

Mighty Thrusting Sword of Justice: The Applicants

The chamber was already filling with water when the wall collapsed. Beef the Barbarian's massive muscles strained as he struggled to shelter his teammates from the falling masonry. Standing straight, which he wasn't, Beef was just under seven feet tall and seemed nearly as broad across the shoulders. Cobblestone streets creaked under his heavy footfalls. Even if he had not been scarred by a lifetime of battles, Beef would not have been considered a handsome man. His thick brow suggested a lineage on a somewhat lower branch of the evolutionary tree than standard, and "unkempt" would have been far too kind a word for his wild mane of mangy brown hair. Personal hygiene was another inapplicable term where Beef's description was concerned. The possibility of being crushed to death by a falling wall did not disturb him nearly as much as the fact that the flooding room was much too much like bathing for his tastes.

"Any time would be good," suggested the group's cleric-mage, Ubet Choas who, at just over four feet tall (including his hat, which added a foot to his height), was already chest-deep in water. Despite his stature and navel-length gray beard, Ubet was human rather than dwarfen. His affinity for the latter race had come as a result of adolescent attempts to find his place in the world during which time he'd joined and later became a shaman of a dwarfen church. It was only his inability to grow a full beard as a teenager – and the fact that all the dwarf girls his age had – that ultimately drove him to seek his fortune in human kingdoms of his birth.

"I'm workin' on it," hissed Agent. He was a handsome dark-skinned, dark-eyed man with fingers quick as striking snakes, and right now those fingers were feverishly working the lock to the deathtrap's exit. He'd already disarmed the arrow trap, fireball trap, exploding doorknob and the poison needles in the magic lock. Kneeling in front of the door, Agent was also chest-deep in the water. Unlike Ubet, who wore the cheap, sturdy robes typical of cleric-adventurers, Agent's black silk shirt, black pants and black leather boots were being ruined. Only his Stealthy Cloak of Midnight would come out of the unscheduled laundering unscathed.

The last member of the group, the sorcerer Dr. Flagg, conjured up a series of two-by-fours to help Beef prop up the sagging wall. Dr. Flagg was the opposite of Beef: One-hundred-and-thirty-five pounds soaking wet (which he was), Dr. Flagg was a pale smooth-skinned man with thin hair and sharp features. "This is getting us nowhere," he complained. "Maybe I should try it from the other side."

"You don't know..." began Ubet.

Dr. Flagg raised his staff and vanished. There was a splash as the water rushed into fill the spot where he'd been standing.

"...what's on the other side of that door, you idiot," finished Ubet.

"Well, I'm sure he knows by now," said Agent, his black cloak floating on top of the water behind him. Ubet's long beard was similarly afloat.

"Beef can't hold wall much longer," grunted Beef as one of Dr. Flagg's two-by-fours snapped and vanished.

"Hang in there, big guy. I've almost got it," said Agent. "Anything you can do to help him out?"

"Wall lifting isn't exactly my forte," said Ubet with deliberate slowness.

"Well then maybe the *gods* can help him," suggested Agent mimicking the small man's tone.

Ubet slapped his forehead. "Oh, right." He sloshed over to Beef and laid a stubby-fingered hand on the gigantic thigh. "O gods of the Earth and Tunnels and Mines," intoned Ubet. "Grant strength to my friend's muscles and the will to his spirit to use them." A soft, yellow glow spread from Ubet's fingers and traced its way along Beef's muscles, tendons and ligaments. The wall yielded a few inches and the strain etched on the barbarian's craggy features softened.

"Beef thanks little friend," Beef gasped.

"Bang! There we go," said Agent finally overcoming the lock. Even as the door swung open, it burst into flame and crumbled into ash which was washed away by the rush of exiting water.

Dr. Flagg stood on the other side of the doorway, his staff still leveled at it from the fireball he'd just conjured.

"Great timing," said Agent stepping through the doorway followed by Ubet. Beef gave the wall he was holding a great backward shove and leaped out of the room before it collapsed.

“Sorry,” said Dr. Flagg, “I had to deal with a welcoming committee.” He gestured toward the smoking lower half of a stone golem hobbling in loose circles in the ankle-deep water. All that remained of the stone guardian’s upper body was a pile of twitching rubble. “I believe the exit awaits.”

There was a stone staircase with a heavy wooden door at the top.

Agent sighed and tried to shake some of the water out of his Stealthy Cloak of Midnight. “I’ll check for traps,” he grumbled.

The door, as it turned out, was safe and unlocked. Duke Loren was waiting for them on the other side along with his personal scribe and a variety of attendants, servants, and guards.

“Thirty-seven minutes, eighteen seconds,” the scribe told him as Agent, Dr. Flagg, Ubet and Beef stepped into the courtyard.

“Excellent!” enthused the duke. “I do believe that’s a new record!”

“Actually, it ties the existing record from four years ago,” put in the scribe.

“Outstanding nonetheless,” continued the duke. “Certainly the best performance we’ve seen this year.” He paused. “However, we’ve decided to go with another group.”

“What?!” exclaimed Dr. Flagg.

“Why?” demanded Agent.

“Who?” Ubet Choas wanted to know.

“Duh?” wondered Beef.

“Look,” said the duke sympathetically. “It’s not that you boys wouldn’t do an outstanding job as our official champions. In fact, I’ve already had my scribe write up my personal recommendation for you. You’ve got a colorful reputation, and a fine balance of magic, muscle and experience. It’s just that you’re not quite what we’re looking for demographically.”

“Demographically?” repeated Ubet.

A small group of adventurers stepped up to the duke’s side. “These are the Professionals,” he explained. They included a tall bald man in light, loose-fitting clothes, a handsome dark-haired woman in armor, a slightly built brown-haired man in green robes, and a cute elf maiden packing a broad sword.

The bald man introduced himself. “I’m Nmok, the monk,” he said. “This is Vianna Tamar, the paladin; Insta Tune, the druid; and Corriana Carrison, the fighter-mage. We’re the Professionals.”

“Insta Tune?” repeated Dr. Flagg, bemused.

Agent stepped up and jumped into the awkward silence. “I’m called Agent; this is Dr. Flagg, Ubet Choas, and Beef. We’re, er, Mighty Thrusting Sword of Justice.”

“No hard feelings, old chap?” questioned Nmok.

“None at all,” replied Agent shaking the bald man’s hand and patting him on the shoulder. “That’s life in the big fiefdom. We’ll just mosey along to the next province and try our luck there.” Agent quickly exchanged similar greetings and fare-thee-wells with the other Professionals and the duke before turning to his own team. “Gentlemen, I believe it was time we were on our way to seek our fortune.”

Ubet, Dr. Flagg, and even Beef nodded pleasantly and excused themselves from the courtyard having understood Agent’s statement to mean that he had just picked several pockets and they’d all do well to be very far away before someone noticed.

By the noon the next day, the four had put many miles between the duke and his new heroes and them by catching a barge downstream to the river town of South Squit. South Squit sat at the mouth of a mountain pass and saw a lot of travelers including prospectors, miners and adventurers coming in and out of the mountains as well as merchants and pilgrims following the river to and from the sea. Farmers working the rich floodplain also did brisk business in South Squit, so the town had something for everyone.

Upon hitting town, Ubet, Agent, Dr. Flagg, and Beef split up. Agent had to replace his ruined clothes, Ubet needed to visit the local dwarfen temple to pay his respects, Dr. Flagg wanted to check in at the local Wizard's Guild, and Beef was merely hungry and wanted to go find someplace to eat until dinnertime.

A human among dwarfs, Ubet Choas probably would not have had a lot of opportunity for advancement in the dwarfen clergy even if he'd chosen to stay. However, some members of the dwarfen pantheon of gods saw value in supporting a human sympathetic to their people. While the worldwide dwarfen population had been stable for tens of thousands of years, humanity was expanding rapidly. Only orcs and goblins bred faster, and humans had shown great proficiency in keeping them in check. So the dwarfen gods continued to grant Ubet the powers of a low-level shaman as long as he kept faith with them, even though he was not a practicing member of the dwarfen clergy.

For his part, Ubet's obligation to the dwarfen gods included checking in at a dwarfen temple whenever he was in the neighborhood, performing the Rite of Dedication, donating generously to the church, and carrying out whatever task the high shaman there required of him. The latter usually consisted of some minor chore such as helping consecrate a new mine, cleaning the temple, minding the church daycare center for an afternoon or performing some other small favor for a member of the congregation. Only a couple of times had he been required to undertake a long and dangerous quest.

This afternoon's task hadn't been of the long-and-dangerous-quest variety, but Ubet almost might have preferred it if it had been. Instead, he'd had to muck out the pigpens. That alone was bad enough, but the job was complicated by the fact that he'd also had to avoid the amorous attention of a near-sighted old boar. Somehow, he'd managed to finish the entire job with a shovel between him and the boar and his back pressed firmly against a wall the entire time.

When Ubet rejoined his companions by the fountain across from the South Squit Adventurers Guild – late and covered with mud and pig crap – Agent and Dr. Flagg were in the midst of an animated discussion about their employment prospects and the previous day's disappointment. Beef loomed behind them, gnawing on a large bone. Ubet half-expected him to reach up and scratch himself behind the ear with his foot.

"The point is, we've lost out on four opportunities for not being 'demographically correct.' We need to be better rounded," Agent was saying.

"What's to need? I'm the brains and magic, Beef's the muscle and melee, you're the black guy..." He glanced at Ubet who was trying to comb some of the filth out of his beard with his fingers. "...and Ubet's the little guy that goofy crap keeps happening to. We're plenty well-rounded and our record speaks for itself."

"No," insisted Agent. "The one thing we need that we don't have – and that every team that's beaten us so far has had – is a girl."

"We don't need a girl," replied Dr. Flagg.

"This isn't the Fellowship of the Ring. We need to be able to offer some sex appeal; more than I can deliver by myself," said Agent. "Unless you want to go back to Olvyllia and reconsider Lord Windeschmere's offer."

"Windeschmere?" remembered Ubet washing himself in the fountain. "He's the one who said he might be able to work with us if we were openly – or at the very least, ambiguously – homosexual."

"A niche market to be sure but we could probably make it work," said Agent. "At least, I've got the fashion sense for it."

"What fashion sense?" argued Ubet. "You usually dress all in black."

"But I make it work," retorted Agent preening. "Besides, there's always Beef and Dr. Flagg."

A visible shiver of revulsion went through Dr. Flagg. "Beef and I are not gay!"

Beef took the bone he'd been working on out of his mouth. "Beef loves cute, puny Dr. Flagg," he volunteered.

"Gah!" cried Dr. Flagg.

In years past, Beef had made an enemy of a powerful evil wizard named Ghaaznül the Vile. Through dumb luck and extraordinary circumstances, Beef had managed to thwart Ghaaznül time and again. In yet another futile effort to get the better of his arch-nemesis, Ghaaznül conjured a powerful foe to defeat Beef; a foe who would be the barbarian warrior's exact opposite, whose strengths would match precisely to his weaknesses. He would answer Beef's muscles with magic; Beef's stupidity and luck with genius and planning. The result was Dr. Flagg, whom Ghaaznül instilled with a deep hatred and loathing of Beef's very existence. What Ghaaznül had failed to realize was that Beef's feelings toward Dr. Flagg would be exactly the opposite: namely a deep adoration and sexual attraction. Dr. Flagg discovered this the first time he was sent out to battle Beef. The more he wanted to kill Beef, the more Beef wanted to hug and kiss and squeeze him. Eventually, Dr. Flagg realized that he could control Beef's inappropriate desire for him by controlling his own hatred of Beef. As a result, he and Beef were able to team up and give Ghaaznül the butt-kicking he so richly deserved. As satisfying as that had been, it left Dr. Flagg magically bound to the giant malodorous barbarian. As time went by, Dr. Flagg was able to modulate his dislike of Beef into a grudging tolerance, which Beef answered with manly and – hopefully – platonic affection.

When questioned as to whether or not they'd consummated their adversity before defeating Ghaaznül, Dr. Flagg consistently declined to answer. No one had yet come up with a way of phrasing the question in a way Beef understood.

Dr. Flagg struggled to get his dislike of Beef under control until the dreamy look faded from the barbarian's bloodshot eyes and he went back to gnawing on his bone.

"Speaking of gay," said Ubet to Agent, "'Mighty Thrusting Sword of Justice'?"

"I panicked," admitted Agent. "Still, if we're out to make a name for ourselves, it would help to actually have one other than 'those four guys who did all that damage.'"

"But 'Mighty Thrusting Sword of Justice?' Oh well, it's not like we're stuck with it, I guess," said Dr. Flagg. "We have enough dumb stuff happen to us without people laughing at our name."

"I wish one of you had said something before I had the business cards made," complained Agent, "and registered the domain name with the Adventurers Guild."

Ubet pinched his eyes together and moaned.

"For how long are we registered as Mighty Thrusting Sword of Justice?" Dr. Flagg wanted to know.

"Not long," said Agent.

"How long?" repeated Dr. Flagg.

"There was a special," said Agent. "Six years for the price of five."

"Oy vey," said Ubet.

"Just be glad I didn't go with Mighty Throbbing Sword of Justice," said Agent.

Only the sound Beef gnawing on his bone broke the long, uncomfortable silence.

"Look," said Agent finally. "This just brings us back to our original problem. If we want to prove our collective masculinity..."

"What's left of it," muttered Ubet.

"...Then we need to get a girl," finished Agent. "I've taken the liberty of posting some notices around the Adventurers Guild and reserving a conference room. We start interviewing candidates tomorrow."

The next morning found Agent, Ubet, Dr. Flagg and Beef waiting for their first interviewee in one of the South Squit Adventurers Guild's conference rooms. The Guild rented private rooms to members who made good use of the space for planning campaigns, dividing up treasure, replenishing their mana, and so forth. With some of the money he'd obtained from the Professionals, Agent had sprung for one of the larger second-floor rooms. This one included some

potted plants framing the door and window; a fireplace with an over-sized mantle; and a high arched ceiling from which hung a wrought iron chandelier that tapered to a spear-like point. After all, it was as important to make a good impression on a prospective new member as it was for her to make one on them. Agent had set up a long table with four chairs facing the single – and lower – seat on the opposite side for the interviewee.

Agent sat with his hands folded on the table. His hood was up and he looked dark and mysterious, as was his intention. Unfortunately, no one else seemed to be onboard with the game plan. Ubet was struggling to get comfortable on the booster seat perched on his chair. Dr. Flagg had drawn the curtains to look out the window, which spoiled the back lighting effect Agent had tried to create behind their seats. Beef was sitting in the corner smacking himself in the head with his club because it was fun.

“I don’t see anything good coming of this,” complained Dr. Flagg.

“You never do,” sighed Agent. Because Beef was such an innocent, Dr. Flagg was a hopeless cynic. “It looks like we’ve got some good responses though.” He nodded at the stack of papers at his elbow. “Now sit down and try to act like we’ve got a purpose here.”

The booster seat slipped off the chair and Ubet went down with a crash.

“Even if we don’t,” concluded Dr. Flagg while Ubet swore loudly. Nonetheless, he moved to draw the curtain and take his seat.

“Ay-yi-yi-yi-yi-yi!” The window exploded inward. Of the two women who crashed through the window, one was blonde, petite and dressed in tan animal skins, and the other was tall, raven-haired and dressed in a black leather outfit that looked as if it had come from Frederick’s of Tristram.

“You must be our first applicant,” said Agent. *Knows how to make entrance*, he wrote on his notepad.

“I am Zeena, the Warrior Princess,” announced the taller woman, her blue eyes flashing with intensity. “And this is my little Zeeniebopper.”

“Hi!” said the blonde cheerfully.

Agent shuffled through the stack of paper for a moment and found the one he wanted. “Let’s see,” he said skimming the page. “According to your character sheet, you’re a level 17 fighter with 18/92 strength... impressive... and you’ve got a special weapon.”

Zeena nodded and unhooked a metal disk from her belt. It was the size and shape of a dinner plate with the center punched out. Its outer edges were razor-sharp. “Ay-yi-yi-yi-yi-yi!” she shrieked and hurled the chakram. It embedded itself between the eyes of a stag’s head mounted over the fireplace at the far end of the room.

“Well, that’s one hunting trophy that will never hurt anyone again,” observed Ubet cautiously uncovering his ears.

Zeeniebopper scampered across the room to retrieve the chakram.

“I don’t seem to have any paperwork on you sidekick,” noted Agent. “What does Zeeniebopper do?”

“She bops my zeenie,” answered Zeena with a completely straight face.

“Too much information!” shouted Ubet.

“We’re ambiguously homosexual,” volunteered Zeeniebopper from across the room. She had climbed up on the mantle and was trying to pry Zeena’s weapon out of the stag’s head.

“Lord Windeschmire put you up to this, didn’t he?” accused Dr. Flagg.

“Okay,” said Agent. “The thing is, we’re really looking to fill just one spot.”

Across the room, Zeeniebopper was perched on the mantle with one foot braced against the wall as she struggled to free the chakram.

“And we’ve already got a goofy sidekick,” added Dr. Flagg jerking a thumb at Ubet.

“Hey!” protested Ubet.

At that moment, Zeeniebopper simultaneously yanked the chakram from the stag's head and the stag's head from the wall and fell backwards over Beef.

"Huh?" wondered Beef, startled out of his own private little Idaho. He looked around and, as soon as he determined the source of the racket was nothing that he could either eat or battle, went back to smacking himself in the head.

"Got it!" managed Zeeniebopper holding the chakram up in the air. The stag's head had split completely open and dumped its sawdust brainpan all over her. A broken piece of antler had somehow entwined itself around her shoulder.

"Look," suggested Agent to Zeena and ignoring the carnage. "If you could maybe pony up 75 gold to cover our security deposit on the conference room, I can give you a good lead on someone who's looking for a champion with your..." He glanced over at Zeeniebopper. "...qualifications."

Zeena shrugged and counted out coins from her belt pouch to cover the damage. In exchange, Agent drew her a map to Olvylia and gave her Lord Windeschmere's name.

"Come, Zeeniebopper!" ordered Zeena. With that, she let out her battle cry one more time and leaped out the broken window.

"It's a living," shrugged Zeeniebopper and ran after her.

"Well, that was pointless," observed Dr. Flagg conjuring up a broom and sweeping the sawdust, stag bits, and broken glass into the fireplace.

"At least we got reimbursed for the damage to the room," said Ubet.

"And then some," added Agent. "The security deposit was only 40 gold."

"Nice one," said Ubet.

"What say we have a look at the next candidate?" suggested Agent cheerfully.

"If we must," allowed Dr. Flagg.

"Beef, will you show our next applicant in?" asked Agent.

Beef got up, lumbered to the door and then stopped. "Show her in what?" he wanted to know.

"Just go out and say we'll see the next applicant," Agent advised him gently.

Beef shrugged his massive shoulders and squeezed through the door. He returned moments later followed by a youngish woman with light brown hair and green eyes. She wore a shirt of elven chain mail, a dark green cloak, sturdy brown trousers and thick-soled leather boots. A scabbard containing a broad sword hung comfortably from her belt.

Beef wandered back to his corner and began an intensive hunt for nose goblins.

"I'm Calserenessa," she introduced herself. Her voice was low and husky, yet also warm.

Ubet introduced the team to her while Agent flipped through some papers and nodded with approval when he found the right one. "According to this, you're an eighth-level ranger. Strong, intelligent, good wisdom score, and very charismatic."

"Huh! Well we certainly could do with that," noted Ubet.

"Oh, hey, check it out," said Agent showing the sheet to Dr. Flagg. "It says she's a princess."

"Pretty much in title only," admitted Calserenessa. "I'm the third of three daughters, and it's a small and distant kingdom. I trained to become a ranger as an alternative to being married off to a local noble. I've been adventuring solo for four years and I've completed six major quests and about thirty or forty side quests of varying difficulty and relevance."

"She's competent, independent, a princess, and good-looking," Ubet told Agent. "They don't come any more demographically appealing than that."

“That’s definitely the sort of appeal we’re looking for,” agreed Agent.

“Plus,” added Calserenessa, “as the romantic interest, I’d bring...”

“Hold the scrying mirror,” interrupted Dr. Flagg. “Did you say ‘romantic interest’?”

“Sure,” replied the ranger. “I’d be half of an attractive and likeable couple that would form the foundation of the team.”

“And the other half of this foundation-forming couple would be?” prompted Dr. Flagg.

Calserenessa opened her mouth to speak and then stopped short, taking a closer look at her interviewers. “Hmm. That would be a problem,” she admitted. “You’re not likeable enough, Beef’s not handsome or smart enough, and Ubet’s not tall enough. Agent might be workable.”

“I’m workable?” asked Agent.

“Sure,” replied Calserenessa. “I’m pretty headstrong and you obviously have definite ideas of how things should work with the team. We’d probably bicker a lot to mask our growing attraction for one another. It’s a classic.”

“Now just a second,” started Agent.

“Now there’s the whole interracial thing,” continued Calserenessa, “but frankly, I don’t see it as a problem anymore these days. In fact, I’d even go so far as to count it as a bonus. It would be even better if we were entirely different species; you could be, for example, a misunderstood half-orc with a gnarly, knobby forehead and we could develop a whole ‘beauty and the beast’ theme.”

“Are you nuts?” Agent wanted to know. “I don’t even know you and you’re ready to pick out your bridesmaids’ dresses. And since when is interracial a ‘thing?’”

The ranger frowned. “Weren’t you listening? I just said interracial wasn’t a big thing. As for the crack about bridesmaids, I won’t even dignify that with a response; you’re not nearly so hot as you think you are. By the way, I think it’s good that we’re bickering already.”

“We are not bickering!” shouted Agent.

“Are too. You could cut the sexual tension with a dull halberd,” argued Calserenessa. “Now I think, instead of joining the team directly, it would be better for me to be introduced at some future point and then recur on an irregular basis to develop my mystique.”

“You’re crazy,” accused Agent rising to his feet.

“You think I should stay then?” She pondered the idea for a moment. “I dunno. It’s sweet of you to want to get started right away, but I think it would be rushing things. We should give our romance time to develop as a subplot over time. Give ourselves a chance to resist the inevitable.”

“Oh, I’ll resist, all right.”

“Good! Then we’re agreed,” said Calserenessa.

“No we’re not!” shouted Agent.

“I have an idea,” interjected Ubet. “I think it might be even more interesting plotwise if you were actually already betrothed when you encounter Agent. Maybe an arranged marriage for political reasons.”

“Hmm,” said the ranger. “So I’d have to choose between Agent and what’s good for my father’s kingdom. Go on.”

“It would be even better if your fiancé had some redeeming characteristics. That way, we’d set up an additional layer of conflict,” Ubet continued. “He’d be someone you respect and maybe even love in a way, but not someone who is able to excite your passion like our guy.”

“That,” exclaimed Calserenessa, “is brilliant!”

“I thought you might like it,” said Ubet modestly.

“Of course, I’ll need to go back home and set up the situation,” she said. “I’ll need to find a fiancé.”

“Arrange the arranged marriage?” asked Agent cynically.

“Don’t be jealous,” chided Calserenessa gently.

“I am not jealous!” exploded Agent.

“You’re sweet,” she smiled.

“I am not!” shouted Agent.

“Listen,” Calserenessa told Ubet. “I’ve got a ton of work to do. You’d better go ahead and keep interviewing applicants and I’ll catch you guys in a few months.”

“Sounds good,” nodded Ubet. “Could you send the next one in on your way out?”

“No problem,” she said casually waving them goodbye with the back of her hand.

They watched her leave. Ubet watched Agent watching her leave.

“What a nut!” breathed Agent. “I owe you one, Ubet.”

“You like her,” stated Ubet.

“What? I do not,” protested Agent.

“Do too,” continued Ubet. “You liiiiiiike her.”

“Now listen...”

“Ahem,” interrupted Dr. Flagg.

The next candidate stood at the door. She hesitated at the threshold for a moment and then squared her shoulders and strode in. “Make eye contact with each person,” she whispered to herself, “and introduce yourself in a clear firm voice.” She wore a suit of second-hand but well-cared-for leather armor and a plain green general-purpose traveling cloak. There was a short bow and a quiver of arrows slung over her shoulders and a short sword in a scabbard hung from her belt.

She stepped up to the table and made eye contact with Dr. Flagg, Agent, and Ubet (Beef seemed to be dozing off). Then she said, “Hi, I’m Plucki.” Her petite build was a dead give-away of her half-elven heritage. The pointed ears would have been another obvious indicator had they not been covered by her medium-length brown hair which also managed to be in her face despite her efforts to make herself presentable. Her delicate features and large eyes had come from her mother’s side of the family, but her thick eyebrows and hulking musculature (at least compared to her full-blood elf friends) were straight out of her father’s human gene pool.

Agent jotted something on his notepad. “Right. Plucky,” he said. “What’s your name?”

Plucki looked puzzled for a moment. “No, that is my name: Plucki.” She twanged her bowstring for emphasis. “With an ‘i.’”

“Oh,” said Agent as understanding dawned. “I put ‘plucky’ down as your primary characteristic.” He shrugged. “All right then, Plucki with an ‘i,’ what would you say is your primary characteristic?”

“Well, I guess I’m a real people person,” she said brightly and then, noting Dr. Flagg’s eye-roll, added. “But I have a lot of experience as an adventurer. I scored a 92 in combat archery and a 90 in advanced swordplay in the Adventurers Guild training program. Also, I just got my Level 3 certificate in Woodland Magic and I’ve been taking some side courses in general sorcery. I have some letters of recommendation from my instructors.” She dug into her pouch, pulled out a fist full of scrolls and handed them to Agent. “Plus, I participated in a quest last spring. We rescued mayor of Havenhollow’s uncle from a marauding band of goblins.”

“Goblins,” repeated Ubet.

Plucki suddenly got the distinct feeling that she was not impressing her interviewers. “Their chief was a hobgoblin...” Her prospects were fading fast. “...and he was really mean,” she added lamely.

Dr. Flagg hummed a few bars of ‘How Green My Grass Grew.’

Agent shot him an annoyed look despite generally agreeing with him. “Look, Plucki,” he told her gently. “You seem to have a lot of promise, but we’re really looking for someone with a few more experience points under her belt.”

“We’ve undertaken some very dangerous missions,” added Ubet. “Demon princes, dragons, unspeakable other-dimensional horrors and what not.”

“But listen, you keep training hard and knocking off goblin chiefs and you’ll be ready for the big time before you know it,” said Agent.

Plucki’s sunny disposition clouded as she considered whether Agent was patronizing her or just trying to be nice. She gave him the benefit of the doubt, despite her disappointment.

“Well,” she said taking her scrolls back. “Thanks for your time. I’ll send the next candidate in.”

“Beef liked Plucki,” complained the giant barbarian after she’d left.

“I did too, big guy, and that’s why we wouldn’t want to take a chance on her getting hurt hanging around with...” began Agent and then stopped as the next woman walked through the door.

“Solo!” cried Ubet, Agent, and Dr. Flagg recognizing her.

“Pretty friend Solo!” added Beef standing.

“Oh no,” said the bard backing toward the still open door. “Not you guys.”

“But you’d be perfect!” cried Ubet. Agent and even Dr. Flagg nodded in agreement.

“Absolutely not,” insisted Solo. “I’d just be the sensible one and end up getting stuck with all the straight lines again. No thank you. Been there, done that, retrieved the magical artifact. Besides, I’m only here for a cameo anyway.”

“But...”

“Sorry, boys, but it’s back to the tribe of bisexual Amazons for me,” said Solo, and with that, she teleported the hell out of there.

Almost the same moment Solo disappeared, another woman appeared in the room in a puff of orange flame and black smoke. She had long black hair, violet eyes and pale skin. She was dressed in a slit black gown-and-cleavage ensemble that looked as if it had come from Frederick’s of Hogwarts.

“I am Esmerelda the Enchantress,” she said. When Agent began shuffling through his papers for her character sheet, she snapped her fingers and it magically appeared at the top of the pile for him.

“Thanks,” said Agent and then skimmed the sheet. “Magic-user, good selection of spells and magic items. How come there’s a blank space after ‘Alignment’?”

“A darkness has touched my soul and threatens to consume me,” she said melodramatically. “Until the day I finally confront my father and his minions, even I do not know which path I shall choose. Until then, my trustworthiness will be in question, adding dramatic tension to your adventures.”

“I think we’ll pass,” said Dr. Flagg. “We’re already a pretty magic-heavy team and we’re a fairly unsophisticated lot; we don’t do ‘dramatic tension.’ Besides, you already seem to have a lot on your plate.”

“Very well,” said Esmerelda. She closed her eyes and touched her fingers to her temples. “But I sense we shall meet again.”

Dr. Flagg sighed. “I’m sure we will, but we’d appreciate it if you’d foreshadow on your own time.” He waved his hand and the conference room door swung open behind her.

“The future is uncertain,” intoned Esmerelda not taking the hint.

“Yes. Thank you,” insisted Dr. Flagg. He caused the door to bang against the wall a couple of times for emphasis.

“The paths to our destinies are enshrouded in the fog of mystery,” continued Esmerelda.

Ubet leaped on the table clutching his head. "I sense... I sense... the inky black, er, blackness of your father's minions in... Zantaria!"

"I must go to Zantaria to protect innocents from my Father's corruption, even as I struggle to resist its dark temptations!" she stated. "Until we meet again!" She vanished as she had appeared.

"Good call, guys," said Agent fanning the black smoke with his cloak.

"Man, she was over the top, down the other side, under the bottom and halfway back up again," said Ubet.

Agent indicated her character sheet. "Plus, her back story was eight pages long."

"That was a close call," said Ubet. "We all would have been reduced to sidekick status hanging around her."

"Why don't we go ahead and have a talk with the next applicant?" suggested Agent.

"Do we have to?" whined Dr. Flagg.

"May as well. We've got the room for the rest of the day," said Agent.

"I am Thundora the Femizonian! No man can defeat me in battle!" boasted the next applicant as she strode through the door. Not merely large and sweaty, but bulky, Thundora filled the narrow doorway with a mass that was ninety-percent muscle and ten percent scale mail. The rest was a huge double-edged axe.

No man can defeat in battle, Agent jotted on his notepad. "That could come in handy."

"Why don't you tell us a little about yourself," suggested Ubet.

"Little?!" Is that some kind of crack?" snarled Thundora hefting her axe and looming menacingly over Ubet. "Like I'm some kind of little girl put here for your pleasure? Is that what you think?"

Ubet swallowed. "Uh, no," he argued.

Thundora turned and sneered at Agent. "You call yourselves men. I scrape better men than you off my boots on a regular basis! 'Mighty Thrusting Sword' indeed. More like 'Mighty Limp Sword.'"

"Well, see about that name..." began Agent.

"Geez, wotta battle axe," whispered Ubet to Dr. Flagg.

"Yeah, and her weapon's pretty impressive too," returned Dr. Flagg.

They both paused as if waiting for the rim shot.

Instead, Thundora went on: "Bah! Even if I didn't already have a complete and utter contempt for all things masculine, I wouldn't be seen with a bunch of weak little testosterone monkeys like you!" she snarled.

"So you came here for an interview because..." suggested Dr. Flagg.

Thundora stopped in mid-rant and there was a long pause. "Because no one likes me and I have nowhere else to go!" wailed Thundora.

"Okay, thanks for your time," said Agent.

"I'm hostile to men and women think I'm a wet blanket!" she continued.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we have another winner," muttered Dr. Flagg.

"Even the Psychotic Militant Sisterhood said I need to lighten up," sobbed Thundora, huge muscular tears now rolling down her cheeks.

"Er, Beef," suggested Agent. "Why don't you take Thundora downstairs and buy her a cup of coffee."

"Or some anti-depressants," added Dr. Flagg.

"I can get it myself!" snapped Thundora when Beef opened the door. "I'm not helpless, you know!"

Beef just shrugged and followed her out of the room.

“A lot of people think I have a great sense of humor,” they heard her say as she headed down the stairs.

Dr. Flagg turned to Agent. “On those notices you posted yesterday, they didn’t by any chance say, ‘Emotionally stable need not apply.’”

“Listen,” said Ubet, “am I the only one here who could use a drink at this point?”

When Agent and Dr. Flagg both assured him that he wasn’t, he offered to go downstairs and bring back a pitcher or beer and some mugs. He narrowly missed being stepped on by the unicorn the next applicant rode through the door.

“How the hell did that thing get up the stairs?” wondered Ubet.

The unicorn was white and preternaturally beautiful with a golden mane. The unicorn’s rider was also white and preternaturally beautiful with a golden mane. She sat sidesaddle and wore a flowing white gown. “I am Chastity,” she said.

“Big surprise there,” commented Dr. Flagg.

Agent squinted down at her character sheet. He was starting to get one of those headaches behind his right eye. “It says here that you’re a virgin, an empath and a healer,” he read.

“I sense your pain,” she told Agent. With that, the unicorn trotted close enough for Chastity to reach down and touch his brow with delicate alabaster fingers. Agent’s headache went away.

“Hey, thanks,” said Agent.

“Mine is the power of love and purity,” said Chastity smiling serenely.

“Oh, puh-lease,” said Dr. Flagg rolling his eyes.

Chastity regarded him with eyes like soothing pools of blue. “I sense you are a very angry man. There is a bitterness about you brought on by an existence not of your own choosing.” She and the unicorn moved toward him. “I can ease your sorrow.” She reached down to caress his cheek with fingers like a butterfly kissing the dew off an April rose.

“You and your similes can just keep your hands off of me,” warned Dr. Flagg pushing his chair back to avoid her touch.

Chastity looked at him sadly but not judgmentally. “Peace, friend. I mean you only good.”

At that moment, Ubet returned carrying a tray with a pitcher of beer, four large mugs and bowls of peanuts and popcorn. He stepped in something the unicorn had left, skidded across the floor and went down with a crash sending beer, snacks and broken glass everywhere.

“I sense great pain!” gasped Chastity.

“That would be me,” groaned Ubet, sprawled on his back.

At that moment, the room darkened and an ominous presence surrounded them.

“I sense,” managed Chastity clenching her perfect teeth and clutching her pretty temples, “evil!”

The very cracks in the walls vomited forth hundreds of chittering malevolent, red-eyed ebony minions. The vicious shadowy gremlins raced around gathering up the broken glass because they liked broken glass and then merged into several large serpentine forms.

Dr. Flagg jumped out of his chair, got his back against the far wall and readied a spell to unleash against the threatening entities. Agent was even quicker getting to his feet, his magic dagger, *Spirit of the Mongoose*, in his hand. For his part, Ubet was focused mainly on not getting stepped on by the nervous unicorn. He rolled out from under the mythical beast’s cloven hooves right into the pile of unicorn poop that had been his downfall in the first place.

Meanwhile, from somewhere, there came music so loathsome and unearthly that it would have made Erich Zann smash his violin and stomp off the stage in disgust. The shadow serpents reared up and began swaying to the blasphemous music.

And then their master appeared.

The unicorn, being no fool, had had enough. He bolted for the door carrying the hapless Chastity with him.

The indescribable malevolent presence regarded Agent, Dr. Flagg, and Ubet for a moment. Then it spoke to them in a voice like a brain tumor: "Have any of you seen my daughter? I thought I was supposed to meet her here."

"You must have gotten your signals crossed," managed Ubet who hadn't been as lucky avoiding the unicorn the second time. "She said something about meeting you in Zantaria."

"Zantaria?" said the vile entity in a voice like a suicidal urge. "That's halfway around the world! Kids! They never listen." His exasperated sigh was like the dying breath of an entire people. "Oh well, thanks."

With that, the ancient and undying evil and his minions disappeared into a noisome black cloud that swirled away through the cracks in the floorboards like an inky black storm.

Agent slowly let out a breath and sheathed his magic dagger.

Dr. Flagg produced a small spray can of Simile-B-Gone™ from his cape pocket and used it up.

Ubet Choas struggled to his knees and cast a minor healing spell on himself to repair the direct and indirect damage Chastity's unicorn had done to his small body. "Hey!" he exclaimed as he tried to wipe the unicorn poop off himself. "Its crap literally doesn't stink! Amazing!"

"Ewww!" said the next candidate standing in the doorway. "That is so gross!"

The speaker was a slender brunette in her teens. She wore high-heeled sandals, designer blue jeans and a pastel-colored blouse. A small leather purse hung from one shoulder.

Dr. Flagg eyed her suspiciously. "So what's your story?"

"My name is Tiffany Banks and I'm looking for some heroes who can help me get home to San Diego," she replied.

"Never heard of it," said Ubet.

"It's in another – whatchamacallit – dimension," said Tiffany with a shrug.

Ubet glanced over at Dr. Flagg. "San Diego?" he asked.

"Not one of the ones I'm familiar with," admitted Dr. Flagg.

"So you're not here to interview to join our team?" asked Agent.

Tiffany opened her mouth to say "As if," but changed her mind. "Will it help get me home?" she asked.

"Depends on what you can do," replied Agent.

"Well, I'm good at finding traps and monsters, and villains' secret lairs," she offered.

"Well that's useful," nodded Agent jotting something down on his notepad.

Dr. Flagg was not impressed. "And once you find said traps, monsters and secret lairs, do you usually need to have someone rescue you from them?"

"Well, yeah," admitted Tiffany sheepishly.

Agent scribbled out what he had just written and sighed.

"This is so not fair," complained Tiffany. "I'm not even supposed to be here. It's all because of my dorky brother and his nerd friends. They were, like, playing Dungeons & Dragons™ in the dining room and I was just passing through on my way to the kitchen when one of them pulls out these dice that he says are magic. I mean, as if. He says a mysterious stranger gave them to him. Then he rolls them and everything goes all swirly and suddenly we're here."

"Let me guess," said Dr. Flagg. "Your brother and his friends drag you along on a quest of some sort, right?"

"Uh huh," nodded Tiffany.

“Then they nearly score with some elf maidens, invent gunpowder, defeat a major villain and vanish back to San Diego, ditching you here,” concluded Dr. Flagg. “If I had a copper piece for every time I’ve heard that story.”

“I did *not* get ditched!” insisted Tiffany. “Like, I’m so sure they couldn’t have held the portal open for a few more minutes while I got my cell phone?” In response to the blank looks she was getting, she added. “I mean, we’d been here for months and my bonus free weekend minutes roll over if you don’t use them and... Oh, never mind.”

“Okay,” said Agent. “The thing is, we’re really not ready to undertake any quests until we get our personnel issues resolved here.”

“Plus, we have enough trouble with anachronisms without having you adding to it,” put in Dr. Flagg.

Agent ignored him and went on. “But if you check downstairs, I’m sure you won’t have any trouble finding someone to help you out. This is an Adventurers Guild after all. If you’re still stuck here in a day or two, look us up again and we’ll see what we can do.”

Tiffany looked uncertain. “But they sent me up here. Oh well.”

“Tell me you didn’t just foreshadow an adventure with her,” Dr. Flagg said as she left.

“I was just trying to be nice,” said Agent.

“Speaking of nice, check out our next applicant,” said Ubet. He had wiped himself more or less clean and climbed back up into his chair.

She had green eyes and a mane of thick red hair that went halfway down her back. Her charms were obvious and very visible thanks to her chain mail bikini from Frederick’s of Black & Decker. There was a dagger strapped to her creamy white thigh and a long sword adhered to her back by means unknown.

“Uh, name?” asked Agent following the inevitable silence.

The girl blinked. “Sorry,” she said. “You’re the first person who’s ever asked.”

Agent made a concentrated effort to focus on the papers in front of him. “Okay then, primary characteristic?”

“Chain mail bikini,” she answered.

“Secondary characteristic?”

“I’m freezing.”

“Check. You any good with that sword?”

“In this outfit, I’d have to be.”

“Good enough for me,” said Ubet. “You’re hired.”

“What?” exclaimed Agent and Dr. Flagg.

“Could you excuse us a moment while we confer amongst ourselves?” Agent asked her.

“Sure. Take your time,” replied Chain Mail Bikini. “I’ll just be over here striking some provocative poses.”

Ubet grabbed Agent by the lapels. “You have *got* to give this to me!” he hissed.

“What’s the big deal?” asked Agent firmly grasping Ubet by the wrists and ending the assault on his wardrobe.

“I’m three feet tall and covered with hair and women like her don’t voluntarily associate with men like me. That’s the big deal!” snapped Ubet.

“That armor can’t be very practical,” Dr. Flagg told Chain Mail Bikini in the meantime. “Don’t you have anything else you can wear?”

“Well, I had a chain mail thong, but it was giving me trouble with chafing and rust.”

“Too much information!” exclaimed Dr. Flagg.

“Sometimes my top comes off in battle,” she volunteered.

“Pleeeeeeze?!?” whined Ubet.

At that moment, Beef returned looking pleased with himself.

“It’s about time you got back,” noted Dr. Flagg.

“Beef got date with Thundora later,” he replied scooping up some of the popcorn and nuts on the floor and stuffing them in his mouth.

“Aw, Beef. That’s really sweet of you,” said Agent, “But it’s not right to go out with someone just out of pity.”

“No, Beef thinks Thundora really likes him,” the barbarian assured him. He glanced at Chain Mail Bikini on his way to his seat at the table and shrugged.

“Can we please hire this one?” Ubet pleaded with Agent.

“Come on, Ubet, our lives could depend on her abilities and you want her onboard without even knowing what she can do,” reasoned Agent.

“Perhaps then we should duel to see who can earn the honor of fighting alongside Mighty Thrusting Sword of Justice,” suggested a new voice from the doorway Beef had left open.

The newcomer was reed-thin and dressed in black tights with a red sash around her waist and a katana strapped to her back. Her hair was black and short and she regarded the others with almond-shaped eyes.

“Who the hell are you?” asked Chain Mail Bikini thrusting her lower lip out in a cute little pout.

“I am Eclekta Ninja, Mistress of Tai Kwon Slo,” she replied with a bow.

Agent flipped through the papers in front of him. “It says you’re a one-woman fighting machine,” he said.

“Huh,” mused Dr. Flagg. “Just for future reference, how many women in the typical fighting machine?”

“Ah! You are humorous,” observed Eclekta without cracking a smile. “Now watch.” With that, she leaped onto the table, banked off the wall, drew her katana while twisting in mid-air and swung it straight down at Chain Mail Bikini’s head.

“Hey!” protested Chain Mail Bikini parrying the shot with her long sword with a loud ‘k-tang!’ But Eclekta had already flipped through the air and landed cat-like at the other end of the room.

“Are you nuts?” demanded Chain Mail Bikini. “This is supposed to be my interview.”

“Then, by all means, claim it from me,” invited Eclekta.

Ubet tried to give the two women a standing ovation to show his approval of the idea and fell off his booster seat again.

Chain Mail Bikini gave an exasperated sigh and, in one fluid motion, snatched the dagger from her thigh and flung it at Eclekta. Both the dagger and Eclekta moved in slow motion as Eclekta bent backward at the waist to avoid the attack. The dagger, leaving a lazily rippling trail of motion behind it, embedded in the wall.

“Such attacks are of no use to one who has mastered Tai Kwon Slo,” said Eclekta, but Chain Mail Bikini was already charging her, each link in her top straining to contain its ample load.

Eclekta leaped over the swinging blade and did a neat back flip off the wall.

“Y’know,” commented Dr. Flagg, “this is much more interesting than just interviewing them. If we ever have to do this again, we should just rent an arena and let all the applicants duke it out.”

“Hmm,” agreed Agent nodding. “We could sell tickets; maybe turn a profit.”

Meanwhile, Eclekta leaped off the mantle and narrowly missed the high ceiling. She came down at Chain Mail Bikini, katana over her head in both hands. “Anime Attack!” she cried.

“Notice how her face splits into three close-up panels?” asked Agent. “How does she do that?”

“Dunno,” replied Ubet. “Nice reverb though.”

Eclekta's katana met Chain Mail Bikini's long sword in a burst of sound and dazzling energy as the two women seemed to freeze in place at the moment of contact. Then both were forced backwards.

"An ordinary sword would have been shattered by that attack," panted Eclekta noticing Chain Mail Bikini's weapon was still whole.

"It's magic," breathed Chain Mail Bikini.

A tall, pale woman in a black robe entered the room and closed the door behind her. "I am here in response to your advertisement," she stated giving the melee at the other end of the room only a cursory glance.

"Why not? The more, the merrier," said Dr. Flagg.

Agent glanced at the newcomer's paperwork, keeping one eye on the ongoing duel. "Hmm. Alignment: chaotic evil. Your interests include destruction, murder, feasting on the blood of heroes, and spamming. Are you sure you've got the right room? Because we're basically good guys here," Agent told her.

"I was referred quite specifically to you," she replied.

Agent flipped to the references sheet. "Wait a second, you've got Ghaaznül the Vile as your first reference?"

"Yes, and he sends his greetings," she smiled revealing a set of needle-like teeth. The black robe fell to the floor. From the upper torso up, she was more-or-less human-looking except for the teeth and the glowing crimson eyes. Four giant spidery legs unfolded from her sides at mid-torso. Everything below that was serpentine ending in a scythe-like growth at the end of her tail. She reared up to her full height, which put her head within a couple feet of the ceiling, and spat a glob of spider webbing at Dr. Flagg. The sticky mass struck with enough force to knock the sorcerer backwards and adhere his head to the wall behind him. Dr. Flagg's first instinct was to wipe the stuff off his face, which only resulted in his hands becoming stuck.

With the sorcerer unable to move, speak or cast spells, the demon turned her attention to Agent, but he was already on the move, hidden by the Stealthy Cloak of Midnight.

"Ugly spider-snake lady hurt puny Dr. Flagg!" Beef announced leaping up. "Beef will smash!" Beef's club had originally been the trunk of a medium-sized tree, but the giant barbarian swung it as if it were weightless.

The demon scuttled out of the way of Beef's powerful but clumsy attack and webbed his feet to the floor.

"If you ladies would like an opportunity to prove yourselves, now's the time," Agent told Chain Mail Bikini and Eclekta from the shadows near the fireplace.

At the same time, Ubet Choas was on his feet and had conjured a Dwarfen Hammer of Smiting. The magical war hammer appeared above his head and flew at the demon. The creature grunted in pain as the hammer struck her square in the chest and then proceeded to fly around her and smack her several times before fading.

Agent took advantage of the demon's momentary distraction to strike her from behind with *Spirit of the Mongoose*. Faster by far than its siblings, *Spirit of the Rat* and *Spirit of the Cobra*, *Spirit of the Mongoose* amplified Agent's natural dexterity in battle to blinding speeds.

Despite being perforated several times, the demon brushed Agent away with one of her spidery legs.

Eclekta leaped into the fray, her face frozen in a combat grimace. The Mistress of Tai Kwon Slo sailed through the air to deliver a lethal kick at the demon's head and froze momentarily in mid-air from several different camera angles. Then, somehow, she remained frozen in mid-air and her expression changed.

"Oh hell. Stuck again," she grumbled. "I hate it when this happens."

The demon smiled and then gave Eclekta a gentle shove with the tip of her tail. Eclekta floated out the window like a toy balloon. She drifted for a bit and then the effect wore off.

"Oh, no," she managed before plunging into the fountain below.

Chain Mail Bikini's slicing blow narrowly missed its mark as the demon parried with her tail.

Beef freed his feet along with large chunks of floorboard and smacked the demon in the ribs with his club. Stunned, the demon scuttled for the relative safety of the ceiling.

Ubet sent another Dwarfen Hammer of Smiting after her and added to her collection of bruises and cracked bones.

Beef grabbed the snaky tail and pulled her down onto Chain Mail Bikini's sword. Simultaneously, Agent was on the demon's back cutting and stabbing with his dagger. Dr. Flagg managed to free one hand and unweb his mouth and eyes; that gave him enough freedom of movement to nail the demon with a quartet of magic missiles.

The demon howled in pain.

"Oh," said Chain Mail Bikini. "My top has come off in battle."

"Wha?" began Ubet turning to stare. The Dwarfen Hammer of Smiting he'd been conjuring dropped and struck him squarely on the coconut before flying wild and hitting Chain Mail Bikini in her exposed stomach.

The demon then wrapped her tail around Beef's ankle and used him to swat Dr. Flagg. She then reached back with a pair of her spidery legs, grabbed Agent and tossed him on top of the pile before webbing the three of them into a solid, sticky lump.

"Well, that sure turned around on us in a hurry," commented Agent. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Ubet unconscious on the floor and Chain Mail Bikini lying on her side clutching her stomach in pain.

"Beef has to pee," complained the giant barbarian.

"Not now, you lummo!" cried Dr. Flagg pinned beneath him.

The demon loomed over them, grinning.

"You'd think with a hall full of heroes downstairs, we could get a rescue," complained Agent.

"Get serious," chided Dr. Flagg. "The sounds of battle coming from a private meeting room at an Adventurers Guild hall? Who'd be naïve enough to walk into the middle of that?"

The door swung open and Plucki walked into the middle of the room. "I was wondering if you guys could validate my stable stub?" She looked up from the slip of paper she was holding and took in the scene. "But I see you're busy right now," she finished weakly.

The demon turned and lunged at Plucki.

"Yikes!" she cried dodging out of the way.

"The only blood sweeter than that of heroes is the blood of innocents," hissed the demon licking her lips with her forked tongue.

"Eww!" cried Plucki, her eye twitching slightly.

The demon lunged again and Plucki ducked behind one of the fallen potted plants for cover. Plucki grabbed the plant by its stem and tried to put her Level Three Woodland Magic Certificate to practical use. Interestingly, she found that casting a spell during a performance exam in front of Professor Valdir and casting it in front of a demon that wanted to drink her blood were remarkably similar experiences. Who said school was different from the real world? The plant sprouted a wall of thorny vines.

The demon tore through the barrier effortlessly, but Plucki had enough time to get underneath the demon and drive her short sword between the monster's ribs, to the hilt, right between the humanoid arm on the right and the adjacent spider limb.

The demon looked annoyed, then mockingly sympathetic. "Only magic weapons or blessed iron can harm me, morsel," she said expositing her weaknesses in the tradition of her demonic breed.

Plucki turned and ran again, this time only to trip over Beef's club. She tumbled and rolled over on her back near where Ubet lay. Looking up, past the demon reaching for her, Plucki saw her salvation. She slid her bow off her shoulder and fired an arrow past the demon's pointed ear.

"Is that the best you can do?" asked the demon shaking her head and picking her up.

Plucki's arrow had embedded in the ceiling and nicked the rope holding the iron chandelier. She watched the rope unravel and finally snap. The heavy chandelier landed right on top of the demon; its tapered point pierced her neck, passed through her torso, exited just below her right rear spider leg, and staked her to the wooden floor. She dropped Plucki and looked really mad. "Too bad for you this iron has not been blessed by a priest," snarled the demon struggling to unspindle herself.

Ubet awakened and grabbed one of the chandelier's candleholders. "Ghesundheit," he said offering the quickest and simplest blessing he knew.

"D'oh!" cried the demon. The chandelier glowed orange, as if it were melting. Then both the demon and the chandelier disappeared in a shower of cold orange sparks.

"You were magnificent!" exclaimed Agent pulling himself free from the rapidly dissolving webbing.

"Well, I had a little help from Plucki," admitted Ubet modestly.

"He meant the girl, simpleton," snapped Dr. Flagg squirming out from under Beef. "And I concur."

"Beef likes little Plunki," announced Beef standing.

"That's 'Plucki,'" corrected Plucki.

"Well, I can see which way this is going," said Chain Mail Bikini putting her top back on. She stood and winced. "Congratulations," she told Plucki.

"Hey, listen," said Agent. "You didn't do any worse than the rest of us did. You're welcome to stay on too."

Chain Mail Bikini glanced down. Her abdomen was already purpling where the Dwarfen Hammer of Smiting had struck her. The bruise promised to be large and multicolored. "I don't think I'm going to be fit to be seen in public for awhile."

"You could wear a shirt," suggested Agent.

Chain Mail Bikini just stared at him as if he had asked her a question in a foreign language and shook her head.

Ubet leaped up. "Wait! I could cast a healing!" he offered.

Chain Mail Bikini looked down at him. "I think I'll pass on the laying on of hands ritual. I'll just pick up a couple of healing potions on the way out." She retrieved her sword and dagger and left.

"Dang it!" said Ubet snapping his fingers. Then he shrugged. "Anyone else need healing?"

Agent turned to Plucki. "Well, you've earned it. Still interested in the position?"

Plucki gave a delighted gasp. "You bet I am!"

"No," corrected Ubet. "Ubet am I. Plucki are you." No one laughed at the lame pun and Beef just scratched his head and said, "Beef not get it."

Ubet shut the hell up.

"Welcome to Mighty Thrusting Sword of Justice," said Agent.

"How long again before we can change that name?" asked Dr. Flagg.