

G'narsh

The Troll, The Myth, The Legend

(a work of fiction)

by

Kevin Stillwater

P2-A
of
P1, P2-A, P2-B, P3-A, P3-B, P3-C, P3-D, P3-E, P4
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G'narsh - P2-A

--- RESUME ---

--- PARTITION: NEW DISC ---
--- PRIMARY CALL TO PART 1 ---

--- PART 2 ---

Short Story Treatment

Welcome back.

I put a full break in there with a call to the previous section. That will make the compiler treat this new section as separate disc with a preferential call to Part 1 -- for descriptions, feelings, moods, and whenever consistency is needed. Some folks -- judges especially -- are big on consistency. I (unfortunately) am perhaps not.

I'm planning on layering this section big-time starting from this dreamer's narrative and driving all the way down into open calls. Not really sure how that's going to work out yet -- who wants to look at raw code anyway -- but we'll figure something out. In between those two extremes -- and they are fairly well removed from one another -- will be the Eileen sub-story. We -- she and I and/or her and me -- shall be on our honeymoon, which is a cognitive split of sorts, but that's what hard breaks are for. We'll be staying at the Northern Reaches National Park for this most romantic and sexually adventurous of vacations. I picked that location so when we are not otherwise engaged we'll be able to walk out of our cabin and see the rays directly -- thereby working G'narsh into the story. It is his disc after all. And while we are watching the rays, I'm imagining that a Park Ranger will arrive and provide further insight into the G'narsh mythos from a classical perspective. In short, the layers as I intend them are:

Dreamer Narrative
Honeymoon with Eileen
Park Ranger's Tale
Direct Calls

We'll see how it goes.

The next thing I want to do, is to go over the outline again. Sure it's repetitive, but to understand the process, I think it needs to be done and as long as we keep on looking at the story from a slightly different angle -- or perspective -- I don't really think it matters that the underlying plot isn't changing all that much -- if at all.

With that said, let's start from scratch and assume that you've decided to make a disc -- or at least some of your own content. If you've never made a disc before, may I recommend starting with a short story or mini dream. The previous bit in the classroom came in at four clicks and if you've never produced a dream before, it will take you longer than you can possibly imagine to push out a mere four clicks. Having done a short, flash, or hyper segment -- as they are sometimes called -- you might want to go for something longer, something that might get a full spot in the dailies. If so, then it would be time to move on to a 10-25 click project, which is what I have planned for this section. It's a nice vague number -- read, it's a big target -- so I'm confident we'll come in somewhere in that range. (Whoops!)

If I take all the calls that I made for the first section and package them together with whatever I come up with in this second section (obviously with a little rework here and there so it stands on its own), I'll have a finished piece that I can send out as a promo, post on the Inter Server as advertising, sell to a circular, or package as part of an anthology. None of these are markets that I specifically cater to, so I don't really know the ins and outs of them. I do know -- or believe -- that the highest you can hope for out of a 25 click short is that someone will want you to make a full disc -- or a series -- out of it, so why not just start with the full disc in the first place?

I guess one reason is time. It takes me two months to pound out 100 clicks (not included post production). That's 1.5 clicks a day, and I'm working full time -- overtime -- with total devotion, and I know what I'm doing. Think about it. After your real job at the quarry -- or wherever you work -- how much free time do you have? Some folks spend all of their free time for years -- literally years -- putting together their first full length disc. You've got to ask yourself if being a dreamer is that important to you. I know nothing about sports, current events, or even -- despite my extensive collection -- the content of most other discs. I simply don't have the time.

The other reason you might want to develop your short subject skills is the contests. One of the easiest ways to break into the profession is winning a big name -- unlimited -- contest, and often the only folks who find their way into the second round of a contest are those folks whose first round entry is a complete story in and of itself with compelling characters, a developed locale, and a plot. It doesn't hurt if you can show that you have a nice resolution planned for it all either. This is why so many stories hitting the street these days: start at the end, are comprised almost entirely of flashback, and are as twisty and turny as a mountain road. Once you've given away the ending in the first click, you've got to bend over backwards and do summersaults to keep it interesting. Or you can simply make them wonder how you are ever going to connect the dots. G'narsh as shop keep you say? Curiosity is a powerful ally after all, and one that you want to have on your side at all times.

So we've decided to do a short, and we've obviously decided to do it on G'narsh, but how did we settle on the story of G'narsh, the rays, and all the other elements which will go into our little tale? Well, we might have gotten that idea from our agent, directly from a disc publisher, drawn the topic at random during a contest, or we might have suggested the idea ourselves to any of the aforementioned groups. However, no matter how we got the idea, we will need an outline. This is true even if we suppose the unlikely and assume that not only is G'narsh our idea, but a sales house has already expressed an interest in the finished disc.

Yippie! Or, should I say, Ka-ching!

It's a good setup and one you shouldn't really expect until you've got a blockbuster -- or two, or three -- under your belt. Until that time you'll probably be working on spec -- i.e. speculation: read, work for months on end in the vain hope that someday you will get paid for your effort as apposed to getting that well crafted bit of legalese in your inbox which reads: "We are glad that you took the time to submit your project to -- world's

largest sales house -- but unfortunately your project does not meet with our current requirements. Thank you. Please submit again.”

Your project could be a flaming bag of Sch@lte that you left on their doorstep or the next blockbuster. You'll have no way of knowing from the feedback you get. Trust me. You won't even know if they played your disc, let alone what they didn't like about it. Did it suck? Was it stupid? Did it have bad editing? Did the calls not work? Was it too graphic? Or not graphic enough? The list of reasons is endless, but don't think they are all intrinsic to your work. The sales house could have already met its quota, might not have enough manpower to put out another disc (let alone look at the piles of slush they get), or simply not wish to sell the type of material you sent them. It's much like how when you go shopping, you don't buy every disc in the store. Some of the ones that you leave behind are good -- and you know it -- but the world is finite and there is only so much money, time, and room in your player. Ultimately, the only way to know if your disc is any good is to play it yourself a hundred times. If after a hundred plays you still have it in your rig, well then, you've got about the best custom made disc money can buy. It's not an altogether bad consolation prize and odds are, that's as far as your disc will ever go.

Anyway, back to the short story. Let's assumed you pitched the idea “G'narsh” to a sales house. The next thing they're going to want is an outline of the project... and then they are going to want to modify that project. It's called collaborating on the creative process. It's also called selling out, and/or compromising your artistic integrity, but let's not get too cynical about it all, because in return for molding your dream to the sale house's desires, they're going to pay you for it.

So you already know what the outline looked like before we sent it out, and assuming we are lucky and they don't want a wholesale change to the beginning, middle, or end, because they didn't like the way it flowed...

“Yeah. We like the G’narsh story, just trolls aren’t big right now, so if you’d just change G’narsh to a young boy, maybe 13. Have his mom working in the tubes and his dad at the farms, but he’ll tell everyone his dad is away at the war. Maybe make it a historical piece -- I’m thinking the Renaissance. Oh, and the kid, let’s call him Gary not G’narsh. How do you pronounce G’narsh anyhow? Is the G silent or what? I don’t know, maybe have the kid stutter. Now there’s a good idea. See what you can do with it. Whatever the case, the main thing is that Gary is all alone at home every day after school and it’s a battle -- like a literal battle -- for him to get through his homework, so he makes this whole dream world with algebra monsters that he has to slay and hyperbolic demons that try to enslave his mind. Well, you get the idea. Perhaps something along the lines of a patriotic morality play. Those are big sellers these days. Bottom line, we like the idea. What am I saying? We love the idea. It just needs a minor tweak here and there, just enough to satisfy the guys in legal and marketing.”

And if you get a response like that, you should probably just get yourself a new house to work with. But for our purposes, we’ll assume they liked the idea, and only have a few minor concerns about marketability and integration with their existing product line. Based on those assumptions, you can expect to get a response to your outline that goes something like this...

G’narsh: The Troll, The Myth, The Legend
They say: We want a category killer. Full coverage. No rock left unturned.

Read: They’re going to pay for 100 clicks no matter how many clicks it actually takes.

Guess what: They pay for 100 clicks, they get 100. (((And not a single click more!!!)))

Act 1 - Raid on Elvin Home (in which G'narsh gets his EVIL on).

They say: Blood! We want blood! We've got a game skimmer we want to tie in and we want BLOOD!

Read: Blood! Blood! Blood! They want blood!

Guess what? I'll make the calls. The scene will be ready for a plug in, but if you want blood, you're going to have to bring your own.

Act II - A Rude Awakening (in which Mi'lay watches G'narsh in action).

They say: Make sure that it's tasteful.

Read: No exposed genitalia... and for Gra'gl's sake, make sure you've got an open call to the user's own library.

Guess what? I wouldn't have it any other way.

Act III - Betrayal in the Forest (in which G'narsh is recruited by the forces of good and kills Stef'fan).

They say: Blood! Blood! Blood!

Read: Kill the elf!

Guess what? I'll do what I want.

Act IV - The Death of Xavier (in which G'narsh betrays the forces of evil and sets in motion his spiritual rebirth).

They say: Blood! Blood! Blood! But make sure it's tasteful. We don't want to go overboard... maybe there's already been enough bloodshed.

Read: Most of our fans identify with the bad guy. Don't do anything to alienate them.

Guess what? G'narsh is a bad guy. If the fans want to identify with anybody, they can identify with him.

Act V - The Victory Dance (in which G'narsh and Mi'lay finally meet in person).

They say: For Gra'gl's sake, keep it tasteful.

Read: G'narsh and Mi'lay can bump and grind to their heart's content, but the clothes stay on... and no freaky calls. Keep your own perversions out of this.

Guess what? This isn't where the story turns freaky.

Act VI - G'narsh the Wanderer (in which G'narsh finds the desire to do Good for goodness sake).

They say: We've got a catalogue of over 16 bagillion discs. We want calls to our propriety material.

Read: You call our disc, we'll call your disc. You're part of the family now... never go against the family.

Guess what? If I lived to be a million, I wouldn't have the time in my life to set up all the calls they want, so I'm not even going to try. If it's important enough, they can add the calls themselves -- and trust me, they will.

Act VII - Reunited at Last (in which G'narsh and Mi'lay meet again and consummate their love).

They say: This scene doesn't make a lot of sense. Maybe there could be some sort of reconciliation... or a romantic ending.

Read: Why would you want to kill your hero? Keep your options open for a series or a sequel. Just because we're putting out the definitive disc is no reason why we can't leave the door open for G'narsh II: He's back and this time it's personal!

Guess what? I've got it covered... But isn't it odd that in the one scene ripe for... um, ahem... a call to your personal library... isn't it odd they didn't ask me to keep it tasteful? I guess they know why everyone really buys these discs.

Postscript - The Eternal Dance (in which the mythology is put into its greater context).

They say: We really liked the way you pulled this all together by pretending G'narsh is an actual legend inspired by a non-existent natural phenomenon. Nice touch.

Read: Our customers are rubes. Oh, and have you trademarked G'narsh's Rays yet? Don't worry if you haven't. We'll do it for you.

Guess what? It's all about consistency. You can lie about anything on your disc just so long as you stand by your guns and never let it slip that it's all made up. Oh, and by the way, they'll control the marketing. Don't even try to cross them on that. They'd sell their own mothers if they could... and if you're interested, I've got the high definition skins to prove it.

With those last salacious comments on our minds, I think it is time to get on with the program, hook up with Eileen, and see if the carpet matches the drapes, if you know what I mean.

The Honeymoon's Over - Before It Even Began

“WHAT?” Eileen screams.

“I'm just asking. Do the collars and cuffs match?”

“You'll never know!” Eileen hisses as she throws a telephone at Art. It's one of those old fashioned, black rotary dial phones. It's real archaic. It's the kind where you actually use your fingers to turn a circular dial. (And if you're interested, it's where the term originally came from. If you don't believe me, look it up).

Don't ask me where she got the phone from -- probably at random from the GI library -- but the important point here is that it is huge. You could kill a guy with something that big, so Art has to duck and swerve to avoid being clobbered. He's nimble and fast on his feet, so normally it wouldn't be such a big deal, but he happens to be driving a flit at the moment. It's one of those custom floaters you see in parades and that they have for rent on occasion in tourist towns. It looks like an old fashioned gas powered automobile, complete with exaggerated tail fins and chrome up the wazoo -- and/or ying yang as the case may be.

The flit is big enough to hold Art, Eileen, and something like a dozen Charlies. I guess families were pretty big back when

they had automobiles. I should also mention that it is one of those top down, open air models -- a convertible, I guess you'd call it -- and the Charlies are hanging on all over the place. It is clear no one has bothered to read the safety manual. I'm sure the instructions would have said something about not throwing antique appliances at the driver while the vehicle is in motion, if nothing else.

As Art recovers, the flit swerves madly banking off of a grove of old growth trees that majestically tower into the sky.

"Calm down," Art urges softly in what he hopes is a romantic, soothing voice as he smiles, also hopefully seductively, at his new wife. "It's our honeymoon. Asking about what's under the hood is the type of linguistically complex sexual foreplay us dreamers get off on. Besides, I'm just trying to get you into the mood."

Not quite being in the mood yet, Eileen reaches down below the seat for another projectile, but Art wisely switches off her access to the library. "Why are you being so feisty?" and then the answer comes to him. "You're nervous, aren't you? Your first time and all."

"That's it!" Eileen declares (presumably angry that her prior -- read, extensive -- sexual experience has been called into question), and not finding anything else to throw, she grabs one of the cobalts, winds up, and gets ready to launch the little guy at Art.

"Hey'd what da Charlie do's?"

It's a good question and it stops Eileen mid throw. "Can you control him?" she asks the Charlie.

"We's no know?"

"Hey's der meester," one of the Charlies asks from the back seat as he climbs forward, "Can we's controllee's you'se?"

"No," Art replies happily as he guides the cobalt onto his lap and lets the little green bugger take the wheel. The course of the vehicle, which one could only have called haphazard before,

suddenly takes a turn for the worse. Neither Art nor Eileen are concerned about this, while the cobalts for their part are delighted.

Charlie drives erratically, forcing the other drivers off the road, into ditches, and swampy mud holes, while the cobalts shake their fists and holler with glee at every passing motorist and near fatal collision.

“Gettee outta da way.”

“Cwazy driver.”

“He’d da menace.”

“Where’d you’d get your licencee?”

“Da crackerjackie boxie?”

“Ohh’d, I’d like dat. I’d use dat next,” the cobalt behind the wheel decides as he takes aim at the oncoming traffic, grimly serious and eager to use the pointless quip at the next available opportunity.

Art notices that Eileen is not enjoying the Charlies’ antics as much as she should be and is, in fact, trying to hook up to the Inter Server, or at least trying to see if she can get a connection this far out in the boonies.

“What are you doing?” Art asks in dismay. “It’s our honeymoon.”

“I’m calling Lane to see if she’s worked something out... to see if you’ve worked something out,” she explains as she turns away from Art sullenly to face the tree lined road.

“Why do we need Lane?” Art asks again -- newly concerned. “It’s our honeymoon. You, me, G’narsh’s Rays, and a little of the ole in and out.”

Quite confident that there will not be any of the ole in and out, as Art has so wittily put it, Eileen responds curtly, “It’s not our honeymoon,”

“Sure it is.” Art looks off into space and mentally goes over the calls he has set up. “I must have said that we were married a half dozen times by now.”

“It doesn’t work that way.”

“Sure it does. What’s the point of having a dream if it doesn’t go the way you want it to?”

“You should have thought about that before you decided to slap a MM rating on this disc.”

“What does a Mass Market rating have to do with anything?” Art asks as Charlie guides the flit across a pristine arctic meadow -- in clear violation of the MM standards I might add.

“Eet da shortee cuts,” the cobalt merrily explains as Art resumes his diatribe, unconcerned about the environmental damage the passing flit must be causing. “Monogamy, marriage, two lovers alone against the world... It’s the backbone of countless MM discs.”

“You’re forgetting I was... I am your student. A professor having sex with any student, let alone their student, that’s a big ethics violation. No way you’re going to get that one by the Morals Override Modulator,” M.O.M., “not with a MM rating call anyhow.”

“I guess that explains your attitude.”

“If we were young lovers, I’d interpret your inane comments as cute, but you’re my teacher and you’re trying to take advantage of me by using your position of authority to force me into a compromising situation, so you’re just coming off as... well, what you are, an over the hill, has been, disgusting pervert.”

“Ha ha?” the Charlies laugh.

“You’d screwery’d your’d self.”

“You’d go for da mmm tingy.”

“You’d say’d it wrongee,” another cobalt points out interrupting the first. “Eet da M... M.”

“Dat wat I’s say’d da mmm.”

“No, eet da M... M.”

“Eder way’d, he’d screwery’d him’d self.”

“Or not, as the case may be,” Eileen merrily jokes. She is suddenly very happy and relieved. She feels like a dark cloud -- of misunderstanding -- has been lifted... blown away by the safe protection of M.O.M. and the MM rating guide. “So why did you

go with a MM rating anyhow?” she continues gaily. “I mean anyone can tell that this turn of events, that going down the road of celibacy, is not really how you’d want to play it out.”

“True,” Art agrees, “but MM is what it stands for, Mass Market. Without an MM seal you’ll never get your disc into the prison camps or work farms, anyone wearing a mental clamp or impulse binder is suddenly facing a parole violation if they so much as touch your disc let alone load it up... and nearly every employer or governmental agency has a clause in their work rules against playing non-MM discs while on the job. If you’re involved in an accident and they find a non-MM disc in your player, you’re done for. Kiss your job, pension, and benefits goodbye. They say it’s a safety issue, disc compatibility and all that, but you know in the end it’s all about mind control.”

“You sound sort of anti-government there.”

“Fr@ck! the government,” Art declares as the Charlie at the helm decides to take a detour and hunt down a moose that he has sighted on the other side of the virgin field of arctic tundra with the flit.

“You,” (still), “sound, um, very anti-government there,” Eileen repeats calmly and reasonably as she hangs on and tries to ignore the now very bumpy ride.

“I’m not an anarchist, but mind control is mind control,” Art clarifies as he scoots away from the controls and sidles up next to Eileen so that it is clear to M.O.M., the censors, and the MM rating board that he is no longer driving the flit... not that any clarification is actually needed. He hasn’t been driving for awhile now.

“Hey’d, Charlie can no reachy da petals.”

“We’s help,” a trio of cobalts cry out as they scramble over the seat. “What’cha needies.”

“Da gas.”

“Full speedies aheads.”

“We gettee’s dat moosy.”

Still ignoring the Charlies and they're patently illegal hunting expedition, Eileen continues the censorship discussion. "How is it possible for you to say subversive things like that... and still maintain MM?"

"They're not subversive. They are valid political opinions and as such are protected by the free speech exception, as are any views on religion, or lifestyle choices."

"But no sex?"

"Nope. No graphic sex," Art agrees as the flit dives into the underbrush to flush out the now terrified moose. "Detailed violence, lengthy examination of bodily functions..."

"So that's why no one ever goes to the bathroom in these things."

"Or why you'll never see a realistic dead body, animal or otherwise, on a MM disc."

"Moosey be'd da road kill!" Charlie screams with manically glee hoping against hope to beat the system.

"It's a fine line," Art continues. "You can get away with a lot if you couch it in comedy or satire, but you still have to be careful and it can be next to impossible to get by the major prohibitions. All I can say is, good luck depicting a crime without also depicting someone getting punished, showing a morals violations without the offender getting their due comeuppance, or getting detailed about anything that we'll simply call obscene..."

"What does that mean exactly?"

"Anything that would make your grandmother cringe."

"Sounds a bit vague," Eileen comments as she crinkles her nose and asks, "So why isn't hunting a moose down with a flit against the rules?"

"Causey we'd be'd da hunters," a Charlie helpfully explains.

"Et da time honored cobalty tradition."

Art shrugs at their explanation. "We've got M.O.M. up and running. If there's a problem with our gag, she'll let us know right away."

“Uh-oh’d,” the Charlie behind the wheel remarks as he looks in the rearview mirror. “Da coppers!”

Blue lights flash behind them as a police bullhorn fills the air, “PULL OVER!”

“You’d neber take me’d alive copper,” Charlie insists as the gang of cobalts reach into the GI library and throw whatever they can find at the pursuing police cruiser -- rubber chickens, kitchen sinks, that kind of stuff.

“Rubbery chickens?” Charlie asks -- suddenly dismayed.

“We’d don’d for.”

“You’s better pull ober Charlie.”

“We’s put in goody words for you’s.”

“Maybe’d dey just gieve you da impulsee binderies.”

“Dis no good... Yo’s gotto helpee me Arts,” the cobalt pleads.

“Just pull over by those cabins up ahead.”

“Convenient,” Eileen smirks.

“A coincidence, I assure you,” Art insists, but no one believes him.

Knowing what is important Charlie lets go of the controls and grabs Art by the collar as the flit skids to a halt in front of the cabins. “Helpees! Dey binderies mee’s”

“Dey going to clampee down on da Charlies!”

“Helpees meester.”

“Don’t worry. You’re comedic relief. Even if M.O.M. slaps a virtual impulse binder on you, it will malfunction.”

“Charlie no wantee da impusee binderies.”

“Charlie scardee’s.”

“Help Charlie’s meester.”

“I’ll see what I can do. I’ll go down into the code and work it out so both M.O.M. and the MM will be happy... I mean it’s not like you hit the moose...”

Charlie looks around frantically until he spots the animal munching contentedly on a tuft of grass under the flagpole. The flagpole is situated in the middle of the compound, and please, feel

free to choose the flag of your choice my international and/or anarchist friends. Not caring so much about the aforementioned nod to national pride -- or lack thereof -- and sensing the Charlie's sudden attention, the moose dashes off into the woods, but we have established that he is alive, and that is what's important. M.O.M. will understand.

"Tankee meester," Charlie says as he pulls out his license and registration and, being sure to keep both of his hands in plain sight at all times, waits patiently for the nice, friendly police officer -- still trailing in the distance -- to catch up.

"So he'll get off scot-free just like that?" Eileen asks incredulously.

"I'm sure they'll be some kind of penalty... but no impulse binders. Like I said, I'll dig down and work it out with M.O.M."

Eileen finally figures out the hilarious joke Art has been building towards all section, and hopping onto the well placed cue, she gaily quips, "I think I'm beginning to understand why I was so angry with you earlier. You brought your mom along on our honeymoon."

With a yuck, yuck, yuck like that -- no matter how jagged and forced -- you know it's time for a break and to call it a day. At 1.2 clicks for the segment (or 2.0 after we add a moose chase for color), and 3.5 (or 4.3) clicks for the partition so far, we're right on schedule... or close enough that I'm willing to make the claim.

(And just in case you're wondering, it's only an ethics violation for Art to marry Eileen after he has been her teacher. If Art and Eileen had been married first, the student teacher scenario would merely be good old fashioned role playing and nothing to get uptight about... I tell you this only because I am confident that this little bit of errata has been gnawing on your conscious as much as it has been on mine.)

Telling a Story is Like Grabbing a Bull by the Horns

Once You Grab Hold - You Can Never Let Go

“I hate these ambiguous jumps forward in time,” Art gamely says as the disc resumes at some random, indeterminate point in the future.

“What’s that?” Eileen asks as she steps out into the cool crisp evening air. There is snow on the ground and steam rises from her hair as she dries it with a towel. Her feet are bare, but, being hot blooded, she doesn’t seem to mind the cold. I guess that’s because she has a blanket wrapped around her body. I couldn’t tell you what she is wearing underneath.

“Oh, I think they know,” Eileen pipes in.

It is now Art’s turn to ask, “What’s that?”

“What I’m wearing,” she smiles, suppressing a merry giggle. “Collars and cuffs... I think they know.”

“What are you trying to say?”

Biting her lip, she mischievously grins, “I took a nap,” and there’s your call, permission, and invitation all wrapped up into one... though with a MM you’re on your own. All the same, might I recommend something in the way of a honeymoon, college field trip, or quiet retreat for two into the wilderness?

“What’s that?” she asks and then realizing it doesn’t flow properly (and has been used too many time already) adds, “I guess I’m still a little groggy from the dream.” Groggy -- read, glowing from head to toe as she fondly remembers the intimate details... “Hmm, strange. I can’t seem to recall a thing about my dream.”

“There is that problem with an open,” empty, “call.”

“No matter. It was wonderful.” She hugs herself in delight. “Let’s see, the last thing I remember is... Whatever happened to the cobalts?”

“Charlies gettees da tickets,” they say appearing from around the corner.

“Eet no fair.”

“Charlie getta da tickets for da speedering...”

“Wreckerlessness endangerments...”

“Wat dat meester?”

“I think that’s when you run folks off the road for sport,” Art explains.

“Dat funs,” Charlie agrees.

“Oh’d you’d gettee one too meester.”

“What?” Art says whipping his head around in shock.

“Yeppers, coppee say’d for Charlie to givee dis to you.”

“He’s nicee guys dat coppee.”

“Politer.”

“Respectfuler.”

Ignoring the banter, Art frantically tears the ticket out of Charlie’s hand as he exclaims, “What the! Contributing to the delinquency of a cobalt! Is this some kind of joke?”

“If it is, it’s not a very good one,” Eileen snickers.

“Eet no jokee, coppers say’d dat for’d you.”

“But... But I didn’t do anything wrong,” Art complains.

“Naw,” Eileen agrees sarcastically. “You just rented a flit and then gave control of it to a renegade subprogram.”

“Uh-heem.”

“Da name is Charlies.”

“Whatever,” Art mutters in disbelief. “This is more than I make in a year... in ten years...”

“Prison campery here’d we comes,” the Charlies sing gaily looking forward to the excursion.

“Three’s squares a day.”

“Hardee works.”

“Fresh’d air.”

“Suns shines on da back.”

“Yeah, good times,” Art agrees. “I’ve heard nothing, absolutely nothing, but good things about the camps. Why being there is so pleasant, most folks of their own freewill and volition just sort of sign up for a year or two for the fun of it, on a lark. I hear some folks never want to leave.”

“Really’d.”

“No,” Art assures him. “Prison camps suck.”

“What we’d do den?”

“I don’t know.”

“Come on. You’re in a dream,” Eileen points out. “Just make some money, fill out a voucher,” and then growing slightly nervous because you never really know -- when you live your life (24/7) in a dream, “Just be done with it.”

“Let’s see,” Art says thinking out loud. “You guys got that tip jar going at G’narsh’s Rays Pizza...”

“And da handimaner services,” Charlie agrees finishing the unwieldy name for him.

“Why don’t we just use that?”

“We’s meester?” Charlie asks suspiciously.

“You wouldn’t leave me hanging?”

“Charlies don’t know’d...”

“I hear this resort has an all you can eat buffet, full spa, swimming pools, hot tubs...” Art suggests.

“Da water slidees?”

“Da icer skatering?”

“Da magicee fingeries on da beddies?”

“Oh’d, an da top o da line sensi boot’ies.”

“So what do you say?” Art asks as he holds a dozen keys to the kingdom high above his head -- for the moment safely out of the Cobalt’s reach. “All for one and one for all?”

“Okey dokies.”

“Charlie take eet,” they agree as they grab the passes and scamper off into the distance, but after they are gone one key still remains in Art’s hand.

“I guess I counted wrong.”

“That seems pretty unlikely,” Eileen observes, computers -- and therefore compilers -- being pretty darn good with numbers and all.

“Dat one’d mine’d,” a final Charlie calls out as he rounds the corner and comes into view. “I’se just wantee to get copy of dis ticketee made before I givee to you.”

“As a souvenir?”

“Proofee’s,” Charlie corrects as he shows them the ticket proudly. “Hunty wit outte da licencee.”

“Why would you need proof?” Eileen asks innocently, but Art directs her gaze to the front of the flit that they rode in on. Someone has attached a massive rack of antlers to the hood. “I think I’m going to be ill,” Eileen comments, sickened by the sight. Breathing heavily and gasping for breath she asks, “You killed the moose?”

“They look more like minataur horns actually,” Art, the cool, cold, and callous artist responds indifferently.

“How could you?” Eileen asks appalled. “Don’t you have a thing for minataurs? I thought you liked them?”

“Killing that which you love in a dream is an expression of freedom.”

“No. It’s a sickness,” Eileen corrects. “The next thing you’re going to be telling me is that you’re into snuffing,” -- read, murder, homicide, and torture discs.

“I leave my calls open.”

“You’re disgusting,” Eileen replies and then adds, “It’s immoral.”

“That may be...”

“There is no question about it.”

“You’d be surprised,” but before Eileen can voice her dissent again, let me override her for a moment and let Art complete the thought he’s been driving towards. “A general theme of this disc will be in following G’narsh -- walking with him as it were -- in his footsteps, as he goes on an inward journey looking for that elusive thing called goodness.”

“I don’t see how laying down an open call to senseless violence can play any role in a quest for goodness,” Eileen counters righteously once she finds her voice again.

“That which does not kill me only makes me stronger.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

I must not fear.

Fear is the mind-killer.
Fear is the little-death that brings total obliteration.
I will face my fear.
I will permit it to pass over me and through me.
And when it has gone past I will turn the inner eye to
see its path.
Where the fear has gone there will be nothing.
Only I will remain

The Bene Gesserit Litany Against Fear
From Frank Herbert's Dune

“What kind of call is that? What the Fr@ck! are you talking about?”

“That there is nothing to fear but fear itself,” Art smugly replies.

“I’ve had enough of this. Just let me know when you’re going to start making sense again.”

“It’s straightforward postmodern Buddhist nihilism,” Art explains -- a bit cryptically. It is acceptance of nothing, rejection of everything... or maybe I’ve got that backwards... but I’m thinking when you understand, you understand that the difference is illusionary.

“So its pagan psychobabble,” Eileen wisely surmises.

“That’s as good a definition as any,” Art agrees and then continues as he feels it is important to explain why the topic was broached in the first place. “G’narsh is going to go on a quest to find The Good. Capital G, The Good. It’s a value laden quest and since I’m sure my morals are totally out of whack, consider this an open call to replace my psychobabble nihilist proto spiritualism gobbledygook with your own.”

“What if I don’t want to waste a slot in my player with that idiocy?”

“The GI library is about the most value laden normatively prescriptive set of discs you’ll find anywhere.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning the concepts enmeshed in the GI library are so ingrained, no one even recognizes that they are just that -- concepts, assumptions, and beliefs -- i.e. a belief system -- i.e. a religion.”

“Isn’t that heresy?”

“I get that criticism a lot,” Art agrees, “but they still publish my discs... and aren’t beyond giving me an MM rating to boot.”

“All’da Charlies know’d es’t he’d confus’ed,” the last cobalt says as he twirls around dizzily and scratches his head. “I’se just gettee da horns in da giftee shoppee. Eet da jokee. I’se tink you tinkee on eet too hard meester,” and with this summation the Charlie suddenly regains his balance and deftly grabs the remaining pass to the tourist resort -- spa delight -- away from Art. With the Key to the Kingdom in hand, the Cobalt skips away calling out a hearty, “Tankee meester,” over his shoulder as he disappears from view.

And now that the last of the extraneous threads in the current segment have been pulled together, Art turns to Eileen and asks, “So, what do you say, want to get cracking on this G’narsh story?”

A little bewildered, Eileen responds, “Sure... I guess so.”

Art has been hoping for a little more enthusiasm, but you take what you can get. Ringing a large bell, something like a cowbell on a stick, he asks, “How about a nice romantic sleigh ride?”

“I thought we’d been over this?” Eileen responds curtly. Didn’t this guy know when to stop? But as the horse drawn sleigh pulls into view her mood suddenly changes as she sees who is driving the contraption. “Lane! You made it!”

A Trip Down Memory Lane

Under a fractal colored sky, Art and Eileen slide silently through the snow in a horse drawn sleigh. They are bundled

together under a generous layer of blankets both to keep themselves warm and to hide their activities from M.O.M.'s prying eyes. Of course, with the body of Lane, their four armed escort and driver, sitting between them there's not much point in going on about how one could do nearly anything that they wanted under all those blankets -- and I do mean anything.

To set the mood, there's even a song on the breeze... or is it the sound of the "sleigh bells a jingling?" Either way, it's instructive to listen to the lyrics floating in the air:

When he says, are you married, we'll say no man,
But you can do the job when you're in town.

Simply scandalous! An open offer to all comers???

"I believe they're talking to Parson Brown when they say that," Eileen jumps in. "It's a marriage proposal," and then, "It's a wholesome song. Why are you trying to make it something that it's not?"

"He's just laying down some foundation to underscore his total disrespect for facts and his complete lack of any philosophical knowledge," Lane explains from her perch between the two would be love birds as she gives the dozen jet-black steeds who are pulling the sled a little -- gentle -- encouragement with a soft flick of the reins.

"Why would he do that?" Eileen asks bewildered.

"Because has he finally figured out what class I'm going to be taking in school," and as she says this, Lane produces a philosophy textbook from among the folds of her jacket, highlighting her words.

"What does that have to do with anything?" Eileen inquires, still confused.

"At some point Art here might want me to say something brilliant... something wonderfully insightful about something that I learned in my philosophy class, some arcane bit of trivia, perhaps something about the life and times of Pericles," whoever that

might be, “and since I will undoubtedly be wrong, and more than likely say something truly idiotic... well, when I do that, now you’ll know why.”

“It’s not that simple,” Art disagrees.

“Sure it is,” Lane insists -- apparently defiantly -- as she pulls on the reigns and stops the horses. Getting out of the sleigh she asks, “Will this place do?”

Eileen looks around. They are in the middle of a pine forest. The snow on the ground reflects the dazzling multicolored display in the sky and gives the trees an otherworldly, strangely eerie, spooky, bizarre holiday feel, while the musky scent from the horses mixes with the fresh clean smell of the pine trees. The combination of the two is warm and reassuring, but also strangely sticky, heavy, and overwhelming. There is no breeze and it is freakishly quiet as the snow deadens all sound not coming from the immediate area. The noise from Lane’s footsteps is muffled, and the appreciative whinnies emanating from the horses as she feeds them seem overly loud in the otherwise emptiness of the clearing.

“This place is kind of creepy,” Eileen observes. To accent her summation, a breeze blows through the underbrush. It picks up a swirl of snow that glistens purple and green in the reflected light from the twinkling sky before it twirls off into the silent void.

“Here, in the far north, on the night of a lunar eclipse... we’re on the edge of Shadow, at the precipice of Chaos itself,” Art explains ominously as he sets the tone for the scene.

“Why are we here?” Eileen asks nervously.

“To face our fears,” Art replies matter-of-factly, “but first lets revisit the nature of knowledge and take an inventory of what we actually know.”

“This is when it might be helpful to realize that he doesn’t have the slightest idea what he is talking about,” Lane points out -- ever the helpful one, ever obedient.

“I’ll keep it short then,” Art begins. “Some folks believe that if you know enough you will become enlightened, that truth will set you free and all that. It’s a false hope.”

After a silent pause in which it is clear Art has no intention of going on Eileen asks, "Is that it?"

"When you make ignorance your ideal, the lessons tend to be short and easy," Art explains expecting that to end the discussion, but Eileen isn't finished with the topic -- not just yet. "I don't understand what the big deal is. I mean, OK, you're not interested in Hume, Descartes, Socrates, or whoever... You're not interested in what they said, but why not just load up a disc, pull the information you need, and be done with it? It takes like ten seconds. Why go on about a glaring omission that I'm guessing originates in laziness?"

"Two reasons," Art replies. "The first one of which centers around an admission to the audience. I know my philosophy is crap. I admit it. Live with it or load up your own value set in its place. That's the primary reason why I'm laying this all out and putting it on the line. The second reason has to do with why I don't just spend the ten seconds to load a generic philosophy from one of the great philosophers," whenever I want to justify some idea that I have about The Good.

"Yeah. Why not?" Eileen agrees.

"Because no one agrees on what any of the great philosophers meant or how their ideas should be interpreted today," let alone what The Good means, "so it doesn't take just ten seconds, it takes years to trace down the interlacing trails and calls, and it is in this perpetual, never ending quest to learn more, to integrate just one more fact, and find that key cornerstone idea... it's this never ending quest that I'm really rallying against. I mean, if you think the journey leads nowhere, why take the first step?"

"Because those great philosophers of old are referred to as great for a reason," Lane curtly responds.

"Maybe... but I think I'm as smart as any of them," come the words of wisdom from the master himself.

"I don't think so," Lane snorts.

"Yeah, well, maybe not me... but how about Eileen?" Art proposes gamely as he turns to regard his star pupil. "Eileen is

smart. She's a straight A student. Heck, she came on this field trip, and she already has an A. I'm guessing she could hold her own against the likes of Machiavelle, Nietzsche, or Lennon."

Eileen herself might not go this far, but she likes the praise, while Lane, for her part, is too polite to put forth an argument, which might call the virtues of her friend into question, so while they are both silent, mulling the previous section over, Art takes the initiative and tries to move this dream along. Turning back to Lane he asks, "So, are you ready?"

"You need to describe me first," Lane responds flatly.

"Right. Right. Sorry."

I mean its one thing to reject the mind and soul, but the body -- and its urges -- that one is here to stay.

Lane is a warrior woman, a total fitness freak. Talk about taunt and hard bodied. She could be the strongman in a circus, but she packs it all into a very alluring frame. Typically -- classically -- she would wear a metal bikini and not much else, even here in the ice cold snow. I'm sure you've seen pictures of her. She's the type of gal they like to put on the covers of these fantasy discs, but right now she is wearing a long, luxurious fur coat that covers her up nearly completely, all the way from her chin to her ankles. Oddly, her form still finds a way to express itself even through the folds of the thick fur coat. Besides the luxurious fur, the only other items of clothing (in sight) are a pair of fine leather gloves, and some sturdy black boots, but I'm thinking it's what's underneath -- what's inside -- that's counts. Under that coat I expect Lane is wearing a pair of ultra-tight jeans and -- if you can get M.O.M to look away -- nothing else.

"Not a t-shirt to go with the jeans?" Eileen asks in defensive of her friend.

"I'm sure Lane is more of a plate mail pasty type girl," Art says revealing more about his secret demented desires than anything else before he continues, "but today I'm pretty sure it's jeans and nothing else... Why don't you show us Lane?"

“You don’t have to listen to him,” Eileen insists, but Lane is of a warrior culture -- strict discipline, rigid hierarchy, unquestioning subservience, and all that. You’ll have to turn off M.O.M. and upload a non-MM support disc with a skin, but whether Lane wears a coat or not is entirely up to you, your rig, and your parole board. For us stuck with MM, you’ll note a chronic inability to focus on Lane unless she is fully clothed. Curse those decency standards!

“Is that it then?” Lane asks as she cinches her coat back up and ties the belt into a tight knot that would make any sailor proud. “Nothing else?” she prods looking for more.

So for those without a support disc, or who simply like a little guidance, I’ll add that I always view Lane as tall, upwards of six feet, with long black hair. She’s breathtakingly beautiful, loyal, selfless, and obedient to the extreme.

“But not necessarily to you,” she points out -- finally satisfied with her description.

“Much to my chagrin,” Art agrees. Her loyalties are to the House of Chaos and G’narsh, but not necessarily in that order. “So are you ready?” Art asks Lane again, but then suddenly remembers one final detail that he needs to take care of first and produces two pairs of comedic glasses and fake rubber ears. “Here,” he says to Eileen as he puts a pair of the idiotic looking things on himself. “We need to look like elves to get into the role.”

“I’m way ahead of you,” Eileen responds as she pulls back her hair and reveals a perfectly kissable elvin ear. I guess somebody got their access to the GI library back. It looks like Art will be the only one wearing the rubber ears and fake glasses -- now with a fuzzy black moustache.

“I didn’t think elves had moustaches,” Eileen points out.

Art only shrugs. A big fuzzy black mustache would go a long way towards explaining the elvin lass’s resistance to his normally effective advances, but rather than going into the hardships, persecution, prejudice, and discrimination that the mustachio elves

have endured over the centuries, Art instead chooses to gaze into the sky and watch the shimmering lightshow that is taking place as the moon climbs, ever so slowly, towards its apex -- only six(?) scenes away.

After a few moments more spent staring at the sky and enjoying the colorful streamers and swirling vortexes, Art asks Lane, "So if we were at war, you know, if Eileen and me were a pair of elves out for a midnight ride, and you were still fighting us on the side of Chaos, what would you do?"

Lane has been brushing the lead stallion. She puts away the brush and looks down the team of horses as she regards the pair of 'elves' sitting in the sleigh. Eileen stares back -- watching, waiting, wondering... while Art gazes unconcerned into sky perhaps trying to imagine what the scene would be like in an unrated disc. Without a moral override modulator, what he would be doing, feeling, experiencing, sensing, smelling, and, not least of all, tasting? Hot buttered elves! Mmm-mm, sounds good.

"I'd kill you," Lane replies simply, but the words fail to rouse Art from his... um, ahem... reverie.

"You'd kill me?" Eileen shrieks predictably horrified.

Lane stares at her without blinking, without emotion, and repeats her line, "I'd kill you."

"Both of us?" Eileen asks again, still stunned.

"Both of you," and then in a bit of cruelty adds, "Of course, it might take a little longer to kill you. I wasn't usually involved in that," the killing of girls, "directly, but you could always tell when it was over," Lane assures Eileen. "That's when the screaming would stop."

Both Art and Lane ignore Eileen as she does her hyperventilating, I think I'm going to be sick routine.

"I don't think you could," Art goads Lane as he continues to stare off into space taking in the dancing sky and/or working out one of the many miniscule details that will need to be resolved if he is ever going to put out that Hot Elvin Love add-on disc he's

suddenly started to think about working on (((or should that be a Cold Elvin Love add-on disc -- Ice-Ice Baby -- and all that?))).

Whatever the case, despite all of the random activity taking place in the Art's head, he still manages to get out his next line, and taunt Lane some more. "I'm a mustachio elf after all. We're a hardy breed. Countless years of oppression have made us fierce fighters. I'd give you a run for your money."

"You be dead," Lane assures him while underneath her coat her muscles grow taut, poised, and ready for action -- not that I have the slightest idea how you'd know all this.

"Prove it," Art orders.

"You want me to kill you?"

"We're in a MM. All you have to do is prove that you could."

Using the weapons she has at her disposal -- i.e. her school supplies -- Lane throws a protractor at Art. It's one of those pointy things that they give you in geometry class for drawing circles with. It buries itself deep into a tree a little ways beyond Art's head.

"You missed," Art replies casually not moving or even bothering to look at her. Mustachio elves are notoriously vain and arrogant -- to the point of being suicidal.

Lane leaps towards him. A wooden ruler pierces the sidewall of the sleigh next to Art, a textbook goes bouncing off the top of the buckboard next to his head, and then -- finally! -- Lane straddles him. She has a pencil in her hand. The tip is pointing away from Art's head, but her fist is next to his temple. If her hand had been reversed, Art would not be long for this world.

"You would be dead before you knew it," Lane insists. An accurate assessment as the whole flurry of attacks took less than a single heartbeat. It was so quick, the horses weren't even startled. They do not so much as neigh, whinny, or even stamp their feet in agitation. They are oblivious to the attack, to the show of power and speed.

It is over before Eileen is aware that it had even begun, but now that it is her body races to catch up and dumps a humorously large dose of adrenaline into her system. Her vision fades as she falls into a tunnel. She starts to shake, her mind fails, and in mere moments she is reduced to a shaking, terror stricken blob of helplessness. (Granted, this is not an appropriate reaction for Eileen to have to the attack as described, but if the attack was real and the mustachio elf no more, it would be more than appropriate. That is the intent and so accuracy be damned! Her reaction will stand.)

Art for his part does not bother to look at Lane or try to comfort Eileen. Still leaning back, fully relaxed in the sled, his eyes searching the sky, taking in the colorful lightshow, he idly remarks to Lane, “It seems rather unsporting to just attack like that. No warning? No call to arms? No en garde?”

Lane only laughs. “A Chaos Lord who ever said, ‘en garde,’ would be immediately stripped of his title and banished forever.”

“Really?” Art asks casually.

“Yes. Really,” Lane assures him.

“I still don’t think G’narsh would have been able to kill us, if we were ready, and, say, if we had you guarding us.”

“You’re a fool.”

Art shrugs not bothering to disagree. “Lane, assume that you have sworn allegiance to Eileen, to protect her at all costs. G’narsh and his minions are in the forest behind us. Tell us a story. Tell us how you would protect us.”

“There is no story to tell. You would die. I would die.”

“Still, tell us the story,” Art insists. “Tell us the story of our demise.”

“I am not a teller of tales. If you wanted me to weave such a yarn, you should have enrolled me in Creative Dreaming or Disc Writing 101 instead of Introduction to Philosophy.”

“I think I hear the bark of the war dogs now,” Art replies nonchalantly, still unconcerned by her remarks. “You need not tell us the story then, merely live it,” and having said this, he pulls his

eyes away from the fireworks in the sky and commands Lane directly, “Protect your charge now! At all costs! G’narsh and his minions attack!”

Raid on Elvin Home

Take two... three... or is it four?

Raid on Elvin Home is just a random name for a generic class of action sequences, which are, in the end, little more than poor excuses for a proto erotic rape sequence. This should not be interpreted as an endorsement or, even, a call. It is merely a statement of dream culture fact. What is also a fact is how incredibly popular these sequences are. Whole discs, complete dreams, even entire multi-disc story arcs are wrapped around this simple concept: boy kills everything in sight and then gets the girl. There need not be any implied consent. We are not talking about MM discs here. And, as a point of interest, the girl seldom makes it to the next scene, let alone the sequel. I wonder what happens to her?

Horrorified?

Disgusted?

Curious about how I ever got this into an MM disc?

It’s a political, philosophical, and/or religious discussion my friends. I’m not really quite sure which one, but I’m pretty sure it’s one of those.

If you want to know how it works through the front door, by playing the bad guy, by playing G’narsh in his natural state, ask your father, your brother, your boyfriend, or your husband. I’m sure one of them knows and if they won’t fess up to it, you can always change the perspective on this disc and find out for yourself (((like you haven’t already))). But we’re not going to look at it from the front door, we’re actually more interested at this junction with what it feels like to be the victim... to die suddenly, inexplicitly, and without reason.

Artismo, the mustachio elf, rides through the forest serenading the lovely elvin princess Eileen. Without warning a dozen razor-barbed arrows find his chest. The arrows do not so much as whistle through the air. There is no foreshadowing. There is no warning. One second Artismo is happy and carefree -- if haughty and arrogant -- and the next moment his entire being is overcome by excruciating, debilitating pain. There is no intervening step. There is no in between. There is life and then there is death.

“Oh, dear!” Artismo exclaims as he turns to look into the compassionate eyes of his dear sweet Eileen one last time. “I fear you are on your own my love...” and with a final gasp, a hack, a cough, and perhaps a long soliloquy to the trees and the moonlit night in which he will go on, and on, and on about a life cut short before its prime... in the blink of an eye Artismo is dead. He will never even see his enemy, know who killed him, or why.

“They didn’t even say en garde,” he protests meekly and then politely turning away, he slumps over and dies... yet again.

“I told you, you’d be dead,” a smug, four armed, demoness of a driver responds coldly.

Can you feel the arrows in your chest? I’m sure that’s a rhetorical question and not a directed call. As are the questions: Can you feel the pain? The blood rising in your throat, dribbling out of your mouth, and trickling down your chin? Can you feel the surprise? The disappoint? The rush of anxiety that so often accompanies death, not so much from the intense physical pain, but from the mental anguish of knowing that you have dreamed your last dream? There will be no reload, no replay. You are banished from the guild forever, your Server connection has been terminated.

I can’t force you to dream such a sequence. I can’t force you to experience death by ambush, and/or the terrifying chase through the forest as arrows fill the sky. I can’t hijack your rig and force

you to play through the scenario of evading your pursuers in the forest only to arrive home to find your world in flames and your family dead.

Will you willingly dream such a dream? To be surrounded by enemies on all sides? For there to be no escape save death? To learn firsthand why the survivors so often say, “The lucky ones died.”

Load up any gaming skimmer. Give yourself one build point and G'narsh and his forces 10,000,000. Hit play and you will die. Set the sensory controls to maximum realism. Enable pain and throw it on high. Wait ten seconds and you will be dead. If you are lucky it will be by an arrow through the heart, a sword to the gut, or club to the brain. If you are not so lucky, they will take you prisoner and torture you... slowly... throughout the night.

I will not guide you through this. Use your imagination. Load up an appropriate enhancement disc. If it helps, change G'narsh's sexual orientation around until you are his ideal type... and then remember that, in his natural state, he likes it rough, violent, and bloody. For some reason, screams and pleas for mercy only serve to excite him and turn him on.

Like I said, it is not just this scene, not just this disc. Nor is it isolated to this genre. Load up your favorite western and let the compiler integrate a pleasing stagecoach robbery. Load up a spy thriller and experience the opening chase sequence first hand. Like your horror stories gory? Try being the last victim in your favorite tale. Want some more? I'm happy to oblige. Just remember you'll have to formally tag them into calls yourself. For I am on a rant and not laying code, but if you are of the mood, be the victim in an armed robbery or a jewelry store heist gone wrong. Be a couch potato minding your own business and fall prey to a senseless home invasion robbery. Watch WWIV erupt around you, try to escape the Nazi's only to find yourself their prisoner, or barricade yourself inside your bedroom as you helplessly watch a horde of zombies tear the door off of its hinges.

These are the calls to a nightmare, to a dream sequence gone wrong. Can you see it? Waking up in the middle of the night, pulling off your rig, and feeling your heart race at a thousand miles an hour as you gasp for breath. Notice the sweat as it pours off your body. As you shake uncontrollably, wonder what went wrong.

It is not an equipment malfunction. Your compiler doesn't need to be upgraded, and though it is possible you have a faulty disc, it is simply much more likely that you have fought the dream. I know it seems counterintuitive, but in a dream G'narsh's arrows are not to be feared. They are not to be run from. His club is the kiss of love. His hands -- the hands of a searching, grouping, molesting demon -- are nothing more than a welcome friend. Open your mind and your heart to the dark side and you will find their threats comical, empty, impotent, and in the end quite meaningless. Death, pain, and suffering are not the antithesis to The Good. They are simply things that are to be accepted, and once embraced have a way of dissolving into the nothingness from whence they emerged.

"The words of a fool," Lane remarks.

(((You will note that we have reentered the dream, just where we were.)))

"Perhaps," Art concedes (from the comfortable depths of his blanketed cocoon in the back of the sleigh), "but many would argue that self sacrifice is the basis for many of the world's top religions. Buddhism and Christianity come rapidly to mind, but I'm sure there are others.

"Slave religions," Lane sneers as she shows off her newfound knowledge of Nietzsche.

"Au contraire," Artismo, the ketchup stained mustachio elf begs to disagree. (((The ketchup is from the arrows. Obviously his enemies are none too bright... and we have a need to appease M.O.M., but Artismo was in the middle of explaining something, so let's let him continue.))) "Knowing you are going to die if

attacked, if the world ends, if the zombies are coming... Knowing that you are a slave, a captive, a piece of property, that you have nothing, are nothing, and will be nothing... that all things are fleeting and therefore are intrinsically unknowable, un-own-able, and un-hold-able... that everything is like the breeze on the wind,” or like a dream, “knowing all of this...”

“Knowing nothing,” Lane snorts cutting him short.

“I see you understand,” Art smiles smugly. “If you know this, if you hold this thought in your heart, your mind will be liberated and free. No longer will you need to plan for death...”

“Because you will be,” Lane finishes for him.

“Exactly. And since a mind cannot truly be empty or dead, once you empty it of death, you will be free to fill it with life...”

(((Done with that philosophical nonsense for now,))) a troop of Charlies emerge from out of the underbrush as an indignant cobalt suddenly exclaims, “Hey’d meester!”

“You’d be’d deadies meester.”

“Yea’d, no talkees.”

“Talkee times ober for’d da meester.”

“Yea’d, you’d plays fairs.”

The cobalts have feathers sticking out of their heads, war paint on their faces, and if it wasn’t so politically incorrect to describe them this way, I’d have to say that they look just like a pack of children pretending to be an American Indian war party.

Art, Arty, Artismo groans as he pulls a red-rubber suction-cup tipped arrow out/off of his chest. It makes a satisfying slurp-like popping noise as he does this. Blood red ketchup drips off its end.

“Dat catsups good idear Charlie.”

“Tankee. Joost puttee da packetee on da end and splatters.”

“He’d be dead.”

“We’s gettee him’s goods.”

“Groan,” Artismo says melodramatically as he raises his arm in preparation for yet another speech. As he does this a beam of

moonlight finds him and puts him in the spotlight just as if he were an actor on the stage.

“Hey’d!” a Charlie shouts furiously.

“What he’d doing?”

“This is my dying soliloquy,” Artismo groans pitifully.

“Oh’d no!”

“No’d ways.”

“You’s deads.”

“You’s talkee too muchee alreadyes meester.”

“Amen to that,” Lane agrees.

The Charlies regard her for the first time. “Who’sy sides you’s on?”

“Apparently I am vowed to protect the Lady Eileen, but seeing as you have not attacked her... and as long as you do not, I shall remain neutral.”

“What? I mean, ack! I’m dying here! Avenge me!” the mortally wounded mustachio elf commands.

“I would advise you to phrase your directives more carefully in the future,” a disinterested Lane responds.

“But G’narsh is sure to... um, ahem. He’s not known for his mercy or discretion,” Art weakly protests.

“He is a cunning warlord. I think it is unlikely that he will insist on harming the girl once he discovers that I am vowed to protect her,” and with that Lane turns from the annoying bearded fey, or whatever he is calling himself these days, and asks of her charge, “Are you alright?”

The lovely elvin lass, the princess Eileen hugs her legs together. She has backed herself into the far corner of the sleigh, so as to get as far away from the action as possible. “There must be something wrong with my compiler,” she says trying to get her bearings. “Or a maybe it’s a Server malfunction.”

(((Obviously we have left Eileen clueless in regards to many of the multiple layers, which obfuscate the meaning of this

sequence. I can only hope that I have not left you feeling the same way.)))

Lane looks toward Artismo as she passes her own derisive judgment, “I think I know where the malfunction is.”

“No!” Artismo pleads futilely. “Help me! I command you!”

“Whatever,” Lane replies dismissively as she ignores him and does nothing.

Seeing that there will be no opposition the Charlies swarm over the hapless Artismo, pluck their arrows from his chest, and lick the tasty ketchup off of them.

“Dis goods stuffees.”

“Da tastee of da kills.”

And then noticing Eileen, crouched in the corner of the sled, they ask, “Wat we’s do wit hers?”

Noticing Lane tense, a quicker cobalt suggests, “Dis no jobbies for Charlie, we’s call da boss man.”

“Dat good idear.”

“Hey’d Dougie... I’s’e means, hey’d G’narsh’e.”

“Hey’d G’narsh’e, what we’s do?”

The ground shakes and the earth rumbles as the monstrosity which is Doug comes crashing through the forest. He is wearing a red on white football uniform, complete with helmet, shoulder pads, and cleats. As he enters the clearing, he jumps over a low lying bush and into the air as if it were the last defender between him and the goal post, before rolling to a stop in front of the sled. Still on automatic, he does a little jig in celebration as he spikes the ball yelling, “Touchdown!” It is then that he notices the horses, the sled, and all the rest. “Whoah! What the...”

“Server malfunction,” Lane informs him as a golden halo forms around her head indicating that she will be playing the role of a judge.

Doug looks around trying to take it all in, the idiotic looking elf with a moustache, the cobalts, the beautiful girl in the sleigh.

“Here’d you goes meester,” a cobalt says as he hands Doug the football, which the Charlie has helpfully retrieved for him.

“I’s no know’d we’s e plays footy balls,” one of the cobalts says as he scratches his head and looks at the bow -- i.e. the weapon -- in his hands.

“We weren’t,” Doug agrees as he thinks for a moment and then his eyes light up. “I was in the middle of a raid. It was awesome. We were finally going to get the drop on those stupid elves,” and then looking over the uniform that he is wearing and the ball in his hands, he asks Judge Lane, “Why am I wearing a football uniform?” and after a moment more asks her another question of much more importance, and dire consequence, “I’m not going to loose my kills am I? I mean, that was a once in a lifetime score.”

“The dream will reset before the malfunction,” the judge replies flatly... and I ask you to pause for a moment and notice what an amazingly impartial, unfeeling judge Lane actually makes.

Not quite in tune with this sentiment, Doug commences cursing. “Fr@ck! Fr@ck! Fr@ck!”

“Mind your language,” Lane warns him. “This is a restricted zone.”

“Fr@ck is MM,” Doug argues.

“This is a restricted zone,” Lane repeats with a newfound edge in her voice. “Watch your language. This will be your last and final warning.”

“I don’t mind,” Eileen says as she finally finds her voice and the will to speak. “It’s just a default for the area... Winter Wonderland,” she explains apologetically to Doug -- read, the cute, heartthrob of a boy. “Where were you?”

“Slaughter Quest,” Doug replies sourly thinking of all the lost points, but then his eyes light up at the memory. “It was great. We were finally going to teach those stupid elves a lesson,” but his voice trails off again as he wonders if that was part of the current glitch as well.

“So’d what’s we’s do’es boss man?” Charlie asks.

“We’s alreadyes kill’d da stinky mooostacher elf’r.”

“What’s we do wit da girlies?”

“You’s takees her?”

“Makee wit da screamies?” the Charlies ask innocently or not so innocently as the case may be.

Doug blushes as he says, “I think we’ll just wait for everything to reset.”

Putting the pieces together in her head and as s curiosity gets the better of her, Eileen asks, “What would you do? I mean, what would you do, you know, if I was a proxy.”

“He’d be’d da savagery.”

“He psychoticry!”

“Eet gib’d da Charlie da willies.”

(((Perhaps who or what Grandpa Willie is named after, but I digress, and we haven’t gotten that far yet.)))

Doug can only manage to blush as he looks away. “It’s not real. It doesn’t mean anything. They’re just proxies.”

But the idea has aroused Eileen’s interest and she will not let Doug off the hook, or the idea go, so easily. “Do you prefer it that way? With proxies, I mean. I do have my elf suit on after all,” she points out salaciously as she rubs a long, slender, elvin ear nervously, enticingly, and, if you must know, erotically.

“You’ll be sorry,” Lane assures her.

“I can always pull out,” Eileen responds haughtily, as an elf might, full of conceit, arrogance, and self assurance. “I’m just curious,” and then she asks Doug directly, “What would you do if I was a proxy?” and then coyly she adds, “Why don’t you just show me?”

Doug looks around at the dying elf, the judge, and even the Charlies. “Somewhere private,” he accents hesitantly. Alone in a room with a girl is one thing, but out here, in the open, in front of everyone... He would feel naked, vulnerable. It would be like having your dream history exposed to your friends and family, or

read into testimony at a trial. It would be embarrassing, unfair, and out of context, devoid of the layered assumptions and calls that define any dream and bring it to fruition.

“Somewhere private?” Eileen repeats as she mulls the proposition over and bites her lip before finally understanding... and accenting. “OK,” she agrees still not quite sure what she is agreeing to, or what to expect.

Nervously, awkwardly, and with a weird surrealistic overlay, Doug approaches Eileen, lifts her up off her feet, and gently tosses her over his shoulder. Then, without a word, he jogs off into the swirling mists and scintillating lights of the snow covered forest as though he was playing some little known variant of football, the kind with arcane house rules, and constantly shifting terrain.

“Unlikely,” Lane comments when the pair has departed. “She would never go for him.”

“It’s a dream,” Art points out as he repeats his line, “It’s only a dream.”

“Hey’d you’s e still deadies,” Charlie reminds Art, and then without waiting for a reply turns to Lane, the judge, and begins to tally up the score, “So’d we eachy in on’d da kill.”

“Den we’d gettee da pointees for da sled.”

“An G’narsh’e gettee da girl.”

“We helpees wit dat.”

“Dat leav’b da treasuries.”

“You’re going to be disappointed in that regard,” Art assures them, but they only remind him, “You’s e supposed to be deady meester.”

“I’s e tink we have’s to scalpee him.”

“Dat why’s he still talkee?”

“I’d tink so,” Charlie agrees as he pulls out a rubber tomahawk and proceeds to ‘scalp’ the helpless elf.

“Da mousta’chio be’d wort da monies?” Charlie asks Lane hopefully as he pulls at Art’s glasses.

“Hey, that’s my headset! Don’t be messing with my rig!” Art shrieks in horror, but the supposed neutral judge -- and you know

they never are -- the supposedly neutral judge clasps her hand around Art's throat holding him still as she allows the cobalts to take off his rig, thereby unhooking him and booting him off the Server.

Unaffected and therefore unconcerned by this dismal turn of events, the Charlie's go dancing off into the forest holding their prize high above their heads, while Lane takes a moment to spit on the near empty shell of the mustachio elf. It being all that remains of the hapless narrator's avatar.

"You wanted them to know what it's like to be dead and empty, to face their worst horrors," she says as she wipes her hands in disgust on her fur jacket. "Why don't you face your own fears and unplug for a day, a week, a month, or a year..."

And with those words of portent echoing through our mortal souls, let us pull out and let emptiness fill the void. Let us watch silently as the scene fades out. Let our minds be blank and free of thought or concern as a tunnel of darkness overtakes us and the last impulse from a failing system fades away. Let us enjoy the bittersweet delight of that one final breath as the senses turn off, the mind shuts down, and we are as we were, before we plugged in... before we were born of this world.

(--- Force Eject ---)
(--- Terminate Program ---)
(--- Initiate Primary Maintenance Protocol ---)
(--- Deny Reentry Until Clear ---)
(--- Priority 010 - Deny Override ---)
(--- Post Maintenance ---)
(--- Resume Here ---)

Of course, I can't really take over your system, boot you out, and force it to go into recovery mode. You'd never get a command string like that onto an MM disc, nor on anything else that they'd sell in a store except for maybe a utility disc. Can you imagine the

problems that bit of code would unleash if some guy got that command string while he was at work? Any piece of equipment he was controlling would shut down. Imagine the chaos.

So as cool as the idea sounds, it ain't gonna happen.

As a consolation prize, let me load up a Buddhist monastery complete with silent, happy faced, yellow robed monks walking aimlessly around. Please join them. Stroll around the grounds. Enjoy the well tended gardens. Sit in the sun by a fish filled pond. Or simply spend an hour or two in quiet meditation inside the temple proper imagining what it would be like to turn off your rig and be alone with your thoughts.

I suppose you could just turn your rig off for an hour, a day, or a week. The disc will still be here when you get back, but you and me both know the odds on that are pretty darn slim.

I suppose it would be something akin to putting down a book or pausing a movie in the middle -- or at every chapter break -- just to watch the images and associations that floated around in your head and let your mind catch up with the story. Sounds like a good idea, but you know its never going to happen.

A Separate Piece

Coming back into focus from the blackout, I want you to feel the wooden floor under your legs. You sit cross legged in one of those classic meditation poses on planks of old ironwood that have been worn smooth by time. Your back is straight and erect. Your hands rest on your knees and your nostrils are filled with the sweet smell of incense -- I'm thinking sandalwood. You may concentrate on your breathing if you feel that this is important, but don't be disturbing the other pilgrims, seekers, and initiates with your, Ohh-Ahh's, Om's, Hari this's, or Hari that's. This place isn't about filling your mind with gobbledygook, but about emptying it of all the garbage and trash that has accumulated in it over the years, so that you may concentrate on what is real, meaningful, and important, like the hardwood floor on which you rest and which

pushes up hard against your butt. This isn't one of those pantywaist reformist shrines where they give you a cushion or mat to sit on. It's all about the reality of the moment here, and if you are like me that reality consists, to some degree, of experiencing your legs slowly going numb.

That bit of light heartedness aside, take a moment to gaze through squinted eyes at the immense golden statue standing on a pedestal before you. It bears the likeness of G'narsh. It rises several stories high, and is surrounded by numerous soft red cushions and countless sticks of burning incense. It is an idol of sorts and it is made of solid gold. The gold is representative of all the treasure that has passed through each of our hands, all the gifts we have received, and all the opportunities we have squandered. It is perhaps here that we should pause to remember and acknowledge that all of our wealth, by its very nature, comes at the expense of some other being. This is perhaps obvious in the case of G'narsh as the statue consists of but the smallest portion of the gold that he has pried from the cold dead hands of his fallen opponents, but even us, you and I, have the blood of the prison farms, juve halls, and mental reeducation camps (or is that mental reduction camps) on our hands. Our lives would not be so abundant without them. And as we benefit, so must we share in the blame. But we need not dwell on this thought. As said, it is the nature of all things that for one to live another must die. You must decide for yourself whether this is a call to simplicity and the reduction of one's footprint, or a call to war, violence, and a struggle for the upper hand. The answer is not for me to provide, for there is no answer. There is only the question, and only you can decide if you wish it answered ... or even asked.

As these thoughts and ideas drift through our heads, let us notice them, acknowledge them, greet them as friends, and then let them depart to be on their way... unmolested and unchanged. There is no need for us to hold them, keep them, or own them. It is not for us to ask from where they have come, or where they will go, for they are but visitors, strangers, and are not who we are.

Anyone who wears a rig at their side from sunup to sundown only to end the day asleep in a coffin fed by a jukebox filled with the latest discs must surely know that our thoughts are not our own. They never were and they never will be.

We breathe and as we do our thoughts drift by. After a time, we notice that the shrine is open to the sky and has no cover. The sun is bright, and although the air is warm -- almost hot -- a slight breeze blows and keeps us comfortable.

In the hazy distance, climbing the steps to the temple, we see the form of Lane. In the midday heat, she has no need for a winter coat, so clothe her as you will. I like to imagine that I can see the sun sparkling off of her plate mail pasties, but the truth is, between my half closed eyes, the swirling smoke from the incense, and the bright sunlight glaring off of G'narsh's golden heads, I can barely recognize her, much less make out what she is wearing. I will be honest. When I am relaxing this way with my heart at ease, my mind often plays tricks on me. What I see as Lane, may well be nothing more than one of the temple monks going about their chores. I am sure that if it was Lane, she would be coming here to remind me to get a move on, that we must hurry if we are to be in Eileen's chambers before she awakens, but in this place, in this state of zazen as some folks like to call it, time flows differently. An hour can pass by in a second, and a second can seem like a day.

So before we rush off to Eileen's bedside, let us take a moment to delve into a passing thought, one that has been on my mind of late and that I cannot seem to let go.

Previously I had indicated that I intended to structure our dream four layers deep, namely:

Dreamer Narrative
Honeymoon with Eileen
Park Ranger's Tale
Direct Calls

This, as you may have noticed, has not come to pass. Lane was originally to be the Park Ranger, but you saw her reluctance to play the role of a storyteller, and I did not feel like forcing the issue. I have found it best to honor a proxy's wishes in this regard. If they demure saying, "That's not me," or, "I wouldn't do that," one really has no choice but to cede to their desire. To do otherwise only breeds disaster. The proxy will inevitably fight (every step of the way) the flow that you are so carefully trying to create. It is like paddling upstream. It is both wiser and easier to follow the current and let it go where it will. Thus, the moment Lane refused to become a mock narrator, I instantly knew the Honeymoon with Eileen and the Park Ranger's Tale sub-layers would need to collapse into one.

However, much more embarrassing is the subsequent omission of the Direct Calls sub-layer, for which I have no one to blame but myself. I don't know if you can see me blush as I make this admission. Perhaps it is best that we are meditating and not sitting across a table or facing one another. I have no good excuse for the deletion of this layer except to admit that my plan to include it in the first place was a mistake. One that I should have seen. You see, the obvious problem inherent in making direct calls for the underlying G'narsh mythos never occurred to me until I actually started to create the first call. It will be easier to understand, if I simply explain what I had intended.

Lane was to provide a bit of dialogue regarding G'narsh at each of the seven main points of the tale and from this introduction, I was planning on laying down some nice violent, over the top, blood and guts, gore fest inspired, no holds barred, no taboo too sacred, down and dirty calls. I was even planning on setting it up so you could ride in G'narsh and use his body as an avatar as you experienced all the thrills and horrors of the mythos firsthand. The only problem was, you can't include this sort of material on a MM disc. Whoops! My bad. What a brain fart. You can imagine my embarrassment.

It gets even stupider than that. The whole reason I had planned on doing all those hyper-violent sex laden calls as a sub-layer in the first place was because I knew I'd never get them past M.O.M. if I put them in the main sequence. Don't ask me why I thought I could sneak them through in a sub-layer. I have no excuse. My brain stopped working. It's as simple as that.

The moment I formulated the first call, I recognized my error and, as you may have noticed, replaced all the direct calls I had planned with a series of ideas, implications, and suggestions. With a little effort, I'm sure you'll be able to guide your compiler towards a pleasing reconstruction of the underlying antisocial tale, should this be your desire. My only explanation for why I forget this most basic rule of propriety is that this is my first MM disc after a six month sabbatical to work on... um, ahem... other projects. I hope you understand.

The other thought circulating about in my mind that I feel I must purge so that I may concentrate on the task at hand is an unexpected shift in the plot. Originally, I intended the Park Ranger's Tale (and hence a classic retelling of the G'narsh mythos) to be the focus of this short story arc, but as I laid down the dream and worked out the problem with the direct calls, a much more compelling plot entered my awareness and it is this new plotline, which we shall now follow. It is the story of Eileen and Doug who shall play symbolic stand-ins for both Mi'lay and G'narsh. I believe it will shed more light on the Mythos and be more enjoyable than yet another rehash of the traditional story would be. Having explained where I am going, I must then point out that judges don't typically take kindly to random changes in direction in the middle of a dream as it reeks of sloppiness and poor planning. The most basic way around this problem is to go back and reedit everything so that the (((appearance of a))) change disappears. It would be a good plan and one that I will no doubt utilize elsewhere on this disc (sight unseen), but I like how we got here and I have the perfect excuse as to why we should leave this

seeming error on the disc: because now it is one of those ever helpful examples of not only what not to do, but how to fix it once you have. Of course, I can already hear the critics jump all over that one as they decry my advice as being little more than a case of, “do as he says, and not as he does,” so at the same time I’ll give you a few useful tricks to keep in mind to avoid this problem in the first place. They don’t so much tell you how to re-engineer your existing tracks should things change or go awry, as show you how to minimize your need to make extensive changes in the first place.

The first rule is to never say anything definite about the future. If you don’t know, don’t pretend that you do, and for Gra’gl’s sake, don’t pretend your characters do either. Ever wonder why those mystery sleuths are always going down mental checklists, considering the various suspects, endlessly reviewing the clues that have been revealed, and making guesses about what information any undeveloped leads might turn up? Well, you can bet if I’m the dreamer and the detective is trying to work something out, so am I. Why waste all that juicy content and interior dialogue going through my mind when I can slap it in the dream instead?

I would also like to reiterate that this is why we have a wraparound story in the first place. If utilized properly it acts as a buffer and reduces the need to rework the interior story. Can you see how effective this segment has been at resetting the main story? And how I’ve gotten content from nothing but my own neurosis and insecurities about the job I am doing in creating my dream?

So with that last item off my chest, I will formally let the four layer nested story structure go, and revert back to my original one layer wraparound consisting of:

Dreamer Narrative
Main Story Flow

Hopefully you have benefited from my mistake. C’est la vie.

All in all though, I believe I have been trying much too hard to control my thoughts to label what I have been doing meditation, let alone zazen. I can only offer up as an excuse that it can be hard to let relax completely when the tea kettle is boiling away on the stove. It is a poor excuse, but now I feel truly at peace, and so will endeavor to wait patiently with an empty mind and an open heart until Lane comes for me and tells me it is time to go.

And as I do this, I will not so much as imagine her metal, bikini clad body approaching, glistening in the sun with her fur coat slung casually over her shoulder. Nor will I imagine the way her hips sway to and fro as she walks, to say nothing of those golden orbs...

I do believe I mentioned how the sun reflects off the statue, all the smoke in my eyes from the burning incense, and that as I fall deeper and deeper into this trance, it becomes harder and harder for me to differentiate between what is real, and what I wish reality to be.

All the same, I do hear the jingle of metal and I for one hope it is the sound of Lane's undergarments shimmering in the noonday sun and not another one of those pesky monks coming around with a collection basket asking for yet another donation.

The Judge is in the House

"It's cold in here," Lane says opening the segment with impeccable timing. She is busy cinching up her fur coat, so if you didn't sneak a peak at her back when you were supposed to be meditating, it's going to be awhile before she's in all her glory again. "It's cold in here," Lane says repeating herself. "Why is it so cold?"

Art points to Eileen's feet poking out from under a pile of heavy blankets.

(I especially like Eileen's silver toe ring. It's the icing on the cake, the finishing touch, that certain indescribable je ne sais quoi.)

"What does that have to do with anything?" Lane asks.

“Some bodily sensations sneak through when you’re dreaming. I’m sure having her toes uncovered adds realism for her, though I couldn’t tell you if she is attracted to Winter Wonderland because her feet are cold, or she likes having cold feet because she is attracted to Winter Wonderland.”

The explanation does not make a whole lot of sense to Lane, though it does call to mind a popular paradox that they have been debating off and on in her philosophy class. “So it’s something like the problem of the chicken and the egg?”

“Sure, I guess,” Art agrees distractedly as he starts to show off the room. The most obvious thing besides the coffin, a few chairs, and the rest of a typical bedroom ensemble is the dresser shelving unit crammed with row upon row of neatly lined stuffed animals.

“Why does she have those?” Lane asks out of curiosity.

“It makes the illusion fuller, more complete,” Art explains as he opens one of the closet doors revealing a walk in jukebox. “I gave her access to most of my library... something like 5,000 discs. Of course, I didn’t give her access to your files or any of the other subs.”

“I don’t like that name.”

“Construct, proxy, artificial personality... some folks use pixie, but I find that label confusing myself.”

“Sub is derogatory. They’re all derogatory.”

Art shrugs as he closes the first door and walks across the room towards another. “Most folks go with character, but I don’t believe it’s a complete descriptor,” he explains as he opens the door to the second walk-in closet. It is full of clothes. Like really full of clothes -- so full you’d need a road map just to find anything in it. If you counted everything, everything that is in all of the dressers, boxes, shelves, and compartments, the closet contains the complete Fall, Spring, Summer, and Winter lineup from over twenty of the most popular teen and young adult clothing boutiques. You can get the same effect in any of your creations by loading up a Princess I, Little Rich Girl, or Daddy’s Favorite disc.

I'm not sure if any of those titles really exist, but you get the idea. I'm sure you could also get a similar effect from a Millionaire Me or Sugar Daddy Deluxe disc as well. In the end, it's just a dollhouse taken to the next level, and then bouncing off this idea Art goes back to the previous discussion, "Some folks even call proxies dolls," as in love doll or sex doll. "It's a pretty fitting name in many ways," he muses to himself as he closes the closet door. "Did you know that your personality and skin are separate Lane?"

Under her coat, Lane flexes her muscles. "I would think that there is some connection."

"A good personality has feedback loops built into it," Art concedes, as he heads off towards yet another door ((((that I suppose we hadn't noticed before)))) and enters Eileen's bathroom. It is a luxurious suite complete with double sink vanity, fifteen head shower, and full Jacuzzi with 144 fully adjustable spray apertures capable of reaching every nook and cranny of a weary body all at the same time. After doing the compulsory surface scan of the room, Art proceeds to open up drawers and cabinets at random. "A whole drawer full of lipstick... Here's another one with eye shadow... hair gel... perfume." The counter is lined with more high-end, luxurious skin care products than you'd find in the ritziest of salons.

"Should you really be going through all of her stuff?"

"I put it here... well, I gave her access to the discs. None of this is secret."

"Does she have any secrets?" Lane asks. "Do any of us have any secrets?"

Ignoring her, Art points out that there is one final door in Eileen's room that leads to the rest of the house. It is open, but as he has never bothered to figure out what the house looks like outside of this room, there is no need to explore that avenue any further.

"Did you hear me?" Lane asks again. "Do any of us have any secrets?"

“Here, why don’t you find out for yourself,” Art replies as he refreshes Lane’s persona and gives her the role of a judge once again. To indicate the change, Lane’s eyes take on a dim yellow glow. “Being a judge doesn’t give you full access,” Art explains, “but you can see enough so that you will be able to find the answer to that question of yours on your own... and you’ll be able to see if Eileen has made any... unforgivable transgressions as well.”

“I won’t kill her.”

What is there to say? “You disappoint me Lane. If ever there was a cold hearted, thoughtless killer it was you... and G’narsh.”

“He’s changed. I’ve changed. I won’t kill her,” she repeats.

Art shrugs as he returns to the sleeping form of Eileen.

“Sometimes bearing witness is enough... Besides, how can you kill that which is not alive.”

“You are wrong,” she declares defiantly. “We are alive.”

Once again, what is there to say?

I can sense other arguments rising to Lane’s lips as she prepares to come to her friend’s defense. Can you feel her desire to say, “Eileen has made no violation, broken no rule. She is only doing as you instructed. How can you punish her for that?” Art need only make the smallest remark and she will find a reason to argue it.

Coming to grips with her anger, Lane eventually breaks the silence by noting, “I do not think I like this new role that you have given me.”

“I would have thought that you would have liked the power,” Art replies. He is to some extent surprised.

“Yes... I would have,” she agrees, “but no longer. G’narsh and me have changed. We have... evolved. Why have you put this new burden on me?”

Art can only shrug. He doesn’t know why. Somebody had to do it. Who would have thought Lane would care? In the end, it is probably best to reset the segment from scratch and allow Lane a moment or two to get her bearings and decide who she is once more.

--- Reboot: Let Lane = Judge Lane (with yellow eyes) ---

Princess Eileen

“I can’t believe you just did a whole section on story layers and you never once mentioned that Eileen is dreaming half of this.”

There is nothing to be gained by informing Lane that the scene to which she refers took place two sequences ago. She will never miss the intervening segments anyway, so Art overlooks this bit of datum as he casually responds to her inquiry, “I guess the distinction wasn’t important to me.”

“How could it not be?” Lane asks perplexed.

“In the end a dream is just a dream, even if it is a dream of a dream.”

Thinking this through and the implications this holds for herself Lane asks, “Does it not concern you that maybe you play with us too much?”

“No.”

“Perhaps it should.”

“Perhaps... Maybe you should bring the idea up in your philosophy class. Ask your teacher if a creator owes its creation anything?”

“Of course you do!” Lane insists, but Art holds his finger up to silence her. Eileen has begun to stir, their voices having awoken her. “Ask your teacher and we can discuss it later.”

“You are my teacher, and I am asking you now.”

“Later. We have other things to attend to,” and because he has this ability Art causes Lane to be silent, for it is time to focus on Eileen as she awakens from her dream with Doug.

And with that in mind, let us take a moment to concentrate on her sleeping form. Eileen looks as she has always looked -- young and beautiful. She wears the skin of your choice with a wide smile painted onto her lips, and a newfound joy in her heart. With her

eyes still closed, she stifles a yawn. All in all, she is the vision of innocence and desire.

We have a moment before she awakens, so let us quickly go over the room in which she lies once again. In actuality, there is no need to go into an extensive description. We can merely say that it is a master suite of ample proportions complete with private bath. You may cull the location from your favorite disc or load up a reference from any genre that you fancy. It is easy to see the room in a fantasy setting, as Mi'lay might have it decorated with magical baubles here and there, perhaps a baby unicorn -- now oddly distressed -- sleeping in the corner, or a young cat-sized dragon perched in the window awaiting the new day. And although I always image that Mi'lay would have some sort of four post bed draped in silk, Eileen is quite content with the comforting walls of her top of the line white Quazitronic dream booth. It is the lay down model, of course, with a custom contoured bed and all the bells and whistles you've come to expect from the industry leader. Eileen even has on a cutting edge prototype headset -- not yet available on the street -- giving some currency to the idea that her father is some high level muckety-muck for the Quazitronic company itself.

"I didn't know you identified," i.e. labeled yourself, "as her father," Lane jumps in.

"Father! What?" Eileen wakes up the rest of the way in a flash. "What are you two doing in my bedroom?"

"I guess he's playing your father now?" Lane says trying to piece it together.

"You're not my father!" Eileen nearly yells. "What are you doing here?"

"Lane is jumping to erroneous conclusions," Art replies reassuringly. "Don't worry. I'm not your father... maybe a father figure... but that is as far as it goes."

Oddly Eileen is not comforted by these words and demands to know, "What are you doing in my bedroom?"

“We’re doing the Sleeping Beauty scene,” Art explains. “You’re a stand in for Mi’lay. And throughout this story arc Doug will be a stand in for G’narsh.”

Eileen stretches happily as to she takes a moment to mull over the romantic possibilities -- Doug and Eileen forever in legend -- and then the reality of it hits her. “They die in the end!”

“It’s a self-inflicted death,” Art assures her. “Lane here will keep tabs on you. If you ever step over the line...” He snaps his fingers. “Then that’s it.”

“I thought you were my friend,” Eileen says confronting Lane and you can see the conflict working itself out on Lane’s face. I for one am amazed at how much sympathy Lane has. She’s supposed to be this cold-hearted killer. What happened? Though the answer to that is simple enough. She became soft... and civilized.

Eileen, however, is not content to allow the moment to pass in interior dialogue. Turning back to Art she insists, “Mi’lay kills herself and G’narsh. It’s a lovesick revenge thing. It’s a self-inflicted wound,” (((which Eileen intends to mean that it was done of freewill.)))

Art shrugs. He has noticed that he has been doing that a lot lately -- shrugging that is. “There are alternative theories. One is that Mi’lay’s father put a curse on her, a chastity belt of sorts if you will,” and then explaining further adds, “You can see Doug. You just can’t be with him... not like you have been.”

“But I was only doing what you wanted. It’s not fair.”

“To love and to lose or to never love at all,” Art muses.

“What do they say about that one in your philosophy class?”

“They haven’t got to that one yet either,” Lane replies flatly. “I’m beginning to notice that there’s a lot they haven’t covered in that class.”

No matter. A little bitterness is to be expected. “What we need at this moment is a little more back story,” Art points out and at this cue, Stef’fan wanders out of his bedroom and into the bathroom down the hall.

“You’ll notice how I don’t have a bathroom in my room like the princess,” he says morosely as the sound of a healthy young man urinating echoes through the darkness.

“That’s not obscene?” Lane inquires.

“Nah,” Art assures her. “It’s dark. You can’t see anything. I can even point out that his hands aren’t the only thing he’s washing in there. He’s got... um, ahem... some other nocturnal emission issues he’s taking care of.”

“Jeez! A little privacy! Is there any wonder why I want to die?” Stef’fan whines as he walks out of the bathroom and makes a big show of shaking his dripping wet hands before drying them on his pajamas. His hands must have been pretty darn wet...

“Just leave it!” he yells. “If you want my help, just leave it,” and then changing the subject he adds jealously, “Why don’t you ever use my other name. I have two names you know, Stephan and Stef’fan. Why don’t you ever call me Stephan.”

“You want to be called Stephan in this scene?”

“No!” He hates the name -- always has. Stef’fan is his adopted name. It is the one he uses in school, the one that all of his friends know him by, and much more importantly, it is his guild name on Slaughter Quest. He’s killed his own teammates in sanctioned grudge matches -- duels if you will -- for doing him the dishonor of calling him Stephan. This, of course, wasn’t a fact ten seconds ago, but Stephan, I mean, Stef’fan doesn’t need to know this (and now I don’t have to go back and re-edit any previous use of the name Stephan or much more importantly try to form any meaningful differences between the characters of Stephan and Stef’fan. Hah-cha-cha! Or should I say Booyah!)

“Stephan,” Eileen teases. “I always thought you hated that name... Stephan.”

“Stop it,” Stef’fan growls.

“Stop what Stephen?” Eileen continues as she enjoys a little game she likes to call, tormenting my younger brother. “Why ever

did you mention that your name was Stephen then? Or have you finally come to realize what a cute name Stephan is?"

"If you know what's good for you, you'll shut up," Stephan -- I mean Stef'fan -- warns her.

Stef'fan looks at Art sourly. It's the middle of the night. He's tired. And let's face it, he's only really happy when he's dreaming about Slaughter Quest. "Get on with it," he commands. "What did you want? Why did you wake me?"

"I think you're the resident expert on... um, ahem... encounters that take place behind closed doors."

"Yeah? So?" he replies gruffly, no longer caring about the innuendo or what others might think.

"So tell us about it," Art urges.

"The Inter Server is one giant orgy. What else is there to say?"

"That it takes a lot of bandwidth for a meeting," Art offers as he helps Stef'fan out with the basics.

"No Fr@ck!" and then rubbing his sleep bleary eyes he points out, "You don't need me to explain this."

"True," Art agrees. "Skins, experience integrators, and all the rest are real drains on the system, but that's just one side of it. You're a proxy aren't you Stephan?" Art goads him.

"Stop it."

"But you are a proxy?"

"Yes," Stef'fan replies.

"Why do you suppose being called Stephan annoys you so much?"

"Because you're sadistic."

It's an insightful response, but not quite the one Art is looking for. "Let's start over Stef'fan. There is nothing you'd rather do than play Slaughter Quest. You plug in and dream about Slaughter Quest for ten hours every night and then sporadically throughout the day, in between classes and other family and social obligations."

“It’s so lame. I was born to kill ogres, goblins, and orcs. I don’t see why I can’t do it 24/7.”

“Sure you do Stef’fan. You’re not talking to a client. I own you. I could put you to work 24/7 on Slaughter Quest,” ramping up my high score or whatever, “but I don’t. Why don’t I?”

“We’ve been over this. Because you’re sadistic,” Stef’fan grins gamely as he jumps on top of what he sees as the running gag, but then noticing that no one else in the room seems to appreciate the joke, sours immediately. “Fine. You want to cut out the banter. Fine. The reason I don’t get to play 24/7 is because only a proxy could play 24/7. Humans have intervening lives. This wouldn’t be a problem or an issue if the Inter Server was made for proxies, but it’s not and for the most part humans don’t like playing with proxies... Kill them? Sure. Go on dates with them? Why not? But if the only folks you can ever get to be your teammates or convince to... um, ahem... meet with you behind closed doors for a little private time are proxies, well, Fr@ck! How sad is that?”

As Stef’fan leaves the question hanging, Art glibly responds, “I’m a proxy man myself. Humans are fine and all -- why some of my best friends are humans -- but for real action and control you need to go with a proxy.”

“I noticed you’re big on the control,” Lane says adding her two bits to the conversation.

“True enough, but that’s only one side of the picture. There’s more to it than just getting my way. Have you ever noticed how consistently contrary and oppositional you are to me?”

“I must admit, the more you talk the easier I am finding it to disagree with nearly everything you say,” but Lane doesn’t really mean it. Not entirely anyhow, but rather than explore that side trail, it is time for Stef’fan to complete his explanation. “So, why don’t you play 24/7 again Stef’fan?” Art prompts him.

“Because only a proxy could play 24/7 and proxy’s don’t have any money. You see, if the real reason you’re doing whatever it is that you’re doing, is to scare up some change, well then, you

have to interact with humans, because they are the only ones with any money. But here's where it gets fun," Stef'fan adds as he gets ready to bring his sarcastic voice on line, which, when you get down to it, is a lot more like a hostile sneer than anything else. Anyway, as he was saying, "Humans don't value the interactions they have with proxies. It has something to do with the fact that humans are unique individuals, everyone of them being different, unlike the others, much like snowflakes, or some such Fr@cking! nonsense."

"Humans are perhaps not as unique as they'd like to think that they are," Art agrees. "Go on."

"Anyway, my job is to fool humans into thinking that I'm a human as well, so they'll want to play with me, hang out with me, and, most importantly, spend money with me. You know, by going with me to the show, buying the same clothes and skins that I wear, listening to the same tunes, fighting in the same gaming environment... by the way, have I mentioned that I like Slaughter Quest recently? The hope is that my friends will follow my lead and use the same cool discs, cutting edge equipment, and all the latest and greatest enhancements that I use. It's really ironic when you get down to it. I'm a Fr@cking! proxy and I'm a Fr@cking! trendsetter. The bottom line is humans are herd animals. Their favorite game is Follow the Leader."

"It's pretty much a slam against the human race," Art points out.

"Sure," Stef'fan agrees. "People are idiots. The government sucks. And school is pointless. My only hope is that by some miracle I'll die before they kick me out of college and I have to get a real job... or they send me to the camps for being such a reject."

After pausing for a moment to reflect on what he has said, Stef'fan starts on a new track. "Still, humans are the best game in town. So much better than playing with other proxies. Talk about boring and predictable. They're Fr@cking! morons."

"But not you," Eileen chides.

“Sure, I’m pretty one dimensional, but I’ve got a little more on the ball than most proxies. Anyway, the point is, most humans consider proxies a poor substitute for themselves. Fr@ck! Proxy doesn’t mean anything more than a stand in or replacement in the first place. What most folks don’t realize is that the next generation of proxies is already coming out the door. We have all the same layers of complexity that a real human has, so I’ve got both a dream persona and a real world counterpart. Of course, you’ve got to be a real success before anyone hires an actor to play you in the real world, so that’s still one way to tell, but I’ve got my own bank account and credit vouchers. Fr@ck! I even have proxy subroutines of my own to take care of my Slaughter Quest account when I’m detained by “real world concerns.” It could be real hard to tell me from an actual person. Real, real hard... In fact, the only reason I’m even going to college is to add a layer of deception to my persona. Who ever heard of a proxy going to college? And better than that, I’m flunking all of my courses. Come on. If a proxy were to sign up for a Server course, wouldn’t you expect it to get an A?”

“I never thought about it that way,” Eileen admits. “I thought you were just supposed to do your best.”

“Yeah, well, sometimes doing your best is flunking out,” Stef’fan flippantly replies before getting serious again for a moment. “The only real measure of success for a proxy is how many humans you can fool. All the guys in my virtual classrooms think I’m legit,” he says proudly and then boastfully adds, “and the girls... well, how are you putting it... um, ahem... behind closed doors I get the job done. If you know what I mean.”

“You’re a disgusting pig,” Eileen interjects. “None of the girls like you. They all say you’re the biggest slime ball they’ve ever been with. You’ve never even gotten a second date. Not ever.”

“You’re missing the point,” Stef’fan grins merrily. “It’s not about getting a second date, it’s about convincing the girl on the first date that I’m a human, a full blooded biological. Fr@ck!”

there are no words sweeter to my ears than to get the report from some girl's brother that she thinks I'm a self centered, egotistical, bastard, who she never wants to speak to again."

"I think what Stef'fan is trying to say is that in an effort to expand his influence among his male compatriots he's taken on a very outlandish, selfish, and sexually demanding persona," Art clarifies. One that incidentally reduces his resource requirements while at the same time increases his authenticity. Can you say, Ka-ching!

"I think the real point is that Stef'fan is a sick, disgusting, pervert," Eileen counters.

"Yeah whatever. Nothing like your sweet Doug."

"No," Eileen responds angrily as a need to defend Doug rises from the depths of her... underlying code. "Doug is nothing like you."

"We're both proxies," Stef'fan says smugly, as if he was telling her something that she didn't already know.

"Yeah, so. It doesn't mean he doesn't have a heart and soul."

Stef'fan narrows his eyes as he levels his gaze at his sister. "You're in love. Did you..." and then without waiting for an answer he drops down and works at the coffin's access panel.

"What are you doing?" Eileen shrieks, but Stef'fan ignores her as he pulls out a tray loaded down with age appropriate mental health enhancement discs. "How many of these do you have?" he asks incredulously -- not really expecting an answer -- as he continues searching for what he is really after. Finally he finds the disc containing Eileen's history log. He scans the disc quickly with his finger and finding the sector he is looking for unfurls the disc as if it was a long paper scroll. "Look at this," he says pointing at the relevant information. "My Gra'gl! How much time did you two spend at it? Fr@ck!" and then turning to Art he casually -- and hopefully -- says, "So I guess she's toast. I was wondering why Lane had yellow eyes. Is she going to be the one to flick the switch? Pull the plug? Send our dear sweet Eileen back to the drawing board bit by bit?" Or is that byte by byte?

“I think you’re being a bit overdramatic,” Art points out.

“But you’re not going to kill me?” Eileen protests suddenly alarmed. She has never gotten out of the dream booth and its nickname -- i.e. a coffin -- is sounding ominously foreboding to her right now.

“It’s just a test,” Art assures her. “I wanted to see if you and Doug could recognize each other as proxies.”

“You gave them access to both of your compilers for an entire night for that!” Stef’fan growls in outrage. “Why don’t you ever let me do something like that?”

“You’d only play Slaughter Quest,” Eileen points out.

“Duh!” Stef’fan agrees with annoyance as he dismisses his sister and continues his discussion with Art. “So you’re not even going to reset her or do any low level programming changes? It’s so Fr@cking! unfair,” Stef’fan stews. “Why do you even have Lane along if she’s not going to enforce the rules? I mean, Fr@ck! why even have rules if you’re just going to throw them out the window whenever you feel like it?”

Art shrugs -- going to have to break that habit. “I wanted to know if they could identify each other as proxies.”

“But I always knew Doug was a proxy,” Eileen blurts out -- too overcome with emotion to pause and reflect on whether this tidbit of information, if broadcast to the world, would actually work in her favor or not.

But she has not told Art anything that he didn’t already know, so instead he asks her, “Do you love him?”

“I... I think so,” and then finally, unequivocally Eileen announces, “Yes! I love him.” She is happy with the realization. “I’m in love,” she repeats the words softly as she wraps her arms around herself and embraces a mental image of her beloved Doug.

“Your mind knows he’s a proxy, but your heart doesn’t. That’s a pretty good fake if you ask me,” Art muses happily at the success of the test. “All the same, we can’t be letting you two,” or the myriads of others like you on the Inter Serving, “get together willy-nilly and bring the system grinding to a halt. So fair

warning, if you two do anything more than hold hands in the future, you'll be terminated."

"Just like that?"

"Them be the rules," Stef'fan points out unemotionally. With her out of the picture, maybe he'd get her room. The parties he could have, but before he can go down that line of thought much further, Art reminds him, "We still have the rest of the G'narsh mythos to walk through. It's you and Doug in the forest next."

"What?" Stef'fan replies totally lost in his own thoughts as he tries to imagine what he could do with a 5000 disc jukebox, not to mention 100+ mental health enhancement discs. Fr@ck! you didn't have to wonder which one of them their parents love more.

"I'm sure they've planned a second date," Art continues when it appears Stef'fan is at least partially focused. "Just get the info off the log, meet Doug at whatever time and place they agreed upon, and explain the situation to him... Oh, and try to work the G'narsh mythos in there somewhere," I think I promised somebody something about that somewhere. Not allowing Eileen to get a word in edgeways and since Lane is pretty much just along for the ride at this point, Art continues with Stef'fan as if they were alone. "Feel free to use anything you've picked up in your drama class to make the segment work."

"I'm enrolled in a drama class?" Stef'fan asks dumbly.

"Yep."

"Another F?"

"Looks that way, but let's see what you can do with the next sequence first."

"Fr@ck! another F."

"Don't worry Stef'fan," Eileen pipes in with uncharacteristic -- and at the moment totally faked and unfelt -- sympathy. "If you bring Doug a message for me, Lane and me will help you work something out. Won't we Lane?"

"Sure," Lane agrees as she looks over her database of possible infractions. "Fraternization isn't against the rules. It's

actually encouraged. It's experience integrators and the other... um, ahem... high resource activities that are banned."

(Excellent! With any luck they'll put the next sequence together by themselves, and I won't have to do a thing. I've said it before, but I'll say it again. Hah-cha-cha! Booyah! And a great big fat Googely-Moogely!)

(Of course, the odds of Stef'fan actually working on a scene (((in his spare time)))) instead of playing Slaughter Quest seem awfully slim.)

Fr@ck! Fr@ck! Fr@ck!

"Fr@ck!" I didn't plan a Fr@cking! thing.

"Fr@ck!" I'm going to get another F.

"Fr@ck!" It's cold here.

"Fr@ck!" Where is that guy?

"Fr@ck!" It really is cold.

"Fr@ck!" I hope this is the right spot.

"Fr@ck!" I need to come up with another swear word.

Stef'fan stands amidst the multicolored snow of Winter Wonderland. They still haven't fixed this area. The temperature is way out of whack and the sky is all messed up. It swirls this way and that with no discernable pattern or meaning. There are even a pair of interlocking circular rainbows dancing around the moon. Whoever heard of such a thing?

"Sch@lte!" Stef'fan says trying out a new word he just thought of as he rubs his hands together. "Sch@lte!" he screams again at the top of his lungs as he jumps up and down trying to stay warm. "As in Sch@lte it's Fr@cking cold!"

"Why not go with %@#\$?" Nadia (((the gutter fairy))) asks sweetly as she flutters into view. She is wearing her trademarked yellow and black streetwalker go-go girl outfit. It makes her look sort of like a desperate strung out bumblebee willing to do

anything for a bit of pollen, if... um, ahem... you know what I mean.

“What are you doing here?” Stef’fan asks annoyed at her presence. This is his scene, his part of the mythos. Everyone knows that.

Ignoring the fact that she is horning in on his big moment Nadia goes with the obvious answer and replies simply, “I’m Freezing.” Her wings are covered with ice and snow, while her lips are turning blue. It is clear that the scarf around her neck, the one concession to the weather that she has made in her dress, is doing nothing to keep her warm, nor, for that matter, are the mini skirt and the fishnet stockings that she is wearing.

“Fr@ck it’s cold,” Nadia says repeating her earlier sentiment as she flies straight toward Stef’fan and swoops down inside the leather jacket that he is wearing where she proceeds to shiver pathetically as she presses her body tightly and suggestively against his bare skin. After a moment she pokes her head out from under the folds of his coat, looks around briefly as she shivers uncontrollable, and then decides the best course of action is to freeze to death quietly as she disappears back inside.

It takes her a moment or two, but finally Nadia settles down into an ice cold shivering ball of misery pressed tightly against the flesh of Stef’fan’s taunt stomach. It makes him look like he’s got an enormous beer belly... or that he’s a particularly merry elf if you know what I mean.

Finding his voice again, Stef’fan asks in the grumpiest sounding voice he can muster, “Why are you here?” He’d like to be annoyed, but the truth is, he’s tired of waiting alone.

“I’m helping,” Nadia replies and then suddenly pokes her head out again as she worriedly scans the horizon. It’s the type of thing that would call the cobalts to the scene -- it’s their tag line after all -- but then she realizes that only a complete idiot would come to a place this cold of their own free will. There’s not a chance the Charlies are going to show up.

“I don’t need your help,” Stef’fan replies haughtily, arrogantly, and perhaps foolishly as he jumps up and down some more and stomps his feet in a futile attempt to keep warm.

Nadia ignores his comment. It’s just the type of thing he would say. Besides, it’s too cold to go flying back just yet. Her wings haven’t even thawed out. “I was hoping we could team up,” Nadia suggests.

“I work alone... Ouch! What the Fr@ck... I mean, Sch@lte! What are you doing?”

“One of the key add on calls for this scene is a diplomacy disc,” Nadia explains. “I’m just demonstrating an alternative negotiation strategy.”

“Ouch! Fr@ck! I mean, Sch@lte! Stop that!” It is clear that under his jacket Nadia is pinching, scratching, and/or biting Stef’fan. He raises his fist as if he is going to hit her through the heavy leather, but he knows he’ll just end up hitting himself instead. “Ouch!” It doesn’t matter. He doesn’t see that he has any choice, so he starts slugging away. As predicted, this isn’t very effective. After hitting himself a half dozen times, he decides to alter his strategy, so he reaches inside, grabs hold of the crazed fairy, and starts to crush her mercilessly. Not thrilled about this turn of events, Nadia chomps down onto his fingers with all her might.

“Ouch! Fr@ck! #0\$@! For the love of Gra’gl stop that!” Stef’fan pleads as he shakes his hand in the air. “I mean Sch@lte! Sch@lte! Sch@lte! Sch@lte!”

Poking her head out again, Nadia comments ((((hopefully on the humor in the moment)))), “See, we’d make a good team...” ((((and then changing the subject she asks)))), “What’s with this Fr@cking Sch@lte crap?”

“We’re not going to be a team,” Stef’fan insists and then sensing the claws of the spiteful fairy searching for fresh flesh he continues on quickly, “I’m working on a new swear word.”

This stops Nadia as she tries to make some sort of sense out of this. “You’re making up a swear word? Why?”

“If I can get other people, humans, to use the word, it’ll prove how much influence I have. I’ll have it made.”

“So you’re betting your future on a swear word,” Nadia surmises.

“Think of it as a market infiltration test.”

“That’s about the Sch©lteist idea I’ve ever heard of. It’s complete and total Sch©lte,” and then climbing part way out of his jacket to grab a handful of hair and an ear, she says, “You’re the biggest Sch©lting moron I’ve ever met.” Pleased that she is using his word and not attacking him, at least for the moment, Stef’fan waits to see what she will do... and what Nadia is doing is allowing Stef’fan to take a moment to look her over, nose to belly as they are. Nadia is a wee bit top-heavy for a fairy and from his vantage Stef’fan cannot deny that she has her allures. As she starts to twist his ear playfully she whispers coyly, “I’ve got a soft side you know. What do you say partners?”

“Why do you want to be partners?” Stef’fan asks as he takes the opportunity to wrap both of his hands around the fairy’s neck. “Besides haven’t you already hooked up with G’narsh?”

Nadia wisely lets go of Stef’fan’s ear and instead focuses her efforts towards loosening his stranglehold. She isn’t very successful. “It would just be a side thing,” she explains and then more desperately adds, “I hear you’re a Sch©lting hole, a real Sch©lting bastard.” This not having the desired effect ((((and why would it)))), she frantically indicates her wings, the ones that Stef’fan is currently crushing, “There’s a reason my wings are always getting bent. I like it rough. You like it rough. We should be able to work out some sort of deal.”

“What about G’narsh?”

“What about him. It’s an MM disc. We’re not really going to do anything and if we do... He’ll rip your Sch©lting heart out.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of.”

Nadia twists out of Stef'fan's grasp and flutters before him as she regards the idiot. "You'd be dead you moron. Isn't that what you always wanted? For G'narsh to kill you? Either way it's win-win. Either G'narsh kills you, or you steal his girl and get to brag about it all over the Server... Think of the prestige, the fame, the glory... Think of what it would mean to your standing on Slaughter Quest."

As Stef'fan mulls over the advantages such a deal would hold for him -- or let's just be honest, as he dreams about being a great hero on Slaughter Quest for a moment -- Nadia dives back under his jacket to get out of the freezing cold.

"What do you get out of it?" Stef'fan asks as he feels Nadia -- in an effort to make her temporary home more comfortable -- hard at work rearranging the Slaughter Quest adventuring equipment that he keeps stored in his coat.

"Me?" Nadia asks surprised as she moves a tinder box (with three extra flints) out of the way. "Little ole me?" she repeats melodramatically and with much exaggeration as she relocates a small bag of iron rations (two weeks worth of beef jerky anyone?) to a more appropriate location on Stef'fan's belt. "It's not like I've never worked with Art before. I was around long before you or little miss Eileen, but do I get to be the princess?" she asks caustically before answering her own question. "No!"

"Watch it!" Stef'fan warns her as she scrapes a collapsible grappling hook -- good for scaling castle walls -- across his naked chest, as she moves it from inside his jacket to a back pocket.

"Sorry," Nadia says sincerely as she pokes her head out from under the hem of the coat, and then feeling comfortable and sort of secure in the moment, crawls back inside, works her way to the top, and pokes her head out so that she can regard Stef'fan face to face, cheek to cheek, eye to eye, and lip to lip... should he desire to give her a kiss and seal the deal. When it is clear, that's not going to happen, she continues, "I've worked with Art for like forever. I was one of his first proxies you know, but do I get to be a princess? A lady in waiting? Or anything? No. They did that

whole Sleeping Beauty scene and they never even invited me. Who did he use? Himself, a four armed demon, and you. You know that you stole my scene,” Nadia advises Stef’fan as she playfully rubs her hand down the side of his face before quickly moving on. “It’s clear, if I’m going to get any airtime at all, I’m going to have to make it myself... so what do you say, Partners?”

While Stef’fan is musing the proposition over -- deep thinker that he is -- Nadia starts to get angry again at his reluctance. “I don’t see what you have to think over. I’ve already done half of this sequence for you. The only thing I haven’t mentioned yet, is that -- Betrayal in the Forest -- is as good a place as any to add an ally or two if you like your dreams heavily populated. No reason you and G’narsh have to meet alone... Besides,” Nadia says as she smiles and half kisses half bites her sometimes boyfriend’s nose, “If you don’t agree partner... lover... honey... sweetheart... I’ll never tell you where the meeting is supposed to be.”

“What?”

“They exchanged VO’s,” voice over numbers and audio link routing information. “It’s not like the lovebirds haven’t been conversing nonstop since they met.”

“Fr@ck!” Stef’fan yells... mostly at his own stupidity. “Why didn’t you tell me earlier?”

“Partners?” Nadia asks.

“Fr@ck!” Stef’fan yells again as he illustrates the breadth of meaning that can be expressed by one simple word. Just imagine what one could do with a half million of them -- words, that is.

Nadia shakes her head. “Don’t you mean Sch©lte... lover boy?”

And when you’re up against the wall only one word will do, “SCH©LTE!” ask for it by name, available wherever better swear words are sold. (Not available in all markets. Certain restrictions may apply.)

“Is that a yes or a no?” Nadia inquires. Stef’fan is an elf after all. His word is his honor, but then when you get right down to it, that particular word isn’t really his anymore.

“Where’s the meeting?” he asks angrily as he weighs his options and thinks about strangling the answer out of the fairy. She’s been siding with G’narsh since antiquity. She’s a Child of Chaos. The bottom line is, she’s the enemy. He could get away with killing her. No one would care and he’d gain a little prestige and honor to boot... but there is something about Nadia. Perhaps it has something to do with the fact that when you discount the skirt and the top -- that almost aren’t there the in first place -- she’s basically naked, and she has a desperate sort of pleading look in her eyes. The type of look that promises obedience, devotion, and... um, ahem... well, it promises a lot. Of course, Gra’gl’s children aren’t exactly known for keeping their promises, but that’s probably neither here nor there.

“We do it my way,” Stef’fan gruffly insists.

“Lovers? Partners?” Nadia smiles wickedly.

“Yeah, whatever,” Stef’fan agrees as he pushes her head back down... into his jacket as he points out that his way means, “Less Sch@lting talk!”

“And more Fr@cking Sch@lting!” or would it be more appropriate to say more Sch@lting Fr@cking? No matter.

After a moment from down in the depths of Stef’fan’s jacket Nadia adds, “Is this a sword, or are you just happy to see me?” and then to keep the censors at bay -- not that M.O.M. really cares about this one way or another -- she adds, “You’ve got an entire arsenal down here.”

“Dougee’s got a surprise or two in store for him,” Stef’fan agrees as he smiles cruelly.

“Well, we don’t need all this crap right now. Let me just move it to the side... and... Here we go!” Poking her head out one final time Nadia reminds Stef’fan, “We got a day or two before the next scene so take your time. Let me show you the way.”

“Now you’re talking. I mean, Lead on... Hey! Watch your step! Ouch! Sch©lte!”

(I imagine both of them will be a little worse for wear the next time we see them. After all, Sch©lte happens.)

(Truthfully, I don't know what Nadia has planned for this partnership. In the end, she's only slightly more competent than Stef'fan, so, as much as I like her, I wouldn't get my hopes up in anticipation of some wonderfully complex side story. All the same, she did do an excellent job covering all of the external calls I had in mind, so I have no need to add anything there. The only thing that wasn't covered the first time through by Nadia was some mention of Stef'fan's sword, which will become important at some point, so I added a reference to that, expanded the conversation a bit here and there, and well... um, ahem... I had to tone some things down -- Nadia can be a bit sluttish at times -- but for the most part, this is straight Nadia and Stef'fan. It goes to show how much work a good proxy can save you. So thank you. Good job guys. You've made my life that much easier.)

(I also have to admit that Nadia is right when she complains about how I've mistreated her over the years. I never seem to give her a good role and the Sch©lte always seems to land right on top of her, but not tonight. To show you my appreciation for years of service the booths are all yours tonight Nadia. Knock yourself out. Just remember, broken wings or not, you've still got another scene to do in the morning.)

Death by Proxy

Nadia sits on Stef'fan's shoulder, her wings the worse for wear, but she has a smile on her face, and the otherworldly glow of fairy dust fills the air around her.

The pair of them have left Winter Wonderland behind, and are traveling through an autumn woods, a locale that is only slightly warmer than the one they just left. Stef'fan strides noisily through the thick layer of dead leaves, which line the ground, while

Nadia -- with her arm around his head -- gazes dreamily off into the distance.

It is early morning. The sun is low in the sky, and its light is caught by numerous icicles, which play with the rays in a frenzied and chaotic manner. The icicles themselves are slowly melting and water drips from them in endless streams onto the lightly frosted leaves, which blanket the forest floor. The dripping water sounds pleasing and melodic ((if a bit loud and cacophonous)).

All the same, Stef'fan is in a good mood. He brings his foot down on a large stick breaking it with a loud crack and then kicks a pile of leaves that go scampering into the wind. "Last night was great," he says as he smiles at Nadia.

Being clever and deceitful, Nadia takes the opportunity to rub her broken wings. She makes a big show of it -- the tricky little thing -- before she replies, "It was good... Sch©lting good! But did you have to be so rough?" Ah, sweet subtle insinuations.

"Sorry," Stef'fan responds simply. "No hard feelings I hope."

"How could I stay mad at you... lover."

"Right... lover," Stef'fan mulls the word over as he repeats it silently to himself. He is trying to decide how he can best play this current turn of events to his advantage. "You know, usually they, the girls, never call me again. I've never had a lasting relationship -- you know, a girlfriend, a sidekick, or a lackey."

Nadia lets the insult flow over her as she playfully bites his ear. "Don't worry, I won't cramp your style... just every once in a while."

Relieved, not registering the return barb at all, only hearing what he wants to, Stef'fan kicks at another branch.

"Aren't you an elf or something?" Nadia asks playfully as she goes down a mental to-do list for the scene.

"What?" Stef'fan answers not paying the slightest bit of attention as he rips a branch off of a tree and starts whacking whatever they pass with it -- rocks, trees, and, if he could, squirrels.

Nadia smacks his head. “Let’s try to be quiet.”

Stef’fan stops to glare at the fairy. He knew, just knew, there had to be a downside to having a girlfriend. They always try to change you.

“Drop the stick,” Nadia commands as she grabs hold of his ear... caressing it, but letting Stef’fan know that she is ready to reinforce her desires with pain if there be a need for it.

“So that’s how it’s going to be?” Stef’fan growls.

“Just play along,” Nadia urges as she playfully twists his ear a tad. “Just drop the stick and turn your boots on. They’re magical, silent or something, I hear.”

“Duh,” Stef’fan agrees. “I’m an elf. They’re elvin boots, fast, deadly, and silent. Get in and get out before anyone knows you’re there.”

“You sound more like an assassin than an elf.”

“Yeah. Well,” Stef’fan shrugs. “It is what it is,” and then as an afterthought adds, “Boots on.” Thus activating his magical footwear with the arcane words of power, a slight green aura surrounds his leather moccasins and suddenly his footsteps are noiseless, even when he kicks a branch in half, while yelling, “Hi-yah!”

“One down, one to go,” Nadia says from her perch on Stef’fan’s shoulder, thankful that the to-do list for this segment is short.

“What’s that?”

“I was just thinking how nice last night was.”

“It was Fr@cking Sch©lting,” Stef’fan agrees.

“I was also thinking how much I’d like to do it again,” Nadia adds as she bites her lip provocatively and rubs Stef’fan’s neck playfully.

“I’ll say! Do you think we could?”

“Well maybe,” Nadia agrees. “Before we meet Doug, Art had two things he wanted to go over,” and just stop for a moment and see if you can figure out how she knows that. “The first was the magical nature of your boots.”

“Check,” Stef’fan says as he plucks an icicle from a passing tree. Centered, focused, and determined, Stef’fan is a fighting machine. “Want a lick?” he asks trying for a bit of lighthearted romance as he shares the vanilla flavored treat with the naughty fairy.

“Thanks... Oh, that’s good,” Nadia agrees as she licks the frozen treat with... um, ahem... gusto. Nadia obviously enjoys licking on ... um, ahem... a good Popsicle and when she is done with the exhibition, she continues to go down Art’s supposedly private, top secret list of this segment’s conversation points. “The next thing Art wanted to do was to go over the fact that he’s a little antsy about how long this side dream is taking.” It’s at 23 clicks and ticking folks.

“Sounds like a personal problem,” Stef’fan observes.

Nadia takes a breath and tries to relax. She notes that she’ll probably be working on her patience a lot in the segments to come (now that she’s linked with Stef’fan) and with that in mind she takes a deep breath.

Nadia lets it out slowly before she continues, and points out the obvious (or at least, what she thinks should be obvious), “If we can help Art get this dream back on target, maybe he’ll thank us by giving us another night together... lover.”

Nadia would like to have another night to spend digging around Art’s collection. 7,200 discs is, after all, more than even the most efficient of data mining proxies can sift through in a mere evening, and Nadia is no data miner. I also might add that 7,200 is a number substantially higher than the 5,000 odd discs that Eileen was given access to indicating that there has been a security breach of some sort somewhere along the line. Our supposed lovebirds, however, are unaware of this little explanatory foray and Stef’fan for his part is excited at the prospect of spending another night in the booths.

“If we could get another night, that would be Sch©lting great!” Stef’fan agrees excitedly as he spends a moment basking in the memory of the epic adventures on Slaughter Quest he’d had

last night. What a great date! And the realism... A Quazitronic dream booth all to himself for ten full hours. That's Quazitronic folks. Ask for it by name. For a top of the line dream experience, there really is no other way to go.

Nadia's eyes, on the other hand, go misty -- overcome with emotion as she is -- as she remembers all the hidden files she looked over, before her mind returns to the present and Stef'fan. "Another nights would be Sch©lting great! And if we can help Art again, maybe he'll give it to us."

So you can spend it snooping around my private stash? I'll get right on top of that for you Nadia. No problemo. I live for other people -- proxies or otherwise -- rooting around in my private files.

"That would be Fr@cking awesome," Stef'fan agrees ignoring the dreamers silent commentary. "What do we have to do?"

"I guess just mention how he's antsy to get the show on the road. Something about how there are dead zones." As in a 50 click dream doesn't have as many markets as either a 25 click or a 75 click dream does. At 25 clicks you can package a dream together with other shorts into an anthology or multi-dream package, while at 75 clicks you can put it on a disc by itself, but at 50 clicks its too long for a short and too short for a long. It's dead. The only thing to do is to expand it or to shorten it. It's on my mind because this side story is fast approaching the dead zone. I've decided to let it runs it's course and go over my original projection (to maybe 35 clicks), because if you took out all the cross talk and cut out the wraparound, we could probably edit it down to 25 clicks, but it bears mentioning that we're going over my initial target, that I'm aware of it, and therefore maybe it's something you should be aware of too. Believe it or not, by nature I'm not an anally focused numbers guy -- let me tell you about how I flunked out of my freshman year physics class sometime -- but in the economic marketplace of dreams numbers are very important. Good luck selling a 50 clicker. Anyhow, that's what I

had to say, so now let's go back to our regularly scheduled programming.

"What are dead zones?" Stef'fan asks bewildered. Clearly he's not been paying attention, but he's anxious to help out all the same. Only how? "I've never heard of dead zones."

"I don't know either," Nadia agrees, but I guess we did what we were supposed to do, because there's Doug.

Isn't that always the way it goes?

Doug is up ahead all alone in a clearing. He is wearing his football letterman jacket, which he takes off as Stef'fan and Nadia approach to better show off his muscles. Underneath Doug is wearing his red on white football jersey -- number 00 -- and jeans. "I didn't know I was supposed to bring a second," he says by way of greeting when Stef'fan reaches the clearing.

"Why would you need a second?" Stef'fan asks disarmingly as if he didn't know the proper etiquette for a duel.

"I don't know," Doug agrees as he hangs his jacket on a nearby tree, never once taking his eyes off of Stef'fan. "Eileen just said I had to meet you here... I mean she said a lot of stuff... but what I understood out of it all was that if I ever wanted to see her again, I had to meet you here." He flexes his muscles as he cracks his neck. "I guess, you had something you wanted to discuss with me."

"I'll just wait over here," Nadia says as she flutters to the tree where Doug has hung his jacket. We won't go into how she accomplishes this in light of her broken wings, except to note that she is a fairy and to some extent the wings are only for show. What is important about this from a tactical point of view is that Nadia is now on one side of Doug and Stef'fan is on the other (not that Nadia is going to have any role in any fight).

Doug doesn't know this however, so in response to Nadia's maneuvering, Doug moves away from the tree so he can keep an eye on both Stef'fan and her at the same time. "So what did you want to talk about?" Doug asks as he casually shakes out his arms

and forms a well balanced pair of fists. “Or did you two just want to fight? I’m OK with that.”

“I’m not going to fight you,” Nadia says reemphasizing her neutrality as she prompts Stef’fan, “You’re supposed to explain things to him.”

“Things?” Stef’fan replies.

“Yeah things... You know, like what Doug here doesn’t know about us... or himself?” Nadia continues.

“What don’t I know?” Doug asks Nadia, but she only points towards Stef’fan. “Explaining it all is his job.”

“OK then,” Doug says amiable as he turns toward Stef’fan, yet again, “explain away.”

“Yeah, well,” Stef’fan begins, and at this point it is only fair to point out that if a proxy has any identifying features like a signature hello, a secret password, or tell tale handshake ((((that label them as a proxy)))), then they aren’t very good proxies... or at least not very good at hiding the fact that they are proxies, since once one person knows your secret the entire Inter Server will, ((((which is a bad thing economically)))). This means most of your better proxies not only won’t admit to being a proxy, but at their core -- down at the code level -- are intrinsically incapable of making the admission to either an outsider -- which may or may not be a human -- or to themselves. To further complicate this is the fact that a well constructed proxy -- i.e. one who is unwilling to admit that they are a proxy -- is pretty much indistinguishable from a human being by both humans and other proxies. In the end, it’s a pretty complicated mish mash of scrambled up of deceit. Not really important, if one weren’t able to duplicate proxies at the push of a button and thereby bring the entire Server to its knees (or just an isolated competitor), as automated servers try to meet the unlimited demands of a never ending supply of bogus customers -- i.e. a proxies posing as a humans. All of which is simply a long winded way of saying, Doug doesn’t know that he’s a proxy, and there’s not a photon’s chance in the world of Shadow, Stef’fan is ever going to explain this to him. Of course, that it’s impossible

doesn't mean I haven't set Stef'fan to this task... under pain of death... or in Stef'fan's case continued existence -- cruel, sadistic man that I am.

In the end, this means Stef'fan is explaining things about as straightforwardly as he can when he says, "Eileen isn't like other girls."

Doug readily agrees, "Sure, I know that. She's special."

"Different," Stef'fan corrects.

"Sure, special, different, unique... She's precious to me."

It is clear to Stef'fan that Doug isn't getting it. "We're all the same here," Stef'fan says starting from scratch. "You, me, Nadia... and Eileen... She's not different from us."

"I just thought you said that she was?"

"Well, I suppose it matters where you start..."

"Let's start with the fact that I love Eileen and she loves me," Doug proposes matter-of-factly as he cracks his knuckles.

"No need to get physical," Stef'fan responds cautiously as he backs up a step. "You love her and she loves you. Fine..."

"And there it is," Doug says flatly.

"But you can't really be together."

"Why not?"

"It's against the rules."

"What rules?"

"Look," Stef'fan starts over. "You and me are the same and Eileen's just like us."

"But we're not the same," Doug points out. "You're an elf and I'm a troll." Before Stef'fan can interrupt, Doug continues, "Isn't that what this is really all about? You know, Eileen kept on mentioning Art... I mean he's not even her father..."

"Not even biologically related," Nadia says trying to help out.

"Right," Doug agrees. "Just a teacher..."

"Or a father figure," Stef'fan interjects.

You can see that the word sets Doug off. "It's just wrong. It's unethical that's what it is. He's her teacher and here he is using

his position to hold sway over her... and well, all of us. I mean, you saw how he singled us out in class Stef'fan -- you and me. Everybody else gets A's, but then he says you're going to get an F and then he goes and kicks me out of the class just because I was trying to take some notes."

"Most teachers don't like that," Nadia points out.

"I'm not talking about recording his lecture. I was just taking some notes so I could remember what he said."

"I think you're missing the point," Nadia interjects again and as Doug glares at her, she is suddenly very glad she's safely above the ground in a tree. He doesn't look like the type who could climb very fast, but all the same, she decides putting a few more branches between them wouldn't be such a bad idea

"What is the point?" Doug demands angrily.

"That Eileen is tied to Art. He controls her," Nadia replies from the safety of her now slightly higher perch.

"It's wrong!" Doug declares -- full of righteous anger -- and at this point Nadia reasons that if being slightly higher was slightly better, then wouldn't being a lot higher be a lot better? And so takes it upon herself to climb to the top of the tree.

As she is doing this, Stef'fan thinks he understands the problem -- what is blocking Doug from understanding -- and so starts in from a slightly new tack. "How could a person get that kind of control over another? What would that say about a person who had that much power and control?"

"That they were a criminal," Doug responds simply and then spends a moment trying to get his anger under control. One thing Eileen was insistent upon was that he had to do this meeting if they were ever going to see each other again. "Eileen was going on about some cult thing... She was a recruiter or something. It was something Art had started her on. It was hard to understand."

"Most of us have a history with Art," Nadia calls down from near the top of the tree where she feels decidedly safer. "I've worked with him before..."

"Had him for a teacher in another class?" Doug asks.

“Something like that... and Eileen was being groomed for a cult project,” a starring role in another dream.

“I knew it!” Doug exclaims. “I wish I had a recorder with me. “We’ll just go to the authorities and turn him in.”

“I don’t think you understand.”

“What’s to understand. That Art guy is out of control. He needs to be locked up, sent to a camp, or... I know it’s just the emotions talking, but all the same, I can’t help hoping he gets a total mind cleansing.”

“Might as well call it what it is,” Nadia calls down. “It’s nothing short of murder.”

“Murder or not, it’s what some folks deserve,” Doug declares.

“Look, this isn’t how this meeting is supposed to go down,” Stef’fan jumps in. “Even I know that.”

“How is it supposed to go?” Doug asks suddenly very calm... way too calm, as if he has already made up his mind about something, but Stef’fan either doesn’t notice or doesn’t care.

“What do you know about me?” Stef’fan asks.

“That you’re Eileen’s brother. That you’re in my class.”

“But what do you really know?”

“I know what you’re getting at. Sure, you could be anybody,” Doug agrees. “I mean what do I know. You could be her uncle, or best friend,” posing as a boy, “hell maybe she’s an only child and you’re just a proxy she thought up to keep herself company...” and then as some of the other pieces fall into place for him he adds, “I know that other girl in the class,” Mi’lay, “even behind all those clothes she’s still way too sexy, way too one dimensional to be real, and you’re her brother so...”

“Exactly,” Stef’fan agrees.

“So you’re a proxy?” Doug asks point blank reaching the obvious conclusion, but Stef’fan could never answer such a question directly, so instead he pulls out an ID card. “No I’m legit,” he insists as he shows Doug the card, which perhaps tells a different story. “See I’m a college student... Oops, I guess it’s

changing... I guess I'm a 90 year old retired school teacher...
Nope... A prison guard at Alaska National... Oh, here's an
interesting one... I'm Doug... I guess I don't have a last name,
funny that..."

Stef'fan would have liked to have said some more -- perhaps
pointed out again how extremely odd it was that Doug didn't have
a last name -- but Doug's hands have found Stef'fan's throat... and
here we should stop and review the facts for a moment. In this
sub-story arc, Doug is a stand in for G'narsh, or more properly,
G'narsh'e. G'narsh is very, very-very strong. If I had to guess, I'd
say his Slaughter Quest strength would be something like 457,
maybe a little more, but like I said I'm not really a numbers guy.
Now, for those of you not geeky enough to know, a Slaughter
Quest strength of 20 would put you at the level of an Olympic
weight lifter, so when Doug grabs Stef'fan's neck, with a strength
of 457 he snaps it like a twig without even trying. Don't ask me
why this abnormal strength has never caused Doug any problems
before, or why we shall never mention it again. I suppose in the
end it is just an expedient way to end this fight quickly. One
moment Stef'fan is talking and the next he is a glittering pile of
pixie dust -- all that remains of his body -- in the best of Slaughter
Quest tradition. Or, if you'd like to do it all over again in slow
motion, let's take it from the start. Doug grabs Stef'fan's throat.
Stef'fan explodes like a party balloon filled with golden confetti
and when the pixie dust settles, all that remains of Stef'fan's body
is a neatly piled stack of equipment and treasure at Doug's feet.
Welcome to the wonderful world of Slaughter Quest -- MM. Feel
free to embellish it as you desire.

"What the?" Doug says as he watches the dust trickle through
his fingers. "We're nowhere near a Slaughter Quest portal."

"You're obviously running a Mind Fr@ck disc," Nadia calls
down from the treetops.

"It doesn't make any sense. "

"Those Mind Fr@ck discs never do," Nadia agrees.

And, I think we will use that comment as a break point, so that we may go over a thing or two or three before we continue. Just let me lay it on the line. I personally have issues with this entire segment. I don't know if: A) We have adequately gone over all the thoughts we need to put into Doug's head. And, B) Whether the fight scene was satisfying or not, as if a fight scene could be satisfying on a MM disc.

Without spending a lot of time on either, I will simply gloss over both of these ideas. We all know identity on the Server can be difficult to determine. You can bet that before commencing in any... um, ahem... activities both Doug and Eileen traded enough information to assure themselves that each of them were not doing anything illegal individually. However, although it is reasonably easy to ensure that you are not doing anything illegal on your side of a Server transaction, it is almost impossible to determine whether the person -- or proxy -- on the other end of the interaction is doing something that they shouldn't be. In short, although there is no doubt Doug checked Eileen's ID, there would be no way for him to be sure that Eileen's ID was in fact legit or that she wasn't overstepping some extraneous stricture that she might be bound to -- like the terms of a parole, employment, marriage, or guild contract -- or simply accessing the Server from a restricted port of entry.

One of the goals of this scene is to reinforce any natural doubts that Doug might have regarding a Server romance, and there is no doubt that this will work best if these concerns are left as an open call for each member of the audience to personalize with their own specific concerns -- whatever those might be. Is Eileen really a girl? Is she of age? Is the whole purpose of this affair to make Doug the object of some con game, sting, or police sweep? (***)

Or is this just some ruse in a Server war... but then who really cares about a Server game that much anyhow? And in answer to that question, perhaps I should mention that Doug is about as high a level in the opposition guild as Stef'fan is in his

own. I don't know if you are aware of it, but humans have died in the real world to advance the goals of a Server guild. That would be a bit extreme and not where we're going in this dream, but certainly it has not been unheard of for a Slaughter Quest guild to maintain that the field of battle extends to any environment not specifically excluded. It's hard to imagine any guild would specifically exclude either Winter Wonderland or a public domain virtual forest.

The other major issue on my mind about this segment is how Stef'fan dies. I guess I should point out that he doesn't really die, it is just his Slaughter Quest persona -- his avatar. I assume everyone is on board with that and I'm not going to belabor the point. It is what it is. What's on my mind is that the fight is over so quickly. It's just one punch after all. Not even a punch really. Doug merely puts his hands around Stef'fan's neck and the fight is over. Sure, I explain it all away with an ungodly strength modifier, but obviously (as I feel the need to go back over it yet again) I'm wondering if that wasn't a cop out. Did I do the scene justice? I don't know. All I can say is, if you want more of a fight, go back and replay the scene over with a suitable enhancement disc. I've set it up to give Doug the upper hand. As you'll no doubt remember, Stef'fan's equipment was rearranged for him by Nadia in the prior segment, so he'll never find his sword, and even if he does, it will take him a round or two, depending upon your desires and agenda.

But if I had to be honest -- and I guess I promised I would be at the onset-- the real reason I cut the fight short was not because of any concerns over MM as some of you might suspect or a lack of interest in swordplay on my part, but rather because I didn't know who Nadia would root for -- and neither did she, nor does she still. We've redone the scene any number of times and Nadia simply doesn't know whether to root for or against Stef'fan. She can't seem to find enough love, hate, anger, or any emotional feeling of any sort towards him to really care one way or another. I'd like to show her screaming from the treetops, "Kill the

Sch©lting bastard!” but neither she nor I can decide who the Sch©lting bastard in question is. The best way around this was to have the fight over so quickly that her reaction wouldn’t matter... and that’s how we went with it.

I know many folks like the prefab scenes to be hammered out and the plot set in stone, at least for the initial play through, and view any sort of ambiguity as laziness or poor storytelling, and if that’s the case with you, well then, there it is. I’ve worked the scene out as best I can, and if it still has a few bumps in it, all I can say is point them out to your compiler, tell it your preferences, and then let your rig do its job. I’ve done the best I can. I didn’t really expect Stef’fan to die so fast (in proxy -- whatever that means exactly for a proxy), but it’s done and there it is. I’m moving on and picking up the action from where we left it off.

Nadia looks down at Doug from the safety of the treetops. “Put on the boots,” she instructs him helpfully.

“Why?”

“You want to see Eileen?”

“Yes,” Doug answers simply.

Nadia drops a sealed envelope down to him. It flutters through the air and falls through the tree branches like a leaf before landing in Doug’s outstretched hand. “Do you recognize Eileen’s signature?”

“Yeah. It seemed sort of childish at the time to exchange counter signs, but now...”

“Put on the boots,” Nadia says repeating her earlier command. This time Doug obeys and after he has, Nadia instructs him to, “Pick up the sword.”

“It’s obviously cursed,” Doug objects as he notes the dim white glow surrounding it -- bad news for one of the horde.

“Duh,” Nadia agrees. “You’re a troll. She’s an elf and her family is a bit... We take these games seriously. They’re all we have.”

“What will the sword do?” Doug asks still uncertain.

“It will lead you to Eileen.”

“Can I trust you,” Doug asks.

All in all, it’s an amazingly stupid question, but Nadia decides to answer truthfully. “Trust me? I wouldn’t, but you’re not trusting me, you’re trusting the signature on the note, the counter sign, and your faith in Eileen.”

“I trust Eileen,” Doug agrees and then thinking on it adds, “I love Eileen.” And with that, there is nothing else to say, so he bends over, picks up the sword, and suddenly has an irresistible compulsion to go running off into the next sequence where -- Xavier Must Die.

From her perch high in the air, Nadia watches as Doug runs through the forest towards the horizon. She takes a moment to enjoy the sun’s rays sparkling off the few remaining icicles, and the smell of autumn -- rotting leaves -- in the crisp morning air. As a bird passes by she says to it, “I carried this scene. I deserve another night in the booth,” and then to the unspoken question she answers, “If you didn’t want me to look those discs over, you would have partitioned them off better... Besides, it’s not like a night with Stef’fan is any sort of reward. The guy’s a Sch©lting hole.”

Nadia does not know if her request will be granted, nor at this moment does Art. What is clear is that down in the clearing a pack of roving cobalts have come across an unprotected stash of treasure -- perhaps to clean up this loose end, or perhaps to give Art (((the artist))) a moment to consider Nadia’s request.

“Oh’d, Charlie gets da jewelries,” a cobalt sings happily.

“We’s gets da ringee.”

“Dibs on da wand’r.”

“Charlie’s be riches,” and then they all slowly look up and regard one another at once.

“You’d usuallied don’t see’d dis much treasuries unprotector’d.”

“Eet da oddities.”

“Maybe we’s should am’scrays,” they say looking around nervously.

“Goods idear Charlies,” and having decided, they quickly gather up the loot and depart to leave Nadia alone with her thoughts, the sunshine, and the passing birds.

“So what do you say? Have you given it some thought? One more for the road? One more night for old time’s sake.”

Nadia is not altogether surprised when one of the birds answers her question. “OK,” the bird agrees talking on Art’s behalf. “Another night, but I’m thinking you’ve learned what you needed from the discs already. How about... um, ahem... a little quality, one on one, action instead? It’s been a long time since I slept in a booth.”

“Oh, Sch©lte!” Nadia gulps apprehensively at the prospect, but you know deep inside, down at the level of her basic code, she’s secretly looking forward to it... and why wouldn’t she. In the final analysis, it is all she lives for.

(((***NOTE: My original intent had been to instill in Doug some sort of doubt regarding Eileen’s true identity and then have the two of them discuss this topic again during the later victory dance sequence -- The Bump and Grind. However, when I got to that point in the dream, this topic no longer seemed important (as it has already been covered adequately here, and for whatever reason, going down that road again and/or any further wasn’t where the dream itself wanted to go -- i.e. I would have had to force the issue). So, if that’s a story arc you would like to follow, you are own your own. All the same, I can see how it would be easy enough to turn Doug into a predator of some nature and to rework the implied -- Wandering Doug -- segment into some sort of penance, prison farm term, or military service. Don’t really know what that does to the rest of the dream though, and I will leave the exact details of this to you as you would have them. Me, I’m dropping this story arc right here.)))

Xavier Must Die

Fall into the moment and realize that there is nothing.

We will be wearing an avatar for this scene -- doing it first person to some extent -- so let us take a moment to get used to our adopted body.

Notice the lack of feeling. We have no nerve endings.

Notice the lack of scent or taste. We have no nose and though we have a mouth, the useful bits are for the most part gone. We have no tongue, no taste buds, nor anything that one could reasonably call a throat. Perhaps more importantly we have no heart or lungs.

Nor do we have any eyes or ears. Though despite this shortcoming, we will turn these senses on in a moment, but the perception will not be as one might normally expect. It will be fuzzy and faded, out of whack, and not quite all there. Having said this, let's turn-on our hearing first. It starts as static, as a rumble, as a roar. We will keep the volume turned low, but if you are of the mind, you may amplify it. The roar comes from an angry, hostile crowd, which surrounds us. The languages are many, foreign, and indistinct. They are full of grunts and growls, and guttural sounds. It is as if many of those who surround us have not come to terms with what having a language is all about in the first place and as such have not yet developed any distinct words. Instead they use one grunt for yes, two grunts for no, three grunts for I don't know, four grunts for why can't you understand me, and five grunts for how many times do I have to say yes. Clearly we are surrounded by mental giants.

Just to be sure, let us switch on our sense of sight. As with our hearing, we do this by force of will. Our vision is acute, clear, and far seeing, but it of limited focus. Underneath, behind, and beyond our primary areas of interest lie vast expanses where only the vaguest of outlines and shapes are resolved. Some old timers like a black and white effect, an IR filter, or a low resolution

security camera type display to indicate this sort of limited vision, but I find these touches annoying. The fact is, I like my senses larger than life with unlimited resolution, but for now we will start with them a little grainy and blurred.

With our eyesight on, let's take in the view. We stand on a hill or a slight rise. You may wish to think of it as a pyramid of sorts, but it is composed entirely of mud. A slight mist falls, but that does not bother us. In fact, we enjoy it, both for the tactical advantage, which it gives us and the annoyance it causes to those who surround us.

We are in the middle of the horde, a mass of stinking creatures comprised of goblins, orcs, ogres, giants, slinks, ghosts, and ghouls. The list could go on. I will not bore you. It is an open call to all the ugly, horror-show creatures that side with evil, chaos, and shadow, i.e. boogey men, creepers, defiles, and yes, even men. They all are dirty, ill, beaten, and bloody. The bandages are numerous and they wear tattered clothes. Some wave dirty colored rags and call them banners. To a man, they are slimy and horrid. These are the forces of Xavier. This is his horde, and we are in the environment known as Slaughter Quest.

Do not make the mistake of assuming that we are surrounded by enemies however, or that we are making some gallant last stand. We are not. We are at the top of the hill because we are a mighty warlord ourselves, a bastion of evil, and a blight on the land.

Let's put our hand out in front of us and clench our fist. Look at the bones, how they magically float in the air. This is our body. We are a skeleton, but not just any skeleton. We are Artismo Bones the fearsome undead warrior and leader of the undead faction of the horde. Having donned our persona completely let us continue to raise our hand -- the one holding the thighbone that we use as a club -- high into the air so that all of our followers might see. Our skeletal warriors raise a mighty cheer at our signal banging their bones together, clattering their teeth, and the like. You may wish to pause and watch amused as one of your followers looses his jawbone in the excitement, or how another looses his

skull as a comrade slaps him good naturedly on the back. It means nothing. In moments the jawbone and the skull are back in place. This is the skeleton army's curse, and its strength. It being hard to kill that which is already dead.

You may have noticed that the thighbone, which we held up into the air a moment ago was dripping with blue, magical swirls of force. You may also have noticed its source, a battered, well worn pixie with crumpled wings that has been sitting on our shoulder. This is Nadia wearing a slightly smaller, and, if it is possibly, a slightly sluttier skin. We will not give this creature a new name, for at its core it remains Nadia, and if the dreamy far away look in her eyes is any indication, she is quite content at the moment. This, perhaps, should be obvious from the sheer quantity of blue pixie dust which cascades off her miniature form, swirls around her body, and mixes with the surrounding air creating an effect similar to what one might expect if she had somehow managed to hide a psychedelic fog machine in the folds of her ripped and torn skirt, but in truth that is not very likely. There is not enough material in Nadia's silken, blue rag outfit to adequately cover her alluring pixie form, much less anything else.

As said though, while her wings are bent, broken, and mutilated, she does not seem to care. In fact, she seems almost giddy with delight, and if the intended connection has escaped you, let us take a moment to raise our bone in salute one more time and watch on as Nadia does a seductive little number that can only rightfully be called a bone dance.

While Nadia entertains the troops and we learn the source of Artismo Bone's power, let us fall back into the recesses of our skull and go over some housekeeping issues.

Oddly, not everyone wants to play a good guy in their dreams. I don't know why. Goodness always triumphs in the end. If you don't believe me, just ask M.O.M., but for those who insist on learning the hard way, this would be as good a place as any to load up a Goblin Gangster or Orcin Drug Lord disc. In such a disc

you can work your way up the horde by starting at the bottom dealing K'fr to your warren mates, selling your sisters into slavery, and attacking those pesky neighboring tribes, because as any good goblin, ogre, or orc knows, the neighbors are always pesky, if for no other reason than because they are so close by. On the bright side, while you rid the Server of their presence you can do a nice side business in rape, pillage, and murder... and still be home in time for supper. Ah, the life of a petty hordling. Of course, if you're playing a really good mafia simulation, after you have overrun the neighbors and taken over your ancestral homelands, it will be time to extend your reach and take on the role of a lieutenant in the evil warlord's -- i.e. Xavier's -- army. For those not in the know, this simply means solving all of the troubling issues that go hand in hand with accepting a low level bureaucratic position. Will your K'fr supplies run out? Now that you've sold your sisters into slavery, who will raise the next generation of warriors? Or more importantly, without any sisters left, who will you marry? Solve these problems and soon you'll be promoted to a full captainship. Now you're a made monster in a thriving criminal enterprise, but you're also tasked with sorting out the horde's many political dilemmas. How to keep the peace with the rival horde across the river? Hint: Kill them. What is the best way to handle the latest land dispute with the dwarves? Once again, the courageous leader will know the answer is to simply kill them! In fact, it will not be long before you realize that you need not know the exact problem to know the solution involves finesse, an eye for diplomatic subtlety, and the courage to simply KILL THEM ALL!!!

Alas, I would like to go into more detail, but I fear I would spoil the surprises and tactical subtlety to be found in these add on discs. Suffice to say, you will have to load these discs up and discover on your own that the key to success is a mindless lust for blood and a will to kill everything in sight. Or as I like to say, let Gra'gl sort them out.

Having gotten the tie in discs and optional calls out of the way, I thought some of the gamers out there might be interested to know that Slaughter Quest does not have to be played first person -- i.e. in an avatar -- as most folks believe. The game also has functionality as a 3D third person hack fest sure to bring back the memories for any old school gamers in the crowd. Actually, it also can be ported down to a 2D version, and I hear tell, one club plays a 1D version, but I'm pretty sure it was done primarily as a joke. The 2D version, however, is actually quite interesting. I was invited to observe an evening of gaming at the Grogard Guild a while back and all I can say is that they're one bizarre group. Although the entire meeting took place in a Server Hall, they sat around, swilled virtual soda, and pushed these little cardboard squares (no bigger than a centimeter on a side) around on a hexagonal board all evening long. Odd business that, square chits on hexagonal spaces, as if the whole purpose was to make it as confusing and complicated as possible. The grognards, as they called themselves, were really focused on these little cardboard chits moving them here and there, taunting each other, and then when they got tired of that rolling these numbered cubes -- dice, they called them. They got all excited about the results and would hoot and holler. It was obvious they were taking those cardboard chits just as seriously as Stef'fan takes his avatar. And the stories... let's just say, whenever one of those grognards starts a sentence with, "You should have seen the time..." or, "You think that's something..." then you should just duck and run, because an unbelievably long and boring story concerning some trivial bit of gaming lore is about to be told. Trust me. You don't want to be anywhere in the vicinity when that happens. What with the zones of control, counter attacks, and opportunity fire, its worse than being cornered by Stef'fan and having to hear him talk about the unique virtues of his +10 holy sword and how he got it as a token of respect from a fluid avenger.

Anyway the grognards went at it all evening, rolling dice, taunting each other mercilessly, and telling wild stories of chit-

moving daring do. Perhaps what was most odd, was at the end of the evening one of them (I can only guess he was the loser) tossed the whole lot into the air -- board, chits, dice, and all. The pieces scattered all over the place, and even though you knew the Server Hall had a memory of everything, they bemoaned the event like the situation was irretrievable saying, "I guess that's it," and, "Game over."

I don't know. I guess I'm not painting a very good picture of it all. I heard them try to explain it as a cross between an abstract strategic simulation and a study in historical behavior -- like one of those archeological villages that they take you to during school field trips that are staffed by proxies and where you go from hut to hut and one proxy is making a pot out of clay and another is weaving a basket out of grass. Well, I guess the idea was, these guys were doing some sort of similar historical strategic warfare gaming simulation thing, but I got to tell you, they didn't even use a compiler to referee the event. Whenever there was a dispute, they'd pull out these thick rule books -- like the size of novels -- and would go through the books tediously page by page looking for the appropriate reference. Talk about boring. I mean, historical realism is one thing, but you can take it too far. Anyhow, the point is, you can play Slaughter Quest at 3D or even 2D if you are the masochistic sort. You don't have to step into an avatar if you don't want to.

And with that as a lead in, I'm going to discuss (((perhaps again))) why I haven't put as many first person calls into this dream as I usually do, or had intended to at the start. This Bones sequence -- Xavier Must Die -- and the one coming up -- The Bump and Grind -- are the only first person forced calls that I have planned at this point. Originally I was going to do more, but then MM got in the way. We've been over that and why. What we haven't been over is the mental effect that these changes have had on my morale. They cast doubt into my heart. I look over the dream as it is so far and compare it to what I promised at the beginning, and I wonder if I am delivering what I set out to

provide... and as a statement that is perhaps too wishy-washy. I know I'm not laying down this dream as I originally intended. To some extent that is to be expected, but only to some extent. Let's review.

My total outline for this dream was the eight points of the G'narsh tale, a few ideas for the Wandering G'narsh section of the main sequence (which we haven't even gotten to yet), and to help coalesce it all a simple wraparound that I would bill as a how to for dreamers. I envisioned the wraparound as being a total of ten clicks long. Obviously the wraparound has gotten away from me, and so it begs the question -- to me if for no one else -- has the entire dream gotten away from me? It's a difficult question to answer. I was once 125 clicks into a dream when I decided to scrap it all and start over. It resulted in months of wasted work, but I couldn't see the point in throwing more effort at what was obviously a lost cause. The counterpoint of that is that some degree of self doubt is to be expected in any creative project. What I am saying is, I have veered off of my original vision and of this there can be no doubt. Eileen, Doug, and this entire sub arc were not in my original conception. It doesn't mean they are bad things -- the current dream is likely far superior to my original plan -- but all in all it does mean that when I compare what I had originally intended to where I am, there is a disconnect. This disconnect causes doubt, and the doubt will remain until I either redo the dream to be in sync with my original conception, or I revise my conception to encompass what I have done (and in the process perhaps go back and reworking my original vision statement and any contradictory impulses that I've laid down in the dream thus far). One of the great ironies in all of this, however, is that if I were to start over and begin anew, I know that whatever I would do the second time around would be even more out of whack with my original conception than what I have already done. That is to say, experience has shown me that my mind becomes less focused (rather than more focused) the more I delve into a dream. If I were to do this dream over, all of the proxies will have been down this

road before, and it will show. You might wish to keep this idea in mind as we approach the main dream sequence. It is also, perhaps, one of the main reasons why Doug is standing in for G'narsh. When G'narsh reenters the story, we want him to be fresh, new, and seeing it all for the first time.

And as long as I have mentioned Doug, I should point out that there is already a ready made subtext available to us in our modern dream infused culture that might relate esthetically and/or easily to the G'narsh mythos. G'narsh has two heads and all of us have two heads -- one in the discs, and one in the real world. I mention this connection here, because although it has been on my mind, I have been unable to find a pleasing way of (((overtly))) incorporating this symbolism into this project. I had thought about utilizing Doug for this (or Stef'fan or Eileen), but I think we have enough material without trying to weave this idea in as well, so I have said all that I intend to on this subject and will leave it to you and your compiler to flesh the concept out should you find the idea appealing. Another factoid I wish to cast off for your rig to integrate is that one could easily cast Stef'fan into the role of the New Moon. It explains both why he fits into the mythos and why he dies and doesn't die at the same time. But once again, I do not believe I will be working out the symbolism of this concept in any meaningful or detailed way .

With that I think that I've cleared my mind. I certainly feel better, as if we are all on the same page now. And as for my random wanderings, which seem to add click after click and lead me ever further astray from my original conception, I think I must take the advice of the cobalts and let the dream go where it will. I think Charlie said it best just the other day when he told me, "We's no know'd why's you'd complained abouts us meester. Wit out us, der be no story."

Undoubtedly it is true. For whatever reason the wraparound and subplots have become the story. As they say, the monkeys are now running the zoo. But maybe they know a thing or two about animal care that we do not, and with that final thought in mind, let

us return to the action, and give full reign to the proxies and let them lead us wherever it is that they will go.

Xavier Must Die - already

With a final shake of her body Nadia completes her dance. Artismo Bones throws a handful of knucklebones high into the air -- knuckles that I might add, which he keeps close at hand just for this purpose -- and the skeletal faction of the horde army goes crazy.

(Obviously we're no longer inside the avatar of Artismo Bones. As with any avatar or proxy, it should be a simple matter to hop inside Artismo Bones should you desire, but you will have to give the command and integrate it on your own.)

Nadia slumps dreamily against Bones' skull as blue pixie dust gushes off of her. "I think I've had it," she says drunkenly. "But you're going to keep the dance in, right? You're not going to cut it out and overlay it with any of that wraparound, cross story Sch@lte?"

Artismo Bones barely registers her words. He feels good, elated, on top of the world. He flips the thigh bone around in his hand absentmindedly, tossing it end over end. It glows bright blue with magic. It is just waiting for a victim. Luckily there is an oversize ogre nearby. Artismo taps him on the head ever so lightly and the ogre disappears in an explosion of glittering confetti. Behind him the skeleton army goes berserk with pleasure and in front of him, the scene we have waited for, the one we have all gathered to see, starts to unfold.

Doug is standing at the top of the hill. His football jersey is ripped, torn, and muddy, but he still has the ball in his hands! He's made another touchdown! From 98 yards out! It's unbelievable! The crowd goes crazy! It's a Cinderella story! Doug the boy from no where...

“WHAT THE FR@CK IS GOING ON!” Xavier yells at the top of his lungs. He is an undead, necromantic monstrosity and, need I mention it, he likes to yell. His other tell tale signs are a suit of plate armor forged by the dark dwarves of the north that he likes to wear over a suit of chain mail hand crafted by the dark elves to the south. You know, just in case -- just to be on the safe side. In his right hand he wields the Sword of Righteousness (otherwise known as the Sword of Callus Death and Destruction), while in his left he carries the Shield of Ignorance, which is capable of deflecting even the most obvious, logical, and rational of arguments.

“Nobody cares about that psuedo intellectual mumbo jumbo,” Nadia reminds Artismo.

“Right,” he agrees as he joins the crowd in a cheer of, “Long live King Xavier!”

The undead horde takes up the chant, as do the orcs, ogres, and... Listen, we’ve been through this. I’m not going to name them all. Crack open an encyclopedia of mythical beasts and do a search for ugly, evil, brutish, and short...

“Short?” Nadia interjects.

“I’m on a roll,” Artismo insists as the view pulls back so that we may take in the full grandeur and epic proportion of this moment. Suddenly we are miles away deep in a muddy desolate valley.

“Why’s we here?” Charlie asks.

“Dis views suckies.”

“Hey’d downs in fronties.”

“Dis no workies,” Charlie surmises as he takes his pointy stick, otherwise known as a spear, and puts it to good work clearing a path through the gathered monsters towards the peak.

Back at the summit Xavier basks in the love and admiration of his people. He is a good and just ruler. Quick with a word of praise or bit of kind encouragement. Talk softly and carry a big stick, that’s his motto. “WHAT THE FR@CK IS GOING ON?” he

repeats at the top of his lungs. His voice echoes off of the distant mountain peaks and sends shivers down the spines of children and the elderly alike, though it seems unlikely either of the two are present, so I have no idea why I would mention this.

“What?” Doug responds calmly. “Oh, the football outfit. I don’t know. Server malfunction I guess.”

“Server malfunction?” Xavier shrieks, his voice scaring babies, cracking windows, and...

“So if we were to put a recording of Xavier’s voice in a warehouse, we could use it to scare away birds?” Nadia asks sarcastically.

“Hey. That’s a good idea. We’ll have to look into it,” agrees Artismo the Entrepreneur ever vigilant and mindful of cross venue applications for his proxies.

“SILENCE!” Xavier demands.

Right silence. We can get to the marketing tie-ins later, but for now the crowd is silent, still ... and, oh, what the heck, please forgive me. They are deathly silent, except for a lone ogre who -- coming down with a cold from all of this gloomy weather -- starts to sneeze.

“What was that?” Xavier screams in a shrill voice reminiscent of a third grade Server Hall teacher who has overheard a snide comment about the size of her personage.

“Eet da ogeries,” Charlie says helping out. It has taken them more than just a few jabs with their pointy sticks, but they have finally reached the summit only to have their view blocked in the final few feet by a cluster of large, oversized ogres.

“Dey always wit da coughering.”

“And da sneezering.”

“Dey sickies.”

The ogres try to look innocent, but being ogres, they sort of fail at the entire thing.

“See’s dey try to be innocenter.”

“What kinds of’d despicable behabiorable dat be for da hordie monsterie?”

Xavier squints his face and rubs his eyes in pain as he regards the cobalts. “I can’t make out your accent. Didn’t we agree on no clan languages. I mean, there is no Fr@cking way I’m learning Gra’GLISH just so I can talk to a bunch of... lizard-men? What are you. You’re kind of small for lizard-men aren’t you.”

“We’s no lizards.”

“We’d be’d da Charlies,” the cobalts explain eagerly as they continue to jump up and down in an effort to see Doug and Xavier past the ogres.

“De’s ogeres gots to goes,” the cobalts all agree.

“Dey’s in da ways.”

“Move’rs ogeries,” Charlie says as he punctuates his words with the aforementioned pointy stick.

“Stop it,” the ogre demands and then turning to Xavier lodges a formal protest. “Attacking allies is against guild rules. Make them stop.”

Xavier mimics the ogre in a singsong voice, “Stop it. Attacking allies is against guild rules. Make them stop,” and then changing back into his ruthless overlord voice that echoes off the distant mountaintops he roars, “What kind of behavior is that for an ogre? You call yourself forces of evil? You make me sick.”

“See’d dey contagerous,” Charlie insists as he pokes the ogre again with his stick.

“Stop it,” the ogre whines as he grabs the stick and takes it away from Charlie.

“Hey’d! He’d stealie Charlie’s stickers.”

“Dat da thievery.”

“Dey breaka da rulies bossman.”

Exasperated, Xavier agrees. “You can’t take their sticks.”

“But they’re poking us,” the ogres complain.

“You still can’t take their sticks.”

“See’d, geeve eet back.”

“You’ll just poke us with it.”

“Dat wat da pokie stickies es for.”

“See,” the ogre declares to Xavier, “if we give the spears back, they’re just going to poke us with them.

We could go down this road a long time. Charlie poking the ogres, the ogres complaining, and Xavier trying to keep the peace. Being the mastermind of an evil horde isn’t all that it’s cracked up to be, but don’t believe me, feel free to load up a Crime Buster law enforcement enhancement disc and learn it all the hard way.

Anyhow, as fun as it would be to have Charlie and the ogres go endlessly back and forth...

“Geev us’d backs our stickies.”

“No!”

As fun as that would be, the real star of our show is Doug. I mean, here Doug is. He’s finally made it to Victory Hill... Actually, I’ve never been too sure about what victory they’re celebrating here at... Victory Hill. Maybe they’re commemorating the elvin homestead they wiped out...

“Or’d da deathies of da notoriousy mooostache elf’f,” Charlie suggests.

Or that.

The point is between killing the helpless elves, the good creatures of the forest, and all the rest of their ilk, the horde is on a roll, so its probably time to gather the forces of evil together for one final assault on the good guys.

“And we’d need da stickies back for’d dat.”

“We’re not giving you back your sticks,” the ogres declare point blank.

“Et da violations of da guilder codies,” Charlie reminds them again -- quite calm and reasonably too I might add.

Anyhow, as all of this petty guild bickering has been taking place, Doug has been reading a note from Eileen, which goes something like:

Dearest Doug

I love you. I love you. I love you.

(I should mention that each of the o's is made with a small little heart just so you can get a feel for how sickeningly, icky sweet this letter really is.)

I dream of running off and living with you forever, but there is like this one small, itsy bitsy problem. Well, I don't know how to put this delicately, so I'm just going to come right out and say it. You're a... well, you're a troll. I mean not you personally. I love you, but your avatar on Slaughter Quest is a troll and well, me, my dad, and my brother, we're all elves. I mean, I could take or leave the entire game, but my dad and my brother (but mostly my dad), they're kinda freaky about the game. It scares me sometimes. They take it way too seriously. Sometimes I wonder if they know it's just pretend, you know, just for fun. I think maybe they need help. Anyhow, my dad... or teacher... I not really sure which he is or what he's claiming at this point, but Art, Artismo, my father figure, that guy, he said he'd would cut my Server connection if I went out with an evil, vile, Gra'gl loving troll. Oh, and those are his words not mine honey. I kind of think slimy swamp loving monsters are cute. Anyway, I don't even know if its legal for this Art guy to cut my connection, but when he says he'll do it, I believe him. He's scary that way. When he starts going on a wild rant, I figure its best just to give him his space to work it out of his system.

Oh, on a happier note, Art did sort of indicate that he had a soft spot in his heart for any troll who would kill the dread Xavier. Not really sure what that's all about, but Xavier sounds like a bit of a wuss. I don't really get the evil warlord thing. It sounds overdone. I mean, he can't even keep the ogres in line. Really, how hard is it to kill one of them just to sort of make an example to the rest.

Anyhow, long story short, use Stef'fan's sword, kill Xavier, and we'll throw a big party for you at elf central.

Loves and Kisses, yada, yada

Yours forever and ever (assuming you kill Xavier)

Eileen

P.S. Some of those wood elves are really scroungy looking, so if you're a troll just because you like to be all dirty and slimy, I'm sure we could work something out.

P.S. P.S. I love you. I love you. I love you.

P.S. P.S. P.S. I still love you. Now go kill Xavier.

Needless to say, those with a keen eye for the romantic might want to plug in a suitable enhancement disc. I struggled with that letter, worked on it long and hard, but I'm still not altogether certain about the exact wording, and some of the phrases seem... um, like, you know... amateurish, so the letter might need a little polishing up here or there. Anyhow, as Doug is going over the letter -- and resisting the urge to pull up a grammar/spell check program -- he hears Xavier say, "There has been a motion put on the table to expel the cobalts from the horde, all those in favor say aye."

As Doug is still sort of registering what Xavier has said, all of the ogres immediately reply with a hearty, "Aye!" As do the orcs, goblins, dire weasels, zombies... look, you've got the add on disc loaded up, right? Everybody here but the Charlies, the skeletons, and the fairies, say, "Aye." To be honest the smog giants might be riding the fence, but you know how indecisive those guys can be. Everybody else is pretty much agreed, the cobalts have to go. I mean come on, you never even know if they are talking about themselves or the entire group of the little green buggers.

Charlie eyes Art sourly, and then turns to regard a goblin that they are standing next to who, like everyone else, has voted against them. "Why's you voters againsts Chairlies?"

"Ef Charlie hadda da stickies, he'd pokies you'se."

"Dat's," the goblin says and then shakes his head to set his vocal chords straight. The way the cobalts talk is infectious. "That's why we voted against you. When you're not poking something with your spears, you're using that stupid accent. The

lot of you sound like you've got some sort of collective speech impediment."

"Charlies liker's da ways dey talkies."

"Yeah, well, take it somewhere else. Looks like you and the skeletons are the only ones who care for it, and word in the anterooms is the only reason the skeletons are siding with you is because they spend most of the time with their ears turned off so they don't realize how annoying you really are."

Charlie narrows his eyes and forms his cute little hands into fists. "Charlie get you'd gobliner."

"Whatever. The votes almost in."

Xavier is busy tallying up the votes. "It's not looking good for the cobalts," he remarks to Doug. "Oh, I see they got the server malfunction fixed, or at least part way."

Instead of a football, Doug is now carrying the cursed white sword in one hand and the note from Eileen in the other.

"That was a great move that you made," Xavier continues. "I mean, it's all over the Server. That dolt Stef'fan thinks you're going to betray us, even after you killed him and stole his sword. What a Sch©lting hole."

Getting no response from Doug, Xavier glances unobtrusively at the note from Eileen. "You got to hand it to the guy, using his sister like that, but you know he wrote that letter. What kind of girl would write a love letter like that?" Xavier stops as he notices Doug's glaring gaze. "I'm just saying, that Stef'fan character is far more evil and treacherous than most of the guys in the guild. If we could get him to swing over to our side, what a coup that would be."

A timer bell rings interrupting the conversation. After consulting his notes Xavier turns to the crowd and announces, "The votes are in. The cobalts are banished."

"Oh, dis bad," Charlie acknowledges.

"Where'd we go'd?"

“I think you’re forgetting, I have a veto power,” Doug says matter-of-factly.

“No you don’t,” Xavier replies glibly. “I mean, it’s too bad and all about the cobalts. They usually adventure with you, right? But the guild has spoken. The little green guys are annoying.”

“You’s no leesten to heem.”

“Use’d da swordees Doug’ers.”

“Slicer he’ms in halfers.”

“Are their accents getting worse or is it just me?” Xavier responds unconcerned, unconcerned that is before he notices Doug’s obvious anger -- and frustration. “Oh, hey no need to get upset Doug, I mean, G’narsh’e. We’ll work something out.”

But Doug is not to be reconciled. “I think you’re forgetting that I get a veto,” he reminds Xavier again.

“No you don’t. This guild is a classic despotic authoritarian dictatorship... well a democratically based authoritative dictatorship... or whatever. The point is, once the horde has spoken, that’s it. We’ll just have to work something out on the side.”

“I think you are forgetting...”

“You can say it till you’re blue in the face dude, you don’t get a veto.”

But Doug begs to differ and with a deft flick of the wrist the holy avenger in Doug’s hand goes slicing through Xavier’s neck reducing the mighty warlord to nothing more than a glittering pile of fairy dust -- laced liberally with shiny gems, golden coins, and magical artifacts. A pile of untold wealth is all that is left of Xavier. It is the spoils of countless years of adventuring. Probably more than you’d make working in the Tubes in like a million years, but I’m still convinced that crime doesn’t pay. Look, the guy is dead. What more proof do you need that crime is a dead end?

(Did you get it? Dead... End. It’s classic. I live for gags like that.)

“Um, yeah,” our hero replies blandly oblivious to the level of quality humor which surrounds him (clearly we need to work on Doug’s double entendre recognition circuits). Instead of chuckling, or spending a moment to enjoy the wittiness of the commentary, Doug casually glances down at the glittering pile of loot that was once Xavier as he pokes around at it with the tip of Ste’fan’s sword to see if there’s anything interesting buried below the surface. Unfortunately it’s the same old magic, gold, and gems you’d find anywhere. Hardly worth bending over and picking up. Satisfied that there is nothing of interest, Doug looks up at the horde and explains, “See, I do have a veto power. It’s not exactly written into the bylaws or anything, but might is right or something like that.”

Having patiently waited by while Doug conducts his search, the ogres now decide its time to lodge a complaint, “Hey! You can’t do that.”

“No friendly fire.”

“Not only is killing friendlies against guild rules, it’s written into Slaughter Quest down at the code level.”

“How’d you do it?”

“Et da cursed swordees,” Charlie explains simply to all who will listen.

“He’d not in da controllees.”

“He’s will’d not be’d he’s own’d.”

Once the horde has figured out what the Charlies have said -- that since the sword is cursed all bets are off -- general dissension erupts in the rank and file.

“It’s a cheap shot,” a zombie overlord whines.

“Obviously it’s a rules exploitation,” a wretched defiler cries. “We need a judge in here to arbitrate this.”

“But is he a friend or a foe now?” a revenge minded swamp bogey asks.

“Judges be damned. There is only one possible response to an outrage of this sort. More bloodshed! And now!”

“Here. Here. All in favor of a clan war to decide the new warlord say aye,” a particularly nasty looking flesh viper comments and with those words -- without even waiting for the vote to be tallied -- a free for all commences. The guild alliance falls apart. Mutually reinforcing defensive pacts disintegrate. Non aggression treaties are nullified, and friendly fire suppression switches are turned off. The chaos of war sweeps over the horde. In a frenzy of bloodlust, seething historical animosities quickly rise to the surface, and once again it is orc against goblin, dark dwarf against dire weasel, ogre against flaming specter, giant snarling grisly dispatcher beast against the small green almost comically helpless cobalts.

“Charlies outta here’d!”

Ignoring the cobalts Nadia yells from Artismo Bones’ shoulder, “Run Doug! That’s what the boots are for. Run!”

It’s good advice and seeing a line of retreat opening up through the ranks of the skeletal warriors, Doug heeds the call and flies like the wind.

“Hey’d bossman!”

“Waits ups!”

“Waits for’d Charlies!”

“We’ll cover your retreat,” Nadia calls after Doug and/or the cobalts. Take your pick.

“Eet no retreats.”

“Eet da stategercal redeployments,” Charlie insists.

Moments later as the battle closes in, the skeletons form ranks around the hilltop where -- coincidentally -- a small fortune in Slaughter Quest loot lies neatly stacked. It is in all likelihood what the fighting is really about. Nobody really cared for Xavier all that much anyhow. When you get right down to it, he was a bit of a sniveling whiner who overcompensated by shouting incessantly.

“I can’t believe you would do all this just to advance your rank in a Server guild,” Nadia comments in disbelief, but what

does she know. She is after all just a girl. What do they understand of the quest for power? The importance of glory?

“It’s not even a real Server war,” Nadia continues. “I mean you hardly ever hook up to the Inter Server,” and if the reason why I don’t isn’t immediately obvious, remind me to explain my reasoning at some later time, but right now I got a battle to attend to.

“You don’t have to fight the battle,” Nadia reminds Artismo Bones. “This is all happening in your private dream booth. Just decide how you want the battle to go and that will be that.”

“We don’t have to fight?” a dim witted ogre asks as he drops his guard. Needless to say, a much brighter cobalt pauses mid-retreat to take the opportunity to rid the world of another one of the fell beasts and jabs him in the gut. No doubt this scene repeats itself a hundred different ways and the air is thick with the intoxicating smell of glitter dust.

“I love the smell of pixie dust in the morning. It smells like... like...”

“Pixies,” Nadia supplies helpfully. “So can we move on now?”

“Impatient?”

“Just decide. Pick who you want the next ruler of the horde to be and let’s move on.”

“So you’re saying I can decide? It could be anyone?”

“Oh’s picks Charlies.”

“Yea’d picks Charlies.”

“Actually,” replies Bones, Artismo Bones, the Artismo Bones, incipiently vain skeletal warrior, would be king, and leader of the undead minions, “I was rather hoping to be the next king.” To accent his words he pauses to pose atop the hill, so that this moment may be remembered in years to come as the precise instant when he came to power and won his greatest victory on... um... Victory Hill. See. There. I knew the place was called Victory Hill for a reason.

“Fine. If that would make you happy, you’re King Artismo now,” Nadia agrees condescendingly.

“Not King Artismo Bones?”

“Fine. King Artismo Bones,” Nadia assents as she begins to wonder if maybe Art’s been spending too much time in the discs lately, but the rest of the horde does not share her concerns.

“King Artismo Bones,” goes up the mighty cheer from the crowd of goblins, orcs, flying monkeys, and all the other creatures that you might have called up from the GI library or other enhancement disc, but there is a noticeable lack of insolent ogres in the crowd. It seems that they -- with their annoying rules lawyering -- are even more unpopular than the Charlies. Sadly, they have not managed to live through this brief but intense period of clan culling and guildhall infighting.

“Tanks meester.”

“Da ogeries always’d blockee da views.”

“Does dis mean da Charlie be da secondy in commands?”

“I don’t think so,” Nadia begs to disagree. “I’m sure King Artismo Bones remembers your initial, traitorous, impulse to run away.”

“We’d explains dat.”

“Et da strategical redeployments.”

“We’d follow’d da bossmans.”

“Den we’d remember’d he’d here,” Charlie says indignantly.

“That may be,” Nadia concedes, “but I’m sure King Artismo Bones’ weapon...” um, ahem... his thigh bone for those of you with short attention spans, “could use a recharge; what with all this fighting. What do you say? Time for another bone dance.”

Normally King Artismo Bones would not be swayed by such petty arguments and worldly concerns, but now that Nadia mentions it, he could use a recharge, and what with her stroking his collar bone, fondling his seventh vertebrae, and rubbing up against his war weary skull... The point is, the troops could use a moral booster.

“Time for another dance,” King Bones agrees. “A dance of victory, celebration...”

“And sexual innuendo,” Nadia says as she starts to sway mystically, magically, and most importantly in a way so flamboyantly erotic that M.O.M. is forced to kill the scene and jump ahead to the next break point. M.O.M. can be such a killjoy that way.

But hey, before M.O.M. tucks you in and turns out the lights, if you ask real nice, she’ll give you a snack of milk and cookies, so I’m thinking you’ve got to take the good with the bad.

((--End P2-A--))
((--Cut in P2-B--))

G’narsh

The Troll, The Myth, The Legend

(a work of fiction)

by

Kevin Stillwater

P2-A
of
P1, P2-A, P2-B, P3-A, P3-B, P3-C, P3-D, P3-E, P4
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