

# Matchmaking

by Bret Sheeley

The barkeep grunted as the small pain in his back acted up again. He was helping his waitress carry the round wooden table out from the rear room to the middle of the floor. The lizardmen had burst through the front door and after much damage the adventurers had fought their way outside. What happened after that was not his concern. His concern was getting the tavern up and running again. Besides, stuff like this happened all the time. It was the reason his rear room was filled with all sorts of extra tables, chairs, place settings, oil lamps, mugs, barstools, and everything else that would be broken in a fight. It was a slow night so far. Closing was in five hours, and he had only brought two new tables out since opening.

His waitress left him rubbing his back in the middle of the crowded tavern while she went to retrieve the replacement chairs. Unfortunately none of them survived the fight. Two were broken when a lizardman was flipped over by a large fighter-type. Two more were destroyed when swung at both human and inhuman faces in the conflict.

Nearby a gruff dwarf turned from his meal holding up a pitcher containing the slow dripping foam of the remnants of beer. “Anuthr mug barkeep!” he said. Sighing, the barkeep stopped nursing his ache. It was still painful, but the customers came first no matter what. Only if he was bleeding would he ignore a call but not before that. He had decided on where the line was drawn years ago, and he stuck to it.

“Yessir,” he said with a purposeful smile. “I’ll get that to you now, sir.” He received two more additional orders by the time he got behind the bar, and in his mind he stocked them away in a mental queue. First order first, he filled a pitcher for the dwarf, red wine for a half-elf, and two refills spiced milk for the two yellow spotted cat-folk women sitting near the fireplace. Making a quick circuit of the room, he delivered the drinks as smoothly as possible. In doing so, two more requests were made. Luckily his buxom waitress had finished resetting the last of the new tables and was able to take care of several of the customers while he fulfilled the new orders. Taking a place up against a wall so he could see out over most of the room, he put his hand to the spot on his back again. Rubbing it in circles didn’t make it feel better exactly. He just felt the rubbing in addition to the ache, and if it wasn’t solely the ache then it was an improvement.

“A hard but honest life you have,” said a cloaked figure in the corner. A long stemmed pipe protruded from the deeper darkness where the man’s face should be. The corner was already dark, and the deep green hood made seeing the speaker’s features impossible.

There were many corners like that in the tavern, heavily shadowed. The barkeep had made sure the room was constructed that way. For good or ill, there were many who wanted their mysterious shadows.

"It pays well enough when business is good, more than most think." He had no fear of attracting thieves with comments like that. If they tried to rob him, they would never be able to find jobs here again, and he was the most popular tavern in town. "Would you like a menu?"

"No, thank you," he said with a deep yet smooth voice.

The barkeep did not mind. The shadow-corner types never ordered food and rarely had drinks. As such, he had set up things for other options. "We also have a number of tobacco leaves from places near and far."

"No," the figure said with a stronger, slightly annoyed voice. "Thank you."

Well, it was only an option.

"I simply wish not to be disturbed. I am waiting... for friends." The last two words were said with a tone of misdirection and irony. Again the barkeep was not surprised. "And I believe they are here." The figure's hood turned in the direction of the table with the dwarf who had recently gotten a refill.

"That's not the group you'll want," the barkeep said flatly.

The figure had not appeared to hear him. At least at first. The voices coming from the crowds mixed together. For most men, the words would clutter together in their heads, nothing being made out as anything intelligible. The barkeep's ears were a little sharper than that. The figure in the shadows balked. "Excuse me, what?"

"I said that's not the group you'll want. I assume you're planning on either hiring them for a job or forcing them onto some duty or adventure. But I'm telling you, they're not the ones you want."

The pipe was lowered onto the table. "And what, pray tell, makes you think you know my needs?" The voice had changed, sounding more regal and commanding than before. It did not bother the barkeep. This was far from the first time he had been in conversations like this.

"See that man over there, in the far corner." He nodded his head across the room towards the opposite shadowy corner. Sitting there alone in a chair was an older man in a dusty tan jacket that dropped down from shoulders to floor. Even sitting it flowed over his knees and covered his feet. The man had a black patch worn over one eye along with a wide brimmed brown hat on his head. Beneath the rim, sitting on each shoulder was a raven or crow. The barkeep wasn't sure. Animals weren't his strong suit.

"I see him," the figure in shadows said.

"He's been eyeing that group for the last two nights, and tonight is the third. He will be getting their attentions soon."

“Then I will make sure to get their attentions first.” He shifted in his seat to get up.

“Uhhhh,” said the barkeep with a raised finger. “Considering certain details I will not bore you with, I believe your would-be competitor would give you some difficulty. Besides, you’ve only been watching them for the last hour.”

“And I believe you are meddling in affairs you do not even have the slightest ability to comprehend!” And yet the figure in the shadows had still not completely gotten up out of his chair. “I need a valiant group of heroes pure of heart to travel the lands on a mission of greatest importance. I will not let some bird-loving fool get in the way of—”

The barkeep held his hand up, gesturing to calm the man’s words. It instead resulted in the man quieting instantly. Before the shadowy figure could explode in anger, the barkeep quickly said, “Then they are certainly not the ones for you. They don’t seem like it, but three out of the six in that group are murderers. You need adventurers who are pure. Not ones who are beginning a path of redemption.”

The shadowy figure sat back down in such a stunned silence the barkeep could tell he was in shock. “How can you know?”

While delivering and taking orders, the barkeep heard more than just gripes about the food quality or local taxes or threats made by creatures hiding just off of the roads. He heard stories of people’s lives: what they were hoping for, what type of services they needed to be done, or what type of people they wanted to complete a service they wanted done. That variety of sorts.

People needed people, and that was the reason why most of the customers came here.

Adventurers always needed food and drink, and those needing adventurers needed food and drink. Here they could fill their stomachs and wet their tongues easily enough, and in time, if one knew what they were looking for, their other requirements could also be fulfilled. Most joked how all epic adventures began in a bar or tavern, but that was the truth. It’s where you go to meet people. The barkeep knew this to be the reason, and so he helped those people get together. Happy customers came back (if they lived) or at least spread word. It was good for business.

“I listen,” said the barkeep. “They don’t say things outright, but there are words between words. Now, who you’re looking for is sitting at the bar, which I will need to get back to soon.”

“Who?” the figure asked.

“The one two stools from the wide man in the steel grey coat.”

“I am not looking for a single man,” he growled.

“No, but nor is he really alone. He comes here every so often, but he always comes in an hour before the rest of his friends do. One of them had a

father who had died with a massive debt, and this man comes into the bar to make sure the collectors aren't here to harass his friend for the money. It's clear tonight, so once he leaves in a few minutes, all of them will return. They are good people. Honest folk. Even the guy being hunted down is an innocent. He didn't get anything from his father, who was a broke arrogant bastard, so the collectors are just trying to wring money out of him for no reason. It's a little bit of baggage, I admit. But if the cause is right, I think you will do well by them."

The figure in the shadows remained quiet, staring at the back of the man the barkeep talked about. In that time, one of the birds from the figure in the far corner flew over to the center table, right in front of the dwarf.

"What the bloody-?" A flash of light sparked magically from the raven's eyes. It was directed into the gaze of the dwarf who was looking right at it. A surprised expression on the dwarf became one of emotional pain. "... oh gods.... I killed them," he muttered. The barkeep couldn't hear him in the noise, but the words were plain on the lips. His party members looked from the dwarf to each other and then the bird. The bird's eyes flashed again, and soon all of them looked distressed. Several were weeping.

The bird was now gone from the table. Without wasting time by traversing the spacing between, it was back on the eye-patched man's shoulder again, giving a small caw towards the bird on the other shoulder. The old man had a smile on his face. With that, he stood up, tossed a few coin down, and left the tavern.

"Wait!" the dwarf called out. He finally had seen the man with the birds in the middle of his weeping. He picked up his things and ran out of the tavern. The others dropped some coin and followed out.

While this was going on, the man at the bar whom the barkeep had pointed out to the figure in the shadows gave the room a sweep with his eyes. He ignored the incident with the other party. He was too concerned about his friend's wellbeing right now. Satisfied the place was safe, he left the tavern as well.

"I pray you are right, bartender." There was apprehension coming from under that dark green hood, but the barkeep showed no concern. He knew he was right.

"Give them a half-hour to show up and another half-hour to get something to eat. If they mention need of a job of some sort, I can make an offhand reference to have their attentions turn to you. But if you prefer I can also let you handle it."

The figure was quiet. "Either way," he said finally.

With that, the barkeep returned to the bar. The waitress gave him a glare. "That one didn't order anything beyond a refill of the nut bowl. Did you have to spend so much time with him?"

“A customer is a customer,” the barkeep said. “Even if he didn’t pay, those he will eventually hire will.” He took a few orders from customers and collected the payments left behind. The waitress got the bird-man’s payment and came back after taking a few orders.

She returned to the bar and spoke into his ear. “Two ales, a stew, and cheeses for table eight where the woman with the off-orange hair is an inexperienced sorceress hoping to battle dragons someday. Table ten wants three plates of elven carrowicks, two of them spicy with waters and white wines, along with a plate of rare veal. That one is hoping to break a curse of lycanthropy that has haunted his family since gods know when.”

“Wolven or other type?”

“Spider, and he’s not actually elven. He’s a drow, albino with his hair dyed.”

The barkeep nodded and sent the orders into the kitchen.

Time rolled by. Those who were the targets of the figure in the shadows (table two) were polite and friendly. They asked how things were going, and the barkeep put on airs of things being queer and unnatural. He fulfilled his promise and said he was nervous about the strange one in the corner. “Something doesn’t feel right with him. He doesn’t order anything, but there he sits.” The leader of the group turned, noted the figure, and after a few minutes went to speak to him. What began with inquiries of who the figure was turned into an acceptance of a plea for help involving the destruction of a powerful artifact of vile evil. In the hour table two and corner table three were cleared. The figure had left a very good tip considering he didn’t order anything.

Passing by one of the occupied smaller tables the barkeep saw that the wick in the lamp had gone out. “Pardon me,” he said to the red-haired man in golden and silver clothes sitting there as he relit the fire.

The well-dressed man simply nodded and continued to watch the room as the barkeep noted he had not touched his glass of water. The barkeep straightened up and blinked. The shadow of the man projected up onto the wall from the tiny flame showed to have large curling horns coming from a broad head with pointed ears. The shadows of two wings spread out from his shadow’s as well. The barkeep coughed and bent again to pinch the flame out. “Sorry about that, maybe I should put that-”

“I like the fire,” the man said with a gravely voice. The smell of brimstone spilled from his breath.

“Well then,” said the barkeep. “Let’s make this all the better then.” He reached over to the neighboring table that was just cleared and took its lamp. Moving the two flames to each side of the small table, the barkeep looked up on the wall. Both shadows were there, but the two separated light sources made

the forms indistinct. Only if someone knew what they were looking for would have been able to make out the demonic shapes. "Two flames are better than one."

A cruel but pleased smile formed on the man's lips as he looked at the two flickers of fire in front of him. Rolling his eyes, the barkeep went back to work. Before he came back, the red-haired man was speaking to two women. Both wore the armor of paladins, but their armor was black. The barkeep was glad he didn't have to match *everybody* up in this tavern.

Business started to slow after a messenger for either a royal or noblewoman stumbled into the tavern and fell upon the table where one group was seated. Some obscure and faintly heard dying words were given, and soon the to-be heroes left. His waitress cursed before walking over to table five, where they were seated. Pardoning himself from the bar, the barkeep went to help her remove the corpse. He wish she would get more used to things. The adventurers always left the corpse behind. It shouldn't be anything new.

Getting back to the bar he noticed he had a new customer. A very short individual, one of the diminutive races he was sure, was sitting on one of the barstools. His head was just barely reaching the counter, and the expression his face was one of worry and fatigue. His coat was bulky, and he kept it closed in front with one hand.

*He's either got a powerful artifact or a child with him, the barkeep thought to himself. "What can I get you?"*

*"Just milk please," he replied nervously.*

*Child.* Without additional question, he poured a tall thin glass of milk and even slipped him a drip-cloth in a manner no one else could see. The halfling flinched in surprise, and then quickly started to soak the cloth with the milk. "Thank you," he said in a hushed tone almost totally drowned out by the rest of the din. "You, uh, don't happen to know where I can find an orphanage. Or someone else who could help me in regards to, uh..." He opened up his jacket just enough to let the barkeep see the tiny head of the human babe. The customer slowly put the cloth to the baby's mouth. He (or she, the barkeep could not tell the child was so young) yawned and then closed its mouth on it, starting to suck.

The barkeep smiled warmly and nodded. "It may not be exactly who you are looking for, but I know someone who can help. You see that thin white-haired woman over there?" He pointed to an elven woman of indeterminate age and yet great beauty who was sitting at a table with two other gentlemen. Her blue dress was thin, hinting at transparency, yet it showed nothing underneath. The lashes curled out from her eyes a full inch,

thick and black. Her hair was not really white. It was silver and done up in a bun. Two sticks protruded from either side of a violet lotus flower resting off-center from the back of her head. "Listen carefully, and don't let it circulate. Also, you did not hear this from me. That woman is a powerful diviner. She will be able to give you information on either where the child came from, or where the child is headed. Maybe even both. Be polite, and if her guardians give you any gruff, stand strong. Only if the child is in danger should you back away, and also if the men do not let you get too close to her, make sure she sees the babe. She will help you."

The halfling thanked him and cautiously slid off the stool, still carefully holding the milk-soaked cloth near the baby's mouth. The barkeep took an order of ale and cheese from the next person at the bar before heading into the kitchen.

"I understand your needs exactly," he later told the tall man with the pointed hat and long white beard. "Unfortunately the boy you're looking for is probably too young to come in here regularly. How sure are you that he's in this town?"

"Very." The wizard's voice sounded ancient, and his eyes sparkled with a light of knowledge from beyond the boundaries of time. In his hands was a staff made of old knotted wood. Even in the dim light of the tavern, a faint glow shined from the gnarled end on top.

The barkeep nodded and poured the wizard a small amount of good dwarven brew. "Alright. Odds are the kid you're looking for is being raised by an uncle in town. It may not really be his uncle, or the kid may think his guardian actually is his father, but that doesn't matter." Reaching underneath the bar, he unlatched a small box and pulled a copy of a list out. "Take this. These are the boys living nearby we're not fully sure of the parentage of. Since you've shown up, keep a close eye on them. Some disaster will happen to one of them, and his guardian will be struck down and very likely killed. Whichever one of these kids this happens to will be your to-be savior."

Looking down his long crooked nose at the list, the wizard grimaced. "This has happened a lot, I take it?"

The barkeep shook his head. "No. Not a lot. It's been two months since the last one. By the way, keep a watch out for unknown relatives the kid has who will be run into once you two get going."

After taking a long swig, the wizard put the empty mug down. "This is very good. Do you have tabs here?"

"Do you plan on going on an adventure once you find this kid?"

"Well, yes."

"Sorry. Can't do."

"I *will* come back," he said with some objection.

"Sorry. Tavern policy."

The wizard grunted and slapped down a few coins on to the counter. "Thank you, anyway." He folded the list and hid it into his robes before departing.

Watching him stomp out the door, the waitress returned to the bar carrying a few empty glasses and some dirty plates on a tray. "Lost your personal touch?"

"He can't pay a tab if he's dead. He might come back in some form afterwards, but there is still a strong chance he isn't going to be able to clear the bill."

"You somehow know he's going to die?" she asked incredulously.

"The mentor figure who drags the hero out of his backwater town into a life of adventure always dies," he said matter-of-factly.

"You can't know that. I mean, sure there are certain groups of people who you can see are good for certain jobs and all that, but—"

"The mentor always dies."

"With everything that could possibly happen after they walk out those doors—"

"The mentor always dies."

"But—"

"The mentor always dies."

She sneered at him.

"He may come back to life or appear posthumously, but at that point bar tabs won't mean much."

She gave a huff and walked into the kitchen with her tray of dirty items. "I hate this job."

He ignored her comment. If she couldn't deal with the facts of how her employment worked, that was her problem.

The end of the night was approaching. Four more tables and seven chairs had to be replaced as the inevitable assaults broke out. The nightly average was approached but not reached. The front door wasn't even broken into. Slammed open several times, but not broken. A very rare night. Slow nights were good. They might be dull, but dull helps one rest between the more active times.

The barkeep assisted a group of people who were unsure of their surroundings until one of them proposed that they "were sucked into an inter-dimensional rift and pulled into a fantasy setting." Several of the others ignored him and were arguing as to which of them was the one dreaming this while in a coma.

He had no experience using the weapon, but in these situations it was always best to ask, "Do any of you have a gun?"

Confusion swept across their faces. Finally one said softly, "Yes. I do."

"Learn a new weapon, maybe even magic, but keep the gun close and safe. You'll want to save the bullets until you reach the climax of your adventure. The knowledge and skills you learn here will help you survive. The knowledge and skills you already have from your world will help you succeed." With that the barkeep took their plates and returned to the kitchen. Of course, none of them asked him anything more since most were still in shock. He'll let his waitress deal with them until closing. It would make things easier in the long run. It always did.

There was some time left before he would lock the doors, but his waitress was already turning chairs up onto the tables in areas where nobody was seated anymore. It was good night, overall. Good business was done, and he knew he did his part to help people where they needed it. He began cleaning the counter and looked down to the far end of the bar. A single generally pretty human woman of twenty-something years was sitting there. She had been there most of the night, talking to people sometimes, just nursing a drink at other times. This moment was one of the latter.

*Last call*, he thought to himself. He wandered over towards her.

She was absent-mindedly stirring her brandy-port mix and looking out over the mostly empty room. With a sigh, she looked about ready to call it a night. "Can I help you?" he asked.

"Oh. I'm fine. How much do I owe?" There was a touch of fatigue in her voice.

"Two silver marks and a crown." She put two silver, five down.

He thanked her for the tip and took the money. "Troubles bothering you?" *Money problems*, he guessed. *Landlord, loan sharks, or bandits will probably be forcing her out of her home soon.*

"Hrm? Oh no. I... I was hoping to meet somebody here. No luck this night."

"A friend of yours didn't show?" *Maybe a kidnapping.*

"No. That's not what I meant," she said with a light smile. "I'm doing what I can to help end the single life."

The barkeep slowed the wiping of the counter and tilted his head. *Single life?* For the first time in a very long time, he was confused. *Maybe she's a little drunk and meant a single life. She could be an assassin.* "The single life?" he asked aloud.

She nodded. "Yeah. I've had no luck with some of my past relationships, and my date-book has been running thin. So I thought I'd go to a tavern, try

to talk to people, maybe make friends, and hopefully find someone who could be more than just a friend.”

He stood there quiet for several moments trying to understand what she was saying. “More than just a friend? A bodyguard?”

It was her turn to look puzzled. “No, I mean I was hoping to find someone I could eventually date.”

“Date? You mean... to have a relationship with?” *I’m missing something in this. What am I missing?*

“Yeah,” she said as if what she was saying was obvious. “I mean, I’d love to find the ideal perfect shining knight or whatever, but at this point I was hoping just to find someone decent. Unfortunately everyone here just seemed too wrapped up in their own business or some ridiculous plan for the future or seemed to just be mental lunatics thinking the end of the world was coming. I shouldn’t be surprised considering my luck with men. What? What is it?”

The barkeep had lowered his head onto the counter. A throbbing had formed behind his eyes. There was nothing he missed. This woman was simply insane. He straightened himself and said softly, “Miss. If you want to find a man, you’re going about it all wrong. Going to bars to meet someone is not the way it is done.”

“Oh?” she asked, cocking her head to one side. He could tell she was taking offense, but he didn’t care. It was his job to put people on the right course to find someone if he couldn’t put people together right then and there. “And what do you suggest I do?”

Straightening himself up, he put on a smile and said simply and clearly, “First off, you need to get yourself an attendant of some sort, someone to do odd jobs for you whether it be cleaning the house, horse tending, scribing tomes, those things. Then, when you are out on the road with him, get yourself kidnapped my one of the local lords. If they aren’t available some of the bandits in the forest will work as well, but they will be less pleasant. It will come down to how much you can afford after hiring the attendant. Now, during the fight in which you are taken, make sure your attendant escapes. He or she will probably be injured, but that doesn’t matter. The attendant will come here or to some other place and alert people through word or mouth or by poster that you have been taken. In a few days a number of adventurers, or maybe even just one adventurer will make his way to wherever you have been taken to, defeat the villain who is holding you, and deliver you to safety. That person will be the man for you. Your attendant will likely get killed, but there is still a good shot he’ll survive. Still, in the end I believe with the type of man you’re looking for, it will all be worth it.”

The woman stared at him with her jaw hanging open, saying nothing and not moving.

*What in the heavens is wrong with this lady?*

Suddenly she snapped out of her stupor. “Good lord, man! Have you been drinking more than me this night? You’re crazier than your customers! Get myself *kidnapped!*?! I just wanted a damn date, and you want me to stage my own kidnapping!” She turned around and walked out muttering to herself furiously. The door slammed behind her.

The remaining customers were watching ever since she raised her voice, and several jumped when the door slammed even though their eyes were already following her. After she left, their eyes turned briefly to him. Realizing his own mouth was now hanging open, he closed it. Heat flushed his face. He didn’t know why, but he actually felt embarrassed. Slowly everybody’s eyes turned back to their own concerns.

*Coming to a bar to find a person to date?* he thought to himself again, trying to sort it all out. He knew taverns were where people came together, but not in that fashion. The whole concept was alien and foreign to him. *Ludicrous.*

He told himself that every so often, even after years roll by, somebody or something original that he had never seen or heard of would walk through those doors. He had worked this tavern for decades, and he admitted this was one of those rare occurrences. Failing to put the insane woman out of his thoughts, he let himself get a small chuckle out of it as he returned to cleaning up the counter. In a quarter-hour he’d be closing up, and in two hours he’d be home getting sleep. Tomorrow night, the whole thing will start up again. He resolved himself to the fact that the insane woman was a nice change from the usual. It prevented things from getting too stale in the long run.

“People needed people,” he muttered to himself. “Even the strange ones.”