



REPOstiltzkin

James Daniel Ross

MY EYES QUEST AROUND THE ROOM AND SEE HALF-OPEN SUDOKU books, *The United Nations Space Fleet Engineering Manual*, crosswords, *A Brief History of Everything Else*, and copies of *America's Most Frustrating Riddles* lining the shelves. None of the well-worn pages hold any interest at the moment. I had loaded up my *Spellcraft Horizons* account this afternoon, but all I had done was watch guys line up on the computer screen, flexing virtual muscles and flourishing kilobyte weapons. They'd come, they'd go. I just sat with my bored avatar on the screen.

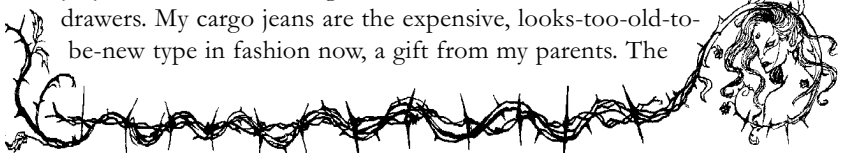
I am supposed to be a master wizard, weaver of mighty enchantments, brewer of eldritch potions, caster of spells that can crack mountains and boil oceans, scourge of evil and slayer of dragons...my heart just isn't in it tonight.

I log out, staring at the *Spellcraft Horizons* logo, groaning a bit as the scantily clad elf princesses flashed on the screen. I grab a stale can of Blur Dog and take a swig, wincing as the caffeinated herbal infusion spreads its hangover all over my tongue. Remembering stern glares from my mother, I get up to pour the dregs out in the bathroom. I pause at my dresser, take Goldie, my lucky polyhedral die, and roll it cleanly off my palm, bouncing it off my second place chess trophy. There are twenty sides, but of course a small, laughing number one is what comes up.

"Figures." I run a finger over the forward phased torpedo array of my model of the UNSF Indefatigable.

"Captain Lockhart, what would you say about a dusty ship?"

My eyes wander to the large, ornate mirror above the chest of drawers. My cargo jeans are the expensive, looks-too-old-to-be-new type in fashion now, a gift from my parents. The



hoodie, likewise is a gift, from Toby. It proudly sports the Assassin's Guild coat of arms from *Spellcraft Horizons*. Unfortunately, the rest of me is still the same as ever.

Flippy, lifeless, mouse-brown hair? Check. Oversized nose? Check. Adams apple like a grapefruit? Check. Acne? Present and accounted for, sir! I salute, giving myself a wry smile without much humor in it.

"Samuel, you are not just a nerd. You are THE nerd, the template from which all other nerds are drawn." But I didn't say: and you are alone on your birthday, and worse, a Friday night, to boot.

I open the door to my room and go downstairs. Pictures of me are everywhere, a legacy of a shutterbug father with an only child. At least he is out of town on business tonight. I have no real desire to have a permanent record of Toby and me at L33T Games. I mean, we still had a blast playing Cybermarine, Purple Heart; Postmodern Warrior, and Light-speeder online against thousands of others, but I still can't get over the fact that it was just he and I.

"You can't...all there...I won't let you...."

I hear my mother speaking angrily downstairs. I hope beyond hope that she isn't meddling. The last thing I need is her getting all orcish on the guys' moms over the lonely party. It sucks, but having mom riding to my rescue would be worse.

"Don't you give me...sixteen years! This is his home...."

She's just always so protective. I enter the kitchen and see the Gunnery Sergeant from Cybermarine cake cut into little squares. Mom had taken one; I had eaten one; Toby had scarfed five. I immediately feel it's my job to catch up to him. I scoop one piece up and bite it in half, letting the soft green icing and rich chocolate chase away the depressing cobwebs from the corner of my head as I toss the can of Blur Dog at the trash. Immediately afterward, I have to pick it up off of the floor and put it carefully into the can.

"...You've got another thing coming, mister!"

Whoever she is talking to, she is really going tonight. I finish the cake as I reenter the hallway, cramming the other half between my teeth and chewing. I am trying to pull myself out of my funk, repeating to myself over and over that I'm young. That I have straight A's. That I am already studying REMIX, X=+, and SuperBasic. With a firm grounding in enough computer languages, soon after college I'd have a stellar resume, full fluency in computer code, and....

I glance over my shoulder as I catch a new voice, a strange voice, much quieter and gruffer than Mom's. It sounds like it came out of a massive, round, barrel chest that had somehow been shrunk in the wash. "Look, you signed da contract, right? Now ya wanna tell me dat da contract means nothin'?"

The idea of some strange man in my house arguing with my mom at this time of night sets off all kinds of bells and whistles. I reach back into the kitchen and snatch my Mom's cell from its charging cradle. I dial in 9-1-1 and then hide the little phone in my hand in the front pocket of my hoodie. I try to pump myself up; standing as tall as I can, I walk into the living room, wanting to be intimidating as possible and back up my mom.