

Book I
of
The K'fr Road: to Ve'kahn and Back Again

The Third Book
in the
Dragon Bound
a.k.a Dra@g©n B©und a.k.a
a.k.a **The D-B©und Adventuring Series** a.k.a

starring
Ruby FireHaven
and so on and so forth

as conceived, written, and enchanted by

Celli
the
Happy Go Lucky Celaphopod

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and in the Earthen Vortex

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Happy Birthday to the LeeZards

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The K'fr Road: to Ve'kahn and Back Again
By
Celli the Grim and Gruesome Celaphopod with Literary
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###

Luggage.
Packing a few things.
A little baggage as it were.

###

Who Has Big Balls?

Action!

Paint the scene. The sun rises majestically behind a battered weather-worn wood-shake cabin. The sky is every color of yellow, orange, and red. Technical Specialties won't have to rework the scene; you couldn't ask for more in a sunrise. The air is crisp and cool. A slight breeze blows. But then, a slight breeze always blows, here.

Close up to the cabin's front porch. A naked Minataur steps out of the door. He has to turn his head to fit his horns through the doorway, but even so they scrape against the frame. The doorjamb is noticeably scarred from this repeated abuse. He walks to the edge of the porch and stretches his arms toward heaven. He gives his head a shake and bits of wood fly from the roof where his horns hit it.

There is a water barrel to the side of the door. He steps off the porch and washes his face. He washes his balls, great big... bull balls. He is after all a Minataur.

He turns around to stretch again. When he is done, he scratches his balls lazily.

The camera pans in with artsy perfection and the scene changes as it does in these pretentious productions, to a close up of a human scratching his balls under a pair of dirty, full of holes, cotton briefs. The shot pulls back. A refrigerator door, blocks the man's face and the glare from the early morning sun. The view shifts to the back of his head. We see the refrigerator from his vantage point. It is empty save for a small pile of ketchup and mustard packets, a doggy bag container, which he opens, smells, and puts back, and a trio of beers. He stares at the fridge. One wonders why he is taking so long. Perhaps he is enjoying the only air conditioning in the house. This would make sense, if it weren't so damn cold. Finally he grabs a beer, opens it, and drinks half of it. He sets it precariously on the counter. He doesn't look around. He doesn't notice that someone left with his two prized Sinsamillia plants last night or that a dazzlingly beautiful girl is sleeping on his couch. And, most importantly, he doesn't know he's been cast into a leading role in a major studio production.

Oblivious to all this and the shot establishing relative ball size between our leading males complete, Matt wanders back to bed. It's early. He's a bartender. He won't get up for hours. Once he's left the kitchen, cockroaches scramble into his beer and the girl turns over in her sleep.

And as Matt goes to sleep, Bull, as the Minataur is called, grabs his breeches (without putting them on) and heads off to tend his fields. We watch him approach from a distance. Blades of grass interfere with our view, as if we are hiding. We cut back to a close up of Bull. He plays with the ax he has been using to clear the fields by tossing it in the air. The fields are a work in progress. Only a few short weeks ago this was all a rain forest. He is clearing it to grow tomatoes... or something. He's not really sure yet. All his neighbors grow K'fr, but it's illegal, and Bull doesn't need the temptation, so he's really planning on growing tomatoes... or something. No one believes him.

He gives the ax a few swings battling imaginary creatures. It's a shot designed to establish that he knows his way around an ax. It's all theatrics. He's never used an ax in a real fight, but in the movies Minataur's use axes and Bull has been in a few productions. As such, he's learned the standard choreographed moves. He'd never intended on becoming an actor. It just happened. After his stint in the Ve'kahn War he wound up in the Holly Woods. He hadn't headed there, he just found himself there.

He had been working landscaping, a good, wholesome outdoor job for a while when one day his Pixie friend Jac'lyn had given him a call. She said she was in this production and they needed extras. "Just show up and do what they tell you. It's easy... They put out an all you can eat buffet." It was enough. Bull showed up. The writer liked him. He got a talking role, some protest scene. They paid him a week's wages for yelling at a Dwarf. It had led to other roles... a few books, a few movies. They'd even made a plushy doll out of his likeness at one point, but he had no pretensions. He had always been a bit player. Finally he had decided to let it go. Find somewhere quiet and grow tomatoes... or something, maybe lettuce, but his agent had called and here he was again.

Still gratuitously naked, Bull is in the middle of the field. He tosses his breeches to the side and throws the ax into the air. As it twirls around he grabs a huge log and lurches it into the air as well. The camera follows the log up into the sky. Minataurs are strong. Bull might never have been in an ax fight, but he could put on a good show. The Ax comes down and Bull catches it with one hand while he grabs a knife that was plunged into a stump with the other. He throws the knife into the falling log, hitting it dead center. He tosses the ax again and throws more logs into the air. He tosses the knife into some and the ax into others. Some he kicks away with his feet to the edge of the clearing. Others, he catches and throws back into the air. He dances around seemingly practicing the fine art of war. The helicopter for the next scene is hovering in the sky getting an aerial shot and once again we find

ourselves by the edge of the clearing, peering through blades of grass. The camera moves imperceptively lower, as if to insinuate we are seeing the scene from the view of someone at the edge of the clearing who has been hiding there and is now crouching lower.

Bull dances. Logs fly. The Ax swings and chops. Sweat pours off him as he twirls. The helicopter pulls back. We finally get that establishing shot letting us know where, exactly, in all the vortexes we are we. Bull's cabin is on a hill overlooking the ocean. Following a red dirt road down to the beach, we find a lonely cluster of buildings, not much, just a hotel, a general store, and a post office. Gary Ganesh, a small baby-looking elephant wearing a shopkeeper's apron, walks out of the general store and stretches. Noticeably, he does not scratch his balls. We get a close up of him. "It is a good day," he says and then we pull back to a sweating Bull up the hill. The rest of the world is just getting up, but Bull has been awake for hours working and training. With a final burst of energy, he throws one last log into the sky. It seems to hover at the peak of its arch. As it does, Bull readies his ax. The log comes down on the other side of the field. He throws his ax... he misses. The ax goes flying off and sticks into a tree at the edge of the jungle.

Bull sighs. "I must be getting old," he says to himself as he sits down and starts to mend his breeches. There's going to be a party tonight and he wants to look his best.

We pull away to another aerial shot. The sun is high in the sky now. In the middle of the clearing Bull is sewing his pants. We slowly pull away. We watch life start in the village. A girl draws water. An elderly Elf walks out of the hotel and stretches. The Gnome mailman shows up to the post office and opens the door.

Back in the clearing, Bull sews. We see him from the vantages of ground level at the edge of the clearing. Our view is obscured by grass... and the handle of the ax fuzzy at first comes into focus. We shift back and forth between Bull and the Ax. As

one comes into view, the other blurs out, back and forth. At last a slender hand comes into view and reaches for the ax.

The scene cuts to the same brown hand clutching a pillow on Matt's couch. We see the face of a Fey'an beauty. Diamonds are woven into her long black hair. She has a small smudge on her face and a single leaf in her hair to indicate the trauma and hardship she has gone through. The camera pulls back to show her perfect body, tastefully adorned in a spider silk dress of the purest white. The hem has been torn high on her thigh revealing a slight scratch on her leg. When the DVD is released countless young Elves throughout the realms will play this scene over and over again committing every detail and curve of her body to memory. The camera focuses back on her eyes. She is restless... her dreams are unsettling.

###

The K'fr Road

De'sca'lence a Fey'an princess sleeps on Matt's couch. Focus on the leaf in her hair. Watch the leaf sprout and grow. This is all done by special effects. This is the title sequence of the movie. That single leaf will tell us much.

Small searching tendrils grow out from the leaf. More leaves sprout and unfold. The growing plant fills the screen. It is a vine. We watch the vine grow long and fast. As the vine grows longer, the leaves grow broader, and small thorns sprout. Almost like fuzz at first, the thorns grow to the size of rose thorns, but they do not stop there. They grow larger and larger. Perspective is hard to hold onto. The tendrils have never stopped growing. All the time new leaves bud, new tendrils develop, and new thorns grow. There is no end to the size. Leaves of all size fill the screen. There is no clue as to their true dimensions. The only difference is in coloring. The leaves, stems, and vines are the lightest of greens at first, but as they grow bigger they turn ever darker shades of green, while the thorns eventually turn a purplish black. When the thorns turn

black, the plant is mature, but this is misleading. The plant is always growing, always young, always sending out tendrils. Nonetheless, at the time the thorns turn black, the first flowers bloom. Small white flowers appear at first, but as the rest of the plant grows they do as well. The petals remain white, but the sticky stamen at the heart of the flower turns a deep purple.

A whole myriad of specialized life has made this plant their home. The camera pulls in close to the inside of a large flower. Deep in it's heart the purple stamen oozes an intoxicating nectar. A spider waits in her web, which surrounds the heart of the flower. She uses it as bait. An unsuspecting hummingbird flies into the flower. In the flash of an eye the spider bites it. The bird falls paralyzed and the spider eats her meal.

We pull out and see a three foot tall Pixie, Jac'lyn, collecting nectar. The flowers come to her waist. With skillful movements she reaches into the blooms and collects a handful of purple nectar, which she places in a basket. Suspense is built as we pan back and forth between Jack and the spider, but not to worry. She is a Pixie. Jac'lyn reaches into the flower where the spider is, collects the nectar, and is at the next flower before the spider lunges at empty air. And the thorns, they might as well not exist as far as Jack is concerned.

Her basked full, she skips along to a collection point. Many other Pixies are doing the same thing. They lay the wet nectar out on rocks and let it dry in the sun.

Down at the end of another line of nectar that is now dry, a weary Gnome collects the blackened crystals. He puts these into a burlap bag, which in turn is loaded onto a wagon. Since the wagon is now full, a troll driver instructs his mules to "giddy up" as he shakes the reins and drives off. We do not follow the wagon's passage. Instead, we jump ahead and see the wagon at its destination, a dank cave at the edge of a swamp. Inside the wagon is unloaded onto the backs of Goblins who each carry a heavy, oversized canvas sack down into the depths.

We track ahead past a hundred Goblin porters, all dirty and dressed in rags, till we get to a deep underground lava river from which a Depth Fiend supervises a hi-tech operation. Elves, Humans, and the other more esoteric beings work in white lab coats, checking dials, carrying clipboards, and performing tests on test tubes full of clear, lavender, purple, and black liquids. The focus of the cavern is a long stainless steel covered conveyor belt contraption. Raw crystalline nectar is poured onto one end of the belt as it disappears from view into the gleaming processing machine. We follow its assumed passage down the outside of the device. We go past the dials, past the Elf with a clip board, past the human putting drops into a test tube that turns its contents blue, all the way to the end where the final product is coming out of an extruder. For all the world it looks like black shit. A razor automatically slices the grainy paste into a disc and the disc in turn drops onto another conveyor belt. The disc goes through a pair of super-heated rollers, drying it. The view stops on one of the brittle disc and moves in for a close up. The black material is dotted with shiny metallic violet specks... the good stuff. We pan back out. The disc moves onto a machine that wraps it in a clear square of plastic. It is reminiscent of a condom. Other manufacturers use a packaging that makes the finished product look like a penny in a coin holder, wrap them in rolls, or simply sell the product loose. But this is the good stuff. And once wrapped, the disc falls into a bin full of such packages.

The packages are put into cardboard boxes by yet more Goblins and then loaded onto trucks. We follow a big-rig semi-trailer truck out of the cavern. It drives down a gravel road. From the sky we watch it drives down a desert highway. It merges onto a superhighway. We stand by the road and watch as the truck passes by, mixed in, almost invisible in a stream of heavy traffic that crosses a bridge, finding its way into a major city. Maybe you recognize the buildings.

Skyscrapers blot out the sky. A young Cobalt wearing clothes designed for an Ogre stands on a dirty street corner. An Elf

pulls up in a luxury sport car. He trades a gold coin for a package of K'fr. The Elf drives away.

Later, the same car is parked behind a billboard on a road cutting through the middle of an old growth forest. The headlights are off. An owl flies by in the night. There is no moon. The stars do not shine. It is pitch black. The Elf, his evil looking face illuminated only by the dashboard lights, pulls out the package of K'fr and offers it to his date. It sparkles enticingly in the darkness,

“OK,” she says. “If you think it’s all right?”

He produces a pipe. The scene cuts out. We look on the car from a distance. The windows of the car flash with the flame and the trees of the forest are briefly illuminated. Startled, a flock of birds flies off.

The red glowing hand of Gra'gl reaches out from across the road and the depths of despair to grab hold of each of the Elvin souls. He pulls on the spirits separating them slightly from their material hosts and then with a giant pair of shears cuts off a chunk of each -- a bit of their life force.

As he does this, the girl coughs. “It’s burns.”

The boy holds his breath until he can't anymore and then he answers. “But, it’s worth it.”

Rush back into the car filled with purple smoke and highlight the girl who now has a tear in her eye. Follow the tear back quickly to its origin. Trace back rapidly in a few moments the route the K'fr has taken as the Elf buys the K'fr from the Cobalt street hustler, the truck, the processing operation supervised by a Depth Fiend, the line of Goblins porters, the wagon, and the Pixie harvesters. Trace the Pixie's hand back into the giant K'fr flower and trace the vine through the forest to its end where its leaves turn brighter and the thorns are smaller. Focus on a flower at the end of the K'fr vine at the edge of a clearing where a Minataur is taking a nap after mending his pants.

You can rest assured. He intends to grow tomatoes, or lettuce, or something... K'fr doesn't grow in a clearing. It only grows deep in the wild forests.

Now, watch the brown hands again, the ones that belong to Ess'mer'lence, De'sca'lence's sister and also a Fey'an princess. The hands come into view. She is watching Bull from the edge of the clearing. She puts down the ax for a moment to pluck the flower and weave it into her hair. She is Or'tung and for centuries the Or'tung had commanded Hals'bad, a fortress whose only function was to control a key intersection of the K'fr Road.

###

And Now a Word from Our Author

Those of you who have ever read any of my work before know I have a tendency to write myself into the book. My backers made my promise I wouldn't do that this time... so we'll see how long that lasts.

Anyway, some things are opinion. I don't go for presenting opinions like they are fact, but sometimes a little opinion, history, flavor, whatever, makes the story go smoother. So, even though I don't plan on making a cameo, as say a traveling monk in the thirteenth chapter, I really can't tell a story without putting my stamp on it. I believe everyone will be happier, if we all know when I'm riding over the story and putting my two cents in, like now.

The reason I am cutting in here is to present a little background and to give more of a set up for the action. You've read the first few chapters. You know if you are going to dig the flow or not, so let's pull back for a moment.

I've worked with Bull before. You may have already figured that out. He's worked under the stage name of Minne and Buddy for me, and other names for other production crews. He's agreed to do two chapters for me, maybe more; the opening sequence you've already seen and a little high budget Ve'kahn flashback sequence that we hope you'll all enjoy. After that, it's up to him whether he stays in the story or not. Bull knows this a story. Right

now for him, it's a movie, an acting gig. That might change. This is a work in progress in a magical land.

I know how some production companies like to have a storyboard and script all laid out before they shoot a foot of film. Well, I've tried that only to have the actors go their own way and ignore all that hard work, so why bother? Look, let me brag for a minute. I've got Bruce Brilliant, Garg, and Targor signed up to do at least one cameo chapter each. And then, get this, for the first time ever, anywhere, they've agreed to be on the screen together. It's going to be entertainment history. To get them to agree to that, I had to give them complete artistic control. All I know is that the plan is that they all show up together on a boat. How they get there? What they do then? I don't know. That's for them to figure out. It's their moment to shine. I'm looking forward to watching them at work.

That's the deal with Bull as well. Two chapters and then he decides whether he wants to stay or go. If he wants to stay, he's got to work out the plot details himself.

You may have noticed Gary Ganesh, the elephant, from Days of Abundance in the opening sequence. He's agreed to work as the proprietor at the general store for a while as a sort of payback homage to all his fans who own convenience stores across the realms. It's just his little way of saying, "May your life be full" to his many admirers. Clearly with a big name star like him I've got no control. If he decides he's gone, how could I stop him? Likewise, if he wants in on the main story quest, why would I want to stop him?

Then we have Zay'ar'lyne, who's always said she wanted to work with Targor and she's at least agreed to do a cameo. I think we've got a bikini shoot on the beach planned with her, but then every scene with her is a bikini shoot if you know what I mean.

You may have noticed Jac'lyn, the Pixie, in the opening sequence as well. I've worked with her before under the screen name Nellie and she and Bull go way back having met in Ve'kahn. We've got a little table dance scene planned for her and with any

luck she'll be hanging out in Bull's horns for the better part of the show, but like I said, it's up to them.

That pretty much sums up the game plan. Mix a bunch of big names together. Let them try to out do or one up each other and put the most entertaining moments from it all into the final cut. Some might just show up, sleep walk through a cameo, and then be done. Who know? I mean neither Targor, Garg, or Bruce Brilliant have done a movie in years. Maybe there's a reason for it. So, although we can pay them to show up, you can't make someone be a hero. You're either a hero or you're not... and maybe this just isn't their quest. I don't know yet. As soon as I do, I'll share that knowledge with you.

Now, in my opinion, the intros have been relatively straightforward up to this point, but all this movie magic gets trickier when you add Matt, De'sca'lence, and Ess'mer'lence into the picture. None of them know this is a movie. This is all real life for them. I met Matt at Con-In-My-Head and all he could say the entire time I was signing his book was "I wish something like this would happen to me." Well, I got him to sign a general liability release on the presumption that I'd maybe name a bit character after him one day. And what do you know, since he's the only one who's ever been foolish enough to sign one of those blanket liability waivers for me, he's going have the opportunity to play a leading role in this adventure. And if we can call this a dream come true for Matt, this is a nightmare made reality for Dee and Esse. You've noticed Esse in the fields looking on at Bull, and Dee is sleeping on Matt's couch. Speaking of which, it only goes to show you how plans change. Dee was supposed to wake up screaming or something, but neither Matt nor Dee noticed the other in that first scene. That's the way it is with these live action productions. Anyway, what I was saying is a viscous Warlord has just ransacked Dee's and Esse's kingdom. And both of them are running for their lives. We'll get to that scene in a moment, but this isn't staged. It's real. It's live and it's happening right now. We paid a lot of money for the latest quest detection scrolls,

damsel in distress spells, and crystal balls with all the extras (zoom, stop motion, reverse, temporal adjustments valves, the works) in an effort to bring you right into the action. So sure, Bull is posing for the cameras now, but it's a fine line between reality and make believe in the realms... where sometimes, make believe is just another name for story telling magic.

###

The EVIL Warlord Experience

Hello. Welcome to the narrator's track. We're very pleased with what we've been able to put together for you with the EVIL Warlord EXP, so whether you're hooked into a brand new Nefarnal Dark Forces 666 system, paying by the minute at a Sensory Arcade, or just have the latest rig available in your vortex, you can be sure you are going to have the gaming experience of your life with the EVIL Warlord EXP.

My system has loaded up now, so I'm going to assume yours has as well. Oddly, they tell me that all I have to do is lay down one track and they'll modify it to fit each version. Don't ask me how they do it. I mean, hear they are releasing the game all the way from the highest synthetic dimensional processors down to, get this, book form. Think about that for a second. I bet you're glad you don't live on one of those backwards vortexes that's both magic poor and tech poor with your own imagination being your only possible source of escape... but enough of that.

Here we are in the starting queue. There's no external sensory input. Take a moment to examine the avatar you will be playing. It's a male human about average height and average build. The default name is Evil Warlord. We can change that to Matt if we want to or we can just add nicknames we like such as Dark Liege, My Liege, or simply Liege to the list.

The only sense I have turned on now is touch. I want you to just wiggle your appendages. The two upper ones are called arms with hands on the ends. You'll do all your major task functions

with these. The two lower ones are called legs and are chiefly used for locomotion. Since they are so much stronger than the arms, they are sometimes used to kick in fights as well. Most of this is explained in the tutorial section, which this is not. This is a walk through. I just wanted you to take a moment and get used to the body before we dropped down any externals. Here, let me modify the heartbeat. It goes up and down. If you are playing at higher levels, the speed of your heart and breathing will be major clues as to both the status of your body and other externalities.

I'm going to turn on the light now, just a little, turning the expanse we are into a grayish black. Some old timers like this area to have intersecting green lines in it and we can do that, but I'm a shadow zone person myself.

This is the start. You're a male human; super strong, super skilled, super smart, but still a human. The default clothes outfit is a black spider-silk ninja outfit reinforced with strands of braided magic. It will protect you from most anything other than competing avatars or heroes.

We'll walk for a moment; but then, I'm more of a horse guy... so load a large black steed and we're riding on horseback. You can feel the horse roll back and forth as it walks. The realism is in a word, unreal. Did I mention, I'm using a new Nefarnal Dark Forces 666 rig to play as I record the commentary and I've got to say it's incredible. Let's plug in some environment. We'll go from cool desert at night, to a forest, and here we go, a muddy swamp. I like the sucking noises the horse's feet make as it walks along and you can even smell the thick humid air. If you want, you can add bugs and mosquitoes, but who would really want to? We'll clear away the trees, shrubs, and logs; turning it into a muddy plain... And here we are, overlooking Hals'bad, a simple castle fortress next to a stream in the middle of nowhere surrounded by a Goblin horde. You can start where you want to, but I always like to ride in from off screen. You know, sort of meld in from Shadow as it were.

If you reach down, you'll see you have a sword. Take it out. And, I'll remind you at this point, this is just a walking demo narrative, if you don't mess with the interface and just enjoy the ride, you'll stay right in step with me, but you are free to move around and explore at any time, if that's what you want to do.

Next, we'll swing the sword around a little. And I want you to notice how easy it is to swing. Flip it. Twirl it. You're a Warlord and that means you are a weapons, magic, technology, social, combat... whatever you want, expert.

In a flash we can change the sword to an ax, a spear, or a lance. Anything. I'm a sword guy, though, so we'll keep it a sword. Now, I want to show you something. We don't have a 'cheater' level on Warlord, because that's the default level, but if you want to up the realism we can. Here we go. Max realism: skill. Swing the sword and it slices through your mount's head like butter and continues down and slices off your leg. Why? Because I don't know how to work a sword, but if you want to test yourself, or build up your mental prowess, you can use the EVIL Warlord EXP as a training arena or practice field. If you want to feel the pain of losing a leg, you can do that as well. Of course, in the default mode, in the unlikely event you lose a limb or get hurt, you'll feel a little sting or tingle like you do now.

We'll hit 'Revert', return everything to the default settings, and our leg will reappear as the horse trots along happily again -- head intact. And redoing scenes or hitting 'Reverse' isn't a problem. And you can back the game up at will. We have a continuous save function, and if that wasn't enough, you can simply tell the system that you wanted to make a different decision, like, 5, 10, or 1000 seconds, hours, days ago and it will update the environment to reflect the changes. You don't have to replay the entire game and it's not like the entire thing is run by some malevolent Djini, either. You can specify the changes. Like, "Targor didn't die when he went over the waterfall and he doesn't hold any grudges," just like in one of his movies. Or if you want, he'll appear right then and there, or you can set it up for further

along in the game, like foreshadowing. That brings up another point. You can port in characters, equipment, locales, and campaigns into the game. You don't have to reformat files or make endless compatibility adjustments; the system does it for you. We've got thousands of stock characters already loaded, but if we're missing your favorites, or you have something custom made you'd like to integrate, just port it in. No problem.

Now, what I was intending to show you with the sword was that, first of all, you can change the level of difficulty, pain, and sensory input -- once again pretty much anything. But secondly, lack of skill levels or personal knowledge does not hamper you. There are no skill levels to build up. Look at the Goblins standing guard a quarter mile away. So, we'll change to a bow -- notice how we didn't have to sheath the sword, get out the bow -- and notch an arrow. It's all one smooth continuous motion. Shoot an arrow to the sky. Take aim. Shoot another. Go for a close up of the Goblins with your incredible eyesight and watch the arrows. One comes down right into his heart. He explodes. Blood Goblins, they earn the name if you ask me. The other we just nicked in the ear, but he explodes just as well. Kind of makes you wonder how Blood Goblins ever manage to win a battle. Anyway, if we hit reverse, they come back to life and we can change them to Sludge Ogres. Hit forward and the arrows are in the air again. The first hits the Ogre in the heart and he dies, while the other starts to run. Shoot another arrow into his head and he's dead. Now, that's control. And you won't see that in the competition.

Now, here, we're just going to let the demo do its thing. The horse walks up a hill and we find a group of two Goblin chiefs and a male Fey'an. Fey'an are kind of a cross between a small brown skinned oriental human and an Elf. And this guy is the classic betrayer -- sold out his people for a figurative bag of gold. Reach into your pocket. Throw him the bag of jewels you promised him, because you may be evil, but that doesn't mean you don't keep your word. I mean, a deal's a deal. And it's not your fault he didn't ask

for safe passages as well, so as he examines the contents shove your sword through his chest. Now this is the good part. Just let your sword linger there. Meet his eyes. He's frozen, but you can see the pain, the surprise, the 'Oh My God I'm Going to Die' look in his eyes. Twist the sword. Classic. You can get him to dance on the end of your sword for hours, interrogate him for information, bind his soul to power a spell, or just send him to eternal damnation. It's a fake soul to be sure, but all the potential you might expect from a real soul is still there.

Even the Goblins are laughing. What a joke. Stupid Fey'an thought we'd actually pay him.

You're an Evil Warlord. Join in the laughter. "Ha. Ha. Ha." Or, should I say, "Mu-ha-ha. But wait. Are they laughing with you or at you? You can never be too sure, might as well kill the lot of them, as well -- for the fun of it or because eliminating witnesses to your betrayal can't hurt. So, slice one in half with the sword and toss an ax into the other as he tries to run away.

You don't even have to waste your time picking up the bag of jewels or retrieving your weapons; and since we're done up here, we don't have to waste our time riding into camp either. We could, but if you don't want to deal with logistics of needless travel, then you don't have to.

So, here we go, snap your finger, blink your eye, or just wish it, and we're right in front of your command center. It's just a simple tent guarded by two Ogres. Judging by their outfits it looks like they are into S&M or at least the black leather and chains look. They don't seem to recognize us. Let's try that again. US! The EVIL WARLORD! They don't seem to recognize US! It's a personal attack on our honor, so we'll just have to kill one to insure we get the honor and respect we deserve from the other in the future. I mean, it truly is amazing to me that evil armies can tell friend from foe at all. The only real difference seems to be that if you are a foe, instead of killing one or two guards or allies, you just kill them all.

Anyway, as we go through the tent flaps, we enter command central. This will be pretty similar no matter which scenario you are running. You can customize it if you want and the system will remember your changes. You can have this room be as crowded or empty as you like with extras running back and forth, runners reporting from the front, and what not, but personally I like to keep it sparse. So, as planned, stab one of the affronting Ogre Guards who didn't have the common sense to recognize you in the eye -- you don't have to look around to do it -- and tell the guards at the other end of the room, "No body gets in here."

Say it like you mean it. They'll obey. Sensing your desire, minor avatars and help functionaries will dissolve away and we are left with four advisors. The first and most important is the ever present love interest, Da'zi. Stupid name to be sure, but Matt sometimes suffered from terminal nostalgia. Da'zi is what's known as a Shadow Elf.

And, this is what's known as a Hello Kiss. It's a fully functioning system. Feel the taste of her lips. Look into the depths of those eyes. Run your hand along the skin. She's not wearing much. She's excited. See how she jumps up and down. Feel her body pressed against yours. Sense the urgency and need in her heart. You won't be railroaded into a useless quest or campaign either, if that's not what you want. If you just want to spend quality time with Da'zi, you're the Evil Warlord. Do what you want to do. That's what the EVIL Warlord EXP is all about, personal sensory fulfillment at every level with no censorship.

So, enjoy...

###

Inside Evil Warlord EXP:
Not Just a Game, it's an Experience.

Matt, er, the Dark and/or Evil Warlord is happy to see Da'zi. He always liked having her around.

"What's the status?"

“We’ve been testing their defenses for two days. As per your instructions we’ve bombarded them with an endless string of illusionary assaults with real scouts and exploratory raids thrown in to force them to play their hand. They’ve used up most of the major defenses our informants told us about.” Da’zi points to areas on the map as she talks. “They covered these areas with fire storms multiple times, but they haven’t fired any off recently.” She looks at the Warlord with love and desire in her eyes. She knows why he’s attacking this fortress, but she doesn’t care. To fight by his side one more time, to lay down her life, or her body for his merest desire. “They have a repeater up in the main tower that they are saving, but other than that they either know we are using illusions at this point... or they’re out of major magic.”

“Good Work.” The Warlord produces a leather bound chest from thin air. He works the clasps and opens it to reveal a small stack of tomes, a satin bag of runes, and a small highly detailed replica of himself. He places it on the war map that they have been talking around and puts it next to a black tent. “I’m in,” he says.

“How does this work,” a similarly dressed human asks from across the table. How embarrassing, both he and the Dark Warlord are wearing the same outfit.

“How does what work?” Matt asks.

“Well, I mean, you’re a fallen hero. I’m a fallen hero. If we each get the standard half shares that doesn’t leave anything for the rest of the army.”

Matt (playing his Dark Warlord alter ego, not quite real in his home vortex, but real enough in the Hals’bad vortex) walks around the table, all nice and sweet like, as he puts his arm around...

“Dark War...” the neophyte sees the error of his ways. “Dirk Warrior. Dirk Warrior is the name, killing good guys is my game.”

“We’re Evil,” Matt lets him in on a secret. “We don’t really have to tell them we’re going to split the loot between us. Goblins aren’t that smart. They might not ever figure it out.” And after noticing Dirk’s weapon of choice, he adds, “Hey! Is that a Snake Dancer?”

“Yeah,” Dirk Warrior replies as he pulls out his sword. “+12 attack, +12 defense, 2x damage on a 15 or better, and best of all owing to the five snake head blades I get 5 times my base attack rate per round.”

You can’t see Matt’s disdain through his ninja mask, but it’s there. “May I?”

Dirk thinks about it leerily, “OK,” he finally decides.

Matt holds the blade. “Feels good, nice and powerful.”

He can see Dirk is concerned so he gives the blade back.

Matt takes out his own sword. It’s a simple sword; not too long with a leather grip and a blade of blackened steel.

Dirk eyes Matt sword. “No jewels? I thought you were this Evil Warlord? Don’t you pack like a +15...?”

Rather than grimacing again, Matt twirls his sword in the air and then in one fluid motion thrusts it deep into Dirk. “I call my sword The Final Word.” Conversationally he asks, “What do you call yours?”

“Slithering,” Dirk says as he falls to the floor.

Matt wipes his blade. “Not The Five Headed Snake Blade or the Slithering Snake Sword?” He shrugs. He looks around the room. “I hate number crunchers.” Seeing as how no one else speaks up, he adds, “since I killed him, I get his share as well.”

(For those of you who might be concerned, EVIL Warlord EXP uses a multi-dual processing system. You get your own private area in a fully registered gaming vortex. You can play with others or if you want to eliminate a pesky player who isn’t fun to have around, you can erase them (or Dirk, as the case may be) without any problems. We run the experience in parallel. For Dirk this exchange goes a little differently and Matt gets the short end or is happy to have him along. Trust us. Unless you know personally who you are playing with/against, you’ll never know whether someone else is personally in the game and whether they’ve been taken over by an automation. We even have lounge areas where you can go to relax, discuss the game, and put together a group. In

time the system learns your true desires and you'll be surprised at how easily it is to put together a reliable party of compatible players.)

The action has not stopped for our aside; Da'zi is busy giving the Dark Warlord the eye. She nods her head as her fingers dance.

Over the years they have developed an intricate system of hand signals and gestures able to communicate the most complex of thoughts. They have found it useful in the roar and chaos of battle, say when you're up against a clan of Cobalts, but surprise-surprise they happen to have a full compliment of howitzers or when a brigade of Dwarven men at arms are advancing, clashing their war hammers on their shields. Well, at times like this you're not going to be able to talk to each other, because you can't hear a thing over the din. It is for occasions like this that they had developed the battle signals, a series of complex subtle finger moments capable of communicating the most intricate of ideas in a flash. There are a few shortcomings to the entire thing. Like if you are behind someone, they don't tend to see you and believe it or not, when the ground is exploding around you from an artillery assault, you don't tend to look at your allies fingers just to see if they are saying, "Holy Crap! Where did this come from?" No. Instead you pretty much decide it's every man, woman, and child for themselves and dive for cover.

So although battle signals are a good idea, the Dark Warlord would be the first to admit he is bit rusty. He pauses to watch Da'zi's fingers fly, but he can't decide whether she is saying; "the wizard is a traitor," "do you want to break for lunch in a bit and grab some pizza?" or if all that tapping is just her usual pre-battle jitters. He does not pause to wonder. He is a man of action, decisive action; action that is at times foolhardy, ill conceived, and hazardous to those around him, but action none the less.

He holds his sword to the Wizards throat accusingly.
"You've betrayed us."

“Who me?” the Wizard asks, but it is too late. A cohort of Goblins runs into the room and amid a flurry of screams he is dragged into the night.

“Get crumbs on my comic books. I’ll show you,” he mutters to himself in that mysterious way Dark Warlords have.

“What?” the Captain of the Goblin Guard asks.

You got to love Goblins. They’re not too smart. Matt has just been going down the line offing extras and here a Goblin is all but saying, “It’s my turn. Kill me. Kill me.”

“You have your men in position?” The Dark Warlord asks.

“Yes,” the Goblin answers.

“What about that box of miniatures over there?” The Dark, Evil, Deceptively Cruel Warlord asks, indicating a large box of miniatures by the side of the table. Many are not even painted.

“Second wave,” the Goblin answers.

“Second wave?”

“Second wave,” he says, nodding his head.

Without preamble the Dark Warlord kills him. Another Goblin appears in the fallen Goblin’s place.

“I don’t do second waves. We attack now,” Matt explains and dumps the box of miniatures on top of the model of a small castle. The castle is buried deep under a heavy pile of plastic and metal. He grabs a Goblin miniature that was by the black tent and balances it precariously on top of the pile. “You too. Everything. Everyone. NOW!”

In a rush the Goblin departs. The ground shakes with explosions.

“I guess they were holding something back,” Da’zi observes.

The pile of miniatures on top of the castle grows smaller, but the castle is still covered; overrun as it were.

There are only three of them in the command tent now. The thoroughly Evil, but lovable in a ‘the world misunderstands me type way,’ Warlord, Da’zi, and a fallen Deep Dwarf type monstrosity from the depths.

The pale gray skinned Deep Gnome thing kneels. “My Liege. It is an honor to see you at work. How may I be of assistance?”

No. That isn’t right. Reverse. Back up.

“Good to see you Dr’gr.”

“As well, my Liege. Things go as planned. May I ask what brings us to Hals’bad?”

Matt goes back to his briefcase and pulls out two sheets of paper. He lays them on the battle table. Dr’gr and Da’zi look them over.

“I don’t think we’re going to be able to pull both of them into the fold,” the Dark Warlord says opening the topic for discussion.

The sheets of paper have pictures of Ess’mer’lence and De’sca’lence on them and scores of descriptive words. Both Esse and Dee look identical. They are not identical twins, but for descriptive purposes they might as well be. They both are shortish, petitish, oriental looking, maybe Thai’ish, looking beauties. The sheets include headshots, body shots, and statistics.

“Esse has better outfits,” Da’zi observes.

“I like both the leather and white dress look,” Matt counters.

“It is, of course, my Liege’s decision, but Esse can fight. She will be a great addition to the team.”

Dr’gr dismisses Da’zi’s commentary with a waive of his hand. “Da’zi does not know these things. Why even involve her? Look,” he says turning the sheets over. “Esse is proficient in the ways of war and as per her heritage has trained since birth to defend the Or’tung and Hals’bad fortress. She’s already vowed to kill you.”

“She won’t be able to,” Da’zi butts in.

“No, but look at Dee,” Dr’gr points to the lines on her bio. “Trained since birth to be the ultimate companion. She will view anyone who takes over Hals’bad as a superior mate. The very fact that you have killed her clan will make her love and value you more. She’s been bred to accept submission and be a slave upon defeat.” He brings his fingers down hard on the paper. “Art,

dance, culture... knife juggling, not knife fighting mind you knife juggling, sword swallowing, erotic dance.” He turns the paper over again. “She went in for alternate systems... look at these skills... she’ll love you long time,” Dr’gr says in an imitation of a Ve’kahn streetwalker.

“I think it’s decided. We’re after Dee.”

“And her sister?” Da’zi inquires.

“I don’t see how we can make the conversion.”

“Excellent choice my Liege,” Dr’gr reassures him. “Are you ready for battle?”

“He was born ready,” Da’zi quips.

###

How bad can it be? Hals’bad.

This is one of those great unedited, uncut, cinematic masterpieces, shot from a first person perspective in real time.

The Evil Warlord walks out of the tent and jumps onto his waiting horse. The night sky is filled with the flashes from explosions. Tracer arrows shoot in an endless volley overhead. Flaming fireballs launched from catapults dance back and forth. You don’t need to worry too much about realism. In a world of magic, this is what a battle looks like. Total chaos. There is no front, no back, and no edge. The battle expands to fill the senses. Smell the sulfur, the smoke, and the sweet scent of blood. Feel the ground shake. Taste the death in your mouth.

You do not look back but your companions are behind you. You charge through the Goblin camp that surrounds your headquarters picking up a trail of stragglers who join your charge.

Flames, fire, streaks of light, red bolts from pulse guns, and blue sprays from wands fill the air. You charge. Fear is for lesser men. You are an Evil Warlord. Up ahead you see a company of Goblins readying their equipment for battle. They are stragglers. Didn’t you give an order? Didn’t you say attack? You guide your cohort through the stragglers. They are traitors. They are cowards.

You swing your blade with abandon and the battle has commenced. You have christened the night with blood, the Goblin blood of your allies.

The ground shakes to your left as a meteor crashes to the earth. Some of your riders fall off. This is not your concern. You ride past the catapults, past the archers, past a group of skirmishers on the ground. It's not clear who they are fighting. The defenders are all in the castle, all 300 of them. Maybe a third of them are trained combatants, another third are of some help, but the last third is just dead weight. There are tens of thousands of Goblin, Ogre, and Skeletal troops on your side. Defeat for the defenders is a forgone conclusion. You are a War Lord not a War Wanna Be.

You come to the castle walls. A rain of arrows shoots down, but you need not dodge them. The defenders pour oil, drop rocks, they throw small enchanted spheres which explode, spread gas, ripple portals open, and sow the field of battle with mindless monsters happy to kill anything in sight.

A battering ram works at the base of the rampart. A rolling tower is letting down its gate. Hundreds of ladders are leaning against the wall. It's called overpowering by superior numbers. It's not brilliant. It's not military strategy at its finest, but it works. The Goblins die by the thousands, but the defenders tire. They are killed and injured one by one.

You jump off your horse and climb a ladder. Insignificant allies are in the way. You cut these Goblins down with your sword as you climb the ladder. Nothing will slow your attack. At the top you stick your sword into the first defender, a human. It feels good. You raise your voice. "Praise Gra'gl, may his fury be raised." Over the wall, you go; and as you do, the first defensive barrier falls. Countless Goblins join you. You press the attack. You throw a dagger at a retreating Elvin defender and an axe at a robed figure with blue horns making the holy sign of Karthrax (the good). The defenders you haven't killed yet pull back to the next wall.

Arrows stream at you from an arrow slit in a tower. You flick your hand and the stone wall behind the arrow slit explodes. The Fey'an defender inside screams, falling in flames to their death. The main tower opens fire. They've got a plasma repeater up there or is it a mana chain gun shooting strips of magic at high speed causing havoc and death in whatever they hit.

You duck behind a wall. This will take a moment. You reach into your belt and pull out a small black orb. Twist it to arm, peer around the corner, and throw the orb. As it leaves your fingers it expands. It is the size of a large marble when it leaves your fingers and as it departs it grows so it always blocks out the same arc of vision. In a few minutes it will be hundreds of miles away and the size of the moon, in an hour or two it will reach the size of the sun, and then it will punch a hole in the side of the vortex. Who knows where it goes from there? On it's way it will destroy everything in its path. The environmental impact from such a weapon is monstrous. You are after all evil. You do not care. You watch in delight, as the tower is obliterated. There is nothing left. Behind it a black orb sails into the sky.

You are on top of the last wall before the keep. You jump down to ground level in the inner courtyard, see a battering ram, and jump on top of it as it levels a large pair of double doors. Inside there are a half dozen warriors who had been manning the arrow slits. You make quick work of two and turn just in time to block the attack from a desperate Fey'an. You recognize her, Ess'mer'lence. You pull your blow and instead of slicing her in half, you punch her in the face. She is slammed against the wall and drops out cold. To all appearances she is dead. You do not stop to check the damage. You charge into the hall, up a spiral staircase, and then duck suddenly into a nook as a giant spiked ball, sparking with magical energies goes past you down into the courtyard. You recognize the weapon. If we followed it down, it would bounce around the inner courtyard killing all it encounters. You are alone on the stairs, the ball having killed the Goblins behind you, but you do not stop. You run ahead only to duck into a

nook again as another ball comes bounding down, and then another.

Two can play at this game. You take out what looks to be a bunch of yellowish pipe cleaners reminiscent of a pack of spaghetti broken in half. You throw them up the hall and the darkness erupts in a flash of light. If we cut to an outside view, we would see every window, portal, and arrow slit on an entire side of the castle erupt with the exit of these sparkly rays of death.

You continue up the stairs. At the top a badly burned door has been knocked off its hinges. You find yourself on a landing. It is full of Goblin warriors and your elite Swamp Curl Shaman. He is a two headed beast, fairly man like, in a rotted, rubbery flesh type way. He has powerful magic. You notice he is standing at the landing urging his cohort of Goblins ahead as he holds back like a coward. An arrow from Da'zi's bow finds his heart. The Goblins pause in their advance to chop him down.

"No one holds back," Da'zi commands as she rushes past you. No one. You run into the last room. The fortress has fallen. A king kneels as you enter. You do not pay him any mind. He is not worth the attention. Dr'gr slits his throat as he glimmers at you with his evil yellow eyes. "Hals'bad is yours my master." He looks to you for guidance, command, and leadership.

Outside the fighting continues. You brought fifteen different Goblin clans together for this battle. There will be only one clan left by the end of the night. It is the way of Goblins. Be it by death, assimilation, or retreat. Only one clan will remain. Only one clan will live, but that is not your concern

Momentarily a Goblin Chieftain enters. He is the surviving representative. "It is finished," he says.

Still this in not where your mind is. Hals'bad home of the Or'tung for the last two hundred years, it is not much of a stronghold. It is not much of a target, but you have not come here for treasure, land, strategic territory, or to control the K'fr trade. You have come her for De'sca'lence and maybe Ess'mer'lence if you can work out the details.

The survivors are lined up. You know Dee and Esse are at the end of the line. You will come to them last. It builds drama. It builds suspense. You start going down the line by looking at the first girl. She is beautiful. She wears a white dress, she has rubies in her hair, and jewels around her neck and arms. She is an Or'tung Fey'an who has chosen the Soft Road, the road of subservience, of willful surrender. You look her over. You study her teeth and pull her mouth wide as if she is a horse. Without complaint she complies. You make her turn around. She does so eagerly, but it is just a show. You pass over the first three, her and two children. The Goblin Chieftain grabs them by the hair and drags them outside. We need not see the scene. We can hear the screams. Rest assured, they will not need to endure whatever it is that they are enduring for long.

Why the next is still standing we do not know. It is a man. Without a thought, Matt kills him. Kill the men, rape the women, and enslave the young. Other Evil Warlords go for a different combination, but he is a purist. At his example the other men in the line up are instantly brought down. He comes to a child next. She has jewels woven into her hair. She is beautiful, willing, and eager to please. Matt passes her by. A Skeleton Warrior who has no need of food or sex grabs her. He rips the jewels from around her neck, out of her hair, and off her fingers. He is not kind. It is not a scene of passion or even rape. It is a scene of removing jewelry from a manikin. The manikin does not live through the experience.

Pause for a moment and consider the irony of it all. In countless vortexes it is permissible to go into graphic and gory detail regarding the gratuitous dismemberment of an innocent child, but the slightest hint of sex (and therefore what might keep these youngsters alive) is censored.

The next child falls to Dr'gr. Having some brains she has removed the jewelry from around her neck and hair. She kneels at his approach and offers him the jewels. He ignores them as he

covers her mouth, so we need not listen to her screams. They will last a while.

Believe it or not, this is the scene, the moment, for which the entire battle was fought. It is not a new scene. It does not originate with this production company. From before the Vikings or even the Iliad, it is a scene of historical truth... and for a thirteen year old boy with hormones a'raging, it can be a very compelling scene indeed. How can you not get laid with this set up?

Let us build up some background. Your average sentient is driven by a sexual urge. The urge is just as strong at puberty, perhaps even stronger then, than it is later in life, but at thirteen a boy has little opportunity to feed the desire, consummate the urge. In all likelihood, the need will remain unmet for years, yet it is there. It feeds on itself and grows.

Deep in their heart, this young sentient wonders and thinks. How can I satisfy this urge? Under what circumstances would I, someone who at say thirteen, is very helpless, under the control of others... in a word impotent; under what circumstances would the urge be consummated? The lad might watch a film, play a game, or read a book. He might go in for a sub-genre of fiction, which satisfies these urges, or at least come close. He might spend time in his own mind with these thoughts. He might create his own artificial made up world to play in. Given enough time, enough desire, he might find a way to cross over into another vortex that he personally does not believe is real. He might not know that he has crossed over. He might not know of the effect he is having. Or he might and just not care.

You need not think too hard on it. Matt as he knows himself to be is not a bad guy, but Matt as much of the universe knows him to be is an Evil Warlord. He fights this battle different ways on different nights. It's what he does in his sleep and his waking idle moments. He calls them daydreams. To him they are just stories no different, than a game, a movie, or a book.

It is not real, he says, but it is. It is harmless fun, he says, but it is not. Action brings consequence. Even if you only believe

imaginary action will bring imaginary consequence, then take it to heart in a world where magic is real, there is no more powerful force than imagination. How do you think Wizards forment their spells anyway?

In the end, I don't really blame Matt. He is just going along with the flow. After a lifetime of such images, what do you really expect him to daydream about? No I blame the media. I blame irresponsible authors... but not me. This is respectable avant-garde literature. It's an important plot-developing scene.

Evil Warlord is easy to say; but in the end, it is just a name.

And please don't make the mistake of believing you have seen the face of evil. It has been edited away and hid behind innuendo, but Ess'mer'lence and De'sca'lence have, and it looks surprisingly like the face of the Dark Warlord, the face of Matt.

###

The Hard Road and The Soft Road

Esse and Dee stand at the end of the line up. In case you have forgotten, Matt, the Evil Warlord, is going down the line choosing his share of the booty. The rest are discarded to his troops. If we were following a story board or plot outline, this would be a great place for a flashback sequence, but my heart's not in it and I've learned over time that if my heart isn't in it, the bit sucks in the end. So, rather than do a sucky bit that we'd all be bored with before I even begin, I'll just sort of go over some ideas we've been tossing around.

For a flashback, you need some sort of justification. Now we have that. This line up is nothing new in literature and it's not anything new in Hals'bad either. 200 years ago, Esse and Dee's great grandfather's, great grandfather captured this fortress and believe it or not put the inhabitants through a similar, if less bloody, process. It is how he got his wife, sister in law, and two adopted children. So, it would be an easy enough thing to show Esse and Dee as young children at their great grandfather's knee as

he related the family history and the family tradition to them. Because, if you're going to live in a fortress that falls repeatedly, almost like clockwork, you should have some expectation that if not you, then your children, or your children's children are going to be captured and sold as slaves or... whatever.

And there are two ways to react to this knowledge. One is the Hard Road. The Hard Road is the road of the fighter, the warrior, the individual who vows to protect Hals'bad and its inhabitants against any and all invaders, who vows to lay down their life in the process if necessary. Esse took this road and if we were to do a flashback, we would show a montage of Esse's youth. We would see her running through obstacle courses, climbing the castle walls, and jumping into her great grandfather's room in the middle of the night and waking him up by holding a sword to his throat. We might do this scene over and over again with the first time her great grandfather waiting for her at the window. The next time she makes it to the bed, where he pokes her in the belly with a scabbard, but finally she does it. She holds a sword up to his throat as he sleeps deeply. She might steal his glasses at this point and disappear back into the night. We'd also have to throw in a lot of weapons training, ranger lore, outdoor survival, tracking, and things of that nature, but you get the idea. Esse spent her youth in the single-minded devotion to an idea. Live by the sword or die by the sword.

We could then perhaps pull back from Esse's eyes and return to the Evil Warlord in his room of death, watch as another Fey'an dies, and then zoom in for a close up of Dee's eyes to set up her flashback. It starts again at her great grandfather's knee, but instead of choosing the Hard Road, Dee chooses the Soft Road. No matter how skilled the defenders, eventually Hals'bad will fall again. In defeat, the warriors are often killed, but the women and children may escape this fate. There are things one can do to escape death if you know and believe in your heart that someday you will be sold into slavery. You can learn to dance, sing, tell stories, sew, repair armor, polish weapons, care for horses, cook,

clean, and in short train yourself to be the perfect slave, the perfect servant, the perfect wife, or the perfect whore. Dee or any of her cousins would easily fetch 10, 20, 100 times, or more the price of a typical slave. She has trained from her earliest days, non-stop, and with no less effort or devotion than Esse, to be the perfect concubine, the perfect mistress and that my friends is historically what has always fetched the highest price down in the slaver markets.

So, you get a feel for the content of the potential flashbacks and since they would be done in montage, they could be really fun. I love those montage scenes. We could get some big name bard to write a custom song or maybe just use a classic track and you have movie magic. The problem isn't so much the flashback, as it is the hall of death they now inhabit.

Let's set the scene again. Dee is on the end of the line up. She wears a white dress and jewels in her hair. She's watching her friends and relatives get torn apart and otherwise destroyed. It's not the scene she was expecting. You don't have to train a lifetime to become food or an unwilling participant in a gang rape. The Evil Warlord and the Goblins were throwing away a literal fortune in human flesh, but they didn't care. Goblins aren't that bright and the Dark Warlord didn't care. He ran this scene endlessly in his head. Somewhere he might have a kingdom and a harem full of girls, but in reality, night after night, rather than spending any time in the harem, he always went off searching for fresh meat. From his point of view there was no reason to save anything. Another fortress would fall tomorrow and it wasn't real anyhow. Why would you put any effort in saving what is not real?

But then, the point isn't what's going through Matt's mind; but rather, what's going through Dee's mind. She's terrified. She's watching her friends and relatives get killed for no good reason. They are literally wasting a fortune in prime Fey'an flesh. Around her, everyone is dying. And she has no reason to believe that she won't die, as well. Her mind is not on a time long ago at her great

grandfather's knee when she decided to take the Soft Road. Her mind is on survival and her best bet for that is a hero... it's Esse.

Esse for her part is out cold. She is not standing on her own. When the Goblin's threw her into the room, Dee wrapped a blanket around her to hide her fighting outfit, and when the time for the line up came Dee lifted Esse to her feet. In a word, Esse doesn't have the mental wherewithal right now to have a flashback. She doesn't even know she's seemingly moments away from certain death. We could force the flashback from Esse's point of view by making it as a sort of dream, altered states of consciousness, her life flashing before her eyes type of routine; but then, like I said, she's out cold. Her mind is a void. It's almost as if she is in that black loading area of one of your better quality, cutting edge games like EVIL Warlord EXP, but she's not. And in the end, that's really just one of those misleading statements. Trust me. I'm not going to claim that this is all a game towards the end of the story. Life may be a game in a metaphorical sense, but the events related thus far are not a game to the participants. So, that bit is just clever writing and product cross promotion on my part. You know as in, if you like the book, you might like the game, EVIL Warlord EXP. But that doesn't mean it's going to be a game, dream, or some other stupid thing at the end. I mean, that's not a very satisfying way to go and in the end it's kind of moronic. Having the book be a game in the end is a lot like ending a computer game and at the end saying surprise-surprise it's all been a book. Not only does it not flow, it's idiotic, not to mention a great big let-down.

And I suppose you could argue it would be an awful lot like doing a flashback chapter by explaining why you're not going to do a flashback chapter, but it's not. It's a totally different concept. See, having a book that turns out to be a movie in the end is just Stupid. But, having a book that is presented as a multi-media, cross promotional assemblage of narrative styles, which includes movie footage, that my friends is pure Genius.

... And if I may be so bold as to add. It means you, my friend, have incredible literary taste.

###

Line Cutters

“Wake up!” De’sca’lence pleads, but Ess’mer’lence does not hear her.

“Wake up!” She whispers again through clenched lips. “They are killing everyone,” but still Esse does not respond. She is still recovering from the blow to her face, a blow that would have killed a lesser creature. Even now her face is puffing from the bruise. She will live the rest of her life with a shattered discoloration around her left eye. It is a magic burn. It will look like a large dark brown birthmark. It might in fact be the easiest way to tell Esse and Dee apart from here on out.

“Wake up!” Dee pleads again, but she knows it is useless. And she knows the rules. She’s supposed to wait in the line up and accept what comes; but then, they aren’t supposed to kill everyone. And if they aren’t going to play by the rules, neither is she. So as discretely as she can, she reaches for a vial she has hidden in the folds of her clothes. Although no one can see it, it is a small blue vial. It is a healing potion. She places it in Esse’s hands and is relieved when Esse grabs hold of it. At least that much of her sister’s instincts are working.

And as another soul loses her life at the other end of the lineup, Dee squeezes the vial in Esse’s hand. There are better ways of administering a healing potion, but if she can break the bottle, this gambit of hers will still work. So she squeezes with all her might, but it won’t break. Finally with a bit of inspiration, Dee wraps her sister’s hand around the pommel of her sword and using the weapon as a hard edge, manages to break the vial. The glass cuts Esse’s hand. The pain brings her to consciousness. While the potion works its magic, sealing the cut, and clearing Esse’s head.

“They are killing everyone!” Dee informs Esse. “Everyone!”

Between the vial and the exchange, they have made too much noise. Da'zi focuses her attention on them. "Quiet down there!" She starts walking their way. "Or, do you want to be next?"

The Evil Warlord dismisses the noise. The victims are nervous. Their knees are shaking. A little noise from the peanut gallery is reassuring. It lets him know he is playing his role properly. "Don't worry about them," the Evil Warlord reassures Da'zi. It is almost like he is helping Esse and Dee.

Of course, this help would not be conscious on Matt's part. But let us back up and remember that this is all a dream, a fantasy for Matt, almost like a game, a story he tells himself. The Dark Warlord works tremendous magic through Matt's imagination. If Matt says it is, and he can hold the thought in his head, then it is. It is as if a council of a thousand powerful Wizards convened all their strength on the idea. So, as Matt goes down the line killing innocent girls... having fun, in many senses it is just that. When he gets down to Dee, his ultimate goal, desire, and reason for the slaughter in the first place, he will want her to regard him with love in her eyes. After killing her family, this might not be very likely, so the past will need to be edited. He will need to talk to the Djini in the game. Reverse. Back up. Change reality and the story thus far. He might decide the Goblins attacks have always been and therefor suddenly are Humans. Or that Hals'bad is a key way station on the K'fr road; and therefore, its destruction is justifiable. And from there, maybe Matt will decide that Dee has always felt strange about her family's involvement in the K'fr trade. And maybe that she is being held against her will, bred since birth to accept defeat, or promised in marriage to someone she despises. These are just details, minor changes. The power emanating from Matt's mind is nearly incomprehensible. Matt already plans to spare Esse's life. It is an easy matter to go back, re-edit the scene, and spare the lives of her friends and family. Perhaps Dee will be held as a semi-willing hostage, collateral as it were, for the lives of her fellow Fey'an's. Later, Matt will go back, work it out, change

and edit until, Yes, it feels right and Dee looks at him with love in her eyes... or until Matt can believe this, which will make it so.

This is the way it goes with the Evil Warlord. So please, do not concern yourself with improbability of a frontal assault, a line up of death only mere moments after the fall of the fortress, that Esse has been included in the line up, or that all it took to disguise her was a simple woolen blanket. To understand, you need only look at it as closely as Matt would. That, after all, is the story.

So, Matt is not worried about a little noise at the end of the line up. He knows that it will all work out.

Esse and Dee on the other hand do not. Aware, alive, her fighting senses on full alert, Esse has power of her own and within seconds she has taken stock of the situation. The Warlord is killing everyone. She is outnumbered. Retreat is the only viable solution. She reaches into a bag at her waist. She takes out a random handful of marbles and sows them across the room in one fluid motion. Without waiting to see the effects she grabs hold of Kal'elle'de'en, the child standing next to her in the line up and tosses her up to the window she knows is behind her.

Around her the enchanted marbles work their magic. Snakes slither on the floor around Dr'gr. The tapestries against the back wall explode in smoke. Arrows of red death shoot off in random directions keeping Da'zi occupied. A hole opens in the floor by the main door that the Goblins rushing into the room fall into. Their standing instructions to attack no matter what does them no favors in this instance, as the Goblins in back push the ones in front into the hole and then soon find themselves in the same situation. While sparklers fill the air, a plague of mosquito's surround another Swamp Curl, and a swarm of rats occupies the Skeleton.

Esse does not pause to watch. She grabs hold of Dee, quickly climbs the wall to the window, and jumps through it into the moat below holding onto Esse with one hand and Kal with the other; leaving the blanket behind to block the opening. A hail of

arrows bounces off the wall around the opening and punch into the blanket, but Esse and Dee are gone.

The Dark, Evil, Despicable Warlord smiles as he waives distractedly at the swarm of white sparklers surrounding him. He watches in delight at the chaos that has erupted in the room. He calls out, “bring me my horse,” and pulls out the bios of Esse and Dee once again. Desire builds in his heart. The chase is on.

###

The River... Symbolic or Something?

The trio splash into the moat. It is not luck but fate that they do not hit any of the debris floating in the water. They sink down low and Esse’s boots get stuck in the muck at the bottom. No matter. She pulls free of her boots and guides her charges to a cave she knows of. The Evil Warlord is not the only one who can work this type of magic (of daydream desire).

They come up into the small cave. It is pitch black, yet they can see aided by an indiscriminate glow from an unknown source. This is a way station, a muster point. It is part of Hals’bad’s defenses. Inside the tunnel a lone Fey’an warrior, Tral’acar, waits. He is little more than a boy. He holds his sword at the ready. Though he knows all three of the new comers, his mind is fried. Fear overwhelms him.

Esse assesses this and then mentally dismisses him. She ducks back into the water to retrieve her boots. When she returns Kal is being stupid.

“We should have stayed,” Kal insists. “It is our way.”

Esse does not have time for this. She grabs Kal by her jewel-encrusted hair and holds her sword to her throat. “I claim you as mine.”

Kal does not seem to get it.

Esse is a fighter, cold, hard, ruthless, trained from birth to defend Hals'bad and its occupants. She pushes Kal's face against the cold rock. The lad, Tral, is still in shock. He knows not what to do. Esse repeats her claim. "Hals'bad has fallen. As is my rights of possession, I claim you. Do you dare defy me?"

It does not make sense to Kal, but years of conditioning win out. "I am yours," she agrees. "What will you have of me?"

Esse indicates the cavern's passage as she pushes the child ahead. "Tral will go with you. I bind you to him. And Tral," she says to the boy, "you will protect Kal at all costs. With your life if need be."

He nods. "Yes," he says nervously.

"Go run. They will not follow you. Run for thirty days and then find somewhere nice, safe, and peaceful to live out your lives."

"But Hals'bad," the boys asks.

"Hals'bad has fallen. It will never be yours again." Esse does not have time to argue. "I gave you an order boy... I gave both of you an order. Now run!"

After they have departed Dee asks, "Will they be alright?"

"If Tral can remember his training. They are not the quarry the Evil Warlord looks for," Esse explains as she puts her boots onto Dee. When she is done, she reaches into a crevice and pulls out a dozen small pebbles. She keeps one and gives the rest to Dee. "They are water breathing pills. Go downstream. Stay underwater as long as you can. Then run through the vortexes as fast and far as you can."

"Aren't you coming with me?"

"Hals'bad has fallen," with meaning she adds, "there is nothing left."

"You're not serious."

Esse does not respond. She guides Dee back into the water. "He will chase you. Run far. Run hard."

With her sister Dee on her way, Esse strips off her leather jerkin and chain mail. She takes off her sword and removes her dagger. She takes all that she has and wraps it into a bundle. She wades back into the water, dives under, and bites into the water breathing pebble.

Esse swims upstream. It is not far. Hals'bad is in a scrub desert. The fortress is situated by the only water source for miles around. It is a gushing spring that emerges halfway down a stone face and falls into the small river below. At the bottom of the pool, where the spring falls into the river, Esse finds a place to stash her gear. She pushes it deep into the muck. She will miss her sword, but she cannot carry it where she is headed.

Cautiously she pokes her head above water. Above the falls, there are Goblin guards, but they do not hear her climb the rocks. She has practiced this climb many times. She squeezes into the opening of the spring. Her water-breathing pill has expired, but more are hidden here. She takes one and fights her way into the rushing current of the spring. The going is difficult. It is like walking into the spray of a dozen fire hoses, but she has come this way before. A dozen yards into the rushing torrent; in a place that looks no different from others she twirls a few rocks, as if dialing the combination on a lock. She takes a few more steps and the passage widens. She moves to the side and turns some more rocks. And the passage closes behind her. The water stops rushing, while far above her she sees the surface of the water. She swims toward it, eventually breaking free into the night. She is in an ocean. She knows not where. She has never been here before. By the twinkling of stars she can see land in the distance. Hours later she pulls herself up on a sandy beach from which she walks into a jungle, up a hill, and through a stray vortex or two. Exhausted, she comes to the edge of a clearing. It smells friendly. It feels safe. She falls asleep.

She will wake in a few hours to the sound of crashing logs and the familiar sight of battle training, but then, you might have already figured that out.

Meanwhile, Dee swims with the current downstream. She stays under the surface. She does not come up for air. She does not need to. She goes past Goblin and Ogre sentries unnoticed. Now and again she comes to the wreckage from war and winds her way around it.

Riders crisscross her path, but they do not find her.

The water is rushing along and she makes good time. Like all Fey'an she can hop vortexes and change the dimension, the reality she is in. She starts to do this, carefully at first, but then more and more boldly. She does not know where she is going, but she does not plan on returning. There is nothing left. It is unlikely that hopping vortexes will throw the Evil Warlord off, but she has to at least try.

Unfortunately, she has not gotten very far when Esse turns off the water. The current quickly slows and then stops. At this point, Dee cautiously pokes her head above water. Happily, there is no one around. And as she will now make better time on land, she runs off into some scrub, which she shifts into a forest filled vortex as she hops over. And even though Hals'bad is several vortexes away by now, she can hear the rumbles in the distance. She can see the flashes in the night sky. For, when Esse turned off the water portal, she turned on another one. And Flame Spirits have been set loose on the Hals'bad vortex. They will destroy everything for hundreds of miles around Hals'bad, but they will not jump over to neighboring vortexes. They do not have that ability. Hals'bad will be no more. And this is as it should be. I mean, if everyone in Hals'bad is going to die, then everyone in Hals'bad should die. Goblins are no match for Flame Spirits, no matter how many Goblins there are. In a day or two the Spirits will dissipate and all that will be left of Hals'bad will be ruins. It will be as if nothing has been there for thousands of years. The fortress will be a ruin. The river will disappear. It will be nothing but a desert spring, a trickle of water from which a few lucky palms might someday grow.

Hals'bad will never again control the K'fr trade. This route of The K'fr Road will never be rebuilt. If you are of the mind, you can view this as justice, a positive outcome. If you are of the mind, you can view the fall of Hals'bad as a necessary evil that if not orchestrated by Matt, would have happened eventually nonetheless. It would give rise to the concept that the Evil Warlord is an anti-hero, a dark Paladin in the positive sense. History is written by the victors after all and historically the Evil Warlord has been the victor, but let us not dwell on this.

Dee certainly does not. Hals'bad is gone. There is nothing to return to, but still she is pursued. She can sense this. She runs as fast as she can easing in and out of vortexes; from scrub to forest to mountains, through a stream that becomes a river, a swamp, and then a dried up desert riverbed again. On and on she runs. She has spent her life dancing, juggling, exercising, and doing gymnastics. She is in incredible shape. She does not tire, but she is not running fast enough.

The Warlord is able to track her. He can travel through the vortexes as she does. He can see her trail. With magic, he can predict where she will go, and he rides a fast horse. He makes better time than she does.

He waits by the side of a hill and watches her run by in the valley. She turns and cuts through a vortex, but he is waiting for her. She turns again and he is by her side.

He is playing with her. The chase is over, but she does not give in. She does not lie down to die. Desperate, she ducks into a K'fr patch in a parallel world seeking shelter, but the plant does her no favors. The thorns tears at her dress and cut her flesh. The Warlord follows cutting a path through the weed with his sword. The K'fr will not hide her. She is scared now, more than before. In terror she runs like a rabbit, here and there. Doubling back, she zigzags through vortexes blindly.

Still he pursues. She hears his galloping horse from behind, closer now... and then she feels his touch.

In full gallop, he grabs her and pulls her onto his horse, into his arms. The scene fades. She blacks out. Darkness envelops her and uncharacteristically it envelops the Evil Warlord as well as he falls to slumber after an evening of fantasy; his quest incomplete.

It happened. It is real, but Matt will not remember the details. He will not remember De'sca'lence's face, this chase, or even the specifics of the fall of Hals'bad. It's one of a thousand battles Matt has envisioned over the years. It is not special. Before morning it will all fade away.

When next they meet it will be in Matt's world. De'sca'lence will awake to find herself held prisoner in the Evil Warlord's secret lair. And some of you may even recognize the magic poor suburban locale.

###

A Little Bull

The movie crew is busy setting up a screen in Bull's clearing by the edge of the Jungle. Folks in the neighborhood have come to watch the film shoot, but the next scene will take the action away to a different locale, so the crew is doing a little PR work and setting up a viewing screen for the locals. Also, that way, they can stay behind, because the next scene is going to unfold naturally. No one will yell, "Cut," "Stop," "Action," or more importantly "Incoming." There will be no retake. I say, let the dice and artillery shells land where they may.

Bull's eyes are closed. He is lying on the big stump in the middle of the clearing. He snores, pretending to sleep, but he is not asleep. He is trying to figure out who has been wandering around the edge of the clearing. At first, he had thought it was one of the Pixies in the neighborhood, maybe Jack or one of her friends trying to sneak up on him to play a joke or something, but he doesn't believe that anymore. Whoever it is doesn't smell like a Pixie and they are a little too big.

His agent hadn't told Bull much about the movie, just that the writer had been too lazy to write a screenplay or even do a plot outline. Bull doesn't know if the creature on the edge of the clearing is a friend, a foe, part of the story, or just another shy Fey, watching the world from the edge of the wild.

And then, even though it's still a long way off, he hears the helicopter. So, he stretches and pretends to wake up. "Choppers," he says. They have been scouring the jungle lately looking for K'fr. They've been growing K'fr in this vortex since before the beginning of time and now all of a sudden they want to make it illegal... but not really. They are searching for K'fr with helicopters as if K'fr is something you can see from the air. None of the local politicians or law enforcement agencies are actually interested in stopping the trade. They are just putting on a show to impress outside forces. This becomes most apparent when you realize all they do if they find any K'fr is simply confiscate it... and then sell it at auction, hardly an effective method of dampening the trade.

The helicopter is still a long way off, but you don't have to have great eyesight to see that it is piloted by an Elf. All you have to do is look on the big movie screen.

"Down there," his Gnome spotter says pointing towards Bull who has stood up to waive at them.

"Let's check it out," the Elf says and the chopper dives down. Bull stands and waits.

Secretly the film crew hopes Bull will have some sort of PTSD flashback and take off into the bush. It would make for great footage, but Bull stands his ground.

Once the chopper lands, extras in camouflage fatigues run across the field. They hop into the helicopter from one side and jump out the other. They cover the field. They search for K'fr or anything suspicious.

The Ogre Capitan drops out of the helicopter and sneers at Bull. "If you're hiding anything, we'll find it, boy." He accents his words with jabs to Bull's chest.

A Troll in fatigues by Bull's cabin calls out. "I found something." He holds his AK-47/5889 in one hand and a potted plant in the other. He runs back to the Ogre with the plant.

As he approaches the Ogre says, "I told you we'd find it."

Bull watches unconcerned at the Troll approaches.

"What's this, then?" the Ogre asks indicating the plant.

"Planning on growing something?"

"Tomatoes," Bull agrees as he plops one of the ripened red fruits into his mouth.

The Ogre sneers. "I've got my eye on you, boy," and then he calls to his men, "we're not going to find anything here." He looks at Bull again and adds, "not today anyway, but we'll be back."

As far as the Ogre is concerned, the scene is over. "Are you really going to grow tomatoes?" he asks.

"I'm going to try," Bull replies as he goes to take the plant away from the Troll, but the Gnome from the helicopter interrupts him. "Time for the flashback. Here, put on this helmet."

Bull just looks at him.

"It'll hide your horns," the Gnome explains.

Sure enough, it goes right over his horns and Bull enters the helicopter.

As the helicopter pulls away, stock footage runs on the screen courtesy of the Seven Realms Airborne Cavalry. Montages. I love montages. We see a young Minataur at graduation. He throws his cap into the air. Later sitting by a pond, a graduation dance going in the background, his girlfriend asks, "What are you going to do?"

"I've been thinking about the Army..."

We join him on the bus debarking at the training base. An Ogre Sergeant yells at the new recruits for no apparent reason:

"Stand at attention!"

"Do not salute me! I am not an officer!"

"Do I look like your mother?"

"The Army must hate me to assign you to me."

"You WILL become soldiers," and so on.

The recruits run into a building and take their turns in a chair where hair, horns, feathers, and claws are shorn with equal ferocity. They go down a line picking up uniforms, boots, and helmets. Outside in the rain, they stand at attention. We go down the line; humans shorn of hair, Elves without hair OR jewelry, bird creatures without feathers, Lion Men without fur, Rhino Men and Minataurs without horns, all devoid of dignity. Oddly the Orcs, Goblins, and half-breeds all look better, as if perhaps this is the first time they have ever been groomed in their entire lives. The Ogre Sergeant yells at them for no apparent reason, yet again. “You are the most pathetic looking bunch of vermin I have ever seen. Drop and give me twenty.” It is raining. In the mud they do push ups, sit-ups, and jumping jacks. They fall out one by one, till only a hornless Minataur remains in the rain doing push ups. The scene cuts back to reveal an Ogre standing on his back yelling for no apparent reason. “You call those push ups? My grandmother can do better push ups than that.”

The scene cuts to a sunny day. It is hot. The recruits run with 100lb packs on their back. The bird creature, an Avarn falls; he cannot carry the load. A Minataur stops to help. He takes the Avarn’s pack off and helps him up. He puts on the Avarn’s pack to double up. He continues the run carrying two packs. The scene repeats itself with an Elf. The Ogre Sergeant watches this and shouts again for no apparent reason. “Did I tell you to rest? Who do you think you are carrying three packs? Do you think you are special?” Lightning flashes in a night sky and an Ogre stands on the back of a Minataur doing push ups in the rain.

We see the Elf helping the Minataur pass bunk inspection. We see the Avarn helping him with KP duty. We see a Minataur tossing squad mates over a rope net obstacle and we see the Ogre standing on the Minataurs back as he does push ups in the rain. “I will make a soldier out of you yet.”

The recruits are given AK-47/5889’s to destroy hay bales with pictures of Goblin’s taped to the front. For some reason, the Goblins are especially good at this. We watch grenade practice.

We watch the bird creature puke into his gasmask during gasmask training and then we watch our happy recruits conducting a parade march in full dress uniform. The Ogre and his human commander go down the line inspecting the troops. He stops in front of the Minataur and yells. "I'm surprised you made it Soldier!"

The Minataur responds at the top of his lungs, "Thank you."

At the end of the line the commander turns. "I hope you have spent your time here well. You're all headed for the 'Kahn."

###

The Ve'kahn Experience

Bull is in a WASP helicopter flying low over the jungle. On top of Ve'kahn era black and gray combat fatigues, he wears a flack jacket and a flight helmet. A similarly dressed Gnome is instructing him in the use of a 50-C Manna Chain Gun. "It's probably just as you remember," he shouts over the roar of the blades as he indicates the drum cartridge. "This is your power supply. If you jam, change it. Don't think. Just change it. It's the most common problem." He holds the lightweight ammo belt in his hands. It's composed of 6" by ½" strips of white ribbon, standard 8-bit rounds. "This is your ammo. They're a self-aiming, tracer rounds. Just point and shoot. If you need to concentrate your fire on something specific or avoid friendlies, you can override its targeting function by holding down this button." He connects a safety tether to a clip at Bull's waist before slapping Bull on the shoulder. "Ready!"

"Sure."

Bull is standing on a small weapons platform. The Gnome hits a lever freeing the safety catch and swings the platform out the door. It arcs out and forward on a 5' pivot giving Bull a 150-degree arc of fire on the right, starboard, side of the helicopter. The Gnome hooks himself up and swings out the port side. They both can cover the front 45-degrees of the gunship, as can the Elf pilot.

With five other WASP gunships, they fly spread out wide in a loose scouting formation over the jungle. Moments after Bull and the Gnome are in position, they fly over a ridge and the jungle disappears. One minute they are flying over a thick solid jungle, the next they are flying over a smoky, barren, war charred plain. Bull looks back. He can see the straight edge where the jungle suddenly stops, just like it would at the edge of a clear-cut lumber operation. From positions tucked into the edge of the jungle, Bull can see the occasional tracer round from Elvin Rangers picking off the stray Goblin or two.

They fly low and fast over the plain. There is not much to shoot at. Even so, now and again they shoot off a few rounds to break the monotony. Occasionally Bull or the Gnome sees something move or a likely hiding spot and one or the other squeezes off a few rounds. It's easy to tell if something is hiding and when it is dead. The tracer rounds curve into the shadows if there is something alive down in the crags and tunnels; otherwise they fly off into the distance or shatter into the landscape.

After a bit, they fly over a slight hillock and catch a few dozen Goblins by surprise. Immediately Bull, the Elf, the Gnome, and the crews from the WASPs on either side open up. They don't even bother to aim at first. They swing their weapons around as they fire full bore. The rounds curve in flight. The Goblins explode as multiple rounds hit each of them simultaneously. By the time Bull's gun is even aimed in the general direction of where the Goblins had been, they are all dead. The rounds from the chain guns pound uselessly into the dirt for a few moments while the gunner's process the information. The firefight is over. It has been a short, decisive firefight. It has been the sort of firefight you might put at the beginning of a fight sequence to illustrate the overwhelming superiority of the Seven Realms Airborne Cavalry. You know, to sort of pay back the Seven Realms Airborne Cavalry for all the support, equipment, and extras they've provided during the film shoot, and to let anybody out there know, if you mess with best, you'll die like the rest.

“Yeehaw! Like shooting fish in a barrel,” the Gnome merrily announces.

“It’s a turkey shoot,” the Elf agrees.

Bull ignores the cliché lines. He understands the motivation. A talking role is a talking role. They’ll get double pay if their words make it into the final cut. Bull silently wishes them the best of luck as he clears his weapon. This is a big time production. A dozen Goblins is just an appetizer. The Seven Realms Airborne Cavalry didn’t lend the production company the use of six WASP’s and who knows how much other equipment to kill a dozen Goblins, but in the end the lure of easy money wins out and he finds himself yelling over the roar of the engine, “I got a feeling that’s just the tip of the iceberg, fellas.”

And, right Bull would be. I mean, this is that big Ve’kahn flashback sequence. No expense spared. What we have done is simple. We pulled together a few loose dimensional strands to make our own private vortex. Standard planar fabrication, nothing fancy. Then we infused it with the appearance of an old growth Jungle. Well, appearance and reality is always a bit of a blurry distinction (at least, to me). And it’s a registered vortex, built up from scratch, so we can do what we want with it. All legal. All legit.

Once the jungle was thriving we invited homesteaders in... with the understanding we were going to run military maneuvers in the area in a few weeks. You know how Fey go for premium jungle acreage, so the place is literally packed with Elves, Fey, and Pixies. Just like Ve’kahn was; and then, just to make it all fun and interesting, last week we opened a intervortex portal to not one, but two different Goblin hordes on the verge of swarming. And just in case they needed an extra little push, we told the Goblins we put a million in gold at the center of the jungle. But just between you and me we lied.

And all that preparation worked like magic, exactly as planned, as we have a literal mini jungle war on our hands... Of

course, we're not the only film crew out here. You put that much capital into something and you have to recoup your expenses, so you can expect to see a bunch of Ve'kahn conflict era productions to hit the market in the near future.

Conveniently, after the explanatory narrative is over, the radio erupts with an urgent cry. "This is Alpha Five. Alpha Five." It's hard to hear the transmitter's voice over the gunfire and explosives going off in the background. "We have a Break Out at 9-4-7. Repeat, we have a Break Out at 9-4-7. Requesting full support."

"That's only four clicks away," the Elf informs his crew as he responds to Alpha Five. "This is Blue 19. We're four clicks to the south. Repeat Blue 19 from the south."

The helicopter banks quickly and heads due north. Over the radio other teams can be heard to report in. "Orange 17, seven click from the East."

"Green Tango leaving the nest. It'll be ten minutes."

And then the urgent cry from the ground. "Ringo Parade digging it at 9-4-6. Repeat Freindlies at 9-4-6."

"Green Tango. Copy that Ringo. 9-4-6 you're on your own."

"Blue 19 heading to 9-4-6. We got your back Ringo."

"Ringo. Much appreciated, Blue. We'll mark it for you."

The WASP formation gains altitude and is high in the air. They cruise towards the Goblin swarm at 300'. It is a good altitude to work from. At 300' you can spot and shoot individual Goblins, but more importantly you are out of the range of their spears and arrows.

But even at 300', the WASPs are by no means immune from all danger. Goblins have been known to pick up guns, rocket launchers, shoot ballista, and have a variety of specialized troops and spell slingers mixed in with them. So, the danger is real enough. Countless WASPs were shot down during the Ve'kahn conflict; but then, to put it in perspective, a WASP gunner at 300' is

much safer than an Elvin sniper dug in at the edge of the jungle. But I'm just going to assume you know your military strategy and tactics.

Watch as the Goblins come into view long before they are in range of the 50-C guns. Although it cannot be seen, ten clicks beyond them lies the portal opening to the Goblin's home vortex. The Goblins are charging blindly in a swarming mass from this opening towards the jungle. If they can cross the plain and reach the jungle, the odds will be more even. In the open plain, they are as good as sitting ducks.

From high in the sky at a distance the Goblins appear as a swirling mass of motion. Individual Goblins are not identifiable. The whole army flows together. From Bull's vantage, the surge of Goblins is reminiscent of a river, a flash flood, or perhaps most accurately the violent area of raging water that lies slightly downstream from a collapsing dam. It is exactly as if someone had torn a hole in the Goblin vortex; and upon finding it, the Goblins are rushing out, like water draining out of a toilet, or concert goers leaving a stadium when the band has stopped playing. Inside the Goblin vortex, the Goblins are crowded and backed up, but once they hit the open expanse of the Ve'kahn plain, they spread out. Bull and the other WASP gunner's job it to keep the Goblins focused and corralled so when the firestorm hits, it takes out most of the Goblins en mass.

"I forgot how many there were," Bull remarks quietly to himself.

The Gnome agrees. "It always amazes me. The sheer numbers."

"Focus on the job gentleman," the Elf reminds them. "The only good Goblin is a dead Goblin."

"Roger that," Bull agrees. Still out of range, he fires off a few exploratory rounds to calm his nerves.

As he does, just in case anybody has forgotten about the presence of friendlies the ground, an indiscriminate part of the field erupts into a mushroom of blue smoke.

“We’ve got your marker, Ringo,” the Elvin pilot calls into his headset.

“The party’s all yours, now,” Ringo responds dryly. “No time to chat. It’s a little crowded down here, so we’re going to turn off the lights.”

Emerging from the blue smoke a ripple of yellow washes horizontally across the plain for a hundred yards and then grows in intensity as the brilliance flows backwards over itself. In some ways, it almost, sort of, looks like the reverse of a giant yellow drop of water falling from the sky and then sort of bouncing back off as water droplets are prone to do. When this second droplet hits the ground, the whole area suddenly illuminates like a flashbulb. Ringo Parade, a ground unit, is now dug in deep into the ground, conceding their position to the enemy, cut off from radio communication, but safe for the time being with a protective shield around them. Tracer rounds won’t seek them out, but even with the shield, they won’t be able to withstand the direct effects of a firestorm.

As the yellow light from defensive enchantment fades, pulling back to where it is needed most, the Goblins immediately swarm into the blue smoky area, trying to overrun the abandoned position, but they are met by the fury of the WASPs. The 50-C chain guns are going full bore; killing Goblins by the hundreds, but still the Goblins come.

“Let’s give ourselves some working room,” the Elf says as he lets loose a volley of rockets around Ringo’s position.

“Sounds like a plan,” another pilot agrees and shoots off rockets of his own.

Large horizontal explosions of fire fill the plain clearing large football stadium size areas of Goblins in one fell swoop. The 50-C gunners continue to fire, picking off any stragglers, and hitting the areas between the rocket explosions.

“This area is clear,” one of the pilots calls out momentarily. “We’ll hold them here.”

The WASPs have pushed the Goblin horde back from Rango's position, marked by the blue smoke. Three of the WASP's pull off and start a defensive figure eight pattern around the area. And as they bank and turn, the gunners fire into the edge of the surging Goblin mass. It's a lot like herding cattle by shooting the outermost animals. It doesn't take long before the smarter ones don't want to be on the edge anymore and the more mentally challenged ones find it more and more difficult to climb over a barricade of dead bodies.

"We'll take the pressure off upstream," the Elf calls out. He pulls off and two of the WASPs follow him as he heads towards the source of the swarm's flow. As they go, they form a single file line and fire into the side of the rushing torrent of Goblins picking off any outliers. For the most part it's mindless butchering. The Goblins are like salmon in a stream, flowing on, oblivious to the danger ahead. Not able to stop their charge, their only option is a shift in direction. The WASP crew takes advantage of the Goblin's limitations and with the help of the occasional rocket and non-stop fire from the chain guns; the Goblin swarm is slowly encouraged to shift direction away from Ringo Parade's position.

"Ringo is clear," the pilot working the defensive figure eight calls. "We're coming to back you up."

"Negative That. Negative That. Green Tango in position. We're coming in."

"Pull out," the Elf commands as he goes into a steep corner and veers away from the swarm.

"We're bugging out."

"Alpha clear."

"Blue clear."

"Orange clear."

"Green Tango's coming in... Speak now or forever hold your peace."

A half click away from the horde, the Elf turns the WASP around to face the Goblin horde as he continues to back away slowly. “You’ll like this.”

“Gives me goose bumps every time,” the Gnome agrees.

A lone Mithra Class fighter jet appears high over the jungle. This forward scout makes no sound. Moments later a reverse wedge of five more Mithras fighters appear mere feet above the jungle canopy. The Elves at the jungle’s edge give up a cheer.

“We’re stilling using Mithras?” Bull asks.

“It’s a period piece... flashback,” the Gnome reminds him.

“Right. In the heat of battle there, I forgot.”

The jets rip over the plain. The corralling effects of the WASPs wearing off, the Goblin horde has spread out slightly, but it has only been a few moments, since the helicopters pulled back. And Goblins only run so fast.

In a few short heartbeats, the Mithras cover the distance between the jungle and the Goblin horde. As they fly over the Goblins a few heavy weapons are fired at the jets, but any sentient with half a mind is too busy high tailing it out of there to fight back. Behind the jets, the ground erupts into a field of rolling black fire with a roar. Think napalm. Think ninth plain of hell. Think everything’s dead. I mean, it’s not just fire -- even though, you know, it’s called a firestorm. Rather, it’s an evil, noxious brew of death. A direct hit will kill even a Depth Fiend.

The jets fly over the Goblin column. And behind them, the ground behind them continues to erupt into a fiery field of death. The smell of sulfur, burnt flesh, and sour smoke fills the air. Even at a half click away, a warm breeze washes against Bull’s face. Death comes swiftly to the Goblins on the surface. Those who have managed to dig in deep enough to avoid the fire will still likely suffocate. And that is the real danger left for Ringo Parade. Their shield will protect them from all but a direct hit from the swirling firestorm, but the firestorm will consume all the available oxygen quickly, sucking the air from caves, tunnel, and hiding

places. It is the early part of the war. No one has thought of providing the ground troops with a back up air supply yet.

Someone quips over the radio. "I love the smell of a firestorm early in the morning... It, it smells like Victory."

"Or burnt Goblins."

"Isn't that the same thing?"

The jets fly on. It is a long column of Goblins. For ten clicks or more, the jets pour out their fiery death on the ground behind them; and then, the end comes in sight. The portal to the Goblin plane looms dark and black. The lead jet flying high and forward shoots off four large rockets into the hole as it flies by it. The flying wedge closes up as it approaches the portal and they shoot an assortment of smaller rockets into the hole before they pull out. The effect of the rockets is not clear at first, but then searing jets of flame pour out of the hole in a backslash explosion. Arcs of plasma and fire and lightning a thousand times more intense than the firestorm that was poured on the field erupts out of the portal as the edges of the inter-vortex connection begins to warp, melt, and finally collapses as the portal implodes.

"Good shooting Green Tango."

"We aim to please... We're going home."

The jets gain altitude as they circle around back towards their jungle base.

"Now we get to clean up the mess," the Elf advises his crew as if they didn't already have the routine down.

The firestorm still rages. It will burn for a half hour or more; but even then, it will not kill all the Goblins. There are always stragglers, outliers, and would be deserters. So, the WASPs spread out wide. And every few minutes a 50-C Manna Chain Gun spurts off a few rounds as a gunner sees something interesting, is bored, or just wants to make sure their gun is still working. They will keep at this for several hours before they return to base.

"Pity it isn't always this simple," the Gnome observers.

How did that line go? “Someday this war will be over,” Bull agrees with a wisp of nostalgia in his eyes as he guns down an errant Goblin squad. If it had only really been this easy...

Meanwhile, crouched low at the edge of a jungle clearing, watching a big screen set up in theory so the locals could view the action and so the crew didn't have to get anywhere near a live battlefield, Esse watches Bull at work. The images have been carefully cut and edited to play to the viewer's emotions and portray Bull as having a key and decisive role in the battle. It is no mistake when Esse concludes; she is watching a hero at work.

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Leaving the 'Kahn Behind

The Elf leads the WASP formation low and fast, skimming the surface of a broad river, kicking up a spray. It's not time for Bull to leave the 'kahn, not yet. First, he has to return to basecamp in order to do a short scene. He can see the base up ahead. It's located on a small two-acre island that fills the middle third of the river. (And that's what happens when descriptions go astray.) The island is packed to the gills with extras and military equipment. Giant howitzers command the high ground. At water level, the island has been ringed with sand bags, manna wire, and 50-c Manna Chain Gun emplacements, while yet more WASP gunships circle overhead and others lower to the ground pull water skiers behind them. Special Ops Mermen race the skiers, while a trio of giant Turtles basks on the shore.

Past the island a bridge is being built. Its edges disappear into the jungle. Under the bridge stands a grass shack village. If it wasn't for the thump-thump-thump of the helicopters or the occasional roar from a jet flying overhead, the scene might look idyllic -- peaceful even.

“Bull! BULL!” yells Jac'lyn -- the Pixie, better known as Jack -- as Bull's helicopter comes in for a landing. But she doesn't

wait for a response nor does she wait for the WASP to fully land before using her own wings to fly in under the helicopter's rotating blades, and wrapping her arms around Bull.

"Hey, Jack!"

"I'm glad you made it back." Jack looks around nervously. "We got to get out of here."

"We just got here. Relax. You look nervous," Bull says nonchalantly.

"You don't get it Bull. This place is going down." But Bull doesn't respond with the urgency she would like, so she clarifies a bit, "Not in a year, a week, or a month. This place is disappearing tonight."

"What are you talking about?"

"They're promising folks, Pixies and Buttercups mostly, a hundred gold in the morning if they agree to spend the night in the village. You know them, Bull." Them, perhaps meaning me. "They're not planning on paying up. The village isn't going to make it through the night, Bull! There aren't going to be any survivors!"

"She's probably right," the Elf says, putting in his two coppers worth. And then, the Elf sort of repeats the designation to himself, The Elf? as he shakes his head. Then he shrugs as he dismisses the thought. It's a paying gig, does it matter if he doesn't have a name? Well, yes it does. But all the same, he moves on with the scene and shakes Bull's hand. "It's been great working with you. But she's... What's her name?" Oh, yeah. But the Pixie gets a name, he silently muses to himself. Three if you count the fourth book. Four if you count that G'narsh thing and believe the crossover rumors. But, hey! Who's counting?

I guess, the Elf is.

Anyhow, going back to the Elf's question, Bull advises that Jack's name is (surprise, surprise), "Jack."

And then, the Elf continues with more or less what he could have said a few seconds of film back, "Jack's right, this place is

going down. I've got another gig tonight. Oh, and get this. I'm taking Garg, of all people, up the river. But when we leave..."

And as if on cue, as if he had some sort of scene stealing precognitive ability, Garg suddenly appears. And I hope, a star like Garg needs no introduction. I mean, we all know what he looks like; but then, maybe we don't, because he's not wearing his leopard skin modesty wrap or carrying his trademark club. No. Today he's decked out in the field green of the Seven Realms Army: Be All That You Can Be. So maybe we should just give him the once over. (Oh, yeah. And I got the memo about better descriptions, so eat your heart out.) At five feet tall, Garg is shorter than the average Human. And if truth be told, he looks like he might have some Gnome, Ogre, Neanderthal, or Cro-Magnon blood in him (or really, a lot of Cro-Magnon blood in him) as his bony eyebrows are the most prominent feature of his face. He's also wiry, sort of drape his arms like the knuckle dragger that he is and even (somehow) manages to slump even when standing rock solid (military) straight. And he is, of course, a big star -- a big-big star -- a living legend as it were.

"That's right," Garg says as he wraps his arm -- all friendly like -- around the Elf. "We pull out at midnight. They expect this place to be all lit up by then. Once we're up in the air, we look back and I just sort of say, 'There's nothing to go back to.' Not really sure if I'm supposed to be sad or something, but I'm guessing it'll flow."

"See Bull," Jack pipes in not wasting any more time. Oh, and just by-the-by, she hasn't let go of Bull since she said hello, like she was afraid of losing him, or getting separated and somehow getting shunted off to the village as just another extra if she did in fact let go of him. And with flavor text like that, you just know the next words out of her mouth are going to be, "We got to get out of here, Bull!"

"We got till midnight... at least. Relax," you know, he says, trying to reassure her.

But it doesn't really work. "You weren't here," Jack starts, but then sort of pauses as she looks around. "Here, there... wherever we are? Were any of you there?"

"What are you talking about?" Bull asks. "Do you have heat stroke?" But then he considers the more plausible explanation. "Have you been hitting the K'fr?"

(And if you're asking me -- Celli the perhaps Grim and Gruesome Celaphopod with only minor literary aspirations -- then the answer is No.)

Nellie... er, Jack on the other hand, ignores the question. And I don't know if I mentioned this but being a Pixie, Jack stands a mere three feet tall; so at this point, as to be more even with Bull and talk face to face, she is standing on his belt and grabbing his flak jacket. And as if noticing the flak jacket for the first time she says, "I've got to get myself one of these." And then, noticing the smiles this comment elicits, she sort of gets indignant. "Look! Sure, you did your year. You fought Goblins. You maybe saw Hell. Yada. Yada. But if you remember, we did lose the war. Were you here when the Cobalts broke through?"

No answering the question, Garg calls over two of the Creatures in question. "Hey! Charlie! And, um, Charlie! Right? Come over here." And since he's the star (or one of them, we have quite a few), two of the waist high anthropomorphic looking alligators wearing flak jackets and friendly smiles (i.e. Cobalts) come sauntering over.

In unison they smartly announce, "Charlies be reporting'ers for duties." (Not that he's here, but I'm guessing, they learned the common tongue from Grt.)

Anyhow, Jack is noticeably distraught by their presence. "They're already here!" she manages to blurt out before starting to quiver uncontrollably.

"These guys are on our side," Garg remarks casually, but then suddenly noticing the camera's and remembering he's supposed to sort of, kind of be working on a movie, he drops into one of those deep baritone voice over modes, "The Cobalts had no loyalty, no

memory, no... compassion. They would obey me as long as I was the strongest... I wondered how much longer that would be.”

And that’s just, like, exactly the sort commentary Jack did not want to hear, “We got to get out of here! Now!” She insists as she scrambles further up Bull’s body in order to get away from the monstrosities. “They may look sort of cute. But they’re not. They’re viscous monstrosities. Goblins didn’t run us out of Ve’kahn, Cobalts did.”

“We came back,” Bull assured her, missing the point.

But Jack is quick to correct him. “No, WE didn’t. I didn’t. You didn’t. No one did. Where do you think all your neighbors came from? We got to get out of here while we still can.”

And Garg was going to say something else, maybe another line from the dialogue he’d spent the morning memorizing. But Jack cut him off as she looks around nervously at the film crews, perhaps taking them in for the first time, and the true significance of their presence. “There’s nothing these guys would like better than to get a close up of a Pixie biting it on film. Get me out of here! Coming back was a mistake.” There’s no way she’s going to let go of Bull until she’s out of the ‘Kahn.

Being the considerate sort, Garg commandeers a flak jacket off of one of the Charlie’s and hands it to Jack, as he tells Bull, “Maybe you should just get her out of here.”

“What about the scene?” Bull asks, while a spastically shaking Pixie tries to don the flak jacket. Something she can’t quite manage until Bull helps her. And then, once her own flak jacket is on, she burrows under Bull’s flak jacket and disappears. Nestled deeply in the depths of the flak jackets, her muffled voice calls out. “Get me out of here, Bull. I’m done. Get me out of here.”

“I’ll cover for you,” Garg offers. “Be a hero. Do as your friend asks, and get her out of here.”

Bull wraps his arms around Jack who is still shaking uncontrollable under the two layers of flak jackets. “I never knew...”

“Just get me out of here,” her muffled voice cries out.

“I’ll take you,” the Elf offers, before turning to Garg and advising steel faced through mirrored sunglasses, “I’ll be back.”

“Sure, no problem,” Garg agrees as he watches the trio disappear. “We’ve got to get supplies anyhow... and a new flak jacket for you Charlie.”

“Okays, Boss,” the Cobalts respond cheerfully. You know, ‘cause truthfully, I don’t even know if Cobalts understand the concept of death. They certainly don’t seem to fear it.

#

Hearts of Darkness

An hour before sunset the last of the movie people bug out. The weapons dealers pull down the flaps of their tents, pack up their brochures, and leave.

As dusk falls, it is clear no one is in charge.

For fun the troops shoot tracer bullets into the sky. The howitzers shoot at random announcing the location of the island to the waiting darkness.

Garg is arguing with an Ogre about supplies. The Ogre ignores him and completes a Troll’s request for a carton of cigarettes and then a Gnome’s order for dozen cases of beer. It is clear the Ogre is more concerned about running a business than meeting the supply needs of a soldier.

When the Ogre ignores Garg’s request a final time and heads back for a case of steaks, Garg follows him into the supply tent and the Cobalts follow Garg. Garg shows the supply Ogre his requisition papers again. Then as the first incoming mortar round hits, releasing a cascade of dirt from the newly erected tent’s roof, Garg shows him a pistol. Actually, he doesn’t so much show it to him as press the barrel against the Ogre’s forehead. “It’s our turn,” he says, “unless you want to be the first casualty tonight.”

“Take what you want,” the Ogre begs and so they do.

Charlie gets a new flak jacket and each of them carry two crates of munitions just like the requisition papers say. Garg throws a case of whiskey as well on top of each stack for the Charlies to carry.

Garg walks down the street. Tracer rounds fire off into the night. Now they have something to shoot at and something is shooting back, but no one hits anything. A tent erupts in an explosion as Garg walks by. He doesn't seem to notice. He opens the case of whiskey and takes out a bottle. "I'll meet you back at the boat," he says to the Charlies.

"Okays, Boss."

Garg wanders around the island by the waterline. He looks into the distance and can see shadows run through the jungle. A Cobalt in the trenches loads an AK-47/5889 and holds it over the sandbags. Without looking, the Cobalt empties its magazine into the jungle and then he repeats the process.

Garg wanders to the top of the island and watches the Howitzers fire with clockwork precision. He asks the Human Sergeant what they are shooting at.

The Sergeant answers, "The Jungle."

Through it all, Garg has no expression on his face. "The Jungle." The man could have answered tumbleweeds, chicken sandwiches, or milk shakes it would have garnered the same response from Garg. Garg has starred in over 20 books, 6 movies, and even done a TV series. Through them all, he has not once broken character or showed the slightest hint of emotion. It seems unlikely tonight will be any different.

Garg moves on. Shells fall onto the island. Troops run back and forth. WASPs take off. Small isolated firefights can be heard in the distance. The night is young. The war hasn't started yet.

Garg ducks into a tent. He stares unemotionally at the young male Fey'an doorman. He does not pay a cover charge. The Fey'an does not ask for one. Lest there be any ambiguity as to why the Fey'an let Garg pass an officer is stopped at the door until he pays the cover. It has been established. Garg is a killer,

unemotional, unremorseful. He sees, but he does not feel. If you are smart, you hope he passes you by without interest.

This is a bar. Pixies dance in the flickering of Christmas tree lights. One approaches Garg. “Love you long time, Seven? Seven long time?” Seven, the Realms. Garg removes the Pixies hands from his uniform. We notice it is devoid of name, rank, unit, or any type of insignia. It is a green shirt, nothing more.

“Seven?” the Pixie repeats herself. “You Seven?”

Garg grabs her hand and squeezes until the level of pain has reached the point where she no longer wishes to continue the conversation. She makes a face and flies away as she shakes her hand. Garg listens to the music as if for the first time. He watches the Pixies dance. He notices a Fey’an in the corner holding an enlisted man’s hand. Her gaze catches his eyes. He stares. There is nothing for him here. He leaves. Garg is not a romantic lead.

Back at the boat, the Elf is there. Garg will never bother to learn the Elf’s name. Charlie is there too, both of them. Garg unhooks the rope, pushes the small 30’ boat out, and jumps on board. He walks past the single 50-C gun in front, past the elevated pilot tower, and into an open aired storage well in the back of the boat. He sits down facing backwards. It is symbolic... of something... I’m pretty sure.

“We should wait,” the Elf says.

A mortar round crashes into the dock. A Cobalt coolie goes flying. The special effects are amazingly lifelike... amazingly.

“You want to stay here?”

Another Mortar round hits next to the first. A dozen 50-C guns open up blindly blanketing the jungle with gunfire. Another mortar round hits. The Elf puts the boat into gear.

They float slowly by the village. A grass shack burns. In a path leading from the shack to the river a dozen dead Pixie bodies smolder. Jac’lyn’s fear was justified.

The Elf clenches his jaw to fight back the rage. Garg barely notices. As they float under the bridge, tracer rounds fly back and forth. A jet of flame erupts in the jungle. Trees burn. Things

explode. The night is lit up with the sights, sounds, and smells of war. If he could, Garg might smile... I'm back. Did you miss me?

Garg gives the island a final look. As promised, it is lit up with the sights and sounds of battle. To himself as much as anybody, Garg says, "there's nothing to go back to."

There never is, the Elf softly whispers as he pilots the boat upstream.

They turn a corner. Garg pulls out a dossier, which he reads out loud in a narrative voice over... in a blatant breach of security.

"Curtis, Conrad, Joe... all star little league, first picked kick ball, all school keep away champ." Pictures accompany the narrative, an 8 year old human in a baseball uniform, 8th grade graduation picture, 13th birthday party... "The all American boy. Plays well with others, excels in math and reading, does an oral report on George Washington in fifth grade and one on Abraham Lincoln in sixth. Known to stand up to bullies on the behalf of others... What could make a person change? What had happened to Curtis?"

We pull back from the pictures, the birthday cake and Christmas morning. Behind the boat in the afternoon sun the lizard like Cobalts are water-skiing. We look at a hand made card. Happy Mother's Day... Love Curt. The Cobalts are parasailing. We look at a stack of hand made coupons, good for one car wash, good for one sparkling bathroom, and good for an afternoon of yard work. "He was a good kid, respected his elders and liked by his peers. He had it all going for him." The boat is stopped in a lagoon. It is still sunny. The Elf is sunbathing. One of the Cobalts is swimming in a yellow inner tube. The other comes up for air. He is wearing a mask and snorkel. Garg ignores them and continues to read the file.

An aerial shot establishes that the river is getting smaller. "In high school he makes the football team his freshman year. Starting defensive line... but he doesn't try out sophomore year. Accompanies Katie to the freshman mixer... the last dance he attends. Drops out of the chess club... joins a gaming society."

The river is tight and slow moving. Garg slaps at a mosquito. He watches the Cobalts light up a K'fr pipe. He drops below and emerges with a bottle of whiskey. Good, strong, Seven Realms whiskey. The sun has disappeared. It starts to rain, big large dollops of water.

“Curtis plays a Paladin till third level... then stops. Rolls up a Ninja-Assassin... a month later he drops out of gaming group and starts his own campaign... but it never gets off the ground.” The Cobalts hunker down miserably in the rain. Garg does not notice. “He reads Herbert, Heinlein, Ellison, Aspirin, Adams, and Paufler... all the great names (not necessarily in the order of greatness). Does an oral report on the Seven Realms... gets his first F.”

The rain has stopped, but it has turned misty. The air is full of fog. Like ghosts, now and again Cobalts can be seen on shore running along with the boat. If you know what to look for, which you should by now, you can see the young tendrils of K'fr reaching out from the jungle. White flowers at the end of the vines fall into the water. “I was getting close... Charlie had stopped calling me boss. They weren't sure anymore...”

From the shore a Cobalt tosses a spear across the bow of the boat. The Elf ducks down into the cabin. “Just let me know when it's over. I saw the movie.” Garg doesn't move. He ignores the Elf and the Cobalts. Charlie throws the spear back into the jungle. The jungle throws it back. They float down the river repeating this game.

Garg pulls a deck of colorful collectible playing card out from the dossier. He looks the deck over as his voice over continues. “Curtis started collecting cards, miniatures, figures... he designed a solo adventure and sent it to a publisher.” Garg holds a rejection letter. “We are sorry, but your idea does not meet with our current publishing needs... He fell into himself... running solo dungeons, re-rolling bad dice rolls... faking results... and then he put the paper away and headed out into the wilderness.”

The river ends in a lagoon. It is eerily quite. The boat makes no noise. There is no background music. The only noise is the silent glide of the boat on water.

The water is filled with Cobalts. Some wear water wings. Some are on surfboards. Some are in canoes wearing dayglow finger paints with spears in their hands. They silently part as the boat drifts by. On shore thousands of Cobalts await. They form a gauntlet. Garg walks down the gauntlet. At the end he can see Curtis. He is a cocky teenager. He wears a black concert t-shirt, glasses, and unkempt hair. He sits at a folding coffee table set up under the open sky. He does not stand. He motions for Garg to join him in the empty seat across from himself.

Garg sits and Curtis adjusts his glasses.

“I play black.” Curtis smiles. “You know Dark Heart.”

Garg regards him unemotionally. Continuing his narrative voice over he says, “my orders were to terminate his winning streak without prejudice... without... prejudice.”

“This is my arena. Your narrative voice over won’t work here... What does without prejudice mean anyway?”

Garg ignores his quip as he sets the terms. “Sudden death, unlimited... Winner takes all.”

“Sure, fine.” Curtis takes out a deck of cards and shuffles. “Do you want to borrow a deck? I have a white weenie...”

“I brought my own,” Garg cuts him off.

They shuffle. They cut. They ante. Curtis plays a first turn Sacrificial Altar combo with a...

Below the table Garg draws his pistol and unloads a full clip into the unsuspecting lad. Curtis lurches backwards from the slugs impact. The Cobalts watch in shock. Garg flips the table out of the way. He ejects the spent clip and puts in a new one. Blood spurts out of Curtis’s mouth as he looks up wide eyed from the ground.

Garg repeats the terms. “Sudden death, unlimited... Winner takes all,” and empties the gun into Curtis.

Garg looks at the Cobalts.

They stare for a moment and then they kneel and prostrate themselves. The Cobalts had never understood the game. Everybody played with their own deck? What was with that? And then the cards meant different things depending on whether they were in your hand, in this pile, that pile, your opponents pile, there were stacks they couldn't see that resolved in seemingly random ways... It was worse than playing Dragon Poker. Talk about confusion. They'd never learned the rules. Every time they thought they had it down, Curtis would show up with new cards and new rules. No wonder Curtis always won. They weren't even sure if they were supposed to call Curtis Black Heart or if that was the name of his deck... It didn't matter. The nightmare was over. They were back to something they could understand; senseless murder thinly disguised as resolution to a plot parody... well at least the senseless murder part. That was something they could wrap their minds around.

Being a pro, Garg waits patiently for the narrator to wrap it up. He doesn't try to follow along. Who cares about the inner workings of the Cobalt mind?

Silence... the narrator has stopped.

Garg resumes the story. He tosses the spent weapon on top of Curtis's limp body. His job done, he turns to return to the boat. As he walks past them, a breeze catches the cards and swirls them in a gentle whirlwind. They disappear from whence they came back into the jungle. Garg ignores this. He walks through the line of Cobalts back to the boat. Silently he pushes off. He wonders for a second how the Elf is going to get out of there and then he shrugs. It is the first sign of emotion he has ever shown, a shrug. He cranks the radio and calls in the coordinates for an air strike.

The chapter closes with an aerial shot of a group of Mithras flying low overhead and releasing a full load of firestorm over Curtis's base. You don't make an old growth forest with the intent of just giving it away to a bunch of homesteaders. We trashed a thousand acres for this shot so enjoy it.

It is a long gratuitous shot certain of earning us a coveted XXX rating in many of your more environmentally conscious vortexes. With any luck the outcry from the Fey community will be long and loud. We have our fingers crossed. You can't buy that sort of publicity. So watch, enjoy. Realize that for many of the Fey, the trauma of Ve'kahn, isn't about watching their buddies or families die. It was in the knowledge that when they lost, the jungle was destroyed. By the end of the war, Ve'kahn was a desolate plain no different from where Bull was gunning down the Goblins. That my friends, to steal a line, is the real horror.

Kick back. Make some popcorn, invite your Orcin buddies over and enjoy for a moment the smell of the old growth jungle. Feel its vibrancy and then watch the flames leap high into the sky as two square miles of prime jungle erupt into flame. Watch the trees burn. Enjoy the scent of freshly roasted K'fr, Sycamore, Olent, Hickory, Palm, Pine, and Dragon Bush filling the air.

Doesn't it make you wish you had some marshmallows? Feel the warmth on your face. Follow the black oily smoke on its way into the heavens. Laugh at the angels and wonder how they are ever going to get all that soot out of their hair.

If you listen real close you can hear the trunks of 1,000 year old trees explode from the heat. Snap, crackle, and pop my friends... but more importantly you can hear the screams from the countless birds, insects, and animals who never knew the firestorm was coming. All rendered in exclusive dooby surround sound. If you listen real close, you might just be able to hear the dieing squeals of the slower Cobalts as well, but we might have just added that in postproduction.

We won't go into the close ups of burning Cobalts here, but you can be sure we'll come out with an unrated version in the near future. I'm sure it's all done with special effects though...

Garg watches from the back of the boat. His face is warmed and illuminated by the red glow. White ash falls around him. Unemotionally, he tosses Curtis's bio overboard as he floats down stream.

At the edge of the flame Cobalts dance and scream.
“Boss. No go Boss.”
“Boss.”
“Where next Boss.”
“We go with Boss.”
But Garg ignores them, curls into a blanket, and goes to sleep.

###

Unexplainable Fear

From a low view on the edge of Bull’s clearing we watch the Elf drop Bull off. There is no one else here. Having some common sense, the film crew did not show Garg ordering in an air strike to a crowd of jungle dwelling Pixies and Fey. As the WASP takes off, Bull waves goodbye and walks towards his cabin.

He is still wearing the flak jacket and combat fatigues. Something is wrong. It is as if he is arguing with himself. A creature emerges from under his flak jacket and sprints towards the edge of the clearing. Puking sounds resonate loudly, echoing deeply in the late afternoon air.

We are in front of the bushes across the road from Bull’s cabin. Being a tasteful production, we resume our coverage as Jac’lyn finishes puking into the bushes. It’s amazing to me how cute Pixies are. It’s something intrinsic to being a Pixie. She’s wearing a bulky flak jacket and wiping puke off of her face, but yet she’s still cute, adorable, and yes, even a bit sexy... if you’re into that whole bodily secretion scene...

Jac’lyn stops wiping her face. She looks past the clearing into the jungle.

Bull was going to ask the perfunctory, “are you alright?” but thinks better of it. “What is it?”

Jack grabs hold of Bull and starts climbing back under his flak jacket.

“What’s up with you?” he asks.

“It’s the next scene. Ess’mer’lence...” she trails off.

“Esmerlcense?”

“Esse, just go with Esse.” Only Jack’s eyes show from above his flak jacket. “Turn towards the jungle Bull.”

“What? Why” but he does it.

Jack calls out in deep old formal Fey’an. “Come out Ess’mer’lence.” She has a premonition of Esse doing a long battle dance sequence with Bull’s axe by way of introduction only to have the ax fly at her, no doubt by accident, at the end.

“Weaponless,” she adds quickly.

What’s a Fey’an to do? Esse stands at the edge of the jungle. She is a little under five feet tall, about halfway between Bull and Jack’s height. Deep brown skin, slender build, hair pulled back in tight braids, she wears a black slip and nothing else except for the long ax in her hands. The bruise on the side of her face does nothing to distract from her beauty. She walks barefoot through the clearing littered with logs, branches, and plant debris.

“Crap!” Jack says. “Drop the weapon!”

Esse twirls the ax, flipping it idle. Without looking she tosses it into the air, catches it, trades hands and continues the display. The ax is nearly as long as she is; it is as they say an extension of herself.

“Drop the weapon! Drop it!” In growing terror Jack tries to spit out words of command. “DROP IT!”

In the forest a squirrel drops a acorn, a bird looses hold of a piece of straw he was carrying home for a nest, a Flower Cap stops arguing with his wife, and Bull opens his hands.

The words flow past Esse with no effect. She is a trained warrior. She does not drop her weapon, ever. She is at twenty paces, and she does not alter her stride.

“Do something Bull,” Jack pleads as she disappears completely under Bull’s flak jacket.

Esse continues forward another stride and then throws the ax backwards over her shoulder, but she does not slow her pace. She is staring into Bull's eyes.

"Do something Bull. Do something." Jack continues her mantra from deep in the recesses of Bull's flak jacket.

Esse stops in front of Bull, looks him in the eye, and then drops to her knees at Bull's feet. The ax lands with a satisfying thunk across the field into the same tree where Bull had thrown it earlier. Head bowed, Esse speaks words in ancient Fey'an.

"What?" Bull does not speak Fey'an or most of the Faerie languages.

"Oh, right." Jac'lyn pokes her head out. "Ha... Ha." She says with deliberate effort. "Ha... Ha." She looks around nervously.

"What is going on?" Bull asks.

"Ha... ha... ooh, ha... that's a good one." Jack wipes a non-existent tear from her eye. "That's a funny one... a ha, ha."

"What is wrong with you Jack?"

She disappears into the flak jacket. Bull can feel her start to shake. "The author is going to kill me," she murmurs.

"I don't think..."

"He's going to kill me... he hates me Bull. I can feel it."

"Get yourself together Jack."

"Promise me you'll protect me Bull."

"Sure."

Jack emerges slightly from the flak jacket. "I mean really protect me. If he kills me... if the author kills me, promise me you'll kill him... swear a blood vendetta."

"What? Why? He's not going to kill you? Why would he kill you?"

Scared as she is, she is still a Pixie. "If he's not going to do it, then it's a small thing for you to promise. Swear a blood vendetta Bull."

"I'm not going..."

"Do you love me Bull?"

“What?”

“Steve’s gone Bull. Now’s our chance.”

“You’re making no sense.”

Jac’lyn is hugging Bull’s chest under the flak jackets. “I love you Bull... I’m not just saying that now. It’s true. You know it is.” She pokes her head out again. “Don’t you Bull?”

“Sure, I guess...”

“If you love me, swear the blood oath, or I’m out of here... I don’t know where I’ll go... if you love me, swear you’ll kill the author if he off’s me.”

“Fine. OK. I swear. If he kills you for sport or whatever, I’ll hunt him down and kill him.”

“No qualifications Bull.”

“You got your oath. It’s done. Can we move on? Like why is she kneeling at my feet?”

“She thinks you’re a hero Bull,” Jack looks around nervously and tries to make light of it. “Ha... ha, see... good joke, you a hero... ha... ha... ha.” She doesn’t sound very amused.

Bull let’s Jack get some of the nervousness out of her system. “Why is she kneeling? Tell her to get up?”

“No.” Jack drops down from Bull and stands next to the kneeling Fey’an. She rattles off a string of words in the ancient language and Esse responds, never once lifting her eyes, head, or even shifting her body.

“Well?” Bull asks.

“When you were shooting Goblins in your WASP, they had a big screen set up just for her... they said it was for locals, but it was for her. You’re a big hero Bull. You wiped out an entire Goblin horde by yourself. It should be a small matter for you to take on another one right?” Jack looked up at Bull. “She wants you to kill someone named the Evil Warlord.”

Bull made a face. “Why would I want to do that?”

“Because you’re a hero. See, I told you it was funny.”

“So, tell her no and let her get up, she’s making me nervous.”

“No.”

“No?”

“No. Geez Bull, didn’t ever bother to learn anything about the Fey?”

“Don’t start with me.”

“She’s on her knees. She’ll stay there until you release her...”

“So, I release her.”

“Which, I suppose would be easy if you had ever bothered to learn Fey’an.”

“You know the words. You do it.”

“It’s just a movie right Bull... just a gig, but it’s not. Try to get out of your contract. She’s a Fey’an warrior, Or’tung, trained from birth for war and just by coincidence she’s on your land asking for help. Some guy called the Evil Warlord destroyed her lands. She ran here. He’ll follow. You don’t have a choice Bull. The path leads to you now.”

“It’s just a movie. Relax.”

“It’s not just a movie. She thinks it’s real. The producers had her entire family killed off...”

“You’re sounding paranoid.”

“Those were real Goblins you were shooting Bull.”

“They’re just Goblins.”

“They started a intervortex war so they could make a movie Bull.”

“Lay it out Jac’lyn. Take a breath and say your peace. I’ve got a party to go to.”

Jack tried to compose herself. “I’m a Pixie.” She held up her hand to cut Bull off. “Sure, the author says let it run its course. We’ll do a freestyle adventure. No advance planning.” She waived her finger. “But he had planning. He had opening scenes. I am a Pixie. I was curious. I went into the movie guy’s trailer and looked over the notes for the location shoots... dead Pixies... old growth forest burnt to ashes... they took out her entire family.” She put up her hand. “You can argue it away by temporal viewing... but if you can view the past, you can send a message. You know, give the Or’tungs a little heads up... oh, by the way, an Evil

Warlord is attacking tonight with a 100,000 Goblins might want to send the non-combatants somewhere safe, call in your allies. None of the homesteaders are going to live through the battle of New Ve'kahn. The whole purpose of that wasn't to provide a movie set for a few low budget productions. They built a vortex, opened a portal, and Goblins attacked. That makes the Goblins aggressors..."

"And they can set up a conservership over the Goblin vortexes," Bull finishes for her.

"Exactly."

"Fine. They're evil. We're out of the movie."

"You really don't understand the concept of Evil yet, do you Bull? We need to bind her to us. We need all the help we can get."

"You might be right."

"I am right Bull."

Bull kneels down in front of Esse. "Word is the Evil Warlord's minions are going to follow your trail right here. There's good people in these woods. You owe it to them to protect them from whatever evil you've dragged with you." He bid her rise as he stood.

Esse stands.

"You tricked her Bull."

"No," Bull explains. "I just told her why me, you, and her are going to end up finishing this."

"You're not a hero Bull."

"No... but I've played one on TV," and with that he picks Jack up as holds his jacket open for her. "Madame, might I escort you to a party?"

Jac'lyn doesn't need any encouragement to dive into the comforting recesses of Bulls flak jacket. "How can you think about a party at a time like this?"

"Easy," Bull explains. "I'm hungry... and Gary Ganesh will be there. No one ever dies when he's on the scene."

"You're smarter than I thought Bull."

“I just hope I’m a better hero than you thought. You too Esse? You’re coming with us. I want you right by my side and together they leave the quite, peaceful homestead behind.

###

Ke’Hyryn

Imagine if you will, that you are a large blue skinned Ke’Hyryn. You have hoofs for feet, a sort of large mannish torso, a slightly dragonish blue face with bushy white eyebrows and a pair of white elk like horns curling towards the ceiling. There is a typewriter in front of you. You are John Ke’Hyryn, a reporter, typing yet another op-ed piece, or is it your column, for tomorrow’s edition of the Seven Realms Sun? You need not worry too much about which keys your fingers strike. No one will read what you write. No one ever did.

You are inside the club on the island base in new Ve’kahn, the movie set vortex. Like clockwork an incoming artillery shell hits the island every minute or two. The club is dug in deep underground now. You have to descend a long narrow stair staircase made out of sandbags to get in. It is like entering a tomb. Once inside, the only illumination comes from a single strand of blinking Christmas tree lights, which hang behind the bar. Every other light on the strand is burnt out. It backlights a trio of Pixies dancing on the bar. Dancing, swaying provocatively, showing off their tiny breasts and genitalia to all comers... it is a matter of opinion. The island has changed. The war has changed.

One of the naked Pixies flitters over. “You want long time?” she asks.

Spend a moment looking her over. Whatever you want. Search for a copper and hold it out. “Sleep with me?”

“OK Seven,” she says wearily and joins the two other Pixies who are already fast asleep by your side. She would have done anything, of course, and you could have gotten her sisters and nephews in on the fun as well, but by the time you type the words

she is already asleep. “Sleep with me.” It’s not a pun. It’s a literal desire. You are after all a Ke’Hyrin.

A group of humans huddle in a dark corner drinking with a pair of Elvin maidens. I use the term loosely. A Troll sits two tables over. He shares his space with a Fey’an. They both stare empty eyed straight ahead.

A shell from the incoming artillery explodes seemingly overhead. No one notices. Lifting their heads to watch the dirt fall would take too much effort.

You look at the pile of sleeping Pixies next to you. Feel their warmth. Notice the comfort they get from your presence. They would have done anything for that copper and all you have asked for is quiet company. It is ironic in a way that Jac’lyn thinks you are intent on killing her, but that is the way it goes.

Jac’lyn butchered the last few chapters. That is why you are here watching the last two Pixies on the bar. You promised a Pixie dance scene, but even they have stopped dancing. They confer for a moment and then flutter wearily over.

“Long time Seven?” the one asks hopefully for the both of them.

You press a copper into each of their hands. It would buy whatever you want of them... whatever. You gently lift the one standing on your table onto the pile of sleeping Pixies next to you. “I like the warmth,” you explain. You might have added more words, but she is already asleep.

You rub your eyes. You add a chunk of raw crystalline K’fr to the brazier in front of you. Besides the old black typewriter and the brazier, photographs cover the small wooden table.

You grab two photos. They are aerials of the river and the surrounding jungle. What it was and what it has become. You know what the place used to look like. Now it is a charred barren plain. Once you open a portal to a vortex, the next portal is easier to open, and the next, and the next. It is how Wizards can dimension hop by snapping their fingers. Once the connection has been made, subsequent connections are easier and easier, until

literally it's a snap. In an effort to keep the Goblins at bay, the jungle has been firestormed. It is dead. If you were a Ke'Hyrin you might cry...

Still, Goblins aren't the worst. This is probably old news, but after the Goblins came Cobalts, Depth Fiends, and others filling the landscape with endless traps... after a while you might look around at the smoking, dead fields and ask yourself, why are we fighting for this vortex anymore?

It's a good question. Jac'lyn thinks I hate her. I don't. Jac'lyn thinks I'm plotting to kill her. I'm not, but if she keeps on blowing her scenes, she's not going to stay in the show. She's a Pixie. Of course she was going to go into the production trailer and snoop around. That's what Pixies do. Then she was supposed to meet Bull here, do a little table dance for old times sake, and spill all she had found out to Bull, before they caught the last chopper out; but it didn't go down that way. Instead she freaked out. That's a problem and she knows it, because I've got Dee plugged in for a little Post Traumatic Stress Disorder action and I'm not sure I need two characters with PTSD. I like Jack. I like the image of her riding around in Bull's horns as they go off on a quest. I want to keep her in the show, but Dee is a little more central to the story than Jac'lyn is.

Let's back up. This is a movie, a story, but it is also a land deal. We created a vortex, New Ve'kahn, and then opened a few portals to a pair of vortexes containing Goblin hordes, the Bitter Tooth horde and Cut Knee horde. This is all legal, all legit. There's nothing dastardly about opening a vortex. It's akin to ringing the doorbell on your neighbor's house.

Set the scene. You've just moved into the suburbs. The moving truck is shutting its doors and pulling away. Your shiny new car is in the driveway, your shiny new boat is in the garage, and in the family room you've got one of those big twenty-foot crystal balls. But, what do you know? You forgot to pack any sugar, so you go next door. You ring the doorbell, say, "Hi. Can I borrow of cup of sugar?" and the Goblin living there runs you

through with a spear. Not content to having murdered you for saying, "Hello," he gets his buddies together, forms a raiding party, and ransacks your house; killing everything he meets and robbing you blind.

Now you're dead. Ringing the doorbell and moving into the neighborhood doesn't seem like such a good idea anymore, but for you next of kin it's a literal gold mine. Wrongful Death; the lawyers will have a field day with it and not only will your next of kin get the Goblin's house, they'll also walk away with all of their assets, because believe it or not ringing on a someone's doorbell, leaving your garage door up so your neighbors notice you have a shiny new boat, or bragging about the hoard of gold you keep under your mattress is not against the law.

Besides, I hate Goblins.

Pull back to the bombed out bar in the final days of the Ve'kahn war. Pick up one of those fancy photos off the table. Look at it. They're the kind that move. You know, show a movie. The picture presently in your hands is one of the more famous ones from the Ve'kahn conflict. It shows a Fey'an Security Force officer blowing the brains out of a Goblin captive at point blank range. Watch the spray. It made all the papers.

Here's another one. It's the picture of a Karthrax Holy Warrior going through a warren, stabbing baby Goblins in their sleep. It raised a public outcry. If you're looking for my point of view, I'll just mention Karthrax didn't discommunicate the warrior for his actions. Nor did he ever issue a public apology.

I'll even take it a step further. Back in my early years I was doing a documentary on Goblin reservations. They live like animals, but all the footage we were getting was of boring mundane stuff. Then we thought of a grand idea. We just let it be known, we'd be presenting the Goblin chief with a fabulous thank you gift at the end of the shoot. That little rumor was enough to set off a civil war. The tribe imploded into a bloodbath as different factions tried to elevate their representative to the level of chief. The carnage was unreal and the film footage... unbelievable.

What I am saying is I don't have a problem setting up or killing Goblins. It's more or less standard in the industry to use real Goblins rather than bother with any sort of special effects. You can literally rent a Goblin horde, kill half of them, pay the chief a 100 gold at the end of the day, and he'll consider it a bargain. In fact, if you want to, you can pay the chief a 100 gold for the first day, kill off half his horde, and then pay him only 50 gold for the second day, because now there's not as many Goblins. It gives you something to think about. If you're a Goblin, leave the horde behind. You'll live longer.

We should leave the reverie for a moment and return to the bar. Put your hand gently down on the pile of sleeping Pixies. Let it rest there. Feel the vibrancy of life flowing through the Pixies even now. Notice how they breathe in unison and the whole pile goes up and down as they do. I, you, we are a Ke'Hyrin. We have a soft spot in our hearts for the Fey. Why would we kill them?

There are other pictures on the table. They show other horrendous episodes from this and other wars. Look through them at your leisure. Drop another hunk of K'fr into the brazier. Shift in your chair and notice you have something in your back pocket. Take it out. It's a small box. Open it. Inside are cards. Look them over. They have hideous scary pictures on them of evil creatures that come to life and claw at you. Some are of spells, which reach and strain for bits of your soul to power them. This is the Dark Heart deck. Put it back in the box and seal it with a white ribbon of manna before you drop it in the brazier. It flashes in a puff of smoke. It is gone. We don't want it to get into the wrong hands and we don't want to be tempted by the deck's false allure of power.

The cameraman was upset about his nephew, Curtis, but what did he think we were going to use? Fake bullets and catsup packets? He should be glad we only went after Curtis's dream persona. I mean it's an evil game full of spells, summonings, and enchantments. We were doing the world a favor.

Don't even think about starting up with how I might be just the teensiest bit of a sore loser. Word to the wise, if you're going to invite me to play some stupid game in between takes where everybody is supposed to have their own deck don't be handing me some weinie deck full of commons and expect me to shrug it off when you pound me to crap. You want to play unlimited? I got your unlimited right here fella... but enough of that.

You're a Ke'Hyrin, a spirit of the forest. You wonder if Curtis would still be alive if he had only had the foresight to play green. The thought drifts out of your mind as you drop another lump of K'fr on the fire. It clears the bad taste from your mouth. The evil stench in the air from the deck fades away as the vapors reinvigorate your mind. You reassure your backers you are not setting up the Ke'Hyrin as a persona for yourself. You just wanted to do a scene in first person to get a few details straightened out, without the interference or the static from dialog. Perhaps you even take a moment to remind the readers that this is all more or less historically accurate.

You are John Ke'Hyrin. You are done with your column. It will be the last thing you ever write. The final line says it all. "Kill them all." We need not read the rest to understand the message.

You hold the brazier over the Pixies and waft the pungent K'fr smoke towards them. As they awake, you show them a bag of gold and jewels. You fight back a tear.

"OK, Seven," they say devoid of emotion. It has come to this then. Their time has come.

Sadly you lead the Pixies out of the bar... all of them. The Elf and Fey'an follow you with their eyes. You emerge from the trenches in the dark of night... It is a misnomer; the sky is lit up brighter than the bar you came out of. Endless tracer rounds from 50-C guns fill the air and reflect off the water. A rocket roars overhead exploding in the distance. The Pixies have not seen the sky in ages, but then this is the sky now, tracer rounds, smoke, and the reflection of fire. If the Pixies didn't look so dead, so empty of

life, they might look comical in the oversized flak jackets you have given them. They huddle close as you lead them down the path. You walk past gunners, Human, Trolls, Elves, and even Cobalts. It is surprising how many Cobalts there are, but now is not the time for sightseeing. You lead the Pixies to the landing field. The Elf, with no name, is waiting. You load them onto the WASP. The tears fill your eyes now. You fight back the flow of emotion as you toss the Elf the bag of gold and turn quickly away.

Maybe you are selling them into slavery. Maybe they will find a forest that still grows. Maybe someday, they will come back and bring a bit of the forest with them. It is done. It is over. In the dark of night they fly away. If they look over the landscape one final time before they depart forever, they will see hell. There is nothing to return to. For them, there never will be.

Pull back from the Ke’Hyrin. Observe him in third person. Watch him walk over the wire. The shooting does not pause for this. Nor does it pause as he walks into the water and merges with it, dissolving like a fine sheen of oil over its surface.

Moments later we can cut far upstream, perhaps near where Curtis was gunned down. We may make out Cobalts dancing in the dark around small K’fr filled braziers. There is no other light. As he walked into the water, the Ke’Hyrin emerges. He does not bother to hide his tears. He walks among the Cobalts, they pause in their dance.

“Boss?” they ask.

“You boss now?”

The Ke’Hyrin ignores them as he walks to the center of a stone dais. It is the heart of the jungle. It is an ancient Gra’gl temple. Immediately a dozen Depth Fiends surround him. He ignores them. They are nothing. He kneels and holds his head to the sky. In a mocking parody, he says, “This is the End.” The air strike he called in moments before hits and the sky explodes with fiery death. The jungle burns. The trees explode. In silence, the Cobalt’s scream unheard cries. The Depth Fiends melt and the jungle dies. It is the end. It is no more. Blackened and burnt, the

jungle gone; the Ke'Hyrin dissolves away into the ground. A blue sheen dissipates into the earth like an oily stain on water.

We shift view and look at the last stretch of jungle burn from a barren rocky knoll over the shoulder of a Cobalt. In the light from the fire, the Cobalt's skin shines red before it shifts ever so slightly to blue. Something grabs at the Cobalts feet and he is suddenly whisked out of view to his death.

It is over. It is the end. The Ke'Hyrin's vengeful spirit is the "Boss now," but there is nothing worth being boss of left.

A melancholy soundtrack plays in the background. Choose your favorite.

In the bar we cut to the Fey'an. Without a word she dissolves away, flipping out of the vortex. The jungle is gone. There is nothing holding her here. She is free... pause to remember sadly, freedom is having nothing left to loose.

The Elvin maidens in the corner feel the call as well. If they could walk the vortexes, perhaps they would leave, but where would they go? Instead they stand, grab one of the many extra weapons lying around the bar, and head for the surface. No one stops them as they climb out of the hole, cross the wire, wade into the water, and disappear into the night. Someone must lead the way... show the Cobalts how to die.

The war is almost over. There is nothing left to fight for. Ve'kahn, the jungle, is no more. The object is simple and clear now; the motive revenge. "Kill Them All."

You can watch the desperate evacuation of the island; the desperate pleas for a spot, any spot, at any price on the hastily retreating WASPs. You can even watch many of those very same WASPs get shot down moments later.

You can stay and watch if you will. It doesn't get any prettier. As the Seventh Realm pulls out the entire vortex is carpet-bombed and if that is not enough, for the final coup de grace they send in Dimensional Rippers to seal the plane, closing all portals, isolating the vortex

Ve'kahn is gone. The jungle is gone. There is nothing left and even if there was, how would you get there?

If you are a Ke'Hyrin, a Pixie, or even a sentient, you just might cry... dare I say, at the horror of it all.

#

There it is.

Our bags are packed.

We're all ready to go.

Now all we need is a destination.

#

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