

The Guardians

It was every bit as dark as he remembered. He shone his torch around the walls, illuminating the immediate area – cool stone, rounded contours, grey-green lichen glowing eerily in the beam of his maglite.

She was at his back, pushing at him. Irritating as hell, but then, she'd started getting to him as soon as they had stepped onto the moor to begin the long walk to the old mine, and it hadn't eased during the two hours it had taken them. Why had he brought her along at all? This was his journey, not hers and already he was resenting her presence.

He found himself thinking back to the last time he'd been down here, as a boy. A dare of course. He'd acquitted himself with honours, making his way alone down the tunnel and into the dark heart of the mine, bringing back proof of his bravery to show his awed friends. He had stood outside in the welcome sunlight, accepting the pats on the back and congratulations from those who would never have done it themselves.

Hoping that he didn't look too pale, too sweaty.

Knowing he'd never tell ...

Sarah leaned close again, her voice strident in the narrow tunnel. "What's the hold up?"

"Can't you just shut up for five minutes?" he snapped, feeling her recoil with surprise. He was pretty surprised himself; she had been getting to him all day, still, he would never normally have spoken to her like that. It felt good. He flexed his shoulders, enjoying the newly created space behind him and allowed himself a small smile in the privacy of the darkness.

They moved on.

Twelve, he'd been; twelve years old and up for anything. Known for it. Some of the village kids had been talking about the cavern under the old mine near The Hurlers, and he'd felt the familiar thrill of the challenge.

"What's down there?" he'd asked.

"Dunno, but something's weird about it, cos my dad says he'll kill me if he finds out I've been down," Jonathan told him, then he lowered his eyebrows and spoke in his best spooky voice, "It's said that people have gone down there and never returned ... "

Michael's interest grew further. "Really? Who said that?"

"No-one, you dick! I just made it up!"

"So who's going down?"

"Are you mental? Nobody's bloody going down!"

"I'll do it."

Silence.

"I said I'll do it. If you dare me."

"DARE YOU!" shouted five voices at once, and Michael felt the tingle of anticipation blossom.

Word went round the village quickly. It was amazing how so many kids could find out without word ever reaching anyone over five feet tall. The following weekend saw a straggling group of local children winding their way up past the three groups of standing stones known as The Hurlers, to the sealed-off mine entrance. It was a warm day at the start of the summer holidays, but as Michael slipped into the tunnel he felt a clammy chill close itself around the legs of his jeans. Bound to be cold down here, out of the sunlight, in the dampness of this old place. He heard the shivery "oohs" of the children outside and smiled to himself; his dares always seemed to bother everyone else tons more than they bothered him, which was great.

"Don't forget to bring back proof!" Jonathan called, his voice already sounding

as if it were coming from a distance much further than the mouth of the tunnel a few feet away.

“Don’t forget to take your thumb out your ass!” Michael called back, grinning. He could just see Jonathan flipping him the finger before he slipped out of sight.

Once around the first bend, the darkness was total and startlingly solid. His fingers trembled slightly as he snapped on his torch, shining it ahead of himself down the tunnel, and he shook his head. Stupid. It was only dark, nothing to be scared of. But *this* dark felt a little more ... tangible somehow. As if he could push it aside like a curtain. Even his best torch, an expensive one he’d had for his birthday three weeks ago, seemed to be struggling against the heavy blackness.

He gripped the rubber handle tightly and moved forwards, gradually growing accustomed to the wet feel of the coldness that crept up his legs and pushed chilly fingers through his jumper. He closed his mind to the discomfort and kept going until, finally, he was able to drop down out of the tunnel onto the floor of the biggest underground cavern he had ever seen. Having been descending steadily, he was now far underground and the roof of the cavern stretched away, arching over him like a leaky umbrella. The drips forming there seemed to hang for an age before plopping down onto the floor, the sound echoing in the massive chamber.

Michael swept the torch around in a wide arc, taking in as much as he could at once. The cavern was huge, there was no doubt about that, but he could still see into the far corners, and there was nothing weird down here at all. Quite likely this was some trick by the other boys – knowing his penchant for taking dares, and what if he’d played right into their hands by accepting this one, and they’d sealed off the entrance to the tunnel somehow? A stupid joke but an effective one.

He knew a second’s heart-squeezing fear.

Then he laughed aloud, remembering that he was the one who’d extended the challenge to himself, needing only those magic words “Dare You” to push him

that extra step.

The laughter sounded odd as it bounced back at him, and he stopped abruptly, looking over his shoulder without knowing why. As he turned back, his torchlight caught on an outcropping of rock at the far side of the cavern and he started across the uneven floor, worn away in places by the centuries of dripping water.

When he reached the crooked part of the wall he felt a twinge of excitement as he saw that it concealed another, smaller chamber beyond. Immediately inside he saw a wide shelf cut into the wall and, as he flashed his torch on it, he drew a sharp breath. A large wooden box nestled at the back of the shelf, its lid raised slightly as if it were too small to house its contents. Without a second thought, Michael put his torch on the ledge and boosted himself up, scraping his trainers on the stone wall.

He walked on his knees over to the box and, holding his torch between his teeth, he gripped the heavy lid in both hands and raised it, noting the way rust fell away from the hinges as they moved – it clearly hadn't been opened in a long, long time. Strange, since this cavern was something close to common knowledge nowadays, but the question was swept from his mind a second later as he saw what the box held.

Gleaming dully in the limited light it was, nevertheless obviously, gold. Piles and piles of it – dirty, cast carelessly into the chest, but so much that the sight of it took his breath and squeezed it from his chest in a grunt of amazed delight. Tiny, gilded boxes, chains, some weird looking plain band that didn't close up completely and had knobbly ends. Was that a torc? He'd read about those, weren't they supposed to be what the Celts wore?

One piece in particular caught his attention and he reached out for it. Not gold, but with a strangely powerful attraction – a jar with a highly decorated lid and two handles jutting from its swollen middle. As his hand closed over it and he

lifted it out, he heard something rustling behind him in the widest part of the cavern.

His heart locked briefly and then began to pump harder and faster, almost painful as he tried to listen past the roaring in his ears to identify the sound. Maybe it was Jonathan? Probably couldn't bear to hand over all the glory, and came down the tunnel after him ... but something told Michael that lucky boy was still up there in the sunshine, probably throwing stones at the tall mine chimney and singing some dirty song or other while they waited for him to come out.

The sound came again, disturbingly loud this time and Michael took the torch from his mouth, sweeping it around behind him. What he saw made him draw breath to scream, but no sound came from his frozen throat; there, standing on wizened, bow-legs, shrivelled looking yet menacing, stood a little man no higher than Michael's hip. A wide, slashed mouth and hook-nose, the head, seemingly huge on puny shoulders, tilted to stare at Michael. One hand reached out to take the jar, and with the other he jabbed a long tined pitchfork at the boy's leg.

Michael yelped and jumped back, dropping his prize back into the box. He couldn't move forwards past this utterly unbelievable creature, and there was nowhere to go in any other direction – walls either side and the treasure chest at his back. He stared in bemused horror at the little man, a dusty green velvet jacket and weird half-trousers ... he was like something out of Enid Blyton's scarier tales, or The Brothers extremely Grimm come to that.

The pitchfork he wielded was small in comparison to Michael's size, but wickedly sharp, and Michael was appalled and embarrassed to find himself on the verge of tears. What did the creature want? He held up his hands to show that he had no weapon apart from the torch, and the man seemed to calm slightly. It took a moment for Michael to realise that this was not out of relief that he posed no danger, but because he had put the jar back into the chest.

The pitchfork dropped slightly and the strange, frightening little man stepped aside, watching the boy as he sidled past and out into the main cavern again.

Michael in turn, didn't take his eyes off the creature as he stumbled backwards towards the entrance of the tunnel. He slipped in one of the slimy puddles and fell down, hurting his tailbone and biting back a cry. But it reminded him of something that no longer seemed important. Still, he braved taking his gaze off the creepy little man and flashed his torch at the ground next to him. Quickly he grabbed a hanky from his pocket and soaked it in the puddle he was sitting in. His proof.

"Nasty boy!" screamed the little goblin-thing suddenly. His voice was shrill, terrifying. Angry and tearful all at once and as Michael stared at him he began to jump up and down, brandishing his pitchfork and sobbing furiously.

"You should never have come here, you nasty, *nasty* boy! The Spriggans don't let *no-one* near what they must protect, now get out or you'll be sorry. You might just get what you came for!"

Michael scooted backwards through the puddle on his behind, finally gaining his feet and lunging at the tunnel. He pulled himself up and didn't look back once as he scrambled up towards daylight once more.

His friends accepted the wet hanky as proof he had been down far enough to find water and, as Jonathan pointed out with a grin, they'd have accepted his wet arse as similar proof. Michael had grinned good naturedly, punched Jonathan as was expected of him, and dreamed fitfully for weeks.

Now here he was, eighteen years later, and heading down the same dark, breathing tunnel.

It had been just three weeks ago when, idly flipping through the sixty million channels of shit on the TV, he had seen a picture that froze his finger on the remote button. Despite Sarah's urging to carry on channel-hopping, he'd stared at the screen until his eyes hurt. A jar, dated at over a thousand years old had recently been uncovered by some archeological team in Scotland. Apparently it

had a partner, also missing, and the reward for the recovery of the lost artefact had more noughts on the end than Michael could contemplate. And did he know where that partner was? Oh, indeed ...

Sarah waited for him to carry on flipping through the selection of repeats, soaps and makeover programmes. They had known each other for years and were still sickeningly, romantically in love. Still he knew that if she spoke again he might have to slap her.

"What's so fascinating about an antiques show?" she said at last. His hand itched. He gripped the remote tightly and didn't answer.

"Mike? Come on, there's gotta be something better than this – *big yawn*," she exaggerated putting a hand over her mouth. His irritation increased, but he remained silent, shushing her with his hand as he tried to listen to the TV.

When the report was over, he wondered why he had got so annoyed; she was only saying the same stuff he would have said in the circumstances. He leaned back on the sofa and tossed the remote onto the coffee table, slipping a hand under her shirt and cupping a full breast.

"Who needs the crappy old telly anyway?" he muttered into her hair. She arched towards him, unbuttoning and parting her denim shirt.

"Who indeed?" she replied in a breathy whisper. As her hand closed on his bulging jeans he forgot the jar and remembered only how much he loved this woman.

They had planned the trip as a romantic excursion, travelling down to Cornwall from London on the Friday evening and arriving at the small hotel on the edge of the Bodmin moor just as it got dark. Finding they had time for an evening walk, Michael took Sarah around his old village, showing her where he had played, scrumped apples and had his first kiss.

"Jane Farmer," he said wistfully, looking at Sarah out of the corner of his eye, "she was everything a boy could want."

"You mean she'd snog at the drop of a hat," Sarah translated.

"Okay, yeah."

"Well it seems it's up to me to eclipse your first kiss memories. The first time you had a *shag* on Bodmin moor should do it ... "

To his astonishment and intense pleasure she pushed him back against the wall and began unzipping his fly, one hand travelling up inside his shirt to rub his nipple. They made love there, just out of the light from the local pub, where anyone could see if they drove by. Despite what she had said, and the situation, this was no casual sex; it was thrilling, unexpected and deeply enjoyable – just like her.

The following morning they started out on their journey across the moor towards the Hurlers and the old mine. He hadn't told her about the jar, just that he wanted to show her something wonderful.

She had been girlish and excited at the prospect, endearing at first, but her enthusiasm quickly became tedious as they neared their destination.

He hadn't forgotten about what he thought he'd seen down there but now, as a man of thirty he realised that there was no way he had really been scared off by some goblin-creature with a bloody silly name. Sporran? Spirran? Spaggan? No, he'd been a child reacting naturally enough to shadows and echoes, no doubt started off by his friends yelling down the tunnel. Either way, the jar was real alright, and even if, by some bizarre chance some little dwarf guy *had* sheltered from the weather down there, what could he do against two fully grown adults, even supposing he was still alive nearly twenty years later?

These thoughts marching through his mind, he wanted to focus on the possibilities that the money would afford him, and as soon as Sarah started talking he felt himself tense up. She was gushing about how pretty the moor was, how fascinating the history of the place, and how she loved to be in the open air with him. God, didn't she ever shut up?

Finally they arrived at the Hurlers, and Sarah sighed at the sight of the

standing stones.

"I've heard about these, wasn't it supposed to be some punishment, for the men of the village to be turned to stone for Hurling on a Sunday?" she giggled, "must have been too much beer on Saturday night!"

That's right, take the piss, Michael thought. She knew as well as he did that hurling was an ancient tradition here, and she should have known better than to make fun of his home. Still, he smiled at her supposed joke and pointed to the tall chimney outlined clearly, a single granite finger stabbing the sky.

"That's the one, there."

"What about it?"

"We're going down it."

"We're *what?* We don't have any equipment with –"

"Don't need any." With that he started towards the towering chimney, leaving Sarah to stumble along after him.

And now here they were, in the tunnel itself, and as they descended further underneath the moor he began to wonder what he had ever seen in her. They had been warm and loving once, he knew, but it was almost like a fact he'd read about somewhere, not a memory. He knew they'd shared everything, good and bad, and he knew that at one time he'd have given his soul to her if she'd asked for it, but again – things he knew intellectually rather than emotionally.

They reached the end of the tunnel and he jumped off into the cavern, not looking back to help Sarah down the unfamiliar drop as he knew he probably should have. *Would* have, if he'd cared. He swept his powerful Maglite around the cavern, hearing Sarah's gasp of amazement as she took in the size of the place.

"Wow!" she breathed. Then he felt her slender arms slip around his waist from behind. "You know what this place is calling out for?"

A tingle in his groin; the thought of laying down here in this cavern, so far underground, was undeniably exciting. But there was work to be done. He pushed

her hands away and stepped towards the outcropping of rock at the far side of the chamber.

"This isn't what we're here for," he told her, his voice curt. He hurried across the floor, hearing her following him, clearly scared to be left lightless in this strange place. A brief memory burned in his mind; a small man crying furiously ... a green velvet jacket, a pitchfork ...

"Spriggans," Sarah said suddenly. Michael went cold from head to toe in an instant.

"What did you say?" he croaked, turning to shine the torch onto her face. She was smiling.

Except her eyes.

"I said Spriggans. Down here."

"What the hell are Spriggans?" His voice was little more than a whisper now, and he could tell by her expression that she knew the question was dressing only.

"Oh come on," she said, and her smile slid into a brittle leer, a parody of itself. "Do you really think you're the only person who knows of The Guardians? You're after the jar, aren't you?"

He could only stare at her, mute. His mouth moving up and down, his hand shaking, sending the torchlight flickering wildly across her face.

"You can't have it, you know. And you can't tell anyone else about it either. It's not allowed."

"N ... not allowed?"

"Of course not. You should never have seen it, but since you were so young they let you go. I was sent to make sure of you. Pity, you're quite a nice guy. You should've turned the TV off when I said, Mike."

Michael's stunned mind fixated on one sentence among the confusion.

"You were 'sent to make sure of me'? Of what?"

"That you wouldn't tell anyone about what you found here. That's why The Guardians revealed themselves to you, so that you'd be too scared and

embarrassed to tell about the jar.”

“*Revealed* themselves? Christ, Sarah ... ”

“Rhiannon. And yes; you are among a very few mortals to have seen them – you were given a chance, Mike and you repaid their mercy with greed.”

“But how did they know I’d fall in love with you?” He couldn’t believe he was even asking, but he had to know the extent to which his life had been manipulated. Because he *had* fallen in love with her, and God he had fallen hard. Her deeply glossy red hair, her green eyes, her slender form –all that had been part of it, but they had connected on a level way beyond the physical. Or so he’d thought.

“You were supposed to. You couldn’t *help* responding to me. In my true form you’d probably run a mile.” She laughed then, and her perfect white teeth gleamed in the half-light. Slowly she unbuttoned her shirt, allowing it to fall open and Michael was amazed to find himself aroused by the sight of her nakedness, even here. She licked her lips and then put a long, shapely finger in her mouth, sucking luxuriously on it before drawing lazy circles around her erect brown nipples.

His mouth went dry. Sarah/Rhiannon beckoned him closer. He felt his feet moving, beyond his control, and a moment later he was closing his arms around her body, feeling the softness of her hair against his cheek. Her hands touched his face as she pulled him away from her, raising her mouth to meet his.

They kissed. Even now he wanted her and he groaned into her mouth as he gave himself over to the heat. Her tongue snaked into his mouth, touching his teeth and locking, locking ... suddenly he couldn’t breathe. Her tongue was too long. Wrapped around his own, pulling it deeper into her mouth, he could feel it tearing loose, blood starting to flow, stinging pain turning to shrieking agony as he finally punched out at her to loosen her grip and pulled away, stumbling back, the torch dropping to the floor with a clatter.

Complete blackness. A shroud.

Sobbing with terror, Michael groped for the torch, not wanting to think about what had happened, His fingers encountered the ground with bruising impact, and he grunted and pulled his hand back briefly. Blood seeped steadily into his mouth and he knew that his tongue had torn away in places ... he spat hard and with revulsion, searching blindly, and then the torch wasn't needed at all as light flooded the cavern. Bright, glaring, screaming light that made him cry out and clap his hands to his eyes. When he could face it again he dropped them away and blinked furiously to clear the tears of pain.

Rhiannon stood there, her hair no longer deep red, her shirt no longer invitingly parted. In fact, no shirt at all. She was dressed in a long shift of dull brown linen, tied at the waist, and carried a staff in her hand. Her shining hair was now black, wild, framing a face that Michael barely recognised, but still he knew that it was the woman he'd known as Sarah. Her nose was hooked and oversized, dwarfing her eyes but shrinking in comparison to the wide mouth that slashed the face from ear to ear. She opened this slit-mouth now, and allowed her lizard-tongue to brush the thin lips. Michael gagged as he remember how that black thing had nearly pulled his own tongue from his mouth. He spat blood again and tried to speak, but could form no words.

"You had the chance, Michael." Rhiannon grated her words out, the sound echoing hideously off the walls.

She banged the knotted wooden staff on the floor and Michael moaned in terror as they came, swarming from places hidden in the rock that he had never seen before. He was ready to swear those gaps hadn't even existed, but the hissing, grinning Spriggans gave the lie to that notion. They capered around him, laughing, poking at him with their long pitchforks, they were no higher than his knees but the sheer volume of numbers made it impossible to move through them to the safety of the tunnel. To climb over them forcefully would simply spill

him to the ground where he would be even more at their mercy. His legs became a mass of tiny pains as the tines prodded through his jeans, and he found himself hopping away to avoid them, much to the delight of the tiny men.

"How come *you're* so tall?" he gasped to Rhiannon, noticing at the same time that she was the only female.

"Oh, I'm not one of *them*," she said, disgust entering her voice as she glared at the madly dancing, glee-filled creatures.

"I'm *pure* Faerie. This treasure belongs to my ancestors, it's their job to guard it. I just take on their appearance so they know I'm their queen. Much the same way as Sarah was to you, remember?"

For the briefest second she became the beautiful red-head once more, and Michael's heart contracted at the sight of her. How could he have wanted to hit her, to shut her up, to make her miserable? Then Rhiannon reasserted herself as the Spriggan Queen and he found himself wondering if the presence of the Spriggans and the nearness of her treasure had somehow forced her to become closer to her real character, and he had sensed it on some level. After all, it was only when the jar was foremost in his mind or physically close that his feelings had changed.

"What if I'd never come back here, if I'd taken my chance and stayed back in London. What would you have done then?" he asked, stepping fearfully away as an enthusiastic Spriggan aimed a fork at his groin.

"I'd have stayed with you, aged with you of course, and outlived you for a little while. Then I'd have come back here as myself once more. It wouldn't have mattered – a short sentence in terms of my own life-span," she shrugged.

"So what are you going to do with me now?"

"You can't be allowed to go free and tell someone what you know."

"But if I promise, or ... hey, what if you come with me, as Sarah?" he begged, hope flaring.

"No. You cannot be trusted."

She banged the staff on the ground again and the Spriggans began closing in, pushing him back towards the wall, jabbing at him and shrieking. Each one the mirror image of the one he'd seen eighteen years ago, green jacketed, huge-headed, shrivelled and wizened little men with wide split mouths and hook noses. As Michael reached the wall he looked out over the sea of Spriggans to see Rhiannon, her hair blowing wildly ... but where was the wind? Then sick horror as he realised that it was not waving in response to any breeze, but that the movement was caused by bats rising from her head, tangling in her hair before tugging free and joining into a massive cloud. Huge, shiny black rodents that flew towards him with a single-mindedness that froze him where he stood.

A pitchfork stabbed him in the thigh and as the blood flowed he turned pleading eyes to Rhiannon, but her level gaze left him in no doubt; he was going to die here. The Spriggans closed in, driving their small but deadly effective weapons into his body, thrusting as high as they could, but reaching no higher than his waist. As he felt the tines rip into his stomach he almost welcomed the bats that fell on him from the high, dripping ceiling.

Almost.

Rhiannon knelt over the prone figure. Michael's lower body was a mass of

shredded flesh, his chest torn open and seething with glistening black bodies, but he was still alive. Good. She passed a hand over the blood-soaked head. A wisp of smoke rose from the eyeless sockets and she cupped her hands over it. An attentive Spriggan lifted the lid of the jar by her side and she blew gently on the trapped smoke until it was drifting down into the wide bellied, highly decorated piece of pottery. There it joined with other writhing wisps – mouths appearing, disappearing, screams as silent as they were horrific, tortured faces in the shadowy smoke.

Closing the lid once more, she smiled. Michael had his jar.

The End.

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