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"The Intercontinental Union of Disgusting Characters"

Roger M. Wilcox

"Ho ho, Ringman!" the shining-armor-clad rider goaded. "You know you're no match for me!"

His bearded target ran out of the reach of his longsword's blade. The fleeing armored figure clenched his teeth and spat, "We'll see about that, Peter Perfect!"

Ringman the Bearded put his gauntleted index and middle fingers in his mouth and whistled. The bushes nearby rustled, and out charged a warhorse plated in glowing metal barding. Ringman put one foot in the left stirrup and mounted up, the clank of his own glowing armor against the horse's ringing of their adamantite alloys.

"You don't think your own warhorse will give you enough of an edge to defeat me, do you?" said Peter Perfect the Clean-Shaven. "My holy blade will rip you to shreds!" He raised the sword in his hand. It was one of those rare magic types that didn't glow.

Ringman stood firm. "As can my own holy blade!" The sword he drew did glow; in fact, it pulsed an intense greenish-white and hummed a bit. "Prometheus!" he addressed the sword. "Show this self-dubbed paladin what we can do!"

"You mean what I can do," the sword protested. Its luminous pulsations fit perfectly to the rise and fall of its voice.

Peter Perfect glanced down at his body. It was starting to move of its own accord. "Hey -- what the?!"

"Prometheus has you in a telekinetic grip. You'd best surrender before it throws you into a tree at 512 feet per second."

"Not if I can dispel the effect," Peter Perfect said, gestured, and dispelled it. He fell perfectly onto his horse's saddle.

'Zounds,' Ringman thought. 'That's a third-level spell! Where did he get the experience points to --'

Peter Perfect lowered his eyebrows and his head while staring intently at Ringman. At once, he opened his eyes wide and a cone-shaped, yellow wave of mental force cascaded out from his forehead and struck both Ringman and his horse. The armored man made his saving throw; his horse didn't, and collapsed.

Startled, Ringman got to his feet and went to the horse's neck to check for a pulse. There was none. His lower jaw quavered as he slowly turned back to Peter Perfect. "You've . . . killed . . . a paladin's warhorse! You call yourself lawful-good?!?!?"

"No, I call myself the epitome of paladinhood."

"STAND AND FIGHT, YOU MURDERER!" Ringman charged, magic- shield first.

Peter Perfect dismounted and let his horse's armor take Ringman's first blow, which was ineffective. The clean-shaven paladin rounded the animal and bashed Ringman with his shield, which sent him reeling.

'He's got the strength of a titan,' Ringman figured as he rolled head-over-heels backwards. His armor clanked heavily, but didn't hinder him as he regained his footing. "When was the last time you paid your tithe," Ringman asked as he charged and swung. His +2 to hit from strength and +5 to hit from the holy avenger finally got through Peter Perfect's armor class -10; Peter Perfect was wounded in the left shoulder.

"Argh," Peter arghed, clutching the wound. "\_Nobody\_ does more than 10 hit points of damage to me and gets away with it!" He charged and hacked, hitting Ringman's +4 shield by mistake instead of his groin.

But the force was enough to knock Ringman on his back again. Peter Perfect straddled his prey and raised his sword again. Ringman hid behind his shield, which took the blow -- in exactly the same place as it had just been hit. There was a deep groove along the shield's center.

Fury in his eyes, Peter drew back his sword a third time. Shimmering blue patterns raced from the metal girdle about his waist up the right side of his body and into his holy avenger's blade, giving him all the titan strength he needed. The sword came down like a meteor, on the same place it had hit Ringman's shield twice before, and broke the shield in half.

Ringman gasped, and rolled out of the way as quickly as he could. He stood up about twenty feet away, holding Prometheus in his right hand and drawing a lesser (+3) magical hand-axe with his left. He'd be at -2 to hit in his off hand, but at least he could use it to parry. Without his shield, his armor class was only -5.

Peter Perfect smiled. He knew he outmatched his rival. "Prometheus," he called, addressing Ringman's sword.

"Don't answer him," Ringman whispered to his sword.

"What is it, opponent?" the sword asked in spite of Ringman's plea.

"You're a holy sword. You serve a paladin, right?"

"Right."

"Well, I too am a paladin, and far superior to this wimp."

"I . . . see . . ." the sword pondered.

"Prometheus, this man is no paladin!" Ringman countered. "He must have killed at least three people on his way up here."

"No, only two," Peter Perfect corrected him. "And how many have you killed in the past week, Ringo?"

"Why, none."

"You see my point, Prometheus? You are a lethal weapon. Come join the service of a wielder who will let you be lethal."

"I like that idea," Prometheus mused. "I like it . . . a great deal." It jumped from Ringman's hands.

Ringman gaped. "Prome --"

"Don't bother me any more, wimp. I'm serving a real master now." The sword easily bridged the distance between its previous and its new owner, landing grip-first in Peter Perfect's right hand.

Ringman kneeled nearly motionless on the ground. His face was clenched in anger and sorrow. So much had happened since the day began, so much had changed for the worst.

Peter Perfect turned to walk away, but glanced back over his shoulder. He had accomplished his mission for the day. "And just to show you there are no hard feelings, Ringboy --" He tossed his non-sentient holy avenger, which landed ten inches away from Ringman point-first. "-- You can have my old sword." He mounted up, and rode away.

Ringman slowly raised his head to look at the blade. "Stained with the blood of how many?" he asked. In any event, a holy longsword was a holy longsword. He picked up the sword, wondering if a good bath would clean off the blade's blood and bad memories.

#

The advance copies of the new issue of Dragon and Dragrace Magazine were already bought up first by Clerasil and Wierd Dough, as usual. There was an interesting feature on the anti-paladin class and a side article on a new class called a "Weapons Master," but no new errata restricting the power of any obscure and exploited rules. None they would tell anyone about, anyway.

Peter Perfect rode down from over the hill range, his horse's hooves never quite touching the ground and his new sword wavering proudly. He joined the cleric and the magic-user by the lake.

"Wierd Dough, Clerasil," he presented the sword. "It looks like our skeptical rival has one less near-artifact on his side."

"You mean YOUR rival," the adamantite-armored cleric responded.

"Oh, come now, Clerasil, he would have turned against you eventually too. Balance of power and all that. I know he would have eventually come down on you, Wierd Dough." He pointed to the guy in the white Robe of the Archmagi. "You're a chaotic force in his eyes."

"Not as chaotic as some people I know," Wierd Dough commented.

Peter chuckled. "I'm not chaotic, just competitive. Say, the tide looks a little high on the lake this afternoon. I'd better fix that."

Actually, the tide was just where it should have been, but Peter wanted to show off. He gestured, waved Prometheus a few times, and threw a pinch of dust into the lake. A 200 foot by 200 foot section of the water sank out of sight.

Clerasil was astounded. "That's a fourth-level spell! I know magic swords can't have that spell, so you must have cast it; but last I saw you you were only tenth level. You'd have to be at least fifteenth level to cast that spell."

"I'm twentieth level, actually."

Wierd Dough's jaw dropped. "How did you get so many experience points so quickly?"

"Well, how'd you guys get your experience points?"

Clerasil cleared his throat. "I plane-travelled to the Abyss and cleaned out all the demon lords."

"Likewise," Wierd Dough said. "I went down through the nine circles of Hell and destroyed all the arch-devils. And a good deal of greater devils to boot. Nothing like a pair of petrification glasses with the lenses put in backwards."

Peter Perfect inhaled and exhaled contentedly. "I got my ten levels from one lowly centaur."

"WHAT?!" the other two said in unison.

"Half the centaurs carry gems, right? This one happened to be carrying a couple million gold pieces worth. I just cut him in half, stole his gems, and got one experience point for every gold piece they were worth."

Clerasil quickly hauled out the Book of Infinite Wisdom. "Hey, that's right! A single gem can be worth up to a million gold pieces, if you roll the dice right."

"Well, what are we waiting for?" asked Wierd Dough. "Let's go mug a centaur and take his four one-million-gold-piece gems!"

"Kill a centaur and take his four 1 000 000 g.p. gems," Peter Perfect corrected them.

#

Three centaurs later, Clerasil's level went from 28th to 38th, and Wierd Dough's jumped from 18th (just barely arch-mage status) to a whopping 49th. They would have gone farther, but that was maximum spell ability in their campaign. Clerasil could now cast ten of each of the seven levels of clerical spells per day (plus 2 each 1st, 2nd, 3rd, and 4th level spells due to his superior strength of will), and Wierd Dough could cast 13 of each of the nine levels of magic-user spells each day (well, 26 actually, thanks to his 5 rings of wizardry).

They also had an extra 12 million gold pieces between themselves to spend. Digging up another obscure rule, they found a use for a couple million of them: By using the psychic plane-travel ability, they could not only survive contact with a small black hole but actually destroy it and gain another major psychic power in the process. They each bought about 30 black holes ("Spheres of Annihilation," they were called on the open black market) for some 30 000 gold pieces apiece, ran into each one, and gained every psychic discipline known to man and god alike. These made a fine addition to the spells and potions whose effects had been made permanent upon them, and let them keep pace with Peter Perfect who had already gone through the spheres-of-annihilation bit before they'd even thought of it.

The whole group was decked out almost beyond recognition. Enough rings, cloaks, magic armor and shields, bracelets of defense, and sundry magic gadgets to bring their armor classes down to the lowest allowable in the universe, -10; protection scarabs with enough gear to give them a 95% chance of avoiding the effects of magic that is supposed to be unavoidable; three or four different magic helms, all stacked one

within the other, with the outer one bearing gems of explosive proportions; rings on each finger, covered by dexterity gloves, covered again by another ring on each finger; and all the wands of automatic missile fire stored inside their portable holes.

Ringman peered through the trees carefully at the group. With all their magic items, they must have detected him by now, he figured. They doubtlessly wanted him to see what power they held. It was disgusting.

"Do you realize how powerful we are now?" Wierd Dough asked. "We could take on an army and win!"

"Ah, from such humble beginnings spring such mighty oaks," Clerasil mused.

"Oaks can be cut down," Peter commented, symbolically swinging his Axe of the Dwarvish Lords through the air. "We can't. And as I recall, our beginnings weren't too humble."

"I was there, remember?" Clerasil replied. "We were in that dungeon together. The experience point values of the magic items alone was enough to boost us both to ninth level. The Dungeon Master" -- his voice quavered in fear as he spoke the words -- "would have sealed us off and doomed us in a half-mile-thick concrete prison if you hadn't threatened to kill off the characters he was running in your campaign."

"Yeah, and then he got tired of that campaign anyway," Peter noted.

"In any event," Wierd Dough continued, "We are positively disgusting in our power level. Holy swords and artifacts are nothing more than furniture to us. Look at that stack of artifacts Clerasil has."

Clerasil blushed.

"There must be others like us in the world. I know there must, because I've picked up several high-powered dummies on my crystal ball who didn't have the foresight to wear a detection-proof amulet. I say we form a union -- a worldwide union. All the disgusting characters from around the globe can come to meet here on the shores of Crysglass lake, on this very spot." He drew Excalibur, his +6 dagger of sharpness. Peter Perfect followed his example and drew Prometheus, as did Clerasil who drew Mjolnir, his sentient hammer of thunderbolts. They raised their weapons together to the sky. "And we shall call it . . . the Intercontinental Union of Disgusting Characters!" 'I think I'm going to be sick,' thought Ringman.

#

Now of course paladins can't get sick because they're totally immune to all forms of disease, but Ringman did a pretty good impression on his way back to town that evening. He felt miserable. At least the saloon might have warmer greetings for him than Peter Perfect had.

"Hey, Ringman!" someone called out when the magically- armored man clanked through the swinging doors. "Hey, Ringman!" said another. He was sort-of a hero to this town. A year ago, when the town was threatened by the huge ancient red dragon Smogzilla, he had killed one of her babies with Prometheus and forged one of its scales into the head of an arrow of dragon slaying. Smogzilla had fallen with a single shaft in her breast.

"Gimmie a milk on the rocks," Ringman said to the bartender.

"Hey, Ringman!" said a young man who sat down on the barstool beside him. Ringman felt ready to bury his head in his hands. "I hear you stopped Peter Perfect from getting into town today."

"I didn't stop him," Ringman winced. The noise level in the barroom cut in half. "He was after me. And he killed two people just to get to me. That's what happens when you carry around a highly intelligent holy sword. Look at what I have now."

He drew his recently-acquired holy longsword out to show everyone.

"It ain't green no more," the bartender noticed.

"It's not even the same holy avenger." He sheathed it. "He could have killed me, but I think he knows he did more damage by letting me live. He has Prometheus now, of the sword's own will, since it realized that Peter Perfect would use it more for its intended purpose. And that's not the worst of it."

The youth next to him gulped. "I couldn't think of anything worse than Prometheus working for that so-called paladin."

Ringman turned and gazed at him solemnly. "How about Clerasil and Wierd Dough becoming far more powerful?"

The bartender gasped. "Those two're Peter Perfect's associates, ain't they?"

Ringman nodded. "And they're forming a union that any disgusting character from anywhere on Central Earth can join. All of them with the strongholds they've built from the gems they've stolen from centaurs, and the small keeps they've gained from a deck of many things, all leaving those and the people within them so they can join with the other disgusting characters not three miles from this very spot. We'll be flooded with Peter Perfects and Clerasils and Wierd Doughs, most of which might not even be 'good' like those three claim to be."

Amid the pallor of doom that had fallen over most of the patrons at the saloon by now, a young lady strode up to the bar and proclaimed, "Gimmie a wine on the rocks." She slapped a gold coin down on the counter. It made quite a dent, particularly since it was 3/16 of an inch thick.

Ringman scanned her affectionately. Blond hair, blue eyes. She was probably 17 or 18 years old. Her outfit was skin-tight, which worked very nicely. She would have passed for a gorgeous lady of the night were it not for one thing: the broadsword stowed in the sheath on her back. He turned to the man next to him, who was also eyeballing this woman. "She's been carrying that broadsword around with her for weeks now."

"Maybe that's because she's a broad."

Ringman shook his head, grinning. 'At this point I'm glad she's not wearing any armor,' he thought. 'One crack about breastplate and I'd go off the deep end.'

"Most people training to be fighters," Ringman addressed the woman, "Wear some form of armor for protection."

"Huh?" she turned. "Oh, hi Ringman. No, actually I'm not going to be just a fighter. I'm training to be a melee weapons master."

Ringman puzzled. "I've never heard of that class before."

"Here," she drew a rather ratted-looking magazine out from her back pocket. "It's in next fortnight's issue of Dragon and Dragrace. I got an advance copy."

Ringman took the magazine slowly. "Where'd you get this from?"

She smiled. "I stole into the outskirts of Clerasil's camp today while he and his merry men were off somewhere else. Odd, the errata pages in this issue seem to have been torn --"

"That place must be mined with traps all over the place. How'd you get past them without being detected."

"For one, I don't have any magic powers or magic items, so their magic detectors wouldn't go off. Secondly . . . I have the power to cloud men's minds, so as to appear . . . invisible."

Ringman rolled his eyes up into his head. 'Psionic invisibility,' he thought. 'What next?'

"Well, anyway, what's this melee weapons master class like?"

She pointed to the magazine. "It's on page 32."

"Uh . . . I can't read very fast. Could you just sort-of give me an outline?"

She retrieved her magazine and chuckled a bit. "Okay, silly boy." She opened to page 32 and cleared her throat. "'The weapons master is a sub-class of fighters. To be a weapons master, a character must be human or half-elven, and have at least 15 strength and a dexterity of not less than 16. High ability scores bring no experience point bonus. A weapons master may be of any alignment.

"Weapons masters combine many of the advantages and disadvantages of fighters and monks. They may not wear armor or shields. They begin with proficiency in but one weapon, like monks, and thereafter gain proficiency in a new weapon every three levels, like fighters. They use the monk's table for experience level progression, requiring 500 000 experience points for every additional level beyond the seventeenth.'"

Ringman commented, "Doesn't sound too good so far."

She closed the magazine. "Those are about the only disadvantages the class has. They get 10-sided hit dice, get the extra hit point addition for 17 or 18 constitution that fighters do, use the fighter's to-hit table, make their saving throws off of either the fighter's or the monk's table, whichever is better, get to add in half their level as damage points every time they hit with a melee weapon they're familiar with, just like monks, and get an effective armor class in front whenever they're wielding a melee weapon equal to what a monk of the same level would have, plus the dexterity adjustment for armor class monks should have gotten in the first place."

Ringman's eyebrows went up slowly as he blinked. "Impressive."

She sidled up closer to him. "They also get to roll for exceptional strength if their strength is 18. I'm just as strong as you."

"That's a pretty sizable claim, lady. I'm almost as strong as an ogre." He put his right elbow on the bar and lifted his hand. "Let's see you prove it."

She smiled and put up her own right arm. Their hands grasped each other, their faces hardened, and they began to push. Their arms stood fixed, vibrating against each other perfectly perpendicular to the table. Ringman's gave an inch, then hers gave an inch to make up for it. The sweat on their palms was reaching pressure-cooking

temperature due to the adiabatic pressure between their hands. Finally, Ringman jerked his hand away and exhaled loudly.

"Hey, I wasn't finished yet!" she complained.

Ringman rubbed his finger bones. "You've more than proven your strength to me, young lady. You'll make an excellent warrior."

"Weapons master, please. Ordinary warriors don't get to add their dexterity to-hit adjustment with missiles into their to-hit chance with melee weapons, or get as many attacks per minute with a melee weapon as a monk of the same level does with his open hands."

Ringman's jaw dropped open a foot. "How do you get \_that?!?\_"

She took out Dragon & Dragrace. "Right here, page 34, top and bottom paragraphs."

Ringman quickly formed the words "melee weapon," "dexterity," "to-hit," "monks," and "open-hand attacks." "All right, I believe you. How come I never heard of these bonuses?"

"Because only melee weapons masters get them, and they're a hot-off-the-press character class."

"So," Ringman changed the subject slightly, "What \_is\_ your dexterity?"

"Only eighteen now, but --"

"I see. Uh, and your constitution?"

"Oh, eighteen, of course."

"Of course." Ringman was getting worried. Straight 18's across the board was a sure-fire ringer for that new I.U.D.C.. "Do you have anything that's not an 18?"

"Sure. My hit points are only 14. And my level's only 1."

'Maximum hit points,' Ringman thought, 'all 18's, a character class deadlier than any previously devised, and psionics. I think I'm in big trouble.' "What do you intend to use your talents for?" he asked.

"Killing centaurs and taking their four 1 000 000 gold piece gems."

Ringman gasped.

She put her left fist to her hip. "So that I can drive away those Disgusting Characters. If there's anything the world doesn't need, it's more political pressure."

Ringman let out a relieved sigh. "For a minute there, I thought you were going to join the IUUC."

She chuckled. "For a minute a while ago, so did I."

"Say, you can be any alignment. Have you decided on one yet?"

She thought a moment. "Why, no, actually."

"Might I suggest lawful-good?"

She turned it over in her head. "You know, that sounds like a pretty good idea."

Ringman smiled affectionately. "I'm very glad to hear that."

"That way, I can change my character class to cleric at level 30 and wield the Mace of Cuthbert."

#

Even before dusk the next day, new disgusting characters were dimension-walking in. There was the Great Druid Koenieg, the Grandfather of Assassins Wild Max (who was half orc by race), and the Grand Master of Flowers Middle Monk. There were also a few obscure wraiths with the word "Sauron" emblazoned on their T-shirts, but they were only wearing one ring apiece so Wierd Dough sent them away.

The initiating process started out slowly, but by the time the evening rush set in they had the system pretty well figured out.

"Name?" Clerasil questioned the latest entry.

"Rango."

"Class and level?"

"Ranger, level 17."

"Alignment?"

"Chaotic good."

"All major and minor psionic disciplines?"

"ALL of them? Why, no, I --"

"Tch tch tch. Armor class?"

"Negative ten."

"Good. Main weapon?"

"Longsword of dancing."

"Hmph. You're going to have to do a lot better than that. What's your saving throw against spells which normally allow no saving throw?"

"My WHAT?!"

Clerasil looked him square in the eye. "My God III, man, haven't you even heard of a scarab of protection? Look, you're obviously not prepared for this. Come back tomorrow after you've exchanged some of those gold pieces for real magic items."

Rango turned and left, disgruntled. As he kicked a pebble from side to side while walking away, Clerasil shouted back, "And don't forget to make whatever +6 sword it is you're going to get sentient! We can't have a union without special purpose powers, you know!"

The next few days acquired numerous patrons of moderate level who had yet to go through the centaur process. Eventually, not only were Middle Monk, Koenieg, Wild

Max, and even Rango added to their ranks, but so were Da Bad Dude (a 31st-level, neutral evil illusionist), Melnic the Loud (alias Disgusting Bard, chaotic-neutral), and Dirk the Destructive (a 20th-level anti-paladin). Dirk and Peter hit it off quite well.

Ringman was scouting their camp again as he had done so often in the past, and he practically cried. What good was he, a 9th-level paladin who pays his tithe, donates his excess, and keeps within the limit of magic items, when compared to an army of state-of-the-art killing machines?

Footsteps heralded the intrusion of another party on his scouting post. Startled, Ringman drew his holy avenger and assumed a defensive posture.

The weapons mistress from the saloon stopped and rolled her eyes up into her head. "Oh for crying out loud, it's only me."

Ringman sheathed his sword. "You took a lot of chances coming here. Do you know what's going on in there?"

"That's what I came here to find out," she replied. She kneeled down two feet to the left of his old scouting position, looked, nodded, and turned to him. "I did it."

"Huh?" he kneeled down beside her. "You did what?"

She took out the four giant diamonds she'd stowed in her newly-acquired leather backpack. "I made a hit on a centaur. Peter Perfect was right! I tell you, if they're all carrying loads like this the species won't survive."

Ringman looked down solemnly. "You . . . you killed one of them?"

"No, I jumped out of the bushes with broadsword in hand, and yelled, 'Hold, creature, and face the wrath of my sick sword!' He just dropped the gems and ran. I was ready to use my psionic blast on him and everything."

Ringman chuckled. "The centaurs must be used to these raids by now if they know enough to drop the gems and scam."

"You know, for a fighter with a 10 intelligence you're pretty thoughtful. I just decided on my alignment not a week ago, and you've probably been living with it all your life."

"I'm 23. I've been a paladin for a few years, so I'm used to this alignment by now. Oddly enough, the only reason I'm lawful good is because I have a 17 charisma and I didn't want to waste it. Now, even if I could be, say, a chaotic-neutral paladin, I'd never change my alignment for the world. I've seen its true virtue. I hope you will too."

"Well, I have at least a couple more weeks to think it over. These stones only brought me up to 18th level."

Ringman shook off the impact of that statement. "So you're --"

"-- armor class -7 from the front. And I get four attacks per minute and can hit armor class -10 on a 14 or better -- 9 or better if you add in my strength and dexterity bonuses."

"I see. And when you've gotten another four gems, then what?"

"Then I'll be 26th level, and only have two million gold pieces -- er, experience points to go before level 30, when I'll change and become a first-level cleric."

"And when you've taken the stones of a few more centaurs and climbed all the way to 39th level for the full added hit dice, then what will you do with your life?"

"Why, what else? Buy magic items, of course. The black magic market isn't particular who they sell their magic items to, as long as they get list book price. And with these gems I'll be able to pay more than enough."

"And who's gonna buy million gold piece diamonds? You don't exactly have a 'small change' spell, do you?"

"Of course not. I was planning to slice the diamonds up into little 10-gold-piece-valued diamond pieces. Two hundred diamond pieces and I got me a +1 broadsword -- or fifteen thousand d.p. and I got me a +6 vorpal weapon broadsword of dancing, life stealing, 9 lives stealing, and wounding, with 17 intelligence, speech and tel --"

"Enough, already! Creating artifacts out of the void with money. Where does this black magic market get its magic-users and alchemists to enchant the items?"

"It doesn't. There are an infinite number of magic items on the market. You just have to have the money to buy them. . . . Uh, I've gotta be going now. I'm gonna buy that sword and some potions."

"Hey wait --" he began, but she was already gone. He was staying in danger hanging around here, too, he figured, since the sun had already set, so he turned to a path that wouldn't make too many rustling noises and headed out. Having no place in particular to go, he went to find out more about the new weapons mistress.

"Ah, you're back here again," the bartender commented, wiping a glass with a rather old rag. Bartenders never clean glasses, but this always looks appropriate. "Milk on the rocks?"

"No, no. Uh, that blond woman with the broadsword who was in here three days ago -- do you know her name?"

"Nope. Never heard it."

"Well then, do you know where she lives?"

"Why, no, I was looking the other way when she left." The bartender was looking the other way now, too, only his palm wasn't. His thumb rubbed against his fingertips.

Ringman sighed, and hauled out a quarter-inch-thick disk of a gold-silver alloy. This naturally occurring alloy was about ten times as valuable as plain silver. The bartender glanced at the offering pressed into his hand, and commented, "Uh, yeah, I saw her leave, but I didn't see which way she turned the corner." His thumb still rubbed across his fingers.

Ringman added another electrum coin to the pile. This was evidently enough. "She went down Bloodlust alley, heading west," the Bartender blabbed. "My guess is she probably lives at 1324 Memory lane, one block south of the corner of Death street and Gore avenue."

Ringman raised his eyebrows as he dismounted his stool. "That's a pretty impressive guess."

The bartender grinned. "I read it off the lost-and-found address on her broadsword."

'Oh yeah,' Ringman thought, 'Reading.' He left the bar.

He approached 1324 Memory lane as quietly as he could in his plate mail. He wanted to get a candid look at his new acquaintance in action; he couldn't afford to trust anyone who was that close to becoming a disgusting character. Stealing up against her front wall in the early night darkness, he peeked in through her front (and only) doorway.

A lit lantern hung from her stony ceiling, illuminating the one-room abode in pale yellow. She was alone; from the looks of her place, she lived alone. She was seated with her back to the doorway -- a very bad move in a place without a door -- and the table before her was littered with glass beakers, some full and some empty. She had already bought the potions she spoke of.

Ringman scanned the walls for the magic sword she claimed she would buy. There was no evidence of such a blade anywhere, although the sword she had been wearing was mounted on one wall. Then he caught it: a leather strap, like the type used to hold a sheath on one's back, dangled under the table. Above it, he could see part of a metal handgrip glowing with a pale blue light. Well thought out, he figured.

"Discovery!" she suddenly barked. Ringman froze, but she made no motion to turn around. He observed her more closely. She appeared to be scribbling something on a tablet. Five seconds later, she picked up a potion from one pile and a potion from the pile on the opposite side of the table, and drank them both at the same time. Then she picked up one white and one purple ball about an inch in diameter, rattled them in her hand, and tossed them across the table. Scanning the tops of the pseudo-spheres, she proclaimed "Discovery" again, and scribbled something down on the same tablet.

Ringman looked closer at the spheres. They seemed too angular to be ordinary balls, and they clattered too much when they rolled. Then, he recognized them: they were icosahedrons, twenty-sided polyhedra, each face of which had some marking on it.

In fact, each side of each object had the same marking on it: a number "0."

#

The last shovelful of dirt descended on the tremendous grave. Ringman had buried his warhorse with his magical plate barding and horseshoes of the zephyr on. Those were just more power-hungry magic items like the disgusting characters used anyway. He realized that now. He had once tried to walk their path, before he had heard of centaur's gems; that was how he had obtained his +5 plate mail, Prometheus, and all the rest. He wanted no part of that now.

As he began to carve the markings into the headstone with his holy sword, a finger tapped his shoulder. He turned; it was the weapons mistress.

Or rather, she was but an ordinary weapons mistress before; now prayer beads and an adamantite holy symbol hung from her neck. "Well, lady," he said, scanning her bedecked body, "I see you've joined the clergy."

"I am the clergy," she corrected him. "Thirty-ninth level cleric. Ten of each level of spell -- twelve of levels 1-4. Like the Mace?"

She produced a jewelled battle mace from under one of her robes. It practically hummed with a life all its own. "This used to belong to Cuthbert," she said. "That cleric was a wimp, though."

Ringman was too solemn to get caught up in her mood. "Behold my steed," he proclaimed, indicating the grave. "Slain by Peter Perfect without a scratch on him."

"Psionic blast, eh? Hmmm . . . how long has he been dead?"

"Ten days. He died the day before Wierd Dough, Clerasil, and that murdering Peter Perfect formed their new union."

"Dig him up."

"WHAT?!"

"Trust me. Just do it."

"Oh, all right," Ringman replied nervously. He scooped the dirt off the top until his shovel hit adamantite, then began clearing the side dirt away as well.

"There," he said when finished, shoving his shovel blade into the ground beside him with his full strength. "There he is. I hope you're satisfied."

"Lift him out of the grave," she said.

"What? You're crazy. I'll do no such thing. Besides, he's too heavy and . . . and too fragile."

She grinned ever-so-slightly, pointed one of her rings at the animal, and began concentrating. Rays of light as fine as spider webs raced from her ring and her forehead, enveloping the corpse and lifting it out of its nine-foot-deep hole. She set it down on the ground beside the grave, and began praying.

'Clerics have a knack for not letting you know what they're doing,' Ringman observed.

Finally, she pointed her right index finger at the warhorse. There was a spark on her fingertip simultaneously with a spark on the horse's underside, and the animal blinked its eyes open.

Ringman gasped, and knelt down by the horse's head. "You're alive, old boy!" He turned to the weapons mistress/cleric. "He's alive!"

"I told you to trust me. He'll have to rest for another ten days, but he'll be up and running after that."

Ringman clasped her elbows in his hands in exasperation. "Oh, I don't know how to thank you!" He hugged her.

"Clerics aren't really supposed to hug, you know," she commented, hugging him back anyway. As he pulled back, she said, "Wait until I'm an arch-mage too."

Ringman slapped his hand over his eyes, but this time he was smiling. "Magic-user too! Where will it all end?! Ha HA, but you did it, you brought my warhorse back to life! And I don't even know your name!"

She smiled broadly at that. "Well, now that my level as a cleric has exceeded my level as a weapons master, I can switch freely between the two classes, using edged weapons and effective armor class and all that." She pulled the +6 vorpal broadsword of ridiculous power out from her back-sheath. "I call myself . . . Sick Sword."

Ten figures jingled with magic items down the dusty noontime main street of the town. Several people stopped to watch the procession, but more fled in fear back into their houses. No one as yet knew what motivation, if any, lay behind the Intercontinental Union of Disgusting Characters, and few wanted to be there when they found out.

Ringman accompanied the mayor out to meet the unknown that was marching down the street. For a town hero and a paladin, he was certainly nervous. They stopped walking when they reached the town square.

And so did the Disgusting Characters. "Citizens of this small town," Clerasil began, "We represent the single most powerful combined force on Central Earth: the Intercontinental Union of Disgusting Characters. What was once the territory of king whoever the seventy-fifth is now ours. Each of us controls a country or even an entire continent of his or her own. We are the new strength, the new Union."

"And what do you want from us?" the mayor asked.

"Yeah," the gathering crowd replied.

"Only that you recognize that your ancient feudal system will be undergoing some changes from its newly appointed heads of state."

"And how," Ringman interjected, "Did you manage to take over every country in Central Earth in less than two weeks?"

"Yeah," the crowd conferred.

"Simple," replied Peter Perfect. "You can't very well oppose an incoming force without an army, can you? What little armies they had couldn't even touch us. We just walked in to every major political stronghold on the planet and took over. Nobody even had to die."

"Although some did," Wild Max commented.

Ringman drew his holy longsword and his +3 magic hand axe. "If you think you're just going to push this town around, you've got another thing coming."

"Ho ho ho," Peter Perfect gloated. "The town hero." He drew Prometheus. "Even your old sword knew you were a fool." He pointed the hilt at Ringman, and spider-silk-thin beams of telekinesis lifted the paladin off the ground. "Even your old sword bears adversity toward you!"

Ringman dropped both weapons, too frightened to speak. He simply shook in midair.

"Even the bravest of heroes," Peter Perfect began. Prometheus picked up his thoughts and released Ringman. ". . . must fall!"

The bearded paladin landed with a clatter. He propped himself up and shook his head to regain his bearings. Getting to his knees, he picked up his sword and axe, then defeatedly put the hand axe away.

"And now," Melnic the Loud began, "To celebrate this joyous day, let us have music!" He set the Recorder of Ye Cind down on an adamantite instrument stand and took out his Ollamh Banjo.

"That's a great idea," Clerasil commented. He opened one of his portable holes and retrieved Heward's Mystical Organ from inside it.

Melnic was a bit skeptical. "Uh, can you play the organ?"

"I'm a cleric; of \_course\_ I can play the organ!"

"All right. Recorder, Rainbow Connection!"

The recorder began sustaining a B-flat. Melnic strummed the introduction to the song on adamantite strings. Clerasil copied what Melnic was doing in parallel organum. 'Sure he knows how to play the organ,' Melnic thought, and began to sing:

"See that pool over there, well,

It's really fresh water,

And a quick dip now might be re-freshing!"

The audience stood entranced by the charms of the bard's music. Even Ringman was drawn in by the twang of those adamantite banjo strings and the virtuosity of that 23rd-level medieval voice. Only one person in the mob made her saving throw versus magic at -7; but she was enough.

The song ended, and the crowd cheered uproariously. Half of them headed off for the lake to take a quick dip -- although seeing as the only lake around had its access through the disgusting characters' base of operations, they probably wouldn't make it past the glyphs of warding and spiked pit traps. Ringman hadn't been suckered in by the lyrics, but he was just as jubilant as everyone else there.

Well, almost everyone else.

Sick Sword looked on with her arms folded, leaning against a cottage, with five dull gray gemstones orbiting her head. "That's nice, Disgusting Bard," she commented loudly enough to be heard. The crowd silenced itself. "Now, can you play me 'The Impossible Dream'?"

A hard lump formed in Melnic's throat. That was exactly the kind of song that could rend the Disgusting Characters' reign. And this girl was obviously immune to his charming melodies. "Sorry, I . . . uh . . . don't do requests. Not anymore, anyways."

Wierd Dough stood ground for him. "Just who are you, young lady?"

Her eyes narrowed. "Your worst nightmare."

She saw the blur long before it was any threat to her. The arch-mage had whipped out his copper wand and was chanting, "Watt and Ampere, volt and ohm, let this discharge find its home!" She could have easily done something in the twelve seconds it took him to say that, but what she was about to do would be far more disquieting.

The lightning bolt leapt out of the tip of that magic lightning rod just as she knew it would. Gritting her teeth, she pointed one of the rings on her left hand straight into the oncoming bolt. The bolt struck the ring; half of the damage went through to her, and half raced back to Wierd Dough. Unprepared, Wierd Dough gasped as the bolt homed in on the like ring he was wearing, inflicting half the remaining damage on him and sending the left-over quarter back to Sick Sword, who bounced half of that back again. The lightning bolt completed ten strokes before this was through.

"A ring of spell turning!" Wierd Dough gasped. "I never figured on --"

"If you had inspected her body more closely," Peter Perfect commented, "You would have seen that she's equipped with just as great a magic arsenal as any of us. She

even has the stretch marks characteristic of probability-travelling through numerous Spheres of Annihilation."

Wierd Dough shot him a threatening glance. "Yeah, I suppose you inspect women's bodies and look for stretch marks a lot, don't you?"

Peter clasped his hands behind his head casually. "All the time."

"All right, you weak bosons!" Sick Sword shouted. "You're not dealing with some obscure ninth-level by-the-book paladin any more!"

'Thanks a lot,' Ringman thought.

"I am Sick Sword, weapons master, high priestess --" She cast a meteor swarm spell at nobody in particular. All the Disgusting Characters' helms of brilliance went into action, and they all ended up taking 10 damage points each. "-- and arch-mage. I have gone through all the power-building rituals you've undergone for the sole purpose of disbanding or destroying you." She glanced at Ringman. "If you intend to take this town, you must take me first!"

Peter Perfect's eyes were red with rage. "Get her, boys!"

And before any spell effects or weapons reached her, she word-of-recalled out of town.

"Huh?" Clerasil said, stereotypically. "Where'd she go?"

The instant he said "Where'd she go," a non-corporeal mouth appeared on the town statue of somebody-or-other the seventy-fifth, and began speaking in Sick Sword's voice: "I'm sure you're going to have a real fun time finding me through my mind-blank and detection-proof amulet!"

"Damn it!" Peter cursed. "She's been planning this all along!"

Ringman leaned against his sword and gave a thumbs-up sign in the direction of where she'd revived his warhorse; that was the most likely place she'd teleport to. Glancing around, he caught sight of one townswoman of half-elven stock who wasn't the slightest bit afraid of the recent goings-on; in fact, she looked rather interested in the Disgusting Characters. This worried the pants off him.

Her name was Omnion, and she was indeed interested in the I.U.D.C.. She not only wanted to become one, she wanted to lead them. What character classes weren't represented in the Disgusting Characters? Fighter and thief. Fine then, she could become both of those classes, and throw in magic-user for a little firepower support. What alignment was missing? Lawful evil.

Perfect.

#

Omnion had no trouble locating and killing the nine centaurs for their gems. She found a lair with nine of them in it all looking the other way, snuk in, and backstabbed one of them with a longsword and her exceptional strength; it screamed and died. The other eight immediately rushed to attack her, but they all rolled "1"s and missed. She quickly scooped up the four million-gold-piece gems from the dead centaur, and with her sudden gain in experience easily dispatched the remaining eight.

That was how she told the story. The truth was she waited for them to line up in a 20-foot cone and then psi-blasted them all.

A few permanent potions, several permanency spells on the spells she could make permanent on herself, 30 spheres of annihilation, two or three decks of many things, the entire gamut of magic items, and all the left over artifacts and relics later, she stood at the front entrance to the headquarters of the I.U.D.C.. "Hello, fellow Disgusting Characters," she began with a slightly evil smile, "The name's Omnion. I want to join up."

Clerasil was bookkeeper for the IUDC now, thanks to his clerical skills. He looked at the girl over the top of his glasses. "A half-elf? All right, what do you do?"

She leaned on his desk menacingly. "Fighter-archmage-thief. 63rd, 49th, and 73rd levels, respectively -- that's only for the maximum spell ability as a magic-user. Every artifact not already owned by one of your characters is mine. My main weapon is a sentient +6 vorpal longsword of wounding named 'Hymenslayer.' I have all major and minor psionic disciplines, all permanent spells and potions that I'm able to use and have any use, every magic item in the book . . . and I'm lawful evil."

Clerasil's eyes were already wide open. He cleared his throat: "Well, I, uh, think you live up to our standards. Uh, Wierd Dough! Come and look at this!"

Wierd Dough strode over to Clerasil's desk and read the notes he had just taken. "Forget it. The Book of Finite Wisdom clearly states that half elves can't reach upper levels as fighters or magic-users."

"It also says that characters can't buy magic items," Omnion added coldly, "and that you can't wear more than one ring on each hand. I'm sure you wouldn't want the Dungeon Master to find out what you've been doing behind his back."

Wierd Dough backed away. "Oh, no, no, of course not, you'd be a welcome final addition to our group. You've got just the two classes and the one alignment we've been missing."

"I know," she said wilily.

And Sick Sword, who was eavesdropping on this exchange from Ringman's nearby bush, got really worried for the first time in her life.

#

Sick Sword found Ringman in their private little clearing, tending on both his horse and his campfire. He hadn't gone back into town since the Disgusting Characters made themselves known there. She commented as she approached: "You know you're chancing it by coming here."

He turned. "Huh? Oh, hi . . . uh . . . Sick Sword."

"Any time they want they could locate you with a crystal ball or a wall mirror, teleport in, and kill you and your warhorse."

Ringman stared at his boots. "They could do that wherever I am. At least here they won't slaughter half the townspeople in the process."

Sick Sword got to the point. "They have a new member. A half-elf."

Ringman closed his eyes and nodded his head. "I saw her smiling at the I.U.D.C. the day you fended them off. I detected evil on her."

"Lawful evil, to be exact. Her name's Omnion. She's got a +5 shuriken of returning around her neck in the shape of a black triangle with a hole in the center. My guess is the black stands for evil, the triangle for law, and the hole for law and evil enveloping the whole universe. She's at least as powerful as Wierd Dough, and is a fighter and thief to boot so she can score quintuple damage and get off five double-handed melee attacks per minute."

"Five?" Ringman ventured. "I thought fighters only got up to two attacks a minute."

"Not if they're under the influence of a permanent potion of speed at 150% effectiveness."

"Oh. . . ."

"What really worries me about her is that she's got more artifacts than Clerasil; and every major benign power on them is 'weapon damage is +2 hit points.' That means she's +50 to every armed strike just from her artifacts alone. Seriously, Ringman, she's after the whole of Central Earth. She won't bother with a ninth-level paladin like you unless you get in her way."

"It's my job to get in their way. Why do you think Peter Perfect's always on my tail? And what do you think she's going to do to you?"

"I can take care of myself," she said, put her arms around his neck, and kissed him on his right cheek.

Ringman looked into her eyes. She was truly beautiful. "You sure you don't have a boyfriend?"

"None at the moment," she mused. "I'm too feisty for most." She stroked his beard, moving his head to face hers. "And now that I'm an archmage first and a priest second," she kissed his nose, "I have no statute against having one."

Ringman smiled affectionately. "I'm very glad to hear that," he said, and bridged the gap between them.

#

Omnion hadn't been a Disgusting Character for two days, and already she was making waves. Wierd Dough and Clerasil jokes were on everyone's lips. Peter Perfect was referred to as just a Ringman that didn't let his morals get in the way. The originators of the union talked worriedly among themselves in the darkness.

"I'm worried," worried Wierd Dough.

"You were the one who let her in," Clerasil noted. "And her sacrilege! She would have to be an atheist."

"So what?" Wierd Dough responded. "So am I."

"Atheism seems to be the norm for wizards," Peter Perfect mused.

"So is spelling their first names wrong," came a shout from a drunk Dirk the Destructive.

Peter, Wierd, and Cler moved further away from the circle gathered around the fire. It was only one burning leaflet, but an affect normal fires spell could do wonders. "I didn't misspell it by accident," Wierd Dough explained, "I just spelled Wierd weird to be weird."

"And your last name?" Peter asked.

"My father was a dough maker and I handled his shipments, all right?"

"Anywhich," Clerasil began, "Omnion is well on her way to taking control of this group. We're the senior members --"

-- by almost a whole month," Wierd commented.

-- and something has to be done."

"Like what?"

"Like insult her pride. That's where she's weakest. She claims to have every artifact in the Book that we don't, right? Well, that's not quite true. . . ."

The original three approached Omnion. "Like your artifacts," Wierd Dough said to her. "Tell me, which ones do you have?"

Omnion stood and polished Hymenslayer in her left gauntlet of dexterity. "Oh, Queen Elhissa's nightingale, Arnd's invulnerable coat, Baba Yaga's hut, the crystal of the ebon flame, Yagrax's tome, the evil crown, orb, and sceptre of might . . ."

"How about the mace?"

"The which?"

"The mace. Cuthbert's +5 mace of disruption."

"Oh, that. Only a saintly cleric can use that. No, I don't have it; I suppose one of you does."

Clerasil shook his head. "None of us is a lawful-good priest. None of us even possesses it."

"Well, then where is it?" Omnion demanded.

Wierd Dough smirked. "In the possession of Sick Sword."

Omnion thought a moment, then nodded. "I'll get it by sunrise." She left the encampment.

"That was keen, Wierd Dough," Clerasil commented. "If she kills Sick Sword, we have no opposition, and if Sick Sword kills her, we have no competition. We win either way."

#

Ringman was awakened by Sick Sword's stirring on top of him. The sky was overcast, but it wasn't dark and he could tell it was about 2 a.m.. His ally and girlfriend was scratching some numbers into the ground.

"What are you doing?"

"Oh, sorry, did I wake you up? Yes, I did. You were dreaming about a city of gold and light."

"How'd you know that?"

She tapped one of her amulets. "Medallion of ESP with Empathy. Indispensable for lovemaking. Anyway, I'm calculating a certain half-elf's backstab damage. Let's see . . . d8 from longsword, +14 from strength, +50 from artifacts, and +6 from the weapon bonus is 71-78. 71 x 5 is . . . 355. I only have 339 hit points." She sighed. "She could kill me in one strike."

She got up, momentarily forgetting that Ringman was inside her Robe of Eyes with her. "I don't mind the robe," Ringman said, "It's kind of cozy. But do you have to have those stupid gray pebbles whirling around your head?"

"They add 50 to my psionic strength total. You wouldn't want me to be unable to throw a tower of iron will around you, wouldja?"

"No, I suppose not." He slipped out of her robe and into his adamantite plate mail. The armor felt awfully cold against his skin by comparison.

"Of course, she has to be totally outside my field of vision to backstab me, and that's impossible with a robe of eyes on."

"Speaking of vision," Ringman said, looking off into the distance, "There's something strange going on with mine. Everything's color-coded."

"Oh, that. I cast an infrared vision spell on you before we dozed off. It lasts for two days, and I can memorize it now anyway. You can see heat differences as bands of color. The offshoot of this is that you can see in the dark."

There was just the slightest whoosh of air, and a half-elf-shaped heat apparition appeared behind Sick Sword. All Sick Sword did was inhale a bit. ". . . and a good thing, too," Ringman realized. "Behind you!"

"I know," Sick Sword replied, staying perfectly still. Just as the half-elf lunged with her longsword, Sick Sword whirled around and parried it with the +6 dagger of wounding in her left hand. Since her armor class couldn't be reduced below -10 anyway, the sword hit; but she only took 75 damage points.

The half-elf gasped. "You survived."

"Correct, Omnion." Sick Sword drew her sentient blade, the one named after herself. It looked like a glowing blue variant of the broadsword belonging to a certain muscle man on Eternia. Ringman was making like a jack-rabbit for the sidelines. "And now, I'm gonna carve you up in one minute."

She lunged, and struck first, seeking to carry out her threat. She would have been out of luck if she'd aimed for her torso, groin, or upper arms, but her legs, forearms, and head weren't so well guarded. Neither the dagger strike nor the broadsword strike rolled a 1, so both of them hit and Omnion lost 71 hit points. The half-elf could still take over two hundred fifty points of damage, but the devastation of her opponent's two-weapon strike had impressed her.

Sick Sword, having lower speed factors than her adversary (a considerable advantage of being a weapons master in these situations) struck with dagger and sword again before Omnion. She got to do ten attacks per minute to Omnion's five, anyway. Her dagger hit-and-did 40 damage; but her sword somehow managed to miss. 'Oh no,' she thought, 'I've rolled a one! This is it. . . .'

Omnion struck with both hands, delivering a massive 145 damage points to Sick Sword's body. Ringman cringed in fear; the wounds were horrible. Normally, they'd both be healing half the damage they inflicted, but the wounding powers of their blades prevented that. Sick Sword had taken a total of 220 damage; another sword-dagger combination like that last one and she'd buy the farm. She had no other choice but to cast one of her 26 ninth-level spells.

"\_I wish\_," she chanted, "\_That all damage on my body be healed\_" And then, it was.

Omnion practically dropped her sword. "You're more than a weapons mistress, aren't you?"

Sick Sword puzzled, "You mean you couldn't see what I did that day?"

"No, and no one in the Union wants to give details about the day you challenged them. They never hinted that 'Sick Sword' was also an archmage."

"And a high priestess," she bragged.

"A \_cleric\_?!? They're the worst! Anyway, you're too nearly an even match for me if I attack frontally." She grinned an evil smirk at that, albeit a lawful evil one. "See you later." Her second helm glowed purple for a moment, and she vanished.

There was a long, dead silence. Ringman approached Sick Sword's heavily-glowing-infra-red form cautiously. "Are you all right?"

"No."

Startled, Ringman took off his gauntlets and came closer, preparing to lay-on-hands. "What's wrong, what's the problem?"

Sick Sword stared up into the murky heavens. "She is." The cloudy weather displeased her. She took her adamantite holy symbol from around her neck and began waving it back and forth. "Omnion is more than an even match for me in one-on-one melee combat; and she'll never chance going up against me that way again." She lit a stick of incense. "She's going to find some way to ambush me."

"How, with all those protection devices you have?"

She was manipulating her prayer beads now. "There's a way through everything, Ringman. She'll find some obscure loophole in the Book of Infinite Wisdom that'll allow her to get by me. Or I could fall asleep -- people have a tendency to do that, you know."

Ringman thought for a moment. "You could plant a shrieker and use it for a burglar alarm."

Sick Sword chuckled. "No, no, shriekers wouldn't be able to see invisible objects."

"Then put a robe of eyes on it."

Sick Sword held his arm with her unoccupied hand. "My dear Ringman, she could see any such trap the moment she teleported in and blast it to fragments before it went off."

"Then the blast would wake you up."

"And she'd run around me invisibly and jam her sword through my kidneys."

"But that robe lets you see anything."

"Hmmm . . . I guess that's true. We'll have to move our camp, you know. She knows about this place now. And for your safety as well as mine, for the time being . . . you'd better not hang around me anymore."

Ringman got behind her and began massaging her back. "I want to be by your side every step of the way."

"Hon, if they locate you, then they locate me, too, and Omnion'll probably kill both of us."

"And if you're not around, what's to prevent them from capturing me and using me as bait?"

She finished waving her symbol, and pondered. "Good point. You'd better stick with me." She pointed to the sky. "Isn't it a beautiful night out tonight?"

It was true. The stars smiled down on them where there had been clouds only a few minutes before. The waning moon had already set, leaving only points of light in the crystal dome above their heads.

"The fifth element, perfectly hard ether," Sick Sword mused. "Sure wish I could have a battle suit made out of that stuff."

Ringman sat by her side. The threats were piling on worse and worse, and abruptly, he began humming "The Impossible Dream."

#

Sick Sword was nervous as a baby away from its mother. She had sent Ringman away on some superfluous errand to hunt down game, just so he wouldn't be there when the time struck. She looked at the sun; it was about half an hour past noon. The attack would come at any moment.

The day before, she had called upon Cuthbert's mace to grant her daily audience with the Dungeon Master itself. "When will Omnion or the Disgusting Characters attack?" she had asked. "At half past noon tomorrow," a voice had channelled back through the mace. Well, it was half past noon tomorrow, and she still wasn't quite ready, psychologically speaking.

"I don't have to worry about backstabbing," she told herself, "I've got my robe of eyes which allows me to see dust of disappearance and in a 360-degree arc. I think."

One more time, she drew out the Book of Infinite Wisdom. Hers was a copy she'd bought from a garage sale, with the words "Fire Elementals Suck" scratched into the efreet on the cover. Yes, she was right, but there was another stipulation: "A light spell thrown directly on a robe will blind it for 1-3 minutes."

Oh oh. Her clerical light spell took 24 seconds to cast, but how long did the magic-user spell take? It had been so long since she'd needed to use it; she hauled out her spell book.

"Lesse . . . hold portal; jump; light -- ah, here it is. Level: 1, Range: 60 feet (or yards outdoors), Duration: 2 minutes/level, Components: verbal and somatic, Area of effect: 20 foot radius globe, Saving throw: none, Casting time: . . . six seconds."

Six seconds. A tenth of a minute. Faster than she could carve up anybody or throw any kind of devastating spell, even from a wand. And without her robe of eyes, anyone cloaked in dust of disappearance would be totally invisible, even to her permanent detect invisibility spell. What could defend against that?

Ah, yes, that was right, dust of appearance countered dust of disappearance. Maddeningly, she opened one of her portable holes and began digging through the contents. She found one of the ivory tubes containing the dust she had been looking for.

She was about to sprinkle it on the ground around her when nearby space bent and a female half-elf stepped through the rift.

Sick Sword froze. Omnion was indeed covered by disappearing dust. "I asked my artifacts about you, too," she said, and cast her light spell on Sick Sword's robe of eyes just as Sick Sword had feared.

But she was ready. The instant the spell was thrown, Sick Sword uncapped the tube containing her own magic dust and blew through the other end at where Omnion was. Unfortunately, she'd neglected to label her tubes; this wasn't dust of appearance, but dust of sneezing and choking.

But that would do just fine. It should incapacitate Omnion for 5-20 minutes, enough time for her robe of eyes to recover and for her to hold her breath, rush in, and carve Omnion up in one minute. Then she recalled one of her own necklaces, the one that was a staple of every disgusting character that allowed its wearer to adapt to any environment -- including sneezing and choking dust. Omnion would be unaffected.

Sick Sword glanced around, terrified. Where was she? Where could she be? She spun 180 degrees and hacked at empty air. Where? Where? WHERE?!

Actually, Omnion was right behind her. Hymenslayer plunged quite easily through Sick Sword's heart. She screamed slightly, and fell down dead.

#

Omnion was at the lifeless body instantly. First, she removed all her rings and set them in a big pile. That would insure that no regeneration would take place. Then, she took off her amulet of life protection and smashed it with her vorpal longsword of wounding. She could practically see the ki escaping and going to the first of the Seven Heavens. But in order to ensure her permanent demise, she would have to slay her soul as well. She smiled evilly, touched her amulet of the planes, and went through a wrinkle in the astral dimension. Heaven would be a hostile environment for her, but that was no problem.

Ringman had heard the noise and came running just in time to miss Omnion's exit. He stared down with terrified eyes at the prone weapons mistress, at the fatal, bloody wound rent through her robe of eyes, protection cloak, and white archmage robe. Instantly, he got to his knees beside her and listened for a pulse, hoping against hope that she was merely unconscious. But there was none, and his healing powers could do nothing to bring her back. He sat back on his heels, still hovering over her motionless form, ready to cry.

The hissing, crackling sound of a teleportation gate opening snapped him to attention. He drew his sword and axe; none of the Disgusting Characters were going to desecrate this body without getting through him first. In the direction the sound had originated, a shimmering curtain of light peeled back to reveal a figure clad in adamantite plate mail, carrying magic shield and hammer, wearing three layers

of helms, and bearing a symbol around his neck that resembled a sextant. It was Clerasil; he approached with a mixed look of aloofness and concern.

Ringman clenched his expression. "Haven't you people done enough already?! She's already dead, for Heaven's sake!"

Clerasil's eyes opened a bit wider, and he upped his pace until he reached Ringman and the deceased Sick Sword. Ringman nervously held him at sword point, but the cleric only brushed the holy avenger aside and said, "That won't be necessary."

Clerasil bent down to observe the body. The paladin had to deal with four conflicting emotions at this moment, so he didn't interfere. The cleric replaced the rings on her fingers, then looked at the broken amulet with a start.

"My God III!" he exclaimed. "That half-elven bitch destroyed her amulet of life protection!"

"So what?" Ringman asked contemptuously.

Clerasil turned to face him, holding the gadget in his hand. "If this amulet was destroyed when Sick Sword's psyche was inside it, her soul is gone forever!"

Ringman dropped his weapons and his jaw.

"Unless . . ."

"Unless WHAT?!?"

"We Disgusting Characters always have a back door installed on our life protection amulets that allows our souls to escape even if the amulet's destroyed. If she picked up on that practice she could still be alive in Heaven."

"You call that alive?"

Clerasil flicked his holy symbol. "Where I come from, yes!"

"Then . . . she could be re--" Damn, he almost let the word "resurrected" slip out in front of one of his senior nemeses. He had to give them as few ideas as possible; if she could be raised from the dead, then the Disgusting Characters might want to prevent that.

"She could be raised any time," the cleric noted, "But not if someone destroys her soul while it's in Heaven."

#

Omnion's eyes darted back and forth among the angry-and- scared new angelic recruits. She hadn't been there two minutes; this wasn't nearly enough time for Sick Sword to pass through the pearly gates.

Her mistake. She caught sight of the glowing saint-initiate just as she passed through into sanctuary. Well, she'd be damned if she'd let that stop her; she charged toward the gate, plowing through any angels that got in her path.

Saint Peter's monstrous form towered in front of the gate and blocked her. "Hold," his voice thundered. "None as diabolic as yourself may pass through this portal!"

"Cram it, Peter Imperfect," she sneered, and hacked him to pieces.

#

"If Omnion's gone to Heaven to destroy her soul," Clerasil said, readying his holy symbol, "Sick Sword's in big trouble. All her magic items and material components are down here."

"But Omnion's evil," Ringman noted. "She'd never survive in Heaven."

"Oh yeah? I made it through the Abyss pretty well, didn't I? Now stand back; if she's not brought back before Omnion gets to her, she's finished!"

"What? You mean your going to resurrect her?"

"No, raise her from the dead. It's a less exhausting spell, and it's faster to cast."

Ringman was aghast. [editor's note: no, not in the literal sense, you monster manual moron!] One of his mortal enemies was actually saving the eternal life of his closest friend and lover! He listened more closely, as the cleric was saying some things in Common besides the normal Latin verbal components. He caught snatches of, "Been so blind?", "Working for the wrong side all this time!", "Power for power's sake . . .", and "Hope I'm in time to undo what I've done."

#

The streets of Heaven beneath Omnion were indeed paved with gold; then again, the streets of Hell were paved the same, so that made little difference. The whole place was just as her storybooks had depicted it: lots of mindless undead angels wearing white choir robes and brass rings held in place above their heads by bars going to the backs of their collars, big grassy fields that had been untended so long they were all choked out by weeds, and piped in harp music eking in from everywhere. The place would have made her vomit had she not had an 18 constitution. Where the Angel was Sick Sword?

Ah, there, with the armed security guards escorting her to the concorde. This was getting a little too schmaltzy for Omnion to take, but she consoled herself in the fact that once she'd sprayed Sick Sword's soul's non-corporeal blood all over the runway things would get more agreeable. Not wanting to let her get in that SST and take off, she scrambled over the heads of the waiting crowd holding Hymenslayer high above her head and yelling some incomprehensible get-out-of-my-way phrase.

Sick Sword looked back and gasped. She was completely unarmed, and couldn't cast any spells that required material components, including fireball and lightning bolt. She had to hold Omnion off somehow. Concentrating, she flexed her brain neurons into action and froze Omnion in a psychokinetic grip.

Omnion put her hands on her hips. "This would stop me if I didn't have a flying potion at 150% effectiveness permanently on me." She flew forward and countered the telekinetic force. The logo on the jet, "Trans Heaven Planelines," grew nearer and clearer. The force barrier Sick Sword was creating with her mind doubled in intensity every sixty seconds, but this gain wouldn't be rapid enough to prevent Omnion from flying through it, reaching her, and carving her up in one minute. Sick Sword's face rang with dread.

#

"Don't be too late," Clerasil commented as his spell neared completion. He pointed his finger at Sick Sword's body. "Don't be too LATE!" His arm recoiled, a spark ignited at his fingertip, and the spark duplicated itself over Sick Sword's heart.

There was no motion. Clerasil and Ringman stared in open-mouthed horror. She should at least be breathing by now! Her soul couldn't have been annihilated this soon; it couldn't have!

The body twitched slightly, and as though suddenly awaking from the climax of a nightmare, Sick Sword's eyes popped open. And all three of them let out a welcome sigh of relief.

Sick Sword's mind started churning almost instantly. She felt very tired; she hadn't been resurrected, just raised from the dead. The amount of time she'd been dead was a good indication of that, too. Ringman couldn't have raise-deaded her; he could barely cast three cure light wounds spells. He couldn't have retrieved a 9th-level cleric that fast. Only one person alive she knew of could arrive that quickly and cast that spell. She strained to look over her shoulder, and found Clerasil exactly where she'd expected him to be.

"Why . . . did you save me?"

"Don't talk," Clerasil soothed her. "Just rest. You were almost annihilated."

"When . . . Omnion . . . finds out . . ."

As if on cue, the Heavens shook with the fury of a thousand Zeuses and lightning bolts resounded the word "NO!".

Clerasil snapped to attention, and nodded. "She's found out. C'mon, we've got to get you two out of here to a place where she can't find you." He glanced at the paladin. "Hmmm, no amulet. I'm afraid you're too much of a risk." He took the second in the stack of helmets from Sick Sword's head and placed it on Ringman's. "Concentrate on the town square," he instructed.

"Uh . . . okay."

"Now, go there."

So, in a flash of purple, he went. It was as simple as that.

Clerasil turned to Sick Sword. "Do you have any psionic strength left?"

"Tons of it."

"Great. Then teleport us out of here. Anyplace. Anyplace except town or Union headquarters."

"Right. How about . . ." Boink. ". . . the cracks of doom?"

Clerasil glanced around. "You teleported us to the interior rim of an active volcano?"

"First place that came to mind."

"Well, at least she won't find us here. She'll run out of her day's supply of teleport spells and psionic points long before she guesses to come here. I sure wouldn't have thought of it."

Sick Sword chuckled. "\_You\_ don't have a 22 intelligence."

#

Ringman was a little annoyed. Here he'd followed that good cleric's instructions to the letter, and he and Sick Sword didn't even follow him into town. The patrons of the town had all looked up into the town square when he popped in, but when they saw it was only him they wiped their brows and lost interest. That wasn't too uplifting either, but he kind of expected it. He could slay an ancient red dragon, but couldn't even scratch eleven people.

He let the teleporting helm dangle in his sword hand as he walked away from the town's center. He was worried sick for Sick Sword; he knew about the recovery time for being raised from the dead, and at any point during that Clerasil could decide to snuff her back out again. Then again, Sick Sword could defend herself better unconscious than he could defend her at full strength.

The creaking of the pub's swinging doors was a welcome feeling; he hadn't seen the place for days. "Hey, Ringman!" somebody called out. Then practically the whole bar joined in: "Hey, Ringman!"

Ringman smirked a bit and said, "Hey." He approached the bar. "One double paladin health shake. On the rocks."

"Hey, Ringman!" the bartender hailed him as he retrieved the necessary equipment. "Long time no see! What's been goin' on?"

Ringman sighed. "I wish I knew. Omnion killed Sick Sword."

"WHAT?!?" the whole bar expurgated.

". . . and then Clerasil raised her from the dead."

The bartender puzzled. "What's that Disgusting Billy Graham reject got up his sleeve?"

"Apparently, defection. People usually don't mumble about having 'worked for the wrong side all this time' when they're casting raise-dead if they believe in what they've been doing."

"You mean Clerasil ain't tryin' to take us over no more?"

"Well, I --"

"HOORAY!!" issued the cheers from the bar. The piano player instantly began playing Wild West barroom music and everybody started dancing on the table tops. Everyone was so excited that they not only didn't pay the slightest attention to Ringman, but failed to notice that pianos hadn't been invented yet as well.

A league away, Omnion fumed. She felt like strangling anything, even her pet imp. Only one cleric could have gone in that fast and raised her mortal enemy; Clerasil had turned legit. She glanced around at the other Disgusting Characters in the encampment, picked out Wierd Dough, and spat, "I'm going to murder that cleric and destroy his soul!"

"Soul destruction isn't what we're here for," Wierd Dough replied, still wrongly confident that he was in control. "A dead defector's soul can't do anything to us from the plane of its alignment."

"Oh yes," Omnion interrupted on her own wavelength. "That reminds me. Destroying his soul is a good excuse for me to clean out Elysium. Now then, where would they have most likely gone?" She trod over to her pile of maps.

Wierd Dough's face clenched into anger. Responding, his pseudo dragon leapt up onto his shoulder. He tromped over behind her.

She saw him coming from behind, easily. "But first," she stood up from her maps of Central Earth, "I need to let off some steam. Maybe I'll go wipe out the plane of Olympus."

The plane of chaotic-good! That was more than Wierd Dough could stand. "Now see here, young lady --"

"CRAM IT, wizard wimp!" She gestured and cast a lightning bolt at him.

Wierd Dough was half-expecting it, but it still shocked him [sic] that she'd actually fry him in anger. He stuck out his spell turning ring and deflected the bolt back at Omnion, who in turn deflected it back on him. The bolt doubled or tripled its speed with each rebound, setting up a resonance field that soon exceeded the speed of light. Several things could have happened at that point, but what did happen was the quantum-tunneling lightning bolt sucked both Omnion and Wierd Dough along with it into the positive material plane.

Wierd Dough took an instant to get his bearings. He was standing on a glowing planet under a glowing sky, with glowing trees and a glowing lake nearby. It looked suspiciously like a glowing version of the Disgusting Characters' camp on Central Earth. The only thing that wasn't glowing was Omnion.

She drew her sentient +6 vorpal longsword of wounding and her +6 dagger of wounding; the weapons looked like they were having a devil of a time functioning on this plane. "I could carve you up in one minute," Omnion declared, "But I'm not going to."

Wierd Dough still held his ground. "You can't. This plane works for me, not you. My spells are at one-and-a-half times normal strength here, while yours won't even work since they have to tap the negative material plane!"

She growled, then involuntarily glanced at her imp, who had come along and felt quite nauseous at this point. Wierd Dough's pseudo-dragon seemed to be enjoying itself quite a bit, grinning and hopping up and down on his master's shoulder. Even an arch-mage's familiar felt the pull of its magical environment.

"Even your ninth-level ball lightning swarm spell couldn't penetrate my items' defenses fast enough to keep me from slicing you into luncheon meat. NEVER forget who is most powerful in this group -- NEVER forget who the real leader is!" She touched her amulet of the planes, and left with her imp.

Wierd Dough rubbed his glowing chin. She was right, she was the Union's most powerful member. And she had assumed leadership even though she'd failed to destroy her objective. This was definitely getting out of hand. Well, he'd give her one last chance. . . .

Wierd Dough popped out of the ether just outside the Disgusting Camp, and peered in. Omnion was hunched over her maps, explaining them, and her imp and a bunch of other Disgusting Characters were leering over her shoulder. Doubtlessly, she was describing her latest plan to annihilate Sick Sword and Clerasil. Wierd Dough scanned the leering group; there was Wild Max the chaotic-evil Grandfather of Assassins, Da Bad Dude the evil illusionist, Dirk the Destructive the anti-paladin, Rango the chaotic-good ranger (\_that\_ was a little unsettling), and -- Great Bahamut's ghost! -- there was Peter Perfect looking in maniacal amazement at Omnion's plot over everyone's shoulders!

That was the last adamantite straw. The group had schismed, Omnion's people on one side and the less violent on the other. 'I should have figured this group was doomed from the start,' Wierd Dough said telepathically to his pseudo-dragon, 'But I was too power-hungry to see it. What cause would a group like this have served anyhow? All the monsters are already scared to death of human beings, if they're not extinct. We can't make any advances in increasing prosperity, lengthening the average lifespan, getting people laid more often, or bettering our understanding of the universe. All we did was change the power holders from a bunch of third-level monarchs to a bunch of thirtieth-level monarchs.'

'We've got to rally Middle Monk, Koenieg, and Melnic the Loud against these guys, and find Clerasil and Sick Sword. That weapons mistress'll be our most powerful ally. What do you think, pseudo-draggy?'

'Rrrgh, I'm hungry.'

#

Sick Sword examined Clerasil's character sheet scrupulously. She glanced back up at the cleric, then down again at the sheet. "Nope. If you want to take these guys on, you're gonna have to shift a few things around."

Clerasil looked peeved. "Oh yeah? Like what?!"

"Like your artifacts' powers." She took out her copy of the Book of Infinite Wisdom. "You've got all 32 of Dhalver-Nar's teeth, Heward's organ, Guy Gaxx's ring, the Seven Rods of Parts, the good Crown, Orb, and Scepter of Might, Orcus' wand -- from it's original owner -- and even Yeenoghu's flail. And what do you have for major benign powers? 'Wall of fire twice per day.' 'Disintegrate once per day.' 'Animal Summoning III.' You're not a tenth as powerful as you could be!"

"Well, what can I do about it? I can't just change the powers on my artifacts!"

"Why do you think those powers are only pencilled in in the Book? Here, you take this eraser, rub out II:KK to get rid of 'Stone to Flesh,' and replace it with II:UU for 'Weapon damage is +2 hit points.'"

"Well . . . okay," he acquiesced, changing the entry, "But what good's an extra 2 damage points going to do?"

"You mean what's an extra 2 damage points taken nineteen times going to do. Oh, and you'll want to have one of those major powers be 'Cause Serious Wounds by touch' -- that'll up your strike damage by 3-17 every time."

Clerasil looked at the entry for the Mace of Cuthbert. "Then why didn't you take that power on your mace instead of the +2 damage points?"

"Because caused wounds can be healed magically. Extra damage inflicted by a sword of wounding can't. You have to take these things into account when you're fighting someone with a vampiric ring of regeneration. I'm just sorry there's no such thing as a hammer of thunderbolts of wounding."

"Hey," complained Mjolnir, the sentient hammer of thunderbolts hanging from Clerasil's side, "I resent that!"

Clerasil looked at the Cuthbert entry again. "Why minor power Z? What's so good about having a mind blank thrown up three times a day? It's only good against id insinuation, and --"

"Not the mind blank defense mode, the eighth level mind blank spell! It's as good as or better than an amulet of proof against detection and location. I cast one of them daily on my brownie so the Disgusting Characters won't find him." She patted her brownie on its pointy little head.

Clerasil put his fists to his waist and indicated the brownie. "Now how come I've never seen that little Pixie Stick before?"

"Don't be so dense, Cler," she replied. "I'd never take my familiar with me into a Disgusting battle. It'd be the first one to bite it. That's why you hardly ever see Omnion's imp or Wierd Dough's pseudo-dragon; they're within a few feet of their masters all the time, but they're usually astrally projected."

"Say," Clerasil figured, "If you can put your imp under a mind blank, couldn't you do the same with Ringman?"

"No, he wouldn't want to leave his horse behind," she replied, as if that explained it all.

"But I thought you had three of those things in the mace."

"Right. One for the brownie, one for the Sick Sword, and one for either Ringman or his warhorse but not both."

"You mean you put a mind-blank spell on your weapon?"

"Sure. It has a mind, doesn't it? Anything that has a mind can be detec-- you mean we've been sitting around with Mjolnir here open to outside scrying all this time?!"

"Well, yes, I never figured on locating a sentient item to find its owner."

Sick Sword didn't waste an instant. She drew the mace of Cuthbert and tapped Mjolnir with it, transferring the day's last mind blank spell into the war hammer.

"Ooch!" the hammer complained. "Watch it!"

Sick Sword exhaled. "We're damn lucky Omnion didn't know you were that stupid."

"But I couldn't have mind blanked it anyhow!"

"Oh, yes you could've. One of your teeth has power I:Z just like my mace does. A mind blank spell lasts all day."

Clerasil was taken aback. "You mean three people could be continuously protected better than if they were all wearing amulets? That's pretty sick for a minor benign power."

"No, as a matter of fact, it's disgusting for a minor benign power."

"Well," Clerasil began, trying to soothe and resume better terms with his new ally, "Since my left top bicuspid can cast three mind blanks, why don't we bring in Ringman and his horse?"

Sick Sword's nervous anger melted. "I'm very glad to hear that," she said. 'That's what Ringman always used to say,' she thought as she opened her Acme patented sure-fire Road Runner Portable Hole and rummaged for a clear crystal sphere. "We have to find him first." She found the device, took it out, put the hole on the ledge (through which she could catch glimpses of more lava), and started moving her hand over the sphere's surface.

"You have to rub these things," she commented, "Though I never could figure out why."

Clerasil watched in boredom as an image congealed out of the sphere's bent light. He and Sick Sword saw a sturdy, adamantite-plated horse floating a few inches off the ground (thanks to its glowing horseshoes) and grazing. "Yeah, horses are always grazing when you spy on them," Sick Sword commented. "I guess it's a tradition."

The image changed to a glowing armored man sitting behind a maple desk with a helm of teleportation on it in a rather plain room. He was looking at drawings of the surrounding town on the left, unable to read the legends, and sketching a rather crude likeness of Sick Sword on the right. Sick Sword and Clerasil smiled at each other.

"I think he likes you," Clerasil said.

Sick Sword tapped her medallion. "I know he feels more than that," she replied.

"How romantic. Uh . . . he hasn't gotten you pregnant, has he?"

"Why do you think I'm wearing a ring of protection?"

They turned their attention back to the crystal ball. Ringman was meticulously filling in his picture's erogenous zones. Suddenly, he dropped his charcoal, stood up, and drew his holy sword and magic axe. Two humanoid silhouettes of haze and snow had just materialized in the room.

"A couple of people just showed up who are scan-proof," Sick Sword declared. "The I.U.D.C.'s moving in on him. Quick! Use that teleporting tooth of yours to get us over there."

Clerasil shrugged, alarmed, and activated his left main incisor just as Sick Sword sent her brownie into the astral plane.

They stepped through the teleportal just in time to see Omnion and Dirk the Destructive dissolve holding a struggling Ringman between them.

#

Ringman sagged beneath his own weight. His arms and legs were bound by adamantite ropes to a ground-level adamantite crucifix; they'd stripped him of his magic items, his magic armor, and even his clothing. Even his own tremendous strength had given out trying to support him. He was nearly ready to pass out from exhaustion, when a cold hand touched his chest and he felt a nasty shock.

"Yaaaah!" he yelped. It felt like a hundred people who'd shuffled their feet across a dry carpet touched him at the same time. He could hear the static.

Omnion withdrew her hand. "Be grateful that was only a shocking grasp and not a symbol of pain. We can keep damaging you and healing you like this indefinitely."

"Well, well, well!" intruded a chiding voice. Ringman recognized it instantly. "We meet again, Ringman the goody-goody. How does it feel to be totally helpless?"

Ringman met the other paladin's stare. "I hope you find out first-hand, Peter Perfect!"

"Oh, tut tut, you shouldn't be so snippety -- especially considering the position you're in." He drew his sentient holy longsword. "Look, Prometheus, your former owner."

"Glad you could make it," the holy avenger pulsed.

Dirk the Destructive moved in and put his unholy sword under Ringman's chin. "You gonna talk?"

"Talk? I'll talk all you want! There's nothing I know that you can use that you haven't already picked from my brain! Why do you want me to talk?"

Omnion explained, "Because that's what you always have to make the prisoner do in a torture scene."

Ringman shut his eyes. "Oh brother! Look, really, what do you want me for?"

"Bait."

Ringman stopped cold. 'Oh no,' he mouthed, 'Sick Sword.'

"And that traitorous cleric. There's no way we can locate them with their amulets and mindblanks on, but with you captured they'll have to come to us. That's when we can kill them." She snapped her fingers.

Rango walked in drawing a horse by the reins. Ringman gasped; the +5 plate-barding, the two layers of magic horseshoes, the little white spot beneath his chin -- this was his warhorse.

"Since we already know you'll be super-valiant against us, I thought we'd up your cries of anguish." She tossed a scroll to Wild Max. "Max, invoke the symbol of pain on this animal."

"NO!" Ringman protested. "Not my warhorse!"

Wild Max began to read, panting with anticipation.

"You cruel barbarians! Can't you see how much he's been through already?!"

'That's right,' Omnion thought. 'Keep on screaming, Ringman. Your peril will echo across the farthest reaches of Central Earth for Clerasil and Sick Sword to hear.'

Sick Sword picked up his empathic signal, all right. She stared helplessly into her mirror of mental prowess, at the naked paladin scared out of his wits, at the horse writhing in pain. She looked up at Clerasil who was violently shaking his head from side to side, saying "No way!"

"And now that she's heard you," the evil female half-elven fighter/ archmage/thief continued, "We can do even better for you." She drew out another scroll, illuminated with gold leaf and ruby-colored ink made from real rubies. "Normally, a symbol of

pain or a few more jolting grasps would get anyone's attention, but just to be sure -  
- RINGMAN!!!"

As she read his name from the scroll, he froze. He couldn't have moved even if he hadn't been bound and panicked. 'I thought those things could only be used on creatures from the lower planes,' he worried.

Omnion read: "Oh freddled gruntbuggly, thy micturations are to me --"

Ringman cringed in pain. Yes, it was a Spiritwrack scroll.

". . . as plurdled gabbleblotchits on a lurgid bee."

Ringman could feel his discomfort mounting. It would get worse.

". . . Groop I implore thee, my foonting turlingdromes."

That was all Sick Sword could stand. With or without that cleric, she had to stop Omnion. It was bad enough she was torturing Sick Sword's boyfriend, but to do it by bending the rules about what a Spiritwrack could affect was inexcusable. She spent a few psionic power points, teleported right between Omnion and Ringman, and cut the scroll and Ringman's bonds in half with one stroke of her broadsword.

Omnion was thrilled. "GET HER!"

Sick Sword had to hurry. She snatched Ringman up in her left arm and stuffed him into one of his portable holes as she ran. Several Disgusting Characters were hot on her tail, but none were fast enough on their feet to reach her.

"Damn it!" Omnion cursed. "Where's that monk?!"

That monk, along with the bard and the druid, was in the midst of a tumultuous decision with Wierd Dough. They stared out at the fray from their adamantite X-ray proof bush. Wierd Dough turned to the Great Druid. "Don't you see what they're doing?"

"All things must exist in balance," Koenieg replied.

"First torture and now a gang-bang!"

"The Way exists along the golden path," Koenieg continued.

'This guy's more like David Carradine than I am,' Middle Monk thought.

Wierd Dough didn't want to let this unsettle him. Sick Sword's coming back around for Ringman's warhorse was doing that to him just fine. "Look, Omnion can't come back and attack us if she doesn't know we're interfering, right? All my spells are pretty loud . . ."

Sick Sword had finished cramming the warhorse in the same hole as Ringman, but she wasn't done yet. She had to get Ringman's pile of magic items, and her Helm of Teleportation, before she'd leave. She glanced around momentarily, then caught sight of a mound of junk with a sign saying, "Ringman's Pile of Magic Items" sticking out of it. That was what she wanted; she altered course and charged.

Omnion snorted. Dirk the Destructive had fired an arrow of slaying lawful-good at Sick Sword, which she made her saving throw against. Da Bad Dude had cast a prismatic wall in front of her, which she ran right through without noticing, and then an alter reality spell, which altered nothing. Wild Max had cast a fireball on her from his helm, from which she took a whole 7 damage points. Peter Perfect had

charged after her on his own warhorse, which didn't stand a chance of catching up. Well, Omnion would be damned if boots of speed, a speed potion at 150% effectiveness, and the "double movement speed on foot" major power in Sick Sword's mace would keep her at bay. Already covered in Dust of Disappearance, she cast a light spell on Sick Sword's robe of eyes and charged.

Koenieg was reciting more proverbs: "The Tree of the Universe holds the center of all --"

"SHE'S DOING IT!" Wierd Dough cried. "She's charging invisibly on Sick Sword!"

Sick Sword was nearly upon Ringman's Pile of Magic Items. A helm on one side of the stack had a piece of masking tape on it labelled, "Sick Sword's Helm of Teleportation." She also knew she was done for.

"If she reaches her, it's all over! Cast your trip spell on the ground in front of her, Koenieg! Cast it!!"

Koenieg scowled at the archmage, then replied, "Oh, all right, just to humor you."

From behind an adamantite X-ray proof bush, a piece of mistletoe waved. A lump of ground in Omnion's path curved imperceptibly upward right where her next stride would land. She hit it, and feather-fell on her face in the mud.

Perilled, she lifted her head. And she saw Sick Sword touching everything in the Pile at once, casting two of her own 8th-level mindblank spells on Ringman and the warhorse, and teleporting out.

"FRAAAAACKERS!!!!!" Omnion screamed, and shook the landscape.

#

"Whew! It's hot in here," Ringman commented.

"And it's a lot safer than our old hideout," Sick Sword returned. "But you're right, you and your horse must be sweltering. I know my brownie doesn't like this place much either. Tell you what . . ."

Everybody fell through Sick Sword's dimension door.

". . . we'll hole up on the shady side of this volcano."

That was better. The temperature was at least thirty (Fahrenheit) degrees cooler out here. The view was also far more breathtaking, particularly since it looked out on a bunch of black-capped mountains where nothing grew surrounded by scorched ground with flaming cracks. "Lovely place," Ringman noticed.

"But better than Union headquarters," Clerasil remarked.

"Yeah," Sick Sword said, "Your H.Q. must be loaded with traps. Omnion tripped trying to catch up with me; I could see her impression in the ground. Any place that can trip someone with an eighteen dexterity's pretty hazardous."

"Hmmm," pondered the cleric, "That sounds like the second level druid 'trip' spell. Funny, Koenieg never instigated any trip traps."

"And 'trip' allows the runner a saving throw to see if he or she avoids falling. Omnion'd never miss a saving throw in a circumstance like that; she'd play with loaded dice that can't land on '1'."

"Well, maybe this was some new spell that allowed no saving throw," Ringman offered.

"She'd still make her save," Sick Sword said. "Scarab of protection and eighteen pluses, remember? . . . However, Koenieg could have cast the new spell on the ground. If the ground assumes a new natural shape, that's not a magical effect, and the scarab won't help you, right?"

Clerasil worried, "But that kind of advantage -- always tripping if you don't notice it -- must incur some kind of heavy penalty on the spell's utility to make up for it."

"Perhaps. A higher casting level, or a limited duration would do the trick. How does this sound: Range 50 feet, Duration 1 minute per level, Casting time 6 seconds, No saving throw ('cause it's on the ground)?"

Clerasil nodded. "That'd do it. If that is the new spell, then that can only mean --"

Sick Sword and Clerasil chanted in unison, "Koenieg is on our side!"

Ringman's eyes opened wide. "A new ally? Really?!"

Clerasil and Sick Sword thought a moment, then said, ". . . Nah."

#

"Now then Peter," Omnion turned away from her maps, "Where would be the least likely place for a bunch of anti-Disgusting- Character disgusting characters to hang out?"

Peter Perfect pointed at the map with Prometheus. "Well, they could have gone HERE --" he made a hole "-- but I doubt it. Or, they could have holed up back HERE --" he stabbed the map again "-- but that wouldn't make much sense. Or, they could have hidden behind HERE --" he punched through the map a third time "-- but then they'd have to go on reconnaissance patrols over --"

Omnion snatched the map away. "Will you quit wrecking my documents!?! Vellum's expensive stuff!"

"I did notice one point of interest, m'lady," Dirk the Destructive commented.

"Oh? Where?"

He indicated a big black region on her maps and picked out the tallest mountain. "Right here. The cracks of doom."

Omnion smiled omniously [sic]. "Perfect. That's just where I can summon up my Legions of the Dead. If Sick Sword and Clerasil aren't there, the undead can march all the way into the populated heart of the continent. If they are there, then that'll save the trip. Bwa ha ha ha ha. I'm going to get my Ghoul Generator gear ready."

"But what can a few hundred lower undead do against them?" Da Bad Dude asked. "They're both ultra-clerics; all the monsters have to do is look at them and they'll turn to powder."

"The onslaught of ghouls will be ceaseless. They'll be pumped out of my Negative Entropy Ghoul-A-Second Monster Generator and Vegetable Slicer faster than they can be pureed. And even if they can get past this . . . the undead have one other can of tuna up their sleeves. . . ."

#

Clerasil surveyed the landscape with his Eagle Eye glasses. He usually switched one of its lenses with a lens from his Eyes of the Microscope, but he needed binocular vision now and didn't exactly want to go through having a split personality. Nothing in particular was happening, aside from the usual sulfur emissions from the ground and the black, demonic giant bats circling the volcano's rim.

Sick Sword was trying some experiment with convex and concave lenses. She said she should be able to achieve the same effect as wearing Eyes of the Eagle this way.

"Bah humbug," Clerasil replied. "Optics'll never replace good old-fashioned magic."

The brownie, meanwhile, was toying with Ringman's holy avenger. "Neat toy," the half-pixie commented. "How far can you throw it?"

"You don't throw a longsword," Ringman answered, "You use it to hack up things standing next to you."

"But suppose they're not standing next to you?"

"Then you throw your hand axe --" Ringman stood up and hafted his +3 axe into his right hand. "-- Like THIS!" He heaved it at an outcropping of soft rock, which it embedded itself into and cracked.

"Okay," the brownie continued, "Now you've killed that Evil Mutant Rock Creature, but you haven't killed his brother yet. What do you do?"

"Why, I get out my bow and --"

-- By that time he'll've reached you and will be trying to squeeze the whey from your body."

Ringman did a double take. "I don't have any whey in my body!"

"Then the Evil Mutant Rock Creature will find that out -- after he takes your body apart."

"Okay, forget the bow then, I'll just throw one of my magic arrows."

"Great. That did enough damage to make him mad. He'd still grab you and wring you out."

"Look, I've got 79 hit points anyhow. He can't kill me in one attack!"

"No, but if he grabs you you can't melee him with that holy sword. You have to throw your sword at him before he gets to you!"

"But you can't throw a longsword!"

"Sure you can. Have you ever tried?"

"Well, no, I --"

"Then what are you waiting for? Throw it at the Evil Mutant Rock Creature's brother!"

"Oh, all right, just because there's nothing else to do!" He aimed with his right eye at a neighboring rock and threw his holy avenger like he would fling a canister of sneezing powder. The blade sailed point-first into the stone, sank in half way up to its hilt, and practically knocked the Evil Mutant Rock Creature's brother off-balance.

Ringman had impressed himself. "Well, what do you know? You really can throw a longsword."

"Hey, Arthur," Clerasil interrupted, "You'd better draw that holy sword out from the stone; we've got ghouls half a league away!"

"Ghouls?!" Ringman yiped, suppressing a perk of rejoicement. He leapt up, dashed over to the first stone, yanked out his axe, moved over to the second, grabbed the hilt of his holysword, and pulled with all his might. The sword didn't budge.

"Oh, come on!" he cursed. "You're not even sentient; how can you discern your True Wielder?"

The sword still refused to give.

"Pretty please?"

The sword practically leapt into his hand. Ringman rolled his eyes up into his head and started toward the precipice at the edge of their campsite that led downward.

"No need for that, fuzz face," Sick Sword restrained him. "I can get us there a whole lot faster."

Ringman stared her squarely in the eye. "I know you can," he said deliberately. "And you can vaporize all the ghouls a lot faster, too. There isn't anything you can't do faster than me!"

Sick Sword shot a glance at his groin, and she suppressed a chuckle.

Ringman's face reddened. "BESIDES that, I mean! Look, I'm more a nuisance to you than an asset! Sometimes you make me feel so . . . so impotent."

Sick Sword could hardly contain herself. She was staring long and hard at his groin now. "Believe me, you're anything but --"

"WILL you stop that?! You know what I mean! And . . . besides . . . I don't try to be very fast. I don't exactly consider twenty minutes to be a quickie."

Clerasil's eyes widened as he acknowledged the paladin's prowess.

"I'm of no use to you, or anyone," Ringman continued, "Except maybe as a bed partner. With heroes like you pushing the outside of the envelope when it comes to the rules, rolling dice with 0's on each face, and mugging centaurs for their four 1 000 000 gold piece gems, what can a legitimate paladin like me accomplish?"

Sick Sword glanced down at the multiplying ghouls. Their numbers had exceeded countability. Without bothering to wait any longer, she teleported the lot of them down to the edge of the ghoulish plague.

Ringman took an instant to regain his equilibrium, and almost fell off his warhorse. His mount had been teleported there too. He glanced to his left and saw the disgusting cleric and the anti-disgusting weapons-mistress/cleric/archmage, side by side, brandishing their respective holy symbols. He returned his glance to the right and saw a ghastly-looking [sic] bony creature in the center of the ghouls with red glowing eyes.

Clerasil and Sick Sword saw it too.

"That lich is really gonna screw things up," Sick Sword noted. "The best either of us'll be able to do is turn 1-12 of them, instead of dispelling 7-12 of them."

Clerasil puzzled for an instant and said, "Oh, that's right, in a mixed group of undead, turning is based on the most powerful member if that one is a leader and the undead aren't mindless."

"That's why Omnion used ghouls instead of zombies," Sick Sword replied. "Lowest of the mindful undead. I sure wish we could just get rid of that lich; it would make our job a whole lot easier."

No sooner had she said this than a shimmering white arrow shot across the gap and hit the lich square. Before the creature could return fire with any spells, it screamed and disintegrated.

The two turned to Ringman, who was holding up his bow and smiling. "So much for my arrow of slaying undead," the paladin reported. "Glad I could put it to good use."

Sick Sword joyously cried back, "Great move! You'll get at least eleven thousand experience points for that one!" She turned to Clerasil. "Ready?"

Clerasil nodded and concentrated on his holy symbol. "One . . ."

"Two . . ." Sick Sword did likewise.

"THREE!" they chanted in unison. Then: "BEGONE!!!"

Waves of clerical force zoomed in toward the ghouls, intersected each other, and dissipated ineffectually.

"Huh?!?" Sick Sword wondered.

"We're getting destructive interference," Clerasil noted. "Who's your deity?"

"Why, God II, of course."

Clerasil snapped his fingers. "THAT'S the problem! I worship God III. Our different turning channels are cancelling each other out."

Sick Sword scanned the area. "Okay then, I'll take that side, and you take this side." She split off without waiting for a reply.

Six seconds later, from opposite ends of the ghoulish horde, the words echoed out again: "BEGONE!!!"

Ten ghoulish gray bodies evaporated into dust on Clerasil's side. Sick Sword had been slightly luckier, as usual, and had absolved twelve of the undead back to the dust from whence they came. The other 436 would have to be dealt with by more conventional means.

Sick Sword went into action like a living thunderbolt. Her jewelled outer helmet glowed bluish, which was painful and mildly damaging to the ghouls, but this couldn't begin to match the lethality of her melee. Every one of her twenty strikes in that first minute struck home and flung their formerly undead corpses over a dozen meters away; she destroyed a ghoul every three seconds. Clerasil was a bit slower -- especially since the only two weapons anyone could use in his off hand were both edged -- but not much less effective: he struck and downed two ghouls and was on the verge of a third. Ringman got in one successful holy- sword-strike that cleaved its target, but his hand axe only wounded the ghoul it sank into.

Watching the ghouls try to scratch through their defenses was a ridiculous farce. They looked like enraged monkeys trying to break through five-centimeter glassteel, as seen from the glassteel's other side.

But one dull gray arm came too close to Ringman; he instinctively tried to block it with his left arm, but with no shield it penetrated to the flesh beneath. Ringman clenched his arm and suppressed a yowl; fortunately, the ghoul's normally paralytic chill didn't take hold of him this time.

"I'm used to having my shield," Ringman mumbled. "DAMN that Peter Perfect!"

Sick Sword and Clerasil continued to dominate the ghouls' attention for the next three minutes, while Ringman stuck next to Sick Sword and took care of any strays her La Machine fighting style might have missed. That was when Sick Sword's sick sword vibrated to tell her it was ready.

"Okay, Sick Sword," Sick Sword instructed her sick sword, "Do your stuff!"

The sword instantly leapt from her hand and began slaughtering ghouls all by itself, with a prowess and might equal to Sick Sword's. Normally at this point Sick Sword would take out her +6 bastard sword of wounding, but since her enemies were undead she instead drew the Mace of Cuthbert.

"Ya-hooo!" she shouted, lunging into the nearest gray thing mace-first. The instant the mace touched undead flesh, the ghoul disintegrated into dust.

"Nice effect, this disruption," she commented, "But I did SO enjoy seeing them fly back forty feet."

With Sick Sword's dagger, mace, and dancing sword going through the enemy ranks like a Tasmanian devil, there wasn't a single ghoul within twenty feet of Ringman. He wondered momentarily how they had gotten within his Protection from Evil in the first place, then recalled that he broke it by attacking one of them. But now it was back up, and he could relax and let the expert-and-a-half handle the situation from a safe distance.

And it was just this relaxation that triggered an alarm within him.

"My deity!" he gasped. "While we're here getting our kicks with the ghouls, more of the Disgusting Characters' minions could be storming Town!"

He moved to the sidelines, mounted his warhorse, glanced around, relocated his girlfriend by the flying grey flesh and weaponry, rode up to her over the piles of dead undead, and grabbed the bluish-glowing helm of brilliance off of her head from behind.

"What are you DOING?" she barked, slicing a ghoul in half with her dagger. Her ESP medallion only pointed forward, you see.

Ringman took the second helm off her head and put the glowing jewelled one back on. "I've got to return to my Town!" he said. "Their homes and lives are in jeopardy!"

"Can you handle it?" she asked, lightly tapping another ghoul and thus blasting it out of existence.

Ringman reached down into one of her portable holes and retrieved one of her spare million-gold-piece diamonds. "I can take care of myself, love. You're not the only one with an at-least-average intellect around here."

He put on the helm, pictured the town, and disappeared from view, horse and all.

#

The ether shifted slightly around the town square, and a paladin-and-horse-shaped apparition materialized into a paladin and a horse. He scanned the horizon over the one-story building tops; sure enough, a rather large clump of animated corpses was approaching from four miles off. He had no time to waste.

He trotted off northward out of the town square, looking around constantly. Where was that black market that Sick Sword bought her items from? "Gotta find it," he mumbled. "Where? Where?!"

SUDDENLY, just as he turned into Texas Chainsaw alley, a dense crescendo filled the air and a sales stand materialized from out of nowhere. The back end of the shop was blurry, and the negro sales clerk looked like he should be selling uncaffeinated lemon-lime soft drinks.

"Ahhhhhhahahahaha," the salesman chortled, "Welcome to Dirk Vader's black magic market for black market magic! Would you like to buy . . ." he produced a glass flask filled with pink liquid ". . . a potion of speed?" He waved a finger in front of Ringman's face. "Crisp and clean, and all caffeine; no natural colors, no natural flavors."

"Um, no," Ringman waved it off. "Not right now, I don't think. I --"

"But of course, you don't want to lose a year off of your life. Then how about . . ." the liquid he produced this time was gold ". . . a potion of extra-healing?"

Ringman shook his head, exhaled, and slapped Sick Sword's million-gold-piece gem on the counter. "I want --"

"Oh, I am sorry effendis, but we cannot accept any denominations over twenty gold pieces."

"Grrrrr," he growled, then took out his holy sword and decided to try Sick Sword's trick. Seventeen cuts later, he'd cleaved the one gem worth a million gold pieces into 131 072 gems worth 7.629394531 gold pieces. He pushed the pile forward.

"Ahhhhh, that's more like it. What may I do for you?"

"Give me every potion of super-heroism you have in stock."

The clerk looked puzzled. "Our stock is infinite."

"Uh, okay, then, just gimme 428 of them."

"428, eh?" the polynesian said, reaching back behind a black etheric cloth. "What kind of Enterprise are you planning to embark on?"

"Never mind that. Oh, and field plate! Yes, I need 428 suits of field plate armor."

"Ahhhhhh," he repeated, rummaging around behind the cloth again. He pulled out the front end of a tremendous pile of metal and flasks. "That comes to 834 600 gold pieces -- we're having a sale on non-magical field plate this month."

"Can you deliver it to the town square?"

"For another 100 gold pieces."

"Immediately?"

"THAT'S another 5000 gold pieces."

"Fine. Do it."

The dark-skinned islander snapped his fingers. "Done."

"Uh, keep the change," Ringman indicated the pile and turned away.

"But you still have 160 400 gold pieces left. Surely, there must be something else you want."

"No, no, I'm in too much of a hur . . ." He slowly turned back. "Well, actually, you COULD interest me in a +4 magic shield. . . ."

#

"It's no use!" Clerasil shouted to Sick Sword from half an undead horde away. "No matter how we attack, they're being created faster than we can pulp them!"

"Yeah, I know, it's that accursed generator situated against that rock crevice over there. This reminds me of a game based on a piece of armor worn over the hands." She cut two ghouls in half simultaneously; her dancing sword was in its four-rounds-of-melee-combat cycle instead of free from her hand.

"I'll try and fry that thing." Clerasil wiggled his fingers, said something in Latin, and threw a half teaspoon of sulfur into the air. The yellow powder vanished, and a pillar of fire thundered down over the far-off generator and struck it squarely. When the flames receded six seconds later, though, the generator was unharmed.

"Damn that bitch!" Clerasil cursed. "She musta given it a magic-proof vest or something."

"Or made it out of electrum. You know how temperature resistant that stuff is."

(Actually, at this point, they weren't talking to each other so much as communicating telepathically through their helms. It's hard to hear through 200 intervening, yowling undead.)

"No problem, really," Sick Sword telepathized, "I'll just fly over these guys and . . . hey, what gives? What happened to my permanent potion of flying at 150% effectiveness?!"

Clerasil was slightly alarmed. "Hey, yeah, I can't fly either!"

"You took three steps?"

"And jumped off like a diver. Just like the instruction book said."

"Well, I can still teleport."

She blinked. Nothing happened.

"WELL, I CAN STILL TELEPORT!" she insisted, and blinked harder.

Still nothing happened.

"Great," Clerasil slumped, pulverizing another ghoul with his hammer of thunderbolts. "An anti-flying zone and an anti-teleporting zone."

"How about ethereal phasing?" Sick Sword wondered, casting the appropriate spell. It worked just fine, but that didn't allow her to pass through the ghouls. "No good, their bodies are biplanar."

"Lemme try dimension walking," Clerasil decided, and didn't go anywhere. "Arh, no good, that's still considered teleporting."

"I tried moving through the ground, but it exists on the etheric plane too. Boy, this is the last time I vacation on the flatlands by Mount Doom!"

"Have you tried astrally projecting yet?"

"Why bother? Astral access is how teleportation works in the first place, and we KNOW we can't do that."

"You could plane shift and then come back," Clerasil offered.

"Yeah, and then I'd end up exactly where I left. You know that."

"Well, we can't just sit here and fight ghouls all day; we'd never get to the generator!"

"Hmph. It's all we CAN do. We've at least gotta try."

And as if on cue, a small (6d6) fireball cascaded down from above and immolated 1256 square feet of ghouls. Astonished, Clerasil looked up and Sick Sword gazed through one of her robe's skyward-pointing eyes. The form floating above them was Wierd Dough.

"Wierd Dough!" Clerasil exclaimed.

"Wierd Dough?!" Sick Sword gaped.

"Wierd Dough," Wierd Dough commented. "The one and onl-- whoa, hey, what's going on, I can't flyyyyyyyyy! . . ."

Fortunately, his earthen ring kicked in and he floated gently to the ground.

"Wierd Dough," Sick Sword wondered. "You too?"

"Darned right me too. I'm sorry I ever suggested the Union."

Clerasil smiled. "I'm just sorry we let Omnion in."

Wierd Dough shrugged him off. "Aah, Dirk the Destructive, Wild Max, Da Bad Dude, and Peter Perfect would've screwed things up eventually. Do you realize that Rango the Ranger is still siding with them?"

Sick Sword was amazed. "You mean Koenieg, Middle Monk, and Melnic the Loud are on our side?"

"Just as sure as I am," Wierd Dough said, looking over his shoulder at the generator. "Haven't you taken that thing out yet?"

Sick Sword exhaled, non-chalantly stabbing a ghoul in back of her. "We can't GET to it."

"Oh yes, that's right, the anti-teleport and apparently anti-flight plains-of-the-cracks-of-doom magic-absorptive field. Well, there's one seventh level spell I have that that can't counteract."

Wierd Dough gestured and spoke, and in forty-two seconds the three of them were englobed in a shimmering sphere. The sphere rose ever so slightly off the ground, and then moved in an arrow- straight line toward the generator.

"We're moving!" Sick Sword noted. "THROUGH the ghouls! Not even their etheric bodies are touching us."

Wierd Dough breathed on his fingernails and rubbed them against his robe. "Wierd Dough's Transporting Bubble; it's a spell of my own devising."

"Yeah, I figured that from the title."

"Nothing within the bubble can touch the outside world; and conversely, nothing outside after the sphere is formed can intercept the sphere's contents. We move in one direction and one direction only, at constant speed, until the spell runs out or I stop it."

They reached the ghoul generator. Wierd Dough Stopped It.

"Here we are," the archmage commented, presenting the generator with an ostentatious extension of his arm.

"Great," Sick Sword mumbled under her breath. She went up to the generator and slammed her sick sword down on top of it. Both objects, sword and generator, vibrated like mad; neither was dented.

Sick Sword put both of her blades away, and reached into the portable hole labelled WEAPONS. "Guess I'll need something that can do a little more structural damage than that." She pulled out something that looked like an adamantite pole -- at least for the first eight feet of its length it looked like an adamantite pole. The huge perpendicular cylinder at its other end dismissed that notion. She grasped the titanic mallet in both hands, concentrated psychically, grew one measly foot, raised the maul, and brought it down with all her might onto the generator.

#

Ringman had climbed into the church tower next to the town square and grabbed the bell rope. Jumping up, he pulled down on the rope with his full near-ogriish strength, then pulled the cord again and again. The tower bell's alarm echoed through the Town.

'They don't call me Ringman for nothing,' Ringman thought.

In minutes, the entire population of the town had gathered in the center. Ringman ascended the pedestal of the statue of Whatshisname the seventy-fifth and addressed the crowd charismatically:

"Townspople, this is a dire emergency. The whole village is in peril from a threat worse than Smogzilla. I need only for the farm workers to remain; the rest of you, return to your houses and lock your doors!"

Nearly a thousand women, children, and medieval computer programmers scattered from the scene; all that remained were 428 farmers.

"Laborers of this fair town, the threat we face is an incoming horde of zombies a half mile across. I cannot defeat them alone; they would surely get by me and overwhelm the city. We must ALL join and fight them. Gather up whatever farming tools you are familiar with that you can use as weapons!"

"Farmers against zombies?" cried 428 voices. "How many of us would die?!"

"None of you, if you do this right," Ringman commented. He hauled out the cartload of armor and potions. "Retrieve your weapons, return here, and I shall equip you to attack and defend!"

These people had a great respect for this paladin indeed. They all scurried back to their tool sheds and returned, two-and-a-half minutes later, with an arsenal of hoes, sickles, staves, wheelbarrows, and one two-handed sword.

"Hey, I have hard soil!" the two-handed sword bearer explained defensively.

"Now then," Ringman instructed, tossing out field plate ensembles, "Everybody get into a suit of armor. This stuff doesn't constrict as much as plate mail and offers better protection."

Eight hundred fifty-six farmwork-toughened hands snatched the incoming iron body suits from the air. The scene was filled with countless people fastening their metal fasteners, slipping on arm and leg greaves, and pulling helmets over their heads. Metal gauntlets never before used were flexed. Surprisingly, everything fit perfectly.

'One-size-fits-all armor,' Ringman thought. 'I wonder what would happen if the garment industry ever thought of . . . nah.'

Within three minutes, a newly formed, completely equipped army stood ready to fend off the incoming undead. Well, almost.

"You have your weapons, you have your armor, you have your conscience, and you have your courage," Ringman oratoried. "The only thing you lack is training. Would that I had three weeks to train all of you; but the menace will be here in less than an hour." He reached down into the remaining heap of items, now consisting only of 428 glass flasks filled with glowing white liquid, and raised one beaker. "THIS will serve as your training."

He readied to hand the first beaker into the crowd. "But I must warn you: its effects last for only five to thirty minutes, so don't drink until I tell you too." He commenced with potion distribution.

And once every nervous individual possessed a full dose of the glowing white fluid: "Now, onward to the edge of the city!"

#

To commemorate the final kill, Sick Sword obliterated the last ghoul by kicking it. It didn't feel as good as she'd hoped.

"Well," she said, brushing the non-existent dirt from her hands, "That's that."

"Now what do we do about the \_real\_ enemy?" wondered Wierd Dough.

Sick Sword sheathed her dagger. "We can storm into the Disgusting Characters' headquarters and wipe them out."

Clerasil shook his head. "They'd wipe \_us\_ out in the process."

"Oh yeah, that's right," Sick Sword recalled, "Most of you aren't half as powerful as I am."

"By the real enemy," Wierd Dough interjected, "I meant specifically Omnion. Er, for now, I suggest you let me be the brains of this operation."

"What for?" stammered Sick Sword, putting her fists to her hips.

"Well, for one thing, you only have a 21 intelligence, Sick Sword, and you, Clerasil, have only an 18."

"And what's yours, pray tell?" Sick Sword folded her arms.

"24, naturally. Now, what precisely is it that makes Omnion as powerful as she is?"

Clerasil wondered. "Um, her 49th level of magic use? No, her permanent potions, right?"

Sick Sword figured it out: "Her magic items."

"Exactly," Wierd Dough came back. "Specifically, her artifacts. Liberate her from them, and she'll be reduced to naked ash."

Sick Sword rubbed her chin. "But liberate \_me\_ from my magic items, and I'm twice as fast in melee and can do far more damage and be a lot harder to hit with any melee weapon."

Wierd Dough saw what she was getting at, too. "So you think a good way to defeat her would be to go someplace where magic items don't work or are stripped from you, and there trash her yourself."

"Yup," Sick Sword replied. "Now, where are we going to find a place like that?"

Clerasil snapped his fingers. "I've got it! How about an anti-magic shell?"

Sick Sword and Wierd Dough shook their heads, then said in unison, "We've already tried that."

Wierd Dough chortled a bit, then continued: "Anti-magic shells neutralize all magic and magic items -- even permanent potions and spells -- EXCEPT for artifacts."

"Yeah," Sick Sword related. "I cast it once to test its effectiveness. My Sick Sword went into a coma, but Cuthbert's Mace was up there chugging along at full strength without even flinching."

"Well, aren't there any inner or outer planes of existence that force you to drop all your magic items before you enter?"

Sick Sword thought for an instant. "No, I've never had to go through customs before boarding a plane."

Wierd Dough smiled broadly. "There may be at that, Clerasil."

"Huh?" Sick Sword huhed.

Wierd Dough promptly pulled out a portable hole, opened it up, and took a mint-condition magazine off the top of a pile that nearly filled the hole. "Fortunately, I was able to get this new month's supply of Dragon & Dragrace before Omnion got her grimy little half-elven hands on it."

Clerasil glimpsed the vast collection of not-yet-available magazines in the hole before Wierd Dough reclosed it. "Just like old times."

"I haven't read all the articles yet," Wierd Dough admitted, "But I think some of them might prove useful, if not decisive. Particularly the one about the plane of Fordinchuarlikomfterrablaxxuuuuuchh'chh'chh-pt."

#

"Present potions!" Ringman ordered from warhorseback.

Four hundred twenty-eight hands raised four hundred twenty-eight beakers of glowing white super-heroism juice. One of the farmers belonging to one of the hands belonging to one of the beakers said, "Zeke here won't use the stuff; says it's 'gainst his beliefs ta drink potions."

"Oh, all right then, I'll use his," Ringman said as a young farmer next to the one who'd spoke hurled his potion back to the paladin. "Never hurts to gain a couple of experience levels." He glanced back over his shoulder; the zombies were nearly upon them. "Now, DRINK!"

And four hundred twenty-eight bottle bottoms tipped skyward and glugged their white gold down four hundred twenty-eight throats.

Within 12-30 seconds, the ground was literally rumbling with magic potions going into effect. Four hundred twenty-eight little capes appeared on the imbibers' backs, and a single letter -- the person's initial -- appeared as an insignia on each of their armored chests. The potions of super-heroism had lived up to their name.

The now-12th-level paladin with the "R" on his adamantite-plated chest turned his warhorse away from the 427 sixth-level farmers (not including Zeke the 0-level non-imbiber), drew his holy avenger longsword, pointed it toward the approaching undead, and cried, "CHARGE!!"

The warhorse charged. The mob of superfarmers charged.

On horseback, Ringman reached the front line of zombies before anyone else. They looked pretty oblivious to his presence, but anyone would be if he was just an

animated corpse. Ringman held his holy avenger forth in an impressive, paladin-like manner, and hollered, "BEGONE!". Nine zombies erupted into non-existence.

That was the easy part. The undead turning; that was easy. The other countless approaching undead were the real challenge. There were so many of them; it looked like too many, even by overrated "number appearing in lair" standards. His curiosity aroused, he quickly took out his Field Guide to Central Earth Wildlife (the one with the flying red dragon, unicorn, centaur, troll, owlbear, and roper on the front cover) and thumbed to the listing for "zombie." The "number appearing" column read "3-24."

'Thought so,' Ringman thought. 'No way hundreds of those beasties could bunch up naturally.' No time to waste, however; he went about setting an example for the formidable armored farming army behind him by hacking at the nearest available zombie with his holy sword and cutting it in two through its chest.

The farmers reached the zombies and eagerly joined in the fight. The first hoe came down and nearly severed a zombie's shoulder. A sickle swished through the air and took another zombie's head off. The farmer with the two handed sword hacked all the way through one undead's body in one stroke. A wheelbarrow clanged down on a zombified head and gave it a terrible migraine, if nothing else. Everywhere, state-of-the-art medieval farming equipment got put to the test against the Town's grey foes. Several times a zombie managed to get a lucky shot in past a farmer's armor, but the damage was taken off the added super-heroism points first so those strikes didn't really count anyway.

After five minutes of fraying, the first of the farmers' potions of super-heroism started to wear off. These farmers, feeling their sudden drop in ability and toughness, immediately fled to the sidelines; but there were far more remaining who still retained their potions' added powers. The zombies' ranks diminished as rapidly as they had appeared; the farmers had already chopped the half-mile width of their mass down to a third of a mile, and still it CONTINUED to shrink.

"How many of you need healing?" Ringman cried out. "How many of you have taken damage beyond the added hit points of your potions?"

Two farmers on the sidelines raised their hands. Ringman rode over to them at top speed and began to cast his first cure light wounds spell.

"But what about the battle?" one of the injured farmers complained. "You can't just leave those other farmers there!"

"I still have a few minutes before my own super-heroism potion wears off; I want to get my extra one first- and four second-level spells off before then." He completed the gestures, touched the injured farmer, and healed him of 1-8 hit points of damage. "The other one of you can wait. I'd take this opportunity to cast a chant spell or two, except that they take 10 minutes to complete." So saying, he rode back into battle, holding his holy sword straight out beside him so that it could cut off any undead heads it happened to intersect.

More and more farmers' capes-and-insigniae winked out of existence as more and more zombies fell to the earth. The longest those potions could last for was thirty minutes, but most of them failed a long time before that, including Ringman's. At the end of the thirty minutes, a single farmer remained sixth-level to fight beside the now-only-ninth-level paladin. His last sickle strike reduced the zombies' numbers from 55 to 54; the rest was up to Ringman.

'Hey,' figured Ringman, 'Maybe if I leave and then come back, these'll count as a new group of undead and I can dispel them again!'

So thinking, he rode off to a nearby boulder, rode out of sight around it, came back, held forth his holy sword impressively, and shouted, "BEGONE!". Nothing happened.

'Nuts,' he thought, 'I'll have to do this the hard way.' And so, he charged back into the mass of undead to hack all 55 of them up. All 54 of them up. 52 of them up. 51 of them. 49. 48. At one-and-a-half attacks per minute, that was exactly how fast the zombies' numbers dwindled.

Before long, only a single zombie remained, who appeared quite worried despite the fact that it was mindless. Ringman smiled and gestured for it to approach him. The zombie shook its head. Ringman nodded his head. The zombie shook its head more fearfully. Ringman stopped gesturing, shrugged his shoulders, began to turn away, then came about and flung his holy sword through the air and right through the torso of the zombified beast.

'That's one less Evil Mutant Rock Creature's brother in the world,' he thought, and retrieved his sword.

"Now," he turned back to the embattled farmers. "Who needs healing? Who else took damage past their potion of super- heroism's added hit points?"

Four hands went up. Ringman dismounted, rushed to the first and inspected the wound. "Zounds, you're down six hit points!"

"Yeah, I would've died if I hadn't been a lucky farmer." Which was true; farmers got 2-7 hit points to begin with.

"You're going to need special treatment," Ringman said. He took off his gauntlets, opened his palms, and laid them on the zombie's claw marks. The wounds vanished.

"Who else?" Ringman barked. "Who else?"

"Here!" cried one. Ringman touched him with a finger and removed his light wound.

"Here!" cried another one. Ringman approached him and began to chant. "Say," the farmer said, "I thought you paladins could only lay your hands on somebody once a day."

"We can," Ringman reported. "This is a cure light wounds spell." And it cured his light wound very nicely.

"Here!" cried the fourth post-battle injured one. Ringman cast his third and final cure-light-wounds spell of ninth- leveldom.

"Oh yeah, and me too!" came another voice. Ringman approached this one, began to gesture, searched his memory, and admitted, "Oh darn, I've used up all my spells for today." Nevertheless, he reached into his leather backpack and pulled out a green potion. "I was saving this for myself, but it wouldn't have done much for me anyway. Drink."

The farmer drank, and then, he was healed.

Ringman stood up, put his gauntlets back on, and brushed the dirt from his hands. He put one fist to his hip and one hand to his lower jaw; he'd been so engrossed in reparations for the last few minutes that only now did he notice the din around him. Clapping and cheering issued from nearly every point around him.

His arms dropped to his sides, letting his +4 magic shield fall to the ground. The mouth under his beard waxed into a contented smile, and faded into chuckles of

victory. "Huh. Hah. Hah hah. I did it. I DID it! I actually got this town to fend off the zombie attack! I saved the whole town!"

"Ringman, ya did it!" cheered several people at any point. "You led us to victory over the Forces of Evil!"

And home they brought him, shoulder-high.

#

"Ringman," the mayor continued, "This town is deeply indebted to you for the second time in its history. You, and you alone, had the courage and wisdom to round up the able-bodied farmers of our fair land, give them the right potions and armor for the job, and stop the zombie menace before any harm could be done. For Smogzilla we owed you our gratitude; for the zombie horde we now owe to you our well-being."

"Thank you, mister mayor and kind folk of this town." Ringman spake.

"Yaaaaaay!" the crowd cheered.

"But the battle is far from over. Those zombies weren't merely a natural apparition, a bunch of undead who happened to be going out for a hot night on the town all at the same time. No, they were sent here by Omnion, with the backing of that Intercontinental Union of Disgusting Characters, because of Sick Sword and myself. Yes, that's right, they were animated to ruin my name and the name of my dear friend and ally who also comes from this town's ranks. Until the Disgusting Characters are brought down, until Omnion is vanquished, this town and all like it on Central Earth can never be --"

Space twisted and turned around Ringman's body. The crowd gasped as the paladin vanished from their view. In a nearby stable, his horse had his meal of oats rudely interrupted by just this same space warp. When normalcy resumed, both were standing in a dry, grassy clearing with an unlit fire pit in the center and Sick Sword, Wierd Dough, Clerasil, Melnic the Loud, Koenieg, and Middle Monk off to one side.

"-- safe," Ringman completed his sentence.

"Beautifully worded," Sick Sword acknowledged his speech. "I couldn't have said it much better myself."

"Although she probably could have projected her voice a little more loudly," Wierd Dough noted.

"Not as loudly as I could," Melnic the Loud commented.

"Huh? What? Wierd Dough, and the monk, and the druid, and the bard -- here?!"

"Easy, lover," Sick Sword calmed him, "They're on our side now."

Ringman let his jaw drop slightly, surveyed the ex- Disgusting-Characters once more, and broadened his expression into joyousness. "I'm very glad to hear that."

"In fact," said Clerasil, "We wouldn't have been able to mop up all those goons if it hadn't been for Wierd Dough."

"Really?" Ringman was genuinely amazed.

Wierd Dough snapped his fingers. "Spells-R-Us. 'Wierd Dough's Transporting Bubble' and 'Ball Lightning Swarm' a specialty."

Sick Sword hadn't heard that last one before. "Ball Lightning Swarm? As in Meteor Swarm with electrical damage?"

"Exactly. I actually fabricated it to get rid of you. It's useless against Omnion, though, thanks to that blasted Invulnerable Coat of Arnd she's always wearing."

"So," began Ringman, "When do we storm the Disgusting Characters' camp and get rid of them?"

Sick Sword sighed. "It's not that easy. We're about an even match for them in number and strength, but as far as the big one goes -- Omnion -- any battle with her right now would be decided by who rolls a '1' first and blows a vital saving throw. We can't risk the fate of Central Earth on that."

"Then what do we do against her?" Ringman asked.

"She draws most of her power from her magic items and artifacts. Primarily her artifacts. If we can get her to plane- travel to the plane of Fordinchuarlikomfterrablaxxuuuuuchh'chh'chh-pt, she'll be forced to drop everything she's carrying at her point of departure."

Ringman chuckled. "A plane you can't carry any baggage on, eh?"

Sick Sword scowled. "I already made that pun."

Wierd Dough continued where Sick Sword had left off. "We don't know any details about Fordinchuarlikomfterrablaxxuuuuuchh'chh'chh-pt, only that itemnal entrance is barred. This article in the new Dragon and Dragrace talks about non-magic and non-psionic people who used devices to try and travel there and got stuck there forever."

"But we can't force her to plane travel there," Sick Sword said; "She'd make the saving throw against whatever we used against her, whether she's supposed to get a saving throw or not. Scarab of Protection and all that. We have to TRICK her into going there, rely on her not knowing the price of entering Fordinchuarlikomfterrablaxxuuuuuchh'chh'chh-pt. The only way to do that is to lure her there; and I'm the best one for the bait."

Ringman gaped. "YOU?! You're going to throw your life to the wind and lure her somewhere where your own magic items can't follow you either?!"

"Stripped of all our items, I'm the more powerful of the two of us; assuming I can find a make-shift weapon before Omnion finds me."

"And what if she figures out your ploy, and you dare her to follow you onto Fordin- whatever and she stays behind?"

Sick Sword sighed, and held up card # 3 from the Hero's Collection of Commonly Used Sayings. It read: "That's a chance I'll have to take."

"Where'd you get THAT?" Ringman wondered.

"I sent away two magazine inserts and one electrum piece for postage and handling to the Dragon and Dragrace publishing company."

"In any event," Clerasil said, "We have to catch them off guard. They can't suspect what we're doing."

Ringman's eyes bugged wide. "With me and my horse sitting here right now, listening and talking to you?! They've probably crystal-balled in on me already and know everything I've been saying!"

Sick Sword buried her face in her right hand. "Don't you remember the mind blank spell I cast on you at the beginning of the day?"

"Uh . . . oh yeah, that's right. Never mind."

"We want you and your warhorse to be in on this too," Melnic the Loud interjected. "We'll need every moderately-powered helping hand we can get."

"ME? Against Disgusting Characters?!"

"Wild Max is only fifteenth level," Middle Monk noted. "And he's evil, so your paladinness will protect you from him . . . a little. So what if he has titan strength, is wielding the sword of Kas, and can do quintuple damage from behind?"

Ringman swallowed hard.

Sick Sword approached her boyfriend, put her arm on his adamantite-alloy-plated shoulder, and turned him away from the rest of her new allies. "What I really brought you here for is the last shot."

"The what?"

"You'll see," she said, and kissed his cheek. "I can't do everything by myself. . . ."

#

Clerasil glanced impatiently at his wrist-sundial after having sniffed a block of meditational incense for the last eight hours. It was nearly 1600 hours, the time they had all mutually agreed upon would be the "least likely time for them to expect us to attack."

Melnic the Loud was still tuning his Ollamh banjo, wondering whether he should tune it to just-intonation or the Pythagorean system. His Recorder of Ye'Cind was Pythagoneanically tuned, yet he couldn't figure out for the life of him what Clerasil's Mystical Organ of Heward was tuned to, unless it was some ungodly system of all-half-steps-being-equal.

Ringman sat busily adjusting the string on his +1 bow; he never knew when he'd need it. He wondered fleetingly whether he'd need to consume his potion of storm giant strength, then dismissed the thought. Of COURSE he'd need to consume it. He'd never get a better opportunity to use it than against the Disgusting Characters.

Koenieg simply sat in lotus-position, resting his hands on his legs, thumbs touching his forefingers, and saying, "Ohmmm. Ohmmm." as a block of magic incense finished its eight-hour burn nearby. Middle Monk glanced at him out of the corner of his eye, wondering if he was queer or something, and practiced striking imaginary targets with Dhalveron, his sentient +6 Pair of Gloves. Wierd Dough glanced back in his magic book, making sure that there was no maneuver to this-or-that spell he might have forgotten (anybody who memorizes 234 spells every day is bound to forget something).

At last, Clerasil drew his attention to the second hand on his wrist sundial. "Five . . . four . . . three . . ." Everybody was intently alert, so intently alert it

nearly hurt. "Two . . . one . . . NOW! It's sixteen hundred hours! Teleport! Teleport!"

And with that, Wierd Dough teleported half the party and Sick Sword the other half, using very little effort indeed from their helms of teleportation. Everybody popped back into being at precisely the points in the Disgusting Characters' camp where they were supposed to be.

Rango the ranger sounded the verbal alarm instantly. "IT'S THEM!" he shouted. "THE ANTI-DISGUSTING CHARACTERS! THEY'RE HERE! THEY'RE HERE!"

And within seconds, Dirk the Destructive, Wild Max, Peter Perfect, Da Bad Dude, and Omnion were all charging up to the front lines with weapons and material components in hand.

"Omnion's mine," Sick Sword sneered, then turn to Melnic the Loud. "Sing for us, Melnic! We need all the help we can get!"

"I know just the song, too," Melnic the Loud smiled, his Recorder of Ye'Cind already welded to his shoulder. He began strumming his adamantite banjo strings as the recorder began to flutter wildly through arpeggiae.

Clerasil picked up on the mood instantly, too, having already removed Heward's Mystical Organ from its portable hole. He put a Scroll of Player Piano Paper in the appropriate slot on the organ (this scroll held a clerical spell, though; that is, it had air holes for controlling the organ stops) and left his instrument there to accompany his hammer-flinging.

And Melnic the Loud's song began:

"To dream the impossible dream, . . ."

Clerasil cast bless, resist fire, prayer, and sticks to snakes all at the same time. Thirty-eight twigs on the ground within ten feet of each other rose up into totally venomous serpents, meant more as an inconvenient distraction than a serious threat. Da Bad Dude charged through the field of innocuous deadly snakes and swung at Clerasil with Stormslinger, his sentient dagger of life stealing but, with Clerasil's armor class of -10 and protection from evil, naturally missed.

". . . To fight the unbeatable foe, . . ."

Wild Max fumbled with a tube of Dust of Disappearance, hoping to invisibly stab one of the anti-Disgusting characters in the back with Kas's sword and his own titan strength. Middle Monk wasn't going to let him get away with that so easily; he ran up at an unbelievably fast speed and knocked the container out of the Grandfather of Assassins' hand with a lightning-fast palm strike.

". . . To bear with unbearable sorrow, . . ."

Koenieg hopped into the foray on his right hand, primarily because he couldn't untangle his legs from the lotus position. This meant, of course, that he couldn't use his +5 defender scimitar and move along the ground at the same time, since his left hand held his +5 wooden shield. No matter. Rango the ranger was closing in on him with Escalatio, his sentient +6 broadsword, so Koenieg hit him with an Ego Whip which bounced harmlessly off of his Johydee's Mask but got him to stop and check to see if his face was still there anyway.

". . . To run where the brave dare not go; . . ."

Many of the anti-Disgusting characters were beginning to sing along with Melnic the Loud, or at least mouth the words while they expounded their spells' verbal components. Wierd Dough, realizing that nearly every other opponent was taken, shrugged his shoulders, turned to Dirk the Destructive, and cast a Ball Lightning Swarm spell just a few centimeters off target. Being off-targeted, Dirk the Destructive would get a saving throw against the spell (which he would have gotten anyway thanks to his \$#@!ing Scarab of Protection) but wouldn't be able to spell-turn the electricity. Dirk the Destructive gladly took the 50 (half averaged) damage points the spell inflicted upon him; it was either that, or throw up an "energy control" mind discipline and lose 40 psionic power points. He then stabbed nonchalantly with his unholy sword and unholy dagger at Wierd Dough and hit both times.

". . . To right the unrightable wrong, . . ."

Peter Perfect stared at Ringman and smiled; he would have smiled evilly had not that blasted stamp on his character sheet read, "lawful good." He was already mounted on his warhorse, and decided to charge Ringman sword-first in classic paladin fashion. Ringman half-expected, half didn't expect this, but he was ready; the strength of an ogre was nothing compared to the storm giant strength compressed into his human-sized muscles at this point. Just as Peter Perfect and his warhorse were about to impale him, he dropped to the ground, let the horse run halfway over him, then lifted the beast up and overbore him to the ground seven feet away. He sang along with the Melnic the Loud's next line, staring at Sick Sword:

". . . To love even if from afar, . . ."

By now, every anti-Disgusting Character's morale and to-hit chances had been boosted by 10% and +1 respectively, thanks to Melnic the Loud; and Sick Sword was no exception. Omnion rushed up to her with a sickening scowl on her female half-elven face, raised Hymenslayer high above her head, and hacked down with full titan strength. Sick Sword held her Sick Sword valiantly before her across the incoming longsword's path. And when Hymenslayer impacted against the Sick Sword, much to Omnion's astoundment, it didn't reach Sick Sword's body and do any damage.

". . . To try when your arms are too weary . . ."

"What?!" Omnion screamed. "That's impossible! I didn't roll a '1', I had to hit!"

'What's the matter, Omnion,' Sick Sword telepathized, 'Didn't you read the latest issue of Dragon and Dragrace?'

No, her shaking head conveyed.

'Straight from the Dungeon Master's mouth, assuming it has one. They've repealed the armor-class-negative-ten maximum character limit. We can be as hard to hit as we want; and with all my protections, even without specifically parrying, I'm armor class -24. You couldn't hit me without rolling a 20.'

". . . To reach the unreachable star; . . ."

Peter Perfect got to his feet, looked around for his pet peeve, and then realized that there was this bard pounding out a traitorous tune not twelve feet behind him. He twisted around, sanctions in his eyes, charged the Magna Alumnae, and hacked down with his holy sword as he yelled. Melnic the Loud brought the neck of his Ollamh Banjo up as a cross-brace and intercepted the sword with his adamantite banjo strings. This was completely inexcusable, Melnic figured, and kicked the dumbfounded Peter Perfect in his adamantite-alloyed-steel-plated groin; this sent the paladin clanging unharmed into the side of his warhorse. Never interrupt a bard's song.

". . . This is my quest, to follow that star, . . ."

Incredulous, Omnion slashed sideways with her left-handed +6 dagger of wounding and missed Sick Sword for a second time. Sick Sword followed up by thrusting her Sick Sword in rapier fashion at Omnion's head, which also missed. 'See?' telepathized Sick Sword.

". . . No matter how hopeless, no matter how far, . . ."

Clerasil, meanwhile, was having a Hades of a time with Da Bad Dude. Thanks to the repeal of the armor class -10 limit, neither of them had any real chance of hitting the other, and their spell protections were all so powerful that neither could harm or control the other with illusion or clericism. At that point, Clerasil noticed that Wierd Dough was having a Tarterus of a time with Dirk the Destructive, too, primarily because the archmage's armor class was only -14 and Dirk could indeed hit that rather well. Casually turning his attention from the innocuous Disgusting illusionist he faced, Clerasil aimed his holy symbol at Dirk the Destructive and shouted, "BEGONE!", at which the anti-paladin screamed and ran for his life. 'If an evil cleric can turn a paladin,' Clerasil figured, 'Why shouldn't a good cleric be able to turn an anti-paladin?'

". . . To fight for the right . . . without question or pause, . . ."

This left Wierd Dough free to gang up on Da Bad Dude with Clerasil. He opened up with a classic mirror image spell, creating four false likenesses of himself, which Da Bad Dude easily saw through with the help of a certain first-level illusionist spell that's good for seeing through illusions. Wierd Dough conked himself on the head for trying to fool an illusionist with an illusion, took out a potion of heroism (which wouldn't affect him normally since he wasn't a fighter), drank it, gestured, and suddenly had the music get real loud as a startling transformation occurred. "Yee-haa!" he shouted as he berserkedly charged the Disgusting illusionist with a magic dagger in each hand.

". . . To be willing to march into Hell for a Heavenly cause; . . ."

Sick Sword savored that line of the song; Omnion sneered at it. "Cause or not," the half-elf cursed, "I'm still the better swordswoman!"

'Oh yeah?' oh-yeahed Sick Sword telepathically, exchanging three or four double-handed parries with her Disgusting opponent.

". . . And I know if I only stay true to this glorious quest . . ."

"Yeah," Omnion sneered. "If you weren't dripping in so damned many magical protections, I could carve my initials into your chest right now!"

'And while you were doing that,' Sick Sword mentally responded, 'I could give you a successful radial keratotomy.'

'Hmmm,' Omnion thought. 'That is good.'

". . . That my heart will lie peaceful and calm when I'm laid to my rest. . . ."

Sick Sword glanced through one of the rear-facing eyes on her Robe of Eyes to see how Wierd Dough was doing. He had had the brains to cast probably the single most potent spell in the Disgusting arch-mage's vocabulary, Tenser's floating transformation, and was now perfectly capable of meeleing Da Bad Dude to death. Good. She turned her full attention back to Omnion, who was still failing to get a shot in past her defenses. She disengaged from Omnion and darted across the camp, telepathically shouting, 'C'mon, catch me, catch me!'

". . . And the world will be better for this . . ."

Her ploy worked. Omnion took the bait and started after her. Nothing in the Disgusting Characters' camp or in its vicinity could trip Omnion up now that she knew about Koenieg's improved trip spell; that wasn't why Sick Sword was drawing her out. She had to get the lawful-evil bitch chasing her before she'd follow to more distant locales. Omnion threw the +5 shuriken of returning from around her neck and missed.

". . . That one man, scorned and covered with scars . . ."

In desperation of the lethal melee-ball in front of him, who had worn him down nearly to nothing, Da Bad Dude started to cast a phantasmal force spell. He would need it to alter reality. Clerasil was no supra-genius, but he knew this too, and cast a flame strike down on the illusionist. His ring turned half the effect and they both took only two points of fire damage thanks to their helms of brilliance, but that was enough to foil Da Bad Dude's spell. With blue-white mana in his berserk little eyes, the transformed Wierd Dough struck hard and fast with both Excalibur and his meager +5 dagger in combination, and felled the Disgusting illusionist to the ground.

". . . Still strove with his last ounce of courage . . ."

Koenieg had been spouting Zen Druid Bhuddism to Rango continuously under his hail of 25 ineffective sword hacks, and evidently it was getting to him. Upon telepathically hearing 'One to change it and one not to change it' for the twelfth time, Rango threw down his weapons, threw up his arms, and cried, "No more! No more! Get this tree brain away from me! AAaaagghh!"

Middle Monk was also handling Wild Max quite well. The Grandfather of Assassins' armor class of -18 made him hit-proof, but he'd neglected to reduce his save against no-save magic below 10-or-better. Thereby, when the Grand Master of Flowers (that's Middle Monk) grabbed him in the effect of his telekinesis ring, he failed to resist it, and Middle Monk lifted him high into the air and accelerated him down at maximum speed -- with a little help from Central Earth's gravity. He smashed into the ground and took 30d6 of damage, which killed him instantly.

Before Melnic the Loud completed his song, there was the little matter of a very rude paladin still trying to make him shut up. Frustrated at his opponent's stubbornness, he opened one of his portable holes, took out the Machine of Lum the Mad, set the range finder, and pushed the button marked "Don't press"; and a creeping doom of 800 one-hit-point-of-damage-each insects materialized right on top of Peter Perfect. He made his no-saving-throw saving throw, naturally, so he only took 400 points of damage; but that was enough to pick him to the bone anyway. Too bad. If he could've gotten off any fire-based spells, he could have immolated the whole cloud.

". . . To reach . . . the unreachable stars!"

That was her cue. Sick Sword smiled back at Omnion, gestured, and opened a one-woman portal to another dimension. "I'm headed for the plane of Fordinchuarlikomfterrablaxxuuiuuchh'chh'chh-pt," she goaded; "Follow me if you dare!"

She hadn't much time; her body was getting sucked through the portal even as she recalled that she hadn't explained the whole plan to Ringman. 'Damn!' she cursed herself, and quickly articulated a "message" spell. The laser-thin beam of whispered words fell upon Ringman's ear alone, yet all she had time to say before the portal closed was, "The arrow, look at the arrow!"

Ringman tapped his head as though his hearing was going, then realized who had said it. The arrow . . . which arrow? What did she mean?

Omnion fumed in smoke signals. "YOU WANT ME TO FOLLOW?!?" her words echoed across the valley. "YOU GOT IT!" And with a psionic snap of her fingers, she left for Fordinchuarlikomfterrablaxxuuuuuchh'chh'chh-pt.

She didn't even notice the gigantic pile of magic items lying at the foot of where Sick Sword's interdimensional portal had been.

#

The world surrounding Sick Sword's mind was hardly more than a cloud of streaming primary colors. This was the longest transition layer she'd ever had to go through before congealing out on a solid plane. Omnion might be able to attack her in this etheric soup, but she wouldn't be able to do much even if she found her.

Finally, shapes began to resolve and outlines began to take on some solidity. There was gravity, with green below and blue above, and patches of brown and red. The brown was upright and rectangular, and the red was cubic and, apparently, distant. Then the whole picture resolved, with sound effects and olfactory sensations and cold under her feet and all. She was standing in the middle of a meadow on a slightly overcast day, with a single brown-trunked tree (from which a bird sang) and a red barnhouse off in the distance. It felt rather cool all-of-a-sudden; partially because her ring of warmth was back on Central Earth, and partially because she was stark naked.

A rather plump, middle-aged woman was running toward her, making the standard medieval maneuver of holding up her peasant dress so that she didn't step on it. She looked ticked off, but then again so would any farm woman who had a wood nymph suddenly materialize in her back yard. Sick Sword had no time to waste on her, though; she had to find Omnion.

Then again, why wasn't Omnion right there? She'd obviously appeared in a different place on Fordinchuarlikomfterrablaxxuuuuuchh'chh'chh-pt. Excellent; that would give Sick Sword plenty of time to rebuild her arsenal--

"Just what do you think you're doing, young lady, parading around naked in somebody's meadow? Why, I should --"

"My appearance can't be helped, ma'am," Sick Sword explained, "I'm not from around here. I had to come here with nothing, absolutely nothing, so that I could hunt down a half-elven woman. Have you seen --"

"Well, if you really have no clothes," the tubby woman interrupted, "Then we ought to put you in a robe or something. Come on inside."

"Um, okay, but I'm not wearing any pointy hats."

"Eh?" the older woman said, shrugged, and started leading her around to the far side of the barn. "My name's Izabella," she began. "Who're you?"

"Sick Sword," she replied, as though her name was just another name.

"Sick Sword? What kind of a name is that?"

"Well, what kind of a name is Izabella?"

"And what would a 'Sick Sword' be doing in North Fliedershire?"

'North Fliedershire,' Sick Sword logged the name of the town. "I . . . look, the less you know about who I am and why I'm here, the better. I'm looking for a female half-elf with a rather nasty disposition. She probably first showed up naked, too. Have you seen her?"

"No, but first thing's first. Come on inside."

She led Sick Sword into a farmhouse in back of the barn and put a sleeved wool robe over her back. "You're going to catch your death of cold running around naked this time of year. How long were you out there like that?"

"Oh, it couldn't have been longer than sixty sec-- oh, not long."

"Well, a nice hot cup of dirty water will fix you right up." She went to the waiting kettle in the other room and poured a tablespoonful of dirt into a cup.

'Strange customs here,' Sick Sword thought, and began searching the room. She spied a broom with a decrepit-looking head but a fine handle. "Pardon me, Izabella, but do you need that broom in the corner?"

"Oh, that old thing? My, it hasn't worked in years. I've just been too lazy to take it in to the service shop."

'Good God II,' Sick Sword winced. "I'd like to use it. May I?"

"Sure, be my guest -- hey, what are you doing?"

"Well, you said yourself that the broom doesn't work. I'm only interested in the handle." She pried the bristles off the end.

"But won't that violate the warranty?"

Sick Sword rolled her eyes up into her head, then ignored the comment and put both hands on the pole. She whirled it around above her head fast enough to make a B-flat above great C, then practiced blocking and striking imaginary opponents in the room. "It's not my favorite weapon, but it'll do under the circumstances."

"Weapon? Circumstances?" Izabella practically dropped Sick Sword's cup of hot diluted dirt.

"Yes, weapon and circumstances. The half-elf I'm pursuing is Omnion, the scourge of Central Earth. She's called Omnion because she wants to take over everything -- the Omni. If I don't build up my own personal arsenal, she certainly will, and she'd gladly hunt me down and stab me in the back. Being head freedom fighter has its dangers, you see. Do you know where I could find any sulfur or bats around here?"

Izabella was already shocked into near-silence. Either the woman she'd let into her house was a target with a quarterstaff, or she was a psychotic with a quarterstaff. The best thing to do was to tell her anything she wanted to know, and to have it lead her outside her house. "Th . . . there's an old bat-cave about f-f-five kilometers southeast of here. Y-you can pick up some sulfur in town on the way there."

She thought a bit. "A town. Do they have a blacksmith?"

"Oh, they have anything you want! J-just hurry on out before everybody closes up for the day."

"All right, I'll do that. Uh, thanks for your hospitality and your broom handle. I wish I could repay you, but I have nothing." So saying, and having sensed her hostess's nervousness long ago, she let herself out.

She wasn't halfway to the road when she saw Izabella charging away toward town on horseback along a back road. Izabella doubtlessly wanted to beat her there and warn them. That wouldn't do; she wanted as little friction from this alien culture as possible. And so, she engaged her psyche and opened up a short high-speed journeyway. No horse in the known universes could outspeed a Dimension Walk.

#

Dirk the Destructive returned to the battle site after Clerasil's turning had worn off. He wondered why he had ever been so scared of some guy in adamantite plate mail with a holy symbol that looked like a sextant. Then he stopped wondering about that and wondered why he hadn't thought to do the same thing to Ringman. Nevertheless, when he returned, the battlefield had lost its look of favorability.

"Dirk the Destructive" Clerasil mused. "So delighted you could join us again. . . ."

Wierd Dough stood up and smiled nastily at Dirk, and Melnic the Loud and Middle Monk followed his example, wiggling their spell-casting fingers, brandishing their weapons, or whacking their fists. Dirk looked for his comrades to aid him, but they were sadly overwhelmed. Wild Max looked like he'd just had a terminal fall, which he had. Da Bad Dude had La Machine marks all over his corpse. Rango was whimpering in a corner, stripped of all equipment. And there wasn't even enough of his good buddy Peter Perfect left to recognize.

Koenieg, through all this, was still sitting in his inextricable lotus position, meditating on something forest-like.

Wierd Dough spoke to the anti-paladin: "You are going to put that unholy sword and unholy dagger down, aren't you?"

He did.

"Good." Wierd Dough went on with the Prisoner of War processing process at the usual rate.

Meanwhile, Ringman still stooped over Sick Sword's pile of magic items, wondering which arrow she had meant in her message. He found a quiver inside one of her portable holes, which contained eleven arrows; but except for one pair, all eleven of them were different. They had shafts of enchanted redwood, enchanted balsa, and enchanted zinc-plated aluminum; feathers from birds Ringman had never heard of, presumably also enchanted; and heads of anything imaginable laced with adamantite. The pair had jet-black heads shaped like equilateral triangles with a hole in the center.

An equilateral arrowhead . . . now that was strange. That design couldn't hold a point as well as an isosceles head. And why was there a hole in the center of the point, like some sewing needle that wouldn't be invented for a few more centuries? He vaguely remembered seeing this shape before, somewhere, but he couldn't quite place --

Yes, that was it. The black triangle with the hole in the center was the shape of Omnion's +5 shuriken of returning that she wore around her neck. The triangle represented order, the blackness evil, and the hole in the center the universe -- the Omni. And the three feathers on each of the shafts were all different: one from a hawk, one from a nightingale, and one from a magpie. A fighter bird, a magic-user

bird, and a thief bird. The two arrows reeked of Omnion. Perhaps they were arrows of slaying.

"All right, you've got me," Dirk the Destructive moaned, now stripped down to his medieval BVDs. "Are you going to turn me into a corpse too?"

"Nonsense," said Clerasil, "That would waste too much effort, in more ways than one." He walked over to the broken-boned corpse of Wild Max, then turned to Da Bad Dude's slashed-up form, then shunned both aside and said, "Naah, I'll raise them later."

"You're going to raise them from the dead?" Middle Monk cringed.

"Stripped of all their magic items and psionic powers, of course. Prisoners of the anti Intercontinental Union of Disgusting Characters characters -- that's us. They'll also serve as . . . memories of our misguided past."

Everybody bowed his head down for a couple of seconds, then forgot about it.

Clerasil looked at Peter Perfect's bleaching bones. "Hmmm, it's gonna take a Resurrection spell to get this guy back up on his feet."

There were other items in the pile that held just as much import to Ringman as the arrows: for one, that Sick Sword of hers. It was lying on top of everything, outside its sheath and alongside her +6 dagger of wounding. It was lawfully-good aligned as well; it was too tempting not to try.

The instant he grasped the hilt, the air burst bright white and the sword's telepathic song cut through the air -- "DAT da DAAaAAaAAaAAaAA!"

"I AM THE SICK SWORD."

'My deity!' Ringman thought. 'This sword's more powerful than my old Prometheus!' He swallowed hard. "How do you do, I'm --"

"RINGMAN. YES, I KNOW. MY WIELDER AND NAMESAKE HAS TOLD ME MUCH OF YOU."

"Your namesake? I thought she named you after herself."

"I WAS THE SICK SWORD BEFORE SHE EVER DECIDED UPON CALLING HERSELF THAT. I AM THE GREATER FORCE IN THE UNIVERSE BESIDES."

'He's also more arrogant than Prometheus, if that's possible,' Ringman figured.

"MY PURPOSE IS TO SLAY EVIL, DEFEAT CHAOTIC EVIL, SLAY EVIL, OVERTHROW CHAOS, SLAY EVIL, SLAY NEUTRAL AND EVIL NON-HUMAN MONSTERS, SLAY EVIL, AND SLAY EVIL."

"Slay evil five times?" Ringman asked the sword.

"OF COURSE. I WANT TO MAKE SURE IT STAYS SLAYED. I AM A +6 VORPAL SWORD OF WOUNDING, LIFE STEALING, DANCING, AND NINE LIVES STEALING, UNLIKE YOUR OLD 'PROMETHEUS' WHICH WAS ONLY A MERE HOLY SWORD."

"Hey!" screamed Prometheus from Peter Perfect's remains. "Watch who you call 'mere!'"

"Um," Ringman began apologetically, "I hate to tell you this, but I don't have weapons familiarity with broadswords. Just longswords and bastardswords."

"WELL, IT'S NOT LIKE YOU'RE A WEAPONS MASTER AND NEED THAT TO STAY ALIVE OR ANYTHING. YOU'RE A FIGHTER, YOU'LL ONLY TAKE A -2 PENALTY WITH ME -- OH, AND BE GRATEFUL THAT YOU'RE LAWFUL GOOD."

"Why not? It was my suggestion to Sick Sword to become that alignment in the first place."

#

Sick Sword came out of the sulfur mine with a substantial nugget of pure gold in her hand to use for money, Dimension Walked again, and materialized just outside the door of an assayer's. She entered and plopped the chunk down on the table. "I want to trade this gold in for its cash value."

The assayer looked at her wool robe, looked at her incredible figure, looked at the piece of ore, and looked at his scale. "Uh . . . nine-and-a-half troy ounces. The stuff looks like real gold all right. Feels like it, too. That's about eight-tenths of a pound; I'll give you seven gold pieces for it on the spot if you'd like."

"Uh, sure, that'd be fine," she said, scooped up the seven three-sixteenths-inch thick gold coins, and made for the door.

"Say, where'd you find this gold anyway?" the assayer asked.

"You may not believe this, but I used to be a miner before I was 18." She left and headed for the nearest glassmith.

Ah, there was a sign -- it wasn't in any language she knew, but she could easily Comprehend it: "Glass modeler." She entered, slapped a pair of gold pieces down on the counter, and said, "I need a mock-up glass model of a broadsword and two daggers connected by short, tiny glass threads."

It was an unusual request, but the manager consented. "I can have it ready in an hour and a half. What kind of glass do you want it out of?"

"Oh, I don't care, crown glass -- whatever's cheapest and fastest to work with." She took out a piece of licorice root she'd retrieved during her Dimension Walk and cast a haste spell on the glass worker. "I'll be back within the hour." So saying, she left one gold piece as partial payment and left.

As she crossed the dirt road, she caught sight of Izabella riding in. Izabella caught sight of her too and, astonished, stopped her horse right next to her. "How did you get here ahead of me?"

"I'm a fast runner." That was true, but that wasn't how she did it.

"I had to have been going forty kilometers per hour!"

'They still use the per-hour system here,' she thought. "Uh, look, I got here ahead of you in about the same manner I got into your farm in the first place. Like I said, the less you know the better. If you like, I'll return your broomstick and your robe."

"N-n-no no, that's all right." She felt horribly insecure for a woman mounted so that she stood twice the height of the person she was talking to. "Are . . . are you the . . . the Fire-eater?"

Sick Sword wrinkled her forehead and scanned her mind. The fire-eater was the name they gave to the non-existent god who would one day come down and save them from some obscure thing she didn't quite pick off Izabella's mind. "You mean, am I a god?" she chuckled. "I really wonder some times. I have a few less powerful friends who've

defeated a few gods in their tim-- uh, no, I don't think I'm this fire-eater. Not if Omnion hasn't started a reign of terror here yet, anyway."

Izabella trotted nervously off without replying to hitch up her horse. Sick Sword shrugged and entered a blacksmith shop.

"I need a hunk of steel," she announced.

"Sorry, we don't deal in stolen goods," the head smith scowled at her.

"No, no, S-T-E-E-L, iron-limestone-charcoal alloy. You must have heard of it."

"Alloying pure iron with impure non-metals? Don't be ridiculous. We've tried carbonated iron before, and it's brittle as all get-out."

"With high amounts of carbon, yes, but I'm talking of alloying less than half of one percent carbon with iron. And a little limestone for calcite protection. Look, here's a gold piece if I can use that batch of iron in your blast furnace. I only need a little, and I think you'll be impressed with the results."

"Uh, sure, be my guest. I'm only smelting a little iron today."

Smiling, she made her way to the blast furnace and opened the lid. The overwhelming heat pouring out would have overwhelmed anyone else, but she merely waved it aside as an annoyance. She studied the red-hot molten metal for an instant, then looked around the room and made for the forging furnace.

"Hey, what you need the forge for?"

"Charcoal," she said. She opened the oven door and found inside the standard wood-burning fire she'd come to know so well in her youth on Central Earth. She reached in and broke off a small piece of a log to within a micron of the size she wanted it.

"Hey, lady, those're red-hot coals!" the smith yelled.

"I know," she said, holding it up as she carried it in her hand across the room. Suspending the burnt log fragment above the molten iron, she crumbled it into the metal, then turned her psionics on it and stirred telekinetically. No way she could stick her hand into molten iron without taking a point of damage every six seconds.

"Um," she turned back, "You wouldn't happen to have any lime around here, would you?"

The blacksmith and his two apprentices, never moving their terrified eyes from her, pointed in unison at the bags of powdered lime in the corner.

"Ah, of course, I shouldn't have missed it." She crossed to the bags, opened one, and took out a precisely measured handful of the stuff which she transported to the blast furnace and deposited into the iron/charcoal mixture.

"Now, watch," she instructed, and poured out one miniature pig's worth of the alloy. "The best way to make this into a weapon would be to quench it in warm water -- about body temperature -- and then whirl it around in the air until it's completely cool. After it's cooled down to reasonable forging temperature, that is. If I quench this pigiron now it'll turn into iron, carbon, and calcate glass -- but you already know that, don't you?"

They all nodded their heads in unison, still terrified and speechless.

"So I have to cool it off in a different way. Say, you wouldn't happen to have a small crystal or glass cone, would -- no, I suppose you wouldn't. Oh Gehenna, you know what to do from here next time, you'll just have to take my word for it."

She lifted up the pig and doused the whole mess in the nearest quenching trough. This was about as hard and brittle as steel would get; but it was still steel, and that was enough. She smiled and waved goodbye to the cheery bunch of blacksmith and apprentices, who waved back in terrified chorus as she left with her hunk of steel.

She re-entered the glass shop just as the modeler was putting his final touches on the mock-ups with lightning speed.

"Hereyouare," he said, speaking speedily without really realizing it. "Onegenuinebroadswordanddaggerpairconnectedbythe- tiniestlittleglassthreads. Absolutelypositivelynooneelsegetsthe- jobdonefaster."

"Thanks," said Sick Sword, picking the combination up. "Oh, I need a spare piece of glass, too."

"Here, useoneofmyleftoverglassblobs. I'djustthrowitbackin- thehopperanywayorreplaceitwithanequalamountofsand."

"Yeah, sure thing," she said, picking up a small glass blob and rubbing her piece of brittle pig steel against it. She started chanting and gesticulating, and 48 seconds later both the glass blob and the steel disappeared.

And the glass broadsword and two daggers, which she broke into three pieces from their thin connecting threads, now had the tensile strength and unbreakability of actual steel.

"Now to enchant them," she said to nobody in particular, a little of the calcium and carbon still on her hands from the iron works. She sprinkled the white and black powders over all three weapons and cast the same spell twice. Now, for four hours and five minutes, those three weapons would be able to hit someone who could only be hit by magic weapons, like Omnion.

She went back out into the street with one glassteel dagger and a broomstick stowed in her robe and searched for Omnion's mind with her own. Nothing. She was still protected by a "mind blank" spell, no doubt. No problem, Omnion'd find her instead. Her challenge to "follow me if you dare" was too smug to pass up.

She was swishing her glassteel broadsword through the air when the town's warning bell rang.

"She's coming!" cried the town crier. "She's coming!"

Omnion, Sick Sword thought. So her enemy had reached this town before her. Everywhere, people ran from the streets and shut their houses tight. Sick Sword caught sight of Izabella running for her horse and falling down when a minor tremor shook the ground.

Sick Sword traced the tremor's source and looked to the horizon. No way Omnion could achieve an effect like that.

"What are you doing?!" yelled Izabella as she propped herself up on her hands. "Get out of sight! Smaugzilla is coming!"

Smaugzilla? That sounded almost like the name of the dragon that had plagued her own home town before Ringman defeated it. "Who's Smaugzilla?"

"The dragon!" Izabella screamed. "The huge red fire-breathing dragon!"

A dragon, was it? Well, maybe she would take a detour from her search for Omnion.  
. . .

#

Dirk the Destructive sat distraught on a boulder, his hands and legs bound with adamantite ropes, perusing a book entitled, "Spell Effects Made Easy: a field guide to magic identification for the beginner" (also known as the Book of Finite Wisdom). It had a picture of a big, horned, orange statue being looted for its ruby eyes on its cover. He was currently in the second chapter, Druid spells, and had just reached the seventh level spell descriptions.

"Um, how did you say you killed Peter Perfect?" Dirk asked.

Melnic showed Dirk the entrance to the portable hole that contained Lum the Mad's machine. "With a creeping doom spell, of course."

Just his luck, that spell was on the very next page. He read silently: "When the druid utters the spell of creeping doom, he or she calls forth a mass of from 500 to 1000 venomous, biting and stinging arachnids, insects and myriapods. This carpet-like mass will swarm in an area of 20 feet square, and upon command from the druid will creep forth at 10 feet per minute towards any prey within 80 feet (80 yards outdoors), moving in the direction in which the druid commanded. The creeping doom will slay any creature subject to normal attacks, each of the small horrors inflicting 1 hit point of damage (each then dies after the attack), . . ."

Wait a minute -- did it say "subject to normal attacks"?! That was it! Not a moment to waste; Dirk the Destructive levitated himself across the ground and plopped down next to the bones of his good buddy Peter Perfect. "Pete! Hey, Pete! That spell you died from? Those insects shouldn't have been able to affect you, you hear? You're invulnerable to normal attacks like the rest of us!"

The instant Dirk the Destructive said this, massive quantities of charged flesh materialized from out of nowhere and strapped themselves in layers onto Peter Perfect's skeleton. Prometheus still rested atop the right-hand finger bones, and even before the paladin opened his eyes to full consciousness, he grasped the sword, sat straight up, and slashed down across Dirk's adamantite bonds to within a millimeter of his skin.

"Careful, Pete," Dirk complained as he burst the final adamantite threads, "That thing touches me and I take 10 points of damage without even trying!"

"Sorry, Dirk," he said, opening his eyes. He assessed the situation instantly. "We're in bad if we stay here. Touch your pile of magic items and teleport half a league west."

"Gotcha," he replied, and beelined for his pile of goodies.

"Huh?" Wierd Dough gasped as he caught the blur of motion. "Dirk's free! And Peter Perfect's up-and-reincarnated!"

Peter smiled at that as he touched his item pile. "Wrong, fool, I was never really dead! You didn't think a mere 400 points of damage could kill me, did you? Dirk - - one, two, THREE!"

They both vanished.

And as if on cue, Ringman glanced down at Sick Sword's pile and sighted card # 12 from the Hero's Collection of Commonly Used Sayings, which read, "They got away again!".

"Damn it," cursed Clerasil, "Where did they go?"

This was just the break Rango had been waiting for. They could strip him of his magic items and drain him of his psionic power points (with #@\$! repeated mental attacks), but they couldn't deprive him of his wits. He jumped up and dove head-first into the inverted helm of teleportation on top of his magic item pile, with all the precision a 19 dexterity would allow. He summoned up the helm's will instantly, and teleported himself and his whole pile -- but not his adamantite shackles -- a quarter of a league east.

Wierd Dough saw this and gasped again. "He made off too! Drage it, I knew we shoulda used 'hold person' spells instead of adamantite!"

"I precognate," began Koenieg, precognating, "That the grass a mile and a half to the west has just been stepped on by two people, as has the grass three-quarters of a mile to the east by one person."

"Great," Wierd Dough began, "They've split up."

"Oh no!" cried Clerasil, Koenieg, Melnic the Loud, and Middle Monk in unison. "They can do more damage that way!"

"I shall go and tackle the ranger lord," Koenieg proclaimed.

"Oh, no you won't," said Clerasil. He grabbed the lotus-crossed legs of the Great Druid and pulled them apart with his titan strength. He heard some cartilage fibers snap, but that was it. "\_Now\_ you shall go and tackle the ranger lord."

"Anti-Disgusting Characters, . . ." Wierd Dough chanted.

Everybody raised his favorite magic weapon. "GO FOR IT!"

They disappeared.

All except Ringman, that is. He was nervously perusing Sick Sword's Hero's Collection of Commonly Used Sayings cards.

"HEY," the Sick Sword complained. "AREN'T YOU GOING TO FOLLOW THEM?"

"Me?" the ninth-level paladin asked. "Go after Disgusting Characters?"

"DIRK THE DESTRUCTIVE IS EVIL. HE IS ALSO CHAOTIC. IN FACT, HE IS CHAOTIC-EVIL. I AM DESTINED TO SLAY CHAOTIC-EVIL. YOU WILL FOLLOW THEM."

Ringman could feel voluntary control slipping away from his muscles. The sword was trying to dominate him. It was succeeding. He knew the price he'd pay for leaving this spot; he had to convince the sword not to go after Dirk before it decided to teleport him or something.

"Listen, Sick Sword --"

"GO AHEAD. I'M LISTENING."

"-- the combined strength of the guys who went after him'll surely overwhelm Dirk the Destructive. That anti-paladin doesn't stand a chance."

"SO? I WANT TO BE THERE WHEN HE BITES IT."

"But if we leave here, we'll miss Omnion's return!"

"OMNION?"

"Yes. She's evil through-and-through, more so than Dirk ever was."

"HMMM. YOU HAVE A POINT THERE. I GUESS I CAN WAIT A FEW MORE MELEE R-- UH, MINUTES BEFORE I GO BACK INTO ACTION."

"Yeah," Ringman encouraged the sword, feeling its grip loosen, "And besides, you can be wielded by Sick Sword then, a real ultra-warrior."

"I DON'T LIKE SICK SWORD TOO MUCH, ACTUALLY. SHE ALWAYS MANAGES TO EXCEED MY PERSONALITY SCORE. YOU'D THINK A 95 WOULD BE PRETTY HARD TO BEAT, TOO."

'A ninety-five personality strength?' Ringman worried. 'I'm holding on to a sentient weapon with nearly three times my personality score? I don't see how even Sick Sword manages to keep this thing under control.'

#

"Do you have any mercury?" Sick Sword asked.

No one answered. Except for the few still out on the dust-paved streets, urging her to get the heck out of there, you crazy loon.

'How am I supposed to get material components if everybody's scared out of their wits?' Sick Sword thought. She glanced around for any sign saying, "Base Metal Shop" or words to that effect; there was none. She looked at a pebble on the street: yes, she could turn it into mercury if she so wished, but it would be very demanding on her psyche. There had to be another answer.

The mine she'd explored to find the gold nugget was actually a sulfur mine; she'd pocketed about a half pound of the yellow powder, but found no quicksilver. That was the only hole in the ground that the heavy liquid metal might deposit itself in except for . . . the bat cave? The place where she wanted to go to find bat guano? Well, it was worth a shot.

In the space of half a minute, she Dimension Doored the meager distance to the mouth of the cave and entered. The walls were cool, so any warm objects (like bats) would stand out in infra-red. Ten feet inside the cave she found the first of the winged mammals, perched in waiting on the ceiling. It was still sleeping; she had no time to wake it gently, and startling it would be more effective anyway.

She whipped out with her 19 dexterity, speeded-and-a-half right hand, grabbed the bat, and held it face-up over her left palm. The bat screeched an ultrasonic squeal and was so scared that it defecated into her hand.

"Thank you," she said, letting the bat go free. The frightened critter swooped around, tried to bite her, and broke one of its teeth on her skin.

That was enough bat guano for two balls. She took out a modest amount of sulfur and rolled the bat turds around in it, letting the stinking powder cover the stinking droppings, and divided the mass into two tiny spheres. Two catalysts for two fireball spells. Perfect. Now, if there was only some --

Her permanent-and-a-half clairvoyance potion spotted it behind a rocky wall. A pool of dense, metallic liquid lay not thirty feet away. Crossing thirty feet of cave would have been no problem; the trouble was that stone surrounded the mercury pool on all sides. Nowhere was the surrounding stone less than ten feet thick. She cursed herself for not having memorized a passwall or phase-door spell today.

Oh God II, she hadn't even taken a rock to mud spell! There was no way she could get through that wall in less than a quarter hour, even with her titan strength. Oh sure, there was a psionic discipline that could make materials weak and easily broken, but that cost a massive 50 psionic strength points and could only affect two feet of stone wall at a time. Maybe the mercury just wasn't worth . . .

Well, there was one spell she had, but it wasn't exactly the conventional thing to do at this point. She could cast stone to flesh on the wall, and then only have to tunnel through ten feet of meat, but the thought of that seemed a bit repulsive. She wasn't even sure what kind of flesh the walls would turn into, as they never had a flesh form in the first place.

Still, there seemed no other choice. She picked up a pinch of dirt, pricked her finger with her glassteel dagger (which would have been impossible had she not enchanted it), covered her eyes, and cast the spell. She cracked her fingers open and peeked out with one infravisual eye.

Oh for Arcadia's sake, why did it have to be warm? Side effects of the magic energy, she assured herself, side effects of the magic energy, it wasn't really alive, she could plow through it without killing anything. So thinking, she held her breath, aimed her glassteel enchanted broadsword and her glassteel enchanted dagger at the wall, and made like a food processor.

It took her almost a full minute to make it all the way through the wall of flesh, but she reached the mercury deposit. She sighed in relief, dipped the point of her glassteel enchanted broadsword in, and raised it above her head; she only needed one drop of mercury for this spell. Finally, she chanted the verbal components: "For the honor of grayhawk!"

The mercury at the sword's tip burst into tiny scintillating pyrotechnic shards that whirled down and danced around her body. In the background, ethereal voices began to chant: "Dum da da doo doo, do dum da doo -- SICK Sword, SICK Sword! Dum da da DA DA, Da dum da doo. Dum -- SIIICK Swooord! Da da da da DA DA DA DA dah, dit dah. Da da da da dah, da da dah, DIT dah, di di da dah, di dah DIT dah!"

It was too bad she had to use this glassteel broadsword rather than her own Sick Sword to make the spell work. The Sick Sword looked the part so much better.

And when the pyrotechnics ebbed away at the chant's cadence, Sick Sword had a resist fire spell up in addition to her standard fire resistance potion at 150% effectiveness.

She would have to get back to town as soon as she could; the dragon must have been practically upon it by then. She glanced to one side and caught sight of something shiny in the pitch darkness: a small vein of silver. She could use this, too; she broke off a piece, pressed it into an egg-shape in her titan strength hand, and stowed it in another of the folds of her wool robe. She would have to leave now.

No, not quite. That tunnel of flesh she'd made just looked too inviting; she had to taste what kind of meat she produced this time. Quickly, she broke off a piece and chewed it. "Venison," she commented. "No wonder this spell's so dear to me."

With that pun, she Dimension Walked back into town.

She could see the dragon now. If she had had her eyes of the eagle, she could've seen the shapes of each individual scale. As it was, though, she could see quite enough. Smaugzilla was a huge ancient red dragon, heading her way feverishly in anticipation of all the mass destruction she hoped to inflict. There was less than three minutes before the dragon would arrive.

Still, there was one more thing Sick Sword could do. She rushed into a paint shop (the proprietor hid in the back), took out her silver egg, dipped it in white paint, and dried the paint with a quick "burning hands" spell. That done, she picked up a light blue magic-marker lying on the workbench and drew a thick blue stripe on the egg just below the center line. She cast that marker aside, picked up a narrow, dark blue one, added dark blue trim to the light blue band, and finally wrote the words "HOLY SYMBOL" in block letters above it. A generic holy symbol; she never knew when one'd come in handy.

She dashed back out onto the street for the last time. Izabella was still on the sidelines, and now held her cheeks and shook her head at Sick Sword's idiocy.

"Don't worry," Sick Sword explained. "I've got a 'resist fire' spell up now, in addition to my normal fire resistance."

Izabella puzzled. "So . . . you've got fire resistance twice."

"No, fire resistance once and resist fire once. You see, multiple applications of the same spell aren't cumulative, but different spells with similar effects are cumulative with each other."

"Huh?"

"Um, never mind. Just stay out of the line of fire, if you know what I mean."

Smaugzilla was within earshot now. This was it. "Hold, dragon!" Sick Sword bellowed, "Turn back now or be slain!"

"Bwa ha ha ha ha!" the dragon chortled back, smoke billowing from its tremendous nostrils. "A human against me? You must be kidding! RAAAAAAA!"

Smaugzilla flapped her mighty, Ghydra-like wings and took to the air. All right, if she wanted to be fought above ground, then that's how Sick Sword would do it. The weapons mistress/high priestess/arch mage took three valiant steps forward and jumped into the air like a diver; it was the fact that her trajectory didn't curve back toward the ground that amazed all the onlookers.

"My deity!" Izabella exclaimed.

The townspeople weren't the only amazed onlookers; so was Smaugzilla. Here was this . . . this mammal who dared to fly in a dragon's realm! Well, she'd put a stop to that. Smaugzilla opened her craggy maw and belched out a cone of flame ninety feet long.

Sick Sword instinctively put her broadsword and dagger behind her as the flame passed over her body. Just because they had the tensile strength and unbreakability of actual steel didn't mean they didn't melt like ordinary glass. When the smoke cleared, Sick Sword rose like a phoenix from the rescinding flames, having taken only 14 actual points of damage.

Everybody's eyes bugged out at that. "My deity!" Izabella exclaimed again. "She's . . . she's the fire-eater!"

"GO GET 'ER, FIRE EATER!" the crowd cheered her on.

Her wool robe had burnt up completely, but she could do without that. Her glassteel broadsword, her two glassteel daggers, her two balls of bat guano and sulfur, and her generic holy symbol remained intact; she let all but the sword and one dagger fall, knowing they would survive. But there was one thing she had lost: "You ruined a perfectly good hairdo, you reptilian creep!"

Smaugzilla gaped in horror at the naked pink phoenix still approaching her. In desperation, she realized that her own arms were longer than Sick Sword's, and so the instant she got within range Smaugzilla swiped at the anti-Disgusting Character with her right claw. Sick Sword swished her broadsword through the air and deflected the massive paw without much effort at all.

Sick Sword flew up to the creature's neck and hacked at it twice, once with her sword and once with her dagger. Her weapons master training and titan strength combined to inflict horrible wounds across that scaly area; but her adversary was still alive. Knowing that the next strike would do it, she crossed to the dragon's abdomen and thrust her glassteel enchanted broadsword right between two of her metal-like scales. Smaugzilla screamed momentarily, pivoted on the still-embedded sword, and slid belly-up off the weapon. The only damage Smaugzilla ended up inflicting on the town was a huge, dragon-shaped impact crater in the middle of Main Street.

"YAAAAAY!" the crowd roared as Sick Sword descended to where she'd dropped her things. She took a bow. "YAAAAAY!"

"I'm sorry, O great fire eater," Izabella apologized, "I didn't recognize you!"

"There you go with that 'fire eater' gibberish again. I . . ." Well, why not? Prophetic legends are prophetic legends. "Um, how long have you had to put up with Smaugzilla?"

Thirty different people from the still-growing crowd gave thirty different answers, ranging from a year to a century. The favored answer, though, seemed to be thirty-five years.

"You've been living in appeasement with that chaotic-evil bugger for that long?!" She gathered up her other dagger, her generic holy symbol, and her two fireball catalysts. A bit of wool was still stuck to her shoulders. "Why couldn't you do anything about it?"

"What, and give up a name like 'Dragontown'?"

Sick Sword buried her face in her hand and chuckled. As she looked back up, she froze into dead-seriousness when she saw the humanoid shadow at the other end of the street. The shadow was vaguely half-elven, and vaguely female. A pallor of blackness seemed to hover over the form. Its left hand clutched a faintly glowing dagger; its right seemed almost to be a weapon in and of itself. "So," the shadow rumbled, "I've finally found you."

"Omnion," Sick Sword mouthed in silence. The crowd's cheeriness dwindled away. It would have dwindled away a lot quicker if they'd known how much more deadly this woman was than any meagre huge ancient red dragon.

Omnion advanced at a snail's pace. "You thought you could get the better of me if you got rid of all my magic items and artifacts, didn't you? You thought you could trick me into following you onto a plane that doesn't allow luggage."

"And evidently," Sick Sword folded her arms, "I was right."

"HAH!" Omnion hahed. "This plane has its store of magic items too!" She whipped the glowing dagger up above her head. "See?"

Sick Sword started advancing as well. The local sun, another class G2, shone high overhead. Her sword and dagger gleamed in glassy lethality in her hands. "But how many magic items could you get in the time you had? You can't steal artifacts where none exist, you know."

"I see," Omnion began, changing the subject slightly, "That you had a glassteel spell and two enchanted weapon spells memorized before you came here. You've been planning this all along, haven't you?" She continued advancing, her eyes as hard as her manner.

Sick Sword moved ever-closer, step by step. The crowds were retreating back inside and barring their doors. This was looking more and more like a walk-down swordfight. "I'm ready when you are, pod'ner. Draw."

Omnion was confused. "Pod'ner? Draw? What're you talking about?"

"Never mind, just something I saw in an old black-and-white precognition."

Omnion was tired of waiting. With a cry of awe, she took three steps and leapt through the air, dagger and right arm pointed forward, on a collision course with Sick Sword.

Sick Sword smiled at the opportunity, whipped her glassteel dagger up to the wool still stuck to her left shoulder, and rubbed vigorously. She could feel the resistance build up. As Omnion's trajectory reached the half-way point, she moved the dagger away from her wool pad, drawing an arc of crackling blue shimmers out from the point. She aimed for the flying half-elf, and with a gleam in her eyes chanted the mystic words, "Lightning bolt!"

The crooked ion path thundered out from the charged glass dagger and struck Omnion dead-center through her abdomen. She made her saving throw, of course, and so only took 24-and-a-half d6 worth of damage, but the fact that she took any electrical damage at all was something her Coat of Arnd would never have allowed.

Sick Sword chortled. "Not so indestructible without your artifacts, are you, Omnion?"

Omnion fell from the sky and levitated to the ground, sneered venomously at Sick Sword, and fired a shimmering yellow cone-shaped wave of mental force -- the dreaded Psionic Blast -- at Sick Sword's mind. Sick Sword immediately threw up a Tower of Iron Will, the most effective mental deterrent against a Psionic Blast, but still ended up losing a total of 17 points of psionic defense strength. "Not so well mind-shielded without your amulet of life protection, are you, Sick Sword?!"

Sick Sword counterattacked in the same mode, and Omnion defended with the same iron will tower and lost the same 17 psionic defense points. Sick Sword commented, "Nor are you."

Omnion got to her feet and rushed Sick Sword, who parried both her +1 dagger and her +4 sword arm.

"Resorting to the old body weaponry discipline, eh?" Sick Sword goaded. She slashed sideways with broadsword and dagger at the same time; the dagger was unlucky and missed, but the sword rolled above a 6 and made a nasty (24 damage point) gash on Omnion's left side. Omnion was only armor class -7, after all. "Been a long time since you've taken physical damage on your torso, hasn't it?"

Sick Sword was getting smug and letting her guard slip; even a mere 64th level fighter like Omnion could see that. Omnion reached in past the hole in her opponent's guard, and used the +4 sword of her right hand to hack an O-shaped scar on Sick Sword's naked belly, doing more disfigurement than damage. "I told you I could carve my initials in your chest."

'Oh yeah?' Sick Sword thought as she stabbed toward exactly the same place on her opponent's abdomen with her dagger. This time her opponent was parrying with her own dagger, so she had only an 11-or-better chance to hit (she missed), but that move was just so Omnion would shift her guard. Instantly, she followed up with a lightning-fast thrust straight to Omnion's optic segment. The couple dozen points of damage she could have incurred wouldn't have done much to her; that wasn't her intent. Instead, she whisked her sword lightly across the surface of Omnion's right eye eight times.

Omnion recoiled, clutching her eye in horror. When she took her hand away, she could still see out of her right eye, but her accommodation field had been lengthened, which she was not used to. "What have you done to my eye, witch?!"

Sick Sword shrugged. "I told you I could give you a successful radial keratotomy."

Omnion's face burned and clenched in white-hot rage. She reached into one of the back pockets on her hastily-acquired black robe and whipped out card # 7 from the Villain's Collection of Commonly Used Sayings: "You'll pay for that!"

"I didn't know you people had those things too," Sick Sword noted, genuinely impressed.

"Not on Central Earth we don't, but here in Fordinchuarlikomfterrablaxxuuuuuchh'chh'chh-pt you'd be surprised at the oddities they make. I must come back here when I've secured Central Earth."

Sick Sword reached for her back pocket to pull out one of her hero sayings cards, then recalled that both those cards and her back pockets were back on Central Earth. Oh well, words would do for now: "And that'll never happen as long as I'm around, Omnibrat!" She backed up and took to the air. "Not so long as there is breath in my body, not so long as living beings have free will to think and love, not so long as orgasms exist will your terrible might dominate this or any universe!"

"RrrrrrRRRRRRRRRRRAAAAAGGGGHHHH!!" Omnion ragged, and launched herself after her arch-nemesis.

Sick Sword looked over her shoulder at the approaching Omnion. 'Great,' she thought, 'It's working. She took the bait.'

If Omnion would follow her into the air, then presumably she'd follow her into a Dimension Walk. She engaged her mind and shifted perpendicular to 3-space; Omnion followed right on her tail. Perfect.

"You can't get rid of me by Dimension Walking, Diseased Sword!" Omnion chided.

And if she'd follow her into Dimension Walking, then maybe she'd also follow her right out onto the ethereal plane. A slight shift of mental power allocation and any and all links between Sick Sword and the plane of Fordinchuarlikomfterrablaxxuuuuuchh'chh'chh-pt were shattered. And Omnion followed her example there as well.

There was no ether cyclone to disturb their little interplanar chase, nothing save the misty blue-flecked serenity of ethereal darkness. Their speeds matched each other exactly; Omnion neither closed nor fell further behind. "Let this plane be

your final resting place," Omnion said, took out a bat's furry hide and an amber rod she'd acquired especially for just such an occasion, and cast a 49d6 lightning bolt at Sick Sword.

'Well,' she figured, making her saving throw, 'Maybe I deserved a dose of my own medicine.' Eighty-three damage points was the final total; that amounted to maybe a small second-degree burn against her 339 hit point total. There was only one more step to this game of cat-and-mouse she had to play:

Omnion had followed her this far afield. Would she follow her blindly back to Central Earth and the Disgusting Characters' ex-headquarters?

#

"Oh, where are they now?" Ringman worried.

"DIRK THE DESTRUCTIVE AND THAT SO-CALLED PALADIN? PRESUMABLY THEY'RE STILL --"

"No, not them," Ringman interrupted the Sick Sword, "Omnion and Sick Sword. They've been gone for over an hour! Drage it, Wierd Dough, Clerasil, Melnic the Loud, Middle Monk, and even Koenieg are still off chasing down those other Disgusting Characters. That leaves me alone to handle things when Sick Sword leads Omnion here. How close are they to coming back?"

"WELL, IF YOU REALLY WANT TO KNOW, YOU CAN USE ME TO GET A CLAIRVOYANT VISION. I HAVE A THIRTY YARD RANGE OUTDOORS."

"Really?" If they were that close, it'd nearly be time for him to go into action, however he was supposed to do that; still, a 90-foot early warning system was better than nothing. "Okay, how do I get your vision?"

"HOLD ME UP TO YOUR FACE SO YOU'RE LOOKING JUST OVER THE EDGE OF MY HILT."

"Okay." He did so. All he could see was broadsword.

"NOW SAY, 'SWORD OF SICKNESS, GIVE ME SIGHT BEYOND SIGHT'."

Ringman shrugged, and chanted, "Sword of Sickness, give me sight beyond sight!" Nothing happened.

"OH, THAT'S RIGHT. YOU HAVE TO SAY IT IN LAWFUL-GOOD."

Ringman shook his head. The very idea of alignment languages never really went down well with him, but he tried again in his own alignment tongue: "Sword of Sickness, give be sight beyond sight!"

Instantly, Ringman's eyes glowed like little cats-eye-shaped slits, and a ring of orbiting blue rays overwhelmed his field of vision. Inside the clairvoyance port, all he could see was a black void clouded only by serene blue swirls and streaks of energy.

"It looks like the ethereal plane," Ringman commented.

"AH YES, I REMEMBER IT WELL. HAVE YOU EVER BEEN THERE?"

"Well, sort of. I guess. Most of what I know is just what I've heard -- oh, wait a minute! That's . . . THAT'S THEM! Sick Sword, carrying a glass broadsword and dagger, chased by Omnion, carrying a dagger and a very nasty looking right arm . . . they're coming! They're --"

The thunder of the ages rent its black hole in the low- flying firmament not thirty feet above the ground. Sick Sword and Omnion both soared out of the ether and into their home plane as the thunder ebbed and the hole sealed itself. Oh no, thought Ringman, he'd meant the clairvoyance to alert him to their arrival, and now that it had he was too frightened even to move.

The pair landed on the ground. Omnion slashed at Sick Sword. Sick Sword parried, then cast her glassteel broadsword aside. "Sword of Sickness," she commanded, "Come to my hand!"

Ringman was so frozen in fear that the Sick Sword had to wrest itself free from his petrified grip. "Huh?" Ringman said, his senses finally starting to return to him.

The Sick Sword landed grip-first in Sick Sword's right hand, surging with white light to acknowledge its true owner.

Omnion could care less. "Your Sick Sword won't save you from my wrath, Sick Sword! I will live to see your rotting corpse yet!"

Ah. There was one thing Ringman had prepared for this encounter, and this was the time. He reached into a fold in his adamantite plate mail and held forth the laminated card #1 from the Hero's Collection of Commonly Used Sayings: "Not if I can help it!"

"The arrow, Ringman!" Sick Sword wailed.

'The arrow?' Omnion wondered.

Ringman was still unsure. "Which arrow?!"

"Use your brain, lover!" Sick Sword retorted as she futilely attempted to disarm her opponent. There were no disarming rules in the Book of Infinite Wisdom, ergo it could not be done. "Which arrow do you think? She's vulnerable now without her scarab of protection! Get her!"

Ringman already had his magic composite bow in his hand and was searching Sick Sword's pile for where he'd put those two Omnion-looking arrows. "Drage it, where are they?"

"No, no, Ringman," Sick Sword momentarily diverted her attention from Omnion. "Use my long bow, it's more powerful and accurate."

"Huh? Oh, yeah, right." He bent down and picked up her bow without bothering to inspect it, then looked back up in shock. "SICK SWORD!"

Omnion had grappled the 130-pound naked Sick Sword thanks to that diversion. Sneering evilly, she threw her as far as her titan strength would allow. Sick Sword landed on her feet, as usual, but she was a long way away.

"I wish . . ." Omnion began to chant.

"Yikes," Sick Sword squealed, taking to the air as she could fly faster than she could run, "She's starting a wish spell! Ringman, shoot her!"

Ringman shook like mad. Where was that -- ahA! There was the arrow quiver! The right arrow must be in . . . no, the quiver was empty. He cursed himself for having dumped all the arrows out to inspect them.

". . . That all my items . . ." the half-elf continued.

Sick Sword was also cursing herself, this time for not having the foresight to memorize a single magic missile spell. Even at maximum outdoor speed, in this slow-poke universe, she was still only flying at seven-and-a-half yards per second. "I can't reach her in time, Ringman!"

There were her arrows. All eleven of them. Despite their differences, they suddenly seemed a whole lot more alike. Just a bunch of shafts with three feathers on one end and a point at the other. The one he was looking for, he recalled, had a hole in its equilateral head; none of the arrows on top looked like that. He'd have to dig through the pile. One of them gave him a nasty black-colored shock as he nervously pushed it aside.

". . . And artifacts . . ."

She was still out of dagger throwing range, too -- that was 90 feet outdoors. "Hurry, Ringman, hurry! If she gets this wish off she'll be as invincible as ever!"

Arrow, arrow, arrow, arrow, ar-- THERE IT WAS! The black adamantite shaft; the hawk, nightingale, and magpie tail feathers; the black equilaterally triangular head with the hole in the center: this was one of the two anti-Omnion arrows. He picked it up and nearly fumbled it despite his high manual dexterity.

". . . Were here . . ."

Sick Sword could engage dimension walk and close with her foe at nearly 200 feet per second. Yes! Why hadn't she thought of that?! . . . Sick Sword hadn't thought of that because dimension walking could only be accomplished in ten-minute increments. "Shoot her, Ringman!"

Ringman notched the arrow in Sick Sword's adamantite bow, pulled back, and suddenly realized that even adamantite bow strings can come unstrung. That +5 bow was useless. He'd have to use his own +1 composite bow instead -- he was more proficient at it, but the other bow was a lot more powerful. He hoped his would be enough as he unstrapped it from his shoulder.

". . . On my body . . ."

Sick Sword's face contorted into frenzied desperation and panic. "SHOOOOOOOOOOOOT!!!!!!"

'Oh my deity, guide my hand!' Ringman thought, lined up the shaft, pulled his own bowstring back with his own muscles, shivered nervously, and let the black arrow fly.

". . . Right no--"

sssssssSSSSSSSSSSSTHWUNK!

"--\_ooo\_ooooooOOOOOOOOOH!!!!!"

The black triangle didn't even have to penetrate Omnion's flesh. Just the slightest touch from tip-to-skin was enough to catalyze the deadly reaction. A shining alkar of blackness spread out omnidirectionally over Omnion's body, crackling and cascading over her convulsing form. It stretched up her trunk, up her neck, over her wide-open screaming mouth, over the top of her head, down across her misguided groin, down the lengths of her half-elfin legs, down to the tips of her toes and out. She was a humanoid, black, convulsing, short-circuiting mass, the screams of her crackling black aura now outweighing the screams of her voice.

She stood straight up, her arms at thirty-five degree angles to her sides, her fists clenched, her mouth screaming skyward. Ringman had no idea what would happen next; Sick Sword shielded her eyes because she did know. Suddenly, a ring of white rays sprang and expanded outward from her hips. The light was bright, but harmless. Omnion's sizzling black body lowered its head and clenched its fists to its sides for the last time, and all the living and deadly energy that ever was her thundered upward and outward in a foot-and-a-half wide, streaked, blazing white mass. Omnion's physical remains disintegrated in an accompanying sphere of light; the whole effect was blinding.

Ringman's vision started to clear, and Sick Sword took her hand away from her eyes and took her brownie out of the astral plane to watch. The energy streak of Omnion's essence rose to an altitude of about five hundred feet, slowed and stopped, circled itself, and spiralled inward upon itself until it disappeared entirely. Thousands of tiny, shimmering, barely-visible vapor trails swam out from where the spiral's center had been, and were gone.

The sky looked considerably brighter and bluer now. A kind of semi-ignorable grayish haze had always seemed to hang over this region for the last couple of months, but that was gone. For the first time he could remember since the forging of the Disgusting Characters, Ringman heard a bird singing from a tree.

In fact, he also heard an English horn playing the opening to the Pastorale from Rossini's "William Tell" overture. Now that was a little too much. He stuck his finger in his ear and tried to clean out any wax that might be making him hear things. But he stopped when he saw Melnic the Loud come into view, carrying Peter Perfect triumphantly by the back of the neck, with an English horn reed stuck in his Recorder of Ye'Cind.

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The vigilant party strode down the main street of Town toward the town square. Trumpets and cheers echoed from all sides -- keeping time with Melnic the Loud's banjo, Ye'Cind's recorder, and Heward's organ, of course. Sick Sword (with optional brownie on her shoulder) and Ringman (with optional horse off in the stable), their battle gear on their persons but not at the ready, led the procession, holding each other's hands in the air in triumph. Clerasil followed, carrying the front end of a long pole. Behind him, Peter Perfect was strapped to the pole by his hands and feet, stripped of all gear. "This is humiliating," the so-called paladin commented.

They were followed by Melnic the Loud, supporting the pole on his non-recorder shoulder so that he could play his Ollamh banjo, then a stripped and bound Dirk the Destructive, then Middle Monk, then Rango the ranger (the only captured Disgusting Character not bound by his feet), then Koenieg, and finally Wild Max and Da Bad Dude, lightly bound and half-nude, who had been raised from the dead without the benefit of having their psionic ability reinstated. Wierd Dough was at the back of the whole column, both to keep an eye on the two resurrectites and because his petty 12 strength wasn't much useful for carrying poles full of P.O.W.s.

They reached the town square, and Sick Sword and Ringman lowered their hands. The townspeople were still ecstatic. Ringman turned to Sick Sword and sighed in a low voice, "The war's finally over."

She smiled back, the glimmer in her eye well worth both their efforts. "Fellow citizens," she addressed the crowd.

"YAAAAAAAAAYY!"

"Fellow citizens!," she tried to cut through their noise.

"YAAAAAAAAAYY!"

"FELLOW CITIZENS!"

"YAAAAAAAAAYY!"

She rolled her eyes up into her head, took out her old glassteel dagger (which had long since lost its temporary enchantment), rubbed it against a bit of goat fur, and cast a very loud lightning bolt above everybody's heads. The crowd instantly silenced itself.

"Thank you," she began. "Fellow citizens, after more than a month of control over virtually all of Central Earth, the Disgusting Characters' reign is at an end. On this day, the Intercontinental Union of Disgusting Characters is completely disbanded, and Omnion's soul rests in Hell where it belongs."

"Wait a minute," Wierd Dough message spelled to Clerasil, "I cleaned every arch-devil out of Hell when I was becoming disgusting."

'So?' Clerasil telepathized back.

"So when Omnion gets to Hell, nobody's going to be ruling it."

'Ah, no. I'm sure some pit fiend with a name that ends in an "r" 'll step in to take ol' Asmodeus's place.'

"Or maybe Omnion will."

'Chilling thought, isn't it? Then again, without her magic items to help her out she'll be a lo-o-ot weaker. She'll probably just end up coming back in a few decades as a lich or something.'

"Oh, that makes me feel a whole lot better."

". . . And so," Sick Sword concluded her little speech, "We shall need a kind of a police force, an Intercontinental Union of Anti-Disgusting Characters, to keep the threat of Central Earth domination or destruction out of our lives. Thank you."

"YAAAAAAAAAYY!" the crowd cheered wildly. They thought she was terrific!

Hands were shaken, the crowds thinned out, and the bad guys were hauled away to adamantite jail cells.

Sick Sword sat down on the pedestal of the statue of somebody-or-other the seventy-fifth. "Aah, this age is coming to an end," she mused.

"Why?" said Ringman. "What's going on? We've restored the power to the hands of the people who deserved it."

"That's just it, in part. The people who deserve it are the mass population, the people whose lives are going to be affected by major decisions. Sure, the I.U.D.C.'s dominion's been removed from the power centers of Central Earth, but we've started to reinstate parliaments instead of kings, senates instead of dukes, ballots instead of royal orders. I never dreamed that the only way we'd achieve democracy is to ram it down people's throats."

"Well, what's so bad about that? That sounds like the beginning of a great new age!"

"Yeah, but that's just political side, the side that never really matters anyway. I've also heard of the discovery that by mixing sulfur, charcoal, and saltpeter, we can produce an explosive as powerful as a fireball out of a wand. We can make objects appear closer by shaped pieces of glass, instead of clairvoyance or Eyes of the Eagle. Soon, there'll be no need for magic on Central Earth at all."

"Oh dear. How long do you think the changeover'll take?"

"Oh, maybe three hundred years. Four hundred at the most."

Ringman giggled. "Then I guess we don't have anything to worry about." He coaxed her face gently and playfully to his and kissed it. "Uh, that arrow I shot Omnion with . . . that was --"

--an arrow of slaying lawful-evil half-elven fighter/magic- user/thieves."

Ringman stared through his eyebrows at her. "In other words, an arrow of slaying Omnion."

"No, it would have worked against any old lawful-evil half- elven fighter/magic- user/thief that happened to get hit by it."

"And why couldn't an inhumanly powerful hyperdeity like yourself fly any faster than you did?"

Sick Sword smiled and chuckled a bit. "What do you expect in a world where a normal person, engaged in mortal combat, can take a swipe at an opponent only once a minute?"

"You're right, half of this whole world doesn't make sense." He kissed her lightly once again, then slowly stroked his bare right hand across her 150% invulnerable face. "There is one thing I have been worried about. After all we've gone through . . ." He stared lovingly at her perfect 18 charisma body.

She smiled back. "Well, of course, I --" She read his mind. That was not what he was thinking about. Not mainly, anyway. "OoooOOooohhhhhhhh. I see."

Ringman nodded his head. "How many experience points do I get?"

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"Estas malpermesita entrudi sin en la evoluon de pli naivaj kulturoj." -- La Unua Direktivo, pli aw malpli