

The Town Drunk

Presents

The Great Deeds of Payven Carum

Rod M. Santos

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Try as he might, Dimp could not pull the monkey off my head.

Dimp scratched his chubby chin. “Perhaps if I cast a firebolt—”

“No,” I cried, and the monkey screeched in agreement. Its trembling paws dug deeper into my scalp. “Great job, Dimp. You scared it even more.”

“And who made the monkey jump up there in the first place, *Payven?*” he asked and answered in the same breath.

Dimp is sort of an idiot savant. A savant, because he can cast spells even some of our teachers are afraid to try. An idiot, because... well, that’s self-explanatory.

What he had in magical talent, he lacked in self-preservation. Not that he was a daredevil in the normal sense—he didn’t have the physique for that. He was simply fearlessness personified... which made us complete opposites. Naturally, we were roommates.

In the last few minutes, our dorm room had become a nursery for monsters. A huge piglet sat on my bed, while nearby, a baby dragon munched away on fruit (and the basket it was sent in). On my desk, an imp we’d imprisoned in a heavy flower vase was shrieking a string of curses that would have made a prostitute blush.

The door to our room slammed open, and when the Headmaster walked in, I nearly fainted. Even Dimp had sense enough to be distressed.

Before my Fear riposte could go off, the situation exploded.

By some dark god’s mischief, the door had banged the wall just hard enough to tip over the flower vase. The newly-freed imp hooted and ran around the room, spouting curses in Hellspeak. The baby dragon thought this was a game and took chase, upturning the table and chairs in the room.

Dimp yelped as the monkey bit his thumb. The piglet, perhaps not wanting to be left out, had an “accident” on my bed.

“*Flazhul!*” the Headmaster shouted. The imp was instantly banished back to its homeplane, and the baby dragon, now deprived of its playmate, decided it was time for a nap.

“Sir, there’s actually a logical explanation for all this,” I said. My voice broke on the word “logical.”

The Headmaster’s eyes almost burned me, like lenses magnifying the anger behind them. “You are both to report to my office at noon. *Sharp.*”

He slammed the door again on the way out.

“Gods above,” Dimp said, “did you see how red his face was? Like a furnace. If you cracked an egg on him, it would have fried right up.”

“Do not... mention... *eggs,*” I said through clenched teeth.

We sat in the headmaster’s office, the only noise a slight whimper from Dimp’s belly. The monkey adjusted its grip because the profuse sweat on my forehead made its hold precarious.

The Headmaster looked from the monkey to me, but I couldn’t meet his eyes. “Mr. Larum.”

“Yes, sir,” I said in a voice so sheepish, it was lamb-ish.

“I am highly disappointed in you.”

“Please, sir,” I begged, “don’t tell my father.”

“Out of courtesy to your father, your grandfather, and your entire august lineage, I will allow you the chance to explain. I’d advise you to—”

Trepidation flashed across his face. When he realized what was happening, he slapped his large oak desk with both hands, making me jump. “And you *will* control your Fear riposte.”

I would have gulped, if my throat hadn’t been so constricted.

One of the first things we studied at the Academy was how to curb our ripostes. Fear ripostes, Hate ripostes, Joy ripostes, and so on. They were those instinctive bursts of magic that shot off whenever a mage experienced intense, primal emotions.

I had managed to master all except one—my Fear riposte, which manifested as a hex that caused others to feel my fright. I squinted and scrunched my face, the mystical equivalent of crossing

your legs when you have to go to the bathroom.

“Sorry, sir. It started with... with...” I glanced at Dimp.

“Continue, Mr. Larum. Or do you think I can’t deduce that Mr. Dimplemoor started this mayhem?”

Dimp looked wounded. “Please, sir, if I may. It began quite innocently, you see.”

The Headmaster seemed content to let my roommate talk, and I breathed a silent sigh.

“Well,” Dimp said, “our morning classes were cancelled, as you know, due to Lukiss Hopfroth’s unfortunate Disgust riposte during dissection lab. All the students—at least those who hadn’t been splattered with mucus—were sent back to their rooms. We had some free time. So I decided I’d get ahead on some of my homework.”

As my roommate spun his version of events, I sat back and recalled how things had actually played out. The truth, of course, was much, much stranger than Dimp’s fiction.

It had all started earlier that morning. I’d never been so happy to see someone vomit mucus. Thanks to Lukiss Hopfroth, I now had time to finish a homework project due later in the week. With some diligence, I could complete it quickly and start the book of epic myths I’d borrowed from the Academy’s library.

Dimp put down the bestiary he was reading. “I think it’s time to hunt a boar.”

“You mean like Professor Soprosleif?”

“No, not a *bore*, a *boar*. You know. Tusks, hooves, likes to gore people to death. That type of boar.”

“Why in Haven’s name would you want to hunt a boar?”

“Ham,” he replied.

I heard Dimp’s stomach grumbling and immediately understood. Lunch would not be served for hours, and Dimp’s appetite had achieved near-legendary status at the Academy.

“I know exactly which boar to hunt, too,” he said. “The Dire Boar of Daleekonia.”

I fell off my chair. Dimp always thought big. Once, when he was craving a hamburger, he’d gone to find the Golden Cow that the country of Neshtulia revered as a god. He was disappointed to discover it was just an idol that they worshipped. The Neshtulians weren’t happy either, as Dimp had taken a piece of the golden udder for a souvenir.

“The Dire Boar of Daleekonia,” I reminded him, “is over twice as tall as you and makes even the King’s best knights soil their armor. It’s got bristles like spears. No one is stupid enough to go near it. ”

“That’s why it must be succulent. It must spend its days just lazing around in honeyfields. Sure, it might be tough on the outside, but its innards are probably softer than butter.”

I looked away. “Please don’t salivate when you’re talking to me.”

“Did you know that in some places, Dire Boar meat is a delicacy?”

He patted his ample belly, which made me nervous. Dimp was the only mage ever known to have a Hunger riposte. In moments of perceived starvation, it kicked in and opened up portals that summoned random animals. Unfortunately, it was unpredictable, and you were as likely to get a tiger as a turkey.

He must have been reading my mind. “Don’t worry, I’m not *that* hungry. Yet.”

“Here, why don’t you just have one of my apples?” My mom had sent me a fruit basket from home along with some nice orchids in a vase.

“You don’t understand, Payven. Dire Boar meat. De-li-ca-cy.” Each syllable was a morsel melting in his mouth.

“Well, count me out. If the administration ever finds what you’ve been using your teleport spells for, they’ll kick you out.”

“You never do *anything* with me,” Dimp said. “I’m starting to think you don’t even like me.”

“You’re just *starting* to think that?”

“Do you know what people say about you?” he asked.

“If you’re trying to bait me, it won’t work.”

“That you’ll never be a great mage. That you’re afraid of your own shadow. That you’re only here because every male ancestor you’ve had since the dawn of time has been an alumnus.”

“I don’t care what they think,” I said, a little too loudly.

“Payven the Craven, that’s what they call you. No one’s forgotten how you fainted during that field trip to the Faerie Forest.”

“I had a good reason.”

“It was a chipmunk.”

“It was drooling. I thought it had rabies. Then it lunged at me.” I shivered at the memory. Bad things always had a habit of lunging at me.

“You can’t stay locked up in this room. Come with me. It’ll be like one of those adventure books you love to read.”

“I read about great heroes doing great deeds.”

“This will be our Quest.”

“For ham?”

“Can you think of a nobler pursuit than food?” Dimp did not let me answer. “You really need your one story.”

“My what?” I asked.

“Your one story. Everyone should have one story that can be told anyplace, whether it’s at a party, or on a date or—”

“—at their funeral?”

Dimp’s whole body sighed. “All right, Payven, I’ll be honest with you.”

“You don’t really want ham?”

“What I want is you.”

If I hadn’t been on the floor already, I would have fallen off my chair again. “You mean my Fear riposte.”

“Well, that too. If I get into trouble, I want whatever’s trying to eat me to get equally scared. But aside from that, I need to know *when* I should be scared. And you’re one of the few people I actually trust. You balance me.”

I had a comic vision of us on a scale. Dimp weighed almost twice as much as I did.

“I can’t even control my Fear riposte,” I said.

“You don’t have to. It’s more effective when you just let loose. Look, I’m not stupid. I know I don’t have a thimble’s worth of survival instincts. Did you know I almost died getting the Golden Cow?”

“You did?”

“Yep. I asked some Neshtulians why they worshipped an animal that couldn’t get up if you

tipped it over. They almost ground me into fertilizer for their Sacred Pasture.”

“You never told me that story.”

“I never told anyone. If you’d been there, you could have warned me to watch my mouth.”

I doubt he would have listened if I had. The thought of having my own adventure terrified me, but I couldn’t deny the vicarious fantasies I entertained while reading. “One story, eh?”

He must have taken that as an affirmative because he smiled. He clapped me on the back hard enough to leave a bruise.

Before I could say anything more, he began to chant, his hands describing mystical shapes in the air. A buzzing, globe-shaped flame popped up and grew in height and width to form a Teleportal.

“After you,” he said, and when I hesitated, he pushed me in.

“Isn’t this fun?” Dimp asked as we traipsed in the primordial forest.

“Sure is. I’m not sure what’s better, the oppressive humidity or the huge stinging insects.” I swatted at a bloated fly, and I could have sworn it laughed when I missed.

There was a sudden rustling in the underbrush, and I yelped. I felt my Fear riposte kick in. With a loud “Meep!” something launched out of the brush and landed on my head.

“Get it off. Get it off!” I screamed. I ran around in circles, wondering how Dire Boars had learned to fly.

I heard Dimp laughing.

“What is it?” I wailed.

“Just a monkey. Looks more afraid of you than you are of it.”

I raised a tentative hand to explore the furry creature. When none of my fingers got bitten off, I tried to remove it.

It would not let go of my head.

“Wow, you must have really frightened it,” Dimp said.

“If it’s afraid of me, why doesn’t it just run away?”

“Who knows? Maybe monkeys are stupid.”

“Meep,” the monkey cried, either in agreement or outrage.

Dimp reached up and patted its head. “Perhaps it just likes your shampoo. Anyway, say hello to your new familiar. The other kids will be so jealous.”

“Help me do a handstand. Maybe the blood will rush to its head, and it’ll drop off unconscious.”

Suddenly, the ground shook, and a deafening bellow trumpeted through the forest.

“Oh, dear gods,” I said. “Please don’t let that be—”

“The Dire Boar of Daleekonia!” Dimp whooped and ran toward the sound, pulling me after him.

We saw the beast as we topped the rise of a steep hill. The trees thinned, leaving us very exposed. I dropped to the ground and motioned Dimp to follow suit.

The beast had not spotted us yet, and a good thing, too. A true horror, it could level a forest just by rolling around. A man would have to reach up on his tiptoes to touch the monster’s belly.

“Okay,” I whispered. “I’m done. Got my one story. Let’s go home.”

Dimp didn’t budge. But he did point.

I’d been so struck by the sight of the Dire Boar that I’d missed its lighter-hued mate standing several yards away. She was smaller than the Boar, meaning she could fit in a house. Possibly.

“That’s still too big,” I said.

“Not the Dire Sow, keep looking.”

Sure enough, when the sow moved I could see three younger pigs, each about the size of a horse.

“They’re still pretty big,” I said.

Dimp grabbed my chin and directed my view toward a small maple. At the base of the tree, sitting with a dopey expression, was the pudgiest piglet I had ever seen. It was the size of a large dog, pink and hairless, with a perfectly round snout.

Just to be sure, I glanced around for any kitten-sized piglets we could put in our pockets and call it a day.

Nope. The dopey one was definitely the runt. But there was no way to get to it without

attracting the attention of its dad, mom, and larger siblings. “Do you have a plan?” I asked—but my question immediately became moot.

Dimp’s stomach grumbled like rocks caught in a millstone, and as one, the Dire Boar family looked up. At us.

“Wonderful,” Dimp said.

He grabbed me under the armpits and lifted me so that I faced the beasts. Using me like a shield, he charged as fast as his thick legs could run.

I heard a horrible screeching and discovered it originated from my mouth. My Fear riposte went berserk, hurling out waves of fear in whatever direction Dimp pointed me. The sow and the bigger piglets shot off like bolts from a crossbow.

The Dire Boar stood its ground, until the last second, when it grunted surrender and dashed off to join the others.

The littlest Dire Piglet just sat there, smiling at us. Dimp plopped me down, and I collapsed in the grass until I could stop trembling. I noticed the Dire Piglet gazing at me.

“Are you really going to eat him?” I asked. “He’s just a baby.”

“Don’t worry. I have a spell back home that’ll get a piece of him he won’t need. He might even thank me for taking some of his baby fat.”

I didn’t want to admit it, but I’d almost enjoyed our adventure.

“Just one more stop before home,” Dimp said.

I stood up. “What?”

“Well, all this running has really given me an appetite. And nothing goes better with ham than eggs. Hmm, maybe even some bread to make a sandwich, the most delicious ham and egg sandwich ever.”

“That’s three stories. I only wanted one. I’m not going.”

“No problem. Go back to the room, and I’ll meet you later.”

My glower could have parried swords. “You know I can’t cast Teleportals.”

“You’re too uptight,” Dimp said. “Really. Do the heroes in your books give up so easily?”

I turned and kicked at some bushes. I considered forcing Dimp to take me home, but the sad truth was that I didn’t wield half of his power. “Fine. A quick stop for eggs, but that’s it. You

know, by the time we get back it'll nearly be lunchtime."

Dimp's stomach moaned. "'Nearly' isn't good enough. You don't want to be around for my Hunger riposte. Last time, it almost summoned a rabid chipmunk."

He did his eldritch song and dance, and a new Teleportal buzzed into existence.

"You'll be carrying the Dire Piglet," I said.

"Me? Why me? You're not carrying anything."

I pointed to the monkey and glared until Dimp picked up his ham-to-be.

"Great, where are we now? This doesn't look like a chicken farm."

The cavern was chilly and dank. A large opening above us allowed in enough sunlight so that we did not trip over our feet. The ground was composed of strange, glittering pebbles the size of coins.

"Shh," Dimp said. "It should be hibernating by now. Listen for snoring."

Something huge that I had first taken to be rock formations shifted before us, and my mind suddenly registered what it was.

A dragon. And it was definitely awake.

The dragon lifted its head and roared like all the waves that have ever broken upon a rocky shore. Its wings spread, distending until they seemed capable of shadowing the entire world. Serrated scales blanketed it from maw to tail, talon to wingtip. I started counting saber-like teeth, then stopped when I realized it would be easier just to count *rows*.

My goosebumps got goosebumps. My heartbeat went on vacation. My Fear riposte short-circuited from sheer terror.

Fortunately, Dimp suffered no such frailty. "Greetings, Mighty One. We are all-powerful mages from a faraway realm."

Why are you carrying that fat piglet? the dragon asked.

"It is... an enemy of mine whom I have cursed... because he asked too many annoying questions."

You've come to steal my treasure, haven't you?

I looked at my feet, and saw the pebbles weren't *like* coins—they *were* coins.

“Not at all,” Dimp said. “Why would mages as mighty as we need such trinkets?”

Quick as a striking snake, the dragon's head darted right up to Dimp, so close that its breath made his robes flutter. Dimp didn't blink.

Then the dragon turned and closed in on me. One snap of its jaws could have swallowed me whole. Fear froze me where I stood, and I hoped the beast would mistake my petrification for poise. The dragon's curiosity began to show. Neither Dimp nor I had flinched.

Why are you here, then?

“We're here to... help,” said Dimp.

The dragon's demeanor changed. Its wings folded to its sides, and its massive shoulders slumped. Its eyes became pools of sorrow, and it let out a monstrous sigh.

Finally, it cried, I thought the gods would never answer my prayers.

“So, what seems to be the problem?” Dimp asked.

You don't know?

“Of course we do. We wish to hear the specifics.”

The dragon rolled over. Its belly was massively bloated.

Dimp nodded sadly. “Too much snacking between meals. I'm afraid I can relate. Once I accidentally ate a whole cake meant for the wedding of Prince Helflez and—”

I'm pregnant, you imbecile.

Fortune smiled upon us. Reminiscing about the wedding cake had nudged Dimp's ill-tempered stomach. Its rumble was as loud as the dragon's roar as it echoed throughout the cavern.

“Do not presume to insult me, dragon,” Dimp said over the thunder in his belly. “Or else we shall leave you, alone and in pain.”

The dragon closed its eyes and nodded, probably the closest thing to an apology it had ever offered in its life.

“So,” Dimp said, his voice steady, “tell me about your problem.”

My eggs are stuck.

This time we did flinch.

“I must consult my colleague.” Dimp sauntered over to me.

I was panicking. “Dimp, what in Haven’s name—”

He silenced me with a look. “I thought there would be a bunch of eggs just sitting around. And there would be, if they weren’t stuck. Now calm yourself.”

I frowned.

“Are you calm?” he asked.

I nodded.

“Let me hear you say—”

“I’m calm.”

“Good, because it’s actually quite simple. We just have to figure out how to induce labor in a dragon, and then distract it long enough to steal one of its eggs. Any chance your Fear riposte is working?”

“It’s burnt out right now.”

“Gods above. We’ll have to use Plan B. You have to go up the hole.”

I looked at the opening in the ceiling.

“Not that hole. You know. The hole... where the eggs come out of.”

“Dimp?”

“Yes, Payven?”

“Would you like to ask me again if I’m calm?”

I don’t know if Dimp was acting, but he suddenly grabbed his belly, dropping the Dire Piglet in the process. “Payven, you’d better hurry. My Hunger riposte is getting closer by the second.”

“Then let’s go home.”

“Are you crazy?” He massaged his paunch. “You’re about to go where no mage has ever gone before.”

“I don’t want to think about it. And I don’t want to go.”

“This is your dad’s fault, isn’t it?”

“What?”

“Your dad. When you were younger, he probably lectured you about how dangerous the world was, full of Dire Beasts and dragons and who knows what else, and he got you so scared that you locked yourself in your room with only storybooks for friends. But you’ve just faced two of the most powerful creatures you’ll ever come across, and you’re still alive to tell the tale. Heck, you even made one flee for its life. You have to grow up someday, Payven. Why not today? You can’t stay a terrified little kid forever.”

My throat tightened, but I refused to cry in front of him. “I hate you.”

I kicked twice at a shiny mound of coins, then stalked off to find the dragon’s egghole.

The dragon repositioned itself to give me access. I don’t remember most of the details, but I’m sure they’ll resurface in future nightmares.

The tunnel was dark and clammy, and I was glad that Lightcasting was one of the spells in my repertoire. It was weird, because even though I’d cast many spells in my life, this was the first time I’d actually cast one outside class.

I felt like I’d been walking for days when I saw a red glow ahead. A tiny imp with antlers and a bulbous, purple nose was jumping up and down in front of a wall of eggs, all clogged together. Imps caused mischief and chaos wherever they could, but I was still shocked to find one... here.

My first thought was to run, but Dimp’s words haunted me.

The imp shouted a question, but I’d taken only one semester of Hellspeak, and the professor had proven quite inept. *Slowly*, I said in its language.

It hopped about angrily. *You can’t stop me, apple pie.*

That couldn’t be right. Unfortunately, the only questions I could ask involved either the weather or the location of the bathroom. *Is it cloudy in here?* I asked.

With a frustrated snarl, it leaped to scratch out my eyes. Two small, furry hands reached out and blocked the attack.

I guess the monkey had grown attached to me, in more ways than one. My head as a battleground, the monkey and the imp struggled and pitched about.

I staggered forward and grabbed the nearest egg. Though I pulled with all my strength, it wouldn’t budge.

I climbed on top of one of the lower eggs, and bracing my back against the tunnel wall, I pushed out with both legs. It rolled a little, then a little more. I tried rocking it, and the other eggs shifted.

When the dam of eggs started to dislodge, I realized my predicament. “Oh, for Haven’s sake,” I cried.

I’m not sure what went through Dimp’s mind when that first egg shot out. Nor do I know what he thought as the other eggs began barreling out as if racing each other.

Myself, I wasn’t thinking a single thing, busy as I was, scrambling backwards on a rolling dragon egg. I felt the egg beginning to crack from all the spinning and bouncing. The monkey and the imp were still wrestling atop me, and I suspected the imp was starting to fight dirty.

Something bright and buzzing ignited ahead of me. I realized it was a Teleportal only as I went through it and found myself crashing back to my dorm room.

Dimp returned with the Dire Piglet just as the chaos was climaxing. The egg had cracked open, and a premature baby dragon was looking around for a mother to imprint on.

I grabbed the imp, and it shrieked, *Burning doughnuts! Burning doughnuts!*

Dimp plunked the Dire Piglet on my bed. He grabbed the vase I’d received from home, threw out the flowers, and stood by my desk.

“Throw it here,” he shouted.

I swung the imp in circles by the tail and tossed it onto my desk. Dimp dropped the vase over the stunned little demon.

Then there was a sound like thunder farting, and a look of dread crossed Dimp’s face. His Hunger riposte was activating.

A blur of sparks and sparkles formed a huge ellipse. It hummed like a Teleportal but far more ominously.

A lion’s head poked in, but it hesitated, seeing how crowded the room already was.

I leaped over to my fruit basket, grabbed an apple, and pitched it to Dimp. He took three bites, and the portal quieted down and faded. The lion left, shaking its shaggy head.

“I wish you’d taken that apple the first time I offered it,” I said. “Now, if you don’t mind, can

you please help me get this monkey off my head?”

Dimp frowned at the dragon. “I really wanted some eggs. They’re supposed to be a delicacy.”

There’s an old saying that people who look backwards make the best fortunetellers. As I sat, remembering all that had happened, my life grew a little clearer, a little surer. I can’t say exactly when the change occurred, but I couldn’t deny it.

The Headmaster scratched the sides of his chin and scowled. Dimp finished his adaptation of events, and though the Headmaster wasn’t pleased, he didn’t summarily expel us, either.

“So, this was just a school project gone awry, coupled with your Hunger riposte?” he asked.

“Yes, sir,” Dimp said.

The Headmaster turned to me.

“Yes, sir,” I said before he even asked.

The Headmaster stood, hands braced on his desk. He leaned towards me like a crumbling tower. “I am disinclined to believe Mr. Dimplemoor out of principle, but I know that you, young Payven, are far too aware of the consequences of lying. Am I not correct?”

He thought I was too afraid to lie. And if he had questioned me the day before, he would have been right.

“Yes, sir,” I repeated.

And as I sat there under his unblinking gaze, thinking of fear—of how it could be a shield or a cage, a thief or a jailer, an invention or an inheritance—I knew I was on my way to mastering my Fear riposte.

The monkey patted my head, jumped off, and curled up in my lap.

Rod M. Santos was abandoned as a baby in a downtown Manhattan Cineplex. He was raised by kind ushers who fed him overpriced Milk-Duds and weaned him on butter-flavored topping. Despite his colorful childhood, he lives a relatively boring existence working in Human Resources for a non-profit agency. Non-profit, by the way, is not a misnomer. Writing allows him to vent off his excess quirkiness. “The Great Deeds of Payven Larum” is his first sale, but he threatens that it will not be his last.