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The Maze



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Adventuring is a dangerous job. In the old days, you went to a tavern and picked up a bunch of other adventurers. Either you got a good group together and you came out richer than Croesus or you just didn't come out. Turns out there is a lot of similarities between dating and picking your adventuring team. First of all, you are looking for people who have similar temperaments. Charging into a dungeon with a crew of evil minotaurs is probably not going to end well for you if you are a paladin. Conversely, you are aiming for complementary characteristics. A group of spellcasters will be found, together, with the charred remains of the first group of goblins they encountered ... due to everyone using the same exploding flame spell at once.

Some people resort to complex interview questions, such as: "Devise a way to make sure there is always spell components in my bag." Or the more famous: "Situational based: Your spell caster has messed up by casting magical armor around your undead opponents, how will you use your skills to turn things around?" But my favorite is: "As a thief if you were standing in a crowd of people, how would you *not* stand out?" Sometimes these worked, but most of the time you ended up with a group of people who can answer trick questions but couldn't swing a sword to save their lives ... which, in this case, is *particularly* important.

All this went away when the Guild of Adventurers appeared. It all revolved around the size of the selection pool. In a tavern, you have a selection of, what, thirty or so? But the GOA had thousands of candidates and a group of Shedus who grasp how to select the right candidates for the job.

Shedu? Yea, I could never recall what they were either. They resemble bearded Greek centaurs with wings. Stupid looking things I know, but very smart for the standpoint of personnel. All you had to do was agree to give the GOA 10% of your take. They even handled removing the loot for you, zapping it out of the cavern you were in as soon as the bad guys were deceased. I guess it was a good thing. It stopped all those pesky arguments ... you know ... like who gets what. Although I really wish I had more language skills. Everything in the GOA is an acronym. I probably filled out their membership form wrong about twenty times before I realized WOC meant weapon of choice.

My first GOA team was unusual, to say the least. We got along OK I guess, even though it was a little bumpy at the start. The GOA armorer who got us ready had a few problems with sizes. He fitted me with a steel breastplate. On the one hand, it was great, I'd never been able to afford one on my own, but it only went down to the bottom of my ribs. This left quite a bit of my abdomen unprotected. I've seen some girls wear this style, but I must tell you, it's downright cold. Not to mention leaving some parts of you embracingly exposed to your average spear thrust. For that matter, a caveman with a club could do a pretty good job on you as well. When I complained, he remarked that GOA wouldn't send me out without appropriate gear to reflect my abilities, after all, how else would they get their cut?

The very first kobold I ran into saw the weak spot at once and lunged straight for my stomach. As I rapidly backed peddled, I tripped. I landed flat on my face, right on top of the kobold's spear, disarming the little bugger. Our thief, a goblin named Nut, was able to open his back like he was cracking a hardboiled egg. I suppose the blacksmith was correct ... or he got lucky. Still, not one of my proudest moments. In retrospect, I suppose it was one of the bright spots. Right now, we are in a cold dark room. Right after Nut opened the empty chest, a stone slab sealed the room and it started flooding. Supply gave us a magic expanding rod, but it was only good against traps with walls which close in on you. Fritz, our

barbarian started hitting the door with an axe, which was about as useful as the expanding rod. I did what I was famous for ... I panicked.

At least my girly screams had one favorable effect, it forced Fritz to stop hitting the door. He gave me one of his patented icy stares. "If you don't stop doing that, I'm going to break both your legs so that you drown first." I must admit I was impressed. Fritz used more words in a sentence than I thought he knew. I was able to keep my head, but not because of Fritz. Kobold architects are great with caves, traps and stone slabs, but they stink when it comes to water. Right after Fritz's threat, the pipes funneling water into the room clogged. The water slowed to a trickle and finally stopped altogether.

Now listen up and listen good, I'm going to lay down some important dope here. When you are building a water trap, don't do it in a room with a sand floor. Soon the water was rushing out through a hole it had dug under the stone slab which was blocking the doorway. The rushing water soon had made the tunnel large enough to crawl through. After the room had emptied, we made our way back out into the hall. That was good. What was bad was the trio of hell hounds rushing at us from the other end of the hall. Nut pushed me out of the way ... so he could escape first. Before you could say "blind alley" we were doing the 100-yard dash down an unknown corridor. Turning left, we ran right into the real treasure room. Mounds of gold and silver coins and a waterfall of gemstones.

But the real surprise was the stunning blond with the bastard sword strapped to her back. It was one of those defining moments. The wind was blowing her hair and it was backlit. OK, maybe it wasn't backlit. After all, I had recently escaped a possible drowning, so I might have still been a little loopy. It was so perfect. Que the needle skipping across the record and the music coming to a stop.

She was wearing my breastplate. Damn that blacksmith. Now I saw how ridiculous it looked on me, but the one she was wearing ... well, it showed the right amount of ... well ... everything. It was hard to believe chainmail could stretch in that way. It didn't seem like it was much in the protection department thought. If you were going to survive in such an outfit, you'd better be fast ... very fast.

I was thinking about what I was going to do to the GOA blacksmith when I got back when the gorgeous woman rushed me. She was charging towards me as if she was a wild bull on fire! Although naturally, I saw it in slow motion.

That's was when she pushed me down ... full face into the dirt. The sound of the clashing of swords and the screams of the dying reverberated in my ears. I got up in time to witness the blond cleave the last of the hell hounds in two. Both she and Fritz stood in the doorway, blood dripping from their weapons. "Nice work," she said to Fritz. She looked at me. I was smitten. "What's the *matter* with you?" She asked coldly. "You don't turn your back on a pack or raging hell hounds." My dreams of our future together exploded as if it were an oversized soap bubble. Fortunately, I was saved, because when things were about to get hot ... in all the wrong ways I might add ... the treasure went zap and the room was empty.

"Oh, gods," she spat, "don't tell me you fools work for GOA?"

"Well, I ..." I stuttered like a schoolboy with a lisp.

"There must have been 100,000 gold coin in that stash." She screamed pacing back and forth in the now empty room. The blood from the hell hounds splashed all over the room as she stomped across the floor.

“We’ll be glad to give it back to you when we get back to the surface,” I offered.

“Don’t you understand, but the time you get up there they’ll be less than 50,000 coins left.” She was clearly steamed.

“No,” I replied meekly, “They only take 10%”

“Idiot,” she looked at me with pity in her eyes. This was not the look I was hoping for. “Don’t you ever go over your accounts? There are charges. Magic resequencing, money counting, clerical activities fees ... and some they will just plain steal.”

“That’s not possible,” I muttered helplessly, “that would be against ethical standards of the GOA. I had to take a class.” I pointed to Nuts and Fritz. “They took the same class, ask them.”

“Of course, you took the ethics class,” the blond laughed. “GOA wants you to be ethical ... so they get your money, you dolts *You* have to be ethical, not them!”

“That can’t be,” I said in a genuinely shocked voice, “we all had to sign forms saying we’d support GOA ethics. We took a blood oath. Before the Master of the Order of Revenge Paladins.” I insisted.

“Did you see any of the GOA officers at this class? Taking the oath?” The blond asked as if she knew the answer.

“No, but ...”

“GOA morons,” the blond shouted, “They can do whatever they want, ethics be damned. It’s all in your contact ... didn’t you read it?”

I had a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach. Not that she was right, of course, she was right. Besides, I can’t read anyway. No, it was the sinking feeling you get when you smell the dead carcasses of hell hounds. “I sure we can come to some kind of arrangement,” explained Sparkles. The dark-haired elf was not only our spellcaster but also the voice of reason in our little group. Only the charisma she had didn’t really work with women. The blond simply put her blood-stained sword back in its scabbard and turned to her. “You’d better make this right. That gold wasn’t yours and it’s certainly wasn’t GOAs, so you better make this right.”

All I was thinking about was which diamond I would have the jewelers put on a ring, so I could ask her to marry me. You know that glow every guy wants to glimpse in his girl’s eyes went she looks at you? That radiance that promises everything? Well, she wasn’t giving me that gaze. She stared at me with eyes blazing like two steel daggers, “Right?” She asked me.

“Oh, right,” I stammered, “anything you say.” We were going to have to work out some ground rules in our relationship. I couldn’t have her getting her way *all* the time.

“How much money do you have in your account?” She asked intensely.

“You mean besides the treasure which we all watched get zapped into the GOA Credit Union?” I asked sheepishly.

“Yes, besides that.”

I swallowed hard. "About 57 copper coins."

She reached for her blade when Sparkles put her hand on her arm to calm her. Sparkles was the overly cheerful type. Although I don't know what wizard school you go to in order to learn to be so cheerful. She was always bright and joyful. In fact, she usually wore a long flowing mood robe which never varied from lively and happy colors ... except when Fritz brushed up against it, that part usually turned black. Unless Fritz had recently killed somebody. "Alright, I understand your concern," she explained, "we don't have enough to settle accounts right now, that's true. But we're good for it. We'll simply have to collect more treasure."

"It doesn't work that way," she remarked candidly. "You're already in debt. The more you earn, the more the GOA keeps. It's a vicious cycle." OK, she was disgusted with our collective brain power, I get that. At least she might still think I'm handsome, in a rough sort of way. Maybe ... if the moon is shining right ... and I get her very, very drunk.

"Come on," she indicated we should follow her. "I have a plan. We're going to rob the GOA."

"I could end this all," Fritz explained, "Let's kill her and be done with it."

"No," I said, trying to be sly. Although in this case, I simply didn't want Fritz killing my new girlfriend. Especially because she didn't know she was my girlfriend. I couldn't have Fritz whacking her before she at least knew about our relationship.

Fritz as your quintessential axe-wielding primitive. Leather armor with lots of fur around the edges and boots made from the pelt of a leopard. Everything about the dark-haired barbarian was oversized, except maybe his IQ. That's not completely fair, he did pack a fair amount of understanding into that massive skull of his. Let's say he had a one-track mind. His go-to plan was to kill everything ... *then* ask it questions. "OK," he muttered, "but let me know if you change your mind."

All we could get out of my blond girlfriend Nephtys was her name. She was more tight-lipped than an ogre in a bad mood. She spent most of her time sharpening her sword.

Nut seemed to be the only one who was OK with Nephtys' plan. In fact, it seemed to cheer the little fellow right up. Still, the next step in any plan is to go over the details and since Nephtys hadn't even told us what the plan was yet, which turned out to be kind of important. That's when she took us to a tavern. Personally, I believe the true reason was she wanted to get to know me better. It's probably what the blatant hostility was all about. I mean, it was like she wanted to kill me, but it couldn't be, because if it was, I'd already be dead.

The Wild Heart tavern was beautiful and cheerful, it was covered with happy, curtained windows, where you could spot the liveliness of the establishment from the outside. Once inside, you're welcomed by a sense of home and a feeling of comfort. Probably a spell. Yet, it was as lovely inside as it was on the outside. The place seemed unusual packed. Taverns had hit a rough patch since adventurers weren't using them to form groups anymore.

Celebrating GOA teams seem to be the primary clientele here, and the secret of this tavern seemed to be you could run up a GOA tab at the bar. Several long tables are occupied by separate groups of

adventurers, all enjoying themselves. The noise inside would easily mask our conversation. In the corner was a smaller, strangely unoccupied table. Nephtys motioned us over to this table. Ah, yes, a small, intimate setting, perfect.

“Is this wise,” Nut asked hopping along to keep up. “This is obviously a GOA sanctioned tavern. I usually don’t recommend discussing a crime plan in the middle of my target’s business establishment.”

“You should try it sometime,” Nephtys declared, “hiding in plain sight. It’s usually the best method. Besides this place has seen everything. There was a guy in here the other day, sliced off a man’s arm with a glowing sword. Hardly anyone even noticed.”

“The guy dressed as a bear got some attention though,” she added after a bit of thought. She stopped abruptly and turned around. Nut froze, his hand in a patron’s robes. “That doesn’t mean they won’t notice someone picking their pockets though.”

“Sorry,” Nut declared, slowly pulling back his arm. “Irresistible habit.”

As Nephtys had suggested, the patron was so busy with his own business, he hadn’t even noticed the whole exchange. Nut was a little disgusted with the obvious oblivious nature of the customer and he responded by kicking the man in the shin.

“Hey, watch it,” he cried out.

Nut slipped the purse he taken off the angry customer’s belt during his outburst and slipped it into his side pocket.

When we got to the table, Nephtys pushed up one of the chairs, leaning the top against the table. She sat in the seat next to it. Naturally, I assumed she was saving the seat for me, but when I pulled it out she gave me a hard stare. “Don’t sit in that seat,” she snapped, “nobody sits in that seat.” I casually put it back against the table. I was going to sit on the other side of her, but Nut was already in that chair, so I picked another. Once we were all seated, Nephtys began to explain the plan. She started by pushing back the unoccupied chair as if she was waiting for someone to come sit in it. This relationship was not starting off well.

A waitress came over and put several loaves of bread on the table. “Wait a minute,” I complained, “We didn’t order this.” I was concern about our rapidly dwindling funds. According to Nephtys, we were already up to our ears in hock to the GOA ... even after finding our first treasure, so there was no call for making it worse by ordering something we probably couldn’t pay for.

“Not to worry your little head, cute stuff,” she smiled amiably, “the bread is on the house. The GOA can’t let its teams suffer from malnutrition now can it?”

I put my hands together over my head and leaned back in my chair. “See,” I smiled my best and most charming, girl attracting grin, “I’m cute.”

Nephtys ignored my comment and took out a small bottle, filled with an oily black liquid, and placed it on the table. “This is Hassan,” she said nonchalantly. “He’s going to be our inside man.” She took off the cork stopper and out rose a plume of steam, it coalesced into a rather well-dress Djinn. He gave everyone a wave with the side of his hand.

“You mean he’s going to wish us all into the GOA’s vaults?” I asked.

“Not on your life,” Hassan announced, “I don’t do that anymore.”

“Hassan’s free,” Nephtys declared, “He’s no longer a slave of the bottle. He’s along for a share of the loot like the rest of us.”

“So, if he doesn’t belong to the bottle,” Nut asked with all the tack of an over-sexed grizzly bear, “What’s he doing living in the bottle.”

“It’s rent controlled,” Hassan smiled back at him, “Besides, I spent 200 years fixing it up. You don’t expect me to simply move out because I lost a gig, do you?”

“I’m not sure I grasp what the Djinn’s role is in all this,” Fritz replied, a little annoyed the conversation seemed to be veering off track. Fritz was nothing if not focused.

“Simple,” Nephtys, “Everyone knows that the layout of the GOA HQ changes every day. That’s why they call the place the Maze. If we came crashing through the front door, the guards will be on us before we have time to find the vault. So, we steal some loot and when GOA zaps it into the vault, we make sure Hassan’s bottle is in the pile getting zapped. Hassan uses his smoke form to find his way to the front door. We met him there and he takes us back in. Simple.”

“Except for one thing,” Sparkles coughed, “How do we get anywhere near the front door?”

“We’ll get in because we won’t be posing as adventurers,” Nephtys smiled and my entire day was immediately better, “we’ll be posing as salesmen.”

“Salesman,” Fritz snorted like my girlfriend had asked him to roll in manure. Barbarians don’t like the idea of any kind of commerce, but traveling salesmen are the worst. They tend to bundle up practitioners and introduce them to a large pile of burning lumber. “What are we going to sell? Have you forgotten the point where our current assets number a total of 57 copper coins.” I had to admit the big fellow had a pretty good point.

“And this,” Nut dropped a purse in the middle of the table.

“What’s that?” Sparkles asked intrigued.

Nut turned the leather bag over and poured the contents on the table. It was sand. “Dame,” the goblin muttered, “I fall for that every time.”

My girlfriend simply brushed the sand off the table with a shrug. “You know the Gem Altarpiece?” Nephtys prodded our barbarian.

“Yea, multi-paneled dwarfish artwork, done in gold and precious gems. In 934, some thieves broke in and stole the lower left panel, which was never seen again.” Fritz answered as if he were conversant art professor in his off hours. I didn’t know Fritz knew what art was, much less that he’d heard the legend of the missing panel.

“Even if we had the missing piece,” Sparkles laughed, “The GOA has the complete set. I’ve seen it on display. They say some experts painted a replica of the missing panel; In fact, it’s so high quality many believe it’s the original, hiding in plain sight.”

“Yes,” smiled Nephtys and the fact everyone thinks it a forgery is our ticket in. You see, we’ll have the missing piece.”

“How are you going to manage that toots,” Fritz snorted in derision.

“That’s where Harry comes in.” Nephtys had a grin on her face like she knew something we didn’t ... which was probably because she knew heaps of stuff we didn’t know.

“Harry,” Fritz practically spat across the table, “who the fuck is Harry?”

A small voice piped up and replied, “That would be me.”

Everyone looked around frantically. While they were looking I noticed a pair of eyes and a mouth had appeared on the empty chair. I pointed it out and soon everyone except Nephtys and myself was reaching for a weapon.

“Relax,” Nephtys tried to calm everyone, “He’s with us.”

“You mean he’s a fucking mimic,” Fritz growled.

“Yes, and he’ll be mimicking the lower left panel for us.” Nephtys declared as if it was so obvious any kindergartener should have seen it at once.

Personally, I’d never seen a mimic up this close. Stories abound of the smaller of the two mimics, which are more intelligent, and generally friendly if offered food, usually telling adventurers about what loot can be had nearby. Harry seemed fairly large at the moment, so I found it hard to imagine what the larger version looked like.

According to "the Journal of the Unknown Scholar." A mimic's naturally gray skin can change in color and texture to resemble wood-grain by filling its outer layers with a brown pigmented liquid. A mimic is said to be amorphous, the more intelligent ones can even assume the shape of a partition wall, so Harry wouldn't have any trouble forming the shape of the lower Gem Altarpiece. Although I had to admit I wasn't sure how he was going to do the paint pigment. He must be a *really good* mimic.

Harry seemed to be behaving as Nephtys’ pet. She threw him a loaf of bread and he swallowed it like a happy St. Bernard. When we move in together, maybe I can convince her to get a dog. I didn’t want to get bit in the ass when I sat down on what looked like an ordinary stool. Still, I had to admit if we kept Harry around he’d make a good end table.

The group slowly retook their seats, except for Sparkles, “Even if he does mimic the panel, how will that get us in the front door?”

Nephtys smiled again and I heard romantic music playing. The sun shining through the windows seemed to crackle with joy. “Because, if the one they have is fake, they’ll want to see if Harry is real. If they have the real one, they’ll want to know if it’s been stolen and replaced with a forgery. Either way, we get in.”

Hot and smart, I was definitely falling in love. “Once we’re inside, we finish off the guards and Hassan leads us to the treasure room.”

“You still haven’t told us where we get the treasure to put Hassan in, or do you plan to use Harry for that too?” Fritz asked as if he’d found the one hole in the plan.

“Simple,” Nephtys announced, “we raid Flynn Hollow Point.”

The table went silent. Nephtys might as well have passed out brochures announcing our funerals next Tuesday. Fritz was the first one to recover from the shock, he mumbled and stammered, “Flynn Hollow Point is a dragon nest.”

“Yes,” Nephtys replied as if she were describing a simple Sunday outing, “and they are rather fond of loot. One the GOA won’t be able to resist putting in their main vault.”

“Nest,” spat Fritz, “That means there are lots of ‘em. Everyone is smart enough to stay away because only the dragons ever come out.” His voice rose as he finished the sentence until he was near full on shouting at the end. I must admit even I was starting to think this relationship wasn’t going to last, what with our imminent deaths at the hands of dragons and all.

“I’ll take care of the dragons,” she smiled confidently.

“You,” Fritz laughed, “All by yourself?”

“You let me worry about the dragons, OK?” she replied without any sign of worry on her forehead. I was impressed. I had to get into this woman’s pants and it had to be now. I mean either that or never since I didn’t perceive much hope for us after we both became dragon food.

While I was daydreaming about our little thatched-roofed house on the outskirts of town, surrounded by a gaggle of screaming rug rats, Fritz got up. “Well it’s been nice meeting you,” he announced, “I’d tell you to have a nice life, but as it’s ending soon, no point in wasting my breath, is there?”

“Sit down,” Nephtys commanded, but Fritz remained standing.

“She might be on to something,” Sparkles declared motioning Fritz to take a seat. “She’s come up with a pretty good plan so far. Maybe, just maybe, she has something.”

Nephtys ordered drinks for the table. “You’re still missing the point of the 57 copper coins,” Fritz snorted as he retook his seat.

“Don’t worry,” Nephtys smiled, “I’ll put it on your GOA tab.”

We still hadn’t talked, yet, but I was feeling the bond between us grow. Several times on our journey through the forest, she pushed me out of the way. Obviously, my manly presence was too much for her. But I could tell she was warming to my presence. After all, the day before she brushed me aside as often as today and it was already noon. I imagined a hundred diverse ways of introducing myself.

“Medley. Clyde Medley,” I would announce with a suave and debonair voice, “I couldn’t help but notice

you have the bluest eyes." Girls always swoon when you talk about their eyes. Although I did have to admit Nephtys didn't seem like the swooning type.

I talk to Nut about everything. He's my guide, my mentor. OK, yes, it's a little strange to have a goblin thief as a mentor. But you get used to it. Anyway, Nut and I go way back, we were roommates at Delver's College. The first day he appeared in the room he jumped up on the bed, "OK," the diminutive goblin asked, "You have Goblophobia? If you do, I want to know right now."

"There no such thing as Goblophobia," I said.

"Yes, there is," he announced heartily, "It's a psychological condition, it's an irrational fear of goblins."

"No there isn't," I explained, "people fear goblins because they are bat shit crazy. It's not irrational at all."

"So, do you have it?" he demanded again.

"Have what?"

"Gblophobia," he repeated as if I was dysfunctional.

"I don't know. Are you bat shit crazy?" I enquired.

"Not that I know of."

"Well, we should get along fine then." Anyway, now he's my idea man. Anything I need to know I bounce it off Nut. "Nut," I asked our resident thief, who'd been my best friend throughout training, buddy through thick and thin, "How do you think I should woo her?"

"Her? Nephtys? The iron lady of poison and hate?" Nut asked rhetorically, "Give it up partner. She's way out of your league. Her idea of a first date would be to open up your belly and drink your blood as is it was wine. I know the type."

"You said the same thing about Sparkles," I snickered at his negativity.

"No, I said she'd kiss you and turn you into a toad ... instead of the other way around. Look, why can't you find some nice tavern girl or something ... do you have to go after Elsa of the Slave Lords?"

"Oh, she's not that bad." I chortled.

"You're right," Nut apologized, "If she was Elsa, you already be carrying a set of whip scars on your back." I could tell he was simply passing the time while we both came up with ideas for the perfect date. "By the way how *did* it turn out with Sparkles?" he asked me.

"She changed me back after a few days," I shook slightly from the memory of being an amphibian, "you know, flies can be quite tasty. You should try a few sometime."

"Thanks, buddy, but I think I'll pass."

"I know, I've got just the thing to turn her around," I beamed delighted, "a nice romantic candlelight dinner, under the glowing moon. We can share a potion. I'll cook my famous stir fry."

“Ok,” Nut rejoined, “One, we don’t have any candles. Two, this is a new moon period, and three ... *where* are you going to get lobster in the middle of the woods?”

“OK,” I agreed, “the plan has a *few* holes in it.”

“Medley,” announced the mighty Fritz under his breath, “if you don’t shut your trap, I’m going to scoop out your brains and use your skull for a spittoon.” Before I could respond we were surrounded by a band of cutthroats, crazier even than those maniacs looking for Kickstarter funding. It was the White Blood Company. I recognized the red and white scarves tied around their heads. They already had their swords drown ... but Fritz had his axe out and Nephtys’ blade was already reflecting the sun.

The only problem was that there were 60 of them. Fritz was good, but not *that* good. I doubt Sparkes could take them all out with a line-of-lighting spell before they closed in on us.

“Harry,” Nephtys spat viciously.

“Harry?” I asked with not a little bit of incredulity, “Is he with the White Blood Company?”

“No,” Nephtys explained, “He’s very amiable for a chaotic Mimic, quite easy to work with, but he talks in his sleep.”

“Can you do something about this?” Nephtys whispered to Sparkes.

The two girls stood back to back, facing off against the well-armed bandits. “I didn’t memorize the sleep spell,” she explained, “it doesn’t work on dragons. Now if you can get these guys to grow wings, I got us covered.”

Fritz swung his double-headed axe in a figure eight arc and took a defensive stance, “this isn’t going to be a fair fight,” he retorted, staring down the bandits, “you should have brought more men.”

“Fight,” laughed the White Blood captain, “You misunderstand us, we have no desire to fight you. No, we’re much more interested in a contest. A test of skill if you will.” He smiled, but it wasn’t a friendly smile, in fact, it was downright disturbing. “Yes, sir, a test of strength and courage, a wrestling match while surrounded by bear traps, an arm-wrestling match where scorpions sting the loser, that sort of thing.”

“Like cards?” I suggested innocently.

The bandit chief immensely looked pleased, like a man who had found a kindred soul. What he didn’t know about was my fame with a deck of cards. No one could deal from the bottom of the deck as I can. I had him right where I wanted him. Strange how easily he fell for it. He smiled again, “Cards it is, then. Excellent choice.”

“You moron,” Nephtys looked right at me. Well, it was more through me than at me, but it was close enough. I have to say I was pleased with the speed our relationship was progressing. We’d now moved into pet names. Although maybe she could find something a bit more romantic than ‘moron’ in the future.

“What’s the catch?” Nephtys asked.

“Catch?” the bandit chief mused, “Oh, you mean where the loser is dropped into a pit of cobras?”

She cocked her head in a jaunty fashion, “Yea, like that.”

The bandit leader looked flabbergasted. He turned and explained slowly in a tone which suggested he didn’t want to be misunderstood, “The loser is dropped into a pit of cobras.”

While being closely watched by about twenty crossbowmen, the bandits disarmed Nephtys and Fritz. They almost forgot my mace, but I stopped one of them and handed it over. The White Blood Company led us to their encampment. It was a collection of white A-frame tents. You know the type, the ones you can almost stand up in, but you can’t really. Most of them appeared to be set up as living quarters, but one near the center was packed with chests and bags of loose coins. In case you were wondering, yes, this is foreshadowing, so pay attention. Overall, the camp looked like a rather delightful place, not exactly glamping, but the place was well appointed. In the center, they set up a small wooden card table surrounded by two chairs.

I pulled up the first chair and looked charmingly at the captain. I glanced over to make sure Nephtys was watching me. She was playing it cool, tapping her foot in impatience, waiting for me to make my move. I was confident, stylish and sophisticated. OK I was acting confident, but it was working, “So let’s talk about stakes.”

“Stakes?” he asked, “You win, you get to keep your lives, I win, and we feed you to the cobras.”

“Well, if you want to take the coward’s way out,” I answered nonchalantly, “let’s get this party rolling, yea.”

The captain was insulted, “What do you mean coward’s way out?”

I was led back to my seat. I was cool as a cucumber until I almost fell over backward in my seat. I stumbled myself back into a proper position before I stated, “it merely means if you’re not willing to take a risk, it’s not a game is it? We might as well flip a coin.”

The captain giggled. Of course, his crew looked at him like he was a little girl, but he waved them off. “Alright, if you win, you get our loot.” He pointed casually at the treasure-filled tent. See, I told you it was foreshadowing, try to keep up with me here.

Several of the bandits brought out a box of cards, with one poking out a slot at the bottom. The captain rubbed his face as if he was tired.

“Did you sleep well?” I asked, “You’ll need to be at the top of your game if you expect to come out ahead.”

“No, no, I did not,” he replied, “it was a little noisy.”

“When you move into the forest, you can’t complain the wildlife makes noisy neighbors.” I explained, “I’ll let you draw the first card.” I grinned with a confident air.

He turned over the first card, it was the Black Knight. Good card. Hard to beat. The next card was a six of swords. Another solid card. “Sixteen,” the bandit captain smiled, “Looks like you are going to visit our little reptile zoo.”

I fingered the card at the bottom of the box, the bandit captain looked pleased. Little did he know. I pulled the card out and flipped it over. It was a two of ... OK, I'll say it, it was the *Two of Horse Manure*. What the hell was a two doing there? My knees started shaking. I'm allegoric to venomous snake bites, and I was already starting to break out in hives. Relax, I can handle this.

My second card was the *Five of Serpents*. This is not foreshadowing ... this had *better not be foreshadowing* or someone is going to end up dead ... and it was likely to be me. OK, maybe I can't handle this. Not good for the relationship. I could imagine dating would be a bit more difficult with one of us pushing up daisies. I looked over at Nephtys. She seemed unconcerned.

The uncaring glint in her eye gave me a huge dose of confidence. She knew I had this covered. I looked at a table, a light mist was forming, flowing across the table. It was rather ominous. I pulled out the next card and closed my eyes. I hesitated, but finally, I flipped it over.

"Son of a ..." the bandit captain screamed. I opened my eyes, it was the Red Queen. Seventeen, match point. "I thought you fixed the deck!" the captain screamed at one of the others. "I did!" he replied.

The captain didn't wait for any other explanations, he pushed the hapless bandit into the serpent filled hole. I swear, right before the screaming I heard lips smacking, but cobras don't have lips. The captain led the others off with a wave of his hand. "Where are we going?" one of them asked. "Back to the road, you idiot. We need to start a new collection. At this rate, it's going to take us forever to earn enough to build our castle."

The mist on the table turned into Hassan in a flash. "Do you think I used the right card? I couldn't decide between this one and the Old Crone."

"Good choice," I responded, "because if you'd have to make it the Old Crone, we would have lost."

"Really?" The djinn face didn't mask his confusion, "I thought the ..."

Nephtys came running up with Hassan's bottle, "Quick get back in."

"But I need to ask one question about the game," Hassan sputtered.

"Quickly," Nephtys yelled, "They are almost out of sight. Hassan dissolved into a flow of steam and flowed back into his bottle. Almost at the same time, Nephtys tossed the bottle into the treasure tent, Hassan's vapors trailing behind the cork. Her timing was perfect. The djinn's bottle had scarcely landed on a pile of coin bags when, "zap," it was all gone.

"Well," Nephtys smiled proudly, "That will save us the walk to Flynn Hollow Point."

We put as much distance between us and the White Blood encampment as possible, in case they realized killing us would solve all their problems. They were probably the most feared mercenary company this side of the Endless mountains, but they weren't known for their intuitive approach to problem-solving.

I got *them* out once I thought everyone was asleep. Creeping over to a small rock, I laid them out in their positions. That's when I heard the coughing behind me, it was Nephtys. "What are you doing?" She asked. "Dolls, really? You're playing with dolls?"

"They're not dolls," I protested. Ok, I guess at first glance they looked like dolls. After all, they were made of braided straw, in the same way your average household doll was manufactured, but they weren't dolls.

"They sure look like dolls to me," Nephtys replied in a tone which did nothing to hide her flagrant disgust.

"This is my portable shrine to the gods," I said defensively. "You can't expect to have a handy temple around the next corner, mind you. So, I have to be prepared." Holding up the larger of the two, I introduced him. "This is Nibris, God of Prosperity."

She knelt to have a closer look. "And this one," she picked up the smaller figure, "the one with the big ..."

"Chest," I finished for her, "It's Otrix, Goddess of Love," I explained.

"Well, send my best wishes to Nibris." She handed the other figure back to me. "You should put this one away. We won't be needing her services." As she handed me the figure, I felt a spark of energy pass between us. At least I thought it was a spark, it could have been a loose stalk stabbing me in the palm of the hand. No, on second thought it had to be a spark. That's why she was telling me I didn't need to pray to Otrix, she was already falling under my spell.

She gave me a glance over her shoulder. It was a hot and sultry look. Sadly, much of her beautiful face was obscured by shadow, because I could have sworn she was giving me a look of pity. Which obviously couldn't be right.

This was going to be one rough romance. How do you surprise a woman who is always one step ahead of you? Well, this challenge too will fall before the might of *the Medley*. I held up Otrix in the palm of my right hand and swore before her that when I got back to the temple, I'd complete the prerequisite course in seduction. Who cares if the last time the instructor laughed me out of the room.

I finally got back to where everyone was curled up at about four in the morning. It took me another hour to get to sleep though. Sparkles must have been having a dream. Her mood cloak was displaying a shower of fireworks across its surface. I'll have to remind her to take that thing off when she goes to sleep.

I dreamed of Nephtys.

Once we got to GOA headquarters, getting in was easy. Nephtys was right, with Harry as the lower panel, it really piqued their interest. The part which astonished me was the insistence we go in without our weapons or armor. I mean, I know Nephtys had amazing hands. Really incredible hands and ... don't even think about asking me how I know that. You people have dirty minds. Filthy, disgusting, immoral minds. It's not like that. You see I have this problem with the muscles in my lower back.

But, I'm getting off track. Once we were in, a group of well-armed guards led us into the GOA HQ. These boys certainly hadn't been supplied by the same mindless blacksmith who had made my armor. No, this guy must have been a pro. Their steel fit them like a second skin. Before we got more than six feet into the entry room, a light mist drifted across the floor.

This was our signal. Harry changed form. He dropped Sparkes' Rod of Majesty into her hands first and tossed Fritz his twin-bladed axe. The barbarian caught it as it sailed through the air with the grace of a ballerina, only in a manlier way, if you know what I mean. Nephtys was next, pulling out her sword from a concealed scabbard. Harry released my mace ... and I dropped it, right on my foot.

The room turned into a blur and flash of swords. One of the guards fell before me, blood spirting from a sizable hole in his neck. Fritz gave him a finishing blow with his axe, almost cutting off my nose in the process. Nephtys was dancing between the blades of her foes. Once again, I could only envision the scene in slow motion. She glided through the air, avoiding several deadly thrusts, slicing one from the top of his head to his breastbone, while kicking another in the teeth with those highly fashionable black boots of hers. At one point I was sure she had winked at me, but it might have been the flash of one of Sparkes famous Jets of Flame attack ... No, I'm almost sure she winked at me.

Sparkles' Rod of Majesty didn't have the appearance of your average magical rod. In fact, your average archer might have mistaken it for a recurve bow which was missing its string. On command, an arrow would appear in the rod and leap away from Sparkles at a frightening speed, as if fired from the missing string. After leaving the bow, it would burst into flame, to give it that extra touch. Sparkles could shoot four or five of these Jets of Flame in a minute, but today she seemed to be closer to six.

Fritz was like an assassin, taking out four of them in only a few seconds. Even Nut played his part, backstabbing with glee. What was once at least a dozen guards had now been whittled down to less than a handful. I spun around and cried, "Hey, leave a few for me" as Fritz cleaved one of the remaining few in two. I noticed one was busy crawling around on the ground, so I gave him a good whack with my mace. Score one for me. I looked over to get the adulation of my girlfriend, only to see, to my horror, she had been pinned to the wall by a spear through the shoulder.

I not going to say I panicked, but there was one last guard between me and Nephtys. He started off having a head, but by the time I'd gotten to Nephtys, he was missing his head and my mace was dripping with excessive amounts of red goo. All I heard was a heavy thud on the floor. In a flash, Fritz was right next to me, pulling on the spear shaft. For a woman, she was astonishingly quiet for someone with a spear all the way through her shoulder. But after all, she was my girlfriend. I suppose I *should* find a way to tell her she's my girlfriend, but this didn't seem like an appropriate time. After all, she still had a free hand to rip my throat out.

Fritz grunted and groaned as if the spear was a nail which had been driven into the wall with a mallet. Do you ever try to get a nail out of a piece of wood that's been driven all the way in? It's a pain in the ass. It's incredibly frustrating and yep, Fritz had that stare of exasperation in his eyes right now. I'd recognize it anywhere. After one good heave, it can free of the wall and Nephtys' shoulder. She fell to the floor with a crash. I rushed up and crumpled up Lota leaves and dropped them into the wound like a snowfall of colored ash. When they hit the wound, they burst into flame. When the smoke cleared, not a

sign of the injury could be seen. It was as beautiful and pristine a shoulder as I remembered it. The skin might have been a tad glossier, but it could be my imagination.

“At least you’re good for something.” Nephtys sneered, rubbing her formerly injured shoulder.

Ah, to be needed. Roses and daisies were floating through the air, I could smell jasmine. I could hear music, I think it was opera. But I’ve never seen opera, so who knows. I was like a love-sick puppy. If I’d had a tail, I’d be wagging it like a metronome. Oh, note for the future, do not inhale Lota leaf fumes when in use, it leads to hallucinations. Mostly of flowers and opera music.

We changed into the guard’s armor. Nephtys had been wearing a dress. Did I mention my girlfriend looks fantastic in a dress? I probably wasn’t supposed to be looking when she took the dress off. Give me a break, will ya? Hey, I not from a celibate order you know. Besides we’re in a relationship. OK, it’s a rather one-sided relationship, but it still a relationship. As I forced myself to turn away, I noticed Hassan was staring ... well, leering was more like it. He had an expression on his face I only saw on a few old men in an art studio before.

“Hey,” I yelled at him, “avert your eyes.”

“What? Have you been confined in a bottle for 200 years? I’m a normal guy, you know.” He snapped back at me, “What’s your excuse?”

I turned to face Nephtys and tried to give her my most innocent look, but she wasn’t buying it. I do, however, consider it an advance in your relationship that she didn’t kill me on the spot.

Senior GOA representative Rolf heard a noise by the entrance and went to investigate. When he arrived the seven of us jumped him. OK, well the six of us, Hassan wasn’t too good at jumping in his mostly gaseous form. We used the key provided by Rolf and walked through the maze of corridors. Along the way, we had to round up two other GOA employees. They both claimed to be accountants, although I still can’t figure out what accountants need with concealment cloaks and thief’s tool kits. One of them was wearing the exact same outfit as Nut was wearing, only in a larger size. He normally described it as Thief’s apparel #47 by Devious. It even had the same attached dark disguise hood and everything. I mean, one of them had 27 knives strapped to his body! What, he had a multitude of pencils to sharpen? You’d think one was enough. After all, how many pencils can a guy sharpen at once? Nut tired them up and gagged them with their own cloak hoods.

Sparkes waved her hands and the ropes around the GOA accountants turned to venomous snakes. “Now let’s just relax,” she explained cheerfully, “you wouldn’t want to wake these snakes from their naps. They might get a bit angry.” That accomplished, we ventured downstairs towards the vault.

“The snakes won’t actually bite them, will they?” I asked concerned.

“Probably not,” Sparkles beamed, “But in any case, they’re not poisonous.”

I was shocked and not a little taken aback, “you lied?”

“I didn’t lie silly,” she smirked, “I never said they were poisonous. I only made them look that way. I saw the great magicians Marker and Cashier do it once on stage at a desert café. It was cute.”

The entrance to the vault was a massive metal door covered in hundreds of gears. Each of the gears had a number displayed in the center, as you turned the gears the numbers in the center changed. This was made even more complex by the fact that turning one gear, turned other gears and transformed about ten numbers at once. Over the door was a gilded sign which read "Guild of Adventurers, Inc. The company that prepares to you delve safely into dungeons." The second half was in a bit smaller type and slightly less ostentatious. Not the same number of swirls and flourishes.

Fortunately, Hassan had an identic memory and he had watched as one of the GOA managers had opened the door. He turned gears, which turned other gears. He moved on to change still more of the complex, interwoven mechanisms. As he progressed he sped up so it became difficult to follow his exact movements. The interaction between Hassan's mist and the metal door created a series of static electrical discharges, so as the djinn moved, flashes of lightning jumped from one gear to the next. There were sparks everywhere.

Finally, he stood back and admired his handiwork. The components now began to move by themselves, and the numbers in the middle slowly changed to letters. Hassan opened his hand, indicating the door, admonishing us all to marvel at his safe-cracking and mechanical skills. Jets of steam shot out from the edges of the double-door and the grinding of machinery could be heard. Next, there was a loud thud and ... nothing. The letters on the combination gears now read NICE TRY JACK, BUT NO LUCK.

"Shit," Nephtys bellowed, while Hassan simply looked bewildered.

"The combination must reset itself after each time the door is opened," explained Sparkes with her sometimes-annoying constant cheerfulness.

"Who's Jack?" I asked, genuinely confused. "I don't know any Jack. Is there another mimic?"

Fritz did what he normally did in such situations, he hit the wall with his axe. When the blow fell, the walls actually vibrated in reply. I guess that means Fritz was in kind of a mood. When the vibrations died down, the gold GOA sign fell to the floor with a crash. Everyone looked up to observe the GOA sign had been covering up another, older sign. This one was black, and the letters looked like red-hot metal. Shadows passed over the symbols as if they were being heated by an unknown source, it read: THE UNSEEN COUNCIL.

"Jupiter's hairy cock," Nephtys roared.

"What?" I asked, "Did I miss something?"

"You know how ordinary crimes are controlled by the Thieves Guild," Nut explained, "bank robberies, extortion, arson, insurance, and corporate downsizing?"

"Yea, I've seen your office in the bazaar, Nut," I replied. "Nice place, great furniture," I added without getting the picture.

Nuts eyes told me that right now, he thought of me as a puppy who has mistaken a dried stick of cow manure for a bone. "Well in the infernal regions that organization is called the Unseen Council."

"So that means we're finished here," Nephtys spat. She looked about as happy as a cat who had recently discovered the dog has been using her litter box. "Let's go."

“What a minute,” Sparkles declared, “let’s not be too hasty.”

“You want to mess with the council?” Even Fritz was a bit taken aback by their magician’s apparent lack of concern. “You do realize we’re dealing with minor demons here? You know, the kind who eats your liver, just for fun, then resurrects you and does it again?”

“This actually works out to our advantage.” Now it was everyone’s turn to regard Sparkles with a cocked look on their faces. “No, hear me out.” She was practically glowing with excitement. “We’re robbing the Guild of Adventurers, right? The council can’t very well come after us without revealing *they* are behind the GOA. It would ruin the whole franchise.”

“She does have a point,” I said supporting her, even though I had no idea what she was talking about.

“Well, even if she does have a point,” Nephtys retorted, “The door is still locked, and we can’t get in.” My girlfriend was looking distressed. I have to say distress was not one of her better expressions. Medley to the rescue. I wanted my girlfriend to be happy.

Sparkles beat me to the punch and let out a grin which would have dimmed an explosion. “I can take care of that.” She stood back and pointed her fingers at the door. Her hands appeared to be clutching large door knobs, except between her fingers were boiling clouds of pink, beige, heliotrope and violet. She seemed locked in concentration, her eyes forced closed as if to avoid watching kittens being bathed. She smiled and turned her hands in opposite directions. The gears spun, and the numbers changed. It all happened so fast, some of the works started to squeal. When they stopped there was a quiet hiss and ... nothing.

“Nice try,” Nephtys gave our wizard a conciliatory glance, “No let’s get out of here.”

Something was funny about the door. All the gears had numbers on them and not letters. I experimentally leaned on the door and it glided open with ease. “Maybe we shouldn’t leave so quickly,” I announced.

When Nephtys turned around I saw the disappointment on her face melt and turn into a grin. OK, now we can go home, I made my girlfriend smile. Nothing else can make my day any better. She pushed me out of the way with the same disdain she might have expressed if I was a lazy drunk in a tavern. Oh, yea, physical contact, this was turning out to be a red-letter day.

Inside was a second metallic double-door, only this one merely required a key to open it. Nephtys took out the key we’d gotten off Rolf and headed for the door. “Stop,” screamed Sparkles. This was not her cheerful voice, so something must be seriously wrong.

“There’s a safety system in the vault, built around the double-door system,” our resident trap disarmer Nut explained, “whereby the first door must be shut in order for the other one to be opened without activating an alarm. If you put the key in the lock, the first door will close, and 40 demons will teleport into the room.”

“So, you can fix it?” I suggested to Nut. “I mean disarm it.”

“Don’t be stupid,” Nut replied, “do you think something this complex can be disarmed by a couple of wrenches from S-Mart and bobby pin?”

Everyone piled into the space between the doors. The room between the two sets of doors was a 10-by-20-foot corridor, so there was plenty of room for everyone. I huddled up close to Nephtys so we were touching ... perhaps a bit too intimately for this stage in our relationship, I get that. She shoved me back until I landed against Fritz. He grunted like a bear and I wisely took my distance.

Fritz closed the outer door and Nephtys placed the key in the lock. There's a smile you get on your face when you realize you are about to reach our ultimate goal. Nephtys turned to us and gave us that exact look, while at the same time opening the inner door. Inside was a room so vast, you couldn't see the far side. It was filled with chests of all sizes and descriptions, and countless numbers of bags. Most empires didn't have this much cash. If we'd had ten years we couldn't have looted the whole place. Nut was about to have some kind of nervous attack, he was drooling. Ever see a goblin drool? it's disgusting.

The first part of the room was an oversized bookcase, filled with expensive, leather-bound volumes. Nephtys took one and opened it on the conveniently placed table. She began carefully sifting through the notes and manifests to determine which parcels we wanted. Each page of the books started off with a large code number, which matched the carefully stenciled numbers on the bags or a handwritten card attached to a chest by a string. One thing you have to say for minor demons, they are obsessively tidy. I mean this stuff was cataloged and cross-referenced in a way which would have made any library blush.

Nephtys started calling out numbers and Fritz began hurling parcels of cash through the door. When Fritz couldn't find something, Sparkles held out her hand, palm down and raised it about six inches. A bag would float off the shelf and hop over to the main door. In all, we removed around 140 bags. Harry came in quite handy here as he changed himself into a cart. Although it was a bit disconcerting to listen him cry "uffff" each time Fritz threw another sack on the load.

"You sure you can't give us one wish," I asked Hassan politely, "Just to get this stuff out of here?"

"Absolute not," he said, crossing his arms in the classic genie fashion, "It's out of the question."

"OK, don't think of giving *us* a wish," I suggested, "think of it as giving *yourself* a wish. After all, you're part of this you know."

"That's what I mean," he gave me a snotty glower. "The laws of Solomon demand any wish I grant must be for the benefit of others and not myself. Do you think I'd even have to take this gig if I could merely wish myself a fortune? You're dumber than you look."

"No need for name calling," I responded.

Nephtys was passing by, adjusting one of the final bags on the cart. "Moron." She spat at me casually. Ah, pet names, I love a good pet name.

Getting out was even easier than getting in, except for the loud huffing and puffing Fritz and I let out as we dragged the cart through the maze of halls. Each one of our wheezes was punctuated by a grown from Harry, who was still playing his role as the cart. Fritz and I gave out about halfway through the trip, collapsing on the hard stone floor of the GOA headquarters. That's when Sparkles cast an unseen servant spell to carry the load the rest of the way out.

“You could have told us you could do that earlier,” He grunted with his usual derision.

Sparkles merely smiled. “I wanted you to feel you were accomplishing something.”

Sometimes Sparkles cheerfulness is the kind of thing which makes you want to strangle her. Fritz probably would have, but he was so exhausted from pulling the cart, he could barely follow the wagon. Poor Harry, he was still the cart.

We only ran into two others as we left the building. They too looked like GOA accountants, but we never got the opportunity to ask. Fritz took out one with his axe and Nephtys got the other one as he was trying to conceal himself in a dark corner.

Once outside, Nut told us to stop. He ran around the front entrance and cut small sprigs of leaves from the local bushes. He put one on each of us, tucking it in our hair behind one ear. Nut even tucked a few between the sacks Harry was carrying. “How cute,” Sparkles professed to adjust her hair. Looking over at Nephtys, I couldn’t agree more.

We set off down the road at a jaunty pace. Harry barked at us in a strained voice, “If you folks don’t find a real cart soon, I’m gonna turn into a hole and swallow this shit.”

Someone must have noticed all the bags missing from the vault. An armed party of GOA guards was soon jogging down the road at a brisk pace. We quietly slid off the side of the road and stood still. The guards passed us like we were trees. Of course, to them, that’s what we looked like, trees. Well, except of course for Harry, he looked a bit more like a bush.

“Why didn’t you think of this before,” Fritz criticized Nut.

“It only works outside.” Nut rejoined.

“Dammed embarrassment,” Harry related in a less than polite way.”

“How so?” asked Sparkles.

“A respectable mimic, resorting to artificial camouflage,” he spat, “If anyone of you breathes a word of this, you’ll never be able to sit in a chair again!”

He grunted again from the weight, “my father would turn over in his grave if he saw this.”

Nephtys laughed heartily, “I thought your father was alive?”

“Well, this will kill him if he finds out,” Harry snickered.

Nephtys put her arms around my shoulders as we walked down the road, filthy rich. This is going to be the start of a beautiful relationship.

Now the way this story ends, Nephtys and I went on to become two of the richest and most beloved adventurers this side of the Great River. I figured it was all the counting of coins which delayed our courtship, but I did eventually wear her down. OK, five years is a long time ... but not in the great scheme of things. But that’s a topic for another story. Did I tell you the one about the murderous tribe of green Troglodytes we let loose in the GOA’s branch offices?