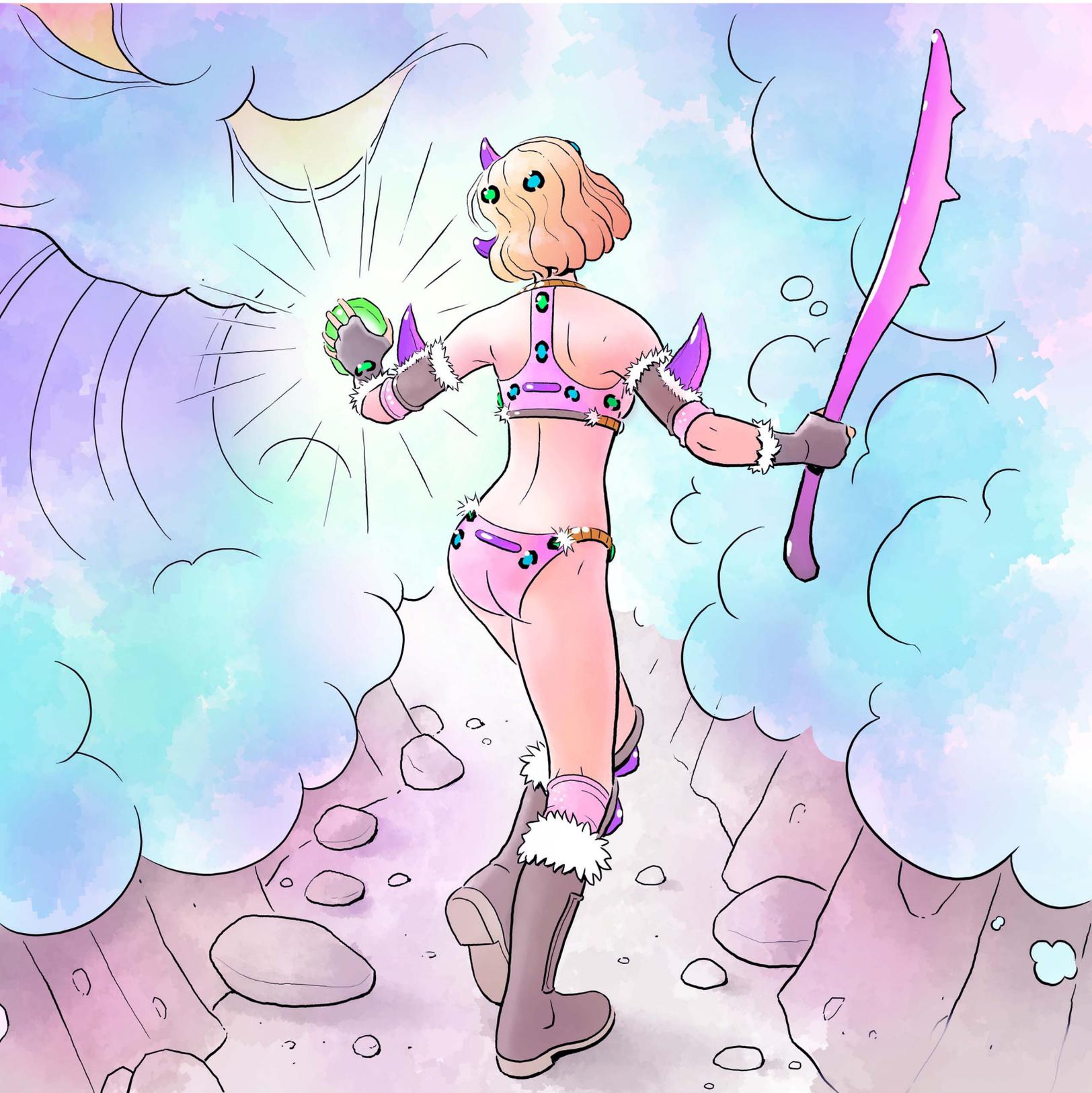


MOCKING STICK MALKING^A^N^D STICK



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Mocking Stick and Malking Stick

by Kelly Ishikawa

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There had always been conflicting versions of the legend. The amazing branches who could mimic any plant they made contact with. Some said they were called 'mocking' sticks. Others called them 'malking' sticks. Turns out, there were actually two legends all along. Two species of plant, completely unrelated. Perfect examples of convergent evolution.

Kraggberry Krrumble had one of each. I couldn't say if they were physically different from one another. I don't think I ever saw their true forms. But there were differences in their personalities.

The 'mocking' stick was always trying to outdo the other. It made sure we all knew that it had been around for longer; had been in contact with more extraordinary plants. It fluttered around the other stick, antagonizing it.

The other stick—the 'malking' stick—was more timid; gentler. Maybe it was a relative baby compared to the other. Kraggberry didn't know their ages, but she believed they could be hundreds or even thousands of years old. She was sure that some plants they emulated were extinct. I hoped she was right.

The mocking stick became a giant, cupped leaf. It looked like it was made of glass, but it was soft as we stepped into it. With the help of the malking stick, which turned into a sturdy, flat-leafed branch, Kraggberry paddled us across a wide river. Through the bottom of the leaf-boat, we saw long strands of underwater plants. Our craft shimmered where it made contact with the leaves, adding, I imagined, to its repertoire of plants to impersonate.

Kraggy was telling me all about the sticks. What they liked to drink, how they preferred different kinds of light depending on what forms they take. Suddenly, she tensed.

Ahead, on the shore, a mist was gathering. My hands reached to my belt, making sure my pouches were secure. Kraggberry paddled faster. This would be easier to deal with if we were ashore.

It didn't have a proper name. No one lived on this world, so no one was there to name it. But visitors had spoken of river-born clouds that swirled into faces. If they were to be believed, the clouds drank moisture from living beings, adding to their vapors.

We didn't make it to the shore. Too fast a face coalesced before us, and began hovering menacingly by the waters. The sticks needed time to change. We were about to put some research to the test.

As we leaped into the water, the mocking stick began its transformation, shriveling up and sinking beneath the water. I dove after it. It was lost for a few seconds, but as its transformation completed, I easily saw its green, glowing form. It was light, and had actually begun floating upwards towards me. We emerged together, to find Kraggberry already on the shore, the 'paddle' now in the form of a large, spikey, edged leaf.

Kraggberry wore a magical outfit, the 'Mantle' and 'Edifice' of her people, the fabled Clamberberriennes, and it protected her from the water. You couldn't tell she had just emerged from a river. I called out to her and tossed the mocking stick. It had taken the form and attributes of the powerful fogblight seed. If our books were correct, it was a natural repellent against mists and clouds.

She walked towards the face, holding the seed aloft. Its green light shimmered bright, and the cloud grimaced! It made one, tentative move towards Kraggberry, but faltered. She slashed at it with her malking stick, and the mists dissipated!

Once we were sure the creature was gone, we moved on. Up a rocky slope we clambered, and soon, our eyes set upon great patches of grassy earth, set between jagged rocks. Kraggberry spoke to the green seed, which pulsed with its green light. I reached for my pouches.

Within, lay five delicate egg sacs, belonging to butterflies, discovered in lands far across many meandering. Who knows how they got so far from here, but after a great deal of reasearch, and many meetings with traveling specialists, we had finally loacated their home, and were bringing them back. Unfortunately, we also learned that the insects' life cycles were entwined with that of a long extinct tree. Without it, they would never hatch.

Kraggberry lay the green seed onto one of the patches of earth, and we waited. Could it be that, in all it's years of traveling, the mocking stick had found its way to this land, during the days when the butterflies' trees still grew? I wondered how it sensed its surroundings. I wondered if was remembering. Then, it began transform again. First, the large shape of the fogblight seed began to shrink, turning white and coarse, disappearing into the grasses. It must be working! A moment later, curling, blue sprouts wound upwards, then began splitting into branches. It hadn't taken long at all. When it was done, a single tree, right out of our books' pages, stood rooted in the rocky slopes. Thought it wasn't very large, I found places for all the egg sacs. Over a period of a few hours, we were rewarded, and the tiny caterpillars emerged. The mocking stick obliged by sprouting shimmering leaves for them to eat.

It would take some time for them to grow, and for their own shapes to change. But when they flew off, they would carry new seeds for more of these blue, spiraling trees, which depended on the butterflies as the butterflies depended on them. Soon, they would both be abundant on this world again.

As we left the tree, I wondered what form the malking stick would take to get us across the river. At the moment, it was helping its owner down the rocky slope, in the form of a simple walking stick.