

## ***Under a Molten Sky***

This was not going to end well.

It was hard to believe it had gone this far. A few short weeks ago, we were friends. Wil of Wheaton had once saved my life, and for that I had owed him much. But as he approached riding that mutant aberration he had so lovingly designed just to defeat me, I knew that whatever friendship had been forged in the past was over and my debt to him not only forgiven, but regretted.

I should probably start from the beginning, because as they say, a good story always has one. It always has an end too, and this one was coming on the wings of that damn pussicornasus. I could see the glint of Wil's steel tipped spear in the distance, collecting the heat from the lava flow and gathering it for the strike. My buckler was ready, and my trusted axe Gertrude would make it a fair fight. But Wil wasn't going to fight fair. He never did.

Perhaps that's why we became friends. I was but a lowly foot soldier in my father's clan when we first met on the Plains of Glath'agg. He wasn't even a lieutenant in the human army. An ensign I think he was, ferrying water from the few springs that spouted water fit for the humans to drink. Water made all the difference out here in the Unexplored Territory. An orc like me could go a week without a drink, humans less than a day. The lava heated the air to a balmy swelter, perfectly suited to orcs, but deadly to humans. Yet they kept coming back, invading our land again and again in search of some long lost relic that they thought would give their pale, skinny race the ultimate power over all the world.

The humans had attacked with a full brigade at dawn, and my clan scattered. We were strong fighters, but we knew this land, and knew what ground was worth giving up. My father had lured the

human forces to that spot – made it look like we were staging our attack there. We then withdrew as soon as their armies landed. It was just another chunk of rock, nestled like an armpit between active lava flows. Lava tubes wormed through the rock, and if the humans wanted to chase us, they were welcome to try. My job was to circle behind them, and to kill their mounts. There was no water in this area of the territory, and without mounts, they would all die before they could get out. It was a bold and imaginative stroke of genius by my father, and would have worked, had I been able to do my part.

As I climbed out of the small crevice where I had buried myself prior to their landing, I came face to face with the one thing in the Territory that frightens every orc – a clown spider. And it wasn't one of the little ones that just makes the hair stand up on your arms before you squish it with your boot. It was a big one – an Oopsie Daisy, we called it. When you were close enough to see one of those, oopsie, you were daisy fertilizer.

I barely had time to get my shield up before it was on me. I blocked its first strike with the shield. Its bulbous red nose dripped deadly snot over the steel, and the acid began to corrode the edge. One of its legs grabbed at my shoulder plating, and I forced myself to look away from it. The delicate flower like glands on the kneecaps sprayed another type of venom that could blind on contact. Its ever smiling mouth was as big as it was disturbing, and would have wolfed me down in seconds.

I was as good as dead, and I was ready to meet the great God of the Mountain, but not without a fight. I braced my shield with my shoulder, readied Gertrude and shouted my war cry. The spider shuddered and staggered backward. For the briefest of moments I thought that somehow I had scared it. A whooping sound, a scream that shook me to my soul, reverberated through the rocks. I glanced over the edge of my shield as the spider bucked and threw its head back. Where one of its eyes had been, was now a dripping, red hole. Perched on the spider's back was a pale looking human, wearing a god-awful olive green shirt that must have been unbearably hot and itchy in this place. With one hand,

he slammed a short sword into the spider's brain. The other hand held the shaft of his spear, driven deeply into the spider's chest. Every attempt the spider made to dislodge this incredible warrior caused the steel tip of the spear to slash at the internal organs. A gooey mass the consistency of tapioca pudding dripped out of every orifice and wound.

I moved forward to attack with Gertrude, ready to make a killing blow, but by the time I was close enough, the spider was still. The human leapt from the spider's back, sword in hand, with a near perfect summersault, but landed awkwardly. One knee bent to side, tendons popped and tore, and a grimace of pain rippled across his face. He tried to stand, but the leg would not hold him, and he leaned on his spear for support. I could have killed him right there. It would have been so easy. And in retrospect, probably would have avoided this whole troubling situation and ended the war permanently. But you can't change the past. Not easily anyway.

We stood there for a second, him with his sword wavering through the pain, his spider gut coated spear suddenly a crutch. I lowered Gertrude, and spoke in what little human I had picked up from the constant propaganda broadcast from loudspeakers dispersed throughout my homeland.

"I am John, of the Clan Scalzorc. I owe you my life."

"I am Wil of Wheaton." He paused for a moment. "Go, and I will not kill you too." He spoke with such confidence that I almost believed that even in his injured state, he could still mount a fight. I had seen only two clown spiders defeated in my entire life, and I had never seen one killed in such a manner.

"You fight bravely, Wil of Wheaton." I moved a step closer to him. His sword came up an inch, but even that little effort showed as another slash of pain crossed his face. I stopped, and lowered my axe. Twenty paces behind him was the first of the army's mounts. I could have circled around him easily enough and still completed my mission, but we orcs, we silly orcs, live by this damn code that says we

value bravery over just about anything else. And I now had this debt to him. And there was something else he needed to know.

"Wil of Wheaton, in five minutes, or perhaps less, this spider's mates will arrive to mourn its passing, and a clown spider's funeral is not an enjoyable place for anything with less than eight legs. Take your army's mounts, and fly them away." I didn't know if we even had five minutes. I could hear snickering in the distance, and it was getting closer in a hurry.

"Very well." He could hear the sound as well, and through his brave façade, I saw the first indication that he might be a little worried. I withdrew a little to the west, and turned to watch his retreat. His knee was in worse shape than I thought, and he was barely able to walk. The spiders' mourning cackles grew louder, and Wil of Wheaton had less than a minute to live if I did not act. I raced backed to him as the first spider came into view. Wil didn't try to fight me. I picked him up, threw him over my shoulder and carried him as fast as my legs could go to the nearest mount. Together we climbed onto its back. With a flutter of its massive wings, the winged horse took to the air, and left the horde of spiders grasping at the downdraft. The rest of the herd was not as lucky. Some realized their danger before it was too late and tried to flee, but the unaltered Pegasus breed was a fairly passive creature, and ill fit for life as a war mount in the Territory.

Will left me on a ridge a few miles away from the massacre, and said nothing as he flew off. The loss of his army's mounts meant the men of his unit were as good as dead unless he could get help, and he flew through the pain to organize the rescue. In human lore, he was the Hero of the Massacre of Glath'agg. In Orc lore, I was also treated as a hero. I never told anyone on my side about the spiders and about my encounter with Wil of Wheaton. The escape of the human force was treated as dumb luck. Only Wil and I knew different.

The humans retreated from the Territory after that battle, and for years, a relative peace filled my homeland. In the borderland city of CrusherTown, humans and orcs mixed with an uneasy peace, and it was there, a few years after the truce that I ran into Wil once again. Orcs don't change much over the years, but Wil had grown facial hair, had added a few pounds, and if possible, seemed a little more self-assured and cocky.

"Hello, Wil of Wheaton."

"Greetings, John of Clan Scalzorc." Our eyes met, and a silent message passed between us. Neither of us had told the full story of what had happened on that ridge that day to anyone else. Somehow, we had turned it to our advantage. Wil now wore the badges of Captain's rank. I wore the bones of Clan Leader.

We talked around the incident that evening, and that evasion formed the basis of our friendship, a shared secret that could be told to no one without endangering our own lives. I laughed when he told me that his Special Forces unit was nicknamed the Clown Spiders. "Send in the Clowns?" I joked. He grimaced like he had heard that one before, but I guess it hurt a little more to hear it from someone who was still supposed to be his part-time enemy.

We departed as friends that evening, and over the next few years, met by chance a dozen more times in CrusherTown, and shared more food and more drinks. Never once did we talk about that day.

But at our last meeting, just a few weeks ago, he told me that the human leadership was considering renewing their search for the totem. I told him that would result in war, and he nodded, as a slight sadness filled his eyes. "I'll make sure you die quickly, John of Clan Scalzorc." He said. It was hard to know if he was joking or not, but judging by what faced me this day, I have decided that he was definitely not kidding.

The pussicornasus extended its claws and bared its teeth a hundred yards out. This beast was the remedy to the situation that had caused the human defeat during the last war. No spider would mess with a kitten – not one of this size. Spiders were toys to kittens, meant to be batted around like balls of yarn. The wings of the Pegasus gave humans control of the skies. The unicorn horn was just for decoration and intimidation, but it was effective. I was shitting my pants.

Wil reached back with his spear as the distance closed. I braced my shield against my shoulder, and readied Gertrude for battle under a molten sky.

It would be one for the ages.