

A short story

A tale of Henren the Bloody and the Cat

"Bring me a story, Henren the Bloody," the old man said. "That's my price."

I stared at him for a moment, and he stared right back. There was a feverish look in his eye, and his skin was sallow, with a few wispy white hairs on his chin. But this was a shabby inn in a poor part of a trading town that had been hit hard by the war, and there were many who looked much worse than him. Plenty who acted crazier too, despite his most recent pronouncement.

"A story?" I repeated. "That's all you want?"

"That's all I want. But – " he interrupted me with a cackle as I was about to speak again, "but it's got to be your own story. I'm not interested in someone else's adventures. What's more," he poked a bony finger into my chest, "I want it clean. Nothing stale, nothing that's been bandied around in taverns and mead halls." Another poke. "Bring me something fresh off the streets."

I leaned back in my seat and considered the old man. I also didn't want to be poked again. There was stuff under his fingernail that, if his breath was anything to go by, could cause an infection that even the powerful charms I bore wouldn't protect me against.

I was tempted to walk away. I'd been dealing with crazy people and honest-to-goodness charlatans for the better part of half a year in my search for information. A pair of twins in Skunstown swore they could see the answer to any question in each other's eyes. I watched them gaze at each other for almost an hour before I gave up and left. An old witch-woman in the Low Hills wanted to bind me in servitude for seven years, but when I'd beaten her with her own staff she admitted that she had no help to offer me after all.

I was on a seemingly impossible quest. A Sea Prince of the Cold Islands had offered gold for any news about his father, and even more for actually returning him home. The man had been a renowned warrior in his time, until one day he'd just left. They'd found his crown and his great sword in his chamber, and later they'd learned that he'd taken ship as a common oarsman. That was the last anyone had heard of him. The Sea Prince, having felt his father's shadow looming large over him all his life, found that he was unable to step out from that shadow while the old reaver's fate remained unclear. Hence the hero for hire and the promise of gold.

I'd taken the job not just for the gold, but also out of sympathy for the Sea Prince. I appreciated his need to move forward, not just personally, but for the sake of his realm. So now I gritted my teeth as I had so many times during the past six months, and smiled at the sack of rags and bones sitting across the table from me.

"You're saying that I'm to go out, and have some amazing and unique experience, and come back here to tell you about it. Is that what you're telling me?" As I spoke I wondered what the catch was, what was in it for the old man.

"No no," he replied hurriedly, with another cackle, "no need for it to be unique. As long as its *fresh*." He seemed to relish that last word in particular – probably the freshest his mouth had tasted in many years. "Even the path retrodden can seem unspoiled to new eyes. I'd be happy with a tale of loyal companions, a lady in distress, a rooftop chase, a stolen treasure. As long as it's yours, and you

bring it to me.” There was an almost greedy look in the watery eyes now. Whatever he was after, it probably wasn’t silver or servitude.

I mumbled a non-committal farewell as I rose, tossed the barmaid a kiss and a handful of coins, and made my way outside. The old man seemed mostly harmless, but it was frustrating to find another promising lead prove to be a further dead end. This one had come recommended by Ferretface, but now I suspected that the pointy-nosed thief had been playing me for a fool.

Outside the inn was a wooden bench, and I sat down heavily. A battered lantern hung from an iron bracket, trying to fend off the night and damp. I was tired, more in mind than in body, and I was seriously considering giving up the search. The old warrior had probably drowned at sea, another nameless rower on one of the countless ships plying the sea routes.

After a moment I became aware of a frenzied barking, round the corner and a few streets over but drawing nearer. I was leaning forward to see what was going on when a dark shape leaped up onto the bench behind me and crouched down behind my back.

“The Mayor’s Hounds are out tonight,” a voice murmured. Low, almost velvety, less volume than you’d expect. I peered round over my shoulder, and saw a large black cat balanced on the plank that made up the bench’s backrest. He seemed to become aware of me looking, and returned the gaze with big green-gold eyes. It was hard to tell in the dim light of the lamp, but he seemed to be coal-black all over. “Don’t mind me,” he spoke in that soft voice. “I’ll be gone as soon as those slobbering brutes are doing their slobbering somewhere else.”

Fair enough. I’d travelled far and wide, and seen plenty of strange things. And if a face carved into the stone cliff over a river can talk, then why not a cat? I turned my attention back to the sound of the approaching dogs as around me the few folk hurried away. The Mayor ran a fairly relaxed town by day, considering there was a war going on, but at night his patrols were apt to deal harshly – very harshly – with anyone caught breaking the law, or just in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Noticing suddenly that the street had become deserted, I decided that it was time for me to make myself scarce as well. Back to my lodgings for now, and I’d give the old man’s request the attention it merited in the morning.

I rose, but at that moment a figure came careening round the corner and ran headlong into me. I’m built along solid lines, and the newcomer bounced off me with an audible squawk and fell onto the ground.

By the lantern’s struggling light I saw a slight figure dressed in a long gown of pale shimmering silk. The head was hidden by a shawl, but the hands that were pushing up from the dirty flagstones were slim and delicate. The feet, I noticed, were clad in supple but sensible boots.

I reached a hand out, grabbed a silk-clad arm and hauled the figure up. For a moment I was staring into the features: large, deep-set eyes under dark brows, a nose thin and straight, a wide mouth – and a definite stubble on upper lip and chin.

The arm wrenched free of my grasp, and with a rustle of silk and a few very unladylike curses the figure was off again. In moments he’d vanished into the gloom, his footsteps rapidly fading after. I was about to get going myself when a glint of gold caught my eye.

“Looks like he dropped something,” the soft voice came from where I’d been sitting. “A thief caught in the act, do you think?”

The gleaming object, on examination, proved to be a rectangular tablet of hard black wood, the size of a playing card and perhaps as thick as my thumb. One side was covered with a layer of heavy gold, worked to show an intricate floral design. The pattern was repeated on the underside, but raised in relief. A rose and a thistle. I didn't need any light to know that the lines were stained with red ink.

"All hells!" I breathed, thoughts of wandering to my lodgings gone from my head in an instant.

"What is it?" the cat asked from his perch on the back of the bench. I looked up at him. "It's bad. Oh so bad." The barking was very close now.

Tucking the tablet safely inside my tunic I ran to the bench and used it as a mounting block to hurl myself at the wooden shingles of the inn's roof. For a moment I scrabbled for purchase, then I was hauling myself up. I risked a quick glance backwards. Two green-gold eyes were staring up at me from the dark. "You don't want to be here when the Mayor's Hounds arrive," I said quietly, then I started to pull myself up onto the sloped roof as quietly as I could.

There was a rush of movement below me, accompanied by a snarling, then I felt my ankle caught in a vice-like grip. My boot kept the teeth that I could definitely tell were there from ripping the skin open, but I was going to be bruised. But that wasn't going to be much of a concern if I couldn't get free. Looking down, I saw the snout of a massive hound enveloping most of my lower leg. Gleaming eyes glared up at me with what seemed like implacable hate. Worse, and more immediately, the weight was dragging me down, no matter how desperately I scrabbled with my hands on the slick roof.

For a moment or two we hung there, my frustrated mutters mingling with the hound's muffled snarls. I tried to shake it loose, kicked with my other foot, but couldn't dislodge it. Another part of my mind registered the barking of more hounds approaching, with the voices of cursing men only slightly further away.

Suddenly the hound below me gave a pained yelp, then another, and its jaws let go of my ankle. I didn't waste any time but started to pull myself up again, as a dark shape slipped past me. "You owe me one," the cat said, passing me. As I managed to drag myself entirely onto the roof, I glanced back and saw the hound, huge front paws on the back of the bench, a hurt look on its face, and two sets of gleaming red scratches gleaming wetly in the dim light.

I'd barely reached the roof's top when I heard the other hounds arrive, followed by a clatter of heavy voices and heavier boots. I decided not to stay and watch, but eased myself along the other side of the inn's roof until I reached a chimneystack. There I stopped and caught my breath, rubbing my sore ankle. Moving silently is tricky at the best of times, but on a sloping roof, with a short sword and a heavy dagger at my belt – and the bulk of the tablet digging into my ribs and the knowledge of what it was squeezing my heart – it took all my concentration. Forcing myself to breathe deeply and slowly I pulled myself up to peer around the chimney.

What I saw was a pair of green-gold eyes in the dark, barely a foot from my face. "They split up," the cat said softly. "Some of them are still down there, others went after our friend in silk. That's not just some random patrol out chasing petty crooks. What was it that he dropped?"

"This isn't the place," I replied as quietly as I could. "Let's get some more of this night fog between us and here."

We made our way along the roofs, with the cat picking out the route and me following. Below us, I could hear the Mayor's Hounds searching and cursing. Occasionally the cat would shoot me a

warning glance, as if I was making too much noise, although I was moving in near silence. Well, near silence to my ears anyway. A few streets over we heard excited howls and cries – the other group of Hounds running their prey to ground.

Eventually we found a square wooden turret adorning what in better times had perhaps been a mansion of some quality. The cat scouted ahead, then called me over. Clutching my sword against my leg to keep it from rattling I pulled myself over the parapet. There I sat for a moment, revelling in the feel of a flat surface once again. The sounds from the street were moving further away.

The cat took a turn along the wooden edges, peering into the murky darkness, then jumped down silently beside me. “Now, are you going to tell me what’s going on?”

What was going on was that the tablet was the personal seal of Grand Duchess Lizia. “The Flower of Drakkanborg,” said the cat, examining the delicate engraving. “Very fitting. And with this seal an enemy could forge all kinds of orders. Cause any amount of chaos.”

I nodded. “But it’s not just that. If a thief – or a spy – got his hands on it here, that means that she must be here too. And the only reason that I can think of for the Grand Duchess to be here, in secret, is if there’s a big attack planned. If this made its way across the river ...”

“Makes sense for a spy to steal it then,” the cat agreed. “But I understand why you wouldn’t want to be handing it over to that patrol down there. The Hounds have a reputation for letting their clubs ask the questions, and their boots listen to the answers.”

“That’s what I was thinking. And they’ll have been under instructions not to go easy on anyone who might be involved.” Remembering the tense moment hanging half off the roof of the inn, I added, “Thanks, by the way.”

The cat started to wash his face, then stopped. “How do you come to recognise the Grand Duchess’s seal?”

I shrugged. “I’ve moved in high places. I don’t spend all my time outside shady taverns or on rooftops.”

“Why not?” the cat asked, returning to his grooming. “That’s where you meet the most interesting people.”

We stayed in that small wooden turret until the night was once again cloaked in silence. The cat, his grooming done, stretched himself out on my legs. It was a nice feeling. I’d been heroing-for-hire for a long time, and I’d enjoyed the cat’s company. Most of the people I’d dealt with over the years had regarded me with too much awe, or fear, or loathing, for any easy conversation. The cat spoke to me on an equal footing.

An hour or so before dawn I gently lifted the cat from my legs and set him down on the planking. He treated me to a glare, but didn’t say anything, just stretched.

“I’d better get off this roof before sunrise,” I explained. “You might be able to come and go as you please, but if I jumped down into the street in plain sight it would be sure to attract attention.” Again, the cat made no reply, just watched me.

As cautiously as I’d come, I made my way out of the turret and to the edge of the roof. The street seemed deserted. The cat appeared beside me and peered down too. “No-one here,” he told me, then jumped down onto a stack of ancient crates.

I swung carefully down off the roof, hung for a moment, then let myself fall. Apart from the dull thud of my boots, the night remained quiet. I straightened my clothes and my sword, checking to make sure the seal was still tucked away safely.

I turned to the cat and was startled to see a shape looming in front of me. “Henren the Bloody!” a voice cackled. “Well met! And well done tonight. That was precisely the sort of story I meant!”

I recognised the cackle sooner than I placed the sallow skin and the feverish eyes from the inn where tonight’s adventure had begun. It was the same half-crazed old man – but apparently gone completely crazed during the past hours. The cat was crouched down on one of the crates, ears flat and tail lashing. He looked to have doubled in size.

Before I could gather my thoughts and reply, the old man had turned away and was shambling off, still cacking to himself. Suddenly he stopped, and called over his shoulder, “Look for your man in the dungeons of Crag Eye Keep!” Then he disappeared into the fog. Somewhere a cock crowed.

I looked at the cat. The cat, returned to his normal size and looking at ease once more, looked back. “Well,” he said after a long silence, “are we going to see about returning that seal to its rightful owner? I’ve always wanted to meet a Grand Duchess.”