

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

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

starring
Ruby FireHaven
and so on and so forth

as conceived, written, and enchanted by

Celli
the
Happy Go Lucky Celaphopod

© The Dragon ©

© Dragon Bound Publishing ©

© Celli the Happy Go Lucky Celaphopod ©
and in the Earthen Vortex

© © © **Brett Paufler** © © ©

Commemorative Internet Edition

Released to the wild October 15th, 2014

Happy Birthday to the LeeZards

All Rights Reserved

all rights that can be reserved have been reserved by the copyright holder(s)

You Waive All Rights

by downloading, reading, transmitting, saving, talking about, thinking about, refusing to think about or in any way interacting with and/or failing to interacting with this work you agree forthwith and henceforth and backwhen and thenceforth to forfeit any and all rights that can be forfeited by any and all means whether now known or to be discovered in some dismal post-apocalyptic future

Imported from the Realms 2©©7

(give or take)

Editing, Translated to the English, and in general Debugged & Deburred

by

Brett Paufler

Brett@Paufler.net

Licensing Programs Available

please make me rich

www.Paufler.net

The K'fr Road
5-30-07
Copyright, Brett Paufler

84,000 in the can, 16,000 to go

Book 4

###

The Spice of Life

An indeterminate amount of time has passed. The location is unclear. We focus across a small pool, nothing more than a watering hole, a mere twenty feet across at the most. We are unable to see past the thick vegetation on the other side. It is like a cut scene from the Garden of Eden. The air is filled with the happy sounds of birds, frogs, and insects. It is not the lagoon by the temple, though it perhaps shares many qualities with that body of water.

We focus down onto the water's unbroken surface. It is like glass. A water bug skittles across the surface. A frog jumps from one lily pad to the next. The scene is calm, serene, inviting.

A ripple glides across the surface of the water. Something is swimming beneath the surface. It is headed straight for us. We have switched to slow motion and although the birds have not stopped singing, we can no longer hear them. It is a cheap device to misdirect attention and build suspense. We know whatever is in the water is coming straight this way towards us. The wave on the surface grows. Whatever it is, it is surfacing. Before our eyes the water erupts as Klara Bo Southborne, the top heavy Elvin maiden, slowly emerges in all her naked glory. She lifts an enormous quantity of water with her as she rises. The water careens off of

her face, down her neck, and across her ample, matronly bosom. The Lady of the Lake has arisen. It is a vision of beauty.

Now see, that's art. Matronly bosom? What does that mean anyhow? You have it on DVD. You know you want to watch the scene over. Hit the reverse. Even though it was shot in slow motion, slow it down even further. Watch as Klara comes out of the water. Her eyes are open. She smiles a great inviting smile as she emerges from the water. She stands rapidly and as she does, she lifts great bucketfuls of water with her, most of it carried up by her massive breasts. They are just huge, honking big tits. Watch the water run over them, glistening, shining. There is something about water and breasts that just seems to go together like bread and butter.

We shot this scene with some of the best film available anywhere. If your viewing rig supports it, you can up the magnification to where you see individual pores, or whatever it is that you fancy. And, if you've got one of those sense-o-round rigs, knock yourself out. I think you'll be pleasantly surprised with the bonus features and Easter Eggs we have hidden away... anyway, that's the less artsy version

Back to the action, normal speed resumes, the soundtrack kicks back on, and the bird's song is drowned out by Bruce. He sits by the edge of the pool wearing his black cowboy hat, blue jeans jacket outfit. He's not even looking at Klara. In front of him on a handkerchief, he has taken apart his wand as if it was a gun that needed cleaning. It's not a gun, it doesn't need cleaning, and he doesn't have the slightest idea what he is doing.

Bruce's attention isn't really on the wand or Klara. He is telling his story about how he turned his luck around at the casino. He's been telling this story for the last week. We could put together a traveling montage of the group with Bruce telling the story the entire time. They walk up to Bull's place and Bruce starts his story. They walk into the jungle and he continues. They walk through the vortexes, hopping through forests, down creek beds,

and across a desert on their way back to Hals'bad and all the way he tells his story. In the short form, the story is not that complicated. It boils down to Bruce being a degenerate gambler and loosing everything. Dejected, he returns to this room, flips on the TV and almost immediately an ad comes on explaining how he can get out of debt by taking on a consolidation loan. It seems too easy... but what does he have to lose? He calls the number, takes out a loan, and in seconds a man is at the door delivering him a briefcase full of cash. Presto, he's out of debt. It worked once, why not try it again? He pulls out the phonebook and within minutes another man is delivering him a briefcase full of cash. The scene is repeated numerous times and by now he's running out of places to put the briefcases.

If we were doing a montage, Klara would interject now with a "I do declare," and Esse would scoff.

Undeterred, Bruce would continue with his story. "The first million is the hardest, or so they say. So I figured why settle for one fortune when you can have two."

"I do declare!" Klara says her bit again, while Esse leads the way across the desert.

Following behind, Bruce explains with many side trails, random anecdotes, and meaningless information in a nonstop banter how his first impulse was to go gambling again. "That's when it hit me. I knew Zay was right and I'd never win, but I'm a degenerate gambler. It's in my blood. So, I hit upon the ideal plan..." and two days later after we have crossed the desert and are at the spring behind the ruins of Hals'bad, Bruce finishes his story. "I bet against myself."

"I do declare!" Klara says as she sways her breasts for the camera and drips water over Bruce's (broken?) wand.

Let's take a moment to rotate around Klara. She is naked. Dripping wet. She happily poses for the camera. She relishes the attention and the media exposure, however the full photo shoot will not be related here.

Instead, as we rotate around her naked body, we will focus long and blur her body out. We will take in the landscape. The greenery by the pool is an oasis. We are in the scorched out landscape behind Hals'bad. Within feet the dense foliage of the spring, gives way to dirt, dust, and endless desolation as far as the eye can see.

Not far away, the Fey'an Esse digs in the sandy ground. She has a keen sense of location and knows this is where she left her sword and other gear, but it is deeper than she would have expected. As she digs she can hear Klara's squeals of delight, "I do declare." It seems now that he is done with his story, Bruce has weightier concerns on his mind... and in hand.

Esse clenches her jaw and narrows her eyes in determination as the fractured starburst around her eye pulses faintly. That fool Bruce has talked nonstop for the past week. He told her many things. How he is an idiot, a fool, a gambler, but more than that; how all this, the destruction of her home, her people is all part of some movie, some script, some documentary... some bard's tale.

She let's the anger grow in her. She will use it soon enough.

Finally, Esse comes upon a bundle in the dirt, but it is not the bundle she has been expecting. It is clearly a sword. Of that there is no doubt. A sword wrapped in faded black velvet and worn red ribbon. Underneath this first bundle, is the one she left for herself in the muddy river bottom.

She takes both bundles and carries them back to the spring. She takes a bath as she ignores Klara and Bruce. Let them have their last moments of fun. They are soft, weak willed creatures. They do not notice the danger. Esse does not consider them friends or allies anymore. They noe fall into another, unspoken category, enemies. She does not feel the need to alert them to her change in mood. They will learn this soon enough.

She suits up for war; laces on her leather armor, slips into her chain mail shirt, puts on her boots, ties her equipment into place, and buckles on her own familiar sword at her waist.

Bruce and Klara, finished with their semi-private side quest, watch as Esse unties the black velvet wrapped sword. It is, of course, the EVIL Warlord's sword.

"I do declare!" Klara exclaims as she hastens to get dressed. She has opted for a pink frilly summer dress with a wide brimmed umbrella, sort of a southern plantation dress done up tight, revealing, and slutty. It's the sort of outfit Little Bo Peep might wear if she had decided to become a madam and put her sheep to work in a whore house.

Esse ignores the bimbo. "Who would leave this for me?" she demands of Bruce.

"I don't know," he replies as he sits before, with his disassembled wand in front of him. He still hasn't got the faintest idea how to put it back together.

"It is the EVIL Warlord's," Esse says. She would recognize it anywhere. "I will kill him with his own sword... Matt, you said he calls himself Matt."

"I don't think..." Bruce voice trails off as Esse brings the EVIL Warlord's blade quickly to his throat.

"Matt will die," Esse assures him. "You will help me."

"But the story, he's a lead..."

Esse pushes the blade into Bruce's throat drawing blood. "He will die. You will help me."

"Yes, of course."

"Are you through with the slut?"

"I do declare!"

"Can she even say anything else? Is she of any use, or do we kill the Elf now?"

Blood drips down Bruce's throat. He is sweating. He soils his pants... which is the polite way of saying he is scared shitless.

"Then we kill her," Esse says as she turns to do the sweet, promiscuous Klara Bo Southborne in.

Klara backs away. "I do declare."

"She cripples men, befuddles their minds," Bruce calls after Esse. He has composed himself a little. "You've seen the EVIL

Warlord in action. He is a mighty warrior... but few men can take their eyes off of Klara.”

“She is a charm, a diversion?”

“I can vouch for that,” Bruce says pleading Klara’s case as he considers the disassembled wand on the ground before him.

Esse notes the distraction in Bruce’s voice. She turns to regard him and sees his attention is on his wand. She pushes the tip of the sword into the other side of his neck. “You are not such a mighty wizard. I do not even think I need your help.”

“I can help. We’ll help... Right Klara?”

“I do declare.”

“Am I to take that as an oath of fealty?” Esse asks as she drives the tip of the blade in ever deeper.

“Yes. Yes,” Bruce desperately agrees.

Klara echoes her earlier sentiment with yet another, “I do declare.”

Esse sheaths the EVIL Warlord’s sword over her shoulder and squats before the Bruce. She takes a black, leather gloved finger and wipes at the blood on Bruce’s neck. She smiles as she tastes it. “You are not such a wizard and you are not such an actor... Ketchup,” she explains.

“Ketchup?” he asks in shocked disbelief as he tastes it himself.

“You will honor your oath?” Esse questions him.

Bruce shrugs and discards the question. “To get to Matt’s secret lair in Suburbia, we need to go through the Depth Fiend’s K’fr processing plant they showed in the opening credits. We were going to do that anyway.”

Esse warns him. “No tricks wizard. It will not be ketchup next time.”

“No. No tricks,” Bruce agrees as he winks slyly at the camera and takes another lick of the tangy condiment. “I can see how much you hate deception.”

###

Truth, Honor, and the Or'tung Way

Sand, dunes, desert, and rocky desolation as far as the eye can see. We are high up in the clouds and all we see below is desert. Join us as we go into a dive, ease through the wispy tendrils of low lying clouds, and careen across the landscape at terrifyingly high speeds. There is nothing here, but rocky waste. Veer with us around outcroppings strewn with boulders and across the top of barren hills. This is the land around Hals'bad and not much has changed since its fall, or since before its fall. As we pull up over a rise; in the distance, on the crest of a sandy dune, we see our travelers. Having set the scene, speed in for the close up.

Bruce is in the lead, showing the way. He is tired. He stumbles, yet he finds the energy to help hold Klara up. She is exhausted, on the edge. They have been walking for days. Once again, Bruce has talked nonstop. "The Depth Fiend sold out the Or'tung. I don't know why you keep on defending him." He turns to regard Esse who is walking behind them, guarding them. "He is evil."

Esse draws the EVIL Warlord's sword slowly over a sharpening stone. "I imagine you would know evil well wizard." She glares at Bruce. "When did you know... that my people would die?"

"I don't see how..."

Esse casually points the sword towards Bruce and he shuts up. "You knew. That is enough... I have listened to you wizard for many long days now talk of honor, evil, and other things of which you know nothing... You will kneel. Both of you." Turning to Klara she adds, "if you say, 'I do declare,' I will kill you now slut."

Slowly Esse cuts a line across each of their cheeks drawing blood, real blood. "Listen carefully. I tire of your games. I will explain it once and if you contradict me, I will kill you. Do you understand?"

“Yes.”

Klara nods.

“Good... Evil is merely what the losers call the victors. It is nothing more. Honor is doing what you have promised and nothing more. It is therefore possible to be both evil and honorable at the same time. The Depth Fiend we go to visit, Monty... yes, even Depth Fiends have names. Monty is my friend, my ally, my godfather. We will not kill him. He did not betray the Or'tung.”

Noting Bruce's discomfort at this statement, she slices another gash down his cheek. “You will not interrupt or correct me. You are my chattel. This is my word. It is your word.” She pauses waiting for an answer. When Bruce does not reply immediately, she prompts him by slicing another line down his cheek.

“OK! Your word... my word, whatever.”

“Not whatever.”

“Right. Your word is truth.”

“I know you are wondering if the sword I carry has turned me Evil,” Esse says indicating the Evil Warlord's blade.

“Considering that it was your own allies who provided me with the weapon, it seems unlikely.”

“I do...” Klara stops mid-sentence as the blade is swung towards her neck. “I'd never thought of that.”

“No. You wouldn't have.” Returning her attention to Bruce Esse continues, “You are a mighty wizard?”

“Yes?” He is unsure. His mind is elsewhere. He had not considered that the EVIL Warlord's sword might be playing a role in this. It wouldn't be the first time a cursed sword had possessed its would be owner, but it didn't ring true. He knew how these things worked. He was a wizard. He could see the cameras as well as the next person... It didn't make sense for the sword to be cursed, but that wretched pulsing wound across Esse's eye and the side of her face. Born of hate and malice in the heat of battle, a mortal wound that would not heal, festering until...

The tip of Esse's blade slices into Bruce's neck, breaking his reverie. "Yes! Yes," he says. "I am a mighty wizard. I see things others do not," as do you...

Bruce wonders if he can work magic without the wand. He snaps his fingers testingly. A peacock feather appears in his hat. It is not what he expected, but then he hadn't really thought about what he had expected. He snaps them again and his jeans jacket outfit turns into a purple frilled, pimped out suit. He is pleased with himself and does not mind that he looks like a fool.

"I imagine you have friends, allies," Esse looks around for one of the invisible camera eyes that have been following them these last few weeks and looks directly at it. "I imagine without your friends you are not much of a wizard, but with them you can accomplish much."

"As you say," Bruce wisely agrees, but he felt some part of the power flow through his fingers just then.

Esse smiles and then snaps her fingers playfully. "I believe it is time for you to take us to Monty's front door." Missing his cue, Bruce does not move. Esse repeats her demand. "Snap your fingers wizard... or would you prefer to die here?"

Bruce pays attention as he snaps his fingers this time, carefully keeping his will in tune with his desire. He has the sense that snapping his fingers is like pushing a button and as he pushes it, forces off stage whisk our discordant party away.

I will leave it to the more philosophical in the audience to ponder; if Bruce is a wizard because, like all wizards, powerful unseen forces obey his will, is Esse any less of a wizard if she uses Bruce as a tool, to control powerful unseen forces on her own behalf.

###

Into the Depths

The trio stands before the cave entrance. A sullen eyed Goblin walks past them carrying a burlap sack on his shoulders filled with raw K'fr. He does not bat an eye. Bruce is in his newly enchanted purple pimp suit, Klara is in her Little Bo Peep streetwalker outfit, and Esse with her pulsing scar is holding a sword on her captors... you get used to seeing that sort of thing in this part of town. The Goblin knows it is best to simply keep his head down and hope no one notices him, but it is not to be.

“Follow the Goblin,” Esse demands. The trip has not improved her mood. A dull sort of festering rage has filled her being. She has one thought which consumes her, Kill Matt. After that, she might go after the film crew... or she might get a manicure... she's not really sure.

We cut ahead and the trio is walking down into the... well, er, depths is really the best word... so they are walking into the depths of the Depth Fiend's lair. The cavern has opened up into a great chamber at the bottom of which is a river of lava. All they need are donkeys, and it would be like one of those tourist trips down to the bottom of the Grand Chasm, but unlike at the Grand Chasm there is no handrail.

As they walk, they kick up rocks, which roll off the trail and bounce off the side of the cliff on their way into the impenetrable depths of the canyon. In many places, the trail is made of little more than an angled pile of loose stones sloping off into the abyss, as if the trail itself has been slowly falling away into the... depths. It is only a matter of time before the entire cliff face gives way. Hardly a moment goes by without the echoing sounds of some falling rock. The portents are clear. This place is on marked time.

Esse trails behind Bruce and Klara, keeping her captives in sight.

Klara is in Bruce's arms. He is a gentleman of sorts and helps her walk down the path, though he is careful to keep her on the outside edge. He may be a gentleman, but he's not an idiot; no matter how much he looks or plays the part.

Klara is too tired to care. She is worn out. She is ready for her role in this quest to be over. “Did you get your wand back together?” she whispers hopefully to Bruce.

He reaches into his pocket and takes out a small handful of springs, clips, and gears. He shrugs as he pockets them. “Mostly,” he answers. It is not comforting news to Klara, but Bruce nonchalantly rubs his fingers together. In the end wands are just for show, isn’t that what the great wizards are always saying?

“What are we going to do?”

“Shut up and walk,” Esse answers for her. Esse is ready for this adventure to be over as well. She is anxious to stand over Matt, plunge his own sword deep into his heart, and watch him die. All the same, she is enjoying herself. Klara is so exhausted, she might just slip and fall over the edge; wouldn’t that be a pity. And Bruce, it is obvious he is terrified of heights, the way he hugs the inside wall. He is a coward and an idiot. He calls himself a wizard, but he does not appear to know the first thing about the art.

Let’s us leave Klara and Bruce to their suffering and Esse to her grim enjoyment as we pull away from them for a moment and do one of those establishing shots, taking in the entire cliff face. The wall of the cavern is mammoth. It descends for thousands of yards. Its black volcanic rock surface is dimly illuminated from the lava river far below and the occasional torch. It is obvious the place has not been kept in the best of repair, the trail is falling apart and more than half the torches are burnt out or missing from their wall sockets. The route is in desperate need of some maintenance. As we watch, a great slab falls off the side of the cliff face and down into the depths. See, that’s the type of thing I’m talking about, a little basic maintenance. As we watch, another slab falls off to join the first. Well, maybe more than a little maintenance. Perhaps the magic that is holding this place together is failing...

To even the most casual of observers, it would be obvious that management is a little tighter with the manna these days. Not that there ever was much money in the budget for trail safety, but

there was a time when you weren't wondering if the ceiling would collapse on you are not. The talk around the water cooler is of layoffs and further budget cutbacks. In short, things are not quite the way they were back in the good old days before Hals'bad fell and this section of the road was flush with K'fr.

The reduction in K'fr flow is easy to see. Take a moment to look at the Goblins coming down the trail. Back in the opening credits they were spaced maybe ten feet apart, now there are gaps sometimes as long as a quarter mile between porters. No K'fr. No money. No magic. But, as we have said, the direction of causation is not always clear.

Let us return to our party. They have stopped. There is a line of unmoving Goblins in front of them. "What's the hold up," Esse growls, but she heard the roar from the pair of avalanches and word is already trickling back from the Goblins. The trail is out.

It would be easy to show a scene of Esse madly pushing Goblins over the edge to get to the front of the line so she can get a first hand view of a trail that suddenly ends in a thousand foot sheer drop. She even considers this for a moment, but then she realizes there is a better way.

"Wizard," she commands. "Get us to the bottom."

Bruce helpfully takes out his wand. It is clear it is not put together correctly. It is not straight. There are springs coming out in a way that springs never do except in cartoons... or malfunctioning magical items. It does not take a genius to foresee the entire side of cliff falling off in a gigantic avalanche should Bruce use his wand.

Esse brings her sword up to Bruce's neck. Should she need to, she will be able to stop any ill conceived action on his part... and all future action as well, but the way Esse is feeling right now, that might not be such a bad thing. By the minute, Esse's mood is worsening. She idly wonders if killing Bruce or a Goblin would make her feel any better. Or maybe a little torture. She puts the thought out of her mind. If there is to be any torture, she will save

it for Matt. “Snap you fingers wizard.,” Esse commands. “Let your allies take us to the bottom.”

“Oh yeah, good idea,” Bruce agrees as if he had never thought of the option himself. Without delay he snaps his fingers and our heroes vanish in a puff of purple smoke, leaving us and the line of stranded Goblin porters behind.

We focus in on the hapless Goblins and come in for a close up of the eyes and face of the Goblin who ran into our adventurers at the start of the scene. The ground trembles beneath his feet. He looks into the camera with sullen eyes, as if to ask, why me, and then he falls from view as we pull back to watch the entire cliff side give way. It tumbles into the lava river far below, raising a great cloud of choking black smoke... because magic or not, some things are inevitable.

###

The Demon You Know

We are in the secret lair of the EVIL GENIUS... or something like that. Times are slow. Monty and the gang are sitting around a table playing poker. You know Monty, he’s a flaming red fiend from the depths. On either side of him are two unimportant bit characters wearing white lab coats. One is an Elf and the other is a Human, but it’s hardly important. If you were casting for this scene, you might call the first one Underling #1 and the second Underling #2. Around the room, Underling #3 watches a dial on the K’fr processing machine, Underling #4 sits in a rickety metal folding chair reading a magazine, while Underling #5 talks on the phone trying to explain why yet another K’fr delivery will be late.

Of course, you can’t really play poker with only three players; Monty, Underling #1, & Underling #2. You need a fourth, so they have recruited one of the Goblins. He’s looking a little worse for the wear. His arm is propped up and in a cast, as is his leg. He has a bandage around his head and he has a sort of scared animal terror in his eyes. It’s probably the type of look you would

have if your clan was decimated in a reenactment of Ve'kahn, cut down further by infighting after an apparent victory at Hals'bad; and then just when things were looking up and you were almost home, the last few dozen of your great and mighty horde happened to fall victim to an avalanche. We've already covered the PTSD thing in earlier sections and we don't need another shell shocked victim in the story, so we'll just say our little Goblin friend is suffering from Historical Trauma.

“Oh, what the heck. I'm going all in,” Monty says as he pushes a stack of chips and the deed to the K'fr processing plant into the center of the table.

“I'm out.”

“I fold,” Underling #1 & #2 say quickly, and out of turn I might add.

The Goblin looks nervously at the Depth Fiend from beneath his bandages. If his limbs weren't in traction, you might be able to tell he was shaking.

“That's right. I'm calling you out... What's your name?”

“Thunder Toe,” the Goblin says meekly. “Thunder Toe of the Doom Crag Horde.”

“I think I've heard of them,” Monty quips.

The Goblin doesn't want to discuss politics with a demi-demon. Actually, he doesn't want to discuss anything be it sports, weather, or pop culture with a demi-demon. It could be as bad as talking to a dragon. You were bound to lose it all.

Monty senses his unease. He's a kind, caring, sympathetic Depth Fiend... well, at least he is by Depth Fiend standards. “I understand. All business. So it's to you Thunder Toe of the Doom Crag Horde for the whole shebang... You going to fold, tuck your tail between your legs and go running home to the reservation... surrender as it were.” Monty can see the Goblin wince at the word. “Surrender... you Doom Crager's have a history of surrendering...”

“We were tricked,” Thunder Toe states morosely.

Monty shrugs. “Look you can’t be second guessing these things. The only real question is are you going to go down fighting or are you going to be a coward, fold in the cards, and surrender.”

It is obvious at this point the Goblin is looking for an out, any out. He points behind Monty, “Adventurers!”

Monty shakes his head. “I wasn’t born yesterday.” He points behind the Goblin. “Look a butterfly flapping its wings.”

The Goblin is noticeably distraught. “A wizard, an Elvin floozy, and a Fey’an warrior.” The Goblin gets up to run away, but seeing as how he can barely move, he doesn’t get far.

Monty knows it’s a mistake. It’s just a ploy, but the Goblin is doing such a good job of acting, he can’t help himself. He looks around and sees Esse running towards him.

“Monty!” Esse exclaims. It is the first time we have seen Esse happy... ever.

“Ess’mer’lence,” he says as he holds her in a tight embrace. “I didn’t think there were any survivors.”

“At least me and De’sca’lence.”

“How is the kid?”

“I haven’t seen her since the fall... The EVIL Warlord, Matt is how he calls himself. The EVIL Warlord has taken her captive. I go to free her and kill him.”

“Good for you Ess’mer’lence,” Monty says enthusiastically, supporting her in the path she has chosen for herself. He pulls back from the embrace to look at her. “You’ve grown.” He traces the scar on her face. “I don’t think I’ve seen this before.”

“It a remembrance from the EVIL Warlord.” She narrows her eyes. “It is to remind me to kill him when I see him.”

Monty shrugs amiably. “Or, torture. You don’t want to be hasty and rule out torture.” He traces the scar again. “This is more than a battle scar you know.”

Esse moves his hand away. “Do not make it more than it is. He left a mark on my face, and for that I will leave a hole in his heart.”

“You might want to word your curses a little more carefully...” Monty’s voice trails off. His attention has been compromised as he finally notices Esse’s traveling companions. “Is that... Is that... Is that Klara Bo Southborne? The Klara Bo Southborne?”

Klara flutters her eyes, twirls her umbrella, and gives Monty a leering smile. “Why, I do declare.”

“Oh my Gra’gl! It’s Klara Southborne! How did you ever get Klara to hook up with you, Ess’mer’lence?” It is a rhetorical question. Monty rushes over to Klara. “I’m such a fan.” He looks around madly for something for her to write her autograph on and then remembers himself. He takes her hand softly. “May I Miss Southborne?”

“I do declare,” Klara twitters merrily as Monty kneels before her and lavishes her hand with kisses.

“Have you lost your mind Monty?” Esse asks, but Monty isn’t listening. He is looking around again for something for Klara to sign. He is hampered in his quest, by a refusal to let go of her hand. Finally, he produces a black felt tipped marker from thin air which he hands to her as he slaps his stomach. “Right there. Sign away. To Monty... with Flames of Passion or something...”

Klara fans herself with her hand. “I do declare it is hot in here... Mister?”

“Monty, my friends call me Monty... or Montgomery if you prefer.”

“That is such a sweet name,” Klara says. “Montgomery.” She takes a publicity photo out and signs it for Monty.

He takes it and carefully files it away into that transdimensional space that demons, demi-demons, and bureaucrats* file stuff away into as he holds her hand again, stares into her eyes, and motions with his head towards the lava. “Want to go for a swim?”

“I do declare Mister Montgomery, my clothes would burn.”

Monty shakes his head up and down eagerly. He's thought it through himself. "I've got fire resistant rings. We can all go for a swim. I'll be back in a minute."

*(Just as a pointless aside, I can't spell worth crap. If it wasn't for spell check, I don't know how I'd get anything out the door. I just thought you might find it amusing, as I do, that every time I type bureaucrats, I spell it wrong and the only option that spell check comes up with for me is bearcats. Maybe my computer knows something I don't... Or, maybe this little aside is just 68 pointless words closer to that magical publishable number of 100,000... make that 89.)

###

A Ring of Fire! A Ring of Fire!
(a.k.a. A nod to Double Indemnity)

So what does this make, the third time we've done a Klara Southborne striptease in this feature. I think you can visualize it on your own by now. Monty gives her a ring, Bruce and Esse a ring, and a ring for Underling #1, #2, #3, #4, & #5. Perhaps, not surprisingly, there is no ring for the Goblin.

Klara wades into the river of lava and as she does her clothes catch fire. "I DO DECLARE!" she yells in mock pain as she pretends to be incinerated and writhes in agony. She makes a big show of it as she jerks and goes into a series of simulated rigor mortis twitches before she slowly sinks under water... only to bob to the surface moments later due to her ample buoyancy.

Snuff/Slasher flicks are a whole sub genre in and of themselves and within this twisted branch of fetishized cinematography, there is the amazingly popular sub sub genre of immolation. What some creatures from the lower plans won't pay to see a monk dump a gallon of gasoline over his head, or better yet...

Well, decorum forbids me from continuing down that line. Suffice to say, what with running a K'fr processing plant, a white slave empire, or just being head of a good ole fashioned Mafioso family; your average Depth Fiend has an amazing amount of disposable income. Income they are happy to spend on any media project that gives even the slightest nod to their demented demonic desires.

“Wow!” Monty remarks to Esse as he wipes the sweat off of his forehead. “That Klara is something.”

“I do declare,” Esse says sarcastically, but the effect is lost on Monty.

“Why don't you come in?” Monty urges as he splashes in the lava. Esse is sitting on the edge of the river, she dips her toes in the fiery water, but goes no further. She has not taken off her clothes and she doesn't intend to.

“Come on,” Monty requests in a sing song voice as he playfully splashes her. Esse rolls sideways quickly to avoid Monty's splash and as she turns around she is pointing Matt's sword at Monty's face.

“Well, aren't we a party pooper,” Monty remarks unfazed. He gazes at Bruce who is over by the K'fr processing equipment. “What's he doing?”

“Probably planting explosives... They think destroying your operation is imperative to some greater quest.”

“What do you think he is using? Plastic? C-10?”

“I don't know. I didn't ask. Look, I can just go over there and kill him. No problem. He's not much of a wizard.”

“No. No,” Monty smiles to himself. It's not much of an imitation, but what do you want. He's a Depth Fiend not a character actor. “So what you are saying is that you led; my own flesh and blood led a group of adventures to my lair to shut me down?”

Esse stands. “Look. It's no biggy. I'll just run him through.”

Klara has swum up besides Monty. Although her clothes look burned, they also look like the sort of burned clothes you might get from wardrobe. She has black smudges on her face, reminiscent of the black smudges make up puts on disaster victims. Klara sidles up next to Monty in the burning lava and strokes his neck with her hand. "I do declare," she murmurs softly.

Esse has never put her sword away. She angles it towards Klara. "I'd be happy to start with this one... You ever give any thought to your final death scene Miss I Do Declare?"

Klara, being a professional, knows there is only one possible response to such a threat. She says, "I do declare," while prudently swimming behind Monty.

Monty looks hurt. "I'm shocked Esse. I mean I know I'm just your Gra'gl Father, but I've been like an uncle to you. Time was you'd come down her just to go swimming, torment the Goblin porters, and roast marsh mellows over the lava river. What happened? I can't believe you're betraying me by bringing a bunch of adventuring do gooders..." He turns to Klara. "You are a meddling do gooder."

"I do declare," Klara states as she thrusts her chest out ever farther.

She was going to continue, but as she was formulating some good, bad, better sexual innuendo, Monty lifts her up and carries her out of the water.

"We can just kill them," Esse insists, but Monty ignores her as he walks past her back to the poker table, where with a gallant flourish he sets Klara down. Then he whistles loudly and calls out, "Brilliant, Bruce Brilliant... are you setting up explosive charges with the intent of blowing up my secret lair?"

Bruce looks up with a start. "Um, er," he stammers. He thought Klara was occupying the Depth Fiend, but instead the Depth Fiend has his arm around her, is smiling one of those evil creepy Depth Fiend smiles. "Um, er," he tries again. "I was just admiring your processing equipment." He takes off his purple plumed hat to wipe his forehead and remembers his outfit. "You

know, we're interested in buying some K'fth," he says stumbling over the word like a pro. "Need to make sure what's coming out the other side is pure."

Monty leaves Klara and walks over towards Bruce. His smile is unnerving as are his comments. "This is great. I'm exchanging witty repartee with Bruce Brilliant... you're a good guy right Bruce."

"No. No. I'm an evil K'fr dealer."

Monty smiles. "If you're evil, kill one of the lab techs."

"What?" Bruce asks aghast.

Monty comes up behind Underling #5 and punches a hole through his chest. Blood splatters everywhere. "If you're evil, prove it with some pointless murder." Monty grabs Underline #4 and tosses him through the air towards Bruce.

"What?" comes Bruce's inspired response.

Monty has grabbed hold of Underling #3, a Gnome, and is holding him up in the air. The Gnome tries ineffectually to run away. After a bit Monty tires of his antics and rips him in half. He smiles, "Your turn."

"Um..." Two weeks of non-stop banter and when the crucial moment comes, what do we hear? "Um..."

"You're not really evil," Monty assures him. "You're Bruce Brilliant. You're one of the good guys. Everyone knows that."

Bruce doesn't have anything brilliant to say to that, so he pushes the button on the transmitter in his pocket arming the explosives.

"Oh, good, I like that," Monty compliments him. He doesn't bother to point out that Bruce is standing next to a self destruct button. It would have been every bit as effective, but the flashing lights hurt Monty's eyes and the sirens make conversation hard. He continues. "So, it's settled, you are good."

"Good as the day is long," Bruce quips.

"I'm good too," Klara says as she goes to join Bruce, but Monty wraps his arms around her and won't let her past him.

"Good, I'd say you were more like fantastic."

“Well, I do declare Montgomery, are you trying to seduce me into changing my lawful ways?”

Monty beams brightly. “We’ll just have to see about that.”

“Why, I do declare Mister Montgomery,” and I do believe for the first time in my life, I am seeing Klara blush.

Monty seems a bit flustered himself. He stares into her eyes for a moment and then drifts back dreamily to the poker table. He sits down and pulls out a piece of paper from that spot where bearcats do their filing. “I just want to make sure that we are clear that my secret lair is under threat of imminent destruction by a party of meddling do-gooders... you are meddling?”

“I’ll meddle if you want me to,” Klara offers seductively.

Monty pulls himself away from her gaze. “And I was betrayed by a close family member.”

“We can still kill them” Esse insists as she brings the blade of Matt’s sword to Bruce’s neck and draws blood. “Disarm the device wizard.”

“I can’t,” Bruce insists.

Monty ignores them as he opens up the paper he is holding and spreads it on the table. It is his insurance policy. “Full replacement value... loss of income... here we are.” He reads carefully. “Double payment if your operations are closed down as a result of a religious, noble, and/or Good Quest.” Monty smiles as he looks up and pulls his fist towards his body in celebration. “Cha-ching... triple coverage if said do gooders are meddling.” He happily kisses Klara on her cheek. “My darling meddling one.” He goes back to the paper. “Ah... here it is... the grand prize.” He has a tear in his eye as he looks up at Esse. “A 10X multiplier if I’m betrayed by a close family member.” He can’t help himself. Tears of joy are running down his face. “I’m so proud of you. You’ve betrayed your Uncle Monty.”

“You’re really just my god father.”

Monty wipes a tear from his face. “So big, so grown up, sooo evil... she’s even trying to cheat me out of my insurance policy by devaluing our close relationship.” He can’t help himself.

He rushes around the table and gives Esse a big tear filled hug.
“I’m so proud.”

The scene is not over yet. As Monty sniffles and tries not to be overwhelmed by emotion, the Goblin taps his cards on the table.
“We were in the middle of a hand.”

“Sniffle... What?” It is Monty’s turn to be at a loss for words.

“The middle of a hand.” The Goblin repeats himself.

“You’re all in.” He taps on the deed to the mine that is lying on the table and then pushes a stack of chips into the middle of the pile.

“And, I’m all in. I call. Royal Flush!” the Goblin declares as he flips over his cards. He smiles and looks about as smug as a person can look when half their bones are broken.

“What! No! You cheated!” Monty looks around wildly.

“While we were swimming... you just changed cards... it’s obvious you cheated.”

“We’ll just kill him,” Esse says as she swings her sword around.

“No. This is poker.” Monty looks around worriedly. “Evil is one thing. Gra’gl likes the bit of evil here and there, even encourages it, but gambling debts and poker especially... He’s a real stickler.”

Smugly the Goblin flips over Monty’s cards. “Bluffing,” he says derisively and then scoops the pot his way. “OK. Hand over the insurance policy.”

Monty files it away with the bears, cats, and other zoo animals... don’t ask me. It’s some demonic thing. “Clearly the policy wasn’t in the pot. It’s been in my pocket the entire time.”

Sirens sound in the distance.

“We should go,” Monty advises the group and leads the principal characters down a side passage.

Moments later cops storm the secret lair and set upon Underling #1, Underling #2, and Underling #3, beating them merrily.

“Whose in charge here,” they ask between blows and all fingers point towards the Goblin trying desperately to follow after our ‘heroes.’

“Where do you think you’re going?” a police officer who looks surprisingly like a human version of Bull asks as he grabs the Goblin.

“We should interrogate him,” a short female pixyish police officer replies as she pulls out her Billy club, but before the scene can go any further, the charges which Bruce set detonate and the Depth Fiend’s K’fr processing plant ceases to be.

###

Hot Rock! Hot Rock!

We have arrived at the next scene early. We are at the promontory of a rise. Down below is a river of lava snaking slowly into the unseen ocean a mile away. It is near dusk and so the lava glows with a luminous red-orange. We have, of course, touched this up. I not saying lava...

“Better watch what you’re saying sonny.”

An old...

“Uh-uh.”

Despite her warnings an old crone is still pretty much the best description. She is a white haired old woman overlooking the valley below. She is the god...

“Goddess.”

Of fire. Despite her age she is incredibly sexy.

“Alluring, hypnotizing, captivating... if I do say so myself.” She shakes her full head of hair.

She is Pele... well maybe not Pele.

“I’m Pele. What do you mean maybe not Pele?” She raises her hands slowly over her head as she sways her hips provocatively in a slow false step.

“It’s called dancing sonny boy, don’t be making it all fancy.”

Pele dances. It is the hula, and then it is more. In response to her entreaties the side of the mountain explodes and a geyser of lava fills the air.

“That’s not the only thing I can make erupt,” she insinuates salaciously. “You know, I can be younger...” Her body starts to morph as she regresses in age... but we remind her off screen that we like the old crone look and if she looks as old as the island itself rather than the age of the current flow, we will not run afoul of child pornography laws.

“You white men make everything too complicated. A girl can’t be too young, can’t be too old... bah! If the ground shakes, if the earth moves, isn’t that enough?”

She sways her hips in slow circles and the mountain responds with renewed vigor. “That’s what I’m talking about. What more do you want?”

As Pele loses herself in her dance our heroes come into view scrambling up the slope. Despite the fire resistant rings, all of their clothes are singed and smoking... even the Depth Fiend’s.

“Aloha... welcome,” Pele says as she dances for our party and places a lei around each of their necks. As she does, each of them changes. Bruce’s pimp suit turns back into his old jeans jacket black cowboy hat ensemble. Klara changes from an Elf to a Human Southern Belle before our eyes and her pink dress and umbrella renew themselves. Esse changes from a Fey’an to a Thai-ish looking Tomboy Human, and although she still carries weapons, they are hidden from view. Lastly, Monty is transformed into a tattooed, pierced, degenerate looking evil brute... although he can pass as a human, the simple truth is he looks more like a cross between an Ogre and a professional wrestling bad boy.

To some extent, all of this is mere theatrics. Although they are presently in a manna rich environment, the vortex they find themselves in is historically a manna wasteland. It is the odd bit of counter intuitiveness, but disguise spells are never needed in manna poor locales. Despite the seeming absence of magic, non-

conforming visitors (Elves to a Human world, Humans to a Dwarf world, and so on) automatically take on the appearance of the native dwellers, as if by, well... magic. Like I said, it's counterintuitive. It's been theorized that this is a way magic poor vortex's insulate themselves against magic encroachment as if the vortexes themselves have some sort of will. I personally believe it is easier to simply assume all sentients have some residual magical power and rather than accept that Elves, Dwarves, or dragons are real; they simply find it easier to cast a mass delusion/disguise spell.

Like my other explanations on magic, I feel this one is somehow lacking. The only reason I included it was to highlight that no matter how much you think you know about magic, there is always someone, somewhere utilizing magic exactly opposite of the way you are... in ways you might have thought were impossible, but they're not. Such is the nature of magic.

Anyhow, let us return to the action.

"A-hem. Yes. As I was saying before I was interrupted," the crotchety old crone begins her...

The old crone narrows her eyes and seeks out one of the many invisible floating crystal ball camera eyes covering the scene. "Don't be starting with the lip boy," she says warningly.

Or, what? You'll torch my house. For dramatic effect a house flares in the distance.

Pele is riled now. "Oh, don't be blaming me for that. She goes into the realm of bearcats and pulls out a map of the island. "See, this here is a flow chart. It shows were it's safe to build a house and where it's not. See right here. This red area. I've been dumping lava down these slopes for the last 250,000 years. If you build a house there and it gets torched, it's your own damn fault. Now over hear," she says indicating a green area on the map. "This is pretty safe. I haven't played over here in a while. I'm not saying I won't ever again, but to get to say this valley right here Mister Author."

I'm listening.

"Well, to get to that valley, I'd have to flow uphill for ten miles at an altitude gain of over a 1,000' and erupt from a caldera I haven't used in half a million years."

So I'm pretty safe.

"No. You're not listening sonny. So if your house gets torched some night, you should take the hint and realize it wasn't some freak accident... but these idiots built their house in the middle of a flow bed. It says so right here on the map, so don't be giving me grief."

...

"Ah, ah, ah," she waives her finger warningly. "Don't be making me look bad... or evil."

No, of course not.

Pele returns her attention to her guests. "I guess you heard all that."

Her guests nod.

"Well, behave. You're my guests. No mucking things up. Enjoy the beaches, buy a few souvenirs, enjoy the weather, and we'll all get along just fine." She turns her attention to Esse. "And no killing the locals. I don't care if you think he's some EVIL Warlord... of all the ridiculous..."

But she is interrupted by Monty. He has produced a black pen again. "I'm a big fan."

"A pen? You sissy." She takes the pen out of his hand and replaces it with a fresh piece of lava. He drops the lava in pain as it sears his flesh. "Now there's a real souvenir." As an afterthought she adds to her guest, "and no taking any rocks... like I'd go to your house and take a brick out of your wall as a souvenir."

Monty is busy looking at his swelling hand. "Wow! I could really learn from you."

"I don't take apprentices."

"At least let me buy you supper," Monty insists.

“Well, there is that new resort down on the coast I’ve been meaning to hit.”

“Then it’s a date... anybody else want in?”

Miss “I do declare,” wraps her arm around Monty. “If I wouldn’t be imposing.”

The crone considers it. “I like your style kid, but no trying to show me up on the dance floor.”

“How about you Bruce?” Monty asks.

Bruce has been watching a stray bit of manna float around. “This place isn’t as manna poor as folks are letting on.”

“There’s a leak somewhere,” the crone admits.

Bruce deftly snatches the manna out of the air as he thinks out loud. “We nailed the K’fr processing plant. My bit in this story is over... All of us can just walk away from it, leave the past behind.” He says this last part while looking at Esse, but she ignores him. “I think I’m going to bow out, take it easy for awhile; meditate, get in touch with my inner self. You know. Rejuvenate, figure out where to go next.”

“There are some real lookers down at the resort,” Pele advises him.

“OK. Maybe I’ll tag along for a while. How about you Esse?” Bruce says trying to give her another opportunity to change the course she is on.

“This story is not over yet. There is still killing that needs doing,” she answers grimly.

“Well, heed well what I said Missy,” the bitter old house destroying crotchety crone... “Eh, still holding that grudge? You should come with us author boy. This flow has only been going on for few years, I’ll show you some dancing tonight.” So what the heck, like I could turn down an invitation from the goddess herself to go dancing. I’m only human after all. So as the five of us...

“Six, I’m coming along.” the Story Finishing Gnome insists over my shoulder...

So as the six of us walk down one slope towards the coast, Esse walks uphill towards Matt’s secret lair.

As we are almost gone, and the scene is almost over, the amazingly spry child goddess calls back to Esse. “Remember. No killing the locals,” and then after a moment she adds. “Unless they’ve done something really horrendous.”

Like walking on someone’s shadow, eating a banana...

“Or making eyes at a chiefs daughter... or up staging a goddess on the dance floor.”

“I do declare Miss Pele; what type of guest do you take me for?”

“With all respect, I don’t think that last comment was directed at you. I think she was talking to me,” the Story Finishing Gnome says with a mischievous grin on his face as he starts to cut it up on the way down the hill. “No one can do the Limbo like I can.”

“He’s so cute,” Pele squeals in adolescent delight and with that our sextet descends from view and although I’ll be back in the morning I expect that will be all we hear from Bruce, Klara, Monty, and Pele, the bitter old...

“Don’t you have eyes.”

Bedeviling, young...

“That’s better.”

Goddess of these fair isles.

###

Magic Made Easy

There is nothing to write in this chapter. The more cynical of you may note, “So, what’s new?”

“Oh, same old, same old, but thanks for asking...”

That little bit of nonsense aside. Here’s the proposed start for this chapter:

They say love is blind. Apparently revenge is not.

And, then we follow along as Esse goes waltzing straight off to Matt's secret lair. Now me personally, I don't have any problem with Esse tracking straight to Matt's house. She's a skilled Fey'an warrior brought up in the ways of the hard road, and this includes the ability to track down her sworn enemy, and arch nemesis, Matt the EVIL Warlord. It's simply something Esse can do. It doesn't matter that she is in an alien vortex whose inhabitants practice unfamiliar customs. She's not planning on interacting with the locals anyhow. She's just planning on walking to Matt's house, say "Hi. How's it going? Remember me? You killed my family," and then drive his own sword through his heart. It's a simple plan, which will give a certain degree of, er, closure to our story, but as I sat down to work this morning I started second guessing myself. Is Esse being a skilled warrior explanation enough? Will viewers accept it... or do we need something more?

And, that concept of needing something more may appear to contradict with Esse not being a paid actress, all the characters in the story having freewill, and this account being a more or less accurate representation of the events as they happen. And although they look intertwined, they are actually separate concepts. Esse is not a paid actress; never has been and never will be, because quite frankly we don't have it in the budget. Secondly, whether or not she is an actress has nothing to do with freewill. Bruce is an actor and he has freewill. He decided the role he would play in this adventure, not me. Sure, me and the backers can decide a lot of the background. We can whip up a storm or make sure a crucial bit of plant debris winds up in Dee's hair, but how the individuals react to the events surrounding them is their own choice. It's the last item on the list, I'd have questions about, if I were you. Are the events as portrayed accurate?

Now, here's where I'll go back to Esse. Esse tracked her way to Matt's house. It's not conventional tracking, but she's a Fey'an... and I'll admit one of the reasons I am having a problem with it is because it's something I don't really understand. Is it enough to say Esse is a Fey'an tracker? There really isn't anything

else to say... so suppose I decided it wasn't enough. That despite a reader's willingness to believe, I personally can't see letting the story lay at, Esse tracked her way to Matt's house. So what then? Believe it or not I have options. Instead of saying Esse is a Fey'an tracker, I can say she casts a spell, she uses a tracking bauble she left behind with her equipment, or Matt's sword acts as a homing device. They are straight forward, easy to digest explanations. Trust me. I don't know how many times I've been in a production meeting after a plot has gotten out of hand and gone all screwy and someone says magic; blank, blank, blank magic. It sounds pretty convincing doesn't it? Blank, blank, blank magic, will pretty much explain anything away.

And here's where we're going to get to what this chapter is really about. We'll call it editing. We'll call it post production perceptual modification techniques. So, suppose we've had our production meeting and we've decided that although we all know Esse used her Fey'an tracking abilities, the audience isn't familiar enough with Fey'ans to accept tracking as an explanation. Instead, we've decided to go with Esse casting a tracking spell. The beauty part is if this is how we decided to go, Esse doesn't even have to cast a spell. We'll make it happen post production. Here's how:

That Pele scene which shows up as a few minutes on film and a chapter in the book took over an hour of real time. Esse has never been much with the small talk, so she spends most of the time being bored and idly waiting. Instead of showing this during the Pele scene, we show it later, picking from the footage we have that does not include any of the other characters. It makes Esse look indecisive and hesitant about which way to go. Then we take a random, fidgeting hand movement that Esse made during this time, focus on it, blow it up, and add a manna aura along with a little sparkle and flash in post production. The last thing we need is a little auditory reinforcement. You know; Esse speaking a word of force to power her spell. We wouldn't use a real one, because a movie will never get played in the big theatre chains if you use real power words, so what you do is fake it. One of the many things

we didn't show in the Pele scene was Esse hugging Monty and saying goodbye in Fey'an. Somewhere, someone watching the film is going to know Fey'an, so what we do is take that raw audio track, slow it down, and play it backwards. Couple the natural use of magic in Fey'an speech with the backwards chirping of birds and the muffled roar from the flowing lava, and you've got some eerie sounding vocal effects.

Taken as a whole, that's an example of how we could blatantly lie, but sooner or later someone is going to view the original scene with a crystal ball. They'll know we lied and the next thing it'll be all over the Ether Net. Not a big deal if you're producing fiction, but bad news if you're claiming realism, as we are. Sure, it's Holly Wood self aggrandizing behind the scenes tell all realism, but at some level it is real, and if we show Esse casting a spell when she doesn't, we'll never hear the end of it.

So, if we were to blatantly lie, it would only come back to haunt us, but we could stretch the truth if we wanted to and this becomes more esoteric, because it's a value call. Let me start with a subtle example of stretching the truth. Let's start with Esse again. Monty and the gang have left and she's getting ready to go. As a Fey'an tracker she looks at the ground, studies the trees, rocks, and gets a general feel for the vortex. Arguable one could include the sun, moon, clouds, stars, and sky to this mix of what she looks at. I am told it's not an important element of tracking, but at the same time the sky isn't ignored. The critical concept is that, however slim, we have a basis in reality. Esse, as part of her tracking, will look at the sky.

Now in fact, Esse as a tracker doesn't need anything else to get her to Matt's, but we are looking for is something we can show to the viewers that gives them a feel for this tracking... without being overly misleading.

One way to do this is to take a shot of the horizon from where Pele was with special manna revealing filters on our camera lenses. If we were to track across the sky, in the distance we would

see a slight hint of a manna geyser peaking above the treetops. Silent sparkles of manna and dancing lights would glow almost out of sight, behind the trees and hills. It would look a lot like big aerial fireworks, almost completely hidden at this distance, but not totally. The geyser is centered on Matt's house. Its origin is The K'fr Road portal in the ceiling of Matt's bedroom. Magic is literally flooding into this vortex and anyone with the sight can see it for miles around. So, to accomplish our goal of linking Esse's tracking to something understandable, all we have to do is edit back and forth between Esse and the geyser. Esse walks up the side of a hill and in the distance we see the geyser. We see Esse walking towards us across a grassy field and then swing around to look where she is going. It is the geyser and it has grown larger. If there is any question in the viewers mind as to where Esse's magical sight is coming from, we can focus in on a shot of her rubbing her eye where the EVIL Warlord hit her. Remember that? And then remember Gary Ganesh doing a little healing? What was that all about?

But, the bottom line is we don't want to get into Esse's eye. It is clear at this point that whatever gift or power Esse's eye has the potential to develop into won't happen before the end of the story. This has everything to do with Esse's refusal to give up the quest of killing Matt. Gary Ganesh is a good guy. He's against the whole idea of revenge, and as such he's put any development of Esse gift on indefinite hold. Since we know nothing is going to come of the fractal starburst around Esse's eye until after the story is essentially over, we have no desire to draw any further attention to it, and with that cursory dismissal, we will leave it behind.

At this point, we have talked much about adding fabrications to the account, but even once one decides not to add any blatant fabrications, relating a truthful account is not as straightforward as some might imagine. Let's join Esse for a moment as she walks towards Matt's house. The island is bigger than many would imagine. The walk takes days. The camera focuses on Esse as she

walks by a waterfall. It is a simple action. Esse is at a waterfall, but what does it mean? Is this a detour? Is this a scene of Esse taking a moment to stop and smell the proverbial roses... possibly rethinking her planned course of action? Cut ahead and she has stopped by a roadside stand for nourishment. She is eating an ice cream cone. The sun shines on her face. She smiles. She laughs. Has she caught the eye of a small baby and reconnected with the joy in life? Or, has she simply thought of a new and better way to kill Matt?

Two different narrators would take the same scenes, the same actions and paint different pictures. I see Esse as proceeding towards Matt's house with grim determination. I have every confidence should Esse come upon Matt asleep in his bed, he would never wake up again. Another might relate the same facts, along with the same prediction, but give them a different twist.

Esse was beginning to have second thought about the merits of the road she had chosen and the oaths she had sworn, but unlike her sister, Esse did not have the will to throw off her past. Despite her growing misgivings, Esse knew when she met Matt, one of them would die.

Factually, the passage is accurate. Like everyone, Esse has cross thoughts and dissenting ideas floating through her head. Assigning motivations is a not a science. It is done by sense of touch and in the end is highly subjective.

As you may have noticed, we are closing down story trails. The fractal starburst around Esse's eye is gone. I admit, we had high hopes in the beginning for something to pan out, but then we would have guessed she was going to go on the main quest as well. I need not belabor the point. Esse's eye is gone. Monty is gone, while Bruce and Klara are out of the story as well.

We have come to the final pages. Our story is near an end, but before we resume, let me share with you two final facets of

storytelling, which are not usually considered by the audience. The first is general to all stories, while the second only applies to fiction and reality based productions. Esse's walk to Matt's house will take her five days. She walked with Bruce for over a week and a half. She was in Monty's lair for over two hours. How long did these events take on film? On paper? You can rest assured Bruce told Esse far more than was ever related in this story as did Monty. What I am trying to express is that not only can we control your perception of the story by what we add, but also by what we leave out. And perhaps, most importantly, we can control it by seemingly chance encounters, serendipity, and coincidence. If Esse had lost her way, it would have been a small matter to give either Mr. Cardinal or the Lieutenants a compulsion to visit the locale where Esse was and let the similarity in appearance between Esse and Dee guide the scene's resolution. Which is just another way of saying, freewill or not, the show must go on.

###

A Cold Family Reunion

So, if you don't want to go with the legendary tracking ability of the Fey'an warriors, I leave it for you to figure the intervening steps. One way or another, Esse stands in front of Matt's house gazing at the streamers of manna shooting into the heavens, she smirks at Matt's seemingly pretentious display of wealth. How many souls have died so that he might have a pointless manna fountain shoot into the sky?

She does not wonder at the K'fr vines growing out of the house. Nor does she pay any mind to the homeowner's association's notice taped to the front door demanding removal of the 'Unsightly Weed'.

She draws Matt's sword and creeps inside. The house is thick with K'fr vines, leaves, and flowers. She hears the running kitchen faucet. She sees the roots choking the sink. Everything is covered with a heavy tangle of vines. The carpet and wall are no

longer visible. Perhaps correct to some extent, she determines the reason Matt attacked Hals'bad was so he could control the K'fr trade for himself. It is the only way to explain why he lives in a house of K'fr. She does not pause to consider that perhaps Matt, and/or others, do the vine's will, which is odd. For as she walks slowly down the hall, past the glowing closet with the grow light, she strokes a large thorn in greeting. As if to say, I am here K'fr, I will avenge you and grant you your freedom as well.

Her sword at the ready, Esse walks slowly down the hallway, which has essentially become a K'fr lined tunnel. A breeze blows the leaves about, damping out all other sounds. Who knows what traps the Evil Warlord has placed in his lair, or what viscous beasts guard his home? Esse moves light footed and cautiously. She is in no hurry. She has reached the end of the hall. The passage forks. She pauses to consider which way to go.

We cut views and show Dee sewing on Matt's bed and focus in on Spook, the ridge back puppy, that lies by her side. He opens his eyes. Lifts her ears and then he is on full alert. Spook barks Dee a warning, "Intruders," and scampers off the bed. We track along with Spooks in a ground eye view as he dashes towards the hall. He runs around K'fr vines and rooms within rooms that the plant has created. He comes running towards Esse and she swings her blade in greeting. She has only one thought, to kill the vile beast.

We cut away to Dee on the bed. She hears Spook's excited bark, a growl, and then a pitiful whimper. "Spook," she calls, as she drops her sewing and runs after him. She arrives in the hallway just in time to see her sister raise her sword to finish the monstrosity.

"Freeze!" Dee screams without thinking. We garble the word, but the effect is clear. Esse has turned to ice. Dee turns her attention to Spook. His insides are spilled out from a sword gash. "You too," Dee says sadly and with one last whimper, Spook is frozen.

###

Time to Cool Off

It is just as well. Dee gently carries Spook back to the bed and lays him down. Then she returns to her sister and pushes her into the bedroom. She is not dead. She will thaw soon enough, as will Spook. Dee props her against the far wall where she will be in plain sight. She is happy to see her sister, but she is wary. It is a dangerous meeting. Their paths are at cross purposes. She knows Esse is here to rescue her, but by tradition, she is bound to resist...

By tradition, by the rules and ways of the soft road, Dee is beholden to her master. She is sworn to protect her master however possible. She is sworn to deliver any rescuer or assassin to her master's hand, even if that rescuer be her own sister. And she is to do this by whatever means possibly... that her master would approve of. Surely an Evil Warlord would approve of a little deception, a little lying, a mere shaving of the truth. How then could Esse ever possibly believe that Dee had fallen from the soft road. That is the first thing Dee would claim, so as to throw Esse off her guard. Are there not endless stories of a lover coming to rescue his beloved only to be greeted by a kiss, a heart felt embrace, and a dagger's piercing blade?

So, it is just as well how it has transpired. Esse will have time to cool off as it were. Get it? Cool off... OK. I'm not a big fan of puns either, but you play the cards you're dealt. Look on the bright side, at least I haven't referred to Spook as a Pup-cicle...

Anyway, Dee sits on the bed and cradles spook. Birds singing words of celebration hop onto the comforter to see what she is doing, and inquire as to whether anything needs bringing.

"How may we help De'sca'lence?" they sing in Fey'an. The room is flooded with magic. They get the magic intonation correct and say De'sca'lence name as it should be said. Dee is pleased.

The birds learned the words quickly, as if it was not too long ago that these parts were rich with manna.

She instructs the birds to fetch fresh fruits for her sister.

“We help the De’sca’lence,” the birds sing as they depart.

Dee renews the frost spell on her sisters legs, while she sets K’fr braziers to float at her upper extremities. She turns her sewing to Spook, as she waits.

We fade out. Times passes. We fade back in focusing on Esse’s hand. The frost has melted. Dripping condensation trickles off her fingers as her grip on the sword weakens. Her fingers loose their rigidity and Matt’s sword clatters to the ground.

Dee pats Spooks head. He is tired, sedated, but he will live. His insides are back where they belong. At the sound of the dropping sword, Dee looks up at Esse who blinks her eyes. She wraps her hands around her body and shivers. She notices that her legs are set in a block of ice.

“You would betray me! Your own sister!” Esse growls, but Dee pays her no mind. What else could she expect. Instead she reaches behind her and takes a boiling pot off of a small bedside stand. She pours Esse a bowl of fresh K’fr tea, which she causes to float towards her sister.

“Poison?” Esse asks.

“You would be dead, if that was my desire. You need not be so dramatic... I am free from Matt,” and then realizing her sister may not understand, she adds, “the EVIL Warlord. He is not my master.” She indicates her hand embroidered, cardinal lined harem outfit. “I am my own master, my own mistress... drink... You will thaw faster. You will feel better.”

“I do not believe that you are free,” Esse states as she brushes aside the K’fr tea.

“I did not expect you to. That is why your feet are set in a block of ice. As the ice melts, it will give you time to consider, that if I wanted you dead, you would be. If I wanted you helpless

and bound, you would be. When you are free, you will know that it is only by my will that you are.”

“He has enslaved your mind.”

“How do you ever plan on trusting me again. If I am truly his, the mere passage of time, or change of scenery would not change this. At the first opportunity I would have to kill you and make my escape. What type of life is that for either of us? Trust me when I tell you I am free?”

“I will believe it when he is dead.”

Dee does not respond. Instead she pours a bowl of tea for herself and shares it with Spook and the returning birds. “You will feel better after you have had some tea.” She arranges the small fruits and nuts the birds have brought onto a plate. “And a light snack?”

“When he is dead, then I will break bread with you.”

“So, it’s not just rescuing, it’s also revenge.”

“It is the way. You know that,” Esse says

“Then you will have to wait,” Dee remarks as she waves her hand and the frost renews itself, slowly climbing up Esse’s torso.

“I knew you lied.”

“Put your hands by your side,” Dee advises. “You will be more comfortable.”

Esse is conflicted. How is she being tricked? But in the end she complies and as the frost takes her over, she is standing straight with her arms by her side. Dee causes her to levitate and sets her sister down on the bed, so she has a view of the portal.

“Why did you not use your magic against the EVIL Warlord when he attacked?”

“All of us fought as well as we could until the fight was over.”

“The fight is never over.”

“True... I am glad you came for me Esse. Watch the ceiling. It is a portal that shows us Matt, the EVIL Warlord’s actions.”

“He will die,” Esse manages from between clenched teeth.

Dee had to giggle. It was ridiculous. Esse couldn't be more helpless and if Dee hadn't fallen from the path... Suddenly Dee realized maybe she was delusional and she hadn't fallen from the path. "I wish I could trust you, but I can't. If I let you go, you would only die. Powerful forces back Matt. They will keep him alive... till the end of the story... they call it a movie, a book."

"They have gotten to you too," Esse growled.

"You are far more bitter than I remember."

"Our people have been destroyed, but maybe you don't remember... or never cared."

Dee kisses her sister's forehead and then lays next to her, stroking her arm. After a moment, she fine tunes the enchantment holding Esse prisoner. "You will have your chance. Should Matt return, you will be instantly freed... or when the scrying eyes, which surround us depart... They will be gone soon enough, and when they go, Matt's protection will leave with them. You may kill him then, if that is your desire."

"You advise as Monty did, that some things are best done off screen."

"Yes. Exactly. How is Monty these days?"

And, it is here, that I expect we will leave both Esse and Dee for the final time. Soon the camera's will be shut off and as Dee so accurately predicted, what happens to Matt then will no longer be our concern...

###

Getting the Show Back on the Road: The K'fr Road

Despite what I just said, we start the next scene in Matt's bedroom. The camera peers over Dee's shoulder as she consoles her frozen sister on the bed. "Soon you will have your revenge," Dee reassures her. The camera starts to float upward slowly and now we leave Esse and Dee behind as we tilt our gaze towards the portal. We see Bull's head peer into the ceiling of the room as if he is only feet away, but he is not. The portal entry is like a one way

mirror. Although Bull and the rest are easily seen from this side, all that can be seen from the other is the endless expanse of The K'fr Road. We break through the portal's membrane and glide down the K'fr lined tunnel. We pick up speed and in seconds we are going incredibly fast as thorns race by and then just as suddenly we stop. We have come to the end of the tunnel. We glide past Bull who is standing on a rickety ladder and calling down, "It's open." The way is clear. The thorn barricade is gone.

In a fluid motion, we continue our movements out of the portal, beyond the temple, and into the pooled gardens of the temple grounds.

"Et opens!" the Cobalts cheer.

"The ways be clears."

"I knew Bruce would come through," Zay remarks. Next to her, Targor wisely keeps silent. He does not wish to bad mouth a colleague and he has other issues on his mind. The end is near, he can tell, and that usually means an ambiguous cliff hanger death scene for him. It is something he would like to avoid if he could. In a flash he has come to a decision. "I quit. I'm done with the quest," he announces to all within earshot. "I'm retiring here... that OK with you Charlie."

"Okay Dokey's," Charlie, the Cobalt boss man agrees.

"We'd throws you'd da feasties tonite." Charlie consults with his advisors... Charlie and Charlie. "He bringa da butter, rights?"

"We don't know."

"We'se tinks so."

Zay turns to Targor. "You're quitting... hanging it up?"

"Better to stay here in a limbo then lost down a side trail on the road... or who knows what's waiting on the other side... they don't need me. Matt will find Ve'kahn with that hand of his. That's why he's here." He looks at Zay'ar'lyne. "You could stay. We could get married." Targor gets down on his knee, holds Zay's hand, and...

We mute out the sound. Very little of the end of our story will be definitive. Targor cannot explicitly get married. He has too

many female fans... or maybe that is exactly why he should get married... and what about Zay? Does she accept? That is for the next movie to figure out. We will not stay to watch. The camera floats between them and focuses long blurring out Zay's reaction to Targor's proposal.

The camera has focused on the trail head, which leads from the temple grounds to the beach and we watch as Gary Ganesh comes into view pulling a hand cart loaded down with trade items. Soft jingly bells announce his presence as the cart bounces into view.

“Et da Gary.”

Gary, our short elephantine merchant friend, stops at the entrance to the temple grounds. He takes out a handkerchief and wipes the sweat from his face. Pulling a fully loaded cart uphill is hard work. Before he can catch his breath, he is swarmed by Cobalts. They are like kids clamoring for a pennies, candies, peanuts, gungu snaps, and other trinkets of passing pleasure.

“We've lost Targor,” Bull comments taking stock of the situation as he climbs down from the portal opening.

“Zay too,” Jack advises him.

“Did she accept?”

“She's thinking it over.”

“So, they're not going to go with.”

“Nope... we could stay here too,” Jack hopefully suggests, but the innuendo is lost on Bull. He is busy putting together the party. “You're in, right Matt.”

“Yeah, sure.” The feeling that this is real has been growing on Matt. It's been the same dream for too long. Maybe he's gotten into a car crash and he's in a coma. Maybe he's gone insane. Or, maybe, just maybe, this is reality. He's not sure. His mind is still trying to come to terms with talking lizard men, Minataurs, Pixies, giant praying mantises... diminutive hairballs that talk... elephant merchants... and on and on.

It's too much. You could ask him, "Hey Matt. We're forming a raiding party to clear out the Ninth Plane of Hell. You want to come along? Be point man?" And he'd go, "Yeah, sure," oblivious to the danger or absurdity of the quest.

Bull does not dwell on Matt's detached affect. He's got other things on his mind. "How about you Kreel?"

The Kreel is silent for a moment. He doesn't want to be rushed into something he will regret. He gazes into the murky waters of the pond. "I'm in enough trouble as it is," he says working the problem out loud. "My wife is going to kill me..." and then a smile sweeps across his face as the answer comes to him. He can already hear her screams of rage. "OK. Why not?"

"Garg?" Bull asks.

"Garg In," he somberly nods.

"I guess that just leaves Irvin."

"Da monster stay here," Charlie insists.

Irvin does not move as his fate is discussed. He looks even sadder than before. He doesn't even have the will to tug at his chain. Glumly he stares into space.

"He be ours."

"Yeah'd too many'd us dies."

Garg can see where this is going. Quietly, without comment, he goes to where Irvin is tied up. He unhooks the chain and as he does he nonchalantly pockets a handful of egg casings that the Mantid has been dropping. Garg does not tell Irvin, "everybody dies," or reassure him in any way. He simply leads him over to where a Cobalt is and hands him over.

When he is done, Garg says, "We go."

"Not one last night?" Bull asks, but Garg insists in his trademark deadpan. "We go."

"Ready?" Bull asks Jack.

She flits up into his horns. "Ready."

"Saddle up! We're moving out!" Bull calls out as Garg and Matt climb up into the portal.

"Dey no horses here," a Cobalt scratches his head.

“Et just figures of speech,” another explains.

“I’m coming with,” Gary Ganesh calls out, but he is still swarmed by Cobalts. He tries to close up shop.

“Hey’s we helps,” a Cobalt complains.

“Yeas, we’s dies.”

“Lots of us dies, but we no geeve up.”

Then one of them has the master stroke of genius. “You leavee da carty wit us.”

“OOOH! Dat good ideas.”

“Yeah, you leave da cart.”

“Et like da reward.”

“But I need the cart,” Gary tries to explain, but the Cobalts don’t listen. Even now, they are ransacking his cart carrying off whatever they can. It is like one of those riots you see on TV in the Orcin sector every August.

The bells and baubles are rapidly stripped off the cart. They open the drawers and carry off bundles of cloth, packages of fireworks, and yes even a display case of rolled up novelty fortunes... and as Gra’gl is my witness, that is the last we will see of those fortunes!

After the cart is ransacked and there is nearly nothing left, one of the Cobalts opens the cart’s bottom cabinets and exclaims happily in a sing song voice. “Da butter! We gotta da butter!”

A pair of Cobalts rush forward to roll the five gallon bucket of butter away and another trio of Cobalts lead Gary to the group of adventurers. Bull is holding the ladder steady while Garg puts down his hand to assist the Kreel as he climbs into the tunnel.

“We works hard,” the Cobalt boss man explains. “You leavee da cart.”

The camera cuts back to the cart. There is nothing to leave. Even now, what is left of the cart is being used by the Cobalts to give wagon rides to one another.

“Et no big deal. You just snappy fingers, you get another one. Okays?” the boss man continues with his entreaty as he pushes Gary up the ladder.

“Okays, you go now.”

“Gettee da show on da road.”

“Youse no be stranger”

“Comee backs anytime,” a final Cobalt agrees.

But, this is not the last we will see of the Cobalts. Two of their number show up wearing newly patched blood stained red shirts. “We’s go wit you.”

“Yeahs, we’s help.”

Bull has started to climb the ladder back into the portal. Jack clutches at his horns. They will bring up the rear and are the last of the party to climb into the portal. Bull considers the Cobalts wearing their red shirts of near certain death. “Maybe you guys would be better off just staying here,” he advises them.

“He tries to keep all da glory for heemself.”

“Glory hog,” the Cobalts taunt him.

“You’re just going to die,” Bull warns them again.

The Cobalts look at each other. “No’s, we wear our lucky red shirts.”

“You no worry about us.”

Bull shrugs. He is certain by one means or another they will find a way to accompany the party. It will best if they are formally invited. “I suppose somebody has to die... You can scout ahead for us.”

“Now you talking meester.”

Bull puts his arm down and helps the Cobalts up.

“Tankee boss man.”

Bull gives it one last shot. “You sure you don’t want to stay?”

“We no likee lobster,” the Cobalt explains, but like many things in this last scene, the comment is lost on Bull.

After everyone is in the tunnel, the group slowly makes its way down The K’fr Road. It is slow going. The floor is a tangled mash of vines and thorns. Every footstep must be carefully placed.

The Cobalts are surprisingly nimble. As suggested, they take the lead and scout ahead. They move quickly and are careless with their own lives. They recklessly dance around large purple thorns that would kill them instantly if they were to trip or fall on them. Their antics make it clear, if they weren't such fast breeders, Cobalts would have died out long ago, but they are fast breeders. The population by the temple has already recovered from the Klk'it hunting expedition.

Behind the Cobalts, comes Matt. At any intersection, he chooses the path. He will lead them to Ve'kahn... or at least that is the hope. Then comes Garg, ready to deal with any nastiness and after him in the safest position of all is Gary Ganesh. He has to admit, for Cobalts, the little green buggers are awfully clever. He doesn't know how he would have ever pushed the cart over this tangle of vines and they were right; when they get to Ve'kahn, all he has to do is snap his fingers and another cart will appear. Traveling without one is so much easier.

Behind Gary walks the Kreel, who only after a few moments is already beginning to regret his decision. He cannot detect anything beyond the walls of the tunnel. It is like one of his senses has been cut off. True, he can feel the emotions of the others in the party. The playfulness of the Cobalts, the seriousness of Garg and Bull, the whirling confusion going on in Matt's head, and Jack's rekindling fear, but it is not enough. He doesn't feel the ever present warmth of a multitude of other creatures. For a mind reader, he seems hopelessly alone, cut off, and isolated. The Kreel looks back the way they came.

Behind him Jack perches in Bull's horns. Bull turns to see what the Kreel is looking at and as he does, Jack swivels in her lookout perch so she remains facing backwards. It is her job to make sure nothing sneaks up on them, and since she would likely be the first to be attacked should anything or anyone sneak up on them, she is a highly motivated lookout.

"What is it?" Bull softly questions the Kreel.

"We're alone," is the Kreel's cryptic response.

“That’s a good thing. Isn’t it?” Bull asks, but the Kreel has already turned around again facing forward. The words from the fortunes are dancing through the Kreel’s head; you can never go home again and with great risk comes great rewards. He doesn’t know that we have left the fortunes behind... but then he is a Kreel. Maybe he knows something we do not... but by Gra’gl, I would not bet on it.

We have followed the camera’s flow from the start of the group to the back and it is at the rear that we will linger for a moment or two longer. This is one of those times when only a few moments pass on film, but an indeterminate amount of time has passed in reality. We accomplish this effect in this particular scene by focusing in on Jack’s face and then cutting to what she is presumably looking at, the K’fr lined walls of the tunnel. Then we can edit back and forth between the tunnel wall and Jack making it look like we are following her momentary gaze when in reality we are simply jumping ahead in time to the desired point in the journey.

The exchange starts with Jack asking Bull, “Do you think we’ll run into any problems?”

“I don’t know,” Bull answers. “I overheard one of the cameramen saying they were almost out of film. I think they’re ready to wrap it up.”

“I hope so,” Jack agrees.

We cut from Jack’s face to vibrating patch of vine. A fist sized spider with purple markings pokes his head out and then disappears. We cut back to a close up of Jack’s face. Her eyes dart back and forth as she scans for trouble. A paranoid Pixie on high alert; you couldn’t ask for a better alarm system.

“Have you ever been in a K’fr tunnel before?” she asks.

“No... You?”

“No.”

And with that last exchange, we will track around Jack’s head till we are gazing down the tunnel showing something akin to what

Jack must see. The portal they came through is nowhere in sight. The tunnel seems to stretch behind them to infinity, but then at the same time it also seems to turn a bend a mere fifty feet away blocking any distant view. The leaves on the vine flutter and it is hard to tell if they are small leaves up close, or large leaves at a distance. The same is true of the thorns and the flowers. It is a dizzying, vertigo inducing effect.

They have not been traveling for long. The chaos will get worse the farther they go. If they really wanted to, at this point they still might be able to turn around and find their way back... but even as we watch, the tunnel seems to close upon itself like an iris in the distance, perhaps indicating that option... much like our story, will not last very much longer.

###

Ve'kahn: We've Been There, Now It's Time to Go Back Again

We are at 100,000 words. The story is almost over. Me and Harry, the Story Finishing Gnome, are sharing a tray of freshly baked Cinnamon Raisin Oatmeal Cookies in celebration.

Cinnamon Raisin Oatmeal Cookies

- 1 stick Butter
- 1 cup Brown Sugar
- 4 teaspoons Cinnamon
- 1 teaspoon Vanilla
- 1 teaspoon Salt
- 1 Egg
- 1 cup Flour
- 1 cup Raisins
- 2 cups oatmeal

Set butter on counter and forget about for 30 minutes while it softens. Cream butter and brown sugar

together. Mix in cinnamon, vanilla, and salt. Mix in Egg. Mix in flour. Mix in raisins and oatmeal. Fill cookie sheet with tablespoon size lumps. Feel free to pack 'em in, these suckers aren't spreading out. Nor is there any need to grease the pan. Cook in preheated oven at 350 degrees for 12-15 minutes. Let cool and enjoy.

(Those who prefer Oatmeal Raisin Cookies versus Cinnamon Oatmeal Raisin Cookies, might wish to use less cinnamon, like maybe only 1 teaspoon. Those looking for something more like hard tack, might want to cut the sugar in half)

I know. A recipe is a sure sign an author is trying to pad the word count, but like I said, we are already at 100,000 words. Count them if you don't believe me. The point is, from here on out it's just bonus. You already got what you paid for, or at least what I intended to deliver.

Look on the bright side, if this were a typical Garg story, not only would it have ended 25,000 words ago, but it would have ended exactly at the target word count, because back in the days when Garg started, 75,000 was the magic number and his agent is a pit bull of a leprechaun. So, before you start giving me grief about how I've decided to end the book, just keep in mind if this was a Garg novel it would have stopped on the dime with something like:

... Garg climbs into the K'fr lined tunnel and disappears from view.

Will we ever see Garg again?

Does Matt know where he is going?

Will Zay accept Targor's proposal?

Will Esse really kill Matt?

Why was Bull so... bull headed and oblivious in the last chapter?

And what about those egg cluster?
Find out the answer to these and other exciting
questions in the next issue of GARG!!!

Of course, then they never really answer any of the questions except for the first one. Will we ever see Garg again? Yes. Even I can answer that one. Believe it or not, Garg #347, or whatever number we are up to, will in fact be all about Garg, so yes, odds on bet, if you buy Garg #347 you will see him again. Some of those other questions though, will never get answered. Not here and not in the next Garg novel.

But, let's go back to the topic of closing up the story again. This is always a difficult transition. The story ends, but believe or not, the characters lives go on.

For instance, Bull will have to decide whether to live in Ve'kahn or go back home and also whether he wants any sort of ongoing relationship with the Cobalts or not.

Jack will have the same decisions to make; whether she wants to resettle the 'Khan, bring in any of her relatives, or go back to the cove, her adopted home. She also might need to decide if growing tomatoes is really what she wants to do with the rest of her life.

The point is, they live. And, if we needed to pad out the story some more, we could... with their future lives, or we might have our merry band of adventurers encounter a giant spider or something while they are in The K'fr Road... Hold up the piñata Harry.

I know it doesn't look like much. It's just a 12" cardboard ball with black streamers for a body with eight pink tissue paper legs and wobbly eyes, but it's special effect's job to make it look scary. The point is, if we needed another scene to make the word count, we could just throw a spider at our group, kill a couple of Cobalts, and the next thing you know we're 1,000 words closer to

the mark, but as I said we already have the word count and I don't feel like killing any more Cobalts...

Oh, right. Harry is holding up another model he's been working on. It's a hedge maze. Our adventuring friends get lost on the road. We'll do the scene in a moment, but for a while, we thought about dealing with this event symbolically by having them navigate a typical fantasy labyrinth type maze. The model is for the aerial shots. We can just track over it, and due to the self repeating nature of K'fr vines, there would be no way to tell the true scale of what's on the screen. It's a fine piece of workmanship and it's a shame we can't use it. Harry really went all out. It's got a few pit traps in it, and some of the walls even move, but like I said, we have the words, so we don't need more action. What we need is some degree of closure, no matter how contrived, that will leave us all with that happy, I just read a great book vibe. You know the feeling I'm talking about. It's pretty much the same sensation as the, I want to buy the sequel compulsion, My book club should read The K'fr Road as its next title itch, I wonder what else this author has written tingle, and the ever popular I think I'll nominate The K'fr Road for Best Book Of The Year experience of true and utter bliss.

So everybody wants closure. You, me, the Story Finishing Gnome, and the K'fr vines, especially the K'fr vines. In fact the K'fr vines want closure so much, they are slowly strangling the life out of Bull, Matt, and the rest of the gang even as we speak.

It is clear our party of intrepid adventures have lost their way. OK. To be sure, I don't really know what intrepid means. Maybe I should look it up... but I seem to remember reading that phrase somewhere. Maybe in a Garg novel. The words just seem to go together smoothly, intrepid adventurers. It just sort of rolls off the tongue. The point is, our adventurers might be intrepid, or they might not be. I guess it matters what the word means, but either way, they are definitely lost. I know the meaning of that word (lost) forward and backwards and it's about the best word there is

to describe Matt and the gang's situation. See how I bypassed that intrepid issue this time? I called them a gang, and whoever heard of an intrepid gang?

Did I mention how this was all bonus footage, and therefore should be held to a lower level of accountability?

“Stop!” Bull orders saving the author from himself.
“Everybody stay still.”

With annoyance Matt pushes a vine out of his face. It snaps back and lacerates him. He is covered with cuts and scratches. As is the rest of the party. The Kreel would be overjoyed, if he wasn't convinced he was going to die. They are surrounded by living breathing vines. The tunnel has closed in on itself and has all but disappeared. The vines have wrapped themselves around the arms, legs, wrists, etc. of the adventurers who, as we have discussed, may or may not be intrepid.

“Link hands,” Bull commands.

“Okays boss man,” the Cobalts obey, but even as they do more vines search them out and wrap around their necks. “You's sure about dis boss man?”

“Just stay calm.”

Long ago, Jack had crawled down to hold onto Bull's chest. She wants to comment on how closed in it feels, how it feels like the vines have swallowed them alive, like they are buried, trapped in a thorn lined coffin, but instead she offers the little support she can muster. “You have an idea Bull?”

“Let's just calm down. We're surrounded by the vines... the K'fr. We can't fight it. We don't even know where we are. We just need to relax.”

They have huddled together. The vines, which only moments before seemed like they were actively attacking them, appear to have relaxed. “Calm,” Bull repeats his entreaty. Miraculously the vines retreat further and form a small walled area around them like a cell... like a grave or a mass tomb, but at least thorns are no longer actively scratching them.

Everyone in the party is cut and bleeding. Gary Ganesh holds his arm where a freshly made gash oozes blood. It might be the first time he's ever been injured. "It doesn't make sense," he comments in disbelief.

It is only one scratch. Everyone else is in worse shape. Matt looks like hell. Bull's legs are covered with countless lacerations. Jack and the Kreel look like... they've walked for miles through an angry temperamental briar patch... gone through a shredder... been forced into a bag with an angry sharp clawed cat by their psychotic older brother. The Cobalts look no better, but they are in relatively good spirits. If they were to complain about anything at this moment, they would bemoan the loss of their lucky red shirts, torn to shreds, and ripped from their bodies long ago. They do not pause to consider, that the loss of the shirts is perhaps the only reason they are still alive.

They are all scratched and bloodied, except for Garg. He is apparently unharmed. Even his Seventh Realm Army uniform is in perfect, field parade, shape.

"Why isn't it attacking you?" Jack asks Garg.

Garg doesn't know. He doesn't have an answer.

"What is going through Garg's mind," Bull asks the Kreel.

"What him? Almost nothing. He's got to be about the most boring person I've ever encountered. He's just here... it's almost like he's waiting to die," the Kreel answers with uncharacteristic annoyance.

"Can you mirror his thoughts onto the rest of us?" Bull asks.

"I don't know. Never tried it... I'm sure it'll be easier if we link hands again," the Kreel instructs and after everyone is in position, he continues. "Just let your mind go."

The Kreel mirrors Garg's mental state onto the rest of the party. It is not an absence of thought as he claimed. It is perhaps Zen perfection. In this moment, Garg is devoid of hope or fear, desire or loss. He is and he is not. Mirroring these thoughts onto the rest seems to have positive effects at first. Almost as if the K'fr was reacting negatively to what was on our adventurers minds

before. The walls of the tunnel recede slowly and then they reverse direction. The intrepid vines... No? Sorry. The vines, which lack intrepidity, wrap around our heroes arms and legs, but Bull notices he is not being cut by thorns as he was previously. White flowers with purple stamens brush by Bull's face and he takes a deep breath. "Just stay calm everyone," he says reassuringly as he breathes in the intoxicating aroma. "You're doing good work Kreel. Keep it up."

Bull's vision is completely blocked by the flowers. Jack clutches at Bull's chest, as he holds the Kreel with one hand and a Cobalt with another. "Just hold on," he says. "Everybody here?"

They all are. The vines carry them as if in a trance. They know not where, nor know how long, and then without warning the vines open before them and they are dropped to the ground.

Behind them in the side of a hill is an entrance to a narrow K'fr lined cave. It is surrounded by a thick inhospitable patch of brambles. Even as we watch, K'fr vines snake out of the cave and invade the surrounding terrain. Root tendrils exit the tunnel, shoot into the ground, and immediately take hold. The earth beneath them pulses slightly from the ever expanding foothold the K'fr vine is establishing in this unknown land. Behind the cave on the hill, small white K'fr flowers are already in bloom. The K'fr has found a new home.

Facing away from the cave is an inviting open field of fresh green grass. The hills slope gently into the distance. A slight mist fills the air, and as we watch the sun bursts forth majestically over the horizon.

It is a good background for the ending of a movie. Watch as the camera circles low and behind our group of adventures. We are looking directly into the sun's morning rays and all the details of their battered bodies are blocked out. Bull is but a shadow. We can just barely make out the shadow of Jack climbing back into his horns. The Cobalts are jumping around happily. The Kreel shakes his head and his snake like appendages dance about. Gary brushes

himself off and gets ready to summon a cart, while Matt and Garg simply stand and take in the beauty of the moment.

We have been fading away slowly. We notice the ground around us is shimmering with a magical blue aura. It is the Ke'Hyryn. He makes his peace with the K'fr, welcomes it into his abode, and then the blue bodied, white horned elemental materializes. We are low and at a distance. The Ke'Hyryn and our adventurers are indistinct silhouettes against the bright morning sky. The orchestra plays a loud uplifting soundtrack. It is clear our quest is at its merry end.

Over the rising crescendo of the music we hear the Ke'Hyryn exclaim, "You've come back!" as he lifts Jack out of Bull's horns and gives her a heartfelt embrace.

The music swells forth with renewed vigor. We circle around our adventurers, slightly off the ground. We look around and take in the expanse that is Ve'kahn. It is fresh, virgin... and now that Jack... now that the Pixies have returned... anything is possible.

Jack hands the Ke'Hyryn the pack of seeds. He wipes a tear from his eye. How could it get any better than this. The music plays to the heart. It is a homecoming decades in the waiting and as we fall back to take in one last view of the sky and its brilliant sunrise it is clear Jack, the Charlies, Gary and the rest are only the beginning as a flock of birds flies out of the portal connection and spread to the skies. Life, civilization, and the Fey have returned to Ve'kahn. It is cause for celebration.

The curtains close. The credits role. This is where we will stop our story and call it the end. For it should be a happy ending, a joyful ending...

Therefore I will not remind you that behind the birds come Dee, her sister, revenge, and all the other things that ride piggy back on the things we desire and which we label the good life. If you were to think too hard about it, you might wonder if after it all, Ve'kahn wasn't better off before our return... and if what we

brought with us, might have been what destroyed Ve'kahn in the first place.

But really, who wants to think that hard? I mean, I suppose you could think about it... or you could just read the last chapter. Come on. You know you want to. Just one little chapter. Maybe just a paragraph... or a sentence. What could one little sentence hurt?

###

An Intrepid Little Ending

Goblins, you got to love them.

We just can't seem to get this scene straight and it's a very important scene... for the movie... for my mental health... for philosophy in general.

It poses the question: if a Goblin is slowly tortured in a darkened room for 24 retakes of the same scene, but the sound recording equipment has never been turned on, does the Goblin really scream?

“Scene 655321. Take 25. An intrepid little ending.”

We start in blackness, but this is never accurate. The ground is made of large marble tiles. The sky looks like spilled ink. The air is crisp, cool, and still. We are in EVIL Warlord EXP. We have chosen a large body, a cross between a Human and an Ogre. It is lean and muscled, reminiscent of a body building Giant. Except for a modest strip of leather around our loin, we are naked... that is if you discount the thin layer of filth which covers our body.

Glare at the camera as you lurch forth into the darkness. Form your hand into a tight fist and appreciate the strength at your disposal.

You are walking towards a light. Under a lamp that hangs down thousands of feet from the ceiling high above is a lone Goblin, a Mr. Thunder Toe or some stupid name like that. He is

sitting on a folding metal chair in front of a cheap, badly dented coffee table. Sitting probably isn't the right word for it anymore, he is sort of propped up, unable to move. He knows what is coming. He would sign the confession, peace treaty, whatever it is, if only they would let him, but they... we do not let him. This is art. "We are going to redo this scene until we get it right!"

You are the Special Officer in Charge of Interrogations for the Rigor Pass Police Department. It is a long name to be sure, too long. Your buddies on the force have shortened it to Pain.

Witty banter starts around you. The cop who looks like Bull, introduces the problem. The problem is Thunder Toe. The cop who looks like Jack comments on how he won't be a problem for long, meanwhile the Goblin, through broken teeth and a bandaged jaw tries to insist that he will sign anything. That we don't need to shoot the scene anymore. You are annoyed. The Goblin is trying to ruin this take! To show your displeasure at his breaking character and not going with the script, you grab the coffee table he is sitting in front of and bash him with it. Repeatedly. It is a cheap prop. It falls apart easily, though the Goblin puts on a good act. For a second you almost believe that you ran out of fake coffee tables 20 takes ago... The Goblin is good. Too Good. He is trying to upstage you with his moaning and his bleeding. Enraged you kneel over him and punch his face knocking his few remaining teeth loose. He spits blood, the showoff.

A door opens. The room is bathed in light from the hallway. The effect of an endless expanse in shadow is ruined. It looks like we are using a room in a typical suburban house. Sheets are hung over the windows. Around the edge of the room spectators have gathered to watch. You might be able to pick out Trent, Dr'gr, and a few others.

"Close the door," someone yells and the two Cobalts comply.

"Ooh, dat look like funs."

"We's next," they plead and then remembering they hand you a bottle opener. It is the wrong type. They have given you a corkscrew, but then maybe it isn't the wrong type. It fits in you

hands easily. The spiral pointy part sticks out from between your fingers. You form a fist around it and attack the Goblin with renewed vigor.

“You’re going to sign that paper,” you inform it between jabs.

“Yes, yes,” the Goblin whimpers, but you ignore it. After a while, you stop. It just doesn’t feel right. “Thunder Toe,” you mutter in disgrace. “More like Broken Toe,” and then you snap back one of his toes. You are disappointed. It doesn’t break. It is hard to break the same bone twice. You stand. “It doesn’t feel right... we’ll have to do it over... from the top. Whose turn is it?”

We will leave that scene behind. Eventually they, we, will tire. Eventually the Goblin will sign whatever. You can rest assured this little enterprise has been a success for Trent, for The Dragon, for the land speculators, but as I said, we will leave that behind.

The camera floats out of the room. We are in a suburban house. You may remember it from the shipwreck scene. Cobalts are everywhere. We walk through the living room. It is filled with Ogre’s, Gnomes, and Trolls. We are having a cast party. Outside on the patio a Bar-B-Q is going. The main course is a greenish looking lobster; Mantid, no doubt. Here and there, extra’s from the movie are standing, sitting, and talking; sharing a beer, munching on a claw, regaling each other with tales of movie magic and editing daring do.

Targor and Zay sit with their feet dangling in the water.

Ruby and Grt, important characters from other Dragon Bound books, splash at their feet. Ruby would be appalled if she knew about the scene being filmed inside, but she doesn’t. Instead, she talks with Targor and Zay unconcerned, as Grt, her drag-goon companion, plays with the Cobalts.

We will not go down all the bit characters. Nor tie up all the loose ends. I am sure there are holes in the narrative, questions that you may have, but even if I were to go down the holes I see, it is unlikely I would address the ones you personally are most

interested in. Suffice to say, you will have to come to your own conclusions. Sometimes it is better that way.

This was never intended to be a treatise on the Ve'kahn war. There are many histories of that war, and I suspect, soon there will be many more. War happens. The reasons are never very good. Usually at the bottom of it all you will find money or an idea to blame. Often the idea is something as seemingly harmless as freedom, but freedom is almost universally reactionary. I will not work out the details of this thought. I will just lay it out that the Seven Realms is in the end just an idea. Some argue for this idea. Some argue against it. Oddly enough, both sides in the debate tend to use the same arguments... the same means of persuasion.

Though she would argue... no, rage against it, there is one undeniable argument in favor of the Seven Realms over the other possibilities and that is Raging Bertha. She is a large, oversized Goblin, perhaps the biggest, ugliest Goblin I have ever come across. She has come to the party. She is a guest. Not that I would have to point her out, but she is next to the Bar-B-Q. She has a Mantid claw in either hand and in a moment she will grab another. She is here, because like Ruby, she has been in a previous Dragon Bound production and is an old fan favorite. As if that wasn't excuse enough to invite her, she is also married to the Kreel. All of this is just flavor text, mere decorative narrative. The important point is that she is a Goblin and she is not being tortured. She is being treated like any other guest, and despite any claims by her to the contrary, she has done quiet well by her association with the Seven Realms and Dragon Bound Publishing. In fact, I would bet that whatever settlement is worked out with Thunder Toe in the back room, will also work out to Raging Bertha's personal benefit. I do not try to make an excuse for the back room. I will lay it on the line. I hate Goblins. If it was up to me, I would liquidate them all, but it is not up to me, and perhaps those sentiments are exactly why. The point is the Seven Realms is an amazingly free, open, and friendly place and this is true even if, by catastrophe of birth,

one happens to be an Orc or a Goblin. If you are unfamiliar with the Realms and the action of this story has convinced you otherwise, I would simply point out that ALL of the action we have related has taken place outside of the Seven Realm, essentially on enemy territory, so what you have seen is more of how the Seven Realms fights a war, rather than how it ensures the peace within its borders. The difference is profound.

And, before I leave my bigoted views on Goblins behind, I would like to disabuse you of the notion that my hate arises solely from their being horde creatures. This simple is not true. I like Cobalts and they are horde creatures and many an Elf and Dwarf has held that there is not any meaningful difference between Humans and the other horde animals.

But, enough of that, rather than elaborate on these thoughts any further, I will instead direct your attention to the far side of the pool and the Cobalts at play. We will focus in and use this shot as the basis for an edit to fade back to the temple grounds for one final scene. There too, at the temple, Cobalts play and as we pull back, we see that blazing torches light the night sky. It is a celebration of sorts, perhaps for a marriage, perhaps for the Cobalts victorious battle against the Klk'its, or perhaps it is simply the cast party spilled over into another vortex.

Whatever the cause for celebration, it is clear Irvin will die. The Cobalts dance and shout as they lead the giant praying mantis to a giant black cauldron. Once he is standing inside, they fill the pot with water, and light a fire underneath him. Irvin does not move. He shows no signs of pain. It is a big pot of water. It takes hours to heat up. It takes hours for him to die. When Irvin is no more, the Cobalts push his body under the boiling water with their spears. They will eat him. This is what the butter is for.

In the end, civilization is nothing but an idea, an idea that some might argue was not present during Thunder Toe's interrogation. And, if it was not present there, it certainly is not present here. The Cobalts are engaged in... these things may be

best left to the viewers imagination. Certainly one Mantid is not enough to feed all of the Cobalts gathered and they are known cannibals... but we need not focus our camera's on such things. Suffice to say, both Zay and Targor seem to enjoy the evening, as do the Cobalts.

Surprisingly, it is not long before the Esse and Dee join the celebration. As the sweet smell of boiled Mantid seeped through the portal, Dee was able to secure an oath from Esse. It is here that they will wait for Matt and the rest to make it through to Ve'kahn, which, to my mind then leaves us with only one last quick scene to do before we call it a wrap.

We will focus again on the Cobalt children at play. They are gathering up the hatching Mantids, Irvin's children and roasting them over the fire. We will focus in on a young three inch tall Mantid scurrying for the jungle and watch as a Cobalt grabs it by the wings before it can get away. Then we will show the same scene again, but with the Mantid disappearing into the underbrush.

When we pull back from this shot, we will find ourselves in the K'fr tunnel. The egg casings in Garg's pockets have hatched and the two Cobalt scouts each hold a handful of Mantids, but even as we watch, plenty more fly down the passage or disappear into the foliage of the tunnel wall. No doubt, in time they will grow and hunt wayward travelers in these very vines. I'm guessing Goblin and Orcin travelers, but perhaps that is merely wishful thinking on my part.

“How long have we been going?” Jack asks.

They are sitting down resting. “I don't know,” Bull responds.

Gary Ganesh rubs his hands together. “Long enough. It is time to eat.” He rubs his hands together again, but nothing happens. He rubs them again, and again; nothing.

The Kreel senses his discomfort. “What's wrong?”

“I can't bring anything up,” Gary explains.

This then is the beginning of their problems with the K'fr. I do not know exactly the dynamics between Gary and the vine. It is perhaps simply the K'fr letting all know that it controls the trade routes and not the merchants, but like I said, I do not know. Nor do I even know if the K'fr is sentient; if it has thoughts or desires as you or I might have.

We can stay and watch if you desire. Bull and Jack share the gungu snaps from long ago and the Cobalts share the baby Mantids, but it is not enough. There is no water. They have no provisions. They start down the tunnel again, but soon, they are tired, hungry, and thirsty; exhausted. Matt seems to lose his way. It almost feels as if they are walking around in circles. Bull takes out the map, but it is no use. It is a map of Ve'kahn, not a map of how to get there. It seems hopeless. Our party's frustration grows and the vines turn angry, the tunnel collapses on itself, and turns inward... but then you know that story. No sense repeating ourselves.

It is here that we will part company. The story is now over. I hope you have enjoyed the ride, and if knowledge was your desire, I hope you have learned what you have desired to learn, but no matter. It is over. It is what it is. As we say goodbye, join me for a moment longer. For there is one final loose end, I wish to address.

We are in the Islands, in the suburban housing track where Matt's house is located. A block away, with the help of his cane Mr. Cardinal is walking down the street. It has been several weeks since he has seen Dee. He wishes to visit with her. See how she is doing and how Matt is doing.

We will not relate what happens when Mr. Cardinal arrives. The story must end somewhere, sometime. We have run out of film, time, and money. As such, it is the end... but it is also a beginning.

Most of the individuals we have met on this journey, we will never encounter again; not Mr. Cardinal and not the Lieutenants.

Likely the list is much longer than that. I will leave it to you to compost the list, as I will therefore leave it to you to image their futures, it that is your desire.

For the future is an unknown, a place where anything is possible and if you've ever watched a Targor movie you know the future is not constrained by anything, least of all the past.

#

THE END

#

Full Moon Party

Cut to scene. Cobalt opening fortuens
You only come this way once
Dis not for me, dis for somebody elseY

Gary is he good or evil, Mercantilism

#

Kaliedscope K'fr Tunnel

Back add Kreel into Party

Dee & Esse join, Mantid Bake

Even though their trip down The K'fr Road will take them weeks,
we

garg, Mini Mantids out of pocket
Lobster Bake \, Targor, Zay Irvin

Irvin Mont, Mantid, Grasshopper Chronicles

And with any luck, it will be here that we leave Esse and Dee for
the final time...

now we leave Esse and Dee, NOW, really Now!

#

Bull- Jack, Garg, Matt, Charlie x2, Gary
Parrot
Irvin, Seeds solution??

It is at meal time that the differentiation between the lucky and
unlucky is most obvious.

Targor, I always die, here OK stay here?w

Cobalts (small vile looking lizard, anthropomorphic alligators, +/-
3' tall)

Some kind of monster than spawns, goes back to gate, etc

#

The Stock Helm Syndrom

Loo'kee god of fools, Cockroaches

Duel

Total ambiguity at end for all characters.

###

Zay'ar'lyne, The Peaks of Passion, Picchu = Peak
Ess'mer'lence and De'sca'lence

Matt, Human, Evil Warlord, Liege (Da'zi, Dr'gr)
Dee, De'sca'lence, Fey'an

Bull, Minataur, Jack, Jac'lyn
Esse, Ess'mer'lence, Fey'an

Hals'bad, K'fr Road, Or'tung

Doom Crag Horde, Deed to Mine, K'fr Ring, etc, compromises
Doom Cragers Position

Klara (Bruce secret life behind the narrative, Him and Garg an
item)(I liked it better when you weren't talking)

Klara Bo Southborne, "I do declare," big boobed elf

Bruce, Black Cowboy, Jeans Jacket