

Anyways, IUDC was written (primarily) in 1986. This story, The Sick Kids, is its sequel, and was written two years later in 1988. To date this is the only novel-length work of fiction I have concocted, and it still stands as one of my better (though still seriously flawed) prose works.

Those of you who have memorized the nuances of all the AD&D first edition loopholes will doubtlessly get a big kick out of this. Especially if you picked apart "Unearthed Arcana" the way I did when I got it in the *middle* of writing this story. (Unearthed Arcana is referred to as "The Other Book of Infinite Wisdom" by the characters in this story.)

If anyone's interested, I can put together an ASCII version of the actual character sheets for the characters in this story. I used them *constantly* for reference to make sure I wasn't missing any of their (tons of) abilities or enabling them to do anything they couldn't.

Anywho, enjoy, enjoy, and laugh your sides off.

-----PART ONE-----CUT HERE-----CUT HERE-----

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"The Sick Kids"

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PART ONE

Sick Sword nursed her baby daughter in one arm and her Sick Sword in the other. Disgusting Sword was quite a name to be born with, but she was worth it. After all, she would never have even been born had not the Intercontinental Union of Disgusting Characters brought Sick Sword and Ringman the paladin together.

Ringman entered from a nearby room and smiled at the sight. About a year ago, Sick Sword had moved the small keep she'd gained from the Deck of Many Things to the same clearing in which she and Ringman had had their first romantic interlude, and the sunlit trees sparkled gaily through the portal spells -- er, windows. This place hadn't seen any combat in its life, and Ringman always liked being able to walk around without having to wear +5 plate mail.

"Do you know what day this is?" Sick Sword asked as she simultaneously carried on a telepathic conversation with the Sick Sword.

"It's Tuesday," Ringman chuckled in reply.

"Mm hmm. It was also one year ago this date that the I.U.D.C. was completely disbanded."

"Oh, that's right! It is, isn't it? And it's also the first anniversary of Omnion's death."

"Thank goodness you got rid of her, too. She was a real pain. I'm just sorry that God II doesn't condone going to the outer planes and destroying someone's soul, otherwise I'd --"

"-- But you wouldn't want to lose your alignment status, now would you?" Ringman assured her.

"Mm, I s'pose not. I just don't like the thought of her taking over Hell, or coming back as a 49th-level arch-lich, or plane-travelling to any of the other outer planes and wreaking any more havoc."

Ringman hadn't heard of this last one. "She can do that?"

"Well, not for another 99 years; and even then she couldn't get away with much. Most of her power lay in her magic items, and they've all been stored away in The Dungeon."

"Uh, you do mean a few levels below The Dungeon, don't you?"

"Yeah, yeah, well, it's all the same place," Sick Sword agreed as she put down her Sick Sword. "I had to do something with that old freehold of mine, didn't I? And what better use is there for stone walls and adamantite bars than to hold all the surviving Union members?"

"Ah yes. Wild Max, the Grandfather of Assassins; Rango, the 17th-level ranger; Dirk the Destructive, the 20th-level anti-paladin; Da Bad Dude, the 31st-level evil illusionist; and that dastardly 20th-level 'paladin' Peter Perfect. I hope I never see any of 'em again."

"Without their magic items and stripped of their psionic powers, they're just as harmless as 31st-level kittens."

Ringman suppressed a shudder and decided to change the subject. "So, what were you discussing with your sword just now?"

'He's getting pretty perceptive,' Sick Sword noted. "I was just seeing how well it was doing in the major benign powers department."

"And how many major powers does it have now?"

"It's up to five. Two more and I get another prime power."

Ringman shook his head and snorted a disbelieving chuckle as he turned and walked out of the room. "I always thought it took more than a year for something to become an artifact," he muttered.

The Sick Sword's rate of power gain was pretty impressive, she figured. "I have eight extraordinary powers and eight special purposes," the Sick Sword had told her. "I'm almost an artifact right now. Why not let me go that last extra step and become a real artifact?" She had agreed, but she also made sure that the sword picked up enough malevolent and side effects to keep its personality score below hers. The sword, therefore, now had "alignment of possessor permanently changed to that of item" and "user has limited omniscience" as well as bestowing total immunity to all forms of mental and psionic attack.

She fingered Disgusting Sword's chin lightly, and the baby replied with "Hi mommy, you feel nice." Age 3 months was a little late to start speaking, but she would catch up. She'd need all the skills she could muster if she were to become as powerful as Sick Sword wanted her to be.

And then again, she thought as she rubbed her belly, if Disgusting Sword didn't measure up, there was always the next child she was pregnant with.

"YOU!!" Rango screamed, clawing through the adamantite bars. "YOU'RE the one who got me into this mess! You ought to be in one of these cells just as much as any of us!!"

Clerasil the 38th-level high priest maintained his smugness. "If you recall, I changed my mind."

"Yeah, right, and I suppose none of the other Union members gave you AAANNYYY peer pressure to stay in the group!"

"That's right."

"That's because you were away from headquarters when you defected!!"

"True, true. But Wierd Dough wasn't away from headquarters."

"He was also nearly fried by that half-elven ultra-arch-devil!"

"Koenieg, Middle Monk, and Melnic the Loud thought the risk was worth taking."

"My God IV, man, Wierd Dough didn't even let me IN on what was going on!!"

"You knew about them later. Omnion was practically screaming their names out at every turn, from what I hear. You could always have come over to the Right Side."

"UP YOUR SIXTEEN-FOOT-STOP, CLERASIL!!"

Clerasil, in the most insulting gesture he could dream up, grinned at him and left without another word.

"Looks like Rango hasn't calmed down yet," Wierd Dough the 49th-level arch-mage commented when Clerasil joined him.

"Yeah, yeah, and he's sort-of right." Clerasil was looking slightly down and away. "We did make the Union in the first place, after all."

"Hmmp. Don't think Peter Perfect wasn't instrumental in that too."

Koenieg the 14th-level Great Druid broke his druidic silence. "It is very convenient for you, then, to have Peter Perfect to dump all of your blame and guilt on."

Wierd Dough blinked at that. Clerasil only looked down and away even more.

Middle Monk the Grand Master of Flowers, meanwhile, approached Da Bad Dude's cell. "How ya doin', Da Bad Dude?"

The illusionist growled. "If I had my spell books right now, I'd cream you."

Middle Monk folded his arms. "No you wouldn't."

"Okay, then," Da Bad Dude decided, "If I had my spell books and my psionic powers, I'd cream you!"

"No you wouldn't."

"Well, then, if I had my spell books, and my psionic powers, and my magic items, I'd cream you!"

"No you wouldn't." Middle Monk turned and walked away.

"ALL RIGHT, THEN," Da Bad Dude shouted after him, "IF I HAD MY SPELL BOOKS, AND MY PSIONIC POWERS, AND MY MAGIC ITEMS, AND MY ARTIFACTS, I'D CREAM YOU!!"

Middle Monk rejoined the other anti-Disgusting-Characters. Melnic the loud the Magna-Alumnae bard looked around. "So, why isn't Sick Sword on these little prison tours any more?"

"She says it's because she doesn't believe in laughing at the prisoners," Wierd Dough said, "Which is ridiculous because everybody likes to gawk at the bad guys. Actually, she hasn't been around recently because --" he made a cradle out of his arms "-- she has a little ga-ga to take care of."

Clerasil shook his head. "I told her not to take off that ring of protection."

"Aah, she probably wanted it that way. She is a mortal human after all, and she does have to worry about the next generation."

Clerasil cocked his head to one side. "So are you."

"Er, um, yes, well, ahem, you see, I haven't had . . . uh . . . much time for family life recently. Yeah, that's it, not much time."

"Oh?" said Middle Monk. "You seemed to have plenty of time for that cute blond apprentice sorceress last --"

"That's different!" Wierd Dough stammered. "She needed help learning her . . . um, somatic technique."

"I'll bet. What did you teach her to cast, a sleep spell?"

"Well, you're just jealous because you couldn't score with any of the female recruits in your monastery."

Clerasil intervened. "You've got your monastery, Middle Monk; you, Wierd Dough, have your wizard's college; you, Melnic the Loud, have your faculty position at Ollamh; you, Koenieg, have your trees; and I have my church of Clerasilism. We've been out of the Disgusting Character scene for over a year now. I don't even know why we bother to come to The Dungeon any more."

"TO CHORTLE AT PETER PERFECT," Wierd Dough, Melnic the Loud, and Middle Monk replied.

Peter Perfect heard that, and clenched his teeth. He was the greatest thing on horseback until those wimps decided to join up with Sick Sword. Now, he'd already spent a whole damn year rotting away between adamantite bars and unbreakable stone walls. They'd stripped him of all his magic items. They'd whittled him down to zero psionic strength points, feebleminded him, inflicted him with idiocy through an ego whip, then healed both the idiocy and the feeblemind to leave him exactly as he was before except without any psionic powers. They'd dispelled every spell he'd had made permanent upon him. And they'd been feeding him terrible meals every day since then -- without any dessert.

He'd show 'em. He'd get out and get even with them . . . somehow.

#

Sick Sword's second baby was just as beautiful a girl as the first, especially considering that they both had 18 charisma. In fact, they both had straight 18's all the way across the board. She'd named this second child Ridiculous Sword, in the hope

that she'd be even more powerful than her first daughter. She also hoped that Disgusting Sword wouldn't mind if she played favorites.

"Don't play favorites, mommy," Disgusting Sword warned her. So much for that idea.

Ringman entered the nursery and put his hands on Ridiculous Sword. "May I?" he asked.

"Be my guest," Sick Sword shrugged.

Ringman picked up the little girl and held her close to his chest. Ridiculous Sword liked that. She always liked being held by daddy. She reached up and ran her tiny fingers through his beard.

"So," Ringman said, "You're going to bring them up to be weapons masters, then clerics, then magic-users, right?"

"No, silly, they're going to be druids first."

"Uh . . . druids?"

"Sure. First they become druids and work their way up to 14th level, then they change to monk, then at 17th level they change to thief, then --"

"My goodness, what are they going to be? Characters with seven classes?"

"Eight classes, actually. After thief comes paladin, then comes illusionist, then cleric, then magic-user, and finally weapons master. I figured if you put weapons master last you could get to the highest level in that class, and that way you could do even more per-level damage in melee combat."

"Oh, wow, you're raising them to be the last word in killing machines." Ridiculous Sword sensed his anxiety and withdrew. "Sick Sword, what use is there in making them into disgusting characters?!"

Sick Sword frowned. "Don't ever call them that."

"Why not? You're a disgusting character. Just because you didn't join the Union of Disgusting Characters doesn't mean you didn't make yourself just as powerful as they were."

"Look, mister self-righteous, we've been over this before. I made myself disgusting so that I could get rid of the Disgusting Characters. You know it would have been impossible to stop them otherwise; you were there."

"And that's just the point. They're not around anymore. You don't need our kids to kill centaurs and take their four one-million-gold-piece gems. In fact, who's to say that one of them might not turn power-hungry and abuse her disgusting abilities?"

Sick Sword's eyes turned to steel. She lunged from her chair and snatched Ridiculous Sword from Ringman's arms. "That's just about the lowest suggestion you could make, paladin! These are my children, I can keep my kids on the right side!"

"They're my kids, too."

"Not if you're going to raise them to be wimps like yourself!" Sick Sword shuddered slightly at having said that, then turned her eyes away and looked at her daughters instead.

Ringman walked over to a dresser, pulled open a small drawer, and took out a pack of cards. He slapped them down loudly on the bureau top to get Sick Sword's attention.

Sick Sword gasped, "My Hero's Collection of Commonly Used Sayings! What are you doing with them?!"

Ringman put them in his left shirt pocket. "You obviously won't be needing them any more."

"Get out." It was a simple, poignant command.

"Sick Sword, hon, if you can't take --"

"Get out! Get out of my keep!"

Ringman stopped cold. "Out of the whole house?"

"Get out! And don't come back!!" She pointed. Her helm of telepathy flared a dim red. She'd psionically dominate his will if she had to.

Open-mouthed, Ringman slowly turned and walked out the nursery door. What had he brought upon himself?!

"Get out!!" she called after him.

He walked down the corridor to the foyer, half sad and half dumbstruck. He heard Ridiculous Sword's muffled voice cry, "Daddy?", but nothing else.

'My deity, my deity,' he thought.

He glanced at the stone walls around him, half stunned and half in sorrow, knowing he'd probably never see them again. Despite the interior decorations, this place was still a converted castle and thus had all the standard fortifications. The vertical notch in the outer wall, for instance, was called an arrow slit, and Ringman had always thought that was just about the most suggestive name for something he'd ever heard. That comforted him little now. He took his +1 composite longbow and his quiver of +1 and +3 arrows off their pegs by the arrow slit, and stared solemnly back at the nursery that was now around the corner.

"Get out!" Sick Sword insisted.

'X-ray vision,' Ringman thought, halfway in contempt.

"No, clairvoyance; now get out!"

He shook his head and would have chuckled were things not so grim. He put on the +5 suit of plate mail still standing in the hall while he looked for his +3 periapt of proof against poison. Periapts were always easy to confuse with any ordinary gems that might happen to be lying around. He found it, though, thanks to the big white +3 he'd painted on its side. After securing the adamantite-alloyed armor to his body, he strapped his +3 hand axe and +5 holy longsword to either side. Finally, he picked up his +4 shield and slid his arm through it.

One more trinket caught his eye, and he felt even worse for having forgotten it. It was Sick Sword's ring of shooting stars. A year-and-a-half ago, right after the downfall of the Disgusting Characters, he'd given her the only ring he had, which was his own ring of shooting stars.

"That's sweet," Sick Sword had told him, but insisted that he take her ring of shooting stars, both to make them even and in case he ever needed a shooting stars

ring again. Of course he'd later recovered his old +3-in-a-five-foot-radius ring of protection since he'd used up his potions and had two more slots available within his magic item limits, but at times he had cherished the ring she'd exchanged with him.

He picked up the ring, turned it over in his hand, almost put it back down, and finally slid it over his left ring finger with a sigh.

He opened the outer door, looked out solemnly, then looked back one last time. "Sick Sword," he began.

"GET OUT!" came the reply.

"I still love you."

"_GET OUT_!!"

And so, he did. He had only one last stop to make, and that was at the one-horse stall just off the east side of the keep.

"Warhorse, old boy," Ringman addressed his warhorse, "It looks like we'll be riding off alone again."

The horse neighed in apparent sympathy and understanding.

Ringman checked the horse's hooves; yes, the horseshoes of speed were still firmly in place beneath the horseshoes of the zephyr. He hauled out his warhorse's old suit of magic plate barding and began to put it on him; the horse didn't mind, seeing that the armor was nearly weightless. Odd; the Dungeon Master must have decided to publish another official book, since the horse's plate barding had dropped from +5 to +3 and was now only meteorite iron steel. Unlashing the horse's reins from the hitching post, he put his right foot in the right meteorite-steel stirrup, pulled himself up onto the meteorite-steel saddle, and urged the horse forward with a sulken "Giddyap."

He couldn't believe Sick Sword had actually thrown him out. She was his girlfriend -- effectively his wife -- and she just tossed him out like all their months together had meant nothing. He shook his head hard. Why had he pushed her so hard about the way she should raise their kids?! Couldn't he have just talked her out of her position more slowly? Now those poor, fatherless children would have an even bigger chance of turning to the wrong side!

He'd taken an oath, he assured himself; he'd taken an oath when he became a paladin to uphold truth, justice, and the lawful-good way. Like The Impossible Dream, he would "fight for the right without question or pause" and "be willing to march into hell for a heavenly cause." He had to tell her, straight-out, that she was raising their kids to be just as disgusting of characters as the ones they'd both despised. Maybe she'd cool down, eventually; maybe she'd even see it his way.

He rode off into the wilderness. He didn't feel like going back into town right away. The old I.U.D.C. headquarters at the bank of Crysglass lake, in fact, would probably provide the solitude he needed, if it wasn't swarming with scavenging looters. Who needed that old Sick Sword anyway? After all, from one centaur she'd gained four million experience points, and from being instrumental in saving Central Earth he'd gained enough experience points to put him a fourth of the way to his next level. . . .

#

Peter Perfect hadn't heard many things from all the times the Anti-Disgusting Characters had come to gawk at him, but he'd heard enough. Every magic item and

magic artifact the Union had had was stored in some vault a few levels below The Dungeon. This included his sentient holy sword, Prometheus. He crossed his legs on the floor and tried as best he could to let his mind slip into alpha state. He wondered why he had never thought of this before.

'Prometheus,' the word echoed in his mind. 'Prometheus, hear me!'

The sword should answer. Eventually. Even if Peter wasn't telepathic any more, his sword still was.

'Prometheus!'

"I hear you, Peter Perfect."

A response! The sword heard him! At least he hoped that dull voice in his head was the sword's and not something he'd made up. 'Prometheus, where are you?'

"I'm in a dark vault surrounded by bits of enchanted junk. I think I'm a few levels below ground in a freehold basement."

'What signal strength are you reaching me at?'

"Really strong. I figure you couldn't be more than fifty feet away. Say, why didn't you use any of your telepathic powers to call me?"

'Because the Anti-Disgusting Characters stripped me of all my psychic abilities. Listen, can you cut your way through the ceiling?'

"Sure, I can try, but I can only animate myself for one minute."

Peter Perfect sighed. 'Yeah, that's right, your telekinesis only lasts that long. Well, give it a try and see what happens.'

"Okay," the voice agreed.

Deep within a chamber beneath The Dungeon, something moved. It wriggled its way through all the helms of brilliance and rings of elemental command that had been heaped on top of it, and shot up, impaling itself in the ceiling. There, it sawed and pried enough of the stones loose for its hilt to fit through, slid all the way up to the next level, and found a darkened room there too.

"I made it up one level," the voice told Peter Perfect, "But you're still a ways above me. I'd estimate you're twenty or twenty-five feet away."

'Well, your teek still has some time to run. Plow up through another level.'

"Roger."

The object shot up through the darkness and impacted the ceiling. Peter Perfect could see the glowing green blade sticking through his own cell floor.

"It's working, Prometheus!" Peter Perfect urged it on with his own voice. "Work your way up through the rock!"

The sword blade jutted its full length through the stone and smacked into its own hilt. "I can't go any further," it spoke to Peter directly, "I can get my blade or my handle through, but my T.K.'s almost gone and I can't work a hole big enough to fit my hilt through."

By now everyone's attention was drawn to Peter Perfect's cell. Even Wild Max the Grandfather of Assassins was getting interested.

"Then turn around and stick your grip through the hole," Peter Perfect insisted. "I'll take it from there."

"Okay, but --" The blade withdrew from sight and switched to telepathy. "-- hurry up! I'm almost out of lift!"

The grip of the sword barely managed to poke itself through the hole. It shuddered, and started to drop -- and at just that instant, Peter whipped out his hand and grabbed the handle. "GOTCHA!" he cried.

"Yaaaaay!" all the other Disgusting prisoners cheered.

Peter Perfect acknowledged the cheers of his audience, then started to pull the sword loose. "Come on, give," he insisted, futilely trying to pull the sword through the hole with his makeshift titan strength. "What do they make the floors out of in these places, anyway?"

"Interlocking silicate stones containing trace quantities of mithral, bound together by a mortar laced with 7.3 percent mithral," the sword told him. "Far more sturdy than the stuff they made the last floor out of."

"Prometheus," Peter Perfect said as he continued pulling.

"Yes?"

"Shut up."

Peter started jamming the sword back-and-forth. Bits of rock crumbled away. Finally, he gave a good stiff yank and the whole assembly sprang out of the ground and held itself upright in his right hand.

"All RIGHT, Prometheus," Peter cheered, "We're a team again! Now let's get out of this rat trap!"

He swung the sword around edge-on at the bars of his cell. The sword thwacked against a bar, made a loud ringing sound, and shook in his hand. The bar wasn't even scratched.

"Damn," Peter cursed, "That's right. Solid adamantite bars. The pure metal is +6, and you're only a +5 holy avenger. Well, the floor is just plain old mithral-laced, and that's only +4; so it looks like we're gonna have to tunnel our way out."

He hacked at the ground with Prometheus, widening the old gash by several centimeters. He stuck the sword in the crack and began to saw. In two minutes he'd nearly completed a full circle. Finally, he withdrew his holy sword and stamped his foot down hard on the saw-loosened section of floor. The little tab still holding it on broke, and the disk fell through with a crash.

Peter triumphantly jumped down the hole, landed on top of the slab he'd just loosened, and added enough weight to the already-punctured floor beneath him to break it as well and continue on down until he landed in a pile of miscellaneous magic items.

Shaking himself back to his senses, he held prometheus up high and looked around. The green glow from the sword illuminated everything within a twenty foot radius; and everything within that radius looked wonderful.

"This is IT!" Peter Perfect cried. "This is where all our stuff is stored! In fact . . . yep, there it is! My old +5 suit of plate mail!"

He pulled himself up onto his legs with his makeshift titan strength (the permanent potion he had in effect didn't increase his to-hit chances, you see) and walked through the minefield of magic items to his suit of armor. He was about to put it on when a shimmer off to one side caught his eye. The sword's green light glittered off a coat of very fine chain links.

"On the other hand," Peter Perfect mused, "Why bother with just a run-of-the-mill suit of +5 plate mail . . ." He crossed to the chain coat and took it off its wall peg. ". . . When I can have the Invulnerable Coat of Arnd?"

"Good choice," said Prometheus, thoroughly impressed. "Didn't that used to belong to Omnion?"

"Aah, Omnion's dead now anyway," Peter replied, pulling the coat over his head. "She won't miss it." He got the coat all the way on and put his arms through the sleeves. "Hmmm . . . this only goes out as far as my upper arms and down as far as my groin. I'm gonna have to pirate the leggings and vambraces from my old magic plate mail."

He did. His forearms and legs were now armor class -2. He clanked the vambraces on his arms together. "Ahh, adamantite alloy once again. It feels so good to have this stuff back on my body." He tried to impale himself with Prometheus, but it only sent up a few sparks. "And this mail is totally unbreachable. I wonder what kind of stuff it's made out of; pure adamantite would only be +6. Now then, where's my Axe of the Dwarvish Lords?"

He found his Axe, of course, after he'd located a scarab of protection to let him resist the Axe's malevolent effects. He also found a germanium ring (that would be a ring of protection) and an obsidian ring (a ring of regeneration). His cup and talisman of Al Akbar were hidden behind somebody else's +5 suit of leather armor. He eventually collected a helm of brilliance, a helm of telepathy, a helm of teleportation (which he carefully stacked on his head), a medallion of ESP with empathy, all the rings of elemental command, a rod of lordly might, a cube of force, a vampiric ring of regeneration, five dull gray ioun stones (which he remembered he didn't need since his psionics were gone), his +4 cloak of protection, a girdle of titan strength, one pair of reverse eyes of petrification, his warhorse (which had been stowed in a portable hole for the last year-and-a-half), his warhorse's plate barding (which was still +5), gauntlets of dexterity, gauntlets of ogre power, a ring of raise dead fully, a book of infinite spells or two, every other ring he could possibly use (he could stack them on the inner and outer sides of his gauntlets), his longsword of green dragon slaying, and all the other various odds-and-ends he'd had when the Union was still in force. It was a good thing he had enough portable holes to carry everything in.

Getting out was the easy part. He simply knocked open the vault door from the inside, mounted his warhorse, rode across to the staircase, and galloped out to freedom.

"Hey," Prometheus complained, "Aren't you going to free the rest of your comrades?"

"Are you kidding? Most of them are evil."

"Rango the ranger isn't evil."

"THAT wimp? You must be kidding. Let him find his own way out."

"Don't you even feel obliged to get back at Clerasil and Wierd Dough for the way they treated him? And you?"

"No, no," Peter explained, "Vengeance isn't my style."

'Now to get even,' he thought nastily.

#

Tiamat rolled lazily over onto her back and laid another white dragon egg. This one was of the small variety, so the white dragon that grew out of it wouldn't have quite as many hit dice as it could. She wondered if she should bother sending it to a cooler climate so that it could survive.

'Naah,' she figured, 'I saved a white dragon runt last week. Let this one burn here in Hell.'

A rap on her front door rudely interrupted her train of thought. "Come in," she grumbled.

Peter Perfect flung open the five-ton mithral door. Suddenly, Tiamat breathed with all five of her heads at once, and Peter got hit with a cone of frost (which bounced off his Invulnerable Coat of Arnd), a bolt of lightning (which bounced off his Coat of Arnd), a stream of acid (which bounced off his Coat of Arnd), a cloud of chlorine gas (which bounced off his necklace of adaptation), and a cone of fire (which bounced off his cup and talisman of Al Akbar).

"WHAT DO YOU WANT?" all five of Tiamat's heads requested at once.

"Do you always breathe first and ask questions later?"

"Of course," her red and white heads replied, "It keeps out the door-to-door salesmen."

"Tiamat, let me get right to the point."

"Ohhh, please doooooooo. . . ." her black head said acidly.

"I need some help taking revenge on the Anti-Disgusting Characters."

"And what's in it for me?" her white head asked coldly.

"If I'm right, your life."

"That's a pretty serious threat," her red head growled hotly.

"Do you seriously think that those new sick kids Sick Sword and Ringman have are going to just let you crank out evil dragons in peace? More likely, they're going to try to hack your brains out right here in your lair. And if they're anything like their mother, they'll succeed."

"I see your point," her blue head agreed, and there was a spark to its voice.

"So what do we do?" Peter inquired.

"WE DON'T DO ANYTHING," the five heads said in unison. "YOU WOULDN'T STAND A CHANCE AGAINST SICK SWORD ONE-ON-ONE. IN FACT, NEITHER WOULD I; BUT I CAN DESTROY HER AND HER FAMILY . . ." she inhaled, "THROUGH TREACHERY. SHE AND HER CONSORT, RINGMAN, HAVE RECENTLY SPLIT UP, BUT HE DOES NOT REALIZE THAT SHE IS PREGNANT WITH YET A THIRD CHILD. A BOY. I SHALL PLANT THE SEED OF EVIL WITHIN SICK SWORD'S WOMB. WITHOUT A FATHER TO GUIDE HIM, AND WITH HIS MOTHER PUSHING HIM TOWARDS

DISGUSTING-CHARACTER-LIKE POWER, HE WILL EASILY FALL PREY TO BECOMING EXACTLY WHAT SHE DESPISES."

"Okay, great," Peter Perfect agreed, "But how are you going to plant this 'seed of evil' in her womb?"

Her green head said: "I'm not," and then the other four heads kicked back in: "YOU ARE."

Peter folded his arms. "Phhh, oh, right, I'm just going to walk over to her with a packet of seeds and stuff them up her birth canal without her objecting."

The chromatic dragon only smiled evilly. Her blue head: "Do you have a potion of polymorph self in permanent effect on you?"

"Of course I do."

"Good. . . ."

#

Sick Sword felt despondent. Why should she? she thought. What did she need that paladin for, anyway? Anybody who said she shouldn't raise her kids to be tough and successful deserved to be thrown out. Maybe she just needed somebody else to go to bed with. Yeah, that must be it, she just had to get laid.

She set Disgusting Sword and Ridiculous Sword down -- they'd know how to take care of themselves -- put on her most arousing skin-tight suit, and teleported into town just outside the saloon.

"Hey, Sick Sword!" echoed someone's voice as she walked through the swinging doors. Then another: "Hey, Sick Sword!"

"How ya doin', Sick Sword?!" everybody turned around and said.

Sick Sword smiled wanly and started checking out the meat. She knew most of these guys so well she couldn't stomach the idea of propositioning them. There was one newcomer who caught her eye, though, and she decided to try him.

"You're new around here, aren't you?" she sidled up to him.

The stranger's azure eyes looked straight at her. There was a nervousness about them that he kept carefully hidden. "Yes, as a matter of fact, this is the first time I've been out in over a year. I'm a paladin."

"Really?" she said. "Uh, hold on just a moment."

She turned around, made some barely-noticeable gestures, took a pinch of something out of a pouch, and mumbled some phrases in Latin. The stranger cupped one hand to his ear and listened. He recognized the incantation; she was casting a detect lie spell. He would have to be very careful about what he said to her from then on.

Forty-two seconds later, she whirled back around and asked, "Say that again?"

"You mean that I'm a paladin?"

In her mind, a green light blinked over the stranger's head. He was telling the truth. "How interesting. I like paladins. What's your name?"

The stranger's eyes rolled up into his head for a split-second, then he decided, "Call me Slim."

He wasn't very slim -- he was quite brawny, as a matter of fact -- but she let it slide. "Okay, Slim," she stuck out her right hand, "I'm --"

"Sick Sword. Yes, I know." He took her hand and kissed it. "I've heard much about you, m'lady."

Sick Sword took her right hand back with a coquettish smile. "You're cute, you know that?"

Slim smiled and raised his eyebrows. "Yes, I do. You're not so bad-looking yourself, either."

"Hey," Sam the bar frequenter said to the bartender, "Wouldja lookit Sick Sword put the moves on that guy?"

The bartender shook his head. "I know. Jeez."

"But don't she and Ringman --"

"Well, ya never can tell these days."

"So," Sick Sword winked at her pick-up, "You wanna split this joint and come up to my keep?"

"Mmmm, sounds like fun." He winked back.

'Thank goodness this guy doesn't scare as easily as most of them do,' she thought.

"So, are you going to use any of those special powers of yours and teleport us there, or --"

"As a matter of fact --" boink "-- yes, I am."

Slim looked around and took his bearings. Considering the large bed dominating the scene, this was probably her bedroom. This girl didn't waste any time. He felt even more nervous than before, now that he was in her home court. He had no armor, weapons, psionic powers, or charms; if she decided to take her troubles out on him now . . .

She stripped herself down to her bare 18 charisma skin right in front of him. He would have come in his pants were his charisma not the epitome of perfection to match. He slowly unbuttoned his shirt, exposing the beefy chest within. Sick Sword couldn't restrain herself any longer and took off his clothes for him in a 150%-permanent-potion-of-speeded flash.

They didn't even bother to get beneath the sheets.

#

"Mmmm, you're not bad, kiddo," Sick Sword cooed into his ear after the exciting part was over. "Where did you say you were from?"

"I didn't say where I was from," Slim told her. "I hope I didn't get you --"

"Oh, don't worry about that, I'm already pregnant."

"Oh . . ." Slim said, trying to act surprised. "Um, I meant, I hope I didn't give you any --"

"Well, you're immune to diseases anyway, being a paladin and all; and even if you are carrying something, I've always got my periapt of health."

"Oh. Glad to hear it. Well . . ."

"Well, um, I . . . uh . . . guess I'll see you later then?"

"Uh, yeah, guess I'll see you later too."

They got up and got dressed at opposite ends of the room. If anything, Sick Sword felt worse.

"G'bye," Slim said, and walked out the front door.

'Hmm,' She figured, 'Guess he didn't need a ride back.'

Slim didn't need a ride back, certainly not. His warhorse was parked just beyond the edge of the clearing he was now exiting, as a matter of fact. He could see the +5 plate barding through the trees.

"Whew," he told his horse, "Glad that's over with. She coulda gotten suspicious at any second."

"Neeeeigh," the horse replied.

"Yeah, I know what you mean." He pulled the finely-tooled chain shirt out from one of the saddlebags of holding and put it on. By the time he'd drawn the coat of mail completely down over his torso, his features had changed. His hair was blond. His lower jaw jutted ever-so-slightly more forward. His cheekbones were slightly wider. And his voice was more firmly in the baritone range.

He put on a weapon belt and drew its green glowing sword. "Well, Prometheus," he said to the sword, "At least I got laid. Even if that wasn't my own sperm I injected into her womb."

#

Ringman only heard about his son Gross Sword through the grapevine. After living with his lady love for eighteen months, here he was right back in his old cottage in town. Of course his cottage was actually a small castle, but without Sick Sword in it it was hardly a keep. He'd never managed to get back to the way things were before Peter Perfect and the Disgusting Characters had come along. He would've started drinking were he not concerned about keeping his paladinhood.

So he had a third kid and he'd probably never see him. He'd come back to Sick Sword's keep once, all right -- for the sake of seeing his daughters if not her -- but she only tossed him out with an even louder "GET OUT" than before. The glimpse he'd gotten of her face before she slammed the door looked more like Omnion than it did like her. The next thing he knew, Sick Sword had moved her keep several leagues away, back to where she'd first drawn it from the deck. He hadn't seen or heard from her since. Well, a paladin operated best as a solo player anyway; at least, that was how he tried to reassure himself.

He picked a volume up from one of his shelves and flipped to the page he'd had marked. His doomed relationship hadn't been a total loss; she had taught him how to read.

#

Disgusting Sword reached her first level of Druidicism at age 10 1/2. Again, she was a slow developer, but she could still make it. Sick Sword took her to the edge of a centaurs' lair and pointed inside.

"That's a centaur's lair," she told her daughter.

"I know," Disgusting Sword replied.

"Good. And you know what to do?"

"Of course." Disgusting Sword activated her permanent potion of flying at 150% effectiveness and wafted into the shallow cave.

One psionic blast and several clatterings of gems later, she emerged as a 15th level druid, a 17th level monk, an 18th level thief, a 21st level paladin, a 31st level illusionist, a 38th level cleric, a 49th level magic-user, and a 58th level weapons mistress.

"Well," she said to Sick Sword, making sure all 533 of her hit points were in place, "That was easy. How long before my magic sword becomes an artifact?"

Ridiculous Sword was a little smarter. The only reasons Disgusting Sword had taken those particular levels of development was so that each of her classes would be of higher level than the one before it. Reading between the lines on the rules, Ridiculous Sword figured that it didn't matter what order her levels were stacked in, so long as the last class she chose had the highest experience level. As the bard class couldn't be started with a lawful-good alignment, she would need that rules assumption if she were to become both a 20th level paladin and a 23rd level bard without losing her paladinhood.

And so, hitting the centaur pits on her tenth birthday (only one day after her sister did), Ridiculous Sword emerged as a 23rd level druid, a 15th level assassin, a 17th level monk, a 17th level ranger, a 17th level thief, a 23rd level bard, a 20th level paladin, a 31st level illusionist, a 38th level cleric, a 49th level magic-user, and a 60th level weapons mistress. She would have gone farther in that last class had not the . . . Dungeon Master . . . set the maximum half-point-per-level damage bonus for weapons masters at +30 points.

And she didn't stop at just one artifact weapon like her sister did, either. No sirree. No one "Ridiculous Sword" for Ridiculous Sword. She had the Ridiculous Hand Axe -- a +6 holy vorpal defender frost-brand flame-tongue sun luckblade of wounding, dancing, life stealing, disruption, slaying everything (as in the arrows of the same name), throwing, thunderbolts, red blue green black white brass & copper dragon slaying, speed, final word, and nine lives stealing with maximum intelligence, eight special purposes, and enough artifact powers to leave her set for life (including "weapon damage is +2 hit points" taken five times) -- sure, Disgusting Sword practically had one of those. But she also had the Ridiculous Broadsword, which did almost everything the Ridiculous Hand Axe did except allow her to cause serious wounds by touch. And she had the nearly-identical Ridiculous Dagger and Ridiculous Longsword, both to boost her weapon damage by 20 points and to serve in melee if she had to fight for more than four minutes and got to loose the other two weapons to dance. And in case she got totally unarmed, she also had the Ridiculous Pair of Gloves, although it seemed kind of strange to combine the gauntlets of ogre power effect with a +6 holy vorpal pair of gloves of wounding and all the rest. And she had the Other Ridiculous Pair of Gloves, in case her first pair got to fight for more than four minutes and could be loosed to dance.

And as if that weren't disgusting enough, she topped it off with the granddaddy of all artifacts: the Bracer of Irresistible Damage. No sentience, no ego, just immunity to all forms of mental, psionic, heat-in-a-20-foot-radius, and cold attacks, and the ability to cast first, second, third, and fourth-level spells simultaneously.

And the "weapon damage is +2 hit points" major benign power taken 100 times.

Then came Gross Sword's turn. The lad was younger than his sisters, a bare nine years old, and Sick Sword had felt uneasy about her third child all along the way. But she felt obliged, and was determined, to prove to herself that she didn't need that old paladin Ringman to bring up her kids as deity-level psionic magical powerhouses that could really take care of themselves in the outside world. And so, when Gross Sword's whack at the centaurs came, he was ready; although not quite the kind of ready that Sick Sword had hoped.

He found the cave, jumped in, and hit all the centaurs in the room with a psionic blast just like Sick Sword had told him to. That stunned most of them and put the rest of them in a coma. He collected the sixty million gold pieces worth of million-gold-piece gems just like Sick Sword had told him to. And he systematically killed every centaur in the room without telling Sick Sword or anybody.

He emerged into daylight and immediately began spending his experience points just as his sisters had. He progressed until he was a twenty-third level druid, then switched and became a fifteenth level assassin, then a seventeenth level monk, and then on to rangerhood.

Well, not quite on to rangerhood, and that made Sick Sword feel really uneasy. What he chose instead was to become an anti-ranger so that he wouldn't once have to shift his alignment away from evil.

'Have I created a monster?' Sick Sword thought. 'No, no, I'm overreacting. Gross Sword knows what he's doing, sure. His alignment doesn't really mean that much, does it? After all, the Intercontinental Union of Disgusting Characters had all sorts of different alignments in it, and they got along just . . . fine. . . .'

And up through the 17th level of anti-rangerdom, to the 17th level as a thief, to the 23rd level as a bard, and then . . . and then he became an anti-paladin all the way out to the 20th level.

But still, Sick Sword held firm. This was her son, for crying out loud, she couldn't just send him to his room for something so trivial as an alignment choice, now could she? Naw, of course not. And besides, his becoming an anti-paladin would allow him to keep all the benefits of being an anti-ranger. Yeah, that must be why he did it. Yeah, yeah, sure.

Gross Sword kept that chaotic-evil alignment of his anti-paladinhood all through his being a 31st level illusionist, a 38th level cleric, a 49th level magic-user, and a 60th level weapons master. It would be stupid to change alignments now; he'd have to sacrifice both his anti-rangerhood and his anti-paladinhood if he did. Sick Sword knew that, and she wasn't about to change him into anything less powerful than he already was.

And like Ridiculous Sword, Gross Sword bought four hundred of each type of pearl of power (so that he could cast 426 of each level of magic-user spell every day) and created seven magic artifacts for himself: the Gross Dagger, the Gross Broadsword, the Gross Longsword, the Gross Hand Axe, the Gross Pair of Gloves, the Other Gross Pair of Gloves, and the Other Bracer of Irresistible Damage.

It didn't take long for all three of them to probability-travel through a few dozen spheres of annihilation and gain every major and minor psionic discipline, either, but every Disgusting Character had done that at one time or another.

'Every Disgusting Character?' Sick Sword thought in horror. 'No, no, they're not Disgusting Characters. Not my kids. No, they're anti-Disgusting Characters, just like I am. They must be. They have to be.'

Ridiculous Sword, on the other hand, was extremely nervous about her kid brother.

#

A clamor in the streets shook Ringman from his midday doze. He heard cries of "Run for your lives!", "My god, it's him!", and "He's back!". 'Finally,' Ringman thought. 'I haven't seen any action in nearly nine years!' He clasped himself into his +5 suit of plate mail -- it still fit -- strapped on his +4 shield, fastened his weapons belt around his waist, made sure his two rings were still in place, and tramped out into the middle of town.

He'd walked barely fifty feet from his door when he stopped dead in his tracks. He recognized the figure at the other end of the street and drew his holy avenger.

"Peter Perfect!" Ringman worked his voice into order. "How . . . how did you get out?!"

Peter had positioned himself so that he stood directly between Ringman and the sun. It made him look more impressive that way. "Ha ha, I've been 'out' for nine-and-a-half years!" He started to approach. "And I must say, your ex-concubine is really good in bed!"

Ringman gasped. "Sick Sword! What have you done to her?!"

"Nothing, Ringman, nothing at all. Nothing she didn't agree to, anyway."

Ringman suppressed a shiver. He couldn't speak.

"Face it, Ringboy, you're ancient history and Sick Sword knows it! And so does Prometheus, right?"

"Right," the sword in his right hand pulsed. It would have smiled if magic swords could smile. "It's been a long time, Ringman."

Ringman sneered. "At least the holy sword I have now doesn't want to kill everything in sight!"

"Too bad," Prometheus sighed. "It doesn't know what it's missing."

"Oh, sure it does, Prome," Peter Perfect told his sword, at every moment stalking closer to Ringman. "It used to have a much more lethal wielder, remember?"

Ringman clenched his jaw hard. "They should never have let you live, Peter Perfect." He spat out the two P's.

"And I should never have let you live," Peter cursed, and charged at him.

Ringman saw the incoming flash of green. He gasped, raised his shield, and blocked Peter's Promethean swing with a full-parry. Pete followed up by hacking with his Axe of the Dwarvish Lords; he hit Ringman's right shoulder, but not hard enough to sever the arm. (That is, he didn't roll an 18, 19, or 20.) Of course, Peter Perfect's cause-serious-wounds-by-touch ability didn't help Ringman much, but at least he saved

against contact paralyzation. As he clutched the wound with his shield arm, Peter Perfect kicked his groin with an adamantite-tipped boot as hard as he could. Even Ringman's +5 plate mail couldn't dissipate all the impact strength of a blow like that; he shrieked involuntarily, and was stunned.

Peter Perfect straddled him, a nasty smirk across his face. He reached down and tore the +4 shield from Ringman's left arm, then reached out once more for his downed opponent's holy avenger. Panicking himself back to his senses, Ringman rolled aside and kept his holy sword in his own right hand.

"Think you're pretty tough, do you, paladin?" Pete scorned. "You all thought The Dungeon was pretty tough too, didn't you!? So tough that none of you even came back to see if I'd escaped! But I did escape, bwa ha ha, and I got back all my magic items and artifacts -- and a certain invulnerable coat as a bonus. And I bought a few scrolls and, with the help of Prometheus here, managed to recast all my permanent spells -- including protection from good."

Ringman wondered why he was incapable of moving during this ego trip Peter Perfect was on. He thought it was some special power, but then dismissed that since he didn't see any magic twinkles. He thought it may have been some obscure rule about getting to make unlimited soliloquies in combat; then he remembered that it was just the fact that one exchange of blows in melee combat took a whole minute.

"And furthermore," Pete continued, "I struck up a deal with Tiamat!"

"Tiamat?" Ringman gulped. "As in the chromatic dragon?"

"No, as in the lady across the street! Of COURSE the chromatic dragon! Geez, you never were very intelligent, were you? In any case, thanks to Tiamat's seed of evil, your son is now precisely what you and your ex-bed-partner wanted him not to be."

"You struck a bargain with Tiamat for some 'seed of evil,' and you're still a paladin?!"

"Hey, the ends justify the means, Ringo. It was my pleasure to thrust Tiamat's seeds into Sick Sword's womb."

Ringman lay there, dumbfounded.

"Why do you think I did it with that bitch in the first place?"

Things couldn't have been much worse, Ringman figured. He had to get out of this disadvantaged position, though, before he could think of what to do next. He put his right thumb and index finger in his mouth and whistled a string of three notes.

"What are you doing?" Peter Perfect demanded.

"Whistling," Ringman told him.

"I KNOW that, but for what?!" Peter Perfect clutched his medallion of ESP and aimed it at Ringman's cranium. Unfortunately, he rolled a 6; he whacked the medallion in disgust. "Stupid newfangled piece of junk, can't even count on it to work right!"

Just then, a horse galloped silently into view on a cushion of air. Peter Perfect recognized it instantly from its +3 plate barding; it was Ringman's warhorse. He stood out in front of it, between the horse and Ringman, and punched the horse across its meteorite-steel-plated jaw as hard as he could. The animal rolled with the punch onto the ground some twenty feet back.

In the mean time, Ringman had recovered his shield. Peter Perfect sneered at Ringman for daring to try something so dirty and underhanded while claiming to be a paladin. "Savor death, insignificant flesh slug!" He hacked down with his Axe of the Dwarvish Lords, this time slashing Ringman's right shoulder cleanly enough to sever his right arm.

Ringman screamed with pain, now shocked out of his stunned condition. The arm socket gushed blood, but it would stop before he ran out. He let go of the top strap of his shield and grabbed his severed arm -- which still held his holy sword -- with his remaining hand. The shield flopped uselessly from his elbow as he scrambled for his horse.

"Hah!" Peter Perfect called after Ringman, shaking his Dwarvish Hand Axe in his left hand and inadvertently switching it to Battle-Axe length. "Let's see you fight without your writing arm!"

Ringman made it to his horse and tried to mount up. He had to hold the arm between his chin and his chest to get on.

"You're a wimp, Ringman! A one-armed wimp!"

Stowing the right arm between his legs, he grabbed the reins in his left hand and giddyapped out of there. He was grateful for those horseshoe-of-the-zephyr shock absorbers; any jostles could have sent him tumbling.

"Ringman has no writing arm! Ringman has no writing arm! And he's got a chaotic-evil Disgusting Character for a son!" Peter chided him.

'First stop, Clerasil's place,' Ringman thought as his horse accelerated. 'He'll probably be able to reconnect my writing arm. Well, Peter Perfect, at least it is a writing arm now. What self-improvements have you made during lo these past years?'

#

Knock knock knock.

"Who is it?"

"It's Ringman."

A bit surprised, Clerasil got up from his desk and went to the tremendous gothic double doors. The man on the other side of it had +5 plate mail, a beard, and a severed right arm.

"My right arm's been cut off," Ringman said, just in case Clerasil hadn't noticed.

"My word," Clerasil inspected the limb, "That does look rather nasty. Er, come in, come in."

Ringman came in.

"Tell me, who did this to you?"

Ringman stared at the ground. "Peter Perfect."

Clerasil gasped. "The Disgusting paladin? He's escaped? But how?"

"He didn't say how, only that he's been out for nine years or so."

Clerasil seemed to be in a mild state of shock. "Well . . . uh . . . it's true that we stopped visiting him after a while; er, we got tired of ragging on him. But escaped? I don't unders-- wait a minute. That's right. We stored all their magic weapons in a vault two levels below The Dungeon. He could have made telepathic contact with his holy sword and had it hack its way up to him."

"So, in other words, you didn't even bother to eliminate his psionic powers."

"Oh, yes we did; we were very careful about that. It just so happens that his _sword_ has its own powers of telepathy that we couldn't touch."

Ringman put a hand to his chin. "Oh yeah. That's right, Prometheus _was_ telepathic. I guess Prome just didn't want to be telepathic with _me_."

Clerasil changed the subject. "Let's reconnect that arm of yours, shall we?"

Ringman had practically forgotten about it. "Oh, uh, sure, sure."

Clerasil exposed the severed flesh on the end of the arm and pressed it up next to the stump on Ringman's shoulder. Ringman had thoughtfully tied a tourniquet over the open end of his stump. "You know, you're lucky you're a paladin here. Your disease resistance let you get away with this without getting gangrene."

Ringman folded his arm. "And then you'd have to cast a cure disease spell on me, right?"

Clerasil didn't reply, he merely opened the tourniquet and let little bits of blood leak through to the severed limb. He sprinkled holy water on it and began to chant: "Ooom, shalagoom, shak shak. Qui tolis veal pecata mundi, et in unum domino's pizza, e pluribus uranium, semper ubi sub ubi. BY THE POWER OF GOD III, I COMMAND THIS LIMB -- REGENERATED!"

The mighty hand of God III stretched its fingers through Clerasil's body and touched Ringman's shoulder with its awesome pinky. He could start to feel sensations in his arm almost immediately, and within a minute, the limb was whole again. He moved the joint and flexed the arm a bit.

"Uh, thanks," Ringman said.

"And since you're a paladin and have had to give away all your excess wealth," Clerasil said, "I'm gonna let you keep that regenerated limb for the low low price of only 15 000 gold pieces."

Ringman scowled at him. "That's the _usual_ price; and besides, I gave all but a little under 300 gold pieces away to some amorphous lawful-good institution long ago."

"Hmmm. Well, considering how crucial a role you played in vanquishing Omnion 'way back when, I'll let you have it on the house. Now good day."

Clerasil indicated the front door of his church and turned back to his desk.

"Um," Ringman umed.

"Yes, yes what is it now?" Clerasil kept his back turned to him.

Ringman exhaled. "Peter Perfect's out, and I'm no match for him."

"And I suppose you want me to just go charging out there and bring him back to justice, right? Sorry, no sale."

"He's already done plenty of damage."

"Yeah, I saw your arm. Now go away."

"That's not all. He made a pact with Tiamat."

Clerasil dropped his writing utensils and froze. "Tiamat? The chromatic dragon?"

Ringman chuckled, recalling his own reaction. "Yes, Tiamat, the chromatic dragon, the hellbound spawn of all evil dragonkind. Apparently he and Tiamat . . . um . . . 'implanted' some seed of evil in my third child before he was born, and now he's a chaotic-evil genociding machine at least twice as powerful as his mother. Or at least he has the potential to be one."

"Now I know I'm out of my league. Sick Sword herself could have creamed me if she'd been so inclined; any kid more powerful than her could stomp me into a little grease spot before I had a chance to cast a spell. Sorry. Uh, you could try asking Wierd Dough, though."

#

Knock knock knock.

"Come in."

Ringman opened the door and stepped into just about the biggest magical pyrotechnics display he'd seen. Sparks showered off the walls in all directions. Jugglers juggled without using their hands. People whose faces were glued to instruction manuals cast burning hands spells without looking where they were pointing. Several graduate-level pranksters, doubtlessly from one of the half-elven fraternities, were casting fireball and cone of cone spells at the same time, annihilating each others' effects mere milliseconds before disaster would have struck. And this was just Wierd Dough's magic college's anteroom.

"Ah, whom may I say is calling?" asked a third-level apprentice who was seemingly unaware of the din going on around him.

"Ringman."

"Ringman. Lessee, Ringman, Ringman, Ringman -- that Ringman with an 'R'?"

"Uh, yes. R-I-N-G-M-A-N. One word."

"Ring, Ringfield, Ringling, Ringworm -- nope, sorry, no Ringman on my appointment list here."

"Look, this is important, I have to see Wierd Dough. It's a matter of life and death."

The conjurer apprentice stared at him coldly. "The chancellor sees no one without an appointment."

Ringman opened his mouth to speak, but a stray lightning bolt startled him and he had to begin again. "Just tell Wierd Dough that Ringman is here to see him. He'll know who I am."

The apprentice shook his head. "What level are you, anyway?"

"Ninth."

"Oh, and I suppose you think you can push everybody around just because you're a sorcerer? Well, listen here, bud--"

"I'm not a sorcerer," Ringman folded his arms impatiently, "I'm a paladin."

The apprentice mouthed the word 'paladin,' and then evidently something snapped and it All Made Sense. "Ringman . . . the paladin. RINGMAN THE PALADIN?!"

The spell casting going on through the room stopped in mid-syllable. Everybody dropped what they were doing and looked. "_RINGMAN THE PALADIN_?!"

The apprentice gawked, "The same Ringman the paladin who defeated Omnion in the final battle of the I.U.D.C. at Crysglass lake?"

"Yes, the same Ringman the paladin. Boy, for a character class whose prime requisite is supposed to be intelligence, you can sure be --"

"_Welcome_ to Wierd Dough's college of magic, Ringman! Won't you have a seat, make yourself comfortable, can I get you a glass of --"

"No, no, no." He was still impatient. "I have to see Wierd Dough. It's a matter of life and death."

"Whose? Yours or his?"

"Everybody's."

Now just a tad more nervous, the apprentice ducked behind a curtain and shouted to the next rung in the chain of command. Ringman could just barely hear the "Ringman wants to see Wierd Dough," and the "Not _the_ Ringman!" issuing from beyond.

Twenty-four seconds later, everything spun around and suddenly he was elsewhere. He was in a very dimly lit elsewhere, as a matter of fact. In the center of this dimly lit elsewhere was a robed figure who illuminated his bearded face by holding a handful of magic flame up to it. "Welcome," the firelit face said in a haunting tone, "What can I do for you?"

"Can the theatrics, Wierd Dough. This is serious."

"Oh, all right," the figure acquiesced, and switched on the light spells by snapping his fingers. "You sure know how to spoil other people's fun!"

"Peter Perfect escaped from The Dungeon nine years ago."

Wierd Dough rubbed his chin in thought. "Hmmp. I wouldn't put it beyond him. He probably made telepathic contact with Prometheus and had the sword hack its way up through two levels, then grabbed on to it and worked his way down to the magic items chamber, took his own stuff and the Invulnerable Coat of Arnd as a souvenir, rode his warhorse out of the complex, and sought revenge against the lot of us. Pity we stopped going there to make funny faces at him, or we would've found out."

"You _knew_ about how he made his escape all the time?!" Ringman stammered.

"You mean my guess was _right_?"

"Yes! Your guess was _exactly_ right! Why didn't you think of it before?!"

Wierd Dough shrugged. "I just never wondered about it before. Anyway, he couldn't have done much or we would've heard about it."

"He has done quite a bit, but it's the type of stuff you don't hear about until it's too late. He got some 'seed of evil' from Tiamat and implanted it in Sick Sword's womb while she was pregnant with my third child, Gross Sword."

Wierd Dough grinned. "The old sexual-implantation-of-the- deity-spawned-seed-of-alignment-determination-in-a-womb-that-has-an-unborn-child-in-it bit, eh? I tried that once myself. Nothing much happened, though."

"Yeah, well something happened this time. Gross Sword is supposedly a couple times more powerful than Sick Sword herself; he could probably bring Central Earth to its knees."

Wierd Dough nodded solemnly. "And you want me to help you get rid of him, is that it? No, it's not. You want me to help you vanquish Peter Perfect and then do something about Gross Sword. Sorry, kiddo, but I know about how poor you paladins tend to be. No sale."

"You want me to pay you for ridding the world of those menaces?"

"Sure. Running a college of magic is expensive stuff."

"You could rob centaurs if you wanted money."

Weird Dough looked up at the ceiling, whose distance was distorted so that it appeared 5 feet above the floor. "True, but then I wouldn't be able to complain about how low we are on funds over here. How would it look to all the other colleges if mine didn't desperately need more money?"

"Don't you feel the least bit indebted to me for having gotten rid of Omnion?"

"Indebted for how much you participated in that campaign? Sure I am! I'll cast a polymorph others spell on you at no cost, if you want it! But going back into action again is another matter entirely. You're better off trying Middle Monk; at least his profession involves constant fighting."

#

The instant Ringman stepped on the welcome mat in front of the monastery, a fifteen-foot-diameter gong sounded on its own and Chinese movie music issued from enchanted loudspeakers. One of the lesser disciples approached the front gate and bowed, greeting the man in the +5 plate mail. "Greetings, most honorable Lingman the paradin, welcome to our humbre monastely. How may we assist you?"

"I need to see Middle Monk," he told him. "It's --"

"--A matter of Rife and Death. It always is. I wouldn't berieve you if you welen't who you are. Forrow me."

Never unclasping his hands, the disciple led Ringman in through a complicated maze of hanging gardens, beneath a row of paper lanterns, past some statues with unpronounceable monosyllabic names, and past a paper sliding door into the Main Training Room. Ringman was a little worried about the security of this place until he noticed that the paper walls were made of adamantite-woven paper. Three rows of monks, each wearing a white bathrobe and a different colored sash, were going through a training exercise.

"Ichi!" the one up in front shouted. They all stepped forward and thrust their right fists into imaginary opponents. "Ni!" he shouted again, and they did the same with their left fists. "San!" came the shout and the punch again. "Chi!" issued the cry

and its consequent a fourth time. "GO!" This time, the three rows yelled as they stepped forward and punched.

Middle Monk, the one at the front of the group wearing a black belt with several victory notches carved in it, caught Ringman out of the corner of his eye. Realizing who it was, he dismissed his students with an impulsive "Yasumeh!" and walked like a slob up to the man in armor.

"Ringman, ol' buddy!" Middle Monk slapped him on the back with his full titan strength. Being a monk, his strength did no extra damage, but it sure toppled the paladin. "Long time no see! Whatcha been up to? Can I get you a Coke or a Pepsi?"

"Uh, Coke? Pepsi? Um, are those some oriental --"

"Uh, no, no, never mind. So," he began to walk alongside Ringman, "What brings ya to these parts? Wanna be a monk and be easier to hit than a first-level illusionist? Or do ya just need a new magic bo stick?"

"No, it's a bit more serious than that. Peter Perfect escaped."

"No! Really? Wow, that's intense. He wanted to go surfing, right?"

"He escaped nine years ago."

Middle Monk stopped bantering for a few seconds, which was about the longest time he could be relied upon to be banter-proof. Then: "Well, that cat probably would've gotten out some time anyway. Not much trouble he can cause."

"Oh no? He made a bargain with Tiamat so that my son, Gross Sword, is just as chaotic and evil as my two daughters are lawful and good. And my blacksheep son is more powerful than anything that's come before. He could take on the entire I.U.D.C. and win if they were still around."

"Including Omnion?"

"Including Omnion."

"Oh." Middle Monk grimaced a bit. "Wow. Gee. Awesome. Tubular. Cosmic. Like, what's he done so far?"

"Nothing that I'm aware of, but at any moment he could decide to kill Bahamut or something."

"I thought Weird Dough killed Bahamut for the experience points," Middle said, then recalled: "Oh, yeah, that's right. That was only a Bahamut android, programmed to act like him in every detail."

"Both that damned Peter Perfect and my multiple-deity-powered son are running around loose, and there's no way I can deal with them on my own."

"Mmmmm, so you want me to help. I catch your drift. Um, I don't think that's such a hot idea, what with my armor class being higher than negative 17 and all. I mean, one hit and that kid of yours could do . . . uh . . . how much damage did you say he could do in one blow?"

"I didn't say, but from what I've heard, over three hundred points. Times five if he hits you from the rear."

"YEEESH! I only have 104 hit points myself! Um, take care of yourself, man, but I've got my temple to attend to. Why don't you try Wierd Dough?"

"Already tried him."

"Hmmm. Then Cleras-- no, that cleric wouldn't get involved for all the holy water in the Specific Ocean."

"Yes, I know," Ringman added coldly.

"Then your best bet is Koenieg the Great Druid. He lives in the Great Big Forest surrounded by some large menhirs -- er, standing stones -- that are supposed to predict eclipses and things."

#

Ringman could have sworn he'd gotten the address right. He was in the Great Big Forest, 5 leagues north of the Really Huge Falls, twelve furlongs east of the Vastly Hugely Mind-bogglingly Wide River, standing right in front of the Ring of Large Menhirs. He should have seen some druidic activity by now.

It was then that the bottom fell out of the universe beneath him. Screaming, he fell in a direction that was the fifth-dimensional equivalent of down, and landed five feet away from the center of the Ring of Large Menhirs. From this angle, he could easily see the nine initiates of the 9th Circle mulling about and Koenieg the Great Druid seated in lotus position at the center.

"Oh, I get it," Ringman commented, "I can only see you from inside the menhir ring."

"Naw," one of the 11th-level initiates told him, "That ring of stones out there in the Great Big Forest is just a decoy. The ring you're in now is in a parallel universe. It keeps the salesmen out."

A wave of mistletoe from the center caught Ringman's attention. Koenieg addressed him: "Welcome, Ringman, to the Tree of the Universe."

Ringman didn't see any trees around, but he had more pressing matters to worry about. "I'm here to --"

"Enlist my help in vanquishing the escaped Peter Perfect and your blacksheep son. Yes, I know; Middle Monk sent me a Telepagram. I believe his words were 'Watch out for this one. He's a loo-loo.'"

Ringman exhaled. "Well, that was his answer. What's yours?"

Koenieg went off into alpha state for a few milliseconds, then came back with: "No."

"Why not?" Ringman asked, even though he knew it was futile to try and talk a 14th-level druid out of anything.

"The tree of the universe spreads like a golden path upon the well-spring of Life. He who can pick its fruits and not be cast down the dark pit will know ultimate wisdom. If Buddha tripped and fell while nobody else was around, would he make a sound? He who always finds fault in his friends has faulty friends. A penny saved is a penny earned. A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush. A stitch in time saves --"

"Okay, OKAY, I get the message! Sheish!" He looked out through the menhirs and saw only swirling darkness. "Uh, can I get back to the Prime Material plane now?"

"Certainly. Just click your heels together three times and say, 'There's no place like home, there's no place like home'."

Burying his face in his hands, Ringman grudgingly tapped the heels of his high hard boots together and meekly chanted, "There's no place like home, there's no place like home."

And while Ringman had his eyes closed, Koenieg cast some obscure plane transport spell on him so that he would think he'd gone back to Central Earth under his own power.

Of course, Ringman wasn't that stupid, but he was glad to be back on Central Earth again. Well, sort-of glad. Oh, all right, he could barely stomach the thought of living on the same planet with Peter Perfect and his killing machine son. And he hadn't even seen his killing machine son yet.

"Yep," Ringman told his warhorse as he mounted up to ride off, "There's no place like home."

#

Clerasil had refused to help. Wierd Dough had refused to help. Middle Monk had refused to help. Even Koenieg the Great Druid had declined his services. The only anti-disgusting character left was Melnic the Loud, and that bard would almost certainly not get involved.

The instant he stepped on the welcome mat in front of Melnic's Ollamh college, he realized it was a telepad. That was because everything around him had suddenly congealed and deposited him in the middle of the college's courtyard. He found himself surrounded by raucous, noisy, semi-drunk Ollamh bards, some pure human and some half-elven, who upon his arrival began strumming away at their lutes (a few had genuine Anstruth or Ollamh harps) and singing:

"Welcome, Ringman, to our fancy-pants abode!

Ringman, the paladin, whose tale is still told

Of how he vanquished Omnion to the realm of burning cold;

Ringman, Ringman, aren't you getting too old?"

"Uh, hi, guys," Ringman said wanly.

"YAAAAAAAAAAAAAYYYYYY!!!"

Melnic the Loud emerged from the middle of the crowd, strummed his Ollamh Banjo, shifted his Recorder of Ye'Cind into overdrive, and sang a fast little ditty that sounded very much like Haydn's g minor symphony (except that Haydn hadn't been invented yet):

"From days of long ago a legend down to us has come,

Or maybe it was Wierd Dough's mind that this message comes

from;

'Tis said that Peter Perfect had escaped his cell of late,

And went to Hell to make a pact with Tiamat the great.

And from his loins an evil seed in Sick Sword he did spray

To make an evil child nine years ago this very day;

And now he's tough, so all we'll say

Is singing, singing, singing, singing, ye-e-e-e-e-es,

. . . we are!"

And all the other bards joined in and repeated the refrain: "And now he's tough, so all we'll say / Is singing, singing, singing, singing, ye-e-e-e-e-es, . . . we are!"
STRUM. Stru-dummmmmmm.

Ringman rolled his eyes up into his head. That last line didn't even fit in the context of the song.

"We know that last line doesn't fit within the context of the song," Melnic the Loud admitted in recitative, "But it's . . . a tradition."

"Well, for one thing, HE didn't make that child, I did. Gross Sword is my son just as much as he is Sick Sword's. Peter Perfect only . . . 'sprayed' . . . a little Tiamatish evilness onto him a bit later."

"OoooOooooOooooohhhhhhh," everybody sang.

"So you probably already know that I need to enlist some help. I can't stop Peter Perfect and Gross Sword on my own. Melnic the Loud, will you --"

"Well, er, I, um, that is, uh . . . I've got this college to run, see?"

Ringman folded his arms and shook his head. "So did Wierd Dough."

"Good. Then you'll understand."

"I know why you're declining," Ringman said, "But I don't think I'll ever understand."

Ringman turned his back to Melnic and started to walk away, then noticed all the 20th+ level Ollamh bards around him. "Any of you bards want to help me?"

"Grumble grumble grumble grumble," they grumbled, suddenly becoming concerned about their studies.

Ringman walked slowly toward the telepad marked "MAIN EXIT" at one side of the courtyard. This had been his last shot. There was no one else he could turn to.

'Oh well,' he tried to console himself, 'I've had to go it on my own before.'

#

Gross Sword scratched a few dark magic symbols into the ground around Sick Sword's keep's clearing. He couldn't stand his sickening mother or his two goody-goody sisters. He had tried to wish them away once before, but they'd all made their saving throws and a wish spell probably would have sent him away instead anyway. Luckily they hadn't found out about that, so they didn't vent any retribution upon him.

He spied a squirrel scurrying up a nearby tree. He hated squirrels. They were so cute and cuddly he wanted to throw up. He took out his Gross Hand Axe, whirled it

around as though it were a 5-ton war hammer, and let fly at the critter. The squirrel was instantly felled, frozen, burnt, wounded, dismembered, poisoned, level-drained, hacked to bits, and finally stunned by the axe's clap of thunder. Sick Sword would doubtlessly hear the noise, just like she always did, that bitch.

"Gross Sword!" called his mother's voice from within the keep. "Are you killing squirrels again?!"

"Yes, mother," he replied.

"How many times have I told you not to do that?!"

"Fifty-seven, counting now," he called back. God IV, how he hated Sick Sword.

"Well, don't do it again! How do you ever expect to make it on Central Earth if you just go around killing things indiscriminantly?!"

Gross Sword shook with rage. "All right, mother, THAT'S IT!!" He opened up one of his portable holes and took out a tubeful of disappearing dust. He spread the dust over his entire body in the blink of an eye, and was gone from sight. "YOU'RE DEAD MOTHER! DO YOU HEAR ME?! _YOU'RE DEAD_!!!"

"YOU'RE DEAD you're dead you're dead . . ." echoed his cry from every distant mountain. Disgusting Sword and Ridiculous Sword looked up in alarm. "That's it," Ridiculous Sword commented, "He's making his move. Come on, we'd better stop him."

Their helms of teleportation glowed purple for a moment, and they emerged at their mother's keep two leagues away.

The town heard the thunderous cry as well. Ringman, from the top precipice of his house (which was actually a small castle), heard the thunder's words and knew who the voice had to belong to. These were the first words he'd ever heard his son say, and they frightened him down to his kidneys. After all she'd done to him, he still loved Sick Sword deeply, and now his Tiamat-infected son was about to kill her and there wasn't a damned thing he could do about it.

Except dash for his warhorse and ride like lightning to Sick Sword's keep, that is.

Sick Sword zipped over to her portal spell -- er, window -- and saw the dust-of-disappearance-covered killer urchin trodding through the front drawbridge of the keep at a rather alarming 40 feet per second. The old cover-yourself-with-dust-of-disappearance-and-cast-a-light-spell-directly-on-Sick-Sword's-robe-of-eyes-to-blind-it-for-one-to-three-minutes-so-that-even-her-permanent-detect-invisibility-spell-can't-see-you-and-you-can-sneak-up-on-her-from-behind-and-backstab-her-for-quintuple-damage trick; Omnion had tried that on her twice before, and had succeeded the first time and nearly succeeded the second. Sick Sword knew what to do; all she had to do was spray him with dust of appearance when he first showed up. Now, where had she put her dust tubes?

The Sword sisters arrived just in time to see their evil brother dart into the keep covered in dust of disappearance. They both knew this maneuver well; it was the only known way of handling a really disgusting character. Without even having to use ESP on each other, they rushed in after him.

Ringman rode hard and fast. Very fast. He'd equipped his warhorse with horseshoes of speed and secured them in place with an outer layer of horseshoes of the zephyr. His horse could move at double speed without tiring; and for some reason, right now it was going two feet per second faster than that. That would get him there in time, he assured himself. Of course it would.

With a flick of his middle finger, Gross Sword knocked down the solid adamantite door to Sick Sword's room. His mother was ready for him; she uncapped her tube of appearing dust and blew at her son through the other end.

That would have worked perfectly, had not Gross Sword also been prepared. For the last fifteen seconds, he'd been chanting, gesticulating, and fiddling with a legume seed behind that locked door; and now, having carefully integrated the flicking-down-the-door maneuver into his somatic components, he released his spell, blowing the spoilsport dust right back to its owner with a strong gust of wind. And since his artifact bracer allowed him to cast simultaneous spells, he followed that gust of wind up with a light spell thrown directly on Sick Sword's robe of eyes.

Disgusting Sword and Ridiculous Sword had a clear line of sight from the splintered drawbridge through the knocked-down adamantite bedroom door to their blinded mother and her unseen adversary. He'd succeeded; she didn't manage to coat him with dust of appearance in time. "Get out of there, mom!" Disgusting Sword and Ridiculous Sword shouted as they charged across the foyer. "Teleport!"

Ringman could see the edge of the clearing through trees blurred by speed. Within that clearing lay the unmistakable silhouette of her keep. This was not the same clearing they'd lived in together -- it was instead where the keep had first materialized -- but it may as well have been. There were hundreds of bushes, trees, and leaf piles that could hide Sick Sword and Gross Sword, if they weren't inside the keep. Only because that terrifying "YOU'RE DEAD!" sounded like it had come from this particular spot did he ride here at all. He changed course ever-so-slightly and headed for the keep; he could only hope that they were in fact in there.

'My own son,' Sick Sword thought. 'How could I have misled myself this far?'

She didn't teleport. She didn't look from side to side in panic. She didn't try to find another container of dust of appearance. She didn't even pick up her Sick Sword from the far wall. She just stood there and regretted her fate.

'The bitch always was a pushover,' Gross Sword thought, and rammed his Gross Dagger through her heart from behind.

Disgusting Sword and Ridiculous Sword both saw the phantom form impale their mother. They both cringed in horror as she convulsed and fell over dead. Disgusting Sword involuntarily dropped her Disgusting Longsword, which clanked noisily against the stone floor. As Gross Sword shook off the disappearing faerie dust, he trumpeted an evil, victorious chortle that sent shivers through both the still-approaching Ringman and his horse.

He was still chortling when he left the prime material plane six seconds later.

"My God II," Disgusting Sword cried as she knelt beside her dead mother. "He wasn't supposed to get this far!" Her fists clenched as her throat tightened up and wavered. "We were supposed to stop him first!!"

Ridiculous Sword nervously looked at Disgusting Sword, then at Sick Sword's body, then at Gross Sword's footprints in pile of invisible dust he'd just shaken off, then back at Sick Sword's body, then back at Gross Sword's footprints. "I'm going after him," she resolved.

"But how will you know where he is?!" Disgusting Sword demanded.

"There's only one place he could have gone," Ridiculous Sword replied. "What's the matter, have you forgotten Standard Evil Operating Procedure number twenty-six? After an evil person kills someone who's lawful-good, he or she goes to Heaven to permanently destroy the soul!"

Disgusting Sword just stared back at her and continued breathing hard.

"Well, don't just stand there, start a raise dead spell on her!"

"Oh," she blurted. "Oh yeah." She took out a white-with-blue-striped generic holy symbol and began chanting and gesticulating.

"I only hope I can reach him in time," Ridiculous Sword mumbled, flicked the switch or her amulet of the planes, and went to Heaven.

Ringman double-parked his horse by the keep's entrance, jumped off, and rushed in through the door. Without his bulky adamantite-alloyed plate mail to hinder him, he could run a whole 1% faster. He saw Disgusting Sword kneeling over Sick Sword's body chanting a now-all-too-familiar raise dead spell, gasped, and continued to rush forward. He had been right; damn it, that had been Gross Sword's deadly chortle. His old love was dead.

He knelt beside Sick Sword opposite Disgusting Sword and drew his holy avenger. Solemnly lining up the point with one of the spaces between the floor stones, he forced the blade three inches down into the floor. The upside-down sword now resembled a cross, the ancient symbol for death. He clasped the grip of the longsword and reclined his forehead against his hands, closing his eyes. Silently, he prayed to his deity for Sick Sword's survival.

#

"Pardon me," Ridiculous Sword asked an angel-initiate passer-by. "Did you happen to see a --"

She noticed a double-file path of dead angels littering the yellow brick road that lead through the pearly gates.

"Oh. Never mind."

She got a running start and then kicked in her artifacts. With all the times she'd taken major benign power "O: double movement speed on foot," she'd multiplied her running speed by 2, 4, 8, 16, 32, all the way up to 64. She could now run 12 288 yards in six seconds flat.

Tiptoeing over the dead angels at a mere 6144 yards-per-six-seconds, she reached the pearly gates. She addressed the toll booth. "Saint Peter, you've got to let me in! There's a --"

And then she noticed that the trail of angel-initiates weren't the only casualties around here. Saint Peter had been killed over a decade ago by Omnion, and now even his replacement, Saint Paul, lay in a desiccated heap.

'Guess I don't need his permission to enter, then,' Ridiculous Sword thought, and charged in after Gross Sword.

Sick Sword felt a sickening lump of deja vu form in her stomach. Here she was, perched on the boarding steps of a Trans Heavenly Airlines concorde SST, unarmed and about to get CuisinArted by a ruthless, evil foe. She didn't much like being in this position when Omnion was bearing down on her, and she certainly didn't like the idea of getting eternally wiped out by her own son. She had seen this coming and had finished a contact other plane spell several seconds ago, in case the worst were to happen, and that didn't reassure her one bit. So she did the only thing she could: she started psionically telekinesing Gross Sword and hoped that she'd be raised from the dead in time.

Gross Sword held up Card Number 8 from The Villains Collection of Commonly Used Sayings. It read: "Hah, you puny mortal fool! Your powers of telekinesis are no match for my permanent potion of flying at twice normal strength!"

Sick Sword raised her eyebrows momentarily at the idea that such a card could actually be a commonly used saying, and continued concentrating. Card Number 8 was right; during the first minute of concentration, her teke could only reduce his flight speed by four percent. She couldn't teleport, either; teleportation involved using the astral plane for quick transit. Since she was dead, she was bound to the plane of Heaven and to that plane only; she couldn't leave Heaven for another hundred years.

Ridiculous Sword wished she had asked somebody for directions now, even if it was only some cherubim-in-training. She was lost. Every yellow brick road looked the same. There wasn't so much as a map pointing out "You are here," or a sign saying "New angel recruits -->". Saint Peter or Saint Paul sure could have told her where Sick Sword had gone, yessireebob, but for all her Disgusting powers there was no way she could locate Sick Sword's spirit while it still had that %\$!@#* mind blank spell up! Why couldn't Sick Sword have relied on her amulet of life protection just for today?!

Gross Sword drifted closer by the millisecond. Sick Sword was doomed, and she knew it. Well, she might not be able to leave Heaven, but she could bloody well still transmit her thoughts through the contact-other-plane link she'd opened less than a minute before. If she was going to be annihilated, she had to round out one last thing first. . . .

"Ringman!" Sick Sword's voice echoed in Ringman's mind.

"What?" he sat upright. "Sick Sword?!"

He glanced at Disgusting Sword. His outburst had not disturbed her prayer.

Ringman could feel her presence almost as much as if she were still alive. He could feel the quavering fear, the encroaching doom in her telepathic voice. He could almost see his own son bearing down on her with his adamantite dagger and broadsword.

"Ringman, you were right," the voice said. "You were so right, there is no need for Disgusting Characters on Central Earth anymore! I should never have turned our children into killing machines!"

"Sick Sword," he clutched his face as he said it, "No, no! Don't let this be the end! I still love you with all my heart!"

"My love," she replied, and her voice sounded more final than ever, "Ringman, I'm sorry. . . . I'm so, so sorry."

A choking sensation cut across the telepathic ether, and her transmission ended. Ringman neither spake nor moved.

"NO!" Ridiculous Sword shouted to Gross Sword when she at last reached the scene, but too late. Before she could get any of her spells off, before even the quickest of her psionic disciplines kicked in -- before there was any way she could beat him to the punch -- Gross Sword impaled his mother's ghost on his Gross Dagger and channeled enough damage into it from his Other Bracer of Irresistible Damage to vaporize her. Her phantasmal form twinkled for an instant, and then dispersed itself back into the cosmic ocean from whence it came.

Disgusting Sword finished her prayer, pointed her right index finger at Sick Sword's corpse's neck, and let her arm recoil slightly. The standard raise dead spark flashed on her fingertip, but it wasn't echoed by the body at all.

Disgusting Sword's mouth dropped open in disbelief. Ringman had already known for the last several seconds that it wouldn't work anyway. It was all over.

Gross Sword smiled chaotic-evilily at Ridiculous Sword, guffawed a hideous laugh, and left the plane of Heaven. Ridiculous Sword couldn't find him now unless he wanted to be found.

Ringman buried his face in his hands and started to shake. His fingertips grappled with his temples. Then, not caring if Disgusting Sword or Ridiculous Sword or the whole town heard him, he tore his hands away and screamed as loudly as he could.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!"

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!" wailed the first echo.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah," cried the second.

"Aaaaaaaaah . . ." whispered the third.

The silence that followed was thunderous. It took Ringman a long while to break down and sob.

'The poor man,' Disgusting Sword thought. 'It must really be hard on him.'

PART TWO

"Portable hole," Disgusting Sword read off the inventory sheet.

"Check," Ridiculous Sword replied, taking the folded piece of black hyperdimensional cloth from Sick Sword's bureau and stowing it in a trunk.

"Second portable hole."

"Check." Ridiculous Sword did the same to this facsimile.

"Fifty containers of dust of disappearance."

"Tentwentythirtyfortyfifty -- check."

"Ring of earth elemental command."

Ridiculous Sword pulled the ring from Sick Sword's finger and threw it into the trunk. "Check. Ringman, you sure you don't want any of this stuff?"

"Huh, what?" Ringman awoke from his stupor. "Oh, no, no, I've got my limit as a paladin. Can't have more than four non-armor non-shield non-weapon magic items, you know."

Disgusting Sword shrugged. "We've never gone by that stipulation."

"You also got this way via robbing centaurs," Ringman noted. "Sorry, that lifestyle's not for me."

"Suit yourself. Ring of water elemental command."

"Check." The ring made a "ting" as it landed in the trunk.

"Plus six dagger of wounding."

"Check."

"Plus six bastard sword of wounding."

"Check."

"Mace of Cuthbert."

"Check. Hey, you think one of us ought to use that?"

Disgusting Sword pondered the idea. They were both lawful-good clerics with strengths of 18 or more, after all. "Well, we'll see. Maybe later. Hammer of thunderbolts."

"Check."

"Arrow of slaying lawful-evil half-elven fighter/magic-user/thieves."

"Check."

"Plus five longbow."

"Check."

"Helm of brilliance."

Sick Sword's lifeless head lolled gently up, then down, as Ridiculous Sword took its jewelled helmet off. Ringman couldn't bear to look anymore. "Check."

"Helm of teleportation."

She took the helmet underneath the first off her head. "Check."

"Helm of telepathy."

She took the third helmet off her head. "Check."

"Amulet of life protection."

Ridiculous Sword moved to the bureau and took out a charm-on-a-chain. Sick Sword hadn't needed the amulet's limited psionic protection when her now-artifact sword had given her total immunity to all forms of mental or psionic attack. And despite its namesake, Ridiculous Sword reassured herself, the amulet of life protection wouldn't have done any good against Gross Sword anyway. "Check."

"Reverse eyes of petrification."

Ridiculous Sword covered the spectacles with her hand so as not to look at them. "Check."

"Sphere of annihilation."

Ridiculous Sword calmly chucked the black ball of nothingness into the trunk. "Check."

"Wand of negation."

This item she was more careful with. "Check."

And the list went on and on. Altogether, 10 magic wands, 20 magic rings, 150 containers of magic dust, 3 magic helmets, 3 magic pairs of gauntlets, 17 magic ioun stones, 3 magic staves, 13 non-artifact magic weapons, and 45 other miscellaneous magic items completed the inventory of the late Sick Sword's magic item arsenal.

"And last but certainly not least," Disgusting Sword finished the list, "The Sick Sword."

"I AM THE SICK SWORD," the Sick Sword bellowed as Ridiculous Sword grabbed it.

"Oh, pite down," Ridiculous Sword silenced it. "Check."

She was about to toss it in the trunk, but she stopped herself. "You know, this weapon right here could do a lot of good in the right hands. Ringman, are you sure you --"

Ringman backed away emphatically. "Even if I did have room for it on my inventory, which I most definitely do not, you understand, I am not going to touch that sword again!"

Ridiculous Sword let the sword fall and put her hands on her hips. "Hey, wait a minute. You have four magic weapons, right?"

"Yeah, that's right. My holy sword, my +3 hand axe, my +1 bow and +1 and +3 arrows, and my --"

"And you have one suit of magic armor and one magic shield, right?"

"Well, yeah, but I was in too much of a hurry to put them on when I heard Gross Sw--"

"And what other magic items do you have?"

"Well, there's my ring of shooting stars," he counted one on his fingers, "My +3-in-a-5-foot-radius ring of protection," he counted two, "My +3 periapt of proof against poison," he counted three, "And my . . . and, my . . . my . . . uh . . ." His voice trailed off.

"You don't have a fourth magic item, do you?" Ridiculous Sword chuckled. "Ha! You'd been hauling around those two magic potions for so long that you forgot when you used them that they freed up two slots on your inventory."

"Oh, I remembered that, all right," Ringman defended himself, "It's just that I've been --"

"So preoccupied with the rest of the things going on in your life you forgot about it," Ridiculous Sword finished the sentence for him. "Well, now I'm reminding you. You can have one more magic item in your care." She indicated the overflowing trunk. "Well, now's your chance to pick one. These things might never get used again otherwise."

"No, no, I couldn't, I'm --"

"Afraid of taking anything that once belonged to your true love."

Ringman grimaced. "Well, yes, because then --"

"You'd feel like a vampire."

"WILL you stop doing that?! Just because you can read my mind doesn't mean I want you to!"

Ridiculous Sword nodded solemnly. "Sorry about that. I guess all the experience points in Central Earth wouldn't teach me respect."

"Anyhow," Disgusting Sword reached into the trunk, "How about her old helm of brilliance?"

"I already told you, I don't want --"

"Oh, come come now. It'll protect you like a double strength ring of fire resistance, it'll glow pale blue whenever undead are around, this pale blue glow'll do 1-6 points of damage to the undead per minute, you can produce flame at will, it'll turn your holy sword into a holy sword of flame, and you can fire up to ten prismatic sprays, twenty walls of fire, thirty fireballs, and forty light spells."

Ringman rubbed his fuzzy chin. This magic item did seem awfully useful. "Uh . . . uh, no. No, I couldn't. Really."

"Then how about this handy-dandy girdle of titan strength?" She held up the harness and added temptingly, "Plus 7 to-hit, plus 14 to dam-age!"

Hmmm, he thought. Compared to the normal +2 to-hit and +5 to damage that his 18/92 strength allotted him, 25 strength would certainly be an improvement. He recalled how much he'd enjoyed being super strong after imbibing that storm giant potion for the final battle against the IUDC, and that only gave him 24 strength. But that was only a power trip, he realized. "No. No super strength for me. There's enough of that in Central Earth."

Disgusting Sword shrugged. "Suit yourself. Hey, then how about a wand of negation? One zap from this wand can instantly neutralize any magic item it's pointed at 3/4 of the time. Or, in the same vein, a rod of cancellation might do wonders for you. It can instantly drain an item of all its magic powers just by touching it."

"They would be useful against Peter Perfect and his ilk. Listen, I'll tell you, one of the reasons I'm reluctant to take a fourth magic item is that my warhorse already has horseshoes of the zephyr and horseshoes of speed. I'd feel a little guilty if --"

"And you'd feel a little stupid if having that one extra magic item could have saved your skin the next time you clash with Peter Perfect," Ridiculous Sword butted in. "Besides, didn't you used to have a carpet of flying?"

"That was a very long time ago. I got rid of that years before I even met Sick Sword. And I have a fast warhorse anyway."

"Hey," Disgusting Sword resumed, "How about a rod of lordly might?"

"Doesn't that count as a weapon?"

"Not if the Dungeon Master isn't looking."

Ringman covered his eyes with his hands and shook his head.

"Her old amulet of life protection would make you immune to psionic blasts, and that's the only psionic attack mode that can affect you. Or that amulet of proof against detection and location would keep the bad guys from finding out where you were. Or . . ."

Ringman wasn't listening anymore. He was lost in thought. 'That helm of brilliance sounds marvelous. Wearing that would be like being a fire god. But . . . titan strength, the ability to lift and carry 1500 pounds without even straining, smash open locked doors 9 times out of 10, successfully bend bars and lift gates 110% of the time, and get +7 to hit and +14 to damage.' He rolled the words around in his head. "Plus 7 to hit and plus 14 to damage. Mmmmm. +7 to-hit/+14 damage.

"WHAT am I SAYING!" he suddenly blurted out. Disgusting Sword stopped rattling off item names. Ringman hyperventilated. "Look, I can't get involved in any power trips, no matter how tempting."

"Don't tell me you actually think your code of paladinhood prohibits that sort of thing!"

"No, no, no, power trips . . . power trips got the I.U.D.C. together in the first place. Power trips turned Gross Sword to chaos and evil. I don't want that to keep on happening to people, least of all to me." He grasped his holy sword by the hilt, which was still stuck point-first in one of the gaps between the stones in the floor, and pulled it out.

Or at least he tried to pull his sword out. It wouldn't budge.

"Oh, come on, holy avenger, we've been through this before. You're not sentient. You weren't forged by a wizard who looked like a red push-button telephone receiver. So stop playing that sword-in-the-stone bit and come on out."

He yanked again. The few inches of the blade still stuck in the masonry still refused to give.

"Maybe it likes being Sick Sword's tombstone," Disgusting Sword suggested.

"We're gonna move Sick Sword anyway," Ringman said as he strained with the stubborn longsword. "She'd stink up the keep if we didn't bury her. And we can't exactly cremate her while that permanent potion of fire resistance at 150% effectiveness is still in effect on her. Oh, stop playing dead, you stupid sword, let go!"

Ringman exhaled and dropped to his knees. It seemed there was only one way to get it out. "Pretty please?" he pleaded with the sword.

The holy avenger leapt from its place in the floor into Ringman's right hand. Ringman shook his head in tired disbelief.

Ridiculous Sword eyed the holy sword warily. "Are you sure that sword's not sentient?"

"Sure I'm sure. It's never so much as throbbed at me for the whole time I've owned it, and Peter Perfect said it was an ordinary holy sword."

"Lemme have it for a few minutes."

Ringman shrugged. "Okay." He handed her the sword. "What are you going to do."

She held the sword in her right hand, took out a scroll she'd had specially scribed for just such an occasion, and read the runes from the page. The scroll looked like it would take a while to read.

"She's identifying it," Disgusting Sword told him. "The identify spell itself takes ten minutes to cast, but she can pick up one property of your holy sword every six seconds after that."

"Oh."

"Say, what weapon do you use in your off hand?"

"You mean, what's in my left hand when I'm wielding my holy sword?" Ringman replied.
"My shield, of course."

"No, I mean, what do you use in your left hand when you're not using your shield."

"Oh. Well, when Peter Perfect splintered my old +4 shield I had to use my magic hand axe in my left hand."

"I see. And just how magic is your hand axe?"

"Plus three. Why?"

"Well, you can use a dagger, right?"

"Well, yeah, I have --"

"So why not trade that old +3 hand axe in for Sick Sword's +6 dagger of wounding?"

Ringman opened his mouth in a half-stupor. "A plus . . . six . . . dagger . . . of wounding?" he whispered. Then, in his normal voice: "Hmmp, it's bad enough she was ever able to buy such a weapon in the first place. Can you imagine me walking around with a pure adamantite dagger that leaves unhealable wounds?"

"And . . . you're sure you won't want that girdle of titan strength?"

Ringman stood up and put his hands behind his back. "I think," he mused as he strolled toward the window, "That I would rather take in the view of the surrounding forest than wear a girdle of titan strength."

Disgusting Sword glared at him out of the corner of her eye. "Are you sure you're really our father?"

Ringman glanced solemnly over his shoulder at her, and after a few seconds replied, "Are you sure you're really my kids?"

He looked out over the fields in the late-afternoon sun for a long time, never so much as flinching. Never so much as looking back at his first daughter, whom his last question had hurt. It was only Ridiculous Sword's voice ten minutes later that broke him out of his trance.

"I think I've found something," she said, putting the sword down. She would have been quite exhausted had not that spell come from a scroll instead of herself.

"Oh?" Ringman turned toward her, only half-interested.

"Your sword has no intelligence in the usual sense of sword intellect. However, it is sentient, in a way." She handed the holy avenger back to Ringman.

Confused, Ringman carefully took the sword in both hands. He viewed it in a totally different light now. "How . . . is it sentient?"

"It has one special power, in addition to being a run-of-the-mill +5 holy longsword."

'Run-of-the-mill holy sword?' Ringman thought. "Um, what power is that?"

"If you embed it in stone, it won't come back out unless you say, 'Pretty please'."

#

Ringman rode rather slowly back to his own castle. Disgusting Sword and Ridiculous Sword could straighten things out at his late girlfriend's keep on their own.

His holy sword hung from his belt as it had on that hurried journey over there. He had firmly decided not to take any magic items from Sick Sword's inventory home with him, so there was no helm of brilliance capping his head or girdle of titan strength circumscribing his waist. However, there was one charge of Sick Sword's that he did feel obliged to look after, and it sat on the saddle behind him.

"My master's gone," the brownie sobbed. It had taken a long time for him to get over the shock of having the mental cord between himself and Sick Sword snap apart. Familiars always took a while to recover from the loss of their master. Now his crying had subsided to a gentle evening shower in the middle of the forest.

"I know how you feel," Ringman commented. "Believe me, I know how you feel, . . . uh, what's your name?"

The half-pixie dried one of his eyes with his index finger. "Sick Sword always called me 'the brownie'."

"She . . . she never even asked you your name?"

"Naah, she was usually too busy, and most of the time I was astrally projected so I wouldn't get hurt." He gazed skyward, then out at the forest. His first home had been in a forest much like this one. "The astral plane was an awfully drear place; but at least I had her thoughts to keep me company."

"Did you have a name among the brownies?"

"Well, yeah, my folks and all my friends used to call me 'Homer' before I got recruited to be Sick Sword's familiar."

"So . . . you left your family and friends behind then."

"Yeah, but at least I got this in the bargain." He held up a dimly glowing short sword. "It's made of pure adamantite."

Ringman chuckled slightly. "So what around here isn't?"

"Did . . . did you used to have family and friends too?"

"You mean, before I became a paladin? Well, yes, as a matter of fact, I did. My father was a mason, you see; in fact, that was the family trade, fitting and mortaring stonework. Of course, like everyone in this culture I learned the family trade too, but my father knew somebody who had connections with the Knights' Guild, and that if I trained hard enough I could enter the service of King Whatshisname the Seventy-Fifth. So I went to knight school --"

"Couldn't you have gone in the daytime?"

Ringman grimaced. "That's an old pun. Anyway, I made it through knight training, entered the king's service, and eventually got selected to be one of the elite palace knights. They said it had to do with certain rare qualities that were determined at birth.

"Anyhow, they gave me this book to learn called 'The Code of Paladinhood.' Only problem was that at the time I couldn't read, so I had to learn it by rote. Well, I

did learn the paladin's code, and the instant I finished reciting it before the Knights' Guild I gained all these weird powers. And pretty soon, I got assigned to be guardian of the town I'm still living in."

Homer rubbed his chin for a second. "But you still haven't told me about your family and friends."

Ringman thought for a long moment. He was looking down at nothing in particular. "Maybe that's because . . . I've been trying not to remember them."

They rode on through the forest in silence.

#

Now that was something you didn't see every day, the first guard thought. Rarely did little boys ever visit The Dungeon, and even then they usually weren't wearing robes of eyes. Still, he had his duty to uphold, so he straightened his scale mail, drew his broadsword, hefted his shield, and asked, "Who goes there?"

The boy grinned and parted open his robe of eyes on one side, then opened the black robe of the archmagi underneath so that both guards could see the dagger sticking out of his belt-sheath. The tiny sliver of the blade that was exposed to sight glowed a dim blue.

The first guard nudged the second out of his nap with his elbow. The second guard rubbed his eyes to resolve the very dangerous looking little boy stalking toward them.

The first guard pointed his sword at the kid. "Halt and identify yourself! Who are you?"

The boy stopped four feet away from him and narrowed his eyes until he stared out of slits. "Your worst nightmare."

The second guard drew his sword as the first one gasped and tightened his posture. It wasn't very easy to move in scale mail. It was, however, very easy to move in a robe of eyes and a robe of the archmagi, particularly if you happened to be a 17th-level monk and a 60th-level weapons master under the influence of a potion of speed at double normal effectiveness. The boy's hand flashed out, snatched the broadsword from Guard Number One, and squeezed until the blade broke in half.

Startled, Guard Number Two swung his sword around in a crescent arc, aiming for the kid's left shoulder. Before he knew what happened, the boy had drawn his dagger with his left hand, sliced up through the air, and cut off the guard's right hand.

"OWWWWWWWW!" the guard screamed, slumping to the ground and clutching his right wrist below the stump just as hard as he could. It didn't stop the slow trickle of blood.

The first guard said some interjection in lawful-neutral and scampered away as fast as he could. The second guard wasn't about to stop the youth from getting in The Dungeon if he wanted in that badly. He couldn't have stopped him anyway.

'That's what I like about being chaotic evil,' Gross Sword thought as he walked through the entrance, 'You can do anything you want.'

"Well well," Wild Max said when he glimpsed Gross Sword walking into the visitors' arena, "What have we here?"

"It's a boy!" declared Rango.

"A boy wearing a robe of eyes!" Da Bad Dude observed.

"And a black robe of the archmagi," Dirk the Destructive added.

"And holding," Rango examined the dagger in his left hand, "A +6 unholy dancing frost-brand defender anti-sun blade of wounding, sharpness, throwing, thunderbolts, venom, life stealing, slaying everything, contradisruption, bronze dragon slaying, brass dragon slaying, copper dragon slaying, gold dragon slaying, silver dragon slaying, green dragon slaying, blue dragon slaying, speed, final word, and nine lives stealing."

A fire leapt up from the dagger's hilt and consumed the blade. "You forgot flame-tongue," the Gross Dagger complained.

"Oh, how stupid of me," Rango said.

"Frost-brand and flame-tongue at the same time?" Da Bad Dude wondered.

"Humph," Gross Sword humphed. "Hmm. Ha. Ha ha. HA! HA HA HA HA HO HO HO HO HO! HARDEHARHARHAR!!"

"Hey," Wild Max sneered, "What's so funny?!?"

"You call yourselves Disgusting Characters?!? HAH! I spit on your feeble attempts of disgust! PTOOI!"

"Well, what do you expect?!" Dirk the Destructive said defensively. "We've been stripped of our magic items, our psionic powers, and our dignity. Why, back in the days of the Union, we could --"

"DO NOTHING! Your pathetic Union was defeated by a bunch of wimps as weak as yourselves!" He reached into one of his portable holes, pulled out his three magic helms, and stacked them on his head where they belonged. "Why, my mother could defeat your most powerful member."

"Oh yeah? Who's your mother, kid, Sick Sword?!"

"As a matter of fact, yes."

That got their attention.

"Or at least she was until today. Now she's nothing."

Rango shrugged. "Well, don't look at any of us. We didn't have anything to do with it."

"Not that we're sorry to see her go," Wild Max gloated.

"Of course not. I killed her and evaporated her soul."

All four pairs of ex-IUDC-members' eyes bugged out. Then slowly, one by one, they began applauding their boy hero. Gross Sword bowed.

"Kiddo," Da Bad Dude said amid the mounting cheers, "You've just got yourself four followers for life."

"Followers?" Gloss Sword asked rhetorically. He'd expected someone to suggest that, but turned the word into a question anyway for dramatic effect. "Oh, I'm not interested in followers. You four are going to bow down and worship me."

The cheering stopped instantly.

"Or I will kill each and every one of you."

A purple shimmer in the middle of the room broke the mood. The ex-Disgusting-Characters all wiped their brows in relief until they saw who it was stepping out of the purple shimmer.

"I thought I might find you here, Gross Sword," Ridiculous Sword said.

"Well, sister dear," Gross Sword smiled chaotic-evilily, "Long time no see. Too bad about dear old mom, eh?"

"You've killed your last prime material being, Gross --"

"And she might have survived, too, had she ever bothered to draw the 'fates' card from a deck of many things. Tch tch tch."

Very calmly, she said, "Defend yourself, brother," and charged at him at 12 288 feet-per-six-seconds.

Gross Sword's Gross Broadsword deflected Ridiculous Sword's Ridiculous Hand Axe with no trouble at all. Of course, the clap of thunder that rose out of the weapon-to-weapon contact was a bit unnerving. "I always have," Gross sword replied to her last instruction.

This time, it was Ridiculous Sword's Ridiculous Broadsword's turn to parry Gross Sword's Gross Dagger, which it did quite well. With a little guidance from its disgustingly accurate owner and another very loud thunder clap, of course.

"Hmmm," Gross Sword said in between sword hacks, "Not bad for an amateur."

Ridiculous Sword glanced around at the cells around her and their terrified occupants. Each weapon-to-weapon thunderbolt probably brought them that much closer to deafness. She would have to take the battle outside. Breaking off from the fray, she ran out through the entrance doorway, past the wounded guard, and into the elysian fields.

Gross Sword ran out as far as the de-handed guard in the doorway, then stopped. "Gee, too bad," he said very loudly, "If you won't engage me I guess I'll just have to kill him instead!"

Ridiculous Sword had to get his attention, and fast. "Gross Sword sleeps with his Teddy bear!" she teased, and scampered insultingly away.

"I do not!" the nine-year-old disgusting boy replied. "And besides, he's a Teddy dragon-turtle." He charged after her.

They clashed again. And again. Their weapons sent peals of thunder echoing from the far-off peaks. And neither of them got hit.

"I see," Gross Sword said over the prevailing thunder, "That the Dungeon Master hasn't retracted that old limitation requiring you to roll a natural 20 to hit anyone who's armor class -17 or better."

"Don't play dumb with me," Ridiculous Sword replied just as audibly. "The Dungeon Master let us add our to-hit bonuses into those 'extended twenties' on the attack matrices long ago. Our armor classes are just so good that we can't hit each other anyway."

They couldn't even hit each other by surprise or from behind, either, as they eventually discovered. Their rear armor classes were -45, not counting their protections from evil/good.

Clang, clash, the skirmish continued. Clang, clang, clang, shink, kssh, kssh, shunk, pshank -- they could have knocked each other unconscious and never hit each other. They were hit-proof even in their sleep. This was getting them nowhere.

"This is getting us nowhere," Ridiculous Sword commented.

"Who cares? This is the most fun I've had in hours!"

Sparks flew from their weapons, dusty roads and elysian fields got trampled underfoot, a few people and some forest creatures in the vicinity went deaf, and still they hadn't a scratch on them. Neither of them dared to use any of their "slay living" or "finger of death" spells, both because they'd easily make their saving throws and because any spells they cast at each other would set up a resonating field between their rings of spell turning. It was a stalemate, pure and simple.

And finally, even Gross Sword got tired of playing this silly game.

"I'm tired of playing this silly game. I think I'll go wipe out an upper or lower plane instead."

"No!" Ridiculous Sword accidentally gasped.

Gross Sword smiled. "You'll see me around again. On one plane or another." And with that, he vanished.

Ridiculous Sword let her weapons drop down by her side, and retrieved her Ridiculous Dagger and Ridiculous Longsword from out of the air. Being weapons of dancing, the dagger and longsword had been doing their part independent of her. Then again, Gross Sword had been doing his part independent of her since before he was born. She wished she knew what had made him go wrong, she wished one of those commune spells or audiences with the Dungeon Master or Ollamh bards would have let her in on the secret. Something about spraying an evil seed was all she'd ever picked up.

But first, she had to warn the other planes of what might soon happen to them. Gross Sword could attack anyplace at any time, but his most likely targets would be those planes that were lawful good. After all, he could goad her the most by attacking a saintly plane, and his own alignment was diametrically opposed to law and good anyway. That narrowed his choices down to the three levels of Arcadia, the seven Heavens, and the Twin Paradises. Twelve planes to choose from, and Gross Sword could strike at any one of those. Well, she had better get st--

No, there was a thirteenth plane she'd almost neglected to include: the back of the east wind, where Bahamut's palace stood. The lord of all good dragons; wouldn't his head make an excellent trophy to hang on Gross Sword's wall. That would have to be Ridiculous Sword's first stop.

#

"Bahamut!" Ridiculous Sword called out. There was no answer. Surely, the one platinum dragon could hear her; his palace was barely a hundred yards away. Even if the palace was invisible to normal sight. She approached a bit closer, and called for him again: "BA-hamut!"

An old hermit creaked up to her from a nearby brook down a hill. There were seven canaries flitting around his head. "Are you looking for the platinum dragon?" the hermit asked.

"Oh, there you are," Ridiculous Sword said nonchalantly. "Hi, Bahamut. We have to talk."

The hermit studied her closely, then gasped and bugged out his eyes. "It's you!" he exclaimed, and as he said this his body underwent a startling transformation. His neck elongated and thickened, his arms and legs elongated and thickened, his head elongated and thickened, his torso elongated and thickened, his previously non-existent tail elongated and thickened, and his skin turned from wrinkled dry tan to shining platinum. Within seconds, the hermit was a huge ancient dragon once more.

His canaries turned into huge ancient gold dragons too, but that was what usually happened anyway. "Ridiculous Sword!" Bahamut said, quivering in awe. He bowed in that way that only dragons can. "I'm honored by your presence! Tell me, what brings you to the back of the east wind?"

"I came here to warn you about my brother, Gross . . . hey, wait a minute. Didn't Wierd Dough kill you for your experience points?"

"Oh, phhh, that was only my Bahamut android, programmed to act like me in every detail. So what is this warning about your brother?"

"He's finally flipped," Ridiculous Sword exhaled. "I saw it coming for a long time, 'though I'm not sure why. He said he wanted to wipe out an upper or lower plane, and he's fully capable of following through on that promise. This place is his most likely target. And so are you."

Bahamut shook his tremendous mane and swallowed hard in that way that only huge ancient platinum dragons can. "And . . . what can I do to protect myself and my court?"

Ridiculous Sword glanced downward. "I wish I knew."

And that's when the air behind Bahamut glowed purple for a moment.

"Holy feces," Ridiculous Sword cursed, "He's here." She drew her Ridiculous Hand Axe and her Ridiculous Broadsword and ran around behind the dragon lord.

Gross Sword only smiled and sprinted in a wide arc out to Bahamut's right side. Ridiculous Sword followed at the same impossible breakneck speed, but there was really no way she could catch up to him. Not unless he made a mistake.

He seemed to be making a mistake, Ridiculous Sword noticed. He seemed to be running too slowly. Ridiculous Sword was actually catching up with him. She knew he had the same set of artifact powers and the same running speed as she did -- their infernal balance of power insured that -- so then why would he run slow enough for her to close the gap?

It was not Gross Sword that had made the mistake. It was Ridiculous Sword who had. She was so intent on catching up with her brother that she didn't think that maybe he wanted her to catch up. Just as Ridiculous Sword was nearly upon him, Gross Sword doubled back and headed for the platinum dragon at full tilt.

Ridiculous Sword cursed herself for falling into that trap, leapt, executed a midair flip, and sprinted back toward her brother and the dragon lord she had been trying to protect. She wasn't closing in on Gross Sword this time, though.

But Bahamut wasn't going to take this sitting still. He knew about disgusting characters' armor classes, so clawing and biting were out of the question; besides, they had far too many hit points to kill in just a few blows. Instead, he opened his

cavernous maw and exhaled a cloud of vapor at the boy-demon charging him. The seven gold dragons by his side also breathed seven cones of fire at the light-brown-haired youth in case that might do any good.

If by some miracle of nature Gross Sword had managed to roll a "1" on a 20-sided die against Bahamut's vaporous breath, he would have assumed gaseous form for two whole hours. As it was, though, he was neither vaporized nor fried; the flames all bounced off his fireproof Other Bracer of Irresistible Damage anyway. He closed to terrifyingly close range with Bahamut, glanced over his shoulder at his sister (who was only 10 yards behind him), jumped, whirled around in midair, landed on the back of Bahamut's neck, and poised his Gross Broadsword threateningly beneath the platinum dragon's chin. "FREEZE!" he commanded.

Ridiculous Sword hesitated. The dragon lord was motionless as stone.

"One more step, Ridiculous Sword, and Bahamut here gets it!"

Ridiculous Sword eyed her brother warily. He had already killed his own mother; he was certainly capable of following through with his threat. She wondered why he hadn't just killed Bahamut outright.

"Now, throw down your weapons," Gross Sword ordered.

'So that's his plan,' Ridiculous Sword thought. 'Make me disarm myself, then he can kill me and Bahamut both.' "You'd kill him anyway," she said, and leapt through the air toward him.

"You're right," Gross Sword replied, "I would." And the instant before Ridiculous Sword reached him, he stuck his sword into Bahamut's throat and did 345 points of damage. And that wasn't even counting the life stealing, slaying, venom, severing, or disintegration effects of the weapon. Bahamut slumped headless to the ground.

Gross Sword liked the feeling of that so much he killed one of the seven huge ancient gold dragons as well before he used his amulet of the planes to transport him out.

There wasn't a human or gold dragon present who wasn't screaming, crying, or moaning.

#

Ringman was unaware of what had just transpired at the back of the east wind. He had his own dilemma to worry about.

He saw it coming the moment he'd parked his horse. A lone figure, this time confidently without its own warhorse, stalked slowly into town toward Ringman's small castle. The glowing plate mail, the jewelled helmet, and the sheathed Prometheus dangling from its side left no question as to who it was that had decided to bug them again. "Quick, Homer!" Ringman instructed the brownie, "To the second floor!"

"But what's being one floor higher gonna do against Peter Perfect?" Homer asked as he clambered up the stairs behind Ringman.

"If I'm right," the 9th-level paladin explained as he reached the second story, "Everything." He pointed. "There's a closet marked 'Non-magical weapons' along the south wall. In it, there'll be a stack of things that look like javelins. Grab all of those javelin-looking things you can and bring them to the east parapet."

"Right," Homer said, and got going. He was too scared of Peter Perfect to argue.

Ringman went to the north parapet and unslashed a rather large war engine on wheels. "I put this here to ward off attack from the north," He mumbled to himself as he started to push the apparatus. "Peter Perfect would have to attack from the east."

He was having an Acheron of a time getting this thing to move on those old, rotten wooden wheels. He wished now that he had taken that girdle of titan strength; then he could just carry this whole mess to the east parapet. But he was making pretty good time anyway, considering that the left wheel only turned about 1/3 of the time.

"Oh RIIING-mannn!" Peter Perfect's voice echoed from far-off just as Ringman finished dragging the artillery engine onto the parapet. "Where ARE you, Ring-mannn? Come out and pla-ay! It's that time of the month again!"

Ringman grabbed the front end of the gismo and pulled until it pointed more or less at Peter Perfect. Homer was just emerging from the hallway, carrying a very large armful of javelin-looking things. He dropped one about every ten feet. Ringman nodded at the brownie, then took hold of the gigantic rubber band that spanned the front of the device and stretched it across a large metal tong three feet back from the apparatus' front.

"Now what do I do?" Homer asked as Ringman got behind the machine.

"Load one of the missiles into the firing slot, just in front of that rubbery thing as soon as I crank it all the way back." He grasped the two levers connected to opposite sides of a toothed wheel and began to turn it. Several gears and pulleys later, the metal tong keeping the rubber band in place pulled back even farther. Ringman continued to crank and the rubber band continued to retract.

"What is this thing?" Homer asked.

"It's a ballista," Ringman said with evident strain in his voice. It was getting harder and harder to turn the crank.

Peter Perfect interrupted them again, this time closer. "Which part of your body shall I cut off this time? How about your left arm? Or a leg? Or a different extremity?"

Ringman ignored him. "Since I learned how, I've been reading the Book of Infinite Wisdom a little myself," he explained. "I found this little gem in the construction and siege heading. So, with a little help from Sick Sword -- before she threw me out of her life -- I got hold of a +1 ballista. Peter Perfect's in for a nasty surprise."

"Hey, too bad about your little girlfriend, Ringboy," Peter shouted once more. "At least you won't have her ordering you around the castle to wash the dishes, right?"

Homer smiled expectantly as he loaded the first spearlike missile into the firing track. Ringman took his seat as the firer and grabbed the handles which allowed him to aim. Since this was a magic ballista, the swivel bearings would never rust, and so despite his difficulty in moving the ballista to this position its aiming mechanism worked smooth as glassteel. He poised his thumb atop the right handle's release switch, lined up Peter Perfect in the built-in crosshairs, and let him have it.

The missile streaked through the air and shattered to flinders against Peter Perfect's chest. "Ho ho, Ringman," he laughed, "You're going to have to do better than that!"

Ringman whacked himself over the forehead. "I would have to forget about that accursed Coat of Arnd. He's totally invulnerable from his neck down to his thighs. Reload for me again after I crank it back; I'm going to have to aim for his legs."

Homer shrugged. "Sure thing, uh, boss." Ringman had already set the rubber band back on the metal flange and was hurriedly working the crank.

Peter Perfect trudged ever-closer. He was less than two hundred yards away now. "I never thought that the 'great and powerful' Ringman would resort to throwing things at me!"

Homer had the ballista loaded, and Ringman centered Peter Perfect in his sights. He aimed just a tad lower this time, putting the crosshairs on his right thigh rather than his torso, and fired. The rubber band tossed the projectile forward, the ballista rattled back-and-forth, the black streak of the missile lunged across the intervening distance, and a javelin-looking thing pierced right through Peter Perfect's adamantite-alloyed thigh guard and impaled his right leg.

"ARRRRGH!" Peter screamed, clutching at the shaft. "How could you possibly have hit me?! I'm armor class -20!"

"Think again, you poor excuse for a paladin!" Ringman shouted. "According to page 109, left-hand column, paragraph 4 of the Book of Infinite Wisdom, 'BALLISTA TARGETS . . . ARE ALWAYS CONSIDERED TO BE AC 10 IF EXPOSED TO SIGHT.'!"

"Armor . . . class . . . ten?!?" Peter worried.

Ringman had another missile loaded in less time than anyone in his right mind would think he was capable of. "Fire!" he shouted, this time aiming for Peter's right leg.

Peter Perfect saw it coming and tried to dodge. His shield and dexterity were totally useless in this situation; he could only hope that by not being a static target he would incur some to-hit penalty on Ringman. Penalty or not, the missile still hit, and now Peter had a wooden pole sticking out of his left leg.

"Ouch!" Peter ouched, hopping from leg to leg. Either leg was equally painful to walk on. His invulnerability had not protected him here, so he figured that that blasted Ringman must be using a magic ballista or something. He heard the sound of a turning ratchet; Ringman was reloading again. Confound it, and he only had 188 hit points too. Sure, each hit only did 1-11 damage points to him (they'd be doing 3-13 if not for his permanent protection from normal missiles spell), but how long could he hold out before Ringman got that lucky strike to his head? He had only one alternative as far as he could tell: get out of there, and get out fast.

And so, with a purple glow from his second magic helmet, Peter Perfect teleported out.

"All right!" Homer shouted, "We did it!" He held up his hand.

Ringman slapped the brownie's hand a high-five, and joined him in rejoicing. "Yeah, we did it! VICTORY! . . . for now."

#

"Defeat," Ridiculous Sword said as she solemnly lowered Bahamut's corpse into the ceremonial dragon burial ring, "For now." There would be no cremation, no funeral pyre; dragon skin was too valuable to waste.

Two small bronze dragons and one normal-sized young gold dragon lowered the slain gold dragon's body down beside Bahamut's. There were tears in all their eyes, but the young gold dragon seemed ready to burst.

A silver dragon took faltering steps toward the two, and laid headstones next to them. "Bahamut," the first one read, "Lord of all good dragons." The second one read: "Samuel, of Bahamut's court."

"G-g-goo'bye, dad," the young gold dragon wept by Samuel's remains. Then, he closed his eyes and recited one of the gold dragons' axioms: "You shall lie more peacefully . . . that you have furthered Bahamut's ideal."

And with that, nearly every one of the hundreds of metal-colored dragons who had gathered there burst into tears. The six huge ancient gold dragons that had been Bahamut's court most of all. Bahamut was Life to each and every one of them.

"First Saint Paul," Ridiculous Sword recounted, "Then our mom, and now Bahamut. I swear, Gross Sword, I'll not rest until you've been defeated. I'll find a way. No one is totally invulnerable, not you, not I, not anyone. Even if it means my own life and soul, I'll stop you."

"Bahamut!" the saurine voices around her wailed. "Oh Bahamut, Bahamut, Bahamut!"

PART THREE

Ridiculous Sword pushed her way through the swinging doors of the saloon. She needed a drink. Or at least she needed some place to unwind.

She listened briefly to the piano player on her way from the door to the bar. He was playing one of those sprightly tunes that piano players always seem to be playing in saloons. A sign rested on top of his tinny upright, reading: "Don't hack me to bits, I'm only the piano player."

She propped herself up on a barstool and smoothed the light-brown hair out of her face. "Bartender, gimmie a double ethanol."

The bartender leered at her. "Okay, kid, let's see some I.D."

She looked him straight in the eye. "I.D.'s haven't been invented yet."

"Oh yeah," he replied, and reached below the counter for a bottle of pure grain alcohol.

She looked at the piano player again, who was repeating the same phrase he'd just played 20 seconds ago. "Oh, can it, pianos haven't been invented yet either."

"Here ya go, kid," the bartender returned with a glassful of ethyl alcohol. "Uh, ya do got money, don'tcha?"

"Do I have money, he asks! Here." She plopped a million-gold-piece gem down on the counter.

The bartender's eyes bulged out. "Um, er, uh, sorry, but we don't --"

"Take any denominations smaller than 20 gold pieces. All right, all right! So what else is new?"

She drew her Ridiculous Hand Axe, much to the dismay of the bartender, and chopped the 1,000,000-gold-piece gem up into 65,536 15.25878906-gold-piece gems. She scooped 65,535 of these back into her leather backpack of holding (which she placed in her portable hole) and gave one to the bartender. "Here. Keep the change. Oh, and bring me two more of these, will ya?"

"Two more double-ethanols? Uh, sure . . ." He set to work.

She lifted the glass to eye level and swished it around, watching the small impurity of water make little eddies. Then she lowered it to her mouth. "For the honor of Grayhawk," she toasted, and downed the whole glassful in a single gulp.

It was in staring at the bottom of the tilted glass that she saw a reflection of the commotion outside.

"No," the little half-elven boy screamed as he struggled to free himself. "I don't _wanna_ go with you!"

"Sure-you-do," the female dragging his left arm replied in a monotone. "Don't-you-want-to-come-home-with-us?"

"No! You're not my _real_ mommy and daddy!"

"Of-course-we-are," the male dragging his right arm recited in a monotone half an octave below the female's.

The monotone mommy and daddy barely noticed that they had bumped into a ten-year-old girl. When the message reached whatever passed for their brains, they were quick to reprimand her.

"Get-out-of-our-way," the female said, pointing her decaying, elven pointy ears forward. "This-is-none-of-your-business."

"Oh no?" Ridiculous Sword replied. "Since when do zombie parents have live children?"

'Zombies?' the boy gulped.

The two glazy-eyed humans looked at each other quizzically, then looked back at Ridiculous Sword and said in chorus, "We-are-not-zombies."

Ridiculous Sword smirked. "We'll see about that," she replied as she reached under her robe of eyes. She pulled out a white egg-shaped thing with a light blue stripe (with dark blue trim) across the middle that had the words "HOLY SYMBOL" printed on the side. Holding it out in front of her and facing the kid's "parents," she nonchalantly said, "Begone."

And the two zombies disintegrated into piles of dust.

The boy just stood there and shook.

"Sorry," Ridiculous Sword put a hand on his shoulder. "Did those ever used to be your real parents?"

"Well," the boy sniffed, "Well, they did look sorta like my mom and dad . . ."

Ridiculous Sword nodded solemnly. "They've probably been dead for several days. There are always those prankster cults around who'll look for parents who have just died and animate them into zombies before their kids find out. Sorry it had to happen to you."

"I," the boy began, ". . . I had a feeling something was wrong when they went out to the town well yesterday morning and didn't come back."

Ridiculous Sword nodded again. "Are you an only child?"

"Um, I don't have any brothers or sisters, if that's what you mean." Then, he added: "I used to have a sister, but she died of typhus."

Ridiculous Sword covered her eyes with her right hand and shook her head. "When are these people going to get around to inventing penicillin?"

The boy puzzled. "Peni-what?"

"Er, never mind, never mind. Hey, what's your name?"

"Jimmy, what's yours?"

"Ridiculous Sword."

In the most phenomenal turn-around Ridiculous Sword had seen in a long time, Jimmy went from the verge of sobbing to a barely-controllable fit of the giggles. He was down on the ground in seconds.

"RIDICULOUS Sword?!?" he managed to spit out between guffaws. "RIDICULOUS Sword?!? Haw haw haw haw haw haw!! That's the stupidest name I EVER heard!!"

"Oh, right," Ridiculous Sword folded her arms, "And I suppose you think Jimmy is a lots better name."

"You bet! HAW HAW HAW!! RIDICULOUS SWORD! What a STUPID name!!!"

Of its own volition, the broadsword stashed next to Ridiculous Sword's left hip pulled itself free of its scabbard and dashed toward Jimmy. Jimmy's case of the giggles went away instantly. The sword hovered in midair momentarily, and then zipped to within an inch of his throat.

"RIDICULOUS SWORD," the sword bellowed, amplifying its voice with telepathy, "HAPPENS TO BE A PERFECTLY FINE NAME! THERE SOMETHING WRONG WITH THAT?!?"

"Now, now, Ridiculous Sword," Ridiculous Sword chided her naughty weapon, "Don't go threatening innocent bystanders. He was talking about me, anyway, not you." She drew her sword from the air and sheathed it. Jimmy shook like a fault line. "Sorry about that, Jimmy; my Ridiculous Sword's a bit touchy. You'd be, too, if you had an 82 ego."

"Your . . . your sword's named after you?"

"Sure." She drew some of her other weapons. "And so's my hand axe, and my longsword, and my dagger, and my pair of gloves, and my other pair of gloves. They're all just as Ridiculous as I am."

Jimmy was silent for a very, very long fraction of a second. Then, he spoke up: "What do I do now that my mom and dad are two piles of dust?"

Ridiculous Sword shrugged. "Well, I guess you're with me, kiddo."

Jimmy glared at her. "But you aren't any older than I am!"

"No, but I have seventy or eighty million more experience points than you do."

'Seventy or eighty million?' Jimmy mouthed, his eyes bulging.

"Come on," Ridiculous Sword gestured, "Let's go to your place and try to straighten out your future."

#

"Now that I'm looking after you," Ridiculous Sword explained as they walked down Hack-and-Slash Lane toward Jimmy's old home, "I think you ought to know that I've made some pretty powerful enemies. Not the least of whom is my own dear brother."

"Uh huh. So?"

"So, they might want to get at me through you. You'll need to be able to protect yourself."

"Hey, I'm ten years old! If anybody tries to mess with me, why, I'll bash 'em across the jaw!" He swung at the empty air. "I'll kick their butts!" He thrust his foot out in front of him. "I'll --"

"You'll get killed, if you try that. Fists and feet aren't very useful against crossbow bolts --"

Jimmy gulped.

"-- unless you happen to be a monk, like me."

"A monk? But I thought you were a cleric!"

"No, silly, pure clerics can't use edged weapons."

"So you're a monk, and a cleric then?"

Ridiculous Sword thought of telling him more, then thought better of it. "Yes, I am."

"Oh." They resumed walking. Jimmy rubbed his chin for a moment. "But monks aren't supposed to use swords!"

Ridiculous Sword sighed. "Okay, you got me. I'm also a ranger."

Jimmy stopped short. "So you're a ranger, and a monk, and a cleric? Are you anything else besides?"

"Well, I am a druid as well."

"All right," Jimmy folded his arms. "Tell me, from top to bottom, everything you are, or I'm not budging a centimeter!"

"Kinda personal, wouldn't you say?"

"You want me to trust you? Then tell me."

"Okay," she breathed, "I'm a Hierophant of the Cabal druid, the Grandfather of Assassins, the Grand Master of Flowers, a 17th-level ranger lord, a 17th-level master thief, a 20th-level paladin, a magna-alumnae bard, a 31st-level illusionist, a 49th-level arch-mage, a 60th-level weapons mistress, and a psionic. I'm lawful good, because neither the Book of Infinite Wisdom, the Book of Finite Wisdom, nor the Other Book of Infinite Wisdom makes any stipulation against druids or bards or thieves or assassins changing their alignment." She paused, reached into the astral plane, and pulled her brownie down into the physical universe. "This is my familiar, the Ridiculous Brownie. Say hello to the nice little half-elven boy, Ridiculous Brownie."

"Hi, nice little half-elven boy," the brownie said, and disappeared back into the astral world.

"There," Ridiculous Sword finished, "Are you satisfied?"

Jimmy rolled his eyes up into his head and fainted.

When he woke up twelve seconds later, he found Ridiculous Sword leaning over him about to cast some kind of wake-up spell. "Oh my deity," Jimmy moaned, "You're more well-equipped than Sick Sword!"

Ridiculous Sword stopped gesticulating, smiled a smile of sudden understanding, closed her eyes, and nodded her head. "Sick Sword was my mother."

"Your mother . . . Sick_Sword . . . Ridiculous_Sword . . ." They had the same last name and everything. Now it all made sense. Well, almost all of it did: "You said Sick Sword _was_ your mother?"

Ridiculous Sword nodded solemnly. "Up until a couple days ago. Like I said, my brother is my most powerful enemy."

"Your own brother killed your mom?!"

"Mmm hmm. 'Fraid so. Evil little sonofabitch, isn't he? Didn't even leave a soul behind to resurrect."

"So you're an orphan like me?"

"Well, not quite. My dad's still alive, but he's just a 9th-level by-the-book paladin. He's a nice guy, though. . . . Well, anyway, like I was trying to say, I've got some pretty powerful enemies, so you'll need some protection."

She took a portable hole out of her pocket with a piece of masking tape across the top. On the strip of tape were scribed the words, "Sick Sword's stuff -- excess." Opening the hole, she reached in, rummaged around noisily, and finally pulled out a gray, solid adamantite broadsword and handed it to Jimmy. "Here," she told him, "This ought to help."

The instant Jimmy grabbed the haft, the sword's will took advantage of the opportunity and lanced full-force into him. Brilliant white light scintillated outward from the blade, an ominous fanfare wafted through the air, and a voice both telepathic and auditory boomed, "I AM THE SICK SWORD!"

"Y-y-y-yikes!" said Jimmy meekly.

"BEFORE SICK SWORD WAS, I WAS. BEFORE CENTRAL EARTH WAS, I WAS."

'Oh, come_on_,' Ridiculous Sword thought, 'You've only been around for twelve or thirteen years.'

"I AM ALL THINGS GREAT AND POWERFUL, ALL CREATURES GREAT AND SMALL. I SERVED IN THE HAND OF THE GREATEST WEAPONS-MISTRESS/ CLERIC/ARCH-MAGE THAT EVER LIVED. I CAN FELL AN OGRE WITH A SWIPE OF MY BACKHAND. I --"

The Sick Sword felt a Ridiculous glove grab hold of its adamantite blade. "Cool it, Sicky," Ridiculous Sword ordered, "Or I'll find a humble ant to crush you beneath the foot of!"

The adamantite broadsword was instantly silent.

"Sick Sword," she continued, "This is Jimmy, your new wielder. You're to protect him just as you did Sick Sword. Understand?"

"*sigh* . . . ALL RIGHT. DO YOU WANT TO BE MY NEW OWNER, JIMMY?"

"Well . . . yeah, sure!" Jimmy decided.

"EXCELLENT. WHAT'S YOU'RE ALIGNMENT?"

"Uh, kinda chaotic-lawful with neutral tendencies."

"WELL, IT'S LAWFUL-GOOD NOW."

"Huh? What do you --"

"ARTIFACT SIDE EFFECT A: ALIGNMENT OF POSSESSOR PERMANENTLY CHANGED TO THAT OF ITEM. YOU ARE LAWFUL-GOOD NOW, WHETHER YOU LIKE IT OR NOT. OH, AND I'M ALSO SUPPOSED TO PLACE A GEAS OR A QUEST ON YOU . . ."

Ridiculous Sword leered at the weapon menacingly.

"SO, UM, UH, YOUR GEAS IS TO, ER, SEEK OUT AND FIND THE, UM, UH --"

"Holy Grail?" Jimmy asked.

The sword pointed at him defensively. "HE SAID IT, NOT ME."

Ridiculous Sword snapped her fingers. "No matter. _I wish that Jimmy were ungeased_."

"WHEW," the sword exhaled. "WELL, THAT WASN'T SO BAD, NOW WAS IT?"

"Well, I dunno," Jimmy told the Sick Sword, "I ain't never been geased before."

"Jimmy, this is a +6 vorpal 9-lives stealing broadsword of wounding, dancing, and life stealing. It's made of solid adamantite. Do you know what that means?"

"Yeah, it means I get to HACK UP THE BAD GUYS! Wham! Hack! Swoosh!" He swung the sword around precariously three times.

"No, no, NO! It means --" she grabbed the sword again to keep him from slicing haphazardly through the air, "-- that you've gotta _learn_ how to use it to defend yourself. In other words, you gotta know how to parry as well as how to attack. One of the sword's major artifact powers _will_ reduce your base armor class to 0, but that certainly isn't enough to make you hit-proof. Now then, what's your DEX?"

"Er, my what?"

"Your DEX. You know, your Dexterity."

"Well, I _guess_ I'm pretty good with my fingers."

"You GUESS?! You mean you DON'T KNOW?!!"

"No. Should I?"

"By God II, what kind of a world _is_ this where people don't even know their own character abilities?! Where's your character sheet?"

"My what?"

Ridiculous Sword conked herself on the head. "How do you expect to keep track of your experience points without a character sheet!?"

"Well, um, I always just thought that, well, uh, you know . . ."

Ridiculous Sword sighed, feeling rather vexed, and reached into the outer planes right above Jimmy's head. She pulled out a yellow sheet of paper with lots of markings on it and the name "Jimmy" written in bold calligraphy. "Let's see. Jimmy: half-elven, level 0 --" she eyed the sheet and the boy warily. "-- Oh, that's right, only PURE elves never get to be 0th level. Ahem; 9 Strength, 12 Intelligence, 8 Wisdom, 11 Dexterity, 13 Constitution, 10 Charisma." She looked at him over the top of his character sheet. "You're not much, are you?"

Jimmy grimaced but didn't bother to reply.

Ridiculous Sword took his hand. "Come with me," she said.

Jimmy shrugged and nodded his consent.

Not that he had much choice in the matter. Ridiculous Sword's second helm glowed purple for a moment, and they found themselves within a great cavern at the core of a majestic mountain. With his natural infravisual capability, Jimmy saw a massive stone chair carved out of the stone on one side of the cave. Intricate mosaics of ivory, platinum, and adamantite adorned the bejewelled throne. It was pretty awesome-looking even in the infra-red.

"This is the Throne of the Gods," Ridiculous Sword told him, indicating the chair. "Sit on it."

"Um, sit on it?" Jimmy inquired, not quite believing her and still a little shaken up from that teleport.

Ridiculous Sword nodded. "Go on, sit on it."

Jimmy took a few faltering steps toward the relic. "Are you sure this is a good idea?"

"Would I lie to you?"

"I don't know, would you?"

Ridiculous Sword sighed. "Look, here, I'll even cast a detect lie spell on you so you can tell if I'm telling the truth." She did. "Now then, that Throne is perfectly harmless."

Jimmy put a hand to his chin. "What does that little red light over your head mean?"

"Er, um, uh, all right then -- that Throne is perfectly harmless if you do as I say."

In Jimmy's mind, the light over her head changed from red to green. "Well, okay," Jimmy acquiesced, turning back toward the seat, "But no funny stuff."

Jimmy's hands trembled so badly he could barely hold on to the arm rests as he sat himself down.

"Now, repeat after me," Ridiculous Sword told him. "Semper fidelis, cum regio spaticum est."

"What's that mean?" Jimmy asked.

"Never mind what it means, just say it."

"But what's it mean?"

"It means 'Holy fidelity! It's a space ship!,' all right? So say it: semper fidelis, cum regio spaticum est."

"Semper fidelis, cum regio spaticum est."

"Sic transit gloria tuesdi."

"Sick transit gloria tuesdi."

"Lisan-al-gaib Shai-hulud Muad'dib Kwisatz Haderach shield-lasgun explosion."

"Listen-al-gaib Shy-hoolud Maud'dib Quizzat's Hatrack shield-lazegun explosion."

"Abra cadabra, presto changeo."

"Abra cadabra, presto changeo." And the instant he finished "changeo," he felt somehow . . . different. "I feel somehow . . . different," he said.

Ridiculous Sword smiled. "Prime power B: 'All of possessor's ability totals raised to 18 each upon pronouncement of a command word.' Those little phrases I gave you to say were the command word; now you have straight eighteens across the board."

Jimmy's eyes bugged out. "You mean 18 strength, 18 intelligence, 18 wisdom, 18 dexterity, 18 constitution --"

"And eighteen charisma," Ridiculous Sword finished.

"But suppose I don't want straight 18's across the board!"

"Oh, nonsense, everybody wants all 18's. Everybody except people who have 19's, that is. Which reminds me . . ."

"Oh, no you don't!" Jimmy insisted, standing up and moving away from the Throne. "Bad enough that I can outclass most nobility right now! You're not getting me pumped up any further!"

Ridiculous Sword folded her arms. "I could never get my father to do even as much as you just did."

"Maybe that was because Ringman knew that all of his abilities would get permanently raised to 18 if he did that. You never told me what you were doing with me. Gehenna, you've hardly ever told me anything! What are you, a cleric or something?!"

"Naturally. Part cleric, part --"

"Oh, how could I for_get about your eleven classes -- especially now with my 18 intelligence! For the positive material plane's sake!" He slammed his fist down on a rock outcropping, leaving an 18 strength fist-shaped indentation. "There, you see! You've already given me more power than I know what to do with!"

"Come on, you can handle it; you've got an 18 wisdom."

Jimmy was about to formulate a reply when Ridiculous Sword snapped her fingers. "Oh, wait a minute, almost forgot." She reached into a pouch strapped to her side and pulled out two baubles that Jimmy couldn't quite see. "You don't have psionics, do you?"

"Well, no, why would --" Jimmy stopped short.

Ridiculous Sword rolled the pair of icosahedrons across the cave floor. Since each face was marked with a "0," the roll was of course a double-zero, or one hundred. "Well, you do now!" she told him.

Jimmy slapped his palm over his face.

"Sure; your intelligence, wisdom, and charisma just went up, remember?" Ridiculous Sword rolled again. "Another 00. 172 psionic strength," she rolled yet again, "All attack . . ." another roll ". . . and defense modes, and . . ." yet a fifth roll of the crystalline, loaded percentile dice ". . . four minor and two major psionic disciplines."

Jimmy didn't bother to uncover his eyes. He just shook his head.

"Okay, for now, your psionic devotions are invisibility, cell adjustment, domination, and reduction, and your psionic sciences are energy control and probability travel; but you'll get more powers once we get you in touch with some spheres of annihilation."

"Why me?" Jimmy moaned.

#

They eventually made it back onto the prime material plane -- thanks to a whole lot of complaining on Jimmy's part -- and walked the rest of the way to his old house. Ridiculous Sword went in and turned the place inside out in three minutes flat.

"I found seven silver pieces and three coppers in loose change," she said, "But that's all your parents had lying around."

"Of course," Jimmy replied, "Rents are cheap around here."

Ridiculous Sword put her fists to her hips. "Rent hasn't been invented yet."

"Oh yeah, I forgot. Well, we were just meager serf-type village folk who earned a poor but honest living."

"Oh, give it up. You didn't even have a single electrum piece stashed under the mattress. In fact, you didn't even have a mattress."

"Well . . . I like hay. It feels comfortable. (Except when it makes me sneeze.)"

"It also makes you smell like a farm animal."

"Everybody around here smells like a farm animal. Soap hasn't been invented yet either, remember?"

Ridiculous Sword relaxed her posture. "Oh yeah. Sorry. I'm only intelligence 19, you know."

"So you've ransacked my house and come out saying that everything me and my family have ever owned is useless to me now. So what?"

"_So_ . . . now we have to get you a better place to stay. How would you like to come live at my late mother's keep for a while?"

"Really?! Wow, that'd be neat!"

'Whoo, can this boy's mood change fast,' Ridiculous Sword figured.

#

"This," Ridiculous Sword indicated the updrawn gang-plank in front of the small castle, "Is the drawbridge."

"Wow, just like on a real castle!" Jimmy said excitedly. You would think he had only read about these places and never seen them or something.

"Hey, D.S.," Ridiculous Sword shouted, "Lower the D.B.!"

Disgusting Sword stuck her ethereal head through the adamantite-reinforced drawbridge, said "Okay," drew her head back in, solidified, and pulled the lever marked "down." The drawbridge cranked down across the moat to the sound of clanking adamantite chains.

"And this through here," Ridiculous Sword led Jimmy across the drawbridge, "Is the foyer. This is where my sister and I have placed a rather strong protection from evil spell -- just in case our brother or anybody he's in cahoots with decides to visit us."

"Yeah, I kinda figured that from the thaumaturgic circle inscribed on the floor."

"There, you wouldn't have known that was a thaumaturgic circle with your old intelligence of twelve, now would you?"

"As a matter of fact, I saw a thaumaturgic circle being demonstrated two years ago, and I would have recognized it anyway. Nyaah."

"And this," Ridiculous Sword quickly changed the subject, "Is the room where my mother used to sleep. It'll be your room for the time being."

"Um . . ."

"Oh, don't worry, all her magic items've been moved out."

"Um, I'm more worried about her ghost."

Ridiculous Sword lowered her head involuntarily. Her eyes felt moist. "If she had a ghost, we could bring her back."

"Oh . . ." Jimmy's voice trailed off. Somehow, he understood. "I'm sorry, I didn't know."

"It's all right. I wish Bahamut hadn't had to follow in her path, though."

Jimmy gulped hard. "Bahamut's dead too?!"

"As a doornail."

"A platinum doornail!" a voice approached from the other room.

"Uh, Jimmy," Ridiculous Sword indicated the entering girl, "This is my big sister, Disgusting Sword."

"Hey," she put her hands on her hips and addressed Ridiculous Sword, "Who's the cutie?"

Ridiculous Sword rolled her eyes up into her head and pointed at the other girl with her thumb. "She's just entering puberty."

"Oh," Jimmy replied, "Well, I'm just entering puberty too. . . ."

Disgusting Sword grinned girlishly.

"I found him," Ridiculous Sword insisted, "So he's mine. Nyaah."

"Oh yeah?" Disgusting Sword retorted. "Well, double nyaah!"

"NYAAH!"

"NYAAH!"

"PTTTTTTTTT!" they both rasped each other, lockhorned.

"Girls, girls, let's not fight over me." Jimmy grabbed their opposing shoulders and tried to tear them apart. They wouldn't budge, no matter how hard he pulled. "What gives," he strained to say, "I thought I had an 18 strength!"

"You do," Ridiculous Sword told him without flinching, "We just happen to have 25 strength."

"Oh . . ."

"25 star strength," Disgusting Sword corrected her.

"Anyways, like I was saying," Ridiculous Sword said smugly as she put her arms around Jimmy's neck, "I found him so he's mine now." She pulled up a little closer to him and playfully kissed his cheek.

"EW!" Jimmy wrenched himself away from her. "I don't wanna be kissed by no girl!" He wiped her smooch off as harshly as he could.

Disgusting Sword shook her head as she left the room. "What a waste of an 18 charisma."

Both Ridiculous Sword and Jimmy were silent for some time. Then, Ridiculous Sword said, "Hmmp. Looks like we've all got some growing up to do."

Jimmy folded his arms. "Phh, boy, I'll say! You two didn't know when to quit!"

"Your attitude toward my, er, affections wasn't exactly the most mature on Central Earth either, bub."

"Aw, that's just a sissy game."

"Yeah, played by us sissy 60th-level weapons masters, sure. And what do you want to be when you grow up?"

"Oh, that's easy. I wanna be a FIGHTER!" He thrust the Sick Sword through the air again. "I wanna hack up all sorts of vicious monsters and mount their heads on my wall! On the wall of my palace, that is -- the palace I got by killing the villainous king that lived in it! HA! HACK! THRUST! DIE! DIE!! DIE!!!"

"Well, I can help train you in that direction, if you'd like."

"YOU?! But you're a GIRL! And you're not even a fighter, besides!"

"Oh, sure, I'm not a fighter, he says. I'm only a weapons mistress and a paladin and a ranger! Those don't count!"

"Oh yeah, that's right, those are sub-classes, aren't they?"

"Well, actually, the Other Book of Infinite Wisdom (a genuine Dungeon Master{tm} publication) goes back and says that a paladin's actually not a fighter but really a sub-class of cavalier, but it's close enough. Tell you what, kiddo. If you really want to get invincible, you ought to be multi-classed; say, a fighter/magic-user, or a fighter/thief, or a fighter/ magic-user/thief, or a cleric/druid/fighter/ranger/weapons master/cavalier/paladin/magic-user/thief/thief-acrobat/assassin who'll change to become a bard, or --"

"No! I'm NOT gonna be a fifteen-classed character! I want to be a fighter -- just a fighter! You got that?"

"Okay, okay, it was only a suggestion."

"Hmph. I'm surprised it wasn't a suggestion spell."

"Oh, believe me, it was. You just got lucky and made your saving throw."

Jimmy narrowed his gaze and eyed her warily. "You're sure we're on the same side?"

#

"No, no, don't aim for my sword," Ridiculous Sword instructed, easily deflecting the latest hack of his Sick Sword, "Aim for my body! You're fighting me, not my weapon!"

"But I don't wanna hurt --"

"Don't worry about that, kiddo, there's no way you could really hit me. Just try to, all right?"

"Well, okay. Hyyyyah!" Jimmy swung his sword out and around in a wide arc blade-on. The blade was barely half way to its target when Ridiculous Sword brought her Ridiculous Broadsword to within an inch of his left eye. Jimmy gasped and dropped his blade.

"That maneuver may have worked against someone wearing plate mail," Ridiculous Sword told him as she slowly moved her sword away. "Heavy armor'll slow down an opponent's reaction time enough for you to finish blows like that. But you left yourself wide open for anyone with half an ounce of speed to thrust his rapier through your heart. Or her broadsword through your left eye. Now let's try again."

Jimmy studied the distant mountains for a few long seconds and rubbed his stockinged toes in the grass. Then, he cleared his throat. "Ahem. Sword of Sickness, come to my hand!" he commanded in Lawful Good. The adamantite Eternian-looking sword shot up from the ground and landed grip-first in his palm.

"Now, defend yourself!" Ridiculous Sword launched at him with both her Ridiculous Longsword and her Ridiculous Hand Axe before her.

Jimmy was barely able to draw Sick Sword's old +6 dagger of wounding and parry the adamantite longsword in time. He was so relieved at having fended off her sword that he didn't cover his right side and received a nasty run in his shirt from her hand

axe. That made him mad enough to forget about being nervous and hack at her with the Sick Sword as hard as he could. Ridiculous Sword jerked to one side and easily avoided getting hit.

Jimmy didn't get to stay angry for long. Three seconds later, a mere instant in this particular combat system, Ridiculous Sword hacked at him again with her long sword, forcing Jimmy to block the blow with all his might. Adamantite clashed against adamantite, then, and again, and again, until their ordeal seemed to take on a rhythm of its own. Every thrust or slash Jimmy made, Ridiculous Sword easily curved away; every stab Ridiculous Sword took, Jimmy somehow managed to parry or avoid. Sure, she was holding back, but she wasn't making this a picnic for him.

Finally, after four long minutes of fruitless exchange, Jimmy backed up a few feet, loosed the Sick Sword to dance, and drew Sick Sword's old +5 broadsword to attack with. Ridiculous Sword shrugged, sent her Ridiculous Longsword dancing into the air to deal with the Sick Sword, and flashed the Ridiculous Broadsword into her right hand in the blink of an eye. She also let her Ridiculous Hand Axe dance after Jimmy.

"Hey, that's not fair!" Jimmy complained, desperately fending off the adamantite axe. "My dagger doesn't dance!"

"True, but who's to say your next opponent won't have a +6 holy vorpal defender frost-brand flame-tongue sun luckblade hand axe of wounding, dancing, life stealing, slaying everything, disruption, throwing, thunderbolts, all dragon slaying, speed, final word, and nine lives stealing with intelligence 17, speech and telepathy, read languages and magic, ten non-alignment languages, eight extraordinary powers, eight special purposes, seven artifact minor benign powers, twelve major benign powers, and limited omniscience in one hand and a nearly-identical sword in the other?"

The instant she said "other," Jimmy found his opening, ducked under the hand axe, and came at her at full tilt. She saw his sword hack coming a mile away; it would be easy enough to parr--

Jimmy's +5 broadsword came within three inches of her right side, jerked over, and thrust right below her left ribcage. Surprised, Ridiculous Sword reached down to the sheath on her left boot, pulled out her Ridiculous Dagger, intercepted Jimmy's thrust, and sent his sword reeling two hundred feet through the air to land, point-first, on the center of a target painted on a rock.

"Amazing!" Ridiculous Sword told him, lowering her dagger. "I haven't seen a feint like that in weeks! You're real fighter material, Jimbo."

"Really? You mean I can be a real honest-to-gosh fighter now?"

"That's right, Jimmy. You've passed the test."

"Oh, wow! Neat! I . . . I . . ."

Jimmy's voice choked off as he shook and fell to his knees. Something was wrong inside him, something was definitely wrong. He felt his stomach convulse and he doubled over. Every muscle, every fiber, every epidermal fragment of his body rumbled like it was about to explode. He pressed his palms into his throbbing temples. "Wha . . . what's happening!?"

Ridiculous Sword fished two baubles out of her pocket and handed them to Jimmy. "Here, quick, roll these!"

"Okay," Jimmy strained, barely able to hold on to the objects. "If it'll stop this." He tossed them. They rolled along the ground and tumbled to a stop.

Jimmy gasped and yelled, "It got worse! HEEEEEEELLP!"

He looked down at his spasmodic arms. What looked like bubbles underneath the skin stretched it completely out of proportion. He could hear muscle and tendon fibers rapidly snapping and reforming like cracking celery. It wasn't a tenth as uncomfortable as it was horrifying. "WHAT'S HAPPENING TO ME?!!"

"You just became a fighter," Ridiculous Sword explained, "With an 18 strength. Fighters with 18 strengths get to roll for exceptional strength. I gave you those double-zero dice to roll just to be sure you got as strong as an ogre."

"You . . . what . . . ?!?"

And just as suddenly as the transformation had begun, it ceased. Jimmy's skin came out toughened and weathered (although it was still 18 charisma skin). Muscles bulged from his body where he didn't know half-elves could have muscles. The great phantom character sheet in the sky told him that he had the full 14 hit points. He felt like vomiting.

Ridiculous Sword approached him and put her arm around his shoulders. She looked into his eyes, and said, "Welcome to level one."

#

Peter Perfect stopped scanning with his eyes of the eagle from his warhorse's saddle. Across about a mile of dry lakebed, he'd seen what he was hoping for.

"Well well well," he told his horse and his holy sword, "It looks like Ringman's decided to face me on my own turf. We'll see how well he handles himself without a magic ballista!"

He put his funny glasses away, held Prometheus in his right hand and the warhorse's reins in his left, and with a tiny jolt instructed the horse to trot toward the approaching Ringman. He surveyed the landscape one more time: absolutely flat, not a tree or a bush or a rock or a dumb old human to mar the expanse of barrenness. This place had his name written all over it; nothing was quite so impressive as his castle jutting up from the center of all this nothingness.

It also gave Ringman and any goody-two-shoes cohorts he might happen to be carrying along with him nowhere to hide. Like that brownie Peter saw riding on his shoulder. Yeah, he figured as he rode closer, maybe he'd capture the brownie and torture it just to see what Ringman would do. Or maybe he'd torture Ringman to see what the brownie would do. Or perhaps he'd torture Ringman and the brownie to see what Ringman's horse would do.

Ringman rode up toward him on his own horse, unusually confident for being about to face his old nemesis. Homer the brownie rode on his left shoulder, meteorite-iron steel plate barding rode almost weightlessly over the warhorse's body, and Ringman's holy avenger rode in its scabbard rather than in his hand. He flinched as Peter Perfect shot him a sinister grin, but quickly recuperated. He also noticed that Peter Perfect had probably been reading the Other Book of Infinite Wisdom; he'd traded in the gauntlets and chausses of his +5 adamantite-alloyed plate mail for +6 pure-adamantite-metal full plate armor.

Their horses trotted toward each other until they were practically nose to nose.

"Well, Ringman, old buddy, old pal," Peter Perfect chided, "What brings you to my realm of dread?"

'How can the Dungeon Master let this guy stay a paladin?!' Ringman thought. "I've come here to settle a grudge that's more than a decade old," he told him.

"Oh?" Peter Perfect asked sarcastically. "And what grudge might that be, hmm?"

Ringman shook his head and grinned a bit. "You and me, you disgrace to paladinhood, you and I. So long as you stay the way you are right now, I'm ashamed to share your character class."

"Oh, I see. So you've finally come to die." Peter cracked his knuckles.

"No," Ringman replied quite calmly, "I've come to bring you down."

The beardless paladin chuckled through his nose. "You must be joking. You? Alone?!"

"Ah, but I'm not alone," Ringman observed. "I've brought a friend."

"Pphhh, what, the late Sick Sword's little brownie?"

"Homer, sure, I brought him."

A flurry of scintillating dust grains wafted away from a spot two feet to the left of Ringman's horse. As the wind carried the dust away from what it had been obscuring -- or rather concealing -- there resolved the form of a ten-and-a-half year old girl with an adamantite dagger in her left hand and an adamantite broadsword in her right.

"I also brought along my first born," Ringman explained.

"<gulp>," gulped Peter Perfect. "D-D-D-Disgusting Sword! You? Here? How!? What?"

Like a lightning bolt that had drunken a permanent potion of speed at 150% effectiveness, Disgusting Sword bolted up onto Peter's saddle and stuck a +6 holy vorpal dagger of wounding, dancing, life stealing, and nine lives stealing in front of his face. "Hello, Peter Perfect," she grinned, "I've wanted to meet you for so long."

Peter Perfect shook with fear, even though paladins were immune to fear by then, then dismounted his horse as fast as he could without speaking a word. Disgusting Sword got down too and zipped around in front of him again.

"Hey," Peter said, "W-w-wait a minute. I'm a Disgusting Character too. I've got rights, y'know. And besides, I'm armor class -23; you couldn't hit me by rolling anything less than a natural twenty."

"You can't fool me that easily, you weak boson. I read Dragon and Dragrace, too. The Dungeon Master relinquished that natural-20-only-no-matter-how-many-to-hit-bonuses-you-have restriction long ago."

"Ah, b-b-but then I can hit you, too." Peter held Prometheus defensively in front of him. It shook in his hand like a divining rod.

"Of course you can hit me too; I'm only A.C. negative twenty-seven. But I have nearly four times as many hit points as you do, and I'm part weapons mistress. I could tear you apart in two seg-- er, twelve seconds."

'Hey, baby,' a telepathic message wafted into Disgusting Sword's head from Prometheus, 'How'd you like to use a real macho holy longsword?'

'BACK OFF, BUDDY,' the Disgusting Dagger replied telepathically to the sword, 'SHE'S WITH ME.' Prometheus was the first intelligent sword on Central Earth in centuries to visibly cringe.

"Um . . ." Peter Perfect began, "Um . . . uh . . ."

"Surrender or die," Disgusting Sword offered.

"Surrender!" Peter Perfect yelled. Prometheus fell to the ground as his hands shot into the air. 'Whew,' he thought, 'Glad she made it easy on me to decide.'

Disgusting Sword shrugged and said, "Good." She snapped her fingers; Peter's warhorse obeyed blindly and sank to its knees. There was nothing quite like a permanent potion of animal control at 150% effectiveness. Peter Perfect had one of those, too, but he thought better of using it at this point.

"Now, the first thing we take off of your body --" shhhink, she exposed Peter's woolen undies, "-- is this Invulnerable Coat of Arnd. Here, dad, keep this warm for me, will ya?" She tossed it to Ringman.

"Do I have a choice?" he replied, fumbling the chain shirt with his mere 17 dexterity.

'Hmmp,' Peter thought, 'It's a good thing I dragged the torso and groin plates from that +6 full plate along for just such an occasion.'

"Next --" she took off his belt "-- goes your girdle of titan strength. Here, Ringman, why don'tcha put this on?"

Ringman caught it while still holding on to Arnd's invulnerable coat. "I thought we went through why I won't put this on before."

'Hah, those fools,' Peter thought, 'Little do they realize that I have a permanent potion of titan strength in effect on me!'

"And don't try to get away by using that permanent potion of titan strength you have in effect on you," Disgusting Sword warned him. "I have Atlas strength."

"Um, what's --" Ringman began.

"Atlas has 25-star strength," the brownie whispered in his ear.

"And finally, we take away each and every item on your person that increases your saving throw versus magic. . . ." Disgusting Sword took away his +4 cloak of protection, his +3-in-a-5-foot-radius ring of protection (although why Peter Perfect would want to protect anyone but himself was beyond her), his stone of good luck, his luck blade longsword, his scarab of protection, and his Axe of the Dwarvish Lords, then dispelled the protection from good spell he'd had permanently placed upon him. She bared her archmagi robe. ". . . and cast a charm person spell on you."

She waved her hands through the air, stuck her two index fingers up her nose, and cried, "Oolam caloophid baeower gazots / Diddlysquat barnstorm hotten and tots, / If I don't charm you I think I'll just cry / So be under my power or you'll have to die!"

There was a tremendous crash of thunder as waves of magical force cascaded down from the positive material plane, through Disgusting Sword, and into Peter Perfect's head. Ghostly voices rose up from all around to help control Peter's mind. Her robe of the archmagi shone an awesome white. It was overwhelming.

And then, nothing happened.

"Oh well," she said, "Looks like he made his saving throw. He had a 5 or better chance of making it anyway."

"So now what do you do?" Ringman asked.

"Easy. I'll just cast it a few more times until he blows it." She did. Two tries later, he was as harmless as a 20th-level paladin kitten. Heck, she didn't even have to use her permanent potion of elf, half-elf, and human control.

"Yes-master," Peter addressed Disgusting Sword in a monotone, his arms jutting out in front of him, "What-may-I-do-for-you?"

"Get on your horse," she directed him, "And ride off to Sick Sword's old keep. You do know where that is, don't you?"

"Of-course-I-do. I-have-been-there-before."

"Oh? And when was that?"

"When-I-seduced-Sick-Sword-and-injected-Tiamat's-evil-seed-into-her-womb."

"When you . . . you . . . what?!" She was completely surprised. (She could even be attacked using six second intervals as minutes right then.)

"I -- I thought you knew," Ringman said.

"Sure," Peter continued, zombie-like. "That-was-when-she-was-pregnant-with-Gross-Sword."

Disgusting Sword just sat there with her mouth open. It took her twelve seconds to finally say, "We've got to get this back to Ridiculous Sword."

"Right," Ringman answered, and gave his horse a little snap on the reins. He started trotting off with Peter Perfect and his warhorse following close behind.

"Oh, and in the mean time," Disgusting Sword told Ringman, "You might want to replace the main section of your plate mail with the Invulnerable Coat of Arnd."

#

Ridiculous Sword heard them entering through the keep's drawbridge (Disgusting Sword usually lowered it by using her unseen servant) and saw them through the open door of her room. "Oh, hi D.S.," she said, taking her hands out of Jimmy's pants. "You're right, puberty's lots of fun!"

Disgusting Sword stepped aside and pulled Peter Perfect into Ridiculous Sword's view from behind Ringman. Peter's arms were still out stiff in front of him. "R.S., we have to talk."

Ridiculous Sword puzzled at the charmed paladin in front of her. Fiddling with her medallion of ESP, she had the answer in six seconds. "So this is Peter Perfect, eh? Um, why'd you take him out of The Dungeon?"

"We didn't take him out," Disgusting Sword told her. "He escaped over nine years ago."

"Nine . . . ye . . ."

Disgusting Sword shrugged. "I didn't even hear about it until this morning. It's a good thing dad decided to mention it to me."

"Like I said," Ringman explained, "I thought you knew!"

"And . . . what's he been doing for those nine-plus years?"

Disgusting Sword nudged Peter Perfect with her elbow. "Tell her what you told me."

"You-mean-about-how-I-made-a-deal-with-Tiamat-to-inject-a-seed-of-evil-into-Sick-Sword's-womb-while-she-was-pregnant-with-Gross-Sword?"

Ridiculous Sword's jaw just about dropped to the floor.

"Yes, that's it," Disgusting Sword told him.

"I-made-a-deal-with-Tiamat-to-inject-a-seed-of-evil-into-Sick-Sword's-womb-while-she-was-pregnant-with-Gross-Sword," Peter told them.

"That's what I thought he said," Jimmy commented.

"So that means," Ridiculous Sword figured, "Gross Sword was drawn toward evil by an outside agent. It wasn't all mom's fault! I knew it!"

"Why did you make such a deal," Disgusting Sword asked the clean-shaven mind-controlled paladin.

"It-was-in-our-mutual-interests. Tiamat-got-to-spread-evil-all-over-the-multiverse-and-I-got-to-have-my-revenge-against-the-woman-who-destroyed-the-IUDC. And-her-husband."

"And how did you manage to keep your paladinhood?" Jimmy asked.

'Silly question,' Ringman thought.

"Silly-question," Peter bleated. "I-did-it-for-the-sake-of-perpetuating-my-ideal-of-lawful-goodness."

"Which is?"

"Live-and-let-live . . . unless-you-don't-agree-with-them."

"Say, Ringman," a voice from Peter Perfect's side cut in. It was Prometheus. "Since my master is in no shape to kill anything, how's about you and me teaming up again?"

Ringman put his fists to his hips. "Why Prometheus, what a wonderful fair-weather friend you are!" He pointed out the nearest glassee spell -- er, window. "See that pool over there? Well, it's really fresh water, and a quick dip now might be refreshing!"

"You sure you don't want me?" the holy avenger pleaded. "I'm +6 now!"

"And how did you manage that?"

"Easy. Peter Perfect just shucked out the 20 000 extra gold pieces and had me upgraded."

"Go disappear in a puff of logic," Ringman cursed it.

"Fine," the holy avenger replied, "I'll take that as a no for now."

"Hmmpf," Disgusting Sword noted. "If Prometheus were an artifact I'd give it the humble ant treatment."

Ridiculous Sword totally ignored their sidetrack. She was too deep in thought about the nine-year-old news she'd just received. "How many times have I been in conference with the gods? How many times have I asked my contact-other-plane or vision spells if there's anything unusual going on?" She read Ringman's mind briefly. "Limbo, even Melnic the Loud's bard university knew about what Peter did to mom! Why did everybody keep it a secret?!"

"Hey," Jimmy perked up, "Maybe there was a conspiracy going on against you!"

"What makes you say that?" Disgusting Sword asked.

"'Cause then you could go out and find the conspirators and HACK THEM TO PIECES! Wham! Wham! Die, die, die!"

Ridiculous Sword waved his gestures aside. "No, God II damn it, there has to be a reason! In the months that I've been a disgusting character I've contacted just about every deity known to man and humanoid, good, evil, lawful, chaotic, or otherwise. Supreme beings who hate each other don't just conspire to withhold information from the most powerful force of lawful good in the multiverse!"

"Or the second most powerful force of lawful good in the multiverse," Disgusting Sword interjected.

"Just the same, we should have heard something about it! Hmmpf, I wonder . . . the fact that we didn't know gave Gross Sword time to be able to do all the sick, disgusting, gross, ridiculous, unbelievable things he's done without our butting in until it was too late. Some greater force out there wanted Gross Sword to get to my power level. Maybe if we knew more about why, we could find out how to bring our dear 3/4-brother down."

Jimmy puzzled. "But if the gods won't talk to you --"

"The Happy Hunting Grounds the gods won't talk to me!" Ridiculous Sword stammered. "I'll make them talk!"

And without another word, the most powerful force of lawful good in the multiverse amulet-of-the-planesed out of there.

#

She emerged on the plane of Gladsheim. This was the outer plane of chaotic good neutrals and, like most of the outer planes, was multi-layered. The first level of Gladsheim, and the only level touching the astral plane, was named Asgard; the second, which housed the dead warrior heroes brought there by the valkyries (along with a few fire giants), was named Muspelheim; and the third, where the Norse gods reigned, was named Nidavellir. Unlike the other outer planes, the three layers of Gladsheim were connected to each other by two rainbow bridges. Ridiculous Sword approached the first bridge.

A very large, flaming battle axe came down and blocked her path. "Halt!" the axe's owner demanded, showing off his gold teeth, "Who goes there?!"

"Oh, come on Heimdall, don'tcha recognize me?"

Heimdall gulped. "Ridiculous Sword? Wh-wh-what do you want here?"

"I want to go to Nidavellir and see ol' papa smurf."

Heimdall cleared his throat threateningly. "No one as lawful as yourself may cross this rainbow bridge without first crossing Heimdall!"

"Now really, do you think a wimpy +3 battle axe like that one is going to stand a chance against me?"

"How did you know my axe was +3?"

"Easy, it's the strongest kind of battle axe the Other Book of Infinite Wisdom lists on its miscellaneous magic weapons tables. Now let me in."

"No!"

Ridiculous Sword blinked her eyes and dimension doored to the other side of the bridge. "Looks like you don't have much choice in the matter," she shouted back to him, and departed forty-two seconds later.

The rainbow bridge leading from Muspelheim to Nidavellir didn't have any picky old guard on it, so she didn't bother wasting one of her 399 remaining fourth-level spells on it. However, there was a god on the other side with long blond hair and a great big magic war hammer in his hands, wearing gauntlets of ogre power and a girdle of giant strength, riding on a chariot drawn by two trained attack goats, who was spouting curses at her.

"Odds and forsooth!" the blond-haired god thundered, "I knowest not how ye managed to pass by Heimdall at yon Bifroest Bridge, but ye had better get thine buns back to where thou camest from or know the wrath of my magick war hammer of thunderbolts, Mjolnir!"

"I don't think Clerasil would like you using his hammer," Ridiculous Sword pointed out.

"You dare to mock the God of Thunder?! Eateth hot lightning bolts, lawful slime!" He pointed his Mjolnir at Ridiculous Sword and pulled the trigger.

She made her saving throw (that is, she didn't roll a "1") and easily juttet her hips to one side. The bolt missed her.

"So, thou thinkest thou canst escapeth my wrath just because thou art a monk and taketh no damage from an attack if thou makst thy saving throw! Well, that'll not save thee from Mjolnir's adamantite-alloyed steel head!"

The thunder god cocked back his right arm and swung his hammer a mighty blow. Ridiculous Sword drew her two main weapons, parried Mjolnir with her Ridiculous Hand Axe, and juttet the Ridiculous Broadsword to within a mil of the blond god's neck. "That wasn't very polite," she told him.

"Um, er, uh -- phhh," the God of Thunder groped for words as he blew some blond hair out of his face.

Ridiculous Sword took the sword away. "Thank you," she said, and walked over toward Odin's Place at a leisurely 2560 feet per second.

Odin's Place had a colossal pink neon sign over the drawbridge that read, "By invitation only." Ridiculous Sword got out a little piece of fleece, ground it between her 25* strength palms, blew the fleece dust at the sign, and chanted the ancient mystical words, "Permanent illusion!" That being done, she leapt over the moat and smashed through the adamantite-reinforced drawbridge.

Odin turned from his wife Frigga, with whom he was having a dreadful argument, and shouted, "Who dares smash a human-shaped hole through my drawbridge?!!"

Ridiculous Sword snapped her fingers and centered a continual light spell two feet above her head. "Me."

"And who art thou?"

"Ridiculous Sword, the most powerful force of lawful good in the multiverse."

Odin was furious. "I didn't invite you!"

"Take another look at your sign."

Odin peered through the window at the pink glowing letters. Sure enough, the sign now read, "By invitation only unless your name happens to be Ridiculous Sword."

"Upstarts and robes!" Odin cursed. "I'll show thee who's boss in Gladsheim!" He walked over to one wall of the chamber and grabbed on to a cross-brace several feet across which had a barrel glued to it. He pulled. The cross-brace moved slowly away from the wall and exposed more and more of a thick sheet of polished metal. The sheet was long and narrow and had sharp edges. It was about ten feet out of the wall before Ridiculous Sword realized that the cross-brace was actually a hilt, the barrel was actually a grip, and the sheet of metal was actually the blade to the biggest sword she had ever seen, bar none.

When Odin finally finished drawing his sword from the wall, it was about twenty-five feet long and must have weighed well over half a ton.

"What's that," Ridiculous Sword asked, "A twelve-handed sword?"

"Avast ye, yon varlet, hast thou not heard of the Odinsword?!"

"I thought you normally used Gungnir, the spear with the never-ceasing thrust."

"A man can only keep thrusting for so long, thou knowst; and besides, if I use the Odinsword I can do more damage that way!"

Odin swooshed the gigantic sword around the room at Ridiculous Sword. As she ducked, Ridiculous Sword wondered if that sword shouldn't have been named after her; she hadn't the foggiest idea how Odin kept it balanced. The first sword hack whooshed harmlessly over her head and nearly hit Frigga, whom Odin may have been aiming at as well for all she knew.

It would take Odin about two minutes to finish following through on that swing and hack at them again in the opposite direction; that would be more than enough time for Ridiculous Sword to do her thing. She rushed up to Odin the Head God, grabbed the Odinsword out of his hands, broke it in two across her leg, slapped him harshly on the wrist, shook her finger at him, and declared, "Tch tch tch, naughty boy, didn't your mother ever tell you not to play with knives?"

And with that, both Odin and Frigga fainted.

Ridiculous Sword had Odin back on his feet within eighteen seconds. "Now tell me," she demanded, "Why didn't you tell me about Peter Perfect's pact with Tiamat to taint the baby in Sick Sword's womb?"

Odin shrugged. "D-D-D-Dungeon Master's orders! No telling the player characters anything about Peter Perfect. Honest, that's all I know!"

Ridiculous Sword stared him warily in the eye and cast a detect lie spell on him. The green spot over his head meant that he was telling the truth. She sighed. "I guess I'll have to try some other outer planes then. But one more question: just what in the universe is a player character?"

#

And try some other outer planes she did. Olympus was like Gladsheim all over again, what with Zeus, Hera, and Ares being dead ringers for Odin, Frigga, and Thor; it was also as fruitless as the Norse plane. She throttled a few greater devils she found running around in Acheron, but they only gave her the same sob story. On the Happy Hunting Grounds it seemed that the only word the natives knew how to speak was "How." She broke some of the inhabitants of Nirvana out of their meditative stupors and looked into their minds, but all that got her were pictures of the back walls of their skulls. The boss, tyrant, king, and queen of the elemental planes of earth, fire, water, and air were likewise uninformed. Even going up into the face of God II, her own deity on the seventh layer of Heaven, only got her a mild suntan.

She materialized on the keep floor and rested her head on her hands.

Ringman turned to his newly-reappearing daughter with no more feeling than if she'd just come back from going into town. He was almost used to this kind of stuff by now. "How'd it go?" he asked.

Ridiculous Sword could have just said, "I learned absolutely nothing," and been done with it, but instead she fired up her telepathic projection and compressed every detail of the last two hours into a six-second-long beam aimed at Ringman's cerebral cortex. Ringman got the message, all right, in a very forceful way.

"Wow," he said.

"Not used to seeing things through the eyes of your ten-year-old daughter, eh?" Ridiculous Sword asked him.

"Not in the slightest. I'm also not exactly used to seeing things through the eyes of a disgusting character."

"Say, speaking of disgusting characters, have you read the new paladin rules in the Other Book of Infinite Wisdom?"

"In the Other Book of Infinite Wisdom?" Ringman inquired.

"Sure, you know, the one with the picture of the brass-headed alchemist looking googoo-eyed at a tome on the front cover."

"Um, is this something I'm supposed to know about?"

"It's only the official upgrade to both the Book of Infinite Wisdom and the Book of Finite Wisdom as authorized by the Dungeon Master."

"Oh. No, I haven't seen the upgraded paladin rules."

"Well then," Ridiculous Sword smiled, hauling out her copy. "For starters, you're no longer a sub-class of fighters. You're now a sub-class of this other class called a cavalier. And since cavaliers don't have any prime requisite, you don't get any 10% experience point bonuses anymore."

"Oh," Ringman worried. He checked his tally. "No problem; I'm still ninth level with fifty-five thousand points to spare."

"You also get to train your strength, dexterity, constitution, and charisma every time you gain a level until they're all 18's (or 18/00's); are immune to fear; project a protection from fear aura in a 10 foot radius; can vault into the saddle and have your horse underway in six seconds flat; ride your horse at 20 yards per minute faster than normal, not counting horseshoes of speed; remain conscious all the way down to negative however many hit points you had at first level; have 90% immunity to any mental magic, including a psionic blast; and, since you're ninth level, are at +2 to hit and +9 to damage with mounted lance and +1 to hit with long sword."

Ringman gaped. "You mean, I have this globe of anti-fear emanating from my body --" the air within ten feet of him suddenly glowed a dim grey; "-- can hit better with my holy sword --" he could almost feel his hack and thrust improve; "-- and by now would have maxed out on my dexterity --" his new and improved nerve endings gave him a buzz; "-- my constitution --" his torso bulged out to accommodate the extra 9 hit points; "-- my now full ogre strength --" his musculature broadened and toughened; "-- and my charisma --" a phantom breeze swept his hair back in a gentle rolling curve; "-- all because somebody decided to change the rules again?"

"You bet! I keep my mind's eye peeled for those kinds of things all the time. Heck, I wouldn't even have gotten that extra fifth level druid spell, those two extra sixth level druid spells, or those three extra seventh level druid spells if I hadn't heard that druids can now go all the way to 15th level and become the Grand Druid; in fact, they can go all the way to 23rd level as a Hierophant and get all sorts of neat interplanar powers."

"Although you get to cast six more levels worth of druid spells if you stay a Grand Druid!" Disgusting Sword called out from the next room.

"And not only that," she whipped a magazine out of one of her portable holes, "The special Other Book of Infinite Wisdom supplementary issue of Dragon & Dragrace says that weapons masters can specialize or double specialize in a single melee weapon just like fighters and rangers can. They get their number-of-attacks-per-minute entry shifted to the next better category with this weapon, and get +1 to hit and +2 to damage with it -- +3 to-hit and damage if they double specialize. And of course these to-hit bonuses add into their armor class when they're actively parrying just like all their other hundred or so bonuses do."

"Oh, wow. So now you're even more disgusting, is that right?"

"Hey, I get 15 attacks per minute with any of my Ridiculous weapons -- 18 per minute with my Ridiculous Hand Axe, which I retroactively double specialized in. I also retroactively gave the Axe some powers from the new magic weapons they have in there. Even the new +6 Prometheus is an official weapon type since they added +6 defenders and holy avengers to the magic swords tables. See this?" She whipped out an ordinary-looking spoon. "This ordinary-looking spoon is a spoon of stirring. Stir any potion with it and if you're real lucky, the potion comes out at twice normal strength. Not just 150% effectiveness, twice normal strength. Oh, and I almost forgot, you have another character ability to worry about now: comeliness."

"Comeliness? What's that, the chance I have of co--"

"Er, no no no no no; comeliness is how good looking you are. Hey, Disgusting Sword," she called out, "How many dice does Ringman get to roll up his comeliness with?"

Disgusting Sword walked in carrying her personal copy of the Other Book of Infinite Wisdom. She flipped to page 74. "Um, well, since his other six abilities are already rolled up, either 4d6 discarding the lowest die or 3d6 six times choosing the

best roll of the six." She looked up at Ringman. "Too bad, you'd get to roll 5d6 and discard the lowest two dice if you were a pure cavalier."

Ridiculous Sword took out four dice and rolled them across the floor. They came up 6, 6, 2, and 1. "Fourteen," she told him, "Plus 3 for having a charisma of 18 makes 17 comeliness. Darn, you just missed the next higher category of attractiveness; but you're pretty good-looking, though."

Ringman glanced at his distorted reflection in the arm of his +5 plate mail; then he looked back at them in disbelief. "I don't look a damn bit different!" he insisted. "Do you mean that if you had rolled four 1's my comeliness would be a . . . let's see, a . . . five --"

"Six," Ridiculous Sword corrected him.

"Okay, a six, and that I would suddenly become homely?"

"No, if I'd rolled four 1's I'd have rolled it over."

"But that's cheating!"

"No it isn't; it's good business practice."

Ringman grumbled slightly. Chivalry was fast becoming a four-letter word. "Well, at least I'm not excessively good looking. Um, what would happen to me if I were in that next comeliness category?"

"If you were in the 18 to 21 range, you'd fascinate practically every woman you met and be the envy of most ordinary-looking males. As it is, though, you're just plain old run-of-the-mill good-looking."

'Fascinate practically every woman I met,' Ringman thought, 'And I missed it by one. Hmm, I wonder if any of them could measure up to Sick Sword?'

"Oh, geez, I almost forgot," Ridiculous Sword expounded. "You got a couple more cavalier restrictions besides your normal paladin ones."

"More restrictions, oh great. What do I have to give up now?"

"Well, first off, you have to take a lance as your first weapon of proficiency."

"But I don't even have a lance!"

"You do now."

Ringman searched his memory. He did remember a lance being stashed in one niche of his castle, although he couldn't remember having put it there or even having remembered it before. "Oh, all right, I'll give up weapons familiarity with that light crossbow of mine. I never use it anyway."

"And you have to prefer a dagger over a hand axe."

"Don't tell me." Ringman looked at the loop in his belt where his +3 hand axe used to be. In its place was a +4 dagger of throwing. He wondered briefly why it wasn't his old +2 dagger that was +3 only against larger-than-man-sized opponents, until he remembered that the Other Book of Infinite Wisdom had created a few more miscellaneous magic weapons since then. He had no idea where the 1500 gold piece price difference between a +3 hand axe and the cheaper +4 throwing dagger had gone.

"_And_ . . . you have to choose full or field plate armor over plate mail, even if the plate armor is non-magical."

"What?!" Ringman gasped. He snatched the book from Ridiculous Sword's hands and read the cavalier entry. After his eyes bugged out at what it said, he flipped over to the description of new armor types. He read to himself for a few seconds, then looked up in dismay. "My deity! They want me to replace this, this perfectly gallant-looking armor of adamantite alloyed plate mail, with a tin suit that actually becomes one armor class worse if it absorbs too much damage?!"

Disgusting Sword and Ridiculous Sword nodded in unison. "That's right."

Ringman could feel the arms and legs of his armor vibrating. Ringman had a good idea of what was about to happen. "Oh, no," he cursed, covering his face with his hands, "Not again." He took his hands away and gazed skyward. "All right, get it over with!"

By the time he looked back down six seconds later, every piece of plate mail on his body had become a mithral-alloyed piece of full plate armor.

"Mithral alloyed?" Ringman asked. "But that's only +4."

"Only plus four, he says!" Ridiculous Sword snickered. "This coming from the man who absolutely refuses to wear a girdle of titan strength?"

"But doesn't mithral-alloyed full plate armor cost mucho gold pieces?"

"You got a discount from not getting the full suit. And 1500 gold pieces worth of credit from exchanging your hand axe. Besides," she turned a small fragment of a million-gold-piece gem to the light, "We covered the difference."

"And anyways," Disgusting Sword noted, "With +4 full plate, after it absorbs its 90-damage-point limit, you'll be exactly the same armor class you were in +5 plate mail."

Ridiculous Sword shrugged. "We could have got you +6 pure adamantite full plate, but that wasn't on the treasure list in the Other Book of Infinite Wisdom, and we know how you can't stand to bend the rules."

"Oh, thank you ever so much for sparing me the embarrassment! I think I'll go take a bath in Crysglass lake now for a year or two to see if mithral alloyed steel can rust."

"Awh, don't be so sore. Just think: now you can stay conscious all the way down to -16 hit points."

Ringman did a double-take. "But I only had 13 hit points at first level."

"Not any more you didn't. You get a d10 plus three hit points at level one, in addition to your constitution bonus."

"Oh, but then I should have had 17 hit points at 1st level, because my constitution just went up to 18."

"No, your constitution didn't make it up to 18 until you were third level."

"Oh, well, forgive me for not remembering something that never happened to me! Geez!"

"My, aren't we in a testy mood today." Ridiculous Sword pulled a glass full of a smoky-colored liquid out of her ethereal cooler. "Here, drink this. You'll feel better."

"_Ohhhh_ no you don't," Ringman insisted, "I almost fell for that last time! What is it today, a double-strength permanent potion of extra healing at 150% effectiveness?!"

"No, no, no, nothing like that," Ridiculous Sword assured him. "And the 150% effectiveness bit isn't cumulative with the twice-normal-strength thing anyway. You just looked like you could use a drink."

Jimmy materialized by the side of the room. He had just gone through several spheres of annihilation (with some severe magical protection) and was trying out his new psionic disciplines. Sometimes he couldn't stand having all these powers, but usually he just thought they were neat.

"No thank you," Ringman waved Ridiculous Sword's glass away, "I'm not thirsty."

"Well, I sure am!" Jimmy interrupted, walking toward the center of the room. "If you won't drink this, I will." He took the glass from Ridiculous Sword's hands and swallowed it down. It was good enough for him to lick his chops and wipe his mouth on his sleeve. "Mmmm, that tasted great! What was it?"

"A permanent potion of invulnerability at twice normal strength," Ridiculous Sword told him in a perfectly level voice.

Jimmy gazed down at the glass, then down at the floor, said, "Oh," and strolled slowly out of the room.

#

"Only one more permanent potion to go, Jimmy," Ridiculous Sword told him, pouring the contents of her +6 bowl of potion mixing back into its original decanter. "Oil of acid resistance. Take off all your clothes."

Jimmy eyed her warily for a moment until he was sure she didn't want to play doctor with him, then stripped bare. Ridiculous Sword immediately began rubbing the acidproof liquid over every exposed portion of his body. She lingered briefly around his groin when she got there, but then moved on.

"Here, Jimbo, you'll have to drink a little of it too."

Jimmy shrugged, took a mouthful from the container as she handed it to him, and swallowed it with a grimace. "Oh, God II, is that stuff bitter!"

"Of course it's bitter. This is the most powerful antacid known to man and god alike. Now your mouth's been coated, and so has your throat, and your stomach. Within about nine hours, it'll have gone all the way through your digestive tract and you'll be acid-proof on the inside from both ends. You'll never get an ulcer and never have to worry about heartburn again."

"Heartburn. . . . That sounds like the title of an evil magic-user spell or something."

"It does at that, doesn't it? Okay, now, I'm gonna put a drop in each eye. It'll sting for a couple seconds."

"Don't worry," Jimmy said, tensing up every muscle in his body and straining his voice, "I can take it!"

She let one drop fall into his left eye, then his right, after each of which Jimmy blinked almost uncontrollably. Within a few seconds his eyes felt normal again, and by that time Ridiculous Sword had already finished coating the back of his neck and was working the oil into his left ear.

"So, R.S.," Jimmy began, trying to take his mind off of his fifth rub-down that day, "If the gods can't give you any answers as to why they wouldn't give you any answers, where'll you go next?"

"I'm not sure," she commented, acid-proofing his chest. "The gods were all hushed up about it for some reason. I figure it's because they had to answer to a higher station. I need to find someone who doesn't have to answer to anybody, someone on another plane who gets in on all the interplanar poop and yet isn't bothered by godly protocols."

"Oh," he chuckled, "You mean like Omnion?"

"Omnion," Ridiculous Sword said, rolling the idea around in her mind. "Omnion," she repeated. "She just might know. . . ."

"Oh, you are not serious!" Jimmy quavered.

"You bet I am. Let's get Disgusting Sword and we'll all meet her on the first plane of Hell."

"C-c-c-couldn't we just send her a postcard?"

"Mail hasn't been invented yet."

"Then couldn't you use one of your extraplanar powers to contact her from here?"

"She might not believe it's us."

"Then you could make her believe it."

"Nope, there ain't no other way around it. I might need to be there to cast just the right spell on her or something."

"So why do I have to come along?"

"For the educational experience." She finished coating his Achilles heels with the oil. "Now come on."

One minute and forty-two seconds later, Ringman, Disgusting Sword, Ridiculous Sword, and Jimmy all materialized in the first layer of Hell.

The place gave new meaning to the word hothouse. 200 to 300 degrees was the likely temperature, and the ground stank of burning sulfur. Vaguely humanoid blobs, the "lemures" which all (or nearly all) new recruits in Hell got turned into, littered the ground as far as the horizon stretched. Every twelve feet or so an orcish-looking devil with a whip and a trident punctuated the sea of lemures.

"Now Jimmy and Ringman, watch out for the devil taskmasters. You two might be fire resistant, but you're not fire immune. At least not without being within twenty feet of that Sick Sword or any of our artifacts. You especially be careful, Jimmy; you're only first-level with only 14 hit points."

"How come I'm fire resistant?" Ringman asked.

Ridiculous Sword and Disgusting Sword chanted, "The Invulnerable Coat of Arnd."

An orc-like taskmaster stopped beating up on one of his lemures and noticed the new arrivals. "Hey, who the here are you?!"

"That's none of your business," Ridiculous Sword told him.

The orc-devil sniffed briefly in their direction. "You're . . . you're all lawful _good_! Why, I ought to --"

Ridiculous Sword and Disgusting Sword pulled out their holy symbols and shouted "BEGONE!" at practically the same time. The devil turned black with fear and ran away with its barbed tail between its legs.

Jimmy turned to the lemure the devil had been beating. "Have you seen Omnion?" he asked it.

"Uhhwuuuuwuuuuuuuhpthhhht," the lemure replied, accidentally spitting up some internal glop.

Jimmy wiped the ectoplasm off. "Ewwwwww," he commented. "Forgot those things barely have minds."

"No problem," Ridiculous Sword reassured him, "I see her."

Six seconds later, everyone else saw her too. She wasn't a lemure at all. She was just plain old Omnion -- stripped of all her magic items, of course, but still the same Omnion Ringman had slain eleven years hence. She was stooped over a rather large basin, moving something in her hands back-and-forth against a rough board. Suds covered whatever it was in her hands and the interior of the basin.

Our four heroes walked toward her rather cautiously. Several dark-shaded somethings were piled in a heap behind her; the back and top ends of the pile were lost in the darkness. Omnion saw them, wrinkled her forehead, and then smiled. "Well, hi, all you _lovely_ people. I was wondering when you'd get around to stopping by."

Jimmy indicated the boundless mountain of stuff behind her. "What's the pile?"

"What's the pile, he asks! HA! That's a good one! 'What's the pile?' _IT'S DIRTY LAUNDRY_!! That's all I've been doing for the last eleven years is DIRTY LAUNDRY!" She wrung out the devil-shaped shirt in her hands, threw it at the lemure next to her, told it "Rinse!" just as she had for the past 132 months, took a pair of pants down from The Pile and dunked it in her basin. "And just think, I only have 988 years to go. Then I can _really_ show Hell who's boss!"

"No talking, slave!" a taskmaster shouted in her direction. "Back to work!"

Omnion grabbed the taskmaster's collar with one hand and drew him up to meet her gaze.

"Omnion!" the guard yelped. "I'm sorry, I, er, didn't recognize you!"

"Sorry isn't good enough," she said, tossed him in her basin, scrubbed his head against her washing board, took him out, broke him in half across her right leg, and flung his remains to the far horizon thanks to her permanent potion of titan strength.

"Oh, don't worry," she told our heroes, "They'll replace him soon enough." She took the pants in her basin in hand and began scrubbing. "And, uh, I'm _really_ sorry to

hear about your mother, little Sicklets. And your parents too, Jimmy." Her sinister smile revealed her still-perfect 18 charisma -- er, 23 comeliness -- teeth.

"So how come you have to put in 999 years of servitude?" Ridiculous Sword asked her.

Ringman counted on his fingers and mumbled to himself. 988 plus 11 was about 999, all right. He never was much good at this math thing.

"_Why_?" Omnion blurted. "Because you have to! Everybody who gets sent to Hell has to take anywhere from a hundred to a thousand years worth of torture, depending on how evil you were while you were alive. Since I was invulnerable to most of the things they could throw at me, they assigned me to do Hell's laundry for 999 years. I was pretty pissed that they didn't think I was worth the full millennium treatment." She wrung the pants out, threw them at the lemure next to her, told him to "Rinse!," plucked a pair of smelly underwear from the pile, and chucked it into her tub.

"Yeah, but why do you have to do it?"

"Because they make me!"

"But couldn't you just beat them all up?"

"Sure I could."

"Then why don't you break out of your predicament?"

She sighed. "They don't make me by ordering me to do these things. When they assign you to do something, you have to do it. You just plain have to. It's one of the laws of nature in this place, for crying out loud! Now get out of here, unless you have something important to do!"

Ridiculous Sword folded her arms. "Aren't you afraid we might kill you?"

"Kill me? Heck, go ahead. Non-existence sounds like a welcome relief from this monotonous lifestyle -- er, deathstyle."

"Laundry's that dull, huh?"

"Well, it's not all that bad. In another four-and-a-half centuries or so they're going to invent the washing machine, and I'll have more free time to do what I please. But I still won't be able to leave this plane. Nope. Un-uh. Nosirree. That's a no-no. No interplanar travel until your torture period is over -- not even to any of the deeper layers of Hell."

"But you can contact other planes, can't you?"

"Oh, phhhh, anybody can do that!"

"Good. There's been this sort-of news blanket over every not-from-the-prime-material-plane creature we've talked to for the past decade or so. It seems the Dungeon Master didn't want the gods to tell us about what Peter Perfect and Tiamat did to our mom."

Omnion grinned at their mentioning it.

"I take it you know about Tiamat and her seed of evil, then."

"Oh, you bet," Omnion shot back. "Heck, I could have told you about it, even. I could have told you everything. But did you once call up your --" she leered at

Ringman "-- good buddy Omnion and ask her, 'Hey, Omnion, is there anything going on that we should know about?' No! You just thought your own petty little deities and demigods would tell you everything! Come on, this is the thirteenth century, wake up and smell the adamantite! Do you honestly think God II is going to be perfectly honest with you just because he's your deity?!"

"He's not my deity," Ringman mumbled.

"So, then," Ridiculous Sword got back on the main track, "Do you know why the Dungeon Master forbade the gods to chat with us about it?"

"Honey, if I knew why, I'd . . . I'd . . . I'd know why, I guess." She scrubbed the underpants.

"Then do you have any idea why?"

"You bet. The Dungeon Master was making one of his usual cruel and wanton proclamations."

Ridiculous Sword's and Disgusting Sword's eyes bugged out.

"Or maybe the D.M. was testing out his new hyperdimensional transport inverter beam when it malfunctioned and caused all non-material beings within a 700-plane radius to be unable to talk about the event. Or maybe the Big Referee accidentally stepped on all the gods' brains and wiped out their speech centers for a decade. I don't know!"

Ridiculous Sword cast a charm person spell on her a few times just to make sure. She was indeed telling the truth.

"Well, thanks anyway," she said, and prepared to leave.

"Any time," Omnion sneered at her. She watched them dematerialize in a purple haze.

"Hmmpph," she grumbled to herself, wringing out the undees. "Rasper the pit fiend thought he could rule Hell forever when Wierd Dough vanquished all the arch-devils eleven years ago. Ha! Only nine hundred eighty-eight years left; your days are numbered."

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The halls of Sick Sword's small keep had not sounded so quiet for years. Nobody said anything to anyone else since they'd gotten back. Of course, part of that might have had to do with the fact that Ringman, Disgusting Sword, and Jimmy all went off to take a nap.

Disgusting Sword found her sister sitting by the window, staring out into space, with her head resting on her left palm. She had been like that for hours. Disgusting Sword brought her halfway out of her trance by telepathically asking her what was going on.

'Oh, nothing, as usual,' Ridiculous Sword thought back. 'Nobody knows why Gross Sword's contamination was hushed up. Nobody in this whole multiverse knows. Hardly any of them seem to care.'

'I care. You care.'

'Oh, sure, and why didn't our own deity care? Why didn't anyone say anything? Didn't the forces of law and good give a damn about what would happen to Sick Sword - or to Bahamut?'

'The important thing is that we know now, so we can prevent him from killing any other supreme beings or from mass murdering entire planar populations.'

'Prevent him? How? Every time we find a new loophole in the rules, so does he. We can't even hit each other any more. He can do anything he wants, and there's not a single force in the multiverse that can stop him!'

Ringman entered the room behind them and watched for a while. Not that you can really be behind anyone wearing a robe of eyes, that is.

'Not even Omnion knew anything,' Ridiculous Sword's telepathization continued. 'There has to be a reason for all this!!!'

A rather annoying clanking sound approached from the laundry room. Peter Perfect emerged into their room, carrying a laundry basket as stiffly as he could manage. With that adamantite full plate armor, his stiffness, and his monotone voice, Peter would have easily been mistaken for a robot had robots been invented yet. He set the basket down at Disgusting Sword's feet. "Here-you-are-master -- er, mistress. I-made-sure-to-wash-your-robe-of-the-archmagi-in-the-same-load-as-the-rest-of-the-white-clothes."

"Um, thanks," she said, lifting the white robe out of the basket. It crackled as she wrenched it free from its environment. Hmmph. A thousand years of medieval advancement and they still hadn't figured out a way to get rid of static cling.

"Like I was thinking," Ridiculous Sword spake, "Like I've been thinking ever since I found out, there has to be some reason the gods clammed up, and somebody has to know it!"

"Heck," Ringman interjected, "At this point it seems that the only person who'd know is the Dungeon Master."

Ridiculous Sword's head sank back into her hands. "Yeah, I know," she sighed. "And I've even tried using the limited omniscience power of my artifacts to find out. Six times today alone. But every time I called up the Dungeon Master with that particular question, I got his answering machine! It's as though even the D.M. is keeping it hidden."

"Hey," Disgusting Sword snapped her fingers, "Maybe if you talked with the Dungeon Master face-to-face! The D.M. couldn't back down then and might have to tell you! Maybe. . . ."

Ridiculous Sword nodded solemnly. "I've thought of that myself. But no one knows what the realm of the Dungeon Master is like. No one in history has even seen the Big Referee and returned to tell about it! You can't exactly jaunt over to his plane and chat with him, because he doesn't have a plane in the usual sense of the term. Anybody who went to the Dungeon Master's world would be outside of the multiverse as we know it and completely at the D.M.'s mercy. Still, it doesn't look like we have much choice."

Jimmy had overheard, too, and was overjoyed. He bounded into the room shouting, "Oh boy! You're gonna go visit the Dungeon Master! Can I come along too? I always imagined the D.M. as this old guy wearing black-and-white stripes with a whistle stuck in his mouth!"

"No, you can't come along," Ridiculous Sword told him firmly. "You probably wouldn't survive for an attosecond. And I've always imagined the Dungeon Master as a female jailkeeper with a huge keyring that locks and unlocks all these dungeon doors."

Disgusting Sword snorted. "That's funny. I've always seen him as this three-foot-high gnome-looking guy with long white hair, a huge bald spot, red robes, and a cabbage-patch face."

"Whatever he looks like, I'm going to have to risk it. I'll take all my magic items and artifacts along with me, of course; if any of them work against me in his realm I can always discard them. It never hurts to have a little insurance." She paused. "If I weren't a paladin, I'd be really really scared."

"I'm a paladin," Ringman said, "And I'm still scared."

"Yeah, but neither you nor I can be affected by a fear spell, at least."

"Oh. Hadn't thought of it that way."

Ridiculous Sword exhaled once resignedly, and then once again decisively. She hauled out her amulet of the planes. She kicked in the vision spell from her Ridiculous Hand Axe. She cast commune, contact other plane, gate, and an astral spell, then rubbed herself down with some oil of etherealness. She activated all six of her limited omniscience side effects at the same time. And finally, she chanted the mystic words, "Bric-a-bracker, firecracker, sis boom bah / Dungeon Master, Dungeon Master, rah, rah, rah!"

And the multiverse collapsed into a big puddle around her.

The scene looked like the usual long-and-drawn-out plane travel special effects. There were lots of pretty colors and weird music playing on a 13th-century synthesizer in the background. She still felt her body clinging to the outside of her spirit, just like always, but she couldn't see it. Not even with her permanent detect invisibility spell or her robe of eyes. She felt very alone, and very, very helpless.

"What will the Dungeon Master look like?" she tried to ask herself. It was in trying to speak that she realized there was no air around her. She was in a vacuum. Even if there had been air out there, she noticed, she wouldn't have been able to breathe it; oxygen or nitrogen would turn to ice. The temperature was absolute zero. Her items and artifacts were doing a very good job of keeping her alive.

Then, the pretty colors started to dim. All lights and sounds -- however she could hear sound in a vacuum -- were leaving her senses. Within six seconds, it was absolute zero, and absolute vacuum, and absolute silent, and absolute dark.

She felt an almost imperceptible jostle. 'This is it,' she thought.

And as light and sound and temperature at last started to return, her limbs -- as if of their own will -- began to pose in an awkward mid-stride stance. They also started to stiffen. Her whole body, even her head, began hardening into a mould which almost, but didn't quite, fit the normal contours of her body.

Even her eyes became frozen in place. Fortunately, her robe of eyes still afforded a 360 degree view of things. The first thing she could make out was a white landscape; a perfectly flat white landscape. As the details cleared, she began to see thin blue lines networking the land, crisscrossing in a grid with each line spaced ten feet apart -- or ten yards, she couldn't be sure. Above the horizon loomed an eerily lit, plaster-covered wall that seemed to enclose several square miles on all four sides. Directly overhead was another wall, this time with short stalactites hanging down from nearly every point. Any one of those stalactites could have been a very short and fat piercer, except for the fact that piercers didn't particularly care for bright light. A yellowish-white sphere hung from the tremendous ceiling, shining like an artificial sun.

It was then she noticed that the walls weren't plain; there was a gigantic wooden panel set into the flank side of the wall to the left of her, with a gold-colored cylinder jutting out of one side. It looked rather remotely like a mammoth door. Oh, and there was one more detail in the room. Perhaps she had not wished to acknowledge its presence, but there was something else there. Or some_one_else there. Someone whom she could no longer ignore. Someone who, judging from the scale of the blue lines on the ground, must have been 600 feet -- or yards -- tall.

The giant looked away from the papers in his hands and stared at Ridiculous Sword through his thick glasses. His eyebrows lowered as he pointed at her. "YOU! What are you doing here?!"

Ridiculous Sword couldn't move her mouth to speak, but she could still use telepathy. 'You must be the Dungeon Master.'

"Darned right I'm the Dungeon Master!" he insisted, setting some of his papers down and inadvertently dropping a 20-sided die. "Brilliant deduction! You don't have a 19 intelligence for nothing!"

Ridiculous Sword glanced at her reflection in his spectacles. She looked nothing like herself. She was metallic-gray, adorned in a lifeless mockery of a magician's robe. She looked like a metal statue of some girl wearing long robes and holding her hands in a spell-casting position. Her feet rested on a circular metal base half a foot high and three feet wide. In short, she looked just as stiff and motionless as she felt.

'You undoubtedly know why I'm here, O great and powerful Dungeon Master.'

"Of course I know why you're here! Duuuuuuuuuuuuh!" He whacked his right hand limply against the chest of his horizontally-striped T-shirt. "You wanna find out more about Gross Sword! Well, you little twit, I know everything there is to know about him!!!"

He thumbed rapidly through the pages in his hand and whipped out a yellow-orange piece of parchment adorned with beautiful ink illumination and ugly pencil scratches. "Do you recognize this_?!" he thrust it in her face.

Ridiculous Sword's eyes tried to widen (but couldn't, of course). 'My character sheet!'

"Exactly," his mouth grew into a sinister grin. "I control your character sheet. I control . . ." he began the teensiest of rips along the top edge, ". . . your destiny!"

Ridiculous Sword felt a terrible pain run across the rift on the top of her head. She was having a splitting headache.

"Feels terrible, doesn't it?" the Dungeon Master chortled. "You see, I know about all the ways you've been stretching the rules. I --"

"Honey," a distant feminine voice interrupted from beyond the door, "Your dinner's ready!"

"Aw, mom!" the D.M. yelled toward the door, putting the character sheet down, "I'm talkin' with Ridiculous Sword!"

"Well, hurry it up," the phantom voice replied.

The Dungeon Master turned back to his hapless audience of one. "As I was saying, I know about how you wear five, ten, or even fifteen magic rings on a single hand. I know about your percentile dice that are marked with zeroes on all the faces. I know about how you can buy magic items on the black magic market at cost. I know how you change character classes not once, but ten times. I know," his voice tried to grow more impressive, "How you kill centaurs and take their four one-million-gold-piece gems!"

'So you want us to stop doing all that, is that it?' She would have shivered nervously if she could move.

"Stop it? Are you kidding? I was the one who let you do all that in the first place!" He thrust a finger right underneath her dull metal nose. "So that means you owe me, doesn't it! I let you types get away with plenty! And you know what? It was getting boring! That's right, boring as Hell! Or as the Abyss, or as Tarterus, or as whatever other plane you want to use in a sentence! Why do you think I let Gross Sword get 80 million experience points and be a chaotic-evil killing machine, huh?! For play balance!!"

'So that's why we couldn't hit each other when we were fighting, even though all our weapons had the final word power.'

"They do?" He picked up one of the sheets just beneath her character sheet. "Wait a minute, they do, don't they? So that would mean that each of you should have hit each other after the other person attacked. I played that wr-- er, uh, I mean, of course that's why I did it! I'm the Dungeon Master! I couldn't have let you kill each other then because, because . . . uh . . . because I still wanted Tiamat to die!"

'But Tiamat's still --'

"Er, Bahamut, I mean! Yeah, that's it, I had to have Gross Sword kill Bahamut!" He picked her up off the white landscape and brought her to his eye level. Ridiculous Sword's robe of eyes told her that the white landscape she'd been standing on was actually a tremendous sheet of parchment atop a huge folding table. "And you can't do anything about it!" He turned her to face the circular receptacle standing in the corner. She'd already scanned it with her x-ray vision and knew it was full of crumpled documents. "There's where Sick Sword is now! See? I tore her in half! Nyaaah! Your mom is DEAD! Dead dead dead dead dead! And I burnt her character sheet, so that not even Scotch tape could bring her back!"

'Er, Scotch what?'

"SHUT UP, YOU STUPID PUKE!" And with that curse, he hurled her back down at the white landscape.

She hit the ground so hard, in fact, that her spirit got jarred loose from the metal statue and she continued to fall through the table and into the darkness beyond.

#

What she emerged into looked like the Astral Plane. It wasn't the Astral Plane, though, as anyone who had really been there could tell you. It was, in fact, the Prime Material plane; yet she was not on Central Earth. She was on her way to Central Earth, though. She found that out right quick, yessirree. Just as soon as she saw the big blue-with-white-cloud-specks disk rush toward her at a relativistic speed.

Instantly, she kicked in her permanent double-strength potions of flying and levitation as her ring of earth elemental command automatically engaged its feather

falling power. That barely made a dent in her speed. The next instant she hit Central Earth's atmosphere and would have burnt to a cinder (or a plasma) if not for Artifact Prime Power DD. That slowed her down somewhat, but not enough, she calculated, to smack her into the ground subsonic. She thought about teleporting upward to give her more time to slow down, until she remembered that the \$#@!ing rules didn't allow her to teleport anyplace where there wasn't a solid surface. She watched helplessly as Central Earth rushed up to greet her.

The cloud layer zoomed toward and past her in the space of a heartbeat. A normal heartbeat, that is, not the heartbeat of a disgusting character under the influence of a permanent potion of speed at twice normal strength. She could see the gridlike division of landplots beneath her now -- they reminded her, ironically, of the blue lines on the Dungeon Master's map. The continental outline and the land patterns made her destination clear: she was hurling down just outside of town, aimed straight for her mother's small keep from whence she'd gone to visit the D.M. in the first place. She wished she had time to scan the castle with her x-ray vision, just to see whether or not her physical body was still in there. Just to see if this wasn't some terrible falling nightmare she was going to wake up from in a cold sweat. But the wind and the pressure and the heat all felt far too real to her for it to be a dream anyway. And there wasn't a damned thing she could do to save herself from the fall.

The next instants flew by all too quickly. She saw the keep explode into her visual field, saw the east parapet heading straight toward her, heard the loudest stony screech as her sight blacked out, and felt an impact akin to someone hitting her with a pillow the size of the astral plane. She opened her eyes some six million microseconds later, and glimpsed clear blue sky pierced by a dark gray castle tower. A bird's cheerful midday song accompanied the hurried approach of human -- or at least half-human -- footsteps.

"Ridiculous Sword!" Ringman's voice neared from around a corner. "Are you still alive?!"

She craned her stiff neck forward and managed to look at Jimmy's astonished face. She smiled weakly at him.

"You musta been going supersonic when ya hit the ground!" Jimmy relayed. "How come you didn't get splattered into a zillion pieces?!"

She glanced to her left at the outer stone wall of the castle seven-odd feet away from her, and understood. She smiled at Jimmy again and pointed at the masonry.

"Huh?" Jimmy huhed.

"Oh, I get it," Disgusting Sword said, appearing virtually from out of nowhere. "You didn't take any damage because you fell within eight feet of a wall."

Ridiculous Sword made the O.K. sign, as if to say "perfect," and slumped back flat onto the ground. This whole experience had just about taken everything out of her.

Ringman arrived and knelt beside his second daughter. The next moment, when he realized that she'd come through totally unscathed (as usual), he asked, "What did you find out?"

"Yeah!" Jimmy enthused. "What'd the Dungeon Master look like?!"

Ridiculous Sword exhaled deeply. "He is the most nasty, ruthless, egotistical, self-righteous, manipulative being it has ever been my displeasure to meet. It makes me sick just to think that I'm living in his multiverse."

Disgusting Sword blinked uncomfortably. "So did you find out anything about our dear, beloved brother?"

Ridiculous Sword nodded solemnly. "Uh huh. I know why the D.M. wanted him to get away with being a chaotic-evil brat for so long. And I know what I have to do. . . ."

PART FOUR

Sick Sword's memory still haunted Ringman like Isolde's did Tristan. Like Juliet's did Romeo. Like Thisby's did Pyramus. Like Rock Hudson's did Jim Nabors. Like --

"Enough, already!" Ringman sneered. "We get the picture!"

Homer the brownie rode in back of Ringman on his warhorse, as usual. Disgusting Sword and Ridiculous Sword floated through the air next to them. Peter Perfect rode his own warhorse aside Ringman's, holding the reins stiff-armed. The horse seemed a little uneasy about this whole setup, as did Prometheus. Jimmy lagged a little behind everyone else (staying clear of the horse's trail, of course), swishing the Sick Sword menacingly through the air.

"So what's this big plan of yours, R.S.?" Jimmy asked.

"Yes, Ridiculous," Ringman inquired, "I'd also like to know what we're about to get ourselves into, so I can decide whether or not I should be afraid of it."

"Well," Ridiculous Sword began, "The first thing we've got to do is lure Gross Sword back out into the open. That's why we're heading for The Great Big Clearing That Happens To Be Even A Little Bigger Than The Clearing Sick Sword Built Her Keep In."

"Ah," Ringman ached, "So there won't be any innocent bystanders for him to hack up."

"No, just to give us some maneuvering room. Oh, by the way, I just remembered: Ringman, you've gotta upgrade your ballista. Plus I won't hit anyone protected by a double-strength potion of invulnerability."

Ringman buried his face in his right gauntlet.

"Aw, don't bother him about it," Disgusting Sword told her, "Peter Perfect doesn't have a spoon of stirring anyway. So, tell us more about your plan."

"Why don't you tell 'em, sis?"

"I don't know your plan."

"But you can read my mind."

"Not when you always have a mind blank spell up."

"Oh, all right," Ridiculous Sword acquiesced. "Anyway, we get Gross Sword to come to us. Disgusting Sword and I will keep him occupied by meleeing him and not hitting. Meanwhile, he'll keep us occupied by meleeing us and not hitting. And then," she pointed to Jimmy, "You hit him with Secret Weapon XJ-46."

"Right," Jimmy grinned, instinctively moving his left arm behind his back.

Quizzically, Ringman looked behind Jimmy's back. All he saw was a left hand clutching air. Then the paladin fingered his own torso and decided, 'I think I'd better keep this Invulnerable Coat of Arnd on for the duration.'

"And that's the whole plan?!" Homer complained. "Hit him with Secret Weapon XJ-46?! No escape routes, no back-ups, no ideas of what to do if Gross Sword's still alive _after_ your big lollapaloozer hits him?!"

"Oh, he probably _will_ be still alive after he's hit. I've already thought of that."

They reached the geometric center of the clearing and stopped. Ridiculous Sword solemnly declared, "The time is right."

"Uh," Ringman interrupted, "Don't we have to wait for the three suns to align or something?"

Ridiculous Sword grimaced at him. "Central Earth only _has_ one sun! Sheish, for a paladin you sure have a weak stomach!"

"You ready?" Disgusting Sword asked of everyone (but of Ridiculous Sword in particular).

Ridiculous Sword nodded matter of factly. "I'm ready."

Jimmy smiled like a little boy hiding a secret. "I'm ready."

Ringman and Homer blinked at each other. "We're not ready."

"Good, we're all in agreement then," Ridiculous Sword declared. She raised her horn of blasting into the wind, and yelled through it: "GROOOOOOOOOOSS Sword! Come out come out wherever you are!"

The clear-blue sky seemed to rumble a reply as Ridiculous Sword put her horn away and both she and her sister began to cast the same spell. What spell it was they were casting, no one but they had any idea. Homer the brownie, suddenly aware of his vulnerability in only having four hit points and a _positive_ armor class, ran around behind Ringman's warhorse and blended in with the surroundings. Peter Perfect, of course, just sat there stiff-armed on top of his horse. Ringman drew his (merely +5) holy longsword and raised his shield.

The air felt tense. Very tense. Ringman probably could have drawn a spark by touching metal if he wasn't grounded to his armor. He wished to his deity that his daughters would hurry up and finish whatever spell it was they were casting.

Then, he saw it. So did everyone else, for that matter; it was rather hard to miss. Six seconds ago the sky had been pure azure, but now it was dominated by a single gigantic, swirling, black cloud reaching all the way to the ground. And into the center of the Great Big Field, out of the cone of this cyclone -- no, hurricane was a better word -- dropped the single most powerful force of chaotic-evil in the multiverse.

And flanking him at ten yards intervals dropped four twelve-foot-high humanoid machines.

"Golems!" Ringman gasped. Ridiculous Sword or Disgusting Sword could have told him that, of course, but they were still busy saying magic words and waving their arms around. This scared Homer even more, and even Jimmy and Ringman's warhorse began to get lumps in their stomachs. (Though Peter Perfect, of course, just sat there in the saddle with his arms out stiff.) These golems were big, and broad, and dark-colored, and noisy. Very noisy. One solid, clanking step from any of them could set off a fault line. Ringman had a slight feeling that he was outclassed. "Uh . . . Ridiculous Sword . . . Disgusting Sword . . . could you hurry it --"

"Ha haaaaaah!" the boy in the middle gloated, drawing attention back to himself (as well as the Gross Broadsword and the Gross Hand Axe). His sandy brown hair framed a dark, hidden fury within his eyes, but the whole of his expression drowned in his sinister, sickening smile.

It was then that it dawned on Ringman: this was his son. This was the first time he'd ever so much as seen his own boy. It was also the first time Gross Sword had seen him for real, even though he had probably spied on Ringman countless times with a crystal ball or a mirror of mental prowess or whatnot.

"So, father," the sinister smile mused as Gross Sword pulled out card number ten from the Villain's Collection of Commonly Used Sayings and held it up to display: "At last we meet."

He tromped with painstaking slowness toward Ringman, Gross Broadsword in right hand and Gross Hand Axe in left, relishing the ever-increasing look of horror on his father's face. Perhaps, some dim flicker of conscience told him, he should be paying more attention to his goody-two-shoes sisters; but they were no threat and this paladin was far more entertaining.

The holy sword quavered in Ringman's hands.

And at that moment, Ridiculous Sword and Disgusting Sword finished their spells by casting their hands toward the sky and crying the activating phrase, "TEMPUUUUUUUUUUUUUS FUGIT!"

If you thought the Sick Girls could move fast before, you would have been flabberghasted to see them now. Their normal running speeds, which were already only slightly under mach five, now increased SIXFOLD to a monstrous 30 720 feet per second. They could move six times as fast, attack six times as fast, cast spells six times as fast, and even think six times as fast. This was the awesome might that Tempus Fugit had bestowed upon them.

Gross Sword looked through his robe of eyes' rear eyes at the two human cyclones now approaching him. "God IV!" he gasped. "How could I have overlooked such a powerful spell!"

Ringman wiped his brow, grateful that his murderous son's attention had been drawn from him. He stopped relaxing, though, when he realized that the four golems hadn't been so distracted.

Gross Sword assessed things as quickly as he could manage. Ridiculous Blur and Disgusting Blur would probably use their speed to try and feint past his defenses. He would have to keep his guard up more now than ever before in his life. The only way he could hope for better-than-average odds of survival would be to . . . <cringe> . . . PARRY -- without attacking! He swallowed his pride and went on the defensive.

Ridiculous Sword reached him first. She had been nearer to him when she'd finished her spell. Gross Sword crossed his broadsword and hand-axe and readied to kick in his helm of teleportation if it came to that. And then, when Ridiculous Sword closed to within ten feet of him, she . . . she slowed down! She slowed to her usual ridiculously-fast pace, instead of the unbelievably-fast pace she'd just had. Puzzled but delighted, Gross Sword looked at Disgusting Sword, and found that she had slowed down to below hypersonic as well. And his father behind him, and the four golems -- they looked to be moving six times more lethargically than they had any right to.

Now he remembered. Tempus fugit affected everything within ten feet of its caster, friend or foe.

Ringman hardly noticed his son's and daughters' little skirmish; twelve feet of mindless metal was about to pound him into the ground like a tent peg. He would have to hit it first. He charged up the few remaining yards to the behemoth, shouting to drown out his fear, and rammed his holy sword toward its metal belly.

He was in mid-swing, too late to stop the momentum of his blow or the momentum of his thoughts, when he realized exactly what kind of metal this golem was made of.

The sword's tip impacted into an impenetrable wall. It arched under the weight of Ringman's thrust, protested, and finally snapped in two. The upper half of the blade clattered down soundlessly against the grassy earth. Ringman stared in horror at the half of a sword remaining in his right hand, then slowly turned to the golem and exclaimed, "You have broken what could not be broken!"

"I am pure adamantite," the golem replied. "That is a +6 substance. Your holy sword was only +5. That was why it broke."

Ringman nested his face in one hand and shook his head.

"This has been a recorded announcement," the golem finished, and smashed down on Ringman so hard it knocked him to the ground.

Ringman rolled out of the creature's way and stood up. Just being stepped on by that thing would probably squish him, mithral-alloyed armor and all. The adamantite golem stumbled harmlessly by, leaving six-inch-deep footprints. Ringman figured he might be able to keep its attention for a few minutes, but then it might lose interest and turn instead on Homer or Jimmy or his warhorse. He needed to down this thing, and he needed a +6 weapon to do it.

He looked over at Jimmy. He had a +6 broadsword. He was also using that +6 broadsword to fend off one of the other three adamantite golems. Ringman certainly couldn't take that sword from Jimmy, even if he could stomach taking the Sick Sword into his hand again. Ridiculous Sword and Disgusting Sword also had +6 broadswords - - and +6 daggers, and +6 longswords, and +6 hand axes. And all eight of them were either in their hands or dancing in the air to keep Gross Sword's attention. And Gross Sword probably wouldn't be willing to forfeit any of his +6 weapons to Ringman just yet.

Where on Central Earth could he find a +6 wea--

The green glow from Peter Perfect's hip almost seemed to respond to his thoughts. That poor-excuse-for-a-holy-sword had told him that Peter Perfect had paid the extra 20 000 gold pieces to upgrade it to +6. . . .

"No," Ringman convinced himself aloud. "No. No way. Un-uh. No. Absolutely not."

The golem clanked toward him again.

"Oh hell," he said, reached over, and drew the +6 sentient holy avenger longsword from Peter Perfect's sheath.

The sword was as perky as a +6 holy puppy dog. "Ringman, old buddy old pal old pal old pal! So ya finally changed your mind!"

Ringman pointed a threatening finger at the sword. "One snide remark, Prometheus, and I'll find a way to break you, too!"

Prometheus shrugged in that way only holy swords can. "My personality score's higher than yours."

The golem was nearly upon them.

"Fine," barked Ringman, "For now just do what you do best!"

"I thought you'd never ask," Prometheus replied and, in concert with Ringman's strong right arm, rammed its tip right through the adamantite golem's belly.

"Ouch!" the golem commented.

Ringman yanked the sword out of his opponent and swung again, making a deep gash in the metal giant's side. It was hurt pretty badly now. "Two attacks per minute," Prometheus commented. "I'm impressed."

"New paladin rules," Ringman replied as he deflected another swing of that adamantite arm with his +4 shield. "Longsword happens to be my weapon of choice."

Ringman hacked twice at the behemoth again. This mountain of adamantite was doomed to fall, Ringman could be sure of that.

Nearby, Jimmy was disposing of his adamantite golem in classic fashion. He couldn't attack as often as Ringman could, since he was only first-level, but with the Sick Sword in his hands he could hit just as hard, if not 10 damage points harder.

The third and fourth golems, surprisingly, were already mangled heaps of metal filings lying on the ground. Disgusting Sword figured maybe she didn't need both her Disgusting Dagger AND her Disgusting Broadsword hacking futilely at Gross Sword at the same time, so she sent the dagger off to tackle the golems during one of its four-minute "dancing" episodes.

All this time, Gross Sword and the Sick Girls had been hacking at each other and at each others' dancing weapons with absolutely no result. Gross Sword could have sworn that Disgusting Sword had only been armor class -27 last time he saw her, which was certainly a weak enough A.C. for him to penetrate.

"I could have sworn you were only armor class -27 last time I saw you, Disgusting Sword," Gross Sword said, breaking their silence.

"I was," Disgusting Sword told him as she parried and riposted. (Her riposte missed, of course.) "Look at my stones."

Gross Sword quickly counted and assimilated the tiny baubles whirling around Disgusting Sword's head. Sure enough, there were eighteen dusty rose stones in orbit about her that hadn't been there before. "Oh," he said, "I see. Eighteen +1-protection ioun stones to bring your armor class down to -45. You're almost as cheap as I am."

Jimmy chopped down on his golem for the final time. The humanoid lump of adamantite gave a non-descript grunt and keeled over. "All right!" Jimmy cheered. "I got one! I . . . uh . . . I . . . IIIIiiiiIIIIIII -- AAAAAGH!"

Jimmy too keeled over, holding his stomach. He looked like he was about to explode. Ringman saw this and rushed to his side, taking off his gauntlets in case he needed to lay on his hands. "What's wrong, son?!"

Gross Sword glanced over at him when he heard that. But it wasn't he who his father was asking, merely Ridiculous Sword's new playmate whom Ringman had fleetingly called "son."

Ridiculous Sword looked over at Jimmy and smiled. She knew what was going on.

Disgusting Sword had already put a fair distance between herself and her dear little brother.

Gross Sword sheathed his broadsword and his hand axe. "I can fix that," he muttered. He inhaled deeply, wiggled his fingers, and began to chant. The chant was an illusionist spell; a fifth-level illusionist spell. He had memorized tempus fugit just like his sisters had. He just hadn't been sure of what the spell could do, that was all.

A sword and a dagger buzzed through the air toward him at blinding speeds. They were Ridiculous Sword's. Damn her dancing weapons. One hit from one of those things, backed up by her Bracer of Irresistible Damage, would be enough to finish him off in his current state of health -- he only had 279 hit points left. There was nothing he could do except abort his spell and run backwards until he was out of the dancing weapons' 30 yard range.

So reasoning, he aborted his spell and ran backwards until he was out of the dancing weapons' 30 yard range.

Disgusting Sword wasn't about to let him out of her clutches so easily. After all, the old Grosser might still have another tempus fugit spell memorized. She ran around behind him and charged with her dancing +6 holy longsword of wounding and her dancing +6 holy hand axe of wounding. Gross Sword saw the disembodied weapons coming (he was wearing a rode of eyes, after all) and parried them with the Gross Broadsword and the Gross Dagger. The weapons didn't stand a chance of hitting -- poor old Disgusting Sword was born too soon to put the Final Word ability on her toys -- but still they hacked and thrust and slashed six times faster than they had any right to.

"What gives?" Gross Sword said, fending off her dancing weapons. They had certainly been confusing the hell out of him all this time. "Your dancing weapons aren't inside of a tempus fugit field!"

"They don't have to be," Disgusting Sword called back. "Dancing weapons fight with exactly the same expertise and power as their wielder. And since I'm in a tempus fugit field . . ."

Gross Sword slapped a palm over his face (while still parrying with the other hand, of course). "That has to be the most ridiculous distortion of the rules I've ever heard of!" he exclaimed.

Ridiculous or not, it was there, and being implemented; and any second now Ridiculous Sword's weapons could catch up with him and deliver the Final Word. He was at a dangerous disadvantage. There was only one option open to him. He grit his teeth, swallowed his pride (which was a very large gulp), and declared, "Tactical advance to the rear!"

Then he teleported.

#

Or at least he tried to teleport. Neither the Ether nor the Astral Plane would accept him. He bounced off of the fabric of the multiverse in a purplish haze, and snapped right back to his point of origin.

"WHAT?!?" Gross Sword winced.

Ridiculous Sword grinned. "You don't think we chose this particular clearing by accident, do you? Certain areas of Central Earth, such as this place and the Cracks of Doom, are inherently teleport-proof. You've just walked right into our trap."

Gross Sword grimaced, then pulled out his last ace. "Oh yeah?" he breathed, "Well, there's one other trick I have left." He grinned. "Which you didn't count on." He moved his hands to the sky, and his sisters recognized the gesture.

"OH NO!" the Sword sisters gasped in unison.

Gross Sword snickered evilly, finished his somatic components with a groin thrust, and chanted the mystic words, "ANTI-MAGIC SHELL!"

Ringman stared on in awe as an invisible sphere 49 feet across englobed his son. Even he knew what that spell could do. No magic item would function within its confines -- not a single one. Nor would any of the Sick Kids' permanent spells. However, Ringman did recall his dearly departed Sick Sword once saying something about --

"Artifacts!" he yelled, pointing at Gross Sword. "Your artifacts can still work inside the shell!"

Ridiculous Sword, Disgusting Sword, and yes, even Gross Sword all turned to their father and grudgingly told him, in chorus, "Not any more they can't."

Ridiculous Sword beamed him a telepathic picture of Dragon and Dragrace's latest issue, page 23, paragraph 3. The paragraph read: "I, the Dungeon Master, the most lordly and highest creator of all the multiverse, and the most incredibly omnipotent of any of you jerk-offs out there, hereby declare that anti-magic shells will now stop the effects of artifacts and relics, as well as the effects of non-artifact magic items, like they were supposed to do in the first place. Furthermore, magic potions imbibed before the anti-magic shell touches the imbiber will function normally. IN NO WAY IS THIS STATEMENT TO BE ASSUMED AN ADMISSION OF DUNGEON MASTER ERROR!"

"Oh," Ringman shrugged.

The scene fell silent. Gross Sword had summoned in the ultimate defense. "Ha HA," he chortled chaotic-evilily, "My defensive powers still work, but your offensive powers do not! Your little trick hasn't availed you at all, my dear sisters! And now that I know about this spot and about tempus fugit, you'll never be able to trick me again! BWA ha ha ha haaaa!!"

Jimmy shook his head and looked at Ringman, who was standing less than ten yards away. "I dunno . . . it's that evil laugh that gets me."

That evil laugh . . . that old bwa-ha-ha. That was something Peter Perfect had always wanted to do. If evil laughter wasn't prohibited by that darned code of paladinhood, he'd . . . he'd . . .

Something snapped. Something that only Peter Perfect could hear. It was no louder than a blade of grass dying of thirst, or a bottle of fresh milk evaporating, but it was like thunder compared with the boundless silence that had been numbing Peter Perfect's consciousness. That evil laugh had brought him to the surface, and allowed him to make another saving throw against the charm he was under. And this time, with the help of the magic items the Sick Sisters had given back to him, he made it.

He felt his warhorse's familiar adamantite saddle underneath him; the saddle sores felt welcome indeed. He surveyed his situation. Gross Sword was chortling up a storm inside of an anti-magic shell the way Peter had always wanted to do. Ridiculous Sword and Disgusting Sword were standing there, pondering their next move. Jimmy was holding the Sick Sword in his right hand and concealing his left behind his back, and pretending to be something more than he was. Homer the brownie was hiding behind

Ringman's warhorse. And Ringman, staring in awe at the fray (or lack thereof), was wielding his own dear Prometheus!

He was about to charge over and snatch the holy sword from his rival's hands, but his combat sense stopped him. The Sick Kids would mash him to bits if they knew he was up and around. He couldn't let them know. He put his arms out stiffly in front of him, as they had been when he was charmed, and hoped that Ridiculous Sword and Disgusting Sword were too busy to tune in to his wavelength.

'Prometheus!' his thoughts cried.

Startled, the holy sword twitched in Ringman's hand. Fortunately for Prometheus, Ringman was too preoccupied to notice. 'I hear you,' the longsword transmitted telepathically.

'When I tell you too,' Peter Perfect continued without flinching, 'Leap into my hand. _When I tell you to_.'

'Gotcha,' the sword replied. 'It's nice to hear from you again.'

'Yeah, yeah, whatever.' Neither of the Sick Girls turned their attention to him. Good. He watched, and waited.

Gross Sword raised his voice. "I demand one billion gold pieces, in small coins, and safe passage out of this land!"

"Gold pieces?" Ridiculous Sword asked. "What would you want with money?"

"Oh yeah," Gross Sword corrected himself, "That was just something I heard on one of those old late-night precognitions. But I still demand safe passage out of this land! Or I'll kill each and every living thing within thirty miles, and you won't be able to stop me!"

"Oh, we won't, will we?" Ridiculous Sword's grin grew as wide today as it ever would. "Jimmy, it's time!"

Jimmy almost lost control with excitement. He pulled his long-concealed left hand out from behind his back to reveal: "Secret Weapon XJ-46!" he yelled, glinting the secret weapon in the sunlight. "A BALLISTA OF AUTOMATIC MISSILE FIRE!!!"

Disgusting Sword and Ridiculous Sword whipped out their Ollamh Harps and strummed an incredibly triumphantly dramatic chord. Jimmy continued, "And ballista targets --"

And now everyone joined in, except for Peter Perfect who was still pretending to be charmed, "-- ARE ARMOR CLASS TEN IF EXPOSED TO SIGHT!"

Gross Sword cringed at the oversized crossbow sitting on Jimmy's shoulder, at the chain feeding into it. Each link of that chain held a missile the size of a javelin with the punch of a small house. He wanted to fireball that kid as fast as he could. Or iceball him, or lightningball him, or sonicball him, or whatever he wasn't immune to through the Sick Sword he carried in his other hand. But to launch any such attack on him, Gross Sword would first have to lower his anti-magic shell -- and that would leave Ridiculous Sword's final-word weapons open to reduce him to chowder. There had to be some other way for him to remain invulnerab--

"Ha HAAAH!" Gross Sword suddenly recalled, "My permanent double-strength potion of invulnerability isn't affected by the anti-magic shell! You still need a +2 or better weapon to hit me with, but since every weapon that comes near me gets rendered non-magical, you won't be able to hit me at all!!!"

"Not so!" Jimmy replied in the most majestic tone of voice he had ever used. Ridiculous Sword had planned for just such a come-uppance, and had given him one final contingency. "Your invulnerability requires your opponents to have a weapon of at least +2 OR hit dice of 6+2 or greater!"

Gross Sword shook a finger at him. "No no no no! I've read page 75 of the Book of Infinite Wisdom myself, and the footnote specifically states that 'This does not apply to characters of any sort!'"

Jimmy grinned. "But it does apply to monsters." He flexed his neurons in concentration, and kicked in his permanent potion of polymorph (self). A startling transformation occurred. Two seconds later, he stood before his gross foe as . . . a hill giant.

A hill giant with a ballista of automatic missile fire.

A hill giant with eight hit dice (plus one to two additional hit points).

"A character with lots of hit dice might not be able to hit someone who's invulnerable, even if he's shooting at him with a ballista," Jimmy explained in a hill-giantish voice, "But a monster with lots of hit dice firing a ballista at him can!"

He pulled the trigger, and tore the sky apart. The weapon's catapult-string twanged back and forth, accepting and releasing its javelin-sized loads, with an unearthly speed all its own. Shot after shot filled each deadly second with over a dozen missiles, none of which failed to strike home. Gross Sword cringed under the onslaught as the shafts riddled his body, ignoring his permanent double-strength invulnerability and all common sense.

And he couldn't heal himself. None of his clerical healing spells or magical wish spells or vampiric rings of regeneration would work unless he dropped the protection of his magic-proof sphere -- and lowering his only last-ditch defense would leave him wide open to Ridiculous Sword's weapons' Final Word attacks. Slaughtered or shish-kabobbed; one was hardly different from the other. His psionic cell adjustment ability would only heal a couple hundred hit points of damage before he exhausted his psionic power point reserve. His monk ability of missile deflection was useless against siege missiles like the ones that were puncturing his body at that instant. And he couldn't teleport.

Gross Sword was down to four hundred hit points, and dropping fast. . . .

Three hundred hit points. He still couldn't teleport. . . .

Two hundred hit points. The supply of missiles going into that ballista still seemed endless. . . .

One hundred hit points. Instinctively, he cowered behind his own arms . . . which were also impaled.

Weak flesh. Weak weak weak. All his special training, all those experience points, all those artifacts he'd collected to make him indestructible came to nothing now. He was as naked as when he was first born. As naked as in the womb before his birth. As naked as when Tiamat's seed of evil had first infected him.

Fifty-three hit points. He looked up, looked around for salvation. Jimmy's hill-giantish eyes were merciless. His sisters played their Ollamh lutes with mounting tension. Only Ringman, among the onlookers, seemed deeply concerned. Gross Sword's paladin father bit the knuckle of one of his gauntlets and shook his head with impending sorrow.

Father . . .

Forty-five hit points. . . . Twenty-eight. . . .

Twelve. . . .

"_ST00000000000000000000000000000000P_!!!!!!!"

Jimmy released the trigger on impulse. Everyone froze. The music ceased. Gross Sword's scream left a wake, a gulf of deafening silence.

And the mightiest force of chaos and evil in the multiverse collapsed onto his knees and cried.

"Mphg," he sobbed into his hands. "Ahuc ahuc ahuc. Wh-wh-wh-what -- what've I done?! WHAT HAVE I DONE?!"

Ringman started to stride toward him, feeling urgent.

"No no, Ringman," Jimmy warned him, "He's still dangerous!"

"Nonononononononono!" Homer the brownie called out to the ninth-level by-the-book paladin, shaking his head wildly with each syllable.

Ringman ignored their warnings and sauntered toward his son. He took his gauntlets off within the first ten yards; then his helmet, then his greaves, then the Invulnerable Coat of Arnd. Armorless. Completely defenseless. He knelt down by his only male child.

Gross Sword looked up at him out of his hands, then buried his reddened eyes right back into his hands again. (Of course, that didn't keep him from seeing anything, because he still had on his robe of eyes.) He shook his head and nearly flung off his tears. Then, slowly, he looked back into the eyes of his father once more.

He lowered his right hand. Ringman grasped it.

Gross Sword shook his head more slowly, with a furrowed brow. "Mom," he winced. "Bahamut. All of the people and non-people. They didn't deserve it. They didn't do anything -- anything -- to deserve what I did to them." He inhaled sharply. "WHY DID I POLLUTE ALL THEIR LIVES?! Why . . . why in Hell's name didn't I listen to the last generation of Disgusting Characters when they told me about Tiamat's seed of evil?!"

'Tiamat's evil seed,' Peter Perfect thought. 'That was my doing. Hah, revenge never felt so good as that time.' All the other onlookers were thoroughly distracted. It was not yet time to leap into action, but it wouldn't hurt to get into a better position. He nudged his warhorse ever so subtly with an invisible squeeze from his legs, and the mount trotted, slowly and non-chalantly, toward Gross Sword and Ringman.

Oblivious to Peter -- and still presuming him to be charmed -- Ridiculous Sword and Disgusting Sword also made way toward their brother. He saw them coming and lowered his anti-magic shield. More barriers were the last things he needed right now.

"This," Gross Sword went on, pouring out more than nine years' worth of misery, "This was all wrong. Damn it, I only felt satisfied whenever I did something sadistic! And every victory was as hollow as the ones before it! All those people I hurt or killed, all with lives . . . and loves . . . of their own."

He looked into his father's eyes. They were nearly as red as his own. "Oh, dad!" he sobbed, clutching him, "Why'd I do that to you and mom?!"

Ringman embraced him back. He could barely breathe straight, his feelings so choked him. In all senses of the words, he had finally met his son.

Gross Sword broke the hug and looked into Ringman's eyes again. Ringman nodded, weeping with joy. "Gross Sword, I think I can be really proud of you now."

Gross Sword shook his head, unable to accept it. "Proud of a mass murderer? A tyrant? Proud of Bahamut's and his mother's -- your love's -- killer? Proud of the being . . . who could have set the whole multiverse back five thousand years?"

And Ringman couldn't accept that, either. "I was proud of you," he admitted, "From the time I first heard you were born."

They hugged each other again, and sat that way for a long, long time. Of all the spectators present, Prometheus was the only one who was the slightest bit agitated.

'Now?' the holy sword begged, telepathically.

'No,' Peter Perfect returned, 'Not yet.'

'Then when?!'

'Soon, all right?!' Peter's thoughts barked. 'Geez, you're more impatient than I am!'

'But I wanna kill something!' the sword pouted.

Peter was tempted to bury his eyes in his hand and shake his head, but that would have given him away. He stood firm as always, arms still out stiff, and waited. The moment would come.

Gross Sword loosened his tearful embrace and looked down at his own waist. Four adamantite belt loops jutted out from his Bluejeans of Free Action. These loops housed the hafts and blades of the four grossest chaotic-evil weapons in all the multiverse. The Gross Hand Axe, the Gross Longsword, the Gross Dagger and, most powerful of all, the Gross Broadsword; four weapons devoted solely to spreading limitless evil and chaos through whoever chose to wield them. Their overwhelming power had been his idea, and his alone. Nothing, he had figured, could withstand the might of an anti-ranger and anti-paladin who used those . . . those . . .

"NO!" he blurted, startling everyone there because he still had his mind blank spell up and they couldn't read his mind. He stood up. "I don't care what powers those two classes give me! I don't . . . want . . . to be an anti-paladin or an anti-ranger any more!"

The heavens rebuked -- well, actually it was the Abysses that rebuked, but you get the idea -- and Gross Sword, the only son of Sick Sword and Ringman, gave up the powers of the anti-paladin and the anti-ranger.

Even Ridiculous Sword was impressed. "Wow," she uttered, finding it difficult to pick the right words. "Now . . . now you're only . . . a plain, average, run-of-the-mill psionic druid/monk/assassin/thief/bard/illusionist/cleric/magic-user/ weapons master!"

Gross Sword nodded solemnly, his eyes still wet. "I know. A terrible loss -- but no price is too high now."

"What a guy," Disgusting Sword whispered with utmost sincerity into her sister's ear.

"I _don't_ want to be some unholy force anymore!" Gross Sword continued. "I _don't_ want to be evil! AND I _DON'T_ WANT THESE DAMNED SENTIENT WEAPONS POLLUTING THE MULTIVERSE ANYMORE!!"

He snapped the Gross Longsword and the Gross Dagger out of their loop-scabbards and hurled them to the grassy ground, where they impaled themselves point-first in the earth. Without another thought, he followed up with the Gross Broadsword and the Gross Hand Axe, thwunking the broadsword into the ground just as he had the other two weapons but hurling the axe edge-first into the soil beside them. He flung the Gross Pair of Gloves off of his hands and down next to the blades, then drew the Other Gross Pair of Gloves from their holsters and cast them away. That was twice he'd hurled down the gauntlet in as many instants. He inhaled vehemently. "I'm gonna have you six DESTROYED!"

The six weapons erupted in light and shone directly on their owner. His robe of eyes was blinded, but he wasn't, of course. "YOU CANNOT DESTROY US," the Gross Weapons boomed together as one. "WE ARE ARTIFACTS. YOU YOURSELF CREATED US AS MORE THAN MERE SENTIENT MAGIC WEAPONS. WE CANNOT _BE_ DESTROYED!"

Ridiculous Sword chuckled for a few seconds, then broke into roaring laughter. "HA HA HA HA HA!!" she addressed the Gross Artifacts. "You don't think so, do you?!" She reached into her last portable hole, and rummaged for a tiny object. She'd been awaiting this day ever since her brother created those weapons in the first place. At last, she pulled out the one thing she'd had prepared specifically for this event.

It looked like one of those snap-lidded velvet cases that diamond rings come in. Disgusting Sword clasped her chest and beheld the box in splendid wonder. Ringman and Jimmy scratched their heads and beheld the box in utter confusion. Homer the brownie didn't know _what_ in Sick Sword's name was going on, but he was enjoying this whole show more and more. The front of the box was engraved, in block lettering, with simply, "The Ant Box."

Ridiculous Sword flipped the box open. "All right, you Gross toasties!" she exclaimed. "It's time for you to meet . . . THE HUMBLE ANT!"

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHH!!!" the Gross weapons screamed.

The centimeter-long black ant in the box lethargically lifted its eyes up to Ridiculous Sword, and said, in that language spoken only by ant-kind, "I think you ought to know I'm feeling very depressed."

She picked the ant up on her right index finger. "Never mind that," she replied in Antspeak, "I have a task for you!"

"I won't enjoy it," the ant informed her.

"I'm not _asking_ you to enjoy it," Ridiculous Sword told it. "I just want you to step on those chaotic-evil artifact weapons."

"<GASP>!" the Gross weapons gasped.

"You want me to go step on some artifacts," the ant groaned. "Here I am, brain the size of a pinhead and you want me to go step on some artifacts. Probably be the biggest load on my intellectual capacities today."

"For a humble ant," Jimmy sidetalked to Homer the Brownie, "He sure has one pompous ego."

Ridiculous Sword lowered the ant toward the weapons. Disdaining his task, the ant grudgingly crawled down from her left index finger and trudged toward its quarry. It reached the Other Gross Pair of Gloves first.

"ARRRRRRRRRRGH!" the gloves screamed. "NOOOOO! DON'T SEND ME BACK TO THE VOID!!"

The ant stepped. There was a <CRACK> where its foot came down, and in a flash of blue-white light the gloves crumbled to dust.

The ant looked down at his work and moaned, "I'm not getting you down at all am I?"

And since the Gross Pair of Gloves was nearest to where the Other Gross Pair of Gloves had been, that was the humble ant's next target. He walked toward it in that way that only humble ants can.

"NONONONONONO!" the Gross Pair of Gloves Wailed. "Wh-What have I ever done to you?!"

"I have this terrible pain down all the formic acid ducts on my left-hand side," he said with disdain, and destroyed the second of the Gross Weapons.

'How does that ant manage to destroy BOTH gloves at once by stepping on ONE of them?' Disgusting Sword wondered.

Gross Sword smiled and nodded in revelation-like gratitude as the ant approached the Gross Hand Axe. The axe wasn't quite as receptive: "Uh . . . er . . . ah, that is . . . uh . . ."

"Call this job satisfaction?" the ant asked rhetorically, and stepped on the axe head. The head broke in half and released its essence back into the etheric ocean. "'Cause I don't."

It approached the Gross Longsword. The weapon shivered with fright. "It wasn't enjoyable at all, what with being locked up in that box all the time," the ant told it. "The first ten million years were the worst. And the second million years, they were the worst too. The third ten million years I didn't enjoy at all. After that I went into a bit of a decline."

"B-b-b-b-b-b-b-b-b-b-b-b-but now you're OUT of the box!" the sword argued. "You can get away from all this and live your own life!"

"_LIFE_!!!" the ant bellowed. No one present had any idea that an ant's voice could get that loud. He crunched down solidly on the blade, and broke it forever in twain. "Don't talk to me about life."

Two Gross weapons remained. The Gross Broadsword and the Gross Dagger were all that remained of Gross Sword's old evil. The ant approached the dagger, and the blade bargained for its life: "Hey, ant! Maybe we can make a deal! Just claim me for your own and I can give you . . . well, power beyond your wildest imaginings!"

"Sounds awful," the ant replied, and snapped the life out of this blade to boot.

'Whoo,' Peter Perfect thought. 'Some ant. Glad Prometheus isn't an artifact weapon.'

And now, it came down to the Gross Broadsword. Gross Sword's number one weapon throughout his entire Disgusting career. The ant treaded his way toward its quarry as before, but the Gross Sword didn't flinch. It didn't cry out on fear, it didn't beg for its life -- it just sat there.

In an act of greatest contempt, the ant said nothing either and just stepped on the blade.

And nothing happened.

It stepped again. Again, nothing. It stepped harder. Still nothing. The ant looked solemnly up at Ridiculous Sword and complained, "Hmmp. You seem to have miscalculated."

"Ha HAAAAAH!!" the broadsword cheered. "I knew it! I knew it! I was Gross Sword's favorite, you see! I was much too valuable to have the foot of a humble ant be the means of my destruction!"

Ridiculous Sword smirked. "You're right. Being stepped on by an ant isn't the way you were designed to be destroyed. You, Gross Broadsword, can only be destroyed -" She cast a gate spell. "-- by HIM!!"

Through the purple glow of the gate stepped the most monstrous humanoid being any of them had ever seen. It towered 48 feet in the air and had skin of solid iron. The very air shook in his vicinity. The being of iron stared down balefully at the bunch gathered before him and bellowed, "WHO SUMMONS ME?!"

Ridiculous Sword stepped forward and non-chalantly pointed at the Gross Sword that was still on the ground. "Step on that artifact," she instructed him.

The being's eyes grew wide with anger. "YOU, A CHILD?! You DARE SUMMON TALOS FOR SUCH A MIDDLING . . . er, such a middling, uh . . . er . . ." He recognized her. "Er . . . uh . . . duh, um . . . ooh . . . eeh . . . ah, ah, OH, PLEASE DON'T KILL ME, RIDICULOUS SWORD_!! I have a wife and seventy-two hundred children! I'm only three thousand years old, I'M TOO YOUNG TO DIiiiiiiiE!!!"

Ridiculous Sword shrugged her shoulders. "Then step on that artifact."

Talos nodded meekly. The Gross Broadsword knew what was coming next, and it wasn't going to take it lying down. Using its telekinetic ability, along with its flight power and some of its unused minutes of being a dancing weapon, the broadsword leapt up and out of stomping range of the Triple Iron Golem. "OH no ya don't!" the sword barked. "You're not getting rid of me this easily!"

Without a word, Ridiculous Sword rushed up to the Gross Broadsword and plucked it from the air. The sword vibrated in her hand as it tried to escape. "Let . . . go . . . of . . . me." The sword was trying to dominate her ego. A futile attempt, but it tried anyway. She forced it down onto the ground. "Step, Talos," she said with infinite calm.

The iron giant put its foot down on the sword. That is, it tried to put its foot down on the sword, but the sword jerked itself out of the way it the last instant. Even in Ridiculous Sword's Atlas-strength grasp it wasn't totally immobile. Talos stepped again, but again the sword evaded the giant iron foot.

Everyone's attention was on Talos and the Gross Broadsword. The time was perfect. Peter Perfect vaulted off his warhorse's adamantite saddle, tumbled across the ground to an upright position, and in all the confusion made it to Gross Sword's side before even his robe-of-eyes-assisted vision could warn him. He had his hand around the artifact bracelet on his left wrist and had yanked it off before Gross Sword even reacted.

"Now, Prometheus!" he shouted. Ringman looked down at his hilt just as Prometheus pulled itself free. The sword landed grip-first in Peter Perfect's right hand. "HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!" Peter guffawed. "Now I have the power!!" And with that, he

engaged the helm of teleportation which Disgusting Sword and Ridiculous Sword had seen no harm in leaving on his head, glowed purple for a moment, and vanished.

The Gross Broadsword was so stunned, in fact, it didn't even see Talos's foot coming down, and it died in a fit of breakage.

"M-may I go now?" the Triple Iron Golem asked.

"Yeah, sure, sure," Ridiculous Sword waved him away, not even bothering to look straight at him. Talos went back through the gate and both disappeared.

"Peter Perfect wasn't even charmed!" Disgusting Sword said with disgust. "He fooled us!"

"Yeah . . ." Gross Sword noticed. "And how the HELL did he manage to do what he just did in a Teleport-Free Zone?"

"Hell," Ridiculous Sword cast a thumb over her shoulder, "That gate I made shouldn't even have worked. Teleportation of ANY kind is supposed to be prohibited in this region." She cast her eyes skyward. "_But I guess the DUNGEON MASTER forgot about that little detail_!!!"

The skies rumbled once more, and a searing blue bolt of pure damage hurled down from the heavens and struck Ridiculous Sword squarely. None of her magic items of protection could defend her from that murderous bolt, as it was thrown directly from the Dungeon Master's hand. Ridiculous Sword's body lay there in a fried heap.

"Ridiculous Sword!" Ringman screamed, and knelt down beside her. "OH, MY DEITY!"

And then, ten seconds after her death occurred, Ridiculous Sword stirred and shook herself back to consciousness. "Mmmm, hi dad," she said.

Ringman scratched his head in utter confusion. "But . . . but how did --"

"Easy," his younger daughter told him, propping herself up on her elbows, "I was dead, right? Sent to Heaven, right? Well, all I had to do was cast a raise dead spell on myself and POOF, here I am!"

"This is one Hell of a crazy multiverse," Ringman mumbled. "Hey," he noted, "I thought raise dead was a minute spell."

"It is," Ridiculous Sword came back, regaining more and more of her composure with each second. "Tempus fugit's still up. And we can still catch Peter Perfect."

"But how?" Jimmy asked, joining them. "Where did he go?"

"Yeah," Gross Sword commented. "I tried to pick him up on clairvoyance just now, but all I got was snow. He's still mindblanked."

"All right, then," Ridiculous Sword figured. "If you were a megalomaniacal paladin, what would you most want to do?"

"Take over the world," Jimmy said.

Ridiculous Sword winked at him. "Right. And if you couldn't take over the world, then what?"

Ringman rubbed his chin, then said, "You'd want to destroy it."

"Uh huh. And that's most likely what he's set out to do."

"Destroy the world?" Disgusting Sword puzzled. "Before we can find out about it?"

"Right."

Disgusting Sword had a revelation. "Ohhhhhhhh."

"All right," Ridiculous Sword drew a breath, "Hang on to my coat tails, Jimmy. You, Homer, ride with Disgusting Sword, and Gross Sword, you take dad, okay?"

Ringman did not catch this at all. "Wait, wait a minute. Where are we going?"

By the time he said "we," Gross Sword already had him on his back and Homer and Jimmy had already mounted up. Ridiculous Sword leapt into the air and told him, "To the basement of the world!"

The clearing whooshed by beneath them. Soon, they were passing over forests and towns, and then lakes and finally a wide ocean. Ringman was still confused. "And where is this 'basement of the world'?"

"Where else?" Ridiculous Sword chuckled. "On the bottom side of Central Earth.

Ringman mouthed the words "bottom side," then asked, "You mean it's flat?"

"Sure! What did you think it was anyway, round? Hah, we'd all fall off then!"

"Well, that makes sense," Homer the brownie concurred.

The ocean passed serenely beneath them. Soon, the blue of the sky faded to a black, velvet backdrop against which the stars shone more brightly than they ever did at night. They were reaching The Edge. Ringman pointed helplessly as the boundary of Central Earth -- circular, but so vast that up close it looked straight -- rushed by beneath them, and they were in free space.

"Whoa," Ringman moaned, feeling uneasily giddy. "Whoa, this feels weird!"

"We're weightless now," Disgusting Sword informed him. "That's what happens whenever you leave the plate."

Ringman nodded. "I'll remember that next time I happen to come here."

Ridiculous Sword dipped down -- not that down had any real meaning anymore -- and swung past The Edge. Ringman looked forward and saw the stars in their sphere of perfectly hard ether swoop past; over his shoulder, the dirt and rock of The Edge obscured more and more of the blue-capped top of that beautiful world. And at last, The Bottom reached his view.

The Bottom was nothing like the blue-lit majesty of The Top. It was in deep night now, and would be until the sun set and passed its light from the world above to the world below. Yet even by the dim light of the stars alone, Ringman could make out the contours. It was rough and craggy, dripping with stalactites of rock and dirt. There was no living sound, not even the breath of life; only a hollow echo of their swift passage through this Other World. The hanging peaks passed above him, and he realized that they were, indeed, above him. Back under the plate, gravity had returned.

Homer, of course, merely hung on for dear life through all of this.

Their course hugged the mountainbottoms and aimed straight for the other side of the world. In this space without blue air, the other side could clearly be seen, even

though its true size was impossible to grasp. But it was not the opposite side of the plate that was their goal; it was the center. Ringman peered with as keen an un-disgusting eye as he could manage, and saw it. He was the first non-disgusting character in the history of Central Earth to see it. A tiny, tiny thread stretched down from the center of the world and lost itself in the unfathomable depths below. The North Pole of Central Earth. That was the axis along which the plate rested, the reference point that indicated which direction "down" was.

"That thread," Ridiculous Sword told him, "is called the Thread of Gravity. It's what generates our weight on Central Earth. Without that, everything would float off into free space."

Jimmy scratched his head. He had only been disgusting for a few weeks, and hadn't learned everything yet. "So then . . . that means that the plate itself should weigh something also."

Ridiculous Sword nodded. "That's right. It does."

"So then," Ringman interjected, "what's holding it up?"

"Atlas," the Sick Kids said in chorus.

Finally, it all started to dawn to Ringman. Atlas had the job of holding up Central Earth. If Peter Perfect wanted to destroy the whole world, his best bet would be to get rid of the pillar that was holding it up. That would be Atlas. That was why he took the Other Bracer of Irresistible Damage from Gross Sword to begin with.

The Center of Central Earth came closer and closer into view. Ringman could make out a tiny silhouette on the end of the thread pushed right up against the plate. It was a humanoid silhouette -- no, two humanoid silhouettes. At last, Ridiculous Sword cast a continual light spell on the nearest stalactite and illuminated the situation in both senses of the words.

Atlas, who was no larger than your average Greek athlete, was still holding up Central Earth -- but just barely. Terrible wounds more than justified the exhaustion in his eyes and face. His feet could barely keep their grip on the thread. Next to the teetering titan stood a grinning Peter Perfect, waving Prometheus to exult the blood that now stained it. He had wanted them to catch up with him, to see his moment of triumph. Ridiculous Sword levitated herself up to the bottom of Central Earth and used the inverted surface to run toward him at her full running speed.

Peter Perfect put up a restraining hand and stepped to Atlas's side. Ridiculous Sword stopped herself. Prometheus went down so that it just covered the world-holder's throat, and the Other Bracer of Irresistible Damage around Peter's wrist pulsed in blue-white readiness. "One more step, Sick Kids," the disgusting paladin announced, "And Atlas here gets it!"

'Hoo boy,' Ringman thought. Jimmy's thoughts ran along the same lines. Homer was too frightened to think.

Gross Sword looked him levelly in the eye. He never did like this poor excuse for a paladin, but now his dislike for him was for different reasons. "You don't really want to do this," Gross Sword said to him.

Peter Perfect did a take. "What do you mean I don't want to do this?! Of course I want to do this!!"

"You want to destroy everything on Central Earth just because you can't have it all?" Gross Sword put to him.

"Darned right!" Peter exclaimed. "Stupid old world. What did it ever do for me, anyways? And besides, you people seem so attached to this miserable little planet, full of so much vile filth and sin and nasty other things that we paladins are out to destroy, that if you don't agree to give me total control over all beings on this planet, I'll snuff out Atlas right here and now!"

"And what would you do with total control?" Gross Sword pressed on.

"What would I do with it? Why, rule over it, of course!"

"You mean play with it as you pleased."

"Exactly!"

"Like a toy, whose only purpose was to amuse you."

"Yeah!"

"And you call yourself a lawful-good paladin?" Gross Sword and Ringman asked at the same time.

Peter Perfect's eyes darted worriedly to either side. He still felt like he had his paladin powers. Sort of. Didn't he? He shook his head, and with utter contempt, slashed the last slash across Atlas's neck. After the Other Bracer of Irresistible Damage, his Titan Strength, the Axe of the Dwarvish Lords' +2 weapon damage bonus, the cause-serious-wounds-by-touch power of the Talisman of Al'Akbar, and Prometheus's own +6 magical bonus, he ended up doing 242 damage points, killing the Titan-Who-Holds-Up-the-World instantly and inflicting temporary paralysis on him to boot.

And amid gaping horrors, Central Earth fell.

No earthquake could match what happened on the plate's Upper Surface. No words can describe the sudden and inexplicable loss of weight that everything thereon experienced. On a world that had grown up with and evolved everything it had into the concept of gravity -- for over four billion years -- freefall was simply not within the realm of understanding. Nor would it be for long, as it was gravity's task also to hold the blue air to the surface of the world.

And as it fell, it landed on something. Something that was already in freefall. Peter Perfect. The blow was nothing more than the force of, say, walking across a room and not stopping before you ran into the wall. Not enough to hurt anyone. Not normally.

But the Book of Infinite Wisdom, or perhaps it was a necessary reality-building article in Dragon & Dragrace, made a stipulation about that. It said that whenever a solid object lands on somebody else, that object does a certain number of d6 worth of damage for every hundred pounds it weighs. Central Earth weighed six billion trillion tons. And since there was at least a little mithral that hadn't yet been mined out of its crust, it was considered a +4 or better weapon with regard to what kinds of creatures it could affect. Peter Perfect's permanent potion of invulnerability thus rendered useless, he and even his adamantite full plate armor were squished into an unrecognizable bloody wet-spot a mile across.

"Gee," Jimmy commented, "He didn't even say goodbye."

"Yeah," Ringman noted, now in freefall himself, "But that didn't keep Central Earth from falling!"

"Somebody's got to catch it," Disgusting Sword commented.

"Who'd be strong enough?" Ringman asked.

"Somebody as strong as Atlas," Ridiculous Sword replied, non-chalantly. "Don't forget who you're in the company of."

Ridiculous Sword flexed her 25*-strength muscles and prepared to halt the falling slab . . . but Gross Sword slid in ahead of her. He braced his Atlas-strength legs against the thread that was the North Pole, held up his Atlas-strength hands, and with a calming breath and about three inches off leeway, he brought the world to a stop.

Having weight return to the people up top so abruptly was almost as big a shock as having it leave in the first place. Massive property damage ensued, and most everyone was severely shaken up -- but fortunately, no one was hurt.

Ridiculous Sword caught her falling father with ease, not taking her eyes from her brother. Gross Sword stood there, holding up the world between his shoulders, and heaved a mighty sigh of relief. Central Earth and all its inhabitants were safe -- safe from losing their atmosphere to free space, and safe from the Old Gross Sword's petty wrath.

"Now," said Ridiculous Sword, "How are we going to brace it?"

"Uh, brace it?" Gross Sword asked.

"Sure. You can't just keep holding it up forever. We've gotta brace it with something."

Gross Sword thought for an instant, then shook his head in dismay. "It would take a column of adamantite bigger than all the adamantite in existence to support this much weight. The only force strong enough to hold up Central Earth, and keep it held up, is somebody with twenty-five star strength. Like me."

Ringman's brow furrowed. "But . . . but you can't just stay here forever!"

"Sure I can," Gross Sword surmised. "Every twelve years or so I can set Central Earth down on my shoulder blades and buy a potion of longevity from the Black Magic Market for Black Market Magic. Uh, make that several potions of longevity, so that if the first one backfires I can cancel it real quick. And then I can pick Central Earth up again and go back to work."

Ringman shook his head. "And what kind of a life is THAT?!"

Gross Sword sighed. "A sacrificial one. Hell, I got us into this scrape in the first place. If I hadn't been suckered over to the evil side of things, we could have all gone out together and ridded ourselves of Peter Perfect once and for all. have to repay this world for the damage I've done. This is the only way I know how."

"No," Ridiculous Sword replied. "There's another way. We can train huge numbers of people to have 25-star strength, and have them take turns holding up the plate. For which they'll get paid five silver pieces an hour, or some such."

Gross Sword brightened up for a fleeting instant, then sank back. "No, it's better this way. I don't deserve --"

Ridiculous Sword cut him off. "Damn it, Gross Sword, YOU'RE WORTH MORE THAN THIS!!"

Gross Sword blinked his eyes, realizing something but saying nothing.

Ridiculous Sword wrinkled her mouth shut and nodded. "Let's go. Gross Sword, we're going to get you out of this predicament even if you won't."

She took Ringman's hand and gestured to Disgusting Sword, Jimmy, and Homer. Prometheus slid itself into Ringman's sheath, grudgingly coming back to its first master for the third time. The war was over. It was time for the healing to begin.

EPILOG

Fordinchuarlikomfterrablaxxuuuuuchh'chh'chh-pt did not fit Ringman's concept of an ideal vacation spot. Ridiculous Sword took him to that plane with nothing, since no material possessions other than those created there could make the voyage. Ringman and his younger daughter materialized stark-naked in the middle of a fuzzy, cold green place. It took nearly a minute for the paladin's vision to clear, for the green to resolve itself into grass, and for him to cringe as a not-so-naked woman rushed out to greet them. He instinctively crossed his hands over his groin.

Ringman expected this woman to shout insults at them for mucking about on her lawn with all this interplanar travel nonsense, but instead she smiled and waved to them. She pulled the front of her skirt away from her legs and bounded toward them, unable to conceal her more-than-well-fed bulk. "Fire Eater!" she cried out, "Fire Eater! You've come back! Y--"

She stopped about twenty feet away, finally able to make out their features. "Oh, excuse me," she apologized, one hand on her heaving chest. "I thought . . . say, are you two any relation to the Fire Eater?"

Ridiculous Sword extended a psionic probe and gleaned a picture of the "Fire Eater" from the woman's mind. The memory was more than eleven years old, but it was clearly of Sick Sword. Ridiculous Sword nodded her head solemnly. "The Fire Eater's dead."

"Oh." The woman felt concerned for a few instants, then it passed. Especially when she took a good look at Ringman. Her lips slowly broke into a smile. "Hey, what's your name?"

"Ringman," he replied, now shivering from the morning cold. He felt somewhat imposed upon, as well, until he looked into her bright little eyes. "What's yours?"

She put her hands on his shoulders. "My name's Izabella." She looked down a little lower. "Mmm, you have quite a physique." She looked still lower. "Yes, quite. . . ."

"Thanks," Ringman replied, his teeth now chattering. Whoever invented the morning chill should be skewered. "B-b-but c-c-could you g-get me some c-c-clothes to wear?"

Izabella puzzled momentarily, then leapt back to reality. "Oh, oh sure. Sorry. Follow me."

She led them both into her farm house, gave them each one of her old tattered terrycloth robes, and sat them down around a small circular kitchen table. She also poured them each a hot drink. As far as Ringman was concerned, hot dirty water never tasted so good as now.

"We're here," Ridiculous Sword broke in, "Because my mother -- the Fire Eater -- promised to come back here one day to check up on things. She never got around to it. So I decided to bring my father here and myself."

Izabella's bright little eyes narrowed to scrutiny as she came closer to Ringman. "You were the Fire Eater's wife?"

"Well," Ringman shrugged, "For all intents and purposes, yes."

She stared at him out of the corner of her eye. "You mean you two weren't legally married?"

"No, as a matter of fact, the Other Book of Infinite Wisdom hadn't come out by then. And that was the first place which listed a marriage spell."

Izabella shrugged. "Oh, all right then," she complied, and sat down next to him. A little too close next to him, by most counts, but Ringman smiled and put his right arm around her anyway.

"So," Ridiculous Sword continued, "How well have things been working out here in North . . . uh, North . . ."

"North Fliedershire," Izabella filled in the name of the town. "By the way, Ringman, how old are you?"

"Thirty-two years young," he replied with a chuckle. "And Ridiculous Sword here is ten, and my other daughter and my son are eleven and nine, respectively."

"Her name's Ridiculous Sword?"

He shrugged. "Sick Sword picked it out."

"Ah. And, um, why didn't you bring your whole family here, Ringman?"

"Well," Ridiculous Sword told her, "Gross Sword -- that's my brother -- is out holding up the entire planet of Central Earth; and Disgusting Sword has already recruited over two thousand Atlas-strength people to take turns taking Gross Sword's place and is looking for more."

Holding up the planet ? Izabella mouthed in astonishment.

"Oh, and Dad didn't bring me here," Ridiculous Sword finished; "I brought him."

"Mmm hmm," Izabella nodded slowly. "So I see that the Fire Eater's power runs in the family."

"And more," Ridiculous Sword stated matter-of-factly.

Izabella raised her eyebrows, then realized she hadn't been paying attention to Ringman for nearly thirty seconds and put her left arm around his shoulders. "And, uh, what happened that your brother has to hold up the planet?"

Ridiculous Sword sighed. "Some jerk who called himself 'Peter Perfect' killed Atlas, so somebody had to stay and keep the world from falling."

"Yeah," Ringman agreed. "Good thing the fall killed him , too, or you kids might have had to get your hands dirty. His body got so splattered there's no way anybody could resurrect him now; so he'll stay in Heaven, completely out of harm's way until some dummy decides to reincarnate him."

"He killed Atlas and he still got to go to Heaven?"

"You betcha," Ringman said; "He was lawful-good. Hmmm . . . I wonder how he's making out in Heaven right now. . . ."

Ridiculous Sword whacked herself on her 19-intelligence forehead. "Thanks for reminding me." She cupped her hands in front of Ringman and projected some blue-

white mental energy there. "Peter Perfect sent me a telepagram from Heaven just this morning. Here, take a look."

Ringman and Izabella drew closer as an image formed out of the blue void. A blond-haired man wearing a gold ring over his head and a winged white choir robe resolved himself against a backdrop of clouds and others dressed like him. He was holding his ears vehemently and screaming: "I CAN'T STAND THIS ANYMORE!! All I ever meet are a bunch of peace-minded angels strumming their stupid harps! BLEACCH! Not even a lousy stinking little piece of EVIL to stomp on! THIS IS NO FUN AT ALL!!!"

Ringman snorted a chuckle. "Looks like he's gone to hell after all."

Ridiculous Sword folded her hands and the image vanished. "Getting back to why I came here in the first place: how has North Fliedershire been holding out since the Fire Eater was last here?"

"Oh, wonderfully," Izabella said with a lilt. "That nasty old Smaugzilla made an excellent set of luggage. And it was nice not having a dragon burn down all your crops all the time, too. Funny thing, though -- I always thought dragons had huge treasure hordes inside their caves. When the townsfolk excavated this one, all they found was an egg five feet across."

"An egg?" Ridiculous Sword sat up. "A dragon's egg?"

"Well, we think so. If it is we'll give the dragon baby everything we've got to make it turn out good instead of evil like its mother."

"Make a red dragon turn out good?" Ridiculous Sword's voice got more urgent. "And this egg's been there for over eleven years. My God II, its incubation period's almost up! We have to get there, and I mean now!"

Izabella shook her head nervously. "Um, there are some horses in the garage, if --"

"No, I mean right now!" She reached across the table and grasped Ringman's and Izabella's free hands. "Have you been to this place where the egg is?"

"Oh, countless times," Izabella told her.

"Good. I want you to close your eyes, and visualize this place in your mind."

She closed her eyes. Ridiculous Sword picked up on her thoughts; they were a bit foggy.

"Really see this place in your head," Ridiculous Sword pushed her onward. "Visualize every detail you ever saw when you were last there. Every shade, every sound, every scent -- even the air temperature, if you can remember it."

Izabella did. The image of the cave's mouth and the wooden fence came in as sharply as the stars in space.

"Good. Now --" Boink. "-- is this it?"

Izabella opened her eyes and gasped. She was actually there! It was a lot cooler than the time she'd just visualized, since the last time she'd been there was in early afternoon, but this was the place!

"Teleportation," Ridiculous Sword told her. "I do it all the time. And that," she crossed the two-foot-high wooden picket and stared at the red, speckled bulb in its center, "Must be Smaugzilla's egg."

"Uh huh," Izabella nodded.

Ringman furrowed his brow. Despite being an obscure ninth-level by-the-book paladin, he did have certain powers of his own which he could exercise. "That's funny," he commented after a few seconds, "It's supposed to be a red dragon egg, but I don't detect any evil coming from it."

"Me neither," Ridiculous Sword concurred. "This is damned strange." She looked a bit more intently at the egg. "My God II!" she exclaimed. "Look at this X-ray picture!"

"How?" Ringman and Izabella asked simultaneously.

"Oh, sorry," Ridiculous Sword caught herself. "That isn't a baby red dragon in there at all!"

"No?" Ringman asked.

"No! The neck's the wrong length, the head resembles a horse more than it does a lizard, and the skin has a metallic sheen -- and there's not the slightest sign of deformity! It's just a plain, straight different species of draco!"

Izabella's eyes grew suddenly distant. "The legend!"

"Huh?" Ringman asked. "What legend?"

"Not another one of these again," Ridiculous Sword muttered.

"The legend of the Fire Eater's leftovers!" Izabella exclaimed.

"Ah, well that clarifies EVERYthing," Ringman muttered. Life in the multiverse could get so confusing. At times like these he wished it was all just castles and damsels and dragons and things once again -- those he could understand.

"'After the Fire Eater's triumph,'" Izabella recited, "'Eleven cycles of Hyperion's bronze chariot will go, and then the fruits of the dragon's demise will ripen and a force that had been lost will be replaced in the universe.' The legend must have been talking about this baby dragon!"

"Or it could have been talking about baked potatoes," Ridiculous Sword sneered. "That's the thing about these legends, they're all so vague. But I tell you what, there's only one way we're going to find out. Stand back."

Izabella stepped back a few feet. Ringman grabbed her and pulled her behind a rock. "When she says stand back," he told her, "She means it."

"Normally a baby dragon can hatch from its egg within six months," Ridiculous Sword explained, "IF it has the warm body of its mother to incubate it. If not, the embryo won't die, but it'll mature about as slowly as glass runs downhill. It can take upwards of eleven years. This dragonette here is on the verge of hatching; it just needs a little warmth to encourage it to come out of its shell."

"Uh, how much warmth?" Izabella asked. Ringman suppressed a snicker.

"Oh, about the equivalent of --" Ridiculous Sword cast a fireball spell and centered it right on the egg. The wooden fence turned to ash, the rocks inside of it glowed a cherry red, and Ridiculous Sword's terrycloth robe disintegrated. Her hair was a little mussed up, too; after all, a double-strength permanent potion of fire resistance could only do so much. "-- Red dragon breath."

Ringman and Izabella came out from behind the rock in time to see the egg crack. The first shell fragment fell away, and a polished (but damp) foot-long dragon head poked out of the hole and glanced around. Not seeing its mommy, it shut its eyes and wailed a few bucketfulls of tears.

Ridiculous Sword grabbed the head and stroked it. That calmed it down a bit, and gave it enough incentive to bust the rest of the way out of its shell. The sun chose just that moment to peer over the horizon, and glinted off its dew-specked dragon skin with an silvery-golden light.

"My deity!" Ringman whispered. "A silver dragon!"

Ridiculous Sword looked back up at him and shook her head. "No. A platinum dragon."

"Platinum?" Ringman mouthed.

"The first one to be born in over two thousand years. The first one to be born . . . since Bahamut."

"A new lord of the dragons . . ." Ringman mused.

"He'll have a lot to learn before he can become that -- but he has 401 years before he's an ancient dragon and ready for that position, anyway."

"Um, you're sure it's a he?" Ringman asked suspiciously.

"Sure," his daughter assured him. "All platinum dragons ever born are male. And besides, I checked."

This puzzled the paladin still further. "But if all platinum dragons are male, that means that they can't reproduce."

"That's 'cause they're a hybrid. You see, when a gold and a silver dragon mate, they produce an electrum dragon. If this electrum dragon then goes on and mates with a speaking, spell-using dragon of another species -- any species, good or evil -- they either produce no offspring, which is usually the case, or they produce one of these." She indicated the platinum dragon chick in her arms. "That's how Bahamut was born in the first place."

"So, then," Izabella put the pieces together, "Smaugzilla had to have mated with one of those electric dragons?"

"Electrum dragons; and yes. These affairs are rare occurrences indeed, because electrum dragons never live past the age of sub-adulthood. But this one's here, and we're going to keep it that way until he's able to take care of himself."

Ringman whistled. "Four hundred and one years. Heck, it'll take him fifty years just to grow into a full adult. That's a lot of time to devote to one creature."

"Mm hmm. Matter of fact, he'd probably be best off if he were taken care of by someone from North Fliedershire. Like you, for instance, Izabella."

Izabella gulped. "M-me? But I couldn't even raise cows right! I don't know anything about raising dragons!"

"They can pretty much take care of themselves. Just feed him scrambled eggs and teach him how to speak -- and he'll be able to tell you everything he needs by the time he's six months old. Send him off to magic college when he's 1, and he'll be casting first-level spells before you know it."

Izabella shrugged. "Sounds simple enough, but --" she smiled at Ringman "-- I could sure use a nice strong man to stay and help me raise this dragon."

Ringman pursed his lips. "Or you and the platinum dragon could come back to Central Earth with me. I have a great little keep set up in town. . . ."

She stroked a finger along the hairy, exposed portion of his chest. "Well, we'll see."

"A new Bahamut," Ridiculous Sword nodded and smiled. The dragon cuddled up against her chest and purred. "A beautiful new Bahamut. I wonder what we should name him."

"Bahamut the second?" Izabella offered.

"Bahamut junior," Ringman chuckled.

Ridiculous Sword rubbed her chin. "How about Sick Dragon?"

"NO!" Izabella and Ringman shouted as one.

"You tell 'em!" a distant voice from behind intruded.

"Huh?" Ridiculous Sword turned around first, unaccustomed to being without the 360-degree aid of her robe of eyes. A naked boy was running toward them. He was easy to recognize.

"Hi, Rid!" Jimmy said as he arrived two seconds later. He would have been out of breath except that he had an 18 constitution. "Hi, Mr. Ringman!"

"Jimmy, what are you doing here?" Ridiculous Sword asked with one fist on her hip.

"Oh, just trying out some psionic plane travelling. I shoulda guessed from the piles of junk that fell to the floor when you two left that this plane doesn't allow any carry-on luggage, but oh well. Hey, who's the fat broad?"

"Izabella," Ringman stared him levelly in the eye, "My new girl-friend."

Jimmy stopped himself. "Oh. . . . And who's the dragon?"

"Bahamut the second," "Bahamut junior," and "Sick Dragon" all came out at once.

Jimmy thought for a second. "How about just calling him 'Bahamut,' like the old one?"

"Well . . . why not?" Ridiculous Sword acquiesced.

"Sure."

"Sounds good to me."

"Good," Jimmy sealed their agreement. "But anyway, R.S., there was somethin' that's been buggin' me."

"Yes? . . ."

"When I turned into that hill giant and attacked GrossSword with the ballista of automatic missile fire?"

"Mm hmm . . ."

"That shouldn't've worked. Just because a hill giant has 6+2 or more hit dice doesn't mean I got to have 6+2 or more hit dice. I was only fifth-level at the time. I shouldn't have been able to affect him."

"I was wondering when you were going to figure that out," Ridiculous Sword told him. "I won't tell the Dungeon Master if you won't."

Jimmy mopped his brow in relief. "Agreed. Oh, and one more thing . . . about how I helped with stopping Gross Sword and Peter Perfect and --"

Ridiculous Sword held up a restraining hand. "Wait . . . don't tell me --"

Jimmy nodded, and he, Ridiculous Sword, and Ringman all joined in chanting the immortal words:

"HOW MANY EXPERIENCE POINTS DO WE GET?"

--

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"Estas malpermesita entrudi sin en la evoluon de pli naivaj kulturoj." -- La Unua Direktivo, pli aw malpli