

CAVE-TROLLS
AND
AMAZONS

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PROLOGUE

She knelt at the rim of the lake, sitting back on her calves as the gentle waves lapped against her bare belly and hips.

Her head was bowed against the rain, her long auburn hair soaking wet and clinging to thighs numb with cold. There had been a hut to shelter her once, built for her thousands of years before by a young lover of hers, but both man and dwelling had long since crumbled and rotted away, leaving her to the face the unforgiving elements frozen and alone. But still she knelt here, staring sightlessly into the water around her, interpreting the rippling images which echoed only in her mind.

She looked young – her early twenties at most – but she was very much older than this. She had been here since the World had begun.

There were others like her all over the universe, one or two to a planet, all monitoring their own worlds, all communicating their acquired knowledge to their brothers and sisters elsewhere. Between them, they saw everything, knew everything, understood everything and everyone. As if they were Gods.

Deep in the water pooled between her thighs, she saw the man approaching behind her. He stopped a few feet away from her back, a dozen or so boisterous trolls in a misshapen semi-circle behind him.

She shivered, partly through cold and partly through premonition. This was the end for her. And it could soon be the end for everyone, if only they knew it.

She sent her last wishes to the other Watchers, spread out across a universe of swirling galaxies. They protested, but she held firm. There was hope of a kind, if they did as she bid them. Hope for others, but not for her.

The man stepped forwards. Taking her shoulders, he lifted her to her feet like a limp child. She stood. She faced him. She could not see him – she was blind – but she knew what he looked like, as he had seen him in the lake.

She could sense his triumph.

“The beginning of the end,” he said.

She nodded. There was nothing else to say.

She felt rough troll paws on her body, pushing her, pulling her, turning her inside out. She needed to be back by the lake, in the water, conversing with her kind. But it was not to be. She was their captive now, and she knew that she would never be free again.

She bowed her head, overcome by grief, as they led her away.

#

Home at last.

One moment, he had been having a pint in the “Rising Sun”. The next, he had been catapulted into some dodgy old world, where he had been chased by witches, locked up by soldiers, imprisoned by Amazons, set upon by wolves, and attacked by trolls, all the while accompanied by a grumpy wizard and a fit Amazon wearing squirrel-skin knickers and little else (the Amazon, that is, not the wizard; that would’ve just been *wrong*).

The next moment, he was back here in the pub. The tunnel had opened just above the bar (good job they had high ceilings or he would’ve knocked his head off), and spat him across the room. He cannoned off the juke-box, ricocheted off the quiz machine and ended up sprawled across the laps of three giggling women by the pool-table. They looked like they might be up for it. It was good to be home.

There was so much he wanted to do now he was back. See his old Mum, tell his mates what had just happened to him, get himself a kebab. But all that could wait. For now, he was happy to snuggle into those warm, accommodating laps and wait for someone to buy him a drink.

“That’s fecking amazing!”

Some bloke at the bar – not much more than a kid – was taking an unhealthy interest in the tunnel. It was still there, shimmering in front of the optics, but it was starting to fade. The sooner it vanished, the better. He knew where it led. He had made some good mates back there, but he was buggered if he was ever going back again. It was bloody lethal.

The kid touched the pulsing spiral of light, and the colours contracted around his hand, rippling back out again in a mesmerising display of psychedelic vibrations. It was pretty impressive. Dangerous things often are.

This time, he put his arm into it, right up to the shoulder. A kaleidoscope of vibrant colour swirled around it, as if luring him in.

He turned to face Rod. “What’s it like in there? I bet it’s brilliant, right?”

Rod climbed reluctantly off the bed of undulating laps.

“It’s –” Rod started, desperately searching for the right word to scare this bloke away from the tunnel, before he did something really, really stupid. “It’s....wicked!”

“Yay!” the maniac shouted, apparently taking this to be a good thing, and dived in to the mouth of the tunnel like a horizontal bungee jumper. He vanished in an instant.

Rod cursed. Dilemma. He really didn’t want to go back in there; he knew what was waiting for him at the other end. And it had been so hard getting back home, too. If he returned to Hedral, who was to say that he would ever make it back here again? But the kid didn’t know what he was letting himself in for. If he let him go in alone, he would be lucky to last an hour or two before he got drugged, beheaded or eaten, or maybe all three (and not necessarily in that order). So what choice did he have?

He gave what he considered to be his “pulling” smile at the three women he had been lying on. “Keep it warm for me.”

He clambered up on to the bar in three clumsy attempts (leaving a trail of overturned barstools behind him). Taking a deep breath, he stepped into the fast-fading swirls of churning colour, which closed in behind him, cutting him off from escape.

As he flew back through the tunnel towards a fate worse than virginity, he heard the lad some distance in front of him, calling out to him in the darkness.

“Yaaaay! This is fecking mental!”

He was inclined to agree.

#

The cave was as black as Hell, but considerably colder. It lay, abandoned and unloved, hundreds of feet below the ground, a tomb in need of bodies. And Halfshaft and Takina duly obliged by providing theirs.

A sudden fierce flash of light, and the two companions were ejaculated across the cave, coming to a tangled, undignified heap by the far wall.

Halfshaft was a wizard, in the loosest sense of the word. He was certainly dressed like one, save that the top of his hat had been severed during an unfortunate and best glossed-over incident involving crabs. But his spell-casting powers were second to just about everybody's. He could snap his fingers to create enough flame to light the candle on a birthday cake, and he could snap them again to conjure up enough fluid to douse it out again. Which made him about as useful as a condom vending machine in a home for impecunious eunuchs.

Takina was an Amazon. She was a little shorter than the rest of her race, and blonde (which was frowned upon, as it clashed with the squirrel-skin furs the Amazons always wore). Even her clothes were sub-standard. She had been coaxed and cajoled into the tiniest of fur bikinis, which was so last hunting-season. Amazons were never shy of flaunting flesh, but they had to draw the bow-string somewhere, and bigger knickers were very much the fashion this year.

The two friends struggled to extricate themselves from each other, though the wizard seemed for some reason to be in less of a hurry to do so than the Amazon did. Indeed, if anything, his contortions made them more entangled still.

"I'm sorry," he apologised. "I got disorientated."

He could see nothing; it was far too dark for that. He reached out for her hand, and received a sharp slap to the face for his troubles.

"You touch that one more time, and I will cut your fingers off."

"Sorry," he repeated. "I was just going to hold your –"

"I know what you were trying to hold," she protested, "and you should be ashamed of yourself, a man of your age."

He clicked his fingers, and summoned a spurt of flame so weak and sickly that he put it straight out again through shame.

“Did you hear that?” she asked. “That noise. When you made fire.”

“What sort of noise was it?” he asked, feeling pretty sure that it would not be a good one. He strained his ears to hear. Somewhere in the distance, he heard the echo of a high-pitched shriek, like an indignant dolphin.

“That noise.”

He nodded. Realising that there was not a lot of point doing this in the dark, he went to click his fingers again, but she reached out a hand and pulled his arm back down to his side. Her night-vision seemed to be better than his.

“No light,” she said. “That is what is drawing it to us.”

That shriek again, much louder this time, and very much closer; only a few feet away. And then panting. Not sexy, heat-of-the-moment type panting, but scary, crazed-animal panting. And then rancid, fishy breath on his face.

“Takina? Tell me that’s you.”

The breathing stopped, and something hairy brushed against his nose. Unless she was rubbing her furs in his face (which seemed unlikely after the slap she had just given him), the creature had found him.

A deep growl, inches from his face. That foul breath again. Suddenly, he knew what this creature was. Fear masticated him, as the realisation struck home. He was within licking distance of a cave-troll.

He sensed motion. He ducked just in time, as a club splintered the stone wall just where his head had been.

“Cave troll, Takina!” he screamed. “Cave troll!”

He could still see nothing, but he could picture them in his mind. Huge, clumpy, hairless, and immensely strong. And very, very aggressive. Not unlike a girlfriend he had once had, in a year of alcohol dependence and very poor judgment.

Could he defend himself against such a monster? Could he protect the young Amazon woman in his care? Could he fight the cave-troll off, and vanquish it against all the odds?

No.

So he ran like buggery instead. It was what he was good at.

#

Rod was in an underground cavern, too, but his was light enough to see in. Enough light filtered in through a passageway to enable him to take in his surroundings. And they troubled him.

He had been here before, when he had come to Hedral last time round. As then, he had been propelled from the tunnel, and had ended up floundering *around in the pool of water like a disco-dancing baby elephant with Tourettes'*. *On the previous occasion, though, there had been a Watcher sitting in the pool, a naked gelatinous bald man who had given him directions to Spartan Castle, albeit in a rather curt and irritale way. But there was no sign of him now. And more to the point, there was no sign of the bloke from the pub either.*

Last time round, there had been stone door-like slabs capping the passageway, but these were now lying on the ground, broken into pieces. Something had happened here, something bad. The "front-door" had been broken down, and the Master of the House had vanished. This was even worse than he had feared. Whom could he now ask how for directions to get back home?

He took the passageway out to the World outside. It was warm and sunny out there. Okay, so he was going to get slaughtered or eaten, but at least he would die with a sun-tan.

The kid was there, sunbathing. He regarded Rod suspiciously as he stepped from the cave, as if he had caught him loitering outside his cubicle in a public lavatory. It might prove more difficult to get him back in the tunnel than he had anticipated.

"We gotta go," Rod told him, attempting a "no-nonsense" tone of voice.

"I'm not going anywhere with you, you pervert. Now feck off, before I have the Police on you."

“Look. Mate, there are witches round here. We’ve gotta go before they find us.”

“You really are very mental indeed, aren’t you?” the lad snorted.

“I must be, to come after a little sod like you.” Rod seized him by the arm, and started marching him away.

His captive struggled. “What are you doing? Don’t hurt me. I’m only nineteen; I’ve still got so much of my life ahead of me.” Rod wasn’t sure whether he was extracting the urine, or whether he thought he was being genuinely abducted, but either way the sooner they got back in the tunnel the better.

He stopped dead. Two figures had just galloped over the hill on the horizon ahead of them, silhouetted against the sun. Both of them had what he knew to be fat elderly women on their backs. Even from this distance, he could hear them, cackling away to each other and cursing their human mounts.

The entrance to the cave started to shimmer, and then disappeared altogether. The witches had sealed off their escape route. He would have to convince the kid to run, if they were to have any chance at all. But at the moment, all he could do was run through what Rod had to admit was a very impressive repertoire of swear-words indeed.

“If they catch us,” Rod shook his companion, gesturing towards the fast approaching women, “you won’t have very much of your life ahead of you at all.”

The kid stopped, and stared at the witches as if noticing them for the first time.

“Shall we throw stones at them?”

“Can you see any stones?”

“Not really. But give us ten minutes, I’m sure I could dig a few up.”

“Or we could just leg it,” Rod suggested, breaking into a trot.

The lad took another look at the elderly man-riders speeding towards him. Maybe digging for stones wasn’t such a good idea after all. His Mam has told

him never to go off with strangers, but following the bloke in the t-shirt and jeans seemed the only option right now. He had been right about the witches, after all. They looked like two seriously crazy old women, as was evidenced by the fact that they were riding what appeared to be two seriously crazy old men.

He set off after Rod, catching him and overtaking him in seconds. As long as he was home for tea, everything would be okay.

#

Halfshaft had soon realised how difficult it was to run like buggery in the pitch dark cave. He had twice come close to knocking himself even more senseless than usual, as his head collided with hard stone wall. Both times, he had sat there, feeling sorry for himself, until he heard the sound of approaching footsteps and the swish of a club through the air. It was amazing how quickly you could leap to your feet, even when dazed, when a cave-troll was trying to separate your brains from your skull without so much as a by-your-leave.

He had been in a similar predicament once before, back when he was the second most revered wizard at Spartan Castle (which was not quite the accolade it sounded, as there were only two of them). He had got drunk on elderflower mead (disgusting stuff, but it did the trick every time) and had told everyone else in the tavern that the Grand Wizard's pipe was an extension of his masculinity. Word had got back to his illustrious colleague, and the two of them had duelled. But his opponent had shape-shifted into a dragon, and then a crab, and finally a huge cobra, and Halfshaft had ended up running around the unlit chamber in blind panic, cannoning off the walls like a demented human pin-ball. He had told himself that he would never put himself in that position again. Mind you, he had said much the same thing after his painfully adventurous one-night stand with Cora, the Amazing Bendy Woman, but he had gone back to her for seconds, too.

He ran into something soft, which squeaked and fell on top of him. He felt it. It slapped his face. Takina. Well, if he was going to die, he might as well go out

in style, beneath an agitated Amazon. Takina, it must be said, seemed a little less comfortable with the situation than did he.

The big troll footsteps came to a halt. That shriek again, setting his teeth on edge. This was it. After all he had survived in recent weeks, his life was going to end at the hands of a stupid cave-troll in the bowels of the earth.

He clicked his fingers, summoning up flame, determined to look his tormentor in the face before the moment of truth. It was indeed Takina on top of him, spitting his grey beard out of her mouth, and scrabbling to roll off him as quickly as she possibly could.

And behind her?

He was expecting to see a ghastly, anaemic-grey cave-troll, battle-scarred and hideous, club raised overhead to strike them both with a crushing death-blow.

Instead, he saw a seedy middle-aged man named Archie Watkins.

#

Rod tested his bonds, but they were tied good and tight. He was going nowhere in a hurry.

He was lying on the dirt-floor in the witch's hut. He could see two men through the open doorway, tethered outside, grazing on the sun-drained grass for such nutrients as they could find. Being the donkey of a plump witch was hard and thankless work.

The two witches came in to examine him. They checked his legs, his teeth (which was a little freaky), and his testicles (which was very freaky indeed). Though one of them remarked that his dental hygiene could be better (bloody cheek!), they passed him fit for active service. He tried coughing unhealthily in the hope that they would change their minds, but both were particularly dissatisfied with the men they had outside, and nothing he could say, do, or cough would make them change their minds. It was decided. From now on, he was going to be a donkey.

The only remaining question was whose donkey he was going to be.

He had had prior dealings with one of these women, the larger of the two. The first time he had come here, she had asked for a piggy-back over the river. She had clung to him as he had forded the raging torrent, wrapping her legs around him as if her life depended on it. He should have become more suspicious when she started tweaking his nipples halfway across. When he had finally made it to the far bank, she had asked him to turn around and take her back again! And then she had tried to drug him. She had obviously changed her tactics since then. Why use subterfuge when you can chase someone down on a man-donkey, and tie them up when your new nineteen-year-old mate buggers off into the distance like Usain-bloody-Bolt?

“I’m having him,” Martha announced, poking her ancient chum in her scrawny bosom. “I saw him first. You can have my old donkey. I’ll make you a chariot, and the two donkeys out there can pull you along, like a queen. Think how fast you’d go if you had two of them!”

“You have to stand up in a chariot,” Mabel protested. “How am I going to stand up with *my* knees? Besides, those two are even more knackered than I am! We’ve had them for ten years now. I want to trade mine in for a new model.”

“I saw him first!” repeated Martha, “you avaricious old tart.”

“You selfish old bag!” Mabel retorted furiously.

Rod coughed again. “I think I’ve got foot and mouth. Best set me free now, before I infect your whole herd.”

“There’s only one way to settle this,” Martha announced.

“Have half each?” Mabel ventured.

“That wouldn’t be a very good idea, would it?” asked Martha, as if talking to a small-child. “You couldn’t get much use out of half a donkey, could you?”

“Depends which half you get,” Mabel mused, a sparkle in her eyes.

Rod coughed again. “I’ve got the clap, too. Twice. I wouldn’t have anything to do with me, if I was you.”

“We have a duel,” Martha ruled, resolving to gag this noisy donkey if she won. Or a carrot in his gob should do the trick. She couldn’t stand the thought of him braying all the time whilst she was riding him round the countryside. He should have been grateful to have a stable-roof over his head.

Despite himself, Rod was intrigued. How would these two old ladies fight? What spells would they unleash? He might be in a pretty dodgy predicament here, but at least he would get to see something spectacular while he was drawing up his escape plans.

“A duel?” he asked. “Are you going to fight each with magic?”

“Don’t be daft,” Mabel retorted. “We’re going to strip down to our knickers, and have a bit of a wrestle.”

#

Takina had seen this man – this Archie Watkins - before. Just minutes ago, she had been fighting the Warlock with Halfshaft. Her wizard friend had a spell to summon up and unleash Harold, the mighty ancient warrior, upon their opponent. Instead, he had conjured up this funny little middle-aged man with glasses, who had gone off in search of something called “Police” to which he intended to report them.

And now this little man was standing over them, a club raised above his head, shrieking like a mating wild-cat. He looked much older than before, by a decade or so, if not more. And very, very pale, as if he had not seen sunlight for years.

She rolled off Halfshaft, grimacing at the taste of greasy wizard-beard on her tongue. In the same movement, she launched herself upwards, knocking the man off balance before he had an opportunity to cull her over-tactile friend. She was just in time. Archie was already in mid-swing, but she sent him toppling backwards, his club dropping harmlessly to the ground just inches from the cowering wizard.

She prepared to strike. It was time to finish him off. Her sisters had never allowed her to hunt; she was just a serving-girl to them. But she was an Amazon, and had the instinct to kill stamped into her soul. If this man was a threat to them, then she would eliminate him.

The man became less of a threat when he started crying.

“My fish,” he wailed. “My lovely little fish.”

“The man’s mad,” declared Halfshaft. “Best finish him off now.”

“My lovely, lovely fish.”

And then he was gone.

“We should follow him,” said Takina. “He might know the way out.”

Halfshaft clicked his fingers, and another feeble flame appeared. They could hear the sound of feet slapping against stone, echoing around the chamber from their left. They set off in determined pursuit.

The chase was made easier as the fugitive kept stopping from time to time, screaming random remarks about fish, and then dashing off again.

They eventually caught up with him. Crouching by a stream, stroking what looked like a stunted salmon.

“They’re my fish. Be off with you, or I’ll set him loose.”

“I’m trembling with fear,” snorted Halfshaft. The worst this fish could do was to give him indigestion. Was the man even more mad than he looked?

“He’ll have your face off as soon as look at you,” Archie warned.

“I expect he knows martial arts. Kung-Fu Kipper.”

Takina tried to change the subject. Making sarcastic remarks about salmon didn’t really to be getting them very far. “How long have you been here? You look like you have been here for years, but we only saw you a few minutes ago.”

“Fifty years,” he replied. “In fish years.”

“How long is that?” she sighed.

“I haven’t a bloody clue.”

She changed tack. “Can you tell us how to get out of here?”

Archie looked puzzled. “Why would you want to leave? This is where the fish are. There are no fish up there, not so much as a haddock. Only trolls and exploding mountains.”

Halfshaft gave him a poke with his toe. Archie recoiled, clutching the fish to his chest as if to protect it from him.

“No!” he shrieked. “They’re my friends! They feed me, and sing to me, and keep me company when I cry.”

The wizard looked troubled. “When you say that they keep you company, you don’t mean –”

“No!” shrieked Archie in horror. “No, no, no, no, no! I would never make love to them.”

He paused for reflection.

“Well, there was that one time, but they wouldn’t speak to me for two fish years afterwards, so I promised that I would never do it again.”

“Can you tell us how to get out of here?” Takina asked again, wondering why all men were such perverts, and a little uncomfortable with the idea that she was alone in a cave with two of them who seemed to be the worst of the lot.

Archie stared at her. “It’s a trick. You don’t want to leave. You want to make the fish your own.”

“We really don’t,” Halfshaft assured him. “Especially not now we know where they’ve been.”

“I’ll set him loose,” Archie warned. “Go now, or I’ll set him loose.”

“All of those scaly little freaks look the same to me. How do you know it’s a “he”? No, actually, best not answer that.”

Archie started shrieking again, a desperate high-pitched scream that shredded Takina's nerves sideways. It was a distress call, and cry for help.

"He's setting loose the fish," scoffed Halfshaft. "If he throws it at me, I'm gonna shove it up his mad old bottom."

Takina was uneasy. "Did he actually say that it was the fish he was going to set loose?" she asked.

"Of course he did."

There was an answering shriek from the darkness, followed by the sound of something large wading through the underground river towards them.

"Then again, maybe he didn't."

A huge cave-troll came into view, smashing its club into the water in its frustration to get at them. It was about eight feet tall, and almost as wide as that across the shoulders. Its nostrils twitched, picking up their scent. It forged forwards, eager to grind these intruders into bloody pulp.

"I think we should run," Takina proposed.

"I think so, too," Halfshaft called over his shoulder, as he disappeared into the murky distance.

#

Rod had seen some pretty disturbing sights in his time, from a knife fight back on Earth to resurrected trolls slaughtering the Bickos suicide sect here on Hedral, but nothing came remotely close to this in the stomach-churning stakes. Martha and Mabel were stripped down to their knickers and wrestling in the grass. And he, it seemed, was to be their prize.

He had no problem with women having a bit of a scrap, his DVD collection was proof of that. "Foxy Boxing" (Numbers 1 to 37), "Ladies of the Ring", and "Princess Piledriver v Heather Hip-toss Get Down And Dirty" had all had regular outings since Debbie, his last steady-girlfriend, had left him three years ago.

Actually, they had had pretty regular outings before then if the truth be told, which was one of the reasons she had packed her bags and gone. She said that she had never been so embarrassed as when he had played “Pot the Pink” when her parents had come round to visit. And if he had felt such an overwhelmingly urge to see it, she felt, he could at least have done so in a different room from them. Her Mum had felt physically faint, and her Dad had never been quite the same again, hanging round snooker clubs in the erroneous belief that they were frequented by naked women who found green-baize tables a particular turn-on.

No, his only problem was that he liked the women to be about 800 years younger than this. One wrinkly old witch straddled the other one, trying to pin her scrawny shoulders to the ground, as her opponent complained loudly and bitterly about her arthritic knees playing up. The only saving grace was that Martha had insisted that they keep their knickers on. Mabel had been keen for them to both shed them, insisting for some inexplicable reason that Martha would otherwise have an unfair advantage.

As he fought to keep down the contents of his stomach, he felt a tap on his shoulder. It was the kid, come back to rescue him.

“Thank God for that. I am SO ready to go home.”

“Me too. Which way is it?”

“What’s your name, Mate?”

“Alfie.”

Rod broke into song. “What’s it all about, Alf-”

“Would you shut up! They’ll hear you.”

“No. They’re too busy with their wrestling.” He glanced over at the grappling old women. He winced, closing his eyes in distaste. “Urgh, a witch in a neck-scissors hold, I really didn’t need to see that.”

“How do I get home?” Alfie urged. “I’ve got no idea where I am, but they’re psychos round here. I want to go back home to me Mam.”

“Untie me, then, and we’ll go and have a look.”

Alfie groaned.

“That’ll take ages. They’ll catch us both. Best if you sacrifice yourself to save me, don’t you reckon?”

Rod did not reckon, and told him so in no uncertain terms. Moaning like the teenager he still just about was, Alfie set to work on the ropes.

Martha sent Mabel reeling with a headbutt, following up with a headlock and a frog-splash (the latter move particularly distressing for their reluctant, queasy-stomached spectators).

The last knot came loose, and the ropes came loose. Rod stood up with relief, rubbing the circulation back into his wrists. Turning his back on the old ladies with more than a little relief, he pointed in a random direction (having no more idea how to get home than his pouting companion).

“We go that way.”

“There’s a river that way.”

“Can you swim?”

“No.”

“Then we go that way,” announced Rod, pointing in the opposite direction.

Suddenly, he staggered under the weight of a crowing witch, wearing just her pants, who had vaulted on to his back.

“I could have sworn you were tethered, Donkey,” Martha scolded him. “Never mind. You’re all mine, now. I win, I win!”

“I’ve found another one!” cried an elated Mabel, leaping on to a very startled Alfie. “And my one’s younger than yours. So I win!”

The two ancient ladies slipped bridles over their new mounts, and steered them in the direction of Spartan Castle. They had business there. And all the way, they would argue over which of them had the better donkey.

“I told you they’d catch me if you made me stop and untie you,” Alfie grumbled, as Mabel spurred him forwards.

“Shut up and gallop,” retorted Rod. He was not a happy donkey.

#

There was a glimmer of light up ahead, he was almost sure of it. Halfshaft ran down the tunnel towards it, Takina by his side. Behind him, the cave-troll screamed along the passageway, swinging his club from side to side like a demented mine-sweeper, leaving great gouges in the walls on either side of him.

“I could use magic,” puffed the wizard. “Slow him down a bit.”

“I think we had better just run instead,” Takina replied, in what seemed to Halfshaft like a less than ringing endorsement of his magical powers.

“It’s got to be worth a try,” he argued.

“We had better just run,” Takina repeated.

Maybe she was right. There was light ahead, flickering like a torch. But who would be down here, at the bottom of nowhere, save for another cave troll, or maybe something even worse (if any such thing existed)? He had practically invented the expression “out of the frying-pan into the fire”. What if whoever or whatever was ahead was even worse than the vicious creature raging along behind them?

He ran on. What choice did he have? Besides, Takina had told him to keep going, and he was too much of a gentleman to argue with an attractive woman in furry underwear.

They came closer to the light. He extinguished the flame from his finger. There was no need of it now.

There was a man upfront, a man with two trolls for company. Not cave-trolls, but the common or garden variety. They stood aside, allowing the fleeing wizard and Amazon to pass them by, and then closed back in again, blocking the cave-troll’s path. The cave-troll came to an agitated halt, confused by the

presence of so many new life-forms in its normally peaceful domain. It passed its club from hand to hand, agitated, deciding whether to attack or retreat.

The man stepped forward. He was tall and bearded. Halfshaft did not recognise him, but he knew the trolls. Crug was the Troll-King or Lord, or whatever it was he called himself. Runt was the Great Troll Philosopher, revered among his peers for being the first of their number ever to work out which day was Thursday.

“Tell him we come in peace,” the man instructed Runt.

“WE COME IN PEACE,” Runt shouted at the cave-troll.

“Tell him we want him to join us,” the man went on, looking bemused.

“JOIN US,” bellowed the troll.

“Tell him these things,” the man sighed, “in his own language.”

Runt shrugged. “I don’t know his language. Different dialects. We just tend to shout at them slowly, and hope they get the gist of it.”

The cave-troll was not getting the gist of it. He had poor eyesight, but a highly developed sense of smell, and even more efficient hearing. His eye-drums were still reverberating as a result of his stupid land-troll cousin yelling at him. Talking was not his strong-point. There was only one way to stop the noise. Smash it to pieces.

The cave-troll charged. Crug and Runt closed ranks, with battle-glint smiles, ready to stop him in his tracks. But there was no need. The man stepped to one side, driving a very long knife a very long way up beneath the creature's ribs as it passed him by. It staggered, and toppled forwards, crashing heavily to the ground on Crug’s toes.

“I had a dead cave-troll land on my toes once,” Runt recalled. “It doesn’t half bloody hurt.”

Crug nodded bravely. He was Lord of the Trolls. He welcomed pain (except when he banged the funny-bone of his elbow, as that really hurt). This was a *good* thing, he told himself bravely.

Halfshaft and Takina had come to a halt, to watch events unfold. Runt – being a great philosopher – recognised them almost immediately.

“These are the ones,” he told the bearded man. “The ones who were with your mercenary friend, Thane.”

“Then maybe,” he replied, giving Halfshaft and Takina a calculated smile, “this journey hasn’t been a complete waste of time after all.”

#

They arrived at Spartan Castle at day-break. Both Rod and Alfie were shattered. They were not used to galloping around with old ladies on their backs, especially ones who were still putting their clothes back on as they were going.

Rod had been here before. Back then, King Spartan – Mabel’s previous mount – was in charge. But not now. As the port-cullis was raised, they were met by a pair of Amazons.

Unlike Takina, these Amazons had dark hair. They were taller than her, and their fur bikinis cut lower, both top and bottom, as was the fashion, (though with more squirrel-skin around the bottom than her, so it was a case of swings and roundabouts really).

Seeing the Amazons, Rod wondered what had become of Takina. And Halfshaft the wizard, Thane the mercenary, and Hubert the dwarf. They had all entered the tunnel together, but only he had come out the other side. It had returned him to his “home” pub, though, so maybe they had been transported home, too. Maybe they were sitting in their houses or huts or whatever, having a few drinks and doing whatever they do here instead of watching telly.

Maybe not, though. Rod wasn’t too worried about being caught by witches, and delivered to the Amazons. He had been through similar ordeals before. No, what really bothered him was that the Watcher had gone. As far as he could make out, the Watchers kept track of everything that was going on in

their world, and called in a mercenary if anything went badly wrong. But if the thing that had gone wrong was the Watcher going missing, who was left to call the cavalry?

Worse still, what if he *was* the cavalry? He could barely manage to make it back home after a night at the pub. He didn't want the fate of a planet resting on his shoulders, not again. He had been in that position once. But never, ever again.

There was something else he remembered. Amazons were totally up themselves (though not in the same way as the ladies in his wrestling DVDs). They required total respect at all times. One joke at their expense, and they became very upset indeed. Which would be fun.

He opened his mouth, ready to make a quip to wind them up, but Martha tugged on his bridle, and he clamped back up again.

"Good donkey," she said, sliding off his back. "I'll give you a treat later." Rod thought that most unlikely.

Mabel dismounted, too.

"Maybe we should make our donkeys wrestle?" she suggested to Martha. "Would that be weird?"

"That would be sick," Martha told her.

Mabel wilted. Martha cackled.

"Sick is good, though. We're witches, after all. We'll have a tag match after our meeting. You and your donkey against me and mine."

Alfie was sick on the floor.

#

"I am Ragnar", the bearded man announced, once they were comfortably seated in his hut.

Halfshaft and Takina were both relieved to be back overground. They were back at Urknor, the troll “castle”, which consisted of a variety of different shaped rocks, and a stone circle for virgin-sacrifices. It was a triumph of troll architecture, but anyone else would have thought it was a bit crap.

Ragnar’s hut had been constructed for him just off the circle, so he had a ring-side seat when the sacrifices took place. His was the only structure on site with a roof, human’s being much more fussy about sheltering from the elements than were trolls.

“Takina and Halfshaft,” Takina replied. “I’m Takina,” she added, perhaps unnecessarily.

“And I’m Halfshaft”, chipped in the wizard.

Ragnar smirked. “That comes as no surprise. So tell me, where is Thane? I’m told the two of you followed him into Mount Leiden, and none of you have been seen since.”

Thane was the mercenary who had been sent by the Watcher to defeat a troublesome shape-shifting Warlock. It was true; they had all gone to Mount Leiden together, and taken shelter in the tunnel when the mountain had exploded. But that was the last they had seen of him. It was a shame he had not come here with them. He had seemed pretty invincible. They could have done with him when the cave-troll had attacked.

“When you say “seen since”, what do you mean? How long have we been gone?”

“Ten years.”

“Ten years!” groaned Takina, lapsing temporarily into Amazon-mode. “This is awful. That makes me thirty three. I will be getting wrinkles soon!”

“Nonsense,” Halfshaft protested. “We don’t look any older than we did before.”

“It’s of no consequence,” Ragnar announced. “Where’s Thane?”

“Gone,” Halfshaft told him. “We escaped through a tunnel. Me, Takina, Rod, Thane and Hubert. We ended up here. They ended up somewhere else. There’s nothing else we can tell you.”

Ragnar stroked his chin. He looked disappointed. “He’s coming back. I need to find him when he does.”

“We can’t help you,” Halfshaft shrugged. He was uncomfortable with this. Ragnar knew Thane, that much was clear. But he had a gut feeling that the two were far from friends. He did not want to say anything which might help him track Thane down, (not that he knew anything anyway).

Crug entered. Even bowing his head, his shoulders still scraped across the thatched ceiling.

“Have you asked her yet?”

Ragnar laughed. “I don’t need to. I can always tell.”

“Asked me what?” Takina enquired suspiciously. “And what can you always tell?”

“The Lord of the Trolls is always on the lookout for virgins to sacrifice, to celebrate it being Thursday. And, at my suggestion, his ceremonies have been extended to cover Mondays, Tuesdays, Wednesdays, Fridays and Saturdays as well.”

“We like to have Sundays off,” explained Crug. “Keeps them special.”

“We have a little arrangement. I supply him with all the virgins he can manhandle, and he helps me find recruits for my Grand-Plan.”

“I’m not a virgin,” Halfshaft informed him. “I’ve had more women than I’ve had hot dinners, and I’ve had an awful lot of hot dinners. Most of them were paid-for, but they still all count.”

Ragnar turned his attention to Takina. He smiled, a cold, humourless smile.

“And how about you, Takina? Have you had many lovers in your time? A fine looking woman like you, in an outfit like that. You must have had hundreds.”

“The Queen would not allow me to mate,” Takina replied defensively. “I was just a serving girl to them. Only warriors mate.”

“And since then?” Ragnar persisted without mercy. “How about with your little magician friend here.”

“Enough!” shouted Halfshaft. “Leave her alone.”

“Or what?” Ragnar enquired. Crug took a step forward, looming over the wizard. Takina leapt to her feet, but Ragnar was on her in an instant, knocking her on her back and pinning her to the ground with his body.

“This is probably the nearest thing to sex you’ve ever experienced,” he taunted, as she bucked beneath him.

“If this is your idea of sex,” she retorted, “I would stick to self-gratification if I were you. You seem like the sort of man who would be well versed in it.”

Halfshaft felt power coursing through his fingers. He wanted to burn them to a crisp, totally annihilate them for what they were doing to his friend. And the strangest thing was, he really felt that he could. Blue sparks flew over his wrists, his elbows, up over his shoulders. What was going on? He couldn’t do magic, not proper magic, not without a donated spell to help him. But the magic coursing through his veins was real, powerful, all-consuming.

He backed off, scared at what was happening to him, frightened that whatever it was, he did not appear to be in control of it. The sparks fizzled and died.

Ragnar removed himself from Takina, evading her attempts to kick him as he did so. He looked thoughtful.

“We keep him in our army,” he instructed Crug. “He might be useful.”

“And the girl?” Crug enquired.

“It’s Friday night. Time to party.”

Crug looked puzzled. “Is partying the same thing as sacrificing?”

Ragnar laughed.

“It is if you do it right.”

#

Martha and Mabel sat impatiently at the back of the Great Hall, craning their heads to see over the pointed black hats of the witches in front. The room was buzzing with conversation, as hundreds of witches, Amazons and female wood-elves speculated about what could be beneath the cover on the large cage at the front of the hall. Rarely have so many women been in one place without a performance of “Dirty Dancing” being given.

“I told you we should have got here earlier,” Martha grumbled. “We could have sat at the front, got a proper view. “Instead, I’ve got to sit here and stare at the back of Maud Sourweather’s fat head.”

Maud turned round and glared at her.

“Shut up, you daft old bitch,” she instructed, before turning back round again.

“Did you hear that?” Martha huffed. She tapped Maud on the shoulder repeatedly, until the witch swivelled stiffly back round again.

“I may be daft,” Martha advised her, “and I am definitely a bitch, but I am not old, do you understand? I am probably the youngest woman here.”

Maud smirked. “Some of these Amazons can’t be much more than eighteen or nineteen. You’re what, two hundred and forty six?”

“I am not two hundred and forty six, you vicious old slut!”

“A vicious old slut who’s forty eight years younger than you!”

“I thought you were actually two hundred and forty seven,” put in Mabel, a tad unhelpfully, and got a slap round the head for her trouble.

“You have bottom-sex with donkeys!” Martha screamed at Maud, determined not to be outdone in the insult stakes. “Some of whom fall in and are never seen again! Others are hoisted out by pulleys.”

Maud jabbed Martha in the face. Martha retaliated with a left hook to her warty old nose, which oozed green slime.

Other witches joined in, and it took barely thirty seconds for the two old ladies' argument to degenerate into a massive free-for-all. Amazons took exception as the witches jostled them, and waded in to the brawl with relish. Even the wood-elves joined in, not through anger but because they were a very sensual race and never liked to miss out on the chance of a good grapple.

"Stop!" Mabel shrieked. "Stop! This is no way to behave!"

She was right. Some of her sisters hung their heads in shame.

"No," she went on. "We should strip down to our knickers, and have a bit of a wrestle instead."

#

Halfshaft crept up to the stake to which Takina was tied, praying no-one would see him. The trolls were all busy making preparations for the sacrifice, but it was not them he was most worried about. It was Ragnar. The speed at which he had got the better of Takina had to be seen to be believed. He had only ever seen Thane move faster than that, and the mercenary was no longer here to protect them. He would have to rescue Takina himself, whatever the cost. But the thought of Ragnar catching him in the act was not one he relished.

He hugged her when he reached the stake. He went to untie her bonds, but she shook her head.

"There are too many of them. And it is all open-countryside round here. We would not make it to the bottom of the hill before they caught up with us. You have to wait until they are asleep. Even Ragnar has got to sleep some time. Then come and find me."

"You could be dead by then. They're going to roll you down the hill on a giant stone, to be devoured by their gods as soon as you leave the circle. If their

gods don't get you, the rock will. I've got to save you now, while there's still time."

But she was adamant. "I do not fear their gods. And there is an evens chance that the stone will topple over with me on top of it. I could easily survive. And then you can slip down and set me free, and we both escape before they know it."

"But what if it topples with you beneath it?"

She shrugged. "Then that is what the Amazon Goddess wills."

"It's not what I will," he said.

"Then everything will be fine."

She smiled at him. He gave her an unconvincing smile back. She changed the subject, fearing that he might otherwise start crying like a boy (Amazon girls were far too brave to cry).

"Have you noticed that there are no women here? No troll women. None at all."

The change of subject came too late. He started blubbing.

"After all we've been through together. I can't lose you like this."

"I am very hard to lose," she joked. "You will see me again, I promise, once the stone has stopped rolling. I might just be a little flatter than I am now, that's all."

Two trolls approached. She nodded her head, signalling for him to leave her.

"It is time. Go. Come and find me afterwards."

He nodded miserably, and slunk away. Takina watched him go, a sad smile on her face. Despite her words of encouragement to him, she did not think that she would survive this ordeal. This was probably the last time they would ever see each other alive. And as the Goddess of the Amazons wasn't too keen on men (except in the form of burnt offerings), it seemed unlikely that they would meet again after death, either.

#

Alfie was bored. If there was one thing worse than being ridden like a donkey by a bossy old hag, it was being tied up in a courtyard and left to his own devices while she buggered off to some meeting or other. He had only Rod for company, the bloke who had selfishly insisted upon being rescued, which was what had got him in this mess in the first place. And he had a very short attention span indeed, which hardly helped.

He was too freaked out by all this to be as scared as he should have been. His brain was working overtime to find some explanation as to how he could be down the pub one minute, and galloping around in a land full of perverted witches the next. So far, it had not come even remotely close to finding an acceptable explanation.

The only consolation was that there were loads of real women walking round the castle in tiny fur bikinis. Tall, fierce looking woman, granted, but real women all the same. He was more used to his women pouting and heavily-airbrushed, but at least these ones didn't have staples across their stomachs.

His boredom evaporated every time one of them went past. Here was one now. Dark hair, fit in every sense of the world, bra size DD (he was probably wrong on that score, but as far as he was concerned if they were big they were Double-D's, end of story). She was walking like a panther (a proper one, like a leopard, not that stupid pink one you used to get in cartoons).

Her bikini bottoms were tiny. He could have scrunched them up and enclosed them in his fist. He held this image in his head for a while, fantasising about her standing there naked, trying unsuccessfully to cover herself up, while she begged him to give her bikini bottoms back. "It'll cost you," he would tell her. "I'd do anything," she'd reply, trying unsuccessfully to prise her underwear from his clenched fingers. "Well, you can start with -"

His fantasy was brought to an abrupt and extremely painful conclusion as she jabbed him in the testicles with her javelin.

“You look at me like that again,” she told him, “I will tear off your balls with my teeth, and use them for earrings.”

“Couldn’t you just erode them with your tongue,” he leered, and received another sharp prod in the bollocks for his trouble. The girl clearly had no sense of humour at all.

Another Amazon appeared, equally fit but equally ferocious. That’s what happens when there are no men around, he decided. They get all twisted and bitter, and start taking it out on every bloke within spitting distance.

“What’s going on?”

“This little boy is trying to be funny. I am teaching him that he is not succeeding.”

“If she jabs me anymore, I’ll be peeing like a watering-can,” Alfie complained.

The second Amazon took her own javelin, and struck him hard in the groin with it.

“Is that better?”

Rod winced. “That had to hurt.”

She did it to him, too. “I don’t like men. You deserve much worse. At least you are unlikely to breed now.”

“Come over here, and I’ll test that out,” Alfie quipped.

Another prod in the knackers. Rod shook his head. Would the kid never learn? He was starting to think he was enjoying it.

“There should be no men here,” the second Amazon declared. “Or rude little boys either. We should kill them.”

The first Amazon looked dubious. “They are here with two of the witches,” she cautioned. “They ride them around like donkeys. They will not be happy if we cull them.”

The two exchanged glances.

“It would be worth it though, would it not?”

“What if we untied them? Spear them as they run away. No one would complain if we were just stopping them escaping.”

“We’re alright here, Darlin’,” Rod assured her. “I’ll make sure my mate keeps his gob shut from now on. Honest.”

But the Amazons were hacking through their tether-ropes already. The good news was that they were now free. The bad news was that they were unlikely to live long enough to celebrate. Maybe seven or eight paces at most.

“Shouldn’t you cover your eyes and count to a hundred?” Rod asked, ever the optimist. “Make it more interesting.”

The Amazons raised their javelins.

“I guess not then.”

Rod started running. Alfie stayed put. There were three reasons for this. Firstly, he realised that they wouldn’t make it five yards before they ended up with javelins in their backs. Secondly, he had never been this close to almost-naked women before, and he couldn’t bring himself to turn away from them, whatever the danger. But thirdly, and most importantly, he had been repeatedly jabbed in the knackers with a javelin, and it would be quite some time before he could walk again, yet alone run.

As the first Amazon drew back the javelin to bring Rod’s escape attempt to a brutal end, the second turned on Alfie, sliding a knife from the sheath at her hip. He closed his eyes. He did not want to die. He had not had his tea yet.

#

If Alfie had been getting excited at the sight of the scantily-clad Amazons who had been passing him by (and/or the prospect of them jabbing him in the testicles with their javelins), he would have had mixed feelings at the events taking place in the Great Hall. There were plenty of Amazons there, many wearing their fur bikinis, but some having cast off even what little clothing they had in order to wrestle better. But on the other hand, there were dozens of

elderly witches, wearing even less than their Amazon opponents as they grappled for mastery (mistressy?) of the Hall. Toned perfect bodies in one corner, wrinkled old hags in the other. Watching this, Alfie would no doubt have veered between ecstasy and depression, like a schizophrenic with bipolar disorder.

In a wrestling contest, the witches were no match for the Amazons. They were older, poorly trained in physical combat, and their corns were playing them up. The Amazons, on the other hand, were perfect killing machines. It was for this reason that the witches were cheating big time, throwing in spells whenever it suited them to knock their opponents off their feet or to deflect a knife or a javelin. Maud – whose tendency always to ride female donkeys had raised more than one painted-on eyebrow in the Witches' Circle – was using her magic to rip the clothes off any Amazon within range (she later claimed to distract them, but Martha was not convinced).

Several of the Amazons let out war cries, and within minutes reinforcements arrived, streaming into the witches flanks in a well-executed manoeuvre that threw the old-ladies into temporary confusion. But then the witches fought back, using unrestrained magic which left the Amazons in enraged disarray.

“You will stop this now!”

A voice, confident and authoritative, rang out across the Hall. Save for the occasional crafty kick and curse, the fighting halted immediately. Everyone knew who this was, and not one of them was bold enough to disobey her.

Lathgertha surveyed the women in the room with disdain. Almost to a woman, they avoided eye contact. Even the Amazons, who bowed to no-one, looked contrite. Their leader had caught them acting like naughty children, and they were mortified.

This woman looked older than the Amazons, though very much younger than the witches. In her early thirties, perhaps. But she was as physically striking as any of them. Her natural beauty was enhanced by the superior way in which she carried herself. Everyone took the view that she was so much better than them, in all respects, simply because she made it abundantly clear that this was indeed the case.

“You are supposed to be shieldmaidens!” Lathgertha chided them. “Hang your heads in shame!”

This instruction caused them some difficulty, as most of their heads were hung in shame already. Those that could, hung them even further. Martha contented herself with poking out her thin bottom lip in a sorrowful pout; had she bowed her head any lower, it would have made her chins hurt.

“I have told you of the threat we face. Those sorrowful creatures who call themselves “men” are on the march against us. We must be united, or we fall to them. We are not united if we fight amongst ourselves like pole-cats the moment my back is turned. You have a simple choice to make here. Either you put aside your differences and fight as one, sisters all, or we allow the men to conquer us and we become their slaves forever.”

“We were just having a bit of a wrestle,” Martha grumbled, very quietly indeed so as not to be overheard, but hers was the only dissenting voice. Everyone else in the Hall roared their solidarity, Mabel included. Martha thought it best to go with the flow, so she roared too. Unfortunately, everyone else had finished bellowing by then, so Martha was yelling on her own. Damn, she thought. Everyone’s going to think I’m retarded now.

“I have brought you all a gift,” Lathgertha proclaimed.

“I hope it’s not shower-gel,” Mabel confided in her companion. “Everyone always gets me shower-gel. I’m starting to get a complex.”

“Shut up, you daft old bint,” Maud chided, a tad rudely. “It’ll be wart-cream, most like.”

Mabel thought of smacking her in the face, but remembered just in time that they were “sisters all”, so resolved to punch her in the face later, when no-one was watching.

Lathgertha approached the cage at the front of the Hall. The witches elbowed themselves to the front, so their view would not be obstructed by the tall Amazons who were grouped in front of them. Silence settled upon them like dust from a beaten carpet.

They gasped in unison, as Lathgertha whipped the cover off the cage, like a magician performing the “table-cloth” trick. This was not a gift they had expected. No shower-gel, no wart-cream, no paintings of memorable mandonkey derbies of the past. What was in the cage was much, much more troubling. For in the cage was a Watcher.

What the witches knew (but the Amazons did not) was that there were two Watchers on Hedral, one male and one female. They had the male one on their side of the Great Forest, and the female one was off in troll country somewhere. In the cage sat the male Watcher, pale and fat and naked, his head bowed even further than theirs had been minutes before.

Here was one of the most powerful creatures in the whole universe, bent bruised and broken, crammed into a tiny cage for all to see. He was wearing a scold’s bridle, an instrument familiar to many of the witches from their formative years. The iron muzzle was locked on to his head, the bridle-bit in his mouth studded with cruel spikes which would dig into his tongue if ever he tried to speak. It was designed as a punishment for scolds and witches. Martha herself had been forced to wear one as a young girl, led through the streets by her parents as her fellow villagers beat her and rubbed excrement into her hair. They had all regretted it later, when she had fully mastered her powers and sent them screaming through those same streets in a blaze of fire, but the memory of it lived with her still. The excrement especially.

She felt a pang of empathy for this man, locked in this cage for the curious amusement of her sisters and the Fur Brigade, shivering with fear or shame or both. He was supposed to be omniscient, all-powerful, yet he had been brought to this. She looked around and saw her fellow-witches joining with the Amazons in baiting him. One even electrocuted the bars for an instant, screaming with laughter as he howled like an animal in pain, which was exactly what he was. As he howled, the spikes on the muzzle sank into his soft fleshy tongue, virtually severing it. This was too much. She enjoyed inflicting a little misery, a little humiliation, but not like this. Not like this.

Quietly, so as not to draw dangerous attention to herself, she turned on her heel and left.

#

Takina was tied to a large round stone, and rolled towards the edge of a circle of stones not unlike Stonehenge. It was night-time, but her surroundings were illuminated by a couple of dozen trolls who danced just inside the perimeter with fiery brands in their hands, chanting and wailing to some unknown (presumably male!) God or Gods.

Crug (Lord of the Trolls) and Runt (Great Troll Philosopher) were standing before her, admiring her curvaceous Amazon breasts. They had removed her fur top. They had claimed that it was an essential part of the ritual, that it was a time-honoured component of the blood sacrifice they were about to make, but from the dopey expressions on their faces, she suspected it was more likely due to the fact that they just wanted an excuse to ogle her tits.

They had tried to make masks for themselves, but with the women away their attempts at handicraft were way past pathetic. Runt – the brightest of the two – had made himself a pair of glasses out of sticks, and wrapped some grass around the arms. Crug’s “mask” was worse still. He had just stuck a few twigs up his nose, which he had to hold in with one hand as they fell out whenever he moved.

Her position was hopeless. They would shortly be rolling her down the slope to her death. She had told Halfshaft that she had a fifty per cent chance of success, but she did not believe this. She felt certain that she would be crushed beneath the stone as it came to rest. But it was better that Halfshaft did not try to rescue her. At least this way, he would be safe.

Runt- being a Great Troll Philosopher – had an idea.

“Wait a moment,” he said.

Crug huffed. The winds had whipped up around the hill; the Gods were here. The sacrifice was secure, the stone was the roundest they’d found in a very long time, and he was ready to roll.

“Sorry,” Runt apologised. “Sorry.”

He scurried off. Crug waited. The topless sacrifice glared at him. This was awkward.

“Nice weather we’ve been having,” he ventured. “Bit too hot for me, though. I get sunburn.”

Takina said nothing. If there was one thing worse than being a human sacrifice for two dirty old trolls, it was having to make small-talk with them in the meantime.

Runt returned, a proud grin on his massive face. He wore her bikini top on his head, like a pair of ear-muffs. He danced clumsily from side to side, like a child in fancy dress, as he displayed his new costume to his war-lord.

“Look at my mask!” he crowed triumphantly. “I’ve got the best mask ever!”

Crug was furious. He attempted to seize the furry bra from his impertinent subject, but Runt took evasive action. To add insult to injury, the twigs fell out of Crug’s nose. He was maskless. She would see who he was.

“Give me your mask!” he commanded.

Runt took off the branch-spectacles and handed them over dutifully.

“Not that mask,” Crug stomped. “The one made of squirrels!”

Takina had had enough. She corrected her earlier assertion; if there was one thing worse than being a human sacrifice for two dirty old trolls, it was in fact having her ceremony put on hold whilst her chief tormentors fought over her bra.

Crug tried again, with the same result. He threw a punch at Runt’s head, which luckily for the Great Troll Philosopher was cushioned by the squirrel fur tied round his ears. Runt retaliated with a couple of counter-punches, and they ended up on the grass, wrestling for ownership of her bikini top.

She looked around for Halfshaft. Now was the time, while they were distracted. Circumstances had changed. Despite her previous injunction for him not to interfere, she desperately wanted him to appear, set her free, and lead her away to safety while the two trolls wrestled on the ground.

Sure enough, Halfshaft appeared at the edge of the circle. He hesitated. She could sense his indecision. Should he seize his opportunity and slip past the bickering trolls to rescue her, or should he do as she had bid him, and go and find her after they had rolled down the hill?

Now, Halfshaft, she prayed. Rescue me now!

He started to scurry towards the stone-circle, but there was a shadow behind him. She couldn't make out the features of the shadow in the flickering torch light, but from the way it moved it had to be one of two people. Either it was Thane, their mercenary friend, come back to rescue them as he had the last time they had been held here. Or it was –

Ragnar.

Halfshaft reached the edge of the circle, just twenty feet or so from her, but Ragnar had cut him off, blocking his path. Halfshaft jumped angrily from foot to foot, desperate to get past him to save his friend, but painfully aware that he did not have the tools to do it. His arms started to glow again, crackling blue with electricity. Takina intervened.

"It is okay, Halfshaft. I am okay. Go back. I am okay."

He hopped all the more. Ragnar took a step towards him, warning him off. Halfshaft took a step forwards, and his arms crackled all the more.

Takina knew that this was not a battle her friend had any chance of winning. He had to back down, and he had to do so soon. She was doomed already. She did not want to take him with her.

"Halfshaft!" she shouted. "Leave me! Please!"

After what seemed like an eternity, he took a step backwards. Then another one. Eventually, he turned and stalked back down the hill. He was not a happy wizard.

Ragnar caught her eye, and smiled. There was no warmth there; none at all. He radiated death and destruction. She feared for Halfshaft when she was no longer here to protect him.

Eventually, he turned and left. It was almost a relief when Crug popped up in her field of vision, the bra balanced precariously on his head (he had not worked out how to tie it up yet). Runt climbed to his feet beside him, spitting out teeth.

“Maybe I could have her furry bottoms?” Runt ventured, never one to give up easily.

“That’s not fair!” Crug protested. “They’re even better than the furry top!”

They started fighting again.

Takina started rocking back and forth as they were arguing. Eventually, she made the stone move. It rolled slowly towards the top of the hill, and then gained momentum, toppling down it at speed. Enough was enough. If they wouldn’t push her down the hill, she would push herself.

Halfshaft watched on in panic as the large stone wheel careered downwards. The trolls were back on their feet, watching with child-like wonder as Takina plunged head-over-heels down the hill. Halfshaft couldn’t care less whether they saw him or not. His imperative was to reach the stone, wherever it came to rest, and salvage whatever was left of his Amazon friend. He would take her away, nurse her back to health. No more quests, no more danger; just the two of them, in a cottage somewhere, growing vegetables and penning sheep.

It was a large hill, so it took him longer to descend than he had expected. After what seemed like Forever, he found the stone. It had rolled into the margins of a clump of a dozen or so very sickly-looking trees.

It was dark. The troll torch-light barely reached the bottom of the hill, and he could hardly make out the trees, yet alone anything else. He felt the stone, rather than saw it. He ran his hands over the surface, praying that she was there, but where he hoped to touch warm flesh or fur, he felt only cold granite. Frantically, he tried to haul the stone upwards, knowing that she would have been crushed to death but refusing to accept it until he felt her poor broken bones with his own hands, but it was too much for him. The stone would not budge an inch. It would take a troll to move that stone; an elderly wizard would not even come close.

He screamed long and hard, seeking release of his grief and frustration, but to no avail. Both tunnelled deep inside him, anchored against his rage, immune to his feeble attempt at catharsis. He screamed again and again and again. It changed nothing. Takina was dead.

The blue fire was back in him. This time, he embraced. A bolt of sizzling light shot from his fingertips, briefly illuminating the clump of tress, and then it was gone.

He cursed his own stupidity. He had just sent a message to the trolls that he was down here. He had to leave now, to buy time. Not for himself, but for Takina. He would seek revenge for her. But he could only do so if he was alive. Expecting Ragnar to materialise at any second, he slunk off into the darkness.

Minutes later, Crug and Runt appeared. They had come to reclaim the stone; it was far too round not to be recycled. There was one thing that puzzled them, though, something which even the Great Troll Philosopher had no way of explaining. This copse normally consisted of nothing but gnarled old trees. Now, one of them had become a sapling.

#

If Martha had been perturbed when she left the Great Hall, she was even more so when she stepped into the courtyard. There was her donkey, running along the flagstones in panic, with an Amazon in hot pursuit. To her right, a second Amazon was on the point of gutting Mabel's donkey (who for some strange reason was rubbing his testicles vigorously, an expression of extreme discomfort on his little man-donkey face).

The first Amazon threw her javelin. Martha was having none of that. He was her donkey, and she was not about to see him written-off by some trollop in furry knickers. A quick spell, and the projectile turned from a javelin to a small rock. As the rock struck the back of Rod's head and knocked him unconscious, it occurred to her that this was not the cleverest transformation she had ever done – something softer may have been wiser in the circumstances - but she

had had to make a snap decision so it was hardly her fault if it had not gone entirely to plan.

She clapped her hands above her head, and the two Amazons, rose into the air. She clapped again, twice this time, followed by a single clap, as if she was at a Queen gig. The Amazons flew towards each other, banging their heads together with a squelching noise that made even a seasoned witch like her shudder a little. Maybe I should have done that in the first place, she thought, rather than the rock thing.

She would have to leave. Lathgertha would not be impressed when the Amazons were found. It didn't really sit well with her all-sisters-together plan. She glanced over at Rod, who was still very prone indeed. She could try a revival spell, but that would take time, and she was not sure how easy it would be to find lizard's gizzards and virgin's vomit round here anyway. Without those ingredients, the spell could go horribly wrong.

She took the easy option, hopping on Mabel's donkey and spurring him away. Alfie moved awkwardly, and was still rubbing his testicles in a manner which would have got them both disqualified from the donkey-derby in disgrace. But he would have to do. Leaving the unconscious Rod to the mercy of the Amazons, she set off through the castle gates, on a mission to save the world.

#

Halfshaft was back underground. He needed a cave-troll, and Archie was the only person he knew who had one to spare. It would take a cave-troll to lift the stone so he could recover and bury poor broken Takina, and it would take a cave-troll to help him wreak his revenge on Crug and Runt. If he could get two or three of them, he might even be able to execute Ragnar as well.

He was well aware how dangerous this was. The last time he had met Archie, the little man had set a cave-troll upon him. So he had taken precautions this time. He had brought with him a sack-full of fish as a token of his friendship and esteem.

It had taken two or three hours wandering through the tunnels before he found his new friend-to-be. Even then, he might have missed him, but for the sound of splashing and giggling. He clicked his fingers for illumination. Sure enough, there was Archie, stripped down to his underpants, with the tail of a pretty large fish thrashing about above the waist-band.

Archie withdrew the fish hastily, oozing guilt.

“They seek out warm places” he explained unconvincingly. “I keep telling them off, but do they ever listen?”

“Whatever floats your fishing-boat,” Halfshaft replied. He threw him the bag of fish. “I’m sure you’ve got plenty of room in there for a few more.”

Archie thought this comment over awhile, and eventually decided that it was being suggested that he had insufficient equipment to fill his pants himself. It also occurred to him that it would be useful to dispose of the wizard, before he told everyone about how obliging his little fishy-friends were; when word got round, they’d all be wanting a slice of the cod mornay. He shrieked for back-up. There was a much louder shriek in response. Halfshaft knew what that meant. There was another cave-troll on its way.

“I come in peace,” Halfshaft gabbled, but Archie shrieked all the more.

“I have more fish,” he ventured. The shrieking stopped.

“What do you want?” Archie asked suspiciously. “People don’t go around offering fish without wanting something big in return.”

“I want to borrow one of your cave-troll friends.”

Archie started shrieking again.

The cave-troll arrived. Halfshaft could hear it, snorting and pawing the ground, ready to tear him to pieces the moment its master gave the word.

“Please,” the wizard implored. “Just for one day. Then you get him back, with all the fish he can carry.”

“He can carry a lot of fish,” Archie warned. “And when I say a lot, I mean a lot! He has very large hands.”

“Just for one day,” Halfshaft repeated. “That’s all I ask. You can tell him to kill me if I’m a minute late.”

Archie pondered. All the while, the troll snorted by his side. But the more aggressive it became, the more determined the wizard was to see this through. He needed a killing machine if he was to avenge Takina’s murder. And there was nothing in the whole wide world as powerful as a cave-troll.

“I have three riddles for you,” whispered Archie, his voice a worrying cocktail of glee and cunning. “Answer them, and he’s yours to keep. Get them wrong, and you die.”

“I’m useless at riddles,” Halfshaft protested. “Can’t the two of us have a nice game of chess instead?”

“I look like a fish,

I smell like a fish,

I taste like a fish.

What am I?”

Archie paused for dramatic effect. “Answer correctly, or your life is forfeit.”

“Would I be a fish, by any chance?”

“You must have heard it before!” Archie complained, splashing around the underground stream in frustration. “Admit it! There’s no way you could have got that unless you’d heard it before.”

Halfshaft shrugged. “I guess I’m better at riddles than I thought.”

“You think you’re so clever? Then answer this correctly. Or your life is forfeit.”

“You don’t have to keep saying that every time. I’ve kind of got the message by now.”

“I am silver.

I swim in the sea and rivers.

I taste delicious with chips.

What am I?"

Again, Archie paused. "I've got you this time, haven't I? You're not so clever now."

"You're still a fish," Halfshaft replied. He had met some pretty stupid people in his travels, but this strange little man had to be top of the list. His riddles were about as challenging as a table-tennis match he had once had with a wizard's apprentice named "Blind Gregory". And that hadn't been very challenging at all. He had won 11-7 (though he had had to move the net ten inches closer to his opponent every time they changed ends, to make certain of victory).

"You're cheating!" he sobbed. "How could you possibly know that, without cheating?"

"It's a gift. Last riddle please."

Archie thought for a very long time. Indeed, Halfshaft literally nodded off at one point. Eventually, the pale little man came to a decision.

"Your last riddle is this. Answer correctly, or -"

"Or my life is forfeit?"

"Yes!" Archie snapped. "No-one likes a smart-arse."

"And the riddle?"

"I am not a fish. What am I?"

"What's the rest of the riddle?"

"That's it."

"There's got to be more than that. How am I supposed to solve a riddle like that? You could be anything! Give me a clue!"

"I have given you a clue. I've told you I'm not a fish."

"That's a crap clue!" spluttered Halfshaft. "Give me another one."

"Your life is forfeit," Archie ruled. "To be fair, I did warn you three times."

Halfshaft felt his hands glowing blue again. He was tempted to let off another bolt of whatever magic was brewing inside him, but fought back the urge. He did not like the idea of uncontrolled, undefined magic, especially in a confined space like this. It frightened him.

“That is a trifle unfair,” a voice put in. “The whole concept of a riddle is that there ought to be sufficient clues to enable a perceptive person to solve it. Your riddle left him no chance at all.”

“Who’s that?” Halfshaft asked in bewilderment. “Who just said that?”

“Shut up, you,” Archie snapped. “We’ve had this conversation before. You’re not supposed to speak. You just stand there and look menacing.”

Halfshaft conjured up flame. Archie was glaring at the hulking great cave-troll, who was shuffling uncomfortably from clawed-foot to clawed-foot.

“Look, you know how much I hate confrontation,” the cave-troll replied. “I’m not making an issue of this. I just wanted to draw your attention to the injustice of the position you’ve adopted.”

“You’re a troll,” the wizard said, somewhat superfluously. “Trolls don’t talk like that.”

“No, they don’t!” agreed Archie. “So shut your face!”

The cave-troll approached Halfshaft and raised a fist. The wizard leapt backwards, anticipating a crashing blow to the head and body. But no. The creature was just trying to shake hands.

“My name’s Narkanaka Hbili Tanayaka Gostok,” the ogre informed him. “But all my friends call me George. I’ve no idea why.”

Halfshaft shook his hand. He fully expected it to be crushed, but the handshake was gentle; limp even. This was surreal.

“Halfshaft.”

“No, it’s just the way I’m standing,” quipped the troll.

Archie groaned. “He thinks he’s a comedian now.”

“You’re not going to kill me, then?” the wizard enquired.

“I wouldn’t dream of it. I hate physical violence. It never solves anything.”

Archie set upon the troll. George fended him off, with the embarrassed expression of a martial arts champion being assaulted by a grumpy guinea-pig.

“I’m sorry about this. He gets a little temperamental from time to time.”

“Would you come with me?” Halfshaft asked him. “My friend’s trapped beneath a stone. I need someone to lift it off her.”

“It would be a pleasure.”

“You walk out of that door,” screeched Archie, “and you’re never coming back. You’ll be dead to me.”

“There are no doors here,” George pointed out. “It’s open-plan.”

“After all we’ve been through together. You leave me for another man; an older man at that! How could you? How could you do that to me?”

“It’s not you, it’s me,” said George. “I just need a little space; some time to think things through. I’ll always have a place for you in my heart.”

“Just go, you big dopey bastard!” Archie sobbed. “And never come back.”

The cave-troll ran off, fighting back the tears. Halfshaft followed, not being quite sure what to make of all this.

“At least there are no children,” he joked as he left. Archie choked in despair, and went in search of silvery tail to console himself.

“Do you know what the worst thing is?” George told his new confidante as they left. “I’m sure he was lying to you in that last riddle, when he said he wasn’t a fish. He’s *always* a fish, believe you me. He’s obsessed. There was this one occasion –oh, the humiliation and shame at the mere thought of it! - when he made me dress up as an orange-finned loach, and tried to pump water up my-”

“Please,” Halfshaft interrupted, “promise me that you’ll never, EVER finish that sentence.”

George blushed, as they headed back up towards the outside world. Maybe it was best not to tell the wizard about the Friday-night fish-oil massage sessions either, even though he had actually found those to be quite a pleasurable way to start the weekend.

#

Rod awoke to find Alfie had vanished, and two highly concussed Amazons nearby. He felt pretty groggy himself; double-vision and sickness, the kind of feeling you get when you mix beer, Absinthe and three-day-old kebabs.

He climbed shakily to his feet. The doors of the Great Hall were suddenly flung open, and a withered-handful of witches came dashing out, disappearing off in search of transport. Mabel was close on their heels. She snorted crossly when she saw that Martha had stolen Alfie, but quickly resigned herself to Rod. Leaping on his back as energetically as her arthritic knees would allow, she tugged on his bridle, steering him towards the castle gates.

“Run, Donkey, run. Run faster than you’ve ever run before.”

Rod broke into a concussed zig-zag. Mabel struck him with her whip.

“Faster than that. And straighter, too, Chubster. Martha sneaked out when she saw the Watcher in a cage. They think she’s a spy. We’ve got to get to her before they do, or she’s toast.”

Rod staggered on. He had been too dazed to understand much of what the old hag had just babbled, but he could have sworn that it had been something about toast, and that was good enough for him. He was bugged if he was going to graze on skanky old grass for the rest of his life.

#

Rolling down the hill at speed might have been quite exhilarating had she not been tied to a massive rock. Smacking into a tree, though, would not have been exhilarating under any circumstances whatsoever.

Takina was as giddy and disorientated as Rod. She had assumed that she would by now be in the Afterlife, sharing hunting stories with that great Amazon Goddess in the sky. But instead, she could have sworn she was surrounded by female trolls with branches tucked into their knickers.

Whoever they were, they did the decent thing and cut her loose. They even lent her some of their foliage, to cover her embarrassment at being topless. Amazons were usually happy to cast off their clothes at the drop of a headband, to show off what they knew to be their gorgeous and perfectly-toned bodies, but Takina had always been a little more shy than her sisters. Call her old-fashioned, but she preferred not to bare her bosoms to all and sundry. Not unless it was someone she wanted to mate with, anyway.

As her head gradually cleared, she discovered that these women were indeed trolls. The branches in their knickers was not some strange and twisted ritual, but rather part of their camouflage so they could blend in with the trees without being spotted by their menfolk at the top of the hill.

Their leader was a trolless named “Grunt-mate.” They explained that troll women did not have their own names, but just added the word “mate” on to the name of the troll they had last had sex with. This meant that it was very difficult to have an extra-marital affair, because as soon as you changed your name to that of your married lover, everyone would know what you’d been up to and his wife would proceed to rip your face off with her bare finger-nails. Indeed, there had been a particular scandal when one of their number had changed her name to “Grunt-and-Runt-and-Crug-and-Slurp-and-Farg-mate”, but they had all abbreviated her name to “Slut” to make it less of a mouthful. The fact that one of the more butch trollesses had later changed her name to Slut-mate had caused more gossip still.

Grunt-mate had explained –with much grinding of teeth – that they had all been cast out of the village when Ragnar had arrived. He had declared that an army of women were on the march on the far side of the Great Forest, determined to wipe the trolls off the face of Hedral. When they arrived, their

sisters were bound to up and join them. This had puzzled them all, because as far as any of them could recall they had no close relatives on that side of the Forest.

Ragnar had been very persuasive. "Cast them out today," he had said, "or they will be cutting your throats tomorrow." And when this had left some of the troll-men undecided, he had promised them saucy virgin sacrifices as often as they liked, and this had very much been the deciding factor.

Ragnar had urged the husbands to slaughter the wives, but had put up surprisingly little resistance when the husbands had insisted that this was a step too far. Instead, it was agreed that the wives should just be banished to the wilderness, so that they could be called upon whenever there was a shortage of passing virgins.

Some time after they had been evicted from the village (or Castle, as Crug insisted upon calling it), Ragnar had come to them, and urged them to join their sisters on the far side of the Forest. They had humoured him (the silly little man did not seem to understand the difference between "sisters" and the females of other races) but had settled upon a different course of action entirely. They had fallen upon Hench's slave-market on the outskirts of the desert, made it their own and used it at a honey-trap for passing men. If Crug could have his virgin sacrifices, then they could too. None of them had any idea what a virgin actually was, but what did it matter? If they got to strip men naked, roll them down sand-dunes, and then eat them, they were happy come what may.

"The only problem," Grunt-mate said, "is that we keep running out of stock."

"Stock?" Takina enquired, puzzled.

"Sex-slaves," Grunt-mate mouthed, as if too embarrassed to say it out loud. "We have to have women there, to attract the men. Who would come to a slave-market if there were no women there? We need stock; Hench taught us that, before we -." She tailed off, apparently reluctant to describe the full horror of his fate.

Takina did not know whether to laugh or cry at the mention of the slave-trader. She had been captured by him only very recently (though it now

appeared that ten years had actually passed since then), and he had sold her to the trolls. He was a large slug-like creature, who made her flesh crawl. But by the sound of it, he had met the end he deserved.

“Why does your stock keep disappearing?”

Grunt-mate looked sheepish. She shrugged defensively.

“A girl’s got to eat.”

“You are eating the slaves? That is awful!”

“I know,” Grunt-mate replied. “They’re half-starving, some of those girls. No meat on them at all. It’s hardly worth the effort of chewing. Not like you. You’re nice and curvy. Dinner for two, I’d say.”

“You are not going to eat me,” Takina declared. It was most certainly not a question. She had survived one troll attempt upon her life, and she was in no mood to consent to another one.

“Oh no, Dear, of course we’re not. Not unless we get really hungry. You’re going to be our new sex-slave, to lure the customers in.”

“Out of the frying-pan,” the Amazon murmured.

“I wouldn’t mention frying pans if I were you. The thought of frying you might be too much of a temptation for some of our less disciplined ladies.”

Takina hugged the foliage which the trolleses had given her earlier to protect her modesty. How ironic, she thought, to allow me to cover up, when they were planning all the time to sell me as a sex-slave.

Grunt-mate patted her shoulder kindly.

“There, there, Dear. You hug those branches all you like. But we’re going to have to take them off you later, I’m afraid. Some of our customers prefer their women without a bush.”

Martha rode into the hamlet upon a weary Alfie-donkey. The sun was rising. It was going to be another hot day.

A witch emerged from a nearby hut. Martha rolled off her mount, and the two women embraced affectionately. This was, after all, Martha's mother.

"Have you come to see how they're getting on?" asked the older woman. She clapped her hands. "Recruits! Out you come, ladies!"

"I have important news," Martha told her.

"You can tell me afterwards," her mother replied. "Let me show off my girls first. We don't get many visitors here."

Twenty or thirty witches appeared of various ages, all of them considerably younger than Martha (the smug bitches!). This was the Academy for Trainee Witches. All the women here had shown enough magical ability to convince Mother that they would make excellent witches in time, but they had to spend many years here before they were let loose on the outside world. The official explanation for this was that they needed to hone their spells to perfection, but this was balderdash as far as Martha was concerned; magic was a natural ability, and no amount of classes would make a jot of difference to the talents they had when they first arrived here. No, the reason they had to spend so long at the Academy was that the new recruits were all far too young and saucy, and there was no way that the elder witches were going to tolerate such unfair competition. So they were closeted away here, until they were fat or scrawny or wart-ridden enough to no longer be a threat.

Most of the witches were pretty much ready for parole. Two in particular seemed overdue for graduation, one having a belly and bottom which almost reached down to her knees, front and back respectively, and another had enough hair on her face to thatch a kennel.

But there was one of their number who was an embarrassing failure in the witch-maturing stakes. She stood there in her flaxen cloak, head bowed in shame at her failure to cultivate so much as a pimple.

"Autumn, come here."

Autumn was not her real name. She had been Summer when she had arrived here two years ago, but they had changed this to Autumn in the hope that she would age quicker. She hadn't.

Autumn raised her head apprehensively. And Alfie fell in love in an instant.

She was black, with exquisitely fine features. Her eyes were hazel. And she wore a self-conscious smile which had Alfie wanting to throw himself in front of her and protect her from the world. He decided against this, though. If he was going to have any hope of chatting her up, it was best not to attempt it by prostrating himself at her feet whilst wearing a bridle and stirrups.

Autumn stepped forwards as she was bid. Martha's mother – whose name was Doris – circled her, shaking her head in sorrowful embarrassment.

"I've tried," Doris told her daughter, "the Devil knows how hard I've tried, but it's hopeless. Just look at her, the pretty little strumpet. What am I supposed to do with that?"

Alfie knew exactly what he would like to do with "that", but remained silent. He prayed she would not notice him. What would she think of him if she knew that he was just a donkey? As long as he was saddled up, theirs was a love that could never be. Like a cross between Romeo and Juliet, and Red Rum.

Martha rubbed her chins thoughtfully.

"Have you tried soaking her face in urine? That's good for warts."

"Every night for two weeks. Not a sausage."

"Sausages? That might do it. I put on six stone when I was on my sheep-poo and sausage diet."

"She didn't lose an ounce," Doris complained. "Don't you just hate girls with metabolisms like that?"

"You could smack her in the face with a rock. Break her pretty little nose."

"It might come to that," said Doris sadly. "But I always think that I've failed when I have to resort to that. It's so vulgar."

“You did it to me,” Martha replied, a touch hurt. “Four or five times, if I recall.”

“That wasn’t witch-training, though. It was just because you were a mouthy little cow who needed a good hiding.”

Martha nodded, reassured. It was a good point.

And then out of the blue, Mabel was there, geeing-on her still semi-concussed man-donkey.

“Flee!” she shouted. “Flee!”

“Fleas might work,” Martha mused. “Nasty red blotches, and all that itching would make her scowl a lot more. She’d have wrinkles in no time.”

“Not flea! Flee!”

“What’s she talking about?” asked Doris.

“I think she wants you to run,” Autumn told them. Flee with two E’s.”

Doris slapped her hard on the bottom. “When I want your opinion, my girl, I’ll ask for it.”

Mabel came to a halt beside them “Well go on then. Flee!”

“With two E’s?” Martha enquired.

“How do I know, you fat old bitch? I’m a witch, not a sign-painter. Now will you just jump on your donkey –well, MY donkey actually - and get out of here? They’re coming for you. They’ll be here any minute.”

“Who are coming for her?” asked Doris, not a little puzzled. “Why are they coming for her?”

“That’s what I was trying to tell you. But you wanted me to see the girls first.”

“Will you just flee when I ask you?” Mabel flapped, exasperated. “They’ll be here any minute. Are you deaf as well as ugly?”

Martha summoned Alfie, who for some reason was shielding his face with his front legs, as if he didn't want to be seen. Curious creature. She resolved to replace him at the earliest possible opportunity.

Martha and Mabel rode away. Doris watched them in indecision. Her daughter was in danger; she wanted to be by her side, to protect her from danger. But how could she leave her young wards unattended. They could get up to all sorts of shenanigans without her here to guide them to witch-hood. There was only one solution. She clambered on to Autumn's back.

"All right, girls. Pair up, and follow me. Fatties to be donkeys, please, so as not to squash the skinny ones."

And then she was off, riding to her daughter's rescue, with a dozen pairs of witch-riders and witch-donkeys following on behind her like bewildered ducklings after their Mum.

The village stood deserted, but not for long. Within ten minutes or so, five witches came galloping through, Maud at the front, cursing their decrepit donkey-men's lack of speed. But though their steeds were slow, they were trained for endurance. They would catch up with Martha sooner or later.

Lathgertha had declared her to be a spy. The witches had their orders. They would capture her, and cram as many spells into her as they could. Sooner or later, this would make her burst. There were few things funnier than an exploding witch, Maud mused, as the coven homed in on the women who were fleeing ahead of them. With two E's.

#

The stone had gone by the time Halfshaft and Cave-troll George arrived.

George patted the wizard on the back, in an uncomfortable attempt at sympathy, but Halfshaft shrugged him off. He was in no mood for sympathy. He wanted revenge. He explained his battle-tactics.

“We go up that hill, and we take out the lot of them. You and me against the world. They won’t stand a chance.”

“Now let’s not be hasty,” the cave-troll replied. “Violence is never the answer. Maybe we should try arbitration? Find some middle ground.”

“They tied my best friend to a rock and rolled her down a hill! Now she’s dead. You can arbitrate all you like, but I want them dead first.”

Halfshaft’s voice broke down. He stopped talking for ten seconds or so, trying to compose himself. She was more than his best friend; at least, she had been whilst she was still here with him. What was he going to do without her?

“Let’s go home,” George urged. “Sleep on it. Everything always looks better in the morning.” He patted the wizard on the head, and gave him an awkward smile of encouragement.

Halfshaft wanted to punch his new friend in the face. What was the point in having a cave-troll in tow if he refused to eat anyone? Cave-trolls were supposed to be the biggest, baddest creature in all of Hedral, but all this one wanted was for everyone to kiss and make-up. He was a disgrace.

“We’re going in,” Halfshaft instructed. “And when we do, you’re going to wreak havoc, do you hear me?”

George shook his head, miserable and dejected. “No.”

“Why? Why won’t you do this one little thing for me?”

The cave-troll produced a handkerchief (which was puzzling, as he had no clothes, yet alone pockets), and dabbed his nose. His bottom lip started to tremble.

“What’s the matter?” asked Halfshaft. “You look like you’re about to burst into tears.”

Sure enough, George started wailing.

“I told you, I don’t like violence. It’s all so pointless. And I have no access to medical facilities, have you thought of that? What if I get injured? I could get a

nasty infection. I might die, even! I don't mind come along for moral support, but I won't get involved in fisticuffs, do you understand me?"

"You're a cave-troll!" the wizard yelled at him. "You're not supposed to be scared of getting a nasty infection! And what the Hell is "fisticuffs" supposed to mean?"

"Look, if you start shouting at me, I'm going home this minute," snapped George. "You're not the boss of me!"

Halfshaft gave up. Anyone who came out with the line "you're not the boss of me" was not about to single-handedly slay twenty land-trolls and a bearded psychopath.

"Let me talk to them," George pleaded. "Tell them how much they've upset you with their rowdy behaviour. It's all about communication, you see. I'm sure they'll apologise when they feel your pain."

"Oh, they'll feel my pain all right. Don't you understand; I don't want them to apologise; I want them dead. I loved her. Okay, she didn't feel the same way about me, but that's beside the point. They've taken her away from me, and I'll never, ever have her back again. And someone has to pay for that."

The cave-troll shook his massive head. "It's not the answer," he said. "I can empathise; I really can. But believe me, this is the not the answer."

"It's the only way I know," the wizard replied. "I have to do this. For her. And for me, too, I suppose. I let them do this to her; I didn't lift so much as a finger to stop them. If they rip me to pieces up there, it's no more than I deserve."

Halfshaft deflated. He patted the cave-troll on the arm.

"No hard feelings, eh? Go back home. This isn't your battle, anyway."

"No hard feelings."

George watched as the wizard started to make his lonely way up the hill. He shook his head again. This was wrong. He felt the almost overwhelming urge to accompany him, to do the right thing, but he was scared. Yes, he was big, yes he was ugly, but he was not stupid. One cave-troll against a couple of dozen land-trolls was not a fair fight. They would do nasty, hateful things to him, and

he would die broken and in pain, in the harsh and unforgiving daylight, many miles from the dank comfort of the caves he called home.

There was one thing he could do though, one way to even the odds without risk of those rough land-trolls hurting him.

He galloped up the hill after the wizard. Halfshaft turned, his expression elated, at this sudden change of heart.

“I knew you’d change your mind!” he gushed. “I knew you’d help me. You don’t know what this means to me.”

“Sorry,” said George. “I’m not joining your quest. I just wanted to give you my lucky handkerchief.”

#

Takina was not keen on her new accommodation. It was not so much because it was a tent, nor even that she had to share it with several other girls. It was more because it had a sign outside saying “*This way to the trollops (buy one, get one free).*”

The other girls wore little more than ankle bracelets. There was the occasional strip of cloth which could loosely be described as clothing, but they looked more like floppy leather book-marks than under-garments, if you asked her.

She had been befriended by a buxom village-girl named Pussy (an inexplicable name for a grown woman who looked nothing like any cat Takina had ever seen), who had taken her captivity quite cheerfully. “We get all the food we can eat, a nice warm place to sleep, and we get banged senseless five or six days a week. It’s much better than being at home, I’ll tell you that for nothing. I was lucky to get so much as a cuddle a month from my old man.”

The deal, she explained was that the girls would parade around seductively until a handful of punters arrived. They would then give them a free sample or two, and encourage them to spread the word among their friends. When they

came back en masse, they'd be nabbed by the trolleses, and used in some sort of perverted ritual (presumably much the same, thought Takina, as the stone-rolling one their husbands have just put me through). They would then move the slave-market on to the next pitch, and go through the same routine all over again.

"I will not be a common prostitute," Takina told her. "I have my pride."

"That's what Sammy told them."

"What happened to Sammy?"

"They ate her alive."

"Maybe I could give it a try, then. See how it goes."

One corner of the tent was curtained off. Her curiosity got the better of her. She went to investigate. She braced herself as she pulled back the curtain, fearful of the debauchery which might be revealed on the other side, but even she was not prepared for the sight which greeted her. It was all she could do to keep herself from retching.

There, closeted away in the curtained off area, was Hensch, the big fat toad who had previously owned the slave-market. And all he had on was a pink thong. He held up his blubbery stomach to reveal his little pink pants to what he assumed would be another customer. His expression, when he realised it was only a slave-girl was a mixture of indignation and extreme relief.

"Go away, little girl. I need my rest. I'm booked in for a cart-load of dwarfs at midday, and it's taken me three hours just to get my pants on."

"What are you doing here?"

"Just about everything those despicable little men can think of. Now go away. I wish to be alone."

She pulled the curtain back, having no desire to see such a huge bloated body in such a tiny garment. It was like seeing a walrus in crotchless knickers.

"Some of the punters have very strange tastes," Pussy explained. "When the trolls took over here, they kept him on to fulfil them. They claim it's because

he's very good with the dwarfs, but personally I think it's because some of the trolls have a soft spot for him. Literally. Every Tuesday and Friday. You should see the length of his tongue."

Takina shuddered. She was not sure which was worse; the image of Hench's long tongue, or the thought of the trolls having "literal soft spots" twice weekly. The combination of the two images was almost too much stomach.

Grunt-mate came into the tent. She clapped her hands as if sending little 'uns to bed (which, from her lofty perspective, was exactly what she was doing).

"Come on ladies. Action stations. We've got two soldiers and a wood-elf outside. Lots of potential for repeat business there. Double double chop chop!"

"Make sure you get a soldier," Pussy whispered. "You don't want a wood-elf, believe me."

"Stop that whispering, young lady," chided Grunt-mate. "Your delicious young men await. And where's Hench?"

"He's behind the curtain again."

"You'd think he'd outgrown his shyness after some of the things he's got up to in the last couple of months! Oh well. Hench! Hench! Come out here now."

Hench emerged from behind the curtains, holding up his belly in both hands to confirm that the pink thong was finally fully in place. He shook his head in sorrow.

"This is cutting me like cheese-wire," he grumbled. "And I'm never going to be able to reach round the back to stick a plaster on."

"Maybe one of your dwarfs will want to assist," Grunt-mate suggested. "They're strange, like that. You could play dwarfy-little-doctors and big fat nurse."

"No," Hench pouted. "I may be obese, Madam, but I still have my pride."

"Said the man in the pink pants," giggled Pussy.

Grunt-mate poked her head outside the tent-flap, and gave a most unlady-like whistle.

“Oi, punters,” she screeched. “They’re oiled up and ready to go!”

Hench held his head in his hands (which was a great relief, as it meant that his voluminous belly dropped back down to his knees, covering a multitude of pink-satin sins).

“My establishment used to have such a class,” he groaned. “A slave-market for gentlemen of taste and refinement. But that ghastly woman has turned it into a common knocking-shop.”

He made his way back behind the curtain, and dropped heavily on to all fours, ready for dwarfish action..

“I hope they’re not in any great hurry,” he grumbled on. “It’s going to take me a fortnight to get my pants back off.”

#

Martha, Mabel and Doris were having a bit of a rest. Well, quite a lot of a rest, actually. They had been galloping for hours, and riding donkeys always made them sleepy. They were flat on their backs, snoring loud enough to wake the She-Devil.

Rod and Alfie were tethered, but Doris had at least insisted that their bridles were removed so they could feed on grass (if the mood took them). They were, at last, free to talk.

Autumn sat with the other trainee-witches on the far side of their temporary encampment. Alfie watched her intently. He had never seen anyone quite as beautiful as her. One day, he resolved, they would be married and have lots of little witches together. And maybe the occasional little wizard, too, as long as he wasn’t born with a beard, cos that would be too weird.

“I’m in love,” he told Rod.

“Bugger off,” Rod replied.

“I am. She’s gorgeous.”

“Your one or mine?”

“Not the old ladies! The girl. The girl donkey. She’s so fit. I just wanna -”

“Yeah, I know exactly what you wanna do. Just make sure you take precautions, otherwise there’ll be hundreds of baby donkeys all over the bloody place. It’ll be like a bloody sanctuary or something.”

“I need to talk to her.”

“Look, mate, it’s not going to happen. We’ve got to escape. And if we get the chance, we’ve got to go for it. We can’t trot over to your witches’ apprentice and ask her if she fancies coming, too. She’s one of them. She’d shop you in a second. And then the old girls would stuff you full of frogs and newts until you vomit. Best steer well clear.”

Alfie shook his head. It wasn’t true. This girl was an angel. No one with a face like that would drop him in it. She’d take one look at him, and she’d *know*. They’d be inseparable after that. Maybe he could take her home to meet his Mam. She might need a change of clothes first, though. The witch, not his Mam. The kids on his council estate would take the piss something chronic, if his girlfriend was wandering around in a flaxen robe and sandals.

“I don’t want to escape. I want to stay here with her.”

“As a donkey?”

“If that’s what it takes, why not? There are worse jobs.”

“Name one.”

“Traffic warden.”

“Name two.”

“Wait, she’s coming over, she’s coming over.”

Autumn approached. She smiled at them, reassuringly, and started to stroke Alfie's head. He purred like a cat with the keys to the cat-food cupboard. Rod elbowed him.

"Would you knock it off. You're not a cat, you're a donkey. And a pretty crap one at that."

Autumn took a startled step backwards. "You can talk!"

"We're magical donkeys," claimed Alfie, in a particularly poor attempt at impressing her. "With magical donkey powers."

"I had a girlfriend who used to call me donkey," mused Rod. "Totally different reason though."

"I thought donkeys were dumb?" Autumn asked Alfie.

"We kind of are. Well, my mate here is. He's really dumb. But I'm the sharpest donkey in the box. No, hang on, I got that wrong. Something about pencils. I've got the sharpest pencil or something."

"I don't wish to see your pencil," smiled Autumn.

"No, sorry, that wasn't a chat-up line. I would never use a chat-up line on you. Well, I would, cos you're so pretty and everything, but -"

Autumn's face crumpled.

"You think I'm pretty?"

"Yeah, yeah, I really do. Stunning."

She burst into bitter tears, and ran back to the other apprentice witches for comfort. Alfie watched her go, totally bewildered. That was not what women were supposed to do when you gave them a compliment. They were supposed to go all goo-ey, or invite you back for coffee.

"That went well," joked Rod.

"Feck off."

This expletive woke the witches. Doris rounded up the girls, pairing them off into mounts and riders again, whilst Mabel dished out the bridles. They

hurried; they knew that the witch-posse was not far behind them now. But their donkeys were young and well-rested. They were confident of reaching their destination before they were apprehended.

“Do you think they might let Autumn ride me at some stage?” Alfie asked before he was bridled up.

“You are such a pervert,” Rod laughed. “Besides, what’s wrong with the one you’ve got? She might be old and ugly, but I bet she could teach you a thing or two.”

But Alfie didn’t hear him. He was too busy day-dreaming about Autumn on his back, without their clothes (this was a prerequisite of all his daydreams), the two of them changing position from time to time. It was a pleasant way to pass the hours, though the effect it was having on him was going to make it considerably harder to gallop.

#

Halfshaft marched into the troll camp, ready for action. He was alone, but this did not worry him. If they killed him, then so be it. At least he would go down fighting. Takina would be proud of him.

He was at first surprised and then disappointed to note that the trolls paid no heed to him at all. The buggers hadn’t even noticed that he had been gone for the night!

He sought out Ragnar. There was no way he could defeat even one troll, yet alone a whole camp of them. But maybe if he caught Ragnar by surprise – asleep ideally – he could kill him, and then present himself to the trolls as their new leader. It wasn’t a brilliant plan, but it was the best he could think of in the time it took him to march up the hill.

There was no sign of Ragnar in his hut, and there were not many other places he could be. The hill was bare of everything except standing stones, save for the hut and a cage. The cage was covered with a large cloth. Halfshaft went to

investigate. He couldn't think of anything else to do other than to march back down the hill, Grand-Old-Duke-Of-York-like, but that seemed like a bit of an anti-climax after all the fuss he had made about coming up here.

He did a few circuits of the cage, plucking up the courage to pull the cover from it. It wasn't all that large; maybe a yard cubed, at most. Maybe it was for him? Maybe they were going to capture him, and shove him in here for a punishment for trying to rouse a cave-troll against them?

He pulled back a corner of the cover, and peeped nervously inside. What he saw shocked him. There was a woman, hunched over, naked as the day she was born, reddish-brown hair. She would undoubtedly have been described as beautiful under other circumstances, but not now, not with the scold's bridle clamped across her face. And the expression in her eyes as he looked up at him; so much sadness, so much pain. But no sight.

His heart went out to her. He felt an almost overwhelming need to help her, get her out of there, set her free. But instead he dropped the cover back over the cage. I'll help her in a minute, he told himself. I just need time to compose myself first. He was deeply disturbed. The fact that they had caged a blind woman in this way was bad enough; that look in her eyes was worse still; but the thing which really staggered him was that he knew exactly who this must be. This woman was a Watcher. That pretty much put her on a par with the Gods. If Ragnar could do this to her, what chance did anyone else have against him?

He took a deep breath to steady himself, steeling himself to pull off the cover and release her from her cage. What he was going to do with her after that was beyond him. It would be difficult to escape from a band of blood-thirsty trolls and the most lethal killing-machine on the planet with a blind girl in tow – but he had to start somewhere.

“Don't worry,” he told her, as he pulled the cover back again. “I'm here. I'm going to get you out of here.”

She turned her face towards him. He thought from her eyes that she was trying to give him an encouraging smile, but it was difficult to know for sure, with that monstrous contraption over her mouth.

“I’m here, too,” said a voice behind him. He turned, already knowing who it would be. A tall man, with a beard and a cruel grin. “And she’s not going anywhere.”

Halfshaft raised his hand to strike, but Ragnar had him flat on the floor before it had reached shoulder level.

“You’ll regret this!” Halfshaft spat into the dirt, as Ragnar ground his face into the ground for fun.

“I regret it already. I’m going to have to waste a couple of hours making you a cage.”

#

The punters filed into the tent. The two soldiers came first, weapons at the ready, followed by six excited dwarfs (the seventh had grumpily stomped off home). They hopped excitedly from one foot to another in anticipation of the delights which awaited them. Two of them made straight for the curtain without so much as looking at the girls. There was a big, slug-like man in there, ready to be prised out of his G-string. What did they need of voluptuous slave-girls when they had that?

Last of all came the wood-elf. Takina had never seen a wood-elf before; they lived deep in the Great Forest, and she hadn’t realised that they ventured out into the outside world. She knew very little of them. No-one did, by all accounts. They were a very secretive race.

What she did know was that she was very much attracted to this man. He was tall, maybe six foot three or four, which was very important to an Amazon (there was nothing worse than your consort having to wear platform moccasins to be tall enough to mate standing-up). Handsome in a heroic, self-confident sort of way. And best still, he seemed very interested in her indeed. Bearing in mind she was practically naked, she would have been very insulted if he had not been.

“Remember,” whispered Pussy. “Any of them but the wood-dwarf. Try and throw up on his shoes; that normally puts them off.”

Takina smiled. She knew what this woman was doing; she wanted the elf all to herself. Why would an Amazon settle for a grimy soldier or a horny little dwarf when she could have a wood-elf like this? If she was about to lose her Amazon-virginity, then it would not be to a randy little gnome. It would be to a big randy elf instead.

“Takina!” one of the dwarfs called out. “My beloved!”

She had not bothered paying the dwarfs much attention until now. She took a closer look at the one who was hopping up and down like a kangaroo on a pogo-stick. Oh no, she thought. Not him. Not now.

Hubert was ecstatic. He was one of the notorious dwarf twins who had guarded the paths into the Forest. His brother Horace always told the truth, and Hubert always lied. But then he had met Takina, fallen in lust with her, and had mended his ways (and abandoned his duties). He had declared his undying love for her, and offered to take her home to his warm dwarfish bed. She had refused for some inexplicable reason. They had then gone on all sorts of adventures together, vanished into a time-tunnel in an exploding mountain, and he had been regurgitated back into the Forest (where his brother had given him a real bollocking for deserting his post). But now they were together again. In a brothel. How romantic was that?

He would ensure her release, of course. They were friends, and she was his wife-to-be. There was no way he would leave her here in this awful place, to be pawed (and worse) by every creature with the inclination and the money. But first he would paw her (and worse) himself, while she was in no position to say “no”. After all, he had the money, and he most certainly had the inclination.

“I’ll take her,” Hubert told Grunt-mate.

“Go with him,” the trolless instructed. “Second tent on the left. You’ve got twenty minutes. Time and a half after that.”

“No!” declared Takina, horrified.

“I’ll rescue you afterwards,” Hubert whispered to her.

“What do you mean, “afterwards”? After what? I am staying here.”

Grunt-mate stepped forwards. “I said, go with him.”

Takina thought about launching an attack, but it was teeming with trolls outside. Now was not the time; she would have to pick her moment better if she was to have any chance of escape.

“Come on, my darling,” Hubert coaxed. “Let’s go and make sweet music together.”

“Twang your own banjo,” Takina hissed. “Or I will rip your grubby strings off.”

He took her by the hand, and started to lead her from the tent. Grunt-mate watched on, ready to punish any further signs of dissent. Takina allowed him to lead her away, casting one last longing look at the wood-dwarf who looked on in detached amusement.

“Hold on,” the dwarf said, stopping dead in his tracks. “Who’s this, then?”

“I’m Pussy,” the slave-girl replied, flashing him her widest smile (and a lot more besides).

“Well of course you are,” Hubert replied flirtatiously. He gave her a manly jig to impress her. “I’ll have this one instead.”

“You are choosing her over me?” asked an incredulous Takina.

Hubert nodded happily. “I love you with all my heart,” he told her, “but she’s got bigger tits than you.”

Takina was furious. If there was one thing worse than being pursued by a dirty little dwarf it was being dumped by one. She thrust her chest out to show him what he would be missing.

“Are you sure about that, Hubert?”

“They’re all very nice,” he shrugged, “but I want Pussy.”

“All very nice?” she repeated, outraged. “What sort of compliment is that?”

“Don’t be offended, my buxom little orange-blossom. They’re the second best ones I’ve ever seen. But Pussy’s are better, anyone can see that. Hey, Randolph.” He beckoned towards one of his fellow dwarfs. “Which ones do you prefer?”

“Pussy’s,” nodded his vertically-challenged companion, without so much as a moment’s hesitation. “They’re like bowling-balls. Lighter, though, I expect.”

This is awful, thought Takina, truly awful. Why are they all picking her over me, especially in front of the wood-elf she was so keen to impress. She tried to stick her bosoms out still further, but she had run out of raw material; she had nothing left to give.

“You’re twenty minutes has started,” Grunt-mate announced. “Best get on with it if I was you.”

Hubert started to remove his dwarfish trousers.

“Not here,” the trolless sighed. “Second tent on the left.”

Hubert took Pussy by the hand, and waddled out of the room at speed, without pulling up his trousers first. He didn’t want to waste any more of his twenty minutes on such trivial matters, and he would only have to tug them off again later.

“Not the wood-elf,” the sex-slave mouthed to Takina, as he led her away.

There was a triumphant dwarfish shout from behind Hensch’s curtain. “Got ’em off! Time for action, Big Fella.”

The wood-elf stepped forward, and took Takina’s hand.

“Troy,” he introduced himself. “And you are?”

“Takina,” she fluttered.

“Well I’d choose you over Pussy any day,” he smarmed. “You’re the most exquisite creature I have ever laid eyes on.”

She nearly fainted. This was the person she was destined to mate with, over and over and over again (and then some more). They would be life-mates. She just hoped he had enough money for that.

Pussy's words of warning still blinked on and off in the back of her mind, but she managed to suffocate them and bury them in a shallow grave in her subconscious. Her so-called friend was obviously jealous; she wanted Troy all for herself, while Takina was left with the dwarfish scraps. Well, she had had the last laugh! She had got her man, and Hubert was welcome to all the Pussy he could manage.

Grunt-mate watched the two of them leave the tent, ignoring the disturbing noises which were now coming from behind the curtain. She shook her head with mild regret. She had high hopes that the Amazon would attract a lot of new business to the slave-market; she was a good-looking girl with a very serviceable body. But she knew what the wood-elves did during sex. She would never see this new slave again.

#

They rode into town in late morning. There was one long street with wooden houses on either side, wide enough for them to ride six or seven abreast. The place was deserted. They could hear shouting up ahead, but Martha seemed in no hurry to investigate.

They came to a halt outside the only building with an open door. Doris clapped her hands to get the attention of her charges, like a primary school teacher with her pupils.

"Okay, settle down, girls. The three of us have some business to attend to here. I want the rest of you to stay in this bar until we get back. You'll be perfectly safe, there are no hairy men around to pester you. Just stick to Dandelion and Thistle cordial, though, do you understand me? Anyone caught drinking will be severely reprimanded."

"Cut off their warts," Mabel urged. "That'll teach them."

Rod started to follow the trainee-witches into the bar. Mabel reined him in.

“Oi, Donkey, where do you think you’re going? I’ll put you to trough later if you’re thirsty.”

Rod groaned. All that alcohol! So near, so far!

“It’s okay, it’s okay,” Alfie reassured him, his voice slurred and distorted as a result of the donkey-bit in his mouth. “Autumn’s staying with us.”

“I need a pint,” Rod grumbled, his speech equally distorted. “If it wasn’t for you, I’d be sitting in “The Rising Sun” right this very minute, making up for lost time. But you just had to go charging into that tunnel, didn’t you?”

“I’m glad I did. I would never have found her if I’d have stayed there.”

“Look, Mate, I hate to break this to you, but she’s not your bird. She’s a witches’ donkey.”

“She stroked me,” Alfie crooned. “Right on the head. We’re in love.”

“I used to stroke the donkeys on Margate beach when I was a kid. Doesn’t mean I wanted to shag them.”

Autumn coughed from beneath Doris. “You do know I can hear all of this, don’t you?” she asked.

Alfie went crimson. “I’d forgotten you were there. Oh, I’m so, so sorry. We were just playing with you. Ignore everything I said. And everything he said. Ignore everything, okay?”

“I thought it was rather sweet.”

“You did?”

She nodded, blushing almost as deeply as him.

“Will you be my girlfriend?”

“Will you two behave yourself?” Rod put in. “Or at least use a proper chat-up line. This is like watching two toddlers make friends at a nursery.”

“You’re just jealous.”

“I’d be more jealous if you had a pint.”

They were trotting along the street as they spoke. They turned left at the end, and there in the field in front of them was a large circle of men, cheering on whatever it was that was going on in their midst.

The witches reined in their donkeys and dismounted. Martha marched up to the nearest spectator, and pulled him to one side.

“Take me to your leader,” she demanded.

“She knows I’ve always wanted to say that! She could’ve let me say it,” Mabel whined. “Selfish bitch!”

Doris gave her a stern look. “That’s my daughter you’re talking about.”

“No offence,” Mabel shrugged.

“That’s okay,” Doris relented. “You’re quite right anyway. I’ll smack her legs for you later.”

The spectator disappeared into the throng of people, and emerged twenty seconds later with a man with a large wart at the end of his nose. Martha studied it, oozing envy. It was a very fine growth indeed.

“What’s going on here?” the witch asked, addressing the wart rather than the face behind it.

“It’s a BRS meeting.”

“What’s that?”

“BRS? Bickos Rehabilitation Society. We meet here on the first and third Sundays of the month.”

“Explain.”

“Bickos. You must have heard of us. We were a suicide sect. “Sign up, sign off”, that was our motto. We had some beautiful check-outs in my time. Fred the Farmer; hanged himself from the ceiling with elastic rope, and died of multiple concussion. Arthur the blacksmith; sewed two hundred lemmings on to his apron, and laid down near a cliff-top. Bernard the publican; fisted a heterosexual troll while he was changing his underpants. Beautiful, beautiful deaths, and every one of them a work of art.”

“And?” enquired Martha.

“Some of us weren’t so keen. Suicide seemed so – final. We were all pretty taken by the idea of it –such a romantic gesture, don’t you think? – but when it came down to it, we were always coming up with some excuse or other. Had a bit of a cold, couldn’t get the day off work, couldn’t find enough lemmings. Anything to put it off to another day.

So, in the end, we all had a meeting, and decided to tone it down. Instead of killing ourselves, we’d just knock ourselves about a bit. So we turn up here twice a month, and take it in turns to kick the crap out of ourselves instead.”

He beckoned them to follow him, and led them to the edge of the circle. A chubby, middle-aged man stood before them, repeatedly punching himself in the face. Eventually, he dropped to a heap on the ground. Two people dragged him away, and his place was taken by a younger man whose preference was to continuously elbow himself in the bollocks.

The three witches stood transfixed, as did their donkeys. It was a full ten minutes before they retraced their steps back out the circle to resume their conversation. The man’s ordeal only ended when he got carried away with his own success, and tried to kick himself in the testicles instead, losing his balance and falling over. His place was immediately taken by someone who seemed intent on gouging out his own eyeball with a tea-spoon.

“We’ve come for reinforcements,” Martha told him. “There’s this woman at Spartan Castle trying to raise up all the witches and the Amazons. If she gets her way, everyone will be at war. I’ve got to stop her, but I can’t do it on my own. I need help.”

“You want us to fight with you?”

“Hardly,” Martha said slowly, as if talking to an imbecile. “I want you lot to be donkeys.”

“I’m afraid I don’t understand,” he said, dodging as an eyeball arced over the ring of spectators and narrowly missed his left ear. Mabel seized it and stuck it in her pocket. It would come in useful later on for some spell or other.

“I’ve already got my army back there, in your saloon bar. But there aren’t enough donkeys to go round. There’s just these two, and they’re both a bit knackered, to tell the truth.”

“I’m in my sexual prime,” declared Alfie, more for Autumn’s benefit than for anyone else’s, but no-one was listening.

“We need new mounts, so all the girls can ride into battle with us. They’re having to double up at the moment, and that’s going to half our fire-power.”

“I don’t know about that,” the man replied. “What’s in it for them?”

“Nothing at all. You’d get ridden around all day, never allowed to rest, fed on grass and nettles, and have a bridle and bit in your mouth. It would be truly horrible.”

“Great,” he smiled. “We’ll do it!”

Martha and Mabel started to remove the bridles from Rod and Alfie. Doris followed suit with Autumn. Alfie was not happy.

“You can’t just sack us. Not without giving us notice. I wanna stay here, with you guys. I want me and Autumn to have foals together.”

Two of the witch apprentices came galloping over, one astride the other.

“They’re here,” she gasped. “The other witches. They’ve arrived.”

The bridles went back on. Rod huffed, but Alfie had never seemed happier. He rolled his haunches against Autumn’s in a gesture of affection. She gave him an encouraging smile back.

“Would you two get a stable?” Rod groaned.

“Come on donkeys,” Martha coaxed, wheeling them through 180 degrees. “We’ve got work to do. The six of us against the world.”

“Death or glory,” announced Doris. “Victory or oblivion.”

“All this riding’s making my crotch sore,” Mabel said, which rather spoiled the moment.

#

He felt guilty about it, but Halfshaft was extremely relieved that they had built him a separate cage, covering over like an over-sized budgerigar. Ordinarily, he would have had no problem at all being crammed into a confined space with a naked woman, but this time it was different. She was a Watcher. She knew everything he had ever done. It was too embarrassing for words. He was just relieved that she didn't have any water in there with her. Without water, she was truly blind. She could no more see him than he could see her.

What was she doing here? If Ragnar was holding her prisoner, there must be some sinister motive behind it. It wasn't like she had lost a bet, or she was doing it for a charity auction. The look in her eyes had really unsettled him. He ought to rescue her. But he would have to work out how to free himself first.

As if reading his mind, the cover was pulled from his cage, and Ragnar opened the door. Halfshaft's legs had gone numb, and he struggled to get to his feet. Ragnar seized him and pulled him out, leaving him sprawled on the floor.

"Get up. I have company for you. One of your own."

Ragnar frog-marched Halfshaft back to his hut. The man inside was undoubtedly a wizard. He had the standard-issue wizard's hat, along with a long grey beard and half-moon glasses. A stack of books sat on the rustic wooden table by his side. He regarded Halfshaft thoughtfully.

"Halfshaft?" he enquired. "Come in, come in. Let's take a look at you, then."

"And you are?"

"Sorry, how very rude of me. I'm Rustmarrow. It's a pleasure to meet you."

He held out his hand. Halfshaft took a suspicious step backwards. He had no idea what was going on, but he was sure whatever it was would be bad for him.

Ragnar pushed him forwards. "Shake the man's hand, then. We're all friends here."

Halfshaft took the wizard's hand, and shook it gingerly. He expected at any time to be electrocuted (if not worse), but all he felt was a limp hand-shake. He sat down on a chair when instructed, and watched as Rustmarrow leafed through "Magic Diagnoses Volume IV".

"Tell me about your powers. Not the fire and the water. The other stuff."

Halfshaft shrugged. "I don't have any other powers. I could have been a great wizard if only someone had shown me properly, but they never did. It's a training issue."

"The blue light that comes from your hands when you're agitated. What is that?"

He shrugged again. "I have no idea. It just came on after I stepped into the time tunnel. I've not used it yet. It's probably nothing."

Halfshaft was lying. He was sure that it was something; something spectacular. He had been a great wizard just two or three days ago, conjuring warriors out of thin air (well, Archie Watkins anyway). But if he did have a power, he didn't know what it was yet. And he certainly wasn't going to tell this old wizard about it, yet alone Ragnar, in case they took it away or used it against him. It was never easy for him to keep his mouth shut, but this was the perfect time to get a little practice.

"Does it itch?" Rustmarrow enquired.

"Not if we're still talking about my hands."

"Tingle?"

He shook his head.

"Throb?"

"You're enjoying this, aren't you?"

Ragnar took a threatening step forwards.

"No," Halfshaft assured him hastily. "It doesn't do anything. It just glows a little when I'm cross."

Rustmarrow swapped books, leafing thoughtfully through “When Spells Go Bad: Volume III.” He tried to stroke his chin, but his beard was too thick, so he gave up. “Maybe Volume V,” he muttered.

“Would it help if you saw it for yourself?” Ragnar asked, in a tone which made Halfshaft more uncomfortable still.

“Yes, yes. If I could just see the extent, the hue, the direction of flow, I’m sure I could diagnose him in no time at all.”

Ragnar bent down, and whispered in Halfshaft’s ear. “We recovered your friend’s little body. What was left of it. The trolls tell me it was delicious.”

Blue light crackled up Halfshaft’s arms, right up into his shoulders and chest. It was stronger than before. His breathing became shallow, as if the phenomenon was feeding upon it. It scared him; how could he use a spell over which he seemed to have no control at all? What if it did nothing but burn him up? Ragnar wouldn’t be provoking him like this if he felt that the spell was putting anyone else in danger.

It was Rustmarrow’s turn to shrug. “No. I’ve never seen anything like that before.”

Ragnar snorted in derision. “You’re no use to me, then. I need to know whether this sad little man has a weapon I can use. At the moment, he’s just an ornament to put in the corner of the room and amuse the children. But I know power when I see it. There’s something in him which might be as destructive as that Watcher I’ve got out there. He could be my Plan B. I just need to know precisely what it is he can do. Find out!”

Rustmarrow grabbed another book from the table, and rifled through it, determined to find something helpful before this big bearded man turned on him. There was nothing worse than being turned upon by a big bearded man. He had found this out the hard way, after having once gone for a midnight stroll in the woods, and been pursued by a hairy individual who accused him of being a tease just because he had refused the man’s bizarre request for him to take his robes off.

“That book will not help you,” the big bearded man declared (this big bearded man, not the one in the woods).

“Yes, yes, I’m sure it will,” Rustmarrow lied.

Ragnar seized the book, and waved it in the elderly wizard’s face. “In what way do you anticipate “One Hundred Sexual Positions For The Asthmatic Wizard” is likely to assist us here?”

Rustmarrow knew when he was rumbled. He tried to make a break for the door. He made it precisely nine inches before Ragnar had swept his feet from under him and was rubbing his face in the earth.

“I have anger issues. Failure makes me angry. Success makes me smile. Please don’t make me angry again.”

“I can do this,” Rustmarrow gibbered, spitting earth from his mouth. “I just can’t do it with people watching me. I have a bashful spell-bladder.”

“Strange. I’ve always performed better with people watching me,” Ragnar advised. He hauled the elderly wizard to his feet, glaring at Halfshaft who had sidled a few feet closer to the door. “Don’t even think about it, little man.”

The two wizards stood before him, shuffling nervously from one bunioned-foot to another, whilst they waited for judgment. Their discomfort amused him.

“There is a solution to this. I will shut the two of you in this hut, and you will duel to the death.”

Halfshaft winced. That didn’t seem to be a very good solution at all. He had duelled to the death before. He had won, but where had it got him? Locked in a dungeon at Spartan Castle, and catapulted into an adventure he had no wish to have. He would have been so much happier sitting in his chamber, sampling fine wines and loose women. He might be a great wizard, but magical duels weren’t really his strong point, especially against an older man with a very much bigger library.

“IF Halfshaft is the victor, he can tell me exactly how he has managed to survive, and I will then have my weapon. If Rustmarrow is the victor, then I’ll

know that Halfshaft had no weapon worth harnessing. Either way, it's problem solved."

He clapped the two wizards on the back, as if the three of them were the best of friends. "Good luck, gentleman. May the best wizard win."

He left the hut, closing the rudimentary door behind him.

It was time. Halfshaft had to unleash his power – whatever it might be – or die. Or it was more than possible that he would do both.

#

Takina faced Troy in the semi-darkness of the tent. The sheets on the floor were shop-soiled from the over-exuberance and poor aim of previous clients, but she refused to let that spoil the moment. She was about to lose her virginity to the most strikingly-handsome man she had ever laid eyes upon.

"What do you know of tantric sex?" he enquired, as he traced a finger down her body. It descended ever downwards, inch by deliciously agonising inch, between her breasts, across her stomach, and then down beneath the waistband of her furs. She inhaled sharply. If she knew that it felt like that, she would have done this a very long time ago.

"Nothing," she panted. "Teach me."

"It can go on for many, many hours. You put off the moment until you can bear it no longer. And then you climax again, and again, and again."

"We have only got twenty minutes," she replied. She cursed herself. That was hardly likely to inspire him.

"I've got you for as long as I need you," he whispered. "We've got until sunset."

"What time is it now?" She winced. She really ought to think before she spoke in future. She knew very little of pillow-talk, but knew instinctively that asking the time was not really the done thing.

“Time to make love,” he crooned, hooking his thumbs into her furs and drawing them slowly down her legs.

She was now completely naked.

“All right then.”

He removed his own clothing, keeping eye contact with her the whole time. She felt embarrassed standing there, without so much as squirrel-skin to cover herself up, while he disrobed. Amazons were used to running around naked; they removed their clothing at the slightest excuse. But this was different somehow. He was looking at her so intently, as if she was the only other person in the whole of Hedral. She wanted to impress him. She had always felt that she had a good body, but was nervous that it wouldn't stand up under close scrutiny. He, on the other hand, was most certainly standing up. She looked away, uncertain whether he would think ill of her for looking.

He stepped towards her and hugged her. She felt him pressing against her, her naked body tight against his. All of a sudden, her passion ignited. She didn't want tantric sex, she decided. It would take too long. She wanted it now, quick and hard, before he changed his mind.

She guided him down on to the sheet, and kissed him urgently on the lips.

“Slowly,” he coaxed. “Oh so slowly.”

“Why?” she whispered, nibbling on his ear. “Can't we do quickly first, and slowly afterwards? And then maybe quickly again?”

“What's the hurry?”

His hand was on the move again. She gasped. Screw doing it “slowly”, she wanted it now!

“I have never done this before. I want to know what is like. Whenever you're ready.”

He pulled away.

“You're a virgin?”

“Yes,” she said impatiently, grabbing his wrist and trying to return his hand to where it had just been. Another few seconds of warming up, and she would be ready for just about anything.

He pushed her away, and stood up. He started to get dressed.

“I’m afraid we’ve both been wasting each other’s time.”

She got to her feet, bewildered. She tried to kiss him, but he pulled away in irritation. She tried again, with the same result.

“What is it? Why are you being like this?”

“You’re a virgin. They don’t taste the same.”

“You do not have to taste me, if you would rather not. We could just mate.”

He turned on her, exasperated. “Didn’t they tell you what we wood-elves do?”

She shrugged, totally confused. What was he talking about? Why didn’t he just pull her back down on the floor and take her there and then? She was offering herself to him on a plate, and it was hurtful that he didn’t want so much as a nibble before he left the table.

“After sex,” he explained, “wood-elves eat their mates. I would have given you the time of your life, and then consumed you. But virgins taste different. They’re too bland. I need a girl who has been around the forest a few times; a girl with *flavour*.”

“How dare you? How dare you think I am that kind of girl?”

“We’re in a brothel,” he pointed out, not unreasonably. “Why would I think you were anything but?”

She put her squirrel-skin bottoms back on. She wanted to cover her breasts, too, but Grunt-mate had never returned her top to her. She crossed her arms across her chest, feeling used and vulnerable.

“I would like you to go now.”

He nodded. "I'm sorry. I thought you knew. I'm sure the sex would have been fine, but it's taken me six months to save up enough money for this. I need the post-coital meal to get my money's worth. And you would have tasted rather dull. I might just as well have made myself a chicken sandwich."

"This is not helping," Takina huffed. "Would you please just go."

He finished dressing, and left. She declined his offer of a "no-hard-feelings-handshake." As soon as he had gone, she burst into tears, which was something she had never done before, not even as a child. She cried through rage, humiliation, through sexual frustration. Was this to be her life from now on? Even the paying customers were turning her down.

Eventually, she was all cried out. She tried to put a brave face on it. She had just survived a painful and depraved death. There were much worse ways to go, granted, but at least she was still alive to mate another day.

"My life," she affirmed, "can only get better."

But life was too cruel to allow this statement to go unchallenged. The moment she finished her sentence, the tent flap opened, and Hubert and Pussy bounded in, both of them stark naked.

"Oh happy days, my Angel!" he crowed, jigging around the tent like an electrocuted munchkin. "I've just found out it's buy-one-get-one-free today, so I've booked the two of you for a double-session. Let's all get down and dirty!"

#

The three witches and their donkeys stood at one end of the street, facing off the half a dozen mounted witches at the far end. Nothing else moved, save for the tumble-weed which blew along between them. There was going to be a fight, and there could be only one winner. Martha knew the odds against them were just too great. All she could do was to make sure that the three of them (six of them if you included the mules) went out in a blaze of glory.

“This reminds me of that film,” Alfie said, his voice distorted by the bit in his mouth. “You know the one. All-time classic.”

“High Noon?” Rod ventured.

“No, the other one.”

“How do you mean, the other one?”

“The other one with the cowboys in it. I saw it on satellite once. Come on, you know the one I mean.”

“Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid?”

“No. The *other* one.”

“True Grit?”

“No. “Carry On, Cowboy”, that was it! With that bloke with the flared nostrils.”

Their conversation was cut short as Martha spurred Alfie forwards. Mabel followed suit with Rod, with Doris and Autumn close behind.

“She’s not going to charge them!” Alfie exclaimed, horrified. “Like in that old war film with the cannons. You know the one.”

“Shut up,” said Rod, in no mood to play more guessing games. But the kid was right. They were charging straight at the old ladies at the far end of the street, who were ecstatic at the poor tactics Martha had adopted. Magic bristled in the air as they summoned up the spell that would see their unwise opponents consigned to oblivion.

“What are we going to do?” shouted Alfie. “You don’t charge witches, everyone knows that.”

Rod laughed in spite of himself. If he was going to go, at least he’d go with a smile on his face (and a bridle!).

The distance between the combatants narrowed quickly. Three hundred yards, two hundred yards, one hundred yards. Why did the street have to be such a bloody long one, thought Rod, as he galloped towards his doom. It was

bad enough charging to his doom, without having to knacker himself in the process.

“I love you!” shouted Alfie in desperation.

“You’re all right, too, Mate,” Rod puffed.

“Not you! I was talking to Autumn!” protested Alfie.

“You’re such a tease.”

They were now just fifty yards from the line of witches cordoning off the street ahead of them. The hags had conjured up a ball of flame between them, ten feet across, and were raising it in the air, ready to send it crashing down on them the moment they were in range.

“Goodbye, mate,” Rod said. “It’s been fun.”

“Autumn!” Alfie wailed. “Autumn!”

Autumn said nothing. She was in a battle of magic. It was almost like being like a real witch at last.

All of a sudden, the witches’ apprentices burst out of the saloon, and fell upon the left flank of the witch posse, throwing them into confusion. The ball of flame fizzled out, showering the grappling women below with harmless sparks as they rolled around on the floor. And then Martha, Mabel and Doris were in amongst them, riding their donkey-men into the thick of it, slashing about them with short-ranged spells until their elderly opponents moved no more.

Martha was ecstatic, high-fiving the apprentices with such enthusiasm that one of them nearly broke her wrist.

“We did it!” she bellowed. “We did it! Our fight-back starts here!”

“Did you know that was going to happen?” asked Doris. “Were we leading them into a trap?”

“No,” Martha cackled. “I thought we were well and truly bugged. I literally wet myself back there.”

Alfie nodded unhappily, confirming this to be true. He was one drenched donkey.

“So what now?” asked Mabel. “Even if those men back there join us, we’re still no match for all those witches and Amazons at the Castle. And we’re certainly no match for Lathgertha.”

“We go the Underworld. And we recruit enough demons to wipe that smug bitch off the face of Hedral.”

“I don’t think they allow donkeys there,” Doris advised. She was the eldest of the three by some margin. She took an interest in the Underworld, as a tourist who would shortly be travelling there on a very long holiday indeed.”

“They allow dogs,” Martha argued, not wanting her mother to appear more knowledgeable than her in such matters.

“Only three headed ones.”

“Then we’ll leave the donkeys with the trainees. Come on ladies. We’re just about to go on the most spectacular adventure ever!”

“I hope it’s not too warm, there,” grumbled Mabel. “It’ll give me chilblains.”

#

Rustmarrow shuffled around uncomfortably at the far end of the hut.

“Well, this is awkward. Most awkward.”

Halfshaft nodded warily. What was the old man up to? He would have felt a lot happier if he had known his adversary, or at least known of him, so that he had a better idea exactly what he was up against. Forewarned was forearmed. Was the wizard a shape-shifter? Or was he more into incantations or curses? Curses would be Halfshaft’s best chance of survival; he would die in the end, but at least he would have time to give the old man a good kicking in the meantime.

“Indeed.”

“This wasn’t my idea,” Rustmarrow went on. “But that gentleman out there can be very persuasive. Not eloquent-persuasive, either. Violent-persuasive.”

“I can imagine.”

Rustmarrow regarded him anxiously. “You’re not saying a great deal. You’re focusing your powers, aren’t you? You’re going to unleash that lightning from your fingers, and fry me to a crisp.”

The old wizard sounded frightened. It suddenly dawned on Halfshaft that Rustmarrow was more worried about his powers, than he was of Rustamarrow’s. This was something of a novelty. He had never had a magical duel before with anyone who had not been practically wetting themselves laughing at his lack of magical abilities. The difference here, he supposed, was that his opponent didn’t know quite how restricted those abilities actually were. Maybe he could bluff his way out of here alive, if he was lucky.

“I don’t want to,” Halfshaft shrugged. “But as you say, that gentleman out there can be very persuasive.”

“Violent-persuasive,” Rustmarrow reminded him.

“What did he do to you?” Halfshaft enquired, more out of morbid curiosity than anything else. “Did he hurt you? Force you to come here against your will?”

Rustmarrow nodded sadly. “He did. He did.”

“What did he do?”

“I’d rather not say.”

“Best get it off your chest.”

Rustmarrow shook his head. “Some things are better left unsaid.”

“Did he torture you?”

“In a manner of speaking. Not physical violence against my person, but it was torture all the same.”

Halfshaft was getting frustrated. All he'd wanted was straight answer to his question, not a game of twenty-questions! The merest trace of electricity crackled across his fingers. Rustmarrow picked it up – he was clearly sensitive to these things – and held his hands out to placate his opponent.

“What is it? Why are you doing that?”

“I merely want to know,” said Halfshaft slowly, as if speaking to a child, “what it was he did to you to bow you to his will? Did he beat you? Did he abduct your wife and children?”

“Worse than that,” wailed Rustmarrow. “He smashed up my vegetable garden!”

Halfshaft didn't know whether to laugh or cry. This man was no threat to him. If the worst thing he could imagine was a row of mutilated pumpkins, this was not going to be much of a duel at all.

“Let's not do this,” Rustmarrow whined. “Let's not fight. We could just here, wait for him to come back. What could he do, in the face of a united front?”

“He could urinate on your carrots,” Halfshaft pointed out. “Wipe his bottom on your lettuce.”

“They're gone, all gone. There's nothing left there for him to hurt me with.”

Halfshaft nodded. What choice did he have. Neither of his spells – the birthday-candle-sized flame or the little spurt of water – was going to be sufficient to win a duel, and he did not think he could bring himself to injure this dodderly old man anyway. It would be like pulling middle-aged prostitutes at a brothel. Easy enough to do, but ultimately unsatisfying.

“How long do you think he's going to give us?”

“I guess he'll be out there until he hears a death-scream.”

“We could be in here all day, then. I get bored easily. Very short attention span.” It was true. Now Halfshaft knew that the wizard was no threat to him, he was getting bored already.

“We could read?” Rustmarrow suggested. “Brush up on our magic. Or I have a few “Wizards’ Wives” drawings tucked into one of these books here, if you prefer a little light relief?”

Halfshaft shrugged, feigning indifference, but very much wanting to see what wizards’ wives might look like. He hoped they didn’t look anything like wizards, as beards on women were a real turn-off. Rustmarrow rummaged through his text-books, and handed over a couple of dozen drawings. Halfshaft nodded gratefully, and took a seat in the shadows. Ragnar could take as long as he wished. He had plenty to keep himself stimulated for quite some time yet.

Rustmarrow selected more academic-looking reading material for himself, and settled down on the far side of the hut. They sat there for ten minutes or so, like two retired colonels in a gentleman’s club, the silence only broken by the occasional cough (or by Halfshaft’s increasingly frustrated whimpers as he worked his way through the erotic drawings). He was getting more and more flushed as he marvelled at the various uses these magician’s spouses were making of their well-worn wands.

All of a sudden, Halfshaft became conscious that the atmosphere was crackling. He looked up, puzzled. That tended to be a sign that there was some major magical feat being performed. He had felt it when he had conjured up the time tunnel beneath Mount Leiden, and a few times at Spartan Castle when the Grand Wizard was showing off. But where was it coming from now?

He looked at Rustmarrow. The wizard was staring intently at the pages of a book, his lips moving silently as if in prayer. Realisation dawned. Rustmarrow was not just whiling away the time having a quiet reading session; he had been selecting a spell to use in their duel. And to make things more humiliating still, he had distracted Halfshaft with cheap pornography whilst he was doing his research! There was more than one wanker in the room, he fumed.

Halfshaft leapt to his feet and charged towards the older man, but it was too late. He felt a gust of wind in his face, buffeting him, preventing him from taking any further steps towards the double-crossing old goat before him. It gathered in strength, spiralling round him like some invisible sheath, sucking him up. The world around him became faint, then transparent, and then vanished altogether. It was suddenly very dark.

He flicked light on to his fingers to see where he was. There was a black river flowing in front of him, just a few inches from his feet. He took a step backwards, fearful of falling in. Where was he? What was he doing here?

He heard a lapping sound, and managed to coax the flame a little larger. By squinting, he could make out a small boat, maybe twenty yards away. It was coming towards him. With every stroke of the oarsman's paddle, he became more certain what had just happened.

That wasn't just any boat; it was a ferry. Rowed – perhaps unsurprisingly - by the Ferryman.

Rustmarrow had killed him. And the Ferryman was here to row him to the Underworld, to live in darkness forever more.

Uncharacteristically, he tried to count his blessings, needing something positive to hold on to, to save him crumbling into all-consuming, bowel-loosening terror. It took him quite a while to think of any blessings at all in the circumstances, but one finally occurred to him just as the Ferryman's boat nudged against the shore.

At least he still had the "Wizards' Wives" sketches clutched in his grubby hands. And from what they were getting up to in the pictures, they may even have ended up down here in person.

#

Hubert had mixed feelings as Takina wriggled under the wall of the tent and made her escape. On the one hand, he had paid a small fortune for a threesome, and by the time he caught up with the naughty minx, he would be too knackered to get his money's worth. On the other, he was getting seriously excited watching her barely-clad bottom squirming around as she squeezed between tent fabric and sand, and he was now fully primed and ready for action.

Pussy followed close on Takina's heels. By now, Hubert wasn't sure whether to laugh or cry. He had just seen a mini-Mexican wave of heaving bottoms, and his only complaint was that both of them were fast disappearing in the opposite direction.

He tucked his beard beneath the wall of the tent, and caterpillared his stubby naked body after it. The drawback with this plan, he discovered, was that it's very uncomfortable crawling on your belly on red-hot sand when you don't have any pants on.

He leapt gingerly to his feet, rubbing himself briskly to ease the pain of his poor burnt testicles. But then he caught sight of the two fleeing slave-girls, and he was after them in a flash. If he was going to injure his privates, he would rather it be from sexy friction-burns.

Sand dunes encircled the camp. Takina sped across the sand towards the nearest of them, with Pussy closing in on her fast. Hubert hobbled along behind them, cupping his badly scalded equipment in one hand to avoid unsightly jiggling, appealing for the two wilful young hussies to return to his loving embrace.

"Come back!" he pleaded. "You can escape later. Just come back here and make sweet love to me first!"

Takina ignored him. The sand-dune was just a stone's throw away now. Within seconds, she would be over the hill and far away.

"Takina!" he cried. "It's you I want. It was always you!"

No reply. A change of tack was called for.

"Pussy! It's you I want really. It was always you, right from the moment I met you ten minutes ago."

But Pussy was not for turning. The naked slave-girl caught up with Takina, and – much to Hubert's astonished delight – rugby-tackled her to the ground. He stood back to admire the two of them thrashing around on the desert sand. This is much better than a threesome, he thought. All the fun, twice the action, and I don't even have to warm them up first.

“What are you doing?” Takina yelled. “Got off me, you mad-woman!”

“We’ve got to go back,” Pussy ruled. “If a girl escapes, the trolls will eat two others.”

“Then we must all escape.”

“Has it never occurred to you that some of us don’t want to escape? You don’t know what it was like where I come from. Disease, squalor, death. And, worse still, lots of very dull men. They look after us here, as long as we behave ourselves. Something warm inside you for lunch and dinner, and something even warmer inside you between meals if you get picked out by the punters. And you get a lovely tan, what with all this sun. Who could ask for any more than that?”

“She’s right,” Hubert nodded wisely. He uncovered his dwarfish equipment to give the ladies an added reason to stay. “Best just go back to the tent for a spot of hubbly-jubbly.”

“I would rather die,” Takina retorted. “I have no wish at all to be picked up by the punters, or by anything else for that matter.” She stood up, and prised Pussy’s hand from her wrist. Pussy looked at her intently for a second or two. The Amazon seemed so proud, so earnest. She clearly meant what she said.

The sex-slave stepped back, and gestured for Takina to continue on her way.

“Good luck, Sister. I’ll cover for you as long as I can.”

“Hubbly-jubbly first, though, don’t you think?” Hubert suggested, more in hope than expectation.

“No. No hubbly-jubbly.”

“Just jubbly, then?”

But Takina was not listening. She gave Pussy a hug, and marched off towards the sand-dune. Then she stopped. She took a few cautious steps backwards, and turned towards her companions.

“Come to Papa,” Hubert chuckled, knowing that the lure of dwarfish hubbly-jubbly had worked its magic yet again.

“Run!” Takina shouted, and broke into a sprint back towards the tent.

“Blimey, she’s keen,” Hubert cackled, breaking into an excited little jig. It was then that he caught sight of the three soldiers on the sand-dune, swords drawn, reeking of violence. He stopped in mid-jig.

“Run!” Pussy echoed, haring after the fast retreating Amazon.

Hubert considered his options for a few seconds. He looked around. He could now see other soldiers on all the surrounding dunes, contracting on the slave-camp like dogs around a wounded bear. He covered himself up again, fearful of stray arrows splitting his differential.

He bolted back towards the tent. This was too, too cruel. Not only was he probably going to be gang-banged by a gaggle of military misfits; he had missed out on his twenty-second-ever sex-slave threesome in the process.

#

Martha coughed up a nice hefty plug of phlegm, and spread it across the earth with one hand. She delved into it with the other, but all to no avail. No gateway into the jaws of Hell in there. Mabel coughed up some of her own, and mixed it in with Martha’s. She too had a rummage around, without success.

Doris raised her eyes to the heavens.

“Kids!” she exclaimed. “You haven’t got the first idea, have you?”

She pinched one nostril closed, and exhaled sharply through the other. A stream of hissing snot splurged from her nose, landing irritably in the centre of the lake of phlegm conjured up by her less knowledgeable companions. She breathed life into it, and then spread it across the ground with her bare-bunioned foot. A charred tree shoot nosed its way out of the earth. She seized it, and tugged on it sharply, feeding the burnt bark from the ground like some crazed magician conjuring up knotted handkerchiefs. And as she did so, the earth crumbled round it, exposing the blackened roots below.

“Come on, then,” she chided. “Don’t just stand there, watching your mother do all the hard work.”

Martha apologised, and joined in, as did Mabel. Within twenty minutes, the tree rose high into the sky, and the exposed roots plunged deep into the earth below them, as far as the eye could see.

Rod and Alfie looked on, transfixed.

“What’s occurring?” Rod asked. “What’s that tree doing there?”

“Yggdrasil,” said Autumn, awe-stricken.

“Bless you,” responded Alfie, worried that his new girlfriend might have caught a chill.

“Yggdrasil. The World Tree. The heavens rest upon its branches, and the Underworld nestles round its roots. And we cling to its trunk all our lives, until the Gods decide whether we climb up it or slide down.”

Martha and Mabel grabbed hold of the trunk as if it was a fireman’s pole.

“You stay here, Mum,” Martha urged. “In case we need some help getting back again.”

Doris nodded. She hadn’t gone down for ninety four years, and it was too late to start again now.

“When shall we three meet again? In thunder, lightning or in rain?” she asked innocently.

Mabel sighed. “Now I thought we agreed you weren’t going to do all that old skool stuff any more?” she complained. “We’ve got to keep up with the times. I might even get myself an eye-pad.”

“What’s that when it’s at home?”

“It’s an eye, stuck on a pad. It watches you, wherever you are in the room. All the kids have got them nowadays.”

“It’s time to go,” Martha stated. “The tree won’t be here for long.”

“Show his eyes, and grieve his heart,” chimed in Doris, “so like shadows now depart.”

“If you don’t stop that, I’m going to smack you one in the face.”

Martha sighed. “Here we are on a mission to save the world, and you two are squabbling like petulant donkeys!”

“I resent that remark!” Alfie chimed in, and Rod nodded in amused agreement. As he did so, Martha released her hold of the tree, and she vanished from sight, sucked into the bowels of the Earth like a portly old spider into the nozzle of a vacuum cleaner. With one last reproachful look at Doris, Mabel followed suit.

Doris rapped the bark of the gnarled, blasted tree with her gnarled, blasted fingers, and it crawled back into the earth from whence it had come.

“When the hurly-burly’s done. When the battle’s lost and won,” she crooned to herself. “Then we’ll meet again. She paused for a while to reflect upon this. “Or maybe I’ll see you next Tuesday.”

#

“I’m not getting in that boat,” Halfshaft said. “I know where it goes. I’ll stay here, thank you very much.”

The Ferryman shrugged. He had a large head and tiny arms, like a T-Rex. Halfshaft wondered how he could row like that. It would be bad enough being rowed across the river into the jaws of Hell, without having to do it one tiny little paddle at a time.

“Makes no difference to me. You’re my last of the day. Just means I can knock off and go home twenty minutes early.”

“I’ll just stay here, then.”

There was a howl in the distance. Not a silly, dog-howling-at-fire-engine type of howl, but more of a Hound-of-the-Baskervilles-trying-to-sexually-molest-a-werewolf type one.

“What’s that?”

“Big dog. Lots of heads. Nasty bugger. Guards the gates of the Underworld. Deters burglars.”

“You wouldn’t get burglars down here.”

“Course we do. Loads of them. Where else do you think they go? Burglars, murderers, rapists, politicians. They all come here in the end.”

There was another howl, much closer this time.

“Am I safe from it here?”

“Safe as houses. For about thirty seconds. Then it will gobble you up. We can’t have people wandering round out here, picking and choosing whether or not to cross the river. No infrastructure on this side of the river, you see. And it would be dangerous to leave you here in the dark. Health and Safety would go mental.”

Halfshaft leapt into the boat, nearly sending the two of them toppling into the black water which flowed insiduously beneath it.

“Steady,” cursed the Ferryman. “You nearly capsized us. You don’t want to end up in there.”

“Monsters?”

“Sewage. All the crap from Paradise. One of these days, we’re gonna pump it back up there, see how they like it!”

He started to row. No sooner had he pushed off from the bank, a large dog appeared, watching them malevolently as they inched away from the shore. It looked like a huge albino German shepherd dog, but for the fact that it had three heads. One of them started barking, one started snarling, and the third appeared to be asleep.

“There’s a five headed kitten, too,” the Ferryman informed his shaking passenger. “Not so scary. Unless you’re allergic to cats.”

“Still, it’s all behind us now,” panted Halfshaft, more to reassure himself than anything else. “Things can only get better from now on.”

The Ferryman chuckled mischievously. “You keep telling yourself that, Mate. You keep telling yourself that.”

“What do you mean? What could possibly be worse than that?”

“Well for a start,” the Ferryman explained with relish, “when we get to the other side of the river, you’ll meet his Dad.”

#

The three soldiers gave the signal. The slave-market was surrounded, and they were ready to attack. Within minutes, everyone would be slaughtered. It was going to be fun.

They were the sons of Ragnar: Hvitserk, Sigurd and Bjorn. Hvitserk and Sigurd were younger versions of their father; tall, with rugged blond beards, and a shared sense of cruel humour. Bjorn was more like his poor mother; dark, swarthy and not the sharpest sword in the stubby scabbard. The others took it in turns to rib him, but were careful not to go too far. He might not be bright, but he was very strong indeed. He had once wrestled a huge black bear during a drinking binge in the One Forest, and had won by two falls and a furry submission. More impressive still, he had never once released his grip on his drinking horn, even when the bear had tried to swallow it.

Hvitserk caught Sigurd’s eye, and nodded towards the nearest tent. A woman had just wriggled out from under the canvas. Attractive, fair-haired, wearing nothing but squirrel-skin knickers. They exchanged grins. This was going to be their day.

Their smiles broadened still further when a naked woman popped out behind her. The two of them started jiggling in their direction. It would have been much wiser for them to have run the other way, but far less fun.

Their task here was simple; destroy the camp, and massacre everyone inside it. It was a just punishment. Ragnar had spared the trolls on condition that they crossed the Great Forest and joined the Western army which was amassing there. Instead, they had taken over the slave-market and preyed on passers-by who were looking for a little company. They had broken their word. And now they would pay the price.

The two elder brothers watched as a nude dwarf emerged from beneath the tent, running after the naked women as if his life depended on it. "Pussy!" they heard him shout, brazen as even an unclothed dwarf can be. "Pussy!"

You had to admire his balls.

As the Amazon neared their dune, her buxom friend rugby-tackled her to the sand, and the two of them started rolling around in what was presumably a passionate clinch. Then, just as suddenly, they were off again, leading the dwarf back towards the tent, no doubt eager for some afternoon delight. If they had known the women here were quite so brazen, they would have visited long ago, before Ragnar had given the order to wipe the inhabitants off the face of the earth.

"I'm keeping the Amazon," declared Hvitserk, staring the other two down. "We massacre the others, but I'm saving the Amazon for myself."

"I'll have the other woman," Sigurd announced, as he watched Pussy disappearing back into the tent. "Thighs like a racehorse, and humps like a prize camel."

Bjorn took a long hard look at the naked dwarf who was convulsing painfully on the baking-hot sand as he struggled back under the canvas. He turned to face his brothers, fighting back the urge to smash their gloating faces in.

"You bastards," he said. "You've gone and left me with one of them horrible little blokes again."

Hvitserk smirked. "Treat her gently."

Bjorn raised his sword, and charged across the sand, ready to work out his frustration on the skulls of whoever came into his path. Hvitserk and Sigurd followed on behind him, not wishing to miss out on the fun. There was death to distribute. And afterwards, there were two slave-girls to break in, plus a funny little dwarf to dangle in front of their funny little brother.

#

Free at last.

With Martha and Mabel gone, and Doris having no use for them, Rod and Alfie had been put out to grass. Both had different ideas as to what to do now they were no longer donkeys.

From what they had gathered from their previous owners, a Watcher was being held prisoner by the witches and Amazons back at Spartan Castle, and they were planning to march into battle against everyone on Hedral who had a set of knackers. Rod knew enough about Watchers to know that this was not a good thing. Thane – the mercenary who had helped him on his earlier quest – had explained the role that they played in the “divine order” of things. Sticking him in a cage and feeding him carrots seemed a bit harsh to say the least.

“We’ve got to rescue him,” Rod urged.

“The feck we have. I’m staying here with Autumn. You go, if you like. Send me a post-card, okay?” He snuggled up to the witches’ apprentice. He was going nowhere in a hurry.

“Look, I know how this works. I’ve done it before. We’ve got no chance of getting back to the pub until we sort things out here. Maybe that’s all we’ve got to do; stick the bloke back in his cave, and ask for directions home. Job done.”

“Maybe he doesn’t know the way home.”

“He will. Trust me, mate. We find the Watcher, and we’ll be back at the bar in no time, getting the beers in. And by the way, you owe me one for this.”

“I don’t want to go home. I’m staying here. Me and Autumn; we’re in love.”

“Bollocks you are.”

“We are.”

“You don’t know nothing about her.”

“I do! We’ve been talking.”

“Why does she want to be a witch, then? You’re so loved-up, answer me that.”

“I don’t know stuff like that. Just important stuff. Her favourite colour’s blue. And she doesn’t like turnips. Ask me anything else. Anything you like.”

“I want to be a witch,” Autumn interjected, feeling that it was time for a little female sanity to be introduced to the conversation, “because all my family were witches. Or Cunning-folk, as we call them back home. All the men and all the women. My father, Lingus, was the greatest of them all.”

“Cunning Lingus?”

She nodded. Alfie chuckled despite himself.

“I’ll bet all the ladies loved Cunning Lingus.”

“They did. He was kind, and wise and looked after us all. I want to be like him.”

“Like Cunning Lingus?” Alfie laughed, barely able to contain himself.

Rod elbowed him in the chest. “Pack it in. That’s your father-in-law you’re talking about.”

“So you went looking for the witches?” he asked, changing the subject before Alfie could dig himself into an even deeper hole. “Asked to join up?”

“No. They had a witch-trial in our village. A competition, to see who had magic in them.”

“Like Hex-Factor?” quipped Alfie, on the verge of wetting himself. Rod elbowed him again, harder this time.

“Your Dad. Lingus. Is he still around? Do you think he’d help us?”

“My father could do anything.”

“Result. Are you in, Alfie?”

Alfie wiped the tears from his eyes. “As if I’m gonna stay here on my own, while you two go off for Cunning Lingus! Besides, I need to ask him to pay for our wedding.”

#

The Ferryman guided his boat up against the far bank, holding it steady with one foot as Halfshaft scrambled off.

“It’s customary to give me a tip.”

“I’ll give you the tip of my boot up your bottom, if you’re not careful.”

“You’re a bit stressed, aren’t you? A lot of them are. But it’s not so bad down here, not once you get used to it. And once they think you’ve learnt your lesson, you’re eligible for reincarnation, which is always a laugh.”

“Reincarnation? Back on Hedral?”

“No. You’ve got to start on this place called “Earth”, and work your way up. It’s a bit dodgy there. You’ll probably meet a few of them in the waiting room. You’ll know them when you see them. They’re all getting cross cos they can’t get any reception on their mobile phones.”

“Mobile phones?”

“You’ll see.”

He held out his hand, but because his arms were so short Halfshaft was unable to shake it without getting back in the boat. He gave the man a salute instead, to show there was no hard feelings.

The Ferryman tried to salute back, though his arms were too short to reach his forehead.

“Naval salute, I like that. Cos I’m sort of like a captain, aren’t I? The captain of my little boat.”

“Let me know if the dog dies, and you can take me back home again.”

He walked away. Almost immediately, he came across a well-maintained pathway, lit by dim lanterns suspended from posts along one side. There were signposts every so often, bearing such legends as “This way to check-in” and “Please have your Soul ready for inspection”. One said “Trespassers welcome”. He followed the path. He didn’t appear to have a great deal of choice.

It eventually led him to what people from another world might have compared to the departure lounge of a modest-sized airport. People milled around in the semi-darkness, checking message-boards on the wall, before returning despondently to their seats.

A husband and wife were arguing with a man in a black uniform. Their throats had been freshly sliced. They had their luggage with them, and were furiously protesting as the official prised it out of their fingers. “How many times have you people got to be told?” the man in uniform chided. “You can’t take it with you.”

Halfshaft approached him, as much for human contact as anything else. This was all alien to him. It was like the first night in a maximum security prison, knowing that he’d have to brave the communal showers the next day. He was very, very scared.

“Can you tell me what I’m supposed to be doing? It’s my first time here.”

“Oh, I doubt that very much,” replied the official. “You’ve probably been here plenty of times before, you just don’t remember. You’ll need to go and see that lady over there, Check-in number 3. I’m helping another customer right now.”

“He is *not* helping us,” the husband protested. “We’d never have topped ourselves if we’d have known all our luggage was going to be confiscated when we got here.”

“We should report him,” chimed in the wife. “There’s no need for him to be so rude.”

“This is the Underworld, Lady,” the official told her. “If you get upset that I’ve taken away your change of clothing, I’d love to see how you react when they dunk your head in a barrelful of demon-shite”.

She burst into tears. Her husband tried to console her, glaring at the man in the black uniform as if he were some sort of fiend (which was, in fact, not very far from the truth at all).

“It’s all right,” he soothed her. “That’s not so bad. They did something very similar on “I’m a Celebrity, Get Me Out of Here”, and they were all fine the following morning.”

Halfshaft reported to the check-in, as he was bid. There was much grumbling by the people ahead of him when the check-in closed after ten minutes, and they were re-allocated to another queue, and even more when after a further ten minutes this second check-in closed and they were all directed to return to the original one. Eventually, however, he made it to the front of the queue.

“Name?” asked the officious woman behind the desk.

“Halfshaft”.

“Offence?”

“Sorry?”

She looked at him as if he was being deliberate awkward. “Offence?” she repeated.

“None taken,” he shrugged, hoping that this might be what she wanted to hear. It wasn’t.

“What is it you’ve done wrong?” she asked.

“Nothing.”

“They all say that. The man before you just claimed that his worst sin was photo-copying his bottom at a Christmas party. Let’s see your tag.”

“I haven’t got one.”

“Everyone’s got a tag.”

She leant over the desk to check his wrist. There was nothing on it. She twisted his arm around, as if there would be one on the other side, but all to no avail. She huffed. “Where’s it gone?”

“I’m not supposed to be here. I was in this duel with another wizard. And while I had my back turned, he sent me here. It’s all been a terrible mistake.”

She looked at him thoughtfully. “I suppose you might be telling the truth. You’re sure you haven’t done anything sinful? No murder, arson, piracy, that sort of thing?”

“Nothing like that at all.”

“Okay, turn out your pockets. I need to check you’ve not just stuffed your tag in there to try to lie your way out of here. If there’s no tag, I’ll call my supervisor; see whether or not we can get you sent back home again.”

He did as she asked. Loose change, disintegrating hankies, a bottle-opener, an used coach-ticket to the Wizard’s Convention, another bottle-opener and some rolled up sheets of paper.

“What are those?”

“Oh, nothing,” replied Halfshaft, blushing bright red.

“Let me see them.”

He handed the parchments over. She unrolled them, one at a time, and viewed the image on each with increasing distaste. She looked at him as if he was some sort of pervert (which, of course, he was).

“What are these?”

“They’re Wizard’s Wives,” he informed her, hanging his head in shame.

“At your age,” she snorted. She threw the drawings into the bin, and returned to her paperwork.

“I’ll put you down here as pervert.” She stamped his pass, and handed it to him, making sure not to make any contact with his fingers as she did so. “Gate C. Keep an eye on the boards, and they’ll tell you when your punishment is ready.”

He sloped off, taking a seat as far from any of his fellow sinners as possible, and waited for his number to come up. It was not unlike taking your place at the collection-point at your local “Argos”.

#

The trolleses emerged from their tents, a trail of frightened sex-slaves in their wake.

The soldiers closed in, baying like fox-hounds. There were about three of them to each troll. Their mission was to isolate the trolls, dispatch them, and then execute everyone else who did not appear to be worth recruiting to the Cause.

Three of them circled Grunt-mate, jeering at her and poking at her with their swords. She had no weapons save for her hands and her teeth. Every time she tried to face one of them, the others would close in, slicing her with their swords, and forcing her to turn to face them. She would then turn her attention to another soldier, only for the same thing to happen again. They were toying with her, like cats playing with a bird with a broken wing.

They had under-estimated her, though. She resolved to ignore the pain of sword-metal in flesh, and pressed home her attack on the nearest soldier, even as the other two hacked at her flanks. She seized him, took a chunk out of his face, and battered his two comrades with his lifeless body. One of them fell to the ground, and she was on him in an instant, tearing his arms from his sockets. The other ran for cover.

Elsewhere, the other trolls were having less success. One by one, they were falling to the swords of the soldiers. Crug-mate moved on, pounding on the skulls of two men who were trying to hack her sister to pieces, but she was

fighting a lost cause. Each time a troll fell, the soldiers went to reinforce their colleagues, so the trolls were more and more outnumbered. It was just a case of how many she could take with her before she fell.

Assistance came from an unexpected quarter. The new Amazon slave – Takarta, was it? – came hurtling out of a tent, and scissor-kicked one of the soldiers in the face. He dropped to his knees, clutching a broken nose. She seized his sword, and wheeled around to face the next man, who was closing in on her fast. She was a fraction too slow; there was insufficient time for her to fend him off. But there was no need. Grunt-mate plucked him up into the air, and head-butted him so hard that she fractured his spine.

“You should have told me you were a warrior,” Grunt-mate scolded her new-found ally. “I would have put you to better use.”

“I am an Amazon. What else would I be?”

The army had started to turn its attention to the slaves and the customers, as there were no longer enough surviving trolls to go round. The stronger looking ones were separated into male and female groups, and then herded away. The weaker ones were slaughtered, their desperate pleas for mercy falling on deaf ears. If they weren't fit enough to do battle, they were of no use to anyone.

Takina and Grunt-mate set upon the nearest soldiers, resolved to fight on until they could fight no more. They came from very different backgrounds, but both trolls and Amazons had one thing in common: they both knew that to die in battle was a glorious way to go.

Three men encircled them. Two of them were tall, bearded, and bore a very strong resemblance to Ragnar. The third was squat and powerful, like an ugly human bear. The first two had their swords drawn, and the third was wielding a bloodied battle-axe. All of them were clearly relishing the contest to come.

Grunt-mate lunged for Sigurd. He evaded her easily, and sliced his sword across her back as she passed him by. He could have rammed his sword right through her, but restrained himself. There was no point finishing her off quickly, when he could have a little sport first.

Takina launched herself at him, but Hvitserk plucked her from the air and slammed her down into the sand. She struggled to get up, but he was too strong. He pinned her down as if she was an errant child, preventing her from bringing the sword into play. The more she thrashed around, the more he laughed.

“I’ve caught myself a ferocious little savage. I’m going to have so much fun breaking you in.”

Grunt-mate aimed a kick at his head, but Sigurd intervened, shoving her whilst she was off-balance and sending her toppling to the floor. Again, he sliced her with his sword, deep enough to wound her but not so as to kill her. Plenty of time for that later.

Pussy rushed out of the tent, ready to come to her new friend’s rescue, with Hubert following on behind with considerably less determination, still pulling on his trousers. Bjorn grabbed them both in a waist-high bear-hug, which left Pussy kicking and screaming and Hubert dangling impotently in mid-air. Neither of them were warriors. Their battle was over almost as soon as it had begun.

Hvitserk and Sigurd swapped places, the eldest brother being keen to have a little combative fun while the troll was still able to fight back (and the middle brother keen to have a little fun while the Amazon was still intent on squirming around on the sand beneath him). Again and again, Grunt-mate charged at the eldest of the brothers, but each time Hvitserk stepped aside like a bull-fighter, slashing at her back and sides until her clothes were drench-heavy with blood.

One of the tents went up in flames. There were still people inside it. A handful of sex-slaves came rushing out, followed by a gaggle of cursing dwarfs. Finally, Hench hopped into view, attempting to step into his tiny pink G-string as he went, in a futile and misguided attempt at clinging on to the last shred of dignity he still possessed. It was a hopeless task in any event. He knew deep down that it would take him a quarter of an hour to coax the garment over and into his gelatinous body, and time was a luxury he did not have.

Several soldiers closed in on him, and took it in turns to jab him in his wobbling buttocks with their swords, following the example which their

leaders had set with the big trolls. It was like some hideously perverted game of “blind-man’s-buff”, made so much worse by the fact that the blind man could see the expressions of delighted derision all around him (and made so much worse for his tormentors because he really was “in the buff”).

As Takina bucked beneath Sigurd, and Pussy and Hubert struggled in Bjorn’s arms, Hvitserk moved in for the kill on the troll. He brought his sword crashing down on to Grunt-mate’s skull, and stepped backwards, waiting for her to drop neatly at his feet. He was an artist with the sword. He had not only executed her, but had planned exactly where she should fall for maximum effect.

She staggered, but stayed upright. Puzzled, Hvitserk struck again, harder still. Grunt-mate dropped to her knees, the world swimming about her, giddy through loss of blood. He closed in to finish her off.

“No!” screamed Takina. “She is defenceless!”

Hvitserk winked at her, and chopped his sword down upon Grunt-mate’s neck, hacking off her head in one stroke.

“She is now,” he joked.

Takina tried to kick out at him, but he was just out of range. He pushed Sigurd off her and dragged her to her feet. “Don’t look so angry. You’re one of the lucky ones. They get to die, and you get me.”

“I would rather die.”

“There’s plenty of time for that, later. None of my little companions ever last longer than a week or two.”

He tired of the conversation. “Bjorn, come with me. It’s time to give our new recruits their orders.”

Bjorn offered Hubert to Sigurd. His brother raised an eyebrow. Cursing, Bjorn offered him Pussy instead, whom he accepted with relish. What use was a dwarf to him, when he could have a naked slave-girl? Especially one as top-heavy as this.

Bjorn stomped off, with the ashen-faced dwarf tucked under his arm. He took out his frustrations on Hench as he passed him by, lopping off the creature's blubbery head with his battle-axe on the way by. His men howled in disappointment, having determined to keep their game going for as long as they could, but Bjorn was in no mood to play. His brothers would be frolicking around with nubile sex-slaves that night, fulfilling their carnal desires until drowsily satiated, whilst he would have to settle with yet another session of dwarf basket-ball. How was that fair?

#

It had taken them until night-fall to reach Autumn's village. They were tired, but it could have been worse. At least they didn't have old ladies clinging on their backs any more.

The village appeared to be deserted. Rod and Alfie checked each hut in turn, looking for signs of life, but found no-one at all. Autumn made straight for one particular hut, and came out crying. Alfie put his arm round her, feeling slightly guilty that he was enjoying the physical contact when she was so very upset.

"My family," she explained. "They're all gone."

"How about Cunning Lingus?" asked Rod.

"Let's find her family first," Alfie replied.

Autumn led them out of the village, into the woods. It was dark, and the trees seemed somehow unfriendly. It was nothing Alfie could put his finger on; they just seemed hostile for some reason, leaning over the pathway to menace the three of them.

There was a dwelling at the end of the pathway, not much more than a hovel. It looked abandoned. The thatch had come off in clumps, and a section of the wall had caved in a few feet from the battered wooden door.

"I'll go in first," she told them. Alfie protested, but she ignored him. She hurried into the hut, whilst the two men waited nervously outside.

“It’s very dark, isn’t it?” Alfie remarked.

“Last time I was in the woods, I got chased by wolves.”

“Feck off,” Alfie retorted. “You don’t get wolves in England. Not south of the Watford Gap anyway.”

“You still don’t get it, do you? We’re not in Ramsgate any more. We’re not even on Earth.”

“Course we are.”

“Then how come there are witches running around all over the place? And Amazons?”

“It must be something they put in the water. A government experiment gone wrong. They were trying to make us all zombies or something, but they made it like this instead. I’ve seen films about it. ”

Rod gestured around him.

“Where are the houses, then? And the roads? And the pubs, come to that? And where did all these bloody huts come from?”

“Government conspiracy,” Alfie persisted. “The Council must have taken everything away while we weren’t looking.”

“How long were you in the pub?” Rod asked.

“A couple of hours.”

“When was the last time Thanet District Council ever did anything in a couple of hours? Yet alone rolled up all the roads, packed away the houses, and -”

“Shut your face,” retorted Alfie. “I don’t care how they’ve done it. I’m just glad they have, cos I can be with my Autumn now.”

The girl in question emerged from the hut, a relieved smile on her face. “He’s here,” she said. “He’s alive.”

Alfie hugged her. Any excuse. And once she had eventually managed to prise him off her, she beckoned them to follow her in.

It was hard to see much in the hut – the candle in the corner was too small to throw out much light – but they could make out a rudimentary table, with a bundle of rags behind it. The bundle of rags held out a hand for the two of them to shake in turn. Alfie wiped his hands on his jeans afterwards, resolving to wash them at the first available opportunity. The man was in need of a good bath.

“It’s a tramp,” he whispered to Rod.

“It’s your father-in-law” Rod whispered back.

“I’m Lingus,” the man wheezed. “Thank you for bringing my daughter back to me. Just in time.”

“That’s okay,” Alfie said. “We’re gonna get married. Can you pay for the wedding?”

“We’re not getting married,” Autumn protested. “I like you, but I can’t marry you. I want to be a witch.”

“That’s okay,” Alfie reassured her. “I’ve got no problem with my wife having a part-time job.”

Alfie and Autumn started squabbling, Autumn pointing out that being a witch was not a job but a way of life, Alfie responding that he didn’t care what it was, as long as she was home in time to cook his tea. Rod decided to leave them to it. He addressed Lingus instead.

“What happened here? Where’s everyone gone?”

“A woman came. A warrior. She took all the women, and sent the men off to the Great Forest. None of them wanted to go, but they didn’t have any choice. She had the children, you see.”

“They didn’t take you, though?”

“I hid in my hut. I was a coward.” The guilt which wracked his voice was painful to hear. “I watched them take my family away.”

Rod shifted uncomfortably. He had a question, but it was a difficult one to ask.

“You didn’t try and save them?”

“I tried magic. But there were witches with her. My magic was too weak. I watched them take my family away, and then came back to my hut. I put my own safety over theirs.”

“When was this?”

“Two hours ago.”

Autumn broke off her conversation/bickering with Alfie. “They were here? Two hours ago?”

The rag-bundle nodded.

“Then we must go after them, Father. The two of us. We could do it, between the two of us.”

“You need more magic than we possess. You need a wizard.”

“I know a wizard,” Rod exclaimed. “Halfshaft. He’s my mate.”

Lingus laughed without humour, and then subsided into a coughing fit. “I know Halfshaft, too. He used to visit my sister when the mood took him. But he hasn’t been here for ten years or more. Besides, we need a proper, n wizard for this. The Grand Wizard might have helped, but not now. He was taken by the witches a decade ago, him and Spartan. Used as donkeys, believe it or not. Poor degraded wretches.”

“Alfie used to be a donkey,” Autumn chimed in, much to the irritation of her husband-to-be, who didn’t think he was creating the right impression for his future father-in-law.

“Hug me,” said Lingus.

“No, you’re alright, mate,” Alfie recoiling in disgust. He wasn’t about to start hugging men, especially filthy ones like this, even if they were soon to be closely related.

“I was talking to my daughter.”

Autumn, ran to Lingus, and hugged him tightly. He gasped in pain, and coughed up blood.

“What is it? What have they done to you?”

He shook his head. “They’ve done nothing to me. It’s poison. I’ve poisoned myself.”

“Why? Why would you do such a thing?”

“I watched them take away your mother, your brothers, your sister. When my magic didn’t work, I turned tail and scurried into my hut so they wouldn’t find me. What use is life to me now?”

“But what about me?” she cried. “I was still here.”

He choked up more blood. “Sorry. I forgot.”

And with that, he was dead.

“Crap last words,” Alfie remarked, a tad insensitively.

Autumn started sobbing, partly in grief and partly in anger. She had lost her beloved father, by his own hand. And he had not given her a second thought as he swallowed the poison to end his own life. Maybe he was not the great and caring man she had always believed him to be.

Alfie wrapped her in his arms, stroking her hair to comfort her. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I really am. But it’s gonna be alright now. Everything’s gonna be alright. You’ve got me to look after you now.”

For some inexplicable reason, she sobbed all the more.

#

A man with a clipboard came to collect Halfshaft, after what seemed like an eternity. He would ordinarily have complained bitterly about the delay –he was something of an expert at bitter complaints, after all – but thought better of it. If he was being escorted to Hell, any delay was to be welcomed.

“Can I ask a question first?” he asked.

“Yes,” the man replied cheerfully. “Was that it?”

“What?”

“Your question.”

The wizard sighed. It was bad enough being escorted into the depths of the Underworld, without having to cope with a smart-ass guide on the way.

“Can I ask another question?”

“You’ve done it again. Do you see? You guys never learn, do you?”

Halfshaft decided to dispense with the pleasantries. He had been consigned to the Underworld through no fault of his own, and was destined to spend all eternity with the most wicked and vicious people who had ever lived. It seemed unlikely that anyone would be too perturbed if he didn’t ask for permission every time he wanted to speak.

“Is Takina down here?”

His guide shook his head. “Not if she’s died within the last 6 days. I’ve got all recent Hedral deaths on my rota, and there’s no Takina down here.”

He was 99% relieved. He didn’t want her to suffer what he was about to go through. But the other 1% was disappointed. It wouldn’t have seemed quite so bad if he had someone down here to keep him company. Especially her.

“I shouldn’t be here,” he said.

“Says here you’re a dirty old pervert,” his guide remarked, checking his list.

“She said she was just going to put me down as a pervert!” Halfshaft complained. He took a look at the list. “Look. She’s written in the words “dirty old” in pencil!”

“You’re right. I’ll have words with her about that. Tell you what, I’ll cross out the word “old”? How’s that for a compromise? That way, you’ll just be a dirty pervert? Is that okay?”

Halfshaft nodded miserably. What difference did it make what type of pervert he was? He didn't have the strength to argue the point.

"If you wish. Now, can you just show me to my room? I'm very tired."

"Room? Bless you, you don't get rooms here. Just pain and humiliation." He punched Halfshaft in the groin, and looked on sympathetically as the wizard doubled up in agony. "Sorry about that. It's part of the induction. I get a written warning if I miss it out. Three written warnings, and it would be someone escorting me to Hell, and giving me a whack in the testicles, and we wouldn't want that now, would we?"

Halfshaft shook his head, as he wiped the tears from his eyes. "What happens now?"

"You'll like this bit." The guide took out five tarot cards, and fanned them out. "Pick three cards. Go on. Any ones you like."

Halfshaft stared at him in amazement. "Is this my punishment? I've got to watch you do magic tricks for all eternity?"

"No. You're choosing your punishments. We used to give everyone all five. It was called the "Five Sense Experience" in the brochure. The thing you least wanted to see, least wanted to hear, least wanted to taste, feel, smell. But our budget's been cut, you only get to have three of them now. It was decided that more of the funding should go upstairs, where they "deserve" it. I don't agree with that myself. As far as I can make out, they just prance around all day in their togas, plucking on their little harps. You don't need a budget for that. Whereas down here, at the bottom of the World Tree, we have all sorts of expenses. "Special equipment", if you get my drift. You're a dirty old pervert, you'll know what I mean by that.

"I'm just a dirty pervert," Halfshaft reminded him, selecting three of the cards at random. "We dropped the word "old", remember?"

The guide gave him a reassuring nod, and surveyed the cards with interest.

"What have I got?" asked Halfshaft. "What are you going to do to me?"

“Two of these cards are stuck together. That means you’ll get both of them, you lucky boy.; “least want to taste” and “least want to smell” at the same ordeal. The other one’s “least want to hear”. You sure you don’t want to draw again. Our “least want to feel” ordeal is genius.”

“I’ll stick with what I’ve got,” Halfshaft told him. “Come on, then. Let’s get it over with.”

“It won’t be over with for a few thousand years at least. You’re supposed to be here forever, don’t forget. No, it’s back to the departure lounge for now, I’m afraid. I’m expecting a consignment from a sex-slave-market in an hour or two, and I want to double you guys up. Keep costs down.”

“Typical,” Halfshaft complained. “I don’t even get eternal damnation to myself!”

#

Takina, Pussy and Hubert had been thrown into a cart, and taken to the docks. These were the nearest thing that Hedral had to a town. Rows of tiny houses lined the quayside, each packed with merchants hoping to do business with the ships docked in the harbour, and willing to cut open the throats of the crews once the deal was done.

Once on board Hvitserk’s ship, they had been taken to the captain’s quarters, and forced into low cages beneath the built-in seating. By the smell of them, they had been designed to house chickens and other small live-stock. The three of them had to lie there, wrinkling their noses as they peered through the grill, as Hvitserk and his brothers congratulated themselves on a job well done. Takina’s only consolation was that they had at least returned her bra to her. Hvitserk, it transpired, was very territorial about her chest, and didn’t want his crew checking out his property before he had had the opportunity to thoroughly examine it himself.

“To twenty dead trolls!” Hvitserk toasted, and the three brothers gave a rowdy cheer, raising their tankards and crashing them together with such

gusto that there could have been very little left in them to drink once they had finished.

“To fifteen males of fighting age sent to join the Eastern army, and twenty seven females for the Western one!” roared Sigurd, and the tankards collided again.

“And to two ravishing sex-slaves!” chuckled Hvitserk, cutting across Bjorn, who was just about to make a toast of his own. The two older brothers raised their tankards higher this time, so that Bjorn could not quite reach. He bellowed in annoyance, which made them laugh all the more.

“And to Bjorn’s sexy little dwarf!” Sigurd toasted. “No more lonely nights for our baby brother!”

Hvitserk and Sigurd roared with laughter. Bjorn hand went to the battle-axe lashed to his back, but he thought better of it. Father would not be best pleased if he lopped his brothers’ heads off before they had accomplished their mission. He would try reasoning with them first. And then lop their heads off afterwards.

“We should share the girls,” he declared. “I’m fed up with being stuck with the dwarf every time.”

Hubert huffed. “How very dare he? I’d make a much better sex-slave than the two of you put together. I can do things that’ll make your hair curl.”

Takina thought it best to ignore him. She had no wish to know what the dwarf could do, and even less desire to have curly hair. One of her tribe had asked the Shamen, their witch-doctor, to give her curls once, and the rest of the tribe had scaped her and presented her tresses to Queen Rana as a breast-warmer for the winter-months. Breast-warmers were highly prized when the weather turned cold. That was the only drawback in running around with virtually no clothes on; you froze your tits off in February.

“I’m not having your sloppy seconds,” Hvitserk declared. “Think how unhygienic that would be. No, best if Sigurd and I sample the delights of our nubile sex-slaves, while you fill your hairy boots with that friendly little fellow over there. Once you’ve hosed the chicken-shit out of his beard, of course.”

Bjorn grabbed his battle-axe. His two brothers unsheathed their swords. They stood there for a full twenty seconds, deciding whether to hack each other to pieces.

“I’m hungry!” called out Hubert. “You can all have me, for a plate of biscuits.”

The three of them collapsed into helpless heaps of laughter. Weapons were returned to their sheaths, at least until the next time. The menace which had pervaded the atmosphere had dissipated in an instant, leaving the brothers the best of friends again.

“We’ve lost two brothers to squabbles already,” Sigurd said. “Let’s not lose a third.”

“Father said he’d kill us all if we do,” Bjorn pointed out, a little guiltily as he had been the one responsible for chopping his other two siblings into pieces. They had deserved it. They had nicknamed him “Stumpy”.

They raised their tankards for one final toast.

“To Father!” Hvitserk shouted.

“To Father!”

They left the room, laughing, and patting each other on the back.

“Wait!” Hubert called after them in despair. “Wait! I wasn’t joking about the biscuits!”

#

Back in Lingus’ hut, Autumn was in pieces. Her father was dead. Not just a father, but the wise man of the village. There would be no more Cunning Lingus for any of them.

And on top of that, her mother, her brothers, her sister, all vanished. She would not rest until she had found them. And she would have her revenge on this Lathgertha woman, who had taken them all away.

Her emotions were in turmoil, and this was made worse still by the attention she was being given by Alfie, the younger of the two donkeys she was accompanying on this quest. Her main reason for wanting to be a witch was to follow in the wise old footsteps of her father, but the decision to leave had been made easier by the fact that all of the other men in her village were complete idiots. All they cared about was harvesting sufficient crops to buy enough alcohol from Spartan Castle to get them through the next twelve months. And from the amount they drank, it was astonishing that they were able to harvest anything at all. Some of their plough-lines became so crooked after a heavy drinking session that they often went round in a great big circle and ended up where they started.

And their attitude to women was unsophisticated to say the least. Her mother had taught her about courtship. "When will I know if a man likes me?" Autumn had asked her. "He'll grab you by the hips from behind," her mother had explained, "and tell you to brace yourself."

But Alfie was different. He had laughed at Cunning Lingus, which had not impressed her at all, but despite even that he seemed much more mature than the boys from her village. He had hugged her and comforted her, and had not tried to mount her when she had her back to him. He was a gentleman.

Had she known him sooner, she might have had second thoughts about signing up for the Witch Academy, but then again she might not. Being a witch was all she had ever wanted to do. It would have been asking a lot of her to put her life-long ambition aside for the sake of one man, however attentive he might be.

"So what now?" Alfie asked.

"We find my family. And the other villagers. And we set them all free."

"We'll need a wizard, though. That's what your Lingus guy said. It'll take a wizard."

"I know where's there one," Rod said. "You know when those witches captured us, and turned us into donkeys?"

Alfie shivered. He remembered it only too well. He still had the saddle-marks to prove it.

“Well, one of those blokes was a wizard.”

“How do you know that?”

“He was wearing a wizard’s dress. Like Halfshaft.”

“He had half a what?”

“Don’t know who the other bloke was, but I guess we only need one wizard. He looked a bit knackered. No surprise, when you’ve had two old ladies riding around on your back all day. But it’s got to be worth a go.”

“I agree,” Autumn nodded. “We find him, and make him join us. And the other donkey, too, if he’s any use to us.”

Alfie shrugged. “You’re the boss, my Angel.”

They elected to stay in the hut until morning, give Lingus a decent burial, and then trek back to Martha’s in search of the wizard.

“We’re off to see the wizard,” Rod chuckled, as he snuggled down under his blanket.

“If you start singing that fecking song,” snapped Alfie, “you can sleep out-fecking-side!”

#

The guide popped his head round a “staff-only” door, and beckoned for Halfshaft to follow him.

“Okay, everything’s ready,” he chuckled. “The thing you’d least want to smell, and the thing you’d least like to taste, all combined into one.”

Halfshaft followed apprehensively behind him. He had hoped to have a few days of acclimatisation before his ordeals started. If he was going to be here for all eternity, it didn't seem to him that there should be any great hurry.

His guide started chuckling. "Under different circumstances, you would really appreciate this. It's total genius. And the timing! He only arrived an hour or two ago; we've not even had time to let him choose his own punishments yet. But it was just too perfect. I might well get promotion for this."

"What is it? What do I have to do?"

"It's a surprise. I don't want to spoil it for you."

"I really don't mind. I hate surprises anyway."

"You shouldn't have told me that," the guide advised him, making a note on his clipboard. "I'll have to work that into your next ordeal now. If there's anything you're not too keen on, better keep it to yourself, or it'll come back to bite you. Literally bite you, as often as not."

Halfshaft followed in silence, terrified of letting slip any of his many phobias. He was terrified of dragons, trolls, witches, being buried alive, being buried dead, evil spirits, watered down spirits, and being made to do PE lessons in his pants at school. If his guide was so ingenious, who was to say that he would not try and incorporate all these things into one ordeal, which would leave him as a complete gibbering wreck. He was determined not to mentally disintegrate until at least Day Three of however many million days he would be here.

The guide stopped outside a door in the dimly lit corridor.

"We're here," he said. "Are you okay?"

Halfshaft shook his head.

"You're not going to flush my head down the toilet, or something, are you? I wouldn't like that."

The guide scribbled furiously on his clip-board. "What did I just tell you? I'm going to have to write that down now. Doesn't like head in toilet. Fits in well with the smell and taste ordeals. Right, let's get this done with."

“Okay.” Halfshaft took a deep breath. “How hard can this be, after all?”

“It’s pretty bad.”

“I’ve just got to keep telling myself, it won’t be forever.”

“It will, you know.”

“Please! You’ve got to give me something to work with here!”

The guide thought for a while, and then thought for a while longer. Eventually, he stumbled upon a crumb of comfort.

“Okay, okay, I’ve got it. It’s not all bad. You get tea-breaks once every four hours.”

Halfshaft breathed a sigh of relief.

“That’s good,” he said. “At least I know that I get some respite once in a while.”

“I wouldn’t get too excited about it, though. I haven’t told you what you’re going to have to drink yet.”

#

“Has anyone got a hair-grip?” Takina whispered.

“Are you going to make yourself pretty for me?” Hubert perked up.

“I am going to try and pick the lock, and get us out of here.”

“Good. I’m getting cramp lying here. And I think I’ve got chicken poo up my nostrils.”

“What can we do if we escape?” Pussy asked. “I can feel the boat moving. If we’re at sea, there’s nowhere to run.”

“We steal a rowing boat, and make a break for it. And if anyone sees us, I will kill them and throw their bodies over-board.”

“That’s a bit harsh,” Hubert protested. “Couldn’t you just knock them about a bit?”

“Too noisy. Best kill them,” Takina advised. Queen Rana would have been proud of her.

“Hubert!” Pussy protested. “Stop that!”

“I was just wriggling my toes.”

“I know. It’s where you’re wriggling them that concerns me.”

Hubert apologised. Pussy forgave him, and told him that she wouldn’t have minded if his toe-nails weren’t so long.

“Are you with me?” asked Takina, trying to keep her companions focussed. “Shall we escape?”

Pussy and Hubert talked this over for a few minutes, much to Takina’s frustration. They were wasting valuable time. The brothers could return at any moment. She was the only warrior of the three captives. She stood very little chance of defeating any of the brothers, but if she had to deal with all three of them on her own then her task really was a hopeless one.

Eventually, they came to a decision.

“Yes!” Hubert confirmed. “You can free us, if you like.”

“Good. Give me the hair-grip, and I will unpick the lock.”

“I haven’t got one.”

“Pussy?”

The slave-girl shook her head.

Takina sighed. It was going to be a very long journey.

#

Rod recalled that Martha's hut was close to a stream, so Autumn used a water divination spell. The three of them were now walking along the river bank, keeping an eye out for two elderly men grazing on grass.

Autumn spotted the centaurs first, thirty or forty of them a couple of miles ahead. Rod was keen on running off, and Alfie suggested throwing stones at them, but she overruled them both. Centaurs were no threat to anyone. They were gentle, peace-loving creatures. She had always wanted to meet one, but they were rarely seen in the daytime ("like vampires, badgers and cottagers", according to Alfie).

As they approached, more and more of the creatures appeared, standing silently at the water's edge as if waiting for something to happen. They were half man and half horse, each man's waist joined to where the horses' necks would otherwise have been. The horses were magnificent creatures, like small carthorses, and Autumn remarked that the men were very fine, too (which wound Alfie up in a fit of jealous pique for the rest of the day).

When they were just a few hundred yards away, the water started to churn, as if someone had just turned the Jacuzzi on. Rod and Alfie backed away, expecting the worst, but Autumn called them back, a huge smile on her face.

"Water nymphs," she whispered.

Gradually, the churning subsided, and a naked woman slid effortlessly on to the bank. She was tall and slight, and somehow insubstantial. She was followed by one ethereal woman after another, each one nude, each one elegant, each one looking so incredibly sad.

Once they were all on the river-bank, they approached the centaurs. The horses dropped to their front knees to bring the men down to the same level as the women. Each of the water nymphs sought out their centaur, and the two clung to one another in a tight and desperate embrace, the nymphs crying silently all the while.

"Blimey," Rod remarked. "It's like an Athena poster."

Autumn approached the nearest couple, and put her hand lightly on the horse's flanks (again, much to Alfie's annoyance).

“What is it?” she asked. “Why are you all so sad?”

It took awhile for either of them to notice her, such was the intimate intensity of their embrace. Eventually, the centaur turned towards her. The despair in his eyes was almost too much for her to bear.

“We’re going to war,” he said.

“That’s ridiculous. Centaurs don’t fight.”

He turned away, choking back his reply.

“They should man up,” Alfie grumbled. “Grow a pair. Except the women. They’d look *wrong* with gonads.”

Ignoring him, Autumn moved on to the next couple. They were equally emotional.

“What’s going on?” she asked. “Please tell me. Maybe we can help.”

This time it was the nymph who replied. “They’re going off to fight. We’re saying our goodbyes.”

“Can’t you stay with them?”

The water-nymph laughed bitterly. “Unfortunately not. It’s us they’re fighting.”

Autumn was bewildered.

“Why would you fight centaurs? You love them, anyone can see that.”

“We have our orders. They must fight in the male army, and we must fight for the females. And when we meet in battle, we are expected to kill each other.”

“That’s awful. But why? Why would you agree to that?”

The nymph became transparent for an instant, her whole body turned into female-shaped water, like some human-sized tear.

“She has our children; our little nymphlets. We have no choice.”

“Who?” she asked. “Who has your children?” But deep down, she already knew. It could only be Lathgertha.

The centaur and water-nymph were no longer listening to her. They gave each other one last hug, deep and fierce and hopeless, and then the nymphs were all flowing back into the river, leaving their grieving men-folk behind them.

“Goodbye,” whispered the centaur.

The river splashed tenderly in reply.

#

Halfshaft recoiled when he saw the large wooden rack in the centre of the room.

“Sorry about the out-of-date equipment,” his guide apologized. “We should have thrown that monstrosity out years ago, but the Boss won’t have it. We’re still using the iron maiden, too, believe it or not! If you’d have picked the “the-thing-you’d-least-like-to-feel card, you might have found that out the hard way!”

“This has got nothing to do with the cards I picked!” Halfshaft protested. “You said smell and taste. Not tearing my arms and legs out their sockets!”

“Technically, we are allowed to tell lies down here. This is the Underworld after all. It would be a pretty sorry excuse for Hell if we weren’t allowed to tell the occasional fib. But not to worry. The rack’s just to tie you down so you can’t escape. It won’t hurt a bit.”

“Is that a fib?”

“Maybe just a little. Now take off your hat, and lie on the rack, please. I’ve got a four thirty appointment with some errant Eskimos, so we need to get a move on here.”

Halfshaft reluctantly removed his hat. It was his badge of office, and not to be shed lightly. He took his position on the rack, whimpering a little as his guide placed his wrists and ankles in the metal cuffs at either end. He had seen the rack in use before; King Spartan had been particularly fond of public torture, and on days where he had little else to do he had popped along to the torture chamber and sat in the public gallery, munching on his sandwiches as the torturer wrung confession after confession out of whoever was on the itinerary that day. Had he known that one day he would be facing the same ordeal, possibly for the whole of eternity, he might not have tucked into his packed lunch with quite as much gusto.

“Ready?” the guide asked.

“No,” wailed Halfshaft.

The guide chuckled. “They all say that, first time round. Makes me laugh every time.”

He clapped his hands, and the light in the chamber dimmed still further, so it was difficult to see very much at all. There was a grinding sound above, presumably as a heavy trap-door swung open, and then silence.

“What is it?” Halfshaft asked. “What’s up there?”

“You’ll see. Friendly word of advice. I’d keep your mouth closed if I were you.”

There was something moving above, something being slowly lowered towards his face. He strained to see it, but could not make it out yet. It was too dark.

And then a whimper from above. There was definitely someone there, someone who seemed to be just as frightened as he was. He had to know what was going on. The suspense was almost worse than the torture (which, he supposed, was kind of the point).

“Who’s there?” he shouted. “Who’s up there?”

But there was no response, save for renewed whimpering, a sinister and pitiful sound which set his teeth on edge. He looked over towards the guide, but he had stepped back into the shadows. There was no-one to reassure him,

no-one to save him. It was just him, and whatever miserable creature was being lowered towards him.

He strained his eyes. He had to be able to see; things would be so much better if he knew what it was up there, *who* was up there. Gradually he made out human flesh; pale white flesh, and plenty of it, descended towards his face an inch or two at a time. And all the while, that terrible mewing, like an orphaned kitten inadvertently locked up for the night in boarding kennels for unruly Rottweilers.

A flash of pink. What was it? Something truly terrible was up there, something so unimaginably awful that even his guide was hiding away somewhere, too squeamish to watch.

And then it struck him. He knew what this thing was. And it was worse, so very much worse, than he had ever imagined. As the full horror of his situation struck him, he started screaming, one shrill shriek after another, as the monstrosity was winched down on to his face. For the great fleshy object, now just inches away, was the big, monstrously fat bottom of Hensch, the slave-trader, clad for some inexplicable reason in nothing but a tiny pink cheese-wire thong. And within seconds, he would be suffocating beneath that huge hairy arse.

The thing you would least want to smell, the guide had said. The thing you would least want to taste! Oh, the inhumanity of it all!

The guide started laughing, a fit of giggling which may have been infectious under other circumstances. The hairy bottom above the wizard came to a halt, swinging back and forth an inch or two above his twitching nose.

“Oh, this is priceless,” cried the guide. “Priceless! The look on your face.”

Halfshaft failed to see the funny side. Why couldn't they have just stretched him on the rack? It would have been far more pleasant, and infinitely less humiliating than the punishment which had been assigned for him.

“Okay,” called the guide. “Winch him back up!”

The bottom slowly disappeared from view as it was hoisted upwards into the darkness, although the image of it would live in Halfshaft's nightmares for the rest of his days.

"Right, let's get you out of there, and we'll move on to the next room."

"Thank you," Halfshaft gasped. "Thank you so much. I thought you were going to lower him right on to my face!"

"Don't thank me," the guide replied. "Thank those idiots upstairs. The rope was just that little bit too short. Our technical guys will get that fixed while we're in the room next-door. Don't worry, though. It's never so bad the second time around."

#

Bjorn entered the cabin, dropping heavily to his knees to unlock their cage.

"If I can't have you," he muttered, "then I'll be damned if they do."

Takina wasn't sure what to make of this. Was he going to set them free, or hack them to pieces with his axe? As it turned out, it was a little of both.

He pulled Takina and Pussy from the cage, but pushed a protesting Hubert back into it.

"Not you," he said. "You stay there for later."

Takina tried to make a break for the door, but his grip was too strong. He held her by the bicep, with Pussy in the other hand. Try as they might, they could not get free (though Pussy's efforts seemed remarkably half-hearted in the circumstances).

"If you keep that up," Bjorn announced, "I'm gonna break all of your necks."

They stopped struggling.

"What's your name?"

“Takina.”

“And yours?”

“Pussy.”

“I said your name, not your job.”

“Pussy. I’m called Pussy.”

“You’re called Pussy, and they try to palm me off with a dwarf! Well come on, ladies. This is your lucky day. You’re going to escape.”

“Not without Hubert,” protested Takina.

“I’ll stay for two biscuits,” Hubert chipped in. “Or just the one if it’s chocolate.”

“Can he swim?” Bjorn asked. “He’ll need to be able to swim.”

Hubert shook his head vigorously. “Dwarfs don’t *do* water. We faint at the sight of a face flannel.”

“Well he might want to stay here, then. We’re anchored three miles off shore.”

Takina and Pussy both tried to make a bolt for it. Neither had any idea to where they would be running; this was a ship after all, and nowhere could provide them with safe sanctuary for very long. But anything had to be better than this. Neither were especially strong swimmers, and being thrown in the sea three miles out was tantamount to a death sentence. But it was all to no avail. He seized hold of them around the waists, and no amount of struggling, kicking out or biting persuaded him to loosen his grip.

Bjorn hauled the two women on to the deck, absorbing their blows as easily as he ignored their pleas for mercy. There were few crew members around, and no sign of Hvitserk and Sigurd. The two elder brothers would have intervened if they hadn’t been below deck. They would not have wanted to see the night’s entertainment thrown overboard.

“I’m really bad at swimming,” Pussy wailed. “I can do doggy-style for fifty feet, and then I sink.”

“You’re not paddling quickly enough, then.”

“There is no honour in this,” protested Takina. “Throwing two women to their deaths, without giving us a chance to defend ourselves.”

“I can live with that. Not sure you can, though.”

And then they were airborne, flung from the side of the vessel like ballast, crashing painfully into the heaving sea, twenty feet below.

“Land’s that way,” he laughed. “About two hours that way. Watch out for the sharks.”

As he spoke, Hubert shot past him, launching himself into the air like a human-cannonball, which was an appropriate analogy judging by the impact with which he hit the water.

“What did he just say?” he asked, inexpertly treading water.

“Sharks.”

“Okay,” he called up to Bjorn. “I’ve had my exercise. You can haul me back up again.”

But Bjorn was gone.

“Hey,” the dwarf added. “Look at me. I can swim after all.”

It was then that he started to sink. Takina grabbed him under the arms, and swam towards the anchor, Pussy doggy-paddling furiously along behind her. The three of them clung on to the anchor-chain as best they could. It was hard for all three to get a proper grip, though, and every so often Hubert would let go and start sinking again.

Just as it appeared that things could get no worse, she spotted a dense black cloud on the horizon. It was not moving like any rain-cloud she had ever seen. It seemed to swirl around, as it arrowed directly for the ship.

“Great,” protested Hubert. “Not only are we going to drown, but we’re going to get bad weather, too.”

Realisation dawned on Takina. This was no rain-cloud.

“Climb the anchor,” she commanded.

“I can’t,” replied Pussy. “My climbing’s worse than my swimming.”

“Hubert! Climb!”

“Why? What’s the point. They’ll only throw us back in. Best just stay here, and drown with dignity. Fancy one last kiss before we go?”

“Climb!” she shouted.

Hers was not a tone to be contradicted. He started to climb. Takina followed up after him.

“Hold on to the anchor,” she shouted down to Pussy. “We’ll haul you up.”

They had to get back inside the cabin quickly. The “cloud” heading towards them was Sluagh, a writhing black mass of the tormented souls of the dead but not departed. They flew around like a flock of demented birds, hoovering up any living thing in their path, good and bad alike. However bad it would have been to drown, to have been eaten by sharks, it couldn’t compare with the terror of being sucked into the maelstrom heading their way. Once you were consumed by it, there would be no escape. You would be damned forever.

“Faster!” she screamed at Hubert. “We have to go faster.”

The dwarf looked over his shoulder, ready to complain about how bossy she had suddenly become. He took another look at the cloud. It suddenly dawned on him precisely what it was that was homing in on them. Without another word, he shot up the anchor-chain like the proverbial rat up a drain-pipe.

Takina was close behind. They had to pull up Pussy, and pull her up fast. But there was no time. The cloud was closing in on them. She had no problem dying, as long as it was fearless, warrior death, preferably in battle. But not like this, not like this.

#

Rod spotted the two men first, grazing on grass just half a mile or so from Martha's hut. They had been conditioned to become donkeys, and donkeys they had remained, even after the witch had replaced them with him and Alfie. He was depending on the wizard to come to their aid, to help them to free the Watcher at Spartan Castle. It looked like he was going to be very disappointed.

Their first problem was catching the two men. Like jittery horses, they ran away every time Rod or Alfie tried to grab hold of them. They would dash off for fifty yards or so, and start grazing somewhere else, until the whole process was repeated all over again.

"We've been doing this for hours!" complained Alfie, after ten minutes. "Let's leave them to it. I'm knackered."

"We need them," Rod replied. "We're never gonna be able to free the Watcher without them. Or Autumn's family, for that matter."

"Let's not bother, then. We can just stay here, and live off the land. Me and Autumn in this hut here, and you could be our gardener, or something. Find your own hut, and come over every so often to mow the grass. Knock first, though. We may be having a cuddle."

"The Watcher's the only one who can get us home."

"I don't want to go home, now. I'm gonna stay here with Autumn. Mam's cooking's crap, anyhow. I'm better off here, with my woman."

"I'm not marrying you," Autumn insisted. "I like you a lot, though I really can't think why. But I'm going to be a witch."

"Then I'll just be your donkey."

"That might work. Now, come on. My family are in danger."

Rod made a despairing attempt at rugby-tackling the Grand Wizard, who whinnied in fright and galloped even further off than before. It was a hopeless task. The two men were pretty quick on their toes for their age, and Rod had to concede that all those pints at the "Rising Sun" had not left him at the very peak of physical fitness.

"I can do it," said Autumn. "I can round them up for you."

“No wife of mine is going to run around after other donkeys!” protested Alfie, just a little hurt. “This is man’s work, anyway.”

She smiled, and raised her hands above her head, wriggling her fingers.

“Yeah,” chuckled Alfie. “Like that’s going to work!”

The donkey-men stopped grazing. Rod could have sworn that they pricked up their ears if such a thing was possible for humans. They looked around, confused, and then trotted quietly over to Autumn, nuzzling her in a sufficiently intimate fashion to leave Alfie very disturbed indeed. He tried to shoo them away, but Autumn seized the wizard and Rod seized his fellow mule.

“Now what?” Rod asked.

Autumn jabbed a finger into the wizard’s left thigh, whispering words of power as she did so. She did the same to the second donkey, only to the forehead this time.

“Would you stop touching that man’s legs!” demanded a horrified Alfie. “This isn’t an open relationship, you know!”

Clarity seeped into the Grand Wizard’s eyes. Autumn’s spell was having a similar effect upon his companion. The two of them looked around, shaking off the cobwebs from their gradually reawakening brains, trying to come to terms with who, what and where they were.

“I’ve had the most awful dream,” said the Grand Wizard. “I had a skinny old lady on my back, who made me eat grass.”

King Spartan stared at him.

“We have had that dream, too. But our old lady was portly. And totally oblivious to our majesty.”

Rod clapped Autumn on the back (again, much to Alfie’s irritation). Why did every male on the planet feel the need to touch up his fiancée right in front of his very eyes? If they had to grope her, they could at least have the decency to wait until his back was turned!

“Okay, guys,” Rod announced. “We’ve just recruited a wizard and a schizophrenic. Let’s go back to the castle and kick Amazon ass!”

#

Halfshaft made a break for it. He was not keen on the Underworld. If he was having large sweaty bottoms lowered on to his face on his very first day here, what horrors awaited him in years to come? Best try and find the World Tree, and see if he could shinny up it back to Hedral, or better still he could keep going until he reached Paradise. There would be no sweaty bottoms, there, that was for sure! They would be freshly talcum-powered, assuming that any bottoms were allowed there at all.

It had also occurred to him that there was very little they could do to punish him, if his escape attempt failed. He was in Hell, after all, where he would be receiving the worst punishments imaginable. If he was given community service for trying to run off, then that would actually be something of a relief.

He pounded along the corridor, his feet working to the same beat as his racing heart. His guide sprinted along in pursuit, shouting for him to stop. But he was not going to stop for anyone. He would find a dark corner and hide, until they had forgotten all about him and allocated his torture itinerary to someone else.

It was his lucky day. There was door at the end of the corridor, with an “exit” sign on it. He raced towards it, hope in his heart for the first time since he had arrived in this awful place. He had never imagined that it would be this easy. He had no idea whereabouts in Hedral it came out, but did not care. If there were no gelatinous bottoms there, he would be happy.

“No! Not in there!” the guide shouted in alarm. “You really don’t want to go in there!”

He reached the door, threw it open, and closed it quickly behind him. The guide slammed into it on the other side, and started rattling on the door-handle, but the door had locked the moment Halfshaft had closed it. For once

in his life, something had actually worked out for him. He had escaped the Underworld! Before long, he would find his way back to Hedral, where the trolls and witches and Amazons would no longer seem anywhere near as frightening as they had done before.

“I’ve done it!” he crowed. “I’ve found the exit! I’m free! I’m going home!”

“You’re not, you know,” the guide replied. “Stay there while I get the key. Don’t go any further, whatever you do.”

“You must think I’m stupid. It said “exit”. This is the way out. I’ve found the way home.”

“I’m sorry to disappoint you,” said the guide from the other side of the door, “but what you’ve actually found is the entrance to the maximum security wing. Where we keep all the people who are so vicious and violent that we have to lock them up separately, where the only people they can injure are each other.”

Halfshaft changed his mind about escaping. He pulled furiously on the door-handle, but the door stayed well and truly locked.

He heard a laugh in the darkness behind him, a cold and inhuman braying which set his teeth on edge.

“Oh, bugger.”

#

Hubert threw himself on to the deck, with Takina close behind him. It was deserted. The crew had presumably seen the Sluagh approaching, and had gone to lock themselves into their cabins until the danger had passed.

Takina looked out over the choppy sea. The cloud was much closer now, and travelling at speed. It may have been her imagination, but she fancied that even at this distance she could pick out black individual shapes swirling around

inside it. Whether she could see them or not, though, she knew that they were in there. And that they were coming for her and her friends.

Hubert tried to make a dash back to the cabin, but Takina seized him by the collar, and hauled him back to her side.

“We haul up the anchor first. We are not leaving Pussy down there on her own.”

“But Beloved,” he wailed. “There’s no time. Let’s get inside, quick. It’s what she would have wanted.”

“It’s not what I want!” screamed Pussy from below. “It really isn’t!”

“She says that now,” Hubert argued, “but when she looks back on this, she’ll realise -”

Takina started weighing the anchor, pulling desperately on the heavy wooden mechanism with all her strength. But it was a two woman job. She needed help. And Goddess help her, the dwarf was the nearest thing to an assistant she was going to get.

“Help me!” she shouted at him.

“I’ve got a bad back. It’s the dwarf curse. All of that digging, I suppose. I could supervise. From the cabin.”

“Hubert!”

The Sluagh was closing in. It had halved the distance to the ship in the couple of minutes which had passed since she had first spotted it. It would not be long before it was upon them, yet Pussy was still dangling from the anchor just a few feet above the water.

Hubert grabbed hold of the winding mechanism, and started winding, grumbling as he did so. One foot at a time, they winched Pussy towards the deck. But the Sluagh was travelling so much faster. Takina made the mistake of looking up, to see how much time she had left. She instantly regretted it. It was so close now. They were never going to make it. They were winding far too slowly.

She could definitely see the individual souls in the Sluagh now, milling around, screaming in pain, baying for fresh tormented souls to join them. Why should they be the only ones to suffer this fate? They had been consumed by the cloud and consigned to this soul-rending misery, and they wanted their revenge upon whoever came into their path.

And then Sigurd was there, either unconcerned or oblivious to the horror which was descending upon them. He pushed the dwarf to one side, and chuckled as the little man made a bee-line back to the cabin. He took Hubert's place at the winch, and between the two of them they hoisted the anchor, with a dripping-wet Pussy clinging on to it for dear life.

"Why are you doing this?" Takina asked.

"Hvitserk and I have plans for you two, tonight. And every night afterwards, come to that. It just wouldn't be the same if the only one of you three to survive was that beardy little dwarf. He's much more Bjorn's type than mine."

Pussy was on the deck now, spluttering, and coughing out sea-water. There was no time to check whether she was okay. The Sluagh was a literal stone's throw away. Takina seized her friend, and pulled her towards the cabin. It was maybe fifteen seconds run away, and the cloud would be upon them in half that time. They were never going to make it. So near, but yet so far.

Sigurd saved them again, unintentionally this time. The Sluagh settled upon him, chattering furiously around him as it attempted to pluck the soul from his body. It became agitated, then puzzled and then furious as it realised its mistake. It was unable to rip his soul from him for the simple reason that he did not have one.

It changed course, and set off after the fleeing women, ignoring the mocking laughter from the man it had reluctantly left behind. Too late, though. The cabin door slammed when it was just a few feet away, and it swirled around outside, looking for some way to get in after them, howling in cheated outrage as it found none.

Eventually, it gave up and went in search of easier pickings. They would have had to come out some time or other, but the Sluagh was not known for its patience. It had an all-consuming appetite for souls, and the hunger was too

great, too urgent, for it to wait around for a door to open. It headed off for the nearby port instead, ignoring the taunts of the bearded man on deck, whose soul had so evidently gone AWOL.

#

Hvitserk was taking Bjorn to task. The cage-door was open, and the slave-girls had bolted. Even the dwarf had gone. And the Crow's Nest had reported a black cloud on the horizon which was heading their way; a Sluagh, most likely. Bjorn had freely admitted that he had set them all free. Why should he end up with the dwarf every time, when his brothers frolicked around with barely-clad women? It was time for Hvitserk to feel what it was like to be frustrated and disappointed.

All of a sudden, the cabin door sprang open, and the dwarf rushed back in, flinging himself back into the cage. Seconds later, the two slave-girls darted in after him, panting and choking water. They slammed the cabin door behind them, and threw themselves against it, their bosoms heaving in a most becoming manner, as Sigurd roared with laughter outside.

Hvitserk smiled, too, a lecherous smile which almost prompted Takina to throw open the door and take her chances outside.

“Welcome back, ladies. You're just in time to play.”

#

This was the third time Rod had been at Spartan Castle. The first time, he had been on his own, sent here by the Watcher to find the Grand Wizard, but ending up with Halfshaft instead. The second time, he was being straddled by an old lady. This time was different, though. Not only was he riderless, but he had a crew with him. The Grand Wizard, King Spartan and Autumn. And little Alfie, too, bless his woolly cotton socks.

The port-cullis was open. Whoever was inside was obviously not expecting any trouble. All they had to do was march inside, find the Watcher, free him, find Autumn's family, release them, and the Grand Wizard could zap anyone who got in their way. The plan was fool-proof.

Well; almost.

The moment they were inside the castle, the port-cullis was lowered, cutting off their escape route. Witches and Amazons appeared from every building, dozens and dozens of them. It soon became obvious that the castle was being used as a barracks for Lathgertha's army.

Valuable time was lost as the Grand Wizard and King Spartan started squabbling between themselves.

"Fry them!" ordered Spartan.

"I was about to. Of my own volition. I'm not doing it just because you're telling me to."

"We are your King!" Spartan protested. "You will do as We tell you."

"You used to be King. It seems to me that you've been very much deposed."

"Treason!" spluttered Spartan, his face a most unbecoming and unhealthy crimson colour. "You will do as We say, and you will do it now, or face the consequences."

"Shut you face, and zap them!" Rod urged, as the Amazons closed in on them.

"If I don't take orders from him," protested the Grand Wizard, "then I most certainly don't take orders from a pleb like you!"

Time ran out. The Amazons descended on them. Autumn tried to ward them off with magic, but the witches were right behind them, counteracting her spells with the greatest of ease. Before they knew it, the Grand Wizard was lying on his belly, hog-tied by the wrists and ankles to stop him casting spells, and Rod and the others were encircled by a ring of uncomfortably probing javelins.

“All right, girls?” Rod asked, in what he considered to be his most charming manner. “We’re not stopping. We just popped in to wish you luck.”

A warrior made her way to the front. He recognised her. Gerasa. She had been his guard when he had escaped from the Amazon village. She looked older now, though, by a decade or so. Maybe she had forgotten him.

“You!” she said.

No. She definitely still remembered him, then. She poked him cruelly with her javelin, as if to confirm this, and then turned to a nearby witch.

“We take him. You have the King and the Wizard.”

The witch cackled. “Suits me. What about the other two? The boy and the girl.”

“I could not care less.”

“One each?”

“No!” shouted Alfie. “We want to be together.”

“We’ll take the girl, then. She’s one of ours, and I doubt Lathgertha would let us keep the boy anyway. We’re having enough trouble keeping the donkeys we’ve already got.”

“No!” cried Alfie again. “Please. I love her. We’re going to get married, and she’ll do all my cooking and stuff. And I’ll patch hut walls with mud, or whatever it is blokes do around here.”

“What did he say?” asked one witch to another.

“I don’t know,” her curious friend replied. “I don’t speak donkey. Something about carrots, I expect.”

The witches started hauling the two older men away. Another took hold of Autumn’s arm and led her off after them.

“Please don’t go,” sobbed Alfie. “I need you!”

But she was gone.

Gerasa signalled for the port-cullis to be raised, and gave Rod an unnecessarily sharp poke in the ribs with her javelin. "Move!" she said.

"Or what?"

"Or die."

"I had a feeling you were going to say that."

He moved, putting an arm around Alfie's shoulder as he did so, in a futile attempt at comforting him.

"It's all right, Mate," he said. "You'll see her again. I'll just chat up their Queen, and we'll be back here in no time."

"So my future happiness depends on whether their Queen fancies you or not?"

Rod nodded reassuringly. But for some incomprehensible reason, Alfie burst into tears. That seemed a bit harsh. He was a good looking bloke, on the right side of forty. He pulled women in the pub on a pretty regular basis (though some of them were a bit ropey, it had to be said, and the others were pretty inebriated). He had as good a chance as anyone of sweet-talking the Amazon leader, and getting them set free.

"Who is your Queen?" he asked Gerasa, as they made their way out of the castle for the last time.

She gave him a hard, humourless smile.

"I am."

Rod winced. He patted Alfie on the shoulder.

"Autumn probably wasn't right for you, anyway."

#

There was something moving in the darkness. Halfshaft was tempted to flick his fingers for light, but couldn't make up his mind whether it would be worse to see whatever was here with him, or whether to sit here in the blackness and pretend it didn't exist.

"Are you edible?" a voice croaked, inches from his ear. He scrambled away from it, and tried unsuccessfully to burrow his way through the locked door. Claw-like fingers tugged at the fabric of his robes, pulling him back again.

"Is that your skin?" the creature asked. "Or have they let you keep your clothes on?"

That's all I need, though Halfshaft. They're all naked in here. Not only am I locked in here with a psychopathic cannibal, but he's got his willy out as well.

"Bugger off," he shouted, in as deep a voice as he could manage. Attack was the best form of defence. Hopefully. "Bugger off, or I'll eat you." He held his breath, and waited to see if the bluff had worked.

"There's not much left of me to eat," the creature rasped. "They've had one of my arms, half my left leg, seven ribs, and a chunk out of my voice-box. It doesn't half sting."

Keep going, Halfshaft told himself. Show weakness, and you're doomed. "I'll have your right leg, if you don't back off!"

"I'm hungry, though. There's nothing to eat in here, except each other. Maybe we could do a deal?"

"What?"

"You eat me, and I'll eat you. Avoid vital organs, and we could last a week or two, easy."

"Bugger off!" He beat the creature off with his cap, but it came straight back again, like a little cannibalistic boomerang. It seized his ankle.

"Meat! You are edible! I knew it, you sounded like you'd be quite tasty. Come on, let me have a nibble. Just to keep me going 'til tea-time. You can have what's left of my right buttock in return."

“No,” sobbed the wizard. “Go away. Leave me alone.”

“I’ll chuck in a nipple to secure the deal.”

“Go away!” the wizard screamed at him.

The creature shuffled nervously. “I wish you hadn’t done that.”

“Why? Did I frighten you?”

“No. You just told everyone else that you’re here. Now they’ll all be wanting a slice. And they don’t bargain like me. They’ll just come and help themselves. You’ll be an organ buffet in a minute or two. And I’ll be lucky to end up with your finger nails, the way they hog all the food. Fingers nails are rubbish, I can tell you. Totally tasteless.”

There was movement all around him. He fought back the urge to create flame. It was too small to use for protection, and he had drawn enough attention to himself already. He was defenceless. This looked like the end for him; there was nowhere to run, and he fought like a girl who didn’t want to smear her nail-varnish.

“At least if they kill me, I wouldn’t have to cope with this horrible place any more. It’ll almost be worth it.”

“You haven’t been here very long, have you? If they kill you, then them out there will capture your soul, and torture that instead. And when that dies, they’ll take your soul’s soul, and then your soul’s soul’s soul, and then your soul’s soul’s soul’s -”

“Yeah, okay, I get the picture. It goes on forever.”

“There is one way to stop them eating you. Stay alive for that little bit longer.”

“Yes?” said Halfshaft, a tiny slither of hope inside him. “Tell me. What do I do?”

He felt excruciating pain in his ankle. He ran his hand gingerly over his leg, to check out the damage. There was a bite-sized chunk missing.

“You let me eat you first.”

They were here. He could feel them all around him. He covered his ankle, worried that they would smell the blood. He could run, but what was the point? They would get him in the end. So he did the only thing he could do in the circumstances. He dealt a swift punch to the face to the little bastard who had just tried to eat him alive.

The creature howled in surprise, and the others were on to him in an instant, tearing him limb from limb. Halfshaft shrunk away from the sounds of ripping sinew and gnawed bone, and the terrible (and rather puzzling) screams which went on even after the pitiful creature must have been long dead.

His fellow cell-mates retired to their respective corners of the cell, leaving him in peace, for the time being at least. Lonely, frightened and exhausted, he closed his eyes and sank into a troubled sleep.

#

Night had fallen. Hvitserk welcomed his brothers into the cabin, and bid him haul the sex-slaves from their cage. It was time to get some use out of them.

They lined up, Takina in the centre, with Pussy and Hubert to her left and right. Hvitserk walked around them, like a sergeant major inspecting a new batch of army recruits. He poked Takina in the stomach with a stiff finger, and laughed when she growled at him.

“They look alright to me,” he declared. “Except yours, Bjorn. There’s no accounting for taste, though.”

Bjorn scowled at him, but said nothing. He was outnumbered. There would be time enough later. His brothers were not so brave when they were on their own.

“What game shall we play?” Sigurd asked. “Nudey hide-and-seek? Pass the naked parcel? Blind woman in the buff?”

Takina leapt into action. She wasn’t sure what was more contemptible; these mean using her and her companions as sexual play-things, or the childish

games they had dreamt up between them. They were supposed to be men. Fearless warriors. But deep down, they were just adolescent boys.

She grabbed Bjorn's battle-axe, and waved it around in an arc in front of her to keep the three brothers at bay. They exchanged amused glances, which made her more angry still. She hated being patronised.

"Okay," Bjorn said. "Naked chess it is. And I'm going to rook the queen."

"You can't rook a queen," Hvitserk argued. "That doesn't even make sense."

Bjorn glowered at him. If it wasn't for the fact that the Amazon had stolen his axe, he would have been sorely tempted to set about his brother's head with it.

"Besides, she's my queen. You've got the beardy little pawn over there."

Bjorn attacked. He had had enough. He didn't care that he was weaponless, nor that he was outnumbered two to one; if he was going down, he was going to take at least one of the condescending little gits with him.

Hvitserk and Sigurd closed him down, keeping him at bay with their swords as he lunged at each of them in turn, two dogs baiting a seriously bad-tempered bear. Takina seized Pussy and Hubert by their arms, and hurried them out of the cabin, ducking as Sigurd's sword sliced past Bjorn's shoulder and buried deep into the door through which she was leaving.

"Is this a good time to remind you that I can't swim?" Hubert asked.

She looked around for inspiration. She spotted a rowing boat, suspended by ropes, at the far end of the deck. She ran towards it, towing the others behind her, expecting Hvitserk and the others to come after her at any time.

She was glad she had the axe. She severed the ropes with it, and breathed a sigh of relief as the boat dropped down to the wooden deck-planks below. She supposed that it was on some sort of winch, and that this might have been the sensible way to set the vessel afloat, but she preferred to use the axe. She needed to get some of the aggression out of her system. Besides, Hubert had not covered himself in glory last time she had asked him to winch for their lives.

She discovered, though, that winching would have been the easier course of action when she tried to lift up the boat to get it over the gunwale and into the sea. It was not a large boat – designed for just two or three people – but it was heavy all the same. She took one end, and Pussy and Hubert took the other, but they kept dropping theirs (probably because the dwarf did not appear to be taking any of the weight and the slave-girl was not strong enough to bear her end unassisted).

Eventually, after she had encouraged Hubert by giving him a hard kick to the bottom, they got the boat over the side and into the water. Takina groaned as it landed hull upwards. She dived in after it, and spent another five minutes trying to turn it the right way up again. It was well over a quarter of an hour after their escape before they were all sitting in the boat -Hubert protesting bitterly that his trousers were wet - and ready to go.

It was then that Takina realised their biggest problem yet. They had liberated the boat, but not the oars. They were still somewhere back on deck, maybe under lock and key to prevent the crew absconding.

“We could paddle with our hands,” the dwarf suggested.

“We could be miles from shore, though.”

“I’ve got big hands, though. All that digging.”

“Not big enough to row a boat.”

Three shadows appeared at the side of the ship above them. One of them raised an oar above his head.

“Are you ladies looking for this?” Hvitserk smirked.

Takina weighed her options. Dying a slow and painful death cast-adrift in a tiny rowing boat, or back aboard the ship, being subjected to Amazon-Goddess-knows-what. She preferred the dying of thirst option, but Pussy was in the water already, doggy-paddling for all she was worth. Being a sex-slave held no terrors for her. In fact, if she was given more comfortable lodgings, she thought she might rather like it.

Takina dived in after her, resigned to having to return to the stinking ship. There would be other escape attempts. She would not rest until she and her friends were safe.

“The dwarf stays in the boat,” Bjorn shouted. “We’ve decided that the three of us will share you two until we find someone to join you. Someone with breasts but no beard.”

“Share and share alike,” agreed Hvitserk. “One for one, and all for all.”

“I’m not leaving him behind!” she called up to them as she swam towards the ship. “Either you take us all, or I’m drowning myself.”

“Looks like your girlfriend’s going to be busy, then,” quipped Sigurd. “One woman between the three of us. Surely you’d want to be there to take some of the weight off her shoulders. Or her pelvis, I should say.”

There was a splashing sound behind her. Treading water, she glanced round, to see the rowing boat stuttering away from her, a foot or two at a time. True to his word, Hubert was scooping water with his hands, propelling the boat towards shore by tiny degrees. He would be pretty helpless the moment he struck a tide, but at least he was heading away from the ship, even if it was at a whelk’s pace.

She thought of swimming over to him, and making her escape in the rowing boat. But she couldn’t leave Pussy alone. The slave-girl would never gain her freedom without her help. She had no choice other than to return to the ship, and bide her time until her next opportunity came to escape. She knew, though, that they would be watching her much more closely from now on. This might just have been their last chance of freedom.

With a heavy heart, she returned to captivity, with Hvitserk and his brothers cheering her on ironically from above.

#

Rod tried to console Alfie as they were escorted away by a dozen or so Amazon women, but his counselling skills had never been all that highly developed.

“She didn’t seem too bothered about us being separated,” Alfie complained. “Here’s me, in pieces, and she trotted off as if she was going off for a pedicure with her mates.”

“Pedicure?” asked Rod, mystified.

“Me Mam does it. I think it’s got something to do with fish biting your feet, or something. She did tell me, but the footie was on, you know how it is.”

“Maybe,” suggested Rod, “She might have been a bit more upset if you didn’t keep going on about her doing all the washing up and stuff. She wants to be a witch, not a home-help.”

“Me Mam does it, though. *She* doesn’t complain.”

“Yeah, but presumably you don’t want Autumn to be too like your mum, do you?”

“That would be creepy.”

“That’s my point.”

Alfie pondered this advice for a minute or two. “So you’re saying I should do all the washing-up and Hoovering myself? Treat her like a princess?”

Rod raised his eyes to the sky.

“No,” he said. “I’m saying that you treat her like a princess until she’s married, and *then* you get her to do all the housework afterwards! You kids have got a lot to learn.”

They high-fived. “I like your style,” Alfie told him. “All we have to do now is get her back, and I’m set for life. Do they even have hoovers here, though?”

Getting her back was not going to be easy. Rod assumed that they were being taken to the Amazon village, but he was mistaken. Before long, he caught sight of twisted, blackened trees in the distance. He cursed. The Great Forest. His least favourite place in this world.

Alfie picked up on his mood.

“What’s up?” he asked.

“I’ve been to that forest before,” Rod explained. “I got chased by wolves, chased by dwarfs, and one of the people with me got grabbed by ghost-soldiers and pulled down into the earth until he suffocated. It wasn’t a barrel of laughs.”

“Do you think they’re gonna chuck us in there, then?”

“I hope not. I think I’d rather be a donkey, than go back in there.”

Unfortunately for Rod, he did not have a choice. The Amazons escorted the two men to a mound of earth on the outskirts of the forest, upon which sat a miserable-looking, white-bearded dwarf. A path ran beside the mound, which forked in to two, both halves disappearing into the foreboding trees. They were at the gateway to the Forest.

A couple of dozen yards further down this path, a huge Amazon stalked back and forth. Every other Amazon they had seen was slender and graceful, but not this one. She was built like a granite boulder, with a hard face to match. She also appeared to be a little deranged, talking to herself in animated tones, as if in heated argument. Rod recognised her. This was Trugga. Last time they had met, she had tried to crush him, and had very nearly succeeded.

Gerasa approached her, and the two had words. The big Amazon did not seem pleased. Rod strained to make out their conversation, but without success. Only once were her words audible.

“You are not my queen!” Trugga hissed. “I have only one queen, and I will stay here until she returns.”

More animated conversation, until Trugga finally relented. She shrugged, and followed Gerasa back to the mound, where she regarded Rod with unconcealed contempt.

“Alright, Darlin’?” he enquired. “Remember me?”

She snarled at him. She remembered him all too well. Ten years ago, Queen Rana had followed him into the Forest, and she had been awaiting her return

ever since. He had a lot to answer for, which was the only reason she had come out of retirement for one last duel. He had taken her queen away from her for all those years, and she was going to make him pay for every minute of her miserable solitude.

“You are familiar with trial by ordeal,” Gerasa addressed him. “You have done this before. Trugga is our champion. Defeat her, and you and the boy here go free.”

“I’m nineteen!” Alfie protested. “I go to pubs, and everything. I’m getting married soon.”

“But if she defeats you,” Gerasa continued, ignoring the child’s outburst, “we will rip out your bowels and strangle you with them.”

Rod shuddered. It was not the way he wanted to go. Drowning in a giant barrel of beer was his demise of choice. Preferably with a couple of tactile porn actresses holding him down.

“Do you strangle us with our own bowels,” Alfie asked, “or with each others? I’d rather you use mine, if that’s okay. No offence, Mate. It just seems more hygienic, you know?”

Trugga struck before Rod had a chance to reply. She dealt him a blow to the chest which sent him staggering backwards towards the earthen mound. His plight was not helped when the dwarf – Horace, brother of Hubert – leapt on his back, covered his eyes and started biting the back of his head with vicious enthusiasm.

“I lost my brother because of you!” yelled the irate dwarf. “Now I have to guard the gates of the Forest all on my own. You’ve ruined my life!”

“And mine!” bellowed Trugga, swinging a punch at Rod which sent him reeling to the floor. Fortunately, his fall was cushioned by the grumpy dwarf who was clinging on to his shoulders.

“You’re squashing me!” complained Horace, a touch unreasonably, as he wriggled around beneath him. “You monster!”

Alfie waded in, pulling the dwarf away. The outraged dwarf turned on him, propelling himself torpedo-like through the air, and knocking this impudent young human off his feet. Horace stuck his thumbs in Alfie's mouth and tried to prise the sides apart.

"Ge' o' 'e!" protested a wide-mouthed Alfie, temporarily restricted in his choice of consonants. "You stu'id 'ucker!"

Trugga seized Rod as he was climbing to his feet, swinging him around by one wrist and ankle. Once she had gained sufficient momentum, she let him go, sending him soaring through the air, swearing fluently as he went. He came crashing down on the ground several yards distant, and lay still. The fight had been knocked out of him.

Horace continued to try to pull Alfie's face off, all the while. Alfie grabbed at his hands in a desperate effort to stop the dwarf from stretching his mouth in directions it was never intended to go, but all to no avail. The dwarf had strong wrists. All that time out here on his own, it was inevitable, Alfie speculated.

Trugga closed in for the kill. She plucked an unprotesting Rod from the grass, and manoeuvred him into a bear-hug. She was careful to keep the top of his head below chin-level; last time she had tried to hug him to death, he had unsportingly butted her in the face. Not this time. Everyone might think she was stupid, but when it came to fighting, she was always careful to learn from the very few mistakes she made.

"You took my queen away from me," she told him, her voice heavy with pregnant violence. "I will crush you until your ribs splinter, and then I will crush you some more."

"I'm sorry about your queen," he gasped. "She was a bitch, but may she rest in peace."

Trugga stopped squeezing.

"She is dead?"

"Chopped in half by a dead troll. Right down the middle, from head to.....well, you know, the business area. Down south."

“You are sure of this?”

“Pretty much. She was trying to hack me to pieces when it happened.”

Trugga dropped him to the ground, and took a few dazed paces away, oozing pain and confusion. How could this be? Her queen had told her to wait here until she returned. What she do if Rana was never coming back? In all the years she had been waiting here, it had never once occurred to they would not be reunited one day.

“Finish him off!” commanded an impatient Gerasa. “We need to return to the castle. We’re marching off to war today.”

“You are not my queen.” But then again, if Rana was dead, maybe she was. What to do? Whom to obey? She needed time to think. She was built for fighting, not thinking. She needed Rana to tell her what to do, but she was lost forever. They both were.

With a howl, Trugga ran into the Forest. The strain of thinking was too much for her. She would allow the trees to finish her off.

Rod came to Alfie’s assistance, pulling the dwarf off his face. Alfie got to his feet, pulling his mouth around experimentally, in order to test the extent of the damage.

“Sorted,” Rod announced. “Clever little donkeys! Looks like we’ve just won our freedom.”

Gerasa huffed. She hated the idea of these buffoons walking free, but she had given her word, and would never break it. Besides, she was coming towards the end of her life. She had found a hair the day before last, which if not grey was at least a little lighter than her others. It was only a matter of time before her beauty would start to fade, and she would then strip bare and walk into the Forest, sacrificing herself to the waiting trees. If she had broken her oath, here in front of them, they might spit her back out again, and then she’d be wandering around the countryside butt-naked, all grey and humiliated, until she starved to death. No, she had promised freedom, and her oath must be kept.

An idea occurred. A happy compromise.

“You may have your freedom,” she told them. “I am a woman of my word.”

The two men high-fived, and leapt around like clumsy dolphins at show-time.

“You may have your freedom *in the Forest.*”

Rod stopped jumping. “You’re having a laugh! We won’t last five minutes in there.”

“Not my problem.”

She raised her javelin, and the other Amazons did likewise. Horace took a running jump in an attempt to reach Alfie’s face again, but missed and ended up in a cursing heap at his feet. He contented himself with biting holes in the legs of his jeans instead.

“Can we take Autumn?” asked Alfie.

Gerasa prodded him experimentally in the chest with her javelin. “You have thirty seconds to go. Then we kill you.”

Rod took Alfie by the arm, and led him into the Forest.

“Good job you’re nineteen,” he quipped, “or this would look really dodgy.”

Alfie was in no mood to reply. From what Rod had been saying, every step he took into the Forest was a step closer to death. It was bad enough losing his love and losing his life, but to do so with a floppy mouth was more than he could bear.

#

Halfshaft awoke to find a very attractive naked woman squatting on his chest. He closed his eyes again. He was obviously dreaming, and he was terrified that he might wake up.

The pressure remained. He opened his eyes again. She was still there, She winked at him. He clamped his eyelids shut to buy himself thinking time. He had never had a strange naked woman sitting on his chest before (or any other

type, as far as he could recollect), and he was not entirely sure what he was supposed to do about it.

“Hi,” she said.

“Good morning,” he replied.

She laughed. He opened his eyes again. She was smiling at him.

“Do you mind if I - ?”

“Be my guest,” he told her, having no idea what he was consenting to, but deciding he would never forgive himself if he said “no”.

She tore open his robes at the chest. That was a bit uncomfortable. He didn't have his vest on, and it was pretty cold in here (unlike the other side of the door, where it was literally as hot as Hell). She slid her legs slowly down either side of his body – delicious, delicious friction – to make room for herself. Pinning down his arms, her face descended on his exposed chest, her eyes on his the whole time. She nipped him playfully.

“You like?” she asked.

“I love,” he assured her.

She bit him again, harder this time. She had drawn blood. He didn't feel a thing. Let her take all she wanted, he had buckets of the stuff to spare. She was stunning, and she was sitting on him. She could have whatever she liked.

Someone humphed in the darkness to his left. Her eyes clouded with irritation, just for a second. Then she was back into seductress mode, as if nothing had happened. She bit him again. This time it was painful, but in a good way. He squirmed beneath her. She smiled, a deep and knowing smile.

“Shall I show you what else I can do?”

More grumbling from the sidelines. Halfshaft tried to crane his neck to see who was there, but she took his head in her hands and guided his face back towards hers.

“Don't worry about him. He's an idiot. Focus on me. I'm about to do something to you that's beyond your wildest imagination.”

"I have a very wild imagination," the wizard cautioned her.

"I know," she replied, licking the blood from his chest. "I can feel it prodding me."

A man stepped out of the shadows; handsome, naked and seething, but not necessarily in that order.

"Oh, you've gone too far this time! How can you say that to him, knowing I'm here, watching?"

"Go away, Choad," she responded coldly. "I'm working."

"Never mind him," Halfshaft urged her. "Do that thing you were just talking about." He obligingly tore his robes a bit further, and gave her an expectant smile. "Fill your boots."

"Just remember that it is just work, Areola" Choad said. "You're not supposed to enjoy it quite so much."

She ignored him, and turned her attention back to Halfshaft. "Now, where were we?"

She slipped a hand into the tear in his robes, and started delving around in a manner of which the wizard approved whole-heartedly. If it wasn't for their unwanted spectator, this would have been his idea of Heaven, which was ironic in the circumstances.

"Is he ready yet?" Choad asked. "I'm going to vomit if I have to watch much more of this."

"He's never going to be ready, if you keep moaning away in the background."

"Ready for what?" Halfshaft asked, starting to become a little concerned at the direction their conversation was taking. He remembered this was the maximum security wing of the Underworld, and a tiny part of him started to suspect that a beautiful naked woman sitting astride an elderly failed wizard might have some sort of ulterior motive, especially when her partner was skulking in the wings.

“Do you know what a succubus is?” Choad enquired cruelly. “Do you know what they *do*?”

Halfshaft shrugged. Best not to speak to him, and he might go away and leave them to it. But Choad was not giving up without a fight.

“She seduces men in the night, steals their semen, and then gives it to me so I can impregnate women when I call upon them.”

“That is a little creepy,” the wizard conceded.

“If you think that’s creepy, you should see her without her make-up on. Sure, she looks beautiful now, but take away all that foundation and red lipstick, and she’s just a walking mound of wrinkles and liver-spots.”

Areola lost it. “I wouldn’t need to do this, you jealous little bastard, if you had the equipment to do the job yourself. You see my husband over there, wizard? Notice anything unusual about him?”

Halfshaft took a look. She was right; the man did not appear to have the “equipment” for impregnating ladies. Where his genitals ought to have been, there was just a shallow horizontal ridge, maybe seven inches from side to side, and half the thickness of his index finger. It was like he had a pencil balanced across the top of his legs.

“You’ve got no -!”

“Oh, thank you very much.” Choad shouted at his wife. “Every chance you get to humiliate me. And for your information, wizard, I do have the “equipment”, as Areola so delicately puts it. It’s just that its shape is a little unusual.”

“Like a thin top lip,” Areola taunted. “And about as much use as a third nipple.”

“You bitch!” screeched Choad. “You always said that size didn’t matter.”

“Shape does, though. And technique. And - ”

“Please stop this,” pleaded Halfshaft. He felt uncomfortable. He had never been in the situation before where a married couple were having a full-blown

domestic whilst the wife was sitting astride him, stark naked and fumbling around beneath his robes.

Her fumbling stopped. She had found what she was looking for (and he was only mildly embarrassed that it had taken her quite so long to track it down). She grasped it tightly in her hand. Maybe he could live with this situation after all.

“When I say “please stop this”, I mean please stop this in a few minutes time,” he corrected himself. “You can take my semen first. It shouldn’t take long. It would be a shame for you two to have fallen out for nothing.”

“Over *nothing*?” Choad smirked. “Don’t be so hard on yourself.”

“You’re hardly in a position to make insinuations about my size, Ridge-knob!” Halfshaft taunted in defensive retaliation.

Areola released him, and dismounted. She got to her feet and squared up to her husband. “How many times do I have to put up with all this crap?” she screeched at him. “It’s my job to collect it, it’s yours to dish it back out again. What part of that don’t you understand?”

“I really don’t mind if you’d like some,” Halfshaft called out to her. “Help yourself. It would be a shame to waste it.”

“It’s just so difficult,” he sobbed. “Skulking here in the shadows, seeing you with other men. Especially sad little creatures like that. My self-esteem’s in tatters.”

“Do I complain when you’re with other women? It’s just what we do, you idiot. You can’t keep doing this to me. Look at my hand; it’s shaking.”

He burst into tears. She clung on to him, stroking his hair, and making cooing noises as if comforting a small child or a pigeon. “It’s okay. It’s going to be okay.”

The door opened, and the guide stepped nervously in. He tugged at Halfshaft’s sleeve, and motioned for the wizard to follow him out. Choad guided Areola down to the floor, and the two started rutting. The wizard

looked on, transfixed and not a little curious about the mechanics of the encounter).

“Yes, in a moment,” he told his guide. “I just want to -”

The guide grabbed him by both arms, and bundled him out of the door, slamming it shut.

“We can’t just stand there while you gawp at those two. There are people in there who’ll tear you to pieces soon as look at you.”

Halfshaft nodded, a little ashamed. He had found that out the hard way. “Thank you,” he said. “For coming back for me.”

The guide shrugged. “I’ve got my job to think about. I’d be made redundant if all my charges kept disappearing into prohibited rooms and never coming back. Mind you, if you’d have gone any further in there, you would’ve been on your own. They are creatures in there that would make your hand stand on end.”

As if to illustrate the point, there was a high-pitched squeal from the other side of the door, interspersed with a series of guttural grunts.

“Monsters?” asked Halfshaft, in a tiny voice.

“Areola,” the guide corrected him. “It’s amazing what Choad can do with that little ribbed ridge of his when he puts his mind to it!”

#

Pussy was contented. At last, she was back in the cabin, and ready for action. As long as she ended up with one or both of the elder brothers, she was happy. She wasn’t so keen on the sulky bear of a man who had thrown her into the sea.

She had been born and bred in a small village where all the men were practical, and most were named Geoff. They were very safe, and very sensible, and very considerate, and she had detested them all. When she was sixteen,

she married one of them – her very own Geoff – and had sunk unhappily into a life of what all her friends and family assured her was popularly referred to as “domestic bliss”. It didn’t feel like bliss, though. It didn’t really feel like anything.

In her way, she was not unlike Autumn; both of them were deeply dissatisfied with the men of their village, and longed to escape to a better life. The difference between them, though, was that Autumn had despaired that the villagers were so very unsophisticated and immature, whereas Pussy would have chosen a horny rough-handed farm-lad over a practical pipe-smoker every time.

And then one day, when Geoff had sent her out into the meadows to “make daisy chains, or whatever it is you women do”, she was captured by slavers, and sold on to Hench as a sex-slave. She was frightened at first – she missed her Mum and was worried that Cunning Lingus would be out of her life forever – but when she got used to her new surroundings, she found that she really loved her job. She had swapped daisy-chains for a never ending conveyor-belt of hard emotionless sex, and she loved every minute of it.

Some of her customers were rough, which was a bonus. Some were ugly, which was not so good. Some were massive trolls (and boy, were they massive), which was uncomfortable at first, though for some reason within twelve months or so she was barely batting an eyelid. But the important thing was that not one of them was called Geoff. Life was good.

Every so often, she would befriend one of the new girls, and try to make them understand that life would not be nearly as bad as they were expecting. More often than not, she felt that she was making a difference; helping them to “bed in”, so to speak. But every so often, one of them – usually an Amazon – would turn on her, tell her it was degrading to think as she did, tell her that no-one should have the right to choose her sexual partners for her, least of all someone who was profiting from it at her expense. But they were missing the point. The point was that she loved her work, and she could never imagine doing anything else. She had made her choice.

Things had got a little harder when the troll women had taken over. She had been able to influence Hench to a certain extent. He was certainly no push-

over, but after a little tactile flattery he would usually give her the night off if there was a particularly ugly cart-load of punters in town. Not so with Grunt-mate. She was immune to her charms. But even then, as long as she avoided the wood-dwarfs, she was a very happy Pussy.

She looked Takina up and down, as the three brothers argued over who was going to have first “go”. Two into three doesn’t fit, they were saying. They had a lot to learn. From her professional experience, she was aware that not only could two fit into three, but that three could fit into one if they were all pointing in the right direction.

Takina was pretty. Blonde, tanned, voluptuous in all the right places and none of the wrong ones. And clad in just two or three strips of soft fur which barely covered the softest parts of her body. Pussy felt a pang of yearning. She had never been interested in girls before coming to the slave-market, but having had so many threesomes since then, her tastes seemed to have changed. Whereas she used to be strictly meat only, she was now more of a “surf and turf” type girl.

She reached out a hand and stroked Takina’s arm. She figured that the brothers would not object. If they were content to look on as she took the Amazon through her extensive repertoire of positions, then it would save them arguing over which of them should go first. They could just sit back and enjoy the show.

Takina gave her an encouraging smile. Yes, thought Pussy. Game on. But then the Amazon took her hand, and squeezed it. She had mistaken Pussy’s touch for anxiety, the need for human contact, and she was holding her hand to reassure her that she would protect her from these men. It was about time she realised that Pussy really did not need protecting from anyone.

Takina put her head to one side, as if listening to something. Pussy strained to hear. There was a voice, somewhere very far off, calling them in song. It grew stronger. One woman at first, then two, then maybe a dozen or so. The men stopped arguing, and listened, too. Without a word, they left the cabin. Pussy and Takina followed them out.

“That’s beautiful,” mumbled Sigurd, hanging over the side of the ship in an effort to get as close to the voices as possible. “Absolutely beautiful.”

Pussy was puzzled. She didn’t know what he was listening to, but the voices she could hear were nothing special. Passionate, a bit husky maybe, but nothing out of the ordinary.

“It’s all right, I suppose,” she shrugged. “Now let’s get back to the cabin, shall we? Get down to business.”

Takina shot her a look. Pussy shot her one back. She was not going to miss out on an orgy, just because her new friend was frigid.

She took Hvitserk by the arm, and tried to guide him back inside. He was having none of it. He shrugged her off, and gazed transfixed over the side of the vessel, straining to catch sight of the women who were singing this bewitching song to him.

The ship changed course. Someone had wrenched the wheel hard to portside. They were heading towards land. This would normally have been a good thing, but was less encouraging now the helmsman had deserted his post and was pushing his way through the huddle of crew-members to try to spot the ladies who were serenading him.

“We will run aground,” Takina warned. “As soon as we are close enough to shore, we jump in the sea and swim for it.”

“Bugger that,” Pussy huffed. “I need some company first. I’m dying for a shag.”

She tried to prise Sigurd away, but he pushed her from him. She thought of targeting Bjorn, but had to draw the line somewhere. She returned her attention to Hvitserk, singing her best ballad to him. If that’s what he liked, then that’s what she would give him. That, and plenty of other stuff besides.

He turned to look at her. “Stop you’re wailing!” he commanded. “I can’t hear the ladies singing!”

She thrust her chest out at him. No effect. She thrust out her pelvis, and rubbed her hips seductively. No response at all. She left him to it. The man was clearly gay.

She could now make out the shoreline through the darkness. There was a fire-burning, a circle of women dancing round it, holding hands as if playing ring-of-roses. They sang as they danced – badly, if you asked Pussy – but their song was for some inexplicable reason driving these men to distraction. One by one, they leapt into the churning sea, like sex-starved lemmings, desperate to be nearer these strange enchanting temptresses.

Takina touched her arm.

“Sirens,” she said.

“Fog-horns, more like,” replied Pussy, not without a hint of jealousy. “They sound awful. I bet they’re not as pretty as me either.”

They watched as another couple of crew-members flung themselves from the boat. The better swimmers made it thirty or forty yards before being sucked under. Others disappeared straight away, having either forgotten how to swim in their bewitchment, or having forgotten that they never knew how in the first place. None of them made it remotely close to the shore. The waves were too high, and the current too strong. One by one, they leapt to their salt-water graves.

Pussy was distressed. It was not that the men were dying; she had got used to that since the trolls had taken over the slave-market. Whenever they had turned up in sufficient numbers, Grunt-mate and her friends had slaughtered them, and feasted on their carcasses. It was more that these sailors were flinging themselves into the sea to reach the women on shore, when she was standing amongst them, wearing little but a smile, blatantly sexual but totally ignored. It didn’t seem fair, somehow.

There was a rending sound, as the ship struck rock, an unwelcome grinding accompaniment to the melodic chorus of the dancing temptresses ahead of them.

Takina looked worried. “We’re going down!”

“Chance would be a fine thing,” Pussy replied.

And then Bjorn was overboard, swimming for all he was worth, Hvitserk and Sigurd diving in after him, determined to get ashore before him. Within seconds, a giant wave picked them up and sent them crashing ten or twenty yards distant, where they were lost from view. Takina rejoiced. Pussy almost screamed in frustration. Unless she could turn Takina, it was going to be a very lonely night.

The bow of the ship lurched upwards, sending the women tumbling along the deck towards the stern.

“We’re going down!” Takina repeated hopelessly.

“It would pass the time,” Pussy quipped. Takina looked at her as if she had lost her reason. She shrugged back at her. What was she supposed to say?

“We’ve got to jump,” the Amazon said. The boat was nearly vertical now, and was slowly sinking into the churning waves. “We jump or we die.”

“I’m game if you are,” Pussy told her. If she was going to go, then she might as well get a few double-entendres out of her system on the way down. Go out in style.

Takina hauled herself over the side of the ship. Pussy counted. One, two, three, splash. It was a long way down. What choice did she have, though? There was nothing left for her on board worth staying for. With a scream, she launched herself after her stubbornly heterosexual Amazon friend.

The impact of the water nearly knocked her unconscious. She lost her bearings. She swam, but wasn’t really sure whether she was heading back towards the surface, or deep down into the sea. She didn’t much care. At least there were men down there somewhere.

And then there was an arm round her ribs, pulling her she knew not where. She counted again, but got stuck at four. She was normally good at counting; she could make it to twenty nine on a good day, but everything was so cold and confusing, and her brain wasn’t working properly. But then she was back to the surface, breaking through the water like a killer whale (no, make that

dolphin, she knew she was too gorgeous to be a whale), flailing around and gasping for breath.

“I’m wet!” she spluttered.

“No change there, then!” Takina shouted over the roar of the waves.

Pussy smiled at her over her shoulder, feeling the Amazon’s cold body tight against hers as they trod water together. So Takina did have a sense of humour after all. That would make it just a little easier, when they drowned together.

#

“Wolves,” Rod advised, when the howling started.

“Real wolves?” Alfie asked. “Not just Alsations, or something?”

“Real wolves. Great big furry ones.”

“That’s not good, is it?”

Rod shook his head. That wasn’t good at all.

They were only twenty minutes walk into the Forest. Alfie had been going on about Autumn the whole time; how they were in love, and how they were in lust, and how he would do anything to rescue her if it wasn’t for the fact that the tall women in furry knickers had banished them into the woods and wouldn’t let them come back. If he hadn’t had “previous” with the vicious buggers, it would have almost been a relief when they started howling, as at least it had got Alfie to change the record. Or the CD. Or the i-tune, or whatever it was kids listened to nowadays (he still preferred vinyl, every time).

That sound again. Long, drawn out, primeval; hungry above all else. They needed to find somewhere to hide, pretty damn sharpish.

“Should we throw stones at them?” Alfie asked. It appeared to be his solution to everything, and a pretty crap one at that.

“No,” Rod told him. “We leg it.”

“Where to?”

For once, the kid had asked a sensible question. They couldn't run back down the path. The Amazons weren't stupid. They would hardly have forced them into the Forest, and then bugged off, leaving them to come back out again half an hour later. There would be guards there, to make sure they didn't try and retrace their steps. And those guards would have very sharp javelins pointed in their direction.

They couldn't run into the trees either. Rod had been here before. He knew the drill. The trees had a life of their own. The moment you were amongst them, they would seize you with their branches and tear you limb from limb. He'd rather face the wolves than die like that. He'd dislocated his shoulder when he was a kid when he'd fallen off a “borrowed” motorbike, and it bloody hurt.

That left only one direction for them to take. He set off at a jog.

“You've got to be winding me up!” Alfie complained, as Rod ran along the path which led deeper into the Forest. “That's where the howling's coming from!”

“No choice, Mate,” Rod called over his shoulder.

“What about the stones?” Alfie protested, but Rod jogged on. With legs heavy with misgiving, he set off after him. If there was one thing worse than chasing a nutter into the woods, it was standing amongst the brooding trees on his own.

There was another howl up ahead. It may have been his imagination, but it seemed much closer this time.

“Are you sure about this?” he asked Rod, hoping for reassurance.

Rod chose not to answer. He was not sure at all. Most likely, he was charging down the pathway towards a pack of wolves, with his anxious friend in tow. Maybe throwing stones wouldn't have been such a bad alternative after all.

The guide stopped outside a door. A notice hung upon it. "Silence. Torture in progress."

"Couldn't you let me off this one?" Halfshaft asked. "After all I've been through in that last place, I thought maybe you'd give me the weekend off?"

The guide shook his head. "We have work to do, I'm afraid."

"If you send me in there, I'll tell them that you let me escape. You'll get in trouble."

The guide shrugged. "Too late. I've been given a roasting for it already. Literally."

"I'll sue, then!" the wizard threatened. "It was negligent, letting me go in there. I was bitten, and someone tried to steal my love-juice. And it's all your fault."

The guide shrugged, unconcerned.

"Where's a lawyer when you need one!" Halfshaft snorted.

"This is Hell," the guide pointed out. "We've got pretty much all of them down here. Now can we get on with this? I do have other people to attend to, you know."

Halfshaft nodded. What was the use? Last time he had tried to avoid his punishment, it had not gone very well at all.

The guide opened the door, and motioned for him to enter. He did so with a heavy heart. His mood lifted immediately, though, when he discovered that the room was jam-packed with slave-girls. They were pressed together like sardines, some wearing little more than strategically placed "handkerchiefs", but most wearing nothing at all.

He turned to the guide, raising a confused eye-brow.

"They're fresh in today," the man explained. "There was a massacre in a slave-market earlier today. Only a handful of survivors. The guy in the pink pants got here first. These young ladies took a little longer to arrive. We could

only get a couple of them at a time in the ferry, and for some reason the ferryman didn't seem to be in any great hurry to row them across. Kept going off on detours. Lots of giggling. Never heard him giggle before. All very curious."

Halfshaft was confused. He was finding it difficult to imagine what torture the guide could have devised involving a room full of naked writhing women. Unless it was that he could only watch, without diving in? He had heard stories of the Underworld, where you were chained up, lacerated with thirst, where a river of wine ran around you, just out of reach of your lips. Maybe he had been sentenced to a river of slave-girls instead, with all lip-action strictly off limits?

"What is it?" he asked. "What do I have to do?"

"I want you to squeeze in there with them," the guide advised. "Wriggle around as much as you like. Fill your boots."

Halfshaft looked at him in astonishment. What trickery was this?

"There must be more to it than that. What sort of punishment would that be for me?"

"It's not your punishment!" the guide chuckled. "It's theirs!"

The wizard was put out. What sort of crazy mixed up world was this where it was considered to be the worst fate in the world for attractive women to have him rub himself up against them? He was in the prime of his life. They should be grateful, if anything.

Putting his pride to one side, he took a step towards them. He would do his duty, and he would do it well. Whatever the reasons for instructing him to do this, it had to be better than the giant-bottom-on-his face ordeal. It was tough job, but someone had to do it.

The door flew open, and two witches entered. One was large and ugly, and the other skinny and uglier. Maybe this was the catch. If they were going to strip off and join the slave-girls, it would take a lot of the fun out of it.

The rotund witch thrust a sheet of paper into the guide's hand. "Orders from above," she announced.

“From below, I think you mean.”

He read the message.

“We’re recruiting an army of the dead,” Mabel told Halfshaft conversationally. “We’ve got the go-ahead from the Head Honcho. He sees it as an investment. He signs out a few dozen of you now, and gets a couple of hundred back after the battle.”

The guide sighed. “All this seems to be in order. You’re free to go.”

Halfshaft looked at him in exasperation, and then back at the slave-girls. Wall-to-wall women, waiting for him to come amongst them (literally, in all likelihood). Yes, he wanted out of here, but not now! Not now, of all times!

“Great,” he replied. “Just give me half an hour, and I’ll be with you.”

“Now,” Martha told him.

“Ten minutes, then,” he pleaded. “Ten minutes should do it.”

“Now.”

He let out a huge sigh of frustration. This really was to be his punishment after all. Death was as unfair as his life had been. With a sad nod of his head, he indicated that he was ready to go.

“Okay,” he mourned. “Get me out of this wonderful Hell-Hole.”

“I’m not a bleeding taxi!” Mabel retorted, clipping him round the ear. The World Tree’s in the seventy sixth corridor on the left. Take the Hedral branch. Make your way to Crow Hill in the Great Forest, and wait for us. If you don’t show up, you’ll be straight back down here, so no funny business.”

With one last lingering look at the recently deceased slave-girls, Halfshaft trudged from the room. The chance of funny business would be a fine thing.

The guide held out his hand, and the wizard went to shake it. The guide withdrew it again, huffily.

“What?” Halfshaft asked, mystified.

“It is customary,” the man told him, “to tip. And if you could fill in the customer-satisfaction questionnaire on your way out, it would be very much appreciated.”

#

The wave struck them full-force, sending the two women spinning through the water like human whirlpools. Takina’s lungs filled with sea-water. She clung desperately to Pussy, knowing that if she relaxed her grip for an instant her friend would drown. They were both doomed anyway, but the instinct to fight for her life was too great for her to simply give up and sink to her death in the pitch-black depths of the sea. She would go out with a fight. She was an Amazon, after all.

And then a wall of wood was rushing towards her head, striking her, pushing her beneath it. She let go of Pussy, to fend it off. She had been in the freezing cold sea for too long. Her mind was in tatters. She clawed at the wood, trying to understand why she had a coffin lid above her. Yes, she was drowning, but where had the coffin come from?

And then two hands penetrated the dark blue water to one side of the wooden lid, taking hold of her, pulling her upwards. And she was out of the sea, clinging to Pussy as she shivered in the bottom of the rowing boat she had mistaken for her grave.

“Where did the boat come from?” she asked.

“I think it must be the one Hubert escaped in.”

“Where is he?”

Pussy shrugged, the dwarf was nowhere to be seen.

Fingers grasped the side of the boat. Someone was trying to haul themselves up into it. Hubert? No, the hands were too big. A face appeared over the side. Bjorn!

“Help me!”

She prised his fingers off the wood, and ducked him down into the sea. It was a small rowing boat. They would not be sharing it with him, not if she had her way. He tried again, but a wave struck the boat, sending it over his head, and a dozen yards distant. He sank back down into the blackness. They were safe for now.

They clung on to the boat as it pitched crazily in the psychotic storm. Pussy started to retch, and it was all Takina could do not to join her. The boat rose, and pitched, and spun, nearly capsizing on each revolution. It was only a matter of time. The vessel had appeared to be their salvation, but had merely given them false hope. Sooner or later, they would be back in the sea-water, and they were too debilitated by fear and sickness to survive for long.

The sun crept over the horizon. How long had they been in the water? Twenty minutes? Thirty? An hour maybe? It seemed like forever.

And then the storm vanished. No gradual abatement, no tapering off. One moment it was full-on, and the next it was gone.

The sirens had lined up on the shore, and were scouring the sea for survivors. A couple of them swam out to the rowing boat, and towed it back to their rocky beach, smiling reassuringly at their frightened passengers. You’re safe now, the smiles told them. All the men are dead.

Pussy started shivering violently, whether with cold or shock it was hard to tell. Takina hugged her, reasoning that this might help whichever it was. This seemed to perk up her friend immediately. Pussy put a hand on her thigh, squeezing it gently.

“Thank you,” the slave-girl said. “Are we safe now?”

Takina nodded. But deep inside her trembling body, she was not so sure. She had never heard of anyone who had met a siren before. Which tended to suggest that few people, if any, ever made it out of their village alive.

#

The wolves were definitely closer now. Rod could hear them up ahead, clamouring with excitement, no doubt deliriously happy that not only had they located their prey, but they were getting home delivery as well. It could not have been often that any creature was stupid enough to trot up to the wolf-pack and invite them to tuck in.

“Let’s turn back,” Alfie urged, not unreasonably in the circumstances.

“We’ve got to keep going,” Rod told him, with more conviction than he felt. “We can’t outrun them, and there’s nowhere to hide back there. We’ve got to look for a hiding place up ahead.”

“You reckon there is one, then? Somewhere safe, if we keep going?”

“Course there is,” he lied.

They spotted the cottage, just off the track, just as the wolves appeared several hundred yards ahead of them. They were larger than any wolves either of them had ever seen in their local Kent zoo-parks. Hungrier, too. In the zoo, the wolves had just skulked around in the back of their cage, refusing to put on a show for Alfie however much he shouted at them that he had paid twenty quid to see them. These ones were less reticent. There wasn’t much to eat in the Forest, as the trees usually finished off anything that moved. So little did they eat, in fact, that some of the older ones recognised Rod’s scent, even though it had been ten years since they had last picked it up.

They were not about to let him escape twice.

Rod made a dash for the cottage, with Alfie on his heels. The wolves changed direction, determined to intercept them. They had stopped howling now. They were saving their strength for the kill.

There was one wolf ahead of the others, the pack leader. He was huge, even by wolf standards. Some of his brothers were skin and bone, but not him. Whenever they managed to catch a dwarf unawares, he would always feed first, so he stayed strong whilst the weaker ones dwindled and died. It was their way.

Rod was close to the cottage now. Another thirty or forty yards and they would be there. If it wasn't for the pack leader, they would just about make it. But that big black one at the front was too fast. He would reach them just a few seconds before the others, but that would be all that it would take. Rod was still marginally ahead of Alfie. If the wolf went for him first, then the lad might still get to safety before the rest of the pack arrived.

"If he takes me down, you keep running, okay?" he shouted over his shoulder.

"Okay," replied Alfie with relief. "No point us both going, eh?"

Twenty yards from the cottage. The wolf was just a stone's throw away now. Rod could have sworn that the hideous creature was smiling! Still running, he looked it straight in its yellow eyes, trying to ignore the expectant drool dripping from its bared fangs. He had given it his best shot, and both of them knew that it wasn't going to be quite good enough. He was going to have the creature hanging from his throat any second now.

A stone skimmed through the air, striking the wolf painfully on the nose. It stopped, confused. It had never felt pain before, and wasn't sure that it cared for it very much. Then another one, right in the eye. It turned, panicking, getting in the way of the wolf behind it. The wolf tried to hurdle over him, but didn't quite back it, and the two of them ended up in a writhing ball of blood and fangs on the leafy ground.

Praying that the front door would open, Rod seized the handle and pulled. It was unlocked. He supposed that there was not much need to lock up when you had a wolf pack patrolling up and down outside your window.

He jumped inside, pulling Alfie in after him. He slammed the door shut just in time. There was a heavy thud as furry flesh met solid oak, followed by a yelp of pain and what was to be a full twenty minutes of outraged howling.

He turned to Alfie. "You never told me you could throw like that!"

"I kept asking if I should throw stones, and you wouldn't let me! If you would have let me chuck them at those witches, we could have been back through the tunnel, and home in time for last orders at the pub!"

“I’m sorry, Mate. It was just that you look like you’d throw like a girl. No offence.”

“Thanks for that. But no worries. I wouldn’t have met Autumn if we had gone back home. I’m glad we’re still here.”

Rod decided not to comment.

It was then that they realised that they were not alone in the cottage. Hungry eyes watched them from the bottom of the stairs. And in Rod’s experience of this strange, mixed-up world, whenever someone was hungry, they would usually try to eat him.

#

Lathgertha was in the Great Hall at Spartan Castle. Outside, her armies were ready to march, to follow their leader to what they thought would be death or glory, but what would in actual fact be certain annihilation. She would make sure of that.

She was a Shield Maiden. No, correction, she was the original Shield Maiden. For millennia, she had led armies into battle, determined to grind her foes into the dust. But not this time. This time, the plan was to kill everyone on the battle-field, whosever side they were on. Mutually-assured destruction. The plan was genius.

And after the battle, there would be only five people standing (or just two if she was really lucky). She would survive, of course, as would her warrior husband, Ragnar. Her step-children would probably make it through, too. But it would be an added bonus if they perished. Sure, they would back within a generation or two, but the thought of having Ragnar to herself for thirty or forty years was just too delicious for words. Those boys were far too full of themselves for their own good, Hvitserk in particular.

They had Plan A. They had Plan B. Word had reached her from the far side of the Forest that Ragnar had even found a wizard whose powers might give

them a Plan C. There was only one man who could stand in their way now, a mercenary who had defeated her family in the past. That man was Thane.

Thane was an intergalactic mercenary, summoned to planets by the Watchers to assassinate people like her. She had kidnapped a Watcher. Ragnar had abducted another one. It was unthinkable that the Watchers on other planets would not try to secure their release. There were plenty of mercenaries out there, but only one who had any hope of success. But he was leaving it late. Once she had led her army to Crow Hill and set it loose on Ragnar's troops, there would be nothing he could do. Thane could defeat her in combat, and probably Ragnar at the same time. But he couldn't compete with the five of them, once Hvitserk and the boys were there with her. And he certainly couldn't battle two huge armies on his own.

In a way, she hoped that he would put in an appearance, right at the very last minute, when it was too late to make a difference. He would have to watch on as the two armies – the male and the female – clashed, knowing that he was powerless to intervene. Would he care? She doubted it somehow; the man was colder than a streaking Eskimo. But he had always taken a professional pride in his work. If he was indifferent to the thousands of ordinary people perishing before his eyes, it would hurt him to know that his mission had been such a spectacular failure.

Which is where the witch apprentice came in. The girl stood before her now, fidgeting apprehensively. She was good looking; not in Lathgertha's league, granted, but pretty all the same. Ebony skin, cheek-bones you could hone a battle-axe upon. Maybe she would give her to Ragnar as a present. Or maybe she would keep her for herself. The boys wouldn't be having her, though, that was for sure.

But it wasn't this girl's physical attributes which interested her at the moment. She had just learnt that she had been in the company of two men, wearing short-sleeved shirts and blue trousers. Thane had last been seen in Hedral ten years earlier, in the company of someone wearing just such bizarre attire. The trolls had said that the two men had disappeared into a mountain together, along with various assorted hangers-on, and soon afterwards the mountain had exploded. She needed to find the man in blue to question him.

To find out if he knew where Thane was, or when he would be coming. But first, she needed to know if the witches' apprentice knew anything herself.

"Who was the man you were with?" she asked. "The older one?"

Autumn shrugged. She had sense enough to look frightened.

"Just some man," she said. "I don't know his name."

"Would torture loosen your tongue?"

Autumn shook her head bravely. "Torture me all you like. I can't tell you what I don't know."

"Who said anything about torturing you?" Lathgertha smiled. "You have been recognised by one of the older witches. I know which village you came from. I don't know your parents, granted, but that is of no consequence. I can bring the villagers out one by one, and hack off their limbs in front of you. You'll speak soon enough."

And Autumn knew she was right. She felt loyalty towards her new friends, but it was nothing compared to the love of her family. And what good could her information do Lathgertha anyway? The two men had been taken away by the Amazons. They would most likely be dead by now.

"And if I speak?" she asked. "You'll let them go? All of them?"

"One of them. You get to choose which. I'm not an unreasonable woman."

"All of them," Autumn insisted.

Lathgertha beckoned over an Amazon who was waiting in the wings. "Go down to the dungeons," she said. "Start killing the prisoners, until I send the word to stop."

"Wait!" the witch apprentice shouted. "Please, wait."

"But of course. Now, my child. We have some serious talking to do."

Halfshaft was not very good at climbing trees, and the World Tree was a very tall one indeed. When he reached the branch half way up which led to Hedral, he paused, seriously tempted to keep on climbing and make his way up to Paradise. Two things stopped him. The first was that he was dubious that they would let him in up there. The second was that his legs were tired.

He hopped along the branch, and all of a sudden he was back in the hut where he had “duelled” that cheating old wizard, Rustmarrow. There was no sign of his adversary now. He had no idea how long had passed since he had left this place. Did time move differently in the Underworld? It might have been just a few minutes since he had last been here, it might have been centuries (though, if it was, someone had kept the hut in remarkably good repair in the interim).

He poked his head out the door. He cursed. Ragnar was there, leaning against the wall, an insufferably smug look on his face.

“You’re harder to kill than I thought,” Ragnar teased. “Still, you lost your duel against a second-rate wizard. I thought that lightning thing you do might be useful to me, but if you can’t defeat Rustmarrow, you’re of no use at all.”

Halfshaft felt the blue light crackling round his fingers.

“Too late now,” Ragnar said. “I need weapons, not fireworks. And I’ve got all the weapons I need.”

Crug and Runt approached. Ragnar nodded towards the wizard.

“Lash him to a rock, and roll him down the hill, like the last one. It amuses me.”

The two trolls exchanged dubious glances.

“We only do that with women,” Crug protested. “It’s no fun with men. It would make me queasy when we rip their clothes off.”

“It would amuse me,” Ragnar repeated, in a voice which tolerated no contradiction.

“Okay,” Runt conceded. “But we’re keeping his pants on, whatever you say.”

#

Much to their surprise, Takina and Pussy found that the Sirens were quite friendly, especially for women whose sole purpose in life was to murder as many men as they could.

The women introduced themselves. Lilith was their leader. Then there was Agrat, Naamah and Zenunin. They would be introduced to the others later. The two friends had clearly had a stressful time, and the Sirens didn’t want crowd them until they had had a chance to recuperate.

It had been an hour or two since their ship had gone down. They sat by the dying embers of the signal fire, the Sirens dressed in white, Takina and Pussy dressed in very little at all. The women had offered to bring them white robes to put on, but Pussy didn’t feel they were very fetching, and Takina wasn’t sure they she wanted to wear the Sirens’ clothes just yet. Today, she would be wearing white, tomorrow, she might be dancing round a fire, luring men to a watery grave. Better to take it one step at a time.

Towels were fetched for them. Pussy insisted on rubbing Takina down, she was very considerate like that. She must have been delirious, as she kept making strange little strangulated noises as she was rubbing the rough material over the Amazon’s bottom and breasts. She then asked Takina to return the favour, and the barely-stifled groaning sounds continued, more frequent still. She would need a doctor. Or, bearing in mind the lack of men round here, a nurse.

It did not take long for Lilith to get round to business.

“We’d like you to join us,” she urged. “Join the Sisterhood. Stop those big ugly men from sailing all over the world, spreading their filthy diseases to all and sundry.”

Pussy shook her head vigorously.

“Sorry. I love big ugly men. And the only diseases they normally have are the ones they’ve picked up from big ugly women.”

Lilith frowned. She wasn’t used to being contradicted. It was not often that any women were salvaged from the shipwrecks, and the ones that were had tended to have been so mistreated by the sailors that they were only too happy to join the Cause. It was almost as if this one enjoyed the company of the hairy beasts.

“Please reconsider,” she urged. “We have a wonderful community here. All girls together. And we could teach you to sing our beautiful songs.”

Pussy did not appear to be as impressed by this offer as Lilith had expected. She just rolled her eyes, and carried on briskly towelling the Amazon, even though she was by now completely dry.

“Do we have a choice?” Takina asked.

“My Dear, of course you do! We would never hurt our sisters. You are free to leave here anytime you wish. It would be very dangerous, of course. We’re surrounded by sea water on one side and the Great Forest on the other. Pirates and sharks in one direction, and wolves and wood-dwarfs in the other. But if you prefer certain death to the company of your sisters, your new family, then that’s a matter for you. It’s every woman’s right to choose.”

Takina shrugged Pussy off. Her skin was raw from over-towelling.

“Is there no there no other way?”

“If only there was,” Lilith sighed. “We have lovely sea-views here, but the diet of fish and pine-cones does get a little monotonous after a while. Not that you should let that put you off. We could have such fun here together. Singing classes Monday to Wednesday, fishing on Thursday, “All-Men-Are-Pigs” refresher lectures on Fridays, pine-cone gathering on Saturdays, and on Sundays we let our hair down by stripping off our silly clothes and going for a dip in the sea.

“Sounds ideal,” said Pussy, brightening up. “Where do I sign up?”

But Lilith’s attention was elsewhere.

“Oh dear. That’s unfortunate.”

Takina followed her gaze towards the sea. In the distance, she saw three men standing on the rocks, silhouetted against the sea. They stood stock still. It was hard to make out their faces from here, but she didn’t need to see their features to know who they were. The clothes, two swords and a battle-axe, the bristling aggression.

Hvitserk. Sigurd. Bjorn.

She took Pussy by the hand.

“Run!”

#

The child at the bottom of the stairs watched them with cold, empty eyes. He was a small boy, maybe eight or nine (Rod was never very good at calculating kids’ ages, as you didn’t tend to see a lot of them at the pub where he spent most of his free time). He had dark hair, and black irises. He made Rod uncomfortable.

“Sorry we came in without knocking. We were being chased by wolves. We figured we might have lost a leg or two if we rung the door-bell first.”

“You are welcome here,” replied the child, his voice older than his years. He didn’t sound particularly welcoming. Indeed, there did not appear to be any emotion there at all.

He beckoned for them to take a place at the table. “Please, take a seat. Can I get you something to drink?”

“A couple of pints would be nice. And something for my mate here, too.”

“Two pints of tea?”

“No, no, if it’s tea, then a couple of cups would be fine. Cheers.”

The boy made tea as they waited. His movements were slow, deliberate. He kept casting looks towards them the whole time, as if worried that they would take flight. There was something very unsettling about him. If it wasn't for the wolves outside, Rod would have made his excuses and left.

The boy joined them at the table. He handed them their tea. Much to Rod's surprise, it was served in bone-china cups, much like his old Mum would've used.

"Where's your dad, then? Or your mum?"

"Dead."

This was not an encouraging start to the conversation. Rod looked at Alfie. Alfie shrugged, and stayed silent. He was leaving this strange little child to Rod.

"You're here on your own, then?"

"Yes."

"What happened to your parents? Was it the wolves?"

"My father was half troll. The wolves were frightened of him. He beat them with his spade."

"Okay." Rod paused, uncertain whether to ask any more questions. The answers he had got so far were far from reassuring. The child pressed on.

"He gave my mother sanctuary from the wolves. He made her pregnant. With me. He was married at the time, but his wife was a skeleton, so mother said that was okay."

"Result," Rod replied, resolving to finish his tea and go, wolves or no wolves.

Alfie finally pitched in.

"How do you survive here? All on your own? It's not like you can pop out to the shops for your groceries."

"Strangers come by. I leave the door unlocked for them. They keep me fed."

"They bring you food?"

“They keep me fed.”

Alarm bells were ringing. Not just tiny bicycle bells, but great big ones, the size of Big Ben. Surely the kid wasn't saying that he eats his guests?

Rod tried to stand up, but his legs buckled beneath him. Alfie followed suit, with the same result.

“My father used to drug people's tea and bury them outside as a sacrifice to the trees. I would never do that. It's such a waste of good meat.”

“Fleck off, you little bastard!” shouted Alfie. “You come near me, and I'll smash your evil little face in.”

“A boy's got to eat,” smiled the child, without the merest trace of humour.

Alfie head nodded down on to his chest. He was out cold.

“Don't do this,” Rod begged him. “I know it's been hard for you, stuck out here in the woods, surrounded by wolves, but we can help you. Take you to safety. Find someone to look after you.”

“And miss doing this?” the boy protested. “Would you deny me the one pleasure I get in life?”

And with that, Rod blacked out.

#

Halfshaft was lashed to a round boulder, probably the same one which had sent Takina to her death some time before. Mercifully, they had let him keep his clothes on. It was traditional for trolls to strip their sacrifices down to the bare minimum of clothing, but no-one had either the inclination or the stomach to remove his. At least he would die with dignity.

There were a couple of things which were really bothering him. The first was that from his vantage point at the top of the hill, he could see camp-fires spread out all over the plain below him. There was a huge army down there,

ready to follow Ragnar to war. And they had the Watcher, too. He should do something, save the world as he had before. But it was difficult to save the world when you were tied to a rock.

The second was that he had already had a taste of the Underworld, and he really wasn't in any hurry to go back there any time soon. Unfortunately, it didn't appear that he had a great deal of choice.

The trolls appeared, and made a circle around him. Well, it was more of an oval, since some of them seemed quite reluctant to get too close to him. Even their dancing was half-hearted. They liked their sacrifices to be saucy naked virgins, and they were far from enthusiastic about the prospect of sacrificing a bearded old wizard who for some strange reason smelled of tobacco smoke and stale brimstone.

Ragnar entered the circle/oval, and stood in front of Halfshaft, regarding him thoughtfully.

"It's a shame you didn't win that duel," he said. "I could've done with a Plan C, just in case Thane turns up."

"He will turn up," Halfshaft spat. "And he will rip your smug face off."

"If you see him while you're rolling down the slope," Ragnar joked, "tell him I'll be at Crow Hill, waiting for him."

He stepped back into the shadows, leaving Halfshaft to his fate.

The song reached a crescendo, or as near to one as the trolls could be arsed to reach. Crug and Runt stepped forwards, ready to roll the stone down the hill.

There was a commotion behind them. Something was approaching at speed, not from the army campfire side of the hill, but from the other direction. The dancing trolls faltered, and ground to a halt. What was going on?

Cave-troll George appeared, a big silly grin on his chops.

"My dear fellow!" he said. "I've been searching for you for ages. I felt so guilty leaving you like that, I just had to come back and rescue you!"

Ragnar reappeared.

“Back off!” he hissed.

Another cave-troll emerged from the darkness, and took his place beside George. Then another. And then several more.

“This time,” George announced, “I brought a few friends with me. Their diction is very poor; you’re lucky if you get more than a few grunts out of them, even on a good day. But they’re awfully handy in a scrap.”

Ragnar cast an eye over his shoulder, frustrated that he had thousands of soldiers just fifteen minutes away, but just a handful of trolls here and now. Between him and the trolls, he would have backed himself against just about any opponent you could imagine. But cave-trolls were a different proposition. They were huge, and they were fearless. He could fight one with ease, two with difficulty, and three with a sharp sword and an awful lot of luck. But there were too many of them. It was not worth risking his life, and the cream of his troll army, for the sake of a scrawny wizard who was of no value to him in any event. Especially when he could pursue that wizard later, and avenge this unexpected insult to his pride.

“Take him, then, and be damned.”

George went to untie Halfshaft, but accidentally nudged the wheel and set it in motion. It started rolling towards the top of the hill. George seized it just in time, and hauled it back again.

“Oops,” he said, in a most un-cave-troll fashion. “Butter-fingers!”

Halfshaft retreated, huddling within a protective ring of cave-trolls, ignoring the growls of the no longer dancing land-trolls around him. He tipped his wizard’s hat at Ragnar.

“See you at Crow Hill,” he told him. “And maybe I’ll bring Thane with me for company.”

Ragnar drew his sword, but stayed rooted to the spot. It was a moral victory for Halfshaft. This battle had been won. Winning the war, however, was another matter entirely.

#

As Takina and Pussy fled into the Forest, Hvitserk and his brothers marched along the rocks towards the flapping women. The Amazon had expected them to have some sort of contingency plan for dealing with men who made it to shore; archers, perhaps, hidden behind the larger rocks on the beach. But there was no defence all. Presumably, no man had ever made it out of the sea before.

She was tempted to go back, to fight alongside the women, but knew that this would be hopeless. The women were not even fighting; they were just running around in circles, singing a bit in one last desperate attempt to bewitch their assailants into surrender. But the brothers were having none of it. If she went back, she would be her against the three of them. If she ran, at least she might save Pussy.

The Forest was much as she remembered it. Dark, brooding, foreboding. She knew how dangerous it was, and she would rather be almost anywhere else but here. But the alternative was Hvitserk, Sigurd and Bjorn, so she ran on, tugging the strangely reluctant Pussy behind her.

“We must run!” she urged her friend. “They’ll come for us!”

“I’d be very disappointed if they didn’t,” Pussy giggled.

She could hear screaming behind her. The Sirens were being butchered. The brothers would presumably want to finish off every last one of them, as revenge for the loss of their ship. It wouldn’t take them long though. Once they had finished their grisly task, they would set off into the Forest, to reclaim their slave-girls. They had a fifteen minute headstart at best.

There was a lone figure on the path ahead of them. Short, stocky, bearded. A dwarf. Takina came to a halt. She didn’t have much luck with dwarfs. Last time she had been here in the Forest, they had dragged her out of a tree and sold her to HENCH’s slave-market. And then there was Hubert, of course!

“Psst,” the dwarf called over to them. “Over here! Quick as you like!”

“Hubert?”

“Psst,” Hubert repeated urgently. “Don’t just stand there! They’ll be here any minute!”

Takina and Pussy fled towards him. Hubert opened his arms for a reunion hug, but had to re-open them to fence them in when they tried to flee straight past him.

“Whoa. Not that way. I have a hiding place.” He nodded towards the nearest tree. “Up there. Come on. No time to lose.”

“They will see us,” Takina declared. “We keep on running.”

“No, they won’t. You’ll see when you get up there. We’ll be safe, I promise.”

Takina and Pussy exchanged glances. The Amazon gave a nod to show that she was “game” if her friend was too. Pussy nodded back. They didn’t appear to have much of an alternative.

Takina shinnied up the trunk like a koala on steroids. Pussy followed unsteadily behind her.

“I’m not very good at climbing,” she explained. “There wasn’t much call for it in the slave-market. More going down than up, if you get my drift.”

She felt grubby hands push against both her bottom cheeks. Hubert was helpfully pushing her up the trunk. If it had been Hvitserk or Sigurd, she might have quite enjoyed the sensation, but the dwarf was really not her cup of tea. Quite how he was clinging on to the bark without the use of either hand was a mystery to her. Either he had very strong thighs, or he was using some sort of sticky substance to attach himself.

The Sirens stopped screaming. That could only mean one thing. A whole race exterminated, never to reappear. And if the brothers had finished with the women, then they would be on their way into the Forest now, just minutes behind. Takina and Pussy were pretty much defenceless up here. If Hubert’s plan failed, they would be doomed.

Pussy eventually made it up the tree. Hubert was right behind her. For some reason, he had a huge grin on his face, and danced a little jig of excitement when he reached the safety of the branches. Indeed, he danced with such gusto that he would have fallen out of the tree had Takina not seized him by the collar as he toppled over.

“Thank you,” Hubert said.

“My pleasure,” Takina lied.

“And thank *you*,” the lecherous dwarf leered at Pussy. “Such a beautiful bottom, right there above my head. Such a soft-”

Takina coughed. “Your hiding place?”

Hubert remembered the imminent danger, and consigned the thought of Pussy’s posterior to his mental recycle bin, ready to be restored whenever he was in need of cheering up. He pointed along the branch.

“There.”

There was a platform of leaves and twigs, all bound together with what looked suspiciously like dried wolf poo, to form a large platform in the tree-top. It measured maybe six foot across and a couple of feet wide. It was just large enough for the three of them to sit, hidden from below. For once, the dwarf had come up with a sensible plan. His little nest was the perfect hiding place.

Takina and Hubert tight-rope-walked along the branch, and took their places on the platform, Hubert allowing Takina to go first (as he was keen to sit snugly inbetween his lady friends on their perch). Pussy followed on all fours, unused to heights. Hubert swore, cursing himself for not having positioned himself behind her. Still, there was probably not much room left in his recycle bin of saucy memories anyway. He had accumulated an awful lot of images over the years, and was reluctant to permanently delete a single second of it.

No sooner had Pussy squeezed up to the dwarf, then the brothers were below them. The sound of jogging, then panting (Bjorn, maybe?), taunting (Hvitserk), and then cursing (definitely Bjorn).

The brothers stopped beneath the tree. Hubert hugged the women to him under the pretext of comforting them. Had their hideaway been spotted?

More taunts (from Sigurd this time), and stronger swear-words from Bjorn which made even Hubert blush. The threats he was using against his brothers seemed totally implausible, in any event. There was no way you would ever be able to force a hedgehog into that particular part of the male anatomy, yet alone a bastard porcupine.

They waited with baited breath, expecting to hear the brothers hauling themselves up the tree trunk. Instead, they heard trickling liquid, followed by a loud Bjorn-sized sigh of relief.

“I needed that!”

And then they were gone.

The three companions waited in the tree for an hour, to allow their pursuers a healthy head-start. The tree was the tallest around, and the view was spectacular, affording them a breathtaking panorama of the Forest around them as they waited for the coast to become clear.

Pussy had a question.

“How come we’re still alive? Aren’t the trees here supposed to rip you to shreds?”

“There are good ones and bad ones, just like people. I’m a wood dwarf. It’s my job to know the difference.” He patted her thigh for much longer than was strictly necessary, and then rubbed it for a while for good measure. “You’re safe with me.”

Takina had a question, too.

“How did you know about this place?”

“I built it when I was a dwarfling.”

“Why?” Pussy asked.

But Takina knew the answer already. Apart from the views over the Forest, the tree looked over the beach where the Sirens were encamped. What was it

they had said? Singing on Monday to Wednesday, fishing on Thursday, some other stuff on Friday and Saturday, and on Sunday they would strip naked and run into the sea.

She looked at Hubert with disapproval. Was there no end to his dwarfish depravity?

“What?” he asked. “Why are you looking at me like that? Sure I could see the ladies from up here, but it’s not like I was here all the time.”

“Just on Sundays?” she ventured.

He nodded, assuming himself vindicated. “Yes,” he replied, in a hurt little voice. “Just on Sundays.”

#

When Rod regained consciousness, he kind of wished he hadn’t.

He was lying on the kitchen table. He couldn’t move his arms or legs, presumably as a result of the drug still in his system. Alfie was propped up in a chair, still sound asleep. What was really disturbing, though, was the sight of the little boy, holding up a succession of wickedly sharp knives to the light, and frantically polishing any of them which bore the merest speck of dirt. It wasn’t natural for a child that age to be so obsessively hygienic.

Rod tried to speak, but his mouth didn’t work. He just made a sort of crazed gurgling sound. The boy looked at him, with black, disinterested eyes, and went back to his polishing.

“It’ll be done soon enough,” he said. “There will be pain – lots of pain – but it will stop when your heart gives out. It always does.”

Rod tried to think of a plan of action, but decided it was impossible to put any plan into effect when he couldn’t move. If he was able to roll off the table it would have been a start (it wouldn’t have got him far, but at least it would

have taken his mind off things for five seconds), but he was unable to manage even that.

The boy finished polishing. He scanned Rod's body thoughtfully, as if he had been presented with a huge roast dinner and was weighing up the pros and cons of starting with the meat, potatoes or the Yorkshire pudding. He jabbed a carving knife into Rod's ribs.

"Too much fat," he complained. "Too much everything. You're going to be all dried up and stale by the time I've finished you."

Rod resisted the urge to apologise. He couldn't speak anyway.

The door opened. Someone was coming in. Two people maybe. He couldn't see them from his position on the table. They would have to come and lean over him to be in his field of vision. He hoped they hadn't come over for dinner.

The child turned to face them. He looked wary. Good. There was the tiniest shred of hope, then.

"We heard you had visitors," a male voice said.

"Young visitors," added a female.

"You heard wrong," the boy replied. "They're both ancient. Especially the fat one on the table."

Thanks for that, thought Rod. He didn't think Alfie would be terribly impressed by the remark either. He'd probably be throwing stones at the kid by now, if he could move his arms.

"Are they dead?"

"Not yet. They would have been by now if I'd have known that you two would be showing up."

The child moved away from the table. Rod could see nothing at all now, save for the white ceiling above him. He longed to sit up and see what was going on, but he was stuck on the table as effectively as if he had been pinned there.

“This is our territory,” the female voice declared. “Anyone not yet middle-aged, you send to us.”

“It’s only yours since my father died,” the boy spat. “You wouldn’t have dared come here if he was still alive. He would have beaten you to a pulp with his shovel. Besides, they’re well over middle-aged. Look at the state of them.”

“Your father is dead.”

“I know.”

“Your mother is dead,” the woman added, a touch unnecessarily.

“And I know how she died,” the child retorted.

“We loved her as our own,” the man retorted.

“She’d still be alive if you hadn’t.”

There was stalemate. Almost complete silence for a full minute, the only sound being the ticking of a clock somewhere in the cottage. The boy returned to the table, and selected a meat cleaver.

“I’d like you to leave,” he told his unwanted guests.

He raised the meat-cleaver above his head, ready to bring it down on Rod’s left thigh.

“Stop!” the woman commanded. “We are taking him.”

“That’s not fair.”

“We’ll give you a puppy. One of the wolves has had a litter. We can bring one of them here for you.”

“Puppies taste disgusting,” the boy grumbled.

“Not if you boil them first. Two puppies, then. Or you get nothing.”

“The whole litter,” the boy insisted. “And the mother, too.”

The man and woman conversed in whispers.

“All the puppies. Not the mother. Or we take these men and leave you hungry.”

“It doesn’t look like I’ve got much choice, then.”

Two faces appeared in Rod’s field of vision. One was male, one was female, both were beautiful. They had light, delicate features, and wide, reassuring smiles. The woman rubbed something on his forehead, and almost immediately he felt movement return to his body. He sat up, and watched as she repeated the process on Alfie.

Alfie rubbed his sleepy eyes, and looked around the room.

“What have I missed?” he asked.

“Deal or No Deal,” Rod replied. “With a little bit of “Master-Chef” thrown in for good measure.”

He patted the little boy on the head. The child stared back at him. If looks could kill, he would be well on the way to his death rattle by now.

“See you later, Kid,” he said. “Don’t forget to lock up after us. There are some pretty weird people about.”

#

Halfshaft had some difficulty persuading George and his fellow cave-trolls to follow him into the Forest. He had to go to Crow Hill, he told them, and he would never make it there without their help. The future of the whole world depended on them. But still they were reluctant to go with him. The wolves and the dwarfs held no fear for them. But bizarrely, they were convinced that if they entered the Forest, they would be set upon by moles.

“Why moles?” he asked. “What harm can they possibly do to you?”

But the cave-trolls simply muttered amongst themselves, like superstitious natives in old Johnny Weissmuller films who wouldn’t go over the mountains

for fear of bad magic on the far side. "They burrow," was all George would say ominously. "They burrow in dark places."

Eventually, he was able to talk them into accompanying him, by promising to engulf in raging flame any moles they happened to encounter on their trip. He was a wizard, wasn't he? Raging flame would not be a problem for him. They looked a little dubious, which irritated him. The blue sparks crackled at his finger tips, and this was enough to convince them that he was powerful enough to defend them from the furry black fiends. He felt that they were damning him with faint praise, but George assured him that it was a very great compliment indeed. Some trolls were so afraid of moles, that thousands of years ago they had gone to live in caves, as moles can't tunnel through rock. And they had been cave-dwellers ever since.

They had been walking through the Forest for an hour or so. The wolves had come to terrorise them, taken one look at the cave-trolls and beaten a hasty retreat. Halfshaft smiled. It felt good to be top of the food chain for the first time in his life.

What to do when he got to Crow Hill though? The cave-trolls would be useful, but he had seen the size of Ragnar's army. Even with the element of surprise, he could not hope to defeat them. He had his magic, though. He now felt it coursing through his veins, even when his fingers weren't glowing. Using that time spell under Mount Leiden had changed him; there was wild magic trapped inside him which was determined to find an outlet, and the longer he bottled it up, the fiercer it became. This was his secret weapon. He wasn't sure what it would do, but he felt that it would be pretty awe-inspiring, whatever it was. It was the only hope, in any case.

There was a commotion up ahead, around a bend in the pathway a few hundred yards distant. Ordinarily, Halfshaft would have turned tail and fled. But not now. He had a cave-troll escort. He was invincible. He would march ahead, and let whoever was up there run instead.

He regretted it when he reached the bend in the pathway. There was an army of corpses sprawled across the track, of such size that it spilled into the Forest for thirty or forty feet on either side. The trees would ordinarily have crushed them, but showed no interest in them whatsoever, detecting no signs of life.

The gathering looked like a cross between a refugee camp and a huge school outing.

A dozen women were marching along the path towards him. The Sirens wore plain white frocks, cut low at the front, and their hair flowed loose over their shoulders. The most striking thing about them, though, was that all of them bore terrible injuries. One had her face cleft almost clean in two from a battle-axe, another had a slit across her throat which made her head wobble up and down as she ran (as if on a hinge). Almost all of them had copious amounts of blood splattered across their clothing. They were clearly very dead indeed, although they didn't appear to have realised this.

Two familiar witches stood at the circumference of the pool of corpses up ahead. They were the ones from the Underworld, the ones who had so cruelly "delivered" him from the room of practically naked sex-slaves he had been ordered to "infiltrate". One of the hags was attempting to keep her charges in check, the other (larger) lady was bellowing after the Sirens who were attempting to make a break for it.

"You're dead!" she shouted at them.

"Bugger off," retorted the fleeing Siren, Lilith. "We're just a little poorly, that's all!"

Martha vanished, and reappeared in front of the Siren. She hated doing this – it took all her energy to get her tights on in the morning, so even short-range teleportation left her gasping like an asthmatic making obscene telephone calls.

"You're dead," she repeated. "Only an hour ago, I'll grant you, but dead all the same. And I've borrowed you for the next twenty four hours."

"We're going home," Lilith insisted. "Come on, Ladies. We have work to do."

"That's not even the right direction," Martha protested. "Women never could map read!"

"Traitor," Lilith hissed. "You're supposed to be on our side! And look at all those men back there. We're not staying here with the nasty lecherous creatures. I have my ladies to think of."

Martha seized the head of the nearest Siren, and slammed it back and forth like a trap-door on loose hinges.

“You’re dead,” she repeated one final time. “And if you don’t do as you’re told, you’re all going straight back to Hell where you belong.”

“Ouch!” protested the lady whose head was being manhandled. “That really stings!”

Lilith huffed, but Martha held firm. Eventually, the Sirens wilted. They marched furiously back towards the body of the corpse army, shooting Martha furious looks as they went.

“If they so much as look at my girls,” she grumbled, “I’ll rip their heads off.”

“How ironic,” the witch mused. It was then that she caught sight of Halfshaft, who was by now endeavouring to creep back around the bend in the pathway to anonymous safety.

“I wondered where you’d go to!” she shouted after him. “Come back here at once!”

Halfshaft was not keen on going back there, whether at once or at any other speed. He broke into a run, the cave-trolls loping along obliquely behind him. Maybe she would leave him alone if he got far enough away? She had her army of freaks to look after. Surely she would stay with them?

He heard Martha screeching an incantation behind him, and ran all the faster. The earth started shaking. What was the old cow up to? Never mind. Keep running, and hope for the best.

The ground started to shift up ahead. Something was forcing itself up through the earth. What horror would this be? More corpses? A skeleton army, perhaps? Some huge, horrible demon that breathes fire and consumes everything in its path.

No. It was a furry little creature with sightless eyes and a twitching nose. A single, solitary mole.

It was enough, though. The cave-trolls turned tail, and fled back towards the witches. Halfshaft vaulted over the blind little miner and was a couple of dozen

yards down the path before he realised the full horror of his situation. If he kept running, he would have to face the wolves without a cave-troll escort. He would be back at the bottom of the food-chain. But if he turned back, then he would be at the mercy of those crazy witches, and conscripted into their Army of the Dead.

What to do?

He heard a howl up ahead.

With a heavy heart, he changed direction, and headed back towards the confused cocktail of witches, Sirens, soldiers and cave-trolls who milled around the pathway ahead. He just prayed that the hags had had the decency to recruit a few of the deceased sex-slaves he had met earlier. It would be good for morale.

#

Takina had argued in favour of them following the brothers into the Forest to see what they were up to. If they were meeting up with anyone, then she wanted to know about it. And if they were finding an escape route, then so much the better. Either way, she reasoned that the path would be clear of wolves, as the brothers would no doubt slay any of them who crossed their path.

For once, Hubert had a better idea. He was a wood dwarf. This was his home. As long as he was here to guide them, they would be safe. He would take them to see the dwarf elders, and seek advice as to what they should do now. It was only a matter of time before the dwarfs took them in anyway. They would know already that there were strangers in the Forest, and they would come for them. Better to hand themselves in first, as a sign of good faith.

Hubert threaded his way through the Forest, sometimes on the pathway, sometimes through the trees. Takina protested that she and Pussy would be torn apart, but the dwarf had overruled them. He knew the destructive trees

from the placid ones. They should stay close to him (“no, much closer than that”) and he would guide them to safety.

Eventually, they made it to the Grand Assembly Cavern, the earthen cave twenty feet below the Forest, where the dwarfs held their meetings. The ceiling consisted of a mass of tangled tree roots, reaching down into the chamber as if hungry for the dwarf meat below. The floor was tramped flat by generation after generation of dwarf boots. They had lived here for a millennia.

The light was poor. The dwarfs could not light fires down here – it would never have been tolerated by the malignant trees up and above – and the sole light therefore came from the four surface shafts at each point of the compass. Takina and Pussy were creatures of sunlight; it was difficult for them to see very much down here at all. But Hubert took everything in at a glance. He was very much a creature of the night.

No dwarfs here. He was hoping to find Arkon, foremost of the elders, but there was no-one here at all.

A number of shafts led downwards into the earth. The dwarf’s living quarters were down there, hundreds of chambers cut into the rock and soil. He investigated a dozen of them in turn, one in each shaft. Each time he returned to the surface, he looked more anxious, more mystified. The place was deserted. What had happened here to make his people evacuate their home?

He found a little food – mainly worms and grubs, which diet was one of the main reasons he had preferred to go off on his travels in the first place – and they prepared to leave. There was a scabbling above them. Someone was coming down the Eastern access shaft towards them. Whoever it was, they were large enough to block out the light. It would be impossible to make out their identity until they dropped out of the shaft, though. There were no weapons down here. If it was fight or flight, they would have to choose the latter, as the former was out of the question. But Hubert overruled Takina when she voted to make a quick exit using the Western access shaft. He had to know who this was. And more importantly, he had to know what had become of his people. Whatever the risk, whatever the consequences, they were staying put until their visitor arrived.

#

Rod and Alfie were used to being out of the frying pan, into the fire. Just for once, though, they were not only out of the frying pan, but out of the kitchen as well. Their rescue had gone very well indeed.

Their rescuers were wood-elves. They had brought them back to their Forest stronghold, a village they called Vorgas. The “buildings” consisted of huge fallen trees, hollowed out to make spacious rooms, and draped with the finest silks to give them the appearance of some high-class Arabian brothel.

Rod had asked how they had managed to carve their homes from tree wood in a forest like this? Wouldn't the trees fight back? Their rescuers had explained that they were the masters of the Forest; that the trees were so aggressive, because that is how the elves wanted them to be. It kept tourists out, and dwarf numbers down to manageable proportions. The relationship was also symbiotic, to a certain degree. That was when Rod stopped listening; if they were going to use dirty words, then they could at least have the decency to use four letter ones so he could understand what they were going on about.

Alfie had never really been listening in the first place. He, too, had thought his place looked like an Arabian brothel, and was wrestling with his conscience. If he was offered anything more than tea, he would have to decide whether he and Autumn were “on a break”.

Their new friends introduced themselves. The female was Asrai. She was half water-sprite (the male equivalent of a water-nymph, back before the days when the wood-elves had eaten them into extinction). She was tall and willowy, and had poor taste in men, as she seemed to have taken an active interest in Rod. She was flirting outrageously, and had actually tried to unzip his jeans whilst introducing her male friend. Rod was having none of it, though. Sure, he would be happy to oblige when the two of them were alone, but he wasn't about to whip out his todger with two other blokes in the room. He had standards.

The male, rather disappointingly, was called Jason. He was half human, it transpired. It seemed that the wood-elves weren't keen on having relationships with each other, so they sought out other species instead. Maybe they were all too skinny for each other's tastes.

"Would you like to retire to somewhere more – comfortable?" Asrai enquired. "I could find us a room. We could make love."

"Yeah, all right," nodded Rod, as casually as he could manage. "Sounds like a plan."

She tried to unzip his jeans again.

"Calm yourself," he laughed. "It's not like it's gonna go cold if you wait five minutes."

"It had better not," she smiled. She took him by the hand, and led him away.

"I might be a while," Rod told Alfie. "Don't wait up."

Jason flowed across the floor, to what he considered to be an semi-intimate distance from Alfie. Alfie took a step backwards. He wasn't comfortable with anyone other than Autumn invading his personal space.

"Shall we?" Jason asked.

"Let's not, eh?"

"I could show you things you've never even dreamt of."

"That's what I'm afraid of."

"Am I not your type?"

"I'm afraid not, Mate. You're a bit too -" Alfie groped for the right word. "A bit too blokey."

Jason placed his hand on Alfie's chest.

"That doesn't matter. Believe me, you wouldn't regret it."

He took a step away from the wood-elf.

“Look, Mate, I’ve got a girlfriend.”

Jason shrugged. “That doesn’t matter. What goes on in Vorgas, stays in Vorgas.”

Alfie shook his head. “Look, I’m flattered and everything, but I bat for the other side.”

Jason gave up. He beckoned for his new companion to wait outside. Alfie gladly obliged.

“Would I have still been out here if Asrai had offered herself to me?” he wondered aloud, as he stood on the grass outside the fallen tree-trunk. Would his love for Autumn have given him the strength to turn her down, or would he have been in there, having the time of his short life?

He gave a deep sigh. He would have turned her down, he was sure of it. Autumn was the only woman for him, and he would never have forgiven himself for so much as looking at anyone else.

What a twat, he thought.

#

Halfshaft was astonished to see Trugga marching down the pathway towards him. It had apparently been ten years since they had fought their duel, and he had assumed that she would have died many years before. But it was not this which surprised him. It was the fact that she had cast off all her clothes, and was stalking through the Forest stark naked. Bearing in mind she was built like an Amazon slop-house, it was not a pretty sight at all.

Ordinarily, he would have given her a wide berth, but not on this occasion. He was part of the witches’ army, and he still had his cave-troll body-guard with him. When Martha approached her to converse, he sidled up to find out what was going on.

“Good morrow, Sister,” Martha said, under the impression that this is how Amazons spoke. “What news?”

“Bugger off and leave me here to die,” Trugga replied, rather less formally than the witch had anticipated.

“What’s wrong?”

“I have failed my Queen. She went off into the Forest a decade ago. The man named Rod has just told me that she is dead.”

“Rod?” Halfshaft exclaimed. “Rod’s here?”

They ignored him. He was a mere man.

“That’s no reason to kill yourself,” Martha soothed her. “Come and join us instead. Take your revenge on others. It’ll make you feel better, I promise.”

Trugga shook her head. “No. I have failed my Queen, and I must die for it.”

“So why are you naked?” Halfshaft asked. “Are you trying to give yourself a nasty cold? There are quicker ways to top yourself, you know.” He signalled to one of the cave-trolls. “Allow me to demonstrate.”

“Why *are* you naked?” Martha asked.

“When Amazons fail their Queen, they remove their clothes and march into the Forest so the trees can take them.”

“And?”

“The trees don’t want me,” Trugga blubbed in despair. “They spat me back out again.”

“So come and join us,” Martha urged. “Redeem yourself. You’re an Amazon, a warrior; if you’re going to die, you should go down fighting in glorious battle.”

“I’m not worthy,” she wailed. “I failed my Queen.”

Halfshaft gave a sign, and the cave-troll dealt Trugga a vicious punch to the face. The Amazon shot through the air, landing amongst the trees. A tree root explored her, made a disgusted little choking sound, and withdrew. Trugga

climber unsteadily to her feet, and cried her heart out at this latest humiliation.

Martha rounded furiously on Halfshaft.

“Why did you do that?” she demanded of him.

He shrugged.

“Sorry,” he said. “But she was getting on my tits.”

#

Hubert was ecstatic. He danced a jig of dwarfish delight as the stubby little figure emerged from the tunnel. Their visitor could not have been more welcome. It was Horace, his brother.

“What are you doing here?” Hubert asked, as the two of them hugged each other. “Where’s everyone else?”

“They’ve gone to war,” Horace said. “There’s going to be a battle on Crow Hill, the first for a thousand years.”

“Which side are we on?”

“That’s the problem. We’re on both.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Me neither, Hubert. Me neither.”

Horace explained why he had left his post. He was supposed to have been one of the two guardians of the Forest, but had been there all on his own since Hubert had deserted him in search of the blonde Amazon who was here with him now. Horace had stayed on for the last ten years, without so much as a day off, until today. But there was no point him being there any longer. The Eastern army had marched right past him, thousands upon thousands of them. The dwarfish women had joined them and shown them the safer of the two pathways. And word had reached him that the dwarfish men had set off to the

West, and an army of their own. There was no point in him guarding the Forest now. The horse had bolted, and there was no point locking the stable door when it had been kicked to bloody smithereens.

“I’m glad to see you, though,” Horace said. “At least there are two of us left. Have you missed me?”

“No,” Hubert declared, not wishing to appear to be effeminate in front of his two lady friends.

“You always were a bad liar,” Horace laughed, and the two of them laughed and hugged some more.

“So what now?” Pussy asked.

The dwarfs were in two minds. Horace was for going after the male dwarfs and joining the western Army. Hubert thought the better course of action was for the four of them to make love, and have a think about things over a post-coital mint (they were not allowed cigarettes as the trees wouldn’t let them light up).

Takina overruled them both, though. There was only one place for them to go. If Ragnar was leading an army against the women to the west, they had to stop him before the two sides clashed. They had to go to Crow Hill. And fight him to the death.

#

Rod was out of his jeans quicker than an anorexic out of a meat-pie factory. He had had an awful lot of experience with women, but they were almost invariably either well past their sell-by date or plucked from the bargain-bin of life. He had once had a buy-one-get-one-free offer, but they were about one hundred and twenty six between them, and he had politely but firmly turned them down.

This wood-elf was different. Tall, slender, gorgeous. And she didn’t even need to be warmed up with a few drinks first. He was on a promise, and he was

going to get second or third helpings before she realised quite how far he was out of her league. It was like his primary school second team playing Man Utd. Away. With bad colds. They might have given QPR a run for their money, though.

Asrai was equally keen to strip. It had been weeks she had mated. She knew there were other species where the female devoured the male as soon as he had served his purpose, but to her knowledge wood elves were the only one where both male and female enjoyed a good munch after the deed was done. Wood elves had stopped mating with one another many centuries before, because if there was one thing worse than fighting over the duvet, it was bickering over who was going to eat whom after sex. It ruined that cosy, sleepy glow you get, when you were both trying to hold each other down to take the first delicious chunk out of their face.

Unfortunately, word had got round to the other races of their special post-coital culinary requirements. As long as the trees ensured that no-one made it out of the Forest alive, their secret should have been safe. But somehow, word had been spread, and that had made things very difficult indeed. They had suspected that one of their number had been eating people outside the Forest – at a brothel or slave-market perhaps – but how it had happened was immaterial. The fact was that more and more people who ventured into the Forest seemed to be aware of their innocent little habit of devouring their lover, and it had reached the stage where as often as not their potential suitor turned them down. They would still eat him or her, of course. But it just wasn't the same without a little foreplay as an aperitif.

Rod was not her idea of the perfect lover. He was about sixteen stone, spoke in a strange dialect, and was wearing curious blue trousers. But beggars couldn't be choosers. He was here, and he was willing, and that was all that mattered. And once she had finished with him, she would go in search of Alfie, just in case Jason had failed to get there first.

When he whipped his trousers off, she nearly called the whole thing off. Hungry as she was, she was not sure she could eat a man who could be so totally oblivious to how unsexy he looked. The grubby short-sleeved shirt, the long colourful undergarment bearing the legend "While You're Down There",

and worst of all the fact that he had kept his socks on. And she suspected that it was only a matter of time before she would be picking back-hair out of her teeth. Maybe she should just go vegetarian, and have done with it.

“Let’s get ready to rumble,” he invited her, which didn’t help his cause at all.

He tugged his boxer shorts down, and waited for her to follow suit. She didn’t appear to be all that keen to follow his lead, as far as he could tell. Her tight green elfish leggings stayed stubbornly in place.

“Shall I take my socks off?” he asked. “Would that help?”

“Maybe.”

He took his socks off.

“Maybe not, though,” she said. “I’m sorry. This isn’t working for me.”

“Is it my boxers? I went out with a feminist once. And I mean just once. She went mental when she saw the slogans on my pants. Said they were demeaning to women. I thought that was a bit harsh, bearing in mind she was bending me over a coffee table at the time, and spanking me with her copy of “Fifteen Shades of Grey,” or whatever it’s called.

Asrai looked confused. “I’ve got no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Neither have I, really.”

He pulled his boxers back up.

“Shall we call it a day?”

“It’s for the best.”

Jason walked in unannounced. “What’s going on? I expected to hear you two copulating by now.”

“Do you mind, Mate?” Rod asked. “We’re having a private conversation here.”

“I’ve changed my mind,” Asrai told her kinsman. “I’d rather just go on a diet.”

“Do you mind if I -?” Jason enquired. “I’ve gone a week longer than you, and I’m nowhere near as fussy as you are.”

“Hold on a sec,” Rod protested. “I’m not just a piece of meat, you know. And I never, ever thought I’d say that.”

“You are, actually,” Jason corrected him. “Now be quiet, there’s a good boy, while Asrai and I sort this out between the two of us.”

Rod pulled up his jeans, and zipped them up defiantly (though not too defiantly, for fear of collateral damage). “I’m sorry, but when a man says “no”, he means “no”.”

Asrai’s interest revived. “You know, it’s funny, but now he doesn’t want to, I think maybe I do after all.”

“Too late,” Jason protested. “You didn’t want him. I’ve claimed him now.”

“You’ve got the skinny kid outside.”

“He won’t play. Let’s swap.”

Rod weighed up his options while the two elves were bickering. He could stay here, and be shared around like a joint at a hippy’s beach party. Or he could do a runner, grab Alfie, and disappear into the trees (and almost certain death).

“There’s so much more flesh on your one’s bottom,” Jason protested. “That would keep me going for days!”

Rod ran. However dangerous it was outside, it had to be preferable than Jason working on his arse for the rest of the week.

#

Takina, Pussy, Hubert and Horace took the path to Crow Hill. They could hear commotion in the Forest, both to the East and West. It was the sound of two huge armies converging on the same point. And the four of them were all that was between them.

Things went from bad to worse as they emerged into the clearing in which the Hill was situated. For there in the grass, not fifty yards away, sat Hvitserk, Sigurd and Bjorn, picnicking upon roasted wolf meat.

The four of them tried to slither quietly back into the relative safety of the Forest, but it was too late. Hvitserk was up and after them in an instant, Sigurd close on his heels. Bjorn stayed put, preferring to finish his snack before joining the chase.

“Let’s split up!” shouted Hubert as they ran, judging correctly that their two lusty pursuers were much more likely to chase the scantily dressed slave-girls than the asthmatic old dwarfs. They divided at the first fork in the path, and as predicted the brothers kept on after the women, as the two dwarfs vanished into the trees.

The gap was closing fast. But then there was the sound of running footsteps up ahead. Someone was coming towards them at speed. If whoever it was had weapons, Takina thought, then maybe – just maybe – they could join together and fight Hvitserk and Sigurd off.

The brothers were just twenty yards or so away now, and the gap was shortening with every stride. They were wearing chain-mail, and if it had just been Takina they were chasing, then she felt fairly confident that she could out-run them. But Pussy was slowing her down. She was not built for running, and she had had very little practice at it. She was more used to lying down.

There was a bend in the pathway up ahead. If they could just make it there, wheel round to fend Hvitserk and Sigurd off, and pray that whoever was running down the track towards them would come to their rescue. It was not a good plan, she knew, but unfortunately it was the only one they had.

They reached the bend, just six feet ahead of their pursuers. She grabbed Pussy by the hand, and wheeled her around so the two of them could fight. The brothers went crashing into them, their momentum too great for them to stop in time. The four of them ended up in a writhing heap of flesh on the ground.

“Blimey!” said a voice above them. “Is everyone at it in this Forest?”

She looked up.

Rod! With some youth she had never seen before.

“All right, Darlin’?” he winked at her. “Sorry. We’ve gotta dash. We’re being chased by sex-starved wood pixies.”

#

Martha lined up her troops just beyond the brow of the Hill, ready to pop out when they were least expected. She heard some shouting at the bottom of the Hill, but it sounded as if there was just a handful of people down there at most. The time had not yet come for her peace-keeping force to spring into action.

She could hear the armies moving through the Forest to her left and right. Lathgertha would no doubt be leading the one from the west, a huge force of witches, Amazons and assorted village-women marching along behind her. The Eastern army would consist entirely of men. They would be no match for the women, of course; they would be slaughtered when assaulted by the superior sex. But it was such a tragic waste of good donkeys.

Hers was the only army consisting of a mixture of both sexes. She had dead soldiers and deceased slave-girls from the Underworld, the Sirens (for what they were worth), the cave-trolls and the scruffy-looking wizard. And this was the ideal recruiting ground. Thousands of men, dwarfs, Amazons etc had died here at Crow Hill a thousand years ago, and all those that fell were still trapped in the earth, ready to set upon anyone foolish enough to walk over their unmarked graves. If she could harness them, she would have an army to equal anything that Lathgertha could throw at her.

There was movement in the foliage behind her. Her army had been outflanked. She turned to face the threat, but she couldn’t get a clear sight of it through the mass of slave-girls and cave-trolls blocking her path. She could only hope that Mabel was alive to the danger and was taking steps to address it.

She looked around, trying to locate her long time friend and rival. Eventually, she spotted her, saddling up a cave-troll. What a bitch! Fancy donkey-shopping at a time like this!

She looked back towards the Forest. She squinted. She was getting old. Her eyesight wasn't what it used to be. Who was there, marching up the pathway towards them? And was it too late to saddle up a cave-troll of her own and lead her troops in a glorious charge to death or glory?

All of a sudden, her expression changed. No need for a charge. No need for anything. The cavalry had arrived. For the figure making its way up the hill towards her was none other than Doris, her beloved (if rather irritating) mother. And with her, all the witches' apprentices, the men of the Bickos sect and all the sundry refugees should could muster.

She now had a full-scale army. And she was not afraid to use it to crush anyone who tried to do battle on the other side of Crow Hill.

#

Lathgertha reached Crow Hill just a minute or two before her husband. Her army did not so much march behind her, as dawdled. Some of them were keener than others to do battle. It was not the best army she had ever led, and she knew that she would lead better ones again in the future. But it would serve its purpose well.

She took her place on the nearest slope, with her best warriors towards the top, and the weakest at the bottom. In truth, it didn't matter much where any of them were positioned; they would all die very soon indeed. But she had her professional pride to think of. If she adopted a poor formation, then her stepsons would tease her about it for years to come.

Gerasa, Queen of the Amazons, urged her to take the high ground at the crest of the hill, but she declined. This was on the pretext that there were known to be the spirits of dead soldiers up there, who would spring from the ground and drag passers-by kicking and screaming back into the earth with them. The

witches protested that they could protect them against this threat, but Lathgertha was adamant. What she did not tell them was that she did not want the upper ground, as it was important that she did not gain any advantage over the opposing army. If Plan A failed owing to some unforeseen problem with the Watchers, then Plan B depended upon the two armies being so equally matched that they fought each other into oblivion.

The Amazons took the high ground on her left flank. There was some scope for arguing that the witches would have been the most effective fighters and should have been positioned higher than the Amazons, but the witches didn't seem bothered either way. The Amazons, on the other hand, were likely to have melted away into the Forest if they had not been given precedence, sulking like spoilt children who had not been selected first for the football team even though it was their ball.

The witches came next. Donkeys had been found for all of them, two of which had been King Spartan and the Grand Wizard in happier times. A number of the others were the male villagers from West of the Great Forest, including those from Autumn's village.

Below them, came the water nymphs, all with improvised bows. And then the female villagers, fighting only because they had been told that it was the only way that their menfolk would not stay as donkeys for the rest of their lives. A few had refused to fight, not on moral grounds but because they quite liked the idea that their husbands might stay as donkeys, but these villagers had been executed *pour encourager les autres*.

And then last of all came the assorted dregs of the land, creatures with whom Lathgertha would never have bothered under normal circumstances, but who were there simply because she wanted as few people to survive this battle as possible. They would be her cannon fodder, if only she had cannons.

No sooner were they in what was as near to battle formation as she could optimistically expect of them, then Ragnar marched into the clearing from the East, and started organising his men on the opposite side of the hill. The trolls took top spot, opposite the Amazons, with the wizards beneath them to face off the witches.

Then came the centaurs. They pleaded not to be matched against the water-nymphs, their women, their lovers, but Ragnar sent them back to the ranks with a cruel reminder that he still had their children. They must fight the water-nymphs, or watch their children die.

At the bottom were the dwarfs, grumbling furiously that they were on the lowest ground, and protesting that surely – as everyone who has ever composed a picture knows – the smallest should be on the top to balance things out. Again, Ragnar was deaf to their protestations. This was his moment of glory. He was not about to get involved with office politics with beardy little gnomes.

There was a flurry of excitement from both sides as a group of white-robed women emerged from the crest of the hill and ran towards the ranks of the female army. The recently deceased Sirens had deserted Martha, and had come to show solidarity with their sisters.

As they charged down the hill, the ground started to bubble, and large blisters formed out of the grass. The blisters grew, some of them four feet high, other up to eight feet or more. They split open, like spent chrysalises, and grim, grey figures stepped from each of them. These were the spirits of the dwarfs, men and trolls who had fallen at the Battle of Crow Hill a thousand years ago. It was lonely in the Hill. They had dragged many men down into the depths to keep them company, but this was the first time women had been here. Maybe their tombs would be slightly more bearable once they had pulled the Sirens down below to share their misery with them.

The witches burst into action, casting spells left right and centre to force the spirits back into their graves, but Lathgertha motioned for them to stop. The two armies were equally matched. She neither needed nor desired new recruits to tip the balance in her favour. Despite the protests of the witches around her, she stood back and watched Siren after Siren being seized by the waists and shoulders and sucked slowly into the earth, where they would remain for all time.

It was hard for most of those assembled there to look on without pity. The Sirens descent into the ground was painfully slow. They sank into the ground as if it was quick sand, flailing around in wide-eyed panic, but no-one moved a

muscle to save them. Other than their agonised screams, the only sound in the hushed battle-ground was the occasional chuckle from Ragnar and Lathgertha.

Eventually, they were gone.

Ragnar marched out to the centre ground, and Lathgertha joined him. They kissed passionately, their hands all over each other. It was not part of the plan, but the sight of the poor suffocating women had turned them on to such an extent that they could not help themselves. Besides, they revelled in the fact that their respective armies were so much under their thrall that not one soldier dared to protest when their generals started dry-humping each other on the battle-ground before their very eyes.

Ragnar's joy was complete (Lathgertha's slightly less so) when Hvitserk, Sigurd and Bjorn emerged from the Forest at the bottom of the hill. They had four people with them, all of them on leads attached to spiked metal collars around their necks. Hvitserk held a blonde Amazon, who was struggling furiously against him. Bjorn was leading a sex-slave, who looked as if she was actually quite enjoying it. And Bjorn was following up behind with two men in strange blue trousers, moaning as usual about how his brothers never let him near the women.

The five of them embraced. The family was back together again. The prisoners' leads were handed over to Ragnar and Lathgertha as presents from their doting and ever dutiful sons.

The time had come. Everything was ready. Ragnar and Lathgertha signalled to their respective sides, and the ranks opened to allow the cages to come through. Ragnar and Lathgertha retired through the gaps which this had created, taking their collared captives with them. They needed to be at least a thousand yards away when the two cages came into contact. For they knew what would happen when two Watchers meet.

Everyone else, of course, was blissfully oblivious to what was about to happen. But they would find out soon enough.

#

Halfshaft watched incredulously from his perch atop the hill as Takina was led from the forest by the three men, with Rod at her side. There were a couple of other people there, too, a boy in blue trousers and a girl in a robe, but they held no interest for him. Even Rod's appearance was of limited significance. Takina was alive. Takina was alive!

He launched himself down the hill towards her. He slowed just for a second, when he realised that he was galloping straight into a minefield of hungry spirit soldiers, but the ground had churned up where each had emerged to claim his Siren bride, and by avoiding these areas he managed to find a safe path through. Either that, or now that the soldiers had their women, they had no further use for the likes of him.

He cursed as Takina disappeared through the ranks of the army to his left, Ragnar's prisoner, and cursed still louder when they swung closed against him. He looked over to his right, to see that Rod had vanished into the female army, too. He was now standing in the middle of a battle-field, all alone. It was not the most comfortable place to be.

Two trolls were approaching him, pulling a small cart behind them. A cage stood upon it. The female Watcher was inside, naked and terribly vulnerable, her beauty marred by the ugly bridle across her mouth. Her shoulders heaved. He could tell she was weeping. Ragnar's army followed along close behind her.

From the other side, four Amazons pulled a cart of their own. Inside, the male Watcher sat hunched and broken, wearing a scold's bridle of his own. His blind eyes could see nothing, but he knew what was happening. He knew that Armageddon was at hand.

Ragnar's army followed along behind. The soldiers at the bottom – the rabble of both armies – broke into a run. It would not be long before they clashed at the bottom of the hill, closing him in on three sides. The only escape now lay back up the hill, back towards Martha and Mabel.

His last hope of salvation evaporated, though, as Martha charged over the crest of the hill, her Army of the Dead hard on her heels. She had decided against waiting any longer after first the Sirens and then the wizard had

deserted from her ranks. She would rush down and sweep the other armies off the battlefield, saving the day.

Halfshaft was now well and truly trapped. The male army to the east, the female army to the west, the two armies already clashing at the bottom of the hill, and Martha's legions of the dead descending upon him from the top. There was nowhere left for him to run. And no way left for him to come to Takina's rescue.

Worse still, he was one of the few people who knew what would happen when the two Watchers were brought into contact with one another. There would be an explosion. A very large explosion. And everyone still on Crow Hill would be blown into sad and sorry oblivion.

It was at that moment that the air above him started to churn, and a tunnel appeared. A man was spat out of it, landing at his side in a commando-roll. A mercenary dressed in black, dagger at the ready.

"You took your time!" Halfshaft protested, his voice a mixture of reproach and relief.

"Better late than never," Thane replied.

#

"They're deliberately provoking me," Lathgertha complained when they were a safe distance away from the soon to be exploding Watchers. "Out of all the slaves they could have presented to me, I end up with two sorry specimens like you."

"This is where you're supposed to say "no offence", " Rod advised her. "Otherwise, we might get all hurt and tearful."

"I'm feeling a bit tearful already, Mate," Alfie chipped in. "Anyone would think she doesn't like us." He had a point. Both men were after all on leads, which she grasped tightly in one hand, tugging upon them from time to time in a fruitless attempt to choke them to silence.

“It’s such a waste,” Lathgertha went on. “There are some wonderful men out there. They would have lasted me for weeks. But what do they give me? Two failed donkeys!”

“Hey, don’t you start dissing us donkeys!” Alfie complained. “Where would the world be without us?”

“One of my birds used to call me “Donkey”. She never had any problem with it.”

“Too much information, Mate. Too much information.”

“Soon,” Lathgertha told them, in a futile attempt to shock them into silence, “they will all be dead. Every single man, woman and horse-like creature amongst them. Just me and my husband left. And those horrible step-sons of mine, if I’m really unlucky.”

“Why would you want that?”

“It’s what I do. I’m born, I destroy, I die; I’m reborn, I destroy, I die. Ragnar, too. It’s our destiny.”

“Couldn’t you just settle down somewhere?” Rod asked. “Retire by the sea. Buy a bungalow. Join a bowls club. Join the National Trust. That sort of thing. Put your feet up for awhile.”

Lathgertha tired of the conversation. “I thought I’d amuse myself while the slaughter is going on.”

“We’ll just watch,” Rod told her.

“Frighten you with tales of blood, and death and torture. But you two are too dull even to be afraid. So I tell you what I am going to do, instead.”

“Set us free?” ventured Alfie, a tad optimistically.

“Do you know what the Blood Eagle is?” she asked.

“Is it a rock band?” Alfie ventured.

“A book by Edgar Allan Poe?” Rod suggested, feeling very intellectual, without realising he had got the wrong bird.

“A DJ?” suggested Alfie. “A super-hero with red hair and sticky feathers?”

“The Blood Eagle,” she said, drawing her dagger from its sheath, “is my favourite torture. I cut open your ribs, and pull them apart so they look like wings.”

“That’s gotta hurt.”

“Oh, it will, especially after I’ve pulled your lungs out and sprinkled salt on what’s left of you. Sometimes, they die of shock. Sometimes they die of blood-loss. But sometimes, if I’m really lucky, they stay alive just long enough to watch me cut their hearts out.”

Rod and Alfie tried to run, but their collars cut into their throats and they very nearly strangled themselves. She laughed. “See!” she shouted. “I knew you would amuse me if you tried hard enough!”

She seized Alfie. “You first. Let’s see what a pretty blood-eagle you make.”

She raised the dagger, ready to plunge it into his chest, and carve his ribs away from his body. He shrank away. Rod leapt forwards and tried to wrestle the dagger from her hand, but she fended him off effortlessly, released his lead, and sent him crashing to the floor. He tried again, with the same outcome. He got to his feet a third time, and she held the dagger to Alfie’s throat.

“Step away,” she told him.

“No way. You’ll kill him.”

“I’ll kill him either way.”

Rod attacked again, but yet again she fended him off, and pushed him over. She was tremendously strong. He was beginning to realise that she was no ordinary woman.

“We’ve got a stand-off, then,” he said, playing for time.

“Not really,” she laughed. “I slit his throat, turn you into a raven, and then finish him off afterwards. Problem solved.”

She was right. When he was last here, he had a magical sword. He wasn't very good at using it, but at least it evened the odds a bit. This time, he felt helpless. He needed to save Alfie, but how? She was armed, she was stronger than him, and she had her dagger to his friend's throat. He needed help, and he needed it now.

It came from an unexpected quarter. Lathgertha dropped the dagger and Alfie's lead, and clawed at her throat, as if she was trying to pull invisible fingers from her windpipe. Rod turned, to see Autumn behind him. She had her eyes closed. Her lips were moving in some silent incantation, and her hands swirled through the air in a complicated rhythm. The faster her hands moved, the louder Lathgertha choked.

Alfie ran to her, desperate to hug her, but Rod headed him off.

"Leave her," he said. "If you distract her, we're all dead."

Lathgertha dropped to her knees, still clawing at her throat. Her eyes never left Rod, as if she was blaming him for her ordeal. That was fine by him. He wandered over to her, and gave her a nudge, sending her sprawling to the grass. She went to grab at him, but he side-stepped just in time. Her hand went back to her throat immediately. She was starting to turn blue.

"You won't win," Rod told her. "We'll defeat your army, just as we've defeated you."

She made a little gurgle, half choke and half laugh. And then, following a final flourish of Autumn's hands, she was lying on the ground, motionless and devoid of life.

"You did it!" Alfie screamed. "You beat the bitch!"

He grabbed Autumn, and hugged her for all she was worth. She clasped him back weakly. The spell had taken all her energy. She clung on to him as best she could, fearing that she would collapse completely if he let her go.

"Would you two get a room?" Rod suggested. "Or better still, follow me. We've got some serious arse-kicking to do."

#

Ragnar watched in amusement as his cubs argued over the two slave-girls they had presented to him. He had thanked them for their gift by offering to allow them to break the ladies in for him, but – as usual – they could not agree as to which of them should start off. If ever they sank their differences and worked as a team, they would be a very formidable force indeed.

“I’m oldest,” Hvitserk insisted, “so I get first choice. And I’m having the blonde Amazon. You two can take it in turns with the other one.”

“Me first, though,” Sigurd insisted. “Bjorn can have my left-overs.”

“I’m not having your scraps anymore!” Bjorn roared. “I’ll go first.”

“We could always get you another dwarf to keep you amused. There’s plenty of them about. We know you’re keen on a beard and a pair of chubby little legs.”

Bjorn grabbed his battle-axe. But one look from his father persuaded him to replace it. He was furious, but he was not suicidal.

“Maybe I should just cut her in two,” Ragnar suggested. “You boys can have half each. And before you start squabbling over which half you get, I’ll be cutting her lengthways.”

All of a sudden, Ragnar dropped the leads with which he held Takina and Pussy captive.

“Lathgertha! She’s in danger.”

His sons smirked, partly because they thought it highly unlikely that there was anything which could put their ferocious step-mother in jeopardy, and partly because the idea that she might just be in peril was music to their ears. Hvitserk and Sigurd watched in astonishment as their father ran off, back towards the battle.

“Not that way, Father!” Hvitserk shouted. “The Watchers!”

Bjorn was not watching his father, though, whether in astonishment or otherwise. He was swinging his battle-axe at Sigurd while his back was turned. His brother sensed danger, and side-stepped, the axe-blade glancing harmlessly off his armour. Bjorn raised the axe to strike again, and Sigurd was upon him, Hvitserk close behind him, like two vicious fox-hounds finishing off a particularly large and aggressive fox..

Takina and Pussy exchanged glances.

“Lets go!” urged Takina.

“Maybe we should wait here and see who wins,” Pussy suggested, frustrated at how close she had just come to a good seeing to, and wondering whether anyone would ever again oblige her in this respect.

“Let’s go,” Takina repeated. Something in her tone persuaded Pussy to do as she was told.

The two girls ran back towards the battle-field in their haste to escape the battling brothers. Takina was determined to find Rod and then flee as far from Crow Hill as she could manage.

“It’s going to be all right,” she told a still-sulking Pussy, as the two of them ran towards the trolls, towards the witches, towards the Watchers who were just about to be detonated. It was the Amazon way. Death or glory.

#

Thane stood beside the swirling time tunnel, in the midst of the battle. Halfshaft stood by his side, but he ignored the wizard for now. He had more pressing matters to worry about.

The female Watcher cowered in the cage to one side, the male to the other. They were both glowing an angry yellow. Halfshaft was screaming at him to help him move the cages apart, but there was no point. They were surrounded by the three armies, fighting toe and claw, packed so densely in places that the dead could not even fall to the ground. They would never be able to force the

cages through the throng. Besides, it was too late in any event. The Watchers did not need to come into physical contact to start the melt-down. They just needed to be in each other's presence. That had happened already. The fuse had been lit and there was only one way to stop it. That was why he was here.

He approached the female watcher, and forced the lock from her cage. He stepped in, and sliced the hideous bridle from her face. She looked up at him. Her eyes were blind, but he felt that somehow she could see him. She had been waiting for him to come for a very long time.

"Thane," she said.

"I'm here."

"Do it now. Please."

"Are you sure?"

She nodded, a brief, sharp nod, frightened that she would change her mind if he gave her time to think things through. But the clock was ticking. She was too close to her fellow Watcher. There would be a chemical reaction any second, which would not only destroy the two of them, but would wipe out every living soul on the Hill, and many of the walking-dead ones, too. However hard this was, however painful, it had to be done.

She nodded again, more urgently this time. She was resolved. It was all Thane needed to act. He took out a knife, and plunged it deep into her heart. There was a scream of shocked surprise – from the wizard, the Watcher assumed – and then there was nothing. Her vigil had lasted for millennia, but it was finally at an end. She was no more.

"You're supposed to be on our side!" Halfshaft shouted at him. "Who made you do such a terrible thing? Who told you to come here and kill her?"

"She did," Thane replied, doing his level best to keep any emotion from his voice. Even he was shaken, though. He had never been instructed to terminate a Watcher before. Of all the terrible things he had done in his lifetime, this seemed like the worse, even though for once he had his victim's full consent. She had known that this would be the only way to save the world, and had signed her own death warrant accordingly. But it still felt wrong.

Halfshaft moved to block his path to the male Watcher.

“You’re not taking him, too.”

Thane emerged from the cage.

“I don’t need to. The danger’s passed; he’s no risk to anyone now she’s gone. Now all we have to do is stop the battle, before everyone kills each other.”

A troll swung an axe at his head. Thane ducked beneath the blade, and dug a blade up beneath his assailant’s ribs, following up with a second blade to his neck. The troll grunted in surprise, and dropped untidily at his feet.

“Before you kill everyone, more like,” Halfshaft spat at him.

“I had to do it,” Thane replied. “She gave instructions to the other Watchers. They gave instructions to me. She had to die to save everyone else.”

“There had to be another way. Why does violence always have to be the answer with you?”

Thane broke off. He was not used to having to justify himself, whether to failed wizards or anyone else. He was sure he had done the right thing. But he knew that he would never convince Halfshaft of it.

But then, just as Halfshaft was on the point of laying into him again for resorting to physical force over calm and reasoned debate, the wizard spotted Rustmarrow doing battle with a witch. With a shriek of pique, he let loose a volley of all-consuming blue-fire at his former opponent. The wizard flailed around in panic. With an expression of bewildered discomfort, he shrank to childlike proportions. Halfshaft had turned him into a small boy.

No-one was more surprised at this than Halfshaft himself.

“How did I do that?” he asked, genuinely puzzled.

“Couldn’t you have just talked to him?” Thane teased.

“How?” the wizard asked again. “I’ve never done anything like that before.”

“Energy from the time-tunnel,” Thane told him. “You’ve stored it, and channelled it, and that was the result.” He side-stepped as an Amazon tried to

force a javelin into his stomach, following up with a swift punch to the temple which dropped her on the spot. “And there’s plenty more where that come from.”

“What do I do? Shall I blitz everyone here?”

“No need. Just pick one side, East or West. And toast them.”

“East,” announced Halfshaft with relish. If he was going to turn anyone to toast, it would be Ragnar’s army. He had told Thane that violence wasn’t always the solution. But in this case, it seemed like a pretty good start.

#

Ragnar found Lathgertha lying twisted and broken in the dirt. Her body had been spotted by two trolls, who had trampled upon her to make sure she was truly dead. He cradled what was left of her in his arms, and wept. He always wept when he lost her, life-time after life-time. The loss of his one great love did not get any easier with time.

He pulled her poor battered face into his beard, willing her to be alive again, but knowing that he would not feel her breath upon his cheek again until their next reincarnation. He forced a tongue into her still warm mouth. It felt salty with haemorrhaged blood. Had she been alive, it would have been the best kiss imaginable.

“Next time,” he vowed to her. “Next time, we will crush the whole world together.”

He placed a hand on her forehead. Hazy pictures formed in his mind; Lathgertha holding the two blue-trousered men his sons had presented to her, a figure behind her – a young witch – making incantations, his wife choking, gasping painfully for air. It was all he needed to know.

He took his hand from her forehead, and gave her one last kiss, a delicate one this time. He climbed to his feet, and scoured the battle-field. He would find the girl who had done this. And she would die by his hand, just as Lathgertha

had died by hers. But her death would be much slower, and infinitely more painful.

#

Halfshaft played the blue flame across the massed ranks of soldiers, like a fireman dousing a raging fire. Thane had told him to target just the one army, but it was impossible to distinguish the two in places, where the hand to hand fighting was at its fiercest. And wherever he directed the flame, the people before him dwindled and shrank and became children once again.

Martha recalled her army when she saw what was going on. She had had her doubts about precisely what she could hope to achieve from the moment they charged down the Hill and set upon the flanks of the two armies below her. She was supposed to be there to prevent the carnage, but her blood-thirsty troops were just making it worse. So when the wizard started splaying blue fire around, she sounded the retreat, discharging her troops back to their villages, back to their forests, back to the Underworld where appropriate. Her work here was done.

Newly created children started milling around the battle-field, lost and frightened. At first, she feared that they would be caught up in the fighting, mown down where they stood, but the water-nymphs intervened. One by one, they took a brace of children and led them away to safety, mindful of their own children who had been taken from them not so very long ago, children they might never find again.

Others followed suit. The women from the villages, the handful of Sirens who had made it past the spirit soldiers (choosing girls only, of course), even the witches. Only the Amazons stood apart. Boys were no use to them; they would make very poor soldiers indeed.

The women left the battle-field, leading off children like mothers collecting their unprotesting off-spring at the end of a school day, and the hill gradually cleared and emptied. Halfshaft shook the last few drops of magic from his

fingers, and returned to Thane's side. All was forgiven now. They had won the day.

Two sets of figures came into view at the same time. To the West, they spotted Rod hurrying towards them, the younger man and the robed woman at his side. Some distance behind him, but closing fast, was Ragnar. And even from this distance, it was clear that he had murder on his mind.

To the East, they saw Takina, dragging a barely-clothed woman along behind her. She too was being pursued. Three men, miniature Ragnars (one of them cursing and swinging a battle-axe) were hot on their heels.

Halfshaft made his choice in an instant. He set off towards Takina at a gallop, desperate to save her at all costs. Thane headed off towards Rod. If he finished Ragnar off quickly enough, there might still be time to rescue the Amazon and the wizard, if only they could hold off the Sons of Ragnar in the meantime.

#

Ragnar caught up with his prey first. Rod tried to block him, but was sent flying to the floor. He struggled back to his feet, but the world was spinning in directions it was not designed to rotate in, and he collapsed back down to his knees. His fight was over before it had even started.

"Leg it!" he shouted at Autumn. It was poor advice, and he knew it. She would never outrun Ragnar. But there was nothing else to do.

Alfie had fled, and was scrabbling around on the ground forty paces away. All those protestations of love, all that planning for a happy future together, all out of the window the moment he was under threat. Why wasn't it someone else who dived into the tunnel in the pub, Rod lamented. The three girls by the pool table would have been so much more helpful than this kid who thought only of himself.

Autumn started her incantations, but Ragnar was on her, seizing her wrists and stopping her in mid-spell.

“I don’t think so!”

She tried to struggle free, but to no avail. He was so much stronger than her. She looked around for help, but none was forthcoming. Rod was on his knees nearby. Alfie was on his hands and knees quite some distance away. No-one else was even close. She was to all intents and purposes alone.

“If it’s any consolation,” Ragnar told her, “I’m killing myself, too. I’m taking you to Lathgertha in the Underworld. I’m sure you two will have plenty to talk about. She’ll be anxious to meet the woman who murdered her.”

He unsheathed a wickedly long dagger.

“First you,” he said. “Then me. I’m really going to enjoy this. The Blood Eagle is such a beautiful way to die. It was always Lathgertha’s favourite.”

A stone came whizzing through the air, and struck him full in the face. He dropped the dagger in surprise.

“What the -?”

Another stone followed. Then another. Archie whooped in delight. He stood there with an armful of ammunition, launching stone after stone at Ragnar’s head like a demented human Gatling-gun, each missile finding its target with unnerving accuracy. Rod started laughing, too. Autumn resumed her spell.

But then the stones were gone. Archie cried out in frustration, and dropped back down to his knees, frantically searching for fresh ammunition. But there was nothing left. His arsenal was empty.

Ragnar grinned. Ignoring Rod’s shouting and Alfie’s howls of protest, he retrieved his blade and returned to Autumn’s side. Her incantations tailed off. The game was up.

“Your arse is mine,” Ragnar told her. “Now, and for all eternity.”

She bowed her head, all fight gone.

He bowed his, and leant heavily upon her, the dagger clenched in his right hand. She waited for the blade to sink into her body, but felt nothing. She

pushed at him. He fell to the ground at her feet, a wickedly sharp throwing knife protruding from the back of his skull.

She glanced around, back towards the battle-field. A man in black, a second knife at the ready in case it was needed. He nodded at her. She nodded back. And then he was gone.

And then Alfie was there, hugging her for all he was worth, almost choking her, so tight did he squeeze.

“I thought you were gone,” he cried. “I thought you were gone.”

She looked at him sadly, and kissed him on the forehead. She wanted to cling on to him, and tell him that everything would be okay. But she didn't want to give him false hope. She knew what she had to do next, and he wasn't going to like it at all.

She allowed herself the luxury of one brief hug, and then she was away, knowing that she would never see him again.

#

Takina felt her legs go from under her, as Hvitserk rugby tackled her to the ground. She still held Pussy by the arm, and she pulled her down on top of her. Sigurd crowed with delight, and bundled on top of them, crushing the breath from her body. Bjorn dived in, too, nearly squashing her completely.

Hvitserk got to his feet, pulling her up with him.

“It's time,” he said. “I've been waiting a very long time for this.”

He went to pull her furs from her body, top and bottom. The moment his hand left her arm, she had hold of his dagger, thrusting it into his face. He swivelled away from her. She was fast, but he was marginally quicker. The blade sunk into his cheek-bone, slicing a flap from his face, but it was still just a flesh-wound, albeit a disfiguring one.

He flung her to the ground again. She tried to spring back up, dagger at the ready, but Sigurd intercepted her, wrestling the blade from her grasp. And then Halfshaft was there, leaping on Hvitserk's back, snarling like an enraged spaniel as he tried to gouge out the soldier's eyes from behind.

Hvitserk deliberately fell backwards, squashing the wizard beneath him. He snatched his dagger from Sigurd, and closed in for the kill. It would take him just seconds to dispatch this crazy wizard, and then the woman would be his. And he did not intend to be remotely gentle after all she had put him through. She would beg for death by the time he was finished with her.

Halfshaft raised his hands, ready to consume his assailant in a stream of blue-fire. The trickle that came out was disappointing – he was almost running on empty – but it should have been enough. It had very little effect at all, though.

“You’ve just made me thirty years younger,” Hvitserk said. “A drop in the ocean when you’re as old as I am.” He ran his hand over his face. “I should thank you. I was starting to get a few wrinkles, but they’ve all gone now.”

He took his dagger. Takina tried to leap on him, but Sigurd held her fast. There was nothing she could do to save her impetuous friend.

And then Hvitserk was ducking, as a knife flew past his left ear. He turned, to see Thane approaching at speed. He shoved the Amazon to the floor, and turned to face him, Sigurd and Bjorn lining up on either side of him, the three brothers united against this new threat.

“Your father’s dead,” Thane announced, coming to a halt a couple of yards away from them. “Lathgertha, too. It’s all over. Go home.”

Takina looked around her, searching for reinforcements. Thane was good, very good, but maybe not enough to fight the three of them together. She would be of little help; they were too fast for her. Halfshaft would be of no use at all. There had to be someone she could turn to. Grabbing Halfshaft by one hand and Pussy by the other, she made a strategic retreat.

Bjorn struck first, swinging his axe in a tight arc at Thane's head. The mercenary stepped backwards to avoid it, but Hvitserk was on him

immediately, sword chopping the air this way and that, Sigurd close behind as always.

Thane ducked and weaved, cursing himself for not having picked up a sword on the way over. He had his knives, but they were no use for parrying. He only needed a second to send one spearing into one of the Brothers Grimm, but they knew that as much as him. They were not going to give him any time at all to launch a counter-attack.

He continued to evade their blows, but they were encircling him. There was only so many directions he could take. Once they had encircled him, he was done for. He could cope with any two of them, but the three of them was another matter entirely. For the first time ever, he thought he had bitten off more than he could chew.

He was struck on the forehead by the wooden shaft of Bjorn's axe, and staggered backwards in pain. It was a lucky blow, but they all count. Off guard for a split second, but that was all it took. They were on him, chopping and hacking away, as he fought desperately to stay on his feet. He was lucky to escape with a fractured left hand, and a gouge wound across his stomach, but he was losing blood now. He could not hope for a second reprieve. He was living on borrowed time. There were just too many of them.

And then the Amazons were there, Takina leading them into battle as she had always dreamt of. Six or seven of them, every bit as ferocious as the brothers had been, their slashing javelins sending the three men into chaotic retreat.

Hvitserk made a stand, and the brothers rallied around him, but they broke again when they saw Thane closing in on them. They were outnumbered now, and he did not look best pleased with them. They turned and fled, Sigurd and Bjorn diving into the time tunnel from which the mercenary had emerged not long before.

Hvitserk turned to face Thane. The two men surveyed each other from just a dozen yards apart, cool and calculating.

"You will die by my hands," Hvitserk said.

Thane raised a knife. Hvitserk leapt into the tunnel after his brothers, a pack of Amazons following in after him.

"Whatever," Thane replied.

Pussy gave Takina a wink and a wave, and disappeared into the time-tunnel after the escaping men. She had unfinished business with all three of them. All at the same time, if she played her cards right.

#

There was a wail of grief and frustration.

Autumn was in the cage, bent over the fallen Watcher. Alfie was howling beside her, clinging on to her as if his life depended upon it. Something had gone dreadfully wrong.

Rod was back on his feet, and was attempting to console his friend. Halfshaft and Takina ran over, Thane on their heels. He was in no hurry. He was pretty sure he knew what had just happened, and nothing he could say or do would make it any easier for any of them.

"No!" Alfie shouted. "What have they done to you?"

Autumn stared back at him, or at least where she assumed he would be. Her eyes were clouded over. She was totally blind. She smiled, and reached out for him, to reassure him, to make him understand. But he was inconsolable.

"What's going on?" Halfshaft asked Rod, clasping his hand in welcome.
"What's happened?"

"Search me."

"She's chosen to become a Watcher," Thane told them. He nudged Rod, and the two of them started to pull the male Watcher's cage away to a safe distance. Autumn was immature as Watcher, just a few minutes old. The spark within her would be weak as yet. But it was best to take no chances. It would

be ironic if they had gone through all of this, only for Autumn to trigger an explosion which wiped them off the face of the planet.

“No,” ruled Alfie, shaking his head vigorously. “No wife of mine’s doing a job like that. I need her here with me.”

“Please understand,” she pleaded with him. “I have to do this.”

“Don’t do this to me,” he begged her back. “Please. I need you.”

She cried. He wrapped his arms around her, and held her to him. She snuggled into his shoulder. She wanted to be with him. But she knew now that she had been born not to be witch, but to be a Watcher. This was her Fate.

Halfshaft and Takina looked on awkwardly. This was a private moment between the two youngsters, and they felt like intruders. The wizard gave Takina a hug of his own. To his surprise, she hugged him back. He tried to pat her bottom, but she removed his hand firmly. She was pleased to see him again; but not *that* pleased.

“Do not push your luck, Wizard.”

Thane returned. “We have to leave, before the tunnel vanishes.”

Rod said his goodbyes, and blew them a big wet kiss. “Come and visit,” he bade them. “The beer’s lovely.” He stepped into the tunnel, vanishing instantly.

“I’m staying here,” Alfie told him. “Autumn’s blind. She needs someone to look after her.”

“I’ll be fine,” she told him. “Go. You can’t give up your life looking after a blind woman.”

“I’m staying here.”

“Me, too,” Halfshaft said. All of the wizards are children, now. They need me here to show them what to do. We can’t let the witches have it all their own way.”

“Well I’m coming with *you*,” she told Thane. She touched Halfshaft’s face. “Sorry, my friend. There is nothing left for me here.” She stepped into the tunnel after Rod, and was gone.

The wizard hung his head in disappointment. He had hoped that she would stay here with him, sharing his glory as the only grown-up wizard on the planet. But without Takina here, none of it seemed to matter very much.

“Maybe I’ll come after all,” he decided, clambering in after her. He was not going to leave her alone again, whatever the consequences.

Thane stepped in next, without a word to anyone. Goodbyes were never his thing. Within a minute or two, the time-tunnel closed in behind him, never to re-open again.

Alfie took Autumn by the hand. “Where to?” he asked her gently. “Where do we start our new life together?”

The blind young woman smiled at him. She squeezed his hand.

“Buggered if I know.”

They laughed, and made their way arm in arm into the sleeping Forest, leaving the grieving battle-field to the maggots and the spectres of the dead.

#

NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR:

I hope that you enjoyed reading this book as much as I enjoyed writing it. I apologise profusely for the frequency with which Takina and Pussy lost their clothes, but in mitigation I would point out that Takina's virtue remained very much intact at the end of the book (even if Pussy's virtue had been slaughtered and buried in an unmarked grave many years before).

All reviews – especially on Amazon – are greatly appreciated. They really make a huge difference in introducing Halfshaft to an unsuspecting world. Whether that's a good thing or a bad thing is for you to judge, but knowing how generous and altruistic you are gives me great encouragement....

Thanks again for your support. There'd be no point writing without you.

Jonathan

ALSO BY THIS AUTHOR:

SLAVE-GIRLS AND AMAZONS

The first book in the “Amazons” series.

When the Hedral Watcher was in need of a warrior to defeat an all powerful warlock, he knew that Thane – a lethal intergalactic mercenary – was just the man for the job. Unfortunately, he ended up with an amiable drunk, an inept wizard with an inferiority complex, and a blonde Amazon squeezed into a tiny squirrel-skin bikini.

As the omniscient being of the planet, the Watcher had a funny feeling that it would all end in tragedy, unless Thane was able to vanquish the warlock before his woefully inadequate substitutes stumbled upon his adversary’s mountain fortress. But the band of fearless warlock-hunters had other ideas. How hard could it be to defeat a one thousand year old shape-shifting warlock and his army of battle-hardened troll corpses anyway?

This is the story of their trials and tribulations, as they romp through a Tolkienesque landscape peopled by the Weird and Wonderful, such as witches seeking men to ride for the donkey-derby; a psychotic forester with a skeletal wife and a sinister fascination with wood-work; a band of trolls on the look-out for virgins to sacrifice to celebrate Thursdays; and more skimpily dressed Amazons than you can shake a spear at.....

THE HALFSHAFT GAMES

When Halfshaft is duped into competing in the “Games”, he has little confidence in being one of the two Candidates who will make it out of the Great Forest alive.

But despite the best efforts of assorted trolls, Amazons, elves, dwarfs and witches, he and his voluptuous new partner, Cherry, exceed all expectations. But just as he begins to think that it really might be possible to win for them to win their freedom, he finds that there is one obstacle in his path to glory which he cannot overcome. To win the Games, he must defeat Takina, the woman of his dreams.

The third book in the “Amazons” series. Rude, wonderful and very, very funny.

THE WEDDING FEAST (Book One of “The Wedding Feast” trilogy).

Philip awakes, naked and chained to the floor by wrist and ankle, in the ramshackle dwelling of a family of murderous inbreds. His only hope of rescue lies with Matilda, their hideously deformed and needy daughter, who lurks in the shadows in her bloodied wedding dress. But will the price she demands for his release – a white wedding – be too high for either of them to pay? And will either her grotesque parents or his insanely jealous girlfriend allow them to make it to the altar alive?

This is a black comedy about unrequited love, the dilemma a shallow man faces in choosing between beauty and fidelity, and the problems the happy couple face when the Groom’s potential in-laws are Hell-bent on eating him whatever decision he makes.

TETHERED (*Book Two of "The Wedding Feast" series*).

Abigail awakes, naked and vulnerable, in pitch darkness. Her wrists and ankles have been manacled to the floor. One by one, her brutal, troll-like captors come to visit her. Time is short; she is to be the feast at their wedding. No-one can rescue her. But can she save herself before they eat her?

Elsewhere, three friends spring a young woman from her cage at an animal experimentation centre. Can they stay one step ahead of the government agent who is determined to recapture her? And was it wise for them to leave her alone in an old caravan in the woods whilst they went off for tea and biscuits with two frisky old-aged pensioners?

Fantasy horror and tongue-in-cheek British humour combine in this dark and tragic sequel to "The Wedding Feast."

THE LAST OF THE NEANDERTHALS

The third and final book in "The Wedding Feast" humorous horror series.

Matilda has spent the last ten years in the woods, foraging for anyone foolish enough to venture into the brooding trees. But her Family has finally summoned her home. Tired of hiding from the Outsiders in the darkness, they are fighting back, and have chosen as their battleground the pubs and sex-shops of the sea-side town of Margate.

With Georgia in pursuit, and frisky pensioners Maurice and Elsie following along behind as fast as their artificial hips will allow, Matilda takes to the battle-scarred streets of Thanet in a desperate attempt to save her people from extermination.

But, as usual, nothing goes quite according to plan....

Please note that both "The Wedding Feast", "Tethered" and "the Last of the Neanderthals" contain fantasy horror, strong language and scenes of a sexual nature. Not to mention the inappropriate use of custard-creams.