

VIRTUAL WOMAN

By Dee Dee Perri



ILLUSTRATED BY CHAS

A 'NEW WOMAN' NOVEL

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VIRTUAL WOMAN

By Dee Dee Perri

Chapter 1. Dungeons and Dragons

“It’ll be just like, you know... when we was kids,” Matt Star said as he nervously swept a hand through his thinning blond hair. His blue eyes pleaded with his friend. He held out the skull cap with the attached wires. “Come on, Boss. Remember Dungeons and Dragons, like you promised?”

Lester Norththrop stared back at the broad shouldered man in the blue jeans and tight tee-shirt. They’d been friends ever since... when? The dawn of memory? Forever? Matt had always been bigger and stronger. He was the leader and, more often than not, his *protector*. Lester winced at the memory. Way back then they’d called him “Little Les.” Back then meant before he’d become Mr. Northrop, before he’d controlled a rapidly growing fortune in the local dairy industry, and long, long before he’d become a man of some importance in Lee County. Later, in high school, while he was still “Little Les,” an invisible dork, Matt Star had been, well, the *Star*. A three letter varsity man: basketball, baseball and, of course, football. Matt: the all-sports squad captain, the prom-King, the big man on campus, the heart throb of any girl at Wilson High that was worth remembering... back then.

But the worm had turned as adulthood unfolded and brains *did* count in the big picture. Now Matt, the *former star*, had failed at everything he had put his hands on and was now Mr. Lester Norththrop’s *assistant*, Norththrop’s man Friday... Lester smiled like the good patron and friend he was and said in a slightly condescending voice, “Sure, Matt. Why not a little D & D for old times sake. It’s Saturday. I can golf tomorrow.”

He took the cap gingerly in his hands as he thought, ‘Why in the hell did I ever agree to play D & D again at this age? I’m a grown man, for Pete’s sake. A man of responsibilities!’ He stared at the hulk before him and thought, ‘Poor Matt couldn’t cut it in life so he lives in fantasy. Pity. Humor him, he has little enough, and I owe him for all the times he saved my bacon.’

“Great, Boss!” Matt’s smile broadened to show his even white teeth. “It’s like the latest thing in **V-erse**.”

“Huh?”

Matt looked a bit embarrassed. “Virtual reality is called the virtual universe, ah...,” he stammered. “You know, **V-erse!**”

“Oh,” said Lester. Confusion and insecurity were evident in his face as he twisted and turned the cap in his hands. “Where’s the goggles or whatever they call them thingies?”

“Electrodes,” Matt said as he pointed at the slivers of metal embedded in the cap. “The latest stuff, Boss. Signals from these shut down external input to the brain, eyes, ears, everything. And then,” he pointed to the cable running out of the black box which in turn was connected to the computer, “a two way connection between **V-erse** dot com and your brain.”

“Huh?” Lester yelped.

“Not to worry, Boss. Thousands go into **V-erse** every minute of every day. No problemo! Besides, as soon as you’re in, I’ll jack-in and I’ll join ya.”

“I don’t know,” whined Lester Northrop. He didn’t much like the idea of having foreign electricity in his own brain. “Is this computer of yours really big enough?”

Matt laughed and slapped his knee. “Boss, you’re killing me. **V-erse** is like, ah- ah-distributed network. Like thousands and thousands of systems meeting online with...” He stopped when he saw Lester’s blank face. “Sorry, Boss, I just thought that everybody, ya know, knew about this stuff.”

“Is this going to take long?” Lester asked, seeing a way out of his predicament. He should never have agreed to do this D & D thing with Matt. “I got a meeting downtown at four and it takes hours to play a full game of D & D.”

“Gosh Boss, you really don’t know anything about this stuff do you?” He looked at his watch. “It’s about 9:20, I figure we’ll be back by 11:30, latest.”

“And that’s time to...”

“Tons. What with a dilation factor of 26 plus, I figure we’d have a bit over two days...”

“DAYS?” Gagged Lester.

The big man nodded. “Each hour in real time is about 25 maybe 30 hours V-time, depending upon the system demand. Hell, Boss, why do you think **V-erse** is so popular? Like between now and lunch time we get a whole weekend off, you know what I mean?”

“I’m afraid I haven’t a clue, Matt.”

“Right,” muttered Matt under his breath. “Well look, I’m going to sign you in as a novice on Thor World. They got lots of different verses, you know Boss? And then I’ll get over to my friend’s house, hop on his system and...”

“You mean I’ll be at that Thor place alone?”

“Just a little while. No way we’d pop up at the exactly same time and locus anyway, it don’t work like that. Look Boss, wherever they start you it will be a one to two hours walk from the city- no more than that. Probably no dragons or nothing from the start, you being a novice and all.”

“City? One or two hours walk?”

“Yeah. The center of the Thor verse is a big old walled town- always is. Anyhow, I’ll go straight away to town and wait for you in the main square and...”

“How do I get there and how will I recognize you and...” Lester was getting really upset.

“First, all roads lead to the city. And if you can’t find a road, ask someone. Second, you’re a novice. Ain’t earned no identity or nothing yet. Don’t worry, I’ll recognize you and...”

“What will you look like?” Lester whined.

“A big blond barbarian warrior. All muscle, a kilt and not much more except...” He grinned and his chest swelled with pride. “Except Stinger, that’s my magic sword. Earned it about a year ago in **V-erse** combat. Stinger and me...”

Lester rolled his eyes before Matt could go on about his sword. “What if I get lost or something?”

“Or killed, you mean?” Matt shrugged. “You’ll be back here in a blink of an eye. But don’t try to get killed. It hurts like hell, I can tell you. Some say like the real thing.” He stopped when he saw his Boss blanch. “Not to worry, Boss. Just remember the two rules your daddy told you.”

“And what, pray tell, are these?”

“Don’t take rides from strangers and don’t never take candy from them neither. Just keep your head down, don’t piss nobody off, and follow the first road you find and meet me at the main square, say five minutes real time max.”

“I don’t think...” Lester sputtered as the skull cap went on his head. Abruptly his eyes rolled up, showing their whites. He collapsed in Matt’s arms.

“We’re going to have a real good time, Boss, I promise ya,” Matt said as he eased his friend down on the cot. “Going to be like old times. Just me and little old Les again, like when we was kids.”

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Les blinked once, twice, and then just stared. It wasn’t at all like he thought it would be. It looked... REAL! Vivid blue sky, a hot, bright orb near the horizon, and thick, lush grass that clung to his feet. FEET? He looked down at where his \$900 Italian shoes should be. He saw naked toes entwined in the thick, rich, blue-green grass. There were baggy leggings of some sort that ended half way down his calf, rough undyed wool by the feel and color. Ditto a sleeveless shirt tucked in at the waist and covered by a raw, orange-red leather vest that hung open at the front. He moved his hands to the crown of his head to find the skull cap, but all his fingers found was thick, uncombed hair. He pulled his hands down and held them before his eyes as he touched his index finger to his thumb. The tactile sensation was as immediate as it was REAL. He had to hand it to Matt, this wasn’t at all like the VR stuff he’d know years ago. Simply amazing.

‘Okay,’ he said to himself, ‘are you going to stand here all day? Where is that city Matt mentioned anyway?’ Below him the land fell away as a series of gentle rolling

hills. Off in the distance was just more of the same. No medieval walled city, no buildings of any kind were visible. He turned and looked back. A dark, brooding forest stretched behind him. 'No city that way,' he thought as a chill wormed its way down his back. A place like this Thor World with magic and monsters- the forest was definitely NOT a place to visit. Les turned back, squared his shoulders and began to walk down toward the valley. "Damn Matt!" he muttered out loud. "Him and his directions! Follow the road to the walled city, right! What road?"

Fifteen minutes later, Les came to a small dirt path that slashed across his line of march. Not more than three feet wide, it clawed its way up into the hills to his right and down towards the valley on his left. "Okay, smart ass," he grumbled as he looked in one direction and then the other. "Assuming this is a road, which way hum?" Again he cursed Matt and his dumb instructions. Follow the road indeed!

He'd just about made up his mind to turn left when his eye caught some color and movement at the top of the hill to his right. Moments later, an old man in a full white beard, wearing a bright yellow gown, came striding to the crest of the hill. Les froze. It was obviously too late to hid. Short of running away, he and the old man would meet on this 'road' in a few seconds. Les' mind was spinning with the possibilities. In D & D situations any meeting was filled with potential. The old man might suddenly transform into a heinous flesh rendering monster. He might be a mad, crazed wizard or... just an old man who might know which way to go to get to the walled city. The little voice inside Les that said 'Run away!' was abruptly silenced when a second figure reached the crest. Wheat-gold hair flowed down a naked and very feminine form. Proud, high breasts swayed, unfettered below a comely face. A wide, bright metal belt cut tightly about her waist from which a full, translucent skirt fell to the earth. 'If topless were the style in old Thor World, perhaps this visit might be all right after all,' thought Les as his resolve to meet the old man sharpened into certainty. Moments later, a second female figure appeared at the crest. She was as black as ink at midnight. Tall, lithe and athletic in her movements, she was, other than a loin cloth, naked as the day she'd been born. And then a third female appeared. She was an entirely different sort of creature from the two before her. While the first two radiated sexuality, the last was a skinny, little mouse, fully clothed in what appeared to be rags bound roughly into a dress. Mouse-brown hair hung limply across a narrow, plain face. Les was still gaping when the Man called out to him.

"Stranger! Greetings!" he said as he held up his two hands showing that they were empty. The voice was sonorous and pleasant to Les' ears.

"Sire?" said Les. Where in the Hell had that come from... Sire? That's right, old Thor World was in his head, so why wouldn't it effect his speech as well? Right! "I seek the walled city." Again he was struck by the odd flow of his words. This was going to take some getting used to all right.

"Indeed," muttered the old man as he continued to walk toward Les. "I and my surpercargo make that way as well, stranger." He pulled himself up before Les and stopped. "No kit or kin about, stranger?"

"No, sire. I'm new to these lands."

“It figures, from your foreign clothing and tongue. I am known as Bangor the Honest of Bridgehead, a man of the merchant craft.” He extended his palm.

“I am Lester of Galen, sire.”

Of Galen? Where did that come from? Amusement bloomed on his lips as his hands touched and then clasped the offered palm. The man’s handshake was shockingly powerful and challenging. Les was able to pull his hand away only with extreme effort. It tingled from the contact.

“You’ll not make it there before night fall, Lester of Galen. And the city gates close at dusk. No place for the likes of decent folk there outside the walls at night. Cut throats and thieves swarm the fields about the city until dawn.”

“Oh,” said Les in a small voice.

“Yea, verily.” The man nodded thoughtfully. “And besides... tonight the Death Moon rises shortly after dark. The night will be filled with the undead, monsters and Were.”

“Where?” Les looked confused.

“Weres. Like in changelings. Human by sunlight and forest creatures, wolves, bears and snakes, by the light of Death Moon.” The old man nodded toward the not so distant ridge and the brooding forest beyond. “From there they’ll flood out at the first bite of moonlight. Best not to be about then, stranger.” He then called out in a commanding tone of voice, “Sill! Riss! Twig! Make camp!” He turned back to Les, “You are welcome, young sir, to spend the night with us. I have crystals to mark the boundaries of our camp. No unclean thing will enter.”

Les blinked and nodded. Thor World suddenly seemed far less pleasant then it had but a few minutes earlier.

“Girls!” called out the old man.

“Master?” they cried in unison.

“The camp- NOW!” he ordered.

To Les, it was like something out of an old Vaudeville act. The girls gathered around an old sack that the ‘Nubian’ had carried. They began to extract objects from it. Things far too large to have ever resided in that sack, let alone actually carried by a single person. More and more ‘stuff’ was pulled out. A stove, a large, silk tent with poles, pillows and chests and benches as if the sack were bottomless. Under different circumstances it would have been funny. But here in Thor World, where anything was possible, Les just stared in muted astonishment.

Finally, when the girls had scattered to their various tasks of making camp, the old man stooped over the sack and removed what had to be the largest cut diamond Les had ever seen. It was the size of a football. And then another and yet another of these magnificent crystals were removed, until a perimeter had been set up around the camp. Each seemed to glow from an inner light that flared in response to the animal sounds that already were lashing the dusk.

The old man grunted as the last crystal was in place. “Not a moment too early, Lester of Galen. The air is thick with evil tonight.”

‘Not a moment too early indeed,’ thought Les as the dusk abruptly ended with the onset of a blood red haze that filled the night. A bloated, red moon edged its way above the horizon more rapidly than any natural phenomenon had any right to do. Half seen figures filled the nightmarish, hellish night, and the sounds of feet and paws and slitheringness grew into a muted storm of sound not unlike a New York subway station at rush hour. Automatically Les moved neared to the fire that twisted and snapped unnaturally a few feet from the old man’s tent.

The old man eyed Les’ movements with amusement, “Not to worry lad. You are safe at my fire.”

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It was amazing just how hungry one could get in **V-erse**. As they prepared a meal, Lester turned to one of the women to make a little small talk. Lester stuttered looking for something to say that might ease the tension. “What do you do, you know... A job or something?”

“Do?” Her eyes widened. “Whatever my MASTER desires, if I can.”

“Oh? You’re a slave?”

“Aye. And going to market come the new sun.” She brooded for a moment. “I hope my new master will not be too quick with the whip.”

Lester was shocked: slavery! What kind of sick mind would created a world for fun where people would own people? “Then your master, Bangor the Honest, is a... a slave trader?”

Before Twig could answer, the old man and the other two girls joined them by the fire. Sill began to cut chunks of meat from the rack as Riss pulled two loafs of hot bread from the oven. The exciting smell bloomed to overpowering intensity. Les’ stomach growled audibly. Now didn’t seem exactly the time to question the old man’s profession or his morality. Les gladly accepted the hot chunks of meat and the steamy hunks of fresh bread. A sweet but tart wine splashed down his throat, and for a moment he could forget the horror that swept but a few paces from the warm, dancing flame and the flaring crystals. Moments slipped into minutes as the unnatural hunger gave way to the heavy contentment of a belly filled with meat and bread. More wine and then more still, until his tongue waggled loosely in his mouth.

“How can one trade in human flesh? I can’t... can’t think of anything lower, more inhuman.” There! The words had shot from his mouth unbidden. Too late to retrieve them, the bubbly chatter ended instantly.

The old man’s eyes became red coals as his face lost the kindly visage of a host and took on the look of one bitten by the well fed dog. He rose to his full height and glared down at Les. The red spilled down from his eyes to his cheeks. His sonorous voice twisted and became harsh, cutting the night air. “You were but minutes from a death most horrible, stranger, when I took you into the safety of my fire. You owe me a life! And what do you offer in return? Lick spittle on my chosen profession, question my morality, my humanity? Is that how you trade for a life given back?”

Les sputtered. He hadn't expected quite the sudden transformation from kindly old man to outraged, injured party. "I'm sorry," he whimpered, cringing away from the fierce glare.

"I am in my rights to demand full payment for goods delivered. Show me something equal in value to your life, or..." He pointed to the swirling red nightmare that clawed eagerly at the lip of light cast by the fire. "Or you can go as you please into the night."

"I would die, sire."

"Hurrumph." The slave trader held out his hand. "Surely you carry some treasure. A pretty bobble, a tool? It wouldn't take much, considering how little your life is worth."

Les fumbled in his pockets: nothing. "Sire, the clothes on my back and nothing more I possess."

"Your filthy rags and nothing more? Surely you jest." His voice became shrill as he began to chant.

Les wanted to run away but there was no place to run to. He could sense monsters in the night pressing closer in anticipation of a tasty morsel that might be forthcoming in a few moments. "Please," he begged. The chanting was eating into his mind, dissolving part of his soul. His limbs grew flaccid as his eye lids drooped and he fell back as one asleep.

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When he regained consciousness, he was alone. The fire was down to but coals. The sounds of snoring wafted from the tent. He rolled over. "Sorry," he muttered to the person beside him.

It was Twig laying beside him, next to the fire. Her eyes fluttered open. "Back with the living?"

He pulled himself up into a sitting position. Both hands went to his temples in a vain effort to quiet the banging headache. "What happened? He started the chanting and then..." Les' voice trailed off.

"A spell. The MASTER took the only thing worth your life: you."

"Huh?"

"You're a slave, a possession just like me now."

"No way!"

"Try saying the MASTER'S name. Go on, try."

"It's Ba... Baaaa... MASTER!"

"You see? MASTER! He says jump and you say how high? He looks at you and all you'll want to do is please him."

"This is sick," moaned Les.

"It could have been worst."

“How?”

“Look at Sill.”

“Sill? The Nubian?”

“Yes. She is an exotic dancer and professional thief, both valued talents on Thor. She should bring a good price tomorrow.”

“So?”

“He wasn’t any of those things yesterday.”

“He? Oh!”

“Sill was a preacher until he angered MASTER. Yep! Yep! You got off easy. He’ll probably sell you for a dozen shekels as a farm laborer or some such. Hmm, maybe you and me, we’ll get sold together... A breeding pair!”

“What!” Les yelped as skinny, mousy Twig climbed on top of him, pulling down his pants as she did.

Twig wasn’t one for much foreplay. Holding his cock in her mouth only long enough to cause it to begin to stiffen up, she swung over and drove the half erect member inside her birth canal. Muscles inside her vagina began to twitch as Les began to respond in kind. Moments later, she was twisting and grinding violently. Her screeches were but a very small addition to the heinous cries that continued to fill the night air.

A new cry was added to her screeches. Les’ deep moans of pleasure shifted to shrill simpering squeaks of horror. Something was dreadfully wrong. All sensation from his cock had abruptly ended and...

Just then Twig rolled off and pulled something from between her legs. She held it aloft for a second. “It’s a... a pee-pee, a prick, a penis, a weenie!”

Les staggered to his feet. “HEY! Give me back my cock!” he cried in falsetto, as he stumbled toward her like someone drunk.

“Mine... It’s mine!” She giggled as she easily avoided his lunge and then ran to the other side of the fire. She stuck it back inside, but now with the head facing down. “Look at me, look at me,” she said, legs spread slightly. “I got a cock now! Yep! Yep!”

A surprised look flashed across her face. “Huh?” She yanked on the severed member but it didn’t fall out. She jerked it again but less violently. And then she began to stroke it vigorously and with purpose. “Hot damn! It works!”

Les crumpled to the ground. The world was spinning something awful and then it all went black.

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Les awoke to the sounds of camp being broken. He pulled himself up on his elbows and looked around. The sun hadn’t reached the horizon yet, and the girls were but gray shadow. The master must still be in his bed. MASTER! He jerked up in horror. The nightmare he had last night... Les reached down between his legs as the horror bloomed anew. His hand rested on a mount of Venus- NO PRICK! He looked down at

his chest. Nipples the size of walnuts! Fat, swollen bubbles, but nothing more. His hand slid up his belly and across his chest. The flesh was velvet soft, like a baby bottom. No coarse body hair was evident except between his legs. He flopped back and began to hyperventilate as he thought, 'I should have thrown myself to the night creatures last night. It'd be over now. Back home again...'

"Stupid!" a voice yelled.

"What?"

"Are you going to sleep all morning? Get over here and help me with the oven."

Les stumbled toward the dark figure. The face loomed up in the twilight. "Twig?"

"Yep!" She smirked as she flexed her new muscles that rode on broad shoulders. "Grab this end, twerp."

"You... you've changed so much."

"You too, sweetie. Now lift!"

It was true, of course. He too had gone through a 'change' last night. He was not some kind of sexy, hyper-developed woman, but he was effeminate to say the least. A fine layer of fat flowed where male muscle had been. His hips were a tad broader and his butt more fleshy. And apparently little strength remained in his upper body, as demonstrated by the effort required to lift 'his' share of the oven. All and all, an incomplete work if one had wanted to create a female: no pussy, only a little pee-hole and a pair of hairy balls still hung between his legs.

"Cute," Twig murmured.

"What is?"

"Your face, stupid! Who would have know you could be so... cute."

Les' hand went to his lips. They felt swollen. It was only then he noticed the heavy weight of his hair that trailed to his shoulders.

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One would have thought that Bangor the Honest of Bridgehead had been personally selected for punishment by the gods that ruled the world of Thor. The instant he saw the two of them, Les and Twig, that early morn, Bangor began to rasp his teeth together something frightful. Then he started wailing, his face turned toward the sky. "Why me?"

"Why him, indeed?" Grumbled Les under his breath. The old man acted like it had been him that had been un-manned. Both he and Twig remained face down in the dirt, cowering appropriately at the feet of their grieved MASTER.

Finally, the merchant had resigned himself to his loss. He turned away from their prostrated bodies and ordered his slaves on their way. "To market," he sighed most fretfully. "Perhaps we'll find a fool that will have purpose for you two. Perhaps..." There was only despair in his voice. "Sill, Riss, walk by my side. You two," he turned and glared, "stay well back until were reach market. Damaged goods!" he muttered as he turned his back on them and took up the path to the city.

Les looked at the retreating form and then back at Twig, “Couldn’t we, you know, just run away?”

Still on her haunches, Twig flexed her massive shoulders as one hand thoughtfully scratched at her swollen breasts. She muttered, “Go ahead and try!”

Lester realized the futility the moment he set his foot in the opposite direction from that taken by MASTER. It turned back against his will. “Damn!”

“Yep, yep. Come on, they’re getting too far ahead.”

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The market was held just inside the massive walls of the city. Pigs and goats were sold first and then began the sale of human chattel. Eventually Sill was put on the block. The bidding started at ten shekels and quickly climbed to over a hundred. It was obviously a princely sum, for Bangor’s face beamed as he received the heavy purse. Then it was the sexy blonde’s turn. Apparently sexy blondes were not nearly as valued as Nubians, or perhaps it had been the Nubian’s skills that were so valued. Riss went for 60 and change. Les almost felt sorry for her. Only sixty shekels! But that concern disappeared in a flash, for next came poor Twig. The bidding floundered at 11 shekels, and from the look on the face of the man who had purchased Twig, upon reflection, perhaps that had been too much. Apparently a woman with a cock was not considered a real asset.

Then it was Les’ turn. Bangor tried his best to have Les sold fully clothed, but the crowd wouldn’t agree. Taunts and boos followed poor Les’ when he removed his shirt and the crowd grew even more restless and angry when his crotch was exposed. Castrations were not unheard of in this world but... Balls and no prick? Definitely gross!

“Bidding starts at ten shekels. Do I hear ten?” Boos and hissing erupted from the upturned faces. “Perhaps five?” Cries of “Cover it up!” or “Enough, take it away” began to over-ride the boos and hissing.

The auctioneer made one last attempt, “A shekel?” He gulped. “Ten pifferlings?” He thumped the rail finally. “Take it away! Next we have...”

Pale and shaken, Les climbed down off the platform. Whatever pride he’d retained had vanished like the red mist of the previous night. To be a slave was bad enough. It reminded him all too much of his childhood, when the other boys were picking sides for a game of softball. He’d always been the last chosen. At least he had been chosen back then! His musings were interrupted when Bangor jerked him off his feet.

“Corrupt, twisted anomaly! I’ll not feed a useless mouth.” He raised his hands and began to chant. “There!” he said after a few moments. “You’re manumitted.”

“Huh?” Les just stood there, knock-kneed, as Bangor strode angrily away. The compulsion to follow was but a shadow of a memory now. Thoughtfully he pulled on his clothes and then, slowly, a smile broke across his lush, naturally pink lips. He screamed in a high, feminine voice, “FREE!”

Chapter 2. Going on a Quest!

Les was surprised to find that Matt had been watching the whole auction unfold.

“It could have been verse,” he jokingly consoled his friend.

Les groaned. “Matt, no more of your puns, okay?”

The blond giant grinned. “Boss, you seem a lot Les every time I see ya.”

Les groaned again, “Matt!”

“Okay, Boss.” He folded his arms across his heavily muscled chest and continued to grin as he looked down at his attenuated friend. Finally he said, “Sorry, but I got to ask: You look kinda like a girl now...”

“I still got my balls if that is what you want to know.”

Matt nodded. Relief splashed across his manly barbarian face. “Good. No self-respecting warrior would be caught dead with a chick for a partner, unless, of course, she was one of them Amazon broads. And that you sure ain’t.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence.”

“I’m sorry about that Death Moon thing. It was completely unexpected. They do it a couple of times a year. All the sick freaks come out of the woodwork on Death moon nights.”

“Is everybody here, you know, a real person?”

“Yeah.” He jerked his thumb over his shoulder. “See the kid setting in that pool of filth making mud cakes?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Probably a neurosurgeon or something in the real world. People like a change of pace, you know? Like the dragon we’re going to hunt. Les, you’re still up for a quest, ain’t ya?”

Les’ pink cheeks lost their color for a moment. “Sure... But a dragon?”

“Don’t think of it as a dragon then, if it bothers you. It’s probably some old librarian or elementary school teacher from Akron who once a year gets to kill and slaughter the innocent for a few days in **V-erse**.”

“A librarian?”

“Sure, why not?”

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For the life of him, Les couldn’t see why anyone might want to ‘quest’. For the past 6 hours, all they had done was walk and walk and walk. And then, for a change, they’d walk some more. They left the walled city about 6 o’clock that morning, so it was about noon, according to Les’ calculations. Hard to believe they’d been here less than 18 hours. Harder still to believe that all this had happened in some 30-40 min-

utes, real time. The idea that it would be yet another twenty or thirty virtual hours bothered Les. Plus, it was getting old. Suddenly Matt ran into the meadow beside the road.

“Matt? MATT! Why are we doing this?” Les whimpered. He spun around; the road was empty and the field was empty. Confused and a tad frightened, he finally followed his friend into the field. A spark of fear scurried up his spine. “You see a dragon or something?”

Rather than answering, Matt threw his hands in the air, threw his head back and began to yell like the savage he was. He repeated it over and over again as he worked himself into a real sweat. Les held back and stared. His friend had surely gone bonkers or worst. “Gaaaaaaar!” echoed back from the surrounding hills. If there was a dragon nearby, it could hardly fail to hear poor old Matt.

When Matt finally stopped, lowered his arms, and headed back to the road, Les shook his head slowly before turning and following. “Matt, what was that all about?”

The blonde giant shrugged. “A challenge. Mortal combat. The dragon will hear and it will come.”

Les paled as he crossed his arms across his narrow chest. “That’s really dumb,” he muttered. “So what does gaaaaar mean, anyway? Some kind of dragon talk?”

Matt shrugged, “My name. Gaar.”

“Oh, like Gaar of Galen?”

Matt snorted. “Barbarians are real men. Just plain Gaar. I got the name when I became who I am. It’s the sound I make in combat.”

“Oh, and the dragon knows this and... plays by the rules or something?”

“Naw. You just make enough noise and it will come.”

Les rolled his eyes. “Of course!”

Whatever anxiety Les had, and that was a lot, it waxed anew and washed over him in a great wave when they came to the top of the next hill. Down below was a village, or rather what remained of a village. Buildings were torn apart, some burning, but worst of all were the parts from human bodies strewn about like some mad harvest. In a voice that quivered, Les began, “Matt...”

“GAAR!” snapped his companion.

“Sorry! Gaar, how big exactly is this dragon?”

“There!” Gaar’s finger pointed at a dark blob in the sky that moment by moment was getting bigger and better defined.

“We could still run, couldn’t we, Matt? I mean, Gaar?”

“Why?”

Les whined, “It’s bigger than a 747...” His voice trailed off. It was more reptilian or snakelike than he’d imagined a dragon would be. Les hated snakes. It had impossibly small wings which carried the great bulk at what seemed to be an incredibly high speed. “What are we going to do now, Gaar?” Les moaned. The thing had stopped and

hovered over the ground like a helicopter. It's spiny -crested head flicked side to side and back again and then froze as it turned it's long, sinuous body in midair and began to slowly approach them. "It's too big, Matt, tooooo frigging big! Let's go!" He turned to run, but Gaar wasn't coming.

The barbarian warrior pulled his sword from the sheath that rested between Gaar's shoulder blades. The sword made a wicked humming sound that sounded like a bunch of agitated bees. Gaar slashed experimentally at the air.

"Get serious, Matt!" screamed Les as he stumbled back and away from the doomed barbarian. "Stick it with that and you might make it really, really angry."

Gaar spread his legs and gripped the hilt in both hands. Just in case the dragon hadn't already put them on the menu yet or was perhaps a bit near sighted, Gaar opened his mouth wide, threw back his head and yelled, "GAAAAAAAAAAAAAAR!
GAAAAAAAAAAAAAAR!"

"Right!" Les turned and began to run. A black shadow fell over him in an instant. He looked back just in time to see Gaar's wondrous sword spin out of his hand and sail end over end toward a pile of boulders. It clattered noisily against the rocks and then thumped to the ground, impotent. The big thug just stood there, now empty handed, as the monster swept past. The dragon had ignored Gaar and was making a beeline for Les.

He screamed and ran even harder toward the mound of boulders. He was climbing between a pair of these when the first touch of dragon breath hit his back and ignited his shirt. Screaming, he ripped it off while stumbling back and up the unstable mass. For a horrible moment, the reptilian gold-green eyes caught his gaze. The great mouth opened as the monster landed upon the boulders. The long tail flicked out, hitting Gaar on the back of his stupid barbarian skull. Gaar went sprawling and seemed to be down for the count, though poor Les wasn't exactly counting as he dodged the long, sticky forked tongue slithering around the boulders. Les suddenly became aware that someone was screaming.

Something was happening! When the monster eased down on the pile of boulders and tried to force his head into the cavity, the whole mess began to give way. In a blink of an eye, Les and some hundreds of tons of rock began to side and roll and bounce. Now there was a new scream, as the big reptile was abruptly smothered in stone. How Les survived was a mystery to him. Surely he should have been squished like a bug by the falling rocks. Down and down he tumbled, head over tea cups, until coming to a rest not more than three feet from the monster's head.

"Dead," Les moaned. And then again, louder, "FOR PETE'S SAKE! MATT, THE DRAGON'S DEAD!"

WRONG! A lid winked open, a great gold-green eye about the size of a small coffee table caught him in its hot glare. Not only was the monster alive, it didn't look too happy either. Not at all happy! Once again the ground began to move. Boulders bounded away. Lester tried to imitate the obviously wise granite spheres, but his leg was wedged under one of the dragon's limbs. The rocks moved again, the head was lifting free for the final strike. Suddenly the hilt of 'Sting', Gaar's sword, surfaced as the rocks slithered and rolled. Les grabbed and pulled. Sting came free. The sword

whined anxiously. “No time, no time!” the sword seemed to sing. The monster’s head pushed a rock away as if it were Styrofoam. The dragon pivoted toward Les.

Les jabbed the magic sword in the general direction of the monster. It was almost as if Sting entered the creature’s eyeball and continued into the reptilian brain on its own impulse. The monster reacted by going into a convulsion, throwing Les all the way down the slope amid the tumbling boulders, any one of which could have crushed the life from his body in an instant. As pain-wracked consciousness slipped away from Les, all he could think about was the hot blood that was burning and consuming his body. Dragons, he thought, what a really, really bad idea!

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“Les? Les? Can you hear me?”

Les grunted and then moaned in pain. His body was on fire, the pain was almost unbearable.

“Sorry, Boss, but you’re dying. The dragon’s blood is dissolving your flesh.”

“For Pete’s sake, quit talking and... kill me, Matt!” He sobbed as he looked though nearly blind eyes. “I’ll meet you back in the real world.” He tried to grin but the lips twisted into a scream as Matt attempted to lift him.

“I can’t kill you, Boss. It’s against the rules, leastwise I can’t kill a boon companion...”

“Screw the rules!” And then all went black again for Les.

When he came to, the pain was gone but he still couldn’t see much. “Matt? Are you still here?”

“Take it easy, Les. I found a magic pool to heal you. Has the pain ended?”

“Uh-huh,” he grunted. “Can’t see shit, though.”

“You’re healing, that’s what counts.”

“What kind of magic is this?”

“Not to worry, okay?”

“Matt?” Les mumbled.

“Yes?”

“This world sucks.” And with that he slid into a deep, troubled sleep.

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“I don’t know how to tell you, Les.”

Les was still enjoying the sensation of having flesh covering his bones once again and the absence of the pain that was more intense than any he’d ever imagined. He ran his left hand slowly down his right forearm, savoring the light touch of flesh on flesh... his flesh, healthy flesh. “Tell me what?” he murmured, distracted by the relative pleasure of being whole and pain free.

“Well, that magic pool...”

“Yeah, thank God you got me to it when you did.” Les had switched hands and was now stroking his other arm. “I don’t think I could have stood the pain one instant longer.”

“Right...” muttered Matt. The massive blond barbarian shrugged his broad shoulders and bit his lower lip. “Boss? You agree it was necessary to use that magic pool, right?”

“Definitely.”

Matt cleared his throat and drew his hands behind his back. His wrists clasped and went into a ‘parade rest’ posture. He looked up at the vivid blue sky as if for answers, and then said, “Well, it’s about the... magic...”

“The magic pool?” interrupted Les. Now his full attention was upon his companion. His brow wrinkled nervously. He began to think he did not want to know what Matt was about to tell him. “For Pete’s sake, what?”

“There’s no free lunch on Thor, you see.” Matt’s gaze flicked down and caught Les’ gaze for a moment before returning to the empty sky above. There was a guilty expression of Matt’s face. “What I mean is that, well... The pool cured your wounds but... at a price.”

Les jumped to his feet and glared at Matt. Matt blurted, “HowwasIsusposed-toknow—”

“Whoa, slow down. Matt! Matt, look at me! What price are you talking about?”

“A wood nymph lived in that pond.”

“A what?”

“Sorry, Boss. You’re... turning into a wood nymph.”

Les’ hands started exploring all over his body and found nothing. Frantically he grabbed his crotch, but of course what he didn’t find there had been gone all day anyhow. “But I’m...”

Anguish pulled at Matt’s face. “Damn it, Les, your ears...”

“HOLY SHIT!” Les gasped as his hands touched the long sharp points that had bloomed from his ears. “Is that bad?”

“Oh yeah, Boss.” Matt nodded slowly. “Member Tina in shipping? The bimbo’s bimbo, the blond... Oh hell, Tina would be the Einstein of Einsteins in the world of nymphs. And the wood nymphs are the dumbest of the bunch.”

Les was staring at his own chest. “But I don’t see anything.” His already fat, oversized nipples started swelling as the flesh took on a pale green tone and a mass began to form under them. “Maaaaaatt!” he trilled as his voice shifted up yet another octave. A wild tangle of bright green hair abruptly avalanched from the crown of his head. One wave slithered like a thing alive down his back and beyond, while a lesser mass fell across his face and hung upon the rapidly swelling breasts that thrust out from his already slender chest. Bones cracked noisily as the ribs and hips adjusted. Fleshy half spheres ballooned on his posterior as his legs and spine shortened. Les staggered and fell heavily on his newly amplified butt, legs splayed apart... He began giggling.