

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.

34 / THE BREAKING OF THE FELLOWSHIP

Paul and Marvin sit around a table covered in Dungeons and Dragons rulebooks, legal pads, hex maps, dice, glasses of pop, and bags of chips. Paul looks over the character sheet for his barbarian, Adi-Kaya, and listens to Marvin sigh with exaggerated impatience.

When they started up this new campaign, they first had to agree on a time when they could all consistently meet. They discussed weekday nights, but then, in a burst of optimism, they decided to give over a weekend afternoon, hoping for longer sessions of gaming, less constrained by late commutes home and thoughts of *work tomorrow*.

But now it is Saturday, and they were supposed to start playing at noon, and it's pushing towards 12:45, and Lydia is nowhere to be seen. Paul recalls her heading out to Austin's last night; he suspected that she might stay over, but he also assumed that she'd be back in time to play. They've already called her cell and left her a message—*call us and just let us know what's going on*.

—We could just get started, Paul says. He knows that Marvin wants to play: Marvin looks forward to the game more than any of them. And Paul feels responsible, partly responsible anyway, for the delay, because it was his idea to invite Lydia into the campaign in the first place. (He's not sure why Marvin didn't want to invite Lydia, although he suspects it has something to do with her being a woman.)

—I don't know, says Marvin. —I just wish she'd have *thought to call* us.

—Yeah, I know, Paul says. —I’m sure she’ll call soon and let us know what’s going on. She’s probably waiting for a bus or something right now. So do you want to play?

—I guess, Marvin says.

—You guess, Paul says. —Come on. I can see it.

So they begin playing. Marvin contrives something to separate Lydia’s character, Malgorra, from the rest of the party. (She steps on a trapped plate and slides down a chute.) One moment later another chute opens beneath Adi-Kaya and Galbraith, Marvin’s cleric, and they slide into a coal bin that’s at one end of a giant underground forging complex, run by dwarves who have been enslaved by ogres.

After a few minutes the game has raised Marvin’s spirits. The ogres, on catwalks high above, begin to fire crossbow bolts; one catches Galbraith in the shoulder. Adi-Kaya embraces Galbraith to him, blocking the rain of arrows with the bulk of his scarred and armored back, and charges across open space, aiming for the shelter of an alcove at the far end of the room. A single ogre guards the path with a pole-arm, and Adi-Kaya glares, raises his axe and swings—

A froth of blood rises from the ogre’s slashed throat; Marvin describes it with great animation and obvious relish. Paul enjoys watching his performance: Marvin’s love for the game becomes so clear. It is obvious that the game is the thing, more than anything else in this world, that helps Marvin to feel competent, needed, and cool. The game is the thing that helps him to come fully alive.

The phone rings. Marvin rolls his eyes and grabs the cordless before Paul has a chance to intervene.

—Yeah? Marvin says. A pause, then: —Hey, where *are* you?

Paul has already forgiven Lydia. The game does not do the same thing for her. He knows that she comes alive in other spaces. Right now, those spaces are the ones that she shares with Austin. He wonders if he can find a way to help Marvin to understand that.

—Yeah, well, Marvin says. —I guess. We got started without you.