we proudly present:

Fantasy Faction Monthly Writing Contest Anthology, July 2016

Various Authors

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### Fantasy Faction Monthly Writing Contest Anthology, July 2016

This month's theme has many fathers and mothers. @Lady\_Ty who posted the Shakespeare Adaptation Generator in the Ideas Topic, @Raptori who modified it (we kept some of your choices!), @ClintACK who provided the online dice roller you will use below and at least @ScarletBea and yours truly who put it together. We hope you have lots of fun with it!

*All content originally appeared on the Fantasy Faction Forums in the Monthly Writing Contest. You can see more information (and even participate in the forums!) on this particular contest by visiting the site.*  
<http://fantasy-faction.com/forum/(jul-2016)-story-generator/(jul-2016)-story-generator-submission-thread/>

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# Trial by Cake

## By Alex Hormann

Just south of the Edrym river lies a solitary tavern, which caters mostly to passing merchants, but also has a reputation for harbouring clientele of a rather darker nature. Rumour, that oft-cited yet seldom trustworthy source, would have you believe that Halfnose Hethec, the self professed bandit lord of the western kingdoms, would often lock himself away in one of the private rooms to scheme and plot his next daring act of robbery. The tavern's name – the Curs'd Gibbet – is often said to be a reference to Halfnose Hethec's absolute failure to keep his hideaway a secret. Nevertheless, the place remains popular among the alleged villains and ne'er-do-wells of the world.

One such person, who was either a murderer or a deranged lunatic, depending on the person asked, was approaching the Curs'd Gibbet for the first time. Her name was Bannet, a witch freshly exiled from her coven for crimes to unspeakable to repeat. Suffice to say these crimes involved the elderly, a larger number of knives than was strictly necessary. Alone in the wild, Bannet knew she did not stand a chance of survival, and the crude representations of her scarred young face which had been plastered across every wall and nailed to every tree in the land made certain that there would be no hiding for her among the decent folks of the world. People were surprisingly sensitive about he torture of the elderly.

And so she had sought aid from the one person who might possibly have some shred of affection for her still, despite her monstrous deeds. Her mother. Like all children, even the bad ones, Bannet loved her mother dearly. Yes, there had been troubling times. Being repeatedly thrown into a lake sprang to mind. But Bannet was sure that her mother had only the best of intentions with regard to her wayward daughter. And she had been proven correct. Her mother had agreed to meet her at the Curs'd Gibbet on the eighth night of the fourth month, which would, by Bannet's calculations, be this very night. Witches like Bannet and her mother had a unique way of planning such things. Never was a witch late, save when she chose to be.

Bannet pushed open the door to the tavern and surveyed the contents. The usual mix of rogues who always gathered on nights such as this. Cut-throats, pocket-pinchers and murderers the lot of them. Spilled ale on the sawdust floor and the unquestionable stench of stale vomit hanging in the air like a corpse in the gallows. Dull light from a half-dozen oil lamps leaking through the smoky air, plumes of breath and body heat rising from the drunken, half-comatose customers. All told, the makings of a respectable establishment.

“Where is my mother?” Bannet asked of the barkeep. “Has she booked a room?”

“”Don't book rooms at a tavern, lady.” The barkeep paused to spit into a customer's drink. “You sees if there's a room when you get here and maybe you can have it for a few hours.”

Bannet sighed. “Is my mother here?”

“Don't know about no mothers,” said the barkeep. “But there's some old bird lurking upstairs. Says she's waitin' on someone. That you?”

Bannet walked away without answering. The stairs were old and stained with an ungodly number of things. Drinks, blood and an alarming quantity of other bodily fluids all mingled to create a swirling pattern of no fewer than seventeen colours. It was almost pretty, and would have been more so were Bannet not able to name each substance trampled into the oak surface. Such were the perils of a good education.

Upstairs was a single room, more an attic than room in truth. Bannet entered without pausing to knock. “Hello, mother,” she said as she closed the door behind her.

“Bannet, my dear. Do please take a seat.”

Mirischam was an old woman, particularly by the standards of witches, who tend to inadvertently kill themselves prior to their fortieth year. A sad but inevitable danger when casting spells. But Mirischam was at least sixty, and still wore that kind grin from Bannet's childhood. The older woman was seated behind a table, facing a vacant chair. There was an object of some type on the table but it was covered by a large sheet of white cloth. “Sit,” said Mirischam a little more forcefully.

Bannet sat. “I knew you would not abandon me, mother,” she said, her own lips parting in a smile to rival her mother's.

Mirischam set her hands on the table. “They are calling you a murderer, my sweet. Are the things they say true.”

“It cannot be a crime if the reasoning is pure,” Bannet replied. “Yes, they are dead, and it was I who moved the blades, but my intention was to create a thing of beauty, and in this I was successful.” She reached into her cloak and pulled out a length of white material, roughly the size of a pencil.

Mirischam's eyes widened. “Truly?”

Bannet placed the item on the table. “Truly,” she confirmed. “A wand of pure bone, carved from the corpses of a hundred grandfathers, using only the smallest bones of the inner ear. I doubted at times, but I followed the teaching to the very last letter. Never before has such a thing existed. With this, we can cast the greatest of spells with no threat of harm to ourselves.”

A silence passed between them.

“Are you proud, mother?”

“Yes.” Mirischam took the wand and caressed it like a lover caresses her husband. “So very proud.”

The her face darkened. “But now you must prove yourself innocent in the eyes of the gods. Air, fire, earth and water are nothing to witches such as we, so it must be trial by cake, as the old laws say.” She pulled the cloth from the table and revealed a large sponge, two layers divided by jam and cream. “Consume this, and you will be found innocent,” she said. Then she winked. “Do not worry, I baked it myself.”

Bannet took a slice of the sponge and raised it to her lips. She took a bite, and very nearly spat it at her mother in shock. It was oily, tinged with iron and, and . . . meaty. She lowered it to the plate and saw that it had changed. No longer fluffy sponge, but to slabs of flesh, the same pink as a human's. Grey paste like leaking brain matter glued the halves together, and blood spilled out from the centre.

She raised her head to look at her mother. “What is this?” she asked, her voice barely more than a whimper.

Mirischam frowned. “It is cake. Now eat, or the world shall think you a criminal. There is no harm, unless you harbour some crime.”

Bannet took a second bite, swallowed it against a tide of rising bile. But she did not want to be though a monster, not when she had acted only to further the cause of magic. And so she finished the whole thing, even going so far as to lick the plate clean.

# Luck from the Irish

## By night\_wrtr

There are few things that get the blood rushing like sneaking about with intent to steal something priceless. For Samuel Thirston, falling through a stained glass window beat it hands down. He gave a pathetic scream as he fell mingled with shards of glass. Cross stealth off Thirston’s abilities this evening.

He tried bracing for impact, spinning too wildly to see what lay directly below him. A pew, perhaps? Maybe the organ, which had a nice array of pointed tubes protruding upward to impale a faller, or more likely, the vast center isle that divided the church sanctuary in half.

Of all the possibilities, Thirston landed in a pool of water.

He splashed with a thud, taking his breath away and racking his ears like a drum. He gritted his teeth as glass sank into the water, reaching for him with their sharp edges as if the High Father guided their course. He roared a curse but it came out as a gurgle, followed by a choking spasm as the last of the air left his lungs.

He burst through the surface coughing and spitting, hauling himself over the side of the shallow pool and crashed onto his back. He stared up at the hole, letting his breath calm. He stood a moment after that, drenched and irritated.

Clapping echoed through the church. “You really are a lucky idiot, aren’t you?” Thirston whirled about, searching. He knew that accent.

“You should be one to know, Irish,” he said. “You granted me that wish yourself.”

“Ugh,” Irish said. “Remind me not of that unfortunate event, Sammy. “

Thirston grunted, scanning the balconies. Irish sounded so close. *Keep him talking, flush him out*, he thought. “I liked the idea. Came in handy more than once. A lot you can do with luck.”

“Obviously.”

“Where are you, Irish?” Thirston howled. “You can’t hide from me!”

“I’m not hiding,” he said with a sigh. “Seriously, Sammy.”

He continued to look about, but then caught the movement of a hat around the opposite side of the baptism pool. He walked a few paces around it, spotting the short fellow called Irish with an irritated look to his face.

“Ah,” Thirston said. “There you are.” He cleared his throat. “Well, I thought we agreed not to cross paths again?”

“We did,” he said, raising a hand to stroke his red beard. “I said *I* was coming to Boul’o Charm. You agreed to go to Cupbard.”

Thirston nodded, lips pursed. “I vaguely remember that conversation. Are you sure *you* weren’t supposed to go to Cupbard, and *I* wasn’t supposed to come to Boul’o Charm?”

Irish’s face burned. “You heard about the Talking Sword, didn’t you?”

Thirston shrugged. “Yeah.”

“Damn the day I showed you my rainbow!”

“We all make mistakes, you know?” He pointed to the glass above. “Look, I’m in need of some serious coin, Irish. That sword would set me to rights. Got into a little bit of trouble with the Cupbard Latches, if you know what I mean.”

Irish lost the anger in his face and found his laugh once again. “Oh? Trouble you say?” He grinned.

“Yeah, I…” Thirston narrowed his eyes. “You told them I was coming didn’t you?”

“I vaguely remember that conversation,” he said, that stupid twinkle shining in his eye.

“Fuck you, Irish.” Thirston’s shoes squelched as he walked away toward the back wall of the sanctuary. Irish followed behind him, chuckling softly. Thirston made it to the pastor’s podium, pushed it over and stared at the hidden door beneath. It was flat and made of solid godsteel, which was unbreakable. Dead center was a massive lock dial with a hundred hash marks. To each side was another dial, but only half the size.

“I’ve already tried, Sammy.” The leprechaun sat next to him crossed legged with an intense stare. "Been here every night for a week, yet haven’t come close to getting a single digit.

“Irish, you just need a little luck.” He reached to the center dial and spun it to the left. When it stopped, he spun it again to the right. He did the same to the smaller dials, and then stood with his hand on the door handle. It lurched open with a sharp tug.

Irish fell back in a gasp, rolling to his feet. “Bless my Charms, Sammy!”

They climbed down a ladder that seemed to go on forever until they reached a small dark room with a single door. Thirston twisted the handle and swung it open.

Brilliant light nearly blinded them from inside, illuminating a massive room three or four times larger than the church above it. “What in the High Father’s name?” Thirston let his mouth gape. It was completely empty save for a dark hole in one corner that stood as tall as the walls. At the opposite end sat a small wooden case. They glanced at each other before bursting into a run.

“50/50, Sammy,” Irish said.

“60/40.”

“50/50!”

They reached the wooden case. A hammer appeared from under Irish’s coat, which he smashed against the lock, breaking it free. Thirston lifted the lid and they stared. It was empty.

“So…where is it?”

Irish scratched the side of his head.

“You two don’t look like pastors.” A women’s voice behind them! The two spun about. Thirston stood motionless. A thud said Irish had fainted.

In front of him was a mass of flesh and teeth. “Allow me to introduce the mighty Brutus Tyrannosaurus.” The massive creature tilted its head after a long silence. “Hello?”

“High Father,” Thirston mumbled. “A talking dinosaur.”

Soft clanks rang from the ladder. Thirston glanced over, ready to run, when he saw Irish hauling ass up the ladder. “100/0, Sammy! 100/0!” Then he was up and out of the room. *Fucking leprechauns!*

“Excuse me?” Thriston looked back at Brutus. “Are you a pastor or not?”

He cleared his throat. “Uh, so...Brutus, is it? Pleased to meet-“

“Oh dear, forgive me,” the woman's voice said, “I’m not Brutus. My name is Leech. Please, look down.” So he did, down to the massive claws on Brutus’ feet. “Up. Up. No, down. The necklace! Look at the necklace!” Thirston found the massive chain around the dinosaur’s neck, and dangling from it was a brilliant sword of silver with a ruby hilt. “Ah, you found me!”

The Talking Sword hung like a pendant from a fucking dinosaur. His luck had finally run out.

The dinosaur loomed closer, bringing its head down to stare at Thirston. Its breath nearly knocked him back, filled with a nasty stink of something rotten. “If you would answer my question, please?”

“Right,” Thirston said. “A pastor you say? No. A thief, actually.”

“Ah, so you must have come for me?”

Thirston grimaced. “I apologize, I see you have no intention of being stolen.”

“Quite the contrary,” Leech said. “But, had you been a pastor I would have had Brutus eat you.”

“Lucky me,” Thirston said.

“So, shall we go?”

“We?”

“I grow tired of Brutus and this enclosure. The pastor used a particular magic to bind my soul to this sword, so I will want to undo that as you can imagine. Can’t rightly do that stuck down here, now can I? I’ll make you a deal. I’ll tell Brutus not to eat you if you vow to help me regain my body these pastors have stolen. Deal?”

Did he really have a choice? “Deal.”

“Excellent!” Brutus came closer to expose his neck, pushing the sword within Thirston’s reach. “Go on then.”

Thirston kept a wary eye on Brutus as he slipped the sword free. The blade was made of some kind of crystal, and it was…warm to his touch.

*Thank you.* The voice was a whisper at the back of his head. Something gripped him and he shuddered. His body flexed backward, but he didn’t fall. A searing heat surged up his arm to his chest, then settled behind his eyes. *Ah.* Thirston’s body relaxed. *You’re a smart fellow. You can’t imagine how difficult it was to survive in the mind of that thing. It was like trying force a museum into a walnut. You though? Oh, I will like you.* Thirston’s body moved toward the ladder. Thirston panicked, his sobs locked deep in his mind where she had severed his control. *Oh, don’t worry. I will return you to your body soon enough. You freed me from this prison and I will not forget it.* She forced a smile on Thirston’s face. *You have a wide range of skills*, she said, searching through his memories. *Most useful.* Thirston climbed the ladder and walked to the sanctuary door.

She led him out into the night on the open street where a light rain fell. *What a lucky day this turned out to be.*

# Moonlight Lake

## By slywind

Jann approached the moonlit lake the same way any self-respecting pirate worth their salt approaches a body of water--drunkenly. Not so drunk that he would tumble on the rocks and spill the little cloth-wrapped package that he carried under his arm, but not so sober that common sense would take the reins and make him turn back. Frogs croaked. Owls hooted. The water splashed at the sand, making the reeds and cattails sway as if there was a breeze. But there was never any breeze here.

Setting the package down delicately on the bank, Jann removed his three-cornered hat, his worn boots, and his old coat, and then spent another five minutes removing the small armory of weapons he carried. When he was disarmed and significantly less dressed, he scooped up the package and gently stepped out onto the sand.

"I'm mad at you," the soft voice said, reminding Jann of the mermaids off the Bone Coast, hungry for foolish sailors that sought true love at the bottom of the sea.

"I couldn't come last night," Jann explained, taking an easy step into the warm water. It should have been icy from the night air, but it wasn't. The water was never cold here.

She materialized in front of him, taking shape from slivers of moonlight, gentle splashes of water, and the fireflies that had gathered. Jann's throat caught at the sight, just as it had the first time. Just as it always did. A drink would steady his nerves nicely right about now.

She reached a slender, translucent hand towards his face. Jann could almost feel it brushing against his skin. He swore he could. Her beauty stole his breath, her brilliant blue eyes locked on his.

The ghost of Moonlight Lake.

"You promised you'd visit me."

Jann put his own hand over her hand, and for a moment there was pressure, like he was pushing against something... and then it passed through, and he was left touching the stubble on his own cheek.

"I have, Serina. As soon as I could. And I brought you something!"

The ghost turned away from him, but then looked back over her shoulder. "Oh?" she said, a playful smile on her face.

Jann grinned, leading both of them out of the water and crouching down into the sand. He set the package in front of him, loosened the twine, and unwrapped the cloth.

Serina's eyes narrowed on the small piece of lemon cake.

Drifting forward, she crouched before him in the sand, eyes on the dessert. "It's very pretty."

"Like you," Jann said roguishly. Hoped it had been roguishly, at least.

His pirate's mind didn't understand how a ghost could blush, but it still pleased him to see.

"Go on, Jann," Serina said excitedly. "Describe every taste of every crumb!"

And so Jann did, of course. When it came to their little ritual, he performed it the best he could. Poetically describing the taste of cake wasn't his strong suit, though--his forte was more aligned with drinking rum, stealing cargo, and swinging a saber around.

As he described the sweetness of the lemon meringue using as many flowery words as possible, Jann's mind settled on a conclusion that had been building for some time. Even in his rum-addled state, he immediately knew it to be true. The months spent with Serina had led him away from the dark purpose that had originally brought him here.

"I love you," Jann said.

Serina looked up at him, her bright blue eyes shining like the moon and the stars. "And I love you, my honorable pirate."

That stung, considering his original intentions. Maybe it was the rum swirling around his gut, but it seemed wrong now, to hold onto such a secret.

"I have to tell you something, Serina..."

"Anything," she said, sitting back on her haunches.

"Surely you've heard of the treasures hidden in the depths of Moonlight Lake..."

Her eyes narrowed.

Jann swallowed and pushed on. There was a waterfall of guilt inside him, spilling out. "Of course you have. Because you're the guardian of those treasures."

Her fists clenched.

"Those treasures are the reason I first came here."

She stood.

"But they aren't what keep me coming back!"

An anger had settled on her face like the finality of midnight. Jann had seen it once before, the first night he had come, and she had openly suspected him of the very crime he was confessing too. He had lied then. But not now. Not anymore.

"You are *not* an honorable pirate, Jann. You are nothing but a common thief, eager to defile my lake with your blind greed for treasure!"

"No!" Jann said, standing. "No." Weaker this time.

A wind swept up, sending pinpricks of cold across Jann's skin. The surface of the water cracked and splintered as it froze. The moon passed behind a cloud.

"You want my treasures, Jann the dishonorable?" Serina screamed, raising her arms. The lake responded with a great wave, knocking him from his feet.

He spit the icy water from his mouth shivering. Crumbs of cake and the flowery cloth floated away. "No! I want *you* Serina, and only you! Damn the treasures!"

The ghost recoiled back, drifting just above the water. "You have broken me, Jann." Tears slipped from her eyes. The thunder of her voice choked down like a river damned. "You have lied to me, and stolen my trust. How long until you bring the clerics to banish me? How long until you grow sick of my pathetic ethereal touch and move on to another woman? We are over, Jann, and so is your life."

"The clerics would never know of you, nor any man I spoke to! Your touch--the promise of it--is what gets me through the sweaty days in that hellish port. There is no other woman, Serina, nor will there be!"

She raised her arms, but no wave came. The water began to pull back, exposing the long roots of the reeds and the rocks on the lakebed. A panic festered in Jann's gut, his seaworthy senses telling him to run. When the water retreated, it never retreated for long.

"If this is how I die, so be it. I welcome it. I'll die here for you. I'll return to you, and I'll have eternity with you to make it right."

The wave came.

And the water parted around them, just past her outstretched hands. Jann locked eyes with Serina, seeing the anger there, but also the love. The water sank into the sand and the mud.

Moonlight glinted along the beach--the wave had washed the stars upon the sand. But no, Jann realized, they weren't stars. They were jewels, and coins, and small shining figurines of animals. A golden goose had come to rest at his feet.

"My treasures, Jann. Take them and go."

The pirate in him told him to grab everything he could and run. The rum in his belly promised he'd be rich until he was grey and ugly. He could buy his own ship, run his own crew. He could be a honorable man and leave behind the pirate.

Her icy blue eyes told Jann this wasn't a trap. She was giving him everything. And what could he give her? Nothing.

No, not nothing.

"I don't want your treasure, Serina. I want *you.*”

She looked down, her face becoming pale like the moon's light, hidden by the clouds. "I cannot leave here, Jann. I am bound to this place, and this place to me. Ever since my death here."

"Then I shall find a way to bring you back." He stood, pounding a fist to his heart. "I swear it. No matter what it takes. And I'll return to you. We'll roam the seas together, Serina. And eat cake."

She reached out, gently stroking the side of his face. He swore he could almost feel it.

"I *will* come back for you," Jann said, and then turned. He scooped his belongings up into his coat and started up the hill. He couldn't look back. His resolve was firm now, as firm as it ever was and ever would be, and if he turned back it would all be gone.

He *would* find a way to bring her back into the world. He had too.

Serina watched him go. A deep sorrow began to fill her essence, like a lake slowly filling from a trickling stream. How many had she watched walk away like that, proudly undertaking a quest for her soul? And how many had returned? None. She did love him... She had loved all of them. She would make a life with him, if he returned. Or she'd wait... and eventually another would come along.

# Lyla and the Cats

## By coldbloodedsouth

Lyla skirted the forested edge of the dark lake. The great moon’s reflection rippled slightly on the placid surface. She stepped soundlessly to the water’s edge and inspected the crumbling manor looming on the opposite hillside. For a time, she watched, and then eased back into the greenery, careful to avoid her own reflection and to remain hidden from the watcher in the lake. She moved swiftly but quietly around to the other side. She wore clothing of appropriate cut and color for a thief of her caliber, and she melted perfectly into the midnight forest.

At a crouch, she climbed the grassy rise to the Cat House. Once a great manor, the home was looted and fell into ruin after the previous owner was burned at the stake in the village square. Then the Cats moved in. Her target was reputed to still lie hidden therein, the proverbial golden goose, an alchemists dream of never ending gold. A wizard in a small hamlet on the coast of the Mhu Thulan promised an unimaginable reward in exchange for the object. She planned to arrive just after midnight, a time when, hopefully, the feline residents were out on the hunt.

With a deep breath, she scurried through the shadows and onto the veranda, sidestepping through a shattered window and into the ballroom. The air smelled of wet fur and urate, and the eerie moonlight made shadows on the floor as it shined through broken and grimy window panes.

She scanned the room and what she could see through the various doorways, thanking the gods for her hyperactive night vision. The house appeared empty. She made several hand gestures and whispered a quick prayer before beginning her search.

Through the house, she moved as quickly as a thorough search allowed. She checked every crawlspace and cabinet, as well as the walls and floor-tiles for hidden cubbies. The house lay about her quiet and dark, and as the search continued, her confidence grew and she slowed a bit. At the rear of the house, she knocked upon a hollow tile centered beneath a great and furry wreath. Her breath caught, and she knelt to pry up the tile.

“Hello She, what brings you here,” said a voice from the darkness, high pitched and lispy.

Lyla froze. Fear scurried through her like a crazed mouse. Slowly she turned. The dark shapes of the Ultharians moved lithely in the shadows, green eyes with vertical black slits stared out at her, unblinking. A quick scan and she counted eight sets, but there had to be more around. The bright eyes maneuvered around, forming a semi-circle and effectively backing her against the wall.

A great Cat, huge and gray, stepped into the moonlight. The pride mother said, “You are the great enemy of our species, and yet you come here. She, She, She. You must know we will not allow you escape this time. By morning, you will be nothing but hairballs in the corner of our litter room.”

A chorus of mewling rose up behind the mother Cat as she spoke.

Stay calm, she thought. You prepared for this. Nevertheless, her hands shook, as did her voice. “I…I. Our past is why I came here tonight.” While speaking, she slid her hands into the pouch at the small of her back. “I wish to make amends for my transgressions against your great and noble…”

“And superior.”

She gulped. “…great and noble and superior race. I am here at your…”

“You lie, She. Why did you slink in here so, if you want peace? And what is that behind your back?”

Here goes nothing. Lyla removed the object, and held it out in the moonlight for the congress of felines to see. She held a small glass jar, toppered with wax and filled with a granular white substance.

The mother stepped back. “What is that?”

"A gift,” Lyla said. “Here. I’ll show you.” With a flick of her wrist, she tossed the jar across the room. It shattered against the cold hearth, releasing a peculiar odor. The Ultharians meowed and moaned and bounded for the substance.

That’s my cue. Now, to escape or go after the object. Whatever she did, she’d have to move fast. The trick would not last long; goat cheese bewitched to smell like catnip of a very specific and rare locality. She thought of risking her life and coming away with nothing, of the great reward promised, and then she leaped through the opening in the floor. She landed fifteen feet down onto a cobbled floor, rolled, and bounced to her feet, finding herself in a narrow corridor, dark and rank.

Behind her, the mother Cat roared. “It’s a trap. She has tricked us. Get her. Get She and tear her to ribbons.”

Lyla ran as fast as the spongy soles of her boots allowed, nowhere near as fast as the Ultharians with their padded paws. With little to no light, her vision was little better than an average human’s, and so she ran with arms outstretched and prayed she would not strike something and knock herself out. If anything went wrong now, she would be catnip.

Meows and shrieks echoed down the corridor, growing louder every second.

The corridor suddenly turned downward, and Lyla skidded and slipped and fell, sliding downward into darkness, gaining much-needed speed but also scraping her back along the uneven stone cobbles. The sound of pursuit grew distant and she heard only the wind whipping across her.

She struck bottom and rolled hard into a wall, jarring her body. Climbing to her feet, she felt a knob. A door, not a wall. She entered, and found herself standing in a crypt. Moonlight floated in through a broken stone doorway. Amid the dusty remains rose a small altar where sat the object she’d come for. Excitement bloomed within her, having found both the object and a means of escape. Quickly, she crossed to the altar, lifted the object, and wedged it into the pouch. The object was slightly larger than the jar and bulged against the fabric, but she secured it with strong twine.

Then the Cats began to arrive. Without the door to stop them, they slid into the room, spinning and disoriented. All around her, the Great Cats of Ulthar bounced and rolled and scratched for purchase. Lyla ran to the nearest corpse, gripped both of the dead human’s arms, and pulled them off at the elbows. She held the arms out, skeletal fingers dangling toward the felines, and backed slowly toward the outer entrance.

The immortal Cats preyed primarily on earthly humans, yet detested the long dead remains. The reminders of humanity’s short life spans, of their reverence for death, repulsed the Ultharians. They pressed into a tight group of fur and claws, their backs arched and fur on end. Vicious mewling and snarling filled the tight stone room.

“There will never be an end to this, She. My kind will stalk you and your progeny to the extinction of your line,” the mother Cat said. Goat cheese powdered her snout. She pressed back against her followers and swiped claws at the air. “She, your transgressions…”

Lyla shook the arm like a chew toy. “Here kitty, kitty, kitty.”

The shrieks of indignation sent a giggle through her. She tossed an arm at the group, keeping hold of the second, and bolted for the crag in the stone. Behind, the Cats scrambled clear of the arm, mewling pitifully and licking their pelts.

Lyla exited onto an overgrown knoll behind the Cat House. The land came alive with the lamentations of the Cats. With the remaining arm held out like a battle sword, she sprinted around the house, making her way to the forested side of the lake. Once there, she paused and made hand gestures of thanks and praise. Then Lyla took her bearings and navigated a southern course for the Mhu Thulan sea, and her great reward.

END

# Love Resides in Cake and Daggers

## By Venandiaer

That earnest face sent a shiver down my spine, rain falling sporadically. Those eyes like drops of mercury, boring into me, unblinking. What was I doing here?

“Adam… what’s wrong? Why do you struggle? We are forever together. You made our contract.” The voice lilted, and the sky roared.

She seemed to possess a kind of lustre, her hand reaching out, caressing my face. I shivered, for she was as cold as steel. “What a beautiful master.”

What had I got myself into?

………………………………………

My brother and I had headed down to the lake for some family bonding. We hadn’t seen each other in a few years, and it was time we caught up. At least, that was what he said. My brother Alex was an archaeologist whose superstitious notions had gained him the very definition of ridicule. To be honest, his superstition’s probably rubbed off on me to.

As we drove toward the lake, I greedily admired the luscious curves of a slice of mud cake as Alex began his rants. This he was also famous for, and he spoke with zeal.

He was insistent, ecstatic, that he had found it. The very lake where King Arthur had been given the legendary Excalibur. The home of the so named ‘lady of the lake’. True or not, it looked to be a nice view, and a good vacation.

Alex’s failed attempt at sneaking stealthily out of the house had woken me, and I had decided to follow him. Now I crouched, watching him intently as he walked onto the jetty, staring over the glistening lake. The wind was silent, and the moon stood proudly in the star-lit sky.

The surface was unmoving and flat like glass. Brown, algae covered glass. The lake was not the drawing feature of the area.

“You who reside in the lake, cometh! Lady of the Lake, will thou not show yourself?”

All seemed silent for an age, but as Alex stood, a single ripple moved across the dank pool.

“Please refrain from such speech patterns.”

Alex stared, as a dark shadow began to appear. Robed in green and brown like the algae around her… actually, it seemed she was just covered in it like everything else.

“You’re real? You’re real!” Alex began to shout, running around in circles.

“Yeah. Sure. So, let’s see, how’s it go again….” She cleared her throat. “You are the chosen one! I will bestow upon you a great gift of heroes, if you will convince the local council to clean up my waterways!”

His eyes widened, and he grinned stupidly. “YES!!!!!!!”

“Okay good. Here. She tossed a small steel dagger violently out of the pond, the blade flying dangerously past my head, and landing not far behind me.

“Take this dagger… uh… Burexcali. Okay, I’m going now. Fix my pond. Keep dagger. No questions? Good.” She disappeared beneath the lake, muttering.

I stared at the weapon for a split second, before grabbing it and making a dash for the cabin. Behind me, I heard Alex talking to himself. He was still kneeling on the edge of the dock, staring stupidly into the smooth mould covered depths, where the lady had disappeared.

I lay in bed, hoping my brother wouldn’t realize what had happened. He walked in, past me, like a man half asleep, not even giving me a second glance.

I stared at the roof. Had all that really happened? Or was all the Strawberry Pavlova I ate mixing with the Black Forest Cake? Suddenly guilt began to course through my veins, as I desperately tried to fall into slumber. This had been Alex’s great wish, years of work and condemnation. Stolen away. Thief. I lay in restless exhaustion, until sleep finally took me.

I stared at the shimmering blade. So beautiful. Such lovely craftsmanship. No! Thief! Hypocrite. You don’t care about Alex.

It’s true. If there’s something I love more than my daily dose of sugary treats, then its shiny trinkets. Who am I kidding, it’s the other way round. All hail Meringue! Besides, didn’t brother always say magic dagger’s brought good luck? This was probably magic right? It came from that lady.

‘You really think I’m beautiful?’

Strange, the thought appeared in my head as if the blade was speaking. Silly me. Either way, I couldn’t let this go to waste, such an alluring treasure.

‘You will take me? Will you be my love? Promise.’

The blade fell from my hands, but as it did, I was already bending over, drawn toward it. I wanted to hold it.

‘Show your love… take me.’ I was going insane. Yes that was it. Maybe some Rocky-Road would help. Just wrap up the dagger, and hide it away… as my hand fell on the dagger, the world disappeared.

I seemed to be floating, the world I knew null and void. Cold hands held me, a gentle yet stiff face was touching. “Do not fear, my love. You have made the contract, and now I will protect you for eternity.”

My eyes flashed opened as I hit the floorboards, greeting me with a pulsing headache. The dagger was in my hand, cold and silent.

That night, after chowing down on more than my usual portion of Christmas pudding (don’t question me!), I ventured outside chilled to the bone. I doubt I need to mention my slight shivering was from more than the cold, as I held the dagger out before me under the crescent moon.

‘We’re all alone, under a beautiful sky.’ I really hope that was me. It wasn’t. It was raining, for goodness sake.

The blade began to slip from my hand, but it didn’t fall. It seemed to move forward of its own accord, becoming liquid as it did. It swirled and spun, rearranging itself. In an instant, she stood before me. “What do you think, my love?”

So that’s how I met her. Or it. This is what my vacation has become. Hiding a love-crazed sentient-dagger from my star struck brother who’s still convinced he’s the chosen one. He searches every morning, hoping to pull the dagger from the pond slime, and be crowned king of absolutely nothing.

Two weeks of our trip passed when things got worse. Yes, you heard me right. W-O-R-S-E.

It was a Thursday afternoon, and there was knock at the door. As Alex opened it, he gasped. Their stood the lady of the lake, with an expression of complete exasperation. “What are you doing you dolt! What’s happening with my lake?”

He stared open mouthed. The lady stared into his eyes for a few seconds.

“Oh great. You spent this ENTIRE TIME searching for my dagger. Your thieving brother has it. He hid it in a muffin the night he stole it.”

Alex stared even more open mouthed. He turned, to look at me as I stood behind him, and then back at her.

“This is stupid. You, thief. Will you fix my pond? You can keep the dagger if you do.”

“No!” Alex was starting to come to his senses.

Finishing a mouthful of brownie, I tried to speak. “I…”

‘Don’t do it, my love. Don’t let her trick you. You already have me.’

“Will you take the dagger away if I do?” ‘That’s not funny love…’

“No. I don’t want that wretch back. Ever.”

“Then no deal.”

“If you refuse, I will be violent!”

“Why?”

“Because you two have annoyed me far too much, and I haven’t had a chance to abuse my power for ages!”

‘Don’t worry Adam, I won’t let my mother hurt you!’

What? Actually, at this point I’m not really surprised.

With a flash of swirling silver, the dagger-woman stood once again beside her beloved. My brother simply stared.

“Get out of my way child! The lady of the lake is here!” A golden sword appeared in her hand, a spear in the other.

“You will soon be lost in Antiquity!”

“You really were down there a long time mother.” The dagger-woman bristled, literally, as her body became covered in tiny silver blades in another swirling flash of silver.

At this point both I and my brother moved well out the way. As in, run away, away. A shout of “EXCALIBUR!” and the crash of the entire log cabin was blown to smithereens, a sure fire sign that it was the right decision. Grabbing what we could, we both jumped into Alex’s car and were out of their like the wind.

Nothing untoward happened on the way back to the city. Alex dropped me off at my house, and said he would come back tomorrow to discuss what he called ‘paranormal events’.

Well, it seemed we had escaped the worst of it. Finally, my sponge cake and I could relax in peace. As I opened the door, there was a metallic ringing. A cold embrace. “Welcome home, my love.”

Please no.

# All That Glitters

## By Jmack

The first time Becca saw Stephen do magic, she gasped with wonder. It was behind the King's Paws, and she was smoking a fag. He stepped out the back of the pub to answer his mobile. He listened, went very still, and began to chant. It was so weird Becca wouldn't have stuck around if he hadn't been so bloody handsome. He began to glow, and she decided to watch a bit. When his clothes faded away, and he stood there in golden glory, she decided she was in love. Too soon, the clothes came back, and the light faded away. Stephen put away his phone, patted his hair, then went back inside as though nothing had happened. Becca fanned herself for a few minutes, then went back in to work.

After that, Becca watched Stephen like a cat whenever he came to the pub, but it was some weeks before it happened again. He was nursing a pint, when his phone chimed. He put it to his ear, then went straight out the back. Becca tossed down her towel and started to follow.

"Here now!" said the landlord. "Where do you think you're going? A guest just sat down!"

Becca glanced over at her section and was surprised to see a midget waiting. You didn’t see that every day, but she was in a hurry. "You can sort a little thing like that, right?” She didn’t wait to hear what the guvnor said back.

Out in the alley, Stephen stood with his back to her, glowing again, and fit as a god. He was smooth and muscled. His arms depended from broad shoulders and finished in fine hands, one of which he held out in front, clearly taking a selfie. He was so, so beautiful. Becca moaned softly way back in her throat, and Stephen must have heard. He turned and gave her a look that burned deep, deep into her soul. She couldn’t look away. Her head spun, and the ground rushed up.

She faded back into the world and realized she was on a bench in the Paws. Her head was in someone's lap. The someone was Stephen, and he was looking down at her with tender concern.

"She's alright now," he said. His voice was refined, like the BBC. "You had us worried."

“I’ll just pass out again right here," whispered Becca, staring up at his perfect chin.

"That's understandable," he said, smiling.

"Don't think you're getting paid for the last fifteen minutes, Becca,” said the landlord. "You’ve scared off the clients."

"Now, now," said Stephen. "I'm sure she'll be alright in no time."

"And what about that midget?" continued the man. "He left before he got his goat cheese."

Stephen stood abruptly, letting Becca’s head thump on the bench. “Goat cheese? Where?" he demanded. "Where was he?”

Becca sat up while the landlord pointed at her section. "Over there he was.”

"Was he Irish?" Stephen demanded.

“He sure had the accent,” said the landlord. “Told me to pull him a Beamish, then asked for some crackers and goat cheese. Like I have goat cheese every day.”

“How did he find me?! I have to get out of here,” said Stephen, tossing down a ten pound note. He paused at a window to check his reflection, then made for a Jaguar across the lane.

He was back in thirty seconds, complaining loudly. "It's been clamped!”

"I've told you not to park there," said the landlord. "It was only a matter of time."

“I can drive," said Becca, surprising herself.

“You're not fit to drive," said Stephen. Becca’s heart sank. "But," he went on, and her heart leapt, “I can drive while you recover. I’ll turn the keys and the car back over to you when we're where we're going."

"Where’s that?" asked Becca.

"Into the tales people tell around the fire on Midsummer night, girl.” Becca wondered if she'd be home to her mum in time for tea.

Outside, Stephen snatched a canvas sack from his boot, and put it into Becca's back seat. He helped her into the car, closed her door like a gentleman, then slid behind the wheel.

When they’d got to the M1, Stephen turned soulful grey eyes on her. “What did you see in the alley?"

"Er," said Becca.

"It's alright," he said, his voice reassuring.

“Um - I mean - I think I saw… magic?” said Becca. She could hardly meet his gaze. She sounded ridiculous.

"Yes. Yes, you did, Becca. Very old magic."

A thumping sound came from the back seat. "What's that?" asked Becca.

"More old magic," he said. The thumping grew stronger, then Becca heard a distinct honk.

"It sounds like a goose."

"As I said, very old magic." Stephen glanced into the driver's mirror and must not have liked what he saw. He twisted it around to get a clearer view of his face, turning his chin to one side then the other. His eyes left the roadway. Then the car did.

Becca's stomach rose as her car fell, then slapped down as it hit the ground, the dampers bottoming out. The car bounced as it plowed through underbrush and mowed down small trees before slamming to a stop. Airbags exploded around them.

"Wha?" mumbled Becca after a stunned minute. It had all happened so quickly she couldn't fully process anything except the ringing in her ears and a burning across the skin of her face. "What?" she croaked. She looked over and saw Stephen slumped over the wheel. There was glass all over him, all over the front dash, the seats, herself. "Ow, fuck." She was bleeding from a lot of cuts. "Ow, fuck!" She started to cry.

"Oh, poor little lassie!" said a voice outside the car. Becca scrubbed her eyes. A midget was standing on the bonnet of the car, dressed in a green suit like the character on the cereal box and glaring at her through what used to be the windshield. "It's what you get for collaborating with the likes of him."

"What?"

The little man stomped closer, standing easily on the crushed metal of the bonnet. "What? What?" he mocked. "Can't say anything more than that?" He spat a stream of brown liquid into the bushes.

Leprechaun, thought Becca, and started giggling. “Lucky Charms!”

“Stop that!” snapped the man.

"Lucky Charms!” Becca pointed a shaky finger. "Leprechaun!"

"And what if I am? He's a witch, I'm a leprechaun, and you're a twit."

"Ohh," moaned Stephen. His eyes opened, but looked glazed over.

“We’re bleeding,” Becca told the leprechaun.

“And what’s that to me?” said the leprechaun.

“Can you help us?”

“Why would I do that?” laughed the little man. “I pulled the road out from under you. I did this to you. And you want me help? Want to steal my pot at the end of the rainbow? Catch me and ask for wishes?”

Becca started crying again, though she wasn’t sure why.

“I tell you what,” said the leprechaun. “You give me that sack from the rear seat, and I’ll be on me way. Once I’m gone, I’ll put the road back, and you’re on your way.”

“Is my face cut?” whinged Stephen, pawing glass from his hair and skin.

“Why should I give it over?” said Becca.

The leprechaun reached into his green velvet coat and pointed the barrel of a huge old-fashioned gun between Becca’s eyes. “Because I’ll fecking shoot your head off if you don’t. Is that a good enough reason, lass?”

Becca groped behind her quickly. The sack was heavy and awkward, and the creature inside didn’t want to stay still. But she managed to pull it to the front, and the leprechaun snatched it away. He looked inside, and grunted in satisfaction. “There you are,” he cooed. The sack honked back at him. A tiny bell chimed in mid-air, and a wide grin spread across the leprechaun’s face. He reached in and pulled out a gleaming, gold-colored egg. “Aye, and you’re glad to see me old self again, aren’t you?”

The leprechaun turned a black look on Becca. “Do yourself a favor, girl” he said. “Find a nice, dull fellow who’s not a witch, a thief or a gigolo. Or all three, like this dobber.” He hefted the sack, hopped off the bonnet and disappeared.

Becca stared daggers over at Stephen. “What was all that rubbish, then?”

“I only borrowed the goose,” he complained. “It’s expensive, living, isn’t it?”

“And what was that with the magical selfies in the alley?”

“Advertising! You don’t expect women to hire me sight unseen, do you?”

Becca watched Stephen disappear in her rearview mirror as she pulled her wreck of a car onto the tarmac, which had reappeared just like leprechaun had promised. The handsome witch shouted angry curses after her but his words were lost in the clatter of her wheels throwing gravel.

“Sod magic,” thought Becca, hoping it wasn’t too late for tea.

# Better with Salt

## By Sam Bowring

She still believes she can save me, the stupid old bitch. Oh, how I have wished, after many a long stretch plying the eddies at world’s edge, to return to some semi-civilised port with plunder in the hold and a will to spend it, and hear news of her demise – hopefully in some horrible fashion, instead of the ever-increasing likelihood that she will pass peacefully in her bed, surrounded by loyal attendants falling over themselves to mop the last spittle from her withered lips. That is not what she deserves. Tied to a stake in desert sands, or a glowing poker slowly pushed up the arse, or thrown into a pit with a dozen razer roaches – that’s what would await my mother were there such a thing as justice.

I am surprised, given her nature, to even find myself alive. Yes, locked deep in the castle dungeon and fed barely enough to stave off the need to eat rats, but alive. I eat them anyway, of course – meat is meat, and if I’m to maintain some semblance of my strength, I need more than what she gives me. Besides, what becalmed, hungry sailor hasn’t looked the odd rat in the eye? Better with salt, I admit – although currently sweetened by the fact that mother loathes rats so very much. If she could see me now, aha.

Does she think there’s some way to salvage her first born from the life he has chosen? I who was prince, who would have been king, had I not abandoned my family in shame and horror, divesting myself of name and fortune in order to make my own way in the world. Which one, I wonder, of my ‘trusted’ crewmates finally figured out who I was, and what I’d be worth upon delivery? I suppose there are only so many posters of one’s own visage that one can hope to walk past unnoticed, yet I’d grown to think that my dyed-black dreadlocks and beard (not to mention the passage of time and effects of weather on my skin) would keep me hiding safely in plain sight until the end of my days.

Does she think she can simply scrub me up? Starting with my mind? Her ridiculous Priests of the Goat visit every day, explaining the need to recant my sins and surrender my soul back to Bhakeat. That’s part of why they leave me hungry, I suppose – they want me to eat of the Body of Goat. Trouble is, I detest goat’s cheese utterly, which serves as the ingestible part of their disgusting metaphor. One reason I was so ready to turn my back on the church – they insist on feeding everyone such overly pungent ceremonial nonsense every Seventh Day.

Perhaps she thinks that lack of company, except the odd priest, will drive me insane? I chuckle to myself and spit out a shard of rat skull. Maybe that’s why they’ve hung my hat, cloak and cutlass on a hook within plain sight, if not reach, of my cell? Am I to gaze upon these vestments of my former life and go mad with desire or loss? Aha, I will not go mad – what my jailers do not realise is that I can actually talk to my magic sword. Oh yes, you heard me. Taken from Redblain’s secret stash before the encroaching lava chased us out, it is his famous sword in fact, none other than Soulkeeper itself! The sword which holds the ghost of the very last thing it killed, able to commune only with its killer. Only released when the sword kills again.

‘Harken, Vargas Murkbender,’ I whisper to my blade. ‘Do you sleep? Or a better question – can you sleep?’

*You know that I cannot, tormentor.*

‘Now, don’t call me that. We are old friends by now, surely?’

*Release me from this prison and I’ll say it is true.*

I haven’t really explained to poor Vargas, who was until recently a much-feared mer-wizard ruling off the Skallafrag Isles, the limitations of his confinement. If he knew the truth – that I am currently powerless to free him in any way – I could not cajole him to entertain me with tales of his undersea kingdom by promising him that once he has satisfied my curiosity, I will let him go.

*Free me, pirate lord. Was it not enough to cut off my head and watch it sink to the crabs?*

‘I didn’t want to cut off your beautiful, blue-maned head, Vargas. I simply wanted the Pendant of Tides, and you wouldn’t give it over. Fetched a pretty penny in the Fyshlorn Ports, I can tell you. I would have liked to spend that penny too, before I … well, we ...’

*Before we were brought here.*

‘Yes.’

*I beg you, let me soul pass into the grey waters.*

‘Perhaps. But first, tell me a story.’

*Always the same reply. When will my stories be enough?*

‘When you’ve none left to tell, I suspect. So, if peace is what you seek, you had best be forthcoming.’

The sword sighs. *Very well. What would you like to hear?*

‘There is rumour that you once did battle with the shark-folk of the deep reefs when they encroached upon your spawning beds?’

*Oh yes.*

Vargas changes his tone a little as he remembers. He is proud of his exploits, and once he gets talking, he’s good at telling an exciting tale. War under the waves from a figure of legend – and they think they are torturing me down here!

*Let me see. I had just defeated Zargen and taken the crown of Skallafrag as my own, a triumph I detailed in our last conversation. Winter winds brought much churning and dumping of material from the coast, and the seas grew dark and troubled. I had not yet truly proven myself capable of rule, as one must be tested before one’s people before they will believe. Luckily for me, a tribe of shark-folk left their deeper waters and made dangerous incursions into our …*

The dungeon door opens and one of mother’s brown-clothed lackeys enters, one hand around the sign of the Goat which dangles from his fat neck, the other carrying a small tray.

‘You had to come now!’ I shout in a rage. ‘Did you, with your blathering and bleating?’

The priest blinks at me, not knowing what he has cheated me out of.

‘Be at peace, oh prince,’ he says. ‘Please – your mother, the Queen, in her infinite wisdom, may she bathe in milk for the rest of time, has decided … to finally visit you.’

That does surprise me. It surprises me even more when she moves through the door, disgust plain on her face, into the dank room which houses my cell.

‘Mother,’ I say, and give an insincere little bow. ‘I didn’t expect you down here.’

She sniffs at me. ‘I cannot bear the thought of your soul so tarnished. You must accept Bhakeat, Nannie to the Stars, back into your life. Take the Goat into thyself ...’

The priest lifts the tray to reveal a piece of cheese, which instantly turns my stomach. Still, it occurs to me that maybe I can pocket it somehow and use it to attract rats. As if summoned by my thought, a black rat appears from a crack in the wall, no doubt drawn by the pungent aroma.

My mother follows my gaze and spies it for herself.

‘Ergh,’ she says. ‘Filthy creature.’

Before I know what she’s doing, she draws my magic cutlass from the wall and raises it above her head.

‘No!’ I scream, making everyone start, including the rat. It flees into a recess in the wall which, while shadowed, is not deep at all.

‘What’s this now?’ says mother. ‘Don’t want me to kill it? Why, is it your only friend?’

‘Please,’ I say, a rare word to cross my lips, which I wish I could catch back the moment it escapes. She gets a decidedly malevolent look on her face – she thinks it is the rat I care about. She shoves the sword into the recess where it meets a short, sharp squeak.

Vargas’s soul is released with a grateful sigh only I can hear. The end of his story is lost to me forever.

‘There,’ she says. ‘No false idols before you.’ She hangs the sword back on the wall. ‘Now be a good boy and eat your cheese.’

I take the tray, and stare her in the eye as I wolf down the whole, horrible, sour tasting wedge.

‘And you,’ I say, ‘I curse with pirate magic.’

She scoffs. ‘There’s no such thing.’

‘Oh no? Mother, hear my words. The terrified squeaking of rats will follow you until you bring me the keys to my cell.’

# The Frosted Glass

## By tebakutis

It was past dark when Ren came in sight of old Prophet’s Church, and the local militia were gone. Perhaps in the first days, when the fires of revolution still burned in the minds of the people, those guards had not shirked their duties. Those days were decades past now, the great people’s revolution now reduced to boring history.

No one had worshipped in this building in decades, since it was abandoned by royal decree. Newly crowned King Darenth had not ordered it burned or torn down—that would imply the land’s newest monarch thought the Prophet’s rantings meaningful—but had instead ordered it left to decay in obscurity. Forgotten, like the Prophet herself.

Still, the church was in better shape than the Prophet. You could not behead a church.

Ren’s trusty velociraptor, Shrike, hunkered down as Ren reined him in at the stone fence. Time and opportunistic villagers had left its stones depleted. Shrike hated the church, hated what waited inside it, but that was because raptors were, by nature, distrustful of magic. What had brought them into the world could easily send them back out again.

“There now, girl.” Ren slid off Shrike and stroked his hand down the raptor’s long neck. “Don’t fret. I’m going in alone.”

Tonight, Ren knew, he would finally hold Elen into his arms. He would free her from her magical prison and bring her home to his father, to marry. He would tell her he loved her.

The inside of the church was in worse shape than the exterior. While stone and mortar had weathered the years gracefully, the wood inside was peeling, broken, and rotting. Ren chose his steps carefully. He was going down to the cellar, but he preferred to take the stairs.

He felt his way down stone steps in darkness, using the wall as his guide. Only once concealed by the cellar did he produce his wand and light it with a word of power—Solyr. Long ago picked clean by scavengers, the cellar was empty of all valuables save one—the full-length mirror with the golden frame and frosted glass. The mirror that had called to Ren from his dreams. Elen’s prison. A prison for the woman he loved.

The scavengers hadn’t touched the mirror They hadn’t even been able to see it. Ren could see the mirror because he knew the old words, like Solyr and Vanis, because he had learned those words from his father. King Darenth’s mastery of those words had allowed him to seize the throne. All Ren wanted was to free Elen.

He walked to the mirror and set the wand aside. He focused and waited until a blue tint grew at the edge of his vision. He said the words that brought him to Elen six weeks ago, on the first of many nights they spent talking, commiserating, falling in love. “Revel.”

The frosted glass melted from top to bottom, revealing a surface beneath like the side of a soap bubble, transparent but always shifting. Elen waited beyond the frost. Her brilliant smile when she saw him lit Ren’s world brighter than the glowing wand.

“You’re back!” She was everything he wanted. “I thought I’d never see you again!”

Elen was close to his age, old enough to marry but only just, with golden hair to her shoulders and a green dress—the same dress she always wore—that rose to her neck and fell to mid-calf. She had soft curves and a nose that was just a bit rounder than his. She owned his heart.

“I found the word,” Ren said, and Elen’s eyes grew wide. “I can free you. We leave this church tonight, together.”

“You found it?” Elen clasped her hands together at her breast. “Oh Ren, I knew you wouldn’t fail me. I love you! I love you! I love you!”

Each repetition made the words more powerful, and Ren felt his face flush and his body heat. He thought of all the nights they had spent talking in this cellar, her on one side of the glass and him on the other, and the bond that grew as they learned they shared the same dreams, and beliefs, and hopes. Her to be free once more, and him to free her.

“I need you to stand back,” Ren said. He couldn’t wait to touch her, to hold her, to kiss her, at last. “Stand well back, Elen, and I should be able to make a hole in the mirror.”

“Will it hurt?” She swallowed and stared from behind the glass that kept them apart. “The Prophet told me it would hurt. She said I would die if I went free.”

The Prophet again. Ren worked to hide his anger. The Prophet deserved to lose her head for all the awful things she had done, least of which was imprisoning her own daughter in this mirror when King Darenth took power. No one deserved to suffer forever in a mirror.

“It won’t hurt,” Ren said, because he wanted to reassure her. “And you won’t die.” That he did know, having researched every book in the old king’s library regarding enchanted mirrors. “You’ll be free, we’ll be together, and we’ll rule the kingdom as husband and wife.” He smiled. “In a few decades, of course. After Father passes.”

“I’m ready.” Elen stepped back. “I trust you, Ren. I know you’d never hurt me.”

Ren focused on the golden frame, on the bubble glass, and waited until the blue tint came. It was all around the edges of his vision now, crackling more than normal. Was that a warning? Ren didn’t care. He focused on the word, fixed it in his mind so he could think it as urgently as he said it, and *spoke*. “Liber.”

The surface of the mirror shimmered like a still pond struck by a heavy stone. A wind grew inside it, tossing Elen’s blond hair and pressing her dress close against her body. Frost appeared at the edges of her hair, and her teeth chattered. “Ren!”

“Come out, Elen!” Ren shouted. “Walk toward the wind!”

“I can’t!” Her eyes were wide now, the frost spreading across the glass. She reached for him, struggling. “Help me, Ren! Help me!”

Something was wrong. He had said the word of power wrong, but he couldn’t let her die in that mirror. He couldn’t let her freeze.

Ren dashed forward and, for the first time, reached through the mirror. He strained for her and Elen for him. Their hands touched, warmth upon warmth, and for the barest of moments time ceased to be. There was just Elen, her hand in his, her smile and her love.

The world melted around him.

Ren stumbled into hard stone, except it was not stone, not any longer. It was glass, clearer than any he had ever seen and tall as the sky. A golden frame surrounded a mirror shape in the wall of glass, and behind that glass and endless sky was a dark cellar and a glowing wand. Elen stood in it, staring at him, smiling, her hair still tipped with frost.

“Elen?” It was cold in this world of sky and glass, and Ren saw his breath mist as goosebumps rose on his arms. “Elen, what’s happened? Are you all right?”

“I’m fine now, Ren.” Elen’s smile grew as she watched him through the glass that had once separated them. “No, beyond fine. I am perfect. I am avenged.”

“What?” Ren didn’t understand any of this, and he pushed his hands against the glass that separated them. It was no longer a bubble, and it was hard and cold. “Elen, what are you doing out there? How am I in here? What is this?” He loved her!

“Your father’s reward.” Elen’s smile turned chill. “My mother’s gift.”

She was the Prophet’s Daughter. The Prophet had imprisoned Elen, hidden her, damned her, and King Darenth had killed the Prophet. Elen should be grateful!

“Elen, no. I love you!” Had she lied about everything? He realized he didn’t care. “I’m not my father. We can overthrow him, Elen! We can rule together!”

“My mother can’t rule without her head.” Elen picked up his glowing wand and turned her back on him. “And your father can’t pass on a kingdom to a son that doesn’t exist.”

She was mad! She was going to leave him here, in this mirror, where no one would find him, because he loved her. Because he wanted to save her. “Stop! Please! Don’t do this!”

Even as he shouted, even as his heart pounded and his head thumped, Ren knew she wouldn’t listen. He knew, because he remembered those words. The Prophet had uttered those same words, in that same tone—before King Darenth chopped off her head.

“Farwell, Ren Darenth.” Elen climbed the steps. “Farewell, you blind fool.”

Ren was still screaming when the cellar grew dark again.

THE END

# A Triumphant Quest for Severance Sharp

## By Mr.J

Severance Sharp, renowned hero, charmer, dashing rogue, champion of the War of the Rags and all-encompassing lover – stroked his magnificently chiselled face in the cracked mirror of his Captain’s Cabin.

He was naked but for his black boots, fur lined of course and shining in the afternoon sunlight pouring through the great window at his back. He could feel it radiating against his skin, tanned and smooth and muscled, those weird little bumps prickling on the back of his neck and arms – what is the point of those?

He scooped his genitals back inside his underwear as the stirring naked legs awoke themselves from his bedsheets. The swaying floorboards made their pretty eyes wobble inside their pretty heads. Heads. Plural.

Susi and Sami peered at their satisfied lover and hero, the great Captain Severance Sharp.

‘Who were you talking to?’ Susi said, peering around the room.

Or was it Sami? Severance Sharp had forgotten which head was which. He was sure Sami was the lip biter, and Susi the ball pincher, but right now Sharp was interested in far more important matters.

He was a man of alluring stature and shape, and pleasured himself greatly with frequent comfort of those fortunate enough to capture his pearly blue eyes. It was only as the sing-song shouts of the sailors above deck sailed into the luxurious cabin spilling with treasures and riches the two heads woke to their sharp new reality.

They were definitely not in Port Arbour anymore. Susi or Sami, short blue hair sticking out at the side, sat up in bed, dragging her twin head Susi/Sami up with it, still half asleep and bending at their shared neck.

‘Are we at sea?’ Susi or Sami said. Severance Sharp laughed heartily, an attractive and gay noise. As harmonious and jovial as the finest bard and poet.

‘It is hard for a ship to not be in water my sweets.’ He quipped, most quippingly.

Severance Sharp was not just known for his wit, fantastic love making and a particular skill at making the best Goat’s Cheese Quiche you will ever set your intoxicating tongue too. But possessed of the most cunning, and devious mind. He…

‘Cap’n. Cap’n!’ A rotund woman with a waist and chest covered in drooping pistols stormed into his cabin, breaking his chain of thought…

‘Yes. How may I assist you Bo?’

The middle aged woman was bursting with excitement, almost hopping on her tiptoes like a girl and flashing her wide white teeth.

‘We’re there Cap’n Sharp. We’re at X!’

Sharp clapped his hands together and cheered, extending his arms outwards like a bird, raising his delicately round but still very masculine chin, clicking his fingers. Bo scuttled past Susi and Sami in the bed, ignoring the exposed breasts and penis, fetching Severance Sharp’s gear.

She dressed him in his finery; a dark red Captain’s coat of pristine gold buttons and excellently white cuffs, a white undershirt carefully exposing his thin tuft of dark chest hair. His black and gold belt was balanced around his thin waist, the sheaths of his sword and dagger hanging limp and empty. Severance Sharp held the key himself, a blue key shining on a cord round his neck.

Susi/Sami exclaimed in disgust at their presence as they peered outside, pressing their heads against the window. The blue swash spraying against the glass, a dark tower looming above them.

He laughed as he let the key click inside the box hanging on the wall. A sword and a dagger, glowing green, almost translucent. And very much magical.

‘You can’t just kidnap us.’ Susi or Sami said from behind him, grabbing the nearest weapon with one of their hands, a silver apple paperweight on his desk. Severance Sharp pressed the cold green metal of the dagger against his smooth face, feeling its stirring presence in his fingertips, heavy pressure slicking against his marvellous skin.

‘Lady and Gentleman I must apologise, but if Captain Severance Sharp had kidnapped you, you would know it.’ He grinned with a winning flash of his dark red lips and bright teeth, striding past the naked figure and sheathing the magic dagger. Susi/Sami wrapped themselves in their clothing and followed him out onto the deck.

An enormous black, bulging castle loomed above the pillars of wood, thick black sails bulging in the searing wind slicing at their cheeks. It was balanced on sheer rock, consuming every inch of natural stone like a devilish sea creature, advancing into the sky like a God.

The sailors cried out and swore with bitter tongues; salt on their faces and grit in their fingertips. Canon’s were readied, pistols cocked, swords wetted and axe’s hacked sharp with rocks. Severance Sharp smelt the air proudly, his muscular chest swelling with his abdominal muscles pulsing.

‘Welcome to Castle X! It marks the spot.’ He snapped, grinning at Susi/Sami’s bulging pairs of eyes.

\*

‘Look, when I said “I never want to see you again, ever, and if I do I will break your balls with a chisel and marinate them in a stew of wine, barley and beef while singing a sea shanty” us fucking was not what I had in mind.' Titus O’Brian said, flicking dried remnants off his skin.

He was furious. With himself.

His round face was purple, both from their anger driven sex that broke the wooden bed they were balancing on, and how a mightily pissed off fool he’d been made by the charm and genius of Severance Sharp.

Captain Sharp had crushed his former lover’s castle to pieces, the walls still crumbling like soggy pie on a pastry into the waters surrounding them. Although a fine specimen in the peak of his virility, athleticism and strength, you took certain risks when sleeping with a Leprechaun. Especially when it was a combination of pity and anger-make-up sex.

Despite Titus’s protestations, his writhing in the sheets and his balled fists clenched as tight as his…teeth, Severance Sharp knew it was what the young man had always wanted, yearned for. Desired. He lit a cigarette and puffed at it idly, listening to the calming collapse of ancient castle walls outside the window. He sighed deeply, like a mysterious hero being mysterious and thoughtful.

‘Is this because of my dagger?’ Titus said, offering a bushy eyebrow to Severance.

The hero shrugged, handsomely.

‘You mean my dagger Titus, my dagger that I discovered while you were picking rocks in that cave.’

‘The cave I FOUND’ His voice pitching to a squeak. A familiar sound, one Severance Sharp had enjoyed eliciting from the leprechaun, but now found it tiresome to his ears. Aching, an irritant. A noise a Captain such as Severance Sharp should not tolerate.

At the mention of Sharp’s ancient, powerful and beautiful green dagger he averted his attention to its presence, resting casually on the war chest at the foot of the bed. A deafening crack thudded in the near distance. The walls rattled the ground. Captain Severance Sharp could smell the hint of gunpowder in the air as it wafted through the open castle window. Canon fire.

But not an enemy, he knew what his girl sounded like. His ship was spewing anger. He leapt out of bed, displaying his fine form to the world and heard many booming claps. The sight of his ship clutched at his throat, sailing away from the harbour. Gulls circled around it, crapping on his deck. Sharp’s deck.

He peered out of the window, letting the world see his exposed manhood. The world was lucky to be presented with such magnificence. But Severance Sharp had little time to consider such things. A two headed, leather coated menace stood proudly on his deck, at his wheel, the many arms steering it proudly with a captain’s hat perched on each skull.

Susi and Sami. The bastard(s).

Severance Sharp cursed and ran to his weapons, Titus drawing the sheets around himself in bed in fright. ‘What now?’ he said, as the heroic and betrayed Captain Sharp dressed and found an empty sheath gripped in his hand. The dagger was gone. They must have crept inside during their love making and laid their filth ridden thief hands on it! The cowards! Scoundrels. He would make them pay, if it’s the last thing he would do!

Now, he just needed a crew. And a ship. And weapons. He turned to the naked leprechaun in bed, and had a cunning idea.

\*

Susi and Sami turned proudly back to the castle as Captain Severance Sharp bounded about his room dressing himself in a flurry of panic. They raised their many hands in a single fingered salute to the raided castle, and sailed merrily out to sea, the magic dagger resting proudly at their waist.

# The Villain of Ravenblood Lake

## By m3mnoch



The warmth of the day faded as the final orange rays reflected off the windless lake, causing the dark water to ripple red, earning its name. Fishermen filled the main room, fresh off the day’s harvest and emptied their pints while spinning stories. It was loud, and boastful, and echoed with back-slapping joy. The blackfish season, thus far, had been grand.

Jorge shaded his eyes as the sunlight burned through the grimy windows of The Owl and Perch. The woman sitting across the small, scarred-oak table cut a sharp silhouette as the ball of fire in the distance dipped into the lake.

But he hardly noticed.

The story she was telling had him wrapped in every word. Her flush cheeks and pulse-quickening beauty wasn’t helping his goal. She was beautiful.

It was a damn shame he was going to have to kill her.

“But, once he’d left the woman who loved him for another — another woman without his same passion for pirate’s gold, mind you — it was inevitable that he’d fail.” She picked up her mug of spiced wine, swirled and sipped, her gaze distant, soft, focused on a different time. Ten heartbeats later, she snapped back to the present and continued, “Especially after his spurned lover bartered her soul in exchange for the curse that forced him to sail the lake for eternity.”

Jorge, running a finger around the rim of his own mug, asked, “Even with all his piloting skill, all his luck, after sailing through the channel to Ravenblood Lake. . .” He paused to wave his hand at the lake out the window, “The pirate never did find the hoard?”

“I guess not.” She shrugged, staring into her mug. “At least, I don’t think so, as people still say they see his ship when the lake mists are thick.”

*Of course he never did, whore. You killed him first.*

Satisfied he had the right woman, Jorge leaned back on the wooden bench and gave an almost imperceptible nod to the barkeep. The man immediately turned to one of the young boys running food to the tables and sent him scurrying to the kitchens. The keeper straightened up and nodded back, face grim. Jorge’s companion didn’t seem to notice the exchange.

“What was it you said your name was?”

Glancing up, and through pouty lips, “Bethany.”

“Bethany, are you hungry? Buying your dinner seems the least I can do for so much information on this ghostly lake pirate. Edward was his name, right?”

Bethany nodded, her emerald eyes taking on an enthusiastic shine. She really was lovely. He couldn’t fault Edward for his enfatuation.

Jorge signaled the barkeeper over to their table. “Let’s eat then. I hear they have incredible crab cakes here.”

“Oh, yes.” Bethany nodded her head, turned and and smiled at the keeper as he arrived at their table. “For someone new to town, you’ve done well finding the best. They’re a staple here in town, surely, but no one does them better than The Owl and Perch. Right, Alton?”

The barkeep straightened with pride, then bustled off, presumably to have their dinner prepared.

The sun was fully set now. The scullery boys were lighting the candles at the tables and coaxing a fire to life in the hearth. It seemed only moments before their meal arrived at the table. Bethany grabbed one.

“Delicious. Won’t you have one?” She broke the cake apart and slipped a large piece into her mouth.

“In a moment, of course. I want to enjoy watching you eat.”

She grinned at him, then opened her mouth and stuck out her tongue, showing him a mouthful of mashed up crab meat and bread crumbs. Bethany swallowed, giggling as she broke off another portion.

Jorge smiled back at her. “How does the Dragon Thorn taste?”

Bethany cocked her head to the side, swallowing the rest of the crab cake before she said, “Pardon me?”

“Dragon Thorn. The crab cakes are poisoned. I had Alton add it to the batch. That’s why I’m not eating them.”

Her eyes widened. She looked down at the platter in between them.

Jorge leaned forward, elbows on the table, fingers laced. “I know you killed him. You couldn’t take it. That he left you — for the likes of me.”

Bethany’s eyebrows pinched together, her mouth hanging half-open. He could almost see the pieces falling into position behind her eyes. Almost see the thoughts connecting. It was time. Now, before the poison reached her heart and she fell to convulsions.

Standing, he pounded the table. “We were in love, damn you. And you took it from us. From me. So, I’m taking everything from you.”

She mumbled, closed her eyes, and shrank back from his looming form.

Then laughed.

It was a chuckle at first, but becoming a hearty belly laugh. Opening her eyes, she saw his face and the stupid look he must have worn. It made her snort with laughter again.

“I’m sorry. I just couldn’t hold it in anymore.” She reached out and grabbed another crab cake with her left hand and waved to Alton the barkeep with the other.

Alton immediately barked several commands. The other patrons stood, as if remembering business elsewhere, and left all of their unfinished meals and half-full pints strewn about the common room. Finally, the barkeeper himself disappeared into the kitchen.

They were alone.

“Did you really think tossing a few coins around would work? This is my town, Jorge.”

Jorge was still standing, leaning across the table, paralyzed with confusion, looking down at this vixen. This villain. Feeling much less intimidating.

“The only reason you’re still alive is because I couldn’t figure out who you were. I’d assumed you were someone’s paid assassin, but anyone who would hire you is already dead.” She took another bite. “These are delicious. You should try one.”

She pushed the plate over, but Jorge, still standing, simply shook his head.

“Suit yourself,” she said. “But, the thought of you two being lovers? I didn’t see that coming. However, Edward always had a sissy side to him. I suppose I should have guessed.”

At the mention of Edward’s name, Jorge lifted his hand from where it knuckled the table, fully intending to punch the heartless wench in the face.

Instead, she sank ten inches of steel into his chest, and he fell back to the bench, struggling for the hilt.

“That’s the same dagger I killed Edward with. You see, I wasn’t kidding about selling my soul. I used it to buy a fancy knife.” She waved half a crab cake at his chest. “Well, eternal life and a fancy knife. Do you like it?”

Before he could respond, the area around the wound started sparking. Thin, blue bolts of lighting crackling from handle to hilt to him.

“Oh, it gets better.”

Slowly at first, a living, pulsing, snapping web of blue energy spread from where the blade had entered his breast. Patterns of lightning and fire consumed his chest, then abdomen, throat, arms. It flowed over his face until devouring every inch of flesh.

There was a final, intense flicker and it was done. The knife clattered to the floor and he stood there, translucent, one foot in the physical world, the other in the afterlife. Looking down at where his hand should be, he saw only the table and a platter of half-eaten dinner.

Blue lightning arced, tracing the outline of his fingers for a brief moment. His body hovered, oscillating back and forth between transparent, and something like a glinting blue shadow.

Bethany stood and walked around the table, making a show of passing through Jorge, and retrieved her dagger from the floor. “See? I did you a favor. Now, you can treasure hunt with your beloved for all of eternity.”

The candles flickered and snuffed out as a sharp draft flooded the room, blowing through the tavern door, banging it open.

“No, bitch.” The ghostly form of the Pirate of Ravenblood Lake flickered in and out of existence in the doorway. “You mistook the treasure I had been hunting for.”

Edward’s shade moved closer to Jorge, and he could feel. He hadn’t noticed it before, but all sensation had ceased during the dagger’s transformation. But not anymore. Now, he felt. Memories of joy erupted from his chest and spread, not unlike a warm flush, throughout his form.

He glowed brighter. Together, they glowed even brighter. A fervent heat filled both he and Edward. Together, they pulsed. Jorge and his love.

Edward took Jorge’s hand and turned to face Bethany. “You may have won eternal life, Bethany, but now we’re rejoined, we’re not leaving your side. We’re taking all you have left.”

Jorge, feeding on Edward’s strength, swelled and flexed in his new form. *The power. The raw freedom.* Glancing over, he saw an uncertain Bethany slowly backing away.

He popped across the room, instantly at her ear, and whispered, “Your sanity.”

# The Cake Won't Kill You

## By Anonymous



*Comic • Wizard • Castle • Talking Sword • Vain • Ex-Girlfriend • Cake*

The famed wizard Icewind, Archmage of the North, Conjurer of the Arctic Lights, Guardian of the Soul of the Snow, refused to look at the magnificent pink cake which had appeared—as if by magic—on the table. Even though it had his name on it.

He puttered about a draughty guest-room high up in the castle's southern tower, sweeping the floor without using a lick of sorcery. Hiding who—and what—he was. Even though she had clearly found out he was here.

A voice disturbed the quiet, its timbre like a ringing chime. "The cake won't kill you."

Icewind rolled his eyes and continued sweeping.

"There's nothing wrong with it. Even I can tell."

"Since when are you the expert?"

"Cakes need to be cut."

The wizard glared at his sword. "Cakes are cut *by knives.*"

Brightedge sent him a sharp look. "Don't be prejudiced. Swords are meant to cut too."

"Swords are meant to cut *people.*"

"You know how I feel about violence. It never solves anything."

Icewind groaned. "And I paid extra to get a bloody sword that could *turn my enemies into mincemeat.*"

"You never complain about that at dinnertime."

"That's different. You can't always moonlight as a piece of cutlery."

"You're one to talk! A wizard who works as a maid!"

The wizard turned bright red. "The correct term is *manservant.*" He put down the broom and fiddled with some knick-knacks on a shelf.

"Ah. I suppose that makes all the difference."

"I had to get away from her. "

"Well now you've been found out."

Icewind grimaced.

"Maybe she wants you back? She did send cake."

"We didn't part on the best of terms."

"I thought she was nice. That's all I'm saying."

The wizard laughed. "For a sword, you're remarkably trusting."

"We can't all have hearts as hard as steel."

Icewind sighed. Loudly.

"I may not be the sharpest, but I know there's more to it."

The wizard held his tongue. He opened a window to let the room air out and started dusting the sills. A servant's life of simple tasks and sedate routine did wonders for one's temper—and all the work was great for one's physique.

"At least let's cut one piece."

He shot a dirty look at the cursed cake. "I don't want it."

"It's a nice gesture!"

"It's a taunt. She knows I can't eat desserts."

"What's the worst that could happen?"

"You don't get a figure like mine if you eat cake."

"You never used to care."

"I never used to look like this."

"Indeed. You used to wear a wizard's robe."

Icewind gritted his teeth. "Cut it out. Or I'll throw you out the window. And that damn cake with you."

Brightedge glistened menacingly.

"That doesn't work on me. I know you."

The sword grumbled to itself.

The wizard finished off the windowsills and started folding the clothes which had been left strewn across the furniture.

"I bet that icing's nice and smooth."

"No."

"Just one piece!"

"Every last crumb is filled with spells. I can't even tell what half of them are meant to do."

"I don't understand."

"She's a witch. It's what she does." Icewind pointed at the cake. "That thing probably causes an incurable addiction to sugar."

"Surely cooking is magical enough without adding sorcery into the mix."

"Only if all you want is food."

"And she wants something else?"

"Of course! She wants me to be like her. Fat and ugly."

"That's hardly fair."

"So now you're the judge of human beauty?"

"I have a keen sense of aesthetics. I am a work of art myself, you know."

Icewind closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He tried to picture the frost glittering beneath the stars, to feel the biting chill of the wind. To remember the clean simplicity of a solitary life.

"The cake is pretty too, you know."

He could almost feel the wilderness, the only place he felt at home. He'd lead that life again someday. If he could get away from her.

"I think it looks nice, at least."

He couldn't tune out Brightedge's voice. Visions of his long-lost life melted away. Reality alone remained—solid, heavy, inescapable. A dusty castle. A stupid sword. Chores. He gritted his teeth, opened a chest, and began to place the clothes inside.

"I wonder what the layers look like."

"I said no."

"It's just a cake."

The wizard took a deep breath. "Stop it."

"No need to get your knickers in a twist."

"I already told you no."

"I'd like to lodge a formal complaint."

"Shut up."

"You never let me be myself."

Icewind slammed the chest lid shut.

"You just want me to cut people. You barely let me help you with your food."

"You're a *sword.*"

"You never think about what *I* want."

"Don't be absurd."

"If this is going to work, you need to think about me too. Let me live a fulfilling life."

The wizard gripped his hair with shaking hands.

"We have to be a team. Not a master and an object."

"You're insane."

"So, I'll tell you one last time."

"Don't."

"I want to cut the cake."

Icewind roared and threw his hands up in the air; the very light seemed to tremble in fear. He yelled out words which sparked and fizzled as they came into the world, shaped them with flicking fingers and rolling wrists, directed them with an imperious sweep of his arm.

The cake flew out the window.

"Well that was very mature."

The wizard turned his furious gaze towards his sword. He raised his hands once more.

A deafening boom rent the air before he could utter one more word; the tower trembled, sending objects crashing from the shelves, then settled into a very disconcerting sway.

Dust filled the room. Icewind coughed. "What the hell was that?"

"That wasn't you?"

"Of course it bloody wasn't!" He hurried over to the window and stuck his head out.

A column of smoke rose from the ground at the base of the tower a hundred feet below. Soldiers rushed towards the scene, but nobody was nearby. Debris lay scattered across the lawns—rocks, churned earth, bits of wood.

Icewind was certain he could see some bright pink chunks of cake.

# The Right Way

## By ArcaneArtsVelho

It was pitch black. The musty air hung motionless and carried only the sounds of few underground critters scurrying across the sandy ground. Then came the screams, growing ever louder until ceasing with three distinct thumps... and some cursing.

“Squire! My eyes are acting up. Fix them.”

“Yes, sir,” a monotone voice answered, and soon after a torch was lit. “Better, sir?”

“No! I’m appalled by your incompetence, squire.”

“It would help if you opened your eyes, sir.”

“My god, that did it. I knew I could count on you.” The man got up off his squire and looked at the hole in the cavern ceiling. “See, I told you two the fall wouldn’t be that bad.”

Third person, a female in heavy leather armour with her face buried in the sand, let out a muffled curse from under the squire.

“Lizael might disagree, sir,” the squire said as he helped the warrior woman up. “Are you all right, Lizael?”

The woman growled while the squire gently cleaned her face and ringlets from the dust. “I’m fine, Eidan,” she said through gritted teeth, scowling at their master.

But the man didn’t see it. “Ha! I knew it! This cave is in fact a dungeon,” he said, looking at a few decayed cell-like structures near one wall. He put his fists to his hips and raised his chin. “I, prince Skip of Mercessexumbria, claim this cave-dungeon… cavungeon… this dungeon-cave… du… da… dave! For my father the King.”

“Technically this is a cavern, sir,” Eidan said.

“And technically you are my squire, squire,” Skip said and flashed a wide smile. His ‘joke’ was lost on Eidan and Lizael but someone clearly found it funny; there was a suppressed laugh coming from somewhere close. “Lizzy, swallow your food before laughing.”

“It’s coming from your sheath, sir,” Eidan said.

“Of course,” Skip said and drew his sword. “Claymr! What is it, my trusty steed?”

“Oh notin’, ser. I just found yer joke funny,” the sword said with a thick, rhotic accent. “An’ I think that ye mean a sword, ser.”

“Yes, a trusty sordser.” Skip turned to Eidan and whispered, “It’s not the right word, but he’s a bit simple.” Eidan sighed and Lizael took off. “You’re right Lizzy; we have dallied enough. Onwards!”

After only a few minutes, someone shouted, “Help! Over here!”

Lizael and Eidan stopped upon hearing the voice, but Skip strutted towards it with Claymr in hand. “Ahem, this is prince Skip, the heir to the throne of Mercessexumbria. Show yourself!”

“I’m here. On the ground.”

“What? Under this map I’m standing on?”

“I am the map!”

“A talkin’ map?” Claymr exlaimed. “That’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard.”

“Agreed,” Skip said, picking up the map. “And yet now I’m holding one. So tell me, mister Map, what help do you need and why are you looking for it here?”

“Well, I want to get out of here, obviously,” the map said. “I was… erm… charting this cavern with—“

“Dave!” Skip interjected.

“No, not Dave.” The map sounded confused. “I was with the guy sitting in the corner.”

Skip looked over the map and saw a cob-webbed skeleton. “My god! I think that man is dead!”

“Yeees, he is. That’s why I need your help.” As Skip only kept nodding with a blank expression on his face the map continued. “Why are you here?”

“We are here to help you. How fortunate!” Skip said.

“You are?”

“Yes! Though that wasn’t the original reason. You see...” Skip trailed off, looking bored. “Squire, tell him! I have more important things to do.”

Eidan sighed and began his slow narration. “We are tracking a group of bandits led by an evil witch. If we can’t stop them, they will decimate a jungle tribe that is technologically advanced—“

“And loaded with gold!” Skip interrupted.

“...but pacifistic.”

“We were going to go over the mountains rather than under them, but *someone* wasn’t willing to pay for the climbing equipment,” Lizael said.

“Can you believe that old man? Asking for two loafs of bread for a few pieces of rope? Starving my ass; more like greedy.” Skip shook his head in disgust.

“But that’s basically how we ended up down here,” Eidan said. “By the way, mister… map. Have you seen the bandits or the witch coming through here?”

“Well, now that you mentioned it, I did hear a group of people walking about. But I didn’t like the sound of their boots, so I just sat still. It’s been quite a while now since they were here though.”

“We might already be too late.” Eidan stared into the distance. “By the time we get there the tribesmen—children, women and men alike—might be dead. Their homes burned and belongings pillaged. Their tormented souls crying; all their songs of lamentations will fall to deaf ears.”

“My god you are negative, squire,” Skip said. “And besides, if we are there, then their songs won’t fall to deaf ears. They will fall to our ears.” He looked at Eidan with a smug smile on his face. “In any case, we should move. Map, show the way!”

“Erm, okay. Turn a little to the left. No no, my left. And a little more. There!”

“But that’s where we came from,” Lizael said. “I’m going the other way.”

“Lizzy, Lizzy, Lizzy...” Skip paused. “What was I saying?”

Eidan sighed. “I believe you were going to ignore Lizael’s sound advice in a demeaning manner.”

“Of course. Lizzy, Lizzy, Lizzy. You should always follow the map with the man… rather than a *woman* with no map… or man, for that matter.”

“Aargh!” was the only thing Lizael said. She sat next to the skeleton when the others left.

About an hour went by as the prince and his entourage walked to where they had started and then back to where Lizael had been waiting. And after that it took two hours before they finally found their quarry.

“Piggy! Is this some sort of trap?” Skip shouted as he saw the evil witch and two of her bandit lackeys.

“It’s Pigrin!” the witch muttered under her breath. “Skip, you know me better; I would never trick you. Have some cake.” She pointed at a pedestal with a piece of ominously glowing sponge cake.

“The cake is a lie!” Eidan said, stepping forward and drawing his mace. “Don’t eat it!”

“Wuh?” Skip asked, mouth full of cake.

Pigrin cackled. “Now you’re cursed, fool! As long as I live, you will suffer from horrible pains of the stomach.”

There was a swoosh and a thud as Lizael, who had sneaked behind the witch, cleaved Pigrin’s head right off with her axe. “We don’t have time for this,” she said and then quickly disposed the two bandits. “This way. I can hear something.”

The men… and the sword and the map were flabbergasted by this sudden act of brutality and had no intention of objecting to what the woman said. They went after her and could soon hear distant barking.

“You were right, Lizzy. I can hear a cow,” Skip said and looked at Lizael with uncommon appreciation.

“No, ser. A cuu says muu,” Claymr said.

“What?”

“A cuu says muu. That’s a dug. A dug says ruf.”

“A duck?” Skip sheathed Claymr and turned to Eidan. “See? He’s quite simple.”

“Look! Daylight,” Lizael shouted.

They all rushed out of the dave, and Skip struck his pose. “I led us out! Now we must make haste and save the jungle tribe. Map, direction!”

“Okay, the tribe’s village is to the east, so… you need to turn left again. My left.”

“Again, that’s not right,” Lizael said. “It’s the opposite of right. You can even see the village from here.”

“Lizzy, Lizzy, Lizzy, what did I say about the map with the ma—”

“Shut up, Skip!” Lizael snapped. “I’m going to save the damn village by myself then. Or are you coming, Eidan?”

The squire hesitated. “I *am* bound to serve him.”

“I’ll share my tent with you.”

“I might as well come. It’s not like I have a contract or anything,” Eidan said and went after Lizael.

“Traitors,” Skip growled. “It’s just you and me then, Map.”

“Amd mm, srrr.”

“And Claymr,” Skip said. “Lead the way, Map!”

A few hours later Skip sat down beside a starting fire and pulled out Claymr. “It’s just you and me now.”

“What happened to the map, ser?”

“As the sun was setting down, I realised something: First, that we were heading towards the sunset even though the village was to the east, and then, that I needed some kindling to start the fire.” Skip took a stick and poked a piece a burning paper deeper beneath the flames.

“Oh,” Claymr said. “To be fair, ser, as far as I understand, we’ll git there eventually even if we keep headin’ west.”

Skip smiled. “I like the way you think, my trusty sordser.”

# Conan meets Nietzsche

## By Lanko

Hither came Nietzsche, the philosopher, narrow-eyed, mouth hidden under a huge mustache, carrying gigantic melancholies and wisdom, an ember about to ignite, a bullet in a loaded gun, ready to shatter the sacred traditions of the Earth with his fearless pen.

He walked calmly on the streets of Leipzig, in the kingdom of Prussia, until he was grabbed by an enormous arm and carried into an alley like a baby. Before him was the tallest and broadest man he’d ever saw. Black-haired, sullen-eyed, wearing a loincloth and a large fur cape, an enormous broadsword on his back. His muscles were massive, thews clearly never softened by life amid marble walls.

“W-who are you?”

“I’m Conan, from Cimmeria.”

“Never heard of it.”

Conan pulled a dagger and Nietzsche shivered. “I stole this from the temple of Dagon, unintentionally cut myself with it and here I am. Cursed witchcraft.” The dagger was red, ornamented with gold and onyx jewels, full of inscriptions that couldn’t possibly be human.

But of all the people Conan could’ve met, Nietzsche was the last who would believe such a thing. “I’ve seen priests in the asylum lie better than that.”

Conan’s face reddened. “I raided and fought with bandits, barbarians, pirates and knights. I’ve been called thief, reaver, slayer, I care not. But no one ever called me a liar.”

Nietzsche gulped. “I… I meant no offense, Conan.” He infuriated many people over the years speaking openly about the harsh truths of the world, but now he would mind his tongue. Civilized men are actually much more discourteous towards each other than savages, but only because they know they can be impolite without having their skulls split, as a general thing.

“The dagger is drawing me towards there.”

Nietzsche frowned. “It’s only the church. If you wish to loot or raze it, please, by all means.”

Conan flinched, disturbed. “Is their god dangerous? I had enough sorcery for a day.”

Nietzsche laughed. “Nothing to worry, he was actually killed almost two thousand years ago.”

They proceeded, Conan walking very cautiously. Nietzsche sighed. Religion claimed to be able to move mountains, but he only saw it actually placing mountains where there were none before.

“I dream of a future where we have successfully given up our longing for gods and eternal life. No more clinging to myths, but to live life to the fullest by creating our own values instead of borrowing them from some forged divinity.”

Conan thought for a moment. “I have known many gods. He who denies them is as blind as he who trusts them too deeply. But I agree with you, I seek not beyond death. I simply want to live deep while I draw breath. Let me know the rich juices of red meat and stinging wine on my palate on every meal, the hot embrace of a woman on every night, the mad exultation of battle when the blue blades flame and crimson, and I will ask for nothing more.” Conan patted Nietzsche on the back and laughed. “I will let teachers and philosophers like you brood over questions of reality and illusion.”

“If life is a lie than nothing matters.”

Conan shrugged. “I know this: if life is an illusion, then I am no less an illusion, thus the illusion is real to me. So I live, I love, I slay, and am content.”

Nietzsche actually smiled at that.

“Friedrich?”

“Wagner?” Nietzsche raised an eyebrow. “What are you doing in Leipzig?”

“The real question is: what are you doing in a church?”

“Just brought this man here to raze it.”

The red dagger flashed in Conan’s hand. “Whatever it wants, its here.”

Richard Wagner widened his eyes. “The dagger of Dagon! Guards!”

Three men entered the room, rifles in hand. Conan dragged Nietzsche out of the line of fire just in time.

Nietzsche was petrified, but Richard Wagner was merely annoyed. “There are things at stake that a barbarian cannot comprehend! The fate of nations, the very definition of man and civilization! The king is under my spell, as soon will others. This dagger is needed to unfold my plans!”

“You are right. I, who was born in a naked land and bred in the open sky, what do I know of cultured ways, the gilt, the craft and the lie? But I know this, fool: the subtle tongue, the sophist guile, they all fail when the broadswords sings. So come! Rush in and die, dogs!”

Conan cleaved one man in half with a single strike. The other two charged with their sabers. The first died impaled, the broadsword stuck in his chest. Conan let it go, dodged the attack from the other man, then hurled him into a wall with his barbaric strength. The man’s head exploded like a smashed tomato.

“Friedrich! You said religions are a fantasy! Look at this!” Wagner raised his left hand. “The ring of the Nibelung! The proof that our religion, the German religion, is true and powerful! Behold! Auferstanden aus Ruinen, Die Walküre!”

A woman, armored and armed, white wings on her back, appeared. An angel, no, a Valkyrie. And Richard Wagner was a wizard. Nietzsche almost laughed.

“I fought and laid with all kinds of women, but this is the first time I meet a fully armored one.”

“And also the last,” she replied, charging.

The broadsword met the golden spear, and the thunderous sound of the impact surprised both warriors, as neither of them staggered from what they both thought would be a mortal attack.

They attacked each other relentlessly, losing and gaining ground, an epic battle worthy of the Eddas. Conan dealt the decisive blow with the blunt part of the broadsword. The Valkyrie fell.

“What are you doing? Kill him!” Roared Wagner.

Conan grabbed him and quickly removed the ring from his finger. Wagner fainted.

“What happened?” asked Nietzsche.

“The ring was manipulating your friend.” Conan stomped it.

“You destroyed the ring,” said the Valkyrie.

“Aye. And who are you, woman? I’ve never faced such an opponent before.”

She stood. “I’m Brynhildr. I was cursed by Odin. Only the strongest warrior of the Earth could free me. But he deceived me. And then tragedy after tragedy followed. This ring could summon me from frozen Hel, and now I’m free and alive to once again walk upon the Earth. Who are you, mortal able to best a Valkyrie?”

“I’m Conan, the Cimmerian.”

“Conan, let me go with you. I was promised to the strongest warrior of the Earth, and so it shall remain. But if you prove unworthy, I will kill you myself.”

Conan’s laughter boomed. “If the day I become a weakling ever comes, then I deserve to die!”

The dagger flashed crimson. “Farewell, Nietzsche.”

“Farewell, Conan. May more free spirits like us walk this world going mad.”

\*

Conan and Brynhildr were greeted by a massive roar of a Tyranossaurus.

Conan charged. “I will take care of it—”

Brynhildr flied and slashed the dinosaur’s head in half.

“I killed it, so you cook it.”

Conan roared with laughter. “Oh, Brynhildr, we will soon thread all the jeweled thrones of this Earth under our sandaled feet!”

\*

Nietzsche was in an alley, beneath the halo of a post lamp. He walked through narrow streets of cobblestone, turning his collar to the cold and damp. He was in a huge city, buildings reaching high in the sky like a collection of Babel towers.

On the highest, under the naked light of the moon, he observed the future.

He saw hundreds, thousands of people, maybe tens of thousands. People talking without speaking; people hearing without listening; people writing songs and stories that would never be shared.

He saw walls that flashed out warnings, forming words and voices of hate that boomed over huge crowds. Instead of one, now dozens of false prophets preached about famine and disaster, wars and rumors of wars to come, playing nations, races and compatriots against each other.

And to his horror he saw the people bow and pray to the neon god they made. And they discussed the blasphemies on subway stations with strangers, in dining rooms with their families and on tenement halls with their neighbors.

This was too much for him, his head hurt and darkness embraced him.

\*

Nietzsche woke in his bed. He sighed, another one of those headaches and the craziest dream of his life.

But soon a sense of despair loomed over him. What if that future happens? Life had many fronts. So he started his battle, because to hold a pen against a blank page is to be at war.

He knew where that path would lead him, but he would walk on it anyway. His words needed to be written, to prevent humanity from drowning in the sea of ignorance and tyranny.

On his urge, he didn’t notice the faint scar on his hand, done by himself with a magical dagger left behind by a wandering barbarian.