

From the Kitchen

21 July 2010



In a time long ago, there were two giants who both wanted to be in charge of all the people in the villages and on the farms and of all the creatures in the forests and on the plains. Only one of the giants could be the boss. They used to decide the issue by fighting over it, but things had changed.

In a time longer ago, there was plenty of space in the land for the giants to fight in the old-fashioned way. The damage they exacted on the environment went mostly unnoticed. With ever less wilderness left, such destruction was no longer tolerated. The centaurs saw themselves as the custodians of the forests and the plains and they dealt fiercely with any giant who damaged them. Consequently, the giants were no longer feared in the way they once were.

The giants were no longer the only ones seeking power over the land. The centaurs were themselves asking others to officially recognise their importance in bringing balance to the land. And, while the farmers used to have a strong voice, they had lost much of this to all the people who now lived in the ever-larger villages.

Wizards and witches, who used to be laughed at or ignored, now held some power. They had successfully concocted potions that gave people a sense of being healthy and staying young. They even had potions that the dwindling number of farmers could use to grow more crops more quickly.

There was one other group that had gained notoriety and power: the trolls. They had discovered and were now mining shining minerals that the villagers were willing to pay a lot of money for. They had also found a mineral that glowed by itself and which could keep the houses warm. They called it glowium. This meant that fewer trees had to be cut down for firewood. The centaurs were divided about whether this was a good thing, because their control over the forests had traditionally given them much of their power.

The witches and wizards warned about using this new-fangled glowium. They said it was unnatural and would make people sick, but these warnings were largely ignored or dismissed as self-interest; the trolls said that the witches and wizards were just being spiteful.

Instead of the giants fighting for power, they now held popularity contests. They travelled through the land and in each village the inhabitants and the local farmers would gather and listen to what each giant promised he or she would do for the people if chosen as the most popular. Yes, now that fighting was no longer the way to decide supremacy, female giants also entered the popularity contests. And so did some of the centaurs, a few wizards and witches and one troll.

The giants were not used to being chosen on the basis of popularity, so they promised to do things that they imagined the people would want. Therefore, each time one of them offered something, the other would offer more of it, or something better or shinier. One of them even promised to ask the tooth fairy to double the amount paid for children's teeth. The other giant then promised to pay for the witches and wizards to make available some of their common potions.

The centaurs also wanted to be in the power game, but they didn't have the same clout as the giants. They urged people to consider a power-sharing arrangement, such that both giants would be voted as equally popular and that one of the centaurs would share all decision making. The centaurs thought that this would help them protect the forests and the plains, because the chosen centaur could side with whichever giant made the best decision for those things the centaurs considered needed protecting.

The trolls, on learning of the centaurs' plans, argued that they should also be in on this arrangement. No-one liked the trolls and told them so. To keep the trolls happy and out of the way, the giants decided to let them keep most of the proceeds from their digging and mining. The trolls considered this briefly and accepted it as a fair deal.

Because the two giants were so similar in what they promised people, the people found it hard to choose. It was finally decided that one of them could be most popular for three years and then the other would be most popular for the next three years and then they would swap again. One of the centaurs was chosen by his own kind every three years to be with the giants and help them to make good decisions.

The witches and wizards continued to concoct ever more wonderful potions and the trolls kept right on digging and mining and growing rich. Most of the people were happy, provided no-one demanded too much of them and they were by and large left to get on with their lives.