

# Dimementia & The Dwarves



An Adult Fantasy Tale  
*by*  
Christine Stromberg

# **Dementia and the Dwarves**

**A Tale of Magic and Mayhem**

by

**Christine Stromberg**

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Dedicated to my hero and inspiration Sir Terry Pratchett,  
without whom I would never have thought of writing  
this type of fantasy.

If you enjoy it you have him to thank for it.  
If not, the blame is all mine.

## **Dementia and the Dwarves**

On a world not unlike this one, in a time of magic and wonderment, a group of young people were going about their business; working, playing, having fun, little knowing what was just around the corner. Picture the scene: a country lane in early Spring, the day slowly creeping towards evening. In the trees, birds fuss and twitter as they get ready to settle down to sleep while the things of darkness stretch and yawn in preparation for the night ahead. In the lane a young man, one of four, speaks:

“Fancy a drink, wench?”

The wench in question, a tall statuesque blonde named Freya, moistened her lips. “Later. I’m meeting some of the other girls soon. We’ll see you there. We need something from Dementia anyway.”

The men had no idea what it was the ladies wanted from Dementia but they would hazard a few guesses before long, with the aid of a liberal amount of liquid refreshment. The inn they were to honour with their presence for the purpose of getting well and truly bladdered was called The Cock and Bull.

This den of insobriety was a small, picturesque establishment situated in the little village of Strathely, in North Goatland. If you could call it a village. It was more of a hamlet really - just the inn and a few houses on a road to somewhere else - but, whatever it was, never was one of them more misnamed. Strathely, you see, means steadfast or firm, and there was nothing at all steadfast about this place.

It had a habit of disappearing for days on end when no-one was looking. Where it got to on its travels no-one was too sure but it always managed to find its way back all right. At least, it had so far. The people who lived there swore it never moved but any outsiders trying to find it weren't going to be fobbed off like that. They knew better.

The four men, known to themselves if nobody else as "The Gang of Four", walked down the road, singing as they went. "We are the champions, we are the Gang of Four, Alfred and Harald, Roger and Tor." The final word was followed by much back slapping and cheering. Not terribly imaginative as anthems go but what it lacked in inventiveness it made up for in volume.

They arrived at their destination and pushed their way through the door into the inn. Over the door was a home-made sign depicting the name. This however was a testimony to the landlord's imagination rather than his artistic skills. And it said a lot about his imagination. A more unfortunate cock was never seen.

"Dilapidated" wasn't a word that sprang to most people's minds. Not in these parts. Most people here didn't use big words. They had more colourful words they used, but just plain "past it" would fit. The bull looked a bit the worse for wear too. Deformed, in fact.

The inn itself was small, dark, and full of smoke. This was the natural kind of smoke, produced by tobacco or something akin to it though occasionally the arrival of certain people could produce smoke of a more magical nature. But more of that later.

Inside the hostelry were a few tables and chairs which from the look of them could have been home made, and probably were, and a bar of course, which had also been cobbled together by a less than competent builder, and had anyway seen better days. The walls had once been whitewashed, though not in living memory, and were now stained and darkened by the aforementioned smoke. Behind the bar were barrels and bottles of ale and stronger drinks.

On one wall an open fire crackled and sparked, welcoming and warming on a cold night, inviting weary travelers to come in and sit down, put their feet up and rest. Mind you, if anyone had put their feet up it would have to be on another person's chair or a table, and the customers wouldn't have taken too kindly to that kind of behaviour. More than one unwary visitor had come a cropper that way, finding himself back outside in double quick time.

There wasn't much in the way of decoration. This was a working men's retreat. Although known locally as "the inn", there were in fact no rooms for any aforementioned weary travelers to avail themselves of for a night's rest. That would have meant an upper story, and this was very much a single story building. And even calling it a building was being optimistic. Maybe "inn" was just a nod to the fact that it's where people went "in" for a drink of an evening. Pretty literal, the folk around here.

Back in the lane Freya, the unspoken leader of the female group, due to her outgoing and rather forceful personality, smiled a welcome as her girlfriends, Gudrun and Astrid, met up with her and they hastily headed off along the road and turned into Rutters Lane to enter the woods. It was in these woods, known locally as the Treacle Woods, that Dementia made a reasonable living as the only purveyor of preternatural items in the area.

Treacle, incidentally, referred not only to the darkness, but to the fact that people tended to get stuck in there and never come out again.

It was early evening and not yet dark out. A faint light from the setting sun filtered through the canopy to light their way but as they approached the part of the woodland where the old woman was normally to be found, the atmosphere changed. It suddenly seemed darker than before, which had nothing to do with the trees being closer together or the sky becoming overcast or the sun having set.

No, it was as if the air had become thicker somehow, almost tangible. As if you could take a handful, squidge it up and throw it, like a snowball. It was a peculiar shade of blue, too, verging on purple, and had a most peculiar odour. Rather like raspberries, with a hint of lavender, and just a suspicion of fish. And something else. Something - undefinable. Something almost metallic but not quite.

"This place always give me the jitters," muttered Gudrun, shuddering.

"I know, me too," agreed Astrid. "Come on, let's just get there, get what we came for, and get out again."

Gudrun was a redhead. A little shorter than Freya, and with curves in all the right places. Which helps. Pretty too, fair skinned with freckles and a nose that some would describe as "pert". Her personality was less assertive than Freya's but she was nonetheless brave and energetic, not lacking her own opinions nor the courage to express them.

She was occasionally nicknamed Gudrun the good, mainly for her love of small animals though. It wasn't a reflection on her morals. Mind you, morals in Strathely were something of a forgotten art. What the eye didn't see, the heart didn't grieve over, seemed to be the general attitude. And it worked. Most of the time.

It wouldn't be right to ignore Astrid at this juncture so let's look at her for a moment. Blond, pretty, with a friendly but quiet nature. She was the peacemaker, the one to calm situations which seemed to be getting fraught. Everyone loved Astrid.

Right now she was wondering whether Dementia could actually do the business. "What do you think, Freya? Are there really magic spells?"

"I can't be sure," replied Freya. "I want to believe it though. For Ingrid's sake."

The young women pressed on between lichen covered trees draped with hanging mosses and parasitic plants. They looked around nervously as they went along the mossy, leaf-strewn path. It felt as if the trees were watching them which, to be fair, they probably were.

Astrid had asked if there was a safe path through the woods, as she'd heard stories, but Freya had just said, "Safe paths? In this place? No, you've left the safety of home now."

It wasn't as if the girls expected trouble in this neck of the woods, but you just never knew. People had been known to vanish without trace before now. It was very unsettling.

Actually, as far as the people themselves were concerned, they hadn't vanished at all; though what they experienced was even more unsettling, you might think. They would enter the woods on a certain day and emerge the day previously; only to repeat the process again the next day, and the next, indefinitely, in a sort of temporal loop, while the rest of life went on without them.

This has never been satisfactorily explained, but it was probably something quantum. Most unexplained things are, it seems. Either that or it was alternative universes. That's another popular theory but it's unlikely that anyone from Strathely had heard about it.

It was quiet here, eerily quiet. Not completely silent however. Birds could be heard overhead and occasionally snorts and growls interrupted the general air of somnolence. Little rustling sounds in the undergrowth also made themselves known, and some rather blood curdling howls too, though the creatures who made them did not. It was anyone's guess what might be lurking there, and most people preferred not to guess or even think about it.

The women eventually found Dementia in the dank and decidedly uninviting cave she called home. Other people called it The Hell-Hole, but that's people for you. They can be so unkind. A sign outside, decorated with bats, read:

Dementia D. Doubledare  
MMA, Th.D, Dip. SP  
Thaumaturge Extraordinaire

By Royal Appointment

Potions - fresh daily.  
Witchcraft While U Wait.  
Spells and Charms to Order.  
Magical Mystery Tours Arranged.  
One free curse with every purchase.

No-one knew what the middle D stood for. No-one had ever asked, though a few had wondered.

She preferred to describe herself as a thaumaturge. Others called her "the witch", or "the sorceress" or some such thing, but Dementia thought that those kinds of words carried certain undesirable connotations - visions of ducking stools and inquisitors came to mind - not to mention warts - whereas "thaumaturge" sounded educated and more upmarket. Besides, it's what she was. She had qualifications in thaumaturgy which she'd got with flying colours. And it's not easy flying colours.

Educated she certainly was, having been studying magical lore for more years than she or anyone else cared to remember. She'd started her education at the famous Hogwash School of Magick, where she'd perfected her knowledge of healing herbs and such, and gone on to study at the Academie of Mystick Artes. Her success there got her a place at the Northern University of Thaumaturgy where she had succeeded to some degree or other. Quite a large degree actually if the size of her certificate was anything to go by. And a Diploma in Spells and Potions.

The name of the place was a bit of a mouthful so was usually referred to as the N.U.T. and graduates were known as Nuts, or Nutters. Dementia didn't like to boast of course but she was quite proud of being a Nutter and kept her certificate in a fairly prominent place, its plain black frame festooned with purple ribbon.

Upmarket, though, that was stretching things a bit. Upwind of the market, yes. Best place to be, especially on livestock day.

Inside the cave the thaumaturge herself was sitting on a low stool, puffing on a long stemmed clay pipe and stirring a rather evil looking brew which half filled a huge iron cauldron suspended over an open fire. Various worrying objects would bob to the surface now and then, and spin around for a while before descending once more into the murky depths.

If I were asked to name these objects I'd probably say, "No. I'd really rather not. I want to be able to sleep tonight even if you don't," but if you want to imagine things like pigeon's feet and fleshy spherical objects of uncertain derivation - some of which stared back at you - you wouldn't be far off.

It actually smelled quite reasonable. But the look - Oh, the look!

It was dark in the cave and damp; moisture constantly trickled down the walls as if the rock above it was old and incontinent. Which it was. On part of the soot-stained ceiling a seething mass of bats clung, resembling in the faint light a patch of thick brown mould. Mildly obscene fungi of various hues and textures grew on every surface, and assorted - and thankfully unidentifiable - objects dangled from the branches of a tastefully arranged dead tree.

Alongside these, glass jars containing shimmering insects of every hue hung precariously from lengths of vine. The tiny iridescent bodies reflected what little light there was, which mostly emanated from the fire, though some came from a couple of tiny lanterns, popularly known as faerie lights, held by two very small people with long pointy ears and long pointy noses, who sat on ledges opposite each other.

When I say small, I do mean small. They could have easily crouched on Dementia's shoulders and in fact did sometimes, when she needed to go out into the woods after dark. They were dressed in green and giggled continually. Every now and then they positively shook with silent laughter which made the faint light from the candles in the lanterns flicker and dance around the cave.

No one ever dared to ask exactly what they found so amusing, but even if they had they wouldn't have got a very coherent answer. It was one of those identical twin things. Probably.

The floor of the cave was of beaten earth and here and there hollows had caused the moisture to gather into small pools from which an occasional croak could be heard. Freya was sure she saw small golden eyes peering at her from under stones too.

The other main problem was the bat droppings. You had to be careful where you trod in Dementia's place, that's for sure.

"Why she can't live in a hovel like any other old crone I'll never know," Astrid murmured to Freya, who chuckled quietly. Astrid, the third member of the current group, was blond, like Freya. Short but shapely, she was pretty in a more girl next door kind of a way. "Ho, crone!" she called.

~

Meanwhile, at a table in The Cock and Bull, four young men sat and discussed the evening ahead.

Alfred, a rather short and pimply youth of less than average wit, always enjoyed a good night of quaffing ale and feasting followed by sleeping it off under a hedge. It's what he was used to and suited him just fine. Tor agreed as long as it was "a bit more, you know, physical."

This young man's nights out were not regarded as successful unless they ended in a punch-up. Tor, blond and blue eyed, could be described as fairly well muscled, in the same way that an elephant could be described as fairly heavy, but he'd never seen an elephant so that wouldn't mean anything to him. It's not that he was a violent person. He just had the kind of physique that attracted challenges and he'd not yet learned how to walk away from them. Besides, he enjoyed a good brawl.

He was named Tor due to his resemblance, even as a baby, to a mountain. Not that he was triangular, although his brain was not the best developed part of him, it's true. It was more a case of general size and weight. His mother had almost despaired of keeping him fed as a child and had been frequently heard to declare that he must have hollow legs, though that seems unlikely.

He'd developed his fine physique pulling carts and ploughs for local farmers who couldn't afford a horse. His father had been hiring him out by the day for years. He got a goat - yes, I did say goat; goats were far too expensive - for every day he worked and a thump round the ear for every day he didn't. Tor didn't mind though. It gave him a chance to flash his muscles at the local wenches and, seeing as how that's all the entertainment there was round those parts, they quite enjoyed it.

Girls of varying ages were often to be seen waiting around in the fields in the hopes of catching his eye. The glass one that is. He'd lost one of his own in a fight and, glass blowing being what it was locally, the replacement was something of a botched job, size-wise and liable to flying out at times.

Roger, the third member of the group, was a handsome young man. Not a gentleman exactly, more your average lech, but quite romantic at heart. He was also known to his friends as Todge or Todger, though whether this was due to his intimate dimensions or the whereabouts of his brains is open to question. In short, he liked the ladies and generally wanted to find a couple to take home with him. "Three even, if they're ok with it." Very few were, but as he often said, "That's ok, two's enough."

He was presently attempting to write a love poem on the back of a beer mat, but it kept crawling away on tiny legs and giving itself a good shake, making the words fly about all over the place. Not that Roger was the kind of airy fairy poet people often picture. There was nothing effeminate about our Roger.

"You can't get obliging beer mats no more for love nor money," he grumbled. Mind you, that may have had something to do with the mushrooms he'd gathered and fried with his bacon that morning. He had used his Lay Person's Guide to Edible Fungi and was pretty sure they weren't poisonous, as such, but the whole issue was fraught with danger. Then again, it may just have been the beer mat being awkward. They were like that.

Harald, the fourth of the friends, was plotting. It's what he did best. A lover of practical jokes was Harald, and the bane of everyone, male or female, in the village. He loved tormenting people. It's what floated his boat, tilted his kilt. Not that he wore a kilt. He wasn't the right shape for a kilt, somehow. Not obese exactly, just - well covered.

He'd been the kind of baby that mothers call "healthy" and had stayed "healthy" ever since. This had gained him the nickname of Fatman among those he had annoyed. If they'd ever heard of the Pillsbury Doughboy they might have called him that instead. But of course they hadn't. Or indeed the Michelin man.

His pranks never actually hurt anyone, mind. He wasn't into pain - well, not his own, anyway - so he was careful not to go too far. People can be very unreasonable at times and one or two had been known to take revenge.

So far, then, there was no consensus of opinion, so they got in another round of drinks. As everyone knows, there's nothing like ale for helping you make up your mind. Things always seem a whole lot clearer through the bottom of a glass.

~

Inside the cave, Gudrun, Astrid and Freya looked around them, no more at ease than they ever were in here. But suitably impressed, the wi - sorry - thaumaturge thought.

Dementia was a rather short and comfortable looking person. Well upholstered. Like a perambulatory armchair. Forget all about hooked noses and curved chins with hairy warts, forget hump backs and hands like claws. Think instead of an occasionally grumpy but generally fun loving outrageous old granny. It does no harm to think.

She peered at the women through some greying strands which were escaping from under a tall pointy hat which was purple - as was the floor length robe she wore - the overall impression being of a rather lumpy cone standing on its larger end. Mostly she wore black, sometimes green or red, or purple as now; it depended on the time of year.

But whatever the colour, both hat and gown would be adorned with pictures of birds, bats, cats and toads, and assorted shiny gold symbols which were constantly changing shape.

This could get very hypnotic if stared at for long, and anyone watching would end up with the kind of expression more usually seen on people whose preferred leisure pursuits are not entirely legal.

The girls tried to avoid looking at the clothing, they had to walk home after all, but the effect of looking anywhere else was rather like the feeling you get in a morgue, so it was difficult to know where to look. They settled for watching the faerie lights.

Dementia attempted to push her hair out of the way but it clearly had a mind of its own and insisted on covering her face.

"Do I know you?" she enquired testily.

"Oh no," groaned Gudrun. "She's getting worse."

"Of course you do," replied Astrid. "We come here often, forsooth. We've come to request a love potion for Ingrid. She's having no luck at all."

"A love potion? A love... Do I look like I make love potions? Hah! Yea, verily. I can mix you up a nice batch of "Turn 'em green" stuff. It generally raises a few laughs in these parts. Or how about something to make their dangly bits shrivel. That's always a best seller. I've even got --"

"No, no, that won't be necessary," Freya smiled. "Just the love potion. For now anyway. But I'll bear the last one in mind."

"If you say so," cackled the old woman, continuing to stir the evil concoction.

"Sooner rather than later," Freya tentatively suggested. While not wanting to offend the ancient one, which was never wise, she knew her of old.

"Now don't rush me, young woman. These things take time y'know." She stopped stirring though, put down the evil smelling and still smoking tobacco pipe, and hobbled slowly across to a niche in one of walls of the cave. Here she began to rummage through her cache of tiny bottles containing tinctures and essential oils. Dementia regarded them as essential anyway. The friends had anticipated a long wait. They weren't disappointed.

"Right then, what do I need?" she muttered. "Orchid root, got that. Oil of jessamine, got that. Herb Paris... Herb Paris...now then, let's see..." she went on, picking up and discarding phials, "Hart's tongue, Hawthorn, Heart's Ease, Hemlock, Hemp, Henbane, Holly - Holly? Oh yes. Here we are - Herb Paris. One of these days I'll get properly organised. Now, I know I've got some dried bat blood somewhere. Where the...hang on...Ha! Here it is! Now then, powdered frog bones...hell's bells and buckets of blood! Clean out of it."

Dementia shook her head and frowned, causing her face to resemble even more an old and well dried apple. "Ah, I remember now," she grumbled to herself, "I used the last for that woman who wanted to resurrect that elvish king. Buggerrations. Mind you, she might have done it. He's been seen all over the place since then.

Gudrun turned to Freya. "There's a bloke works down the market swears he's elvish," she said.

"Some people will say anything to get what they want," Dementia murmured. "Oh well," she continued, "I'm sure toad bones will be just as good. Right, now then, just one or two other things..." and she gathered up some other bits and pieces from her secret store; a pinch of this, a spoonful of that.

It's probably not a good idea to ask what they were bits and pieces *of*.

"Um," Freya began, "are you sure that the substitution will work all right? I mean if something were to go wrong --"

Dementia cackled again, her cracked voice and general demeanour testifying to far too many nights of wanton spellbinding. Hers had been a long and interesting life. "Don't you worry about a thing, dearie. I've been doing this for as long as I can remember and nothing's ever gone wrong before."

This reference to her memory was not exactly reassuring to her clients.

Dementia, while perfectly capable of turning people green - especially in here - had a tendency to get a bit lost when it came to travelling down certain neural pathways. For example, she often knew who she was, and sometimes where she was, but not always both at the same time. As for nothing having gone wrong before, her cat would beg to differ on that subject.

She began to chop and grind and mix things in a small wooden mortar, warbling while she worked her own version of "A Witches Best Friend is Her Broomstick", to the embarrassment of the young women listening. After a while she added some strange smoking liquid before muttering the mystical incantation: "Doowop shawaddywaddy zippity boomdeboom!" over the resulting potion.

"There we are, my dears," she said, grinning. "Just put two thimblefuls of this stuff in his ale - stirred, not shaken, mind - and Dave's your uncle."

Gudrun turned to the others, looking worried.

"Shouldn't that be Bob" she said quietly.

Not quietly enough however. Dementia's hearing was legendary. She claimed she could hear a butterfly stamping its feet on a far off flower, or a barn owl swoop on its prey. If she put her mind to it.

"Bob?" she said now. "No. Never had an Uncle Bob."

"But you had an Uncle Dave," suggested Gudrun.

"Well. Now you come to mention it, no. Never had an Uncle Dave either. Funny, that."

Gudrun now just looked puzzled. "But..." she started to say, but quickly found a couple of hands clamped over her mouth.

"Never argue with her," whispered Freya. "It just isn't worth it. Believe me. I've known warriors shrink and wither before her wrath."

"Or at least their dangly bits," chuckled Astrid.

On their way out they noticed the cauldron and peered gingerly in but quickly retreated when they saw its grotesque contents bubbling away merrily, if somewhat ominously.

"Um, interesting," Freya said faintly. "One of your famous potions, is it?"

"Heavens, no," replied Dementia. "Soup."

Her eyes twinkled gaily behind the veil of hair as the women stared at her, aghast. I know it's wicked to wind 'em up, she admitted to herself, but sometimes I can't resist. It's just too easy.

Just then a beetle dropped from the ceiling, where it had been innocently taking a pleasant evening stroll until it slipped on something and lost its footing. It fell straight into the foul concoction. The young women's eyes widened even further.

"Did you see -" Gudrun started to say, but quickly found herself winded by an elbow in each side of her ribs.

"All good protein," Dementia announced to no-one in particular. "Waste not, want not."

She began to chuckle wheezily to herself as she watched their expressions turn from horror to absolute disgust. Too easy. Much too easy.

The girls paid for the elixir without stopping to haggle over the price or ask for their free curse - they reckoned they'd heard enough curses for one day anyway - and left the cave. Two goats a phial this stuff cost; a day's wages for some lesser mortals but chicken feed to Freya.

The chickens would have preferred corn, but there you go. As she always said, they're lucky to get groats, the price of things these days, and there's nothing wrong with groats when supplemented with a few worms. Ask her old granddad.

Speaking of worms, it was about time for the ladies to meet the men for that drink.

~

Arriving at The Cock and Bull, Freya pushed open the heavy wooden door which complained bitterly.

"Watch it," it groaned. "Your hands are like ice. Why can't you wear gloves like any sensible person?"

Freya ignored the door and went in, followed by the other women. Some doors make polite suggestions, like: Please mind the step, or: Watch out for the low ceiling, but this particular one was known for its surly manner and no one ever took any notice. Which may have been the reason for it being so surly of course. No one likes being ignored.

At a table at the back of the room were the men they had come to join. They were too busy laughing to notice the women come in so, taking advantage of this, Freya and her friends sat down at a nearby table and discussed who should be the recipient of the love potion.

"I think Harald could be a good bet. He's fun, and quite good looking," mumured Astrid, but Gudrun disagreed.

"No, too tricky. You never know what he's up to. How about Tor?" she suggested.

"Oh no, he's always fighting," said Freya. "You don't want a man who's always too bruised and battered to perform, however hunky he is. Besides, he's got no conversation."

"Conversation? It isn't conversation she's after!"

"Well I know, but - ok. Alfred?"

"Ye gods! He drinks like a fish that's just come back from a week in the Deserts of Dundari. He'd be incapable! No. Definitely not. How about Rodg the Todge?"

"Ok if you don't mind sharing. I doubt that Ingrid is in the mood to share. Not tonight."

That covered the men they knew much about. They looked about them now at the assembled males. Most of them were strangers from other villages, none of whom was any great catch but one of whom could nevertheless be the recipient of Ingrid's affections, or at least her long repressed passions, before the night was out.

Standing at the bar was a thin weaselly faced chap squinting at them across the top of his tankard.

At least it might have been them he was looking at. It was a little hard to tell. His eyes looked as if they'd had a row and were trying to avoid each other, staring in opposite directions with their arms crossed. He was leering and sniggering with someone beside him you could really only describe as spherical.

This one's face gave the impression of what might result if you tried crossing a pig with a pumpkin. It was also covered in a tracery of red veins, which on certain species of sea slug is quite attractive. On him it wasn't.

Astrid gave a slight shudder and let her gaze continue on.

Further along were three spotty adolescents finding out which of them could drink the most ale in the least time and singing bawdy songs. The kind of songs that males sing when there are no women around to hear the language. The fact that there were women around hadn't given them pause however and they were getting louder and more obscene by the minute.

They raised their glasses again now and toasted each other with that well known cry: "Bottoms up!" which was heartily followed by: "Up yours!"

The women breathed a deep sigh of despair. It just wasn't fair. Having to live in a place like this with not a decent man for miles.

Alfred came back to the table with four tankards of ale just as the young women came round the corner of the bar.

"Ok girls? Coming to 'ave a drink with us? Where's Ingrid?"

"She's joining us later," Astrid told him. "She had things to do."

"I believe she was washing her hare," added Gudrun. "The daft thing fell in the soup again."

"Aye. They do get a bit frisky this time o' year, it's true," agreed Alfred. "I 'ope the soup wasn't too 'ot."

Freya, who had joined her two friends, now hustled them over to the table before the conversation turned to the best way of juggling hares - or possibly mugging hares - and they sat down.

"Got what you were lookin' for?" asked Harald, fishing for clues.

"What?"

"What you went to the old crone for."

"Oh! That. Yes thanks."

The girls smiled to themselves, making the men wonder just what was going on in those devious minds. You just can't trust women, all men know that, but when they start involving magic it makes things even worse. They had been discussing this very subject when they first sat down and had come to no firm conclusion about that either.

Tor had wondered if Ingrid needed a spell lifted - she'd been in a funny mood lately, it had to be said - though Roger thought maybe they were having their futures divined. Harald knew they were up to no good. Well - stood to reason, didn't it? Alfred had just stared into his ale and pondered on the mystery that was woman.

Now here were those women, with them. At the same table. And still sober. Alfred trembled slightly and thanked his lucky stars he was well tanked up. In this state he could cope with most women, though he was under no illusions about the outcome. He had been very badly teased about the apparent inadequacy of his dangly bits in the swimming pool on Farmer Figgin's pasture; a nice enough pool in its way, although a bit muddy, and sharing it with thirsty cows could be unnerving. Anyway, he knew he was better off leaving women well alone.

This situation was ok. At arm's length was fine. He'd just have to make sure they got no closer. He stared fixedly into his ale so that none of the women would get the wrong idea and try talking to him.

Roger was already chatting up all three of the women in hopes of a night of unbridled debauchery. He was attempting to read them the poem he'd written - parts of which were still hanging around in the air, clinging to wisps of smoke - and he felt they were looking reasonably impressed. They hadn't run out screaming yet anyway. Or fallen asleep.

Tor saw this and snorted. He wanted to see some action. All this girly stuff wasn't his thing at all. He went and sat next to Harald and asked if he had any fun lined up for the evening.

~

In her cave, Dementia gave the cauldron a last stir and put a lid on it. It would be fine now, left to simmer, while she got on with something else. When all's said and done, it didn't have to do anything except look the part for visitors.

A thaumaturge's work is never done and, to add to her worries, she had been keeping an eye on the goings on in Outer Psynck where the authorities, known sarcastically as the System Lords - due to them apparently having no system at all - were having huge problems keeping the place stable.

People kept appearing and disappearing without warning, mostly in funny blue boxes, and every time this happened it threw the whole system out of kilter. And if that wasn't bad enough, wormholes were opening up all over the place, and the worms that made them had to be seen to be believed.

Huge things they were, fat and very ugly, with enormous teeth which dripped a foul and loathsome slime. Definitely not something you wanted to meet on a dark night. Or any time actually. And the tremors they caused going about their loathsome work were nobody's business.

Dementia shuffled to the darkness at the back of the cave. Then, making some strange motions with her hands and uttering the ancient arcane phrase, "A-wop-bop-aloobop-a-wop-bam-boom", she disappeared into a little world of her own. She had no worries about leaving the cave unattended; the magic took care of that, scaring off any would-be intruders in its own inimitable way.

She landed in her private apartment and gave herself a little shake. It was totally different in here, much more light and airy, being open to the sky with only a kind of magic to keep out the weather and any prying eyes. A one way force field kind of a thing. Light could get in, but not out.

She had no faith in windows. Half the time they didn't work properly. They had a nasty habit of seizing up. Dementia was convinced that they'd taken a fatal exception to her.

And they were always performing illegal operations as well and she didn't believe in operations, legal or otherwise. Charms and potions had been good enough for her mother and were good enough for her, thank you very much.

The local artisan, William Dors, aka Will the Wily, was renowned for selling you things that worked for a while but then you had to be continually adding bits on. And the bits you added invariably screwed up something else. Dementia preferred to trust in good old fashioned magic. You knew where you were with magic. Mostly.

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