

Like No Business I Know

Mark Bourne

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When the gateway from Faerie reopened into our world, it happened on a sunny Tuesday afternoon, in Los Angeles, three feet from a West Hollywood swimming pool.

Laura Lundy placed the twenty-pound dumbbell next to the patio chair and padded barefoot toward the swimming pool, the phone against her ear. "I'm sorry, Robert. I don't mean to bother you. You know I'm glad you're my agent-

And that was true, too. The short, thin man on the other end of the phone had done more for Laura's career in just seven weeks than all her previous agents put together. Of course, the others hadn't seen much reason to put Robert's kind of effort into her career. (Well, except for poor Adam. She hoped Robert's predecessor was recovering okay in Miami.) "-I know there's nothing you can do about the strike-

The voice on the other end interrupted her for the third time in two minutes. Laura clicked the phone back to the second line, where the reporter from People waited. "Sorry, Tony. What was the question? Oh, right. Sure, Xora: Avenger Priestess wasn't how I expected my ship to come in, but I was happy to hop on board when it pulled into port two years ago. My agent, I mean, my previous agent, Adam Duchowski, helped me land the role-" She didn't add that she'd then the syndicated TV series had moved her out of her tiny overpriced apartment and into a house in the Hollywood hills and this swimming pool she was pacing back and forth along. "Hold on another sec, Tony, sorry-

Click. "Yes, Robert, I'm listening. Sure, you know I appreciate you. Hell, you're a miracle-worker-Yeah, I saw it. Came today," She edged her toes beneath a poolside TV Guide and with a deft kick somersaulted it into her waiting hand. Its cover displayed Laura's (rather Xora: Avenger Priestess's) thick night-black hair, toned sword-wielding arms, and photogenic devil-may-care smile.

"Says here I'm 'at 29, the hottest, buffest new star since Linda Hamilton' and that I've been invited to a half-dozen Xora conventions across the U.S. and England. Seems that thousand total strangers on Web sites and something called alt.fan.xora know more about each episode than I do." She read dramatically: " 'Her just-revealing-enough-for-primetime costume has become a fashion fad at clubs and so-called scene parties where leather and chainmail are worn by people who don't necessarily slay semi-convincing monsters and defeat tyrannical overlords on a weekly basis-'

Good thing Terry wasn't into that kinky stuff, much. Dear Terry. Laura enjoyed the parts their life together that were plain old "vanilla." Well, vanilla with nuts and strawberry syrup perhaps. Lately, though... (Heart to brain: new subject, pronto!) "You're my agent, Robert, how come you never tell me about those conventions?"

Click. "Hi, Tony, you still there? Overnight success? Well, yeah, if you consider overnight being six years of cattle-call auditions, TV movie bit parts, and one year as the 'official spokesmodel' for ExerTan-the only aerobics workout machine and tanning booth in one!-infomercials. Adam saved my life by getting me out of that one-"

Funny thing about Adam, his having that breakdown and quitting the business so suddenly. That was less than two months ago. Good thing Robert Goldfarb had appeared out of nowhere to pick up the pieces and take her on. The wiry ball of energy in the loud suit, gaudy jewelry and slicked-back hair had been on the sound-stage when word about Adam arrived. He handed her his card, took her to lunch, and displayed a persuasive Type-A personality. Before she knew it she had signed a bottom line with R. P. Goldfarb Talent Agency. Poor, stressed-out Adam. She hoped he was okay in his Florida condo. How come bad things happened in groups?

Click. "What? Yes, Rob, I know the writers have joined the other unions and you can't do anything about that-"

Heart to mouth: bad move. Terry was a writer hoping to make that One Big Score. With talent to spare, but too damn stubborn to play the Hollywood game. Terry had, instead, that Big Weakness that could keep a writer waiting tables at Sunset and Crescent for the past two years: integrity. Integrity to a vision. Integrity to self. Hardly cardinal virtues oft rewarded in Hollywood success. With the frustration that caused on top of everything else in their lives-How long had it been since they'd really made love, vanilla or any other flavor? Heart to chest muscles: squeeze! She scrunched her eyes shut at the still-fresh memory of Terry stepping out the door and saying softly, sadly, "I'll call you later." During the past three days, every time Laura's phone rang, it had been Robert on the other end. Brain to heart: knock it off, you jerk!

"-Yeah, the trades are printing as many rumors as they are union proposals. Christ, what SAG really does pull the plug too? That's the last thing this town needs: more out-of-work actors, with me along with them. Hell, Rob-" Click. "-After a month of no shooting, the whole seasons schedule is shot to hell, the execs are panicking, negotiations are stalled, and the sponsors are pulling out faster than a teenage boy without a condom. I hate not knowing when I'll be working again. No, wait-Tony? Jesus, you weren't supposed to hear all that-" Click. "No, Rob, I know you didn't call just to hear me complain. It's these damn strikes, that's all." Click. "-Plus after a year and a half, Terry just up and decides that I'm more involved with my career than my personal life or anyone in it. Says I get distracted from the important details. Wha-? Tony? Aah! I'm sorry. You didn't hear that. Don't write it down!"

Click. "You've been saying you're going to do something about it for four weeks! What c

you do? You're just an agent, for Chrissakes! No, I'm sorry, I didn't mean it like that. Stop it, Rob. It's just that... Oh, come on! You know I-Yeah, well, fine. Call me later. I've certainly got nothing better to wait for!"

Click.

"Goddammit shit bastard hell! No, not you, Tony, sorry. Look, I've got to go. My jujitsu coach just arrived with my monogrammed hari kari knives. Bye."

She wanted to slam the receiver into its cradle-hard. But the goddamn cell phone made the most unsatisfying snick as she closed it. So she threw the phone across the pool. It struck the marble wall on the far side and exploded into a spray of plastic and metal pieces. Some landed in the pool. L.A.'s eternally clear, blue, afternoon sky reflected peacefully in the little ripples that spread across the waters surface.

Laura screeched between clenched teeth, collapsed into a deck chair, and cried. What she wanted more than anything else in the world-more than an end to the sudden chain of strikes that was crippling her work, more than her hope that Xora would be a stepping stone to even better roles and career peaks, more than even her life-long dream of making it big, really big-was to feel Terry's soothing, steady hands rubbing her shoulders. Their own familiar rhythm: first the left shoulder, then the right, then both, then down...

"Shake it off, toots! We got work to do!"

She leaped to her feet, spun toward the voice, and prepared to kick a groin or sprint toward safety.

No one was there. No intruder. No one who could have produced that gravelly, gruff male voice. Maybe he was hiding behind that mirror.

Where had that full-length, oval mirror come from? And why was it floating unsupported above the tiles near the exercycle?

"Hello?" she called.

"Wait just an orc-schtupping minute," replied the sandpaper voice.

Laura stepped cautiously toward the mirror, keeping the door to the house accessible on her right. She had another phone just inside, with 911 set on the autodialer.

The mirror was as tall as she was and defied gravity above the deck tiles in exactly the same way her bathroom mirror couldn't. She positioned herself so she could see her reflection in its perfectly flat, clean surface. She'd gained a bit in the waist lately...

"Oh, do let's get on with it," complained another voice from the mirror. This one was high and clipped. "We haven't much time. You're holding it upside down!" With an accent like C Grant's.

"I'm doing the best I can," bellowed the first. "So shut your gob, ya green pointy-eared fruit!"

"Enough!" a third demanded—a woman's voice, strong and clear. "I gave you the stone, goblin, because you insisted on being be the first through the worldveil. Quickly, fool! One stone cannot part the veil for long!"

"Yes, forgive me, Mistress," acquiesced Voice #1. "I forget how you told me to hold it. My thanks, kind Mistress."

From the reflection of Lauras bare belly, a curly-haired head poked out of the mirror and into the Hollywood sunshine. The head was attached to a squat, business-suited man who stepped out of the mirror and approached her. His bare, hairy feet slapped the tiles like hard shoes. Though no more than three feet tall, the muscular form beneath his rumpled brown suit suggested he could easily bench-press as much as she did.

L.A. does things to a person. After eight years here, Laura had become immune to certain types of shocks.

His swarthy hands clasped a crystal as big as his potato-shaped nose. It (the crystal) glowed with a fiery blue aura. He slipped it into a jacket pocket, stepped forward, and sandwiched Laura's right hand between both of his, shaking it roughly.

"Gurack Thornhollows the name," he said. "Glad to finally meet you." With a silvery sparkle, a lit cigar appeared in his hand. It smelled imported. The little exec-thing began pacing the swimming pool and gesturing emphatically.

"I'll get right to the point, sweetheart. You're marvelous, kid, simply marvelous! Obviously a newbie, but still the best thing this show has going for it." He stepped out over the pool, hovered above the water for a beat, then pivoted and marched back toward her. "With me as producer and director, we're gonna take this series right to the top, straight to Number One. Y'know what I'm saying? I've got the best writers and the best talent working for me. Y'know why? Because I'm the best—and I only work with the best! You and me, kid, we're goin' places. Xora's already the hottest ratings smash between Tir na n-Og and Avalon, and now with pan-dominion cablesPELLS we can finally crack that rural orcish market! I tell ya, baby, we're goin' to the top! First, though, we need to make a few changes—"

"Oh, do not bore her to death before we've even made our proposal," exclaimed the Car Grantesque voice. Its owner stepped (or floated?) out of the mirror—a body lithe, ethereal, and clearly belonging to a world other than Poolside L.A.

"You're an elf," Laura exclaimed, her hands rushing to her mouth in reflex astonishment. Delicate and elegant, its presence made her think of green sun-dappled glades and rings of courtly spirits gathering by moonlight. Things she had never seen before. "How-how do I know that?"

"Elf is a better word than many," sniffed the being. He stepped hautilly past the first visitor-a goblin, she suddenly knew-and appraised his new surroundings disapprovingly. "I prefer 'Elder People of Faerie' myself," he said, curling his lip exactly like the snooty maître at Andrico's. "Though I am aware that I am in the minority on the issue. As to how you know that, I gave you the knowledge beforehand, immediately before stepping through the veil. I soothed the fear that was building within you. You will find that it speeds communication. And we have much to discuss with precious little time."

"Cut to the chase, leaves-for-brains," barked the goblin. He took Laura's hand and tried to pull her aside. She pulled back, hard, causing the little grotesque to stumble. "Hey, nice grip there, sweets," he said, letting go. "I like that." Then sotto voce: "Don't let greenie there bother you. He's been pissed at this world ever since he saw those Keebler commercials. Ha!"

The elf crossed his arms and rolled his eyes blueward. "Oh, please!"

"Cease the prattle, underlings!" thundered the woman's voice. "Speak to our good lady with respect and deference. She is an artist and a professional, not a servant pixie. And we need your willing services."

The source of the voice stepped out of the mirror. A woman, all right. But Laura couldn't imagine even Joan of Arc radiating the powerful presence this woman exuded. She was, in a word, striking. Six feet tall. Lean yet powerfully muscled. Her bronze skin all but shimmered with inner vitality. The only marks on otherwise smooth, tanned flesh were a few pale scars branding her forearms and left thigh. A mane of auburn hair cascaded about her shoulders, encircled on her forehead by a jeweled coronet. One hand was wrapped around the hilt of a polished sword hanging on her hip. If her gleaming leather-and-metal outfit, particularly the rune-embossed gold hemispheres cupping her impressive breasts, was as heavy as it looked, she didn't betray any sign of it.

For the first time in her career, Laura felt flabby and puny by comparison. Still, there was something... soft about this woman. Good soft. Maternal perhaps. Aged. Experienced. Though she wore a body that looked little older than Lauras, her clear green eyes and wise face betrayed a maturity that Laura only hoped to one day achieve. She was who Xora wanted to grow up to be.

"I am Nnagartha of the Golden Strength," the woman proclaimed. "Favored sword of Finvarra, King of Eirinn Faerie. It was I who defeated the dragon Ruadherra and the Black Wizard Tyrkobal; who led the centaur armies and won the heart of the mighty Ton n'Uthara"

during battles against the Dark Hordes-" Laura squinted in the sunlight glinting off those breasts. "-Who led the Daoine Sidhe against the Fir Bolg on the Plain of Pillars, and who instructs the young ones of Faerie in stories of the stars and the quiet power of the cool, watchful moon."

Everyone in this town has a résumé. "Okay. Assuming you're not a delayed hallucination triggered by something slipped to me at Jay Leno's party last week, why are you-" Laura spread her arms to include the space from pool to exercycle to towel rack. "-here?"

"Because, Lady, our long quest led us to you." Something in her voice darkened. Her hands clenched into fists that would probably pulp Brazil nuts. "From the Fortress of Power beneath King Finvarra's palace, one of our land stole the sacred veilstone, a crystal from the Mount of Darkness. It has the power to part the veil between worlds, to open a... a passage twixt realms." She indicated the mirror. "The stone was used to enter this world. It has taken us a long journey to find another. Now we must entreat your help to finally capture the thief."

Or was it Letterman's bash? That Barrymore chick was awfully chummy that night. "Why me?"

"The trickster who eludes us has targeted you, and through you he seeks his revenge against what you have done for the folk of Faerie. So through you we shall find him."

"Who's 'targeted' me? And for what? What have I done to... to..."

"The folk of Faerie."

"Whoever!"

"You have, in fact, done a great deal for the many who populate the world that split from this earthly realm so many centuries ago." Leather creaked and metal flashed as the woman circled Laura like a teacher sizing up a potential pupil. "You have brought them pleasure, excitement, and a new thirst for adventures and legend-spinning. Many of our realm, particularly the young ones, have not experienced such things for a long time. Not since the Dark Hordes were vanquished, and the final Black Wizard dissolved into misty eternity. You, Xora, have renewed the memories of our glorious former days!"

"Xora? I'm not Xora. That's just a part I play!"

"We know that, of course. Yet it is a part we love in a drama that captures-albeit crudely and imperfectly-the spirit of our kingdom."

"You mean you watch Xora in... wherever you come from?"

The goblin tossed his cigar into the pool, where it sizzled and vanished. "Listen, babe.

Xora: Avenger Priestess is the hottest thing to hit the Golden Realm since the bards' festival allowed the rude limerick contest. You're a hit, and everyone wants more of it!"

Nnagartha raised a finger. The goblin shut up. "You see," she said, "I am not unacquainted with this world, and the energies that carry your staged enactments through the ether can pierce the veil between this world and ours. With some difficulty, and after much debate, I convinced the Mages Guild to conjure receiving boxes so that we too might see and hear the images that freely flow through the veil."

"You watch TV in Fairyland?"

Nnagartha looked pained. "Simply Faerie, Lady. And it has been a long time of peace." She gazed wistfully into the pool, lost in memories Laura could never imagine.

"Your little play-acting," said the elf, "is the most popular such... program in our realm. Though, I must say, I rather prefer more substantial fare. Travel documentaries, for example. But the common folk clamor for more Xora: Avenger Priestess, and no new tales have been forthcoming for more than a lunar cycle. All we-they-receive are... oh, what is that word you have?"

"Reruns," Nnagartha said.

"Thank you, my Mistress. Lady Laura, we are here to help you create more of these adventure tales, though this time we shall help you do them with greater, shall we say, accuracy."

"Greater accuracy?"

"More realistic. Truer to life." The elf's posture stiffened even more-exactly like that man he'd met at Andrico's. "Really, Lady, even you must admit that the centaurs in that one episode looked rather, to put it delicately, unconvincing. Our own centaur forces are presently awaiting the first cue. And your roc! Oh, dear... if I had a sense of humor I would have doubled over laughing at its clearly artificial claws. And all the magic-users thus far portrayed obviously know nothing of a real mage's art. That's not to mention the shoddy dragons-"

"Enough, my assistant," admonished Nnagartha. The elf bit his lower lip, silently.

"Flowerhead's right," exclaimed the goblin. He adjusted his tie into an even less attractive position. "There's been no Xora for weeks now, and we're here to help out."

"Well, of course there's been no Xora," Laura countered. "Everyone's on strike!"

"Not a prob, babe. I got writers, crews, and supporting cast waiting to jump in and save your show and your shapely ass."

Laura pivoted and stamped away. "No way! This is too unbelievable. I half-expect Kath Lee Gifford to jump out of the bushes and tell me I'm on Americas Weirdest Home Videos."

"But you must." Nnagartha was now insistent. "The veilstone is gone and the thief has escaped to this world. You have no idea of the danger the two together represent. There are reasons why the realms were separated and the stones kept carefully guarded."

"Yeah, right! Your security system was clearly burglar-proof. Why drag me into your lit snatch-and-run?"

"He did it because of you! He hates Xora. He hates you! With the power remaining with the stone, he has the ability to shape the wills of others. There's a reason why the strikes are happening all at the same time. His next plan is to spread scandalous stories about you to sabotage your career."

Laura spun to face her. "What? How do you know that?"

"We know this malfeasant. It is his way. Also, he boasted of his plans to drinking companions. No one took him seriously until we discovered the veilstone missing and read taunting note he left behind. He has done this sort of thing before. You, unfortunately, are his latest victim. So you must help us capture him." She waved her hand in an odd pattern. The mirror changed. It was now a window open onto a vast meadow. In the distance, gentle green hills became immense mountains laced with waterfalls. Between the window and the mountains, perhaps ten miles away or a hundred, a shimmering city of golden domes and jewel-hued spires reflected the same sun that shone on Lauras bare back in L.A. Like Judy Garland's Oz, complete with Technicolor.

Nnagartha gave Laura a generous moment to take in the view. "We ask you to follow us through the veil and-"

"What? Me step through there?"

"There, in Oberon's Green, we shall create a new episode of Xora. My people will provide all that is needed to perform, record, and broadcast the story throughout Faerie. The magic released during this will attract the malefactor, bring him out of hiding. Then we shall capture him. Afterward you may return here with all the afflictions he has brought upon you undone gone."

Laura eyed the window warily. "And what will happen to my career if I don't help you?"

The demi-amazon shrugged. "Nothing."

"Nothing? Really?"

"Absolutely nothing. Ever." Nnagartha's eyes were as cold and hard as her swordblade.

"I see." Well, what else did she have planned before she hit the unemployment lines? "So what do I do?"

"I will tell all presently. We must hurry. No doubt our thief's veilstone has already alerted him to our presence. We must capture him unawares, or he can use his stone to lock us all on the other side-permanently."

A dragon's snout poked through the window, followed by the head and the beginnings of a long neck. Covered with iridescent green and gold scales, its Spielbergish head could barely squeeze through the opening. Softball-sized eyes blinked and cavernous nostrils twitched in the SoCal air. "So will she do it?" it said. "When do we start? I have some suggestions for the script. First, I think the dragon should get lots more lines-"

Nnagartha thwacked the snout with her fist. "Silence, Ruadherra!"

"Well, pardon me!" huffed the beast. Sulfurous smoke roiled from its nostrils as it retreated back into the opening.

"Actors!" grumped Nnagartha.

"Tell me about it," Laura replied.

Following Nnagartha, Laura stepped through the not-window onto a meadow of lush, green grass and wild-flowers. Nearby, a brook gurgled serenely, and the air smelled of sweet berries and honey. A pair of unicorns gazed at her with intelligent eyes, then turned and galloped over a hill. The sharp, shocking contrast with the world she knew-with the smog and the traffic noise and the subconscious spoor of thousands of stressed-out people-knocked Laura off balance. Collapsing into a soft cove of foxglove or bluebell wouldn't be a bad thing.

"Here it is, babe," said Gurack as he stepped out of the view of Laura's backyard pool. "Here's our set. And your script." He handed her a stack of vellum sheets stitched with gold twine. "It's called 'Dragon's Wrath,' based on a real event that happened, oh, a hell of a long time ago. You'll love it. 'Course, we put some spice in it. Y'know, added a few characters, made it one big battle in act four rather than the series of small ones. Gave you-I mean, Xora-some good scenes with our local talent. It'll be a hit. Love ya, babe." He looked around the meadow. "Where the hell are the others? Where'd that troll-calloopin' dragon go? Goddammit, I told them to be here on time-" The director stomped grumbling off toward the sparkling city.

"How do you feel?" asked Nnagartha. She placed a firm yet gentle hand on Laura's shoulder.

"A bit wobbly, I guess. This isn't how I expected my day to go."

"You will be at ease soon, I promise. This land can have an effect on people. I remember my first time back-

"What do you mean?"

Nnagartha pulled back her gorgeous auburn hair, more out of distraction than necessity. "Nothing, my girl. Your script is ready, and all the cast and crew have been rehearsing their respective parts. They will be pleased that you agreed to join us. Before the others return, though, I must fight you." With a quick gesture, she withdrew her sword and flowed into an attacker's stance.

"Excuse me?" Laura said. She backed up a step and almost tripped over a massive sword on the ground behind her.

"Take the blade," Nnagartha demanded.

Laura did. It was a lot heavier than the props she was used to.

"Attack me," the other woman ordered.

"Why?" Laura swung the sword in her warm-up pattern, gauging its heft and size.

"Because I desire it!" And Nnagartha arced her blade in a killing swing.

Laura blocked it, but the blow forced her to her knees. Nnagartha stood over her, sword already sheathed and fists on hips.

"What the hell was that for?" Laura shouted. "You tried to kill me!"

"Not at all." The warrior offered Laura a hand. Laura refused, standing and brushing herself off on her own. Pleased, Nnagartha added, "I apologize, Lady. It was just a test. Xora brandishes her blade with ease and grace, though I suspect that that has more to do with editing than actual warrior's skill."

"My swordplay coach says I'm the best student he's ever had."

"I don't doubt that, Lady. You are good-in your world. Here, though, we have set different standards. You must look as though you can fight with Xora's skill, or else your fans here will be sorely disappointed. Would you like a few pointers?"

Sparring with a pro far better even than her coach? She did have a lot of stress to work and Terry didn't like her practicing at home...

Laura smiled. "Can't let down the fans."

Shiiing! "Then attack me."

Laura did. It felt good.

An hour later, the meadow was a stage set populated by assorted gnomes, sprites, goblin faeries, and warriors. Swords and shields clanged together like thunder as the centaur army practiced the climactic assault from act four. Nnagartha was off somewhere searching for something... or someone.

Feeling strong and more than a little sexy in the authentic costume Nnagartha had provided for her, Laura sat studying her script on an Alice-sized mushroom that seemed to have appeared for just that purpose. A quick study, she had already memorized her lines and was rereading goggle-eyed the outrageous scenes coming up. Who was playing this "Bran" character, the capital-H Hero who enters after the first few scenes? Probably another over-inflated, self-loving, brainless beefcake like all the others the writers kept sticking her with.

Footsteps behind her. Furtive and hesitant. She turned. A young elf boy, shy and awkward with his leaves and pointed ears, stood gazing up at her raptly.

"Hello," she said. She hopped off the mushroom.

The boy elf wore a moss-green tunic, on the breast of which was pinned a large, round button. The button bore words written in red script. Laura leaned close to read:

I do have a life!

It's Xora: Avenger Priestess!

From her experience, that wasn't a good sign.

"Excuse me, um, Laura... Miss Lundy?" the elfling stammered. "I'm your biggest fan. I know you're busy, but, um, I was wondering if I could ask you a few questions? Only for a minute"

The centaurs were arguing loudly about who was most photogenic and therefore should lead the attack on the dragon's lair. There was time. "Sure."

He rushed to her side. "Okay. In episode 12, 'Lettuce Prey,' when you battled the enchanted plant creatures of the evil Lord D'spair, how come you controlled the ivy monsters with D'spair's Sword of Power but you had to chop up the wolfweed beasts to stop them? Did the ivy monsters have more lifeforce than the wolfweed beasts? Or were the wolfweed beasts enchanted by a different level of magic?"

Oh, to be able to conjure up the idiot writer who came up with that one. She smiled politely. "I don't know."

"Why didn't Lord D'spair hide the Sword of Power in a secret place instead of displaying it in the center of his trophy room with bright lights shining on it?"

"I don't know."

"When you were captured by Lord Kandor in episode 31, 'Dirge for a Scourge,' and he chained you to that wall above the Pit of Eternity, and you asked him, 'Before you kill me, you at least tell me what this is all about?' why didn't he just say no and drop you instead of telling you his plan and giving you time to escape?"

"I don't know."

"How come in episode-"

With a quick motion, she jugged her elbow into the side of his head-hard. "I don't know."

"Lady Laura," called Nnagartha's voice. Pleased by the distraction of the approaching warrior, Laura was startled to see striding confidently alongside Nnagartha the most handsome man she had ever beheld. Square-jawed and Adonis-featured beneath a leonine head of hair that would make Fabio consider implants, he was the type of man for whom the term "mighty-thewed" was invented. Wearing an animal hide draped about his stunning shoulders, a leather breech cloth that bulged with robust good health, and leather leggings up his solid calves, he could make a fortune smoldering those soulful blue-green eyes on the covers of romance novels.

"Lady Laura, this is your leading man. His name is Bran-"

"-Son of Tur Gwynthorn, mightiest of the Northern Kings!" he said, bowing. "My Lady, it is a privilege to serve at your side. Pray, be patient with me, for I am new at this 'acting' art that Mistress Nnagartha asks of me, and you are even more beautiful standing before me than you are in the mages' vision boxes."

Nnagartha gave Laura a wink. "I'll leave you two to get acquainted. Perhaps you should over your lines together. I see that Gurack is almost done rehearsing the dwarfs."

When they were alone, Bran took Laura's hand and held it as if it were a sacred relic. "My Lady," he said with a voice like Brad Pitt massaging her feet with aromatic oils. "Long have I admired you from afar, and worshipped you as a goddess. When told that I, of all the men of our kingdom, had been chosen to play the one who captures your heart, my own heart might burst in song."

In any other case, Laura would have spoiled the moment by trying to stifle a giggle. Yet unlike the typical muscleman from Central Casting, this handsome specimen wore-if little else-an honest reality that was refreshing. Clearly he didn't just play at being a Hero. The finely sculpted-by-Michelangelo face betrayed a boyish earnestness that softened his aura of strength and rugged nobility.

The goblin approached and jabbed Bran in a thigh bigger than the goblin's head. "Okay, hunkazoid, save the fan mail until the wrap party." An old-fashioned megaphone sparkled in the directors hand. "Listen up, everybody! Let's start with scene four, in which Bran-that's your buddy-first encounters Xora after the unsuccessful battle against the Black Dragon of Doomlair. Elven Sages, you be ready for your entrance. Pixies, check your scripts; take your positions and be ready to fly in and beg Xora and Bran to attempt another raid on the dragon cave. And Ruadherra, this time don't keep ad-libbing the way you did in rehearsal. We don't need a prima-fucking-donna. There were other dragons at the audition, you know."

At Gurack's direction, will-o'-the-wisps rose from the ground to light the scene effectively. Something flitted near Laura's face. She resisted the urge to swat it. When it stopped in mid-air at her eye level, it looked like a Hummingbird Barbie wearing night-goggles. Nnagartha had explained that these small faeries with the "mage-cams" were the audio-visual crews for the production.

After a few moments, Gurack stood on Nnagartha's shoulders and surveyed the set. At last he brought the megaphone back to his lips. "Act one, scene four. And action!"

It was a good shoot.

After Gurack again praised her performance, touching her often enough to discover that her nose was an easy target, he hurried away to warn the dragon against continued unnecessary improvisation. Where was Nnagartha? Her mentor had spent the hours looking nervously at and studying people and objects with intense scrutiny. At last, Laura saw her on the far side of the meadow, speaking to the regiment of goblin balloon bombers. Nnagartha was frowning. Laura had decided to check up on her when-

"Lady, may I speak with you?" Bran had stepped alongside her. She shot a glance at Nnagartha, who was examining a goblin balloonist by holding him at eye-level with one hand.

"Sure, Bran. For a minute."

"Lady, where I am from, a man shouts his love for his woman to the trees and the hills and the stars."

"What about to the woman?"

Bran blinked, then smiled. His white teeth glistened. "To her he entreats more softly. I would like to ride into battle if only to be your champion and win for you a lovers victory. In longing desire for you to stay here with us and let me woo you with courtly reverence, I have composed a song. Would you like to hear it?"

Flattered. Flustered. Part of her wanted to giggle, another to cry. He was probably a good hugger. "Oh, God. I'm sorry, Bran. That's sweet, really. It's just that-" She waved her hands about vaguely. "I already have someone in my life, and we're-"

"Another man, a mighty warrior true and virtuous, has earned your affections, my Lady?"

She looked him squarely in those gorgeous aqua-blues and nodded. "Something like that."

Bran gazed into the distance. Emotion threatened to crack his proud visage. "Then he is a worthy man indeed to have captured your love so fully. I may be a mere prince and a warrior, yet I can feel your love for this man, and the pain it has recently caused you." He inhaled deeply, held the breath a moment, then exhaled a slow sigh that conveyed sadness and resignation. "I would like to meet him, and pay him the honor and respect I feel for the one worthy of your love, my Lady."

"I'd love to introduce you. You two'd get along well, I think."

"Warrior to warrior then! We three shall drink from shared flagons and toast the memory of loves lost and finer loves gained!"

"Right." He was cute. Buns of steel, oh lordy.

Striding her way was Nnagartha, Gurack struggling to keep up with her.

"You're worried," Laura said.

"Observant as well, I see," Nnagartha declared without sarcasm. "Yes, I am concerned. I had hoped that our activities would attract our prey, but I cannot sense his presence. He is a man of great power."

of stealth and disguise, and I trusted my hunter's experience to make uncovering him easy w
I was mistaken. My fear now is that this was all in vain, that he has chosen to stay permane
in your world. The damage he could do there... I do not like to think about it."

Gurack coughed. "Look, pardon me, Mistress, but we still got a hell of an episode of Xc
in the works here. Wouldn't it be worth it just for that? I mean, I know it ain't like the old da
and all, but hey, you gotta admit the people are gonna love 'Dragon's Wrath.' They'll pay me
attention to it than anything else. Even the Jesters Guild has tossed in the towel and contact
me about producing a comedy series. It's just too bad we can't make more than one new Xc
Oh, I can see it now! A whole 'nuther series shot on location! With the best director-that's
me-and the best-"

"That's enough," said Laura. She was deep in thought, an idea dancing just out of graspi
range. "Something Gurack said just now," she whispered. "I believe I now understand why
took the veilstone, why he wishes to see Xora canceled." She raised her voice. "Give me th
veilstone!"

Gurack looked stunned. "Say again, Lady?"

"Give. Me. The veilstone." Her best Xora intonation.

"I'm sure it's here somewhere. Just a minute." While the goblin searched his pockets,
Nnagartha fixed Laura with a questioning look.

Just play along with me. Let me be the pro here.

"Fraggin' pockets! Here it is!" Gurack handed the blue crystal to Laura.

She held it in her palms. It was heavier than she expected, and warm, and began glowing
with auroral colors. "Is it true, Nnagartha, that with this stone I could close the veil betwee
this world and mine forever?"

The warrior was silent for a moment. Then a shade of a smile twitched the comers of her
lips. Bingo! "Why, yes, Lady. If that is your wish."

"So I could conceivably keep on playing Xora here, without the troubles of strikes and
studio executives and shifting time-slots."

Laura heard the soft sound of Nnagartha's foot pressing down-hard-on Guracks. The gob
yelped. "Why, um, yes, of course, Lady!" he bleated. "Absolutely! Why, any, er, thing you v
you just ask me." Then he followed Lauras directing eyes to the left. His own eyes met hers
then widened appreciably. Bingo 2! "As a matter of fact, you're great! Marvelous! A sure-f
smash! The best entertainer this land has ever seen. And I do mean ever! You can write you
own ticket, with total control of your career. I'll get a small percentage, of course, a finder'

fee, but you'll be the top of the heap, let there be no mistake about that!"

A sheet of rough paper materialized in his hand. In ornate script at the top was the word Contract. "By signing here with one hand while holding the stone in the other, you will be granted an exclusive and binding contract to be Faerie's most favored actor. You'll be the top of the entire Kingdom. Finvarra himself is eager to get your autograph. Here's a pen." He gave her a colorful quill. The veilstone glowed even more brightly. The window behind them wavered and fluttered like a bad transmission.

What if it didn't work? She didn't like the way the window flickered now. Her backyard was difficult to see, going dark and fading to static snow. Laura gripped the quill tightly.

Nnagartha took the contract from Gurack, looked around for a suitable writing desk, then walked ten paces to the left, placing it on the giant mushroom. Laura followed. "Here's a good place to sign," she said. "When you do, the veil will be closed forever, the veilstone powerless, and you will be our land's most favored performer. With no turning back." The sentence held a barely shaded hint of warning.

"I know," Laura said firmly. She placed the pen to the paper. The stone was a tiny sun now. She didn't want to look back and see what was happening to the only passageway home.

"Here goes," she said quietly and began to sign.

The surface of the mushroom bucked, knocking the pen from her hand. Laura jumped back as the mushroom shifted and melted and folded in on itself like origami. Within seconds, her agent stood where it had been. "No! Stop!" he yelled.

"Robert!" Laura cried. Though she had been expecting it-rather, she'd prayed that she hadn't screwed up big time-the sight of the wiry little man startled her.

"You sign anything and I'll-" He lunged at Laura. She, in perfect form, shrieked her trademark Xora battle yell, subconsciously evaluated weight, strength, positioning, and anatomy, and shot a mae geri kekomi front thrust kick that caught Robert in the chest. Three point two seconds after launch, her agent plopped to the ground like a goblin balloon bomb.

The snooty elf, apparently waiting invisibly for such a moment, formed out of the air and waved his hands. A translucent bubble of green light englobed Robert. Or whoever he was. Whoever he was stood groggily and pounded on the inside of the bubble.

"You'll never work in this dominion again! You hear me?" He kicked the bubble and shouted and cursed some more, all to no avail. At last he gave up, sat, and sulked, looking more like a pouty child than a... than a slick-talking, career-sabotaging asshole.

The goblin director approached the bubble. He raised a palm, where an official-looking

badge appeared. "Gurack Thornhollow, FBI. You, Puck, alias Robin Goodfellow, alias Robert Goldfarb, are hereby charged with grand theft, use of a veilstone without authorization, breaking and entering into a forbidden reality, and behavior unbecoming the Designated Shrewd and Knavish Sprite of Faerie. You will be detained until you stand trial before your peers and the High Court." A pair of little gold handcuffs manifested in his hands. With a twinkle they vanished and reappeared clasped around Robert's-Puck's wrists.

Laura felt her eyebrows arch up to her hairline. She gawped at the ugly little goblin. "You a cop?"

"Faerie Bureau of Intervention, ma'am. Undercover specialist."

"But I thought you were just another jerk director."

The goblin waved a hand through the air with a flourish. "Acting!"

"Brilliant!"

"Thank you!" He bowed from the waist.

Nnagartha crossed her arms sternly. Her face was distressed, but not angry. Like a mother scolding a troublesome child, she said, "Puck. Why?"

The being in the bubble was no longer disguised as Robert Goldfarb. Instead, his naked green-gold skin, pointed ears, and wide comical face made him look less arrogant, almost puckish.

"You stopped paying attention to me," he said. "I was the King's and the lands most favored entertainer!" He pointed a long finger at Laura. "Until she came into our homes on the mage boxes. It was I the people wanted, who played tricks and japes, then sang songs and made the people laugh even in the darkest times. Until Xora, until her."

Laura nodded. "That merry wanderer of the night. You jest to Oberon and make him smile when you a fat and bean-fed horse beguile. And then the whole quire hold their hips and lope and waxen in their mirth, and swear a merrier hour was never wasted there."

"Aye," said the prisoner softly.

"Lady?" Nnagartha said.

"Titania, summer stock."

"Ah. You realize, Lady, the risk you undertook? The magic was real, otherwise it would have convinced him of your sincerity. If you had actually signed the contract, the veil would

have closed and the stone used to create it would have been spent. There are no more veilstones known. You would have been trapped here. Very likely forever."

"That's what I figured."

The director-cum-detective puffed on an elaborate curved pipe. "What I don't understand is how you knew?"

"Easy. You gave me the clue. 'They'll pay more attention to it than anything else,' you said. 'Even the Jesters Guild has tossed in the towel.' I know what it's like to be a replaced performer, to be out on the streets two minutes after that final curtain drops. Let me tell you, it never gets easy and you never get used to it. I realized that with Xora at the top of the ratings around here, there was someone else who had been number one for a long time beforehand. If I were that someone, I would be more than a little pissed. Maybe pissed enough to be tempted to do something about it. I gambled that the last thing he would want was me getting his permanent four-star engagement with all the frills."

"I am a fool," Nnagartha said. "This is largely of my own making. Mine and the other peoples of the land. We should not have been so... distracted. That will carry weight in his favor with the High Court."

Laura squatted to look at Puck eye to eye. "After that, it was easy to figure out that the one new person in my life, beginning the same time as the strikes and the production shut-down and my problems with Terry, was my new agent-the miracle worker, as I called him."

"Hey!" R. Goodfellow managed to look indignant. "I had nothing to do with your piddling relationship problems. That's all your doing, and I'm not the least bit surprised about it. Criminy, if I were your mate I would have packed my bags long before Terry did. It doesn't take magic stones to see that you're more career-centered than people-centered!" He'd done a good job picking up earthly jargon. How much of that came from our TV shows, she wondered. Still, if he had meant to sting her, it worked. Hard.

Gurack paced the area authoritatively. "And you deduced that he was disguised as the mushroom because the mushroom hadn't been here when we arrived."

"Actually, 'guess' is a more accurate word than 'deduce.' But yes."

"You realize, I trust, that sudden manifestations of giant mushrooms and similar flora are no surprise around here."

"It was to me!"

Gurack nodded thoughtfully, cogitating on this new deductive approach.

Nnagartha said, "The trickster now owes you a boon. He must grant you one wish, what it may be. And I assure you, he will do it well and willingly." Her voice carried a threat, and Puck nodded vigorously. "You were the victim of his ability to shape the wills of others. If you like, you may use that ability to your own advantage. It is only fair."

She indicated the window. It was steady now. The image of her backyard pool was crisp and clear and inviting. A familiar person—a beautifully, lovingly familiar person—sat on the edge of the pool.

"Jesus! What's Terry doing there?" It was Terry! Back at home. Talking with someone else.

"Jesus! What's Bran doing there!"

Bran's voice resonated from the window as he stroked Terry's blonde hair. "Lady," he was saying to the lovely woman, the most important woman in Laura's life, "Where I am from, a man shouts his love for his woman to the trees and the hills and the stars..."

"Christ!" Laura shot to her feet. "How am I going to explain that?"

"You could use the boon," Nnagartha said, sounding all the world like a butch Glinda the Good. "You could make sure that she came back to you and stayed with you."

It was tempting.

"No," Laura said. "This one is my problem. I want Terry to want to come back on her own. We have a lot of talking to do." Heart to itself: nice work, kiddo.

"As you wish, Lady. Is there any other boon you desire instead?"

She wanted to sprint through the veil, usher Bran back through it, and watch it vanish. Bran was not yet. "There is one." She cocked her head at the sulking figure in the bubble. "He knows what it is. I need a good agent again. I suspect he had a hand in getting rid of my former agent. He can help Adam and fix that particular problem, if you please."

"As you say, Lady."

Ruby slippers? Cut that crap. Laura stepped toward the window. The sun was setting over the meadow, the glittering city, and the cast and crew of Xora: Avenger Priestess-Special Edition. Maybe they had enough material for a travel documentary.

The window wavered and dimmed as she crossed through it. Bran passed her going the other way, looking puzzled. The last thing Laura heard was the dragon chatting with someone near the brook.

"Acting's fine for a start," the beast exclaimed. "But what I really want to do is direct."