

## With This I Smite You and Hell Hath No Pizza

With This, I Smite You

by Jim Bernheimer (JBern)

John sighed. He generally enjoyed doing panels at cons, but there was always that one annoying person who felt the need to ask the most inane questions. A good moderator can usually redirect that person and get the conversation back on topic. Unfortunately the one they had doing the just completed, "How to Beat Writer's Block" seminar sucked monkey balls and Mister "I should be on the panel because I clearly have all the answers," kept going on about how using hallucinogenic drugs helps him beat the dreaded writer's block.

Finally, John stepped in and cut the lunatic off. Sometimes, a little verbal "smackdown" is unavoidable at these events. The guy must've realized that he'd overstepped some boundaries and followed him into the lounge to apologize. He was even nice enough to buy him a drink.

The drink wasn't helping. In fact, his head hurt even worse. He was sorely tempted to blow off the charity auction and go get some rest, but it was for a good cause and John decided to soldier on.

"Why the long face?" Wil asked after making his way through the crowded lounge. Wheaton was wearing that ridiculous clown sweater.

"My eyes! They burn!" he said. "Seriously, what's with that?"

"Some guy stroked a five hundred dollar check to the Lupus Alliance if I'd wear it for the rest of the night."

"Really?"

Wil shrugged and said, "He did, so I did. You wouldn't believe how many people have been asking to take pictures with me since I put it on. It's like a magnet. How many times have I told you to beware the power of the sweater? Hey John? Are you okay? You look a little funny."

*"Tonight, you will die and I will feast on your testicles!"* The clown on Wil's chest said to John.

"What? Why would you want to do that?" John asked.

"John? Up here." Wil said.

*"Wil and I are plotting against you. Your death will be but the first of many!"* The clown cackled as a long forked tongue came out of the creature's "mouth" and flicked at him.

"Impossible! Wil and I are friends," John protested.

*"He's an actor, you fool! They have no friends. Now, you will die slowly and painfully. Grab him, Wil!"*

John recoiled from Wil's grasp. Sure, Wheaton was asking if John was okay, but the threat of the demonic clown was too great. Pushing the table over, he ran out of the lounge and looked for a means of escape. All around him strange and unusual monsters and humans in unfamiliar garb closed on him.

Stumbling, he slammed into a massive beast. It had the head and body of a cat, with a unicorn's horn, and huge beating wings. The thing's claws grabbed at him and it growled something unintelligible.

*"Hold him my pet! You may consume his flesh, but I must eat his loins!"* The clown's voice rose over the din.

He wasn't certain where he was anymore. All John knew is that he must escape the evil clown, Wil, and this new threat. To do so, he'd need to lose them in this crowd. A sign in front of him promised to turn a person into an orc and there was an enchantress surrounded by colorful salves.

Breaking free of the clown's pet creature. He ran to the enchantress and said, "They mean to kill me. I must have a disguise. Please, use your magic and turn me into an orc!"

The witch looked at him oddly and John wondered if she was allied with Wil, the clown, and the Pegakittycorn.

"O... kay," she said. "Poof. You're an orc."

John watched as his skin turned green and his muscles bulged. His shirt turned into armored mail. *"This is almost like turning into the Hulk,"* he thought. No longer was he simple "John." Now, he was Jahan, the mighty breaker of bones and the occasionally flatulent.

Cursing himself for not asking the enchantress to turn him into a dragon, Jahan knew he was running out of time. The traitorous Wil sprinted toward

him and yelled for the other denizens of the marketplace to grab him. The Pegakittycorn hovered next to his former friend obeying the clown's every command.

A disguise wasn't good enough. He'd have to fight his way out of here. Nearby was a weapons merchant. Jahan shouldered a spear and hurled it at the Pegakittycorn with all his orcish strength. His aim was true, but the weapon merely bounced off the monster's thick hide. Desperate, he grabbed a deadly looking axe along with a sturdy shield and marveled at how light they felt in his powerful hands. Jahan retreated through the marketplace and saw where the city gave way to rugged and mountainous terrain near an active volcano. He'd fight them there.

Orcs, Jahan knew, were resistant to heat. The active volcano nearby didn't bother him in the least. He had hoped the difficult footing would separate his pursuers. The clown thwarted him by mounting the Pegakittycorn and they came flying through the air at him. In the hands of the clown's thrall, was the spear he'd thrown earlier. They were too fast! He was cornered with nowhere left to run. Jahan's final stand would be on this spot.

"I won't go down like this!" He screamed in defiance, raising his axe high and calling to the spirits of fallen orc warriors to rally to his cause.

The thunderous impact as the three came together shook the ground and nearly toppled the nearby volcano. Again and again, Jahan slashed with his axe, but the magic protecting the demon clown and his terrible steed prevented the orc champion from drawing blood. Throwing caution to the wind, Jahan freed himself once more and in a feat of strength no mere mortal could duplicate, he ripped the volcano from the very earth it rose from and brought the fiery mass over his head.

"With this, I smite you!" Jahan exclaimed bringing the full weight of the volcano down on his enemies.

Jahan reveled in his victory. Nothing could survive that! The Pegakittycorn's head was severed revealing a man that it had consumed earlier. One wing still twitched and Jahan savored the beast's death throes. The man said something to Jahan, but the orc no longer understood the common tongue of humans. Still, he might need a hostage to ensure his escape. His muscular green arm reached out to pull the human out of the belly of the beast, only to discover the human was a spellcaster. The wizard's wand touched Jahan's outstretched hand and the vile sorcerer summoned lightning. Jahan fell to the ground defeated. The last thing he heard was the laughter of the clown echoing in his ears.

"Holy crap! I really did all that," John said watching the You Tube clip of his rampage through the convention's dealer room. For something that had only been up on the video sharing website for twenty-four hours, it sure had a ridiculous number of hits. The bloggers were having a field day with it too. That didn't bode well. One proclaimed it to be the "most awesome lulz evah!" Admittedly, the one titled, "Clown Wheaton 'crush-ered' and pwnd by volcano!" did take some of the sting out of this whole ordeal.

"Sure did! Along with the fiber optic volcano set up to promote someone's book," Wil said while wincing a little at the black eye John had given him during the scuffle. "They caught that guy that spiked your drink. I'm guessing you'll want to press charges."

"Yeah, that's a safe bet. Man, I trashed that off duty cop's costume. At least I wasn't caught saying, 'Don't taze me, bro' like that one guy," John muttered.

"I don't know. 'With this, I smite you' is going to be around for a long time to come. The fact that I'm in the clown sweater won't help it go away anytime soon. There's already a T-shirt for sale in one of the booths downstairs. Are you sure you're okay?"

"As far as I can tell," John answered.

Wil smiled and said, "Okay, I'm going to step into the bathroom and clean up. They rescheduled the charity auction for tonight. I'll give them a call after I get out and let them know that you're feeling better."

John watched his friend walk into the bathroom. He wondered about the effects of a bad acid trip. Should he be worried? Out of the corner of his eye, John saw the clown sweater resting on the big recliner in the corner of Wil's room.

*"You were lucky mortal. Next time you die!"* The clown said.

John shook his head and tried to clear out the cobwebs. He knew that he didn't really just hear that. Still, John was a pragmatic man. "Hey Wil?"

"Yeah John?"

"How about I make a large donation at the auction tonight and you let me cut up that sweater onstage?"

Hell Hath No Pizza

by Perspicacity

A line of people plodded through a narrow corridor decorated in mute, chain-hotel pastels, their hushed voices forming a susurrant background. Glowing lights dotted the ceiling in wavy arcs that converged far ahead. Two men robed in white trudged behind a diminutive Indian woman.

Both men were tall, though not overly so, with brown hair and trimmed beards. The similarity ended there, however. The first, Wil, had the uncanny charisma and magnetic stage presence of a professional actor. The other wrote books.

Wil muttered, "How was I supposed to know?"

The second man, John, glared back. “What kind of idiot MacGuivers a time machine out of a high voltage line and a Mr. Microphone reverb? Wasn’t ‘Danger: High Voltage’ a *little* ominous?”

“I said I was sorry.”

“‘What’s the worst that can happen,’ he says. ‘Fiery death,’ I say. ‘It’ll be awesome if it works,’ he says. ‘Only if we don’t flame out like Kerry in October,’ I say. Then BOOM, fiery death—never saw *that* coming.” He rolled his eyes. “That reminds me, Krissy doesn’t know how to program the lawn sprinklers.”

“You should have put in xeriscape. It’s more environmental,” Wil said.

“Like I care. Maybe you should have listened to me and left Mr. Microphone in the box with the other Ronco 70s crap.”

“I was wearing Wellies, so I thought it would be safe—and please don’t start with that Dunning-Kruger ‘awareness of incompetence’ thing again,” he said, preempting his friend’s favorite rant. “Besides, it’s the environment. You should care what happens to it.”

“Talk to the spectral hand.”

Wil harrumphed and they walked in silence. “So, this is heaven? Somehow I imagined it to be less like the DMV.”

“Actually, I think it’s Limbo, where we get sorted. Heaven or Hell, Elysium or Tartarus, Moksha or Wal\*Mart...” John said, scratching the back of his neck.

“Crap,” Wil said.

“What?”

“I just mailed in my SAG dues.”

They heard the sound of someone clearing his voice.

“Next please,” a voice intoned and they turned to see a slender, refined man at a podium looking especially sinister in neatly trimmed goatee and stereotypical villain leer. He wore black robes stitched with jagged, angular runes. His body was surrounded by tiny wisps of sulfur.

“Dude, you’re putting out some stink there,” Wil said, waving his hand in front of his nose.

John eyed the annoyed being who would determine the fate of his soul and faced an existential decision: a witty riff on Wil’s comment or a polite one that might actually save his soul.

Politeness won out. Barely.

He knelt before the podium and bowed his head. “Saint Peter?”

“Judas Iscariot, actually. I’m temping while Pete’s off on flex time.” He peered at a large book open upon the pedestal and turned to the other man. “Wil Wheaton, actor, author, father...” He hummed to himself and traced a razor-sharp nail down the page as he read a record of the man’s deeds.

“Don’t forget blogger,” Wil added. “WWdN: In Exile is way popular with the geek crowd.”

Judas fixed the man with a piercing stare.

“Er, right. I’ll just be quiet then,” Wil said.

After a long pause, Judas said, “Poker player? It appears that you are destined for Hell.”

“What? It’s just a hobby and I gave most of my winnings to charity.”

“Who ever said death was fair?”

“Dude, come on,” Wil pleaded. “I was in Trek—hey, help me out and I’ll put in a good word for you with Marina Sirtis... Or John Frakes, if that’s how you swing.”

Judas looked thoughtful. “I don’t normally do this, but for the chance of meeting Ms. Sirtis, I suppose I can make an exception. I shall grant you a boon, a wish to ease your damnation.”

Wil turned to John. “What should I wish for? I’ll miss my family, but not enough to send them to Hell. How about pizza? An eternity of Chicago-style would be pretty awesome.”

“You’re facing eternal torment and wasting a wish on pizza? Why am I not surprised? At least ask for something meaningful, like an end to stupid politicians or Cool Ranch Doritos or something,” John said, turning away.

"But I like anchovies. Wait, John, don't be like that--I don't want to be alone..."

"Granted!" Judas said.

"Huh?"

"Your wish, to never be alone." He twirled a squat, golden scepter that resembled a tall can of malt liquor and Wil's clothing disappeared in a translucent cloud. His robes became blue bicycling pants and a familiar clown sweater appeared about his torso.

"Crap, this *is* Hell."

"HELLO, DAVY," the sweater intoned, its maw opening into darkness that stretched impossibly far into Wil's belly.

"Gah! Get it off!" Wil screamed, running in circles and tugging at the hem.

"LET'S BE FRIENDS, DAVY."

"Aaah!"

"I'm afraid it's quite impossible to remove," Judas said, zapping Wil with a pink bolt of lightning from his scepter, calming the hysterical man instantly. "Now for you, Mr. Scalzi..."

"Sir," John said, biting back the first two Judas jokes he knew, surprising himself at having known any Judas jokes. "I've tried to be a good man and husband. I spent my life pointing out ugly truths and attempting to change people for the better with humor. I even wrote speculative fiction, some of which didn't suck."

Judas read the page. "Indeed. The records show you led a virtuous life."

"Score!" John said, looking in vain for someone to share a high-five.

Wil, still under the effects of Judas's malt-liquor mood-zapper, scooted bonelessly to his friend and drawled, "Don't tell him about taping bacon to your cat."

John answered by stomping on Wil's bare foot.

"Unfortunately, I regret that the Holy One has decreed that no more than one speculative fiction writer may be admitted into Heaven. We've reached our quota."

"What? Who?" John asked.

"L. Ron Hubbard--God has a sense of irony."

"Damn. Can I have a boon too?"

Judas shrugged. "I don't know why not."

"I wish to go to Heaven." John said, grinning at his cleverness.

"Were I to grant this wish, God would be proven fallible and all of creation would disappear in an ontological impossibility. Do you truly wish to unmake everything?"

"Beats the Bejesus out of suffering in Hell--no pun intended."

Judas tapped his chin with a black-nailed fingertip.

"I know just the thing," he said, shaking his malt liquor scepter like a can of spray paint. John's body began to shrink, becoming squat and muscular and his face pulled into a permanent scowl. Pointy fangs protruded from his lower jaw as equally pointy ears sprouted from either side of his head. About his body was steel mail. A battleaxe appeared in his meaty hands.

"Dude, you're an orc!" Wil said, tittering.

"Laugh it up, clown boy," he grunted, adding a bestial snarl for good measure.

"THAT'S NOT NICE, IS IT, DAVY?" the clown sweater said.

"Stop calling me Davy," Wil grouched, then said to Judas, "You know, for being immortal and all, your boons suck."

"You know what else sucks?" John said. "Being poor." Everyone was quiet as they contemplated the awkward *non sequitur*.

"Judas, what gives with this getup?" John asked, gesturing with his axe.

Judas didn't answer. Instead, he flicked his scepter once more and the two were swallowed by a cloud of silver motes. When it cleared, they found themselves on a basalt island in a sea of lava. Several volcanoes erupted in the distance and the sky was black and tempestuous.

"I can't believe it," Wil said. "We're in Hell and I'm stuck with this clown sweater. Could it get any worse? Ouch, hot feet--should've wished for shoes." He started hopping from one foot to the next.

"Are you kidding me?" John said, ignoring his companion's plight as his mouth widened into a feral grin. "This is awesome!"

"Maybe for you--orcs don't get epic-class skills, so of course you'll find brimstone and lava to be heaven, even without pizza..."

*Hiss.*

"Did you just pass gas?" Wil asked.

"Pass gas? What are we, in grade school? Maybe there's a vent or something."

*Hiss.*

"There it is again," John said. "I think it's coming from behind that rock."

"It's a kitty!" Wil gushed as the beast raised its massive head above the rock to gaze down upon the two men. "Here kitty, kitty."

"I don't think that's such a good idea..." John said.

The beast pounced onto the ground before them, regarding the two much as a predator would something beneath killing. It was the size of a horse and had the hindquarters of a steed. Wide, feathered wings flapped once, raising a blast of superheated ash. It had the head and front limbs of an enormous kitten and atop its head was a golden unicorn horn.

Wil made kissing noises and puckered his lips. "You're a pretty kitty, aren't you. That's a good kitty. See, John? Nothing to be afraid of."

"I dunno. He looks a little like Dick Cheney," he said backing away. "At least he's not carrying a shotgun."

The beast swiped at him with a claw. John dodged, finding his stubby orc legs surprisingly agile.

"Bad kitty!" Wil said, swatting its nose. It turned and narrowed its eyes. A violet ball of magical energy appeared about the tip of its horn. It hummed loudly as lightning lanced across the sky in an ominous crescendo of growing power. Suddenly, with a flabby, flatulent noise, the enormous, glowing glob leaped from the horn and struck Wil in the head, knocking him flat onto his back.

"Wil!" John rushed to his fallen friend, arriving just as he sat up. Wil's eyes were crossed.

"Whoa, it's all different, but makes so much sense now. Everything I believed was wrong. I see now that Bush was an *awesome* president and Cheney was right about, well, everything."

The demon-pegasus-unicorn-Cheney-kitten preened at the praise.

"Dude, snap out of it," John said, moving to slap the other man, but pulling his hand back as the clown sweater blinked to life.

"CAN I EAT HIM, DAVY?"

Wil eyed his companion suspiciously. "You know, with that orc stuff, you almost look like a terrorist."

"Right," John chuckled, then realized Wil was serious.

"The John Scalzi I knew would never throw his lot in with the enemy. He was a patriot who loved America. What have you done with my friend?"

Wil raised his hand to the heavens and a bolt of lightning struck his palm. The light faded and he was grasping a mighty, golden lance.

John, who had backed away, having had one too many bad experiences with Wil and lightning, watched as his friend mounted the demon. The two took to the air.

"Last chance, friend of Saddam!" Wil shouted. "Where's John--where you stashed the weapons of mass destruction?"

"Wil, it's me!"

“C’mon, Dick, let’s smoke him out.” Fire erupted about the lance as the demon swooped low. John dodged again, narrowly escaping being skewered.

“Let the mighty eagle soar!” Wil sang as they banked hard to make another pass. Then, he improvised an off-key verse that stirred John’s orcish blood with battlelust. “Heinlein knock-off: Old Man’s War...”

John brandished his axe. “Them’s fightin’ words, clowny.”

“Prepare to be lava-boarded, pointy-eared terrorist!” Wil shouted and roared a battle cry.

Cheney-demon hissed its assent.

“GET HIM, DAVY!”

John snarled. And passed a little gas—he didn’t want to admit it, but it really was him the first time.

The two met in a titanic clash, one that would come to redefine the very nature of the cosmos. And of clowns. But that, dear reader, is a tale for another day.