The Quest Giver

Joe Prosit

“It’s dangerous to go alone. Take this.”

The kid, and he was just a kid, too young to be called a man, looked funny at the gun resting in my open palms. “What is it?”

Not a head for smarts, this one. He had an unblemished face and youthful beauty. All his days spent maturing and none aging. Oh yes, he was going to need the gun where he was going. “A forty caliber Smith & Wesson automatic, the magazine loaded with full metal jacket for penetrating armor. In case the monsters have thick hides.”

“Thick hides? Listen mister, I’m not shooting a gun at anybody.”

So petulant. So certain of his purpose in this world, or rather, lack thereof. Apparently I needed to speak more slowly. “You clearly don’t have a handle on the situation in which you find yourself. I said, it’s dangerous to go alone.”

“Nah. No thanks, man. I think you’re dangerous,” he said while stepping away. When he had backed far enough to bump into the glass door of the pawn shop, he smirked. “Later, weirdo.” Then he pushed the door open, slipped out, and was gone.

“Yes. I’ll be seeing you again shortly.”

When the boy left, the pawn shop fell quiet once again. Ambient traditional music plinked and twanged from invisible speakers, only audible when everything else was not. I sighed and slide the gun back under the counter. He’d be back. They came here to hock car stereos or buy used guitars that would make them stars in their dreams, but in reality would sit unpracticed in the corners of their rooms. They came in with petty desires and unmotivated dreams, but left with so much more.

The front door’s electric chime binged and bonged, and another character entered the pawn shop. This one was a girl. Big hair. Vapid smile. Short skirt. A suit coat with big shoulder pads. She strolled to the center of the pawn shop like it was a model’s runway. She stopped in the middle of all the used electronics and old romances novels, tossed her hair and winked at me. I nodded back.

She showed no reaction. A few seconds later, she tossed her hair again, flipping it with the back of her fingers, and followed it with another wink.

Ahh. A non-player character. Cliched, but on cue.

And just as timely, another unwitting hero appeared through the front door. This one also a girl, but not so designed and more soaked in her own idiosyncrasies. Hair undone. Shoes untied. Eyes she kept to herself and cast downward whenever not stealing glances sideways. She wore enough black to be a villain, but I knew better. She moved to a selection of old DSL cameras and lens. The non-player character did her best to show this new girl how well she could flip her hair and wink. The girl by the cameras didn’t notice.

But when the three oversized brutes shoved through the door, their crunching footsteps drowning out the bing bong bell, the girl by the cameras looked up. Perhaps she had potential after all. The three brutes ignored her and moved to the winker and hair flipper. One quick uppercut to the gut and she crumpled over. The middle brute caught her before she had a chance to fall to the ground. He slung her over his wide muscular shoulder like a sack of potatoes. And once they had her, the three about-faced and strutted back out the door having not said a word.

The girl by the cameras, her eyes were wide and alert now, stabbed out from under her overhanging bangs. Her back was pressed against the shelves. “Jesus Christ!” she said as soon as the non-player characters were gone.

“Quick! They’ve taken the mayor’s daughter!” I said to her.

“What the—?” the girl said to me. “Aren’t you going to call the cops?”

“After them! They have the mayor’s daughter!” I said, emoting as much as I could.

“Forget that, old man. I’m calling the cops and getting the hell outta here,” she said, dug out a cell phone, and fled to the exit. I watched her go out of the door, check up and down the sidewalk, and shuffle off in the opposite direction of the brutes and kidnapped girl.

The boy who would go alone to dangerous places nearly knocked into her as he came charging back into the pawn shop. His face was pale. His eyes electric.

“How much?” he hurried me. “How much for the gun?”

As if the weapon had never left my hands, I raised my open palms above the counter and displayed it to the boy. “It’s dangerous to go alone. Take this.”

“Yeah, you said it! How much?”

“No charge. But do not dawdle. Adventure awaits,” I told him and this time he listened.

The boy snatched the gun and held it aloft for just one frozen moment. When the moment had passed, he looked only slightly more bewildered than he’d been when he first returned to the shop. But he didn’t let the second of sentience-betrayal distract him. He racked back the slide of the gun and chambered a round.

“Thanks, old man,” the boy said and rushed out the door.

Another satisfied customer.

He was barely out the door when Meryl entered. Meryl. That bureaucrat. Tall, plain-faced, dull hair, a somehow boring and featureless black trench coat and dark sunglasses: an appearance that was almost a non-appearance, a man you only thought you saw. He approached the counter with a confidence and a smirk that crawled under my skin.

“Hello, Meryl,” I said.

Behind him, the door bing-bonged and another unknowing adventurer came closer to his destiny. A teenage boy. Not from the city. Flannel and jeans. Long uncombed hair.

“Hello, Adalrich,” Meryl said. “Up to your old tricks again, I see.”

“Tricks? What tricks?” I asked.

Behind Meryl, a TV popped to life in front of the be-flanneled youth. His eyes locked on the screen. In an instant he forgot whatever trivialities had occupied his life before this fateful moment. The entire width of the forty-two inch monitor was consumed by the image of Sky Admiral Angus CloudCleaver. “Red Alert! Red Alert! The evil Xikicrons have invaded the Galactic Colonies. All pilots to their starfighters! This means you!” Just outside the pawnshop, a beam of light came down and shone on a quarter-operated amusement ride molded in the shape of a rocket ship.

“What tricks?” Meryl turned from the boy and his starfighter to me. “Come on, Adalrich. Do we really have to play this game?”

My eyes were still on the boy, whose eyes were flashing between the ride, the TV, and the two of us at the counter. The TV was looping its message over and over again now, short blasts of static between each of the Sky Admiral’s alerts. When I caught the boy’s eyes, I chinned in the direction of the amusement ride, encouraging him on. They all needed an extra push from time to time.

“Adalrich,” Meryl snapped at me.

“Meryl, we both know I’m too old to change my ways. I’ve been around this globe for too long. I’m not like these brave-hearted souls who come to me. They’re just beginning their journeys that will shape and develop them. Me? I’ve had my arc and have fixed my beliefs.”

“Stop,” Meryl said. “You’ve been warned, reprimanded, fined, and sanctioned. The next step is to shut you down and bring you in. Is that what you want?”

Blatherings. I heard it all before and none of it interested me. My eyes were still on the boy. I waited for his decision. When I saw his confusion beat out his curiosity and drive his feet through the door and away from the quarter-operated amusement ride, my shoulders slouched.

I sighed. “Why are you here, Meryl?”

“Haven’t you been listening to a word I’ve said? I’m here to shut you down, Adalrich. I promised the counsel that I’d come here and find you abiding by the terms of your probation. That you’d learned your lesson. That you’d only issue out adventure by the approved means. Books. Movies. Stories planted inside their minds by hypnotic suggestion. You know, how the rest of us do it. But here you are, quest-giving again like bearded old wizard.”

“They need it,” was all I said. All I felt I needed to say.

“It’s dangerous, Adalrich. There’s a boy out there firing full metal jacket slugs into ravenous monsters in the street. Right outside your store.”

I leaned an ear towards the front of the shop. Of course there was the quiet ambient sounds of guitars, sitars and shamisens playing peaceful in the store. But now that he mentioned it, I did hear the distant sounds of screams, gunfire, growling beasts, and the whine of police sirens in the distance. I shrugged. “Someone had to kill those monsters.”

“Adalrich, there were no monsters until you issued them out. Just like there were no kidnapped mayor’s daughters and no invading Xikicrons until you created them. You’re causing all this, and a lot of people are noticing,” Meryl said.

“Sometimes I create evil for them to defeat. Sometimes I send them against pre-existing evils. So what?” I shrugged.

“So what? So last time I brought you in, you signed an affidavit specifically saying you’d stop creating real-life dangers for susceptible frail humans like these wanders and vagabonds who come strolling through your door. Fiction! Adalrich. You signed the affidavit swearing you were going to stick with fiction. And now I come here and see this nonsense. And there’s no way I can hide this. No way I can cover it up or brush it under the rug. You…” He stopped. “What?”

I held up a finger. Long, thin of flesh but thick of knuckle.

“What is that supposed to mean?” Meryl asked.

“It means nothing, but I have to correct you. The term you’re looking for is ‘heroes.’”

“Heroes?” Meryl repeated. “When did I ever say anything about—”

“Susceptible frail humans. Wanders. Vagabonds. That’s what you called them,” I said. “But the term you are looking for, is ‘heroes.’”

Behind Meryl’s back, the young man in the flannel crept back into view, just outside the glass storefront. He on the left. The quarter-operated starfighter on the right. Ever so slowly, he stepped closer to the fighter.

“And what happens when one of your heroes gets killed?” Meryl said.

I didn’t mean to roll my eyes. It was just that he was so boring. “I give them extra lives, Meryl.”

Frustrated, he tried another attack from another front. “They didn’t ask for you to interfere in the life they had! They come in this shop to look for a cheap deal. To make a few quick bucks. To waste time. To sift through the debris of other safe terrestrial lives. Not to be sent on some wild goose chase by a crazed old man.”

“And you approve of that sort of life?” I took my eyes off the youth outside and fixed them on Meryl. “Of common lives lived commonly? Of time wasted looking for cheap deals or swapping stolen goods for worthless paper money? If that’s what you’d like for yourself, I have all the paper money you like,” I popped open the register and began shoveling dollars and euros and yen out onto the counter. “Here. Take it. If this is what our lives amount to I should consider mine fulfilled and you should consider yourself lucky to have come in today.”

“Put that— Adalrich! Quit it. Put this money—“ Meryl shoved at the bills mounding on the counter. I kept shoveling. Some of it spilled over to the floor. Some of it he managed to grab and throw back at me. “Stop this insanity right now!”

I slammed my fist through the money and against the glass countertop. Before my fist met glass, every scrap of money vanished from floor to counter to register. Uncushioned by currency, the glass cracked. My eyes locked on Meryl’s. “This world has been without true adventures for too long and you know it. It is decaying their souls. They lumber about without mission or purpose. Without pride or perspective. They are gorged with money and wealth and peace and pacified by poor electronic simulations, but they have never tasted the one food that will truly make them whole, the meal that will feed their spirits and banish the likes of you back from whence you came. They’ve never tasted true adventure.”

“And they never will. Not while I’m here,” Meryl said. “There’s a cost to the product you sell, and it’s got nothing to do with money. Pain. Misery. Destruction. Loss of life. You con them out of it like the crooked pawnbroker you pretend to be. You think you’re so noble, but look around! You think it’s all a façade, but this is exactly who you are. An old man hocking broken goods to broken people.”

“So leave me be,” I said. “I enjoy being this old man, hocking these old ideas of danger and far-off destinations. If I’m an obsolete relic of a time long forgotten than forget me. Leave me to the waste bin of legend.”

“And what about this?” Meryl half turned and stretched a palm out to the youth and the starfighter. The boy climbed inside, and as he did, the craft grew around him. A poly-carbon alloy airframe unsheathed around the plastic molding of the child’s ride. A canopy highlighted with laser-green electronic readouts slide over his head and sealed him inside. He strapped into a flight harness and began flicking switches like he was born to fight the Xikicrons. Thrusters fired and rumbled to life against the sidewalk. Launch in t-minus five… “What am I supposed to do about that?” Meryl asked.

“Nothing,” I said. Four. “We’re clear of the blast-off area.” Three. “But I would advert your eyes.” Two. “The ion thrusters are rather bright.”

One. White smoke consumed the starfighter a moment before it punched space-ward and out of the atmosphere in one supernova-bright flash. We were left deafened by the roar and blinded by the blaze. The exhaust cloud choked the entire street and blocked any view beyond the shop windows.

“That’s it, Adalrich. That’s the last straw,” Meryl pointed a finger at me. “We’ve known each other a long time and I’ve given you more than ample opportunity to change your ways. But you’ve worn out my patience. I’m taking you in.”

The cloud outside the shop was slow to dissipate. It hung there like a thick fog, and through it, four short humanoid shapes began to take form.

“Okay. I’ll go quietly,” I said to Meryl and stuck out both wrists, ready to be cuffed. “But before we go, answer me this. Do you really think I’m the only one who still has a taste for pitfalls and perilous journeys? For heroism? For adventure? Do you really think I’m the last quest giver?”

“Don’t be so proud of yourself. Your kind are a dime a dozen,” Meryl said and went about fishing handcuffs out of a back pocket. He slapped one cuff onto a wrist.

“And who do you think us quest givers send our adventurers out to protect?” I asked him. “Don’t you think we have each other’s backs? Who, Meryl, down here on this terrestrial plain, has your back?”

The pawn shop door binged and bonged. Meryl turned. The cloud had thinned enough to show us four young human silhouettes and the familiar outline of BMX bikes leaned up against the windows. As the first boy entered, smoke from the ion thrusters rolled in with him and his crew. Another boy followed, he with a flashlight and a bandana tied around his head. The third member was a girl with a ponytail and a slingshot at arm’s length. The fourth held an accident time-yellowed map.

“You sure this is the right place?” the first boy said.

“I’m sure of it! The map leads right here,” the last answered, his eyes never leaving the sand-colored sheet of parchment.

“To the lair of the Man in Black,” flashlight boy said.

Slingshot girl stepped around him, and pulled the rubber bands of her weapon taunt. “We’ve come a long ways for you, Meryl. We’re here to send you back from whence you came.”

“Don’t you see, Meryl?” I smiled at him. “I just send out the call to adventure. They’re the ones who answer.”