

A Light Repast



Humorous Fantasy
by
Rabia Gale

**To my kids (Sir I., Miss M. and the Baron) for making me laugh. I
no longer have to make up jokes to amuse myself**

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Prophecy's End

When the heroes burst into the throne room of Castle Doom, they found Umbraga the Dark Lord seated upon his throne of skulls (padded to spare the Dark Lord's backside), with the Staff of Immolation across his knees.

Prince Florizel squinted myopically at a piece of stained parchment covered in crabbed handwriting and addressed the Evil One. "You foul villain," he read. "Your ring... sorry, *reign*... of terror is at an end. This day you shall polish... polish?" Deep frown lines appeared between the prince's eyebrows. He wiped his sweaty forehead, gave Umbraga an apologetic smile and said, "Excuse me a moment." There was whispered consultation with the rest of the party, opened by Florizel's irate, "Damned royal bards!"

After a furious exchange, the heroes turned back to Umbraga, with identical expressions of steely resolve. Prince Florizel stepped forward. "Umbraga!" he proclaimed. "This day you shall pol... perish!"

The Dark Lord looked at the prince with an expression generally reserved for a zealous housewife confronted with a cockroach in her kitchen. "Hah!" he said. "I can only be defeated by one wielding the Sword of Invincibility!" His gaze traveled to the weapon in the prince's hand. "Is that a *poker* I see?"

Prince Florizel (who was short, fat and balding), looked at the floor and muttered something.

"Excuse me?" said Umbraga, cupping a hand around his ear.

Florizel looked up defiantly. "We threw away the Sword of Invincibility."

Umbraga's eyebrows shot up. "Threw it away?"

A tall, middle-aged woman with a mane of chestnut hair liberally sprinkled with gray, pushed to the front. She had a long face that--if you were being kind--could only be called "striking". Or "horsy", depending on who you asked.

"Of course we did!" she brayed. "The wretched thing would start glowing and singing at the presence of any malefactors, which, of course, was *all* the time in the cities. We nearly got arrested for disturbing the peace, and I swear, they were forming a lynching mob in that last town. And then, up in the mountains, it kept us awake all night, singing heroic sagas. We took a vote and down the ravine it went. And a good riddance, I say."

Umbraga turned his disbelieving stare towards her. "And who might *you* be?"

"I'm the prophesized princess, of course." The woman gave him an exasperated stare. "Now, can we get on with this, please? My best mare is near her foaling time, and I want to be back before she gives birth."

Umbraga's thin-lipped mouth turned down primly. "I'm sorry. A poker cannot defeat the Dark Lord. Unless it's the Poker of Much Hurting?" His tone was hopeful.

The woman gave a neighing laugh. "No, it's just an ordinary poker. Give Florizel anything sharp and he'll stab himself in the foot more like than not! Why, the Queen won't even let him carve the Winter Solstice turkey anymore, even though it's traditional for the..."

Florizel, red-faced, interrupted. "Do stop rattling on and on, Martha!"

Umbraga looked ready to faint. "Martha? Martha? What sort of prophesized-princess name is that? I've been confronted by Clarissas and Emelines and they were all young and beautiful, not like this *hag* over here."

"There *are* no other princesses, so you're stuck with me. We can't all be young and beautiful, you know," said Martha, reasonably, "especially after six children."

"Six children?!" shrieked Umbraga, spittle spraying from his mouth. "The prophesized princess-companion must always be a virgin. You," he stabbed a bony finger in Martha's direction, "do not qualify!" Looking wildly about, he pointed at the burly man hovering behind Martha and Florizel.

"You!"

"Yes, sir?" said the man, touching his cap politely.

"What's your name?"

"Conan, sir."

Umbraga relaxed. "That's a good solid barbarian name, at least."

"Um," began Conan, holding up his hand. "I'm not a barbarian. Sir. I'm a painter."

One of Umbraga's eyes whirled madly in its socket.

"I wanted to see the final confrontation," said Conan hurriedly. "So I can paint it. For posterity. Well, actually for the Royal Art Society's annual competition. They always get hundreds of pastoral scenes with rosy-cheeked shepherdesses and portraits of fat children with puppies. I thought I'd do something different this time." His words trailed away under Umbraga's withering stare.

"And I suppose he's really a pacifist tailor?" Umbraga jerked his head towards the fourth member of the party who had detached himself from the group and was gently orbiting around the room like a moon on vacation. He had flowing silver hair, eyes of cerulean blue, and well-made clothing that showed off an excellent figure. Occasionally, he made notes in a leather-bound silver-clasped book with a long white quill that curled elegantly at the end.

"His name is Elindorian Bright Moon," volunteered Florizel. "He joined us three days ago. We're *quite* sure he's an elf. Or a bard. Maybe even both." His brown spaniel eyes looked appeasingly at Umbraga, whose fingers clenched convulsively around the Staff of Immolation.

"*He* may be all right, but the rest of you!" said Umbraga, through gritted teeth. "What a sorry lot! Have you no respect for tradition, for custom, for Ancient Prophecies that Must be Fulfilled to Every Tiny Jot?" Conan and Florizel drew closer together under the blast of his scorn.

"Never have I seen such a motley, ill-prepared, ill-equipped set of would-be heroes! Does Good not train its Chosen Ones anymore? I have risen and been defeated twenty-five times in the last thousand years..."

"Twenty-nine," interrupted Martha. "You've been defeated twenty-nine times."

"*I am never defeated a prime number number of times!*" shrieked Umbraga.

While Florizel and Conan tried to work this out, Martha said. "Oh yes, you are. You had to go through nineteen to get to twenty five. And it's the last thousand and one years. We'd have come last year but we had to find Florizel first. He ran away from home when he found out about this Chosen One business and hid in a brewery for six months. And when we finally found him, we had to pry him loose from his barrels of Ostenian beer."

"*Martha!*" complained Florizel. "Do you have to dredge up ancient history *all the time?*"

"Chosen Ones do not run away from their Destiny!" blared Umbraga. He stood up, towering over the heroes, the Staff held out stiffly before him. Florizel and Conan cringed, Martha's lips tightened. "I see that I must take things into my own hands, since Good is doing such a useless job of it. I shall have to train you."

They turned horrified looks at him.

"You, Prince Florizel, will lift weights and run five miles every day. You will be permitted only stale bread and cold water. My Right-Hand Almost-Supreme Commander will instruct you in the use of the sword and the bow. You will retrieve the Sword of Invincibility from whichever ravine you pitched it in. The Princess Martha will get a complete make-over. Hair dye, manicure, new clothing, and three hours in deportment every morning. And as for the painter..." He drew in a deep breath.

They were not fated to know what delights Umbraga had in store for Conan. Just then, a lump of stone fell from the ceiling and landed with a *thunk* on Umbraga's head. The Dark Lord's eyes crossed. The Staff clattered to the floor. Umbraga tumbled headfirst down the dais steps to lie in a crumpled heap on the floor.

The trio stared at the Dark Lord's body in stunned silence. Elindorian Bright Moon drifted over in a cinnamon-scented cloud and placed a hand on Umbraga's chest.

"Dead," he pronounced.

"Um?" began Conan, just as Martha said, "I gathered as much from that awkward angle of the neck."

"I thought only the Sword of Invincibility could defeat him," said Florizel. He whipped out a handkerchief as Conan once again uttered an "Um?" which was lost in Florizel's giant sneeze.

"Damnit, Elindorian, must you wear that scent?" said Florizel, eyes tearing. "You know I'm allergic to it."

"UM?" said Conan, louder. The others looked to see him pointing up at the ceiling. They looked up.

After a bit, Martha said, "It doesn't look too stable, does it?"

Elindorian examined the enormous wax-covered blackened-iron chandelier hanging over their heads by a chain that was slowly working loose from the ceiling. "No. The whole building's in utter disrepair, and Umbraga never heeded the warnings of the Department of Housing Safety. I came to deliver the property condemnation papers."

As if to prove a point, the entire structure groaned alarmingly.

"Shall we?" suggested Elindorian.

There was a mad rush for the door.



Four figures stood outlined against the sunrise, watching the collapse of Castle Doom from a convenient hilltop.

After the dust had settled, Martha said to Elindorian. "We thought you were a bard."

Elindorian flicked a piece of lint from his elegant sleeve. "I was once. Bureaucracy pays better."

Martha looked back down at the ruined heap. "I wonder what Umbraga will do when he returns. A Dark Lord needs a moldering old castle, and there's not many of them left since they went out of style centuries ago."

Elindorian stifled a yawn. "I doubt that it will be a matter of any concern in the future. Umbraga will not return."

"But he always does," protested Florizel. "He's indestructible."

"Only because the Sword of Invincibility decapitates him without banishing his soul out of the world," said Elindorian. "Crumbling castles, on the other hand, are not that subtle."

The other three digested this in silence.

"Why, that...," said Florizel.

"Quite so." Elindorian gave him an understanding smile.

Martha gave a cracking yawn. "Well, it's a good thing we threw it away then. Let's go home. Who knows what the servants are doing without me to supervise. Walter's a dear, but he'll let anyone walk all over him. And Firefly needs me with her." After a thoughtful pause, she added, "I expect the children will be glad to see me, too."

Florizel's eyes grew misty. "Mother was expecting a shipment of '34 wine when we left. It ought to have come by now. Yes, we'd better hurry back before she serves it all up to those jumped-up courtiers of hers."

"I wonder if a Crumbling Castle painting will impress the judges?" mused Conan. "I'll add lightning in the background, and just a hint of dragon wings. And robes flapping in the wind as the hero battles the Dark Lord..."

The figures disappeared down the hill.



In the cold dark waters of the river, the Sword drifted, dreaming of flaming dragon's breath and marching armies upon vast plains.

One day, the Chosen will come. And together we'll set the world on fire. Our names will blaze across the sky, our fame will make the nations tremble.

How long it dreamt, it never knew. A hand parted the waters above it, grasped its hilt. The Sword thrilled to the strong fingers, the manly clasp.

"What's this, then, Anron?" yelled a coarse voice from further away. A peasant voice. The Sword disdained it.

The man named Anron had a voice like dark honey and cold steel. "A sword, Pilel," he said. The voice reminded the Sword of the great heroes who'd wielded it. This man would be greater than any of them.

Pilel snorted. "What good's a sword with Umbraga dead and gone?"

"No good at all," said Anron. "But I always need metal for ploughshares."

III Met by Afternoon Light

"The hearing will now begin." The judge looked down his nose at the people sitting in his courtroom. He settled back in his chair--which he privately thought of as his throne--and smiled at the sight of all those expectant faces, awaiting *his* pleasure. He glanced at the accused, Thvor (just Thvor, he did not need a last name, he was *that* famous), the premier hero of the Twelve Realms, who was staring sulkily at the table. Beside him sat his lawyer, a dapper little man by the name of Pennywig. Judge Haverly looked to his right at the plaintiff, Princess Melisande, the youngest daughter of the King of the Ninth Realm. Behind the two concerned parties, the courtroom was packed to overflowing. Judge Haverly didn't usually get such prestigious cases in his courtroom--the really exciting crimes like treason and ogling the Royal Daughters were tried in the king's palace. That had always rankled him.

Judge Haverly smiled benevolently at Princess Melisande, a beautiful girl with hair the color of guinea gold and eyes as blue as delphiniums. "I know it's been a harrowing time for you, poor child. Would you like to tell me exactly what happened, if you can?"

Melisande's eyebrows arched as she heard herself described as "poor child". In the back of the courtroom, a courtier who knew the princess sniggered. Thvor hunched his shoulders. He looked completely out-of-place in the courtroom, with his leather vest that barely met over his bulging pectoral muscles and the iron wrist bands that encircled his sinewy wrists. His long legs were uncomfortably pulled up so that his knees almost touched his chest.

Princess Melisande rose to her feet. She had brought no lawyer, only an impressive stack of leather-bound books and a sheaf of paper, each sheet covered with painstaking notes in her flowing cursive. She was attired in somber

dark blue, her hair scraped back from her face into a bun and her expression austere.

"Your Honor." Her clear voice, trained by the palace's finest orators, reached the farthest corners where townsfolk and courtiers rubbed shoulders as they gawked at what was shaping up to be the juiciest scandal in years. "I accuse Thvor of the Hero's Guild, Champion of Five Realms, valedictorian of his class at Brutus' Academy for Heroes, Kings & other Diverse Noble Professions for the martially-minded, etc., etc., of violating that sacred and most noble of texts, the Hero's Code."

The spectators gasped, even though they had known for days what the charge was. Secrets were hard to keep in the Ninth Realm.

Judge Haverly, who had avidly read through Princess Melisande's report and even dusted off his copy of the Hero's Code, looked as shocked as the rest.

"Dear me!" he said. "This is a most serious charge." Thvor scowled, and hunched further down in his seat. "Pray continue, my dear Princess."

"I do hereby accuse the aforementioned Thvor of violating the Hero's Code on the 18th of Quintober, at two of the clock in the afternoon, in the presence of myself, Princess Melisande, Royal Princess of the Ninth Realm." Melisande's voice rang out, and the spectators leaned forward in anticipation. Surely, Thvor, no matter how mighty and famous he might be, would never stoop to... no, not Princess Melisande, with so many more willing women around! Princess Wilhelmina, for one...

Thvor looked both sulky and uncomfortable. He was a man of action, a doer of deeds (many of them even *mighty* deeds), not a man of intellect or oratory. He wished he were back in the Fourth Realm where the women were soft-skinned and plump-bodied and easy-going, not like the skinny harpy accusing him now!

"On the 18th of Quintober, at two of the clock in the afternoon," continued Melisande inexorably, her face severe with the enormity of the heinousness she was about to reveal, "I was talking a walk, as it is my custom, in the Weeping Forest..."

"The Weeping Forest?" interrupted the judge. "It is not a place for a gently-bred person such as yourself, my dear Princess. I beg you to refrain from such doings in the future!"

Melisande shot him a hostile look. A courtier in the crowd tittered.

"As I was saying," Melisande continued, pointedly, "I was walking in the Weeping Forest. I had just reached the Meadow of Small, White & Boring Flowers when the sky darkened and I was cognizant of a Large Presence. I looked up into the trees yonder and saw that they shivered as if a strong wind passed through them. While I stared in amazement at this phenomenon, the trees parted and there appeared a dragon!"

A sigh ran through the audience. A dragon! It had been years, nay, decades since a dragon had been sighted in the Realm. A few were disappointed at the lack of assault and rapine in the story, but they consoled themselves that Thvor had not yet entered the narrative.

Melisande cleared her throat. "Naturally, the sight of such a beast made my heart falter, but I stoutly rallied myself and hailed the dragon. The dragon, who looked as taken aback to see me as I had been to see him, answered with great cordiality, and we fell to exchanging pleasantries."

"What did you talk about?" the judge interrupted again, awed by the thought of conversing with such a large and dangerous beast.

Melisande gave him another one of her basilisk stares that completely failed to impress him. "We talked about books," she said coldly. "He was an old dragon, and had come to the Meadow to nap in the sun. We were just about agreed that I should depart and leave him to his rest, when suddenly, the accused, Thvor, happened upon us, and *without any warning attacked the dragon.*"

"I *did* warn him," muttered Thvor. His barrel-chested frame was not designed for muttering, and his words rumbled through the courtroom like a growl of thunder. He did not look at Melisande. "I shouted, 'Away with ye, ye foul beast!'"

Melisande held up a finger. "*That* is not the correct challenge to a dragon, Your Honor. It is said to lesser beasts, such as succubi, incubi, and three-headed hounds of hell. A noble creature like the dragon must be addressed with far more respect. I draw the court's attention to Section 5, article 2(ii)..." She picked up the Hero's Code, which, Judge Haverly saw with trepidation, was bristling with bookmarks.

"Yes, yes, the court concurs that the official challenge to the draconian kind is quite different from the defendant's words," said the judge hastily, to forestall the reading of the aforementioned article which was fully five pages long and had a great many "hithertofores" and "thereinwhens".

"The accused then proceeded to attack the noble beast from the side, *while its head was turned away from him.*"

"Didn't want to get in the way of the flame," objected Thvor. "It's very dangerous. "

The audience half-groaned, half-sighed at this less-than-heroic comment. Thvor said sulkily, "*It is true. Never get in the way of a dragon's flames.*" Pennywig nudged him into silence.

Melisande waited until the ripple of noise died away. "As if to add to his infamy, the defendant, after unmanfully and shamefully disabling the aforesaid dragon, *then* turned his vile attentions to *me.*"

A collective gasp came from a group of ladies in large hats decked with feathers.

"He grabbed me by the waist, and despite my protestations he slung me over his shoulder and made off with me."

The judge nearly fell off his chair. "And did he then... ah... ah...?"

In the expectant hush, Melisande replied. "He *then* took--nay, carried--me willy-nilly, to the castle where he audaciously announced to Their Majesties that he... *he...*," Melisande shot Thvor a nasty look, which he missed because he was glumly examining his fingernails, "had rescued me and wished to claim his reward! His reward! For manhandling the Person of a Royal Daughter!"

Pennywig popped out of his seat like a jack-in-the-box. "Your Honor!" he fluted. "I would like to remind the court that the strict laws protecting the Royal Persons are understandably relaxed in the case of a rescue. My client, Thvor, has rescued many many ladies of high birth from life-threatening--even *virtue*-threatening--emergencies and has won acclaim and gratitude from the general populace for his heroic deeds."

"I was in no need of a rescue," snapped Melisande. "Thvor took too much upon himself."

"My dear Highness, he was only concerned for your safety, and that concern may have prompted him to act a trifle precipitously but..."

"His only concern was for the reward. Greed and barbaric bloodthirstiness, impaired his judgment, not concern for me."

Judge Haverly banged his gavel. "Order, order!" This was getting out of hand. He mopped his face with a white handkerchief and tried to think what to do next. He couldn't afford to offend a Royal Princess, nor could he to sentence the greatest hero in the Realms. He would be vilified by tearful maidens and indignant matrons in all the Realms should he declare Thvor guilty. What a quandary! And Princess Melisande did not look as though she would be satisfied by a mere apology.

Time for an adjournment while he thought out his problem.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he began, when the room was suddenly darkened and a wind beat against the windows.

"What... what was that?" the judge stuttered, shrinking as he saw the dark scaly bulk of some large beast outside the windows.

"The dragon," someone whispered, a phrase that was taken up by everyone, so that it went across the room on a long drawn-out sigh. The roof of the courthouse shook and rumbled. Everyone looked upward, clutching their chairs and each other, crying out in terror as the roof was lifted off with a gentle ease, revealing a patch of vivid blue sky. Judge Haverly, purple-faced and breathless, pounded on his table, weakly calling, "Order! Order!"

A huge black head peered down at the sea of upturned white faces. The eyes were big and yellow, with long cat-like pupils. They held an expression of curiosity. For several long heartbeats, the crowd and the dragon looked at each other, frozen into stillness.

"Good morning," rumbled the dragon. His breath, smoky and sulfurous, blew over the crowd, causing the ladies to clutch their hats to their heads.

"I apologize for the intrusion," said the dragon, "but, as the injured party, I felt necessary for me to attend this trial. And the courthouse is too small for me to enter."

"Are you quite recovered from your wounds?" asked Melisande, while the judge was still gasping for breath, his eyes bulging at the presence of a dragon in--no, *over*--his courtroom.

The dragon snaked his head in so he could peer at the princess. Several women fainted. Other interested spectators, who were thrilled to see a real dragon, noted that his black scales were iridescent, hints of rainbow colors shining through the darkness. The trend-setters determined then and there that this would be the fashionable color for the next season--if they could find a dyer to duplicate it.

"I am wholly recovered, Your Highness. Your concern is touching."

"I am determined to bring your attacker to justice," said Melisande.

"Ah. I have been pondering the situation myself," said the dragon, "and I have a proposition that, I believe, will adequately solve the dilemma and restore honor to all parties. May I speak, Judge?"

"Er... yes, " said the Judge, who was still struggling with the reality of a dragon--actually, a dragon's head--in his courtroom.

"I propose that we erase the unfortunate events of that fateful day and start over--this time properly. I confess that it has been a long while since I last captured a princess, but I am willing to do so now--if the Princess does not object--and take her to my abode, where Thvor can come at his leisure and rescue her in the appropriate manner. That, I flatter myself, would solve our

difficulties. The dragon added graciously, "Thvor may also claim his reward from my hoard."

Melisande's eyebrows arched. "You're asking my permission to kidnap me?"

"Well, yes. I wouldn't want you to be an unwilling participant in this."

"Where is your lair?" asked Melisande, her brow wrinkling.

"Beyond the Twelve Realms, I'm afraid," said the dragon, "a very long way from here--or from anywhere. I came to the Realms to visit my cousin, and to attend an auction of rare manuscripts. I am most fond of books, you see. My home is over the Mountains at the End of the World, but I would fly you there in the greatest of comfort that I can manage."

"Beyond the End of the World, hmm?" said Melisande. It would be months, even years, before she was rescued. She thought of her parents and her older sisters and her decrepit aunts and fat uncles, all nagging her to talk lower and sing louder, to read less and flirt more, to giggle and not retort, and a hundred other things. She thought of the Ninth Realm--a pleasant, but boring kingdom where the most interesting event in the last decade was when the pigs got into the palace pantry on the night of the King's Birthday Ball. She looked at the dragon and saw that his eyes held understanding and a hint of mischief.

"I suppose you have a library?" asked Melisande.

"My collection of Baledric sagas is held to be very fine," said the dragon with pride. "I have all 1,346 of them. No other library has, I believe, been able to collect them all."

Melisande's eyes gleamed. Those would take her a good many months to read. "I agree to this proposal," she said. "Yes, it is the best solution to *all* our problems."

"I, too!" Thvor struggled to his feet (he had lost circulation in his legs from the knees down). He wanted to leave here and go to the comforting arms of the women of the Fourth Realm. And he didn't have to go rescue the princess *at once*. Maybe, some other hero would be fool enough to try...

The dragon peered at the judge. "What say you, sir?"

There's a dragon in my courtroom, thought the judge hazily, *telling me what to do. There's a dragon in my...*

He gathered his wits long enough to manage, "Yes, yes, that sounds good." He made it official by banging his gavel. "Yes, whatever the dragon says. My assistant will draw up the necessary papers... now."

"Very good," rumbled the dragon. "Thank you, Your Honor."

"Now would you please," pleaded the Judge, "remove your head from my courtroom?"



Queen Mildred was determined that her daughter would not go into captivity without warm undergarments and a grand farewell party. Despite the short notice, more than a thousand people attended. Melisande received a number of impractical gifts, including embroidered slippers, crystal vases and music boxes. She gave these away to her sisters, because, as she said, it was not proper for a kidnapped princess to have such luxuries. She also resigned herself to leaving behind all twenty leather-bound, gilt-edged volumes of *The Essential Guide to Traveling in the Twelve Realms and Beyond*. She did not think the dragon would want to stop along the way to see the sights. She packed a small rucksack with practical things like sturdy shoes and waterproof cloaks, and it lay in her chamber, ready to be snatched up at a moment's notice.

The merrymaking ended after sunset with an impressive display of fireworks and the presentation of an enormous dragon-shaped cake ablaze with candles. Melisande cut it while the attendees sang, "We wish you a merry imprisonment", hastily created by the Royal Composer for the occasion. After the applause and the teary farewells, everyone promptly retired to bed in a state of great expectation. Queen Mildred reminded Melisande to keep her balcony door open.

"No need to inconvenience the dear dragon, is there?" she asked.

Exactly at midnight (for the dragon had a fine-tuned sense of drama), a large winged shadow swooped towards the darkened castle. By royal decree, no

guards were posted that night and all people were securely tucked in their beds with blankets over their heads. Next morning, Their Majesties were gratified to find their youngest daughter gone, and the dragon having obligingly left glittering obsidian scales as Clues for would-be rescuers. On further investigation, all volumes of *The Essential Guide to Traveling in the Twelve Realms and Beyond* were also found to be missing.

Thvor, upon his release, hurried to the Fourth Realm, where he retired from Heroism and married the most easy-going of the plump ladies of his acquaintance and started his own inn, *The Black Dragon*. This unforeseen development set back the rescue of Princess Melisande for quite a long time, but that was all very well, for travelers to the Ninth Realm continued to report sightings of the dragon and Melisande all over the Twelve Realms for a number of years. Apparently, they had decided to take the leisurely route to the dragon's lair.