the dance. Now, I've seen combat dancing before and it's a nasty business. Someone always ends up maimed. Somewhere in the crowd, I found Luc's steady gaze. I'd talked him into walking into a lion's den with a giant troll's head bleeding from his hand. The least I could do was do a bit of dancing.

My back screamed out in a hundred new and interesting ways as I clapped my hands, slapped my thighs and accepted Lilya's invitation to dance. Even now, years later, most of that night is a foggy blur of painful, sweaty memories. Lilya and I danced and

jumped and shimmied our butts off in a stomping, sweating duel. After an hour or so, the heroes all stopped watching and wandered back to swap stories and play cards. We barely noticed. We weren't dancing for them.

Finally, somewhere near midnight, my hobgoblin stamina deserted me. I slumped over a bar stool, my legs exploding in a paralysed, jelly custard kind of way. "I give up. You win."

Lilya grabbed my bra strap through my skimpy clothes and hoisted me up so I was sitting properly on the bar stool. "Well, yeah," she said with a toothsome grin. "Buy me a drink?"

I nodded hazily, signaling to the barman. "You bet, babe."

A few minutes later, one of the larger bearded heroes came up beside us to order a huge round of beer. "That new bloke's not bad," he said with an impressed kind of leer. "Eight trolls in one day. Can't do better than that."

"Oh, he's a champ," I grinned through a haze of cherry cordial and whisky with extra gin for good measure.

Hours later, when the sun was starting to come up, Lilya and I staggered arm in arm out of the tavern, barely able to stand without each other's help. We found Luc tied to a flagpole in the middle of the square, draped in cheap women's underwear. Various axes were stuck in the pole from having been drunkenly thrown at him.

"They sussed you out?" I called up sympathetically.

"No," he said in a stunned, croaky voice. "This is what they do when they like you. They think I'm one of them!"

In my surprise, I let go of Lilya and she crashed to the cobblestones with a booming thump. I squinted up at Luc, trying to gauge how easily it would be to get him down in my current inebriated state. It might be easier, I reasoned drunkenly, if he were equally legless. “Fancy a drink?”

Okay, so Luc had been accepted into the hero community. He even had an official license scrawled in crayon on the back of a beer mat. This was good news, but it was time to introduce him to the world in general - after all, heroes don't exactly go around advertising each other. My own portrayal of a damsel in distress was less than convincing, so what we needed to do was find a blushing maiden and make her think Luc had saved her life.

You might think it would be easier just to find a damsel who's in distress and *actually* save her life. Maybe so, but my mind doesn't work that way.

We'd been walking for several days since Axgaard, dragging the reluctant horse behind us. We were near the start of the Zibrian canal system when we saw the carriage.

Remember what I said about horses, and how no one in their right mind would ride one across the messy landscape of Mocklore? That goes double for carriages. Triple, quadruple - if I could think of a word that meant more times than quadruple, I'd use it. Away from the cities or the Great Mocklore Road, no one would even consider travelling in a horse-drawn carriage. It's just silly.

Nevertheless, there it was. A carriage, bumping along the lower Zibrian moorland and occasionally lodging a spindly wheel in an oversized rabbit-hole. As carriages go, it was as impractical as humanly possible. It was round and pumpkin-

shaped, which means the occupants would have to curl up inside like hunchbacked slugs. It was also gilded, which made it prey for any passing thug or profit-scoundrel - at least, it would if the constant jolting of the journey hadn't scraped off half the gilt work. The profit-scoundrels were probably following behind at a safe distance, picking the golden flakes off the trees and rocks. The wheels of the carriage were high and thin. They kept getting snagged on branches, tall blades of grass and the aforementioned rabbit holes. The two horses pulling the damn thing were covered from head to toe in silver bells, cockle shells and other atrocities of bead work. The whole contraption lurched from side to side despite the desperate work of a pale-looking coachman. It was entirely likely that a gust of wind from the wrong direction would collapse coach, horses and all into a pile of very pretty rubble.

Inside the ridiculous carriage, there was a princess. There would have to be, really.

Mocklore Survival Guide #4: Princesses. Technically, there aren't any in Mocklore at all, given that a princess should be the daughter of a king or an emperor. Kings were abolished sometime in the last century, and Emperor Timregis (this was in the days before he was horribly assassinated) had been on the throne nearly fifty years without producing any kind of heir. So because people like having princes and princesses around (for the sake of fairy tales if nothing else), the rules were changed. Now the children of Lordlings also count as princes and princesses.

At this time, i.e. the summer I turned seventeen and went to Seek Luc's Fortune, there were a few princes here and there, but not exactly a glut. There were only two princesses, both daughters of Axgaard. One of them was crowned Jarl of Axgaard a few

years later, and the other took herself off to join the Sparkling Nuns. So much for fairy tale endings. I knew almost instantly that this was not one of the Axgaard girls. No braids, no rosy cheeks, no battle axes cunningly disguised as jewellery. This was a foreign princess, a different kettle of fish altogether.

Foreign princesses (ie. coming from outside Mocklore) all follow a certain pattern. They wear floaty dresses, pointy hats and wistful expressions. Occasionally a few of them come here looking for husbands (preferably princes or heroes) but they tend to get scared off by the various magical explosions, mysterious events and dangerous creatures that most native Mocklorns take for granted. Occasionally, these foreign princesses get eaten by dragons. But that only happened twice.

This girl was the foreign princess to end all foreign princesses. Her hat had not one, but two pointy bits. Instead of going straight up, the pointy bits curled around in an elaborate headdress from which tiny silver beads dangled prettily. A mesh of jeweled netting held the rest of the princess's blonde hair in place. Her gown was velvet, attached to a fluffy cape which trailed out of both windows of the carriage. Both the gown and the cape were pink. Why anyone would deliberately use pink dye on velvet is beyond me. But there you are. There she was. A little painted doll just crying out to be rescued from something.

I couldn't resist her.

In order to put my latest devilishly cunning plan into action, Luc and I had to go fishing for a few hours. Luckily, it's something we're both rather good at. Within two hours we had a hoard of a dozen large trout and several handfuls of tiddlers.

“It’s a waste of good fish,” Luc warned me.

I grinned at him, stuffing my bodice with tiddlers. “You’re just saying that because you didn’t think of it first.”

We left the stream and made our way across the uneven ground. There was no road, of course. The stupid carriage had only traveled about half a mile during the time we had taken to gather our fish. “Up, I think,” I said to Luc. He smiled back at me, liking this part. We’re both champion tree-climbers from way back -- truth be told, he’s a smidge better at it than I am, even taking skirts into account.

We swarmed up separate trees, jumping from branch to branch until we were right over the unfortunate carriage, which was stuck in yet another rabbit hole. I pulled a trout out of Luc’s sack, aimed carefully and struck the coachman on the left ear. He jumped wildly and stared at the fish as it flopped to the ground. While he was staring down, Luc threw two fish in quick succession, one hitting the coach and the other slapping the coachman on the back of his head. The coachman looked up in alarm, but the foliage was thick enough to hide us from sight. I let a handful of tiddlers dribble through my fingers. They plopped against the coach and pattered around the poor idiot’s feet.

With a strangled yelp, the coachman threw himself at the carriage door and scrambled inside. “Your highness!” we heard. “It’s a rain of fish! We must shelter, I’ve heard *terrible* stories!”

I grinned. It was good to see traditions surviving, such as the grand old tavern tradition that all servants of foreign aristocrats must be told horror stories about Mocklore’s environment until they are quivering wrecks.

A high, princessly voice reached us from within the carriage. “Well, do something about it!” she commanded.

Luc leaned out of his branch and lobbed a large trout so perfectly that it bounced inside the window of the carriage. I could have kissed him. The princess and the coachman both screamed.

I handed Luc half my tiddlers so he could keep the rain going for a while, and scampered down from the branches. Time for me to make my entrance. I threw myself at the carriage, beating on the door and looking wild. “Please, please help me! Give me shelter from the rain of fish!”

“Don’t let it in!” cried the princess, miserable little cow.

I looked pitiful, clawing gently at the door, trying to get the coachman’s sympathy.

“It’s only a girl, your highness,” he said.

Just then, Luc lobbed a particularly-well aimed trout which bounced off the carriage and slapped me in the bosom. I’m not sure how deliberate that was, but I screamed loudly enough to be convincing, and the coachman swung the door open and dragged me inside.

As I’d expected, the curvy insides of the carriage were well-padded but desperately uncomfortable, particularly with three of us packed in. Not that I was busy gawping at the decor, I had a job to do. It involved sobbing, mock-terror and near-hysteria, plus dialogue. “Oh, thank you, kind sir, my lady. The storm came up so suddenly, and I was so frightened! I’ve heard of people drowning in fish season.”

“Yes, I’ve heard that,” the coachman agreed. Bless those precious tavern stories.

The princess wrinkled her nose and seemed about to say something aristocratic, but Luc had the great timing to smack a few more trout down on the roof of the carriage, along with a couple of rocks to shake us up and make the fish last a bit longer.

“Ohhh!!” screamed the princess, grabbing at the coachman.

“Oh-ohhhh!!” screamed the coachman, grabbing my knee.

I just screamed generally, without grabbing, but I bounced a few times to make the carriage rattle. “What will we do?” I wailed. “This could go on for days and your carriage will break under the weight of all the fish!”

Since the princess and the coachman both had their eyes tightly shut, I grabbed the last handful of tiddlers from my bodice and threw them at the pointy headdress. Some of them stuck there. The rest tumbled down into her highness’s royal lap.

“Ooooooh,” she squealed.

Then, bless him, I heard Luc’s hero voice. He was getting awfully good at dramatic timing. “Don’t worry!” he bellowed from outside. “I’ll save you!”

And he did.

What we pretended later was that he had thrown a giant fishhook at the carriage, secured it, then pulled the weight of the carriage, occupants and horses at great speed for several miles across the countryside. It made a great story, and Luc looked suitably modest while he told it.

The truth, of course, was that he hitched our horse up to their horses and let them do the work until we were in a suitably different-looking bit of Zibrian countryside. The coachman and the princess were both so shaken that they had no problem believing our version, particularly since they didn’t know Luc and I were in league together.

We ate rabbit for supper - barbecued over the campfire, half-charred and delicious. I managed to drip a few hints to Princess Desirée (can you believe someone seriously gave that name to a princess?) about how Luco the Magnificent was really a Baron in disguise, and half these lands belonged to him. Her eyes sparkled.

Luc soon got wind of what I was doing and dragged me away from the others under the pretext of showing me ‘the way to that village you mentioned, young lady.’

“What the hell do you think you’re doing, Bounty?” he hissed.

I acted innocent. Big hobgoblin eyes are good for that. “I’m helping.”

“*How* are you helping?”

“Well, now she thinks you’re a Baron, she’s definitely interested. And once we show her the castle --”

“I don’t have a castle!”

“What I thought was, I’d go ahead and tip a few peasants to say these lands belong to Baron Luco, and clear the way for you to the castle.”

“What castle, Bounty?”

“When we were kids, the Void twins told me about the old witch city of Shadowe, and how their Uncle Imago turned it into a giant castle. It’s not far from here.”

“I can only think of one reason why someone would want a giant castle, and it doesn’t sound good,” said Luc suspiciously.

“Technically he’s not a giant, apart from being forty feet tall -- but that’s not important. What I thought was, I could talk him into lying low for a bit. We only need a teeny bit of giant castle to impress the princess over there, and we can always promise old Uncle Imago a cut of the dowry if she...”

“If she what?” Luc demanded. “If she marries me? Is that the plan here, Bounty? Because I thought we were Seeking Our Fortune as an *alternative* to getting married!”

“Marriage to a foreign princess is a Fortune,” I argued. “That’s it, you’ll be made for life.”

Luc’s narrow little face changed. I’ve never seen him so angry and so cold at the same time. He half-scared me, and that’s saying something. “Some simpering little rich wife to keep me in velvet shoes and roast peacock? Is that what you think I want? Or do you just want me married off so you can strut away and start your brand new life with a clear conscience?”

That was uncomfortably accurate, apart from the strutting bit. “Luc, you’ve got this all out of proportion. I just wanted to give you a good start in life. It’s not like we were planning to hang out together forever!”

He stared at me with ice in his eyes. Hurt, wounded ice. He turned on his heel and went back to the campfire.

I sat down suddenly. My legs just didn’t feel like standing upright. Had he really thought we were a life partnership? That didn’t make sense. He *knew* me. He knew I was fickle, and shallow, and heartless... and despite all that, it looked very much like he was in love with me.

Ouch.

I didn’t go back to the campfire for a long time. When I did, the princess was fast asleep, curled up in her strange little carriage. The coachman was sprawled out on the grass, snoring noisily. Luc was still awake.

“I don’t want to talk,” he said quietly.

I hesitated. “I don’t suppose you want to go on with the giant castle plan, either?”

“No.”

“So what do we do?”

He looked at me, finally, and the ice was still there. “I think we should follow your other plan, Bounty. The one about us going our separate ways.”

“But you’re not --” I swallowed what I was going to say, but Luc caught it anyway.

“Not ready? I can take care of myself, Bounty. It *is* possible. I don’t need to marry a princess and I don’t need you.”

I had been doing things all wrong. He would never have a chance to be independent unless I was gone. If I couldn’t set him up in a cushy situation, the best thing I could do for him was leave. Right now. I reached for my bag.

Luc was there suddenly, standing close to me. He took the bag gently and let it fall to the grass. “Not right now,” he said softly. “You might break your leg in the dark.”

“I can see in the dark,” I whispered back. “And it’s a full moon.” The sky was black around us, no moon in sight. “I mean, it will be. When it turns up. Which could be any minute now.”

Luc hesitated, and his fingertips touched mine. “I thought,” he muttered. “If we’re splitting up for good, if that’s it, then --”

I kissed him. Hell, I’ve been wanting to do it half my life. I pushed my mouth into his and kissed him as hard, as roughly as I could.

To my surprise - or maybe not - he kissed me back. He slid his arms around me, pressed his hand into my hair, and forced the kiss into something longer, sweeter. "I love you, Bounty," he mumbled into my mouth.

"Still want me to leave?"

"Yes," he said without hesitation.

"Good." I slipped my fingers into his belt, started untucking his white shirt.

"Those are the only circumstances under which I would do this."

"I know," he said, and pulled me down on to the grass.

Now, I had been keeping tabs on him via the village girls, and I knew for a fact that this was his first time, but his fingers and his mouth felt pretty expert to me. We kissed and we touched and we rolled a little way away from the dying campfire, for the sake of modesty.

His skin was silver in the darkness and I suppose mine was too. When the moment came, of total naked togetherness, he held me tight and wouldn't let me go.

Finally, he slept. When he woke up, I wouldn't be there. It was the beginning of a pattern which would last a lifetime.

There was a Memorable Moon that night. Our moon-cycles in Mocklore are as unpredictable as rainfall - the moon can wax and wane over a day and half if she feels so inclined, or she can stretch it over weeks and weeks and weeks. I remember the year we had the same crescent moon for four months. You don't want to know what that sort of thing does to the tides - but it explains our lack of seaside towns, and why the fishing trade is considered the most dangerous of professions.

Once in a while, the erratic cycles catch up with the moon and she decides to give everyone a treat for putting up with her generally frivolous behavior. She swells into extra-fat fullness and hangs in the sky like a huge, beautiful teardrop. She becomes suddenly so wonderful, so powerful that people fall in and out of love without even noticing. Children are conceived, nightflowers bloom and the barriers between this world and the next open up a little wider than usual. We call it a Memorable Moon. It changes lives.

That night, lying on the grass in the middle of nowhere, I watched the moon rise and I knew what kind of moon it was. I watched it while I found my clothes and tugged on my boots. I kept watching it as I walked out of the castle and into the castle, heading toward my next adventure, leaving Luc behind.

If I'd thought to watch where I was going instead of staring at the damned moon all night, things might have turned out differently. But, no. My eyes were full of moon and my head was full of thoughts. Meanwhile, my feet had crossed from one world to the next and nothing would ever be the same again.

The first thing I noticed was the voices. Whispering, teasing voices. At first I thought it was the trees or the wind or the wind in the trees. It's a logical assumption. You hear a hollow howling, a gentle whispering, a chitter-chattering of nothing in particular and you think -- wind, trees. But then you catch words in the wind, questions in the trees and you realise it's something else altogether.

Invisible fingers were tugging at the tiny hairs on my skin. They scampered across the back of my neck, traced the line of my spine, rattled in my ears. Tiny voices pricked and poked at me.

*Whoareyouwhodoyouthinkyouarewhyareyouhere?*

I retraced my steps and flung myself around in circles. I walked quickly and I ran and I rolled around in the dirt, but nothing would shake them off. I pinched and I slapped, but the scampering fingers and the grabbing little voices hung on for dear life.

*Whoareyouwhodoyouthinkyouarewhyareyouhere?*

Louder and louder they questioned me, tugged at me, grazed their teeth across my skin.

*Whoareyouwhodoyouthinkyouarewhyareyouhere?*

Eventually, I broke. I screamed out my name -- I whispered it, yelled it, chattered it, sang it, shrieked it over and over, but it wasn't enough to satisfy them. I could see faces now, bursting out of tree trunks and the night sky and the ground at my feet.

*Whoareyouwhodoyouthinkyouarewhyareyouhere?*

Their voices were pressing against me, harder and stronger, with such intensity that I thought I would fly apart into a million tumbling pieces. I tore my eyes up to stare pleadingly at the moon that had got me into this mess. Something in my stomach went very calm. I knew the answer which would satisfy all three questions at the same time. I knew where I was.

I dropped to one knee. The clawing, prying fingers fell away from my skin. I spoke in as steady a voice as I could manage under the circumstances. Somehow, it turned into a scream. "My name is Bountiful Julietta Esmereldina Fenetre, daughter of Lord Nanneke of the Hobgoblins! *I belong here.*"

The trees crashed together and a figure climbed out from under them. He was small and gnarled, with nut-brown skin. As he walked, wisps of hair and braided grass

trailed behind him. He wore a dancing, ragged robe of berry beads and oozing weeds. His face was peaceful and ugly. His eyes were hard and beautiful.

“Well,” he said in a gravelly, scraping voice. “Why did you not say so in the first place?”

Mocklore Survival Guide #5: The OtherRealm. Also known as the unknown orchard, the moonlight dimension, the land of the fey. The beginning of the end and the end of the beginning. Scary stuff. Scary, beautiful stuff. I can't describe what it was like, not with any degree of accuracy.

I can't describe the feeling of deep green peace that overtook me in that moment. It settled in my stomach and stayed there for a good long time. I can't explain how soft the trailing vines were as they brushed my face, or how the grass felt cold and clear under my feet.

Let me just say, as an example of why this world was paradise, that the first thing that the gnarled, nut-brown chieftain did was take me shopping.

Oh, yes.

They call it the Sparkle Market. This is where the faeries and the goblins and the aelves and all the other magical, unreal folk brings their magical wares. Occasionally, when I'm walking through the mortal world, I'll hear their bells and scramble off to find them because I'm dying for a cup of acorn coffee and a chance to browse the second-hand wings stall. But their visits to the mortal world are rare, and they always seem a little

more subdued than they do at home. Here in the OtherRealm, the Sparkle Market is in its element.

That first visit was the defining moment of my life. I wandered past the stalls and banners and strange, multi-coloured people and felt at home for the first time in my life. It was only then that I realised how out-of-place I had always been, in the village, at Ma Fortuna's place, in the big bad world. This was my home.

There were frocks everywhere, as far as the eye could see. Sunset frocks, glass frocks, frocks made of promises and good intentions. "Pick one," grunted the nut-brown chieftain, stomping along beside me.

I couldn't possibly choose from that wealth of beauty. "Are you sure?"

He ran his dark eyes up my ragged, fishy frock. "You're one of us, girl. Should you not dress appropriately?"

I stopped and ran my fingers over a delicate rose bodice and bluebell skirt. "I can't choose."

"You'd better," he muttered ominously. It sounded like it was far more important than just me picking an outfit. It was about accepting these people, this world, my heritage.

I scanned the stalls, ignoring the dancing creatures and happy music. I let my eyes roam up and down the rows of colour and beauty and natural magic. Something caught my gaze. I moved towards it slowly. The rest of the Sparkle Market melted away. There was just the one stall and the gleaming two-piece hanging on display.

It was chainmail, finer and more elegantly linked than any of those pieces I drooled over at the village blacksmith's. Silver-steel chainmail, forming a short bodice

and low-slung hip skirt. I pointed to it and several flower maidens leaped forward to unpeel my ragged damsel dress. They bathed my skin with dock leaves and soft mountain grasses, then they fitted the chainmail to my naked body.

It fit like a glove -- like a silken lingerie glove with full underwire support. The chainmail draped over my breasts and hips, baring my midriff, glittering and shimmering. The flower maidens cooed and chattered, braiding my hair with clover and forget-me-nots.

“Suitable,” agreed the nut-brown chieftain. “Granfiddich,” he grunted, pointing at himself. “Grandfather,” he added.

I hesitated. “Does that mean Grandfather of the People?”

“Granfiddich means ruler of the goblins,” he said in a low growl. “Grandfather means I’m your grandfather.” He turned on his heel and stomped away.

I glanced at the flower maidens. “Do I need to pay?” After all, this was a market and the last thing I wanted was to offend anyone else in the OtherRealm. Offending their ruler and my grandfather was probably enough for one day.

“Negotiate payment with the Granfiddich,” giggled the maidens.

Brilliant. Just brilliant. I ran after him. The Sparkle Market was back with a vengeance, all bright colours and streaming banners. I could barely keep my eye on the Granfiddich in the crowd. Finally I burst out of the edge of the clump of stalls, coughing on herbal smoke and cinnamon dust. The Granfiddich was waiting for me, sitting on a large rock shaped like a four-leaf clover.

I dropped to my knees. “Granfiddich - grandfather, I’m sorry. I did not mean to say anything wrong.”

“Six months,” he grunted.

I frowned. “Sorry?”

“It is fine craftsmanship, the best our people have made in a hundred years.”

He was negotiating for the chainmail. “Oh. What does six months mean?”

“Six months here, in the True Realm,” he growled, staring at me like he expected me to refuse. “Learning about your past, your heritage. Six months.”

“Okay.”

He blinked. “You will not haggle?”

“No, six months sounds fair. I want to stay here and learn all those things, grandfather. Any less than six months would be too little.”

He nodded, seeming pleased. “Then the gift is yours. Come. Let me show you our world.”

Again, I find it difficult to describe what it was like. The sky was constantly swirling with a hundred different colours, most of them edged with silver. The world went on forever. We broke into fruits that tasted of honey and ice-cold jam. We slept in trees and gorgeous leaf-green boats. We drank water from grass goblets, then tore them apart and replanted the stalks in the ground. It was kind of like your ultimate health farm, but with fun and the occasional fashion parade. The world was peaceful, full of music, dance and magic. Magic most of all.

In the mortal world of Mocklore, magic crashes and smashes through the landscape, exploding with abrasive sounds and colours. In the OtherRealm, magic just is.

I spent three days making daisy chains with the flower maidens, a week swimming in the pearl rivers with a gang of macho fish goblins and a fortnight learning

elegance, poise and sexy walking skills from Mistress Hazelswitch, an aelf matron who was once concubine to the Faerie Prinse himself. I lost count of the weeks, but it can't have been more than six or seven before I found myself in the cave of the seeing pool. It was the favourite place of the flower maidens. "We love to watch the mortals playing," they laughed. I went along to see how the mortal world was getting along without me. An hour later, I was still gazing fixedly into the seeing pool. How could I tear my eyes away from Luc?

He was a real hero now. Rescuing damsels, slaying the really dangerous monsters, righting wrongs. He was still going for the fairy tale hero look, but his long curly hair was dyed black instead of tucked under a wig. He had found a sword somewhere and was surprisingly good at using it. I stared in wonder at my boy, all grown up. "How long have I been gone?"

"Mortal weeks or faery weeks?" asked Harebell.

I blinked at her. "There's a difference?"

"Of course," laughed Rosehip. "Back when the Faerie Quene ruled us, she kept strict control on that sort of thing. She loved to lure mortals here for a day and send them back a hundred years later. Now it's not so silly, but the Granfiddich and the other chieftains sometimes play with the hours."

I was stunned. Luc was looking awfully grown up, more than I would have expected after a month or two. How long had I been here?

"I hope they don't kill him," said Foxglove. "He's such a nice hero."

I pushed her aside and gazed deeply into the seeing pool. “Who are going to kill him?” I could see them now, the threat. Goddesses. Three of them. Not a nice combination. My boy was in big trouble. “Is there sound on this thing?”

“Put your head in the water,” suggested Harebell quite seriously.

I had grown used to trusting these girls. I threw myself forward, thrusting my head underwater. Voices filled my ears.

*“It’s a simple choice,” said Amorata, sultry brunette goddess of lovelorn lust and unresolved sexual tension.*

*“Which of us is most beautiful?” asked green-haired, swirling Destiny.*

*“No harm will come to you,” purred the elegant blonde Lady Luck, the most dangerous of the three. “Which is the fairest of them all?”*

*“Why me?” choked Luc. He was sweating, his Corpse White No. 4 face powder coming off in flakes. “What makes you think I’m qualified?”*

*“You’re a man,” shrugged Amorata.*

*“The most famous and popular hero in the land,” said Destiny.*

*“Choose,” snarled Lady Luck. “Give the golden apple to the fairest of them all. One of us. NOW.”*

*Luc, faced with the three of them, was holding a glowing golden ball. He tossed it back and forth nervously. Then he did the most sensible thing he could possibly have done. He threw the golden apple as hard as he could in one direction, and ran as hard as he could in the other.*

I came gasping out of the water, yanked out by the hair. “You nearly drowned,” scolded Harebell.

“You still have to breathe,” said Foxglove crossly. “You’re half mortal, remember.”

“I need to find the Granfiddich,” I spluttered. “Now.”

“He won’t like it,” warned Rosehip.

“He doesn’t have to like it,” I said grimly. “He just has to let me go.”

The Granfiddich stood on a cairn of pebbles, his grouchy voice booming down to me.

“You pledged six months, Bountiful Julietta Esmereldina Fenetre.” I *knew* I shouldn’t have told anyone my real name.

“How many mortal months have I been here?” I yelled back. “Six, twelve, twenty? I’ve served my time and more. You’re the one who messed with the time streams. I’d happily stay here longer, but not while Mocklore is spinning faster than I am. I have obligations to the mortal world.”

“To a man?” he said skeptically.

“To a friend,” I shot back.

“Do you promise to return?” asked the Granfiddich.

“Do you promise I won’t lose more mortal time if I do, grandfather?”

A flicker of a smile crossed his grumpy face. “I make no promises. Do you promise to return?” He made a gesture with his gnarled hand and the Sparkle Market appeared around us, musical and brightly inviting. “If you make the promise, you may have anything you like from the stalls.”

I wasn’t going to do it. I was going to stand up to him, tell him it was my choice whether I came back or not, and I didn’t have to make any stupid promises. But the truth

was, I really wanted to come back. Plus I saw something I kind of wanted on a nearby stall. So much for the moral high ground.

“I promise to return.”

I had been gone three years. Three years. Do you have any idea how much can change in three years? Mocklore had certainly changed. In the years since I wandered off to the light of a Memorable Moon, my homeland had been ravaged by a huge magical explosion that multiplied the insanity of the Skullcap Mountains and turned a lot of things purple. Plus our many hundreds of gods had been decimalised by our mad Emperor, and there were only ten left!

Lia was pregnant.

Ma Fortuna’s eldest girl, who had been only fourteen and in pigtails when Luc and I left to Seek Our Fortune, had married herself a Guardsman and got herself knocked up. I stood on the wooden verandah of Ma Fortuna’s house, my silver chainmail hidden under a respectable linen dress, and stared at the girl I had always thought of as my own baby sister. “Gods.”

“Bounty!” She threw her arms around me, hugging me awkwardly but with genuine affection. “It’s been so long. Ma will be so happy to see you. Luco’s here.”

“I thought he might be.”

It was worse than I thought. There were two babies squalling in Ma’s kitchen, and an unfamiliar girl trying to calm them both.

“Bounty.” Ma Fortuna emerged from the pantry, immaculate and bustling as ever. She kissed me several times. “You finally came to visit. Meet Diona, Franc’s wife.”

Franciscus, the brattiest teenage brother of them all, had a wife. I had definitely been gone too long. Diona smiled shyly at me over the heads of her two enormous babies. I needed air. “Is Luco around, Ma?”

“Outside with the children,” Ma announced, placing a plate of cold chicken sandwiches and chocolate cream cookies in my hands and propelling me towards the back door. “Go on with you.”

I wasn’t prepared to see more children, but as it turned out -- to my enormous relief -- there hadn’t been any more breeding in the Triclover family than I had already seen evidence of. The children Ma referred to were her own - baby Alessandro now at least ten years old by my calculations, young Giuno about to descend into adolescence, tomboy Nina on the edge of womanhood and ignoring that fact to the best of her ability. They were all tearing around the orchard like mad things, kicking a football with their big brother. Tia, the middle sister who had to be going on sixteen now, was sitting to one side and pretending she was too grown up for such games.

I sat next to her and ate a chicken sandwich, watching Luc. He had washed out the black dye, scraped his face clean of Corpse White No. 4, left the white ruffled shirt and the black leather trousers elsewhere. Racing around the garden with the kids, dressed in his old scruffy clothes with his light curly hair tangled wildly around his face, he looked like my boy again.

“Bounty!” shrieked Nina, the first to notice me. She tore across the grass, throwing herself into my arms.

I hugged her happily. “When did you turn into such a babe?”

She wrinkled her nose. “Don’t call me that. Tia’s the fashion plate.”

“Am not,” snapped Tia.

Giuno came forward, all awkward arms and legs, and let me kiss him on the cheek. Alessandro shot me a cheeky smile and squeezed the breath out of me with his hug. “You’re my favourite sister,” he said solemnly.

“Beast!” shrieked Nina and chased him into the house. The others trotted after them, lured no doubt by the tempting scents coming from Ma’s kitchen. Finally, only Luc and I were left.

“So,” I said. “You didn’t bring the hero home?”

“Can you see me coming into Ma’s kitchen in leather trows and face powder?” he said wryly. “They don’t need to know about that stuff. They all think I’m training as a merchant in Zibria.”

Yeah, right. Like Ma didn’t have a scrapbook somewhere detailing the heroic exploits of Luco the Magnificent? Ma Fortuna’s kids always underestimated the way she knew *everything* about them. I suppose it was the only way they could stay sane.

“What’s happening with the goddesses?” I asked him.

He ignored me. “Anyway, I’m not the only one who dressed respectably for Ma. I bet you don’t wear that dress when you’re running around having adventures.”

“I’m not dressed that respectably,” I snapped at him. “Under this, I’m wearing metal underwear that the faeries gave me. What about those goddesses, Luc?”

“How did you know about that?” he said sharply. “You weren’t there.”

“I wish I had been,” I said, feeling guilty.

He looked angry. “Why? What could you have done? This is my mess, Bounty. I’m the one who ran around building up a hero reputation, getting so bloody popular. I made myself too noticeable, that’s all.”

“How did you get away from them?” I couldn’t help asking.

Luc’s face was red now, furious, but not just with me. “I ran,” he said bitterly. “They’ve turned up every other month since it happened. I know that if I choose one as the fairest, the other two will kill me or curse me or make things ten times worse. When I run away, they always let me go. Until next time. That damn golden apple turns up everywhere -- in my soup, in my bedroll. There’s nothing I can do but run away every single time.”

“We can figure something out,” I said earnestly. “All we need is a plan. I can help.”

Luc gave me one of those cold icy looks he had got so good at since leaving home for the first time. “I don’t need your help, Bounty.”

I swallowed the instant hurt of his rejection, determined to make my point. “What are you going to do, keep running away for the rest of your life?”

“I’ll think of something,” he spat. “When I need your help, I’ll ask for it. Until then, keep your nose out of my business.” He slammed his way back into the house.

I stayed where I was for a moment, stunned. It was hard to get used to, the idea that Luc and I weren’t a team any more, that we couldn’t just pick up where we left off. After at least a minute of blinding self-pity, I walked back to the front of the house where

I had left my bags. I yanked my respectable dress over my head and tossed it on to the steps to keep it clean. Then, clad only in my midriff-baring faery chainmail, I swung a rough, muddy hessian sack over my shoulder and went down the hill to visit the pond nymphs.

The pond was just the same. Beige, boring, muddy. The few limp lilies that were left entirely failed to perk the place up. There was no sign of my girls. I rummaged in the filthy sack, pulling out some leafy plants. “There I was,” I said aloud. “About to make a clean break with the OtherRealm. I was going to leave without promising to come back, but then I saw these babies on a market stall and I couldn’t resist bringing them back to you.”

Slowly, I lowered the plants into the murky water of the pond. The first water lily had flowers of a vibrant purple colour. As soon as it touched the water, the petals exploded in showers of silver glitter, making the pond shimmer and glow. The second lily was pink and yellow candy-striped, heavenly scented with peppermint, strawberries and cream. The last lily was midnight black with a shimmer of an opal crescent moon in its centre. As I watched, the moon swelled into fullness and back again, sliding through its phases in the blink of an eye. I had brought baby seedlings too, a dozen different varieties just waiting to do their stuff. I floated every one of them in the pond.

The nymphs emerged. Maybe it was my imagination, but they didn’t look like the fright-wives they had always been. There was a new glow about them, a radiance. They would never be pretty, but the new lilies had sparked some life into them.

“Ssssank you,” said Globula.

“Presssssy,” said another nymph, admiring the new adornments. “Beaussisful,” she added, leaning forward to inhale a baby crimson lily.

“Like your boootsss,” Globula said shyly.

I grinned, preening in my chainmail lingerie. “Well, I’m glad someone finally noticed my boots.” My new outfit went so well with the grey leather.

“Ssssat poor hero,” she said, laughter bubbling in her watery voice.

I laughed too, remembering the last day I had been here, tricking the wandering hero out of his clothes and horse and troll head... Then I sighed, not feeling cheerful any more. “Globula, is it true that water nymphs can see reflections of the future?”

“Somesssimes,” she whispered.

“I’m worried about Luc and these goddesses. If he annoys them too much, they could blast him into infinity with one bat of their eyelashes. He is going to ask me for help eventually, isn’t he?”

“Swim firssss,” said Globula insistently. “Anssswers afsserwards.”

It wasn’t a bad offer, and the water lilies had perked up the pond no end. I’d never seen it so sparkling and crystal clear. “Your wish is my command.” I pulled off my boots and my faery chainmail, then plunged into the cool, real water. It was almost like being at home in the OtherRealm. I missed it already, but I wasn’t ready to go back. Not until I got things sorted in my mortal life. Having said that, I spent the afternoon swimming with the pond nymphs and trying to forget about my worries. Maybe they would sort themselves out, in time.

Mocklore Survival Guide #6: If a pond nymph ever tells you anything about the future, listen. She knows these things. I confidently believed that Luc would give in and ask me for help with his goddess troubles within a week or so, and everything between us would be okay again. Globula told me that I would be waiting far, far longer than that. I told her she was crazy.

Eight years later, I'm still waiting.

Tansy Rayner Roberts (Copyright)