



❧ The Cave of Snakes ❧

Lynne Hardy

‘Embelyon was lost, renounced. And T’sais wept.’

Hidden in the depths of a forest is a quiet wooded glade, at odds with the surrounding glades due to its peace and tranquillity. The rest of the forest may be alive with slaving beasts of hideous dimension, but here all is calm. The glade undulates towards a small waterfall and pool. Strangely the waterfall makes little noise other than a susurrating hiss and the pool at its base is so dark that it casts no reflection, seemingly absorbing any light that falls upon it.

A small amount of investigation reveals there is a cave behind the falls. It, too, is as black as night and uncomfortably warm. There is a gentle rustling noise that drowns out the falls and should anyone light a torch the reason will become clear. The cave is full of snakes of every size and description, mostly sleeping, but in constant motion. They will take no action against the intruders provided they are not threatened or harmed themselves.

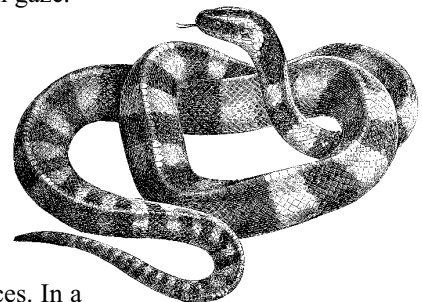


Should any be brave enough to remain here at night, they will see a bizarre spectacle. As the sun sets, the snakes move as one towards the falls, through which they pass into the pool to vanish without trace. Those watching outside will see a great shadow slipping silently into the velvet waters. A few minutes later, to the sound of an unearthly keening wail, a column of water in the form of a monstrous serpent rises from the pool. It sways in time to the awful noise and then abruptly sinks back below the surface, from which the snakes now return. Instead of returning to their lair, they fan out into the forest, ignoring the watchers unless challenged. They will return several hours later, having fed and each carrying in its mouth a tiny white flower, which it casts into the pool before slipping behind the curtain of the falls.

Locals hereabouts are very superstitious about the glade and will not enter it at night. Interestingly the snakes rarely bother people and depending on who you believe this is because they once were humans and still remember some of their society's mores. According to the legend, the forest was once the home of a prosperous village that venerated the snake-god Adasbo in the time before the moon fell¹. The god was as benevolent as any other and demanded only an evening tribute of night-blossoms in return for his patronage. These flowers he wove into a bower for his love, the water goddess Falspri, to protect her from the chill of night and the moon's harsh gaze.

But Adasbo had a rival for Falspri's devotion – the very moon itself.

The moon whispered into the hearts of the villagers and told them to ignore the tribute so that Falspri would no longer favour Adasbo. He promised them many things and the greedy hearts of men listened far too well. The tribute stopped and the bower faded away to nothing. Adasbo was confused as to why his people had betrayed him and keened in anger as the moon gazed lasciviously at the beautiful water spirit, exposed and frail without her flowers. But Falspri, the water goddess, knew that the moon had been duplicitous and rejected his advances. In a great rage, he turned her into a waterfall and the villagers into snakes. So vast were the magics he made that night that the locals believe that this is the reason the moon fell from the sky. Adasbo could not compete with the power of the moon, but he did create a haven for his snake-children, shielded by Falspri as they had once shielded her. He could not forgive them completely for their actions and decreed that they must continue to bring the tribute for the rest of time. With that he leapt into the midnight pool and drowned in the embrace of his transformed lover. His ghost rises every night to remind the snakes of their duty to him and every night they return with the tiny white flowers that led to their downfall.



¹. Note that this would place the legend in the 8th or 9th aeon which means it is of considerable antiquity. It may also indicate that the explanation is wrong.