

‘Boojum, Boojum’

by Janet Pack

From *Heroes and Fools*

The proprietor of the Crossroads Inn looked nervous. He had good reason. Besides his regular noon patrons and the usual handful of strangers in his establishment, there were also eight Dark Knights and a kender. The regulars and guests sat to the left in loose knots around small tables, whispering to each other and throwing furtive glances toward the dark forces; the Knights lounged around a trestle board to the right, intently listening to their leaders; and the kender roamed the bar, occasionally bursting forth in song in a voice rendered seventeen times louder than normal by the amount of dwarven spirits he'd imbibed.

The innkeeper shook his balding head. Not an auspicious day, although the ale the Knights were drinking had lent an extra jingle to his money drawer. He wiped down the bar with a damp rag, making a detour around the kender who had finally fallen asleep with head curled on his arms. The innkeeper tried not to listen to scraps of conversation, especially those coming from Takhisis's troop.

“We need to post notices for maps of this area,” Khedriss Mennarling, commander of the strike force of Dark Knights, was saying. “A good target is rumored nearby. If these rumors prove to be true, then we will have the test we require.”

The kender stirred groggily. “Mapsh?” he muttered into the bar, his pronunciation still under the influence of dwarven ale.

“The reconnaissance will take time,” continued Thrane Gunnar, burly second-in-command of the troop. “So we'll need to be patient. Luck will be as important as a good map. Maps with information this specific are not common.” The big man's eyes glittered maliciously as he happened to connect looks with the merchant seated nearest him. His rusty-hinge voice rattled the windows. “You have an interest in our business?”

Everyone in the room tensed. The merchant looked away immediately, shaking his balding head. “No. No interest,” he squeaked.

“Good,” replied Gunnar. “Make sure it stays that way.” He surveyed the rest of the patrons for a challenge. No one met his eyes.

“I got mapsh.” Suddenly motivated, the kender swung up onto the bar and danced across it singing:

*I know of the boojum, boojum, monster of the glade.
It swings a club made of a tree, and is silent on its raid.
It has a treasure ages old laid up within its cave,
And it laughs a great and rumbly laugh as it guides you to your grave . . . ulp!*

Thanks to Gunnar's swift muscular reach, the small being found himself suddenly sitting in the middle of the Dark Knights' table, surrounded by eight calculating glares.

“Let's find out what he knows,” said Mennarling. “Hold him, Drethon.”

Firm hands closed about the kender's upper arms. He squinted at the fingers, but couldn't believe that pale sausages possessed such strength.

“Even if he knows nothing, we can have some fun with him,” growled Gunnar, slapping the captive hard enough to make his ears ring. “He’s probably not worth our time. Kender only take up space that can be occupied by better people.” He leaned menacingly toward the short creature. “What’s this boojum you’re singing about, and where does it live?”

“Hi, my name’s Thistleknot Tangletoe.” With his eyes slightly crossed, the kender thought the Dark Knights looked truly peculiar. Thistleknot tried to fix his sight by pulling at the corners of his eyes, but it didn’t work. “What? Oh, yesh, the boojum. Well, it’s huge and furry, and very fierce. Everybody knows that.” His voice dropped to a conspiratorial whisper. “An’ everybody knows its favorite dessert ish kender. More’s the compliment!”

One of Mennarling’s eyebrows cocked. “Where is this legendary beast?”

“Oh, you’re close, it’s right around thish area. Thash why the trade route changed. There washn’t much left of a certain caravan after the last boojum raid, so they moved the road south. The old way runs deep in the forest. No one ‘ardly goes there anymore.”

Gunnar rumbled, “Do you happen to have a map?”

“I thought you’d never askh!” caroled Thistleknot, reaching for a bulging pouch and spreading out a beautifully detailed parchment. “We’re right here, at the Crossroadsh Inn.” His finger wobbled. “The boojum haunts thish vicinity.” They could see it was not far away, labeled simply “Boojum” in red, underlined twice. “The ‘X’ marks its cave. An’ you gotta be careful when you get there.” He brought his fingers to his lips and whispered. Mennarling leaned forward slightly to hear and to examine the tiny but precise printing. “There are lots and lots of trapsh!”

Mennarling looked at Gunnar. “Can we trust him?”

“Kender maps are some of the best on Krynn.”

“Is the monster real, or just a legend, though? You come from this area, Relthas. What say you?”

The woman warrior considered. “I’ve heard of this boojum all my life, sir. It may be legend, but things have happened to livestock and people that have never been thoroughly explained. Piles of bones have been found next to trails. People have disappeared. Sometimes the bodies are found with expressions suggesting they died of fright. I’ve never seen it,” she said slowly, “but I, for one, believe the boojum does exist.”

Tangletoe danced next to the map. “I know of the boojum, boojum_” he started to sing. Drethan silenced him with a cuff to the ear.

Mennarling nodded, satisfied, and rose. “Then it is decided. This boojum will become the test subject for Her Dark Majesty’s new death machine. We’ve saved a lot of time by discovering this kender and his map.” He threw a few coins on the table, grabbed up the chart, turned toward the door, and added, “If boojums like kender so much, bring this one along for bait.”

“Heeeyyyyyyy!” Thistleknot howled as Drethan hauled him backward off the table by collar and belt. When the Dark Knight shifted his grip, however, Tangletoe scooted for the portal, leaving a ragged piece of collar in Drethan’s hand.

“Stop him!” boomed Gunnar.

Thistleknot managed to dodge the only Dark Knight between him and the outside. He skidded across the porch and raced toward a hand-drawn cart with a big closely swathed burden, the only refuge in sight despite being guarded by three_no,

four_humans.

Tangletoe dove beneath the canvas, instantly intrigued by his whereabouts. He worked his hands beneath the ropes at the largest end. “Metal,” he muttered. “Heavy. It’sh bigger’n me. Wonder if it’s hollow. Whatsh thish, writing? Too dark. Wunnder what it shays? Yeoww!”

One of the guards had him by his heels and dragged him out. “We’ve got him,” he announced to the rest of the Dark Knights as they charged from the inn.

Gunnar grinned through large, square teeth. Mennarling nodded. Tangletoe tried to duck but was too slow. Gunnar’s fist slammed into his chin, and the kender saw multicolored stars.

“Boootiful,” he managed to say, and knew no more.

* * * * *

Tangletoe awoke abruptly, his sense of being in a different place than before tingling along his nerves. Blearily he tried to think where he had been and where he was going. Certain clues presented themselves to his ale-befuddled brain.

The first was that he dangled from a rope tied tightly around his middle affixed to a springy pole that bounced him up and down, up and down, in the darkening woods. The rope also caused him to spin around, which gave him only occasional glimpses of the trees looming suddenly before him, as well as a queasy stomach. Or was the latter an aftereffect of the dwarven spirits? He didn’t know, and at the moment, didn’t care.

The pole was held by Thrane Gunnar, who grinned wickedly after glancing upward and noticing the late afternoon light bouncing off of Tangletoe’s slitted eyes.

“Here boojum, boojum, boojum,” he called. The rest of the troop laughed, except for Khedriss Mennarling.

“Quiet,” the Dark Knight commander snapped. Behind him, the eight men and two women hushed their catcalls, pulling the canvas-draped death machine on a small two-wheeled wooden cart. “According to the kender’s map we’re now well into boojum country. The monster could be anywhere. Be vigilant.”

“My m-m-map!” wailed Thistleknot mournfully from the rope end of the springy pole, his enunciation still beyond perfect control. “You owe me for th-that map. It’s my very besht one!”

Mennarling smiled without humor, his pale blue eyes resembling ice. He replied in a low voice that made the kender think of edged steel being pulled from a scabbard. “You tried to steal our Queen’s experimental machine. I still wonder how, in your inebriated state and in such little time, you managed to work yourself under without loosening any of the ropes. But that’s a mystery I’ll save to ponder later. Meanwhile, you are making a valuable sacrifice toward the great goals of Her Dark Majesty. Remember that.”

“But . . . but I wasn’t steal_watch ou_ooofffff!”

A sudden shift of the pole in Gunnar’s hands brought the kender into unfriendly proximity with a tree. He tried to fend it off with his fists, but Gunnar jounced the pole and sent him whacking against the trunk not once, but twice. Tangletoe left some skin on its rough bark. His new abrasions stung, but the pain helped his mind clear a little.

“Ouch! Hey, I could help if I really wanted to. I know important information that

could lead you right to—”

“Silence, kender,” Mennarling barked. “We have your precious map and all the meticulous notations you made on it. There’s only one more thing we require of you, and that’s to keep smelling like a kender. Bleed a little, and attract the boojum. . . .”

Of course Tangletoe smelled like a kender, and mighty proud he was of it. But the bleeding he could do without. He used sore hands to fend off a branch trying to snag him.

“I don’t write everything down on my maps, you know. There isn’t always enough room, and—”

Without hesitation Gunnar whirled Thistleknot around and whacked him into the nearest large branch, temporarily stunning him. “Let’s try quiet bait,” he grinned.

“Don’t kill him . . . yet,” one of the Dark Knights warned.

“If he dies, we could turn him into a kender projectile,” said Gunnar thoughtfully.

“I’ll seriously consider that,” Mennarling said softly, speaking mainly to Gunnar. “That would be an intriguing fallback.”

Gunnar momentarily spared a hand from grasping the pole to massage one ear. “He deserves all the punishment we can devise. My hearing will never be the same—his singing is worse than any screech owl.” His hand returned to the pole, and he gave the kender a harsh jolt.

“Ow! Hey! Who are you calling a screech owl?”

“Just making sure you’re still up there and on the job, boojum bait,” Gunnar chuckled.

“I worry that the fuel is not quite right,” Mennarling muttered, “and that the troop is not drilled well enough in the loading procedures.” Thistleknot strained to hear.

“You saw me train them,” Gunnar protested. “We trained for days. I ran them through the steps until it takes only moments to get ready. Every one of them can perform his or her duty, even on a moonless night. I swear, they could do it backward if you ordered it. Nothing has been left to chance. All that remains is finding the boojum.”

“We may only have moments to react. By all reports, this boojum is fast for its size. And what if there are casualties among the operating squad?”

“You know these people,” stated Gunnar. “They’re among the best of the Dark Queen’s forces in Ansalon: loyal, quick, and dedicated. They’ll perform, and well.”

“But this is a weapon that has only been fired twice, and never during battle. . . .”

Mennarling’s hand in the air stopped the troop. He pulled Thistleknot’s map from the breast of his tunic and studied it before turning to the Knights, his voice still pitched low. They leaned forward to hear every important word.

“According to the kender’s scribblings, we’ve reached the vicinity of this boojum’s lair. It is reputedly set with many traps. Be extra wary from now on. Anything can happen. I’m slowing the pace. We don’t want to lose Her Dark Majesty’s new death weapon to a pit trap.” He waited for the murmurs of assent to die down. “Right, then. Forward, carefully.”

They crept onward, picking their way gingerly down the path, stout sticks, bow ends, and spear butts waving like feelers on bugs. Dirt stirred into the air and coated them with pale dust sometimes festooned with long green tendrils of weed and fern.

Thistleknot was grinning from his overhead vantage. Preoccupied as they were, at least the pole held by Gunnar no longer slapped him against every tree they passed.

“Lieutenant.” A soft hail came from middle rank of the troop. Mennarling

whirled, hand on the pommel of his sword, and sprinted back in that direction.

Relthas stood frozen with the wooden haft of her spear stuck deep into the dirt near the side of the path. With Mennarling watching, she pulled it up to show there was no resistance, and then stabbed around until she could trace the outline of a corner.

“Pit trap. Good work, Relthas. Proceed everyone, but be watchful.” The commander returned to the head of his troop as the others labored to maneuver the covered cart bearing the Dark Queen’s new death weapon safely past the hazard.

“Lieutenant.” Mennarling hurried to investigate again, this time finding an ingenious spring-snare covered with forest detritus. He peered upward into the arching trees, but couldn’t resolve anything sinister in the fading light.

“Lieutenant.” This time it was a partially hidden rope snaking off into the bracken. Mennarling didn’t investigate further. The soldiers gave it wide berth.

This boojum was wily. It would prove an excellent adversary, a perfect test target, if they could just lure it into sight.

“Looks like we got to the right place,” Gunnar said with a satisfied nod as Mennarling caught up to him again.

“Indeed. The map is excellent. I had expected traps, but not so many and so diverse.”

“You know, there’s a big outcropping of granite near the boojum’s cave,” Thistleknot said conversationally. “Then you’re getting really close.”

“Keep your mouth shut, kender. We’re busy,” snapped Gunnar. He’d almost forgotten the diminutive one. He gave the pole a whirl and a whack just for good measure.

Thistleknot grumbled, “Ow! I was just trying to be helpful.”

“We don’t need that kind of help from you,” replied Khedriss tartly. “What we need is the boojum.”

Now the soldiers wended their way in cautious silence. Late-day crickets fell silent, too, as did those little birds that normally chirped through anything save the fiercest thunderstorms and full darkness. The Dark Queen’s minions concentrated on avoiding the boojum’s traps and transporting their new weapon without dire incident.

Something, a peculiar clicking noise, made Thistleknot look up and to his right. His eyes widened at what he saw there, and he tried to clear his suddenly constricted throat. “Uh—”

“I told you to shut up, kender,” Gunnar ordered.

“But there’s—”

“When I want information from you, I’ll beat it out of your ugly little body,” the second-in-command thundered, beginning to jostle the pole in preparation to flinging the kender against another tree.

Two huge hairy hands reached down. One grabbed the kender’s rope where it dangled from the pole, the other sliced it cleanly through with an overlarge knife.

“Whoaaaa—uuullpppppppp!” was all Thistleknot could manage as he vanished into the canopy.

“The boojum!” Gunnar cried.

“Ready the weapon!” shouted Mennarling at the same time.

The Dark Knights swirled with activity, ripping off the canvas shrouding their death machine. Then they rolled in a big round shape, poured liquid from skins down its

throat, and tamped it all with a large padded stick. Two men stood at each wheel to turn the mechanism on orders from their commander. Relthas and her sister soldier stood waiting to ignite the wick with a torchlight. Everyone seemed to be holding their breaths.

“I think you confused them,” whispered Thistleknot to his companion. “Thanks for finally getting me off that rope. It hurt!” He gingerly rubbed his stomach.

“Shift your location, so that when they fire nothing will perish but leaves.” The big hairy thing beckoned. Thistleknot nimbly followed his rescuer along the branches—good thing, too. Moments after, several arrows flew into the foliage where they’d stood.

“Predictable,” whispered the tall costumed man. He stepped down to another branch, grabbed a bunch of bloody bones secreted there, and cut one of two cords holding them to a branch. They dropped among the Dark Knights with a muted *thwop* and left a sticky dark stain on Gunnar as one glanced off his leather armor. The big hairy thing stepped to a large cone-shaped contraption and spoke into the small end, sending his voice through the forest much amplified from its normal pleasant baritone.

“I AM BOOJUM. YOU TRESPASS IN MY DEMESNE. THE PENALTY IS DEATH DESPITE THE TASTY KENDER!”

Lifting his face from the cone and the hairy hood from his sweaty face, the mild-featured Solamnic Knight with curly brown hair grinned at the kender and shifted his position, whispering, “Now we’ll see what transpires.”

More arrows answered his pronouncement. Fortunately they were off target.

“That was good,” Thistleknot commented, impressed with his friend’s improvisations. “I didn’t know you were going to get all dressed up and everything.”

“I admit to being truly inspired by counterfeiting the boojum.” The Solamnic Knight scratched. “Yet this weave is vexing. I hope to be rid of it very soon. Ah, they’ve come within range. Prithee, draw on that cordage next your right foot.”

“This one?” The kender heaved. A number of buckets filled with mud and pea-sized gravel upended, pouring their contents onto the hapless beneath. Curses and howls rose from the squad, along with a few arrows, which fortunately missed by far.

“Save the fuel!” Thistleknot heard Gunnar holler. “Wait for a good shot!”

Thistleknot giggled in delight. “This is working out better than I’d hoped.”

“As long as we can purloin that weapon for study,” grunted the Knight, making his way back to the conical voice expander, “we will achieve success.”

“SURRENDER NOW. SAVE YOURSELVES FROM CERTAIN AND PROLONGED DESTRUCTION.”

“They never will, you know,” stated the kender, watching the scurrying below. “Uh, ohhhh. Run!”

The night filled with a flash brighter than lightning, brighter than day. A massive roar was followed by splintering of branches as a projectile the size of his head ripped past. The iron ball—for that is what it was—eventually struck a substantial tree and lodged there. Only moments after embedding itself, it exploded, blowing the entire crown from the forest patriarch and flinging its woody shards all around and on the ground.

“Wow!” was all Thistleknot could muster. His ears rang with concussion.

“By my father’s sword, that weapon has a god’s voice.” The Solamnic Knight sounded very far away to the kender, although the man in the hairy costume stood right beside him.

“In the name of Her Dark Majesty Takhisis, we demand your immediate surrender, boojum,” called Mennarling in his best indomitable tone.

Thistleknot looked at his partner. The Knight shrugged, indicating a stalemate. Biting his lip, the kender forced himself to think and preferably to think fast.

“Yeeeoowwww!” The branch he stood on suddenly dipped violently, sending Thistleknot plummeting into the midst of the Dark Knights. He landed hard but scrambled out of the way as his tall associate in the hemp costume minus its disguising hood thumped down a moment later, nearly on top of him.

Although the Solamnic Knight’s expression reflected surprise, he recovered quickly, leaping to his feet to face Gunnar as the rest of the enemy, looking equally surprised if not confused, closed a circle around him and the kender, their weapons bristling. The Solamnic’s hand curled around his cherished ancestor’s sword hilt, and he drew the ancient weapon from its scabbard. The warriors were at a stand-off and took each other’s measure for several heartbeats as the forest maintained silence about them.

Above, something rustled. Thistleknot looked up and felt his eyes go wider than ever as his muscles jellied. The grinning countenance staring into his appeared to be savoring an excellent joke. His eyes finally tore away from those huge brown ones in the foliage, and he shuffled over to where the Solamnic Knight stood ready for battle.

“Uh...uh...” was all he could stutter, tugging at the Knight’s sagging costume.

“Not now,” hissed his tall partner. “Can you not see I am engaged?”

A dark bass laughed, its roar seemingly coming from the bowels of the earth as well as the ceiling of the sky. It filled the forest without aid from the conical voice-enhancer. The Dark Knights froze. Everyone, even the Solamnic Knight, looked up.

“BOOJUM IMPERSONATOR. PITIFUL PLAYACTOR. NOW ENCOUNTER THE REAL BOOJUM!”

The sound of a huge bowstring’s thrum capped the end of the monster’s statement. One of the Dark Knights hissed suddenly and folded forward with an overlarge arrow stuck in his chest. Three feet of said arrow appeared to protrude from his back.

“BUT HERE IS NO SPORT. YOU ARE AS DYNAMIC AS DUCKS FROZEN ON A POND. I WILL MAKE ME SOME FUN.”

A rope snaked down, dropping over the head of the soldier standing closest to the secret weapon, and pulled tight. This Dark Knight was quickly hoisted into the trees, so fast he couldn’t even raise a weapon. A moment later was heard a yelp and the distinctive sounds of bones cracking.

A huge arrow struck the ground near Relthas. She moved back a step, then a few more when another arrow followed. The third missile caused her to leap aside. She flailed the air as dirt crumbled beneath her feet and a pit trap yawned to engulf her. Her pitiful moans were heard every few minutes, until eventually they ceased entirely.

“Come on, fill in there!” Mennarling snapped a command as he stepped bravely to the front, peering up at the trees, finding no trace of the mysterious foe. His voice was sharp, and it brought his soldiers’ concentration back into focus. “Ready that machine!”

His team bent to the task, fed fuel to the barrel of the cannon, tamped down the ball, and aimed the death machine into the canopy, all with impressive speed and precision. Except for the Dark Knight, who stumbled over Thistleknot, and Gunnar, who was looking daggers at the Solamnic Knight, there was little wasted movement.

Mennarling shouted, “Fire!”

Steel slid from two scabbards at the same instant the death weapon roared. Gunnar and the Solamnic Knight staggered from the concussive noise, but still managed to trade slices. Thistleknot was thrown to the ground, hands clapped over his much-abused ears. From flat on his back he noticed movement above him in the trees.

“WHAT IF I THROW THIS BACK AT YOU? IT IS NO THREAT TO ME,” the boojum’s voice thundered, stirring the leaves.

“Uuuhhh ohhhhh!” The kender scrambled up and away as the explosive projectile, shooting sparks, thudded back down into the center of the knot of Dark Knights.

It went off almost immediately, hurling shot, shrapnel, and dirt into the bodies of those soldiers slow to take cover. Four were wounded. It also dismembered the wheels of the wagon supporting the death machine, tilting it crazily and burying the nose of the barrel among leaves and pine needles. A nearby tree burst into flame as pieces of the cannonball made contact, bringing a lurid light to the darkening scene.

Clashing steel continued as the explosion faded. Thistleknot saw that his friend in disguise was well matched. The Solamnic Knight’s reach and quickness were balanced by the Dark Knight’s impressive fighting skills. It seemed the two could duel forever.

As well they might, or at least to exhaustion, unless Mennarling interfered. The troop leader slunk around the edge of the firelight with sword at the ready, angling to come to the aid of his cohort. Crouching, Thistleknot aimed himself in the Dark Knight commander’s direction and poised to take off at a good clip.

Something clamped over his ankle. Dropping face first, the kender then twisted to see what caught him. A hand belonging to one of the Dark Knights held him in an iron grip. The man’s grin looked spectral in the light from the burning tree.

“Saw what you intended,” the soldier rasped. “Can’t let you sneak up on my commander.” He lifted a short sword and maneuvered to his knees without letting go of his prisoner. Firelight glinted along his blade. “I confess I’m going to enjoy this.”

“HUMAN OFFAL.”

Something huge swept down from the trees and disappeared just as quickly, swatting the Dark Knight away from the kender as if the warrior were a pesky gnat. The man went flying one direction, his sword another. His scream trailed off.

“THAT TINY BEING IS MY DESSERT!”

Thistleknot didn’t wait to see what would happen next. Risking a glance over his shoulder, he jumped up and ran directly into something warm and unyielding. It grunted. Tangletoe looked up past leather scale armor into the cold eyes of Khedriss Mennarling.

“Just who I wanted to bump into,” the troop leader said, knotting his fingers over the back of Thistleknot’s leather vest. “Your timing is perfect. I—”

“CHILDREN SHOULD ESCHEW AMUSING THEMSELVES WITH SHARP OBJECTS. THIS DANCE NO LONGER DELIGHTS ME. I WILL MAKE AN END.”

Gunnar oofed out air as an arrow buried itself in his chest. He staggered backward until he collided with the death machine, sat down hard, and sighed out his last breath.

“My friend,” choked out Mennarling, before regaining his martial composure. “I will kill you first, kender, and then the trickster and I will finish this travesty of a battle.”

“I WILL FINISH THIS!”

The being that dropped out of the tree and landed lightly despite his enormous frame was as big as his voice. Completely awed, an unusual emotion for a kender,

Thistleknot estimated the creature's height at somewhere around ten feet, possibly more. Thick, long brown and sorrel fur covered most of his body. Shorter hair highlighted his facial features, notably dark eyes, which gleamed with intelligence. His domed head was topped with two upstanding rounded ears. He carried a giant longbow made from a thick tree branch, with tremendously long arrows riding in a quiver made from bull hide. A club hung opposite the quiver, both dangling from a thick leather belt, the only clothing he wore.

"The boojum!" Thistleknot whispered loudly, as the Dark Knight closest to him turned and ran into the forest without a word, vanishing in the night.

"LET US SEE IF THIS COUNTERFEIT CAN SKIRMISH WITH THE AUTHENTIC," the monster said, hurting everyone's ears with his thunderous laughter.

"But you're putting up no weapon," protested the Solamnic Knight, trying not to breathe hard and looking particularly beleaguered in his unravelling hemp disguise. Mennarling, temporarily ignored and glad for the oversight, inched away from the monster.

" 'TIS YOU WHO NEEDS WEAPONS, NOT I." The monster reached out a finger and tapped the Solamnic Knight's outstretched sword. It wavered despite the young man's best efforts to hold it firmly in place. "COME, MAKE YOUR PLAY."

"Very well." The Solamnic Knight showed granite determination, making him appear much older than his years as he settled into a fighting stance. "Ready."

"I've got to help him!" Thistleknot muttered to himself. His feet scabbled forward, as a hand on his leather vest yanked him back. "Ooooofffff!"

"You've got to help *me*." Mennarling turned and dragged the kender toward the death machine, signaling to the remaining quartet of his squad with a wave of his sword. "This is our last chance to fulfill the mission. One exploding sphere remains—and if that doesn't work, there's always the kender."

"But—" Thistleknot began, before choking cut him off.

"All right, start loading."

Thistleknot was enlisted to help as the Knights righted the machine. Mennarling stood over him with threats. The kender was distracted, especially when he heard the Solamnic Knight's sword crunch against something, followed by a heavy grunt. He managed to spill quite a bit of the fuel before one of the Knights noticed, shoved him away, and added more, tamping the whole mess down the machine's maw.

Mennarling exhorted the Dark Knights. Because the wheels were broken, they were going to have to hold the cart up during firing. They swung the machine around and aimed at the Solamnic Knight and the real boojum, who were still skirmishing. Thistleknot didn't much like being forced to crouch beneath the barrel, helping to hold the metal tube aloft. The Dark Knight standing opposite him looked equally skeptical.

"I'd almost rather be inside," said the kender. "I can imagine what it feels like hurtling out of that thing—"

"Fire!" ordered Mennarling, touching flame to the hole in the top.

Thistleknot didn't know when he took off running or what prompted him to do so. The kender only knew that by the time the death weapon had sucked down the flame, coughed, hesitated a moment, and then exploded, he was already in full flight.

He tripped over something and sprawled, feet flying, as shrapnel whizzed by. The weave beneath his elbows looked familiar. Thistleknot turned, looked, and choked.

The Solamnic Knight lay in a pool of blood, his face shadowed by bruises and peaceful in death. Strings of hemp were clotted around a gaping wound in his chest. One hand still clutched the hilt of his precious sword, its blade now badly nicked and broken in two.

Kender don't cry as a rule, but Thistleknot Tangletoe thought his brave dead partner deserved some tears. He looked at the still-burning tree, hoping its brightness might help his eyes water, and squeezed them half-shut tightly. "We sure had great times," he sniffed. His friend had been a rare man, strong and gentle, with a sly sense of humor equal to his own. Considering everyone else the kender had met throughout his life had demanded his maps, taken him for granted, beaten him up, or just plain tried to ignore him, Thistleknot gave the Solamnic Knight his highest rating:

"Having adventures with you was really, really fun."

One teardrop dampened the corner of his right eye. He looked around, saw no sign of Mennarling (probably blown to bits) or the other Knights (ditto). No sign either of the real boojum, whom he would have liked to shred slowly. Shrugging, Thistleknot did one of the things kender are best at: He put sorrow behind him.

"There's no way I can take even a piece of that death weapon back to the Solamnic enclave," he mused, looking at the twisted metal. "It's too bad. I'd like to, it would be the honorable thing to do and all that. But it's all curled back on itself, like dying flower petals. I'd have to get another cart, and have someone help me hoist it on. That'd slow me down considerably. The Knight commander might just have to do with a description.

"Hey, that's it! I can make a drawing—just like a map. I can present the Solamnic with a map of the death machine!" He turned back to the Knight's body, coaxing forth another sorrowful sniff. "I promise you that I'll finish our assignment and tell everybody a wonderful story of your death. Your Lord Dulth-what's-'is-name will *really* honor your memory after I'm done." He frowned, chewing on his lip. "Come to think of it, I'd better take something of yours back so they know I'm telling the truth."

Thistleknot stepped over to where the Knight's outflung fist still gripped his weapon. Grasping the crosspiece, he pulled once, then again. Even in death, the young man wouldn't (or couldn't) abandon his grandfather's legacy. His fingers remained firmly locked about the hilt.

"And he called *me* stubborn," the kender muttered, yanking again. "Ulp!"

Something snatched him by the back of the vest. Thistleknot found himself confronting the grinning visage of the boojum. "Uh, hello," he managed without too much tremble in his voice. "My name's Thistleknot Tangletoe. What's yours?"

"Told you I'd leave you for last," laughed the boojum in a voice that was oddly normal. "Didn't I, friend Knight?"

"Dessert was your word precisely," a familiar voice answered. "Pardon me if I say so, but I don't know how you abide such furry covering. I may have to drown myself in healing muds for a tenday before I wash away the irritation from that carpet."

Thistleknot tried to crane his head over his shoulder. "But you . . . you're—"

"Sincerely dead," stated the Solamnic Knight, sitting up and picking loose hemp from his armor, "to which deception I owe gratitude to my friend boojum, a stage natural." He reached behind a fallen log to replace the broken sword reverently with his own, antique whole one.

“I followed a traveling theatrical troupe around for a while,” the monster said deprecatingly, “and studied their techniques.” He had a slight lisp, caused, Tangletoe speculated, by his overlong canines. “Over time, I’ve practiced and improved upon them.”

The kender squirmed. “Oh, pardon. I forgot,” said the furry being, setting Thistleknot gently on the ground. “By the way, the expression on your face when you thought your friend here was dead was . . . ah . . . truly dramatic. I only wish I could master the expression of such delicate emotions. Especially the moment when you tried to squeeze out that tear. Brilliant. It would make inspired stagecraft.”

“That’s one I’ll treasure long,” the Knight murmured. “Imagine, a kender crying! And over me!”

Thistleknot felt anger rise from the tips of his toes to the ends of his pointed ears. “You tricked me!”

“Ah, but ‘twasn’t a hurtful tricking,” consoled the boojum.

“Certes, only good fun between friends,” stated the Knight, rising to peel off his “wound” and buffing where it had been stuck. “This prevarication allowed me an excellent retribution for your insisting on being the bait, while I was made to suffer in costume.” He patted the boojum on the arm. “Fortunately, this noble beast and I chanced to cross paths and made friends, and the rest is . . . well, you know the rest.”

Thistleknot glared at him unforgivingly.

“Kender, put away your wounded pride,” said the Solamnic Knight. “Here stands another one such as we. Remember you that ambitious plan that we discussed over our campfire nary a week gone by?”

“The one about sneaking into the Dragon Highlord’s library and changing all his war maps for new ones with little mistakes dropped into them?”

“No, the one where . . . never mind. The point, little friend, is that if we join with the boojum, we can, in the future, venture much more complicated sorties.”

The boojum beamed proudly. Thistleknot beamed back, warming up to the fellow.

“Now the three of us can take the remains of the death machine back to my Lord Dulthan. On the way, we can plot our next operation.” The Knight bowed his head respectfully toward the boojum. “That is, if you are so inclined, friend boojum.”

“I must admit I did enjoy myself tonight,” said the grinning monster. “Let us do as you say. But first we must adjourn to my cave for some delicious tea and dessert.”

“Dessert?” asked a worried Thistleknot. “But what about . . . the legends? The legends say boojums eat kender for dessert.”

“Never,” the boojum shuddered. “Although some kender do make good appetizers.”

“Hold,” the Knight said thoughtfully. “Think you this might be a gnome-wrought machine? If so, it functioned extremely well.”

“There’s some writing on the big part,” Tangletoe stated. “I found it when . . . hey, wait for me!”

Monster and Solamnic sprinted for the ruined weapon, which lay in the area fitfully lit by the still-burning tree. The boojum hefted the back end of the barrel and rotated it with help from the curly-haired human as the kender scampered up.

“Ah, there it is.” The legendary being squinted at the script. “‘Made by A Diddlethompermarium, Gnome Inventor Extraordinaire.’ ” The boojum stopped in

surprise, nearly dropping the cannon.

Thistleknot laughed with delight as the Knight finished the memorial in an awed voice.

“Popcorn Popper. Patent pending.”