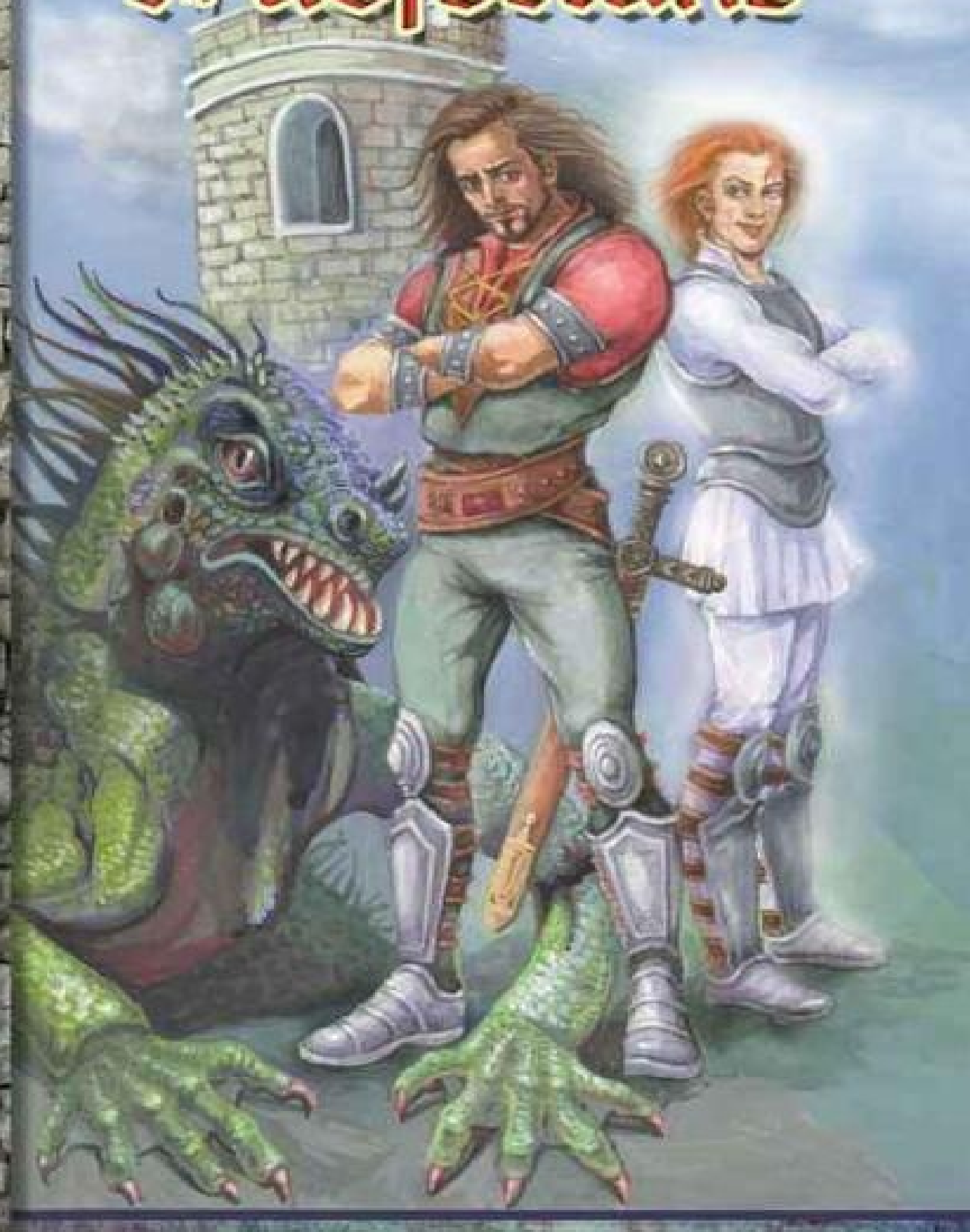


A Fly Sparkling Misfortune

Laura Lord



My Sparkling Misfortune

Laura Lond

Book 1 of *The Lakeland Knight* series

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Praise for My Sparkling Misfortune:

"An incredibly fun and funny story." -- *Tea and Tomes*

"Interesting characters and unique twists in the traditional hero/villain stereotypes made for an entertaining reading experience." -- *Dark Wyrms Reads*

"One of the reasons the book is so enjoyable is because you never quite know where the plot is going. You are continually surprised." -- *The Literary Lioness*

"What a nasty, dreadful, and cruel villain Arkus is. Oh, and don't forget funny. Yes, I said funny. With author Laura Lond's crisp, wry sense of humor, you'll be laughing right along with the scoundrel on almost every page." -- *The Feathered Quill*

"The author manages to pack in an epic's worth of action, adventure, and humor. ... It is one of those rare, great stories when you find yourself rooting wholeheartedly for the villain of the piece." -- *A Myriad of Books*

Chapter 1

I was understandably surprised when Shork, my lackey, announced that I had a visitor...

Oh, wait. You know nothing about me yet, so you would not see why I was "understandably surprised, right? Hmm... Perhaps Korvaleus was right, writing a book is not so easy as it seems, and I shouldn't have, uh... Oh well. He'd deserved it, anyway.

All right then. I'm not going to rewrite anything, I like my opening line. I'll just introduce myself here, it should explain things: Lord Arkus of BlackriverCastle, also known as Arkus the Fearsome and the Dreaded Lord, at your service. I spend my days scheming, plotting, attacking, invading, killing, plundering, kidnapping, collecting ransom, and having other types of fun. I've done a few backstabblings as well, but only returning the favor; I do have some manners.

Yes, you have guessed it: I am a villain. What? You wanted a noble hero? Well, tough. You've got the wrong book then. But let me tell you something before you put it down: there are no heroes without us villains. They'd have nothing to show off against. Besides, goody boys do some wicked tricks as well, as you will see if you keep reading my story, and it takes some heroism to be a villain sometimes, too. I suppose you already know it though, if you're smart, which you have to be, because I'm not writing this for silly people.

So, with that out of the way, let me get back to the story. I had just finished my rather bland tasting dinner (it turned out to be a real headache to find a decent cook after old Mr. Flamm thought he could serve me chicken five nights in a row), and, as I said, I was understandably surprised when Shork announced that I had a visitor.

Nobody visits BlackriverCastle out of their own free will. And if somebody wanted to, for whatever strange reason, it is unlikely that they would safely arrive at my doorstep: Arkusville, my domain, is filled with goblins, robbers and other assorted outlaws. It's a dreary and dangerous place. I take good care to keep it that way. Heroes occasionally still come to fight me, of course, but they don't count as visitors, and they do not take the trouble to be properly announced.

Yet Shork was insisting that someone had come and asked to see me. And not just someone--Prince Kellemar of Dalvanna himself. Yes, the oldest son of noble King Ramian, my respectable enemy. A proud young man with a cute face, brave in battle, and of course with aspirations of becoming a hero. Preferably at my expense. He came alone, imagine that, without his bodyguards.

Naturally suspecting some kind of a set up, I told Shork to invite him in and to immediately alert my army and watchmen.

The prince entered with a defying look on his face, obviously rehearsed for villains like me. If I was supposed to make me tremble inside, let's just say it did not work.

"You are a brave man, Your Highness," I greeted him. "What brings you here, and what makes you think that you will make it out of here alive?"

"Arkus, you are despicably wicked," he began.

Blatant flattery, I noted. He wants something from me.

"But even you," he continued, "would not dare to harm me now and face the wrath of my father when he returns."

"I have faced your father before, many times, and stood against him quite well," I replied. "So what stops me from taking you captive and getting a nice chunk of ransom money, as I believe I have already done in the past?"

By the way, it's true. I had captured him once, and the king paid.

Kellemar did not appreciate the reminder, of course; I could see it by how his jaws clenched. Well, I suppose I make some kind of a funny face, too, when I'm mad.

Meanwhile, Shork returned and communicated to me that everything was fine--no attackers, no spies sneaking in. Kellemar, indeed, came alone. I was getting intrigued.

"Listen, Arkus," the prince spoke, "I have certainly thought of what evil intentions my coming here like this, unprotected, will inspire in your evil mind." (He was trying to be eloquent, but I wouldn't use the same word twice in a short phrase like this, even if it was such a nice word as "evil". Wouldn't you agree?) "But hear me out before you start plotting. I have a proposition."

That piqued my interest even more.

"Proposition? From *you* to *me*?" I couldn't help getting a little sarcastic here. "As in 'deal' or 'agreement'? The honorable Prince Kellemar is offering me a deal, did I get that right?"

"You can mock all you want. Yes, I wish to make you an offer. Will you hear me out?"

"Of course. I will die of curiosity if I kill you now without knowing what you had in mind. Go ahead, I am listening... Oh, wait: Does your father know about this?"

The question irked him, as it was intended to.

"He does not," Kellemar said through his teeth. "But it does not matter. When the king is away, I rule in his stead, as you very well know. Whatever I say to you carries the same weight. Satisfied?"

"Quite. Now, go ahead."

"Several of our regions have been attacked by the Dolmanians. Are you aware of that?"

"I have heard something, yes. My condolences. They are a pesky little tribe.

"Well, we've been fighting them off, but I want to rid my land of them completely, once and for all. And I want your help to do it."

I almost fell off my chair. Wouldn't you?

"You want my *what*?! Kellemar, that's insulting. What kind of a ridiculous joke is this?? Did you happen to take a drink from Black River on the way here? Because if you did, well, that would explain a lot, and-- "

"Stop fooling around! I know you will not help if there is nothing in it for you, and I know you love of gold. I can tell you where the Dolmanians store their plunder. Would that interest you?"

"Oh, I see. Well, it might, but answer me a couple of questions first. Number one: Why don't you take the plunder yourself and give it back to your people? And number two: Why don't you call on your numerous allies who are supposed to help you out without getting paid?"

The prince smirked.

"Valid questions. I will start with the second one, if you don't mind. I do not wish to bother our allies with this because I want to save their help for a more serious occasion. Like you deciding

attack us again, for example."

"Shameless flatterer. And my first question?"

"Easy: I do not want to waste my men's lives to capture stolen gold, only a part of which used to belong to my people. There will be no way to determine whose gold is where as people who unfortunately lie about it. And I do not wish to spoil them by dividing it all equally and sharing it."

"Then why don't you just take it for your treasury?" I asked with an innocent expression. I already knew why: he didn't have enough men. His father must have taken half the army with him (which would be nice to check, by the way).

Kellemar squared his shoulders. "As hard as it must be for you to understand, I do not want the plunder. I'd rather use it to stop the raids. So you can fight the Dolmanians and take it. What do you say?"

"Well, let me think here... You want to build yourself some reputation by defeating the Dolmanians in your father's absence, with only a half of the army..."

"Two thirds," he quickly interjected. I had to stifle a laugh.

"Two thirds? All right, two thirds then, sorry for the assumption. Anyway, it is obviously not enough to completely destroy them, so if you manage to pull it off, you'll be regarded a hero. And in order to do it, you offer me to take out the part of their forces that is guarding the plunder. Of course no one will know about it. If word gets out that Lord Arkus attacked the Dolmanians, no one would think that we had an agreement about it and I was actually helping you. Evil Arkus went after the treasure, they'll think. Am I following you?"

"Close enough. So what do you say?"

I made an innocent face again. "That's not quite heroic though, is it?"

My pun reached its target, I could see it. Kellemar clenched his teeth, but chose not to pursue the subject.

"Let that not concern you. Do you agree to my offer or not?"

For a moment, I wondered what he would do if I refused.

"It is an interesting offer," I said. "Shall we discuss the details of your plan over a map?"

The prince smiled. "Arkus, I am no fool. I do intend to get out of here alive. If you agree, you will receive the location of the plunder in a separate message, on the day of the battle."

I smiled in return. *Good thinking, Kellemar.*

"A day before. I'll need to verify your information and prepare."

"Very well, a day before. Deal?"

If you think he extended his hand here, you are wrong. He wanted to strike a deal with a villain, but without dirtying himself by shaking hands on it. You tell me how noble it is.

"Deal."

I wanted to see his reaction, so I offered my hand. He didn't touch it.

"There is no need for that. You have my word as a prince."

So I let the prince go and waited for his message, entertaining myself with thoughts of how I could have fun with the messenger. Kellemar, however, robbed me of that pleasure by sending the message attached to an arrow shot from a safe distance. His note stated that the plunder was hidden in the SkeletonCave. I knew the place well. According to the note, the raiders had only about a hundred men guarding the treasures--a mere trifle for me and my army, especially keeping in mind that I have had some encounters with the Dolmanians in the past, and, well, let's just say they find me a little intimidating. It looked like I was going to have an easy victory.

In case you are wondering whether I thought of attacking Kellemar after taking the plunder, of course I did. What respectable villain would disregard such an opportunity? However, I decided against it. A deal is a deal, after all, and as I have said before, I have manners. Besides, what's the use of invading his land when it has just been raided and I'd already have all the gold?? I could wait for a better time. According to my sources, King Ramian wouldn't be back for a while.

I studied the map and planned my route, making sure to check whether there were any white towers on the way (I will explain that later). On the day of the battle, I donned my best armor and my favorite purple cape. I am a handsome and stylish villain, by the way. No, seriously.

My men were ready for the mission and happy about it. They always salivate when they smell gold. We reached the cave unnoticed and surprised the Dolmanians. The battle was short. I took out the leader, who screamed like a maiden; the rest of them panicked and fled, making it even easier for my guys to finish the job.

I entered the cave first. There was more gold in it than I expected; the Dolmanians must have raided several settlements before hitting Dalvanna. I stepped closer to count the sacks filled with golden coins.

That's when I heard the growl.

I recognized it immediately, nearly dropping my sword--quiet yet powerful, the chilling sound that had become my nightmare, only this time it was real. The monster had found me again. He shouldn't have, he couldn't be there...

I spun around and saw him towering at the cave entrance... a lizard-like beast, taller than any man, with glowing red eyes... and the sharpest fangs... hideous claws... and...

All right, all right. I am terrified of him. Even writing this makes me shudder. And don't you dare laugh: if you saw that creature, you would have fled faster than I did.

By some miracle I had made it out of that cave, my cape torn in half with the beast's paw; that was how close he was to completing his mission. I saw Prince Kellemar riding up, and for a split second I was stupid enough to think that he would help me. He was, after all, an aspiring hero, and heroes are supposed to do such things. Not this one: Kellemar stopped his horse and watched with a smile.

I ran for my life, heading to the nearest white tower. To my horror, I found it in ruins. That explained why the monster was able to get to me; it also meant that I had no protection from him for two more miles, until--and if--I reach the white tower in Arkusville, the closest one to my castle.

Those of you who think that running for two miles with a monster after you is a fun adventure will have to allow me to disagree. Add to it the humiliation I had endured, in front of Kellemar and in front of my men. That would be enough to move Kellemar to the first spot on my long list of enemies and

start planning the most cruel and treacherous invasion ever--immediately. However, that was not the end of my troubles. When I reached the spot where the second white tower was supposed to be, I saw it destroyed as well. My home, the BlackriverCastle, was no longer safe.

At that moment, Shork showed up, on horseback. He was the only one of my men who knew about the monster and therefore knew where to look for me.

"Oh, no, the tower is gone!" he exclaimed. "And the next one--the next one is in Malgarra, that's over sixty miles from here!"

Idiot. As if I didn't know that.

"What took you so long?!" I yelled at him. "And why didn't you bring my horse?!"

"I couldn't catch it, Your Lordship. It bolted away, and I-- "

"I have no time for this! Give me yours!"

He hurried to dismount. "What will Your Lordship do?"

"Guess!" I snapped, jumping in the saddle. "Ride to Malgarra, of course!"

"But we could get to the castle first, take some supplies and another horse."

"The beast can be here any moment, you fool!!"

"He isn't that fast... Ouch!"

Usually, Shork was pretty good at knowing when I was going to smack him, but this time he missed it.

"Now, listen, and don't you mess anything up, or I will have you for dinner. Go to the castle, wait for the men to return, and order them to start rebuilding the tower. Then take some money and food and find me in Malgarra. Got it?"

"Yes, Your Lordship. Castle, tower, supplies, and find you in Malgarra. Very good."

I had no time to remark that I did not need his evaluation of whether my orders were good or not. I had to get out of there before the monster would catch up with me.

* * *

Well, now that you know my secret, I suppose it is a good time to tell you how it came about. Several years ago, I had a disagreement with a wizard named Magner. We fought, he died. The monster belonged to Magner; how he had captured and tamed such a beast, I do not know, but the creature served him faithfully, obeying his every word. When we fought, it was just Magner and me in an honest duel without magical tricks. But when I overpowered and wounded him, Magner called on the monster. His dying words were his last order to the beast.

"Kill Arkus."

The accursed creature had been haunting me ever since.

I can't tell you how many times the monster's growl had startled me when I thought I had lost him. He covered my tracks, or found a place he could never reach. He could dig tunnels, climb mountains and walls, swim across any river or lake; he knew how to hide and how to wait. I learned early on that swords were useless against him, his scales were too thick. Whoever I hired to guard me would quit after the first encounter with the monster--if they survived it, that is.

My life had turned into a nightmare, with that constant expectation to hear the growl, and fear that one day the beast might decide to change his ways and sneak up on me silently. I thought I was going to lose my mind.

Then, quite by accident, I had discovered that for some reason the monster could not go near white towers. Being a villain, I never appreciated those before and actually destroyed a few. Built by sentimental fools to help those in need and supposedly capable of allowing people to talk without sparklings, they were no use to me. However, it turned out that a white tower was the only thing that offered me safety.

That gave me some breathing room. I built a white tower next to my domain, and a couple more down two major roads. Of course, I could not ruin my reputation by openly building them, so each time I hired a man who would hire a man who would pay the builders. I kept obtaining the latest maps and when I traveled I'd make sure I stayed close enough to white towers on the way. Nobody knew my secret, only Shork who, with all his faults, would never dare to betray me.

I have no idea how Kellemar found out. He must have destroyed the towers when I was on my way to the cave. It was a smart move, I'll give him that; a move worthy of a villain--and the best part of that, technically, he did not break his word of a prince that he had given me with such reserve. He did what he promised, he'd sent me a message with the location of the plunder one day before the battle. It was implied that we would not harm each other during this joint venture, and he did nothing to harm me; he only destroyed the white towers, letting the monster take care of the rest. Now he was going to be praised not only for beating the Dolmanians and getting the gold but also for defeating the evil Lord Arkus.

Prince Kellemar, son of King Ramian of Dalvanna, you will die for this.

* * *

Before I could fulfill that vow, of course, I had to ensure my safety. I wished I could gallop all the way to Malgarra, but that would kill the horse. I made it there by nightfall. The white tower stood intact, and there was a tavern right next to it. I breathed a sigh of relief, dismounted, and tied the horse. I was not recognized, but my fine clothes impressed the owner enough to give me a room without asking to pay first. He offered supper as well, but I could not think of food. It did not look like

I would be able to sleep, either. I had to plan my revenge.

There was plenty of time, and I used it well. On the next day, I had an elaborate plan, smart and wicked enough to win the first award at the annual villain conference. All I needed was to have the towers rebuilt, so that I could return to my castle and get to work.

I anxiously waited for Shork, inventing new punishments for him for every hour of his delay. The hours turned into days; the servant would not come. When three days had passed with no sight of him, I sensed that something was wrong.

I had been avoiding the crowd at the tavern, irritated to no end by ridiculous stories of how brave Prince Kellemar fed evil Lord Arkus to a monster. Yes, that's what people were saying, can you believe it? However, after those three days I decided that listening to travelers' conversations might help me figure out what was going on in Dalvanna and Arkusville.

I went to the dining hall and took a seat in the corner. Sure enough, it was not long before yet another crook began getting free drinks by telling everyone about Lord Arkus's shameful demise.

"He begged for his life," the fellow asserted, "but the prince was not moved, and he threw him right in the monster's mouth!"

"Did you see it happen?" someone asked.

The storyteller shook his head. "No, I did not, but I heard it from someone who did."

The stupid crowd took it as sufficient proof; they filled their glasses and drank to Prince Kellemar's health.

I figured I'd better ask the questions I had in mind, before these guys got too drunk to answer--before they drive me mad enough to give them a taste of my sword.

"So Arkus is dead," I began, "But I believe he had a whole army. What happened to it?"

"Some were captured, others fled to the castle. They picked a new leader, from what I know. Some fellow named Belvir. But he is far too scared of Prince Kellemar now to cause trouble."

Belvir was my second in command, so it was understandable that he took charge in my absence.

"Is anyone rebuilding the white towers?" I asked.

"The ones Arkus destroyed? No, not yet. The prince has decided to build new ones, on a different location--farther away from the BlackriverCastle. I think it's a good idea. It would be a waste to rebuild them on the same spots and then have Arkus's men bring them down again."

Lovely. So even the destruction of the towers was blamed on me.

I still could not understand why Belvir was not following my orders relayed through Shork and why Shork wasn't here. Has something happened to him?

"Do you know anything about Arkus's personal attendant?" I asked.

The storyteller gave me a puzzled look.

"The servant? Why, I would think he is still in the royal dungeon, with the rest of the captives. Why would he be treated differently?"

Now I had the answer. Shork was captured, and everyone thought me dead, including my own men. I was stuck here. No one was looking for me, waiting for me, or going to rebuild the towers where

needed them. It was up to me to get out of all this trouble.

I returned to my room. I had to think of something--fast. My brilliant plan lay in ruins; I needed new one. So what could I possibly do, without money or men, and with the monster on my back?

I sought long and hard, and I eventually found a solution. It was difficult and dangerous, but it worked... Oh, I would show them all what happens when you anger Lord Arkus!

* * *

Years ago, I had learned from one unfortunate scribe that it was possible to catch a gormack, an evil spirit, and make him serve you. There was only one place in the world where that could be done, but not many knew the location and the rules one had to follow to achieve that, and out of those who knew, not many would dare to try. The priceless secret was strictly guarded, but that scribe owed me more than he could ever pay, and after much hesitation, he paid by sharing it. Now, it looked like the time had come to use that information.

The place was called SilkyLake. The water of the lake was said to be so beautiful, warm, and pleasant, that spirits could not resist the temptation to swim in it, even though only for a few minutes. To enjoy swimming, of course, you need flesh, so spirits would temporarily take a physical form. This weakened them, and for some reason the water of the lake weakened them even more. That's what gave a mere mortal like me a chance to subdue a powerful gormack.

A gormack could only spend four to five minutes swimming in the lake, the scribe had told me. Staying longer, he risked losing too much strength, which would force him to remain in the limiting physical body for many years. No spirit would want such inconvenience and humiliation. So a human wishing to catch a gormack needed to wait for a little less than four minutes, and then jump at the spirit, grab him and hold him. Compared to humans, the spirits were still very strong, and they would try to wrestle away with all their might. If you failed to hold the gormack... you would most likely pay for it with your life. However, the longer you held him, the weaker he would become, and his risk of getting stuck in the physical body would grow. Eventually, the gormack would offer you something for letting him go, usually gold, jewels, or fulfilling one simple wish. That's when you had to bargain and tell him you wanted five years of service.

Five years in flesh, and bound to a human master, is not a lot of fun, so the insulted spirit would probably try to break free yet again, with renewed vigor. However, five years is far better than thirty, forty or more he would be risking at that point. If you manage to hold the gormack that long, there is a good chance he will agree--and he will not be able to go back on his promise, if you use the right words to seal the deal.

Five years of having a powerful spirit at my command... Can you imagine what I could do with such a servant? There were, of course, some limitations to what he would be able to do, brought by his physical body and by general laws of the spiritual realm that would have to be considered, but still... Just thinking about all the possibilities took away my breath. Kellemar would pay. I could take care of my long list of enemies, too, accomplish everything I ever wanted... And I could order the gormack to kill the monster that haunted me. He should be strong enough for that. I would be free again! Yes, it was a dangerous task, but it was well worth the risk.

* * *

As you can imagine, my journey to Silky Lake was not easy, but I will spare you the detailed account of all the hardships I went through; let's just say that it took me over two months to get there, and there were no white towers in that region--none at all. I had left their safety several times during my journey, and those days were agonizing, but the monster didn't show up; he must have not tracked me down yet. That had given me confidence for the final plunge--venturing into the area where I would be completely unprotected. Remember I told you that being a villain at times requires some

heroism? Well, this would be one such occasion.

I reached the lake in the middle of a bright sunny day. The water, indeed, was stunning beautiful... and that's all I will say. You didn't expect a sappy description from someone like me, did you?

I hid in the nearby bushes and waited. Nothing was happening for so long that I began to wonder whether the whole thing was a sham... Then I heard a loud crack in the air followed by a big splash. The first gormack arrived for a swim.

On my way there, I had decided that I would not try to catch the first one I see. I would just wait how it all happens to be better prepared. The spirit materialized in midair--that's what had caused the cracking sound--and fell in the lake. He swam underwater for a while, and all I could see was the dark purplish glow coming from his body; then he emerged... Huge, barrel-chested, half man, half bear with spikes on his head and along his back, mean piercing eyes and powerful jaws. I would say that he was magnificent if he hadn't eerily reminded me of my monster. Even though the resemblance was not striking, it was bad enough to make me want to hide better.

As he swam with obvious pleasure, his purple glow diminished. I checked my watch. He spent almost exactly four minutes in the lake, then climbed ashore and sat on a rock, probably recovering his strength. When his glow regained its intensity, the gormack stood up, stretched, and disappeared with the same cracking sound.

All right. So now I'd seen it. Things seemed to work exactly as the scribe had told me. The only question I had was, Are they all so big? Because, as much as I'd love to have a creature like the one I just saw in my service, I wasn't sure I could overpower it. I am a strong warrior, make no mistake about that; not many can stand against me in battle. But the way that gormack looked... I just had to be reasonable. After all, there were no second chances in this game.

Two loud cracks interrupted my thoughts. Two spirits at once?? I cautiously looked out. Yes, there were two of them, and they were fighting. Quite viciously, too, I might add. One glowed in blue, the other bright orange, like fire; both had thin swords of the same colors, glowing as well, and the swords clashed with incredible speed and force, raising tons of splashes--they fought in the lake, although close to the shore, on a shallow spot.

These two were considerably smaller than the first, which answered my question. They did not look like beasts, either; if it wasn't for the glow, each could pass for a human, a slender yet strongly shaped man.

They kept fighting. Each seemed intent on not letting the other out of the water, obviously trying to use its weakening effect and ignoring the fact that it was weakening them both. The orange one appeared stronger, he was attacking more and once managed to knock his enemy down. The blue one got back on his feet quickly enough, but I could see that he was losing ground.

I checked my watch. They'd been splashing for a little over three minutes. I had to think fast here. What if I grab one now? Will the other one let me catch him or turn against me? Logically, he shouldn't interfere, but if being captured by a human is considered such a bad thing, who knows maybe the other gormack will forget whatever disagreement they had and choose to help out. On the other hand, gormacks are evil spirits. "Evil" and "help out" don't go together.

I figured I'd have to risk it.

Three and a half minutes... Three forty five... Three fifty. Now!

I leapt out of the bushes, ran in the water, and grabbed the orange one from the back. I wanted him of course, since he'd proved to be stronger. After the half-second of the initial surprise, the gormack began to struggle; I held him with all my might. The blue one let out a triumphant laugh.

"That's what you get for messing with me!"

Whew. I was right. He wasn't helping.

The blue gormack hurried to get out of the lake.

"What are you doing, silly mortal?!" the orange one demanded. "Let me go!"

"I don't think so," I answered, fighting hard to keep hold of him. He was still very strong, just as the scribe had warned. I strained my every muscle to its limit, hardly able to breathe. I was sure glad I didn't go for the big purple guy!

"What do you want?!"

Oh, so he wouldn't threaten me? And wouldn't offer anything? He's already asking what *I* want. The fellow was getting desperate... which meant I could ask for a little more.

"Six years of your service."

The blue one laughed from the shore. "Happy captivity!" he shouted. "I hope you will think of me every miserable day!"

Crack! He was gone.

My gormack was supposed to be growing weaker each second, but I couldn't feel it. He swung like a rag, trying to break free, and my arms were getting numb, but, somehow, I still held on.

"Six years of service!" I repeated. "I will not release you until you pledge it!"

Did he really stagger, just a little, or was I imagining it?...

I wasn't.

"Very well. Be it as you wish."

He agreed!! My overstrained muscles begged for a break, but I couldn't let go of him yet; that would be a fatal mistake. I had to seal the deal.

"So do you promise to serve me faithfully for six years?"

"Within the laws of both worlds, that of spirits and of men, yes."

Within the laws, well, that was fine. The scribe had told me about that. No spirit could break those laws.

"To act in my best interests?"

"Yes."

"Not to lie to me?"

"Yes."

"And never seek retaliation for being captured?"

"Yes."

"Abyss take you if you break your word?"

"Naturally."

Naturally? Was he leaving some kind of a loophole?

"No tricks! Say, 'Yes, I promise, the abyss takes me if I break my word!'"

He said it.

At last, I could loosen the grip. Oh, my arms, shoulders, back... They'd be aching for days.

The spirit waded to the shore. I cautiously followed, still unable to fully believe it. I did it, didn't I had a gormack now. My own, for six full years.

He sat down on the sand. I figured I'd give him time to accept the unfortunate change circumstances. I could use some rest as well, so I lowered myself on a large rock a couple of steps away and looked at my prize. As I have said earlier, he could easily pass for a man, especially now that he'd stopped glowing--a lean young fellow with well-defined features, dressed in a short tunic, breeches, and tall boots. His hair was still flaming orange, but his skin turned the color of regular human tan. I waited for the glow to return, but minutes passed, and it was not happening. Was something wrong?

"Your glow is gone," I said. "I hope you have not lost all your strength."

He looked up at me and, quite unexpectedly, grinned.

"That would be a disappointment, wouldn't it? Don't worry, it's just because I am settling in to the physical world."

Well, at least he was not too upset about it.

"Has this happened to you for the first time?"

"I would think those to whom it had happened once will not come to the lake again."

"You have a point." I looked him over again and noticed that he had no weapon. "Where is your sword?"

"Always with me." With that, the shining orange blade showed up in his hand, and before I could blink it was pointed at me. "Why? You want to taste it?"

Uh-oh. So he *was* a little upset.

"Hey now. You promised to be loyal to me."

"True." He smiled and removed the sword. "But I never promised not to have fun."

A feisty one. It looked like I'd have to teach him some manners.

"You must do what I tell you, and I'm telling you to be respectful. Is that understood?"

He gave a quick bow.

"Yes, Mr. I-Don't-Know-What-To-Call-You."

Well, he had a point here, too. I had not yet introduced myself.

"'My lord' or 'master' will do very well," I said, "but if you wish to know my name, it is Lord Ark of BlackriverCastle. Now, what is yours? I assume you have a name, too?"

"Of course. I am Tulip."

"Tulip?? What kind of a name is that for an evil spirit?"

"I am no evil spirit."

I gave him a long, hard look.

"...Don't you joke like that. I appreciate a good bit of humor, but not of the kind that makes one's heart stop."

"But I am not joking. I am not an evil spirit, I am what you call a sparkling."

The world faded before my eyes.

"WHAT?? A sparkling?! Are you telling me I have caught a *sparkling*?! A goody-goody spirit that helps heroes, watches over little children, and messes up villains' plans?!"

"Well, that's a rather broad definition, but yes, generally speaking, that's what a sparkling does. What seems to be the problem?"

I wanted to scream. And I did.

"I WANTED A GORMACK!!!"

"Oops. Your mistake. You should have picked Ragnar then. The one I was fighting."

I grabbed him by the tunic collar.

"Why didn't you tell me who you are?!"

"I do not recall you asking."

* * *



Chapter 3

Even the most determined villains have moments when they feel like giving up and quitting. Do I need to say that I was having one after such a disaster?

Everything I had been through, everything I endured... all in vain.

I sat on the rock, with my back to the orange-haired misfortune, not wishing to move. Ever.

Some time passed, and he walked around to face me.

"I have regained my strength," he informed. "We can go now."

"Get out."

"Excuse me?"

"I said get out. Get lost. Leave me alone."

"For how long?"

"Forever!!"

"I am bound to you for six years. Have you got some kind of a memory problem?"

Some other time, he'd get a good whack for such language, but at that moment I didn't care.

"I don't want you. You can't serve me, anyway."

"Why is that?"

"Because I'm a villain, if you haven't yet figured it out."

"I have. So?"

As little as anything in the world mattered now, that piqued my interest.

"You mean you still want to?"

"I promised. I gave you my word."

"And you would have no qualms about switching sides and helping me?"

"Oh, I'm not switching sides, I will not help you in villainy. But I can still be of service, doing whatever harmless and good I can for you."

Ha! Big deal.

"Like what? Shining my boots? I can hire a regular fellow for that, without ridiculous hair. Goodbye."

"Well, whether you like it or not, I can't leave just because you have changed your mind. I gave you my word, and our deal is sealed."

"I release you from it; consider yourself lucky. Now, get out of my sight before I change my mind again and make you shine my boots twenty four hours a day just for the fun of it."

And there it came. The growl.

Have you ever tried treating apathy and depression with mortal danger? From my experience,

greatly recommend it. I was up and running in no time. Somehow, even though my life seemed to be over, I still did not want to meet those fangs or claws.

Where was I running to, you might ask, keeping in mind that there were no white towers in the region? Good question. I thought about it as well, as soon as I regained some portion of my ability to think. And I had no answer.

The monster had snuck up too close, even closer than he did the last time in the cave. He leapt after me, and his paw hit my shoulder, sending me flying through the air--upside down--back towards the lake--and against the big rock I was sitting on before. Yes, you can say "ouch" again.

"Hold it right there, lizard! Leave that man alone."

I looked up. It was the sparkling. He stood between me and the monster, sword raised.

The beast let out a louder growl and swung his paw at my unexpected defender. In the past, that had often been enough to make my bodyguards forget their duties, but the sparkling easily dodged the blow and responded with a series of quick strikes, forcing the beast to step back.

"That was a warning," he said, resuming his stance. "Now, go away, or I will use force for real."

I do not know what shocked me more: that he *could* fight the monster or that he *was* fighting. Didn't I just release him? Not that I had any objections, of course.

The beast's furious roar indicated that he was done playing, too. He threw himself at the sparkling with all his terrible might. The battle that followed defied description, all I could see through the cloud of sand were glimpses of paws, fangs, and flashes of orange sword and hair.

I cannot say how long it lasted, but when the whirl suddenly stopped, I couldn't believe what I saw: the beast was running away. The sparkling actually chased him off!...

"What a bothersome creature. Look at that, he got me all covered with sand." He dusted off his clothes. "That's what I don't like about this world: you always get dirty here... Well, Lord Arkus, do you still say that I'm only good for shining boots?"

I sat up. My head was still spinning from hitting the rock.

"No. And I have changed my mind, I am not releasing you."

I know. It was not nice of me, at all, after he saved my life--something nobody ever cared to do before. But what choice did I have? The monster tracked me down, I needed protection, and the fellow had just proved capable of giving it.

"Remember," I went on, "I said, get out before I change my mind? You didn't. So you have lost your chance. Now you must serve your six years."

He crossed his arms.

"Is this what I get for a thank you?"

"Listen, I'm not trying to be mean here, I have little choice. I do need your help. That monster you chased away... He will be back. And I am in no condition to fight him."

"You mean, run from him."

"All right, yes, if you have to point it out. I can't run from him. Tell you what: I'll knock a year off. Let it be five years, not six. Just to show you that I am not lying."

"Five years of service and not six?"

"Yes. You have my word."

I expected some comment about a villain's word not being worth much, but he said nothing of the sort. He just looked at me with a strange, thoughtful expression, as if trying to evaluate something.

"Very well. I am bound to you for five years."

I knew I was going to regret this stupid generosity, but, oh well. What's done is done.

"Well, are you going to help your injured master or will you stand there like a statue?!"

He stepped closer and easily hauled me upright, offering his shoulder to lean on. I needed it.

"Are you always so irritable?"

"Yes! Get used to it."

"But there's no need to get angry. You could have just said, 'Help me up Tulip,' and I would be happy to do it."

"I will give my orders the way I like. And one more thing: no servant of mine will be named *Tulip*. I will call you Jarvi."

"Why Jarvi?"

Well... He didn't need to know that. And neither do you.

"Because that's what I want."

* * *

I could barely walk. The sparkling saw that and offered to use his supernatural powers to take me home. "Home" was out of the question. I did not want to show up looking like this at the inn where I was staying, either, so I ordered him to find a safe place where I could recover.

The sparkling let out a whistle, and in the next moment I found myself in a slowly rolling carriage. I suspect he also did something to make me fall asleep, because normally I wouldn't be able to sleep after an encounter with the monster, especially such a bad one.

I woke up in a small cave, lit by a campfire in the middle. I was lying on something soft and comfortable. The first thing I noticed after I tried to move was that my head no longer ached, however, the rest of my body was hurting all over, especially the shoulder.

Jarvi was sitting on the ground, next to the fire, feeding it with dry twigs.

"Good evening, Lord Arkus," he greeted me. "How are you feeling?"

"Strange..."

"I healed your head injury. The rest will have to wait until tomorrow."

I see. He still wanted me to pay for catching him. Wasn't it against the rules though?

"I thought you had promised not to seek revenge."

"Who speaks of revenge?"

"Isn't that why you wish me to be in pain for another day?"

"Of course not. It's because I have used up my supernatural acts. You see, I am allowed only three day: one bigger miracle and two small ones. The small ones can be used any time, the bigger one has to be reserved for a greater need."

I didn't like that, but I supposed it fell under the "within the laws" part of our deal.

"And what did you use them for?"

"The big one to get you here; I had to conjure a carriage. Then the healing, and supper."

"Supper?"

"Yes, but you slept too long, so I ate it."

"Oh, you--"

"Just kidding!" He laughed, so happily that you'd think he just won half a kingdom. "You should see your face now, Lord Arkus. What a remarkable expression you've made. No, I didn't touch your meal, here it is."

He stood up and offered me a tray with a steaming bowl of stew, bread, and a jug of milk. I didn't realize how hungry I was, I had not eaten since the morning.

"In the future, I would advise you to watch out for that 'remarkable expression.' My former lackey Shork, knew it very well and wisely took it as a signal to dodge."

"Are you in the habit of hitting your servants?"

"You bet. Now, shush and let me think."

As I ate, I went through all the new information. So he could heal; he could conjure things like a carriage, food--probably anything. He wasn't that useless, after all, even with the three miracles per day limit.

"Can you conjure gold?"

"I knew you'd ask. No. Not allowed."

Darn. That would have helped a lot.

"How about a castle?"

"I thought you said you've already got one."

"Yes, I do, but it is far away, and I cannot return there yet. I need a place to live. Unpretentious as I am, for a villain, this cave will not do."

"Where have you lived before coming to the lake?"

"A cheap inn. But I am out of money."

"Very well, I will make you a house. Tomorrow."

"I said I want a castle."

"I heard that. There is no such need, and I cannot spend a big miracle on something not really needed. A house will suffice."

I wanted to smack him, but he wasn't close enough.

"Will you always contradict my orders?!"

"Only when I must. I do not set the rules."

"Then who does??"

"Don't you know? Faradin, the king of all spirits."

That was a new one on me; the scribe hadn't said anything about the king. It made sense though the spirits had one, and I couldn't blame Jarvi for not wishing to mess with someone like that.

"Tell me something, Lord Arkus. That lizard I chased away--I take it you've got some history with him? Why is he after you?"

"None of your business. But, since you brought him up, can you kill him?"

"Kill? Sparklings don't do that, unless it happens in battle."

"I thought as much."

"Do not worry though, if he returns, as you say, and tries to attack, I will fight him off. But it would help if I knew what happened between you two."

"I said it's none of your business! Are all sparklings so nosy?"

"No. You've got the nosiest one."

I sighed. Just my luck.

* * *

Jarvi kept his word. On the next day, first thing in the morning, I had a new house to move into, nothing special and definitely not a castle, but it would work as a temporary solution. He also healed my shoulder, as promised, spending the second miracle for the day. The third one, once again, went on food.

As you see, I could live quite comfortably with him by my side, not having to worry about basic necessities, but, of course, I wanted far more than that. Therefore, wasting no time, I began to work on getting back in shape, in power, and, ultimately, accomplishing my revenge.

I exercised with the sword for long hours, every day, by myself and with Jarvi who willingly agreed to help and in fact had too much fun with it. He was by far the best and the fastest swordsman I ever encountered, yet he'd give me a fair chance to deliver a decent blow, tumbling down with impossible shrieks whenever I managed to do it. I could see that he was holding back his strength to avoid hurting me. To him, it was just a game, but I was getting the best training of my life.

The miracles were very handy. I used the small ones to obtain more armor, clothes, and other helpful things; bigger ones proved to be more of a challenge since I usually had to grapple with Jarvi about what was "really needed" and what wasn't. It took me half a day, for example, to convince him that I needed a horse (I had sold mine during my journey here). The only thing he immediately agreed to use the big miracle for was making a white tower. That happened after I glanced out the window one morning and nearly had a heart attack upon seeing the monster who lay quietly under a tree, his red eyes fixed on the house door.

"Jarvi!!" I yelled. "Come here! Is this how you ensure my safety?!"

The sparkling did not share my concern.

"Yes, I saw him. He is not doing anything bad, he just sits there, so I figured there's no harm."

"No harm?! Get him out of here, *now!* And never let him come close!!"

"All right, all right, I will go do that. I'm sorry, I didn't know he was making you so nervous."

After such carelessness on his part, I naturally had to take measures. It was clear that the monster had been waiting for a moment when Jarvi would not be around, and I did not want to take such a risk even though so far I had no reason to send the sparkling anywhere. I needed my home to be safe at all times. Later that day, I told Jarvi to build a white tower nearby. He was surprised, of course, and I suspect he'd read too much into it, but he didn't question my order and fulfilled it right away. A couple of days later I decided to expand my safety zone and told him to make another tower a mile away. With that done, I was far more comfortable and able to concentrate fully on my preparation.

In two weeks, I felt stronger than ever and, as much as I hated the very thought of it, ready to take it on again.

"We will go to the lake tomorrow," I told Jarvi.

"To the lake? Why?"

"So that I can capture a gormack, of course. Don't worry: I know you can't help me in this, and I am not asking you to. You will just follow me and watch out for the beast."

He looked puzzled.

"Why do you still want a gormack? You've got me."

"Will you go to the kingdom of Dalvanna and bring me its prince in chains if I order you?"

"No."

"Well, that answers your question. I need a servant who will."

The sparkling gave me a long, serious look. I didn't like it.

"I hate to disappoint you, Lord Arkus, but I am afraid I cannot allow it."

"You *what?*"

"Trying to capture a gormack is very dangerous, far more than you know. I vowed to always act in your best interests. I cannot allow you to do this."

"And how do you think to stop me?"

"That shouldn't be hard. I am much stronger than you, as you are aware."

Oh yes, I was well aware of that, especially after our sword matches.

"Don't you dare..."

"I am sorry, but I must."

I grabbed the first thing I got my hand on, which happened to be a piece of firewood, and hurled it at him. Jarvi ducked with one of his ridiculous shrieks, angering me even more--I wasn't playing, I meant it!

At the fourth piece thrown at him Jarvi flew up to the ceiling. That stunned me enough to pause.

didn't know he could fly... Unless?...

"Are you wasting a miracle on this?!"

"What choice do I have? Look what you're doing, you're murderous!"

* * *

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