

I Married a Pagan!

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DAY ONE

“Sins! Sins! Sinners all!” The man in the red suit stood on the platform speaking to the crowd. “We stand at the brink of destruction, don’t you see? Our only hope is to repel the Chaos! And what must we do? We must build Order, each one of us! Brick by brick, stone by stone, mortaring by mortaring! So join us! Join our cause! Welcome the great Builder into your life, and embrace the Order he brings!” He raised his hands to the heavens. “Which of you will step forward and join us in our worthy endeavor? Is it...you, sir?”

The man he pointed out in the crowd picked his nose, stared at what came out, smiled, and pocketed it.

“Hmmm, perhaps not. But what about you?” This time he pointed to a man who appeared to not understand large words, such as “you” and “the.” He drooled as he stared straight ahead.

“Fine, fine. Well, I’m sure...er, somewhat positive... that at least one of you hears this word and is moved to action. Let me relate a parable. There once was a carpenter, by the name of Steve...”

Near the back of the crowd, “Darkhider” Henry Cresswell watched the man rant from the podium. “It’s really sad, Jack. Religion just isn’t the same around here anymore.”

Jack Roberts looked at him, confused. “What do you mean, Henry?”

“Well, take a look at him.” Henry gestured toward the man on the podium, who was now looking frantically for someone in the crowd not more intent on his own bodily functions than on spirituality and fulfillment. “The Hammers have set up street vendors now, begging for anyone to join their ranks. Remember how they used to just go from door to door and grab the young men of the household? THAT was conviction. Now they’ve set up shop next to this fellow.”

He pointed to the man on the next stage over. He had approximately less teeth than he had ears (of which he still had one). He pranced about onstage wearing a woolen hat with antlers sticking out of it, as well as some sort of diaper, heavily soiled. He screeched at the crowd, speaking of the healing powers of crumb cake when applied to the large toe on the left foot.

“See, Jack? You can’t go around preaching next to these sorts. Sort of undercuts your message.”

“What, you mean like how there’s an even bigger crowd around that stage?”

“Well, in a way, yes.” Henry pointed back at the man in red, who was now asking which of the crowd threw the orange at his head when he’d had his back turned. “But my real point was that it’s not very seemly for your major religion to be seen on the

same street as a loony covered in his own filth. Sort of says you're no different from them."

"And exactly how ARE they different, Henry?"

Henry sighed. "Well, for one thing, Jack, the Builder actually exists, as far as anyone knows. Old Brother William told me all about him while I worked at the parish. I'd be slopping the floors with mop water and he'd tell me all these stories about how the Builder would protect those who forged the way to the future."

Jack reached into his front pocket and pulled out a foot long sandwich, from which he took a bite. "What about those who didn't?"

"Didn't what?"

"Forge a way to the future."

Henry thought about it. "Not sure, exactly. I think they got shoved into the Eternal Furnace and became the cornerstone of the...lessee...tavern of Heaven, I think."

"Doesn't sound all that horrible." A slice of tomato fell out of the sandwich and onto the cobbles. Jack snatched it up, wiped it on his shirt, and ate it. "I mean, a tavern in Heaven? You'd be partying every night."

Henry looked down at the spot where the tomato slice had fallen, which almost vibrated with mold, plague, and the leavings of a passing horse. "No, no, you're missing the point. You see, it's punishment. It's a little hard to party when you're melted and formed into an enormous brick. Sort of like, you can see the party, but you don't have a ticket to get in."

"Ah, I see." Mayonnaise squirted out at the next bite onto the back of the peasant in front of Jack. It actually made the fabric of the peasant's shirt cleaner. "And how's this fellow over here stack up?"

Henry sighed. "As I pointed out before, the man is clearly insane. That's lesson number one. Never take advice from a man who appears in public with less clothing and more odor than yourself. The antlers are also a dead giveaway."

The crazed speaker now bent himself in half, backwards, yelling at the wall behind him. "And yay, Wibble-Wobble the Great insists that, by the power vested within himself, that upon placing the satchel within your left ventricle, ye too may find the salvation ye dost crave fortnightly! Fondle the strumbly, and gigglefrom the masslepatheos!"

"And, Jack, there's lesson two. Watch for the facts. Wibble-Wobble is not mentioned in any scholarly texts, and most likely has been made up on the spot. Strumbly, gigglefrom, and masslepatheos are clearly nonsense. And putting a satchel in any ventricle is not possible according to the laws of medical science."

"So, ventricle is a real word? What is it, then?" With five inches left to go on the sandwich, Jack crammed the remainder into his mouth and dusted his hands.

"It'd take too long to explain it scientifically, but to use an example, yours would be extremely tired and not in favor of mayonnaise and tomato sandwiches."

"So, Henry, what've you been readin' that's made you so smart, anyways?"

"They're called books, Jack. You should try opening them sometime instead of eating them."

"Might do that one day. I have a Saturday off next month." Jack adjusted his sergeant's helmet and grabbed the chain leading to Henry's shackles. "Well, that's enough education for now, I think. Ready to go?"

“Yes, I suppose.” And Jack led Henry off to the local lock-up.

Five years, despite its relatively low number in the cosmic scale of things, can bring about massive changes. Take, for example, Great King Hasselstrook the Nineteenth, who reigned for five years. In this time, he wiped out fifteen different tribes from the face of the planet, developed a new code of laws (most of them outlining his extreme measures against any musician who played the trombone), sacked and pillaged the capitals of 4 nations, and owned a dozen or so cats. At the beginning of the sixth year of his reign, he was forcibly retired from public service by an angry mob and a hot scimitar to the stomach. He was replaced by Edgar the Unwashed the Fourth, and his name was donated to a local meat stew. In most cases, having a food dish named after oneself is a great honor; this is common knowledge among anyone who has never eaten Hasselstrook Stew. But I digress.

Five years had passed since Henry, Jack, and Pete Williams stepped out of Lord Farnsworth's tomb during a thieves' contest in the Bonehoard, the only survivors save Garrett himself. After they were released once again from the same dank city cell which the police kept warm for them, they'd had a gigantic argument about whether their group would ever succeed in their thieving lifestyle. Jack broke down in tears and ate an entire roast ham as he explained that all he wanted was an honest job, where he would be accorded dignity and respect. Pete just stormed off without a word.

Despite the setbacks, Henry never gave up. Well, he did for a brief period. He decided to settle in for a nice job working for a moneylender. But simply counting the money wasn't enough. Every day for the nine days of his employment, he stared at the great piles of gold Mr. Tafferton locked away inside of the gigantic vault every night at seven. When temptation became too great, on the ninth day he waited until nightfall and came in to crack the door. He dressed in black, and was prepared for anything.

Unfortunately, Henry had never bothered to actually check the vault for traps, even though he often entered it to retrieve some money for a customer. Although he successfully bypassed the alarm by knowing the combination by heart, he was unsuccessful in dodging the Hammer-brand Securi-T-Hammer that swung down from the top of the vault directly into his face. He woke a day later in a cell, with guards laughing all day long. He also no longer remembered bits and pieces of his childhood, though in Henry's case this was not necessarily a bad thing.

It was then that Henry realized...going straight would never do. He'd be as crooked as a...well, a city guard until the day he died. Maybe it was the massive concussion talking, but he decided that if that was the way things were going to be, then he'd have to get a lot better at his craft in a hurry.

One of his brilliant ideas was to go the library and actually learn something for once. Day after day he pored over books on practically every subject. Unfortunately, very few discussed how to rob people or pick locks with ease, but he fell in love with the books talking about the history of the city. It helped him on more than one occasion, as learning about the ancient and underused sewer system gave him the ability to move around the city quickly and undetected by sight.

The downside, though, was that it was very difficult to successfully hide anywhere when the guards wondered where the hell that godawful smell was coming from. The zombies wandering around down in the tunnels weren't any comfort, either.

This combined with the fact that, try as he might, Henry just wasn't very good. Every caper he pulled ended in disaster. He broke into the art museum, but tripped every silent alarm in the building. He successfully broke into a small mansion, but didn't count on the crazed Lhasa Apso that slept in the safe at night. He even tried to pickpocket the coin purse of an old woman, but she beat him so hard with her umbrella that he actually needed medical attention.

As much as he hated to admit it, the solo career just wasn't working out. He'd tried forming another team with some fellows he'd met during an "All-Bardic Revival" at the Drunken Mongoose tavern, but on their first job they tied him up by his underpants from the rafters (something Henry had long since gotten used to) and robbed the place blind. They were never caught, and the last he'd heard, they had all retired successfully on a tropical island somewhere near the New Continent.

Jack and Pete were all he had. But they had 'careers' now. Jack was a sergeant in the City Guard. Even though it'd seemed impossible, his strict diet of sandwiches, donuts and coffee had made him even fatter than before. He apparently wasn't too bad at it, though. After all, he'd personally arrested Henry four times.

And Pete...well, he had something he was doing now. Henry had received a remarkably well-written letter from him some time ago, talking about a "successful venture" down on Beggar's Avenue. Henry wasn't sure if having a successful venture on Beggar's Avenue was a good thing.

As Henry lay in his jail cell for the third time that week, he pulled the letter out of his pocket. As he read it again, he just couldn't understand why the group couldn't get together again. Why wouldn't they come back? What about that time when they tried to rob Lord Farnsworth's place, and Pete kept getting shot with the cannon? And when in the Bonehoard Jack ate and then threw up that priceless artwork? And how cool it was when Zantar fired that rocket and nearly killed all three of them?

Nope, he just couldn't understand it at all.

"See you tomorrow, Henry?"

"Most likely. Good night, Jack."

Henry stepped out of the guardhouse and made his way up the street, past the hordes of beggars lining the sidewalk. He stared at his feet as he walked. Even though he was following his life's ambition, he wasn't getting anywhere.

Then, he remembered something he could follow that would get him somewhere. It was to follow a 'Dragon's Armpit' with a 'Green Zombie on the Rocks,' and it would get him drunk. When he reached Canal Street, he turned north and headed for the Haunted Foghat Tavern.

The sounds of the place hit him long before he entered the dank alley which led to the front door. If Henry remembered correctly, it was Wednesday. On Wednesdays, the place either held a drinking contest, a pissing contest, or some off-color combination of the two. Considering the yelling and the stench, he guessed it was the latter.

Henry clambered up the wooden boxes which acted as steps that led to the front door. He went to open it, but a bell above the door rang. Henry calmly stepped aside as a few seconds later a figure crashed through the wooden door, tumbled into the alley, and groaned. In the remnants of the door stood a massive figure, dusting his hands.

“Evening, Nick.”

Nick, the bouncer, noticed Henry standing off to the side. “Oh, evenin’, Henry. You know, this warning bell you put in has really cut down on the number of accidents we’ve had lately. We’ve never been more busy.”

“That’s good to hear.” Henry liked talking to Nick. Nick, unlike most of the other bouncers at the leading taverns of the day, hadn’t had most of his brains punched out of him years ago (or, in some cases, never had much to punch out in the first place). And strangely enough, Nick wasn’t his real name. He had been born Skull McBloodfist to Mr. and Mrs. McBloodfist, a farming couple who grew radishes outside of town. When he went to apply for the job of bouncer at the Haunted Foghat, he had insisted that he be called Nick. The manager had sat there for a few seconds, then laughed hysterically.

The manager that replaced him hired Nick on the spot, though it took several weeks to clean up all the blood...and buy new furniture. However, the manager did hang up what was left of one bar stool, both as a warning to anyone who angered the bouncer in the future and to honor the ingenious and creative use to which that stool had been made. Since then, no one had asked Nick why he wanted to be called Nick. They preferred their limbs remained attached.

“So, uh, Nick...what did he do, anyway?” Henry pointed a thumb at the drunk still lying face down in a pile of broken bottles, semi-coherently shouting something about a walnut conspiracy.

“Oh, him? He tried to cheat in tonight’s contest.”

“Ah, I see, I see.”

They stood for a moment, silently watching the man try to stand up, a task at which he failed spectacularly when he fell backwards into a box of rusty swords.

“So, should I bother asking what he tried to do, or would I be better off not knowing?”

Nick rubbed his chin as the man stumbled out of the box, scratched the sword protruding from his back, and promptly wandered over to and climbed over a fence clearly labeled, ‘WARNING! FEISTY BURRICKS BEYOND THIS POINT!’

“You know, Henry, I think you’d be better off not knowing.”

“Thank you. You’re a true gentleman, Nick. May I come in?”

Nick stepped aside from the busted doorway and Henry entered the establishment. The dimly lit premises left much to the imagination, which meant people with good imaginations would probably be best going someplace else. On the other side of the room came the clamor of many rowdy patrons guzzling down some sort of drink, to the clamor of others exchanging money. Surprisingly, save for a man passed out in a bowl of peanuts, the bar itself was empty. Henry went over to it and grabbed a stool. It wheezed embarrassingly as he sat down on it.

The bartender came up to him, wiping a wooden mug with a clean rag. “If I didn’t know that seat better, I would’ve thought Jack had sat down, not you.” She put

down the mug and leaned her elbows on the counter, chin in hands. “So how’re you doing, Henry?”

Henry fiddled with a knothole in the bar. “No time for talking, Cait. I need something hard, and fast. I’m feeling sorry for myself, and I’d enjoy it more if I were completely plastered. What’s the new one you’ve got?”

Caitlyn sighed, tossing the rag onto one of the kegs behind her. “It’s ‘Fighting Mameluke,’ but I’m afraid you’re cut off tonight.”

Henry looked up, chagrined. “What? Why?”

“Because I think it’s time we had a talk, that’s why. And you have no money.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because you didn’t have money the past three times you’ve been in here. Come on, we can talk upstairs. It’ll be quieter there.”

Henry looked over at the crowd noisily gulping down what he honestly hoped were alcoholic beverages. He nudged the man face down in the peanuts, and hoped the lack of response meant sleep of the temporary kind. “What about the bar?”

Caitlyn grabbed a loose strand of hair and pushed it back. “Oh, Mildred will cover me. She may be sixty, but she knows how to tend bar, let me tell you. Let’s go.”

It wasn’t that much quieter in the cramped upper room of the Foghat, but it was devoid of patrons and certainly smelled better. Caitlyn took one of the seats by the round table in the center of the room. Henry stood, looking out over the city from the window. Save for a few lighted windows, smoke pouring from chimneys, and a few rabid beggars fighting over half a vanilla wafer, the city lay still.

Caitlyn huffed and folded her arms. “All right. We’re here. Henry, you’ve been coming in here for...what, two years now? And every time I see you, you look more and more depressed. Every day you keep saying you’re going to make this big score, and you’ll be set for life. Face it, Henry, it’s never going to happen. Whatever the Builder, the Woodsie Lord, or...or whoever runs things up there has planned for you, it does not involve thieving. Do you hear me?”

Henry pressed his face against the glass. “Hey, I think that one beggar is actually trying to eat his own foot while singing at the same time.”

Caitlyn stood, red-faced. “Henry! You’re not even paying any attention!”

Henry turned to her, his face expressionless, but his voice saying enough. “Well, what do you want me to say, Cait? You think it would be better for me to throw it all away and work here in this stinking bar for the rest of my life or something?”

“Well, it’s better than being found in an alley with your undershorts pulled up over your head by a couple of eight-year-olds! Eight-year-olds, Henry! What in the world do eight-year-olds have that’s worth stealing?”

Henry stormed across the room and pointed his finger in her face. “For your information, those little bastards stole my wallet, and I wanted to get it back!”

“Oh, come ON, don’t you see, Henry? That’s exactly what I’m talking about. One of these days you’re going to get yourself killed, and for what? A couple of gold trinkets? A bag of money? A decent pair of shoes?” She flung her hands into the air and turned her back on him.

Henry looked at his shoes. “What’s wrong with my shoes? They’ve only got one...two...okay, THREE holes each in them, tops!” When he looked back up, Cait still had her back turned, her foot tapping on the wood floor. Then, she suddenly bolted from the room. Henry almost followed, but she came back almost immediately with a copy of “The City Times.” She thrust it into his face, and confused he took it. The headline read:

MASTER THIEF STRIKES AGAIN!

City Watch and Hammer Priests have asked citizens to aid them in finding and apprehending a master criminal who robbed St. Edgar’s Cathedral two nights ago.

Besides several thousand in gold, the thief also stole a Chalice, which is considered by High Priest Griedus to be, “A very, very important relic, and what it actually is for is none of the paper’s business.”

This loss occurs at a very bad time for the Hammerite faith, considering the recent scandal involving Very High Priest Vordecai III and Mrs. Thompson of the East Side.

Vordecai still continues to deny the accusations, saying Mrs. Thompson has no credibility. “I mean, the woman couldn’t make a good cup of tea to save her life,” he said.

The City Times has heard reports that the Pagans are also missing an artifact of great import, but as the Times currently refuses to listen to any of those smelly pixie-worshipping freaks these reports have been largely ignored.

These reports are only indicative to a larger crime wave currently sweeping through the city; last night, 5 people were found unconscious, 0 people were killed, 16 pieces of jewelry were reported stolen, and a baker at his wits’ end reported that stacks of gold coins kept disappearing almost as soon as he got them.

As Henry finished, a roar came from the floor below, followed by the sound of mass vomiting, signaling either a massive win of cash or a general loss of dignity for all concerned.

“You see, Henry? They didn’t mention his name, but Garrett? Now HE’S a thief. If he stole that Pagan artifact, too...no one else even comes CLOSE. Who else has the stones to rob both the Hammers AND the Pagans two nights in a row? And no one even knew he was there until it was too late! Henry? Henry!”

Cait noticed Henry was, well and truly this time, not paying attention. The newspaper had slipped from Henry’s hands and had fallen to the floor. His eyes no longer focused on the object in his hands, but on some far away space, where dreams are born.

Cait knew what that meant.

“No, Henry, don’t even get any ideas...”

But Henry snapped out of his trance, grabbed Cait around the arms, and kissed her on the cheek, very loudly and with very little romance. “Too late, Cait. I think I’ve got it. This is the one. I have to get going.”

As he went out the door, he nearly bumped into Nick, who was coming up the stairs with a hot cup of coffee and a copy of “5 Minutes to a More Peaceful Inner Self” under his arm. Cait came out into the hallway just as Henry bounded down the staircase.

“Wait, where are you going?”

Henry called back, not even looking. “I have to get the team together! They won’t want to miss this!”