

Long Grass Like Gold

Short Story

His mother shook him awake, her hand on his shoulder. “Gordon,” she whispered, “time to get up. Dad’s having breakfast in ten minutes.”

Gordon rubbed his eyes with the heels of his palms. The last images of a dream slipped from him, a downpour rain becoming thick, quiet snow. He dressed in his school pants and a sweat shirt, and made his bed with one quick yank of sheets and blankets. Downstairs, his parents spoke, their voices muffled. He reached between his mattress and the boxspring, withdrawing a bag of polyhedral dice, his maps and notes, the rulebook of the adventure he’d played all summer with his friends, *The Tomb-Caverns of Toxixot*. He hid these in his backpack, between textbooks, beneath his pencil case. Gordon smoothed the sheets at the foot of his bed, his pulse hammering at his throat. He crept to his closet. There is nothing to be afraid of, he whispered to himself. I’m only getting ready for school. From a shoebox buried under a packed tent and sleeping bag he took three bottle rockets wrapped in a black plastic trash bag, stowed these among his school things, too. With a deep breath, he walked downstairs.

“Working on a spinach omelette for dad,” his mother said. “Want one?”

“No, thank you,” Gordon said. “Just cereal, please. I’ll fix it.”

A bowl and box of granola from cupboards, a spoon from a drawer, milk and blueberries from the refrigerator. He sat at the table opposite his father, who folded his newspaper to a new page. Gordon’s mother served omelette onto his father’s plate, wiped her cast-iron skillet clean

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with vegetable oil. She gave Gordon's shoulder a gentle squeeze as she passed. Steps creaked as she went upstairs. Gordon finished breakfast, cleaned his dishes at the sink. His father clipped bites of egg with the edge of a fork. Gordon waited, trying to feel into his father's mood. They'd reached a stiff formality with one another, no fits of rage, no shouting. Not for the first time he wished life were as easy as play, that a simple dice roll could reveal truths and insights.

"Dad—" he said.

His father sighed, set his newspaper on his lap. "I don't know how many times I have to say it, Gordon. Mornings are for quiet. You understand how busy my days become the second I leave this house. I know you understand it: I've told you a hundred times."

"I'm sorry."

"What is it, then? Now that we're making a racket. You're still having trouble with those boys at school?"

"No, sir—"

"They pick on you because it's easy. It's what I would have done at their age. This is your last year of high school but you still play elementary school games. Little fantasies. Dolls, silly voices, make-believe."

"Sewers & Sorcerers doesn't have any dolls."

"I don't want to hear anything about it," his father said. "Your mother tells me you're sleeping over at a friend's house tonight?"

"Yes, sir."

"And what are you boys going to do?"

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“Hyun-seong’s trying out for baseball this year. He asked me to practice with him, so we’re going to work on our swings and hits. And catches, of course.”

“Swings and hits,” his father said. “Sometimes I can hardly believe—”

The kitchen telephone rang. His father turned to stare at it. On the second ring he stood, walked to the stairs, and shouted up for Gordon’s mother to answer the damn call. Gordon grabbed his backpack, slipped out the front door, closing it softly behind him.

He lived a mile from the high-school. It had been a hot summer, and the nearby hills leading up to forests and mountain were gold with long, dry grass. A crisp morning breeze stirred the first of autumn’s fallen leaves along the sidewalk ahead of him. He’d only been in school a month, but the summer past felt already like some ancient epoch, a fabled golden age of sleepovers, late evenings, and all the time in the world available for play.

He met his friends at their spot behind the school’s library. He and May and Estrella and Hyun-seong didn’t joke around, share gossip or small talk, but instead double-checked the equipment they’d need when the final bell rang: their character notebooks, their maps, their pencils, erasers, their sets of dice.

“I can’t believe the adventure is almost finished,” said Hyun-seong. “Should we skip last class? I just have Health & Sexuality and can totally cut. Coach Henriksen doesn’t even take attendance. We’re only learning about how gross girls’ bodies are, anyway.”

“We’re not gross,” said Estrella. “I have a quiz in History. Can’t skip.”

“If I get caught cutting class again this early in the school year, my mom will fucking freak,” said May. “She’s pissed I’m staying out to play Sewers & Sorcerers as it is.”

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“Let’s meet at the bike racks, then,” said Gordon. “Right after last period. We might not have too long a game session anyway... the tomb-lord Toxixot makes quick work of those who trespass in the caves beneath his ancient citadel.”

"Oh, yeah," Hyun-seong said. "Real scared of him."

“Definitely,” said May. “Remember when he pussied out after we killed his guards at the Sapphire Temple? He better be scared of us.”

“Bye,” said Estrella, “the bell is going to ring.”

At lunch, they met outside the cafeteria. They waited together in line, collecting plates and silverware on plastic dining trays. Throughout his morning classes —English, Orchestra, Biology— Gordon had hardly been able to sit still. The minute hand on his watch felt broken. The glittering eyes of monsters populated his vocabulary quiz; the scales he played on his clarinet were keys to solving ancient puzzles. As Miss Fernandez described the inner components of a living cell, Gordon ran silent lines of Toxixot’s dialogue in his head, the tomb-lord’s voice echoing through dim, torch-lit caverns.

“Ouch,” said May. “Meatballs and rice, heralds of the shit-storm. The last time I had the school meatballs I felt like I was going to die.”

“Still, it’s better than starving to death,” said Hyun-seong. “Or the Tuesday casserole.”

“I brought lunch from home today,” said Estrella.

They shuffled and stagger-stepped down the cafeteria serving line, received their meatballs, their rice, their ladlefuls of fruit salad as administered by Doris, the lunch lady, and Armen, whom they called the lunch lord. They fished cartons of milk from a stainless steel tray floated in ice water and then found places at the end of a long table by the windows that looked

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out over town and the hills and mountains beyond. Gordon used the voice of the tomb-lord, describing his hunger, that he would consume all that lay before him, laughing in the villain's low, dramatic chortle. May and Hyun-seong grinned, played along. Gordon turned to Estrella. She seemed to look past him, eyebrows knit, her mouth open. He readied a taunt, one of Toxixot's now-infamous one-liners, when he heard a piercing pop and felt the sting of an open-palmed slap across his cheek, his ear. He cried out, jerked from the table, whipped his head around and watched the other boys' mouths move, their voices coming to him slowly as the ringing in his ear subsided, asking him what he thought he was looking at, fairy princess, and what he thought he was going to do about it. Tom, Butch, and Marcus. They fainted at him, laughing and slapping one another high-fives when he flinched. They moved off like a slow storm across an open plain, bullying their repertoire of usual victims, cutting in front of the last person in the lunch line.

“Assholes,” said May.

“They're going to have miserable lives when they realize they have the combined intellect score of a sentient turd,” said Hyun-seong.

“Gordon,” said Estrella, “are you all right?”

His hands trembled in his lap. He rearranged the meatballs in the center of his plate, said he was fine. What would he father say? What would he have done? So many times, in his bedroom at night or in the hallways of school, boiling with anger, Gordon imagined a version of himself who would stand up against those boys, who might stand up to his father. Someone strong. Someone, he imagined, without mercy. After lunch, he struggled through Algebra class. He enjoyed math, and excelled at the work when he could concentrate on the formulas as

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arranged on the blackboard. Sometimes the symbols and diagrams drifted away, transmuted into eldritch runes and glyphs drawn not in chalk but etched into the stonework of sunken ruins, their solutions producing neither the distance between moving trains nor the sum of apples remaining in a schoolgirl's basket, but instead the click of hidden mechanism, groans of rusted hinges, the glimmering revelation of hoards of gems and gold untouched in centuries. The bell rang, and he jumped; he passed his homework toward the front of the class.

On his way to the bicycle racks he stopped at his locker to retrieve the fireworks hidden beneath his gym clothes. He looked both ways before stuffing them between his books. Outside, he met Estrella, May, and Hyun-seong as people spilled from the high school's buildings, congregating in cliques, sprinting or trudging off toward homes, detentions, football or marching band or chess club practices.

The girls walked ahead, Gordon and Hyun-seong following as they left the school grounds for shady neighborhood sidewalks.

"I told my dad we're going to practice for baseball," Gordon said.

"Why would you do that?"

"Otherwise he probably wouldn't let me sleep over," said Gordon. They stopped at a corner to let an old pickup truck rattle past. May and Estrella waited outside a convenience store.

"Would you ever want to play baseball?"

"Baseball?" Hyun-seong said. "I'd need a lobotomy, first."

At the store they stocked up on snacks, soda, and gum, paid together in one large sum of crumpled bills and scattered change. Gordon asked the man at the register if he could have a

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book of matches, and the man grunted, slid one across the glass counter as he counted coins into his palm.

“Hey,” said Hyun-seong when they stood outside, passing a bag of chips around in a circle. “It’s going to be light out for a while. We can go to my house, but what do you think about heading up to the park? Where we played a few weeks ago?”

“I’m game,” said Gordon.

“Fuck yes,” said May. “I love it up there.”

“Good idea,” said Estrella.

They walked to the county park in the hills above town, following a public trail until they came to a deer track climbing up through tall grass, scrub brush, and large, twisted oaks. The afternoon was alive with birdsong, and as they hiked they stirred up grasshoppers, wheeling, clacking, flashing yellow wings.

“There it is!”

A squared, concrete structure sat across a gully, embedded in the flank of a hill. Slabs formed a small porch, a canopy. When they reached it, they shrugged off their backpacks, wiped sweat from their faces, touched its rough, cool walls. They’d carved their initials into the concrete below a metal sign reading ‘Bureau of Reclamation, 1972: Keep Out’ the last time they played there. An absent door had once sealed off a small chamber; old pipes ran across the space, disappearing into the concrete, into the hill. Their town lay below them, shrouded in trees. To the west, mountain peaks stood against a bright blue sky.

“It’s actually pretty close to a tomb-cavern,” Gordon said.

“That’s why I thought of it,” said Hyun-seong.

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“Such a beautiful view,” said Estrella.

They arranged their snacks and game materials in a circle, cracking open cans of soda, sharpening pencils, making test-rolls with their dice to determine which felt luckiest.

“I’m ready,” said Hyun-seong. “As we enter the game, I become Salvir Malazano, the Fleeting Prince, master of all thieves along the Silver Coast.”

“And I become Holy Gath,” said May, “loyal knight in service to the Ghost of the Lady of Eternal Light.”

“Okay,” said Estrella, “I’m Los-Lomoth, the Skull-Eater, Champion of the Killing Pits.”

“Excellent,” said Gordon. “As Sewer-master, I will keep the rules, guide monsters, provide traps, treasure, and excitement. I hope you guys are ready; I designed some pretty hard stuff for the last session.”

They picked up the story of the adventure they’d played all summer. Hyun-seong, May, and Estrella described the movements and thoughts of their characters while Gordon narrated their exploration down ancient subterranean passageways. They slew monsters, solved the riddle of the tomb-lord’s three magic keys, opening the way to Toxixot’s final resting place. Gordon wiped a snack’s cheese dust onto his pants and read a passage from the adventure book; the heroes suddenly found themselves ambushed by carnivorous fungal creatures. Hyun-seong sucked the last drops from a can of soda and described himself slashing monsters with his daggers; he rolled his dice and they saw green blood spray in arcs from wounds cut into spongy flesh. Estrella used her character’s agility to scale a cliff face, lowering rope for her friends to climb up behind her. With a lucky roll, May discovered a hidden cache of healing potions. The sun lowered in the sky above the western mountains. They pulled the hoods of their sweatshirts

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up, passed around more candy, more gum, taking breaks to stretch their legs, urinate in the tall grass behind the concrete structure.

“We’re almost done,” Gordon said. “The tomb-lord’s three necromancers —Tomon the Cruel, Corpulent Buuth, and Marchuvius Foul-mind— are dead. Their magic fades, and Toxixot’s crypt is unguarded. What do you want to do?”

“Open the fucking crypt!” said May.

“I meant do you want to keep playing here? Or start down to Hyun-seong’s house? It will be dark soon, but I have a flashlight in my backpack.”

“Let’s finish it,” said Hyun-seong. “Then we can just chill out at my place and have pizza and watch a movie, maybe plan for our next adventure.”

“Open the crypt!” said Estrella.

They played on, delving deeper into the game’s caverns as dusk purpled the evening. They came upon the tomb-lord, rolled their dice to see how their turns would be ordered; “*I don’t know how many times I have to tell you,*” Gordon narrated in the voice he used for Toxixot, “*This is a place for silence. But now that we’re making a racket, it will be time for you to die.*” May, Hyun-seong, and Estrella’s characters fought hard, using all their characters’ magics, skills, and abilities. But soon May lay heaped in the dirt, unconscious, the last of her powers spent in sundering the armors protecting Toxixot’s once-mortal heart. Hyun-seong, on the brink of death, bled from wounds all across his chest and throat. Smoke and flame surged through the tomb-lord’s crumbling lair; black ichor gushed from the cracks in Toxixot’s glowing skull as the monster spat curses, its long claws dripping venom.

“Estrella — sorry, Los-Lomoth, it’s your turn. What do you want to do?”

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“Oh, no. First, I’ll drink my final potion of strength,” said Estrella. She sat with her legs crossed, her hands on her cheeks. “Gosh. I guess this is it. If he hits me again, I’m dead.”

“Estrella—” said Hyun-seong.

“No hints!” Gordon said. “But what’s it going to be? Clock’s ticking.”

“Here I go. You watch as Los-Lomoth heaves up her axe, shouting the battle-cry of her people. She rushes forward to attack, and I’m hoping, hoping!” Estrella reached out and slapped Gordon’s knee, “to dodge his defensive claws and hit him right in the throat to chop his head clean off!”

“Let’s see,” said Gordon. He rolled a handful of dice and bent low in the dusk to study their results. “What’s your defense score? Whew— the tomb-lord’s claws miss! Now, roll to see if your axe hits.”

Estrella took dice in her cupped hands, raised them above her head and shook.

“Come on,” said Hyun-seong. “You got this.”

“Kill his fucking ass!” said May.

Estrella rolled her dice onto the rough concrete floor. She squealed. “Seventeen!”

“Seventeen hits,” Gordon said, peering at his notes. He rolled another die. “Okay, now let me just check something...”

“Oh, get real,” said Hyun-seong. “He’s dead.”

“Definitely,” said May. “Has to be.”

“So, Los-Lomoth rushes in with her axe, just managing to slip past the tomb-lord’s deadly claws. With one powerful swing, her blade carves deep into Toxixot’s neck, through the bone, and boom! In a flash, the tomb-lord’s body crumbles to the ground, its ancient flesh

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withering and decaying into dust right before your eyes. Toxixot's skull soars into the air above you. Its eyes burn, its mouth glows. *'I shall return!'* the tomb-lord says," said Gordon, his arms outstretched and shaking, hands balled into fists. *"You have not seen the last of the mighty Toxixot!'* and with that, the skull explodes into a ball of green fire, and the dreaded tomb-lord, scourge of the Silver Coast, is defeated for another thousand years!"

Hyun-seong jumped up and howled out into the dusk. May hugged Estrella tight to her chest. Estrella began to cry.

"Yes!" Gordon shouted, "yes!"

"Here," said Hyun-seong. He dug through his backpack, revealing a tall bottle of beer, levering its cap off with a key-ring opener. "I got this from my older brother to celebrate if we won. Or if we lost. Whatever. He said it's good beer, and strong."

They passed the bottle around, taking small sips, grimacing, laughing. May gulped down a huge swallow and stood hunched over, hands on her knees, her tongue lolled out. "It's so fucking gross," she said. Estrella sipped it, screwed her eyes shut. Hyun-seong swigged from the bottle and passed it to Gordon, saying he wasn't sure, but he thought he liked it.

The beer swamped Gordon's mouth in a sour, foamy wash. He choked it down and coughed, and passed the bottle back to Estrella. He told them he had a surprise, too. He set three empty soda cans in a row on the structure's concrete porch, unwrapped the bottle rockets from the black plastic bag, laced their long wooden stems into the cans' mouths.

"Whoa," said Hyun-seong. "Cool."

"What the fuck are those?" said May, drinking again from the bottle.

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“Fireworks,” said Gordon. They seemed like magic in his hands, their delicate, bright paper wrappings, the little twist of fuse. “I brought them to celebrate the victory. I thought we could shoot them off over the pond behind Hyun-seong’s house, but I think the view from up here will be even better.”

“Gordon,” said Estrella. “Be careful.”

He struck a match. It flared and died. He tried another, and then another, and when Hyun-seong cupped his hands around the matchbook the fourth flame held. They moved together, carefully, wick to wick until all three bottle-rockets spat sparks. Giggling, they scurried for cover, their hands pressed to their ears. The first rocket flashed and shrieked up long and loud into the evening, exploding in a sphere of silver sparks. They stood stunned, and the second rocket flared and burst in one thunderous bright burning blast of red. Gordon staggered after the last rocket and tried to kick it down but it howled out, low, dropping down below them into the grass, popping and sputtering. Silence roared in Gordon’s ears. No bird calls, no insect sounds.

“Oh, wow,” said Hyun-seong. “They probably heard that all over town.”

“We’ve got to leave.” May said. “My mom said she’d kill me if I cut class again, but I don’t want to know what happens if we get caught blowing up fucking bombs in the park.”

“Quick,” said Estrella, “grab your stuff.”

They collected their dice, their notebooks, stuffing them into their backpacks. Hyun-seong hurled the bottle of beer away into the grass. May asked for help; she couldn’t find her favorite die, the purple one with orange numbers. Estrella shouted for everyone to hurry.

Gordon’s ears rang. Dusk tarnished the gold of the hills’ grasses into gray. Lights of town blinked through the trees below them, and he gasped. One light moved. He thought it must be a

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flashlight, the sheriff climbing up to arrest them, throw them in the back of his car, haul them off to jail. May hyperbolized so often of her mother killing her, but Gordon saw clearly his father's furious rage, spittle dotting his lips, the man's neck red and tense, bursting with veins. The moving light below them grew. A running orange, a flickering lick.

They held their backpacks to their chests and watched the wildfire born of bottle rocket creep through dry grass, crackling, hissing, its movements low and hidden in rising smoke. Then, like snapped fingers, the flames grew, a bright wall, a hulking monstrosity lunging to swallow the darkening sky. The fire drew in a long lung of wind, and the blaze burst up, looming above them, roaring.