



Tackling Giants

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Humor

5 min read

TACKLING GIANTS

‘When can you leave? The job must be done quickly, lad.’

The skinny lad nodded, having spent five minutes bowing to his monarch. Only the King’s scowl and tapping of the fat royal fingers on the golden throne made the lad stop.

‘You have all the necessary equipment, Jack? You were shown how to put it on correctly?’

‘Yes, Sire. Your armouries people were very kind and went over things repeatedly with me.’

‘I should hope they did, I pay them enough!’

The King looked again at the lad. The monarch’s confidence sank. All those adverts, all those personal appeals and who applied for the job? Some backward peasant of a boy wearing a dirty tunic and precious little else. And it also looked as if it had been some time since the lad’s last decent meal. Still it could work. The magical world loved its unlikely heroes. If all went well, the monarch would be financially rewarded.

That old witch, Griselda, could never resist taking a bet. And she’d definitely go for this one. The King could just hear her telling him he’d lost his touch when it came to picking a winner. Ha! She’d see soon enough... he hoped. The King wished the lad in front of him looked more promising though. Jack didn’t look as if he could fight his way out of a paper bag. Still on the plus side, Griselda would be found to think that as well. If ever anyone could be said to be a dark horse, this lad was it.

‘You have been told what to do?’

‘Yes, Sire, I kill the giant.’ Not for the first time Jack wondered what he’d got himself into but his mother

drummed it into him never to think of a task as impossible but to break it down into manageable chunks. Was it possible to do that with a giant?

‘Have you had any training with weaponry?’

‘Yes, Sire. I got on best with the magic sword. The other weapons were too heavy.’

‘Very well, lad. Good luck. We hope to speak to you again later.’ Though the King resolved to put on a side bet against that possibility. He may as well be sure of making some money. And it wasn’t as if the royal bookmakers were going to argue with him (at least not while there was still the prospect they would be awarded a Royal Warrant).

The lad was inevitably going to be giant fodder but it would buy the Kingdom peace for a while and it would make a nice change for the girls not to be picked on. Why should the magical realm’s less pleasant creatures devour every virgin they could get their claws on? The King was hard pushed to remember when he last enjoyed a virgin. The late Queen had reassured him on that point for herself but it had been a long time since...

Well, the King thought, dismissing his erotic dreaming for a more convenient time, some creatures had all the luck. And I resent the fact I am not one of those creatures... I am the King. I should have all the luck. My bloody ancestors did...

‘Easy money, Sire,’ Griselda appeared from behind the purple curtain which was to the left of the King’s throne the moment the boy left.

The witch and monarch shared two traits – arrogance and a love of gambling – but both knew their positions meant they could and did get away with it. Neither much cared for the inevitable dislike that attitude caused. Neither could be bothered to do anything about it.

‘The giant will eat well tonight, Sire. And we’ll all sleep peacefully for three months. It’s funny how he doesn’t eat much despite him being so hefty.’

‘He told me once the taste of our flesh fills him up more than any other protein,’ the King said in a tone that told his companion the ruler was also well used to comparing meat types.

Mind, judging by the size of the King’s belly, the witch could easily reach that conclusion.

For a moment, the Witch wondered if she was the only compassionate one out of the two currently in the Throne Room and then realised she was. Even she didn’t consider the peasant lad as just meat. She thought of him as a lad who, unfortunately, would become a piece of meat. The difference mattered. His Majesty clearly didn’t agree. She shuddered. There was something wrong when the big bad witch was the kindly one.

‘We’ll see about your boasts, Griselda. The lad is keen. I’ll give him that. We have seen, earlier this morning, that on the archery field he’s an excellent marksman.’

‘The giant will expect that. When did he eat your best archer? The guy you imported from Earth? That fellow called Robin who wanted to sharpen his arrow firing abilities? Said he’d won a golden arrow once.’

The King grimaced. Robin failed him. Worse, Robin let himself down. The only one pleased with that day’s work was the giant who ensured Robin went down very well and quickly. Annoyingly, the King had to arrange for a suitable story to cover Robin’s death to reach Earth. Still the treacherous Abbess story had been a good one. Humans were still falling for it.

Even Griselda refused to bet against Robin winning and then cursed when she realised she could’ve taken the royal house for a significant sum. She wasn’t making that mistake again. She’d won three bags of gold doubloons so far. So help him, she wouldn’t get a fourth. It was meant to be a friendly bet. There were no rules. It wouldn’t surprise the monarch if the witch tipped the giant off. Still two could play that game and the King had given the lad a hint. Now to hope Jack was intelligent enough to take it. It was the only thing that could save his life.

‘Thank you, Sire. If I win, do I get half the kingdom?’

We recall the lad now Griselda has gone and he has the nerve to come out with that, the King thought. Cheeky beggar. The politicians tell me we must publicise the fairy tales, keep the people in touch with their roots and all we get in return is someone who knows the going rate for acts of daring do (or, more accurately, successful acts of daring do). That leaves sod all room for negotiations. There are times I curse people for remembering the stories too well!

‘No, lad. Nor do I have anyone suitable for you to marry, thanks to that bloody giant eating the Queen. You will fight this giant for the sake of your good name, the Kingdom’s reputation for restraining those less lovable magical creatures and because your mother and I are telling you to do it! Every youngster should prove themselves. Aren’t you lucky to have this opportunity?’

The lad frowned. Luck was not the first word that had sprung to his mind. It was the second. The first was “bad”. The third and fourth words had been swear words.

The King suppressed a grin. Good. Cheeky sod can’t think of a reply. Not that I blame the lad. I don’t fancy facing the overgrown brute either. But someone must and one great thing about being King, it means it cannot possibly be me. I’m needed here on the throne. Shame really but it is how it goes. Duty calls. My ancestors

would have done the same. And nobody expects me to go against tradition. That's useful sometimes.

The King was satisfied he'd done what he could to prepare the lad though. It was the least he could do. There'd been a video training meeting held in one of the small study rooms off the Great Hall, the lad had been given armour and a huge diagram showing a giant's vulnerable spots (there weren't many) so at least the lad knew where to aim.

'Off you go, lad. Time to show everyone what you're made of.'

But don't do it literally, the King thought. We could do without seeing someone else going down head first. It's not a pleasant sight, the screams are dreadful, the ensuing silence even more so and, from what I saw of your mother, I suspect I'd never hear the last of it. Still if you manage this, I think I could manage your mother. She is a fine figure of a woman... Maybe there's something to be said for the more experienced lady. How I miss the Queen. Bloody giant. How dare he disrupt a royal visit and eat above his station!

There's no mistaking where the giant is, Jack thought.

Sniffing rapidly and then grimacing, as he took in the odour, he deduced it was a combination of ammonia and vomit. Jack swallowed rapidly.

Now is not the time to throw up, he thought. How often has the giant eaten because folk were put off by his perfume. He's not getting me that way... I'm made of sterner stuff. I can down the hottest of dishes, much to Mother's disgust.

As Jack began approaching the giant, the lad noted Griselda, the witch all knew loved arguing with the King, was in the stadium. So was a peculiarly dressed fellow behind her, wearing a deer stalker hat several sizes too big for him, which he thought would go well with a pinstriped suit. The fellow was wrong. Every so often the fellow wrote notes on his clipboard. Griselda would turn to him and shout loudly about odds.

Jack grimaced. People were going to make money out of this fight and, so help him, if he won, so would he.

Jack had the feeling the King would be most generous. He'd seen the monarch eye up his still attractive mother and, while Jack didn't entirely approve (nobody likes to think of their parents having a sex life), he recognised a business opportunity when he saw one. Bless her, so did his mother. Everyone knew the King had been lonely since the Queen became the realm's most upper class main course.

The giant turned, saw Jack and laughed. It was down to his puny size, Jack knew. Jack rummaged in his jacket. The secret weapon was there. Given to Jack by the King just before the lad emerged on to the battle field, the boy assumed the monarch had been on a losing streak with betting with Griselda and now desperately wanted

to win something.

His Majesty should do well enough on this flutter, the lad thought. I've only got to get the angle right. Given how many windows I've smashed in my time with various stones, this should be easy.

The giant walked towards Jack. Jack froze. The ground vibrated to each heavy footfall. Jack's confidence sank. The image of his mother's face came into his head. No. He must steel himself. He reached into his pocket and took out the weapon the King gave him, a home-made catapult and several smooth stones.

The catapult looked as if it was centuries old, the boy thought. And there are marks all over it so it's been well used. I wonder who by? I can just make out the letters D, A and V. Odd name I must say. Who was the target? Picking one of the smooth stones from his other pocket, Jack fitted it into the catapult and fired the stone at the giant's forehead.

The giant fell. Two minutes later the vibrations stopped. Jack carefully approached the prone brute and was in time to see the heart stop beating. As people always liked a show, Jack drew his own sword and cut the giant's head off.

Jack distrusted magic swords since he came across one on his travels stuck in a block of marble and asking plaintively to be let out. Jack walked on by. He wasn't silly. He knew trouble when he saw it. Taking the sword out the block would only be the beginning of adventures and danger and Jack didn't want either. He knew his stories. He also knew he wanted money. Stories could get you into trouble. It was difficult to go wrong if you had lots of lovely lucre and then went somewhere nice to enjoy it all. That was the summit of Jack's ambition. Then Jack heard the cheering, led by his monarch. Griselda looked as if poison had been injected into her face. She rushed over to her giant. Jack was amazed someone who could cheerfully transform someone into an animal or blast them to smithereens in the blink of an eye could show genuine tenderness. Not that she looked at Jack that way once she lifted her head from tending her darling.

Jack wasn't sorry the King hurried over to stand between him and the witch. Even Griselda knew better than to fire spells at the monarch. Fairy rulers always got their revenge. It always hurt. The lucky ones died immediately. Griselda was smart enough not to rely on luck. All knew she was the most intelligent witch for many centuries for that reason.

Perhaps that's why the King likes her, Jack thought. His Majesty wants an intellectual equal.

'Well done, lad!'

'Thank you, Sire.' Jack bowed. Creeping to his monarch was not a bad idea either when said monarch's intervention would be the only thing to save him from Griselda.

'He cheated!' Griselda ran around to the other side of the King and gave Jack such a glare he swore all the milk

for a distance of five miles must have curdled. Certainly it was enough to chill his blood though the temperature was 21°C.

‘He used no magic, Sire, the way the lore says he should have done. Nor did he use the traditional magic sword. He used his own sword and then only after he catapulted a stone. What kind of technology or magic is that? Where did he get the idea? Nobody in our history has taken someone out like that.’

Jack knew Griselda was telling the truth. Had Griselda been able to use other worldly technology to win a bet, she would have done.

The King coughed. ‘I found this book on my last visit to Earth. You know how I like to keep an eye on the inquisitive, noisy and self-destructive beggars partly to ensure humans are nowhere near ready to discover our world’s existence. While there, I thought I’d look up how they dealt with giants. I assumed there would be something. What civilisation has not been plagued by giants? It took me ages to find anything but someone gave me this book and told me where to look, a guy called Samuel wrote the tale apparently, and I thought one of our people should test the idea. You did well, Jack. The combination of the force of the stone, the speed at which it flew and impact – yes the humans are on to something here.’

‘It’s cheating.’

‘Griselda, as ruler of this world, we are permitted by magical lore to bring in new techniques that may be beneficial.’

‘Sire, if everyone goes around chucking stones at those less pleasant creatures living amongst us, it will kill magic as we know it. Magic needs to be renewed. Our emergency reserves need regular renewing as well. No magic means the magical world will fade away. The lack of magic will destroy our kind. It will just be a slow process, that’s all, but it will destroy us. You know what they say – if you don’t use it, you lose it.’

‘You’re just miffed you’ve lost this bet, Griselda. Nobody likes a sore loser.’ The King smiled at Jack.

Jack frowned. Was he piggy in the middle? Once the King left Jack to his life again, would Griselda pursue him? All he knew now was he didn’t like the way the witch was glaring at him. It had the “cooking time per pound” look about it.

‘Griselda, leave Jack alone,’ the King said sternly. ‘I’ve never had a go at your people when they’ve been successful. I expect you to show the same professional courtesy. You’re not to do, in any way, threaten or carry out any threats or injure Jack or anyone close to him!’

‘Very well, Sire, but I won’t pretend to be happy. I’d be careful about dealing with human books. How do we know we can trust them?’

‘We don’t always know we can trust our books. Spell books have been known to go rogue as you know. We have

had several volumes self-detonate and I know you've had that unfortunate experience. We heard the explosions when in the Palace gardens and know they must have come from your home. Given your place is over ten miles away as the dragon flies, that takes some doing.'

Griselda nodded. The only good thing about those explosions was knowing the King had to call in his most powerful wizards to help him bring his Library under control when the books decided to protest at the inauguration of a Royal Bonfire in the Palace gardens, having got the wrong idea as to what would be put on said bonfire. Instead of books, it really had been only potatoes that were cooked.

'Time you went home, Griselda,' the King said. 'We will know if you cheat and have a go at Jack here.'

Oh great, Jack thought. The way the King will know is I'm going to turn up dead somewhere.

Jack managed to smile when the witch vanished. As far as he was concerned old hags could stay vanished. Was there a way he could arrange that? Sadly probably not. Griselda was powerful. And Jack guessed the reason for it was because she had ensured nobody who could threaten her position ever got to do so.

The King's cough disrupted the lad's thought. Jack blushed but the King took no notice. The monarch was looking at an attractive middle aged lady waiting in one of the refreshment tents set up for the benefit of those members of the public who thought watching someone being eaten alive was the last word in entertainment and, in this lady's case, to be able to wave goodbye to her son. Still the King was glad it hadn't come to that. He hated the sound of women crying. It made him feel useless. He also recalled the scenes with the Queen when she had rounded on him for being useless in the face of the giant's threats. She had been brave enough to tackle the giant alone. She died.

No, the King thought, reckless bravery just isn't for me.

'You were going to introduce me to your mother, lad, weren't you?'

Jack nodded at his ruler. The lad could take a hint. Business beckoned.

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