

ONCE UPON A GOBLIN

by Nate French

For months, the archon known as "She Who Commands the Chosen" had been the laughingstock of all the competitors in the 347th sector of the Crucible. "An easy win," some called her, while others claimed she was not even worth practicing against. In any event, she was a non-entity, and no threat to the Æmber-potential of the other teams.

A few weeks back, that started to change. Why? Because she came to me. Generally, I do scouting reports on other archons for my clients, but for this job She Who Commands the Chosen had asked me to scout her own team, and tell her what needed to change...

On the inside Harry's sleeping, on the outside Harry's eating, in the morning Harry's mean and—every evening—Harry's eating. Every evening Harry's eating. In eating anything arresting, in eating anything he's counting, in eating there is retribution, in eating there is consummation, in eating there is shortage and everything's been taken Harry's pinching. All the stomachs are stalled and all the Æmber's been eaten and all the mellow inspiration grand. All digestion's digesting. This makes candy. Bland."

Pingle the goblin was doing what he did best: annoy. He danced across the battlefield, calling out in his high sing-song voice, improvising a chant that fell somewhere between the realms of sense and nonsense. His efforts were directed at the opposing archon, Harrison the Omnipotent Maw, in an attempt to cause it, or one of its followers, to make a rash mistake.

More often than not, they bit.

"Hey gobbo!" A thunderous voice called out, and a hulking serpentine figure with menacing bat-like wings crested a nearby hill. "Ya wanna get scooped?"

"Sure thing! I'll take two!" Pingle taunted back, and reached into his pouch to pull out a giant rot grub's egg.

He loved these things.

Just beneath the eggshell was a thin layer of protective fluid that was simultaneously sticky and just a wee bit acidic. And it stunk to high hell. It was quite difficult to be hit by a giant rot grub's egg and not be annoyed.

SHPLATT!

They didn't call him "The Sniper" for nothing. The egging wouldn't do any serious damage, but the effect was predictable.

"OH! Now you've done it, gobbo!" The swamp devil roared, rushing across the field and wiping egg from its face.



Pingle was already running, back into the upside-down forest, ducking beneath the tripwire he had set. The pursuing creature ran through the wire, and the horns Pingle had rigged to the trees sounded out. Perfect! The trolls should be on their way just about...

THWOMP!

Pingle ducked at the last moment, narrowly avoiding the swipe of the creature's claws, and danced behind an upside-down tree. Where were those trolls? He reached into his pouch for a second egg, but thought better of it as another, even bigger and uglier (if that were possible) swamp devil emerged from a nearby ravine.

He dropped the egg back into his pouch, turned tail, and ran toward his archon's command post. There was a good chance he'd run into the trolls coming from that direction, and there was no way he was taking on two swamp devils by himself!

As he sprinted through the woods, he came across the fallen bodies of his troll teammates. Something had gotten to them. He was on his own now. The swamp devils were in pursuit, but they were slowed a bit by the hanging trees, and he was able to stay just out of their reach. If he could get to the command post at the base of the hill in the center of the forest, the defenders there could protect him. So he ran, and the creatures followed.

Strange. They're usually faster than that, Pingle thought, but he wasn't about to question his luck. He ducked beneath the top of a poisonous upside-down willow, and the command post was in sight. His archon, She Who Commands the Chosen, was there, rapidly preparing a batch of Æmber for shaping. The defenders were nowhere in sight.

Upon seeing the archon, the swamp devils accelerated. Pingle dove behind a boulder to get out of their way, and the devils raced past without a second thought.

Realizing his mistake, Pingle pulled another egg from his pouch, and splattered it across the scaled back of the second swamp devil, right between its wings. Bullseye!

But to no avail.

The devils disrupted the forging ritual, captured the Æmber, and raced off into the woods.

She Who Commands the Chosen looked at Pingle, a look of disappointment? no, it was annoyance—on her face. He shrugged. What did she expect him to do?

Moments later, the archon's mystical forge evaporated, and a triumphant bellow sounded from the direction of the ravine.

The contest was over. Harrison the Omnipotent Maw had forged its third key and would eat well tonight. She Who Commands the Chosen—the only archon who had ever given Pingle a chance—had lost. Again.



That night, as I was spinning a web above the team in a clearing, I could tell that morale was low. It wasn't just the tenth loss in a row—three of which I had scouted. It was the common denominator in the losses: Pingle.



"Can someone explain to me," steamed She Who Commands the Chosen, "how an entire Brobnar warband can be destroyed in a single melee?"

"They had devils, boss," answered the troll that was connected to her via glowing tendrils of Æmber light. Archonic restoration was one of the many civilities that had been built into the ritual of the contest: while it could sometimes turn violent on the field of battle, none of the casualties were permanent, as the competing archons had spoken a vow in the Architects' name to restore the vitality of any of their team who might fall in competition.

"Besides," said the other troll, who had just been restored and was propped up against a boulder, clearing the cobwebs from its head. "It weren't the *whole* Brobnar band. We did have one survivor." The troll glared across the clearing at Pingle.

"Survival of the fittest, lumphead," Pingle shot back.

"I'll show you a lumphead," the troll grunted and tried to rise, stumbled once, twice, and tottered back to a sitting position. The side-effects of the recovery took a few hours to wear off. "But maybe in the morning."

"If you think you can live through a night's sleep,"

Pingle spat. "The whole lot of you are better at dying than anything else worth talking about. If you showed up where you were supposed to be today, we might've even won!"

The troll hung its head. Pingle took pride in his survivability, and was often praised by the archon for his resilience, as it was one of the sole bright spots on the team. The other team members had mixed feelings about this, ranging from bitterness and resentment when they felt that they were doing all the dirty work, to humiliation and shame when they were down and didn't feel that they could do anything right.

I couldn't remain silent any longer. I threaded my way down from the branch above the archon and whispered in her ear.

The archon paused, as if she hadn't considered this seemingly obvious point. "It's worth a try. I'll talk to him," she said. I climbed my way back up-down?—the upside-down tree, to put the finishing touches on my web. A spider had to make do with what she could, in the wild.



"Destruction is temporary, pride is forever," I whispered in Pingle's ear, riding upon his shoulder as he crept through the underbrush behind enemy lines.

"I suppose I can admit it to you, spider-writer: I'm scared."

"What's there to be scared of? The archon will bring you back afterward."

"I've never been destroyed before. And it doesn't sound pleasant. The consecutive match survival streak, my seemingly unnatural ability to avoid enemy combatants...it's all because I'm scared of being destroyed."

"You mean you've never...?"

"Not once. Can't say I'm looking forward to it." Pingle shuddered, and I had to flex a couple extra legs to keep my balance.



"What did the archon say to you?" I asked.

"She gave me a long-winded idealistic speech about sacrifice, bravery, and the lack of 'I' in team. None of it sunk in. But then she said if I didn't sacrifice myself for the greater good in today's match, I'd be on cooking-pot scrubbery for the next four cycles. And...yeah. No thank you!"

"So here we are."

"Yes ma'am. Here we are."

"Destruction is temporary..."

"Pride is forever." Pingle gulped. "So I hear."

The team was competing against Boss Zarek, the most dominant archon in the area. He hadn't lost a Vault in nearly three cycles, and the minions that followed him made the swamp devils of the Omnipotent Maw pale in comparison.

It occurred to me that Pingle might not have to try very hard to get himself destroyed.

"Once upon a time, once upon a pony, once upon a rhyme, Boss Zarek's just a —"

A monster known only as "The Terror" loomed up, a massive insectile creature that was every bit as terrifying as its name might imply. Even I was impressed by the speed with which it had tracked and located Pingle.

"...phony." Pingle completed his rhyme, and the thing clicked its pincers at him. Next thing I knew, we were running for the safety of the nearby caverns. The Terror would not be able to follow Pingle through the smaller openings, and there was a chance he might survive the battle in there.

"Pingle!" I hissed in his ear. "Stop! Destruction is temporary! Pride is forever!"

He kept running. Maybe even sped up a bit.

"Remember what the archon said...you have to stand your ground! Confront The Terror!"

It was as if I wasn't even there,
and Pingle was getting closer
and closer to the caves.

It's times like these that an old spider-writer has to take matters into her own eight hands. I'm not necessarily proud of what happened next, but I've got client reviews and future contract opportunities to consider.

I crept along Pingle's collarbone to the nice juicy vein that runs along his neck. I have several kinds of venom. One will kill, one will put a victim to sleep, one will just slow them down and dull their senses. This was a job for the latter. I gave Pingle a nice sharp jolt of the relaxer-venom, he cried out "You dung-addled spider!" then felt his legs grow heavy, stumbled, and rolled to the ground.



"What have you done?" he shrieked. I winked, and jumped to the safety of a nearby log. The Terror closed in. There's no pretty way to describe what happened next.



Much later, Pingle woke to the cheers of his warband. His head was groggy, but the mood around the camp was unlike anything he had experienced before.

"Wha- What happened?" he asked.

"You Architects-be-Blessed Goblin, we won!" roared one of the trolls.

"All because of you," She Who Commands the Chosen added. "The Terror ran you down outside of the caves but wasted far too much time on you and the Æmber you were carrying. It totally underestimated the rest of our forces, and the trolls took it by surprise. After routing it, they went on a roll and took out a whole battalion of knights. Momentum continued to build, and next thing you know, we pulled off the upset of the season!"

"You mean...I was destroyed?"

"Indeed you were, Pingle. How do you feel?"

"Tired, sore." He paused. "Amazing." Pingle smiled.

Destruction was, after all, temporary. But heroes were forever.