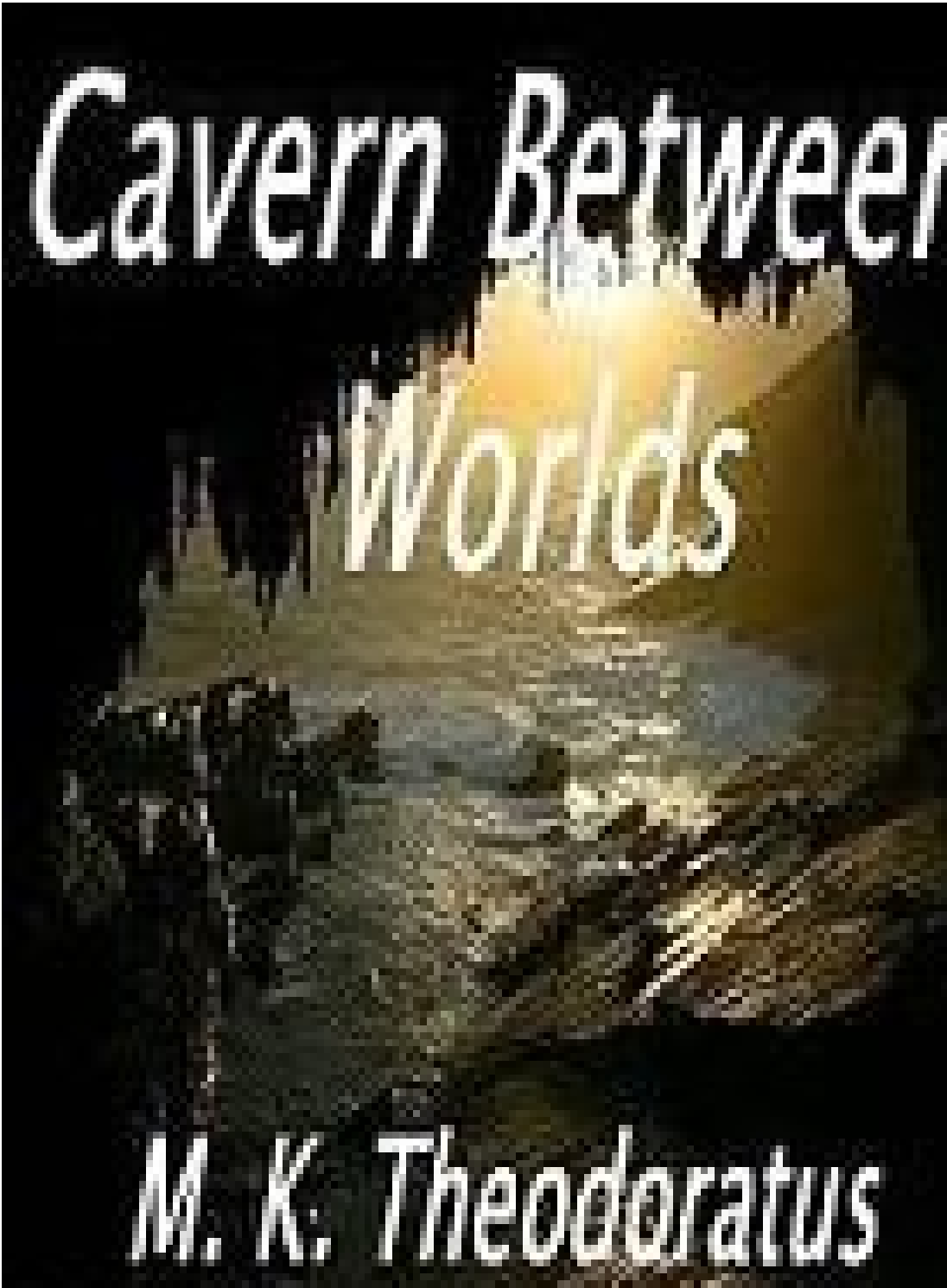
Cavern Between
Worlds
M. K. Theodoratus

Cavern Between Worlds:

A Tale of the Far Isle Half-Elven

By

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Freedom. Thoughts of her coming leave teased her like ripe plums. Hattenel signed the last requisition with an illegible scrawl, and the quill plopped into the ink pot. *Time for a change of scenery, free from camp politicks … and all the gossips waiting for some misstep to chew on.*

Captain Hattenel, of the Half-Elven rangers, bit her lip to suppress a smile as she listened to Aberfan, her aide, cluck in the outer room. As soon as she had announced she had decided to take her leave this time around, the man had gone all granny on her, giving her more advice than her own mother had ever dared. The old goat treated her as if she was an underaged stripling who needed wrapping in cotton wool. The sound of his stockinged feet whispered across the plank floor, and she dropped her gaze as if the supply request on her desk engrossed her attention.

Aberfan, a grizzled veteran of the ancient southern wars, grunted to catch Hattenel's attention. He threw a letter on the cleared desk. "One last … er … urgent request. Deny it, sir, and you're free to enjoy your leave."

Hattenel glanced up to his scowling face and stiffened at his attempt to make her decision for her. "Deny … what?"

"Nothing worth wasting leave time on, sir, I assure you."

"Shouldn't I decide that?"

His lips moved his drooping mustache in and out. "Captain Voronlig, of the Sea Spray, requests permission to explore some mystery down in the southern Rookeries. Claims the enemy isn't watching them for danger closely enough." The veteran ranger cleared his throat. "You may not know of him, but he's a trouble-maker. The sergeants kicked him out of camp early as a cadet. The scouts suspect his crews …"

"He's a pirate?"

Hattenel didn't resist the urge to tease him. According to Aberfan, everyone cause trouble except for, maybe, the sergeants under their command …

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sometimes. Hattenel stroked the scar, a souvenir from a Suthron patrol when she was trying to escape north to the Marches when a stripling, along her cheek. She ignored his inhale.

"Voron?" She leaned back in her chair, battle-scarred fingers tapping on her desk. "The name's familiar. Where … have I heard … that name before?"

"Twitchy fellow." Puzzlement filled her aide's face. "Can't understand how, but he captains a merchant ship even if he's as podgy as a well fed mouse. Ship always turns up where it shouldn't be."

"How is that important if his crew doesn't mind?"

"This time he has some tick chewing his arse about investigating some danger to our fishing fleets. I'd say the danger'd come if he got caught disturbing the truce with the Suthrons."

Hattenel now remembered Voronlig's book describing his far travels in the Pashalands. The western militia captains had discussed him and his book in the mess late one night. While his observations were respected among the active military officers, most Half-Elven thought him a blithering idiot since he seldom returned to the Marches with a salable cargo. The conflicting images made her curiosity itch.

Hiding her interest, she said, "I'll look into it on my way home. I'll complete the paperwork when I return."

"Not a good idea to let loose ends dangle, sir. Never know what might happen. You could scribble something and send it back. Maybe on a piece of his hide?"

"Sergeant, the paperwork can wait until I return."

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When she shifted from headquarters to the coastal hedge tavern indicated in the message, she found Voronlig bending over a large map spread out on a table set in an alcove. Light pierced through the grime of the line of small windows, revealing a wide, unappealing rump. His lank, unbraided hair, the grayish brown of mouse fur, brushed the table top. Hattenel had never seen such a flabby person in the Marches, even among the merchants and traders. Using elf skills used enormous amounts of energy, and Half-Elven tended to be lean.

Stale ale and wood smoke permeated the air, and a stink from the rushes rose from the floor when she stepped nearer. Hattenel wrinkled her nose, but she heeded her prickling battle senses, even though she sensed no obvious magic. She shadowed her presence from his ken, even though the tavern was empty this early in the afternoon. Hattenel hoped to glean more information before she confronted him.

A well fed mouse, indeed. How could he be dangerous? Hattenel touched the deep scar along her cheek, remembering her shock as the Suthron sword sliced. *Never assume.*

Aberfan was right. The tall sailor did twitch. First, he glanced from his journal to the map and back again. Then, repeated the process. When he stood, he waved his hands as he stared out the window, but he soon bent to consult the notes lying on top of the map. The longer she watched, the more he appeared a foolish twit. But, she had read his book. Hattenel sent a delicate mental probe to solve the discrepancy. Her eyes narrowed in surprise at the strength of his shields. The miserable image of a man held a glamour as dense as the Wall separating the Marches from the Suderlands.

Is he avoiding military service by pretending to be an idiot? If so, the lord high commander needs to know.

With enemies surrounding the Marches, the high command needed all the talents of all Half-Elven, even the most unpromising. Though tempted, Hattenel decided not to challenge him. At need, merchant ships could be commandeered into the militia so, technically, he fulfilled his military duty. His

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book suggested sailing the seas made a better use of his talents than keeping watch along the coasts. Yet, he wanted to waste his time exploring an off-shore mystery he refused to explain.

Intrigued where she expected to be bored, she unshadowed. “Did you loose something?”

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