

# 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 43<sup>rd</sup> 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.

#

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?”

#

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.

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