

ROLL FOR INITIATIVE

a short play

by Greg Gould

greg@nowordfor.com

CHARACTERS

Graag the Great	late teens; enthusiastic, but not too bright
Sissdra the Enchantress	late teens; clever, witty, often indignant
Sir Brandon	late teens; slacker with nowhere better to be
Dungeon Master	late teens; wishes wizards were real

LOCATION

The Dungeon Master's basement / Shadowbridge

TIME

Saturday night / The year 342 pre-cataclysm

A game of Dungeons & Dragons. Dungeon Master, Graag the Great, and Sissdra the Enchantress sit around a table littered with dice, stat sheets, miniatures, maps and D&D manuals. Dungeon Master wears an elaborate red cape.

DM: Suddenly there's a low rumble and the ground begins to shudder. Panic ripples through the square. Townsfolk scatter. Buildings tremble. Then you see it: the earth rising up before you like a volcano. Only it's not a volcano. It's the dragon! Like a massive winged zombie, it pulls itself out of the earth. Smoke billows from its snout. Saliva drips from its mighty jaws. Fire burns in its eyes!

SISSDRA: Holy. Shit.

DM: What do you do?

GRAAG: I take out my +4 Vorpal sword, and slay the evil son of a bitch.

DM: Do your best.

Graag rolls a dice.

GRAAG: 19!

DM: Hit! Like the heroes of ages past, you plunge your sword into the creature's chest. The dragon rears back in agony. A sickening scream pierces the air. Then it collapses. Its eyes shut. The smoke clears. The dragon is dead.

GRAAG/SISSDRA: Yeah! Alright!

Graag and Sissdra perform an elaborate high five dance and cheer.

SISSDRA: Oh man, that was epic.

GRAAG: I thought we were dragon-meal for sure!

SISSDRA: Not today, baby!

GRAAG: Not today!

Another high five. Brandon enters, doing up his fly.

BRANDON: What'd I miss?

SISSDRA: Only everything. Graag the Great just slew the dragon.

BRANDON: What!?

GRAAG: That's right. The tyranny of the black wing has ended. The people of Shadowbridge are free. But I can't take all the credit. The beautiful enchantress Sissdra was right by my side.

SISSDRA: I am the bringer of light. It is my destiny to defeat darkness wherever it lies.

BRANDON: Dudes, you said you'd wait.

DM: Dragons don't wait, my friend. Especially for knights.

BRANDON: So what was my character doing during this great battle?

DM: Same as you. Peeing.

BRANDON: Oh, come on! These guys are slaying dragons and I'm just standing there, taking a piss?

SISSDRA: Fear not, Sir Brandon. When the people of Shadowbridge build statues in our honour, I'm sure they'll build one of you too.

GRAAG: Yeah, right above the fountain.

Graag mimics a little boy statue peeing into a fountain. Sissdra and Graag laugh.

BRANDON: I suppose I don't get any XP either?

DM: You know the rules. You have to fight the battle to share the spoils.

BRANDON: This is bullshit. How am I supposed to level up if I don't get experience?

DM: Dude, relax. There are plenty more dragons to slay.

BRANDON: Not with Saint George and Margaret the Virgin here running around.

SISSDRA: So, I guess we're done?

DM: We are. Once again the heroes have triumphed over evil. Game over.

GRAAG: Pizza time!

DM, Graag and Sissdra get up to leave.

BRANDON: Whoa. Hang on. That can't be it.

GRAAG: The dragons dead. Game over.

BRANDON: What about the rest of it?

SISSDRA: Rest of what?

BRANDON: Everything. Dudes, you just took out the leader of a nation state. That's heavy shit.

SISSDRA: Yeah, but he was a *bad* leader of a nation state. The people hated him. He took their gold. He banned their magic. He demanded living sacrifices.

BRANDON: True. But he did bring stability to the land.

SISSDRA: Terror is not stability.

BRANDON: Isn't it? Think about it. This dude ruled for how long?

DM: A thousand years.

BRANDON: A thousand years. And in that time, how many times was Shadowbridge sacked?

They all look to the DM.

DM: Er, none.

BRANDON: Damn right. Because he's a freaking dragon! You got to be pretty stupid or pretty arrogant to take on a dragon.

GRAAG: Hang on. You're saying that by killing the fire-breathing dragon, we've made Shadowbridge *less* safe.

BRANDON: Exactly. Don't get me wrong. The dragon wasn't a pillar of hope for the people. But in a weird way, he did protect them.

SISSDRA: That's ridiculous. He was eating them!

BRANDON: Only the poor and the disabled.

SISSDRA: That doesn't make it ok!

DM: To be fair, the dragon never specified *whom* he wanted to eat. The people decided that.

SISSDRA: The ogre's choice. They were damned if they do and damned if they don't.

BRANDON: Look, my point is that now that the dragon is dead-

GRAAG: Thanks to yours truly.

BRANDON: -a huge vacuum of power has opened up. It's open season, man. Now every two-bit warlord this side of Skullcap Peak wants in on the action. *(to the DM)* Am I right?

DM: I guess.

BRANDON: Damn right. Check it out. *(pulls out a fantasy map and points)* We've got orcish hoards to the north, frost giants to the east, lizardmen tribes to the south, and - what the hell is this?

DM: The Sunken Sea. Home of the sea elves.

BRANDON: They evil?

DM: Not really. They farm seaweed.

BRANDON: Right. But the others, they're war faring folk. Right? And what do war faring folk want most?

GRAAG: War?

BRANDON: Yes. But why?

GRAAG: Cause they like killing stuff?

BRANDON: No. They want gold. The shiny stuff. And who had lots and lots of gold?

SISSDRA: The dragon.

BRANDON: Damn right. Slithery bastard slept on a mountain of the stuff. Now everyone's looking to cash in.

GRAAG: But that's *my* gold.

SISSDRA: *Your* gold?

GRAAG: I killed the dragon. I get the gold.

SISSDRA: You mean *we* killed the dragon.

GRAAG: Yeah. But I stabbed it in the heart.

SISSDRA: With an enchanted sword *I* gave you!

GRAAG: Still...

SISSDRA: Oh, c'mon! I cast the protection enchantment. Without it you'd have been burnt to a crisp!

GRAAG: Still, I ... you know (*mimics a lame sword thrust*)

SISSDRA: The gold doesn't belong to us. It belongs to the people of Shadowbridge. We came to liberate them. Remember? Not rob them.

BRANDON: I thought we were here to find the Soul Gems.

GRAAG: The what?

BRANDON: The Soul Gems. You know, the magical orbs the dragon was supposedly stockpiling? Crafted by evil wizards? Possess the souls of a thousand mighty demons? Can wipe out an entire city in the blink of an eye?

GRAAG: Oh yeah. Did we find any?

DM: Not one.

GRAAG: Really?

BRANDON: Of course we didn't. They never existed.

GRAAG: Sure they did. We had intellect about them.

DM: Do you mean *intelligence*?

GRAAG: Yeah. That. (*to Sissdra*) Remember? You used that magical pond to scour the land for mana? You said there was a high concentration of demonic activity in this region.

SISSDRA: I didn't scour anything.

GRAAG: Really? Oh. Then who told us about the Soul Gems?

DM: Faziun the Fabulous.

GRAAG: Who?

DM: Grand Master of the Shadowbridge Mages Guild.

SISSDRA: So where's this grand master now?

DM: Dead. The dragon beheaded him for selling secrets to you.

SISSDRA: Oh. But he *saw* these gems? Right? You know, before the head thing?

DM: Not exactly. He was told about them by a disgruntled Bazaal demon.

SISSDRA: Ok. So the demon saw the gems?

DM: No. He was told about them by the Dark Elves.

GRAAG: Dark Elves?

DM: *They* intercepted a rogue leprechaun smuggling large quantities of pixie dust through Deadwood Forest.

SISSDRA: What the hell does that have to do with anything?

BRANDON: You need pixie dust to make Soul Gems. It's like the main ingredient.

SISSDRA: Right. So this leprechaun was smuggling pixie dust to sell to the dragon?

BRANDON: Dunno. We never actually spoke to it.

SISSDRA: I thought we had an agreement with the elves. They provide us safe passage through Deadwood forest, and we lift the trade embargo on their borders.

BRANDON: We do. But by the time we found out about the leprechaun, it was gone.

GRAAG: Escaped?

BRANDON: Eaten.

GRAAG: Eaten!

BRANDON: Apparently leprechaun is an elven delicacy.

SISSDRA: Hang on. So for all we know, this leprechaun could have been using pixie dust to brew a potion for his sick mother!

GRAAG: Leprechauns don't have mothers.

SISSDRA: Of course they do! Where do you think baby leprechauns come from? They don't just appear out of thin air!

GRAAG: Maybe they do. They *are* leprechauns. (*to the DM*) Can we check the manual on this?

DM: (*flips through the Monster Manual*) I'm not sure it covers that kind of thing ...

BRANDON: I think the important thing to note is that we just invaded a nation state, overthrew its army, and assassinated its leader based on half-baked information obtained fourth hand from a turn coat demon, some cannibalistic Dark Elves and a thieving leprechaun.

SISSDRA: We had to do something. Soul Gems or no Soul Gems, the dragon had to go.

BRANDON: Even if it was justified with dodgy information?

SISSDRA: It was the right thing to do.

BRANDON: (*mocking*) The right thing to do?

SISSDRA: As the great goddess Shirane said "Those who are in a position of strength have a responsibility to protect the weak". What kind of heroes would we be if we just stood by and let this dragon devour this land?

BRANDON: Oh, I see. The city is in ruins. Thousands are homeless. The city guard has been disbanded. But hey, it was the right thing to do. What are you gonna do next? Poison the people's water supply and salt their fields?

SISSDRA: No. We're gonna make things better. We're gonna re-establish a government. A democratic government. One by the people for the people. We're going to re-build the city. The ports. The roads. The markets. We're going to invest in health and education. We're going to make sure every creature in this land is free to live with dignity and respect. Because that's what we do. We're heroes.

GRAAG: That was beautiful.

BRANDON: Yeah, good luck with that.

SISSDRA: You don't think we can do it?

BRANDON: Hell no. Do you know how long that will take? Democracy is slow. Shit, just establishing the rules to run an election will take years. Years of meetings. Consultations. Negotiations, concessions, revisions, contradictions, objections. And you don't have years. You've got like a week. (*points to the map*) Need I remind you of the gold-hungry hoards coming our way?

SISSDRA: Ok. We'll install a caretaker government. Someone to protect the people through the change. Someone the people can trust.

BRANDON: Like who?

GRAAG: I'll do it! The people love me. They call me the Dragon-slayer.

DM: No one calls you that.

BRANDON: You're a barbarian warrior from across the sea. You can't lead these people.

GRAAG: Why not? I risked my life for them. I killed the dragon.

SISSDRA: Jesus. We get it. You killed the freaking dragon. Let it go already. Sir Doubt-a-lot over here has point. We need a local in power. Someone the people trust.

DM: Might I suggest Carmon the Black?

GRAAG: Wasn't he the dragon's right hand man?

DM: Not by choice. In fact he defected during the final battle. Saved thousands of innocent lives.

BRANDON: Just because he defected doesn't mean he's for the people. He just didn't want to die.

SISSDRA: But maybe he *is* for the people. Maybe while working for the dragon he was secretly protecting them from the inside.

GRAAG: Like Liam Neeson! In that movie!

DM: Schindler's List?

GRAAG: No. Star Wars: The Phantom Menace. Remember? Without Qui-Gon Jin, Queen Amidala would never have been able to overthrow the Trade Federation's occupation of Naboo.

BRANDON: Qui-Gon wasn't working for the Trade Federation. He's a Jedi Knight. He shouldn't have been fighting a war at all.

DM: Never mind the fact he convinced Obi-Wan Kenobi to train a young Anikain Skywalker who would later become Darth Vader and enslave half the galaxy.

GRAAG: Oh c'mon. How was he supposed to know that would happen?

DM: He's a freaking space wizard.

SISSDRA: Who gives a shit! We're not talking Star Wars. We're talking Carmon the Black. We need to decide if we can trust him.

GRAAG: How?

SISSDRA: I could cast a mind reading spell. See where his allegiances lay. I can do that, right?

DM: You'd need to be close. He's got a high Will score.

BRANDON: I thought you were all about freedom. Since when did freedom come with a free mind probe?

SISSDRA: Alright. Fine. Carmon the Black is ... problematic. Who else we got?

DM: What about Grimwold Ghan? Dwarf. Head of the Stone Mason's Guild.

SISSDRA: He'd be a handy leader for the re-construction.

BRANDON: Not if you want to keep the Dark Elves on side.

GRAAG: What do they care?

DM: Dark Elves hate Dwarves. They've been killing each other forever. Even before the dragon.

SISSDRA: What about the Mages?

BRANDON: Wizards? You want to put wizards in charge?

SISSDRA: I'm a wizard.

DM: Actually, you're an enchanter. Totally different.

BRANDON: No one wants a wizard in charge. Wizards are aloof. Always mumbling about moons and stars and shit. It's weird. Besides, you put a wizard in charge and the clerics will be pissed.

DM: It's true. Clerics hate wizards. Think they're heathens.

SISSDRA: Do we care what the clerics think?

BRANDON: You should. Even the dragon placated the clerics. Clerics provide spiritual guidance. You lose the clerics, you lose the people.

SISSDRA: Hang on. Wasn't it the clerics who brought the dragon to Shadowbridge in the first place?

DM: You read my notes!

SISSDRA: (*shrugs*) I had a free period.

DM: Awesome. Yeah, they did. They gifted the dragon to the emperor when it was a hatchling. Only the dragon didn't like being a pet. It grew big, ate the emperor and enslaved his people. Tragic really.

SISSDRA: (*sarcastic*) Well then, by all means, let's put the genius clerics in charge. (*beat*) Next.

GRAAG: What about the City Lore master, Ethandrial? He's cool.

DM: He's a half-elf. Humans won't follow a half-elf.

GRAAG: Gherag, the port master?

BRANDON: He's a half-orc.

SISSDRA: What about Khera, leader of the Teetan people? They fought valiantly in the siege.

Beat. DM, Graag and Brandon exchange awkward glances.

DM: Khera's a woman.

SISSDRA: So?

DM: The founding fathers of Shadowbridge were seafarers. They believed that if a woman was ever in power the sea goddess Kranska would grow jealous and send a huge wave to destroy them. As such, females are forbidden to rule.

SISSDRA: You're kidding?

DM: (shrugs) Sorry. Tradition.

SISSDRA: Well this is ridiculous. We can't put a dwarf in charge because of the dark elves. We can't put a wizard in charge because of the clerics. We can't put a half-elf or a half-orc in charge because of the humans. And we can't put a woman in charge because all the men are afraid their dicks will fall off because of an ancient curse. Meanwhile we've got frost giants, lizard men and orcs all biting at the bit to destroy us and steal our gold. This is messed up. We came here to help these people. To free them. Instead all we've done is behead their leader, shatter their city and leave them open for invasion.

BRANDON: But it was the right thing to do.

SISSDRA: You know what? Graag's right. We should just take the gold. Take it. Go home. Forget this place.

GRAAG: Really?

SISSDRA: Only going to get plundered anyway. Not as if the people who need it will get any.

BRANDON: Now we're talking like a real hero.

SISSDRA: Yeah?! Well, come on smart arse. You know how this works. So please, enlighten us. What should we do? How can we fix this?

BRANDON: You want to know?

SISSDRA: I'd trade my Ring of Three Wishes to know!

BRANDON: Ok. Easy. *(stands up and clears his throat)* Here's what you do. *(his mobile rings – he picks it up)* Yeah? Now? But it's only eleven. We're still playing! But. Alright. Fine. I said fine. *(he hangs up)* I gotta go. Mum's out front.

SISSDRA: But you have the answers ...

BRANDON: Yeah. Sorry. See ya guys. Thanks for the game.

DM/GRAAG: Bye.

SISSDRA: But ...

Brandon exits.

Beat.

SISSDRA: So what? That's it?

DM: I guess. *(beat)* Pizza?

GRAAG: Shit yeah!

DM and Graag get up to leave.

SISSDRA: But what about the people? And the gold. And the hordes?

DM: Bah. Just a game. I was getting tired of that campaign anyway. I'm thinking something new next week. Something hard core.

GRAAG: More dragons?!

DM: Two words for you, my friend: Mind. Flayer.

GRAAG: Sweet!

DM and Graag leave. Sissdra is left to ponder alone.

SISSDRA: But we were doing the right thing ...

Blackout.

END