Gangsters and Crime Lords

Fantasy Faction Monthly Writing Contest Anthology, June 2017

Various Authors

June 01, 2017, 12:45:28 PM

# Gangsters and Crime Lords

### Fantasy Faction Monthly Writing Contest Anthology, June 2017

'Crime Lord' by Jordy Knoop  
  
Al Capone. The Godfather. Kingpin. There are many infamous crime lords in history and pop culture. Your job this month is to bring them into a fantasy setting.  
They don't need to be the main character but a crime lord and their unerground organization have to play a significant role.

*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/index.php?topic=10744.0>

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# San Fantastico

## By Henry Dale

Me and the boys had set up in Mackie’s barn for the meeting so we could make a quick escape if the coppers bust in. Jmack, that old goat, was out of town so we had the place to ourselves. We set up by the table, loaded with some grass to smoke, a result from our last heist. I’d told m3m to keep watch out by the door so nothing would disturb our little business. It was hard finding the right allies in this world of ours. Some grass cigars lit up the dim-lit room, the smoke circled the wood beams supporting the ceiling. ‘You all know why I gathered you here in San Fantastico.’ I opened with a voice heavy with emotion. Most members of the familia had made it, some faces were missing. Tolkien was working on something new after all this time I heard, George R. R. was always late. Some might turn out to be traitors, left us with unfinished business. San Fantastico was a dangerous city. ‘I like my family. Family means loyalty, family means trust, family means certainty in a world of coppers and honest law and eager politicians. The world used to be simple, it was those with power and those without but no more.’ There was an uneasiness in the room, I left it hanging. Let them sweat a bit instead. It was a painful necessity to give them the long silence treatment. Then I hit the message home. ‘We’ve got a mole boys.’ It took a moment before the weight of the words settled. Knives were sharpened, trust fleeted away like piss down a drain and brothers, sisters, cousins eyed each other with suspicion. They were wary, they were murderous, they were dangerous. Dangerous but necessary. My eyes passed the gathered family in distress, loyal every one of them, once. Beatricea tried to look anywhere but to the others, quite a feat if you consider the crowd she was in. Radley Rarewood’s nostrils flared, he demanded blood. Aunty Ty from Down Under looked at everyone’s legs (happens if you are upside down). Nora, a vagabond, cussed in a strange eldritch tongue and cousin Gem was scribbling notes on the table, unaware he’d run out of paper a long time ago. Xia, his name suspected a Chinaman, kept his cool though. His inquiry was direct, no nonsense, I appreciated that. His question struck through the family like a musician’s instrument through a crowd and silenced them. ‘Who is it, Henry? Do you know?’ It was the question I had anticipated and I was ready for it. I looked at him intently, ready for the effect my words would have- ‘Henry! Dinner time boy!’ a voice echoed from the farmhouse. A loud cacophony of mewling and hissing erupted as the cats scattered, leaving behind a table with ravaged catnip, Nora cussing and Lady Ty stuck on her head, her floppy ears bent. ‘Sorry guys.’ Henry said as he licked his paw. ‘Big reveal some other time; next RP session in the King’s Paws?

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# Penelope and the Book Trolls

## By Jmack

**Penelope and the Book Trolls**  
  
  
"Where is it?!" Penelope searched her shelves again. **The Miller's Tale** wasn't a valuable book, but the young Librarian worried that any book in her wing of the Endless Library could be missing, especially from her private office. Her Librarian's amulet told her the location of the collection's every book, scroll, and artifact, except for the dark, vile ones guarded by battle beetles in the deepest catacombs. She could locate books beyond the Library, too, if she stepped outside the massive walls.  
  
"I sent three teams of shelf squirrels to search the stacks." Penelope's best friend and unofficial assistant, Alexander, leaned in her office doorway. Two of the magical squirrels that retrieved and re-shelved the Library's books perched on his shoulders.  
  
Penelope fingered the amulet. The heavy seal was her badge of office, and magically connected her to the great Card Catalog. She lifted the golden chain from around her neck. Losing her link to the Library was like losing a piece of her soul.  
  
"Here," she said, holding the amulet out to Alexander. "I have a meeting with the other Librarians - though they never listen to me, so I might as well not be there - then office hours. I can't leave the Library today, but you can."  
  
Alexander's eyes lit up. He'd only been Outside a few times. Raised by the Library squirrels, Alexander had wandered the maze-like halls in bare feet and rags until Penelope came into his life two years before.  
  
"Can I take the Overdue Collection squad?" he begged.  
  
Penelope nodded. "Just be careful." Alexander gave her a cocky wave and ran off.  
  
.....  
  
The Endless Library stood at the nexus of the twelve known worlds, dedicated to collecting and protecting their knowledge. Since folk could cross to other worlds by passing through the Library, the Librarians controlled who paid how much to go where with what. Their currency was, of course, books. Millions and millions of books, even the annoyingly bad self-published ones. Want to borrow a book? Pay with a book. Want to sell wine from Chittar to Nard? Pay your passage with a book. The rarer and more magical your offering, the more valuable it was.  
  
Books meant money, and where there's money, there's those who'll lie, cheat, and steal to get it. The Librarians called them "trolls", though most were normal folk.  
  
Mort and Gord were book trolls. They didn't make much of a living, but they liked having the things around for their musty smell and the smooth touch of worn leather. They'd even read a few.  
  
The husbands stared at the book in the center of their table, a thin volume with blue buckskin covers and only thirty-or-so pages.  
  
"Tell me again, dearest," said Gord.  
  
"See that symbol on the spine?" Mort pulled at the edges of his mustache nervously. "This here book is from Calabria, or I'm no scholar."  
  
"Calabria," Gord breathed. "The lost world."  
  
"This one's not for us, Gordy." It was only a children's book, but the boss wanted it enough that the two trolls had hired their best thief. Mort had paid the man off an hour before. "I'll go to Lady Tiger's tomorrow. She'll turn us into mincemeat if we fail her."  
  
"Will she pay us well, Mort?"  
  
Mort started to answer when the door to their little apartment burst open, slamming into the wall and rattling their few pieces of kitchenware. Mort grabbed a heavy club and shielded Gord as a figure stepped into the flickering candle light.  
  
"It's a kid!" squeaked Gord.  
  
In the threshold stood a boy in his early teens. He had a sharp, handsome face split by a wild grin. With slow drama, he pointed at the blue book. "That book belongs to the Endless Library."  
  
"Oh, yeah?" Mort smacked the club against one palm.  
  
"And it's overdue!" The boy's grin grew wider.  
  
Mort stepped forward. "Who's gonna make us return it? You?"  
  
"No!" The boy pointed at the window. "They are!" Ten squirrels in leather armor leaped through the open shutters, barking and brandishing tiny swords. Mort and Gord couldn't stop themselves screaming.  
  
.......  
  
A note appeared the day after Alexander rescued the missing book. Penelope thought the matter was finished until she found the cream-colored envelope placed in the exact center of her desk. She couldn't imagine how the thief kept getting into her office. This worried her as much as the contents of the letter itself.  
  
"Honorable Librarian," the message began in neat script. "Please accept this invitation to dine with us tomorrow evening.” The handwriting in the next sentence changed, twisted. "You have something of ours and we want it back. Bring the book." The note was signed 'Lady Tiger' twice, once in each hand, along with a street address.  
  
*Something of mine.* **The Miller's Tale** belonged to the *Library*, not a criminal who paid for it to be stolen for her. Penelope had done her research. Lady Tiger was the self-proclaimed queen of the book trolls, a ruthless and unpredictable wizard who bossed the used book sellers, flim-flam men, and petty thieves of the city.  
  
Their book, indeed. Penelope's blood boiled. Though she did wonder what might be for dinner.  
  
.....  
  
Penelope tucked the **Tale** into a fold of her robes, and summoned a carriage. She placed a small metal box next to the book. She hoped she wouldn't need to open it. She told herself she needed to understand anything that endangered the books, but, mostly she was curious about what made this little book important.  
  
The carriage let her out at a sprawling brick house brightly lit against the night. A silent maid guided her to a room at the end of a long corridor. Books of every size, shape, and material lined the walls. Penelope found herself trying to read the spines.  
  
Wrapped in gold and black striped silk, Penelope's hostess waited for her in a throne-like chair. Light from a candelabra cast strange shadows on the woman’s face.  
  
"Welcome, my dear, dear Librarian," the woman said. "I hope you had a pleasant journey." Half her mouth moved, and half her face smiled. The other half snapped out, "Did you bring my book, girl? Youngest Librarian ever. Pah!"  
  
The sudden shift from courtesy to rudeness was confusing. Penelope wondered which side of the face to answer. She decided on both.  
  
'Thank you," she said. "The ride was quite pleasant." Then she added, "Yes, I brought the Library book you stole, but not to just hand it over to *you*."  
  
“You see?" The polite side of the face was pleased. Penelope decided to call that one the Lady, and the other side the Tiger. "The young lady brought our book," Lady continued.  
  
"Give it to us," demanded Tiger. One wrinkled hand stretched out, groping. Penelope shrank back.  
  
She steadied herself, heart thudding. "This book was entered into the Card Catalog one hundred eighty-five years ago as bond for borrowing five books on knitting with basilisk bones. The borrower never returned them, so **The Miller's Tale** was forfeited as payment."  
  
"That was my sister's doing," said Lady. "I always hated her," muttered Tiger.  
  
Something Penelope read recently came to her. "You're a Calabrian gemini." They were rarer than rare now that the doors to that lost world were closed forever.  
  
"Of course, you twit," spat Tiger. "What else would we be?"  
  
Penelope sat without begging her hostess's leave. Lady tutted, and Tiger glared. The woman was a refugee, even if she was a criminal. Penelope drew out the **Tale** and rested it on her lap. Both sides of the troll queen tensed.  
  
"You might have asked to trade for this.” Penelope flipped open the front cover and paged through the first few sheets. On the third, a childish hand had scrawled her name twice in different scripts.  
  
"We trade for many things," said Lady. "But we take what's ours," Tiger sneered. "That's our way."  
  
"Not with *this* Librarian," Penelope declared, then blushed a bit at her own pride. She consulted her amulet. "You have twenty-three overdue Library books in this house." Lady Tiger hissed. The amulet searched, sifted, and tallied again. "Plus three hundred seventeen in places around the city. Should I collect them all tonight?" She was bluffing, since she only had one squad of armored squirrels. Her stomach churned.  
  
Lady Tiger said nothing, the two halves warring silently. At last her face smoothed into a careful smile. "Dinner will be ready soon," said Lady's voice. "I'm sure we can work something out."  
  
Penelope let out a breath. She was very glad she wouldn't have to release a battalion of angry battle beetles from the metal box secreted in her robe. Trolls were a problem, but she didn't need a war. It looked now like everything would work out fine.  
  
"Ever tried scorpion stew?" cackled Tiger.  
  
Penelope's stomach clenched. She pasted a smile on her face. "Scorpion stew sounds lovely."

# Baptism by Fire

## By Doctor\_Chill

Whispers on the wind brought me west. To the church, they said, and I went. Chapel was a heft of stone, stark contrast against the shanties. Docklands were known for many things, but opulence wasn’t one of them. I had not come for fanciful excursions, nor pleasure, but because of murder. Twelve bodies lay scorched in the noonday sun south of here. Old Town’s north side was burned with wonder, a black line of soot running worry. It laid a painful gnaw in my stomach. Woulfe hadn’t set me to investigate, but I knew this would spread if it wasn’t nipped early. Digging told a harder story. This wasn’t some anarchist jig gone awry, but wild rivers of magic. Whether planned or by accident, I had a problem, and a masque had to be it. Eyewitnesses had sent me here, to a faithful house pining salvation from the clergy. This couldn’t be it, I had muttered all the way here, but evidence told me otherwise. I had to trust these nobodies. Still. The knife in my coat pocket was the only religion I needed, I noted. That, and the shake in my fingertips, ready. I coughed. Wind was picking up off the quay, spray doing nil to help my nerves. Afternoon rain made the cobbles slick, but I didn’t slip, no sir. I swallowed confidence and swept through the front door. Hinges creaked me a greeting, but I kept on. Sanctuary was long, longer than it had any right to. Church was one of the oldest in Lebokant, and it showed. Not in the braziers’ brass encrusted, nor the statue of the Almighty and His rising sun. No, it was in the details, places nobody looked, not unless they were looking for them. Where stained glass from my home might show, the eastern nations held stripes and swirls in their glass accents. I thought them curious when I had first arrived, but now? Now they were nothings six years in. Nothing but a reminder that this wasn’t my turf, not really, not when you thought hard about it. Garek didn’t have to think too hard to know this. He was in the back, I guessed, place void of anyone of note but the usual homeless and acolytes dozing on the pews. I stepped past the altar, toward his office and to the right. “Grayson, is that you?” His voice was low like a riverbed, smooth, but if anything, he knew I was coming. He was drinking. Bottle was half empty, yeah, yet the night was still young and him a church man through and through. “I assumed we would chat, eventually. Please, sit.” Man motioned to the seat across from him, and I did. “You have a good walk?” “It was something.” I placed an arm on the table, got comfortable. Yet the twitch in my fingers wouldn’t quit. “You hear about the bodies out in Old Town? Those burned to a toast, scarred and left on the streets?” No sense beating around the bush. A known Black Crown agent didn’t show up on your doorstep for a friendly get together. I ran business full round the clock. Garek understood. “I heard well, I did.” Man sipped at his wine. Wriggled his nose at the taste, but took another swig. Gulped hard. “That what bring you here?” “Yeah.” Unfortunately. “You never come just to visit,” he sighed. “Are you here to seek asylum after a long run with the law? Or you think it one of my men, hmm?” I could hear the strain in his voice, like a father holding back the switch. “Neither.” The lines under his eyes lost their wrinkles, if just for a moment. “I’m here looking for the man who did it.” “Ah, I see.” I had known Garek since my first stint in this backwater land. He had held some exotic paintings from the western city-states, shipped express and him slow to answer questions. But that laconic tongue had held true with a bribe, no sign of the Guard since. Man kept the docks strung together, holy fire behind his priests’ eyes and a fervor of gratitude running the piers. He was a good man, by all accounts. Better than most I had ever met. Provided a warm meal and shelter to any who asked. Never saw him turn away an open palm, and that made me wonder. Not hesitate, have you. Couldn’t survive long with a flinch in your satchel, but I stumbled here to this seat. Had questions and maybe he could answer. “What do you know about the burnings?” “Not much.” He finished off his glass. “Not much to talk about, anyway.” “I’m sure, but humor me.” “Alright. Heard they were refugees, people from the West fleeing a famine. People from your neck of the woods, I believe. Though, maybe not that far west.” “I see.” “Sure, plenty of people would want to see them die. Pity they had to.” My thoughts lingered on the end. “Had to?” He kept silent. Pushed the glass away, bottle near half empty, and his wits reaching there, too. Even so, man wanted me to pull it out of him. It hurt. “That’s not wine, is it?” Man didn’t say a word. He wiped blood from his lips and eyes rose to meet mine. His stare could cut stone. “They had to die, I’m afraid.” “Little Midgets were stirring up too much trouble, yeah?” The old man ran a hand through his salt and pepper hair. Tucked one behind his ear. “Yeah. Yeah, they did.” There was a myriad of reasons why Garek would torch the immigrants, and a number more why anybody else would want to see them dead. But a clergy man, out in broad daylight, that’s not what made my heart tremble. “Don’t much care for the details, you understand. No, all I care about is how long you’ve been hiding the gift.” His gray eyes softened for a second, and a second of sympathy was enough from the Almighty. He hadn’t expected me to piece the puzzle together, and sure as hell not that quickly. Make me think it was a ritual or improvised baptism by fire, not magic. Yeah, sure. Steel in my pocket itched something wicked. This was where things got sticky. He could’ve torched me there, locked in his home without a lie needed to tell anybody. But Garek didn’t burn those people because they were rustling up some protests or change. His vision fell to the floorboards. “You lost control, I know.” That was the only explanation. Dabble in the dark arts and soon your vision will be swimming black. Many didn’t make it back, and the man sitting here was a miracle if I ever seen it. “That’s why you’re drinking. You think there’s only a bit of sanity left, and I agree. You need to cling to it, like it’s your dying breath, and it is.” “I know.” He paused, collected his thoughts, and continued. “It started just to save coal, to make life easier for the church folks. Then it became a way to help the poor have a warm winter, provide food and a reason. Gave us protection and rooted out thugs, it did. But then…” His words trailed off, as they are wont to do. That’s how all descents begin, with a start and a first step. That’s all it takes. I sighed and rose. Pulled the knife from my frock and placed it on the table next to his glass. “You’ve got a choice to make.” Knew to the heavens I couldn’t make it, but it needed to be done. “Think hard about it, understand. I don’t want to make another visit.” Never wanted to come here in the first place. Never wanted to come this close to the docks ever again. Garek grabbed my arm before I could run. “Do me a favor,” those cold eyes shone in the firelight. I froze. “Don’t ever let it overtake you, okay. Do that for me.” The bite was gone from his gaze, replaced by something scared and wrong. How could you argue with a dead man? “I won’t.” Whether that was a lie or a promise, that was not mine to say. I rolled my feet away from his office, out the hallway and into the pews. His words lingered in my footsteps, a hesitance in each step. I stopped at the altar, pulled a crown from my wallet and shoved it into the tithe box. It wasn’t enough, never was, but it’d have to do. I repeated that to myself, again. It’d be a long walk back without it

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# A Debt Paid

## By Feanor

The wind blasted the coarse, rough sand upon Kitster penetrating his hood and cloak and adding to his irritation. The twin suns weren't helping either, scorching the land depriving the humidity from the air and giving him a cotton-mouth and lip blisters. Jabba had given him a loan to repay his debts by working for him and this was his final job. He didn't want to think what would Jabba do if he refused to work for him or if his life was more precious than the poor sod's that was about to be eaten alive. In fact he didn't want to think at all, he was tired and parched from walking in the Dune Sea. Jabba had instructed him to walk from his palace all the way to the Great Pit of Carkoon, which was no doubt, for his "benefit" as well. Well, he wasn't called the greatest gangster in the galaxy for nothing. "Majordomo,how far to the Pit?" Majordomo, some time ago he felt proud hearing the title, his dream in life, now it felt sarcastic and meaningless. Born as a slave he knew from a very young age that the greatest position a slave could ever acquire is Majordomo, a representative of a powerful individual or House. He managed to buy his freedom and then worked as a smuggler for a time. He met Nejj in one job and decided to take him under his wing as a protege. He eventually managed to become Majordomo of the Rendala Estate, a wealthy Mos Espa House. Only for the Estate to foreclose and leave him unemployed and in debt. Kitster let out an irritated sigh. "Nejj,how many times have I told you to not call me Majordomo?That is a thing of the past ." "Fine boss but you could have bargained a better deal with Jabba or at the very least we could have taken our airship" "Enough Nejj, I will not be judged in my dealings by a whelp."He looked ahead at the great hole in the Dune Sea. "We're here, bring the poor fella" The prisoner was gagged and bound and he was shaking with a terrified look on his face. Kitster reached for the mouth gag and removed it. The smuggler started coughing a mixture of sand and saliva. Kitster waited some seconds before asking him" Are you ready?" The smuggler looked at him with begging eyes "Please, I'll do anything" "You don't have anything to give me so I can't help you." He grabbed him and moved him right at the edge of the Great Pit. At that moment the wind ceased and a gurgling sound echoed in the sands. The smuggler started thrashing about trying to back away from the edge. "Hold him Nejj, stop shuddering damn you!" Nejj reluctantly grabbed him and together with Kitster they hold him in place. "Please,I can give you a silver ring that's all I have." "Nejj, search him." Nejj started patting him down. "Found it, it's a silver ring boss." "Hmmm... what do you know, it seems I can help you after all." "So you'll let me go?" His voice full of hope broke a little at the end of his sentence. "Haha, no my friend Jabba has marked you for death and that cannot be avoided but I can at least make it painless, without suffering." "How?"His voice barely a whisper. "Well,you're going into the Pit but you don't have to go in alive, except if you prefer 1000 years of agony." The smugglers face changed, hope and terror replaced by acceptance. "You know I had dreams." "Don't we all?" "I would make enough money to retire in a beautiful planet with the love of my life. Can you do me a favor?" "Depends on the favor." He reached with his bound hands and removed his handmade scarf. "Can you give this to my wife?" "If I can, where can I find her?" "She works as a serving girl in the arena, her name is Akiva." Kitster was startled. "In the Moss Espa Swoop Arena?" "Yeah, could you give it to her and tell her that I love her more than anything?" Kitster took the scarf with a thoughful look like he was deciding something. "It's a small world my friend.Don't worry I'll give it to her." "Thank you!" The smuggler visibly relaxed and closed his eyes."I'm ready" Kitster slowly removed his blaster from the holster and raised it pointing right at the smuglers heart. "See you at payday!" Kitster used the farewell phrase that smugglers say to each other before a dangerous job. He shoot his blaster right through the smugglers heart.The body fell through the hole right inside Carcoon's enormous mouth. The wind vengefully slapped them with a wave of sand. "Well, now that's done with, can we go boss?This place gives me the creeps." "Yeah, let's go back.Jabba will want confirmation." By the time they reached the palace the twin suns had give way to Tatooine's three moons. Just outside the palace a lone figure was waving at them. "Kit, Nejj you're here!" "Tamora what are you doing here?" Kitster's shock was obvious for his wife started laughing. "What, you're not the only that can surprise mister." "How did you..." "Ulda told me, I guess your ex-wife is more important than your present one since you bother to tell her where you're going." Ulda, damn her, still causing me trouble. "Tamora, Ulda knows only because she mediated with Jabba to give me the loan." "I know husband but she was so smug when she told me that she infuriated me." "Forget about her, Tamora we're free!I just finished the last job for Jabba." The look on Tamora's face was that of pure happiness. "At last husband, what was the last job?" Kitster's expression turned dark for a split second, almost unnoticeable and then he resumed his excited,happy face. "It doesn't matter Tamora,tell me something, do you know a serving girl named Akiva?" "Yeah, she's one of the youths at the arena, very happy girl, why?" Kitster took out the handmade scarf and passed it to his wife. "Give it to the girl and tell her he loved her more than anything." "What is this?" "It doesn't matter Tamora, please just do it." "Alright husband, I'll do it but we will talk after." "Yeah, we will talk, now can you leave? We're about to go in." "Okay,I'll see you at home." Kitster stood and watch her leave until her figure vanished in the night. "Come on Nejj, let's get this over with." He moved to the door, Nejj close behind. He knocked three times and one of Jabba's henchmen opened the sliding window. "It's me, I need to see Jabba." "The enforcer made a grumpling noise and closed the window.After a moment the huge trapdoor opened." "The job is done.Jabba said he wants personal confirmation, take us to him." He brought them to Jabba's court and he signaled Fortuna by Jabba to announce them. "Kitster Chanchani Banai and Nejj Varn" "So, tell me Kitster my boy was he still screaming when you left?" Jabba asked him with morbid anticipation. "Yes, Lord Jabba, he will suffer for the next 1000 years." "Good, he will be another example of what happens when you cross a Hutt." He laughed almost maniacally and pulled the chain in his hands to bring closer a young woman. The woman struggled futilely as Jabba licked her face. "Err...Lord Jabba, this was the third and final job, I believe our contract is ended." "Yes, yes Kit my boy, consider your debt paid.If you ever want another loan you can always work for me."Again that cold, maniacal laugh. "Thank you Lord Jabba, I will be taking my leave"Kitster couldn't wait to leave the palace. He hated Jabba and all he represented. He hoped someone would come that would end Jabba's tyranny in this land. "Boss, maybe we should start smuggling again." "Yeah, Nejj, maybe." He answered Nejj halfheartedly. As they reached their airship at the docks one fella had just landed and motioned them to stop. He was wearing a black cloak and a hood covered his face. "Esteemed gentlemen is this Jabba's palace?" Esteemed gentlemen, huh, if only he knew. "Yeah, but I don't advise you to go in stranger, nothing good can come out by associating with Jabba, if you value your life turn around." "Thank you friend but don't worry about me, you should worry about Jabba." There was something about the stranger that made Kitster believe what he said. "Aye, maybe it is so, good luck stranger!" "Luck to you too friend!" he said as he moved towards Jabbas palace. "Come on, Nejj, Tamora will be waiting for dinner." They boarded the old airship and left the blackness of the desert following the light of the city

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# Den of Dreams

## By NightWrite

Nothing was trustworthy here. Not in this place where bonecasters fled harsh eyes and illusions flowed like wine. Others found the appeal, he knew. To hide away in their fantasy worlds. To bury their problems under illusions and drugs. It just made the waiting reality harsher when they fell. Bovuto struggled to keep his focus as he walked down the cramped, dark hallway towards Bozenya's office. Ears pushed back against his head, he fought temptation with each step. Slips of fantasies drifted out from the rooms which hedged his way. Rubbed against his senses. Offered him promises. Tried to drag him in. The scents of spiced tea and sea breeze mingled with Surasi incense and perfumes from across the sea. Sounds, from a thunderstorm to a rowdy festival, assaulted his ears in a cacophony of memories and dreams. The doors warped and twisted, from plain oak one moment to portals of fantasy the next. Floral arches, gem studded doors, a miniature of the great market arch found on the streets above. They were harder to fight than usual, but he pushed on. He had to focus. Bovuto wouldn't end up like other's under Bozenya's employ, those without bonecraft. He wouldn't be a toy, broken and molded to the whims of the sewer offal which called themselves his peers. So each day he made himself valuable to the boss. So long as he kept his value he'd be safe. Bovuto cursed to himself. His whiskers and tail twitched as his ears pulled tighter to his head. Something wasn't right. He drew upon his daemon and struck the opposing sides of the cramped hallway. His senses told him there were walls, but he felt no vibrations with his earthcraft. A similar lack of sensation occurred when clawed feet stomped against the ground. Why hadn't he noticed sooner. His earth-sense touched nothing, so where was he? “Your realization came quicker this time,” a voice called out around him. It deafened him, filled his being. Covering his ears did little as it reverberated throughout him. “Maybe we didn't give him enough draught of the forgetful.” A second voice assaulted him, softer yet no less powerful. “Perhaps some part of you remembers. Whispers to you how this isn't the first time.” “You're resilient,” the first said, “a useful trait I'm sure. No matter, our boss shall have the information we seek.” “Careful, too many doses this close together could unravel his mind. A blank slate won't get us what we need. Perhaps we should try a more direct approach.” The world pulled out from under Bovuto. Falling. Falling. Falling. Down into a deep abyss he fell, endless void hung around him. He tried to scream, but his throat constricted. When it felt like he'd fallen forever, Bovuto stopped. Suspended in the void in front of him hung two glowing figures. One a deep blue, the other verdant green. Their shape gave nothing away, formless and ever shifting. “Now then, “the blue one pulsed in rhythm with its speech, the voice matching the second. “It's very simple, our boss has two questions. The names out all bonecrafters under your employer’s purview. And the names of your little rathole's suppliers.” “Go drown,” he said, regaining his voice. “How rude. Such a mouth on this little sewer rat, wouldn't you say, Blue,” the green one said. Every aspect of him screamed out as the sensation of a thousand knives raked across his skin. Each fiber of fur was plucked one by one, whispers yanked out and tail dragged out with his spine. Layers of flesh peeled away to expose the soft core within, piece by slow piece. His body burned and his heart would surely burst. His throat went raw as he screamed for soothing release. His body returned to him and sagged as Blue pushed Green. The pain lingered as a phantom, but his balm had been granted. “Enough, Green. We don't want to break him,” Blue said, focusing on Bovuto, “at least not yet. You can have him as a plaything once we get what we want. Unless you bore with his struggles already.” Green said nothing, their presence fading away. “Petulant child,” Blue mumbled. “Now, let us continue. Though I hope you aren't naïve enough to proclaim you won't reveal anything. We've been teasing bits and pieces out for the past few days. We know about Lybrov, Berabor, Hyvel, and Tofn. But I'm sure there's more.“ The worried voice of his daemon rose up in his mind. His heart raced. How much did they know. He tried to pull up any of his magic, but it was weak with haste and confusion. “Now, now, none of that,” Blue said as something was forced down his throat. “No need to worry about that now. We let you keep it to keep up the illusion, but you won't need it now.” What little power he could cling to slipped away, feel apart before it began. Dreamsfoil, he cursed, and a potent batch of extract if it worked so fast. “Now, will you cooperate.” “You can still go drown. It won't change much.” “No, it wouldn't,” Blue paused to sigh. “This will be the last we speak. My boss grows impatient with the completion of his plans. You're now destined for the skittering pack of thugs which hide in his dens. I'm sure Green will be thrilled. Good-bye.” Another substance was forced down his throat and unconsciousness greeted him like an old friend

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# Rounding Error

## By tebakutis

“So, here’s a question,” Mateo said, hands raised. “What if I don’t *want* to get shot?”  
  
Jansen settled his pistol on the counter between them. Mateo couldn’t be older than twenty, but Cordoba hired them young. Easier to control. Jansen was more than twice this kid’s age, but that’s what happened when you were good at your job. You got old.  
  
“Here’s the thing, kid,” Jansen said. “You don’t want it to look like you gave up.”  
  
“But I am giving up.”  
  
“Right, and we appreciate that. But I don’t think your boss will, so here we are.”  
  
The interior of one of Anton Cordoba’s run-down pawn shops smelled like old carpet, and kitschy knick knacks and outdated tech lined the dusty shelves. Nothing anyone would want, but that was the point — you didn’t want your fronts attracting actual customers. At least the windows were reflective.  
  
Jansen’s newest partner, a slightly psychotic young enforcer named Tyler Ryke, unleashed a heavy sigh. “If he’s gonna’ be a pussy about it, pop him in the arm. He’ll take hours to bleed out.”  
  
“What if you just knocked me out and tied me up?” Mateo asked. “Wouldn’t that be convincing?”  
  
“That implies we got close enough to punch you,” Jansen said, “which isn’t a good look for anyone. Cordoba might still blame you for the theft.”  
  
“Right.” Mateo clucked his tongue. “But maybe you could just shoot my gun, like you shot it out of my hand?”  
  
Ryke pulled his pistol and pointed it at Mateo’s head. “How about I put a bullet in your brainpan right now? Won’t hurt a bit!”  
  
Jansen lowered Ryke’s pistol with gentle pressure on the other man’s wrist and smiled at Mateo, who had just gone extraordinarily pale. “We don’t need a murder here, kid. That makes things messy, and the boss doesn’t appreciate messy.” He directed those words at Mateo, but they were actually for Ryke.  
  
Ryke lowered his gun. “If you don’t have the stomach for this job, old man, maybe you should retire.”  
  
“The arm,” Mateo said suddenly. “I can take one in the arm.”  
  
“Good call.” Jansen put a round through Mateo’s arm, just below the shoulder, which dropped the kid and left him howling bloody murder. Someone had obviously never been shot before. If Cordoba bought Mateo’s story about a gun fight, the kid might even get a new tattoo for his bravery.  
  
Jansen offered Mateo’s surrendered gun to Ryke. “Shoot up the place while I’m in the vault. Leave the windows.”  
  
Ryle holstered his own pistol and took Mateo’s, jaw clenched. “Why all this trouble for this little shit?”  
  
“Shoot the shelves, not the windows.” Jansen holstered his own gun. “Back in five.” He walked past the counter and the whimpering Mateo bleeding behind it.  
  
As Jansen entered the vault room, loud reports and exploding electronics assured him Ryke was occupied. As frustrating as Ryke was, sadists had their uses, such as torturing the vault combination out of Cordoba’s accountant, “*El Gato Blanco*.” The pudgy white man’s real name was Walter Nelson.  
  
Nelson now had twelve broken bones and a two missing fingers, but he was alive, thanks to Jansen. Ryke enjoyed his work just a bit too much, but Nelson must have known what might happen when he helped Cordoba rip off Ralyn Paran: Jansen’s boss, and the most powerful crime lord on the planet.  
  
Jansen punched in the combo Ryke had pummeled out of Nelson, then breathed out when the vault door opened. That was the nice thing about money men, like Nelson. They understood the cost of loyalty didn’t equal the expense of being pummeled to death by steel knuckles. The shelves in this air-conditioned vault were stuffed wall to wall with packets of rocket dust, Paran’s newest and most addictive emotional drug.  
  
Jansen pulled six packets from the dozens on the shelves, tucked them into his duffel bag, and zipped it up. As he turned to leave, he found Ryke standing behind him, staring into the vault with wide eyes. It would be nice to have a partner who followed orders, just once.  
  
Ryke whistled to himself. “There’s gotta’ be ten million in dust in here."  
  
“Who’s watching Mateo?” Jansen asked. He didn’t need Ryke getting any ideas about taking a little on the side. Paran would blame him, not Ryke, since he’d been assigned to teach the new guy.  
  
“He’s asleep,” Ryke said. “Got tired of his whining.”  
  
“I didn’t say to knock him out,” Jansen said, trigger hand itching. Was Mateo still breathing out there?  
  
Ryke stared past Jansen as if he hadn’t heard him. “You’re just gonna’ walk out with nothing?”  
  
“We have six bags, the number Cordoba scammed off Paran. He paid for the rest.”  
  
“He disrespected Paran.”  
  
“And that message has been delivered through Nelson, Mateo, and our repossession.”  
  
“You’ve never thought about grabbing some for yourself?” Ryke asked. “Who’d know?”  
  
*Cordoba would know, you stupid shit,* Jansen thought, but aloud, he just said “That’s the job. Cordoba pushes here, Paran pushes there, and a real drug war stays too costly for everyone involved. Right now, Cordoba can just claim his accountant fucked up. No one loses face to a rounding error.”  
  
Grudgingly, Ryke stepped aside. “Since when did crime lords get so goddamn polite?”  
  
“We take more than Cordoba stole,” Jansen said, carrying the duffel, “and he’s insulted. Honor demands he steal it back, and shit escalates.” As he walked back into the front room, he half-expected to find Mateo’s brains splattered everywhere, but the young man still breathed.  
  
Some of Mateo’s teeth dotted the floor, of course, and the kid’s head had some nasty lumps, but he’d probably survive. This didn’t threaten the job. Wounding Cordoba’s thugs was understandable, but murder demanded recompense. Cordoba's *lobos* had a mantra – *sangre por sangre* – and Paran was very clear about not wanting *another* drug war on his hands.  
  
“If it was me in charge,” Ryke said, caressing his steel knuckles, “we’d leave that little shit pinned to the ceiling.” He pointed at Mateo. “That’d tell Cordoba never to fuck with us again.”  
  
“Let’s get going,” Jansen said, because he was feeling a very unprofessional urge to sock Ryke in the jaw. They didn’t have time for that. Mateo’s partner, whom Nelson had called away for a business transaction at Jansen’s suggestion, would find the battered accountant at any moment. They needed to be gone before that happened.  
  
As they reached the door, a woman strolled inside. Jansen had ordered Ryke to lock it. He hadn't.  
  
Jansen clamped down on Ryke’s gun hand with his own and smiled at the now wide-eyed patron, an older lady in a conservative blue dress. “Can I help you, miss?”  
  
The lady’s wide eyes traveled over the wrecked tech on the shelves, the shattered knick knacks, and the bullet holes in the walls. “I, uh … I want to sell my wedding ring.” The counter hid Mateo's body.  
  
“Sorry,” Jansen said, as Ryke yanked his gun hand free. “Shop’s closed.”  
  
“What happened?” the lady demanded. Now that Jansen had smiled at her, she’d recovered enough not to scream and run. “It looks like someone shot up the place!”  
  
“You’ve got good eyes,” Jansen said, as if noticing a dozen bullet holes was difficult. “We just answered the call. Robbery happened not ten minutes ago, but the perps got away.”  
  
“You’re police detectives?” The entirely too dense woman eyed them suspiciously.  
  
“Yes ma’am.” Jansen nodded. “I’m Detective Forrester, and this is Detective Johnson. We’re still processing the scene, so you’ll understand if we can’t let you come inside.”  
  
“But what about my wedding ring?” the woman said. “I need to sell it.”  
  
“There’s a shop two blocks up,” Jansen said. “Second Chances. The owner will cut you a good deal.”  
  
“I see,” said the woman.  
  
“You can go now,” Ryke added, leering at her like an asshole.  
  
“Yes, well … I’ll just do that then.” The woman frowned, backed up, and left through the door. They watched her casting worried glances at the reflective windows as she hurried away. All she had was suspicion.  
  
Jansen ground his teeth and pushed the door open. He had been halfway convinced Ryke would shoot her. If Ryke had shot her, he’d have shot Ryke, and then Paran would be rather disappointed in him.  
  
As they walked to the autocar and the doors opened at their approach, Ryke grumbled something or other. “Never thought a life of crime would be so boring.”  
  
Jansen tossed the duffel into the autocar and turned on a man he would very much like to dump in a river, if he weren’t a professional. “Less chance of getting shot if you take a light touch.”  
  
“Seems you’re as light as they come, old man.”  
  
Jansen got into the autocar. “Just keep your ears open. You’ll pick up the business fast enough.” Though as he watched Ryke fidget with his steel knuckles, Jansen was fairly certain he wouldn’t.

**THE END**

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# The Golden Shamrock

## By Elfy

The Shepherd Divchena stood at the heart of her well-kempt sheepfold, crook in hand and a modest smile on her black lips. That morning, after she led her rams and ewes to the mountainside and her lambs to a low meadow on the banks of the River Polikni, which wound along the flower-laden floor of Zelchat Valley, she bound a miniscule orb to her thigh, underneath the pleats of her grey shift, in preparation for her debt collectors' arrival. The tattered hem of her skirt grazed her knees. When the sun hovered overhead, three Senkcha Family representatives arrived at the southernmost edge of Divchena’s pastures, each riding a hillwalker—an enormous, gentle beast far larger than a yak and hardier than cattle, with ribbed horns as thick as the trunk of a young tree. “Divchena Maluk.” Podim, the head of their triplet, stopped his mount with a yank of its leather reins. He climbed down the knotted fur dangling from the creature’s side. Watching him with attention keener than an owl’s, Divchena brushed the side of her thumb from the pierced bridge of her nose to its petite tip; she flicked her wrist to show Podim and his companions her empty palm. “She I am.” With luck, the early display of respect might ease the tone of their conversation. Podim returned the gesture. He approached the sheepfold on foot. “You have some things to explain.” Divchena smirked. She shifted her weight onto one leg, free hand on her hip. Her fingers, sore from tearing off hangnails in boredom while she was waiting for their arrival, brushed against the night-blue wool of her capelette as she leaned her crook the tiniest bit nearer to her side. One of his companions, a dishevelled woman clutching a sling—Podim’s wife, Zelina—dismounted. She ran halfway to the sheepfold and paused. The bitter-faced man who arrived with them carrying nothing but deep-set creases on his brow remained atop his hillwalker, arms crossed. Divchena owed the married pair a fair sum, to say nothing of the grandiose amounts she had stolen from their new family. To Podim alone, she guessed at least a ram’s weight in tadril and an extra hornful for interest. Zelina had claim to a fresh silk headscarf and three master-wrought rings inlaid with her pick of precious gems. Since Divchena didn’t recognise the old man, she supposed a peck on the cheek for his good humour and cooperation would suffice. To their detriment, they sacrificed their right to compensation months ago and knew why. Divchena had no intention of repaying them, now or ever. Podim, tight braid of mint hair swinging in the slight wind, leant over the wooden sheepfold gate. A thin rod of hard candy drooped from the corner of his mouth. “I reckon you owe us lots more tadril than I suspect you have left. Bet it felt good to think you got away clean, yeah? Thought you had my whole family fooled? Well, sezha, you ain’t fooled me.” “You were one of my most intelligent,” Divchena conceded. Had he and his wife not left, this wouldn't have happened. This, however, was the path they wanted, so they had to live with their choice. “I know.” He took the sweet out of his mouth to spit. “Get on out here. Ottnik’ll be easy on you so long as you don’t try nothing violent.” Divchena chortled. Ottnik, called the Badger by locals, skinned thieves alive if he caught them, and the loathsome horde of brigands he governed would watch her skin peel off with glee. Those who stole from the Senkcha Family rarely escaped their labyrinthine camps with time to enjoy their earnings, much less returned—and came out again, and later repeated once more for the story before fleeing for good. She did not deny her penchant for tasteful revenge. Sneaking into the Sankcha Family’s main camp and robbing them blind, mute, and lame hadn't been done out of irreverence, but policy; they stole a bit of her flock, so she took a chunk of their goods. Thus, the trade was fair. By the measures of the pure and lawful, they had merely… transacted. Shaking her head, Divchena yawned. “I’ll stay right here. As you guessed, I have nothing to give you.” Podim rattled the gate. “I've got a family to defend, and our biggest threat is you. They barely've got enough for a week of food up in the main camp after your little heist. A week. For seven hundred ren. That’s cruel.” “It’s business,” Divchena said. “I suggest you come out before I drag you out.” “I can't leave my flock to starve, much like you can’t let yours.” Podim lowered his gaze. No matter that she really was just a shepherd with a moonlit past now, Divchena demanded respect. Even the Senkcha Family, feared by anyone with proper sense, was not exempt from this rule, thousand members or not. The Shepherd bowed to no one. Podim rolled up his sleeves. “Well then. I guess I will drag you.” He hopped the gate. Before his first footfall hit the loamy soil Divchena had seized her orb, crushed it, and drew from it shards a snarling, vulpine spirit. It charged Podim, fangs bared and jaw snapping. It latched its maw around his ankle, undeterred by his kicks and yelps of pain. Was it disrespectful to play with one’s fears when they became violent? Divchena thought not. She raised her crook, veins aglow with her Essence’s soft orange light, and aimed it above Podim’s wife. “Call it off or I loose it,” Zelina demanded, voice trembling. She fumbled a rock into her sling’s pouch. Divchena shook her head once, slow, methodical, and smug. Posturing did not frighten her. Zelina wouldn’t loose her sling. The only violence in the young woman’s past had been done to her, not by her. Such was the life of a pickpocket. “I said call it off,” Zelina said. Podim shrieked like an infant any time the spirit came near. Divchena opened her mouth, but instead of shouting back at Zelina she chanted a high-pitched, ghostly call. It ricocheted between the mountain slopes guarding the Valley, three or four echoes reverberating in each syllable before the words faded. Bells tinkled in the distance. Wincing, Zelina looked back at the old man, then glanced at Podim, and finally stared at Divchena with helpless eyes. “Please. Let him go.” Again Divchena called a haunting melody, this one brief and steeped in urgency. A host of clinking bells flowed quicker than an avalanche down the mountains, but it was not sheep that ran. It was family. Three hundred ren or more charged the Valley, wielding their own slings as well as bows and knives. Some carried armfuls of rocks to chuck. Arrows, stones, and throwing blades hailed down, pelting the Senkcha representatives with the ire of those who launched them. “Kvilela’s sight,” the old man swore. He tugged the reins fastened to his hillwalker's horns. It reared and bellowed. The ground quaked when it planted its feet back on the dirt. The spirit, unbalanced by the shivering field, released Podim for a moment; he seized his chance and sprang over the fence, arms shielding his head. He snatched his wife’s hand and dragged her toward their hillwalkers. “I am the Shepherd, and this is my flock,” Divchena yelled, arms outstretched as if to embrace the sky. “Tell your matriarch my name. Sow fear and sense into your siblings and children and warn them off hunting my flock!” Her family, all the ruffians, street rats, and luckless miscreants who had come to her sheepfold in search of sanctuary and nourishment, the thieves and pickpockets desiring better roads to scavenge, roared along with her. The Senkcha representatives wheeled their mounts around to meet a wall of Divchena’s family members quick-footed enough to have made it down the lower slopes in moments rather than whiles. Divchena tucked a strand of her burgundy hair behind her pointed, downturned ears. The spirit shattered; distorted space wobbled where it once stood until the shards warped back into a tiny orb. With it vanished the light in her veins. She plucked it off the ground and pocketed it. Slipping between shadows, creeping in the absence of light, taking what did not belong to her: it never failed to enthral her. And when someone caught her? Well, that’s what family was for, and they always took her side. “Strip them, search them, and send them away,” Divchena said to her flock. Satisfied with the conclusion of their meeting, she wandered off to fetch her lambs from the low meadow by the River Polikni. It was time for them to rest

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# Breddan Gess

## By Alex Hormann

Also,

# The Shepherd

## By ThiefofHope

The pamphlet – attributed to the Sanctimonious Saints - had been right. Sex was not at all what the bishops would have you believe. I pushed open the door to my house, tired after the late night. A quiet voice greeted me. “What do you think you’re doing?” Mother’s usual suspicious voice. She sat in a chair in the house’s main room, prayer book on her lap. “Coming home after staying at Ria’s last night.” I kept walking. “Oh?" Her tone stopped me. There was a note of confidence, like she had caught me at something she disapproved of. I had only heard that tone a few times in my life, but when I had, the conversation had never ended well for me. I turned to face her, and noticed a square clay jar striped with red resting on the small table next to her chair. That jar held the tea I used to keep myself infertile while exploring my body. “Why were you searching my room?” I yelled. “I have the right to know what’s going on in my daughter’s life.” I could never decide whether I preferred to believe she postulated that or the priests had fed it to her. Mother spoke again. “I am disappointed.” Tears welled in her eyes. I didn’t care. “In me? No. You’re disappointed you don’t have the pious daughter you always wanted.” I knew better than to goad her, but Mother would never forgive the tea in that clay jar. “I am sending you to a nunnery.” Like that would make me pious. As I opened my mouth, Mother’s forehead creased, as it did every time she knew I was about to disagree with her. “I am not going to a fucking nunnery.” I screamed. It felt good. I strode out the door, then looked back at Mother over my shoulder. “I’m already fucked, aren’t I?” She glanced over at the jar. “It appears so.” Anguish fought with rage and despair. It seemed strange to hear my emotions in her voice. Ten paces later, I heard a crash behind me, followed by a door slamming shut. Mother had thrown the jar. It had shattered, and a slight breeze scattered the leaves inside. I didn’t need them anymore, but maybe I could sell them, if I collected them. I hurried over, pulling a handkerchief out of my skirt pocket. I picked up one of the shattered pieces, attempting to pour the leaves off it into my handkerchief. As I shook them off, I noticed a pattern etched on the inside. Runes. There were more on the other pieces. I forgot about the leaves – they had mostly blown away already – and gathered the pieces, wrapping them in the handkerchief before hurrying away. I did not want another confrontation with Mother. I would not go to a fucking nunnery and spend my days listening to unwed mothers pine after their loves and former prostitutes repent of their sins. Although, maybe I could get the nuns to exile me. That was my most promising option. I had heard that the Sanctimonious Saints would get people out, but I had been trying to contact them for months without any success. I found a bench in the park, set my bag under my feet, and pulled out the clay shards. I laid the pieces next to me and started organizing them, using the runes as a guide. Who had written words on the inside of a small infertility jar? Why? The last pieces revealed a large intricate design. It looked familiar, like one of the theocracy’s official seals, but not quite. Surely the priests weren’t trafficking in infertility teas; they always needed more people to build their altars. Underneath the design, there was a short phrase. I murmured the words to myself as I read them. “You broke the jar; let’s see who you are.” I did not finish the last sentence. Another voice had joined mine. A woman stood behind the bench. She had short, spiky brown hair and wore a slim dress. Proper, yet flattering. “Who are you?” she asked. I did not respond as she walked around the bench and sat down next to me, picking up one of the shattered pieces. “That’s mine,” I said. The woman looked down her nose at me. If she was trying to intimidate me, she failed. Her mouth twitched. She examined the shard in her hand, peering at the design. “Why did you break the jar?” she asked, looking over at me. “I didn’t.” She nodded. Her gaze traveled from the shards to my face, then down my shirt to my bag underneath my feet. I tensed my muscles, squeezing the bag with my shins. “You are a rebel.” Who was this woman? Did she come from a nunnery, recruiting wayward girls? I smiled at her. “And what are you going to do about it?” She held my eyes with hers. “What are you going to do about it?” “Nothing.” I stared at the woman, silently challenging her. I would never become a quiet, pious citizen. “Is that true?” The woman placed the shard back on the bench, smoothed her skirt, then stood up, and walked away. I watched her leave. One question dominated my thoughts: how had she known what the jar had said? Then stars exploded across my vision and pain erupted in my skull. \* I found myself lying on my side on a soft bed. My head throbbed. I groaned. Then I heard noises: a shuffling and a rustling. I opened my eyes, but could not see much. A dim glow illuminated markings etched in a wall opposite me. They looked like words, but in no language I knew. “It is time to choose.” I knew that voice. It was the woman who had asked about the jar. I sat up, too quickly. My vision faded, and I strained to bring it back. When it did, I took a deep breath as I looked at the woman. She wore the same clothes and impassive face as before. “Who are you?” My voice creaked. “It depends on what you choose.” I refused to play her games. Not before I knew the rules. “What did you do to me?” “I did nothing.” Her face shifted to display mild innocence. I tried again. “What did you have done to me?” “You don’t need to know the details. The outcome is what’s important.” “And what is that?” “Choose.” I opened my mouth to give in and ask her what I was supposed to choose, but before the words came out, her forehead creased. Like Mother’s when we fought. But I didn’t want to fight this woman until I knew exactly who and what I was fighting. I put my hand to my head, rubbing my temples to try and dull the throbbing while I thought. The woman had no way to know what I was going to say, but she knew I would say it quickly, without thinking, and that disappointed her. Why? I tried to remember our conversation from earlier. Had she talked about a choice? We talked about the broken jar, and she had accused me of being a rebel. And I’d said I wasn’t going to do anything about it. Was she recruiting for a nunnery? Did it matter? I brought my hands down from my head and looked the woman in the eye, despite my pounding heart and trembling fingers. “I choose to reject the saints and their pious, restrictive, controlling theocracy.” Three ponderous heartbeats later, the woman smiled and stuck out a hand. “Welcome to the Sanctimonious Saints.”

# A Baron and a Princess

## By Rukaio\_Alter

"Won't you stop shaking that fucking leg of yours?" Mike mutters behind ground teeth. "I'll cut it off if it bothers you that much." "Look at that bunch of street punks," I whisper back without trying to bring my leg under control. "Just look at them, so little respect, no gravity." "It's your damn job to groom the newbies Sean." "I didn't make the timetable. Go figure why the boss felt like we should introduce them to the God this session. Certainly wasn't my idea." "Can't blame the runts for being excited though. What kind of crazy rotten luck is it to be here same as the Dons of all people?" "Want me to call them off?" Mike chews on his lips, purple and split from a bout in whatever hovel he decided to cool his temper in this weekend. Being second in command in the Phobos family isn't exactly a relaxing job. Mike likes to go out with the grunts, rough up some locals late on payments or little dealers trying to cut corners. I find my own releases elsewhere. "Nah. Good test of character, this." I'm not so sure. I look up at our five new recruits, mingling with four counterparts of the Don family, jabbing fingers in puffed up chests and engaging in sharp banter. I assume many first met in the streets. All our new boys were urchins not even a year ago. I read their small, single-paged files, hastily written by the people in charge of them throughout our organisation. I talked to them, tried to educate them as much as I could, grinding rituals in their skulls. At the end of the day I don't think they really understand what we're doing here. After all, urchins have no God. Raised around the ovens of a small bakery, I was brought up pious. If object have spirits, places guardian gods, concepts emanations and trades patron saints, it only makes sense to know how to mind your manners and deal with the deities that rule your life. My mother taught me to keep household spirits happy before I could walk, and my father saved our nicest breads and pastries as offerings. He brought me with him whenever he went for donations. The God of bakers loved us like we loved him, and our dough rose high, our pastries stayed crisp and I never saw a mouse in the shop. When I went to school, I paid monthly tributes to the God of students and emanation of knowledge and curiosity. So when I became a gang member and joined the Phobos family, I paid just as scrupulous respects to the God of criminals. I understand the concept in a manner our former-urchins-turned-street-thugs can't. To them the God is a boss on top of the boss, too high up the hierarchy to care about them. But they're criminals now, and their success in that new line of business will depend on proper devotion. "What is the boss doing?" I ask Mike for the tenth time this evening, not trying to hide the worry in my voice. "Can't be long. The Dons are waiting too, see. Maybe Phobos is busy cutting that fat fuck's fingers right outside?" Mike smiles lopsidedly at the images that conjures, but it's unlikely. You don't misbehave like that around your God's place. You're not late either. It goes without saying that you don't get in arguments or fist-fights in the ante-chamber, which I'm starting to worry our boys might have forgotten. I look up across the small waiting room to where another collection of rickety chairs hold equally anxious higher-ups from the Don family, also waiting on their boss so that the ceremony of Gift-giving and Induction can begin. There is Franky, the Don's son and right arm, and Tilda, a cold-eyed woman you really don't want to meet on the other side of a negotiation table. The man glancing back at me over his glasses is Charles Morrow, a fine fellow with a blade of a face who holds a similar position to mine in his own gang. He raises his eyebrows in silent acknowledgement. I close my eyes and sigh. Let's hope the God is in a forgiving mood. A bang and a yelp snap me back to attention. Phobos slammed the door into the men and is storming through, a package under his arm and a puffing, angry red Erzo Don on his heels, still biting on the last words of whatever argument they were having. Each group folds over their boss and everyone pays last minute attention to the gifts they brought and the fine clothes they wear. Phobos is a tall man, sharp and well cut, just like the black suits he favours, and known as the coldest mobster on this coast. He exchanges quiet words with Mike, and pats my elbow briefly. The man's way of making up for the stress he knows he's been giving me. Activity dies down as a servant enters the room to unlock the inner chamber's doors. We shuffle to our positions by hierarchical order and I glance at my charges one last time. "Remember, don't react, keep it all in!" They nod, worry finally settling on their young faces as the solemnity of the event dawns on them. For such a bunch of misfits, they do me proud. All I can hear is sharp intakes of breath as their eyes fall on the deity who will soon learn their name and hold their fates in its heart. The God of transgression, patron saints of criminals and emanation of rule-breaking, looks like a child and a monster. Five years old if you had to put an age on it, with sandy blond hair parting around little horns that poke from its forehead and the crown of its head. Some are black and keratinous, some the off-white of ivory. Its skin is unhealthily pale, cheeks oddly flushed. Its pinched, lipless mouth betrays no feelings. But the real unease comes from the eyes. One dark and filled with odd lights, the other white and full of colourful swirls, both huge and sparkling, somehow. Alien. The child-like being sits on a large pillow atop a carpeted dais, its servants kneeling behind it. Like the building, they are paid for by donations, one of the many ways we show our love to the God. "Greetings!" Don booms, stepping up to deliver his offering. "I present you with these gifts, my dea–" Don's words die in his throat, silenced by a small hand, raised palm out. "Erzo Don, what do you think you are doing here?" The God's voice is high as a child's but its inflections are nuanced, its tone menacing. "Well... We've come to presen–" "You annoy me." The pressure rises in the room and I feel goosebumps all over my skin. The God stands, face as blank as marble. "I am the God of criminals, Don. I patron thieves, liars, racketeers, yes. People who live on the margins of the larger society. But if there is one thing I don't condone, it is lying to me." The God steps down towards Don. I see the sweat drenching him, Morrow's bloodless face, Tilda's hand all white-knuckled around Frank's wrist and their new men's confused expressions. What have they done? "You can't go and grovel to the God of killers and murderers thinking I wouldn't know about it. Did you not think of your family? Of me?" "God, but it was only a sid–" "Go." Silence hangs over us like a corpse at the end of a fraying rope. There is nothing to do but to obey. One word that ends a whole family business, maybe a fifth of the local territory, suddenly up for dispute. Chaos will engulf them, they will have no divine support. I'm still thinking of the consequences as the door closes behind the last of them and Phobos steps up, offering the content of his package like nothing happened. It's two hands sawed at the wrists and held together by handcuffs. Charming–and it makes the God smile. Mike is next, showing his split lips and telling his tales. The God nods along, used to the urban-outlaw-cowboy style of our second-in-command. And then it's me, embracing the being my success in life depends on. He's done me good and I love it like I loved the pudgy God that ate our bread and blessed us for it. "What have you for me Sean?" The child-God asks as I cup its pallid face in my scarred hands. "A secret," I murmur in its ear. "The cops are coming to crack on the riverside locations. I tipped them to great profit." The God chuckles, looking up at me with the same adoration I feel for it. It squeezes my hand and waves for me to introduce our new members. What's a spy to the emanation of rule breaking? Nothing more than a good devotee

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