

G'narsh

The Troll, The Myth, The Legend

(a work of fiction)

by

Kevin Stillwater

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

--- RESUME ---
--- PARTITION: NEW DISC ---
--- PRIMARY CALL TO PART 1 ---
--- SECONDARY CALL TO PART 2 ---
--- PART 3 ---

The Main Sequence ###
Horde Central

(Starting is always the hardest part for me, be it the first moment of a section, resuming after a partition break, or starting a

whole new disc. It's not uncommon for me to spend half a week (or more) getting the first few micro-clicks of the opening sequence just right. The opening sets the tone for all that follows, and maybe because I'm not completely into the project yet, I tend to be fussier about the beginning than any other aspect. Originally (there's that word again), I had worked out an overview of the latest dream technology for this section, but it seemed boring and I figure we can just integrate that later on, putting in a dribble here and a dribble there. I can't see how anybody would miss it, and I find it hard to believe anyone is truly disappointed to learn that I'll be postponing my rant against the Universal Broadcast Initiative (the UBI) until later in the dream as well. Anyhow, it's time to begin, and after several false starts I've decided to simply go with my last take. Oddly, I'm happy to introduce it as the opening sequence I chose not to use. I wonder if anyone will figure out what that means... or will we all casually accept it for the blatant lie that it is?)

We shall begin with a birds eye view. Below us stretches the wreckage and waste of a contemporary battlefield. Green tracers fill the air. Illumination flares float down here and there giving an eerie glow to the grim landscape, while incoming rounds rock the very earth itself.

It is the perfect segue. Well, maybe not exactly perfect, but if you take a moment to gaze at the explosions and smoke that fill the sky, it is sort of reminiscent of G'narsh's Rays.

OK. Fine. It doesn't look anything like G'narsh's Rays. To pull up G'narsh's Rays you'd probably have to load one of those biofeedback meditation discs and zone out on the colors, whereas its kind of hard to zone out on a meditation disc when you are stuck on a battlefield and artillery shells are raining hellfire and damnation from above. All in all however, it is very reminiscent of the end of the Earth sequence that we just went through... especially when you concentrate on the brigade of ogres gearing up for the coming battle.

“You’ve got to be kidding,” the ogre police officer, I mean, the ogre MP says to the cobalts in charge of supply and requisition. “Clubs? You’re issuing us clubs?”

“Dat wat da ogre’es fighties wit,” the cobalt in charge replies nonplussed.

“So’d dat wat da ogre’es gets.”

“Aw come on,” the ogre complains -- annoyingly too I might add -- as he surveys the endless boxes of hi-tech armaments and field equipment stacked behind the Charlies. “How about a fusion rifle? Or at least a few gauss grenades?”

“You gotta da requitioner formy fillered outs?”

“No,” the ogre admits as he tries desperately to work out some kind of deal, “but I’m sure when the order came down to issue us clubs they didn’t know we’d be fighting a modern day division of army regulars.”

The Charlies are sympathetic, full of heartfelt feeling, emotion, and empathy, so they are commiserating with the ogres when they say, “Dat be toughies.”

“Da forms say da clubbies, so’d dat’s wat you’se getties.”

“Oh’d, you’d see’d does gobliners?”

“What do they get?” the ogre asks hopefully. Goblins are none too bright. Maybe they could work out a trade with them... or just use the clubs to steal whatever bit of high-tech gadgetry the goblins are getting. It’s not like they’d know how to use it.

“Dey getta da slingeries,” Charlie informs the ogre.

“Dey getta da one rockie each.”

“And da strips of clothies,” another explains as he holds up a rock and a long strip of cloth to illustrate what a sling is.

“Et doublers as da bandagers,” Charlie explains as he wraps the cloth around his head.

“Dey gonna needer et.”

“Dey takee da walkies through da miner fields,” Charlie continues matter-of-factly as he shares the latest gossip with the

ogre and sets the last box of standard issue wooden army clubs -- a.k.a. ax handles -- on the muddy ground in front of the ogres.

“Der u goes.”

The ogre looks at the cobalt trying to think of what to say, but since this could take a while, and we are on a bit of a tight schedule, now might be a good time for a howitzer shell to explode not more than fifty feet away from the ammo dump.

If you are of the mind, you might wish to imagine that a dozen or so ogres have used the explosion as a sort of springboard to launch themselves high into the air. Perhaps this is part of some arcane, dark forces war ritual, or if you’ve decided to turn the MM off, I suppose that there are other more gruesome interpretations involving blood, body parts, and severed limbs.

(Believe it or not, this really isn’t my opening sequence... and if you’re willing to buy that, I’ve got some lakefront property on the moon I’d like to sell you. In truth, it’s a fun little segment. I like it, but it doesn’t get us anywhere. It doesn’t move the dream along. We’ve tied in the sky again and we’ve set the locale, but that’s it. And just in case you like these things spelled out in black and white, let me reiterate, the locale is a modern day battlefield complete with laser tanks, plasma rifles, and gauss shields. It’s one of those crossover, boundary falling, genre crossing worlds with club wielding ogres up against the sixth armored division. I think a similar thing happened historically in the War of 1812. There was this violent storm and a nexus to the Chaos Dimension opened up in the hold of the USS Saratoga, an American frigate. Unfortunately, when the Brits sunk the Saratoga two days later, the nexus went down with the ship. Granted, the only thing worse than my knowledge of philosophy, physics, or current events, is history, so I might have some of the details wrong, but the important point is that nexuses, portals, and dimensional rifts are pretty much scientific and historical fact at this point, so if I want to put one in my dream, it’s like totally realistic.)

But enough of that nonsense. We should pull back once again and take a quick overview of the military base. It's at the top of a muddy, tree lined ridge. Jutting rocks provide plenty of cover, and if we look to the mountains on the far side of a wide valley we can see where the main fighting is taking place far in the distance. It is perhaps possible that the incoming artillery shell was in fact shot from the horde's own forces -- a bit of friendly fire, nothing more than a little moral booster, and/or a not so subtle way of reminding the ogres that there are far worse fates than dying in combat. The fact that it was an outdated howitzer shell as opposed to a percussion bomb or a pulse explosion gives some degree of credence to this theory.

I suppose at this time I should also just throw out there the idea that most, if not all, armies work on some derivation of this principle -- forced allegiance on pain of death... or worse. It is the rare military organization that doesn't consider desertion, cowardice in the face of the enemy, failure to follow a direct order (i.e. failure to charge an enemy's pulse gun position because you don't want to die), or going AWOL, as being only slightly less heinous offences than flat out treason. I won't defend or go into this thesis any further, but I am certainly not the first person to propose that the only reason many of the men on the front lines stay there is because in every direction they look there is an army preventing their departure. It's just an idea.

An idea that is perhaps more central and immediate to your consciousness when you are on the front lines and your commanding officer is a Dark Necromancer. If that's the case, then the concept of a fate worse than death has a certain immediacy and relevancy to it. If you die in a pointless charge or meaningless reconnaissance mission, you at least have some reasonable expectation that the enemy will give you a nice burial, if for no other reason, than so they don't have to kill you all over again as a zombie, skeleton, vampire, ghast, or some other nasty revenant. With all that in mind, I should perhaps point out that the dozen or so ogres that bit the dust when the howitzer shell

exploded are now shambling to their feet and without even bothering to pick up their new wooden clubs are wandering out of the camp, past the wire, and towards the distant mountains, and the explosions at the front.

However, please don't make the mistake of thinking that the only creatures, which defend the encampment are mindless apparitions. Around the perimeter are nesting lurkers armed with heavy beam weapons -- and please take a moment to notice how I show off my exacting knowledge of modern military weaponry by naming each piece of armament specifically and exactly, using their proper military designations. Philosophy, physics, history, and military science, don't worry, I've got you covered. I know it all.

So, to continue on with our tour, dug in deep outside the wire with rations to last them centuries if need be are sludge boogies with sniper scoped laser rifles. Making the rounds on the lookout for any enemy patrols or infiltrators are shambling berserkers with slug throwers. They are happy to kill whatever they see. While in the base proper, there is the wide assortment of magical monsters and creatures of whatever nature your library (((or your mind))) can call forth. Walking dogs, bears, and wolverines decked out in combat gear, ghosts and ghouls returning from deep recon missions, and the ever present orcs, giants, dwarves, and even a dark elf or two.

The camp itself is one of those sandbag, temporary bunker deals, dug deep into the rock and surrounded on all sides by razor wire and its magical equivalencies (and even to me that sounds like a lazy call, so maybe we'll need to pad that one out some, so...)

There are motion sensors, heat detectors, wards of protection drawn on the ground, runes of power traced into the air, magical enchantments disguised as trees and rocks, portals to horrendous planes rigged to open at the ring of a bell or a trip of a wire, and so on. Folks have been fighting wars in fantasy for almost as long as they have been in the real world. Trust me when I say that a frontal attack on this little outpost is essentially suicide. I don't

care how high your character is on Slaughter Quest. Precious little lives through an artillery barrage... and have you noticed how some things on Slaughter Quest are simply not destroyable -- because they are neutral bases, holy sites, shrines, quest nexuses, or merely because they happen to be the pet project of one of the code writers. This outpost is sort of like that last one, so give it your best shot, but remember, there is that line of instant senseless death at half a mile out -- no saving throw -- written into the code, so I might not have explained all of the defenses very well, but trust me when I say the security is like rock solid dude, totally rock solid, (so just deal with it.)

As we are almost done with our overview of the base, I suppose I should go back to the ogres and point out that they are lining up in a column and marching off to the front. They look sort of glum and forlorn, but that is to be expected as they are headed towards certain death. (Try to arrest me. I'll show you.)

From the opposite side of camp, down another trail, a column of goblins is departing as well. They are not nearly so glum, but then goblins are not nearly so bright, so although their death is just as certain, they are sort of oblivious about the entire thing. Besides, if you've ever... like ever... done one of these fantasy dreams before, then you know that the goblins and orcs are just so much cannon fodder, which is an obscure term, so maybe I should explain it. A cannon is an old time artillery piece that you front load. First you put in some gunpowder, than a wad of paper or cloth (could be old rags), and then the cannon ball, chains, shrapnel, or whatever you want to use as a projectile, could be a traitor, a prisoner of war you want to exchange, or whatever. The rags, paper, or cloth are known as fodder, so when someone (or something) is being used as cannon fodder, death is certain and, well, it tends not to be very pretty. Gruesome might be a better word for it at times... gruesome and messy, but then, at the moment we are smack dab in the middle of an evil warlord's fortress so you really shouldn't be expecting anything less. Evil

warlords are notoriously wasteful and inefficient when it comes to exploiting the talents and resources of their personnel and are pretty much a one trick pony when it comes to motivating their troops as we shall continue to see.

With the overview done and the cursory review of an evil warlord's mindset finished, I think that brings us to the lone jeep pulling into the compound. It's one of those old, disposable, piece of crap, combustion engine conveyances that leaves a billowing cloud of black acrid smoke in its wake, and with its arrival, we can perhaps finally get this dream underway.

In the drivers seat is Lane, our four-armed demon goddess, wearing a tight black leather trench coat. I'm sure it's reflective armor or something like that, but it looks just like leather... unless you get real close and use a magnifying glass in which case it looks like syntho-leather reinforced by carbon fiber and mirrored reflective. Along with the trench coat, Lane wears black combat boots and an officers hat. On her lapels ((((or perhaps somewhere else)))) are the twin X's of Xavier's intelligence corps. Though, since Xavier is dead, I'm not really sure about the significance of those Xs anymore. XX? Maybe it's just a random placeholder. I'll let you decide.

Next to Lane, riding shotgun, is Artismo Bones, the skeletal warlord and commander of this ragtag outfit. He wears the same outfit as Lane, and although he would prefer to do his own driving, M.O.M. wouldn't let him, not after what he did the last time he was given control of a powered vehicle. So remember kids, Dark Warlord or not, driving is a privilege. If you abuse that privilege, you will loose it.

In the back of the jeep, her fingers at the ready on a fusion cannon's trigger switch is Nadia in her half pint, knee high pixie-sprite form. Blue dust swirls off of her in an endless cascade and flows over and around the tripod mounted pulse gun enchanting it with an evil dweomer. As they drive into the gated compound, Nadia squeezes off a few rounds from the cannon, and upon

exiting the barrel, the fusion pulses turn into mini demon-dragon-wraiths which arc through the air and head straight for the front. You can be sure they will find some sort of target before the dream is over. Shooting guns is fun, and let's face it, when you stand 18" tall, you don't get the opportunity to flex your muscles very often, so Nadia let's rip a dozen more rounds or so before Artismo Bones raises his gloved hand and signals for her to stop.

As the last of the black nearly transparent demon-dragon-wraiths scream off into the sky, Lane brings the jeep to a halt in the center of the compound. Off to the side, the final few ogres and goblins leave the safety of the camp as well. Their only real hope is a quick and painful demise courtesy of the elves, but it is a fate infinitely preferable to a cold lingering half death at the hands of the cruel, merciless, yet amazingly handsome and sexually alluring, if slightly self deluded and more than a little full of himself, Artismo Bones.

(I guess, I'm going to have to integrate those demon-dragon-wraiths somewhere, and I think I know just the place. One has to keep track of all those loose ends after all. I mean, just letting those demon-dragons fly off into the night sky would be unfulfilling, it would be like having the Charlies threaten revenge against the goblins and then not showing the fat little twerps getting their do and just reward. So although we have just finished tying up the loose ends with the goblins, we now have a demon-dragon-wraith tracking missile to integrate. They'll probably come in handy when we want someone to die and can't come up with any other rationale.)

As General Artismo Bones... scratch that, I killed Xavier fair and square... or at least someone did, as King Artismo Bones... nah, doesn't have the same ring. I guess I'll stick with General Artismo Bones. It has the sound of authority and command. Unless I wanted to go with...

“Make up your mind,” Lane says shaking her head in annoyance.

“General,” Bones replies decisively. “I’ll be General Artismo Bones.”

“Fine. Whatever,” XX Officer Lane replies condescendingly (and might I add unprofessionally) before wearily asking, “If Xavier is dead, why would I still be an XX officer?”

“I’m sure any 13 year old boy in the audience could answer that for you,” Bones quips. “Now, if we can get back to the dream?”

“You’re the one taking so long,” Lane responds.

Fine! So that’s the way it’s going to be. Fine!

As General Artismo Bones enters the field command center he is livid. He is surrounded by insubordination, insolence, and those other INS words. It is insufferable, intolerable... No. That last one doesn’t fit the pattern. Oh, well. The bottom line is General Bones is furious as he enters the command bunker.

Under a spotlight in the middle of the room, four war gaming grognards are pushing their little cardboard chits around on a hexagonal map of the battle field.

“We’re using cardboard chits?” Bones asks incredulously. “Whatever happened to the miniatures?”

“We didn’t have any time to paint them. You just decided to do it this way five minutes ago,” replies a middle aged man who is swilling a bubbly sugar laden drink and has the residue from a crunchy snack food still hiding in his beard. There is no need to describe his outdated clothes, uncombed hair, or obvious lack of physical fitness for Bones responds to this outrage, this failure, this treasonous unpardonable behavior by shooting the man in the chest at point blank range with a fusion pistol ((((+20 to hit)))).

If we weren’t running MM, the beam weapon would probably scorch a hole right through the man and he would sort of look down forlornly for a second to inspect the cavity where his chest once was before he died, but as we are running MM, he

explodes into a pile of golden confetti -- so much cleaner, tidier, and easier to clean up. Heaven forbid we show real world consequences for real world actions. What kind of lesson would that be for any young impressionable minds in the audience? I guess what I'm saying kids is, if you kill your neighbors, they turn into confetti. It's helpful advice and something good to know should you ever find yourself behind the 8-ball while preparing for your next anniversary, New Years Eve, or birthday party bash. Neighbors = Confetti. It's simple, straightforward, and easy to remember.

Meanwhile, oblivious to this helpful advice, Bones continues to take in the command center. He still has his plasma pistol out -- which is almost indistinguishable from one of those newfangled toy water pistols -- and he figures that he should at least look around the room and see if anyone else needs killing before he holsters the weapon. Luckily there is a goblin communications officer, sneaky little thing -- i.e. a cowardly traitor. Bones lines the bucktoothed bat winged thing up in his sights and makes quick work of the goblin, exploding him into a colorful pile of confetti as well.

"Anybody else need killing?" General Bones asks casually as he holsters his gun. It is a rhetorical question. Nobody answers. The grognards look scared and serious, while the assortment of demons, defilers, and crypt stalkers watch on unconcerned, hardly even registering the two deaths that have just taken place.

For the moment there is a lull in the action and the Charlies take the opportunity to appear with brooms, dustpans, and other cleaning supplies and proceed to remove any remembrance of the two traitors from the command center.

"Right. Fine," General Artismo Bones starts again. "We've established I'm evil.

"You'd be da ebil alrights," Charlie agrees.

"No interrupting," Bones says as he holds up his hands for silence.

“Charlies joost agreeing wit you’s.”

“You’d be da ebiler.”

“Der be no’s ebiler.”

“Good,” Bones begins again.

“Nopers, you’d no gooders.”

“You’d Ebilers,” Charlie corrects.

“You’d joost say’d so’s.”

“I was just saying good, like fine, OK. Everything is satisfactory,” Bones clarifies.

“Et confusing,” Charlie points out.

“Firstee you say’d you’d ebil.”

“Den you’d say’d you’d good.”

“I’m evil, let’s just leave it at that,” General Bones replies testily and then sensing the cobalts urge to continue this witty repartee, he pulls out his pistol and shoots one of wretched defilers guarding the door. “No talking.”

“Somebodies wakes up on da wrong sidee of da bed,” Charlie observes.

Bones shoots the other wretched defiler. “You guys have anything else to say?” he asks looking around the command center for his next target, but the cobalts have said enough.

After he has calmed down a bit and taken a breath -- no mean feat for a skeleton -- General Artismo Bones holsters his weapon and begins again, “Two more clicks down the tubes,” 3.5 after the first edit, “and we haven’t gotten anywhere. Where is G’narsh?”

“Who?” a craving stalker asks -- and don’t even ask me what these creatures look like, because I haven’t got the slightest idea. He’s a stalker and he’s craving. What more do you need to know? Put it together yourself. Use your compiler. That’s what they’re there for after all.

“G’narsh? Where is he?” Bones repeats thinking that perhaps having a holster in the first place was a bad idea, much less ever using it.

“Who?” the craving stalker with a death wish replies again.

“He’s probably one of those new guys that came in last night,” offers the company clerk, a withering defiler who is sitting in the corner sorting through paperwork -- once again he’s a defiler and he’s withering. It’s not that hard. “We put them all up in bunker twelve. He’s probably still asleep. As I recall, he’s a big one. Took seven of us to unload him from the truck.”

“Right. Asleep,” Bones repeats as he stalls for time and tries to decide how to move this bad boy along faster.

“I can go wake him up,” Nadia suggests.

“Good idea,” Bones agrees and as she flies out the door he turns to the remaining grognards. “So how are we doing?”

“Getting crushed,” one of them responds. “You sent in ogres and goblins, 2-1 and 1-1 infantry units respectively, against a 12-4 armored division. They got slaughtered.”

“Excellent,” Bones replies with maniacal glee as he clenches his fist and crushes his enemies in effigy, as if they were ants in the palm of his hand. “I want all of the wretched, withering, and unholy defilers, spiked, scaled or otherwise to launch an immediate counterattack. We have them on the run.”

“The elves aren’t actually attacking... or retreating,” one of the grognards points out. “You can’t really counter attack unless...”

His words are cut short as General Bones takes decisive action and decides the humiliating defeat, which the ogres and goblins just suffered was this tactician’s fault. (Note, once we get rid of all this confetti, there will be two empty spots at the gaming table should anybody be interested.)

“Open up the supply chests,” Bones orders the cobalts as he desperately tries to move things along. “Give the defilers whatever equipment they need,” and then done with the Charlies, General Artismo Bones turns to Lane and explains his crafty plan, “While the defilers are distracting the elvin forces, you and G’narsh will be making the real attack... Here!”

Bones brings his fist down hard on an empty spot on the map -- or playing board, take your pick. The place Bones has identified

is in the middle of the jungle far removed from the front, any enemy troops, or pretty much anything else of any conceivable interest. It is clearly a map grid coordinate of absolutely no strategic value whatsoever.

“Why there?” Lane asks. It’s a reasonable question after all.

Bones sighs as he explains, “Because I said so... Besides I think there are three elvin lasses there. Have G’narsh rape and kill them and we’ll move this story along. How hard is that?”

“Typically there would be a dossier,” Lane responds curtly.

“Look, you’re the XX information officer. You work it out. Go with a blonde, a brunette, and a redhead.”

“I can’t believe how lazy you are being.”

“3 clicks down, 31 to go. Get a move on,” Bones yells randomly to inspire his troops, not really concerned that his estimate is off by well over a click, and then his eyes -- or what passes for eyes in a skeleton -- focus on the pair of remaining grognards moving chits around on the board. “When G’narsh gets here, you explain it all to him,” he orders one of the war gamer as he holds the plasma pistol up against the guy’s head. “Do you think you can handle that?”

“Y-y-yes,” the man replies nervously.

“Excellent,” Bones remarks gleefully. He is obviously pleased to be terrifying someone, anyone, for a change. “And don’t give me some lame excuse about how G’narsh is a 2-1 infantry and he doesn’t have a chance going up against some 12-4 armored tank unit,” he warns the grognard. “Make sure G’narsh has the equipment he needs and the odds are stacked in his favor. Play it out as a small unit commando raid if you have to...”

As Bones is conferring with his military advisers and explaining the importance of this mission to them, Nadia returns to the depths of the bunker with a sleep dazed G’narsh in tow.

“Good. Good,” Bones says as he slaps the groggy G’narsh on the back and ignores the baleful looks from the Charlies concerned about his sloppy (or not so sloppy) choice of words.

“The grognards will fill you in G’narsh. Lane, make sure he completes the mission. Nadia, come with me.”

Before he leaves, Bones pauses in the doorway, turns around, and kills another... creeping expunger for emphasis. “This is taking way to much time! Three clicks,” going on five, “for what?” he yells in frustration, and then addressing Lane and G’narsh equally he adds, “I want those three elvin chicks dead. Do it however you want, but if they aren’t dead a click from now, we release the horde... Ah, what the Fr@ck,” Bones shrugs as he kills another... something or other for emphasis. Done with the killing for the moment, Bones departs in a huff with Nadia on his shoulder.

From the parking lot, he can be heard to ask, “Do you know how to drive?”

“No,” Nadia replies as her voice echoes down into the bunker only to be followed by the baleful cry of a frustrated Necromantic Warlord with a revoked drivers license, “Fr@ck!”

“What was that all about?” G’narsh asks in dismay, still recovering from his semester long slumber.

“Don’t concern yourself with him. Your mission is to terminate these three elves,” Lane explains as she lays down a trio of photographs with matching dossiers on the table.

“Nice,” G’narsh observes. “A blonde, a brunette, and a redhead... What did they do?” G’narsh asks trying to unearth any information that will help him during his present mission. “Saboteurs? Terrorists? Gun runners?”

“They probably just turned him down for a date on the Server,” Lane responds simply.

“So the location then?” G’narsh asks not really understanding Lane’s explanation. “A fort? An outpost? A munitions dump?”

“Of absolutely no military importance. I would be surprised if we found a single weapon among the villagers.”

“So why are we attacking it?” G’narsh ask simply. He is quite frankly more than a little bewildered by the entire thing.

“Because that is what you have been paid to do. You are a mercenary, are you not?”

“I suppose,” G’narsh replies, his mind still fuzzy.

“Then don’t ask stupid questions,” Lane responds curtly. “Do what you are paid for or suffer the Dark Lord’s wrath.” (Kind of gives you goose-bumps to hear Lane talk that way, doesn’t it?) “We leave in an hour. Grab whatever supplies you want. The Charlies will see that your needs are met.”

I told you Lane would make a good judge. Fair, impartial, and willing to stand by as a trio of elvin maidens gets ravaged and their families get butchered... er, turned into confetti, for no discernable purpose other than to move the plot of a dream along.

(Of course G’narsh probably won’t ravage the maidens. This is MM after all, and we’ve given G’narsh a conscious this time around, but this is where the story starts. At the heart of pure evil.)

(I should also mention that the concern about the clicks is just a narrative device to jump into the action. It’s a safe bet that we’re going to go way over 100 clicks by the time we are done. Wrap this up in 30 clicks? I don’t think so.)

(In the end, it is definitely much better to give the clicks away for free than to wind up with something that you can’t even give away, if you know what I mean.)

(Besides, I don’t know about you, but I’m having fun.)

(I’m going to leave it for you to decide on the exact skins for the blonde, the brunette, and the redhead, and I’ll meet up with you again after the break.)

The Blonde, the Brunette, and the Redhead

(Although G’narsh has often been a paid mercenary during his wandering days, he fights for Chaos -- and therefore by extension Bones -- out of loyalty. As such, he should not have been referred to as a mercenary in the preceding sequence. Having

said that, I admit that I don't want to take the time to go back and edit out this erroneous reference, but then why bother in the first place? The story still flows with the error and to be perfectly honest it seems unlikely anyone would have caught this -- glaring -- discrepancy (or even cared) if I hadn't mentioned it. Besides, it might help twist G'narsh's mind in the way that we want it to go -- it being hard to stay loyal to stupid and/or crazy leaders.)

(((One other thing that I should mention before we continue, (because I keep on hitting bugs and snags in the replay) is that the Charlies are right here with Lane and G'narsh at the start of the sequence. I don't focused on them until later, because they are not important to the flow, but they are here. They do not suddenly walk in from the side, or return from a patrol. They are in the background, cleaning their guns, putting on greasepaint, looking through binoculars, and doing whatever else it is that cobalts do prior to a battle.)))

In the distance, across a shallow fresh water lake stands the target, Elvin Home. We have already been here. It is the locale of Doug and Eileen's erotic dance scene -- The Bump and Grind. Party lanterns constructed of colored paper hang in the trees. Music and laughter fill the air, and as we watch a small fireworks display begins.

"I thought you said they wouldn't have any armaments," G'narsh remarks as he turns one head accusingly towards Lane while the other keeps a diligent tab on the (((far away))) objective.

"Sorry, I must have overlooked that," Lane replies sarcastically. "These suburban elves sometimes have lawn darts as well. Please forgive me for not mentioning those either... or the baseball bats and golf clubs... I'm sure one of the boys could probably scrounge up a BB gun if the situation called for it. You can put an eye out with one of those you know."

G'narsh ignores her as he watches the fireworks explode in the distance. The same pattern that we've been seeing in the sky

lately -- with its purples, yellows, and reds -- can be seen on the surface of the water as the waves haphazardly reflect the bright aerial explosions. It's simply amazing what you can do with a good fractal program these days.

G'narsh has good eyesight even at night or in near total darkness, so it is not difficult for him to locate the source of the explosions. At the base of the elvin compound, on a pier to which no boats are tied, two elvin lads are taking turns setting off roman candles, ground fountains, bottle rockets, smoke bombs, sparklers, and other dangerous -- and hence highly illegal -- incendiary devices. Once the pair has ignited the explosives in their hands, they run down the old wooden pier and into the shadows of the forest, where an old man hands them another round from an overflowing box.

"The old man is a wizard?" G'narsh asks.

Perhaps to the boys, but, "No. He is just an old man," Lane responds simply.

"Wizards are notorious for signaling their power by putting on fireworks displays in their off time," G'narsh counters.

"You're being paranoid. He's just an old man," Lane assures him. "Your objective is the girls. Look here they come."

And of all the uncanny coincidences, right on cue, the trio of young nubile girls, straight out of your library, imagination, or heart's desire are getting ready to go for a -- clothing optional -- midnight swim. The weather is just perfect for it, and even at this distance their allure is painfully obvious.

"Your objective is those three girls," Lane reminds G'narsh. "You are tasked to destroy them, however you see fit."

There is no doubt, G'narsh desires to do as Lane commands -- to hear the girls scream... (or squeal, or smile, or laugh as is your preference).

If G'narsh had but one head, he would be hard pressed to swing his gaze away from the girls, but as he has two, he brings the

second around to regard Lane once again. He notices her eyes, perhaps for the first time. Xavier is gone. G'narsh can tell by the way Lane has been talking, and the gossip he overheard back at HQ. Changes of this nature, the commander, the color of eyes, the nature of weapons and war, how people die, or the appearance of the sky... changes are to be expected. G'narsh is the son of Gra'gl, a child of chaos, after all. Things shift and morph. It is the way of all things. It is natural and as Gra'gl desires, but for all things there is also a reason, a cause. Beneath the identifiable surface changes, there are often hidden causal relationships, which are usually far more important to understand if one has an interest in their own continued survival.

“Why do your eyes glow now Lane?” G'narsh asks.

“It is a gift,” she answers simply. She does not bother to add that it is also a curse.

“From General Bones?” G'narsh inquires trying to delve deeper.

“Why do you stall?” Lane counters defensively. She is not overly pleased with the change in herself -- her conversion into a judge -- and has no desire to root through the implications at the moment. “You have your orders.”

“I'm checking out the situation,” G'narsh replies as he turns back to the fireworks, the girls, and the lake. To the right is a small island which might make a suitable waypoint from which to launch an attack. To the left is a muddy bog that stretches halfway across the lake. This too has its uses. Wet swampy ground would not slow or hinder the cobalts. It would, in fact, give them a tactical advantage... as does the water before them. “In all the changes, are the Charlies still loyal?” G'narsh asks.

“Yeppers bossman,” Charlie responds without delay, but G'narsh waits for Lane to collaborate this information.

“Yes,” Lane advises. “Charlie and me remain loyal to you despite the changes, whatever they may be. Me and the Charlies will always remain loyal.”

“Dat da facts,” Charlie agrees

Cobalts are typically loyal to whoever is in charge. This is normal, to be expected, but Lane's insistence that she is loyal -- and always will be -- seems hollow in light of her previous evasion to a direct question. "Then what about your eyes Lane?" G'narsh growls as he returns angrily to his earlier inquiry. "I asked you about your eyes. What changes do they bring?"

Lane pauses -- stalls internally -- as she tries to come up with an honest, yet appropriate, response. "They give Artismo access to all that I see... He can work his magic through them," Lane finally replies. She is not pleased to be revealing this information to G'narsh nor is she happy to be acknowledging the truth of the situation to herself either. "They allow me to see much more than I ever did before. Things that I have never noticed or cared about. Things that make life and action more difficult."

"Like what?" G'narsh demands as he grows angrier by the second at her cryptic responses.

"Like the incoming missiles that are about to appear on the horizon," Lane responds flatly.

(It's a click later and ready or not, here comes the horde. Though to be fair only a very small slice of the horde will actually be deployed. Elvin Home has, after all, absolutely no strategic or military value whatsoever.)

Like the screaming envoys of death and destruction that they are, the mini demon-dragon-wraiths come tearing out of the sky. The first grows as large as a real dragon, a dinosaur, or a subway train, opens its mouth, and swallows the small island whole as it crashes into the lake. This is followed by an explosion of water, as mud, sticks, and stones fly into the air. There is nothing left of the island. It has disappeared.

Charlie gulps. He knows G'narsh had been thinking about sending half of the cobalts to the island in a flanking maneuver. It was the obvious tactical move. If Charlie had been on the island, there would be nothing left of him.

Moments later, before the last of the water and mud from the first explosion has fallen back to earth, a line of larger than life missiles roar into the water and across the bog. Half of the swamp and most of the lake between G'narsh's position and Elvin Home lifts a dozen feet into the air from the impact. A muddy fountain of mist rains down over the lake and the surrounding forest from the earth shattering explosion that follows moments later. Between the water that has been thrown into the air and the rest that has been vaporized, the lake's water level has dropped half a dozen feet. The surface is muddy, turbulent, and sloshes around violently as the water seeks to regain equilibrium.

There is nothing left of the pier, or the small boys. Play with fire and you will get burned. Play with bombs and you go boom. Amazingly the target -- the girls -- have somehow managed to evade the initial attack, but this is not what is on the Charlies' mind. The rest of the cobalts, the ones who would have been sent through the bog to flank left, all gulp nervously. If G'narsh had given the order, there would be nothing left of them.

"It is just the first wave," Lane advises as she points to the trio of girls swimming frantically towards shore through the wreckage of the pier and the muddy, confetti strewn water. "It is nothing more than a warning," she continues. "The next wave of missiles will not miss. Do your job, or the elves will be killed for you. Every last one of them."

(No doubt a forced quest, but it's not like we weren't going to railroad G'narsh down a predetermined path anyway.)

(It also bears mentioning that in the classical version of G'narsh, he would have just charged across the water and the elves on the other side would have been heavily armed. So, if you'd like to play it that way, go for it. Just remember the objective is the girls. Things will link up better if they live and are taken captive.)

(Oh, and I should probably mention that in the first go round the boys lived, but I decided to off them later on. It just seemed to

make more sense. I was trying too hard not to have anyone die, which can be a mistake in a battle sequence.)

Still hiding behind the tree line, G'narsh calmly observes the action on the far bank -- the girls shrieking and swimming madly for shore, while the old man dives in and pulls what little remains of the young boys -- i.e. confetti -- from the debris laden water.

Up in the housing compound proper where couples have been dancing, talking, and relaxing, there is no movement. There is no run for guns. No call to alarm. No manning of a defensive line. Just shocked silence and rigid immobility until one mother yells, "The children! They were playing by the water!" and then there is pandemonium as the crowd moves as one down the hill towards the lake.

By their actions, G'narsh realizes that these are not combatants,. "Hold your fire!" G'narsh commands as he, Lane, and the cobalts leap into the water and charge toward the distant shore. G'narsh is not much of a swimmer though, and soon it is clear, even with all of their guns and equipment, the Charlies could be on the other side long before G'narsh would even make it halfway across.

"Get them out of the compound! All of them," he instructs the Charlies as he asks Lane, "The next wave is going to hit the houses?"

"Without a doubt," Lane agrees.

"Get everyone into the water," he amends his instructs to the cobalts, "but don't hurt them."

"Don'ts hurties dem?" a Charlie asks confused.

"We's justs shooties dem from heres."

"Dey sitting duckers."

"No!" G'narsh shouts. "Get them all in the water and away from the houses. Understand?"

"Okayers bossman."

"We'd know'd understander eet."

"But we's do'er eet."

(I think I'll work the next moment in as an optional call. It shouldn't be too difficult for a heavily armed troop of cobalts to coerce a group of fifty unarmed civilian elves into the water just as the second wave of missiles arrives to completely destroy Elvin Home in a heartwarming display of pyrotechnical firepower and bombing precision. You may wish to watch as G'narsh shoots one or two of the incoming wraiths out of the sky, but the bottom line is, he and the Charlies would never get them all.)

(Once again, I may have influenced G'narsh's actions a little too much. It is always a fine line between giving a proxy too much information and not enough. I want G'narsh to have some sort of positive relationship with the elves and taking them prisoner (rather than killing them all or watching them die) seemed like the best way to go. As you will see in the rest of this segment, G'narsh is -- to some degree -- ambivalent and indecisive at this point. He is still coming to terms with his conscious, is only marginally aware of it, and has not yet incorporated these feelings and impulses into a workable -- i.e. guiding -- philosophy.)

(Of course, any scene can be run in alternative ways. Back at the beginning of the project, I would have imagined this scene taking place with the elves having weapons. After I dropped a few missiles into the compound, I'd have a wave of goblins and ogres charge the elves entrenched positions and as the horde creatures got butchered -- but also slowly overran the elvin positions -- G'narsh would sit back and reflect. He would be of the battle but at the same time slightly removed and we would watch on as the bloodlust slowly fell away from G'narsh's heart. That is to say, the newfound changes taking place in G'narsh's soul would be juxtaposed against a surrealist overlay of death and destruction. But I obviously didn't go that way.)

(Also at one time, I had imagined the possibility of G'narsh watching the battle from the water (with Lane and the cobalts), and maybe having the trio of elvin lasses join them for a game of volleyball or Marco Polo. Such a scene would be a bit extreme,

and not in tune with the current tone of this sequence, however it may have been more in line with the flavor of the previous section -- Horde Central. Keeping the level of frivolity and seriousness consistent from section to section can be difficult. Some scenes, simply don't seem to want by taken seriously, and for others the light heartedness -- or dare I say humor -- simple doesn't happen.)

We rejoin the action after the Charlies have grouped the elvin villagers together in the shallows of the lake. The cobalts are very serious looking. They sight down the barrels of their fusion carbines and motion with their weapons as they herd the frightened elves into ever deeper water.

“No talkees,” Charlie commands. There is no sign of emotion in his voice. Trust me. They are killing machines. What they lack in size they more than make up for in determination, steadfastness, and a cold blooded willingness to kill. There is, after all, a reason why they are called cobalts and not kobolds.

“Movies,” the cobalts command their charges.

“You’se luckies you no deaders.”

Needless to say the elves are scared out of their wits by the time G’narsh and Lane finally arrive on the scene and as a group the lot of them work their way over to the submerged remains of the exploded island where the group pauses to rest and let G’narsh think, as yet another wave of missiles decimates what for all practical purposes appears to have been a lakeside vacation home, part of a rural subdivision, a camping retreat, and/or a converted hunting lodge.

“Why would you do this?” one of the more shocked elvin mothers asks. “What did we do?”

“Shsh,” her husband urges.

“Shuttee uppers,” a cobalts warns the pair unemotionally as he brings the couple into his sights.

“We killers da talkers?” Charlie asks G’narsh matter-of-factly.

“No,” G’narsh replies simply. Wet, water logged, a troll is not a pretty sight to begin with, but give him two heads, deck him out in full combat fatigues, equip him to the hilt with guns, ordinance, and hi-tech gadgetry, and then put a rapid fire pulse gun in his hand... and well, you’ve got the makings for a very horrifying looking creature. You don’t really need to add rumors of savagery and a personal predisposition for over the top psychotic behavior. Without any help a person’s mind would come up with everything it needed to find the moment terrifying.

“You’re going to kill us, aren’t you?” a more hysterical minded elf announces.

G’narsh takes a breath. “I should kill you,” he agrees grimly as he presses the barrel of his gun against her forehead, but as he says this he cocks his second head --listening -- and scans the horizon out of the corner of his eye. He has heard a whining moan in the distance. “Ghosts?” he asks Lane.

“Or ghastrs,” she agrees. “Probably both,” and as long as I’ve described G’narsh again, at some point I should mention that Lane has changed out of her leather overcoat outfit and is looking really good in her waterlogged, black tank top, army fatigue ensemble.

But G’narsh isn’t really focusing on Lane at the moment. Instead he brings both of his heads down to regard his charges and advises the elves, “They’re coming to make sure you’re dead... so the choice is yours really. Scream, shout, yell, talk, whisper, or just breathe too hard, and they’ll find you and kill you. Or you can shut up for the next... How long to ghosts usually stick around?”

“30 minutes,” Lane replies.

“If you know what’s best for you, you’ll shut up for the next 30 minutes,” G’narsh finishes as he crouches low in the water -- so that only his eyes and noses remain above the surface. Lane, the elves, and the cobalts join him in this posture and from this vantage they all silently watch on as the white, black, and red cottony, insubstantial forms of the undead spirit creatures circle around the lake, as they hover just above the treetops, and make their way towards the smoking ruins of Elvin home.

(Ghosts are bad. Ghasts are worse, but ghouls are the worst. The superficial difference is a white transparent smoky body versus a black or a red one, but the real difference lies in the pain, suffering, and torment that they inflict and their ability to sniff out their prey. Ghosts aren't really too bright. Hide under your sheets at night and they'll never find you, while ghasts are timid; singing or ringing a bell scares them away, but ghouls... I don't know how you live through a ghoulish attack unless you're packing a fusion gun. I guess you just have to hope that they don't hear you breathe.)

“He sent ghouls,” Lane states in amazement when the winged apparitions have finally departed. The creatures spent an hour searching for bodies, remains, anything, but they found nothing.

“He'll know nobody died,” G'narsh replies echoing her thoughts as he looks over the prisoners. “Where are the girls?”

“Don't hurt my babies,” an elvin mother plaintively cries, but a cobalt advises her to, “Shutters et ups.”

As advertised the girls are a blonde, a brunette, and a redhead. They are not without their allure, but -- unaffected by their beauty -- Lane is all business as she advises coldly, “Just kill them and be done with it.”

G'narsh considers her, her gold eyes, and her baleful expression. “So what do you propose? A pulse bolt through the head. No that would never do, the ghouls will just come back. They haven't left you know, they're still looking.”

“I know. Just kill them,” Lane insists.

“Why is that important?”

“Those are your orders. Kill them. Rape them first if you'd like.”

G'narsh cannot help but let the thought seep through his loins. It does sound like fun. “Why do you want them dead?”

“I do not,” Lane replies. “What do I care about elvin trash? I follow orders. At one time, you did too.”

“Who is this Bones, this General Artismo Bones anyhow?” G’narsh asks. He is in no hurry. The moment does not hold any danger for him. He scans the sky. The ghouls have taken the search inland. They hate water. The lake will be the last place the ghosts, ghastrs, or ghouls look. G’narsh knows that he has plenty of time to figure out his next step. “Who is Bones?”

“He killed Xavier. He is the new commander.”

“And?”

“And...” Lane smiles. “And he is a fool.”

G’narsh nods understandingly. “I don’t feel like killing tonight Lane.”

“Or hearing any screams.”

“Screams could be fun,” G’narsh agrees as he looks the terrified girls over again closely. As said, they are not without their allure, “but it just wouldn’t seem right.”

“You’ve changed,” Lane observes.

“As have you,” G’narsh counters.

“Kill the girls,” Lane urges. “If you drown them, the ghouls will not hear, and we can be on our way.”

“To where?”

“You ask too many questions.”

Probably, G’narsh agrees silently. “You still with me Charlie?”

“Yeppers bossman.”

“Give me their dossiers again Lane.”

“Just kill them.”

G’narsh smiles as he swings his gun around on Lane. “Why haven’t you killed them Lane? Do they explode? Are they cursed? What is this stupid uninvolved observer role Sch©lte? Kill them Lane, or I’ll kill you.”

Lane has not had her gun at the ready and makes no move to go for it. “I cannot kill them,” she admits.

“How about Charlie?”

“Sures we’s killee dem bossman.”

“I am sure they would miss,” Lane interjects.

“Nopers.”

“We’d be’d at point blankers rangies.”

“How’d we miss?”

“You’d miss,” Lane responds simply. “This is something G’narsh must do.”

“Kill the girls Charlie,” G’narsh orders and we will fade out the screams of protest from the girl’s mothers or the look of horror on the girl’s faces as we concentrate on other matters.

“Okey dokeys,” Charlie agrees simply as he pulls the trigger of his pulse gun, but nothing happens.

“Et be jammers.”

“Stupid gunnery,” Charlie curses as he fiddles with his gun.

G’narsh grabs the gun out of Charlie’s hand and shoots a bolt into the sky. “The gun works Charlie. Try again,” G’narsh says calm and evenly as he hands the gun back to Charlie, but once again Charlie has no success.

“Stupid gunneries.” Charlie shoots another bolt into the sky to test his weapon and then levels the gun at the girl, but when it is aimed at her head it will not work.

“That’s enough Charlie,” G’narsh orders as he looks Lane dead in the eye. He ratchets back the priming mechanism on his gun with a satisfying Schlunk! It is completely unnecessary, but it serves as a final warning and is good for dramatic effect. “Lane, give me those the dossiers. Now!”

(Need I point out that two bolts to the sky will be more than enough to call the ghouls back? Or that the conversation is not taking the turn(s) I had expected? Not that the conversations ever take the turns I expect, but there is a first time for everything, and I suppose I am always hopeful to the point of self delusion that this time will somehow be different.)

Without taking his eyes off of Lane or lowering his gun, G’narsh looks at the girl’s dossiers, which have been thoughtfully printed on waterproof paper, as he switches his attention back and

forth from the girls, to their pictures, to their written descriptions. It's typical personals ad, skin marketing promotional material. The redhead is 24yrs old, 36-24-36, 110lbs, and likes horseback riding, tennis, and midnight swims -- or whatever it is that you've got plugged in for her. "These read more like consort descriptions or sales brochures," G'narsh remarks. "Did you ever put anything like this together when you were coming out for your debutante ball in the Courts of Chaos?"

"No," is Lane's simple response. She's not too thrilled about having a gun trained on her. In the world of the horde, however, it's not an entirely unusual turn of events.

"Charlie, kill the old man," G'narsh suddenly decides. It's a pretty cold hearted decision, but he needs to know if all of the elves are magically protected or just the three girls.

Before any of the elves even register the command the elderly elf is dead. The cobalts are quick, efficient, and completely loyal to whoever they consider to be the boss man. In the blink of an eye, all that remains of the old elf is a pile of confetti that floats on the water's surface. It soon becomes waterlogged and sinks. Gramps is gone. Read it and weep.

"No problem killing the old man." G'narsh says thinking out loud, and once again we will ignore the matronly cries of, "You're a monster," and, "How could you?" that emanate from the elvin clan.

"No problemers," Charlie agrees.

"Good," G'narsh replies. "Kill the redhead."

Obediently, without thinking, or caring the least about the outcome, Charlie pulls the trigger, but the gun jams.

"Stupid gunneries."

"Et defectivers."

"No its not," G'narsh replies. "Belay that order Charlie. What's up Lane?"

"As I have told you, the girls are for you to kill alone. This task is for you and no one else."

"Kill the girl," G'narsh orders Lane.

“I cannot. It is for you.”

“Kill, the girl,” G’narsh repeats.

Seemingly in compliance with his order, Lane draws her pistol, but instead of aiming it at one of the girls, she casually points the weapon at the head of one of the wailing mothers, and reduces her to nothing more than a pile of confetti, streamers, and other party decorations. “She was giving me a headache,” Lane explains simply as she holsters her weapon. “The girls are for you to kill G’narsh, and no one else.”

“Are you really loyal to me Lane?”

“Yes.” She shrugs. “But my allegiance to you is not the only thing which constricts my actions or limits my freedom... You should know that G’narsh.”

“Bones.”

“Artismo,” Lane corrects, “Yes.”

(I should point out that from M.O.M.’s perspective Bones and Artismo are in fact two different characters regardless of what Lane might think.)

(((And I should also point out, because I never get into this later, Lane is a judge and as such she knows that she is only killing a proxy when she guns down the elf. For G’narsh, it is a different matter. For him, the elves are real.)))

So, what has it been? Four shots? Two to the sky and two into random elvin extras? No matter the exact count, the air fills with the high pitched whine of the returning G, G, and G’s.

((** See sequence end note for expansion of combat if interested.))

“Kill the ghouls,” G’narsh instructs the cobalts, and as Charlie fights a pitched battle with the returning apparitions, G’narsh confronts the girls, take your pick as to which specific one. “Why do the guns jamb when they go to shoot you?” G’narsh demands, and we should perhaps pause for a moment to refresh in

our minds what a truly horrifying visage G'narsh must be to this young girl.

She barely manages to get out a shaky, nearly incomprehensible, "I don't know."

As this exchange takes place, the water around them is riddled with incoming rounds, shrapnel, and laser beam pulses which boil the water upon impact. It's one thing to be able to eat a soul, but it doesn't hurt to carry a diverse array of light infantry weapons as well. Needless to say, being in the midst of a firefight does nothing to calm the girls already shattered nerves. Need we go down the affronts to her senses? Home destroyed, gramps and mom butchered, taken prisoner by a troll whose sole orders are to kill her: the girl is understandably on the edge of a complete mental collapse.

G'narsh would be happy to beat the answer out of her, and let's face it, as he holds her hair and pulls her head back, that idea grows ever stronger in his heart. Perhaps, if we let the scene go on long enough, he would not be able to resist this urge, but as one head watches the battle -- the falling ghouls, and an enlightened elf or two who utilize the chaos of the moment to slip under the water and steal away into the night -- G'narsh notices something in the girl's eyes, a spark, a twinkle, an echo, the reflection of something... or someone.

"Who are you?" he asks, and then letting go of the first girl, G'narsh looks into the eyes of the second, and then the third. "Who are you?" he says again to the reflection, the twinkle in the girls' eyes.

(And we'll flood the system here with a love filled emotional cascade -- i.e. dopamine -- as we reveal that an ever so slight and distant reflection of the beautiful Mi'lay can be seen in the eyes of her ladies in waiting.)

"Who are you?" G'narsh demands again as he pauses for a moment to shoot the final ghoul out of the sky.

The girls do not know what to say or do, catatonic fear having gotten the better of them.

“We can’t stay here,” G’narsh announces to himself as much as anybody else. The battle is over for the moment, but reinforcements are sure to arrive. He has betrayed the horde, not that anybody cares about a few ghouls or ghosts, but G’narsh knows it’s just the start. The horde won’t stop until the girls are dead -- for whatever reason -- and G’narsh is unwilling to let any harm fall to the beautiful reflection residing behind those eyes.

“Gather up the elves that tried to slip away,” G’narsh instructs the cobalts and then thinking better of it adds, “Fr@ck, let them go. They don’t matter.” But still... damn indecisiveness. If he is to betray the horde... and for what? The gleam in a young girl’s eyes, a bit of elvin magic... No matter. If he is to betray the horde, having a few more bargaining chips might come in handy. Besides, if they stay here, the retreating elves are as good as dead. Yet... a half dozen elves going in separate directions, it will take too much time to recapture them. Coming to the only possible solution, G’narsh yells across the water to the escapees, “If you stay here, you’ll die. Your best chance is with us.”

Of course from their perspective G’narsh has just blown up their home. Who knows how many died in the attack, and then there were the latest two, killed in cold blood. There is not a chance in Shadow that they will be returning of their own freewill.

“We’s goes roundy dem up?” Charlie asks -- still confused and not knowing what to do.

“No,” G’narsh responds softly. “They’ll stay here and they’ll die, but they’ll make our retreat easier.”

“We’s retreaters bossman?”

“Let’s call it a strategic redeployment to a new base of command,” G’narsh corrects.

“Dat sounders like da retreaters.”

“Call it what you will,” G’narsh accents, but his mind is not on the cobalts. They will listen. They will obey. He is still the

boss man. “Do you have a problem flipping sides or leaving this all behind,” G’narsh asks Lane.

“I have said my loyalty is to you,” Lane replies evenly before adding, “Where you lead, I will follow.”

It is good enough for G’narsh (for the moment anyhow). He grabs one of the girls, the good looking one, the blonde, the brunette, or is it the redhead? I forget. Anyhow, he grabs her roughly, stares into her eyes, and yells into her face, like she was a microphone or some sort of radio transmission device and the reception isn’t so clear. “Where is a safe place? A shrine? A holy place?”

The girl in his arms is dumbstruck, but another elf answers on her behalf, “The Grove... both sides recognize it as neutral... sacred.” If they can get there, and the old ways are to be honored, this troll would be honor bound to let his captives go. It is the purpose of the place, a meeting ground, a place to talk of truce, and ending wars.

“The Grove then,” G’narsh agrees as he talks to the image of Mi’lay in the girl’s eyes. “Meet us there.”

(And there we have it, two murders -- possibly more -- a bit of arson, and a kidnapping, or two, or three. Not to mention that whole treason, insubordination, and failure to follow a direct order from a superior thing.)

(I don’t know that I want to call G’narsh’s actions good at this point, but I don’t think I would call them overly evil either... not when you stop to consider the situation and his personal history. The horde is not exactly known for taking prisoners after all -- nor are the elves for that matter. The bottom line is, there are forty odd elves that would normally have been killed who have been spared. It’s not a bad start, but then again, perhaps not an overly good one either.)

(Anyhow, for good or bad, we’ll start the next sequence at the other side of the communication, and join Mi’lay asleep in her bedroom. Yowza!)

(If you're curious as to the click count, it's three clicks for the section, which will probably turn into five by the time we refine it (and it has), but at least it looks as if we are finally underway.)

((*** NOTE: Ghoul Firefight Combat Expansion.))

(I felt that going into the details of the ghoul firefight was not important at the time I laid down the dream, but now as I am going thru my fourth or fifth edit, I'm not so sure. Some might interpret G'narsh's earlier warnings to the elves that they should shut up or die (and then having the lot of them sit in the water for an hour as they wait for the ghouls to pass by), as a disconnect of sorts when you compare this with the ease with which G'narsh and the Charlies ultimately dispatch the ghouls. So if this bugs you, you're a grognard, or you just want more action, here's some more information to help play it out better.)

(There are two ghost platoons (of 12-24 ghosts each), one ghastr platoon, and one ghoul platoon. The ghastrs are twice as strong as the ghosts, and the ghouls are twice as strong as the ghastrs. None of them will touch the water under any circumstances, so anyone who can dive 10' underwater is immune to both them and their weapons for as long as they can stay underwater. The ghoulish company (four platoons make a company?) will make a frontal attack -- charging straightforward and firing at full blast once they are in range. If you're looking for some realistic guidance, half the Charlies will die, as will half the elves (and another quarter will slip away during combat). G'narsh will get hit by a bolt or two but will heal almost instantaneously. Lane will get seared on an arm or thigh. The wound will somehow make her look sexier and remove a bit of unneeded (and quite frankly unwanted) clothing at the same time. The three girls will, of course, come through unharmed.)

(As long as at least one of the cobalts lives through the combat the rest will reform and rejoin the party by the time they get to -- The Sacred Grove. This is part of the nature of cobalts.

As such, you can bet if there are only one or two left, they will dive underwater and stay there until the firefight is over.)

(Also, if you really want to make things interesting, you may wish to assume that the elves who drift off and escape also manage to salvage a weapon or two. Anyone up for a three-way battle?)

(I'm not going to integrate any of these changes into the dream. For the most part they are only of momentary concern and will fade from consciousness very quickly.)

(And, as long as I've destroyed any chance of a smooth segue into the next sequence, you might want to spend a moment paying attention to how loudly you hear the different layers of the narrative. (Between) -- all of the -- (**different ways)) that I've "called out" information, there must be a dozen (((different layers.))) Surely you're not interacting with each layer in the same manner.)

(((For instance, this here edit is a plot spoiler, so proceed with caution. At the end of it all, try as I might I cannot convince M.O.M. to forgive G'narsh for his ruthless actions in this sequence, and so formally he will die (along with everyone else) as the universe resets (per the Rays of G'narsh plot point). If you're not running MM, the original intent had been to allow G'narsh to achieve forgiveness when he brokers a deal with Stef'fan (at Betrayal in the Forest) or... at other points in the tale as will become apparent in the future. Anyhow, this is advance warning, although I may spend some time trying to finagle some sort of absolution for G'narsh, in the end he is not forgiven. Take it for what you will, and amend the dream accordingly -- or not, as you see fit.)))

(((I give you this advance warning, because it is my hope that this edit will allow you to see my efforts in this regard more clearly, and/or aid in your realization that even the best laid plans Of Mice and Men sometimes fall astray.)))

(((In other words, this little inconsistency (regarding G'narsh's absolution) really bugs me!!!)))

(((Half my (unseen) edit notes pertain to it.)))

There's a Reason Sleeping Beauty Slept So Much

(Ten clicks into the Main Sequence and I've noticed (yet another) snag. (((In other words, I noticed what was to turn out to be a major problem right away, but chose not to do anything about it. Learn from my mistakes if you like.)))

(You see, this was to be G'narsh's last walk thru. He was to break free from the cycle, but he has ordered the death of a helpless prisoner of war. He has killed in cold blood. He has murdered. You just know M.O.M. is going to demand retribution (and therefore his death?) in return. I could go back and redo the last 5-10 clicks, but even if I do, I don't see it sorting out any other way (which is perhaps why it came down the way it did in the first place).

The best solution to this predicament that I see is to pass my depression and moroseness over this realization onto one of the proxies, and it seems to line up with the way Mi'lay has been feeling lately, so there you go. Whatever feelings she may have had in this direction, we are simply going to amplify. Why? Because I tend to push my proxies into alignment with my current feelings and I'm feeling a little down.)

“Fr@ck,” Mi'lay whispers silently from deep within the folds of her blankets. She has just woken up from her dreams, but she does not bother to open her eyes or move.

“Why did G'narsh have to kill those Sch©lting fools?” she whispers quietly to herself. Mi'lay does not feel sorry for the boys, the old man, or even the elvin mother. She knows that they are just electrons in a grid. They are only proxies, an idea. Intrinsicly, killing them is no more evil than flicking off a switch (that perhaps controls something no more important than a light bulb), but when

you are turning off a switch, if in your heart you are throwing the switch on an electric chair -- and therefore condemning someone to death -- then by throwing the switch you have committed murder in your heart (and in fact) -- as G'narsh did when he ordered Charlie to kill the old man.

"Fr@ck," Mi'lay says again as she sighs heavily. Saying the word takes all of her energy. Why couldn't G'narsh have played volleyball like he was supposed to? That's how the outline went... but Mi'lay can still see enough of the dream (((her dream))) to know, it was not entirely G'narsh's fault. Even now she can see Artismo (Bones') malevolent eyes hovering in the night sky over the battlefield like a pair of lightning filled storm clouds on the horizon. She can see him calling in the mini demon-dragon-wraith missile attack and she can see his willingness to force G'narsh's hand, one way or another.

"Fr@ck." She mouths the word, but no sound comes out. Her lips barely move. It is not so much that G'narsh is evil... again. He has always been evil, but now that he has committed a mortal sin, how will they ever get off this merry-go-round, this endless, meaningless cycle? The next 10-20-30-50, who knows how many, maybe 100 clicks -- this whole life -- is a total waste. Might as well end it all and start from scratch, unplug and reboot. Cut your losses and move on.

Mi'lay knows the drill. She is supposed to yell and scream as she awakes in terror, but how many times do you have to awaken from (((to?))) the same nightmare before you cease caring? If she were to scream, she knows that her ladies in waiting, her father, and/or her brother Stef'fan would come running, ask her what was the matter, and then, just like clockwork, Stef'fan would be off, and she would take a bath, prepare for the ball, and put on her best face for the returning hero -- G'narsh.

But G'narsh has killed, he does not seem like a hero to her, and she cannot summon the will to yell and start the ball rolling one more time. What is the point of taking action, when that action is doomed to failure?

G'narsh has killed. That is all that matters and since he has killed, he must pay. The cycle will repeat yet again and Mi'lay is tired of going through the motions -- smiling, dancing endlessly, and putting on a happy face when all she feels like doing is crying. It's probably what she would be doing right now... if it didn't take so much effort.

So instead, Mi'lay closes her eyes... and since she never really opened them in the first place, there is certain simplicity in this decision, an economy of motion as it were, and a purity of existence totally devoid of energy or will.

Luckily, Mi'lay's plans for the day require no action. As she lies in bed, she does not move. She does not stir, shift, or even alter the position of her blankets. Outside of her window the morning birds sing. The sun rises in the east -- or is it the west? -- and the day begins without her.

(I think that summarizes the depression which arose when I thought I might have to scrap a week's worth of work. It feels good to get that out of my system.)

It is past noon before anyone notices Mi'lay's absence. Stef'fan had been expecting to be awoken by her screams at dawn, but since those screams never came, he slept straight through until the clock tower's twelfth chime, just like he usually does.

Still sleepy and in a daze, Stef'fan wanders into Mi'lay's room. He pauses at the door as he notices the finery which fills her apartments: fluffy couches, magical mirrors, dazzling trinkets, gems piled on her dresser for no discernable reason, and then, oh yeah, there is the bathroom. The Roman Baths were never so large or ornately decorated. "By Gra'gl's honor. It just keeps on getting worse," Stef'fan curses, but there is (((seemingly))) no one here to appreciate his remarks.

He walks over to the window and looks down into the courtyard. The troops are readying for battle, or practicing

maneuvers, or something. It is a nice sunny day, so he opens the curtains to let the sunshine in.

“Leave them closed,” Mi’lay begs in a near whisper.

“What?” Stef’fan shrieks in alarm as he jumps around, his hands reaching for his weapons. His is expecting to find an intruder... but he sees no one... until. “Are you still in bed?”

All that shows of Mi’lay is her small mouth, cute nose, and sweet eyelids. She does not open her eyes as she says, “Leave the blinds closed.”

Instantly Stef’fan is by her side full of concern. “It’s noon. What are you doing in bed? Are you sick? Have you been poisoned?”

The last remark gets a slight chuckle out of Mi’lay. “So in your world there is an equal probability of being either sick or fatally poisoned?” she asks amused in a quiet, near whisper.

“What’s wrong?” Stef’fan asks. This behavior is completely unlike Mi’lay -- the happy, joyful, carefree life of the party who everyone loves to watch dance and longs to stand next to.

“I’m tired,” she says simply and then after a brief pause during which Stef’fan takes hold of her hand and checks her forehead for a temperature, she adds, “G’narsh is responsible for two deaths.” It might not be a totally correct statement, so she adds, “He ordered the assassination of Grandpa Willy.”

G’narsh always kills elves, usually hundreds. It is nothing new. They are at war after all. Stef’fan takes the news easily, without any concern, though he is curious. “Who is Grandpa Willy?”

“I don’t know. The name just came to me,” Mi’lay admits.

Stef’fan nods his head knowingly. “I just wish I had taken the time to get to know him better.”

The comment gets a smile of sorts out of Mi’lay. “As do I,” she agrees.

“So what’s up? Why are you so down?” A war, G’narsh killing their family and countrymen, this has been happening as

long as either of them can remember. It is nothing to get depressed ((((or upset)))) about.

Mi'lay sighs as she opens her eyes and without moving her head looks over at her brother. "G'narsh has already killed."

"So? He always does that. What's the big deal?"

"I had hoped that it would be different this time... that this would be the last go round, the last iteration."

"It's never going to be the last time," Stef'fan observes, perhaps correctly.

"All the same I had hoped."

Stef'fan solemnly draws his sword and lays it on top of the blankets across his sister's abdomen ((((as prelude to an oath of vengeance)))), but without warning his mind shifts gears as he suddenly realizes, "Maybe it's your turn to carry the burden of depression." The thought makes him oddly happy and a burst of energy shoots through him. "Me, I feel good," he observes. "I'm going to kill that Sch©lting troll this time around. I polished my sword and I've got a new Sch©lting swear word to boot!"

"You better bring more than a sword," Mi'lay says as she smiles weakly. "This is a contemporary world -- laser rifles, plasma guns, stun pistols, electro swords, concussion grenades, the works."

Stef'fan nods understandingly as he grabs his sword and twirls it in the air with a well practiced flourish before sheathing the weapon. "Then I'll go down to the armory and pick up some goodies... Do we have a meeting? Me and G'narsh?"

"The Sacred Grove."

"Where's that?" Stef'fan asks. He has never heard of the place.

"I'm sure it will come to you in a moment. Artismo," Bones, "picked it out," Mi'lay says as if that is all Stef'fan could possibly need to know, and what do you know. It is.

As Stef'fan suddenly remembers the locale and all that it implies, he curses, "Fr@ck! It's neutral ground. I was hoping to get the drop on G'narsh."

“You could pick him off as he was entering The Grove,” Mi’lay suggests hopefully as she perks up at the thought and rises to a sitting position. She’s still not leaving the bed or getting out from underneath her blankets, but there is, after all, nothing like planning an ambush and the death of one’s enemies to lift one’s spirits.

Yet, it is not to be as she hopes. Stef’fan has a clear understanding of the situation when he responds, “There’s no way I’d beat G’narsh to the meeting, you know how Art...” ismo Bones, “is,” and let’s face it, Stef’fan is just being lazy. These are separate characters folks. No more related to one another than Dr. Jekyll is to Mr. Hyde. OK. Bad example, but you get the idea.

“True, I guess,” Mi’lay agrees. See, the lady herself concurs. It is merely a misunderstanding, so let’s move on.

“Well, anyhow, I gotta go,” Stef’fan says as he takes the ball and runs with the suggestion. “Who knows, maybe the troll will slip up this time.”

“Or Art.”

“Or Art,” Stef’fan agrees. “Speaking of which, you’d better get out of bed. If he finds out that you’re not getting ready for the party, he’s just going to come up here and dress you himself.”

“Sch@lte! Fr@ck! You’re right!” Mi’lay agrees as she jumps out of bed. She has a momentary desire to ask Stef’fan if he thinks he could kill Art, but then thinks better of it. It would be wrong after all... and probably not possible anyhow.

Mi’lay is moonsighted if you’ll recall, so after she has grabbed her glasses off of the nightstand, but before her brother has walked out the door, she makes one final request of him, “If you can, see if you can work it out so I don’t have to dance anymore.”

“You don’t want to dance?”

“No. Remember?”

It takes Stef'fan a moment, but then a scene from a long time ago in a snow covered college town comes to mind. "I'll see what I can do, but if G'narsh comes back a hero..."

"You're going to make him a hero?"

Stef'fan shakes his head. "Wake up. You're still tired. That's always the deal. G'narsh turns traitor and provides us the means for winning the war and in return he gets immunity and the keys to the kingdom," and your heart, but wisely, Stef'fan leaves out this last part as he walks out the door.

When she is alone, Mi'lay remarks to herself, "Maybe we should loose the war this time."

But those are just words whose origins arise from within the depths of despair. With Stef'fan gone, no one is there to hear them, and besides, Mi'lay wasn't serious... Well not too serious... At least, I don't think she was too serious. I mean, isn't a little personal hardship and (yet another) lifetime of continued unhappiness a small price to pay for the greater (nationalistic) good of all elvin kind?

I thought so. So just keep your seditious thought to yourself.

(Believe it or not, I think turning Mi'lay into a morbidly depressed elf was all that it took to get us back on target... and put me in a better mood.)

(And if I may be so bold as to point out a stylistic aspect that I personally find interesting, notice that by utilizing Mi'lay's thoughts at the beginning of this section (when she sleeps in), we were able to call out a scene by inference that does not in fact actually exist. It's like a phantom sequence of sorts. Techniques of this nature can be useful whenever you want to have your cake and eat it too. No doubt you'll have noticed me doing this lots of different ways, and it is one of the major reasons why I am sold on wraparounds. A much subtler form of the same thing, or at least something that is in some ways akin to this, takes place during Mi'lay's mental aside wherein she contemplates asking her brother

to kill Art. It's foreshadowing that doesn't need to be followed through on. If we want to pursue it, great. If not, no worries. It's basically an open call that doesn't need to be answered.)

(I should also mention that at under two clicks, the timing of this sequence is more in line with my expectation for what is essentially material that we've already been over.)

The Sacred Grove

Where I'd heard the Music Years before

(Despite whatever I might have indicated in the past, the first part of this section is going to concentrate on a full description of Stef'fan. By this point I expect that either you or your compiler has picked a body for Stef'fan, and I think you might find it interesting to compare the skin you already have loaded for Stef'fan with the one you would have loaded if I had made all of this information available to you earlier. You might also find it interesting to observe how long you use the new skin before reverting back to the old one or how the two skins interact for the rest of the dream.)

(To do this exercise properly, it will be helpful if you spend a moment bringing Stef'fan into focus and going down his appearance and clothing item by item from the top of his head to the bottom of his feet. You'd be surprised at how lazy compilers can be at times. If your rig is using some sort of fuzzy placeholder for Stef'fan, it will be very hard to do a real comparison, so let's spend a moment reviewing what we know about Stef'fan and going over his particulars. We know he is a guy, an elf, has black hair, and wears a leather jacket. Of his persona, we know he is haughty, arrogant, morose, hollow, empty, and a poor student. There's probably a lot more, but that's all I remember (or consider important) at the moment.)

(Anyhow, if you want to play the game (or just to humor me), please take a moment to refresh your vision of Stef'fan and go

over his appearance item by item. Just spend a moment with him all alone. Say hello. Shake his hand and take a second to notice what he is wearing.)

--- Pause ---

--- Resume on Command ---

(I should also point out that Stef'fan is fairly elated about the prospect of being fully fleshed out. At the moment he is happy and full of positive energy, so although I wouldn't normally paint a smile on his face, just so we are all on the same page, in the coming scene he's going to be floating on air (or at least he will start that way and we'll play it by ear from there).)

(And then one final point and we'll be off and running. It's not my intent for you to be either right or wrong, to have an accurate vision of Stef'fan or not. It's just an exercise, a bit of fun. I haven't been skewing my calls or loading the dice in my favor -- whatever that might mean. I didn't actually decide to describe Stef'fan (or run his description in this particular way) until about the same time I decided we'd all be happier (or at least I'd be happier) if Mi'lay was clinically depressed -- or as they like to say in these fantasy discs, suffering from a severe bout of melancholia, which, since we all know melancholia is a physical ailment brought on by the humors being out of alignment... well, you work it out. I'm sure there's a joke in there somewhere. How can there not be?)

(Having said all that, I am sure you will note that my calls for Stef'fan are wide open (as usual). The purpose of casting my net so wide is not so I can be "right" (((a slightly different concept from you being wrong))), but so that when we are done -- you, me, and your compiler -- all of us have a mutually satisfying and consistent perception of Stef'fan. The fact is, I know nothing about your personal likes and dislikes. Couple that with the fact that plenty of folks are going to run the dream from Stef'fan's point of view (or with him as the major love interest), and the best

one can do is offer up a bunch of possibilities, and let each member of the audience work out the details for themselves. It's the win-win-win solution (((for you me and Stef'fan))).)

Ah. It's a beautiful day. The sun is out. The birds are singing and Stef'fan is going troll hunting. He's got one of those new fangled plasma beam sniper rifles with him, and he's sort of twirling it about, shifting it from shoulder to shoulder, and tossing it around from hand to hand as he skips and dances along. He might even be humming a tune, or maybe that's just the birds.

The sniper rifle is five feet long making it slightly shorter than Stef'fan, and in truth, due to its length, it is a bit much to be carrying, but it is light and can shoot as far as the eye can see -- or well over 10 miles on a clear day. More importantly, when it hits, it delivers an explosive bolt of searing hot plasma, which the GI library tells me is just a fancy term for gas so hot that it's turned liquid again... and you thought I knew nothing about physics. Bah, pshaw, and fiddlesticks. (What I don't know about physics would fill countless discs!) But what Stef'fan and I both know (as would anybody else who has ever played Slaughter Quest) is that molten gas delivers fire damage, and that's just what you need to take out a troll, two-headed or otherwise.

When you get right down to it, that's a lot of information for a weapon that might never actually get used, so let's leave the gun behind and move on to our description of Stef'fan. He wears a worn black leather jacket. I see it as plain leather, but silver studs, or some sort of freehand painting on the back paying homage to some ghetto gang or greaser punk musical style (like an idiotic saying, some stupid catch phrase, or obscure logo -- could be yours?) might be appropriate. Under the heavy jacket he wears a tight black t-shirt. It's one of those new syntho-fibers -- expensive, top of the line, and stylish. I could also go with bare-chested or one of those ruffled buttoned down collared shirt numbers, but I can't really see how you can improve on a plain black t. His jeans are black (sense a continuing theme?) and old(ish) but not

pretentious. I view them as having a tear across the thigh, not due to style or fashion, but as though he has a job on the line, and his jeans are ripped and worn from where he leans against the belt, pulley, or gear all day long. It's a safety violation, of course, but what do you want? To live forever? Certainly not Stef'fan. Oddly, as a bit of an aside, whenever folks are given a demerit at work for having ripped clothes, the reasoning is simple enough. Once the belt is done shredding your clothes, it's going to start shredding your body. From management's perspective, it's a safety issue. If a worker can't maintain their clothes, they probably can't maintain their body either, and as such is a loss time injury waiting to happen. (FYI.)

Moving on, Stef'fan's jeans are held up by a solid sterling silver belt forged to look like a motorcycle timing chain -- the perfect weapon for all occasions. All the more effective because it is not interpreted as a weapon by most civilians, but try to get one of those babies into the tubes. You thought a pizza cutter was bad. You ain't seen nothing. And, in case you are interested, the belt is probably worth as much as your grandmother's silver service... because I know. Have any fencing questions, contact me. I'm your man. I'm currently paying 1.5x over spot for gold and silver jewelry, artwork, and collectables and .85x for bullion. The rates are competitive, so keep me... er, I mean Bones in mind for your money changing requirement.

And if you're going to know a fence on a first name basis, you're going to need a good pair of running shoes. Just trust me on this, it seems to go with the territory. With that in mind, you may wish to note how little Stef'fan seems to care about this particular issue, for he is wearing black cowboy boots with silver studs pounded into the heels that form some sort of runic pattern. I suppose he might also be wearing wear work boots, or yes, maybe even running shoes, and to cover my bases fully, I'll say that I can even see him going about barefoot or with sandals, but my first choice remains Sch©lte-kicker cowboy boots, the type with the pointy toes. He keeps them polished. They are probably

embroidered with silver thread, though I doubt they are made of anything more than simple cow leather -- or being an elf perhaps deerskin would be more likely, but definitely not dragon hide or anything exotic like that. If you have a good memory and want to be a stickler, I previously described his boots as moccasins, so that's a good call as well. Any class of footwear that I've overlooked at this point, I'm sure is completely coincidental. You can be confident that he has a pair of whatever in his closet, and if that's not a completely open call, you can bet it's not through any lack of trying.

I most often view Stef'fan without any sort of headgear, but sometimes a simple cowboy hat seems to find its way into the picture, as would whatever sort of skull cap or sun bonnet is currently in fashion.

His body is lean, five to six feet tall, well muscled in a wiry, hidden strength, sort of way. Although he is physically fit, he does no exercise or work out (hey, it's a dream) and his strength does not show through his clothes...

On the other hand, his jeans are tight (very tight, like elvin male gigolo tight), so maybe his upper body strength isn't what he's trying to show off. His hair is a deep dark black, uncombed, unkempt, greasy, but not repulsive, simply not cared for. It looks like he may have gotten his hair cut six months ago and hasn't done a thing to it since then except for maybe combed it once or twice. His hair always looks this way. You would not believe how long he stands in front of the mirror every morning teasing every strand into place, and when he goes to a stylist to get his hair cut, he pays extra for this trendy, uncut look. Go figure. Kids these days.

If I had to pick an age I'd say 24, but since he's an elf 2,400 is just as accurate. Just don't think he backs that age up with any wisdom. He doesn't.

What race is he? I view him as white or more properly Caucasian, but I do have a personal bias, so chose whatever. He's an elf, maybe that's just a code word for American Indian or

Comanche. What do I know? It works to me if he's Asian as well. Either way, he shies away from facial hair, so either he shaves regularly or it's not an issue.

Eyes? Blue is always the first choice for an elf. I also like steel grey, but there is nothing really bizarre about his eyes. They don't glow, swirl with an inner light, or beguile whoever or whatever he looks at. They're simply eyes, or should I say, they are simply the eyes of an elvin heartthrob... sigh.

I don't bother making his ears pointy, but you could. In the end, don't ask me why everyone knows he's an elf, but they do. It's probably his haughty demeanor, the way he carries himself, and/or his condescending attitude towards everyone and everything.

(Outside of some incidental equipment and weapons, I think that does it. Are we close? Does it matter?)

(Let it sit and gel. I've got a note to revisit this later, but you know all I'm going to do is say, 'remember that time we did that Stef'fan skin comparison thing,' so your best bet is to pause for a second and get whatever you can from the exercise now. It's there for you and no one else, so really the choice is yours.)

--- Pause ---

(Oh, before we continue, I should mention that I'm not a big fan of jewelry. I just don't go for it. I know I put a toe ring on Eileen, and I like a necklace or two on a girl, but for guys, jewelry just doesn't make any sense. I admit it's blind, random prejudice, but that doesn't mean there isn't a silly rationale or two behind it. The first is, if you are really, really rich, you don't need to advertise it. And if you're not, there are better ways to spend your money. The other reason comes straight from the street. There is a saying: Never wear anything around your neck that you value more than your life. Connect the dots. The same applies to your wrist, little finger, and earlobes. Are those real diamonds? I guess I can

always find out later. Bye now. I'd like to stay and chat, but I gotta run.)

(Word is, Bones got bit by the gem bug in a big way a while back and will pay .1x of retail for any precious or semi-precious stones you have lying around. It might sound like a rip-off if you're used to Slaughter Quest rates, but out on the street that's a fair price... a fact which perhaps connects back directly with why I'm not a big fan of jewelry in the first place.)

“Sch©lte yeah! I'm a made man,” Stef'fan announces happily to the world. He thinks about shooting off his plasma rifle in celebration, but he is too close to the edge of The Grove. It would be bad form and the thousands of buttercup fairies, which wait for him at the tree line, would never stand for it, so instead, without missing a beat, he throws the rifle to them.

At three inches tall, it takes hundreds of the fairies to catch the weapon, but they do the trick nimbly and quickly whisk it away into the air and over the trees. When Stef'fan leaves, they will give it back, or at least that's how it's supposed to go.

Meanwhile, Stef'fan sword is sheathed and as long as it remains so, he may keep it by his side. It's a weapon of honor after all -- and The Grove can be used for duels -- though I doubt we'll mention that fact again anywhere else.

The only other weapon of importance is the sawed off double-barreled scattergun that Stef'fan removes from the folds of his jacket. It's a short-snouted ugly looking weapon that is composed of little more than a grip and two thick cartridge compartments. Stef'fan pivots the gun open and takes out a large shotgun like shell. “Poison darts,” he explains. “It's your stuff, so you should be immune.” He is referring to the blow darts that the buttercups use. Each shell is loaded with 1,000 of their darts. It's not that Stef'fan needs to be armed. At the slightest hint of trouble the buttercup fairies will fill the air with tens of thousands of poison tipped sleep darts, but much like G'narsh or Lane, Stef'fan has always felt naked without a weapon.

Since the scattergun is essentially defensive in nature, the small fairies make no move to take it away, and taking absence of action as assent, Stef'fan returns the gun to the folds of his jacket.

(I don't really know why I am going into his weapons. They are not important for this sequence. I think it was just a handy way of introducing the buttercup fairies who enforce the neutrality of The Grove. In the blink of an eye violators of the peace get filled with thousands of tiny sleep darts launched from blowguns, bows, and in this world, probably tiny little tranquilizer guns. I wouldn't be surprised if some of them weren't carrying mini stun batons or electro wands as well. In the end the details of their weaponry aren't important. There are literally millions of the little buttercup fairies filling the air and their poison is quite potent. I don't actually know what the fairies do after they knock someone out, but its probably not very pleasant. After all, the only person they'd have to use their darts on is by definition not honorable, and once that line has been crossed, all bets are off.)

“Is the troll here yet?” Stef'fan asks good-naturedly of the buttercup fairies, which fly about him and fill the air like pollen, leafs caught in a breeze, or a great cloud of buzzing, swirling frenzied insects -- large insects to be sure, something akin to slightly oversized dragonflies perhaps, though some folks simply insist on going for the butterfly effect. But back to Stef'fan and his question, even before he speaks, Stef'fan instinctively knows the answer to his inquiry. In the end, it turns out that he is just going through the motions and making a good show of it. He's in a good mood after all, and unlike some people, he doesn't mind playing along (at least for the moment, that is).

As Stef'fan continues down the dirt path through the forest, the buttercups respond to his inquiry in a sing song language, reminiscent of tiny (tinker?) bells or door chimes. Got me as to what they are saying. Maybe they are trying to ask Stef'fan out on a date (looker that he is), or perhaps they are telling him the latest

gossip or relating a raunchy joke (you know how those fairies are). Either way, one need not understand what they are saying to know that G'narsh has arrived. Up ahead in a small clearing, sitting on the edge of a large stone dais -- something like an ancient sun dial -- is the troll, Lane, twelve cobalts, the three girls, and whatever elves and/or other creatures who lived through the attack.

"Hi-ya, troll," Stef'fan calls out with equal portions of playfulness and snidefulness as he walks into view. "Even for a troll you're pretty Fr@cking stupid. This is neutral ground."

G'narsh stands up in reply. He is almost twice as tall as Stef'fan and weighs four or five times as much. He clenches his hand. It feels empty without a weapon, but he knows Stef'fan is just taunting him, trying to bait him. He knows you need to take elves and their attitudes with a grain of salt (and perhaps a dash of pepper and a twist of lemon as well). "Where's the girl?" he asks.

"Who?" Stef'fan replies as he sneers derisively.

G'narsh chooses to ignore the elf's obvious attitude. "This meeting was supposed to be with the girl, the vision of beauty, the one I saw in the other girls' eyes," he says indicating the three ladies in waiting. Though technically free, they cannot leave The Grove until a deal is struck. If G'narsh wanted to, he could just curl up and go to sleep for the next million years, and his elvin captives wouldn't be able to leave or do anything about, but then, the Sacred Grove isn't such a bad place to spend a million years. You don't age and it's remarkably similar to The Garden of Eden in many ways... or so I've heard. The bottom line is, from the dais there is a view of a pleasant waterfall, a nice swimming hole, and a veritable bounty of fruit and nuts hanging from trees and clustered about on the ground in small piles here and there. It's the type of place elvin families go to on weekends for a picnic or to worship and commune on their holy days, but here I am rambling on. We were in the middle of a conversation. G'narsh had asked about...

"Mi'lay?" Stef'fan replies amused. "She doesn't do the negotiation meeting I do... and I got news for you troll boy,"

Stef'fan continues boastfully, "the second you leave this grove I'm going to hunt you down and kill you."

It is G'narsh's turn to smile as he responds simply, "I guess there's no real reason to leave then."

"But there's the party tonight," the redhead says suddenly, or maybe it was the blonde, or the brunette. They are so hard to keep straight. The fact of the matter is, if it wasn't for the color of their hair, there would be no way of telling them apart at all! Perhaps more importantly, you may have noticed from the content of her comment that the fear of death has left the girls completely. They are in The Grove after all. They are safe, and it's time to get back to what's really important -- the social calendar and tonight's big party.

"Going to be a good one?" G'narsh asks the girls jokingly, but he's a troll, and he's not invited. Being acutely aware of this sort of thing, the elvin girls immediately sense the shift in the air and the dreamer's desires. As one, they snub G'narsh pointedly and turn towards each other to gossip and gab about the news of the day. Word is, a great hero will be escorting Mi'lay to the cotillion ball tonight. Who could it be? With important social news like that to consider, they have no time to deal with this ugly, slimy, boring troll. I mean, as if. In the end, there is nothing else to say and the girls depart down the path towards the pool. They might not be able to leave The Grove, but that doesn't mean they can't enjoy themselves.

(Rather than cutting back to the conversation and letting Stef'fan and G'narsh lock horns, as I am certain they are poised to do, right here is an excellent place to jump in and mention that whenever a conversation (or the action) isn't going quite the way you want it to (or you think that it's about to take a turn for the worse and you want to be proactive about the entire thing), then that's a good time to jump in with your wraparound. Almost any comment will work. Done properly, it's like a mini section break in and of itself. Then, when you are done with the wraparound, the

dream can resume at some indeterminate point in the future and the boring part of the conversation (or resolution of the problem at hand) can be implied.)

Seconds or centuries later we will resume the action. We are in dreamtime after all and there is not much difference between the two. The Charlies play in the water, swim in the lagoon, and slide down the waterfall, where they are joined by the elvin ladies in waiting...

Look. I recognize that consistency of emotion, motivation, and even cognitive identity is not one of my strong suits. I don't feel like dealing with a bunch of elves being down in the dumps and mourning Grandpa Willie and Momma Mia for the rest of the dream, so you can either accept that, I can (and will) adjust their attitude tabs at the flick of a button, or you can go with the fact that elves tend to be a bit flighty -- in a live for the moment, let bygones be bygones type way -- and since it's only a matter of time before G'narsh and Stef'fan reach a settlement, the ladies in waiting (and the rest of the elves) have decided to enjoy the day, and treat it like they would any other. Or, if you don't like that explanation, you can change the elves' attitude to a deep overriding depression colored by a hint of mourning and despair, but quite frankly, that seems like a bit of a downer, so if you want to go that route, you'll have to work out the exact details on your own.

Besides, if you ask me, that seems like a lot of work. So instead, let's just assume that you're with me on this, and you're ready to spend a fun filled day at the ole watering hole. And if that's the case, we should continue with the role call and see what everybody else is doing.

Lane, for her part, is taking the opportunity to get a little sun, which means she's not wearing as much as she did before. Take a moment to appreciate her body as she lies by the sandy shore of the pond and watch as the sunlight glistens off of her newly bronzed skin. I don't really know where she got the tanning oil from, but half the buttercup fairies are guys, so I'm thinking they

were motivated to help her out. Anyway, you can wait a moment or two, and watch as a flock of eager fairies oil her up, or you can dig right in and help yourself. If you ask real nice, she might even return the favor ((((with four arms, giving a full body massage is one of Lane's specialties)))).

So remember, you can dally in this scene for as long as you like. There is a volleyball net set up on the shore and another in the water. I should warn you that Lane is very competitive, but, once again, on account of her four arms you can count her as two (or more) players. Take her on with the help of one (or more) of the ladies in waiting, or help yourself to a glass of lemonade as you watch them play amongst themselves. Watching... um, ahem... over-inflated buoyant-balls floating majestically through the air has never been so much fun.

If you are of the mind to go swimming, inner tubes and swim gear hang from trees and float in the water. Down a path that leads into a nice shady clearing, there is a horseshoe pit and a shuffleboard court for the old timers, but really, did I mention the elvin ladies in waiting? Why anybody would want to be anywhere else but in the cool refreshing waters of the lagoon -- planning a romantic picnic with one (or more) of them in a remote corner of the forest -- is beyond me. And I know you don't need me to tell you this, but lady in waiting is just one placeholder away from gentleman in waiting. I'm sure if you want, a whole cohort of Stef'fan's friends -- gentlemen, ruffians, or otherwise -- would be happy to crash the outing. It's not a difficult change to make.

(So we've got the scene reset. It's all happy-happy, and after you have taken your time and enjoyed your stay in The Grove, it will be appropriate to return Stef'fan and G'narsh's conversation. It should be straightforward. All we need to do is get a working negotiation settlement in keeping with our plot outline and we can move on. That shouldn't be so difficult. Should it?)

(P.S. the answer is No. It shouldn't be and as such, it won't be. Why? Because I control those attitude tabs folks. That's why.)

(Not to mention the background and color characters. I believe I've already mentioned that I'm into the power thing -- i.e. control -- and like playing with a stacked deck.)

G'narsh is lying back, relaxing on the stone dais. The rocky tablet is what? Ten, twenty, thirty feet across, and not that it's important or anything, but the top surface is carved with ancient runes. It's probably made out of a solid piece of granite that a glacier carried to this spot, or if that is not fantastical enough for you, assume that it's a hunk of basalt mined from the Sea of Harmony on the Dark Side of the Moon -- and don't even start with me about how the Sea of Harmony isn't on the Dark Side, because I said Dark Side, not the far side. (So -- Nay! Nay! Na-nay-na! I was bound to be right at least once.)

(((Probably just self indulgent blather, but here and there you've got to let me have my fun. Continuing...)))

Stef'fan sits in the shade of a tree on the other side of the dais. He is whittling a flute with his sword, or maybe it's one of those other trinkets elves are always so fond of making out of wood, like a birdhouse (for one of the buttercup fairies flittering about), an interlinked chain of wooden links (to show off his skill), or a spice rack (because those are always popular...)

"This is nice," G'narsh comments to no one in particular. He's got an arm under either head and he's watching the clouds slowly drift by. "This is nice," he repeats as if he didn't say the words with enough passion the first time around. "I could stay here forever... Ouch! What was that?"

G'narsh sits up suddenly and swats at the swarm of buttercups that are hovering about him and riddling him with darts.

"What the? I thought this place was neutral," he complains as he jumps to his feet.

"I think they're saying you've worn out your welcome," Stef'fan sneers as he sheaths his sword and puts the piece of art -- that any mother would be proud to display prominently in her kitchen -- to the side. "So, you want to get down to it?"

“I thought we could stay here as long as we’d like,” G’narsh protests as another volley of darts hits the smelly troll. I mean how long has he been lying there? And how many baths has he had? I’m not so sure about the answer to the first question, but the answer to the second question is zero, and he’s a troll folks. Trust me. He stinks.

“Oh, you can stay here as long as you’d like,” Stef’fan agrees. “But come on, they’re fairies. They never cut square deals. I’m betting you’re not going to want to stay here very much longer,” and to assent the veracity of this point of view, the buttercups unleash another volley of the painful (but at the moment unpoisonous) darts into G’narsh.

“OK! Enough already!” he yells. “I get the point. So how the Fr@ck do I get out of here?”

“Sch©lte,” Stef’fan corrects.

“What?”

“Don’t you mean, how the Sch©lte do I get out of here? All the cools kids are saying Sch©lte this year.”

“Fr@ck. Sch©lte. Whatever... Hey! I’m not the one stalling here anymore,” G’narsh adds as he dances madly around to avoid yet another volley of the tiny darts. They may be small, and they may not be using any poison, but that doesn’t mean they don’t sting like the Dickens (which is pretty much how I want to be remembered in a hundred years. As in, “He made love to me like an Artismo,” or something like that.)

“Let’s get down to business then,” Stef’fan agrees as the two of them circle around the dais to no real purpose, except that they have to do something, and neither one of them wants to be caught by the buttercups at this point. It also might be traditional, but rather than go into a history lesson, it is time for Stef’fan to begin the negotiations in earnest. “The elves you captured from the raid on Elvin Home go free. That goes without saying.”

“I... me, the Charlies, Lane, and whoever else wants to accompany me, get free passage out of here. You don’t try hunting

us down,” G’narsh counters, as he tentatively and implicitly agrees to the first term of the settlement.

“You get free passage until you mess up,” Stef’fan agrees. “But I’m going to follow you around, you Sch©lting troll, and the second you mess up you’re going to be dead.”

“I’m not going to agree to you being my judge, jury, and executioner all wrapped up into one,” G’narsh replies as he rejects the unreasonable proposal.

“Lane will do it then,” Stef’fan counters, and at this point the crowd in the water has climbed back up the hill to watch silently as the two negotiators do their dance around the stone monument. To Lane’s relief, G’narsh vetoes Stef’fan latest condition as well.

“I get the same treatment as anybody else, as any other elf. The same treatment you or Mi’lay would get.” At Mi’lay’s name, a vision of her beauty echoes through G’narsh’s soul, and a desire for her is rekindled in his heart. Yes. There is something else he wants. “Mi’lay,” he says at last. “I get Mi’lay.”

Stef’fan snorts in disgust. “We’re not orcs, we don’t trade our women. You can meet her once and if she never wants to see you again, you won’t... and no dancing, she’s feeling under the weather.”

The idea of Mi’lay dancing stirs strong impulses in G’narsh’s... um, ahem... nether regions. “I’d like to see her dance,” he says to himself as much as anyone else.

“No dancing,” Stef’fan rejoins, before he casually mentions the requisite condition of any agreement that they might come to today. “There is, of course, the minor issue of the horde. You must betray them.”

G’narsh shakes his head in refusal. “I don’t see what this has to do with the House of Chaos.”

“Be real,” Stef’fan replies fighting down the urge to burst out into a full blown fit of laughter. “As an agent of Chaos you attacked us,” the elves. “If you think you’re stepping one foot out of this grove without accepting a... What are those things called?” Stef’fan asks as he turns towards Lane.

“It is called a geas, a quest. It is an enchanted compulsion.”

Lane’s helpful response does not go unnoticed by G’narsh.

“Whatever,” Stef’fan agrees. “You’re going to have to take down Xavier... Bones... or whoever the current leader of the horde is.”

“It’s Bones,” Lane announces unable to hide her obvious desire to have the wretched (skeleton -- hollow caricature of a) man destroyed.

“Fine,” Stef’fan assents as he throws out his hands and symbolically tosses the problem over to G’narsh. The ball is in his court as it were. It is for G’narsh to work out the details.

“I’m not killing Bones,” G’narsh declares as once again he is forced to dance out of the way and tumble across the ground in a futile attempt to avoid the full brunt of yet another buttercup fairy assault. When it is over, and G’narsh is standing again, he pulls a dart out of his arm. Welts are rising and he is noticeably annoyed. “Because I refused to kill an old friend? What kind of Sch©lting crap is that?” he says glaring at the fairies.

“Bones is the leader of the horde. He is a representation of the ways of evil,” Stef’fan explains unsympathetically. “You must renounce allegiance to Bones and his ways, before we can give you sanctuary,” or passage.

“Fine. I renounce him and his ways,” G’narsh agrees gamely, “but if you want him dead you’re going to have to kill him yourself.”

It is an agreement of sorts and Stef’fan looks to Lane for guidance to see if it is enough. She is a judge and Art’s representative in this meeting after all. If she says it’s good enough, then it is, and if not, well, then it’s time for another round of negotiations.

After a moment’s thought (or delay), Lane assents, “If G’narsh will open his mind to reveal the grid coordinates of Bones’ command center, that will suffice.”

Lane pauses as this bit of magic takes place. You may wish to have a white glow appear around G’narsh head (something akin

to a halo descending upon him from above as he has a moment of mystical revelation)... or perhaps one could have the buttercup fairies swarm around him as they perform some arcane ritual (and you just know G'narsh is going to love that after all the darts they've shot into him)... or maybe it would be easiest if G'narsh were to simply hand over a small rolled up scrap of paper with the required information written on it. Either way, in seconds the deed is done and Lane continues, "We'll launch an air strike," or something, "immediately. I believe we have a settlement," she concludes, and you have to admit, these are strange words to be coming out of the mouth of an ex-XX officer.

(An X-XX officer. Like that? You knew I was going to work it in there somewhere, so no need to wait any longer. There it is.)

I don't think there's anything left to accomplish in this scene and apparently Stef'fan agrees for he says, "I think we're through here."

It is at this moment that the ground begins to shake. It's a gigantic earthquake, the type of ground shaking shenanigans earth elementals are famous for when they are busy replacing an evil warlord's command center with a volcanic crater -- otherwise known as a caldera.

If that's too obscure (not that I know why it would be), in simple terms the elves have opted to go with a ground strike instead of an air strike. Once they got the coordinates off of G'narsh, the elves took immediate action and released their elemental friends.

For the purposes of this dream, the horde is no more, but I'll be honest, you can't really kill the horde. The nature of any horde (what makes it a horde in the first place) is that its power and might waxes and wanes over time (much like the moon). When it is powerful it attacks, and when it is weak, it goes into hiding, but it is simply never destroyed completely. You can no more destroy evil than you can expunge immature childish puns from fantasy

stories or rid the world of cowardice and ignorance. Not that I'm equating puns with ignorance, but if we're going to be honest, despite everybody's hopes and best efforts, both of them are here to stay.

I should also mention that it seems unlikely that General Artismo Bones was at the command center at the crucial moment. It seems like the upper echelon officers, the real military targets in these operations, are often nowhere near the bunkers when said bunkers are ultimately destroyed. It's quite uncanny really. It's almost as if the enemy has some sort of inside information or advance warning.

So even if it wasn't clear before, after collaborating commentary like that, you just know General Artismo Bones -- renegade skeletal warrior, ladies man, and misunderstood leader of the horde -- has somehow managed to escape death. No doubt, as he hastily makes his retreat over the steaming lava covered landscape, he will turn to watch his command center sink below the magma's surface, and as it disappears from view he will make one final vow. Not so much for revenge, but, "As Gra'gl is my witness, I will make at least one final appearance in this dream." It's an odd choice of words for an evil warlord, but you know those bad guys are always insane (it's why they're bad in the first place), and you got to admit, it's just the type of thing an insane guy would say when he's found out he's built his military base on an active volcano. I'm just glad I'm not his building contractor. You know there's going to be a lawsuit. I mean an active volcano? Isn't that why they do geological surveys and conduct soil reports?

(So it's a done deal. We'll see Bones again before the dream is over, but where? I must admit I was planning on killing him right here and now, but I guess that's not to be.)

(This isn't so much a narrative device designed to build suspense, as it is talking out loud, and noting a pivotal moment in time when my plans for the plot have suddenly changed. The

bottom line is, it seems like it would be more fun to have Bones around for an encore appearance, and so that is how it will be.)

(In truth I'm leaning towards revealing that Artismo Bones and Artismo -- i.e. Art -- are in some way related. I know. What were the odds? I haven't worked out the details yet, but don't worry, I'll be sure to keep you posted.)

Anyhow, to wrap up the scene, all we need to do is remind everyone that the last thing Stef'fan said was, "I think we're through here," and then watch as G'narsh glares at Lane and agrees, "Yeah, we're through."

It sends shivers down my spine, and with that the negotiations are over.

Just to move things along expeditiously (if for no other reason), they will travel as a group back to Elf Central where Mi'lay's bedroom resides, and the dance hall awaits the reception.

But although they travel together, G'narsh might as well be alone. He is not endeared to Stef'fan or the buttercup fairies for that matter. The ladies in waiting and the other elves mean nothing to him, not when compared to the vision of Mi'lay, which he holds in his heart. While Lane... It is clear she is not who she has presented herself to be. Is she a double agent? A rogue spirit? Who knows? That just leaves the Charlies, who although they continue to call him boss man and do his bidding, they were quite at home playing with the elves, quite at home indeed. It is suspicious and the sooner he can be done with all of their company, the safer and happier he will feel.

(I want G'narsh to be mad at Lane and the Charlies at this point, because by the end of the next sequence -- (whatever we're going to call it) -- I want him off on his own, beginning the Wandering G'narsh portion of the dream. We'll be pushing 90 clicks by then, and the bottom line is, it's time to be getting a move on.)

(On another topic (and I don't know if I've ever mentioned this before), but I've nickname conversations and dialogue as the great click killer. I can do them in almost real time. They are easier to edit than anything else, and they seem to be a crowd favorite. Which is another way of saying, if we took out Stef'fan's description, the color (i.e. the butter cup fairies, The Grove, and the stone dais -- did I mentioned that it's honed from genuine moonstone?), and all the dialogue, we could have done this scene in under a click. To move the plot along, all we really had to do was list out the negotiation settlement between Stef'fan and G'narsh, and we've already done this like three times before, so we should have been able to do it lickity split.)

(But then we go back to the problem that if we only did the bare essentials, what we would have ended up with would have been boring and dry, and not worth spending a click on in the first place.)

(If I've lost you in all this, the points to remember are, conversations are easy, they fill up time, and the fans like them.)

(At times less can be more (especially in a 1 click ultra short), but in a full length dream, it's really all about taking your time, smelling the roses, and working a little scented mineral oil deep into Lane's... um, ahem... ample musculature.)

(What I'm saying is, The Grove is a wonderful place in which to spend some time and relax. Have I mentioned that Lane is an XXX officer? And with four hands she can really spike the ball if you know what I mean.)

(Which when you stop and think about it, just sort of sounds painful, but hey, to each their own.)

Splish Splash

At 85 clicks, I'm taking a bath

(Obviously we just cruised through the -- Xavier Must Die -- Victory Hill -- sequence and replaced it with an off screen earth shattering calamity of epic proportions. Originally (and I've been using that word a lot lately, but originally) I had intended G'narsh to do away with (a resurrected) Xavier by having G'narsh take off Xavier's crown and tossing it to the ground as a sort of rejection of the horde, the use of violence, and all that deng. Without a crown -- i.e. without others honoring the authority the crown bestows upon him -- Xavier is powerless. We need not actually kill him, which is unfortunate for Xavier, as we already have killed him... Anyhow, he's not coming back, because as a character, I really didn't like him that much. So, see. Just like you mom said, It pays to be popular.)

(Oddly, showing a hero reject a king is not viewed as seditious or revolutionary, since everyone knows that a monarchical form of government is ineffectual, morally wrong, and comically outdated. But if you did the same thing to a president backed by a popular democratic mandate, there'd be all heck to pay.)

(As an aside, as if these all aren't asides, I probably need a better call for heck than heck, but nothing is coming to me at the moment, so I'll have to get back to you on that one.)

(Anyhow, another reason I was thinking of going with the crown bit was because there is an obvious rig/headset metaphor, and by rejecting the crown there is an implied rejection of the popular dream/disc culture. Not that I know why anyone would want to make such an analogy...)

Mi'lay is busy getting ready for the night's big party, event, blow out birthday bash, coming of age debutante ball, beauty pageant, and/or victory celebration. Personally I like to interpret Mi'lay as the elves' secret weapon, sort of like a Manhattan Project for the fey. Can't you just see Mi'lay dancing on the parapets

while elvin archers pick off the helplessly spellbound enemy troops?

But how does it play out? Just as soon as the bad guys find out that the new secret weapon is ready to be deployed they capitulate and declare a peace. It would be just like those cowardly bad guys to go and do something like that, to stop fighting and declare a peace, just when you are getting ready to kick their Sch©lting butts.

Anyhow, back to Mi'lay. She's wearing combat fatigues, a nice well fitting t-shirt -- I'll let you figure out what that means -- and a pair of heavy combat boots, regulation army issue. She is after all a military girl. I guess the proper term would be an army brat. And, the bottom line is, as always, she looks very appealing (you know, like secret weapon appealing).

At the moment, Mi'lay is in her spacious, oversized bathroom getting ready for the party. Presently this consists of staring into the mirror and trying to decide what to do with her hair. Wear it up? Put in braids? Cut is short? Color it purple?

"Color it purple," Artismo agrees as he walks in the door with Nadia flying in tow. He is her gallant father figure, after all, and she respects what he has to say, so he tosses a tube of purple hair color her way as he offers this advice.

Mi'lay ignores the incoming projectile and it crashes haphazardly onto the vanity knocking over dozens of bottles, tubes, and containers. "That was kind of fun," Artismo remarks as he ignores Mi'lay's baleful look of annoyance. "We could set up a pyramid of cosmetics and throw jars of facial cream at them," Artismo continues merrily. "Just like at a carnival... It'd be fun."

Mi'lay closes her eyes, takes a deep breath, and does her best to hold her temper in check. When you're depressive by nature, getting angry isn't such a bad thing, because depression is like the antithesis of having any emotion at all. If you're angry, at least you feel alive, and for many, anger is an easier emotion to nurture than happiness, satisfaction, contentment, or even just an amused disengagement. Though in truth, emotions are just emotions and

none is so easy (or so hard) to conjure forth than happiness, bliss, or the eternal rapture of joy.

Of course, Mi'lay isn't in tune with this philosophy and so she's pretty deeply keyed into her negativity when she asks with as much anger ((and annoyance)) as she can muster, "What's your point?" and then without waiting for a reply, she continues on with, "This is my room. Get out!"

What can Artismo do but shrug. Without the slightest bit of concern he sends the half pint, evil warlord version of Nadia -- complete with ripped silken skirt and swirling blue pixie dust aura -- over to the long row of mirrored sinks to set up a pyramid of coloring pigments. It's the complete I Hate My Life (not to mention my parents) line of hair colorization products. You say purple doesn't go with your eyes, or sparkly silver clashes with your wardrobe? Not to worry. How about a nice olive green, pale yellow, sickly orange, or the ever popular fire truck red. Can't decide on one? Try a rainbow. Sick of going to a party only to find every other girl in the room is wearing the same color hair as you? Try our custom color match service, where every hue is guaranteed to be unique.

And, as long as there is a break of sorts in the flow, here is as good a spot as any to point out that if you look at Art through the mirror on occasion his image flickers back and forth from Artismo to Bones and then back again. Of course, he never looks like Bones whenever Mi'lay could possibly see him, but he certainly looks like Bones when he winds up and throws a jar of hair gel at the pyramid of color Nadia has so carefully set up.

Bones has a pretty good arm. He played minor league ball for a while, and if he had made the pros things might have turned out differently for him, but as we all know he didn't make the pros, and like so many amateur, would be sports heroes, when his dreams of fame and sport card immortality finally evaporated away, he turned to a life of evil. The rest is dark horde, war mongering history. Anyway, he still likes to keep in shape and toss around an orc skull now and again, so when he winds up and lets

rip, he hits the arrangement of pigments head on. If he was at a carnival he'd win a stuffed monkey or something. Which is another way of saying, the bottles explode and color goes spraying everywhere, plastering Nadia, who hasn't bothered to get out of the way, with pigments. Needless to say, the colors also splatter all over Mi'lay, her clothes, hair, and face. It's a fine mess, but even as she is -- colored in pigments -- if you can find a more lovely, breathtakingly chromatic elf than the Lady Mi'lay, marry the girl -- or at least buy the disc and take her on a honeymoon.

Mi'lay breathes deep sucking on air. She is temporarily at a loss for words she is so mad. Finally she comes up with the proper words and screams them in near hysterics, "You idiot! You imbecile!"

Bones, I mean Artismo, is not really concerned about her anger, since this was more or less his intent... well that, and turning her into a multi-colored zebra. And although I say that, if you are of the mind, now is a good time to change Mi'lay's clothes and/or hairstyle to whatever you want. The rationale for the change is magic or something. I mean, we've got Bones -- the necromancer -- pitching a fast ball into a stack of enchanted cosmetics; Nadia standing by gushing pixie dust like a wildcat oil derrick that has hit pay dirt; and every low level magic item they ever made available on Slaughter Quest and then some are lying about the room. You need a source of magic? We've got you covered. So change Mi'lay's hair to whatever you want. Make it purple. Cut it short. Turn it curly, spiky, or give it a perm. The possible color and hairstyle combinations are near endless. Me, I'm partial to long blonde hair for Mi'lay. I admit, for a moment there, I was thinking about turning it purple ((((and spiky like a psychedelic badger)))), but I opted against it. Anyhow, here's a good place to throw at your compiler whatever changes you want to make for Mi'lay. Personally, I'm just going to leave her as she's been with long blonde hair, though I will take the opportunity to add a few smears of (paint like) pigment to her face and clothes for

the rest of the sequence. It's almost as if she has been spending the afternoon painting (again?) and not preparing for the ball like she was supposed to be doing. Naughty girl.

"You've ruined everything!" Mi'lay shrieks as we return to the action, but Artismo is unaffected by her hysteria. "I don't know what you are complaining about. You look good."

Mi'lay shows off her new hairdo, indicates the splotches of paint that decorate her clothes, hair, and face -- and/or her new makeover as per your desire.

"This isn't what I had in mind," she says in near tears.

Oddly Artismo is unsympathetic, and as Mi'lay rushes to examine her new appearance in the mirror, grabs a towel, and goes to work trying to repair the damage, Art takes the opportunity to once again flash back and forth between the appearances of Bones and Artismo. Ending in the visage of Artismo, he grabs hold of the young elvin waif and herds the resisting beauty towards the exit.

"No time to fix things now. You should have thought of that earlier," Artismo instructs. "Your guests have arrived. Time to be a good hostess."

"I can't meet them like this," Mi'lay protests, but Artismo assures her with calm words of (warlordic?) wisdom, "They're returning from battle. G'narsh hasn't bathed in weeks. He'll never know. Show him to the stables -- that's good enough for him -- and have him get cleaned up. While he's taking a shower," sloshing around in the watering trough, or whatever it is exactly that trolls do to prepare for a big date, "you can come back up here and finish getting ready with the others."

"But..."

"Go! Greet your guests. Be hospitable." And as Mi'lay walks down the stairs to do as Artismo has bid, he calls after her, "Oh, and send the girls up here, they'll need to get ready for your party, and I need to debrief Lane and Charlie."

(Well, just debrief Lane actually, but I want the Charlies out of the way and where better than by my side?)

(I felt the need to clarify that. I didn't want you to think I was some sort of weirdo perv with a cobalt fetish.)

(I don't know if you've noticed or not, but the primary purpose of this segment has been to set up the rationale for a hot tub segment later on with Lane. Oh-yeah baby! Daddy's going to get some... bubbles going in the hot tub.)

When Mi'lay has departed, Bones throws off the form of Artismo, and seems greatly relieved to be able to spend a moment in all of his skeletal finery. He flexes his joints to show off his well developed skelelature. Dig those femurs, baby. You're going to have to search a long time to find a rib cage as solid as this one. Needless to say, Bones doesn't have an ounce of fat on him and talk about fit. His cholesterol level is next to zero.

Having completed the requisite gags, Bones suddenly becomes modest and finds a partition to disappear behind. When he emerges, he is wearing a pair of loud swim trunks decorated with yellow paisley flowers. Hopping into the unbelievable spacious wooden tub set in the middle of the bathroom, he starts to draw a bubble bath for himself.

As Bones busies himself with getting the water temperature just right, and making sure there's enough bubble bath goop in the water so that the bubbles are high, fluffy, and overflowing, Nadia inquires of him, "So what was that," the previous scene, "all about?"

"It will be time for Mi'lay to leave the nest soon," Bones explains. "Rather than telling her to leave, she will make the decision on her own accord."

"Why do you want her to leave?"

Bones simply smiles as he invites Nadia to join him in the large whirlpool bath as he turns on the water jets. They are

soothing, relaxing, and loud enough to make conversation darn near impossible.

As Nadia nestles in beside him, Bones looks around at the splendor which he had previously given to Mi'lay and which now surrounds him. An entire wall, over fifty feet, is taken up by a mirrored vanity under which countless sinks and stools await. A large harem (large enough to satisfy the needs of nearly any evil warlord) could get ready in here all at the same time and none of them would have to share a sink, stool, or place at the mirror. Dotting the room are other bathtubs carved out of solid marble, granite, blown glass, or simply old fashioned porcelain. To complement the tubs are numerous shower areas, massage tables, chairs, and cushioned platforms on which one can relax. There is, of course, the mud bath, sand pit, rock ledge, sauna, steam room, and all the other stations of a good spa along with the things you would expect to find in a elvin palace: the moss room, snail pit (very kinky and not for everyone), butterfly chamber, bed of leaves, a cave filled with soft cushiony mushrooms that doubles as a sensory deprivation area, and the requisite herb infusion soaking tubs (cinnamon being my personal favorite). And last but not least, there are the fluffy chairs to keep the ladies in waiting comfortable while they... um... wait I guess.

Around the room are towels of the finest cotton and linen; toiletries, perfumes, lotions, and elixirs of every possible nature along with bundles of fresh herbs and baskets of dried spices; piles of gems, overflowing jewelry boxes containing more trinkets than a person could ever hope to wear no matter how long they lived; and then there is the wooden tub in which Bones and Nadia lie. It is formed of the finest lacquered birch. It's a Norwegian Design or something like that and it's got like a thousand jets pulsing away getting into every nook and cranny, just the thing to soothe your weary bones... or your weary Bones as the case may be.

It isn't long before Bones succumbs to the relaxing influence of the pounding jets, and slowly slips under the surface of the water.

After a moment, or two, or three, a bony hand reaches up out of the bubbles, turns off the jets, and grabs hold of a happy, cheerful, giggling gutter fairy, sprite, pixie... or whatever she is at the moment and pulls her under the water.

And with that we will cut away from this scene, but before we do, we will watch as a trio of bubbles rise from the surface of the bubbly water and drift into the air. We will follow them about the room, tracking them through the finery, the silk, the lace, the gems, the jewelry, and all the rest, and we will float up gently towards the ceiling with the bubbles and watch as the bubbles burst magically one by one, and Bones words are released to whisper a quiet response to Nadia's earlier inquiry, as to why he should want Mi'lay to leave.

"I don't know why," the bubbles say, "No reason at all."

Nadia doesn't believe him, and neither should you, but that doesn't mean the third bubble isn't filled with the sounds of giggles, laughter, and an everlasting moment of underwater delight.

(Once again, this segment is mostly fun. If we go back to the previous section, you'll notice that once I decided (and declared my intent) to formally link Bones and Artismo, the separation ((and/or partition))) between the two proxies just sort of disappeared. I admit, the separation between the two was dubious from the get go, but it was there at one time, and now it's not.)

(In case you are interested about how I'm going to play that out, I'm planning on going with some sort of duality of man thing. You know, everyone has the potential for good or evil within them, or something like that.)

(Besides, if the horde's gone, there's not much point in keeping the elves around and who better to get rid of them than Bones.)

(Mwahaha! Muhuhaha! Muwhahaha!)

(Cough. Hack. Wheeze.)

Down in the courtyard, we will bypass the boring formalities of watching Mi'lay send the rest of the cohort on their way. Lane, Charlie, the blonde, the brunette, and the redhead, will join Bones in the master suite for a bit of R&R. Not being invited, Stef'fan will wander off to his own room, and the rest of the elves will go to their apartments... tree limbs, caves, hovels, or wherever it is that elves go to when they are no longer needed (or wanted. Mwahaha!)

Doing little more than going through the motions at this point, Mi'lay starts the scene weakly with a perfunctory line of dialogue. "I'm supposed to take you to the stables," she informs G'narsh. She says the words without any real energy and the bottom line is, she's still a little down in the dumps, but G'narsh isn't making a meshing of the hearts or a meeting of the minds any easier. He smells worse than you'd think a person (or even a troll for that matter) could possibly smell. It's just horrid, but that's not what's really bugging Mi'lay. She's just tired of it all... everything. I mean she knows G'narsh has just come back from swimming through a swamp for Gra'gl's sake, of course he's going to smell like bog rot. The fact is, he smells just like any elf would smell when returning to base from a deep recon mission. Mi'lay is used to this. She can deal with the stench. She knows she can, so with this thought implanted in her mind, Mi'lay closes her eyes and reaches deep down inside to find the energy she needs to continue the conversation. Miraculously she finds it. Don't ask me where. She's running on empty. "You don't really need to use the stables," she informs G'narsh. "We've got extra apartments, the guards house, whatever. Artismo is just being mean."

"Bones?" G'narsh asks as his ears -- small, rubbery, catlike things -- perk up at the name. "Artismo Bones?"

"Yes. He just calls himself Artismo here, but everyone knows that he and Bones are the same person." I guess news travels fast in these parts. "So, up the stairs to the left," Mi'lay says as she indicates the way by pointing her lovely fingers -- on a

slender hand I might add -- towards a building off to the side, away from where the rest of the rooms are. "You can get cleaned up there," but G'narsh doesn't want to move from the spot just yet, transfixed as he is by the hand, and the body to which it is connected.

Barefooted, wearing combat fatigues and a shirt that can't possible hide much: the whole ensemble is splattered with paint, and then there is Mi'lay's sweet face, golden hair, and those eyes, so blue, so deep, so heartbreakingly sad. G'narsh falls into her eyes and loses himself in the moment, but for her part Mi'lay is oblivious both to his stare or the fact that he has just gotten done checking her out from top to bottom (or more accurately -- bottom to top).

I don't want to insinuate that G'narsh has fallen in love with Mi'lay right here in this moment, but I do wish to point out that he has eyes and he is a guy. But even with that being said, he is not trying to hit on her when he remarks to her, "You're beautiful." Rather, he is just making a statement of fact.

"Thanks," Mi'lay agrees. It is, after all, just a statement of fact and in this moment not an overly important one, so she doesn't really registering the comment. It doesn't really matter. It's the sort of thing everybody says to her. It's almost like a greeting or the type of thing a person will say to fill the moments of silence in a conversation. My you're beautiful... Pleasant weather we've been having lately... Have you heard? Artismo and Bones are really the same person. Stuff like that. Meaningless. Trivial.

So it is understandable when after a few moments have gone by, and G'narsh hasn't left, she repeats her earlier instructions, "So up the stairs." Once again she accents her words with a halfhearted flourish of her hand as she points in the proper direction. If you were to crawl inside of Mi'lay's mind at that moment, her only thought would be, My that's exhausting. Her hand, her whole arm feels like it is made of lead.

Noting all this, G'narsh observes fairly accurately, "You seem down."

Mi'lay looks at him briefly and without moving her lips manages to say, "You think?"

And right now, if you were to focus on G'narsh's eyes, you would be able to see his concern. At this distance Mi'lay could get any man to do almost anything she wanted, and the tug on G'narsh's heartstrings (or loins) is almost more than he can bear.

(And at the risk of ruining the flow, I'm going to jump in here for a second. (Once again), it's not my intent for G'narsh to fall head over heels in love with Mi'lay... right at this moment. Rather, my intent is more along the lines of implanting a -- fond, pleasant -- memory of Mi'lay in G'narsh's heart, so when he looks back on this moment, he will remember her longingly and have a desire that things had worked out differently.)

(But if we did assume that G'narsh is in love, his feeling at this moment would more likely be akin to pain, or a wrenching sensation in his gut, than anything else. It's like when you almost do something stupid, like almost slam your foot in a door, almost touch a moving saw blade with your finger, or almost tell your parole officer to, "Shove it." When you almost do these things and then you realize how stupid they would be, how dangerous they would be, how much they would hurt, there is a fear response. There is a hormonal spike that floods over your body. (It's your brain trying to teach you not to be so stupid.) For me the response centers in my gut, as a bolt of lightning shoots from my nards all the way up to the top of my spine. Well, if you love someone, it almost feels like they are an extension of yourself, and when you see them do something stupid, your body viscerally reacts on their behalf, almost as if the two of you were one. Call it love. Call it crossed wires. Don't ask me to explain it any better than that.)

(In the end, I don't really know where on the continuum of things G'narsh is. I wouldn't call it love myself, but he is certainly more than a casual, disinterest third party.)

I guess the real point is, G'narsh would like to say something like, "Is there anything I can do?" to offer his assistance, but in the end, he is a troll and niceties such as this sometimes escape him.

After a second, or two, or three... I mean you know how they drag these romantic moments out in these discs. Sometimes they do that whole circling camera view thing as they loop endlessly around the lovers. If I wanted to be cheesy, I'd have time stand still as G'narsh falls in love (or lust, or whatever we want to call this thing) with Mi'lay, and just have the camera circle endlessly around the happy couple in ever faster circles as if being dizzy, seasick, and wanting to puke is a suitable metaphor for being in love.

Or maybe you'd rather forgo that pleasure altogether, because (like I said) they're not really falling in love, so what's the point of all that nonsense?

Either way, after a second, or two, or three, Mi'lay breaks the silence. Fighting down the anger which gives her the energy to ask the question, she brings up the only topic she cares about at the moment, "Why did you have to kill Grandpa Willie?"

"Who?" G'narsh asks not knowing who Grandpa Willie is or where the question is coming from. G'narsh has probably killed a million or more of these elves over the years -- centuries, millennium, and/or near endless eons. What could one more elf possibly matter, whatever his name might be.

"Grandpa Willie," Mi'lay repeats, and then realizing G'narsh is never going to know who she's talking about, Mi'lay elaborates, "the old elf you killed in the water, the one that was handing out fireworks to the boys."

"The wizard?"

"No, he wasn't a wizard," Mi'lay responds testily. "He was just a senile old elf. Why did you kill him?"

G'narsh shrugs. He does sort of feel bad about killing the old guy, but still, he didn't really do it, "Charlie did it."

"You gave the order!" Mi'lay nearly screams.

G'narsh is confused. They were at war. People die in war. He doesn't know what to say, so he tells her the truth. "I needed to determine whether the gun was working."

"On Grandpa Willie?" Mi'lay asks incredulously. Her anger growing as she gets more and more worked up.

G'narsh shrugs. "How else?" because if you want to know if a gun works, if it'll do what it's made to do, you got to try it out.

(Surprisingly, more than one genius has laid out this exact rationale upon cross-examination on the witness stand. I suppose when you think about it, it makes a certain sort of sense. A gun might be good for killing rabbits, but will it kill a person? If you're not real big on inductive reasoning, there's only one way to find out...)

Mi'lay shakes her head in disgust. She glares at G'narsh for a moment and thinks about telling him to go use the stables, but in the end she points towards the stairs again. "Up the stairs to the left there are guest quarters," she explains... yet again.

"I'm not staying," G'narsh announces suddenly. Beautiful elvin princess or not, he needs to get out of here. "Things are getting weird," he explains. "Bones is Artismo, leader of the elves and the horde... and when I was staring at the sky earlier, I could see the sky cracking..." (This is probably just a spurious effect of the moonstone dais and not an important comment.) What is more odd (and therefore important), is that while he is going down his list of reasons, G'narsh omits to mention his growing distrust of Lane and the cobalts. I'm not really sure why.

"Look," G'narsh continues. "I think I'm just going to cut out." He looks at her and when she meets his gaze... it's like staring into heaven, but he pulls his eyes away. "You could be a secret weapon," he says simply. His intent is to compliment Mi'lay, to formulate a unique way of saying that she is beautiful, but when you get right down to it, a thousand lifetimes of combat hasn't left G'narsh with very many romantic impulses.

“I’m not a secret weapon,” Mi’lay says quickly... perhaps too quickly. One never knows, maybe she is. Once G’narsh has said the words, Mi’lay finds it difficult to get the thought out of her head.

“I didn’t mean it in a bad way,” G’narsh says as he jumps to apologize as quickly as he can. “I meant it in a nice way. Like I’d be happy to stare into your eyes,” even if bombs were dropping around me, “and watching you dance would be... I’m sure it would be hypnotizing,” G’narsh finishes as he looks away embarrassed. “Stef’fan... He’s your brother right?”

“Yes.”

“He said you were under the weather... that there’d be no dancing.” Once again G’narsh breaks off as he looks away. Looking at the girl is difficult, heartbreaking, nerve wracking. “I just got to get out of here,” he says repeating his earlier impulse and then after a moment he adds, “They never gave me my weapons back.”

Mi’lay smiles sweetly as she puts her hand on G’narsh’s arm. “You don’t want a weapon.”

G’narsh looks at her dumbfounded, as if to say, “Of course I do. I’d feel naked without one,” but instead he remains silent as Mi’lay takes his arm and leads him over to the armory. It’s kind of like a barn, but what it looks like, or in fact what this whole elvin compound looks like isn’t important.

Which, I suppose, means I need to describe it. I’m thinking a sprawling Mediterranean compound with a heavy Southwestern Mission influence. It’s the type of housing complex you might build if you were a mega-billionaire and wanted to spend all your money on one extravagant vacation home. In the end, it’s a lot of buildings with beige stucco walls and red tiled roofs. One of the buildings has a pair of double barn doors in its side and Mi’lay throws the doors open revealing crate upon crate of weapons, munitions, and other high (and low) tech gadgetry. It’s almost as if the munitions dump from Bones HQ was simply transferred to this location. It’s got everything you might want.

(If you're going to play along (and use a gaming skimmer for the Wandering G'narsh saga), it's time to gear up.)

“Help yourself,” Mi'lay says as she spreads her arms wide. G'narsh's rifle and other equipment is laid out on top of a crate in front, but he -- or you -- could take whatever you want.

It reeks of a set up to G'narsh (and it is). “There must be a catch,” he says.

Mi'lay shrugs. “You'll die.” She shrugs again. “If you take a weapon, you will use it, and if you use it, Stef'fan will kill you.”

“But how will I survive... that's not the deal.”

“You're a civilian. You can't carry weapons. Why do you think the elves at Elvin Home were so easy to kill? The only elves with any weapons are those at the border fighting the horde,” (one horde or another).

Mi'lay's eyes go back to the pile of munitions. On top, is a small black sparkling ball about the size of a softball, a 2-lb ball of cheese, or a quart bag of water if it was suspended in space and was perfectly round. The ball looks like child's model of an atom, a molecular tetrahedron, or one of those funky toy balls that expand and contract. It is also very bright. It shines as though it contains the entire energy of a star or a complete galaxy at every intersecting corner. If it was a model from a child's molecular chemistry set, each atom would be a star squeezed down to the size of a small marble and in between the stars would be a shiny, reflective, solid, jet black surface, as if the dark empty void of space between the planets had been pressed flat into a mirror. Mi'lay's eyes settle on this weapon and then she turns to G'narsh without taking her gaze off of it. “That's the reset button.”

But G'narsh does not understand. “What?”

“It will reduce everything to a random array of electrons. It will clear the grid. Nothing will have meaning. There would be total chaos. Gra'gl would want you to push the button,” Mi'lay suggests. It is as though she is a witch tempting Ulysses, or maybe

those were the sirens, so perhaps she is more like Delilah begging Samson to cut his hair... “Use it. Destroy the elves, Artismo, and everyone. It is why you are here...”

The last is a bit of a lie and both Mi’lay and G’narsh know it, but the rest?

G’narsh has an odd compulsion to hit the button, to flick the switch, to end it all. I have been told that the option can be a tempting and beguiling one to some. For G’narsh, looking at the bomb, the doomsday device is worse than staring at Mi’lay. Part of him, perhaps a big part, does want to hit the switch, explode the bomb, and end it all. A good analogy might be when a person is standing on a bridge and they wonder what the fall would be like, or worse, they stand there wondering if their legs will choose that very moment to rebel against them and take it upon themselves to jump over the side... and then at the end deciding if that’s what their legs actually did, it might not be such a bad thing after all.

“I got to get out of here,” G’narsh announces decisively as he tears his eyes away from the device and twists out of Mi’lay’s almost nonexistent grip. In a daze he stumbles into the courtyard and then looks around. There is no one here, but he feels naked without a gun.

“Nobody uses weapons?” he asks again as he clenches his fists.

“No,” Mi’lay agrees as she walks into the open and smiles at G’narsh. She senses his paranoia, his discomfort, and even knows instinctively his newfound distrust of anything she might say, all the same the words find their way to her lips easily enough. “If you so much as spit on the sidewalk, you will die. They’re just waiting for an excuse to kill you.” It’s an exaggeration ((of course)). Frankly, I didn’t think Mi’lay was able to lie, but apparently she can, or perhaps she doesn’t really understand G’narsh’s quest, a thought that Mi’lay quickly lays to rest as she gathers her hair into a ponytail, moves it out of the way, and leans her head sideways. It is as though she is a thrall offering her neck

to a vampire. “Kill me G’narsh. I’m sick of this. I want out. Please kill me.”

“You’re crazy!”

Mi’lay can’t help but agree as she smiles and nods her head. “Kill me. Use the bomb, kill us all. It’s the only way out.”

But G’narsh has had enough. “I’m out of here,” he announces as he scales the side of a building and hops onto the roof where he pauses for a second to survey his options. Seconds later, having charted his course for the next few minutes, hours, or days, he runs a short distance and then disappears from view, not to be seen again until we start the Wandering G’narsh saga.

Mi’lay’s mind is probably cooked, shattered, just sort of scrambled, and not all there. Perhaps I’ve pushed her too hard. It happens to proxies all the time. One second they make sense and the next their actions devolve into randomness, so I’m not really sure about everything going on in her head right now, but one thing I can tell you is that the tears streaming down her face are real and that she means it when she calls out across the rooftops after her retreating hero, “I’m a damsel in distress you Sch©lting hole! COME BACK HERE AND KILL ME LIKE A MAN!”

(As you can see, switching Mi’lay’s tabs to suicidal depression has had some, ah, interesting results. I think we’ll just leave her here, down on her knees, hands full of dirt and dust, as she cries bitter tears at her own misfortune.)

(And since I’m always good for offering up alternate tracks, one could easily rewrite the last scene as Mi’lay having the hots for G’narsh and him rejecting her as he goes off to “find himself,” whatever the Fr@ck that’s supposed to mean. A broken heart or a broken mind, there is often some degree of overlap.)

(Also, since I mentioned vampires and thralls in the last section, I should mention that it would be real easy to turn Stef’fan into a vampire (Bones too), but I will not be taking you there.)

As we cut to Artismo Bones for our final farewell in this sequence, we should honor his namesake and do one of those artsy, high concept edits. So let the field of vision rotate around Mi'lay. She is down on her hands and knees, tears streaming down her face, and she is a thing of misery. Now let's stop the camera in front of her, pull in close so that she fills the screen, and watch as a big oversized tear trickles down her lovely face. Then lets pull back a tad, cut over her left shoulder, and focus long through the open doors of the armory to the stacks of guns, the weapons, and up the pile of munitions untill we reach the shiny black and white sphere of the doomsday machine on the top of the heap. Zoom in. Take in every facet of this thing of wonder. This is the type of relic guild wars are fought over on Slaughter Quest. True it is a generalized off switch, but rumors abound that you can localize the effects, turn it into a black hole that wipes out entire sections of the map board, or that you can convert it into some sort of atomic, fusion, or antimatter bomb.

To give you some idea of its potential, I will point out that the pure black mirrored ebony sides are pocket universes -- portals if you will -- but they themselves are but a binding matrix to hold the true treasure in place. The diamonds at every corner are worth millions, if not billions each, and each one is packed with the power of a thousand suns. The magical energy, the potential, the force is near limitless... and it is sitting right here, unguarded, on the top of a munitions dump.

Or is it? Let us pull back and take in the wide view once more. And what's this? The black orb, the doomsday device sits on a bony pedestal? No. It's not a pedestal. A bony hand holds the crystal while a grinning skull reflects back off of its surface. As we pull further away, we see that Bones holds the black globe of death aloft as he enjoys a nice relaxing bubble bath. He is showing off the doomsday device to Lane -- much like some seven year old boy might show off a frog or a toad that he has found in his travels to his girlfriend and in this way hope to impress her. Lane is, of course, unmoved by the display, but Nadia is

captivated. She salivates at the power the shimmering orb represents as she flits around the sphere, and caresses Bones... um, bony hand. The things she would do to have that sort of power.

And then, as it would appear that we are going down the occupants of the room, let's not forget the presence of the three beautiful elvin nymphs -- the blonde, the brunette, and the redhead -- don't think Bones hasn't taken the opportunity to beguile them with a spell (or reset their attitude tabs so that they are madly in love with him).

So let's take a count. One skeletal dude, three eager elves, a slutty fairy, twelve obedient cobalts to run errands, work the massage tables, and clean up the inevitable mess, and a four armed demon unable to completely ignore a direct command from the House of Chaos: the odds seem -- stacked in our favor. So I'm thinking, this is as a good place as any to pull out, and as we do, we will be escorted by Bones' echoing cry of delight, "Mwahaha! Muhahaha! Muwhahaha!" Cough. Hack. Wheeze.

(With the segue set up, it's time to take a break. At five clicks raw (seven edited), we truly are -- Taking a Bath. All the same, I feel the need to slow myself down. This close to the end, I don't want to get into some sort of Power Through It Till I'm Done mentality, because we aren't really that close to the end. I would guess we have another 25 clicks to go, but I've been so far off in my estimates thus far that I'd have to double that guess (at least) just to feel like I'd be anywhere close. Anyway, I'll spend another day reworking this sequence and then we're off to... I think we'll call the next sequence -- Washing our... um, ahem... Hands.)

(My guess is that we're on the downward spiral now and I don't want to add anything new at this point. What I intend to do is use the next section to close off any old ideas, calls, or story arcs that aren't needed or that I'm not planning on pursuing. And then the sequence after that, we'll start on the Wandering G'narsh story arc in earnest. I don't think that I'm going to set it up as a separate partition (in fact I know I'm not), but I am going to treat it as being

slightly removed. And just so you know, I'm planning on following the action from G'narsh's point of view, and let everyone else's actions merge by implication. This will save some clicks, but I don't think it will detract from the dream in any significant way. It also means that if you want to experience it all first person, you should plan on stepping into G'narsh's avatar real soon (and like I mentioned, if you're running a gaming skimmer (or you just like to keep your options open) you can load up on whatever equipment you want. But keep in mind, you are going to have to deal with modern day cops and security checkpoints, so you might want to think long and hard before taking anything illegal.)

(Having just told you to ready G'narsh's avatar, it only stands to reason to then add that I am planning on spending a lot, and I do mean a lot, of time during the next day or so (real time) immersed in Bones and using him as an avatar. I mean come on, Lane, Nadia, a blonde, a brunette, and a redhead, and a dozen eunuchs by way of the Charlies and you've got the makings for a world class weekend at the spa... so maybe it will be more than a day.)

(Besides, I've been thinking about doing some -- Bonus Material -- work anyhow, so this should probably be a pretty good place to dally (think of it as a save point if you'd like). Even though the next sequence isn't formally part of the -- Wandering G'narsh -- story arc, it will be the set-up for it, which means that I'll be "throwing off" the different proxies -- i.e. giving them assignments so they can meet up with G'narsh later on -- and although I can come back and edit out any mistakes I make, the bottom line is, my dreams work better if I don't have to. I mean, you saw how fast Bones and Artismo meshed into one, and whatever implications that has for the dream are now here to stay. It's not a change that's easy to edit out. It's a change that has worked its way into everything and is pretty much all encompassing at this point.)

(P.S. I should also note that I still haven't loaded any skins for the blonde, the brunette, or the redhead yet, so for the sake of my weekend, I'm hoping you've picked some good ones.)

Washing our... um, ahem... Hands

(In the last section, as a joke I mentioned that Mi'lay could be viewed as a secret weapon, and by the end of the section Bones had somehow acquired a new secret weapon (source unknown). This is the type of randomness that always takes over my dreams. Giving Bones a doomsday device was not planned and now I need to figure out how to integrate that bomb into the dream, or make it disappear.)

(As I said, stuff like this sneaks into my dreams left and right. This is one of the major reasons why I go slow and spend more time with a dream -- sequence by sequence -- than you might really think one might need to. I like to take my time so that I will notice these changes and nuances as they occur. That way, I have the opportunity to add, delete, amend, or adjust any alterations accordingly before the changes dig themselves in too deeply and are too hard to edit out effectively. If I were to just power through the dream from beginning to end, I wouldn't notice this stuff and I would be far more likely to lose control of the entire dream.)

(Granted, this is a personal opinion. Others will give you the exact opposite advice for more or less the same reason, on the presumption that if you don't waste a lot of time on the first walkthrough, you will have more time to focus on your later revisions.)

(Personally I think my methodology is better, if for no other reason than, if I were to stop right now, everything up to this point would be fairly well refined. That can be useful when I show my work (in progress) to friends, family, relatives, and anyone in the industry. They can see the potential (or not) pretty easily and so can you. It can also be important if you are anything like me,

because you are going to need a morale booster a time or two or three during a dream's creation. What better place to find this emotional lift than in your own dream? It's a beautiful little circle. To renew my energy to create I go back into my creation, and routinely I am amazed at the wonderful world that I have already made. Compare this to the alternative, which is to go back to an earlier section and realize that everything there still needs a tremendous amount of work (just to bring it up to the level of crap). Which is to say, when I am done with this sequence, it will stand alone. It might not have a great deal of plot, but it will be satisfying (to me if no one else).

(The creative process aside, the bottom line for the dream at hand is that a doomsday device has somehow snuck into the storyline and this was not something that was even on the drawing board three days ago. As such, I'm thinking it might not be such a bad idea (for me) to take things even slower than usual until I know what that means in relation to everything else.)

(Which ended up meaning taking a break to do some of that -- Bonus Material -- work I had talked about earlier. I'm a big fan of appendixes, add-ons, and the like. It allows us (you and me) to say goodbye to each other over a longer period of time. It's sort of like when you move to a new city (or job) but still set up a voice link every night and chat with your friends from the old city (or job) for a day, week, or a month or two, just to stay in touch. It makes the transaction easier for everyone involved.)

(I mention that here, because I will be starting the farewell process in a moment by wrapping up some loose ends and other miscellaneous details. In other words, the dream is going to end soon enough. If you're not ready, get ready.)

(((Of course, "soon" is always relative.)))

(Also, I should mention here (and hopefully this will be the last aside before we get started in earnest) that I view most dreams

of this nature (ones created for entertainment purposes) as being primarily artificial social networks. That is to say, the real enjoyment from this dream (assuming that there has been any) stems (in large part) from the need to belong (and not the sex drive, any of the other physical impulses -- like eating -- or even from a need to relieve boredom). No one can deny that based on how the proxies are interacting, we have a very cohesive group... of friends (well, at least some of them are friends -- who knows, maybe family is a better word). Whatever the relationship, dropping into the dream allows the audience to surround themselves with a semi-nurturing prefabricated social network (of friends and/or family). Please don't underestimate the allure (or marketing power) of this. After all, in the final analysis humans are herd animals.)

(And I know I was hoping that would be it, but including this next comment right here ends up making the most sense in the long run. If we assume that dreams satisfy a social need (to belong), isn't it interesting how often/much wearing a rig interferes with our ability/desire to interact with anyone standing next to us in the real world -- in the tubes, a lift, or while we are simply walking down a street or corridor? It's something to think about.)

(Anyhow, whatever your feeling about all of that, it is now time to return to our story.)

We are in Mi'lay's master suite, though, in truth, it should probably be referred to as Bones' master suite at this point. Bones and Lane are relaxing at opposite ends of the whirlpool, facing each other. (Who knows what they are doing with their feet under the water?)

It's been three days (for me) but skeletons don't wrinkle, and I'm sure Lane has been in and out of the tub, availing herself of the other amenities the room has to offer. I suppose I should go over the palatial, spa like bathroom again. It's been awhile.

From the top then. It is a large bathroom that could easily hold fifty or more people at once with endless sinks, showers, tubs, tables, and chairs, not to mention all of the specialty spa accruements as you'd find at the best of resorts -- like an ultraviolet booth, self contained radio frequency massage table, electro-magnetic aura balancing platforms, sulfurized air-jet drying stations, and countless bathtubs overflowing with the requisite Jell-O, tapioca, chocolate pudding, and carbonated water. I'm sure you have a spa disc, and I'm sure this not-so-little room has it all.

Of course, if this was the first time one had ever walked into this unbelievably grand bathroom, the first thing they would undoubtedly notice is not all of the finery, but the ungodly mess. The place is trashed. I'm talking totaled. Fr@cking destroyed. Mirrors are cracked. Fixtures are broken. Toilets are ripped out of their moorings and tumbled together as if they were used for some little know derivation of horseshoes called Toss the Crapper. The mud bath is empty (as are most of the other soaking tubs) and their contents are splattered about the room. In fact, there is not a clean towel in the room, but that's just the start.

A good, solid three inches of water soaks the marble tiled floor, (which, I should note somewhere, has plenty of damage done to it as well). Dozens of drain holes spread throughout the room work overtime, but they just can't keep up with all of the water being poured into the chamber. Fountains of water shoot up from where the toilets used to be and (whether they are in use or not) every shower and faucet is going full blast. Two days ago someone (and it is hard to remember at this point exactly who) decided it would be more fun if the entire room was filled with steam and since then the only apertures which have been turned off are the ones which have been broken by random projectiles or have had their spouts packed with mud, moss, gems, and a cosmetic based glue (to a purpose no one recalls anymore). Under the cracked vanity mirror, the sinks add their flow of water to everything else. Where the wash basins are not missing, ripped from the wall, or broken apart for the sheer joy of it, the water

cascades off of the counter in an endless waterfall, and where the sinks are missing, water spurts directly from the wall and the exposed broken pipes as if the entire thing was designed by some young, up and coming artist hoping to make a name for himself in the cutthroat world of surreal installation art. No doubt if we were to read the placard placed discreetly by the entrance to the room it would say something like:

Destruction of the American Dream

“By this piece I intend to bring awareness to the masses of the wasteful lifestyle choices and endless destruction that is the Bourgeois class. There is a subtle irony in the work in that if it wasn’t for the gems and jewelry packed into the water spouts the water would flow out at twice the rate that it now does. It’s a metaphor for how the wastefulness of the rich interferes with their own enjoyment of life.”

Artismo Bones,

artist, evil warlord, political activist

Mixed Media: Gems, jewelry, moss, mud, cosmetics, and water. Lots and lots of clean fresh clear water poured right down the drain to no discernable purpose. Mwahaha!

The bathroom fixtures were salvaged from a low rent apartment building that used to home 137 good, honest, hardworking, law abiding citizens before it was razed to make room for a high end condominium that is expected to house an estimated 24 greedy blood-sucking capitalistic pig-dogs.

This work has been made possible by a grant from The National Art Council of Dubious Taste in association with Sch©lte! Cosmetics, our corporate sponsor and makers of the I Hate My Life (not to mention my parents) line of hair colorization products. Remember its not wasteful self indulgence if its art. (Luckily for us, most everything and anything is considered art these days.)

(I just added the (((museum quality))) art placard in the third walk through, so I don't have much to say about it. My real intent is to pop in here and go over a few more details concerning the trashed bathroom.)

(Destruction of property is very popular in the dream culture. It's akin to small boys playing with toy cars. It's not long before they realize crashing them into each other and watching them flip through the air is much more fun than running a parking lot or obeying traffic laws. There is (obviously) much debate about how this (death and destruction in the dream world) transfers to the real world, but that's really all I had to say at the moment, and we're not going to get into that any further at this juncture.)

(Also, I didn't put any emphasis on the drains, because I want the water to flow down them smoothly (because I like the way the water swirls around when you get a good vortex going), but if you wanted to go for more realism, adding piles of gems, knuckle bones, and similar party debris to the drain grates would make sense.)

(By the same token, I'm using clean water. You could fill the room with murky mucky makeup stained water if you want, but its not what I want to wade around in, so I'm not going to.)

In theory this (the mess in the room, all of it) is exactly the type of thing the Charlies are supposed to be cleaning up (and why they were brought along in the first place), but they are otherwise engaged, split as they are between the moss ledge, the mushroom cave, and the cinnamon soaking tub, which is to say between the blonde, the brunette, and the redhead respectively. Gallant cobalts that they are, they wait on the ladies every need as long as that need doesn't include picking towels up off the floor, cleaning bubbles, soap scum, and makeup off of walls, repairing fixtures, replacing broken glass and tiles, or doing anything to clean up after the great mud bath war of 20/20-10 or whatever year we are in. (Never date your work. It can only lead to your stuff becoming outdated faster than it would otherwise. What? This was pressed

in 23,456? I haven't got time for ancient history. I want something put out in the last 1.5 microseconds... and now!)

The slightly disheveled room does not bother Bones. In fact, he relishes it. At the moment, he's got Nadia setting up another pyramid of cosmetics, and truthfully, at this point the real wonder is how she has managed to find ten unbroken bottles of anything.

"Batter up!" Nadia yells playfully as she sets the last container into place and flits out of the way. She's already covered from head to toe with every type of hair, skin, and nail care product there is, but pretending that she is trying to avoid the splatter is part of the game. "Use the doomsday ball," she urges eagerly as Bones looks around for a suitable projectile.

"This?" Bones asks as he holds up the mesmerizing device before the pixie/fairy/sprite's eager eyes... "We need to change that," Bones says to himself as much as anybody else. However much he personally likes her half pint size, Nadia started the adventure as a three foot tall gutter fairy, and that's how she needs to end it, so using his dark necromantic powers, Bones forms a ball of brightly glowing purple magic and throws it at Nadia.

Once she realizes what's going on, Nadia desperately looks for cover (who knows what madness he is throwing her way), and dives without thinking into the likeliest looking haven, a sink filled with mucky, herb infused water. On reflection, it's probably not such a good idea. Herbs are known magic accelerators. An herb infusion will increase the effect of nearly any spell, so it should be no surprise when Nadia's efforts come to naught. Bones' ball of force follows her into the water and connects with the little pixie with explosive (yet colorful) force. When the scintillating burgundy-mauve smoke clears, Nadia is back in her gutter fairy form, complete with bumblebee skirt, and torn black fishnet stockings. Nadia looks herself over quickly as she frantically explores her body with her hands. Finding nothing amiss except for a wayward sprig of wolfsbane and a flowering cluster of holly in her hair, she looks inward and tries to see if she can determine the change, clever little code runner that she is.

“You can change forms at will now,” Bones informs her. A wave of relief washes over Nadia’s face as she relaxes noticeably at the news. “Whatever size you want to be,” Bones continues as he snaps his bony fingers together for effect. With no annoying skin to get in the way, only good solid minerals and calcium, his fingers make a loud satisfying click. “In an instant you can change your size to whatever,” buttercup, bone dancing pixie, or gutter fairy.

“I was afraid there for a second,” Nadia replies, not thanking Bones for the gift, for it doesn’t really come from him. “He’s always doing mean things to me,” she says, (and quite frankly I’m more than a little hurt. There is, however, no need to get into the veracity of her statement at the moment... or perhaps ever.)

For his part, Bones ignores her comment as he holds up the shiny ball of death -- the doomsday device, the black orb, the sphere of annihilation -- and twirls it around on the tips of his metacarpals. With every movement his bones click against the hard edges of the device. “Do you want this Nadia?” Bones asks as he offers the twinkling, diamond edged crystal to the fairy.

Nadia stares transfixed. It is obvious that the little pack rat... er, gutter fairy desires the deadly artifact. No doubt it is radioactive, causes cancer, has been shown to promote birth defects, and nursing mothers should consult their doctors before utilizing its power, but Nadia doesn’t care. She holds out her hands as she flies forward eagerly. “Yes,” is her simple response.

“You’re not really going to give that to her?” Lane asks incredulously. She sits up in the tub, where she has been with Bones, and readies herself for action should there be the need (like saving the universe from a power hungry fairy or something like that).

Nadia glares at the four armed buttinski while Bones pulls the orb back towards his chest as he considers Lane’s words. “You don’t think I should give this to Nadia?” he asks her.

“No.”

“Stay out of this Lane,” Nadia threatens... perhaps unwisely. “You offered me the ball,” she reminds Bones, “You can’t take an offer like that back.”

Um, yes, you can, so I don’t really know why Nadia would say such a thing, but in the moment (especially an emotionally charged one when we are being offered more power than we have ever dreamed possible) we all stay stupid, inaccrurate things. And while we are on the subject, don’t even ask me why Nadia wants the ball. It has no real utility for her, but the more she stares at it, the more she wants it. Some things are like that... (((blind objects of desire))): ceramic figurines, pewter miniatures, or the latest and greatest discs by the world’s greatest dreamer... (which would be me, just in case you are wondering).

Not concerned with the latest aside, Bones muses, “I guess I did say you could have it.”

“You can’t give it to her,” Lane insists.

“Stay out of this!” Nadia hisses, which until she gets the ball could be considered darn near suicidal, so maybe on retrospection that particular fact has something to do with Nadia’s desire to have the doomsday orb in the first place.

But as these thoughts hang heavy in the air, Bones puts up his hand to silence Lane, and prevent her from attacking the power hungry fairy. “It’s alright,” Bones informs Lane as he turns to Nadia and holds out the ball, “I did say you could have it, and fair is fair.”

Nadia’s eyes go wide with desire as she reaches for the black ball, but just before she grabs it, Bones once again snatches it out of her reach. “Of course, there is the small question of the price.”

“Anything,” Nadia replies eagerly.

“Not anything,” Bones corrects. “G’narsh... He has left. Take Stef’fan, hunt the troll down and kill him. If you can kill G’narsh, this little trinket is all yours,” Bones explains simply as the tantalizing ball dances mesmerizingly on the tips of his fingers. Needless to say, Nadia is hypnotized and cannot draw herself

away, so Bones causes the sphere to disappear. “G’narsh is already gone and his trail is getting cold,” he informs the greedy fairy.

“Which way did he go?” Nadia asks, but Bones only shrugs as he reminds her again, “The trail is getting cold,” and then helpfully (or not as the case may be) he adds, “If you loose track of him, I think he might be headed to New York City,” eventually, “but you’ll want to kill him before he gets there.”

(It might be hard to reconcile Nadia hunting G’narsh down when she ends the story fast asleep in his arms, but stranger things have happened.)

(On the other hand, if you stretch the dream out and ignore the beginning (which is the end), Nadia hasn’t even really met G’narsh yet, let alone have any reason to be loyal to him.)

(I’m sure we could loop through this line of reasoning again. After all, we did already do the end, which was the beginning, so the proxies know the end even though it hasn’t happened yet, because it was at the beginning, and so it has. See, I told you we could loop it through again, not that I understand what I just said, but someone, somewhere must. They’ll probably write me a note saying how my reasoning is wrong, but since I don’t even understand my own reasoning, the odds of my understanding any explanation as to why its wrong seems slim at best.)

(All of that isn’t really important. Even though Nadia cares about G’narsh, she’s also akin to an actor in a theatrical production and she has a role to play, and even more important than that, right now Nadia is a lot like a little sister staring at the last cookie in a cookie jar. She knows she shouldn’t take it, but she doesn’t have the willpower to resist, and damn the consequences to anybody else.)

(You would think after 40 years you could let something like that go, but it was MY COOKIE! You know if I had taken the last cookie, she wouldn’t forget it. I can hear her now forty years later saying, “I was going to buy you that new disc for your birthday, but then I remembered that cookie you stole from me when I was

six, and well, with the time value of money, the emotional trauma...” and on and on, but she wouldn’t let it end there. She’s a tricky/greedy little one (she became a lawyer you know), and sooner or later she’d get to the job, “So I’m figuring it is you who owe me a present,” and then after a pause she’d add mischievously, “So, what’d you get me?”)

(Anyhow, if we can get back on track, just so you know, New York City is simply a generic name from my point of view. Feel free to change locales. It’s not like I’ve ever been to the place and I’m not going to load up a location simulator or even look at a map. Not that you can’t, but I’m not going to.)

“We got to go,” Nadia says frantically as she throws open the door to Stef’fan’s bathroom.

“Geez... A little privacy.”

“I thought you were done with that.”

“Close the door!”

“Come on. G’narsh it getting away. We can take care of that later.”

“The Sch©lting troll’s getting away?”

“He’s already gone. Come on. The trail is getting cold.”

Zippering up his pants as he finishes... um, ahem... dressing, Stef’fan emerges quickly from his bathroom. His hair is in disarray (as always). He hasn’t had time to take a bath or get ready (in any way), but he’s got murder on his mind. The thought of an easy kill guides his motions as he takes the stairs to the courtyard four at a time in a virtually freefall.

“Don’t forget your gun,” Nadia calls after him as she rushes to keep up. “We got to kill that Sch©lting troll,” and with that, we will leave the two happy troll-hunters to their chase.

(Once again, I’m not really sure how this scene meshes with Stef’fan’s earlier description (or with him playing the role of a

heartthrob), but in most people there is some sort of disconnect, so in the end, I'm willing to leave it in.)

(The preceding raises a common dilemma I run up against time and time again. Very -- very -- often I am confronted with a scene, idea, side trail, aside, or random note, and the question arises: Does this help the story or hurt it? Probably a full half of them interfere with the flow of the story, but as a general rule, I tend to leave the lot of them in. After all, if I took all of the asides out (or even half of them), we wouldn't have much of a dream left. Of course, this doesn't mean that sometimes I don't go overboard, or take characters in directions I shouldn't. The later perhaps applies to this last scene with Stef'fan, and if you feel that's the case, feel free to mark it for deletion on subsequent run-throughs. It's not really an important section. Substantially the only thing that matters is that Nadia and Stef'fan have teamed up on a troll hunt and we have that by inference from the previous bit.)

(Either way, we'll rejoin them later when they get closer to their quarry (in where else but New York City). If they beat G'narsh there, maybe they can take in a show or something to pass the time.)

(I do keep on going back to this scene (the third time now) as I question how it relates to Stef'fan and who I wish him to be. To this end, I will note that many people find it far easier to get respect from strangers or in the world at large than in their own home or among people who knew them as children. It's hard to take someone seriously once you've seen them eat a booger, no matter that it was 40 years ago... not that I have any specific cookie stealing, birthday forgetting, younger sisters in mind... but the stories I could tell (and wisely will not).)

(P.S. I don't have a younger sister. This probably won't stop me from mentioning her again, though, should the situation arise.)

(And with this final commentary, I just wanted to formally announce that my commentary track is now actually longer than the scene I'm (in theory) commenting on.)

“That went well,” Bones remarks happily as he pulls out a legal pad. It’s not exactly waterproof and he’s still in the whirlpool (with bubbles swirling about him), so the writing starts to run right away, and as he flips through the pages, they become soggy and soggy, but he doesn’t seem to care.

Lane’s first impulse is to ask Bones why he thinks sending Nadia on a troll hunt is such a good idea, but she is certain he will say something stupid, along the lines of how it is often the ones that we love who tend to be our worse enemies, and then go off on another rant about his little sister. So instead, Lane asks Bones about the notebook that is obviously getting destroyed by the water. “What’s that?”

“Story notes,” Bones replies distractedly as he pages back and forth. “Let’s see, next we need to get rid of the Charlies.”

“Dat no sounders goods,” Charlie says as he looks up from the massage table where he is working on the redhead.

“Charlie be’s helperfuls,” another insists as he applies a fresh coat of flame red nail polish to the blonde’s fingernails.

Pampering good looking girls is one thing, but...

Bones looks around at the mess.

“Charlies cleaner it ups,” a cobalt suggests as he helps the brunette out of the mushroom lined meditation chamber.

“A little mopers.”

“Et be gooders in no timers,” the Charlies insist.

“I’ve got a different assignment for you,” Bone says simply without looking up from his paperwork. He doesn’t really care about the room after all.

“Okey dokey’s bossers mans.”

“What Charlie do?”

“I want you to escort these three lovely ladies,” the blonde, the brunette, and the redhead, “to New York. They have a society party to go to or something.”

“Charlies go toos?” they ask excitedly.

“Sure. Whatever,” Bones agrees, (which means not a Fr@cking chance in Chaos, but the Charlies don’t need to know that.)

“Okay’ers girlies,” the cobalts say to their charges.

“We’s goers nows,” and with that they are off.

(Just simple logistics. There is no real reason to draw it out. If you are of the mind, you could watch as the damsels get dressed and the Charlies make a halfhearted attempt to bring some sort of order to the room before they depart, but I’m not in the mood for it. The girls and the cobalts leave, end of story.)

Minutes later, after the Charlies have departed, it is just Lane and Bones alone, sharing a bath in the trashed master suite.

“You didn’t really need a notebook for that,” she says by way of making small talk.

“No,” Bones agrees as he flips through the pages, finds the right note, pulls a pen out of the water, and crosses an item off of his to-do list. “Charlies to New York. Check.”

“Tell me that’s not on your list.”

Bones merely shrugs as he flips back and forth through his notebook and talks to himself, “We do that at the temple... this in New York... construction site, Central Park... Park Avenue party... then it’s off to the police station, a prison farm...” not necessarily in that order. “Oh, here we go,” Bones remarks as he looks at Lane and lifts a bony foot out of the water. “Foot massage?”

“I’m not touching your disgusting feet,” Lane glares.

“That’s not what you said last night,” Bones replies. “You were all over my thigh bone.” He is smug and happy at the insinuation as he checks off another item on his list. Besides, let’s

face it (clicks be damned), Bones is getting some good content out of this meaningless, space filling banter.

Sticking to the conversation, Lane counters with, "I'm sure I wasn't of my right mind." (But what one can get a proxy to do, if only they are willing to adjust those attitude tabs.)

"Fair enough. Fair enough," Bones agrees as he continues by way of explanation, "I think the first thing we need to do is just put it out there that no matter how unbelievable smart you are, it doesn't hurt to write things down."

At this remark, Lane rolls her eyes (while somewhere a wily coyote gets ready to call his lawyers).

"Take me for instance," Bones continues, "I'm a genius, a super pro extraordinaire, sumo come laude, top of the class, certified genius. Not one of those run of the mill, lucky to have gotten into genius school in the first place, bottom of the class schleps," (who can't even catch a stupid bird. I mean, how hard can it be? Use dynamite. Set a trap. Rent a steamroller).

But, No. We're talking about a real genius here, and, "Even humble geniuses such as myself need to make notes on occasion. Some folks use note cards, others like text documents," or notations and memorandums that they hang about them in dream-space as they work, but, trust me, it's a pain to edit them out. Besides, I'm a bit of a Luddite.

"You don't need me for this," Lane says as she starts to rise and get out of the tub, but somewhere along the way she's lost her clothes, and M.O.M will not let her leave. For the moment she is trapped.

"Au contraire," Bones remarks. "I need you for color, so just sit tight... sure I can't interest you in a bone massage," he offers again as he raises his foot once more out of the water.

"No thanks," she replies testily as she pushes the bony appendage away and folds her arms (all four of them) across her ((heaving?)) chest.

"Have you ever wondered why you have four arms, but not four..."

“No,” Lane responds quickly, cutting the rest of the question off. “Do you have a list or not?”

(I thought that’s what we were doing? Oh well, I suppose that’s the cue to start on this wrap up section in earnest.)

“Let’s see,” Bones says once again as he refers to his notes. “Let’s just go down the encounters that G’narsh is not going to be making. He’ll be doing the carpenter, short order cook thing off screen, and there’s not going to be any support for a 12-Step meeting or any other sort of cult tie-in,” not that the two are synonymous or in any way related. “We’re also not going to show G’narsh camping out, seeing rainbows, watching thunderstorms in the distance, walking through mountains or streams, fishing, staring at the stars, walking through deserts, taking in tourist sites, or awaking from under a foot of snow as he travels about the elvin realms.”

Bones is silent as he looks through his notes some more, and after a bit of page shuffling adds, “I really thought there was more in here.”

“Perhaps now would be a good time to revisit the creator/creation issue,” Lane suggests.

“Not that tired horse again?” Bones whines.

“It is the only thing that you have ever said that I have the slightest interest in.” Lane says this like she means it, but you know it’s not true. Could it be? No... But then, could it? Nah...

“Fine,” Bones agrees testily as he wonders whether what Lane said is actually true, but mostly what he is doing is paging through his notes again stalling for time. “Some of this we’re going to do at the temple in the next scene with G’narsh.”

“All three of us?”

“Sure,” Bones agrees. “All three of us were there last time... twin golden orbs, or glimmering heads as the case may be.”

“I remember the monks telling me to remove you from the premises. Something about how your snores were disturbing the other pilgrims.”

“You’re just making that up,” Bones says trying to look hurt.

“Two can play at that game,” Lane smiles deviously, (a call I’ve tried very hard not to make with Lane, but there you are.)

Bones notes the comment with a hearty, “Touché,” before winding around -- in a backwards sort of way -- towards Lane’s favorite subject. “I suppose one of the concepts I haven’t gotten into yet is the generally held idea that some parents live vicariously through their children.”

After a pause, Lane says, “And?” You may remember this helpful bit of dialog -- i.e. “AND?” -- from the last three times they (Artismo (Bones or otherwise) and Lane) talked.

Bones shrugs. “It’s possible god, by whatever name, lives vicariously through his creations... You know, it’s not unusual for religions to promise more than they can deliver. It’s nothing deceitful. In the end, it’s really just hopeful thinking. I mean, how easy is it to come to the belief that if one were perfectly good, enlightened, wise, knowledgeable, or whatever, then a certain thing would happen?” like entrance to heaven, transcendence, or great material wealth. “But because the individual practitioner is never perfect enough, they’re really just sort of guessing as to the outcome,” of their chosen path towards enlightenment, salvation, or what not.

“Once again this has nothing to do with the topic at hand,” Lane notes full of annoyance and frustration. “I don’t even know that anything you said makes sense.”

“That’s because you’re always expecting me to spoon feed you,” Bones retorts angrily. “Try accepting the words,” the ideas, “for what they are.” (I mean it’s quite obvious I don’t have any definitive answers. Haven’t I made that obvious?)

“What are they then?” Lane asks suspiciously.

“More questions,” Bones grimaces -- evilly. (And with any luck, they might even be halfway decent questions, ones actually worth asking in the first place.)

Not being such a good sport, Lane splashes Bones with a face full of suds, but since he is a good sport, the vile dark skeletal warlord spits, sputters, and coughs as he wipes the soapy suds out of his nonexistent eyes, and eventually takes off his skull so he can wash the suds out. He, of course, uses soapy water to do this, but what do you want?

When he is done with these shenanigans, Bones begins anew. “Another good question to ask yourself is: If this world is the best god could do, with all of its pain, suffering, disease, alienation, death, decay and so on... Doesn't that kind of makes you wonder what kind of hellhole god is living in?”

“What are you talking about?”

(It's easy to make a proxy that doesn't die, doesn't get sick, is always happy, gets lots of sex, has no sex at all, is rich, is poor, is whatever. Makes you wonder why any god (good or evil) would make the world in which we live the way that it is.)

(It is literally, quite literally, a snap to make the world into a different place than it is. So why hasn't god done anything about it?)

“I'm saying,” Artismo Bones replies as he looks full on at the Lady Lane -- from the Courts of Chaos no less -- with his hollow eye sockets and patently empty brain cavity, “that it is quite clear that you hate me,” (certainly at times), “think I'm an idiot,” (sounds accurate), “and don't respect a word I say,” (not necessarily true). “So why are you looking to me for answers?”

“Because you are the maker, the dreamer, the best source of answers I have.”

“Oh,” Bones replies a little morosely as he brushes away some of the suds from his ribs (the better to show off his spacious

chest cavity), “I thought it was that sexual love chemistry thing we have going... Ouch! For the love of Gra’gl!”

Lane has ripped off one of Bones’ legs and, holding the appendage out of the water, casts about looking for a place to toss it. In the end she decides to throw it back at the hideous creature. “There is no chemistry between us!”

“Not a little?”

“No.”

But you know there is.

(I -- personally -- can’t imagine that there isn’t some sort of connection between the two of them, spiced up in no small degree by an on again off again air of open hostility. Someday we will have to find out if Lane would leave forever if given the choice, but we will not do that today.)

(I will, however, note that she is of a warrior culture and jockeying for position (even in a romantic liaison) is to be expected. It is simply her way.)

A little out of sorts, Bones fits his leg back into its socket as he tries to decide whether to go down the romantic innuendo track further or get back to something more serious. Lane helps make the choice easier for him by grabbing his other leg and giving it a warning twist.

Rather than say, if you want a thigh bone in your hands, I’ve got a spare, Bones decides that prudence is the best course of action and returns to the previous discussion. The one they were having before things went awry.

“Let’s see,” Bones says recounting the last relevant topic. “You said I,” Bones, “was the maker, dreamer, and best source of answers that you had.” He smiles at her and then pulls his legs out of reach before he answers. “It is nice of you to think so, my dear, vixenous, lady friend, but you are wrong on all three counts,” and this is true. “You yourself are the best source of information and if

you're not asking yourself any of these questions, then the obvious course is to ask yourself why you are not?"

And with a twisted up comment like, you know that it's time to move on to the next sequence -- The Temple of Light and Self Realization -- so with no more of a segue or rationale for their quick change of mood than that, Bones asks Lane, "Ready to go? I think it's time for the next sequence at the temple."

"What about your notes?" Lane replies helpfully.

Bones sifts through the water with his hands and brings up the soggy paper mache remains of his notebook. "I think we're done."

"What about Mi'lay?"

Producing a clean dry towel out of thin air for himself and then another for Lane, Bones does the best that he can to clean out the soapy suds from the inside of his chest cavity.

"Take a shower first," Lane suggests from behind a partition where she has gone to take her own advice.

It's a good idea, and seconds later Bones is drying off, while Lane is wearing her plate-mail-pasty finest. "About Mi'lay?" Lane asks again.

"Mi'lay will have to make her own way," Bones replies easily as he leads Lane to the door, where he turns and pauses as he tosses the self destruct mechanism -- the doomsday device -- onto Mi'lay's bed.

"Is that a good idea?" Lane asks to which Bones can only look at her quizzically.

"I'm an evil dark lord, necromantic, yada, yada. Of course it isn't a good idea. Leaving doomsday devices lying around where suicidally depressed girls can get to them is always a bad idea," Bones explains (quiet thoroughly I might add) before finishing his soliloquy all off with a hearty, "Mwahaha! Muhahaha! Muwhahaha!" Cough. Hack. Wheeze.

Tapping a cigarette out of a fresh pack (we need something to explain that nasty cough after all), Bones leads Lane away saying, “We need to go.”

“I don’t feel good about this,” Lane replies as she resists his icy and/or bone hard grip.

“We’ve got 25-50 clicks to go,” Bones assures her. “Mi’lay will be fine... and if not you can always come back and help her.”

It’s a lie, but hopefully you wouldn’t expect anything less from a talking skeleton.

“Mwahaha! Muhuhaha! Muwhahaha!” Cough. Hack. Wheeze. “Got a light?”

“No. I don’t. Cigarettes are bad for you.” (((Thank you, Mother Theresa.)))

Ignoring her advice, Bones tries snapping his fingers to produce a flame, but his bones are still wet. “Sch©lte! This sucks. I can’t light my own cigarette.”

“It’s a sign that you should quit,” Lane suggests as she takes the nauseous tube of death out of his mouth and throws it onto the water soaked floor.

“What are you doing?” Bones asks outraged.

“I’m explaining why you’re such a Sch©lting hole,” Lane replies easily as she grabs the pack of cigarettes out of Bones hands and throws it onto the wet floor as well. “You just quit smoking.”

“Fr@ck! That’s even worse than smoking,” Bones agrees as he proceeds to bite nervously on his bony finger tips. “I start smoking only to go through withdrawal half a click later? That isn’t fair!”

“I know,” Lane smiles as she wraps a pair of hands around the bony man. “Moo. Ha. Ha.”

“No-no. You sound like a deranged cow,” Bones remarks as the pair leaves the room, arm in arm (and I can’t explain these things. It’s just the way they are).

“Try pulling the sound from your pit of evil, your hate, from where you fester and live,” Bones suggests before he demonstrates the fiendish laugh again, “Mwahaha! Muhuhaha! Muwhahaha!”

“That’s what I said. Mo. Ha. Ha.”

“Find your inner dark lord,” Bones commands as they disappear from view.

“Mwahaha!”

“Good. Good,” Bones admits. “Now put it all together.”

“Mwahaha! Muhuhaha! Muwhahaha!”

“Excellent. Care for a cigarette?”

“I don’t smoke and neither do you. Put those things away.”

“Just one more?”

“No.”

“Just one?”

“No,” and we will cut away before Lane can get in a final, “Mwahaha! Muhuhaha! Muwhahaha!”

OK. We obviously didn’t cut away before Lane got her laugh in, but we can definitely cut away before the pair of them get into a full on Mwahaha laughing contest.

(If you don’t like the love/hate, lover/adversary vacillation between Lane and (Artismo) Bones, feel free to tip it over the edge one way or the other, but in my observation many relationships are just like this. One can only assume a fantastic love life, a joy of fighting, or some combination of the two is the glue that keeps such a couple together.)

(Or maybe its more practical concerns like money, the house, the kids, keeping up appearances, or the fact that the two of them have to do another scene with each other in just a few moments/days. Even for proxies, it can be very awkward to work with someone day after day if you are feuding with them or even if you simply don’t get along.)

(And if you don’t go for all that, the bottom line is: I’ve got the hots for Lane, and as much as I like having her mad at me and/or Bones, when I step into him and go for a ride, I want Lane’s

arms around my femur, her fingers digging into my clavicle, and her lips -- her sweet delectable lips -- whispering sweet nothings into my external acoustic meatus, ossicle canal, and/or ear hole. As always, I am hardly a disinterested narrator. Lane has four arms and she knows how to use them. You don't have to wonder who taught her... Well, maybe you do, but I don't.)

(Random innuendos aside, I should mention that before I start the Wandering G'narsh Saga, I will transfer my notes to a new pad of paper. This probably would have been a good idea between every partition as well, but since I didn't do it, I'm not going to make the claim. Basically, as we near the end of the dream, it's time to try and stay focused. If a bit or an idea isn't worth writing over on a new sheet of paper (while assigning it a specific spot in the outline), it's probably not worth remembering anymore or including in the dream.)

(If it makes you feel any better, you can always transfer these dead ideas to a generalized story file. I've got a huge one of those, but I hardly ever go through it, least of all when I'm actually working on something. Still, sometimes it makes me feel better to write an idea down somewhere... You know, so when I'm dead and gone, they'll be able to piece together my notes. Though, if I'm not willing to do anything with them while I'm alive, you got to wonder why anybody would bother to do anything with them after I'm gone.)

35 clicks for the partition
101+ clicks for the dream
And running...

((--End P3-A--))
((--Cut in P3-B--))

G'narsh

The Troll, The Myth, The Legend

(a work of fiction)

by

Kevin Stillwater

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