

Swordplay and Love Songs

by Josh Smith

A mighty Wizard surveyed the lands spread before him from atop a hillock. A slight breeze passed over him, sending a soft current through his shimmering silver hair and flowing robes. The gentle winds were of no concern to him, his gaze piercing their advances. So absorbed in thought was the Wizard that he failed to notice the massive Ogre striding up to his side until it spoke.

“Hey, Archie.”

“Huh? Oh. Hi, Billy.” The Wizard distractedly replied.

“Haven’t seen you at the shop all week, whatcha been up to?”

“Nothin’.”

Perplexed by the Wizard’s absent behavior, the Ogre offered up a change of pace. “Wanna go on a dungeon raid?”

The Wizard was unmoved. “Nah, I’m just going to wander around and level up for a while.”

“Dude, you’re a healer. It will take you forever to get anywhere by yourself.”

“No duh. Welcome back to earth.”

“When are you gonna-”

“Spaceman.” The Wizard hastily continued.

“What?”

Obviously, his wit was beyond the spectrum of the feeble-minded Ogre. “Nothing, jeez!”

“Whatever.” The Ogre was not concerned with such wordplay, only action. “When are you gonna come back and battle for reals?”

The Wizard expelled a long, introspective sigh that rippled down his glorious beard. “I don’t know. Is *she* still hanging out?”

“Well... yeah, sometimes. But so what?”

“Apparently Ogres have no capacity for love.” the Wizard grumbled under his breath before breaking down and mocking him. “*So what?* She broke my effin’ heart, that’s what!”

“You need to ease up on the Red Bull, dude. For reals.” The Ogre’s concern for his old friend grew. “I bet you haven’t even left the house since Friday, have you?” The Wizard fixed his eyes on the horizon, leaving his magical garb to deflect the question. “You could’ve at least answered your dang phone sometime.” The Wizard remained silent. “Ugh! I had to log on just to talk to you, dude; the least you could do is tell me what the crap happened.”

The Ogre’s attempts finally penetrated the Wizard’s mystical barrier of silence, so he agreed to let the tale pass his lips.

Some weeks back, Archie and Billy were positioned in their customary seats at opposing ends of a miniature battlefield spread with Orc, Goblin and Elven warriors. The field – a large slab of plywood covered over with miniature landscaping – spread nearly the entire space of a low-lit shop whose walls were lined from bottom to top with unclaimed armies and scenery. The shopkeeper, Newton, a middle-aged man with a patchy beard and a belly rivaling that of a woman in her seventh month of pregnancy moved from behind the register for a closer look at the action.

At one end of the field sat a short, fair-skinned fellow with a puff of wiry red hair. He raised a green die with black dots, commanding the army of intricately detailed miniature Orcs and Goblins set out before him.

The shopkeeper felt the rush of battle overtake him. “Oh, splendid roll, William.”

“Yeah, nice roll, Billy. I’m shaking in my level thirty-two Enchanted Boots.” his opponent fired from across the table. A narrow boy with narrow black hair to his jaw line shot a narrow

glance across the battlegrounds, itching to set his army of High Elves into motion.

Dice and ornately decorated tape measures flashed across the table between the opponents and their striking soldiers. Mothers were insulted, inhalers were pumped, rulebooks were quoted from memory and Newt spat crumbs every which way in fits of glee.

Advancing his Orc frontline into a deadly position, Billy snarled, "How in the Shire do you expect to face Susan with that army of sissies? For reals, Arch, your skills are *so* junior high."

Archie was struck by level nine Paralysis at the mere mention of that name, completely disregarding the insult. "Dude, Susan can beat me any time she wants."

Newton immediately fell into a convulsive laughter, speckling his unkempt beard with a hail of partially chewed cheese puffs.

"Dude, gross!"

"For reals!"

"Besides," Archie continued, "I'm just... so... amped I actually get to play her."

"*Battle.*" Newton corrected between fistfuls of orange puffed corn. "Susan will undoubtedly slay you with great ease. Your entire strategy has more holes than thirty-year old underpants."

"Aw, come on! You're grossin' me out, Newt. But he's right, Arch. You are gettin' *slayed.* For reals."

"Whatever, toads. You're just jealous that I get to play, er... *battle* her and you don't."

"Well that is no concern of mine," Newt reminisced, wiping bright orange dust down the front of his already stained T-shirt, "of course you recall that I have already faced her in combat."

"Don't remind me." groaned Archie from behind his dwindling forces.

"I'm sure you will also recollect that my campaign was victorious."

"Yeah, you remind us every stinkin' day, Newt. We get it, you beat a girl." Billy slid a troop of Goblins in for the kill.

"Sheesh, Billy! Yeah, Newt, what's so noble about beating a girl anyways?"

"Well, for starters, she is not just any girl

"You got that right." Archie said, giving way to defeat and marching his fighters headlong into certain doom.

"Oh, poor, naïve Archibald. It is so obvious, yet you remain painfully oblivious. Your crush – all of our crushes – stem from one simple fact. Susan is *the only* female who has ever entered upon these premises by her own free will. Not even Mother comes in here on her own, so logically your fondness for her is, like our own, instinctive and animal."

"Yeah," Billy chimed in, "and she's probably the only girl you've ever even talked to."

"That's *so* not true."

"No, but I'll bet you my giant" Billy signaled to a fierce looking warrior that towered above the others, "that she's the only one who's ever talked back."

"OMG dude!"

"WTF? Chicken?"

Newt pondered the wager, declaring, "That is perhaps the most audacious, most extravagant wager ever proposed in my ownership of the Troll Hole."

Archie was shocked. "Dude, are you serious?"

"I bet you my giant that no other girl has ever willingly continued a conversation with you."

"Shiitake mushrooms!" Archie seceded, "You totally owned me there. Unless... girls I'm related to don't count, right?"

"And the motha' scratchin' giant remains by my side!"

"Somebody once said, 'You've got to know when to fold them-'"

"Dude. Newt." Billy's right eye began to twitch. "Kenny Rogers. Seriously? The Gambler. Best song ever. For reals."

"I don't care what you guys think about me and Susan-"

"Susan and I." Newt corrected.

“Whatever, I don’t care what you think, Susan’s my dream girl and I’m not just a flippin’ ape chasing her around and someday I’m going to go out with her. She’s amazing.”

“She is quite a magnificent specimen.”

“Don’t talk about her like she’s a bug or something, Newt!”

“My apologies, I meant no offence. You know I enjoy her company.”

“I know. It’s just that she’s so... she’s spectacular! I like everything about her. I even like her lisp.”

Billy spawned quizzical look, “Her lips?”

“No, her *lisp*. You know, how *sthe talksth* like *sthsth*.”

“Oh, right.”

“She has what is called a lateral lisp.”

“What? Why would you even know that, Newt?”

“Mother is afflicted by it as well. I’ve read up on it extensively, it is caused by-”

“I don’t care what causes it,” Archie interjected, “I just think it’s... well... hee hee.”

Billy was on the edge of his seat, warfare’s fury having long since been supplanted by the zeal of a budding romance. “What?”

Archie wore an embarrassed half-smile and lowered his eyes toward his remaining Elves.

“Sexy.”

They shared a hearty chuckle before Billy’s impish impulses overtook him. “*Doeth thith* turn you on, *sthweetheart*?”

“Ha ha, indeed! I *notished* that your *Wishardsh* all bear *shilver beardsh*.”

“That’s pretty good, but not quite right, Newt.” Archie cleared his throat, “I *sthtrolled* down to the *sthop* to *sthee* how you *guysth* were *posthsthioning* your *sthholdiersth*.”

“Dang.”

“Wow, Archibald, that was nearly perfect. I thought Mother had joined us. I mean, I *sthought* *Mosther sthopped* by to *sthee* her *sthpesthial sthon*!”

When Billy caught his breath, he made another attempt. “I *came* down to the *Troll Hole* to *join a battle* and... aw, crud.”

“Yeah, you uh... need some S’s in there for it to work.”

“Hey guysth!”

“Whoa! That was it,” Archie exclaimed, “the *exsthra sthaliva makesth* it-” Billy went even more pale than usual, as though his army had gone up in flames. With bulging eyes, he signaled for Archie to look behind him. “Oh, h-hi *Sthusth*- Susan.”

His face was so flush it caused physical pain, but it was no match for the sheer agony of having to look her in the eye at that moment. There she stood, long brown braids over her shoulders that slouched forward, curving her upper back and accenting her belly ever so slightly. Archie was mesmerized by the smooth “S” shape she became when viewed from the side. His gawk extended long enough to arouse her suspicions.

“Whasth the matter, Artschie? Billy *sthompin*’ your *bunsth* again?” No one was sure whether she was ignorant, playing dumb, or had simply not noticed their mockeries.

“Y-yeah. Yeah, he’s really giving it to me today. I’ve got to get my act together if I’m going to stand a chance against you.”

“You have certainly got that right, Archibald.” Newton fumbled to open another bag of his cherished off-brand cheese snacks. “After today’s thrashing, I will share a selection of my personal Elven tactics. Perhaps I shall even suggest some additions to your overwhelmingly Mage-based militia”

“Good thing, dude. Susan doesn’t lose very often. For reals.”

“Aw, *sthanksth*, Billy. But I *sthink sthome* of *thesthe guysth* justh let me win.”

“Oh, no way, Susan,” her admirer stared deep into her eyes from the ruined battlefield, “you remember Seth? He almost had an aneurism while you were kicking his sorry butt.”

“Yeah, I *guessth*. *Sthesth wasth sthure* a *fiercsthe* competitor.”

Billy stifled a giggle, shifting it into a feigned cough. “Yeah, Seth is tough. He beats me every time.” He could already see orange foam escaping from the corners of the tickled merchant’s mouth. “Newt! Not funny, for reals.”

In the dwindling hours before sunrise, beneath purpling clouds, amidst feral, bloodthirsty beasts, the Wizard and the Ogre converged en route to a secluded cave, deep within an ancient wood. The Ogre hacked down everything in their path while the Wizard cast spells to aid his ally and conjure storms of acid over their foes.

“Are you super pumped about your match with *Sthusthan*?” The Ogre slurred.

The Wizard was not amused. “*Sthop*... stop that.”

“Dude, I can’t. I’ve been *Listhping* pretty much *nonsthop* for the *lasth* week.”

“You have issues, man.”

“No, I’m tellin’ you, *it’sth* really fun. I ordered a *sthandwicth* like *sthisth yestherday*, it was *hilariousth*. You *sthoulda* been there.” The Ogre lost himself in the moment while the Wizard drifted through another, casting a magical barrier around himself. Demonic hounds gnashed furiously, seeking blood, finding nothing save some broken fangs.

“Mm hm.”

“Dude, what’s the deal?”

“I don’t know, just nervous I guess.”

“Don’t be nervous, man. I know it’s easy to say and stuff, but this is probably the best thing that’s ever happened to you. There’s no better chance to get to know her.”

“That’s *why* I’m so nervous.”

“Yeah, but-”

“Dr. McCoy.” The Wizard eventually continued.

“What?” The ogre inquired, severing the head of a grotesque attacker.

“Nothing. What if I say something stupid, what if she totally stomps me, what if-”

“Enough, Arch. Jeez, man. You’re gonna make yourself more nervous than she ever could.”

The Wizard heard truth in the Ogre’s statement and immediately teleported them from the fray to further discuss the predicament. “So what should I do?” Brutes lashed out at thin air, assumed their foes vanquished and crept off in search of fresh flesh.

“Well, you gotta let her know you’re a real gamer. The new recruits will help.”

“Yeah, they seemed to do pretty well against you the other day.” The Wizard fondly recalled the recent triumph over his friend for the first time in months.

“Whatever,” the Ogre flared his already gaping nostrils, “that was just... beginner’s luck or somethin’.”

“Dude? How long have we been playing together? That is *so* not valid.”

“That’s not what I mean. I mean, your new guys and, you know, Newt’s help, and-”

The Wizard halted the Ogre’s fumbling, “Just stop, man. I toasted you.”

“I wouldn’t go-”

“Rye.”

“What?”

“Toasted. That’s all you need to know.” The Wizard proclaimed with confidence, waving his majestic staff though the forest air.

“Whatever, I’m pretty sure Susan’s gonna beat you, even with the new guys. I’m glad you expanded, though. I was afraid you were gonna start cheesin’ on me with all those Mages.”

“I like Mages.” the Wizard fondly recalled.

“I know, I know.” The Ogre grinned. “Now, what are you gonna talk to her about?”

“I don’t know, what kind of paint she uses?”

“No way, dude. The game is right there in front of you, you already have that in common.

There has to be something else. Comics or MMORPG's or somethin'."

An elegant Elven woman ran through the trees nearby, her graceful movements and slender physique instantly brought Susan to mind. He felt a tingle as he imagined the object of his affection masquerading as some mysterious and fantastical creature. The possibility that she could be somewhere nearby, in this same digital fantasy world, that they might someday go on a quest together shifted his outlook entirely. "Yeah, ok. You think she plays MMORPG's?"

"Well, you'll just have to ask her."

"Thanks, Billy. Seriously."

"No prob, man. Now, you ready to pwn some noobs?"

"Eff yes!"

The Ogre and the Wizard tore from their shelter in the trees, storming the cave like a voracious pack of mutant boars on fire.

Archie rampaged around his small apartment resembling a lunatic newly escaped from a straightjacket. He only had a short time to prepare for the big match against Susan and he could not be late. An eighties station blared over the radio as he gave up the debate between a vintage Intellivision logo T-shirt or a light blue button-up, flailing his arms into the former, then the latter. As he gave his hair one last check before gathering his army, a familiar song came over the radio. He began tapping his foot off the beat before he even realized what it was.

*We are young,
Heartache to heartache
We stand*

Archie was floored – *Love is a Battlefield* by Pat Benatar. "O...M...G... It's a sign!" He whispered aloud before romping through the remainder of the song, singing the chorus at the top of his lungs and mumbling his way through the verses. As the music faded, he noticed the rate of his heartbeat. One last trip to the bathroom for an extra layer of deodorant and he was out the door to face his beloved in combat.

"Archibald, Marvelous!" Newt greeted him from behind the counter. "I've been waiting rather impatiently to inspect the final detailing on the new recruits."

"Hi, Newt. I think you'll like them. I pretty much stayed up all night painting." The bags under his eyes were darker than usual, but he carried the two large briefcases containing his army proudly, despite the evident strain they caused his slender frame.

"Well, come now. Present them, I can wait no longer."

"K, hang on." Archie lugged one of the cases onto the countertop and snapped open the clasps, revealing the new additions among his Elven troops.

"Oh my. Well done, Archibald. You've certainly exceeded my expectations – and you would be wise to note that they were not low to begin with."

"Um, thanks, Newt. I just hope she likes them."

"She will adore them."

Archie's nerves were abuzz, "But the paint job can only get me so far."

"Hmm," scratching at his beard, the fuzzy trader considered this concern deeply before submitting his wisdom, "second base at the very least, I'm sure."

"Newt!"

"I'm being serious. I once posted pictures of my Dark Elf army on a gaming forum and not one week later I lost my virginity."

Archie moved his cases toward the battlefield, unconvinced. "Spare me, Newt. I've heard that

story a million times and I still don't buy it. Plus how bad did she want you when you brought her down to your Mom's basement?"

"You'd be surprised what some women find attractive, young Padowan."

"Whatever, you'd have a better chance of getting laid in here."

"Well, at--"

"Tuber."

"What?"

"It's a metaphor... never mind. You never get my jokes."

"At least I've been 'laid,' as you so coarsely put it."

"Well I hope so, you're older than me and Billy put together."

"Yes," Newton calculated the figures in his head, "but just barely. Will he be joining us this afternoon?"

"No, he said he's going to let me fly this mission solo. Plus it's his grandma's birthday and he has to bake her a cake."

"Ooh, I hope he brings me some batter!"

A bright light thrust into the dim room, the sun's reflection from opposing windows just as Susan opened the shop door.

"Hey, Newt. Hello Artschie." Level sixteen Flash. They froze in the shocking beam, trying to peer through it disregarding how it stung their eyes.

"Why hello, Susan. Archibald was just showing me the intricacies on his new Elves." Newt said while Archie fumbled to find words through the angelic vision before him.

"Oh, sthweet! Let me sthee 'em, Artschie."

"O-okay." His first sounds were quivers, as were his motions in presenting his masterworks.

"Holy flippin' stheep, Arcsth! Stthey're gorgeousth."

Archie took a deep breath and cracked a smile. He had surpassed the first obstacle. "I'm glad you like them, I worked really hard for y- for like a week... on them."

"Oh, it sthowsth. I love sthe sthading on your horsthes. And sthe detailsth on sthe armor on thesthe sthwordsthmen isth sthunning." She spoke at such a pace that she was even more difficult to understand than usual.

"He did an unparalleled job, did he not?" Newt commented after a moment of deciphering. "You two get positioned. When you are ready, I have something of a surprise for you."

They did as the eager merchant suggested and arranged their armies across the topography. Archie's High Elves stood out below the soft lights of the Troll Hole with their flickering silvers and sparking blues, but Susan's army was striking in another fashion altogether. They were Warriors of Chaos in both name and appearance; monstrous beast-men with horned helmets, barbed armor and weapons larger than some of Archie's troops. He was intimidated, but just as excited that the battle was about to begin.

Newt examined the table. "Are your troops at arms?" Finding it satisfactory, he produced a small velvet bag from the pocket of his discolored jeans. The competitors knew immediately what it contained.

"Newt! No way, man. We couldn't."

"Stheriousthly, Newt. Your lucky di?"

His eyes gleamed from behind glasses that made them appear twice their size. "You are two of my most cherished companions. It is only reasonable that on your first soirée you use this treasured game piece."

Archie had never actually seen this di in play; it only seemed to come out when Newton was feeling particularly boastful. "I... I don't know what to say, Newt, but if you insist--"

"Yesth! Stthis isth *stho* awesthhome of you, Newt!"

The streak of a smile cracked the gaming guru's beard. "Splendid. My only request is that I am allowed the initial roll. Archibald, you arrived first, so one through three will grant you the opening play. Susan, you are assigned four through six. Any objections?" They shook their

heads, eager to see how the legendary di would land. “Excellent.” He slid the cube from its veil to a pair of gasps and gave it an enthusiastic shake before slinging it out to jig about the terrain and decide for itself the fate of the impending war.

Battle axes and swords clashed, firing sparks around their wielders. Arrows found their way to shields, helmets, bones. Armor-clad steeds trampled unworthy foes only to be cut down by mighty blades. Great eagles challenged spiny dragons for control of the skies. Ogres and Trolls crossed steel with Elven adversaries. The grounds were wet with the blood of the fallen, but the forces above – these warring gods – found themselves moist with other fluids.

“Newt, I’m sweating my face off in here, can you turn the heat down a little?”

The shopkeeper took a moment in returning to reality. “Hmm? Oh, yes of course. I was so deep in the battle that I had failed to notice these disagreeable conditions.” He rose up from his side view of the combat site and adjusted the thermostat. “I’ll crack the door for a moment as well. We should be back to normal in no time.”

“Thanksth, Newt.” Susan said as she made a momentous roll, checked her tape and commanded a dragon to wreak havoc on Archie’s tattered company.

“Jeepers, that behemoth is ferocious! It wasted all my guys.”

“I had troubles with that pesky creature when Susan and I faced off as well.” Newt recalled.

“Sthe’s my sthecret weapon, I call her sthweet pea.” Susan giggled over the devastation below. The battle was hers.

“Well, Archibald,” Newt surveyed her handiwork, “it appears as though your conquest is doomed, but it was a valiant effort, indeed.”

“Yeah, well it was way fun either way.” He stood and extended his hand across the table. “Congratulations, Susan.”

She reached to accept his sporting gesture over the arena but was interrupted just before their hands met. Archie recognized her ringtone song immediately and felt his heart rate double.

*We are strong,
No one can tell us we’re wrong*

“Hey you! Yesth, I’m justh about finished. Yeah. Five minutesth. K. Sthee you sthoon sthweetie.”

“Was that your mother calling to collect you?”

“Not sthoday, Newt.” Susan blushed before a fit of giggles and nervous smiles bounced from her mouth. “Sthat wasth my boyfriend, Sthebasthien.” The look on Archie’s face went from delighted to defeated as she scooped up her battalion and shuffled them into her bag. “He’ssth a LARPer!” She shot her anxious hand into the limp hanging flesh that was Archie’s, “Sthanksth for sthe matsch, Artschie. Sthee ya, Newt.”

She cackled her way through the door, leaving behind a wave of bewilderment. They watched through the storefront window as she swayed on the sidewalk to silent music.

Archie plummeted back into his seat.

“Oh, Archibald, I had no idea she was courting.”

“How am I supposed to compete with a guy like that? He’s an athlete, Newt. A real man.”

“Come now, if I recall correctly, you are a mathlete, that has got to count for something.” No response from his defeated compatriot. “At any rate, it will never last. Those LARPer are troublesome, they disrespect their women just as the barbarians they portray.”

“That... that was supposed to be our song.”