

Questing For ADVENTURE!



By Jean Marie Romana

Questing For Adventure!

Hello, young adventurer! My name is Darren. Darren the Dark Elf. I once took part in an adventure so incredibly epic it reaches past the scope of human imagination and understanding! But I will try to put it into words you can understand.

It all started this one night when I was sleeping in a tree. Down at the base of the tree slept my traveling companion, Gary the Dwarf. His arms were curled around Smitey, his trusty Battle-Hammer. Paprika the fairy was curled up in his beard.

It was just me in the tree. Me and the snake.

“Where did that snake come from?” I thought frantically. It slithered closer.

And closer!

Then I gave it a swift kick with my black leather boot. Whump! It landed below.

Gary let out a shriek.

“Ahhh!” He yelled. “Ohmygod, ohmygod, it’s a snake!”

“Here I come, Gary!” I hollered, and jumped swiftly and nimbly to the ground like some kind of elven ninja. Which I was. Only around here they call us “Rogues.”

I landed softly and pulled out my daggers with a flourish. I waved them around in front of me a few times to show the snake who was boss. The snake growled in return and bared its teeth.

“Take THAT vile snake!” I yelled, and slashed a zig-zag pattern into the snake’s skin.

“Hiss!” yelled the snake, and lunged straight for my throat!

“Oh no!” yelled Gary.

Just then Paprika woke up. Quickly, she pointed her fairy wand at the snake. “I cast fireball!” she shouted, and cast a fireball at the snake!

Poof! Went the snake, and became nothing more than a line of ash.

“Phew! That sure was a close one!” said Gary.

“You got that right, Gary!” I agreed. “What a close call! I bet this is just a taste of what awaits us in our travels!”

“How do you know that?” asked Gary.

“Being a Dark Elf means more than just looking awesome and wearing cool black leather armor,” I explained. “It also means being sensitive to things. Like when the forest is crying out in pain!”

“And is it crying out in pain?” Gary asked in wonder.

I listened for a moment. “Yes,” I nodded.

“Goodness gracious!” said Gary.

The next day we set out for the heart of the forest to see what was making it cry out in pain so much. When we got there, the sight before us was so shocking that if I had been a regular elf and not a Dark Elf, I would have wept.

“Oh no!” cried Gary. “What happened?”

Where the heart of the forest was supposed to be, there was a large clearing with a big stump in the middle.

“I’m searching for clues,” Paprika said, and started searching for clues.

“Here’s a clue!” she called over to us. “There’s a stump where the big tree used to be!”

“You’re right!” I exclaimed. “What happened to the big tree that used to be here?”

“It was cut down,” said a voice from the shadows. A mysterious robed figure with a beard and hood that obscured his face, stepped out of the darkness.

“I am Gorgoblax the Elden,” the mysterious figure said. “And I bid you tidings.”

“And what sort of tidings would those be?” I asked.

“Dark tidings,” Gorgoblax hinted darkly.

Everyone gasped, except Gorgoblax.

“The forest is in pain,” said Gorgoblax.

“I suspected as much,” I confessed.

Gorgoblax continued. “You must find out what is causing this pain.”

“We were already doing that,” I explained. I had a sneaking suspicion it might have something to do with the tree being cut down.

“You must find out who cut down the tree, and for what purpose,” stated Gorgoblax firmly.

“Will you help us?” pleaded Gary.

Gorgoblax shook his hooded head no. “I cannot. You must use the skills you already possess.” Then he lifted his arms into the air, and his voice boomed: “You must venture forth to the Caverns of Treachery and find the source of this evil! That is your QUEST!”

Then, with a puff of smoke and a shrill whistling noise, the man was gone!

“He’s gone!” shouted Paprika.

“He sure is,” I agreed.

“Well, I guess it’s time to get to the Caverns of Treachery then!” said Gary. “Last one there’s a rotten egg!”

We arrived at the Caverns of Treachery, but Paprika couldn't fly fast enough to keep up so she was the rotten egg. "That means you carry the treasure," I said.

"Well darn," shrugged Paprika.

"I'll scout out ahead of you guys, using my stealth ability," I said, and turned kind of invisible.

I tiptoed up to the entrance. The cavern mouth was shaped like a monster mouth with pointy rocks instead of teeth. It was really spooky.

"Yikes!" I thought.

I poked my head around the side and peered into the cave mouth.

"It looks good from here!" I shouted to the others. They both gave me thumbs-up.

Then I checked for traps. Picking up an acorn, I tossed it inside. A squirrel ran out from somewhere and snatched it up, then ran over to a rock and started eating it.

One thing about adventuring is: you can't be too careful. I checked the squirrel for traps too.

I turned visible again. "It's all clear," I said. "Paprika, you go ahead. Gary, you cover the back."

Gary and Paprika nodded, then all three of us marched in solemn formation into the cave mouth.

"Gosh, it sure is spooky in here," said Gary

“Shh!” I said. “Did you hear something?”

Just then a loud rumbling noise started up.

“Is that coming from inside the cave?” I asked.

“N-n-n-n-no!” stuttered Gary, pointing a shaking finger at the forest we had just come from.

Scampering out from the trees at full speed came five more squirrels!

“It’s an ambush!” I shouted.

Then the squirrels did the strangest thing. They lit up with a blue light and rose into the air.

“Darn it!” yelled Gary. “Magic squirrels! Now we’re really done for!”

The squirrels started chittering and shot blue lightning bolts from their eyes. The bolts hit Gary full force in the chest!

“Youch!” he yelled.

“Nooooo! Gary!” I yelled, and fell to my knees.

“It’s okay, I’m only about half dead,” he said. “I’ve still got a lot of fight in me!”

“Then fight on, brave friend,” I said, wiping a single tear from my eye. “And I will make sure you do not fight in vain.” I got back to my feet and pulled out my daggers. “It’s showtime,” I said darkly.

“I cast Woodland Explosion!” yelled Paprika excitedly. She waved her wand and cast Woodland

Explosion. All the squirrels exploded in a shower of sparks.

I smiled victoriously and slid my daggers back into their sheaths. Then I patted them softly.

“Hooray! We did it!” Gary shouted.

I put my arm around him. “Yes we did, my friend. Yes we did.”

“Hooray,” said Paprika.

We decided to make camp for the night at the cave entrance. When we woke up the next morning, Gary had healed. However, we suddenly discovered we no longer knew where we were!

“Where are we?” asked Paprika.

“I don’t know,” I muttered darkly. “But it’s not where we set up camp last night.”

“Then that must mean...” Gary trailed off, waiting for me to finish his sentence.

“Someone, or some thing, must have moved us!” I concluded.

We all gasped, including me. Sometimes I surprise even myself.

“But who – or what – could have done this?” Gary mused aloud.

“Perhaps I can answer that,” said a figure from the shadows.

We gasped and turned toward the figure. “Gorgoblax...?” I ventured?

“No. I am Gorgoblax’s brother, Charlie the Elden. And I must tell you that my brother is evil! He sent you here to your DOOM!”

“What? Gorgoblax? Evil????!!” I threw up my hands in despair. “How can I know who to trust anymore? How do I know I can trust you?” I asked savagely, turning to Gary.

“What? Me?” asked Gary. “C’mon Darren Darkevil, it’s me, Gary Thunderstone. Your best friend!”

“But how can I know?” I wailed, with tears streaming down my face. “How can I know anything anymore?”

“You must trust what’s in your heart,” said Charlie the Elden, and disappeared.

“He’s right, you know,” I sniffed, wiping my face with my gloved hand. “I guess I knew it in my heart all along. How could I have doubted you, my brother-in-arms?”

“Best friends again?” asked Gary.

I nodded. Then we hugged in a manly way. I thumped him hard on the back with my fist.

“Never again will I lose faith in my companions,” I vowed.

“Yay,” Gary and Paprika cheered.

Now it was time to get my bearings. I looked around for a sign of some sort. Then I saw one. “Hey guys, check out the sign under that giant mushroom there.” I pointed. It said ‘Elemental Plane of Fungus’.

“Is fungus an element?” asked Gary.

“I think so,” I said cautiously. “Don’t let down your guard. Anything could happen in a place like this.”

I squinted my eyes suspiciously in case any monsters were watching. ‘I’m on to you, monsters’ is what that look said.

Little did I know then who was actually watching us!

I found out a few minutes later, when some guy stepped out from behind a mushroom.

“Hi guys,” he said. “I’ve been watching you. My name is Dave.”

“Hi Dave,” we said, and waved.

“So what brings you three to the Elemental Plane of Fungus?” he asked.

“We don’t know,” I said darkly. I could tell Dave was impressed with our mysteriousness. I slowly

drew a dagger out of its sheath and pointed it at Dave, glowering. “How do we get out of here?” I asked in my most menacing voice.

Dave gulped. “Take it easy stranger, no need to get violent.”

“You’re right,” I said, and put the dagger away. “Forgive me. My manners are abhorrent.”

“Anyway,” said Dave, “There ain’t no way no how to get out of this here Elemental Plane. I’ve been living here for eight years!”

That’s when we noticed Dave was crazy. He was also foaming at the mouth a little.

“Just me and my mushroom friends,” he continued. His mouth stretched wide and showed all his rotting teeth. “Blargh!” he yelled. “Blillarrghhh!!!”

I drew my dagger back out again. “This is no time for fooling around,” I said. “I’m not fooling around, I’m very serious,” said Dave. “Blargh!” Then he lunged forward! “Blilaaargh!”

“Ieee!” I cried while jumping back.

“Yeep!” squealed Gary the Dwarf.

“Blargh!” yelled Dave.

“Yaaaah!” screamed Paprika. “I go for the throat!!!” and hurled herself at Dave’s neck. There was a great ripping and tearing and Dave’s screams turned to screams of agony, then gargles.

Gary prodded Dave's dead body with the toe of his chainmail boots. Something fell out of Dave's pocket.

"What's this?" I said, and swooped down to pick it up before Gary could.

It was an envelope. I saw the wax seal was already broken. I felt glad because that meant it was okay for me to read it.

"I think it's a letter," Gary said as I withdrew and unfolded the paper inside.

"Perhaps," I said, and started reading.

"Dear Sir or Madame" It started.

"Yep, it's a letter," I said, then continued:

"Thank you for your interest in applying for a position at Magical Mushroom Land, located conveniently in the center of the Elemental Plane of Fungus. Unfortunately, we are not accepting applications right now. Your application and résumé have been filed..."

"A clue!" interrupted Paprika excitedly.

"Yes my little sylvan friend, a clue indeed," I said darkly. "Come, we must make haste to Magical Mushroom Land!"

"Which way do we go?" asked Gary.

I pulled a map out of my pocket. "Elemental Plane of Fungus" it said at the top, but the whole map was

fogged grey except the uppermost left corner. This corner was labeled “Entrance to the elemental plane” and also “You are Here.”

I jabbed a finger at the foggy center of the map. “Magical Mushroom Land is probably here,” I said. So we go... South-West.”

“South East,” corrected Gary.

“South East,” I echoed.

“Which way is that?” Paprika tinkled, buzzing around my head like a hummingbird in a meth lab.

“That way,” I guessed, pointing at a nearby mildew field.

“Lead on,” Gary said with a gesture. I took the front and Gary and Paprika marched behind me, all of us whistling our theme song in three-part harmony as we ventured into the fields of mildew.

We emerged from the other side stinky but otherwise fine. Before us stretched a wide valley filled with mushrooms shining with blue, green, and purple phosphorescent lights like some kind of hippie disco.

Far off in the center of the valley we could just make out a thick, spongy wall of giant mushrooms. A dark castle loomed from the center of the mushroom ring, obscured by a thick haze of spores that hung like green smoke.

“That must be Magical Mushroom Land,” I said. “Let’s break for lunch and cross the valley this afternoon.”

“Who wants cupcakes?” sang Gary, shaking the picnic basket he had been carrying this whole time. “I know I do!”

Gary and I set up the picnic blanket and plates and Paprika buzzed off to collect some mushrooms to add to our meal. “Do you want your cupcake, Paprika?” Gary asked aloud after she had left. “No? Oh well, more cupcake for me!” He smiled and swirled his finger in the pink icing.

I wasn’t feeling so playful myself. I was thinking serious thoughts about our serious situation.

Why am I doing this? I thought. Why am I even on this quest? I looked over at Gary, who had pink icing on his beard.

Do I still need to find out what happened to the heart of the forest? Gorgoblax sent us on that quest, but he turned out to be evil. What am I to do?

Gary looked up at me just then. “Aren’t you going to eat your cupcake?” he asked.

“I can’t eat,” I said. “I am filled too deeply with pain and confusion and self-doubt.”

“Goody!” said Gary, and ate mine too.

Just then Paprika flitted back heavily with an armload of mushrooms. “I got mushrooms!” she shouted.

Gary patted his bulging belly. “Thanks, but I’m stuffed,” he confessed, a crumb dropping from his beard. “And Darren’s too busy brooding to eat.”

I nodded, because this was true.

“Where’s my cupcake?” Paprika asked.

“It wouldn’t be fair for you to get all the mushrooms AND a cupcake,” Gary explained. “So I had to eat it.”

“Okay,” said Paprika, and popped a mushroom in her mouth. Her pupils swam open to double their size.

“Who’s going to do dishes?” Gary shouted. “One-two-three-not-it!”

We slogged through the glowing valley for six hours, the dark castle growing larger and larger on the horizon. And then suddenly we were there, the thickly-packed mushroom wall looming over us like ghosts. Like ghosts of giant evil mutant mushroom monsters. The thought made me shiver.

“How will we get in?” Gary craned his neck so far his head was practically upside down.

Paprika, who had been trailing behind again, buzzed up smeared in neon warpaint.

“Check it out you guys,” she droned. Her eyes were like little black marbles ringed in thick circles of phosphorescent purple mushroom dust. “I’m a racooooon.” She wagged her glowing fingers as she said this.

I didn’t think her disguise was that great, but I didn’t want to hurt her feelings.

“I’ll stealth around the parameter of the wall and see if there’s a way in,” I said. “You two stay here and wait for me.”

Gary and Paprika nodded in solemn agreement.

I crouched down and made a “vwoom” noise and I was kinda invisible again. Very slowly I circled around the dense fungal wall.

Just after I’d circled far enough that Gary and Paprika were out of sight, I bumped into something. I looked around but didn’t see anything.

I stretched out my hand to try and feel what the invisible barrier was. My hand struck something solid. At that same instant something unseen glommed onto my face and groped my nose.

The shock startled me out of stealth. Whatever it was I bumped into must have de-stealthed too, because suddenly I had a gloved hand blocking my vision.

“Mrph,” it said. Startled, I moved my hand off its face.

It pulled its hand down too and I took a long, stern look at my assailant.

She was an elf. And not a dark elf, either. A blonde.

And she STANK.

“How did I not SMELL her before bumping into her?” I thought. “Does her stealth work on STINK too?”

She looked REALLY pissed off and that’s when I realized I’d said my thoughts out loud.

“Whoops,” I said.

“Don’t give me this ‘stink’ crap,” she snarled. “I’ve been stuck on the Elemental Plane of Fungus for a week and a half without a change of leather. What the hell do you expect?”

“My humblest apologies,” I said, bowing. I spied a bag on the ground next to her boots.

“M’Lady dropped this,” I said, scooping it up and presenting it in my open palm.

“Give me that.” She snatched the bag out of my hand and, hunching her shoulders protectively, counted the clinking things inside.

That’s when it occurred to me that she must be a thief-type rogue. Not everyone realizes that there are many types of rogues, like thieves, assassins,

and swashbucklers. I, for example, like to call myself a “shadowslipper.”

I also like to call myself “The Prince of Shadows” but Gary’s the only one who ever remembers to call me that. And he doesn’t remember very often.

“My name’s Darren, Prince of Shadows,” I said, extending my hand in peace. “And M’Lady’s name is...?”

“Priscilla, Queen of the Daffodils,” she snorted, and stuffed the sack into some tiny hidden pocket. It disappeared without making a bulge.

“Well, Priscilla,” I said, “Your expertise may be useful to my party on this quest.” My hand was still extended, and Priscilla just glared at it, unmoving. “Would you care to form a temporary alliance?”

“No.”

“Pretty Please? You’ll get a fourth of the treasure we find.”

“They’re pretty much cleaned out in there anyway,” she confessed.

“So you’ve been inside? That’s where you just came from?” I asked excitedly.

“Yeah, took me forever to get out again,” she said.

“That’s great!” I yelled, and she jumped. “You can show us the way in! You can escort us inside!”

“I don’t think so,” she said darkly. “I work alone.” She turned her head and looked dramatically into the wind.

“Why?” I asked, breathlessly.

“Because I can’t trust anyone. Not even myself.” She let a shadow slip across her face as she said this. “That’s something I learned the hard way.”

“That’s not true!” I shouted earnestly, clutching my hand into a fist. “You must learn to trust what’s in your heart!”

“I don’t have a heart,” she said, and turned away.

“Priscilla,” I said, grasping her shoulders, and turned her to face me. “I have a quest for you. You must learn to believe in yourself. That is your quest.”

“Quest accepted,” she said, wiping away a single tear. “Does it give good *Experience Points*?”

We both laughed heartily for a few minutes.

“Let me introduce you to my fellow party members,” I said, then put my hand on her shoulder. “*Our* fellow party members,” I corrected.

She smiled.

“Gary and Paprika, this is Priscilla, Queen of the Daffodils.” I introduced a few minutes later.

“Priscilla, this is Gary the Dwarf and Paprika the Fairy.”

“Pleased to meet you, your highness,” Gary bowed.

“Um, actually...” the elf-girl corrected with her eyebrows raised. “Just call me Alledriel.”

“I will if you call me ‘Tiger’,” said Gary. “Ho ho ho.”

“Your friend’s funny,” Alledriel whispered to me.

“It is one of his many virtues,” I whispered back.

I turned back to my companions. “Alledriel has agreed to lead us inside the Magical Mushroom Land,” I announced.

“Oh, by the way,” she asked, “what are you looking for in there?”

“Um,” I said. “Oh yeah.” I pulled out the letter we found on Dead Dave’s body. “We found a clue that lead us here.”

Alledriel looked at the letter. “Okay. But what are you looking for?”

“Specifically? Hm.” I looked at Gary for help, but he just shrugged. I looked over at Paprika. She was facing the other way for some reason.

I turned back to Alledriel. “I guess we were hoping to find a way out?” I said.

“You mean a way out of this Elemental Plane? Nuh-uh.” She shook her head. “I scoured that place.

If there was a way out in there, I would have found it.”

Gary piped up. “Well thanks, sweetie, that saves us some time,” he said agreeably. “Any idea where the real exit might be?”

Alledriel pulled out her own map. There was only one foggy area left, in the lower right-hand corner. “That’s the only place I haven’t checked yet,” she said. “It’s gotta be there.”

“Darn,” I said, looking up at the fungoid wall. “I really wanted to visit Magical Mushroom Land.” Then I caught another whiff of Alledriel and changed my mind.

“Let’s take a little *eue de toilette* break before we head out,” I suggested.

“Fine with me,” Alledriel agreed. She pulled a little can of something out of a pouch, shook it, and sprayed herself for about thirty seconds straight. The cloying vanilla fog stretched out and settled in a greasy film on my face.

“Ooh!” Gary cried, grabbing Alledriel’s elbow. “Can I braid your hair?”

Evening was just setting in. I left my traveling companions, old and new, behind me for a few minutes and wandered away from the temporary camp. I felt it was time for some more introspection.

As unofficial leader of the group, it was time for me to think the important thoughts about our quest.

Charlie the Elden said that Gorgoblax sent us here to our doom, I thought. I wonder what he meant by that?

“Oh, if only Charlie the Elden were here to help us understand what’s going on!” I cried aloud.

I waited for a mysterious robed figure to step out of the darkness. It didn’t.

“Well, darn,” I said.

When I returned to camp Alledriel and Gary had finished doing eachother’s hair. Gary had two fat braids in his beard. Alledrial had a ridiculous French braid that started above one pointy ear, snaked across the top of her head and dangled limply behind the other ear. It looked like Gary had braided a few ribbons in, then gotten bored and added a few twigs and mushrooms as well.

They were chatting and giggling when I walked up.

“Did he really?” I heard Alledrial whisper.

“Shh!” shushed Gary. They both looked at me and giggled, then started coughing violently.

I was glad to see my fellow party members working so harmoniously with eachother. All the same, I

kept my “serious” expression on so my companions would know I’d been thinking troubling thoughts.

“What’s the matter, Darren?” Gary asked. He obviously noticed.

“I was just thinking about something Charlie the Elden said to me,” I told him. “I think maybe we’d better be on my toes.”

“On your toes?”

“On our toes, I mean,” I said.

“What did Charlie say to you?” Alledrial asked.

“He said that Gorgoblax the Elden sent us here to our DOOM,” I explained.

“Well crap, I’m outta here then. See ya,” Alledrial said, rising.

“No, no, I kid,” she explained to our shocked faces, and sat back down. “Nevermind. Go on, Darren.”

“So we should be on my toes.”

“Our toes.”

“Right.” I felt like I may have lost some control of the conversation. “Anyways. The night is still young! Let’s head out. Whatever dangers may await us, let us meet them and be ready!”

“All right!” cheered Gary. “...You wanna be torch-bearer?”

“What? Why can’t you be torch-bearer?” I asked.

“I’m carrying Smitey. And the picnic basket. Remember?” Gary shook the basket. It clanked.

“Fine,” I said. “Gimme the torch.” But when we looked around we couldn’t find one.

“Alledrial?” I ventured. She shrugged.

“Nope,” she said. “I never remember to buy those things.”

Just then I spotted a glowing rear end sticking out of one of Gary’s beard-braids. Paprika was squirming around trying to get her head out. I grabbed her by the legs, popped her out of Gary’s beard, and held her aloft.

“Whooop!” said Paprika dizzily. Her phosphorescent warpaint glowed almost as bright as a torch, and twice as moodily. I mentally congratulated myself for my cleverness.

“Onwards – to our destiny!” I cried, brandishing my makeshift torch; and led/carried my companions into the night.

A long march, a short slog, and a brief period of frantic running when we thought we were being chased by bees later...

I crested a large hill and then stopped short. Gary and Alledrial both crashed into me and went “Oof.”

“There it is,” I breathed, pointing with the hand that wasn’t carrying Paprika. “That must be what we’re looking for.”

Straight ahead loomed a weird purple mountain range. A crumbling city spread before it like a grotty welcome mat.

The city was obviously in complete ruins. The purple citadel hewn directly into the cliff-face, however, looked mostly intact.

Alledral unrolled her map. The lower-right hand corner had de-fogged. “Yep, this is the place,” she said, and pointed. “The Soggy Bulwark,” she read. “Eew. It also says, ‘Exit to Caverns of Tretchery’”

I looked again at the citadel. Its bulwark certainly did look soggy.

I gulped, loudly. “Well,” I said. “Time’s a-wasting. Let’s go.”

“Don’t you want to take a little break first?” Gary asked hopefully.

“NO.” I stated as firmly as I could. “We need to get out of this plane as soon as we can.” I didn’t tell him I was afraid of getting boot rot.

“Do you want to scout ahead, or should I?” I asked Alledral.

She put away her map and peered at the moldering city below us. “It looks totally empty from here,” she said. “I don’t think we’ll run into any trouble

until we get to the citadel itself. We can probably just walk up.”

“*Wade* up, more like,” I said through gritted teeth. “Alright, let’s go.”

The further we plodded down the hill the spongier the ground got. When we reached the ruined city it was making a wet sucking sound with every step.

“The air is warm and stale here,” I observed.

“The night is sultry,” Gary added unhelpfully. He was sinking so far into the loam with each step it was practically to his knees. Smitey dragged behind him, carving a shallow ditch that slowly filled up with water. He was also trying to balance the picnic basket on top of his helmet.

“I could carry that picnic basket for you,” Alledrial offered.

“Thanks, but I got it,” Gary said, and bravely struggled on.

Fortunately, a few minutes later we came upon the remains of an old cobblestone road. It looked like it had once been the main thoroughfare.

The road ran straight through the crumbling architecture for about a mile and a half, then rose a little to meet the drawbridge for the citadel. The drawbridge was down.

“Almost as if they were waiting for us,” I muttered darkly. Then I slipped on a cobblestone.

From my new, lower vantage point I was able to see the stones a little better. They were blanketed with a thick layer of algae or something. They also sank into the ground a little when any weight was placed on them.

“Mind your step,” I advised, rising unsteadily to my feet. Then I held out my hands and offered them to Gary. With a wet splorch he popped out of the loam and knocked me on my back.

“Well, Darren, I never expected to see you from *this* angle,” Gary said cheerfully from atop my chest.

“Oh, you,” I said.

“Here, help us up,” I called to Alledrial, who was standing over us. Gary and I grabbed her proffered hands and stood up shakily.

“It sure is dark,” said Gary.

“Whoops,” I said. “I must have dropped Paprika when I fell the first time.” I looked around but didn’t see her.

“Everyone look for her,” Alledrial suggested.

Fortunately Paprika was glowing so brightly I spotted her within a few minutes. She was darting around the molding foundation of an old cottage amongst a swarm of fireflies.

“Paprika!” I called, but she was too mesmerized by the fireflies to answer. With a quick movement she caught one and stuffed it in her mouth.

“Yoink!” I said, and grabbed her by the legs. Her wings kept buzzing furiously and her whole body leaned toward the bugs, glowing hands grasping desperately in their direction.

“I got her!” I yelled triumphantly.

“Oh good!” Alledrial jogged up, slipped a little and then righted herself. Gary picked his way over daintily.

“On to the citadel, then,” I said.

We worked our way carefully up the cobblestone street. When we reached the drawbridge we paused again.

The citadel looked much, much bigger from this angle. It looked HUGE. It looked imposing. It looked... hungry.

“Why don’t you scout ahead now, Alledrial,” I suggested.

“Good idea,” she agreed. “I’ll check out the first couple rooms. I should be back in about five minutes.” She crouched down and went “vwoom” and disappeared from sight.

Six minutes later Gary began to get antsy. “I think you should check on her,” he said.

“Hold your horsies,” I said. “We don’t want to go blundering in there and mess up her scouting.”

“I didn’t say *we* should check on her,” said Gary.
“You should. Use your stealth.”

“Well...” I stalled, looking up at the citadel’s face.
“...Let’s give her a few more minutes.”

Gary sealed his lips for about three more minutes and then started kicking me.

“Ow!” I said. “All right! I’ll go check on her!” I held Paprika out to him. “You stay here with Paprika, then.”

Gary set his picnic basket down, took Paprika in his hand, and looked at her.

I crouched down and went into stealth. As soon as I turned invisible, Gary looked slyly at his picnic basket. He opened it, put Paprika inside, closed it, and picked it back up. Purple, blue and green light shone out through the cracks in the basket weave.

Slowly, carefully, I crossed the drawbridge. The portcullis was open.

I peered into the large antechamber. It was empty. Filthy, and blanketed in lichen, but basically empty.

I thought I could just barely make out the sound of... something, coming from further inside the citadel. It was difficult to tell. The stone may normally have echoed, but the growths on the walls sucked up sound like a slimy sponge in stagnant sink-water.

I paused, and made a mental note to remember that simile for later.

Two doorways gaped at the far end of the antechamber. One on the left wall and one on the right wall. I tiptoed up to the one on the right and peered in.

I saw a short passageway that abruptly turned, led up some stairs, and turned again. I tiptoed over to the other door. Its passage was a mirror image of the first one, except for the remains of what was once probably a wooden chair but now bore more resemblance to a green velour footstool.

By power of deduction and excellent cartography skills I concluded that the passages at the top of the stairs probably connected to each other. I carefully climbed the steps and saw that this was so.

A single doorway led off from the joined passage. I thought I could just barely make out a scuffling or sliding noise coming from that direction. I crept up to it and looked through.

It opened into a long, dim hall. Moonlight streamed in through great big holes in the ceiling where the stone had collapsed in. It reflected off the lichen scaling the walls. Rows of moldy wooden doorways lined either side, spaced about 10 feet apart. Probably guard rooms.

The closest one, on the right, was ajar.

I heard a faint, wet thump from inside.

Ever so carefully I tiptoed up and pushed the door open the rest of the way.

This room was in ruins. A thick shaft of moonlight shone through another hole in the ceiling and illuminated six black, slimy throwing daggers on the floor. Alledrial was balanced on a crumbling ledge near the ceiling, aiming a seventh throwing dagger at the two angry mushroom men milling below.

The mushroom men didn't notice the door open. Apparently, Alledrial did.

"What the hell took you?" she yelled. She threw the seventh dagger. It grazed off one of the mushroom men and landed with the others. Black slime quickly grew over the blade. The mushroom man seemed unphased.

"My daggers aren't doing anything!" She called in my direction. "And I'm hurt! Distract them so I can get out of here!"

The mushroom men looked about seven feet tall. I took a big gulp. Sometimes a hero has to face up to his fears of giant evil fungus creatures.

I crept to the middle of the room where the daggers lay. The mushroom men had their backs to me. I scooped the daggers up and threw them loudly in the corner.

"Whooo!" I yelled. "I'm a ghost!"

That was enough to do it. The rather dim mushroom men ran over to the corner and started searching around for the ghost. Alledrial jumped down from the ridge, winced, and limped quickly out the door.

I felt very proud of myself until one of the mushroom men bumped into me and broke my stealth.

“Yeep!” I cried, looking into the rancid maw of death. Then I turned and ran after Alledrial.

The mushroom men ran after me.

Fortunately I was slightly faster than them. I got to the stairs, slipped, slid down on my butt, and jumped back to my feet. The mushroom men appeared at the top of the stairs and started down after me. I made a wild, scrambling break for the front entrance.

Alledrial was already halfway across the drawbridge ahead of me. I caught up to her and we both reached Gary, who looked more than a little alarmed and ready to start running himself.

I looked back at the citadel as I caught my breath. The two mushroom men milled around the front entrance for a minute, then abruptly ran back to their room.

“What *were* those things?” I asked in shock.

“Fungus elementals,” Alledrial said. “I fought some in Magical Mushroom Land. Only they were much

smaller there. About Gary-sized.” She withdrew a bottle filled with thick red liquid and drained it with one gulp. Immediately an expression of relief washed across her face and she rubbed her ankle. “These guys are too powerful,” she said. “I don’t think we can take them.”

“Well what do you think we should do?” I asked. “Sneak past them? Gary can’t stealth.”

“Oh I can’t, can’t I?” Gary winked. “Don’t underestimate me, my friend.”

“Gary, your talents are truly amazing,” I complimented a little while later. He was affixing a clump of sphagnum moss onto my armor.

“Oh this? It’s nothing. Just a little skill I picked up during my time in the *theatre*.” Gary said. He was wearing his finished disguise, fashioned mostly from peat moss and strange scaly things he got off a tree.

“You were an actor?” Alledrial asked. She was wrapped in the checkered picnic cloth and had a dome-shaped moss hat strapped to her head.

“Head of Costuming,” explained Gary, slapping on a little more moss with a flourish. “There,” he said. “A convincing mushroom monster if ever I saw one!”

I pulled out my dagger and tilted it to see myself in its reflection. I did look pretty menacing.

“All right,” I said coolly, sliding my dagger back in its sheath. “Let’s do this.”

“No time like the present,” said Gary. He picked up his battle-hammer and the glowing picnic basket, whose contents now emitted a tinkling little humming sound.

The humming was actually kinda catchy. As we marched across the drawbridge and into the citadel I found myself humming along. Alledrial joined in with some whistling and Gary gave it words:

Oh fungus men and women we be

Spreading spores sporadically

We love the damp and we love the dark

And we love the slime in The Soggy Bulwark

Then all three of us sang together for the chorus:

So trip on the cat and bang on the drum!

The time for Fungus Elementals has come!

We marched up the stairs and down the hall, still singing:

No need to guess if we’re real or not

‘Cause we look like ‘shrooms and we smell like rot

We’re sure not dwarves, or elves, or fae!

So we'll just be on our merry way

Then, to my surprise, from out of the guard rooms rose the gurgling voices of the fungus elementals joining in the chorus:

So beat up your friends and swallow your gum!

The time for fungus elementals has come!

The air was alive with the joyous sounds of music and fungal celebration when we reached the big door deep within the citadel. It towered above us, carved with intricate bas-relief images of somethingorother. It was hard to tell because all the cracks were filled with green fuzz.

“This is it,” I whispered. “This must be the main stronghold.”

The anticipation in the air was electric. I took a deep breath and put my shoulder to the door. Slowly it pushed open, scraping arcs in the mold and muck on the stone floor.

We popped our heads around the door like a trio of eager meerkats and looked inside.

The cavernous stone stronghold opened before us, lit with an eerie, dim light. It was difficult to tell at first where the light was coming from. Then we realized it was coming from the big, swirling green portal at the far end of the room. The exit to the Caverns of Treachery.

The sight made me very, very happy. But not as happy as what I *didn't* see.

“There’s no one here,” I remarked.

“Yeah, how do you like that?” said Alledrial. “I was totally expecting a big ol’ dragon or something. Another group of adventurers probably came through before us and killed whatever was guarding this portal.”

“Or maybe nobody cares enough to keep it guarded,” Gary suggested.

“Well, let me check for traps just in case,” I suggested. “Then we’ll go.” I picked up a fuzzy piece of fallen masonry, gave it a little practice toss in the air and then skidded it across the floor. It skipped all the way across and then disappeared into the portal.

“I think we’re good,” I said. “Let’s go.”

We ventured into the great chamber. We made it about a third of the way across when the door suddenly slammed shut behind us.

At the same moment a familiar robed figure stepped out of the shadows with his arms raised.

“Gasp!” I cried. “It’s Gorgoblax!” I began to quake with fear.

“No,” said the figure, lowering his robed arms. “It is I, Charlie the Elden, once again.”

“Oh good,” I said, breathing a sigh of relief. “I thought maybe we had met our doom like you predicted.”

“You have,” said another robed figure, emerging from some different shadows.

“Gorgoblax!” I cried, and started quaking again.

“Who are you people?” asked Alledrial.

“We are the Lords of the Fungal Realm, the Great Mushroomancers, the Twin Warlocks of the Elden Order,” boomed Charlie. “And you have fallen into our trap!”

“Oh no!” cried Gary. His chainmail rattled and I could tell he, too, was quaking with fear.

“So you’re both evil then?” I asked, just to clarify.

“Yes,” said Charlie. “We’re evil twins.”

“And we are going to kill you! And then turn you into mushroom zombie slaves, and you will be forced to do our bidding! Forever!” shrieked Gorgoblax. He waved his arms around wildly.

“...But it seems someone has already beaten us to it,” commented Charlie, indicating our disguises.

“Oh, these?” said Gary, flattered. “I just did the best with what I had.”

“Well it looks very nice,” complimented Charlie. “I can completely picture you three as our mushroom

zombie slaves, carving us an evil totem out of that large piece of wood we've recently acquired."

"The heart of the forest!" I gasped. "You guys destroyed it?"

"I guess," Charlie shrugged and looked at Gorgoblox.

Gorgoblox nodded slowly. "And now it's your turn," he said.

There was no time to lose. I unsheathed my daggers and adopted a karate-like defensive stance. "One evil wizard would be bad enough," I murmured. "But two?! I think we're in over our heads!"

"Alledrial, you wouldn't happen to have any secret skills or weapons you haven't told us about, would you?" Gary asked hopefully.

"I'm afraid not," she responded softly so the warlocks wouldn't overhear. "This is my whole inventory, aside from my daggers." She pulled out a small bag and discreetly passed it to Gary.

"There is no use trying to get past without a fight," Charlie announced, and wagged his fingers. A magical force-field sprang up in front of the portal.

Maintaining my defensive stance, I looked back behind me. Gary had set his stuff down and was rummaging through the sack Alledrial had handed him. I caught sight of a map, some rations, an

empty flask and some herbs I didn't recognize; plus tails, paws, spleens, and other assorted body parts harvested from a variety of fabulous beasts.

"Why are you carrying so much junk?" I murmured back to Alledrial through clenched teeth.

Alledrial started to answer but Gorgoblox interrupted her. "Stop planning your escape! There is no hope!" he screamed. With a wave of his hand we were suddenly teleported to different corners of the great chamber.

Gary, who was still preoccupied with looking through the sack, materialized next to Charlie the Elden. He looked up, disoriented. Charlie was looming over him.

"Time... to die!" said Charlie.

"Yeep!" shrieked Gary. He frantically pulled something out of the sack and aimed it at Charlie's hooded face.

It happened to be the can of vanilla spray-on deodorant. The can went "Pffffff" and Charlie caught the full blast right in the eyes.

"Yaaah! My eyes!" shrieked Charlie. He fell to the ground clutching his face. Foam and blood splattered from his mouth.

"Of course! The deodorant has anti-fungal properties! Good thinking, Gary!" shouted Alledrial.

“Naturally,” said Gary. He peered confusedly at the can.

Then Charlie stopped thrashing and the magical force-field in front of the portal blinked out.

“CHARLIE! My brother! You will all pay for his death!” raged Gorgoblax. His eyes blazed red. His robes and beard started blowing like he was standing in a strong wind. Then he rose into the air on a cloud of spores and shot a green bolt of magical energy in Gary’s direction.

It hit the can Gary was holding dead-on. The can exploded and Gary gagged on the thick vanilla cloud that suddenly enveloped him.

There goes our last line of defense, I thought despairingly.

Then out of the corner of my eye I noticed Gary’s battle-hammer and picnic basket. They were still sitting in the middle of the floor.

A tiny little hand pushed open one side of the basket. A tiny little head peered out.

My heart soared. Gorgoblax hadn’t seen Paprika yet. Maybe we still had hope.

Paprika, who was facing away from Gorgoblax and the portal, caught sight of the big door we had used to enter the chamber. Her eyes lit up. In one rapid movement she exited the picnic basket and buzzed toward the door.

“No, Paprika, the other way!” I shouted. She looked behind her and promptly flew into spider web.

Struggling against the sticky bonds only made it worse. Within seconds she was hanging upside down in a tangle of dirty, broken web. “Halp!” she cried pathetically.

Gorgoblox laughed. “So, you had an ace up your sleeve! You are smarter than I believed!” An evil grin glinted from the shadows of his hood. “But it has failed! And so shall you!” With that he closed his eyes and held his hands in front of him.

“Florum, ipsum, blanch svengali,” he chanted. “douglas, cuthbert, marrakech!”

“It looks like he’s gearing up for a big one!” I yelled over the chanting. “Make for the portal! Save yourselves!”

“No!” yelled Alledrial. “We can’t leave you! We’re in a party!”

I looked over to see if Gary was going to stay, too. He was looting Charlie’s corpse.

As I watched, Gary withdrew a small bag of gold from Charlie’s robes, and pocketed it. Then he pulled out a strange glowing orb. Having no magical proficiency, and therefore no use for the object, he tossed it behind him and kept rummaging.

The orb hit the stone floor and shattered. An identical sound came from Gorgoblox’s direction.

His chanting stopped, his eyes flew open, and with a shriek he dropped to the floor in a pile of broken orb-glass.

“My powers!” he cried. “What have you done???!?”

This was my opportunity. I sprinted up to the helpless old man and kicked him in the nuts.

“Yow!” he yelled, and died.

“Good job, team!” I said, putting my daggers away. Gary approached Gorgoblax’s body and searched it, too.

“We’ll divide this up when we get back to town,” he explained, grabbing the dead warlock’s gold.

I went back to the front of the chamber to help Paprika out of her sticky situation. She shrieked when she saw me approach. I’d forgotten about my mushroom man disguise.

“It’s okay, Paprika, it’s just me, Darren,” I explained, grabbing her with one hand and pulling off the clinging webs with the other. She kept screaming and struggling so I put her back in the picnic basket. Then I brought the basket and the hammer to Gary.

“Let’s get out of here,” said Alledrial.

“An excellent idea,” I said. “After you, M’lady.” I gestured toward the glowing portal.

Alledral stepped through the portal gingerly. Gary followed, and I went through last.

I was very disoriented for a second. Then I blinked and my eyes adjusted to the new lighting.

We were in a small, dry cavern. A lit torch was mounted on the wall next to a little sign. One passage led left and the other right. There was also a small chunk of moldy masonry on the floor, which I almost slipped on.

The little sign was shaped like an arrow pointing right. It said “Exit.”

“Let’s go that way,” I suggested. We took the right-hand passage and emerged into the clean night air.

“Well, I guess I’d better get to town and sell all this junk,” said Alledral. She felt around for her bag and then remembered Gary had it. “Gary?”

“Oh, right,” said Gary. He gave her back her inventory.

“Now wait, Alledral, you’re not planning on going back to town alone are you?” I asked. “We’re in a party, remember? We’ll go together.”

“But the quest is over,” said the elf. “We defeated the evil warlocks! And I think maybe I learned to trust in myself again.” She smiled, but there was a sadness in her eyes too.

“Alledrial,” I said. “Gary and Paprika and I have talked about starting a guild. We’re going to call it ‘Avengers of the Pwned Face’. Would you like to be a founding member?”

“You want me in your guild?” asked Alledrial in amazement. “I... What do I need to do?”

“Just hang out, mostly,” said Gary. “And you’ll always have friends to quest with when you don’t want to solo.” He grinned up at her. “Please say yes. Darren doesn’t let me do *his* hair.”

“All right,” Alledrial laughed. “You’ve talked me into it.”

“Excellent!” I clapped my hands. “Did I ever teach you our theme song?”

And so it was that the four of us – Gary, Paprika, Alledrial and myself – marched into the night, into the town, and into our futures, whistling songs of joy and friendship. Whistling... together.

THE END.

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