



First Impression, Part 2

By Shelly Mazzanoble

Illustration by William O'Connor

Allow me to introduce the party.

I am Majeka Magickmaker, an 8th-level gray elf magic-user. To my right is Laura, aka Shab “Shabulous” Heanling, a 12th-level half-elf thief. Mark, to my left, plays Darg Blonke, a 7th-level gray elf fighter, and Chuck rounds out the group as Fage the Kexy, a 7th-level gray elf cleric.

“Fage,” I said. “Like the yogurt?”

“One and the same,” he said.

We are gathered here on a cloudy Friday afternoon due to my desire to experience what D&D was like “back in the day.” All those guys who look back on their 80’s dragon-slaying love affair with the same misty-eyed dreaminess that I get when I think about that day in 1986 when Jon Bon Jovi winked at me when his limo passed by on the way to the Arena. (Yes, the windows were tinted, but I’m sure I saw him wink.) Ahh, I can practically smell the Aqua Net. Fortunately, you’re always a dice roll away from coworkers looking for a pick-up D&D game. Of the four of us, Chuck is the only one who has ever played 1st Edition.

There is, however, one oddity at the table.

“Our Dungeon Master isn’t packing,” I whispered to Laura. “He doesn’t even have a screen.”

“He’s just like . . . sitting there with some dice,” Laura whispered back. “Were we supposed to bring something?”

“I can hear you,” Chris said. “And yes, you should have brought your dice, a pencil, and your characters.”

We look down at the table where, under our lunches and water bottles, reside the homemade 1st Edition character sheets Chris made for us. Aside from our names and our races, there’s a bunch of random numbers clumped together in a grid that rivals a mortgage securitization chart in complexity. But that wasn’t even the confusing part. It was Chris’s lack of props that we found most perplexing.

Mark had an array of minis laid out before him.

“I wasn’t sure who I would be playing, so I bought a smorgasbord,” he said. “You guys can use them too.”

“If you need a *real* representation of your *fake* character, then feel free to put it in front of you and gaze upon it while we play,” Chris said. “But you won’t be using it in the game.”

“We don’t use maps either?” Laura asked.

Chris shook his head.

“Or Dungeon Tiles?” Mark asked.

“Are we Amish?” I asked.

“No,” Chris sighed, baffled by our confusion. “All you need is a good pencil eraser for all those hit points you’ll be subtracting,” Chris rubbed his hands together in that creepy way Dungeon Masters do when they smell a TPK.

Before we began, he instructed us to pick a party color, to which I immediately shouted, “Teal!”

My group stared at me with heads cocked and eyebrows raised.

“What?” I asked. “I’m trying to channel the 80’s, and teal was a very 80’s color. I had about four zillion mock turtlenecks in teal, because it went great with my peacock eyeliner.”

“It’s still a good color for you,” Laura said.

“Thank you!”

“He said ‘caller,’” Chuck offered. “Not *color*.”

Oh . . . right . . .

But none of us knew what a caller was.

“The caller is the one who tells the Dungeon Master what the party is doing,” Chris explained.

“Like a narc?” I asked. Because let’s be clear. What happens behind the DM’s back should stay behind the DM’s back, and no way am I going to take on that role.

“Think of it more like the foreman of a jury. It’s your party’s representative.”

We chose Mark, partly because he was playing the fighter but mostly because he volunteered. Then, once we had our caller, we immediately threw the whole concept out the window. When Chris told us it was time to begin, we turned into an unruly mob, a gaggle of nervous, displaced adventurers left alone in the dark.

We can’t just *begin*. We need answers first!

“Where are we?” Laura yelled.

“Who are we?” Mark asked.

“Tell us what is going on!” I shouted.

Chris shushed us. “Calm down. Let’s first get you in initiative order.”

Ah, yes. Order. Organizing feels good and is the best way to calm a potentially riotous bunch of rabble. Every time we attend a library show and give out free books, we always make the teachers and librarians form a line. If there’s one thing they like almost as much as free books, it’s self-sorting. (And if there’s one thing they like more than free books, it’s crudité’s and wine, but that’s another story.)

Chris started the adventure by telling us how we were recruited to help a small village that has been the victim of numerous giant attacks.

“Like really big attacks?” Chuck asks. “Or attacks by really huge monsters?”

“The latter,” Chris says, moving on. “The townspeople suspect the draw are involved, so off you go into the Underdark.”

“Just like that?” Mark asked. “No fanfare? No preparation? No time for goodbyes?”

For the next few seconds we sat there quietly and looked at each other until Chris cleared his throat.

“Hello?”

“Wait, are we playing already?” I asked. Usually we line up our minis on the edge of the playmat to signal it’s game on.

Everyone shrugged. Chris sighed again. Apparently DMing in 1st Edition is very taxing. “Yes, you’re playing. Tell me what you’re doing.”

I was heartened to notice it wasn’t just me who had trouble grasping the lack of in-game physical representations. Man, we are spoiled. I kept resisting the urge to pluck a piece of broccoli out of my salad and call it Majeka.

“Okay, okay,” Chris said, scribbling something on a piece of graph paper. “I’ll start. One of the townsfolk gave you a map that looks like this.”

His drawing shows a corridor about one square wide and six squares long.

“So we’re just . . . there?” Laura asked. “Alone?”

“I don’t know,” Chris smiled. “Are you?”

“Isn’t that something you would tell us?” Mark asked.

“Isn’t that something you would notice if you were *looking around*?” Chris prodded.

We gave Mark encouraging nods, guessing this is something our caller might be able to find out.

“Yes.” Mark spoke with an authority appropriate for a caller. “We are looking around. We are trying to . . . see stuff.”

“Did you bring a light source?” Chris asked.

Oh, jeez, nothing slips by this guy. This is worse than trying to return something to Best Buy without a receipt.

Sadly, Majeka wasn’t packing a light source. Why? Because she assumed no one would ask for one. And because it would take up much-needed space for all the wine she was carrying.

“I have six wine flasks,” I said. “I don’t even remember buying those.”

“That means you probably had a lot more at some point,” Laura noted.

The group, minus Chuck, decided the best course of action was to take a refreshment break. Darg and Shab were also sans a light source but had their own supplies of wine.

Chuck studied his character sheet. “I didn’t get any wine.”

“Aw, too bad,” I said. “It’s BYOB.”

“Aw, too bad. It’s also bring your own healing,” Chuck scoffed. “My light source and I will see you suckers later.”

Oh, fine. We quickly filled his cup and followed him deeper into the Underdark.

“Okay, I’m *looking up*,” Laura said.

“And I’m looking side to side,” I said. “While holding a lovely glass of merlot.”

“Page is looking down,” Chuck added, to cover our bases.

Chris drew a few more squares of the map.

“You know what would work really well?” I asked. “Dungeon Tiles. I have some at my desk. Want me to go get them?”

“No,” Chris said, pointing at me to sit down. “You’re seeing exactly what you would see with the amount of light you have.”

I was pondering the strangeness of making our fantasy game so realistic when an unfamiliar voice came from my right.

“Shaaaaaaaabulous is claaaaaaaustrophic.”

“What’s happened to your voice?” I asked Laura. Mark nodded sympathetically. “Dairy bubble? Happens all the time.”

“Oh, no,” Laura said in a weird, affected, half-British, half-theater-snob accent. “This is how Shabulous talks.”

Chuck’s eyes got all wide. “Are you *roleplaying*?”

“OMG, I think I am!” she said.

As our caller, Mark told Chris what order we were walking in. With the cleric in the back and the fighter in the front, Majeka was essentially ensconced in bubble wrap, but I still had a feeling something big was about to happen and wasn’t entirely sure we were prepared.

“Someone roll a d6,” our Dungeon Master commanded.

“Why?” I asked.

“I’m not telling you,” he said, but the way he rubbed his palms together told me everything I needed to know.

Chuck rolled a 4.

“Okay,” Chris said as he leaned forward. “You hear what sounds like someone, or something, trying to get away.”

“I’ll run up ahead and play dead,” Shabulous said in her snotty accent. “And see if they come after me. And if they do, I’ll punch them in the face!”

Clearly Laura was used to playing a fighter.

“But you’re our rogue,” Darg said, with an accent somewhere between Irish and frat boy.

“Now what’s wrong with *your* voice?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” he said. “But it’s fun.”

Chris brought out a second sheet of graph paper and drew a map that looked more like a Rorschach test than anything that might actually get us out of here.

“Did our light source go out?” I asked. “Because I’m not seeing anything helpful here.”

“You have to say that in Majeka’s voice,” Laura said. “That’s why you can’t see anything.”

Mark agreed.

Okay, so they’ve both lost their minds, but hey, I was a theater major. The problem is, I wasn’t a very good theater major, so the only accent I can do is that of the Count from Sesame Street. I use it for everything—Italian, Southern, Elvish.

“Majeka looks up once, twice, three times. Ah, ah, ah. And she still can’t see anything.”

Chuck was about to say something appropriately snarky about my acting skills, but our Dungeon Master’s frenzied palm-rubbing momentarily distracted us. Maybe we don’t need accessories.

“You’ve all seen aliens,” he said.

Statements like that are never questions, but rather assumptions because of where we work.

“Oh, yes,” I said. “It was awful when stupid Sigourney came in and shot up all the alien queen’s babies. I cried so hard.”

Chris dropped a handful of dice on the table.

“Then you’ll love this.”

We braced ourselves, because without the map and the minis (and yeah, yeah, I know I’m harping on this but it was new to me!) it really did feel like I was stuck in a dark, dank dungeon with a flimsy spellbook and some friends who speak with weird accents and giggle uncontrollably.

Chris was about to send sparks into the air with his manic hand-rubbing. “You see darts go past whizzing your heads! When they explode, noxious fumes fill the air.”

“Stink bombs?” Laura asked. “They hit us with stink bombs?”

Both Shab and Darg get the brunt of the gassing. When Darg fails his saving throw, he’s not only sick to his stomach but also blinded.

“That’s awesome,” Mark said with his now-southern drawl. “I can’t see where I’m throwing up.”

Chris continued. “Out of the darkness you see three creatures rushing toward you.”

“You said they were trying to get away,” I said.

“Guess not.” He rolled more dice and concluded that Fage had been clubbed over the head for 6 damage.

Okay, so far 1st Edition seems like it’s just the DM doing lots of stuff to the players.

“Do you want to maybe call us when it’s our turn?” I asked.

“Hang on,” Chris said, flipping through the pages of the adventure. “Those of you who can see notice a drow priestess standing before you. When she holds up her hand, a strange purple glow issues forth, catching Fage, Darg and Shab within it.”

“I love this color on me!” Shab exclaimed.

“You look Shabulous,” Majeka told her. “Ah, ah, ah.”

And it was *still* Chris’s turn! One of the priestesses’ minions cast a *hold* spell on Shab.

“Well, that sucks,” Chuck said, stating the obvious. “Does anyone know *dispel magic*?”

“Umm, my apologies, Shab,” I said. “Must have been sick that day.”

Chris laughed. “Sorry, Laura. You might be there a while. If this was the 80’s, we’d be sending you on a pizza run.”

Finally it was our turn. Well, for those of us who could move.

“Darg wants to stop being blind,” Mark said, so he spent his whole turn washing out his eyes.

When Chuck cast a spell, he didn’t roll any dice. Instead Chris rolled to see if he hits. He didn’t.

Majeka found herself feeling the pressure because she’s the only one in the group who hadn’t taken damage, could see clearly, and wasn’t immobilized. I figured:

A—There’s more where these three came from.

B—We could probably handle three. Eventually. Maybe.

C—Magic-users have to be somewhat powerful because everyone says you have to protect them.

Let’s see what’s in Majeka’s spellbook.

I chose *wall of fire* and tried to describe my actions to Chris as well as I could.

“I’ll cast this . . . back there . . . where the rest of the drow priestesses and friends presumably are, in hopes it will erupt into a giant wall of flames that keeps us separated.”

Instead of the usual “Are you *sure* you want to do that?” he says when I’m about to do something strategically dubious, Chris looked a little dejected as he nodded and said, “Go ahead.”

And get this: Not only did it work *and* do 23 damage to everyone caught in the blast, but it was truly a good, strategic move.

“Nice job,” Chuck said, looking genuinely surprised. I mean, let’s be honest. I’m not the most tactical player in the bunch. Yet somehow my lack of vision made me see more clearly.

The *wall of fire* doesn’t just torch a few drow, it lights a fire under us as well. We’re suddenly back in this game. Darg, with his longbow and Jersey accent, deals some serious damage.

“That’s what I’m talking about!” He pummeled his chest all Jersey Shore style.

Fage did 7 damage with his mighty hammer. Shab broke free from her *hold* and did 32 damage with

backstabbing. Thirty-two! We never do that kind of damage in our regular game!

On my next turn I used my dog’s favorite spell, *stinking cloud*. It pretty much has the same effect on the drow as Sadie’s stinking clouds have on humans. The drow are gagging and helpless from nausea for the next three rounds.

While the remaining drow are stuck behind the *wall of fire*, we use the time to heal up.

“Phew!” Mark said. “I’m actually out of breath.”

“Holy cow, this is fun,” Laura said.

I agreed, even though I felt like I still had no idea what’s going on. But wait, perhaps that’s the fun part? We just had ourselves a crazy adventure, and it’s not even close to over. I feel like I did after I riding Space Mountain at Disneyland. *How did we survive that thing?!*

I leaned over to Laura. “Want to come over later and watch *The Facts of Life?*”

“Totally.”

We thanked Chris, took our character sheets, dice, and the remains of our lunch, and walked back to our desks.

“I can’t believe how much I enjoyed that,” I told him. “I feel like I was way more into it than usual. Like my D&D just got more real.”

My mom always said there was a fantasy world in my head. I thought she was only referring to soap-opera characters and stuffed animals.

“See what happens when you’re forced to pay attention?” he said.

I did, but more important, I was beginning to understand what all those boys in the 80’s found so appealing about D&D. The danger, the excitement, the adventures as big as your imagination would let them be. Seeing is believing.

Or, in this case, not seeing is.

About the Author

Shelly Mazzanoble still loves her minis. And especially making armor and robes out of candy wrappers for them.

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