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The Inn of the Hairy Toad

by Mike Resnick

1.

Cretin the Beggar had just finished his nightly quart of ale at the Inn of the Hairy Toad, that gathering place of the outcasts, the misfits, and the flatulent of ancient Agabenzzar. He was swaying down the Street of the Slightly Overweight Courtesans, his scrawny body veering from one dimly-lit hostelry to another, when there was a distant roll of drums, followed by a flash of lightning that struck the cobbled pavement just in front of his feet. This was followed in quick succession by a fanfare of trumpets, a clap of thunder, and the sudden appearance of an enormous, tentacled, fire-breathing monster of a greenish hue somewhere between emerald and shamrock, possessing a skin texture of reprocessed ambergris.

"Cretin the Conqueror, Abuser of the Meek, Defiler of the Fairest Flowers of Agabenzzar, Slaughterer of the Rightful Heir to the Throne, prepare to die!"

"Oh, shit!" muttered Cretin. "Not again."

"Again?" thundered the monster, momentarily dousing his flame to aid in his articulation. "What do you mean, mortal?"

"Just a minute," said Cretin, fumbling through his coin pouch. "I've got it here somewhere, I know I do. Ahhh," he added with a smile, withdrawing a seven-sided coin and holding it aloft.

"What's that supposed to be?" asked the monster, staring at it curiously. At last he reached out a tentacle, took the coin from Cretin's hand, and ate it.

"Aren't you an incubus?" asked Cretin.

"I am a Djinn of the Fourth Order," said the monster, not without a trace of pride.

"Oh. Well. That explains it." Cretin rummaged through his pouch again and withdrew a small opal with a star-shaped flaw.

"_Arrgh!_" cried the Djinn, wincing and dripping huge gobs of saliva on the street.

"Much better," said Cretin. "I could have sworn you were an incubus, though. It must be the fangs." He paused. "You're from Nesbudanchik, right?"

The Djinn nodded.

"Damned Southerner!" snorted Cretin. "Never did learn the language. You want Krotan, the Usurper King of Agabenzzar."

"Krotan?" repeated the Djinn, still cowering. "Are you quite sure?"

"Quite," said Cretin. "You may have noticed that your presence, while momentarily startling, was not altogether unexpected. You're the fifth one, and it's got to stop! Look at me! Just look at me!"

"I see nothing unusual," said the Djinn, scrutinizing him with a practiced eye.

"You see nothing at all! No silks, no jewels, no servants! You see Cretin the Beggar. But it wasn't always thus: two years ago I was Cretin the Moneylender, who wouldn't be caught dead in so unsavory a public house as the Inn of the Hairy Toad. I even had an account at the Place of the Fatted Swine."

"What happened?" asked the Djinn, interested in spite of himself.

"Nesbudanchik happened, that's what! That illiterate charlatan with his malignant desires and his stupid accent happened!"

"And the great wizard took your fortune?" suggested the Djinn.

"No!" snapped Cretin impatiently. "My own wizard took it for charms and spells to ward all you creatures off. I'll be in debt to him for the next thirty years, thanks to your idiot master!" He glared at the monster. "Now, what are you going to do about it?"

"Me?" said the Djinn, startled.

"Who else?" said Cretin. "Any chance of your going back and killing Nesbudanchik?"

"Kill the Master of Darkness?" said the Djinn, blanching a pale green.

"All right," said Cretin. "There's an alternative."

"Thank Lucifer!" said the Djinn fervently.

"If you'll promise not to molest me, I'll put in with you and help you destroy Krotan."

"But why?" asked the Djinn. "You've never even met him."

"What difference does that make?" said Cretin. "It's the only way I'm ever going to get any peace and quiet until your master learns to enunciate properly."

"I don't know," said the Djinn thoughtfully.

"As long as I possess the mystic opal you can't kill me," said Cretin. "Now, what will happen if you can't kill Krotan either?"

"The bottle!" gasped the Djinn. "He'll put me back in the bottle!"

"Right."

"I can't go back there!" said the Djinn. Suddenly he looked up fearfully at the sky. _"I'm not saying it isn't comfortable!"_ he yelled at the top of his voice. "Hope he was listening," he added confidentially to Cretin. "Lucifer knows, he feeds me well, and I have all the comforts of home. But I get so ... so _claustrophobic_, if you know what I mean."

"Then we have a deal?" asked Cretin.

"We have a deal," said the Djinn. He paused for a long moment. "What do we do now?"

"Krotan has doubtless surrounded himself with some pretty powerful sorcerers," said Cretin, "or else he would long since have been assassinated. I think we'd better pay a visit to my own wizard for some charms and spells and the like." He turned to the Djinn. "You don't happen to have any money with you, do you?"

"Of course not."

"Then we'll just have to depend upon his generosity," said Cretin grimly.

"Most of the wizards I know would gladly make a gift of a magical device or two if by so doing they could eradicate a villain like Krotan," said the Djinn.

"You haven't met Pierpont" said Cretin.

"Pierpont?"

"My wizard. And while we're on the subject of names, what shall I call you?"

"I am Kakkab Komir Khastu, Grand Djinn of the Fourth Order."

"I'd hate to holler for help on the spur of the moment," remarked Cretin. "Haven't you got another name, or a nickname of something?"

The Djinn lowered his massive head in thought. "To tell the truth," he said at last, "I've always favored something strong and romantic, like Steeljaw."

"Steeljaw!" snorted Cretin. "What sort of a name is that for a Djinn?"

Cretin instantly found himself fifteen feet above the ground, grasped firmly in two iron-thewed tentacles.

"What's wrong with Steeljaw?" bellowed the Djinn, flames and noxious clouds of smoke bursting forth from his gaping mouth.

"Now that I think of it, Steeljaw, there's not a thing wrong with it," squeaked Cretin. "Some of my best friends are called Steeljaw. It has a certain gossamer gaiety to it."

"Well," said Steeljaw the Djinn, setting Cretin back on the cobbled stones, "that's settled. Now let's hunt up this wizard of yours."

"He dwells in a cave on the side of a mountain overlooking the Fields of Insincere Sorrow, just beyond the River of Mild Despair," answered Cretin.

"How do we get there?"

"It's half a day's march to the northwest," said Cretin. He paused and stared thoughtfully at Steeljaw. "Unless you can magically transport us there."

"I can magically transport me there," said Steeljaw. "You I'm not so sure about."

"It wouldn't work," said Cretin. "He doesn't know who you are. Turn around, please."

The Djinn did so.

"No wings, either," observed Cretin.

"I shed them seven or eight eons ago," said Steeljaw apologetically. "I got so cramped in that damned bottle..."

"Then I guess we walk," said Cretin, setting out. "Perhaps it's for the best. The fresh air will do me good, and it's not a wise idea to deal with Pierpont when you're anything other than totally sober."

And so, side by side, the two adventurers set off down the long, winding Avenue of Occasional Despair, past the temple of Large-Bosomed Goddesses, and into the fields north of the city. Turning slightly westward, they reached the River of Mild Despair after about four hours' hard march.

Cretin waded into the shallows, and a moment later his quick, nimble hands had thrown four fish up onto the shore.

"Start a fire," he instructed the Djinn. "We'll cook the fish and rest for a spell before we climb the mountain."

"We have more important things to do than fill our stomachs!" growled Steeljaw.

"When did you last eat?" asked Cretin.

"About twelve hundred years ago."

"That's a long time," observed Cretin. "If fortune smiles upon us in our dealings with Pierpont, we're not going to have any spare time for eating afterward. And while I implore you not to take it personally, it is my conclusion that when you starve with a twelve-foot Djinn, the Djinn starves last."

Steeljaw glared balefully at him for a moment, then shrugged and breathed onto a dead limb, thereby causing a fire of truly monumental proportions.

An hour later, well-fed and rested, Cretin and Steeljaw began the treacherous ascent up the mountain, and before too much more time had elapsed, they stood at the entrance to Pierpont's cave.

Inside was a vast accumulation of the standard wizardly paraphernalia: bats' wings, newts' eyes, foul-smelling herbs and fouler-smelling chemicals, ancient grimoires, voodoo dolls, and an enormous caldron. On a rock outcropping was an Eternal Candle, which had been burning for the better part of ten centuries. A crystal ball, which displayed an endless parade of Ann Rutherford movies, lay ignored in a corner, right next to a broken monocle. Rats and snakes scurried hither and thither, chased about the cave by an innocuous-looking guinea pig. Covering almost all of the back wall was a magical mirror which was currently showing stock market quotations from August 3, 1957.

A wizened old man, his beard almost touching the floor, wearing a kaftan of spun copper and a pointed alchemist's hat embroidered with the symbols of the zodiac, sat at a roll-top desk, engrossed in mathematical equations which he was scrawling with a piece of burnt straw on a dog-eared piece of parchment.

"Ahem," said Cretin.

Pierpont looked up and glared at his two visitors.

"Do you realize," he thundered, "that if we were alive 7,031 years from now, I could buy Xerox at eight and a quarter?"

"Greetings, Great Wizard," said Steeljaw.

"And 23 years after that, I could sell at one hundred fourteen and put it all into eighteen percent Certificates of Deposit?"

"Sir..." said Cretin.

"Oh, it's an unfair world! Silicon R&D stocks are selling a four-to-one Price Earnings ratios, and everyone I know wears fur skirts and carries broadswords! Sit down, Cretin, don't just stand there slack-jawed and who is your strange-looking companion and God what I wouldn't give for a seat on the Amex!"

"I beg your pardon," said Cretin.

"Sit down, sit down," said Pierpont irritably. "So old Nesbudanchik's up to his old tricks again, eh?"

"Indeed, O Great and All-Powerful Pierpont."

"A simple Pierpont will suffice," said the wizard. He paused. "I don't suppose either of you brought along a shaker of martinis."

"Martinis, Great One?" said Cretin.

"No, of course not," muttered Pierpont. He slapped at a snake that had been slithering along his desk.

"Well, what'll it be this time, Cretin? Need a charm to send this creature back to the Netherworld?"

Steeljaw hissed in fear, and Cretin laid a reassuring hand on one of his tentacles. "No, Lord of the Black Arts. This creature is my ally."

"With allies like that, who needs enemies?" said Pierpont. He laughed uproariously, then scribbled the line down for future use. "So, what can I do for you and your ally?"

"We have decided to kill Krotan the Conqueror," said Cretin.

"Ah!" cried Pierpont, rubbing his hands in glee. "Murder One! Excellent!"

"Then you approve?" asked Cretin.

"Of course. I was wondering how long it would take you to hit upon the idea."

"Then possibly, Great Wizard, you will freely supply us with those charms and spells that we may need to accomplish our noble purpose," said Steeljaw hopefully.

"You have an excellent sense of humor, Djinn," said Pierpont without smiling. He turned to Cretin. "You will need three things to destroy Krotan. In exchange, I will extract three tributes."

"What will we need?" asked Cretin.

"First, you will need a spell to turn the Djinn into a human being, lest his presence give forewarning to Krotan's protectors. Second, you will need a charm to entice Krotan to the Inn of the Hairy Toad. And

third, you will need a magical scimitar with which to dispatch him."

"Why the Inn of the Hairy Toad?" asked Cretin curiously. "Does your magic only work there?"

"Of course not," said Pierpont disdainfully. "But I purchased the Inn of the Hairy Toad some years back as a hedge against inflation, and the publicity would be good for business."

"And just what must we do in exchange for your aid?" asked Steeljaw.

"Twenty miles due east of where we stand is the Valley of the Deeply Malcontented Ogres," said Pierpont. "Only one of them remains -- the others were so discontented that they all left years ago -- and around his neck he wears a ruby pendant of unearthly design. For my first tribute, you will bring me that pendant."

"And your other two tributes?" asked Cretin warily.

"They'll be a little more difficult," said Pierpont with a smile. "Let's see if you survive this one and then we'll talk about them. However, as a show of good will, I shall make a down payment here and now."

And with that, he mumbled a quick spell and traced a trio of mystic signs in the air. Immediately there was a puff of smoke, and in place of the Djinn stood a huge, bearded warrior, garbed in leather and furs, and carrying a sword that a normal man could barely lift.

"Steeljaw?" said Cretin tentatively.

"Aye," rumbled a deep voice.

"How do you feel?" asked Cretin.

"Virile and vigorous," said Steeljaw, striding around the room and trying out his muscular limbs. "Mostly virile."

"Then I suspect we'd best get on with our quest," suggested Cretin, heading toward the cave's entrance. He stopped abruptly at a shriek from Pierpont, who was staring at the mirror again.

"Atlantic Richfield just split three-for-one!" screamed the old wizard. "And nobody in this godforsaken world even knows what oil is! Begone with you! _Begone!_"

2.

The two adventurers quickly took their leave of the old wizard and began walking toward the east. Steeljaw also ran, hopped, skipped and jumped, trying to get used to his powerful new body, and before too many hours had elapsed they stood on a barren hill overlooking the fabled Valley of the Deeply Malcontented Ogres. It was perhaps two miles in diameter, dissected by a number of narrow winding streams, and totally covered by a lush, dense forest.

"Anybody home?" yelled Cretin from his vantage point above the city.

There was no answer, nor had he really expected one. With a sigh, he withdrew his small, almost delicate sword from its sheath and began walking down the sloping valley wall to the forest, followed by Steeljaw, who kept casting apprehensive glances to either side and behind him.

They had gone perhaps forty paces into the forest when a hideous voice thundered out at them:

"Who is it that invades my domain?"

"Two travelers from afar," replied Cretin, trying to determine the direction from which the voice had come. "We are weary from our wanderings and seek lodgings for the night."

"What are you talking about, lodgings for the night?" whispered Steeljaw disgustedly.

"It was the first thing that popped into my head," said Cretin.

"Well, it's the stupidest thing I ever heard!" hissed Steeljaw. "One more blunder like that and -- "

He abruptly fell silent, for suddenly, standing not thirty feet distant, was the ogre. He was a good fifteen feet tall, horribly misshapen, cock-eyed, with a head of wild purple hair and teeth two inches long. Hanging from his neck was a ruby pendant.

"Outsiders may not trespass in my forest!" bellowed the ogre. "The penalty is death!"

"Right you are," said Cretin hastily. "I was just telling my companion here how inconsiderate we were being, coming without an invitation. A thousand pardons, my lord. We'll just turn around and go right back the way we entered."

The ogre roared and glared at them.

"Absolutely," said Cretin. He pulled a small coin out of his pouch and tossed it on the ground at the ogre's feet. "For your trouble."

The ogre roared again and raced with amazing swiftness to a point that blocked their means of egress from the forest. He jumped up and down in a lumbering fashion, grinning evilly.

"Why, what a gorgeous pendant that is!" exclaimed Cretin, indicating the ruby object of Pierpont's desire. "I don't suppose you'd care to sell it?"

The ogre ripped up a tree by its roots and threw it clear to the other end of the forest.

"No, I didn't think so," said Cretin. "Well, then, would you consider a trade?"

"Yum!" said the ogre, licking his thick lips.

"That's a very ominous and portentous _yum_," said Steeljaw nervously.

"Yum!" repeated the ogre. "Fresh meat tonight!"

"How thoughtful of you," said Cretin. "But we really can't stay. Could you point out the nearest road to Agabenzzar?"

The ogre pulled a small tree out of the ground and, smiling, broke it in two across his chest.

"Very impressive," said Cretin, backing away slowly. "An unrivalled display of physical prowess."

"You know," said Steeljaw regretfully, "now that I come to think of it, it actually wasn't such a bad bottle. I mean, I had silken blankets, and I was well fed, and -- "

"Crunch crunch!" said the ogre, making biting motions with his jaws.

"I've had about enough of this!" yelled Cretin. "If it's a fight you're looking for, it's a fight you'll get." He turned to his companion. "Go get him, Steeljaw!"

"Me?" said Steeljaw, aghast at the thought.

"You're a Djinn, aren't you?" said Cretin confidently.

"Not anymore I'm not."

"You mean you haven't any magical powers at all?"

"None."

"You mean I've been saying all these things to an ogre, and you're not a Djinn and that all we've got between us is a pair of swords?"

"And our wits," added Steeljaw. "Don't forget our wits."

"Forget them? I think we've taken leave of them!" Cretin paused, examining the ogre. "What are ogres allergic to?"

"Nothing," said Steeljaw.

"I don't suppose they're especially vulnerable in the Achilles tendon, or anything like that?" suggested Cretin.

"No," said his companion glumly.

Cretin frowned. "The Sign of the Demipolytetrahedron won't fend them off?"

Steeljaw shook his head.

"I guess that leaves our wits," said Cretin with a sigh.

"Some weapon," muttered Steeljaw, watching the ogre as he ripped several saplings out of the ground.

Finally the ogre tired of defoliating the forest and cast his eyes once again upon the two adventurers. He spanned the gap between them with one giant stride, leaned down, and picked Cretin up in his left hand.

"Appetizer," he announced. "Your friend is the main course." He opened his mouth wide.

"I suppose there's nothing to do but face my death like a man," said Cretin. "I want you to know that I bear you no malice. You're not responsible for your nature, and I fully understand that food is more important to an ogre than female companionship."

The ogre's mouth snapped shut, missing Cretin's head by the barest fraction of an inch.

"Explain," demanded the ogre.

"I personally know at least half a dozen rather large ladies who would like nothing better than to make the acquaintance of a superb physical specimen like yourself," said Cretin hurriedly, trying to ignore the rush of foul breath that whipped through his hair. "And I foolishly thought that after all these years of solitude ... but no, I can see that you're a totally self-reliant type, so you might as well gobble me up and get it over with."

"Half a dozen?" said the ogre, sitting down heavily and loosening his grip on Cretin.

"Corpulent beyond all imagining," answered Cretin. "And while I realize that you seek nothing but love and tenderness and understanding, there is the added advantage that when you tire of them, they'll make far better eating than my own undernourished self."

"It's been a long time," said the ogre, smoothing his ragged purple hair with his free hand.

"Understand," said Cretin, "I'm not promising you all six of them. One or two may already have been sold into loveless marriages with puny little men who look not unlike this lout here." He gestured toward Steeljaw.

"But some of them are available?" asked the ogre.

"I guarantee it."

"Plump, you say?"

"They make the moon itself look oblong."

"If I let you go, how do I know you'll bring them back?" demanded the ogre.

"You cut me to the quick!" said Cretin. "If there's any doubt in your mind, maybe we'd better call the whole thing off. You can just eat me and my companion and go back to living alone, isolated from all female compassion, isolated from the tender yet erotic touch of a woman, isolated from -- "

"All right!" bellowed the ogre.

"Fine," said Cretin. "Now, I'll have numerous arrangements to make: I'll have to ship them here from all the far exotic climes where they reside, I'll have to feed them the whole time, I may have to pay off an occasional disgruntled lover..."

"No money," said the ogre firmly.

"Oh, I have money enough of my own," said Cretin. "But I shall have to spend a considerable amount of it to bring these women back here to you. What guarantee have I that you'll still be waiting?"

"Where would I go?" asked the ogre blankly.

"I don't know," said Cretin. "Where did all the other ogres go? No, I'll need some token of good will on your part, some symbolic sign that you'll remain here until I return."

"I have no money," said the ogre.

"A jeweled dagger, perhaps?" suggested Cretin. "Or possibly an ancient book in a rare and delicate binding?"

"Neither," was the unhappy answer.

"Then I'm afraid you'll simply have to eat me," said Cretin sadly. "I certainly don't envy you chewing on all the gristle."

"Wait!" said the ogre. "How about my pendant?"

"Now why didn't I think of that?" exclaimed Cretin. He paused. "But no, on further consideration, I think not. It's such a small piece. I had in mind something more substantial."

"What's the matter with my pendant?" demanded the ogre ominously. "You liked it well enough a few minutes ago."

"As a trinket, a bauble to give to an evening's casual acquaintance," said Cretin. "But as your forfeit in a

solemn agreement ... well, I just don't know."

"You'll take it," snarled the gullet, "or it's down the gullet with you!"

"You absolutely insist?"

"I do!"

Cretin sighed. "Then I have no choice but to accept." He took the pendant from the ogre and tucked it in his coin pouch.

"Blondes," said the ogre.

"What about blondes?" asked Cretin.

"I like them."

"Consider it done."

"Lots of them," said the ogre.

"Then I haven't any time to waste, have I?" said Cretin.

He and Steeljaw left the forest unmolested. Their last glimpse of the ogre showed him to be plucking the whiskers from his chin, one by one.

"Well, nobody ever said they were smart," commented Steeljaw as they began the trek back to the wizard's cave.

"I'd guess that he is about to pass from Deeply Malcontented to Seriously Displeased," replied Cretin. "By the way, I hope you'll be of more help on our next quest."

"Can I help it if appetizers come before main courses?" snapped Steeljaw, as if that settled the matter.

They walked the remaining distance in silence.

3.

Pierpont was sitting at his desk when they arrived, fuming over not being able to sell Polaroid short at eighty-three. He motioned them to sit down, waited until the mirror flashed the latest quotations on tax-exempt bonds, and then turned to them.

"Have you got the pendant?"

Cretin produced it.

"Excellent, excellent," said Pierpont, holding the piece up to the light. "I've always been partial to precious stones. Rubies, emeralds, diamonds -- that's where the future is. Gold's just too damned volatile." He suddenly lost interest in the pendant and tossed it carelessly to the floor, where it startled the guinea pig just as the little animal was about to catch one of the snakes. "Well, gentlemen, are you ready for your next assignment?"

"I suppose so," said Cretin without much enthusiasm.

"Good. For your next tribute, I require the unbroken egg of a roc." He paused. "Oh, and you might bring a skillet and a little butter, too."

As they left the cave, Steeljaw turned to Cretin. "Where do rocs keep their eggs?"

"Atop the highest mountains."

"How big are they?"

"The rocs, the eggs, or the mountains?"

"The rocs."

"Big enough to carry a man off to their nests," answered Cretin.

Steeljaw considered this for a moment, then said: "Are you absolutely sure we can't kill Krotan without your wizard's help?"

"To be perfectly honest with you," replied Cretin, "I'm not totally convinced that we can kill him even with Pierpont's help."

"Then I guess we'd better hunt up a likely mountain," said Steeljaw with a sigh.

"And quickly," added Cretin. "The time element is working against us."

"In what way?"

"Sooner or later even an idiot like Nesbudanchik is going to notice that you're missing," explained Cretin patiently. "And when he does, the very first thing he's going to do is send out a few demons of various shapes and sizes to bring you back."

"Let's find that mountain!" said Steeljaw fervently.

They descended to the plain and headed toward a mountain range about 25 miles to the west, against which Pierpont's own mountain appeared to be but a small foothill. As they walked, a dark shadow passed over them and vanished an instant later. This phenomenon was repeated twice more before Cretin looked up.

"We're in luck!" he cried, pointing toward a large bird that was circling above them.

"A roc!" exclaimed Steeljaw, drawing his broadsword.

"And a hungry one at that," noted Cretin. "See? He's preparing to swoop down upon us. Put your sword away!"

"Why?" demanded Steeljaw.

"Because the quickest way to get to his nest is to let him carry one of us there."

"And how will we get back down?" asked Steeljaw.

"One thing at a time," said Cretin. "The first thing is getting there." He paused. "You'll agree that there's no sense in both of us risking our lives?"

"What are you getting at?" demanded Steeljaw warily.

"Simply that we should stand a little farther apart so he can't grab us both." The roc began diving down toward them. "Don't give it a moment's thought," said Cretin, walking to the protection of a huge tree. "I'll be standing over here sharing the danger with you every second."

Steeljaw looked up, saw the giant bird bearing down upon them, and raced toward Cretin and the tree. The movement caught the roc's attention, and an instant later Steeljaw found himself fifty feet in the air, his sword arm pinned against his side.

"Remember not to break the egg!" shouted Cretin before they were out of earshot.

The roc soared higher and higher, riding the dizzying wind currents and moving sideways to the west. After a chilling twenty minutes that left him convinced that he could happily go another twelve centuries without eating, Steeljaw looked down and saw that they were approaching an enormous nest filled with eggs, each about the size of a large man's torso. He was rudely deposited among them and left there as the roc flew off again.

Gingerly he clambered over the eggs and looked over the side of the nest, uttering a little whimper as his eyes studied the earth some two miles below him. He examined the sides of the mountain for paths, but found none. Hopeful that there might be unseen water below, he pushed one of the eggs over the side and whimpered again when it landed with a loud and unpleasant *_splat!* half a minute later.

"Nesbudanchik!" he hollered into the wind. "I'm ready to come home now! I momentarily lost my ethical compass, but now I see the error of my ways!" He waited for a few minutes, but nothing happened. "Nesbudanchik, you incredibly inept chowderhead, get me the hell out of here!" He seemed to hear a ghostly chuckling sound carried on the wind.

"Pierpont!" he screamed. "I'd be willing to swear eternal fealty to anyone who gets me out of this mess!"

He looked for a sign that his offer had been heard, but none appeared.

At least, not for a moment. Then he saw the roc returning, obviously attracted by his cries. He was quite prepared to be carried back to earth and let Cretin try his own luck at getting an egg out of the nest, but he realized at the last instant that the roc wasn't coming to transport him, but to devour him.

He ducked, and the huge beak of the giant bird broke through the inch-thick shell of one of the eggs, flooding the nest with yolk and albumen. Steeljaw struck back wildly with his broadsword, and as the battle continued, neither antagonist doing any apparent harm to the other, three more eggs broke and the slippery fluid began seeping through to the jutting rock on which the nest was perilously perched.

The roc lowered itself to the edge of the nest to get a better angle, and as it did so, everything -- the nest, the eggs, Steeljaw, and the roc -- suddenly began sliding down the mountain.

Steeljaw and the roc screamed simultaneously. The roc flew straight up into the air and hovered, and the huge warrior, half-immersed in egg yolk, grabbed onto the inner side of the nest and hung on for dear life. The nest careened from ledge to ledge and continued racing down the side of the mountain at a breakneck pace, its coating of slime almost eliminating all friction as it zigged and zagged its way ever downward.

The roc took off in hot pursuit, but was soon outdistanced. Steeljaw kept trying to stand up preparatory to jumping out, but his feet could get no traction. About ten minutes into his unlikely ride he realized that only one egg remained intact, and he immediately adjusted his position as best he could to protect it from any sudden twists or turns. In another three or four minutes he noticed that his direction had become horizontal rather than near-vertical, and in another few seconds the nest skidded to a stop.

Steeljaw got shakily to his feet, dragged himself out of the nest, and picked up the still-unbroken egg. Behind him was the mountain, before him spread a lush green field -- and sitting beneath a tree not thirty yards away was Cretin, his legs crossed, contentedly munching a ripe apple.

"Well done, my comrade at arms!" he said between bites. "I thought you'd take at least a day or two, and possibly even a week, and yet here you are, not an hour since your somewhat abrupt departure. And not only did you accomplish our second task, but I have the feeling that you've invented a new sport which has an enormous profit potential once I can work out the details. Well done, indeed!"

Steeljaw choked on his words for a moment. "I can't believe my eyes!" he sputtered at last. "You should be fleeing for your life, and yet here you sit, feeding your face and acting as if nothing had happened!"

"I must confess that I have given serious consideration to fleeing for my life for the past twenty or thirty seconds," said Cretin, taking another bite of the apple, "and I have come to the unhappy conclusion that it wouldn't do any good at all."

"Ah!" said Steeljaw, glowering at him. "Then you admit that I'm a better man than you!"

"It's not you I was considering fleeing from," said Cretin. "It's the egg's mother."

"The egg's _what_?"

"Its mother," repeated Cretin, gesturing to the enormous roc descending toward them. "She'll be here in another few seconds."

"Then why don't you draw your sword?" demanded Steeljaw as he quickly unsheathed his own.

"She's not mad at _me_," explained Cretin. "After all, _I'm_ not the one who invaded her domicile and stole her egg."

Steeljaw uttered a whine, a curse, a whimper, a snarl, and a moan in blindingly quick succession, and prepared to meet the roc's attack. As he did so, Cretin stood up, pulled his delicate sword out of its sheath, leaned back, and hurled it at the roc, which gurgled once as the blade pierced its jugular and then fell to the ground, dead.

"That was some marksmanship!" said Steeljaw admiringly. "There's more to you than meets the eye, little man."

"Words that are repeated every night in the House of the Indelicately Inclined Maidens," replied Cretin, walking over to the roc, placing his foot against its neck, and withdrawing his weapon.

"Make sport of me if you will," said Steeljaw, "but I am deeply touched by the friendship that caused you to come to my aid in this dark moment of truth."

"You know," said Cretin thoughtfully, "I suppose it was partially friendship that prompted my actions, at that."

"Partially?"

"Well, I certainly had no intention of carrying the egg all the way back by myself."

4.

The two adventurers arrived back at their home base a full day later, panting and groaning under the weight of the roc's egg. Pierpont had switched off the mirror and was engaged in drawing up technical analysis graphs for the transportation industry.

"My egg!" he cried as his gaze fell on Cretin and Steeljaw. "Better and better! Better and better! Only one tribute to go, and then you'll be free to commit the basest and blackest of all human crimes -- or at

least those not involving the S.E.C. Are you ready to see the life fade from Krotan's bulging eyes and watch his protruding tongue turn purple as you twist his throat, pull out his intestines, and behead him?"

"All at once?" asked Steeljaw, looking slightly queasy.

"I'm speaking figuratively, of course," said Pierpont. "In point of fact, you'll be lucky to escape with your lives."

"Then why in Lucifer's name are we going off on all these asinine quests for you?" demanded Steeljaw.

"Because without my help, you'd probably be killed the moment you entered the city limits," answered Pierpont, throwing a rat off one of his graphs. "But if you feel any trepidation about your dealings with me, you have only to return the roc's egg and the ogre's pendant and I'll gladly transform you back into a Djinn, complete with foul breath and a poor complexion."

"Great Wizard, my companion meant no offense," interjected Cretin hastily. "We are yours to command. Merely lay out our third tribute and we'll be on our way."

"There speaks the voice of reason," said Pierpont. "No sense arguing now that you've come this far. Very well, then. For your third tribute, I set you out this simple task: bring me a single fruit from the Tree of Irrelevance."

"And where may this tree be found?" asked Cretin.

"It is the tallest tree in the Forest of Unexceptional Fantasies," said the old wizard. "Just a good stretch of the legs."

"That all depends on whose legs you're talking about," said Cretin. "It's forty miles away!"

"Penn Central declares bankruptcy and you complain to me of mild discomfort?" bellowed Pierpont. "Off with you, before I turn you into food for my pets!"

He made a quick gesture in the air and suddenly there was a brief cloudburst within the cave. Cretin and Steeljaw hastily retreated and swapped lies about their sexual exploits for the rest of the day. They walked in through the uneventful night, and daybreak found them striding through the depths of the Forest of Unexceptional Fantasies. Before long they came to an enormous fruit-bearing tree.

"Nothing to it," said Steeljaw with a smile. He walked forward and reached out for a small, ripe, pomegranate-like fruit -- and a thorny branch slapped his hand.

"Damn!" said Steeljaw, holding his bleeding hand to his lips. "I knew there was a catch to it!"

"Who seeks the fruit of the Tree of Irrelevance?" asked the tree in a high, lisping voice.

"My name is Cretin the Beggar, Lord Tree," said Cretin, stepping forward. "This is my companion, known, for reasons I have not as yet been able to fathom, as Steeljaw. We are tired and hungry and would be forever grateful for a piece of your fruit."

"No doubt you would," cackled the tree. "No doubt you would. By the way, did you know that a lion can run one hundred yards in 3.18 seconds, but requires 92.3 seconds to run half a mile?"

"I must admit I didn't know," said Cretin.

"Hah! I thought not!" said the tree smugly. "Or that there is no First Cause in the set of all negative integers?"

"No, my Lord Tree," said Cretin.

"Not very bright, are you?" snickered the tree. "How about the molecular weight of hydrogen selenide?"

"How about it?" asked Steeljaw.

"Eighty-one!" said the tree triumphantly. "So there!"

"Lord Tree," said Cretin, "might we possibly get back to the subject of the fruit?"

"If we must," sighed the tree. "Name a fruit that begins with the letter 'Q'."

"Must I?" asked Cretin.

"Absolutely."

"I can't," he said after some thought.

"The quince!" cried the tree happily. "What do you think of that?"

"I must confess that I am too weak from hunger to think of it at all," said Cretin, dropping to his knees and clutching his belly in a grandly theatrical gesture. "If you will let me partake of but a single one of your fruits, I might then be able to converse with you on a more satisfactory level."

"Not a chance -- which, incidentally, can be used as a noun, a verb, or an adjective."

"But why not?"

"Because you have not yet answered a single one of my questions correctly," explained the tree impatiently. "After all, fair is fair."

"You mean all we have to do is answer one of your riddles and you will give us the fruit?" asked Cretin.

"Riddles? _Riddles?_" whined the tree. "These are factual questions with factual answers. I do not indulge in trickery or word games, my good man!"

"Please accept my apologies," said Cretin.

"Well, all right," sniffed the tree. "This one time."

"Are you ready?" asked the tree.

"Quite."

"What is the difference between a sidereal day and a solar day?"

"I haven't the slightest idea," admitted Cretin.

"Four minutes," gloated the tree. "Name the only carbohydrate beginning with the letter 'X'."

"I can't," said Cretin with a growing sense of futility.

"Hah! Xylone. Hah!" said the tree. "Poor little man. Are you feeling sorry for yourself? Let me ask you an easy one: how many light years separate us from Proxima Centauri -- which, for your information, happens to be our nearest neighboring star?"

"I don't even know what a light year is."

"The distance light travels in a year, you ninny!" gloated the tree. "And the answer is four-point-three."

"I don't suppose you'd let me ask you a question or two?" suggested Cretin.

"Of course not," answered the tree prissily. "Rules of the game, you know."

"And you always obey the rules of the game?" asked Cretin.

"Always."

"Without exception?"

"Without exception," said the tree.

"I don't believe you," said Cretin with the trace of a smile on his thin lips.

"Are you calling me a liar?" demanded the tree.

"What did the Tree of Irrelevance just do, Steeljaw?" said Cretin quickly.

"It asked if you were calling it a liar," said Steeljaw, still sucking at his wound.

"All right, Lord Tree," said Cretin. "I will now answer your last question. Yes, I am calling you a liar. Now I will thank you for your fruit!"

"Just a minute!" said the tree. "What kind of trickery is going on here?"

"You asked a question of me and I answered it," said Cretin. "You owe me one fruit."

"But even though you tricked me," said the tree, "your answer was incorrect. I am not a liar."

"Whether you are a liar or not has no relevance to the question," explained Cretin. "You asked if I was calling you one, and I replied truthfully that I was. The fruit, please -- or are you a liar?"

"But it isn't fair!" wailed the tree.

"You made the rules," replied Cretin. "I merely played by them."

He walked up to the tree and pulled a small fruit off a branch. "Ouch!" said the tree.

"Sorry," said Cretin.

"You cheated," said the tree sulkily.

"I am aggrieved that you should think so," said Cretin, turning to leave the forest with Steeljaw.

"You can't leave now!" yelled the tree. "I demand a rematch!"

"Some other time," Cretin called back.

"I'm going to hold my breath until you come back!" sobbed the tree.

Wails of outrage followed them until they reached the edge of the forest, and the two companions were more than happy to leave the threats and supplications of the tree behind them.

5.

Cretin and Steeljaw made a leisurely pace back toward the cave, and as a result the fruit was lightly rancid when they turned it over to Pierpont.

"Well, well, the two heroes return successfully again!" said Pierpont, greeting them. "What happened to my fruit?"

"Don't eat it," cautioned Cretin. "A little irrelevant knowledge can be a dangerous thing."

Pierpont roared with laughter, scribbled down the statement for future use, and flipped the fruit into a damp corner of the cave, where it awoke three peacefully-sleeping snakes. Then he reached his hand into the air, seemed to be fiddling with something, and a moment later gave a little yank -- and came away with a jeweled scimitar, which he handed to Cretin.

"With this weapon, and with this weapon alone, may you slay Krotan the Usurper."

"Thank you, Great Wizard," said Cretin. "But shouldn't you give it to Steeljaw? After all, he's the killing expert."

"It only works for you," explained Pierpont. "Besides, Steeljaw is going to be busy holding fifty or sixty of Krotan's bodyguards at bay while you do the evil deed."

"How many?" asked Steeljaw, blinking his eyes very rapidly.

"Cheer up," said Pierpont with a smile. "There might not be more than thirty or so."

"But I can't hold off even thirty warriors by myself!" protested Steeljaw.

"Of course you can," said Pierpont. "Why do you think I turned you into a huge barbarian swordsman, rather than a little wimp like Cretin?"

"It's not fair," said Steeljaw petulantly.

"I could turn you back into a Djinn," said Pierpont. "Of course, if I did that, Nesbudanchik would have no difficulty finding you, but on the other hand you would make mincemeat out of Krotan's bodyguards."

Steeljaw growled an obscenity and walked to the far end of the cave.

"Was there not also a charm?" asked Cretin.

"So there was," replied Pierpont. "Thank you for reminding me. By the way, do you mind if I ask you a personal question?"

"Not at all, Great and Powerful Master of the Dark Arts."

"What's a bright young man like yourself doing with a name like Cretin?"

"It puts people at their ease."

"And simultaneously lowers their guard, eh?" cackled Pierpont. "Not a bad idea at that. Have you ever considered becoming an apprentice wizard?"

"To tell the truth, I'm really rather unfond of rats and snakes," answered Cretin. "And I know not these two gods that you alone seem to worship."

"You mean Dow and Jones?"

Cretin nodded.

"Well," said Pierpont, "we all pray at the temples of our choice. I used to worship at the Gate of the Succulent Virgins, but I must confess that I became indifferent to women about four thousand years ago. But perhaps recommending the mystic arts to you was a mistake. After all, who would I be able to send out for tributes?"

"Surely there are others who come to you for help," said Cretin.

"None with such delightful regularity as yourself," said Pierpont with a smile. "But enough small talk. You still need a charm to draw Krotan to the Inn of the Hairy Toad, do you not?"

"Yes, Great Wizard."

"Then you will learn the following mystical phrase: "Buy when they're friendless, sell when they're fat."

"Buy when they're friendless, sell when they're fat?" repeated Cretin.

"Correct," said Pierpont. "When you reach the Inn of the Hairy Toad, you will light three candles, place them in a triangular configuration, and utter that sentence."

"And then what?" asked Steeljaw from across the cave.

"Then wait for Krotan," answered Pierpont. "He won't be able to keep away."

"As simple as that?" said Cretin.

"Not really. But at least it will get the wheels spinning."

"Whatever that means," said Cretin.

"And now you must leave me," said Pierpont. "_Bonne chance!_" A moment later he was studying the latest no-load mutual funds.

6.

Cretin and Steeljaw climbed down the mountain and walked south to the city, the former slashing the air with his magical scimitar, the latter muttering unhappily about having to hold off half the army of Agabenzzar. They refreshed themselves in a cold clear stream, dined on fruits and vegetables, and reached the Inn of the Hairy Toad just after nightfall.

It was a large stone tavern, with numerous small rooms and nooks hidden by beaded curtains. The wooden floor was liberally covered by old blood stains, a huge boar's head hung over the long, battered bar, and a nude girl danced on an empty table in one corner while other girls circulated from patron to patron.

The clientele seemed right at home. Some were clad in bright and expensive silks, some in the simple leather gear of the warrior, and a handful wore only animal-skin loincloths -- but all were hard-living, hard-drinking men who would gladly slit one another's throats for the price of a drink. At the Inn of the Hairy Toad, a man's shadow was seldom his own, and there was no word for virtue.

It also smelled bad.

"And Pierpont actually owns this dump!" said Steeljaw unbelievably, as he and Cretin sat down at a table.

"I should have figured that out when I saw the price of the drinks," said Cretin, ordering two pints of ale from a hulking, one-eyed waiter.

"Well, we might as well get on with it," said Steeljaw. He rose, gathered three small candles from adjoining tables, and returned.

Cretin insisted on drinking his ale first, and both of them felt a quart of wine would steady their nerves for the battle to come, and the wine was so sweet that they then ordered more ale to quench their thirsts; but finally Cretin lit the three candles, set each eight inches from the others in an equilateral triangle, and uttered the mystic words.

And nothing happened.

"Relax," said Cretin, as Steeljaw tightened his grip around the hilt of his sword. "The palace is more than a mile from here, and the spell wasn't supposed to magically transport him here. It's simply supposed to make him come to us."

"Then it could be hours yet!" said Steeljaw.

"Right. It seems a shame to waste the time. Shall we have some more ale?"

"Might as well," muttered Steeljaw, never taking his eyes from the door.

Forty minutes and six quarts of ale later the tavern's crowd had thinned out somewhat. The girls had made their business and sleeping arrangements for the night, a number of the customers had crossed the street to see what was happening at the Tavern of the Thirsty Camel, and half a dozen men were now propped up against the foot of the bar, snoring peacefully.

Then the door swung open and a huge man walked in. Although Cretin had never seen him before, he knew at a glance that this was Krotan the Conqueror. The man stood almost seven feet tall, had a shaggy black mane, burning grey eyes, and a musculature that put even Steeljaw's splendid figure to shame. His body bore eighty-seven great scars, all gotten in victorious battle, and despite his expensively-woven cape and clothes, his weapons were the plain weapons of the trained fighting man.

He strode to the bar, brushing tables aside right and left with a few casual swipes of his enormous hand.

"A quart of your best ale!" he said, and the echoes of his voice caused the glass to shake in the window frames.

"Yes, Lord Krotan!" stammered the bartender, serving him immediately.

"I don't know what inspired me to come slumming," Krotan announced to the room at large. "I just felt a need to get away from the cares of state. I don't suppose anyone would like to wrestle me for the cost of a drink?" he asked, looking directly at Steeljaw, who almost fainted. "I thought not," he said sadly.

"Whatever happened to the good old days when men were men, and a fellow could get a little exercise in a place like this?"

"Perhaps I could accommodate you," said Cretin, rising to his feet.

"You?" laughed Krotan. "Why, I use men like you to pick my teeth with!"

"Well, if you're afraid..."

"No one calls Krotan the Conqueror a coward!" bellowed Krotan, drawing his sword.

"One moment," said Cretin. "Steeljaw, walk over to the door and make sure no one comes to this braggart's aid."

Steeljaw slunk to the doorway, keeping as much room as possible between Krotan and himself.

"And now, little insect," said Krotan, "come just a bit closer and I shall crush you."

Cretin withdrew the scimitar and crossed blades with Krotan. A moment later he lunged forward and Krotan slashed him on the right forearm.

"Damn!" said Cretin. "That wasn't supposed to happen!"

"It is what you may confidently expect to happen when you cross swords with Krotan the Conqueror," laughed his antagonist.

"But this is a magical scimitar!" said Cretin, parrying another blow and backing away.

"Who gave it to you -- that old charlatan Pierpont?"

"How did you know?" asked Cretin, parrying yet another thrust.

"Who else would give you an inferior magic sword?" said Krotan.

"Inferior in what way?"

"Did he tell you that it could kill me?" asked Krotan, advancing slowly toward the retreating Cretin.

"Yes. Can't it?"

"Oh, it can kill me, all right. It can slash right through the light armor I wear, where a thousand other swords have failed to do so."

"Then what's the catch?"

"The catch, little man, is that you will have no magical assistance in delivering the death blow, and you happen to be up against the greatest swordsman in all Agabenzzar!" Krotan threw back his massive head and laughed. "What did it cost you?"

"An ogre's pendant, a roc's egg, and a fruit from the Tree of Irrelevance," said Cretin, thrusting his sword, only to see it parried once again.

"You came away with a fruit from the Tree of Irrelevance?" asked Krotan.

"Yes," said Cretin, thrusting futilely.

"Do you mind if we stop fighting and sit down together for a moment?" said Krotan, lowering his sword.

"Lead the way," said Cretin, mopping the sweat from his face and trying to catch his breath.

"The Tree of Irrelevance!" repeated Krotan, seating himself at a table.

"Right," said Cretin, sitting down opposite him.

"That's just amazing!" said Krotan. "You know, I must have spent two months with that accursed tree when I decided to become kind. I never could figure out any of the answers."

"You mean you enlisted Pierpont's aid?"

"I tried," said Krotan. "The eye of the Cyclops was easy, and the tongue of the Tree-Dwelling Watersnake took only a single afternoon. But I never could get my hands on that damned fruit, and finally I simply gave up and raised an army to take the crown by force."

"Then why is Nesbudanchik so mad at you?" asked Cretin.

"That old fraud?" demanded Krotan. "What has he to do with this?"

Cretin told him, and Krotan began nodding to his head. "Of course," said the giant swordsman at last. "I took the crown from Kalimakos, who was in league with Nesbudanchik. No wonder he wants to slay me." He paused. "The Tree of Irrelevance! I just can't get over it!"

"Nothing to it," said Cretin.

"Perhaps not for you," said Krotan. "But my sword has always been more agile than my brain."

"Come now," said Cretin, fearing that Krotan would momentarily break into tears. "I find you an excellent conversationalist."

"No, it's true," said Krotan miserably. "I'm much better at conquering kingdoms than running them. I had a conference with my Budget Manager just before I came here, and I didn't know what in Hades he was talking about. I have a stone ear for the language of diplomacy, I schedule my time poorly, I can't read the laws that my councillors write. It's all too much for me. I talk about raising an army to conquer neighboring lands, and they read treaties and draft laws at me. I kill a few irritating slaves, and they fine me for destroying government property. I am forced to give huge dinners for people I don't even know. And as for keeping in shape -- this piddling little workout with you is the first exercise I've had in weeks."

"What are you driving at, Lord Krotan?" asked Cretin.

"I'm tired of being king," whined Krotan. "I need to feel the sun on my back, to taste the blood of a foe as my sword lops his head off, to bed any wench I choose without worrying about statutory rape lectures."

"So?"

"How would you like to trade places with me?"

"I don't know," said Cretin dubiously. "I'm supposed to kill you, not succeed you."

"At least consider it," urged Krotan. "You'd be good at speaking to all these advisors and managing budgets and such."

"True," admitted Cretin.

"And there's a treasure room," added Krotan. "It's sort of depleted these days, but there's still a goodly supply of precious stones left, and you could set up a more effective Taxation Bureau."

"I just don't know," said Cretin. He paused. "You'd have to promise never to try to usurp my throne."

"I wouldn't have it on a bet!" said Krotan devoutly.

"You might get tired of bedding wenches and tearing men limb from limb."

"Never!"

"Well, I may regret it," said Cretin. "But what the hell -- it's a deal."

"Let's seal it with a drink!" exclaimed Krotan.

"Why not? Come on over, Steeljaw. It seems you won't have the pleasure of holding King Krotan's army at bay after all. In fact, who knows -- you just may wind up leading it into battle."

And thus did Cretin the Beggar come unto the throne of ancient Agabenzzar, accompanied by Steeljaw the Djinn, who, ever fearful of Nesbudanchik's vengeance, chose to remain in human form.

7.

Krotan vacated the premises the next morning, taking just enough money to see him through his first week on the road. He headed north and west, in search of battle and adventure.

During his third night on the road, as he was cooking a newly-killed boar over a small fire, he heard a distant roll of drums, followed by a flash of lightning. This was followed in quick succession by a fanfare of trumpets, a clap of thunder, and the sudden appearance of a hideous red demon.

"Cretin the Usurper, Abuser of the Meek, Defiler of the Fairest Flowers of Agabenzzar, Trader in Sorcery, You Who Sit Falsely on the Throne, prepare to die!"

"Oh, shit!" muttered Krotan, trying to remember Pierpont's latest rate sheet.

(For John Guidry, who has never quite outgrown tales of thud and blunder.)