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Tomb of Meowers

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illustration by William O'Conner

I lied. Big deal. As my mom would say, “call a cop.” And maybe you should, because I fear where this Gamma World addiction will lead me next.

I said I wasn’t going to write about Gamma World again. I even told my editor that.

“Good,” he said. “I mean, no offense, but people are going to start thinking you work here.”

But what was I supposed to do with all of these characters? I now had maybe 40. 45. OK, 57 if you’re counting. And I love them all. So much so that I couldn’t bring myself to throw them into some nutso, war-ravaged, radiation-filled death trap. I mean, come on. I grew up best friends with a stuffed rabbit named Cornfeet and three invisible monsters. Is it so hard to fathom my love for a hawkoid plant?

Later that evening I talked to Bart, my carpool buddy, about my flock of Gamma World characters looking for adventure and their overprotective mother.

“I can’t stop creating characters,” I lamented. “And yet they have nothing to do.”

“That’s crazy,” Bart argued. “I love my characters *because* of the crazy stuff they do. I can’t rip a magical coin out of a zombie’s neck in real life, but I can in a D&D game.”

It’s true. Bart does get all willy-nilly with his characters. After all, this is the same guy who thought a wall-mounted candelabra would make a cool night-light for a kid.

The one thing we did agree on is that Gamma World characters aren’t just fun to make—they’re fun to hear about.

“Great!” I said, hoping he’d say that. “They’re in the backseat if you want to meet them.”

“Um, Shelly, you realize no one is there, right?” he asked. “Unless you managed to create a sentient pile of dirty gym clothes.”

“Are those still in here? I thought an errant avocado rolled under the seat or something.” It would have explained the smell.

As he read the character sheets of my most recent creations, Bart decreed that having a bunch of perfectly mutated characters with nothing to do is almost as bad as having a perfectly good adventure but no one to run it for.

“When I was in fifth grade, I read *Tomb of Horrors* for the first time,” he said. “I’ve probably read it a hundred more times since then but never had a chance to run it.” He said this all dreamy-eyed like he



was expressing his wish to climb Mount Everest, save a whale, or audition for *Survivor*.

That's when I had my first brilliant idea of the day. I had a veggie lasagna in the freezer and a case of homebrew beer I was saving for a rainy Saturday. It was perfect! My bevy of Gamma World characters would explore the *Tomb of Horrors*.

I couldn't wait to get that pile of gym clothes and me home to sort out my dream team line up of characters to explore the infamous tomb. Bart said I should plan on bringing at least ten to the table.

"And not ones you're attached to," he warned.

Hmm... maybe this wasn't such a good idea.

* * *

Whenever I cross the threshold of my condo, Zelda, my cat, gets an attack of opportunity. Today was no different.

"Quit it, Zelda!" I shouted, using my Luxe handbag as a shield. What would Marc Jacobs say?

Anyone who knows me (or her) or is friends with me (or her) on Facebook knows we have a rather

tempestuous relationship. She is bossy and vindictive and takes up way too much space on the bed. She also takes great pleasure in sneaking up behind me and digging her death claws into my calves or the backs of my arms. Once I had to beat her off my triceps with a fork. I am told by people with cats that this is what cats do. *Really?*

Zelda wasn't supposed to be my cat. She belonged to my friend and I was her cat sitter. Then one day he came back from vacation and told me he met another cat and didn't want Zelda anymore.

"We never really connected," he explained. "She seems to like you much more."

While that may be true, I didn't want a cat *permanently*. I wanted to get another dog. Maybe two more. But what choice did I have? It was my way or the Humane Society's way. And this is how I get thanked. I hate to say it, but cats kind of suck.

As if reading my thoughts, Zelda raced around to attack my shins. Thankfully I was wearing tall boots.

"Ingrate!" I scolded. "A dog would never get away with this." But because I proved to be an unworthy opponent, she quickly became bored and moved on to the couch to lick my epidermis off her claws.

"You think you're so tough?" I asked. "I should send you to the *Tomb of Horrors*."

That's when I got my second brilliant idea of the day. I *would* send her to the *Tomb of Horrors*! Who but a party of cats would make for a better adventuring team? They're stealthy, fearless, and they pack a mean weapon. This would be my chance to *finally* play some Gamma World characters I wouldn't get attached to. I got to work on crafting the perfect felinoid party.

Zelda, sensing I was doing something fun, spread herself over my lap and attacked my fingers as I wrote.

"Move it, catface," I commanded her, flipping to the appropriate page in the rulebook. "You're getting a make-over."

Giant felinoid!

"That's you, Zelda," I said and immediately felt bad. Not everything's fair in love and war and weight issues are one of them.

The next three combinations I created were felinoid mind coercer, electrokinetic, and pyrokinetic. A perfectly rounded party of cats if you ask me.

Zelda wouldn't adventure with just anyone. Monster is my friend Roxy's cat. He's a big gray beast with a nasty disposition. But who can resist a grossly overweight furball rolling around on his back? Not me. Once when I was over for dinner, I thought he was in a compromising position, like a turtle, so I went to help him ... and he hauled off and slapped me.

"Roxy!" I yelled. "Your cat just hit me!"

"Oh, he does that," she said. "He's just playing."

His playing resulted in a 4-inch scratch, millimeters from my eyeball. What is with you cat people?

The next party kitten was Maddux—a gigantic, shaved, toothless Maine Coon belonging to my friend Bre. You know that super tall kid in school who sucked at basketball? That's Maddux. As big as he is, he's timid as a field mouse, even hiding under the bed whenever someone turns on the oven. (Admittedly, that may be a testament to Bre's cooking and not his fortitude; he's afraid of the smoke detector.)

However timid he may be when it comes to kitchen appliances, he is not shy about food. His stepdad (who incidentally is Zelda's old dad. I know...

such a tangled web) made a huge feast of caprese salad and risotto using the saffron I smuggled back from the Spice Market in Istanbul. Apparently Maddux was looking forward to this meal as much as I was, because no sooner had I lifted my fork than that furball's giant, fluffy head was whisker-deep in my bowl.

"EW!" I shouted at Bre. "Your cat is eating my risotto!"

Know what she did? *Took his picture!* Come on, cat people!

Rounding out the party was Blanche, a small, white, rules-abiding kitty. I don't actually know Blanche, at least not personally. I met her on my way to Greenlake for a run. Her strategy is much like Monster's only she would gladly take the belly rub over a sucker punch. She ran in front of me, rolled on her back, and meowed loudly. I stopped to give her some rubs then moved on, but she followed me and dropped in my path again every few feet. As determined as she was to get some belly rubs, she refused to cross the street when I did. It was like she got caught on a kitty-proof barbed wire fence, the way she teetered there on the curb.

"I guess you have some boundaries, Miss Blanche," I noted.

Her boundaries, however, included *directly in my path* as I was about to step off the curb. Not wanting to squish her (well, sort of) I was forced to do a side-step lunge combination that ended up tweaking my hamstring so bad I had to see a chiropractor for months. Can I sue a cat for back co-pays?

* * *



When game time rolled around, Bart and I were downright giddy. Could that be in part to the empty bottles of beer littering my dining room table? (Drinking homebrew when playing D&D with cats is kind of essential.) I couldn't wait to put these kitties through their paces.

Bart made a few amendments to the adventure to accommodate the Gamma World characters. I was none the wiser, never having gone near the *Tomb of Horrors*, but I've heard the stories and lamented the fallen heroes. My friends would kill me if they knew what I was about to do to their beloved animal companions.

Bart doled out Alpha mutation cards to the party. Blanche got a force ax, Maddux got a pair of jet boots,

Monster could turn your brain into gray paste with a shriek and Zelda got a pair of wings.

"Scary," I said, thinking of Zelda hovering above me. "Those better be some sturdy wings."

The adventure began in a high-tech lab. At the center of the lab was a brain in a jar.

"Meet Mommy Brain," Bart said.

I have a feeling that's supposed to be me. Bart better not kill me.

Zelda had been called forth to help with a super-secret mission.

"Well, the adventure stops here," I said. "Saying you want her to do something is the best way to ensure she won't do it."

"Then Mommy Brain tells Zelda to not go anywhere near the dreaded *Tomb of Horrors*. Do not seek out the powerful Omega Tech treasure rumored to lie within."

"Treasure doesn't tempt her. Trader Joe's tuna on the other hand ..."

"Do not seek out the bounties of canned tuna or attempt to bring down the almighty, slobbering lich, Acereruff."

"Acereruff?" I asked, looking at Sadie, Bart's old, arthritic pit bull mix lying in wait under the table.

Bart gave Sadie a rub with his foot. "I didn't want her to feel left out."

"Oh, okay, Zelda's in," I said. "Anything to spite Sadie."

"You will need a team of your best agents," the Mommy Brain told Zelda.

"I find it odd that you're essentially playing *me*," I said. "If I'm Mommy Brain, shouldn't I be telling Z what do to?"



Bart laughed. “When have you ever been able to tell Zelda what to do?”

True, true.

I had to admit, I was feeling a little remorseful at the thought of one of these innocent cats (and Zelda) biting the big cat nip mouse due to my errant roleplaying.

“Oh, don’t worry,” Bart said. “They won’t die. They have nine lives, remember? They’ll be transported back to the lab where Mommy Brain reincarnates them.”

I guess that would be OK.

Also to assist with their journey, Mommy Brain gave the party a bomb disposal robot. The cats christened it Whiskers.

“Sweet!” None of my friends have pet robots.

The adventurers set forth down a very familiar hall.

“Two jackal-like creatures carved into the wall appear to be holding a bronze chest,” Bart began.

“Get up there and check it out, Blanche,” Zelda commanded.

“You really think one of your living, breathing, fur and blood party-mates is the best choice?” Bart asked. Oh, right! The robot!

Whiskers moved forward and discovered a lever.

“Pull it,” Zelda shouted.

Like they say, curiosity killed the cat. I guess that’s good news for the robot.

After a Perception check that only Blanche was paying attention for, a pit trap just a few feet from the party was discovered.

“Back up, Blanche!” Zelda commanded, which is kind of *duh*. I mean, even a cat wouldn’t deliberately step in a hole. A robot on the other hand ...

“Unfortunately, the trap is right where Whiskers was standing,” Bart said, not feeling unfortunate in the least. “He falls on poison spikes causing 34 damage.”

Holy cats! I almost wish we were in the Shadowfell.

“That seems kind of dramatic for two minutes into an adventure.”

“Welcome to the *Tomb of Horrors*,” he said.

Although Zelda had wings, she insisted Maddux use his jet boots to retrieve the robot (along with some diamonds and a gravity hammer). Whiskers was bruised and pretty beaten but thanks to Maddux’s mechanics skills, he was rolling again. This time when the cats continued down the path, they put Whiskers first. Great in theory—he’s meant to take the brunt of it, but he lacks some important skills.

“And Whiskers goes down again,” Bart said after the next pit trap. “Not too perceptive, is he?”

Maddux pulled him back up to safety and got him moving again—this time in the middle of the pack.

For a scaredy cat with no teeth, Maddux proved to be a pretty solid adventurer. Thanks to his Perception checks, the party skirted the remaining pit traps and made it all the way to the end of the hallway. Yes, I’ve seen that green devil head a zillion times but standing in front of it, even as a cat, gave me the chills.

“Well, it seems like one of you should go through it,” said Zelda, the fearless, careless leader.

They attached a lantern to Whiskers’ arm and sent him in to check things out. He crossed the threshold of the devil’s mouth, and his outstretched illuminated limb went dark immediately.

“What happened?”

Monster yanked out what appeared to be 50% less robot.

“Whiskers is gone?” I shouted. “Well, mostly.”

And with that, the robot keeled over and died.

Zelda (the real Zelda) chose that moment of weakness to jump onto the dining room table and stick her face in a bowl of salsa. She’s not allowed on the table and certainly not *in* my food (at least not when guests are present) but I scratched her head in favor of yelling at her. *There could be 50% less Zelda.*

“Is that a can opener I hear?” I asked. “Looks like Mommy Brain wants the kitties to come home.”

“No way!” Bart shouted. “This is just the beginning! And they’ve already gone farther than most.”

Clearly *someone* has beer muscles.

“Haven’t you heard of leaving well enough alone?” I asked. “I mean, they’re cats. They probably need a nap by now. Let’s have them rest.”

“Let’s have them explore one more room,” Bart urged. He too is a dog person.

The cats turned their attention to the stone archway with the glowing stones just left of the misty pile



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**Monster (with Omega Tech cape),
operating the Misty Archway**

of debris that was once Whiskers. It did not look any more promising.

“Hey, I have an idea!” I said. “Why don’t I just put these cats in a plastic sack and send them down the river?”

I must have looked pretty woeful, because Bart offered a tip.

“Maybe Maddux wants to use some of his science skills to figure out what to do with these stones.”

I sighed. “Maybe Maddux wants to eat a pan of lasagna. Like Garfield.”

But Bre would have been proud. Maddux was by far the most perceptive and skilled feline on this trip, and I was secretly mad at him for gaining enough knowledge to keep encouraging the party. After six failed attempts at color-coding, Monster finally found the right combo, causing the mist to disappear and reveal a smooth stone-walled chamber beyond.

“Nothing but an empty room,” Maddux told the group.

And *whoosh!* Once they stepped inside, the party was teleported to said empty room. Only the room wasn’t empty. Maddux noticed a statue.

“Oh, an arm that looks like it belonged to a statue.” He pointed to the broken statue arm on the ground.

Zelda wasn’t buying it.

“It can’t be just a statue, stupid,” she claimed. “And that’s not just an arm. Jeez, do I have to do everything?”

Zelda punctuated this statement in real life by rolling over on her side and bunny-kicking my wrist.

“I think Zelda just took the statue’s arm,” I told Bart, before getting up to find the Neosporin. “And now it’s bleeding.”

She handed the statue arm to Blanche and I held my breath. There was some trick to it I knew, but I really wanted the cats to go home.

Something was definitely weird here. And not just in a post-apocalypse/feline survivors sort of way. I was punishing a bunch of cats by making them explore perhaps the most deadly D&D setting in its history. I was bleeding on my dice, my cat was eating my nachos, and I was about to blubber into my lasagna over the thought of Zelda being scared and bushy-tailed in that tomb, clawing at the stone walls trying to get back to my featherbed. Oh no! What had the *Tomb of Horrors* done to me?

“Do you want to continue?” Bart asked, opening another bottle of beer. “And investigate the statue?”

What choice did I have? I couldn’t go on like this. I’m a dog person!

“Yes, onward!” I said. “But Zelda stays in the back.”

About the Author:

Shelly Mazzanoble dedicates this column to Monster. Get better soon, buddy! You’ll be punching and slapping in no time!