

THE HALFSHAFT GAMES

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Prologue

The final hidden camera was slotted into the tree-trunk. Everything had been tested, and tested again. They were expecting a truly huge audience for the 43rd Games this year. Nothing could be allowed to go wrong, with all those billions of people watching across the universes.

Most of the Candidates had been chosen already. Trolls, witches, dwarfs, elves and the viewers' favourites, a pair of barely-clothed Amazons. Now all they needed was a wizard. And not just any wizard either. They had one particular person in mind.

In the meantime, their star wandered round the set, checking out camera angles, trying out the bolt-holes for size. Preparation was everything if you were to have any hope of survival, and she had insisted on a number of safety precautions being added to her contract to tip the odds marginally in her favour. There was going to be something of a twist this year, though, a twist which would leave the viewing public in shock for weeks to come. She was blissfully oblivious to this, of course. They couldn't risk a last minute resignation.

Just a few more days now to the opening ceremony. The Games would be incredible, the best ever. There would be laughs, and there would be tears, and there would be a great many deaths. Lonely, frightened, audience-pleasing deaths, as the Candidates eliminated each other one at a time.

So all they needed now was the wizard. And they knew exactly where to find him.

The first thing Halfshaft noticed, when he got back to his quarters at Spartan Castle, was that he appeared to be there already. Which came as something of a shock, even to a wizard as widely-travelled as him.

It had been a very long week. He had literally been to Hell and back, which was never a good thing. And now he was back home, all he wanted to do was put his feet up, puff on his pipe, and pay for several women of easy virtue to do whatever it was that women of easy virtue were prepared to do for gentlemen wizards of limited means. If they did it for long enough and acrobatically enough, it might just put Takina out of his mind, though he had to concede that you don't generally get both "long" and "acrobatic" when you're working to a budget.

When he entered his chamber and came face to face with himself, it was hard to know which of him was most surprised. The wizard in front of him was much younger than him - by maybe thirty or forty years he supposed; he was never very good at assessing the age of anyone still young enough to turn their noses up at cardigans - but it was definitely him all the same. The wizard's hat, the bad temper masking rampant insecurity, the guilty way he was attempting to tuck drawings of "Warlocks' Wives" into the top drawer of his bedside cabinet.

"Get out of my room!" demanded Young Halfshaft, furious that his favourite hobby had been so rudely interrupted by a strangely familiar wizard who had somehow acquired the key to his quarters.

"Our room," Halfshaft corrected. "You're me. Though I take no pride in that at all. I never realised how scrawny I used to be until now. And that's a very sorry excuse for a beard, if you don't mind me saying. Looks like you've been sweeping floors with it."

Young Halfshaft opened his mouth to retort that he wasn't scrawny but leanly-muscled; and that if the old man didn't like his beard he could bugger off to his own quarters or risk a sharp kick to the testicles. But the full import of his unwanted visitor's words finally filtered through to his brain. He regarded the older wizard with more than a tinge of distaste.

“I’m you? I don’t think so! You’re far too old to be me, and not nearly as good looking. And *your* beard’s all tatty and full of leaves. At least I give mine a rinse every month or two.”

“I’m you from the future. And don’t be such a cheeky sod, I’m not *that* much older!”

“How can you be me from the future? I’ve not had it yet.”

He sighed impatiently, as if having to explain himself to a moron. “I’ve come back through a time tunnel. I’ve done great things. *We’ve* done great things, I should say. Mainly me, though, because you’re not there yet. We’ve saved the world twice. Me and you. Mostly me.”

Halfshaft paused to let the full import of his words soak in. This took longer than anticipated. Was he really that obtuse when he was middle-aged?

Eventually, his younger self shrugged.

“Oh.”

It was the not the response he was looking for.

“Oh? I tell you we’ve saved the world, and all you can say is “oh”? You could look a bit impressed. And grateful, come to that. You’ve been sitting here, knocking one out over your “Warlocks’ Wives”, while I’ve been vanquishing shape-shifters, fighting Amazons, escaping from psychopathic trolls. So when you reach the future, it’ll be completely safe for you by then. All you have to do is turn up and reap the rewards, knowing that I’ve done all the hard work for you already. Yet you get to share in all my glory. Oh, indeed!”

Young Halfshaft regarded him thoughtfully for a while. “I can’t decide whether you’re a future me, a delusional maniac, or a bit of both. Saved the world twice, you reckon?”

“Twice,” affirmed Halfshaft. “With my incredible magical powers. Powers that you haven’t got yet, I might add!”

He thought he saw Young Halfshaft stifle a smirk, but it may have been his imagination. Maybe it was a sob. All this must have been a lot for the poor man to take in. He had always been a little slow on the uptake in his (relative)

youth. Probably down to inhaling all that magic dust floating around his wizardry class-room as a boy.

“There’s only one way I can tell whether you’re really me, or not.” Young Halfshaft announced. “Turn round.”

“Okay,” Halfshaft replied dubiously. “But if you try any funny business, you’re going to get a smack in the face.”

“Trust me,” he replied. “I’m you, remember. That’s not the bag we’re into.”

Halfshaft turned around. “So what now? Are you just admiring my robes, or is there a point to this?”

It was then that he was struck viciously across the back of the head with a half-full chamber-pot. He heard his younger self cackle as he sank to his knees, engulfed in alternate waves of dizziness and nausea. Fighting back the pain, he swore for all he was worth. He had always found vitriol to be a pretty good anaesthetic in the past.

Young Halfshaft nodded in satisfaction, as the older man swayed from side to side in time with his own insults, as if dancing to them. He had a very impressive repertoire of swear-words, it had to be said. He was like a rapper with Tourette’s.

“Yes,” the younger man said. “You’re me alright. No-one else could ridicule the size of our wedding tackle in quite so many ways as that.”

It was then that the elderly wizard lost consciousness, his knees buckling beneath him as he collapsed to the hard stone floor.

#

When he came to, he was lying on the bed, with his relatively concerned younger self bending over him. The world was still shifting in directions it wasn’t really supposed to shift in, and he could smell sick in his beard, which ironically made him want to gag.

“Sorry,” Young Halfshaft told him. “I thought you were some mad old man. I didn’t realise you were mad older *me*.””

“Bastard,” Halfshaft replied, not without justification, as their parents had never married (although his father had at least been able to visit his mother on an almost weekly basis, her price having dropped to a more affordable level during her pregnancy).

“I can see it’s you, now I’ve had a good look at you. It’s me, rather. A very much older me, though.”

“Bastard,” Halfshaft said again, feeling the comment to be every bit as justified the second time round. “Nasty little bastard,” he added, by way of clarification. He was always keen to expand upon his insults with a pronoun or two.

Young Halfshaft looked vaguely hurt. “Come on, put yourself in my shoes. That shouldn’t be difficult in the circumstances. If you were in here, minding your own business, when a fifty-years-older version of you walked in, what would you have done?”

“Twenty years older.”

“Whatever. What would you think, though?”

“I’d think, I’m really pleased how well I’ve aged.”

Young Halfshaft laughed. “Look, I’m sorry about what just happened. I feel bad about it, now I know who you are. Are you okay?”

“My head hurts, I’ve chucked up into my own beard, and I’ve probably got irreversible brain damage, but other than that I’m hunky dory, thank you very much.”

“Tell me I don’t use expressions like “Hunky dory” when I’m old!”

“Bastard,” Halfshaft replied, yet again. It was his new favourite word.

They lapsed into silence for a while. Halfshaft’s mood had plummeted. He had been ecstatic earlier. Despite being a particularly crap wizard, he had gone on a journey – two journeys in fact – which had seen him defeating the most powerful beings in the world, and saving all mankind in the process. But now he had gone back into the past, where no-one knew of his heroic feats, so he would have to start all over again, even supposing he still had the energy to do so. And worse still, he had been treacherously whacked on the head by his own past self when his back was turned. He had gone from

elation to bad temper in the time it took to swing a chamber-pot (which was not very long at all).

As Young Halfshaft apologetically washed the sick from his beard for him, he thought of Takina, his young Amazon friend. The only thing that had made his travels bearable was the fact that she had been with him pretty much the whole way through. She was young, and gorgeous, and brave, and gorgeous, and caring, and gorgeous and blonde. And gorgeous. And they were friends. He would have liked to have been more than that, but he knew that it could never be. She was very much younger than him, and could have had any man she chose; to “mate” with, as she would have put it. But he would have done anything just for a bit of a cuddle.

If it wasn't for her, he would have stayed in the future. Or the present, as it was then. He would have been a hero there. He could have been King, he supposed, if he had really wanted to be, after what he had achieved. But now he was back in his past, and he was nothing again. Just an old man smelling of sick and –

He sniffed. Now the vomit had been removed, there was another smell lingering furtively in the background.

“Can I smell –?”

“Sorry for that, too,” Young Halfshaft grimaced. “I hit you with a chamber-pot. It may have spilled out a bit on your robe.”

Halfshaft opened his mouth to speak, but his younger self interrupted.

“Bastard?” Young Halfshaft enquired.

“Bastard,” the older man confirmed.

“Take one of my robes. You may have wasted away a bit, what with you being ancient and everything, so it might be a little bit baggy, but it's got to be better than lying there in your own –”

He tailed off when he saw the expression on the older man's face. Maybe it was best just to stay quiet, if he could remember how.

Halfshaft went back to his own thoughts. They made more sense than the young wizard's offensive ramblings. He was a little confused. He was in the past, but he could not remember this ever happening to him. If, as a young

man, he had met his future self and whacked him across the back of the head with a potty full of urine, then surely that was something that would have stuck in his memory? Time travel was a strange and confusing thing, especially when you had concussion.

He accepted the offer of a clean(ish) gown with poor grace. Young Halfshaft was looking increasingly sheepish. Good, he thought. So he bloody should! He thought his favourite word again.

“Look,” Young Halfshaft told him. “I feel awful about this. Let me make it up to you. There’s a lottery taking place in the courtyard in about an hour. The winner will be rich and famous beyond our wildest dreams. Take my place. And you can have it all if you win. It’s my way of saying sorry.”

Halfshaft thawed a little. This was the first remotely pleasant thing which had happened since his return. “You’d do that for me?”

“I’d do it for *us*. I’ll be grateful for this in fifty years’ time.”

“Oi! Twenty years, I said!”

The two Halfshafts embraced, friends again.

“There is one other thing you could do for me, though, before I go,” Halfshaft told his younger self. “If it’s not too weird.”

“Name it.”

“Can I borrow your “Warlocks’ Wives” when you’re finished with them? Ten minutes on my own should be plenty.”

#

Halfshaft was almost as bad at queuing as he was at wizardry. Considering that he had the magical ability of a comatose badger, this did not bode well for the person ahead of him as they queued up for their lottery numbers in the castle courtyard.

He had been waiting there – almost patiently – for the last thirty minutes. There was a collapsible table up front, manned by a weary-looking clerk

with half-rimmed glasses perched on the end of his nose. Between the wizard and his lottery number stood Ditherer, a man who was clearly in no rush at all to make his selection and move on. He had been asked to choose a number, and had spent the last few minutes deliberating, without showing any sign of reaching a decision. It was time to intervene.

He tapped Ditherer on the shoulder, to give him some friendly encouragement. “Just checking you’re still alive.”

“Oh, I’m still alive, all right,” the man assured him. “I can hear myself breathing. I’m just having a bit of a think, that’s all. I do that sometimes. It’s good exercise for the brain, I’m told.”

He went back to his deliberations. Halfshaft tutted without effect. He rolled his eyes theatrically to make it clear to everyone in the vicinity that he was not even remotely impressed at being kept waiting so long. He tutted some more. But all to no avail. The man in front was still having “a bit of a think”. It was time to intervene again.

“Pick forty seven,” he said.

“Sorry?” the man enquired, somewhat confused at this unexpected interruption to his thought processes.

“Pick forty seven. Now.”

“Forty seven’s gone, I think you’ll find.”

“Pick forty eight then!” Halfshaft snapped. “Pick forty eight, and sod off out of it so the rest of us can have a go.”

“I don’t know if I like forty eight,” the man replied dubiously. “It’s not what you’d call a man’s number, is it?”

“What?”

“A man’s number. A number for men. Like eighty six.”

“How is – Oh, never mind, Pick eighty six, then.”

“I like the way you think, young wizard. Eighty six it shall be.”

The clerk at the collapsible table shook his head. “Eighty six has gone, too. Men’s numbers always go quickly.”

Ditherer's face fell. For a moment, it looked as if he might cry at this cruel twist of fate. "Who had it?"

"That woman over there; the one with the bosoms." He gestured towards a striking brunette standing a dozen yards away, the proud possessor of more than her fair share of cleavage. "You can have forty eight, if you like. That's more manly than some numbers I could mention. Some fellow only chose thirty one when we opened this morning!"

"He doesn't like forty eight," the woman behind Halfshaft chipped in, a tad unhelpfully. "This wizard here was trying to bully him into choosing forty eight, but he wasn't having it. Quite right, too. It's the number of the Beast."

Halfshaft gave her a withering look. "I think you'll find that's six-six-six, you mad old tart."

"Forty eight is the Beast's favourite number," she insisted. "Always has been, always will be. Six-six-six my bottom!"

"I like the sound of six-six-six," mused the indecisive man at the front of the queue. "It sounds kind of nice, without being the sort of number a lady would choose. I'll take it!"

"We only goes up to three hundred and twelve," the clerk shrugged. "Why not have forty eight, like this wizardly old gentleman suggested?"

"Number of the Beast," muttered the woman, who was determined not to let it lie.

"You don't think it's a bit too – girly?" asked the man. "I don't want people laughing at me for picking a lady's number. Are you sure eighty six has gone?"

Halfshaft pushed him aside, snatched up the clerk's quill, dunked it in his ink pot, and scribbled "forty eight" on the blank parchment at the top of the pile.

"Can you read?" he asked Ditherer.

"Not so as you'd notice."

"Then that says eighty six, okay? The number you wanted. No-one's going to laugh at you with a manly number like that, are they? Happy?"

Ditherer nodded, more satisfied than he had been since that glorious day thirty summers ago when he had spent a full twenty minutes alone with Bess Plowright behind the pig-pens (although if truth be told a good quarter of an hour of their time together had been spent washing pig dung off his half-mast trousers after they had finished the dirty deed). He was a man now, and everyone would know it with a number like this. Eighty six, no less! He gave the testy wizard a big sloppy kiss to show his manly gratitude.

“Thank goodness for that,” the clerk sighed, as he moved off to show his number to anyone who cared to look. “I thought he was going to be here all day, and the ceremony starts any minute. What number will you have?”

“Six-six-six,” bitched the woman behind him. “The number of the Beast, he reckons!”

“What numbers have you got left?” Halfshaft asked, choosing to ignore her.

“I could do you a one hundred and seventy six, if you like. Always very popular. Or forty nine if you have less conventional tastes.”

“How often has one hundred and seventy six come up?”

“Never.”

“Forty nine will do me fine, then.”

“That’s the number of the Beast, too” grumbled the woman behind him, but he paid her no heed. King Spartan had come out on to the balcony early. The draw was about to begin. And his younger self had assured him that he had friends in high places who could fix these things. Within the next fifteen minutes or so, he was going to be very rich indeed.

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King Spartan waved the crowd to silence, as he looked down upon them from his make-shift balcony. Halfshaft listened with ever-increasing incredulity as his monarch explained that he was here to supervise the selection of the Castle’s two contestants for the “Games”. It was to be done

by ballot as usual. Everyone picked a number (except him, of course, as that would be just a little *too* democratic!). The two lucky people whose numbers came up would then represent Spartan Castle at the Games. There would be two competitors from the Amazon village as well, together with two Elves, two wood dwarfs, a pair of witches and a couple of trolls. There were also assorted hazards thrown in, just to make it interesting: wolves, psychopaths, touchy-feely lepers, that sort of thing. The Amazons almost always won, of course. They were warriors of the first order. His own subjects, on the other hand, were cretins, who had on occasion even been known to pick up their swords by the wrong end, and disable themselves within the first few minutes of the contest.

Halfshaft looked around to work on his escape routes, but every exit from the courtyard was sealed off by a brace of soldiers. He squirmed uncomfortably, cursing his treacherous younger self as the King droned on, explaining how the Games had been running for forty two years now, what an honour it would be to represent your King and country, how saddened he was that he was ineligible to take part himself. And how he had every faith that one or other of the Spartan Candidates would triumph over adversity, and be the first to make it into the second round. And all this said with a smug, regal face, safe in the knowledge that he would tuck safely up in his throne-room while everyone else was hacking each other to shreds.

Without further ado (his lunch was getting cold) he read out the first number, the number which was destined to send one of his subjects to a cruel and painful – but ever so slightly heroic – death.

“Will the holder of number eighty six please step forward?”

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Halfshaft was not a happy bunny. He had taken his younger self's place here to get rich, but he had been stitched up. Instead of getting his hands on a lottery jackpot, he had just signed up for some sort of combat-to-the-death event that he had not the slightest chance of winning. After everything he had survived, he was going to be murdered by Amazons for the entertainment of the King.

Halfshaft watched as Ditherer from the queue burst into tears. Of course; he had wanted Number Eighty Six. He had positively insisted on it. Good luck with your “man’s number”, he chuckled to himself. Even better luck for me, though. My chances of staying alive have just doubled. And if I make it through this, then my younger self is going to get the biggest smack in the face we’ve ever had.

Someone tapped him on the shoulder. He turned round to see who it was. A woman. Young, very pretty, cleavage all over the place. The woman “with the bosoms” whom the clerk had pointed out earlier. He gave her his very best smile (which was not in fact an awful lot better than his wizardry if the truth be told, as it made him look like a crocodile with learning difficulties).

“Hello, Madam,” he smirked. “How might I be of assistance?”

“That’s my room number,” she purred, thrusting a piece of paper into his hand, and closing his hand over it. “Come and see me after we’ve finished here. There’s something I want to show you.”

“And I’d be more than happy to look at it” he assured her.

She winked at him, and slipped back into the crowd. Maybe the draw for the Games wasn’t so bad after all. The odds of survival were pretty high, after all, especially now he had safely negotiated the first number.

He looked back to the front. There was a soldier pushing his way through the crowd towards Ditherer, ready to send him off to the Games, never to be seen again. And all the while, Halfshaft would be up to his bare grazed knees in the lusty young lady who had just succumbed to his wizardly good looks. Life was getting better all the time.

He took a look at the piece of paper she had handed to him. There was a number on it. “Eighty six”. That was a coincidence; her room number was the same number as –

Realisation dawned, leaving him nauseous with anxiety. She had planted the number on him which Spartan had just called out! He had been stitched up twice in an hour, and – to make matters worse – the second time had been by a strumpet with big tits! But how could she have the number: the man in front of him had Eighty Six, didn’t he? He thought back to the incident in

the queue. He cursed. He had written out Ditherer's number himself. He had told him it was Eighty Six, but he had given him Forty Eight instead.

Halfshaft seized Ditherer, aware that the soldier would be on them within seconds. "Friend," he whispered, pulling him close. "I see from your ring that you are a married man. But I'm single; expendable, you might say. Let me go in your place."

The man nodded in stupid gratitude. Halfshaft exchanged their parchments. He now had Forty Eight, whilst his new friend had Eighty Six. He was safe; if only by the skin of his yellowing teeth.

The soldier arrived, pulling them apart (which was lucky, as the man was on the point of giving the wizard another sloppy and unwanted thank-you kiss).

"Show me your number," the soldier demanded. The man displayed the number which the wizard had just given to him, a relieved smile on his face.

"Eighty six," the soldier confirmed. "Congratulations; it's your lucky day."

"No!" Ditherer shouted, shaking his head so violently that he was in danger of falling over. "This gentleman here has got that number, I think you'll find."

Halfshaft feigned surprise. "Poor man," he said. "Poor, delusional man. Good luck at the Games; don't forget to send me a postcard."

The soldier seized Ditherer by the arm, and started pulling him back towards Spartan. He struggled at first, but then went limp as he finally worked out what had just happened to him. "Why that sneaky little turd," he declared. But the sneaky little turd was no longer around to hear him. He had gone in search of the woman with the bosoms who had come within seconds of sentencing him to death.

#

Cherry was leaning nonchalantly against a wall, chatting up a pair of soldiers, when she was confronted by an irate wizard and a faint odour of stale urine.

“So there’s something you want to show me, is there?” he ranted. “When will I learn never to trust a woman? It should be you up there, not him. And certainly not me! You could’ve killed me.”

“Sorry,” she grinned. She touched his arm, and gave him a disarming smile. “Tell me what I can do to make it up to you.”

Spartan was talking again, building up the suspense for the disclosure of the second number. Halfshaft ignored him. He had more important things to worry about, such as how to stay angry enough to get his revenge when she was being so tactile. He knew she was working him, but it was hard to plot his revenge when she was massaging his scrawny bicep like that. But he would be strong and stay immune to her charms; well, he would be once she stopped touching him like that.

“You can take my number off me for a start. The least you can do is keep me safe, after what you just tried to do to me.”

She rummaged in the pocket of his robe, plucked out the parchment, checked it, and tucked it into her cleavage with a satisfied nod.

“What else?”

“Tell me why you picked me. Why not give your number to someone else?”

“You took my fancy.”

“All the more reason not to sentence me to death!”

“Sorry; I wasn’t thinking. You had me flustered. You’re a very good-looking man, you know.”

He blushed. She smiled, and touched his arm again. He thawed a little more. He knew what she was thinking; men like him were so easy to manipulate. But he didn’t care. He was being touched by a good-looking woman, and it wasn’t costing him a penny this time round.

“It’s a pity,” she said. “There really was something I wanted to show you in my room.”

“Well why don’t you? When all this is finished. I’ve got the time if you’ve got the inclination.”

She gave him a wry grin. “Sorry,” she said. “I think you’re going to be otherwise engaged for a while.”

And then the soldier was there.

“Forty nine?” he asked her. “We’ve just called forty nine.”

Halfshaft sighed. Just when his chat-up lines had finally started to work. “Your number. I’m sorry. We could have been good together.”

“Please don’t apologise,” she replied. “It’s your number, not mine.”

“But you took it off me, I think you’ll find.”

She unclothed that smile again. She produced the parchment she had taken from him a few moments earlier, flashing it at the soldier who was standing impatiently by. It was forty eight, the number Ditherer had given him when they had swapped parchments after the first number had been called. “I think you’ll find he has forty nine in the left pocket of his robes.”

The soldier delved into his pocket, and removed the parchment. “Forty nine,” he confirmed. “It’s your lucky day, Sir. You’ve just qualified for the Games.”

Halfshaft rounded on Cherry, ready to berate her, expose her, grumble her into submission; whatever it took, in fact, to save himself. But it was too late. She had gone, leaving him to his fate. And she hadn’t even had the decency to take him to her room first.

#

Despite his heroics of recent times, Halfshaft only had two spells to fall back upon in times of trouble. He could conjure up a birthday-candle-sized flame on his fingers, and he could produce a sufficient trickle of water to put it out again. Neither talent was likely to be sufficient to facilitate his escape from the dungeon into which he and Ditherer had been so unceremoniously bundled.

The dungeon was dark, damp and cramped. Dirty grey mice threaded their way through the grubby straw on the ground. The place smelt worse than he did. But what really depressed him was that Ditherer kept trying to forgive him, when he really didn't see that he had anything to be forgiven for.

“You've done a very wicked thing,” said Ditherer, “but I'm ready to let bygones be bygones, and forgive you. What do you say, Uncle?”

He held out the calloused hand of peace, which the wizard studiously ignored. He was not about to be patronised by a yokel.

“Uncle?” the man prompted.

Halfshaft looked around theatrically, in search of the “uncle” to whom his cell-mate had referred. No; no sign of an elderly idiot in here, as far as he could see.

The man waved his hand around insistently. Halfshaft wasn't keen on touching it, yet alone shaking the thing.

“Come on. Let's be friends,” Ditherer prompted.

Let's not be friends, Halfshaft thought. Let's just sit here in silence, wringing out the last few moments of peace and quiet from my sad and sorry life, before they chuck me in a forest and leave me to die a fast but painful death.

Ditherer pouted. “Don't you want to be my friend?”

“Well of course I do!” spat the wizard. “I'm locked up in a dungeon; tired, cold and hungry, with only a day or two left to live. I've been manhandled, cheated, and smashed across the head with a potty full of the urine I passed half a century ago. But as long as we can be bestest chums, then everything's going to be just peachy!”

Ditherer smiled. “That's all right then, Uncle. For a moment there, I didn't think you liked me very much!”

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He wasn't sure how long he had been locked up in the dungeon, but even though he felt tremendously weary, his legs were the only part of his body which had managed to fall asleep. Ditherer was snoring loudly, which didn't help. But to be fair (which he was never keen on doing if he could help it) he wouldn't have been sleepy anyway. He was too busy fretting about tomorrow.

He had been in situations far worse than this before. Shape-shifters, trolls, wolves, proper wizards, chubby people in strange blue trousers; he had faced them all down without getting so much as a scratch. But previously, he had had his friends to help him. Rod (he of the blue trousers), Thane (the mercenary), even George (the pacifist cave-troll); all had been there for him in his numerous hours of need. But most of all, he had had Takina to look after him.

Takina was fearless. And she made him fearless. When she was there, he felt the need to protect her. He also wanted to show her how brave he was, that he was a warrior she could be proud of, and that meant that he would do things to impress her that he would never have attempted on his own. But they had gone their separate ways, and now he had to face this ordeal all on his own. Well, worse than that, he thought bitterly. He had Ditherer for company. His brand new idiot "friend"!

He tried to think of a bright side, which took him another three quarters of an hour or so. The best he could manage was that his new companion was dressed differently from his previous one. Takina had looked stunning in her tiny little squirrel skin bikini; Ditherer would have looked shocking in an outfit like that. It was pretty pathetic as "bright sides" go, but it was all that he had.

He thought of furry bikinis for another ten minutes or so, as it seemed to cheer him up a little. Then he thought of them for another ten minutes, and it seemed to cheer him up a lot. He shifted around uncomfortably. He was in the mood for love, even if it was the self-administered sort. Sharing a cell with a simple stranger made things a little tricky, though.

He shuffled round so he had his back to Ditherer. Craning his head over his shoulder to keep an eye on his sleeping companion, he fumbled beneath his robe. It would only take a few minutes. Sure, it was a bit weird, but at least it would pass the time.

Right, where was he? Takina. Furry bikini. Well, maybe just furry bikini bottoms. Well, maybe no bikini at all. And she was bending –

“What are you doing?”

Halfshaft leapt a couple feet into the air, which, from a sitting position, would have been rather impressive under different circumstances. Frantically readjusting his robes, he turned to find out who had just spoken. There was a young man peering in at him through the barred window of the cell door, twenty years old at most. And he was giving the wizard a very disapproving look indeed.

As always, Halfshaft decided that the best form of defence was abuse.

“Pervert!” He screeched. “Spying on me like that!”

“Pervert? That’s fine coming from you!”

Ditherer woke up. “What’s going on? Who’s that at the door?”

“Your friend here was touching himself. Quite briskly, I might add.”

“I do tend to have that effect on people,” Ditherer replied. “Always have done. I think it must be my nose that does it. Look, Uncle, I’m very flattered, but you’re really not –”

“I was not touching myself! I was just scratching my leg.” He rubbed his thigh vigorously through his robes, in an unconvincing effort to illustrate the point. “I can see how it might have appeared to you, but -”

“Look!” cried the man at the door. “He’s doing it again!”

“I’m just rubbing!” cried Halfshaft furiously, doing it all the more.

“I bet you are. You’ll go blind.”

“I’m a married man,” put in Ditherer, trying to let him down gently. “You can’t be doing that sort of thing for my benefit, Uncle, however gorgeous my nose might be.”

Halfshaft stopped rubbing. It seemed to be making matters worse. “Bugger off,” he shouted instead, for want of a better strategy. “Bugger off sideways!”

“He’s obsessed!” said the man at the door, shaking his head in disgust. “First he wants to pleasure himself over you, now he wants to -”

“I was not pleasuring myself!” screeched the wizard, beside himself with rage.

“No, you were just rubbing yourself. Briskly. With your robes round your waist.”

Ditherer winced. “Oh, that’s not nice, I don’t like the sound of that at all. And to think I nearly shook him by the hand. I’m glad I didn’t now.”

Halfshaft could take no more. “Enough!” he cried. “I have nothing more to say on the matter. You’re both perverts, trying to bring me down to your own seedy little level. You, at the door, tell me what you’re doing here, and then be on your way.”

“I’ve come to torture you, on the King’s orders.”

“Okay,” said the wizard. “Maybe we could talk about my little indiscretion for a while longer, after all.”

#

The torturer introduced himself to Halfshaft as he tied him to a table in the torture chamber. His name was Ian, and this was his very first day at work. He had had no practical training, but he’d read a book called “Ladies Who Like It Rough”, which he felt had given him a fair idea of the basics. Torture and sadomasochism were pretty much the same thing, he theorised, except that torturers tended to keep their trousers on.

He didn’t like the idea of people screaming – he was quite sensitive, deep down – so if the wizard could keep the noise down to a minimum, it would be much appreciated. Besides, there was a wine-bar above, and the Chief Torturer had told him the customers tended to complain if the howling reached a certain agonised pitch.

He only had one table, so he would have to torture them one at a time if that was all right with them. He would be grateful if Ditherer – whose name

turned out to be Cartwright – did not try to escape while he was waiting his turn, as he would have money docked from his wages if he had to call the soldiers out, and he was saving up for an engagement ring. He wasn't quite sure whom he wanted to marry yet, as there were a number of girls who had caught his eye, and he wanted to check out what their mothers looked before popping the question as he had been told that this was the best way of finding out whether his bride would look like a heifer in middle-age.

“Right, all secure. What do I do now?”

Halfshaft stared at him. “What do you mean, “what do I do now”? You must have some idea. You're a torturer.”

“If you'd been listening, you'd know that this was my first day. I've never done this before. They just chose me because I'm a big lad, and they said that I'd need to be able to pull people up in to the air on a hoist. But I can't find the hoist. It was hard enough finding the rope, if I'm honest.”

“You've got no idea what you're doing?”

“I thought I'd try out a few things from my book, but I'm not so sure now. All the men in there seemed to be quite enjoying themselves, and that would sort of defeat the object.”

Halfshaft thought quickly. “Well,” he said, “it's normal to just insult me a bit, tickle my feet a little, and then send me on my way.”

Ian regarded him dubiously. “That doesn't sound much like torture to me. You're not trying to trick me, are you, just because I'm new to the job?”

“Well it is torture. I've been tortured by the best. I went to Hell once.”

“I'm not surprised, after what I caught you doing back there.”

“I was just rubbing.”

“Yes, yes, so you said.”

“I think you may be wrong about the tickling,” put in Ditherer helpfully. “I was tortured once, for looking at the King's mother's bottom. She had all her clothes on and everything; I'm not a pervert like you. But I just glanced over in that direction, and the next thing I know they're whacking my tackle

with a rusty pitchfork. Frightened the life out of me, it did. I didn't mind the pain, but I was a bit worried I might get lock-jaw."

"That does sound more like torture," Ian nodded thoughtfully. "And I'm sure we've got some garden implements around here somewhere. Good idea, Mr Cartwright. I'll go easy on you when it's your turn, as a little thank you."

"No, no, that's not torture," Halfshaft gabbled. "That was obviously a little joke on the part of the King's mum. She obviously liked you, and wanted to do something to make you laugh, so she -"

"Oh, it didn't make me laugh," Ditherer replied, shaking his head in sorrow. "Quite the reverse, actually. Have you ever been whacked about the testicles with a pitchfork?"

"Not yet, he hasn't," Ian interjected.

"Well, Uncle, I can tell you now that it bloody hurts. Fair brings tears to your eyes. And I haven't had any more children since then, either."

"They beat you so hard that you couldn't have children?"

"No. I didn't have any more children because my wife wouldn't let me back into bed with her, cos I'd allegedly been caught having a crafty peak at the King's mother's bottom when I should have been checking hers out instead. But you've never seen my wife's bottom, have you, Uncle? It would take a braver man than I to check out that bottom in broad daylight, I can tell you."

Ian disappeared for a few moments, returning with a rusty pitchfork. He spent a moment or two deliberating upon which end to use, but finally decided upon beating Halfshaft with the handle. "We'll save the pointy end for later, just in case you don't talk. Work our way up to a crescendo, so to speak. It'll be fun."

The wizard whimpered. He had never been a great fan of physical pain. "What is it you want to know? I'll tell you whatever you want. Just say the word."

Ian looked puzzled. "Do you know what; I hadn't thought of that. Just torture the people in Cell Three, the King said. I don't think he told me what it was he thought you would know. I guess I just keep whacking you until

you tell me something important, and I then go and ask him whether that was it.”

He took a swing at the wizard. The pitchfork struck Halfshaft across the thighs, causing him to yelp out in pain.

“I need to work on my aim,” said Ian, shaking his head. “Still, at least you’ve got a genuine reason for rubbing yourself now.”

“There’s something I need to tell you,” Ditherer exclaimed. “Something important.”

“Not now. Save it for later, when I’m torturing you. If you tell me everything now, you’ll have nothing left to say when you’re on the table, and then we’d be going on for hours.”

“Fair point, Uncle.”

Ian took another swing at Halfshaft. This time, the pitchfork smashed into his left hip.

“Sorry. I reckon it’s the table. It’s too high; it’s spoiling my aim. I’ll use a lower one next time. I hope you won’t mark me down for this in the client satisfaction questionnaire.”

“Tell me what to say,” cried Halfshaft. “Anything you like. Just stop!”

“I don’t think it works that way. I think you have to say stuff to me. Otherwise, there’d be no point in doing this. I could just think things up, get you to sign a confession, and do myself out of a job. I need to torture you a bit first.”

“Ask me questions, then! You can’t just whack me with a stick without telling me what you want to know; it’s not fair!”

“How can I ask you questions, when I don’t know what the answers are supposed to be? What to do? Okay, I know. You tell me three things that the King might find interesting, and we’ll call it a day. And then your friend here can have a turn. I can’t say fairer than that.”

“But I don’t know three things. Well, I know three things, obviously, but not three things that the King would find -”

The pitchfork came down again, but this time it found its target. Halfshaft screeched in pain. There would be no danger of a repetition of the incident in the cell for a very long time, he thought bitterly, what with his testicles being so severely mashed.

“Confess!” ordered Ian, who was rather warming to his new job now he was working to a definite objective. “Confess, Villain, or get more of the same!”

“Confess what, though?”

“Confess anything! Three times. Like I just said. You’ve really got to start paying attention.”

He struck him again. The pitchfork found its mark a second time. Ian congratulated himself on his aim. Maybe he could make a game of it, to pass the time. Try and get five direct hits in a row, but if he missed one he would have to start from scratch.

“Okay, I confess, I confess!”

“What do you confess?” asked the disappointed torturer. He had hoped that the wizard would have put up a better show, especially now the pitchfork – swinging-thing was going so well.

“I’m a spy! There, I’ve admitted it. I’m a spy!”

“That does sound like something the King would want to know.”

Ditherer butted in again. “I’ve been thinking that maybe I should tell you that thing I wanted to say. Now. Rather than waiting ‘til later.”

“Are you a spy, Mr Cartwright?”

“No, no, nothing like that, young man. It’s just that -”

“Save it for your turn, then. I can’t interrogate two people at the same time, not with this being my first day and all. Right, you, old wizard, I said three things, and you’ve only told me one. So you’re going to have to come up with something else. Two more things please. No hurry, though. Take your time. It’s all good practice for me.”

He struck the wizard with the pitchfork again. A particularly poor blow this time, right across the knees. Cartwright had put him right off.

“I’m working for the Amazons!” shouted Halfshaft. It was the best he could come up with at short notice. “They sent me here. To do their evil bidding.”

“Okay,” nodded the disappointed torturer. “That’s two things. Hang on, though. The Amazons hate men. They’d never entrust a spying mission to you if you were a man.”

“That’s the third thing I wanted to tell you,” he replied, in a soft voice.

Ditherer stared. “You’re a lady?”

Halfshaft nodded. He put on a rather unconvincing feminine voice.

“Guilty as charged.”

“Well, Mr Torturer,” you’d better let her off the table immediately,” Ditherer put in.

“Why?” asked a bewildered Ian. “Isn’t it the done thing to torture women?”

“No, no, there’s no law against that,” Ditherer replied. “Quite the reverse, in fact. But what’s the use of beating her about the testicles, if she hasn’t got any?”

Halfshaft nodded furiously. “He’s right, you know. No use at all. Besides, I’ve told you three things now, just like you asked me to do. Spying; Amazons; being a lady. It’s his turn now. Cripple him instead.”

Ian reluctantly untied him. He hadn’t had that much experience of women, but he could have sworn that having a beard was usually a sign of being a bloke. The prisoner had confessed under torture, though, so it must be true. He motioned for Ditherer to get on the table, and he duly obliged. He lay there, uncomplaining, as he was bound down, and did a very good job of suppressing his whimpering as Ian struck him several hefty blows with the pitchfork (determined to get them in quickly before he confessed everything and ruined the torturer’s fun).

“Right,” Ian got down to business. “You said there was something you had to tell me. Now’s your chance.”

“Well, you know you said the King told you to go and torture the people in Cell Three.”

“Yes. What of it?”

“We were in Cell Four. Cell Three’s on the other side of the corridor. I think you’ve got the wrong people.”

Ian went pale.

Halfshaft spluttered in indignation. “You didn’t think to tell him that earlier? When he was torturing me?”

“He asked me not to.”

Halfshaft seized the pitchfork from Ian, and set upon Ditherer in a frenzy, demonstrating time and time again that his aim was much better than the torturer’s had been. Ditherer squirmed, and groaned, and apologised, but all to no avail. The wizard kept going for a full two minutes, until his fury was spent.

Ditherer stared at him in astonishment. “Who would have thought that an old lady could handle a pitchfork like that,” he marvelled. “And to think that they say that women are the gentle sex!”

#

Back in the cell, Halfshaft remained wide awake as he relived his ordeal, cursing his cell-mate who was wide asleep. The hours passed, unmourned. Eventually, Ditherer stopped snoring, and Halfshaft felt his eyelids grow heavy. He longed for sleep. Waiting for the Games to start was almost as bad as the Games themselves.

He eventually nodded off into uneasy slumber. He saw himself running round a forest, fleeing from something large and dangerous (he knew not what). For some reason, he was naked. He entered a clearing. Takina was there. She looked startled. He backed away, covering himself up, ashamed of his skinny, wrinkled old body. She called after him, but he turned and fled. And then the girl from the courtyard – the one who had planted her number on him and sentenced him to this fate – was in front of him, pointing at him, laughing at him. And Takina was there, trying to hide a smirk, but failing spectacularly. And then Rod, Leofric, Rana and all the others, all

gesticulating towards him, laughing out loud, tears streaming down contorted faces, such was their mirth.

“Run!” he shouted at them. “It’s coming!” But they carried on pointing at him all the same, and that was so much worse than whatever it was that was crashing through the trees to eat them all.

Something grabbed his arm. He tried to shake it off, but it held fast. Ordinarily, he would have cried out in terror, but now he was angry; humiliated. He lashed out at it, again and again, trying to fend it off, so he could get away from all these hurtful people, and hide away from Takina most of all.

The creature grunted in surprise. Without turning round to look at it – in case he lost his nerve – he struck out again, harder still. He was buggered if he was going to let it eat him without a fight. At the very least, he would give it indigestion.

“Stop, Uncle, stop!” it cried out, which was a little unexpected.

He recognised the voice. A voice he had heard recently, and one which he did not particularly care for. He turned to take a closer look at his assailant. For some reason, it was dark now, and he had trouble making out the features. At least the laughing had stopped.

“It’s me, Uncle. Now stop all that lashing about, or I’ll have to punch you on the nose to settle you down.”

It was Ditherer. Back in the cell. He had been dreaming. He wasn’t sure whether or not he should be relieved.

“What is it?” he asked. “I was asleep.”

“Sorry, I didn’t realise. It’s just that I woke up, and I was a bit bored, like, and I wondered if you would care for a nice game of Eye-Spy?”

“Huh?”

“You know, I-Spy-With-My-Little-Eye, something beginning with -. We could make it best of twenty, make it interesting. What do you say?”

“I’ve been trying to get to sleep all night. And you wake me up to play stupid games like that?”

“Yes.”

The wizard paused for second, smothering the urge to punch his cell-mate in the face with all his strength, and resisting only for fear that his cell-mate would punch him back an awful lot harder.

“I spy,” he said, “with my little eye, something beginning with B.”

“I don’t know,” shrugged Ditherer. “I can’t spell. I can usually get it if it starts with C, though, as I always say “cat” and that’s right, as often as not.”

“I’ll give you a clue,” Halfshaft told him. “It starts with B, and ends with “Astart”. What do you think it might be?”

“Is it a cat?” Ditherer shrugged.

“Bugger off!” Halfshaft shouted at him. “You stay in your corner over there, and I’ll stay in mine. You don’t talk to me, you don’t even look at me. And you certainly don’t play Eye-Spy with me. Agreed?”

“Are you forfeiting our match, then?”

“You’re talking.”

Ditherer trudged dejectedly back to his designated corner of the cell. He sat down, and propped his heavy head on his knees, looking like a sick puppy whose favourite toy had been chopped up and fed through the shredder. Within seconds, though, he was yawning, and not long after that he was snoring again.

Halfshaft closed his eyes, willing himself to sleep. His brain remained stubbornly active.

“Cat!” he muttered beneath his breath. “Cat!”

And then the cell-door swung open, and the gaoler was there.

“Good morning, gentleman,” he greeted them. “Hope you both had a comfortable night. What would you like for your last breakfast?”

#

Within the hour, both prisoners were sat astride a horse, their wrists tied to the pommels on the saddles to stop them from escaping. The two horses were tethered to each other, and also lashed to the horses of the gaolers who rode on either side of them. The chances of “doing a runner” seemed pretty slim.

They rode four abreast towards the front gate. As the port-cullis was being raised, the King appeared, flanked by flapping courtiers. A number of curious citizens came to see them off too, more out of idle curiosity than anything else. Halfshaft noted bitterly that his younger self was amongst them. He mouthed obscenities at him, but refrained from vocalising them for fear of reprisals from his guards.

“Hail, the conquering heroes come,” announced the King, which Halfshaft took to be premature, smug and wildly inaccurate. “We know that you will do Us proud.”

“We’ll win it for you,” cried Ditherer. “We’ll win it for our King!”

“Yes,” replied King Spartan, sounding just a little dubious. “Or die with dignity in the attempt!”

“Dignity?” asked Ditherer. “What’s that then, Uncle?”

“Buggered if I know,” sulked Halfshaft. “Something to do with cats, I expect.”

“I like cats,” Ditherer nodded in satisfaction. “I hope we don’t have to fight any in the Games. That would be too sad. I don’t like to beat anything with whiskers, as a general rule.”

There was a commotion behind them. Three soldiers approached at speed, a woman in their midst. And not just any woman. It was the one from the courtyard, the one who had tricked him into taking her number. What was the devious harlot up to now?

They marched towards the King, who did not look best pleased at being interrupted in this fashion. The senior soldier gabbled away, pointing towards Halfshaft from time to time, while the woman stood nearby, an amused smile on her face. She glanced over towards the wizard, giving him a friendly wink. Surely she didn’t still want to show him something in her room? Her timing was awful, if she did.

King Spartan looked perplexed. He approached the two prisoners, and regarded them thoughtfully. He then stared at the woman again, though his gaze seemed to be focussed more on her chest than her face for some reason. He came to a decision.

“This woman here has told our soldiers that she swapped numbers with you at the lottery, and that it was her number which was subsequently drawn. She has volunteered to go to the Games in your place. Our first thought is that it We’d rather not have a woman represent Us, because they’re soft and gentle, and prefer housework to fighting. But then We recalled that the Amazons win the Games virtually every year. And We looked at the quality of the candidates We presently have, and We thought that she could hardly be any worse. So, why not?”

He pointed an Alan-Sugar-like finger at Halfshaft. “You’re fired.”

Halfshaft whooped with joy. He had never been so happy in all his life, not even when he was given a sympathy-shag by two ex-communicated vestal virgins when he was twenty three (and he had been very happy then indeed). He beamed at Ditherer, who seemed genuinely pleased for him (the idiot!). He bowed his head gratefully to the King, who failed to notice as he was looking at the woman’s bosoms again. And then he noticed his younger self in the crowd, looking distinctly shifty.

One of the soldiers untied his wrists. He dropped clumsily off the horse, and the woman jumped up into the saddle in his place, perfectly relaxed as they lashed her to the saddle.

“Thank you,” he said, the words unfamiliar and foreign to his tongue. “For coming back for me.”

“My pleasure,” she replied. She had to be a simpleton, surely? She would get on well with Ditherer, at least.

He looked around, to see his younger self scurrying off into the distance. With a hurried bow to the King – who was back in conversation with the soldiers – he set off after him, determined to give himself the kicking of his life (and who better than him to judge what that might be?)

He moved surprisingly quickly for someone of his age (revenge always motivated him to new heights), and had covered a full fifty yards before his

King commanded him to stop. He carried on running for a few steps, knowing that his monarch's command could only be a bad thing, but then decided that he had little option to obey. To ignore the King would be treason, punishable by death (or at the very least by forty or fifty years with Ian and his pitchfork).

"Come back here," the King ordered. He reluctantly obliged. This was not good; this was not good at all.

"We have been thinking."

"Well done, Sire," Halfshaft congratulated him, eager to please but realising all too late how patronising this sounded. Spartan, fortunately, was so used to compliments that he waved off the remark, and carried on regardless.

"If you swapped numbers with this buxom young lady here, then she had the winning number and it is only right and proper that she represent us in the Games as I have decreed."

"Yes, Sire, very wise, Sire," Halfshaft agreed, bowing profusely.

"But you did have the winning number in your possession before this other gentleman here, so surely you should represent us, too?"

"No, no, that can't be right."

"Are you calling Us a liar?"

"No, of course not. Heaven forbid. I'd never do such a thing. Sire."

"Perhaps you're suggesting that We are mistaken, then? That there is an error in our regal logic?"

Halfshaft shook his head furiously. "As if!"

"Well?" prompted Spartan. "Tell me why you disagree with Us."

Halfshaft opened his mouth to explain, and was surprised to find that no explanation came out. He thought some more. This was important. If he came up with something plausible and convincing now, he would be safe. He could slink off back to his chamber, throttle his former self at his leisure, and spend the rest of the week in bed, with or without company (as the mood and his budget took him). But nothing came. Nothing at all.

He sighed loudly.

“Back on the horse for me, then.”

“Back on the horse indeed,” Spartan agreed.

Ditherer yelped in delight. “I’m free!” he cried. “Free! I’m off down the tavern to get well and truly bladdered. Then back home to my wife, if she’ll have me, or to someone else’s if she won’t!”

“I’m very pleased for you,” Halfshaft lied badly as he exchanged places with Ditherer on the horse.

He glanced over at his fellow prisoner; she was smirking. He gave her his fiercest look, but it just made her grin all the more.

“Just you wait ‘til I get you out of the saddle!” he hissed. She laughed out loud.

“I will not be the object of your amusement,” he told her, with all the dignity he still had left. And then a soldier slapped the rump of his horse to get it moving, it bolted forwards, and he fell off. He was dragged along beside it by his bound wrists, her horse (which was tethered to his) not far behind, and all the while he could hear her virtually crying with laughter as he attempted unsuccessfully to climb back on to his mount.

Theirs was not going to be an easy relationship, he could tell that already.

#

They rode along in sullen silence (at least on his part) for quite some time, flanked by guards, as he waited for his anger to subside. This took longer than even he had expected. She spent the journey looking about her, taking in the sights as if she was a tourist, apparently totally unconcerned by her fate. It wasn’t even as if there was much to see. A ploughed field here; a tree there; the occasional ditch or two. Nothing to write home about.

“Why me?” he eventually enquired, and not without a hint of self-pity. “Out of everyone in that courtyard, why give that number to me?”

“You’ve asked me that before.”

“Have I?”

She nodded. “In the courtyard. And I told you that you’d taken my fancy. You’re a wizard, after all. Who wouldn’t be impressed by that?”

“True,” he nodded. “But why give me your number? Why not hand it to Ditherer instead? Or any of the others?”

“I had a feeling I was going to end up here. So this way, I got to pick my company.”

“Thanks for that,” Halfshaft said, oozing sarcasm.

“You’re welcome,” she replied, either oblivious to, or totally unconcerned by, it. He suspected it was the latter.

“Where do you think they’re taking us?”

“The usual place.”

“Which is?”

“The circus. For training.”

Circus? What was a circus when it was at home? He wanted to ask her what she meant, but he didn’t want to admit his ignorance. He would find out soon enough.

They were heading towards the Amazon village. He didn’t have happy memories of the place. Last time he was there, they had made him duel with this huge lump of a woman, who had nearly taken his head off. He had used spell after ineffectual spell, but all to no effect. He wouldn’t have minded grappling with some of the Amazons; generally speaking, they were lithe and supple and beautiful, and their clothes were virtually non-existent. But in view of her size, his duel with Trugga had not even given him the cheap thrill he would have got from wrestling one of her more streamlined tribeswomen.

There was a squat rectangular boulder at the side of the road (which, by coincidence, reminded him a lot of Trugga). This marked the border with Amazon country. To pass that rock meant certain death if you were a man (and probable death if you were a woman, to be fair). Some of the better

looking males might be mated with for a week or two first, but sooner or later they all ended up in a shallow grave. He shuddered. He was pretty keen on staying above the ground for as long as he possibly could.

They branched off to the left, following a line of stones which led off into the distance, like badly spaced dominoes.

“Shall we steer our horses over the boundary?” suggested Cherry, in a conspiratory whisper. “Just to see what happens.”

“Let’s not,” ruled Halfshaft. “We might get to make it to the Games if we stay over here, and I’m looking forward to them so much that I wouldn’t want to put it all at risk.”

An Amazon seeped out of the long grass to their right. He couldn’t work out how he hadn’t been able to see her before. She was anything up to seven feet tall, whereas the grass was maybe eighteen inches high at most.

As always, she was wearing squirrel skin. A pelt or two round her chest, and a pelt or two round her pelvis. It was more like a pair of narrow parallel straps than an outfit. Bizarrely, he found herself wondering whether all three or four squirrels were from the same family. Whether they had been sitting in their nest one minute, minding their own rodent business, and the next they were dead and skinned and draped round the most intimate parts of a very tall lady. At least they hadn’t died in vain; there were worse places to end up.

Another Amazon emerged ahead of them, and then another, each just a foot or two on their side of the boundary, watching the four horses as they trotted past. The soldiers increased their pace, nervous of assault. There was no point in running, though. If an Amazon wanted to kill you, then you might just as give yourself up and enjoy the experience as best you could (which depended to a large extent on whether they considered you to be of mateable quality or not).

“I don’t like this,” muttered Halfshaft. “What are they up to?”

“Don’t worry about them,” Cherry reassured him. “We could have them easily, if it came to it.”

Much as the idea of “having them” would ordinarily have appealed to him, he was very much of the opinion on this occasion that the safest course of

action was to keep his head down, and hope they went away. It was his second favourite tactic, after running like buggery, though neither of them seemed to work very well.

“At least they’re on their own side of the boundary,” Halfshaft said. “As long as we don’t say anything to provoke them, maybe they’ll leave us in peace.”

Up ahead, one of them stepped across the imaginary line between the stones, and waited for the horses to approach. She was even taller than the others, even more graceful, even more beautiful. The quiver on her back bristled with arrows with golden feathers. There was no doubt about it; this was their queen.

She stood stock still as the horses made their uneasy way towards her. Her face was expressionless. That made it somehow worse. There was something daunting about not being able to read the mood of a woman who may or may not be thinking of killing them.

He looked behind him. The Amazons they had passed earlier had crossed the boundary, and were following silently along behind them. He watched as they peeled away from the boundary one by one, taking their places behind the four of them as if they were following a funeral procession. Which, in all likelihood, was exactly what they were doing.

The lead soldier came to a halt. The others lined up behind him. He tried to shuffle his horse backwards to fall in line with them, not wanting to take the lead in a situation like this, but the Amazon Queen took hold of the bridle, and the horse didn’t seem inclined to argue with her.

“You are coming with us,” she said. “Except you. Girl. You are free to go.”

“I’m coming, too,” Cherry replied. “I wouldn’t miss this for the world.”

“We’ve got to go on,” protested the lead soldier, torn between fear of Spartan and fear of the tall woman before him. On balance, he’d decided that Spartan was worse. How scary could a woman in squirrel skin knickers be, after all? “We have orders from the King, and you will stand aside or face his wrath.”

The Amazon Queen seized his jacket, and pulled him from his horse. In the same movement, she had slit his throat with her knife, the feat accomplished

before he had even landed on the ground. He gurgled incomprehensibly for a second or two and then lay still.

She stooped, pulled up a handful of grass, and used it to wipe the splattered blood from her body with the merest hint of distaste.

“Is anyone else reluctant to accept my invitation?” asked the Queen sweetly.

Halfshaft and the remaining soldier shook their heads vigorously, too frightened to speak in case they said something which the Queen found offensive. Cherry, however, was rather more relaxed than her travelling companions.

“What’s up, then? How come we’re all being kidnapped? Well, they’re being kidnapped, and I’m coming along for the ride.”

“They are trespassing.”

“We stayed on the right side of the boundary,” the second soldier protested. “We didn’t cross it once.”

The Queen drove her knife up beneath his ribs. For a second, he sat there on his horse, an expression on his face midway between surprise and a sense of injustice. And then he toppled off, landing lifelessly on the grass below.

The Queen nodded. Two or three Amazons rocked one of the stones back and forth, until it fell over. They rolled it across the grass, past the horses, and with the aid of a few more women they set it back up again on the other side of the two remaining prisoners.

“You are now on my side of the boundary,” the Queen announced. “Trespassers, as I said. Would you not agree?”

Halfshaft nodded stupidly. Now did not seem to be the time to argue the point.

Cherry appeared to be on the verge of saying something. She then glanced down at her wrists, still tied to the pommel on the saddle. She came to a decision.

“Busted,” she smiled. “Do with us as you will. As long as we get lunch first.”

Halfshaft was feeling rather less relaxed about the situation, as the two of them were led towards the nearby village by a tribe of very scary tribeswomen. His only remote hope of survival rested on Cherry keeping her mouth shut. Which meant, he suspected, that he was already well and truly bugged.

#

The Amazon village was much as he remembered it. A little smaller, perhaps, but the last time he had been here had been forty or fifty years in the future, and he assumed the population had increased a fair amount in the meantime, what with all the mating they got up to.

There were two or three large huts, surrounded by dozens of smaller ones. Each was pretty basic, with circular mud walls topped by thatched roofs. Most villages had walls or trenches around them to keep out enemies or predators, but the only protection the Amazons had was a latrine ditch a dozen yards to the north. He wasn't sure whether this was because no-one would be stupid enough to venture into the village without permission, or because their latrines were particularly offensive. He suspected the former, as the tribeswomen were far too proud and graceful to tolerate any of their number whose poo did not smell of roses.

They stopped outside a hut. There were a number of unhappy looking people inside, including a couple of soldiers, a few villagers, an infant troll and a dwarf. All of them were male. One solitary guard stood at the entrance, a javelin in her hand. She bowed low to her Queen.

“Queen Selene.”

Selene beckoned towards the horses. “The final prisoner. Take him.”

“Take *us*, surely?” protested Cherry.

“You are a woman,” replied Selene, with one immaculate eyebrow arched in surprise. “Why would I imprison you?”

“I go where he goes.”

“I do not understand why you would demean yourself for a man. Is he your mate?”

Halfshaft waited for Cherry to protest, but to his surprise she did not seem even remotely disgusted by the suggestion. Most of the attractive women he knew would have been outraged that anyone might think that they had been intimate with him, which was slightly irritating bearing in mind that most of the attractive women he knew were being paid good money to be as intimate with him as they possibly could, at least for half an hour or so at a time.

“Best mates,” Cherry elaborated.

Selene’s eyebrow raised higher still. “*Best* mates?” she asked, incredulously. “Then I would hate to see what the others look like!”

Halfshaft started to feel guilty, which was not an emotion he had experienced very often in the past. He was doomed; that much was all too clear. But there was no reason for Cherry to sacrifice herself too, out of loyalty towards him. She should go, denounce him, save herself. That was exactly what he would have done in her shoes (metaphorically, of course, because they were far too small for him, not to mention rather effeminate-looking).

“It’s okay,” he whispered. “It looks a bit cramped in there. You’re better off out here.”

“I’m not leaving you.”

“You must.”

“Look at all the men in there,” Cherry joked. “All crushed up together, like a tiny little meat market. If you think I’m staying out here when I could be squeezing myself in there, then you’ve got another think coming!”

“You’re just saying that,” Halfshaft replied. “Why would you possibly want to be squashed in there with a load of sweaty men?”

She winked.

“No. Women don’t think like that.”

She laughed. “Don’t they? It must just be me, then!”

Selene brought the discussion to an end, her patience exhausted. “The woman is obviously mad, if she wants to be imprisoned in there with all those weak creatures, when it is not even mating season. Throw them both in, and see if that brings her to her senses.”

They were ushered from their horses, the Amazon guard prodding Halfshaft with her javelin to encourage him into the hut. Cherry followed along behind him, unmolested and perfectly content. The wizard testily pushed his new hut-mates backwards to make some room for the two of them near the door, but much to his irritation Cherry wriggled between two villagers (blacksmiths or ploughmen, by the look of them!) and disappeared towards the back of the hut. He could no longer see her, but was able to follow her progress by the sound of satisfied grunts each man made as she squeezed past him.

The Amazon guard gave him another poke, just to see what noise he would make, and then turned her back on him, losing interest. She obviously did not consider him to be a threat. He looked around, checking out each of his neighbours in turn. The first thing that struck him was that they could all do with a good wash, although he was conscious of the fact that he had had no opportunity to bathe since he had been doused in his younger self’s urine back at the castle, so he was probably not in the best position to judge them.

“Halfshaft,” he said to a man nearby, in the need of some conversation, however basic. He held out his hand, and waited for the man to introduce himself back.

“You’re asking for a smack in the face,” the man replied, scowling at him. Halfshaft shrugged, and tried again with the man on the other side, who gave him a friendly smile but said nothing in return. What was wrong with these people?

Eventually, and against his better judgment, he introduced himself to the young troll.

“I’m Halfshaft. And who might you be?”

“Buster,” the troll replied shyly. He held out a tentative hand for the wizard to shake, but Halfshaft declined to accept it, conscious that it could be crushed to a pulp. He knew what these trolls were like, and even a young

one like this would be capable of splintering bone if the mood took him. Halfshaft preferred his bones unsplintered, given the choice.

“Have you been here long?”

The troll nodded. He was avoiding eye-contact. Halfshaft had never met a shy troll before. It was rather disconcerting.

A thought occurred. “How old are you?”

“Five.”

“Five? That’s pretty good counting for a troll. No offence.”

Buster shrugged.

“Five’s very young. Are your years the same as ours? Or is it like dog years or something, and you’re really seventy three?”

“Dog years?” asked Buster, looking upset. “How do you mean? I’m not a dog.”

“Nothing, nothing. I was just babbling on. I tend to do that when I’m taken prisoner and shoved in a hut with a whole bunch of people I don’t know.”

He heard a girlish giggle from the back of the hut. He felt a pang of jealousy. If she was going to wriggle about anywhere, it should be against him rather than with total strangers. He would have words with her when she came back.

“I don’t know anyone, neither,” Buster told him. “No-one will talk to me, cos I’m a troll.”

“Where are your parents?” Halfshaft asked, hoping despite his concern for the young lad that they weren’t too close by, as trolls always had the habit of trying to eat him. “You can’t be here on your own.”

“They got picked for the Games. I wasn’t allowed to come with them, but I followed them, all the way through the Forest.”

“You got through the Forest alone?” asked Halfshaft incredulously. Now he really was shocked. The Forest was Death. It was packed full of man-eating wolves, man-eating elves, man-eating everything. For a five year old

to make it through unscathed – whether it was five in dog years or not – was incredible.

Buster nodded. “It was scary. I cried a lot when it got dark. There were things out there, things with yellow eyes and big teeth, things that wanted to eat me. But I stayed as close to the Circus men as I could, and the creatures left me alone.”

“The Circus Men?”

Buster shuddered. “The Circus Men.”

“And then what?”

“We were coming past here, and the big ladies came out, but they saw the Circus Men and went back in again. But I turned and ran when I saw them, and they came after me and caught me and brought me here, and put me in here with all these people. And no-one talks to me, and it makes me feel lonely. And I miss my Mum.”

He started crying. Halfshaft put an awkward arm round his five-foot high shoulders. He had never been very good at comforting people, yet alone preschool trolls who were the same height as him (not that trolls went to school, of course).

“I wanna see my Mum!” sobbed Buster, his lip quivering furiously. “And my Dad, a bit.”

“It was bad luck both of your parents getting chosen,” the wizard said, trying to distract him, but realising mid-sentence that his choice of subject matter could have been better. “What were the chances of that?”

“Everyone was told to pick a number. They were the only ones who knew any numbers, so they got picked that way. They can count to two, between them. How cool is that?”

There was a succession of satisfied grunts heading his way. Cherry was on her way back. She writhed between the two peasants who’d refused to speak to him (both of whom were very much more receptive towards her), and came to a halt by his side.

“I needed that,” she said.

“This is Buster,” he told her, gesturing towards his not-so-little friend. “He’s lost his parents, come through the Forest on his own, and no-one here has said so much as a word to him since he’s been here.”

He stood back, waiting for her maternal instincts to kick in. He felt sorry for the lad, but was more than happy for her to take him off his hands. He had better things to do than baby-sit trollings.

Nothing happened. She just shrugged.

“And?”

“What do you mean, “and”? He needs someone to look after him. And what with you being the only woman here.....”

“He’s a bit too big to suckle, don’t you think? Not that I’d let him anywhere near the girls anyway. Ruins the shape, and saggy tits is not a good look for a girl like me.”

“Cover your ears, Buster!” Halfshaft commanded, horrified and bewildered in equal measure. He rounded on Cherry. “What sort of woman are you? First you go cavorting round the hut with all those strange men (no offence, everyone), and then you refuse to look after this poor little child who’s all alone in the world!”

Cherry nodded knowingly.

“What?” he asked. “What’s that look for?”

“So that’s what all this is about? You just want to give me a hard time for paying attention to other men. You’re too chicken to say that to my face, so you have to give me a hard time about the kid instead. Well he’s not my kid, and you’re not my husband, so I’ll do whatever I like. If you want someone to babysit him, you can do it yourself.”

“But I’m a man!” exclaimed Halfshaft. “I wouldn’t know where to start!”

“Besides,” she replied, whispering all of a sudden, “I’ve been too busy organising a revolution. The moment night falls, we’re breaking out!”

#

Night eventually fell, which was the only part of the plan to work out.

“It’s time,” Cherry breathed to Halfshaft. “When I give the sign, we attack. Pass it on.”

Halfshaft turned to face his fellow conspirators. “When she gives the sign

“Tell them *quietly*,” she elaborated.

He whispered to Buster, who promptly burst into tears. “I’m scared,” the child-troll told him. “They’ll tell me off if we run away.”

“Would you keep him quiet?” Cherry hissed. “This is supposed to be a secret.”

“What is a secret?” asked the Amazon guard suspiciously.

“I can’t say,” Cherry replied. “It’s a secret.”

“Tell me,” the guard ordered. “Or you all die.”

Cherry shrugged. “Bring it on.”

“We were going to escape,” bawled Buster. “I’m sorry. I was just doing what the grown-ups said. Don’t blame me! I’m a good boy!”

“You can see why no-one talks to the kid,” commented Cherry. “It’s quite a surprise he’s survived to the age of five with a gob like that.”

The Amazon guard stepped forward to jab her into silence with her javelin. Cherry deflected the point (into one of the blacksmiths/ploughmen, as it happened, much to Halfshaft’s satisfaction; that would teach them to enjoy being rubbed up against by his travelling companion!) As the man dropped to the ground in agony, Cherry jabbed out an arm, catching the Amazon under the chin with her palm and forcing her head backwards. There was a clicking sound, which made the wizard wince. The Amazon slumped to the ground, as dead as dead can be.

“Where did you learn to do that?” he asked in astonishment.

“I’m a girl of many talents. Stick around, and I might just show you some of the nicer ones some time.”

She took hold of the Amazon's wrists, and started to pull her away.

"Feel free to help me," she prompted. "What with me being a weak little woman, and all."

Buster grabbed hold of the wizard's arm, nearly ripping it from its socket in the process. "Don't leave me. All those men are looking at me funny."

"Since you told our guard we were going to escape? I can't think why."

"Please. I'm only five."

By then, Cherry was out of sight, dragging the squirrel-skin clad corpse along the grass behind her. At first, everyone waited for her return, but after a couple of minutes the remaining blacksmith/ploughman made a run for it, and the others followed suit, dashing off into the night. Only Halfshaft, Buster and the dwarf remained behind.

They exchanged self-conscious glances, like two "other-halves" left alone to make small-talk at a works function.

"I'm Stub," said the dwarf, holding out a pudgy hand, when he could stand the silence no more.

Halfshaft shook it. "Halfshaft," he replied.

"No," snapped the dwarf in reply. "It's just the way I'm standing."

"No, I'm Halfshaft," the wizard explained. "And this is Buster."

The dwarf regarded the troll with suspicion, but said nothing. They lapsed into awkward silence again. The wizard was relieved that Ditherer had not undertaken the journey, as he'd be eye-spying for all he was worth by now.

After just a few minutes (which seemed like hours), Cherry returned.

"Where did you put our host?" Halfshaft asked.

"In the latrine ditch. Where's everyone gone?"

"They ran off. And after all you did for them. Best not to trust strangers any more. Stick with me. Just the two of us."

"And me," put in Buster. "You've got to look after me."

"Me too," Stub chimed in. "I'm smaller than he is."

Halfshaft's shoulders slumped. He had suddenly acquired a hulking great foster child and an annoying little dwarf. Worse still, he suspected that the only reason Stub had remained behind was in the hope that they would all end up crammed in another hut at some stage, and he would get another chance to wriggle up against Cherry.

"Let's go," Cherry urged. "The others will give the game away. But if we head in the opposite direction, through the latrine ditch, we might still make it."

"It's dark," protested Buster, shaking his head vigorously. "I'm not going out there in the dark. There might be *monsters!*"

"Your choice," Cherry shrugged. "Come on, chaps. Time to go."

Buster started crying. Halfshaft hesitated. He looked at the child beside him, and agonised over whether to make a break for it with the sexy young woman who was beckoning him to follow her to safety, or whether to stay and baby-sit the quivering lump of troll until the Amazons came to kill them both. It should have been an easy choice, and even he was puzzled as to why he was not halfway across the latrine ditch by now.

"Come with us," Halfshaft urged the troll-child. "I'll look after you."

"Monsters!" sobbed Buster. "There are monsters out there. White monsters with yellow teeth. And the men from the Circus!" He howled louder still.

"They'll hear him," Cherry said. "We have to go."

Halfshaft patted the child's arm, and trotted off towards Cherry, with Stub in luke-warm pursuit. He turned as he reached her side, to give the boy a reassuring wave. The young troll's face was contorted with frightened tears. He held his arms out towards the wizard, desperate for a hug, pleading for him to stay but terrified that his last remaining grown-up friend would desert him just as his parents had done.

Halfshaft beckoned for him to follow. Buster howled in fear and frustration, and ran deeper into the hut.

"He's obviously happier in there," Cherry remarked. "Problem solved. Off we go, then."

Halfshaft hesitated, and then hesitated some more. “He’s only five,” he told her. How can I leave him here on his own? They’ll kill him.”

“They’ll kill him either way. Save yourself. It’s what he would have wanted.”

“I’m sorry. I can’t.”

He made his weary way back to the hut. He could hardly believe what he was doing. He was sacrificing himself, for a troll of all people! All through his life, he had taken the selfish option whenever one was available. Takina had brought out the best of him when she was around, but she wasn’t here now. He wished he could tell her what he was doing; make her proud of him. Somehow, he wouldn’t feel quite so stupid that way. Life had been much easier when he was selfish. And it was likely to have lasted longer, too.

Buster saw him as he returned to the hut. The troll child let out a whoop of excitement, and charged across the rutted earth towards him, ready to give him a giant cuddle. Halfshaft was less keen on hugging, though, fearing that his spine might be severed in the process, and started frantically backing away. Within a couple of steps back-peddalling, he bumped into Cherry, who had followed him in. The two of them toppled backwards on to the floor, and Buster sky-dived on top of them, whooping in excitement the whole while.

“Get off me, you mad bugger!” Halfshaft shouted at him.

“Such language to use in front of your foster-child!” Cherry quipped.

“That looks like fun,” remarked a serious voice from just outside the hut. They stopped thrashing around, and disentangled themselves sufficiently to crane their necks to see who was there. Halfshaft started doubting the wisdom of coming back for his young troll charge. It was Selene, Queen of the Amazons. And despite what she had just said, she did not look happy at all.

#

As they all climbed to their feet, Selene came over and prodded them half-heartedly with her javelin. She looked puzzled and irritated in equal measure.

“You stayed,” she said. “Why did you stay?”

“We would not dare run from the Great Amazon Queen,” explained Halfshaft. He thought he caught Cherry smirking out of the corner of his eye, but ignored her. The plausibility of his excuse might prolong their lives by as much as a day or two, if they were lucky.

“You were right to stay. The others are now all dead or dying. The ones who fought back are being disembowelled even as we speak. Some of them were disembowelled before they died, to teach them a lesson. It is quite uncomfortable, I am told.”

“I can imagine.”

Selene lapsed into deep thought for a full ten seconds or so. “Can I talk to you?” she asked Cherry. “Woman to woman?”

Cherry shrugged. “Why not? It’ll be fun.”

Halfshaft nudged her. “Show her some respect.”

“Why not, *Ma’am*?”

“I am bored here. I am Queen. I have to be regal. I preside over sacrifices, I lead us into battle, I act as judge and jury for any disputes between the tribe’s-women. But sometimes, sometimes I feel that something is missing. Sometimes I want to have fun. Like you were having just then.”

“You can roll around on the floor with us, if you like,” Cherry invited. “The more the merrier. Take the kid’s place. It will be more fun if it’s grown-ups only.”

“I cannot,” said Selene. “I am Queen.”

“So?”

“I am Queen.”

Cherry laid on the floor, pulling Halfshaft down on top of her. He protested weakly, fearing that the Queen would not be remotely impressed by her

actions, but taking the view that if she was going to kill him then he might just as well have a bit of a grapple with Cherry first.

“Come on,” his friend prompted the Amazon. “Join us.”

“For mating?” Selene asked, confused.

“For fun,” Cherry replied.

“For mating if you like,” Halfshaft added, feeling that it was only fair to give her the option.

“I do not like. You are too beardy.”

“Worth a try. For fun, then.”

She looked at them wistfully. Cherry gave Halfshaft a playful push, sending him over on to his back. She clambered on top of him, and pinned him down by the wrists. Halfshaft started saying his alphabet backwards, fearful of a physical reaction to her actions which it might be hard to explain to the two women. He was having more fun than he'd bargained for.

Selene got to her knees beside them. “I cannot,” she said, in a talk-me-into-it voice. “I am Queen.”

Halfshaft struggled free of Cherry's grip, and flipped her over. She gave him a knowing smile as he sat astride her. He adjusted his position, trying unsuccessfully to minimise the body contact between the two of them.

“Come on in,” Cherry told the Queen. “It's fun. You're certainly having fun, aren't you, Mr Wizard?”

Halfshaft nodded stupidly, blushing crimson. “Oh yes,” he confirmed. “Very much so.”

Selene extended a hand, resting it gently on Cherry's thigh. Halfshaft felt himself flush. Much more of this, and he was liable to have a heart-attack. He had been in steamy clinches with women before, but the professionals at Spartan castle had not been what you might call the most attractive of women, and certainly not the classiest. “Fancy a roll for a fiver” was hardly the most seductive of chat-up lines. But here he was, on the verge of rolling round on the floor with two truly beautiful women, one of whom just happened to be the Amazon Queen. So what if he still had his robe on; he

would still get more enjoyment from this than from many years of full-on action with Dirty Meg and Half-Price Harriet back at the Castle.

And then Selene was on top of them, frolicking about for all she was worth. Halfshaft resumed running through his backwards alphabet, as quickly as he could manage, but knowing that it wouldn't be of much help in the long term (or even the short-term come to that).

And then the Queen was back on her feet, javelin in hand, prodding them both, demanding that they get to their feet. "Get up!" she commanded. "Or stay down there in the dirt, and die."

They chose the "getting up" option.

"What is it?" asked the wizard. "What's wrong? Don't you like fun?"

"She touched me," Selene spat, glaring at Cherry. "Through my fur. How dare you?"

Cherry shrugged. "I was just being friendly. I thought you'd like it."

"You do not touch a Queen. You get touched by a Queen, but you never, ever touch her back."

"You liked it, though, didn't you?"

Selene raised her javelin, ready to lance the insolent girl's heart. As she did so, three tribes-women entered the hut, one of them pulling a struggling Stub along beside her. She rounded on them, furious at the interruption.

"What is it?" she snapped. "Can you not see that I am busy?"

The Amazons looked flustered. They gave cursory bows to their Queen, a breach of etiquette which might have seen them executed under other circumstances.

"It is the Circus," one of them gushed. "The Circus-men are here."

#

The circus-men were lined up in two rows of six, with the Ringmaster a yard or two ahead of them. Thirteen of them in all. Unlucky for some, thought Halfshaft. Unlucky for all, as it would turn out.

The Ringmaster wore the traditional red jacket with tails, with white trousers and large black boots. He had on a particularly tall top-hat, making him the same height as any of the Amazons save for Selene. His clothes had been splendid and colourful once upon a time, but not now. They were faded, jaded, spent.

He carried a long black cane, which he passed idly from hand to hand, while he waited for Selene to arrive. He yawned, as if bored by his mission already.

His followers wore ragged grey uniforms, ripped and dirty. They were a mixture of men and women. All wore vacant expressions; the look of the lost. Each bore a torch, the flames flickering brightly in defiance of the suffocating night.

The Amazons grouped round them at a cautious distance. Menace was heavy in the air. One word from their Queen and they would fall upon these trespassers, and rip them to pieces. Ordinarily, they would be dead already, but they knew there was something different about these people; something dangerous. They awaited the signal to attack regardless.

Selene arrived, with her Guard. Halfshaft and Cherry came behind her, with Stub waddling along a few dwarfish steps back. The atmosphere was not helped by the sound of distant wailing. Buster had remained in the hut alone, and was crying his eyes out in protest at the wizard's departure.

“Shall we attack?” asked one of the Queen's Guard.

“I wouldn't, if I were you,” Cherry remarked. “They're mercenaries, all of them. Not especially good ones, but mercenaries all the same.”

Selene regarded her coldly. “My warriors are a match for anyone. We will kill them, and then we will kill you.”

Cherry smiled. “Good luck with that.”

A nod from the Queen was all it took. The Amazons set upon the circus-troupe. Selene led the assault, honing in on the Ringmaster, as her warriors

fell upon his retinue. As she sprang at him, he raised his cane, swiping her ribs with it. It was not a hard blow – she would not have even flinched under normal circumstances, but the moment it made contact with her bare skin she crumpled, landing in a twitching heap at his feet.

The twelve mercenaries went into action, fighting the Amazons with their bare hands. Wave after furious wave of Amazon was beaten back. Halfshaft looked on in astonishment. There was only one person he had met who could fight like that – Thane, his mercenary friend – but to see twelve of them in action all at once, fending off a whole tribe of furious Amazons without so much as a butter knife between them, was more than he could comprehend. No-one fought better than Amazons; no-one on Hedral, at any rate.

His standard defence mechanism kicked in. He turned around, ready to run like buggery. Cherry seized the arm of his robes, bringing him to a halt. She shook her head. “We stay here.”

The Ringmaster slung Selene over his right shoulder, zapping any Amazon who tried to pull her free. He looked around him, watching with amusement as his followers gradually got the upper hand in their struggle with the tribeswomen. One by one, the Amazons started to fall, and the mercenaries – who remained unscathed – drove the survivors ever backwards towards their huts.

He caught Cherry’s eye, raising his top-hat with the tip of his cane. She gave him a grin, and nodded her head in return.

Halfshaft stared at her in astonishment. “Don’t you ever stop?” he asked her. “He’s slaughtering all the Amazons, and you’re flirting with him!”

“He’s slaughtering the Amazons who were trying to kill us,” she pointed out. “So why not?”

“He’s got Selene. Surely it’s not the done thing to flirt with a man who’s carrying a dead Queen on his shoulder?”

“I’ve done worse,” she shrugged. “Besides, she’s not dead. You can see her twitching.”

“Oh, that’s alright then!” the wizard exclaimed. “As long as it’s just brain damage, it’s okay to dry-hump him all you like.”

“I love it when you’re jealous. Makes me feel valued.”

He humphed, and lapsed into moody silence. Cherry blew the Ringmaster a kiss, but he was pretty sure she was only doing it to tease him. He turned away, refusing to give her the satisfaction of seeing how cross she was making him. Jealous indeed!

Eventually, the Ringmaster decided that enough damage had been done. He could not wipe out the entire village; they needed more recruits for the Games if they held them the following year. He raised his cane into the air, and strolled off, the mercenaries following along behind him like a coach party of tourists behind their guide. He beckoned for Cherry to follow, which she did. Halfshaft and Stub came with her, reluctant to be left alone in a village of furious half-naked ladies.

“Haven’t you forgotten something?” Cherry asked, as they threaded their way through the huts.

He shrugged. “What?”

She cupped a hand to one ear, and made an exaggerated play of listening. He listened too, but all he could hear was crying. Crying! He had forgotten Buster.

“I’m going back for him,” announced Halfshaft, sounding much braver than he felt. The Amazons had been beaten back, but were lurking just a dozen yards away, ready to pick off any stragglers. They no longer seemed particularly bothered about their Queen’s fate; she had fallen quickly in battle, and was no longer fit to lead them. Some had had their suspicions about her anyway, spreading rumours that she might even be susceptible to a bit of fun now and then, when no-one was looking! But despite their lack of regard for Selene, they would still do serious injury to any of the party who fell into their clutches; their pride was severely wounded, and they wanted revenge.

“He won’t let you go,” she told him, nodding towards the Ringmaster. “Trust me. I know the type.”

“I can’t leave that child with them,” Halfshaft protested. “Even if he is a pain in the bottom.”

“I’ll go, then.”

“If he won’t let me go, he’s definitely not going to let you go. Not after you practically jumped him back there.”

“Which is precisely why he’ll let me. Men are so easy to manipulate. Watch this.”

She peeled off from the wizard’s side, and made her way towards the Ringmaster at the front of the procession. “No!” Halfshaft shouted. “Come back!” But, as usual, she totally ignored him.

She reached the Ringmaster’s side, and whispered something in his ear. He turned to look at her. He shook his head. She whispered something else. He thought it over for a second or two, and then nodded. He signalled, and two of the mercenaries left the front of the procession. Together, the three of them headed back into the Amazon village. Halfshaft went to follow Cherry. But two mercenaries fell in on either side of him, grabbing his arms, and holding him between them as they marched off.

Over his shoulder, he could see the Amazons converging on Cherry, knives and javelins at the ready. He struggled some more, but to no avail.

“Come back!” he shouted after her. “Leave the kid there. Just come back to me!”

She gave him an amused look, and then sprinted off, trying to outrun the dozen or so Amazons who were descending upon her from every direction. She would never make it. It was hard enough to outfight an Amazon, but to try to outrun one was madness. He turned away, bowing his head in grief. He could not bear to watch her die.

#

The journey to the Circus took just several hours, but it seemed a great deal longer. All the way, he tortured himself. It was his fault that Cherry had gone back for Buster. She had not wanted to go, but he had persisted, driven her to it. And because of this, she was now dead.

They marched along in silence. The mercenaries said nothing to each other, and showed no interest in Halfshaft whatsoever. It crossed his mind that he

might slip off without anyone even noticing. No more Circus, no more Games. But where could he go? Spartan Castle was out of the question, and pretty much everywhere else was certain grisly death. There was no point going back to the Amazon village; Cherry and Buster would have been executed hours ago. And somehow, his usual inclination to run like buggery – whatever trouble it might bring for him later on – did not seem quite as pronounced as was usually the case. He was responsible for Cherry's death, as surely as if he had killed her himself. He might just as well go to the Games, and have done with it. It would be his penance.

Eventually, they arrived at their destination. They stood on the brow of a hill, looking down into the valley below. There was a large tent close to a river, dirty brown fabric flapping in the wind. Various-sized tents were scattered around it, as if to defend the larger one in their midst, or to prevent it from sneaking away when no-one was looking. And a couple of dozen yards away from the Circus Tent, three cages were lined up, containing he shuddered to think what. Just for once, he thought, put me in a tent. I'm tired of being locked up by everyone I meet.

The Ringmaster waved to some imaginary audience in the sky, and then made his way down the slope.

Selene was beginning to recover consciousness. He saw her eyes flicker, and then half-open, as if she was awaking after a particularly heavy drinking session the night before. He expected her to leap from the Ringmaster's shoulders, but she remained there, confused and docile, as she tried to make sense of the world about her. That staff of the Ringmaster must be quite some weapon to do that to an Amazon Queen, he thought. Lesson One: whatever else happens, don't give him any excuse to prod you with it.

As they walked, the mercenaries fanned out, taking their places around the brow of the hill in a protective cordon. Who would be mad enough to assault the Circus, Halfshaft wondered? Only Cherry, he thought; Cherry would've done it. But she was gone now.

He expected them to head for the main tent, but they went instead to a handful of smaller tents close by. The Ringmaster deposited Selene at the entrance to one of them, motioning for a nearby hunchback to drag her inside.

As the fabric was pulled aside at the next tent, Halfshaft could see two dwarfs cowering in the interior, one male and one female. They looked out in trepidation, expecting trouble. They seemed surprised at seeing Stub being ushered in. The fabric dropped closed behind him, and they moved on to the third tent. The Ringmaster ushered Halfshaft inside.

“You have company,” the Ringmaster announced. “We wouldn’t want you getting lonely, would we?”

“Company?”

The Ringmaster nodded, but did not seem inclined to elaborate. He gestured for the wizard to go inside, with just a hint of impatience. “When you’re ready.”

Halfshaft pulled back the fabric, and made his way into the tent. There were two blankets on the ground, presumably one for him and one for his “company”. There was a human-sized shape beneath the second blanket. Under different circumstances, this might have given him hope, hope that he did not have to face this ordeal alone. But instead, this blanket filled him with dread, owing to the fact that it was pulled over the face of his new roommate. Whoever was sharing the tent with him was very much dead.

He cursed, long and loud. It was bad enough that he had to share a strange tent with a corpse, but it occurred to him that whoever was under the blanket would otherwise have been his companion at the Games. Who was to say whether they would be replaced or not? It was bad enough having to die when the Games started, but dying alone was almost more than he could bear.

He approached the blanket with trepidation. Who was beneath it? Was it someone he knew? Ditherer, maybe? Perhaps they had changed their minds about releasing him, and brought him here after all. A couple of hours of his inane banter, and two or three rounds of Eye-Spy would have been all that it would have taken to convince them that he was a very poor excuse for a human being, and an even poorer candidate for the Games. Maybe they had just killed him to put everyone out of their party-games-misery.

He gripped the corner of the blanket. He needed to know who was underneath it, but was scared to find out. He took two or three deep breaths, and then two or three more. There was only one way to do this; the same

way you go for a swim in a cold lake. Not one step at a time. You just jump in, and take the pain as best you can.

He pulled the material away. No. No, it couldn't be. Not her. But it was.

Cherry.

He held a hand to her face. Still warm. She hadn't been dead long.

He bowed his head, closed his eyes and muttered a few almost forgotten prayers over her poor lifeless body. His chin started to quiver. There were tears coming. He fought them back. They would not do either of them any good now.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I am so, so sorry. But I'll avenge you, I swear it. If I do nothing else, I'm going to kill at least one Amazon at the Games. Whatever it takes. You have my word on it."

He felt a kiss on his forehead. He opened his eyes. She was sitting up, regarding him with amusement.

"You're so sweet when you're in mourning."

"You're not dead!"

"Thank God for that," she replied. "It ruins your complexion."

Halfshaft paused, debating whether to punch her or hug her. Eventually, he decided to do both.

#

"So what happened?" he asked. "I thought you'd died!"

"Nothing much," she shrugged.

"Nothing much! You stroll into a village of vengeful Amazons, and you survive! Whatever that is, it's not "nothing much". What happened? Tell me."

“I wasn’t exactly strolling, I had to run quite a lot. Which isn’t easy with tits like mine. Someone recently told me that I have a very sexy run, though, so it’s nice to be able to treat people to it every once in a while.”

“Are you going to tell me, or not?”

“Is “not” an option?”

He shook his head.

“Okay, Nosey, you win. I went back to save your ickle troll baby. The Ringmaster said “no” at first, but I offered to spend some quality time with him when I got back, which seemed to do the trick. I was sort of hoping that the girls might leave me be, out of sisterly solidarity, but no such luck. They kept trying to stick me with those little spear things they have, and that’s really not my favourite way of being kebabled, if you get my drift.

Anyway, I ran off, they ran after me, and those guys from the Circus ran after them, and we all ended up doing laps of the Village, hurdling over the latrine ditch, dodging the occasional arrow. Now, there’s nothing wrong with my stamina, but I’m basically a lazy git; I don’t like expending energy unless I’m getting some pleasure out of it. So the third time round the village, I decide that I’ve had enough, and I’m going to give them some of their own medicine. So I turn on the first woman, take her little speary thing off her, and stick it in her. She was not a happy bunny, I can tell you. Who would have thought that ladies know swear-words like that!

So the next one comes up to me, and I give her more of the same. Then the Circus guys arrive, and it all kicks off. But by the time I’ve taken out three or four women, they suddenly stop fighting. They withdraw into a little huddle, and whisper amongst themselves for a minute or two, and then they come back and make me Queen! Me; Royalty! My Mum would have been so proud.

It turns out they were going to have a trial to find out who was the bravest and the prettiest woman in the village, to take over from Selene. And when they saw me fighting, they obviously decided not to waste their time interviewing anyone else, because there’s no one else there who looks as good as this in a fist-fight.

So I send the Circus-men back home, and the Amazons throw a feast in my honour. Everything was going pretty well, to be fair; plenty of food, they put on a dance display for me by the fire, and there was even talk of bringing out the menfolk for some celebratory mating later on. I know Selene was moaning on about not having any fun, but I ask you: what more could a girl want than a bloke, a burger and a bit of a dance round the campfire to round off the evening?

But then they brought me out my Amazon costume. It was one of Selene's outfits, apparently, just to keep me going until they had time to catch enough squirrels to make me one of my own. Now, it looked fine on her, I'll grant you, but she's a lot taller than me. It was all sexy and skimpy on her, but it didn't sit well on me at all. Round the chest was fine; I've obviously got a lot more up top than her. But round the business end, I looked like I was wearing a furry little nappy, which was not a look I was comfortable with, I can tell you!

"I'm not wearing that," I told them. "Go and find me something tiny to put on. There's no way that the subjects should look sexier than the Queen; that's anarchy in my book. But they wouldn't have it. The clothes had been blessed by their Goddess or something, to keep the wearer safe in battle. "It didn't exactly work for Selene, did it?" I pointed out, but they weren't having any of it. It was furry nappy or nothing, as far as they were concerned. Actually, I wouldn't have had a problem if wearing nothing was an option, but they didn't even offer me that!

Well, I had a couple more burgers, a bit of a dance again, and then I was out of there, faster than a nun who's accidentally wandered into a sex-shop. While they were all strutting their stuff around the campfire, I went and fetched your troll baby, and legged it back here as quick as I could."

"You've got Buster?" asked Halfshaft incredulously.

"That was the whole point of going back, if I remember rightly. I couldn't leave the little fellow behind, or you'd have nagged me to Kingdom come. He took a bit of persuading to leave, of course. He kept saying it was too dark, that there were painty-faced monsters, and that the Amazons would get cross with him if he left the hut. But I told him that I'd take him to his Mummy and Daddy, and he was fine after that. He even gave me a piggy-back for the last couple of miles, when I couldn't be arsed to walk anymore."

“Where is he?”

“Oh, I left him in the bushes just the other side of the hill. I couldn’t work out how to get him past the mercenaries without them seeing him. He cried a lot; he didn’t want to be left all on his own in the middle of nowhere. But I promised to sneak him in to see his parents the first chance I got.”

“And that worked?”

“Sort of. I had to smack him round the legs a few times to get him to man up, but eventually he came round to my way of thinking, and I’ve crammed him into an empty tree-trunk about fifteen minutes jog in that direction.”

“Thank you,” Halfshaft said, with feeling.

“For going off to save him?” Cherry asked.

“No,” Halfshaft said. “For coming back alive.”

#

They were left to their own devices for the rest of the day. Cherry suggested that they go for a wander to check out the Circus, but Halfshaft was not keen on the idea. He was convinced that there would be mercenaries to keep them inside their tent, but she pulled back the canvas at the door to show him that they were in fact unguarded. He then put it to her that the Ringmaster might not want them snooping round without permission, and they might get in serious trouble. She told him that he was starting to sound like Buster, and asked whether he wanted his legs smacked too. He gave up. He had a feeling that he would be giving in to her quite a lot over the next few days (if she did not get him killed in the meantime).

They headed for the large tent first. It seemed like the obvious place to start. There was a handful of hunchbacks in there, erecting a large cage in the middle of the arena.

“Do you think that’s for us?” he asked, with trepidation.

She shook her head. “Doubt it. Why leave us unguarded on Day 1, and bung us in a cage on Day 2? Besides, look at that. There’s a tunnel leading

into it. Whatever they're going to put in there is coming outside the tent, near where the mobile cages are. Let's go and check them out; see what they're hiding."

Halfshaft looked around, in no hurry to find out what manner of creature was lurking around on the far side of the tent. The fact that they needed a cage for it seemed to suggest that it would hardly be cute and cuddly, and he'd had enough of danger to last him a lifetime. He had a feeling that they would be introduced to the creatures pretty soon, whether they liked it or not, so what was the point of spoiling the surprise?

There was stacked seating all around the circumference of the frayed tent, with aisles at each compass point to allow people easy access to the ring in which the cage was situated. Inside the ring, there was a tight-rope stretched between two elevated platforms, not far from where the cage was being constructed. It was only three yards up, the tent not being especially high. He hoped that he would not be asked to walk across it, because if there was one thing worse than his magical ability, it was his sense of balance. A three yard drop might not seem particularly high, but it was high enough to cause significant injury to a weary wizard with arthritic knees.

"Shall we?" Cherry enquired.

"What, here?" he joked. "It's a bit drafty."

"Not that. We can do that later. Let's go and see what they're putting in the cage."

"We can do that later?" he repeated. "Really?"

"Why not? It'll pass the time, if nothing else."

"You're winding me up."

She shrugged, stifling a grin.

"*Are* you winding me up?" he asked. "Just so as I know."

"Come and help me look where that tunnel comes out, and I'll tell you. Or show you, if your luck's in."

Halfshaft was out the door before she had finished her sentence. He still loved Takina with all his heart, but she wouldn't have touched him with a

barge-pole. He knew full well that Cherry most probably wouldn't either, but if there was even the faintest hope of a sympathy shag then he wasn't about to turn it down. If he was doomed to die in the Games, then he would very much like to go out with a bang.

They tried to leave the tent by the south exit, but discovered that the flaps were sewn shut. There didn't seem to be much point having aisles leading to exits which you couldn't actually exit from, but what was a wizard to do? They had to leave from the door they had entered from, and once outside they made their way around the circumference of the tent to find out what type of creature was closeted away on the other side.

Halfshaft was relieved when he spotted the doors of the cages up ahead were closed. Ordinarily, he wasn't a great fan of cages, as people tended to put him into them, but on this occasion it seemed like a good thing. If the creatures needed to be caged when they were channelled inside the tent, that it was best that they were caged on this side of the canvas as well.

They checked out the back of the cages first, at her suggestion. He suspected that Cherry was trying to prolong the suspense, whereas his preference would have been to get it over with as quickly as possible and then go and hide like girls in their own tent. They could see that the tunnel fed into the back of the nearest cage, a dozen yards away from the Big Top. There was a drop-down metal door in the tunnel, just as it ran into the cage, stopping the inmates from gaining access to the tent until the time was right. Cherry eyed it longingly. She reached out a hand towards the opening mechanism, but Halfshaft slapped it down again. "No," he told her. "We don't even know what's inside yet. Those men in there might be killed if we let it out now."

"It would be fun, though, wouldn't it? Come on, where's your sense of adventure? Seize the day."

"No," he repeated, wishing he didn't sound quite so much like her Dad. He was on a promise here, albeit one which she was almost certain to break, and he realised that the longer he acted responsibly, the less likely it was going to be that she would bother rooting around beneath his robes later on.

"Spoilsport," she pouted. "Okay. Let's go round the other side; see what's in there. No point hanging around back here if you're gonna go all goody-two-shoes on me."

The other side of the cage was open, save that it was heavily barred. Four Forest wolves slept inside. As with all their kind, they were huge, measuring about six foot from the tips of their snouts to their rumps. One was black; the others, grey. Even when sleeping, they looked evil.

“Why would they want wolves here?” he asked.

“I guess this is our training camp for the Games. Maybe we fight them as practice.” She sounded surprisingly relaxed about this.

“We fight *wolves*?” he asked incredulously. “You don’t fight wolves as practice; you don’t fight wolves for *anything*! They have a tendency to rip you to pieces. And then they eat you. That sounds like pretty crap practice to me!”

“Maybe we ride them, then?”

“Ride them? Seriously?”

“They might be specially trained; friendly. It’s hard to know what they’re like when they’re asleep.”

“Friendly? Wolves? Wolves in a cage? I don’t think so!”

“Okay, maybe not, then. I guess we’ll find out sooner or later. I wouldn’t worry about it, though. Mummy will protect you from the nasty doggies.”

He raised his eyes to the skies. Was she never serious about anything?

“Shall we see what’s in the other cages?”

“I can hardly wait.”

They made their way to the next cage. It was empty. He breathed a sigh of relief. It then occurred to him that they might be keeping it free for him, and he inhaled his sigh of relief back up again.

The final cage was the biggest shock, though. The first cage contained certain death. The second cage contained the threat of incarceration (followed by certain death). The third cage contained something very much more sinister, though.

The third cage contained clowns.

#

Halfshaft had once heard it said that there are only two types of people in this world; people who are scared of clowns, and people who *are* clowns. Lacking a cherry red nose and big floppy feet, he most definitely fell into the former category. And these clowns were like nothing he had ever seen before.

There were eight or nine of them in the cage, all of them sleeping (the one saving grace). None of them wore a stitch of clothing. He had always assumed that it was just their faces that were painted that hideous white, but their whole bodies were the same colour. They had black crosses across their eyes, like targets, and the trade-mark shiny red noses. Their hands were clawed up, as if dystrophied, and their nails long and uncut. They were the scariest clowns he had ever seen, which really was saying something.

As he surveyed them, one distasteful clown at a time, he realised with a shock that one of them had its yellow eyes open, and was staring right back at him. For a moment, the two men regarded each other, one with fear and the other with hunger. And then the clown was on its feet, seizing his robes through the bars, trying to pull him into the cage. Its teeth gnashed at him, as it tried to force its face through the bars to take a chunk out of his cheek. The others awoke, grouping round the first, all of them trying to get at him, attempting to rip him to pieces.

Above their baying, he could hear cheering from two cages along, the cage housing the wolves. He would have expected them to make the same sort as noise as the clowns, growling and snapping like wild dogs, but this sounded different; human even.

He seized the bars to try to lever himself away from the clowns, but they took hold of his fingers, trying to gnaw on them. He pulled his hands away just in time, but they still had hold of his robes. They were tugging him up tight to the bars, trying to push their ghostly white faces through them so that they could eat his face. He grabbed hold of the bars again; it was better to lose his fingers than his nose.

Cherry had hold of him, and was frantically trying to pull him away. She was surprisingly strong, but no match for the three or four clowns who were

attempting to tug him into the cage with them. He craned his neck backwards, trying to keep his fear-contorted face out of reach of their teeth. One of them put his hands through the bars, cupped the back of Halfshaft's head, and brought it right up tight to the metal, within chomping range. It grinned at him, a horrible smile which dripped with hunger and malice, the smile of a predator which had finished toying with its prey. It was show-time

And then the Ringmaster was there, tapping his cane against the bars, sending the clowns reeling away in shock. Halfshaft convulsed, as did Cherry behind him. They ended up in a twitching heap on the floor. He retained consciousness for a few seconds, panicking as he could not move any part of his body.

The Ringmaster stood over him. He expected him to be cross, but the man was smiling, a cruel twist of the mouth not far removed from that of the clowns. He could hear groans of disappointment from the nearby cage, human voices that really should not have been coming from the jaws of wolves.

Blackness crept in from the periphery of his vision, spreading across his eye-line until he could see nothing at all. Please don't let me dead, he thought. I've been to Hell before, and I didn't particularly care for it.

#

He was shaken awake.

He took a few seconds to get his bearings. He was lying on the ground in his tent, the coarse blanket thrown over him. Cherry was sitting up nearby, rubbing the sleep from her brown eyes. There was a man nearby, a hunchback. He gave them an encouraging thumbs-up.

"Wakey, wakey, rise and shine. It's your big day today," he announced. "I'm your trainer. Listen well, and you'll win these games, hands down."

He waited a few seconds before responding. He felt as if he had been asleep for days, and it was taking a while to get his brain back in gear. But then it

gradually filtered through that this hump-backed creature was offering hope. It seemed to be under the impression that they had the capacity to win the Games. With the right trainer behind them, who was to say that they might not actually get through this alive?

“You’ve won before, then?” asked Halfshaft, the tiniest speck of optimism in his voice.

“Out in the first round every time,” came the reply. “But the Law of Averages says I’m bound to back a winner sooner or later.”

He introduced himself as Crook-back. Somewhat unnecessarily, he explained that this was more of a nick-name than his God-given name. He chuckled as they tried to stand, swaying around like baby giraffes finding their feet for the first time. “That’ll be the Ringmaster’s cane,” he chuckled. “Always takes a little while to remember how to walk after a prod or two with that.”

Once they were up and about, he explained their itinerary for the day.

“Training first; most of it with me, but one group event. Then a show tonight, to put you in the mood for tomorrow. Then, first thing in the morning, we kit you out with your outfits and pack you off into the Forest for the Games.”

“The Forest?” asked an anxious wizard. “Does it have to be the Forest? It’s really dangerous there.”

“That’s kind of the idea,” chuckled Crook-back. “If it was as safe as houses, there’d be no real point in running the Games, would there now? Might as well just air “Big Brother”, and save themselves a fortune.”

“More to the point,” Cherry put in, “tell me about my outfit. If it covers more than 10% of my body-surface, I’m going home right now. I don’t “do” drab.”

“No worries on that score,” the hunch-back reassured her. “Those costumes are practically invisible, they’re so tiny. I tried one on once, just for a bit of a giggle, and I couldn’t even get it over my hump.”

“Nice image,” groaned Halfshaft.

“Enough chat, though, my little protégés. We’ve got some serious training to do.”

He took them outside, and they moved off to a secluded spot further along the river-bank. Halfshaft looked up the hill, longing to escape. He could spot a couple of mercenaries stationed on the crest; no doubt there were more of them out of sight. Buster was out there somewhere, too. He half expected Cherry to make a break for it, just for the fun of it, but it appeared that the promise of a skimpy outfit was all it took to ensure her full cooperation with the training programme.

“Right, you two. Here’s a nice easy way to remember the training you can expect today. I call it the four Esses. Speed, strength, skill, spelling, sums and intelligence.”

“Intelligence doesn’t begin with ‘S’,” Halfshaft pointed out.

“Doesn’t it?” asked Crook-back, a trifle surprised. He took out a small parchment, and studied it carefully. “No, no you’re right there. It begins with a ‘B’. Well done, Wizard, that’s your spelling training completed already.”

“Begins with a ‘B’? I hope the rest of your training’s better than your spelling, or we might just as well give up now.”

“Never give up, that’s my motto. Unless you’ve got an Amazon on your back, and she’s repeatedly stabbing you in the ribs with a sharp knife. Then you’re pretty much buggered, to tell you the truth.”

“You said four Esses. Speed, strength, skill, spelling, sums and intelligence. That makes six,” Cherry pointed out.

“Five. I think we’ve just established that ‘intelligence’ actually begins with a ‘B’,” chortled Crook-back, raising his eyes to the skies. “Women, eh?”

“Five, then. Not four.”

He consulted the reverse side of his parchment for some considerable time, but seemed none the wiser. He looked up at Halfshaft for assistance. The wizard nodded. “Well blow me down if the little lady isn’t right!” Crook-back exclaimed. “That’s sums off the list, too. Well done.”

“Could you be any more patronising?” she enquired.

“Oh yes,” he nodded vigorously. “Very much so. You’ll find out later, Doll.”

“Do you think we might start our training now?” Halfshaft asked. “We’re going to need all the help we can get tomorrow, and I’ve got a sneaking suspicion that it’s not going to help us much being able to count up to six, and knowing that “intelligence” starts with an “I”!

“With a “B”,” Crook-back corrected. “I think we just established that it begins with a “B”. Don’t forget that. It might be important tomorrow.”

“How?”

He shrugged. “Who’s to say? The dwarfs like their riddles. They might try and confuse you with a spelling test, and then jab you up the bottom with a dagger while you’re trying to remember if there are one or two “R’s” in ukulele.”

#

They started with the Test of Strength. Their hunchback took them to a large boulder in the river, measuring five or six feet across. The water was waist high here, running around the boulder on either side. As Halfshaft waded out to it, he could feel his feet sinking down into the muddy riverbed. He would be walking round in a very wet robe for the rest of the day, which was never the most comfortable of experiences.

“Move it,” Crook-back commanded.

“What? That rock? You’re joking!” the wizard protested. “Have you seen the size of that thing?”

“That’s kind of the point of the Test of Strength. Off you go. In your own time.”

Halfshaft gave it an experimental nudge. “No, it won’t budge. Let’s give up and try something easier. Spelling, maybe, I’m good at that.”

“Come on,” urged Crook-back. “You can do better than that. Put some effort into it.”

He tried again, harder this time. There was no movement at all. He looked at Cherry. She was kneeling on the bank, trying to catch sight of her own reflection in the river. A fat lot of use she was going to be with this task.

Crookback vaulted onto the boulder with surprising agility for someone of his shape, like a mountain goat with a bulky back-pack. He held a branch in his hands. "Come on, tough guy," he taunted. "It's just a rock. What are you waiting for?"

Halfshaft gave it another go, encouraged at the thought that if he was able to get the boulder to move, then their mouthy trainer might fall off and break his stubby neck. He strained until the veins in his forehead bulged, but the stone stayed put.

He felt a blow to the back of his head. He looked up to find the hunchback waving the branch at him in a threatening manner. "You want some more?" asked Crookback. "Move the rock, and I'll leave you in peace."

"I might do better if you weren't smacking me round the head with a tree!"

"It was either that or urinate on you, and I thought this was the lesser of two evils. But give it another five minutes, and I might change my mind. Whip it out, and give your lady friend a treat. Off you go, then. Let's see what you're made of."

Halfshaft put his back to the stone, and pushed with all his might. If there was one thing worse than being humiliated in a test of strength, it was being humiliated in a test of strength while a sadistic hunchback relieved himself on you from above (or from any other direction, come to that). He strained against the rock with every last ounce of strength he could summon, willing it to move. His feet slipped out from under him, and he went under the water, swallowing a huge lungful of muddy liquid. He managed to regain his feet, coughing and spluttering, his dirty robes clinging to his scrawny body like a soggy second skin.

"That's it," he raged. "I've had enough. Stupid bloody training. Why would I want to move a rock anyway?"

Crookback chuckled and vaulted down to the ground, tossing his branch carelessly to one side. Cherry retrieved it, and waded into the river to take

the wizard's place. He watched as she moved her foot back and forth around the base of the rock to gauge what it was resting on. She slid the branch beneath the boulder, and used the branch to lever it. It moved. Just a few inches, but it moved. She stood back, and waited for Crookback to react.

"That's cheating," he protested. "That wasn't strength. That was just you being a smart-arse."

"It was intelligence, then," she retorted. "Tick that one off instead."

"We weren't testing intelligence," he protested. "You can't tick off intelligence in a test of strength. That way Anarchy lies!"

"Well how about if I show strength in your intelligence test?" she enquired. "Even it out a bit. Or better still, how about I jab you in the knackers until you learn some respect?"

"You women are so cunning. Never do what you're asked, always coming up with something completely different to make yourselves look clever. Why do I keep getting women and crap wizards to train each year? They're always trouble!"

"It's the hump, isn't it?" she enquired. "You don't like women, because you're not getting any lady-action. The hump's putting them off, and you're blaming us for that."

"What hump?" he asked, rather disingenuously.

"Look, I can help you with that," she told him. "Show you a few things, if you stop acting like a total tosser. Get you all the lady-action you want."

"You mean you'd -"

"No, I don't mean that at all. Even *I* have to draw the line somewhere. But I can tell you what to wear, how to stand, what to say. Believe me, if you do as I tell you, they won't even notice your back's a little crooked."

Halfshaft coughed impatiently. "Excuse me," he huffed. "When you've finished giving him fashion tips, haven't we got more training to do? We're running out of time here."

"Oh no, don't you worry about that, Sir," Crookback assured him. "We're half way through already, what with your sums and your spelling and now

your – I was going to say “Strength”, but “Intelligence” as it turns out! Buggered if I know what to test you on for “strength” now, but I’ll think of something, don’t you worry about that! So you go off on your break; just thirty minutes, mind. And this young lady here can tell me more about how I can get myself some serious “lady-action” while you’re away.”

“I’d quite like to hear about that myself,” Halfshaft replied. “I’ll think I’ll stay here for a while.”

“Be off with you!” Crook-back protested. “If she’s telling me about lady-action, I’m not having you watching me like some sort of dirty skulking pervert. Me and the young lady would rather have a little chat all on our own. All in private. No crap wizards allowed!”

“Right,” said Cherry, giving the hunchback her brightest smile as the wizard trudged unhappily away. “We need to start on your dress-sense, I think. How do you feel about wearing a crop-top?”

#

He made his way back to the circus tent. He passed the cage of clowns at a wary distance. They were awake, following his progress with ravenous intensity as he passed them by. Their silence was somehow even more sinister than their baying.

As he tried to skirt the wolves’ cage with equal caution, one of them raised a paw and beckoned him over. He stared at it. Surely wolves don’t beckon? It repeated the action, and then put its two front paws together in a gesture of pleading. Intrigued, he approached the bars. He came to a halt six feet away, raking a line in the earth with his foot as a reminder not to get too close. If there was one lesson he had learnt since his arrival here, it was to give these cages a very wide berth.

The wolf spoke. It wasn’t a natural voice by any means, being far too guttural to be described as human. But he could still make out the individual words. “Help me,” it said.

“Help you?”

It nodded. The other wolves snarled at it, uncomfortable with this attempt at conversation with a human creature, but it ignored them. It maintained eye-contact with the wizard the whole time. I should've kept on walking, Halfshaft thought. This is way too weird.

“Help you how?” he asked, at a loss to understand what the creature was going on about.

“Kill me.”

This was now way past weird. It was positively surreal. Further clarification was required.

“How do I kill a wolf?”

“Not wolf.”

“What then?”

“Clown.”

Halfshaft stared at the wolf for a few seconds, trying to digest this information. It looked like a wolf to him. It smelt like a wolf to be fair. It even sounded like one, but for the speech thing. Why would it say it was clown, though? Maybe some sort of escape plan?

“Kill me,” it repeated.

The clowns in the nearby cage started snarling. The wolf's speech was agitating them. A couple of them threw themselves at the bars, trying to force their way out. Painted white hands protruded from the cage, curled like talons. He was relieved to be safely on this side of the line. He turned his attention back to the wolf-cage again.

One of the wolves nipped the one which was talking, eliciting a howl of pain. It turned on its fellow, and the two started fighting, tearing at each other with great yellow fangs. Eventually, the speaker broke away, and backed up tight against the bars, growling at the other wolf to keep it at bay.

It turned to look at Halfshaft again, a look of sheer desperation in its eyes. “Turning,” it said. “Turning. Kill me.”

He looked back. He felt unexpected pity for the creature. It seemed different from the others. They seemed entirely wolf, whereas this one

seemed almost human, despite its canine form. But what could he do? He couldn't kill a wolf, even if he wanted to. With the studied air of someone pretending not to notice the homeless beggar in the street, he turned away, and continued on towards the tent, whistling as he went to cover his embarrassment.

“Kill me!” the wolf shrieked after him, again and again the second wolf attacked again. Covering his ears to block out the snarls and the near-human shrieking, he hurried into the relative sanctuary of the Big-Top.

#

At first, he thought the tent was empty, save for a hunchback who looked suspiciously like Crook-back. But then he noticed two Amazons on the high-wire, which was not – as previously observed – all that high, being a mere three yards or so above the ground. As the hunchback shouted instructions, they made their way along the tight-rope towards one another. Each held a wooden paddle, whether for balance or as a weapon it was hard to say.

One of them was facing him. Selene. Despite his predicament and his recent brush with wolves-with-an-identity-crisis, he took time out to admire her. She really was incredible. Perfect face, flawless skin, and a barely-clothed, sculpted body which was sending his hormones into nuclear meltdown. Assuming that he died fairly early on in the Games, then he would want her to win instead. A body like hers was far too much of a work of art to be munched upon by trolls.

He turned his attention to the other Amazon. She had her back towards him, so he could not see her face. Blonde, though, as Takina had been. He studied her bottom for a while, acknowledging the debt of gratitude he owed whichever Amazon had first decreed that squirrel skins should be so tiny. As if conscious of his unwanted attention, she adjusted her fur bottoms a little, pulling them down to cover an inch or two more of her exposed cheeks.

He realised that the hunchback had stopped shouting instructions. The man was staring at him in a most unfriendly way. He gave the trainer a reassuring smile, and started to retreat towards the exit.

“Spying, huh?” said the hunchback.

“Leching, actually,” admitted Halfshaft, deciding that this was the lesser of two evils. “At your two ladies up there. Very nice.”

He looked up, giving them an apologetic smile. Selene was staring down at him, gracing him with an expression of contempt she usually reserved for the village pigs. The other woman – the blonde – turned her head, looking at him over her bare shoulder. Such a pretty face; friendly this time, and very, very familiar.

Surely not? Surely it couldn't be her?

He made his way to the rope ladder leading up to the tight-rope, as she slid gracefully down it to greet him. She held out her arms to him, and he hugged her for all he was worth, determined never to let go, whatever happened. Her embrace was warm, comforting, safe.

“Halfshaft!” she whispered. “I thought you were dead.”

“Me, too,” he replied, clinging on to her with all his strength.

He had found her again. He had found Takina.

#

Notwithstanding his determination to cling on to her at all costs, it only took two or three sharp blows across the back of the legs to persuade him to release her.

“Enough!” he shouted irritably, as the hunchback drew back his staff for another blow.

“We're training,” the hunchback reminded him. “We do not need candidates from other teams smothering us with their dirty, greasy old hugs.”

“The chances of me hugging you – greasily or otherwise – are about as high as you winning a “who-can-squeeze-their-back-through-the-smallest-hoop-a-hoop” competition. Pretty damn slim, in other words.”

The hunchback paused, debating whether to point out the political incorrectness of drawing attention to his deformity, but deciding instead to whack the wizard around the legs with his staff instead. A smack with a stick said a thousand words, he always found, if not more.

Takina took a step forward, ready to protect him, as she always had in the past. The hunchback raised his staff, ready to give her some of the same medicine. The expression on his face suggested that he would quite enjoy administering it.

“No!” shouted Halfshaft. “No need for that. I’m going. Leave her be.”

He gave Takina a huge smile. “You have no idea how glad I am to see you,” he told her. “Everything’s going to be all right now you’re here.”

She looked back at him, anxiety etched in her face. “I am glad to see you, too. But this is not good. This is not good at all.”

“Why?” he asked puzzled. “How could the two of us being back together again be a bad thing?”

The hunchback answered his question on her behalf, chopping his staff into the wizard’s legs again to illustrate his point.

“Because, you filthy old man, you two are on different teams in the Games. And tomorrow, you’re going to have to try to kill each other.”

#

Halfshaft made his way back to his tent, ignoring the torn flesh and fur in the wolf cage and the inhuman noises emanating from the clown enclosure. He burrowed under his blanket, seeking sanctuary from the outside world, but all to no avail. It remained out there, the thickness of a blanket away, and he did not care for it very much at all.

He had been elated when he had seen Takina. They had been through so much together, the two of them. Troll-attack, Amazon-attack, Warlock-attack, just-about-everything-else-attack, but they had survived everything

Fate had thrown at them. Because they had always fought as a unit. Well, perhaps more accurately, she had fought while he had run like buggery.

He had very strong feelings for her indeed, feelings he had never told her about as he knew they would make her feel uncomfortable. She was a gorgeous Amazon, somewhere in her twenties (he was never all that good at ages). He was a clapped out wizard, aged – well, aged considerably more than her. They were never going to be a couple, he knew that all too well. But he was happy to settle for spending as much time in her presence as he possibly could. Just being with her was almost enough to make him happy.

But tomorrow, the Games would commence, and they would be expected to kill each other. Only one team could survive, that had been made very clear. He considered refusing to fight her, but knew deep down that this would never work. If contestants had the option whether to fight or not, it would rather defeat the object of the competition. No, he had no doubt at all that there would be penalties for conscientious objectors, and that those penalties would be infinitely worse than the Games themselves.

There was only one option open to him. He would have to let her kill him. If one of them had to die, then it would have to be him.

He felt a sharp pang of regret for Cherry. He liked her. Not the way he liked Takina, of course; she was a little too brash for him to think of her in that way (although not too brash for him to think of her in plenty of other ways which were equally as inappropriate). But if he was planning to throw the Games, to let the Amazons win, then he would be sentencing her to death, too. If only there was some other way.

He heard something moving in the hut, as he huddled beneath his blanket. Wolves? Clowns, maybe? He resisted the urge to see what it was; he was in no position to fight them off, and he wasn't sure that he wanted to anyway. It would make life (or rather death) much easier if they finished him off here and now. The alternative was sacrificing himself at the Games, and that would take reserves of courage he had never had to tap before, even assuming that they were there in the first place.

The blanket was torn from his body. He closed his eyes, not wanting to see what happened next. Just let it be quick, he thought. I can cope with death, but I'm not too keen on having the pain part first.

“Come on, Lazybones. Get up!”

He opened his eyes. He shuddered. What he saw bent over him was so much worse than any wolf or clown could ever have been.

It was a hunchback, wearing a lady’s crop-top. The lacy shirt was barely long enough to cover the creature’s rib cage, its hairy flabby stomach on full and horrendous display. Despite his hideous appearance, the hunchback looked particularly pleased with himself.

“What do you think?” he fished for compliments. “Cherry thought it would take attention away from my back. She recons I’m sex-on-legs wearing this.”

#

“Three more tasks to go,” the crop-topped Crookback told them, when they were back at their designated training site by the river bank. “Strength, skill and speed. Let’s start with strength again. I’m determined to cross it off your list at some stage. You see that boulder over there? I want you to move it.”

“Again?”

“You haven’t moved it, yet. She’s moved it. You just flapped around in the water like an agoraphobic duck.”

Cherry gave him an encouraging smile. He smiled back with embarrassment, avoiding eye contact. He would betray her at the Games tomorrow, sacrificing himself to save Takina and condemning his partner to death in the process. How could he look her in the eye after that?

He marched over to the branch which Cherry had earlier used as a lever. He thought he heard Crookback smirk, but chose to ignore him. He would move the boulder, get through the last two tasks, and go back to his tent so he could grieve for himself and his doomed team-mate in peace.

Up to his waist in water, he slotted one end of the branch beneath the boulder, and tugged at the other end. It refused to budge. Crookback smirked again. He wanted to look over at Cherry for support, but he could not bring

himself to do so. He didn't deserve her encouragement. He would have to do this himself for once.

He tried again, a little harder this time, with the same outcome. The boulder remained stubbornly stationary. If he was going to get this task over, he would have to give it some welly.

He pulled down on the lever with all his might (which wasn't all that much, if the truth be told). There was a crack, and the branch snapped in two. He lost his balance, his feet slipped in the mud, and he pitched forwards, face-butting the boulder in the process. Crookback roared with laughter, and Halfshaft burned with indignation.

"Last time round," Crookback chuckled, "your lady-friend here made this an intelligence test when it was supposed to be about strength. So I thought I'd do the same thing. I cut that branch halfway through, to see if you'd notice. Never use a broken branch as a lever, Stupid! Intelligence test well and truly failed!"

Cherry was at his side, wiping the blood from his face. For the first time since he met her, she looked cross. She rounded on the hunchback.

"Stop laughing at him. Now! Can't you see he's hurt?"

But the Crookback laughed all the more.

"I'm being ridiculed by a hunchback in a crop-top," complained Halfshaft. "If that's not humiliating, I don't know what is."

She smiled, and tenderly touched his face. He cringed at her touch, which puzzled her.

"What's up?"

"Please don't be nice to me. I don't deserve it."

She raised her eyes to the sky. She looked towards the hunchback, his hairy belly bouncing up and down between his crop-top and his trousers, such was his mirth.

"I can kill him if you like. If that would help."

"Maybe we should finish our training first?"

“It’s not been up to much so far, has it? But okay, you’re the boss. I’ll kill him tonight instead.”

Halfshaft nodded in agreement. They shook on it.

“Dead by tea-time,” she promised.

It was then that poor, broken Buster appeared on the far side of the river, flanked by mercenaries. However bad their predicament, his seemed infinitely worse.

#

It was not so much that he had been physically beaten; although he was a troll, he was just five years old, and the two mercenaries who were with him would not have needed to use all that much force to bring him to heel. But Halfshaft could see from his body language, even from this distance, that he was mentally shot to pieces. He stumbled along between the two mercenaries, his shoulders wracked with barely-contained sobs, his head bowed in defeat. Maybe it wasn’t the fact that he had been captured; maybe it was the stress of living rough and alone since Cherry had brought him here the night before. But for one reason or another, he did not look as if he could take very much more of what Life had in store for him.

“Is that a baby troll?” Crookback asked, intrigued. “I haven’t seen one of those in years. They taste wonderful roasted, hint of garlic, apple in the mouth. It makes me dribble, just thinking about it.”

Halfshaft ignored him. The thought of a dribbling hunchback was not something he wanted to dwell upon. He watched as the mercenaries escorted Buster along the opposite bank of the river, heading in the direction of the Big Top. He wondered if the child’s parents were training outdoors, whether they could see their son being led into captivity. How maternal were trolls? Would his mother rush to his aid, whatever the consequences? His father even? He scanned his side of the bank for signs of angry troll parents galloping into the water, but apart from a couple of witches a quarter of a mile distant (with yet another hunchbacked trainer) he could see no signs of life at the circus at all.

He met Cherry's gaze. She shrugged. She'd saved Buster once, but she didn't seem to be in any huge hurry to do so again. And bearing in mind what he was planning on doing to her at the Games, he didn't feel that he was in any position to ask her for any more favours.

"Maybe we could borrow him for the strength training," Crookback cogitated. "Moving boulders obviously isn't your thing. A grown-up troll would rip you to shreds – you'll find that out for yourselves in the Games tomorrow – but maybe between the two of you, you'd be able to wrestle with a baby one if I cave his knees in first."

Halfshaft's default mode was to launch straight into sarcastic abuse. He opened his mouth, ready to run to type, but nothing came out. Nothing at all. Somehow, he just didn't have the strength or inclination to tell the hunchback what he thought of him, yet alone his views on the likelihood of their crop-topped trainer's parents having been in lawful wedlock at the time of his birth.

"Dead by tea-time," Cherry mouthed to him, with relish.

Halfshaft sighed. Buster was fording the river now, struggling in the current despite his size. It was too late for him to intervene to save the young troll, even if he had the ability to do so. He just had to hope that the parents would spot him at some stage, and would come to his aid. Not that even they would be a match for a brace of mercenaries, of course. Buster's prospects of survival seemed about as remote as his own prospects of surviving the Games without Takina at his side.

"Let's carry on training," he said. "Get this over with."

"Right you are," nodded the hunchback. "Only two more things to tick off the list now, and that's skill and speed. We do that combined."

"How?"

"You'll like this," Crook-back chuckled. "There's a boat pulled up on the bank further down the river, on the far side of the Circus. There's a catapult in it. One of you paddles along the river, away from the Circus, until you see the spot where the trolls are training, and the other one smacks them in the head using the catapult. That's the skill part."

"And what about the speed?"

“The trolls aren’t going to be too happy about a couple of humans bombarding them from a paddle-boat. They’re a bit tetchy like that. They’re going to come after you, and try and rip your heads off. Literally rip your heads off, you understand. So the speed training consists of you rowing like buggery in the opposite direction, back over here where I can protect you with my hunchback-ninja skills.”

“And what happens if we don’t row fast enough?” asked Halfshaft.

“That’s no problem. No problem at all. We send up to the Castle for two fresh candidates, and we put them in the Games instead.”

“I’m starving,” the wizard responded, which seemed to the hunchback to be something of a random response to the training task he had set for him. “The sooner it’s tea-time the better.”

#

Halfshaft paddled the boat downstream towards the training trolls, bending low in the forlorn hope that this would make him invisible. Cherry sat on the low bench opposite him, catapult at the ready.

The trolls – Buster’s parents – stood facing each other on the river-bank. They had their very own hunchback, who sat in the shadow of a tree, reading a book. Occasionally, he would look up, shout an order or two at his charges, and then go back to his reading. It would appear that their training was as inadequate as that which the wizard had received at the far side of the Circus.

The trolls stood facing one another, as if about to launch into a barn-dance.

“Punch her!” shouted the hunchback. “Hard as you can. Strength, remember, Strength.”

The male troll shook his head. He was large even by troll standards, with a great lumpy head, ginger hair and a road-map of battle-scars lining his face. Halfshaft had had plenty of experience of trolls; he was well aware that either of them could literally tear him in half if the mood took them (indeed, their five year old son could have done so, with a little gnawing to help him through the spine). The best policy to adopt with trolls was never to get

within ten miles of them. Yet here they were, sitting in a rowing boat on a choppy stream, ready to bombard the hideous couple with missiles from a lethal looking catapult. It would be a miracle if they got out of this alive.

The troll remained motionless. He shook his head again.

Hunchback looked up from his book. “What’s the matter? Why aren’t you punching her?”

“She’s my mate. We’ve lived together for twenty years.”

“All the more reason to punch her. You must be really fed up with her by now.”

“She’s my mate.”

“So you said.” The hunchback sighed. “You, then. Woman, Punch him.”

The female troll took a savage swing at her “husband”, her fist connecting with his temple with a sickening crunch. He staggered, but remained on his feet. He gave her a hurt look, but said nothing. It was almost as if he was used to it.

“It’s your fault we’re here,” she hissed at him. “What was it you said? “Let’s go to the Games. We can do lots of killing. It’ll be fun for all the family.” Didn’t think to check first whether we could bring Buster, though, did you?”

“I’m sorry,” he implored. “I thought they’d let him come with us. I thought a bit of killing would be good for him; toughen him up a bit.”

“He doesn’t need toughening up.”

“You know he does. Every time one of the trollings bites him, he cries his eyes out like a human. He needs to learn to stand and fight. The Games would’ve been good for him. If he was here.”

This time, she punched him hard to the face, without even being instructed to do so. His nose crunched. He wiped the blood away with the back of his hand, and tested it with his tongue. He gave an approving smile; the taste was obviously to his satisfaction.

“Your turn, Big Guy,” urged the hunchback. “Whack her in the tits.”

“You watch your language,” warned the troll. “That’s my mate you’re talking about.”

“Not any bloody more, I’m not,” shouted the trolless, kneeling him in the testicles to illustrate the point. He doubled over, clutching himself. He gave her an imploring look, but made no effort to defend himself, as she peeled his hands away so she could dish out a second helping of agony.

The hunchback shrieked with laughter. “Go on, Woman! Do it again! Do it again! We’ll have you trained up in no time.”

She stopped for a second. The troll looked deep into her eyes, the pain in his testicles surpassed only by the hurt he felt that it was his woman who was inflicting it. She paused, empathy staying her hand (or rather her knee) just for an instant. Buster was his child, too. His loss was as great as hers; more possibly, allowing for the guilt he was feeling right now. They had been close, those two, by troll standards; most trolls fathers were trying to eat their off-spring by the time they could walk.

“Please,” he winced. “Please don’t do this.”

“He was our son,” she said. “He was five. They’ll tear him to shreds back home, without us there to protect him.”

The troll’s head sagged on to his chest.

“Please don’t,” he said.

“He might be dead already.”

He looked up, meeting her eyes. “Don’t you think I don’t know that already? Okay, do it again, then.”

“What?”

“Knee me. Harder this time. And then break my neck.”

“Now hang on,” the hunchback called over. “None of that. We need you for the Games tomorrow.”

“Do it,” the troll urged. “Kill me. I deserve it.”

She stared at him, deciding whether to tear his head from his shoulders for taking the easy way out. She took a step towards him, so that they were just inches apart. She touched his face. His bottom lip started to quiver.

“Don’t you dare,” she said. “Trolls don’t cry. Especially not you.”

“He was my son, too,” he shouted at her, suddenly animated. “How can I live with this without you? Just finish it, will you?”

She hugged him, so tightly that she fractured two of his ribs. He took the pain without complaint; all that mattered to him was that they were together again.

She pushed him away. He could see from her face that she had not forgiven him; that would take time, and they probably didn’t have a great deal of that left. But she was somehow softer than before, and that was enough for him for now.

“What if we don’t make it through the Games?” she asked. “What if I don’t get to go back for him?”

“It’s going to be okay,” he whispered. “I’m going to look after you, I promise. I’m never going to let anything happen to our family ever again.”

It was then that he felt something whiz past his left ear, striking his mate square on the forehead. She sank to her knees, fighting to remain conscious. He turned to see a small rowing boat in the river, with two people in it. One was a wizard, trying frantically to row back upstream; the other was a human woman, standing up, a catapult in her hands. She was trying to whistle inconspicuously, as if she was just a casual bystander on an afternoon punt along the stream..

He was stupid, but not that stupid. It was her alright, her and the frightened looking wizard. With a crazed bellow, he charged towards the boat. They had hurt his mate; maybe even killed her. He would have his revenge, and it was going to be very painful for them indeed.

#

As the huge ginger troll pounded along the river-bank towards them, it occurred to Halfshaft that it would have been sensible to turn the boat around before they started hurling stones ashore. As it was, he was desperately trying to point the boat back upstream, wasting valuable time as hideous and painful Death made its heavy-footed way towards them.

“Now would be a good time to row away,” suggested Cherry, remarkably calmly in the circumstances.

“I’m trying to turn the boat around,” he snapped.

“Don’t bother. Just paddle the same way as before.”

“We’ve got to go back to the circus, though. Crookback said so.”

“Sod Crookback! What we’ve got to do is stay at least one stroke ahead of the angry troll who wants to shove us up each other’s bottoms.”

Under different circumstances, the thought of being inserted into any of Cherry’s orifices might have cheered him up considerably, but not now, not with a fuming ginger troll in hot pursuit.

He took her advice. Abandoning the attempt to turn the boat about, he rowed for all he was worth, which wasn’t very much.

The troll reached the river, and plunged in after them. He was maybe twenty yards away. He lunged through the water, his arms raised above his head, ready to tear them limb from limb when he caught up with them.

“Maybe you should row faster?” Cherry suggested. “Quite a lot faster, actually.”

“Can trolls swim?” he asked.

She shrugged. “Buggered if I know.”

It was up to its waist now, wading towards them at speed. The distance between fragile boat and angry troll shrank quickly. Fifteen yards, ten yards, five.

Halfshaft started screaming. It didn’t help, but it made him feel better.

“He’s going to get us! He’s going to get us!”

“I heard you the first time,” she laughed.

“Do something!”

“Okay,” she shrugged. She raised the catapult again, took aim, and sent a stone arrowing towards his head. It smacked him straight between the eyes, sending him reeling back into the water. He thrashed around for a few seconds, shook the pain from his head, and then set off in pursuit again, more furious than ever.

“Nice shot,” congratulated Halfshaft. “A couple more like that, and he’s done for.”

“Slight problem,” she confessed. “No more stones.”

He screamed again. There didn’t seem to be much else he could do.

The troll was chest deep in the water now, and closing in on them one giant stride at a time. His fists pounded the water in front of him like steam-hammers, churning it up into a froth. Halfshaft carried on paddling, screaming as he did so, desperately trying to stay a stroke or two ahead of the troll but failing dismally. He would have preferred to run like buggery than scream, but he was in the middle of the river, he only knew one swimming stroke, and to doggy-paddle like buggery just didn’t have the same ring to it.

The troll seized the side of the boat with one hand. Cherry stepped down hard on his fingers, trying to drive him away, but he held on grimly, deciding that a little pain was a small price to pay for savage vengeance.

“Make fire!” Cherry called out to Halfshaft. “Burn the bugger!”

“I can’t make much,” Halfshaft replied.

“Just do it.”

He put down his oars, and made his way unsteadily to the side of the boat. The troll had hold of the vessel with both hands now, and was lifting it into the air, ready to send it slamming back down into the water.

“When you’re ready,” she prompted. “Any time in the next two seconds will do.”

He clicked his fingers. A flame the size of a birthday cake candle sprang from the tip of his thumb. He flushed red, embarrassed at this pathetic demonstration of his magical “prowess”.

“Is that it?” she asked. She seemed amused, which hardly seemed appropriate in the circumstances.

“Pretty much,” he confessed. “I can make water as well, but -”

And then they were airborne, falling from the boat as the troll sent it crashing back in to the water, flailing around in the current in an effort to reach the “safety” of the bank. The troll shouted in triumph, grabbing each of them in turn and pulling them down beneath the surface. Halfshaft gulped in a lungful or two of muddy water, flailing around as he did so in a futile attempt to break free of the troll’s grasp. The creature lifted him up again, just long enough for him to spew the contents of his lungs back into the river. And then he was back beneath the waves again, at first fighting for the surface, but then drifting and then vacant as his life started ebbing away into the cold water current around him.

#

There was a light in the distance. What did they say you should do when you die? Go to the light? Or, whatever you do, don’t go to the light. He couldn’t quite remember, but thought it might be quite important to get this right.

Go to the light, he decided. Surely that was right? He looked around him. Nothing. Just light in front of him, darkness behind him, and void on either side.

He took a step forward. This was the Afterlife, it just had to be. But he had been to Hell before, and last time round it had been all three headed dogs, taciturn ferrymen and punishments involving sweaty over-sized bottoms. This was completely different. He had cracked it. Something he had done between then and now had earned him an upgrade to the Paradise Suite. All he had to do was stroll through the gates, and find himself a harp and a halo.

The gates came into view. Big ornate gates, glowing white, with a marble pillar either side. They swung open for him. He no longer minded that he was dead. None of his hard and seedy life mattered any more. He had made it here, against all expectations. It was time to pull on a white robe and have a bit of a lie-down.

He caught a figure peering at him from behind one of the pillars. Doon, the wizard's apprentice, possibly the most odious man he had ever met. Doon had sold his soul to a warlock, conspiring with him to help him take control of the whole world in exchange for a share of the spoils. What would a man like him be doing here of all places?

Doon ducked back behind the pillar. Halfshaft came to a halt. He could hear furious whispering on the far side of the gate. Rana appeared, deceased Queen of the Amazons, the woman who had tried to kill him and his companions on their very first quest together. She gave him a tense smile, and beckoned for him to follow her inside.

"Come on in," she said sweetly. "It's lovely here."

He shook his head, and retreated a few steps. He wasn't keen on the idea.

"Come on in," she repeated, rather less pleasantly this time. "I'll make it worth your while."

"No, you're okay. I'll just hang around out here for a while, if it's all the same with you. I need to have a think about this."

"Come here now!" she screeched, in a most unregal way.

He turned and ran, scurrying as fast as he could back towards the darkness from whence he came. His legs seemed to sink into the white ground, as if he was running through quicksand. He made the mistake of looking over his shoulder; Rana and Doon were haring out of the gates towards him, Rana slinging her bow as she ran.

"I'm not spending another thousand years here," she screamed at him. "Get back here now, little man."

He was a little puzzled by this; it hadn't been all that long since he had last seen her, and technically that was in the future anyway so she shouldn't have even been born yet. Maybe time moved differently here. Maybe it moved

backwards, or sideways, or in some other direction that hadn't even been invented yet.

His consideration of the matter was hastily shoved on to the back-burner as he felt an arrow whistling past his ear. Just run, he told himself. Just run. You're good at that. Practice makes perfect.

His legs were turning to jelly with the effort of ploughing through the gelatinous void. He looked back over his shoulder again, knowing that this was a very poor idea, but deciding to do it anyway.

Doon was just a few steps behind him, reaching out for him, ready to pull him kicking and screaming into what he had now deduced to be the back gates of the Underworld. But all of a sudden, the wizard's apprentice shot backwards at speed, as if he had been attached to the gates by invisible elastic, nearly bowling Rana down as he went. He smashed his face against the right-hand pillar, struggled back to his feet and set off in pursuit again. He wasn't going to give up easily.

Rana was closing in on him too. She was slowing down; there was obviously some force pulling her backwards as well. But she was stronger than the apprentice; more determined. She fought to keep her footing, struggling womanfully against whatever it was that was trying to hurl her back into the fiery pit where she belonged.

She raised her bow again. "Take my place, Wizard, or I'll shoot you where you stand, and then we will both be here forever. Take my place, and at least in a thousand years you will have your own chance to escape, too."

He hesitated. What to do? No way was he going to swap with her. He would rather they both get roasted than give her a free ticket out of there. But he wasn't too keen on being shot with her arrow. Granted, he was already dead, but it looked like it would hurt.

He could see Doon racing towards the pair of them, hoping to overtake her, planning to swap with Halfshaft himself. He wasn't too keen on that either. He needed a plan.

"Three steps closer," he told her, "and I'll swap."

"What is this trickery?" she asked.

“Doon’s coming. Better be quick.”

She took a step forwards, her face creased with effort and concentration as she fought to stay on her feet.

“You’d better be quick. He’s nearly here.”

She took another step towards him. Beads of sweat appeared on her forehead, her breasts, her stomach; soaking into her furs as it trickled down her taut body. The effort of standing upright was proving immense.

“That is as far as I am coming,” she announced. “Come to me.”

“Doon’s here!” lied Halfshaft.

She turned to see the apprentice still a dozen or so steps away. And then she was flying backwards through the void, back towards her anchor point, thudding heavily against the gate-post from whence she had started. She was on her feet immediately, and heading back towards him in no time at all.

Doon gave a shout of triumph, and surged forwards. Halfshaft turned and ran. He could sense the apprentice gaining on him, but was determined not to turn round again. If there was one thing he had learnt from Rana, it was that facing the front had a lot to be said for it.

He felt a hand clutch at his robes. He shook it off like a wet terrier drying itself off, and surged forwards again. It was only a matter of time. If the apprentice had had the good sense to take his feet off the ground when he had seized the wizard’s robes, they would both be hurtling towards Hell right now, and all would be lost.

Surely he couldn’t be far from where he had started, where he had entered this strange vacuum of a land? He had to take a risk. His legs were shot, so he wasn’t going to get much further anyway. As Doon shouted out in triumph behind him, presumably on the verge of seizing his robes one last time, Halfshaft dived forwards, trusting to Luck and whatever Gods would have him to send him sprawling to safety.

He hit the ground hard. He felt something pressing against his chest. He spat out water, what seemed like bucketfuls of it. And then he opened his eyes. He groaned, and shut them again.

For looming above him, practically blocking out the sun, stood a very agitated troll. Maybe Hell was not so bad after all.

#

Halfshaft squealed like a little piggy. He had quite a range of different squeals, each one suitable for a different type of threatening situation, but this was probably the shrillest of them all. It was even giving *him* a headache.

Cherry leaned into his field of vision. "It's okay. She's friendly."

"I'm not friendly," the troll contradicted. "There's nothing I'd like more than to rip your beardy head off, and suck all the marrow from your spine."

"There you go," grinned Cherry. "Trolls don't get much friendlier than that."

She helped him to his feet. He felt awful. He had had many near death experiences in recent weeks, but drowning had to be one of the least pleasant. Especially with Hell lurking in the dark waters below.

He looked around. The two hunchbacks stood nearby, one of them looking extremely embarrassed as the second berated him. "What sort of a stunt was that?" he was asking. "When they find out about this upstairs, you'll be off the show. You'll be cleaning the toilets, along with all the other hunchback has-beens."

"What happened?" Halfshaft asked. "Why aren't we dead?"

Cherry looked towards the troll. "Sorry. I don't know your name?"

"Bastard-mate," the troll replied, with pride. "And this is my mate, Bastard."

"I can't think why they called him that," Halfshaft bitched.

"Yes you can. He was called that, because he's always been a vicious little bastard since the moment he was born. Which is why they made him Lord of the Trolls. There's no-one that can grind bones like him. You would have found that out for yourself if I hadn't have pulled him off you."

“Why did you? Don’t get me wrong, I’m very grateful that you did. Just a little puzzled.”

She looked tearful, and a tearful troll is not something you see every day. “We left our little boy behind,” she said. “He’s delicate. We need to go back and see what’s happened to him. We need to win the Games. If Bastard drowned you before they even started, they’d kill us both as punishment, and our little Buster would be wolf-meat without us.”

“He’ll be alright,” Bastard muttered unconvincingly. “He’s a strong little bugger, deep down. Very deep down.”

Bastard-mate punched him hard in the testicles. She watched him double over in excruciating pain, nodding her head in satisfaction. “One more word from you,” she warned. “Just one more word. And I’ll bite them off.”

“Thank you,” Halfshaft said, changing the subject, as it was making him wince. “You saved my life.”

Bastard-mate made as if to punch the wizard in the testicles, but thought better of it as the hunchbacks closed in on her. “Not really,” she told him. “I’ve just put back your death. You two chucked stones at us. When we see you at the Games, we’re going to kill you, and eat you. And not necessarily in that order.”

“See,” Cherry chimed in. “I told you she was friendly.”

#

It was to be the last event of their training. Speed.

The bad news was that it was to all intents a donkey derby. The hunchbacks had lined up all the candidates for tomorrow’s Games, and had mounted each of them in turn. Only Selene had refused to allow a hunchback astride her. She had insisted that hers do all the running. So he stood, humped and doubled over, scissored between her long legs, ready for the starter’s whistle. The pair looked like a fur-bikini-clad Esmeralda giving birth to Quasimodo, which was a very disturbing image indeed.

The good news was that Takina was there too. She had tried to follow Selene's lead, but her hunchback wasn't having any of it, and had refused point-blank to carry her. She hadn't had quite enough gravitas to carry it off, so had eventually consented to him climbing on her back instead. Halfshaft was four places away from her in the starting line-up, separated by two elves and a dwarf. He kept grinning over at her, and she kept smiling back. But there was no opportunity to talk. The race was about to begin.

All of the Candidates were there. Apart from Halfshaft, Cherry, Takina and Selene, there were the trolls (who were fortunately lined up several places away, on the far side of the Amazons), a pair of witches, two dwarfs and a couple of elves. As an incentive to do well in the training task, whoever won would be given a two minute head-start in the Games the following day. Which would ordinarily have been just about enough time, the wizard speculated, to hide himself away in a ditch or rotten tree-trunk, and refuse to come out until everyone else had killed each other. But that plan had gone out the window now. He had to look after Takina. And work out how to let Cherry down as gently as possible.

There was a shrill whistle. They were off. Three laps of the Big Top, finishing back here by the entrance. And then inside for a show and some light refreshments.

The trolls were off like a shot, disappearing round the side of the Big Top before Halfshaft had staggered forward a couple of paces. The elves were not far behind, the male elf a little in the lead. They were tall and slender, not unlike the Amazons in build but wearing forest camouflage rather than the Amazon fashion of as-little-as-possible.

Selene picked up her hunchback, tucked him under her arm like a huge deformed rugby ball, and set off in pursuit.

Takina hurried after them, surprisingly strong for a woman of her size. She was not like other Amazons. She was of "normal" height for a start, which was considered such a defect by her tribe that she had been relegated to servant's duties her whole life, when all she had ever wanted to do was hunt with the tribe. She was a lot like Halfshaft in some ways (though very different in others!). Both of them wanted to prove themselves to a sceptical Outside World, he with his limited magical abilities and she with her warrior prowess. Theoretically, the Games would be the perfect place for the two of

them to prove themselves to a sceptical universe. In practice, however, he would have done just about anything to avoid taking part in the contest the following day.

Cherry was close on Takina's heels, with Halfshaft staggering along behind her. He was old, he was unfit, and he had a hunchback astride him. He was never going to make it round the tent, yet alone manage three circuits.

To his surprise, he was not last. He turned to see how the dwarfs and the witches were doing. The witches had thrown off their hunchbacks, and were conjuring up some sort of spell between them. They stood opposite one another, their hands moving in a complicated rhythm in mirror-image to each other, the air between them crackling with energy. He expected their hunchback to step in, to forbid them to use magic, but he appeared to be encouraging them. The wizard put his own hunchback down. If the witches were up to something, then there did not appear to be much point carrying on. Things were going to "kick off" big time.

The dwarfs were in difficulty. Each was mounted by a hunchback twice the size of them. Their stubby knees bent outwards with the effort of bearing their weight. Each time they attempted to take a step forwards, they tottered to one side, fought to regain their balance, and staggered back again, only to repeat the process a few seconds later. They were clearly going nowhere fast.

The trolls emerged from the far side of the Big Top, one lap done already, and bounded towards the witches at a gallop. The witches stepped aside to allow them to pass, their spell not quite ready. The elves passed through soon afterwards, jostling for position with Selene, who still had her hunchback tucked beneath her arm. Cherry was not far behind, having overtaken Takina. She seemed to be enjoying herself.

He took Cherry's arm as she went to pass him, pulling her towards him.

"Easy, Big Guy," she said. "There's only room for one of you on my back at a time."

"The witches are up to something," he cautioned. "I'd stay here if I were you."

She shrugged. “You’re the boss. I was just starting to enjoy myself though. I reckon I could’ve caught the trolls on the next lap.”

Halfshaft waited for Takina, but there was no sign of her. Cherry, in the meantime, looked over her shoulder at the hunchback who was still firmly in her “saddle”. “Okay, piggy-back’s over. You can hop off now.”

“Maybe another minute or two?” he enquired hopefully.

She threw him off, laughing as he struggled to his feet. “That’ll teach you, you dirty little bugger.”

Halfshaft went in search of Takina. With a shock, he saw her racing away towards the river and the distant hilltops, her hunchback in hot pursuit. She was escaping! But, very much more to the point, she was escaping without him!

#

Takina was halfway across the river in no time, swimming for all she was worth. Her hunchback doggy-paddled after her, commanding her to return to the race or face the consequences. And Halfshaft closed in on them both at a speed of which his own hunchback would have heartily approved had he been able to match it when they were running laps of the Big Top.

He heard Cherry calling out to him. He refused to stop. He had to catch up with Takina, before she vanished into the distance. Part of him was glad that she was escaping; he realised that without her galvanising influence he had pretty much gone along with the whole “Games” plan without once trying to do anything about it. At least she was taking action. But part of him was devastated. She would never have tried to escape without him in the past. Why would she do that? Why would she leave him here alone?

He wasn’t quite sure how he would react if he caught up with her. He was desperate for a chance to talk to her. They hadn’t exchanged hardly exchanged a word since they had last been separated (just a sentence or two in the Big Top earlier), and he wanted to know what had happened to her, how she had come to be captured, and – most importantly – had she missed

him as much as he had missed her? But he was hurt and he felt very much betrayed by her deserting him, and his stock response to such feelings was to become sarcastic. Don't you worry about me, Takina. You just run off into the hills, and leave me here to die at the Games. No, no, it's okay, really it is. I've always been quite fond of excruciating pain and people shoving spears up my arse.

Could he say that to her, to the woman he secretly yearned for, night and day? Too bloody right he could. She had hurt him, and it was her own bloody fault if he hurt her back a little. Besides, he could always apologise later on, and she was never one to bear a grudge.

He reached the river. He paused. He was a crap swimmer. Would he even make it to the other side? He decided to pitch in anyway. If he drowned, then she would be very sorry indeed, so it wouldn't be all bad.

“Stop!”

He turned to see Cherry, sitting astride a puffing hunchback. The cheeky cow had only ridden Crookback to chase him down!

He shook his head. “I'm going after her. Why would she escape without me?”

“Not your best plan ever,” she commented. “Look over there.”

He looked towards the opposite bank. Takina was maybe fifty yards from the river now, sprinting towards the top of the hill. But three mercenaries had appeared at various points ahead of her, and were closing her down. She would be a prisoner within minutes.

“Takina!” he shouted. “Watch out!”

But either she couldn't hear him, or she choose to ignore his advice. She kept running up the hill, as the three mercenaries closed in on her up ahead.

“We've got to save her,” Halfshaft pleaded. “Correction; you've got to save her. You can fight. I'm crap at that sort of thing. Do something, quick!”

“I'm not saving your girlfriend,” Cherry pouted. “I don't even know what you see in her. Her arse looks a little fat from here; mine's far better, see.” She wriggled her bottom to encourage him to inspect it. “No comparison.”

“There is *nothing* wrong with her arse!” Halfshaft bridled.

“It’s okay, I suppose. But mine’s far better, wouldn’t you say?”

“Yours is very nice, but – ”

Now it was Cherry’s turn to be offended. “My arse is *nice*?” she enquired. “Nice? What the Hells’ that supposed to mean?”

“Can we talk about your bottom later on? We’ve got to help Takina.”

“We can talk about it now, thank you very much. I’ve never had anyone describe my arse as “nice” before. “Gorgeous”, “incredible”, “perfect”, but never ever nice. I can’t believe you just said that. After all I’ve done for you!”

“Okay, I’m sorry, I’m so sorry,” gibbered the panicking wizard. “You have the nicest – sorry, the most incredible arse that womankind has ever been blessed with. I would fall to my knees and worship that arse as if it were a goddess, if it wasn’t for my arthritis. I would write sonnets about it, commission paintings of it, mould it in clay and have a cast of it on every street corner in the land. I would even give it its own name, as “arse” really doesn’t do it justice.”

“You’re not just saying that to shut me up? You really want to mould my arse in clay?”

“I really mean it. Now could you please, please, *please* save Takina?”

“From three mercenaries? I’m good, but I’m not *that* good! I’ve got about as much chance of beating them as a troll has of winning the national Sudoku championships. Besides, they’re not going to hurt her. They’re just playing.”

Halfshaft looked over towards Takina. The three mercenaries were bundling her to the ground. She fought to regain her feet, but every time she stood up they swept her legs from under her, sending her toppling back down on to the grass.

“See,” said Cherry. “They’re just knocking her over for a laugh.”

“They’ll hurt her” whined the wizard.

“No, they won’t,” Cherry reassured him. “Not with an arse like that to cushion her fall.”

#

They returned to the Big Top, Cherry in significantly better spirits than Halfshaft. He had gone as far as wading into the river, but she had persuaded him that any intervention from him would make things infinitely worse for his Amazon friend. Without Cherry's assistance – or, indeed, even with it - there did not seem to be much point in provoking the three mercenaries who were taking it in turns to push his friend to the ground.

Events at the Big Top had taken a surprising turn. All the other Candidates were still racing around the tent, but with the exception of the witches they were now running backwards. The spell had obviously kicked in.

As the witches stood facing one another, the elves reversed between them.

“Looks like we've just moved up to third place,” cackled the fatter of the two.

Bastard-mate was next to dissect them, her legs pedalling furiously, but still taking her in the wrong direction. The hunchback was screaming at her to go the other way, but all to no avail. She disappeared around the side of the tent, a look of despair on her face.

“Second,” chuckled the skinny witch. “Just the one more to go.”

Bastard came into view, his hunchback clinging around his neck for dear life as he hurtled backwards towards the witches.

“First,” screamed the fatter witch in triumph, as the troll threaded between them in break-neck reverse. But as he passed them, he stuck out both arms like some huge demented bird, sending both the old ladies flying like ten-pins.

“That's fecking cheating!” screeched the Fat One, seething with indignation as she tried to disentangle her limbs. “He should so be disqualified!”

“Cut off his testicles first!” chimed in Skinny one, more than a little spitefully. “That'll teach him to feck with us!”

Bastard went into forward-mode again as they hit the ground. He roared at the skittled witches in triumph as he passed them by, as did Bastard-mate as she pounded between them a few seconds later.

“Come on, Big Guy,” Cherry urged Halfshaft. “We could still win this one if we get a move on. Let’s ditch the hunchbacks and do it ourselves, just the two of us. Who’s riding whom?”

At any other time during their short acquaintance, he would have told her that he was more than happy for either of them to ride the other, or that maybe they could even take it in turns in the saddle. But not now. He was still fretting about Takina. What would they do to her? How could he hope to save her on his own?

He gave her a shrug, and made his way into the Big-Top. Cherry followed along behind him. She caught him up, and turned him round, and – much to his surprise – gave him a hug, just when he needed it most.

“What was that for?” he asked in puzzlement. He had judged her to be self-obsessed and fickle. But maybe, just maybe, there was more to her than met the eye.

She gave him that smile of hers. “No-one’s ever wanted to give my arse her own name before.”

#

It was another ten minutes or so before the other Candidates joined them inside the tent. In the intervening period, the two of them sat quietly, listening to the commotion outside. There was the occasional flash of light as a spell or two ignited into life, a half dozen bellows of premature triumph and a variety of terrible curses which put even Halfshaft’s obscenity-vocabulary to shame. Eventually, Bastard-mate crawled into the tent on all fours, with a victorious Selene sitting astride her broad back.

The others filed in after them, all of them looking distinctly worse for wear. The witches were leaning against each other for support, Bastard was limping badly, the male elf was dragging the female along the grass behind

him in a far from chivalrous manner, and the dwarfs' hair appeared to have been only recently alight (as it was badly singed, and still smoking in places). There was no sign of Takina anywhere.

Each couple took their seats as far from the other Candidates as they possibly could. The elves were maybe fifteen yards to Halfshaft's left, and the dwarfs a similar distance to his right. The trolls and witches sat on the far side of the arena, only partially visible through the bars of the cage in the centre of the tent. Selene was on her own to one side, towards the back of the stacked seating. He wished that Takina was sitting with her.

Cherry cuddled up next to him, linking her arm through his as if they were a dating couple out to see a comedy at the theatre. The more he seethed at her failure to come to Takina's rescue, the more she seemed to delight in cosying up to him.

The Ringmaster appeared as if from nowhere. A trap-door, maybe, or was he a wizard in disguise? He walked around the circumference of the cage, viewing the Candidates one sorry pair at a time, his mouth twisted into a wry smile. He seemed to be enjoying their discomfort.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he began, which seemed to Halfshaft to be the most sarcastic thing he had heard in a very long time. "You have had a long, hard day of training, and tomorrow will be more arduous still. Yet by the time the next sun sets, two of you will be well on their way to becoming heroes, legends...."

"Or heroines," Cherry called out. Halfshaft shrank into his seat, as the Ringmaster turned his depreciating attention to them. It didn't seem like the right time for heckling.

"Or heroines," the Ringmaster agreed, tipping his top-hat in ironic acknowledgment.

Cherry nodded, satisfied that the error had been rectified. She gestured for him to proceed. "Off you go," she said. "I'm done now."

"But tonight," the Ringmaster resumed, "tonight you relax. We have a show for you, a show such as few people on this miserable planet have ever seen before. But first, first of all there is a little precaution we must take to

ensure that our show passes without incident. We don't want anyone getting over-excited by what we are about to see."

Three mercenaries appeared, as mysteriously as the Ringmaster had done, and made their way round to the far side of the cage. They approached Bastard and Bastard-mate. Halfshaft moved his head back and forwards, trying to get the best possible view through the bars, but it was difficult to make out precisely what was going on. He left his seat, trying to avoid eye contact with the Ringmaster, who watched him through narrowed eyes as he made his way around the boundary of the ring. Cherry stayed in her seat, disinterested in the events which were unfolding on the far side of the tent. If it wasn't shiny, she wasn't couldn't be arsed to check it out.

As the Ringmaster looked on, Halfshaft rounded a corner of the cage, which gave him an unobscured view of the seated trolls. One of the mercenaries was holding a dagger to the thick folded flesh of the trolless' throat, while another fitted a collar around Bastard's neck. The process was then repeated, as Bastard-mate was collared too. The wizard expected the trolls to resist, but they just sat there, puzzled expressions on their lumpy faces, as they tried to work out what was going on. Eventually, Bastard decided that he wasn't comfortable with their new fashion accessories. He seized the nearest mercenary, and attempted to bite a chunk out of his rib-cage. But the moment he moved, there was a sharp buzz, and the troll convulsed in agony. Even from this distance, Halfshaft could detect the smell of roasting troll-flesh.

The Ringmaster was at the wizard's side, some sort of button in his hand. "Amusing, don't you think? The viewers suggested it. Would you care for a go?"

Halfshaft backed off, shaking his head. He scuttled back to the comparative safety of his seat. Cherry linked arms again, and snuggled up to him. He could still smell burning troll-flesh. He resolved not to move again, in case he ended up with a collar too.

"Ladies and gentleman," the Ringmaster announced, his voice building to a crescendo. "I give you – Buster the baby troll!"

Buster materialised inside the cage. This must be magic; he was simply too big and clumsy to have been hidden in there, even if there had been anywhere for him to hide. The little troll looked terrified. He looked around,

trying to make sense of his surroundings. He saw Halfshaft and Cherry first, and rushed over to the bars, rattling them in a vain attempt to reach them.

“Buster!”

It was Bastard-mate. She was on her feet, screaming for her son, trying to clamber over the seat in front of her to go to his rescue. Buster flew over to her side of the cage, sobbing and laughing at the same time, trying to force himself between the iron bars to be with her again.

There was a scream. Halfshaft craned his neck to see what was going on, but Buster was in the way. He didn't really need to see Bastard-mate, though, to know what was happening over there. They were frying her alive.

Bastard roared in anguish at the plight of his son, and lashed out at the mercenaries around him to clear a path to him. And then a howl of pain, deep anguished pain, and Halfshaft could see the troll slumped over the seats in front. A second or two later, and his head was up again, the struggle resumed; and then howling again, slumped over again, the process repeated time after time after time as he tried to make it to the cage to rescue his boy.

Bastard-mate followed suit. She met the same fate as her “husband”. Before long, the whole tent reeked of toasted troll flesh, but still they came on, refusing to bow to the inevitable.

“Is no-one going to help them?” Halfshaft agonised. “They're killing them.”

“All the better for us tomorrow,” Cherry pointed out. “Don't forget they want to eat you.”

“But look at them. And Buster! We've got to do something.”

The young troll was rattling furiously at the bars, desperate to escape, frantically trying to come to the aid of his stricken parents. But the cage held firm.

“Earlier today,” the Ringmaster announced, “these two trolls set upon other Candidates without provocation, and against the express wishes of the Management. Such behaviour will not be tolerated. Not by them, not by any of you. You do as you are told, or you face the consequences. The

consequences for them will be that their son will tonight die for your amusement. The show will start in five minutes. Enjoy.”

“What are they going to do to him?” Halfshaft asked.

“Let the wolves in, I expect,” shrugged Cherry.

“That’s awful!”

“I know. Call that entertainment!”

“We’ve got to stop them, Cherry.”

She shrugged. She did not appear to be all that enthusiastic. Surely she could empathise with little Buster, even if she was indifferent to the fate of his parents? She could save them if she wanted, he felt sure of it.

“Please. I need your help. Just this once.”

“Tell me again how much better my arse is than that Amazon’s of yours.”

“That again? Okay, it’s better. Incomparably better.”

“See, that wasn’t so hard, was it?” She gave him a conspiratory grin, and left the tent. The mercenaries were still busy marshalling the electrocuted trolls on the far side of the tent, and she left unchallenged.

“Not that way,” the wizard hissed after her. “They’re over there!” But it was too late. She had gone.

Halfshaft got back to his feet, and made his way round to the far side of the tent again. Bastard had made it to within a few yards of the cage, but now lay motionless on his front. The stench of burning flesh was stronger over here, and Halfshaft found it hard not to gag. Buster was reaching out to his father through the bars, trying to touch him, trying to help him, but to no avail. He pleaded with his father to get up, but the troll was at the very least unconscious, and quite probably dead.

A few rows behind him, Bastard-mate was slumped over in her chair, her eyes blinking occasionally, but other than that showing no signs of life. It was as if all the fight had been zapped out of her.

“Open the gate,” the Ringmaster directed. “Two wolves at a time, it’ll be more fun for the viewers that way.”

A hunchback disappeared outside, as he was bid. Buster initially redoubled his efforts to reach his prone father, casting ever more anxious glances over his shoulder towards the tunnel which led to the wolves' cage. After thirty seconds or so, he gave up on the attempt to awaken Bastard, and pressed himself against the bars at the far side of the cage, trying to put as much distance as possible between him and the wolves which would soon be trotting through the tunnel towards him. He was not a fighter, that much was evident.

“Come on,” bellowed the Ringmaster. “Where are my wolves?”

It was then that the hunchback rushed back into the tent, his face contorted in panic. He approached the Ringmaster, tried to speak, but his words came out in a jumble, such was his distress.

“What is it?” the Ringmaster enquired. “What’s happened?”

“They’ve escaped!” gibbered the hunchback. “They’ve all escaped!”

“The wolves? All gone?”

“Not just the wolves. The clowns, too.”

For the first time, the Ringmaster looked shaken. “The clowns are on the loose?”

The hunchback nodded, on the verge of tears. “All of them. Someone’s opened the cage.”

The Ringmaster gestured to the three mercenaries to follow him, and dashed out of the Big Top. Cherry strolled back in as they left, giving them a friendly nod as she passed them by. She sauntered up to Halfshaft.

“Oops.”

“Was that you?” he asked, trying to resist the urge to hug her in case it earned him a slap.

“As if. It’s getting a little messy out there, now. Three hunchbacks taken out already. Blood all over the place.”

“Crookback?” enquired Halfshaft, hoping that his sadistic trainer was amongst them.

“Dead by tea-time, like I promised. Torn to pieces by two clowns. Screaming like a little baby. But there was a silver lining for him.”

“There was?”

“Yeah. At least he was wearing a pretty crop-top when he went.”

#

Selene intervened as Cherry was picking the lock to free Buster from his cage. She put her hand on the bars of the cage door, and shook her head.

“No.”

“You’re in my light,” said Cherry, carrying on regardless.

“Leave her be,” Halfshaft urged Selene. “The Ringmaster will be back any moment. And the mercenaries. We haven’t got long.”

“He stays in the cage,” Selene ruled.

The witches wandered over.

“Are we setting him free, or killing him?” asked the larger lady, not really minding either way, but keen to stay “in the loop”.

“Neither,” stated Selene. “He stays in the cage. And if you continue trying to open that door, I am going to have to break both your arms.”

There was a click, and the door sprung open. “Oops,” smirked Cherry. “Look what just happened. Silly me!”

Selene shoved Cherry backwards, slamming her against the bars of the cage. Cherry crouched low, ready to counter-attack, but then Bastard-mate was there, standing between the two women, the smell of burnt flesh sending both the combatants back an involuntary step or two. She swung open the cage of the door, holding the Amazon’s eye, daring her to try to stop her. Selene took a step towards her, but thought better of it. She was unarmed. Even Amazons didn’t set upon trolls without a weapon or two to fall back upon, especially not when there was an impudent strumpet there to back the trolless up.

Buster came bounding out of the cage, throwing both arms around his mother's neck and hugging her for all he was worth. She hugged him back for a few seconds, so tightly that she nearly crushed the life out of him (which would have been ironic in the circumstances). Then she pushed him away.

"We have to go."

"Let's get Daddy."

She shook her head. "I can't wake him up."

"Carry him, then."

"No. He'll slow us down. I have to get you out of here."

"Please."

"We have to go." She grabbed the young troll, and started pulling him towards the exit.

"Please! We can't leave Daddy here, all on his own!"

"He'll win the Games tomorrow. He'll see us afterwards."

Buster started struggling. "I'm not leaving without him."

Bastard-mate adopted the time-honoured tactic that parents have resorted to for thousands of years. "I'll go without you, then. Goodbye."

She hurried out the door. Buster watched her go. He stood his ground for a few seconds. He looked around at the circle of people around him who were watching him with a variety of expressions, some of them more friendly than others. His face creased in fear at the thought of being left with strangers again, and he fled after his departing mother, wailing as he did. Forced to choose between live Mummy and quite possibly dead Daddy, he would chose live Mummy every time.

Selene squared up to Cherry. "Your bodyguard seems to have deserted you. It is time to teach you to respect the command of an Amazon Queen."

Halfshaft took a step between them. "Now, now, ladies. Let's not do anything we might regret later."

“I won’t regret smacking that flat-chested moose in the face,” Cherry said. “Come on, Pancake-Tits. Give it your best shot.”

“Go on,” the fatter witch urged Cherry. “Bitch slap her! The mouthy cow’s been asking for it ever since she got here.”

“Uh-oh!” exclaimed her less horizontally-challenged sister, looking over her shoulder. “We’ve got company.”

Halfshaft turned to the exit, expecting to see that the Ringmaster had returned. That would be very bad for them all, he anticipated; the man had just come close to killing the trolls for disobeying orders, and was unlikely to see the funny side when he found out that Buster and Bastard-mate had escaped in his absence.

But what he saw lurking in the entrance to the tent was worse even than an angry Ringmaster. Much worse.

It was a pair of crazed and blood-splattered clowns.

There was, of course, only one thing to do in the circumstances. He ran like buggery.

#

The elves and dwarfs reaction to the threat from the clowns was, it appeared without the benefit of hindsight, to be wiser than that of the wizard. While Halfshaft ran to the far side of the cage, hoping to put as much distance between himself and the naked white-painted freaks as possible, the elves and dwarfs endeavoured to lock themselves inside it instead. The male dwarf entered the cage first, with the female elf close on his heels. Rather unchivalrously, the dwarf then slammed the cage door in the face of his female companion, deciding that discretion was the better part of valour. The cage-door locked, and the male elf and female dwarf were unable to gain access, however hard they rattled upon it. The sighs of relief from within the cage were soon replaced with screams of horror, however, as a pair of clowns found their way in to the tunnel from the cages outside. It was the turn of the occupants to tug furiously on the door in a frantic attempt to get

out, but all to no avail. They screeched for help as the brace of feral clowns bore down upon them.

Halfshaft frantically tried to shake Bastard awake, reasoning that a recently-electrocuted troll would be in just the right sort of mood to tear the clowns apart. Attack was the best form of defence. As he shook the trolls shoulders, though, it occurred to him that a recently electrocuted troll might not be too choosy about whom he tore apart, and that this might not therefore be the cleverest plan he had ever had. He decided to let Bastard sleep after all.

There was a snarl behind him. He turned to find a clown heading straight towards him, its bared yellow teeth clashing badly with its bright cherry nose. It covered the ground at speed, unhampered by the ridiculously large and comical shoes it had worn in a former reincarnation, back in the days it had been a regular circus performer. It continued to snarl as it bounded towards him. There was something of the wolf in that sound. And an awful lot of the wolf in those chomping teeth.

Halfshaft fled. He would have loved to have been able to stand his ground, to vanquish the clown, to go to Cherry's assistance if she needed it. But the creature pursuing him, all body-paint and fangs, was just so horrific that he had no option but to flee. It was hard to make a heroic stand when your bowels were threatening to open at any time.

Outside. Where to go? It crossed his mind to lock himself in the clowns' cage for his own protection, but he couldn't bring himself to do it. Besides, that would presumably be where they would go if and when they were rounded up, and what if the Ringmaster left him in there with them to teach him a lesson for running off? Best stay in the open, and hope for a miracle.

He could make a run for the river, but had no idea how well clowns could swim. You didn't tend to see them doing the back-stroke in their circus acts, but that didn't mean that the shiny-white bastards couldn't doggy-paddle at a push.

That really only left him with one option. He would have to try to outrun the clown, and then hide in one of the smaller tents, in the hope that the mercenaries would be able to catch it before it found him.

The red-nosed freak was still only twenty yards or so behind him, running along, butt-naked, its horrible chubby schlong slapping from side to side as it pounded along in pursuit, which was probably the most disturbing part of the whole experience. It was bad enough being chased by a frenzied clown, without being flashed in the process.

He ran into a tent. He knew it was a mistake; the clown was hot on his heels and all he had succeeded in doing was to corner himself. Inside, he looked around in a desperate search for a hiding place. The tent was empty, save for several large barrels, all of which were labelled "Spares". Each had a couple of holes drilled in the top, presumably for ventilation. That would do; he would hide in one of them, and hope for the best. It was a particularly crap plan, he realised – if this was the only hiding place in the tent, then even a clown would realise where he must be – but he did not appear to have any other option.

Someone or something started banging inside one of the barrels. He opened it; Stub, the dwarf, gagged and bound. He put the lid back on, much to the dwarf's distress. No time to save him now. The clown would be here any second. The only use the dwarf would be in that time-scale was as clown-food to use as a distraction while he made his escape. Maybe that should be his Plan B if all the other barrels were full as well.

He opened another barrel. Two terrified eyes peered up at him. He recognised the face; it was him, his younger self. After what that git had done to him – tricking him into signing up for the Games Lottery – he was quite tempted to throw him to the clown there and then. But if his former self died, then presumably he would fade out of existence with him. Best just to leave him in the barrel where he belonged.

The canvas at the side of the tent twisted. The clown was attempting to run through a wall, too stupid or high on blood-lust to work out how to pull aside the canvas at the door. It struggled to force a way through for a few seconds, and then changed tactic, opting to burrow beneath the canvas instead. Its talons appeared beneath the side of the tent, closely followed by the back of its bald white head. The wizard was maybe ten seconds from a vile and painful death at the hands of a circus freak. Time was running out.

The best course of action, of course, would have been for him to run out the door while the clown was wriggling into the tent. But Halfshaft was not

renowned for making sensible decisions under pressure (or at any other time, come to that). He opted instead to open one more barrel, with a view to hiding inside it and crying like a girl in the hope that the danger would pass.

He opened the lid of the third barrel. There was a blonde woman inside, unconscious or dead. No, not dead; she was gagged, which would surely have been unnecessary if she was no longer in the land of the living.

Halfshaft's heart sank. He recognised her. He was no longer too bothered about his own safety. As the clown leapt to its feet, ready to tear him into sorry wizardly pieces, the only thought in his head was that he wished that he had fled anywhere else but here. For, in his haste to escape the demented clown, he had led it straight to an unconscious and defenceless Amazon. He had led it to Takina.

#

He could not run; that would mean leaving Takina to the mercy of the clown, which he would never have done. He could not fight; no-one fights clowns and lives to tell the tale. So he took the only course of action left open to him. He jumped into the barrel, pulling the lid down after him.

He had come up with some pretty stupid plans in his time, but this had to be top of the list. The clown had seen him jump into the barrel. All it had to do was to pull open the lid, and he was history. He had hoped that maybe he could hold the lid closed, but there was no handle inside, nothing to pull upon to stop the lid from being opened from outside. All he could do was to wait for the clown to uncork him and devour him. And Takina, too.

There was not a great deal of room in the barrel. He was sitting on her, with his head pressed up against the lid. He could feel one bony Amazon elbow sticking into his bottom. He had often dreamt of being in close proximity to his partially-clad friend, but in his fantasies they had not been crammed together in a wooden barrel with a man-eating clown outside. Fantasies such as that catered for a very specialist market.

He jumped as the clown kicked the barrel. Then again. Then a furious scratching sound as the creature tried to claw its way through the sides.

Could it be that the clown was so stupid that it had failed to realise what the lid was for?

It howled; more wolf than human. Then more scratching, more insistent than before. It kicked the barrel again. Takina groaned through her gag beneath him, the sort of noise you make when having particularly distressing nightmares, or perhaps when a bony wizard is shoving his arse in your face when you're trying to sleep. He hoped he wasn't crushing her; stifling her. She was a warrior, and had always longed for a warrior's death; she would be mortified if she knew that her life might come to an end here in a barrel, suffocated beneath an elderly wizard's bottom.

Another kick. The wood splintered. Another, with the same result. It was only a matter of time. The clown was doing it the hard way, but another few blows and the barrel would split open, leaving the pair of them at its mercy.

He felt the urge to pray, but couldn't remember the names of any gods so opted to curse instead.

"Is that the best you've got, you pasty little freak? My mother could do better than that, and she's been dead forty years! And she's got rickets!"

Another kick. The barrel splintered, a large shard of wood bisecting his legs, coming dangerously close to turning him into an instant eunuch. Just when he thought his predicament couldn't get any worse.

"Go and put some clothes on, you dirty bugger! Running around, with that tiny little thing of yours flapping in the wind, frightening the ladies. You should be ashamed of yourself."

Yet another kick, and the barrel toppled on to its side. A yellow eye appeared at a gap between the planks, leering in at him. It tried to jam its grasping fingers through the opening. Long grubby nails raked his bearded cheek as it tried to gain purchase on his face. The clown gave a frustrated snort, and stepped back to give the barrel one final kick. The end was nigh.

Halfshaft closed his eyes. All he could hope was that by the time the creature had finished eating him, it would be too full to munch on Takina. It was not a particularly tubby clown. Maybe it had a dainty appetite.

No kick. He opened his eyes. He couldn't see the clown any more. But then the barrel started moving. Someone was rolling it. He closed his eyes again,

and thought furiously (which was very much his usual way of thinking). Maybe the clown was taking him outside to share him with his colleagues? A clown picnic on the grass by the river. In which case the chances of Takina being left unscathed were virtually zero, especially when she looked an awful lot more appetising than him.

There was only one thing to do. Wake her up. And when they got the barrel open, he would have to distract them as best he could while she made a run for it. It was a long shot, but it might just work.

“Takina!” he shouted. “Takina!”

The barrel stopped rolling. It was listening.

“Takina!” he whispered. No response.

The barrel was on the move again, faster this time. He rattled around between the lid and the slumbering Amazon, trying to remember which way was up.

He ground his spindly bottom into her face. She was not going to be remotely comfortable with this if she woke up, but he figured she would forgive him eventually if it saved her life. Still no response. What had they done to her to make her sleep this deeply?

He braced his hands against the side of the barrel, and tried to thrust his bottom downwards, hoping the impact against her head would wake her up. It was difficult to carry out this manoeuvre while he was being rolled around, and as he pumped his pelvis up and down in this foetal position it must have looked very much like he was trying to copulate with his own knees, but he carried on regardless, desperate to save her life whatever the cost to his dignity.

The barrel stopped. Picnic time.

The lid came off. He would soon find out how many clowns it had taken to open a barrel.

Time to jump out. Time to run around like a maniac, drawing them to him, hoping against hope that Takina would regain consciousness and flee to safety while they were eating him.

“What were you doing, just then?”

That voice. Familiar. Very familiar. Just a little jealous.

He looked out of the barrel.

Cherry.

“Were you trying to force that poor girl’s head up your bottom while she was asleep? There’s laws against that sort of thing, you know, you dirty old man.”

“No!” Halfshaft protested, not a little outraged. It was bad enough being accused of foul and unnatural practices when he was guilty of them, but to be accused when he was innocent was almost too much to bear. “I was just trying to wake her up!”

“Interesting way of doing it. We use alarm clocks where I come from.”

#

It was the morning of the Games.

All the Candidates were assembled in the Big Top, together with a few others besides. The cage had been dismantled; now that the wolves and the clowns had jumped ship, there was no longer any need for it.

It transpired that Cherry and Selene had between them dispatched the other clown, wrestling it to the ground and dashing its head against the bars of the cage. Cherry had then gone in search of Halfshaft. She had decided upon the stupidest place anyone would try to hide, and headed straight for it. Sure enough, she had found the wizard cowering in a barrel, being set upon by an angry clown. She had downed it with a punch to the temple, and rolled the barrel outside. The wood had split, and she could see that he was pressed up against some floozy inside. Takina had seemed the most likely floozy judging from all the flesh and squirrel-fur on display, though she couldn’t actually make out the woman’s face. The bottom had seemed about the right size, though, being several sizes larger than her own. She had thought it a bit much that her travelling companion had shacked up in a barrel with a half-naked scrubber, leaving her to battle rabid clowns virtually single-handed, and had decided to roll him around for a while before setting him

free. But he had then started grinding his arse into the poor girl's scalp, and she had decided that enough was enough. No-one deserved that, not even if they were one or two dress sizes larger than her. She had uncorked him before he tried anything more perverse still.

The Candidates had been grouped into pairs in the Big Top, each as spaced out from one another as they had been the night before. There were less of the originals now, though. The clowns had taken out the elf and the dwarf in the cage, before turning on each other in their bloodlust. As a result, the Ringmaster had had to call upon the reserves to replace the fallen. The new Candidates were not nearly as fearsome as their predecessors, which was very good news as far as the wizard was concerned. Better still, Takina was back off the subs bench, and back into the Games. Halfshaft would rather that she be almost anywhere else but here, but knew that if she had been left in that barrel then it was only a matter of time before the Circus fed her to some abomination or other in the cages. At least she had some sort of chance in the Games, especially if he did everything possible to ensure that she won at his expense.

He had still not had a chance to talk to her. She had remained stubbornly unconscious after the clown attack, despite his best attempts to shake her awake. Cherry had looked on, a pretty pout on her face, as he had attempted to rouse the Amazon.

“Maybe if you tried humping her again?” she had suggested. “That might perk her up a bit.”

Takina was now over the far side of the tent, still looking pretty groggy. That was bad. She would be fighting for her life in an hour or two, and she needed all her wits about her. He consoled himself with the fact that she was on Selene's team. He had been given to understand that the Amazons almost always won. By his reckoning, only the one remaining troll stood in their way.

The Ringmaster was acting very curiously. He stood facing a man with a black box on his shoulder. The box had a circular piece of glass set into it, only a couple of inches across at most, which he was pointing towards the circus-man. The Ringmaster addressed the box as if it were a person, never taking his eyes from it, even when he was gesturing towards the Candidates ranged behind him.

“Ladies and gentleman,” he was saying, “after yesterday’s unscheduled and spectacular events, this promises to be the best Games ever staged. The wolves remain at large. The clowns remain at large. And we have some brand new Candidates for you, to replace the ones who were torn to shreds before your very eyes just twelve hours ago. So let’s meet them all, one team at a time, and see what they have to say for themselves.”

Two hunchbacks ushered up the first pair of Candidates. Bastard and Halfshaft’s younger self (who had replaced the absconded troll). Young Halfshaft tried to keep as far away from Bastard as possible, as the troll did not appear to have taken to his new partner at all. They were directed to stand in front of the strange black box, and the Ringmaster turned his attention to them.

“Bastard and Halfshaft. Would you tell the viewers back at home what your tactics are for the Games?”

“I’m gonna rip everyone’s head off, and eat them. That little wizard runt over there, included. And then I’m gonna go and find my mate.”

“How can we lose with a cunning plan like that?” Young Halfshaft nodded. “The man’s a military genius.”

“Shut your bastard face,” instructed Bastard, not being much of a team-player. Young Halfshaft decided to acquiesce all the same.

They were ushered away, and the next contestants were directed to take their places in front of the black box.

“Fat Dora and Muriel,” the Ringmaster remarked to the black box.

“My name is not Fat Dora!” objected the over-sized witch. “It’s not fat-anything!”

“Huge Dora might be nearer the mark,” stated her rather bitchy companion. “Obese Dora. Dora-the-Walking-Heart-attack. Dora-Who-Ate-All-The-Pies. Take your pick, Sonny-boy.”

“You anorexic little twat!” Fat Dora objected. “Just cos you’re all shrivelled up, like a flag-pole on a diet. You’ve always been jealous of my curves, you nasty little bitch. You want force-feeding, you do.”

“Don’t you speak to me like that, you old slapper. I’d shove my broomstick up your big fat ass, but it would take a large search-party and a week of pot-holing to get it back again.”

“I’m going to have to move you along, ladies,” the Ringmaster interjected. “No bad language here on Channel Seventeen. This is good, wholesome family entertainment. We have children tuning in for the Games.”

The next Candidates were introduced. “Takina and Selene.”

“Selene and Takina,” the Amazon Queen corrected. “Royalty is always given precedence.”

Takina turned away from the box, giving Halfshaft an encouraging “hang-on-in-there” smile. He smiled back. He was desperate to talk to her. He had so much to ask. First of which, it had to be said, was why she had tried to escape without him.

“You are a very lucky woman,” the Ringmaster told her. “Under normal circumstances, you would have lost your place in the Games. But we seem to be a few Candidates down after yesterday’s exciting events, so you’re back off the sub’s bench and in with a chance of Glory.”

She shrugged, still disorientated. Selene decided to fill the conversational void.

“We will win today. Amazons always win the Games. Women are superior to men, and we are the only all-woman team here.”

“Thanks for that, you malicious tart,” Fat Dora shouted.

“I do not think of you as a woman,” Selene retorted. “More of a sack of wrinkly flab.”

“This sack of wrinkly flab is going to smack you in the chops if you’re not careful!”

“Go on,” Muriel egged her on. “Tug her tits off! That’ll wipe the smile off her face!”

“Family entertainment, remember,” chided the Ringmaster. “You can’t say “tits” on Channel Seventeen. I think we had better move on. Stub and Betty, please.”

The two dwarfs scurried forwards, casting anxious glances around them at the other Candidates, as if expecting them to leap into premature action and annihilate them before the Games had even started.

“Another new recruit,” the Ringmaster advised the black box, gesturing towards Stub. “Are you two getting to know each other?”

“He’s very handsome,” cooed Betty. “Look at that big bushy beard. I could eat him all up, in more ways than one.”

“If there’s anyone who’s going to be eating him, it’s me!” shouted Bastard. “Not that you two tiny little creatures would fill me up for long!”

“And do you find your new team-mate similarly attractive?” the Ringmaster enquired. “Any chance of some love interest here?”

Stub shuddered. “Not likely. I like them tall and leggy. She’d do if I was desperate, but I’ve got my eyes on the Amazons, to tell you the truth.”

It was the turn of Selene and Takina to shudder. Neither seemed to take the compliment in the spirit it was intended. Short and bearded was not a recipe for the perfect Amazon mate.

“Any tactics you’d like to share with us?” whispered the Ringmaster. “Our little secret.” He winked at the black box.

“I’m gonna jump him while he’s asleep,” Betty drooled. “Get myself some hot dwarf action, whether he likes it or not. Show him what he’s missing.”

“Maybe if I get you an Amazon wig,” Stub pondered. “And if you covered your face with your hands. That might work. If I was asleep at the time.”

“Give us a kiss,” she begged. “Just one, and I promise not to jump you when you’re snoozing.”

“No tongues,” the Ringmaster put in. “Family entertainment, don’t forget.”

“Leave me be, woman,” Stub retorted. “I’d rather snog that wizard over there, than pucker up for you.”

“I think you’ve pulled,” Cherry told Halfshaft. “Mind you, he’s more attractive than that Amazon you were dry-humping in the barrel.”

“I was trying to wake her up!” Halfshaft snapped. The black-box swung towards him. He gave it an uncomfortable wave, and looked at his feet until he was sure that it had lost interest in him and moved on.

“Roland and Cartwright.”

The elf. And Ditherer! Of all the people they could have found to substitute for the deceased elfish Candidate, they had picked him! Quite where they had got him from was anyone’s guess.

“Another late substitution,” the Ringmaster advised the black box. “How do you rate your chances today?”

Cartwright shrugged. “I don’t rightly know why I’m here, Uncle, if the truth be told. One minute they’re locking me up in a cell with that masturbating wizard over there, and threatening to whack me in the testicles with a pitchfork; next minute, they’re telling me I’m free to go; next minute they’re telling me that that the wizard has disappeared on the way to the Games and that I might be needed after all. And then you jab me with that black stick of yours, and I wake up in a barrel. You ought to make your minds up, you do!”

“And how about you, Roland? Confident of success?”

Roland shook his head. “We’re doomed.”

The Ringmaster frowned. “That’s hardly the spirit, is it? You have as much chance as anyone.”

“I’m going through a bit of a bad patch. My wife’s left me. My children hate me. My team-mate’s been eaten by a clown. I don’t really see the point of all this, to be honest. Doomed.”

The Ringmaster looked as if he was considering prodding the depressed elf with his cane to liven him up a little, but cast an uncomfortable glance towards the black box and opted to move on to the next Candidates instead.

“Ladies and gentleman, I give you Halfshaft and Cherry.”

“Show-time,” beamed Cherry, as she ushered him into the limelight.

#

Halfshaft squinted into the lens of the black box, trying to work out precisely to whom they were talking. It would be powerful magic indeed to shrink people sufficiently to fit them inside, but what other explanation could there be? Whatever else he might be, the Ringmaster was not stupid, and he clearly thought he was talking to someone in there. However tiny they might be.

The Ringmaster had just asked him a question. Unfortunately, he had no idea what it was, having been too busy trying to unlock the secrets of the black box. He stared at the Ringmaster, hoping that he would repeat it. The Ringmaster stared back at him, resolutely refusing to bail him out.

He looked to Cherry for help. She gave him an encouraging smile. He looked back to the Ringmaster.

“I’m sorry,” said the circus-man. “I didn’t think it was a difficult question. What’s your answer, then?”

“No?” ventured Halfshaft, hoping that this might be an appropriate response to whatever he had just been asked.

“Not at all?” asked the Ringmaster in surprise.

“Well maybe just a tiny bit,” the wizard back-tracked an inch or two.

“He’s lying,” said Cherry, with what sounded like a forced laugh. “Of course he fancies me!”

Halfshaft panicked. So that was the question! He had just embarrassed his team-mate in front of everyone in the tent, along with all the tiny little people in the box (whose opinion seemed to matter to her very much). Actually, humiliated her might be nearer the mark. She was very conscious of her appearance; even someone as unperceptive as him had been able to work that one out. And he had just declared to the world that she was unattractive. It was bad enough that he was going to throw the Games so that the pair of them would lose, but he had now quite literally added insult to injury.

The obvious thing to do was to admit that he had misheard the question, and to assure everyone who would listen that he fancied her very much. Which was, after all, very much the truth. Not in the same way as Takina of

course; it was different with her. He would have married Takina tomorrow if she had miraculously expressed an interest in wedding a testy old wizard with arthritic joints. But he would never have married Cherry even if she had declared her undying love for him. The girl was way too high maintenance for him. That didn't mean that he wouldn't have jumped her, though, given half a chance.

But Halfshaft being Halfshaft, his first instinct was to save himself. Admitting he had misheard would make him look stupid in front of all the tiny box-people; best to just explain in a sentence or two why she was not to his particular taste, and then move on to the next question. Everyone would surely be happy that way.

"She's quite pretty and all that, but she's not my particular -"

"*Quite* pretty?" hissed Cherry. "Have you seen me? Look at this face! You're either mad or blind or both!"

"And a bit too busty for my liking," he continued, determined to justify himself. "I prefer my women to be a little more.....aerodynamic."

Cherry stared at him in incredulous disgust. She couldn't have looked more outraged if he had just expressed a desire to nosh off her nan. "Aerodynamic? What's that supposed to mean?"

"You're a little – top-heavy for me. All very nice and all that, but not my particular cup of tea."

"Anything else wrong with me?" she enquired icily. "I take it that my arse meets with your approval? And I'd advise you to think very, very carefully before you answer that."

"Language," cautioned the Ringmaster. "Why does no-one seem to be able to keep it in mind that this is a family show? We've had over three thousand complaints about the witches already."

"Your bottom's fine," Halfshaft shrugged. "Very pleasant."

"Pleasant!" she shrieked. It was the first time he had seen her so rattled, and it took him by surprise. "You think my arse is "pleasant"? That's not what you said yesterday, was it?"

“I don’t recollect saying anything about your bottom yesterday, or any other day,” he said defensively. But he knew what was coming.

“Yesterday,” she said through gritted teeth, “you told me that I had the most incredible arse that womankind has ever been blessed with. That you wanted to fall down on your knees and worship it. That you wanted to mould it into a statue and put it on every street corner in the world. That you wanted to give it its own name.”

The wizard shifted uncomfortably, deciding whether to deny everything. She was making him look like a complete and utter pervert. Which he was, of course, but he didn’t want the people in the black box knowing that.

“That’s enough,” said the Ringmaster. “She’s going to get us closed down if she keeps on saying that word.” He beckoned to the hunchbacks. “Take her away.”

Halfshaft sighed a giant sigh of relief. This particular ordeal appeared to be over. But Cherry had other ideas.

“And then later on, in the Big Top, you said something else, didn’t you? Can you remember what you said to me?”

Two hunchbacks grabbed her arms and started to frog-march her away. Halfshaft cast an anxious look towards Takina, and then back to Cherry again. “Let’s talk about this later,” he squirmed.

Cherry was very nearly out the tent now. She raised her voice, determined to be heard whilst still on camera, to repair the damage her wizard friend had done to her reputation before she was separated from her audience.

“You said that my arse was better than Takina’s,” she shouted. “Incomparably better! So if you’re now disrespecting my bottom, Heaven knows what you must think of hers!”

She disappeared through the exit. Halfshaft looked at the black box, and gave it a weak smile. “Incomparably better!” Cherry screamed again from outside, while Halfshaft shuffled around awkwardly by the Ringmaster’s side.

“Any other questions?” he asked.

“No,” replied the Ringmaster. “I think we’ve heard more than enough from you for the time being.”

#

Back at their tent, Cherry was sulking. Halfshaft tried to explain himself, that it was all just an unfortunate misunderstanding, but she wasn’t having any of it. It wasn’t until their Games’ costumes arrived that she perked up.

“Have you brought me something pretty?” she asked the hunchback who carried the crate into the tent. “I need cheering up.”

“No cross-dressing. The Management won’t like it,” said the hunchback, viewing Halfshaft with distaste. He left the crate on the ground, and left without another word, before the wizard had had a chance to challenge him upon his curious remark.

“He was chatty,” she joked, back to her old self again. “You just can’t shut these hunchbacks up, sometimes.”

She threw open the trunk, and started to rummage around inside it. “Ooh, sparkly!” she cooed, like a little girl going through her mother’s jewellery box. “Bit too much of it, though. Come and help me look. I’m after something skimpy or smaller.”

Halfshaft would never understand women. One moment, she was fuming about his behaviour (probably with good cause, he had to admit). The next, she was all smiles, burrowing through the contents of the trunk as if she hadn’t a care in the world. Women were good at some things, granted, like dancing and gossiping and needle-work, but they were spectacularly bad at endurance-sulking.

“What do you think?” she asked, holding a thin strip of blue lace across her bust. “Too transparent? Too much nipple? I want to say “Sexy” without saying “Slut”.

Halfshaft shrugged. “I’ve got no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Typical man. Does this say “sexy” to you?”

He nodded.

“Does it say “slut”, though?”

He didn't know how to answer this question. He didn't want to upset her again. It wasn't fair of her to ask him a question without giving him some sort of hint about what response she required. “This one looks slutty, doesn't it?” That sort of thing. Then he could just nod his head, and everyone would be happy. But she had given him no clues at all.

“What do *you* think?” he asked cautiously.

She laughed, and tossed the silk back into the trunk. “Slutty,” she said.

A thought occurred. “Is there anything in there for me? Only I thought I'd get to wear my own robes. I don't like the idea of wearing someone else's.”

“There's plenty in here for you. Come and choose. No robes, though. That's not really the look they're after.”

“The look?”

She screeched in delight. “Metal knickers!” She held up her trophy, the tiny under-garment sparkling in the light like a disco-globe. “Drop-dead sexy or what?”

“Not slutty?” Halfshaft ventured.

“Who gives a toss!” she exclaimed. “They're small and they're shiny. That's all I need to know!”

She dived into the trunk, scrabbling around in a frenzied search for the matching top, squealing in excitement when she found it. It was the most excited he had ever seen her. Had she found matching shoes, she would most likely have fainted with the emotion of it all.

“We are so going to win today!” she told him. “How could we lose wearing these?”

“We're not wearing those. I doubt I'd get into them even if I wanted to!”

“Maybe if you asked me nicely,” she joked.

He smiled, in spite of himself. Today was going to be one of the worst days of his life. It was also almost certainly going to be the final day of his life.

But somehow her childish exhilaration at finding shiny knickers was so infectious that he couldn't help sharing it. He might have even gone as far as a full-blown laugh if he wasn't still worried that she'd make them wear matching outfits.

"Your turn," she said, shuffling reluctantly away from the box. He peered into it with considerably less enthusiasm. "I'm not wearing a bikini," he told her. "No matter what you say."

"Fair enough," she shrugged. "I wouldn't want you out-doing me anyway, you sexy beast."

He gave the garments an experimental prod with a bony index finger. "They're very small. Most of them appear to be handkerchiefs."

"Let me help." She was back in the box with relish, producing one item of unsuitable clothing after another for his consideration.

"What about this?"

"It's tiny."

"This?"

"Too gold."

"This one's perfect!"

"It's crotchless!"

"They're eye-holes, you twat! Crotchless knickers tend to need just the one opening, unless there's something you're not telling me."

"I'm still not wearing it."

She continued to work her way through the trunk, until there was only one male outfit left inside it. Grinning, she held up a shocking pink thong and a matching cowboy hat.

"That's it?" he asked. "Nothing else left in the trunk?"

She shook her head, her eyes sparkling with mischief. "This would suit you perfectly. It's very much your colour."

He checked the trunk, desperate to find something else to wear. He rummaged round the remaining clothes, but they were all for women (not that there was an awful lot of difference between these female items and the outfit she was gleefully waggling in his face; if anything, the thong seemed the most effeminate of the lot).

“That really is it, then? Nothing else to choose from at all?”

“I’m afraid not,” she smirked.

“Okay,” he replied, shaking his head in despair. “I’ll go for the crotchless knickers, then.”

#

Matters became so much worse when it emerged that she expected him to try on the outfit in front of her. She was out of her own clothes the moment he had “chosen” his outfit, squeezing her curves into the metal bikini, which looked even tinier now than it had done when she was waving it under his nose. He stared at her as she hopped into the bottoms, totally unselfconscious about being naked in front of him. She had told him how perfect she was on every possible occasion, and having seen her “in the flesh” he was very much inclined to agree.

She looked up, catching him in mid ogle. He turned away quickly, trying unsuccessfully to stifle a blush. Busted.

“That was a bit blatant, wasn’t it?” she teased. “Men your age usually have a dirty little peek when they think I’m not looking. You’re just straight in there, though, you old pervert.”

“What do you mean, “men my age usually have a peak”? How many men my age have seen you – seen you -”

“Naked?”

He nodded, too embarrassed to repeat the word after her.

“Oh, lots. Men of every age, to be honest.” She wriggled into her sparkling bra as she spoke. “Some of the places I go, clothes are optional, and I don’t

much see the point of them myself. Unless their shiny, of course, but that kind of goes without saying.”

“I wasn’t looking,” he said, remembering that he hadn’t actually denied that yet. “I thought you’d finished, that’s all.”

“You’d better have been looking,” she retaliated. “Or gay. I don’t mind which. But I refuse to be ignored by a heterosexual man when I’m butt-naked. Or a lesbian, come to that. As long as they’re paying me attention, I don’t care who’s having a sneaky peak. Now come on, Big Guy. Let’s get you out of those boring old clothes.”

“What, here?”

“Unless you want to strip outside? Maybe the hunchbacks could help you? I think Crookback’s taken a bit of a fancy to you, you know. That’s why he’s wearing the blouse. He wants to make himself pretty for you.”

“Turn around then.”

“Seriously? You’re not shy are you?”

He nodded. She raised her eyes to the Heavens. “Men! You can’t live with them; you can’t check them out when they’re taking their pants off.”

Once her back was safely turned, he removed his robes. He sniffed them; they still smelled faintly of urine from when his younger self had emptied the contents of his chamber-pot on him, what seemed like a very long time ago. Perhaps it was time for a change of clothes. It was just unfortunate that his new costume was quite so hideous.

He tried to get into his outfit, without much success. He had never seen anything quite like it before. It consisted of a vest and very tight shorts, but all in one strange looking garment. The fabric was like nothing he had ever come across before. It was black, and a little like highly-polished shiny leather. It made squeaky noises as he tried to pull it over his body. He got it over his pelvis with difficulty, tucking himself in with caution, and stretching the shorts over as much of his scrawny bottom as he could cover. He then tried to wriggle his arms into it without success. It squeaked and it squealed, but it resolutely resisted his best efforts to force himself into it. It was hard enough getting it over his elbows, yet alone his shoulders. When

he finally got both forearms into it, it was so tight that it pinned his arms to his sides, frustrating his best attempts to wriggle any further into it.

“Cherry?”

“Is it safe to turn round? I wouldn’t want to catch sight of your little wrinkle.”

“I need some help here.”

She turned to face him, and howled with laughter. He stood before her, in tiny latex pants, his arms pinioned to his sides by his vest, his bony chest on reluctant display, his hands sticking out at right angles from his body as he continued his doomed attempt at burrowing his way into his costume.

“You look like a penguin gone wrong!” she cried, tears rolling down her face.

He had no idea what a penguin was – either a right one or a wrong one – but he suspected that the simile was not a particularly flattering one. He was not happy. He didn’t like people laughing at him, especially not people whose own bodies he had been ogling not five minutes earlier. How could he retaliate, making derogatory comments about her own appearance, when she had caught him dribbling over her moments before? He was something of an expert at sarcasm, and if there was one thing he had learnt, it was that when you are pulling someone to pieces, you make it plausible. He had nowhere to go with this. So he regarded her in frosty silence, waiting for her merriment to burn itself out.

She approached him, grabbed his wrists, and pulled them up in the air. The vest screeched (as did he, as the fabric nearly raked the skin off his arms as it shot up towards his shoulders) but it did the trick. The vest was on. For better or for worse, his outfit was complete.

“I’m sorry,” she said, although the fact that she was still chuckling suggested to him that she was not entirely genuine. “I’ve upset you.”

“No,” he pouted.

“Friends again?” she held out a hand for him to shake. He thought of ignoring it. But it was very difficult ignoring a beautiful woman in a miniscule metallic bikini, when she was standing there in front of him, all

legs and tits (and certain other parts of wizardly interest in-between). He gave her outstretched palm a brief pump after all.

“What can I do to make it up to you?” she asked sweetly.

And if he was thirty or forty years younger, he might just have told her.

#

The moment had finally come. After all that waiting, all that apprehension, all that *fear*, the Games were about to begin.

The Candidates lined up across the pathway leading into the Great Forest. Two dwarfs, one grey-bearded and one white-bearded, sat on an earthen mound just off the beaten track, watching events unfold with interest.

“I don’t think the dwarfs will last long this year,” said white-beard, who always told the truth. “They’re a pretty sorry looking pair, if you ask me.”

“Doesn’t that wizard in the black latex leotard look dignified,” replied his grey-bearded brother, who always, always lied. “His mother would be very proud of him right now.”

Takina stood nearby. He tried to approach her, but the look Selene gave him dissuaded him, and he slunk back to Cherry’s side. It would not do for him to be strangled before the Games had even started.

“How come they’re still in their furs?” he asked Cherry. “I thought you said we weren’t allowed to wear our own clothes?”

“No, I didn’t. I said there were no robes in the trunk. You never asked me if you could wear your own.”

He gave her his most withering look, but it just made her grin. “You mean to tell me that I could have been wearing my own clothes? Why did you make me wear this – thing?”

“We’re Team Sexy. Team Sexy doesn’t wear a down-to-the-ankles dress which smells of stale urine.”

“Team Sexy doesn’t make a middle-aged wizard wear a leotard!”

“Middle-aged?”

“Shut up!”

His one consolation was that she had not made him wear the matching face mask with the eye holes cut out of it. It would have made him look like a gimp doing P.E. lessons. He might have been tempted to wear it had he thought for one moment that it would have disguised his true identity, but the straggly beard would rather have rather given the game away.

He looked around at the other Candidates. He sighed. They were all wearing their own clothes, except Ditherer, who had opted for a lime green mankini and – for some inexplicable reason – a pirate’s eye-patch. And to think that the Ringmaster had declared this to be a family show; one slip in an outfit like that, and the little children he had mentioned would get an awful lot more than they bargained for! He laughed in spite of himself. As long as Ditherer was alive, there would at least be one person with a more ridiculous costume than his.

There were several of the black boxes around the clearing, all with their little glass lenses pointing at one or other of the Candidates. Whenever one was pointed in Cherry’s directions, she started striking very strange poses, sticking out her chest or her bottom, licking her lips, rubbing her hands down her body. Women could be very strange sometimes.

She nudged him, urging him to do likewise. He would happily have run his hands along her body, but he was not about to touch himself up (not in front of witnesses, anyway). It had gone very badly last time he had attempted it.

“What are you doing?” he asked her, genuinely puzzled. “And would you please stop rubbing yourself? You’re making me a bit – flushed, shall we say? And I’ve got nowhere to hide in these shorts.”

“Work it,” she advised, turning her back on one of the black boxes, and wriggling her bottom at it. “Get them on your side. They always make sure the viewers’ favourites survive to the end, trust me.”

“Work it?” he repeated, totally mystified. “Viewers? What are you going on about now? There’s no-one here yet.”

“You’re so sweet when you’re baffled,” she teased, and worked it all the more with the puzzled wizard watching on.

“Ladies and gentleman,” said the Ringmaster, addressing yet another of the black boxes. “The moment you have all been waiting for. I give you, the Forty Third Hedral Games, brought to you by Circus Entertainments and Channel Seventeen. We’re broadcasting live to one hundred and thirty four galaxies right now, with an estimated audience in excess of three trillion people.

The Candidates need no further introduction; you’ve seen them all at work and at play already. So let’s move straight on to the Rules.”

Halfshaft gave Cherry a prod, as she was shaking her playful booty at Camera Six. “Cherry. You might want to listen to this.”

“You listen,” she replied. “I’m busy gaining us Brownie Points here.”

“Brownie points?”

But she had returned to “working” the black box, and he knew that it would take an earthquake (or a rack of shiny clothes) to distract her now.

“The first rule is that there are no rules,” the Ringmaster announced. “Once they’re in the Forest, they can do what they like, when they like, with whom they like. Subject, of course, to there being no swearing or nudity before 9pm Andularian summer time. We wouldn’t want those cute little reptile children getting upset now, would we?”

He winked theatrically at Camera 14, before pressing on with his script.

“The second rule is that only two Candidates get out alive.”

“How can you have a second rule when the first rule is that there are no rules?” grumbled the wizard, but no-one was listening. Okay, he was being pedantic, but being on the verge of certain death whilst dressed in a tiny black outfit was never going to bring out the best in him.

“There is a clearing in the Forest, with a certain hut in it, a hut you’ll all be familiar with at home. Inside, is salvation for two Candidates, and two Candidates alone. Find it, and be victorious. Everyone else must die.”

“I’m not too keen on the second rule,” Halfshaft told Cherry, but she was too busy working the audience to hear him. “I knew he should have stuck with Rule One.”

The Ringmaster turned away and viewed the Candidates, trying to mask his disappointment at the calibre of the crop Fate had provided him with this year.

“Any questions?” he asked.

“Do we get a tea-break, Uncle?” Ditherer enquired, whilst adjusting the lower section of his mankini to try to cover up a hairy left testicle which was attempting to make a break for the outside world.

“Any sensible questions?” the Ringmaster sighed.

“When do we get our head-start?” Selene asked. “My prize for winning the Speed Contest.”

“You don’t. You forfeited it when Takina tried to escape. Any other questions?”

Silence.

The Ringmaster turned back to the black-box, sweeping one arm theatrically in the direction of the Forest and the other – in an equally showman-like way – towards the Candidates. He held the pose, like a demented and rather sinister sundial.

“Then; let the Games commence!”

He looked expectantly towards the Candidates. They stared back at him, bewildered expressions on their faces.

“Let the Games commence!” he declared again, a little louder this time.

They exchanged looks. There were a few shrugs here and there.

“Let the Games commence!” he bellowed.

“And?” enquired Halfshaft. “What are we supposed to do now?”

“The Forest!” shouted the Ringmaster. “Run into the Forest. Kill each other!”

“Well why didn’t he say so?” grumbled Fat Dora as she waddled off, her fellow Candidates following along behind her.

“You might want to split up,” the Ringmaster called after them. “If you all stay together on the same team, it’s going to make for rather tedious television!”

He shook his head. This was going to be the worst games ever; he could feel it in his bones. He should have stuck with presenting children’s telly in Andromeda; you knew where you were with that.

#

One moment she was walking along with the rest of them; the next, Takina was off again, making another bid to escape. But this time, it was Selene who caught her. The Amazon Queen hauled her down before she had made ten yards, pinning her to the ground as she tried to struggle back to her feet. The mercenaries were closing in already, but backed off when they saw the situation was under control. Selene whispered something in Takina’s ear, and she went limp. She nodded. She was allowed back on to her feet.

“Keep walking,” Cherry instructed Halfshaft. “They’re distracted. That gives us a head-start.”

“I need to help her.”

“Look; she’s fine now. Come on. We’ve got work to do.”

There were several packages on the ground between them and the forest. Bastard was unwrapping one of them already, as Young Halfshaft looked nervously on.

“Presents?” asked Halfshaft.

Cherry rolled her eyes. “Weapons,” she said.

“Let’s go then!”

“Theoretically, it would be safer to leave them there, and head off into the Forest. If we stay here, there’s a risk that we’d get executed before we even make it into the trees.”

“We run then?”

“Not likely,” she grinned. “Where’s the fun in that?”

They approached a bundle. Halfshaft looked over towards Bastard. He had pulled the wrapping from his package to reveal a tray of fruit. Young Halfshaft went to grab an apple, but the troll pulled the tray away from him, and flung it away, nearly decapitating Roland the Elf in the process. “We don’t eat fruit,” he instructed. “We eat people.”

Cherry pouted in disappointment as she removed the wrapping from their package. A tin of white paint. “What are we supposed to do with this? It’s not even a proper colour!”

“Maybe there’s something else inside? A weapon or something?”

“Maybe,” she replied dubiously. “We’ll take it with us. I’ll find a use for it one way or another.”

Selene was amongst the bundles, searching for something in particular. She pulled a long package away from Stub, who cursed her but was wise enough not to attempt to retrieve it. She removed the wrapping. A bow and arrows. She smiled, and turned to face Cherry.

“Okay, time to go,” Cherry said. She seized the wizard by the hand, and made a dash for the cover of the trees. “Quick as you can.”

Halfshaft looked over his shoulder. Selene had drawn the bow already, and was taking aim. It was hard to tell whether it was him or Cherry she was targeting, but either way it did not look good for him. He tried to fight down the panic. He had resolved to die here in the forest, to let Takina win the Games and gain her freedom, but self-preservation was a hard instinct to ignore. He put his head down and ran like buggery.

There was an elf barring their way. Roland the Depressed. He held a dagger, jabbing it towards them in an intimidating manner. Halfshaft’s first impulse was to turn and flee, but Selene was behind them, arrow at the ready. There was nowhere left to run.

He looked over his shoulder again. Selene was on the ground, Takina on top of her. The two of them were scrambling around on the grass, Takina desperately attempting to prevent her Queen from reaching for the bow which lay on the ground nearby. Not for the first time, she had saved his life, at least for the time being.

They were near the relative safety of the Forest. It split into two paths ahead of them. He knew from previous experience that one of them was safer than the other, but he was bugged if he could remember which was which. It was academic, anyway. Roland would be gut them before they got there.

“Have we started yet?” Roland called out to them as they ran towards him. “Are we allowed to kill each other before we enter the Forest?”

“No,” Cherry shouted, as she pulled Halfshaft along behind her. “Not until we get in the trees.”

The elf turned to flee into the Forest. She was on him in an instant, swinging the paint-tin at his head with such force that it knocked him out cold. “I lied.” She seized the dagger from him, passing it to Halfshaft. “Hold this.”

He took it from her.

“And this,” she instructed, passing him the tin of paint. “I told you I’d find a use for it, didn’t I?”

Selene was back on her feet. Takina lay on the ground, holding her stomach in pain. The Amazon Queen was drawing her bow again. They were still twenty feet away from the Forest. So near, but yet so far.

Cherry had Roland under the arms, as if she was going to drag him into the forest with them. Halfshaft wracked his brains, but failed to come up with a rational explanation as to what use an unconscious elf might be to them. Yes, she clearly had her needs, but now hardly seemed the time or the place to satisfy them.

“Hide behind me!” she told him. “Now!”

He did as he was told. Experience had taught him that it was by far the safest option when women used that tone to him.

He put Cherry between him and the arrow. This may have been unchivalrous, but it was safe. He watched from over her shoulder as Selene pulled back her arm, the bow-string tight against her chiselled cheek. He could see the smile on her lips even from this distance. And then the arrow was airborne.

Cherry hauled Roland up into the air just in time. The arrow thudded into his chest, killing him instantly. Halfshaft whooped in delight. He went to

give Cherry a congratulatory hug, but she was off again, heading towards the left hand path. Behind them, Selene was drawing her bow for a second time.

“What now?” he asked her, as he jogged along in her wake, dagger and paint-pot in hand.

“We run,” she replied. “And if we’re really, really lucky, we get to keep running until everyone else is dead.”

#

It wasn’t long before they realised that they were being followed. As Halfshaft puffed along in pursuit of Cherry’s metal-bikini-clad bottom, he heard something pounding along the path behind him. Something big.

“Faster,” Cherry called back to him. “Whatever it is, it’s catching up on us.”

“If you remember, my speed training didn’t go all that well. I’m a knackered old wizard. This is the quickest I can go.”

She stopped. “We should hide then. How are you at climbing trees?”

“*These* trees?” asked an incredulous Halfshaft. He looked around at the withered black trunks around him. On this part of the path, the lowest branches were maybe twenty or thirty feet above ground-level, which was actually something of a relief. On a previous outing in the Forest, he had got lost amongst the trees, and the branches had tried to pull him to pieces. They had a life of their own these trees, and it wasn’t a particularly friendly one.

He shook his head. “Not unless you can find one low enough for you to give me a bunk-up.”

She smiled. “A bunk-up? At a time like this?”

“You know very well what I mean.”

“Well if we can’t run, and we can’t hide, we’re going to have to fight.”

Halfshaft launched himself at a tree-trunk, trying desperately to scramble up it. However remote the prospect of scaling it, it had to be better than facing whichever Candidate was stalking them. His momentum took him a yard or two up it, before gravity kicked in, and brought him back down at speed. He tried again. He could hear their pursuer stamping along the pathway, getting closer and closer, and he had a nasty feeling from the noise it was making that it was Bastard. Out of all the Candidates, Bastard was the one he was least comfortable about fighting. At least Selene wouldn't eat him alive.

Three times he tried to fling himself up the tree-trunk; three times he failed dismally. Cherry made no effort to follow suit, knowing a lost cause when she saw one. She just stood to one side of the tree trunk, stifling a smirk, as he tried to achieve the impossible.

“What?” he snapped at her. “What’s so funny?”

“A wizard in a leotard trying to mount a tree,” she replied, with an almost-straight face. “You can stop now. I don’t think we need to hide after all.”

Halfshaft cast a reluctant glance down the pathway, as if convinced that as long as he didn’t look at the troll, it couldn’t hurt him. He was expecting to see Bastard bearing down on them, possibly with some recently unwrapped weapon in his hands, ready to avenge himself for the catapult-incident on the river bank. But it wasn’t the troll running towards them. It was something far, far more irritating than that.

“Oh no,” wailed Halfshaft. “Not him!”

Ditherer had come to kill them, dressed in his lime-green mankini and pirate eye-patch. The only saving grace was that by the time he had made up his mind how to dispatch them, they would most probably be two or three miles away.

#

“Kill you?” repeated Ditherer, when challenged by Halfshaft. “Why-ever would I want to kill you?”

“That’s kind of the point of the Games,” the wizard pointed out. “And you might want revenge for me giving you my number. Or maybe you’re just tetchy because my outfit’s the only one in the Forest which is almost as ridiculous as yours!”

“I don’t do killing, Uncle,” protested Ditherer. “I might dish out the odd Chinese Burn, or give the occasional “wedgie”, but nothing worse than that. My old Mum used to say that violence never solved anything. That didn’t stop her smacking the crap out of me when I was naughty, of course, but that was just her haemorrhoids talking. They played her up something chronic, they did.”

“Your mother had talking haemorrhoids?” teased Cherry.

“No, they didn’t actually talk,” Ditherer conceded. “I might have given you the wrong impression there. They just irritated her poor, saintly bottom, and made her grumpy from time to time.”

“What do you want, then?” Halfshaft interrupted. There was only so much of an explanation he could take of the problems Ditherer’s mother had had with her bottom.

“Company. My friend, Roland, seems to have an Amazon arrow sticking out of his chest. I gave him a good shake, but he’s still got his eyes closed. I reckon he might be dead, God rest his little elfish soul. I don’t want to be wandering round these woods on my own; it might be dangerous. So I thought I’d tag along with you two, if that’s okay? We could be Forest-buddies.”

“One moment, please. We need to confer.”

Halfshaft took Cherry’s arm, and pulled her to one side. “What are we going to do with him?”

“Adopt him or kill him. It’s your call.”

“I don’t want to adopt him. He’s really irritating.”

“Kill him, then.”

“It would be like drowning a puppy.”

Cherry shrugged. “He’s got to go sometime. It’s him or us, remember.”

“Maybe he’d be useful. Three heads are better than one.”

She looked doubtful. “He doesn’t *look* useful. He’s wearing a luminous mankini and a pirate’s eye-patch. I guess maybe we could use him as a decoy, though. Feed him to the wolves to slow them down when they pick up our scent.”

“Wolves?” asked the wizard. “None of the Candidates are wolves.”

“The wolves I freed from the Circus came from here. They’ll be back here by now. Homing instinct, and all that. They didn’t look particularly well fed. It’s only a matter of time before we bump into them. The clowns, too.”

“Clowns don’t come from forests!”

“They’re not clowns though, are they? They’re wolves inside clowns. Haven’t you got that yet?”

Ditherer wandered over. “What are we talking about?”

“Whether or not we should kill you,” Cherry informed him.

“Well that’s not very nice, is it?” Ditherer scolded. “I come over here, offering you the hand of friendship, and you start whispering away in the corner, deciding whether to kill me or not. Well, if you’re talking about me, you can do it in front of me. Go on. Make your decision, and have done with it.”

“I’m sorry.” Halfshaft apologised. “It’s nothing personal. It’s just that -”

“I can’t believe that you’re thinking of murdering me in the woods. Talk about adding insult to injury. Or injury to insult. Or whatever way round it is. I thought we were friends. I thought we’d be Forest-buddies!”

“What do you reckon then?” Cherry enquired. “Shall we do him in?”

Halfshaft wriggled uncomfortably, feeling that he had been rather put on the spot. It was bad enough deciding whether his oafish prison-mate should die, but to do it in his presence was more than he could bear. There was no hiding place this way; no prospect of blaming Cherry for the decision. He looked over at her, pleading for her to make the decision for him, but she just looked back at him, awaiting his verdict. It was Sod’s Law that this was

the one time she had chosen to consult him, just when he wanted to leave the decision entirely to her.

“What do you think?” he enquired.

“I say kill him,” she replied. “But it’s your call. If you think he might be useful later on, then that’s fine with me.”

Ditherer looked at Halfshaft expectantly. “Uncle,” he said. “I trust you to do the right thing.”

The wizard sighed. How could they execute him after that?

“Okay, you can come with us,” Halfshaft ruled. “But on one condition; no dithering. We can’t have you slowing us down while you ramble on and on about whatever it is that you ramble on about when I’m not listening.”

“No dithering,” promised Ditherer, giving the wizard a big hug and a kiss to show his gratitude for sparing his life. “No dithering at all, I promise.”

“There’ll be others along here soon,” Cherry said. “Come on, we’ve got to keep moving.”

She set off along the path, with Halfshaft close behind her. Ditherer stayed put.

“I wonder whether this way might be better?” Ditherer pondered, pointing back in the direction he had just come from.

Halfshaft groaned. “Why didn’t we kill him when we had the chance?”

#

An estate agent might have described it as a homely cave, but it was more of an overhanging rock with space enough for three people to sit beneath it. The left hand side was curtained with tree-trunks, but the right side was open, as was the front.

The three of them sat beneath the boulder. Ditherer suggested using the white paint to brighten up their new home, but the others ignored him. Cherry reasoned that there must be some reason why they had been supplied

with paint, and all would become clear in the fullness of time. Had it been a prettier colour, she might have been tempted though.

“What’s for lunch?” Ditherer enquired.

“Whatever you can catch,” Cherry told him.

“But you’re the woman,” Ditherer retorted. “You’re in charge of cooking and suchlike.”

Halfshaft froze. Takina would not have taken this comment well, and he was expecting a similar reaction from Cherry. But she seemed considerably more laid back about the remark than he had expected.

“I am in charge of “suchlike”. I’m very good at “suchlike”, ask anyone. But if you think I’m going to swap my shiny bikini for an apron, then you’re even madder than I took you for.”

Ditherer grumbled, but to no avail. He changed tack.

“What about the cleaning, then? It’s filthy in here. Can you just toddle round with a broom?”

“I don’t do brooms. And I certainly don’t do toddling.”

“Bit of a dust, then? There’s a good girl.”

Cherry looked at Halfshaft with one eyebrow raised. He shrugged. Maybe he should have let her kill Ditherer when they had the chance. It would have put them all out of their misery.

All of a sudden, Cherry tensed up. She put her index finger to her lips, motioning them to silence. The wizard listened, but could hear nothing. Ditherer opened his mouth to speak, but she repeated the “shushing” gesture with urgency, and he thankfully clamped up.

Seconds later, they heard talking. Someone was standing above them, on top of their rock.

“They came this way.”

Halfshaft fought back the panic. It sounded like Bastard.

“We find them, we kill them.”

Yes; it was Bastard all right.

“Okay,” replied a hesitant voice. The wizard could hardly have failed to recognise it. It was Young Halfshaft. It was him, forty or fifty years ago. He didn’t know what would be worse; being torn apart by a vengeful troll, or being killed by his past self. He tried to reassure himself that this was all part of the plan; he and Cherry had to die so Takina’s team could triumph and return safely home, but right here, right now, it didn’t seem like much of a consolation at all.

And then the troll jumped down from the boulder, landing just a couple of yards in front of their inadequate hiding place. His back was turned to them, as he viewed the Forest, looking for signs of his prey. Halfshaft held his breath, convinced that the game would be up if he made the slightest noise. He prayed that Ditherer would not choose this moment to enquire whether Cherry was planning on doing the washing-up.

Young Halfshaft appeared round the open side of the rock, having made his way down the side rather than taking the direct vertical route. As he walked over to join his partner, he caught sight of the three of them out of the corner of his eye. He opened his mouth, then closed it again, in two minds whether or not to denounce them to the troll.

“We find them, we kill them,” Young Halfshaft agreed. He cast an anxious look towards them over his shoulder. “Let’s get after them, then. Before they get too far ahead.”

“We’ll make a troll of you yet,” nodded Bastard. And then he was off, bounding into the trees with an anxious young wizard running along behind him as quickly as he could manage.

Halfshaft exhaled a sigh of relief. “He saved us. No, actually, *I* saved us. Well done me!”

“Who was he?” asked Ditherer. “He reminded me of someone.”

“I wonder who?” asked Halfshaft, his voice dripping sarcasm.

“I think it was Bobby, my old dog. He had the same nose as him.”

“Is it too late to kill him?” the wizard whispered to Cherry. “As slowly and painfully as you like.”

#

They stayed beneath the rock until they got hungry, and then they stayed there some more. Ditherer had in fact been complaining all day of hunger pains, and demanding to know when Cherry was going to bake him a pie, but his companions had paid him as little attention as was possible. His constant references to food had made them all ravenous, but Cherry had insisted that they stay by the boulder, reasoning that it would be safer to let the other Candidates fight it out amongst themselves while they kept their heads down. That way, there would only be a couple of Candidates for them to deal with when they ventured out. It was a sound plan, though Ditherer had pointed out that, given the choice between her womanly tactics and a nice pie, he would choose the pie every time.

She had offered to go out foraging on her own, but Halfshaft would have none of it. She was the only one of them who had any fighting skills at all, and he was uncomfortable at the thought of being separated from her, even for a short while. Besides, if she was hunting she would need the dagger, which would leave him only with the paint-pot and his wits for protection, and he didn't have a great deal of confidence in either right now.

It was agreed that they would all go foraging the following day. They couldn't allow themselves to go too long without food, or they wouldn't have the strength to make it to the hut, even if the other Candidates succeeded in killing each other. Cherry also felt that there was only so long that the Circus would let them take such a passive role in proceedings. If they stayed put for too long, they were likely to send in some creature or other to make things more entertaining for "the viewers at home". So, despite Ditherer's constant whining about his "rumbly tummy", they were still sheltering beneath the rock at nightfall.

It took the wizard a long time to get off to sleep. Being hungry didn't help; it was hard to nod off with your stomach demanding supper. Ditherer made things worse. Even after his companions had turned in for the night, he continued to witter on about all the food he would eat if he was back home in his dear little kitchen, and it transpired that he had a very healthy appetite indeed.

“Ever eaten dragon?” he asked.

“No such thing as dragons,” Halfshaft snapped. “Go to sleep.”

“I beg to differ, Uncle. I bought a couple of pounds of it from a travelling salesman just a couple of years ago. Nice fellow; gave me it for half-price cos it was a little bit crusty round the edges. Apparently dragon meat is often crusty, though. It’s all those flames, you see. Dries it out.”

“Go to sleep.”

“Do you know what it tasted like? Friend? Do you know what it tasted like?”

“Please go to sleep.”

“This’ll make you laugh. Chicken! Who would have thought it, eh? A great big thing like that, tasting like a little-bitty hen! I nearly wet myself chuckling at the thought of it. Funny thing is, I don’t like chicken, so I was a bit of a waste of money really!”

“Shut up!” shouted an exasperated Halfshaft. He had had about as much as he could cope with, and more besides. “Go to sleep!”

“That wasn’t very clever, Uncle,” Ditherer scolded him. “Screaming out like that, like a big old girl. That troll would have heard, and no doubt he’ll be on his way back by now, to kill us all in our beds. Well, not in our beds, cos we haven’t got beds. But you know what I mean.”

“I’m sorry. I wasn’t thinking.”

“Oh well. Can’t be helped. Anyway, I’ll wish you a good night. I’m off to beddy-byes now. It’s been a long old day, I think you’ll agree.”

Ditherer turned away, and snuggled up beneath the overhanging rock as best he could.

“Okay, okay. Good night.”

“Sssshhhh! Some of us are trying to get some sleep, here!”

#

Halfshaft awoke. There was someone sitting astride his pelvis. He dared not open his eyes. He knew it wouldn't be Cherry, which meant that it could only be one person. The thought of seeing a large man in a green mankini sitting on his "bits" was more than he could stomach.

"Look, Ditherer, I'm very flattered and everything, but you're really not my -"

"Not Ditherer." A female voice. It didn't sound like Cherry, but who else could it be?

He took a gamble, and opened his eyes. There was a naked woman straddling him. A particularly beautiful naked woman, who was rubbing her hands seductively across his black-vested chest.

"Latex," she whispered. "You naughty boy."

She leant forward and nibbled his neck. "Are you ready for me?"

He looked around. Ditherer was sound asleep; Cherry was nowhere to be seen.

"Don't worry about him; I've taken care of it. He'll be asleep for a little while yet. So it's just the two of us. Are you ready to play?"

She bounced up and down in the saddle, keeping eye contact with him the whole time.

"Not yet," he choked. "But give it a minute or two. I'm not as quick out of the blocks as I used to be."

She giggled. "We'll see about that."

"There you are!" A male voice, irritable and agitated, from close by. Halfshaft groaned. He knew what was coming next. He had been here before.

During previous adventures, he had inadvertently ended up in Hell. Worse still, in an ill-judged attempt at escape, he had ended up in the maximum security wing, with all the very worst offenders. These were not people who had forgotten to return their library books on time; these were the people who had carried out the very worst of crimes against humanity (and others).

Whilst there, he had been seduced by Areola, the succubus who was even now trying to coax him into providing her with the attention she craved. And he had also come across her jealous husband (no pun intended); Choad, the incubus.

As a wizard, Halfshaft had attended regular seminars on the supernatural during his studies (well, maybe regular was putting it too strongly, but he had turned up on three or four occasions in twelve years). He knew that a succubus was a female demon, who came to men in their dreams, seduced them and stole their love-juice. They would then pass it on to their lover, an incubus, so that he could use it to impregnate human females. He had vague idea from these lectures that this was supposed to be a wicked and evil thing to do, but he couldn't really see the down side himself. The human female concerned got to have a baby using his much sought after, top quality wizard's love-juice, and he got to have a gorgeous naked woman rubbing herself briskly against his private parts in the middle of the night. There were no losers, as far as he could see. It was just like bees passing pollen from one flower to another, even if it was a little stickier than that in practice.

There was one fly in the ointment, though, to continue the insect analogy. And that was Choad, the succubus' husband. As an incubus, he didn't have the equipment to impregnate women himself. Instead, he had a horizontal ridge, the size of an index finger imbedded beneath the flesh where his groin should have been, which Halfshaft judged to be of little or no use to anyone. It was for this reason that he had to rely on his wife to collect semen from other men, for him to distribute to the female population of the planet. Ordinarily, an incubus was more than happy with this arrangement. But Choad was different. He was far from comfortable with the thought of his wife flitting round at night, straddling strange men, and he never missed an opportunity to raise the issue with her, much to her irritation.

Areola sighed. "Here I am. Doing my job."

"You don't have to enjoy it so much, though, do you?"

Halfshaft was uncomfortable. It was not the most relaxing feeling in the world to witness a married couple having a domestic row, especially whilst the man's naked wife was squatting over his most intimate wizardly body part. As a result, he was now fast subsiding, and all her hard work had gone to waste.

“I think I’ll be off,” he said. “Leave you two to it.”

“You’re going nowhere,” she told him. “Now just lie there like a good boy, and I’ll see to you in a minute.”

Halfshaft nodded weakly. There didn’t seem to be much else he could do in the circumstances. It would be rude to push her off if she was intent on staying.

“I’m not having this. How many times do we have to have this conversation?” Areola asked in exasperation. “I collect it, you dish it back out again. No collection, no distribution. What part of that don’t you understand?”

“You called him a naughty boy. You’re flirting. How is that necessary to what we do?”

“I’ve got to get in the mood. I’m not a robot. I’d be as dry as a witch’s tit if I didn’t get a little foreplay in first. It’s just a lubrication issue; what’s so wrong with that?”

Choad stepped into Halfshaft’s field of vision. He was naked. Halfshaft couldn’t help but stare at the ridge where his genitals should have been. No wonder that the poor demon was so insecure.

“Look at him,” said Choad in disgust. “That beardy old man. That beardy old man in a leotard.”

“Tell me about it!” exclaimed Areola. “I’m still trying to work out how I can prise him out of it! I’ll need to bring scissors next time!”

“How could you, though? With *that*?”

“Excuse me,” Halfshaft protested. “I can hear you, you know!”

“I’ve got serious doubts whether you’re going to get anything out of him,” Choad went on, ignoring the wizard’s outburst. “It probably withered up and died years ago. And even if you do manage to coax a few dribbles out of him, what am I supposed to do with it? I’ve got my reputation to think of. If my ladies start having scrawny, bearded babies, then I’ll end up a laughing stock.”

“My women?” said Areola icily. “You tell me off for doing my job, and then you talk about “my women”? Talk about double-standards, you hypocritical old cuckold.”

Choad flinched. He stared at her for a moment or two. His chin started to wobble, and all of a sudden he was in floods of tears. “It’s you that cuckolded me, though, isn’t it? Why do you do this to me, Areola? Why do you do this? Can’t you see how much I love you? But still you creep out every night, looking for freaks like this, when all the time it’s tearing me into little pieces.”

She climbed off Halfshaft, and ran to Choad’s side. They hugged. “I’m sorry,” she told him, stroking his hair. “I’m sorry. But this is what we do. You’ve got to get over this. If we don’t keep working, we’re back downstairs again.”

“I can’t get over it,” he sobbed. “I’ve tried, but I can’t.”

“You must.”

He pulled himself together. “Promise me you don’t enjoy it.”

She gestured towards Halfshaft, lying spread-eagled on the ground in his little latex leotard. “Do you really need to ask that?” she enquired. “Just look at him, for Goodness’ sake!”

He nodded, and gave her a brave smile. “Go on, then,” he said. “Finish your business. I’ll wait for you by the river. It’s okay, really it is. I’ll be fine. Just promise me you’ll be quick.”

And then he was gone.

Areola stared after him, in two minds whether to go after him or not. She reached a decision. She took a deep breath, and turned back to Halfshaft, suddenly all seductive smiles again.

“Where were we?” she asked, as she climbed back aboard the prone wizard. “And where’s our little friend gone?”

Halfshaft humphed. “No,” he pouted. “I don’t want to now.”

She gave him a vigorous rub. “You sure about that?”

He stayed firm (well, resolute at least). “No,” he said. “The moment’s gone. I’m keeping my “little friend” to myself, thank you very much.”

She stood back up. “Oh well,” she shrugged. “Your loss. I’m sure your younger self won’t be so picky when I visit him.”

He pouted all the more. It was bad enough turning her down, but to do so for the benefit of Young Halfshaft made things infinitely worse somehow. Still, he had his principles. She had been disparaging about him to her partner, and hadn’t helped her cause by referring to his equipment as their “little friend”. Saying “no” was the right thing to do, however much his hormones were trying to argue the point.

She blew him a kiss. “Later maybe. I’d wake up now if I were you. Your friend’s just about to bash your brains out with a rock.”

And then she was gone.

#

He forced his eyes open. The last time he had done so, it was to find a beautiful naked woman sitting astride him. This time, the picture was rather less appealing. Ditherer was kneeling beside him, squeezed precariously into his little lime-green mankini, a heavy stone clenched in his raised right fist.

Halfshaft sat up quickly. This brought him chest to chest with Ditherer, so – not being keen on skin-to-latex contact with his would-be murderer – he slumped back down again, covering his head with his arms as best he could. “What are you doing?”

“I’m caving your head in with a rock, I’m afraid. I’m really sorry, Uncle. I don’t want to do it at all. I wouldn’t hurt a fly normally. Not unless it was a really noisy one.”

“Where’s Cherry?”

“She went off foraging when you nodded off. Asked me to keep look-out. So I thought I’d bash you on the bonce with this stone here, and tell her it was that nasty old troll what did it, when she gets back.”

“Why? Why would you do that to me? After all I’ve done for you!”

“There’s only two of us that gets out of here alive. So I thought, maybe me and Cherry might be the ones, if you weren’t around anymore. I think she likes me, I’ve seen her smiling whenever she catches sight of my bum in this little swimming-suit of mine. We could run off together, and maybe get married if the wife doesn’t find out.”

“I saved your life back there on the path. I could’ve killed you. Well, I could have asked Cherry to kill you. Is that all the thanks I get?”

“I said I’m sorry,” Ditherer replied. “What more can I say? Now if you could just sit still while I bash you one, Friend, I’d be really grateful. I don’t want any trouble, really I don’t.”

Halfshaft looked up at him in astonishment. “You’re still going to do it, now I’m awake?”

“I reckon I will. I’m twice the size of you. I don’t like violence, like I said before. But I’ll make it quick, I promise. Three or four smacks to the skull, and you won’t feel a thing after that. Just a bit of twitching, that’s all.”

He raised the stone above his head.

“This is going to hurt me more than it’s going to hurt you, Friend.”

Halfshaft launched himself up at Ditherer, knocking him off balance. The stone rolled out of his hand, coming to rest a few feet away. The wizard was out from beneath his assailant in an instant, seizing the stone and hurling it as far from the boulder as he could manage (which in truth wasn’t actually very far at all, though fortunately for him it landed in thick undergrowth).

“Now what are you going to do?” he taunted. “Good luck finding it!”

“I don’t need to,” Ditherer replied. He pointed to a small pile of stones a dozen yards away. “I’ve brought some spares, just in case, knowing what a tricky little devil you are when your dander’s up!”

Halfshaft pounced on the pile of stones, and started chucking them in all directions like a crap machine-gun. If Ditherer had had any sense, he would have set upon the wizard, preventing him from throwing them all away, but – not being the brightest of people – he tried to intercept each stone as it was thrown, leaping up to grab each one as it soared over his head, as if he was

playing some bizarre game of piggy-in-the-middle. Six times he leapt into the air like a disabled salmon, and six times he missed his target.

Halfshaft stopped throwing, his task completed. Ditherer regarded him suspiciously, convinced that he was hiding one or more stones from him. Halfshaft held up his hands, palms outwards, to prove that all the rocks had gone. Ditherer's shoulders sagged in disappointment.

“What are you going to do now, then?” the wizard gloated. “Throttle me?”

Ditherer's face lit up. “Thank you, Neighbour. I wouldn't have thought of that, without a bit of prompting, like.”

Ditherer jumped towards him, seizing him by the throat. Halfshaft grabbed the man's meaty fingers, trying desperately to prise them away from his windpipe, but Ditherer was too strong for him. Pretty much everyone was too strong for him, it had to be said. The pressure against his windpipe increased, and he started to make little gurgling noises. He thrashed about, but all to no avail. His assailant was not about to let go.

“I'm sorry,” said Ditherer. “I hate myself for this. You've been so kind, and all. But it's got to be done. I know you understand; I can see it in your eyes. We'll part as friends, that's the main thing.”

Halfshaft tried to swear at him, but nothing came out but a strange choking noise (not surprising in the circumstances). Blackness crept into the periphery of his field of vision, expanding rapidly until it had cut off his sight altogether. He could hear the blood vessels beating in his ears. Ditherer was talking to him again, but he couldn't make out the words of his murderer. A thought occurred; after all the terrible creatures he had outwitted and survived, how shameful that Ditherer was to be the one to kill him.

He felt the grip around his throat relax. He must be dead. Any minute now, he would be back at the gates to Hell, with Rana and Doon ready to seize him and pull him inside. This time, he would have nowhere to run, no life to which he could escape back. He was doomed and damned in equal measure.

#

He awoke to find that Cherry was pouring water on his face.

“Are we dead?” he asked.

“Not yet,” she replied cheerfully. “Give it another few hours, though.”

He sat up, and looked round. “Where’s Ditherer? He tried to kill me!”

“He had to leave. In a hurry. Well, I say “a hurry”; it was quite difficult for him to move quickly after I’d kneed him in the bollocks.”

“You saved me?”

“Only just. You were turning a very strange colour. Good job you’re wearing black, because your face would have clashed horribly with purple.”

“Thank you.”

She shrugged. “You would’ve done the same for me.”

He groaned. She took this to mean he was in pain, but it wasn’t that at all. His plan was to deliberately throw the Games, so the Amazon team could be victorious. But that would mean Cherry dying a painful and imminent death. She was relying on him to cover her back, but all the while he had been planning to betray her to save Takina. And now she had saved his life again. How could he do that to her after she had rescued him yet again?

“I can’t do this,” he said.

“Course you can. We’re gonna win this, you just watch. A wizard and a kick-ass babe like me. How could we possibly fail?”

“Don’t rely on me, Cherry. I’m weak. I’m cowardly. Never depend on me to watch your back, because the chances are I’ll be about a hundred yards behind you and disappearing fast.”

“No, you won’t. You’re my beardy little hero.”

He groaned. She wasn’t taking him seriously. “Please,” he urged her. “It’s really important that you listen to me. I can’t say this again; I’ll probably regret saying it later, as it is. But I’ve got to be straight with you, even if it’s just this once. I’m not what I seem.”

“You seem like a frightened wizard in an itchy-bitsy leotard,” she joked.

“Cherry, *please!*”

“Look.” She turned round. “I’ve scrunched up my knickers to turn them into a thong. Don’t tell me you won’t be watching my back with an arse like this on display.”

He gave up, taking comfort in her bared bottom as best he could.

#

Try as he might, he was unable to get back to sleep before morning. Every time he closed his eyes, he felt the urge to open them again to make sure there were no more homicidal idiots lurking in the shadows. Cherry had promised to keep watch, but it worried him that she might get distracted by “something pretty” (she had, after all, admitted to spending ten minutes by the nearby stream, trying to catch sight of her reflected bosoms in the water). There was only one person he could trust in these matters, and he was wearing a grey beard and a black leotard.

Eventually, he gave up trying to nod off, and volunteered to take a turn on look-out duty. Cherry was asleep within minutes. He resisted the urge to ogle her as she slept; it was worrying that he seemed to be developing a conscience in such matters, something which had never troubled him before.

Now that he needed to stay awake for guard duty, he felt his eyelids drooping. He held his eyes wide open with his fingers, but to no effect. He tried slapping himself round the face, but it hurt so he decided against doing it a second time. He even had a go at humming to himself, but his musical ability was dismal, so he gave up on this after just a few grating lines. And then he slept.

He dreamt that Takina was here. She stood facing Cherry, just a few feet apart, her blonde hair contrasting with Cherry’s dark locks. For a second, he hoped it was going to be one of *those* dreams, but his hopes of the two women having a bit of a girly-wrestle were dashed when they knelt down and bowed their heads towards him.

He realised that he was holding something in his hands. He looked down. It was an executioner's axe, large and heavy and cruel. He sensed the women were staring at him, but when he looked back towards them their heads were still bowed to the ground.

He approached them. "What's going on?" he asked. "Why am I here?" But he knew already.

"You have to choose," said Takina. "One of us lives, one of us dies."

"I'd never let you die," Halfshaft told her. "You've no idea how much you mean to me."

"Me, then," whispered Cherry.

"No," argued the wizard. "Not you either. You keep saving my life. I like you, even if you are a completely self-obsessed pain in the bottom. Well, maybe *because* you're a self-obsessed pain in the bottom."

"Fine," Cherry pouted. "You just go ahead and add insult to injury. Chop off my head, and kick the corpse."

"Shut up," said Halfshaft. "This is my dream. You're not supposed to argue."

"Sorry. You're right, of course. Go on then, get it over with."

He raised the axe above his head, steeling himself to lop her head from her shoulders. She pulled her long hair aside, to make his aim easier. He hesitated. She looked up at him. She gave him a small smile of encouragement. Her bravery broke his heart.

"It's okay," she said. "You didn't ask for this; none of us did."

"I can't do it."

"It has to be me, then." Takina said.

He shook his head violently. "No, not you. Never you."

Cherry craned her neck. "You've made your decision. You know what must be done. No need to look so worried. I understand, really I do. No hard feelings, I promise."

He hurled the axe away. “No. I’m not doing this. I can’t do it to either of you.”

Both women got to their feet. They looked at him, oozing pity. Takina touched his face. She looked deep into his eyes, pouring her empathy into him.

“Tell me what to do,” he begged. “I don’t know what to do.”

She opened her mouth to speak. There is a way, he thought. There is a way out of this, and she’s going to tell me. She brought her lips close to his ear, so close that he could feel her breath on his neck.

“All you have to do,” she whispered, “all you have to do is -”

“Wakey, wakey, rise and shine.”

A voice from nowhere. It sounded like Cherry, but she was standing in front of him, head bowed again, uncharacteristically silent.

He felt his body being shaken.

“All you have to do,” Takina repeated, desperate to finish her sentence.

“I thought you were supposed to be on guard duty,” said the disembodied voice. It was Cherry alright. He opened his eyes. She was leaning over him, shaking him awake. He closed his eyes again, hoping that Takina would be lingering amongst the remnants of his dream, but she had evaporated into the depths of his subconscious from whence she had come.

“All I have to do is what?” Halfshaft called after her.

“Breakfast would be nice,” said Cherry. “When you’re ready.”

#

It transpired that breakfast was to be found twenty feet up a tree.

Halfshaft gazed upwards, a worried frown on his wizardly face.

“You want me to go up there?”

“If you want to eat.”

“Can’t you go?”

“I can if you want me to. But your friend’s still about; the one who tried to choke you to death. I can’t look after you if I’m up a tree.”

“You can’t look after me if I’m falling out of a tree either. What’s up there, anyway? Only pine cones, as far as I can see.”

“They’re not pine cones. They’re asari. They’re edible. Taste crap, but very nutritious. They’ll put hairs on your chest.”

“I’ve already got hairs on my chest.”

“Yeah, nasty old grey ones. These ones will be much prettier. Go on. Up you go. For me.”

He sighed. She would get her way in the end, so he might as well get on with it. Besides, after coming close to beheading her in his dreams, it was the least he could do to make amends.

The trunk was actually fairly easy to climb. Unlike its vertical neighbours, it was at a nice forty five degree angle, with plenty of branches to hang on to on the way up. It struck him that if he was able to climb it, then just about every other creature in the forest could manage it too. He had visions of finding a half dozen elves and an entire branchful of dwarfs when he broke through the lower layers of foliage above.

He reached the lowest bough. There were several cones hanging from it. He plucked them off with ease. For once in his miserable life, everything was going to plan. It wouldn’t last, of course. It never did.

Sure enough, Cherry launched herself up the tree trunk after him, shooing him upwards ahead of her. She had heard something. Another Candidate, no doubt. Please not Bastard, he prayed. Please not Selene. Other than those two, the Forest could give it its best shot.

“Over there,” Cherry whispered. “No, not there. *There*. There’s someone in the undergrowth.”

“Who is it?” Halfshaft asked, peering through the foliage at the ground below.

“I couldn’t see. Thought I’d better get up here with you, though, until we know who we’re up against.”

They waited, but could see nothing out of the ordinary on the ground below. The wizard lost patience.

“You imagined it,” Halfshaft accused. “There’s no-one there.”

There was a sharp cracking sound in the undergrowth. “Ouch!” a voice protested.

“What was that, then?” Cherry enquired.

“I didn’t hear anything.”

Another sharp crack. “Ow!”

“I heard that, though.”

Betty, the dwarf, poked her head out of the shrubs, and looked around suspiciously. Halfshaft regarded her with curiosity. What was she up to down there? And where was Stub?

“I just heard someone,” Betty declared. “We’re being watched.”

“Never mind that,” Stub’s voice emerged from the undergrowth. “Come and give me a kiss.”

“No. I’m gonna teach you a lesson first for being nasty to me in front of all those people.”

She sank back down out of sight. Halfshaft and Cherry exchanged puzzled glances. Last time they had seen Stub, he had made it clear that he did not find Betty attractive at all. Now he was hiding in the bushes, demanding a snog, and she was denying him even that. Dwarfs were so fickle!

A few seconds later, there was another snapping sound, and Stub cried out in pain.

“What’s going on down there now?” whispered Halfshaft.

“God knows,” shrugged Cherry. “You know what dwarfs are like.”

“Give me a cuddle then,” urged Stub.

“No!” insisted Betty, her voice accompanied by a further cracking noise, and a shriek of pain from Stub. “What sort of dwarfess do you take me for?”

“Shake hands?” enquired Stub. Another snap, and another squeal of discomfort.

“In that case,” the disgruntled dwarf told his coy little companion, “you can bloody well stop whipping me.”

Halfshaft laughed so much, he nearly fell from the tree. He clung to the bark, his legs kicking uselessly beneath him, chuckling away the whole time. Cherry seized him by the collar of his leotard, and hauled him back on to the branch with surprising strength. She shushed him to silence.

“What?” he asked. “It’s just the dwarfs.”

She pointed to a spot fifty yards away. There, peering round a tree-trunk, bow in hand, was Selene. The wizard went rigid, and clung on to the branch, suddenly feeling considerably less at ease than before. He prayed that she was too busy stalking the dwarfs to have spotted him, but doubted it somehow. Until her recent overthrow, she had been Queen of the Amazons. It seemed most unlikely that she would have failed to spot a giggling wizard swinging from the branch of a tree.

“What are we going to do?” Halfshaft gibbered in fear.

“We run,” Cherry instructed. “She’ll be busy with your little dwarf friends for the next minute or two. We’ve got a head-start.”

Selene discharged the arrow. There was a yelp from the undergrowth where the dwarfs were hidden. “Untie me!” screamed Stub. “Someone’s just twanged an arrow up my bum.”

“I’m coming, my darling, I’m coming!”

“There’s no time for that,” Stub protested. “Get over here and untie me first.”

Another arrow. Betty shouted in pain. Her head popped up from the undergrowth again like a little meerkat gnome.

“Who’s there?” she enquired. “Who’s that shooting arrows at us?”

It was a mistake. She was now in full view; a sitting dwarfish duck. An arrow slammed into her forehead, nearly splitting her skull in two.

“Move!” shouted Cherry. “We’ve got to get out of here *now!*”

She leapt from the tree. She waited for Halfshaft to follow suit. He stayed put, shaking his head violently from side to side. “I’m scared. I’m staying up here,” he insisted.

“Quick. Let’s go.”

“Not likely. It’s dangerous down there.”

Selene was on her feet, and heading towards Stub. She glanced over towards Halfshaft as she ran, calculating the time she could spare dispatching the dwarf before the wizard got away.

“Let’s go!” Cherry repeated, more urgently this time. “I can’t protect you if you’re up a tree. You’re a sitting duck up there.”

He clung on to the branch for dear life. He wasn’t going anywhere. Not of his own volition, anyway. This duck was going to remain seated for the foreseeable future.

Selene was in the undergrowth. She dropped to her knees. There was a strange choking sound. Stub was no more. And then she was on her feet, heading for the tree, heading for her next victim. Heading for Halfshaft.

“Help!” he cried. “She’s coming to get me!”

Selene came to a halt ten yards away. She drew her bow. She took aim. “Goodbye, Wizard,” she mouthed at him.

And then Takina was there, sprinting from the trees, barging into Selene and sending her sprawling to the ground. Cherry was on Takina in an instant, dealing her a punch to the temple which sent her juddering to her knees.

With a cry of anguish, Halfshaft vaulted from the tree, dashing to Takina’s rescue. He flapped ineffectually at Cherry for a moment or two like a boxing hare with sore wrists, before noticing Selene attempting to rise to her feet. He leapt upon her, as if covering a bomb with his body, and desperately tried to pin her down on the ground. Takina dived in to the fray, helping him to restrain the Amazon Queen, if only for a second or two. But Cherry set upon

Takina again, seizing her hair and pulling her away from the others. The Amazon tried to fight her off, but Cherry was the stronger of the two. She shoved Takina to the ground, and turned on Selene, just as she was emerging from beneath the panicking wizard.

And then Bastard was there, tearing towards them like a demented hurricane, his arms pumping up and down like sledge-hammers as he ran. None of them were foolish enough to stand against him, all knowing better than to attempt to intercept a troll in a full-blown charge. They scattered in all directions, Selene included, as they sought the comparative safety of the trees, Halfshaft screaming all the while like a big-girl's chemise.

Everything was happening too quickly. First Selene, then Cherry attacking Takina, then Bastard coming out of nowhere. Halfshaft needed time to think. More important still, he needed time to run.

Bastard bisected the group, steaming through the middle of them as they went their separate ways. He flailed out at them as he ran past, intent on hammering them into infinity. Halfshaft ducked beneath a massive fist, and headed for the trees, neither knowing nor caring where Cherry and the others had gone. His one impulse was to find somewhere to hide; somewhere where the furious troll would not find him.

Bastard came to a halt where the dwarfs had died moments before. Halfshaft saw him bend down, searching for a missile to fling after him. Without waiting to see whether the troll had found anything, he ran on, almost crying with fear. He sensed something flying through the air towards him. He looked back over his shoulder, to find a dead dwarf arrowing in his direction. Stub's corpse barrelled into him, bowling him to the ground. He struggled to regain his feet, trying unsuccessfully to shrug off the literally-dead-weight of the departed dwarf as best he could. He could hear footsteps thudding towards him, shaking the ground as the troll approached at speed. There was no time. No time to escape.

And then Cherry was there, flinging the dwarf's corpse off him, hauling him to his feet, pulling him towards the trees. And the sound of arrows zinging through the air, and Bastard bellowing in pain. Selene had regained her fighting spirit, and had singled out the troll as her main competitor. Bastard turned, and charged towards her, as she strung another arrow on her bow.

“Keep running,” Cherry commanded. “Leave them to it. With a bit of luck, they’ll finish each other.”

Halfshaft was happy to oblige. He ran like buggery. It was, after all, the one thing he was very good at indeed.

#

They returned to their overhanging boulder. It felt like home. Halfshaft nagged Cherry all the way. On three separate occasions, he had tried to go back to assist Takina, but she had eventually persuaded him that she would be better off without him. She had Selene on her team; the two of them had a fifty-fifty chance of defeating the troll. If Halfshaft turned up at the scene, Selene might aim her fire at him instead, giving Bastard breathing space. Or the troll might attack him, and Takina could get injured coming to his rescue. Either way, it was very much in the best interests of his Amazon friend if he stayed as far away from the action as possible.

Although he eventually conceded the point, it didn’t stop him moaning at her. It made him feel slightly better about deserting his friend.

“Why did you attack Takina? You know how much she means to me!”

“I was just pulling her off so I could get to Selene. She was in my way.”

“Pulling her off by her hair!”

“What’s wrong with that?”

“You could have hurt her.”

“I think you’re sort of missing the point of these Games. We’re supposed to kill each other. And you’re riding me for tugging some slapper by the hair!”

“She’s not a slapper! And I’m not riding you!”

“Yeah, but I bet you’d like to, eh?”

He huffed. “I can’t even argue with you. Whatever I say, you bring it back to how pretty you think you are. You’re driving me mad!”

“*Think* I am? Hello!” She gestured to her body, which was straining to escape from her metal bikini in all the right places. “Have you seen this? I am *awesome!*”

Further argument was stifled as Halfshaft detected the crackle of magic in the air. “Down!” he instructed Cherry with urgency.

“You’ll be lucky!” she quipped.

He dropped to all fours, gesturing her to join him.

“I think you’ll need to stand up or kneel down,” she retorted. “It doesn’t work if we’re both the doggy.”

“Would you stop that, and get down here!” he hissed. “It’s magic!”

“It doesn’t look all that special to me.”

He grabbed her wrist, and pulled her to the ground. He wasn’t going to tolerate any more of her nonsense.

“Careful,” she protested. “You’ll mess up my hair.”

He pointed towards their boulder. She followed his arthritic finger. “Oh.”

“Witches!” he said.

Sure enough, Fat Dora and Muriel stood beneath the overhanging rock, partially obscured by its shadow. They faced one another, their mouths moving in mid-incantation. They were casting a spell.

“Maybe they didn’t see us,” speculated Halfshaft, more in hope than expectation.

“We’re kind of hard to miss,” Cherry observed, gesturing towards their clothing. “Especially me, it has to be said.”

The air around them started to shimmer. Something major was happening. Halfshaft felt his soul ease from his body. This is it, he told himself. This is how it all ends. Crouching on the grass with an insanely vain woman in metal knickers, while two old hags crush the life from me. At least it’s a novel way to go.

He felt himself rise up into the air. Looking down, he could see his body beneath him. He looked more ridiculous in his black leotard than even he

had imagined. He sensed movement to his side. He looked across. He saw Cherry, rising from her body. She was naked. He checked her out with a brazen leer. What did he have to lose? He already knew he was going to Hell, so he might as well be hanged for a sheep as a lamb.

Their souls drifted towards the two witches, which made him somewhat uneasy. He was more uncomfortable still when he realised that he too was naked. He covered his embarrassment with two hands (only needing one, but he had to keep up appearances). Too late, though. Cherry was smirking.

“It’s just because cold,” he protested.

She smirked some more. He decided to ignore her. Sometimes, that was the only policy to adopt with brazen women.

They continued to float towards the two witches, naked and spread-eagled as they tried to keep their balance in the breeze. Halfshaft eventually gave it up, allowing himself to roll around so he was facing the sky. At least that way he would only be flashing his bottom at the people below.

They started to gently descend, heading for their little cave. He felt weightless, like a helium balloon (a helium balloon in the rather unusual shape of an elderly naked wizard). He had expected the two of them to drift off on the breeze, heading for the Heavens, but they seemed instead to be gravitating towards the witches, which was becoming of more and more concern. It would not have been his direction of choice.

He glanced over at Cherry to see whether she was worried, too. She was checking herself out. He raised his eyes and tutted, but then decided to check her out too, to pass the time.

And then there was blackness, breathlessness, a moment or two of thrashing around. And he was back in the cave again, looking out, watching as his wizardly body jumped to its feet and dusted itself down, with Cherry following suit.

“What’s going on?” he muttered to himself. But it was not his voice. It was a gruff voice, female but not feminine. He sounded about one hundred and eighty.

An elderly woman screamed nearby. He turned to find Fat Dora, staring down at herself, screeching repeatedly in horror at the sight of her own body.

It wasn't a pretty sight by any stretch of the imagination, but he would have assumed that she would be used to it by now.

“Look at me!” Fat Dora wailed. “Look at me! My beautiful, beautiful body turned to this!”

Realisation finally dawned on him.

“Cherry?” he asked.

And he looked down at his own body. It was the unpleasant smelling body of a skinny old witch.

Cherry fainted. The shock of being elderly and ugly was just too much for her to bear.

#

On the outside, the two people walking towards him were Halfshaft and Cherry. On the inside, though, they were two witches who had done something very unpleasant indeed. They had stolen his body, without so much as a by-your-leave.

It was strange enough speaking to his younger self earlier, but having a conversation with his present self was almost too much for his brain to process. Worse still, he looked old and haggard. It would ordinarily have been some consolation that he was no longer wearing that hideous outfit, but somehow standing here in a witch's dress seemed worse still.

With Cherry unconscious, he knew that everything rested on his shoulders. He would have to convince the witches to reverse their spell, to put the two of them back in their own bodies. Even giving him Cherry's body would have been fine; he could see all sorts of possibilities in being her for a day or two. But what to say? How to convince them to reunite him with his scrawny shell?

“Come on, you've had your fun,” he scolded. “Give it back to me.”

He was expecting them to cackle, but Cherry's laugh was very much her own. “I don't think so, wizard. We're happy where we are.”

“You may be,” said Fake-Halfshaft to her friend. “You’ve got a young lady’s body now. But have you seen what I’ve ended up with? You said I’d get first choice this time round.”

“I lied,” shrugged fake-Cherry. “I’m a witch; what do you expect?”

“Please give us back our bodies,” Halfshaft begged. “We need them.”

Fake-Cherry laughed. “No you don’t. You’re two beautiful witches. You should thank us for swapping. You’re lucky to have got rid of that wrinkly old shell of yours over there.”

Real Cherry – now in the body of Fat Dora – opened her eyes. She looked at her former self in puzzlement. She then looked down at her new self, and fainted again. It was all too much for her.

“She could be doing that for hours,” Fake Cherry chortled. “Unless we kill her first.”

“Why? Why have you done this to us? What do you want our bodies for?”

“Well to be honest,” explained Fake Cherry, “neither of us wanted your body. We were both after this one. It’s rather nice, isn’t it? Not like your ropey old thing.”

“What’s wrong with my body?” bridled the wizard.

“Nothing now you’re a witch,” giggled Fake Cherry. “But when you were you; well, just look at it. I’d be embarrassed to be in that!”

“Oh, thanks a bunch!” protested Fake Halfshaft. “You don’t mind giving his nasty little carcass to me, though! If you don’t get me an Amazon within the next twenty four hours, I’m gonna club you to death with your own tits.”

Real Cherry awoke again, and leapt to her feet. She had had enough. Her lovely body, her beautiful face, had been hijacked by a couple of bickering witches, and she was not going to stand for it. She seized the tin of white paint, and swung it at her former perfect head with all her might. Unfortunately, she had failed to take account of the fact that her might was considerably less than it had been, now she was locked in an old woman’s body, and Fake Cherry ducked under it with plenty of time to spare.

“What are you doing?” cried Real Halfshaft in alarm. “You’re trying to smash your own face in!”

“I don’t care! If I can’t have it, no-one can.”

“But maybe we can get our bodies back again later.”

“No chance.” Real Cherry swung the tin at her former body again, shouting in frustration as it side-stepped the blow. “You’re going down, Lady!” she shouted.

A thought occurred to Halfshaft. “The clowns at the Circus. The wolves and the clowns. They swapped bodies. That was you two, wasn’t it?”

His former body shrugged. “I’m not saying.”

Cherry swung the tin again, with the same outcome. Her adversary shrieked with laughter. “This is fun. I’ll tell you what. Hit me twice, and you can have your body back.”

“Really?”

“No!”

The four of them squared up to each other, as if they were about to have a Michael Jackson-style dance off. It was going to take something major to break the deadlock.

Something major happened, right on cue. Bastard lumbered out of the trees, a half a dozen arrows protruding porcupine-like from his tough hide. He was seething with pain and anger, and eager to find someone to take it out upon.

“We saved Buster,” Halfshaft called out to him in his thin witch’s voice, in a rather optimistic effort to placate him. “We set him free. Spare us.”

The troll was not listening. He had been stung to buggery by Amazon arrows, and someone was going to pay for it, come what may. He would kill the wizard and his female companion, he would eat their flesh, using the arrow shafts as kebab-sticks. He would suck the marrow from their bones. And then he would devour the witches as well.

“We saved him!” Halfshaft wailed. “We saved Buster!”

Bastard lowered his head and charged. The wizard was as good as dead.

#

Cherry grabbed Halfshaft's hand, and pulled him (or rather *her*) to one side of the rock, planning to scale the boulder before the troll reached them. She scabbled at the rock-face in frustration. "What sort of body is this? It can't even climb!"

"Maybe we could cast a spell?" he replied. "To protect us?"

"We're not real witches," she reminded him. "They've still got all their powers. We've just got their disgusting, lice-ridden old bodies."

She started crying. It was the first time he had seen her so upset. He put his bony witch's arm around her, and told her that everything was all right, even though he knew that it was anything but.

"All right? Have you seen me?" she shouted at him. "I must weigh about twenty stone at the very least! How can everything possibly be all right when I'm the size of a pregnant bloody haystack?"

He was just about to remind her that haystacks don't actually get pregnant (or even have sex, as far as he was aware) when he remembered something. Whilst they were discussing the love-life of large bundles of straw, they were just about to get eaten by a troll. He looked around in panic. But Bastard was nowhere to be seen.

"He's gone. Vanished. Why didn't he kill us?"

She looked at him vaguely for a second or two, still too preoccupied by her body mass index to give any thought to the question he had just asked. But then the old decisive Cherry came back, just for a moment.

"It's not us he's after. It's them. We threw stones at him by the river. He wants to kill us first. But they look like us, so he's gone after them instead."

"We're safe then?"

"Until he's killed them. Then he'll come after us."

"But if he kills them, we'll never get back into our own bodies!"

She started sobbing again. “I refuse to be huge for the rest of my short life! I demand to be gorgeous again!”

“Then we’ve got to go after them. Maybe if we save them from the troll, they’ll give us our bodies back as a thank-you.”

She nodded, though she didn’t look too convinced. “Okay, we go after them, like you said. And if they’re not already dead, we offer to help them if they take their horrible old-lady’s bodies back. And if they don’t agree, we bash their heads in with the tin of paint.”

“Sounds like a plan.” He gave her as encouraging a smile as he could on his unfamiliar hag-face. Somehow or other, he had to keep her spirits up, however grim things had become.

“Now all we’ve got to do is catch them. Aren’t we supposed to have brooms or something? I can’t run through the Forest, that’s for sure. I’d never get this big fat arse between the tree trunks!”

#

As they ran in the direction which they assumed the body-snatchers (and pursuing murderous troll) had taken, Halfshaft had to admit that his companion had been right. She did have a very large arse indeed. It wobbled around like a spring-loaded jelly as she trundled along in front of him. Before long, it actually started giving him motion sickness, and he took the lead after that to give his stomach a rest.

They reached a clearing. There was a gentle slope leading uphill. He recognised it. He had been here before. Crow Hill. Last time he had been here, it had been as part of an army. And that hadn’t worked out very well either.

Cherry went to dash uphill, as fast as her swollen old legs could carry her. He seized her wrist, bringing her to a halt. “Not that way,” he said. “There are creatures hiding in the ground. They pop out, grab you, and pull you under the earth to have sex with you.”

“Crabs?” Cherry asked.

“Maybe even herpes,” he shrugged. “I didn’t think to ask.”

“Which way, then? Where do we go now?”

“You’re the boss,” the wizard said. “You’re the one who always makes the decisions.”

“That was when I was slim and gorgeous,” she stropped. “How can I be decisive when I look like a walrus on an eating binge?”

“Walrus?”

“Big tubby thing. Whiskers. Oh, never mind. Which way?”

He looked from left to right, trying to find some clue as to which direction his old body had gone. He was not used to making decisions. He needed the old Cherry back, so he could tag along behind her, do as he was told, and run when the occasion demanded.

The occasion demanded sooner than he thought. There was movement to his left, some distance away. He strained his eyes to try to make out what was heading towards them. It looked like a white cloud, flowing across the grass at speed. He shielded his old-lady’s eyes from the sun, and squinted some more. The old bag had cataracts, which didn’t really help.

“What?” asked Cherry. “What are you looking at?”

He pointed. She followed his spindly index finger. She groaned.

“Trouble?” he enquired.

“Worse than trouble,” she told him. “Much worse. It’s a pack of clowns.”

#

They ran for all they were worth, but were slowed down by four rheumatic knees, and a tin of white paint. They dived back into the trees, and headed for the imagined safety of their overhanging rock, but the clowns were not far behind them, and closing in with every step. It was only a matter of time before they were clown-fodder.

The clowns started baying for blood. They sensed a kill.

“I can’t run anymore,” Cherry protested. “My thighs keep rubbing together, and my arse is slowing me down.”

She came to a halt. He tried to coax her onwards, but she was having none of it.

“We’ve got a minute at the most,” he shouted at her. “We’ve got to run!”

She shook her head. “What’s the point? We can’t outrun them. And there’s nowhere to hide.”

“Well I’m not fighting them. You don’t fight *clowns!*”

She stopped to think. He fidgeted from foot to foot. There wasn’t time for this. He could hear them crashing along the path, getting closer and closer. Any second now, they would come into view along the pathway. He didn’t want to die like this, ripped to pieces by circus entertainers. Surely there was a more dignified way for him to go?

“I’ve got it!” she exclaimed, showing him/her the tin of paint. “Salvation!”

He groaned aloud. She had finally lost it. The strain of being ugly had addled her brain. He groaned still louder when she started shedding her clothes.

“What are you doing?” he gibbered. “Put your clothes back on. I really don’t need to see that, thank you very much.”

“Come on,” she urged. “You get them off, too.”

“I know we’ve only got a minute or two left to live, but I refuse to spend my last moments of life having lesbian sex with a fat old witch. No offence.”

“You wouldn’t have complained if I’d have been in my old body,” she pouted (or as near to pouting as it was possible for her elderly wrinkled face to manage). “Now get out of those robes, or I’ll rip them off your scrawny little body myself.”

Halfshaft reluctantly undressed. He could hear the clowns getting closer and closer, making more and more noise as they closed in for the kill. He had thought that the worst thing in the world would be to be eaten alive by a pack of feral clowns, but he had changed his mind. The worst thing was

actually to be eaten alive by a pack of feral clowns whilst trapped in the body of an ancient naked witch.

He stood there in someone else's birthday suit, regarding his companion's folds of unsightly flab with distaste. It was ironic. He would earlier have given anything to see her naked, but this was not quite what he had had in mind. Now, all he wanted was for her to get dressed again as soon as she possibly could, and put the whole sorry incident behind them.

She wrenched the lid off the tin of paint, and sloshed it over him.

“What the - ?” he exclaimed, not unreasonably in the circumstances.

She smeared it over him with her hands. In spite of himself, he quite liked it. Indeed, if she had still been her old self, he would have paid good money for the experience.

Just as the clowns came into view further along the pathway, she tipped the remaining paint over her own body, and started rubbing it into herself. It was not a sight he would ever forget. At times, her hands were completely submerged in rolls of blubber. And when she was smearing the paint “down under”, he came very close to losing what little food was left in his stomach. It was the squelching sound that really freaked him out.

The clowns approached at speed. Halfshaft turned to run. Cherry commanded him to stay where he was. He obeyed out of habit. He shook with fear as the rabid clowns bore down upon them.

They stood on the pathway, two naked white-washed witches, the thinner one visibly trembling. The lead clown arrived. The others formed a circle around the two elderly ladies, snapping and snarling, but keeping their distance.

The lead clown approached Halfshaft. He sniffed him. He sniffed Cherry. He returned his attention to Halfshaft, circling him twice in puzzlement. The wizard attempted to face the front as the clown walked round him, its red nose twitching the whole while.

The clown came to a halt in front of him. It leaned forward, peering deep into his witch's eyes, sizing him up. Halfshaft dropped his gaze submissively to the ground. The clown sniffed him again.

And then the pack was off again, bounding along the pathway, leaving the two shaken old ladies behind them.

He watched them leave in astonishment. He turned to Cherry. She was chuckling away to herself like a mad-woman. "I have three questions," he said. "Firstly, what just happened there?"

"They thought we were clowns," she told him. "We were white, like them. The lack of red noses nearly gave the game away, but we got away with it all the same."

"Secondly, how did you know it would work?"

"I didn't. The paint must have been for something, though. I took a guess. I was expecting them to rip us to buggery, if I'm honest, but I thought it was worth a try."

He nodded. He had expected much the same thing himself.

"What's your third question?" she enquired.

"Can we put our clothes back on now? There's only so much nakey-witch I can cope with in one day."

#

They tried to wash the paint off in a stream, but it refused to budge. They tried peeling it off when it dried, but that didn't work either. Eventually, Cherry declared that they would have to leave it on. At least it would afford them some sort of protection if they chanced upon the clowns again.

They made their way back to their rock. Cherry seemed keen for him to sleep, as if she had other business in hand. The more anxious she was for him to nod off, the less inclined he was to oblige. It was still only mid-afternoon in any case.

"I'm not tired," he whinged. "I want to stay up until late."

"You'll go to bed when I tell you to go to bed," the fat witch retorted. "Now go on, go to sleep, or you won't get a bed-time story tomorrow."

Eventually, he nodded off. He was mentally exhausted. He was used to danger after his previous adventures, but this time it was relentless. And this time, he had not even been given the luxury of tackling his assailants in his own body. Maybe a short sleep was in order after all.

He woke up to find there was someone sitting on him. He kept his eyes shut, hoping she would leave of her own accord if he played dead, but she stayed stubbornly put. He groaned aloud. "Leave me alone, Succubus. I've not got the right equipment for you now."

"Prepare to die, Witch!"

He knew that voice. He opened his eyes. He was being straddled by a blonde Amazon, with a rock in her hand (no doubt one of Ditherer's, that he had lobbed into the long grass when he had last been accosted in his sleep).

"Takina!"

She viewed him through narrowed eyes. "How do you know me, witch?"

"It's me. Halfshaft."

She raised the rock above her head, ready to dash his skull to pieces.

"It is! I know I look different, but it's me! I'm not a witch. I'm a crap wizard!"

He looked round for Cherry, hoping to seek corroboration, but she was nowhere to be seen. The only saving grace was that there was no sign of Selene either. Had she been there, he would most likely have been dead already.

"Show me a spell. Halfshaft can make fire with his fingers. Show me that."

"I can't in this body."

She raised the rock.

"Wait. Ask me anything, Anything at all. It's me. Go on."

"Where was I, the last time we were together. Before we came here?"

"Crow Hill. Fighting Ragnar."

She looked at him suspiciously. She seemed far from convinced.

“Who is Rana?”

“Queen of the Amazons. Back in the village you were born in. I’ve seen her recently.”

Takina threatened him with the rock again.

“She’s dead, she’s dead, I know that!” he protested. “That was kind of why I saw her.”

“One more thing,” she said. “Tell me one more thing, that only you would know.”

He thought long and hard, and then he thought some more. “I once tried to take a dump on a dead body in a trunk, whilst we were locked in the bedroom of a deaf troll-cross. That’s hardly something anyone would guess at, is it?”

It was enough. She hugged him. He hugged her back. It felt good. It was the nearest thing to joy he had experienced for a very long time.

She helped him (or rather her, as she was now) to her feet.

“Why are you a witch?”

“Body-swap,” he muttered angrily. “Horrible old hags stole me when my guard was down.”

“And why are you covered in white?”

“Cherry made me take all my clothes off so she could paint me.”

He thought he detected just a flicker of jealousy in her eyes, but was not certain. He might have just seen what he wanted to see.

“It passes the time, I suppose.”

He looked around. “Where’s everyone else?”

“Selene is hunting Halfshaft. Hunting you, I mean. And the girl. The pretty one.”

“She’s not that pretty, not compared to you,” he replied gallantly.

“A little too obvious, maybe,” Takina agreed. “And her breasts are far too large. They must make it hard for her to hunt.”

“Where is Cherry? Have you seen her? She keeps wandering off every time I go to sleep.”

“Maybe she is looking for more paint,” Takina suggested, with a glint in her eye. “So you can give each other another coat tomorrow morning.”

There was something he needed to ask her, but he hesitated. He was worried that he might not like the answer. But he was a white-washed witch being hunted by a murderous troll and a merciless Amazon Queen. How much worse could things get?

“Takina,” he ventured cautiously. “I need to know – I need to know – why did you run away yesterday?”

“I wanted to escape.”

“Yes,” he snapped, more irritably than he intended. “I’d worked that one out for myself. But why did you escape without me?”

“I thought they would catch me, and kill me. You were better off staying at the Circus.”

“How could I be better off? Everyone’s trying to kill me, in case you hadn’t noticed. Even you were trying to kill me, just now. I’ve become a skinny old lady, with chilblains. I’ve got no way of aiming when I need the toilet. What could be worse than that?”

“I thought that if I was gone, then they would not let Selene enter the Games on her own. It did not occur to me that they had replacements for us. Without Selene here, all you had to do was defeat the trolls and you would survive. None of the others would have a chance against you.”

“They wouldn’t?”

“You have defeated Warlocks, and trolls, and wolves. You have wielded powerful magic, powerful enough to defeat whole armies. How could any of the others have hoped to compete against you?”

“That’s true,” he nodded, beaming with satisfaction. “I hadn’t thought of that. But not Selene, though? You didn’t think I could defeat Selene if she was here?”

“She is a woman,” Takina shrugged. “An Amazon. That would have been a different matter entirely.”

“*I’m* a woman now,” Halfshaft pointed out. “And I don’t think it’s all it’s cracked up to be. My hormones are all over the place, and I can’t read maps anymore.”

She laughed. He laughed too. He was very happy to see her, especially now she had explained why she had attempted to escape without him. And she had thought him capable of winning the Games single-handedly (well, possibly with a little help from Cherry). She had faith in him. That almost made up for the fact that he now had to go to the toilet squatting down.

“It is very strange, you being a woman,” Takina commented. “How are you going to get your body back?”

He hung his head, suddenly sad again. “I don’t think I can. They won’t swap back.”

“You could threaten to kill them,” suggested Takina, ever the warrior. “Smash their heads in with a rock if they refuse. You can use this one, if you like.”

“That would sort of defeat the object, don’t you think? There’s no point having my body back, if it’s dead. Besides, I don’t even know where they are.”

“Selene says they are camped on the far side of Crow Hill. The troll could not catch them. He is too slow and too stupid.” She suddenly looked worried. “Oh.”

“Oh?”

“Oh.”

“What is it? What’s the matter?”

“Selene. She knows where they are. Where your body is. She has gone to kill you. Kill them; the witches. You know what I mean. Your body may well be dead by now.”

He felt his jaw quiver. There were tears coming.

“You mean I might be stuck in this body forever?”

“Not really. When she finds out that I have not killed you, she will finish you off herself. Unless I can save you, you will be dead by tomorrow as well.”

Halfshaft let the tears flow. He should have been pleased; it was looking more and more likely that Takina and her Queen would win the Games, and be granted their freedom. But fear was a terrible thing, and he had more than his fair share of it right now. He didn't want to die. And he certainly didn't want to die in a dress, with his bosoms covered in congealed white paint.

#

Takina had left by the time Cherry returned to the rock. She had hurried off to intercept Selene, to put off the inevitable moment when her Queen would discover that the “witches” were still alive. The two Amazons would return to their own camp, and Takina would do everything she could to keep her wizard friend alive for one more day. That was the longest stay of execution he could hope for.

“What time of night do you call this?” asked Halfshaft, his arms tightly crossed on his bony witch chest, as Cherry/Fat Dora waddled back towards their boulder. “I've been worried sick.”

Cherry was not in the mood for a dressing-down. She was fuming, as if fresh back from an argument. “What? Am I on some sort of curfew now?”

“The Amazons were here. Well, one of them, anyway.”

“Selene?” she asked, suddenly concerned. “Selene was here?”

“Takina.”

She relaxed. “That old tart.”

“She's not old (and that's fine coming from you, in that body). And she most certainly isn't a tart.”

“Whatever.”

Halfshaft fumed. His partner was infuriating enough as it was, but now she was an obese witch he found she was more irritating than ever. He was uncertain whether this was because she had become more snappy since she had lost her looks, or whether it was because he was more ready to make allowances for her when she was attractive. He supposed it didn't really matter. Either way, she was a real pain in the arse since she had swapped bodies with a hag.

He decided to be irritating back; give her some of her own medicine.

"I know where our bodies are."

"Where?"

"I'm not telling."

She gave him an impatient look, but he held firm. She followed it up with four different types of tut, but all to no avail. He was good at being annoying when the occasion demanded.

"Oh, for Goodness sake! Where are they?"

"I'm not saying."

"I'll show you my arse when we get our bodies back."

"You get it out all the time; I'd get to see it anyway."

"What do you want, then?"

"Say sorry for calling Takina an old tart."

"Really? Out of everything you could have asked for, you should want me to apologise for saying that about your little girlfriend?"

He nodded. She huffed.

"I'm sorry she's an old tart."

"Say sorry for *calling* her an old tart."

"Shan't."

"Shall."

"Shan't."

They lapsed into uncomfortable silence. Takina was so much nicer than Cherry, he thought. To think he had been agonising all this time about whose life he should save, and this is how she behaved in return. She was really showing her true colours now. What had she ever done for him, anyway? Apart from saving his life on a daily basis. And even that had been when she was pretty. Now she was ugly and overweight, she had not saved his life so much as once. How selfish!

“I’ve thought of a plan,” the plump witch told him. “A plan to get our bodies back.”

“What is it?”

“Tell me where they are, and I’ll tell you how we get them back.”

“Promise?” he asked suspiciously. He did not feel inclined to trust her when she was in this mood, but did not appear to have much choice. He was fed up with being a woman. It was not nearly as much fun as they always made it out to be. Okay, he appeared to be much better at multi-tasking since his transformation, but other than that Girl Power did not appear to have much going for it at all.

“Promise,” she said.

“Takina said they’re the other side of Crow Hill. Now, tell me your plan. How do we get our bodies back?”

She cackled, and ran off into the Forest. “Catch me, and you’ll find out, Sucker!”

She tried to squeeze between two trees, forgetting that she was very much more rotund now she was a witch. She became wedged between the mighty trunks. She struggled to free herself, but without success.

“How humiliating. My arse is stuck. Come on, then, don’t just stand there gawping at me. Help me out.”

Halfshaft sat down. “Maybe in half an hour or so. I’m leaving you there for the time being. Teach you some respect.”

“Oh please help!” begged Cherry. “There’s a bit of tree trunk poking into my dry old witch’s snatch. I’m gonna get Dutch elm disease if you don’t prise it out.”

#

It took them several hours to skirt Crow Hill. Halfshaft was adamant that they shouldn't attempt to climb it. He had only recently seen a group of Sirens sucked down into the grassy mound, and it was not an experience he wanted to share with them. It was safer to walk round it, even if it played havoc with his witch's chilblains.

They travelled in silence. He had not forgiven Cherry for being so cruel about Takina, and she had not forgiven him for leaving her stuck between two trees for the best part of an hour. She had made the occasional remark about her "snatch" having dry rot from the tree-trunk, and on one occasion had claimed to have "squeezed out an ant", but other than that she had not said a word to him.

It occurred to him again that her personality had changed since she had swapped bodies with Fat Dora. Before, she had been whimsical and flighty, skipping from one subject to another at bewildering speed (the only common thread being how drop-dead-gorgeous she considered herself to be). If she was cross, it would only last a minute or two before something came along to distract her, and she would be back to her old self again in no time. But she had been sulking for hours this time round. Maybe she was depressed now she was in someone else's less-than-attractive body. He could not blame her (much as he would have liked to). He had had better days himself.

At one point, they had heard distant baying. Clowns. Cherry/Fat Dora had suggested that they strip naked again as a precautionary measure, but Halfshaft decided that he would rather be eaten than be subjected to her bare body for a second time. They continued on their journey fully clothed. It was for the best.

And then they came upon the camp. Several trees leaned towards one other at an angle, their trunks touching at the top, forming a large tepee-like structure thirty or forty yards across at the base. It was dim inside, little sunlight filtering through the canopy above. But it was light enough to see the two witches inside, dancing around in delight in their stolen new bodies. And, much to their surprise, they saw Selene hanging upside-down from a

tree, suspended pendulum-like from a length of rope. And by the look on her face, she was struggling to see the funny side.

“Finally!” crowed Fake Halfshaft. “A decent body. This old man’s crap; the sooner I’m out of him, the better.”

“Charming,” muttered the real wizard under his breath. That really was adding insult to injury.

“Let me down now!” demanded Selene through gritted teeth, “and I will gut you quickly. Let me down later, and I will do it very slowly indeed.”

“You’ve been saying that for hours,” Fake Halfshaft chuckled. “I don’t think you’re in any position to make threats, not when you’re dangling upside-down like a collapsed yoyo. Now keep quiet. We’re having a bit of a dance.”

“Let me down *now!*” hissed Selene.

“I’d give you a slap,” threatened Fake Halfshaft, “but I don’t want to ruin your pretty little face. *My* pretty little face, soon. As soon as the toad’s warts have warmed up for the potion, we can get started. And don’t give me that sulky face, Lady. You should be happy. You’ll be a wrinkled old wizard soon, you lucky girl!”

Real Halfshaft turned to look at Cherry. He raised an enquiring eyebrow. “So? What’s the plan?”

“Plan?”

“You said you had a plan. To get our bodies back.”

“Did I?” she asked incredulously.

“You know you did.”

“And you believed me?” she enquired, more surprised still.

He sighed. So near, but yet so far. He could see his old self, a body the witch no longer even wanted. But how was he going to get it back from her before she swapped it with Selene?

Cherry tapped him on the shoulder. “I vote we kill them both,” she suggested. She produced the dagger she had procured from Roland shortly after the Games had first started. “Play Kerplunk with them.”

Halfshaft regarded her thoughtfully. This was partly because he was considering her plan, and partly because he was desperately trying to work out where she had managed to secret a ten inch blade when she had been wearing the micro-bikini. He decided that it was best not to ask any further about her hiding-place for the dagger, in case her answer freaked him out. Safest to stick to their present predicament.

“Will we get our bodies back if they’re dead?”

She shrugged. “No idea. It’ll be fun, though.”

“Let’s think of another plan, then.”

“We could use it on Selene. Stop them getting her body, too. Or maybe use it on ourselves. I don’t think I can bear another minute of my thighs chafing when I walk. I’m red-raw down there.”

He ignored her. It seemed the best plan of action. He had been so used to relying on other people in his travels, but all of a sudden everything seemed to depend upon him instead. Cherry appeared to have lost all sense and all hope. It was up to him to save the day. Which was a little worrying, to say the least. He didn’t have a very good track record in that respect.

He spotted someone lurking between the tree-trunks on the far side of the clearing. He groaned. It was Young Halfshaft. This was really starting to get confusing. He could see his own body dancing around, possessed by a skinny witch. He could see his former self, from forty or fifty years earlier, skulking around in the undergrowth. “I’m the only one here who’s not me!” he complained.

A thought struck him. Wherever Young Halfshaft was, the troll would not be far behind. He took it philosophically. There were so many bitches here, what harm could it possibly do to throw a Bastard into the mix?

Sure enough, the troll came roaring out from between the trees, red hair bright against the lush green vegetation. The arrows were still protruding from his hide, a badge of courage and bloody-mindedness. “You’re dead, wizard!” he shouted, as he bore down upon the witches. “Dead!”

The witches froze in terror. And then Fake Halfshaft was off, haring away as quickly as her misappropriated legs could carry her. Bastard shoved Fake Cherry viciously to one side, determined to slay her companion first, convinced that she was the wizard who had helped catapult stones at him from the boat, what seemed like weeks ago.

“Oi!” exclaimed Real Cherry. “That’s my body you’re manhandling!” She dropped the dagger, and was up and after the troll, ready to do battle with him, forgetting that she had become a feeble old lady overnight.

Halfshaft’s first inclination was to go after her, to protect her, to save her life. His second thought was to help the witch who had stolen his body, not for her sake but for his own. If his body was battered and broken, he would never get it back again.

He went with his third thought, though. He seized the dagger (trying to ignore the fact that the handle was inexplicably crusty, presumably as a result of her hiding place) and scurried over to the suspended Amazon Queen.

Selene glared at him from upside down. “Begone, witch, or face the consequences!”

“I’m here to help. But I need you to promise me something first.”

“Forget the speech. Just have done with it. Kill me, while I am tied up and defenceless. At least I will not suffer the indignity of dying at the hands of that fool wizard over there. Though being stabbed by a withered old hag is hardly the glorious death I would have chosen.”

“Promise me you won’t harm Cherry if I let you go.”

She stared at him. Her brow would have furrowed but for the potent herbs she had rubbed into it for that botox-effect the Amazons loved so much. “Let me go, witch? Why would you do that? Is this some sort of trickery?”

“Promise.”

She shrugged, which looked rather strange upside-down. “I promise. I will not harm her *today*. I will kill her tomorrow instead.”

It was the best he was likely to get from her. He sawed the rope in two with the blade. This took him rather longer than he expected, and Selene’s

insistence that he wasn't doing it right only served to fluster him and make the process more tortuous still. Eventually, however, the last remaining threads snapped, and she fell to the ground with a satisfying bump. She leapt immediately to her feet, fuming at the indignity of it all.

"I could kill you," she pointed out. "Saving *your* miserable life was not part of our deal."

He nodded. "I know. Do as you please."

This unexpected response stilled Selene's hand for just a second. But it was enough. All of a sudden, Fake Cherry was there, seizing the dagger from him, trying to bury it in the Amazon's skull. Selene dodged the thrust with contempt, snatched the weapon from her, and held the blade to her throat, looking back at the wizard with an expression of triumph.

"You promised!" Halfshaft cried, "You promised." It had actually been the real Cherry he had been trying to protect, but it occurred to him that as far as Selene was concerned, this was Real Cherry, and maybe, just maybe, he could use her promise to save the witch's life in the hope that his friend might yet get her own body back.

Fake Cherry ignored the pleas the wizard was making on her behalf. Instead, she moved her head an inch or two, checking to see whether her fellow witch was coming to her rescue. But her sister was in no position to lend a hand. Bastard had caught her, and was slowly raising what he thought to be the wizard's head to his mouth, ready to tear a large chunk from the frail old skull. Real Cherry – still in the form of Fat Dora – was going to fake wizard's rescue, but she was too slow. Her elderly legs would never get her there in time to rescue his body.

Suddenly, a fat transparent witch shot out from Fake Cherry's body, like a banana squeezed from its skin at high velocity. It shot off towards Real Cherry. The witch had had enough, vacating the young woman's body like a rat deserting a sinking galleon. Cherry's naked soul came hurtling in the opposite direction, morphing into her own body again. "I'm back to being gorgeous!" she shrieked with glee. The prospect of having her throat sliced open by Selene's dagger didn't seem to phase her at all, just as long as she looked pretty when it happened.

At the same time, Halfshaft felt something invade his own witch's body. Instinctively, he struggled against it, holding on for dear life as it tried to evict his soul. Had he just died? Was he going off to face Rana in the Underworld again? But then realisation dawned, and he let go. His soul soared through the air, shooting back into his old body with a jolt. Despite himself, he smiled in relief. Everyone was now back in their own shells. Yes, he was now on the point of having his head bitten off by an angry troll, but at least it would be his own head rather than someone else's. That had to count for something.

"You!" The troll had stopped, Halfshaft's head inches from his gaping mouth. The creature's foul breath curdled his nostrils as it shouted. It was truly, truly rank. What was going on now? Unfortunately, with his head held so very close to the troll's jaws, he was not in a position to have a look round and find out.

And then he was lying on the ground, tossed aside like an unwanted toy. The troll was lumbering towards Selene at speed. And then Takina was by her side – where had she come from? – handing her the bow and remaining arrows like an archer's "caddy". The two women stood their ground as the troll descended upon them, roaring at them as he ran. He had to admire their courage. It took a lot of guts to face down a charging troll.

The two witches – newly reunited with their elderly bodies - scuttled away, but Selene ignored them, at least for the time being. She strung her bow with two arrows, and took careful and unhurried aim. As the troll approached at a gallop, she let the bow-string go. Both arrows found their target, slamming into the troll's battle-scarred face. He lurched backwards, trying to tear them out. One had entered his left eye, and he screamed in pain as he tugged it free. But then a third arrow caught him on the bridge of his broad nose, and a fourth found his right eye, leaving him totally blind. He roared in agony and frustration, flailing blindly about him, knowing that the Amazon would soon be ready to finish him off and that he was virtually powerless to stop her.

She moved closer, stringing two more arrows on to her bow. "Goodbye, troll," she said. And the arrows were airborne, striking the troll in the heart, sending him crashing to the ground. Still, his body moved, jerking as if having a fit, but resolutely refusing to die. Selene turned her attention to the fleeing witches, judging the threat from the troll to be over. She fired two

more arrows in quick succession, killing each of them instantly. She then turned towards where Young Halfshaft had been skulking in the undergrowth, but he was long gone, the instinct for self-preservation having kicked in the moment she had taken aim at his troll-partner with her bow.

Halfshaft ran over to Bastard's convulsing body. Despite himself, he felt sorry for the creature as it thrashed around on the ground. It had not asked to be here. Yes, it had tried to kill him every chance it could get, but that was all part of the Games. He admired its huge strength, and its obstinacy in clinging on to life even with its eyes taken out and a brace of arrows in its heart.

It jerked one last time. "Buster," it said, and then it was dead. The troll lay sprawled on the bloodied grass, a fallen giant. Yet another Candidate had been forcibly crossed off the list.

Selene said something to Cherry, and the two of them walked over to him, Takina following on behind them.

"I promised the witch I would let this woman live," she told Halfshaft, gesturing towards Cherry. "For now. I will kill her tomorrow instead. But there are clowns in the Forest. She has a better chance of surviving until tomorrow if I let you live, too. I want her to survive until tomorrow. I want to be the one who kills her."

She started walking away. Takina made as if to join Halfshaft, but he shooed her away. Selene had dispatched her last serious rivals. She was now pretty much guaranteed to survive the Games, and he was keen to ensure that Takina was by her side when that happened. His Amazon friend looked hurt when he waved her away, but went with Selene all the same. If only you knew the sacrifice I'm making for you here, Halfshaft thought. I'm going to die – and Cherry, too – just so you can live.

"Let's kill them while their backs are turned," Cherry whispered. "Then that'll just leave Young Halfshaft and Ditherer. We'll be home and dry. Job done."

He shook his head. "Let's not."

She huffed, but her mood lifted almost immediately. She had perked up already now she was back in her own body. She cupped her hands beneath

her breasts and jiggled them up and down. “The Girls are back in town,” she chuckled. “I’ve missed you two!”

“Can I have a go at that?” asked the wizard.

She laughed, which was not really the response he had hoped for.

Selene had cast away the dagger, and they went to retrieve it. They would need a weapon tomorrow, and the empty tin of paint was no longer fit for purpose. They were next on Selene’s hit-list, and they would require all the help they could get if they were to make it through the following day alive.

#

Cherry was very much back to normal. All the way back to their rock, she chattered and teased and pointed out how good she looked. If anything, she was even more self-obsessed than before. The relief of being freed from Fat Dora’s body came bubbling to the surface, and it would take an awful lot more than his virtually non-existent magical prowess to force it back down again.

“Do you know what?” she asked him. “I think I’m even prettier than I was before. Do you think so? How could that be? Hey, watch this!”

She cartwheeled girlishly across the grass. The combination of that tiny little outfit and the Laws of Gravity were almost more than the wizard’s blood pressure could bear. “I’m me!” she declared to the Forest and anyone else who cared to listen. “I’m me again!”

He attempted to shush her to silence, without success. Selene was out there somewhere. Who was to say that she wouldn’t regret keeping her promise, and come after the two of them to finish the job? Bearing in mind that Young Halfshaft and Ditherer were hopeless and alone, then he and Cherry were the only remaining threat to her. If he had been in her shoes – or rather her bare feet – he would have killed him while he had the chance.

Cherry did a handstand. He looked away. He was going to explode if she kept showing off her body from all these different angles. He had a sneaking

suspicion she was doing it on purpose. What was the point of having her curves back unless there was someone there to admire them?

“Come on, you,” she said. “Join me.”

“Join your what?” he asked in puzzlement.

“Join me upside down.”

He tried, just to humour her. Predictably, he ended up in a pile of thrashing limbs on the grass. He wasn't really built for handstands, it had to be said. She coaxed him into a second attempt, with the same outcome. She collapsed to the ground, crying with laughter. He couldn't help but join in. He found it difficult stopping once he had started. It worried him that he sounded so hysterical, but she didn't seem to notice. This was possibly because she was admiring her body yet again.

“I like being me,” she told him. “Do you like being you?”

He shook his head. “No. Not at all.”

She looked surprised. “No? Why not?”

“You want a list?”

“A list?”

“Okay, where to start. I'm old. I haven't got a body like yours; well, the male equivalent of it; you know what I mean. I've got arthritis. No-one fancies me unless I pay them to. I'm running around the Forest, and everyone's trying to kill me. I'm wearing a black leotard. I spent last night trapped in the body of an anorexic witch with halitosis so bad I could smell it withered plants as I passed them by. Only two people can get out of here alive. I love Takina to bits, and I could never kill her in a million years. That means you and I have to die, and I don't want you to die. You're the biggest pain in the arse I've ever met, but you keep saving my life, and despite you being vain, insensitive and generally annoying, I've actually grown to like you quite a lot. Except when you were a witch, and you were all miserable and sulky, when I didn't like you very much at all.”

There, he had told her everything. It was a relief. It was probably a really bad idea, as she would now know that he had split loyalties; no, worse than

that, that he was putting Takina's welfare above their own. That would hardly be good for team morale.

"Life's a bitch, sometimes," she shrugged.

"That's it? You're not cross?"

"Why would I be cross?" she asked mystified. "Frowning gives you wrinkles."

"I can't kill Takina. Not now, not ever. And I'd stop you if you tried to. That means that Takina and Selene are going to win. And we're – not. I'm sorry, Cherry. I am so, so sorry. I don't want anything to happen to you. I don't want anything to happen to me, come to that. But I don't know what to do; I don't know how to save us."

"Why does Selene get to live? Tell me you don't fancy that skinny old moose, too?"

"She's on the same team as Takina. If their team wins, then they both go through."

"Not if she's dead, she won't. there's nothing in the rules to stop two people from different teams going through. Like you and Takina, for example."

This was news to him. "I could get out of here with Takina if Selene is dead? Even though we're on different teams?"

"Of course. The only rule is that there are no rules, remember? As long as only two people get out of here alive, it could be anyone you like."

He stopped to think this over. There was a way out of this, then! He and Takina could make their way to this hut, and escape to freedom. Killing Selene might be a bit tricky, of course. She had looked pretty lethal when she was slaying trolls and witches without so much as a hair out of place. But there was hope of sorts.

There was a flaw in his plan though. Cherry was looking at him, one eyebrow raised, waiting for it to occur to him. It did. His bright idea disintegrated into ashes.

"What about you?" he asked her, knowing the answer already. "What would happen to you if Takina and I escape?"

“Nothing,” she said. He breathed a huge sigh of relief. Everything would be okay then. “Nothing would happen to me, because I’d already be dead.”

“You would?”

“I would. They wouldn’t let the two of you escape as long as there are other Candidates still alive. You’d have to kill me first.”

“I couldn’t do that.”

“Well, I’m very glad to hear it,” she pouted. “Look, I knew you’d find this hard. She’s your friend, I get that. But I thought that if you hung around with me for a bit, see how much more fun I am than her, how much better looking, how much more I’ve got up-top, then you’d change your mind. I just wanted you to like me more than her.”

“You saved my life. Again and again and again.”

She shook her head. “You’re not listening. That’s not what this is about. I want you to *like* me. I want you to like me *best*. It’s not what I do for you that’s important, it’s what you think of me. I need to know I’m worth saving.”

He held out his arms to her, wanting to hug her, reassure her, but holding back for fear that she would think that he was being seedy. Most women would interpret his offer of a cuddle as a dirty old man wanting a bit of body-to-body contact, and in fairness that would usually have been spot on. But not on this occasion. This time, he had the best of intentions. He just wanted to hold her, and tell her that everything was going to be okay. But he held back, convinced that his gesture would be misconstrued.

She started crying, which came as a real shock. She had blubbed a little as a witch, but never in her own body. Cherry was cheerful, thick-skinned and uber-confident. It came as something of a surprise to discover that she had genuine feelings after all.

Throwing caution aside, he hugged her. She clung on to him. He clung back. How could he let her die now? There was only one thing for it. He pulled away from her, held her by the arms, stared intently to her face.

“Of course you’re worth saving,” he whispered. “And of course I like you. You’re in my top two women ever. Which is why – which is why -”

“Why what?” she asked, wiping the tears from her face.

“Why you’re going to get out of this Forest alive.”

“And Takina?”

“Her, too.”

She paused, giving him a curious look. “And you?”

He gave her a smile which he hoped to be braver than he felt. “Never mind about me.”

“You can’t!” she exclaimed. “You can’t die! I won’t let you!”

“Do you see how I look in this leotard?” he asked in a half-hearted attempt to lighten the mood. “Believe me, you’d be doing me a favour.”

#

Upon reflection, they decided to sleep somewhere different that night. He had been awoken from his sleep every time they had spent the night beneath the boulder, and as often as not they had been looking to spill his bodily fluids. Now Selene was after him, it made sense to camp somewhere a little less easy to find.

Cherry insisted that they find somewhere close by. He was keen on picking somewhere with a landmark, so they could find their way back to it later on. She told him, though, there would be no “later on”. The following day would be the last of the Games. Either they killed Selene, or she killed them. They would have no further need of a camp after tonight.

They ended up sleeping under one of the trees between which Cherry had been trapped whilst in Fat Dora’s body. It was within sight of the boulder, which rather defeated the object of changing camp as far as he was concerned, but Cherry would not countenance moving any further afield. She assured him that she would take first watch, and they would be off at the first sign of wolves, clowns or avenging Amazon Royalty emerging from the Forest.

He knew what her record was like when it came to standing guard. Every night, she had promised to watch over him, and each time he had woken to find someone trying to talk to him, mount him or brain him with a rock (sometimes all three). He needed to know where she went, and what she got up to, when he was asleep. He tried asking. She claimed that she was off in search of the hut where the Games would finish, but he was not entirely sure he believed her. So where did she slip off to, the moment his eyes were closed? And why wouldn't she tell him about it?

He couldn't believe that she was in league with one of the other Candidates. If she was, she would have let him die on each of the occasions she had chosen to save him. But she was up to something, and there was only one way to find out what it was. He would wait until she thought he was asleep, and he would follow her when she slipped away.

He closed his eyes as soon as the sun fell below the tree-tops, and faked snoring. It did not sound very convincing, even to him, so he abandoned the sound effects. He realised that he was feeling genuinely tired in any event. He opened his eyes to check that she was still there, but they insisted on drooping closed again of their own accord. He felt himself sinking into deep and authentic sleep.

And then he was wide awake again. He had heard a twig snap. He sat up, looking around, ready to flee if their makeshift camp was under attack. And as he did so, he saw Cherry creeping off into the trees in the distance, abandoning him yet again.

"Right, Lady," he muttered to himself, as he climbed to his feet. "Let's see what you're up to."

He set off in pursuit, trying to find a happy medium between the speed he needed to keep up with her, and the silence required to make sure she did not realise she was being followed. She threaded her way through the trees with assurance. She clearly knew exactly where she was going. It occurred to him, however, that with his crap sense of direction, and without her to guide him, he had little or no chance of finding his way back to camp again. He sped up a little. It was better that she realised that he was following her, than if he lost sight of her and ended up wandering round the Forest on his own until Selene tracked him down.

She came to a halt in front of a particularly large tree, twice the size of its neighbours. The trunk measured a good six or seven feet across. She dug her fingers into the bark at one side, and wriggled them around as if looking for something. A section of bark swung open, like a door. She stepped inside, closing it behind her. And she was gone.

What to do now? He looked around. The moonlight enabled him to see his immediate surroundings, but who knew what might be lurking in the deep shadow? Clowns were his greatest fear, more so even than Selene. At least with her his death would be quick and clean. With the clowns, he would be eaten alive. Would they be out and about at this time of night? He had never taken sufficient interest in them to know whether or not they were nocturnal.

He felt vulnerable out here on his own. He had to follow her into the tree-trunk, even though it meant certain discovery. Now she was back in her own body, she would only stay mad at him for a minute or two, and then she would be inviting him to admire her bottom again. She never held a grudge for long.

He approached the tree. He stopped in front of it, having second thoughts. Maybe it was better just to hide nearby, to wait for her to come out? It was a tree-trunk, for goodness sake; she was hardly likely to be in there for long, not with her attention span. He should hide behind a nearby tree, and follow her back to camp when she got bored in there.

He heard a noise in the undergrowth. It didn't sound all that close, but who was to say which direction it was heading in? Everything in the Forest was out to kill him, except Takina, and even she would have her Queen in tow. There was only one thing for it. He would have to hide in the tree with Cherry, until the danger had passed.

He tried to dig his fingers into the trunk, as she had done, but stubbed his thumb badly. The wood was hard, unyielding. He clicked his fingers to conjure up flame to examine the trunk in better light, but extinguished it again immediately. He recalled his first outing in the Great Forest. The trees were living creatures, who were far from comfortable with fire. It was more than likely that they would find their own way to extinguish it, if he had not done so first, and his way was much less painful than theirs.

He rubbed his hand over the tree-trunk. He heard a noise off to his right. There was definitely something out there, and it was getting closer all the

time. He jabbed his fingers painfully against the bark again, repeating the process in a slightly different spot each time. And, much to his relief, on the fourth or fifth attempt, they sank into the wood, much as Cherry's had done. He wriggled them around. There was something inside the trunk, a catch of some sort. He squeezed it, and the trunk sprung open a few inches.

He stepped back cautiously, half-expecting Cherry to come tumbling out. Nothing. He gave the trunk-door an experimental tug, and it drifted open. There was a metal room inside, an empty metal room. It was lit with a strange artificial light, as if it was day-time in there, even though there was no sign of a lamp or a candle. He stepped in, closing the door behind him.

"Cherry?" he whispered, as loudly as he dared. "Are you there?"

No reply.

He looked about him. There was nothing in the room save for a few buttons, grouped together in a vertical line running down one wall. One had a "G" on it, one had a "B", and the other two had arrows pointing inwards and outwards respectively. He pressed the "G", but nothing happened. He tried the outward arrows, and the door opened, without him even touching it! He pressed the inward arrows, and they closed again.

"What magic is this?" he whispered to himself. But he knew the answer. This was the magic of a great magician, maybe even a warlock or a demon. It put his own abilities to shame.

His hand hovered over the "B" button. His reason told him that this was where Cherry must be. It was the only button left which she could have pushed. He hesitated. Why would she be visiting a demon every night? Was it like his relationship with Areola, the succubus? Did she just come here for sex? Or was there a more sinister explanation? Maybe she was planning on sending him back to Hell, when the time was right. Not Cherry, though. Surely not Cherry. She cared for him. She wouldn't do that to him, after all they'd been through together.

It was a dilemma. He agonised over whether to go in search of her, or whether to go back outside and hide, taking his chances with whatever was making its way through the undergrowth towards him. He touched the "B" button, without pressing it. "What to do?" he asked himself. "What to do?"

The decision was taken out of his hands. The door opened out to the night, and a figure stepped inside. The door closed again, leaving the two of them together. He was alone with one of the Candidates he least wanted to see.

#

Halfshaft screamed like a big girl's Laura Ashley blouse.

Young Halfshaft screamed right back at him, determined not to be outdone.

Eventually, once convinced that neither meant the other any harm, they tailed off.

“You!” said Halfshaft.

“Us,” confirmed his younger self, somewhat smugly.

“What are you doing here?”

“I saw you disappear into a tree. It's dark out there. There might be – creatures. I thought I'd better follow you in. What are you doing here, though? It's just a metal room. Is this where you hide at night-time?”

“It's not just a metal room,” Halfshaft replied defensively. “There are buttons!”

He gestured towards the buttons on the wall. If he was hoping to impress his younger self, he was disappointed. Young Halfshaft shrugged. “So? What do they do?”

“This one opens the door. This one closes the door. The one with the “G” on it must be broken.”

“What about this one?” asked Young Halfshaft, jabbing the button with the “B” with an inquisitive finger. “What does that one do?”

“Stop!” cried the wizard. “You don't know what you've just done!”

“What? What have I done?”

“I don't know either,” Halfshaft was forced to admit. He saw his younger self smirking, and was only just able to resist the urge to throttle him. If you

kill him, he reminded himself, then I won't live to be me. I would've died years ago. Just give him a withering look, and have done with it.

And then they were in motion. The room didn't change in any way, but the feeling in his stomach suggested that it was dropping downwards, down into the earth. Young Halfshaft looked at him in panic. "What's going on? What have I done?"

"I just told you." It was his turn to smirk. "We don't know."

The motion stopped. The doors opened automatically. They were no longer in the Forest. There was a long corridor, with doors either side it. Painted magnolia, which seemed a very strange colour indeed to the two wizards who skittered around the lift. Hell was normally red or black, as far as Halfshaft was aware, if it was painted any colour at all.

A door opened further along the corridor. Halfshaft punched the button to close the doors. They closed. He pressed the "B" button again, desperate for them to start moving back towards safety, but nothing happened. They stayed stubbornly put.

"Where are we? Where was that?" asked his younger self.

"How should I know?"

"You're older than me. Old people are supposed to know stuff like that. Besides, you were the one who was coming here. You must have some idea where this is."

Halfshaft went quiet for a while. "I could be wrong, but I think we're in Hell," he said. He had never been very good at breaking bad news gently.

Young Halfshaft screamed again. Old Halfshaft screamed louder still.

And then the doors opened. A blade flashed. More screaming, shriller than before. And one of the wizards lay dead on the floor in a fast expanding pool of his own blood.

#

“Cherry!” Halfshaft screeched. “You’ve just killed me!”

She tucked the dagger back into the waistband of her metallic knickers. “No I haven’t. I’ve killed him.”

“You don’t understand. He’s me. If he’s dead, then that means I never made it past – whatever age he is. I’ll cease to be.” He checked himself over, expecting to see himself start to vanish at any second. “What have you done? What have you done?”

“He’s not you. He’s a robot.”

“Robot?”

“A machine. A bit like a clock, only considerably harder to build.”

He shook his head. The girl had gone mad. “Clocks don’t bleed!”

“They do if you programme them to. Everyone who “dies” in the Games has to bleed. One of the robots didn’t, one year. I can’t even begin to tell you how many millions of complaints they had. Now they pump blood all over the place, just to be on the safe side.”

“I don’t understand any of this. What do you mean, “one year”? Have you done this before?”

“You’re asking a lot of questions,” she said. “I’ll tell you everything later, when we’ve won. But we’ve got stuff to do first.”

She closed the doors, and pressed the “G” button. They started to rise.

“What stuff?”

“We’ve got to kill Baby Halfshaft.”

The wizard huffed. The poor man – clock, whatever the hell he was – was lying in a pool of blood on the ground. He looked very much dead already.

A thought occurred, as it was prone to do from time to time. “If he really is a clock, how come he died when you stabbed him?”

“I stabbed his blood bank. They close down automatically when you do that. Otherwise, they’d be running round like maniacs with blood pumping out of their chests, and viewers would get even more irritated than if there

was no blood at all. Dead men don't walk, you see, yet alone run around in circles like headless chickens."

"Are they all robots? The other Candidates, I mean."

"Only one of them."

"Are you one? Are you a clock?"

"Have you seen this body?" she asked incredulously. "This face? As if they could design anything this perfect! Besides, robots always have two holes on their right bum cheek. It's where they charge them up. There aren't any holes in my bum, none that aren't meant to be there anyway! You would've noticed, the way you keep checking me out all the time when you think I'm not looking."

The metal room stopped moving. She opened the door, and started dragging his younger self out into the Forest.

"What are you doing?" he asked. "Where are you taking him?"

"Just shut up a moment, will you? You men ask so many questions. Just stand over by that tree, and look worried for me, will you? The viewers are going to love this."

He did as he was told. He had run out of questions for the time being, although he was sure he would think of plenty more later on, given time to think. She started to pull Young Halfshaft's corpse up a tree, like a leopard with her kill. He marvelled at how strong she was. Maybe it was best to do as he was told, in case he ended up in the tree as well.

She balanced the corpse precariously on a low branch. She dropped back down on to the ground, landing lightly on her feet. "You ready?" she asked him. He nodded dumbly, unsure what it was that he was agreeing to be ready for.

"Action!" she cried.

The branch of the tree tipped up of its own accord, and Young Halfshaft's corpse tumbled down on top of her. She gave a cry of surprise, and started wrestling with his body, as a small child pretends to struggle with a toy snake. It did not look remotely convincing to Halfshaft, but maybe someone who thought her assailant had just leapt out of a tree at her would find it

easier to suspend their disbelief. Why was she doing this? She kept going on about viewers, but there was no-one else here. Not even those little black boxes, with the little people inside of them. There were just the two of them, and surely she couldn't be putting on this performance for his benefit alone? The girl was clearly out of her tiny mind.

She was winning the struggle, which was not hugely surprising, bearing in mind her opponent was dead. She caught Halfshaft off-guard, though, when she called out to him for assistance.

“Help!” she cried. “I can't hold him off much longer.”

The wizard looked on in panic. No way did he want to be a part of this farce. Why did she have to involve him, when she was more than capable of fighting off the dead robot all on her own?

“No,” he called out to her. “You're doing fine. I don't think you need any help.”

“Help me!” she cried again.

If there was an audience somewhere, like she'd said, she was making him look ridiculous. What was worse, though? Looking mean for refusing to come to the rescue of a damson in distress, or rolling around on the floor with his recently deceased former self, trying to make it look as if it was a fair fight? It was a hard call to make.

Cherry changed tack. She rolled Young Halfshaft on top of her, clamping his body tightly between her legs, and started pumping her hips up and down.

“Halfshaft!” she screamed. “Oh no, please no, anything but this.”

The wizard gave in. That was all he needed; she was making his former self look like a rapist! If he didn't help her now, he would look truly awful. He had no option but to wade in and rescue her from the vicious cadaver.

“Don't worry, Cherry, I'll save you,” he said in an unenthusiastic monotone. “Leave him to me.”

He walked over to her, pulled Young Halfshaft from her, and wrestled the corpse to the ground. It weighed less than he was expecting, which thankfully made it much easier to manoeuvre than might otherwise have been the case. He pulled it on top of him.

“He’s trying to bugger you now!” cried Cherry, in mock horror.

“No, no, he really isn’t,” Halfshaft replied firmly. “He wouldn’t do that.”

“He is! He’s getting his thing out! Quick, finish him off before it’s too late!”

“He isn’t getting it out!” Halfshaft insisted. “We’re too busy fighting for any of that sort of nonsense.”

He rolled over, so that he was on top, in the hope that this would shut Cherry up.

“Now you’re trying to bugger *him!*” she exclaimed. What a bitch!

“Would you shut up!” he snapped, “or you can bloody well finish him off yourself.”

He stood up. Enough was enough. “There. He won’t be given you any more trouble.”

She came and inspected the body in poorly-acted horror. “There’s a lot of blood,” she gasped.

He looked down. His leotard was covered with the stuff. He shivered. Being covered with his younger self’s blood was not a pleasant experience, even if Young Halfshaft was apparently more of a time-piece than an actual human-being.

“How did you kill him?” she asked.

The question took him by surprise. He stared at her. She stared back. He could see the tiniest hint of a smile flickering at the corner of her mouth. He stared some more, but she was still waiting for an answer.

“Heart-attack?” he eventually proposed.

“How come he’s bleeding?” she replied, refusing to let him off the hook. He stared at her even harder than before, but all to no avail. An idea occurred. He smiled at her in triumph. She smiled back, a trifle warily.

“You’ve got blood on you, too. He must have got covered in the stuff when he was on top of you. I think we both know what happened here, don’t we?”

“We do?” she ventured.

“We do,” he affirmed. “Would I be right in thinking you’ve got the painters in...? I’m afraid you’ve leaked all over him. Probably what gave the poor fellow his heart-attack.”

She frowned at him.

He gave her a wink. Revenge was sweet.

#

Finally, they were on their way to the hut. Selene would get there soon afterwards, Cherry assured him, if she was not there already. Takina would be there, too. Only two of the four of them would be allowed into the time-tunnel. The other two would die “for the viewers at home”. They were a demanding lot, whoever they were and wherever they were hiding.

Question after question occurred to him. She shushed him to silence at first, and bearing in mind she still had the dagger in her belt he decided that it might be safer not to press the point. After all, she was not the woman he thought she was, so who was to say what she might be capable of now her secret was out?

But come midday she let him speak. “It’s all expert analysis at lunchtime,” she said. “No live footage. We can say what we like for a bit.” Quite what she was going on about was anyone’s guess!

“I need answers,” he told her. “There’s so many things I don’t understand about all this.”

“You don’t always get answers,” she replied. “Ever seen “Lost”?”

He shrugged, not having the faintest idea what she was rattling on about. But it was time for her to talk. Where to start?

“You’re one of “them”, then”?

She gave that infuriating smile again. “Usually not. But I have been known to dabble, from time to time.”

“You know what I mean. You’re working for the people who set all this up.”

“Pretty much. I’m their star. I cost a fortune. But I’m worth every penny, I’m told. They love me, at home.”

“So all that stuff you do; it’s all an act?”

“What stuff?”

He ran around in circles, waving his arms around ineffectually. “Oh, look at me, look how beautiful I am! Haven’t I got the nicest bottom in the whole world?”

“No, that’s the real me, alright. If you’ve got it, flaunt it. And I’ve got it by the bucketful.”

He didn’t seem to be getting anywhere with this. He looked her in the eye. She looked back in amusement. “Who are you, Cherry? Who are you really?”

She shrugged. “Hard to say. I’m different things to different people.”

“Try.”

“Okay. I’m a mercenary. They pay me to run around in the Forest, looking sexy, because it puts their ratings up. I do this every year. They tried to replace me the year before last, but their ratings halved so they brought me back again. Apart from looking gorgeous, it’s my job to look after you. The viewers love you. It’s important that you win.”

“Me? Why me?”

“They have satellites all over the place. How can I explain that to you? Like spy-holes, I suppose, where people all over the universe get to see what you’re doing. They were doing a show about Hedral on the Geography Channel, and they saw you and your friends saving the world. The viewers loved it. Someone even wrote a book about it. So they decided to put you in the Games. Make a star of you.

They wanted the others as well, but they had trouble finding them in time for this year’s show. It takes a while to track people down when they disappear into time-tunnels. They could be anywhere and any-when. They’ll

find your friends before long, though, and put them in next year's Games. Thane, Rod, all of them. I'm looking forward to starring opposite Thane; it will be fun working with another mercenary. Less hard work, too.

This isn't your past, by the way. It's a set. The Castle, the Forest, everything's fake. Except the people. Most of them are real. Only one ringer."

He tried to make sense of all this, but failed. It was too much to take in. He had more questions, but wasn't sure he wanted to ask them. There didn't seem to be much point, when he didn't understand the answers she had already given. Eventually, he decided to press ahead anyway. It passed the time, if nothing else.

"So where did you go, when you went into the tree? What was down there? I thought it was the Underworld."

"The control centre. You can see what's going on with all the other Candidates. I need to know where they are so they don't take us by surprise. Plus I get to have a couple of hours' beauty sleep, without fear of having my head bashed in by one of our lovely rivals."

"But I might have had my head bashed in while you were gone!"

She shook her head. "No. I would've seen it on the cameras. Sorry, the spyholes I mean. Like with Ditherer. As soon as I saw him coming in your direction, I came back to help you."

"You left it pretty late."

"Sorry. I was doing my nails. Don't look at me like that. Have you seen the state of them? You try staying well-manicured when you're grubbing around in a forest!"

"And it's your job to look after me? So I win? You didn't save me because you wanted to, you saved me because they were paying you?"

"Yes, they're paying me, but I would've done it anyway. I like you. You remind me of my granddad."

"Thanks for that."

“Don’t mention it. Anything else you want to know? You’ve got about a minute before we “Go live” again, and then we’ll have cameras – “spyholes” – on us to the very end. Speak now, or forever hold your peace.”

“That speech of yours earlier. About you wanting me to like you best. About you wanting me to think you were worth saving. You looked so sad; so sincere. Was that all just an act, too?”

She stopped walking. She turned to face him. The laughter left her face.

“What I said back then. What I said. I - ”

She looked upwards, gauging the position of the sun. “Too late,” she said. “Time’s up. We’ll live again any second.”

She marched on ahead of him. He scuttled along beside her. “Just nod,” he begged. “You don’t have to say anything. Just nod, and I’ll know.”

But she ignored him. It was one question too many. But it was the question he most needed answering.

#

It was just a hut; a normal every day hut. Rectangular, thatched roof, walls made of dried mud. The only thing unusual about it was the metal door, similar to the one inside the tree trunk. They had said it would be a hut, but after everything which had happened to him since the Games had started, he had expected something more imposing. It was almost something of an anti-climax, if the truth be told.

It stood in the middle of a clearing. Cherry insisted that they skirt round it before approaching it, to see if Selene was skulking around in the trees. Halfshaft felt this was unnecessary; Amazons don’t “skulk”, he told her. They’re so confident in their own abilities that they just march up to you and stick you with the sharp implement of their choice. But, as always, she insisted on doing things her way.

They reached the far side of the clearing without incident. There was another door this side of the hut. And a body. There was someone lying on

the ground, his arm bent up behind his back at an unnatural angle, completely motionless. The face was turned away from them, but there was only person left in the Games with a body-shape like that, and the luminous lime-green mankini tended to give the game away too. Ditherer. So near, but yet so far.

Halfshaft surprised himself by feeling sorry for his former cell-mate. Yes, the man was intensely irritating; yes, he had been terribly indecisive, especially when it came to choosing a number for the Games' lottery; and yes, he had attempted to smash his skull in with a rock while he was asleep. But he had just been an ordinary man, trying to survive as best he could in a nightmare that was none of his choosing.

The door of the hut slid open of its own accord. Halfshaft and Cherry exchanged glances.

"What now?" he asked.

"We go and check it out, We should run."

"In case Selene's out there?"

"No. Because I look good when I'm running. They show it in slow-motion in the highlights. It makes my tits jiggle."

He stared at her. "You really are like this, then? It wasn't an act."

"Like what? I'm just saying. It's sort of been my trade-mark, since Season Thirty Seven. You wouldn't believe the fan-mail I get!"

Cherry dashed towards the hut, with the wizard following along nervously behind. He felt exposed in the clearing, but the main cause of his anxiety was, for once, not based upon his own personal safety. He was more concerned about what might happen inside the hut when they got there. Only two people got to escape the Games, that was what they had said. If the two of them ran inside and went straight into a time-tunnel, that would leave no place for Takina. She would die here, abandoned and alone. He would have to wait outside the hut until she arrived; there was no other option. Cherry could escape, and he would send Takina in after her when she arrived. Selene, of course, might have other ideas.

They reached the door. Cherry prodded Ditherer with her left foot. He remained motionless. She looked at the door, and then at the wizard. She gave him a grin.

“We’ve done it,” she told him. “You win. In you go.”

He shook his head. “I’m staying out here.”

“I think you’ve got the rules muddled up in that funny little wizard’s head of yours. The aim of the game is to make our way here, go inside and escape.”

“Not without Takina.”

She sighed. “Okay, you go inside, and I’ll make sure Takina follows you in when she gets here. All I have to do is kill Selene, and that will be a pleasure. She looks far too good in that fur-skin bikini; if it wasn’t for her pancake tits, she could be serious competition in the babe stakes. The bitch!”

He shook his head again. He didn’t believe her.

“What? What’s up now?”

“I don’t trust you. Cherry, No, don’t look like that. What do you expect? You’ve been lying to me since the moment we first met; the moment you gave me the number which got me here in the first place. How can I believe you when you say that you’ll let Takina into the tunnel? Who’s to say you wouldn’t just kill them both and jump in yourself the moment I’m out of the way?”

“Three reasons,” she told him. “Firstly, if I wanted to go in the tunnel, I’d do it now. Who’s to stop me?”

“I would if it meant saving Takina.”

She gave him an infuriating grin. “Really?”

“I’d try. I’m a wizard, after all.”

“Secondly,” she smirked, choosing to ignore this last remark, “I’m signed up here for another two seasons. All those questions you asked, you never thought to ask me whether I actually *wanted* to escape. Some people are just so self-obsessed!”

“Me? Self-obsessed! You’re the one who’s got whiplash from constantly trying to check out their own bottom!”

“And thirdly, I’d never ever lie on camera. I’ve got my public image to think of.”

An arrow sizzled through the air, missing her nose by millimetres. Selene was here, and she clearly meant business.

“Okay,” shrugged the wizard, self-preservation kicking in. They could continue their conversation inside. “Let’s go.”

They took a few steps into the hut. It was dark inside. Halfshaft started groping his way forwards, but Cherry put out a restraining arm. “Let’s have some light first.”

“Shall I conjure flame?” he enquired.

“You could do,” she replied. “Or maybe I could turn on the light switch.”

She pressed a button on the wall, made of some strange white material, and the darkness evaporated. Powerful wizardry indeed!

He looked around him in shock. There were two reasons for this. The first was that the hut was larger on the inside than on the out. He would have said that it was maybe four yards at its longest point before they had entered it, but now they were inside it was three or four times that size. But his surprise at the dimensions of the hut was as nothing compared to his shock at what was inside it. For there, in the centre of the room, not five yards away from him, was the swirling kaleidoscope of colour that could transport him to safety, the time-tunnel he had been seeking since first setting foot in the Forest. And there, huddled around it, like dogs around a fire, were a couple of dozen sleeping clowns.

#

“You can do this,” Cherry whispered to the shaking wizard. “They’re asleep. Just creep through them, really, really slowly. You’ll be okay.”

He shook his head vigorously. “No,” he said. “Not through *clowns*! Not for all the time-tunnels in the world.”

He backed away, hitting the light-switch as he exited. Maybe they would sleep better in the dark. Besides, he really didn't want to look at the foul creatures; they made his stomach churn.

He stepped out of the hut, and turned to flee. But there was Selene outside, bow already strung, preparing to fire another arrow at him. Takina was by her side. He glanced back towards the hut, the only place of safety from her. No, not in there. He would rather die out here, in the sunlight.

Selene loosened her grip on the arrow, knowing it would find its target at such short range. At the very last second, Takina shoved her off balance, sending the arrow off at a tangent from its flight-path. It lodged in the wall of the hut, a yard or two from the door.

Selene rounded on Takina, punching her to the ground, hurling abuse at her for betraying her own Queen yet again. Halfshaft sprinted across the grass towards her, launching himself at her before she could strike another blow at his friend. He skittled her over, flailing around to try to get in as many blows as he could before she regained her composure. He was under no illusion that if he failed to finish her off before then, he was very much a dead man. And Selene might well send Takina to the Afterlife with him.

Unfortunately, his punches were having no effect at all. Most of them were missing by some margin, and the two or three which found their mark appeared to be achieving nothing more than irritating her. She shrugged him off, and climbed to her feet, ready to finish him off. But then Takina was on top of her again, the two of them rolling around on the floor like alley-cats, fighting for their lives.

Halfshaft dived back into the fray, hoping to tip the balance in Takina's favour, but quickly realising that he was less of a help than a hindrance. Selene dodged every blow he struck, and, more often than not, he was hitting Takina instead. He apologised profusely each time, but she was too busy fighting for survival to reassure him that no offence had been taken.

And then Cherry was wading in, the dagger clenched in one hand. She seized the Amazon Queen by the hair, dragged her away from Halfshaft and Takina, and brought the blade down hard into the Amazon's chest. The tip

was so sharp, so cruel, that it pierced her flesh like a scalpel. Selene didn't even have a chance to scream. She flopped lifelessly on to her back. The last of their adversaries was dead. Just the three of them remained alive.

Cherry gestured back towards the hut. "Go on," she coaxed. "It's time for you two to go home. I'll stay here."

Halfshaft looked at Takina. She gave him an encouraging smile. All I have to do, he thought, is guide her safely through the clowns, and we're out of here. We would have survived the Games, against all the odds. He no longer needed to worry about leaving Cherry behind either; not now he knew that she was here through choice. He was a hair's-breadth from freedom. But could he really tip-toe past those slumbering circus-freaks, knowing what they were capable of?

Takina took his hand, and led him towards the hut. Yes, I can do this, he thought. If she's here with me, I can do anything. We're going to win the Games. As Cherry had said, they were going home.

It was then that Ditherer leapt to his feet, and bounded into the hut ahead of them. He waved one arm in the air above his head in triumph, the other hanging uselessly by his side.

"You cheating little bugger!" Halfshaft screamed after him. "You're supposed to be dead! You come back here this instant!"

But it was too late. Ditherer would get to the tunnel ahead of them. That would leave just one person free to follow him. There was no longer any doubt about it. Either Halfshaft or Takina would die.

#

They were back inside the hut within seconds. Ditherer was inching a path between the sleeping clowns, his expression a curious mix of triumph and terror. "I'm going to do it!" he whispered to himself. "I'm going to win!"

Halfshaft surveyed the sleeping clowns in bewilderment. "How come there are so many of them?" he asked Cherry. "There weren't this many at the Circus."

“Who said there’s only one circus?” she replied.

“What are we going to do? Maybe if we shout, wake them up, stop him getting to the tunnel.”

“They won’t wake up, trust me. They’re drugged. One of them might open an eye, reach out a menacing hand; it’s good telly. But they won’t have the strength to get up, yet alone fight.”

“So what do we do?”

“You run. Both of you. Get there first. He doesn’t know they won’t wake up. While he’s creeping along, you and your big-assed Amazon friend run right through them, and beat him to it.”

Halfshaft regarded the naked white creatures dubiously. “They don’t *look* like they’re sleeping all that deeply.”

“There’s no time for this!” she shouted. “Go! Before it’s too late!”

He took a further look at Ditherer, picking his way carefully through the carpet of clowns. Another ten seconds or so, and he would be safely in the tunnel. The creatures made his flesh crawl, but galloping through them was the only chance they had. He grabbed Takina by the hand, and ran towards the tunnel, praying that the clowns would remain safely asleep as he bounded over them.

He stepped on clownish fingers. There was a high-pitched squeal, and a grease-painted hand made a grab for his ankle, missing it by inches. He tried to swerve round the next clown, but lost his balance, landing heavily on top of it, pulling Takina down with him. The creature’s eyes snapped open. They regarded each other with malice and fear respectively, and then it was on him, attempting to separate his windpipe from his throat with its yellow teeth, the red nose thrusting into his beard as he fought to keep its face away from him.

Other clowns stirred, awoke, looked around as they rubbed the sleep from their eyes. Ditherer froze, just a few feet from salvation, torn between the urge to run and the fear of drawing attention to himself. And then they were on him too, engulfing, him, tearing him limb from mankini. And Halfshaft was on his feet, pulling the thrashing clown up with him, Takina yanking on the creature’s head to try to force it away from his throat.

Selene had arrived, firing arrows into the throng as fast as she could. How could that be? She was dead, he had seen Cherry kill her with his own eyes. Was she one of those clocks – robots, whatever you call them? But he didn't have time to think. He was too busy trying to stay alive.

And then he saw Cherry, hacking a path towards them with the dagger, giving her all to carve out an escape route for them.

More clowns arrived through the door at the far end of the hut, pouring into the fray, fighting each other in their frenzy to get at the four surviving humans in their midst. Cherry stumbled, was almost down, surrounded by gnashing teeth and filthy raking finger-nails. She managed to keep her balance, slashing the dagger around in an ever more desperate attempt to clear a path towards them.

And then she was down, an arrow in her shoulder. As she dropped, Halfshaft caught sight of Selene behind her, bow still in hand, smiling the humourless smile of the victor. He screamed in fury, and attempted to unleash a stream of all-consuming fire from his finger-tips in vengeance. All he got, though, was a flame the size of a pencil stub.

Crying out in frustration, he head-butted the clown, sending it staggering backwards into its brethren. He dived into the heap of clowns which had descended upon Cherry the moment she had fallen, attempting to pull them off her. Takina seized him, trying to pull him away. "There are too many of them," she shouted. "We have got to get out of here."

He shrugged her off. "Not without Cherry."

A clown sank its teeth into his forearm. He jerked it free, howling in pain as part of his flesh tore off with it. Another of the creatures leapt on his back, pinning him down, leaving him helpless. This was it. This was how it was all going to end. Part suffocated, part bitten to death, in a mound of feral clowns.

Cherry was back on her feet. How she managed it, he would never know; she must have been an awful lot stronger than she looked. She had blood all over her, splattered on her limbs, her chest, her stomach. But she was still alive, and very much kicking.

She stabbed the dagger into the head of the clown atop Halfshaft. She swung it again, and again as the other clowns tried to drag her back down to the ground. She ducked instinctively, as another of Selene's arrows fizzed past, missing her by inches. And then she was on the attack again, standing her ground, whirling the blade about her in all directions, as she scythed down clown after murderous clown.

Selene was out of arrows. A half-dozen clowns rushed her, and she went down beneath them, kicking and cursing, desperate to regain her feet as Cherry had done. Another clown joined the melee, then another. Her struggling diminished, then stopped altogether. An Amazon arm emerged from the throng, metal threads protruding from it. She was a clock, then; a robot. A very dead one.

“New plan!” Cherry shouted at him. “Run!”

“Your plans haven't worked out so well lately,” he remonstrated, but decided to follow her advice all the same. The clown-dead were heaped all around them, along with a handful of twitching wounded. But plenty more were still alive, and baying for blood. It was time to run like buggery. Seizing hold of Takina's hand again, he made a bee-line for the nearest door, praying that Cherry would follow on behind them.

Twice he was seized by the pale naked creatures as he tried to fight his way outside, and twice Cherry's dagger saved him. They made it out into the sunlight, and ran towards the trees, a dozen clowns in hot pursuit.

Cherry overtook them and banked left, Halfshaft and Takina following suit like some demented airplane formation display. The clowns changed direction too, snarling all the while, determined to rip the three humans into tiny pieces if only the buggers would stand still long enough to be eaten.

“You said they'd be asleep!” Halfshaft panted as he ran after Cherry.

“They were supposed to be!” Cherry protested. “They lied to me. And about Selene. No-one told me that she was a robot. The bastards want me dead!”

“Why? You're their star, you said so yourself.”

She banked left again. For some strange reason, she seemed to be going in a large circle.

“They did this to Celeste,” she complained. “Series twenty nine. The audience got bored of her, and they killed her off, without even telling her they weren’t protecting her anymore. Great telly, but you’ve got to admit that’s harsh. Replaced her with one of the Candidates. I reckon they were planning on signing up Selene instead of me; I guess a robot doesn’t demand a wage-increase every other show. Good luck with that now, though! I’d like to see the bitch beat my ratings with her arms and legs hanging off!”

They banked left again. Halfshaft was flagging. “I can’t go much further.”

“One more minute, and we’ll be there.”

“Where?”

“The hut.”

“But that’s where all the clowns are!” he shrieked in panic. No way was he going back in there again!

“If you take a look over your shoulder, you’ll see that that’s not totally accurate. They’re all out here, trying to eat us.”

She turned left one last time. They were indeed now heading straight for the hut. He took a quick glance over his shoulder. The clowns were gaining on them. They were just a few seconds behind. He wasn’t going to make it.

“Cherry, I can’t,” he said. “You two go on. I’m slowing you down.”

Cherry wheeled round. “I’ll meet you inside,” she said. “Quick as you can.”

He tried to protest, but she was already slashing at the leading clown with the dagger. Takina seized him by the elbow, and dragged him onwards at a jog. They made it inside. Just as Cherry had predicted, there was no-one inside left alive.

Takina banged a switch on the wall, and the door closed behind them.

“What are you doing?” he protested. “Cherry’s still out there!”

“Only two of us get out of here alive,” she replied. “You and me. She gets left behind. If the clowns do not get her, something else will. Best if she dies fighting, the death of a warrior.”

Halfshaft pressed the button, and the doors reopened. It was not a moment too soon; Cherry was haring towards them, her blade so deeply embedded in one of the clowns that she had been unable to wrench it loose again. The rest of the pack were closing in on her, catching her up as she had been slowing down at the sight of the closed door.

“I am sorry,” Takina said. “But she has to stay outside.”

She pressed the button again, and the door closed. Cherry made a despairing dive to squeeze through the gap before it vanished, but she was too late. The door slid shut, leaving her to the mercy of the clowns outside.

Halfshaft tried to re-open the door, but Takina fended him off. He tried again, with the same result. “It is too late,” she told him. “She will be dead by now.”

He looked at her in astonishment. “How could you do that? The Takina I know would never have done that. She saved my life, over and over and over again. Why would you do that to her?”

“We have to escape. Just the two of us. What choice did I have?”

“This isn’t right. This isn’t right at all.”

He regarded her narrowly. She shifted uncomfortably. “We should go,” she said. “Before the time-tunnel vanishes.”

He took a step towards her. “Cherry said there was one other robot amongst the Candidates.”

“Selene.”

“She didn’t know about Selene. It wasn’t Ditherer. That just leaves you.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Show me your bottom.”

“We have been through this before. We are just friends. There is no way I am showing you my bottom. Besides, we have to get away. There’s no time for this.”

“Show me your bottom!” he roared.

She backed away as if he was mad. He dashed after her, seizing her by the shoulders and dragging her down with him on to the floor. He took hold of her squirrel-skin bikini bottoms, and attempted to wrench them from her hips.

“Get off me!” she cried, holding on to her pants for dear life. “Have you gone mad?”

“I need to see your bottom,” he persisted. “Just for a second. Show me!”

As they carried out an intimate tug-of-war over her clothing, there was a tearing sound, and her bottoms ripped up one side, exposing an expanse of her bottom to him. It was a sight that he would have paid a great deal of money to see under different circumstances, but on this one occasion the sight of it left him feeling deflated and hopeless. For there, embedded in her left bum-cheek, was a tiny charging socket.

They stared at one another, each waiting for the other to speak first. Takina adjusted her clothing as best she could. Neither said a word.

The silence was eventually broken by the swish of a closing door.

“Cherry!”

She had entered through the door at the far side of the hut. They had forgotten that there was a second one there. There was a thud as a clown threw himself against it, but it held firm. They were safe, if only for a minute or two.

“Thanks for that, guys! You’re supposed to shut the door after I’m through it,” she pointed out. “I had to knee three clowns in the nuts to make it back here. I think they were kind of enjoying it in the end.”

#

“She’s a robot,” Halfshaft said emptily, gesturing towards Takina. The Amazon hung her head in shame, trying not to cry.

Cherry gave him a wry smile. “I know.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“You two were supposed to win. You might have chosen me over her if you knew what she was. You should have chosen me either way, to be honest. I’ve not got a charging-socket in *my* arse, I’ll tell you that for nothing!”

For once, he was at a loss for words.

“I’m still me,” Takina said. “I may not be flesh and blood, like you, but I still have feelings.”

“That’s called programming, I think you’ll find,” Cherry said, a touch unkindly.

“I know how to change my feelings,” Takina said. “Change them so that I like you; like you *a lot*. There are buttons.”

“Where?” Halfshaft asked out of curiosity.

“Places, she said mysteriously. “Places where you cannot see them. We could be together if you wanted. If it means so much to you. We could leave here together, and live together, just the two of us, as man and wife.”

The thought stung him. It was his fantasy, the two of them under one roof, seeing out their days together as a couple. But Takina – the *real* Takina, had never thought of him in that way. Now she was offering herself to him on a plate, fantasy fulfilled. All he had to do was choose her, and the two of them could walk off through the time-tunnel to a new life of cosy days and energetic nights.

He looked at Cherry. She seemed upset, but said nothing.

“What about you?” he asked. “What happens if you stay behind?”

“Well,” she said, “if you’d have asked me that ten minutes ago, I’d have said I’d make millions finishing off the last couple of years of my contract here, and then I’d retire and spend the rest of my life cavorting with gorgeous young men at a tropical beach-bar. But it looks like I’ve been sacked. They told me the clowns would be sleeping. They forgot to mention that Selene was a robot. They want me dead.”

“So if we go?”

“I’m bugged. And not in a good way.”

There was a scraping at the wall. The clowns were trying to burrow their way in. Given time, he might have taken months to reach a decision like this. It seemed, however, that he would have just a few minutes at most. Which of them was most worth saving?

“You’re real?” he asked Takina. “You’re a real person? You’re made of metal, but you’ve got real thoughts, and real feelings, and real – real – real body parts?”

“Very much so,” she smiled at him, a brave little smile which almost broke his heart. She was so desperate for him to choose her. Surely clocks didn’t think like that?

He looked at Cherry. She was regarding him thoughtfully.

“You love her that much?” she asked. “To want to be with her, even if she’s just a robot?”

He nodded. “I do. But I can’t leave you behind. However I feel, I can’t choose a clock over flesh-and-blood. It wouldn’t be right, somehow.”

Part of the wall broke away. A scarred clownish face peered through the gap. It howled at the sight of its prey, and started scrabbling at the edges of the hole, trying to force its way inside.

“Do you know what?” asked Cherry. “I think I’ll stay. This is far too much fun to miss out on. Besides, crap wizards have never really been my thing.”

“No, I’ll stay,” he replied. “I’ve never been keen on time-tunnels. You two go instead.”

She shook her head. “If I put up a good show, then maybe they’ll change their minds. They’ve lost Selene. Maybe they’ll take me back for another season after all.”

The clown forced his head through the gap in the wall, and tried to wriggle his shoulders in. Halfshaft looked away and attempted to ignore it. There was too much to think about already, without worrying about getting eaten alive as well.

Cherry turned to Takina. “Go,” she said. “I’ll make sure he follows on behind. Just promise me you’ll press those buttons for him, okay? Change your feelings; be a couple. Or better still, let him press them. He’ll like that.”

Takina nodded, and headed for the time-tunnel.

“Wait!” shouted Halfshaft. “I need more time. I’ve got to think about this.”

The clown was through the gap up to its waist. It put its hands out to steady itself on the ground, and wriggled forwards an inch at a time. Other clowns pushed it through from behind.

“Time’s up,” said Cherry.

Takina stepped into the time-tunnel, and was gone.

“Go,” Cherry urged. “She’s waiting for you. Be happy.”

He shook his head. “I’m staying with you.”

“We could have an intense and meaningful relationship if you stay,” she said. “For all of twenty seconds. Then we’d be devoured by clowns. You’re better off out of here.”

“I can’t leave you.”

The clown was through. Another started to wriggle through the gap behind it. Elsewhere, part of the wall caved in, as the clowns found a second weak-point. The game was up. Cherry was weaponless. She couldn’t defend two parts of the wall at the same time.

“Go!” she instructed him again. “I’ll be fine. Well, maybe “fine’s” not the word, but you should sod off all the same. I’ve got work to do.”

He stood his ground. “I’m not going anywhere without you.”

The clown leapt upon her. It tried to grip her by the shoulders, but its talons slipped on her bloodied skin and it stumbled forwards, knocking her to the ground. She slipped out from beneath it, and kicked it to the head to stun it. She seized the wizard and marched him to the tunnel as it was attempting to regain its feet.

“They said that only two people can make it out alive, but I reckon that was another one of their lies. There’s no limit, why would there be? We can both go, okay?”

“We can?”

She nodded. The clown had shaken the concussion from its tiny brain, and was heading in their direction at speed.

She took his hand. “On the count of three,” she said.

He nodded.

“I got you into this,” she told him. “This is my way of saying sorry, okay? One, two, three.”

Neither of them jumped. She released his hand. “Worth a try.”

And then she had hold of his wrist, spinning him round, sending him sprawling into the time tunnel. As he spun, he saw the clown launching itself at her back. She released his wrist, and turned to face it, but there were more of them behind; dozens of them. One of them must have opened the doors to the hut again, and the pack had come streaming in. She went down beneath a sea of savage grease-paint.

“Cherry!” he cried “Cherry!”

The tunnel contracted closed. He could see her no more. He could see nothing at all. But he could hear her screaming. Her cries rent him in two.

Takina was there in the blackness, taking hold of his hand, trying to comfort him. It was no use.

“Cherry!” he cried out again.

But it was too late. She was gone, sacrificing herself to save him. He felt himself falling, screaming her name again and again and again as he shook off Takina’s hand. He had made a mistake; a dreadful mistake. And she had paid the price for him.

He had won the Games. He had saved Takina. He should have been elated; ecstatic with joy. Instead, he felt numb with grief.

EPILOGUE

She awoke in a hospital bed, with tubes protruding from all sorts of uncomfortable places. The Ringmaster was sitting at her bedside, dressed in casual clothes which did not suit him.

“Cherry,” he beamed at her, as she struggled back to consciousness.

“Bastard,” she replied, and closed her eyes again to show him that the conversation was at an end.

“Sorry. We didn’t mean to let it get quite that close. We pumped the place full of horse tranquiliser the moment the wizard was safely in the tunnel, but I think those vicious little monsters are developing an immunity to the stuff.”

She opened her eyes again. “You tried to kill me,” she accused.

“Only at first,” he shrugged, a half apology. “Your ratings plummeted when you kept being rude about that little troll kid. And we weren’t too happy that you let the wizard follow you back to HQ. But you were a triumph at the end, Cherry, a triumph. They love you more than ever now. I’ve brought your contract for Season Forty Four.”

He produced an envelope, and dropped it on to her bed-covers. She winced in pain. She took a peek under the sheet. She had bruises and teeth marks all over the place, and what felt like a couple of broken ribs.

“Bastard,” she repeated.

“Thank you. But you, on the other hand, are an absolute genius! You even had me going for a minute. Letting the wizard take your place in the tunnel like that, just when we thought you were going to escape. All the other guys said it was for real, that you really wanted to save him, but I know you better than that. He was hardly your type after all. You knew, didn’t you? You knew we’d take you back if you sacrificed yourself to save him. The viewers’ chat-room crashed for three hours what with all the traffic you generated. They love you again!”

He gestured towards the contract. “Go on, then. I think you’ll be pleased with the new figure. We have to look after our star.”

She groaned. “Why would I want to put myself through all that again? You nearly killed me. Who’s to say you won’t make a better job of it next time?”

“Take a look at your new salary,” he urged, “and then decide.”

She shook her head. “Not interested, David. You can stick it up your arse sideways.”

“Your popularity poll results, then. I’ve never seen anything quite like them.”

He waved a piece of paper at her. She pretended not to notice.

“And the outfit we’ve got lined up for you next year has to be seen to be believed. It’s pink – I know how much you like pink – and it’s shiny, and it changes hue depending on your mood.”

She sat up, wincing in pain as she did so.

“It does?”

He nodded. “Not that you’d notice most of the time. It’s even tinier than that shred of tinsel you were wearing this time round. It’s practically non-existent.”

Her mood changed. If she’d have been wearing the outfit he’d just described, it would now be a perky sparkling pink.

“Okay, one more year,” she told him. “But if you send in the clowns again, I’m outta there.”

He moved the contract and the popularity poll results over to her bedside cabinet, bowed theatrically, and left the room. She checked the poll results first, before turning her attention to the contract. There was a photo in the envelope, a still from the show, showing her swinging Halfshaft into the time tunnel, an expression of pure panic on his face, as the clowns closed in to mob her from behind.

She touched his anguished face gently, as if to calm him down. “Goodbye,” she said. “I hope you have fun finding her mood switch, and that her bottom won’t be too much of a disappointment after mine.”

And she settled back down to ruminate upon wizards, Amazons and the shiny pink micro-bikini of her dreams.

#

Halfshaft stood in the middle of the plain, the landscape as barren and blasted as his emotional state. He had lost Cherry, having chosen a mechanical woman over a real one. And even the robot Takina had vanished after he had released her hand. The tunnel had taken him in this direction, and her in another. So much for his prize.

He wallowed in his bereavement. Cherry had sacrificed herself to save his life. She was dead by now, no doubt, torn apart by thousands of yellow clown fangs which would otherwise have been feasting on him. It was not until she had abandoned her life to save his that he had realised what he was giving up when he chose “Takina” over her. And now it was too late.

A horse appeared on the horizon, heading his way at a gallop. The rider appeared unsteady, clinging on to his mount’s neck as if he was injured.

He wished he knew where he was; he wished he knew *when* he was. The time tunnel could have taken him anywhere, anytime at all. He was in no mood for surprises. All he wanted was to find a hole to crawl into, and lick his wounds.

The horseman approached. He stood waiting for him. He was in the middle of a deserted plain. What else was there to do?

“I know you can’t hear me,” he whispered, “but I’m sorry.”

The rider fell off his horse as he was endeavouring to bring his mount to a halt. He was wearing full armour, with his visor pulled down. He struggled to stand up. With a sigh, Halfshaft went to his assistance. He helped the man to his feet.

The rider pulled his visor up. He knew that face.

“Alright, Mate,” said Rod. “Glad you’re here. It’s all kicking off big time back at the castle.”

“Kicking off?”

“Fighting. Lots of it. They need us; they won’t last two minutes without our help. Are you in?”

Halfshaft didn’t answer straightaway. Rod stared at him expectantly, like a puppy waiting to be taken for a walk. After a while, he trotted after the horse, trying to catch it while he waited for the wizard to come to a decision.

The wizard sighed. Was it too much to ask for one day off before he was called upon to save the world again?

Rod returned to his side.

“Takina’s here.”

Halfshaft brightened up. “Takina? The real one?”

Rod nodded.

“Have you checked out her bottom?”

Rod nodded again. “All the time. Haven’t we all, though?”

The wizard laughed. He was glad to be back among friends again. Maybe, just maybe, it would be easier with them around. “Count me in,” he said, his voice barely a whisper. “What do you want me to do?”

Rod laughed, and pointed towards the distant horizon.

“You could help me catch that bloody horse for a start.”



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.....

CAVE-TROLLS AND AMAZONS

Two cobbled-together armies square up across the Forest battlefield, ranks of trolls and wizards lining up against a horde of witches, Sirens and Amazons. But they are fighting a war neither side can hope to win.

Only a handful of people stand between them and oblivion, each of whom has problems of their own.

Halfshaft, a failed wizard, enlists the help of a gigantic cave-troll in his quest, but his hopes of saving the world are severely dented when he discovers his "ferocious" companion has a lucky handkerchief.

Takina, a blonde Amazon in the tiniest of fur bikinis, has been abducted by trolls and set to reluctant work at a desert sex-slave market. But when the camp is besieged, she suspects that she may have bitten off more than she can swallow.

Rod, whose dearest wish is to get back down the pub before last orders, has been co-opted on to a small but select band of witches' donkeys. But even with the help of the wizard and the Amazon, he discovers that it is hard to be heroic with a witch in the saddle.

"Cave-Trolls and Amazons" is a colourful and imaginative quest-fantasy romp, stuffed full of humour, adventure and squirrel-skin bikinis. Sheer unbridled escapism from the author of "Slave-Girls and Amazons".

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