"A Hero's Burden"

Once upon a time, not too far away, lived the people of Fantasia. And in Fantasia stood a great stone castle of several towers so tall that it would make your head spin and you would fall and die from looking down one of the spires to the friendly townsfolk below. But this is not just a kingdom of numerous high towers and unhealthy cases of vertigo. Up one of the castle's spires is the tower of Princess Morgan. She is as beautiful as a budding spring rose. Her laugh can light up a castle's open hall. Her hair is a shimmering blond that seemed as silky and flowing as to make goddesses jealous of its natural grace. Her skin is as smooth and tempting to kiss more than any girl ever had been kissed and who is delightful company. She is bragged about by everyone who has courted her.

But today the princess with one-of-a-kind beauty was missing from her high pink tower and no one was affected more than her beloved father, King Harold.

"That tart!" King Harold yelled as he opened the princess's room to find it empty except for her many, many pink things. Her pink hair brush was there, her pink dresser was there, her pink bed was there, and even her pink boots were untouched. But his outgoing daughter was not. "I'm sorry, your highness, but she could not be found anywhere," huffed the servant. Sam had just run up the stairs to the princess's pink room behind the king trying for the second time that morning to see if the princess had returned since the last time she was missing. He didn't find the
princess anywhere in the castle's other rooms either. The king turned to Sam.
"Did you check the royal blacksmith's room?" asked the king. "Yes, I did. She wasn't there," replied Sam.
"What about the carpenter's room?" asked the king. "Yes, I did, Sire," replied Sam. "Still not there."
"What about the stable master's room, the stable boy's room, the cook's room, the librarian's room, and the captain of the guard's room?"
"Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes. And Yes, Sire. All were inspected."
The king took a pink hair brush and threw it across the pink room at the pink bed posts.
"Where is my daughter?!" King Harold yelled. And then a top guard soldier entered and knocked on the pink bedroom door.
"Your Highness, this was given to us by the royal messenger," said the soldier and bowed down to give a scroll to the king.
The king unraveled the scroll and began reading it to himself, murmuring his mouth to each word. Sam could not tell what the King was saying but the king's face became grim as he read the scroll in his hands. It was not good news.
"By the gods, a dragon has her!" King Harold yelled frightened. Sam and the soldier looked to the king for direction as to what to do.
"Is she ... dead, sire?" Sam asked.
"She lives." King Harold sighed. "But the dragon has taken her captive and refuses to give her back safely until we give up our great kingdom to his control."
"What are you orders, Sire? I'll send out the army as soon as you command," said the soldier. "We will hunt down this dragon and destroy it if it takes every last one of us to save the princess. We will save the princess and -"

"No. It sounds like a trap to me," said the king, thinking, playing with the grey whiskers on his chin. The king looked very old with his grey hair but he was also very wise.

"A trap?" Sam asked. "But how do we save her without sending the king's royal army after the dragon? Unless you plan to give up the kingdom. If we give up the kingdom, the princess will die anyway along the rest of us. I'm sure of it, sire."

"And if we send out the army to save her, we will be helpless if the dragon attacks us here without a royal army. No. Nobody is leaving. Except for Sam," planned the king.

"Me?" Sam gulped, thinking he was about to be chosen as the hero to save the princess from a fire-breathing dragon.

"For Sam I have a very serious quest. A quest that will save the lives of the princess and all of us in Fantasia."

"I'm an indoor servant, your highness, I'm in no condition to go on a quest to fight dragons," Sam said.

"No, Sam." King Harold said resting his hand on Sam's shoulder to comfort him.

"You will not be put in harms way but put on a quest to find a hero of amazing strength and knowledge of magic to save us from harm. A man known to slay and kill dragons. A great warrior and necromancer," told the king. "While you are looking for this master of all, the royal
army will be guarding the castle incase an attack. For there is only one who can kill this great dragon."

"Who?" asked the top guard.

"The great white wizard of the great white magic tower, of course," Said the king.

"He has come to our family's aid for generations wherever we had trouble from problems like this. He never let us down and I don't believe that he ever will. He is the greatest hero that our kingdom has ever known."

"And he kills dragons?" asked the soldier. "Not me?" asked Sam.

"Yes." said the king, comforting Sam. "He will save us all. But he must be found first. And he needs to be found as soon as possible, Sam. You do understand your burden. If you never find him, we will be lost to the dragon's fire-breathing whims."

Sam bowed to the king, "I shall do my best, your majesty."

"Guard, give this man our best horse, some gold for his travels, and a map. Can you do this for your kingdom, Sam?"

"I will," Said Sam and then left to find an awesome hero to save Fantasia from the fate of being terrorized by a fire-breathing dragon.

"Is she pretty?" asked the bartender.

Sam's head shot up like a rocket to the sound of the bartenders on duty and wondered where he was and why there were three bartenders tending one bar. Sam's vision was blurred for some reason but slowly the three bartenders turned into one bartender. A feat of amazing visual magic, thought Sam, and
slowly his nerves calmed from his sobering awakening.

"Who?" Sam asked, quietly, hoping the bartender would follow his lead in lowering the tone of his voice, not to make Sam's still ringing skull jump at any more than it had to.

"The woman you've been drinking over, of course," said the bartender. "If there is ever a man getting drunk as you there must be a woman behind it, I say." Said the bartender moving over the bar counter whipping it clean with a wash cloth.

Sam looked at him with a question mark on his face. Sam was then struck with the answer to the nosy bartender's question, but it only brought on another head ache. "For your information, the woman that I'm 'drinking over' is a princess."

Sam stated.

"HA!" said the bartender, cleaning another glass.

"A princess," said the bartender to the table maid. "Aren't they all, eh?"

"Her eyes are as if her father were a thief and stole the stars from the sky and put them into her brilliant eyes. Her skin is that of silk never seeing a hard day's work, or having any purpose other than being kissed with nothing more than the tenderist of true love's kisses. Her legs are as long as stemmed roses and as she walks with the grace of royalty. Her laughter is as warming as a sunny day and cheering as a song bird's delightful tunes. Yes, she is pretty."

"Well, if she is so pretty, what is the reason for your troubles?" asked the bartender.

"She is being held captive by a fire-breathing dragon," said Sam. Sam looked around the bar
and noticed the places other attributes other than the bar. It was nothing spectacular, big enough for any crowd, and the musician played a nice tune while people ate.

Then Sam spotted something on the mantle above the fireplace. There were pies lined up, one after the other, all with a ribbon on them saying 1st place for a certain year of a local Magicia baking contest. All of them said "1st Prize" on the ribbons, but underneath each one was a different name for each different pie. One said "Ogre pie", one said "Black Knight pie", one said "Troll pie," and another one read "Dark Imp pie." Sam wondered why the pies had such strange names and what the cook used for ingredients that they won these strange names and first prize. But then Sam's eyes did a double take.

"Magacia" said the prize title. A light went on in Sam's head. Magacia is where the White Tower is, where the great wizard and soon-to-be dragon slayer lives. Sam had made it to the white tower. "Do you know of a dragon slayer in this town?" said Sam.

"Oooh," said the bartender, "You want the great wizard of the White Tower." "Yes," said Sam.

"My name is Sam, servant of the King of Fantasia to find the great wizard of the White Tower to slay a fire-breathing dragon and save the princess and the kingdom from its deadly, evil clutches."

"Well, if you want to find the great white wizard of the great white tower, you don't have to go all the way to the White Tower. Here he comes right now." said the bartender and Sam turned from his wooden barstool at the bar and looked
to see a big bodied man in a chef's apron and wearing a chef's hat, about the same age as the king in years, enter the bar with a pie in his hand. Again, Sam saw a red ribbon with the words "1st Place" and "Magicia" written on the ribbon attached to the pie. This time though the pie was called "Giant Deadly Spider Delight."

"Another winner, boss?" asked the bartender. "The competition was too easy to foil. One more win and I think I might end up retiring the category. It's the light pie crust that always wins the judges," said the cook and Sam saw the wizard put up the winning pie on the wall with the others and then went back to the kitchen of the bar, disappearing out of site.

"I thought you said 'there he comes now'."

"That was him. Bob's a terrific chef. He owns this place."

"Is there anything I can get you?" asked the chef, entering the bar again, and handed Sam a menu of the bars meals for consumption.

"Like pie?" "Well, sure."

"With award winning pie crust?" asked Sam imagining the end of his kingdom with one serving.

"Of course, I pride myself on it." Said the magic wizard turned wiz chef, and served Sam a slice of cherry pie with a smile. As the pie slice came closer and closer to him, Sam's hopes of saving the prince and his life made him feel like ordering another beer, but there could be another chance.

"Is your name, Bob?"
"Yes. But what does that have to do with life?"
Bob asked.
Sam life was over. The princess's life was over. The kingdom's life was over. His spirits sunk but he gathered his remaining energy, sliced into the pie, and said, "Bob, my name is Sam and I've come here from the King of Fantasia's castle to ask you to save his beautiful princess from a deadly fire-breathing dragon."
"I see" said Bob. "Well, I'll have you know that the king can save his own daughter from the clutches of evil on his own from now on. I'm retired."
"Retired?" asked Sam. "But why?" "It's too cliche."
Sam stopped. Silence filled the air. A lone wolf was heard crying at a full moon in the distance. There was a gun shot in the dark. A werewolf fell over dead.
"Are you telling me that the king's daughter, a beautiful princess, who's life is going to end by being eaten by a fire-breathing dragon, won't be saved by you, the most powerful wizard and dragon slayer in Fantasia, because you consider the quest ... cliche?"
"Well, it is, isn't it?" asked Bob.
Dumbfounded, but still on a mission to save the princess, Sam continued to press on, imagining the princess sliced like an award winning "Pretty in Pink" pie. "Why?" asked Sam
"I've been questing for the king's family in Fantasia for generations now and it's like waking up one morning and instead of preparing your self for rain or shine, it all blends together, because its been done so many times that it becomes cliche to go after a dragon, or save a