

CAVE-TROLLS
AND
AMAZONS

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PROLOGUE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She could sense his triumph.

“The beginning of the end,” he said.

She nodded. There was nothing else to say.

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

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

#

Home at last.

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

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

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

“That’s fecking amazing!”

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

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

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

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

Rod climbed reluctantly off the bed of undulating laps.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Yaaaay! This is fecking mental!”

He was inclined to agree.

#

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“That noise.”

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

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

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

“Takina? Tell me that’s you.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

No.

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

#

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Shall we throw stones at them?”

“Can you see any stones?”

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

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

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

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

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

#

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

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

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

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

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

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

And behind her?

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

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

#

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“You selfish old bag!” Mabel retorted furiously.

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

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

“Have half each?” Mabel ventured.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

#

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“My lovely, lovely fish.”

And then he was gone.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“How long is that?” she sighed.

“I haven’t a bloody clue.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

He paused for reflection.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Of course he did."

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

"Then again, maybe he didn't."

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

"I think we should run," Takina proposed.

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

#

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Me too. Which way is it?"

"What's your name, Mate?"

"Alfie."

Rod broke into song. "What's it all about, Alf-"

"Would you shut up! They'll hear you."

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

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

"Untie me, then, and we'll go and have a look."

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