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New Era, Same Game: The Role of D&D Beyond in *Dungeons & Dragons*

Six friends sit on the floor around a dinged coffee table—the same one you’d find if you went next door, or up a floor, or even down a floor. There’s a string of christmas lights outlining the ceiling of the room, and a stack of books on the table.

“No, really, I think you’d be best at it,” one of them is saying. She has a mantle of flame for hair, dazzling and bright. It flickers above her head, casting moving shadows across her already coal-dark skin.

“Yeah, I mean, you read a bunch of books, right? You were a librarian,” another one says, their voice calm and unhurried. They’re leaning back on an elbow, one knee bent and the other leg outstretched, their silvery-white hair a stark contrast to the colored lights above.

“Are a librarian,” the one in question chimes in, her dark auburn brows furrowing slightly.

“Right, right. But hey, think of this—if you DM for us, then you can be whoever you want. You could be a bunch of people, maybe even all at once,” another, tinier—and much greener—one pitches in amid a mouthful of trail mix.

“Right, sure, but what if I’m not very good at it?” auburn-hair says again. She turns to the tiny, green one with a frown, her golden freckles catching a reflection from the flaming hair of the figure to her right.

“Mhyr’as, c’mon. You’d be great! Besides—” a few crumbs of nuts and berries are falling from the green one’s mouth, “who cares? It’s about having a good time. And,” he gestures around, “we can bring snacks!”

“I’ll bring the ale!” another short, albeit not at all green, figure says.

“Of course you would say that, Jambart,” the final figure says. She has long, straight white hair that splays against the ground, even as she sits straight-backed and tall, legs crossed.

“Would you expect any less, Olviar? You’ve known me for years,” he laughs as he holds up a tankard, “and I always come prepared.” The sound of his voice echoes back from the bottom of his near-empty cup.

“Unfortunately,” Olviar replies with a sigh.

“Anyway,” the fire-haired one interupts, dragging on the first letter. She’s holding one of the books in her hand, flipping through it erratically. “Look at all this stuff! Ooh, look, a longsword! And a mace! And a spear!” She flips the book around to show it to the group, “Can my character have, like, five swords?”

“Why would your character need *five* swords, Tintrí? What would you even *do* with that many swords?” the green one says, wiping his mouth on the back of his hand.

“*So* many things, Wart! *So. Many. Things.*” Tintrí flips back around and continues shuffling through the pages, pupil’s wide.

“Is it easy to find what you’re looking for in that book, Tintrí? If I DM for you all, do you think we’d each need a copy?” Mhyr’as asks as she takes a sip of tea from her mug and glances about the room, her silver eyes just peeking over the brim of the cup.

“Hmm, it’s not too difficult, but I sort of need to know where things are in order to find them. I mean, it’s organized and all, but you have to look through the index, you know? And that takes time you could be spending looking at all the neat weapon choices.”

Mhyr’as stifles a laugh as Tintrí begins shuffling through the pages again.

“That doesn’t sound particularly helpful,” the one with the calm voice says. “I know some people—folks from before I met you all—who use a website instead. And not *that* kind of website,” they said with a glance towards Jambart, who puts up his hands in supplication. “You can access digital copies of these rulebooks there, make your character sheets and stuff, then it’ll do the math and everything for you.”

“Oh, that sounds helpful. What’s this site called, Korin?”

“D&D Beyond,”

“Neat! I’ll have to—” Mhyr’as stops short as the familiar sound of a scratching quill fills her mind. She glances down to a worn leather tome that’s sitting on the table in its own pile yet still as tall as a stack of four books. Korin raises an eyebrow and adjusts their position, leaning on the other elbow.

Mhyr’as smiles meekly and reaches for the tome, flipping it open somewhere near the center. She watches as the familiar, scrawling script appears on the yellowed pages.

Digital tools for D&D? Absolute nonsense. Dungeons & Dragons is meant to be played with quill and parchment only. Anything less is just an imitation.

“How elitist,” Olviar says with a glance over Mhyr’as’ shoulder.

“Does he not think D&D Beyond is a good idea?” Korin asks with a scoff. “How surprising.”

“Whatever leaves my hands free to drink more ale,” Jambart pitches in from the back. Olviar rolls her eyes as the familiar sound of Jambart’s endless tankard refilling itself fills the silence.

“I mean, D&D is a game all about collaboration, storytelling, and experimentation, is it not? It sounds like that’s what D&D Beyond is doing, too,” Wart says (Spiro 6). Mhyr’as tilts her head in agreement before looking back down at the book.

Besides, D&D Beyond only wishes to pocket your gold. Every user needs to buy a copy of the Player’s Handbook in order to make a character, even if you already own a physical copy. Ridiculous!

Wart and Tintrí have joined Olviar in looking over Mhyr’as’ shoulder at this point, and the goblin leans his forearms against the coffee table as he reads.

“I’ve heard, if you’re the DM, you can share all your purchases with people who join your campaign,” he says.

“Yeah, I mean, they’ve gotta make money somehow,” Tintrí shrugs before going back to the *Player’s Handbook* she’s holding, occasionally mumbling about wanting a spell. Or a weapon. Or a horse.

She already has a character sheet with a bunch of notes spilling across the predefined areas like blood on the battlefield, her hands leaving smears of ash on the page wherever they rest. Just beyond that, two plastic prisons hold seven dice each. Or at least, they would, if Tintrí hadn’t already taken them out earlier and rolled them a few times.

Did she know what she was rolling for?

No.

Did that stop her?

Also no.

But don't be fooled—they had all taken turns rolling the d20 just for fun. Mhyr'as rolled the lowest, with a 3, and Tintrí had rolled the highest, with an 18. She had screamed in excitement and flared her hair, nearly setting off the smoke alarm.

“True. I suppose I could look into it and see what it's like. I'll send you guys an email sometime before session zero next week,” Mhyr'as says, keeping an eye on the book to see if anything else appears. The ink from the previous messages has already faded, and the pages remain blank. For now.

Everyone eventually says their goodbyes, leaving Mhyr'as alone with the books and the lights.

Are you always so old fashioned? She writes onto the now-blank page, the ink absorbing alarmingly quickly, the book a dried and crackling desert and her ink a wellspring.

What do you expect? I am old. Comes the reply near seconds later. She watches each letter appear even as her quill rests on the opposite page, motionless.

Mhyr'as chuckles to herself, then glances around, suddenly wishing her friends were still there.

How old are you, exactly?

Old enough to know that some things remain the same for a reason. You would do best to remember that.

A bead of sweat drips down Mhyr'as' tanned, olive skin, tickling her temple. She picks up her quill and takes a deep breath.

I'll consider it.

[Please see the attached email Mhyr'as sent to her D&D group after some¹ research.]

¹ As a librarian of The Cascading Athenaeum in the Feywild, Mhyr'as' version of “some” research is... slightly different than the average person's. And no, she is not taking constructive criticism about it.

Appendix

Greetings, Adventurers:

I've spent some time researching the merits of D&D Beyond. I know the popularity of D&D began to wane in the 1990s when digital videogames became more popular—maybe this is a good way to bring it back? (BBC 2). I'm also happy to find that D&D Beyond *is* officially licensed, so clearly the copyright owners of D&D are fine with it. I was a bit worried about copyright—librarians in the Feywild are notoriously ruthless about that. Regardless, I want to be clear: **no one is forced to use D&D Beyond.**

Personally, I think I'll use a combination of both physical and digital. I like being able to ctrl+f search mid-session, plus then that'll give access to the PHB for those of you who want to use it without having to pay for it yourselves. It's only \$5.99/mo to do that. Netflix costs more, and I probably use that less. Advantage on your first roll to the first person who reminds me to cancel that subscription btw.

I can post homebrew content and people can react to it on the forums for immediate feedback. Do you know how long it takes to get feedback on your research at my library back in the Feywild? Decades. Decades! (Burdick 85-86).

P.S. Did you know D&D Beyond has forums and news articles? I spent two hours following a rabbit hole of different types of Warlock patrons. Do you think my patron can see what I'm typing if I don't write it in my book?

This should be fun to find out.

P.S.S. Tintrí, you can't start with five swords, but maybe the group will go on a weapons raid quest. Wait. I regret that already, and it hasn't even happened yet. You get the idea—anything's possible. It's D&D!

Acknowledgements

A big—bigger than Jambart’s love of ale—to all my friends in my weekly D&D group who gave me permission to immortalize their characters in this little short story. Eliscia, Tyler, Holly, and Nick, here’s to many more adventures and the hope that Mhyr’as’ patron doesn’t kill us all. No promises, though.

Korin the half-elf rogue (and our voice of reason) belongs to Holly.

Wart the goblin druid (who is missing half his right ear but we love him anyway) belongs to Nick.

Tintrí the fire genasi cleric (who really likes shiny things and some good ol’ fashioned brawling) belongs to Eliscia.

Mhyr’as the warlock eladrin (who may or may not have sold her soul over a book) belongs to Kayla.

Jambart the gnome (he has a ring of hangover cure, don’t worry) and **Olviar** the high elf (she runs the city of Su’ken and is more ruthless than you might expect in a fight pit) are NPCs belonging to our Dungeon Master, Tyler.

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