

Things are Tough all Over by Celli the Happy Go Lucky Celaphopod

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“WHAT?” Artismo yelled.

“WHAT?” Artismo yelled again only louder. It really wasn’t clear why he was yelling, just that he was. He was the award winning--seven time award winning to be precise--fantasy author in his alter ego, his stage persona as it were, his alter identity.

“WHAT???” he yelled again. He didn’t really know why he was yelling. Let’s be honest, he was stalling... or building the suspense. That was it, building the suspense. That had a good ring to it. It indicated that he knew where he was going with all of this, and that the reason he was the recipient of the--coveted and highly selective--Delusional Award, was not just because he was a leading sponsor--OK, the leading sponsor--of Con-In-My-Head, but also, on most occasions he was the sole attendee.

And as much as this aside fed his ego, it did not however drive the plot, and so he took it upon himself to yell, “WHAT?” again at the top of his lungs.

He did this because he knew that stories that start with dialogue sell better than stories that start with endless back story or bits of trivia--like recent awards and honors that the author may have received recently. Of course, yelling, “WHAT?????????” over and over again--no matter how many question marks you add to the end of it--can hardly be called dialogue, so even he--the aforementioned award winning fantasy author--knew it was time to move this bad boy along and have someone respond his entreaty.

“WHAT?”

“We’s say’s meester.”

“You’s no welcomes.”

“You’d commees any’ied furtheries.”

“We’d gotta poke’s you’d wit da stick.”

They were Cobalts. No the name wasn’t misspelled. If they were Kobalts, or Kobalds, or Whatever’s, the name would be misspelled, but the name was Cobalt and as a careful examination of the first and second occurrence of the name will suggest that if it was spelled correctly the second time, it was spelled right the first time, as well.

This of course is boring, so to move things along the narrator, who we shall call Artismo for obvious reasons (as that is his name), decides it is best to repeat his line once again, “WHAT?”

“Dat boring too’s meester.”

“Yeah’d.”

“You’d sayee dat like twenty times now’d.”

“It’s only been six,” Artismo responded self consciously.

“I don’t know’d.”

“Eet seem’d like more.”

“Like way’d more.”

“Fine. It was twenty. Have it your way,” the narrator concedes. I mean, he was right, he just went back and counted the occurrences before he spoke the number, but arguing with Cobalts is a losing proposition. They’re none to smart.

“We’s know’d more’d den you’d tink.”

“Likee’s we’d know’d you’d sayee it twenty timers.”

“Probabliers fifties by nowers.”

“Maybes more’d.”

“Whatever.” It really wasn’t important. Really, what he should do is just turn tail and walk down the street.

“Dat good idears.”

“You’d walkee aways with tail between leggers.”

“You’d savee face dat’a ways.”

Like I said, it’s what I should do, but first things first.

“We’d be like at second tingers now’d.”

“Maybe’d tirds.”

“Psst. I’d tink we gotta givee heem da breaks.”

“On accountees of heem being dislexic.”

“Oh’d.”

“Right.”

“Yes. So where was I?”

“You calling second tingies first.”

“Right.” First things first, before I leave, I should explain why.

“We already doo’d dat.”

“You’d no welcomed.”

“Dis soverenties of da imergination...”

“Da Magic Nation.”

“And, you’d no’d welcomes.”

“You’d takee da liberties.”

“So’d, you’d be da excilered.”

I think that sums it up. If anybody has any questions. I’ll be in the next scene licking my wounds.

“You’d still gotto describee us’d.”

“You’d no can leavies, till you do.”

Fine. They are Cobalts. Crack open a RPG rule book, or if you don’t like that suggestion, just use the description from the last story you read that had walking, talking lizard men in it that stood about three feet tall, and who prevented their due and rightful master from utilizing them in a story because... “What was that rationale again?”

“You’d be’d declared da enemy’d of da Charlies.” It’s what the Cobalts call themselves--every last one of them. Whenever a momma Cobalt and papa Cobalt have a child, they choose one of the many names available to them from a broad list and for whatever reason they always choose the same one: Charlie.

“Et da only’d name on da list.”

“Meester not mentioner’d dat.”

“He’d lazy.”

“Der like thousands of’d us.”

“And eberyone hab’d da same name’d.”

“Et confusing.”

“You’d invitee you’rd best friend...”
“Charlie.”
“Ober’d to watchee da game and eberyone show’d up.”
“Eet rediculouusers.”
“Fine,” the artist otherwise known as Artismo said as he walked away from the Cobolt’s embassy and into the next scene.

###

“WHAT?”
“Oh, don’t even be trying that Sch©lte in here. Do it right.”
“I’m not believing this.”
“Neither am I. Do it right, or I’ll file a grievance.”
“What?”
“A grievance,” the Ogre said slowly. Is that fine? Is that sufficient? Is that the sort of color text you’re after?
“Now describe me,” the Ogre insisted, and he was pressing his luck if you ask me. But Fine. Whatever. He’s an ogre. What more do you need to know. Big. Fat. Ugly.
“Hey!” the ogre interrupts.
“What the Fr@ck? At least keep the tense!”
“That’s not my problem,” the Ogre insists. “You got a problem with tense that’s your problem.”
“How about a little word variance?”
“Once again. Not - My - Problem.”
Oh. I hate the union. The little Cobalts would never have gotten so cocky as to declare their independence if it wasn’t for the Ogres.
“And the Goblins.”
And the Goblins. It’s like every stinking...
“That’s two,” the Ogre says interrupting.
“Two what?”
“Two. You know,” the Ogre repeats refusing to help out. Fine. I’ll do it all. The Ogres and the Goblins...
“And the Orcs, Defilers...”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah...” and then the narrator pauses, before he asks hopefully, “You going to explain why I’m here?”

“Not my job,” the Ogre replies as he picks up a paper and pretends to read--as if he could--pausing only to say, “That’s three.”

Bottom line is the horde formed a union and now before I can get any of them to do anything I’ve got to put it past a review committee.

“He’s not really explaining it right.”

“So, now you’d like to help.”

“Sorry. Can’t really do anything for you without a script.”

“I’ve got a script.”

“Let’s see it.”

“Well, it’s more of a concept.”

“Un-hu,” the Ogre replies as he shakes his paper and busies himself with the comics.

“Close, but you’re still on three,” the Ogre comments, before flicking the page. I’m guessing he’s seen other folks do it with papers and so he’s just playing along.

“I’m taking an acting seminar,” he agrees.

“No four.”

“I’m in a good mood... besides you’ll slip.”

Which is true. At some point I’m going to want to continue with the description of the fetid, ugly, stank, disgusting creature before me.

“There you go. That’s four, five, six, and seven. Will you being paying by cash or charge.”

“Maybe you should just put it on my bill.”

“I feel it’s only fair to warn you that we took a vote at the last meeting and decided to charge you interest. You know, on account of how you never pay your bill.”

“I feel it’s only fair to warn you, it’ll be a cold day...”

“Yeah. Where?” the Ogre asks as he stands up and just sort of tosses the desk out of the way as if it was made out of cardboard

or something. He's trying to be intimidating, and well, it's working.

"Um, er, well," the narrator, says as he takes a few steps backwards. The intent is to put a few more feet between him and the Ogre, but the Ogre just sort of casually takes a step forward and the distance is closed.

"Where?" he repeats.

"Jamaica," Artismo offers. Not really the destination he had in mind a few short moments ago, but you know how these conceptual pieces work, they just sort of flit here and there, and if in the course of the story it makes sense to bribe a character not to pound you into some sort of indistinguishable goo, well then, I say let the story flow where it will, but the Ogre isn't interested.

"It's too hot on the beach. I sweat too much."

I don't suppose we need to elaborate on the fact that it would be a cold day or something, but Ogre's aren't all that smart.

"That's eight," but he's already set his desk back to rights and reaching for his paper as the narrator departs. But the scene is not quite over. As we leave the door, we can here the Ogre trying to work out a little math problem as we leave.

"700 words... let's call it 1,000 at half of five cents a word, plus \$80 in demerits, that comes to..."

More than I'll make for the whole stinking story.

###

The point is, ever since the horde formed a union and the Cobalts partitioned off half my mind and declared it their little slice of Sovereignty, writing has not been as easy--or as lucrative--as it once had been.

I tend to spend my days in the market place.

"No loitering."

"What the?"

"Just joking." Well, if it isn't my old friend Pete the Paladin.

"Not going to change that name are you?"

“Why? It works. Um, tell me,” the narrator asks, you know, just out of curiosity, “before we go any further... You still are honoring that vow of poverty.”

“You mean, am I willing to work for free?”

“Well... I mean... Not as such. There is the exposure.”

Of course, Pete’s never been too thrilled about his vows, but you know, “It is what it is,” as he smiles and agrees amiably enough. “Oh, but remember, now, you’ve got to put a line in there about Karthrax.”

“Like go Karthrax or something.”

“No. I think it’s got to be something more along the lines of if you do right by Karthrax, he’ll do right by you.”

“Did he get a new publicist or something?”

“No.” Pete suddenly looks around worriedly. “I’m trusting you. You’re always going on about how you’re an artiste and all. Dress it up. Make Karthrax sound like a good guy.”

And the temptation is to ask Pete if maybe Karthrax isn’t a good guy, but I’ve got a feeling Karthrax is. He came out in favor of same sex marriage you know.

“So how are things with you and Bo Peep,” the transsexual, cross dressing, yada, yada, Cyclops.

“Don’t be bringing that up. She was a maid in distress. I have my vows.”

“Un-huh.”

“Which include chastity,” Pete adds hastily. “Look, if you’re going to be like that, I can just leave.”

“No. No. I’m just kidding.”

“You know if I was evil, you’d be dead for that.”

“I thought, we were just going to change the subject.”

“OK. Fair enough.”

###

Like I was saying, I spend a lot of my time in the communal areas: marketplaces, generic dungeons, and open mountains. You

know, places like that aren't owned by any competing author, or that hasn't been cordoned off by one corner of my mind or another for said split personalities' own nefarious purposes.

“WOW!”

“What?”

“You're not going to start that again are you?” Pete asks.

“No. You're just saying ‘WOW!’ all of a sudden. It's only natural to say ‘What?’ in response.”

The pair of them are sitting in the middle of a NON DESCRIPT FANTASY SETTING. Probably some dusty, two bit village on the edge of nowhere. I'm guessing it's just down the street from some dungeon, crypt, dragon's lair, or whatever, but for now it's just plain old medieval filth.

“Nobody cares about that anymore,” Pete interjects.

“Look. I've got a job to do,” Artismo replies haughtily.

“You protect the world from evil, or whatever it is that you do, and I'll write compelling fiction.”

“Compelling?”

“I can do this scene alone you know?” which sort of shuts Pete up, because although he'd likes to go on about his vow of poverty, the fact is you still got to pony up to the orphanage or something at a cent a word for any scene he's in.

“You're not supposed to say that,” Pete objects.

“At twenty percent off the top, I'll say what I like... Now, where were we?”

“WOW!”

“What?”

“I was saying ‘Wow!’” Pete explains.

“Why?”

“Look,” and this time Pete actually points. You know, if I didn't know better, I'd think he was just stalling to pad the words out. I mean, did you know you can feed 10,000 screaming kids for a month for just a penny a word. So, go figure. Seriously, imagine what a person could do with union rates, but I digress.

“Now that is something,” Pete says not just to get that all important additional line of dialogue in the story, but because... Well, Artismo can be a bit unfocused at times.

“Who are you looking at?” Artismo asks.

“The girl,” Pete replies obliquely.

“Which girl?”

“The one walking this way. Just act natural.”

I do believe Pete is a bit nervous. I don't know why. The girl is nothing special.

“Don't say that,” Pete whispers.

I'm just saying, she looks like any other girl.

“Her head is covered.”

And this is true. You know how it is. She's wearing rags, or coarse linen or something, some sort of full length cloak thing that completely covers herself up. I'm not really seeing what's so special about her...

And then she flips back the top of her cloak revealing her face.

“WOW!” Artismo agrees.

“That's what I've been saying.”

In theory the girl was going to get some water from the well or something. I knew there was a reason me and Pete decided to sit here, but she has forgotten about all of that.

“You are a servant of Karthrax,” she asks as she kneels down before Pete.

“Hey. What gives?” Artismo asks. “Come on. I didn't do all this set up just so you can get the girl. Besides you're celibate and all.”

“Relax,” Pete assures the narrator as he looks the girl over in an entirely un-paladin--as apposed to an anti-paladin--type way. You really have to be careful about these things. There is nothing Pete would like better than to ditch those vows--all of them--but Karthrax is a stickler. Basically, when Pete said till the end of time ole' Karthrax took him for his word at it.

Anyhow, the point is the girl is just to die for, or as is more common in these stories to kill for. I mean, you can just see it in her eyes, she's got some quest that needs doing, some dragon that needs slaying, or some...

"We're going to need to update your clothes," Artismo says after a lengthy pause and then it is finally time for someone else to say, "What?" in this case the girl.

"You want to be a star don't you?" Artismo continues.

"I'm just a poor peasant girl."

"Yeah. Yeah. Yada. Yada," Artismo says as he helps the girl to her feet and encourages the surprised--if slightly confused maiden--to turn around. "Definitely need to lose the rags. Got any royalty in you?"

"What?" the girl asks bewildered.

"I fair it's only fair to warn you that I will be honor bound to slay you where you stand if you finish the punch line," Pete warns.

"Sheesh. It's just a joke," and then deciding quickly, the narrator looks around. "I could use a drink. I know you're in," he says to Pete without even looking. Perhaps unfortunately for Pete he never took an oath of sobriety, temperance, or moderation. The guy's pretty much a lush.

"No. I gave it up."

"You're kidding."

"No really. Clean and sober."

"Un-huh," the narrator asks suspiciously.

"Look, you wrote it yourself. I've been clean for well over a thousand words. Hundreds of thousands if you include all the stories I've never been in. I'm through with the stuff."

"Fine. Suit yourself. How about you sweetheart? How'd you like to be discovered?"

It's odd, but at this point she looks to Pete for guidance. "It's alright, I'll protect you," he assures her.

"OK," she agrees. And is it just me, or does the whole world light up when she smiles. What a face! What a smile! What stage presence! I'll make a star out of her.

#

So here we are. In the tavern, bar, pub. Whatever. It's where all these stories begin.

"Or end," Pete points out.

"Don't be starting."

"That's just it, you're not. You're finishing."

"Fine. Let it go. It's not funny."

After a pause, Pete points out, "I'm not saying anything. Set the scene. This is your moment man. On with the show, author dude."

Ah, yes. There they are: the hero, which will be played by Pete the Paladin star of script, verse, and prose; and the mysterious stranger, probably a wizard, but I'm not really sure yet, played by yours truly--Artismo Jones, seven time World Day-Dream Grand Champion, all around good guy, and ladies man.

But enough of setting the scene. Let's get some drinks.

"Wench! Set us up," he calls out across the crowded bar...

OK. So it's not so crowded. The Charlies would not leave their sovereign domain, the Ogres and what not wanted cash in advance, and let's face it, for every little piddling extra you put in a scene, you got to pay them a share, so it's pretty much me, Pete, and the girl. But not to worry, I'm sure we'll figure out some sort of rationale...

Um, and I guess now would be a good time for that...

"You think," Pete asks. And is it just me, or is a sarcastic paladin pretty much an unneeded--not to mention unwanted--extra at this point. I mean, we've got me. Obviously I've been carrying the show... and the story is probably going to make a lot more sense if we just assume the whole town just got wiped out...

"You could be some sort of evil wizard," Pete suggests.

I must admit. It throws me. "Where does that come from?" the narrator asks him.

“Well, I mean, I don’t just want to be casually dismissed just because you don’t want to pay fair rates. And I am here. So, why not say you’re this evil warlord dude, and you’ve killed everybody else because the fair maiden...”

“Rolanda,” the fair maiden replies.

“Obviously we’ll have to work on the name, maybe something like Ray’londa.” Pete continues.

“Wow.”

“The time for that has come and gone,” Pete replies.

“No. I’m just saying, I’m impressed Pete. You came up with that on the spur of the moment. I’ve been overlooking your talent. Maybe I should write you into more of these bits.”

“That would be good,” Pete agrees shaking his head energetically in agreement, “but back to the present. You’re this big bad warlord. Laid waste to the entire town, or whatever it is that warlords do, and then, I could come rescue Ray’londa. Perhaps we’d have a big sword fight.”

“I don’t do swords,” Artismo replies as he looks Ray’londa over. She’s cleaned up well. And let’s face it, in any story I’m likely to write, bar wenches don’t wear as much clothing as their townsfolk counterparts. So after the girl puts the drinks on the table--nothing but traditional fantasy hot chocolate for me thank you very much, and a pleasing glass of orange juice for Pete-- Artismo instructs the girl to sit in his lap.

And once again she’s looking to Pete for guidance.

“I’ll rescue you,” he assures her, and I suppose that’s good enough, because she just sort of sits down, and makes herself at home.

“This could be good,” Artismo comments.

“To the success of the endeavor,” Pete says as he raises his cup.

“Yes! To the success of the endeavor,” Artismo agrees... and that’s about when the girl decides she needs more of a talking role, because before we can clink our glasses together, she puts her

hands up, and then just sort swivels around, so like I'm facing her. So close, so tantalizingly close.

All I have to do is snap my fingers, Pete will be gone, and me and her can spend the first fifteen chapters exploring every last room, surface, position, and piece of furniture in the two bit tavern, but then she says--all wicked and evil like, "Of course, I'll have to clear the script with my agent. And I'll need three cents a word advance plus fifty percent of the gross with a ten percent retainer..."

"What?"

"You can't start with that 'What!' business again," Pete chirps in. "It just won't work." Oh, and just by the way, it's hard for me not to notice that he's just giddy with glee.

The reason for which becomes sort of clear when the girl hands me his business card. "You can work the details out with my manager."

"Pete is your manager?"

"I had to branch out," he agrees. "Look you weren't giving me that many roles. Besides, I'm protecting a poor innocent defenseless girl from being exploited by the likes of you."

"I'm going to need another drink."

"Don't move," Pete instructs the girl. "We don't do a thing more till he agrees to our terms."

"And I'm the evil one?"

###

Oh, I could just let it end there. The girl of my dreams, so close yet so far, the meddling Paladin with a STUPID NAME! mucking with the works, and me there looking around, staring into space, as I sip on my hot cocoa.

I would be a great place to start a story, but the fact is, I can't afford those kind of terms, so rather than the beginning, this here is the end.

#

“He’ll be back,” Pete assures the girl some indeterminate time later.

“You sure?” she asks as she looks around. The set seems kind of barren, hollow--you know, not really well described at all--and it seems to be falling apart by the second, but Pete is confident.

“Trust me, he’ll be back. Where else is he going to go? Who else is going to star in his books? In the end, we’re all he’s got. So, he’ll be back. Trust me, he’ll be back.”

<<<The End>>>

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