

I Married a Pagan!

By greypatch3 (Seth Paul)

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DAY TWO

“Oh, hello, Henry. What are you in for this time?”

Jack, as always, had some food in his hand as he sat behind his desk at the Watchhouse. Today his mum had packed him a sandwich that would most likely have made several world’s records, not the least of which was ‘Greatest Potential Source of a Heart Attack.’ The rest of the room just sort of milled about in general guard-related activities, not the least of which involved games of dice and a lot of money changing hands.

Not that it surprised him. In his excited mood to tell Jack all his plans the night before, Henry had arrived at the Watchhouse to find it closed. Crime never sleeps, but apparently the Watch occasionally had to nip home for a bit of shut-eye. It was now about 9:30 in the morning, or as Jack referred to it, “Early Lunch.”

“I’m not in for anything...well, not quite true, I’m here to talk to you. Jack, my boy, I need you back. And I’m serious this time.”

“You’re serious every time.” Jack bit into his sandwich, and despite the small toothpick stuck in its middle a good majority of its contents slid off onto the floor. “And so am I. I’m not going back to that, Henry.”

There were some slurping noises from under the desk. Henry chanced a look, and saw two droopy-faced bloodhounds munching on the sandwich leavings. From the way dust had collected around them, Henry assumed they had become permanent fixtures.

“No, you don’t understand, this really *is* the big one. And it’ll work.”

Jack frowned at the remaining sauce and bun of his sandwich, and threw it under the table as well. “Why can’t you be happy for me, Henry? I’ve got a job, a good job, a *real* job. People like me here. They don’t slap me when I make a mistake, they don’t yell at me for just sitting around and minding my own business. In other words, they don’t treat me like they used to when I was working with you. Now, I’m sorry, but I have work to do. Paperwork.”

Henry raised an eyebrow. “You do *paperwork*?”

“Course I do paperwork. Some drunk wandered into a burrick enclosure last night and I need to go get some paper to go and wipe up all the bl—”

“Right, right. So, that’s it, then? That’s what you want out of life? Sitting around on your duff all day, wiping up ‘accidents,’ and never doing anything exciting?”

“Exactly.” Jack opened up a drawer in his desk and pulled out a plate on which sat a full steak dinner, with potatoes and rice. It was even steaming like it had just been pulled out of the oven. “Excitement is exactly what I don’t need. It upsets the stomach.”

“Where did you get that? I thought you said you had work to do!”

“I *do* have work to do, but I’m taking a little bit of a break, if you don’t mind.”

Henry sighed. Of all the things he had been able to convince Jack to do in the past, he knew to never argue during one of Jack’s major mealtime events. For one thing, Jack’s ears tended to fill up with food during one of his binges. Even now, as wads of potato flew through the air, some of it could already be seen dripping out of his ears.

Henry would just have to find another way. That was the thieves’ way anyway, wasn’t it? When the front door was locked, barred, guarded, and covered with high energy explosives, the thing to do was to go through the back door, tip the butler, and throw the cat at the alarm system, creating confusion.

“All right, Jack. I’m sorry it had to come to this.” Henry stood from the filthy stool he had been sitting upon and cleared his throat. “Attention, fellow members of the proud and noble City Watch! It has come to my attention that one of your own, Jack Roberts, has been receiving a number of kickbacks from various houses of ill repute, including...um, let’s see...Madam Zedora’s House of Women, Mister Zamdaro’s House of Men, Farmer Fantastic’s House of Other, and...hmmm...John Barley’s Feed Mill, Art Tankard’s Ale Distillery, Mike Hammer’s Tools, and Constance Pacifist’s Artillery...who else...and, um, that Panhandler on Third. Him too. Oh, and he’s sleeping with the Captain’s wife.”

The noise in the room dwindled to nothing. The heads of the various Watch officers turned in his direction. Dice fell rattling into cups. Chairs scooted backwards with a sound reminiscent of a small, mischievous child with extra-long fingernails finding the world’s longest chalkboard. The officers in the room, all twenty of them, came over, angry scowls on their faces, and they all leaned around the desk.

The largest, at least seven feet of red-faced, bearded, mildly potted muscle, leaned in the closest. “Is any of this true, Sergeant Roberts?”

Jack lowered his head and spoke softly. “Most of it, sir...I couldn’t get Hammer’s Tools to fork over anything.”

Henry coughed. “Are you serious, Jack? I was just ma—I mean, yes, you can see the guilt written all over him!”

The reaction was not as Henry suspected. The mountainous officer began to laugh and slapped Jack on the back. “S’all right, none of us can get anything out of that tight purse-stringed bugger either! What I’d like to know is what you did to loosen up the Panhandler.”

At this moment, two things went through Henry’s mind. The first was that this plan of his seemed to have just backfired completely in his face. The second was that he might have picked the wrong profession to try his hand at thieving; the Watch apparently had the corner on extortion and racketeering. He quickly dismissed joining up, as it would require him to conform to certain standards, such as uniforms, regulations, and a stomach the size of a small water cooler. He tried again. “But, but, but...what about the Captain’s wife?”

“Oh, posh. Everyone’s had a hand on the Captain’s wife at some point.” A smaller, more weaselly officer pointed outside at a lamp post, where a paper with a woodcut picture on it hung. “She even advertises to the locals. Charges ‘em an arm and a leg, though. Worth every penny, I have to say.”

The officers, losing interest, went back to their dice games and whatnot. Henry shook his head. “Has the Watch always been like this, or did I miss something?”

Jack grabbed another hunk of mashed potatoes off his plate and shoveled them into his mouth. “Henry, this is the Day Watch. We always got arrested by the Night Watch. Only somebody daft would rob places during the day.”

“So they hire the daft to deal with the daft? Do you realize what this says about *you*?”

Jack picked up his steak with both hands, tore it in half, and began thoughtfully munching on one of the pieces. “Yeah. It probably means I’m an idiot. But you know what? I’m a happy idiot. Now, just go away, Henry. Do whatever you want, but I want to have nothing to do with it.” And he leaned in close. “And don’t tell anyone I didn’t actually sleep with the Captain’s wife. I need to keep my reputation up.”

Henry sighed, turning away to face the door. “In that case, when I’m famous beyond all bounds, and I have gold pouring out of my ears, I’m going to throw a massive party on my own private island, and you won’t be invited. How does that sound to you?”

Jack swallowed the entire half of steak he had been chewing. “Fine by me. I wouldn’t want to touch that gold anyway, after where it came out of.”

Henry slapped his own face, groaning. “I said *ears*, Jack.”

“Oh. Well, I stand by what I said. And there’s nothing you can do to change my mind.”

Henry stomped out of the room. After all this time, after all these years, he couldn’t believe Jack wouldn’t even give him one last chance for greatness. Nothing he could do to change his mind...

Henry stopped. A wicked smile appeared on his face at about the same time a wicked plan entered his mind.

“Oh, Jack?”

“What now?”

Henry went back over to the desk, the smile still on his face. “So, *most* of what I said about you earlier was true, eh?”

“Yeah. What about it?”

“So what, pray tell, would your Mum have to say if I went and said her favorite little food processor has been taking a little bit on the side, hmmm?”

Jack sat for a moment, not saying anything. He gave one last, solemn chew. “You...you wouldn’t, would you?”

Henry nodded, his smile broadening. “Oh, I would. Indeed I would.”

Jack gulped. “You’re a right bastard, you know that?”

“Aren’t I, though? Should I stop around your place at, say, seven?”

Jack nodded.

“Good. I’ll see you then.”

Beggar’s Avenue was one of the City’s most interesting landmarks. Last year, it had received a bronze plaque, which hung near the door of Dr. Graham Crescent, proudly proclaiming, “This Avenue has the single most godawful smell we have ever experienced. As no detectable source has ever been discovered, we proclaim the street itself to be, in fact, the worst smelling street in the history of the world.” Henry wasn’t quite sure this was likely, as he would be certain that the worst smelling street in the

world would have to have the potential to kill. All Beggar's Avenue did was encourage people to *want* to die.

As he walked past various hooded transients who called for gold and silver coinage in between bouts of profuse vomiting, he looked at the sheet of paper in his hand. It didn't say much; it merely pointed out that a show of some sort starring "The Incomparable Mr. Williams & Friends" was somewhere along this stretch of road. There wasn't even a picture on it. Henry touched his pocket, on the one hand making sure his money was still there (some of it wasn't), but also to check on the letter Pete had written him some time ago. It was the only connection he and Pete still had, and if he played this right, he could sucker Pete back into the game. All he'd have to do is pull out that letter at the right time, all tearful like, and start talking about the "good ol' days," and hopefully there would be a street musician nearby to play some depressing violin music, and they'd all be friends again...

Rounding a bend, Henry found himself at the top of a short flight of steps that led into a plaza large enough to seat about 30, if there had been any chairs or anyone to sit in them. Instead, a group of children, most of them obnoxious, sat on the cobblestones looking up at a small booth, which was hung with curtains. The booth shook slightly every so often, as if someone were inside shifting about. At first, Henry was a tad puzzled, but then bits and pieces began to slide together in his brain...the booth...the children...

"Oh, Lord, Pete, you can't be serious..."

But just then, the curtain pulled back. A small puppet with a large head, with a hand sticking up into its bottom, popped up from the bottom edge of the window. It had long brown hair, a pink dress, and one of those long, cone-shaped hats that no one outside of a doll-shop or fashion show would ever be caught dead wearing. It resembled a woman in much the same way that a colony of ants resembled a complicated mathematical formula; that is, there was no direct relation, but if you squinted hard enough and had a few drinks you might be willing to overlook a few flaws. As the puppet-woman strode 'majestically' around the 'stage,' a familiar, yet oddly normal voice came from the booth.

"Our story begins in the late afternoon, long ago. There was once a beautiful princess named Fastidious, who was, like pretty much every princess, locked away from the world by a dastardly villain."

At this, a second hand rose up, and on it was perched a puppet, also large-headed, who resembled Harvey the Barber, who worked over on 3rd Street. The only difference was that this puppet wore black, evil-looking armor, while Harvey's armor was purple, and he only wore it on Thursdays.

The puppet villain sneered out over the crowd, his handlebar mustache drooping over the edge of the booth. The children booed at it, and one devilish fellow even threw his hard-boiled egg at it. The voice continued.

"Yes, this...er, now egg-covered villain, Sir Mungo of Trent, had locked her away, so that her beauty, which was quite prevalent, would wither and decay in the top of the tallest tower."

One nosy parker in the front row raised his hand. "Why'd he do that?"

The man in the booth obviously didn't have an answer, as both puppets began scratching their heads and rubbing their chins. The villain then looked up, rubbing his

hands...well, puppet nubs that resembled hands...and proclaimed in a loud, snivelly voice, "Because I'm a right bastard, I am!" This outburst garnered much applause. The two puppets disappeared, to be replaced by three others. One was a tall, gangly fellow with blond hair, one was extremely corpulent and holding a sandwich, and the third was dressed in a smart black suit, holding a pipe, and looking very distinguished. To Henry, they seemed awfully familiar.

"Sir Mungo, however, was not very bright, and offered to give away the maiden's hand in marriage to any hero who could best him in a swordfight." The gangly, blond puppet began to hop and dance around, as the voice changed pitch to sound like a whiny cretin. "'Guh, I know! I shall be the one to slay the evil knight, because I have all the answers, and you two are complete morons!'" Suddenly, the knight reappeared, this time holding a sword. "But unfortunately, the brave hero was struck down by the knight in almost no time at all, for while his mouth was very fast, the rest of him was not." And the sword ran through the puppet, with a very convincing red substance pouring out of its chest, mouth, and eye sockets. Again, much applause from the small children. Henry clenched his fists tightly.

"But it was time for the second hero to try. But despite a brave face, this hero was far too dim-witted, even more so than Mungo, and was too fat to be of use in a swordfight. And so the knight killed him, too." And the rotund puppet was also stuck fast by the knight, and tons of gore sprayed out onto the children in the front row. Most of them giggled and slapped their knees before wiping the spray out of their eyes. A few tried to eat it. Henry's fists clenched even tighter, going white.

"And so, it came to be that only one hero was left, the smartest and most brilliantest man in the kingdom, and he knew exactly what to do. When the knight came to attack him, he ran away." And so the puppet did. "And as the knight gloried in his great triumph, that none in the land could best him, what he did not realize is that the hero had not in fact run away, but had gone to hide around the corner, and using his magic whistle, summoned his bestest friend in the whole world..."

And with that, a very familiar white shape, still lacking any facial features, came up from the bottom of the stage. The children all pointed at him and shouted, "IT'S SOCKMAN!"

"Yes, indeed! And Sockman, being an even bigger bastard than Sir Mungo, gobbled him up in two big bites!" The sock reached over and pulled the knight in two, and from this a continuous fountain of blood shot up into the air. The crowd began to go absolutely bananas.

Henry decided he had had enough. He kicked his way through the children (sending one flying into a nearby bush) and strode to the side of the booth. The person inside continued the show.

"Yes, after all that it was Sockman and his friend who had won the day, and because there were no other heroes left in the village, quite naturally the two of them shared all the young, beautiful maidens..."

Henry flung open the tiny door of the booth, revealing none other than Pete Williams, lying on his back, two puppets on his hands sticking up into the air, and two others on his upstretched feet. He was smiling quite widely until he saw who it was that had so rudely entered his place of business.

"Oh, uh, hey there, Henry. How have you been?"

“I’ve been fine, Pete. I see you have a bustling...puppet show. Tell me, has it been a lot of fun backstabbing your own friends for the purposes of giving children, who can’t tell their hands from their rear ends, a good laugh?”

Pete rolled forward, sitting up, pointing what remained of Sir Fobsley at Henry in an accusing manner. “Don’t you talk to me about backstabbing! You don’t even bother to do that, you, you...frontstabber!”

“Oh, real witty.” Henry stepped into the booth, towering over Pete, who rolled back onto his back. “So, you can beat me up when I’m a puppet, but here I am, in the flesh. Is it so easy now? What do you plan on doing about it?”

In reply, Pete smashed his foot into Henry’s shin. He yelled, grabbed it, and began hopping around as best he could in the cramped booth. The children, still watching, began to laugh and point, as a triumphant Puppet Pete popped up and began dancing around. This triumph was short-lived, and the children began screaming and crying as Henry wrapped his hands around Puppet Pete’s neck and squeezed until his button eyes flew off.

“Don’t! These puppets cost a fortune, you stupid twit!”

“Don’t call me a twit, you smelly trouser stain!”

A bare hand rose up to grab Henry’s neck and pulled him down. The booth began to shake violently, and then the wooden front of the booth exploded, planks of wood flying through the air as the two smashed through the wall and into the crowd. Children ran away from the square, taking whatever sweets they could with them. Henry rolled on top of Pete and began shaking him by the lapels, throwing Pete’s head this way and that. Pete slid his knees up, spun, and threw Henry to one side with a thud. He jumped onto Henry, pulled Sockman off of his foot, and tried to jam him into Henry’s mouth. The smell was enough to gag Henry, who finally gave up being nice and punched Pete right in the eye. Pete flew backward into a bush, where a small child yelped, got up, and scampered away.

Henry stood up, wiping his mouth. “Is that all you got, or do I need to—” He didn’t get to finish, as Pete barreled out of the bushes and tackled him, slamming him back first into a lamp post. Pete’s fists moved like lightning as he made quick work of Henry’s ribs and kidneys. Fighting through the pain, Henry grabbed Pete by the ears, pulled until Pete’s face rose to his, and proceeded to bite Pete’s nose. Pete yelled, and began clapping his hands over Henry’s ears. They both let go of each other and collapsed on opposite sides of the plaza, breathing heavily.

“You happy now, Henry? My show’s ruined, my puppets are in tatters...I’m really glad you decided to pay me a little visit.”

Henry reached into his pocket and pulled out the letter. “You’re upset? I’ve had this letter for awhile now, and all I could think of was the old days, when all of us were together...and I started thinking...” He whipped up some good fake tears as best he could. “I thought...wouldn’t it be great if we could get the gang together, you know, one last time, do the whole final job before retirement sort of thing? You don’t realize it, but...I missed you, Pete.”

And despite the phony tears, Henry suddenly realized he meant it. Sure, Pete had always been a handful, but he couldn’t think of any other time in his life that he enjoyed more than when he, Pete, and...all right, Jack too, had just been together, even when they weren’t planning capers.

It was almost pathetic, when he thought about it.

But now, as he waved the letter, he hoped beyond hopes that a violinist would just happen to wander by and start in with the sad music, because this would probably be the best moment for it. Instead, he heard the faint tones of a flute. He looked over and saw a down on his luck flautist tapping out a few notes, then smile and hold out his hand for a tip.

At that, Pete grabbed a rock and chucked it at the flautist's skull. It made a horrible noise and the man fell over unconscious. "Learn to play another instrument, you moron! The entire woodwind family is overrated!"

Henry smiled. "Couldn't have said it better myself."

"So, want to go get a drink?"

"Yeah, why not?"

"Sorry about your puppets...and your nose."

"Eh, don't feel too bad. I think that fight's been built up inside for five years."

"Was it worth it?"

"Dunno. I think so. You hurtin' at all?"

Henry rubbed his sides. "I think you ruptured something."

"Then it was worth it."

They sat in the Haunted Foghat Tavern in a side booth. At this time of day, only the most dedicated drunks came in to drink. The rest of the clientele were generally those in a less reputable business; Henry glanced around and saw at least three tables where money changed hands several times, as well as an under-the-table knifing. He would have reported it to Nick, but the fellow with the knife looked like the type to have lots of friends...friends in high places. It was best to leave things be. He went back to staring at the bowl of peanuts on the table. He seriously contemplated having one to eat.

Pete gulped down the last of his beverage and waved at Cait for another. She nodded and started pouring. "Ah, good stuff. So, tell me Henry, why aren't you drinking anything?"

"Er, uh...it's complicated."

Cait dropped the mug in front of Pete. "Not really. He doesn't have any money."

Pete raised an eyebrow. "So, it's good to hear the whole thieving thing is working out for you, buddy."

Henry sat up straight to make himself look more confident. It didn't work. "I admit, I have hit some hiccups along the way..."

Cait slid into the booth next to Pete. "Hiccups? More like a seizure."

"*But*, that's all about to change. Thanks to our good lady friend here, I've stumbled across an idea that could very well change the face of the thieving world forever. Think about it, we could become famous."

"Henry, we *are* famous."

"I meant in the *good* way, Pete. We wouldn't be laughing stocks. There'd be respect, respect for once in our lives."

Pete lightly sipped his ale. "That's what you said during the whole Boneboard incident, Henry. I think you also said there'd be riches and women, too. And we ended up with, oh, let me count...0 out of 3? Very successful venture."

Henry leaned over the table, studying Pete closely. “You know, Pete, there’s something different about you...other than the smart mouth, I mean. But I can’t quite tell what it is.”

“What, you mean, how I’m not crazy anymore?”

Henry snapped his fingers. “Ah ha! That’s it! What happened?”

Pete sighed. “Well, if your memory stretched back further than last week, you might remember that when we first met I wasn’t actually crazy. Our group just needed someone to fill a role, and since team leader and incompetent sidekick were taken, I became comic relief. Simple as that.”

“Comic relief? I don’t remember you being all that funny.”

“Well, *you* certainly wouldn’t. But I think it became a real condition after Farnsworth’s mansion, and the c...c...c-c-cannon.” Pete turned visibly pale and swallowed a good gulp of his ale.

Cait looked confused. “Cannon? What happened with a cannon?”

Henry gulped and rubbed the back of his neck. “Er, uh...it’s complicated.”

Pete sniffed, on the verge of tears. “I was shot with a cannon three times. Blown clear off of a roof.”

“Well, not that complicated, I guess.”

Cait gave Henry a dirty look. “I thought *you* were the one who got shot with the cannon. I gave you a free drink the night you told me that story.”

Pete folded his arms, his sniffing replaced by a suspicious look. “Did he, now? Free drink?”

“Would you just get back to your story, Pete?” Henry shrunk in his seat. “It was just one drink. And it tasted terrible.”

“Anyway, after that we went into the Boneboard, and after the late Jean Zantar almost got us blown up, I lost Sockman.”

Cait rubbed Pete’s shoulder. “Oh, I’m so sorry. A friend of yours?”

“A good friend. Didn’t talk much, but always willing to help in a pinch.”

Henry slapped his hand on the table. “Oh, come off it, Pete. It was a sock. You didn’t even put *eyes* on it.”

Cait blinked. “So, wait, you’re not referring to someone named Sockman, you mean a man who’s made out of a sock?”

At that, Pete stood as best he could in the booth, pushed her hand away, and glared at Cait angrily. “He’s not just a sock! He’s Sockman! It’s capitalized for a reason! *You got that?*” After a moment, Pete’s face calmed, and he sat back down, grabbing his drink again. “I’m...I’m sorry. I thought I had worked through everything, but I guess I need a few more sessions with Doctor Wences.”

Now it was Henry’s turn to raise an eyebrow. “Doctor? Sessions?”

A drunk at the next table over raised his head, his eyes red with inebriation. “Capitalized?”

“Oh, shut up.” Henry leaned in close. “You’ve been seeing a doctor? For what?”

Pete rolled his eyes. “I was going crazy and you have no idea why I’d go and see a doctor? Do you realize how idiotic that sounds?” Pete waited for Henry to answer, but upon seeing Henry mugging and stalling for an answer, he continued. “As I was saying, when Sockman fell apart something in my mind snapped. I just...just couldn’t take it

anymore. Everything in my life that I loved was gone. So I did what everyone else does when they have trouble in their life...I immediately sought reliable, professional help.”

Henry tried to interject, as if to say that most people with troubles often times entered an establishment such as this, as he did the night before and was so vehemently denied a glass of ‘relief,’ but Cait waved to stop him, as if to say that if he did anything at all to derail Pete’s story one more time, she would find some way to make him pay for it later, possibly painful. He decided to stop.

“Dr. Wences pulled me through it all. He showed me a way out of my funk, that everything, in the end, was ‘s’all right.’ And he diverted my creative energies towards something positive. That is, my show in the park. During my first week, Sockman the Second was born, and things were going well...until you showed up. Now my booth is ruined and several years of therapy nearly went straight out the window.” Pete finished the rest of his drink in a single gulp. “So, what *is* this big idea of yours, anyway?”

“A bad one, if anyone’s still listening to me.” Cait stood up. “If you don’t mind, I have *real* work to do.” She dusted off her leather apron and went back over to the bar.

Pete rubbed his finger around the top of his empty glass, watching Cait as she grabbed a rag and began wiping the counter. “Huh. Weird.”

“You got that right.” Henry was studying a peanut he had pulled out of the bowl. The peanut in question was shaped in a rather rude manner.

“No, no, I mean her. It’s weird that she likes you.”

“She likes me?” Henry threw the peanut across the room, where another patron began to comment, loudly, on its rather rude shape. “What the hell are you talking about? Didn’t you see her just now? She’s been trying to stop me from doing this job ever since I came up with it!”

“My point exactly.”

“Shut up. What makes you so sure she likes me, then?”

“Because of the way she’s cleaning that bar.”

Henry turned to see Cait whipping the rag around the counter. Her movement became so rapid that the rag actually flew out of her hand and got itself entangled in the coat rack. Before she could get it back, a patron got up, mistook it for his hat, and left. She sighed and put her head down on the counter.

“So, your evidence is that she gave the bar a violent toweling.”

“It means she’s concerned about you, Henry.”

“Ah. So why, then, is it so weird?”

“Because I didn’t think anybody liked you.” Pete smiled. “Would you look at that, I’m out of money and out of drink. To Jack’s?”

It would probably come as no surprise to learn that Jack’s house smelled of various kinds of food, since Jack’s mother left the kitchen only to catch a little sleep now and then (not always, though; more than once Jack had had to pry her snoring head out of some freshly kneaded dough or a bowl of sauce). Today, Henry caught a whiff of eggs & sausage and tomato soup, which he assumed were breakfast and lunch, respectively. Trying to outdo them both currently was a mixture of rabbit, curry spices, potatoes, rice, and a lemon pie for dessert.

As Pete stepped in behind Henry, he sniffed the air as well, and a smile crossed his face. “You know, I almost forgot why Jack ate so much. If I lived here, I’d probably be as big as he is.”

“Hey, don’t insult Jack in his own...well, his mother’s home.”

“And why not?”

“Cause that’s my job.”

“Fair enough.”

As if on cue, Jack came waddling down the stairs. “Oh, hello, fellas. Come on in, Mum’s got dinner going.”

And what a dinner it was. Jack’s dining room, not very big to begin with, was almost impossible to move through. The enormous wooden table that dominated the room was overflowing with plates of...well, everything Henry had ever considered eating at some point of his life. So extensive was the collection that not only was there no space for them to sit, but there was also stacks of food on the floor, above the fireplace, cooling in the window...he could swear that a pot of fish hung on the chandelier as well. As Henry tried his best to lean against a tower of roast beef, Mrs. Roberts came into the room, carrying a steaming basket of cornbread.

For all the food she cooked, Mrs. Roberts never gained an ounce. She was a few inches shorter than Pete, and probably weighed half as much. Heck, she probably weighed half as much as the pudding that acted as centerpiece. It was amazing that Jack hadn’t accidentally swallowed her during one of his late night binges.

Mrs. Roberts placed the basket down on top of a chocolate-covered turkey. “Helloooo, boys, come on in and grab a seat.”

Henry coughed politely. “Believe me, Mrs. Roberts, I’d like to, but it’s a little difficult to find room in—”

“Oh, pshaw! Jack will find you some room. Jack? Would you please?”

She didn’t have to ask twice. Soon, around the table were several chairs, as well as a stack of recently cleaned plates. They all sat, Pete taking a moment to clean a turkey wing and a lump of jelly out of his hair that had landed there during Jack’s little ‘cleaning session.’

Eating commenced. For Henry and Pete, to have even a small taste of the bounty stacked up here was a godsend, because in their lines of work, luxuries such as food and shelter came few and far between. Here, luxury actually meant something; everything was cooked to perfection, from the golden brown, gravy-drizzled meats to the fluffy buttered pastries.

Henry burped loudly. “Par for the course, Mrs. Roberts, and you do realize I mean the finest course. You know, one of those ones without all the sandtraps and guards set up all over the place to keep out the riffraff like us.”

His only reply was a vicious snore, as Mrs. Roberts had once again passed out from the sheer exhaustion of making sure her little muffin never knew the pain and sorrow of being a bit peckish from time to time. Henry looked around for his napkin, and became confused when it didn’t seem to be around anymore. Then, as he noticed Jack slurp up a large chunk of cloth along with a large helping of pasta, Henry shrugged and wiped his mouth with his sleeve.

“Well, now that *that’s* out of the way, I believe it is time to start making plans for our...” Henry saw that Jack was still eating (and dangerously close to choking on a loaf

of bread the size of his expansive rear end), while Pete appeared to be picking through the chicken on his plate. “Um, gentlemen?”

Pete waved a hand and kept picking at his meal. “One second...Jack, did you use capers in this? When your mother wakes up, you really have to have her give me the recipe.”

“Pete, when you’re through assing around, there’s a different type of caper that demands your attention.”

Jack perked up, a chewed lump of salmon falling from his upper lip onto his plate. “There’s more than one type of caper? Where do you get them? Mum always gets hers from...”

Henry banged his fist against the table. “I’m not talking about the food capers, you table-frobbing miscreant!”

Jack tilted his head to one side. Henry could imagine a set of marbles sliding from the one end of Jack’s brain to the other, finding the right slots to fit into and complete the puzzle set before him. “Oh, right. Well, if you don’t mind, I think we can all go into the sitting room and talk about it there. My dad used to keep a chalkboard in there, for when he wanted to show me all the stuff he did in the army.”

Henry had almost completely forgotten that Jack’s father was military and away at post; for years he had fallen under the delusion that somewhere, beneath the many pots and pans that made up most of the Roberts household (and probably part of the foundation as well), Jack’s father lay, crushed, surviving only by the bits of food and drink that hit the floor. But now that Jack mentioned it, he remembered that around town, Eustace Roberts IX was often times referred to by many things, such as “Valiant War Hero” and “That Fellow That Totally Knows How to Shot a Pigeon in Its Knick-Knacks from 300 Yards.” Henry had driven these thoughts from his mind, because when it came to words like that, only the phrase “Knick-Knacks” had ever applied to him, often preceded by “So, how many times did those children kick you in the...?”

“Well then, my robust friend, dig out that chalkboard and prepare to be dazzled by sheer brilliance.”

Pete snickered. “That’s rich.”

“Oh? What’s so funny?”

“Shear Brilly Ent’s lives on the other side of town. And I doubt he, his thousands of sheep, and his dazzling skills would be of any use to us.”

Henry groaned. “My God, did you really say that? That’s the worst pun I’ve ever heard in my life.”

“Excuse me, I think you wanted me to join up because I would be the comedy relief.”

“Well, you’re not funny anymore. Get some practice.”

The sitting room contained more than its fair share of collectibles and simple junk collected over the years. The chalkboard, long since unused, was now the home of several old dishtowels, a family of rats, and something that may have been, at one time, chalk. Henry didn’t believe chalk could decompose, seeing as it was mostly minerals, but the piece he now held somehow did. He’d never known chalk to squish so disconcertingly as he held it, and it slurped as he dragged it across the board.

Jack took up the one plastic-covered couch in the room by himself, so Pete had to make do with clearing space on the floor. In the process he uncovered a green rug so hidden by the passage of time that its garish lime color still didn't hold up to anyone's sense of taste even today. They sat, Jack enraptured, Pete bored, as Henry drew up a massive diagram, full of arrows, captions, and complete and utter nonsense. When he finished, he tapped...er, slopped the chalk against the drawing of a large building.

"This is St. Edgar's cathedral. Three nights ago, a chalice used in various special ceremonies was stolen from it with no clues as to who did it, save for the fact that only a master criminal could have pulled it off." He tapped an area below that, which contained a smaller building surrounded by smiling, dancing stick figures. "According to some inquiries I made this morning after I visited Jack, the Pagans also reported that some..." He dug around in his pocket for a scrap of paper. "Let's see, I have the quote here... 'Tricksy manfool made off with our Jacknall's Paw, he dids, and makes us quite peeved in the most highest ways. Say, uh, you wouldn't happen to have a quarters, would you? I needs to buy somethings to get my parkings validated.'" He crumpled the paper and threw it into a pile of laundry. "That happened two nights ago."

Pete folded his arms. "Thank you for the history lesson. Can we get on with it, now?"

Henry nearly dropped his chalk. "That's not comic relief."

"I changed my mind. Jack can double as the simpleton and comic relief. I've decided to be the 'handsome, reckless loner' type. Why do you think I dressed all in black?"

"You always dressed in black."

"Yes, but now I have a reason to...that is, other than owning nothing but black suits."

Jack raised his hand. "So, what does all this have to do with our plan?"

Henry applauded, spraying chalk goo around the room. "And the 'simpleton' gets the ball rolling again, thank you. Now, as you can see, both of these robberies, though seemingly unconnected, were most likely the work of the same individual, since both were conducted by master criminals. Since nearly every master criminal in the city died in the Bonehoard five years ago, there's really only one person left besides us capable of pulling this off."

"You mean Garrett."

"Of course I mean Garrett, Pete. And what, pray tell, would cause someone of his caliber to suddenly make off with both Hammer and Pagan artifacts two nights in a row?"

Pete stared at the ceiling. "Boredom? Revenge?"

Jack raised his other hand, having forgotten to lower the first one earlier. "Maybe he needs it as part of some sort of strange favor to a friend, not realizing that it is all leading to a deep, dark secret the likes of which could tear the city in half, releasing chaos and destruction in its wake?"

"No, you're both wrong. It's so obvious that you're clearly too stupid to see it. He did it because *no one had ever done it before*. Name me one other person who would openly give the finger to the two most powerful factions in the city next to the Cheesemongers Association. Can't, can you? What he's done equivocates to the 'Crime of the Century!'"

Jack raised his foot in the air, and with his balance shifted he tilted to a 45 degree angle, resembling a turtle with an inner ear disorder. "I still don't see what this has to do with us."

"Put your limbs down, Jack. The point is we are about to do something that even Garrett would be proud of: we are going to steal something even *more* valuable from the Hammers and the Pagans!"

The room, which was already silent, stayed silent. Henry, beaming, expected something, anything, whether it was a polite applause or some mild heckling from Pete. But as the chalk in his hand wiggled like an old slice of key lime pie, his two co-conspirators simply stared at him. He tried a different tact. "You see, they have..."

Pete stood, refolding his arms once he got to his feet. "You...absolute...idiot. What in the world are you thinking? Garrett goes out and does this huge job, and your answer to it is to do the same thing? How in the world is this some sort of spectacular, career-defining stunt?"

At last! Henry raised his hand up high, feeling chalk running down his arm. "Don't you get it? We're fulfilling the greatest dream any thief has ever had: one-upmanship! This is the same thing that happened way back in the days of the Golden Age of the Gentlemen Thieves. Remember Lord Frobbman of Codswallop's intense rivalry with Arthur 'The Baron' Swagheaper?"

Pete and Jack glanced at each other. "No."

Henry's eyes glazed over as he told them the story he had read in one of his many trips to the library. Frobbman, a nobleman with a 'Robin Hood' streak, had a penchant for robbing fellow nobles while wearing a golden outfit. He had no need for skulking around in the shadows; rather, he detested that sort of thing out of a sense of honor. Though he kept his identity hidden to protect his loved ones, he treated every single one of his robberies with honor, dignity and grace. Arthur Swagheaper was the utter antithesis of his rival, having risen to the head of a gang of lowlifes from a life of poverty and destitution. He loved the shadows, striking fast and quick, often leaving a trail of bodies in his wake. Whereas Lord Frobbman was greatly loved by the lower classes for his bravery and derring-do, Swagheaper ruled his small 'barony' with an iron fist.

For years, their paths never crossed, as their respective business practices kept them running in different circles. That is, until they both set their eyes on the same prize: The gemstones of Lady Cutlery of Fent. Lord Frobbman loved Lady Cutlery and wanted to wed her, but felt she had too great an attachment to her riches and not enough to decent human kindness and understanding. So, he set up a scheme to take several of her most prized gemstones, and distribute them to the needy, so she could finally have the scales removed from her eyes and see life wasn't all glitz, glamour, and parties.

Swagheaper, on the other hand, thought they would look really nice in his private john. They arrived at her estate at the same time, and when they both realized they were after the same thing, held what was allegedly one of the most exciting swordfights never seen by the public. Frobbman escaped with the loot, and within the week also made off with the Lady's heart. They were married soon thereafter.

Swagheaper did not take this sitting down. Even though he did not know the true identity of the thief that had beaten him, he knew they would meet again. For years, Swagheaper would pull off a caper, only to find Frobbman would conduct one even more spectacular the same night. Swagheaper swore he would get his revenge someday.

And with the small slip of the tongue of a drunk in a tavern who had seen Frobsman removing his disguise, he knew he finally had it.

Frobsman returned one fateful night to find his beloved dead, stabbed once through the heart with a rusty dagger. Upon removing the dagger and grieving at her loss, he turned his attention to a note that had been attached to the blade. It read:

You had a choice when we first met: you could have left the jewels to me and had the lady. Next time, know the consequences of your choices. The Baron has spoken.

The last time either man was seen alive was the day after Lady Cutlery's funeral, when Lord Frobsman went to 'The Baron's' hideout and challenged him to a duel near the lighthouse overlooking the bay. No one knows quite what happened next, but the next morning, they were found at the bottom of the Cliff of Depressed Poets, the waves washing over their bodies. The Watch guards, who in those days were very professional and well-trained, determined the two men had engaged in a battle at the top of the cliff and had fallen off. However, they could not be sure if the men had stabbed each other, at the same time, before or during the fall.

Henry didn't know what drew him to the story: was it the romance of a story of two legendary combatants, ended in such theatrical tragedy? Or maybe it was the really cool illustration of the two falling off of the cliff, both of their daggers raised high? Perhaps it was because right after he finished the tale, he turned to the next page and found somebody had hidden a really neat-o comic about the savage lands of Lumbagia in the book. Whatever it may have been, it had left a deep impression...quite literally, because when he saw what the barbarians of Lumbagia did after they were through pillaging, he dropped the anthology of thieving tales on his big toe.

"So Henry, if I understand you right, we pull off this job, then spend the rest of our lives contemplating all the ways we could have spent our loot as we plunge to certain death over a cliff?"

"Well, everything sounds bad when you put certain death at the end of it, Pete."

Jack started to put up a hand again, but when he saw Henry's glance of sheer consternation he put it down. "So what are we stealing, exactly?"

"Thank you, Jack, I was just getting to it." Henry erased his articulately detailed drawings of a Pagan stronghold and St. Edgar's cathedral and took a few minutes replacing them with a larger outline of an even bigger cathedral, with a glowing hammer floating next to it. "Do you remember, about seven years ago there was that announcement that a big construction project was to be happening in that lovely picnicking spot at the edge of the City? Well, during all that time I spent in the library looking at the 'Kommunaty Evants Noozlettah' I learned a bit about it. The Hammers, with the help of their 'voluntary' workforce of heretics and 'persons of suspicious religious leanings,' finished it earlier last week. It's called the 'Builder's Retreat,' and the complex contains a cathedral with a capacity of two thousand for regular services, housing large enough for an entire diocesan workforce, inquisitorial services capable of converting hundreds daily, and who knows what else. As rumor has it, there is a secret passage underneath the place that leads to some sort of underground smelting chamber. Inside that chamber is, reportedly...get ready for it...the Builder's Hammer."

At this, Pete's incredulous expression swapped itself rather handily for one of awe. "The Builder's Hammer?"

Jack, who had found a leftover rib roast between the couch and the end table, dropped the dusty food and echoed Pete's question.

"That's right. The very object the Builder used to forge the cornerstone of His first church."

Pete stuttered and spluttered, looking for the right words. "But I thought...didn't it...wasn't that whole thing about the Builder just a story?"

"Not as far as I know. Brother William always said it did exist, but that it had been lost over a century ago. Apparently, it had never been lost, the Hammers were just keeping it under wraps until they could find a nice, safe place to put it."

Pete walked over to Henry and grabbed him by the shirt. "Are you serious? Do you realize how absolutely *insane* this is?"

"Insane? You're one to talk."

"I told you, that's over and done with. Henry, the Hammers are not stupid. We're talking about one of the single most important artifacts the world has ever seen. Besides the obvious booby traps the thing has, as soon as we even *think* of going near it the Hammers will have us tied upside-down by our grapes and drinking hot metal for breakfast."

"Ah, but that's just it. I have a very cunning plan, one so cunning it will make people wet their pants in sheer amazement!"

And Henry went on to explain his plan. He got to the part where they set fire to the building when Pete stopped him.

"Henry, that's...a really, really terrible idea. That won't work at all."

Henry threw up his hands, and as he did so the chalk went flying up towards the ceiling and stuck there. "Oh, really? Well, Mister Smartytrousers, we're hitting the place tomorrow evening, and it took me a whole three hours last night to devise this plan! If you can come up with a better one, I'd like to hear it!"

And so Pete gave him one.

