

Book III
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

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Happy Birthday to the LeeZards

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###

Three Heroes

The Viking ship carrying Bull, Jack, Targor, Zay'ar'lyne Garg, and Irvin the Mantid glides toward the horizon swept along by the needs of the plot and whims of the gods, i.e. editors.

Bull is at the Rudder. Jack is in his horns.

“Tell me where to steer Jack.”

“Um, that way is fine,” Jack responds. It is clear to her the rudder is useless. She's not really sure why Bull is holding onto it in the first place.

The wind is picking up. A spray washes over the vessel. The Mantid has stationed himself at the prow of the boat. His barbed feet dig deeply into the wooden beams of the ship. It seems more likely that his legs would break off, before he would loose his grip.

There is no cover, no below decks. Strapped to the gunwales are a few barrels of water, sea tack, and oars. Garg looks to Targor for leadership. He's never been on anything more than a raft.

“Grab some rope. Tie on,” he says over the growing roar.

“Do you know how to put together a safety harness Zay?”

Zay nods as she rigs a harness for herself and Garg. A wave hits as she is finished pushing her back and off balance. “It's going to be bad,” she says stating the obvious as she notices Targor has gone to the rear to help Bull and Jack. “We should join them. We'll tie a second line on and bunny hop,” she says explaining the process to Garg. Another wave bigger than the first hits the side of the boat and washes them both off of their feet. They would have gone over if they hadn't been tied on.

The boat dips down and the prow is submerged for a second. Irvin disappears from view, but as the ship rises, his head is the first to surface. He stands still, like a statue, his arms raised ready to attack. The water does not faze him. He can hold his breath for hours. Unless the front half of the boat breaks off, he will be fine.

Targor is at the stern with Bull and Jack. He fashions safety harnesses for each of them, ties them all together, and then lashes them to the side of the ship and two barrels that are back here. In a moment Garg and Zay join them.

The sky has turned black. The sun, if it is still there, is hidden behind rolling clouds. As they finish tying themselves together, the rear of the boat gets drenched.

“Why are we doing this?” Targor yells. “Shouldn’t we just turn around?”

“Can’t.” Bull yells back. As if to echo what he has said, lightning strikes behind them. “You can never go home again.”

“What does that mean?” Targor is only an arms distance away, but he is yelling as loud as he can to be heard over the wind.

“Life is a one way journey,” Bull explains as he reaches into his pocket and lets the next wave carry the fortune away and out of the plot.

Jack watches him do this. She says, “you can’t do that, fortunes don’t work that way,” but no one hears her, least of all the narrator, because yes in fact, fortunes do work that way.

As if for the first time, Targor notices the sail billowing above him.

Zay notices his gaze. “Maybe we should have taken that down?”

“NO! It’s all right,” Bull assures them. The wind is still blowing. The sky is rolling. Thunder and lightning becomes more frequent. It starts to hail. Soon, the deck is covered with ice and they are standing in half of foot of slush.

“Come on wave,” Zay pleads. She isn’t dressed for the cold. The weather responds to her wishes and another wave broadsides the vessel.

They are drenched again, but the water is surprisingly warm, and the deck is clear of ice.

Targor shakes his hair as the wind dies down a little. His clothes are surprisingly dry. It looks like he just came out of wardrobe. “The calm before the storm,” he observes. “So, why are we out here again?”

Garg who had been staring ahead towards the horizon turns; he wants to know this as well.

“I don’t know,” Zay answers.

“Bull does,” Jack states.

Targor speaks for all of them when he says: “Let us in on it then.”

“We’re going to Ve’kahn,” Bull explains.

“But, it’s gone. They used Dimensional Rippers,” Zay objects.

“Dimensional Rippers just seal the vortex off. They destroy all the portals and isolate the vortex. Ve’kahn still exists... somewhere.”

“But where? How can we track to an unknown destination?”

“It’ll be hard going, but that’s why they put three heroes on the job.”

“Only two,” Zay corrects him. “Bruce didn’t come with.”

“But, I did,” counters Bull. “I’m not so handy with the ax. But, I know how to work a narrative to its best advantage.”

The sky swirls madly. Lightning strikes again and on the horizon a large wave looms into view.

“You’re crazy. That doesn’t make you a hero,” Targor blurts out. “What I mean is, they didn’t start calling me a hero until I’d done six movies. I wasn’t an icon until I’d done twelve. You can’t just say you’re a hero.”

“If he says he’s a hero, he’s a hero,” Jack defends Bull.

Garg watches the exchange without emotion. He turns to glance at the approaching wave and then turns his head back to listened intently to what Bull has to say.

“I’m not a hero like Garg.” Bull says as he returns Garg’s gaze. “You’re steadfast, if you say you are going to do something, it gets done. Like if you say you are going to live through this storm. It will happen.”

“Garg Live!”

Bull turns slightly to face Targor and Zay. “And you two, you’re handier with the weapons than I’ll ever be and your list of credits puts me to shame.”

“I didn’t mean,” Targor begins, but Bull cuts him off.

“That wave is going to be here soon, so just hear me out. We need you two on the other side of this storm to lead us to Ve’kahn, so you’re safe.”

Targor suddenly realizes the power of what Bull is saying. “I’ve already done the shipwreck thing. It would be anti-climatic for me to do it again and my fans would never stand for it.”

“Exactly.”

“Besides,” Zay joins in, “Targor can’t possibly die in the middle. If there’s going to be a cliffhanger, it’ll happen at the end not now... and, as his designated love interest I’m golden till the second to last chapter as well.”

Jack still doesn’t understand. “How does this make you a hero?”

“The gods listen to him,” Targor explains.

“Shaman,” Garg agrees.

They all watch the wave approach for a moment.

Jack is trying to wrap her mind around it. “Is this like the package thing Bull?”

“It’s the same. The universe,” the narrator, “responds to your hopes, dreams, and expectations. Call it praying if it makes more sense that way.”

“What about me then Bull?” Jack asks earnestly. “Give me my golden ticket through this.”

“You’re the whole reason we’re here. All of us are nothing, but an escort service for you.” The wave is beginning to grow under them lifting the boat into the air. “Stay in my horns Jack.

You're my insurance. As long as you're riding my horns, I'm safe as well."

Jack checks the lashes holding her down a final time and holds on tight.

They are almost at the crest of the wave. Garg looks at the prow and then back again. "Insect?" he asks.

"I think he's fishing," Bull responds.

They are at the peak of the wave. They hang three hundred feet above the bottom of the crest for a moment and then plummet down into the raging storm.

The heavens open up dropping blinding sheets of water around them. A gust of wind catches the sail and drags the boat along up the next wave, launching the entire boat into the air like a kite. Lightning flashes around them, thunder fills the air with its roaring boom. Conversation is over. There is little to do but hold on tight. Bull keeps his hands on the rudder, but it seems to do no good. Jack holds onto Bull's horns for all she's worth and the others clutch onto the side of the boat. Standing in the prow, as if in confirmation of what Bull has said, the Mantid catches a fish in its claws and eats it. When he is done, he discards the husk and waits patiently for another sea creature to cross his path.

Soon, the boat will crest a wave and at the bottom a swirling whirlpool will await our merry band and act as a portal, a vortex if you will; a gateway to another world, but that is skipping ahead a chapter or two. For now the storm will toy with them and Jack will silently thank the gods that she took seasick pills. The Captain's Cure: Guaranteed to work by Gary Ganesh himself... or your money back.

###

The 300' Wave Flu

With 300' waves in the cove, it should be no surprise that the author called in sick. He's surfing. He's not fooling anyone. I can see him from here. If we really want to have fun with him, we can

simply remember that he doesn't know how to surf and watch him wipe out, but I like my job, so I'll play along.

“WOW! Look at him cut it up... Is that a shark?”

Just kidding.

I guess I should introduce myself first. My name is Harry. I'm a Story Finishing Gnome and I'll be filling in for the author for the next chapter of two.

Here, I'll hold my spiral bound notebook out so you can get a good look at me. Some folks say I look like a 10" tall pile of hairy brown yarn with arms and legs, hence the name. What I do as a Story Finishing Gnome is take the notes from an author and compile them into a finished manuscript. In return I get that ever precious media exposure and all the hot chocolate I can drink. It's similar to the gig the Little People have been working with cobblers since time immemorial. You know, the cobbler and his wife cut out the leather patterns for a bunch of shoes before they go to sleep and when they wake up the shoes are all made.

I do more or less the same thing only with stories. Let me show you. The story notes for this chapter are:

Sick – Story Finishing Gnome – Surf Advisory

That's it. The next chapter isn't any better.

Carl's Green Legs – Poolside Bar-B-Q Party

It's OK. I'm a professional and I'm up for the challenge. Maybe I should explain how I got this job. This isn't the first Dragon Bound book. It's actually the third. The first book in the series is The Dragon Bound Quartet and the second is Minataur Tails. Towards the end of Minataur Tails the author hit upon a wonderful idea. Wouldn't writing be easier if someone else took care of the nitty-gritty mundane work? Like proof reading, second rewrites... and as long as someone else was going to do that, maybe someone else could take care of that annoying first rough draft as

well. So, at the end of the second book, he put a little classified advertisement:

Wanted Story finishing Gnome who is willing to work for hot chocolate. If that's you, show us what you can do with: Ruby and Grt go to the Wild West. The story should be funny, come in at 100,000 well-edited words, introduce new characters, and include as many of the old favorites as possible. If your work is really good, we can arrange for donuts along with the hot chocolate. Greedy Gnomes or those unwilling to work for token foodstuffs need not apply.

I answered the ad and he liked my ideas for what was expected to be the third book, Rigor Pass 1860: The Manna Boom Years, but that book has never been written. To understand why, let look at how this particular author writes a book. What he does is start with the rough draft. It seems self evident, but not everyone does. Some writers like to start with the second draft and your more polished professionals like to start with a plot outline, story notes, or something. Anyway, he starts with a rough draft. It takes somewhere from a month to a month and a half to pound out a 100,000 word rough draft. Then he reads it through, laughs like a monkey at his own jokes, and lets it sit on the shelf for a month to freshen like wine. Then he reads it again, laughs in the same spots at the same jokes, makes a few changes, and edits it for consistency; like making sure a character's name hasn't changed somewhere along the line. It happens more than you'd imagine. Then he lets it sit for another week, reads it again, laughs again, lets it sit, and reads it one last time. Assuming it all works for him, he's now ready to proofread it. That's right. He goes through the entire manuscript sentence by sentence and makes sure Minataur is always spelled the same, he hasn't mixed up there with their or they're, and the stuff between periods actually forms a sentence. He thinks that proofreading is mind boggling boring work. That's where the idea for a Story Finishing Gnome came from.

Originally, I was just supposed to proofread, but then he thought why dream of chopped liver when you can dream of caviar? Very quickly the idea went from a proofreader and fact checker to someone who could take:

Sick – Story Finishing Gnome – Surf Advisory

And turn it into an interesting 1,000+ word chapter.

Now, although writing can be a very time consuming process, 3-6 months from start to finish, actually getting published takes even longer. I'm sure you've heard the stories of the incredibly best seller that was rejected by a dozen publishing houses before a small outfit took a chance on it. Each one of those rejections takes an additional 1-6 months. Then, after it's finally accepted it can take up to two more years before the book actually hits the store shelves and you find out if there is any demand for a sequel.

So, it takes months to write a book and after that years to get it published. Having already written one sequel to a book that might not get published for years, if ever, there wasn't much point in writing a second sequel. So, the story you are now reading has been written as a stand-alone book that just happens to also take place in the Dragon Bound universe.

Anyhow, that's who I am, Harry the Story Finishing Gnome and that's where I came from.

Now that we've completely pulled back the veil, there's no point in letting it fall back right away. I've been looking over the author's shoulder for the last 50,000 words. If that doesn't mean anything to you, it's the same as; 200 pages of 12pt double-spaced typing, 2 finished reels of film (down from 20 cans of rough footage), or 2 of the spiral bound notebooks us Story Finishing Gnomes like to use. They point is, I've been watching him at work and I can assure you most of what he puts down on paper doesn't exist in his head until he actually types it out. Like the fortunes in Gary's store; the fortunes started as flavor text.

Gary walks behind the counter, pushes a rolling ladder along until he comes to the right spot, and then climbs up halfway to the ceiling. The wall behind the counter is filled with cubby holes, stacks of bottles, and a miss mash of rolled up paper, books, and half filled store displays selling everything from ginseng gum to firecrackers and rolled up fortunes.

Remember that? “Rolled up fortunes,” pure flavor text; it could have been anything. What would there be in a fantasy general store? Maybe fortunes? So, he writes, “rolled up fortunes.” They didn’t exist in the story or his head until that moment, until after he had gotten done typing firecrackers amazingly enough. But then later, because fortunes have already been mentioned as flavor text, the author has Gary give our heroes two fortunes. It wasn’t planned. Nothing ever is.

That’s where Bull comes in. He’s worked with the author before. He knows the author doesn’t plan anything in advance and is willing to let the randomness of flavor text determine the flow of the story. Bull is simply letting his words be flavor text, making it easy for the narrative to follow his lead. Irvin is fishing? Well, that’s a good idea, the author says to himself. Let’s go with that.

It’s not foolproof though. Just because Bull makes something easy on the author doesn’t mean the author is always going to go for it. First of all, it wouldn’t be interesting if Bull always got his way. And secondly, although Bull may understand narrative flow, that doesn’t give him narrative control. Just to give you an idea of what Bull is up against, consider that we have access to the latest graphics editing software. It’s easy for us to go back and modify or erase anything from the story. If the fortunes are causing problems, with a wave of a wand we can delete every reference to them or we can go back and use touchup software to change what they said and have the actors provide voice over audio samples for the new text. Technically it’s not difficult to

change the wording on a fortune, a character's name, or even an entire character. Suppose we decided Irvin was a bad idea or goes and does something stupid, like getting arrested for driving under the influence of K'fr between now and when the story is released. If we don't want the production to be tainted by his bad press, we just use a color screen to delete him from the story. Then we either do without someone standing in the prow of the boat or we paste in another character. It could be anyone. The point is you'd never notice. Maybe the whole reason this is on my mind is because Irvin is a last minute replacement for someone else? You'd never know, because we're a professional outfit and we'd re-edit every scene in which Irvin or his predecessor appeared.

Clearly Bull is outgunned, but he understands the process. He understands the mechanics of narrative flow and how this particular author goes about achieving it. It might seem like a strange basis for a hero, but then this is a strange series. In a nutshell, what Bull tries to do is second guess the author's desires for where the narrative is going, determine where that will put him, figure out if there is a better place for him to be, and then make subtle changes in his words and actions to make the outcome he desires more likely by presenting a convenient, ready made action sequence to the author. Why did Bull get a map and Jack a package of seeds? Because, Bull was looking for a package and it just sort of made sense for Gary to give him something. These things didn't exist and were not part of Gary's or the author's intent before Bull walked into the general store. Bull made them happen. The other characters are doing the same thing, but not consciously. It's important to remember, there is no overall story arc or plan. The story and resolution will be what it will be. What sets Bull apart is that he understands this instinctually, but not only that. He knows that we've got a lot of money riding on this production and we've got some very powerful backers. With the right spell, everything, even the weather, can be controlled. Bull knows this and more so than the others, he's able to finesse the outcome he desires.

All this being said, Bull doesn't have absolute control. He can make it easy for the story to flow in a certain way, but there is no guarantee his efforts will prove successful. Think of it like the banks of a river during a rainstorm. Or, better yet, how a driver under the influence of K'fr treats traffic laws... as mere suggestions.

So, let's return to the fortunes for a second. Like I said, they are flavor text. Maybe we'll find a way to utilize them further down the line and maybe we won't. All I'm saying is, if Bull can let a wave carry a fortune out of the script; it's easy for a wave to carry a fortune back in.

Here, I'll show you how easy it is.

The waters are calm the storm is over. The boat is in the distance and we cut to a close up of a scrap of paper bobbing in the water. It is the fortune; doggedly trailing after our heroes, because everybody knows your fate is not something so easily changed.

See, simple. We even have a rationale for why Bull's actions didn't work. Realistically, we can bring that fortune back into the story however we want. We can have the fortune wash up on a beach after our heroes land or we can have Matt get the same fortune in a fortune cookie at a Chinese restaurant. I'm not trying to lay the foundation for the fortunes to be anything more than what they are, which at this point, is momentary flavor text, but even that's not an accurate statement. I mean, after all this talk, you'd expect to see something about the fortunes again. Right? Well, that's exactly how flavor text and a random example overtake a story.

In fact, if we look at it broadly enough, it's not just a pair of fortunes, Irvin, or gungu-snaps that are flavor text. The whole story in the end is flavor text, open to character abuse, modification, and finesse.

To really understand the full implications of that, you need to know the starting point for this novel and realize how far off base it's already gone. As follows are the total notes the author began this adventure with. They are the beginnings of three separate story lines and a visual event.

A Pixie-Minataur adventuring team where the Pixie rides in Minataur's horns facing backwards. The Minataur has an ax. The Pixie has a bow and arrow. Originally they were going to live in the suburbs (i.e. Matt's house) and the story was going to revolve around the problems of a fantasy adventuring team living a mundane middle class lifestyle. Maybe have an embedded reporter following them on a dungeon crawl.

Garg, Targor, and Bruce Brilliant each does a cameo chapter that ends with them getting onto a boat. Even though the specific boat they individually got on (raft, galley, modern military) was a different type, through magic, they all wind up being on the same boat, probably a Viking ship, and ride out a storm together. When it is over, they sit in the doldrums, and figure out what to do next taking into account they are from separate milieus, etc.

A man's alter ego brings his fantasy girl back from the dream world. Originally Matt was going to live at Bull's place and instead of bringing Dee back, he would have wound up with the much more spirited Esse. As you may have noticed, before shooting started it was decided to switch starting locales.

And finally, there is Bull's Ve'kahn scene where he is standing at the door of a helicopter gunship and spent shell casings dance around his feet. It's odd to think about, but yes, entire stories are written and movies made whose sole

purpose has been to bring one scene to life. The final movie might actually have very little to do with the initial vision.

Believe it or not, those four ideas were the starting kernels for the story thus far. The only reason Bull had a Ve'kahn sequence was so the author could do a gunship scene; and even that scene didn't really pan out as the author envisioned. It never does. If you couple that with one or more characters trying to work the story to their best advantage, it becomes apparent why there's not much point in developing a comprehensive plot line. Anyway, the thing is, if a character is in tune with the ideas that are driving the author, they can do pretty much whatever they want; say if for instance, a Story Finishing Gnome wanted to do his own helicopter gunship sequence. He could.

The diminutive hairball stands in the helicopter doorway. A flight helmet covers most of his body. "Flak jacket? I don't need no stinking flak jacket," Harry sneers.

His small hands stretch upwards as he stands on tippy-toes to reach the trigger guards of the 50-C Manna Chain gun. The gun dwarfs him, but he finds its size and the familiar sensation of cold metal in his hands reassuring. He pulls back the lever on the machine gun and disables the tracer function. He is a purist, a sportsman. He likes to give his quarry a chance.

"There he is," the Elf with no name calls over the headset, but even before he does, Harry has spotted the target as well.

Down in the distance of a black lava rock strewn landscape a lone human figure clothed only in underwear scrambles precariously over razor sharp rocks. It is Matt. It is morning. It is almost time to wake up.

Harry fires off a few preliminary rounds exploding the rocks around Matt. Matt dives for cover cutting his arms, thighs, and chest in the process.

The Elf flies over Matt's position and banks hard bringing his gunner back into firing position. Matt gets up and tries to run. The

sharp rocks dig into his feet. He is bleeding. Why didn't he put on any shoes before he walked out into the lava field? He doesn't know that he is dreaming.

Harry aims off to the left and bursts a cinder cone behind Matt to shards. Matt goes diving again slicing a cruel gash into his thigh.

Harry would be happy to play with his prey further, but there are other warlords to hunt, other evils to destroy. He pulls the trigger on his chain gun. Round after round of manna tears into Matt's flesh. His body dances and jumps from the impact. He looks like a marionette jiggling on its strings.

Cut to the inside of the helicopter. Spent cartridges and chain links dance around Harry. They fall to the ground in an endless spray as if the whole point of the gun was to spit out used cartridges. The quarter manna rounds zip out of the barrel. The gun shakes from the impulse. It is like holding onto a jackhammer. The gun smokes. The sweet smell of persimmons with a hint of cinnamon fills the craft. Matt is long since dead, but Harry continues to fire. The landscape explodes in shards sending up a thick gray-black dust cloud reminiscent of shadow. An endless stream of spent cartridges cascades down from the side of the WASP.

And in truth, this is the scene this is the moment why Ve'kahn was brought into the story in the first place; simply to linger in the visage of a 50-C Manna Chain Gun going full bore spraying white death into a barren rocky landscape.

"I think you got him," the Elf calls over the headset.

The Story Finishing Gnome does not take his finger off the trigger. He wants to be sure. Even as the Elf flies on, he swivels his gun back to pound more bullets into the smoking patch of ground where Matt had once been.

###

Green Legs – Bar-B-Q

This is Harry again. The author is still not here. He didn't bother to call in sick. I am concerned. I am in the author's bungalow (toxic dump of a house that it is) and stare out of the bathroom window overlooking the ocean 600' below. It is the only room in the house that has a window. It is the only room that is even close to being dry. Water drips from the ceiling and seeps through the failed caulking. The rain is a torrent. 300', 400', and 500' tall waves crash into the walls of the cliff below sending up a continual spray of water.

I can see the searchlight from a coast guard rescue chopper that is hovering over the cove. I think some thrill seeking surfers are in are trouble. The only other light is from the continual lightning. I have waited for the author long enough. It is time to continue the story.

The rough waters throw our adventure's sailing vessel back and forth. It is buffeted by wind and rain. The waves are so huge as to be small mountains in and of themselves. The boat rises to the top of one wave only to plummet down the other side. When they are in the wave's trough, they look up at a wave so steep and tall it doesn't look like it would be physically possible for the boat to climb to the top, but somehow time and time again it does.

A close up of the crew show them plastered by walls of water that knock them off their feet and tug at their safety harness. They are soaked to the bone. They spit out mouthfuls of water that they can't help but breathe. It's hard to imagine that it could get any worse, but it will. So far, this has only been a mundane storm. Soon they will start to tack towards Ve'kahn and the storm will turn magical.

Sure enough, at the top of the next rise, it is clear the endless procession of waves is going to end. They are at the lip of a giant whirlpool. There is nothing they can do.

Bull yells, "Hold on!" but no one can hear him over the roar of the wind, rain, and the sucking noise from the center of the

swirling portal. The boat races around the rim of the whirlpool in a bid to build suspense, but their descent into the vortex is inevitable.

Cut to a view Carl the Courteous Cobalt's green scaly legs. He is the producer and he is camera shy. Despite his prominent role in this chapter, we will only see his arms and legs the entire time.

Carl is taking a bath. The water drains out of the tub as a red and yellow plastic tugboat twirls around in the whirlpool caused by the draining water.

One of his hundreds of children yells from the open door. "Come on Dad. We'll be late."

The plastic boat settles to the bottom of the empty tub. Carl grabs it and we track the boat in the air as Carl tosses it into a waiting duffel bag full of other toy boats.

Carl dressed quickly, grabs the duffel bag, carries it outside to the waiting station wagon bursting at the seams with Cobalt children, and opens the roof mounted luggage compartment.

Cut to an inside view of the luggage rack as Carl tosses in the bag. As he closes the lid, the scene blacks out. A pregnant pause indicating travel takes place. Carl opens the carryall and removes the bag. Where there were dozens of Cobalt children before, now there are thousands. Carl makes his way through the children, mostly his own and close relatives, as he winds his way towards a side gate and into a backyard. There is a pool here. Three cameras are set up on one side of the pool, while a large blue screen is stretched across the other.

This is how movie magic is done. It's all smoke and mirrors. Carl takes out the plastic tugboat and tosses it into the pool. A team of 'special effects' Cobalts throws rocks, diving rings, inner tubes, and floating islands at the boat.

"It's not looking very good," a cameraman informs them, but they already know this. They are just warming up. A team of special effects Cobalts goes to work and do cannon balls around the tugboat. They use their hands to make giant splashes, fill their

mouths with water and spit it on the boat, but this too is boring after a bit. Finally they take the boat and throw it around. They end up playing catch back and forth from one end of the pool to another. Floating islands, Styrofoam rocks, and an inflatable sea dragon find their way into the pool.

It is time for a break. They start up the Bar-B-Q while the stagehands clear the pool. With a half-eaten hot dog in one hand, Carl holds a model of a WWII vintage gray destroyer in the other. A cameraman comes in for a close up of the boat. There is a wick coming out of the smokestack of the vessel. Carl places the boat in the water, lights the wick, and pushes it towards the middle of the pool. It glides in a few feet before blowing up. The visage meets with a hearty approval from the crowd.

An Ogre grabs another vessel from the duffel bag. It looks like a plastic Viking ship. The sail is black with a white skull and cross bones graphics. Editing will need to take that out. He shows the boat to Carl.

“See, we even got little plastic men glued down.”

He holds the boat by the plastic man in front and it breaks off at the knees. They spend a few minutes taping him back together before the boat is pushed into the water. They toss M-80's at the ship. They are not very accurate. The M-80's miss their mark and fall into the water. They go off like depth charges sending a bubbling torrent of smoke towards the surface.

“Looking good,” a cameraman exclaims. “Put in orange and purple color on that smoke and we've got something.”

This continues for a while until an M-80 lands in the boat exploding it into a zillion pieces.

“That's a keeper.”

They go through a near endless string of boats. Few look anything remotely like the boats our heroes are on. They light bottle rockets, sparklers, smoke bombs, whizzers, whistlers, and whatever other fireworks anybody has brought with them. The crew and most of the guests are drinking beer. Whenever anyone is done with a bottle, they throw it at whatever boat happens to be

in the water at the time. Many of the shots the crew takes have giant beer bottles floating in the water around the craft.

They send in a hundred Cobalt Special Effects extras to clear out the beer bottles and walk around the edge of the pool to create a giant whirlpool. A gnome puts on a SCUBA outfit. The wet suit has extra fins, tails, and tentacles glued on. He is a sea creature. He attacks a helpless vessel thrashing it back and forth in the water.

The day grows old. They set torches up around the pool. Beer turns to mixed drinks. Sausages and steaks hit the grill. The models they are using are getting more realistic looking. Some of them have a passing semblance to the actual long oar boat our adventurers are on. The crew takes turns firing off the high beam weapon from an AK-47/5889ty into the water around the boat. The water boils where the beam hits. They start a betting game. The object is to hit the boat, but not sink it. They each put a gold in the pot and they take turns. When someone misses, they are out. Several boats are slowly melted and burned away playing this game.

“This footage is coming out great,” one of the cameramen calls out.

“It looks like what we want,” another agrees. “Maybe we should go for this?”

Carl agrees.

A Kreel, a humanoid creature that looks like it is related to Medusa with hundreds of blue tentacles coming out of its head, goes into the house and with the help of a special effects crew wheels out a three-foot scale model of the Viking ship. It is hand made of individual pieces of wood painstakingly cut to shape and glued together. The sail is made of cloth. The rigging is made of braided thread. An amazingly lifelike model of Irvin with alligator clips for feet is mounted on the prow. In the stern, tied loosely together, to the railing, and to the barrels are our five adventurers. The detail is amazing.

“Go over this and get close ups of every angle,” instructs Carl. He sends one of his assistants on a potato chip run.

Around the pool, large fake foam waves are brought into place. They glow from internal lighting that slowly changes in intensity. A large fan is wheeled into place on one end of the pool and a line of some of the more dependable Cobalts are sat on the edge of the pool. When action is called, they will kick their feet making the water rough and lifting a spray to be carried by the fan onto the boat.

On the blue screen, sample clips of severe weather are displayed. They range from backgrounds of tornadoes, hurricanes, waterspouts, dust storms, thunderstorms, and violent swirling clouds. The images are all in black and white. Color will be added in postproduction and will be decided at that time. It will likely be a changing mixture of purples, blues, reds, and oranges, but one never knows. It is possible a purple tornado will slowly morph into a red waterspout that fills the horizon in a spray of red polka dots in final production. If we are feeling really hokey we could have the clouds roll together to form an image of the angry trident god’s face, but just between you and me, the trident god would be more likely to form his face out of the water. So, if we wanted to we could superimpose his image over the whirlpool and have his mouth where the funnel is. We won’t though, because the trident god’s popularity has been waning, his agent asks for too much money, and he has a reputation for being hard to work with and a scene-stealer. Of course, saying something like that about the trident god goes a long way towards explaining how we managed to get under his skin and induce him to come up with 300’ waves.

Anyway, back to the highly detailed 3’ model. The close ups are done. The ship is anchored in place by a weight sunk to the bottom of the pool. The medusa like creature, the Kreel, brings out another gun. He explains that it is a high velocity water jet gun. It will shoot a projectile of hardened water at 400mph. At the range they are firing at, 10’, it is as deadly and accurate as a .22 round.

“We’ll take turns. Same as before, if you miss you’re out. If you hit any of the crew, you’re out. If you sink it, you’re out. We go till the boat is gone or nobody is left. 250 gold buy in?”

There are five takers.

Action is called. The fan starts up creating a tempest. The Cobalts kick their feet. When they get tired others replace them. There are well over 2,000 Cobalts here. The only way for them to get a good view of the action is to be a kicker. There is no shortage of willing bodies. The background waves start their slow shift in light intensity. The blue screen is turned on. It shows images as the shooting takes place, but because of their programmed, repetitive nature, they are easily edited out and replaced in postproduction. The cameras have been mounted to special platforms, which go up and down and sway back forth. When the final production is released and the final cut is on screen, the viewer’s eyes will reverse the motion and it will look like the ship is going up and down and ratcheted back and forth in waves.

The scene set, the cameras rolling, the marksmen take their turns. The main sail goes quickly. We can cut to a close up.

“Look out,” Jack yells uselessly as she scrambles for cover.

Bull ducks as the main mast is ripped off and carried away by the wind.

The marksmen continue. Every shot is like a cannon ball ripping through the ship. Boards explode and splinter.

“What’s happening?” Jack yells.

Bull puts his hand up to reassure her. “It’ll be OK.”

In response to his assurance a hole bursts open in the middle of the deck. It is clear the ship is going to fail.

“Stay together,” Bull yells. “Just stay together.” He pulls Jack down and holds her in his arms to keep her safe.

“I thought you’d said we’d get through this.”

“That I did,” Bull agrees. It is not an altogether reassuring response.

Garg looks at the sky and repeats his earlier prayer. “Garg survive?” but now it is more of a question.

Targor looks inside himself. He’s already done the death at sea bit. He wonders where he will wind up or whether they simply have run out of new ways to kill him. He holds onto Zay with one arm and the railing with another.

Zay struggles to keep her balance, but she is stoic. She does not fear death. She will not embrace it willingly, but she will welcome it when death finally finds her. There are many things worse than death. Being afraid of death is one of them.

Oblivious to these thoughts, the shooters continue. They are running out of targets. The railing under Targor’s hand breaks and gives way. Water flows in over the side.

“It’s sunk,” Carl calls out.

“No it’s not,” the Kreel protests. “Look at the close up. Their heads are still above water.”

They argue for a while. 1,250 gold is a lot of money, but eventually it is agreed. The shooting will continue.

The mast is gone. The rigging is gone. The railing is gone. The prow, the rudder, and most of the deck are all gone. A fateful shot breaks the ship in two, but yet it floats. The model is made of lightweight balsa wood. It floats easily, as does the plastic resin the characters were cast from, and the rest of the wooden debris spread across the pool.

Our heroes huddle close together. They try to stay on top of an ever-decreasing piece of the ship that is now little more than a raft, a large piece of floating rubbish. The waves and wind have not let up. The storm is not over.

As the waves lift them up and throw them about, our heroes fall off the edge of the floating platform. They scramble to hold on and pull themselves up. It is hard to call the collection of boards they cling to at this point even a raft. The mass of debris is caught by the wind and flipped by passing waves repeatedly. There is no boat, no up, no down to the wreckage. Often, they find themselves pinned under the mash of wood and have to hold their breathe,

waiting for the remnants of the craft to right itself or fall apart further for them to break through to the surface. At times, their safety harness's seems to do little but hold them under water, but it does keep the party together.

The shooting of film and water cannon continues. There are three shooters left, they agree to up the ante. Before each turn they have to do a shot of rum and take three shots in rapid succession. Irvin's portion of the boat has long ago broken off from the rest. It is determined to be off limits, out of the game. Only a piece of the wreckage that one of the other five adventures hangs onto is a target. If any of the three shots miss, it's a miss.

It takes more time than one might imagine to eliminate the remaining three shooters. There is nothing left when they are done. The Kreel wins by default when he shoots the last beam out of Bull's hands. There is no boat, no debris, and no wreckage. There is nothing left to shoot at.

The boat destroyed. The scene is over. The Cobalts stop kicking their feet. The lights from the waves, the blue screen, and the fans are turned off. Before he stops filming, a cameraman pans over the floating debris that fills the swimming pool. He zooms in on a piece of paper. It is the other fortune that Bull had kept in his pocket, but if he's not going to keep one fortune, he doesn't get to keep the other. (There, see how easy that was.)

Having drunk way too much in the contest. Carl and the Kreel soon pass out where they are in lawn chairs by the side of the pool. In disgust, an angry wife throws a floating Styrofoam island into the pool and mutters a curse. (Foreshadowing my friends. Like I said, changing reality is easy).

We pull to a close up of the five plastic figures. They bob up and down in the water surrounded by a cluster of wooden debris. In postproduction, an editor causes a black circle to form along the outside border of the shot. Like an iris closing, darkness fills the screen. We black out and leave our characters here. They have their lives, but little else.

Perhaps the only portent to be taken seriously was the one, which came from Gary's lips directly, "You can't take it with you."

And that my friends is how a Story Finishing Gnome earns his hot chocolate.

###

The Whipping Boy

In a storm where the waves reach 300' and the wind is blowing at well over 100mph, the surface of the ocean is not well defined.

To give you some idea, let's work backwards. Stacked vertically, water is a wonderful insulator against surface activity. At a mile down, life is as normal. The water is calm with no indication a tempest rages on the surface. At a quarter mile down, the water is choppy and turbulent as the chaos on the surface is dissipated into the depths. At 1,000', the water is being mixed together from the crashing waves on the surface. Water flows up and down in a myriad of rip currents. The water moves so fast, at times bubbles flow downwards. Just pause for a moment to consider what this means for someone on the surface if at a 1,000' below the surface water flows fast enough to suck air bubbles downward. Water in a storm is not water as you or I normally understand it. It is alive and malevolent, but back to 1000' down. Even if it were a bright sunny day on the surface, the ocean would be pitch black at 1,000'. Not just because light can't penetrate that far. The water is thick from the pulverized detritus of fish, plants, and in our example a Viking ship, but this is not the important element we are driving at. If the water was crystal clear to start with, if light could penetrate to these depths, the water would still be pitch black because of all the microscopic water bubbles that are getting mixed in at the surface.

The conditions only get worse as we approach the surface. If we were able to magically lay the ocean flat for a moment, ignore the effect of gigantic waves, and rise to the surface, we would first have to define the surface. Maybe we would call the surface that point at which there is half ocean and half air. It is not a well-defined transition. It is ground zero for a full-scale war between the water and air gods. It is as if a portal was opened between the Elemental Plane of Water and the Elemental Plane of Air. They don't get along. They don't play well together. They are at war. Water rushes into the air. Air rushes into the water. The two mix together to create an ill defined foamy mist.

During a storm, there is no clear boundary between the water and the air. They are in a state of flux and mix easily. At 20' down, the water is foamy and saturated by large bubbles. Buoyancy is diminished. If we were somehow able to raise our heads a foot above the 50-50 point we have defined as the surface, the air will still be saturated with 30-50% water. If we could get our heads 2' above the surface, the water density would drop to a mere 20-40%. Because we are in a rainstorm, because the tops of the waves are being blown off by intense winds, and because we are hardly ever at the crest of the waves, but almost always at some lower point, even at 50-100' above the surface there may be 10% or more water saturated in the air.

If you are in a storm like this you breathe water. It is not optional. It is not avoidable. It is a continual process and every drop you breathe in or swallow, you must cough, gag, or puke back up. The physical abuse on the body is nearly incomprehensible. It is a constant struggle to survive, to rise 1', 2', or 3' above the surface so you can take a breath of something that vaguely resembles air. But, struggle as you might, you will have no control. A 50-50 mix of water and air does not have any substantial buoyancy. One does not float in it. Nor can one swim in it. You are at the mercy of the elements. One moment you will be above the surface gasping for breath, and the next you will be sucked down into a foamy torrent in which the surface is some

unknowable distance above your head and there is nothing to do, but hold your breath and desperately wait.

Our band of adventurers will survive. They are, after all, heroes (all of them), but when this is over, somebody's going to be sick. The thing is; we are on a tight production schedule. We can't take any time off while any of our adventures get well. Luckily, we don't have to.

It is more or less a scientific fact at this point that the best cure for a cold or any other disease, for that matter, is simply to give it to someone else. More importantly, due to recent advances, we no longer even have to wait until we are actually sick to pass the disease along. Long story short, if we can find a willing or unwilling victim, we can simple give him or her all the diseases and sicknesses our merry band might have contracted and have him suffer them in proxy.

Well, I say him, and you may have guessed, the him in question will be Matt. He's under a lot of stress, he's not getting enough sleep, and he's living with a Fey'an who may or may not be a carrier of the dreaded Or'tung Flu.

Besides, the only other real contender from the start was Irvin. I think it might have been fun to watch a Giant Praying Mantis carrying around a box of tissues, blowing his nose, but um... 17 production assistants and that's just to get the show off the ground. 3 cameramen who cut to his bad side, 57 critics who panned his show, 2 vice presidents who wanted to end the series, and 24... you guessed it, 24 writers. To put it bluntly, I'm scared of Irvin; in an, I respect him as an artist type way, of course.

###

The Or'tung Flu

Matt is dreaming that he is a slave on a Roman era ship. The drum pounds its beat and Matt pulls at the oar. He is lucky however, in that he has a window seat. He is afforded a great view

of an enemy ship headed straight his way. The ship has an intricately designed battering ram shaped like a dragon's head for a prow. Slowly the dragon's head grows larger and larger. The detail on the dragon is truly amazing. It appears to grimace and sneer, as it gets ever closer. It is clear the ship Matt is on is going to be broadsided. Now would be a good time to get above decks, but he cannot. As a rule, slaves are chained into place. It gives them an incentive to row faster should they see another ship approaching; like now for instance. Oddly, most of the other slaves have stopped rowing, with a collision imminent; the guards have gone above deck and those prisoners prudent enough to have some tool at their disposal are working frantically at their chains. Since as of five minutes ago Matt was not on a slave ship, he has not made any preparations for this eventuality. He watches helplessly, as the dragon ram crashes through the side of the ship next to where he is sitting, rupturing the hull. Water rushes in. Matt is chained down. He cannot move. He cannot escape. The ship sinks quickly taking Matt down with it. Never say die, that's the Evil Warlord's motto, that's Matt's motto, so he holds his breath.

For most folks, your real body breathes in synchronicity with your dream body. So, if you hold your breath while you dream, your body holds its breath as well. This can be a useful technique to escape nightmares and it might go a long way towards explaining why some people wake up just when their dreams turn interesting. This in the end is why some, but not all, esthetic orders became interested in breath control in the first place. There are other reasons to practice meditation, but there is no doubt being able to go further into the world of dreams is the chief selling point for many. Anyhow, this is just a random aside should you yourself be interested in lucid dreaming. If you are, then remember breathing underwater while you're asleep won't wake you up; holding your breath while you are underwater will.

Anyhow, back to Matt. He's not in as good as shape as he might like to be, so he does not hold his breath for long. He waits

as long as he can before his dream persona sucks in a great lungful of seawater, as he does this he wakes up.

No longer under the sea, Matt bolts upright in bed and gasps for breath. He is sweating profusely. The room is twisting and turning. He figures he's still trapped in one of those lucid dreams like he used to have as a child, but it doesn't feel like a dream. It feels like an earthquake, but even that is not right. It feels like he is below decks on a ship that is being tossed about by a violent storm. He watches the walls moving up and down, rocking back and forth. He licks his lips. It is a mistake. He can taste the sweat. He remembers the lungful of water. He is suddenly very nauseous.

He jumps out of bed, but the floor moves beneath him. It is like he is on a ship. He cannot keep his balance. He slams into a wall and then backs into a dresser before he drops to his knees. The noise startles Dee and she wakes up with a scream. Matt does not hear her. He is busy concentrating on crawling to the bathroom. As a child, he had learned he could always make it to the toilet in time to puke, if he simply kept his mouth shut. The bile rises into his mouth, but he does not let it escape. He crawls the last ten feet to the toilet with puke filling his mouth. Once the toilet bowl is in front of him, like a pump primed for action, his stomach has no trouble purging itself.

We need not go into the gory chunky details. Though this like many scenes is preloaded into EVIL Warlord EXP. Granted, it is not one of my favorite scenes to play, but you can start a few minutes later, tweak the presets, and well... I'll let you figure it out.

Back in reality, Matt is not having a good time of it. Dee appears in the doorway. It is a quandary of sorts. Her master is in a compromising position. He might be embarrassed by his weakness, but she is a trained caregiver and she does not see how she has any choice. She takes off her dress so it will not get soiled and kneels behind Matt. She holds him for comfort and finds a cool washrag to hold against his burning head.

Matt does not have anything left to puke up, but still he tries. What is perhaps more troubling to Matt is that it seems as though he is puking up great mouthfuls of seawater. He opens his mouth and great plumes of water rush out. He sees bits of seaweed and the occasional fish in the water. There is so much water the toilet takes it upon itself to flush as the bowl fills. It's a ridiculous quantity. He bends over the tub. The toilet is clearly not the right receptacle and just when he thinks he's losing his mind. This thought is confirmed. The illusion of a slowly draining tub filled with bile and seawater gives way to the reality of dry heaves and an empty tub.

Matt spends the next several hours this way, puking up imaginary buckets of water, while in reality there is nothing left for his stomach to contract around. Eventually, he learns to ignore the illusionary torrent of water, curls up into a ball, and spits what little his stomach is able to bring up into a rag. He shivers. Dee brings him a blanket and holds him close. When the shivers are replaced by a fever and he starts to burn, he sheds his clothes and lies on the cool tile. Not content to let him be, his body oscillates back and forth between shivering and sweating.

At dawn the vomiting dies down and the worst of the shivers are over. Dee draws Matt a warm bath and helps him get in. He is too tired and delusional to register her naked body. He closes his eyes. He prays for sleep, but it does not come.

He does however think he might be dreaming when the pain starts in his hand. It is a sudden intense burning sensation. It feels like a spider bite at first and that is what he thinks he sees when he glances at his hand out of the corner of his eye, but the visage is just his fever ridden brain playing tricks on him. As he rubs his hand to knock the insect off, his hand goes through the creature. There is nothing biting him. The illusion dissolves and is replaced by a more horrible sight. Sharp, iridescent, fine lined ridges cover his hand. They shimmer with an odd blue-green glow in the morning light. It is a surreal sight. He would swear that he was dreaming only he has never felt such pain during a dream before.

Not even when he thought he took a spear to the gut. It feels like someone has inserted thin burning wire under his skin. The pain is excruciating. The locus of the pain is moving slowly. At the middle, where the pain is worst, the ridges swell and glow intensely. Further from this moving locus, the pain diminishes. Only a few inches from the center, where it felt like he was originally bitten, there is no longer any discoloration or pain, but the pain he feels where the locus has traveled to more than makes up for this.

Dee has been sleeping on the bathroom floor where she spent the night next to Matt. She wakes with a startled yelp as Matt swears, splashes his arm in the water, and clutches at the ridges in a futile attempt to reduce the pain. She grabs his hand and stares at it as the pattern of ridges slowly pulses up his arm. She looks worriedly at Matt as she explains in Fey'an, "Or'tung Fever."

For the moment it is a meaningless phrase to Matt. Then, as suddenly as they appeared, the ridges recede. Matt breathes a sigh of relief as the pain disappears and then without warning the pain reappears in his ear. He cannot see it, but the side of his face is covered in the same fractured pattern. He holds his ear and curses. He feels like scratching out his eardrum. He can't take it. He lurches past Dee for the medicine cabinet and shakes as he downs a prescription strength pain medicine he just happened to have on hand. One does not, after all, always trade marijuana for money. Sometimes other items are involved. Matt does not wait for the first pill to take effect. He takes another and then another. He stumbles to the fridge. He doesn't have any beer left. In the freezer is the last of a bottle of peppermint schnapps. He chugs it as he downs another pill. He looks in the bottle. He only has a few more pills left.

Blessedly the pain recedes from his ear.

He only has a moment of respite before it reappears in his elbow, but due to the medicine, it is a sort of dull, far away pain; the sort of pain that doesn't matter. He knows he took far too

many pills, but the pain was too much. He lowers himself to the floor and lies facedown lest he start puking again in his sleep.

###

The Cardinals

I wonder if Gary took all this into account when he said accounts were balanced with Matt. Perhaps anybody who knew me, would know I would never be able to simply let things be with Matt without messing with him further. Perhaps?

I must confess I do feel a little bad about Matt, but not so much so that I feel guilty or that it has impacted my appetite.

“Good donuts there Harry?”

“Good donuts. More hot chocolate?”

“Why thank you. Don’t mind if I do.”

In the end, the thing that troubles me most is that I hope what is happening to Matt will not have an impact at how my fans view me at conventions and book signings. Will folks think this is how I treat all my fans?

No matter. One cannot second-guess these things.

I guess the moral to be learned is once you sign that release which holds me harmless and that I can write whatever I want to write about you; I do. Why do you think I need a release in the first place?

Matt is out cold. If he was conscious he would only be in pain, so while we are waffling, we will let him have this little escape. Dee kneels over him. He is helpless. She could easily kill him, but she does not. Matt is her master and she will serve him unswervingly... the only question is how?

Matt is a great warlord who poisons all he encounters with a mind-numbing array of potions. He must have a well-stocked lab somewhere. Dee looks in the kitchen. She tries to figure out the kitchen faucet, but she cannot determine how to alter the type of potion it issues forth. She has lost her magical sight. It all looks

like water to her. She dare not experiment and accidentally poison Matt.

She searches the kitchen and finds a few cans and packets of food, but she cannot understand the writing. She does not know what they are. Finally, above the refrigerator, out of the way she finds an unopened spice rack. It is brand new, still in the box. Small bits of wrapping paper are still attached to it. It is clear from the picture on the box what it is, as it is equally clear that it has never been used. It is new. It must be a gift for her from Matt. He knew of her skill with herbs and so has given her a small starter set. It is somewhere to begin.

She sits on the floor next to Matt. Should he awaken, she wishes to show him that she found the gift and if she is incorrect and it is not a gift, that she is not trying to hide her use of the herbs from him. She cautiously unwraps the container, takes out the instruction sheet for assembling the spike rack, and studies the writing. She is not used to the lettering system, but it seems simple enough. There are only a few dozen characters and they speak so flatly here, it should be an easy language to learn. She puts the spice rack together slowly, trying to follow along with the instructions. She puts the spices in the slots, reading the words off the bottles and the instruction sheet. When she is done, she opens the spice bottles one by one to see if she can identify any of the spices. They are not exotic spices. She easily identifies them all. It gives her a cross-referenced lexicon of sorts, but she does not have the more powerful herbs she will need to combat the Or'tung Flu. There is no K'fr, gungu, or even Hazen Crots in the set.

Matt still sleeps next to her. She can see the fire lines appear and disappear along his body. He is very sick. The pills he took, let him sleep, but they do not slow the illness. The best treatment Dee knows of is the small flowers from a K'fr vine. She looks out the windows. She does not see any K'fr. In the distance are hills where K'fr might grow, but they are a long way off. Her best bet is to search the house to see if he has another secret stash. Evil Warlords have always been big on hidden treasure stores. She will

need to search every nook and cranny of the house. She starts meticulously in the kitchen opening every drawer and searching in every corner.

Matt is not big on hygiene. When Dee opens a drawer, cockroaches go scurrying. She decides to clean as she goes. By the time she is through with the kitchen. Matt is tossing and turning. She helps him to his bed and hands him one of his pills. He takes it from her hand without question and returns to slumber.

Since she is here, she searches the bedroom. He has tossed his clothes together like a pile of Goblin rubbish. She searches that first, but finds nothing. In the bottom of the closet however, she does find a box of great interest. She finds small cards with pictures of men on them. They are baseball cards, but this is not how Dee interprets them. She takes them to be his generals, officers, and men at arms. It must be a summoning system. Not all of the cards are equal. One in particular is held in a thick plastic case. It must hold a demon. She puts it down quickly. Maybe these are not all friends. Maybe he has markers on some of his more notorious enemies as well. As she is going through the cards, she notices a special stack that is bound together. The men on these cards wear the crest Matt gave to her. They must be her personal guard. She looks through them, finds a promising face and concentrates on it hoping to establish contact. Nothing happens. She does not have magic at her disposal. Clearly she was meant to find these cards. They were not hidden well at all. She takes the Cardinal team pack and places it in the coat pocket of her jacket and continues her search. When she finds his baseball hats on the closet shelf she grabs the Cardinal's hat and puts it on. From the cards, she knows this is also part of her outfit. Matt must have placed many of these small gifts around his abode as a test, to see if she could find them all.

She is at the kitchen table when Matt awakens next. She had opened his crystal ball. He had opted for a cyborg-enhanced version. The gatekeeper would not let her pass.

She jumped when she heard Matt stir. Maybe she had gone too far. It is possible the demon that safeguarded his crystal had woken him. She did not move from where she was. To move would be an admission of guilt. Her only crime was in trying to help Matt. She waits nervously for Matt to find her as she fights down the shakes.

She does not have to wait long. In moments, Matt runs frantically into the kitchen. As he does a burst of lines erupts around his neck. He clutches at in agony as he looks for his pills and cries desperately, "Pills!"

"Demon no pass," Dee says from where she sits in front of Matt's computer terminal.

"What?"

"Demon no pass," she says again as she points to the computer screen. She cannot bear to see him in pain. She holds up one of the pills for him. As he grabs the pill, she repeats her request. "Demon no pass." She mimics a mortar and pestle with her hands as she points to the spice rack. "Bay Leaf, help more better." She points to the computer screen again. "No pass."

"Another pill," Matt demands.

She cannot refuse. After this there are only two left. She holds her hand out so he can see. "Later," she advises in reference to the pills and then points to the computer. "Demon no pass." She tries to explain her intent. "Dee help. Dee mix pills," and then she points to the computer again. "Demon no pass."

Matt practically pushes her out of the way as he taps in his password as he says it out loud, "Dark Liege," and then he disappears.

He is in pain. Dee can forgive him. She is staring at the computer trying to make heads or tails of it. She has seen these type of crystal balls before, but she has never used them. Momentarily Matt returns. He puts the keys to his car, cell phone, wallet, and empty bottle of schnapps on the table next to Dee. He notices she is having problems. He brings up his browser.

“More pills,” he pleads. “More something,” and then he falls to the floor into a pile of heaping tears as he clutches his thigh and silently counts his blessing that the pain this particular moment is emanating from a less sensitive part of his body.

Dee has nursed the sick and dying before. She has watched as warriors have had limbs amputated and wounds cauterized. She puts Matt’s cries of pain out of her mind and goes to work.

It never enters her mind that for a great warlord, he is a bit of a crybaby.

It does not take Dee long to find the Fey’an to English dictionary complete with pronunciation key we stashed for her online. From there she is on her own, but she is a quick study and has a lifetime of knowledge to back her up.

She spends an hour online, before she realizes she is not getting anywhere. She does not understand the language or keyboard well enough to find an alternate remedy to a malady as esoteric as the Or’tung Flu. Without an intervortex connection she is wasting her time. She tries to explain the problem to Matt, but she cannot make herself be understood.

She draws him another bath, dumps the containers of clove, bay, and allspice in it, and makes him lie in it. She lights candles around him. She says words of force and healing, though she knows them to be worthless without magic. “Stay, no scream,” she explains and then she is off to the kitchen.

There was a bag of rice there. It is her best shot. She does not understand the markets here, the way things work. It is clear this world is unlike those she has been to before. She takes the K’fr leaf that had been in her hair and puts it in a glass of water and takes it into the backyard. She sits and whistles for birds. They come to her. She gives them a grain of rice and lets them smell the K’fr leaf. “More, bring more,” she instructs them and rewards them with another grain of rice whenever they bring anything close.

She does not have much time. Soon the pills will wear off and the pain will be unbearable. She knows the bath water is weak. It is not what he needs, but it is all that she has. When the birds have brought her a handful of leaves, twigs, and scraps, she takes them inside and mixes them in with the water. She stops to notice that when Matt has another eruption around his ear, he plunges his head underwater. The water is helping a little.

She now understands why Matt was so upset when his closet was empty. It smells of K'fr, not exactly like K'fr, but close. It must have been a very potent strain, but now it is gone. Someone must have stolen his K'fr and then infected him with the Or'tung Flu. It never occurs to her that she is the carrier. Nor does she realize that having only brought one case of the flu with her, now that she has given it to Matt she is no longer contagious. Such is the way diseases work, but she does not think these thoughts. Now is the time for action. Reflection can come later. She has already wasted too much time at the crystal ball trying to find a better solution than what she already knows.

At the K'fr closet, Dee puts the glass of water with sole K'fr leaf inside and having watched Matt as he turned them off, turns on the grow lights. They are bright. They must work. It is a magic she has never seen or heard about before. How can the heart of a jungle be mimicked? She does not have time to consider this.

She races back outside, repeats the procedure with the birds, and takes another handful of vegetable matter into Matt. She then pours out the bag of rice out for the birds and tells them what she wants. She hopes they are honorable birds, but she does not have time to wait. She rushes back inside and shows Matt where the final two pills are should he need them. Then she comes to his side where he remains in the tub. She kneels in front of him. There are tears in her eyes. She cannot stand to see him in pain.

“Dee back soon,” she says asking his permission as she backs away.

“Dee back soon,” he responds with a tear in his eye as well, brought on by a streak of pain which races across his abdomen and reaches deep into his gut.

Dee knows the illness has sunk deeper into his body. She can only see what is on the surface, but she knows the fire lines are penetrating his entire body at this point. From now on the eruptions will become further and further spaced apart, but at the same time they will become more intense, until finally, if untreated, he will die. Though this will not happen for weeks, Dee feels rushed. In her heart, she does not feel the grow lamps will work and if they do not, she does not know how she will save her master.

###

Mr. Cardinal

Matt has made many things available to Dee; his car, his phone, and his wallet, but none are useful tools for her. She does not know how to drive, does not recognize the utility of a wallet, and his phone simply scares her every time it rings.

Instead, she grabs the pile of money she had earned the night before from the coffee table, runs out the door and down the street as she retraces the route they took yesterday back into town. She keeps well to the side of the road. The roaring chariots scare her. She pauses at an intersection. She does not know the pattern. The traffic light does not make any sense to her and she dare not move in front of the dangerous smelly vehicles.

She is concentrating, trying to figure out how to cross this dangerous obstacle when from behind a voice breaks her concentration.

“Go Cardinals.”

The voice causes Dee to jump in a panic. Despite herself, she lets out a squeal as well. She turns to face a smiling older gentleman. He must be very wise to have lived so long. Dee is

honored that he would take notice of her and greet her. Dee raises her fingers to her lips, as she says demurely, “no scream.”

“Definitely no scream,” the old man agrees as he adds with kindness, “I didn’t mean to frighten you.” He gives her a warm smile and waves his cane towards her jacket. “Go Cardinals,” he says repeating his earlier entreaty as he tugs at his sweater and flashes her a thumbs up.

Dee takes this as an introduction. He is Mr. Cardinal. “Dee” she replies introducing herself as she tugs at her jacket and imitates his thumbs up.

The man smiles at her confusion, but does bother to correct her erroneous conclusion. It is not a deception on his part. You don’t need to know someone’s name to say hello, or share a moment in the sun. He looks at the sky. “Great day.”

She matches his gaze and smiles.

“The light’s changed,” he informs her as he holds out his arm. It is a request for assistance as well as an offer to escort her. “How about helping an old man across the street?”

Dee is glad for the company and readily accepts his arm. She holds on tight and looks around wildly as they cross the street. The old man walks right in front of one of the smoking, snarling beasts unconcerned. Dee does not know how he does it. On the other side, she regains her composure and remembers she is on a mission. “Clove,” she says slowly. “Clove, Bay, All Spice... Lavender... Dee Pay.”

The man looks at her for a moment before he realizes. “Food! You want the store.” He pantomimes eating, which meets with a great big smile, so he goes on to pantomime cooking and baking, but Dee has no idea what he is doing, so he goes back to eating.

Dee smiles again. “Food Store.”

“Come on, I’ll take you,” and he does.

Dee is happy to hold onto Mr. Cardinal’s arm the entire way to the store and he is happy to have her on his arm. He can’t

remember the last time such a good-looking girl that wasn't related to him wanted to hold onto him and she is positively clingy. He loves the attention and the proximity to youth. He quickly forgets his plans to sit in the deli and have a cup of coffee, as he escorts her to the store, grabs a cart, and leads her inside.

It is a large store. Much bigger than anything Dee is used to. How could you locate anything in here?

"Clove?" Dee asks cautiously, intimidated by the size of the warehouse they are in. With a surge of happiness Mr. Cardinal has not known in a long time, he gladly leads the young lady to the spice section.

Dee looks at the array of bottles. She readily recognizes Clove, Bay Leaf, and Allspice. This is what she has come for and grabs multiple bottles.

It is clear she does not know what the cart is for, so Mr. Cardinal takes the bottles out of her hands and puts them in the cart. Dee immediately fills her hands again and dumps them into the cart. She looks to Mr. Cardinal for guidance.

He gives her an odd look. "A dozen bottles of cloves?"

"No scream," Dee says as she holds her fingers to her lips.

"No scream," he repeats what she has said.

Dee tries to pantomime Matt clutching his hand, ear, and neck. "Or'tung Flu," she explains.

"Ah," the man says. He looks through the bottles and adds a bottle of powdered Habanero's. He pantomimes someone in pain, pouring the peppers on the pain, the person being in more pain than before, but then the pain goes away and the person is smiling and happy. Dee is doubtful, but Mr. Cardinal insists and puts the bottle in the cart for her. "Try it, what can it hurt? My treat."

Dee is not sure what he has said, but he is being kind. There is no need to argue. She cannot see the logic in adding peppers to a wound, but this is a strange world. Who knows what works here? She lets the thought go and returns her attention to the shelf of spices. Not all of the bottles on the shelf make sense to Dee.

She goes to open a bottle to figure out what is inside, but Mr. Cardinal stops her. “You got to buy it first.”

Dee sniffs at the bottle and looks at the contents closely.

Mr. Cardinal says its name.

They repeat this process for many of the spices on the shelf. They spend a long time here in front of the spices. Often Mr. Cardinal will talk of things such as spaghetti, meat loaf, and liquorish, but Dee has no idea what he is saying. Often he will tell lengthy stories presumably about the contents of the bottles, and although Dee does not understand the meaning, she enjoys listening to the flow of words coming out of his mouth and his obvious joy of life.

She could stay and listen to him longer. His voice is not as flat as many of the others in this world. The thought makes her homesick and she fights it down. It is time to move on. Matt will need her soon. She must hurry back.

They go through the rest of the store quickly. Dee gets salt, more rice for the birds, and some lettuce and tomatoes for herself. The man gets a loaf of bread, butter, and half pound of raw tuna at the deli.

Dee pantomimes drinking and says, “schnapps, no scream.”

The man leads her to the liquor department and after a careful selection with Mr. Cardinal’s assistance Dee is done shopping. The entire time Dee has been holding onto Mr. Cardinal’s arm. She is his happy to have the company of such a venerable old man. She is very lucky to have run into him.

The expedition over, Mr. Cardinal guides her to the checkout lanes where he points to the magazines and makes small talk. For the most part Dee does not understand, but this does not matter. Mr. Cardinal is happy and Dee is grateful for the company.

Had Dee been alone, it is inevitable that she would have been carded for the alcohol. She is well over 21, being as we said decades older than Matt, but as she is Fey’an she does not look the part.

When it is time to pay, Dee carefully places the wad of cash she has on the counter and lets the cashier figure it out. Spice is more expensive than she would have guessed. She does not have enough money, but since he put some items in the basket as well, Mr. Cardinal picks up the difference.

Outside, Dee would have taken her leave of Mr. Cardinal, but he is having none of that. How far away can she live? It is a small town. He helps her with her bags and guides her thru the traffic light again.

He walks her all the way home, which really isn't that far, but at the front door, Dee insists that is the end of the line. Before he goes, Mr. Cardinal gently holds a strand of Dee's hair up and watches the sunshine glitter through a diamond for a moment.

"Where are you from anyhow?" he asks not expecting an answer.

Dee is anxious to get inside. Even through the walls, Mr. Cardinal can hear the reason why. He can sense that she is torn between politeness and the needs of her own life, but before he will let her take her leave, he hands her a business card. It has a caricature of his likeness on it.

"The name's Frank. I like you calling me Mr. Cardinal, it's a good nickname, but Frank is my real name. I own a jewelry store down the way. If you need money, come see a friend first."

Dee doesn't understand.

"This isn't a sales pitch..." she still doesn't understand and he doesn't want the moment to end. "Lavender. We forgot the lavender."

"Lavender," Dee repeats. How could she forget?

"Tomorrow we'll get lavender."

"Tomorrow?" Dee asks.

"Tomorrow," and then the Frank, Mr. Cardinal, hands her all the bags, including the fish and bread that he bought for her, and walks away.

After Dee darts inside, Frank turns around and looks at the house, memorizes the location, the street address, and listens to the muffled screams.

“Zoster,” he says to himself as he continues on his way. It happened to him six years ago, but he can still remember the pain. A flash of anxiety flashes down his spine as he unconsciously rubs the scars on his stomach. It was months of burning pain and agony that he’ll never forget.

###

The Soft Road Two Step

Time will pass quickly for Matt now. Dee rushes in the door, checks on Matt, changes the water in the tub for him, and adds packets of spice. She puts the K’fr like leaves and twigs the birds have gathered for her into a sock and shows Matt how to apply it when the eruptions occur again to dampen the pain. She puts out more rice for the birds and checks on the leaf in the grow room. It has sprouted. It is an odd magic she has not seen before. A fake jungle? She closes the door and returns to Matt.

Day turns to night; and Dee is at the computer learning English, learning of this world.

The next morning comes and Frank, a.k.a. Mr. Cardinal, is at the door. He takes her for a walk in the hills where they collect wild lavender, which she adds to the poultices and bathwater for Matt.

Dee cleans the house, cares for Matt, and appraises the diamonds in her hair online. She visits Frank in his jewelry store where she drives a hard bargain. They are not her diamonds anymore. They are Matt’s. She must respect his property and get its fair value. It is not clear whether Frank pays her what she asks, because it is a fair price, or because he is stricken with her. That is not for us to say, but the next day they walk to the food store together again. The day after that, they go out into the hills to collect lavender, ohia bark, and wildflowers. And, the day after

that, finds them together again using Frank's truck to transport a large birdbath into the backyard for her feathered friends.

It is late at night. The doors to the grow closet are open revealing a large K'fr plant inside. It has grown. Its vines fill the closet, but it is still not mature. Turning the corner, Dee's face is lit by the glow from a computer screen. Time goes by as we watch. She surfs through a variety of pages learning what she can about this world. She whispers phrases such as Diverse Zoological Array, Gold Standard, and St. Louis Cardinals World Series Champions quietly to herself. It demonstrates her thorough command of the English language. She probably can talk better English than Matt can at this point, even if his mind wasn't ravaged by the flu.

Jump ahead to her walking with Frank. They have made a game of naming the plants by the side of the road. They take turns. lepritudus this and lepritudis that. Later in his store, they talk shop about diamonds; cut, clarity, and sparkle; market forces and the supply chain.

"Where are you from?" he asks.

"Down the street," she smiles. "You know where?"

The scene hops around. Frank is at Matt's bedside. He sees a patient with shingles and tries his hot pepper cure. It is not as effective as Dee's, but not as disastrous as one might expect. They have a quite lunch in the front room, while Matt sleeps and then Frank is on his way.

The inside of the house is clean now. Dee goes to work on the exterior. She plants a garden with flowers, herbs, tomatoes, other foodstuffs, and plenty of treats for her friends the birds. The lawn is filled with hundreds of them whenever she is outside. They hop around her on the lawn, land on her shoulders, play with her hair, and fly in air around her. They continue to bring her scraps of K'fr type plants and there is a growing pile of the stuff by the birdbath. It is more than she needs. Some of the smarter ones

can sense this and have moved on to bringing her bits of fruit and dried nuts to eat. With all of them, she shares an endless supply of rice and popcorn.

She no longer searches on the computer now. She has left it behind. Though it has an endless array of knowledge; it has nothing on the Or'tung Flu, nothing on Fey'ans, nothing on vortex gates, and nothing on magic or vortex travel that seems to work. More importantly, it has nothing specific to Matt, her true love on it. Instead she concentrates on what is in the house. She sits down next to his collection of Science Fiction and Fantasy novels. She looks at the covers, reads through a few and then looks at the covers again. She studies the girls on the covers. This must be what he likes; what he is attracted to. She makes note of their outfits and with Frank's help buys a revealing bikini at the town's dive shop.

It maybe foggy in Frank's mind their exact relationship, but it is not in Dee's. She belongs to Matt it is as simple as that. When Frank offers her a present of a kitten, she turns it down. When he puts his hand on hers, she takes it away quickly.

"I belong to Matt," she explains.

When Frank shows up next, she declines his company. "When Matt is well," she says... Matt will decide. She thinks, you should go. He would kill you if he knew what was on your mind, but she knows she may have led him on. He has been her only friend these last weeks. "Go," she requests.

Her slightest whim is his command. One cannot help but note the pain in his eyes, but without a word, he complies and departs.

The house gleams. The yard is manicured. Dee has been a whirlwind of activity the past few weeks. Flower buds appear on the K'fr plant. It is almost ready. She reads another one of Matt's novels and stares at the picture on the front. She puts on the bikini she bought and compares herself to the picture on the front. It is not the same. She must fix that.

She goes to the hardware store that doubles as a craft supply house and buys cloth and some sewing supplies. On the way home she drops by Frank's shop and trades some diamonds for gold necklaces and chains. Frank is happy to see her. She is happy to see Frank. She drives a hard bargain. She knows what the diamonds are worth and even what a fair cut for Frank is. Frank accepts her price.

"Tomorrow?" he asks as she leaves.

"I must tend to Matt," but it is not her place to decide the motives of others. She can no longer delude herself and believe Matt rules this world. She does not even know if she believes he is or ever was a warlord, but if he is, perhaps he would enjoy enslaving Frank, or... "Who are you Frank?"

"I'm just an old man... here," he reaches under the counter and takes out a small turtle charm.

Dee looks at it. "What magic is this Frank?"

"The type of magic that reminds someone of a good time, a pleasant walk, a long lost love."

"I cannot take this."

"Sure you can. Tell Matt where you got it... if he objects, you can always bring it back."

Perhaps Matt would approve of her taking advantage of a foolish old man. She takes it and leaves.

It is night, Matt is in bed tossing and turning. Dee sits against the wall and sews her outfit for Matt's delight by candlelight. As she sews, she tells Matt of Frank and her walks. She begs him not to be mad, not to take vengeance. It seems silly to her to be telling him these things, but she cannot help herself. She knows when he is better, she will have to tell him again. She hopes he will not kill Frank. She looks around again. It is a silly thought. This is Matt's house. It is not a warlord's castle. It is not a fortress. No man at arms has ever been calling. Neither Da'zi nor Dr'gr has ever shown up. His phone has not rung in a week.

No one knows he is sick. No one cares. No reinforcements are coming.

It must be a test she decides, but she cannot make herself believe it. It does not matter. She looks at her handiwork. She is done.

There is not much to the outfit. There never is. The lower half is comprised of two long thin strips of black silk held up low on the waist by a dozen golden necklaces. There is one strip in front and one in back, both drape unrestrained to the floor. Two small triangles of the same silk cloth surrounded by gold chains make the loose fitting top and for her face she has constructed a light veil constructed the same way. Very little of her is covered. For all practical purposes she is naked.

She takes a bath and combs her hair. She makes herself ready for Matt in every way possible. She has sold many of the diamonds in her hair. In his delusion Matt has mention housing payments, electric bills, and other expenses. He will be well soon and there is a stack of money waiting for him to pay these things. It is hard for Dee to think of a Warlord as having to pay rents, but even as soon as she thinks this, she tries hard to push the thought out of her head. Matt is her master. It this is his way, this is his way.

She sets up dozens of candles around Matt's room. While she does this, the fire erupts over his eyes. The ridges are sharp and well defined and glow a bright yellow orange. It lasts for two minutes while Matt bites down on a rag, sweats, screams, and presses a weak poultice over his eyes. It does not help much, but it is all there is. He reaches blindly and Dee knows what he searches for. She hands him a bottle of rum, whiskey, vodka or whatever is closest. He chugs madly. Dee knows it does not do much to ease the pain, but it gives him something to do. When he is done drinking he lies down. The pain has stopped. He has 30-40 seconds of drunken lucidity before the fever will start again.

“It is almost time my love,” she says as his eyes focus on infinity and he is gone again. She wonders if the words are true; any of them

She has a quarter hour to the next eruption, but it will not take that long for her to prepare. She opens the closet door, places the K’fr blooms in a ceramic bowl of water, and adds a few leaves for good measure. She carries the bowl into Matt’s room as she says healing words of power. The words, of course, have no effect. She wonders if she is crazy. Are her memories of magic simply delusions? Like many of the thoughts she has been having lately, she tries to push this one aside and like the ones before she has little success. No matter.

When it is almost time she dips a shot glass into the bowl and moistens a new linen cloth.

Matt wakes screaming and clutches at his thigh.

Dee places the cloth on the eruptions. The cloth hisses from burning steam and a purple smoke rises into the air. Matt stops screaming. Dee hands him the shot of K’fr.

“Drink This!” It is a command.

Matt does not think. He does as he is instructed.

She takes his hand and guides it to the wet K’fr soaked cloth on his thigh. “You will awake again in pain. Put the cloth over the wound and as soon as you are able drink another shot. It will be here,” she explains as she fills the shot glass and puts it on the night table by his head.

After weeks of torture, Matt had finally found some degree of calmness. “It will end?” he asks.

“Do as I say. While you do this, I must dance.”

Matt notices her outfit for the first time. He likes the idea of her dancing in that and then his eyes fog over as he lies back down and focuses on infinity once more. The fever has started.

Dee is pleased. It looks like the cure will work. She will be able to save her master, Matt, the Evil Warlord... she wonders who he really is and how she got here. Like the other doubts she has

had before, she tries to push the thought out of her mind, but like those before she cannot.

It is the next day. Dee sits by the closed window and watches the birds outside play in the birdbath she bought for them. She has spread the K'fr scraps around the bath, as a sort of mulched play area for the birds. Some of the birds continue to add twigs to this pile, but most of them have moved on to dried berries and nuts. In exchange they help themselves to the rice, corn, millet, barley, and other seeds, Dee has left out for them. They are honorable birds. She will have to thank them for their assistance through this ordeal.

She stands. It is almost time. She sways her hips and the motion is carried through the lengths of silk tied at her waist. She shakes her hands and listens to the tinkle of the golden bands. She moves gracefully in a slow circle at the base of Matt's bed. She should be singing magical, Fey'an words of healing, words of love, praise, and devotion, but there is no magic, and she cannot see the point. Even if there was magic, she wonders if she could say the words, she does not feel them in her heart. The magic is gone. The soft road is gone. She does not love Matt. She does not...

She cannot push the thoughts out of her mind. She no longer tries. She starts where she left off and sings the 78th verse of the Ballad of Islain to keep herself company. It speaks to her soul. It tells the story of Islain who betrayed the soft road, killed her captor with her own hands, and ran off with his lieutenant. It helps her think. No, it helps her stop thinking.

The song has taken over her mind. Her voice is lovely and sweet. Her movements slow, graceful, and magically, perfected from a lifetime of practice. For now, she dances for herself, Matt is not awake yet, but she knows instantly when he awakens. He screams... like a boy, a baby, a weakling. She smiles for him as he brings the cloth to his ear. She kneels on the edge of his bed as her movements tell false promises of future sexual adventures and the things she will do for him.

Matt reaches past her for the shot of K'fr. She does not mind. She doesn't even know why she is dancing for him anymore. When he has drunk his medicine, Matt focuses on her for a moment. His eyes are filled with tears from the pain. It is obvious to Dee he is not a warlord. The pain is long since past it's worse.

Perhaps more telling, he does not see the doubt in her eyes. He does not know the words she now sings are from the Ballad of Islain and he does not know that her heart no longer belongs to him.

Matt watches her movements for a moment before he lies back down. Soon he his mind is gone again, as the flu takes over. The room and the entire house is thick with the smell of purple K'fr smoke. It is an odd variety. The smoke does not sparkle with magic as she remembers. She knows Matt did not take away her magic sight. There is no magic here anywhere, in anything. She can't decide if her memories are real or not. Maybe she is crazy.

She watches Matt and she cries. She does not bother to hide her tears. He is not there and even if he was, he is not the EVIL Warlord. He is not the man she had thought he was; she had hoped he was. He is not her dark knight, her true love.

She opens the sliding door, goes outside, and closes it behind her to keep as much of the K'fr smoke inside as possible. She sits down in the mulch with the birds and lets them hop over her as she sobs quietly to herself.

When it is time again. She does not go inside. She does not sing. She hears Matt's cry and his stumbling to fill the shot glass. She had forgotten to fill the glass before she went outside. She does not care. She strokes a bird's feathers. She knows this is not normal. People of this world are not friends to birds. It is the one thing the birds tell her repeatedly.

The sun moves off its zenith. Matt cries again and she ignores him. He knows the program. He will be fine. She wonders if in time they will sing the Ballad of Ess'mer'lence... but

not here. Here they cannot even say her name. Esse was as far as Frank could get as well.

She looks at the charm he gave her. She takes it off. It is a turtle. He was nice, Frank, but he did not even know she was a friend to birds. She does not realize he gave her this specific charm, because it was dear to his heart and belonged to his late wife. It would not matter if she did. Frank is not her hearts desire. Matt is not her true hearts desire. Somehow this matters. She has abandoned the soft road. A bird lands on her shoulder. Sensing its desire, she holds it so it can lick the tears from her face.

“I will find a way to pay you back my friends, of this you can be sure.”

Dee lies down, and with tears in her eyes, and an emptiness in her heart, she cries herself to sleep. She does not hear Matt’s cries as he wakes up. His pain is his pain. She will not carry it any longer. She has enough of her own pain. She has her own losses to deal with.

Matt notices Dee absence, but he does not think on it for long. The pain is a more immediate concern. He awakens with his tongue on fire. He clutches at his tongue with the soaked towel, but realizes this is silly. He tosses back a shot of K’fr water and holds it in his mouth. He can fill the water hissing and bubbling as the excess spurts out his mouth and drools down his chin. Purple smoke billows out of his nose and from between his clenched lips. Rather than concern himself with these strange sights and sensations, he is pragmatic. He is almost out water. He runs weakly to the bathroom and fills the bowl. He is exhausted when he returns to the bed. When he lies down, the darkness overtakes him immediately.

He returns to consciousness again, he knows not how much later to an intense pain in his foot. It feels like someone has driven a railroad spike through his foot. He wraps the towel around it. It hisses and smokes, but it soothes the pain. He downs a shot quickly and following a hunch, runs to the grow closet. He grabs a

part of the plant that grows there at random and tries to break off a branch. The vine resists his action, curls around his hand, and sinks its thorns deep into his flesh. Matt does not have time to be careful. He knows he will black out soon. He tears recklessly at the branch ripping it off, slicing deep bloody gashes into his hand in the process. The pain is a piddling thing compared to what he has been through. He does not have much time, before he blacks out. He runs back to his bedroom, strips the vine from his hand, and manages to put it into the bowl of water, before he blacks out.

It feels like someone has cut off his pinky when next he wakes up. He wonders how much longer can this go on as he plunges the hand into the water bowl. It bubbles and hisses and the vine wraps itself around his hand. He takes his hand out of the water and watches the thick purple smoke curl off of it. The vine has not let go. It is wrapped around his hand and has sunk a giant thorn deep into his little finger. Blue blood oozes from the wound. He laughs. What kind of strange dream is this?

He notices the room is filled with purple smoke for the first time. He sees Dee lying outside in a garden he doesn't remember. He thinks about calling to her, but he doesn't have the energy. He lies down. Through the smoke he stares at a dancing circle of purple light that fills the ceiling. He does not know it is the sun's reflection off of the birdbath. He watches the swirling patterns and ripples off the water's surface reflected and magnified. His mind tries to follow the random eddies, the flashes of brilliance. The sight is mesmerizing. It draws him towards it. An eruption centers on his lip and he dabs at it distractedly with the cloth. He squeezes his hand absentmindedly causing a multitude of thorns to sink into his flesh as the one in his pinky pushes all the way through his finger. He does not mind. He barely registers that he is mangling his hand. Without taking his eyes off the swirling pattern on the ceiling, he squeezes the cloth into his mouth and drinks the bloody mixture of water and K'fr sap.

A pain in his ear, calls him from the picture, but it is just a distraction. He takes the opportunity to go to the closet and get the

K'fr plant. As he grabs hold of it, thorns sink into him around his body. He knows he is injuring himself, but there is little pain. It is as if his pain receptors have turned themselves off. He drags the plant back to the bedroom and puts it next to his bed. He lies back down and stares at the ceiling. He thinks he can see people... Goblins? Demons? Things moving. Images. Things on the edge of sight... call it a vision...

He knows he is having an eruption on his chest. Somehow he knows just what to do. He grabs the vine. It lets itself be grabbed. He is one with the plant now. Without taking his eyes off of the reflection from the ceiling he jabs a large thorn into his chest above his heart. He does not watch the sputter of blue hissing blood. He does not smell or notice the explosion of smoke. His mind is on the portal above his bed. He can hear voices. He can see creatures, monsters. He feels himself being lifted up, out of his bed.

The swirling portal on the ceiling falls to meet him.

This is some dream he thinks... it almost makes the weeks of pain worthwhile, but it is not a dream.

This is a portal, an opening into the vortexes, and Matt is falling through it.

###

Irvin Mont

A Psychopathic Study

We look over an ocean as smooth as glass. The mid-morning sun burns high in a sky clear of clouds. Our gaze turns down and we see two annoying scraps of paper bobbing in the water like so much unwanted litter. It is unclear whether the scraps of paper have writing on them. It seems certain a technical specialties gnome has gone over the image and blurred any writing on them out.

A production assistant smacks the cameraman in the back of the head and he wakes back up. He swings the camera upwards and Irvin Mont comes into view floating on a nice, square, picturesque raft. It is a perfect 10'x10' square with smooth cut edges. It doesn't seem possible that the raft is really wreckage from a ship.

Irvin, the giant praying mantis, stands unmoving, his arms ready to strike, his eyes unblinking. Neither he nor the raft moves.

Pull in for a close up of his eyes. His black multifaceted insect eyes stare blankly into the distance. The camera swings around Irvin's head and as it does he remains as a statue, still and motionless. When we are behind him, a small smoking volcanic island comes into view. We focus past his head and onto the distant image. From this distance it looks like a paper mache science fair project. As we watch, red foam emerges from the top as if someone poured vinegar laced with red food coloring onto the baking soda waiting inside. The foam spurts ominously out of the top of the volcano and runs down the sides.

Keeping the volcano in view, we leave Irvin and rush over the water's surface towards the island. As we get closer it grows lifelike and realistic. Waves crash on shore, a slight breeze blows the palm trees gently at the edge of the jungle, and a score of Cobalt's huddle together discussing strategy. In case you have forgotten, Cobalts are green humanized reptiles, sort of like walking talking alligators, only cuter, but not as bright. Every once in a while one of the Cobalts looks up from the group to see if Irvin has made any progress. Let us join their conversation.

“Three green?”

“Go fish.”

“Two black?”

“Go fish.”

Two of their number are using the cards Curtis left behind to play Go Fish, a game more their speed. As the two play, the remaining eighteen look on spell bound. The action is intense, the

strategy sublime. The subtle finesses and tactical maneuvering are nothing short of brilliant. It is everything you would expect from a pair of Cobalts locked in a battle of wits.

“Three green?”

“Go fish.”

“Two black?”

“Go fish.”

“Got a black.”

“Okays, you go again.”

“Two black?”

“Go fish,” and on it goes.

After the third reshuffle, the wind picks up, blowing the cards about.

“He come now,” warns one of the lookouts. The cards are put away and replaced by spears.

Irvin’s raft washes shore.

“Okays. Dis our island. You our prisoner now,” the lead Cobalt instructs Irvin as he gives his carapace a testing poke with his spear.

Irvin strikes out with his clawed hands. In a smooth, clean motion the Cobalt’s head is loped off and his gut is sliced open. It is as if the Cobalt has been unzipped and his innards fall onto the sand before the body knows it is dead. Irvin stabs at the Cobalts small heart from off the top of the pile and nibbles on it.

The Cobalts jump back.

“Hey, dis our island. You our prisoner.”

Irvin responds by beheading and gutting another Cobalt.

“Hey... you fast. Okay, you be boss.” The Cobalt stands next to Irvin. “We be’s on your side now.”

Irvin rewards the Cobalt for his good sense by lopping off his head, gutting him, and eating his heart.

The Cobalts drop their spears. “Okay’s, you win. You boss now. What we call you boss man?”

True to form Irvin guts another Cobalt.

“Run away!”

“Run away!”

“He crazy!”

“Run away!”

The Cobalts run across the beach and disappear into the jungle.

Irvin licks his claws, tilts his head as he looks around with his empty insect eyes, and then slowly follows after them.

###

The Castaways

We see the spurting science fair island in the distance again from a slightly different angle. We’ve got the WASP helicopters for the rest of the month, so we’re going to use them. We hover over the water at five feet. The bottom half of the screen is filled with the vivid blue waves of a quiet ocean over a coral reef, while in the top half the jungle covered volcano grows ever larger. As we get closer, we pull up into the air and take an establishing aerial shot. Those with keen sight may be able to pick out a green insectesoid disappearing into the jungle on the other side of the tiny island.

It takes all of 15 minutes to fly around the island at a leisurely pace. Outside of a roving homicidal maniac and the resident Cobalts, the island is a nice place. Red lava rock cliffs are covered with moss, ferns, and tropical plants forming a thick jungle canopy. Lava flows from the summit in a wild torrent down one side, but it seems to be well contained. Framing the lava are a pair of beckoning waterfalls that end in inviting swimming holes. At the edge of one of these lagoons is a small columned marble structure reminiscent of an ancient Grecian Temple.

Having circled the island, we return to where we started. As we fly over the beach, we focus in on a body lying at the edge of the surf. It is Targor. Moments later we come upon Zay and then

Bull clutching onto Jack. At the end of the line, Garg is roasting a brace of fish over a small fire. There is a pile of weapons at his feet including Bull's ax, Targor's sword, Zay's spear, and Jack's bow.

The smell of food slowly rousts our merry band.

"We made it," Jack exclaims in wonderment.

Garg hands a smoked fish to Zay as Targor and Bull assess their situation. It isn't complicated. They have washed up on a small island.

"What now?" Targor asks Bull, but even Jack knows the answer to that. "We eat."

It has been a while since any of them have eaten, and let's face it, you'd be hard pressed to come up with a better camp cook than Garg. The smoked fish is excellent, but they do not get to savor it in peace. From the edge of the jungle more than a hundred Cobalts emerge and spread out over the sand. They hold their spears at the ready.

"Okays, dis our island. You our prisoners," the lead Cobalt calls out.

Garg pulls out his pistol and hands Zay her spear.

"Where did this come from?" she asks.

"Shore wash," Garg replies.

"Swords don't float," Targor observes.

"Someone wanted us to have weapons," Bull explains as he offhandedly accepts the ax Garg offers him.

Jack takes her bow, flies up into Bull's horns, and notches an arrow.

"Everyone calm down. Let's just take it easy," Bull instructs his friends and offers some helpful advise to the advancing Cobalts.

"Dis our island. You drop weapons," the lead Cobalt bravely instructs Bull and his party.

Bull puts his hand up to signal his friend to relax. "It's a nice island... do you want some fish?" Bull asks as he holds out the rest of his smoked fish.

The Cobalt holds his spear at the ready.

“Think of it as tribute,” Bull says trying to be friendly. He holds the fish out and the Cobalt hesitantly grabs it. He smells it and then nibbles on it. “Hey, dis good.”

“Maybe we can be friends,” Bull suggests.

“Maybe you be’s slave,” the Cobalt counters.

Bull smiles and shakes his head. “You know we’d just kill you in a fight.”

The Cobalt drops the fish and is instantly back on guard.

“Wrong thing to say Bull,” Jack whispers the obvious.

Bull is undeterred. “Is it just you guys on the island?”

“Cobalt Island,” the Cobalt agrees.

“No boss?” When the Cobalt doesn’t respond, Bull continues.

“Unless you’re the boss, maybe we should be talking to the boss.”

Several of the Cobalts disappear into a huddle.

“Why dey want to see boss?”

“I no know. Dat why we here, to take dem to boss.”

“But dey no suppose to want to see boss?”

“I no know. Maybe dey challenge boss.”

The Cobalt pokes his head out from pile. “You challenge da boss.”

“We just want to talk... work something out.”

The Cobalt disappears back into the huddle.

“He big muscles.”

“He make da boss offer he can’t refuse.”

“He workee something out.”

They look at Bull again and reconvene.

“Et challenge,” they decide. They break up the huddle.

“Okays, we take you to see boss, but no trickies... dis our island dough. We have to confescescate da fishies.”

Moments later our merry band is walking into the jungle with a Cobalt escort/honor guard.

“How is this different from being taken prisoner,” Jack asks Bull.

“We still have our weapons and we didn’t leave a pile of dead Cobalts on the beach.”

“Et win-win,” the Cobalts says from Bull’s side as he munches on the fish. “You nicey guy. Too bad bossy going to kill you.”

“You’re kind of familiar,” Bull says as he puts his hand on the Cobalt’s shoulder. “Were you in the Kahn?”

“You confusing me wit da Charlie meester.”

“All you Cobalts look alike,” Targor says a little disparagingly.

“You said it meester,” the Cobalt standing next to him agrees. “Why’d you think we all hab’d the same name?”

###

The Big Break

Darkness. Cool refreshing blackness.

We hear the desperate cries for order from a diminutive Story Finishing Gnome. The author has left him in charge of a full shoot. This isn’t just covering for sick leave. This is the real deal. It is a big break, an important career changing opportunity for Harry, but things are not going as planned. For the past hour he has been trying desperately to; get the Kreel out of the pool, get Cobalt extras into position, and convince someone to get rid of this ridiculous marble temple.

“Marble doesn’t occur naturally on volcanic islands,” Harry explains the problem to the Kreel again.

“Maybe I imported it,” the Kreel counters as he splashes lazily in the pool.

We open our eyes or the cameraman finally gets his equipment working. We see the world from Carl the Courteous Cobalt’s point of view. We see his green lizard feet stretched out as Carl lounges in a deck chair next to the marble temple on the tropical volcanic island. He has a coconut rum mixed drink in one

hand and a score of bikini and grass skirt wearing Cobalts fan him with palm fronds. He is enjoying himself. He is watching an upstart hairball try to give set directions to a Kreel who is floating in the temple's pool, reflecting pond, lagoon. It's a pretty cool effect. Right at the edge here where Carl is, it looks like a swimming pool, but if you gaze at the opposite bank, it looks like a small lagoon. It's not clear where the clear waters of the pool end and the murky waters of the lagoon begin. We watch as the Kreel takes in a mouthful of water and gleefully sprays it at the Gnome. It never occurs to Carl to tell Harry that Kreels love emotional energy. The more angry, frantic, or terrified those around them are, the happier Kreels become.

Harry doesn't have time for this. He notices his Cobalt guards are wandering off again, so he leaves the Kreel to chase them down.

Carl snaps his fingers as he watches amused.

A Cobalt jumps to his side. "Yeppers boss man."

"Food me."

"Yeppers boss man."

The Cobalt departs and returns moments later with a train of other Cobalt assistants carrying platters of food. Carl wiggles.

"This chair isn't very comfortable."

"You heard da boss man," his assistant takes over and arranges a half dozen Cobalts into a living throne for their king.

"Comfy boss man?"

"Ahhh," Carl sips his drink as he wiggles his butt into the back of a Cobalt seat cushion. "This is the life," he comments as he opens his mouth to let an assistant feed him a hand peeled grape.

"What are you doing?" Harry yells from across the pool where he is repositioning Cobalt extras. Despite his short legs, he runs back to where Carl is surprisingly quickly. "Take this food away," he instructs the food bearers while he frantically tells Carl, "it's almost time. Get inside with the Kreel."

“Change of plans,” Carl calmly explains as he snaps his fingers again. “I need dancing girls.”

“Yeppers boss man,” replies his assistant as he runs off.

“What are you doing?” Harry yells.

“I’m helping,” Carl explains. “Just ask the Kreel.”

The Kreel is resting by the edge of the pool enjoying Harry’s exasperation. He smiles and nods his agreement. “He’s helping all right.”

“You get in the temple. You’re the reclusive mystic. Get inside.”

“I think I’m going to swim,” the Kreel explains as he pushes away from the edge again and drifts into the pool.

“No! You’ve got a scene to do. Get out!” Harry yells, but then he notices his perimeter guards are being drafted as dancers and the rest are continuing their impromptu game of Hide and Seek / Torment the Gnome. He runs after them.

After Harry is gone, the Kreel swims back to the edge of the pool and asks Carl, “Where’d they get the food?”

“There’s a big spread in the temple,” Carl answers as he snaps his fingers. “Help my friend the mystic get out.”

A dozen Cobalts run to help the Kreel out of the pool. Every one of them manages to slip, fall, or be pushed into the pool. As if by coincidence, many of the guards across the lagoon spontaneously lose their balance and fall in as well.

“Get out of the pool!” Harry yells.

“He’s going to have a heart attack if he doesn’t calm down,” the Kreel observes as he walks into the temple and heads over to the food tables. He makes himself a roast beef sandwich while Carl points to food and one of his assistants hand feeds him.

“Not that olive,” he corrects a lax underling, “that one.”

“How is this scene supposed to go anyway?” the Kreel asks.

“Well, you see that light on the ceiling that is reflected off the pond?”

“Yeah.”

“It’s sort of reminiscent of the reflection on the ceiling in Matt’s room. We’re just supposed to look at it. You know, divine the future and that sort of crap. It’s just an artsy edit from Matt to us.”

“Seems like a lot of effort for a mere edit.”

Carl shrugs as he gazes on the portal. “It’s pretty. Look at the edges. You can see the pond lilies wrapping around the edge of the reflection.”

Harry has joined them. He is calmer now that they are inside the temple where they are supposed to be. “Props forgot the lilies. They didn’t do anything right for this set. The temple is supposed to be made of fresh rough hewn lava, the pool is supposed to extend to the interior under the reflection, and the lagoon is supposed to have lilies.”

“Really?” the Kreel asks, forgetting to torment the little hairball as he stares fascinated at the dancing patterns reflected onto the ceiling. “You really can see flowers forming around the edge... but I guess it looks more like K’fr than lilies.”

“See da duck?” one of the Cobalts asks as he gazes at the growing portal.

“Dat no duck, dat chicken,” another counters.

“Eet duck.”

“Eet chicken.”

“Eet duck.”

“The arms and legs on that thing are way too big for it to be a duck,” states Carl, the boss man, putting an end to the heated debate.

“See, eet chicken,” gloats the victorious Cobalt.

“It’s getting bigger whatever it is,” the Kreel observes and then moments later between bites of his sandwich adds, “being the mystic here, my prediction is we’re going to be getting a visitor very soon; and whoever or whatever it is, it is going to fall from the ceiling and land right there; where that buffet table is.”

Carl assesses the situation, eyes the large cake he was looking forward to eating for dessert, which has been conveniently

positioned under the portal to cushion Matt's fall, and comes to a decision. He snaps his fingers and instructs his assistants. "Move this outside."

"No! No! The cake will break his fall... it'll be a good bit," Harry objects, but he isn't the boss man. The Cobalts have already complied with Carl's order.

The Kreel, Carl, and the brighter Cobalts have moved out from underneath the glowing portal. They watch with amusement as Matt comes falling through the ceiling. There is no pool or large cake beneath him to break his fall, but lucky for him a diminutive Gnome and a few of the slower Cobalts have not moved in time.

###

A Salvage Job

It's a quandary.

I guess we've already made the decision, so it's just a matter of implementing it.

Matt dropped down into the temple yesterday wearing nothing but his skivvies. It was a disaster. He couldn't understand anybody and the crew was in one of those moods.

Without going through all the details, but so we can salvage something out of that otherwise wasted day, let me show you some of the highlights.

Here Matt is landing on Harry and the Cobalts. It's a good bit, and made all the better since he can't understand a thing they are saying. Harry is screaming for Matt to "Get off Me!" Finally, Harry bites Matt in the rump and Matt lurches to his feet. It is perhaps the highlight of the shoot.

Because Matt landed on some of them when he fell, the Cobalts decide Matt is an enemy. We've got lots of footage of the tiny lizard men saying,

"He attacks us."

"He fall on us."

“He da enemies.”

“I’s says wes kills him boss man.”

And things like that. Carl is game so he says, “OK. Kill him.”

I can only explain this irresponsible decision as some sort of passive aggressive act of sabotage. Kill the second leading male right when things get interesting? I don’t think so. Carl’s motivation is to piss off our friend the Story Finishing Gnome, but it put a wrench into the works. The Kreel helps out a little at this point by giving Matt a ring so he can understand the conversation, but it is the Kreel’s idea to slow cook Matt. “Why kill him when we can torture him?”

Matt lets himself be guided to a giant black cauldron. The Cobalts are going to make a stew out of him, but he’s not really concerned. This can’t be real. It must be a dream and he’s died so many times in his dreams lately, what’s one more death? He even comes to a rationale for why the dream is so weird and lifelike, “I must have eaten something spicy before I went to sleep.”

Using this as his cue, the Ogre who did such a piss poor job making this set location, takes it upon himself to deliver Matt a bag of Chinese take out food. You don’t have to be a psychic to know the meal is going to end with a pair of fortune cookies... I don’t know why we can’t seem to get rid of those stupid fortunes. It’s flavor text. Can we just let it go already?

Anyhow, Bull and the gang shows up. Bull helps Matt out of the cauldron and then the other party of Cobalts that had met up with Irvin shows up. This is really when things go to hell in a hand basket. The Cobalt is a hack. He’s staring at the ground looking for his stage marker and is totally un-natural about the entire thing. When he’s finally on the right spot, instead of relating a simple tale about Irvin, he starts talking about a thousand man strong Klk’it invasion from outer space.

“Dey breatha da fire. Dey be fifty feet tall. Dey be zillions of dem. Dey maka our minds woozy. Dey maka us throw down our spears, and den after dey boss man, dey eats us anyway.”

All of the Cobalt extras decide that there is only one thing to do at that point and that is to “Run Away.”

“Takee to da hills.”

“Ebery Cobalt for dem selves.”

“We’s be under attack from robot men!”

“Dey’s got mind control rays.”

“Run for da hills.”

And so on. It stopped shooting cold and so here we are the next day. Trying to regroup.

#

The Lagoon of DEATH!!! ARGG!!!

“PEOPLE ARE GOING TO DIE, if they don’t get their act together!” yells an angry young man with a large tattoo of a black dragon covering half his face. He is dressed amazingly similar to the EVIL Warlord only where the EVIL Warlord only carried one sword this young man is decorated from head to toe with weapons. He has a pair of revolvers at his waist, along with an ax, a blade, two daggers, a long sword, a bastard sword... across his back there is a two handed sword, a spear, and a rifle; strapped to his legs are Dillinger pistols. He has boot knives, arm knives, brass knuckles, a bag of gold at his waist he uses as a slap jack, a war hammer, a ... well you get the idea. You really could just go down the weapon’s guide in the players handbook of any number of gaming systems and simply say he has one or two of each of the weapons listed. He is Trent. He is the principle backer for this little enterprise, he doesn’t like to lose money, and the weapons you can see are just the tip of the iceberg.

For no apparent reason Trent lifts a Cobalt up and with one hand throws him into the pool 20’ away. “Out of my way!”

“Me next. Me next,” another Cobalt pleads.

Trent lifts him up, grimaces at the Cobalt, and throws him in a high arc towards the water.

Another Cobalt comes running. “Me...” but Trent does not let him finish. He picks him up and throws him into the Lagoon of Death!!!

Trent works his way towards the photo shoot that is going on. As Cobalts run up to him he throws them into the lagoon, where they splash, play, and run out to be thrown in again.

“Back for More!” Trent screams at a dripping wet Cobalt. “Die!” he commands as he throws the lax underling to the far side of the lagoon.

“Weeee,” his hapless victim cries in mid flight.

“You’re the set carpenter aren’t you?” Trent says in regards to the Ogre blocking his view.

“Oh, hey mister Trent.”

Trent grabs him by the belt loop. “Marble? On a volcanic island?”

“It’s what the plans said,” the Ogre helplessly explains.

“Chinese takeout?”

“Initiative... you’re always saying...”

“Silence! You have failed me for the last time!” and with that he launches the Ogre into the Lagoon of Death where he will spend the rest of the scene blowing bubbles in the water, pretending he is a motor boat, and carrying Cobalts around on his back.

The gang is doing the photo shoot for the movie posters. Bull is at the center of the group. He is wearing green jungle fatigues and his face is streaked with camouflage paint. He has a 50-C Manna Gun in his hands and Jack in his horns. She is wearing a sexy low cut camo outfit as well and someone has given her a sniper rifle for the shoot. Garg flanks them on one side while Targor and Zay’ar’lyne are on the other. Garg’s wears a Seventh Realm Army uniform with his pistol drawn. Targor is in his dashing rogue outfit that he bought at the casino with his sword at the ready, while Zay’ar’lyne is in her trademark leopard skin bikini. She seems to threaten the photographer with her spear. They all grimace at the photographer as he snaps merrily away.

“That’s it. Scare me,” the Elvin photographer urges them on as the gang snarls, squints, and tries to look mean.

He snaps pictures, while he dances around them, and spews out an endless banter of encouragement. “You’re bad. You’re evil. That’s it, I can’t tell if you’re the good guys or not. I just know I’m glad you’re not coming after me.”

Garg aims his gun carefully and squeezes off a round that goes zipping by the Elf. “Garg good guy.”

The Elf is unfazed. “Love the smoke. Let’s all give it a go.”

Garg puts a bullet through the Elf’s hair. Jack shoots into a distant tree and Bull lights up the sky with a burst from the C-50 Manna Gun.

The Elf casually runs his hand through his hair where Garg’s round went. “Love the intensity Garg. You’re a natural.”

Matt has been eating Chinese takeout, watching the photo shoot, and observing this Trent guy yell and scream as he launches extras through the air and into the lagoon. He puts down the Chinese food and walks up to Trent. “That looks like fun. Could you toss me?”

“Ahhhh!” Trent screams at this pathetic worm of a human dressed only in white skivvies. He throws him into the lagoon. “Who’s responsible for this travesty,” he yells, but he is interrupted by Matt tapping him on the shoulder. He is dripping wet and has a great big smile on his face.

“Hey, that was fun. Can you do it again?”

“Die!” Trent’s face turns red with rage as he rids the world of another piece of human excrement. He turns to regard the photo shoot again. “Where’s Bruce?” he demands to know, but his inquiry is cut short by a tapping on his shoulder. He turns to see a dripping wet Matt holding a Cobalt in his hands.

“So, this time, throw both of us and at the top, I’ll throw...”

“Charlie,” the Cobalt helpfully supplies.

“And I’ll throw Charlie when I get to the top.” He nods his head hopefully. “It’ll be fun.”

“Insolence!” Trent yells as he grabs the pair and launches them high into the air. He turns to the photo shoot and eyes Harry. “How much are we paying that idiot?”

“Um, we got to use his house as a location shoot and...”

“How much?”

“One Gold,” Harry answers worriedly as Trent approaches. “Please don’t kill me Mr. Trent. I don’t like the water...”

“Arrg!” Trent yells as he throws the diminutive Gnome into the air. “One gold is pretty good,” he acknowledges, but it is already too late for the hapless finisher of stories. “Enough with the photo shoot!”

Matt taps him on the shoulder to be thrown again, but this time Trent grabs him by the throat. “We’re going to do yesterday’s shoot over. And we’re going to do it right.” He watches as a wet pathetic looking Gnome scurries out of the pool. Trent draws a sword, ax, knife, blade or whatever, there are so many of them, even he can’t keep them straight. He holds the blade next to Matt’s face so he can get a good long look at it. “You’re going to do it right, or you’re going to DIE!”

Matt ignores the blade as he nods his head and points toward the pool hopefully with his thumb.

“Arrrg!” Trent yells as he launches Matt into the pool yet again. For his part, Matt does a wonderfully executed can opener, the spray from which hit the back of Trent’s head. Trent is not amused. Zay hands both Trent and the Gnome towels and as he dries off Trent reminds the assemblage with an evil glare, “There was a time before farces were in vogue.”

He ignores Matt’s tapping on his shoulder. “Someone strap this idiot up. We’re taking it from the top and if anyone messes it up; **THEY ARE GOING TO DIE! ARGG!!!**”

###

From The Top.

The crew has set up a wooden gurney and Matt is being hoisted back into position. When the scene starts again, Matt will drop from the ceiling, as if through the portal. We have not been able to coax either Harry or any of the Cobalts to stand under him to break his fall, so when we release him he will fall 15' onto a hard marble floor, but Matt is unconcerned. Despite the fact that it has been over a day, he has gone to sleep numerous times, and has woken up repeatedly in the same location, he still believes this is all a dream somehow. He doesn't believe he can die or even get hurt permanently and as long as he has a plate of Chinese food in front of him, he seems happy. Even now as he is being lifted into the air, he is munching on an egg roll.

Let us leave Matt for a moment and reexamine the portal he came to the temple in. The vortex gate has grown in strength. Rather than appear as a mere reflection on the ceiling, it now appears to be a K'fr vine lined tunnel that goes thru the temple's roof and winds out of sight. If we focus in close on the opening, we see that it appears to be covered with a green translucent membrane, like cellophane, and we can see Matt's image reflected in it.

This is that artsy edit. It's not how it was originally intended, but then little in this little adventure is as we intended. If we pan back down to where Matt should be, instead of seeing Matt, we see Dee lounging in Matt's bed. She is embroidering red piping down the edge of her new black harem girl's outfit. The room is filled with a tangle of large K'fr vines. Its tendrils go through the entire house. Dee has opened the windows and sliding glass doors throughout the house and the vine explodes from these openings seeking sunlight. The growth is so rampant in the hall closet, that all one can see of the grow lamps is a dull green glow through an impenetrable mass of leaves. Large white flowers as tall as a man's waste with purple stamens fill Matt's living room and backyard. Vines cover his furniture, kitchen cabinets, and walls. The kitchen faucet has been turned on and water pools in the vine lined sink. It would be easy to assume that Dee had turned the

water on, but this is not the case. K'fr is more than a plant or a drug; it is an elemental force. It is the heart of the jungle and it is not to be toyed with.

The inside of Matt's house looks like an abandoned building in the heart of a jungle where the plants have re-exerted control. It looks exactly like a vacation house on the Wet Side of the Islands might look, if someone left in a hurry with the doors and windows open, and didn't return for several years or decades. Of course, it hasn't been years and Matt doesn't live on the Wet Side. Before long, we'll need to make sure we're not liable for any damage to his house. This place is trashed.

In the meantime though, Back to Dee. She lies on the bed working on her embroidery. She is done with the piping and is now adding a repeating Cardinal motif to the black silk rectangles we will generously call a skirt. A ridgeback hunting dog lounges at her feet. Dee calls him Spook, because he woke her last night as she slept outside by licking her face. Her heart nearly stopped as she awoke with a blood curdling scream. Once she got over her initial fright she decided to adopt him. Spook watches unconcerned as birds hop around the room, on the bed, and even across his back. In the truest sense of the word he is now a bird dog. This is not the only dweomer Dee has cast. The air in this previously manna poor land is now thick with magic. Every stitch she sews imbues a bit of magic into her clothes. Around her the lights from a thousand small flames flicker and blink as they glide hither and yon in an endless medley. Behind her, on a headboard she has fashioned out of living K'fr vines, hangs the turtle pendant she got from Mr. Cardinal and a gaudy diamond ring. Having the sight, she can now see the meaning the charm held for Frank as she can tell the ring belonged to Matt's grandmother.

Though we did not show you this scene, when she had originally found it, she thought it might be one of the surprises Matt had left for her. She does not believe the ring, the Cardinal team cards, or the hat were left for her on purpose anymore, but

she intends to keep all of them none-the-less, even if this means she is a thief. She has already fallen from the soft road. One cannot maintain honor only part of the time. It is an all or nothing affair. She knows she could argue that she has paid for these items through nursing Matt back to health and the diamonds she sold from her hair, since most of the money from the diamonds still waits for Matt under the vines on his coffee table, but they would just be arguments. From the point of view of the soft road she has betrayed Matt; both in her heart and in deed. She has taken back her love for him and in this she will always be guilty. Rather than being a weight around her neck, it is a thought that sets her free and brings a smile to her face.

She reaches out her finger to let a bird hop on and together they gaze at the ceiling. Although on the volcanic island it appears the portal is centered on the temple, it is not. The portal is bound to Matt through the wounds in his flesh and follows him around. Dee can see all that Matt has done and will do by looking at the ceiling. She does this now and we follow her gaze with the camera rushing to meet the ceiling. We break through and as we do the reflection of Matt being hoisted high on the gurney and Dee lying back in bed merge together. As is the case with many portals, the two sides are as one.

After we are through the surface membrane, we rush down the narrow K'fr lined tunnel. This is The K'fr Road. It seems a forgone conclusion at this point that it will lead us to Ve'kahn and Back Again one way or another, but we need not dwell on that now. The walls of the tunnel zip by. They are made of a solid wall of intertwined K'fr vines. We pass by a row of small delicate white flowers and then up ahead is the first of the gates. It is a mass of deadly purple spikes filling the way, but they part at our approach and we zoom by unmolested. The thorns do not always turn aside. To highlight the point the next thorny gate has the skeletal remains of a tusked Orc embedded in it. We put the skeleton there for theatrical display, but the Orcs need not know that. Passage on the K'fr Road is safer than many imagine, but it is

not without its perils and the plant has a will of its own. One can never tame the heart of the jungle. You can fool yourself and say you have made a deal, a bargain, but it is like saying the wings of an airplane have come to arrangement with gravity. It simply isn't so. It is more accurate to say for the moment gravity has been subverted, but the moment it can, it will re-exert its will to disastrous effect.

The tunnel twists and turns. This is cinematography. The actual journey takes but a moment, a flash of the eye. Nonetheless, enjoy the ride. It will be over soon enough. The tunnel forks and branches. Down these offshoots we can see visions of distant events; perhaps giving some credence to the prescient qualities of K'fr smoke, or perhaps we are simply pandering to the expectation of fools. No matter. We round a corner and another wall of thorns blocks our way. We focus in on a large deadly looking thorn. It does not move at our approach. We are headed straight for it and sure enough it impales us. It punctures our heart, our brain, and our soul. It seems our journey has come to an end. Our passage stops.

We fall out of the portal on the temple's ceiling and follow Matt's descent from where he is rigged in the air to the hard marble floor far below.

###

Action!

Matt comes tumbling down from the ceiling and lands crookedly. He clutches at his leg.

"Walk it off. Walk it off," the Kreel urges him as he helps him to his feet.

Matt grimaces in pain. The Kreel smiles in delight. Such delectable pain. It is a rare treat.

As they are walking around in a stiff circle the Cobalts escorting Bull, Jack, Garg, Targor, and Zay'ar'lyne show up.

“Hey boss. Da big guy challenge you,” the lead Cobalt in the escort speaks up. “He big. He strong. He pulperize you.”

We see Carl’s feet move suddenly as he jumps up from where he has been lounging. “There’s no need for violence.” He suddenly realizes he is wearing a red shirt like they give those extra’s on Space Trek and hastily takes it off. “I’m not even supposed to be on camera... You wouldn’t hurt me would you Bull?”

“Bull da new boss man,” the Cobalt extra shouts.

“Long libed da boss man,” the Cobalts cheer. “Long libed da boss man.”

“I’m not the boss man,” Bull objects.

“You da boss man,” a Cobalt assures him.

“Look. I’m just going to go,” Carl says, but he is quickly surrounded by a dozen Cobalt extras brandishing spears.

“He tried to escapees.”

“He plan da monkey war in the jungle.”

“Monkey war?” Bull asks.

“I think he means guerilla war,” Zay interprets for Bull.

“Yeah, he be da guerilla... so wees kill heem now?”

“What!” Carl cries out. “Why do you want to kill me? I’m your uncle Charlie. What about all the good times we’ve had together? Christmas? Easter?”

A Cobalt pokes him in the butt with his spear.

“Ouch!”

“You’s be quiet. You da prisoner... So how’s we kills him boss man?”

“How about old age? Ouch!” Carl’s suggestion is cut short by a reminder that he is no longer the boss man.

“You’s be quiet.”

Before Bull can object again that he doesn’t want to be the boss man, the other Cobalt troop emerges. They are frantic and out of breath.

“We’s be attacked.”

Another Cobalt takes over for him. "He's be crazy."

"We tell him he be boss man and he still kill us."

"I bet you just surrendered, you no good, traitorous, OUCH!"

Carl is again cut off by a jab to his posterior.

"You's watch what you's says."

Carl rubs his butt. "All I'm saying..." he grabs the end of the spear as one of his Cobalt guards goes to jab him again.

"Hey's, you's lets go of my spear."

"Prisoner revolt."

"He's tries to escape."

Bull butts in. "Let Carl talk."

"You's heard da boss man. You speak now."

"All I was trying to say was that you're going to have to be a lot clearer. Maybe tell everybody what you saw."

"He's be ferocious fire breathing robot insect man from outer space. I'se tinks someone say he Klk'it yesterdays."

Carl shakes his head as he speaks to Bull. "You don't have to wonder too hard at how I became the boss man. Not only can I talk in complete sentences, but I've got a reasonable grasp..." Carl dodges a spear thrust as he grabs another Cobalt's weapon.

"Hey boss. He cheating."

"I think what Carl is saying is he will trade his freedom for an explanation of the events," Bull helps out.

The Cobalt guard is weary. "Sounds like da trickery to us."

"Yeah'd. We'd be betters off just kills him."

Bull pauses for a moment to consider the full ramifications of what he is about to say, before he decides; "As boss man. I say we accept his generous offer."

"You too kind boss man."

"Just you waits and sees. He stabby you in back."

Bull waives him off. "Be that as it may. You were saying Carl."

Carl brushes himself off. "No jabbing me when I talk."

"We's promises nothing."

"No jabbing him when he talks," Bull the boss man orders.

“You’s be sorry boss man.”

Off to the side Targor observes, “I don’t really see how this is any better than yesterday.”

“No. No. Today is much better,” Matt observes. He is resting his leg and sitting to the side. “Chinese food is like pizza. It tastes even better the morning after... Say, could I get a beer?”

“JUST TELL THEM ABOUT IRVIN!” A very frustrated movie producer yells from off screen. “OR PEOPLE ARE GOING TO DIE!!!”

“Right,” Carl begins. “Um, like they are saying a psychotic praying mantis is loose on the island.” Reading from yesterday’s story notes he adds, “we’ll trade you your freedom for your help in ridding our island of his menace.”

“He’s tries to tricky you boss man.”

“Yeah, hows you givee heem freedom, when you da one captured.”

“No. No. I see his point,” Bull says trying to keep it all moving forward.

“Glad someone does,” Targor interjects.

“Sure,” the Kreel helps out. “Seeing as how you brought Irvin here, it’s only fair you get rid of him, and when you’re done, we’ll help you use the K’fr portal to get wherever you want to go.”

“Like Ve’kahn,” Jack says finally putting it all together.

“Exactly,” Carl agrees. “So do we have a deal?”

“I’ll do it,” Matt offers.

“What?” pretty much everybody on the set says at once.

“I’ll do it. It’ll be cool.” He looks around. “Usually I’m wearing more than skivvies, but this could be fun. You say he’s a praying mantis? How many hit points is that?”

Jack flies over to where Matt is. “You don’t understand this isn’t a dream. You’ll die... like for real. No offense, but you’re a wuss.”

“Sure it’s a dream, OUCH!” Matt screams as Jack pinches him.

“See it’s not a dream.”

“Sure it is, Ouch!” she kicks him in the ankle.

“Stop it,” Matt says dancing away.

“This is good. I like this,” Trent says walking onto stage. “I need a table.” No one moves. “I NEED A TABLE! NOW!” A half dozen Cobalts scramble to lie down in front of him forming themselves into an unstable table of sorts. “And a chair.”

As the Cobalts are forming a chair for Trent, Carl observes, “see that’s how you do it.”

“You’s be quiet, monkey traitor.”

Trent sits on the Cobalt chair and takes out a scroll. “So... Matt, the EVIL Warlord...”

“I go by Dark Liege.”

“Why don’t we just call you Matt.”

“Not very high fantasy.”

“LOOK MY NAME IS TRENT! Don’t be giving me grief about your high fantasy delusions.”

Matt calmly approaches the Cobalt table. “Maybe it’s time to switch to a decaffeinated blend?”

Trent closes his eyes, counts to ten, takes a deep breath, and tries very, very hard not to draw a sword and slice Matt in two. “Right. Decaffeinated. Good idea.” He places a gold piece on the Cobalt’s back. “One gold for what you’ve done, your house, and what not, and another as payment in full for your part in the quest. Standard release of found magical items, princesses, and or salvaged vortexes, etc, etc.” He places down another gold piece next to the first.

Matt picks up the gold pieces and bites into one.

“Don’t do it,” Jack warns as she flies over.

“Stay out of this Jack,” Trent warns.

Satisfied the gold is real Matt picks up the contract.

“This isn’t a dream.”

“Stay out of this Jack,” Trent reiterates his warning.

The writing on the contract shifts and changes before Matt's eyes. "Sure this is a dream. See, I can't even read this writing."

"It's not a dream," Trent assures him. "The contract is simple, it says you give up all claims for two gold and the experience at hand... don't be trying to get out of it by saying it's a dream." As an afterthought he adds, "not that it would matter. The writing changes because if you ever did find a way out of the contract, the wording on the contract would simply change to close any loophole you may have found." Trent smiles. "It's standard boiler plate, nothing to be concerned about, but this isn't a dream." Trent's smile grows broader than before as he takes in a deep breath and screams in a loud bellowing voice. "Make no mistake; IF YOU FAIL, YOU WILL DIE!!!"

Matt's hair blows back as the wind from Trent's outburst assails his face. He can feel his eyelashes burn. He considers making a joke about breath mints, but in the end decides against it. After a moment he shrugs. "Dream; not a dream. This is great. I just hope I don't wake up before this is over." Matt happily signs the contract over Jack's protests.

"You will sign as a witness Jack; that over your repeated protests, cautions, and advise, he signed of his own free will."

Jack stamps her hand on the paper. "You're as good as dead Matt."

Bull disagrees. "We'll help."

When no one was looking, Garg must have grabbed the 50-C gun. He pulls back the lever arming it and sprays a burst of manna rounds into the sky. "Garg help."

Trent snaps his fingers and Zay leads a jet black stallion onto the set. "Your mount and equipment."

"Hey's we helps too," the Cobalts volunteer.

"Maybe one of you would like to borrow my red shirt?" Carl offers sarcastically.

"Ooooh, tanks Uncle."

Carl rubs his rump. "Not a problem Charlie. Just my little way of saying no hard feelings."

###

Logical Logistics

Wow! Look at him go.

OK, I'm being a bit sarcastic, but he's running the show in the end, what am I supposed to say about Trent's little performance with Matt's sword. Let's just watch for a bit and then I'll give you the background. Trent can launch Cobalts 50' into the air with one hand and not even break out into a sweat, dancing around with a Big Ass Sword, as some like to call them, is no problem-o for Trent. He dances and twirls. The image calls back to similar performances by Bull and Esse, so we need not repeat it in great detail here. Though I will mention, one of the advantages of individual weapons dance sequences is that it allows our egotistical big name characters a way to jockey for weapons dominance without actually killing each other. So, you can watch the performance and come to your own conclusion as to whether Trent could take Targor in a fight, or if Targor would kick his ass instead. Of course, if we're taking bets, let's not discount the possibility of Garg laying waste to the two civilized sissies with the machine gun he is now touting, while they are busy crossing swords and saying stupid things like en guard to each other.

The bottom line is, no one likes to lose a fight, even a carefully controlled show duel. It only leads to hard feelings, and endless phone calls to me from their publicists.

"We're cutting that scene aren't we?"

"You got to highlight how X threw sand in his face."

"The sun was in his eyes."

Or, the one I liked the best in a blatant denial of the fact their client got the snot kicked out of him fair and square... "OK we let, Y win that round. So, when are we going to do the scene were Z wins?"

Anyway, we don't do staged duels. We could never get the characters to agree who would win in advance so it would

deteriorate into a real fight and, in theory anyhow, all of folks gathered here today are the good guys, or as good as the good guys get in these days of anti-heroes and ambiguous motivation. So, if you were expecting Garg, Targor, and Bruce Brilliant to get into a three way free for all to determine once and for all who's the baddest, I'm sorry to disappoint you. We make our characters compete the old fashioned way by hamming it up for face time in front of the camera.

In the end, we've stalled long enough. Matt is dressed in his ninja outfit. Trent tosses Matt his sword and Matt being a reasonable sort flattens himself against the ground as the razor sharp blade goes flying by precariously overhead.

Matt smiles sheepishly from where he lies after the sword has clattered to the ground. "Sorry, I forgot this was a dream."

Jack flies over and reminds him, "it's not a dream. Just pick up the sword. They're trying to convince you to trade weapons... do you even know how to ride a horse?"

"Of course I can ride a horse. Me and the Deuce," as he calls his steed, "go way back." At this point Matt has reclaimed his sword and drags it across the marble tiles. He angles the blade upwards slightly and then lets the tip rest on the ground again. "This sword is heavier than I remember."

"Maybe a gun," Trent suggests as he offers a pair of 45's.

"Shotgun?" Matt inquires.

Trent snaps his fingers and the diminutive Gnome struggles to drag a wooden crate towards Matt over the stone pavers.

"It's for the sword and the horse," Trent advises him.

"But me and Deuce go way back."

A saddle rig lands at Matt's feet thrown from off stage. "Do you even know how to saddle up a horse, let alone ride?" Trent asks.

Matt looks around. "I guess you guys aren't big on riding horses." He kneels down and opens the crate. Lying on top of the

shredded wood packing material is a glistening PMP-2 pump action shotgun with two extra shells.

“Only two cartridges?” Matt asks.

“This is high fantasy,” Trent reminds him. “Trust me, you’ll never have to reload.”

Zay jumps bareback onto Deuce and clutches at his mane as he rears his feet in a playful display. “Enough stalling,” she says. “Let’s get this bug hunt on the road.”

As our band of heroes departs the temple grounds followed by their 1,000 strong Cobalt cohort, we focus in on Trent for perhaps the last time this story. He is carefully wrapping up the EVIL Warlord’s sword in a black cloth that he ties with a red ribbon. He hands the package to a creature that looks surprisingly like Dr’gr who asks, “for Dee my Lord?”

“No. Put it somewhere safe... and dry.”

“Yes my Lord, I understand,” but Dr’gr does not go anywhere.

“You have a question.”

“Yes my Lord. Have you really turned...” he seems to choke on the word, “Good?”

“Would that be wrong?” When Dr’gr makes no reply Trent, the young man with the large black dragon tattoo on his face, a.k.a. The Dragon, continues. “For some time now I have felt like a tool. I wonder if this is how the K’fr vine feels?”

“I would not know my Lord.”

“Tell me Dr’gr. The child at Hals’bad, was it as sweet as you remember.”

“It was not the same.”

“No. It wasn’t, was it.”

“What does this mean my Lord.”

“We are getting older. I am sure that if one thought about it hard enough, one might find a parallel in the K’fr vine with its thorns and poisons. K’fr is a ditch weed, a gutter plant, hard sharp and uninviting, but it is used for so much... Do you know they say

the greatest victory you can achieve on the field of battle these days is a loss to The Dragon's forces?"

"It is a propaganda coup my Lord."

"Have I always been fair, honest, forthright, and generous with you?"

"Yes my Lord."

"In a word Good to you?"

"My Lord plays with words."

"But is it true?"

"My Lord has been Good..."

"Then there it is." The Dragon pauses before he changes the subject. "It should be worth noting that Ve'kahn will never be found if they do not wish to be found... or found by us specifically."

"These things are beyond me my Lord."

"Suffice to say, I dabble in real estate."

"If that is a euphemism for ruling the Seven Realms?"

The Dragon decides to cut the conversation off. "There are eyes everywhere. We have said enough. Take the sword as I have instructed."

"Yes my Lord," and with that Dr'gr departs.

As Dr'gr leaves, Trent, The Dragon, puts his arm around the Kreel and says, "Mr. Kreel, if you would so kind as to instruct me in the making of a roast beef sandwich I would be most grateful."

The Kreel does as he is bid and as he is showing Trent the secret of it all, horseradish sauce, he comments. "I couldn't help but overhear..."

"Yes, it is your nature."

"Does it really explain anything?"

The Dragon gazes at the portal in the ceiling, at the K'fr Road. "You know intellectually that I am The Dragon, but in truth you do not sense more than the man before you."

"Your mind is a blank to me, Mr. Trent."

“The same is true of the K’fr. It appears to be only a plant, but it must be more. It wants us to find Ve’kahn. It wants this... I don’t know why.” The Dragon pauses and considers the Kreel for a moment. “Take it as fact, the K’fr is as much a mystery to me, as I am to you,” and not every mystery is resolved between the covers of a book.

###

The Bug Hunt

“Why are we doing this Bull?” Jack raises the question from her perch in Bull’s horns. She is facing backwards with her bow drawn, though she doesn’t think her arrows or even bullets will have any effect against Irvin.

They are walking slowly through dense jungle undergrowth, while above them a solid canopy shades out the mid-morning sun. Although they have not gone far from the temple, Zay’ar’lyne has already disappeared on Deuce into shadow and the Cobalts have fanned out into a disorganized mess.

Bull idly twirls his ax. “I don’t think we have a choice.”

Jack is oddly calm. She believes, perhaps correctly, that Irvin will go through the 1,000 Cobalt extras before he comes after a name character. “One of the cameramen let me watch a few episodes of The Grasshopper Chronicles yesterday.”

“And?” Bull prompts her.

“And it would be hard to call Irvin a hero... and guns, bullets, swords... even axes Bull; they don’t seem to effect him.”

Bull cautiously moves forward through the underbrush. He is surrounded by Cobalts, but he does not have much faith in their ability to spot Irvin let alone disable him. “Nets,” he says to himself.

“What Bull?”

“We need nets. Cobalts are renowned for making traps, but I didn’t want them to rig up crushing logs because they would only

end up killing us, but nets and snares, even if they went off we'd still be safe."

Targor is a step ahead of him. "What will happen is one of us will step in a snare or trap at a critical juncture."

"You sound nervous," Matt says to Targor.

Targor is looking around in the canopy of the trees they walk under. "Death is everywhere."

Matt sights his gun on an imaginary foe and says "Pop!" before he continues his conversation with Targor. "But you always live. I mean sure it looks like you die, but you always live. I've seen your movies."

"What makes you think I don't really die at the end of each one," but that isn't an accurate explanation. "Some day the series has to come to an end... besides, I think I rather give farming or something a go, you know come out of retirement if I have to at the beginning of the next movie, but live the good life between adventures." Targor eyes Matt. He knows this isn't really what's on his mind. It never is. "It's alright, you can say it."

Matt shrugs. "OK. I thought you were taller." He is standing next to Targor and stands a full head above him.

"It's not your size but how you use it."

"Yeah," Matt agrees. "I use that line a lot too." He smiles.

Targor shakes his head, but he has to smile as well. He clasps Matt on the shoulder. "I hope you don't die." As he says this Zay'ar'lyne reappears with a score of horses. Targor jumps on one and the rest are filled rapidly by Cobalt extras.

Deuce rears back and flails his legs as Zay asks, "anybody else have anything witty to say or can we finally get this bug hunt underway?"

Jack is still not satisfied. "Why are we doing this?"

"Because it's fun," Matt answers and fires a testing round into a tree. Branches and leaves explode into dust. Garg levels his 50-C gun at an old cypress tree and explodes it in a blaze of fury. The Cobalts cheer and run off into the jungle saying, "we flush

heem out for you bossman,” while Zay and her troop gallop off into shadow.

The scene dissolves into a frenzy of meaningless activity. Cobalts scour the island. Zay reports back. The island is not as big as they expected. It is flanked by two small parallel worlds and then only ocean. As she is saying this, the first Cobalt dies with a blood curdling scream.

Like in some slasher flick, the party arrives to find a disemboweled Cobalt nailed to a tree. He is wearing a red shirt. The two Cobalts cutting him down are arguing over who gets the shirt next. They both want it.

As we watch, far away in the jungle, another Cobalt screams announcing another death. A Cobalt appears next to Bull carrying a portable chalkboard. “Klk’its 2, Boss man 0,” he says.

“Dey come out wit da early score.”

“What we doos bossman?”

Some of the Cobalts are wearing football uniforms complete with helmets and shoulder pads. They try to get Bull into a huddle. “We’s needs da plan.”

“This isn’t a game,” Jack tries to remind them.

The Cobalts immediately agree. “Eet not just game.”

“Et big game.”

We cut to a scene of Garg walking cautiously alone. He takes slow silent step after slow silent step. A Cobalt scream sounds in the distance. As he approaches branches move. He levels his gun and a flock of birds takes to the air. He lets out a breath, relaxes, and then he sees Irvin running behind a grove of trees in the distance. Garg opens up with his chain gun. He is an amazing marksman. He tracks Irvin perfectly, but true to prediction, the bullets that do not rip into intervening trees bounce harmlessly off of Irvin’s carapace.

As Irvin disappears, Zay and her troop ride after him trying to keep him in sight.

Bull and Jack watch the encounter from a distance.

“See, the bullets have no effect,” Jack reiterates her earlier advise.

“We go with the traps,” Bull informs the Cobalt with the score card. It now reads: Klk’its: 10, Boss Man: 0.

“Okays, boss man. Trappees.”

The day goes on. We watch as Cobalts dig pits, build snares, pile of logs, and set traps. We also see the traps go off on the Cobalts killing them, or Irvin walking through the traps without effect. On occasion we glimpse at the Cobalt’s score card; Klk’its 21, 37, 43, 52. The red shirt changes hands multiple times. The Cobalts do not recognize it as bad luck or they do not care. We even see Zay and Targor return from one of their foray’s. Half of the saddles are empty and Targor has a large gash on his arm. “He’s quick,” Targor explains as a Cobalt medic bandages him up.

We see a parade of meaningless Cobalt deaths, loped off heads, disemboweled bodies, bloody smeared remains that are hard to identify as anything but road kill and the number on the score card increases, 79, 98, 127, 153... there is no end in sight.

It is the afternoon. Matt is tired. He’s been walking around all morning carrying the shotgun. It’s not that heavy, but his muscles are not used to its weight. Bull and the others have wandered off. He has not kept up. It is time for a name character to die. Let me take a moment to point out that the music on the soundtrack has gone completely silent. We hear the crunch of Matt’s boots on the ground. He is in a clearing. An inviting log lies between two trees. It would be a good place to have a picnic. As Matt approaches, we focus on the pin under the log, the wire, the pulley, and the sharpened log hanging in the trees. Focus down the sharpened log. It is aimed right at the middle of the inviting log bench.

Watch as Matt leans his gun against the log. The pin underneath wiggles, but the shotgun does not weigh enough to set

it off. Matt searches his pockets. He finds what he is looking for, a plastic bag filled with the last of his Chinese food. He sets it down on the log. The pin strains. It is almost enough. Tempting fate, Matt brushes off the log to clean off a place to sit. As he leans over to do this, the camera arcs down as if it is the log in flight centering on his butt. We zoom in on his posterior and at the last moment a Cobalt finger emerges and pokes Matt.

“Hey meester.”

Matt jumps.

We pull back. One Cobalt flips a lever in the side of the tree disarming the trap and the other explains, “you’s luckies,” as he points to the sharpened log in the canopy. He notices the food bag Matt has. “We savee life, you feeds us.”

“Sure,” Matt is amiable. He likes these Cobalt guys.

The Cobalts sit on the edge of the log bench, leaving the center, the danger zone for Matt. Matt sits down in the middle, we resume our birds eye view down the sharpened log and watch Matt and the Cobalts share a little left over egg foo yung, stir fried rice, and broccoli beef.

“Dis good stuff meester.”

“You’s be generous.”

“I can’t help but notice you’re wearing a red shirt,” Matt inquires of one of the Cobalts.

The Cobalt stands to show off his blood stained shirt. “Et be Charlies, but he gone now.”

“You know, it’s a... bad luck.”

The Cobalt is noticeably distraught. “You say red not my color?”

“He say you should take off,” the other Cobalt helps.

“It would be a good idea,” Matt agrees.

“You’s be traitor.”

“He says you take it off, you’s have to take it off.”

Sulkily the first Cobalt takes off the red shirt and immediately the second one puts it on. “I’s look good?”

“I don’t see why you guys want to die,” Matt asks as he roots around in the bottom of the bag. All he finds are two fortune cookies. “Look I’ll trade you a fortune cookie for the red shirt.”

In a jiffy the Cobalt takes off the shirt and before Matt knows what has happened he is wearing it. “This isn’t what I had in mind.”

“Shssh,” the Cobalt silences him as he opens his fortune. “You’s cans neber goes homes again.” As he scratches his head trying to figure out what it means, out of nowhere Irvin lops off his head from behind.

“Dat fortune suckees,” the other Cobalt observes nonchalantly as he watches Charlie’s head roll across the ground. Matt scrambles away terrified on wobbly legs, but then realizes he forgot his gun next to the log, and besides, this is still a dream. He runs in to pick up his gun and while he is there he grabs the other Cobalt as well. Lucky for the little guy, as Irvin was just getting ready to disembowel him as well. He misses and his claws sink deep into the tree.

Seeing as how he is stuck for the moment, Matt puts the Cobalt down and tries out his gun. He shoots a few rounds into Irvin, but they bounce off. The Cobalt on the other hand has more pressing concerns, he is opening his fortune. “Wit da great riskees comes da great rewards.” It takes him a moment, but then he realizes, “dis a good one.” He straightens his helmet, readies his spear, and approaches Irvin. He gives the mantis a testing poke as Irvin claws at him with his free hand. The Cobalt jumps backward and trips over the pull wire for the log. He stands and warns Irvin, “you’s be sorries,” and then he flips the switch on the side of the tree which releases the log. Irvin struggles frantically to free his claw as he watches the sharpened log descend, but he cannot break free. The log hits him dead on. All that is left is his claw. Charlie picks it up off the forest floor and looks at it. “Dis great reward?” He scratches his head with it and then he sees a one armed preying mantis charging at him out of the distance. Prudently, he retreats behind Matt.

Matt opens up with his gun, but it is ineffective.

“Here tries dis,” the Cobalt suggests handing Matt Irvin’s claw. Irvin has closed with Matt. Matt tries to deflect Irvin’s blows with the claw, but it is a losing battle. Matt slowly backs up as Irvin batters away with his remaining claw. Matt trips, he falls on the floor, and Irvin steps on him to hold him down. There is no escape. The Cobalt uses the shotgun as a club and hits Irvin in the leg, but it is useless. Irvin casually flicks the pesky Cobalt aside and lunges for Matt’s gut, but mid motion he freezes solid. Irvin is covered with icicles.

It takes Matt a moment to realize he’s not going to die.

The Cobalt cries out “Matt’s kills da insect! Matt’s kills da insect!” before he looks at the fortune he is holding and then shouts even more excitedly, “I wins da lottery. I wins da lottery,” as he dances around and twirls in delight.

Pull in for a close up of Matt’s face as he lies under the frozen insectizoid. Matt struggles to get out from under Irvin, but he cannot move. He pushes at Irvin’s icicle covered clawed foot to no avail. We leave Matt and his struggles and track slowly up Irvin’s body. He is covered in ice. Icicles hang from his bony knees. The layers of ice grow thicker at his spiny waist and thorax; until we come at last to his empty black insect eyes. Behind a thin layer of crystal ice, they blink slowly.

We pull away from Irvin now and track backwards, drifting slowly up into the canopy of trees. We look at the scene from far above. Bull, Jack, Garg, Targor, and Zay arrive and cluster around Matt. They rock Irvin backwards so Matt can get out from beneath him as a swarm of Cobalts lift Charlie with his winning Fortune/Lottery Ticket into the air.

“Long libed da Charlie,” they cheer and then we shift focus in our birds eye view from far below to the branches next to us. The image of our heroes blurs out, while a small K’fr flower shifts into view. We focus on it. It is covered with tiny icicles. We do a soft edit and pull away from the icicle covered flower to reveal

Dee lounging in Matt's bed. The bed is covered with frost. Dee shares an icicle with the puppy Spook as birds twitter about. We need not wonder where the spell that did Irvin in originated from and we fade out.

###

Down Time

Fade back in. A morose looking Irvin stands on a diving board someone has rigged next to the pool at the temple. He has thawed out and a small stump of an arm grows where his old one was ripped out. A large rubber band, like a lobster might wear has been stretched around his remaining claw, but it is a secondary precaution. He wears an iron chain around one foot. It is one little shackle, but that is all it takes. His will is gone. Cobalt children climb over him and dive into the pool. For an unemotional insect, he looks crestfallen. He makes no move when he is splashed or shot with a squirt gun.

Charlie has reclaimed his red shirt from Matt. He lies on a cushion of Cobalts. Additional Cobalts fan him with palm fronds, while still more feed him hand peeled grapes and slices of cheese. He waives the fortune for all to see and a cheer rises up from his people.

Matt joins him and shares a plate of food with him.

"You's lucky I's saved your life," the Cobalt reminds him.

"I thought for sure I was going to wake up then," Matt agrees.

Upon hearing this Jack flies over. She can't help herself. "When are you going to wake up Matt? This isn't a dream."

Matt is beginning to believe her, but right now, to steal a phrase, he has more pressing concerns on his mind. He wades into the pool and throws Cobalts a few feet into the air. It is not the fifty feet Trent or Bull can manage, but the Cobalts are happy all the same and the line to be thrown by Matt stretches far into the distance.

Back in the temple, Bull climbs down from a wooden ladder they have set up under the portal. “The way is still blocked by a thorny barricade,” he informs the gathering of adventurers below.

“Bruce hasn’t done his bit yet,” Zay observes.

“We wait,” Targor agrees.

“Well, we can do more than just wait,” Zay’ar’lyne coyly responds as she leads Targor off.

“Come on Bull, let’s go find somewhere private as well,” Jack slyly suggests and they depart as Bull takes her up on her offer.

Garg is alone. He wonders what Esse is up to. He would like to wander off with her and stare into her eyes. Instead, he climbs the ladder and has a look for himself.

The temple’s ceiling has been overgrown with K’fr and in the center of this growth is the portal. It appears as a large circular K’fr lined tunnel, that immediately turns at a right angle and runs horizontally. A few feet into the passage the way is blocked by an impenetrable tangle of thorns. They are of every size from small peach fuzz and one inch barbs all the way to foreboding spikes as tall as a man. As Garg watches the barbs seem to sense his presence and point their purple poisoned tips menacingly towards him.

There is nothing to do but wait.

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Our clothes are dirty.

The suitcases are a mess.

It is time to return home.

It is time to say farewell to our newfound friends.

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