

CRITICAL HIT by W.M. Akers

EXCERPT

Somewhere far from Blackbriar Keep, a barricade of empty beer cans and crumpled chip bags ringed a plastic castle. On the white grid that represented its muddy courtyard, four one-inch miniature Heroes were locked in deadly combat with the dozen figurines that represented a Horde of thousands. They were beautiful little figurines, but all eyes were on the other end of the table. Nothing mattered but Arabeth.

She had one leg raised, her bowstring drawn taut, and a look of extreme do-not-fuck-with-me on her face. I'd spent twenty-two hours painting her, deploying all my tricks to bring her plastic to life. From her forest green boots to the curls of her rich brown hair, every millimeter was perfect. Tonight, perfect was what it would take.

It was April 2003, when tops were cropped and pants were cargo, when fedoras and trucker hats still seemed like good ideas, when America was already getting bored with its new war. More importantly, it was a Thursday, which meant the back room at Critical Hit was ours. Stale beer and smoke polluted the air. Imitation wood paneling peeled from a drop ceiling that was nearly as stained as the pea green carpet. The walls were close, or I guess the table was too big, because you couldn't shift your seat without banging into one or the other. Absolutely no breeze drifted through the little window on the far wall. Grimy lace curtains hid us from the rest of the games shop. It was a pit, but it had to be the happiest pit on earth.

The man who brought magic into that little room sat at the head of the table. One hand rested on his gut; the other twisted a beard flicked with red ale. His eyes—one bare, the other behind that ridiculous monocle—were slits. A playful smile drifted across his face as he tried to figure out what might happen next. He looked like a big, gentle grizzly bear. A stranger might have mistaken him for just another geek. They'd never have guessed that my big brother was the greatest gamemaster in the world.

"You sure you want to do this?" he asked.

"I think I already have."