

The Battle Net

*"But oh, beamish nephew, beware of the day,
If your Snark be a Boojum! For then
You will softly and suddenly vanish away,
And never be met with again!"*

---from The Hunting of the Snark by Lewis Carroll

Part One: The Lost Tome

Conjurer Ichabod joined Cain, Ogden and Wirt outside the Tavern of the Rising Sun. The corpse of a warrior hung upside-down from the tavern's wooden sign. It was obvious that his death had been an unpleasant one.

"Another one?" asked Ichabod.

"Aye," replied Cain, not looking away from the body. "The fourth in a fortnight."

"Why do they keep hanging them from my sign?" complained Ogden. It had gotten to the point where he almost couldn't decide whether to be horrified or indignant.

"The demons do seem to have some fascination with your sign," suggested Cain. "Perhaps the rising sun image..."

Griswold arrived with a ladder, interrupting Cain's train of thought. Without saying a word, he climbed up to cut the body down.

Despite Wirt's effort to catch it, the body hit the ground with a sickening thud.

"Git yere filthy little paws outta tha' man's pockets!" Griswold warned Wirt. "You show some respect fer the dead or I'll see ye with a hand to match that peg leg of yours!"

Despite the fact that it had only been a few weeks since Griswold had saved Wirt from the Butcher during the disastrous attempt to rescue Prince Albrecht, there was no love lost between the boy and the Master Blacksmith. Somewhere in that dark, evil dungeon, Wirt had lost more than just his left leg, but no one was quite sure what.

Wirt just sneered at Griswold. "He's been picked clean already anyway. Not that he'd have any use for any of his possessions if he hadn't." Wirt let the body drop the rest of the way to the ground.

"I suppose someone should say something," said Griswold climbing down from the ladder. "Where's Pepin?"

"He's looking after Gillian," volunteered Ogden. "She found the body. She's pretty upset."

"It's just as well," said Cain. "Pepin's skills are best directed toward the living."

"There's been no one to give Last Rites since Lazarus disappeared," said Ogden.

Griswold and Wirt each muttered something unintelligible about seeing to it that Lazarus would

require Last Rites if he ever reappeared in Tristram.

"Still someone should say something," insisted Griswold.

There was an awkward silence.

"All right," said Conjurer Ichabod. "I'll give it a go: O Lord. Look after the soul of this idiot. He didn't do himself or us any good, but he meant well. Amen."

There was another awkward silence and someone else muttered "Amen." Together, Ogden and Griswold lifted the body and carried it down the path toward the cemetery. Wirt shrugged his shoulders and hobbled off.

"That was a somewhat harsh assessment of our fallen hero, my friend," Cain told Ichabod as they walked toward the fountain in the Town Square.

"Hero," snorted Ichabod. "Monster bait is more like it. We've had a sorcerer, two warriors and a rogue..."

"They prefer to be called 'Sisters of the Sightless Eye,'" interrupted Cain.

"At the rate they keep getting killed, we oughtta call 'em 'hamburger.'" retorted Ichabod. "As I was saying, we've had four turn up dead, and at least five times that many go into the church and never come out again."

"The situation is quite grim," agreed Cain.

"It's more than grim. The demons get bolder every time they manage to kill one of our so-called heroes," said Ichabod. "It's only a matter of time before they're confident enough to overrun the town and finish us all off. We need a real hero; someone with experience. Someone we can trust not to go into the labyrinth and get eaten by monsters."

Cain leaned against the fountain and arched a bushy eyebrow at his companion. "Oh? And would you be that hero?"

"What are you? Some kind of nut? I'm a Conjurer. I conjure. The day I strap on an Obsidian Plate of Sorcery and march off into the church with nothing but a Short Staff of Mana and a cheery attitude is the same day that they drag me off to a madhouse!"

"Then what do you propose, my friend?" Cain unclipped a tin mug from his belt and filled it from the fountain. After drinking, he offered Ichabod a drink.

"No thanks. Maybe it's just me, but the town water is starting to have a funny aftertaste." Ichabod stared across the Talsande River at his house on the other side. "Have you ever heard of the Battle Net?"

"Only that there's no such thing," replied Cain. "Legends tell of a mystical net that can be used to capture heroes from other realms and invite them to serve you."

"That's the one," said Ichabod. "C'mon back to my workshop. I have reason to believe that the Battle

Net may be real and I may be able to get it."

The sage and the conjurer walked from the Town Square and crossed the wooden bridge over the river to the wood-and-stone building that was Conjurer Ichabod's home and workshop. The interior of the building was dominated by a single large chamber, most of which was, in turn, taken up by an 18-foot pentagram etched into the stone floor. The walls were lined with clutter and the tools of the conjurer's trade.

"A bit early for All Hallows Eve," said Cain taking the chair that Ichabod offered him. He was looking at a collection of animal costumes hanging on pegs near one of the workbenches.

"Farmer Lester has lost over thirty head of cattle since the troubles began," said Ichabod.

"Yes, he is down to a mere seven animals in his herd now."

"So he hired me to conjure a spirit to watch over his pastures. The hoofed mammal ensemble is part of the conjuration. You should see the suit of armor he gave me in payment," chuckled the conjurer. "I think he's been spending too much time with his cows, because there is something seriously not normal about that guy."

"There is something seriously not normal about Tristram these days," Cain replied grimly.

"Ah, here we go." Ichabod dragged a heavy trunk from under one of his workbenches. "Do you remember the sorcerer we found hanging from Ogden's sign late last week?"

"Of course," replied Cain. "Strange fellow. He had a Soldier's Axe of Sorcery. I tried to convince him that an axe was not the most suitable weapon for a spellcaster, but he insisted he would be okay. Said he had done a lot of hacking, and then laughed as if he had said something uproariously funny."

Ichabod opened the trunk. "Before he went off to become monster-chow, he left this trunk with me for safe keeping. You wouldn't believe the stuff he had in here." He removed four thick and dusty books from the trunk. "*The King in Yellow*," said Ichabod, reading the title of the first. "*The Necronomicon*, *The Helping Phriendly Book*, *The Creature of Flame*."

"Those are rare and powerful tomes," commented Cain making a concentrated effort to appear neutral.

Ichabod smirked. The old sage would play leapfrog with a mud runner for a chance to study those books. He pulled what appeared to be an ordinary spellbook out of the trunk.

"Etherealize," he told Cain, holding it up and pointing to the title.

"One of the Lost Spells," breathed Cain. "That is immeasurably valuable."

Next, Ichabod removed a folded tapestry. "Another lost artifact," he announced. "A Map of the Stars."

For once, Cain was speechless.

"But this is what really caught my attention." Ichabod held up a black leather-bound volume with gold

lettering.

Cain's jaw dropped. "The Horadrim be praised! One of *Jarulf's Mystic Tomes!*"

Ichabod nodded. "It bears the seal of Master-Scribe Pedro himself."

Cain made an effort to control himself. "I should like very much to study that tome," he said.

Conjurer Ichabod smiled. "When I'm done with it," he said, "You will bring over a bottle of Ogden's most expensive wine, and you and I will have a big book reading party."

"When you're done with it?"

"According to this book and the Map of the Stars, tonight, the time will be right to go find the Battle Net and use it to conjure a real hero to come to Tristram's aid," said Ichabod.

Cain nodded thoughtfully. "What you are proposing is not without risks. You could well wind up summoning something even worse than what plagues us now."

"True, but there's a point beyond which things can't get worse," replied Ichabod seriously. "I think Tristram is very near that point now. People are leaving or disappearing in droves. You sent your own daughter away."

"All I'm saying is be careful," said Cain. "Be careful."

"Always am," replied Conjurer Ichabod. "You just make sure you have that bottle of wine ready for tomorrow night."

Part Two: The Defiler and the Boojum

Conjurer Ichabod sat cross-legged in the center of the pentagram, facing the point, in the center of his workshop. The Map of the Stars lay spread out before him. Next to it was *Jarulf's Mystic Tome*, with several pages dog-eared for quick reference. Across his lap was a fully charged Staff of Fire Elementals. Around him, the pentagram glowed with a soft yellow-white light.

Shortly after Cain had left, Ichabod opened the Etherealize spellbook and read the Preface. As with most spellbooks, the Preface was actually a powerful Reader spell which, when invoked, magically transferred the knowledge contained in the book directly to the reader's mind. The process vaporized the book itself, of course, but Ichabod had studied the book carefully and took copious notes. Given some time and quiet, he'd be able to re-create - and possibly improve upon -- the Etherealize spell upon his return. That would be a major feather in his cap.

All was in readiness, except for one thing.

His Spirit-Guide was late again. Some beings just didn't know how to respond to a summoning.

A swarm of multi-colored fireflies leaped from the points of the pentagram and buzzed around the workshop a few times before stopping to hover near the animal costumes. The entity that had entered

the room was Ichabod's Spirit-Guide, nicknamed Sparki. Ichabod always thought of Sparki as female, and sometimes "she" was a little moody or flighty which made Ichabod think of her as a young or adolescent girl. The name and gender assignments were mostly arbitrary, of course. Sparki was actually an energy being who existed in psychic realms. The Astral Plane, the Ethereal Plane, the Dream Realms, and many others were her home. Ichabod found her knowledge of these dimensions invaluable in his conjurations. For her part, Sparki enjoyed Ichabod's company and his insights into the mysteries of corporeal existence.

"Isn't it a bit early for All Hallows Eve?" asked Sparki in a voice like soft chimes.

"Don't you start with me too," replied Ichabod. "I've been sitting here for an hour."

"Sorry," apologized Sparki.

"My ass is asleep," complained Ichabod.

"At least, you have an ass," replied his Spirit-Guide drifting closer to him.

"It's not all it's cracked up to be."

The lights twinkled in a pattern that Ichabod had since learned to recognize as a frown. "Is that a pun?" asked Sparki.

"No."

"Oh."

"I need your help for a major conjuration tonight."

"I see," replied the Spirit-Guide. "Will we be conjuring up a view of Gillian bathing again?"

Ichabod didn't rise to the bait. "No, I need you to help me find the Battle Net."

The twinkling lights dimmed to a dull gray hue for several seconds. "For a second, I thought you said you wanted to find the Battle Net."

"That's right."

The lights dimmed again. "Aside from the fact that that would be incredibly dangerous, it also requires one of the Lost Spells to even start," said the Spirit-Guide.

"Etherealize? It's taken care of. I understand that we can find the Battle Net by way of the Ethereal Plane."

The lights buzzed around the pile of ash that was all that remained of the Etherealize spellbook. "Wow. I didn't know there were any of these left. I hope you made some copies before you invoked it," she said flashing blue and white.

"I jotted down some of the major points," said Ichabod. "It seems like a dangerously unstable spell. I get the feeling that it became a Lost Spell on purpose." Ichabod paused thoughtfully. "But it will serve our purposes. Will you be able to lead me to the Battle Net once I'm Ethereal?"

"Yes, but are you prepared? Going onto the Ethereal Plane is no trip to the pub. And most mortals who seek the Battle Net wind up dead or insane or both."

Ichabod tapped an amulet hanging around his neck. "It's an Amulet of Clarity. It should protect me from psychic attacks. I'll also be bringing along my staff and a belt full of Mana potions."

"You're no combat sorcerer. Are you sure you want to do this?" pressed Sparki.

"It's important. You know how I know? When I told Cain about this earlier today, he wished me luck and told me to be careful. But he didn't try to talk me out of it. Tristram's in dire straits."

"OK. It's just that I'd hate it if anything happened to you, Ichabod."

Ichabod started casting the Etherealize spell.

"Last chance: Are you sure you wouldn't rather go watch Gillian bathe?"

Ichabod tucked *Jarulf's Mystic Tome* and the Map of the Stars inside his robe, picked up his staff, and finished casting the spell. It took all his concentration and almost completely drained him of Mana. Quickly, Ichabod drank two of the blue potions on his belt to rejuvenate himself. Around him, the room seemed to disappear into a light mist. An observer looking into the workshop from the doorway would have seen Conjurer Ichabod turn ghost-like and insubstantial.

Conjurer Ichabod opened *Jarulf's Mystic Tome* to the first dog-eared page and read it aloud. The page vaporized as the spell it contained was released. An oval-shaped glowing blue portal opened in the center of the pentagram. Ichabod was familiar with the Horadrim Portal spell. Most of the locals called it the Town Portal, because anyone who stepped through would come out the other side at a spot in town, just northeast of the Town Square. What wasn't known to most people was the fact that, if you were Ethereal and went into a Horadrim Portal, you weren't obligated to come out the other side. Ichabod stood and stepped through the Portal, and then stepped "sideways" onto the Ethereal Plane. Being on the Ethereal Plane was like being in a thick winter fog, only without the wet and cold.

"According to the Tome," Ichabod said to Sparki, "I can get to the Battle Net by casting a second Horadrim Portal."

"That sounds about right," said Sparki hovering around him. Her glowing lights left silvery trails in the Ether when she moved or spoke.

Ichabod opened another Portal and stepped through onto a black plane lit by a ghoulish green glow. Sparki followed. The ground was as smooth and hard as polished obsidian and, from horizon-to-horizon, the sky was criss-crossed with glowing green thread-like lines. Every few moments, pulses of colored light would zip along one of the strands and disappear from sight. As Ichabod stood and got his bearings, the green threads began fading to a light blue, and then to yellow. Across the plane, Horadrim Portals opened and closed at random. There were the blue ones that were familiar to Ichabod, but there were also green ones, red ones, black ones, yellow ones and white ones. The effect was like looking at a sea of sparkling jewels laid out on black velvet.

"The Tome's missing a bunch of pages at this point," Ichabod told his guide. "Any idea how to get to the Battle Net from here?"

"The Battle Net? You're soaking in it," replied Sparki.

"Come again?"

"Look around you," explained Sparki. "See how those lines of energy cross each other? They form a giant net: The Battle Net."

Conjurer Ichabod looked out at the Battle Net. "It looks more like a web than a net."

"Some people call it that as well."

Ichabod's heart sank. "Either way, there's no way I'm going to fit it in my backpack and take it back to Tristram. What am I going to do? How can I summon a hero to save us with that?"

"The strands control the Portals," explained Sparki, "The Portals open into other worlds. Presumably, your hero will come from one of those other worlds."

"How can I tell which Portal?"

"Doesn't your book tell you?"

"It's only one of a collection," said Ichabod, "and, like I said, I'm a few pages short of a complete volume."

"That's what I've always suspected," teased Sparki. "Well, I'll tell you what I've heard: See those pulses of light traveling along the strands?"

"Yeah?"

"Some say those are the voices of the gods. To touch one is to hear their voices."

"Have you ever heard them?"

"No way. Fooling around with mortals like you is plenty for me..."

"You'd love to fool around with a mortal like me," said Ichabod looking over at a half-dozen glowing strands poking out of the ground.

Sparki followed him to the threads. "If I had a body, I'd be on you like head lice on Wirt."

"Ugh. There's a titillating picture."

"Is that sarcasm?"

"Yes."

Sparki glowed a soft gray again. "See? Mortals are confusing enough. Who needs to screw around with the gods?"

"There's a great deal of wisdom in what you say," agreed Ichabod, hoping he hadn't hurt her feelings.

"But I'm not working with a lot of choices here." He studied the strands before him, watching them shift in color from cyan to magenta to orange. Up close, it was clear that the pulses were near constant. It was only the bigger ones that he had seen from a distance. "So I just grab hold and get instantly enlightened?"

"I guess...", said Sparki hesitantly. "Be careful."

"Here goes nothing," said Ichabod. Saying so, he grasped a strand in each hand. A moment later, he was screaming as thousands of pulses arced through his body. A moment after that, he was on his backside several yards away.

"Ichabod? Ichabod, speak to me! Are you okay?" Sparki was buzzing around him. She twinkled bright laser-red and orange as she always did when she was worried. "Speak to me!"

"100010101011101010110111011010110111110," said Ichabod. His hair and robe were singed and a puff of smoke came out of his mouth.

"What?"

"Zak protect me!" Sparki knew Ichabod well enough to know how rare it was for him to utter a religious oath with even mock sincerity.

"What happened?"

"I think, if it hadn't been for the Amulet of Clarity, my mind would have been fried."

Sparki's bright red anxiety has dulled to maroon concern. "I guess the secrets of the gods and the universe could be too much for a mortal mind to contain."

"Secrets of the universe?" retorted Ichabod in disgust as he stood up. "It was mostly banter and griping about PK's"

"What's a PK?"

"I dunno. Apparently, the gods like to kill each other for sport and then complain about it a lot," said Ichabod shaking his head. "If I succeed in nothing else today, at least I've justified my atheism. The gods are even more screwed up than we are."

"I'm sorry your quest was fruitless."

"I didn't say that. I learned a lot, and not all of it was useless. When the gods aren't complaining about getting killed, they brag about their prowess at killing other gods. One name came up repeatedly. There is a being called the Stalker who is, apparently, a slayer of god-slayers."

"A slayer of the slayers of gods?"

"If that's not more than a match for whatever's terrorizing Tristram, nothing is," said Ichabod. "The Portal to the Stalker's realm is right over..." He stopped. "Sparki, what's happening to those threads?"

He was looking at a large knot of threads in the distance. The threads and the very space containing

them were rippling. It made Ichabod think of a large ball underneath a sheet, distorting the otherwise flat surface. The threads within the distortion changed from glowing colors to a flat, dead gray. The distortion was rolling toward them with steady speed.

"The Boojum!" screamed Sparki, suddenly an almost blinding red.

As it drew nearer, the distortion took on the form of a roiling mass of eyes and grasping tentacles. Ichabod leveled his staff at the monster and unleashed a trio of Fire Elementals. The burning sprites were each about the size of children and they raced toward the creature whooping with delight. As they approached it, they began to move slower and slower, until, finally, they froze. A tentacle lanced out at each of them and the three Fire Elementals disappeared. They didn't explode or burn out. They simply vanished.

"Run!" cried Sparki. She had gone from red to infrared. She was just a voice issuing from a feverish panicked hotspot in midair. "And don't look at the eyes!"

Ichabod turned to run. "Where?" he wanted to know. The Boojum was moving faster than he could run.

"Anywhere!" replied Sparki.

Ichabod conjured a pair of Guardians to distract the creature. The three-headed fire-spitting dragons would have given any other creature pause, but they met the same fate as the Fire Elementals.

"Through there!" Sparki darted through a black Portal. A black Portal would not have been Ichabod's first choice, but it was too late to argue. He followed his Spirit-Guide and the Portal closed behind him.

He stumbled out the other side of the Portal into a dark foul-smelling cavern. The walls, floors and ceiling oozed with acidic slime. Distant alien noises echoed throughout the cavern.

Ichabod found a fairly solid spot and sat down. He drank a Mana potion to replenish what he'd spent conjuring the Guardians.

"What in Heaven's name was that?"

Sparki was a calmer, but still agitated, rusty hue. "Most of the beings you encounter in the Battle Net are just passing through, but there's one native: The Boojum. It feeds on the threads and anything it catches. Whatever it touches usually just disappears, although I've also heard of things it touches morphing into other objects."

"Are we safe?"

"Probably. Mostly it seems to lurk around big clumps of strands, but the Boojum's been known to attack prey outside the Battle Net," said Sparki. "In any event, I'd wait awhile before trying to go back."

"So what do we do until then?"

"Take in some of the lovely scenery?" suggested Sparki.

"Was that irony?"

"I've been practicing," said Sparki, pleased.

"This place looks like the inside of someone's stomach," commented Ichabod.

"Perhaps it is."

"There's an unpleasant idea."

"Maybe we can find a hero here," suggested Sparki.

"I'm not entirely sure exactly where 'here' is," said Ichabod. "Anyway, what kind of hero would be hanging around this dump? The Incredible Gastro-Man?"

"And his faithful squire, Heartburn-Boy," added Sparki gleefully.

"And don't forget..." Ichabod stopped. The echoes of heavy footsteps squishing across the cavern floor drew nearer. There was only one way into the cavern they occupied. That could be either good or bad, Ichabod decided. Good, because there was less chance of getting surrounded. Bad, because there was no escape. Ichabod grasped the Staff of Fire Elementals and pressed himself against a wall. There was always a chance that hiding might work. Taking Ichabod's lead, Sparki disappeared through a nearby wall.

The source of the threatening footsteps was not long in coming. A dozen armored giants, each tall enough and bulky enough to look an Obsidian Lord in the eye comfortably, marched past Ichabod's hiding place.

Ichabod had been holding his breath and was about to let it out when the last giant stopped.

"Hold up," said the giant, turning and looking directly at Ichabod. His voice sounded as if it was coming from the bottom of a well. The other giants stopped. "It looks like we've got a survivor," he told the other giants.

Each giant carried a stout metal club the size of a horse's leg. Ichabod leveled his staff at them. If one or two of the other giants moved just a bit closer to the one that had spotted him, he might be able to take out two or three with a single blast.

For his part, the Confederate Marine saw a skinny man in a robe, pointing a stick at him, and was unconcerned. Obviously he was the wretched survivor of the most recent Zerg raid and had been hiding, terrorized, in this alcove at the bottom of a Defiler mound ever since. "Take it easy," he told Ichabod. He slung his rifle over his shoulder and held his hands up to show he meant no harm. "We won't hurt you. Who are you?"

Ichabod lowered the staff a degree, still ready to blast away if the situation warranted it. "I am Conjuror Ichabod of Tristram."

One of the other giants chortled. "Sounds like someone's been breathing the fumes down here for awhile," he said in the same bottom-of-a-well voice.

From the front of the pack, a female giant - at least, thought Ichabod, its voice sounded like a woman's voice - spoke: "Bring him, leave him, or shoot him. Our primary objective is to clean the bugs out of this hive and torch it. We're not equipped to wet-nurse any refugees. Let's keep moving."

The other giants began to move along. "You'd better come with us," the first giant told Ichabod as he turned to follow his squad. "It's going to get pretty hairy down here and you don't want to be by yourself when we turn on the big bug zappers."

"Could these be your heroes?" whispered Sparki. Somewhere along the line, she had hidden inside Ichabod's robe.

"They're big and impressive-looking," Ichabod whispered back, "but we don't know a thing about them."

"They seem to be on a quest," noted Sparki.

The tunnel opened up into a huge cavern. Drifting clouds of black mist prevented Ichabod from seeing all the way to the other side. The floor was spotted with bubbling green acid pits, and lumpy pods adorned every surface. The smallest were the size of oranges, but the biggest could have easily contained several horses.

The female giant at the head of the line spoke: "This is it, Marines! You know the routine. Let's rock and roll!"

The armored warriors split into three teams of four: One to the left, one to the right, and one down the center. Ichabod followed the giant who had first addressed him along the left flank. He was startled when they drew what he had taken to be clubs and pointed them at the pods. Each time a giant pointed his weapon at a pod, there was a flash of fire and a deafening bang, and the target exploded.

One member of each squad carried no such weapon, however. These individuals wore red and orange armor, and when they pointed at a target, a long tongue of flame lanced out to engulf it.

The inhabitants of the cavern were not long in taking action against the intruders. Out of the acid pools crawled every variety of nightmare Ichabod had ever imagined. Scorpions, spiders, worms, beetles and impossible disgusting combinations thereof. The smallest were the size of dogs, while the biggest loomed over his armored allies. They threw themselves at the armored intruders.

At first they seemed no match for the giants' weapons, but then the biggest acid pool in the cavern began to bubble furiously. The Master of this Festering Nest entered the fray. Like the other inhabitants of the cavern, it was insectoid. It looked like a twenty-foot silverfish with a snake nest of writhing tentacles sticking out the front end. The tentacles surrounded a three-jawed mouth equipped with mandibles that looked as though they could crack a dragon turtle's shell like a walnut. Its hide squirmed with thousands upon thousands of lesser creatures.

"It's the Defiler!" shouted one of the giants. "Get it!"

The giants ignored whoever or whatever they were currently battling and turned their attention to the new monster. At the monster's command, the black mist that Ichabod had seen earlier surrounded it, and Ichabod could see that the mist actually consisted of clouds of stinging biting insects.

The clouds engulfed the other two squads of warriors. Ichabod's squad, being slightly further away, was, for the moment, ignored. The insects made it impossible for the warriors to aim their strange weapons and, even worse, they quickly ate their way through the flexible joints of the warriors' armor.

The Defiler spat a stream of acid at one of the squads and there was an echoing scream as one of the giants died.

The insect swarm began to move toward Ichabod's squad. The orange giant in Ichabod's group was able to clear a path through the swarm with his flamethrower, but the path stayed clear only where the flames were present. The swarm quickly moved to attack their flanks.

Ichabod conjured four Fire Elementals who charged into the swarm with great effect. Against a normal-sized opponent, Elementals would explode and burn themselves out, but these tiny insects were more like fuel for their fires. The Elementals grew larger and larger as they ignited each bug in the swarm before finally burning out.

"Who are you?" Ichabod's giant asked him, clearly impressed.

"I told you: I am Conjurer Ichabod of Tristram," replied Ichabod over the din. "But I'm not a combat sorcerer."

"Whatever. You've given us a clear shot at the Defiler!" He and his companions were already shooting at the monster with their strange loud weapons. The Defiler screamed in pain as the hypersonic bullets penetrated its armored hide, but instead of retreating, it advanced into the onslaught. A long sticky tongue shot out of its mouth and snared a scorpion-tarantula the size of a pony. It devoured the creature in two sloppy bites. The act of cannibalism seemed to restore the creature's strength and Ichabod could see that its wounds were healing rapidly.

It ate two more members of its hellish brood and then spat a stream of acid at the flame-throwing giant. The mighty armor melted like butter in a forge and the giant didn't even have time to scream.

Meanwhile, the rest of the swarm disengaged from the other squadrons and Ichabod noticed with a sinking feeling that not a single one of the other eight giants remained standing.

The remaining giants in Ichabod's squad kept firing, bravely undeterred by the loss of their comrades. A tentacle tipped with a scythe-like claw lashed out and cut open the armor of the giant on point. Ichabod hadn't given any thought to what these warriors looked like without their armor - ogres of some sort he had supposed - so he was startled to see an ordinary human woman wriggle out of the sparking remains of the mighty armor.

She didn't stand a chance. The long tongue shot out and reeled her in. One of the other giants leaped to her aid only to be knocked away, the swarm and the acid already eating away at his armor. A Fire

Elemental burst against the Defiler's leg with only limited effect.

Just before the Defiler consumed her, the woman spat into its horrific face. In that instant, Ichabod had to reassess his preconceptions about heroes. He wondered if that was how the heroes hanging from Ogden's sign had died. Defiant and fighting to his or her last breath.

The armored warrior who had been knocked away leaped into the Defiler's face, his armor smoking and sparking. The giant mandibles grabbed him and began crushing the armor. He drove the barrel of his weapon into the Defiler's hellish mouth and pulled the trigger.

The creature's head exploded in a shower of acid that instantly killed the warrior.

The Defiler hadn't even hit the ground when two of the biggest pods nearby burst open. Two small Defilers - each about ten feet long - slithered out and wasted no time attacking. One grabbed the last warrior and began crushing the armor. Ichabod conjured a Bone Spirit.

It was not a conjuration he liked very much, because he had to imbue the ghostly skeleton with a portion of his own life force. But this was no time to dwell on trivialities. The Bone Spirit wrapped itself around the juvenile Defiler and began draining the life out of it. Weakened, the creature fell to a single hydraulic punch from its would-be prey.

Then the second Defiler grabbed Ichabod with its tongue. To Ichabod's surprise, it spoke: "My brood shall feed on your lands and its people," it said in a voice like a hornet's nest full of hate. "You are nothing but cattle to us. We will butcher you and our eggs with hatch in your bloated stinking bodies."

Four more Defiler pods burst open.

Suddenly, Sparki was near his ear. "The Etherealize spell," she reminded him. "This would be a good time to leave."

Ichabod didn't waste time wondering whether Sparki was demonstrating a new skill for understatement. He cast the spell. He had no way of knowing that the universe he was visiting had a different set of physics than those he knew. How could he have known that the local fabric of space-time was becoming increasingly offended each time he cast a spell or conjured a creature? Had he known this, though, it would not have surprised him that the powerful and unstable Etherealize spell would be the last straw. The resulting blast pulled the entire cavern and every squirming, writhing monstrosity in it into the Battle Net.

Ichabod heard a startled "What the...?" from the surviving giant. The Defiler who had Ichabod was also startled and released him.

"We've got to get out of here!" cried Sparki. "This much activity in the Battle Net is sure to attract the Boojum!"

Even before Sparki completed her dire prediction, there were eyes and tentacles everywhere. Defilers and Defiler-spawn seized up and vanished in droves as the Boojum went to work.

Ichabod spotted the blue Portal back to Tristram. "Follow me!" he called to the confused Confederate Marine.

"Where are we?" he wanted to know.

"Later! We have to leave now or not at all!" warned Ichabod.

Not liking any of the alternatives, the armored giant followed the conjurer. His cybernetically assisted legs allow him to catch up with Ichabod easily.

"Where are we going?"

"Some place safer than this," replied Ichabod. "Through that blue Portal."

"Works for me," said the giant. "I'm Corporal Winslow Jefferson of the ConfederrrrrraaaaaaaatTTTTTTTTT..." He lagged behind and froze.

Ichabod turned just in time to see Corporal Winslow Jefferson of the Confederate Marines vanish at the Boojum's touch. He also saw the Boojum's eyes.

Ichabod was perfectly aware of what was happening and knew he had any number of options such as running or casting a Horadrim Portal. Only he couldn't make his body move fast enough to carry any of them out. His thoughts were racing but his body seemed to lag further and further behind.

Dozens of eyes and tendrils surrounded him. Two slender tentacles reached into his robe and he felt the weight of *Jarulf's Tome* and the Map of the Stars vanish. A third tendril touched the Amulet of Clarity, and he felt the amulet's weight change. Two giant eyes loomed near his face, one cat-like and the other baby-blue, and in their reflection, Ichabod could see that there was now a half-empty Mana potion hanging where the Amulet of Clarity had been. The roiling mass of eyes and tentacles was finished playing with him and moved in for the kill.

Then there were a dozen flashes like lightning directly in Ichabod's face as Sparki moved between him and the Boojum. The dazzling white light broke the contact between Ichabod and the Boojum and Ichabod rolled out from under it.

"Run," cried Sparki. "Ichabod..." And then his Spirit-Guide softly and suddenly vanished away at the Boojum's touch.

Ichabod struggled to his feet, only to be sent sprawling once again by a massive tentacle, but not one of the Boojum's. "Cattle!" threatened the Defiler. "Your people are nothing but fattened cows to feed my brood!"

The blow bounced Ichabod directly into a mass of glowing strands, and once again thousands of pulses arced through his body. Only this time, the Amulet of Clarity had been replaced with a useless potion. Just before his consciousness shattered into electronic chaos, one semi-relevant fact floated to the top: The gods had another name for the Boojum. They called it the Lag Monster.

After a second or two, the strands that Ichabod had fallen against built up a big enough charge to throw him off. Lady Fortune decided to throw Ichabod a bone, and the shock threw him right through

the Portal home. As he passed through it, he caught a glimpse of the Defiler chasing after him, and the Boojum looming up large behind it.

Ichabod materialized in the center of his workshop, in the center of the pentagram. Groggily, he stood. His quest had failed, but at least he was safe.

Then the entire Defiler mound burst through the floor.

When Ichabod awoke, he was lying in the mud on the other side of the Talsande River. His home and workshop had been destroyed, replaced by what looked like a giant festering boil in the earth itself. He knew what would come out if any foolish hero dared to try and lance that boil.

"Cattle," he said standing up. "Heh."

He picked up and pocketed a couple of his belongings that had also been blown across the river, including a Rune Bomb. The armor that Farmer Lester had paid to him lay draped across a fallen log. "We're nothing but cattle." He began to giggle as he gathered the Bovine Plate.

Then he saw the cow costume from the conjuration that had earned him that armor in the first place. Conjurer Ichabod began to guffaw and sob uncontrollably. "Cattle. I'm just a cow. Moo. I'm just a cow, okay?"

He put on the costume and headed for the pasture.

End.