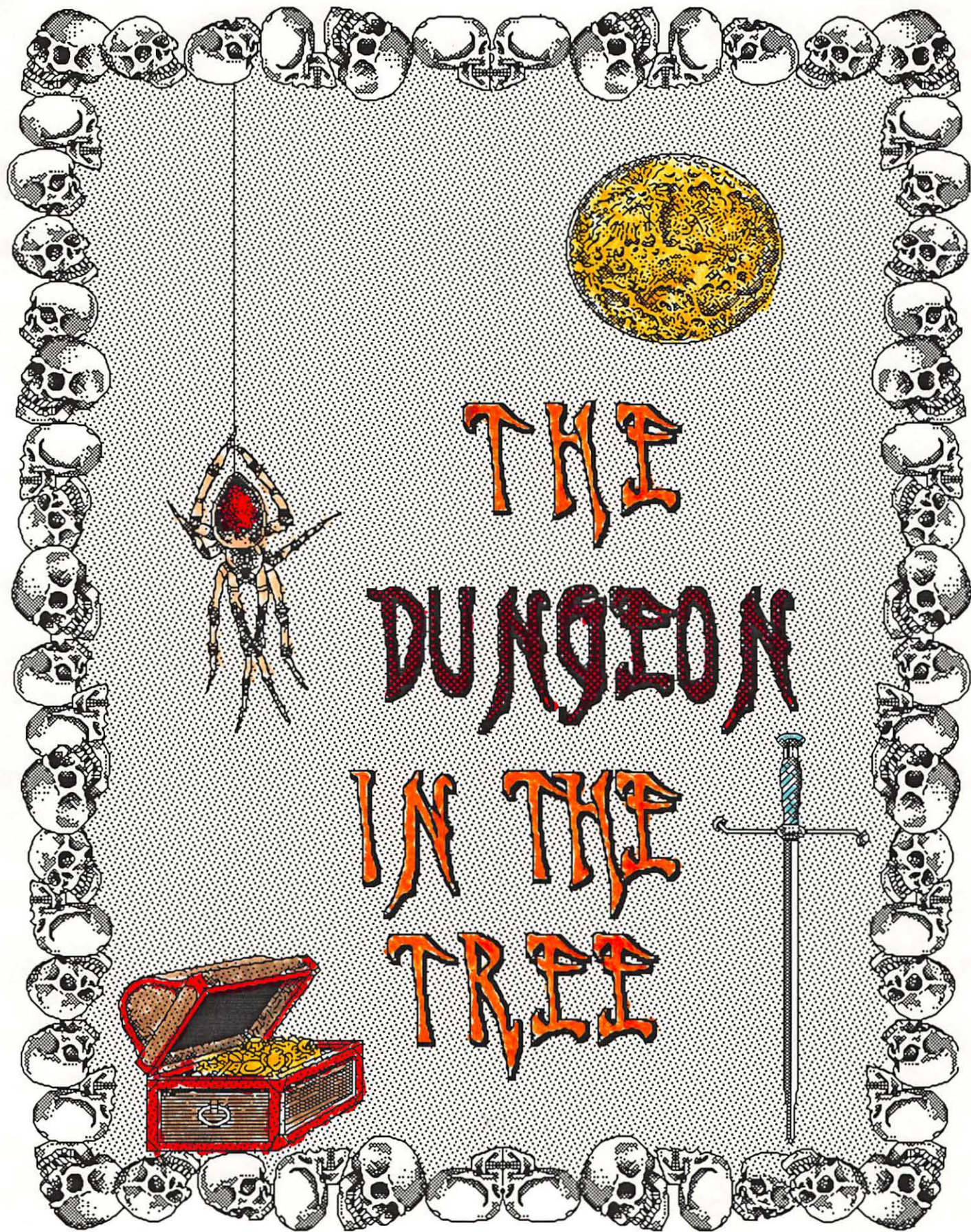


# **THE DUNGEON IN THE TREE**

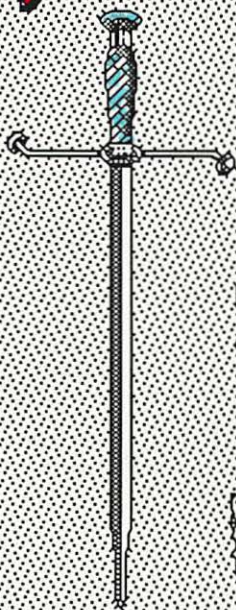
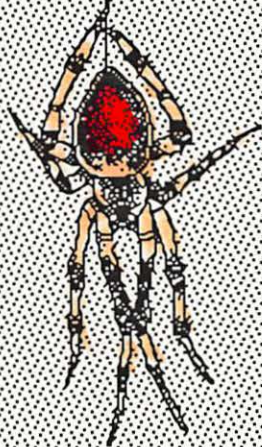
by

**Arthur Chandler**





THE  
DUNGEON  
IN THE  
TREE





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## BACKPACKING INTO THE NORTH FOREST

I know you're not going to believe this story. It all sounds too wild to be true. You're going to say that my story reads like one of those super-hero comic books, or maybe sounds like a late night T.V. monster movie. But it's true anyway. And when I'm through telling you my story, I'll prove it's true.

It all started with our 25-mile backpack trip into the North Forest. Tim, Peter, Allen and I were all loaded up -- or loaded down, however you want to call it -- with camping and wilderness survival gear. My dad got up at 5 o'clock in the morning (thanks, Dad!) and drove the four of us out to the edge of the woods where the trail begins.

So there we were, at 7:30 on a cold but sunny morning in late August, ready for our four-day campout. We stood at the edge of the North Forest, a huge territory of redwood, laurel and eucalyptus trees. The woods were making waking-up sounds -- branches cracking, squirrels running up and down the tree trunks, scrub jays caw-cawing with their raspy songs. Ahead of us the path branched off in three directions.

"Which way, O peerless leader?" Peter asked me. He's always talking like that. Peter has read every fantasy, science-fiction, and adventure book in the school library, and he likes to dress up his talk with rich words like "O

peerless leader." Some people don't like that way of talking -- sounds too smart, they say -- but I do. It's like his words help you think you're always in the middle of some great adventure.

"Well, subject and knave," I said (I can talk that way, too, when I want to), "I choose the central pathway." And I started walking down that road with long, king-like strides.

"Wait a minute!" Allen yelled. "Do you know where you're going, you turkey?"

"Yeah," Tim chimed in. "Wouldn't it be great if we had to tell people we got lost after hiking a grand total of two minutes and thirty seconds?" Here Tim put on the voice of a news announcer: "And in today's news, folks, four boys from Mill Valley Middle School set a New Guinness World Record by getting totally lost after only two minutes of hiking. . ."

"OK, OK," I cut in. "Which path do you want to take?"

"Uhh. . ." Allen looked around at each of us and grinned, shrugging his shoulders. He's bigger than any of the rest of us. In fact, he's put together like a football player. When he goes into that routine -- the grinning and shrugging -- he looks like Yogi the Bear. But he's the second smartest kid in our grade, so don't always go by how someone looks.

For a few minutes we all stood around arguing over which path to take. Then finally Peter came up with a 500-watt idea.

"Listen, fellow adventurers. I have conceived a marvellous scheme."

"Get ready!" Allen shouted. "Mastermind is about to speak!"

Peter ignored him. "Notice that I snap these twigs into three unequal lengths." And as he talked, he broke the sticks and stuck them into his fist. "I personally do not want to decide which path we take," he said. That's another thing about Peter: he may be super-smart, but he can't make up his mind about anything unless he has a month to think it over. "Here is the method: each of you will draw a twig; and the person who selects the longest will have the honor of choosing our course."

Tim grumbled that drawing sticks wasn't the best way to decide on which path we should take. But he finally agreed to the drawing, so we all pulled our twigs from Peter's fist.

I won. "Down the middle!" I shouted, and off we went. I couldn't resist turning to Allen and saying, "See how much time we lost thanks to your grumbling, elephant-head? If you'd only followed my idea from the first, we'd be half a mile down the road already."

Allen laughed, and said, "Just get us back to the road in five days. Then I might not sit on you while I eat breakfast. Might not, I said. . . ."

So into the woods and down the path we went.

## THE WORLD'S BIGGEST TREE

We took the center path. It was a great day, the kind you always hope for when you're on a hiking trip: sunny, but not too hot, with just enough wind to keep you from sweating too much. After a couple of hours the trail branched again. I chose the right fork; and this time Allen didn't object.

We found a giant redwood stump off to the right of the trail, and we all climbed in and settled down to lunch. I pulled out my food and started to eat. But when I looked up, everybody was staring at me.

"An anchovy sandwich?!" they all asked at once.

"What's wrong with that? Want to try some?" I offered a bite to each of them, but all I got were answers like "Bleahh!" or "No dead warm fish for me today, thank you," or "How are you fixed for stomach cramps medicine?"

At this point Allen pulled out his lunch. We all stared at him. "Cold pizza?!"

"Sure," he said, with that goofy grin again. "What's wrong with that?"

And then Peter pulled out his sandwich.

"Oh no!" Tim yelled. "Tell me that isn't really a chocolate chip sandwich, Peter."

"It is indeed a chocolate chip sandwich," Peter replied coolly. "One of my better inventions, if I do say so myself."



"You guys are crazy," said Tim, as he pulled out a head of lettuce and started munching on it like a rabbit.

"Eh, what's up, Doc?" said Allen in his best imitation of Bugs Bunny.

"You mean that's all you're going to eat for lunch?" I asked. I was getting set to tell him that lettuce didn't have many of the essential vitamins, when he pulled out a carrot from his backpack.

"No, I've got some carrots here and some beets inside my backpack. They're better for you than that junk you guys are bombing your stomachs with."

So we all sat there eating our lunches, everyone thinking that the other three were looney. In another ten minutes we were back on the trail.

About the middle of the afternoon the trail branched off in three directions again. I immediately took off down the center road, when Tim called out, "Hold it just a minute, Charles. Are you sure you can get us out of here again? This is the third or fourth time today we've had to choose a path. Are you going to be able to retrace our steps and get us back out of here?"

Before I could answer, Peter cut in. "Elementary, my dear Timothy. If you'll look down each of the paths, you will notice that the one on the left leads into laurel trees. The path on the right leads into eucalyptus trees. And the center

pathway leads into a deeeeep forest of noble redwoods." When he stretched out that word "deep," he made weird and evil motions with his hands and face, as if some monster was lurking out there in the noble redwoods waiting just for us.

"And just how can you tell this 'deeeeep' part of the woods from any other part that's redwood?" Tim wanted to know. Tim always wants to set things straight before he does anything. Some people think he's a grump because he's always coming out with a lot of "How?" and "Why?" questions just when they're laying out grand plans. But he's good to have around just to keep you thinking about exactly why you're going to do something, and exactly how you're going to do it.

"I've got news for you turkeys," said Allen. He pulled a piece of charred wood from his shirt pocket and waved it in our faces as if it were his own personal, perfecto map of the North Forest. "Right when we started on this trip I picked up this piece of burned wood by the highway. And every time we made a turn or took a fork in the road, I marked a big X on one of the trees. So to get back to the highway, all we have to do is follow the X's."

I was impressed. "Good thinking -- for a change," I said. It seemed like a smart idea to me.

Peter was impressed. "For your magnificent idea, I hereby confer upon you the Medal of the Golden Owl."

Tim wasn't impressed. "What if it rains? Won't the rain wash off all those marks?"

Allen's smile disappeared. "Well, uh, maybe. But wouldn't all the branches keep the rain off my marks?" he asked hopefully.

Tim thought about that. "Maybe a light rain wouldn't erase the X's. Let's just hope it doesn't rain at all. I can just see us all slopping and sloshing around in the rain, looking for the last dribbly streaks of Allen's X's."

So we decided that it had better not rain; then down the redwood path we went, and hiked steadily all the rest of the afternoon.

It must have been about six o'clock when we came to the Royal Court. That's what Peter called it, because there was a ring of redwood trees about 200 feet across, and in the center stood one big, huge, gigantic, vast monster of a redwood tree. Now, I've seen the Grizzly Giant in Yosemite National Park, and I thought that was the biggest tree I'd ever hope to see. But you could put ten Grizzly Giants inside the trunk of this tree and still have room left over. It went up and up and up; and it seemed that if you could climb to the top of that tree, on a clear day you'd be able to see half the United States.

That tree was the king redwood tree. And Peter was right -- it did look like a royal court, with all those other medium and tall redwoods surrounding the champion tree of all time in the center. And at the bottom of King Sequoia himself (that's the name we gave to that skyscraper redwood) was a kind of a throne of red and gold ivy leaves.

That ivy, or whatever it was, bothered us, though. It went all around the base of the tree and rose to a height of about ten feet all the way around. We couldn't actually see the bottom of the trunk because of the thickness of the red and gold leaves. In fact, we decided, they looked a little like poison oak.

"Do you think we should try to clear a path to the trunk?" I asked. There was something about King Sequoia that made me want to feel its bark and stand right at the bottom and look up.

"It's getting late," said Tim. "And if it's really poison ivy or something, I'd rather get a good look at it in the daylight."

"Right," said Allen. "And besides, I'm getting hungry for pizza again. Let's set up camp and eat."

"Unfortunate," said Peter. "King Sequoia would have made a superior back wall for our tent. Ah well. . ."

We all agreed it was a shame that we couldn't get to the bottom of the tree. But we were hungry and tired, so we pitched camp in the space between the court trees and the King, cooked a crummy meal of dried stew (while Allen sneaked munches of pizza from his backpack), and then went to sleep.

## THE IRON DOOR

When we got up next morning, the sun was shining, but heavy clouds were beginning to gather in the west. They weren't the thin, foggy kind that the sun can burn off by noon. No, these were fat-bellied rain clouds for sure, the kind that always come during the rainy season.

"You can kiss Allen's X-marks goodbye," said Tim sourly, as he munched a beet for breakfast.

"Maybe not," said Allen hopefully. "Like I said yesterday, the upper branches of the trees will probably protect the marks. Besides, it may not rain." But he didn't sound like he believed his own words.

We talked about the possibility of rain for a while; but even while we were talking, we all kept looking at King Sequoia. I told everyone about a dream I'd had the night before. I dreamed that the tree was a frozen rocketship, and that the red-gold ivy (or whatever they were) leaves were really frozen rocket flames. In my dream I could hear noises coming from inside the spaceship-tree -- sounds like hammering and laughing at first, but then yells and screams and groans after that. I thought I woke up and could still hear noises; but I decided that my waking up and hearing those sounds must have been part of my dream, too. How could there be hammering and screams coming from a huge



redwood tree? The whole thing wasn't exactly a nightmare, but it was a pretty weird dream.

After I told them about my dream, we all started talking about what route we were going to take out of the Royal Court. I could tell that everyone sort of wanted to stay and explore the area; but we all thought that we ought to hike on, and should try to make camp that night farther into the woods.

"Want to draw sticks again?" I asked. I had a great plan, but I had to count on my winning the draw to pull it off.

"No way!" said Allen. "That's how we did it last time, and look where it got us."

"What's wrong with where we are?" asked Tim. "I kind of like it here. In fact, I vote that we should work out a better system for marking our path so we can come back here again. I'd like to bring my camera and take some pictures of that gigantic tree."

"Right," I agreed. "With my 3-D camera I could get a great stereo shot up the trunk of King Sequoia -- if I could stand right under it at the base. Can you imagine how fantastic that would look in three dimensions?" My dad gave me an old Realist 3-D stereo camera about a year ago, and I've been taking depth pictures ever since. Once you've seen a 3-D slide you'll never want to see another flat picture again.

"I concur with your estimate of photographic potential here," said Peter in his highest style speech. "But we still

haven't solved the problem of which path we should take today." He reached down, cracked three twigs, stuffed them into his fist, and said, "Draw, if you please."

Tim grumbled that he still didn't think drawing sticks was a "logical" way to choose a path; but since he couldn't think of a better way, we drew from Peter's hand.

I won again.

"It's fixed!" yelled Allen.

Tim stared at me. "Are you sure you and Peter aren't into some kind of plot together?" he asked suspiciously.

"I assure you. . ." Peter began.

"They're just jealous of my good luck -- which, of course, I deserve," I said. After that remark Allen dived at me, and all four of us rolled around on the ground wrestling and laughing for about ten minutes.

When we got up again and shook the dirt off our clothes, Peter asked, "Now, then, O Peerless leader, what path do we take today?"

I pulled myself up to my full height, and announced in my best command-voice, "It is my will that we hike no further until we have explored the base of King Sequoia."

Everyone agreed to that idea right away. I think that's what all of us really wanted to do all along. So we packed our gear and left it by the burned out campfire. Then we began our exploration of the World's Greatest Tree.

We walked around and around the base, but couldn't find a break in the thick ivy that covered the tree's bark at the bottom. Obviously someone was going to have to volunteer to hack a path through to the trunk. But naturally, no one wanted to wade into a sea of poison ivy.

"Want to draw sticks to see who cuts the path?" I suggested.

"No way," said Tim, "but I do think that the leader should be the one to do it."

I started to protest, but all three of them shouted me down. They said that since I was leader, I was the one who had to make the path so that I could lead.

"Rats!" I thought. "The last thing I want to do is spend the rest of the hike itching and scratching and itching some more!" Then a small hope came to me.

"Does anyone have a pair of gloves?" I asked hopefully. "Then I wouldn't have to get the stuff on my hands."

"Sure, I do," said Tim. Good old Tim, always planning for emergencies. So Tim went back to the camp and returned with a pair of thick, padded snow-gloves.

"Snow-gloves?!" I said. "Did you think we were going to be climbing Mount Everest?" But I was happy to have those gloves, even if the padding made them clumsy to work with. Now maybe the itch-powder wouldn't get through the padding.

So slowly and carefully I began cutting away the branches. It was hard work, since the vines were tougher than they looked. Peter, Tim, and Allen stood around and joked while I cut and sawed and hacked. After about an hour of their jokes and my work I asked, "Anyone want to help out, so we can finish this job before Christmas?"

"Sure," said Tim, "I'll do it for awhile. Let me have the gloves."

As I took off the gloves and handed them over, Tim sniffed them suspiciously. "Say, this doesn't smell like poison oak or poison ivy. It smells more like licorice. Here, take a whiff, you guys."

Peter and Allen smelled the leaf-juice on the gloves, and agreed that it didn't smell like poison oak or poison ivy.

"Come to think of it," said Allen, "the leaves don't really look like oak or ivy. Want to take a chance and start hacking and pulling without the gloves?"

"A dangerous enterprise," said Peter, "but what's a little itching to four adventurers?"

So all four of us started hacking and pulling at the thick growth of vine-stalks and leaves. In about thirty minutes, we reached the base of the trunk.

"Victory!" Peter yelled, and Allen whooped and pounded the bark of King Sequoia in a fit of craziness.

"Yeow!" Allen yelled all of a sudden. "What did I hit?"  
He was holding his injured right hand cradled in his left.

I looked at the tree trunk where his fist had struck.  
"It's a door hinge!" I said in amazement.



## HARD WORK IN THE RAIN

We couldn't believe it, but there it was: three iron hinges attached to the tree trunk on one side and to something metal on the other. After another ten minutes of clearing away the brush, there it stood: a huge iron door, maybe ten feet high and six feet wide, with a heavy-looking iron bolt crossing it about half way up and running into a big iron latch that was fastened into the other side of the trunk. The door itself was covered with rust and lichens. Who knows how long it had been since anyone had opened it?

And where did it lead to?

We started pulling on the bolt with all our strength, trying to force it off the door and into the latch -- no luck. The rust had welded it shut.

"What we need is some oil or something to help grease it loose," said Allen. He gave the bolt another couple of tugs, but it wouldn't budge. Allen was pretty strong, and he wasn't used to having things not budge for him.

So we sat around thinking about how we might loosen that rust. Naturally, nobody had a can of oil in his backpack. But finally Peter (as usual) came up with the 500-watt idea.

"Aha! I have it," he announced. "Charles, do you still possess a tin of those horrible anchovies that you so dearly love?"

I told him I did -- four tins, in fact -- but I didn't see how a can of dead fish was going to pry open that door.

"The oil, Sir Charles, the oil!" Peter cried out.

"We'll pour the oil, in which the anchovies are packed, over the rust on the latch. Then we'll all scrape away at the rust with our trusty knives."

"Not a bad idea," said Tim. "I'll go back and get our backpacks, just in case we need anything else." Good old Tim -- always thinking of emergencies. In fact, I hate to think of the fix we would've been in if he hadn't gone back for our packs.

So Tim went off and came back with our gear. I took out the anchovies and opened a tin. Boy, did they taste good after all that work. I was starting on my second one when Allen yelled at me.

"Hey, Charles, are you going to help us work on this door or are you going to stand around munching those stinking fish all day?"

"Can't let all these goodies go to waste," I said. "And besides, it's my anchovy oil that's doing the hard work on the rust, isn't it? So you guys can chip away at the rust while my anchovy oil does its job. Besides, I've spent an hour more than you guys working at that brush."

"OK," said Tim, "but when we get the door open we're going to leave you out here and take the hard-working anchovies with us inside."

"You mean if we get the door open," said Peter. "Unless we all begin work at once, we're all going to be standing out here in the rain."

We all looked up. The clouds had moved overhead, and were bunching up for a rain -- no doubt about it. So we all -- myself included now -- started hacking away at the oil-loosened rust. It was slow work; but we had to cut away big chunks of orange rust if we wanted to open that door. The thought that it might be warm and cozy inside the tree (you'll see how wrong we were about that!) encouraged us to keep working steadily.

The sky overhead was soon completely covered with gray and soot-black clouds. It wasn't long before the first raindrops began to fall.

"Let's give the bolt another try!" Allen shouted. We pulled and pulled. The bolt finally moved about an inch, then wouldn't budge anymore. The rain was coming down in a steady stream now.

"Someone try kicking the bolt down by the latch end and see if that loosens it," said Tim. So Peter and Allen kicked, banged, and shoved on the far end of the bolt while Tim and I tugged from the near end.

The rain started to come down really hard.

"Let's go back to the tent!" Tim shouted above the roar of the rain. "We'll never get in there now."

"Onward!" yelled Peter, as he and Allen kicked and banged even harder. But still no results.

Then it was my turn for the 1,000 watt idea. A few feet away from me I spied a large branch. "Just right for a crow-bar!" I thought. So I grabbed the branch and wedged it under the bolt, braced it against the tree trunk, and lifted. Nothing. The rain was pouring down my face and soaking my clothes. I lifted harder..

"It's coming!" yelled Allen. "Keep lifting! Tim, come down here and give us a hand!"

So the three of them pulled, while I pried at the bolt. Slowly but surely, the bolt raised up out of the latch and began to slide off of the door. We pushed and pulled until the bolt went all the way off the latch, and went crashing to the ground.

"Three cheers for us!" Peter shouted, and did a little dance in the rain.

"Do you mind if we watch your dance from inside the tree-trunk?" Tim asked. "I'm soaked. And we still haven't gotten the door open."

We were so happy to get that bolt out of the way that we forgot that the door might be even tougher to open. It might even be locked.

"Let's try it," I said. There was a large brass ring attached to one side of the door. We all grabbed hold of it

and gave it a giant pull. We were sure that it wouldn't budge at all, but surprise! It opened as smoothly as an automatic door -- smoother, in fact, like it was on a greased track. There was even something weird, even frightening, about the door sliding open like that. It was like somebody -- or something -- made the door really easy to open so that you'd be lured inside.

But we were cold and wet, and the inside looked warm and dry. So in we went.



## BEYOND THE DOOR

The inside of the tree trunk was like a cave -- only a cave made out of wood. It was so big that we couldn't even see across to the other side.

"Shine your flashlight around, Tim," I said. I wanted to get a good look at what we were walking into. So Tim took out his flashlight and aimed it at the far end of the wood-cave.

Allen was the first to see it. "Look at that, would you!" he yelled. "There are two sets of stairs at the other end of the room!"

We couldn't believe it, but there they were: a carved wood banister surrounding a set of spiral stairs that twisted upward to the ceiling, and stone steps that descended downward out of sight. We all followed the beam of Tim's flashlight over to the top of the stairs, then looked up and down.

Next we started discussing which stairs we should try, when a strong blast of wind chilled us right through our wet clothes to the skin.

"Maybe we should close the door and spend the night in here," I suggested. "I can't think of any other place inside 50 miles of here that's going to be any warmer or drier."

"I'm for staying the night here," Tim agreed, "but I don't think we should shut that door. We don't know that

it would open up from this side. But first, let's bring in our backpacks." And once again, as you'll see, Tim's sharp thinking came in very handy -- though we didn't know it at the time.

We fetched our backpacks. The packs themselves were soaked; but luckily, most of the things inside were either dry or only a little wet. So the first thing we did was to put on dry clothes.

"How about a little fire?" Allen suggested.

"Inside a tree? Are you mad?" Peter asked him.

It did seem crazy -- the idea of lighting a fire inside a tree where you were sleeping. But the inside of old King Sequoia was so vast that it seemed like a good idea to me. Tim and Peter, though, said, "No way, not now, not never!" about ten times, so we gave up the idea. I just wanted some more warmth; but I think Allen had in mind cooking up a pizza.

"Say," said Tim, "do you think I should go back and get the tent? It might. . ."

Just then, a loud blast of wind roared into the tree, and, to our horror, started to push the door shut.

"Hey, someone grab the door!" yelled Allen.

We all jumped to our feet and rushed toward the huge iron door as it swung shut. It got darker fast. Then, with a loud thud and a click, the door banged shut.

I didn't like the sound of that click -- like a lock snapping in place. "Everybody shove!" I shouted. We all heaved and pushed, but it was no use. The door was locked. We were trapped inside the tree.

## THE TWO STAIRWAYS

So there we were, locked inside an enormous tree, and no possible way of getting out, as far as we could see. We could hear the storm raging outside; but it sounded far away, like it was raining in another world. And in a way, we were in another world: the pitch-black inside of a giant sequoia tree.

Then all of a sudden Tim switched on his flashlight again. "Man, we're lucky to have our backpacks with us in here. Otherwise no light, no food, no water, no nothing," he said.

"That was good thinking on your part to bring our equipment in here," I said.

"Lucky thinking, you mean," said Allen.

"Neither good nor lucky will do us much good for long," said Peter, "unless we can find a way out of here. We might be able to stretch our food and water supplies out for a week or so. But after that, we either learn to eat tree bark and drink sap or die."

"I just can't understand it," I said, giving the door another useless shove. "After we shoved the bolt out of the latch the door opened right up. There wasn't any snap-lock on the door itself."

"Obviously there was," Peter replied, "or we wouldn't be incarcerated -- locked up, that is -- in here right now."

"The question is," said Tim, "what are we going to do now? We can't just sit around here until the food and water run out."

"Since it seems pretty certain we're not going out that door for awhile," I said, "maybe we should try the stairs."

Tim swung his flashlight in an arc to the top of our room inside King Sequoia. It was like a church in there, with a high ceiling that narrowed to a point about twenty feet up. Now we could see that the spiral steps disappeared through an opening high up in the top of the room. Then Tim threw the flash beam back to the lower stairs. Those stairs seemed a lot darker than before, but probably because the door was shut now.

We gathered up our backpacks and squatted down to discuss strategy. Tim and I would use our flashlights now, so that Peter and Allen could conserve their batteries. Then they all voted me leader -- or, I should say, scout.

"Up or further down?" Peter asked. This time the decision wasn't too hard to make. The steps going downward were a kind of grimy stone, cracked in places, and sprouting weird-looking blue, grey, orange, and black mushrooms. A dark ooze seeped through the cracks in the wall and collected in dirty puddles where the stairs were worn down. And where those stairs stopped going down, we couldn't see. When I flashed my beam down there, it was like the darkness just swallowed the light. And



every now and then we could hear scraping and shuffling sounds, like something was moving around down there -- something big, and something that made the dark its home.

"Up, definitely up," I replied. Everyone agreed, even though the stairs going up looked dangerous enough themselves. There was a single redwood shaft sunk into the stone under our feet that rose up out of sight into that roof; and all around the shaft there were planks of wood fastened to it by wooden struts and thick hunks of rope. The plank stairway rose upward in a corkscrew spiral all the way into the ceiling. It didn't look too sturdy; but the light at the top was definitely more hopeful than the dark at the bottom of the stone steps, so up we went.

The stairs were steep and rickety, so we climbed slowly, with one hand on the central shaft and the other on the rope struts all the way up. By the time we got to the hole in the ceiling, we were all breathing pretty hard.

"Want to rest here?" I asked. "Or should we go on up through the hole?"

"Rest," said Tim. .

"Go," said Allen.

"I don't know -- you decide," said Peter. They were a big help.

And then I dropped the flashlight.

I must have been trying to hold onto the rope and the flashlight at the same time -- I don't know for sure. But

I for sure dropped it, and down it went, waving crazy patterns in the air as it dropped. It made a horrible crash and breaking-glass sound when it hit. Then we heard it roll, then some more thumping sounds that grew fainter and fainter.

"Nice going, Charles," said Allen. "Now we have three lights left."

"Hey, I didn't throw it away, Allen," I yelled back. I felt pretty bad about dropping that flashlight like a klutz, and I didn't need him to remind me how fumble-fingered I was.

"Don't worry about it," Tim said. "We still have three left, and I have some extra batteries. But if we go on up there into the light, we can save some energy in our flashlights."

We all agreed, and I led the way up through the hole in the ceiling.

## THE CHAMBER OF TORCHES

On the other side of the hole we came into a huge room. It was like being in an enormous tree fort, with the wood of the tree sloping up to a point over your head; but bigger, a lot bigger than any tree fort could be. King Sequoia was really huge!

But the amazing thing about the room wasn't its size: it was the torches. All around this upper room, in a great circle, there were a hundred torches blazing away, all fastened to the wall by metal clasps that kept them away from the wood of the tree. And underneath the torches were cases and cases of weapons.

Yes, that's what I said: weapons. Old weapons. There were straight-edged swords and curved swords, shields, chain mail and plate armor, maces, flails, morning stars, spears, daggers, slingshots -- every kind of old-fashioned fighting equipment you could think of. No guns or bullets at all.

And at one end of the room was an immense counter. It was like any counter you'd see in a department store or hotel; but it was huge -- maybe six feet high. In fact, it looked more like a judge's desk, or whatever it is they sit behind in court; except that this one was about 15 feet long, like a counter. And on top of this big counter there was a sign lettered in fancy, old-style script that read:

## ISHAR'S WEAPONS AND MEDICINE SHOP

## BANG GONG FOR SERVICE

"What in the name of Godzilla is this place?" Allen asked in a loud whisper.

"Maybe it's a lost fort... or something," I suggested. I didn't really believe it; but a wild guess was better than nothing right then.

"If this place is that old, then how come the torches are still burning?" Tim wanted to know. That shot my theory.

"Perhaps it could be a movie set," said Peter. Of course nobody had the foggiest idea of where we were or what this room was doing here 100 feet or so up inside an enormous tree somewhere in the North Forest of California. But just guessing helped keep our minds off just how strange the whole setup was.

"No way," said Tim. "In the first place, we didn't see any trucks or cameras or actors or anything outside. And second, that door was really rusted shut. Nobody's been through that door in a long time."

"Except us," Allen corrected him.

"Maybe they use a different entrance," Peter countered. Nobody went along with his movie-set theory; but it made us feel more hopeful to think there might be another way out. For sure we weren't going out the door we came in.

While Tim and Peter and I were trying to outguess each other on the subject of what the place might be, Allen strolled over to the gong and picked up the mallet. I should mention that Allen really loves hitting things. Not people -- hitting rocks with sticks, hitting garbage cans with rocks, or even just hitting garbage can lids against garbage can lids. That's just the way he is. He should have been a drummer.

So as soon as he saw that mallet, he couldn't resist. It was about three feet long, with a solid iron shaft and tipped with a big fuzzy ball of felt. The gong itself was gigantic -- bigger than any of us. It swung suspended from a couple of leather things that held it inside a circular metal frame-stand.

Allen gave it a medium-strength whack with the mallet.

A deep, rich, golden sound started to vibrate the whole room. You could feel the sound shake you all over -- it even made my teeth feel warm! What a sound!

But of course, Allen couldn't stop there. On the next stroke he hauled off and whammed the gong with a homerun swing of the mallet. This time it sounded like every tin can in the world had come crashing down out of the sky onto an aluminum roof. My teeth started shaking like they would vibrate loose out of their gums. Even after I covered my ears, for a long time it felt like someone was using a file on my eardrums. What a noise!

When the racket finally faded out, Peter turned to Tim and me and said, "We have just heard the true sound of Allen's mind."

Allen came on with a Yogi Bear grin. "I guess I did hit it pretty hard," he admitted.

A voice boomed out from behind the counter. "Loud? Loud?? Not as loud as the sound he will make when I cast him down the stairs!"

## ISHAR

We all looked up as a bald head rose up over the top of the counter like a giant orange moon. Then two shaggy eyes appeared. Then a full, bushy red beard, streaked with white. The face peered down at us with a frown. We were all sure that this was a ten-foot high giant who'd trapped us in his tree, and we were finished.

"And who," bellowed the huge red face, "are you?"

We were all scared to death -- all of us except Peter, of course. Like I told you, he's read millions of books where people wind up on strange planets or in weird time warps where every kind of monster roams around. So he wasn't as surprised as the rest of us (or maybe he was just faking it). So he put on his best story-book style and introduced us all to the Big Red Face.

"Allow me to introduce ourselves," said Peter with a sweep of his hands toward the rest of us. "On the far end stands Sir Charles, the best musician and chess player in our fair school."

I felt so good about this compliment (though it's all true, of course), that I smiled at Peter and bowed to the Big Red Face.

"Next to him stands Sir Alien, star football player and whiz-kid in mathematics." This brought on a winning grin

from Allen, who also shuffled his feet and turned red in the face.

"And next to him," Peter continued, "stands Sir Tim the hard-headed." I think Peter meant to say that Tim was always practical and thinking about the realistic things to do; but it sure sounded like he thought Tim had a slow brain. Tim glared at Peter; but Peter went on as if he'd said just the right thing.

"And I am Prince Peter, lord of all the books in the great library, and master of many other skills -- which I am too modest to name." That bit about "Prince" Peter irked me just a little -- why should the rest of us be "Sir" and him "Prince?" But he was lord of all the books in the library, no doubt about that.

Peter concluded his grand introduction with a low bow to the Big Red Face.

"And who are you?" Allen asked bluntly.

"Sir Charles! Prince Peter! Sir Tim!" said the Big Red Face with a snort of disbelief. "Why, I don't believe a word of it. For one thing, you're all too young. And for another, you don't speak like lords. And finally, you can't be 'sir' and 'prince' because this isn't even England. It's. . ." Here the Big Red Face squinted up one eye while he was trying to think of the name of where he was.

"California?" Tim suggested.



"No, no, that's not it at all." The Face squinted the other eye and looked up at the ceiling, like the answer was written up there and he was trying to read it up there.

"America?" I tried.

"No, no, no. Ah, the old memory isn't what it used to be. What does matter, though, is that you're here inside King Sequoia."

We couldn't believe what he'd just said. How did he know the name we'd given to the tree? Had he been out sneaking around our tent at night, listening to our talk about King Sequoia? That seemed pretty unlikely; but I remembered my dream -- or was it a dream? -- about the lights and the groans coming from inside the tree.

"How did you know this tree is called King Sequoia?" Tim asked. He was obviously thinking the same thing I was.

"How do I know?" the Big Red Beard thundered. "How do I know?? I'll have you know I've lived in this tree for 200 years. And before that, for 250 years in the Grand Arbre de Roland in France. And before that, for 400 years in the Niebulungsbaum in Germany. And before that. . ."  
He stopped to catch his breath. "How do I know?" he asked again. "Because I named it, that's why!"

He sure sounded like he was telling the truth. But just how it was that we thought of the name "King Sequoia" before he'd told it to us is still a mystery. Maybe there's

such a thing as mental telepathy. Or maybe the tree itself has a telepathic mind. No -- that's too fantastic. What do you think, reader?

"Just a minute," said the Big Red Beard, "let me come down and get a better look at you." So the red beard and bald head disappeared. We heard footsteps thumping down the stairs that led up behind the counter. And then there he was, standing right in front of us.

He was a dwarf!

I don't mean he was just short, or even super-short. I mean he looked like a real dwarf, like the kind you read about in the Lord of the Rings or "Snow White." His head was at least twice as big as mine, even though he was at least six inches shorter than I am. Shorter, yes -- but you should have seen his chest and arms! His arms looked like oak logs covered with thick brown hair. And his hands looked like they could crush a horseshoe or rip a thick phone book in half without even trying. And that chest -- well, it was covered with a worn shirt made of brown leather and trimmed with copper lions' heads, silver eagles blowing trumpets, and a bronze dragon breathing gold fire. But you could tell that chest filled the shirt without any padding, and must have been 60 inches around, at least!

"Ishar's my name, lads!" he thundered in a loud but good-natured voice. He held out one of those massive hands for Allen to shake.

Allen gripped Ishar's hand, then let out with a loud yell.

"Oh, sorry, my boy," Ishar apologized, "I've been working in the weapons shop all day, and I forgot that I shouldn't shake a hand like I bend an iron blade."

"That's for sure," said Allen as he rubbed his mangled hand gently.

Then all of us started asking questions at once. "Where are we? . . . Do you really live in this tree? . . . Can you tell us how to get out of here? . . ." and so on. Ishar held up his hand to stop the flood of questions.

"One matter at a time," he said with a wide grin on his face. "First, you fellows look pretty wet and hungry. How about some warm ale or cider and a bit of vroat-meat?" -- I'm glad I didn't think to ask what a vroat was -- "You all need to put on at least another 50 pounds of solid flesh and muscles. Well, something to eat and drink right now will rush the energy through your arteries. Then we'll discuss the how and the why of it all together."

So he led us up the stairs, behind the counter, through a thick animal-skin curtain, and into a back room. And I've never, never seen a room like this one. I don't know if I can come close to describing it so you'll get the same feeling of amazement we had. But I'm telling you the story, so I've got to try. Here goes.

## THE WEAPON SHOP

The back room was smaller than the one we just came from. But it was still pretty big; and it was a whole lot fuller. The only light came from an enormous chandelier hanging from the ceiling in the middle of the room. It held about fifty candles that sent out wavering, gloom-edged beams of light across the room.

The walls were entirely covered with shelves and display cases. Some of them had glass doors, others were open, and still others had heavy iron bars across the front, with thick padlocks on the latches. On the shelves and inside the cases were swords, shields, chain-mail armor, and helmets, emerald-crusted drinking goblets, flasks and bottles of every color imaginable (and some I'd never imagined), old scrolls of paper and parchment, wands made out of smoky crystal, wooden staffs carved with snakes' heads, locketts and amulets hanging from gold and silver chains . . . I could go on and on. Some of the things there I'd never seen before. Even Peter didn't know the names of some of the weapons. And he couldn't read the writing on any of the scrolls.

All four of us stared like country tourists in the big city for the first time. Ishar just laughed, and went over to a table in one corner of the room. He gave us some cider that tasted like it had ground-up redwood tree in it, then

sat down to watch us stare our eyes out at his collection. He was having a great time.

And so were we. We even forgot for awhile that we were trapped inside a huge tree with a dwarf who seemed to collect bottles and weapons from the Middle Ages. We just kept going from one case to another, with our eyes bugging out of their sockets in pure wonder. Peter was about to have a heart attack from the excitement.

Rather than just keep on listing all the things we saw, let me describe three of them to you. That should give you a pretty good idea of the variety of what Ishar had in there. But just remember to multiply everything I say by 100, because I couldn't begin to tell you everything, and can't hope to tell you how weird and exciting each case was to us.

In one case there was an old, cracked piece of vellum (Peter says that's sheepskin dried to make a kind of heavy paper). It was faded brown, and had wrinkles all across it like an old man's face. All around the border it was colored black. And printed in an extra fancy script were the words

MALEDICAT DOMINUS

and some more words I couldn't make out. Peter thought that it was written in Latin.

What amazed me was that this little dried up scrap of sheepskin was resting on a little pedestal covered with brown velvet, like it was a valuable jewel.

"What's this piece of paper in here for?" I asked Ishar.

He looked up from his drink and squinted at the case I was looking at. "Aha! You are looking at a genuine Papal Curse, son. Made for Innocent the Third himself, no less."

I had no idea who or what "Innocent the Third" might be, but I tried to look impressed.

"What does it do?" I asked.

"Recite it, and there's a 25% chance that any monsters you meet will run from you bellowing with terror. And for all undead monsters, the chances are 50%."

"Undead monsters?" I asked. I didn't have the foggiest idea what he was talking about. Or maybe I did, just a little, and wanted him to explain some more.

"That's right," he went on, as if I'd known all about undead monsters all my life. "But, of course, you've got to be a druid to use the curse. And even then, there's still a good chance the fiends won't be affected, and they'll attack you anyway. But it's still a good buy, even with those odds, when you think of what those things can do to you."

"Buy!?" I thought. Surely these things weren't for sale. I was about to question Ishar further on this point, when Allen pulled me over to another case.

"Charles! Take a look at this!" said Allen in an excited whisper. "What a bashing you could deal out with this club!" He was pointing to a short stick, maybe two and a half feet

long, with a heavy flange of iron fastened at one end. I'd seen things like that before -- they're called maces -- but never one like this. The handle end was capped with a tiny but perfectly-shaped lion's head, with rubies set in its eyes. The wood of the handle wasn't like any kind of wood I'd ever seen before. It had an orange grain streaked with swirls of dark silver. The head of the mace was pure platinum, and it gave off a faint silver glow, like it was lit from within by an invisible light source. It was beautiful -- but it had nicks and scratches on the head and handle, and one of the lion's ears was missing. This obviously wasn't just a show weapon. It had been used, and used hard.

Ishar saw us staring at that lovely mace, and walked over to join us in front of its case. "Ah, that's one of my very favorite pieces. It's not only a fine weapon: it has three strong spells locked up in it, too. Let me show you how it works." He took out a large bundle of iron keys, selected one, and unlocked the case. Then he grasped the mace firmly and drew it out.

"It has a good, warlike heft in the hand," he said, handing it to Allen. "Give it a swing."

Allen took the mace with an eager smile. Then a look of surprise came over his face. "Hey, this thing is light as a piece of balsa wood," he said. "Wouldn't it crack in two if you hit something heavy with it?"

"Not at all," Ishar said. "In fact, the wood is indestructible -- you couldn't even burn it. And it's got the striking power of a 40-pound sledge hammer."

I was afraid that Allen might try to test it out on something right there in the shop. But he gave it back to Ishar -- slowly. Allen obviously would liked to have kept that lovely little war hammer for himself.

"Now," said Ishar, "watch this."

He took a small coin from his pocket and threw it high up into the air. In a flash he spun the mace over so that he was holding it by the club end, and pointed the lion's head up at the spinning coin. There was a loud crack, like the sound of sudden thunder, and a thin blue bolt of lightning forked out of the lion's mouth and struck the coin. The coin spun upward in a molten blaze, then dropped to the ground. I picked it up. It was a shapeless lump of charred silver.

My mouth was still hanging open when Ishar flipped the mace back over in his hand, pointed the club end at Allen, and said, "and now for power number two."

A pale white beam of cone-shaped light crept forth from the mace. It seemed strange to see light moving so slowly, but it was still moving faster than a man could run. Allen stared at the approaching beam for maybe a second.

"What. . ." Allen began. And that's as far as he got. The beam bathed him in its ghostly light, and seemed to



wrap itself around him like a glowing blanket. Allen slumped to the floor.

"What did you do to him?" I yelled, and ran over to where Allen had dropped to the floor. I was relieved to see that he was still breathing.

"If you've hurt our friend. . ." Tim said ominously. I don't think that the three of us would have stood a chance against Ishar. But we were scared and mad, and we would have given it a try.

"No need to worry, lads," said Ishar, laughing. "He's only sound asleep -- very sound asleep. As you can see, this mace casts a 100% accurate sleep spell. You can use it only twice a day, and it must be recharged after every ten uses. But it always works on creatures less than ten feet tall."

"How can we be certain he's unharmed?" Peter asked. But he was looking at that mace, not at Ishar or Allen. I bet Peter would have given everything he owned for that mace.

"Give him a good shaking and he'll come to," said Ishar.

But Allen looked so peaceful down there on the floor that we decided to let him rest. We could still see him breathing quietly, so we felt better about letting him lie there.

"You mentioned three spells," said Peter, who was still eyeing the mace. "What is the third spell you spoke of?"

Ishar gave him a quick look with raised eyebrows. "That, my fellows, you may not know. For none but its owner may know the secret of the mace Palaro."

"Palaro -- is that the name of the mace?" I asked.

"Palaro it is," said Ishar as he put the mace back on its shelf and locked the case.

"Palaro," said Peter to himself, "Palaro. . ."

Just then Tim called out to us. "Peter, Charles, come over here and take a look at this bottle!"

We all (except Allen) gathered around the case that Tim was staring into. It was a small case; but the glass front was criss-crossed with stout iron bars. Inside it, resting on a cushion of black silk was a tiny bottle, no bigger than my little finger. Tim was looking at it like he was hypnotized.

"Do you see those patterns?" Tim asked. His voice sounded far away, and kind of sleepy.

I looked. The bottle itself was made of a pure, thin crystal, with a teardrop-shaped stopper of a smokier color. Inside the bottle was an incredibly beautiful gold liquid that seemed to swirl and bend and twist like it was alive. For a few seconds it would tumble around slowly, giving off flash reflections from the candles in the ceiling. Then it would churn around like a living creature, and a soft glow seemed to come out of its center.

I bent down in front of the case to look even closer. I saw -- or I thought I saw -- that the glow wasn't just a shapeless pattern. I could see figures: hundreds of tiny people all rising up out of the ground and flying up into

the air. I looked even closer, and saw that they all seemed to be coming out of little crosses that were planted on a hillside.

Then it hit me: those crosses were gravestones. All those people were rising up from the dead, out of their graves, and flying up, up, up into the heavens. And in the sky were hundreds and hundreds of winged men and women, who circled around the tombstones as the people -- or ghosts -- came out of them.

All of this inside a tiny bottle no bigger than my little finger!

I don't know how long I stood there peering into the golden depths of that liquid. I kept trying to get closer to the bottle. I felt that if I could just get a little closer, I could hear the angels singing. . .

I felt a strong hand on my shoulder. "Better back up a bit, lad," said Ishar, pulling me away from that incredible flask. "You can go mad watching that bottle if you're not careful."

All three of us were dazed and groggy, like we'd just travelled a million miles to another world and back. "What is that?" I asked weakly. I felt like I could sleep for a month. So tired. . .

"The Golden Waters of Resurrection," Ishar answered. His voice was serious when he told us the name.

"What do they do?" Tim asked. He was sitting on the floor now, trying to rub the sleep out of his eyes.

"That liquid can restore the dead to life," Ishar answered. "Pour it into the dead man's lips and he will return to life completely healthy."

We all wondered at that. If those Golden Waters of Resurrection would do what Ishar said it would, that bottle would be one of the most valuable things in the world. You could name any price for it -- if you'd want to sell it.

But Ishar must have guessed our thoughts again. "The vial of Golden Waters is priceless, of course," he said. "And there have only been 14 of them discovered since the opening of the first dungeon, and that was many a century ago."

My mind was spinning: Dungeon? First dungeon? Golden Waters of Resurrection? The magic mace Palaro? A dwarf named Ishar who claimed he'd lived inside a giant tree which, as somehow we knew even before we met him, was named King Sequoia?

I guess my mind overloaded. Sleep pulled my eyelids shut tight.

## GOOD NEWS, BAD NEWS

When I awoke, the first thing I saw was Ishar sitting in his chair, writing away in a large brown book on top of his table. It still seemed like night to me, because it was dark and the candles still sent out their gloomy light. But of course, it would always be like this inside old King Sequoia. Luckily, though, I had on a digital watch. It showed that the time was 10:00 o'clock in the morning.

And we were due back at the road to meet my dad in three days.

I heard Allen stirring next to me on the floor. "What hit me?" he asked as he rubbed the sleep from his eyes.

"The sleep spell of the mace Palaro," said Peter, who was searching through his pack for some breakfast. I guess he was too shy to ask Ishar for some food. Or maybe he didn't want to find out what Vroat-meat was.

"We must have been hypnotized by that bottle," said Tim. "I saw the strangest things happening inside it."

"And you'll be finding many stranger things before you leave the tree, my boys, many stranger things -- and more deadly," said Ishar from across the room. We all thought he was absorbed in his book. But Ishar, as we learned much later, was a man who could do many things at once; and do them all well, too.

Ishar's words sent a shiver up my spine. What did he mean, "more deadly?" Were there bears or rattlers inside King Sequoia? I didn't know for sure, but I had the feeling he wasn't talking about bears and rattlers. I might have been happy if all he meant was bears and rattlers. But after all, I told myself, that was all that was left in California that might be dangerous to people -- except, maybe, other people. Were there some kind of killers down there? Or maybe some kind of scorpions or black widow spiders? I was all ready to ask Ishar a few important questions, when Allen spoke up.

"Hey, you guys," he said, standing up and stretching, "I think we'd better ask Ishar how we can get out of here. I mean, this is a fantastic place and everything; but if we want to get back to the road in time to meet Charles's dad, we'd better find a way right now."

We all agreed.

And we all agreed that Peter should be the one to approach Ishar with the questions that would get us out of here. Since Ishar looked and acted like a storybook character, Peter seemed like the best one to deal with him. So the rest of us broke out some tins of food from our backpacks while Peter went over to talk with Ishar.

While the three of us were eating, we kept sneaking looks over at Peter and Ishar. Ishar seemed to be doing most of the

talking, with Peter just nodding or shaking his head once in a while. Finally, after about fifteen minutes, Peter joined us at our breakfast on the floor of Ishar's Weapon Shop.

We all looked at Peter. He didn't say a word.

"Well, come on, Peter," Allen said. "Is there a way out of here or not?"

Peter still didn't say anything. He just sat there looking thoughtful. We were starting to fear the worst.

"Is it good news or bad news?" I asked.

"Good news and bad news, Peter answered. "First the good news: there is a way out of King Sequoia. In fact, there are three ways out, not even counting the iron door entrance. Apparently the nearest exit is about a mile from the foot of the stairs."

"Hooray!" Allen shouted. "Let's get going then. What are we waiting for?"

Somehow, Peter didn't look as cheerful as he should have, considering he'd just told us there were ways to get out of the tree. But, of course, there was still the bad news part to come.

Tim guessed part of the trouble pretty quickly. "I'll bet we have to go down those dark stairs at the bottom to get back out."

"Yes," Peter said slowly, "and that's not all. All of the paths lead through a dungeon."

"A dungeon!?" we all yelled at once. Ishar turned around and smiled. I think he was actually enjoying watching us take in the mind-slammng news.

"You don't mean a real dungeon, like they used to have in castles hundreds and hundreds of years ago?" I asked.

"Something like that," Peter answered, "except that in those days a dungeon generally consisted of only a few cells for holding prisoners and a torture chamber."

Peter's talk was giving me the shivers. But as he talked to us, Peter himself seemed to get more and more excited. There was even a smile on his face now. "He's actually enjoying this mess!" I thought to myself. "He really wants to go into that dungeon!"

But like it or not, it was beginning to look like we were all going into it if we wanted to come out on the other side. Dead or alive.

"Wait a minute," said Tim. "You said that we'd have to go a mile to the nearest exit. Are you trying to tell us that this dungeon is a mile long?"

"That's exactly what I'm telling you," Peter answered. He was up and pacing back and forth in front of us right now, like he was ready to take off into that dungeon any second. Sometimes Peter is one hundred percent looney.

"According to Ishar," Peter continued, "there is a whole network of passageways leading out from King Sequoia. The south passageway, may I remind you, is the shortest one. And



according to Ishar, it's also the easiest. So I believe we should try that one -- after we're all armed, of course."

"Armed?" I asked. "What do you mean, 'armed!?' There's nothing really dangerous down there, is there?"

Another gleeful smile crept across Peter's face. "Don't you remember Ishar's words when he said we'd be finding stranger and more dangerous things in here than the Golden Waters of Resurrection?" He paused for a dramatic effect. "There is most assuredly something down there more dangerous than a spell-binding bottle," he said in a voice straight out of the monster movies.

My head was spinning with thoughts of going down those stairs to face -- whatever it was that lived and lurked down there. Tim, though, was right back asking sensible questions.

"How are we supposed to arm ourselves? The deadliest weapon I've got is a Boy Scout pocket knife."

"I asked Ishar the same question," said Peter. "Apparently he's willing to do some trading with us."

"That I am," boomed Ishar's voice. He'd been listening to our whole conversation with a smile of delight on his bushy face. "Now come over here by my business table, and let's see what you have to offer for Ishar's fine weapons."

## FIGHTERS, MAGICIANS, AND DRUIDS .

We all gathered around Ishar's business table. He was seated in his tall-backed wooden chair carved with dragons and scrolls. In front of him was his accounts ledger. Ishar was ready to do business.

But not until he answered some questions for us.

"Before we get started," said Tim, "let me ask you a straight question, Mr. Ishar. Are you sure you can't just open the door down there and let us out of here the same way we came in?"

Ishar gave Tim a disappointed look. "I'm surprised at you, young fellow. Where's your spirit for adventure? Sure there's danger down there in King Sequoia's dungeon. But there's excitement, too. And adventure. And. . ." He paused here for dramatic effect, ". . .there's treasure, too! No one's been down there for years, so far as I know. So all the creatures will have gathered up some fat treasures by now -- yours for the taking, if you can stand a little risk and some bold fighting."

But Tim wouldn't be put off the track that easily.

"If no one's been down there for years," he asked, "then where does all that treasure come from?"

Ishar looked at him innocently. "Did I say no one has been down there for years? My mistake, lad. What I meant to say was that no one has come out of there for years."

That might explain where the treasure came from, all right. But it didn't make me any too eager to go dancing down there and try to get it away from some ten-ton monster.

"So can we or can't we get out of here through that big iron door?" Tim asked again. At this point, you understand, we only wanted to get out of there as fast and as monster-free as we could.

"You tried it yourselves, didn't you?" asked Ishar. That didn't exactly answer the question. I had the growing suspicion that Ishar could walk down there and open that door any time he wanted to; but he had made up his mind we were going through the dungeon, and that was that.

"Oh we tried, all right," said Peter, "but we thought that perhaps you might have some knowledge of door-opening that we, at present, lack."

Ishar regarded Peter carefully. "In fact," he said, "there is a way to open that door -- an easy way."

We all gave a shout of joy. But Ishar cut our happiness short.

"Unfortunately, you need a second-level magician's spell to open it," he continued. And none of you has any experience points -- yet."

"And just what exactly are experience points?" Peter wanted to know. In spite of the trouble we were in, Peter was getting interested in our situation -- as only he could. Treasure,

adventure, monsters -- just the sort of thing he's always reading about.

"It's very simple, really," Ishar explained. "The more adventuring you do, the more experience you gain. Whenever you fight a monster, you gain experience points. Whenever you use a spell correctly, you gain experience points. Fighting, spell-casting, bravery, shrewdness, acquiring magical items -- everything you do that shows you have courage and intelligence adds to your experience. And after you've accumulated enough experience points, you advance a level."

"A level of what?" I asked. I had the feeling we were getting into something big and complicated, as well as dangerous. But our lives were going to depend on our knowing the nature of this fantastic game, so I wanted to ask all my questions now. I didn't want to be down there away from Ishar, and suddenly have a life-or-death question facing me that I could have asked him here and now. Better to know now than to be wondering in front of a monster, I thought.

Ishar pushed himself back from the table, took out a long, smoke-blackened pipe, lit up, puffed for a bit, then began his explanation.

"Yes," he began, "you're certainly entitled to know exactly what you're getting into, and what your choices are. So here they are:

"Before you start out, you must choose one of the three basic classes to belong to: fighters, magicians, or druids.

Once you've made your choice, you have to stick with it. There's no changing classes in the middle of the dungeon.

"If you choose to be a fighter, you can use any armor or weapon you want. But you can never cast any spells. You can use enchanted weapons or armor, and certain kinds of magic rings, potions, or amulets. But you can never employ magical scrolls, wands, or staves of any kind.

"If you choose to be a magician, you can use any spell at all -- provided your mind is powerful enough to cast it. Scrolls and wands you may use -- when you find them. But you may never use any physical weapon other than a simple dagger. And you may not wear armor.

"Then there is a third class that lies between the other two. If you want some of the advantages of both classes, you may elect to become a druid. A druid may use weapons and armor -- but he may use no edged weapons, like swords or knives or even arrows. And he must avoid shedding blood whenever possible. And finally, he may use druidical spells -- spells which, on the whole, are less powerful than magicians' spells, but good spells nevertheless."

After Ishar's speech we were all quiet for a long time. Each of us was thinking over the choices that Ishar had given us. It was a tough decision -- but an exciting one, too. We were about to make decisions that would determine our lives, powers, and characters as long as we were in the dungeon --

and who could say? Maybe even longer. Once we saw that the only way out of King Sequoia was through the dungeon, and that we would have special powers while we were travelling through it, all of us started getting into the spirit of the adventure. This was a once in a lifetime chance. We might never have another adventure like this again, as long as we lived.

-- Assuming, of course, that we would live through it.

For two of us, at least, there was no problem about what class to join. Like I said before, Peter is usually slow to make up his mind about anything. But not this time. "I'm definitely going to be a magic user," he said. I thought that's the class he would choose. He's just the one who would really get into casting spells and working all kinds of magic.

"The fighting class for me," said Allen. Again, no surprise to me. Allen is big and strong, and would be the best one among us to handle any heavy fighting we might have to do. He'd even taken classes in fencing and karate last summer. So his choice was perfect for him, and for the rest of us.

Tim was next. He looked thoughtful for a long time, but finally made his choice. "This is a tough decision," he said, "but I think I'll become a magic-user too. I'm still not exactly sure what I'll be able to do, though." Again, I think the right decision was made. Tim and I are both medium height, and we don't have the muscle on our frames that Allen has. So

Tim was right in choosing a class that would let him use powers that didn't take a lot of physical strength. And he's got a sharp mind, which is what Ishar said all magicians need.

As usual, Tim wanted to ask Ishar all kinds of questions about the magic-users class he'd just joined. But Ishar cut him off, and said, "First, let Charles decide on his class. Then we'll discuss what powers you'll have, and how you'll get them."

All eyes turned to me. My problem is that I wanted to be both a fighter and a magic-user. It was also true that I'd never handled a weapon or cast a spell before (none of us, of course, had ever done that!). But I wanted to try them both. So I compromised.

"I think I'll choose the druid class," I said, after a few minutes of thought.

"Fine, my boys, fine," he boomed out after I announced my choice. "You'll have a well-balanced force." Then he stopped for a moment and looked us over critically, like he was thinking about our chances of survival. "Of course, you'd be better off with another strong-armed fighter or two. But with luck, and the right spells, and brave hearts, you'll probably survive."

That speech didn't sound too encouraging to me. But the other three fellows were ready to go down there and stomp all the monsters in the world. It was Tim, though, who got us back on the right track by asking questions.

"How can we get the weapons and the spells and the armor we're going to need down there? And what if we get hurt? I don't suppose there are any doctors around here, are there?"

"There's no doctor down there in the dungeon, to be sure," said Ishar. "But there's medicine aplenty up here. And weapons. And even spells. But they're not free. I have to make a living, you know."

Somehow, I just couldn't understand why Ishar would need money. Where would he spend it? I couldn't see him walking into a department store in San Francisco and buying a television set. And besides, if he'd been living inside this tree for 200 years, without going outside, why did he need to buy anything at all?

But I didn't start questioning him about all that. The real question for us was, what would he take as money? Or trade?

As if he'd been reading my mind, Ishar said, "O.K., boys, let's talk business. I'm sure you have no gold, which is the one true kind of money up here and down there in the dungeon." He was right about that, unless he was willing to pull out a couple of my teeth. "But open up your backpacks, and let's see what you might have to trade."

The four of us looked at each other. What could we possibly have that this fantastic dwarf could want? What could you offer to someone who owned the mace Palaro and the Golden



Waters of Resurrection, plus a whole shopful of wonders?

I was beginning to think that the whole process of choosing whether to be a fighter or a magician or a druid was useless. What good would it be to choose the fighting class if you couldn't afford a sword?

But we had to try. So we fetched our backpacks and emptied their contents onto the floor. Then began a tough trading session with Ishar.

## BUYING AND TRADING

Ishar started off: "Now first of all, adventurers, you'll be needing food and water. I've got some nice salted vroat-meat here, or some choice cuts of wyvern. . ."

"We've got plenty of food," I said, and showed him some packets of freeze-dried stew, lasagne, dried fruit, and other untasty but portable camping food.

Ishar took a packet of the stew, looked at it, and frowned. "Are you trying to tell me there's stew in here?" He shook the packet. "Sounds like dried leaves to me."

Luckily for us, Allen had a brainstorm as he was watching Ishar puzzle over the stew-packet. "Let me do the talking," Allen said to the rest of us in a whisper.

Then he turned to Ishar, who was still studying the stew packet like it was some kind of new spell -- which, I guess, it was for him: a magician's meal that you conjure up out of water and what looks like dried weeds. But I never would have thought of the line Allen was about to throw at Ishar.

"This stuff -- I mean, this fantastic food is one of the greatest achievements of the world since you've been outside," Allen said, with what sounded like real enthusiasm. "All you need to do is add water, heat it, and it turns into a delicious, savory, mouth-watering bowl of beef stew. Now how about it -- what will you give us for this incredibly

delicious magic meal in a bag?"

Allen had just neatly turned the tables on Ishar. Instead of us trying to bargain for something Ishar wanted, now Allen had Ishar thinking about bargaining for something Ishar wanted -- or, we hoped he would.

Ishar was obviously interested. I suppose if I had been living on monster meat and mushrooms for a couple hundred years, I'd be pretty excited about changing my diet, too. "Well," he said, "you lads are probably selling me a batch of dried weeds for a stew, but I'll trust you. I'll give you one used sword for this packet. And it had better be as good as you say it is, or I'll come hunting for you!"

And believe me, I was sure that Ishar would be out looking for us with a sour look on his face and the mace Palaro set for lightning bolts after he'd tried that stew. But Allen went on like he was giving Ishar the deal of the century.

"Only one sword for this juicy, tender, savory stew? No way! We'll trade for two swords and two maces for one packet, and you're getting a good deal!"

Oh man, I thought. When Ishar tastes that crummy mush he'll bash us into such little pieces that not even the Golden Waters of Resurrection will bring us back to life.

But Ishar only replied, "Four weapons from Ishar's shop for one meal in a bag? Be reasonable, lad. Only one of you can use a sword anyway."

He was right, of course. Allen had forgotten that only fighters could use swords. "All right," said Allen, as if he were making a big concession to Ishar, "how about a sword, a mace, and two daggers?"

"Too high," said Ishar, "but, ahhhh, how many of those packets do you have?"

I was about to tell Ishar the truth, when Allen spoke up again with a little bit of an untruth. "Only three," he said -- which was right: we only had three left apiece. But Allen kept the ball rolling on his sell-job. "Remember, Ishar, these magic packets of delicious, tasty stew are really expensive. Only a few people buy them for dinners because they cost so much."

Now, this was really laying it on thick -- but he wasn't lying all the way. The stuff is expensive -- but not because it's such a gourmet's delight. And very few people do eat it for dinner; but not just because of the price. It tastes terrible, like I said, and you only eat it when you have to -- which is when you take long backpacking trips, and you need food that's light and easy to carry, but full of energy-vitamins.

Oh well -- Allen was doing a great job bargaining for us, so what did I care if he was dressing up the truth in fancy clothes?

As long as Ishar liked the stew well enough not to hunt us down.

Ishar looked at the packet again. "Well, as a favor to you beginning adventurers, I'll give you the weapons for all three packets."

What a deal, I thought! But Allen wasn't satisfied.

"Throw in a couple of shields for Charles and me," he said, "and it's a deal."

Ishar thought for a minute. "They'll only be wooden shields -- no fancy iron or bronze," he said.

"Fair enough," said Allen, with a big smile on his face. He took out his other two stew-packets and laid them on the table. "Just pour the packet into heated water, let it cook for five minutes, then settle down and enjoy the meal of a lifetime."

Allen still had half a dozen mini-pizzas in his backpack; so he didn't mind letting that stew go. I don't think Ishar would have gone for the pizza, anyway.

So Ishar wrote the deal down in his book, then walked over to one of the big brown trunks that stood by the doorway that led out into the front of the weapons shop. He opened the lid, rummaged around for awhile, then finally pulled out a sword, then a mace, then two daggers. From another trunk he pulled out a couple of shields. He lifted the whole bundle in his arms, brought it over to us, then let all the stuff fall to the floor with a crash at our feet.

"Here you are, young adventurers," he said with a smile.

"A bit used, I'm afraid. But they'll still deal out blows

and help keep monster claws off your skin, if you use them right."

"A bit used" -- that was the understatement of the year. But what could we expect for three packets of freeze-dried stew? Allen's sword had so many nicks on the blade, it could have passed for a hacksaw. And the leather on the handle was worn right through to the metal in two or three places. But there wasn't a bit of rust anywhere on the sword. And the blade was as sharp as a razor.

"These weapons may be old and worn," said Ishar with pride in his voice, "but you'll never find a dull blade or a spot of rust on a weapon from the Shop of Ishar."

My mace looked like it was in pretty sorry shape, too. The handle was wrapped with leather thongs, and it felt good and tight to the grip. But there were several strands hanging loose like pieces of dirty spaghetti. The iron head was in good shape, though, even if there were nicks and chips and scratches in it.

One nice touch, though, is that my mace had a lion's head at the end of the handle. It didn't have jewels or lightning bolts, like the mace Palaro; and the lion's nose was caved in, like someone had mashed it flat in a fight. But I liked that lion anyway. I promised myself that I'd clean him up and fix his nose as soon as possible.

Those weapons were the best deal we got in the trading. After that, Ishar was stiffer with us. It cost us Tim's Boy Scout knife for some leather armor that smelled like old horses. And the shields were nothing great, either.

We must have looked pretty strange carrying swords and shields and backpacks over our leather armor. But none of us cared how we looked, so long as we could get out on the other side of the dungeon.

We were all ready to go, when Ishar came up with the most generous offer of the century.

"Well, lads," he said, "you're off for a great adventure, and that's the truth. But two of you are magic-users, and one a druid; but not a one of you has a spell. Now, since there's no use in your being magicians or druids without having any special powers, I'm going to give each of you one spell you can cast. These spells don't work well outside the dungeon. In fact, they usually don't work at all out there in the ordinary world. But down there in the dungeon you'll find them a powerful help. And what's more, you can use them every time you go through a dungeon."

Every time! Did he think we'd want to come back here once we'd escaped? It sounded to me like Ishar had lost his mind. But, as you'll find out later, Ishar knew what he was talking about. Anyway, we were so happy that he would be giving us the spells free, we shouted for joy, slapping Ishar on his broad back in gratitude.

He reached into another chest -- this was a small iron chest that he kept under his table -- and pulled out two long sheets of paper. One was headed "SPELLS: MAGIC-USERS ONLY" and the other read "SPELLS: DRUIDS ONLY."

"Here you are, adventurers," said Ishar with a wide smile. "Take your pick. But only one spell each."

Peter and Tim looked at their list. Here it is, as well as I can remember:

DETECT MAGIC  
HOLD PORTAL  
READ MAGIC  
READ LANGUAGES  
PROTECTION FROM EVIL  
LIGHT  
CHARM PERSON  
SLEEP

And here's what my list of druid spells looked like:

CURE LIGHT WOUNDS  
PURIFY FOOD AND WATER  
DETECT MAGIC  
DETECT EVIL  
PROTECTION FROM EVIL  
LIGHT

Tim and Peter and I looked over the lists eagerly. We asked Ishar about all of them, but we finally began to settle on the ones we were pretty sure we would want.

"First of all," Tim said, "will these spells really do what I hope they'll do? And second, how exactly does a Charm Person spell work?"

"First question: yes, definitely yes. Second question: ah, the Charm Person spell! That's a good one. At your level,



you can use it only once a day. But with it you can charm from one to four humanoid creatures."

"Humanoid?" Tim asked.

"Right -- like goblins, kobolds, orcs, elves, dwarves -- things that are basically like us. Humans and lesser monsters."

Goblins! Orcs? Kobolds!? I remember reading about orcs in the Tolkein books. And they didn't sound like "lesser monsters" to me. I was beginning to think this dungeon might be very, very dangerous.

"Ah, just what are some of the toughest monsters down there?" I asked. I wanted to be prepared for the worst.

Ishar stopped to consider my question. "Well, lad, it's been a long time since I've been through the dungeon. I'm getting too old for adventuring myself, you know. And my shop here keeps me busy most of the time. But the most dangerous creatures I remember were the dragons and the balrogs -- except for the demons, of course. But the really huge and dangerous monsters are much farther down in the dungeon than the first level. And the demons rarely leave the plains of hell, unless they're summoned. Don't worry yourself about the first level, though. The balrogs and dragons rarely come up this far."

I had some more questions, but Peter broke in with a question of his own. "What does a Hold Portal spell accomplish?" he wanted to know.

"That one," said Ishar, "will keep any door open or closed for thirty minutes. It's a handy spell if you're trying to keep something or someone from following you through a door. And it's handy for keeping doors open, too."

"If we'd had that one when we first stepped inside the tree," I said, "we wouldn't be in here now."

"A true observation," Peter said, "but useless in our present circumstances."

Peter and Tim questioned Ishar closely about the other spells. But they finally decided on Hold Portal for Tim and Charm Person for Peter. Peter almost chose the Read Magic spell -- he was sure we would find some magic spells down there to decipher. But the rest of us convinced him that we needed an anti-monster spell even more.

For me, the choice came down to two spells: Detect Evil, or Cure Light Wounds. From all the hints Ishar had dropped, I figured that a spell to detect the presence of evil might be pretty useful. But on the other hand, if there was any fighting and people got hurt, it would be a good thing to be able to cure them.

So I chose Cure Light Wounds.

"How do we operate these spells?" Tim asked, once we had all made our choices. I still wasn't sure these so-called spells would work at all. But if they would, Tim was right: we should know exactly how to use them.

"Good question," said Ishar. "Now, the first thing you have to understand is that these spells come from different times and different lands. And so, different powers lie behind them, and different spirits must be invoked if they are to work properly. For the Hold Portal spell, you must recite the words 'By the Ka of Thoth, I command this portal to hold fast!' Thoth was an ancient Egyptian god; and the Pharoahs often invoked his aid to keep thieves from opening the doors to their tombs."

"Did it work for the Pharoahs?" Tim asked. Since he'd taken the Hold Portal spell, he wanted to make sure old Thoth was still around to come to his aid.

"Of course it worked," said Ishar. "But even strong spells decay with the passage of time. During the course of thousands of years, the spell weakened, and tomb robbers broke into the Pharoahs' chambers. But you won't be needing to work the spell for a thousand years. Thirty minutes is all you should need."

"How might I best use the Charm Person?" Peter wanted to know.

"Ah, the Charm Person spell!" said Ishar with relish. "Now that spell comes straight from Merlin, the greatest magician who ever lived. Unfortunately, though, he gave the secret of this spell to a witch named Vivien, who used it on him. Nobody has seen or heard of him since."

"Boy, isn't that just like a woman?" Allen said with disgust.

"You mean, 'Isn't that just like a man?' don't you?" Ishar corrected him. "But at any rate, to use the spell you must wave your arms like this, and move your feet like this, while looking directly into your victim's eyes." To demonstrate, Ishar looked directly into Allen's eyes and went through the complicated dance-and-hand-mime that was supposed to make the spell work. Allen looked puzzled; but he didn't look charmed.

"It didn't work," said Allen. He seemed relieved that the spell didn't have any effect. Maybe he thought he might be charm-proof.

"Of course it didn't," said Ishar. "I'm not a magic-user. The only spells I can use are connected with weapons."

"Like the Sleep spell in the mace Palaro?" I asked.

"Exactly," said Ishar.

Peter went off into another part of the room to practice the spell-dance. It looked a little ridiculous to me. But if it worked, that's what counted.

Ishar regarded Peter's efforts critically. "You've got it," he said. "You certainly learn quickly. Very good -- you'll find that it's an asset to learn fast down there in the dungeon."

Next it was my turn. Ishar came over to me, took me aside, and said, "Young adventurer, you have chosen the most humane

spell of the three. It's a great responsibility to use; but in many ways it's the best spell of all, because it doesn't cause pain: it relieves it.

"So now: what you have to do is to place your hands -- both of them -- over the wound you want to cure. Soon -- within a few seconds -- the wound will disappear from the hurt person -- but it will appear on you! Now, don't panic when you take on the wound. In one minute's time the wound will start to fade away from your body. In five minutes, it will be all gone. It's an old medicine man style of healing; but if you like fancy words, it's called empathic curing. At first, you'll suffer from the pain of the wound just as much as the person who's been cured. So you'll have to grit your teeth while the cure is taking place.

"One more matter: at your beginning level of experience, you can usually cure each person only once a day. Some rare talents can do it twice; but only expect it once."

After we'd all learned our spells, the four of us assembled in the front room at the top of the stairs. We wore our packs over the armor, and the shields were slung over our shoulders.

Ishar gave each of us a slap on the shoulders ( or, I should say, on the armor over the shoulders). "Best of luck to you, adventurers. Perhaps you'll return some day and tell old Ishar all about what happened down in the dungeon." His huge red beard fanned out as he gave us a parting smile; then he turned back, and disappeared behind the counter.

I sort of hated to leave Ishar's shop, and not just because it was cozy and safe and warm. All of us had gotten to like that bushy-faced old dwarf.

But we had to get out of King Sequoia, so down the stairs we went.

## INTO THE DUNGEON

We worked our way carefully back down the stairs that led from Ishar's shop to the ground level. It was tricky trying to climb down those steep stairs with all the armor, shields, and weapons strapped to us. But we got to the bottom, and took a last look up at the light shining from Ishar's shop. It seemed dim and far away.

"I kind of hated to leave there," said Allen, adjusting the armor on his chest and back. "I wonder if we'll ever see him again?"

"I wonder if we'll ever see anyone again," Tim said in a dreary voice.

"Where's your spirit of adventure?" Peter asked, trying to make his voice sound like Ishar's deep baritone. But even Peter was casting longing looks up towards Ishar's shop.

"Well," I said, "we're not getting anywhere by standing here. Let's go."

We headed for the down-stairs that led into the dungeon. But suddenly Tim cried out "Stop!"

We all got very quiet. "Did you hear that?" Tim asked in a whisper as he pointed down the stairway.

We listened some more. For a minute, we didn't hear anything. Then came some low croaking sounds, like several people with deep, hoarse voices whispering to each other. Then silence again.

"What do you think that was?" Tim asked.

"Let's go down and find out," I said, trying to sound like I meant business. Actually, I was just as scared as everyone else, and maybe more so. But we couldn't just stand there all week listening for spooky noises. We had to go down there sometime and face the danger.

"You lead the way," said Allen.

"Wait a minute!" I said in a shout-whisper. "You're the fighter of the group, and you've got the sword. Why don't you lead?"

"You've got a mace," Allen countered. "And besides, we chose you as leader, remember?"

I started to argue, but I stopped myself. It was true that I was the one who got us into this mess by leading us to the tree in the first place. And besides, there was no use standing there all day arguing with Allen and waiting for the monsters to come upstairs to find out what the commotion was about.

So I said, "All right, I'll lead. Peter, you stay right behind me, and be ready to flash that Charm Person spell on the first moving thing you see. Tim, you come in third, and watch every door we come to, so you can keep it open or closed when we go through it. Allen, you bring up the rear, in case anything pounces on us from behind. But if you hear us yelling for help up front, come running



with your sword swinging. Peter and Tim, you keep your flashlights going."

"Flashlight!" said Tim suddenly. "Charles, where's that flashlight you dropped?"

We looked around. No flashlight.

"Maybe it rolled down the stairs," Allen suggested.

"Maybe it did," I said. "Let's go and see."

So we all took our places, and slowly wound our way down the spiraling staircase into the dungeon itself.

The steps were worn and slick and slippery. Some kind of ooze seemed to be seeping through the jagged cracks that ran like lightning zigzags through the stones. Here and there deadly-looking mushrooms sprouted like little grey and blue umbrellas from the cracks in the steps and the walls. The walls were made of the same stone as the steps, and they seemed to be weeping dirty tears.

Down, down we went, as the stairs spiraled and shifted around in twisting bends. Then we were at the bottom.

We found ourselves at once faced with a choice to make. There were three passageways ahead of us. One went north, one went east, and one went west.

"So this is the dungeon," I said, my eyes following the flashlight beams as they moved along the walls and down the passageways. It was absolutely pitch black down there. If we ever lost those flashlights, we would be finished for good.

"Hey Charles," Tim yelled in a shout-whisper, "there's your flashlight!"

And sure enough, down the right passageway about twenty feet, I could see a silverish gleam. I eased down there slowly. I was sure that one of the wall stones would open up and a hairy paw would jump out and grab me. But I got the flashlight without being attacked.

I tried to turn it on. No go.

"It's broken, all right," said Allen. "The glass is completely smashed.

"But that's not all," said Peter as his eyes got bigger and bigger while he stared at the useless flashlight.

"Look at this: teethmarks!"

He was right! Something had bitten into the flashlight with big, pointed teeth.

"Let's hope that all the creatures down here are metal-eaters," said Peter.

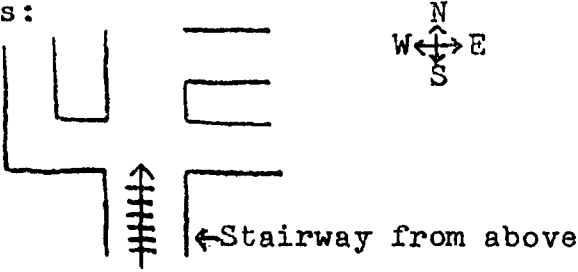
"Even if the flashlight doesn't work," Tim said, "be sure to take out the batteries. We can always use an extra set."

"And now: which direction do we travel in, o peerless leader?" Peter asked me with a bow and a sweep of his hands. I remembered the last time he'd used those fancy words. That was when I chose the path that got us into this fix. But this was no time to groan about the past, so I tried to sound confident as I shouted out, "Straight ahead!"

"Just a second," said Tim. He took off his backpack, reached into it, and pulled out a sheet of paper and a pencil. "I'm making a map of this place as we go through it. If we ever get confused or turned around down here, we could walk around in circles for days and never know it."

"An excellent thought," Peter agreed. "You shall be our cartographer. Perhaps you'd best begin right here."

So Tim made a sketch of the beginning of the dungeon, and it looked like this:



I was getting anxious to go. "North!" I said, and we all started down the hallway. Allen had his sword out; I had my mace ready; and the other two were set to cast their spells on a second's notice.

After going about twenty feet north, the passage turned east (as you can see from the drawing). Then, after about another 20 feet, it turned north again. Tim shined his light down the passageway. It went on north beyond the reach of the beam.

"Look at this!" said Allen suddenly. He was pointing to a big brass ring attached to a door in the east wall.

"All right!" Allen yelled, and immediately started pulling on it.

"Wait a minute, you gorilla," Tim shouted. "You don't know what's on the other side. Listen first."

Allen gave us a "you caught me stealing the cookies" grin, and stopped yanking at the ring. We all put our ears to the door. We could hear a kind of low growling, but far away. Every so often we heard a laugh -- a deep, cruel kind of laugh. But like the other sounds, it seemed far away.

"Shall we investigate?" Peter asked. "Remember, I've got the Charm Person Spell, and Tim has the Hold Portal spell, just in case we need to keep back the owners of those sounds."

We all agreed on Peter's plan of action. But when we tried to pull open the door -- no go. We heaved and pushed and pulled and shook. It wouldn't budge.

"Maybe it's locked from the other side," I suggested. "Let's forget it and keep on going down the passageway."

"Good enough," said Allen. "It seems we just don't have the luck for opening doors around here."

So we headed north again, on the alert for the first sign of danger.

## KOBOLDS

After about another thirty yards, I spotted another door on our right. Like the last one, this one had a large brass ring attached to one side. But this door was slightly ajar. And through the crack, we could hear shuffling sounds.

Without talking, I motioned the other three to the door. We all listened. The shuffling went on for a few seconds, then stopped. Silence. Then came a horrible, high-pitched laugh. Then some guttural, grumbling sounds. Then silence again.

"What on earth do you think is in there?" I asked in a whisper.

"More important, what should we do about what's in there -- attack or flee?" Peter asked.

"Attack?!" Tim almost shouted. "You must be out of your mind!"

"Shhhhh!" I said to Tim in a tense whisper. "Do you want to bring whatever's in there out here?"

"What I want to do is leave -- right now," Tim answered in a definite voice.

"Hey, be quiet," said Allen. "Do you hear those noises any more?"

We all got quiet at once. We listened. Nothing.

Then all at once the door came crashing open, and out sprang four horrible-looking things with long claws, sharp-looking fangs, and filthy bodies covered with strands of greasy-dried hair. They were small -- under four feet tall -- but they looked vicious and beserk, and they had the advantage of surprise on us.

"Kobolds!" Peter yelled. But it was Allen who reacted first. As one of the creatures leaped at him, he swung his sword with both hands. The monster's howl became a shriek, and its severed head thumped to the floor.

One down -- but a second kobold had leaped on Tim, and was clawing away furiously at his back. Luckily for Tim, the backpack warded off the first blows. I lifted my mace and struck at the thing's head. There was a sickening crunching sound, and the monster slid off of Tim's back and down to the ground.

Two down.

I looked around for Peter. He had backed into the doorway, and I could hear him yelling for help. The other two kobolds were driving him deeper into the dark corner of the room. Allen and I ran after him. In the far end of the room, the two creatures were slashing at Peter with their curved claws while he was frantically waving his dagger in front of him in wide sweeps to keep them off. Then one of them caught Peter's dagger with a claw and

sent it spinning through the air. They jumped on him at once, and Peter's flashlight dropped to the ground. Allen and I jumped on the kobolds, and all five of us thrashed around on the floor, with the flashlight's beam jumping around crazily as we kicked and slashed and fought.

"Get out of there, you guys," Tim shouted from the doorway. "There's more of them in there!"

And sure enough, another one of them landed on my back and began clawing at my head. I spun over on the floor, rolled once, and jumped to my feet. Another kobold came rushing at me; but I clipped the side of its head with my mace, and it slumped to the floor with a howl of pain.

I clouted another attacker and pulled it off of Peter, who had rolled himself into a defensive ball. Allen had gotten free of his trouble, grabbed the loose flashlight, and ran for the door.

We all ran; but the monsters were recovering, and started to sprint for the doorway right behind us.

"Tim!" Allen yelled. "Use your spell now!"

We all shoved the door shut, and Tim chanted out the words, "By the Ka of Thoth I command this portal to hold fast!"

There was a crashing and thumping and screeching on the other side as the monsters tried to push and beat the door open. But the magic held. We had thirty minutes breathing time before the charm would wear off.

## TREASURE

For about five minutes, we all just lay there, collapsed on the stones of the passageway floor, breathing hard and trying to control our shaking hands. Finally I asked Peter, "What did you call those things?"

"Kobolds," Peter answered. "They're related to goblins and orcs; but they're smaller and not as powerful as their larger cousins -- or so I've read."

"You mean those were weak monsters?" Allen yelled. "Oh man, are we done for!"

"Rather than fruitlessly lamenting our situation, perhaps we should discuss our next plan of action," Peter said. He had some fierce looking claw marks on his cheeks. But he seemed to be his old, calm self, in spite of his injuries from the kobolds.

"Does anyone need a wound-cure spell?" I asked.

We all took stock of the damage we'd taken, and decided that we were OK for the moment.

"Let's search these monsters and see what they've got on them," Allen suggested, pointing to the two we'd killed in the passageway.

This was a great idea, we all agreed. The first monster was just a mass of filthy hair and long, dirty claws. But the second one -- the one without a head thanks to Allen's



swing -- had a pouch tied around its waist. We cut off the pouch and spilled its contents onto the floor.

Gold! And rings!

There were thirteen gold pieces and four small rings in the monster's bag. Tim, Peter and I took three gold pieces each. We agreed that Allen should get four, because he was the one who'd laid the kobold out with his sword. The coins were old and worn, but the gold still gleamed through the dirt with a dull sheen. Each coin was large -- about three inches across -- and the edges were notched, like our silver dollars. On one side was a picture of a golden castle surrounded by seven stars and a sliver of a moon. On the other side was a picture of -- a kobold! I couldn't believe that ugly thing had its picture stamped on such a beautiful coin.

But even while I was looking at it, the golden image of the monster's face began to fade out. I rubbed my eyes -- I thought for sure it was just my eyes being tricked by the dim light of the dungeon. But no -- the picture of the kobold was dissolving into a shapeless lump. No, wait a minute -- the lump was reforming into new eyes, mouth, forehead.

As I looked, the golden image became a picture of. . .me!

I looked at my other coins. They all had my picture on them now.

Peter, Tim and Allen had all put their coins in their pockets, and were looking at the rings. So I said, "Hey, you guys, did you notice the face on your gold coins?"

They hadn't, so they pulled out their coins and looked.

"Would you believe this?" Allen shouted. "This one has my picture on it -- they all do!"

"Here's my handsome face on my gold pieces," said Peter.

"Amazing," said Tim as he stared at his coins.

"Since these coins are clearly endowed with magical properties," Peter said, "perhaps they can aid us in performing spells. Ah well -- I suppose we could ask Ishar, if we ever see him again."

We pocketed the coins, and took a look at the rings that came with the gold coins. There were four of them in all. Three of them looked like they might be made of silver -- really old silver. One of them was made in the shape of six snakes intertwining in a circle. Another was plain, except for some wedge-shaped marks all over it. The third silver ring had a large blue stone in its center.

The fourth ring was all beat up, and it seemed to be made out of wood. But there were tiny pieces of metal set into it; and the metal pieces made up the same kind of wedge-shaped marks that covered the silver ring.

We flipped one of my gold coins to see who would get which ring. Allen won first, and took the snake ring. I won second, and took the ring with the blue stone, even

though it was too big for my finger. Tim got the silver ring with the wedge-marks. And Peter was left with the wooden ring.

"Ah well," Peter said with a shrug, "you can't win them all."

We all put on the rings. At once Tim fell to the floor -- unconscious.

"Oh no -- grab him, Charles!" Allen yelled as Tim pitched forward. But I was too late.

"Take off that cursed ring," Peter said. So we pulled the ring off. Tim still wasn't moving, but he was breathing. We shook him by the shoulders, but he just turned over and grumbled "Go 'way and let me sleep."

After more shaking, we finally got Tim up and walking around. He was waking up, but slowly.

"He seems to be coming around," Peter said. "Apparently the ring has some sort of sleep spell associated with it. It's clearly worse than useless for us. But perhaps it may come in useful as a gift to someone we don't wish to be troubled with. What do you think, Charles?"

I turned around to answer. No Peter! Where was he?

"Hey, Peter," I called out, "where'd you go?"

"I'm right here, you ninny," he answered. "Can't you see?"

## THE ATTACK FROM THE CEILING

After another 50 yards of traveling, we came to another branching passageway. The main hall continued for about thirty yards straight ahead, then bent around to the right. But there on our immediate right was a short hallway that went for about 15 yards. And at the end was what looked like a room full of long, white strands of something.

"Should we keep going straight, or do you want to explore?" I asked the group.

"Explore!" they all agreed. So we took the path to the right.

Slowly and cautiously, we approached the room of the white strands. They had a soft glow to them when we played the flashlight beam into the room.

My foot struck something that went skidding off. Then I crunched down on something else. Peter pointed his flashlight down at the floor.

"Ugh! What's that?" I asked, drawing back in disgust.

"Whatever it is, or was, it appears to be dead. Let's see," Peter said, and picked the thing up as if he were looking at a science specimen.

It was a dead beetle. But this was no ordinary bug. It must have been at least six inches long, not counting the feelers. And it had mean-looking pincers jutting out

from its head. In its belly there were two large holes, with dried green blood around them.

We looked around and saw dozens of the dead beetles lettered around us. Some were as long as a foot; others spanned only a few inches. But they were all dead; and they all had those holes bitten into their stomachs.

"I bet that whatever killed these bugs comes from down there," Tim said, pointing to the room with the hanging strands. But Peter and Allen were already moving down the corridor to explore, so Tim and I followed.

Finally we came to an archway that opened up into a vast room. We couldn't tell just how big the room was, though, because it criss-crossed with those big white ropes.

Or, at least, they looked like ropes.

Allen touched one of them. It wobbled slightly. "Man, this stuff is sticky," he said. His hand was stuck to the strand. He gave it a strong pull, and it finally came away.

"Let's leave," said Tim.

"Wait a minute," said Peter. "What's that gleam on the far side of the room?"

We could just barely see something shiny on the floor about 15 or 20 yards away. I strained to see what it was; but there were too many of those white rope-things in the way to make out what it was.

"Let's check it out," said Allen. He went forward and hacked at the strands that looped down from the ceiling and barred our way. His sword cut through them pretty fast, but there were so many of them that it took about five minutes to advance about ten feet.

"How much longer will this take?" Tim asked.

"Use your dagger on this stuff and it'll only take half as long," Allen replied.

"Right you are," said Peter as he started slicing away, too. "We're practically there."

"It shouldn't. . ." Allen began. But he never finished that sentence.

Something huge and black swooped down from the ceiling, knocking Allen and Tim flat.

A giant spider!

That thing must have been at least eight feet across. Its legs were slick and wet-looking, and its body was jet-black, except for a red hour-glass mark on its belly.

"It's a black widow!" Tim screamed. "Kill it, or we're both dead!"

Allen was trying to ward off the thing's deadly fangs by flailing his sword in front of him. But his legs were caught in the webbing, and the monstrous black widow was crouching for the jump.

Then I noticed a movement above us. Another spider! This one was smaller -- but at six feet across, it was big

enough. It was gingerly climbing down our way to share in its mate's coming feast -- namely, us.

First, though, I had to do something about the bigger spider that was getting ready to spring on Allen. I took my mace in both hands and swung as hard as I could at the thing's body. There was a crunching sound, and part of the spider's bulbous abdomen caved in like a piece of tin-foil. A greenish ooze began to seep out of the wound. Then the spider lurched around, its eye-facets glaring in hate, and went into a crouch aimed at me.

I'd saved Allen, all right. But now who was going to save me? Tim and Peter were frantically trying to keep the second spider from pouncing on us. And Allen was still stuck in the webbing. I could see the venom dripping from the thing's fangs as it pulled back onto its rear legs, then sprang right at me.

I was too paralyzed to move. But just as the spider began its spring, I heard the sound of Allen's sword biting into one of the widow's back legs. That stroke saved my skin. When the spider leaped, its mangled leg was useless, and that threw its aim off. It shot by my left shoulder, knocking me to the floor, and landed on its side in the webbing behind me.

Meanwhile Allen had cut himself loose, and we both rushed over to the wounded spider. He hacked and I

smashed until our weapons were covered with green gore, and the spider finally lay still.

While all that was going on with spider number one, spider number two had retreated back up its web to the top of the room. It made a kind of high-pitched whistling sound, I don't know whether it was mad at us or sorry for the death of its mate. Or maybe it was just disappointed at missing a delicious meal. But it retreated out of the range of our weapons, singing its eerie whistling song at us from above.

"Good work, you guys," said Tim, sheathing his dagger.

"Thanks," I replied, wiping my mace off on the sticky strands. "Do you want to get out of here, or should we get what we came after?"

"Let's get it," said Allen.

"By all means," Peter agreed. "After all, we've already gone to a considerable amount of trouble to obtain our prize."

So we started cutting again, hacking a path toward the gleaming object we'd seen from the doorway. And all the time we kept a wary watch on the ceiling, just in case the spider changed its mind about leaving us alone. It was still moving around up there; but so far it wasn't making any move to attack us.

Finally we got to the end of the chamber. And there, on the floor, was a grisly sight. Two human skeletons



were lying there, each with its bony fingers wrapped around the other's throat. On the floor beneath them was a silver chest -- the source of the gleam.

"I bet those people killed each other for whatever's in that chest," said Allen.

"Or was in the chest," Peter corrected him.

"Come on," I said, "let's open it up."

"Here, or back out in the hall?" Tim asked.

"Here," I said. "I know what the danger is in here, and I think we can handle it. But I don't want to go back out into that passageway until we're all good and ready to fight."

"I'll open it," said Allen, and he hacked off the leather knot that kept the lid closed. He flung back the top of the chest and looked in.

Unfortunately for Allen, the first thing he saw was a cloud of greenish gas rising up out of the bottom of the chest. His eyes opened up wide in surprise. Then he pitched forward and rolled over the chest, onto the skeletons.

Then the weirdest thing happened. He sat up and laughed. And laughed. And laughed. He laughed until the tears rolled down his cheeks.

"Hey, Allen, cut that out!" I said; but I was catching the laughs, too. Allen was rolling around on the floor,

hooting with laughter; and the rest of us started giggling, then laughing. We'd probably still be in there laughing, if Tim hadn't noticed that the webs were shaking around again.

The surviving black widow was crawling down toward us again. Only this time, there were dozens of smaller spiders coming behind it. I said "smaller," but they were still about a foot across. And they were coming down pretty fast.

The sight of that eight-legged army descending on us sobered all of us up pretty fast -- all but Allen, who kept right on howling and shrieking with laughter.

"It's the gas," said Peter. "We'd best drag him out of here, since he's clearly in no condition to walk."

So Peter and I dragged Allen past the corpse of the dead spider, through the cut strands of sticky webbing, and out into the passageway. Tim brought the chest and covered our retreat with his dagger.

The spiders were right behind us as we lurched out into the passageway. But, fortunately for us, they didn't leave their lair. The mass of little spiders, led by the big one, swarmed over the body of the dead spider and started their grisly feast. Ugh! We could hear the crunching and munching sounds out in the hallway.

We finally got Allen to cool off, and we all sat down to explore the chest again. As soon as I hit the floor I felt really hungry (in spite of the gross sounds of the spiders'

feast). All of us broke out our food while we discussed what had happened in the spiders' den. We must have made a strange sight: the four of us twentieth-century fellows, dressed in armor, carrying backpacks, huddled around a booby-trapped silver chest, and eating supermarket food. I dined on my delicious, savory anchovies while the other three groaned and shook their heads over my peculiar tastes.

Between fits of left-over laughing, Allen gobbled down three cold mini-pizzas (and he thinks my tastes are weird!). Tim ate a carrot salad with his fingers (the same goes for Tim!); and Peter wolfed down an awful concoction of chocolate chip cookies and beef jerky (how can he stand it?).

All the time, of course, we kept a flashlight beam aimed at the spiders' den. We didn't want any surprise visitors dropping in -- or down -- for a snack.

After we'd all eaten and Allen had finally calmed down into near-normalcy, Tim took another look into that chest. "You know," he said, "it looks empty. But I can hear something rattling around down in the bottom."

"It's reasonable to believe that those two skeletons were fighting for possession of that chest when they met their deaths," Peter said.

"Turn it over," I suggested. "Maybe there's a secret compartment in it somewhere."

Tim flipped the box over. And sure enough, there were two hairline cracks in the wood at one corner of the bottom

of the chest. Tim pressed on the corner, and presto! A section of the bottom fell away, and out rolled two stones -- two very valuable looking stones.

"Lovely!" said Peter as he picked up the gems and held them up to his flashlight. "A ruby and an emerald, if I'm not mistaken. Quite valuable, too, I should think."

We all rejoiced over that find. We even wasted some time speculating how much they might be worth, and what we would do with our shares when we sold them. But in the meantime, Tim had his fingers inside the false bottom, trying to pry something out.

"Got it!" he said, and pulled out a thin piece of wood from the secret compartment of the chest. Right away we could see there was something magical about that stick. It was round at one end, about nine inches long and maybe half an inch thick, and tapered to a point at the other end. It was made of dark, black wood. And there was a faint, deep-purple haze that glowed all around it, like it was slowly burning with some strange fire inside. Inlaid in the wood were thin flames of gold with their tips all meeting at the point of the rod. It was beautiful.

"A wand!" said Peter. He was really excited as he looked at it closely. "I wish I knew how to use it. Perhaps if we were to ask Ishar. . ."

"No way am I going back past those kobolds again," said Allen.

"Allen's right," I said. "We have to keep on going. Maybe you and Tim can figure out how to use it as we go along."

Peter didn't want to hand over that fantastic wand to Tim. They were both magic-users; but Peter already had the invisibility ring. And as a magician, Tim would have the best chance of being able to use the wand.

So we started off down the passageway again. We were just beginning to unwind from our encounter with the spiders. We were even laughing and joking about our narrow escape, and kidding Allen about his laughing-fit. But our good spirits didn't last long. After only another thirty yards or so down the hallway, we ran into our worst fate yet.

## TERROR ON THE BRIDGE

About thirty yards down from the spiders' corridor, the passageway slanted off to the right. After that, it suddenly wasn't a passageway anymore. The stone floor came to an end; and a rickety-looking wooden bridge spanned a gaping hole about twenty yards across. Then the stone passageway seemed to continue on the other side.

Beneath the bridge was that huge hole. Peter and Tim shined their flashlights down into the blackness. We couldn't see a thing. I took out a coin -- not one of the golden ones, of course! -- and dropped it over the edge of the pit. There was a long pause. Then, from far down and away, we heard a faint splash.

"I sincerely hope that bridge is stronger than it looks," said Peter. "Perhaps we'd best go over the bridge one at a time."

"You first, leader," Allen said, making a low bow to me. That was courteous of him!

"Oh well, brains before brawn," I said, grasping the flimsy wooden handrail. I carefully edged my way across. Planks were missing from the bottom of the bridge; and the whole thing creaked and groaned and swayed with every step I took.

Finally I reached the opposite side. I'd just breathed a sigh of relief, when I felt a huge hand grab my ankle like a vice-grip.

For a second I thought for sure that I was going to be hauled down into that deep pit. But the thing that had grabbed me shifted its grip to my arm, then my neck as it pulled itself out from under the bridge.

A troll!

When it climbed out and stood up, it was enormous -- it must have been at least ten feet tall, maybe more. It was thin and wiry for its size. But its arms were still thicker than my legs; and I could see the hard strands of muscle under its dead-white skin. The hands that gripped my neck looked like human hands; but the nails were hard and pointed like hawk talons.

He picked me up and held me out so that my face was even with his. His breath gave off a rotten smell. And when he opened his mouth to speak, I could see his snagged teeth all bent and twisted like an old picket fence. But they looked sharp and tough enough to grind me to bits.

First he just stared at me with his huge red eyes. Then he started shaking me. The pressure of that vice-grip was cutting off the air from my windpipe, and his nails were biting into the flesh of my neck. I was just sure it was all over for me.

"Gold?" it growled. "You give gold! Gold!"

Weakly, I put my hand in my pocket and pulled out one of the gold coins with my portrait fresh-minted on its face. I didn't think he'd be very satisfied with one gold piece, but I held it out to him.

He smiled, and snatched it up with one hand, keeping me hanging with the other. Then he seized me by the feet and shook me. All the stuff in my pockets, including the other gold coins, came tumbling out, and my backpack spilled its contents onto the floor. Some things rolled off the edge into the pit, gone forever.

Weak and gasping for breath, I rolled over on the floor and yelled for help. I could see Allen and Tim over on the other side, their flashlights pointed at me and the troll. They had horrified expressions on their faces.

Then I noticed that the bridge was swaying and shaking. The troll wasn't paying any attention to the bridge, though. It was too busy scooping up the gold coins.

I tried to rise. But as soon as I made a move, the troll's vice-like grip seized me again. It held me up to its face again, a cruel smile spreading slowly across it. The troll pointed across the bridge at Tim and Allen. The bridge itself had stopped swaying.

"Friends have gold?" the troll asked through the twisted smile smeared across its ugly face. "Have friends bring gold."



I knew what a troll did to its prisoners when it got hungry; so I didn't answer. The troll squeezed tighter, and started shaking me again. The pain was unbearable. "Call friends or I eat now!" the thing growled. Saliva began to drool down its corpse-like jaw.

I was too weak to resist. So I called across the pit, "The troll wants our gold. Bring it across now, or he'll eat me."

I could see Tim and Allen still standing on the other side of the chasm, talking to each other. They weren't making any move to cross the bridge; and I couldn't really blame them. But if they didn't do something soon, I would be one dead adventurer.

And where was Peter?

Then Allen stepped up to the edge of the pit on the other side and yelled, "We're not coming across. But here's the gold if you want it. Catch!" And he threw one of the gold coins across the dark hole.

It fell short. The troll leaned forward to try to catch it; but the golden coin sank downward and out of sight about 6 feet from the ledge.

The troll was furious. "No throw!" it shouted, jumping up and down. "Bring gold! Now!"

But Allen didn't pay any attention to the troll's temper tantrum. Instead, he heaved another coin, arching it over the pit towards the troll.

This one was going to make it. The troll looked straight up -- and dropped me into the pit as he raised his hand to catch the coin!

Luckily for me, we were right near the edge of the chasm when it dropped me. As I fell, one hand caught the ledge. If I hadn't reached out just then, it would have been good-bye Charles! Slowly and painfully I reached out with the other hand and grabbed one of the boards that jutted out from the bottom of the bridge.

I was alive. I was hanging on -- but how long could I hold out? I was still too weak from the pounding and shaking the troll had given me to pull myself up. And even if I did, the monster would just grab me again. It looked absolutely hopeless. But I hung in there.

The troll was standing near the edge again, watching another one of the golden coins as it sailed over the pit toward him. But this time as he reached out to grasp it, his knees buckled, as if something had rammed him from behind. With a loud and furious howl he pitched over the ledge, his long, deadly arms flailing about for something to hold on to. The howl got fainter and fainter. Then came the faraway splash.

Allen and Tim were still on the other side, yelling and jumping up and down and clapping their hands, "Good work, Peter," they shouted. "Great going! Give that adventurer a trophy!"

All of a sudden Peter popped into visibility right above me. "Thank you, thank you," he said, taking a low bow.

All this time, I was still hanging by my tired fingers over that dark pit. "How about pulling me out of here before you go on with your victory celebration?" I said to Peter.

"We'd best wait until the others arrive," said Peter, putting the ring back into his pocket. You might pull me over if I were to try to pull you out of there all by myself."

"Better make it fast," I said, my voice tight and tired at the same time. "I don't think I can hold on much longer." Allen and Tim were coming over the bridge as fast as they could. But they had to be careful; and I was afraid they wouldn't get to me fast enough.

I could feel my fingers slipping, slipping slowly but surely, slipping away from the ledge and the bottom of the bridge. I tried to dig in with my fingernails, but they wouldn't hold, either. I squeezed my eyes shut and tried desperately to hold on. No use. I felt one hand slip away. . .

And then six hands grabbed my arm and pulled. Grunting and panting, they slowly hauled me up. I was so weak I couldn't help them at all. But finally, they pulled me up over the top.

"Thanks -- that was a close one," I gasped. "And that was a great trick you pulled off on that troll."

But I was so beat, that I couldn't talk any more. I just put my head down on the cold stone floor and slept.

## SHARP TEETH

When I woke up, it was dark -- and I do mean dark. There was zero light down there in the dungeon. I couldn't see my hand in front of my face.

My first thought was: am I dead? I remembered the troll grabbing me, then dropping me over the side of the pit. Then the others saved me -- or did they? Maybe I just died, and imagined them saving me.

"Peter? Tim? Allen!" I called out. Silence. Then a low groan.

"Hey, quiet over there," came Allen's sleepy voice. "Can't you let a guy sleep?"

Then I remembered: I'd passed out. My fellow adventurers must have decided to get some sleep, too, as long as I was out like a light.

I tried to get back to sleep, but I guess my system got going too fast while I was lying there wondering whether I was dead or alive. I lay there for what seemed like an hour, because I knew that the others probably needed the rest. But finally, I just had to have someone to talk to, or I'd go crazy staring off into the darkness. And besides, I was sure I was hearing noises all around -- shuffling noises, creaking, and scurrying sounds like mice (or rats) running across the floor.

"Hey," I said in a quiet voice, "We'd better get going if we want to get out of here and back to the road in time. Come on, you guys, wake up and let's go."

I heard them groan as they stirred around and gradually got themselves awake. Tim turned on his flashlight -- which made me feel 100% better at once. That utter darkness was really depressing.

Peter yawned, stretched, and tried to rub the soreness out of his back. "I can definitely say that sleeping on the dungeon floor is fit for monsters only," he said, and everyone agreed with that!

It took half an hour or so to get up, repack our gear, and set off down the passageway again. We were all rested, and we worked ourselves up into good spirits by talking about how we'd gotten rid of the troll.

The passageway went for another fifty yards beyond the troll bridge, then turned left. We were all on the alert, and keeping a sharp look-out for any new danger.

And we didn't have long to wait.

Since I was in the lead, I was the first to notice that the passageway coming up branched off left and right in front of us. The main way, though, still seemed straight ahead. But just to be on the safe side, I had Tim flash his light over to the left and right. Nothing visible to the right -- but just as he swung his light to the left, we saw something whisk away from us -- something big.

"What next?" Allen groaned as he pulled out his sword and adjusted his shield.

"Well, at least this time we should be ready for whatever that was," I said, pulling Palaro junior down from my backpack.

We carefully crept up to the place where the passageway took the left fork. We still couldn't see anything; but there was a scuttling sound, like something with long nails hurrying across the floor.

So that we'd have the surprise jump on whatever it was, we all rushed around the corner at once, and shined the flashlight down the corridor. This branch of the hallway was only about 10 yards deep -- a dead end. And at the end of the dead end was a gigantic rat. It must have been 6 feet tall, and covered with long, stringy fur.

But the creature wasn't making any move to attack yet. In fact, it was clawing the wall at the end, as if it were trying to escape from us. But now, it was cornered and trapped. With a speed that was amazing for something its size, the rat whirled around to face us, its eyes glowing like red coals with rage and fear. Then it opened its jaws and growled -- it might have been only a squeak if it had been a regular-size rat. But this one had a deep growl like a German shepherd. Its tail lashed back and forth like a cobra ready to strike.

Then it sprang.

You wouldn't have believed such an enormous beast could jump so far and so fast. It knocked Peter and me down like bowling pins, and slashed into Allen and Tim with its razor-sharp teeth and pointed claws.

Allen got it first. The huge teeth cut into his sword arm, and with a yell, Allen let his weapon clang to the floor.

Peter was still lying on the floor in a daze. I pulled out my mace and leaped over Peter to where the rat was attacking Allen. I gripped Palaro junior with both hands and swung as hard as I could.

The mace sank into the rat's furry hide -- and bounced off! It didn't seem to have any effect at all -- except that it stopped gnawing at Allen.

But now it looked like it was going to be my turn. Just then, though, the rat gave a squeal of pain, and turned away from me. Tim had stabbed it with his dagger, and there was a stream of blood trickling from the thing's flank. With a growl of fury, it rushed at Tim. Allen was back on his feet, and we pressed the attack on the rat from behind, cutting and smashing with all our strength. The rat finally left Tim and turned back to us. Both Tim and Allen were bleeding pretty badly.

Then, in the middle of the battle, a small flame appeared in mid-air behind the rat, who was getting ready to leap



on us again. But the flame darted down and into the rat's hairy hide. In an instant, the fire caught and blazed along its whole body. We backed away from the burning monster as it twisted around and around, snapping at the flames as it turned. Finally it rushed out into the main passageway, running back down toward the troll bridge.

In another minute, the dungeon was dead quiet again, except for our loud and labored breathing.

And once again, Peter was the hero of the day. It was his attack with the matches -- under the protection of the invisibility ring -- that had finally saved our skins and destroyed the rat.

But we were in no condition to do a victory dance this time. Allen had two deep cuts on his right arm. And Tim's face was badly mauled -- bad enough to leave scars, unless he could be healed right away.

"Well, now's the time to find out whether my Cure Wounds spell will work or not," I said. "Let me try it on you first, Tim."

So Tim and I sat down on the stones across from each other, while Peter and Allen stood over us and watched. Following Ishar's instructions, I put my hands over his face, and shut my eyes. For a minute, I didn't feel anything. "Maybe this isn't going to work," I told myself -- but I kept still, and concentrated on passing Tim's wounds over to myself.

Then it happened.

I yelled as if I'd been bitten by the rat myself -- because, in a way, I had. I opened my eyes. The scratches and bite marks were gone from Tim's face -- he was completely healed. But I could feel them on my own face, burning and searing at my flesh. Tears welled up in my eyes, but I clenched my fists and stared straight ahead. Peter and Tim and Allen were all looking at me intently, half out of concern and half out of fascination with the whole process.

Then the pain began to go away. It was like an echo fading out, becoming fainter and less distinct every second. Finally, after about five minutes, all the pain was gone.

"Thanks, Charles," Tim said. "I bet I would have been scarred for life if you hadn't cured me."

"It's an amazing thing, feeling someone else's pain," was all I could manage to say.

"Someone once said that pain is the best teacher of sympathy," Peter said.

"In that case," I replied, "I just got an A in the course."

"I hate to ask you to go through the same thing again so soon," said Allen, "but could you cure me too? That rat really sliced up my fighting arm."

I remembered Ishar saying that once a day was all most beginners could work the Cure Wounds cure. And, of course,

I wasn't too eager to go on that pain trip again so soon. But Allen needed the help, so I told him I'd try.

But then came a howl from the passageway, and we all whirled around to face the new menace. Allen's wound would have to wait.

## CHARMING COMPANY

Maybe they were attracted by the noise, maybe by the smell of blood, or maybe by the hope that the rat would have turned us into easy prey. But whatever their reason, six stocky human-like creatures rushed down on us from the hallway. Their swords were drawn and menacing, and their pig-snouted faces wore looks of insanity.

"Orcs!" shouted Peter as he slipped on his ring and vanished from sight.

"This is a great time to chicken out, Peter," I called out as I swung my mace Palaro Junior to meet the sword-thrust of the first orc. Allen was still wounded, and Tim had only a dagger. The orcs were pounding and slashing away at our shields, driving us to the wall. There was no skill in their fighting -- only a kind of berserk frenzy that made them swing wildly at our defenses. But skill or no skill, Tim and I couldn't hope to defeat all six of them.

Then Peter reappeared behind the orcs, and started performing his weird Charm Person dance. His feet were going through the intricate pattern that Ishar had taught him, while his eyes and fingertips were focused on the skulls of the orcs as they pressed their attack.

I began to notice that the blows from four of the monsters were growing slower and weaker. Two of them, though, continued to hack and hammer away at our shields

with full force. A lucky shot from my mace caught one of the still-active orcs a glancing blow on the head. It reeled back, stunned but not unconscious. But just at that moment, another orc banged Allen's shield from his hand, and raised its sword to strike the death-blow.

Just then Peter yelled out, "Slaves! Listen to me! You are in my power now. Cease your attack on those people. You will do as I tell you."

Four of them immediately let their sword-arms droop to their sides. Their eyes had a glazed, far-away look. They were obviously in Peter's power.

But the other two orcs just as obviously were not. The one attacking Allen halted for a few seconds and turned to see what had happened to its fellows. It must have figured out that Peter somehow held them captive, so it turned on him with a snarl.

"Protect your master! Attack the traitor!" Peter commanded, pointing to the onrushing orc. At once four swords slashed out, battering the astonished orc, and sending him to the floor under a shower of blows. A lunge from one of Peter's new slaves, and the orc on the floor was dead.

Meanwhile, though, the one I had stunned had recovered. Seeing what was happening, it ran up behind one of its spell-bound fellows and drove its sword into the charmed orc's back. Mortally wounded, it howled and fell to the floor.

"Attack!" Peter shouted again, pointing at the last orc not under his control. The fight was a good one, and lasted for maybe five minutes. But three against one is bad odds among equals; and eventually, the last enemy-orc lay still on the dungeon floor.

Peter was watching all this action with a look of real pleasure on his face. And no wonder -- he now had a group of orc warriors under his complete control, and he could do with them whatever he wanted. As soon as the fight was over, he ordered them to stand at attention. The orcs then stood stock still, their eyes still glassy-looking, like they'd been hypnotized.

"Well, well," said Peter, grinning from ear to ear. "That Charm Person spell certainly works wonders with humanoid enemies. From now on, these brutes will do our heavy fighting for us. Battles are far more interesting to me if I'm not bothered with the necessity of protecting my own life. Yes indeed, these creatures will certainly come in handy."

"But how long will the spell last?" Tim asked. "Remember, my Hold Portal spell is only good for thirty minutes. And I don't want to be around when those orcs wake up and find out how they've been used."

"True," Peter admitted, "your spell lasts only for thirty minutes. But the effects of Charles's Cure Wounds spell presumably lasts forever. Perhaps the Charm Person will work indefinitely."

"In other words," I said, "we don't have any idea how long the spell will hold. It might last for another thirty days -- or another thirty seconds."

"Alas, you're correct there," Peter said with a sigh. "I regret that I failed to ask Ishar in more detail about the properties of this spell."

"The question right now," Tim said, "is, can we trust the spell enough to take the orcs with us to do our fighting? What if the spell wears off while we're asleep or wounded? They could do us in pretty fast if we're not careful."

"I'm for doing them in right now before they snap out of it," said Allen as he drew his sword. "We're going to have enough trouble down here without carrying more along with us."

"I've got to go along with Allen," Tim said. "They're just too dangerous to have along."

"But just think of the fighting they could do for us," I said. "I liked Peter's plan, even though it involved a certain risk."

"Besides," Peter added, "if the charm wears off, I could just charm them again."

"Not if you're asleep or out of the action," Tim said.

And so we argued and discussed the question for some time. Tim and Allen kept insisting on the danger involved. Peter and I kept stressing the use they could be to us in

a tight spot. Finally I came up with a solution.

"Look," I said, "what we seem to be most worried about is their coming out of the spell and attacking us when we're not watching -- right? Well, then, to begin with, we'll take away their swords. And, if you still don't think that's enough, we could tie their hands."

"That's great," said Tim, "but then what good will they be to us in a fight?"

I was ready for that one. "When we're ready to fight, we cut them loose and give them back their swords. And when we're sleeping, we can take turns watching guard over them. What do you think?"

Allen was persuaded. Tim still wasn't too sure he liked the idea, but he went along with the majority. So we tied the orcs' hands behind them, then sat down to discuss plans of what we should do next.



## DISAPPEARANCE

We tried to question the orcs, but they just grunted in their own kind of growl-language, and we couldn't understand a thing. They seemed to respond to Peter's commands by obeying his thoughts. But communicating with them by way of language was out. Peter could tell them what to do; but we couldn't get any information out of them.

We decided to check out the right fork of the passageway before we proceeded down the main path again. We knew we might be asking for more trouble. But by now we were getting into the spirit of the whole adventure, and we were willing to explore the dungeon more thoroughly. And with three orcs to fight for us (we hoped!), we could take more risks.

I tried my Cure Wounds spell on Allen now, but it didn't work -- not very well, that is. His wound faded out part way, and my own arm took on a kind of ghost wound which quickly went away. At least Allen felt a little better. We bandaged up his arm, and I promised him I'd try again later.

We crossed the central passageway, heading down the right fork. It went north for only about ten yards, then turned right. Then after about another thirty yards to the east, we came to a dead end -- or so it seemed at first.

But the left wall seemed to shimmer in a strange way when we flashed our light on it. It was like the wall was slightly out of focus, even though it seemed solid when you first looked at it.

"Let me take a look at it," said Allen. Although he had a wounded arm, he still wanted to get into the act right away. So he pushed by me and put his arm up to the wall.

And his arm went right through it!

"An illusory wall!" Peter said with delight. "Perhaps it's there to guard some valuable treasure."

"Or to hide some hungry monster," said Tim.

We all stuck our heads through the unreal wall. On the other side was a small room -- entirely bare, except that the floor shimmered with the same unreal quality that the wall had.

"Let's send an orc in to explore around first," said always careful Tim.

"Save your orc. I'll check it out," said ever-reckless Allen.

"Hey, wait!" I yelled. Too late. Allen took a step into the room -- and dropped out of sight through the floor.

"Hey, what. . ." were the last words we heard from Allen. Then nothing -- no yells, no crash from his hitting the floor: just silence.

"Remarkable," said Peter. "It would appear that the floor is an illusion, too."

We dropped down to our knees and stuck our heads through the unreal wall and the unreal floor. Beneath the floor there was a pit, only about five feet deep (luckily for Allen, I thought). In the far corner lay a skeleton, still clothed, a rusty sword in its bony hand, looking as if he were only resting against the wall of the pit.

In the corner, right below where Allen had fallen, the stones glowed with a soft purple light. Allen was nowhere to be seen. But it was my guess that those glowing stones had something to do with his disappearance.

"You don't think that skeleton might be Allen -- or what's left of him, do you?" Tim asked.

"Quite unlikely," said Peter. "Look at Mister Bones's clothes -- quite different from Allen's. Notice the boots, for example."

"The boots!" Tim shouted. "I saw a pair like that in Ishar's shop. Oh man, if those are the same boots . . . and there are the gloves. That must be the same outfit I saw." Tim was really excited.

"What are they supposed to do?" I asked.

"Are we going to engage in a discussion about a pair of boots and gloves, or are we going to attempt to locate Allen?" Peter asked.

"You're right," I said. "Got any good ideas for finding him?"

"What we clearly need," said Peter in a cool voice, "is the application of deductive logic. Now, let's review the facts. We saw Allen walk into the illusory room. We heard his voice as he fell through the illusory floor. We looked into the pit beneath the floor, but saw only a skeleton and some purple, glowing stones. The skeleton, as we saw by the clothes it is wearing, is evidently not Allen. Furthermore, the glowing stones are located precisely where he would have landed. Therefore I conclude that the glowing stones most probably account for Allen's disappearance."

"Bravo! Brilliant!" I shouted, clapping my hands. "And now, what should we do?"

"Do?" Peter replied. "Why, I have no idea. I was merely analyzing the facts."

"Why don't we drop an orc onto the glowing stones and see what happens," Tim suggested.

"Ah! The very action I was about to recommend," Peter said.

But we agreed that it would be cruel just to push the creature in and watch it break its head, or else drop through a trap door -- and besides, we needed that orc as a fighter. So Tim and I each held onto one of its arms, and we lowered one of the glassy-eyed orcs down through the illusory floor, into the pit, and onto the purple, glowing stones.

And as soon as its feet touched the stones, the orc disappeared, just as if he'd been wearing an invisibility ring.

Tim and I, who had been holding onto the orc, fell backwards with a gasp of surprise. Where did it go? And, even more important, did Allen go to the same place?

"Now for an important question," said Peter. "Should we all attempt to touch the glowing stones? Or should only one of us go through and try to find Allen?"

"Whatever we do," I said, "I think we'd better stick together. If only one of us managed to find Allen, then we'd all still have the problem of trying to get back together again. If we all go, at least our fighting strength will be up to its best level."

"That's one way of looking at it," said Tim. "Another way is that we could all wind up lost together."

"We don't really know where we are right now, for that matter," I replied. "Wouldn't it be better if all four of us were trying to get out of the dungeon together?"

"You're right. But before we hop onto those glowing stones, I want to check out those boots and gloves the skeleton's wearing."

"There is one difficulty to your proposal," said Peter. "How are you going to get over to the far end of the pit without landing directly on those glowing stones which, presumably, will transport you elsewhere?"

"I'll just have to take a running leap," said Tim. So he backed off and ran straight at the illusionary wall. It looked pretty strange to see him running full force at a wall, even though we knew the wall wasn't really there. But he went flying through it, then dropped down through the floor that also wasn't really there.

Peter and I stuck our heads down and looked into the pit. Tim had landed on his feet, and was pulling the boots off the skeleton.

"Oh man, I think these are the ones," Tim yelled. He was really excited. "Come on down."

"Thanks anyway," said Peter, "but I believe that I'd best stay up here to keep an eye on my orcs."

"I'm coming right down," I shouted to Tim. "Stand back down there." And I took my running leap through the not-there wall, fell through the not-there floor, and landed on my feet.

"Well done, Charles," said Peter, with his head sticking through the floor above me.

Tim was trying to put the boots on, but without success. "Damn it! My feet are too big for the boots. Hey, come here, Charles, and let's see if they'll fit you."

"What are those boots supposed to do?" I asked as I pulled off my hiking boots.

"See if they fit first, then I'll show you," Tim said.

"You know, I saw a matched pair of boots and gloves just like these in Ishar's shop -- for 1,000 gold pieces!"

The boots fit me; and the gloves were fine, too. They looked and felt great. The insides were lined with some kind of silver fur that seemed to grip my hands and feet. The outside was a soft, grey leather that had gold thread stitched into it. When I looked more closely, I saw that the stitching seemed to be patterned into the same kind of rune-writing we'd seen on the rings and the wand.

I was eager to find out why these boots and gloves should cost 1,000 gold pieces in Ishar's shop. I know that it should have seemed strange to be wearing a pair of boots and gloves that had just come off of a skeleton. But by now, I was getting more used to the weird things that could and did happen in a dungeon like this. After coming across everything from orcs to giant spiders, wearing a skeleton's outfit seemed almost natural!

"Now," said Tim, "turn around and put both hands on the wall."

So I did.

"Now put one foot on the wall."

So I did.

"And now put your other foot on the wall."

I didn't. "Wait a minute," I said, "are you crazy? I'll fall flat on my back."

"Not if those boots and gloves are what I think they are. Just try it."

And in fact, I noticed that my gloved hands seemed to be fastened to the wall like they were cemented there. I moved the foot that was already planted on the wall. It resisted, then moved. All right! I thought -- this just might work!

So I pulled my hands off, then put them back up higher on the wall; I braced one foot on the wall, and then the other. And I stayed there, hanging like a human spider. Then I moved one foot, and it came swinging away. Then, unfortunately, I moved both hands at once, and came crashing down to the floor.

"Keep practicing, Charles," Peter said excitedly from the floor above. "You'll get it."

"In Ishar's shop," Tim said, "that boot and glove combination was called the Master Climber's Set. You can climb anywhere with them -- even on the ceiling."

But right then I was only picking myself up off the floor. Clearly, I needed practice. It was strange, but when I walked around I discovered that the boots didn't cling to the floor at all. They held traction only when I was climbing. That was a great feature of those boots -- otherwise, I wouldn't have been able to wear them except for climbing.



I went back to the wall. This time I tried a system of alternately lifting my right arm up, then the left leg as I put my right hand down; left arm up, left leg down; right leg up, left hand down -- and so on. It was slow and complicated at first; and twice I almost dropped back to the floor. But pretty soon I was scrambling up and down the wall like Spiderman.

"This is great, Tim," I said, crouched upside down on the wall, my legs sticking up through the illusionary floor above me. "But I feel bad that you can't use them. Want to try putting on these boots again?"

"That's all right, Charles," he said. "I've got this wand. I don't know what it's good for yet; but I have the feeling I'll find out before we're out of the dungeon. And since I've got the wand, you ought to have the Master Climber's Set. We should split up all treasures equally among all of us, right?"

"Ahem!" said Peter from above. "I hate to disturb you gentlemen in your polite conversation; but we are missing Allen and one orc, you know. Don't you think we should attempt to locate them?"

"He's right," I said, climbing down from the wall. I felt kind of guilty for playing around while Allen might need our help -- wherever he was.

"O.K.," said Tim, "who's going to step on those glowing stones first?"

"I think Peter ought to go first with his orcs," I said. "If there's any trouble at the other end, Peter can use his new fighters to help out. And we'll come along right behind them."

"Assuming, of course, that we all wind up at the same place," Peter said. "What if those stones are the entrance-way to a random-direction telekenesis transporter?"

"A what?" Tim and I asked together.

Peter looked at us impatiently. "You know -- a device that sends you somewhere in an instant, like the transporter beam in Star Trek."

"But Spock and Kirk always go to the same place when they use their transporter," I said. "So what's all this jazz about 'random-direction'?"

"True," Peter admitted. "But this one may operate on different principles."

"Well, then we'll all land on the stones at the same time," I said. "Then maybe we'll have a better chance of coming out together."

"How about the orcs?" Tim asked.

"We'll have to lower them onto the stones first," I said. "Then we go."

So Peter lowered the second orc down onto the glowing stones and poof! he disappeared in a fraction of a second. Then the last orc went through.

"Now come on down here, and we'll all jump together," I called to Peter. He took a running jump over the stones, and came falling down to where we were standing at the bottom of the pit. He landed with a crash, but he wasn't hurt.

"You ought to spend more time on gymnastics in P.E.," I said as Peter slowly got up from his crash-landing.

"It's true, my jumping technique is not very professional," he replied. "I'll have to read a book or two on the art of jumping accurately." And he was serious!

Then we all lined up in front of the glowing stones.

"Jump on the count of three," I said. "One, two. . . three!"

And we were gone.

## NEW ROUTE, OLD ENEMIES

The first thing we saw when we reappeared was Allen struggling with a tied-up orc. The two charmed orcs that came through the teleportation stones (that's what Peter called them) with us were still under his control. But since the other one had been away from Peter for so long, it must have gotten out of his control. The spell was broken, and the orc was snarling with rage, trying to butt Allen with its head.

I gave the struggling orc a good rap on the head with old Palaro Junior, and the monster collapsed like a deflated balloon.

Allen got up and dusted himself off. "It's about time you guys showed up," he said. "What were you doing back there -- having an anchovy milkshake?"

"We were merely trying to ascertain the best course of action," Peter explained in a calm voice. "You wouldn't want us to do anything rash, would you?"

"Oh, indubitably negative," Allen replied in a perfect imitation of Peter's style.

"Say," said Tim, "do you guys realize just where we are?"

I looked around. "This does look familiar," I replied. Then I noticed the stairway leading up. "There was the ooze

and the jagged cracks and the deadly-looking mushrooms.

"We're right back where we started!"

We were all amazed. The teleportation stones had somehow sent us back to the beginning of the passageway through the dungeon.

"Oh no!" Allen groaned. "Do you mean we've got to go back over the same path again -- past the kobolds and spiders and across that rickety troll bridge?"

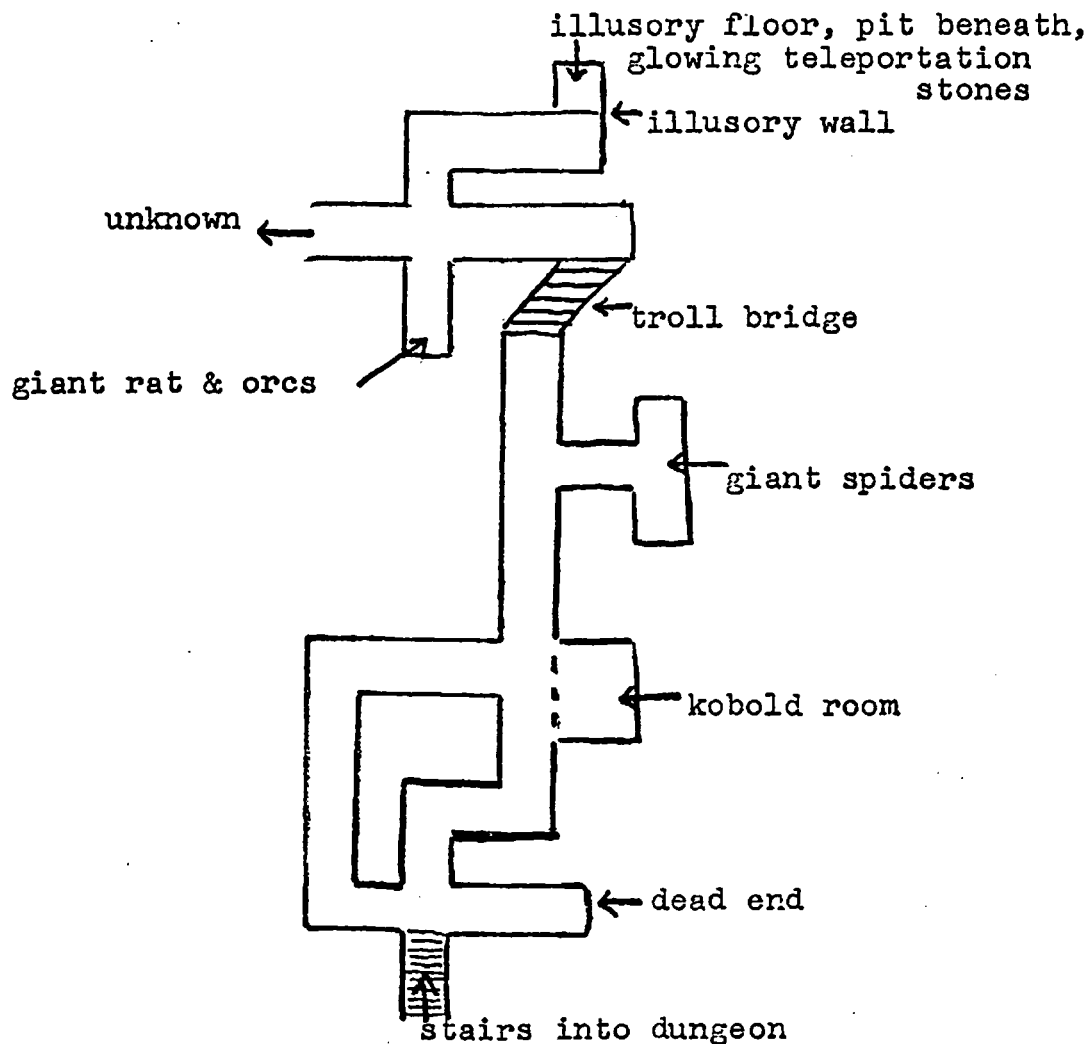
"Look at it this way," I said. "At least we know where we are. We could have wound up somewhere down in the tenth level, and not had the foggiest idea where we were or where we ought to go."

"Fellow adventurers," Peter said, "may I remind you that if we wish we could take the path to the left this time. Perhaps it might lead to somewhere new and exciting."

Peter's idea sounded good to us. It would mean taking a new path -- one that didn't lead by the kobolds' room (although we felt pretty sure we could handle them easily with the help of our new orc-fighters); and there might be new adventures and treasures down the left fork. So we took it.

But as it turned out, our side trip was uneventful. In fact, after a couple of bends in the path, we found ourselves back in the main passageway again, about ten yards down from the Kobold room.

"Just a minute, you guys," Tim said. "Let me make a map of where we've been in the dungeon so far. I think we ought to know where we're going, and where we've come from." So here's the map Tim drew:



After Tim had finished the map, we double-timed on down the hallway, hoping to make up for lost time. But when we got to the troll bridge, we had a nasty surprise waiting for

us. One of the orcs who'd escaped Peter's spell was standing on the other side of the bridge laughing at us. It grunted something in its own language, then hacked at the ropes that held the bridge fastened to the floor on the other side.

The bridge groaned and sagged to one side as its supporting rope dropped away. Still laughing cruelly, the orc proceeded to slash away at the other rope.

"If he cuts that rope, we're trapped over here," I yelled. "Try to charm it, Peter!" So Peter tried his Charm Person spell on it again; but either the distance was too great, or the spell just wouldn't work on that orc, or else Peter had just used up his magic for a while.

In another minute, the rope was cut, and the whole bridge came away with a clatter, and fell down through the blackness of the pit. It was still fastened to the stones on our side, of course. But that wouldn't do us much good. The bridge crashed into the stones below us, and the loosened boards fell away into the depths of the pit.

The orc was still standing at the edge of the pit on the other side, laughing at us and gloating over the bad fix he'd put us in. But just then, a huge, thin hand reached over the edge and grabbed the orc's leg. The laugh at once changed to a shriek of terror as the troll pulled the struggling orc over the side. Then it was gone. We tried to shine our light over to see where the troll had taken the orc. I thought I saw a

kind of cave dug into the side of the pit wall, about ten feet down from the edge. But I couldn't be sure, because of the way that pit seemed to swallow light. The troll and the orc were both gone -- that I knew, and it was just fine with me.

But now, of course, there was a new problem: how were we going to get across that pit with the bridge down?

"I have some rope in my backpack," Tim said. "Maybe we could lasso the stakes that held the bridge up over there."

We agreed on Tim's idea; so he took out his rope, and tied it into a lasso. Allen pitched it over the pit -- but it fell short. He tried again and again. But he wasn't any kind of cowboy, so he missed every time.

"Even if he does get it," I said, "how can we be sure it's fastened tight on the other side?"

"Got any other ideas for getting this rope over there?" Allen asked me. He was getting frustrated at not being able to rope the stake.

"I sure do," I replied. "I'll just walk over there and tie the rope on."

"Oh really, Spiderman? Let's see you try it," Allen challenged me. Tim and Peter just stood there smiling, since we hadn't told Allen about the boots and gloves yet.

I hitched the rope into my belt, walked over to the wall and put my hands on it. The grip felt firm; but the thought of crawling along the wall over that deep pit was pretty



frightening. But I had to try it if we wanted to get that rope fastened and get us all over to the other side.

Besides, I wanted to see the look on Allen's face when I started crawling the wall.

So I made sure my hands were firm, planted my feet on the wall, then started my trek across. I was being super careful; but I couldn't resist a look back over my shoulder at Allen. "Come on!" I shouted back at him. "Why don't you try it?"

Allen was thunderstruck. "I don't believe it. I just don't believe it," he kept saying over and over. His eyes looked like they would pop out of his head in amazement.

I continued edging my way across. But just as I almost reached the other side, I got a little too eager. My feet came away from the wall, and only the grip with my hands was holding me up. But that wasn't enough to keep me in the same place; and I started sliding down into the pit.

Luckily, my fingers caught an outcropping rock about twenty feet down. I dug in, and finally got my feet planted on the wall again. But down that far, the stones were slippery with some kind of wet moss, so my grip wasn't too good. Carefully, oh so carefully, I inched my way back up the wall.

About half way up, I could hear crunching sounds that seemed to come from inside the wall itself. First I strained my eyes -- then I realized what I was hearing. The sound was

coming from the troll's cave, and it was eating something -- probably the orc. I shivered, then continued my climb. I had no great love for that orc, since it had cut down the bridge, and caused the danger and hassle I was going through just then. But I felt sorry for it anyway. After all, I'd almost been a troll's dinner once myself.

After what seemed like hours, I finally dragged myself up over the ledge. Then I tied the rope to one of the stakes that used to hold up the bridge, yanking on them hard to make sure they could bear the weight of people crossing over the pit.

"O.K., you guys," I yelled across, "now comes the hard part. You're going to have to swing hand-over-hand on the rope to this side. And make it as fast as you can, because there's no telling when that troll might come out for another course for his dinner!"

They conferred for a minute, then Peter shouted, "We've decided to let the orcs test the strength of the rope and stake first. Here they come!"

Peter issued his command, and the first orc came swinging across. It reached my side without any trouble, and scrambled up over the ledge. Then it stood stock still, staring off into space, just as Peter had told it to, waiting for the next orders.

The second orc also came over without any trouble. Then Peter came dangling across. He was causing the rope to sway

more than the orcs had, so I pulled on the line to keep it steadier. I was so involved in watching Peter come across that I didn't even see the hand that came creeping up over the ledge. Suddenly, I felt a familiar iron grip around my ankles.

I let out a yell, let go of the rope, grabbed my mace and swung hard at the grasping hand. There was a sharp crack as steel struck knuckles, and the hand let go. Peter reached my side safely; but the troll was moving farther down the ledge away from me. Then he began climbing up.

Since Tim was coming across on the rope, we had to act fast. "Attack the troll!" Peter commanded his two orcs. But then we realized: Allen had their swords! I groaned, realizing that we'd been over-careful with the orcs. But there was nothing for them to do now but fight with their bare hands.

Both orcs immediately struck at the troll, and there were savage grunts and howls as nails and teeth tore at flesh. But the troll was just too strong for them. In a minute, it lifted one of the struggling orcs high in the air, and was about to fling it into the other orc, when Peter yelled to the orc still free, "Push them! Ram them both over the edge!" The orc then charged into the troll at full speed. With a groan, the troll and its struggling orc-victim toppled over the edge of the pit. And for the

second time, I heard its hideous howl as it fell through the darkness.

Finally Tim made it over, and we were all standing together, looking over the edge of the pit. We all congratulated Peter on his quick thinking by having the orc get rid of the troll in the way it did.

"Thank you for the compliment," Peter said. "But it's a great pity that we're down to one charmed orc." He sighed with obvious regret.

"You're right, of course," I said. "But think of where we'd be right now if those orcs hadn't been along with us."

"In his dining room down there," Allen said, pointing down to the troll cave.

"Those troll must be impossible to destroy," said Tim. "I bet he'll just crawl back up here again after his plunge."

"Let's hope we never have to cross this pit again," said Allen. "I sure didn't like swinging by a rope over that pit -- especially with a hungry troll on the other side!"

"Let's get out of here now," I said. "We've got to keep moving if we want to get out of this dungeon."

So down the passageway we went again, ever on the lookout for danger, treasure -- and a way out!

## THE BANDITS AND THEIR CAPTIVE

We travelled for over a hundred yards going east down the passageway. It seemed awfully quiet all of a sudden. The only sounds were our breathing and an occasional drip of water splashing in a puddle on the floor. We ate a little food on our way, since we didn't want to waste any time by stopping to eat. It was eerie, too, walking down a dark passageway with only flashlight beams for light, and a charmed, pig-nosed orc lumbering along by Peter's side.

We came to a bend in the passageway, then turned north. After another twenty yards, a fork off the main passageway branched to the right. Now, usually at places like that, we would get into a discussion or argument about which way we should go.

Not this time, though. We heard muffled shouts, followed by a high-pitched scream coming from the pathway leading right. We shined our lights down that way. But the fork seemed to dead-end after about twenty yards. The shouts and the scream, though, seemed to have come from behind the wall.

"Let's check it out," said Allen, and he took off in the direction of the sounds before we could stop him.

"Allen's going to land us in a heap of trouble one of these days if he keeps on acting before he thinks," Tim said as we all followed Allen down the right fork.

And, as we would soon find out, Tim was right.

By the time we reached him, Allen had already made a discovery. "This is another one of those unreal walls. Look," he said, plunging his arm through the solid-looking stone.

"A true observation," Peter said, "However, this time I would suggest that you test the floor on the other side before you leap through."

Just then, another high-pitched scream, followed by bursts of shouting and loud laughter, came from the other side of the illusory wall. Tim stuck his head through the non-stones, and shined his flashlight around in the space beyond.

"There's a doorway about another ten yards down," he said. "And all that noise seems to be coming from the other side of the door."

We all agreed to go down and investigate. "But let's be very, very quiet about it," I said. We readied our weapons, and went through the wall slowly, testing the floor every step of the way. It was solid enough -- although Allen slipped on one of the big blue mushrooms that sprouted from the floor. Luckily, we caught him before he went crashing to the stones.

Pretty soon we were standing by a huge stone door that looked exactly like the locked one back down at the beginning

of the dungeon passageway. This door, though, was slightly open. I carefully peered around the corner and into the room.

The room was about twenty yards on a side. In the center was a small fire that burned and crackled smokily, and sent weird, wavering shadows scurrying around the dark walls. On the far side of the fire there were four big, burly men standing around someone -- or something (I couldn't tell which) -- tied to the back wall. Whatever or whoever it was, the bandits were questioning in angry voices. After a minute or so their voices got louder and more impatient. Finally one of them lashed out with his fists, and there was another high-pitched scream. The men laughed at the scream, then started in on their questioning again.

Tim, Peter, and then Allen crept around to the crack in the doorway and looked in. The spell-bound orc stood immobile in the background, still awaiting Peter's next command.

"It would appear that someone in there is in great distress," Peter whispered. "Do you think we should attempt a rescue?"

"I don't know," Tim said, "those guys look pretty big. And there are four of them -- armed, too, from what I can see."

"Ah. . .ah. . .ah. . ." -- Allen was starting to sneeze! We all clamped our hands over his mouth and pinched his nose.

"If you sneeze now," I whispered fiercely in Allen's ear, "we're going to take you back and feed you to the troll!" But fortunately, the sneeze stayed bottled up.

Tim whispered, "If we could lure those thugs out here, we might be able to untie whoever's being held captive in there. I could do a hold portal spell. . ."

"Right -- then we'd all be trapped inside," I said. "What we need is a plan to keep them in there while we sneak in and rescue the victim."

"And how do you propose to distract them long enough to bring the victim out here without those thugs noticing the abduction?" Peter asked.

"Maybe. . ." I began. But just then there was another scream. Allen looked into the room.

"Hey, they're torturing a woman!" Allen yelled out loud. "They're beating up on a girl they've got tied to the wall! They can't get away with that!" And he drew his sword and rushed in.

With all his yelling, Allen had attracted the attention of the big bruisers inside. They looked startled for a moment; but they recovered fast, drew their weapons, and came at Allen.

"Oh man," I said, "Allen's really done it this time." I tried to stop him, but it was too late. He'd already leaped into the room, determined to be the Noble Rescuer



of the Fair Lady in Distress. And we had to follow him in and fight, or he'd be cut down in a minute.

But as it happened, the fight never took place. A rap on the skull from behind, and Allen went down and out. As soon as I came into the room, I realized what had happened: there were five of them in the room -- and one of them had been standing guard by the door. We never heard or saw him. And so when Allen went running in, the guard just whacked him from behind.

I saw that there was no way I could hold off all five of them with my mace, so I dropped Palaro junior and held up my hands in surrender. Tim, too, dropped his dagger -- but Peter had gotten away. Or else he'd disappeared.

The three of us were disarmed, pushed back to the wall, and tied up there alongside of the girl we'd tried to rescue. After we'd been bound up, I got a better look at the girl. She seemed to be somewhere between sixteen and eighteen years old, tall and thin, with dark, straight hair that hung down over her shoulders. She should have looked pretty pathetic, with her eyes all red and her cheeks puffy from crying. But I immediately saw something cruel in her eyes. I could understand her hating the men who'd been torturing her, but she looked like she hated the world. And if the tables had been turned, I could believe that she might dish out much worse treatment than she'd been receiving herself.

It was just a feeling I had about her. And I think I was at least part right.

She looked down on us as we gasped for breath. We were bound to stakes in the wall by strong ropes that pulled our arms up over our heads. It was really uncomfortable, and hard to breathe.

"Fools!" she said, spitting out the words. "You certainly made a mess of your great heroic rescue, didn't you?"

Allen couldn't believe what he was hearing. "Wait a minute," he yelled. "We were trying. . ."

"You failed," she interrupted. "That's all that matters now. You tried, and you failed."

"She's right," I said to Allen. "We were fools to come running in like that. We should have planned it out carefully -- or else just left her here, and gone back to Ishar for help." I'd forgotten that it wouldn't have been an easy matter to get back over the troll pit with the bridge gone.

Meanwhile the bandits were talking among themselves. They were going through our backpacks, keeping everything they wanted and flinging the rest around the room. It wasn't long before one of them came across Tim's wand.

"Hey, look at this," the bandit said, holding up the wand for his fellows to see. "Looks like magic stuff. Let's see if we can get Miss Witch over there to show us how it works."

"Don't bother," said one of his buddies. "We haven't been able to get the location of the Buried Idol out of her. She won't tell us nothing about nothing."

"Oh yes she will," said the one with the wand as he walked over to us. "Which one of you characters owned this wand?" he asked us.

"I did," Tim confessed at once. "But I don't have any idea how it works. If I did, you can bet I'd have tried it out on you."

The bandit laughed a kind of snarling laugh. "You know, kid, I think you're telling the truth. You don't look like any kind of magician. But now Queenie here" -- he pointed to the girl -- "Now, she knows all about spells and that kind of thing, don't you?"

He held the wand in front of her eyes, turning it around slowly in his fingers. She turned her head aside -- but I could see her looking out of the corner of her eye at the rune-letters on the wand.

"Maybe the game's changed now that we have your little helpers tied up -- right, witchie?" said the bandit. Then he snarled, "If you don't tell us where that blasted idol is, and show me how to work this wand, I'm going to cook your little friends here over the fire -- real slow."

The witch girl didn't even blink. "Go right ahead," she said with a little laugh. "Just save me a little for dessert, won't you?"

The bandit drew back his fist and slugged her with a hard right. "You won't be so cutesy when we're through with you, my tasty little witch-princess. Come on now: cooperate, and we'll let you in for a cut of the loot. All you have to do first is tell me how to operate this wand. Come on -- what do you say?"

The girl looked at the wand again. She was trying to act casual and cool about it; but I could see her interest pretty clearly.

"Let me see it more clearly," she said. The bandit held it up for her to see. She looked carefully at the runes. Then she smiled a sour smile, and spit in the bandit's face. "It's a child's toy, you idiot. There's no magic in that rod."

The bandit started to hit her again, but his fellows called him off. They wanted her conscious for more questioning later. So the bandit with the wand left her with a curse, and went back to his comrades at the fire for more talk, drink-swilling, and meat-eating.

"Is that wand really worthless?" Tim asked her, "Or were you just trying to throw them off the track?"

The girl looked at Tim for a moment. "How did you manage to get ahold of a Doom Fire Wand? You certainly don't look like a magician. And I can't believe you're warriors."

Tim ignored the insult. "A Doom Fire Wand? What does it do?"

"You'll find out soon enough if they learn how to use it," she said. "But you still haven't answered my question: how did you get the wand?"

"We found it," I said.

"Ha -- a likely story!" she replied.

"But it's true. We. . ."

"Don't bother explaining, Charles," Tim said. "She wouldn't believe you anyway." We were both pretty angry with her. After all, we did try to help her escape -- or, at least, Allen did, and we followed Allen. It was true that we'd botched the job, barging in like that and getting caught from behind. But we did try.

The girls must have been reading our thoughts, because her looks softened just a bit, and she said, "I appreciate the spirit of your attempt. But you'll have to admit you didn't carry it off very well. And now, we're all here -- doomed, I suppose, to be tortured to death by those vile barbarians." Then her lips set firm. "But they'll never get a word of information out of me."

"What is this buried idol they were talking about?" Allen asked.

"That's my business," she snapped back. She was back to her old hard-as-nails self.

"Sorry I asked," Allen replied sarcastically. Since he was the one who'd tried to rescue her, he was understandably pretty bitter about her cold, unfriendly attitude toward us. By now, I was getting mad about her sneering words.

"Listen," I said to her, "it won't do you any good to treat us like enemies. We've never heard of your precious Buried Idol; and right now, we couldn't care less what or where it is, or even if it exists or not. But we do want to get out of this room and out of this dungeon alive. If you've got any ideas to help us all escape, let's hear them. If not, we'll just have to wait. . . ." I almost said, "Wait for Peter." But I didn't want to let her know about Peter and his invisibility ring just yet. So I said, "We'll just have to wait until they decide what they want to do with us -- or to us."

She was silent for a minute. Then she spoke. "That wand -- you really don't have any idea what its powers are?"

"No idea at all," Tim replied. "Like I said, if I knew how to use it, I would have used it on the bandits right away."

She looked at Tim thoughtfully. "Yes, I believe you're telling the truth. If we could get that wand back, I could drive those bandits out of here like a pack of whipped dogs."

"That's precisely what I was waiting to hear," said Peter's voice, apparently coming quietly out of nowhere.

"Now, if you'll kindly inform my friend Tim as to how he might best employ his wand, I'll see if I can extract it from the bandit's belt."

The witch's eyes widened, and she looked around frantically. "Who are you? Where are you?"

"Shhh -- not so loud," I told her in a whisper. "That's Peter, and he owns a ring of invisibility. And right now, he's our only hope for getting us all out of here alive. So keep your voice down. If they catch him, it's all over for all of us."

"A ring of invisibility?" she said, her eyes opening wide. She was obviously impressed. "And you had a Doom Fire Wand? Maybe I misjudged you. No one wins prizes like that in the dungeon without some skill in fighting or conjuring."

"I'm glad you've decided we're not just thieves," said Allen.

"May I suggest," said Peter to the witch, "that you inform Tim as to how he can use the -- what did you call it? -- ah yes, the Doom Fire Wand. There's no use in my stealing it if he doesn't know how to use it; and it is his wand, you know."

"Bring me the wand and I'll use it on those bandits myself," she replied. "I can't trust you bunglers to do it right."

"Ah, but you must trust us," Peter replied in his most reasonable voice. "I've been listening quite closely to your conversation here; and I have no reason to believe that you would help us escape once you yourself were free. Nor am I convinced that you would return the wand to Tim, its rightful owner, if I gave it to you. No, I would much rather that you instruct Tim in its operating procedures."

The girl stiffened and frowned. "You do not trust me?"

"Frankly, I do not. But if you can help us all escape by telling Tim about the wand, I might be inclined to trust you more. Right now, though, there can be no question of trust. You want to be free, and so do my friends. I can help everyone -- but only if you will help us."

"And if I refuse?"

"Then I will attempt to free only my friends. Why should we risk ourselves for someone who so clearly spurns our offers of help? If you refuse, I can only try to filch weapons, untie my friends, and hope that we can fight our way out of here by swords and spells. We may die in the attempt, it is true. But in any case, you would remain behind, tied to the wall -- and still at the mercy of the bandits. And they seem little inclined to show mercy. But the choice is yours."

Peter was driving a hard bargain. But he had to, or the witch would obviously set herself free and leave us to



the bandits' vengeance. Right then, though, with Peter free and invisible, we held the upper hand in the bargaining.

"It seems that I have little choice," she said with bitterness. She clearly wasn't used to taking orders or offers on any terms but her own.

"If you wish to be free, yes," said Peter. "I sincerely wish you would trust us and allow us to befriend you. But since you persist in treating us like bandits, we must be rather businesslike with you. So -- you help us, we help you. That is my proposition."

The witch seemed impressed by Peter's calm, rational words. I have to admit that Peter was sounding like a powerful magician just then, speaking out of thin air and protected by his ring of invisibility, in a voice that commanded respect.

The witch turned to Tim. "The smaller end of the wand is the firing end. Point it at your enemy, and concentrate on a mental picture of a bolt of blue lightning coming out of the wand's tip. Then recite this rune: 'Grelan Furor Shadray!' Do it with as much intensity as you possibly can, since the wand discharges only after enough psychic force has been built up. And if it works -- well, just watch and wait and see what happens!"

"Are you sure that will work?" Tim asked suspiciously. "How do we know that you're not just putting us on so Peter will cut you loose?"

"It will work," she said simply, "if you do it right."

"Well, madam, for your sake and for ours, I hope you're telling the truth; because if you're not, there's not much hope of any of us escaping alive."

"What are you going to do next?" the witch asked Peter. But there was no reply. Peter was gone.

## THE BATTLE

For what seemed like hours, nothing happened. The light from the smoky little fire in the center of the room flickered dimly; so there was no chance for us to see whether Peter was succeeding in filching the wand or not. But at least for the moment the bandits were occupied in eating, drinking, and arguing among themselves. From the snatches of conversation I could hear, two of the bandits wanted to slit our throats and move on. They were convinced that we were useless, and that the girl couldn't be made to talk.

Another two bandits agreed with them as to our uselessness, but wanted to try some more torture to see if they could pry the location of the Buried Idol out of the girl. I couldn't tell whether they really thought they might learn something, or whether they just enjoyed torturing people. I had the feeling, though, that after they tired of working on the girl, they would amuse themselves with us next.

The fifth bandit didn't seem to care one way or another. He just nodded his head in agreement, no matter who was speaking. He seemed to be drowsing off from the effects of the wine.

But suddenly, the fifth bandit jerked alert, clapped his hand to his knife sheath, and yelled, "Hey! Somebody stole my knife!" He jumped up quickly, looking around the room for the thief.

The others laughed at him. "Sit down, Grax," one of them said. "Your head is so fuddled with wine, you probably threw it away with all that junk we got from the kids."

"I didn't," Grax answered vehemently. "I know I didn't." Then he scratched his head. "At least, I don't think I did." He seemed to grow confused for about five heartbeats. Then he snapped his fingers and said, "Just a minute! Now I remember. I felt my knife sliding out of the scabbard. There's someone in here, I tell you. Maybe a ghost." He looked around again, fearfull this time.

"And just what would a ghost do with your knife -- pick his teeth? Sit down and relax, Grax. Have some more wine." And they all laughed at Grax again as he stumbled around the fire, cursing as he looked for his knife and swilling wine from a leather wineskin.

In the meantime, Peter came back to where we were tied. "It would appear that I'm not a very slick pickpocket," he said. "But I did manage to obtain the wand and a knife to cut you loose. I'll release you first, Tim, since we'll be needing the services of your wand right away."

Everything seemed to be going along smoothly -- except for Grax feeling his knife slip away. But then, my heart skipped a beat. "Peter!" I whispered. "You're becoming visible again. Keep your ring on."

I could see Peter now, standing there like a grey ghost, cutting Tim's rope. He looked at himself. "It

seems that the ring is losing its effectiveness," he said simply. "I'd better work quickly." But with every passing second, he was growing more and more visible. We could only hope that the bandits wouldn't look toward us until he was through freeing us.

"Hurry up," Allen whispered. "If they see you, they'll be on us in two seconds."

Peter had just finished cutting Tim loose and was working on Allen's bonds, when the bandit named Grax spotted him.

"There he is!" yelled Grax, pointing at Peter. "There's the one who must have grabbed my knife. Let's get him, boys!"

And with that the bandits sprang to their feet and reached for their weapons. But Peter was prepared for that moment.

"Attack! Attack these men now, my servant!" he shouted. And through the door rushed Peter's spell-bound orc, brandishing his sword like a berserker.

The bandits were completely surprised. The orc cut down the man nearest by with a slashing swoop of its sword. But then Grax let fly a spinning ball studded with sharp spikes that flashed wickedly as it whistled through the air and struck the orc in the side of the head.

The orc fell to the floor at once. But instead of running over to pick up his weapon, Grax shouted out the

words "Shavo Eedro Gadro!" and the ball of spikes dislodged itself and flew back into his outstretched hand. Then the bandits turned their attention back on us.

"Use the wand!" cried the witch. "It's our only hope. Use the wand now!"

Tim grasped the wand firmly and pointed it at Grax. The bandits hesitated for a fatal second. They must have known that they could easily defeat us. Tim, Peter, and Allen were weaponless (except for Peter's dagger), and I was still tied to the wall. But they clearly feared the wand. Grax, though, came out of his fear-fit first. He drew his arm back to send his spiked ball flying at Tim's head, just as Tim shouted out the words "Grelan Furor Shadray!"

The spike never left Grax's hand. From the tip of that small and innocent-looking wand came a crackling bolt of blue lightning. It shot forward with a noise like a thunderclap, and zigzagged right into Grax's chest. For about half a second there was a sound like a thousand mad bees buzzing. Black smoke poured from the bandit's body as he dropped to the floor.

Now there were only three bandits left -- and they wanted nothing more to do with Tim's Doom Fire Wand. Without waiting to see whether their comrades were only dead or wounded, the remaining three fled out the door with yells and curses.

"Go after them," screamed the witch. "Kill them! Kill them all! The pigs deserve to die!"

"I don't want to destroy anything or anyone more than I have to," said Tim, slipping the wand inside his belt. "We're free now, and that's what counts."

"You fool!" she snapped. "What if they return with reinforcements or more powerful weapons. Don't you know they'll be thirsting for revenge?"

"We'll deal with that problem when we come to it," said Allen.

"You'll come to it soon enough," she replied. "Now come over here and release me this instant."

"Please wait your turn," said Peter, who proceeded to cut my bonds first. Then he turned to her. "I hope we'll have no cause to regret freeing you," he said, then cut through the heavy thongs that bound her to the wall. Now we were all free.

Tim and Allen went around the room gathering up our belongings, which the bandits had either stuffed in their own pouches and bags, or else flung around the room. Unfortunately, they'd escaped with our remaining carved coins -- only Peter still had his. But our weapons and armor were still there. And, best of all, Allen now had a new weapon to use -- Grax's spiked ball.

While Peter and I were talking with the witch about where we should go next, we heard a clanging crash from

the other side of the room. We all whirled around, just in time to hear Allen yell "Shavo Eedro Gadro!" and to see the spiked ball come whirling back to his hand, its spikes fitting themselves exactly between his fingers.

"This," Allen said with a wide grin, "is going to come in very handy. I hope we meet up with those bandits again."

"That weapon," the witch remarked, "is no toy. In case you're interested, it is called the Sailing Stone of Spikes, and was once owned by Darman the Berserker. The bandit named Grax must have stolen it from him -- Darman is too great a warrior to have lost it to that sleazy robber in an honest fight.

"You are quite fortunate to own the Sailing Stone, young adventurer. But beware: if it is thrown, and called back without drinking the blood of a victim, it may turn on its owner and sink its blades into his flesh. Therefore, beware of target practice on dungeon walls, sir, lest you fall victim to your own weapon."

Allen looked at his new weapon with considerably more respect. Then he smiled, and tucked it into a part of his backpack where it could be reached quickly. "Don't worry, miss," he said. "The Sailing Stone of Spikes and I are going to get along together just fine."



So while Allen and Tim continued gathering up our equipment -- plus whatever else the bandits had left behind -- Peter, the witch-girl and I discussed what we might do next.

## THE CAT AND THE EGG

We learned that the witch's name was Tasha. When we asked her where she came from, she told us an astonishing story. She hadn't been born at all: she had been conjured into existence by a high-level wizard for the purposes of tending his laboratory, and for working minor spells that he had no time for. But when we asked her where she lived, and how and why she got away from her wizard-creator, she was vague.

"Let's just say that my home is close by, yet far away. And let's just say that my master, Nostradamus, let me go for his own purposes."

"Are you still in his service, or are you free?"

Peter asked.

"Both -- and neither," she replied.

We clearly weren't going to get any more information out of her on that subject, so I switched the conversation to what we should do next. "Do you have any idea how we can get out of this dungeon, Tasha?" I asked. "I mean, it's been great, being able to go adventuring down here. But we do want to get out again -- and soon."

"Into the upper world?" she asked with surprise. "But no magic works up there, or, at least, not the kind of magic that we work down here. Personally, I've never been outside,

and I have no reason to want to go there. The dungeon is my life; and it's big enough for me to spend a lifetime exploring."

"But are there any ways out of the dungeon except through the door under Ishar's shop?" I asked.

She thought for a moment, then said, "Yes, I have heard that there is an inter-dimensional door in the fourth level of one part of the dungeon. But the path to reach it is extremely dangerous. You would be wiser to go back out by the door through which you entered."

"Unfortunately, that is out of the question," said Peter. We told her the story of how we became trapped inside King Sequoia in the first place. We must have looked pretty glum as we told the story, because she burst out laughing at us even before we'd finished.

"Such sad faces! And such an easy problem to solve. Have you never heard of a Wizard Knock?"

We hadn't. From her sleeve she plucked a small piece of brown parchment and handed it to Peter. "This is your key to the outside world," she said. "I'm giving it to you to repay the debt I owe you for saving my life -- even though I was pretty harsh with you."

Then her smile faded. "But don't trust me," she continued in a serious voice, "for your own sakes. I may have temporary fits of gratitude like this; but my wizard's training makes me cold and even cruel most of the time."

Then the smile returned. "But for now, we can be fellow adventurers -- at least for a while. I will travel with you until we must part ways. I have a quest. . ." she began, but then fell silent.

"Does it have to do with the Buried Idol?" Peter asked. "Perhaps we could be of some assistance."

"We will speak of it no more," she replied. Her face had the old hard look once again.

"Let's get back to the subject of how we can get out of here," I said. I told her about the destroyed bridge and the troll that lurked in the pit. "So, if it's at all possible, we'd like to avoid going back that way. Is there any other way we can get back to the door we came in by? And how will that piece of paper help us get the door open?"

"As for your first question," she replied, "the answer is yes, there is another way to return to the entrance without crossing the troll pit. You may remember that when you came into the dungeon, there was a locked door on your right. Did you see it, or try to open it?" We told her we had.

"Excellent -- you know just where it is. I will show you a passageway that leads to that door from the other side.

"And as to your second question: this scroll, when properly read and recited, will open any door -- unless it has been charmed shut by a wizard greater than sixth level in experience." Then her face darkened. "I forgot one

important detail, however. This spell may be used only by one who possesses a Hold Portal spell."

"Then we're in luck," I told her. "Tim -- the one who owns the wand -- has a Hold Portal spell. He's already used it once, in fact."

"Excellent -- that is indeed fortunate. I will instruct him in the use of the Wizard Knock. Only mark my words well: this spell can be used only once. As soon as it works its magic, it will curl up and vanish into smoke. So use it only when you need it desperately. If the door to the Outside World is definitely locked, then by all means save this spell to use on that door. Otherwise. . ." here she smiled her old, cruel smile -- "otherwise you may find yourselves adventuring in the dungeon for many a year."

So after a brief meal -- courtesy of the bandits, who had left behind some excellent meat, already roasted over the fire -- we left that grim room for good. Allen and I were both in the lead, sword and mace drawn and ready for action, since we figured the bandits could be lurking anywhere, waiting for revenge.

We passed through the illusory wall and out into the main passageway. We struck off on a bending course that took us north, east, north, and east again. So far, so good -- no trouble yet. Then after traveling south for about twenty or thirty yards, the passageway branched off:

one road continued south, and the other led off to the east.

"Which path should we follow to the doorway you mentioned?" Peter asked Tasha.

"The passageway east is your road back to the entrance-way door. But there are some interesting marks on the floor leading south. Look."

The stone floor of the southern passage was pitted with clusters of holes, with three tiny pits per cluster. And across the stones were long, continuous scratch marks -- as if something had been dragged across them -- something, maybe, that had three-taloned claws. Big claws. Our flashlights showed that the passageway continued south for another thirty or so yards, then turned west.

"What say you, adventurers," said Tasha in a challenging tone of voice. "Do you want to run directly to safety, or are you willing to explore this mystery first?" The way she put it, we were all cowards if we didn't decide to explore the pits and scratches to the end of their trail.

But as it was, we were all ready for some more adventuring anyway. It's amazing how the excitement and action down there in the dungeon gets into your blood. Only a couple of hours earlier, we were back there in the bandits' room, tied up and waiting for torture, and maybe death. Now we were ready to go and search out more danger -- and

not for any money or honor, either. Just the excitement and the feeling of meeting danger and overcoming it was enough. So far we'd been lucky — and skillful, too. And since we might not ever have another chance for adventuring like this again, we decided to follow those tracks, even in spite of Tasha's daring us to do it.

"Let's go south," I said to the other three. "What do the rest of you say?"

"South it is!" they all shouted in one voice. So off we went.

After going south, then west, the passageway headed north. Tim shined his light into the gloom up ahead. His beam struck a large pile of rocks. We all gathered together and readied our weapons and spells, since those rocks could easily hide an ambush party.

"You know," I said, "those rocks don't look like just a random heap. It's like they were placed there in some kind of order."

"If those rocks are what I think they are," said Tasha, "you're right. And we are in extreme danger. We should leave at once." And she turned around to go.

"Wait a moment," Peter said, putting his hand on her shoulder. "Do you want to run directly to safety, or are you willing to explore this mystery first?"

Peter's quoting her exact words back at her must have shamed Tasha, because she turned back to us and said, "You

mock me. Very well -- but mark my words: those stones, by every indication, are . . ."

But just then, Tasha's explanation was cut off by a low, dismal-sounding yowling that came from the direction of the stones. Then it stopped. Silence. We all looked at each other.

"Why don't you put on your invisibility ring and go check out the sounds?" Allen suggested to Peter.

"I would be glad to try the course of action you suggest," Peter replied. "But unfortunately, the ring's power seems to be used up -- only temporarily, I hope. But since you now possess the Sailing Stone of Spikes, perhaps you should lead the way."

"Uh, well, I really haven't practiced enough with it yet. But how about if Charles walks ahead on the ceiling? That way . . ."

"That way I'd be a sitting duck, or rather a hanging duck, for whoever or whatever made that noise," I interrupted. "Tim, you've got that fantastic Doom Fire Wand. How about leading the way toward the stones?"

"Well, all right," Tim agreed reluctantly. "But why don't we all go in together? That way there won't be only one lone target in case we're attacked."

Tasha, who had started to say something earlier about what she thought the tracks meant, said nothing more. She



seemed to be thinking -- or rather, scheming -- about something else, from the look in her eye. So we all bunched up together, and slowly started toward the pile of stones.

As we advanced, we came into a rectangular room, maybe thirty yards by twenty yards. The pile of rocks was backed up to the wall on our left, and extended out into the middle of the room. There was a strong smell of something in there, but I couldn't place what it was.

Tim could, though. "Lizards! This place smells like it's full of lizards or snakes -- or something."

Just then, his flashlight beam caught the gleam of a single eye peering at us from between two stones in the pile. Then it suddenly disappeared. Still no sounds at all in the room.

"Did you see that?" I asked.

"See what?" Allen replied, looking around the room. It turned out that I was the only one who'd seen that gleaming eye in the rocks.

"Are you certain that you aren't just imagining that you saw an eye?" Peter asked. Clearly, nobody wanted to believe me; but they were all afraid that I actually had seen something.

"There's one way to find out," I said, and started towards the rocks, my mace ready for instant action.

Then there was another yowl, and something sprang out of the rocks at me, landing with its claws in my chest. It felt like my heart had jumped into my mouth, I was so startled. Whatever it was had leaped on me so fast that I didn't have any time to swing at it. I dropped the mace, seized the creature with both hands, and pulled it off my chest, while my super-helpful friends just stood there with their mouths hanging open.

After some grappling with whatever it was, I finally got a good grip on it and held it out in front of me.

It was a cat.

A blue cat!

When my friends realized that all those creepy noises had been coming from a little cat, they burst out laughing. Tasha, though, was looking very carefully at the cat's fur.

"This," she said finally, "is no ordinary cat."

"That," Peter said, "is quite obvious from the color of its fur."

"Pah!" she spat in disgust. "You outsiders see only the surface of things. Look at those eyes. There is great intelligence in those eyes -- human intelligence."

Allen looked, but wasn't convinced. "If it's so smart, then why did it almost get itself killed by jumping on Charles?"

"Because it must have recognized that we were all jumpy, and might have hurled some weapons at it if it

had tried to escape," Tasha replied, with an obvious dig at Allen's impulsive behavior. "And wouldn't an ordinary cat have tried to run away? This one leapt into Charles's arms as a demonstration of intelligence -- and of friendly intentions."

"I can think of better ways to show friendliness than by digging claws into my chest," I said to Tasha. But the longer I gazed into the cat's eyes, the more I was inclined to agree with her. That cat looked like it was thinking, and trying to communicate something through its eyes -- maybe some kind of mental telepathy. I wasn't picking up any signals. Those eyes, though . . .

But there was still the question: was the cat good or evil, assuming that it did have some kind of human or super-human intelligence? And now that we had it, what should we do with it?

The second question was answered as Tasha reached out to take the cat from where it was resting in the crook of my arm.

"Let me have the cat," she said. "Perhaps I can learn something about . . ."

But the cat slashed her grasping hands with a wicked swipe of its claws. It didn't even change position in my arms. But it let Tasha know definitely that it didn't want to go with her.

"You miserable little beast!" Tasha screamed, and started to strike the cat with her own long, cat-like fingernails. But I pulled the cat away, and Allen came between Tasha's claw-nails and me.

"Take a hint," he said to Tasha. "The cat wants to stay with Charles -- or, at least, it doesn't want to go with you."

Tasha drew back, and gave Allen a superior sneer-smile. "Suit yourselves. But mark my words: if the cat proves to be an evil sorcerer or a form-changing monster, you'll have only yourselves to blame for the consequences."

Tim interrupted our argument with a shout. "Hey you guys, come over here! You won't believe this!" He was standing on the heap of rocks where the cat had been hidden. We all climbed up to where Tim was, looked down inside the pile, and saw --

A gigantic egg!

And when I say "gigantic," I mean this egg was at least four feet long and three feet high. It was a light orange-red in color, with black lines or veins all over.

"A red dragon egg -- just as I'd hoped!" Tasha exclaimed as soon as she saw it. "Aha, here indeed is a great opportunity." All the coldness was gone from her voice now. Her eyes seemed brighter, and she was really excited.

"A dragon egg!" said Alien with a groan. "Oh great -- that's just what we need: a baby dragon to take back as a souvenir of the dungeon."

"You fool!" Tasha hissed. "Don't you realize what a valuable find this is?"

"What I see," said Tim, "is how dangerous a find it could be. What if the dragon's mother comes back and finds us here with her egg?"

"She will not return," said Tasha with conviction. "Don't you see how close the egg is to hatching?"

"I fail to understand why the condition of the egg should mean that the mother will not return," said Peter.

"But what I would like to know is why you consider this egg so valuable? And even if it is priceless, you clearly cannot move the egg out of here by yourself; and it is far too unwieldy for all of us to carry. And where would you take it? And finally, of what use would a red dragon be to you?"

Tasha looked at Peter in surprise. "Do you not know," she said to him, "that the new-born red dragon will follow and obey the first creature it sees when it emerges from the egg? And can you not imagine what an invincible servant such a beast could be in the dungeon? Those vile bandits, for example, would not have dared to attack me, had I possessed even a young red dragon."

"I just can't see how a full-grown dragon could possibly fit into these passageways," I said, "unless this type is a dwarf breed. The ceilings are too low, and the hallways are too narrow for it to be able to maneuver."

"But that is how a dragon learns and grows in the dungeon," Tasha replied. "It eats and grows until its living space becomes too confining. Then it leaves, and travels downward to lower levels, where the spaces are taller and wider than they are here in the first level."

"Are you telling us that there are full-grown dragons down lower in this dungeon?" Allen cried out. "Just how many levels are there in this place?"

"Let me put it this way," Tasha said to him. "How deep one travels depends on one's strength, courage, and experience. I myself have gone no deeper than the fifth level, although I have heard adventurers -- mighty warriors and powerful wizards, like my own creator -- tell of many more."

"Why would anyone want to go where the monsters are even more dangerous than they are here?" Tim asked. "We've had enough trouble just trying to stay alive on the first level. I can't imagine just going out and looking for even bigger trouble."

"Ah, but you have all tasted adventure yourselves, have you not?" Tasha asked with a smile. "And is it not

a sweet taste, a good savor, when you defeat an enemy and win magic and treasure?" She paused to let us consider, then continued. "Just think: the lower levels do indeed contain monsters many times more dangerous than those you have encountered here. But the treasure is also greater down there, and the magic to be won, more powerful -- and, of course, the excitement is therefore also greater."

Then she looked at each of us carefully. "Tell me, novice adventurers: once you leave the dungeon -- if you leave the dungeon, I should say -- will you not wish to return some day, to fight for gold and spells and charms?"

The four of us looked at each other. None of us said a word, because we knew she was right.

## A PARTING OF THE WAYS

"How long do you think it will take for the egg to hatch?" Tim asked Tasha.

She shrugged her shoulders. "I have never seen a red dragon egg before. But if I can judge by the eggs of the black dragon and the white dragon, this one should hatch within a week -- perhaps even in a day or two."

"Are you just going to wait around here for the egg to hatch?" I asked.

"I mean to do just that," Tasha answered. "I have enough food to last me for a while. An opportunity like this is rare, very rare, even in the dungeon, where almost anything can and does happen in one's lifetime. In return for my patient waiting for a few days, I will have a servant who will grow ever more powerful as the years go by. Surely you can understand my reasoning?"

"When you say 'powerful servant,'" said Peter, "just how do you mean to employ the dragon?"

"Once they are a few years old, they begin to mature into tremendously fierce fighters," said Tasha. "But you have to know how to control them. They develop huge claws and long, sharp teeth, like all dragons; and they can fly. What's more, the red dragon has the ability to breathe acid twice a day when it's fighting. And since red dragons are



intelligent beasts, they can be put to guarding a treasure or a laboratory." The more she dreamed and talked about the future, the more her eyes lit up. Obviously, nothing was going to stop her from trying to keep that dragon.

But as for the rest of us -- we weren't going to stick around for several days or a week just to wait for the big event -- which was only going to profit Tasha, anyway. For one thing, we had been gone for days, and we had to get back to the outside, and down to the highway in time to meet my dad. In fact, we were supposed to meet him in just about twenty-four hours -- and we weren't even out of the dungeon yet!

And for another thing, I wasn't entirely convinced that the mother dragon wouldn't return and decide to get rid of the intruders in her nursery hanging around her egg. True, I'd never seen a dragon; and for sure I'd like to have seen one. But I knew our limits. The four of us had whipped or outsmarted some tough enemies so far in the dungeon. But we couldn't take on a dragon and come out of the fight alive.

So I turned to our companion and said, "Look, Tasha, we can understand your reasons for wanting to stay here. But the four of us have to get back to the outside world -- and soon. If you want to come with us, fine. If not, we're going to have to leave you here now."

"I understand," she said without emotion. "It is well that we part ways now."

"But before we part ways," Tim said, "could you tell us how we can get back to that door you were telling us about?"

So Tasha explained the route. The way seemed easy enough, except that at one crucial place, we were not to take the stairs going down, since these led to lower levels of the dungeon. And, of course, the last thing we wanted to do right then would be to go deeper into that dungeon.

Then Tasha gave Tim the Wizard Knock spell, and told him how to use it. She warned us again that the spell could be used only once, and so to save it for our last exit.

"Will you take the cat with you?" Tasha asked, her eyes looking possessively at the blue animal still curled up in the crook of my arm.

"We'll let the cat make that decision," I said, and put it down on the floor.

"Goodbye, Tasha," said Peter. "Perhaps we will meet again sometime under less dangerous circumstances."

She smiled coolly, and replied, "For a wizard-witch in the dungeon, there are never 'less dangerous circumstances.' And mark my words: you saved my life; but I have repaid you with instructions and a spell. Therefore

I consider the debt repaid. The next time we meet, we may be friends -- or we may be enemies. Nothing is certain in the dungeon. But for now, fare you well -- and may your adventuring be successful."

So she shook hands with us all the way around, then settled down on a stone to keep watch over her red dragon egg.

The four of us regrouped, with Tim and me in the lead. Then, with a final wave of the hands, we left Tasha and her prize, and went back out into the main passageway.

The blue cat followed along behind me.

## RUN AND HIDE

To tell the truth, we were all glad to leave Tasha behind. Her moods were too unpredictable -- and we could never trust her.

"I'd hate to meet up with her again after she's got that red dragon for a servant. That bit about her debt to us being cancelled didn't sound like she wants our friendship very badly," said Allen.

"True," Peter agreed. "I expect she'd make a first-rate dragon lady, though. She has something of the personality of a dragon herself."

"Come on," I said, "you guys are being unfair. She taught Tim how to use the wand; she told us how to get out of the dungeon without having to go back by way of the troll pit; and she gave us the Wizard Knock spell. There's got to be a streak of kindness in her, in spite of those cold words."

As we were talking, we'd been heading east down the main passageway -- ultimately, we hoped, toward the door leading out of the dungeon, the same door we'd tried to open from one side and couldn't. But after we'd been traveling for about a hundred yards or so, we had to quit arguing about Tasha and make a decision. Straight ahead of us was a door; but the main passageway itself took a jog south, then appeared to keep going east again.

We stopped to talk it over. "While you guys are deciding which way to go, let me bring our map up to date," said Tim, who got out his pencil and map-drawing, and sat down to work.

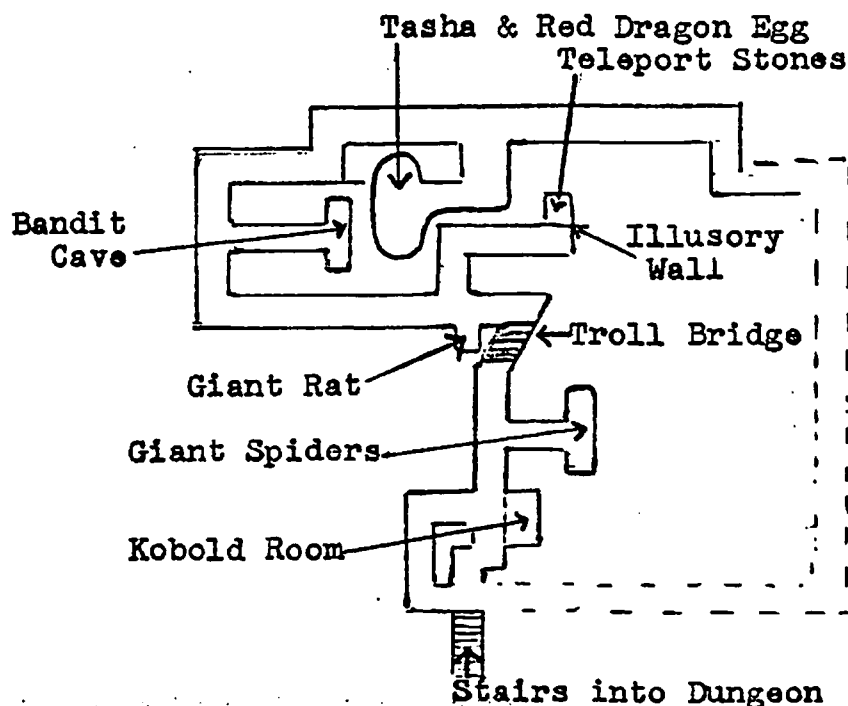
"Tasha didn't say anything about a door, did she?" I asked Peter and Allen.

"She sure didn't," Allen replied. "So much for your gratitude to Tasha for showing us how to get out of here."

"I do remember her saying to keep going south, though," said Peter.

"How do we know that this door doesn't open onto a south passageway?" Allen asked.

"Hey, before you make any moves, do you guys want to take a look at where we've been so far?" Tim asked. He showed us the map as he'd filled it in, and it looked like this:



"The dotted lines stand for where I think the passageway will go -- hopefully, back to the door we want," said Tim.

"Hah!" Peter exclaimed after studying the map for a while. "You're right. We have to go due south, and somewhat east." He smiled at Tim. "Your map is in fact accurate."

"Of course it's accurate," said Tim with mock indignation. "You don't think I ever make mistakes, do you?"

"So which way are we going to go -- along the main passageway or through this door?" Allen asked. "Myself, I'd sure like to see what's on the other side of this door."

"Probably just what's been on the other side of every door we've opened down here -- trouble!" said Tim.

"I'm sympathetic with your urge to go exploring, Allen," Peter said. "But if we have any intention of getting back to the highway on time, we'd best take the quickest way out -- which, we hope, is by the route Tasha suggested."

We all agreed that Peter was right, so we took the passageway.

Right into trouble!

After we went south, then east, we came out into a long, long passageway stretching off south. And the passageway wasn't empty: about sixty yards away, Tim's

flashlight picked up the gleam of swords, shields, and helmets. Then the whole pack of snarling, pig-snouted faces turned to us. And with a shout, they began striding towards us at a fast pace.

It was a whole army of orcs!

There was no telling how many of them there were -- and we certainly weren't going to stand there and count them. But it was obvious that there were far more than we could ever hope to handle.

"Run!" I shouted. "Everybody back down the way we just came!"

So we took off -- although we knew that if they followed us all the way back to the troll pit, they'd have us for sure.

"In here!" Allen yelled as we passed the door he'd been wanting to enter before. Maybe there was a chance they wouldn't follow us in there -- or maybe the door could be locked or blocked with a "Hold Portal" spell from the other side. So we heaved on the door. It came open, and in we went.

But Peter was gone!

Or so it seemed. Then he popped back into sight again, and said, "I've just thought of a marvellous scheme, now that I'm sure my ring of invisibility is working again. The rest of you stay in here, and keep the door shut. Use a Hold Portal on it if you have to,

Tim; but remember: you'd like to get back out this door again -- which you can't, if the door is charmed shut. Meanwhile, I'll draw off the orcs, lead them a merry chase down the hallway, then turn invisible, slip back past them, and come back here to get you. Quick now, shut the door, and wish me luck."

We didn't have time to argue with him, so we pulled the door shut, with Peter on the outside. We could only hope that his plan would work -- because if it didn't, that would be all for Peter.

Tim and I listened by the door. Soon the thundering footfalls of the orc army came by. From the sound, it seemed as though they were running at a medium jog -- not fast, but at a pace that could be kept up for as long as they wanted. It was a good speed to wear down a frightened enemy. Peter could easily outrun them in short spurts. But he didn't dare go all the way to the troll pit. His only hope would be that the ring of invisibility wouldn't give out on him at the crucial moment.

I was thinking about how he might get out if he couldn't turn invisible, when all of a sudden it struck me how we all could have gotten out without facing those orcs. "The teleport room!" I groaned. "We completely forgot about that. We could have gone back there and teleported to the entrance!"



"You're right," said Tim. "Why didn't we think of that?"

I thought for a bit, then said, "I have a feeling that Tasha must have worked some sort of spell on us. Maybe she knew about the Dragon Room all along, but just wanted us along for protection, in case there were any more bandits, or maybe even a mother dragon that needed to be fought."

"I bet you're right," said Tim. "It's just too much a coincidence for all four of us to have forgotten all about the teleport room. Maybe we could still go back there, though."

"Not with those orcs between us and the room," I replied. "What do you think, Allen?"

Tim and I turned around. But Allen wasn't there.

## THE GREAT CHASE

"Allen? Allen! Where are you, you klutz?" Tim and I called out.

"Down here!" came the far-away reply. "Come on down here and check this out. This place is even bigger than the rooms up there."

Tim and I looked at each other, then shrugged our shoulders. There was nothing else to do but to go get him and drag him back up with us. So we went running north, and came to a set of stairs leading down.

"Oh no!" Tim groaned. "Allen's gone down into the second level."

"Well," I said with a sigh, "let's go get him. We can't leave him down there."

"Don't tempt me," Tim replied as we descended the worn, gray stones into the second level.

At the bottom of the stairs was a huge room, with two wide passageways branching out from it. Straight ahead, at the end of the room, was a kind of a niche, with a curtain drawn across the far end of it. Allen was standing there looking at the curtain, and was just getting ready to open it.

"Don't do it, Allen," I said. "We don't have time to go adventuring down here. Don't you remember --"

Peter's up there trying to draw those orcs off our trail. And we've got to be up there by the door and ready to run when he comes back."

"Just hang on for a minute," Allen replied. "It won't hurt just to . . ."

But as he was reaching for the curtain, there was a tremendous bellowing noise from the northern passageway that led out of the room. Allen scrambled out of the niche in a big hurry, and we all headed for the stairs at full speed.

But not before the ogre saw us.

The monster was as tall as a troll -- maybe twelve feet high -- but much more massive. Its thick head was set atop a squat neck, and its face and arms were covered with long, thick hair. But the face -- ugh! I've never seen such an ugly face. Its teeth were long and pointed, but all snagged and bent at different angles, with some of them sticking out of its mouth like jutting rocks. The eyes were huge, and looked like they were bulging out of their sockets.

The ogre lunged at us with surprising speed. We turned and fled up the stairs, but it came stumbling after us, bellowing with what sounded to us like the rage of monster-hunger. There was no use trying to divert this thing with gold or any other treasures, like

we did with the troll. It wanted a meal, and that was all.

We got to the top of the stairs and sped toward the door. "Maybe those things aren't allowed on the first level," Allen gasped as we pushed the door open.

"Guess again," I said, pointing back at the slobbering, growling thing as it headed toward us. Obviously, there were no rules, written or otherwise, that would keep that ogre from trying to feed itself as fast as it could.

When we were all through to the other side, we slammed the door shut. We could hear shouting coming from farther down the hall in the direction that Peter had led the orc pack. Did they get him?

"So glad you could make it back for the party," Peter said. He was standing beside us, looking half-ghostly, just as he did while he was untying us in the bandit room. "Unfortunately, the ring isn't yet back to full power of invisibility. Just as I'd turned invisible and let all the orcs run by me, I started to double back -- but I started becoming visible again. One of the last of them turned around and saw me -- curse the luck! -- and . . . But look: here they come!"

Just then, though, came a heavy thud against the door that Tim and Allen were pushing against.

"The orcs aren't the only problem we've got around here," Allen yelled, as the door shuddered again, and began to inch open.

Then Tim pointed his fingers at the door, and chanted, "By the Ka of Thoth, I command this portal to hold fast!"

The ogre had already forced the door open about a foot. But the spell locked it into place, and the ogre couldn't squeeze itself through. Instead, it reached one hairy arm out through the crack it had already made in the doorway, desperately trying to grab one of us and pull him back through. But Allen gave the ogre's arm a good slice with his sword, and the ogre pulled its arm back, howling with rage and pain. Then it started crashing and hammering at the door in a berserk fury. The spell held -- but every time the ogre struck the door with its tremendous strength, the door seemed to open another fraction of an inch.

And meanwhile, the orc army was bearing down on us fast.

"Run! Now!" I yelled, and we took off down the passageway south -- hopefully, toward the door that would lead out of the dungeon and upstairs into freedom, once Tim could use his Wizard Knock.

At first, we outdistanced the orcs pretty well. We could run faster than they could straight away.

But we were weighted down by our backpacks, weapons, and other gear. And they seemed to be able to keep up their steady jogging pace for as long as they wanted.

Thirty, forty, fifty, sixty, seventy yards. The passageway seemed to go on forever. We were gasping for breath, and sweat poured down our foreheads.

"How much farther until we get to that door?" I asked Tim.

"We could be coming to a bend to the right pretty soon, if my map is accurate," he shouted back. And sure enough, there it was, about forty yards ahead. We put on an extra burst of speed, straining our tired legs to an even greater effort.

We rounded the bend at full speed -- and I slipped and fell! The floor was slick with pools of stagnant water, and I just wasn't careful enough. Of course, we weren't exactly in a position to be cautious about where we stepped. But down I went, twisting my ankle under me as I fell.

"Charles is down!" Tim yelled. The others came to a quick stop.

"I've got him," Allen answered as he hauled me up off the floor. I tried to run again, but my ankle just folded under me.

"I think I've sprained my ankle," I groaned. "Just leave me here, and I'll try to hold off the orcs as long as I can."

"No way!" Allen replied, and flung my arm around his neck. We staggered together that way down the passageway west, the orcs gaining on us fast now. About another forty yards ahead of us was the door -- the same door we had tried to open from the other side when we first came into the dungeon.

"I certainly hope we won't be compelled to use the Wizard Knock on this door," said Peter, panting in quick gasps. The fast run had been especially hard on him, who was much more at home with a book than on a running track. "We should try to save that spell for the final door, you know."

"If we can't open this door, we're never going to have a chance to use that spell or any other again," said Tim.

Just as we came up to the door, the orc-platoon rounded the corner behind us. They raised an even louder shout when they saw us, apparently trapped at a locked door. We could see their swords and shields flashing with the reflected beams sent out by our lights.

"The door's bolted shut," Tim shouted.

"Then let's heave it open -- and fast," Allen said. Then he turned to me. "Can you stand by yourself for a

minute, Charles?"

"Sure," I replied, drawing out my mace. "Go ahead, and I'll see if I can hold them off."

"No holding them off by yourself," Allen said as he heaved on the bolt. "You're coming through with the rest of us."

The bolt slid open with the harsh grating noise of rusty iron scraping against stone. We all heaved on the door, and pushed through to the other side.

The orcs were almost upon us. We tried to push the door shut, but several of them slammed into it with full force. Slowly but surely, the door opening widened, and we felt ourselves pushed backward.

"Tim," Peter shouted desperately, "try a Hold Portal!"

Tim tried chanting the words that had worked twice us so far. But he couldn't let go of the door to concentrate on the chant, because all of us were needed to keep the orcs from bursting through.

No good -- the spell didn't work. "I must have spent my power on the last door, to keep the ogre back," Tim gasped.

"Then maybe we'd better run for it," I yelled over the shouting of the orcs. But we didn't dare to push, or the orcs would be on us at once.



Finally, with one gigantic heave, the door flew open, hurling us backward. The orcs came charging at us, swords and maces already swinging away. Fortunately for us, though, Peter was still thinking. He looked straight at the first four orcs that came through the door, and went into his complicated Charm Person dance.

The orcs were puzzled by Peter's strange movements, and they hesitated for just an instant in their attack. And then it was too late for them to escape the power of the spell.

"Attack, my slaves!" Peter shouted, pointing at the rest of the orc army as it surged through the door.

"Destroy our enemies!"

With a roar, the charmed orcs began swinging their swords at their fellows. The surprise was so great that Peter's orcs hacked and hammered down several of their comrades before they were finally overwhelmed.

And meanwhile, we ran -- and I limped -- down the passageway to the stairs that led out of the dungeon and back to the place where we first came into the tree -- a place we hadn't seen for what seemed like a long, long time!

## THE GRAND BATTLE

My injured foot held us back from going full speed. But the charmed orcs were giving us some extra time by holding off the main attacking force. Soon we were back up in the big circular room where the door led from the inside of King Sequoia to the North Forest.

"Let's go, Tim," Allen said. "Cast that Wizard Knock spell as fast as you can, and let's get out of here."

"Here goes," said Tim. He leveled the palms of his hands at the door, and recited the words, "Pleedreem Ovriete Tendel -- By the powers of Janus, let this door open at once!" Then he rapped three times on the door, first with his right hand, then his left. The spell scroll in his right hand crumpled up like it was on fire, and the ashes drifted to the floor.

Then a spear struck the door only inches above his clenched fist. The orcs were up the stairs and into the room. There didn't seem to be so many of them now -- maybe because Peter's charmed orcs had done away with several of their comrades before going under themselves. But there still were some fifteen or twenty of the monsters, all swarming up the stairway and into the room, each of them brandishing a sword or a mace or a spear.

And the door hadn't opened.

"Come on, Tim!" Allen yelled frantically. "Keep working with that spell."

"I did!" Tim shouted back. "I'm finished. It just didn't work."

"Good old Tasha and her big-help spell," said Allen bitterly as he drew his sword. "Now we're going to have to fight our way out."

"If in fact we ever do get out," said Peter as he drew his dagger.

But then, no more conversation. The orcs were upon us, and the fight had begun.

To start, Allen got in a good -- or lucky -- swing with his sword, and put one orc down right away. Those monsters were ugly and tough-looking, but they couldn't move as fast as we could. They were clumsy, and had to rely on sheer, brute force in their fighting. But from the looks of things right then, they had more than enough of that to win the day.

After the first orc went down, three others began a slow, swinging and hammering at Allen's sword and shield, driving him back closer and closer to the circular wall. He was parrying their blows well enough; but he obviously couldn't keep it up as long as they could.

Two orcs attacked me at once. The first swing I parried with my mace; then I swung around, got by his

guard, and banged him hard on the helmet. The orc reeled backwards, then fell motionless to the floor.

I immediately leaped onto the wall as high as I could, just as the second orc's sword swished through the air right where I'd been standing. My magical boots and gloves held me to the wall for the few seconds I needed. Then I leaped all the way over the orc's head, bringing my mace squarely down on his helmet. When I hit the ground, two orcs were down, and I was crouched and ready for the next attack. My hurt ankle was screaming out in protest; but I was in a fight for survival, and couldn't pay any attention to minor injuries at a time like this.

Meanwhile, Tim and Peter were rushed by a crowd of several orcs, who must have seen only their daggers, and thought them almost defenseless. But Tim had his hand ready in one hand, and pointed it right into the middle of the charging crowd of monsters. The blue flame crackled from its tip, and a searing bolt of lightning flared out into the midst of the orcs. Two of them went down at once, their clothes smoking. The rest of them backed off with howls of pain and frustration.

I was glad to see the fight going so well; but I shouldn't have been watching Tim and his wand without keeping a lookout for trouble. Something came crashing

into me from behind, and I went down to the floor, my mace arm pinned beneath me and an enraged orc gripping me tightly from behind. I managed to twist over on my back. But I lost my mace in the process; and the orc was raising its long, wicked-looking knife to plunge into my chest.

The only thing I could do was to lash out and land a desperation punch on its jaw. I think that blow hurt my fist more than it hurt the orcs jaw. But luckily for me, I'd hit him with the blue stone ring I'd gotten from the kobolds. As soon as the ring made contact, a pale, bluish sphere began to expand out from the stone, and wrap itself around me. The orc, to its amazement, was pushed off my chest by the force of the expanding sphere. And as he struck at me with his knife, the blow just glanced harmlessly off the force-field surface of the sphere.

Another orc came up, raised its mace with both hands, and smashed at the sphere with his mace. No luck (for him). I was completely enclosed and protected by the magical force brought forth by the ring.

So the orcs couldn't get to me. But I couldn't get to them either. I picked up my mace, which was lying inside the force-field, and tried to hammer my way out. The blows just glanced off the inside of the sphere. I was trapped inside.

In one way, I was just as glad to be out of danger. But in another way I was frustrated that I couldn't get back out there to help my friends. I was just a spectator now -- like a spectator in a silent movie, too, because the sphere cut off all sound from the outside, and gave everything an unreal, bluish hue. The fight raged, swords and shields clanged together, orcs and people were shouting -- but it was all a noiseless pantomime to me now.

The first thing I saw was an orc's blade bite into Allen's right hand. He dropped his blade and jumped back, grabbing his injured hand with the other hand. But just as two orcs moved in for the kill, something swelled out from under clenched and injured hand. It was the ring -- the ring he'd gotten from the kobolds at the same time I'd gotten mine -- and four huge snakes dropped from his hand to the floor, their fangs bared and their long, supple bodies coiled to spring.

The orcs jumped back, eyes frozen with amazement and fear. Allen was just as amazed as they were, and for an instant they were all -- Allen, orcs, and snakes -- all frozen like a 3-D hologram.

Peter had been watching the whole scene, too, and figured out immediately what must have happened. "Order the snakes to attack, Allen," he shouted. (I couldn't

hear him, of course; I got this part of the story from them later).

So Allen pointed at the orcs and yelled, "Attack those things!" The four serpents shot forward like steel-sprung missiles. Two of them wrapped themselves around two of the orcs' necks, and the other two snakes sank their fangs into their legs. The orcs backed away, howling and struggling to loosen the iron grip of those coils around their necks.

The battle seemed to be going pretty well in our favor. But then, one of the orcs -- a big, ugly fellow with jagged scars that zigzagged across his face -- shouted something, and they all retreated to the far end of the room. There they massed together -- there were still about fifteen of them left -- and the big orc said something to them in low tones.

Allen came over to where Tim and Peter were standing, and the three of them got their weapons ready for whatever was going to happen. I was still locked inside my blue sphere of protection, unable to help them out at all. I could see Allen take out his Sailing Stone of Spikes, and balance it in his hand for throwing. Tim readied his wand. Peter held his dagger poised for action.

The air was tense. The orcs were getting ready for their big charge. Would they survive a rush by fifteen

orcs? And how would I ever get out of this sphere I was trapped inside?



## THE RETURN OF AN OLD FRIEND

The orcs charged. The leader -- that same big orc who had called them all together for the charge -- only ran about three steps before Allen's Sailing Stone of Spikes dropped him in his tracks.

"Shavo Eedro Gadro!" Allen cried out, and the miraculous weapon flew back to his grasp. But by then it was too late to use it again. The orcs had closed in range for hand to hand combat.

Another sheath of blue fire shot forth from Tim's wand. More orcs fell -- but not enough. Soon they were all charging into the small, huddled group of my friends, beating Allen's sword and Peter's dagger to the ground. Tim's wand was wrenched from his grip. Peter had used up his Charm Person spell. It looked like it all over for them.

Then (they told me later), there came a booming shout from above them. "Twelve against three?" roared the voice. "You orcs never have a sense of fair play. Guard you well, though, orcs. The combat will now become more equal."

The surprised orcs looked upward in amazement. They were expecting a quick victory; and already the four of us had proved tougher than they expected. Then they thought they had my three friends ready for the slaughter,

when someone came to their aid, shouting down to them from the stairs that led upward.

It was Ishar!

His longbow hummed as the arrows he let fly whistled sharply through the air. One, two, three, four orcs fell to the floor, struck down by the dwarf's deadly aim. They backed off in confusion, trying to escape from the lethal rain of arrows. But as soon as they began their retreat, Tim picked up his wand from a fallen orc and released another flash of lightning-flame.

The remaining orcs -- and there weren't many! -- ran for the stairs, howling with fear. We -- with the help of Ishar, of course -- had just defeated an entire army of orcs. I still could hardly believe it. A few minutes earlier, it looked as if we would all be dead. Now we were all free to go -- assuming I could get out of my sphere, and assuming we would be able to open that door to the outside.

"Well, well, well!" said Ishar, in a voice twice as big as his size. "The adventurers return -- and with some fine weapons, too. But you certainly brought a pack of trouble along with you. Old Ishar was glad to help out, though."

Then he turned to me and my blue sphere. He came over and peered inside, like I was a fish in a fishbowl.

I couldn't hear him or talk to him, but I tried to get across to him the fact that I was trapped inside and couldn't get out. He soon got the idea, and made twisting signs around his ring finger.

"Aha," I thought. So I twisted my ring to the left -- nothing. But when I twisted the ring to the right, the blue shell began to grow fainter. After three complete turns, the shell disappeared entirely, and I was free again.

"Welcome back to the world," Ishar said as the shell faded away. Then he saw the blue cat. "And who or what is this strangely-colored creature?" he asked. With a swoop of his arms he scooped up the blue cat, who had been cowering in the corner during the whole battle.

Ishar examined the cat's fur and face critically. "It certainly doesn't look like a normal cat with dyed fur," he commented.

"We found it in a room by a red dragon egg," Tim told him, "and it followed us up here."

"I'll be an imperial balrog if this cat isn't a bewitched human being," Ishar swore. And at that, the cat looked up into Ishar's eyes -- and nodded its head! It was amazing to see a cat tell us that it wasn't a cat at all, but a person with some kind of enchantment laid on it. No wonder Tasha wanted this cat so much.

"Well," said Ishar, setting the cat down and clapping me on the shoulders, "I imagine you adventurers have had some pretty exciting times since I saw you last. Let's all go upstairs to the weapons shop and talk about it. And maybe I can talk you into selling or trading some of those fine weapons you've won." Then he looked around the room. "Say, weren't there four of you when you started out? Where's that other magic-user -- the one who uses the fancy language?"

We were all so relieved just to have survived the orc attack, and so surprised to see Ishar again, that we didn't even notice that Peter was missing.

"Ahhh, he probably just slipped on his invisibility ring when the going got tough there at the last," said Allen. But he sounded worried -- and so were we all.

Then we saw him. There, in the midst of a pile of fallen orcs, lay Peter.

"He's hurt!" Tim yelled. "Quick, Charles, do a Cure Wounds spell on him."

I ran over to where Peter was lying, and felt his pulse. "No Cure Wounds spell is going to help Peter," I said slowly. "He's dead."

## THE GOLDEN WATERS OF RESURRECTION

The joy over our victory turned to sadness in a flash. Suddenly we knew: we'd conquered monsters, won treasure and magic, had gone through some great experiences -- but now none of it was worth it, since Peter was dead.

Without a word, Ishar climbed the stairs back up to his weapons shop, and disappeared out of sight.

"What do we do now?" Allen asked helplessly.

"I don't know," Tim replied. "We couldn't even open the door. But now, even if we can get that door open, we'll have to carry Peter's body back to the highway."

"I guess you're right," I said. Then we were all silent. What would we say to his parents? And who would believe our story when we told the truth -- that Peter died of sword wounds in a battle with an army of orcs?

In a few minutes, Ishar came back down the stairs with a crafty smile on his face. He looked at each of us, then said, "My boys, I shouldn't give you any breaks at all after that stew you traded me. Ugh!" He made a face. "That was the worst stuff that I ever tortured my tongue with! But you're young, and new at this game of adventuring. So let me make you an offer for a deal." He reached into his pouch and pulled out

a small bottle. "Here it is -- maybe the most precious thing in the entire universe -- a vial of Golden Waters of Resurrection! Surely you remember this bottle from your last visit to my shop."

We certainly did remember it! A light of hope flashed across our faces. Here was a magic potion that could bring the dead back to life. But Ishar surely wouldn't just give it to us outright. What would he want in exchange?

As if he'd read my thoughts, Ishar said, "Now, you realize of course that this potion is extremely rare and quite valuable. I myself have seen only half a dozen such bottles of this fluid in my whole life. But I'm a businessman -- even though I'm still not a bad warrior, as you've just seen -- and as a businessman, I'm always ready to make a trade. What have you got to offer me for this potion?"

He certainly must have known how badly we wanted those Golden Waters of Resurrection. So I didn't feel like I was giving up anything when I almost shouted, "Everything. We'll give you the whole pile of treasure and magic."

"Let me see what you've got," Ishar replied. "Stack it all here where I can see it."

As we were piling up our treasures for Ishar's evaluation, Tim asked him, "Are you sure those Golden Waters will

really work? It's not that we don't trust you, or that we're afraid you might gyp us out of our gold and things. We just don't want to get our hopes up about reviving Peter and then be disappointed."

Ishar looked at us soberly. "I won't lie to you. With this potion, there is a 25 percent chance that the potion won't work. Sometimes the potion was brewed too weak, and sometimes the person has been dead too long for its magic to take effect. But here's my promise: if it doesn't work, I won't take a cent from you. Fair enough?"

"Fair enough," we all agreed.

All of our winnings from the dungeon made a pretty impressive pile. The ruby and the emerald, the gold, the one remaining carved coin, my sphere of protection ring, Peter's ring of invisibility, Tim's ring (it was a loser anyway), my magic boots and gloves, Tim's wand, and Allen's snake ring and his Sailing Stone of Spikes. -- we hated to have to part with all that treasure. But all the loot in the world wouldn't have meant a thing to us just then if Peter's life was gone forever.

"Here it all is," I said to Ishar. "Is it enough to buy the Golden Waters of Resurrection?"

Ishar was a shrewd trader. He knew how badly we needed that vial. He looked at our treasures and frowned, as if we were trying to pass off second-rate stuff in

exchange for his genuine potion. But finally he said, "Well, I'm getting the bad end of this deal, and that's the truth. But I suppose. . ."

"Wait just a minute," said Allen. I could see the look in his eye, and I knew what was coming: even in the midst of this tragedy, Allen couldn't pass up a try at bargaining with Ishar. "We're giving you some pretty valuable things here. Let's make a compromise: we'll give you most of these things if you'll agree to let us use them free of charge when and if we ever come back to the dungeon again. How about it?"

I couldn't believe it. Not only was Allen trying to drive a bargain while our friend's life was at stake; he was actually talking about returning to the dungeon later -- for even more risks!

Ishar looked shocked. "But if you want it so that you can use these weapons whenever you want to, they're really still yours. I can't sell them -- I'd only be keeping them for you. No, that's no kind of a deal."

So they argued back and forth. Finally, though, they reached an agreement. We agreed to give up the gold, and jewels, the coin, and all the magical things except for Peter's invisibility ring and my magic boots and gloves. Ishar would keep everything in his shop until we came to use them again. Then we could use them for



one campaign, after which we either had to pay him for them or else give them to him outright to sell. And we had to return within one year, or Ishar could sell everything -- ring and boots included.

Considering how badly we wanted that vial of Golden Waters of Resurrection, I thought Allen did a pretty good job of trading. And so did Ishar. "A hard bargain-driver you are, son," Ishar said to Allen, "but it's a deal. And here is the vial."

Since I was the healer of the group, Ishar handed the small bottle of precious fluid to me. As I looked at it, I saw its colors twist and turn in wild, fantastic shapes that always seemed on the verge of making some definite picture, but never quite making it. It was hypnotizing -- but I couldn't allow myself to stand there entranced by its mysterious patterns this time, like I had before. I had a serious healing job to attempt.

So I tilted back Peter's head and let the liquid flow, drop by drop, into his parted but lifeless lips. I emptied the bottle, but there was still no breath, no stirring of the pulse. Everybody, even Ishar, was bent over us, their faces drawn tight with anxiety.

A minute went by. Two minutes. Five minutes. Ishar started to look pretty glum -- and that was definitely a bad sign.

"It should have taken effect by now if it were going to work at all," said Ishar with a heavy voice. "I'm afraid. . ."

But just then, Peter moved! His eyelids fluttered, and the color came back to his cheeks. The breathing started again. And he opened his eyes.

We all whooped and shouted for joy. Ishar even did a little dance of celebration.

Peter looked up at me with a puzzled expression. "What is the occasion for all this commotion?" he asked. "I was sound asleep, and then all of a sudden I hear the lot of you shouting as if it were New Year's Eve. What on earth are you making all the racket for?"

We all laughed. But Peter just looked around sleepily and yawned.

"For some curious reason, I find myself very hungry," he said. "I don't suppose any of you would have some chocolate chips, would you?"

## BACK DOWN THE PATH

After Peter had returned to life, we all went up to Ishar's shop for a celebration. We told him the complete story of our adventures, while he listened attentively, commenting every so often on our bravery or our foolishness. He was silent, though, when we told him about Tasha. Maybe there was -- or used to be -- something between them. We never found out.

Finally, though, I had to say something about our bad luck with the door. "Ishar, it's been great talking with you. And we'll always be grateful to you for starting us off on these adventures. But we're supposed to meet my dad today at a place a long ways from here. That door is still locked, though. Can you help us try to open it?"

"Like I told you when you first came here," said Ishar, "I can't open the door any more than you can, unless I've got some special kind of spell -- and even then, I can't use it, since I'm a fighter -- or used to be, anyway. But I can't understand why the Wizard Knock spell didn't work -- unless, of course, it's a fake. And I wouldn't put it past a wizard's witch to give you a spell that didn't work, just as a cruel kind of joke. I've even known witches, like that Tasha you spoke of, to give young magic-users spells that backfired on the users.

"But come on; let's go downstairs and see if we can discover the problem."

So we all packed up and climbed down to the circular room where we'd fought the orcs. And there was the great door, the source of all our troubles, still closed. Ishar walked up, put his hands against it, and shoved.

The door swung open!

And so did our mouths. "How did you do that?" Tim asked in amazement. "I thought you said you didn't have any magical powers."

"And I don't," said Ishar with a laugh. "You unlocked it yourself with that spell. All you needed to do was to push the door open. The spell unlocks the door for you, but you can't expect it to produce a doorman who comes out and opens the door with a bow. You've got to do that yourself."

We all, especially Tim, felt pretty foolish about that dumb mistake. It was obvious that we all still had a good bit to learn about the dungeon.

After the several days we'd spent in the dim, flashlight-lit world of the underground, the sunlight was blinding. But we soon got our daylight eyes back, and ventured outside. Ishar, though, stayed behind.

"Come back again, lads," he said with a wave of his powerful hand. "I like to see young adventurers, full

of bright ideas and the pep of youth, go down there and brave the dangers of the dungeon. And of course," he added with a wink, "it's good for business, too!" Then he grasped the door and pulled it shut with a clang, leaving us outside at the foot of King Sequoia.

We all stood there for a moment, looking at the huge tree and thinking about what went on inside it.

"I can hardly believe all the things that happened to us in there," I said.

"I can't wait until we get back and tell all our friends about this," said Allen. "Will they ever be green with envy when they hear about our adventures!"

"What makes you think they'll believe us?" Tim asked him.

"And why wouldn't they?" Allen asked.

"Would you believe someone if he came up and told you that he'd gone inside an enormous tree, met a dwarf who sold him weapons and spells, fought with kobolds, giant spiders, trolls, bandits and orcs, met a witch, died, came back to life, then escaped from the tree with a spell the witch had given him?"

Allen's face looked glum. "It doesn't sound very believable, does it?"

"I hate to intrude on your musings and speculations," said Peter, "but according to my calculations, we have

approximately six hours until Charles's father arrives to pick us up. May I suggest that we depart at once?"

"Six hours!" I gasped. "Oh man, we'll never make it. It took us twice that long to get up here."

"We'd best get going in any case, Show us the way again, oh peerless leader," said Peter with a bow.

"And let's double-time it!" shouted Allen.

So we all took off running back the way we'd come, with me kind of loping along, since my ankle was still sore. I wasn't too sure of our path after the first half hour of travelling. But then I saw one of Allen's marks on a tree.

Allen saw it too. "Now aren't you guys glad I had the genius to mark those trees when we came out here?"

"We're just luck the rain didn't wash those genius marks away," said Tim.

The rain had left the marks, but it made our path pretty boggy. Before long, we were all spattered with mud. The day was beautiful, though. Strong sunbeams were making the mist rise off the ground, and all the branches and needles sparkled brightly. After what seemed like hours of running, we came to a river.

"I don't remember this," I said. "We might have taken a wrong turn somewhere back there."

But we flopped down on the carpet of wet redwood needles anyway. We were too tired to go any further

without some rest. We'd missed at least one whole night of sleep. And the exertions of the past several days were finally starting to catch up with us.

"I remember this place," Tim said finally. "It was dry before the rain. That's why you don't remember there being a river here, Charles."

"How about some chow?" Allen asked as he opened his backpack. Now that we were resting, it occurred to us that we were super hungry, so each of us dug out his favorite food.

"Anyone want some anchovies?" I asked as I opened a tin of the tastiest food there is.

"Ugh!" was Tim's reply. "Here -- better have some nice carrots and spinach leaves to go with that awful stuff you're eating."

"Uh, no thanks," I said, looking at the wilted spinach leaves and dried-out carrots. How could he eat that stuff and like it?

"Have some pizza, you guys," Allen said with his mouth full. He held out a few pieces of old, stale pizza to all of us.

"No, thank you," said Peter. "But would you like a bite of this delectable chocolate chip sandwich -- my best invention, if I do say so myself."

We looked at the soggy bread crammed with dried-out chocolate chips. "No, you go right ahead and eat the

whole thing -- if you dare," I said. So each of us ate his own lunch, wondering why all the rest had such weird taste in food.

We rested for awhile after we'd eaten, then took off again through the woods at a steady jog, hoping to make the highway by five o'clock.

We came to another one of Allen's X-marks. I was relieved to see it; but Tim said, "It's 4:30 right now. We'd better hustle, or we'll never make it in time."

So we ran full-tilt. And at exactly five o'clock, we reached the highway. And just as we threw ourselves down on the grass next to the road, utterly wiped out by fatigue, I saw my dad's car coming down the road towards us. He pulled the car up to where we were lying, and rolled down the window.

"Well, there you are -- still relaxing, too, I see. Did you have a quiet and peaceful time out there in the North Forest?"

The four of us looked at each other and burst out laughing. Quiet and peaceful!

"Right," I said as we all piled into our car. "It was so restful that we want to come back here again soon. Will you bring us back here some time?"

"Sure," said my dad.

And before he slammed the door, the blue cat jumped in and settled down on my lap.

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## EPILOGUE

Well, that's my story. I was going to prove it was all true by inviting you to come over to my house and see the blue cat. But since I started writing this book, we've been back to King Sequoia and the dungeon in the tree. And the cat turned out to be . . .

I'll tell you about that cat, and some even more amazing adventures, in the next story. But if you're ever in the North Forest, and if you come to a huge tree with a door in its side, and if you can get that door open -- you may write your own book!