

Life Elsewhere

(for Telltales)

Telltales is a bi-monthly reading event which usually happens in Falmouth, Cornwall, although it does stray to nearby (and occasionally distant) literary festivals. The theme they set for their May 2014 event was Life Elsewhere, and that worked for me. So I wrote this for them.

Camera pans over a battlefield. Bodies everywhere, scattered swords and broken engines of war; the battle's over. Two dragons in the background, wearing saddles and bridles, their heads low to the ground. They're standing over their fallen riders.

Among the dead stride women in armour, helmets on their heads, wings on their backs. These are the Valkyries, come to take the souls of the mightiest Warriors off to Valhalla.

Then, from above, an earsplitting screech. Darkness spreads rapidly from the far horizon. The Valkyries are taken by surprise. They draw their swords, gazing upwards, shifting into battle stance. We hear the beat of terrible wings. Suddenly –

An amplified voice shouts: “Cut!”

Everybody relaxes. Two Valkyries who have launched into the air are winched back to the ground. A young man in big spectacles and low-slung cargo pants, carrying a clipboard, goes from one to the other, turning off the flapping mechanisms in their wings.

In the foreground, a Valkyrie crouches down

beside the body of a Warrior. The Warrior comes up on one elbow. He offers the Valkyrie a cigarette. They light up, puffing for a while in contented silence. In the background, the battlefield is now swarming with key grips, best boys, gaffers, spin-off game designers, tie-in plastic figure manufacturers, social-media marketing gurus and make-up artists carrying paintbrushes and buckets of fake blood.

The Valkyrie blows a perfect smoke ring. As she watches it float away into nothingness, she says: “Are you doing anything over the break?”

The Warrior says: “No, not really.”

But she’s heard the tiny hesitation. “Come on,” she says. “You can tell me.”

He really doesn’t want to. But he knows her well enough not to draw this out. “I’m going to Cornwall,” he says. “Visiting family.”

“How lovely,” she says.

There is a silence. Finally, he asks: “What are you doing over the break?”

“Oh, it’s nothing.” She stubs out her cigarette. “Just a private project, really.” She names a producer, and a tiny spasm of pain crosses the Warrior’s face. The Valkyrie continues. “He’s had this idea for years, and now it looks like it might happen. So we’re flying out on a meet-and-greet with the money people. Just him and me and – ” She names a director and a major Hollywood action star. “The film’s going to be called *The Blue-Eyed Blonde*,” she adds. “Unless he comes up with something better.”

The Warrior is suddenly intent on the tip of his cigarette. He doesn’t look up into her blue eyes. He doesn’t ask what role she might have been offered.

“But you will be back by the end of next week?” he says.

“Oh yes,” she says. “At least, back in –” She names their next location. They’re done with the ancient-mythology stuff. “It’s just a short hop to there from Tahiti,” she adds.

The Warrior stubs out his cigarette.

“So we’re both getting a taste of life elsewhere,” he says. “I’m going home to Cornwall, and you’re going to Tahiti.”

She looks at him, startled by the tone of his voice. Then she looks away, blinking rapidly. Then she reaches out. But her hand doesn’t quite touch his shoulder. “I wasn’t –” she begins. “I didn’t mean –” Again, she stops. She says awkwardly: “*Life Elsewhere* would be a good title.”

Their eyes meet. After a short, endless moment, he picks up her hand from where it has fallen between them. “I like *The Blue-Eyed Blonde*,” he tells her.

She drops her eyes. “I’ll tell him that,” she says.

They hold the pose while fresh blood is poured from a milk jug onto the wound on his chest. He has to let her go while the arrow that killed him is fixed more firmly into place over his heart.

“Be sure you do,” he says softly. By now, he’s looking away at the distant green screen where the mountains will be. “I’ve seen things you people wouldn’t believe,” he says, watching the crew move among the actors.

The Valkyrie and the Warrior have known each other for so long now that they can have entire conversations in the dialogue that they learned at film school in Falmouth.

“Attack ships on fire off the shoulder of Orion,” she tells the make-up assistant who’s dabbing at her face. The tone of her voice says: that’s more than I’ve ever seen.

“C-beams glitter in the dark near the Tannhauser gate,” he tells a passing game designer, who raises a high five to show that he’s got the reference.

Their eyes meet again, shyly, just for a moment. In their private language, they’ve said what needed to be said.

An amplified voice shouts: “Okay, positions everybody.”

The Valkyrie and the Warrior both pick up their stubbed-out cigarettes and drop them into a pool of fake blood.

“Smoking is so twentieth century,” says the Valkyrie. “It’s almost an anachronism now.”

“We should get those electronic things,” says the Warrior, lying back down.

“I wish you’d hidden a Thermos of coffee under that – “ She points. She doesn’t know what to call it. She decides not to say “mini-skirt”.

The Warrior grins. He doesn’t speak, but in a moment, while he’s lying dead and she’s acting, he’ll think through the perfect wording for the one-liner that he could have delivered, about getting the hots for her, and keeping a lid on it. When acting has finished with him, as he knows it soon will have, he wants to write.

As the Valkyrie stands, they’re joined by a young woman in big spectacles and low-slung cargo pants, carrying a clipboard.

The young woman says to the Valkyrie: “This is the long take, right? You’re looking for a heroic

Warrior to take to Valhalla, and the audience has to know that when you see this guy” (the Warrior gives a little wave) “he’s the one. Then you’re interrupted – ” The young woman gestures upwards, to where a crane is swinging an enormous black winged dinosaur back to its starting position (actor swathed in black robes clinging to its neck and swearing) “ – and when you see the Valkyries are losing, you revive him – ”

“ – and all his friends – ”

“ – and together you defeat the evil wasname – ”

“ – and that sets me up as an undead superhero,” says the Warrior. “Who writes this stuff?”

The young woman says: “Correct! Then it’s opening titles, modern day, street scene in Manhattan, undead superhero walking towards us looking carefree – ”

“ – wearing a really nice suit – ” says the Warrior.

“ – and cut to me teaching martial arts in a gym,” says the Valkyrie. “Wearing a really baggy top.” She gestures over her shoulders at her wings.

“Correct! And an ancient evil is just at that moment waking up in the East River. It infects a group of politicians and bankers ... ”

The young woman gives a perky smile just as an amplified voice shouts: “Clear the set!”

“Oh! Sorry!” The young woman darts off camera.

“Memories ... ” sings the Valkyrie, softly. They’re back in their private language, and they’re not going to forget this moment in all its glorious absurdity.

“... of the way we are,” sings the Warrior, just as softly.

“Action!”