

The Town Drunk

Presents

HOT FUDGE AND WHIPPED CREAM

Tarl Roger Kudrick

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Deep down in one of the least reputable layers of the mystic underworld, Skragg, one of the least reputable of genies, felt a summons from the human world. *Impossible*, he thought. He hadn't felt a proper summons in... well, he'd probably remember if he tried hard enough, but why bother?

Besides, hadn't humans forgotten about magic? He'd find out if he answered the summons, but he had better things to do. Those three imps who'd been following him around lately wanted to learn how to play poker, and they were dumb enough to let him deal the cards. The underworld didn't have money, but they could play for rocks, sticks, or even toenail clippings for all he cared. Skragg, whose bad mood was well into its fifth century now, just wanted to make somebody lose.

Skragg showed the imps how to properly shuffle the deck and stacked it in the process. The gargoyle-like imps' eyes glazed over as he talked, and they made funny faces at each other. Skragg had never known an imp to care about the proper way to do anything, and these three were no exception.

As Skragg dealt, he felt magic pull at his black leather jacket again. Meanwhile, the imps carefully examined the cards they received, as if viewing them from different angles might change them into something they could eat.

"Do five red cards beat four sixes?" the short imp asked.

"Sure!" the fat one said.

"Let's make all the cards wild," the tall one said.

Skragg seethed. "Can't you imps do *anything* the right way?"

"The fun way *is* the right way!"

Skragg's reply was cut short when magic pulled at him a third time, stronger than before. The fat imp sniffed the air. "Skragg, are you being summoned?"

"Bet or fold!"

The fat imp drooled a bit, licked one of the cards, grimaced, and folded. The short imp bet, pushing a few stones into the middle of the hot, red ground between them. The tall imp raised. Then Skragg was yanked into the human world so forcefully, he felt like he'd been launched from a catapult.

The room he appeared in was lit by a single weak bulb hanging from the ceiling. He had to take off his sunglasses to see he was in a dusty garage. Probably suburban, given the bright red kid's bike leaning against the wall and the half-finished doghouse on the floor.

"You've got legs!" said a high-pitched voice.

A little girl wearing blue overalls, a red shirt, and red socks with no shoes stared up at Skragg. She held his bronze lamp and a thick rag.

A little girl? Was somebody kidding? "Course I got legs!" Skragg said. "C'mere, I'll step on you." He wiggled one of his thorny feet at her.

The girl walked around him like an art critic taking a dim view of a statue. She didn't smell anxious, or even excited. "You're all pointy."

Skragg straightened his jacket and ran a hand through his green mohawk. "You're all *dull*."

The girl giggled. "I'm Candace."

"That's your problem."

"I'm six years old today. It's my birthday!"

Skragg snorted. "I'm six *thousand* years old."

Silently, he cursed every human who had ever lived (except James Dean). The days when emperors and kings would summon genies and beg for their help were long gone—and good riddance—but a little kid? Had his life sunk so low? At least it couldn't get any worse. He let his cigarette slump from his lips and adopted the most surly, superior, and uncooperative pose he could muster.

Candace smiled coyly and dragged one red-stockinged foot back and forth, as if a boy had just given her a flower. "Now I get a wish."

"Don't you mean *three* wishes?" Skragg asked, bored.

“Uh-uh,” she said. “Three wishes is a fairy tale. Real genies give one wish every ten years.”

How could she know that? Genies had been spreading the “three wishes” story since before humans knew how to write it down. He supposed it didn’t really matter. “You’re going to wish to be a movie star, right?”

Candace took a big breath. “I want an ice cream sundae with hot fudge and whipped cream.”

Skragg stared at her. “You’re kidding.”

“Nope!” She giggled and bounced.

“You summoned an Elder Djinn across five layers of reality because you want ice cream?”

“I really want a unicorn, but Mom would kill me. So it has to be the best sundae ever.”

Skragg folded his arms. “We’ll compromise. I’ll make it taste like unicorn, and your Mom can just beat you up.”

Candace laughed. “Noooooo! I want a real sundae. The best ever!”

What kind of child summons a genie and doesn't even take him seriously? “Kid, I don’t know where you got your information, but the days of wish-granting are over. I’ve got to get back to my game, or I’ll be lucky to have a pair of twos.”

“Why?”

“Because those imps cheat, that’s why.”

“Why?”

“Because they’re rotten.”

“Why?”

He wanted to tear her tongue out. “Can’t you say anything but ‘why’?”

“Will you make me a sundae, Mr. Genie?”

“No!”

Under her dark bangs, her big round eyes grew bigger and rounder. “What about my wish?”

“Go jump rope in a minefield.” Skragg prepared to go home.

Candace faced him as squarely as she could, given that he was three times her height. “You’re a

mean genie. I'm gonna *make* you give me that sundae." She stared at him with such hatred that for a moment, Skragg felt unsure of himself.

But only for a moment. He shoved a fiery finger at her. "Touch my lamp again and I'll feed you to a troll."

She stuck her tongue out. He stuck out his own forked one and returned to his homeworld, where he found three grinning imps and very bad cards waiting for him.

The next day, Skragg was trying to win back all the rocks he'd lost when the imps suggested playing for favors.

"Favors?" Skragg asked.

The fat imp drooled and munched on a rock. "Say, maybe whoever loses all their rocks has to do whatever the winners say for a week."

"Anything they say," the short imp said.

Skragg didn't know a single useful thing an imp could do for him. But so what? Making them run themselves ragged might be fun. They were so dumb, they kept eating the rocks they were using for betting chips.

"Scared?" asked the tall imp. The other two chuckled.

"Never," Skragg said. "It's a bet. And when I win, I'm gonna make you choke on those rocks."

Just then, he felt a terrific wrenching sensation, like his spine had just been pulled out through his head. He was back in the human world, this time outdoors, in the middle of a driveway. Bright sunshine leaped all over him like an overeager dog. He raised an arm to fend it off.

He heard a little girl's voice: "See?"

A crowd of people gasped in unison, then took pictures. Candace had summoned him to a press conference, right in front of her house.

She was pointing and smiling. "Genies are real and they live in lamps and everything!" Reporters and film crews surrounded Skragg and waved microphones in his face.

Skragg stared at Candace. "Do you realize what you've done?"

"Yup!" Candace said. "But if you make me the best ice cream sundae ever, with hot fudge and whipped cream, I'll use my wish to make them all forget!"

Tendrils of steam rose from Skragg's body as he weighed his options. Her offer was tempting. Other genies would be furious if he didn't take it. They'd be summoned by the thousands; they might have to start granting wishes again. It couldn't be allowed. But then he remembered who he was—an Elder Djinn whose bloodline stretched back to the First Dynasty itself—and what he was up against—a little brat human *girl*.

Skragg smiled so nastily that Candace's face withered. "Make them all forget," he said. "Good idea."

He concentrated and drew on the full power of his homeworld. The effort brought him to his knees, but he released enough magic to send the reporters back to their homes with no memories of him or the girl. And of course, every recording of the event was dust.

His head pounded like a mountain had been dropped on it. Candace's horrified expression made up for it.

She kicked him. "You're evil!"

"And you're ugly." He stood and spat on her driveway, melting some of the asphalt. "Now scram. And leave my lamp alone!"

"I want my sundae!"

"Kid, listen to me," Skragg said. "There's no Santa Claus, I ate the Easter Bunny for dinner last week, and every day after your parents drop you off at school, they go to Disneyworld without you."

And with that, Skragg used what little strength he had left to go home.

Much later, Skragg was down five thousand rocks to the imps. How was this possible? He didn't dare use magical trickery—imps could smell magic—but there were a million other ways to cheat at cards, and he knew them all.

It was that brat's fault. No little girl could summon genies and flocks of reporters like that. Who was helping her? Why?

"I wonder what we'll make you do when we win," the short imp said.

"This game's not over yet." Skragg had a good hand, but he knew when he was beat. He folded.

The short imp took the pot, showing a pair of threes, and flapped its hairy, pointed ears—the imp equivalent of whistling innocently.

Skragg was about to invent the sport of imp hurling when the tall one said, "You like the human

world, don't you Skragg?"

"What?" He was so offended, he forgot about being bluffed.

"You observe it all the time."

"I do not. Nothing in that realm's ever interested me."

"Yeah?" The imp leaned back a little. "What was your favorite Elvis movie?"

"*Viva Las Veg*—hey!" Skragg grabbed the imp by the neck and stood, lifting it off the ground.

"Ask me that again, scale breath."

The other imps begged Skragg to put the tall one down. When that didn't work, they praised Skragg and admitted they'd been rude. That worked.

Skragg settled back onto the ground and resumed brooding about Candace.

"What should we make him do if we beat him?" the short imp asked the others.

"Won't happen," Skragg said.

"We could make him perform in a play."

Skragg groaned. The imps had admired human theatre since the days of Sophocles, but they never stuck to the scripts. Their production of *Waiting for Godot* had started with Godot calling out, "Here I am!"

"We could do *The Wizard of Oz*," the short imp told the fat one. "Skragg would look great in big ruby slippers."

"Okay, but instead of Oz, let's have the cyclone put Dorothy on the moon."

"Boring!" the tall imp said. "How about on the *Titanic*?"

"They'll drown! We don't want anything *serious*."

"True," the other imps agreed, shuddering. "Nothing *serious*."

The tall imp tapped its chin thoughtfully. "The *Titanic* should be attacked by Godzilla."

"That's serious! They'll die."

"Not," the tall imp said, "if they challenge Godzilla to some kind of contest and win."

Another pause. Then ideas exploded from them.

“Dueling banjos!”

“Pie eating!”

“Roller derby!”

“No, wait,” the short imp said. “A dance contest!”

The fat imp leaped to its feet, shaking with excitement, and spread its hands as if unfurling a banner. “Dorothy and Godzilla in *Swan Lake II: Disco Forever*.”

They turned to Skragg. “Skragg—”

“No!”

“But—“

Skragg struck the ground. “Play cards!”

The imps sat. “You’re just mad because that little girl keeps summoning you.”

“Were you watching me in the human world?”

“Of course. We watch everybody who goes there.”

“Hardly anyone does anymore,” the tall imp said.

“I think you were the last one, Skragg,” the short imp said. “Don’t you recognize her from that time?”

“Recognize who?”

“The little girl,” the fat one said. “You mean you don’t remember?”

Skragg’s anger drained away, leaving thick bitterness behind. “I don’t bother remembering.”

Nothing was *worth* remembering. After six thousand years, the difference between one day and the next was barely noticeable. Life was an endless series of pointless “now”s, and the future may as well have already happened, for all the good it would bring. Skragg searched for a searing condemnation of all existence that would drip with enough venomous bile, but he couldn’t find one.

“I can’t believe he forgot Margaret,” said the short one.

Margaret. The name rattled around in Skragg’s brain. It finally connected like a right hook to a jaw.

About ten years ago, Skragg had been resting on the shore of a lava beach, minding his own business. (He had no idea how a human vacuum cleaner had gotten into the mystic underworld, and he certainly couldn't say how six of those irritating wind spirits had gotten sucked into it.) He felt a tickling on his neck. It had been coming and going for a while, as if a fly kept landing on him. Was it a summons? If so, it was the feeblest one he'd ever felt. Out of boredom as much as anything else, he slipped through his lamp, into the human world.

He appeared on an elevated stage in what looked like a small auditorium complete with rows of empty chairs and an overhead projector. Off to the side stood a very young woman wearing a dark jacket, a white blouse, and dark slacks. She might as well have been wearing a badge that said, "I'm not a kid anymore!" She was holding his lamp and a silk cloth, and her anxiety stank up the room, almost making him gag.

She put the lamp down. "Well it's about time," she said. Her hands were trembling. "I've been calling you for three weeks. I didn't think you'd *ever* show up. God, you're tall. And your hands are on fire. Good thing I shut off the sprinklers."

Skragg couldn't think of anything to say except, "You did?"

She rearranged a stack of transparencies and set them next to the projector. "Of course. I know all about your kind."

"You do?"

She sighed like she'd been asked the question fifty times that day. "I'm Margaret Cantiveri. I am one of the world's leading experts on genies. I know most of the stories are wrong, but not all of them. I did everything I was supposed to: I coated your lamp with gold dust and rubbed it off with a cloth. You should have gotten here long ago."

She knew about the gold dust! The genies had invented that rule to keep any idiot with a rag from summoning them by the roomful. "First, that cloth is so thin, I barely felt it. Second, the gold dust is supposed to be a secret. How'd you—"

"I found an ancient stone tablet during an archaeology dig." She turned her quivering back to him, as if that would keep him from hearing or smelling how nervous she was. "I'm a historian. I'm about to defend my dissertation on genies. You're going to help."

Skragg had been told those records had been destroyed. He should have known better. "No, I'm not."

"Yes, you are!" she said. "As the master of your lamp, I get one wish every ten years. I need you to be the centerpiece of my orals defense."

Skragg was bored already. “Leave me alone, or I’ll set you on fire and roast marshmallows.”

That got her to face him, at least. “You can’t harm me! I know your rules. If you deliberately harm anyone in my world, you’ll lose your powers for a thousand years.”

She knew that? How was he supposed to handle someone who wasn’t afraid of him?

He’d just have to try harder. He leaped off the stage and lifted her four feet off the ground by her jacket. “Now you listen good, babe. I used to serve the great and powerful. Pharaohs. Kings. But those days are over.” He leaned into her face. “And even if they weren’t, it was never my job to serve the stupid, little whims of stupid, little *girls!*”

He put her down and levitated back onto the stage as impressively as he could.

She stepped out of her heels and climbed up after him. She smelled more angry than scared now. “You can’t leave.”

“Watch me.”

“I’ll just summon you again. We’re bound until you grant me a wish.”

“Or until you release me,” Skragg said. “Now be a good little human and tell me I’m free.”

“No.”

This kind of battle wasn’t even fun anymore. “Maybe I can’t hurt you, but I promise, I can make your life so miserable—”

“Ha! Worse than it is now? The whole department thinks I’m crazy. They want to revoke my funding. They’re right outside this room, you know. They can probably hear me. They probably think I’m talking to myself. You’ve got to help me. You’re the only thing that can.”

Long ago, her plea might have moved him. But Skragg was sick of humans—whining little bonebags; no matter what you gave them, they always wanted more. “You want me to do something magical? Something they’ll never forget?”

“That’s my wish.” She stood straighter. “And my command.”

He’d almost given in. Then she’d added that “command” bit. “Fine,” he said. “Bring them in.”

Margaret climbed off the stage, jammed her feet back into her heels, and brushed her hair with her hands. “Dr. Blanche?” she called. “Dr. Masscott? I’m ready now.”

The door across the room opened. Two older humans and a bunch of younger ones entered. Skragg made himself invisible. As he slipped back to his homeworld, he said, “Your wish is granted,” and made every piece of clothing Margaret was wearing disappear.

He kept the path to the human world open long enough to revel in her wonderful, sustained shriek.

“Skragg?” the fat imp asked. “Are you okay?”

But Candace was just a little kid! Margaret...

...had to be her mother. And if she'd known that much about genies before, then by now...

Skragg's poker playing deteriorated as he tried to convince himself he was wrong. Then he was summoned again, more powerfully than ever.

He didn't have enough room to appear wherever his lamp was, so he automatically bounced back to the mystic underworld. The lamp, however, was still being rubbed, so the moment he got home, he was summoned back to the human world.

This pattern repeated about ten times a second.

After a few minutes of feeling like a supersonic yo-yo, Skragg wanted to throw up, but he could no longer tell where “up” was. He had no choice but to try something extremely dangerous. He would enter the human world *away* from his lamp.

With spectacular determination, he broke through and found himself lying on the cold cement floor of Candace's garage. He'd always wondered what it would be like to get shot out of a cannon, straight into a brick wall. Now he knew.

Candace was standing over him. “Hi Mr. Genie!” She tossed back her long, dark hair, which looked exactly like Margaret's. “Ready to make my sundae?”

Skragg tried to sit up. The world performed a backflip and he lay down again. His lamp was still being rubbed, somehow. So was his stomach, from the inside out.

He had nothing left to fight with. “The best sundae ever made. That's your wish?”

“Nope!”

Skragg moaned. “No?”

“I want two of them.”

The floor was so cool and peaceful. “Two sundaes.”

“The best ever! With hot fudge and whipped cream.”

“Right,” he muttered. “Best ever. Hot fudge, whipped cream.”

Skragg concentrated, and two perfect sundaes in big crystal glasses appeared on the floor next to him. Candace squealed and pulled a Bugs Bunny spoon out of a pocket in her overalls.

Candace sat next to Skragg’s head and took her time eating one of the sundaes, swaying with delight and making “mmmmm” noises after every bite. “The other one’s for Mom,” she said. “Mom told me about you.”

“I bet,” Skragg mumbled.

“She says you don’t *like* little girls.”

Skragg’s whole body was churning. “Kid, however you’re polishing my lamp... you’re never going to do that again, right?”

Candace licked her spoon. “Maybe.”

“You’re cruel, kid.”

“Mom taught me.” She swallowed another bite of ice cream. “She said it was something she learned in graduate school.”

When she finished her sundae, and not before, she got up and turned off a clothes dryer. She pulled out several thick towels that sparkled with gold dust, and his lamp. “See you when I’m sixteen!”

She stepped through the door connecting the garage to the house. As that door closed, a more mature voice added: “And twenty-six, and thirty-six, and forty-six...”

Skragg sat in Candace’s garage and wondered where his life had gone wrong. Some of the greatest leaders in human history had tried to humiliate him like this. He’d vanquished them all. Now he’d been beaten by someone whose previous greatest accomplishment was probably learning not to pee in her pants.

It was his own fault. Why hadn’t he taken his lamp back from Margaret last time, and hidden it again? He could have at least made her spend a few years searching for it. It was as if he’d been *hoping* to get summoned. Nothing, of course, could have been further from the truth.

And the poker game! He was losing to creatures who thought *Hamlet* should have been about a small pig. Even without cheating, he should have crushed them. Plus, he knew ways to cheat magically that were so subtle, even imps might not notice.

He’d lost his edge.

It was time to find it again.

He went back to the poker game, where the imps were arguing about their upcoming production. The fat imp was telling the short one, “You *always* want to add singing cows.”

“So we can call it a moooo-sical!” All the imps looked up. “Hi, Skragg.”

Then they saw his malevolent grin. “Uh-oh,” the tall imp said.

“‘Uh-oh’ is right,” Skragg said. He won the next six hands.

The price of Skragg’s victory was that the imps had to perform a play, just for him, without changing even one word of it. A *serious* play. Skragg visited some muses who lived a couple layers of reality over and described what he was looking for. They came up with a never-produced, fourteen-act piece called *The Long, Slow Death of Ted Wrapplemeyer*. It had been written by a college sophomore named Fred Happlemeier. It featured flag burning, characters dressed as sex organs, evil villains named Mom and Dad, four crucifixions, and a scale model of Chicago that, in Act Ten, got eaten by a goat named Capitalism.

Days later, while watching the imps sweat and writhe their way through the play’s endless monologues, Skragg thought about the future. Now it was different from the vast, empty space that had lain before him for so many centuries. Something beckoned in the distance, like a softer, warmer kind of summons. In ten years, which was hardly any time at all for a genie, Candace and Margaret would call him again.

This time, he’d be ready.

On the big, flat rock that served as a stage, the imps pounded each other with foam mallets labeled “prejudice” and “high interest rates.” Skragg smiled and leaned forward, as if to get that much closer to the future.

Tarl Roger Kudrick isn’t nearly as pretentious as you’d think, given how often he uses his full name. Many years ago he messed around with short stories and got a couple accepted in small press outlets that no longer exist, but now he’s more serious about writing. He’s taking accredited fiction classes and everything. When he isn’t writing, he’s likely working at his day job as a research psychologist or helping other lesser-known writers get published at *On the Premises* (www.onthepremises.com).