

# Armor-ella

[By Holly Lisle](#)

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Once upon a time –

*Which is to say there are still living descendants, so we can't name names.*

There was a beautiful young girl –

*Six feet tall, eight stone, with shoulders like a blacksmith's from swinging a two-handed sword for hours on end – but beautiful. Really beautiful. Call her El.*

Who fell in love with a handsome prince.

*An avaricious, land-grabbing, double-crossing, sneaky young prince; but he looked like a male model, and he had a lot of land – most of it recently acquired by treacherous means – and a whole lot of money. You may call him Charming if you like. No one else did.*

And the bit about the glass slipper was pure fiction.

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The prince decided the house he'd found was perfect. He'd been riding for hours, looking for just such a property, and he was delighted his journey was over. The house he'd discovered was half hidden in the Enchanted Forest, facing onto a flower-filled, sun-speckled glade; its cut-stone walls were covered with ivy and its well sat out in front at the end of a charmingly landscaped little path.

Solid construction, he thought. The miniature ramparts atop

the stone walls came complete with miniature crenellations – too small for bowmen to hide behind, but they added a nice touch. Arrow slits decorated the second floor – they were glassed over, though, so no one could actually shoot out of them. The machicolations above the main doorway looked real, however – as though someone inside might consider pouring boiling oil onto the proselytizers and door-to-door salesmen who came calling. He approved. The place was definitely a concept house. He would bet the builders had pitched it to the family by saying, “Think castle. Your own little castle.”

A battering ram would go through it in an instant, of course; it wasn't a **real** castle. But it would be a grand location for intimate little parties, it would serve as a strategic garrison for some of his troops in the event of activity in the area... and it would extend his territory about fifteen leagues directly south into what was currently Queen Hilde's kingdom.

Location, location, and location – the real selling points when acquiring property.

He turned to his aide. “We'll use the usual story. Go up, see who lives there, and let's find out how difficult they're going to be to get rid of.”

” Somebody get the door!” El's step-mother had incredible lungs.

El, busy sharpening her sword, didn't even look up from her whetstone.

However – “I'm doing something,” Carol shouted, and a beat behind her, Martha yelled, “El's downstairs! El, get the door!”

The doorbell clanged again.

El rolled her eyes and put down her blade and went to see who

was there.

She found a lean, whippet-faced man with mournful eyes waiting on the front step, cap in hand. "Your Prince requires your assistance, madam. Our hounds chased a stag while we were hunting, and became lost in the woods. We have been searching for them for days, without luck. Have you seen or heard them?"

She looked down at the man – his eyes didn't meet hers when he spoke, and she disliked the way he twisted his cap; also, she didn't think he looked dirty or tired enough to have been hunting lost hounds for days. He was lying about the hounds – she'd bet on it. She glanced across the yard to where the prince waited on his fine white steed. The horse looked like he'd been freshly bleached and starched; for that matter, so did the prince.

Worse – although she didn't follow politics closely, she'd had a queen, not a prince, the last time she heard. She doubted that had changed without anyone mentioning it – she also doubted that the flunky's identification of the prince as **her** prince had been in innocent error.

Hunting their dogs, she thought. Of course they are. But she smiled at the man on her doorstep, walked past him out into the yard, and curtsied to the prince.

She clasped her hands and tried to look shy. The prince was gorgeous, and gorgeous men didn't make it into El's stretch of woods often. Not even gorgeous slime. She figured she was probably doing a pretty good imitation of a bashful, blushing maiden.

"I did hear hounds, your majesty," she told him, "only last night. But I mistook them for the Hell Hounds that so often hunt these woods after dark."

She glanced away long enough to let him consider the import of her words, then glanced up to see how he was taking her news.

She noted that he had paled. His gaze flicked nervously to the sun, which had passed its halfway point earlier and was steadily creeping down the sky. "Hell Hounds?"

El ducked her head to hide her smile. "Certainly you know of them, my lord. This is the forest of the Folk. Even during the day it is a tricky place, but at night, I would never ride through it. Besides the Hounds, there are also bogles who hunt in the darkness, and the fey folk that try to lead riders astray. Those who wander into the forest at night are rarely heard from again."

The prince looked down at her, then over her shoulder toward his toady, then back to El. "Well," he said thoughtfully. "How interesting. Do you have a spare room where we could spend the night?"

"Alas, sir," she lied, "it would compromise our honor when my brothers returned home from hunting, if they were to find strange men in the house with their women. Worse, when they come back we will have no room to stable your horses – and left outside, I fear the bogles would eat them before morning."

His face fell at the mention of brothers, and further at the mention of bogles. "Bogles, eh? Could you describe these bogles for me."

Ella thought fast. "Of course, your lordship. Well, none who see them live, of course. Still, they followed me through the forest once, so I can tell you how to recognize their sign. When first they notice you, you'll feel them watching. You'll see nothing, no matter how you look around for them, but you'll know they are there. Next will come the sound of rustling leaves, though you will feel no wind. You'll see tree branches sway, and know they have begun to stalk you. As they get closer, you'll hear whispering, though you won't be able to make out words – bogles are mad, and talk to themselves.

And when they prepare for the final lunge, all the animals near you in the forest will fall silent." El shivered. "No one can tell what happens after that."

The prince's nostrils pinched in and his lips thinned to a hard line. "I see." He studied her, and she saw curiosity and some darker emotion warring on his face. "How, then, do you live here, fair maid?"

El made her face woeful, and hung her head. "My father made a pact with the lord of these woods that his family could live here in safety."

"A pact, hey?" The prince's face brightened. "Maybe I could make a pact with this lord."

El nodded. "Perhaps, though I think you would not want to. My father's pact was to exchange our safety for his life."

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El listened until she could no longer hear the receding thudding of horses' hooves – then she turned away from the well to go back into the house. The danger – and she had no doubt but that it had been a danger – was gone.

Something giggled softly nearby, then said, "I liked the way you described bogles. Very frightening. The prince didn't quite believe you, though, you know." The voice was high-pitched and raspy.

El moved back to the well and said, "Who's there? Who said that?"

The chuckle again. "When he left, he said to his flunky, 'We'll check at the first village, and see if anyone else knows of bogles in the Enchanted Forest. I want that house; I don't want some stupid country girl's superstitions to stand in my way.' But you should have seen the way he near-flew out of the forest when I began rattling branches just behind him."

The chuckle again. "Set him up good, you did."

She was pretty sure the stranger was hiding in the clump of rosebushes and clematis to the side of the house. She intentionally turned her back on the spot, picked up a bucket that hung on the rope crank, and took the end of the rope in hand, as if she intended to draw up water. "Well, of course he was suspicious," she said. "Everyone knows there's nothing enchanted in the Enchanted Forest. That's just the name real estate agents came up with to sell scrubby wooded lots out in the middle of nowhere to fools."

She heard breath sucked in.

She added, "Every stupid country girl knows there are no Folk," and smiled.

The hidden visitor shrieked. "What?!" The piping little voice shot up at least an octave. "No Folk? Nothing enchanted? Just look at me and tell me there are no Folk in the Enchanted Forest!"

A little creature materialized out of the gathering gloom – his rough, weathered skin could have been the bark of an old oak tree, his eyes glowed as red as the jaunty cap he wore, and he stood no higher than her knee. He leaned against a rosebush at the edge of the clearing, arms akimbo, chin jutting out, clearly furious.

El looked around and right through him and then beyond him; she pretended puzzlement. "I don't see anything at all."

He darted closer, and as she continued to stare through him and around him, closer still. She suppressed the smile that twitched at the corners of her mouth.

"Are you blind?!" the creature shouted, and danced up and down in front of her. "Idiot peasant! I'm right here!"

El clapped the bucket down over his head. "Every stupid

country girl knows there are no Folk," she said softly, "but I'm not stupid."

The creature under the bucket screamed and fought; he scrabbled for El's hands with with long, pointed fingernails, but she held on. He turned into a huge black cat that spit and scratched and bit; when he did, she threw the bucket away and grabbed him by the scruff of the neck. He became a snake, cool and dry and papery in her hands, with strong coils that whipped around her arm. She hung on, gritting her teeth – and he became a fish, slimy and slippery, with barbs at the tips of his spines that stabbed and scratched. He flopped and she lost her grip, and he almost got free, but she caught him in her apron and wrapped him in the cloth – and still she held on.

" Let me go!" he yelled. He was once again the tiny manlike creature she'd first seen, though now he was tangled in her apron.

" No." She got a firm grip on the back of his neck and unwrapped him.

" Dreadful big hulking ox of a girl," he muttered.

" With good reflexes," she agreed, and grinned at him.

He glared at her – those red eyes gave him an impressive glare. "Why aren't you afraid of snakes?"

" I'm not afraid of anything," she told him, and grinned wider, showing her teeth.

He shivered and looked away from her. "You might as well let me go. I don't have any gold," he said.

He was lying. They all had gold – and if she hung on to him, she could make him give it to her. But she said, "That's all right. I don't need your gold."

He brightened instantly. "You don't need my gold? Really? I don't suppose you'd care to put that in writing?"

She shrugged, but didn't loosen her grip. "I don't mind."

A sheet of parchment and a huge plumed quill pen appeared in his hand. "Oh, marvelous. What luck." He scribbled for a moment, then presented her with the results of his labor. "Here – this says, 'I voluntarily forgo all right to the gold belonging to Widdershins, both now and in perpetuity, both for myself and all heirs and assigns.' Write your name there – or you can just draw your mark if you can't write."

She winked at him and said, "I can read and write... Widdershins." She giggled when she said his name. "But it doesn't have the second part of the agreement here, so I can't sign it."

"Second part?" His gnarled brow furrowed, and he shook his head. "That covers everything."

"No. It doesn't cover what you're going to do for me, in exchange for my giving up my right to the gold to which I am entitled."

He looked at her, obviously appalled.

"You don't think I left out that bowl of milk every night – with the cream still on, no less – just to get you to stay around, or that I went through the trouble of catching you and hanging on to you just for the pleasure of your company. Did you?"

"I'd hoped."

"I'll bet."

"You left that milk out for me? Just for me? I thought you'd left it for your cats."



" We don't have cats. I put it out for you every night."

" Oh. Well... thank you. It was very nice. I'm awfully fond of milk – and the cream was especially good." He sighed. "So what do you want, since you don't want my gold?"

" Which you don't have anyway," El teased.

" Er, right."

Ella sat on the grass and held Widdershins firmly on her lap so he couldn't escape. His cool skin, rough as oak bark, scraped her hands; his pungent leaf-mold scent surrounded her. "When my mother died, dad and I managed well enough for a while. I missed my mother, but my father loved me. Half the time he treated me as a cherished daughter, and the other half as the son he'd always wanted."

" I didn't think you had any brothers," Widdershins interrupted.

" Of course not. But you don't think I'd tell some land-grabbing Haptigan prince that, do you?"

" Oh. I suppose you wouldn't."

" Anyway," El said, dragging her story back on track, "then dad brought Georgia and her two daughters home with him, and dad didn't have time to teach me to ride or fight anymore. He was too busy working so his new wife could spend the money he earned. And ever since dad died, things haven't been too good for me. I want happily ever after, you know – and I don't think I'm going to get it living here with them. We don't get along too well."

" Well – that's too bad," Widdershins said. "But I don't see what I can do to make things any better."

" I need a fairy godmother," El said.

"What?!" the little creature shrieked. "Excuse me, pardon me – you'll notice perhaps that to be your fairy godmother, I'd have to have a sex change... and I don't intend to – not for any reason. I like all my parts where... they... are. So the fairy godmother idea is out. Got it? Out."

El shrugged. "So you can be my fairy godfather."

"I could, could I?" He snorted and crossed his arms tightly over his chest. "And what duties would a fairy godfather have, pray tell?"

"You would have to help me catch a prince – and keep him. I'm strictly a marriage kind of girl – I don't want any of that living-together nonsense, and I'm not at all interested in becoming a mistress."

"A prince? You want a prince? Like that two-faced scoundrel who wants to steal your land? You want someone like that?"

"Not even someone like that. He'd be fine, actually," El said. "On my terms, of course. I wouldn't want him on his."

"Yes," Widdershins replied after a thoughtful moment. "I can see where you're big on your terms."

"Is it a deal, then?"

Widdershins stared into the distance. "A deal... Would it be over when I finished helping your marry that prince?"

"I thought perhaps you'd care to stay on in my employ – for a full pitcher of milk with the cream on every evening, say, and free run of the castle for yourself and your own offspring. In exchange, you could be my luck. I think a long-term deal would be beneficial to both of us."

"Milk –" He sighed again, and closed his eyes. "One of those big metal pitchers, the kind with two handles? About yea tall?" He raised an arm over his head.

" Good heavens," El said. "A milk can? I'd need a dozen or so cows to keep one of those filled. For that much milk, I'd have to insist on a daily update of what you'd heard around the castle – and occasional extra favors, as agreed upon by both of us."

The wee man looked at her through narrowed eyes. "What exactly did your father do?"

El's smile became positively gleeful. "He was a lawyer."

"Of **course** he was."

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So they signed their bargain, and El and Widdershins set to work to implement El's plan.

Nor were they any too soon, for a week after the prince's first visit, the mailman brought a gilded invitation in a lovely handmade paper envelope to the door.

Carol opened it at the breakfast table. "Oh, incredible," she murmured when she saw what it contained. She handed it to Martha, who read it with increasingly wide eyes.

**She**, in turn, passed it off to her mother.

Georgia read the card, smiled brightly, then sighed and handed it to El. "You ought to at least think about going," she said. "This would be an excellent opportunity for you to get away from the horses and the swords and do something ladylike for once."

El looked over the card.

" By order of the King of Haptigia, who seeks a wife for his son, there shall be a ball on the third Friday of this month, from seven p. m. until dawn. The presence of your entire family, especially all unmarried daughters, is requested –

please plan to attend. Formal attire.”

” He’s looking for a wife,” Carol whispered. She hugged herself, then stood and twirled across the floor.

Martha laughed and said, “Oh, Mama – just think – one of us might have a chance to marry a prince.”

” That would be wonderful,” their mother said. “I think I’m about ready for a house in town. Convenient shopping, a level of civilization, entertainment... a chance to meet a nice widower, perhaps ...” She nodded firmly. “Yes. You girls need to do your best to interest this prince.”

” Has it occurred to any of you that we don’t **have** a prince?” El asked. She crossed her arms over her chest and watched her two petite step-sisters stop their dancing. “We have a dowager queen with a single daughter, Fat Lucy.”

” **Princess** Lucy,” Georgia said with a sniff.

” **Princess** Fat Lucy.” El compromised.

” Perhaps the borders have moved,” Carol said. “That happens sometimes.”

El raised an eyebrow. “It happens all the time around the Haptigan kings. They’ve been expanding their borders for over a hundred years.”

Georgia rolled her eyes. “Well, even Haptigan kings – or their sons – have to marry. And they might as well marry into our family.”

El looked from one petite, lovely, dark-haired step-sister to the other, and felt the old envy rise. Neither Carol nor Martha could swing a sword or ride a horse... or read a legal brief, for that matter. And neither of them would ever need to. Men fell all over themselves protecting and cosseting dainty little creatures like the two of them – but let a tall,

strong Valkyrie of a girl like El come along, and suddenly every man around was too busy to help. "Don't get your hopes up," she said, and glowered off to her room.

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" Are you sure you aren't going, then, Ella, dear?" Georgia was checking her own makeup and making sure the stays in her corset were all lying flat – she was primping in the mirror as badly as either of her daughters.

" No. Sorry. I'm going to oil dad's armor tonight, I think – and maybe go out and polish Thunderbutt's hooves."

Martha made gagging noises in the background. Carol rolled her eyes and said, "Ooooh. That sounds more thrilling than I could stand."

Both Carol and Martha settled their toques on their heads and tucked the corners of their outer skirts into the clips at their waists. Nobody, El thought grimly, should have an eighteen inch waist. Both of her step-sisters looked fabulous enough that if this ball was on the level, either had a more-than-even chance of snatching the prince away from any other contenders. El was throwing away what little chance she might have had – and with those two in the arena, that was a mighty little chance indeed.

Of course, El suspected the ball was a ruse. The timing was just too unbelievable for it to be anything else. And if she was right, **only** she had any real chance of acquiring the handsome Haptigan prince as a husband.

Her sisters and her mother rolled away in the rented carriage, and El went out to the stables.

" They're gone?" Widdershins sat on the stable gate, grinning.

El nodded.

" Well. Then I suppose we ought to get ready."

El nodded again, and swallowed hard. She found herself suffering from a bad case of nerves.

Widdershins studied her through slitted eyes. "Second thoughts? By my very bones, I'd have them if I were you."

" I'm worried," El confessed.

" With reason. If you fail tonight, you'll likely die – but even if you succeed and catch your prince, you lose, to my way of thinking. I can see no reason why you'd want to keep him."

El bit her lip and sighed. "Part of my reasoning is horribly mercenary and self-serving," she confessed. "With his power behind me, I can do what I want to do. With his money, I can own the things I desire." She stared at her callused hands, turning them over and over. "I'm tired of hard life and hard work. I want to try luxury."

The creature chuckled. "Well, that's pragmatic. I'm relieved. I was afraid you were going to spout poetry and nonsense, and go all dewy-eyed on me. If all you're looking for is a business arrangement, then I think even with that prince, you'll get your 'happily ever after'."

" That's part of the reason I want him," El said, and there was a sharp edge in her voice. "The other part, unfortunately, is that I have been able to think of nothing and no one else since I first laid eyes on him. My pulse flutters like the wings of a hummingbird when I imagine his face, and I yearn to feel his lips against my skin."

" Oh, dear." Widdershins' groaned and rolled his eyes skyward. "And the moment after you feel his lips against your skin, I'll bet you feel his teeth sinking into your throat."

" The possibility has crossed my mind."

" With good reason. What a pity I cannot protect you from yourself."

El looked up at the darkening sky and straightened her shoulders. She took a steadying breath. "Well, you can't. But you can help me win. Did you tell your friends about my offer?"

The little man clucked his tongue. "Of course – and they've promised they'll be here when the time comes. Just remember that if you double-cross them, they can do terrible things to you."

" I meant every word I said." El began putting on the padding she would wear under her father's suit of armor.

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" Your majesty might wish to come take a look," the soldier at the drawbridge said quietly. "I think these are your... guests."

The prince went to the secret window, where he could watch without being seen. Mounted soldiers had stopped the carriage, and were asking for identification.

An older woman – obviously the mother, though still good-looking – leaned out and handed a card to the soldier. "My daughters and I were invited to the prince's ball," she said.

Two dark-haired, sloe-eyed young women looked out the windows and smiled fetchingly at the soldiers.

The prince frowned. "This isn't all of them. There are supposed to be brothers – and the blonde girl I talked to, as well. Find out where they are."

The soldier walked out, whispered something to the guard at the gate, then stood and waited.

" All of us?" The mother frowned. "Well, no... my step-daughter

Ella stayed home. She... wasn't, ah, feeling well."

"What of your sons, or step-sons?"

The woman's face became genuinely puzzled. "I have no sons, and no step-sons either. We four women are –" her face clouded and she fell silent. The prince realized she didn't like admitting four women lived in the house alone, unprotected. He didn't blame her. There were a lot of wolves who would willingly prey on a house full of poor, defenseless, beautiful women.

He grinned, and his grin stretched until he felt his face would split.

Quite a lot of them.

He rang a bell and the soldier, hearing it, returned to the guardhouse.

"Your majesty?"

"Have these three and their driver detained in the – oh, the west wing, I suppose. Do make sure father doesn't see them. I'll be along sooner or later to explain things to them. First, I have to let the men know there is still someone at the house, and that I want her brought back here."

He frowned as he turned away, though. He suddenly realized that the girl he'd spoken to had mentioned brothers with enormous confidence. She'd met his eyes when she spoke of them and she hadn't flinched or flushed. Either she was a superb liar, or these people were on to him, the brothers were waiting at home, and his men were riding into a trap.

He considered the possibilities.

The girl was almost certainly lying – and probably to protect her virtue. Four women alone with no one to protect them... two strange men. Oh, he could see it. The poor girl had probably



been terrified he'd want to exercise *droit du seigneur*, and had been hoping to scare him off. He chuckled at the delicious yet typical inconsistency of a woman lying to protect her virtue.

He'd planned to remain at the castle while his men claimed the house. But that lovely girl was waiting... at home, no doubt in bed, with her covers tucked up to her chin. Not feeling well, her mother had said.

All alone, with no brothers and no 'bogles' to protect her – helpless.

**But what did come after us as we were leaving?** his inner voice worried.

He listened to it only enough to decide to take a few extra men with him, then rationalized that decision by telling himself the soldiers were only in case the hypothetical brothers turned out to be not entirely hypothetical.

The idea of claiming his new property in person pleased him.

He headed for the stables, where his men waited.

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El looked down at her father's armor in dismay. "It's exactly the same as it was!"

What it was was ill-fitting and heavy. Her father had never actually worn it – he'd inherited it from his father, who had apparently been stout, short... and fat-headed. The long-sleeved hauberk sagged and bunched under El's arms; the mail hood gapped beneath her chin, exposing her neck to cutting blows; and the acorn helm so completely covered her eyes that she had to give up wearing it entirely. While she could have put both her legs into one of the chausses, she could only draw the mail leg armor up to her knees. She tried to imagine them completely covering her grandfather's thighs, and snarled, "Good God in the Heavens, was grandfather a **dwarf?**" The

chausses weren't going to do her a bit of good, but Widdershins had insisted she wear them anyway. She'd had to hold them up with bits of baling twine, because the leather straps intended to do the job didn't reach anywhere near her waist.

And now Widdershins stood in front of her and swore on a long string of Folk gods that he had transformed her into the perfect picture of a mighty warrior – while she could see perfectly well that he hadn't. She looked like a tall girl in her short, fat grandfather's armor.

She could no longer hope for her first plan to succeed; it had depended heavily on Folk magic and a bit of deception. If she were right and the prince was up to no good, El was probably going to end up in an honest-to-God pitched battle. She wondered how the Folk were with swords.

A winged pixie no bigger than a mouse zipped into the stable and fluttered in front of El's face. It glowed dully in the deep shadows – a flash of wings, a faint, dark sheen. It smelled of marigolds, with the faintest hint of summer grass; it hung on the air in front of her face, wings moving without creating even the tiniest perceptible breeze. Its red eyes glowed as they stared into hers, and its pointed teeth gleamed. If El had not first seen it in daylight, she would have found the creature frightening.

"They're coming," the pixie told her.

"You're certain?"

It nodded. "Men in armor riding horses – about fifteen of them, coming down from the north."

"So I was right." El felt a tiny thrill of satisfaction at that, which fear immediately buried.

Another pixie darted in and shrilled, "They're coming!"

" We already know," El said.

" You knew?"

El nodded, but Widdershins interrupted. "Weed was waiting in a different part of the forest, El. Weed, what did you see?"

The second pixie said, "Men, perhaps twenty, coming around from the southeast."

" Oh!" El looked from the first pixie to the second, and her eyes went round. "Nearly forty men. That's a lot."

She glanced over at Widdershins, who shrugged. "To be expected."

" Do we have enough Folk waiting to beat them?"

" Beat them? The plan was never to beat them, missy."

" But we're going to have to beat them – fight them into the ground and take them prisoners. My plan can't hope to work – look at me! I look ridiculous."

" To yourself, and," the hint of a smile twitched across his face and was gone, "to the Folk, perhaps – but you won't to the people you need to convince. You're going to have to trust me; you're going to have to trust all of us."

El shook her head, but mounted up. Outside the stables, she began to hear the low moans and eerie howls of her advance troops. "I hope I can," she muttered. She couldn't help but wonder how seriously the Folk would take her signature scratched on a promissory note, once things got nasty – or if they would consider what she promised in exchange for their help good enough.

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Something was definitely going on.

The prince, traveling with the soldiers who crept through the night toward the house along the main path, had just decided the blonde girl's stories of bogles had been, like her story of brothers, designed to frighten him off. He and his men were already within a longbow shot of the house, and nothing untoward had happened.

Then the wind died, and the normal nighttime sounds with it. In the stillness and the hush, he heard leaves rustling, and then something howled. His men stopped and drew weapons. Without the creaking of saddles and the soft clank of armor, he could hear another sound – a low, steady, garbled whispering.

"What was that?" the soldiers muttered among themselves.

"Nothing," the prince said. "Dogs. And the leaves on the trees. Keep moving." He hadn't bothered to relay the story the girl had told him about the forest – he didn't want his orders questioned.

The men started forward, but his captain dropped back to his side long enough to say, "I believe I heard men in the undergrowth up ahead. That sounded like whispering to me, not leaves rustling. I fear we may be riding into an ambush."

The prince frowned. "We're heading to a house where one sick girl is all alone."

"Then why did we bring all these men?"

"Because I want to convince her that we're holding her mother and sisters hostage, and that she wants to give me her land. I don't want her to try any—"

He broke off in midsentence, as he noticed that pairs of glowing red orbs surrounded him and his soldiers, just above their heads. He pointed them out to the captain. "Do you see those?"

" Yes." The captain did not sound enthused, exactly. In fact, his voice squeaked out the word, with the tiniest quaver at the end.

" Do you know what they... are?"

" No."

They drew closer, those floating spheres – and the prince had a bad moment when he noticed that they blinked. Then another, when he realized the lowest of them was easily twelve feet off the ground. He began to believe he could make out the hulking, hairy shapes attached to those eyes. "Bogles," he whispered.

His men packed in around him, riding close and slow. He shuddered as something warm and wet licked along the back of his neck. He jerked around in the saddle, but nothing was there – except that something breathed hot, stinking breath into his ear and laughed a horrible, whispery laugh.

Then the screams began. Those were his men screaming – the men in the flanking party whose job had been to surround the back of the house and cut off escape. The soldiers with him flailed out at the whispering, invisible enemy. The prince drew his own sword, and in tight quarters hit only one of his men, who screamed.

The soldiers in the front shouted, and turned back to flee whatever lay ahead.

" Advance," the prince shouted. "Advance. Keep at them!"

The fleeing men froze – then they began pointing and shouting at the place from which they'd just come.

The prince's gut knotted, and he turned, only to find himself staring right into a pair of red eyes the size of grapefruits, inches from his own. And something warm and wet licked along the back of his neck again. "Yum. Tasty," it whispered in his ear.

The prince, howling, spurred his horse forward, shoving his men and their horses out of the way, and cantered into the clearing in front of the house, then sawed back on his reins so hard his horse reared and he nearly fell off its rump. It was well that he did not, for his men, racing after him in a panicked throng, would surely have trampled him.

He stared, jaw hanging, heart throbbing in his throat. In the circle, the moonlight illuminated a cast of shaggy horrors so terrible he thought he would have scratched out his eyes to save himself from ever seeing them again – except that in the center of those terrors, astride a radiant milk-white horse, a glowing creature of surpassing beauty waited and watched. Her hair, white as moonbeams, swirled around her face. Her armor, every inch of it hand-hammered gold, glowed as if it reflected the light of the noonday sun. Her face was perfect, heartbreakingly beautiful, terribly fierce. He knew her. He'd met her in daylight in this very clearing, and mistaken her for something other than she was. Now he saw her in her own element.

The men who'd made up the second half of his pincer cowered in front of her, on their knees with their foreheads pressed against the grass. Only a real woman could make armed warriors grovel in the dirt like that. Oh, she was a real woman – tall and proud and dangerous. She unsheathed her two-handed sword with a smooth movement, and lifted it easily over her head with a single hand, and he fell hopelessly in love. Even as he slid out of his saddle to kneel in front of her, he found himself wondering if she knew what to do with a whip, too.

I would give anything to find out, he thought.

~~\*~~

It was working! El watched the prince dismount and drop to one knee in front of her. His expression held a mixture of worship and fear – so the illusions of the Folk were holding. She

wondered what he and his men saw – and was almost relieved she didn't know first-hand. They all seemed so afraid.

She still saw nothing but a line of pixies floating above her to either side, and another line behind the prince, forming a most insubstantial wall.

She wanted to make her deal, but she wasn't sure the prince was softened up enough yet. El considered the special swordsmen's tricks her father had taught her, the ones guaranteed to wring a plea for mercy from even the fiercest opponent.

She began tossing her sword from hand to hand, catching it easily – the famed Alternating Strokes of Flying Death. She was its master. Then she swirled the blade one-handed in a figure-eight that crossed over her horse's ears – the lethal Doom Loops.

Executed perfectly, as always. She saw the prince's eyes grow round as he watched her, and she prepared herself for the Whistling Two-Handed Circles, when an irate voice broke her concentration.

"What are you **doing**?" Widdershins snapped. He rode double behind her, with his little claw-tipped hands gripping her belt.

"The Alternating Strokes of Flying Death." She snapped right back at him. "Then Doom Loops. If you hadn't interrupted me, I was going to go for the terrifying Whistling Two-Handed Circles."

"The **what**?"

"Whistling Two-Handed Circles," she whispered impatiently. "They're a master swordsman's prize strokes. They're guaranteed to terrify even the best opponent."

"Into thinking he's fighting a lunatic." Widdershins waved

one hand in the general direction of the prince, and the prince and his little band yelped and went forehead to the ground like the other batch. "There," the little creature said. "I gave them a new illusion. Now they just think you were making mystic passes or somesuch."

El was still seething from his comment about lunatics. "How dare you say that! My **father** taught me those strokes."

"Your father... the lawyer?"

"Well... yes."

"When you said you were a master swordswoman, I took your word for it. Whom have you fought?"

"My father... well, when I was little. I've been practicing on the woodpile and the stuffed practice dummy since then."

"Oh, dear." Widdershins sighed deeply. "Lucky you didn't actually have to use that thing tonight. I want you to follow my advice for a moment here. Just hold your sword high overhead – in either one or both hands. It doesn't matter. Whichever you prefer will be fine. It looks dramatic and impressive, and those soldiers see the sword as a glowing magic one. None of your master strokes though, please. Concentrate on looking fierce and proud, and say your little bit, and we should get through this yet."

El bit her lip and nodded. No more Alternating Strokes of Flying Death... no more Doom Loops... no more Whistling Two-Handed Circles.

El wasn't happy with what she was hearing. But she knew about the value of advice. Her father had always said, "Never take advice from people you aren't paying to give it to you, and never ignore the advice of the people you are paying." She was paying – or planning to pay – quite a bit to Widdershins if she got what she wanted.



So she held her sword high above her head – one-handed – and tried to look noble, and then she took a deep breath. “Hear me, O Prince,” she said, and was impressed by the way her voice echoed. Probably proximity to the well, she decided. The prince looked up. “These are my demands, if you and your men would leave my forest alive.”

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Much to her amazement and everyone else’s, it all worked out.

Ella moved into the castle of her Haptigan prince, and put her step-mother and her step-sisters up in the east wing. The castle was big enough she rarely saw them, so they didn’t drive her crazy. El’s husband, the prince, settled down – more on that in just a moment – and, at her request, added on a dairy farm to the establishment, though for reasons he could never figure out, he got less milk out of his cows than any other dairy farmer in the kingdom. He didn’t get away with anything, either – his wife knew exactly what he intended to do from the instant he first came up with any idea. From time to time, he thought he saw some of those glowing red eyes around the castle, but he never dared ask. For one thing, El was not the sort of woman to press on issues she didn’t want to talk about.

For another, she did know how to use a whip.

The Whistling Two-Handed Circles were his favorite stroke.

Widdershins and all his friends loved their new home.

So.

Once upon a time, there was a beautiful young girl who fell in love with a handsome prince. And the bit about the glass slipper was pure fiction.

But the happily ever after part wasn’t.

The End.

(First printed in **Chicks In Chainmail**, Esther Friesner, ed.

Publisher: **Baen Books**

Date Published: 08/1995

ISBN: 0671876821)

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