

This is an excerpt from *Imaginary Year*, a work of serial fiction by Jeremy P. Bushnell. Visit the *Imaginary Year* website (<http://www.imaginaryyear.com>) on Mondays and Fridays for new updates.

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Marvin takes a bite from his enormous burrito. —So, he says, between chews, —I'm thinking of starting up the campaign again.

Paul is sitting at the kitchen counter, balancing his checkbook. When he hears this, he lifts his pen, twiddles it between his fingers nervously. In Paul's mind, Adi-Kaya rises, shaking the loose debris of the past year off of his broad shoulders. —Really?

—Yeah, Marvin says. —Maybe Tuesday nights? How do Tuesday nights work for you?

Paul mentally flits through a short litany of Adi-Kaya's adventures. He recalls their assault on Castle Xexelothanth, a massive fortress shaped like an antelope's skull, lodged in the bottom of a deep chasm. Perilously, on ropes, the lowered themselves towards the tip of one of the antelope's horns, seeking entry to a rumored staircase that spiraled down, into the warren of the skull's interior chambers. They were halfway down when they learned that the opposite face of the chasm was riddled with goblin caves. Suddenly the air was lethal—Adi-Kaya clung to the rope as a rain of arrows thudded dully into the furs and leather strapped across his back—a few piercing the flesh beneath—

—Tuesdays work. Who's going to be DMing? Paul asks.

DMing: Dungeon Mastering. Paul has been using the character of Adi-Kaya on and off in Dungeons and Dragons games for almost a full decade now. (The name was pulled

from the Tibetan *Book of the Dead*, which Paul did a report on for a unit on Mythology when he was a junior in high school.)

—I'll be DMing, says Marvin.

The question is important. When Marvin, Paul and Lydia first moved up to Chicago from Bloomington, IN, Marvin drove out to the hobby and game store and put an index card up on the bulletin board. *Experienced Players Looking To Join Chicago Campaign*. It didn't take long for a group of college freshmen to contact them. Marvin and Paul both felt apprehensive about the age difference—freshmen?—but they agreed to give it a chance.

The first night, they'd been signed into the dorms for only about an hour, hadn't even started playing yet, when one of the guys booted up his computer and showed them a jerky video of a woman masturbating a dog. Paul hung back, watched them laughing, ended up eating half a bag of Cheetos. Eventually Marvin looked over, and met Paul's eyes with his own. He must have seen some kind of pain there, for he erred on the side of diplomacy for once in his life and suggested *maybe we should get to playing*.

Over the next few weeks, Paul grew weary of the sniggering ignorance that these guys demonstrated towards practically everything outside of the game. Conversations about science fiction movies or videos or books would periodically grow spirited, but turn it to music or politics or relationships, and you could watch the interest instantly wither. It bothered Paul that they weren't interested in talking about those things, but it bothered him even worse that they seemed to wear their lack of interest as a badge of *superiority*, as though those things interested only lesser beings.

Paul might have overlooked these faults, were it not for the fact that he didn't feel he could play Adi-Kaya the way he'd grown accustomed to. Adi-Kaya is a northern barbarian, slow, mighty, brutal, but Paul had decided long ago that Adi-Kaya was also homosexual, that

he came from a group of barbarians where homosexual love was part of a masculine code of honor. It didn't usually come up too much when they'd be down in a dungeon fighting ghouls or whatnot, but periodically, especially during some slow town episode, Adi-Kaya would take the opportunity to seek out homosexual encounters. This often developed into engaging mini-adventures: depending on the reaction of the townspeople and the ingenuity of the DM, Adi-Kaya could be forced to narrowly escape being burned as a heretic, or could grow entangled in a secret network of homosexual assassins (this last one was an inspired invention of Marvin's: the Order of the Lavender Hand). But, with this new group, Paul couldn't bring himself to reveal Adi-Kaya's homosexuality. For the first time, he felt like he had to keep Adi-Kaya *in the closet*.

This was unacceptable. Paul gets enough of in the closet in real life.

The fourth week he simply refused to go, and that was the end of that. They have not played since, although Marvin has continued to buy the new Third Edition rulebooks as they come out.

—You have players? Paul asks.

Marvin scratches his head. —Yeah, I know a couple of guys from work who are interested.

—We should see if Lydia wants to play, Paul says.

—Lydia? Marvin asks, as though he has forgotten that they have another roommate.

—Yeah, she's played with us before.

It's true. They rolled her up a character in college and she played a couple of times. But she never played with them regularly, never was really a member of the party. Her character—a rogue—had her own agenda, and served as their ally only in occasional circumstances, when this agenda overlapped with their own.

—I guess, says Marvin.

—See if she wants to, says Paul. —But, sure, I'll play. I'm always willing to play.

—OK, says Marvin.