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“Fantasy Novel”

By

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Nectar ( ‘Neck-Tar’) the Barbarian tugged at his golden braid thoughtfully as he looked across the common room of the Flaming Cow Tavern. As per usual on a Saturday night, the place was crowded with all manner of creatures from men and women to the usual allotment of ill-tempered orcs, foul smelling goblins, salty pirates and diminutive Shortlings. Thick smoke hung in the air, a mix of the sweet-smelling hookah pipes of the men from the east, the sour-smelling orc cigars, and the sizzling bacon stench of the Shortling pipe weed. Nectar wasn’t sure how any of them could breathe the stuff, let alone inhale it.

He hoisted his massive iron mug of wood alcohol, leaned back into his chair and threw his muscled legs up onto the table. The wood creaked beneath him, but held his massive bulk indicating that it had been constructed from the best oak by the best Riston craftsmen. He was fortunate to not be wearing his heavy chain mail vest with matching loin cloth or the weight would surely have been too much. The other tables, all occupied by more than two men, women or creatures, looked just as sturdy; it was a good thing, too, given the number of brawls that occurred each week.

Currently, several dozen people had gathered around a table in the back corner, just past the large stone fireplace, to watch two pirate women arm-wrestling. As was their tradition, each of them dressed in silks and bandanas, had dozens of piercings and tattoos, and biceps the size of cantaloupes. True, next to his watermelon sized arm muscles, they would not measure up, but they could certainly outmatch most of the other men in the place. Even so, he steered clear. It was always wise to give pirate women a wide berth. They were crazy.

“What did you say!” a small voice bellowed drawing Nectar’s attention to the other side of the establishment.

Nectar glanced over at the bar and saw that every stool was occupied by a horde of Goblins. Although they were not huge creatures, they were stronger than they looked and their dark warty skin provided them with natural armor making them formidable opponents. Their yellow eyes were vaguely catlike, but their faces bore more of a resemblance to bats than anything else. Currently, one of them glared down at a Shortling.

“Me am Orush. Me think you small and funny.” The goblin’s words slurred from too much beer and inherent stupidity.

The room went quiet as all eyes turned toward them. Nectar was on his feet in an instant, dropping his mug to the table with a slosh and a thud. He crossed in several large strides, pressing through the throng so he could get a better view. For a shortling, there was no greater insult than to be called small and funny. In fact, as a rule, Nectar always said, never call a shortling small and funny.

“I am Greg of the clan Greg and I am going to tear out your spleen!” the shortling roared. He puffed himself up to a massive three feet.

Now closer, Nectar could clearly see that this shortling had more than beer muscles. He was so thick of limb as to look like a solid cube. He would be a worthy opponent to any creatures of smallish stature.

The goblin laughed.

Greg's face flushed with rage.

"You turn funny color too! Orush buy you more beer as payment for entertainment."

"AAAAAAHHHHHHH!!!!!!!!!!" Greg launched from the ground on powerful, if short, legs. He soared a good five feet, twisting in mid air, and landing on the bar behind the Goblin. He grabbed Orush around the neck and squeezed.

"Orush is no longer laughing!" The Goblin tried to punch the shortling but succeeded only in hitting himself in the head.

The four goblins nearest to him laughed so hard that two of them fell off their stools as Greg proceeded to block the flow of blood going to Orush's head. Orush face turned a deep shade of green as he tried ineffectively to punch and grab the shortling. A moment later, his eyes rolled up into his head and he fell face down into the bar. Greg rolled off, stood on the countertop and grabbed the Goblin's ale. He took a sip and glared at the others who suddenly stopped laughing.

"That's enough!" Huck, the portly barman stood up, a huge crossbow in his beefy hands. "You've had your fun."

"We like shortling, we no make trouble," one of the other goblins said. He turned away, burying his face in his drink.

"Good boys." Huck lowered his crossbow and then moved back towards the far end of the bar to assist a patron.

“Impressive.” Nectar nodded at the shortling.

“Do I know you?” Greg asked him taking another sip and then using the Orush’s head as a seat.

Nectar straightened. “I am Nectar the Barbarian, warrior of the Great North Northwestern Tribe, heir to the Dragon-butt chair and betrothed to Ambrosia, sorceress and princess to the fairy folk of the inner forests.” He flexed his pectorals in emphasis.

“Oh,” the buxom barmaid, who just happened to be passing, swooned.

Nectar caught her, swung around, dropped her into a chair and kissed her on the cheek. He then spun back to face Greg and smiled.

Greg raised a hand, no doubt against the gleam of Nectar’s white teeth.

“Is it truly you?” he jumped back up.

“Indeed!”

“Then we must have words, for you are the reason I have come! I need your help.”

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“Tell me, Greg of the Clan Greg.... Why have you sought me out?” Nectar leaned forward, grabbed his stein and took another sip of his drink. They had returned to his table in the back corner for a more private conversation. The other patrons seemed to have lost interest in the shortling and his brawl for they returned to their drinks, their arguments, their wrestling and their smoking.

Standing on the opposite chair, Greg stared up at him. His blue eyes were clear and honest, his expression shifting from awe to fear and back again. “I am the greatest hero my people have ever known. My full title is Greg the Grenadier.” He thumped his muscular chest with one hand in emphasis.

“A grenadier? Truly?” Nectar’s eyes widened. He had heard of the Grenadiers, brave shortlings who trained for years, honing their bodies to near perfection so that they could practice their impressive and elusive art. In reality, however, very few men had ever lived to see a grenadier in action and little was known about their actual fighting style.

“Yes. Unlike the mud farmers and moss growers of the other shortling clans, we of Clan Greg are tasked with protecting the Shortling lands...” He bowed his head. “In that task, we have failed.”

“Tell me, my short but stout friend; what has happened?” Nectar could not hide his curiosity.

“As you know, our beautiful rolling swamplands are far to the south. We have lived there in peace farming our mud and enjoying the warmth of our moss and stick homes for centuries virtually undisturbed by the other creatures of the world. A modest trade in our unique goods has allowed us to stay abreast of the actions of, and to stay in contact with, the other races and our relations have always been good with our distant neighbors.” Greg’s fists closed. “Until now.”

“What has happened?” Nectar arched a butt-cheek and lowered his mug to the table, no longer interested in drink as the little man’s tale unfolded.

“We woke up one morning and our swamps and the river that feeds them, had dried up.” Tears slipped from Greg’s eyes. “Without water to drink and to grow our skunk cabbage and other swamp crops, we will starve to death in a matter of weeks. And even if our emergency supplies lasted years, our only source of income will quickly vanish as the moss dies and the mud turns to brick.”

“By the gods, how did this happen?” Nectar thumped his table with one fist, launching his mug a good 6 inches into the air. He caught it and took another drink, then slammed it back down.

“We failed... I failed.”

“In what way have you failed, brave shortling? Were you vanquished in battle?”

“Well, no.”

“Did an enemy force invade your swampy paradise?”

“Not that we could detect.”

“Then the fault lies not with you. This sounds like foul sorcery something for which you are ill equipped to handle.” Nectar crossed his arms. “I and my companions, however, deal with magics often. My delicate flower of a wife, Ambrosia, is most adept at such things.”

Greg’s eyes brightened. “Then you will help us?”

“Your tale of woe has touched my heart.” Nectar sprang to his feet. “I and my stalwart friends will aid you.” He shot out a double bicep pose. “My perfect physique shall serve you well.”

“Oh!” A slender blonde serving wench dropped a tray as she swooned behind him.

Nectar spun, caught the tray with his right hand and managed to catch the girl with his left. He whirled around, lowering the drinks to his table and the blonde into his chair.

“Well done!” a thickly bearded dwarf woman at a nearby table shouted. She cracked her mug against the skull of her nearest dwarvish companion in emphasis.

“Here’s to Nectar, brave hero of the North Northwest!” the second dwarf agreed, wiping the beer from his head. He hoisted his mug.

“Nectar! Nectar!” others took up the call until the entire tavern erupted in cheers.

Nectar held out his hands and motioned them to silence.

“Thank you my friends. I, and my companions, are about to embark on a gallant and daring quest to save the shortlings and their mud! Let songs be sung of this day from now until our triumphant return!”

More cheering echoed through the place and everyone from pirates to goblins pounded their fists against their tables and stomped their feet against the floor shaking the very foundations of the place.

Nectar looked down at Greg. “You are in good hands my friend.” He clapped the short man on one shoulder. “Now, I must gather my cohorts. We shall meet here tomorrow at ten for a quick and delicious brunch after which we shall depart on this journey.” Without allowing Greg a chance to respond, Nectar pushed through the crowd towards the stairs to the upper levels. Shouts and cheers followed him the entire way.

“Nectar! Nectar! Nectar!”

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